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Collecting Portraits of Early Christian Virgin Martyrs in Seicento Naples

Abstract

My dissertation is an art historical study of the production and consumption of early Christian female martyr imagery in Baroque Naples. Although it was the second largest city in seventeenth-century Europe, scholars have only recently begun to study the flourishing art market and the prevalence of devotional culture in the lives of Neapolitan citizens. Through a dedicated study of the interplay between socioeconomic conditions, politics, and religious devotion, I will illuminate the potentiality of virgin martyr images to function as both sacred and secular instruments of power. Surviving inventories attest to the widespread presence of saints' portraits in Neapolitan collections, as both the wealthy elite and working classes collected examples of the image type. Artisans and street vendors sold moderately priced or secondhand pictures of saints, while wealthier families commissioned sacred portraits to hang alongside those of family members in their palace rooms. I will examine how these images of virgin martyrs allowed female collectors to communicate authority or undermine patriarchal controls, while also providing non-elite audiences with an accessible and appealing example of feminine agency. My study is organized thematically and spatially, beginning in the studios of artists who specialized in painting female saint imagery, to the palazzo-lined piazzas of the city and the domestic interior spaces of private devotion, and finally to the broader social community and commercial markets in Naples and beyond.