Jesuit Visual Culture: Communication, Globalization, and Relationships

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Abstract

The visual arts are a powerful tool of communication, a fact recognized and utilized by the Jesuits from the foundation of the order. The Society of Jesus has long used imagery, works of art and architecture, and other aspects of visual and material culture for varied purposes, and the five articles in this issue of the Journal of Jesuit Studies explore how the art they commissioned exemplifies the ideals, goals, desires, and accomplishments of the Society. In particular, these five scholars examine a wide array of images and ideas to consider myriad relationships between the Society and works of art in the early modern period, and the implications of their increasingly global footprint.

Keywords


1 The Role of Art and Visual Culture

The visual arts are a powerful tool of communication. This fact was recognized and utilized by Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556) and the early Jesuits from the time of the foundation of the order in 1540. The commissioning of a vast number of illustrated printed works, the extensive building and decoration of churches (and other structures including professed houses, schools, and colleges) all over the world, and the production of marvelous theatrical spectacles speaks to the Society's desire to engage the world with a visual language, in addition to spoken and written ones. The various ways in which the Jesuits
sought to capitalize on the power of images to instruct and convert souls exposes their acknowledgement of art and visual culture as a singular force and a formidable instrument at their disposal.¹

The earliest creations of the Society are the pictures in the imagination of the individual, produced by engagement with the *Spiritual Exercises*, a unique and significant facet of Jesuit life. The process of meditation and visualization that is central to this practice reveals that Ignatius placed a high value on each soul’s ability to engage internally; how each is able to use the imagination to participate in meaningful events of the Bible, especially those connected to the life and passion of Jesus Christ. Ignatius believed that a visualization of the scene or event, engaging all of the senses, would facilitate a better understanding of the life and teachings of Christ. The technique of *compositio loci* (composition of place) that is central to the *Spiritual Exercises* is the act of creating a visual work, albeit one that is temporary, internal, and personal.² The visual artists responsible for producing more permanent and external works of a largely universal nature for the Society—including both members of the order and lay artists employed by them—worked similarly. They engaged the spectator in ways perhaps not able to be envisioned by every soul: in vivid color, with daring illusionism, of innovative compositions, or possessing unexpected symbolism.

In the decades following the establishment of the Society of Jesus there were clear signs given regarding the use of images. Francisco de Borja, third superior general of the order (1565–72) offered a recommendation for the employment of images in meditation. It is in this period that Jerónimo Nadal (1507–80) begins to create the “illustrated gospel” that would become the *Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia* published in Antwerp in 1595.³ These prints facilitated the act of “placing oneself” into the scenes, and are often described as the first Jesuit artistic commission. The process through which

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the reader/viewer navigates the gospel images and reflects upon them can be likened to the practice of the Spiritual Exercises, a type of directed meditation. These prints quickly became among the most-requested works to be carried to the corners of the earth by missionaries, and their value in illustrating concepts that were difficult to put into words was praised specifically by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610).  

As the seventeenth century dawned, the Jesuits had firmly established how, when, why, and where visual images could be of service, and they embarked on a path to use them extensively for teaching and communicating, and as part of their regular practice of prayer and meditation. In recent years many publications have explored Jesuit images, specific individual artists and artistic projects, emblems, and visual culture more broadly. This profusion of scholarship has shed light on previously unexplored artists and works, but there is much work still to be done.

In this issue of the Journal of Jesuit Studies, five scholars contribute new ideas to the field of Jesuit visual culture. They explore how the art commissioned by the Jesuits—in Europe and beyond—exemplifies the ideals, goals, desires, and accomplishments of the Society. These essays examine a wide variety of works of art: frescoes, panel paintings, altarpieces and other church decoration, ephemeral scenographies, printed works, and architecture. They consider myriad relationships between the Society and works of art throughout the early modern period, and consider the implications of the increasingly global footprint of the Society of Jesus. These studies investigate various Jesuit artistic commissions of the early modern period, examining some familiar artists and themes in a new light, and introducing us to new concepts and works. With their examinations, most of which were originally presented at the Renaissance Society of America conference in Chicago (2017), our understanding of Jesuit visual culture is advanced substantially.

