

5.1 Gaudenzio Ferrari. *Christ on his Way to the Praetorium* (detail). Polychromed sculpture with other media. Varallo, Sacro Monte. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)

“Popular” Art in Renaissance Italy: Early Response to the Holy Mountain at Varallo

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The first Sacro Monte, or Holy Mountain, was founded in the late fifteenth century by the Franciscan Observant Bernardino Caimi. It was established at Varallo (Piedmont), which at that time formed part of the Milanese duchy, and the principal function of the Sacro Monte was to offer an accurate reconstruction of Jerusalem with its environs for those pilgrims who could not travel to the Holy Land. Indeed, an inscription painted over the entrance to Varallo’s reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre, recording its completion in 1491, could not have been more explicit: “The Milanese friar Bernardino Caimi designed the sacred places of this mountain, so that those who cannot make the pilgrimage see Jerusalem here.”¹ The original scheme was fairly modest, but the number of structures built to display the sculptural groups and frescoes representing Christ’s life and Passion, as well as the life of the Virgin, increased considerably during the sixteenth century.

The Sacro Monte reached its apogee under the guidance of Charles Borromeo and his collaborators, who created a network of Sacri Monti in the region between the Lombard lakes and the Swiss border. The reasons for Varallo’s later decline, however, were inherently connected to its particular, distinctive characteristics. Indeed, the strong realistic effects of some of the sculptures – such as the use of actual hair, beards, and clothes (Figure 5.1) – which became a hallmark of the Sacro Monte and which had been employed by both artists and patrons to elicit emotional responses from the original viewers, were subsequently regarded as over-dramatic and too “popular”; although what is meant by popular is never further described in the literature on the Sacro Monte.² The study of this unique creation, therefore, became the domain of local historians, who were often more interested in the Sacro Monte’s devotional significance than in its artistic features.

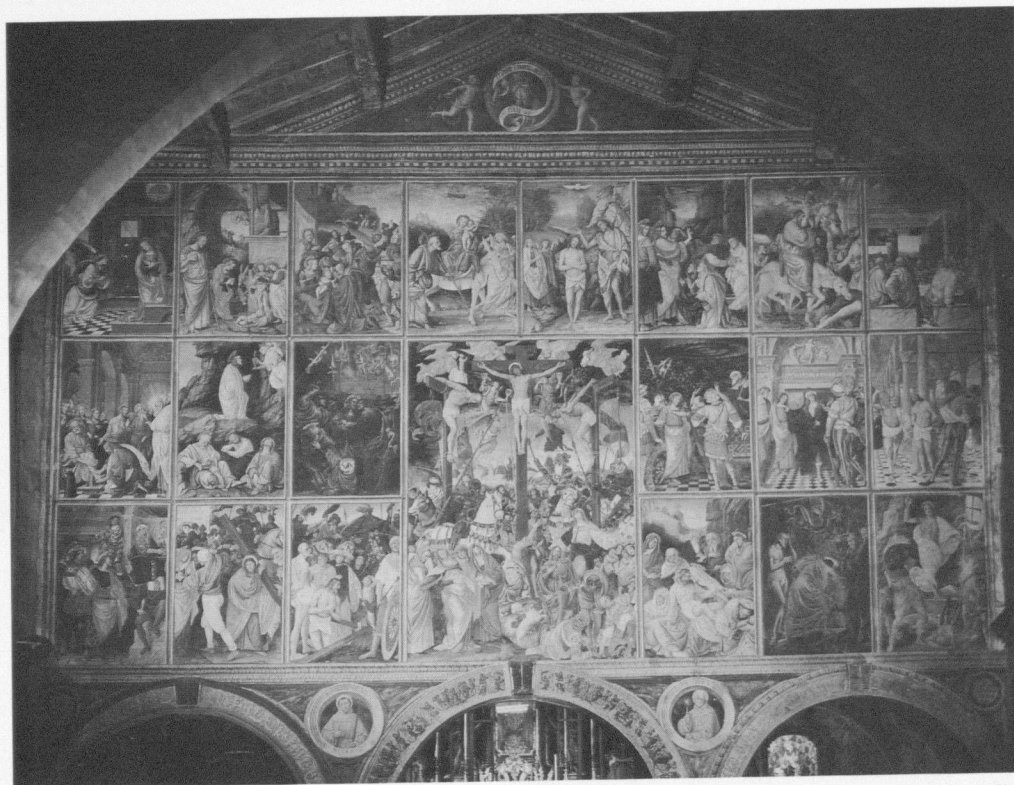
In recent years, however, a number of erudite and scholarly publications have been devoted to the art of the Sacri Monti.³ We are much better informed about the origins, histories, and functions of these unusual architectural complexes; and Varallo, the oldest as well as the most impressive Sacro Monte, has been extensively investigated. Yet some of the most compelling issues posed by this extraordinary monument of devotion have attracted little or no attention: first, the close rapport between the Milanese aristocracy

