Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* and the Post-Tridentine Devotional *Rappresentazioni* at the Confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr in Modena

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Summary: This article examines the ways in which the members of the confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr in Modena used ephemeral architecture, symbolic imagery, inscriptions, lavish decorations, and performance to activate and emphasize the spiritual function of Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* in response to a decree of plenary indulgence issued in 1577. Detailed descriptions of the resulting *Quarant'ore* devotions in the confraternity's chronicle reveal that the brothers very carefully considered the multifaceted role of the altarpiece within the temporary constructions they designed to guide visitors on their spiritual and physical approach to the altar and to educate them about the significance of the indulgence they hoped to receive.

In 1789, Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–1794) wrote in his *Notizie della Confraternita di S. Pietro Martire* that "two things" (*due cose*) most clearly demonstrated the zeal and generosity of the Confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr in Modena.[1] The first (*la prima cosa*) was their altarpiece by Antonio Allegri da Correggio (c.1489–1534), *The Madonna di San Giorgio* (fig. 3.1), regarded by Tiraboschi as one of the artist's most marvelous paintings.[2] Although much can be said about Correggio's altarpiece alone, this article will focus on its role in what Tiraboschi refers to as "the other thing" (*l'altra cosa*) for which the *confratelli* earned renown: their post-Tridentine "sacre rappresentazioni" that celebrated feast days, indulgences, and the *Quarant'ore* (Forty Hour) devotion.[3] The events, which the brothers interchangeably called *apparati* and *rappresentazioni*, combined ephemeral architecture, symbolic imagery, edifying epitaphs, music, machinery, and

[1] Tiraboschi, *Notizie*, 41. Girolamo Tiraboschi was appointed Librarian to the duke of Modena, Francesco III d'Este, in 1770. He wrote many books on the history of Italian literature and the history of Modena.

[2] Tiraboschi, *Notizie*, 41.

[3] Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, 99. *Quarant'ore* devotions were meant to promote Eucharistic devotion.

recited verse in order to stimulate a deeply devotional experience for an educated audience.[4]

From its foundation in 1261 until the *Santa Unione* consolidated Modenese hospitals in 1542, the confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr had been responsible for the administration of one of the city's main infirmaries, called *Casa di Dio* or *Cadè*.[5] After the institution of the *Santa Unione*, however, the confratelli were forced to abandon their work as hospital administrators (*ospedalieri*) so they refocused their energy on providing the community with artfully constructed devotional spectacles on major feast days. Their spectacles were so intricately designed and executed that they earned a place in the chronicles of the city. Indeed, as late as two centuries later, Tiraboschi praised the confraternity's sixteenth-century *rappresentazioni* as having earned the "wonder and applause of the entire city."[6]

Many Italian confraternities staged elaborate devotions, plays, and processions throughout the Early Modern period, making considerable use of objects specifically designed for occasional display such as processional banners (*gonfaloni*), paintings, crucifixes, and more.[7] The events described in the *Libro delle congregazioni* of Saint Peter Martyr indicate, however, that, in addition to using temporary imagery and props, the confratelli also incorporated their permanent altarpiece into some of their *apparati*. Indeed, records from 1575 and 1579 reveal that Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* (referred to in the chronicle as the "*Ancona*") played a significant role as the focal point of the Eucharistic spectacles that took place inside the oratory. In 1575, the altarpiece formed the backdrop for the highly symbolic *Quarant'ore* devotion of 6 November.[8] In that event, the confratelli covered the walls of their oratory with black cloth and made considerable use of candles, number symbolism, and a series of rising steps to concentrate the devotee's attention on the altarpiece and the tabernacle

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[4] I use "*rappresentazione*" and "*apparato*" interchangeably to refer to the devotional displays designed by the confratelli. These words are used in a similar manner throughout the archival documents. For the development of *rappresentazioni* in Italy, see Barr, "From *Devozione* to *Rappresentazione*"; Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento*; and Molinari, *Spettacoli fiorentini del Quattrocento.* For a broader summation of the tradition in Europe see Muir, *The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe.*

[5] Tiraboschi, *Notizie*, 27. For the consolidation of the hospitals in Modena, see Grana, *Per una storia della pubblica assistenza a Modena*; Peyronel Rambaldi, *Speranze e crisi nel Cinquecento modenese*; Fontaine, "Organizing Charity and the Dynamic of Heterodoxy"; and Santus, "La nascita della Santa Unione."

[6] Tiraboschi, *Notizie*, 43.

[7] See Abraham, "Iconography, Spectacle, and Notions of Corporate Identity," 419–421.

