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**Pozzo's Perspective:  
Visual Hagiography in the Church of St. Ignatius, Rome**

The Order of the Society of Jesus was among the foremost creators and commissioners of Counter-Reformation Baroque art. Founded in 1534 by St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits came to be regarded as one of the most potent forces of the Counter-Reformation, due at least in part to the order's high visibility through their worldwide network of building projects. Part of art history's continuing fascination with the Jesuits involves the controversial search for a "Jesuit Style" of art, an approach to image production that is immediately identifiable as Jesuitical. Though a thorough discussion of the Jesuit style is outside the limits of this paper, the Jesuit worldview (including the Jesuit perception of the role of art) is central to interpreting how artists were employed in constructing Jesuit self-identity. Nowhere is this process of identity-construction more apparent than in The Church of St. Ignatius in Rome, built to celebrate both Ignatius and the active ministry of his order throughout the globe.

Andrea Pozzo's monumental ceiling fresco, *The Worldwide Mission of the Society of Jesus* (fig. 1), painted in the central nave of the church, exhibits a typical Baroque-era complexity. The fresco is visually opulent, filled with swirling figures, illusionist architecture, and an intricate, allegory-based iconography. The image is certainly hagiographical—Ignatius is shown ascending to heaven on a cloud, surrounded by celestial figures and beckoned by the figure Christ himself—but is it an example of coercive Jesuit propaganda or of a sincere religiosity derived from Pozzo's close personal

association with the Jesuit order? Pozzo's fresco proves that the two motives are not mutually exclusive.

Pozzo, in painting the fresco, was not so much conscious of his role as a constructor of a propaganda-fueled framework for forming subjects, as he was interested in an exhilarating display of multiple skills used in the service of a fervent faith. However, his fresco certainly reflects the Jesuit attitude towards image-making that developed in response to the Council of Trent: art should be a means to an end, used in the service of God as an incitement to piety. Pozzo, as a lay Jesuit brother, was invested in the ultimate success of the order and the conversion of souls through subject-forming imagery. Yet Pozzo's image is more than mere propaganda. Although his fresco is inspired by a specifically Catholic ideology, the presence of spiritual devotion does not preclude an appreciation of the fresco as a consummate example of Baroque devotional art.

Like the word 'propaganda,' hagiography has negative connotations in a thoroughly secularized modern society. The term suggests the deliberate falsifying of the facts of an individual's life to enhance the appearance of holiness. In Pozzo's image, however, hagiography operates as something closer to allegory. In the image, Ignatius is not Ignatius—he is the Jesuit order. Ignatius is as much an allegorical figure as the figures meant to represent the four continents (the recipients, in this context, of Christ's light to the world). Because of Ignatius's close identification with the order itself, the visual program of the Church of St. Ignatius serves the parallel functions of celebrating Ignatius's life as a Christian exemplar, and of constructing Jesuit self-identity. Pozzo, a master of the Baroque style, reached into his deep bag of visual tricks (including, but not

limited to, illusionism, heightened emotionality, swirling compositions, and theatrical lighting effects) to increase the efficacy of the Jesuit message in the Church of St. Ignatius in Rome; that Ignatius's personal holiness extended to the Jesuit order which then proselytized Roman Catholicism to the world.

Pozzo's deliberate manipulation of audience in an attempt to increase the efficacy of his message can be distasteful to a modern sensibility weaned on the idea of "Art for art's sake." In our post-Kantian worldview, the more apparent propaganda is in a work of art ("interested," to use Kant's terms), the less effective the message. When ideology is explicit, when form is clearly subservient to function, the viewer—who may or may not be sympathetic to the ideals of the art-producing institution—is put on alert.<sup>1</sup> The work of art has to bridge the ensuing distance between viewer and ideology by virtue of its intrinsic value as an art object. In other words, today one may appreciate Bernini's religious sculptures in spite of its Catholicism rather than because of it. To unpack the meaning of Pozzo's fresco and its role in the construction of Jesuit self-identity, it is necessary to see the world from his perspective. Consequently, a brief background on the Jesuit approach to image making is necessary.

The modern distaste for forcefully ideological art has a historical precedent in the Protestant Reformation. Of course, the Reformers were not concerned with the presence of Christian ideology—an ideology they shared—but rather with the opulence and

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<sup>1</sup> Evonne Levy writes at length on the issue of power in *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9: "It is rather a power, often bound to an ethical position, that may generate fear, resistance, or a deeply felt sense of responsibility not to enjoy a work as art. And this power is so great that it, in a sense, blinds us to the object itself."

decadence of Roman Catholic art objects, “the most glaring example of which they found reflected in highly ornate church interiors.”<sup>2</sup>

The Reformation schism in the Catholic Church forced a reassessment of the Church’s role in image making. Pope Paul III, the same pope who approved the founding of the Society of Jesus in 1540, five years later convened the epochal Council of Trent. The Council consisted of Church bishops who met intermittently over the course of twenty years to revise and revitalize the Catholic institution, an institution that needed updating from its outmoded medieval model, and which was still reeling from the recent effects of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the discussion included a re-appraisal of church policy on art.<sup>4</sup> The twenty-fifth and last session of the Council concentrated on the role of images as they related the Catholic faith. Due to the Reformers’ objections to “decadent” Roman art and Calvinism’s unequivocal embrace of iconoclasm, art and its production was an issue in the forefront of Church leaders’ minds. The Council concluded that art was indeed valuable so long as it served a didactic function.<sup>5</sup> Art could be an impetus to piety through aiding the memory and providing an example for the faithful to follow.