and the founders of the Sacro Monte, that is the Franciscan Observants of the Milanese Province; second, the relationship between the friars' sermons and the works of art they commissioned to decorate the "chapels" built at Varallo; third, the way in which these sculptural groups were used by the friars to elicit specific responses from the original audience; finally, the social mix of that audience. All these themes are inextricably interlinked, and here they must be dealt with simultaneously even if, regrettably, in a summary way.

As André Vauchez has pointed out, we know little about the mendicant friars' social background.⁴ If we analyze the role they played in fifteenth-century Italy, however, it becomes easier to determine their social origins and education; or at least this is the case with the Franciscan Observants of the Milanese Province. The power, influence, and prestige of these friars expanded dramatically during this period, in part as a result of the special interest in the region shown by the Order's leaders. After all, it was in Milan that St. Bernardino of Siena, the most important figure of the Osservanza movement, first attained popularity: there he delivered a highly successful cycle of Lenten sermons in 1418, and he returned to Lombardy many times.⁵ Moreover, the region was frequently visited by other distinguished members of the Osservanza, such as John of Capistrano who preached in Milan in 1440–42.⁶ The extent of their sermons' impact can be gauged by the number of Milanese aristocrats who joined the Observants. Among them was the blessed Michele Carcano, who was the successful advocate of public hospitals and of the Monti di Pietà.⁷ Others included Bartolomeo Caimi, who specialized in the writing of confessions of faith (formal statements of doctrinal beliefs),⁸ Bernardino Caimi, Francesco Trivulzio, and Bernardino de' Bustis, who devoted most of his life to the controversy over the Immaculate Conception.⁹ Hence they formed a socially homogeneous group in which each member promoted a specific feature of the Observant program.

The Franciscan Observants are often depicted in the hagiographic literature as the good friars who championed a return to the Order's original ideals in opposition to the decadent and lax behavior of the Conventuals, but by the end of the fifteenth century these friars had acquired a very high social profile: the Observant leaders belonged to the local aristocracy, and they were so well connected with the court that they were also the confessors and spiritual advisors of the Milanese duchesses. The relationship between the Observants and the Milanese aristocracy is a point to which I shall return when I examine the heterogeneous nature of the public that visited the Varallo Sacro Monte. Before addressing this problem, however, it is necessary to discuss the friars' approach to preaching in connection with some of the best known Franciscan devotional tracts.

Preaching was always one of the central activities of the mendicant orders, but for the Franciscan Observants it became their fundamental mission. St. Bernardino himself stated that the sermon was more important than the Mass,¹⁰ and his Lombard disciples also adopted this view. For instance, the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie at Varallo, which was founded at the foot of the Holy Mountain, as well as the other Observant churches of the Milanese Province, were especially designed for preaching.¹¹ They were usually divided into two clearly separated parts by a gigantic rood-screen wall, or *tramezzo*, which extended to the ceiling of the church. The main altar was placed in the choir reserved for the friars;¹² and even if the Mass could also be celebrated on one of the altars in the nave, where the lay congregation stood, the principal function of this public space



5.2 Gaudenzio Ferrari. *Scenes from the Life and Passion of Christ*. Fresco. Varallo, Santa Maria delle Grazie. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)

was signalled by the pulpit. From here the friars could deliver their sermons, and in this part of the church they could use the complex cycles frescoed on the rood-screen wall (Figure 5.2) to instruct listeners concerning Christ's life and Passion, from the Annunciation to the Resurrection. That such frescoes were used as didactic tools is confirmed by an extremely rare devotional tract which was published in Milan in 1514, only one year after the completion of the frescoes on Varallo's *tramezzo*.¹³ The tract is entitled *These Are the Mysteries that Are on the Holy Mountain at Varallo*, and it was certainly written by an Observant friar, possibly Francesco da Marignano who took Caimi's place after his death. It is a description in forty-seven rhymed octaves of the original Sacro Monte; and this text is further evidence of the ongoing success enjoyed by the empathetic approaches employed in Franciscan devotional literature. The familiar exhortations to the pilgrim to participate in the suffering of Christ by weeping, beating himself or herself, and touching the simulacra are indeed numerous. But for the present argument it is more pertinent to observe that in this tract the pilgrim is instructed to stop at the Observant church before beginning his or her ascent of the Holy Mountain. This is because it was in the church that the pilgrim was "purged of all errors." It was in the church, where the friars preached, that the pilgrim was taught how to approach the journey to the new Jerusalem at Varallo in the correct frame of mind. And, last but not least, it was here that the

pilgrim learned that what he or she was going to visit was only a reproduction of the Holy Land.

