

Prayer and Performance in the Middle Ages: Two Unpublished Processional and Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ from Piedmont

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This brief writing is meant to be a small contribution to the special issue of *Performing Arts* honouring the memory of Ronnie Mulryne, who generously shared his passion for history, drama, and the arts with eminent and early-career scholars alike. He gave me precious advice and engaged me in the activities of the Society for European Festival Research while I was still a PhD student. I am not the only one remembering him as an untiring, brilliant man and scholar. It is especially with those who loved and admired him that I wish to share a knowledge of two unpublished, early fifteenth-century sculptures of the *Crucified Christ* which I recently discovered while conducting a research on the iconography of Elizabeth of Hungary and its relation with Third Order Franciscans and Humiliates in Piedmont. The fact that the two sculptures in question – one processional, the other animated – were found in chapels used by female confraternities in two contexts that were different, yet shared some connections with the German cultural area as well as the French one, makes those rare pieces of work even more intriguing. Should other examples be related to similar contexts, it might be possible to grasp a better understanding of how animated figures of that kind were used in rituals that conjoined prayer and performance within a sphere where the lay and the secular overlapped. My research on the sculptures in question, the history of which has not been reconstructed entirely because of the current restrictions to accessing archives, is still in progress.

Relatively few animated sculptures used for

devotional practices involving performance in medieval Europe have survived to this day. They are remnants of a past when liturgy and drama conjoined, and later gave ground to sacred representations that were performed envisaging mechanical or manually operated figures. Although recent study has questioned definitions such as 'liturgical drama' and some theories on the evolution of medieval theatre (Norton 2017), it is generally believed as plausible that the earliest forms of dramatization developed from the Christian liturgy in the tenth century, more particularly from the *Quem quaeritis* of the Easter liturgy that formed the kernel of liturgical drama, which might have given ground to medieval theatre (Nicoll 1931: 176-77; Kobińska 1999: 1-34).

Later sculptures used for the dramatization of salient moments in the Passion of Christ survive in different contexts, including Piedmont. More particularly, preserved in Turin's Royal Museums, at the Palazzo Madama, is a group of lime wood figures representing the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, dated around 1480 and attributed to the Master of Santa Maria Maggiore (*Il Museo Civico di Arte Antica di Torino* 2006: 28, Inv. 1020/L). Similar coeval groups survive in Lombardy, Tuscany, Umbria, and the Veneto – most notably in the church of Santa Toscana in Verona (Tameni 1999: 60). We know that statues of that kind were used to re-enact the *Depositio* and *Entombment* of Christ while singing a *Planctus Marie* (Cattin 2005: 87-110).

A very small number of animated sculptures of the *Crucified Christ* dating to the fifteenth century are also treasured in today's Piedmont. They are little known, and not recorded in Kamil Kopania's 'catalogue of medieval animated sculptures of the *Crucified Christ*' in Europe,

which is a precious scholarly work shedding light on renowned and forgotten examples (Kopania 2010: 245-87). They add to earlier *Crucifixes* whose nature and origins are at times controversial. Preserved in Turin's Galleria Sabauda, for instance, is a twelfth-century sculpture of the *Crucified Christ* once in the Gualino Collection. Lionello Venturi tentatively related it to the Rhine region (Venturi 1926; pl. LXXX), whilst other scholars suggested other attributions (Cervini 2008: 9-32). In their study focusing particularly on German areas, although exploring other contexts as well, Gesine and Johannes Taubert argued that, the dramatised *paschal triduum* ceremonies, including the *Adoratio Crucis*, *Depositio Crucis* and *Elevatio Crucis*, started to be enacted using a movable sculpture of the crucified Christ instead of the cross as symbol in order to enable a deeper connection to the mystery of death and salvation through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (Taubert Taubert 1961: 79-121; Kopania 11-27). The construction of that type of sculptures, to which medieval sources often refer as *imago crucifixi* and *imago salvatoris* or *imago resurrectionis*, envisaged mechanisms allowing certain parts of the figure to move while detaching it from the cross to depose it as a dead body in the sepulchre, and later take it out as a resurrected being (Kopania 2010: 98-106; Bino 2016: 277-311). Although a recent study has questioned, to some extent, earlier theories on the involvement medieval theatre (Norton 2017), it is generally acknowledged that a devotional practice combining rite and dramatization with animated figures spread across Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Text was already present in collective memory as the *Adoratio*, *Depositio*, *Elevatio crucis*, and *Visitatio sepulchri* liturgical offices were contained in missals, thus had long been included in the annual cycle of ceremonies observed in a given diocese, monastery, cathedral, and parish church. The dramatized rites in question were officiated by male clergy members in procession. Nonetheless, they would gain momentum in nunneries and also monastic complexes housing pious women of the Third Order in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Weaver 2002: 3). The use of animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ for devotional and processional practices within nunneries and confraternities of lay women of the Third Order would persist well into the sixteenth century

in some contexts, perhaps inspired by earlier traditions¹.

That is likely to have happened with two medieval sculptures of the *Crucified Christ* preserved in two ancient towns of Piedmont. One is the small processional crucifix dating to the early fifteenth century which is preserved in the sixteenth-century oratory of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary at Trinità (Fig. 1), originally a place of worship in the diocese of Asti.



Fig. 1. *The Crucified Christ*, early XVth century. Processional wooden sculpture. Chapel of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, Trinità (Cuneo, Italy).

