

Objects of Heaven and Earth:
Thaumaturgy & Representation in Quattrocento Italy

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Abstract

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In fifteenth-century Florence, the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata housed thousands of wax sculptures, all created in response to a single fresco located on the interior wall of the nave. This painting, known as the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, holds a position of honor as Florence's most famous thaumaturgic image, and was believed to have healed countless devotees since its miraculous creation in the fourteenth century. The goal of the thesis is to explore a diverse collection of art objects—miracle-working paintings and votive offerings—in order to illustrate specialized types of artistic representation. Using religious studies, anthropology, and theories of magic, I argue that the miraculous cult of the Santissima Annunziata was analogical to remedial magic. By analyzing the Santissima Annunziata devotional cult objects in relation to period curative practice, a slippage between magic and religion in early modern Italy is revealed.

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Introduction: the Landscape of Magical Studies

Official Catholic doctrine claims that magic and miracles are fundamentally dissimilar. Yet in early modern Italy, magic and Catholicism, particularly through miracles, were closely intertwined. Catholicism enters the realm of magic in its popular practice rather than official theology. This disconnect between theology and practice is especially prevalent where images are concerned, especially those which exhibit thaumaturgic powers.¹ This thesis considers Italian Catholic images credited with interventions that could be deemed magical, objects believed to perform supernatural or illogical feats.

Scholars have long noted the many aspects of Catholic ritual and practice that closely resemble magic, most especially miracles. Miracles are a prerequisite to one of the most significant aspects of Catholicism, sainthood. Christ himself performed miracles, beginning the chain of divine abilities that link together Catholic sacred figures. His apostles were gifted with miraculous abilities, and these passed down to the saints. God chose Mary for the miraculous conception, and her prowess for miracle working in Catholic faith is immeasurable. Miracles come in many different forms but mostly focus on healing the sick. Saints often gave sight back to the blind, or cast out demons. As Kenneth Woodward suggests, “Most of the miracles...are healings of the sick because healing (of both body and soul) was the hallmark of Jesus’ ministry.”² Every saint that worked a miracle further evidenced the power of Christ and the Trinity, for all miracles link back to Christ and his original feats of divine intervention.

¹ Wonder-working or miracle-working. The term refers to both magic and miracles.

² Kenneth L. Woodward, *The Book of Miracles: The Meaning of Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 138.

Miracles bridge the gap between life and death. They often save victims from the brink of demise; Peter and Paul even raised the dead. The writing of hagiography is the writing of miraculous stories, replete with tales of Christian saints who resisted bodily torment for days³ or were capable of performing the phenomena of Christ.⁴ Generally, saints gifted with miraculous abilities were not people who held power in the Catholic Church. Often they were children or women. The amazing ability to prolong life through miraculous power transcended age, gender, and social position.

Defining Magic: Black, White, and Catholic

In order to explore the connection between magic and miracles, we must first understand the complex and nebulous characteristics of magic's many forms. The belief in magic was nearly universal, but how it was practiced and performed differs drastically between countries and time period. Scholarship generally divides magic into two categories: black magic and white magic.

The first and perhaps most recognizable is black magic, sometimes known as demonic magic. The Catholic Church obviously opposed it, though it is striking that a series of papal bulls condemning witchcraft only began to be published in the fifteenth century.⁵ In the eyes of the church, black magic was closely connected with paganism and therefore evil. Black magic worked through the power of demons, evil spirits, and

³ Saint Cecilia, believed to have lived three days after her persecutors unsuccessfully attempted to behead her, is a noted example.

⁴ As illustrated by Saint Francis of Assisi's reception of the stigmata.

⁵ "In the 15th century, after centuries of skepticism and hesitation, the papacy formally accepted the argument that local incidence of witchcraft was to be treated as a form of heresy and so subject to clerical prosecution." Christopher S Wood, "Counter magical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 49-50 (2006), 153.

even the devil himself. It was most often referred to as witchcraft and its intention was to inflict harm. It was frequently blamed for failed harvests or infant death. Witches, warlocks, and magicians practiced black magic. These practitioners were generally regarded as heretics and blasphemers who worked against Christ. Witches in particular were thought to have deviated from mainstream society. They were women who no longer acted as normal women: they roamed naked, cavorted with demons, and could fly on broomsticks or by riding goats. There was frequently a sexual component to this form of magic.⁶ Witches were thought to engage in sexual acts with demons or the devil in exchange for the power to operate black magic.

Black magic used a human body or an object specifically designed for use in ritual as a gateway for demonic intervention. This form of magic was practiced outside, and its rituals typically took place at night. Cats, caldrons, and goats frequently symbolized it. Witches and magicians allowed demons to possess their bodies, sometimes with devastating results. Other black magic workers were even believed to be able to control demons.⁷ Figure 1, taken from a fifteenth-century copy of Florentine Brunetto Latini's thirteenth-century *Livre de Tresor*, depicts the magician Zoroaster. Standing within a magical circle and holding a magical text, he commands two demons to do his bidding with a gesture.⁸ This type of magic was additionally connected with binding, specifically one's soul to a demon so that one could work feats of the supernatural.

⁶ See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1-31.

⁷ "Yet in Dürer's time, any wizard worth his salt could not only receive demons but also send them on his bidding. Good or evil, the would-be magus had to *deploy* the spirits that would make marvelous works possible." Michael Cole, "The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium," *Art Bulletin* no. 84 (2002), 630.

⁸ Sophie Page, *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7.

Demonic magic was associated with the air, visualized through vapors, smoke, fog, or other physical manifestations of atmosphere. The devil was thought to have no body and instead assumed an aerial one. Demons traveled through the air and could invade dreams. In this way demons and malignant magicians could confuse and be-spell their victims.⁹

The second form of magic is referred as white magic. This type involved harnessing supernatural forces but without the use of demons. Although the Catholic Church at the official level opposed white magic, it was used for positive purposes. Practitioners of white magic mainly used their powers for healing the sick and ensuring a plentiful harvest. Early modern people thought that music affected the listener emotionally through white magic.¹⁰ White magicians used loadstones,¹¹ water, spoken incantations, candles, and casting runes for the purposes of locating lost objects and other spells.¹² Midwives were thought to use white magic to aid in childbirth. It also was frequently invoked in love spells. Its practitioners could still be witches, but they were of a different type than those thought to commune with demons. They worked spells outside, but in images they were not depicted naked or taking part in sexual acts. One can see the distinct difference between an interpretation of a white witch and a black witch when comparing Dosso Dossi's *The Enchantress*, dating 1515-1520 (figure 2), and Hans Baldung Grien's woodcuts of witches also dating from the early 1500s (figure 3, for

⁹ Cole, 630.

¹⁰ Jeanice Brooks, "Music as Erotic Magic in a Renaissance Romance," *Renaissance Quarterly* vol. 60, no. 4 (2007), 1250.

¹¹ A magnetic mineral thought to possess magical power.

¹² Craig A. Monson, *Nuns Behaving Badly: Tales of Music, Magic, Art and Arson in the Convents of Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 37-40.

example).¹³ In quattrocento Florence, white magic was thought to work by appealing to either nature itself or benevolent spirits that existed in nature.

Theories of white magic were greatly advanced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by learned elites in courtly cultures. These new ideas were found in literary sources such as the Renaissance epics *Orlando Innamorato* and the subsequent *Orlando Furioso*.¹⁴ This point will be discussed in detail in chapter three. In some instances, white magic was practiced in the name of Christ. Even members of the clergy were known to use white magic. Additionally, in the Friuli-Venezia region in the late fifteenth century white witches practiced. On a few days out of the year, the so-called Ember Days, they supposedly fought hand-to-hand combat with evil witches and warlocks who also inhabited the area, each armed with plants used as weapons.¹⁵ Meeting up at a pre-determined, outdoor location, they would challenge evil magic users, armed with stalks of fennel, while their opponents purportedly fought with stalks of sorghum. Many of

¹³ Wood reads Dosso's enchantress as an ambiguous figure; she may be the helpful witch Melissa, or the malignant sorceress Alcina. He perceptively points out that witches often adopted seemingly innocuous disguises, or would shape shift to trick their victim. Wood, "Counter magical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," 155-156. *Orlando Furioso* is in itself an epic about the fluidity of identity, its characters constantly switching roles through the magic of spells and enchanted fountains. In the end, the reader is left with the sense that holding onto a fixed sense of self is impossible. The ambivalence of *Enchantress* then points to complexity of magic and Renaissance notions of self. Even if *Enchantress* is a bad witch masquerading as a helpful one, the comparison to Baldung Grien stands. If Melissa, she is a good witch. If Alcina, she is adopting the typical codes for beneficial witches and is therefore still an example of a white witch's representation. She is clothed, and her body is neither undistorted nor grotesque. She sits passively in the center of the composition, ignoring the viewer and rendering herself nonthreatening.

¹⁴ Wood, "Counter magical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," 151.

¹⁵ Ember Days were feast days sponsored by the church to mark the changing of the seasons.

these white witches claimed to fight in the name of Christ.¹⁶ In cases such as the Ember Days, white magic was connected to Catholicism, leading to Catholic magic.

Out of the categories discussed so far, Catholic magic is the most difficult to explain as it has no strict definition. While structurally similar to black and white types, Catholic magic works through the power of Christ and saints. In many cases, Catholic magic was an outgrowth of prevalent beliefs that were non-theological but not necessarily outwardly condemned, such as the notion that being buried in proximity to the altar had a bearing on the fate of one's eternal soul. Many aspects of Catholic magic grew out of beliefs of the laypeople. Both members of the clergy and laypeople can therefore be considered practitioners of Catholic magic. Miracles are perhaps the most recognizable instances of Catholic magic, which works through objects, such as miracle-working images and votive offerings. The different types of magic supported and reinforced one another in the early modern world. As Hans Broedel states, "powers of the devil are utilized very much like any other natural force or property;"¹⁷ the belief in Catholic magic may have been strengthened because users were familiar with white magic cures and remedies. However, because Catholic magic belongs to a religion, it differs from both black and white magic in a number of ways. Examining Catholicism's relationship to magic can illuminate these.

¹⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 2-9.

¹⁷ Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the construction of witchcraft: Theology and popular belief* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 52.

Intersections Between Magic and Religion

Theology and scholarship have long struggled with how to differentiate religion, particularly Catholicism, from magic. In the mind of early Christian writers active at the beginning of the Middle Ages, there was a simple difference between turning water into wine and calling on Mercury to expel an illness: one came from the true God, the Christian God, while the latter was done by appealing to a false idol.¹⁸ To these thinkers, the pagan gods were not rival deities to the Holy Trinity; rather, they were demons, tricksters, and associates of evil. They had the same type of powers over the world that Christian saints and holy figures did, yet served only evil purposes. Therefore, any ritual asking for their assistance, even if the end goal was a positive one, was considered demonic.¹⁹ Magic became divinity corrupted.

Keith Thomas argues that while once deeply intertwined, religion and magic began to sever in response to the Protestant Reformation: “Protestants were helping to make a distinction in kind between magic and religion, the one a coercive ritual, the other an intercessory one. Magic was no longer to be seen as a false religion, which was how medieval theologians had regarded it; it was a different sort of activity altogether.”²⁰ Protestants denied the divinity of miracles, claiming that they were acts of the devil rather than God. Yet before this, Catholicism allowed for a supernaturally-charged world where the spiritual and the earthly constantly interacted in both negative and positive ways.

¹⁸ Fourth and fifth century early Christian writers such as Saint Augustine and John Chrysostom (circa 347 –407) focused on the differences between religion and magic.

¹⁹ “Augustine insisted that that all magic is worked by demons.” Kieckhefer’s book covers magic from circa 500 to 1500 and discusses a wide range of European countries. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 38.

²⁰ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 76.

Magic and religion, especially Catholicism, intersect most clearly through miracles. Seminal studies treating the connection between religion and magic provide the foundation on which to understand magic and miracles more clearly.²¹ Kieckhefer argues that the deep similarities between magic and miracles existed within Christianity from its inception: “Here again the sole Christian counterargument was that the Christian God was the true deity, and whatever the apostles accomplished, even if outwardly it resembled magic, was in fact a manifestation of God’s power working through them.”²² Early Christians grappled with the parallels between both types of magic and miracles, a struggle that continued on well into the early modern period. Through miracles, Catholicism is related to both black and white magic.

Although the Catholic Church strictly condemned demonic magic, its operations are strangely similar to miracles. Magic and miracles are mirrors of one other; both utilize a portal in the form of an object or a practitioner in order to enact a divine or demonic intervention into the world. A miracle-working image acts as a portal through which divine intervention can occur; a magical object becomes charged or animated so that the laws of nature can temporarily be suspended. A heavenly saint is gifted with miraculous abilities. As such, their depictions are predetermined to act as conduits of miracles. A magician or witch is similarly predisposed to receive the power of a demon. Both work because the portal—in the form of an object or a body—is exceptional. Each possesses a distinctive quality that allows them to access high powers; saints are closely connected to God, and the witch is often in league with the devil.

²¹ See Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950) and J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 1-144.

²² In the eyes of early Christians magic was the sole work of pagans, while miracles came from Christ. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic the Middle Ages*, 36.

White magic often overlaps with Catholic popular piety, and is close to Catholic magic in its aims and goals. The connections between these two types are showcased most pointedly through miracle-working images and votive offerings. Miracle-working images most often intervene into the physical world of the viewer to heal. White magic is generally invoked for healing as well. Votive offerings thank a thaumaturgic image for its aid, often by recreating the healing moment or representing the specific body part that was saved. Additionally, Catholic magic is highly ritualistic. Incense, the lighting of candles, raising and consuming the host, and the chanting of mass and the motions of both the laypeople and the priest all are components of Catholic ceremony. In some instances, these activities are done around or for a miracle-working image, making them instances of Catholic magic. White magic involved the drawing of the magic circle, a predetermined space created by drawing a circle in the ground or floor with a ceremonial tool such as a knife. In this space the practitioner could invoke spirits and practice spells. Both types of magic rely heavily on the ritual and adherence to the specific steps of said ritual.

In quattrocento Italy, the connection between magic and miracles was especially present in art objects and popular culture. The connection between miracles and magic usually takes place at the popular level. My study works closely with the gap that existed between official doctrine and popular practice. Hans Belting discusses the disconnect between images and theology in the introduction to *Likeness and Presence*, arguing:

Whenever images threatened to gain undue influence within the church, theologians have sought to strip them of their power. As soon as images became more popular than the church's institutions and began to act

directly in God's name, they became undesirable. It was never easy to control images with the word because, like saints, they engaged deeper levels of experience and fulfilled desires other than the ones living church authorities were able to address.²³

Miraculous images operate on a level that speaks to members of all classes, who turned to these works of art rather than people of authority within the church at a time of need. In these cases, the depiction of the saint or holy figure within the work acts as intercessor between worshipper and the divine, much in the same way the actual entity would. As such, miracle-working images share a special relationship with laypeople rather than the upper echelons of the Catholic Church.

The Reformation eliminated magical remedies, neutering the power of holy water, exorcism, and the clergy to name only a few. According to Thomas, the Protestant Reformation eradicated a vast amount of cures, but heavily focused on Satan's constant presence.²⁴ Thomas believes witch trails in England were caused by this gap. By continually focusing on the power of the devil, evil became more present and threatening. Left defenseless against harmful magic, post-Reformation Englishmen became deeply focused on witch hunting.²⁵ This argument, however, only works for the England-specific situation and the subsequent rise of the Anglican Church.

Magic was integral to the Pre-Reformation world. The lines between natural and mystical were characteristically hazy. In a mystical world full of demons, slippage

²³ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1.

²⁴ Thomas, 470-471.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 545.

between the supernatural and harnessing secrets of nature was common. The world was full of secrets and divine or demonic forces, some of which worked together and some of which worked against each other.

Magic and miracles heal and protect. Early modern people did not think of them as ontologically identical, but that each utilized different means towards similar ends. Beliefs in the efficacious quality of both were held in conjunction with one another. An early modern sufferer could turn to his local cunning man (magic worker) just as easily as he may approach his parish priest. Both were capable of deflecting or overturning invisible forces. And while church authorities generally preferred congregates to avoid such remedial cures, the popular opinion favored whatever approach worked. Laypeople turned to magic, though the Catholic Church would have liked to hold a monopoly on access to the supernatural. Spells are a manipulation and worked automatically if preformed correctly. Prayer, on the other hand was preformed in hope, involving an imploring person beseeching need. Yet those seeking a solution for maladies desired magic and miracles, both of which participated in the culture of countering forces. Common patterns utilized towards remedial aid indicate a constellation of interrelated ideas in the early modern mind.

Thomas believes the need for magic was generated by the need for remedies in a pre-industrial, pre-scientific world.²⁶ Catholic saints and priests provided a network of cures to early modern peoples. The Church was a reservoir of supernatural power, a well of cures available to the populace. Catholicism offered a network and apparatus of

²⁶ Ibid., 178.

protection. Efficacious objects, such as miracle-working images, produced by and for seekers of remedies provide important insights in the culture as whole.

Case Study: The Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata

The Santissima Annunziata church in Florence highlights a case in which the Catholic Church supported a miracle-working image from its initial moment of divine creation. The mother church of the Servite order, the Santissima Annunziata, is located in a piazza that shares its name. It is a basilica-type church, and one of the most famous Catholic sacred spaces in Florence (figure 4). This church is home to a renowned miracle-working image, a fresco known as the *Madonna of the Annunciation* (figure 5), painted on the wall directly left of the entrance to the church.²⁷ It is Florence's most beloved thaumaturgic image, credited with countless miracles. Devotion to this image was especially high during the quattrocento. Throughout the centuries, the Santissima Annunziata has housed multiple types of votive offerings, which were most elaborate in the fifteenth century. The Annunciation fresco in the Santissima Annunziata was beloved by both official and popular levels of society, and from its very fabrication was intimately linked with and supported by the church.

The thaumaturgic cult of the Santissima Annunziata—which boasted a miracle-working image and *ex-votos*—perfectly showcases the seemingly disparate link between magic and miracles.²⁸ I believe the cult following of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco highlights important connections between miracles and popular magical practice,

²⁷ Also referred to as the *Virgin of the Annunciation*.

²⁸ *Ex-voto* is the Latin term for votive offerings, called “*voti*” in Italian. The Italian word “*boti*” refers to votive offerings specifically life-sized or in the shape of body parts.

powered by a belief system that was intertwined with contemporary Catholicism.

Although the Santissima Annunziata has been studied extensively, no scholar has looked at its entire cult site and connected theories of magic to *both* its thaumaturgic image and its extensive collection of votive offerings. By concentrating on this shrine, I intend to refocus previous scholarship on the connection between Catholicism and the art produced for sacred spaces through the lens of magic.

