

‘Artists Hidden from Human Gaze’: Visual Culture and Mysticism in the Nineteenth-Century Convent

Kate Jordan*

*School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, 35 Marylebone
Road, London, NW1 5LS.
Email: k.jordan@westminster.ac.uk*

This article offers a reading of nineteenth-century Roman Catholic theology through the sacred art produced by and for women religious. The practices and devotions that the article explores, however, are not those that drew from the institutional Church but rather from the legacies of mysticism, many of which were shaped in women’s religious communities. Scholars have proposed that mysticism was stripped of its intellectual legitimacy and relegated to the margins of theology by post-Enlightenment rationalism, thereby consigning female religious experience to the politically impotent private sphere. The article suggests, however, that, although the literature of women’s mysticism entered a period of decline from the end of the Counter-Reformation, an authoritative female tradition, expressed in visual and material culture, continued into the nineteenth century and beyond. The art that emerged from convents reflected the increasing visibility of women in the Roman Catholic Church and the burgeoning of folkloric devotional practices and iconography. This article considers two paintings as evidence that, by the nineteenth century, the *aporias*¹ of Christian theology were consciously articulated by women religious through the art that they made: works which, in turn, shaped the creed and culture of the institutional Church. In so doing, the article contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the material culture of religion.

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‘artists, whose beautiful handiwork is animated with life, who form souls in purity and ornament them with the ineffable grace of Christian virtue . . . artists hidden from human gaze, bestowing on the soul entrusted to their care the blessing of peace and the ornament of Divine grace’.²

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¹ The word *aporia* is aligned in this article with Alexander Nagel and Lorenzo Pericolo’s description: *aporia* is conceived as a self-aware internal contradiction or paradox within theology. A. Nagel and L. Pericolo, eds. *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

² Henri Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia of Pelletier, foundress and the first Superior General of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd of Angers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1953 translation from original 1893), 372.

Over the past twenty years, Grace Jantzen and Caroline Walker Bynum have brought feminist perspectives to theology that seek to challenge the dominant versions of Christian mysticism: from those that describe a universal mystic experience to those that reject the autonomous subject altogether.³ While both Jantzen and Bynum acknowledge mystic traditions, they attempt to destabilise the meta-narratives of mysticism, established chiefly by William James, by highlighting gender difference in the way that spirituality was experienced, expressed and interpreted.⁴ Both have developed their arguments through a close study of the written works of medieval women and both agree that what has been retrospectively labelled mysticism ushered in a 'golden age' of female religious authority in the thirteenth-century, paving the way for subsequent female visionaries and thinkers.⁵ Both Jantzen and Bynum's research is built largely on literary evidence and, perhaps inevitably, peter out after the medieval period (Bynum) and the Counter-Reformation (Jantzen). Jantzen's reasons for concluding her study at the end of the early modern era were explicit. She argued that one consequence of the church being superseded by the state as the major organ of power across Europe, was that religious thought bifurcated: mysticism retreated into the private sphere whilst theology gained ascendancy in the public sphere by establishing itself as an intellectual branch of the Enlightenment. In this account, the mystic experience turned inwards at precisely the same historical moment that separate spheres ideology gained purchase: no longer seers, prophets and philosophers, women were relegated to guardian angels of morality. As Jantzen describes, 'both mysticism and women, then, became constructed as private and personal, having nothing to do with politics'.⁶ Since Jantzen's work, other scholars have suggested corrections to this argument. For example, Luca Sandoni reveals the rising political role of nineteenth century visionaries, through an examination of the debates waged in both

³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California: University of California Press, 1992) and Grace M. Jantzen, *Power Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴ The early canonical texts of mysticism include those by the writer and Anglican priest William Ralph Inge (1860–1954), the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910) and the writer and theologian Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941): William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism: Considered in Eight Lectures Delivered Before the University of Oxford* (London: Methuen, 1899); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1912). These scholars offered an overview which continues to influence discourse. All three foreground literary and written works as intermediaries of mysticism rather than either bodily experience or material culture.

⁵ Though both draw conclusions from the written work of women, both also stress the significance of women's bodily encounters. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, has explored in detail the relationship between food and the mystic experience.

⁶ Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, 190.

scientific and theological discourse on the supernatural nature of female religious ecstasy. While Sandoni's work is less concerned with female agency, it nevertheless highlights the significance of female mysticism in the modern-era Roman Catholic Church.⁷ More recently, Leonardo Rossi lends weight to the argument that mysticism offered Roman Catholic women a public voice and that, in fact, they continued a medieval tradition of women as mystic seers. Here, Rossi identifies a 'discernible female "invasion" of religious life' and an 'overflowing of mysticism' in nineteenth-century Catholicism.⁸ These scholars explore the political and 'public' authority of the women studied, but, as this article suggests, there is scope to explore the 'domestic' setting of convents and the manner in which women themselves understood and expressed religious experience. This article builds on the work of these scholars in challenging Jantzen's characterisation of female mysticism as a spent political force. It will argue that we must treat with caution the inferences that Jantzen has drawn from the dearth of written accounts by women. We might productively look elsewhere for evidence of an authoritative female spirituality – one which has failed to assert itself in either the canon of mysticism or feminist discourse but is, nevertheless, part of a self-confident female tradition. As the written word came to be guarded with increasing jealousy by the academy, the material and visual culture produced by women described by the nineteenth-century priest, Henri Pasquier as 'artists hidden from human gaze'⁹ became a potent means and expression of women's soulful communion with God.

Literary theorist Robert P. Fletcher proposes that, as a seat of mystic experience, 'by the nineteenth century in England the convent had been replaced by the home'.¹⁰ But in fact, female spirituality was widely and creatively explored in nineteenth-century convents. Hitherto, scholarly accounts of women's mystic experiences have been drawn largely from enclosed orders – women who were confined to the cloister and focused on meditative devotion. The reasons for this are plain: in women's religious orders, mystic experience is contingent upon contemplation. I suggest, however, that active sisterhoods – those whose apostolate included education, health or social care in the lay community – shared an emphasis on interior spirituality but experienced it through devotional labour as well as prayer. This served the purpose of providing a spiritual justification for the paradox of being both active within and removed from society: the dual identities

⁷ Luca Sandoni, 'Political Mobilisation of Ecstatic Experiences in Late Nineteenth-Century Catholic France: The Case of Doctor Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre and his Stigmatisées (1868-27)', *Disputatio Philosophica* 16, no. 1 (2014): 19-41.

⁸ Leonardo Rossi, "'Religious Virtuosi'" and Charismatic Leaders: the public authority of mystic women in nineteenth-century Italy', *Women's History Review* 29, Issue 1 (2020): 90-108.

⁹ Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia of Pelletier*, 372.

¹⁰ Robert Fletcher, "'Convent Thoughts": Augusta Webster and the Body Politics of the Victorian Cloister', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31.1 (2003): 295-313, at 297.

which are often symbolised in the culture of women religious by Mary and Martha.¹¹ That the emergence of a new spirituality, one that reflected the way that sisters were reimagining their charism, suggests a certain expediency does not detract from its integrity. The means of achieving a mystical union with God, whether or not we accept that the experience itself is universal or, indeed, actual, have always tracked major cultural and theological shifts. Scholarly work on the spirituality of Victorian sisterhoods has identified a common thread of what I shall term mysticism, observing 'the special connexion [sic] with God transcending the material', but place this firmly within the context of their pastoral work.¹² In emphasising vocational labour, pragmatism and austerity, these scholars have missed the peculiar significance of art in the spirituality of these communities. In order to examine English convent culture it is necessary to examine the influence of continental Europe. The art discussed here was produced in an international context: in search of artistic inspiration, women religious cast their nets widely and rapidly disseminated works of art (or reproductions) throughout their convents – across Europe and beyond – and between orders. Indeed, to identify a 'national' style in English convent art relies on an understanding of the style that Roman Catholics term 'international'. The following will consider artworks that illustrate how active women religious in both England and continental Europe embraced interior mystic spirituality and found ways to express it in an art form that could, like Eastern icons, transcend narrative depictions of the subject matter and operate as stimulants to mystic experience. Moreover, I suggest that precisely the same cultural, social and religious conditions that produced these works also defined the emerging psychology and scholarship of mystic spirituality. In foregrounding the production of visual and material culture as a devotional practice, this article reflects and contributes to a growing body of research on the subject. This area of scholarship builds on the work of historians such as Colleen McDannell, who rightly argues that 'Christian material culture does not simply reflect an existing reality. Experiencing the physical dimension of religion, helps *bring about* religious values, norms, behaviours and attitudes'.¹³ In more recent years, Lucinda Matthews-Jones and Timothy Jones have developed this approach further, arguing that 'objects play an integral

¹¹ Allison Peers, ed. *The Complete Works of Teresa of Avila* (London: Continuum, 2002). In her seminal work *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila explicitly counsels that 'Mary and Martha must combine' in order for women religious to have 'the strength to serve', 215.