[8] See Abraham, "Iconography, Spectacle, and Notions of Corporate Identity," 426–429.

raised in front of it.[9] The 1575 *Quarant'ore* drew considerable attention from the public as a highly impactful devotional experience as well as a truly spectacular sight, since the entire construction guided devotees on a path animated by dozens of flickering lights toward the altar and the painting by Correggio. The most elaborate — and symbolically complex — use of the *San Giorgio Altarpiece* in a *rappresentazione* occurred, however, in 1579 when the brothers celebrated the third year of a plenary indulgence issued by Pope Gregory XIII in 1577. That decree of indulgence initiated a series of yearly *Quarant'ore* devotions that lasted from Christmas Eve until Saint Stephen's Day, 24 to 26 December.

For the first four years the confratelli took the celebration of the indulgence very seriously and created increasingly complex combinations of ephemeral architecture, artwork, and edifying epitaphs in order to encourage the type of contemplative devotion necessary to earn the indulgence. Each year the brothers changed and updated the scenery and orations, striving to reach higher levels of innovation that would engage and delight devotees. When planning the next event, the brothers carefully considered the successes and failures of previous years. In 1577, for the first annual celebration of the indulgence, the confratelli designed their temporary architecture in order to permit a spectator to see, but not approach, the altarpiece and the tabernacle. In 1578, for their second annual celebration of the *Quarant'ore* and the papal indulgence, the brothers addressed problems encountered in the previous year and adapted the architecture to allow the altar and the altarpiece to be more visible. In 1579, the third year of the indulgence, the brothers developed the most elaborately symbolic display to date, and incorporated their altarpiece into its design. They significantly changed the way a spectator would experience their altarpiece by encouraging spectators to approach the tabernacle and Correggio's altarpiece, but guiding this approach by way of the architecture, mottos, and symbols of the sacra rappresentazione. In the fourth year of the indulgence, the brothers covered the altarpiece completely.[10]

Complementing Tiraboschi's account of the "two things" for which the confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr is known, this article will now examine the ways in which the confratelli incorporated the *Madonna di San Giorgio* into their elaborate devotion held in 1579 in honour of the Saint Stephen's Day plenary indulgence. After a brief discussion of the painting's iconography and function, an account of the devotional displays of 1577 and 1578 will demonstrate the developmental evolution of the series, which led to the extraordinary arrangement of the 1579 event.

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[9] ACMo, ms 6/10 C, *Libro delle congregazioni*, fol. 17r, 6 November 1575. Subsequent references to this manuscript will be incorporated directly into the text.

[10] Abraham, "The Reception of Correggio's Two Altarpieces for Modena," 190–195.

La prima cosa: Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio*

Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* is thematically considered a *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints*, a variation of the established *sacra conversazione* altarpiece.[11] Seated on an elevated pedestal, Mary holds the infant Jesus as he reaches to her right toward the patron saint of Modena, Saint Geminianus, who supports a model of the city (fig. 3.1). At the same time, Mary looks down and to her left at the titular saint of the confraternity, Saint Peter Martyr, who adoringly returns her gaze. In front of Saint Geminianus, at the Virgin's right, Saint John the Baptist turns back to look at the spectator as he bends his right arm to point at the Virgin and Child. On the other side of the composition, Saint George rests his left foot on the head of the freshly slain dragon while he too gazes over his shoulder at the viewer. Between the two foremost saints, four putti play with the armour and weapons of Saint George. The group of saints and enthroned Madonna and Child are all placed under a sharply cropped cupola in front of an arch that opens to a view of a landscape.

The gestures of the figures work together with the perspective lines, moments of the narrative, and the architectural devices to acknowledge the spectator and his or her role in what is "happening" in the painting. Paintings that accomplish this task have been referred to as "transitive" paintings because they were designed to create a continuum between painted and real space, which theologically corresponds to a connection between the earthly and divine realms.[12] In order to use a transitive painting effectively, however, the spectator needs to engage in certain mental processes. The mental and spiritual approach to a work of art can be understood by summarizing late medieval discussions of the mind's ascension to God, which were carried into the Renaissance with Neo-Platonism and medieval theological discourses by Saints Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, among others.[13] According to Saint Bonaventure, for example, the mind starts with the visible world and travels towards the divine by means of a series of signs that can be found in objects or images of devotion.[14] In the *San Giorgio Altarpiece*, the signs are most discernible in the images of the saints who were able to live sanctified lives on a profane earth. The

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[11] Ekserdjian, *Correggio*, 189.

[12] Shearman, *Only Connect*, 23. Contemplative accessibility to the sacred space depicted in Renaissance altarpieces has been examined by Wright, *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin*; and Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence.*

[13] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 165.