Critical Scholarship

Magic has been a subject of scholarly concern for decades. Researchers have focused on juxtapositions between magic and science,²⁹ magic and medicine,³⁰ magic and the natural world,³¹ and the history of magic.³² There are also scholarly ventures exploring the connection of music to magic.³³ Michael Cole, Christopher Wood, and Stephen Campbell treat the same link between magic and art.³⁴ Several modern scholars have argued against the church's official position concerning the separation between magic and miracles, declaring that the lines between magic and miracles become vague at the popular level.³⁵

²⁹ For a brief discussion of the specific differences reference Rodney Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic and Science," *Review of Religious Research* vol. 43, no. 2 (2001), 107

³⁰ Loren C. Mackinney presents how the two were often interwoven specifically during the Middle Ages. Loren C. Mackinney, "An Unpublished Treatise on Medicine and Magic from the Age of Charlemagne," *Speculum* vol.18, no. 4 (1943), 494.

³¹ See Kieckhefer, *Magic the Middle Ages*, 17-20.

³² Michael D Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 1-275.

³³ It was a common notion at this period in history that music was imbued with magic, which is how it produced its emotional effects on the listener. Brooks, 1208.

³⁴ Stephen Campbell, "'Fare una cosa Morte Parer Viva': Michelangelo, Rosso, and the (Un)Divinity of Art," in *The Art Bulletin* no. 84 (2002), 596-620.

³⁵ See Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance* vol. 19 (1972), 18.

I am interested in exploring notions of magic by utilizing two categories of art objects that best illuminate the connection between magic and miracles: thaumaturgic images and votive offerings. Though many studies of miracle-working images and votive offerings exist, one study has never treated and tied both to specific theories of remedies and magical practice.

Freedburg, introducing his seminal work *The Power of Images*, states “I would, in fact, be happy if the long-standing distinction between objects that elicit particular responses because of imputed ‘religious’ or ‘magical’ powers and those that are supposed to have purely ‘aesthetic’ functions could be collapsed. I do not believe that the distinction is a viable one.”³⁶ Freedburg seeks to break down the disparate types of viewer responses to art objects. Yet miracle-working images are in fact different than other types of objects specifically due to the immense magical responses they elicit. Wonder-working objects become intercessors into the human world, directly in contact with a human bodily in pain. Freedburg believes that the power of art lies in emotional effectiveness of an aesthetic object, but magical objects also are physically efficacious in a way other genres of art not. Viewers believed the image possessed otherworldly powers, and were so devoted to this idea that they often had other art objects—votive offerings—created to codify said devotion. Miracle-working images are a specific category within all art objects, because they are believed to exhibit an actual, physical effect on the outside world.

³⁶ Freedburg’s momentous cataloguing of images covers both popular and Catholic objects. David Freedburg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii.

Three scholars have examined the connections between magic and Catholic art objects produced in Italy: Michael Carroll, Megan Holmes, and Aby Warburg. These three scholars touch on the connection between magic and miracles, but shy away from fully interrogating it. Their accounts have also failed to note the significant features shared by magic, miracle-working images, and votive offerings.

Carroll discusses thaumaturgic images, but does not connect them directly to magic. His book, *Madonnas that Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century* chronicles instances of Marian miracles, but is most interested in the phenomenon wherein Mary harms rather than helps the devoted; for these reasons he does not discuss the miracle-working fresco at the Santissima Annunziata or its cult. Carroll addresses the connection between Catholicism and magic in the introduction of his book, and devotes an entire chapter to Catholic magic. He concludes his study by explaining his ideas concerning the connection between magic and miracles and their place within the psychology of the typical eighteenth-century Italian, as his book mostly focuses on the Post-Reformation period.³⁷

Holmes is one of the leading scholars on the Santissima Annunziata, and has devoted a number of articles to the origin of its cult and pinning down the details of its miraculous inception.³⁸ Her work on the Santissima Annunziata has taken great strides towards solidifying when the fresco first appeared and the evolution of the many interventions with which it is credited. Her article, “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and

³⁷ Michael P. Carroll, *Madonnas That Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 14-164.

³⁸ For instance, Megan Holmes, “The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence,” in *The Miraculous Image in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Erik Thuno and Gerhard Wolf (Rome: Erma di Bretschneider, 2004), 110-111.

Cult,” focuses on the many votive offerings installed inside the Santissima Annunziata.³⁹ She also clearly explains the history of these types of art objects and the many different forms they took. Famous citizens of Florence and elsewhere in Europe had very elaborate votive offerings installed in the church. Holmes persuasively argues that these votive offerings were used for political purposes, and that they signaled the church’s connections with the Medici, the Republic of Florence, and the Catholic Church. However, she does not engage with their potentially magical qualities.

In “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” Warburg studies the practice of using portraiture to figure Florentine elites. He argues that a specific type of *ex-voto*, the wax effigy, which became very popular in fifteenth-century Florence, should be considered a form of portraiture.⁴⁰ So many effigies were installed in the Santissima Annunziata that their combined weight compromised the structural integrity of the basilica. Warburg explains that these votive offerings were given in thanks as gifts to the Madonna in response to her interventions through the fresco of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*. Warburg mentions a connection to magic based on likeness that warrants further exploration. In *The Donor’s Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold*, Hugo van der Velden argues against Warburg’s magical ideas concerning the wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata.⁴¹ My thesis will side with

³⁹ Megan Holmes, “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult,” in *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 161-180.

⁴⁰ Aby Warburg, “The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeoisie,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 187-204.

⁴¹ Hugo van der Velden, *The Donor’s Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 1-388.

Warburg, as I believe van der Velden's ideas concerning *ex-votos* ignore important nuances of magical practice.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into three chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of magical practice and its connection to miracles. The first chapter will be devoted to Carroll and the thaumaturgic image. It uses Carroll's theories concerning the connection between religion and magic, and his ideas about Catholic magic. Though Carroll does not deal with the Annunciation fresco at the Santissima Annunziata, his ideas about the connections between Catholic art objects and magic apply to it. Scholars generally do not consider wonder-working images examples of remedial cure. This chapter addresses how the fresco is connected to different types of efficacious magic in a number of ways. By looking specifically at the *Madonna of the Annunciation* I argue for a connection between miracles and magic that Carroll touches on but does not fully explore.

The second chapter will focus on Holmes and her theories concerning votive offerings. Holmes briefly mentions that both early modern and modern writers have linked these objects to magic, but she does not delve into this deeply. This chapter takes Holmes' brief discussion of the connection between the *ex-votos* and magic and expands upon it. Additionally, this chapter discusses the *Madonna of the Annunciation* as an *acheiropoieta*, a subject that Holmes has also written about.⁴² While Holmes explains both the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco and the votive offerings placed around the image in political and social terms, this chapter instead shifts the focus towards the

⁴² *Acheiropoieta* is the Greek term for an image not-made-by-hands.

magical. By comparing the *ex-votos* to charms used in fifteenth-century black and white magical practice, this chapter argues that the votive offerings at the Santissima Annunziata had powerful properties that linked them not only to the fresco but also to the need for supernatural remedies.

Solidifying the connection between Catholic art objects and popular magical practice, the third and final chapter will treat Warburg and wax effigies. It expands upon his ideas concerning the connection between magic and full-scale votive offerings, particularly those of the Santissima Annunziata. It explains van der Velden's objections to Warburg's account, and assesses the current debate about the potentially magical properties of wax effigies. Though van der Velden's objections are reasonable, Warburg's original idea was compelling, and needs nuancing and expansion. This chapter furthers Warburg's notions by arguing for the quasi-magical properties of votive offerings. Chapters two and three distinguish objects that in past scholars have grouped together into one study. By examining smaller votives separately than those that recreated a votary's entire body, we better understand the complexities idiosyncrasies of both. After this differentiated analysis the conclusions to the thesis (found at the end of the third chapter) offer a method of re-examining the votive cult of the Santissima Annunziata.

Miracles and magic intertwine because they share vital characteristics. Holmes, Carroll, and Warburg have all touched on the relationship between magic and quattrocento miraculous art objects, but their accounts miss out on important connecting features. The number of conceptual frameworks to treat of the diverse objects necessitates the methodological scaffolding of the thesis. Each chapter of the thesis treats

a different aspect of the Santissima Annunziata cult and the theories engaged with it, and furthers ideas concerning the connections between magic and miracles by looking closely at the church. This thesis argues that magic is related to both thaumaturgic images and votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence by virtue of their mechanisms, their goals, and their connection to Catholic popular piety. Magic involves changing the operations of nature by using objects and ritual to invoke a supernatural intercessor. In many ways the phenomenon interlaces with miraculous intervention, cutting across politics, religion, and artistry to connect facets of fifteenth-century Florentine culture previously misunderstood as isolated from one another.

Chapter One:
Demons and Madonnas: Magic and the Thaumaturgic Image

A miracle purportedly occurred in 1340 in Florence, Italy; angelic hands completed a painting of the Annunciation overnight.⁴³ A priest called Bartholomeus had been working on the fresco for some time, but could not bring himself to render the face of the Virgin. According to the legend, Bartholomeus felt unable to create a representation that would be suitably beautiful. He prayed for several nights and one morning returned to the painting to find that it had been miraculously finished.⁴⁴ Installed in the Santissima Annunziata, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* is revered as the city's most influential wonder-working image. For centuries the faithful have flocked to the church to genuflect and pray before this partial *acheiropoieton* installed in the back of the nave, directly left of the entrance.⁴⁵

Stephen Campbell remarks on the importance of the thaumaturgic image in Italian culture by focusing specifically on Florence: "Certain images that had come into being through miraculous rather than human means, or those in which divine approbation was revealed through the working of miracles, occupied a fundamental place in the devotional life of the city."⁴⁶ As Florence's premiere wonder-working image, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* is the epitome of Campbell's claim. The fresco was treated with care and lovingly venerated, evidencing its substantial importance to the city and Florentine sacrality. Though the *Madonna of the Annunciation* has been the focus of popular

⁴³ Maria Husabo Oen, "The Origins of a Miraculous Image: Notes on the Annunciation Fresco in SS. Annunziata in Florence," *Journal of Art History* no. 80 (2011), 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ Campbell, 596.

devotion for centuries and is studied by many scholars, the image as an object is not fully contextualized within its cult in the Santissima Annunziata and its place in a wider culture of remedial magic and contemporary magic theory. Examining the work of Michael Carroll, who treats the link between magic and miracle-working Madonnas, and notions relating to the nature of magic reveal that the *Madonna of the Annunciation* partakes in the early modern necessity for supernatural aid.

The *Madonna of the Annunciation*, as an *acheiropoieta*, instantiates a divinity depicting a divine figure. Unlike the Mandylion or the Veronica, the fresco was not a pressing of a holy face but a *depiction* of a holy face. An angel created a representation, therefore becoming a heavenly artist. Therefore the Annunciation fresco has more in common in with icons of Luke, which were human-made. At the time of the Lucan icon's creation, however, Luke was still alive and therefore still mortal. Instead, with the *Madonna of the Annunciation* an immortal angel participated in established artistic practice of depicting divine figures. Through this doubling of the holy, the supernatural angel enlivens the thaumaturgic with its power, the power to heal and preserve the viewer. According to erudite late sixteenth-century writer and chronicler of miracles, Francesco Bocchi, "when this miraculous vision [of the fresco] comes before one's eyes, one cannot but be perturbed and feel oneself carried outside of oneself, so superhuman it is, so unique, so truly divine."⁴⁷ Observing the sway the image held over viewers in 1591, Bocchi reveals that its power was so immense as to be unnerving.

Within Thomas' view, magic serves a practical function. The Catholic Church reserved the power to consecrate objects to imbue them with supernatural effects, though

⁴⁷ Francesco Bocchi, *The Beauties of The City of Florence: A Guidebook of 1591*, trans. Thomas Frangenger & Robert Williams (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2006), 206.

in the eyes of the populous, magic practitioners were capable of doing the same. Freedburg notes this slippage by acknowledging “it is precisely by transcending their earthbound quality that the images seem to be miraculous; but the way in which they most often do so is by behaving in ways that are familiar to even the simplest beholder: the more familiarly the image behaves, the more miraculous it may often seem.”⁴⁸ It is precisely the fluency Freedburg observes which solidifies the connection between magic and miracles in the early modern mind. When faced with a choice, the early modern sufferer who turned to the church for aid often did so with the intention of pleading with a thaumaturgic image. As magic and religion intersected so often as to be indistinguishable, wonder-working images entangled in the web of remedies in early modern Italy.

The Annunciation Fresco and its Cult

Closely examining the *Madonna of the Annunciation* and its cult surroundings is critical before examining how it is related to the remedial and protective magic. Rather than the mother and child image typical of miracle-working icons, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* depicts its prelude: a kneeling Mary and the angel Gabriel inside the domestic space of the Virgin’s bedroom. The Virgin humbly receives the Holy Spirit with demurely clasped hands. Gabriel kneels with crossed arms, his drapery lifting off the ornate tile as if he has just landed. From the upper-left corner of the image a golden beam of light makes visible the moment of the Miraculous Conception. The small figure in the ray of light emanating from the Godhead very much resembles the adult Christ. Mary’s

⁴⁸ Freedburg, 485 note 3.

head is tilted upwards towards the light, her red-blond hair draped around her face and down her neck. Lips tinged with pink offset her pale skin. The miraculous face looks very childlike and serene. The painting itself is encased behind a glass frame, and precious jewels cover the Virgin's robes and form a crown on her head (figure 6).⁴⁹

Today a huge tabernacle encloses the image inside the church; large incense burners hang from its extended cornice. At the time of Francesco Bocchi's report the painting was enclosed in expensive Carrara marble, and the flooring radiating from the fresco's place on the wall was paved with porphyry tiles.⁵⁰ A railing, added later, closes off the image from the rest of the church for private prayer and worship of the Madonna (figure 7). Pagno Portigiani cast delicate lilies in copper, and Salvestro Castrucci created silver candelabras to revere the wonder-working image's immense preciousness.⁵¹ The enshrinement of this miracle-working image within the church highlights the deep adoration and gratitude felt for this image. This tabernacle reaches to the ceiling of the church, extending into the world of the viewer. Visitors are encouraged to linger before the object as it is sectioned off and does not block the high altar. Votive offerings surround the *Madonna of the Annunciation* on all sides. Heart-shaped *ex-votos* encased in glass boxes decorate the walls around the painting and its huge brass ciborium. The fresco's enshrinement is the main focal point of the church's entire interior (figure 8), despite its position so far from the high altar.

⁴⁹ Holmes believes this surviving crown was installed in 1852 to mark an official coronation ceremony and covers an original painted crown. Holmes, "The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence," 105.

⁵⁰ Bocchi, 207.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Like many miracle-working images, the evolution of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* and its enshrinement took place over centuries and underwent several changes. The fresco's exact dating is obscure. Italian texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries claim that the image was created during the mid-to-late thirteenth century,⁵² yet based on its stylistic aspects, Megan Holmes places the painting around 1340.⁵³ The large tabernacle in which the image is enshrined was commissioned in 1448 by Piero de' Medici and designed by Michelozzo.⁵⁴ By the mid-fifteenth century the fresco's status as an *acheiropoieta*, specifically the face of the Virgin, was solidified.⁵⁵ Unlike other images not-made-by-hands, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* was not entirely crafted by God. An angelic hand eventually aided a human hand to complete what the painter could not.⁵⁶ Although this unnamed angel presumably worked on behalf of God's will, the specific nature of the intervention sets the *Madonna of the Annunciation* apart from other Annunciations, other wonder-working images, and other *acheiropoieta*. The *Madonna of the Annunciation* stands on its own.

Of the three figures present in the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco—the Virgin, the Angel, and God himself—only Mary is credited with miracles. Throughout

⁵² Oen, 3.

⁵³ Holmes, "Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence," 110-111.

⁵⁴ The fresco may have been a part of the nave renovation of the Santissima Annunziata in 1294. Oen, 5-7.

⁵⁵ Megan Holmes, "Miraculous Images in Renaissance Florence," *Art History* vol. 34, no. 1 (2011), 441.

⁵⁶ As with many wonder-working images, there is no one story of its miraculous origin. Although the painting is always completed by divine intervention, the nature of it varies slightly. In some versions the priest Bartholomeus is the artist, in others it is an unnamed painter who is nonetheless recorded as a very pious man. While an angel is generally believed to have finished the painting, in some versions of the legend it is referred to as an autonomous miracle. See Holmes, "The Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence," 100-101.

the centuries this beloved image performed a number of miraculous interventions, all propagating from the miraculous moment of the painting's divine completion. The presence of Gabriel, although a different angel than the one believed to have rendered the virgin's face, reminds viewers of the miracle of the painting's origin.

The fresco intervened in lives of devotees as a functioning thaumaturgic image. The *Madonna of the Annunciation* was mainly a healing image; laypeople often asked for its aid in curing "malfunctioning body parts."⁵⁷ There were many instances in which the fresco supposedly cured a devotee of the plague. It also functioned as a protective image; it is credited with saving a woman from the anger of a hotheaded husband after she gave away his good wine. The *Madonna of the Annunciation* is also believed to have aided non-Italians. According Luca Landucci's dairy from the fifteenth century, the fresco helped the Duke of Lorraine defeat Charles the Bold at the battle of Nancy, where the Burgundy regent met his end.⁵⁸

The Thaumaturgic Object

Before exploring how the *Madonna of the Annunciation* is connected to curative and protective remedies, an examination of its relation to other miracle-working images is warranted. The realm of the miracle-working image is a slippery one. Teetering at the crossroads between faith and phenomena, art objects that elicit a physical intercession in the viewer's space have not been closely examined as historical markers. Likewise, these types of religious objects operate on another, less tangible level. They break out of the mold of simple devotional practice, and extend into the domain of the magical, a term

⁵⁷ Oen, 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.

that is in itself problematic. There is no shortage of images dating to early modern Italy credited with interventions into the physical realm of the viewer.

Miracle-working images form the foundation of many Catholics' faith, serving as physical tokens of divine intervention through the mediums of paint or marble. Such images flout natural law and thereby defy expectation. Wonder-working images perform tasks that mundane objects are not physically capable of doing. Legends tell of Madonnas that move from town to town of their own volition, or frighten off an army with theatrics, as in 1527 in Frascati, Italy when a wall painting of the Madonna suddenly spoke, frightening off the invading German army.⁵⁹ There are no other types of art objects that act in the same way, especially in regards to their relational magic properties.

Wonder-working images dating to early modern Italy are usually of the healing and helpful nature. Laypersons generally asked thaumaturgic images for aid in common hazardous situations, predominately survival past infancy and into adulthood for children. Additionally, there are some instances where miraculous images intervene, but do not provide help immediately. Yet they always intercede into the world of the viewer in a decidedly sensory way, such as in the case of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*'s original miracle. By providing cures and protection, thaumaturgic images—paintings and sculptures—intercede into the human body, directly effecting a physical change.

While the *Madonna of the Annunciation* does not number among them, there are miracle-working images that were destructive rather than beneficial to the viewer.