¹² Hope Stone, 'Constraints on the Mother Foundresses: Contrasts in Anglican and Roman Catholic Headship in Victorian England' (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 1993), 36.

¹³ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 2.

role in both institutional and personal expressions of faith.¹⁴ Elsewhere scholars have argued that informal social practices and groups contribute as much to the experience of faith as institutions. Both Meredith McGuire and Nancy Ammerman's research into everyday and lived religion explores possibilities for 'describing the social worlds in which religious ideas, practices, groups and experiences make an appearance [and] describing what religion itself looks like'.¹⁵ Though Ammerman's work discusses modern and contemporary practices, it also potentially offers ways of understanding historical groups: as Jantzen and Bynum both propose, women's mysticism was expressed through precisely the informal and vernacular channels that Ammerman describes.

Approaches to Mysticism

As Jantzen observes, the term mysticism is historically sensitive. Although the words 'mystic' and 'mystery' are used frequently, 'mysticism' does not appear in any of the nineteenth-century texts that I have found in convent archives and libraries: as a description of a distinct arm of Christian theology, it was not in popular use during the period that they were written. However, one of the earliest attempts at an overview of Christian mysticism was produced in 1899 by the Anglican priest William Ralph Inge, and, significantly, the term was used by J. Beavington Atkinson in 1882 to describe the work of the Roman Catholic artist Friedrich Overbeck.¹⁶ We may therefore assume that the term had some, if limited, currency in nineteenth-century English Roman Catholic thought. The concept of a 'mystic' experience, drawn directly from Inge's taxonomy, was qualified in 1902 by William James in *Varieties of Mystic Experience*. James, a philosopher and clinical psychologist, attempted a scientific definition of mysticism in what has retrospectively been termed the 'Perennialist' approach. James developed this through the construction of four categories, to which a mystic experience must conform: *ineffability; noesis; transience and passivity*.¹⁷ This paradigm, though widely challenged, cemented 'mysticism' as an umbrella term for a range of thinkers and texts, from Platonic philosophy to Counter-Reformation ecstasies. As a self-contained category, however, mysticism has suggested fresh and important theoretical approaches in the fields of psychology, theology, philosophy and feminist discourse. Grace Jantzen mounted a

¹⁴ Timothy Willem Jones and Lucinda Matthews-Jones, eds. *Material Religion in Modern Britain: The Spirit of Things* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 2.

¹⁵ Nancy T. Ammerman, ed. *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6. See also Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*.

¹⁷ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 371.

challenge to Perennialism by calibrating the terms in which a 'mystic' experience might be thought to exist. Both she and Bynum suggest that the spirituality of medieval and Counter-Reformation women was characterised by a bodily (often eroticised) rather than psychic encounter with God, therefore undermining, for feminists, the utility of a term predicated on interiority. In describing a distinct female tradition and rejecting 'ineffability' as a contingent factor, Jantzen attempted to rescue women's religious experience from the murky backwaters of the private and personal and restore its political and intellectual legitimacy. In disrupting the 'mystic' category, Jantzen implicitly rejects the value of interior spirituality which, for the women that I will be discussing, was authoritative, creative, influential and enduring. Though Jantzen is undoubtedly right that the idea of ineffability would have 'baffled' Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila, it certainly would not have baffled the women discussed here: while they did not use the word 'mysticism' they would, as his contemporaries, likely have recognised James's description of it.

Mystic texts

The written works that were owned and read by active sisters reveal a great deal about the way that mystic spirituality was understood and practiced. In addition to the communities discussed in this article, orders such as the English Dominicans, and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, collected works of mystics identified by James and Inge, such as those by Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Catherine of Siena and St Gertrude. It is clear that these were not read simply for their scholarly or historical value but also operated as spiritual handbooks. The 1869 biography of Mother Margaret Hallahan, foundress of the English Dominicans, for example, offers an intriguing account of her spirituality, which makes explicit references to mysticism: 'Her letters give evidence of that reading of the best ascetic authors which she pursued all her life, they also reveal her deep and accurate knowledge of moral and mystic science'.¹⁸ It goes on to describe a super-sensual state that harmonises with James's notion of ineffability:

If a director required [Hallahan] in obedience to try at self-introspection, she strove indeed, but that nubecula, as I believe the mystics would call it, came over her soul: she grew very suffering; her imagination, which she habitually mistrusted and kept under, began to work; she grew sleepless; a heavy pressure

¹⁸ W. Ullathorne, 'Preface' in *Life of Mother Margaret Mary Hallahan by her Religious Children* (New York: Catholic Publication House, 1869), iv. Though Ullathorne rather than Hallahan herself, is using the word 'mystic' here, its appearance in an important community volume containing memoirs written by the religious, demonstrates that the term had currency.

was felt on her head, and that pressure increased until she could only compare it to an iron hand thrust into her brain.¹⁹

The word that seems to specifically synchronize with ‘ineffability’ here is ‘nubecula’. I have yet to find other examples of the use of this term but employed, as it is here, in conjunction with the word ‘mystic’, it is surely descriptive of an altered state consciousness.

Ignatian Spirituality

The dominant mystic influence in the charism of all of the orders mentioned was that of Ignatius Loyola, cited both by James and Inge. The Rule of St Ignatius provided the model for the constitutions of many active female religious communities in the nineteenth century. Fundamental to Ignatian theology is the concept that God is present in everything (including sin) and that prayer can take a multitude of forms - most significantly, labour in the service of God. The Jesuits, accordingly, designed an apostolate that incorporated education and missionary work. William James refers to this ‘active’ spirituality in his description of Ignatius: ‘St Ignatius was a mystic but his mysticism made him one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived’.²⁰ This was not at the expense, however, of meditative prayer. Contemplation bore equal weight to work in Ignatian spirituality and religious were expected to follow the Spiritual Exercises composed by Ignatius between 1522–1524. The Exercises comprised a set of prayers and meditations themed around the life of Christ and performed daily for a period of 28 to 30 days. These were specifically designed to help the meditator achieve a mystic union with God. James describes their function thus:

Such manuals as Saint Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises recommend the disciple to expel sensation by a graduated series of efforts to imagine holy scenes. The acme of this kind of discipline would be a semi-hallucinatory mono-ideism- an imaginary figure of Christ, for example, coming fully to occupy the mind. Sensorial images of this sort, whether literal or symbolic, play an enormous part in mysticism.²¹

Ignatian spirituality naturally lent itself to those religious orders with an active apostolate, which constituted the large majority in nineteenth century England. Women’s communities, in particular, were keen to maintain or cultivate a sharply defined religious character in order to distinguish their work from secular philanthropy. Practicing meditative contemplation in addition to the offices underscored the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁰ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 306.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 307.

monastic heritage of modern communities and provided a theological and cultural framework within which to reconcile Mary and Martha. Both of the orders that will be discussed here – the Society of the Sacred Heart, founded in France in 1800 by Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779-1865), and The Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, founded in England in 1872 by Frances (later Mother Magdalene) Taylor (1832-1900) – operated under the Ignatian Rule. Not only was this instructive in the practical organisation of their institutions, it also exerted a considerable influence over their spirituality. The Society of the Sacred Heart, for example, was founded by the French nun, Madeleine Sophie Barat in 1800 with the express aim, like the Jesuits, of promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart internationally, a vocation that was operated through the foundation of schools.²² The Society of the Sacred Heart is, in fact, informally regarded as the partner order of the Jesuits. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God, a simple-vowed congregation with a broad apostolate that ranged from nursing to refuge work also had close connections to the Jesuits. Frances Taylor, foundress of the community, produced with her Jesuit confessor, Fr James Clare, a translation from French of meditations in an Ignatian style and spirit.²³ Whilst most histories of Taylor have focused on the practical nature of her spirituality, it is clear that she was also personally engaged with the mystic elements of Ignatian spirituality. In a letter to her niece, Charlotte Coles written in 1889, Taylor writes:

I meant to have told you that I did twice, as I believe, have a glimpse into the other world. Once was after my dearest mother's death. I saw her in heavenly rapture, but the singular part was - she was beautiful and young and yet exactly like herself; I can't explain how, but I seemed to understand how we shall recognise our own eternity.²⁴

It is important to note, however, that although the Ignatian Rule was instructive, the foundresses of many orders, particularly those that operated under papal rather than episcopal authority, were at liberty to construct, within the constraints of formal theology, their own interpretations of Catholic spirituality. Though these were in line with the Church's teachings, they represented a significant opportunity

²² Hereafter referred to as RSCJ.

