

**Thomas Dale, *Relics, Prayer, and Politics in Medieval Venetia: Romanesque Painting in the Crypt of Aquileia Cathedral*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, 170 pp., 8 col. and 160 black-and-white illus., \$79.50 US.**

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[See table of contents](#)

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promote the cult of the saint and to validate the institutional history of the order. But it is a book that does far more.

Firstly, this study significantly modifies the notion that the history of dugento painting was the history of a wholesale and uncritical borrowing of Byzantine sources. Secondly, it adds to our understanding of how Christian culture was radically redefined in the thirteenth century: images and texts speaking to a new emphasis on the Gospels and thus on the humanity of Christ. Thirdly, the tight chronological correspondences that Derbes discerns between developments in Franciscan thought and their reflection in new imagery suggest that, in mid-dugento Italy, imaging had become a high priority indeed. If Franciscan patronage was such that it instructed painters in the selection and sometimes combination of sources, the pictured takes on still greater meaning.

While the book is highly informative and largely convincing, I am left with a problem. According to Derbes (as noted above), the new images appeared between 1235 and the 1270s. How is one to account for this piecemeal reformulation of images that belong to the narrative of Christ's Passion? Some reflection on that question would have been helpful, as the reader, who will often be unfamiliar with the period and material, is unlikely to be able to envisage the circumstances of such a process.

During the thirteenth century, vision and the visible acquired an entirely new prominence in literature and philosophy, and in Italian culture generally. It was the century

of the perspectivists, Roger Bacon, John Pecham and Witelo; it was the century in which Christians increasingly wished to see the host during its elevation in the mass and in which some of the faithful came to want visible proof of miracles. It was the century that saw the invention of eyeglasses and a new emphasis on visualizing the events of sacred history. The role of imaging and of the image as described in this book is much a part of that larger context.

The thirteenth century was also the age of the *maniera greca*, no matter what some recent discussions of the period may say. Those of us working with material from that century know that we shall understand the rebirth of Italian painting only when we have had a thorough investigation of the ways in which Byzantine art did, or did not, condition Italian production. Derbes's book is an important step in that investigation.

*Picturing the Passion* is founded in a painstaking, meticulous exploration of pictorial compositions and compositional motifs that constitutes a now unfashionable form of art history. But Derbes demonstrates the rewards of such an approach and shows how the resulting material, combined with a much broader consideration of the history of spirituality, can yield remarkable results. And as her book is a study that modifies our ideas about the Western use of Byzantine iconography, it will serve as a caution for future investigations of the *maniera greca*.

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THOMAS DALE, *Relics, Prayer, and Politics in Medieval Venetia: Romanesque Painting in the Crypt of Aquileia Cathedral*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, 170 pp., 8 col. and 160 black-and-white illus., \$79.50 US.

Romanesque wall painting is not a fashionable topic in the modern art historical curriculum. It survives principally in remote sites, off the beaten track for North American visitors; in comparison to the media of architecture and sculpture, it is often in a poor state of preservation; and a lack of accompanying documentation means that precise dates are usually highly elusive. Moreover, because traditional approaches have emphasized questions of style, it is rarely seen as being relevant to those art historians who are more concerned with questions of audience and social function, or with theoretical approaches. Indeed, the number of Canadian universities that offer coverage of Romanesque painting, beyond the level of a basic introductory survey of art history, can probably be counted on the fingers of a single hand. What the subject has badly needed is a monographic

treatment of some important site, in which the author demonstrates how central the Romanesque period can be to art history as practised in the late twentieth century – in other words, a “wake-up call” to those who would otherwise prefer not to have to deal with this topic. Thomas Dale's new book on the painted crypt of Aquileia Cathedral rises magnificently to this challenge.

Located right at the top of the Adriatic Sea, between the Italian cities of Venice and Trieste, Aquileia had a distinguished history in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, before being eclipsed by its Venetian neighbours. Its bishops bore the title of Patriarch, and exercised jurisdiction over much of what is now north-eastern Italy, Slovenia and Croatia. Today the city is a vast archaeological site, with an excellent museum and an imposing medieval cathedral, built in its present form under Patriarch Poppo (1019-1042). Perhaps best known to art historians is the magnificent floor mosaic that belongs to an Early Christian basilica church on the same site: a vast Roman sea-scape into which have been inserted episodes from the story of Jonah. But the crypt

of the medieval church, probably decorated in the time of Patriarch Ulrich II (1161-1182), is no less worthy of attention, and here receives detailed treatment in English for the very first time.