Harmful miracle-working images provide a strange counterpart to the helpful ones. It seems intuitive that images would be credited with helping the humble in need of aid, as

⁵⁹ Michael S. Durham, *Miracles of Mary: Apparitions, Legends, and Miraculous Works of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 120.

a beloved saint works through them. However, an image that intervened into the world of the viewer in a damaging way is another issue entirely. Often they exhibited jealousy or even avarice, traits uncharacteristic of the saint or holy figure pictured.⁶⁰ While helpful miracle-working images abound in Italy and are often enshrined in elaborate cases, the injurious ones are not. Harmful miracle-working images mostly exist in legend; they are not venerated or held in esteem. They are ephemeral in a way that positive wonder-working images distinctly are not.

The devotional practice of enshrinement proves how intensely a thaumaturgic image can enthrall viewers centuries after the original miracle takes place. Immense tabernacles carved from marble, frames covered in gold leaf and precious jewels decorating the body of the saintly figures all emphasize and remind devotees of the image's power. Enshrinements of wonder-working objects encapsulate and extend the miracle-working image into our space. They are visual evidence of the intense desire held by the worshipper to please the image or catch its attention. Generally, the more powerful and beloved a wonder-working image is, the more elaborate its enshrinement, such as the extravagant tabernacle encasing Orsanmichele's *Madonna and Child*. The visual effect of a Madonna credited with saving the lives of hundreds of citizens is often heightened by an elaborate enshrinement of gold leaf and precious gems which glitter in candlelight. Often miracle-working images are carefully preserved and displayed in the choir of the church or another section of honor that allows them to be seen and worshipped. These images frequently are encased in such finery *after* they have performed miracles, so it is

⁶⁰ See Thomas, 27.

not this impressive display of wealth and craftsmanship that originally led viewers to attribute them with such amazing power.

Often miracle-working images are met with skepticism from the upper echelons of the Catholic Church. Michael Goodich states: “in accordance with both systematic theology and canon law, the natural philosophers, theologians, canonists, and notaries entrusted with investigating and recording claims of supernatural intercession attempted to bridle the enthusiasm of those who had witnessed or experienced a miracle, who formed a local community of the faithful.”⁶¹ Miracle-working images often fell under the skeptical eye of the Catholic Church, despite how local people and clergymen revered them.

In collections of miracle stories the name of the recipient of miraculous aid is sometimes named; in many others the devotee remains completely anonymous, becoming a sort of everyman.⁶² Moreover, thaumaturgic images impinge into the world of the viewer, but the *type* of viewer is particular. More often than not the vision brought forth from an object heals or helps a layperson of no particular rank or importance. Belting discusses the link between the wonder-working icon and laypeople, saying, “there were the popular expressions of religion—superstition and belief in miracles on a level below that of church doctrine and scarcely touched by it.”⁶³ Though Belting’s observation

⁶¹ Michael E. Goodich, *Violence and Miracle in the Fourteenth Century: Private Greed and Public Salvation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

⁶² In his article treating medieval miracle stories that mostly deal with healing the sick, Patrick J. Nugent states that the overwhelming majority of the beneficiaries in these stories are unknown. Patrick J. Nugent, “Bodily Effluvia and Liturgical Interruption in Medieval Miracle Stories,” *History of Religions* vol. 41, no. 1 (2000), 55.

⁶³ Belting, 269.

indicates a trend of miracle-working images, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* represents a special case as it was accepted and worshipped by all levels of society.

Wonder-working images share common visual characteristics, though many exhibit unique features. These images most often portray the Madonna and Child but may depict other holy figures. The *Madonna and Child* in Florence's Orsanmichele showcases a typical miracle-working image (figure 9). A Byzantine-style gold background surrounds the Virgin, who sits within a throne topped with a pointed arch. The Christ Child, who holds a goldfinch in his hand, reaches up and gently touches his mother on the cheek. Her robes are dark blue, and, like most Marian icons, she engages directly with the viewer, looking out from the frame. A chorus of eight angels with multicolored wings surrounds the holy figures on either side, their forms stacked on top of each other in the typical fashion for the enthroned Madonna type. Originally created by an unknown artist between the years of 1285 and 1292, the current reproduction was painted in 1347 by Bernardo Daddi.⁶⁴ Though it has been repainted and replaced multiple times, the painting retains its miraculous abilities.

Although common compositional elements unite wonder-working images, often an efficacious object boasts stylistic idiosyncrasies. For instance, the *Madonna del Parto* of San Agostino in Rome departs from the typical depiction of Mary within the miracle-working image (figure 11). Created by Sansovino between the years 1518 and 1521, the Madonna's face is distinctly Late Antique. Rather than the shy and blushing virgin seen in the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, the *Madonna del Parto* is a mature and sturdy mother. The Madonna sits inside an ornate niche in the wall immediately to the right of

⁶⁴ Nancy Rash Fabbri and Nina Rutenberg, "The Tabernacle of Orsanmichele in Context," *The Art Bulletin* vol. 63, no. 3 (1981), 386.

the entrance. A section of the floor has been portioned off in front of the altar, so that the devout may sit in front of the image and pray. Mary's generous lap is covered in multiple layers of polished marble drapery. A veil covers her head and she balances the Christ Child on her left leg. Her fingers are dramatically elongated, almost to the point of absurdity, perhaps recalling the intense focus on the hands of the Virgin in Early Christian icons.⁶⁵ She holds a place of honor within the niche, seated beneath a shell-shaped apse and crowned with a floating ring of ten bronze stars, which acts as a halo. Three gilded gold interventions cover both figures. One is a loincloth tied around the waist of the Christ Child, most likely done later for reasons of modesty. The left foot of the Virgin, which protrudes slightly into the viewer's space, has also been covered to preserve the marble that has been worn by devotional touching. Finally, the Virgin wears a matching gold garter around her waist. This is a typical aspect of the *Madonna del Parto*, a type that comes out of the Tuscan tradition, beginning in the fourteenth century.⁶⁶

The *Madonna of the Annunciation* departs from the typical trends of thaumaturgic images in that it is stylistically unique and it is an *acheiropoieton*. The fresco is visually unusual within the realm of wonder-working images because it is a narrative scene rather than a single figure. Rather than a closely cropped portrait of Mary and the Christ Child, we have a view of Mary's room where Gabriel has just entered. Francesco Bocchi asserted that the fresco was "recognized in every part of the world," and overwhelmed

⁶⁵ Her neck is also dramatically elongated. The reasons that Sansovino may have had for choosing to carve her in this way are not entirely clear.

⁶⁶ This Madonna usually assists in childbirth, and often wears a belt of some type. Brendan Cassidy, "A Relic, Some Pictures and the Mothers of Florence in the Late Fourteenth Century," *Gesta* vol. 30, no. 2 (1911), 91.

spectators with its “heavenly and immortal visage.”⁶⁷ Unlike most wonder-working images, it did not initially perform a miracle that aided a devotee. Instead, the painting’s original miracle was that of its own completion.

Acting as an *acheiropoieta*, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* interceded into the world of the viewer in a physical way (such as healing a devotee of an injury or saving him from the plague) when asked to do so.⁶⁸ Laypeople asked for the *Madonna of the Annunciation*’s help because of its original moment of inception as an *acheiropoieta*. The original miracle of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*’s divine completion fueled other miracles, whereas most miracle-working images are generally not special until they work a miracle dealing with a devotee. Though art objects are manufactured things, the legends involving the wonder-working image are fully intermeshed with spirituality and the intangible. At the moment the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco became an *acheiropoieton*, the angel, working for God, temporarily struck down the barrier between the earthly and supernatural. Its miraculous power stems from the surface of the painting itself. As the most famous miracle-working image of Florence, the notions of divine authorship and intense religious devotion coalesce in *Madonna of the Annunciation*.

In some cases, the iconography of a thaumaturgic image begets the type of miracle that is thought to flow from it. For instance, Christ is often depicted as a baby and believed to bestow blessings on his fellow infants, as in the *Bambino of the Aracoeli* (figure 10). Likewise, expectant mothers call on Mary, because she successfully (and miraculously) gave birth, as in Jacopo Sansovino’s *Madonna del Parto* in Rome. The

⁶⁷ Bocchi, 206.

⁶⁸ See Oen, who states “thus, we see that the Annunziata fresco, which appeared to have been ‘activated’ as wondrous in the fourteenth century by a sudden devotion from Florentines who searched for divine assistance of personal matters.” Oen, 4-5.

figure of the virgin—the figure whose face was created by the hand of an angel—directly links the *Madonna of the Annunciation* to the specific, autonomous power of the fresco. Perhaps the *Madonna of the Annunciation* was not thought to aid in childbirth, because the version of Mary represented in Annunciation scenes is not yet a mother. Lacking that experience, the figure of Mary in this particular image has no jurisdiction in childbirth.

A Thaumaturgic Virgin: The Annunciation Fresco and Magic

Traditional religious explanation holds that thaumaturgic objects perform because the saint depicted within works through his or her representation.⁶⁹ By representing the entity credited with bestowing a blessing, icons act as the physical stand-in for the saint.⁷⁰

When these types of images came under fire from Protestants during the Reformation, the Catholic Church firmly defended that the power comes not from the artwork, but directly from the saint or holy figure. The image itself has no power.⁷¹

Yet the evidence does not hold up with official Catholic doctrine. Many devotees worship a particular object and credit the image itself with the magic. In popular practice the portal becomes elided with the saint. Devotees asked the *Madonna of the Annunciation* to intervene on their behalf, rather than asking other famous Florentine miracle-working images—such as the Madonna at Orsanmichele—or even the saint herself. In this way the representation takes on an identity of its own.⁷² Though the power

⁶⁹ Trexler, “Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image,” 9.

⁷⁰ Holmes, “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult,” 160.

⁷¹ Thomas Aquinas, for one, stated in his writings that a miracle is a “product of divine power.” Camille, 244.

⁷² Harmful miracle-working images work in ways that contradict the personality of the saint portrayed, further separating the power of the object from the power of the represented divinity.

may stem originally from the saint or heavenly figure depicted, it is the saint's representation that exhibits supernatural powers by acting as a portal uniquely able to channel divine influence. The agency of the object determines who is benefitted, and not the agency of the saint. The heavenly representation is the precipitator of beneficial reprieve.

We can point to a legend such as the *Madonna of the Miracles* in Venice as evidence that miracle-workings images are in themselves powerful. According to the story, a man was saved from drowning by appealing to a relatively unknown, humble painting of the Virgin, after having pleaded to a lengthy series of other images of the Madonna.⁷³ Early modern peoples expected different images to respond differently to requests, and made decisions concerning which image to approach based on criteria specific to each image. If all miracle-working icons shared the same identity, the devoted need only ask one image, and would not expect a different answer if approaching another. There was something unique about that particular Venetian Madonna that made it independent from the others, though the story does not elucidate what it may have been. Wood states "the Virgin through her miracles tended to take on local forms; she existed across a range of 'avatars.'"⁷⁴ The *Madonna of the Miracles* saved the man, while many other more famous Marian representations did not.

Thaumaturgic images such as the *Madonna of the Annunciation* participated in the web of remedies because the representation within the objects themselves exhibited power. Many scholars, such as Richard Trexler and David Freedburg, argue that popular

⁷³ Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (London: Haverly Miller Publishers, 2010), 81.

⁷⁴ Christopher S. Wood, "The Votive Scenario," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* vol. 59 no. 60 (2011), 214.

piety, at odds with official doctrine, predicated the miracle-working object itself as independently effectual. One of the major notions underwriting their hypotheses has to do with the power of images, or what Freedburg refers to as “the supernatural effectiveness of images.”⁷⁵ A representation within a wonder-working image is enlivened with exceptional autonomous power. Praying to a devotional altarpiece or privately commissioned and consumed Madonna is not the same as appealing to, for instance, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco. The viewer approaches a miracle-working image aware of its specific intercessory history, and pleads with the image in order to benefit from its restorative pattern.

Because they are objects worshipped for their particular power, wonder-working images are often accused of being idols. Official Catholic doctrine holds that the miracle-working image performs by harnessing or channeling the power of the heavenly saint and therefore cannot be idolatrous. Yet deep anxiety concerning the possibly idolatrous nature proves that miracle-working images highlights the hazy line between popular magical belief and Catholic theology. Trexler explains that in popular practice “the belief in power-laden natural objects was general in that [early modern] age. It stretched from the host, through the image to relic, from the body of the dead to that of the living saint.”⁷⁶ The fresco in the Santissima Annunziata was activated and propelled by this general acceptance of the power of images in the early modern Italy.

⁷⁵ Freedburg discusses both miracle-working icons as well as items that belong in the category of minor arts, such as amulets and wax images. There is much to gain from his detailed coda of images that operate on the fringes of art history. See particularly chapter six. Freedberg, 80.

⁷⁶ Trexler also discusses how priests engaged in this practice that imbued specific objects with power. Trexler, “Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image,” 9.

In fifteenth-century Florence, the power of the miracle-working fresco was spread by the act of copying the image. These copies were thought to be efficacious in the same manner as the *Madonna of the Annunciation*. The copies gained power by mimicking the image and not merely containing a representation of the Madonna. Therefore, the copies have power autonomous from Mary. Holmes discusses the importance of the fresco's position in the church to the left of entrance. She points out that when copies were made of this beloved image they were often also installed within the new church in the exact same position as the fresco in the Santissima Annunziata. While we cannot know for sure, we can conclude that this was done so that the *Madonna of the Annunciation's* power could be better transferred to other Florentine sacred spaces. This demonstrates that the power of the cult of the Santissima Annunziata was not confined only to the fresco, but extended to the area surrounding it and the huge number of *ex-votos* once installed in the entire nave.⁷⁷ The cult's genesis, its nascent legend, was the priest-artist's struggle with representation. Bocchi informs us Mary's portrayal "must have borne the impress of divine thought,"⁷⁸ causing the painter to grapple desperately with his task before ultimately succumbing to its impossibility. Angelic hands depicted the Virgin; human hands then sketched efficacious copies of the fresco to transfer its power to a new locale.

While scholars accept the overall power of miracle-working images, the aspects dealing with their structurally magical qualities have not been extensively studied. Carroll

⁷⁷ "This care given to the placement of the copy suggests that the efficacy of the original image was associated with this distinct spatial zone in the church and with the specter of cult activity manifest before the miraculous image." Holmes, "Elusive Origins of the Cult of the Annunziata in Florence," 110.

⁷⁸ Meaning her representation required "the impress of divine thought." Bocchi, 206.

thoroughly examines Italian miracle-working Marian legends,⁷⁹ arguing that the multitude of saints and different incarnations of the Madonna can be explained by the constant presence of danger and death in Italy.⁸⁰ In Carroll's view Italy was home to so many harmful Madonnas due to the country's vulnerable geography as a peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean. Italy was more likely to be exposed to disease and invasion. In the face of these dangers, he claims that Italian Catholics turned to magic, meaning the aspects of Catholic ritual and popular piety that resemble magic, including the miracle-working images. Carroll concludes that Italians internalized their geographic vulnerability and applied it to their Madonnas.

The major flaw in Carroll's approach is that he does not distinguish between *images* and *apparitions* of Mary. A vision of a saint should not be treated as ostensibly the same as a saint's representation captured in stone or paint, because images have lasting, tangible presence on the world of the viewer. There are distinct differences between harmful images and harmful visions of Mary in Italian thaumaturgic legend. Italy produced a number of stories wherein Mary in particular harms innocents, but these are recorded as visions or apparitions, rarely as images. In Italy, if an image does harm, it only does so to the morally guilty. A vision, dream, or apparition of Mary will cause harm, but images are widely helpful. Indeed, we have seen that the representation itself of a Christian figure within a wonder-working image performs the beneficial miracle. The *Madonna of the Annunciation* healed and protected a wide swath of human bodies; the Annunciation scene images the original, exact moment that Christ's body first came into

⁷⁹ Carroll, 71.

⁸⁰ He also points out that the saints themselves can be sources of danger for the Italian Catholic citizen, and that Italians create more saints than any other country. *Ibid.*, 138.

being. In Catholic belief Christ's body allowed for representation of holy figures, as Christ was the Godhead created in form human.⁸¹ This central mystery of Christianity legitimated the use of images in a church setting, and is the connection between representation and the efficacious power to cure.

Carroll explains that there are also miraculous stories of saints that harm the faithful who are innocent of all crimes.⁸² The devotee does nothing disrespectful or blasphemous, and yet is punished by an apparition all the same. Herein lies the critical difference. These are legends that involve visions and dreams, but not art objects. It seems that during the early modern period, wonder-working images in Italy were overwhelmingly beneficial in nature. Though harmful images existed, they acted justly and the sinner was allowed to repent. Even then, they are few and far between when compared to those that heal the sick and inspire future saints to do great works.

Carroll is also not careful about the unique idiosyncrasies of early modern Italian Madonnas. As discussed, Catholic images that harm do so in a punitive manner. These miracle stories are moral tales, wherein the sinner is appropriately punished for his or her insolence and is usually forgiven if they repent. In the vein of the God of the Old Testament, some thaumaturgic images, such as the *Lateran Icon* are so very powerful they cannot but harm those who look upon them.⁸³ Because Carroll does not treat

⁸¹ Bissera V. Pentcheva, "The Performative Icon," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88 no. 4 (2006), 631.

⁸² Carroll, 74-82.

⁸³ Located in the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome and dating to the sixth century, this image was covered permanently by a sheet of silver in 1200 to replace the silk veils covering it previously, "because those who stared at it too intensely were in danger of being seized by a tremor which could prove fatal." The image was so hazardous that it was also claimed to have blinded a pope. Gerhard Wolf, "Christ in His Beauty and Pain: Concepts of Body and Image in an Age Transition (Late Middle Ages and Renaissance)," *The Art*

artworks as distinctive, he does not consider the object's unique ability to effect change, or its analogous connection to period magic.

As works of art that both heal and harm, wonder-working images participated in the Pre-Reformation supernatural world. Carroll discusses seven stories from the *Marian Atlas* of miracle-working images that inflicted harm on the viewer.⁸⁴ All of these were punitive in nature, such as the instance of the soldier who urinated on a fresco of a Madonna del Popolo painted on a wall in Bologna, and immediately he was struck blind and suffered great bodily pain. However, as soon as he repented, he was healed.⁸⁵ In fact, it is often the case with these types of objects that the harm retreats as soon as the guilty apologizes for his or her crime. The punishment meted out by these images was rehabilitative rather than retributive.⁸⁶ This is in keeping perfectly with the Catholic focus on penance and confession, a significant feature of the religion and an aspect that likewise set it apart from Protestantism. Thaumaturgic images participated the cycle of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, thus perpetuating a central aspect of Catholic belief and ritual life.

of Interpreting: Papers in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University vol. IX (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1995), 168.

⁸⁴ According to legend dating to 1590, the *Madonna del'arco*, a fresco located on a wall caused the blasphemer Aureila's legs to fall off. See Carroll, 72-73 for the complete list of harmful Marian images.

⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that all seven stories Carroll discusses, each featuring a Madonna who punishes those who offend her, come from remote Italian cities rather than bustling metropolitan centers. Carroll, 73.

