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It's About Time: Gaudenzio's *bel composto* at Varallo

Roberta Panzanelli

> The past can be seized only as an image, which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]



Fig. 1. The *New Jerusalem* at Varallo viewed from the town. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

[1] Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

Atop a heavily forested knoll, in an Alpine valley dominated by Europe's second highest peak, lies one of Christianity's most bewildering pilgrimage sites: the "New Jerusalem" or Sacro Monte at Varallo (fig. 1).[2] Forty-four chapels—built between the late 15th and 18th centuries—are spread in the dense landscape and around artificial clearings. The interiors of the structures are decorated with life-size polymaterial sculptural tableaux depicting events from the life of Christ, from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion, set against frescoed backgrounds that extend the scene onto the two-dimensional surface of the walls.

The site was founded in 1486 by the Observant Franciscan Bernardino Caimi as a topomimetic duplicate of the Palestinian *loci sancti*: it was intended as a substitute and abridged Holy Land for those who could not make the real pilgrimage.[3] The success of the novel enterprise was immediate and long lasting: Varallo's appeal to the faithful has indeed remained steady through the centuries and the site has never stopped being maintained for pilgrims. In the half millennium of its history, countless builders, sculptors, and painters—known and unknown—have worked at this center of worship under the direction of local authorities and the aegis of the religious establishment. The multiple "authors" of the site have destroyed, built and modified chapels, created new sculptures and re-used old ones. Today, we find traces—both physical and conceptual—that correspond to multiple visual environments and theological agendas. In spite of its congruent and (to the untrained eye) homogenous appearance, the site has reinvented itself frequently and drastically: already in the first century of its existence, the New Jerusalem had morphed from an exact topomimetic replica and hyper-real representation to a savvy petrified theater of counter-reformist propaganda.

Restored, at least in some measure, to their creative virtuosity after centuries of negligent repaintings and damaging repairs, the few remaining structures of the original project now permit a reassessment of the initial Sacro Monte—long hidden under later modifications—as well as a better understanding of the intended reception of its total environments. In particular, the *Crucifixion* chapel (Gaudenzio Ferrari's recognized masterpiece and the most brilliant expression of the founder's vision) enables an approximation of the early Varallo viewing experience without the physical barriers that obscured it until the very end of the last century.

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[2] Varallo, once part of the Lombard state, is now in Piedmont, in the province of Vercelli. It is located in northern Valsesia, at the foot of Monte Rosa (4,634 m, 15,203 ft.), in the Pennine Alps. Today, the Sacro Monte is part of the Riserva Naturale Speciale del Sacro Monte di Varallo, a natural reserve covering the hill of the sanctuary, with a surface of 21.68 ha.

[3] Varallo's function as surrogate Holy Land is recorded on the inscription in the Sepulcher of Christ, completed in 1491. The inscription, located next to the entrance of Christ's tomb, records the founding of the site and the involvement of the local benefactor Milano Scarognini: MAGNIFICUS DOMINUS MILANUS SCARROGNINUS HOC SEPULCRUM CUM FABRICA SIBI CONTIGUA CHRISTO POSUIT. MCCCCLXXXXI DIE SEPTIMO OCTOBRIS. R.P. FRATER BERNARDINUS CAIMUS DE MEDIOLANO ORD. MINOR. DE OBS. SACRA HUIUS MONTIS EXCOGITAVIT LOCA UT HIC HIERUSALEM VIDEAT, QUI PERAGRARE NEQUIT. [The Magnificent Lord Milano Scarognini founded this sepulcher with the nearby buildings for the honor of Christ, October 7, 1491. The Milanese friar Bernardino Caimi envisioned the sacred places of this mountain so that those who could not make the pilgrimage could see Jerusalem right here.] Gaudenzio Bordiga, *Storia e guida del Sacro Monte di Varallo* (Varallo: Caligaris, 1830), 90. For the foundation and early history of the site, see: Casimiro Debiaggi, "Sui cinque secoli del Sacro Monte. Genesi del centenario. Conferma dell'atto di fondazione 1486," *Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia. Quaderno di Studio n. 4* (Novara: Società Storica Novarese, 1986), 20–21; Pier Giorgio Longo, "Fonti documentarie sui francescani a Varallo tra XV e XVI secolo," *Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia, Quaderno di Studio n. 5* (Novara: Società Storica Novarese, 1987), 29–108. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the text are mine.

Past and Present

Bernardino Caimi, member of a prominent Milanese family with strong connections to the Sforza rulers, was a renowned Observant Franciscan preacher and administrator who had briefly resided in Jerusalem on the mandate of the Order (1478).[4] After his return—during a preaching campaign in support of pope Sixtus IV's crusade against advancing Ottoman threats—Caimi travelled to Casale Monferrato, where he met his future benefactor Marco Scarognini, *siniscalco* [esquire] of the Marquis of Monferrato in 1482.[5]

Caimi reached Varallo in the early 1480s: there, he founded the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie with annexed convent and the New Jerusalem on the hilltop overlooking the monastery. As eyewitness and guarantor of the veracity of the enterprise, Caimi allegedly chose the site for its geographical similarity to the Holy Land and revealed marvelous occurrences to underscore the divine appointment of the hill, including dreams, birds' miraculous singing, and the discovery of a rock that was *exactly* like Golgotha and that miraculously split in the same manner after a night of prayer.[6] In reality, Caimi selected the site for very practical reasons that ranged from local financial support and water accessibility to Valsesia's great strategic import for the

[4] Bernardino Caimi was born in the first half of the fifteenth century into an old aristocratic family of German descent that settled in Milan around the eleventh century. The family had slowly assumed a central role in the socio-political fabric of the city and its territory and had strong ties with the Sforza dynasty. Brother Bernardino, whose early life is still undocumented, was mainly based in Milan at the convent of St. Angelo, but traveled extensively at the service of the Order. In 1478, he was nominated *ad interim* Guardian of the Holy Sepulcher and sent to Jerusalem to arbitrate a financial dispute and supervise the election of a permanent successor to the guardianship. Pietro Galloni, *Uomini e fatti celebri in Valle-Sesia* (Varallo: Tipografia Fratelli Colleoni, 1873); Pietro Galloni, *Sacro Monte di Varallo. Atti di Fondazione. B. Caimi fondatore* (Varallo: Libreria P. Corradini, 1909); Abele Calufetti, "I Vicari provinciali dei Frati Minori della Regolare Osservanza di Milano dal 1428 al 1517," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 1/2 (1979): 3–35; Girolamo Golubovich, *Serie cronologica dei reverendissimi superiori di Terra Santa* (Jerusalem: Tipografia del Convento di S. Salvatore, 1898), 32; Emilio Motta, *Il beato Bernardino Caimi, fondatore del santuario di Varallo*. *Documenti e lettere inedite* (Milan, 1891); P. Agostino Salsa, O.F.M., *Biografia del Beato Bernardino Caimi fondatore del Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia* (Varallo, 1928); Anna Morisi, s.v. "Caimi, Bernardino," *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani*, vol. XVI (Rome: Enciclopedia Treccani, 1973), 347–349; Pier Giorgio Longo, "Bernardino Caimi francescano osservante: tra «eremitorio» e città," *Novarien* 29 (2000): 9–25.

[5] Marco Scarognini resided at Casale Monferrato to attend to his office for the Marquis; he was lord of part of the Lazzarone fiefdom and one of the most influential figures in Varallo in the second half of the fifteenth century. Marco Scarognini acted as facilitator for Caimi's enterprise from the very outset and was likely the force behind the donation of the hill to the Franciscans. The Franciscan church of Santa Maria delle Grazie was built over a small chapel dedicated to the Immaculate Virgin, erected by Marco Scarognini; the chapel was incorporated in the new monastic church, which became the elective burial site for local patricians, starting with Scarognini himself, who is buried under the altar of his chapel. His last will is unfortunately lost, but he conceivably left a conspicuous bequest to Caimi and the Franciscans. Federico Tonetti, *Storia della Vallesesia e dell'Alto Novarese* (Varallo: Tipografia Fratelli Colleoni, 1875–1880), 436–438; idem, *Famiglie Valsesiane. Notizie* storiche (Varallo, 1883), 59–78; Paolo Sevesi, O.F.M., "Il B. Bernardino Caimi da Milano predicatore della crociata," *Achivum Franciscanum Historicum* XIX (1926): 297–300; Casimiro Debiaggi, "Sui cinque secoli del Sacro Monte. Genesi del centenario. Conferma dell'atto di fondazione 1486," *Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia. Quaderno di Studio n. 4* (Novara, 1986), 20–21; Pier Giorgio Longo, "Fonti documentarie sui Francescani a Varallo tra XV e XVI secolo," *Sacro Monte di Varallo. Spunti storici e devozionali. Atti del Convegno Culturale (28 Settembre 1986). Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia. Quaderno di Studio n. 5* (Novara, 1987).

