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Miraculous Images and the History of Art

First of all, my thanks to Michael and Gert Jan for the invitation to take part in the winter research school year at Nikki this week: it's been a very enjoyable and stimulating time. I'm also very grateful for the opportunity to offer this paper, not least because it gives me the opportunity to say publicly a number of important thank yous.

Towards the end of 2018 my book *Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany* was published. Those of you who have been on the research school have been kind enough to engage with some of the ideas in it, and I thank you for that.

The first steps in the research for that project were undertaken during a fellowship here at NIKI as long ago as 1999 when Bert Meyer was director. I had a two-month fellowship in May to June of that year during which I began to work on Santa Maria delle Carceri in Prato.

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In particular it enabled me to engage in detail with some critical archival evidence, more of which in a moment.

That short fellowship also enabled me to formulate a project which was the basis for an application for a fellowship at Villa I Tatti, which I gained the following year – I was Deborah Loeb Brice fellow there in 2000-2001. Near the end of that fellowship I won a post at my current institution, Birkbeck College and the University of London where I've been ever since. Before that I had been one of that insecure band of so-called independent scholars. Those two fellowships - here and at I Tatti - changed my life, and I will remain profoundly grateful for the opportunities they provided. My book, and indeed my academic career, could not have happened without them.

There is one more important vote of thanks for me to make and this brings me back to the start of this project. I had begun working on the phenomenon of miraculous images during my doctoral studies. My focus then was this object

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the panel painting venerated as Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland whose cult grew in the early 15th century.

It was George Clarke, then at the Courtauld where I did my Ph.D., who, after hearing a presentation of mine, pointed out that miraculous images were an important phenomenon in early modern Italy and she drew my attention to the work of Paul Davies on centrally planned churches –

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the Carceri in Prato, begun in 1485 – here is the interior - being one of his key case studies. I think it's fair to say that, at that stage at least, Paul's interests, as an architectural historian, focused more on the church building in Prato than on the image that it enshrines – here over the main altar.

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And here in detail.

Reversing that focus became one of the motivations in the project I developed.

In my work on Czestochowa I had tried to take seriously the contents of the fragmentary surviving collections of miracle stories. It was clear from the research of Paul and others, notably Piero Morselli, that the Carceri had two important collections of miracles from early in the life of the cult and they formed the focus of my work during my fellowship here at Niki. They are published now in a wonderful edition by Isabella Gagliardi in the volume edited by Anna Benvenuti, but back then only part of one had been published. They're preserved in the Biblioteca Roncioniana in Prato and while at NIKI I took myself off there everyday and transcribed those two miracle books.

The time-efficient way to capture those stories would have been to photograph the manuscripts and do the transcription elsewhere. The advantage of doing what I did was, of course, that I read those books in detail and although they are, in many ways, very conventional texts, it became clear to me, as the days went by, that they were rather extraordinary -- one of them in particular.

I began with the older of the two, Codex 86 in the Roncioniana's catalogue.

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Here is the opening page as illustrated in Anna Benvenuti's volume. Part of this – the bit that had been published - read as a chronicle of the early history of the shrine and had been studied in detail

by architectural historians, Paul Davies among them. But the extensive section retelling healing miracles associated with the shrine was unpublished and I started with that. That took me about a month. When I moved onto the second book,

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here is its first page from the same source -

there seemed to be a good deal of duplication. Indeed, the first 30 or so stories are pretty much the same. Did I really need to write all this out again?

But it was just at this point that I had the encounter that changed my project. I can pinpoint it in time because the actor transcription was such drudgery that I kept notes in the margins of my transcription of when I started and finished each session of work so that I could time my progress. So I know that it was about midday on 24 May 1999 that I read this story.

8 Carceri

On 15 September 1484

Francesco d'Andrea di Francesco Ghuzzelmi of Prato, a boy of two years and eight months, had had a severe fever continuously for two days and in that time had not eaten or drunk anything and had not spoken and slept continuously and lay in his bed as if dead. And fearing this illness, Andrea, his father and my brother, went to the Madonna delle Carceri and there vowed him to Her Majesty [implicitly this painting]. And that boy was as said in bed as if dead and, at the time that his father vowed him to the Madonna, he suddenly came to and sat up in bed without a fever, healthy and liberated, and said to his mother standing there and weeping, 'Mamma, the Virgin Mary has healed me.' And he began to talk and eat and drink as if he had never had any illness and was perfectly healthy and liberated. And lifted out of bed by his mother, he began to run through the house as children of that age do, healthy and in good spirits. Seeing this, the said Andrea, his father, and his mother thanked God and the Glorious Virgin for such grace and miracle and afterwards they went to the Madonna and prayed and offered according to their consciences.