This public experience was then internalized during the ascent of the Holy Mountain, but when the pilgrims reached the summit they were not free to move around as they wished because they were restricted to guided tours of the holy places given by the friars. Guided tours were traditionally offered by the Franciscans who took care of the Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and the program at Varallo was so true to its model that even this aspect was accurately recreated: inevitably, therefore, the pilgrims' responses to the sacred mysteries of Christ's life and death were directed by the friars. Of course, any work of art is to a certain extent manipulative, but at Varallo the patrons were highly conscious of this aspect. Indeed, the guided tour to the "chapels" of the Sacro Monte was the culmination of the friars' sermons, and the holy places of the original Holy Mountain as created by Bernardino Caimi operated as a kind of visual translation of the sermons transcribed in his *Quadragesimale de articulis fidei* and *Quadragesimale de penitentia*.¹⁴ These collections of sermons were begun around 1488, precisely when Caimi was planning his Sacro Monte, and they differ from otherwise similar productions in that they often quote verbatim long passages from two bestsellers of Franciscan devotional literature: the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* by the Pseudo-Bonaventure and the *Garden of Prayer* attributed to Nicolò da Osimo, who was also an Observant friar.¹⁵

The choice of such sources seems to imply that Caimi geared his sermons to what we would probably call an unsophisticated or vernacular audience – that is, a mixture of semi-literate lay people, untutored clergy, and the unlettered. And this is particularly interesting in view of the fact that the art of the Sacri Monti has also been classified by other scholars as "popular" because of its intimate as well as intensely emotional realism. Yet the social background of the people who visited Varallo was very heterogeneous: there is little doubt that most pilgrims belonged to the lower social strata, if for no other reason than because the Holy Mountain was explicitly designed for those who could not afford the journey to Jerusalem;¹⁶ but it should not be forgotten that cardinals, members of the Milanese aristocracy, dukes, heads of state, and celebrated humanists did not disparage the simplicity of the Observants' Sacro Monte scheme. Of course, this social melting pot is a common feature of all pilgrimage sites. Here, however, I am concerned neither with the visitors' shared religious practices nor with their spiritual behavior *vis à vis* this peculiar recreation of the Holy Land. What I am trying to analyze, instead, is how the *different* strata of the original audience responded to the *same* veristic and allegedly "popular" or vernacular images. A crucial question therefore arises: how did the connection between verism and popular taste develop in the context of Franciscan patronage and devotion?

It seems to be generally agreed that the Franciscan preachers catered primarily to the masses and, since the classic book by Thode, scholars have often connected the Franciscans with the emergence of realistic tendencies in the art of the Italian Renaissance (i.e., a greater verisimilitude in the representation of the narrative).¹⁷ But the single most important reason why the questions of Franciscan patronage, the vernacular audience, and realism have become part of the same interrelated issue is the emphasis placed by the Order's devotional tracts on the minutest details of everyday life in an attempt to elicit an empathetic response from their readers.



5.3 Gaudenzio Ferrari. *Nativity*. Polychromed sculpture with other media, 1520s. Varallo, Sacro Monte. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)

From the Franciscan Order's foundation, St. Francis himself had exploited the realistic dramatization of Christ's life, as is clearly shown by the episode of the Christmas crib at Greccio. And some of the earliest Franciscan writings, such as the *The Tree of Life* by St. Bonaventure, the *Goat of Love* by James of Milan, and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, invited the reader to share in the sufferings of Christ's Passion. These texts are too well known to be discussed here. Yet it is important to remember that the reader was asked to participate in the events of Christ's life not as a spectator but as an actor. When Bonaventure discussed the Nativity (compare Figure 5.3), he encouraged the believer to press his lips upon the Infant's feet; and in the passages dedicated to the Adoration of the Magi and the Purification, the reader was asked to become a companion of the holy kings and to receive the baby Christ in his arms.¹⁸ The Pseudo-Bonaventure expands upon this strategy. He writes: "Kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus who lies in the manger and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him a while. Pick Him up and hold Him in your arms. Gaze on His face with devotion and reverently kiss Him and delight in Him."¹⁹ Similar passages are quoted verbatim in Caimi's sermons, and it is therefore likely that what was suggested in the *Tree of Life* and the *Meditations* was realistically performed at Varallo: the Infant's feet were probably kissed by the pilgrims, and it is also possible that the visitors were allowed, not to say encouraged, to hold the statue in their arms.