⁸⁶ This is not to say that this feature extends over all of Europe. In other countries during the early modern period, there are many examples of harmful miracle-working images acting differently than the Italian ones. Non-Italian Marian images act like a woman scorned when her beauty or her child is put at risk or offense. See Alexa Sand, "Vindictive Virgins: Animate Images and Theories of Art in Some Thirteenth-Century Miracle Stories," *Word & Image* vol. 26, no. 2. 150-159 (2011), 150. Sand's article is one of the few sources that treats exclusively the harmful miracle-working image.

Later in his book, Carroll devotes an entire chapter to the connections between magic and religion. However, because Carroll focuses on the mid-to-late eighteenth century, his theory does not treat the fresco of the Santissima Annunziata, and therefore misses important connections to changes taking place in theories and practices of magic in Italy in the fifteenth century. By instead focusing on the Pre-Reformation quattrocento, before the Church's crackdown on "superstition," we can gain a better idea of the connection between magic and miracles.⁸⁷

Carroll discusses whether it is appropriate to consider miracles as instances of magic.⁸⁸ While establishing his argument, he examines the connections between the two phenomena, stating "in Italy the term *magical* seems reasonably applicable to any verbal formula or standardized ritual that is believed to affect the material well-being of human beings if performed properly."⁸⁹ Carroll agrees with Kieckhefer and states that popular Catholic piety often elided with magical practice, materializing in ways that official church doctrine would have condemned.⁹⁰

For Carroll, the connection between magic and miracles is contingent upon the invocation of a Catholic-sanctioned supernatural being and the presence of a clergy member. Carroll explains that the presence of a priest is essential because the connection

⁸⁷ Carroll, 114.

⁸⁸ "Catholicism has long contained elements that would seem magical." Carroll even uses the term "Catholic Magic." Ibid., 9. See also page 112.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁰ Others, including Kieckhefer, who says "magic was condemned by both church and state," document this. Kieckhefer, *Magic the Middle Ages*, 2. This is not to say, however, that all practitioners of popular magic considered themselves to be acting in opposition to the Catholic Church, or that the whole of the church agreed upon what did or did not constitute condemnable beliefs and practices.

between magic and miracles necessitates a public setting; otherwise it cannot be considered popular.

Carroll is correct in his insisting that the connection happens at the popular Catholic level, but his account fails to fully explain why a priest must be present.⁹¹ Clergy members play an important role in Catholic ceremony; however, the non-clergy practitioner who performed her ritual away from prying eyes was no less an agent of the magical than a priest. Both witches and priests acted as the practitioner in magical ceremony. Therefore, the connection between miracles and magic still holds in private, priest-less ceremonies because of the similarities of the objects used in each domain and the necessity of a practitioner as a possessor of esoteric knowledge. A local village cunning woman ostensibly provided the same curative or protective service as a wonder-working representation. Efficacious practice serves as the connective force between contemporary magical and Catholic power.

Wonder-working images reach out of their frames to either aid or attack the viewer. This causes the divide between the physical space of the viewer and the figural space of the depicted saint or holy figure to disintegrate. It is in this space that the magic occurs. Miracle-working images utilized a representation towards an efficacious intervention into the world. By exploring the parallels between thaumaturgic objects and contemporary magical practice, the exact mechanisms through which this efficacy operated are made clear. Beliefs that on the surface seem contradictory were in fact held in conjunction in Italy's demon-haunted world.

⁹¹ Carroll may be assuming a priest is important to make the event an instance of Catholic magic, but as we have seen different magical types work in the same way towards similar goals.

Wonder-working images are connected to white magic by the nature of the physical change each evokes. The mechanisms endowing thaumaturgic objects with efficacious power are strikingly similar to those utilized in black magic practice. White magic was used to heal the sick, or to aid in very dangerous tasks such as childbirth; miracle-working objects for the most part do this as well. Each utilizes supernatural power on behalf of a supplicant to intervene into the natural world in a positive way.

Contrary to white magic, demonic magic utilizes the body of a witch or magician as a portal through which a supernatural event can occur. In the same way, a miracle-working image boasted a represented body of a saint or holy figure is a portal through which the divine can work. In the case of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, it was Mary who reliably used her representation in the fresco as a way to interact with the faithful.

As discussed in the introduction, demons were imaged by vapors or smoke in Renaissance painting. Period illustrations of Mary likewise associated clouds to not only the apparition but also the veneration of the divine. Hans Baldung Grien's 1510 chiaroscuro woodcut *Witches' Sabbath* describes demonic influence in a series of exquisite, interlocking lines (figure 3). Created approximately two years later, Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* showcases Mary and her son surrounded by clouds that slowly materialize as cherubim (figure 13). Although this painting did not work miracles, Raphael references the wonder-working image with the fictive dark green curtain parting to reveal the sacred conversation. Atmospheric forms in early modern art parallel the analogous mechanisms at work in both heavenly and demonic intervention.⁹²

⁹² Scholars often link demonic possession to the thaumaturgic image, further solidifying the connection between the miraculous and magic. During the Renaissance, artistic

Connected through analogous use of the body and visualized by atmosphere, demonic magic and miracles operate as mirrors of one another. As a thaumaturgic image, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* participates in the mirroring of miracles and black magic. Miracles operate through the agency of the divine. Black magic instead operates through the will of the demonic. Both are supernatural and work through an agent. Miracle-working images work through the object backed by a saint or other heavenly entities. Sometimes a priest or another member of the clergy activates them.⁹³ Black magic works through a practitioner, which comes in the form of a witch, a sorcerer, or magician. As with the clergy member, users of black magic do not themselves bend the laws of nature, but are gifted with the knowledge that allows them to enact the correct forces to do so. A priest does not control God. Likewise, magicians could not control demons, though they were sometimes fooled into thinking they were doing so.⁹⁴ Richard Kieckhefer explains that black magic and Catholic thought have comeingled from the very beginning of the Church: “The notion of demonic intervention in the natural order on behalf of those who invoked demons was deeply rooted in the religious and theological literature of Christianity...the conception of demonic intervention on behalf of conjurers was rooted in New Testament notions of apocalyptic conflict with demonic forces...”⁹⁵

inspiration intermingled with ideas of demonic possession, which points to ideas of the possessed art object. Campbell, 606.

⁹³ This trend is clear with miraculous art objects such as reliquaries used to heal or execute the symbol of the cross during mass, as discussed by Cynthia Hahn. Cynthia Hahn, “The Voices of the Saints: Speaking Reliquaries,” *Gesta* vol. 36, no.1 (1997), 22.

⁹⁴ “Demonic magic entailed a complex interplay of wills; that of the magician attempting to constrain the demons; that of demons, seeking to deceive and ensnare the magician.” Richard Kieckhefer, “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 99, no. 3 (1994), 820.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 816-817.

Kieckhefer's point supports the deeply rooted similarities between black magic and miracles, specifically those of the Catholic supernatural beings.

As both an *acheiropoieta* and an image that worked subsequent miracles, Mary's not-made-by-hands representation in the *Madonna of the Annunciation* healed, protected, and intervened into the mortal realm. Over and over, this famous thaumaturgic fresco worked as a portal through which the supernatural could pass into the mortal world. Its implicit link to white magic existed in the minds of early modern Italians who received its beneficial aid. Because it operated as a portal the fresco characteristically mirrored black magic. The representational image provided remedial aid; a representational trope conceptualizes the similarity between heavenly figures and demons. Surrounded by its opulent enshrinement, the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco inspired its beneficiaries to adorn the nave of the Santissima Annunziata with devotional objects in the fifteenth century.

Chapter Two: Talismanic Fragmentation: Votive Offerings of the Santissima Annunziata

Votive offerings are an essential component of Catholic devotion. Also called *ex-votos* or *voti*, they are elaborate, multifarious objects that signal an individual's gratitude towards a saint or heavenly person for an act he or she performed.⁹⁶ More often than not, when a miracle-working image is installed within a sacred space, diverse votive offerings are not far. Votive offerings are rarely studied as stand-alone pieces and for many years were not a part of art historical analysis. Many aspects of the *voti* warrant more attention, such as how exactly early modern peoples engaged with these powerfully efficacious objects, and their relation to curative practice. Created both to call and respond to supernatural aid, the votives of the Santissima Annunziata sacred space showcase the connection between magic and miracles through the site's diverse collection of *ex-votos*. By applying notions of function and mechanism to the objects themselves, the place of the votive offering within the realm of curative and protective power becomes clear.

Distinguishing and Defining Votive Offerings

Ex-voto is an umbrella term that covers the four main categories of votive offerings: figural, event, body-part, and object.⁹⁷ These definitions are based on the *ex-voto*'s functions, meanings, as well as physical and stylistic attributes. Only a fraction of the votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata are extant, as is the case in many Catholic

⁹⁶ Roberta Panzanelli, *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 13.

⁹⁷ All distinctions dividing votive offerings into separate categories are my own. Previous scholarship is hindered because it does not break down the numerous types of *voti* precisely. For this reason, my discussion of Holmes and other researchers treating votive offerings is split between chapters.

churches. In contrast, during the fifteenth century the church was full of *ex-votos* that depicted the human body in some form.

Figural votive offerings give form to the donor's entire body. The figural votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata became more elaborate and life-like as the decades advanced, culminating in the quattrocento with the most extravagant examples, the full-scale body effigies.⁹⁸ To thank the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco for bestowing its blessings, wealthy Florentines commissioned life-sized effigies in their own likenesses for exhibition in the nave of the church. The Santissima Annunziata in Florence was not the only church in Italy to house figural votive offerings, but many accounts speak of the particularly heightened extravagance and unique attention to artistry seen there.⁹⁹ Bocchi described his impressions of the cult: "the blessings that rain down from this miraculous Virgin are truly innumerable, as the unbelievable number for votive offerings attests; the precious gifts and most beautiful ornaments are exquisite beyond reckoning."¹⁰⁰ Contemporary fifteenth-century accounts hold that the Santissima Annunziata figural votives were highly costumed, covered in jewelry and other accessories. Some full-sized effigies were made of silver instead of wax; others were encrusted with diamonds. The most expensive of votive offerings recreated the entire body of the votary, usually complete with clothes, accessories, and supplementary objects.

Event votives represent a scene of bodily crisis. The nature of the initial miracle sometimes informs the *voti's* compositional components. Event *voti* represented an entire

⁹⁸ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 173.

⁹⁹ Panzanelli, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Bocchi, 207.

body frozen in the moment of the original votive crisis, recreating the scene in miniature. These were usually made of wax and were not always life-sized. Often event *ex-votos* were multi-media, containing wood and other materials.

For those members of the faithful who could not afford to commission a life-sized or event effigy, smaller votives, usually made of wax or paper-mâché could be purchased.¹⁰¹ Fragmented *voti* focus on the specific part body that received miraculous relief from suffering. Body-part *ex-votos* were created in workshops that produced votives in volume to be sold to lower-class patrons. Votaries could select which area of the body they wanted to install in the church based on how the Virgin, through the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, had intervened in their lives. The use of object *voti*, such as candles, coins, and flowers, is still prevalent today. While fragmented votive offerings are somewhat figural, as cast pieces of the human body, their function relates more closely to the object type. This chapter is concerned with only body-part and object type *ex-votos* and therefore does not include effigies that recreate the body in full. Unless delineated otherwise, this chapter refers to just the two smaller, less representational types.

Installing a wide range of object votive offerings is still widely practiced in Catholic churches across Italy today. Consider the multitude of votive offerings crafted by grateful mothers in response to Jacopo Sansovino's *Madonna del Parto* of San Agostino in Rome (figure 12). Cloth pink-and-blue pillows embroidered with names of healthy babies the sculpture purportedly helped deliver are displayed in close proximity. The candles available for purchase burn. In a case hanging behind the pillows are silver

¹⁰¹ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 161.

medallions in an array of shapes. One grateful devotee has even left a flowering plant. Still displayed in the Santissima Annunziata are gold heart-shaped votives, as can be seen in figure 7. Multiple reliquary cabinets cover the walls around the *Madonna of the Annunciation*'s tabernacle. Smaller *voti* could be crafted from silver, such as those seen in figure 15, which displays as a two-dimensional ship.¹⁰² Fresh flowers, handwritten letters, and even coins are all object votive offerings. These objects are carefully selected by the votary, and placed near a thaumaturgic image.

Body fragment and figural votive offerings were most often made of wax. Wax as a medium allows for extremely true-to-life representations of the patron through a wide range of colors and dramatic poses.¹⁰³ Though dating to the late seventeenth century, the ability of the wax medium can be seen in Gaetano Giulio Zumbo's *The Plague* (figure 14), a three-dimensional installation full of writhing figures of the dead and dying. Grief and horror are displayed through the vivid colors and twisting forms of the corpses and ruined landscape. As a material wax is also practical. Votive offerings made of wax could be melted down to create other votive offerings, or even candles that may later be used as object votives, thus continuing a cycle unavailable to other artistic mediums.¹⁰⁴

Georges Didi-Huberman discusses wax as a medium by focusing on the properties of the material. Wax is highly potent, as sculptures made of wax seem almost alive, because wax “*goes too far* where resemblance is concerned.”¹⁰⁵ Ironically, because of this ability to so closely portray life, wax sculptures give the impression of death. By

¹⁰² Ibid., 164.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹⁰⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, “Viscosities and Survivals: Art History Put to the Test by the Material,” in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 155.

recreating the body as a sculpture that does not move, breathe, or speak, figural wax votives remind one of cadavers and therefore connote morbidity. These *voti* present a nearly human body; the skin resembles human skin, but no life pulses beneath it. Wax effigies have long been a part of Italian culture, dating back to ancient Rome where they were historically related to death masks and funerary rituals.¹⁰⁶

In his analysis of the material, Didi-Huberman touches on wax's connection to magic by way of its potent accuracy, saying it is the "*magic of resemblances* in wax that makes possible not a historical but a physiological process."¹⁰⁷ All votive offerings represent suffering, and are created in response to physical pain. Racked with agony or gratitude, a votary chooses or commissions a votive offering to represent their most vulnerable moment. Body-part votives in particular abstract the suffering body in a single part. Didi-Huberman states that votive offerings as a genre, regardless of their material, are "objects that are constituted psychically by the votive bond," which retain power "by direct contact of mechanical transfer" to the body of the votary.¹⁰⁸ Scholars like Didi-Huberman are generally interested in exploring figural *ex-votos* based on the power of wax to recreate a person accurately and create a sympathetic link between the votary and the art object.¹⁰⁹ This critical debate concerning whether or not figural votive offerings should be considered potentially related to magic is the subject of chapter three. Initially, we must focus our attention on body-part and object votive offerings and their place

¹⁰⁶ See Julius von Schlosser, "History of Wax Portraiture," in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 177.

¹⁰⁷ Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals: Art History Put to the Test by the Material," 163.

¹⁰⁸ Didi-Huberman, "Ex-voto: Image, Time, Organ," 8.

¹⁰⁹ Julius von Schlosser, for example. Schlosser, 175.

concerning the convoluted links within a culture that constantly entertained a slippage between the magical and the miraculous.

Miraculous Votives, Magical Votives

Catholic votive offerings, tiny pieces of a Europe-wide religion, forged a personal connection between the individual worshipper and the heavenly saint. Votive offerings brought the vast scope of the church (both the institution and the building itself) down to an individual level: they allowed a single person to have a connection with the divine, even within a church full of worshippers. In the fifteenth century, the Santissima Annunziata housed an immense number of votive offerings, yet each singular *voti* tied the votary to the divine. This one-to-one connection emphasizes individual misfortune, creating a call and response between a Catholic divinity and the suffering supplicant. Miracle-working objects, such as the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, work through only one saint or heavenly figure. This one celestial being then chooses a single individual to interact with through a miracle. This person then keeps the intimate connection active by gifting a votive offering to the image and therefore the saint behind it. The time, effort, and financial necessity to create and install these objects was all undertaken to demonstrate to the painting—and therefore Mary herself—that her followers credited their safety and health to her divine intervention. Votives give form to the body, the symptomatic body.

The term *ex-voto* implies a response to a miracle. Despite the fact that they are generally believed to simply attest to a miracle, quattrocento votive offerings operated on far more complex terms. They stood as tangible reminders of a supernatural event that

took place in the past, and physical objects that participated in divine exchange. While the vast majority of body-part votive offerings signaled gratitude *after* the healing took place, they were also sometimes purchased to *enact* said aid.¹¹⁰ This was especially true of the fragmented votive offerings surrounding the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, a miracle-working image distinctive in that many devotees *asked* for its aid rather than only showing gratitude for it after the miracle had taken place. A votary would occasionally purchase an arm in order to draw the gaze of the divine towards their actual, suffering arm.

Focusing on body-part votives, Christopher Wood stresses “the feet and hands refer to individuals even if their content of reference is lost. The wax body parts lack any differentiating marks. They were not individually commissioned but were mass produced by artisans, for purchase ‘off the rack,’ probably from a shop located near the shrine. But the context creates them as portrait.”¹¹¹ The fragmented body parts represent the votary’s central misfortune. They are neither clothed, nor adorned with hair or accessories. The absence of the fully depicted body lacks color, composition, and poses. Instead, the body-part votive only depicts severed, repeated pieces of suffering flesh.¹¹² Though technically simplistic, fragment votives could ostensibly prevent an individual from dying, elevating pre-cast wax body pieces into life saving depictions. Wood’s case study, a fifteenth-century German woodcut describing a votive cult of the Saint Anthony, also tells of *ex-votos* created to plea for supernatural assistance. Only the fragmented *voti* were installed in anticipation. The synecdochic relationship between wax fragment and devotee

¹¹⁰ Oen, 3.

¹¹¹ Wood, “The Votive Scenario,” 223.

¹¹² Wood calls the body pieces votives “super-representations... powerfully linked to their referents” Ibid., 209.

participated in the early modern culture of remedies. Fragment votive offerings purchased in anticipation transmitted power from the miracle-working image and therefore the divine itself.

In both anticipatory and reactionary votives the active participation of the sufferer resonates. The votive is a trace of suffering, a representation of it. Moving beyond simple identifiers of gratitude, they are depictions of trauma, powerful identifiers of pain and fear. Votive offerings work for the community, representing spirituality and suffering. In terms of remedies, the *voti* remove physical pain from the body in order to restore it to full health. The body-part votives evidence the devotee's hope not to contract an illness, or to fall victim to horrors of bone breakage, a crippling disease or corruption of the flesh. The votary chooses a representation of terrifying moment in his or her life. The *voti* codify the early modern connection between agency and supernatural efficacy through a representation of the traumatized human body or spiritual experience.

Didi-Huberman asserts that only those votive offerings made of wax were potentially magical. However, his analysis should extend to votive offerings as a whole. Didi-Huberman holds that "wax allows the extension and even the constitution of the time of the vow" because of its ability to be melted down and re-shaped into another votive object.¹¹³ However, the same could be said of other materials votive materials were made of, such as silver. Often Servite priests melted down silver votives, especially when space inside the Santissima Annunziata became scarce. This was frequently done to make coins, however, which would strip the materials of its religiosity.

¹¹³ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ex-voto: Image, Time, Organ," *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 47, no. 3 (2007), 8-9.