This manuscript was written by an identifiable individual: the colophon

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Which you can see here

states that the manuscript it was written by one Giuliano Guizzelmi, doctor of civil and canon law in 1505. The 'I' here is the writer of the book, Giuliano Guizzelmi, and the beneficiary of the miracle his nephew - the son of his half brother Andrea. Guizzelmi's book suddenly became much more vivid. In this story he merely claims to be close to miracle, but as I carried on reading and transcribing other stories emerged in which he claimed to be the beneficiary of miracle himself or gave himself a catalytic role in the achievement of miracle for others.

First person passages in miracle stories are by no means otherwise unknown, but they tend to appear in a clerical context and tend to be a framing device. But in Guizzelmi's collection we have first person involvement in the miracle narratives themselves and the voice is not that of a cleric but of a lay person.

Here I am not going to recapitulate any of my arguments about this material in detail. That is what the book is for. Suffice it to say that it interested me as an art historian because the stories involve the relationship with a painting

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- the picture on the wall at the Carceri - and the practices described involve other images - lead badges and prints of the shrine image

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which themselves provoke miracles – an example of the latter survives pasted into Guizzelmi's book, as I show you here - and imagistic votive offerings, including, by the way, life-sized wax images of devotees famous in the Florentine literature since Warburg. Guizzelmi's material offers crucial insights into this vanished body of material. We are led into a dense network of images by no means unknown, but very rarely accessible in written records.

And all this with a link to artistic production more conventionally understood through the writer's own artistic patronage: the burial chapel he founded in the crypt of what is now Prato Cathedral in 1506

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which contains amongst other things a portrait of him.

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On the left hand wall

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Here a close up.

It gradually dawned on me that it made sense to shift focus and rather than write a monograph or series of monographs on shrines, to pursue Guizzelmi and use him as a guide through the culture in which he lived with his experience of the miraculous as part of the practice of his faith. And I would add, it's not just a matter of miraculous images. We also have his book of miracles of the relic of the Virgin's girdle, also claimed by Prato, records of his confraternity and his vow to go on pilgrimage to the holy land, as well as his day-to-day record book for the last 30 years of his life.

So this is my third thank you: to Giuliano di Francesco Guizzelmi who gave me a project.

I may have shifted my attention from the shrine to the devotee, but the miraculous image

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remained at the centre of my study and the rest of this short paper I would like to reflect on that focus. I've now spent quite a long time studying miraculous images. But why study them? What can they contribute to our understanding of the history of art? And also where it has led my thoughts. The richness and density of the material around Giuliano Guizzelmi, enabled me to frame questions with greater precision, and it also prompted me to see miraculous images as part of a continuum. This is important, because I think there is a danger to see miraculous images as things set apart, interesting principally for their impact on the visual arts. For me the challenge is to recognise them as art works in themselves and consider what that does to art history.

Art historians tend not to spend very much time worrying about what art is. For what it's worth, my working definition of art is very broad. The late great Michael Baxandall in his book *Patterns of Intention* coined the term 'intentional visual interest' and that seems to me a very helpful to generate a rough outline of the sorts of things art historians can and should concern themselves with. However we rationalise or understand the status of miraculous images in the societies in which they emerged, they are manifestly fabricated things with intentional visual interest. I should add that my concern is not with whether the images were 'art' by the standards of the society in which they were produced.

But what is it about them that merits our attention? Using that Baxandall formulation, the history of art tends to concern itself with the nuances of that visual interest. It chooses its objects of study, that is to say, on the basis of the characteristics of the visual material. But so-called miraculous images, like the Carceri fresco here, tend to fail to engage the history of art's traditional critical criteria. This painting does not have a prominent place in conventional histories of art. It is recognised as a work of the mid to late 14th century, but, amid the glories of 14th century Italian art, why should one go out of one's way to focus on this? One aspect of that issue is that the history of art also tends to privilege innovation. This is not an innovative 14th century painting. To be blunt, this picture may have intentional visual interest -- but not very much.