[6] Galloni, *Il Sacro Monte di Varallo*, 38–46; Giovanni Battista Fassola, *La nuova Gierusalemme* (1671, reprint. Borgosesia: Corradini, 1976), 5–7; Salsa, *Biografia del Beato Bernardino Caimi,* 51–56; Longo, "Fonti documentarie," 63.

Dukes of Milan and the Franciscan order. The area was, at the time, a wedge of Lombard territory into the Duchy of Savoy: the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie (the first Franciscan foundation in the area) sealed a pact of mutual support between the Milanese lords and the local aristocracy, mediated and guaranteed by the Minorites.[7]

At the outset of the project (c.1493), the Holy Sepulcher at Varallo—as the Sacro Monte was initially called—was comprised of a few locales that focused, as the name suggests, on the major sites inside the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.[8] These included Calvary (a natural rock marked by a large cross), the Sepulcher, and *Anointment Stone*, as well as a lost chapel of the *Ascension* of Christ and a hermitage for the monks.[9] These sites, like all the chapels in the initial New Jerusalem, were open spaces decorated with sparse paintings and movable individual sculptures or tableaux in polychrome wood.

The earliest extant sculptures, dated to c.1486–93, are an anonymous *Dead Christ* in the Sepulcher (fig. 2); the *Bewailing* group by the De Donati workshop (fig. 3); an undated *Last Supper* tableau of unknown authorship. The *gisant* Christ—with movable joints that allow for different positioning—and *Lamentation* tableau were likely used in liturgical processions and re-enactments during Easter week, as was customary at the end of the Quattrocento in Mendicant practices.[10] The initial wooden effigies followed the iconographic traditions of Franciscan devotional art and were carved in the local style.

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[7] Official permission for the new Franciscan foundation was signed in 1486: convent and church were erected on the site of a small chapel that belonged to the Scarognini family, while the top of the hill was donated by the community and signed by local authorities (Scarognini included). Morisi, "Bernardino Caimi", 348–349; Paolo Maria Sevesi, "Beato Michele Carcano (1427–1484). Documenti inediti," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* (1940–41): 366–408; Longo, "Fonti documentarie," 94.

[8] The general orientation of the site is south-north, so that the chapels, albeit maintaining an accurate relative relationship, are rotated in comparison to the Palestinian originals: the buildings that in Jerusalem have a north-south orientation, for example, at Varallo display an east-west orientation. Maps of the Sacro Monte from Alessi's (1565–1569) onward are always oriented south-north.

[9] Debiaggi identified the locale, called "chapel *subtus crucem*" in the documents, as the *Anointment Stone*. Casimiro Debiaggi, "La cappella «subtus crucem» al Sacro Monte di Varallo," *Bollettino storico per la provincia di Novara* LXVI (1975): 1, 72–80. The monk's dwelling was located behind the Sepulcher of Christ: its traces are still visible in the present oratory, built in 1705–07. The chapel of the *Ascension* was destroyed after the middle of the sixteenth century. The structure that contained the *Anointment Stone* underwent several transformations, the last of which occurred in 1956. It now houses a *Pietà* against background frescos of Gaudenzio's former *Ascent to Calvary*: a group of Marys and Saint John by his hand are still visible on the western wall. For a recent discussion of the chapel, see Edoardo Villata, "Gaudenzio Ferrari e la 'Spogliazione delle vesti' al Sacro Monte di Varallo," *Arte Lombarda*, 145 (2005–6) 3: 76–92.

[10] From the 14th century onward, in many areas of Europe Easter Week celebrations included dramatized re-enactments of the *Deposition* and *Ascension* that employed wooden sculptures with movable limbs similar to the *Dead Christ* in the Sepulcher. In Milan, Easter processions with props are recorded in the convent of St. Angelo, Caimi's home base. The recently restored *Dead Christ* is still in its original location in the Sepulcher at the Sacro Monte, while the coeval group of the *Anointment Stone* is now on display in the Pinacoteca di Varallo. Claudio Bernardi, *La Drammaturgia della Settimana Santa in Italia* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1991), 274–76, 295–300; Claudio Bernardi, "Il Santo Sepolcro. Forme rituali e drammatiche della Passione nell'Italia del Cinque-Seicento," in *Di ritorno dal pellegrinaggio a Gerusalemme. Riproposizione degli avvenimenti e dei luoghi di Terra Santa nell'immaginario religioso fra XV e XVI secolo Atti delle Giornate di Studio, 12–13 maggio 2005, Università degli studi della Calabria*, ed. Amilcare Barbero and Giuseppe Roma (Vercelli: Gallo, 2005), 91; Robert L. Kendrick, *The Sounds of Milan, 1585–1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 136; Elena De Filippis, "Un Cristo morto 'alto e divino,'" in *Per Giovanni Romano. Scritti di amici*, ed. Giovanni Agosti, Giuseppe Dardanello, and Giovanna Galante Garrone (Savigliano: L'Artistica, 2009), 64–65.



Fig. 2. Anonymous, *Dead Christ*, polychrome wood, c.1486–1493, Varallo, Sacro Monte.
Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.



Fig. 3. Giovanni Pietro and Giovanni Ambrogio De Donati, *Bewailing* group, polychrome wood, c.1486–1493, Varallo, chapel of the *Anointment Stone* (Pinacoteca Civica).
Photo: Pinacoteca di Varallo.

The importance of Varallo indeed lies in this particular innovativeness, as it was the first monumental replica of Jerusalem sites ever to employ images—a combination of sculpture and painting—to aid pilgrims in their mental re-enactment of Christ's life according to the Franciscan principles of *imitatio Christi*. The success of the enterprise was immediate and its imitations too numerous to count. In fact, the New Jerusalem is unanimously considered the archetype of the novel phenomenon of "Holy Mountains" that eventually spread through northern Italy, Europe, and the New World.[11]

After the death of the founder in 1499, the Sacro Monte continued developing with funds from local patrons and alms proceeds.[12] The rapidity of its growth bespeaks of great success: as described in the first guidebook to the site, by the year 1514 the project comprised twenty-eight locales—called *misteri* [mysteries]—in an expanded scriptural topography that included Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem with its surroundings (the valley of Jehoshaphat, Mount Zion, and Gethsemane).[13] Although professed topomimetic intents still informed the New Jerusalem, many of the sites built after Caimi's death had no correspondence in the Holy Land and were created to fill gaps in the Christological narrative.[14] The expanded progression of

[11] In spite of the common grouping of Varallo with the many later Italian Sacri Monti, there are fundamental differences between the topomimetic intent of the New Jerusalem and the hagiographic focus of all the other sites. The counter-reformist Sacri Monti are different from early Varallo both in concept and formal organization: they are thematic and linear, dedicated to the life of the Virgin Mary, a saint, or the Mysteries of the Rosary. Most relevant for this study, none of them claims topographical or geographical mimesis with the holy sites. The only exception was the New Jerusalem at San Vivaldo (Montaione, Tuscany), coeval with Varallo and with similar topomimetic intents, albeit expressed in a radically different artistic style. For the New Jerusalem at San Vivaldo and its differences with Varallo, see: Franco Cardini and Guido Vannini, "San Vivaldo in Valdelsa: problemi topografici e interpretazioni simbologiche di una 'Gerusalemme' cinquecentesca in Toscana," *Religiosità e Società in Valdelsa nel Basso Medioevo* (Castelfiorentino: Società Storica della Valdelsa, 1980); Franco Cardini, Guido Vannini, and Józef Smosarski, *Due casi paralleli: la Kalwaria Zebrzydowska in Polonia e la 'Gerusalemme' di San Vivaldo in Toscana* (Castelfiorentino: Società Storica della Valdelsa, 1983); *Gli abitanti immobili di San Vivaldo, il Monte Sacro della Toscana* (Florence: Morgana Edizioni, 1987); *La 'Gerusalemme' di S. Vivaldo e i Sacri Monti in Europa*, ed. Sergio Gensini (Ospedaletto: Pacini Editore, 1989); Riccardo Pacciani and Guido Vannini, *La 'Gerusalemme' di San Vivaldo in Valdelsa* (Corazzano S. Miniato: Titivillus Edizioni, 1998); Riccardo Pacciani, "New Research on the Holy Sepulchre at the 'Jerusalem' of San Vivaldo, Italy," in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem (Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages),* ed. Bianca Kuhnel, Galit Noga-banai, and Hanna Vorholt (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 77–81.

[12] From the very beginning of the Sacro Monte's history, the considerable financial revenues derived from alms and bequests caused conflict between the Franciscans, who administered the site, the lay patrons, and *fabbricieri* [vestrymen] supervising the building and maintenance of the chapels and the lay church authorities under whose jurisdiction Varallo lay. The centennial financial and legal battles surrounding the history of the Sacro Monte deserve a separate study that, to my knowledge, is yet to be undertaken.

