

San Martino ai Monti as a Tridentine Theatre. Dughet's Frescoes as a Visualization of a *sacra rappresentazione*

Abstract

The church of San Martino ai Monti in Rome contains a fresco cycle painted between 1647 and 1651 by Gaspard Dughet and Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi. Prior research on the cycle suggested it represented the Carmelite claim to the 'Elianic Succession', which traced the institutional history of the order back to 930 BC. The basis of this assumption was found in an erudite Latin treatise that evoked a theological discussion with the authors of the *Acta Sanctorum*. This essay probes two questions raised about the cycle by a manuscript with the text for a theatrical play entitled *Rappresentazione di Sant'Elia*, written for the Carmelite prior general Giovanni Antonio Filippini and dated 1647. Firstly, the manuscript shows that the cycle addressed both a vernacular public and the Carmelite community itself: to the former it offered instruction in general Christian virtues; and to the latter it demonstrated the validity of the three monastic vows. This sheds new light on the issue of how church decorations in Seicento Rome could be interpreted in various modes by different audiences, and in particular on the way in which sermons and other serious forms of instruction could be paired with more 'entertaining' forms of oral communication. Secondly, the relationship between the manuscript and frescoes in this particular case forces us to think beyond the standard repertoire of iconographers – the printed text – as the primary vehicle for the diffusion of religious and moral concepts, and consider the spoken word (and its residue, manuscripts) as part of a multimedia strategy to spread Counter-Reformation concepts of spiritual reform.