As remedial instigators, votive offerings functioned very similarly to objects used in magical practice. Since only the body-part votives were purchased in hope for aid, they cannot be viewed as ostensibly the same as their full-figural brethren. They actively solicit divine intervention in a way that other Catholic practices that do not involve devotional votives, prayer for instance, cannot.

Alfred Gell holds that art objects act as social agents, which are assigned importance and power by the community in which they are produced, circulated, and repeated.¹¹⁴ A distinction must be made, however, between objects capable of transforming a human body from diseased to healthy one and those that cannot. We may say that votive offerings and magical objects have assumed rather than assigned agency, in that they assume the power of supernatural—rather than social—forces towards remedial efficacy. In order to fully understand how early modern people held *ex-votos* and magical objects in similitude, a detailed breakdown of the precise commonalities is required. Votives showcase performative agency through actual efficacious power. Even if an early modern person would not have picked out her wax arm from the wax-worker's shop and immediately compared it to a handwritten charm created by the local cunning man, she would perhaps have understood the similarities implicit between these two disparate curative objects.

Similar to miracle-working images, votive offerings are additionally connected to magical efficacy through ritual and ritual space. *Ex-votos* contribute to the enshrinement of a miracle-working image within the ritual space of a church. Devotional practice of enshrinement is essential to understanding how miracle-working cults function and

¹¹⁴ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1998), 123.

continually enthrall viewers centuries after the original miracle takes place. Robert Maniura, while not speaking directly of magic, points out that votive offerings are very much linked to ritual, saying “We are not dealing just with mimetic objects—pictures on walls and statues that in certain respects look like people—we are also dealing with mimetic rituals: rituals that mime social interaction and which actively constitute the relationship between devotee and saint.”¹¹⁵ Votive offerings are part of the elaborate enshrinement of miracle-working images. In the fifteenth century, this ritual enshrinement thus served to draw the power of the divine. Votives cannot operate without the divine figure they are intrinsically connected to; they lose all efficacious meaning and function when removed from the context of the sacred space. Encapsulated in an art object, votive offerings give form to suffering so that a votary can leave behind his or her pain in the holy church space. Votive offerings reconciled bodily corruption, utilizing a representation capable of separating anguish from a human body.

Both body-part and object votive offerings hold commonalities with magical objects used within the early modern culture of remedies through materiality and utility. Materially, they share common characteristics. Functionally too, both votive offerings and magical objects were utilized in similar ways to similar ends. From Italian citizens who piously purchased *ex-votos* in silver or wax to the unknown rural healer who fashioned an amulet from base materials to aid in personal protection, all believed that these objects actually had the power to effect and change the world around them, to bend natural order to their will.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Robert Maniura, “Ex-Votos, Art and Pious Performance,” *Oxford Art Journal* vol. 32, no. 3 (2009), 422.

¹¹⁶ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 37.

Holmes discusses votive offerings in their many varieties, mostly the figural and body-part types. Her analysis focuses on votive offerings created for the Santissima Annunziata, further strengthening the notion that the church was exceptional as a site of votive display in the early modern world. Though her article treats all four types of votive offerings delineated in the introduction to this chapter, by focusing mainly on the full-sized effigies she discounts the importance of the smaller *ex-votos*. The practice of using wax to create a malfunctioning body part was widespread in Europe by the thirteenth century; casting them in silver became popular during the following century.¹¹⁷ These fragmented body parts, art objects that signaled the specific part of a body suffering from disease or discomfort, displayed vulnerability, gratitude, and piety of the votary. Holmes argues that the contemporary viewer would have been accustomed to the sight of body parts not only in church spaces but also as part of every day life, as the corpses of criminals were often left in public places and Catholic sacred spaces held saint's body parts.¹¹⁸

Holmes alludes to anatomical *ex-votos* as magically charged objects, stating, "one can imagine the near talismanic potency of these wax body-parts displayed in close proximity to cult images and body relics."¹¹⁹ Holmes utilizes the term "talisman" to indicate that votive offerings walked a line dangerously close to idolatry. Regardless of its meaning within Holmes' text, the talismanic connotation points to underlying links with objects used in magical practice throughout Europe during the early modern period.

¹¹⁷ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 161.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Before exploring the association between *voti* and objects used in contemporary magical practice, an explanation of the latter is necessary. The belief in magical intervention aided by or acting through an art object permeated the creation of a wide range of remedial magical objects throughout the Italian peninsula during the medieval and early modern periods. The possibilities of what magical charms may have looked like are virtually endless. They could be gems, rings, coins, statuettes, or even small vessels that could contain specialized water or herbs. Whatever materials they were made out of, magical objects are usually referred to as charms, amulets, or talismans. The differences between the three terms are so indeterminate that they may be used interchangeably. All are small, material tokens crafted or selected to aid in a specific purpose. These objects were used for both negative and positive aims, and thought to have power by invoking either demonic spirits or manipulating and rerouting the natural world.

Kieckhefer explains that talismans worked much like amulets, save that they often included a written element, with “words or at least letters inscribed on them.”¹²⁰ While the non-pictorial *ex-votos* usually did not boast writing, the parallel is still convincing. Though made of widely different materials, votive offerings and magical objects shared three common physical characteristics: simplicity, smallness, and portability. Both types of objects are relatively simple in their construction, containing only a few elements and often just one type of material. Many objects that fall under the category of the object votive offering were also used as charms, such as coins and candles. Their simplicity allows for people without means to practice magic or take part in the miraculous. Votive offerings are grounded in their materiality. Shorn of ornamentation, complexity and

¹²⁰ Ibid., 77.

detail, they resonate only their shape. Body-part and object votive offerings and magical charms also tend to be small in size. By extension, they are easily portable. A major component of an amulet is its ability to be worn by its creator, therefore extending the reach of its protective power wherever the wearer goes.

Yet the votive offerings exhibited in churches have surrendered their mobility. To understand the link between *voti* to magical objects through the notion of portability, consider their less ornate cousin, the pilgrim sign. Portability and movement is pivotal to pilgrim signs. These objects were tokens of a journey, signaling that the individual had made the trip to a holy site. They were often made of copper or some other less precious metal. A common form of the pilgrim sign was an *ampulla*, which could be filled with holy water.¹²¹ Although the pilgrim sign provided (figure 16) is not originally from Italy, we know that they were created in Rome, as it was one of the most vital pilgrimage destinations.¹²² In most cases, they were worn on the body of the person making the journey as a badge or a necklace. Pilgrim signs were sometimes thought to possess thaumaturgic powers, such as healing the sick. While not technically votive offerings, pilgrim signs share common characteristics with *ex-votos* in that they are purchased by a votary at a Catholic sacred site and are a way to connect to the divine. They are likewise small and inexpensive in material. Pilgrim signs participate in the power of the holy through contact or replication, just as the votary replicated his or body in wax fragments.

Identifying the precise mechanisms that invested Catholic objects with magical efficacy in the minds of the early modern people throws light on remedial practice.

¹²¹ Michael Garcia, "Medieval, Magic, and Water: The Dilemma of Deliberate Deposition of Pilgrim Signs," in *Peregrinations: International Society for the Study of Pilgrimage Art* vol. 1, no. 3 (2005), 2.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 6.

Votive offerings and magical charms are related functionally in three ways: they both center around healing, they both act as transmitters of power, and through the spaces they are used in. Magical talismans were very often used to cure a disease.¹²³ Some were modest charms written on pieces of paper that would be placed on the head of a person suffering from an illness.¹²⁴

Like amulets and talismans, votive offerings were employed in channeling, extending, or heightening the power of the supernatural. The votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata cult acted as talismans, as instruments of divine engagement themselves. Because they memorialized the moment of the original miraculous intervention, they not only recorded the curative moment but also repeated and extended it by keeping the channel open between the divine and the votary through art. The votary desired for his or her votive to endure, so that the suffering stayed safely confined within the representation. In 1619, a manuscript was commissioned to contain depictions of *ex-votos* in the Santa Maria della Quercia in Viterbo, showcasing a serious need to preserve the *voti*, in this case across mediums.¹²⁵ Moving far beyond thanks-offerings and remembrance objects, votives evidence a powerful choice of the votary to represent his or her distressed body. Votive offerings transferred power in the form of gratitude back towards the miracle-working image. *Voti* themselves had their own type of power, to call to the divine in the form of an object. Remedial efficacy continued to resonate long after the precursory votive crisis.

¹²³ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 45.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁵ Andrea Daninos ed., *Waxing Eloquent: Italian Portraits in Wax* (Milan: Officina Libraria, 2012), 91.

In both magic and votary custom, the presence of a practitioner was required. This person was necessary to activate the item so that it could perform its mystical task. In the case of magical objects, such as loadstones and handwritten charms, this individual took the form of the magician. One specialist in one secret, mysterious ritual used magical objects. An amateur craftsman or the magician himself often made amulets and charms. Votive offerings, on the other hand, were usually created in workshops.

As previously discussed, votive offerings purchased for the Santissima Annunziata were often selected in order to thank or solicit the *Madonna of the Annunciation* for its aid. With *ex-votos*, the patron who commissioned and gifted the offering to the church and was represented in the object acts as the practitioner. Like a magician chose the correct type of charm to heal his patient, a specific object was selected by a votary for an explicit purpose, and used in a cult space in a particular way. Although the votary was not trained in magical or miraculous practice, he or she nevertheless acted as the practitioner by purposefully selecting an object, which would participate in divine exchange, as a magician chose a charm on behalf of a sufferer.

Shared utility of the *voti* and magical objects is additionally characterized by common ritual and use of ritual space. While remedial magical objects needed the magical circle in order to work, *ex-votos* required the sacred space of the church and the proximity to the miracle-working image in order to absolve suffering. Magical objects must be within the magic circle and held in the hands of the magician before they can be used to heal the sick or enact a love spell. Most likely, magical ritual practice varied just as much as the objects themselves. One of the major aspects was the drawing of the magic circle. Practitioners cut a design into the floor with a ceremonial knife or sword

where the ritual was to take place. Much like the miracle-working image and its collection of votive offerings, the collaboration between the objects and the mystical circle animated the entire magical space as a carefully constructed work of art in itself.

Case Study: The Witch-Nuns of San Lorenzo

In order to solidify the implicit connection between votive offerings and magical charms a case study is needed. Because there are no surviving magical charms from Florence and very few records concerning their use, we must instead look at examples from Bologna as stand-ins, as recorded by Craig Monson.¹²⁶ The records Monson so thoroughly glossed give detailed accounts of the popular magic rituals and objects used in early modern Italy. Monson presents a report concerning the nunnery at San Lorenzo in Bologna, which was under investigation by an abbot during the mid-to-late sixteenth century (approximately 1583).¹²⁷ Many of the women there were accused of using magic.

The early modern culture of countering forces constantly witnessed a contamination between magic and the Catholicism. Although both the nuns and the inquisitors considered black magic as wholly outside the realm of acceptable Catholic practice a connection certainly existed in the minds of both persecuted and persecutors. Indeed, the nuns may have believed that their magic would work because they were familiar with the efficacy of Catholic objects. Though the practice was independent, magic and Catholicism melded within the convent showcasing that early modern people understood that magic and Catholicism must be similar to blend the two to perhaps make each even more powerful.

¹²⁶ Monson, 25-62.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 33.

The kinds of magic the nuns were involved in varied as they were charged with using both black and white forms. Many of the charms they used blended popular magic and Catholicism; sometimes they would evoke the name of Peter or Paul while practicing. Don Livio da Bologna recorded during his investigation that the cloistered nuns of the San Lorenzo conducted harmless scrying¹²⁸ spells using holy water laced with rat's blood.¹²⁹ The nuns also practiced divination. Fellow initiates accused many of the nuns of using baptized loadstones to perform rituals of location and love magic. Don Livio's account holds that the nuns were even using magic during mass to make the men in the congregation fall in love with them.

One of the nuns in particular, the novice Angela Tussignana, was involved in the darker side of magic. The other nuns believed she was possessed by the devil, and Don Livio found that she had drawn a magic circle inside her cell.¹³⁰ In response to his report, she was exorcised and expelled from the convent. Don Livio reported condemnation for the entire convent, saying, "The nuns are doing all sorts of incantations and casting lots. They're using evil spells, lots, candles, and water and magic words or magic rings to find things they've lost."¹³¹ They may have even been commercializing this heretical behavior by casting spells for laywomen. The nuns of San Lorenzo are particularly intriguing because they used magic for harmful as well as helpful aims, and did so within the very walls of the institution that condemned such practices.

¹²⁸ Scrying is a popular magical practice done by gazing into water and used to locate lost items.

¹²⁹ Monson, 40-45.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 38.

¹³¹ Ibid., 40.

This is far from the only instance of people of the cloth engaging in magical practice. Catholic priests occasionally took part in magical rituals, for instance those believed to protect the harvest.¹³² In the twelfth century, a folk ritual used to turn a fallow field into a fertile one could be performed by a priest. The field itself acted as the ritual space; holes were dug in specific locations on the plot then filled with holy water and herbs while the priest recited Latin words from Genesis.¹³³ Pre-modern Italians were able to embrace and hold together concepts and beliefs that seem entirely disparate to the modern mind.

Magic and Florentine Courtly Culture: Second Case Study

According to accounts written by Bartolomeo Masi, a sixteenth-century Florentine, Lorenzo de' Medici supposedly wore a magical ring in which a genie was trapped, and attributed his good health and fortune to it for many years.¹³⁴ Masi's writings are the first instance we have of this anecdote. Masi holds that the "strange beliefs" circulating at the time about this legend were "collected from the mouths of the people" as well as members of high-ranking families within the city such as the Landucci.¹³⁵ Though Masi himself was skeptical about the genie, he claims that he spoke to multiple sources about the legend, indicating that it was no secret within the Medici court. Rumor held that towards the end of his life the genie, once helpful, turned against Lorenzo. Lying upon

¹³² For a detailed explanation of this ritual, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 59.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³⁴ Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 446.

¹³⁵ Bartolomeo Masi, *Ricordanze di Bartolomeo Masi: calderaio fiorentino dal 1478 al 1526* (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1906), 17.

his deathbed, Florence's prince apparently released the now vengeful spirit, but it was too late to save him. Even if the stories about Lorenzo's ring were only hearsay, they nonetheless illuminate a belief that linked popular magical practice to contemporary Catholic beliefs at the time. As argued in chapter one, the Medici were involved in the enshrinement of the *Madonna of the Annunciation*. Votive offerings relate to magic within the Medici household through examples such as Lorenzo de' Medici's magical ring.¹³⁶ Though loosely connected within the city, Medici magic and votive practice partook in the early modern culture of cures and protective powers. The powerful desire to protect oneself from harm using a particular object was common within the Renaissance world, as attested to by the widespread use of efficacious Catholic and magical objects.

It is possible that Lorenzo's ring resembled figure 17. Jewelry was often used in popular early modern medicinal practice. Generally, rings were considered efficacious due to the natural power of stones set in them, often believed to be more influential than herbs in their protective or curative characteristics. Figure 17 is of Italian origin and boasts a toadstone, a gem with the supposed ability to detect poison and erroneously thought by early modern people to come from toads.¹³⁷ These stones were considered to have physical, rather than divine, healing properties and therefore were not always considered directly magical at the time. However, there are many instances in the early modern period in which a ring itself was considered characteristically magical. The gold ring shown in figure 17, like many magical objects, is inscribed with Bible verses upon

¹³⁶ The connection between Medici magic and figural votive offerings is the subject of chapter three.

¹³⁷ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 102.

the band, therefore evoking Catholic magic alongside the supposedly natural properties of the toadstone. Sometimes magical rings were used for love magic, as they refer directly to the exchanging of rings between married couples.¹³⁸ There were rings in Europe believed to animate the dead for a short period of time, or make a living wearer appear deceased.¹³⁹ Gems on rings relate to the precious stone that often enhanced a reliquary or thaumaturgic image, and its circular shape reflects the magic circle, an important device for casting spells. While the literature on Lorenzo's ring is limited, the legend nonetheless showcases the fact that Italian magical practice intermixed analogically with the cult of the Santissima Annunziata through the Medici. When discussing Lorenzo's ring, Trexler states that some contemporary chroniclers believed the Medici palace to be a "house of magic."¹⁴⁰

The Cult of Relics and the Cult of Votive Offerings

Votive offerings are linked to magical objects through material and function; they are related to the miraculous through the cult of saints. Cynthia Hahn speaks of the often-overlooked importance of saint's relics and the objects created to house them, explaining that "shaped reliquaries of body parts signify specifically through the implied fragmentation of the relic-body, in this way insisting upon a larger whole."¹⁴¹ She argues that the fragmentation of the body increased the power of the relic and thus its ability to act in the world. A body broken down into several parts can reach more members of the

¹³⁸ Monson, 47.

¹³⁹ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 102-103.

¹⁴⁰ It remains unclear from the period accounts whether or not Lorenzo was condemned for using magic. Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 446.

¹⁴¹ Hahn, 20.

devout than an intact body entombed in a single location. A saint leaves behind a relic, later encased in a reliquary, which is a tangible object for devotees to relate to through both touch and sight. Reliquaries doubly operate as containers for the saint's whole body and the saint's specific body part: while technically they only hold a finger or an arm, metaphorically they broadcast the saint's body in its entirety. As sculptures, reliquaries remind the viewer of the sacrifice the saint made while on earth by voluntarily allowing their body to be damaged to the point of fatality. Through a reliquary, a saint's physical remains put on display showcases the martyr's continuation of life after death in the heavenly realm. By extension, reliquaries also showcase the uniqueness of the saint's body when compared to a votary's own.

Several aspects of Hahn's analysis of the saint's fragmented body can be related to the body-part votive offering. Both anatomical votive offerings and body-part reliquaries practice expanded drastically during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹⁴² During her concluding remarks, Hahn touches on this potential parallel but leaves its full expansion to future scholars. She describes the body-part votive offerings: "an affirmation of corporeality, a celebration of the restoration of the body, *ex-votos* represent the healed limb or body part as palpably and concretely as possible. *Voti* speak in a single voice, they speak their body part, and they speak thanks and witness to God's power."¹⁴³ Body-part votive offerings not only signal the gratitude of the votary who purchased them, but also they point to the power of the thaumaturgic image that healed the truncated limb. When Wood asserts "nothing signifies an absent holy person more effectively than a sample of his body," he was speaking of relics, but the statement applies to

¹⁴² Ibid., 20.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 29.

disembodied, focused pieces of a suffering human as well.¹⁴⁴ The voice the *ex-voto* speaks is that of the grateful devotee. The divine receives it. Thus the votive offering inserts itself into the chain of the miraculous, and enters the arena of the potentially magical.

The comparison between body-part *ex-votos* and reliquaries that resemble the body part inside allowed the quattrocento votive offering to partake in the notion of the miraculous. By fragmenting the body, the votary connected to the cult of saints, therefore heightening the channel between the earthly and the divine. We should consider that through the act of fragmenting his or her body, the early modern votary not only related to the cult of saints but also styled himself or herself into a type of relic. While not nearly as powerful or institutionally important as a saint's relic, the body-part votive offering allowed a votary to partake in the complex and vital practice of relic worship. Though anatomical *voti* were not as extravagant as their figural counterparts, their connection to relics holds. As much as expensive materials were admired and related to the divine, earthly relics were considered “ ‘a treasure more precious than gold and topaz.’ ”¹⁴⁵ Relics and fragmented votive offerings related to the Heavenly Jerusalem not through gems and exquisite metals but the connection to the divine.