Few complete decorative programmes survive today from the twelfth century, which makes this crypt a particularly attractive subject for study. The murals are all still there – both walls and vaults – with only a few minor areas of loss; and this permits a detailed “reading” of a programme that was designed to convey a variety of important political and religious messages. Dale’s contribution lies not merely in his exploration of these messages, but more significantly in his excellent understanding of how different aspects of the programme combined to reinforce one another and, thus, served to create a coherent whole. First and foremost, the function of the murals was to promote the cult of Aquileia’s martyr saints, Hermagoras and Fortunatus, on whom depended the patriarchs’ pretensions to ecclesiastical pre-eminence. The city traced its Christian roots back to the time of St Mark the Evangelist, who, it was claimed, had first preached the gospel in the northern Adriatic. Before leaving for Alexandria, Mark had taken one of his converts, Hermagoras, back to Rome to be consecrated by St Peter as Aquileia’s first bishop. Fortunatus, another early convert, was later ordained as his deacon, and the two clerics eventually suffered martyrdom for their activities, becoming the area’s most important local saints. For much of the Middle Ages their cult continued to have significant political overtones. This direct link to the apostles St Mark and St Peter conveyed enormous prestige, a point not lost on political leaders such as the Holy Roman Emperors Charlemagne or Frederick Barbarossa, who appointed the patriarchs and gave them an important role in imperial attempts to control the political affairs of northern Italy.

Although the crypt itself dates from the rebuilding by Patriarch Poppo, who in 1024 recovered the precious relics of Hermagoras and Fortunatus from nearby Grado, Dale argues convincingly that its mural programme was added a century and a half later, when Aquileian primacy in the northern Adriatic was re-asserted by Patriarch Ulrich II. This programme has four primary elements: in the central vault and spandrels a hierarchy of Christ and the saints; elsewhere in the vault an elaborate hagiographic cycle illustrating the story of Hermagoras and Fortunatus; in four wall lunettes an “abbreviated Feast Cycle” comprising the Crucifixion, the Deposition, the *Threnos* (Lamentation) and the Dormition of Mary; and a socle zone painted with a fictive curtain “embroidered” with a variety of figures and scenes. Whereas previous scholarship has tended to concentrate on questions of the iconography and style of individual figural

scenes, with a notable concern to distinguish between “Byzantine” and “Western” elements, Dale’s position is that all four constituent elements should be considered as working in tandem, reinforcing the messages that the viewing audience was intended to receive, digest and take away.

The book has been carefully constructed to provide the reader with all the information needed to understand and assess this overall theme, while leaving more detailed discussions of individual scenes to a lengthy appendix. The writing is laudable. All chapters are succinct and precisely focused, with premises clearly stated at the outset and conclusions deftly summarized at the end. The author begins by sketching the political background, establishing the importance of the martyrs’ cults to Aquileia’s continual struggle to maintain supremacy over its rival claimants in nearby Grado, and later in Venice. He next addresses the architecture of the crypt, including a useful discussion of the function of such spaces as *memoriae* for saints, and then the questions of style and dating. Issues of style, and more specifically comparisons to contemporary work both in Venice and the Byzantine world (e.g. the church of St Panteleimon at Nerezi, dated 1164), have dominated previous discussions of the crypt murals. Dale positions himself somewhere in the middle of this debate, seeing the painting as neither “Western” nor “Byzantine,” but as a “hybrid” (his term) combining elements of both, and probably executed by local artists. While there is no corroborating documentation, a date *circa* 1180 is suggested by similarities to work at a variety of other sites in the region, most notably the Benedictine abbey at Summaga. It also accords well with the political circumstances, which favour the patronage of Ulrich II – and, no doubt significantly, this patriarch’s name saint was given a prominent place in the mural programme, to the left of the relic altar.