In this tentative reconstruction of the response experienced by the original audience of the Sacro Monte, it is no less important to remember that a tacit contract between the friars and the pilgrims existed. The latter agreed to submit, as it were, to an empathetic treatment, while the friars guaranteed that what the pilgrims saw was a precise imitation of the Holy Land. Indeed, Caimi's sermons were replete with his own recollections of Jerusalem. He liked to remind his public that he had been the chief guardian of the Sepulchre and that he had shown the real thing to many pilgrims. Moreover, he claimed to be an entirely trustworthy source because he was an eyewitness: he could describe the holy places in the exact order in which he had visited them and, what was more important, he had recorded the exact distances between them.²⁰ Now, the accuracy in reproducing the topography of Jerusalem and its environs was the greatest innovation introduced at Varallo. More or less faithful copies of the Sepulchre had been built all over Europe well before the foundation of the Sacro Monte,²¹ but the Holy Mountain at Varallo was the first attempt to reproduce the Holy Land topographically. And this leads us back to the *Meditations*, one of Caimi's main sources, and to the Franciscan obsession with numbers, dimensions, and distances.

According to the Pseudo-Bonaventure, "Mount Calvary . . . was as far from the gate of the city as our [monastery] is from the gate of Saint Germanus",²² and he often states the exact distances between holy places. Relics are also precisely measured: as far as the height of the holy cross is concerned, the Pseudo-Bonaventure must rely on information provided by those who had visited Jerusalem, but he can personally guarantee that the table of the Last Supper is square and consists of several boards because he has seen it in Rome, in the Lateran church, where he has measured it.²³ Measurements are of course used as a certificate of authenticity: the Nativity, the Last Supper, the Crucifixion are true events which took place in real locations also because we can measure the manger, the table, and the cross. And to make his readers even more well disposed towards his message, the Pseudo-Bonaventure narrows the gap between them and the distant lands evoked in his narrative by referring to sites familiar to his audience. For example, when he describes how Mary and Joseph were accidentally separated from their Child, he writes: "Very early the next morning they left the house to look for Him in the neighborhood, for one could return by several roads; as he who returns from Siena to Pisa might travel by way of Poggibonsi or Colle or other places."²⁴

Similar approaches were adopted in several Franciscan texts and by many Franciscan preachers. It is therefore not difficult to understand why these ingenuous references to the daily life of their audiences, combined with their taste for minute and familiar details, gave rise to the notion that the Franciscans catered to the masses rather than to members of the upper social strata. Likewise, it is easy to see why the strong veristic effects of the art of the Sacro Monte have been inevitably associated with the "realism" of Franciscan sermons and devotional tracts. In all these forms – art, literature, and preaching – we find the same ingredients: empathy and a penchant for the minutest details.

At Varallo these features go to extremes. Hair, beards, and moustaches are often made of horse-hair; some of the statues are dressed in real clothes; and the passion for verisimilitude is so profound that the food on the table of the Last Supper becomes a matter of concern – indeed, during one of the periodic inspections organized by the local bishops, it was strongly recommended that the traditional Easter dish of lamb "be made

