Andrea Riccio’s Reliefs for the Altar of the True Cross in Santa Maria dei Servi, Venice: A Political Statement within the Sacred Walls

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The mendicant order of the Servites arrived in Venice in 1316 as a small group of friars from Florence, but they rapidly grew in number and importance thanks to the immediate and constant support of the Venetians (Cornaro, Ecclesiae venetae 7; Cornaro, Notizie storiche 291; Vicentini, Santa Maria de’ Servi, 4, 10–11; Pavon/Cauzzi 52–3). In 1318 they began the construction of their mother church, an impressive Gothic building of eleven-hundred square meters that contained twenty-two altars embellished by major works of art (Fig. 1). Santa Maria dei Servi, dedicated on November 7, 1491, competed in splendor and importance with the mother church of the Franciscans, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (1492), and that of the Dominicans, Santi Giovanni e Paolo (1430) (Pavon/Cauzzi 52). Contemporary accounts document its magnificence. In the diary (1494) of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Milanese canon Pietro Casola described the church and

Fig. 1. Jacopo de’ Barbari. Bird’s Eye View of Venice from the South, Detail with the Church of Santa Maria dei Servi. Woodcut, 1500. The British Museum, London. Photo: The Trustees of the British Museum.

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its monastery as a most remarkable place, among the first he visited during his sojourn in Venice before embarking on his spiritual voyage (Newett 134–5). Marin Sanudo in his De origine, situ et magistratus urbis venetae (1493–1530), a celebration of Venice and its mirabilia (marvels), lists Santa Maria dei Servi among the “big and beautiful churches” and those that contain “things that are outstanding” (49–51).

In 1806, during the Napoleonic occupation, the church and its monastery were almost completely demolished. All that was spared were two portals and a few wall sections, later integrated into a subsequent construction. The works of art were removed from the altars and either lost after dispersal or scattered among different churches and museums in the Veneto, Europe, and the United States (Vicentini, Santa Maria de’ Servi 44–98; Vicentini, I Servi di Maria nei documenti; Zorzi vol. 2, 348–61; Pedrocco 104–25). The disappearance of Santa Maria dei Servi meant the progressive neglect of the Servite presence in Venice. Since Antonio Vicentini’s effort, in the early twentieth century, to collect archival materials related to the church, little attention has been paid to the order. The role the friars played in the complex dynamics of Venetian politics before the arrival of Paolo Sarpi in the seventeenth century, and the patronage they attracted, require further investigation. A study of the surviving works of art and the message they conveyed can shed some light on the contribution the Servites made to the artistic and civic culture of Venice.