First, John Marciari takes us back to the first decades of the Society and the works of art commissioned for the Church of Il Gesù in Rome in the late sixteenth century. Of particular attention are two paintings: Girolamo Muziano’s (1532–92) Circumcision of Christ, which originally stood on the high altar of the church, and Scipione Pulzone’s (1544–98) Lamentation of Christ, the altarpiece of the Passion chapel. These works, completed and installed in the 1580s and 90s, represent some of the earliest works commissioned by the Jesuits in

4 Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 93.

Rome. However, they are no longer in their original positions in the church, and the decoration of the Gesù today looks quite different than it did in that period, after substantial alterations to the interior in the late seventeenth century. A visitor entering the church today is greeted by the extensive frescoes of Giovanni Battista Gaulli, known as Baciccio (1639–1709), on the ceiling, and the extravagant transept altars, rededicated to St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis Xavier (1506–52), after they became the first Jesuits to be canonized in 1622. Marciari carefully examines the two paintings by Muziano and Pulzone, considering the roles they played in the sixteenth-century Gesù, and why they are no longer in place. He implores the reader to think about the development of art in the Baroque period, the artistic commissions of the early Society—and the relationships between them.

Andrew Horn examines the paintings of Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709), a Jesuit brother in seventeenth-century Italy, and generally regarded as the most prominent artist of the Society. Renowned for his illusionistic painting style, most spectacularly demonstrated on the ceiling of the church of Sant’Ignazio in Rome (1691–94), Pozzo is celebrated as an artist who engages the spectator. Horn’s investigation dives deeply into this concept of active participation and the observer’s obligation to also serve as performer. Through an analysis of the “theatres” of Pozzo’s oeuvre that considers the importance of the imaginative techniques of the Spiritual Exercises, and the Ratio studiorum’s emphasis on rhetoric and performance, he situates Pozzo’s works in their ritual context. Two of the artist’s ephemeral scenographies are discussed, including one of his magnificent Quarant’ore devotional displays, constructed in the church of Il Gesù, Rome, in 1695, along with two (very different) permanent painted spaces: the spacious interior of the church originally dedicated to St. Francis Xavier in Mondovì (1676–78), and the smaller corridor in the Casa Professa in Rome (1682–86). In his examination of Pozzo’s works, Horn examines the significant relationships between painting and architecture, ephemeral constructions and the spectators who actively engage with them, and the power of illusionistic painting to draw the participant into a performance. He also discusses the relationship between internal and external “theatres” that reflects the process of the Spiritual Exercises. Horn concludes that Pozzo’s scenographies and painted spaces are visual manifestations of the key aspects of Jesuit ministry.

Luca Giordano’s (1634–1705) altarpiece St. Francis Baptizing Indians is the focus of Rachel Miller’s essay. Created in 1685 for the church dedicated to the missionary saint in Naples, the painting reveals much about the relationship between the Society in Europe and their efforts abroad. There were large numbers of Jesuits who longed to participate in the missionary work of
the Society—approximately 14,000 *indipetae* (letters of application for the missions)—are preserved in the Jesuit archives, for the early modern period alone. This number was far larger than the number that could be accommodated, as there was a need for work to be done at home as well. Miller explores the ways in which the Society constructed an alternative “Indies” in Naples to placate Jesuits who desired to serve in this way. Giordano’s altarpiece, with figures possessing geographic and physiognomic variety and including the example of St. Francisco de Borja’s (1510–72) second conversion, translates specific events from the life of Francis Xavier into a more generalized narrative. The Jesuit viewer’s training to “place himself” in the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* here allows him to position himself as ministering to the “other Indies.” The fabrication of this terminology, employed by the Jesuits in Naples throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, permitted Jesuits to effectively use their talents close to home. Miller’s argument presents Luca Giordano’s altarpiece as a visual example of how the Society communicated this ideal, especially to young Jesuits. They were convinced by this image that working in the “Indies” closer to home was as fulfilling and profitable as laboring in the other Indies, halfway across the world.