And yet, at the end of the 15th century, this humble wall painting became the focus of mass attention. That mass attention accrued around its alleged status as a miracle worker. I need to say something about miracle, but I'll be brief.

This is something I've thought a lot about. When I was examined for my PhD, my examiners told me that I hadn't spent enough time discussing miracle, and you can perhaps see my post doctoral work on the Carceri with Guizzelmi's help as an extended response to that.

Let me be clear be clear that the reason so-called miraculous images merit the attention of historians is not that they 'work miracles'. In an academic context, one has to side with the late Richard Trexler and take it as a starting point that they didn't - in the sense of making supernatural changes in the world. Standing outside of the context of faith, that is perhaps uncontroversial. But I argue that, though we may agree that devotees in the period, like Guizzelmi, 'believed in miracles', we have to be very careful about how we understand that belief. It cannot be understood as faith in the reliable mechanistic application of supernatural tools as some of the literature seems to imply. Miracle arises between the image and the viewer or devotee. Ultimately it is the devotee doing the work and that is what is interesting. For me, these images stand as critical examples of what art objects can be made to do in human societies.

We don't have to agree on this to make progress because, in the simplest terms what we're talking about is a change in viewership. The image engages a new audience. The study of miraculous images proposes that this change in audience is worthy of attention.

This may seem like an absurdly simple point, but I think it's worth thinking about. The chronological gap is also important. From the cases that I've studied, this is quite common, though I admit it may not be a universal rule. Whatever we think of the focal image it was already quite old when it began to attract this mass attention. This brings us to another characteristic of art history. It tends to privilege the making of art objects at least in the sense of exploring the objects in the context of the time of their original production. If we are interested in the cultural history of the late 15th century, when the cult began, the picture is manifestly not the new issue. The picture hadn't changed -- yet. It would, of course. It's setting would change radically - and that's one of the things we be looking at on the research School. But this is part of the audience's response. Once again, the new audience is the new issue.

The history of art has for some time, of course, not exclusively confined its attention to the period of production. It has become much more common to study the long history of objects - their biographies, their afterlives. By definition the artworks we study have come down to us through history and those histories impact upon the way we understand them. In that sense the afterlives of objects are unavoidable. However, a concentration on this longer history tends to be confined to works which are already canonical. One way of putting the challenge posed by images associated with miracle is that their cultural value emerges during their afterlives as manufactures rather than at their point of origin. They are notable for the status they were given long after they were made. They are, in an important sense, repurposed images. For a discipline which often looks for subtle significance in a set of values and skills shared between artist, client and audience, that is quite a challenge. And this, I would suggest is one of the values of the so-called miraculous images: in disciplinary terms they are invaluable disruptors which prompt us to reconsider the aims of the discipline and, indeed, the things we choose to study. I want to end by offering some reflections on what I've done with that thought.

So, as I mentioned, at issue are the kinds of questions we ask and the sorts of things that we choose to study. Art history privileges **or is seen to** privilege certain kinds of questions. Should my questions be a matter of historical anthropology? Or is that what art history should be?

This is at the heart of a project that I've now been developing for a number of years which comes out of a British Academy midcareer fellowship that I'm proud to have won a 2014-15.

As you may have noticed, everything I've researched so far has focused more or less on the 15th century and I said to the British Academy that I would reflect on my research to date - and write another book on the 15th century with the object of exploring the limits and possibilities of the discipline. That might sound a bit self-important but funding proposals and funding proposals. The proposal emerged directly from my own experience. I have explained I moved from Central Europe, Poland, to Italy. The move felt natural. I was prompted by comments from within my own scholarly network, pursued the established literature and followed the available textual evidence. That textual trail is one of the things I'm looking at but there's no space to discuss it here. Suffice it to say that coming from elsewhere it's abundantly clear that Renaissance Italy is a very wordy place and I'm not sure that's sufficiently acknowledged. But I want to stress the apparent naturalness of the transition.

The history of art has been a notably self-conscious discipline for as long as I've been involved with it. One important critique takes the discipline to task for its Eurocentricity - the so-called global turn is well-established⁰. But my trajectory has prompted me to think about this geographical issue in a slightly different way.