In 1412, Amadeus VIII, Duke of Savoy, Prince of Acaja, assigned Trinità as a feud to Ludovico Antonio Costa, Count of Bene and Carrù. The latter would marry Paola Gambarà (1463-1515) from Verola Alghisi (near Brescia), who descended from a noble family with Bavarian origins. Once widowed, Paola Gambarà joined the Third Order Franciscan, whose patron saint is Elizabeth of Hungary. The cult of the Blessed Paola Gambarà Costa started long before her

canonization (officialized in 1845) in the context where she lived, which would see the members of the female confraternity of Saint Elizabeth (also known as 'Humiliates') wear a straw-yellow vestment while performing a processional ritual that must have been very close to the one depicted by Antoine Sallaert in his *Procession of the Maids of the Sablon in Brussels* (c. 1621) now in Turin, Musei Reali. Clearly, the pious lay women also prayed before the processional crucifix that is still in the chapel where they used to gather (Zefferino - Bellini 2017: 213-43).

The ownership of similar objects of devotion, as happened with other treasured artefacts and even the buildings that housed them, was subject to change over time. Reconstructing their provenance may therefore be difficult, at times. That is the case of the early fifteenth-century animated sculpture of the *Crucified Christ* which is now in the Collegiate church of Santa Maria della Scala at Chieri (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *The Crucified Christ* (detail), early XVth century. Processional animated wooden sculpture. Collegiate church of Santa Maria della Scala, Chieri (Turin, Italy).

More particularly, that *crocifisso deposto* is in the chapel of St Thomas, where a painting depicting *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary* by Vittorio Amedeo Rapous (1729-1800) has been on display since the seventeenth century, when that chapel was destined to the Humiliates (Bosio 1878: *passim*). The provenance of the Gothic sculpture in question is unknown. It might have been brought there by the confraternity, whose original seat was in the Santuario dell'Annunziata, erected on the foundations of a chapel that had been built in 1401 next to a hospice (*spedale*) founded in 1278 and now part of the Ospedale Maggiore. Originally, it

could also have been in the Franciscans' church, demolished in the early nineteenth century. That is an option to consider, given that some sculptures of the *Crucified Christ* with movable arms surviving in other Italian contexts were once preserved in Franciscan convents or places of worship, including those attributed to Giovanni Tedesco in the lower basilica of St Francis at Assisi and in the church of St Francis at Terni; the one attributed to Agostino di Duccio once in the church of St Francis at Prato; and the famous one related to the circle of Donatello in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence (Kopania 2010: 38, 260, 264, 272).

The authorship of the *Crucifix* in Chieri is still open to question, and yet its stylistic features allow us to compare it with a coeval and very similar sculpture of the *Crucified Christ* of unknown provenance, dated 1456, which is now in the chapel of the Ospedale Maggiore². That piece of work has been attributed to an unknown sculptor, possibly German yet active in the workshop of the Surso family from Pavia (Lombardy), some of whose works survive in Asti and Chieri (Pirretta 2002: 52-53; Pirretta 2007: 102).

It is not clear whether the sculpture of the *Crucified Christ* in the Ospedale Maggiore had movable arms because of its restoration which, as happened with other artefacts, might have caused the loss of articulation in that detached limbs were glued back to the torso. Although movable sculptures of the crucified Christ are one of the most interesting manifestations of religious culture of the Middle Ages, in fact, the aspects relating to their construction as objects of ritual performance, rather than merely objects of cult, have been overshadowed by aesthetics and iconography in scholarly literature until recent years. It appears that in the Western world all kinds of figures crafted in a design that made them perceivable as animated beings able to 'move' and/or 'speak', shared the destiny of being overlooked by historians until recently, perhaps because of their nature of objects in between the visual and performing arts. Luckily, an interdisciplinary conference aimed at fostering a better approach to the study and conservation of movable wooden sculptures from the middle ages was held in Venice, at the Accademia Galleries on 18 May 2012³. Also, some recent publications have drawn particular attention on sculptures of the crucified Christ with movable limbs and other peculiarities in Italian contexts (see Saporì

- Toscano 2004; Mor - Tigler 2010; and Cervini 2019).

As retaining its original features and articulated limbs, the animated sculpture of the *Crucified Christ* in the Collegiate church of Santa Maria della Scala at Chieri can thus be regarded as an intriguing dramatic figure embodying tangible and intangible heritage. Indeed, it conjoins fine art, craftsmanship and performance traditions of bygone times. From a dramatic perspective, it may therefore remind us of Maurice Sand's observation that 'several fantastic and religious types indispensable to all the scenario of mystery plays performed with puppets may not 'pass in silence' over the centuries (Sand 1915: 173-74).

To conclude this insight into an ongoing research which is far from being concluded, I would cast light on the multifaceted nature of sculptures used in ritual, either for processional display or religious drama within contexts where laity and devotion entwined. Further research might allow us to reconstruct the origin and history of the artefacts in question, and also to know more about how they were used and perceived by the female confraternities who preserved them over at least two centuries. That entails exploring issues of identity and gender while inquiring how ritual and performance conjoined through religious dramatization with animated figures – a process triggering aesthetic experience. Indeed, the two sculptures of the *Crucified Christ* presented here can be regarded as objects treasuring the sacred and the secular, the visual and the performative, material culture and transcendence. Their fragmented history and aura of sacredness make the contemporary viewer eager to investigate their inner mystery.

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Notes

1 A lost miniature dating around 1175-1185 from the *Hortus deliciarum* by Herrade von Landsberg testifies to the use of jiggling puppets (possibly taken into Europe from the Holy Land) for recreational puppets at Hohenburg Abbey in Alsace. See Green 1979.

2 Reproduced in Cappelletto 1961. See also Tirsi 1969, 6-78 (13). I am grateful to Vincenzo Tedesco for giving me these references.

3 The proceedings of this symposium were within the framework of the exhibition "L'uomo della croce: l'immagine scolpita prima e dopo Donatello" in Padua, at the Museo Diocesano, on 28 November 2013. See Francescutti 2013.