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## Rules of Engagement: The Intersection of Art History and Christian Scholarship

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**Rules of Engagement:  
The Intersection of Art History and Christian  
Scholarship**

**Susanna Bede Caroselli**

**September 3, 2001**



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The Intersection of Art History and Christian Scholarship**

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**Introduction**

In the past two years, while I have been involved in the examination of aspects of Christian scholarship, with a particular interest in its distinctives and its potential contribution to the Academy at large, I have also been carrying out research on 15th- and 16th-century works of art characterized by complex, layered iconography, with an aim to reclaiming the meaning of the images for their original viewers. The historical theologian Margaret Miles has lamented that, due to the intervening centuries, the spiritual meaning of an image can never be fully recovered, especially if there is no written record of its creation--our reconstructions will be hypothetical at best.<sup>1</sup> I believe, however, that, bolstered by careful scholarship on an image itself and its surrounding culture, scholars can recapture a fuller measure of meaning by allowing the image to address them as it would have addressed its original viewers: personally, emotionally, psychologically, viscerally, spiritually--call it what you will.

There has been some outstanding recent scholarship in the field of art history acknowledging the importance of the experience of the original viewer,<sup>2</sup> but there has been little or no suggestion that art historians themselves might engage in instinctive experience as part of their scholarship. The Academy has long been suspicious of such "non-intellectual" engagement with its objects and

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<sup>1</sup>Miles 1985, 6-7, 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, David Freedberg's *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), and the more focused studies by John Shearman, *Only Connect...: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

areas of inquiry. Marxist and socialist scholars were accused of applying a personal/political agenda to their scholarship, and the first feminists were chided for the stridency of their rhetoric, which suggested an emotional connection to the subject of their scholarly work. These and other "engaged" approaches were and are still often perceived as polluting the crystal stream of intellectual discourse.

Our academic training is partly to blame, since in most fields it stresses immediate intellectual engagement above all else. This attitude is actually more widespread: in looking at art--also in reading literature, listening to music, and attending performances--most people who would characterize themselves as "educated" or "cultured" quickly suppress a purely instinctive (what we call a "gut") reaction in order to engage intellectually with what they encounter, as if the emotional and physical impact of a work of art were a less important, inferior, or even embarrassing manifestation. By doing this I believe they lose the opportunity to understand the work as it was originally conceived: it is this instinctive reaction that may connect us to the message of the work of art as it was intended by its creators<sup>3</sup> to be received.

I do not offer the "instinctive response," as I will call it in this paper, as an alternative to intellectual engagement (which I will call here the "considered response") but as a companion to it, a combination that will lead to a richer understanding of the work being studied. A scholar's previous acquisition of knowledge can only enhance the instinctive response: the reaction of a casual viewer of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* will--while of equal value as response--be far less informative for others than the reaction of a viewer with a grounding in Renaissance history and Neoplatonic philosophy.

What has this to do with Christian scholarship? Christianity has a long history of encouraging instinctive response, not only of the unlettered and uneducated, but also of the great scholars of

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<sup>3</sup>In this paper, within the concept of "creator" I include not just the artist but the patron or commissioner of the work of art, who until the 17th century would have been the primary determiner of its theme and specific content.

the faith, who advocated a personally engaged response to works of religious art for their intellectual contemporaries as well as for themselves. Such a response is, if not unique to, then more natural to the contemporary Christian scholar: no matter how we define and practice Christian scholarship, we can show the way in the advocacy of the instinctive response as a scholarly tool. We are not afraid, or we *should* not be afraid, of spiritual and emotional engagement; we accept that there are different ways of knowing, and that knowledge comes through the soul and the heart as well as through the mind. We are even comfortable with *not* knowing--we call it mystery. Therefore we must challenge ourselves to demonstrate the result for our fields of combining scrupulous scholarship with the insights of our instinctive engagement.

In the past few decades Christian scholars have been advised, and have been urging one another, to bring their scholarly output to the highest intellectual level, where they can compete without apology with anyone in academe. This is, of course, desirable. But while Christian scholars strive to attain the intellectual standards of the broader Academy, they also have something to teach their unaffiliated colleagues about the utilization of the instinctive response. This should be considered not just an opportunity but an obligation.