[14] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, 28. For an example of how Bonaventure's treatise can be used to interpret one of Correggio's other altarpieces, see Goffen, "A Bonaventurean Analysis of Correggio's *Madonna of St. Francis*."

knowledge and contemplation of their legends provided a means by which everyday worshippers could place themselves into the necessary mindset for approaching the Blessed Virgin and Child. Therefore, worshippers had to be fully engaged if they were to experience the true meaning of the artwork.[15] Many Early Modern Italian altarpieces were designed to encourage the devotee's full engagement by featuring subjects that appear to reach outside the fictional space of the painting to directly engage with a spectator.[16] In the *Madonna di San Giorgio*, the exaggerated eagerness of the poses and gestures of the saints indicate that Correggio intended to create a transitive painting in which each figure — in his or her own manner — responds to the presence of an observer.[17] For example, through her gaze the Madonna showers her attention on Saint Peter Martyr, the titular saint of the confraternity, who then, through his gesture, delivers her attention to the worshipper. In this case the interaction of the saints with the spectator not only encourages his or her presence within the space of the scene, but also implies that the inclusion of the viewer is necessary to complete the subject matter of the scene.

The architectural setting also encourages our presence within the fictional space of the altarpiece by means of the radically cropped dome at the top that seems to imply the viewer's occupation of the space below. Furthermore, at the bottom of the painting, a putto's truncated leg and the dragon's clipped nose insist upon an intimate viewpoint, which adds to the spectator's sensation of being drawn nearer to the throne of the Virgin. The fact that the painting was designed to draw viewers — contemplatively — into its environment facilitated its use in the confraternity's 1579 *rappresentazione* as a point of visual and spiritual focus. The confraternity's archival documents demonstrate that the confratelli designed their ephemeral constructions leading to the painting in order to educate and to draw the spectator — spiritually and physically — into a symbolically sacred space, which effectively echoed and expanded the function of the altarpiece.

L'altra cosa: The Saint Stephen's Day Indulgence

The *Libro delle congregazioni che incomincia dal 1537 sino al 1603* records how, on 12 November 1577, the brothers received news that a decree of plenary indulgence had been issued by Pope Gregory XIII (27^{r-v}). The

[15] Similarly, the cognitive function of the image is one of focus; it prevents the mind from wandering, and by doing so, allows the mind to connect to the spiritual essence of who or what is represented in the image. See Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 162.

[16] Shearman, *Only Connect*, 27.

[17] See Soth, *The Mature Correggio*, 91.

original Latin text of the announcement was recorded in the *Libro*, followed by the "vulgarized and published" version that the brothers distributed throughout the city in the days preceding the celebration. Then, the chronicle records that the brothers planned to celebrate the indulgence by ordering "the most solemn decoration that would ever be made in our *scola* for any feast" (28v). The entry continues by recording that the first annual celebration of the indulgence featured walls that were "ornamented most worthily by the choicest tapestries" from floor to ceiling (28v). Then, in order to divide the oratory so that the brothers could perform their orations separately from the attendees, a partimento, or partition, eight *braccia* (5 m) high was placed four *braccia* (2.5 m) from the altar (28v).[18] It had five "faces," a door in the middle, and was decorated with silk veils, garlands, and leaves (fig. 3.2). The faces of the partition on either side of the central door featured two large almond-shaped lattice windows, each decorated with a golden star. Capping the partition, "a very beautiful frieze" decorated the architrave, upon which the Latin phrase *CHRISTUM REGEM ADOREMUS* ("we worship Christ the King") was inscribed in capital letters (28v). Finally, the door and windows of the partition were covered by very thin veils, which made the entire construction look "magnificent" (28v). Thus, upon entering the building, a participant in the festivities would have seen the large partition with a door in the middle and the two almond-shaped windows on either side. Then, peering through the thin veils that were draped over the door and windows, he or she would have seen the altar, the prominently displayed Eucharist and, presumably, Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio.*

The following year, the brotherhood repeated most of the festivities of the previous year's Saint Stephen's Day indulgence but made some notable adjustments to the display. The chronicle entry of 7 December 1578 specifies that the partition was to be designed with the express purpose of more securely separating the brothers from the people so as to make their "oration quieter and more intimate" (34v). While the previous year the *partimento* had been placed only four *braccia* (2.5 m) from the altar, in 1578 it was moved an additional two *braccia* (1.25 m) further away and its height raised by two *braccia*; this suggests that the *confratelli* required more space in which to gather for their devotions and also wished to reduce distractions by buffering some of the noise from visitors (34v).