²³ F. Taylor, trans. and Father James Clare, ed. *Practical Meditations for every day of the Year on the Life of Our Lord composed chiefly for the use of religious by a Father of the Society of Jesus*. Described on spine: *New Meditations for Every Day of the year* (London, 1868). Taylor also produced her own set of Ignatian Meditations, first published in 1880 entitled, *Short Meditations according to the method of St Ignatius*. This was included in a list of her published works in the Poor Servants of the Mother of God archive (hereafter SMG Archive), but there are no copies in existence.

²⁴ Francis Devas, *Mother Mary Magdalen of the Sacred Heart, Foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1927), 338-9.

for women to collect ideas, images and devotional iconography from a range of sources and introduce these to the lay community via their pastoral and educational work.

Mystic Iconography in Nineteenth Century Roman Catholicism

Michel de Certeau, whose readings of Christian mysticism shaped postmodern scholarship in the field, suggests that the mystical, in continual conflict with itself, appears in innately ‘paradoxical forms’.²⁵ My research on the art and architecture of women’s religious communities proposes that a conscious expression of this *aporia* lay at the heart of the spatial planning and aesthetic culture of the convent.²⁶ This is most apparent in the spiritual iconography of women’s nineteenth century-convents that deviated in nuanced but significant ways from that of the institutional Roman Catholic Church. The English author and clergyman, Montague Summers, wrote in 1950 that, ‘one hundred years ago... mysticism was regarded with distrust and suspicion’ by the English Catholic Church’.²⁷ The brand of mysticism that Summers alludes to here was almost certainly the kind being imported from Southern Europe. Mary Heimann has convincingly disputed the received wisdom that Roman Catholicism in England turned quickly towards Roman Ultramontanism after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850, suggesting instead that the Church maintained many of the texts and devotions of the English recusant tradition. Despite the more conservative tastes of the English Catholic Church, however, Susan O’Brien proposes that the religious culture of missionary nuns, many of whom taught in Catholic schools, informally introduced popular devotions that the institutional Church had been reluctant to promote but which have proved obstinately enduring.²⁸ It is certainly the case that women constructed, through the visual iconography of mystic spirituality, their own, often markedly ‘un-English’, cultural identity. It is important to note here that devotional practices were not synonymous with mystical experiences, but instead were often (though not always) conductors of mystic experience.

²⁵ Michel de Certeau and Marsanne Brammer trans. ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics* 22.2 (1992): 11–25 at 16.

²⁶ Kate Jordan, ‘Ordered Spaces, Separate Spheres: Women and the Building of British Convents, 1829–1939’ (PhD diss., University of London, 2015). This argues that women religious explicitly embraced conflicting practices and ideas in the devotional culture and organisation of the convent. These would not have been understood as ‘paradoxes’ but Inge’s reference to ‘mystical paradox’ indicates that the word was being used in relation to mysticism.

²⁷ Montague Summers, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1950), 41.

²⁸ Susan O’Brien, ‘*Terra Incognita*: The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England’, *Past and Present* 21 (Nov. 1988), 110–140.

The Sacred Heart

Both of the communities in the following case studies incorporated devotion to the Sacred Heart within their charism: The Society of the Sacred Heart, which was formed specifically to promote the devotion, and The Poor Servants of the Mother of God, who joined the Jesuit's Apostleship of Prayer which was established in dedication to the Sacred Heart.²⁹ Whilst the support of Cardinal Manning helped to secure the Sacred Heart as an important devotional icon in England it was, as Susan O'Brien suggests, nuns who were the primary 'agents for its widespread popularity in Victorian Catholicism'.³⁰ There can be little doubt about the role of the Sacred Heart in stimulating what James calls ineffability: as Mother Janet Erskine Stuart, describing her contemplation of the icon in 1896 states, 'I wish above all to acquire interior spirit and union with the Sacred Heart'.³¹ Though the English Catholic Church was slow to endorse quasi-mystical devotions such as that of the Sacred Heart, they were an integral feature of the vernacular theologies and culture of continental Catholicism. Mary Heimann suggests that the English religious character, shaped by the Reformation and Enlightenment, was inherently programmed to seek a rational theology to frame paradox. In contrast, the spirituality of women religious, liberated from the constraints of politics, history and tradition, was able to embrace mystery without theological difficulty. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that these women looked towards the increasingly mystical and, arguably, feminized Catholicism of Italy, France and Spain for a visual language that could express Christian mystery.³²

²⁹ Although versions of the Sacred Heart can be found dating back to the Middle Ages, its most recent incarnation was revealed in a vision to Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-90), a French Visitation nun.

³⁰ Susan O'Brien, 'French nuns in nineteenth-century England', *Past and Present* 154.1 (1997): 142-180, at 172.

³¹ Maud Monahan, *The Life and Letters of Janet Erskine Stuart, Superior General of the Society of the Sacred Heart, 1857 to 1914* (London: Longman's Green and Co. 1931), 91.

³² The perceived feminisation of the Catholic Church is the subject of a large body of scholarship, much of which builds on Barbara Welter's research on the development of Christianity in nineteenth-century North America, including Barbara Welter, 'The Feminization of American Religion', in Mary S. Hartmann and Lois W. Banner eds. *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). This trajectory has been problematised in recent years in Patrick Pasture et al., eds. *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), which argues that the term 'feminisation' carries a variety of possible meanings. In this article, I apply the term in relation to characteristics that were considered feminine in nineteenth-century religious culture, such as emotion, domesticity, sentimentality and anti-intellectualism. For examples of this interpretation of the term, see Rossi, "'Religious Virtuosi'"; Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2009); Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); John Shelton Reed, 'A Female Movement: The feminization of nineteenth-century Anglo Catholicism', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 57, No. 2 (June 1988), pp. 199-238; Maria LaMonaca, *Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2008).

Mysticism and Art

The desire to visually express Christian mystery has a long heritage. David Morgan, in exploring the role of art in Christianity, observes specific practices tied to forms of worship. For example, he notes that the act of ‘*Schaufrömmigkeit* (literally the “piety of looking and seeing”) was an important component of religious life in late medieval Europe, when small devotional images and altarpieces depicting the Passion of Christ were a vital form of worship, prayer and devotion’.³³ Bernard McGinn also discusses representations of the Passion and the Trinity from early Christian to medieval art, seeing in it ‘the paradoxical effort to make the invisible somehow accessible to our gaze’.³⁴ Here, McGinn examines not only the contemplation of art as a mystical bridge to God but also the production of art, an idea that began to gain purchase with late eighteenth and nineteenth-century medieval revivalism. In reaction to enlightenment empiricism and secularism, artists, theologians and writers sought to re-engage mystic thought as a means of negotiating the Divine. At the vanguard of this movement were the German Romantics, for whom the musings of Wilhelm Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck provided a loose manifesto: ‘You must wait as with prayer, for the blessed hours when the favour of heaven illumines your inner being with superior receptivity. Only then will your soul unite completely with the works of artists.’³⁵

The Nazarene School

The Nazarene school of painters incorporated Wackenroder’s philosophy into a theology of aesthetics that looked back to ‘pre-Raphaelite’ art, pioneering a style that was, it scarcely needs noting, highly influential in England. The movement emerged from the Brotherhood of St Luke or Lukasbund founded in 1809 at the Vienna Academy and informally led by Friedrich Overbeck (1789-1869), a deeply spiritual man who wrestled with the competing call of monastic and artistic life. Overbeck, Franz Pfaff, Ludwig Vogel and Johann Konrad Hottinger arrived in Rome in 1810 where they established an artist’s co-operative in the empty monastery of San Isidoro on the Pincian Hill. Over the proceeding years they were joined by fellow German artists, including Peter Von Cornelius, many of whom, like Overbeck, converted to

³³ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 59. For a more recent examination of the relationship between sacred art and devotion, see David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

³⁴ Bernard McGinn, ‘On Mysticism and Art’, *Daedalus*, 132, No. 2, (Spring, 2003): 132.