While Hahn allows for some similarities between votive offerings and saints' relics, she does not believe that the votive offering has any link to the magical or the miraculous because for her only the reliquary is connected to the heavenly realm.¹⁴⁶ Yet

¹⁴⁴ Wood, “The Votive Senario,” 211.

¹⁴⁵ Ellert Dahl, “Heavenly Images: The statue of Saint Foy of Conques and the signification of the Medieval ‘Cult-Image’ in the West,” in *Acta ad Archaeologiam et Artium Historiam Pertinentia* vol. 8 (1978), 184.

¹⁴⁶ Hahn, 29.

the same *should* be said of the body-part votive offering. *Ex-votos* do have a power of their own, the power to point to a suffering body of a mortal and insert it into a direct conversation with the divine in order to physically change the state of that body. This method of devotion was another way to relate to the divine and divine power. By self-fashioning one's body as a relic, the votary continued to link to the divine. The survival of the fragment genre over centuries attests to its power.

Hahn's ideas concerning the saint's body and the body-part votive offerings point to the power of the votive offering to identify the entire, living body of the patron that purchased it. Fragmented votive offerings are related to magic through the objects used in magical practice, but also by sympathetic representation of the votary. Because they reproduce in object form the suffering and gratitude of a person who received divine aid, they should be seen as stand-ins for the donor. Although they only signify a small portion of the donor's body, the fact that it was the part assisted by a heavenly intercessor adds to its representational value. Indeed, in the early modern period, a separated wax head could be referred to as a "*ritratto*," a "portrait" of the entire person.¹⁴⁷

The Magic of Body-Part and Object Votives

Because votive offerings memorialized the moment of the original miraculous intervention, they not only recorded the magic, they repeated and extended it by constantly referencing the remedial event. Scaled down to the exact body part that received divine influence, anatomical *ex-votos* were capable of performing in a mode the votary who selected and purchased them could not. The complex interlocking notions of

¹⁴⁷ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 163.

mechanism, materiality and function act as the bonds between votive offerings and objects used in period magical practice. As discussed, many votives were installed to attract, not acknowledge, supernatural aid. Whether in the form of a disembodied arm or expensive golden pendant in the shape of a heart, smaller votive offerings represented suffering and performed gratitude, all within the eyes of Catholic divine figures. In a world full of supernatural forces, *voti* and magical charms operated in a shared cosmology and natural philosophy with one another. While the body-part and object type of *voti* were related to remedial magical practice through their similarity to charms and talismans, the full-scale wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata linked to supernatural efficacy in a wholly distinctive way.

Chapter Three: Ancient Survivals and Medici Magic: The Power of Portrait Votive Offerings

The notion of spectacle was a major aspect of the figural votive offering group in the Santissima Annunziata. Covering the church floor and recreating the moment of the miracle, the massive number of votives tested the boundaries between the divine and the earthly. Specially catered for the patron, the images were sometimes dressed in the actual clothing of the commissioner. Among the most famous stood Lorenzo de' Medici's effigy, created in response to his escape from the Pazzi conspiracy, to be discussed below. This forest of sculptures within the Santissima Annunziata's nave eventually became so untamed that the wax effigies had to be suspended from the ceiling. This created an atmosphere of danger, as sometimes the weight of the effigies proved too great for their cords and the artworks came crashing to the ground. In order to cope with the massive weight of the votives, the walls of the Santissima Annunziata had to be reinforced during the last decade of the fourteenth century.¹⁴⁸ The wax votives were removed from the church in the early seventeenth century, after placing a number of worshippers in physical risk. Before their removal, the number of votive offerings in the Santissima Annunziata climbed to the tens of thousands.¹⁴⁹ The wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata were unique for many reasons, one being that nowhere else in Europe was the widespread practice of effigies as extravagant or dedicated to artistry than at the basilica.¹⁵⁰ Although generally unstudied today, the figural *voti* were a highly regarded art form at the time: Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop produced many of the

¹⁴⁸ Oen, 7. The fourteenth-century satirist Franco Sacchetti wrote of the perilous weight and volume of the votives in a letter to Jacopo di Conte.

¹⁴⁹ Freedberg, 229.

¹⁵⁰ Panzanelli, 14.

more elaborate examples.¹⁵¹ In quattrocento Italy the cult of the miraculous fresco was connected to innovations in magical theory through one of the major players in Florentine history.

Warburg and van der Velden's debate concerning whether or not the full-scale effigies may be considered magical, as discussed briefly in the introduction, needs to be reopened. Figural votives created to thank the *Madonna of the Annunciation* were operationally similar to both sympathetic and non-sympathetic forms of magic.¹⁵² Operating as votive gifts, the figural wax effigies responded to divine aid. Though not created in anticipation (like fragmented *ex-votos*) full-scale wax portraits played a role in the culture of remedies not by soliciting supernatural aid but by responding to it in the form of an image of trauma.

Defining Figure-Type Votive Offerings

Before exploring the critical debate mentioned above, an examination of figural *voti* is necessary. Figural votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata can be divided into two categories: full-scale and event. Full-scale figural effigies in the Santissima Annunziata were a wax body covered in clothing and accessories. Life-sized knights astride horses covered in battle armor and high-ranking members of the church hierarchy dressed in the robes of their order were among the most grand.¹⁵³ Swords and weapons accompanied famous members of the military. One account tells of a true-to-life size pregnant woman

¹⁵¹ Warburg, 190.

¹⁵² Sympathy is what Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood refer to as “the hidden paths and conduits that connect like to like.” Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 11.

¹⁵³ Holmes, “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult,” 166.

depicted atop an actual bed, saved from the dangers of childbirth.¹⁵⁴ While none of the figural votives of the Santissima Annunziata survive, the closest comparisons available are wax effigies from Santa Maria della Grazie in Mantua, dating from the sixteenth century. Figures 18 and 19, full-scale wax effigies believed to represent Pius II and Philip II, illustrate the high level of detail placed in the clothing, poses, and accoutrements given to votive offerings of this type. Patrons from across Europe, such as foreign nobles and dignitaries, who credited the *Madonna of the Annunciation* with a miracle had wax effigies installed as well. The power of the votive offerings inside the Santissima Annunziata was so potent and the connection to the divine so apparent that even a Turkish Pasha, a Muslim, commissioned an effigy for the *Madonna of the Annunciation*.¹⁵⁵

There were also figural wax effigies that re-created the votive crisis, albeit on a smaller scale. These event effigies included not only a wax resemblance of the donor but also setting elements necessary to tell the story of when the *Madonna of the Annunciation* intervened in their lives. Francesco Bocchi tells of a votive image of a man saved from public execution by the *Madonna of the Annunciation*.¹⁵⁶ Figure 20, also from Santa Maria della Grazie, may look similar to the non-extant example from the Santissima Annunziata. Emphasis is placed on the apparatus of execution from which the donor is saved. Desperation and gratitude is equally accentuated in this event effigy. These votive offerings, which displayed a likeness of the patron in the actual votive crisis, link directly to the miraculous intervention on a purely visual level.

¹⁵⁴ Warburg, 207.

¹⁵⁵ Panzanelli, 15.

¹⁵⁶ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 176.

Wax Effigies and Magic: The Debate

Aby Warburg first connected the wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata to magic. As discussed, Warburg framed wax effigies as portraits of grateful devotees, explaining that the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence was once packed so full of life-sized, costumed representations that they became hazardous to the congregation.¹⁵⁷

Warburg believes that the Medici votives in the Santissima Annunziata were so lifelike that they acted as conduits of sympathetic magic.¹⁵⁸ By comparing period accounts of the Medici wax effigies with Domenico Ghirlandaio's portrait of the family in *The Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule* painted between 1479 and 1485, Warburg assigns likeness to the votives. Warburg does not consider the specific magical qualities of the votives, but instead discusses an overall connection to sympathy based on likeness.

Warburg initiated the idea that the wax effigies were powered by sympathetic magic and states that each resemblance was a simulacrum of the donor who commissioned it.

Furthering Warburg, Julius von Schlosser defended the wax effigy as an art form warranting serious study.¹⁵⁹ Beginning in ancient Rome and ending by speculating about the wax sculpture's place within the modern world, Schlosser details the evolution of the votive medium. He speculates that wax has been ignored as a medium precisely because of its unique ability to reflect life and its uncanny resemblance to the human form. As the medium selected to create death masks and funeral effigies throughout the centuries in the west, wax is linked to death.

¹⁵⁷ The church was filled to capacity by the early seventeenth century. Warburg, 190.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁵⁹ Schlosser, 173.

Schlosser does not doubt the wax as a medium's connection to magic, especially black magic used to harm a rival, a common occurrence in ancient spells and curses.¹⁶⁰ Working from the stance that the wax simulacra were very much tied up with black magical practice, Schlosser states "This imitation of the presence of the demonic underlies the notion that the surest way to strike at an enemy is the use of sympathetic magic, using images, and for this purpose wax in particular, so readily molded, has always shown itself a compliant medium."¹⁶¹ Wax is cheap, was widely available in the early modern world. It instantly responds to the heat of human hands and was easily shaped into a simple dummy to use for *maleficium* (harmful magic). While it remains unclear what exactly he meant by a demonic presence, Schlosser's early twentieth century study nevertheless illuminates a strong connection between wax as a material and a reservoir for efficacious power, positive or negative.

Schlosser and Warburg both believed that the wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata were connected to magic through the concept of sympathy, the idea that a representation is numinously linked to the actual physical body of the represented person. Sympathy has long been central to magical phenomenon; as a concept it informs magical practice spanning countless cultures. Kieckhefer defines sympathetic magic as "symbolic likeness between the cause and effect."¹⁶² Sympathy is distinct from black and white magic because it requires likeness to operate. While sympathy was occasionally used as a method in both positive and negative magic, it distinctly does not draw power from either natural or supernatural forces. Black, white, and Catholic magic are either spiritually or

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 175.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 13.

supernaturally efficacious. Sympathy, on the other hand, depends on the law of contact or contagion, connecting to like to like.¹⁶³ Both Warburg and Schlosser believe that Lorenzo de' Medici's wax effigy was sympathetically magical because it resembled him. As we will see, Warburg and Schlosser's linkage between the effigies of the Santissima Annunziata and the concept of sympathy can be developed because perfect likeness is not obligatory.

Schlosser and Warburg's ideas have not gone unchallenged. Recently, Hugo van der Velden has commenced a debate concerning whether or not votive effigies should be considered connected to magic. In *The Donor's Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold*, Hugo van der Velden devotes a chapter to arguing against Warburg's concepts. Van der Velden believes that European votives overall and the Medici votives in particular were originally less lifelike than Warburg and Schlosser assumed, and therefore cannot be linked to the notion of sympathy. Though they were somewhat lifelike, some evidence suggests that they did not accurately resemble the life they supposedly recreated.¹⁶⁴ Van der Velden believes that the *voti* did establish "an intricate bond" between the votary and the miracle-working image, but that this bond was not based on sympathetic magic.¹⁶⁵

Van der Velden rejects the notion of sympathy by pointing out that many donor images throughout early modern Europe (including Renaissance Florence) were sometimes made of precious metals instead of wax, a medium unable to create an

¹⁶³ See Frazer, 11.

¹⁶⁴ Hugo van der Velden, "Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness," *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance* eds. Nicholas Mann and Luke Syson (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 233-237.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

accurate likeness of the votary.¹⁶⁶ Instead focusing on the notion of the *ex-votos* as votive gifts that successfully fulfilled the vow of the donor, van der Velden argues that the effigies were politically efficacious and used by the Medici as propagandist signs of their unofficial rulership of Florence. Unlike Kriss-Rettenbeck (who heavily criticized Warburg for aligning the effigies with magic), van der Velden does believe the wax votives could stand for the donor as signifiers of social and economic standing, and that impeccable mimeticism was not a requirement for this type of power demonstration.¹⁶⁷ However, because the effigies were not verisimilar likenesses of the votary, van der Velden holds they are not linked to magic “unless it be the magic of images—their innate quality of interaction.”¹⁶⁸ According to this logic, lifelikeness and magical potency are mutually beneficial; the absence of verisimilitude therefore severs any potential association with sympathetic magic. The fact that sympathetic magic long pre-existed the achievement of transparent mimeticism in representation, however, renders van der Velden’s assertion unstable. Why he dismisses magic entirely, then, is difficult to surmise, though a large part of his efforts are focused on overturning Warburg and Schlosser’s long-standing acceptance of Giorgio Vasari’s perfect verisimilitude claim (discussed below). Van der Velden chastises (correctly) Kriss-Rettenbeck for having “the baby throw[n] out with the bath water” then abruptly does just that.¹⁶⁹

To summarize, Schlosser and Warburg connected wax effigies to magic through the notion of sympathy and the uncanny power of the wax medium to recreate the likeness of a donor. Van der Velden has pointed out this connection is flawed because

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁶⁷ Van der Velden, “Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness,” 133.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

many wax effigies did not accurately represent the votary they supposedly stood for.

Christopher S. Wood sums this up well in a footnote: “the question of whether this counts as magic or not have vexed the literature. Warburg and Schlosser thought so...van der Velden argue[s] that the effigies were simply representations of a spiritual process or attitude.”¹⁷⁰

While the genre as a whole is outside the scope of this project, there is enough evidence to suggest that those full-sized wax *ex-votos* created for and installed within the Santissima Annunziata operated within the paradigm of divine remedial efficacy. In the following, I intend to argue that the wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata were linked to sympathetic magic—and therefore other types of magic—despite not exhibiting verisimilitude. Even if the Florentine wax effigies did not reach Madame Tussauds-level heights of realism, they nevertheless were mimetically linked to their donor, as sympathy does not hinge on flawless likeness. A distinction must be made between the power of verisimilitude and the power of representation.

Efficacy and the Figural Votive: Alternative Perspectives

Vasari indicates Andrea del Verrocchio, with Orsino Benintendi, “portrayed from life” the Medici votives, creating wax sculptures “arranged so beautifully that nothing better or more true to nature could be seen.”¹⁷¹ According to Vasari, the combined skills of Verrocchio and Benintendi resulted in wax effigies more perfect than earlier examples.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ See footnote 82. Christopher S. Wood, “The Votive Scenario,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* vol. 59, no. 60 (2011), 224.

¹⁷¹ Giorgio Vasari, “Andrea del Verrocchio” in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* vol. 2 (1550), 2.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

Verrocchio, in the chronicler's mind, excelled at two mediums: wax sculpting and the creation of death masks. Remarking on Lorenzo's wax votive offerings in particular, Vasari claimed it to be "natural and so well-made that they represent no more men of wax but the most living."¹⁷³

Previous scholars have used Vasari's account, particularly where he states Verrocchio made both effigies and death masks, to prove the perfect likeness of Florentine wax votives. According to this line of thought, by utilizing a pressing of an actual face, some of the Florentine votives may have been accurate traces of the votary. Van der Velden points out that Vasari's is the only source stating Verrocchio was involved in the creation of the Florentine votives, and that "not a shred of evidence," exists proving that the wax effigies were made from death-mask molds.¹⁷⁴

Van der Velden is correct to point out that there is no way to prove Vasari's claim of perfect likeness, nor that a wax effigy was ever cast from a death mask mold. Even if Vasari's account is not to be believed, however, Lorenzo's full-scale figural votive offering recreated his likeness with a high level of accuracy and fully alluded to his living body. The time of Verrocchio and the Benintendi did witness a push towards heightened verisimilitude in the medium of wax sculpture, bringing the full powers of contemporary sculpture into alignment with the wax medium. This may reflect a long-existing desire for likeness. But it is nevertheless unnecessary to suppose that a connection with sympathetic magic was only attained in the late Quattrocento *voti*, or that the *voti* never accomplished the level of realism, even if not flawless realism, Vasari attributes to them. Ultimately,

¹⁷³ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 177.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

the Florentine wax effigies were still involved with sympathetic magic whether or not Vasari's account can be taken at face value.

Van der Velden dismisses the idea of the votive offering's association with magic by arguing that the effigies as a whole are not always reliable tools for recreating a donor's image. While it is true that many effigies did not fully resemble the patron, he is nevertheless incorrect to sever the correlation to magical practice on two accounts: he does not consider the potency of wax as a medium to relate to identity, and he ignores the performative aspect of the figural votive offering.

Figural votive offerings made from wax, even if the resulting art object does not perfectly recreate their likeness, still create a sympathetic link to the donor because of the medium's indexicality. While we cannot know exactly how accurately the wax effigies within the Santissima Annunziata represented each and every member of the faithful, they nevertheless resembled the donor and stood for them in their absence. The Santissima Annunziata, especially during the quattrocento *did* use wax as a primary medium for many of its donor portraits.¹⁷⁵

Wax was intrinsically related to identity in fifteenth-century Florence. The practice of using seals to stamp one's heraldic insignia onto an important document was widespread during this period. A finished seal speaks of both the physical act of stamping (therefore relating to the living body) and as a solidified signifier of the stamper's identity. Belting argues that a family insignia, though far removed from an individual's likeness, was an emblem of identity. Heraldry often appeared on an individual's shield,

¹⁷⁵ Panzanelli, 14.

which Belting argues “was displayed as a placeholder to the absent person.”¹⁷⁶ A family’s insignia, stamped in wax or recreated on a piece of armor, was considered a stand-in for a single member of that family.

The wax effigy embodies an imprint of the votary. Bissera Pentcheva draws a relationship between sealing and icon making in medieval Byzantium by pointing out the intersection of the two processes. Just as a stamp pulls away from the newly imprinted surface, an icon is pressed with a holy face.¹⁷⁷ The original imprinting mechanism departs but the stamp remains. Pentcheva elaborates: “absence turns into a projection, penetrating the physical space. The relief paradoxically is transformed into the materialization of the form of absence.”¹⁷⁸ We might apply the seal’s functional absence to the absent living body of the votary, who left the church fully healed. Through the votive gift, the giver left his or her identity within the church space. Because figural votive offerings made of wax were much closer to the likeness of the individual donor, they were sympathetically linked to their identity more so than portraits created in other mediums. Scattered records tell of effigies in wax were used for harmful magic in the Renaissance Europe, mostly for revenge purposes.¹⁷⁹ Likenesses of varying accuracy were used in late middle ages sympathetic magic, so that “the action carried out on the image [was] transferred to the person represented.”¹⁸⁰ In the case of the Florentine wax votive, the desired action was to respond to a remedial event with everlasting gratitude to the divine.

¹⁷⁶ Belting, 65.

¹⁷⁷ Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” 635.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 636.

¹⁷⁹ See Warburg, 436.

¹⁸⁰ Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 162.

Operating similarly to magical artifacts, objects like the votive offerings occupy the realms of remedial magical and curative miracles simultaneously. Within this dual role we see unfolding a unique phenomenon: the image of power. By exhibiting efficacious power independent of the miracle-working Annunciation the wax effigies also participated in the magical through the power of performance.