In addition to the updated placement and increased height of the partition, the brothers also altered its architectural design. Rather than a pair of almond-shaped windows flanking the central doorway, this time the confratelli designed their partition with small doors on either side of a

[18] One *braccio mercantile di Modena* is equal to 0.633153 metres. See *Tavole di ragguaglio dei pesi e delle misure*, 441.

large central portal (fig. 3.3).[19] Each of the three arched entrances carried an epitaph that identified which of the three Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope, Charity it represented (34v–35r). That idea that the confratelli intended for the inscriptions to educate the attendees about the significance of the indulgence is expressed by the following comment in the chronicle: "to add still more understanding, an inscription was hung over each arch with the name of its virtue: *fidei, charitatis, spej*." The architrave above the doorways featured a plaque that read: *Ducimur huius celo sectantes iussa Salutis* ("We are led to this heaven pursuing the orders of salvation") (34v). The partition of 1578 therefore served two main purposes: to better separate the confratelli from the public during their orations and to contribute to a spectator's understanding of the meaning of the Theological Virtues, the imitation of which would help him or her move spiritually closer to God.

The confraternity chronicler recorded that on the altar there was a triangular tabernacle about 1.5 *braccia* (95 cm) in height and covered with transparent silk. To highlight the presence of the Trinity in the Eucharist, the tabernacle had been designed with transparent walls to show that inside there were three ascending platforms, each with a symbol of the Trinity (34v). Finally, an epitaph bearing the words "DEITAS INTEGRA" — referring to the wholeness of God in the Three Persons of the Trinity — was hung in front of the tabernacle to assert firmly the symbolic meaning of the display.

In addition to the different form and appearance of the partition, it is likely that the brothers also updated its role in their rituals. For example, "at the time of the oration, the doors were closed with the finest silk veils to prevent the entrance of the people into the place appointed for the brothers to pray" (35r). This note suggests that in 1578 when the brothers were not reciting their orations the public was allowed to pass through the partition's doors and draw closer to the altar. The chronicler then explained that from the hour of vespers until the "second hour of night" an "enormous number of people" came and went, collecting their indulgence by devoutly visiting the oratory (35r). In 1577, on the other hand, the chronicle does not suggest that the central doorway was ever opened to the public, but only that it was used during the Eucharistic ritual to allow the priest to pass through. The 1578 spectacle, therefore, marked a conceptual change in the design of the partition, since permitting the visitor to pass through the central doorway. This was to become a crucial aspect of the devotional experience in 1579, as we will next see.

[19] This format corresponds to that of a triumphal arch, such as the *Arch of Constantine* (4th century CE) in Rome.

Due cose: Correggio's *San Giorgio Altarpiece* and the 1579 *apparato*

For the third annual celebration of the Saint Stephen's Day indulgence, a chronicle entry of 16 December 1579 records how, as in the past, the brothers erected a partition in order to close off the area surrounding the high altar (43v–45v). This time, however, the display was designed with a lot more complex symbolism, more lavish decorations, and greater accessibility to the altar than in the previous two years. The 1579 partition featured eight Doric columns, five *braccia* (3.2 m) high and painted in a faux marble finish from top to bottom. In the centre, a single arched doorway divided the eight columns into groups of four (fig. 3.4). The portal was three and a half *braccia* (2.2 m) wide by seven (4.4 m) high and framed by pilasters in relief. Supported by the columns on either side of the doorway were two long panels bearing an inscription, capped by a large cornice that ran from one wall of the oratory to the other (43v).

A spectator would have seen the grand partition after first crossing the public space of the oratory, in which carefully chosen wall hangings of "beautiful gilded stamped leather" covered every surface from the rafters to the floor (45v). The decorations were accentuated at "every side" with garlands of ivy, and small altarpieces and paintings were set into every appropriate spot "so that it all looked so noble and great that those who entered could hardly resolve to leave" (45v). According to the *Libro*, all of the decorations were devised in order to harmonize with the altarpiece and the golden sun tabernacle (examined below), which were always visible beyond the partition through the large central doorway (45v). An examination of the architecture of the space in front and behind the partition together with the symbolism of the portal sheds light on how the ephemeral construction of 1579 not only incorporated, but also expanded the pictorial space of the altarpiece and, in so doing, made simultaneous use of Tiraboschi's *due cose*.

