

## **Religious Poverty, Visual Riches: Art in the Dominican Churches of Central Italy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries**

**Review Number:** 1679

**Publish date:** Thursday, 30 October, 2014

**Author:** Joanna Cannon

**ISBN:** 9780300187656

**Date of Publication:** 2013

**Price:** £45.00

**Pages:** 368pp.

**Publisher:** Yale University Press

**Publisher url:** <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/book.asp?isbn=9780300187656>

**Place of Publication:** New Haven, CT

**Reviewer:** Michael Morris

When attending a book-signing reception at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley nearly ten years ago, I lifted the hefty coffee table tome titled *The Jesuits and the Arts* and turned to a Jesuit friend of mine and said, 'This is certainly a beautiful and lavishly illustrated book!' After a pause I then, with unabashed Dominican chauvinism, added, '... but of course if this were a history of the Dominicans and the Arts, then a book this size would have to identify itself merely as Volume One!'

That imagined first volume on the art and architecture of the 800-year-old Dominican Order has indeed and at long last arrived with the publication of Joanna Cannon's *Religious Poverty, Visual Riches: Art in the Dominican Churches of Central Italy in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*. Published by Yale University Press, it is also a large and beautifully illustrated book, but it takes great care in stating that it is a study concentrating only on the churches found in the 'Provincia Romana' of the Order of Friars Preachers (the more formal title adopted by the Dominicans) which would include its major foundations in Siena, Pisa, Perugia, Florence and Rome as well as lesser-known centers in Central Italy. For the author, the Dominican Order made a good case study for the monastic art of this region for its material was abundant but not limitless. 28 Dominican churches had been established in this geographical area by the mid-14th century in comparison to the Franciscans who administered 168 foundations in the same area by 1300.

Joanna Cannon examines frescoes and panel paintings, illuminated choir books, carved crucifixes, goldsmith work, tombs and stained glass commissioned for these Dominican churches. Famed artists like Cimabue, Duccio, Giotto and Simone Martini are studied for their contributions as well as the work of minor artists, including that of the friars themselves. To aid her in her research, Cannon consulted the early legislation of the Order, its liturgy, sermons and chronicles to explore the place of art in the lives of the friars and its impact on the urban laity who worshipped with them.

An overriding theme posed in this study is one of paradox. How can a mendicant Order vowed to apostolic poverty and evangelical preaching contract, afford, accumulate, and justify the high art of the renowned painters who decorated their churches and houses? The answer is no less valid today as it was then. Patrons and benefactors to the Order always provide the greater part of arts funding while inheritances and ministry

collections constitute the lesser part. Religious poverty was not intended to equate itself with destitution, and while the establishments constructed and acquired by the Order were to be as humble as the Dominican Constitutions desired, the reality is that for the teeming numbers entering the brotherhood, the buildings had to be large and durable enough to contain them and that did not come about cheaply. Moderation and humility were the goals sought in the Dominican sense of poverty, not abnegation and humiliation. Furthermore, while the friars were to live austere and share all things in common, the money spent on sacred art was seen in a different light for it brought honor to God and inspired the faithful to devotion. The celebrated Dominican theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224–74), argued for the presence of sacred art in churches because it aided the Order in its mission to preach and teach. Like Pope Gregory the Great before him, Aquinas saw sacred art as a valuable teaching device for simple people who could not read. Furthermore, he praised such art for implanting in the memory of worshippers the mysteries of the faith as well as the noble lessons learned from the lives of the saints. He observed that devotion could often be aroused more effectively by things seen than by things heard. Likewise, the 13th-century Dominican, James of Voragine, whose collection of saints' legends for model sermons constituted the now classic work known as *The Golden Legend*, endorsed the crafting of images so that the laity could grow in virtue and constancy by the instruction received through them and the devotion such artworks aroused in their hearts.

But were images intended only for the illiterate laity? What about the educated friars themselves? Both Aquinas and de Voragine, echoing St. Gregory, suggest that while the laity would be educated by images, ordinarily books would instruct the friars. Yet in stimulating feelings of devotion, the image had an equal power over both friar and layperson. The author elaborates by pointing out that the Dominicans originally separated themselves from the laity in the church by a system of demarcating screens built across the nave that insured privacy during the conventual Mass. These screens oftentimes incorporated altars and images on the friars' side that were dedicated to the inspirational exemplars and earliest saints of the Order like St. Dominic, St. Peter Martyr, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Vincent Ferrer. Humbert de Romans, in his commentary on the Rule of St. Augustine under which all Dominican friars conform their lives, pointed out that one of the reasons friars ought to pray in a church was for the purpose of stimulating the senses with images of the Crucifixion, the Blessed Virgin Mary, saints and angels. These would intensify prayer and increase devotion. Thomas Aquinas himself experienced one of his most celebrated mystical visions while meditating before a crucifix. An early illustrated manual for novices also recommended that friars imitate the founder, St. Dominic, in his 'Nine Ways of Prayer', most of which (bowing, genuflecting, kneeling, etc.) entailed concentrating on an image of the crucified Savior. Thus the groundwork was set for the power of the image to aid in a friar's spiritual life, from the moment the novice was clothed in the habit of the Order to his maturity in religious life. This is the rationale for Fra Angelico's frescoes at San Marco in Florence, from Passion scenes designed specifically for novitiate cells to the more elaborate scriptural scenes devised for the cells of senior friars.