In the study of 15th century art, attention has not just been Eurocentric but tiny little bits of Europe centric. Scholarly attention has been overwhelmingly concentrated on Italy and the Netherlands, both associated with innovation in the visual arts. The global turn has indeed begun to change that, but this is the nub of the matter. My concern is that to leap from this to a global focus threatens to marginalise even more what is currently marginal. Unfashionably, I want to argue for the continuing value of studying European art, but crucially a wider range of it.

My project, the pedestrian working title of which is the art of the wider Europe, focuses on my own ignorance, exploring aspects of the history of European heart in the 15th century which I'm aware that I know little or nothing about and seeing what we might learn from that. I have what I is a slightly more intriguing version of the title: the Art of the Long Europe. I'm not going to explain that. It can act as a kind of New Year quiz, let me know if you can spot the reference.

Recent political developments have made this project unexpectedly and distressingly topical. Europe used to be an apparently stable idea. Recent history has shown that to be something of an illusion. On one level this gives me a silver lining to a depressing set of circumstances, but it goes deeper than

that. I think that this raises the issue of what art history can or could contribute, something I think that we collectively as art historians are not good at communicating.

In simple terms I'd like to look at Europe at its fullest extent in unashamedly contemporary terms - I'm not trying to explore the evolution of the notion of Europe. Are I would like to sketch out one important and painful example

During my studies I had become familiar with the encounter between Western and eastern Christian art in the Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe. The Czestochowa picture is part of that. But I have become acutely aware that I know next to nothing about the encounter between Christendom and the Islamic world which is a crucial factor in the 15th century with the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.

This is of course an enormous issue - the whole project is enormous - and my approach is to take isolated case studies as a way of making things at all manageable. In the Balkans I have decided to focus on Kosovo because it is prominent in ways which span the centuries. The name now attaches to what when I last checked 23 of the 28 states of the European Union and 108 out of 193 states of the United Nations recognize as Europe's newest state. The region takes its name from the field of Kosovo which is the site of a Battle with the Ottomans which some aspects of local tradition regard as decisive. That's controversial in terms of military history but it's broadly true that in the 15th century this region was as it were part of the frontline with the advancing Ottomans.

The history of this region is rich and almost unimaginably complex and I risk doing great violence to it in the dying minutes of the half an hour paper, but I will risk that to make a polemical point.

We are all I'm sure aware of the agonising conflicts attendant upon the breakup of the former Yugoslavia of which the war in Kosovo in 1998-9 was part. Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 was in effect a diplomatic continuation of the conflict. The reason that the recognition of the new state is not universal is because Serbia regards Kosovo as an inalienable part of the Serbian state.

The reason I bring this up is because the visual arts are inextricably enmeshed in the continuing disputes. In terms of political history, it is uncontroversially the case that this region was a key part of the mediaeval kingdom of Serbia in the period immediately before the Ottoman conquest and the

Serbian kings built a number of prominent and highly prestigious monuments in the region, including the monasteries at Gračanica and Dečani and the complex at Peć, the seat of an archbishop from the middle of the 13th century raised to the status of a patriarch in the middle of the 14th – in institutional terms that is the very centre of the Serbian Orthodox Church. There are all canonical monuments of Byzantine art.

To rehearse what may be painfully obvious, the vast majority of the local population in this region now self identify as Albanian and the vast majority of them are Moslems. A persistent strain of Serbian nationalism, most virulently exploited by, but sadly not confined to, the regime of Slobodan Milošević, claims the Albanians as latter-day usurpers of a land once purely Serbian and Christian and from this point of view these foundations manifest Serbian entitlement to the territory like flags planted by a prospector staking a perpetual claim to virgin territory. This frankly polemical use has polarised their reception and, though this has at least in the north west of Europe fallen out of the news, these monuments remain under armed guard, mostly now by the Kosovar police force, but Decani still by troops of the Kosovo force, KFOR, of the UN. I'm aware that speaking where I am perceptions may be different. When I visited in 2015 the troops were still there as far as I'm aware that mission has always been fulfilled by Italian troops. I'd be interested to know if this means that situation is a more vivid reality in this part of the world.

We are faced with the spectacle in 21st-century Europe of monuments of late mediaeval architecture understood to arouse such passions that they have to be under military protection. A number of these prominent monuments are UNESCO world Heritage sites and are also on the list UNESCO heritage in danger, the danger note here understood to arise from the local population.

