The Other Mary: The Absence of Mary Magdalene in the Santa Maria in Trastevere

Author: Briana Camp

Faculty Mentor: Denise Baxter, Department of Art Education and Art History, College of Visual Arts and Design

College and Affiliation: Department of Art Education and Art History, College of Visual Arts and Design

Bio:

Briana Camp is a senior at the University of North Texas majoring in art history with a minor in French. She has had various internships in art galleries around the Dallas Fort-Worth area and is currently an intern at Greater Denton Arts Council identifying and cataloging the city of Denton's public art. She also currently works at the University of North Texas Annex Library in Technical Services. Her future plans include graduate study in art history as well as library and information science. Her career goal is to become an art subject librarian within a research library or an art history professor. Her research interests include eighteenth-century Britain with a particular focus on gender studies and print culture.

Abstract:

Ancient Rome is well known for its prostitution even as Christian conversion was on a rise throughout the medieval era. None the less, there is a distinct gap in research on medieval Christian art, particularly in Trastevere Rome, its relation to prostitution during that time, and how prostitution influenced religious art within the walls of the Santa Maria basilica. This basilica is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the only female depicted in the series of mosaics by Pietro Cavallini. The church makes a covert statement by not displaying other women saints such as Mary Magdalene—an extremely significant female figure in Christianity. Avoiding images of Mary Magdalene and visually emphasizing the Madonna throughout the church was a clear, intentional device to promote their philosophy which forbids salvation or redemption after prostitution and promiscuous activity. The church depicts the Virgin as a rhetorical figure for abstinence through Pietro Cavallini's mosaic, *Coronation of the Virgin*. My research examines the social context throughout Rome during the medieval era, the status of prostitution, spatial analysis of Trastevere, and the inevitable entrance of promiscuity through the Santa Maria Basilica in Trastevere.

Introduction

My research evidence is from one of Pietro Cavallini's mosaics in his series "The Life of the Virgin" located in the apse. The apse depicts eight saints and Christ, all males except for the Virgin seated at the right of her Son. The Virgin wears an intricate robe of an elegantly colorful pattern. Mary and Christ are the only figures that have halos around their heads and are seated on their thrones as the other seven saints are lined along the apse in a single line facing the two. Observation of all the figures' hands is vital because they display the subtle gender issues involved in my research. All the male saints hold a book or scroll and have a free hand either extending their index and middle finger as if they are performing a "Hail Mary" or have their entire hand extended toward Christ or the viewer. In contrast, Mary's hands are different in that both are occupied with the scroll; one hand is holding the bottom as the other is slightly covered with two fingers pointed toward Christ. The covering of her hands and her gesture pointing towards Christ suggest her limitations and inability to move or act because Christ's hand around her grasping her shoulder acts as a cage.

My contention is that the absence of Mary Magdalene throughout Pietro Cavallini's mosaics is an intentional void. The Santa Maria basilica is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. She is the only female depicted among the mosaics within the church. The basilica utilizes her as a rhetorical device to eradicate prostitution, discourage sexual activity, and female liberation. Emphasis on the Virgin, the church fails to recognize another important female in Christianity, the other Mary, the prostitute. In the church's apse, a mosaic by Pietro Cavallini depicts the Virgin restrained through her occupied hands, representing female oppression. These two issues, the void of Mary Magdalene and the oppression of the Blessed Mother, pronounce an overwhelmingly masculine statement upon the Santa Maria in Trastevere and its conservative philosophy on female liberation.

