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Healing Rhetoric, Holy Wood, and Venereal Infection in Sixteenth-Century Italian Visual Culture

Abstract

My dissertation, "Healing Rhetoric, Holy Wood, and Venereal Infection in Sixteenth-Century Italian Visual Culture," re-centers port cities to examine how art and architecture negotiated constructs of infection and healing across the Southern Mediterranean. In the last decade of the quattrocento, populations of European port cities and courts played host to a virulent outbreak of infectious symptoms. Early modern texts formulated conflicting theories and terms, including *mal francese* or *mal napolitano*, to describe an affliction that is now considered an historical outbreak of syphilis. In my dissertation project, I assert that historical depiction of venereal infection could not be identified solely by outward symptoms that assume the objective authority of early modern texts, or correspondence to modern scientific or medical theory. Rather, the collective experiences of suffering and triage, the development therapeutic of technologies, and the performance of charitable and civic ritual, informed rhetorical constructions of infection and healing during a period of complex reform.

By the sixteenth century, the epidemic outbreak had quickly become a chronic infection throughout the known world. In the European continent, existing models of charitable institutions and public health measures were adapted in the vanguard of specialized treatment and long-term care. Although collaborative responses varied between Mediterranean centers, venereal infection was consistently described among debilitating conditions, which encompassed recurring afflictions and social consequences of poverty and sin, but excluded acute illness, leprosy, or plague. The dissertation project incorporates interdisciplinary methods of social art history to foreground art and architecture in those conceptual shifts, building upon a foundation of scholarship that has described the allocation of resources towards social consequences and recurring infirmities in the *Ospedale degli Incurabili* that first emerged in the Italian peninsula. My practice draws from methodologies in the histories of science and medicine to elucidate the crucial function that art and architecture served, to negotiate collective faith in intervening authorities, the effective power of diagnosis and treatment as a kind of ritual, and shared, coded language that

defined changing objectives of health management and healing processes. The dissertation contends that visual and material culture mediated a therapeutic latitude, linking the Caribbean to Iberian and Italian ports, to make contested aspects of infirmity and healing intelligible.

The project I complete at the *Centro per la Storia dell'Arte e dell'Architettura delle Città Portuali*, "Between Epidemic Outbreak and Chronic Infection: Visual Rhetoric of Healing in Naples, ca. 1515-1530," will comprise a vital strand of my dissertation project. Although the precise origins of syphilis remain unresolved in both historical discourse, and modern medical theory, Naples holds canonical status as the index case for an early modern pandemic outbreak, turned chronic infection. During my residency with the scholarly community of La Capraia, I will investigate the mobilization of art and architecture that defined the charitable clinical settings for infection at the waterfront of the port in Naples, and across the Centro Storico.