[13] As a consequence of the Sacro Monte's success, a great number of guidebooks were printed during its long life. The very first one, published in 1514, exists in a single copy discovered in Seville in 1926. The so-called *Rhyming Guide* has been re-printed in facsimile and analyzed by local scholars, who reconstructed the initial placement of the chapels with the aid of early representations of the sanctuary in print and painting. Seville, Biblioteca Capitular y Colombina, 14–2–1(1), *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle*, Impressum Mediolani: per... Gotardum de ponte, 1514. The guide was published in facsimile in 1987: *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle (in una «Guida» poetica del 1514)*, ed. Stefania Stefani Perrone (Borgosesia: Società per la conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia, 1987).

[14] It appears, from early documents, that Caimi's knowledge of the holy sites was locally unique. In April 1495, the citizens of Varallo petitioned Ludovico Sforza to intercede with the Franciscan authorities and prevent Caimi's transfer to L'Aquila. In the letter, the town community expressed concern about maintaining topomimetic accuracy in the absence of its founder: "if it should happen that said friar Bernardino leaves the province, without him [the site] will remain unfinished, as there is no religious who has any experience of those mysteries in Jerusalem." The

events fused the *sequela Christi* (the narrative recreation of Jesus' life promoted by the Minorites) to the surrogate experience of the holy sites: it re-created for pilgrims a virtual experience far more complex and enthralling than a visit to the Palestinian sites.

The most influential artist working at Varallo during this phase was Gaudenzio Ferrari (c.1478–1546): a prominent local artist greatly influenced by Bramantino, who had also come into contact with Leonardo's circle during his apprenticeship in Milan. With Gaudenzio—who worked at the Sacro Monte from the early 1490s to c.1528—the chapels became elaborate settings, as he masterfully merged architecture, sculpture, and painting to create the impression of living environments.

Gaudenzio's spaces contained fixed tableaux of life-size, polychrome statues in wood and terracotta set against frescoed backgrounds that extended the spaces of the scenes on the two-dimensional surface of the walls. Architecture, sculpture, and painting crossed the barriers of their respective media to capture the elusive appearance of life through sparkling colors and brilliant surfaces, faux terrains, figures projecting in relief from painted backgrounds, precious detailing, and use of different materials including wood, wax, leather, gold, paper, metal, and glass.

Gaudenzio's total environments successfully interpreted Caimi's vision and elevated hyper-real representation to the category of sensory experience, perfectly attending to the didactic and proselytizing intents of the Mendicant order. Until the end of the sixteenth century, visitors could traverse the chapels to fully absorb the emotional force of the re-creations in real time. Pilgrims would discover the chapels at night, amidst the foliage; enter the structures to observe rich, glittering surfaces and intricate textures lit by flames; feel the terrain change under their feet and smell the faintly musty interiors of clay and stone, all the while listening to the Franciscan guides describe the represented events in dramatic tones and incite them to mental empathy with Christ.

The sensorial syntax of Gaudenzio's spaces changed entirely once the Church of Rome, in the most turbulent moment of its history, prevailed over Franciscan ideology and irreversibly transformed the viewing mode of the New Jerusalem. At the end of the sixteenth century, the chapels were closed off and furnished with grids by instruction of bishop Carlo Bascapé, disciple of San Carlo Borromeo and staunch enforcer of counter-reformist standards.[15] From then onward, visitors could only observe through small openings the scenographic settings they had once traversed: the ensuing, *new* Sacro Monte was—and still is—antithetical to the original.

When visiting Varallo today, we see inaccessible buildings whose solid façades are interrupted only by continuous screens of thick wood carved in intricate patterns. All around the wooden grilles, nothing but walls: walls and pews running along the base of the chapels (fig. 4). The impenetrable stone and brick walls allow no distant viewing of the tableaux and frescos, no gradual physical or visual approach to the represented events. Today, to see the interiors of the chapels, one must stare intently into oval viewing holes—roughly as large as a child's head—positioned at the eye level of the kneeling pilgrims (fig. 5). Once the dark interiors come into focus, the scenes appear in the dim light like a gargantuan peep show, whose evident inanimateness does little to ease spectators' uncomfortable hints of voyeurism.

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letter, in the Archivio di Stato in Milan, was reproduced by Galloni, *Il Sacro Monte di Varallo*, 62–63. Cf. Motta, *Il beato Bernardino Caimi*, 17.

[15] Carlo Bascapè (1550–1615) was bishop of Novara—to whose archdiocese Varallo belongs. From the very outset of his mandate, he took an immediate and active interest in the administration of the site, which had been famously dear to his mentor, Carlo Borromeo. Borromeo is indeed considered the local "patron saint" of the town and its Sacro Monte.

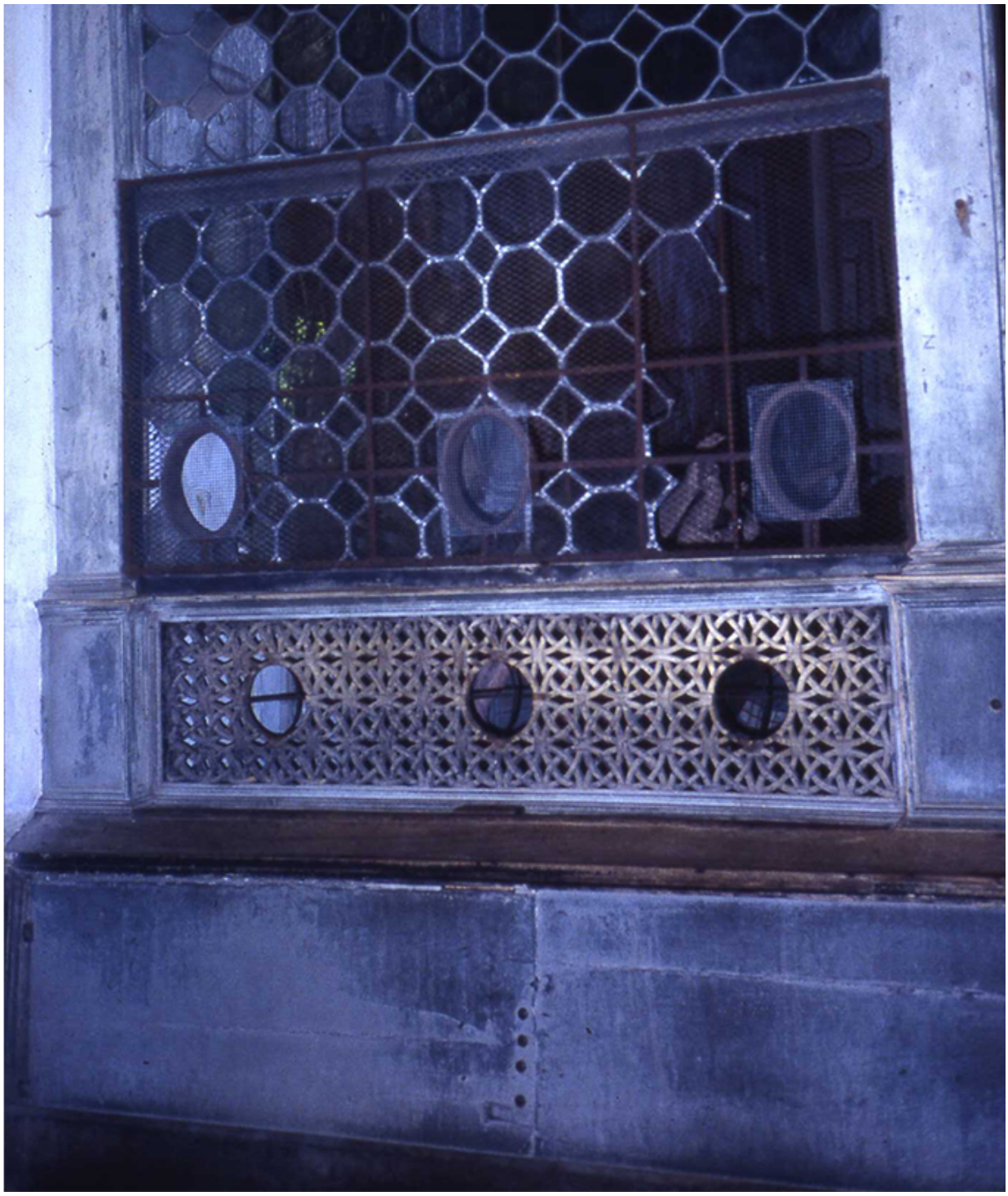


Fig. 4. Ornamental grid with viewing holes and pew. Varallo, Sacro Monte.
Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.