Thus far the author has not strayed too far from traditional approaches. However, the real meat of the book comes next, in the form of four tightly argued chapters, each of which takes as its theme one of the major components of the overall programme. He works literally from the top of the crypt downwards, beginning with the elaborate programme of Christ and the saints placed in the vault. Paralleling the litany recited during services, these include both apostles and universal saints, as well as more specific patrons of the northern Adriatic, who together function as a “form of visual prayer or Deesis” (p. 35), reminding the viewer of the important intercessory role of saints in Christian religious practice. Most important of all, of course, were the two local martyrs whose relics reposed in the crypt, and they are the subjects of an elaborate narrative cycle, originally comprising some 26 scenes. These relate the lives of

Hermagoras and Fortunatus, reminding the viewer of their importance for Aquileia, and establishing the crypt as the locus for their thaumaturgic *praesentia*. Special emphasis is given to the apostolic links to saints Peter and Mark, for, in the final analysis, this was Aquileia's trump card in dealing with its upstart neighbour, Venice. Dale's analysis of the difference between Aquileian and Venetian versions of this story, presented in greater detail in his article in the 1994 *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, offers a fascinating insight into the essential political nature of medieval hagiography.

The third element of the programme is the sequence of lunette scenes depicting the Passion of Christ and the Dormition of his mother, Mary. While agreeing with the traditional view that these are the most "Byzantine" of the crypt paintings, in terms of both iconography and "mode" of presentation, the author breaks new ground by refusing to treat them in isolation. Contemporary twelfth-century theologians, for example Bernard of Clairvaux, wrote extensively on the theme of Mary's *compassio*, the spiritual pain that formed a metaphysical equivalent to the physical suffering experienced by her son, and offered this as a model for Christian devotional practice. The strong emphasis on the expression of emotion – hitherto rare in Western Europe, although by now the norm in the art of Byzantium (e.g. late Comnenian monuments such as Nerezi) – suggests that these murals were not simply an abbreviated narrative, but rather "meditations" on the meaning of Christ's death and suffering, and of his mother's role in the process of human redemption. Through their passions, saints not only imitated Christ, but, like Mary, obtained their own intercessory privileges; and thus the lunettes extend the more general message of the crypt by presenting its theological underpinning. The sceptical reader might well object that, if true, such a combination should also occur elsewhere, at other saints' shrines. But the author has seen this one coming, and offers an excellent parallel in the painted crypt of the shrine of Hosios Loukas in central Greece. Although dating from the early eleventh century, and thus not exactly contemporary, it is one of the few medieval *memoria* crypts whose decorations have survived to the present day.

In the opinion of this reviewer, the most exciting part of the book is the chapter that deals with the decorations of the fictive curtain, painted on the lowest zone of the wall known as the socle or dado. Unlike the fictive curtains of pre-Romanesque churches, which usually sported geometric or vegetal designs, here one finds a wide range of figures and scenes, with the best preserved section depicting a Christian knight in hot pursuit of a Saracen archer. Socle decorations of this sort may be found widely among the

Romanesque monuments of northern Italy, but have hitherto been dismissed by scholars such as Otto Demus and Meyer Schapiro as being devoid of serious intent. Dale begs to differ. Taking his cue from recent scholarship on the marginal imagery found in late medieval manuscripts, he argues with conviction that the dado figures should be interpreted, in his words, "as part of a conscious dialectic within Christian art between the sacred biblical and hagiographic narratives, and contemporary experience conveyed through allegory and fabliaux" (p. 68). Thus they function as a form of pictorial "gloss" on the main "text" figured above. In this specific instance, most are to be "read" as allegories of the spiritual struggle between good and evil, along the lines of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*; and it is both significant and instructive that the near-contemporary dado at Summaga, a dependency of Aquileia, is decorated with pairs of virtues and vices, identified by inscriptions, shown engaged in physical combat. Somewhat surprisingly, no mention is made of what must surely be the best known dado to feature figures of this sort: Giotto's Arena Chapel in nearby Padua, which undoubtedly derives from the same pictorial tradition.

No aspect of the painted programme is thus devoid of meaning, and the author even extends this view to the ornament used to fill in subsidiary spaces, suggesting that this too "may also contribute to the meaning generated by the function of the space and its iconographic program." If the socle zone can be integrated into a larger whole, why not the ornament as well? Regrettably, this is by far the least developed chapter, both intellectually as well as in terms of actual physical length, as this too is a groundbreaking idea, and one that richly deserves greater elaboration. Dale is surely on the right track here, and he makes a compelling case that the ornamental details are not simply "decorative." But the point could well have been pursued a bit farther. Increasingly it is being demonstrated that ornament in medieval manuscripts can function as a means of establishing a matrix for the written text, thus guiding the reader. Why should ornament in a painted crypt not have worked in the same way? There is much exciting ground here for future study!