The author skillfully compares the art and manners of the Dominicans with that of their mendicant counterpart, the Franciscans. While Francis left his brethren a Rule by which to live and the inspiration of his charismatic personality, Dominic left his followers neither a Rule of his own devising, nor even a corpus of writings to guide and inspire them. Dominic's genius was in quietly initiating and organizing the structure and work of his Order; the radical and romantic life of Francis by contrast inspired imitation. The Franciscans strove to present St. Francis after his death as a 'second Christ,' while the Dominicans did everything they could to smother the cult of their founder despite initial lay attestations that his unprotected burial site under the pavement of a walkway in their church in Bologna was the source of cures and miracles. Not until the Order decided to transfer Dominic's remains in 1233, 12 years after his death, was the discovery made that his body was incorrupt and it exuded the odor of sanctity. This led to his canonization the following year. By comparison, Francis was declared a saint a mere two years after his death in 1226 and his body immediately placed under a high altar in the emerging basilica in Assisi. The Dominicans placed their founder outside the choir screen, on the lay side of their demarcated church where devotions to his tomb would not interfere with the friars' liturgical activities. Yet despite this seemingly nonchalant attitude, the Preachers were well aware of the success of the Franciscans in promoting the cult of Francis and

responded in their own peculiar way. They legislated that all priories have an image of Dominic in their house and that the brethren encourage the secular clergy to celebrate his feast and that of Peter Martyr who was canonized in 1253. Thus both Dominican provincials and general chapters actively promoted the cult of their saints through the diffusion of images, and the author points out that this may be the earliest example of the legislative system of a religious Order being used for the positive promotion of art.

While Ms. Cannon emphasizes the legislative thrust of the Dominican chapters to propagate art, she cleverly exercises the skills of a detective in evaluating to what extent the *Vitae Fratrum* had in determining the kind of art propagated. The 'Lives of the Brethren' was that compendium of tales first ordered by the General Chapter of Paris in 1256 citing the miracles and wonders encountered by the friars and nuns in the formative years of the Order. The compilation was given by Master Humbert de Romans to Gerard de Frachet to edit, and while it was formally approved in 1260, Gerard kept working on it until 1271. Herein one can find the earliest depository of myth in the Order and even an eyewitness account of Dominic's physical features. Ms. Cannon, who is a reader in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute in London, skillfully reasons why Dominic is portrayed with white hair and beard in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella while the *Vitae Fratrum* certifies that he had red hair. It is because the artist, Andrea Bonaiuti, wanted Dominic to resemble Saint Peter as much as possible, elevating his stature to that of an Apostle as he guides laypeople to the gates of Heaven. Elsewhere she quotes Gerard de Frachet's account of a certain friar in the convent of Limoges who found himself tempted in the middle of the night by impure thoughts. To combat these thoughts the friar embraced the image of Christ crucified in his cell to the point that he not only kissed it but licked the feet and found the taste sweet. Cannon deduces that this must not have been a mural, but instead a crucifix, something not legislatively allowed in private cells of the Dominican Order until the Constitutions of 1932! Because of the fact that Frachet was himself prior of that convent of Limoges in 1233 and died there in 1271, Cannon presumes that this story was included by him in the *Vitae Fratrum* in order to gently persuade his readers of the benefits of having such devotional art objects in one's cell.

To organize and showcase her exhaustive research, Dr. Cannon divides most of the chapters of the book by artistic medium. Wall paintings get a separate chapter as do stained glass windows, choir books, altars and altarpieces, and even burial spaces. Gorgeous illustrations decorate the pages throughout. Despite her meticulous gathering of data, however, she is careful not to generalise about the art of the whole Dominican Order from the evidence of a single province over just two centuries. Some of her conclusions though are thought provoking and provide art historical evidence of the differences between the religious Orders. By the evidence studied here, it would seem that unlike the Franciscans who emphasized narrative, the Dominicans emphasized art that was more contemplative and symbolic, placing less value on action than on the totemic quality of stasis. Certainly this is evident in Florence when one gazes upon Bonaiuti's Glorification of Saint Thomas in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella. For here art and magnificence are intertwined. Yet is the potency of this beauty to be seen as an affront to the vow of poverty as the rather provocative – yet easily forgettable – title of Cannon's book insinuates? Certainly not! For art and magnificence are both virtues in the theology of Saint Thomas, the former being an intellectual virtue and the latter a virtue of the will. In cultivating these virtues one can participate more intimately in the Divine Life of Beauty. How? By co-creating with the Creator, and by harmoniously reveling in the very splendor of that creation through which one can see God. For the Order of Preachers then, art becomes a divine manifestation and a form of preaching in itself. Beautiful 'sermons' in stone and beautiful 'sermons' in paint complement the sermons heard in the pulpit. Art becomes sacramental, an avenue of grace for the believer. It is no wonder then that so many members of the various branches of the Dominican Order have engaged art throughout the centuries. For it is, in essence, preaching! Only from a modernist perspective has art lost that spiritual value. Today art historians are less likely to study the theology of religious art than to study its form or its politics and gender issues, or its sociology and the economy of the market place associated with it. Both Marxism and capitalism have obfuscated the spiritual essence of religious art by replacing it with baser, materialist values. Today religious art can be viewed as a manifestation of propaganda and control, or worse as something collectible for the wealthy and the elite, something that has been 'christened' with a monetary value dictated by Sotheby's and Christie's.

Joanna Cannon resists such trendy methodologies. She is delightfully inquisitive while maintaining a respectful attitude toward religious Orders and their governance, their evolution in history, and even their quirkiness. Even though she does not go deeply into the abstract theology behind the visual splendors relished here, she exhibits a passion for her subject matter that is unparalleled today in the study of religious art. This is a significant volume in the history of art produced under the guidance of a religious Order. Would that there were more like it!

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further, apart from thanking the reviewer for his apposite comments on Aquinas, art and magnificence.

---

**Source URL:**<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1679>

### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/91918>