Geographical Location of Santa Maria in Trastevere

Background information on the geographical location is important to understand the spatial

context. The name of Trastevere stems from Transitberim, which means “across the Tiber”. The Tiber River separates Trastevere from Rome, thus gathering fishermen, noble families, emperors, and anyone related to a higher status (Krautheimer 254). This neighborhood was known for its concentrated population of the elite class. Trastevere appealed to medieval inhabitants for its ample space to expand their mansions, and build servants’ lodging and other necessary structures (Krautheimer 254). The Byzantine scholar, Richard Krautheimer provides in his monograph, *Rome: Profile of a City 312-1308*, a map of Trastevere drawn in 1593 depicting the city with several houses, villas, mansions, farms, and personal stadiums of wealthy civilians. Trastevere was an area of the elite dating from the ancient world and included such noble families as the Papareschi, Tebaldi, Romani, Bracucci, and Pierleoni.

An important characteristic of the Trasteverini was their sense of tradition. Trastevere aimed to keep history interwoven within their culture, especially through their architecture, religion, and most importantly, their minds. Especially important for this paper are the neighborhood’s acceptance of Santa Maria's philosophy on issues of prostitution and the oppression of women. The neighborhood’s beliefs correlated with the region’s architecture and affected the overall message of Sta. Maria in Trastevere. Krautheimer in his *Rome: Profile of a City 312-1308*, stated, “Trastevere, [is a city] teeming and crowded in antiquity” (Krautheimer, 254). In other words, the Trasteverini were traditionalists and were surrounded by their past. The regional position of Trastevere, isolated from Rome by the Tiber River, created a gap between the cities. The gap was detrimental to Trastevere’s social progression in terms of observing how other Roman neighborhoods dealt with prostitution and promiscuity in the church. As a result of the isolated location of Trastevere, orthodoxy thrived while social progression remained stagnant.

The Social Context of Prostitution in Medieval Rome

In impoverished neighborhoods throughout the majority of Rome the social perception of prostitution began to take shape. In Ancient Rome prostitutes were perceived as creatures of incredibly

shallow status, often seen as inhuman, and were not expected to obey the law, due to their low position within society. In fact, Romans forbade the commingling of prostitutes and the elite class in public because of the indecency that it represented. This view of prostitution had been pushed into Rome's culture since the Christianization of Constantine as the Church attempted to rid society of this 'indecent' act from people numerous times. However, the Church was consistently forced to acknowledge the stability of prostitution, and the act of banning it in the city could only be seen as mere fantasy. Saint Augustine's philosophy was opposed to prostitution as he attempted to stop it repeatedly until surrendering to the conclusion that ridding the streets of sexual promiscuity was nearly impossible. Saint Thomas of Aquinas used an analogy for prostitution by comparing it to a sewer. If sewers were nonexistent throughout Rome then filth would crowd the streets and plague the people, but prostitution would take the place of sewers, providing a necessary outlet for abundant temptation (Bullough 34).

This perception of necessity could have been one of the first implications of progressive thought toward prostitution and the women involved. In Vern L Bullough's essay, *The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages*, he describes the transition of the prostitute. Initially, Rome perceived the prostitute as a "low status creature" who was "under the law," later shifting towards a pathetic character, who could also be considered a "strayed person." The shift in the Church's philosophy showed that the prostitute was viewed as fragile in spirit and more willing to convert to Christianity. This frame of mind became a staple within the medieval church. Rather than casting out prostitutes, the church encouraged church members to view prostitutes as vulnerable beings who desire to be 'saved' through Christ.

The root of this shift in judgment of prostitutes was because of their simplistic conversions. Interestingly enough, there is a plethora of saints who were former prostitutes. This pattern entails: Mary Magdalene, Saint Mary the Harlot, Saint Mary the Egyptian, Saint Afra, Digna, Eunomia, Eutropia, and Saint Thais. Several hagiographies, or narratives of saints, who were former prostitutes,

contain similar stories that refer to a woman who was living a promiscuous life, found the Lord, and ultimately repented of her lifestyle. Another common hagiography depicted a woman who initially was religious, fell into prostitution, gave penance, performed miracles, and was thus regarded as a saint. For example, the hagiography of Saint Mary the Harlot consists of spending her youth locked in a cellar next to her devout Christian uncle, Abraham, who lived in a cellar in order to discipline himself and his niece. Mary imitated her uncle by praying, reading Scripture, and meditating. As Mary grew older and the reputation of her holiness thrived, the town began to know her as a religious woman. One of her uncle's friends, a monk, frequently asked for her consolation and advice, and as a result fell in love with her. One day, he asked if she could come out of her cell to aid him- a trap of immorality that resulted in the loss of her virginity. Realizing what had happened she felt hopeless, sinful, and rebellious toward the Lord and her uncle, and decided to flee from the town's inevitable judgment.