The logical way to approach this task is to cite precedent in the scholarly use of instinctive response and to demonstrate the superior quality of fully engaged scholarship.

### **A Very Brief and Selective History of the Instinctive Response**

There is a great deal of evidence of the employment of instinctive response in intellectual history. The instinctive response to visual imagery predates Christianity by many centuries. In antiquity an entire literary genre--ekphrasis--was devoted to description that not only recreated visual form for the reader but documented how that visual form affected its viewers, including the writer, by fashioning a verbal version of the visual style. In the words of Hermogenes of Tarsus:

Ekphrasis is an account with detail; it is visible, so to speak, and brings before the eyes that which is to be shown....The special virtues of ekphrasis are clarity and visibility; the style must contrive to bring about seeing through hearing. However, it is equally important that expression should fit the subject: if the subject is florid, let the style be florid too, and if the subject is dry, let the style be the same.<sup>4</sup>

In ekphrasis art was most often praised for its ability to move and to astonish by clever visual effect. Thus, Greeks and Romans who became Christians were already conditioned to respond instinctively to imagery. Their responses may, in fact, explain the Christian appropriation of pagan imagery considered inspiring or reassuring, such as the Good Shepherd or the powerful Zeus/Jupiter figure transformed into God the Father.

A great deal of scholarship has focused on the defense of images for the didactic reasons most famously voiced by Pope Gregory I (c.540-604): "What scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books."<sup>5</sup> There were also intellectuals who fully admitted the appeal of images to the literate and educated by their power to move and encourage devotion. The 4th-century Bishop Evodius of Uzala in North Africa described the experiential sequence before a work of religious art as "astonishment.... love, admiration, and gratitude."<sup>6</sup> Two prelates from Asia Minor illustrate such response: Bishop Gregory of Nyssa (d. c.395) claimed that he could not walk by a painting of the Sacrifice of Isaac "without shedding tears, so clearly did art present the story to one's eyes,"<sup>7</sup> and Asterius, Bishop of Amaseia (d. c.410), usually assumed to be an iconophobe for his

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<sup>4</sup>Hermogenes of Tarsus, *Progymnasmata*, 2nd century C.E.; cited in Baxandall 1988a, 85.

<sup>5</sup>Gregory the Great wrote these words in a strongly worded reproach to Bishop Serenus of Marseille, who, "gripped by blind fury," was destroying images of saints in an attempt to keep the faithful from idolatry; cited in Davis-Weyer 1986, 48.

<sup>6</sup>Miles 1985, 44-45.

<sup>7</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *De deitate Filii e Spiritus Sancti*; cited in Mango 1986, 34.

denunciation of Christian images on articles of clothing, confessed to delight in looking at a painting when he was weary of studying philosophy. He described minutely a depiction of the martyrdom of Saint Euphemia, concluding: "But now tears come to my eyes and sadness interrupts my speech: for the artist has so clearly painted the drops of blood that you might think them to be trickling down in very truth from her lips, and so you might depart weeping."<sup>8</sup> Many of the great Christian mystics, particularly Bridget of Sweden (1303-1373), continued the tradition of ekphrasis by describing their visions and their ensuing emotions in such detail that their readers were moved to see and to respond in kind.<sup>9</sup>

Once of the most influential Christian advocates of instinctive response was Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who recommended in his *Spiritual Exercises* the use of all five senses to heighten this response. Most eloquent is his meditation on Hell, in which he guides the instinctive response of the devout in a vivid image so that they might experience the "deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer":

This will be to see in imagination the vast fires, and the souls enclosed, as it were, in bodies of fire....To hear the wailing, the howling, cries, and blasphemies against Christ our Lord and against His saints....With the sense of smell to perceive the smoke, the sulphur, the filth, and corruption....To taste the bitterness of tears, sadness, and remorse of conscience....With the sense of touch to feel the flames which envelop and burn the souls.<sup>10</sup>

These examples are not unexpected, since they come from people of faith contemplating images of faith, and it would be odd if such a viewer, no matter how educated, did not respond in some

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<sup>8</sup>Mango 1986, 39.

<sup>9</sup>Bridget's visions of the Nativity and Crucifixion of Christ had an enormous effect on Western European art, radically altering the traditional iconography that had originated in the Christian East.