Fig. 5. View of *Christ in front of Herod* through a hole in the ornamental screen, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

The closing of the chapels, the addition of grids and pews and, in the new chapels, the adoption of rigorous perspective for the background frescos collectively excluded pilgrims from the represented events. With these changes, the chapels became enclosed and organized spaces observed from a programmatic viewpoint. Rather than participating in the drama and sharing in Christ's suffering, visitors observed a distant scene in stillness and penitent genuflection—an evident reference to the newly enforced sacrament of Confession, pioneered with zeal and rigor in the Milanese territory by Carlo Borromeo and later by his successors Gaspare Visconti and Federico Borromeo.[16]

Indeed, the new arrangements were theoretically similar to the articulations of architectural space in Carlo Borromeo's *Instructions on Ecclesiastical Architecture and Furnishings* (1575),[17] a counter-reformist manual of practical rules regarding the building and ornamentation of sacred edifices. Borromeo's text aimed at a precise correspondence between liturgical/theological functions and the formal appearance of sacred spaces, which became articulated by physical barriers, such as chancels and balustrades in front of the choir or the elevation of the presbytery over the nave. Architectural barriers contributed to the physical and theoretical hierarchization of the *New Church*, emphasizing the priest's role as intermediary between God and laity. The ubiquitous and perpetual presence of Christ was foregrounded through the ritual import of the Mass and Eucharist and reflected in the physical centrality of altar and tabernacle.

Borromeo's writings, like most of the so-called moralizing artistic literature of the time, underscored the effectiveness and appropriateness of art rather than its essence, subordinating form to function in a theological discourse that had no aesthetic aims other than those dictated by *decorum*. Similarly, Bascapè manipulated the reception of the Sacro Monte into a modality that suited the new doctrinal parameters, separating and subjugating viewers to the incarnate God through the intercession of the Church of Rome (fig. 5).

The Varallo Experience

Numerous testimonials attest to the appeal of the early "Varallo experience": from members of the Milanese nobility and the cultural elite to foreign ecclesiastical authorities, lay powers, writers, and artists.[18] This popularity was owed not just to the status of the Sacro Monte as exact replica of the holy sites but, even more, to the felicitous combination of architecture, sculpture, and painting in the untamed landscape. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to do justice in writing to the multifaceted magnificence of the Sacro Monte's built and natural environment. Harder still is to describe the sensation of walking inside the chapels, even for a modern viewer seeking an intellectual experience rather than mental empathy with Christ's suffering. But the hardest task is for the historian: to understand what those spaces meant to early modern pilgrims when they visited them at night after a long climb up a steep hill, chanting and praying in anticipation of an emotional encounter with testimonies of Christ's life. The illusionistic potency of these spaces

[16] The new emphasis on Confession had long and profound social impact. The stress on intercession and interiorized discipline that characterized early Catholic confessionalism was part of the attempt to reshape Lombard society by touching the souls of its people. Wietse de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), passim.

[17] Carlo Borromeo, *Instructiones Fabricae et Supelectilis Ecclesiasticae Libri duo*, ed. and trans. Stefano Della Torre and Massimo Marinelli (1577, reprint Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000).

[18] Girolamo Morone—who visited the site in 1507 and wrote a lost description of the Holy Sepulcher—Matteo Bandello, Federigo Zuccaro, and Duke Francesco II Sforza are simply the best known and most studied.

can be better comprehended with a proper historical contextualization and attention to the ephemeral elements of pilgrimage.

What did pilgrims seek at Varallo in the first century of its existence? And what did they experience upon crossing the threshold into the alternative reality of the early chapels? The persistent leitmotifs in sources are simultaneously the exactness of the copy and equivalence of the pilgrimage experience to the original sites. But surrogate experiences of a distant reality are historically and culturally specific, so it is not immediately evident what constituted an *exact replica* in early modern Italy, before the dissemination of mechanical reproductions.

For centuries, writers, scientists, and artists faced the daunting task of transmitting visual models without the benefit of reliable (i.e., scientific) means of reproduction. The diffusion of visual data occurred with the standard code of communication that was recognizably capable of fidelity to reality: *verbis solis*.[19] The use of words to successfully describe visual information followed specific parameters and required great descriptive accuracy as well as references to known examples. Spatial perception overrode exactitude; dimensions were conveyed by means of similarities to known entities and took as sole referent the human body; shapes always referred to identifiable objects and were specific to the intended audience.[20] Whether literary or visual, the authoritative depiction of distant visual entities was detailed, emotionally loaded, and unquestionable. So at Varallo: the authority of the Franciscans and the dramatic, detailed unfolding of Christ's life and passion charged sensory reception with the full potency of the exact replica. The beholder's experience at the early Sacro Monte cannot be simply equated to the wondrous dioramas of centuries past or a ride through Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean*: the pilgrimage ritual, authenticated by the church through the eyewitness testimony of Caimi, was likely believed *more* than comparable to a visit to the Palestinian sites, in a fashion that is extraneous to our culture.

Visualizing Jerusalem

Gaudenzio Ferrari is known to scholars of the Sacro Monte as the accomplished executor of Bernardino Caimi's vision and the creative force that influenced all future artists at Varallo and beyond. Once heralded as one of the great painters of his days—even placed among the seven archetypal masters of all time[21]—Gaudenzio Ferrari later disappeared from scholarship and was

[19] Mario Carpo, "How do you imitate a building that you have never seen? Printed Images, Ancient Models, and Handmade Drawings in Renaissance Architectural Theory," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 64 (2001): 223–233.

[20] When speaking of medieval architectural imitation, it is impossible not to mention Krautheimer's seminal work, which gave impetus to a wave of studies on space, reproduction, and architectural theory. Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Medieval Architecture,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 1–33. More recent and relevant for this study: Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 7; Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 141–143; Elizabeth Grosz, "Cyberspace, Virtuality and the Real," *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 75–89.

[21] In Giovan Paolo Lomazzo's *Idea del Tempio della Pittura*, Gaudenzio is listed as one of the seven "governors" of art, together with Michelangelo, Polidoro da Caravaggio, Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, and Titian. The seven masters were archetypes associated with descriptive categories that Lomazzo used in substitution for abstract classifications. Each of the governors was associated with a planet, and was, in turn, the guiding "planet" of other masters. In this epistemological metaphor of the artistic cosmos as temple/theater of knowledge, Gaudenzio is the second governor and corresponds to the planet Jupiter, tin, the eagle, Plato, religious books, the ancient painter Timanthes, and the temperament of motion (*moto*). Lomazzo was a Mannerist painter shaped by the work of Gaudenzio and Bramantino, who devoted his life to a literary career after becoming blind at the age of thirty-three.

ignored by subsequent generations of critics, who lost interest both in the artist and the New Jerusalem.[22] Habitually relegated to the limbo of provincial painters until the middle of the last century, Gaudenzio has now been restored to his proper stature in Italian literature, although international art discourse still largely overlooks his work.[23]

When addressing the specifics of Gaudenzio's activity at the New Jerusalem, which took place at the very beginning of his career, we lack comparable material to properly evaluate his three-dimensional production, as he apparently stopped sculpting after he left Varallo and was never again associated with architectural projects. Gaudenzio Ferrari's total environments at the Sacro Monte are the only extant vestiges of a new, brilliant artistic genre that had no precedents and no following; consequently, both the absolute and relative chronology of the artist's three-dimensional work at the site are based on stylistic clues found in painting.

Gaudenzio—who had just completed his apprenticeship when he began working at the chapels upon the hill—demonstrated an exceptional ability in the manipulation of multiple visual media in space and time. His immersive creations stimulated beholders to circulate through the tableaux, share the same air as the silent protagonists, and experience the works with the full force of their senses. The artist's surprising achievements were indubitably rooted in the cultural and artistic milieu of his early career, which is almost entirely undocumented.[24]

Critics over time have suggested several artists as Gaudenzio's masters: from Perugino, Raphael, and Leonardo to lesser-known protagonists of regional schools such as Macrino d'Alba, Girolamo Giovenone, and Giovan Martino Spanzotti.[25] These conjectures, as often happens,

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His writings include *Rime ad imitazione dei grotteschi* (1587), *Rabish* (1589), and the two famous Mannerist art treatises *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (1584) and *Idea del tempio della pittura* (1591). See Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle arti*, ed. Roberto Paolo Ciardi (Florence: Centro Di, 1973–1975); Robert Klein, *La forme et l'intelligible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

[22] Gaudenzio's involvement in the architectural design of the *Calvary* was first proposed by Testori and is now accepted by most scholars. Giovanni Testori, "Gaudenzio e il Sacro Monte," *Catalogo della Mostra di Gaudenzio Ferrari*, 21–33; cf. Elena De Filippis, "La crocifissione secondo Gaudenzio. Nuove proposte sulla 'crocifissione' del Sacro Monte di Varallo," *Prospettiva* 129 (2008): 41–56.