Figural *ex-votos* substitute the body of the donor through sympathetic representation. Holmes agrees with Freedburg's notion that the figural votive offering "generated the powerful illusion of the embodied presence of the votary."¹⁸¹ When discussing collections of votive offerings as images of power, Freedburg points out that the objects held special significance within the cult space and the culture that put stock in their ability to stand-in for the donor:

We do not give thanks in these cases by presenting another, or some symbolic token: we present the substituted body. While social and economic factors inevitably determine the formal and material status of the objects in the great assemblages of the *ex-votos*, and while the emulation of social equivalents or superiors, of the simpler requirements of fashion, have an incalculable and complex effect on the way such images looked, none of these factors are sufficient to mitigate the aims and functions of verisimilitude.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

¹⁸² Although he uses the term verisimilitude, I do not believe here Freedburg means perfectly accurate likeness. Freedberg, 227.

By way of nuancing Freedburg's image of power notion, the performance of the donor participates in the magical. Though uninterested in the remedial efficacy of votive offerings as opposed to other art genres, Freedburg nevertheless believes *voti* record, express, and give thanks.¹⁸³ *Ex-votos*, additionally, should be understood as selected or crafted objects intrinsically and directly connected to the supernatural. By installing a gift the votary is allowed to reenter into an intimate call and response with the divinity that once healed him or her. They are images of power, but a very specific, unique power to link heaven and earth.

Aside from the non-necessity of perfect likeness, the connection to magic can also be maintained by examining the performative aspects of the figural votive offerings. By situating wax effigies as human-made devotional objects that perform magically for the patron, their link with sympathetic magic is heightened. Maniura argues that the act of giving a votive offering is itself a sort of performance: "What makes the gift meaningful is not its form but the fact that it has been given. The offering of a material gift is as much an action as making a pilgrimage."¹⁸⁴ The ritual of installing a votive before a miracle-working image is a performance, and the object left behind continues to perform for the absent patron long after he or she has exited the church space.

Through representation the patron created a permanent stand-in capable of unending attendance in the sacred space. Votive offerings stood for the actual donor, thanking the *Madonna of the Annunciation* day and night, never faltering from this duty, performing their everlasting gratitude in a way that would be physically impossible for the donor himself. Installed in front of the wonder-working image, the Santissima

¹⁸³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁸⁴ Maniura, "Ex-Votos, Art and Pious Performance," 421.

Annunziata's figural *voti* performed as man-made, earthly counterparts to the angelic, heavenly, *Madonna of the Annunciation*. The votives simultaneously thanked Mary for the miracles she bestowed and extended the patron's time in her coveted gaze. The full-sized wax effigies functioned as a stand-in for performance, allowing the votary permanent attendance. After making the choice to appeal to the power of Catholic heavenly figures instead of the local cunning man to cure an illness, and subsequently receiving the needed aid, a grateful devotee commissioned a wax effigy as a form of payment. In the same way that the local healer required payment for his service, Mary deserved expensive, precious sculptures for her remedial succor. Gratitude is powerful emotion, tapping into vulnerability and relief. Figural votives gifted immortal presence, and therefore eternal appreciation. A wax sculpture was the closest mimetic representation available for a thankful human devotee, and could stay in church space long after the living body had perished. The votive is a representation of a temporal moment, capable of freezing time and permanently extending the intimate conversation with the divine. While this performance of surrogacy cannot be described as directly magical, it is certainly within the realm the mystical, supernatural world, which constantly vibrated with spiritual energy.

This performance was aided by the mimetic quality of wax: as Panzanelli states “the medium of wax shaped reception—the expressive force of the colored wax allowed for a degree of verisimilitude that conveyed an undeniable physical presence, and the resulting simulacrum had the performative effect of a ‘double’.”¹⁸⁵ Because wax effigies offered a substituted body of the patron (even if in every instance this body did not

¹⁸⁵ Panzanelli, 17.

perfectly recreate their likeness), figural votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata performed for the votary, so that he or she may thank Mary, the heavenly intercessor.

A devotee gifted his body to a holy figure existing in another world, heaven. Often, the receiver of said body was the same Catholic saint whom the votary had worshipped all his life, dedicated himself to, and a central part of his baptism, marriage, and death. The wax body is both passive and active. It cannot actively respond to a living human in the church, but does not passively stand in the space collecting dust. Instead, the figural *ex-voto* actively solicits divine and mortal attention by its ornateness, its ambivalence between embodying a living entity and a still figure. The fact that Catholic votive offerings are still popular today continues to speak to the formidable belief in them that has persisted for centuries.¹⁸⁶

Holmes is more interested in the social and political meanings of wax effigies, which Freedburg discusses in the passage above. While Holmes touches on the magical properties of body-part votive offerings, she explains their full-scale counterparts solely in terms of social display and conspicuous consumption. When examining those that recreated a votary's entire body, she focuses on how they were used as signifiers of political significance. Votive offerings, particularly the figural wax effigies, are usually explained as political tools purposefully positioned to display one's own social standing within the church space.¹⁸⁷ Holmes comes to the conclusion that as the effigies became more extravagant their significance went from religious objects to markers of political power.

¹⁸⁶ Although there were fifteenth-century skeptics and critics, both in the church and the lay community. Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 159-160.

¹⁸⁷ See Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 177 and Panzanelli, 14.

Yet the social and political function of the votive offerings is just one aspect within the figural *ex-voto*'s multiple meaning and functions. By focusing only on their surface meanings, Holmes entirely misses the more supernatural and mystical facets of the votive offerings. She makes some concession towards this by stating "I would like to hold on to Aby Warburg's sense that this particular representational mode of the votive effigy could be perceived to convey immanence—a charged potency lodged within the figure itself."¹⁸⁸ Holmes is hesitant to assign a magical connection to figural effigies created for the Santissima Annunziata, but believes in the possibility that this link could exist. Additionally, Holmes touches on how the wax effigies in particular are related to miracles in her article. She states that before books recording miraculous events became popular, "the effigies were the repository of the memory of the miracles generated through the agency of the cult image and they enhanced the charisma of the Annunziata."¹⁸⁹

Period voices likewise speak of the wax effigies as autonomous agents performing for the viewer. The Florentine poet Giovanni Rucellai described the multitude of *ex-votos* at the Santissima Annunziata in the shape of so many human bodies and body parts as "a great miracle."¹⁹⁰ Holmes points out that Rucellai's comment "reveals a curious displacement of the discourse of the miraculous from the cult image to the votive object," revealing the quattrocento's focus on the wax effigy as a separate entity connected to but independent of the miracle-working Annunciation.¹⁹⁰ It was not just that the site was arresting, but also that the votive objects themselves were imbued with

¹⁸⁸ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 176.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

independent power. Their connection to the miraculous power of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* based on location and performance places them within the crossroads of the magical.

Lorenzo's Genie, Lorenzo's Effigy: A Case Study in Connections

In quattrocento Italy the cult of the miraculous fresco was connected to innovations in magical theory through one of the major players in Florentine history. In April 1478, over a hundred years after the *Madonna of the Annunciation's* miraculous completion, a wounded Lorenzo de' Medici escaped from an attempt on his life orchestrated by Pazzi conspirators.¹⁹¹ In response, he commissioned three life-sized waxwork self-likenesses to stand in vigil and forever thank Florence's most beloved image for its intervention in the attack.¹⁹²

After his near-fatal encounter with the Pazzi assassins, Lorenzo de' Medici commissioned Orsino Benintendi, an artist Vasari refers to as a great "image-maker," to make three waxwork images of himself.¹⁹³ The ever-cunning Lorenzo used the very same blood-stained outfit that he had been stabbed in to clothe one of the effigies, which he installed in a nun's church on Via San Gallo in Florence.¹⁹⁴ He sent two additional effigies, one wearing a *lucco* (the state dress of the Florentine Republic) to the Basilica di

¹⁹¹ For details concerning this event, see Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 411.

¹⁹² Warburg, 190.

¹⁹³ Schlosser, 239.

¹⁹⁴ The reason why this particular effigy was sent to the nun's church, which housed a miracle-working crucifix, has yet to be answered. See van der Velden, "Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness," 128-133.

Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi and the Santissima Annunziata.¹⁹⁵ Each likeness of Lorenzo the Magnificent credited the divine with allowing him to walk away from the attack alive.

We can gain a semblance of what Lorenzo's full-scale votive offering may have looked like by studying his terracotta bust in the National Gallery (figure 21).¹⁹⁶ The bust dates from the fifteenth century and is believed to have originated from the workshop of Verrocchio. Cutting off abruptly beneath the forearms, the bust depicts the aristocrat in plain garb, his face set in a calm and intense stare. Although the image lacks the elaborate ornamentation boasted by the Santissima Annunziata effigies, the viewer retains a sense of Lorenzo's imposing presence. Van der Velden himself is sensitive to the connection between Lorenzo's political sway and the votive, and would make the case that Lorenzo's wax effigy was made to look like him for political rather than magical efficacy. The Florentine prince perhaps wanted all citizens to be able to recognize his figure, and sympathize with his plight. This may be why Lorenzo chose to dress his Santissima Annunziata effigy in the common gown of a republican citizen.

However, Vasari states the Medici votives were "so lifelike and so well wrought that they seemed no mere images of wax, but actual living men."¹⁹⁷ Period voices from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries uphold the sympathetic connection to the body of the votary. After the family's dismissal from the Florence in 1492, the effigies were taken down; in 1512 one of Giuliano was raised, then Pope Leo X's was destroyed

¹⁹⁵ Warburg page 190 and Panzanelli, 13.

¹⁹⁶ Terracotta was a similar medium to wax, as both allow for a wide range of colors and extended, exaggerated movements, as seen in the life-sized lamentation scenes also found in Italy at this time.

¹⁹⁷ Vasari, 2.

in 1572.¹⁹⁸ In this way, the turbulent waves of Medici expulsion and re-entrance into the city were mirrored in the removal and re-installment of their wax likenesses.

Contemporary accounts refer to these instance as “killing” the effigies, as acts of “murder,” further evidencing the belief that the wax sculptures were considered successful donor surrogates.¹⁹⁹ In describing a controversy involving the crowded Santissima Annunziata nave and a man forced to remove and re-arrange some equestrian votives belonging to the powerful Falconieri family, Sacchetti sarcastically ended with the phrase “May God forgive him.”²⁰⁰

Lorenzo’s connections to period magical theory relate to the interlacing crossroads between the magical and the miraculous in fifteenth-century Florence. The same Lorenzo who took part in the highly pious and potent act of installing a full-sized wax effigy before the partial *acheiropoieta* patronized Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and others who promoted theories of natural magic. The very same family whose leader had installed a life-sized effigy before an immensely popular and beloved fresco in the nearby Santissima Annunziata patronized theorists of magic. He wore a magical ring on his finger, and must have believed his wax effigy had some sort of power to draw the gaze of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* and thank it for sparing his life. These disparate artifacts both participated in curative and protective remedial culture. Wood relates the rise of the full-scale wax effigy in the late middle ages to the “increasing involvement of the individual in public religion.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Van der Velden, “Medici Votive Images and the Scope and Limits of Likeness,” 134.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 134-135.

²⁰⁰ Warburg, 205.

²⁰¹ See footnote 82. Wood “The Votive Scenario,” 224.

Early Modern Italy held adjacent types of objects in proximity, tightly intertwining them within the mystical world. Applying this notion specifically to Florence, Broedel sketches a picture of magical thought:

At one end of the spectrum was the *scientia magic* of Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, an enormously complex and intellectually difficult attempt to understand God and his creation through ritual and meditation. At the other, there were the crude magical practices and recipes found in books of necromancy and compilations of miscellaneous sorcery. Between these two extremes was an extensive middle ground comprising of alchemy, astrology and assorted divinatory practices, the manufacture of magical talismans and amulets, and the use of herbs, stones, and other materials in magical and quasi-magical ways.²⁰²

Under Medici patronage, Pico della Mirandola wrote *Comparanda Apologia* in the *Conclusiones nongentae* (*Nine hundred theses*) and Marsilio Ficino his *De amore* and *De vita coelitus*. These were published in 1486.²⁰³ Ficino and Pico were arguing for a type of magic that had nothing to do with Christian divinity but also did not involve the use of evil spirits. The two philosophers championed this novel concept, known as natural magic.²⁰⁴ Within this Florentine intellectual circle notions of the demonic were removed from ritual magical practice. Instead of evil spirits, natural materials and even nature itself was used to create wondrous effects.

²⁰² Broedel, 174.

²⁰³ Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 2.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Though officially condemned at the highest levels of the church, this new type of magic evolved out of a long and complex interrelation between popular magic and Catholic magic that had codified Italian practice for centuries. What Ficino, Pico, and other Renaissance writers meant exactly when they were discussing “natural magic” is a complex problem. The work of these theorists showcases a shift from the beliefs held by medieval society. High-ranking Church authorities, leaning on the writings of Thomas Aquinas and early Christian writers, believed all magic, even if apparently beneficial, was evil and worked through demons. Though separate from the Catholic Church, natural magic (as opposed to demonic magic) could be deemed as “good” because it harnessed the immense power residing in nature, rather than the influence of demons and demonic entities.

Ficino, ordained as a priest in 1473, experimented with Shamanism without believing this to be heretical. Instead, practitioners of natural magic, through observation and study, were harnessing a system that was ultimately set up by God. The Catholic Church, however, met Ficino and Pico’s ideas with disapproval. In 1487, the year following Ficino and Pico’s publications, Pope Innocent VII issued *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, a papal bull against witchcraft. While the majority of witchcraft trials would take place in the following century, the Catholic Church was beginning to key into the problem of witches and magic users across Europe. Paola Zambelli argues that the two philosophers were attempting to establish a legitimizing theory of magic, published just one year before the *Malleus maleficarum*, which was needed in a period when so many witches were executed.²⁰⁵ By connecting popular magical practice to Neo-Platonist

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 22.

theories—widely influential within humanist circles—Ficino and Pico were crafting a valid principle of magic, perhaps capable of saving a life from the fatal hand of inquisitors.

Scholars believe that Ficino practiced hermetic magic, another magical theory popular at the time, also under Medici patronage. Hermetic magic deals with using the power of the cosmos to enliven statues and temporarily imbue them with the power of movement. While Ficino was wary of the idolatrous implication of hermetic magic, he most likely studied its texts closely. Hermetic texts such as *Asclepius* and *Telestike* discuss sympathetic magic.²⁰⁶ Yet even during the Renaissance, the notion of sympathy was not the only aspect of magic: “I find it hard to imagine that Ficino did not indeed experiment with talismans, at least in his youth; but his suspicion that their efficacy might be caused by the devil rather than by sympathy may well have been genuine.”²⁰⁷ In the fifteenth century, sympathetic magic was linked to the Medici, who were very involved in figural votive practice in the Santissima Annunziata. Although hermetic magic involved sympathy, evolving theories of natural magic instead focused on drawing power from the earth or benevolent spirits. This connecting chain, with Lorenzo de’Medici’s wax effigy at one end, a link forged of humanist magic theories, and the prince’s spirit-entrapping ring on the other, all contributed to fifteenth century remedial and curative practice. This diverse group of objects and ideas worked in concert with one another within the supernaturally tinged early modern world.

²⁰⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Sympathy of the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols,” *Esoterica* vol. 2 (2000): 2.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

The Power of Portraiture: Non-sympathetic Magic

Lorenzo de Medici's wax effigy points to notions of representation. Votaries did not fashion the objects; instead, they would hire an artist to create an effigy along specific guidelines. By controlling the characteristics of their *ex-voto*, a donor self-fashioned his or her votive. Also, by including his or her own personal clothing and jewelry the votary assured the effigy therefore represented their likeness. Though they sometimes *did* resemble the patron, the link was instead created through accessories or an effigy that recreated the moment of crisis instead of a mimetically perfect body. The belief that the wax effigies stood for the donor was powerful and widespread throughout early modern Italy, and especially around the Santissima Annunziata. Otherwise, they could not have been the political icons Holmes so convincingly argues they are.²⁰⁸ Even if some effigies did not accurately recreate the body of a donor, the figural wax *voti* of the Santissima Annunziata still contained a sympathetic link to their votary due to the power of wax as a medium and their performative aspects.

The connection to magic concerning figural *voti* does not lie solely in an issue of sympathy through perfectly accurate representation. As discussed in the introduction, magic is deeply complex and cannot be simplified to a single concept such as likeness. Though sympathy is very important, different types of magic are in play when considering the wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata.

²⁰⁸ Holmes, "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory and Cult," 177.

Van der Velden correctly points out that when Warburg referenced the wax effigies as “image-magic” he did not fully explain what that meant.²⁰⁹ Warburg forges the connection between the wax effigies and magic by making a small but vital point:

By associating votive offerings with sacred images, the Catholic Church, in its wisdom, had left its formerly pagan flock a legitimate outlet for the inveterate impulse to associate oneself or one’s own effigy with the Divine as expressed in the palpable form of a human image. The Florentines, descendants of the superstitious Etruscans, cultivated the magical use of images in the most unblushing form, right down to the seventeenth century....²¹⁰

Warburg posits the idea that Florentines had far from given up their Etruscan roots, and believes that this ancient society was still very much alive and manifesting in contemporary Florence. Warburg introduced the pivotal idea that Italian Catholic beliefs, particularly those surrounding the Santissima Annunziata, are related to the magic of the Etruscans. While we must be careful of sweeping generalizations that loosely connect distant cultures, Warburg’s notion warrants further explanation. Whether or not we can be certain that quattrocento Florentines were acting upon unconscious impulses harkening back to ancient Etruria, Etruscan votive culture demonstrates interesting parallels to votive offerings made in fifteenth-century Florence. Because Etruscan votive

²⁰⁹ Van der Velden, 225-226.

²¹⁰ Warburg, 189.

ritual is intrinsically connected with magic, these similarities may demonstrate how the *voti* of the Santissima Annunziata were likewise related to the magical.

Ancient Etruscans used votives in their religious practice. They were usually made of terracotta and depicted highly simplified human figures individually or in groups such as a family. These may have been donor portraits loosely based on actual Etruscans, but more often are interpreted as deities. Sometimes the votives depicted a ritual, such as the pouring of libations or playing ceremonial music.²¹¹ While scholars are unsure about what exactly these images depicted or how they were used in religious ritual, there is a general agreement that “the cults’ primary functions were to ensure fertility, health, and protection.”²¹² This showcases a connection to typical white magical practice that pervaded early modern Europe. They differed slightly from those used by Florentine Catholics in quattrocento Italy, but the central idea is the same: to connect to the divine through the use of an art object.