Saint Mary the Harlot traveled to Alexandria and became a prostitute within the growing brothel scene. Her uncle was devastated by her absence and asked visitors of her whereabouts. After approximately two years of questioning and investigating he discovered that she was a prostitute in Alexandria, and immediately left incognito. To find her he approached her brothel, he bargained with her on a price. Though he was disguised as a client, she could smell his "ascetic smell" and immediately thought of her uncle. Her uncle consoled her and bought her dinner, breaking a fifty-year fast. After dinner in her cell, he revealed his true identity to her and promised God would forgive her if she repented. Absolutely joyous, she went back with her uncle to her hometown stating, "Her prayers became legendary as did her miracles" (Bullough 39). Upon her death, she became recognized as a saint within the Church. While Saint Mary the Harlot's story is intriguing and sympathetic, the most well-known prostitute in Christianity was Mary Magdalene, a figure who communed with Jesus of Nazareth. Likewise, she spread hope to all women who led sinful lives of promiscuity and prostitution, especially in the medieval era.

The Status of Prostitution

The consistent pattern of prostitute-to-saint and the idolization of Mary Magdalene became impressionable throughout the city and the Church. In 1198, Pope Innocent III pronounced his desire that all “good citizens” should care for prostitutes. The church established reformatories intended to transform prostitutes into godly women. In 1224, nuns were asked to accompany and heed the prostitutes of these reformatories. In 1227, Pope Gregory IX gave the highest ecclesiastical sanction to the Order of St. Mary Magdalene, thus deeming these institutions Mary Magdalene houses. Pope Innocent II encouraged prostitutes and men of the church to marry in order to purge their souls (Bullough 42). As society's perspective changed towards prostitutes in a positive manner, the Mary Magdalene ladies would often marry proper men.

The city's response was successful for the mere rhetoric that the Church utilized elegantly-hagiography. Hagiography is the life of a saint that was written by an educated man. In “*Forgetful of their Sex*”, Kathleen Hughs argued that hagiography is not history. The author is not interested in questioning evidence of the saint and is not attempting to write from a scientific or historical approach (Hughs 18). Instead, the writer had a certain audience in mind, the weak and hopeless, and the ones that were most likely to convert to Christianity. She states, “Hagiography will thus give reliable contemporary evidence about the aspirations and culture of a people” (Hughs, 18). The goal of hagiography is to identify with the social norms of the time. It is a rhetorical tool that persuades a specific audience of a belief using inspirational stories that the author guilefully crafts to seduce readers to listen, believe, and follow.

Because prostitution was a main focus of the Catholic Church, authors would create stories that listeners would find appealing. Appealing stories were told about what was going on at that time, who was being targeted, and who could be a potential ‘target’ of conversion. Another scholar, David Rollason, says that “Far from being primarily a devotional genre out of touch with life beyond the

monastery's or church's walls, hagiography appears as intimately concerned with wider attitudes and aspirations...the cults too appear as intimately connected with that society, although in a subsidiary role" (Rollason 18). Rollason is stating the fact of hagiography acts not as a truthful source of one's life, but as an example of what one's life could become by following the saint's story. These stories are so ambiguous that any common woman, despite lifestyle, could find herself in them and imitate the saint's actions. Essentially, this satisfies the author and his initial intentions.