[23] We owe to Anna Maria Brizio and Giovanni Testori the first re-evaluation of Gaudenzio Ferrari's production, particularly within the Lombard pictorial tradition. Anna Maria Brizio, "Studi su Gaudenzio Ferrari," *L'Arte* 29 (1926): 103–120, 158–178; A. M. Brizio, "L'arte di Gaudenzio," *Catalogo della Mostra di Gaudenzio Ferrari. Aprile-giugno 1956, Vercelli* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1956), 3–20; Giovanni Testori, *Il gran teatro montano. Saggi su Gaudenzio Ferrari* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1965). More recent Gaudenzio enthusiasts are endeavoring to solve some of the perplexing problems in the artist's oeuvre and chronology. Most prominent among them are Rosanna Sacchi, Paolo Venturoli, and—vital for this study—Edoardo Villata. Villata's work fills gaps in the artist's early career and traces a resonant chronology of Gaudenzio's early chapels, albeit one mostly based on painting. Rossana Sacchi, s.v. "Gaudenzio Ferrari" in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 46 (1996); Edoardo Villata, "Gaudenzio Ferrari. Gli anni di apprendistato," in Edoardo Villata and Simone Baiocco, *Gaudenzio Ferrari, Girolamo Giovenone. Un avvio e un percorso* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi Editore, 2004); idem, "Gaudenzio Ferrari e la 'Spogliazione delle vesti' al Sacro Monte di Varallo," *Arte Lombarda* 145 (2005/6) 3:76–92; Paolo Venturoli, *Il restauro del polittico di Gaudenzio Ferrari ad Arona* (Novara: Istituto geografico De Agostini, 1996); idem, *Studi sulla scultura lombarda tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Turin: Allemandi Editore, 2005); idem, "Le statue in legno e terracotta della Cappella della Crocifissione e il problema di Gaudenzio scultore," *Gaudenzio Ferrari. La Crocifissione del Sacro Monte di Varallo*, ed. Elena De Filippis (Turin: Umberto Allemandi Editore, 2006), 35–56.

[24] There are great discrepancies in biographical sources: while Gaudenzio's mature work is steadily recorded and firmly attributed, his early life and career (including the Varallo period) are mostly undocumented and still investigated by scholars.

[25] Gaspare Celio, *Memoria delli nomi dell'artefici delle pitture,* ed. Emma Zocca (1638, reprint Milan: Electa, 1967); Francesco Scannelli, *Il microcosmo della pittura* (Cesena: Neri, 1657); Filippo Titi, *Ammaestramento utile e curioso di pittura scoltura et architettura* (Rome: Giuseppe Vannacci, 1686); Luigi Scaramuccia, *Le finezze dei pennelli italiani* (Pavia: Gio. Andrea Magri, 1674); Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da*

stem from stylistic remarks and ignore the only writer who gave us a detailed account of Gaudenzio Ferrari's life and work, a story likely learned from his master Giovan Battista della Cerva, who had been Gaudenzio's collaborator.[26] Giovan Paolo Lomazzo wrote: "In the [field of] arabesque painting there is much to be said: even though Stefano Scotto was undoubtedly the leading [artist], Gaudenzio […] has surpassed him."[27] Gaudenzio's master was indeed Giovanni Stefano Scotto, an artist famous for his decorations whose work, however, is largely unidentified.[28]

Stefano Scotto was a Lombard painter, member of a long line of artists famed for their decorative skills and often involved in the production of devices for spectacular events. The family, originally from Piacenza, moved to Milan in the early Quattrocento: several generations of Scotto artists are recorded working at the *fabrica del duomo* and for the Milanese aristocracy and Sforza court. While Gaudenzio was apprenticing in Scotto's workshop, Stefano and his brothers received commissions for several spectacular devices, including temporary "triumphal arches" for local notables.[29] At the time, Milan was a bustling center of artistic experimentation, where ingenious devices were often produced for religious and civic spectacles and where Leonardo da Vinci was creating stage sets and machines that have gained lasting fame. One has only to think of the theatrical performances of the *Danaë* and *Orpheus*—which included remarkable special effects and the first mechanized theatrical scenes—or the *Festa del Paradiso*, organized in celebration of the wedding of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabella d'Aragona on January 13, 1490.[30]

Tournaments and *sacre rappresentazioni*, triumphal entries and dramatic performances were as habitual in the Lombard capital as in most urban centers in Europe: they were ephemeral but intrinsic parts of the urban visual fabric. These public events changed, for a few days or weeks, the physical appearance of the urban landscape and provided entertainment while shaping and maintaining social status and hierarchies. During triumphs and royal entries, for example, the streets were transformed into giant festive settings that honored local and foreign notables.

Cimabue in qua (Turin: Stamperia Reale, 1768–1770); Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi, *Abecedario pittorico* (Venice: Giambattista Pasquali, 1753).

[26] Although Lomazzo was only eight when Gaudenzio died, he speaks of the older master as though through personal acquaintance, suggesting that he was conveying knowledge gleaned through his teacher, Giovan Battista della Cerva, who had worked with Gaudenzio in Vercelli and Milan. Lomazzo was part of the Lombard Mannerist circle shaped by the work of Gaudenzio and Bramantino and was active in Lodi, Piacenza, and Milan until going blind at 33. He devoted his later life to a literary career: his compositions include *Rime ad imitazione dei grotteschi* (1587), *Rabish* (1589), and the two famous Mannerist art treatises *Trattato dell'arte della pittura* (1584) and *Idea del tempio della pittura* (1591). For a discussion of Lomazzo's writings see Roberto Paolo Ciardi, ed., *Scritti sulle arti*; Robert Klein, *La forme et l'intelligible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

[27] Lomazzo, *Trattato*, 421; Ciardi, 2:366.

[28] Villata, "Gaudenzio Ferrari," 17–22. Elsewhere, Lomazzo also points to Perugino as a master of Gaudenzio.

[29] Villata believes Gaudenzio to have been in Scotto's workshop in the late 1480s or early 1490s, where he remained "at least until 1495." Villata, "Gaudenzio Ferrari," 30.

[30] Leonardo designed apparata for the *Festa del Paradiso* and the *giostra* [tournament] organized in honor of Ludovico's wedding to Beatrice Sforza. The stagings of these events—recently termed "fixed scene *tableaux vivants*"—clearly surpassed all similar events for their ingenuity and lavishness of execution: indeed, these events survive in chronicles as the most awesome representations Milan had ever seen. Although no drawings or plans survive, we have an eyewitness description of the *Paradiso*. Edmondo Solmi, "La festa del Paradiso di Leonardo da Vinci e Bernardo Bellincore (13 Gennaio 1490)," *Archivio Storico Lombardo: giornale della Società Storica Lombarda*, Serie Quarta, vol. I, 31 (1904): 75–89; *Il Codice Arundel 263 nella British Library*, ed. Carlo Pedretti and Carlo Vecce (Florence: Giunti Editore, 1998).

Ceremonial itineraries wound among houses whose windows displayed tapestries and embroidered fabrics, through vibrantly adorned streets punctuated with temporary structures such as gilt and painted triumphal arches and stages for *tableaux vivants*.

Tableaux vivants were among the most recurrent items mentioned in triumphal literature from the Middle Ages well into the sixteenth century: on a decorated platform, costumed actors assumed fixed poses to represent allegorical or historical themes. The actors of the *tableaux* "performed" sculpture, simultaneously transforming the city into a stage and their bodies into spectacle.[31] Spectators experienced this embodied imagery in real space and real time, markedly separated yet sharing physical reality with the immobile actors. *Tableaux vivants* crossed artistic and performative boundaries. Neither actors on stage nor statues, but their corporeal simulacra, they composed a subversive theater of sculpture, comparable—in terms of spatial relations and time-regulated reception—to Gaudenzio's *tableaux* in his total environments.

The lavish celebrations to which Milan was accustomed at the end of the fifteenth century required the coordination of a multitude of "actors" and artists specialized in diverse media. Local workshops (including Scotto's) were employed for the construction and decoration of ephemeral apparata in lath and plaster, painted and adorned with hammered metal leaves: the very techniques Gaudenzio would employ for the decoration of his *tramezzo* and chapels. Early modern apprentices were taught to draw, paint, carve, and model in multiple media; they also studied perspective for architectural and theatrical settings, engineering to build machines and move props, metal casting and cutting, cartography, light projections with mirrors and lamps, and more. It is not hard to imagine how an experience in the Milanese artistic milieu would give young Gaudenzio the inspiration and know-how to create such grandiose polymateric settings at the New Jerusalem. More important, the construction and decoration of ephemeral apparata needed to account for audience movement and consequently necessitated the artistic organization of space and time. Gaudenzio successfully combined these elements in much of his work at the Sacro Monte, and particularly in the *Calvary*, the only chapel at the site he could devise without limitations.

Gaudenzio Ferrari first arrived at Varallo in the early 1490s with his master, who was commissioned frescos in the chapel of Santa Margherita in Santa Maria delle Grazie—the Franciscan conventual church at the foot of the Sacro Monte. Stefano Scotto returned to Milan after completing the assignment, while Gaudenzio took residence in Valsesia.[32] In the early Cinquecento, while fulfilling other contracts in the area, he often returned to Varallo to contribute to the decoration and planning of hilltop chapels and execute the roodscreen of Santa Maria delle Grazie, which he signed in 1513 (fig. 6).[33]

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[31] Hélène Visentin, "Des tableaux vivants à la machine d'architecture dans les entreés royales lyonnaises (XVI^{e}–XVII^{e} siècles)," *Dix-septième siècle* 21 (2001/3): 419–28.