2 Globalization, Mobility, Missions, Adaptation, and Accommodation

While we often describe the establishment of the Society of Jesus in the “early modern” age, or the era of “Catholic Reform,” it is important to understand that it was also the age of exploration. The ability of the earliest Jesuits to travel widely and engage with cultures who had rarely, if ever, come into contact with Europeans, is truly possible only in this period, and the Jesuits dove deeply into this work. The *Formula of the Institute*, written at the foundation of the order in 1540, denotes the oath “to travel to any part of the world where there was hope of God’s greater service and the good of souls.” The Spanish Jesuit Nadal is often credited with elucidating how the members of the Society were ideally suited to an itinerant life, and that they embraced it willingly, in imitation of

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Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{7} It is their embracing of this mobility that makes their missionary pursuits possible, and from the beginning Jesuits have traveled the globe in order to preach, baptize, and spread the word. The insistent and fervent desire of missionaries, from Francis Xavier to the present day, to convert souls has made the Society of Jesus a global force. The five essays in this issue consider Jesuit visual culture both in Europe, and in the context of the missions in Latin America. The focus of this issue is on the seventeenth century, yet the impact of these artists and their works, and the global footprint of the Society continues to be a vital aspect of the Christian world today. 2018 marks the fifth anniversary of the election of Pope Francis (r.2013–present): the first Jesuit to become pope, and the first pope from the southern hemisphere. The parts of the world that were Christianized by the early modern Jesuits and other missionaries, including Latin America, are the parts of the world in which Catholicism is growing and thriving in the twenty-first century. In many ways Pope Francis embodies the legacy of the Jesuit missions, and why the Society’s efforts at globalization have been so significant over the past five and a half centuries.

Accordingly, in recent years a number of important publications have explored the global nature of the Jesuits. John T. McGreevy’s \textit{American Jesuits and the World} (2017) examines the post-Restoration Society in America.\textsuperscript{8} Through extensive archival records he explores European Jesuits who came to the United States, often in the wake of revolt or revolution, and American Jesuits who traveled abroad on the missions. Stories of controversy and conflict surround these men and their push to develop schools, universities, and churches, and to promote Catholicism in nineteenth-century America. This was often a difficult task, and frequently an almost insurmountable struggle. Yet, despite the setbacks and hardships, the result is that the efforts of these Jesuits made Catholicism more global. \textit{The Jesuits and Globalization: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges} (2016), edited by Thomas Banchoff and José Casanova, includes essays by over a dozen prominent scholars who participated in a multidisciplinary initiative regarding globalization at Georgetown University.\textsuperscript{9} John O’Malley’s chapter astutely points to the inextricable connection between the two forces, by opening with two questions: “How

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\item [\textsuperscript{7}] See John W. O’Malley, \textit{The First Jesuits} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 298–301, for consideration of Nadal and the “fourth vow.”
\item [\textsuperscript{9}] \textit{The Jesuits and Globalization: Historical Legacies and Contemporary Challenges}, ed. Thomas Banchoff and José Casanova (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016).
\end{itemize}
does globalization help us to understand the Jesuits, and how do the Jesuits help us to understand globalization? The essays explore Jesuit efforts in two traditional areas of focus, education and missions, making valuable contributions to our understanding of the two enterprises, both pre-suppression and post-restoration. A consideration of the “fourth vow” to travel anywhere the members of the Society are needed underscores this volume and the consistent focus of the Jesuits in these areas. In To Overcome Oneself: The Jesuit Ethic and Spirit of Global Expansion, 1520–1767 (2013), J. Michele Molina considers the notion of “contemplation in action” and the global focus of the Old Society. She notes other scholars who have recently explored the relationship between the Jesuits and globalization, especially in the context of the missionary efforts, including Luke Clossey, Jennifer Selwyn, and Ines Županov. To her list I would add Dauril Alden and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, in addition to the previously discussed authors. The number of scholars considering the facets and implications of the Society’s global footprint grows daily, and the essays in this volume contribute to that effort.

