

Devotional Culture, Artistic Mobility and Historicized Sacred Portraiture in Naples

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As the site of the first major European outbreak of syphilis, volcanic eruptions, and several plagues, early modern Naples was known for its fervent devotion to its more than thirty patron saints, who were mostly virgins and martyrs. Virginity and martyrdom were celebrated as the highest expressions of faith in a city in which the diseased and deceased were a near-constant presence in public spaces. Neapolitan literature and imagery often celebrated virginal bodies in contrast to the outwardly syphilitic bodies of the infected; cleanliness became associated with physical purity and chastity, while dying a graceful death was likened to the martyr's courage in the face of suffering and torture. As locals sought intercession from Agatha, Rosalia, Lucy, and other early Christian virgin martyrs whose cults greatly intensified in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Naples, pictures of the saints were widely collected by families that filled their homes with "teste di vergini" or "mezze figure delle sante vergini e martiri." The popularity of these images led to the development of a uniquely Neapolitan subgenre of portraiture in which virgin martyrs were depicted with a heightened sense of naturalism, sensuality, and grounded specificity. By analyzing paintings and archival sources including letters, inventories, and studio records, I plan to illuminate the development of the virgin martyr portrait, a Neapolitan invention that brought visionary intensity to the representation of early Christian saints.

Bio

Justinne Lake-Jedzinak is a PhD Candidate in the History of Art at Bryn Mawr College. She previously received her BA from James Madison University and an MA from Bryn Mawr College, with a thesis focusing on the religious works of the Lombard painter Daniele Crespi. Her dissertation examines devotional images of saints with an emphasis on women living in Naples who collected pictures of early Christian virgin martyrs. She recently completed a Curatorial Fellowship in the Department of European Painting and Sculpture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and is currently a Research Resident at the Center for the Art and Architectural History of Port Cities at La Capraia, Naples.