The goal of this research is not to deem prostitution as inherently good or bad. Aside from any type of moral construct, selling sex was an action women could do with their bodies, thus gaining a sense of entitlement and power. It has been said that prostitution is the oldest profession. As far back as documentation exists, humans have used their bodies to express themselves in multiple ways, but most commonly sexuality. Sexual expression is engraved within the framework of humanity. However, in the eleventh and twelfth-centuries, when a woman used her body as a tool to support herself, it was seen as immoral and abhorrent. With this in mind, my research proposes that sex was a liberating experience for women at that time, using the only 'tool' that was granted to them, their bodies.

Spatial Analysis of Santa Maria in Trastevere

It is my contention, however, that the Santa Maria in Trastevere aimed to suggest that a woman with a promiscuous history could not receive salvation. The basilica of the Santa Maria in Trastevere is known as one of the oldest churches in Rome (Santa-Maria-in-Trastevere), built in the fourth century and renovated in 1140. Relevance of the renovation to this paper will be later discussed. Walking among the basilica's Cosmatesque floors, and along the nave of the rows and columns, one would find themselves standing where the Pope pronounced the 'Word of God.' Naturally, one would admire the golden mosaics of the saints, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus created by Pietro Cavallini. However, if one observed the gender of the saints they would notice a scarcity of women. The omission of Mary Magdalene is especially notable. She was the first person to notice the empty tomb and one of the first

people Jesus came to see after his resurrection. Mary held significance in the Bible and in society because of the growing number of women she brought into the Church throughout the rest of Rome.

Through the absence of Mary Magdalene, the basilica intentionally neglected the image of the reformed prostitute and forbade approval of salvation in the Santa Maria in Trastevere. The church did however admire Mary, the Virgin. The walls of the church are covered in pieces of glass and gold depicting Mary's life from Cavallini's mosaics entitled, *The Life of the Virgin*, beginning with the *Birth of the Virgin*, *Annunciation*, *Nativity*, *Adoration of the Magi*, *Presentation in the Temple*, *Dormition* (Tronzo 168), and lastly *The Coronation of the Virgin*. The basilica was dedicated to her, which further positions her as the model of the church, the one to look up to, a woman to follow. The church places the Virgin as a poster girl for abstinence and asceticism. Mary was not promiscuous so the leaders of the church, who were men, displayed that fact to encourage all women to do the same.

This rhetorical image by Cavallini, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, is located in the apse and depicts the Virgin, Christ, and seven male saints. The Virgin and Christ are seated on their thrones as the male saints stand in two lines on the sides of the Virgin and Christ facing the audience. The male saints all have one open hand extending their index finger and thumb as if in the middle of a blessing, while their other hand is occupied with a scroll, book, or a gift. Mary's hands however are both occupied holding a scroll of a verse from Song of Songs. One hand is holding the bottom of the scroll as the other is slightly covered gripping the top of it, unable to do a blessing. She, instead, utilizes her two fingers to create a pointing gesture towards Christ. Christ is presented with one hand holding the Bible as his other arm wraps around Mary's back grasping Mary's shoulder.

Gestures are vital in this image because they show the gender issues that were present in that time period. Mary speaks volumes as her restricted hands express her state of being controlled. The display of Jesus confirms this point as his hand grasps Mary's shoulder acts as a restrictive cage. Mary's two fingers pointing toward Christ suggests that the doctrine of Christianity or the male figure is what

constrains her and women of that time. Pietro Cavallini's mosaics in the basilica were based upon strict and restraining orders of Cardinal Jacopo (Tronzo 170). In his essay, *Apse Decoration, The Liturgy and The Perception of Art in Medieval Rome: S. Maria in Trastevere and S. Maria Maggiore*, William Tronzo describes the situation Cavallini was in as he was following orders of Cardinal Jacopo. Tronzo argues that the mosaics in the Santa Maria in Trastevere were influenced by well-known artist Jacopo Torriti and his mosaics in the basilica of the Santa Maria Maggiore. He states,