The final two articles in this issue consider the art produced on the missions in Latin America. Both authors demonstrate the importance of a visual language, the ways in which works of art were produced, and how they varied given the specific circumstances of the local communities and complex (and often changing) relationships with indigenous populations.

Christa Irwin examines the paintings produced in Juli, on Lake Titicaca in Peru, by the Italian Jesuit Bernardo Bitti (1548–1610). Bitti produced a large number of paintings during his thirty-six years working in the service of the Jesuit missions in Peru, and his works were both well-received in this context, and influential on colonial Peruvian painting. Irwin describes Bitti’s role in providing works with a European perspective that could be integrated into the local culture. She considers the importance of images, especially prints and paintings, to the mission’s activities in Peru. She is interested in their usefulness in eliminating the language barrier, and examines the works themselves as

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tools of conversion. She discusses the ability of art to move, teach, and inspire which was so important in the post-Tridentine world. Finally, she evaluates the potential of prints—perhaps the most portable form of art to be sent from Europe—to serve as the inspiration for works of art produced by artists on the missions. Irwin’s essay on the paintings produced by Bernardo Bitti in Juli also argues that the complex relationship in Peru between the Jesuits and the indigenous population, as the Society attempted to integrate Christian values and European ideals, involved providing accommodations without obliterating Andean culture. The connections forged on the missions in South America are key to understanding the flourishing of the arts in that context.

In the final essay, Katherine McAllen also presents new research on Jesuit visual culture in Spanish America. She examines the complex relationship between the Jesuits in New Spain and a diverse group of local landowners, both Spanish and Tlaxcaltecan, which resulted in the creation of an artistic network. An investigation of the art from the church of San Ignacio in the mission town of Santa María de las Parras (present-day Coahuila, Mexico) reveals works of art produced by prominent artists from Mexico City, transported to the mission church by wealthy benefactors. McAllen argues that this was done not solely for reasons connected to competition, as often thought, but also due to the Jesuits’ involvement in local agriculture. The climate, along with beneficial irrigation and the qualities of the land, in this part of New Spain proved ideal for the growing of grapes, and the Jesuits engaged in the business of winemaking. This enterprise led to local support for the order and their mission, and this profitable relationship resulted in substantial donations. The funding allowed for the renovation, expansion, and decoration of the church of San Ignacio in the 1670s. This project is examined in detail, with references to the ways in which the artworks reflect both the practice of the Spiritual Exercises and local knowledge of Nadal’s Adnotationes et meditationes in Evangelia. McAllen concludes that this model of artistic production, forged in alliance with cultural and commercial activities, could be applied to other missions in Latin America. Certainly, these relationships help expand and refine our knowledge of the missions in New Spain and the important role of the arts in that context.

3 Conclusion: the Essential Relationship between Art and Religion

All of these essays consider the inextricable relationship between the Jesuits and the visual arts. They ask questions regarding how and why art—and aspects of visual culture more broadly—was used in the context of religion, and they thoroughly investigate the results of these interactions. They also explore
the relationships between the Jesuits and the laity, lay patrons in particular. And, where possible, they consider the relationships the Society forged with local populations in the context of their missionary efforts. The idea that visual images were regarded as a popular and important tool for communicating and teaching is a theme woven through all the contributions. They also offer a variety of perspectives on the Jesuits’ efforts at building relationships of many types, and the increasingly global footprint of the Society in the era of Catholic Reform.