[32] The first documented commission undertaken by Gaudenzio as an independent master was the altarpiece for the Confraternity of S. Anna in Vercelli. In the contract, dated to 26 July 1508, the painter is identified as *de Varali*, proving that he already resided in Varallo, where he had purchased a house (sold in 1539) and was married for the first time to an unknown local woman who gave him two children. We do not know the name, family, and circumstances of Gaudenzio's first wife, who likely died before he moved out of the area. Very little is also known of their two children, Margherita and Girolamo. Even in the last years of his life, Gaudenzio often appeared in documents as *dictus de Varallo*, indicating his geographical provenance as well as his association with the Sacro Monte. Giuseppe Colombo, *Vita ed opere di Gaudenzio Ferrari* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca Librai di S.M., 1881), 49, 156–58; Sacchi, "Ferrari, Gaudenzio," 578.

[33] Gaudenzio received contracts in Vercelli for the church of Sant'Agostino della Misericordia and the Confraternity of S. Anna (1508) and in Arona, for the church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (1510). Sacchi, "Ferrari,



Fig. 6. Gaudenzio Ferrari, roodscreen with scenes from the *Life of Christ,* fresco, 1513, Varallo, Santa Maria delle Grazie. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

The *tramezzo*—one of the very few Italian examples to survive counter-reformist destructions—is divided into twenty-one scenes depicting the life and passion of Christ.[34] Iconographically similar to other surviving Lombard roodscreens, the dividing wall of Santa Maria delle Grazie served as a narrative template for the Christological sequence on the hilltop and a mnemonic device aiding the friars in their sermons. Pilgrims started their journey at the church and the Franciscans likely used the *tramezzo* illustrations to inform and prepare the faithful before their ascent.[35] On the roodscreen, Gaudenzio made extensive use of stucco *pastiglia* for decorative elements that emerge from the wall in differing variations of relief (fig. 7): helmets, shields and suits of armor in burnished silver with gold tips, gilded halos and horse trappings garnished with semi-precious stones. Gaudenzio would re-elaborate and expand all these elements in his grandiose *Calvary* with added illusionistic elements.

Gaudenzio," 578; Colombo, *Gaudenzio Ferrari*, 285–286; Brizio, "Studi su Gaudenzio," 162; Venturoli*, Il restauro del polittico*, *passim*.

[34] The wall measures 34.4 x 26.2 feet (10.40 x 8 meters) and—contrary to Central Italian examples—reaches the ceiling. Twenty panels of the same dimensions are symmetrically arranged around the central *Crucifixion*, which is four times as large and aligned with the central arch leading to the choir. For a discussion of surviving roodscreens in the area, see Alessandro Nova, "I tramezzi in Lombardia fra XV e XVI secolo; scene della Passione e devozione francescana," *Il francescanesimo in Lombardia. Storia e arte* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1983), 197–215.

[35] Nova, "I tramezzi," 111–116.



Fig. 7. Gaudenzio Ferrari, roodscreen with scenes from the *Life of Christ,* detail with *pastiglia* decorations, 1513, Varallo, Santa Maria delle Grazie. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

Much of Gaudenzio's initial production at the New Jerusalem consisted of mobile sculptural groups placed in pre-existing structures: a proliferation of three-dimensional decoration ensuing from the Christological and Marian emphasis gradually imposed over the initial topomimetic character of the sanctuary. By 1514, Gaudenzio had executed the *Sleeping Virgin*,[36] the kneeling *Magdalen* in the antechamber of the Sepulcher, and the *Annunciation* group. He also completed the decoration of the Bethlehem complex with the figures on the altar of the *Nativity* (fig. 8), the *Manger* (now the *Adoration of the Shepherds*), and the *Circumcision*.[37]

At first, Gaudenzio sculpted in wood, a lightweight sculptural medium that was not only locally abundant but also habitually used in spectacular apparata, and one to which he was accustomed (the Scotto brothers were enrolled in the *Scuola di San Giuseppe*, the guild of wood

[36] The effigy, once in the old church, was likely the first three-dimensional work executed by Gaudenzio at the New Jerusalem. The image, believed to be miraculous, was already in place by 1498, when it was recorded as healing a Milanese noblewoman, Donna Agnese Botta. The sculpture of the *Sleeping Virgin*, a wooden mannequin with clothes and carved hands and face, is still visible in the underground *scurolo* of the new basilica and bears strong facial similarities to female heads later produced by Gaudenzio. Casimiro Debiaggi, "Testimonianze mariane sul Sacro Monte delle origini," *Sacro Monte di Varallo Sesia. Quaderno di Studio no. 5* (Novara, 1987).

[37] Aside from the *Bewailing* from the De Donati workshop and the *gisant* Christ, the site still has an early tableau of the *Last Supper*, which dates to Caimi's time. The anonymous group, once in a locale behind the old church, has been moved twice and is now under the portico of Casa Parrella on the north side of the main square. The tableau is composed of thirteen wooden mannequins with sculpted hands and faces arranged around a table; the bodies, roughly carved and invisible under cloth garments, have movable joints that allow for different positioning. The tableau has changed settings, arrangement and decorations more than all others at the New Jerusalem and is still awaiting proper investigation.

carvers).[38] Later, he moved to terracotta, occasionally using polychrome wood for functional reasons—as, for example, with the two crucified thieves in the *Calvary*. We can well imagine that the increased work pace made terracotta a better choice; the modeling flexibility of clay and the rapidity with which it can be fashioned and decorated also made it ideal for intricate compositions and large polymaterial undertakings.[39]



Fig. 8. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Nativity*, polychrome terracotta (n.d.), Varallo, Sacro Monte.
Photo: Roberta Panzanelli

[38] For an in-depth analysis of the Milanese workshop organization, see Janice Shell, *Pittori in bottega. Milano nel Rinascimento* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi Editore, 1995).

[39] Recent restorations have revealed the existence of an old kiln on the hilltop. The construction of a workshop for the production of the terracotta sculptures *in situ*, of unknown dating, was a logical step provoked by the intense activity at the site after the beginning of the new century.



Fig. 9. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Christ led by an Executioner,* wood and mixed media, c.1505 (formerly *Christ Stripped of his Garments*), Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

One of Gaudenzio's first multi-media interventions at the Sacro Monte was in the chapel of *Christ Stripped of his Garments* (also known as *The Way to the Calvary*).[40] Gaudenzio painted a fresco depicting a group of bystanders—with a prominent *Virgin* and *Saint John* in dramatic poses and explicit expressions of grief—and soldiers escorting the two thieves to their execution. He completed the decoration with two wooden sculptures: an executioner leading Christ by a rope at his neck (fig. 9). The painted statues have real hair and beards, while real objects complete the realistic effect of polychromy: fabric, metal, rope, and thorns. The chapel, believed to date around 1505, appears to have been Gaudenzio's first attempt at fusion of two and three-

[40] The episode of *Christ Stripped of his Garments* was added to the existing narrative by dividing the locale of the *Anointment Stone* into two separate rooms. The division occurred at an unknown date between 1493 and 1514, when it was mentioned in the *Rhyming Guide*. The locale now contains a seventeenth-century *Pietà* by Giovanni D'Enrico, which partially obscures Gaudenzio's damaged frescos. For a detailed analysis and tentative chronology of this chapel see Villata, "Gaudenzio Ferrari e la 'Spogliazione,'" passim.

dimensional imagery in an existing space. What the effect was of this first attempt to create a total environment through polymateriality is, however, impossible to say: the wooden tableau was long ago moved at the foot of the *scala santa*, where it stands among seventeenth-century terracotta sculptures in the *Christ led to the Praetorium*. The fresco was re-used (with additions) for the chapel of the *Pietà* at the foot of the Calvary: it is still partially visible in the wall decoration executed by Giovanni D'Enrico around 1635 with the new sculptural tableau (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Christ Stripped of his Garments*, fresco, c.1505 (now chapel of the *Pietà*), Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

The two extant chapels that best reveal Gaudenzio's powers of sensory manipulation in time are his last two projects at the Sacro Monte: the *Arrival of the Magi* (fig. 11) and *Calvary*. The first, a space partially carved out of the mountain and added to the pre-existing Bethlehem complex, was begun first and completed last. Its erection and decoration were delayed by physical restrictions and financial misfortune.[41] The result is an environment that, in spite of its persuasive execution, does not reach the expressive force of the *Crucifixion* scene—and likely was never meant to, as the chapel is quite far, physically and narratively, from the dramatic climax reached at the Calvary.

[41] The restoration of the chapel has been recently completed along with the rest of the Bethlehem complex. The cleanings have revealed no surprises regarding the space and reception of images by pilgrims.