The arched entrance in the centre of the partition had been carefully designed to restrict access to the space beyond without impeding the spectator's view of the altarpiece or the Holy Sacrament. In the displays recorded for the first two years of the indulgence, the brothers sought to keep the altarpiece only partially visible to those who entered the oratory by covering the openings of the partition with semi-transparent curtains. In 1579, however, they recorded the fact that the drapes were deliberately raised to allow sight of Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio*:

> Then, hanging from the door were the most appropriately placed puffs of fleece, and two of the richest cloths appeared to seal the opening from the [top of the] arch down to two *braccia* from the floor. The swaths [of cloth] were raised so

> as not to block the view of the Blessed Sacrament and of the *Ancona*. (44r)

Physical access to the space beyond the partition was still strictly controlled, however: "that door was then truly sealed from the floor to the height of two *braccia* (1.25 m)… [by] two wings placed in perspective, one on each side" (44r). The "wings" were most likely a set of wooden panels that, according to the chronicler, were intended "both to stop people from entering there, and to increase the significance [of the door]" (44r). The next few lines of the entry record the images depicted on the two "wings:"

> Painted on the right were the five wise virgins with lit lamps, oil vessels, and the motto: *Prudentibus gratia meritoque datur ingressus* ("To the wise entry is deservedly given"). On the left side were painted the five foolish virgins with spent lamps and the motto: *Insipientibus clausa est ianua* ("The doors are closed to the foolish"). (44r)

The imagery was designed to educate those who sought to pass under the doorway with the "Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins," an eschatological allegory recounted by Jesus to his apostles.[20] A parallel can be drawn between the virgins and the spectators who sought entry into the sacred space beyond the partition. Those who were not prepared would be denied entry, whereas those who prepared themselves in anticipation of communion with Christ would be free to enter. Indeed, a "faux-walnut" gate that was "agreeably corniced" closed the gap between the two wings, which sealed the portal only by two-thirds (44r). Since the gate was inscribed with the true message of the illustrated parable, *Satagite nescitis enim diem neque horam* ("Be attentive, for you know not the day nor the hour"; Mt 25:13), it would have reinforced the significance of the journey from the earthly to the celestial side of the partition (44r).

The ceremonial function of the gate reinforced the edifying imagery when, during the Eucharistic ritual, the priest processed through it with the Blessed Sacrament, which represented the groom in the parable. The images of the parable, accompanied by their corresponding quotations and the ritual enacted by the priest, would therefore have informed the

[20] According to the Gospel of Saint Matthew 25:1–13, ten virgins were selected to participate in a wedding, and having each been given a lamp, they were expected to await the arrival of the bridegroom during the night. Five wise maidens made sure to bring oil so that they could wait with their lamps lit, and the rest brought only their lamps. When the oil of the five foolish virgins burned out, they had to leave to find more, missing the arrival of the bridegroom. Those five who had been prepared were invited to the marriage feast and the doors were shut after them so that those who did not bring enough oil were left out.

spectator about the spiritual meaning of crossing the barrier between the earthly and heavenly realms, and thereby indicated the significance of the act of passing through the physical doorway. Moreover, the fact that one could see the partition, but not physically move beyond it without first having spiritually prepared oneself, corresponds to the devotional function of the painted altarpiece, which also provides a view of — but not physical access to — the spiritual destination reachable only by means of meditative prayer. When making use of a transitive painting like the *Madonna di San Giorgio*, a viewer must work to move the mind and heart toward a closer connection to the depicted divinity. In other words, while the painting requires an internal, mental journey, the gated doorway functioned in an active way by illustrating two potential outcomes in the quest for closeness to God (being welcomed into the presence of the Lord, or being rejected) and by symbolically acting out the movement from the earthly to the celestial realm.

While the symbolism of the gate provided images and words to educate the viewer about the act of moving from earthly to celestial space, the rest of the partition displayed information about the meaning of what would be found on the other side. For example, the large panel mounted above the four columns on the left bore the inscription: *A solis ortu usque ad occasum laudabile nomen Domini Laudate eum sol et luna, Laudate omnes stelle, et lumen* ("From the rising of the sun unto the going down, the name of the Lord is worthy of praise. Praise ye him, O sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars and light"; Ps. 112:3 and 148:3). Correspondingly, the panel on the right read: *In sole posuit tabernaculum suum, et ipse tamquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo* ("He hath set his tabernacle in the sun, and he is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber"; Ps. 18:6) (44^{v}). Both of the phrases indicate that the glory of Christ supersedes the sun and the moon, and that even they exist to venerate and serve him. By alluding to the bridegroom (Christ), the epitaph on the right also connects to the "Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins," depicted on the two panels in the doorway.

To emphasize the role of the sun and moon, two pyramids were positioned on either side of the door above the cornice, each bearing a message that reiterated Christ's sovereignty over the celestial bodies by promising his protection from their heat. One pyramid featured the sun with the inscription: *Per diem sol non uret te* ("By day the sun shall not burn thee"; Ps. 120:6), while the other displayed the moon and the epitaph, *Neque luna per noctem* ("Nor the moon by night; Ps. 120:6) (44^{v}). The Biblical phrases and the significance of their inclusion on the partition were explained in the confraternity's *Libro* as having been designed to support the meaning of the entire display, which was the celebration of Christ as the true Sun.