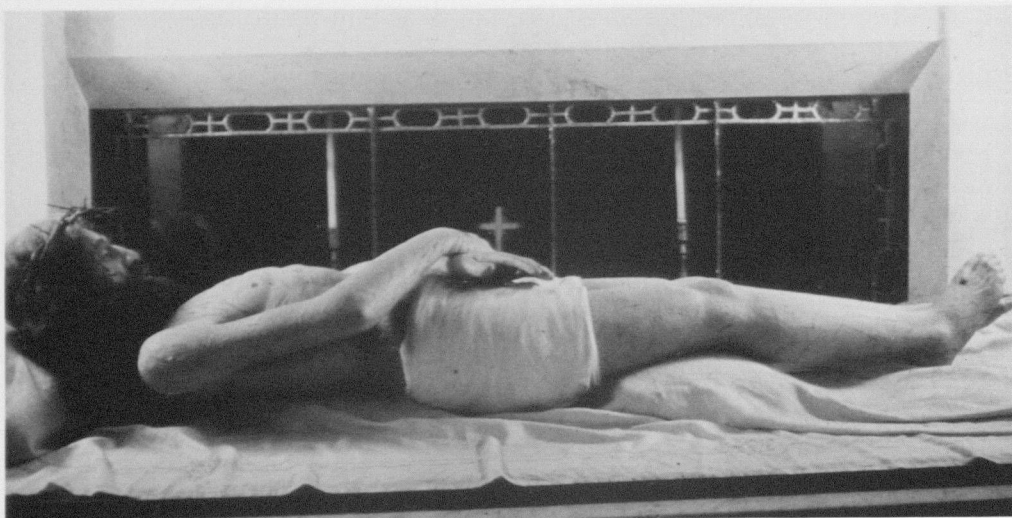


5.4 Christ and St. John the Evangelist (detail of *The Last Supper*). Polychromed sculpture with other media. Varallo, Sacro Monte. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)

as if it were roasted” and that fruits which are not in season at Lent should be removed from the table.²⁵ So great a desire for accuracy seems to us misplaced when we look at the crude statues of Christ and the apostles (Figure 5.4). These are not statues in the traditional sense, but rather dummies covered with real linen draperies which were dipped in plaster to stiffen their folds; yet, to increase the realistic potential of the scene, the statues were made with moveable limbs so that they could be rearranged around the table according to changing circumstances. (However, I want to make clear that this is the only surviving example. The other wood and terracotta statues of the Sacro Monte did not move.)

The final touch of such a *tableau vivant* was probably provided by artificial illumination. Bernardino Caimi’s sermons inform us that the Holy Sepulchre and the place where the body of Christ was anointed were perpetually illuminated by oil lamps.²⁶ It is therefore not implausible that Caimi planned a similar solution for his Lombard imitation, and we do know from two sources that the pilgrims who visited the Sacro Monte could also start their climb up the Holy Mountain at night.²⁷ The impact provoked by the wounds and scars of Christ’s body on those members of the original audience who looked at this statue or at the other narratives of the Passion by candle- and torchlight must have been tremendous; and in this flickering light the statues might have given the impression of moving, of being almost alive (Figure 5.5).

Having said that, however, it is unlikely that this *mise-en-scène* was actually designed to deceive the eyes of the pilgrims. This view is supported by the fact that at Varallo the friars were very diligent in reminding their audience that the places that had been



5.5 Gaudenzio Ferrari. *Dead Christ*. Polychromed sculpture with hair, cloth, and other media. Varallo, Sacro Monte. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)

recreated on the Holy Mountain were only replicas of the real thing. Perhaps this was due to a fear of idolatry but, whatever the reason, the Observants were extremely careful in their handling of this issue. For example, the large stone placed in a niche of the porch outside the Sepulchre is flanked by the following inscription: “This stone is *similar in every detail* to the stone slab which covers the tomb of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.”²⁸ An analogous but now lost inscription was placed inside the chapel reproducing the tomb of the Virgin: “This holy sepulchre is *similar in every detail* to that built at the feet of the Mount of Olives where the body of the most Holy Virgin was buried.”²⁹ The same preoccupation pervades the tract that I have already quoted which functioned as a sort of devotional guide to the pilgrims who visited Varallo in 1514. According to this source the Annunciation takes place in a “place similar to the real one”; the Nativity is staged in a “similar place”; the Adoration of the Magi is “similar”; the Circumcision is in a “similar place”; the Sepulchre is a “holy place similar to the real one”; in the portico outside the Sepulchre is the aforementioned tomb slab which is “similar” to the real one in Jerusalem; and the chapel dedicated to the Ascension of Christ contains a footprint similar to the marble relic preserved on the Mount of Olives.³⁰ It is therefore obvious that Varallo was purely a reproduction of the real thing, even if a very accurate one. One could argue that the friars were overstating their claims because in Jerusalem there were neither statues nor frescoes, but the 1514 guide to the Sacro Monte makes it clear that the illustrated mysteries were meant to stimulate the viewers’ imaginations. This was not a new trend in Franciscan devotional texts. In his *Tree of Life* Bonaventure had already stated that “imagination aids understanding.”³¹ And the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* had also stressed the role played by imagination in the learning of the Holy Scriptures: “For the sake of greater impressiveness I shall tell [the events of Christ’s life] to you as they occurred or as they *might have occurred* according to the devout belief of the imagination and the varying interpretation of the mind.”³² The realistic descriptions

which greatly contributed to the enormous popularity of the *Meditations* must be read in the context of these words in the introduction to the book. The reality effect is not the result of a minute description of the events as they *actually* occurred,³³ because this is neither possible nor desirable, but is the product of an interaction between this didactic approach and the efforts of the imagination in the service of faith and contemplation.