At the same time [Cardinal Jacopo] also demanded that Cavallini change Torriti's model a bit, in certain iconographic details and in the ordering of subjects, so that the addition to his apse would be more in keeping with his conservative taste. (Tronzo 170)

The Cardinal's intentional arrangement and conservative aspects to the image, the traditional implications of the mosaic of the Virgin, her restrained presence, and the absence of Mary Magdalene serve a sexist statement. In Torriti's *Coronation of the Virgin*, Jesus is not embracing Mary, but placing the crown upon her head. As this piece was decorated first, this was an arrangement that Cardinal Jacopo insisted on changing in order to satisfy his tastes, and philosophy, of women. The Cardinal's order to portray Jesus grasping Mary's shoulder illustrates the Cardinal's masculinity or the idea of male superiority. The remainder of the church followed suit because it conformed to contemporary religious and social beliefs.

The mosaic, *Coronation of the Virgin*, was created in the late-thirteenth century. Likewise, Mary Magdalene houses were functioning in 1227, the middle of the thirteenth century. By having these similarities in time, the freshness of prostitution, and its progress in becoming accepted among the church, there is a stark contrast between the S. Maria in Trastevere and its intentions of promoting a specific philosophy through a carefully selected saint. In this case, the church promoted abstinence through Mary.

Promiscuity in the Santa Maria Basilica in Trastevere

Christ's embrace of the Virgin was arranged by Cardinal Jacopo to illustrate his thought of male dominance over women and his desire to detract from Mary Magdalene because of her promiscuity. None the less, eroticism could have entered the basilica's doors with no regard to the Cardinal's desires. Women at this time could have ironically seen the mosaic of Mary and Jesus in a different light. In "Constructing Medieval Sexuality" Karma Lochrie states, "Women's spirituality during the late Middle Ages was usually considered to be marked by erotic, nuptial, and maternal themes, along with an increased attention to Christ's humanity" (Lochrie 181). This humanistic perspective on Jesus may have been interpreted with his affection for Mary in Cavallini's mosaic. Jesus was not normally perceived as a human to give physical affection such as "fleshly love" but was perceived as divine. Instead, his affection for humanity resulted in self-sacrifice to the world. Cardinal Jacopo's iconographic intentions may have failed from the women's perspective, for they could have seen a more erotic implication. Lochrie uses the term "mystical sex" and explains how women could have found sexuality in religious texts such as Song of Songs (Lochrie 181). For example, she states that scholars have found mystical sex within the "place of delights" which is the garden in Song of Songs (verse 5:1-4), and within the concept of the "Bride of Christ" (Lochrie 182). In verse 5:4 the author writes "My beloved put his hand on the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me." It is possible that this statement could refer to the image of Christ embracing and putting his hand on her shoulder and women of the time could have read it the same way. Also, verse 8:3 states, "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand embraces me!" This verse could allude to the image of Christ embracing his mother, or "Bride of Christ". These two examples in Song of Songs could also be detected as "mystical sex" and have sexual implications for women of the late Middle Ages who could have perceived it through the mosaic. However, this may not be a fact, but because of iconography and its occurrence of various interpretations, women could have interpreted the connection of Song of Songs on Mary's scroll and the mosaic.

A key detail of the mosaic is within the scroll that the Blessed Mother is holding. Ironically, the scroll contains text from Song of Songs, an erotic poem in the Old Testament. Ernst Kitzinger's article, "A Virgin's Face: Antiquarianism in Twelfth Century Art" suggests that the text of Song of Songs on the scroll was not initially present and, therefore, was not the prime reason for the production of the mosaic (Kitzinger 10). As a result of the scroll being verse-less for an undocumented number of years, there is irony within the mosaic. Without Song of Songs, this image of Christ and his embrace of Mary was initially illogical, irrational, and not Biblically influenced. Kitzinger states that Song of Songs played a vital and intense role in society within the Middle Ages (Kitzinger 10). Furthermore, he argues that Mary acts as the *sponsa*, or the Bride of Christ (Kitzinger 9). However, the mature Christ is still carrying this implication of marriage to Mary who equally looks the same age, which ultimately implies a sexual undertone.