With an understanding of the architecture, symbolism, and performative function of the partition and the area in front of it, it is now possible to examine the appearance and purpose of the space beyond and, more specifically, to identify the role of Correggio's altarpiece in the celebration of the confraternity's Forty Hours devotion. Glancing over the top of the edifying gate and between the partially raised curtains of the large central door, the spectator would have seen a hemisphere, seven *braccia* (4.4 m) in circumference, suspended under the ceiling of the oratory. It was formed by a web of iron wires and covered with a massive blue cloth. Against the surface of this blue dome, there were "a very copious number of judiciously placed gold stars" of varying sizes, with one made to seem like a falling star (45^{r}). Seraphim were affixed around the circumference of the dome where a golden fringe hung down from the edges (45^{r}). Based on the description, this hemispherical representation of heaven alone would have been wondrous to behold, but the chronicle notes that the greatest surprise was that the entire device appeared to be floating: "This heaven was supported behind by an iron curve affixed to the cornice beneath the [pediment] of the altar so that you could not see how it could be held aloft from the altar by one *braccio* (63 cm); it was a miraculous thing to everyone" (45^{r}).

Elevated and always visible in the centre of what appeared to be a floating celestial dome, a golden tabernacle embodied the meaning of all the epitaphs and symbols that the spectator would have encountered before entering the celestial space beyond the partition.[21] As a visual representation of the theme of the Eucharist as the true Sun, the tabernacle was created in the form of a large gilded sun with twelve rays, each meant to refer to one of the twelve apostles (44^{v}). The body of the sun consisted of a round container of highly polished crystal set against a gold background, with a white moon was mounted in its centre. When the priest placed the Eucharist inside the tabernacle, it would obscure the moon and the centre of the sun, creating a double eclipse, which was a critical part the performative function of the entire display.[22] In fact, the sun and moon on the two pyramids atop the partition (mentioned above) were both covered with draperies when the "true" Sun — in the form of the Eucharist — was carried in by the attending priest.

Leaving nothing to chance, the confratelli emphasized the heavenly nature of the space beyond the partition by finding a way to make the tabernacle appear supernaturally suspended. The chronicle states that:

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[21] For Jewish and Christian concepts of the tabernacle and the use of tabernacle imagery, see Koester, *The Dwelling of God.*

[22] For eclipse imagery, see Suhr, *The Mask, the Unicorn and the Messiah: A Study in Solar Eclipse Symbolism*. For Suhr's discussion of Christ, see 120–128.

> [It was] most astounding that in the middle of this heaven, equidistant from all sides, the gold sun tabernacle of the Blessed Sacrament appeared to be disconnected from the sky. Many were eager to know how it was held up, and after having taken communion, turned their attention to touching it to [learn the secret], but they [were not successful] and all were astonished. (45r)

In order to achieve the illusion of the floating tabernacle, the confratelli devised a suspension system out of "four extremely thin branches," probably made from the same wire that provided the celestial dome its shape (45r).[23] These delicate branches were so imperceptibly placed that not even the sharpest eye could spot them (45r). Then, to complete the visual experience of the dome, and to focus greater attention upon the golden tabernacle in the centre, six flaming lamps were positioned around the perimeter of the hemisphere and left burning throughout the entire forty hours of the devotion. The chronicler noted that the lights seemed particularly majestic at night because they animated the ornate sky and highly polished sun tabernacle with their dancing flames (45r).

Looking beyond the suspended tabernacle, the spectator's eyes would fall upon the high altar and the painting by Correggio, the sight of which the brothers were careful not to obstruct. Indeed, as previously mentioned, the curtains hanging in the door to the partition were partially raised "so as not to block the view of the Blessed Sacrament, or of the *Ancona*" (44r). From this, it is clear that the brothers wanted the altarpiece to be viewed together with the magnificent display of the tabernacle and heavenly dome suspended above it, all framed by the symbolic imagery and epitaphs on the face of the partition. The chronicle further says that the hemisphere was attached to the upper part of the frame of the altarpiece at a distance of less than one *braccia* (63 cm). When considered together with Correggio's abbreviation of the dome in the background of the painting, it may have appeared as if the suspended hemisphere in the oratory was an extension of the dome implied in the altarpiece. In combination with the gestures, poses, and glances of the figures, the radically cropped dome worked to encourage the spectator's presence in the scene. By constructing an actual hemisphere to shelter those who passed through the doorway, the confratelli harnessed Correggio's suggestion of pictorial space, essentially expanding the transitive function of the altarpiece into the physical space of the oratory. Positioning the hemisphere only a short distance from the