The same applies to Varallo: the emphasis placed by current scholarship upon the apparently extreme, sometimes grotesque realism of its images as evidence of its catering primarily to “popular”, in the sense of unsophisticated, audiences, misses the main point. The secret of the Sacro Monte’s success among widely differing strata of Lombard Renaissance society is not merely in the verisimilitude of its representations, but in the *tension* created between the patrons’ desire to reproduce the events narrated in the Gospels and the viewers’ imaginative participation in these events. The allegedly exact imitation of Jerusalem’s topography, of the distances between the holy places, of precise measurements, as well as the realism of familiar anecdotes, hair, beards, and clothes, entail an inherent tension, based on an acute awareness that this is only a replica concocted to stimulate a contemplative frame of mind in the pilgrims. And this tension helps explain how the *same* vernacular images could affect a very *diversified* public.

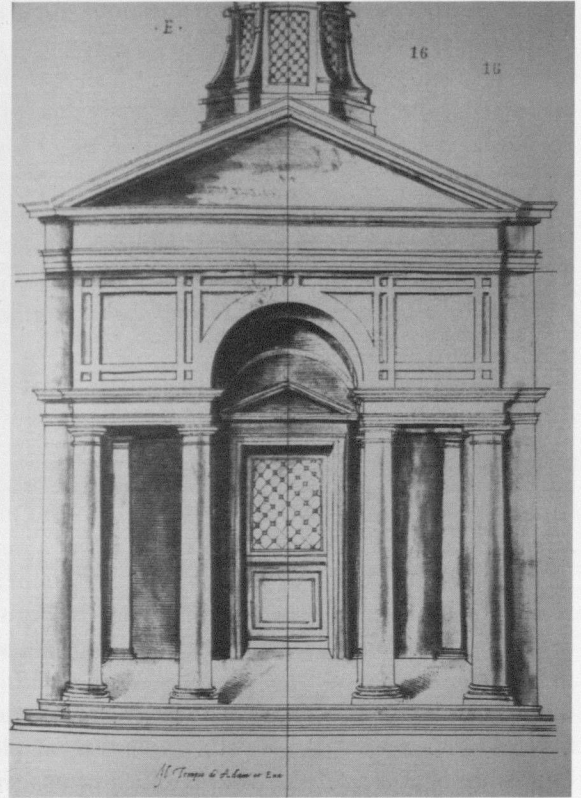
Works of art can be inspired by but are eminently different from sermons. Language is flexible and a good preacher can adjust the register of his discourse to different as well as to mixed audiences; but the narratives reproduced at Varallo could not change to meet the different tastes of their viewers. What could change, however, was the response of the public, and this was perfectly understood by the friars who guided the tour of the Sacro Monte and encouraged the pilgrims to supplement the veristic narratives with their own imagination; in other words, the impact of these images varied according to the viewers’ culture and education, because it was the involvement of the spectator that completed the reality effect.

We should remember that the art of the Sacro Monte is still all too frequently discussed in its post-sixteenth-century morphology after drastic alterations had been introduced. For example, in one of the projects designed by Galeazzo Alessi (Figure 5.6) to transform one of the original structures into a centralized building with a classical portico – a project which was later implemented – the purpose of the elaborate grilles was to keep the pilgrims outside the chapels and increase the effect of distance.³⁴

This was a deliberate rejection of the purpose of the original structures, which pilgrims had been encouraged to enter and experience more directly. In the “chapel” of the Magi, for instance, the spectator had been intentionally caught between two spaces and hence could not help becoming part of the action. In exactly the same way, of course, was the reader of Bonaventure’s *Tree of Life* encouraged “to become a companion of the holy kings.”³⁵

It was in the *tableau vivant* of *Crucifixion*, executed by Gaudenzio Ferrari in the 1520s, that the empathetic strategies were most consistently and successfully exploited (Figure 5.7).³⁶ On the wall opposite the Golgotha are frescoed groups of onlookers who were not originally visible from the exterior of the chapel, and this suggests that the pilgrims originally entered from the door on the right, stopped in front of the cross, where they were surrounded on all sides by carved as well as painted figures, and finally went out through the door on the left. Like the reader of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*,