<sup>10</sup>Loyola 1951, 32-33.



profoundly personal way to the imagery. It becomes more difficult to find instinctive responses among the learned to the images that they study rather than venerate, complicated by the fact that art history did not become an academic discipline until the 18th century.

Most of the 15th-century commentators on art confine themselves to simple descriptions and inventories of works of art. An exception is the prolific Florentine architect, painter, sculptor, and man-about-town Leonbattista Alberti (1404-1472), who in his treatise on painting speaks of the effect a well-produced work should have on its viewers: "it will capture the eye of whatever *learned or unlearned person* [italics added] is looking at it and will move his soul....we weep with the weeping, laugh with the laughing, and grieve with the grieving."<sup>11</sup> Most humanist scholars of the time, however, were pulling back from this type of personal engagement to a position of intellectual and technical engagement with imagery:

Their attitude to painting was...self-conscious; it can be characterized as aesthetic in the modern sense that implies a psychic distance that significantly modifies the immediate emotional effectiveness of a work of art.<sup>12</sup>

Some respected contemporary scholars have noted and often lamented this "psychic distance" between scholars and their objects of study, but they limit themselves to the observation of this phenomenon and not to its alteration. Others advise the reunification of instinctive and considered responses. When Nelson Goodman speaks of "the domineering dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive," he states,

The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses. Emotional numbness disables here as definitely if not as completely as blindness or deafness....I am not resting anything on the distinction between emotion and

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<sup>11</sup>Alberti 1966, 75, 77.

<sup>12</sup>Miles 1985, 74.

other elements of knowing, but rather insisting that *emotion belongs with them* [italics added]....In aesthetic experience, emotion positive or negative is a mode of sensitivity to a work.<sup>13</sup>

David Freedberg ends his important book *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* with the following plea:

All I claim is the need to integrate the experience of reality [i.e., instinctive response] into our experience of imagery in general, and into the terms of critical discourse about imagery and about art. If we do not do so, we lapse into the categorical preconceptions and the ideological narrowness against which this book has set itself.<sup>14</sup>

From this advocacy of the incorporation of instinctive response into scholarship, we should now proceed to examples of scholars who have done so. Here we hit the wall, because there are few who will admit to utilizing their personal reactions as part of their scholarly approach, even though many may unconsciously be doing so.

An unexpected ally appears in Roland Barthes, who points out that in order to see a photograph in depth, he consents "to combine two voices: the voice of banality (to say what everyone sees and knows) and the voice of singularity (to replenish such banality with all the élan of an emotion that belongs only to myself)."<sup>15</sup> One of the most striking examples of instinctive response is that provided by art historian Leo Steinberg as he discusses the art of Jasper Johns. He engages, not with his usual intellectual intensity and assurance, but with the confusion of his "own first reaction":

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<sup>13</sup>Goodman 1976, 247-50.

<sup>14</sup>Freedberg 1989, 434.

<sup>15</sup>Barthes 1981, 76.

I disliked the show, and would gladly have thought it a bore. Yet it depressed me and I wasn't sure why....I was angry at the artist, as if he had invited me to a meal, only to serve something uneatable, like tow and paraffin. I was irritated at some of my friends for pretending to like it--but with an uneasy suspicion that perhaps they did like it, so that I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up.<sup>16</sup>

In the following pages he works though his hostility, forcing himself to confront his feelings about these works over and over again, and as he does he provides one of the most moving and, at the same time trenchant, assessments of the work of any modern artist, reaching conclusions that no art historian or critic could have attained without the honest examination of a personal response. Even his conclusions continue to emphasize the depth of his engagement:

In the end, these pictures by Jasper Johns came to impress me as a dead city might--but a dead city of terrible familiarity. Only some objects are left--man-made signs which, in the absence of men, have become objects. And Johns has anticipated their dereliction....I am left in a state of anxious uncertainty by the painting, about painting, about myself.<sup>17</sup>

But then Steinberg is an eminent and independent senior scholar from whom controversy and idiosyncrasy are expected. Such an approach would be unwise in the work of a graduate student or a young art historian seeking publication.