³⁵ Joshua C. Taylor, ed. *Nineteenth-century Theories of Art* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 137.

Catholicism. For Overbeck, concerned with the archaeology of Christian art and the rediscovery of sacred symbols or 'hieroglyphs', Catholicism was the necessary starting point. It was also the only branch of Western Christianity that, for the Nazarenes more widely, continued to explore and embrace mysticism.³⁶ The Lukasbund exerted a powerful influence on Italian religious art and actively supported the emerging Nazarene-inspired Purismo Religioso movement, whose ideals were enshrined in a manifesto written by the artist Antonio Bianchini in 1843.³⁷ The Lukasbund themselves, and Overbeck in particular, enjoyed the patronage of Pope Pius IX who reigned from 1846-1878, under whose administration much of the residual secularism of the First French Empire was swept away: religious orders flourished once again, devotion to the Sacred Heart was consolidated by the introduction of a dedicated feast day and the beatification of Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-1690), Papal infallibility was decreed and Mariology became inscribed in Catholic worship via the newly defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception.³⁸ In its wake, Marian apparitions abounded and countless miracles were attributed to Mary. Cordula Grewe proposes that the Lukasbund drew from a range of mystical sources, both historical and contemporary, in the creation of a new art. This restored the ascendancy of the symbolic, which had been eclipsed by the high Renaissance pre-occupation with form and beauty. Grewe rehearses Hans Belting's argument, first published in German in 1990,³⁹ in which he describes the ideological shift from medieval to renaissance art as:

a stark divide in the history of Christian representation between, on the one hand, the image (*Bild*) as a miracleworking, magical, and talismanic holy object and, on the other hand, art (*Kunst*) as a modern notion born in the Renaissance, which replaces the conception of "authentic appearance" with that of the self-reflective and self-contained artwork. From this new aesthetic perspective, Belting claims, "art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake—art as invented by famous artists and defined by a proper theory".⁴⁰

³⁶ Cordula Grewe, *Painting the Sacred in the Age of Romanticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), Cordula Grewe, *The Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept* (Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 2015).

³⁷ Lydia Salviucci Insolera, 'L'Ultima Grande Visita All Collegio Romano Di Pio IX, Documenti Inediti', *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae*, Vol. 45 (2007) pp 39-85.

³⁸ See for example, Elizabeth Hayes Alvarez, *The Valiant woman: The Virgin Mary in Nineteenth Century American Culture* (North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 2016) and Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996). For Marguerite Marie Alacoque, see above, n. 29.

³⁹ Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich: Beck, 1990).

⁴⁰ Cordula Grewe, *The Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 2015), 97.

Grewe, however, disputes Belting's proposition that *Bild* and *Kunst* are irreconcilable categories. She suggests that the Nazarenes were able to mesh concepts of the aesthetic and iconic, arguing that style and composition could be as much an integration of the holy as an expression of 'art for art's sake':

... formal conception could bear religious meaning and mark the aesthetic object, that is, art, as a means to venerate the holy. What is at stake in the Nazarene project is a redefinition of style from arbitrary aesthetic choice to expression of holiness that, not unlike the Holy Image, can transmit the sanctity of the original to its replica. It is my contention that the Nazarenes expanded the substitutional principle of painted icons to pictorial appearance.⁴¹

In largely Protestant England the relationship between mysticism and art was enacted in subtly different ways. A number of scholars have explored intersections between the two, discerning themes within the Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements that were certainly in dialogue with the notion of privacy identified by Jantzen – interior spiritualities that belonged as much to male homosexual subculture as to the domestic home. Ellis Hanson has also observed that the prominence of (particularly Roman Catholic) ritualism in the work of Decadents such as Huysmans and Wilde, inscribed a particular relationship between mysticism and the homoerotic – one which, he argues, pushed the literature of the Aesthetic movement to the margins of literary criticism until the mid-twentieth century.⁴² Indeed, the fact that Inge described Huysman's mystic novels as 'repulsive' whilst praising Wordsworth, whom he considered 'the greatest prophet... of contemplative mysticism' for his 'sane and manly spirit', would seem to support this and also demonstrate an awareness that mystic art had, by the end of the nineteenth century acquired a reputation at variance with Victorian morality.⁴³ The zeitgeist of nineteenth-century mysticism gave birth to strikingly different offspring: while the Nazarenes and Decadents shared a common ancestor in the German Romantic movement they were separated by an ideological gulf. Nevertheless, a precarious middle ground existed between the two in Anglo Catholic art and architecture.⁴⁴ It is worth noting that, although the architecture of nineteenth-century Anglo Catholic and Roman Catholic churches shared many outward

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴² Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴³ Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 305.

⁴⁴ Dominic Janes brings together the characterisation in Victorian culture of both the aesthetic and Oxford movements as effeminate, highlighting the emphasis that both placed on the mystery of the incarnation – the union of man and God – which he suggests speaks to a new (or revived) fusion of the Eucharistic and erotic, evocatively illustrated by Edward Burne-Jones in *The Merciful Knight* (1863-4) and Simeon Solomon's *The Mystery of Faith* (1870). Dominic Janes, 'William Bennett's heresy: male same-sex desire and the art of the Eucharist', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17.4 (2012): 413-35.

features, Anglo Catholic art, perhaps tainted by the sensuality of Aestheticism, as expressed in the work of artists such as Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon, appeared to be untranslatable. English Roman Catholic women religious instead, looked to Rome for artistic inspiration. Notwithstanding the vital distinctions between gendered and queer cultures, it is curious that English lay women are largely missing from the variety of mystic art, characterised by Solomon and others. This is not to say, however, that they were absent from the field of religious art. During the nineteenth-century the church offered women a range of artistic outlets – from the embroidery of kneelers and vestments to the design of stained glass and even chapels.⁴⁵ Though it might be tempting to look for comparisons between the paintings in the following case studies and religious art produced by lay women during the same period, to do so would muddy the distinction between the ecclesiastical and the mystic as religious categories, the home and the convent as private spheres. The evidence that emerges from the testament of sisters, suggests that, although art was certainly produced in the service of the Church, it was also a means of entering into a personal dialogue with God. As Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus wrote: 'A Christian art is one of the most important branches of education, second only to that of speaking and writing and in some respects even beyond the language'.⁴⁶ The significance of this form of devotional art will be explored in two paintings 'created' by nuns from two different orders: The Society of the Sacred Heart and the Poor Servants of the Mother of the God. Both paintings function as the iconic image of each community, employ devices from the genre of mystic art and have acquired a mythology within the congregation.

The Society of the Sacred Heart and Mater Admirabilis

The Society of the Sacred Heart's house in Rome, the convent of the Trinità dei Monti, houses *Mater Admirabilis*, a fresco painted in 1844 of the young Virgin. This is not only the iconic image of the order but also inspired a cult of its own, attracting devotees from women's religious communities across the world (figure 1).

The story behind the painting rapidly established itself in Catholic miracle lore. According to the community's sources, it was executed by

⁴⁵ The opportunities available to women in the production of ecclesiastical art have been discussed recently in Lynne Walker, 'Women and Church Art', in Teresa Sladen and Andrew Saint, eds. *Churches 1870-1914*, Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design, 3 (2010), 121-140; Jim Cheshire, 'Elizabeth Simcoe and her Daughters: Amateur Ecclesiastical Design in the 1840s', in Michael Hall and Rosemary Hill, eds. *The 1840s*, Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design, 1, (2008), 87-95; Jenny Uglow, *The Pinecone* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013).

⁴⁶ Julia Wadham, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly*, (Pantheon, 1957), 192.