5.6 (right) Galeazzo Alessi. *Design for the Chapel of Adam and Eve*. Pen and ink with wash. Varallo, Biblioteca Civica. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)



5.7 (below) Gaudenzio Ferrari. *Crucifixion* (detail). Polychromed sculpture with other media, 1520s. Varallo, Sacro Monte. (Photo: Riserva del Sacro Monte di Varallo.)



therefore, the viewer of Varallo was not a spectator but an actor-participant.³⁷ Similar comprehensive experiences are also described in the 1514 tract: for example, the “chapel” dedicated to the Apparition to the apostles displayed a statue of Christ, with open arms, surrounded by the figures of His disciples frescoed on the wall of this circular structure; and the pilgrim was encouraged to place himself or herself between the simulacrum and the paintings, thus becoming physically as well as emotionally part of the action.³⁸ This performance engaged most of the viewers’ senses: not only sight, but also hearing and touch. Understandably enough, art historians tend to concentrate their analysis on the visual evidence. Yet the narratives of the Sacro Monte elicited a response from the members of many different social strata because they also affected the spectators’ other sense organs.

For example, as the pilgrims looked at the narratives, they were encouraged by the friars to recite the most familiar prayers, such as the Our Father and the Creed. And it is possible that the Observants did not reject such practices as those recommended to the Benedictine monks of the Congregation of Santa Giustina by Ludovico Barbo in his *Forma orationis et meditationis* of 1441. For the meditation of Good Friday, Barbo advised the monks to become completely absorbed in the events immediately preceding the erection of the cross in this way: “imagine that you hear the sound of the hammers used to crucify your Lord.”³⁹ In other words, not only the mental image of Christ being nailed to the cross, but also the imaginary sound of the nails piercing His flesh must be used to stimulate the Christian’s appropriate emotional response. And it was not only an appeal to the auditory sense: references to weeping and crying in Franciscan devotional texts are innumerable. Space permits me to mention only the many vernacular translations of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* published in Milan during the 1480s and 1490s, as well as the 1514 devotional tract, all of which repeatedly insist that the reader lament the sufferings of the Lord. Finally, the sense of touch should not be forgotten. At Varallo the pilgrims were encouraged to touch the facsimile tomb of Christ or other relics. For instance, those who touched the replica of Christ’s footprint in the chapel of the Ascension were granted a plenary indulgence. It is not difficult to see how such a complex ritual, in which the verism of the narratives, combined with total viewer participation, could appeal to many different types of audience. The works of art that the friars commissioned were not as flexible as their sermons, but the level of the spectator-actor’s involvement could be adjusted according to his or her religious feelings and education.

In the foregoing, I have attempted to reconstruct the way in which the pilgrims’ responses to the Sacro Monte narratives were directed, although, as we have seen, not entirely preordained by the friars. Naturally, however, it would be useful to possess some written evidence as to the response elicited by Varallo. Fortunately, one such document exists, and it is an invaluable source which records the impressions of an unusually sophisticated visitor.

In September 1507 the humanist Girolamo Morone traveled to this region as the ambassador of the king of France; and, notwithstanding his busy diplomatic agenda, he did not overlook the opportunity of visiting the Sacro Monte. Like many Franciscan Observants, Morone also belonged to one of the oldest and most aristocratic Milanese families. Well known to Machiavelli and Guicciardini, he was one of the most interesting

political figures of his time. He was in contact with numerous humanists, and his Latin orations are often praised by modern scholars for their stylish elegance. Morone also wrote extremely polished letters in Latin, and in one of these, written in 1507 and addressed to the poet Lancino Curzio, he informed his friend about his profoundly moving experience of the Sacro Monte at Varallo.⁴⁰ Before examining this document, however, it is necessary to say something about the artistic tastes of these two remarkable personalities, because – as we shall see – Morone was concerned with the formal aspects of the Holy Mountain.