A couple of observations. Art history apparently has nothing to say about this state of affairs. There is a very interesting book by the American architectural historian Andrew Herscher about the destruction of monuments in Kosovo but he has nothing to say about the historical monuments per se. When I mentioned these thoughts to a noted Byzantinist, who shall remain nameless but for whom I should say I retain a great deal of respect, and commented on the problems of referring to these monuments in unproblematic terms as 'Serbian', this individual commented 'but that's what they are'. And to me this is a good, if painful, example of the limitations of art history's concentration on the moment of production. Yes, if we focus our attention on the 1320s then these are just Serbian Royal foundations. My worry is that in this case art historical purism is dangerously consonant with aggressive Serbian nationalism. I find that profoundly uncomfortable.

The polarisation of these sites is also disturbing in the light of the abundant evidence we have in living memory of the veneration of these 'Christian' sites by Muslim devotees. This was so well-known in the Yugoslav era that it was a matter of comment in guidebooks. It was a matter of study by the Dutch anthropologist Ger Duizings, who observed the Muslim Gypsy pilgrimage to Gračanica in the late 1980s. Rebecca West in her monumental account of her travels in Yugoslavia in the 1930s offers an account of Albanian Muslims venerating the tomb of king Stefan Uroš III, Stefan Dečanski, in his foundation Dečani. If I had time I'd love to read you their striking accounts. Frederick William Hasluck, in his study *Christianity and Islam* based on fieldwork conducted in the immediate aftermath of the Balkan wars of the early 20th-century briefly commented on this phenomenon and dismissing it as so common as to be barely worthy of study. Serbian anthropologists claim this as a modern phenomenon but it seems at least possible that it was a long established practice. Here is another new audience of very striking kind and one which it seems a matter of some urgency to acknowledge. This is relatively common knowledge to Ottomanists but not, I think, more widely again it seems to me something the art history ought to engage with. As with miraculous images there is a repurposing going on – and we are still dealing with sites of intense veneration. But here veneration across what are usually regarded as distinct cultural systems.

I say that this was a common practice. The violence of the 1990s, it seems, has forced upon the Kosovans the very reductionist meanings of the mediaeval Orthodox foundations that the Serbian nationalists wished to assert. The rich, cross ethnic, cross confessional understandings of these monuments have collapsed into unitary ethnic and religious meanings: Dečani, to take one example, becomes a Serbian Christian site in terms of its possible audience as well as origin.

The attentive among you will observe that I be talking about 14th century monuments and here was I claim that I was writing another book out the 15th century. The 15th century monuments in Kosovo are of course the Ottoman ones but they are very little studied. Here is one: the Bayrakli mosque in Pec/Peja. Ottoman studies is a burgeoning area in art historical terms, but a great deal of that study concentrates on the territory of present-day Turkey even though European territories were a very significant part of the Ottoman Empire. The great pioneer, it should be said of the study of the art and architecture of the Ottoman Balkans is the Dutch scholar Machiel Kiel. But he is only one man and even his prodigious output has little to say about Kosovo. Such literature as exists on the fifteenth century Ottoman material in Kosovo is the work of Turkish or local Kosovan scholars with very few resources and has achieved little diffusion. This is not just material that is unfamiliar in

Western art history. It is material with no established or secure place in any history of art. Honourable mention should go to the conservation programme carried out in Pec/Peja under the auspices of the humanitarian organization inter SOS carried out by a Italian team and the book reporting on the conservation, itself intended as a gesture of reconciliation – including the Orthodox patriarchate and the Bayrakli mosque, edited by Carlo Bertelli is one of the vanishingly few texts in a western language on an Ottoman monument in Kosovo.

The Christian world heritage sites are balanced by – virtual art historical silence.

I said I was exploring my own ignorance and this is all in the first place a rebuke to myself. But I intend to use my ignorance as a polemical weapon -because I think it's not just me. These are perhaps not obviously art historical issues, but my thoughts have been led in this direction by asking what were not obviously art historical questions about miraculous images. I said a moment ago that I think that art historians are not good about arguing for the contribution we can make to wider debates. I think we are good at rich, detailed analysis of complex cultural issue and maybe we could get more people to listen to us if we dared more often to ask not so obviously art historical questions.