[23] For the use of machinery and special effects in Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni* see Newbigin, "Greasing the Wheels of Heaven." *I Tatti Studies*, 11, (2007); Eisenbichler, "Depicting Theatre"; and Zorzi, *Il luogo teatrale a Firenze*. For a wider European focus, see Meredith/Tailby, *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages*, 94–116.

cornice above the altarpiece would have encouraged the viewer to perceive the scene depicted in the painting as if it were part of the physical space of the oratory. In this way, Correggio's image of the *Madonna di San Giorgio* would not have been seen simply as the destination at the end of a spiritual journey, as it may have been perceived in the previous spectacles, but would have seemed to outwardly project the painting's heavenly setting into the physical space in which spectators found themselves.

By dramatically altering the physical space behind the partition, the confratelli drew even greater attention to the symbolic "celestial" zone in the 1579 spectacle. Their eagerness to communicate the extraordinary and supernatural nature of heaven is demonstrated by the fact that they engineered such an elaborate illusionistic display, consisting of a large hemisphere and tabernacle that appeared to float without assistance. In contrast, in the earlier spectacles the space beyond the partition contained special decorations that alluded to the significance of the Eucharist, but without a clear depiction of the heavenly source of the Sacrament's power. The visual representation of heaven in 1579, therefore, may have been meant as an illustration of the divine power that, according to Catholic doctrine, fuels the process of transubstantiation, the affirmation of which was a primary Counter-Reformation concern. Furthermore, the fact that the tabernacle was presented in the act of descending from the heavenly dome clearly points to the divine origins of the Sacrament and, therefore, to the literal presence of Christ in the Eucharistic bread.[24] Finally, the act of worshipping the Body of Christ would have brought the spectator as close to God as possible while still on Earth. The heavenly dome of 1579, therefore, crowned the contemplative journey toward God, illustrated by the gestures of the saintly intercessors in Correggio's altarpiece, and culminated in the physical proximity of the devotee's body with the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The performative aspects of the 1579 *apparato* also enabled the confratelli to emphasize the transition from earthly to heavenly realms, thus manifesting a physical symbolic version of the spiritual journey encouraged by transitive altarpieces. In the 1577 *rappresentazione*, on the other hand, the brothers used the partition to firmly delineate the barrier between the earthly and celestial realms and, at various points in the ritual, revealed and concealed the altarpiece and the Eucharist by means of veils and curtains. The spectacle that took place in 1577 thus relied more strongly on the viewer's mental completion of the journey, exemplified in Correggio's altarpiece with gestures, eye contact, and architectural cues. The spectacle

[24] For the Council of Trent's affirmation of the Eucharist, see "The Council of Trent: The Thirteenth Session." Asserting the literal presence of Christ in the Eucharist became an important facet of Catholic campaigns to counteract the spreading influence of reformer sects that denied that the bread of communion was the physical Body of Christ.

of 1578, on the other hand, allowed some physical access to the tabernacle and altar, but the act of passing through the partition was not the chief feature of the devotional experience. Finally, in 1579 the confratelli truly focused on transporting people in a physical manner through the barrier, but not without first having educated them on the significance of moving through the doorway and the importance of the space beyond. The brothers used the 1579 *apparato* to draw the devotee physically nearer to the altarpiece and, at the same time, to educate him or her about the significance of its contents, reinforce Church doctrine, and encourage contemplative devotion. The altarpiece thus served as the physical terminus of a celestial realm manifested on earth by the temporary architecture designed by the confratelli. Their meticulous records reveal that the brethren were not only aware of the transitive visual cues in the painting, but also used those cues to amplify the spiritual impact of their devotions.

The 1579 records are the last to describe the prominent role played by Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* altarpiece. The 1580 records point to a dramatic change of focus: that year, the confratelli eliminated the partition altogether, thereby giving spectators unimpeded access to the altar, but also completely covered their altarpiece with a large painted canvas that celebrated the Trinity (53^{v}). The role of Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* as the spiritual destination and focal point of the *rappresentazione* was thus eliminated in favour of a fully customized configuration of images that radically reconfigured the spiritual journey undertaken by attendees. This fundamental change can be explained by the fact that, during the same years in which the confratelli were adapting their environment to guide the penitent visitor toward the *San Giorgio Altarpiece,* they were also preoccupied with restricting access to it. Anxieties about unwanted attention, the physical security of the painting, and its singularity as an original work of art seem to have contributed to the confraternity's increasing reluctance to allow the altarpiece to be seen by outsiders who repeatedly asked for permission to copy it. Their reluctance to permit the creation of any copies was so great that, in one memorable entry of 1578, the brothers issued a prohibition restricting physical and visual access to their painting by means of a complicated physical barrier. The enclosure was to have been constructed out of heavy wooden panels and secured with three different locks, the keys of which were to be held separately by the three most senior members of the society.