Curzio, who is often mentioned in Matteo Bandello's short stories, was a bizarre figure. He roamed the streets of Milan dressed in a Roman toga and kept his hair long as a sign of his opposition to the French invaders, who had imposed a different fashion. His poems were profoundly influenced by Virgil, and his tomb, which was designed by Bambaia, reveals all the qualities of Lombard classicism. He was well acquainted with the most important artists of the time, such as Leonardo, Boltraffio, and Cristoforo Solari, all of whom are mentioned in his works. Moreover, we know that Curzio was also in contact with Andrea Solario since he provided the elegant Latin inscription which is at the bottom of the portrait of Cristoforo Longoni.⁴¹ Solario, who was one of the most important followers of Leonardo, also painted the portrait of Morone (Figure 5.8).⁴² And what we know about Morone's artistic patronage is sufficient to reassure us that he had impeccable taste: when he was appointed Great Chancellor by the last Sforza duke, he wasted no time in hiring Bramantino as court painter and architect.⁴³

From these sparse notes about their milieu, education, careers, and patronage, it is obvious that Morone and Curzio were perfectly well aware of the best artistic achievement in Renaissance Milan. Yet Morone's letter reveals how deeply he was affected by his visit to the Sacro Monte. He writes: "because of the difficulties and dangers endured by the pilgrims who visit Mount Calvary in Jerusalem, the Franciscans have built in Varallo a copy of the Holy Sepulchre. The events of the Gospels are represented in many chapels into which I was introduced by a pious friar who has seen the place where the real body of Christ is buried. And my guide told me that the distances between these chapels and the structures in which the events are reproduced correspond exactly to the originals. Oh Lancino, I never saw anything more pious or devout; anything that can move the heart in the same way. On this Holy Mountain one is compelled to follow only Christ and to forget about everything else. Everything you see here is superior to all antiquity."⁴⁴

These are strong words in the mouth of a person who was educated in the worship of classical culture; but they illustrate in a very clear way how Varallo's simple images could affect the perception of a sophisticated viewer. It is at this point that I would like to return to the first issue I raised in this paper – that is, the close relationship between the Milanese aristocracy and the Franciscan Observants who founded the Sacro Monte. Varallo is often described as a product of the people's devotional feelings, but this means neither that it was created by them nor that it was exclusively "consumed" by them. On the contrary, as all pilgrimage sites attract a mixed audience, and since a trip from Milan to Varallo took only one or two days,⁴⁵ the Holy Mountain was visited by many distinguished personalities during the sixteenth century: by writers such as Morone, Matteo Bandello, and Agostino Gallo; by painters like Lomazzo and Federico Zuccaro;



5.8 Andrea Solario.
*Portrait of Girolamo
Morone.* Milan, Gallarati-
Scotti Collection.
(Photo: Alinari.)

by saints and cardinals such as Charles Borromeo, Angela Merici, and Alessandro Crivelli; and by many members of the nobility, for example, Francesco Sforza II and Charles Emanuel of Savoy. Yet it is even more important that the chapels themselves were often financed by local as well as Milanese aristocratic families.

On the basis of what I have said so far, it is obvious that one of my main objectives is to demonstrate that the sculptures of the Sacro Monte were commissioned by discriminating patrons for a mixed audience which included the best educated members of the Milanese society of the time. But this does not mean that some members of the original audience were unaware of the fact that the Sacro Monte's earliest statues, such as the Christ and the apostles of the Last Supper or the figures of the Lamentation which have been recently attributed to the De Donati brothers,⁴⁶ belonged to a material culture. This may sound a modern and rather abstract art historical evaluation, but in fact it was the opinion of Girolamo Morone. At the end of his 1507 letter to Lancino Curzio, and after having recounted his moving experience of the Sacro Monte, he adds: "the very simplicity of this enterprise, this structure with no art, and the noble site are superior to all antiquity."⁴⁷ The Milanese humanist was moved to tears as a Christian by Caimi's project, so much so that he repeated his pilgrimage three or four times, but he was

perfectly aware of the fact that the narratives seen at Varallo did not meet the standards of similar works of art produced by north Italian sculptors. Yet the images of the Sacro Monte could still affect the response of different viewers because the reality effect was completed by the spectator's imagination in the comprehensive theatrical performance set up by the friars.

To conclude, the early history of Varallo's Sacro Monte confirms that when it came to sharing the religious practices of their community, literate and illiterate people were indistinguishable; and that, in the socially mixed environment of a pilgrimage site, the image representing Christ's Passion could arouse intense emotional reactions in any viewer independent of those images' formal merits. Morone's letter, however, makes it clear that a sophisticated visitor would have found these works unsatisfactory from a purely artistic point of view. It is always dangerous to draw broad conclusions from the evidence given by one source, but Morone's letter seems to indicate an awareness of the emerging category of "art" or of "artistic quality" in the modern sense of the term. The same work, therefore, can have a different historical significance if examined from the point of view of the history of style or if analyzed from the point of view of response. Varallo's *sermo humilis*⁴⁸ may not have pleased the taste of every viewer but it documents an important aspect of late medieval–early modern religious practices.