To present an effective argument for the overt use of instinctive response in scholarly work, I must thus make the case myself that the incorporation of instinctive response can lead to better scholarship. The following section is an attempt to do so.

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<sup>16</sup>Steinberg 1972, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Steinberg 1972, 14-15.

## A Renaissance Altarpiece

The altarpiece *Christ on the Cross with Saints Vincent Ferrer, John the Baptist, Mark, and Antoninus* was commissioned by the silk weavers' guild of the city of Florence to be placed on their altar in the monastery church of San Marco in the late 15th century.<sup>18</sup> Nowhere in the extant documents has the painter been identified, but, judging from the style of the panel, it should be dated around 1490-95 and is probably the work of Gherardo di Giovanni del Fora (1445-1497), a skilled miniaturist who also executed large paintings and who was known to have worked with his brother for the Dominican community of San Marco.<sup>19</sup>

The image is not a depiction of the Crucifixion: Christ is alive, alert, and in no pain; he seems to hover in front of the cross with outspread arms, wearing a jeweled purple robe and an imperial crown. Several other features argue for a visionary rather than narrative character: the shaft of the deep blue, ornamental cross does not reach the ground but dissolves somewhere behind Christ's torso; between his right foot and the ground line is a chalice nestled in a tiny bank of clouds; and he is surrounded by an aureole of six-winged seraphim and four-winged cherubim, whose purpose is the ceaseless praise of God in heaven and not earthly apparition.<sup>20</sup>

On each side of the cross are kneeling figures who have been identified by their appearance and attributes: on Christ's right is the patron saint of Florence, John the Baptist, recognizable from his unkempt hair, camel-skin tunic, red robe of martyrdom, reed cross, and a scroll bearing the

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<sup>18</sup>Giorgio Vasari identified the patrons of the altarpiece in the 1568 edition of the life of the painter Cosimo Rosselli, although for stylistic reasons it is highly unlikely that Rosselli was the artist; see Vasari 1966-84, vol. 3 (1971), 444.

<sup>19</sup>For a detailed discussion of the reasons for this attribution, first advanced by Everett Fahy, see Caroselli 1994, 69-72.

<sup>20</sup>The arrangement of the celestial hierarchy was first set out around 500 by Dionysus the Pseudo-Areopagite and became the standard work on the topic of angels after its translation into Latin in the 9th century; see chapters 6-9 of *The Celestial Hierarchy* in Pseudo-Dionysus 1987, 160-73.

words "Ecce agnus dei ecce qui" (behold the lamb of God, behold [him] who...). On Christ's left is Mark, patron saint of the church of San Marco, identifiable as the Evangelist from his act of writing in a open codex and from the lion glaring from behind his right leg.<sup>21</sup>

The form and presence of these three figures are easily explained. The inclusion of the patron saints of the city and the church for which the painting was intended was very common in Italian altarpieces from the 13th century onward. As for the unusual representation of Christ as a regally dressed figure, oddly balanced on a chalice, he is shown in the form of the famous acheiropoietic image known as the *Volto Santo* ("holy face"), a wooden statue believed to have been carved by the Pharisee Nicodemus with divine assistance.<sup>22</sup> The *Volto Santo* was particularly precious to the silk weavers of Florence because it was kept in the cathedral of the nearby city of Lucca, the guild's original home. Their devotion to the statue is suggested by the name of their guild confraternity, the Compagnia della Santa Croce (Company of the Holy Cross).<sup>23</sup> The painting depicts the *Volto Santo* as it would have been (and still is) dressed for special feast days in jewels and silk garments (no doubt donated by the guild). The presence and placement of the chalice are additional evidence: in manuscripts, paintings, and drawings of the 14th through 16th centuries the *Volto Santo* is always depicted with a chalice immediately beneath its right foot, ostensibly to secure a golden shoe that kept falling off (a legend tells of the statue dropping the shoe into the

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<sup>21</sup>Early in the 5th century, in the apse mosaic of the church of Santa Pudenziana and a relief panel from the doors of the church of Santa Sabina, both in Rome, the four evangelists were first represented as the four aspects of the tetramorph (Ezekiel 1:5-13; 10:9-14; Revelation 4:6b-8), an interpretation introduced by Jerome in his commentary on Ezekiel. Mark was allied with the lion because his Gospel begins with John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, the traditional haunt of the lion; see Homily 75(I) on Mark 1:1-12 in Jerome 1966, 121.