The confraternity's growing anxiety over the safety of Correggio's *Madonna di San Giorgio* was well-known to elite members of the public and may have contributed to the sudden decline of the *rappresentazioni*.[25]

[25] It is also possible that it became more difficult to secure sufficient funds for such elaborately constructed displays, which was the case for the *Quarant'ore* displays of the confraternity of the Arcangelo Raffaello in Florence; see Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael*, 166.

In the 1581 and 1582 entries for Saint Stephen's Day, the scribe describes far less elaborate indulgence spectacles; from 1583 to 1587, the final year of the papal indulgence, records of these *apparati* all but disappear.[26] Nevertheless, both the altarpiece by Correggio and the brotherhood's practice of staging *sacre rappresentazioni* left such an impression that, two centuries later, Girolamo Tiraboschi identified them as the two things that "must not be passed over in silence" when considering the history of the confraternity of Saint Peter Martyr.

CITED WORKS

Abbreviations

ACMo = Archivio Capitolare di Modena

Manuscript Sources

Modena. Archivio Capitolare di Modena (ACMo) *San Pietro Martire* ms. 6(10) C, *Libro delle congregazioni che incomincia dal 1537 sino al 1603.*

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[26] Starting in 1581, the level of detail provided for each event decreased significantly, and from 1583 until its final occurrence in 1587, the Saint Stephen's Day indulgence merited only one or two lines of text.

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Fig. 3.1. Antonio Allegri da Correggio (c.1489–1534), *Madonna di San Giorgio* (c. 1530, oil on wood). Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. By permission.

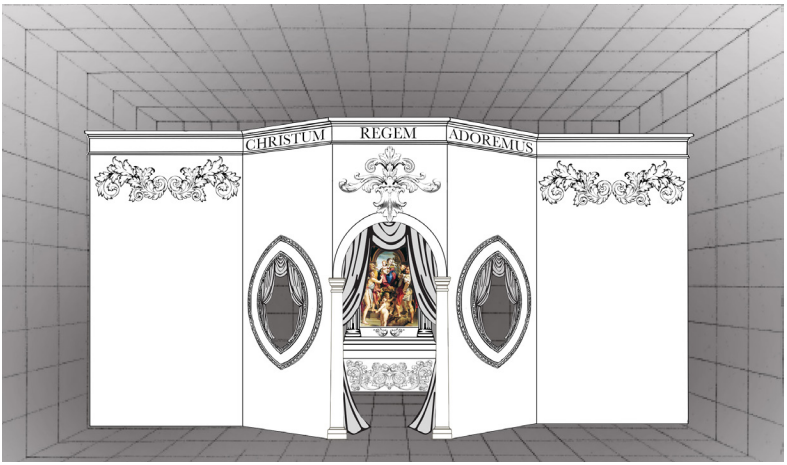

Fig. 3.2. Digital Rendering of 1577 partition. © Alyssa Abraham 2016

Fig. 3.3. Digital Rendering of 1578 partition. © Alyssa Abraham 2016

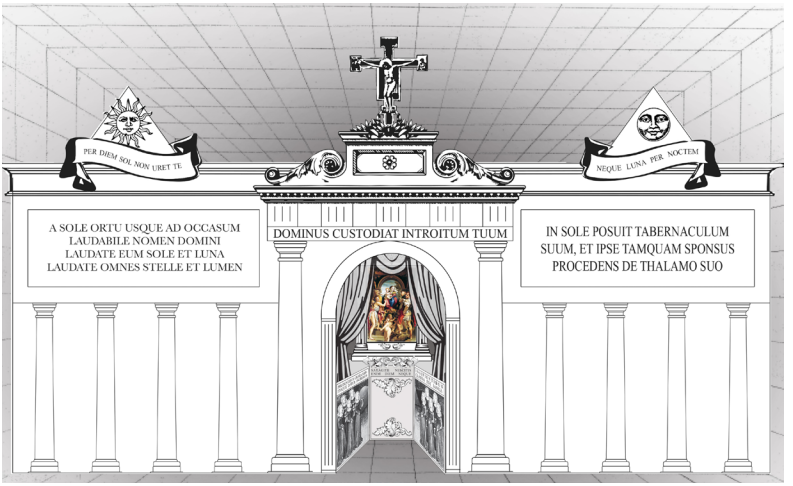

Fig. 3.4. Digital Rendering of 1579 partition. © Alyssa Abraham 2016