Figure 1. Detail of *Mater Admirabilis*, Pauline Perdrau RSCJ, 1844, Convent of the Trinità dei Monti, Rome. Photograph author's own.

a novice of the order, Pauline Perdrau.⁴⁷ Perdrau was seized one day by a desire to paint a fresco of the Virgin Mary in the cloister. Perdrau's lack of experience of working in fresco, however, occasioned some

⁴⁷ Perdrau's name is curiously absent from any accounts of *Mater Admirabilis* that were published externally. As far as this author is aware, only publications produced by the RSCJ and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus name her as the artist.

resistance towards the enterprise from the Mother Superior. She eventually relented, however, and a plasterer was employed to prepare the surface each day and offer advice. On completion of the painting, the Mother Superior was horrified to see how garish the colours were. The painting was dismissed as 'hideous' and immediately covered with a cloth in the hope that, as the plaster dried, the livid tones would mellow. After some weeks, to everyone's relief, the colours improved and the painting, which was now unanimously hailed a success, received a Papal blessing after a visit by Pius IX. In some accounts a miraculous transformation of the painting occurred behind the cloth. Some months later, a priest prayed before the painting to be cured of a throat complaint. His subsequent recovery was proclaimed a miracle and the painting quickly became a pilgrimage site. Pauline Perdrau's memoirs, though curiously silent on the subject of *Mater Admirabilis*, reveal a great deal about her spirituality. In 1843 Perdrau travelled to Loreto where her vocation as the servant of Mary was revealed to her through a mystic experience:

I was meditating there silently, looking with emotion at the sacred walls of this place where the Holy Virgin had pronounced the *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, when a light of holy grace suddenly illuminated the sacred words; I repeated this *Ecce Ancilla*. It seemed to me that I was there, present at the great mystery of the incarnation: 'You have been the servant of God' I said to the Holy Virgin, 'do you want that I should be yours until death?' I meditated at length on these mysteries, playing the role of the humble servant. I concluded that Mary, who herself had dictated the exercises of St. Ignatius at Manresa, had inspired me also to enter into an intimate union with the mysteries of the holy life.⁴⁸

Upon returning to the Trinità, Perdrau determined to paint the Virgin. Having settled on the subject matter, however, she puzzled over how to portray her.

The community was in the habit of assembling for recreation in one of the cloisters. The nuns with their needlework, sat in a semicircle round the presiding Superior Mère de Coriolis. It so happened that she was called away by the arrival of a visitor: "what a pity", commented one of the nuns. "I wish Our Lady would take Reverend Mother's place and preside at our recreation." In a flash Pauline had found what she was seeking, and there passed before her imagination a sudden and momentary vision of *Mater Admirabilis* – Our Lady seated in the Superior's place, her work in her hand, the open cloisters as background. "would you like me to paint Our Lady in this gallery?" She said shyly, pointing to the semi-circular archway of a shallow niche in the wall of the gallery. "oh yes, yes" was the unanimous answer.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Pauline Perdrau, *Les Loisirs de L'Abbaye, Souvenirs de la Mere Pauline Perdrau sur la vie du Notre Sainte Mere* (Rome: Maison Mere, 1931), 14.

⁴⁹ Leopoldina Keppel, *Mater Admirabilis 1844-1944* (London: Sands and Co. c.1944), 12.



Figure 2. *Mater Admirabilis* in the corridor at the Trinità dei Monti Convent, Rome. Photograph author's own.

The painting self-consciously interacted with its intended audience and the particular activities taking place within the corridor: the Virgin, in sympathy with the sisters, resting momentarily from her spinning and lost in contemplation (figure 2).

That the product of Pauline Perdrau's interior spirituality should be a work of art is not surprising: she had received some formal training as an artist before entering the Society and had undertaken some commissions. Indeed, like Overbeck, she had been conflicted over whether to

pursue a career as an artist, as her parents wished, or whether to enter religious life.⁵⁰ Whilst at the Trinità, she had been tutored by Alexander Maximilian Seitz, a student of Cornelius and Overbeck, who was resident in the neighbouring San Isidoro monastery.⁵¹ The influence of the Nazarene school on *Mater Admirabilis* is manifest, as Grewe notes: 'The lyrical archaism and pastel coloring mark it as a true heir to the Lukasbund aesthetic, picking up on the brethren's early fascination with Fra Angelico and early Renaissance fresco. The pious literature is full of praise for the work's beauty of form, harmonious effect, and spiritual depth.'⁵² The debt to renaissance art was not lost on nineteenth-century pilgrims either, as the following critique indicates:

Kneeling before the *Madonna of the Lily*, one has the feeling that the painter had prayed before she painted, as was the case for instance, with Fra Angelico, and that her imagination, inspired by faith and love of God, conceived in prayer what she afterwards translated into this representation of the pure Virgin in the Temple... a deep and holy calm filled my soul.⁵³

Mater Admirabilis illustrates a significant shift activated by the Nazarenes, from the storytelling of the Baroque and Counter-Reformation towards the iconography of early Renaissance and Medieval art. The painting is interactive rather than didactic: Perdrau employs the 'hieroglyphs' of lilies, spinning distaff, twelve stars and open book to stimulate contemplation rather than as narrative tools.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is significant that the gaze of the intended viewer of *Mater Admirabilis* was disrupted in both temporal (the sisters' concentration was largely focused on needlework) and spatial terms (the semi-circular configuration of the needleworkers meant that the image

⁵⁰ Pauline Perdrau, *Les Loisirs de L'Abbaye, Souvenirs de la Mere Pauline Perdrau sur la vie du Notre Sainte Mere* (Rome: Maison Mere, 1931). It was by no means unique for women religious to have studied art before entering the convent. Emma Raimbach, for example, was a talented professional artist who was awarded in 1826 a silver medal by the Society of Arts and regularly exhibited at the RA. After entering the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Hammersmith in 1847 she continued, painting deeply personal work that reflected her spirituality and vocation but which was no longer sold – little, thereafter, went on public display. Of the few of these that did, was a painting entitled 'Mother Regaudiat and three penitents' which was exhibited at the RA and was subsequently donated to Bishop Wiseman. For a short biography of Raimbach, see *Review of the Principle Acquisitions of the Year 1919, Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: HMSO, 1922), 56.

⁵¹ Various Sacred Heart sources name the tutor as 'Stetz' but the annals of the Society of the Holy Child of Jesus name the tutor of both Perdrau and Connolly as Flatz. Gebhard Flatz was at the time resident at San Isidoro. Both Cordula Grewe and Monique Luiard have suggested that the artist who tutored Perdrau was Maximillian Seitz.

⁵² Grewe, *The Nazarenes*, 109.

⁵³ Keppel, *Mater Admirabilis 1844-1944*, 20.

⁵⁴ Although Perdrau was not explicit about the Marian iconography that she employed, she drew from a widely-understood tradition. The painting includes lilies, symbolising purity and also the twelve stars which relate to a reference in Revelations to Mary's crown of perfection. These were both common features of depictions of the Virgin in nineteenth-century Catholic art and would have been familiar and legible to all women religious.

was in the purview of most). It was not until pilgrims, such as the priest mentioned above, were admitted to the hitherto private space, that focused contemplation of the image took place. What separates *Mater Admirabilis* from the work of the Lukasbund, however, is its candid autobiography. Perdrau draws less on the canon of Christian symbolism than on her own domestic experience – the spinning distaff recalling her (unhappy) childhood labours and the colour of Mary's robes a memory, according to several Sacred Heart sources, of her favourite dress.⁵⁵ Whilst it was certainly not unprecedented to portray Mary spinning, it is clear that this activity was meant to resonate in a space where women were occupied in textile work. Moreover, representations of the Virgin sewing, of which Perdrau's tutor would certainly have been aware, were numerous and would have been more appropriate in this context, lending further weight to claims that the painting is autobiographical. Given the private setting, unusually domestic character and undistinguished technical quality of the painting, the question of why Pius IX promoted devotion to *Mater Admirabilis* is, in equal measure, pertinent and unclear. One may speculate reasons ranging from his desire to foreground Marian devotion, to re-establish the spiritual authority of religious orders, particularly those associated with the Jesuits, or to affirm his support for the Nazarene enterprise. It is plain, however, that his enthusiastic endorsement of the miraculous work — his blessing of the painting itself, his readiness to approve miracles attributed to it and his commissioning in 1849 of Nicola Cerbara, engraver to the papal court, to produce devotional medals bearing the image — propelled the burgeoning international cult of *Mater Admirabilis*.⁵⁶ Evidence of the speed with which this was established is offered in a letter to Monseigneur Pierre-Henri Gerault de Langalerie from Alfred Monnin in 1864, twenty years after the painting was finished: 'Since our visit to *Mater Admirabilis*, her glory has spread from sea to sea and . . . to the ends of the earth'.⁵⁷ Just how widely the cult spread in reality is unclear: though the 'ends of the earth' might be somewhat hyperbolic, it had certainly travelled overseas by the last half of the nineteenth century, as the many marble plaques lining the walls of the corridor at the Trinità dei Monti testify. Eleanor C. Donnelly, an Irish pilgrim writing in 1874, dedicated a verse to the image, which attempted to capture something of its mystic paradoxes:

O vast and wonderful mystery,
Laid open and bare to these childish eyes!