<sup>22</sup>When the altarpiece first appeared on the art market in England in the mid-19th century, this identification was not made; however, by 1893 someone had recognized the source of the imagery; see the 1893-94 exhibition catalogue of the New Gallery, London, *Exhibition of Early Italian Art from 1330 to 1550*, no. 71.

<sup>23</sup>Perhaps the appropriation of the *Volto Santo* imagery for this altarpiece was an assertive act of remembrance: the ancestors of the Florentine guild members had been forced to emigrate from Lucca in the early 14th century by the conquering Florentines, who wished to relocate the lucrative silk industry to their own city; see Staley 1906, 216.

lap of poor supplicants), but more probably to refer to the flow of blood and water from the spear wound in the side of the crucified Christ.<sup>24</sup>

The additional two figures in the altarpiece may be identified by their monastic dress as Dominican monks. These men have no significance for the silk weavers' guild, so their presence in the painting cannot be explained if we do not look beyond the guild's commission. There exists in the collection of the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, a highly finished drawing for the framed altarpiece depicting only the three central figures,<sup>25</sup> which is probably the formal presentation sketch that accompanied the silk guild's first proposal for the altarpiece, for no image could be put into a church without the approval, if not the participation, of the church's authorities.<sup>26</sup>

It is at this point that I believe the Dominicans of San Marco took an active role in the content of the altarpiece by stipulating the addition of the saints on each side of the panel. The two monks are fairly recently deceased Dominicans, the celebrated preacher Saint Vincent Ferrer (1350-1419), to the viewer's left, and the Blessed Antoninus Pierozzi (1389-1459), former archbishop of Florence and prior of the monastery of San Marco.<sup>27</sup> The half-Spanish, half-English Vincent holds an open book: the right-hand page admonishes the viewer to "fear God, for the hour of his

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<sup>24</sup>In many medieval and later images the chalice is held by an angel under the spurting wound in Christ's side. Also, the *Volto Santo* was a reliquary once supposedly containing a vial of the blood of Christ; for the history of the statue and a discussion of the imagery of the chalice, see Caroselli 1994, 64-65.

<sup>25</sup>The drawing is usually attributed to Filippino Lippi; see Goldner/Bambach 1997, cat. no. 69. Lippi may have been the artist first approached by the silk weavers' guild; we cannot, however, rule out the possibility that the drawing style is simply similar to Lippi's.

<sup>26</sup>An excellent collection of the types of contracts under which artists of this time worked may be found in Chambers 1971.

<sup>27</sup>Antoninus was originally given the rayed halo of the beatified; at some point after his canonization (1523), someone painted a solid halo over the rays, but it has gradually worn away, revealing the original halo beneath.

judgment is come" (a truncation of Revelation 14:7), and the facing page depicts the Christ of the Last Judgment, seated on a throne and borne up by trumpeting angels. Antoninus Pierozzi (1389-1459) was a much-beloved local figure, a reluctant but superb and supportive archbishop. Here he wears the white pallium of an archbishop, and his face would have been recognizable, either from life (he died within the memory of some of those who first saw this altarpiece) or from his death mask, from which the artist probably worked.

### **"Reading" the Altarpiece**

A disinterested art historian could certainly stop at this point, having adequately identified the elements of the altarpiece. An art historian interested in theology might go further, exploring the transformation of the painting, by the addition of the monks, from a typical guild altarpiece of purely local significance into a powerful didactic image incorporating the expression of political corporate identity, Dominican eschatology, the Sacrament of Penance, and the religious education of the laity. Having investigated the iconography and theology to produce the findings mentioned above, I was not satisfied, however, because this intellectual engagement had not addressed the elements of my initial and ongoing personal engagement with this image. Thus, my further progress was prompted by my own instinctive response, which I will attempt to recapture here.