Fig. 11. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Arrival of the Magi*, fresco, terracotta and mixed media, c.1517–28, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

Gaudenzio's *Bel Composto*

The emotional apex of the Sacro Monte is the *Crucifixion* chapel on the Calvary. Likely built between 1517 and 1520, it is Gaudenzio's *opus magnum*, and the only one of his works invariably mentioned in coeval artistic literature.[42] The site was described for the first time in the second guide to the New Jerusalem (1566) and expressly attributed to the artist's hand. The attribution still holds: although local help was enlisted for the execution of the chapel, Gaudenzio indubitably designed the structure and envisioned the employment of different media, fused at last into a harmonic whole.[43]

[42] Two graffiti on the north wall of the chapel (near the corner with the western wall) were discovered during the latest cleaning. One dates to August 20, 1520, the other to December 8, 1521. The inscriptions were carved over the frescos, thus suggesting a *terminus ante quem* for the completion of the chapel. Guido Gentile, "Sulle tracce degli antichi visitatori: percorsi e graffiti," *Gaudenzio Ferrari. La Crocifissione del Sacro Monte di Varallo*, ed. Elena De Filippis (Turin: Umberto Allemandi Editore, 2006), 65–73. The *terminus post quem* is the 1514 Guidebook, which did not include a description of the grandiose locale envisioned by Gaudenzio.

[43] The Calvary has been plagued by a centennial orgy of repainting, botched cleanings, and other destructive interventions. The most recent campaign (1993–97) finally restored it to a pale semblance of its original brilliance and helps recreate the reception to some extent. My studies are the result of a decennial engagement with the site, during which I have had the pleasure of traversing the room and closely observing the artwork multiple times: some of my conclusions obviously stem from my own sensory experience inside the Calvary.

The chapel is a square building that was originally accessible through stairs on the southern and northern sides.[44] The interior, a large vaulted space with rounded corners and an off-center pilaster that imitates the spatial organization of the Calvary in Jerusalem, contains thirty-two terracotta sculptures—plus three wooden ones—arranged in a semicircular composition against the eastern wall.[45] The floor of the tableau, designed to resemble a rock, is a deep step made with local stones and grey mortar: delimiting visitors' foot space, the faux terrain regulates the fluctuating tension between sacred and profane, past and present, representation and physical reality. Three crosses hover above the terracotta tableau with their wooden crucified figures and the vaulted ceiling and walls are entirely frescoed.

The iconographical elements of the *Crucifixion* panel on Gaudenzio's roodscreen embrace the viewer in an articulated stage, a total space where the movements of pilgrims—like their reactions—were guided by discrete compositional areas. A savvy rhythmic alternating of poised and agitated gestures and static and dynamic arrangements directs pilgrims' movements toward the crosses and their gaze toward the crucified protagonist of the story. Time—normally frozen and contracted in visual representations—melts into a supple, permeable entity that structured beholders' physical activity in real space. The frame that defines pictorial space and mediates representation has vanished into a seemingly uninterrupted space where intuitive consciousness prevails.[46]

Upon entering the chapel from the southern door, pilgrims would encounter the three Marys (figs. 12 and 13). The Virgin Mary, with her arms outstretched and body projected in the direction of her crucified son, is flanked by two women who surround her with extended arms that touch her body in a gesture of comfort and support. Next to them, the apostle John stands gazing upward, his hands loosely interlaced in a static posture. Groups of figures witnessing the crucifixion follow John: a mother in the background gazes in the direction of the viewer and a child at her side stares transfixed at the Virgin's pained face. In the foreground, another woman holding a baby in her arms lifts her head in an expression of bewilderment with a toddler clutching at her dress.

The three-dimensional women and children mirror similar figures painted on the four walls. Gaudenzio's famed "mothers" are represented in two- and three-dimensional form nearly everywhere, particularly on the south wall and its eastern and western corners. The women—depicted in an expansive range of poses, expressions, and colors—form a pictorial *mise-en-abîme* of quiet bewilderment that echoes the grief of the Virgin and underscores the Marian accents of the Franciscan site.

Even Mary Magdalen is unusually subordinate to the potent Marian iconography: standing to the right of the Virgin, she is almost hidden to the visitors' sight and can be recognized only by her uncovered head (and, one would imagine, long, flowing tresses long gone). She is habitually depicted at the foot of the cross, weeping—Gaudenzio himself painted her in this manner in the *tramezzo Crucifixion*—in character with her habitual role of repented and humble model for humanity. In the *Crucifixion* chapel, however, her frail humanity is fragmented in

[44] Gentile, "Sulle tracce degli antichi visitatori," 65–70.
[45] Ibid., 67.
[46] For a discussion of the frame in receptional aesthetics, see Paul Duro, *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Louis Marin, "The Frame of Representation and some of its Figures," in *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 352–367.

myriad female spectacles of grief, reflected in the prism of silent witnesses whose pained expressions are a mute echo of the Virgin's suffering.



Fig. 12. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion*, terracotta and mixed media, c.1517–20, detail, south-east corner, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.



Fig. 13. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion*, terracotta and mixed media, c.1517–20, detail, south-east corner, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

On the middle register of the *Crucifixion* wall, frescoed bystanders on horses are arranged in a panoramic composition (fig. 14): amidst a multitude of spears and banners, the figures appear as broad areas of color that mirror and complement the pigments of the sculptures. The crowd of painted and sculpted onlookers directed the pilgrims' movement towards the area with the three crosses, panning from the relative calm of the first figures to the dramatic intensity of death on the cross, the emotional climax of the entire Sacro Monte journey.

The crosses are not located along the central axis of the chapel but rather placed to its left, past the single pillar: standing to the left of the support—where the space opens to accommodate a small crowd—the main composition is entirely contained in the viewer's field of vision. The upturned heads and lances of the soldiers direct the gaze upward, while the gestures of the thieves (a tilted head, a projected arm) lead the eyes to the figure of Christ. In front of Christ's cross is a freestanding mounted white horse, looking straight ahead with one leg lifted. Its rider's right arm, upturned, holds a mace, whose round top points to Christ's body. With a blank expression, left hand on his hip, the soldier stares in the direction of the viewers, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. In spite of his weapon, the overall gesture appears more a salutation than the menacing signal it should represent.



Fig. 14. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion*, fresco, c.1517–20, detail, north wall, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

Unlike the two thieves, whose postures bespeak their imminent destinies, Christ is composed and static in death, a fully frontal icon dominating the scene as focal point of devotion (fig. 15). Christ's cross is quite taller than the others: his head and torso rise above the two and three-dimensional crowds, isolated against the background clouds. Soldiers on horseback and on foot animate the compositional foreground, their attention drawn to Christ. Four of them cast lots at the foot of the right cross, below the damned thief: fully focused on their game, they anchor the scene and highlight the cleft in the rock, bridged by a shield on which the dice are rolling. The ostensible neutrality of the soldiers—close to visitors and yet remote and incommunicative in their concentrated activity—and the leisurely tone of the scene lend the sacred event a mundane feeling and mediate between represented past and physical present.



Fig. 15. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion*, fresco, wood, terracotta and mixed media, c.1517–20, detail, east wall, Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

At the end of the compositional arc, before the exit door, stand three male figures: with faces variously upturned, these onlookers provide a visual epilogue to the scene, a return to calm contemplation after the drama of death. In the background corner, a young man with a turban and short beard cranes his neck, looking up to Christ; the middle ground is occupied by a heavily bearded figure (once thought to portray Stefano Scotto), that gazes upward with a slightly tilted head. Finally, a bald toothless man in the foreground—long associated with Leonardo da Vinci's

drawing of an old man[47]—stares in the viewer's direction: the old figure, whose robe was once painted in red lacquer with gold decorations, forms a visual full stop to the narrative.

Seen together, these last sculptures in different poses form a sequence: from back to front the characters' attention transitions from the crucified Christ to exiting pilgrims, as if finally acknowledging human presence. The last three figures address viewers with a voiceless *memento mori*, as did Last Judgment cycles on the exit walls of medieval churches: a silent warning of the inevitability of death and the necessity to seek salvation through Christ before their final demise.

The mounted retinue painted behind the crosses continues on the surfaces of the other walls. Colorful bystanders would surround the pilgrims on all sides; the entourage of two-dimensional witnesses projected the sacred scene into a contemporary reality of local notables and townspeople, including genuflected patrons and the portrait of Gaudenzio and his master. The western wall, opposite the *Crucifixion*, depicts a local landscape with a view of Varallo, its inhabitants and the Sacro Monte. Two small windows open onto the valley below, so that the frescoed landscape is juxtaposed to the town and creates visual continuity between painted and physical reality. The space of the *Calvary* becomes an extension of real space, heterotopic and contiguous to the quotidian, where the depiction of Christ's death by crucifixion materializes amidst a multicolored representation of contemporary life.

The vaulted ceiling is a dark, clouded sky populated by flying angels—some in brilliant foreshortening (fig. 16). The angels' gestures of grief were derived from ancient funerary motifs (such as the death of Meleager or Hippolytus) and absorbed into religious iconography through Nicola Pisano and Giotto. Their expressions of anguish punctuate the vault like notes on a music sheet to create a melancholic and powerful symphony of visible sorrow, a background melody of heavenly despair highlighting the apex of Christian drama.