⁵⁵ See for example, Keppel, *Mater Admirabilis, 1844-1944*.

⁵⁶ Alfred Monnin, *Mater Admirabilis: ou Les Quinze Premiers Années de L'image de Marie Immaculée* (Paris: Carlo Douniol, 1865). Monnin notes that Pius IX commissioned papal medals of *Mater Admirabilis* which had an international distribution.

⁵⁷ Monnin, *Mater Admirabilis*, 2.

O sorrow deep as the infinite sea,
 Where she dying lives, where she living dies:
 For lo ! the Spinner who sits in the sun,
 And the Mother who stands by the Cross are one.⁵⁸

Devotees quickly established the painting as an intercessor in achieving a mystic union with God. For Mother Janet Erskine Stuart, Superior of the Society of the Sacred Heart community at Roehampton in England,⁵⁹ the painting was a source of spiritual revelation, as her reflections in 1912 indicate:

Having lived a little with *Mater Admirabilis* it seems to me that she is especially an advent Madonna, with that dawn creeping up in the sky behind her . . . I realised what strength and heavenliness there is in the Fifth Rule of Modesty (each one must express joy on her countenance . . .). I also realised that it is mental austerities that really wear the frame.⁶⁰

Though this was not precisely the intended purpose of the painting it was certainly not inconsistent with its broad aim. It was also entirely consonant with the aesthetic ideology of the Nazarene project, in which, as an expedient to religious experience, the work of art itself becomes a 'miracleworking, magical, and talismanic holy object'.⁶¹ The belief that *Mater Admirabilis* possessed 'miracleworking' properties undoubtedly lay behind the many reproductions of the painting that were produced – from the replicas painted by Perdrau herself and distributed among Sacred Heart institutions across the world, to the medals, prints and statues that are still in production and which transmit 'the sanctity of the original to its replica' as Grewe describes it.⁶² While Grewe is certainly not discussing the translation of high religious art into mass-produced Saint-Sulpician trinkets, works such as the Purismo manifesto suggest the sacred significance of provenance and inheritance. Thus, for the Lukasbund, the process of reproducing holy images has a mystical value that is redolent of the tradition that St Luke painted the first Christian icons, most notably the first image, from life, of the Virgin Mary. This legend is, in fact, deliberately invoked in a series of prints by the Riepenhausen brothers published in 1816, that depict Raphael as a new St Luke. The brothers were

⁵⁸ Eleanor C. Donnelly, 'Mater Admirabilis', *The Irish monthly* II, (November, 1874): 662-663.

⁵⁹ Reproductions of *Mater Admirabilis* are found in every Society of the Sacred Heart school and convent across the world. Antonia White's novel, *Frost in May*, describes the story of *Mater Admirabilis* being told to new schoolchildren. In this fictitious account, Perdrau becomes an Irish novice who is the great aunt of one of the pupils but the broad description of the painting and its subsequent miraculous transformation conforms to the traditional story. Antonia White, *Frost in May* (Virago Press, 2006), ch. 3.

⁶⁰ Monahan, *The Life and Letters of Janet Erskine Stuart*, 341.

⁶¹ Grewe, *The Nazarenes*, 97.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 97.

Catholic converts and members of the Nazarene circle.⁶³ It is unlikely that many nuns were familiar with the theological aspiration of the Lukasbund or Purismo movement, but I suggest that, by the mid-nineteenth century, their ideas had permeated many areas of popular religious art. It is, therefore, in the spirit of the Luke tradition, whether of Nazarene or Byzantine exegesis, that nuns from a wide range of orders made their own copies of *Mater Admirabilis*, either drawn or painted before the original, or hand decorated reproductions. By the 1850s, Mother Cahier, superior general of the Society of the Sacred Heart, had sent engravings of the fresco to all of the Sacred Heart houses across the world so that nuns could paint copies. Many of the replicas were full size and most adorned the convents' oratories.⁶⁴ Among other orders that held the painting in particular reverence was The Society of the Holy Child Jesus, whose foundress, Cornelia Connelly, was, at the time that *Mater Admirabilis* was painted, a novice at the Trinità. An artist herself, Connelly received instruction under the same tutor as Pauline Perdrau and was reputed to be the sitter for the painting. Indeed, according to one source, Connelly and Perdrau together conceived the idea for *Mater* and jointly executed it.⁶⁵ Before she left the convent, she made her own copy, which was apparently treasured by the community. Perhaps more surprising is an account of a pilgrimage to the site given by Anglican convert, Frances Taylor, foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. A hand-tinted copy of *Mater Admirabilis* and a prayer card bearing the image in the community's archive testify to the fact that devotion to *Mater Admirabilis* was active within the congregation (figures 3 and 4). Taylor's firm emphasis on ascetism and practicality appeared to allow little room for the production and appreciation of art and made her an unlikely devotee.

The Poor Servants of the Mother of God and The Annunciation

Emerging from a nation without a developed Catholic character, the Poor Servants of the Mother of God had to construct its own cultural identity, drawing on the spirituality, iconography and devotional cultures of continental and Irish orders. Evidence of Frances Taylor's quest for inspiration is offered by her book *Religious Orders: or*

⁶³ According to tradition, St Luke painted the first Christian icons, notably the first image, from life, of the Virgin Mary.

⁶⁴ Monique Luiard, *La Société du Sacré-Coeur dans le monde de son temps, 1865-2000* (Lille: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009), 28.

⁶⁵ An anonymous chronicler of Connelly writes: 'The two postulants sat and worked together at recreation in one of the corridors and there they conceived the idea of painting on the wall a picture of our Blessed Lady as a young maiden . . . the picture was executed in fresco by Mademoiselle Perdrau, aided by Cornelia who made a copy of it for herself and always cherished a devotion to this representation of our Blessed Mother'. Anonymous, (A Religious of the Community) *Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus* (New York: Toronto, Longmans Green and Co., 1922), 78.

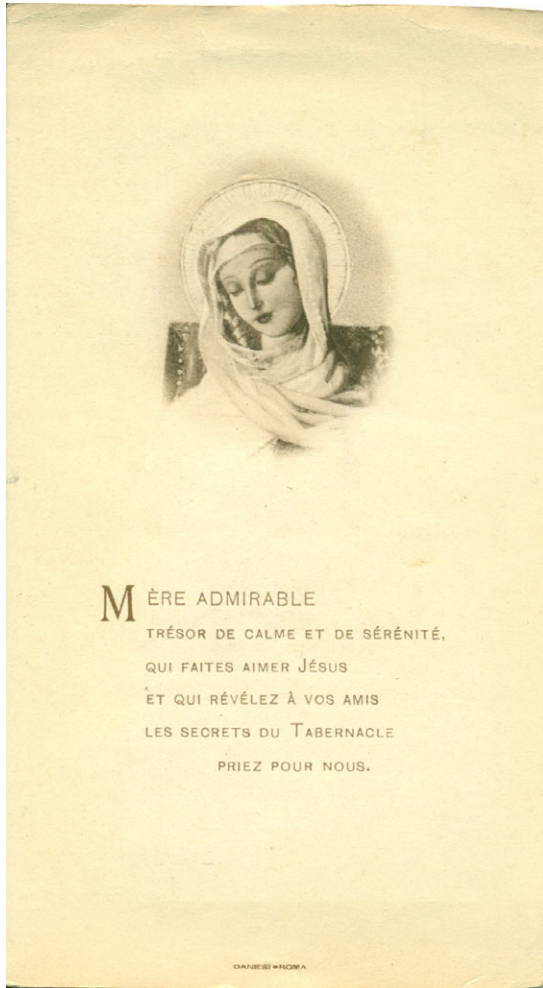


Figure 3. Prayer card of *Mater Admirabilis* from Mother Magdalene Aimée's copy of *The Roman Missal*, SMG Archives, Brentwood, Middlesex, V/A/3. By kind permission of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

sketches of some orders and congregations published in 1862, in which she summarises the history and charism of the most well-known women's communities. Taylor developed particularly close bonds with the Society of the Sacred Heart whose mother house in England and convent in Rome were located in very close proximity to those of the Poor Servants. Though art did not have a defined role in the charism of the Poor Servants, it is clear that Frances Taylor had a firm understanding of its significance and utility and was keen to support sisters who demonstrated an aptitude for painting and drawing. Evidence suggests that Taylor's artistic enterprises were shaped by a number