There is literally an "attractive" quality to of the figure of Christ. With his open, benign expression,<sup>28</sup> his direct gaze, and his extended arms, which seem an invitation to an embrace, he encourages me to draw near. I am confused, however, by his rich clothes, the disappearing cross, the angels, and the chalice and clouds that create a barrier between my world and his and keep me from his presence. I notice that someone else is looking at me: the far more intense monk at the far left, who holds up a book so clearly lettered that I am obviously meant to read it. My Latin is

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<sup>28</sup>In all the works attributed to the artist the expressions of Christ and the Virgin Mary are noticeably more beatific and accessible than those of the surrounding figures, who are far more individualized and austere.

somewhat rusty, but I know it is about fear and judgment, and the accompanying image of Christ as final Judge is clear enough: I am being told that in order to experience Christ's embrace some action on my part is needful, otherwise I will be kept away for eternity. I recognize John the Baptist next to the monk and I am reminded of his message of repentance. I instinctively understand that when I have repented I will be welcomed by Christ--on this earth in the form of the Sacrament represented by the chalice under his foot, and in the age to come face to face.

My own instinctive response to this work is somewhat dimmed by the fact that I first saw it in 1991, but I have relied on the remarks of seven years' worth of people to whom I have shown it, from academic theologians to first-year college students. It is clear from those findings that even without recognizing any figures but Christ (and, sometimes, John the Baptist) most viewers have the same instinctive response and reach the same conclusion.

In order to test the legitimacy of this reading generated by instinctive response, we must, for the purposes of this paper, try to recapture by means of considered response how the altarpiece would have been read at the end of the 15th century by the citizens of Florence.

The altar of the silk weavers' guild in the church of San Marco was well-situated for conveying a message, since it was located on a low transverse wall built across the nave, where it would be on prominent view to everyone who entered by the main portals.<sup>29</sup> During the long sermons that were a tradition in Dominican churches, this part of the nave was reserved for women and children, who were assumed by their culture to be less literate than men, and therefore more in need of clear visual imagery.<sup>30</sup>

Our reconstruction of the original reading is vastly aided by a universal practice employed by

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<sup>29</sup>Caroselli 1994, 67; reconstruction based on documents published in Teubner 1979.

<sup>30</sup>In one of his sermons Dominican reformer Girolamo Savonarola, who was prior of San Marco at the time this painting was executed, declared that pictures in churches should be for the instruction of children and women; see Wackernagel 1981, 112.



artists of late medieval and Renaissance Italy. They relied on *festaiuoli*--figures who attract our attention by glance or gesture, direct it in the appropriate direction, and indicate how we should respond or behave. The concept of the *festaiuolo* was taken by artists from the Italian theatrical and celebratory conventions. On stage, he or she was usually a secondary character who served as an intermediary between the audience and the main action, explaining, commenting, and modeling the appropriate reaction or response.<sup>31</sup> The meaning of the word itself, literally "feast-maker," suggests the role of master or mistress of ceremonies, who would perform introductions and direct guests, and so the *festaiuolo* functioned in a work of art. In his treatise on painting, Alberti provided an excellent job description of the *festaiuolo*:

I like to see someone who admonishes and points out to us what is happening there; or beckons with his hand to see; or menaces with an angry face and flashing eyes, so that no one should come near; or shows some danger or marvelous thing there; or invites us to weep or laugh together with them.<sup>32</sup>

In a work of art, this figure is a secondary one who may establish eye contact with us and, with a gesture, encourage our gaze to move to what is most important. The direct gaze was a far more active connection than it is in the modern world: in various ancient theories of vision, there was assumed to be a physical connection between the beholder and the beheld, involving an exchange of some kind. In the altarpiece, therefore, the direct gazes of Christ and Vincent Ferrer were not just devices to gain the viewers' attention but were meant to communicate something of substance. The face of Christ, radiating love, was meant to attract, but the main character is never the *festaiuolo*. So it is to Vincent Ferrer that we must turn.

The inclusion of Dominican monks is not unusual in an altarpiece destined for a Dominican church, but the monks most usually depicted are Dominic himself, the theologian Thomas

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<sup>31</sup>See Baxandall 1988b, 72-76.

<sup>32</sup>Alberti 1966, 78.

Aquinas, and the inquisitor Peter Martyr. Therefore the appearance of the rarely depicted Vincent Ferrer communicated a specific message, emphasized by the actual message displayed in his book. A gifted preacher, particularly revered in northern Italy, Vincent chose as the topic of his fiery sermons the Last Judgment and the need for repentance, and he identified himself to many as the Angel of the Revelation (Rev. 10:1-7).