Another way promiscuity entered the church was through a small, material reformation in 1140 (Kinney 379). The church displayed ruins from the Baths of Caracalla by distributing eight ancient capitals throughout the nave. Ancient prostitution took place within the Baths of Caracalla. Thomas A. McGinn in his *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel*, states prostitution was utilized in baths (McGinn 23). Baths were used for such things as entertainment, philosophical conversations, eating, and bathing. There were also "pleasure places" devoted to sexual activity (McGinn 23). The placing of these material remnants into the church suggests that sexuality cannot be avoided. Even the Santa Maria in Trastevere attempted to shun prostitution; it was prevalent within the Church, as bath ruins were enveloped within the framework of the basilica.

The progressive thought on prostitution in secular Rome during this era appeared to oppose Trastevere. According to contemporary commentary regarding Trastevere, there is a sense of pride in being a Trasteverini. There are common notions depicting Trasteverini as civilians who have always

stayed in Trastevere, never crossing the Tiber River that remaining prideful of their Roman roots.

Taking this continuous rumor seriously, if a majority of the Trasteverini barely crossed the Tiber, they would not learn what the rest of Rome was thinking in terms of prostitution. Their neighborhood would remain stagnant in terms of culture and thought. Due to its isolation, attributed to topographical reasons, Trastevere breathed traditionalism and oblivion as the rest of Rome evolved.

Conclusion

Because of the isolated location of Trastevere the basilica was blinded to the transforming thoughts and status of prostitution in the Middle Ages. The absence of Mary Magdalene in Cavallini's mosaics depicts an even greater significance due to the immense amount of fame Magdalene was acquiring from the Church's target on prostitution and its reformatory houses. The basilica of the Santa Maria in Trastevere strived to avoid any representation of sexual activity through the rhetorical poster girl of Mary the Virgin; however, it failed to do so. Through the sexual undertones, some women may have interpreted the mosaic of Christ and Mary sexually. The Santa Maria in Trastevere symbolizes a traditional masculine view of women and prostitution embraced by the church.

Works Cited

- “Santa Maria in Trastevere.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 30 Apr. 2010.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/523026/Santa-Maria-in-Trastevere>
- Bullough, Vern L. *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982. Print.
- The English Standard Version of the Holy Bible*. Wheaton: Good News, 2003. Print.
- Hetherington, Paul. "The Mosaics of Pietro Cavallini in the Santa Maria in Trastevere." *Journal of the Warburg Courtald Institute* 33 (1970): 84-106. Web 10 May 2010.
- Kinney, Dale. "Spolia from the Baths of Caracalla in Sta. Maria in Trastevere." *The Art Bulletin* 62.1, no. 3 (1986): 379-397. Web. 09 Mar. 2010.
- Kitzinger, Ernst. *A Virgin's Face: Antiquarianism in Twelfth Century Art*. *The Art Bulletin* 62.1 (1980): 6-19. Web. 22 Apr. 2010.
- Krautheimer, Richard. *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980. Print.
- Lochrie, K. *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Medieval Cultures Ser. 11. Print.
- McGinn, Thomas A. *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004. Print.
- Palmer, Robert E. "The Topography and Social History of Rome's Trastevere (Southern Sector)." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125. 5 (1981), 368-397. Web. 10, May 2010.
- Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg. *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998. Print.
- Took, Thalia. "Fors Fortuna." 2006. Web. 22 Apr. 2010.
- Tronzo, William. *Italian Church Decoration of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Bologna: Nuova Alfa editoriale, 1989. Print.