This is a profusely illustrated book, covering every scene of the painted crypt in addition to a great many comparative monuments. Although in the first instance it may be seen as deriving from Dale's Ph.D. dissertation (Johns Hopkins U., 1990), his views have subsequently been fully reworked and expanded to incorporate a wide range of books and articles published in the last few years. It is also possibly a book which, with hindsight, we may later see as having marked an important new beginning in the study

of Romanesque painting, by rescuing this subject from the academic doldrums in which it has languished for far too long. As the author states (p. 5), "Romanesque mural painting is a highly visible and public art, which helps shape sacred space and potentially reveals much about the history, religious practices, and politics of the community for which it was designed." Dale has more than made his point for the crypt of Aquileia, but the general approach transcends the specifics of any particular site. It is this notion of an integrated design – of a fully worked out "programme," of a decorative "package" encompassing all its constituent elements even down to the smallest details of ornament –

that should commend this study to a much wider audience, and more specifically to all those concerned with how the visual arts have been used historically to both establish a "text" and then to manipulate the viewer's response. It may well be that many of the ideas about programmatic decoration, which we now take for granted in studying more recent periods of history, originated in the intellectual milieu of twelfth-century scholasticism. If so, students of art history who continue to ignore the painted programmes of the central Middle Ages will do so at their peril!

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DAWN ADES, TIM BENTON, DAVID ELLIOTT AND IAIN BOYD WHYTE, eds, *Art and Power: Europe Under the Dictators, 1930-45*. London, Thames and Hudson in association with the Hayward Gallery, 1995, 360 pp., 200 colour and 50 black-and-white illus., "Foreword" by Eric Hobsbawm, "Afterword" by Neil Ascherson.

... In a politics of totalitarianism (or even consensus), where democracy is elevated at the expense of freedom, it is easy to overlook its value. But, like a canary down a coalmine, its state, no longer allied to power but dependent on it, may be an indicator of potential disaster.

In a world of metaphor which art resolutely occupies, the health of the canary is of the greatest importance, the essence (and paradox) of the autonomy of modern art is that it should be valued not only for itself but also as a sign and guarantor of other freedoms – particularly when it turns to peck the hand that solicitously tries to feed it.

David Elliott, "The Battle for Art,"  
*Art and Power*, 35.

Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of the taste for the arts ... besides fostering that spiritual pettiness so appropriate to slavery, they know well that the needs that people create for themselves are like chains binding them ... The sciences, letters and arts ... wind garlands of flowers around the iron chains that bind [the people and] stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seemed to have been born, makes them love their slavery and turn them into what are called civilized people.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau,  
*Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts*, 1750.

As occurs with many collective endeavours, the valuable content of the volume, *Art and Power: Europe under the*

*Dictators, 1930-45*, lies in the sum of its parts; and to the discerning reader, this considerable tome offers valuable insights into the diverse ways in which nation-states mobilized cultural communities under the Fascist and Stalinist dictatorships of Europe. In the current context of the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the creation of a European Union and the rise of old and new nationalisms, the authors have managed to contribute to the breaking down of the simplistic rendering of the period as a polarization between totalitarian and modernist avant-garde culture. In its place, the reader may discern the importance of examining the effects of state policy on art at both the local and individual level, as well as its implication for a culture which could be free from rigid dogma and state control.

The *Art and Power* exhibition which toured London, Barcelona and Berlin between October 1995 and August 1996 is part of a series sponsored by the Council of Europe, initiated in Brussels in 1955. The intention of these exhibitions, to highlight European cultural heritage, began with *Humanist Europe* (Brussels, 1955) and is continued in the current exhibition. *Art and Power* attempts to introduce a contemporary theme, focusing on the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris where art and politics were brought together during the regimes of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. Perhaps most importantly, the selectors have included work from the popular resistance to totalitarian forces through the inclusion of art from Spain. The current exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are the product of a long series of consultations and exchanges on art in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. These were conceived by museum directors at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and included an international symposium at the Courtauld Institute which drew representatives from seventeen countries. The exhibition and catalogue incorporate paintings, sculpture, architecture, cinema, photography and literature, although the emphasis falls on the first three. Also of interest are the