Vincent's counterpart, Antoninus Pierozzi, was well known for three influential works on the Sacrament of Penance: *Curam illius habe* (1472) and *Defecerunt* (1473), two manuals for priests, and *Omnium mortalium cura* (1475), a guide to penance for the laity. These three were often bound together as the *Confessionale*, one of the earliest printed books, which appeared in more than one hundred Latin or Italian editions in thirty-two cities before 1501, and his work was cited by many other authors.<sup>33</sup> In this context, the curious gesture of his right hand, with its slightly curled fingers, may be read as the "mea culpa," a gesture made three times in a confession of sin ("through my own fault...").

The figures of John the Baptist and Mark the Evangelist now take on another layer of meaning beyond their patronage of city and church: the continuing call to repentance by John the Baptist and the emphasis on John's ministry that begins the Gospel of Mark, with the voice crying in the wilderness.

Penitence itself is at the very core of Dominican spirituality and was the chief concern of the prior of the monastery of San Marco in the 1490's, the man who would have given permission for the altarpiece to be installed in the church, who would have dictated the iconography, and who would have demanded changes and additions: the reformer Girolamo Savonarola. The ultimate message of the altarpiece is the same as that of many of Savonarola's sermons: that Christ waits

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<sup>33</sup>Tentler 1977, 39. The *Defecerunt* alone saw seventy-two printings in Latin, Italian, and Spanish.

to embrace us, but we must approach him in as pure a state as possible.<sup>34</sup> For the Church this meant that in order to be united with Christ in the Eucharist, the Christian must prepare by confession, absolution, and atonement--the very process of the Sacrament of Penance. And there stood this altar, in a prominent location in a prominent church, to communicate this message to the laity of Florence, to instruct them in the proper attention to be given to a holy sacrament. The clarity with which this message was conveyed in its time, when the figures and their association were easily identifiable, is proven by the clarity with which it may still be read.

### Conclusion

A general conclusion about the didactic, penitential nature of this image might be reached through disinterested scholarship (considered response). It is also accessible through instinctive response alone.<sup>35</sup> But a combination of the two approaches yields a richer and more resonant result, and one that, in my opinion allows, the scholar to comprehend, if not experience, the intended effect of this image upon its original viewers in the church of San Marco in 1495. By knowing its placement in the church, we know who was meant to read it. By identifying the figures and experiencing the work for ourselves, we know what they were meant to read. One approach reinforces and builds on the other--at a certain point they merge into an inseparable methodological process. The considered response above has confirmed the instinctive response and has enriched it with factual and explanatory material. At the same time, the instinctive response has aided in making connections where facts were missing and choices were many.

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<sup>34</sup>The "fire and brimstone" aspect of Savonarola's preaching has been exaggerated by many historians. In fact, his calls to repentance always included "the promise of reconciliation and a life freed from the burden of guilt and sin"; see Hall 1990, 494.

<sup>35</sup>My students in ART 310H in Spring 2001 took twenty minutes to follow the "reading" process I described and to interpret the message, with no prompting from me and no information about the iconography; they did recognize Christ and several of them guessed correctly that one of the other figures was John the Baptist.

Reading an image through instinctive response is not limited to Christians even if the image is Christian in its iconography, but it is likely that the Christian scholar will respond more deeply and fully and will thus come that much closer to the minds and hearts of those who have gone before. It can only enrich the art-historical mix, and its potential in other scholarly fields is waiting to be explored.

It is legitimate to mention a negative aspect to this: will scholars unconsciously use instinctive response to force the reading they personally advocate, when considered response presents contradictory findings? I believe the answer to that is: they already do. I do not believe that there exists on this earth a scholar who does not experience instinctive response, no matter how quickly it is transformed into intellectual engagement. The damage is done when we do not know that our instinctive response is operating under layers of rational processes. This is another reason why I advocate the recognition, utilization, and even celebration of it in scholarship, so that we can be aware of our personal agendas and biases and hold ourselves and each other accountable for the honesty we owe to the Academy and, more, to the glory of God.

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