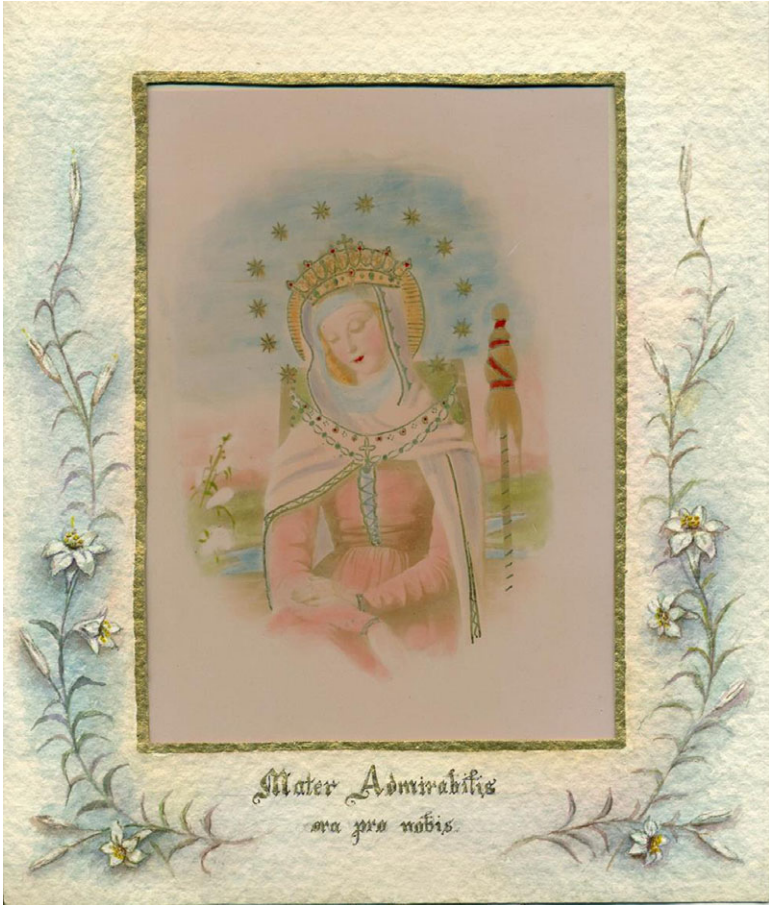


Figure 4. Tinted devotional picture of *Mater Admirabilis* with painted mount by Sr Mary Tommaso, SMG Archives, Brentwood, Middlesex, II/G/1/5/2/1. By kind permission of Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

of factors and influences which included: Ignatian and Counter-Reformation spirituality; her specific devotions to the Sacred Heart and the Incarnation; her religious milieu, particularly the Jesuits; and the growing cult of *Mater Admirabilis*. Such was the ubiquitous nature of *Mater Admirabilis* that Taylor was probably more familiar with the full size replica in the Sacred Heart convent in Roehampton (figure 5) than with the original.

The success of *Mater Admirabilis* must have impressed on many nuns the power of religious art, not only as a highly effective tool in the creation of corporate identity but also for its holy, perhaps even miraculous potential. It is in this light then, that we might read a small biography written by Frances Taylor of Sr Mary Clare Doyle. At first glance, it would appear to be nothing more than an affectionate



Figure 5. Copy of *Mater Admirabilis* at Barat House, Roehampton. Photograph by kind permission of Barbara Vesey, Society of the Sacred Heart, England and Wales Provincial Archives.

tribute to a sister whose life was cut short and of whom Taylor was particularly fond. A different focus might also reveal, however, the influence of the Society of the Sacred Heart in the construction, whether knowing or not, of an English Pauline Perdrau. Indeed, although Doyle's short life followed a different course to Perdrau's, Taylor's account reveals significant similarities between the two: like Perdrau, Doyle was both profoundly spiritual and a gifted artist. Both, like Freidrich Overbeck were initially torn between continuing their art education and entering the cloister. Both, unlike Overbeck, chose a religious life over a career as an artist. In 1879, Sr Mary Clare Doyle accompanied Frances Taylor on a tour of Continental Catholic institutions. Taylor documented the tour, which included a visit to *Mater Admirabilis*, and the works that Sr M Clare Doyle undertook:

Then she had another work in Rome, which was also a great pleasure. She was allowed to copy the only likeness of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The copy was excellent, according to competent judges. That precious picture is in the Chapel of our Mother House, and will ever be reckoned among our treasures,

both on account of its value as a true likeness of our Holy Father and of the dear sister whose skill gave it to us.⁶⁶

Though this painting did not achieve the celebrity of *Mater Admirabilis*, it was and continues to be, among the most prized works in the collection of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, both as a work of art by a divinely endowed sister and as a hand painted copy from 'life' of a revered image. Whilst Perdrau's story was undoubtedly captivating and must surely have been the model for Taylor's biography of Mary Clare Doyle, it was her miraculous painting that would make the most enduring mark on the culture of the Poor Servants. Of the works of art supported, commissioned or 'created' by Taylor, the community's iconic representation of the Annunciation owes the greatest debt to *Mater Admirabilis*. It had been Taylor's wish to express her devotion to the Incarnation in a work of art for which she had devised a particular design. In 1886, while in Rome, she was introduced by a Jesuit father to an artist named Aristide Dies. Dies was probably selected less for his artistic reputation than for the fact that he spoke French, which allowed Taylor, who spoke fluent French but not Italian, to communicate her vision in detail. Nonetheless, confusion arose over the precise composition of the painting – Taylor had specifically requested a portrayal of the Virgin after the angel, having delivered the annunciation, had departed. On visiting the artist in his studio some days later with one of the Sisters, Taylor was dismayed to see that Dies's composition was clearly intended to accommodate the angel speaking to Mary. Taylor promptly removed her companion's cloak and held it in the position that she wished Mary to appear, without the angel (figure 6).⁶⁷

With this story in mind, revealing comparisons might be made between Taylor's Annunciation and another Annunciation, executed twelve years earlier by Pietro Gagliardi. Gagliardi was later commissioned by Taylor (also in 1886) to produce a painting of the Sacred Heart. He was a prolific and successful Italian artist who, though having trained under the Nazarene/Purismo artist Tommaso Minardi, tended to work in a neo-Baroque style. His fresco altarpiece at the Church of the Annunciation in Tarxien, Malta (1874) (figure 7) is among his most celebrated works and bears a striking similarity to Taylor/Aristide Dies's *Annunciation* (figure 6). There is no direct evidence to suggest that either Taylor or Dies had seen Gagliardi's *Annunciation*, but the fact that Dies was confused about the presence of the angel certainly suggests that he was working from a model that had an angel in it.

⁶⁶ Frances Taylor, *Memoir of Sister Mary Clare Doyle SMG*, internal publication of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, 32.

⁶⁷ Devas, *Mother Mary Magdalen of the Sacred Heart*, 60.