The *Calvary* presented pilgrims with a totally unexpected viewing experience: not only was it radically different from other chapels at the site, it deviated from other forms of representational art as well. Architecture, sculpture, and painting crossed the barriers of their media: the faux terrain, the figures projecting in relief from the painted background and the use of different materials aided the blending of two and three-dimensional representations into a realistic mimesis of reality. The architecture of the space is not one of sharp corners and angles, but a circular diorama that envelops the viewer. Space is not organized by pictorial perspective, but by the scene itself, the variations of the terrain, and colors and gestures of the figures.

Gaudenzio's successful representation of reality effaced the narrator and the narrative act, transporting viewers into a virtual scene. The chapel-scene displays, even to the modern eye, uncommon strategies of illusionism and suggestive powers well beyond the traditional boundaries of sculpture and painting; pilgrims moved into the space guided by the physical reality of a scene where they became accidental spectators and participants in the Christian drama.

To achieve these illusionistic effects, the artist employed all the media he had mastered in his previous works. The meticulous combination of materials makes the *Calvary* a particularly felicitous case of poly-materiality. Gaudenzio and his workshop employed a stunning array of media and techniques for the decoration of the wall and clay figures. Wax (light, supple, and easily applicable to curved surfaces) was used for textile patterns, detailing and stars in relief. Mortar and stucco *pastiglia* was used for helmets, weapon tips, and coats of arms. Armor and

[47] Francesca Ricardi, "Traccia da Leonardo ai Sacri Monti," in *I leonardeschi a Milano. Fortuna e collezionismo*, ed. Maria Teresa Fiorio and Pietro Marani (Milan: Electa, 1991), 141–146.

weaponry were covered in tin leaf and many bore gilded accents in wax or stucco made on the surface by means of a punch. The ornaments on the horses' harnesses (studs, tassels, and buttons) were formed in stucco, wax, cloth, paper and metal leaf. Gold was used everywhere: sometimes it was applied in thin leaves as with garment embellishments, turbans and horses' tacks. Other times it was applied as paint—a mixture of gold powder and glue—to highlight figures in shadow or to render painted textiles more precious. The wall (painted last, after the clay sculptures were in place) is painted in *buon fresco*, with occasional *a secco* retouchings, mostly in azurite and malachite; angels' halos and garment hems are painted in intricate nets of tiny gold strokes and tinier flowers.



Fig. 16. Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Crucifixion*, fresco, c.1517–20, detail, *Grieving Angels,* Varallo, Sacro Monte. Photo: Roberta Panzanelli.

The three wooden sculptures on the crosses date to different periods: the two thieves are coeval with the rest of the scene, while the effigy of Christ is older and pre-dates Gaudenzio's *Calvary*.[48] The three statues are carved in minute detail and painted with tempera on a primer of

[48] We know from the 1514 guidebook that, prior to Gaudenzio's *Calvary*, the site had an abbreviated representation of the *Crucifixion*, although the text does not specify whether the images were in two or three dimensions. Here is the relevant passage: "you shall weep [for] Christ on the cross / Accompanied by false Judeans / With the thieves by his sides you will see / Christ in the middle without sin / With Magdalen at the foot of the cross / Who looks at the

gypsum and glue. Hair and beards were made of animal hair and attached with animal glue and wax.

The terracotta figures were painted in greasy tempera applied directly to the clay. Unfortunately, many repaintings and damaging cleaning campaigns have made it impossible to understand the full range of colors once employed by Gaudenzio and his workshop. Paint analyses have revealed pigments similar to those used in the chapel fresco: azurite, malachite, yellow and red ocher, and red lacquer. It is left to our imagination to envision the brilliance of textures and surfaces, particularly with the added decorative elements: harnesses fashioned out of cardboard and covered in velvet or silk were decorated with gilt gesso or papier-mâché; stirrups were made of wood or clay and metal was used for bits and spurs; halos and parts of weapons were covered with metallic leaf or painted to resemble metal; hair and beards were made of natural fibers (mostly horsehair), as were the tails and manes of the equines; some of the earrings and bracelets worn by the women were created with stones, glass beads, and metal wire; gilt wax was employed for relief decoration imitating garment embroidery or small jewelry. Finally, the dice rolled for Christ's garments were carved in stone and painted and a real human skull—traditional in Crucifixion iconography—was placed at the foot of the cross.

Polychromy and detailing not only rendered the three-dimensional figures more life-like, they also homogenized two- and three-dimensional decoration. The fugitive, perpetual mobility of life was captured through fragmentation of sparkling colors and brilliant surfaces on sculptures and walls: patches of vermillion, flashes of gleaming white, emerald threads woven through tapestries of iridescent brocade, shimmering metals, and lacquered surfaces. The end effect was a tactile layering of hues: myriad impressionist color blotches that achieved a brilliant unity where the single elements disappeared into a palpable representation of reality.

The same vivid colors, gold accents, and rich surfaces of two- and three-dimensional images created an uninterrupted scene where pictorial and sculptural surfaces melted into each other to bewilder and mystify, particularly when seen in darkness with uneven lighting. Gaudenzio made no use of directed, concealed, or symbolic light: the most ephemeral element in the chapel is truly impossible to reconstruct, as it depended entirely on movable flame light.

In the sixteenth century, pilgrims arrived at the Calvary exhausted after a long uphill trek including stops and prayers at the many *misteri* already visited. After climbing yet another eighteen steps, they would enter a dark, cavernous space whose small openings provide little light even at midday. As they progressed into the room, the sculpted and painted characters would emerge from darkness before the pilgrims' very eyes, amid glints of gold and trembling reflections of lacquered surfaces lit by the dancing flames of lanterns carried by the monks or set on hooks around the room. The effect could be mesmerizing even to the most skeptical art appreciators of our day.

Gaudenzio, using his experience in ephemeral, spectacular art forms, fashioned a potent surrogate of reality with a savvy blending of media and manipulation of space in real time. His total environments at the early Sacro Monte were unlike any other form of visual art for their capacity to emotionally connect beholders to the depictions of Christ's life. Ultimately, at Varallo we witness the manifestation of an unprecedented art form that involved time, movement, and entangled orders of sensory stimuli. The compositional strategies of the chapel encouraged viewers to circulate along the space-penetrating sculpture, to move on a stage of potentially boundless extension, breathing the same air and absorbing the same space as the

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creator in atrocious pain." The recent cleaning has revealed that, while the two thieves display carving and painting techniques similar to the rest of the scene, the sculpture of Christ appears different and is older than the others.

dramatic tableaux, which—like life itself—retain an infinite number of effective viewpoints. It was a form of art without any physical frame to circumscribe and inscribe it into the realm of fiction. With no frame to construe the artwork and contrive meaning for that which it encloses, the artistic space negated the objective reception of the artistic object as such.[49]

In the *Crucifixion*, Gaudenzio did not attempt a perfect representation of historical reality: he constructed a believable, emotional experience of a renowned past that was well ensconced into Christian culture. He adopted dramatic devices derived from the ephemeral apparata of his recent past to perpetuate the fleeting effect of life: a persistent yet ephemeral rendering of a moment in history that stood at the very core of Christian belief. His total environments defied art historical boundaries: unprecedented and quite effective, they had no known following.[50] We would have to wait over a century and half for an analogous result to be achieved in Italian art: Gianlorenzo Bernini's Cornaro chapel, long heralded as the undisputed archetype of Baroque's theatricality, the quintessential expression of his *bel composto*. In the representation of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, the artist's technical virtuosity led him to "efface the boundaries between painting and sculpture, […] and ultimately to fuse painting, sculpture and architecture into a single entity".[51] By the time Bernini envisioned his masterwork—after experiencing stage design himself[52]—Gaudenzio's spaces had long disappeared behind the physical and psychological barriers of counter-reformist zeal, their memory obliterated by a new viewing syntax that favored structured reception and supplanted embodied movement with a carefully contrived logic of the gaze. Now, at long last, the Calvary has resurfaced as the ultimate expression of theatrical, polymateric, and *virtual* representation in early modern Italy. It is perhaps time to set aside timeworn, normative labeling and reconsider art-making in the Cinquecento with an expanded rubric that accounts for the revolutionary nature of works such as Gaudenzio's total environments.

[49] Duro, *The Rhetoric of the Frame,* 1 and *passim*.

[50] The Sacro Monte is the only (known) occurrence of architectural production and multi-media sculpture in Gaudenzio's prolific career. The singularity could be attributed to many factors: patrons' preferences, the context of his other commissions or new stylistic interests.

[51] Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 24.

[52] Before creating the work he considered the finest of his accomplishments, Bernini had designed the sunset for the comedy *La Marina* and produced the *Inondazione del Tevere* with its notorious representation of a flood. Mark S. Weil, "The Cornaro Chapel, Mystery Plays, and Italian Court Theater," in *All the world's a stage...: Art and Pageantry in the Renaissance and Baroque*. Papers in Art History from the Pennsylvania State University, vol. 4, Part 2, 458–486. See also Genevieve Warwick, *Bernini: Art as Theatre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).