The similarities running through Etruscan and Florentine votive practice are intriguingly specific. In some Etruscan settlements, such as Caere and Vignaccia, the terracotta votives were created in the shape of single body parts. Archaeologists have uncovered terracotta votives of fragmented body parts including heads, eyes, ears, limbs, breasts and internal organs such as livers and uteri. They were primarily used to ask a

²¹¹ Helen Nagy, “Divinities in the Context of Sacrifice and Cult on Caeretan Votive Terracottas” in *Murlo and the Etruscans: Art and Society in Ancient Etruria*. Richard Daniel De Puma and Jocelyn Penny Small, eds. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 213-217.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 211.

member of the Etruscan pantheon for safe delivery from diseases.²¹³ Both the donor portrait and the body fragment votives are stylistically and functionally related across time between the ancient societies such as the Etruscans and fifteenth-century Florentines.

Etruscans also believed in the notion of sympathetic magic, and their votive offering practice holds some parallels to Florentine beliefs. Likenesses of individuals were sometimes deposited in tombs with the hope that their real-life counterparts would suffer untimely ends.²¹⁴ These were made of terracotta or lead instead of wax. The small sculptures were linked sympathetically with the victim, but only by a weak resemblance, therefore accurate likeness was unnecessary. Regardless, they were thought powerful enough to work as proponents of sympathetic magic.

Placed around or in front of the wonder-working fresco, figural votive offerings help to maintain the idea of the original remedial event. Though votive offerings do not themselves work miracles, they aid in continuing the original intervention. By directly relating to the moment of the original miracle, they re-created the efficacious instance and thus kept it alive. The *voti* were highly lifelike, three-dimensional representations that opened a dialogue between the saved supplicant and a holy figure. Wax effigies image a trauma that cannot be verbalized, a relief from pain and anxiety that only be encapsulated in art object form. A moment of miraculous intervention mediated between the natural and the supernatural, between the mortal votary tied to earth and heavenly *Madonna of*

²¹³ Jean MacIntosh Turfa, “Anatomical Votives and Italian Medical Traditions” in *Murlo and the Etruscans: Art and Society in Ancient Etruria*. Richard Daniel De Puma and Jocelyn Penny Small, eds. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 224.

²¹⁴ See Haynes for a more detailed explanation of this practice, as well as other examples of Etruscans using objects for magic. Sybille Haynes, *Etruscan Civilization: A Cultural History* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2000), 283.

the Annunciation distributing curative aid. Wax effigies evidence a need to recreate that intense moment, perhaps the single time in a votary's life wherein their body directly engaged with the presence of the divine.

It is the commitment to performance that imbues figural votive offerings with powers of transmission. The intense desire held by the worshipper to please the miracle-working image or catch its attention underwrites the importance of the votive offering as a channel that constantly keeps the efficacious moment in living memory. Figural votives evoke otherworldliness in their materiality, lavishness, and drama in a way that their smaller counterparts cannot. Because figural *voti* recall the drama of the moment, they demand more attention by fixing the gaze ad infinitum. By playing their part within the enshrinement of a wonder-working image, the figural *voti* aided in continuing a miracle. Votive offerings performed endlessly, coalescing into an ever-growing mountain of validation of power, thus aiding in the supernatural and participating in remedial culture as representational objects that engage with supernatural forces.

We can apply these theories to Lorenzo's figural effigy in particular. The wax likeness memorialized a moment of crisis from which a mortal was saved by divine intervention. By continually pointing to the original moment of magic, his likeness kept open the channel with the divine. Here Lorenzo acts as the practitioner of magic, as a magician who is controlling the response to and continuation of the miraculous. His wax effigy stood for him within the church space, acting as a double for the powerful Lorenzo de' Medici. It kept him within the eyes of the wonder-working fresco and performed in his place. This outward display of devotion inserted Lorenzo into the cult of the Santissima Annunziata along with serving its political purposes.

When the full figure and event effigies combined, in figure 20 for example, this performance was even more powerful. Figural wax effigies worked by recreating the entire body, recalling the miraculous events and by using ornate materials. When the moment of miraculous intervention was recalled in the same object that recreated a donor's entire body, the performative aspect and therefore the connection to the divine was heightened.

Privileged display is very important to the figural *ex-votos* of the Santissima Annunziata. Of all the types of votive offerings, the wax effigy is most often pointed to as a link between art objects and magic. Larger effigies, such as the life-size *voti*, required more space within the nave, demanding added attention from the faithful and the divine. A lavish, dramatic display plays up the earthly aspect and contrasts the simplicity of the powerful divine image. The effigies of the most important members of society—kings, nobles, emperors—were positioned closest to the altar.²¹⁵ As the place on which the host was activated, the altar was the epicenter of power in Catholic ritual. The belief that by being buried close to the altar could assure the entombed a place in heaven was common in early modern period.²¹⁶ This belief therefore was extended and transferred to a votary's resemblance in wax. The wax effigy again acted as a stand-in for the actual body, the living body, until the donor passed away and could be buried within the holy ground of the church.

The wax effigies of the Santissima Annunziata were created to display the patron in the eyes of God and man. Exhibited in a highly decorated church and commissioned

²¹⁵ Panzanelli, 15.

²¹⁶ Micheal Michael, "The privilege of 'proximity': towards a re-definition of the function of armorials," *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 23, no. 1 1997, 60.

specifically to respond to the miracle-working image enshrined in a large, ornate tabernacle, each of the votives of the Santissima Annunziata competed for the gaze. They were displayed in highly trafficked and emotionally charged areas in houses of God for all to see. The effigies attempted to draw the eyes of worshippers; they also contended for the attention of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* and, by extension, Mary herself.

Another way votive offerings display quasi-magical properties is through their placement within miracle-working cult spaces; the *ex-votos* of the Santissima Annunziata were all installed in vicinity to the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco. Figural votive offerings were not only physically close to the miracle-working fresco, but also metaphysically near. Because they were stand-ins for the patron, figural *voti* acted as intercessor between the mortal patron represented and Mary. Figural votive offerings were metaphysically closer to God and his power than other, non-efficacious, artworks. Due to their twofold proximity to a miracle-working image, figural votive offerings were placed within the context of the supernatural.

Figural votive offerings created for the Santissima Annunziata were wax bodies covered in false hair, fine jewels and elaborate clothing. Thaumaturgic images, such as the *Madonna of the Annunciation*, were often decorated with jewels and encased in frames or tabernacles designed and created specifically to heighten their physical presence within the church space. The earthly materials used for figural votive offerings juxtapose the immaterial, divine force behind the miracle-working image, yet paradoxically serve as connecting forces between the thaumaturgic fresco and *ex-votos*; the use of precious jewels and metals further linked the devout to heavenly intercessors.

Through lavish display, figural votive offerings connected to the divine. Ellert Dhal, discussing the reliquary of Saint Foy in Conques, France relates the use of lavish materials in Gothic freestanding sculpture to the notion of the Heavenly Jerusalem: “In short, the vision of the celestial city is almost everywhere present to the medieval mind, and its materials, gold and precious stones, evoke *anagogically* the image of the city above.”²¹⁷ According to Dahl, the medieval viewer automatically linked the sight of precious materials with saintly paradise.²¹⁸ While Dahl’s theories do not directly apply to early modern Italy, the connection between divinity and materiality was no less present in the creation and display of the figural votive offering. By covering their figural votive offerings with precious materials, donors related themselves to the cherished remains of the saints.

Summation

Votive offerings of all types point to the notion of human-made objects and their power within the context of divine intervention. The wonder-working fresco at the Santissima Annunziata showcases the notion of authorship because its initial miraculous legend is centered around the artistic process. The priest Bartholomeus apparently struggled with his art, and through this struggle the supernatural was sparked. An angel, working through God, intervened to finish the work. Many times, famous artists were called in to update a miracle-working image.²¹⁹ Objects like votive offerings and thaumaturgic images relate to issues of artistic intent and human craftsmanship. Though this

²¹⁷ Emphasis is Dahl’s. Dahl, 183.

²¹⁸ I believe this would not apply to secular objects because the sacred space, delineated from the outside world, is a necessary context for the connection to the Celestial Jerusalem.

²¹⁹ For instance, the miracle-working Madonna of Orsanmichele discussed in chapter one.

relationship often does not affect the supernatural aspects of these objects the concept of authorship brings into focus the notion of the artist and current issues concerning divine versus demonic inspirations. Because they share vital characteristics, miracles and magic intertwine. They operated and performed similar functions. The thaumaturgic image and the multiple types of votive offerings created in response to physical trauma all contributed to a culture of remedial aid.

Conclusion: The Santissima Annunziata Cult and the Substitutional Model

The notion of magic and its relation to the miracle-working image ties into the concept of repetition. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood argue that their notion of substitution, a chain of artifacts that link objects together across time and place, cannot apply to thaumaturgic images.²²⁰ According to this model any other Renaissance art object, be it a painting, sculpture, or even a building can be understood in “substitutional terms...as belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously” through the process of repetition.²²¹ According to the theory, early modern peoples did not apply a strict notion of a constantly progressing arrow of time to objects. Instead, repeated visual tropes linked together art objects across time. Works of art bend time, pointing both forward and backward to other artifacts or sometimes “to an origin outside of time, in divinity...the work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting.”²²² Nagel and Wood believe that wonder-working images are fixed at a non-repeatable, single point

²²⁰ Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 83.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²²² *Ibid.*, 9.

in history, especially when they are enshrined and worshipped as powerful objects, as was common practice from the late fifteenth century onwards, locating a shift in culture:

Venerated images will be extracted from the substitution chain and treated like relics, which are by definition nonsubstitutable. Such relic-pictures are no longer credited with the capacity to collapse history, however. Instead, they *picture* history by pointing to a gap in the historical sequence of representational conventions. Reverence for them takes the form of a historical relationship to the image as artifact.²²³

Through their cult following miracle-working images are reworked and copied. While the miraculous fresco at the Santissima Annunziata may not fit within a chain of other scenes of the Annunciation because of its supernatural abilities, it does repeat its imagery through repainting, overpainting, and copies. Nagel and Wood, treating miracle-working images such as the *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco as a relic, deny their ability to fold time back on itself. Maria Husabo Oen believes that the repaintings and restorations the Annunciation fresco underwent up to the Second World War should be viewed as links within its substitutional chain because they repeat the image. As the fresco's efficacious power was not influence by conservation, Oen believes there is "no ontological difference" between layers of paint.²²⁴ The image was also copied into

²²³ Ibid., 83.

²²⁴ Oen, 17.

several drawings and paintings, some of which came to be installed in other churches.²²⁵

These copies must have been believed to harbor some of the power of the original image, installed with the hope that that power would work through multiplied images and protect the devotees at other locations. Oen also compellingly points out that most devotees worship the image itself, rather than a moment that would ground it to a specific time and place, further strengthening the notion that the *Madonna of the Annunciation* can fit within the substitutional model.²²⁶

Oen adds that by using the substitutional model, the Annunciation fresco can be linked to other images not-made-by-hands. Oen believes that because “the miraculous character of the fresco therefore had to be maintained” through copies and the circulation of legends, the Annunciation fresco fits into “a link in a chain of *acheiropoetic* images,” and therefore satisfies the requirements of the substitutional model.²²⁷

The *Madonna of the Annunciation* constantly repeats and reaffirms its place in the substitutional model by way of its thaumaturgic abilities, its physical maintenance, and efficacious copies. Rather than assigning the *Madonna of the Annunciation* a link in the chain of substitution, Nagel and Wood instead argue that its divine authorship anchors it in time, forever tying the fresco to its exact moment of creation. Oen counters by arguing “since miraculosity was something that resided in the temporally and spatially limited minds of the members of a particular society images could lose their power as easily as they gained it.”²²⁸ Miracle-working images are different from other types of Renaissance

²²⁵ The Medici Dukes promoted the image particularly in the late Renaissance. *Ibid.*, 5 & 19.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Oen, 16.

art objects, because their chain links to the immortal divine rather than other aesthetic objects. This inserts it into a continuum that relates back to the Catholic Pantheon, and particularly Mary's place within it.

A thaumaturgic image was art that begot art: votive offerings were created in the service of a miracle-working image. Miracle-working images, therefore, must be analyzed in their relation to their cult surroundings. Maniura provides vital insights into how to reinsert the votive offering back into its religious context. He discusses how the body of a saint is considered powerful, and thus objects such as swatches of cloth pressed to that body or even its reliquary casing are considered activated with miraculous or magical abilities. Maniura refers to this transfer of belief from divine body to ordinary object as "chains of touch."²²⁹ The objects Maniura examines are imbued with their supernatural abilities within the space of the ritual. The votive offerings of the Santissima Annunziata cult operate similarly. The Annunciation fresco activates its cult objects within the predetermined ritual space of the basilica's nave.

As we have seen, in fifteenth-century Florence votive offerings represented a vital part of the cult space and participated in the enshrinement of the *Madonna of the Annunciation* through performative worship. Maniura alludes to this theater of the cult space by saying, "the juxtaposition of the *ex-voto* and the holy image was not the result of a single unified plan but of a process of accumulation over time; yet they were explicitly meant to be seen together."²³⁰ The critical nature substitution resides in chains; votive

²²⁹ Robert Maniura, "Persuading the Absent Saint: Image and Performance in Marian Devotion," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 35, no. 3 (2009), 639.

²³⁰ Maniura, "Ex Votos, Art and Pious Performance," 423.

offerings work through not only chains of touch but also act as a part of the chain that links the fresco to the divine at one end and the mortal votary at the other.

Wax is highly problematic for study because as an art form it does not evolve and transform, and therefore cannot be grounded in history. Didi-Huberman believes that wax as a medium stretches across history, because the material cannot change and thus cannot develop.²³¹ These notions concerning wax, and therefore the wax votive offerings, currently stand in opposition to Nagel and Wood's belief that thaumaturgic images are tethered to a specific moment in time. Though substitution is not dependent on material, we have learned that wax's indexicality is essential to the votive offering's relation to the human body, and therefore the passing of time. Votive offerings simultaneously are grounded in history and have the capacity to fold time. They are created to memorialize varied historical moments of crisis and thanks, but they continue to perform and become part of an ensemble active in the present. *Ex-votos* constantly reaffirm and point back to the miraculous image and the miracle attached to it through performance. Because they are referring to a moment that has passed, a magical moment, the *voti* fold time back on itself. Lorenzo's wax effigy not only recorded the specific moment of the Pazzi attack, but also continually referred to his surviving body, therefore blurring the boundaries between the April Plot and his everlasting gratitude towards the *Madonna of the Annunciation*. Thaumaturgic images and the votive offerings created in response to them operate within the substitutional model.

By standing in for the patron as a substitute, the *ex-voto* connects to the miraculous image and to Florentine culture; though not officially condoned by the

²³¹ Didi-Huberman, 160.

Catholic Church, there was a belief at the time that one could be present through his or her portrait. Votive offerings, both anticipatory and responsive, surrogate the human body, becoming an empathetic link to the supernatural. The fresco of the Santissima Annunziata is the centerpiece of a self-circulating networks of magic linked to Florentine society and religion. Powered by remedial efficacy, contemporary practice of miracles was tied to magical cures and protection, often required in the early modern world. The gaze originated from the eyes on the Virgin's not-made-by-hands face, which watched over the horde of *ex-votos* that eventually reached elaborate and highly artistic proportions.

The miraculous cult at Santissima Annunziata was located within the ever-shifting phenomena of divine and demonic power. Renaissance Italians, who lived within a world populated by saints and demons and believed that *maleficium* was as much a threat as a drought turned to art to prolong their health, and created art in return. Historians of magic do not focus on the object, but it is exceptionally significant to both Catholic and magical practice. Early modern Italians used art and the image to fix something, to hold onto it. Objects were especially efficacious within remedial culture. Discussing votive practice, Freedburg articulates this well: "it is absolutely significant that the candles were not enough...it is not at all surprising that the main evidence for the whole phenomenon...should come from the pictures and sculptures themselves."²³² The solution for maladies was the created or commissioned object. A supernatural cult linking together the generous *Madonna of the Annunciation* fresco, body-part, and full-scale wax representations evidenced the belief that a work of art could save a life.

²³² Freedburg, 138.

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Images

Figure 1. Copy of Brunetto Latini. *Livre de Tresor*. 1425. MS 39844, f. 51.



Figure 2. Dosso Dossi. *The Enchantress*. 1520. Galleria Borghese, Rome.



Figure 3. Hans Baldung Grien. *The Witches' Sabbath*. 1510. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

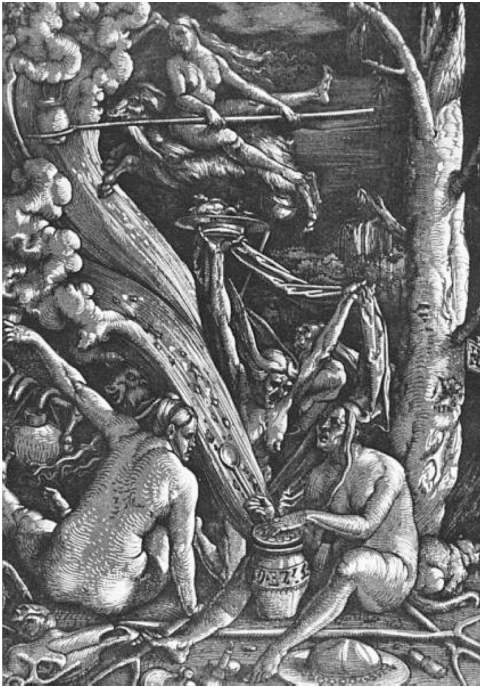


Figure 4. Giovanni Battista Caccini. Basilica Santissima Annunziata. Rebuilt 1444. Florence, Italy.



Figure 5. *Madonna of the Annunciation*. 1234 - 1340. Florence, Italy.



Figure 6. *Madonna of the Annunciation* encased in frame. 1234 - 1340.



Figure 7. Votive offerings at the Santissima Annunziata. Florence, Italy.



Figure 8. Enshrinement of the Santissima Annunziata. Florence, Italy.



Figure 9. Bernardo Daddi. *Madonna and Child of Orsanmichele*, view with tabernacle. 1347. Florence, Italy.



Figure 10. *Bambino del'Aracoeli*. Second half of the 14th century. Rome, Italy.



Figure 11. Jacopo Sansovino. *Madonna Del Parto*. 1518-1521. Rome, Italy.



Figure 12. Jacopo Sansovino. *Madonna Del Prato*, view with enshrinement. 1518-1521. Rome, Italy.



Figure 13. Raphael. *Sistine Madonna*. 1512-1513. Dresden, Germany.



Figure 14. Gaetano Giulio Zumbo. *The Plague*. Ca. 1690. Museo di Storia Naturale, Florence.



Figure 15. Silver *ex-votos* in the Santissima Annunziata. 17th century. Florence, Italy.



Figure 16. English Pilgrim Sign. 14th century. England.



Figure 17. Italian ring. 14th century. British Museum, England.



Figure 18. Effigy of Pope Pius II. Santa Maria Della Grazie, near Mantua.



Figure 19. Effigy of Phillip II. Santa Maria Della Grazie, near Mantua.



Figure 20. Event effigy. 16th century. Santa Maria Della Grazie, near Mantua.



Figure 21. Attributed to workshop of Verrocchio. Terracotta bust of Lorenzo de' Medici. 15th or 16th century. National Gallery, Washington D.C.