Figure 6. *The Annunciation*, Aristide Dies and Frances Taylor, painting in St George's Church, Rome 1886. Image by kind permission of the Congregation of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

The style employed by Taylor/Dies in *The Annunciation* is curious. Gagliardi's Annunciation owes much to the Spanish Baroque – the dynamic composition, swirling clouds, putti, chiaroscuro and so on. Taylor's commissioned painting, however, is restrained and pensive. While elements of Gagliardi's style are clearly present, these have been conspicuously attenuated – the swirling clouds now a vague mist, putti reduced to winged heads, the symbolic form of the Holy Spirit



Figure 7. *The Annunciation*, Tarxien parish church, Malta, Pietro Gagliardi, 1874. Photograph by kind permission of Sirj Photography.

accentuated by the surrounding text. In reading Taylor's *Annunciation*, two key points present themselves. The first is Taylor's personal spirituality and the charism of her order. The choice of the *Annunciation* reflects, as previously mentioned, the centrality of the Incarnation in Taylor's spirituality and her decision to portray Mary alone is an indication of the significance of interiority. Taylor's wish was to depict

the Virgin as 'she knelt alone, with her Hidden God, hidden within her' - a moment that evokes the higher consciousness achieved, or aspired towards, through the Spiritual Exercises that Taylor and her community practiced.⁶⁸ Taylor's solitary Virgin is thoughtful; Gagliardi's, in the presence of the Angel, is (necessarily) responsive. The second point relates to Taylor's conscious construction of an iconic image to represent her community. A picture such as Gagliardi's is effective in telling the story of the Annunciation but too animated to serve as an icon. A much better model for this is provided by *Mater Admirabilis* - the iconic image of women's religious orders par excellence. We know that Taylor held *Mater Admirabilis* in high esteem and it seems plausible that she drew from it in the construction of her own iconic image. Though, as we have seen, Taylor certainly borrowed from the Counter-Reformation style (perhaps in tribute to the community's Ignatian roots), the composition (the solitary, pensive Virgin with lilies re-positioned prominently in the foreground and to the left) dampened chiaroscuro and flattened plane of her Annunciation owes much more to Perdrau's Quattrocento forms. Style and symbolism deliberately synthesized, precisely as they are within Nazarene aesthetic theology. As the brand image of the Poor Servants, *The Annunciation* succeeded in visually embedding the order within the Catholic world and it continues to do so today. But perhaps more importantly, it also succeeded as an icon that inspired and aided the sisters' spiritual devotions. Reproductions of *The Annunciation* grace the walls, in some form, of most Poor Servants convents. Importantly, many of these were the painstaking work of Sr Mary Tommaso who, throughout the early to mid-twentieth century hand painted numerous replicas. At the chapel of the Novitiate in Roehampton, Sr Mary Tommaso reproduced it on a large scale over the altar so that it became an object of devotion for generations of novices, thus securing its status. As with Sr Mary Clare Doyle's copy of St Ignatius, the transmission of 'the sanctity of the original to its replica' could not be more clearly at play. For Sr Mary Tommaso, the very act of reproducing the community's iconic images was itself a personal devotion, as her necrology entry suggests:

Sister was a real artist, and had been trained before she entered. She loved painting, finding in this, *as all true artists do, a way of expressing her love of God*. Her beautiful work will be a memorial of this dear Sister . . . she said once that she often prayed about a difficult piece of work, and it would "come right".⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Devas, *Mother Mary Magdalen of the Sacred Heart*, 260.

⁶⁹ SMG Archive, ref II/H/2 'A.M.D.G. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Necrology. Book 1 (1872-1945) (for community use only), (1956). Italics are my own.

Painting as a form of prayer, as practiced by Sr M Tommaso, Pauline Perdrau, Sr Mary Clare Doyle and, in all probability, the countless nuns who made copies of *Mater Admirabilis* and other holy images is entirely consistent with Ignatian spirituality: 'contemplation in action', as it is described in Jesuit theology. But the artistic legacy of nuns' prayerful painting extends beyond the cloister. In responding to and fulfilling the Nazarene vision of religious art as both an exercise in historicism and a set of universal mystical codes perpetuated by their own inherently holy properties, the paintings of nineteenth-century active nuns exerted a quiet but forceful influence on the 'international' Roman Catholic style.

Conclusion

Susan O'Brien has described the unique ways in which sisters developed their own spiritual cultures, which then passed not only between different orders but also fed into the practices, rituals and iconography of the institutional Church. This article lends further weight to O'Brien's claim, by highlighting the ways that artistic practices were autonomously formed and transferred between communities. The extent to which this reflects a new stress on interiority is unclear but it may be that the flowering of mystic devotions in English convents during the nineteenth century corresponded with two apparently conflicting movements: the increasing emphasis on sacerdotalism, which found its most powerful expression in Papal infallibility, and the rise of female spiritual authority. Significantly, although women were denied a liturgical role, the religious authority of the Mother Superior within the community sometimes outranked that of the Bishop, a state of affairs that warns against conflating the private with the passive. It is demonstrably not the case that mysticism ceased to be a potent force within Roman Catholic doctrine or that mystic women ceased to influence theology in the nineteenth century. Paintings such as *Mater Admirabilis* emphasised and expressed the continuing significance of the unsayable and helped model the devotions and philosophies of the nineteenth-century Church. It is the case, however, that the new feminized mysticisms were either overlooked or derided by contemporary scholars such as William James: the great irony of James's analysis of mysticism is that the one group that it entirely misses – nineteenth-century women – is that which most closely fits his paradigm. No mention is made, for example, of either Thérèse of Lisieux or Bernadette of Lourdes, two of the most important Catholic mystics of the nineteenth century. The nearest that James gets, is a description of Marguerite Marie Alacoque:

In gentle characters, where devoutness is intense and the intellect feeble, we have an imaginative absorption in the love of God to the exclusion of all practical human interests, which, though innocent enough, is too one-sided to be

admirable. A mind too narrow has room but for one kind of affection. When the love of God takes possession of such a mind, it expels all human loves and human uses. There is no English name for such a sweet excess of devotion, so I will refer to it as a theopathic condition. The blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque may serve as an example... amiable and good, but so feeble of intellectual out-look that it would be too much to ask of us, with our Protestant and modern education, to feel anything but indulgent pity for the kind of saintship which she embodies.⁷⁰

James does not dismiss women per se: he holds Teresa of Avila, for example, in the highest regard. He reserved his opprobrium for those who did not express their mysticism intellectually and in written form. Indeed he does not acknowledge any alternative media to the written word. Many of the women discussed in this article shared with James a culturally specific understanding of the mystic as internal and private, and they experienced this through their own extralinguistic, 'ineffable' devotions. But if we consider the prayerful production of art to be both a spiritual exercise and a bodily encounter – the paintbrush as the physical mediator of a union with God – then these women also fit neatly into the female tradition that Jantzen and Bynum identify. And yet, like James, neither scholar acknowledges them. We might say, then, that it is precisely because they did not contribute to the literature of mysticism; precisely because they do not articulate their experiences through the androcentric voice; precisely because that they do not appear in James's account that Jantzen rejects them. A great deal more work on this subject is needed to establish the full breadth and scope of women's mystic art in the nineteenth century. For example, the meditative function of fine-needlework in convents – a subject upon which a significant amount of primary sources exist and which demands much more research – has not been explored here.⁷¹ Neither has the spirituality and artistic output of male religious communities been considered – something which is as likely to reveal convergence as disjuncture – and the comparisons that might be made between the spirituality of religious and lay-women during this period have been briefly touched on.⁷² Moreover, the production of art by women religious, was not, in the nineteenth century, a new activity: I have focused

⁷⁰ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 534.

⁷¹ Primary sources which discuss this include, Henri Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia of Pelletier, foundress and the first Superior General of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd of Angers*, (London: Burnes & Oats, 1953 translation from original 1893). Some limited secondary research has been undertaken by Mary Schoeser in *English Church Embroidery, 1833-1953* (London 1988).

⁷² Very little work has been produced on the artistic output of male communities. My own research has revealed that monks were as active as women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, engaging in activities such as designing buildings (St Wilfred's, Preston by Ignatius Scoles) and producing stained glass (Dom Charles Norris at Buckfast Abbey). Kate Jordan, 'Building the Post-Emancipation Church', in Carmen Mangion and Susan O'Brien, eds. *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism. Volume IV: 1830-1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2021). The production of art by lay women is also under-researched. See above, n 45.

here on the lateral cross-fertilization of ideas over a short period of time and within a small geographical range. A wider study is needed that provides context for the examples described in this article and explores the transfer of artistic practices through the history of Christian women's religious communities. A good deal more research might also be undertaken on the manner in which written mysticism interacted with the material and visual products of female mysticism: a comprehensive review of this might shed light on the extent to which women's art was, in fact, made widely available to 'human gaze'. The article also suggests further methodological routes for exploring the visual and material culture of nineteenth-century convents: it seems likely, for example, that Nancy Ammerman and Meredith McGuire's constructions of lived and everyday religion might yield fresh insights into the ways in which women religious organised their spiritual and devotional practices both within and beyond the convent. In turn, a broader understanding of the art produced in nineteenth-century convents would augment and inform continuing scholarship on both lived religion and its material culture.