In those heady days of Catholic institutional reform, the Jesuit order was born and grew. Ignatius had not founded the order solely to combat the rise of Protestantism, but the needs of the times shaped his order’s eventual charism. Indeed, the Jesuits’ emphasis on active participation *in* the world (as embodied by the order’s globe-spanning networks

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Call, “Boxing Teresa: The Counter-Reformation and Bernini’s Cornaro Chapel,” Woman’s Art Journal 18 (1997): 34.

<sup>3</sup> Robert E. McNally, The Council of Trent, the Spiritual Exercises, and the Catholic Reform (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970): 3.

<sup>4</sup> Call, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Between Renaissance and Baroque: Jesuit Art in Rome, 1565-1610 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2003), 15.

of missions) rather than a monastic-modeled separation *from* the world, and pseudo-military fealty to the papacy in Rome<sup>6</sup> placed the Jesuits in a unique position to implement the Church's post-Tridentine doctrines.

This was an unforeseen conclusion considering the order's humble beginnings. The Jesuits consisted of only ten founding members in 1540: Ignatius and a group of his closest friends. In just sixteen years, by the time of Ignatius's death in 1556, the order's ranks had swelled to a hundred times that number.<sup>7</sup> As the order grew and expanded in to new territories, Jesuit power and prestige increased proportionally. Success demanded the constant construction of new buildings, churches, and universities. These elaborate building programs, often involving Jesuit art and architects, helped create the myth of a distinctively Jesuitical approach to image making.<sup>8</sup> Their unprecedented visibility and power in post-Reform Europe (reinforced by the monumental churches and colleges the order commissioned) has inspired scholars to chase an art historical chimera: the "Jesuit Style."

The Jesuit Style, as a blanket concept, seeks to tie together the various worldwide visual programs of the Jesuits into a unified whole—a vast artistic enterprise with the singular mission of bringing new subjects into the welcoming fold of the Church. The problem of circumscribing Jesuit art with the convenient term, "Jesuit Style" is the diffuseness of the Jesuit mission enterprises, which were spread across Europe, Asia,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2003, 7. In a particularly counter-Protestant gesture, the Jesuits added a fourth vow to the traditional three of poverty, chastity, and obedience: to undertake ministry anywhere in the world at the pope's command.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Sensuous Worship: Jesuits and the Art of the Early Catholic Reformation in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>8</sup> The "myth" of Jesuit Style remains hotly contested, with Bailey and Levy representing two current poles of opinion: Bailey denies its existence by saying the Jesuits favored adaptability and improvisation, while Levy considers Jesuit Style in terms of ideology, not style, and how propaganda is employed in the process of subject-formation.

Africa, and the Americas. The Jesuit Style, however manifested, cannot be referred to in terms of a “style,” *per se*, in the sense that scholars speak of a “baroque” or a “gothic” style.<sup>9</sup> The Jesuit Style is not based on recurring visual characteristics.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it might be more usefully interpreted as an attitude, or an orientation, towards art. Art provides the means to an end, but is not an end unto itself: “Whether a crude woodcut or an eloquent altarpiece, the object mediates the individual’s experience.”<sup>11</sup>

The concept of the object as mediator informed Jesuit attitudes towards art. For Jesuits, the object is a tool of conversion strategy. Art must serve an instructional purpose or else risk self-indulgent glory-mongering. Art and faith were inextricably linked in the Jesuit worldview: faith inspired art and art served the faith. Religious art was not lacking because it was limited to Christian iconography, but rather the converse held true: non-religious art was lacking because of the absence of Christian iconography.

Churches, the emplacement of an order’s ideology in a physical space, were built on a grand scale, large and lavish, to not only reflect but to *assert* the newfound health and potency of Roman Catholicism during its period of Counter-Reform.<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin identifies “grand scale” as the nerve-center of the Baroque, and it is therefore “in the church alone that it finds its full expression: the pathos of the post-classical period is in the desire to be sublimated in the infinite, in the feeling of overwhelmingness and

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<sup>9</sup> Gauvin Alexander Bailey, “Jesuit Corporate Culture and the Visual Arts,” in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999): 45. “It becomes virtually impossible to link this term, used mostly by non-artists and having a largely pastoral and practical meaning, with the modern notion of style and stylistic development, which has its roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century academia.”

<sup>10</sup> For example, It is impossible to stylistically reconcile sculptures made by the Guaraní Indians of Paraguay with Bernini’s sculptural commissions in Rome—yet both examples would fall under the umbrella term, “Jesuit Style.”

<sup>11</sup> Smith, 7.

<sup>12</sup> McNally, 19: “These vast houses of God, where light and color, height and depth wondrously blend, suggest the new vigor, strength, and spirit which the Tridentine Church possessed.”

unfathomableness.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Baroque art and architecture commissioned by the Jesuits constitute, *en masse*, a sophisticated marketing campaign for the Catholic Church and, more particularly, the Jesuit order.

Jesuits adopted the currently *vogue* Baroque model of church decoration when the time came to erect a dedicatory monument to St. Ignatius. The Catholic Church encouraged the cult of saints in a similar vein to its valorization of art. Both were an impetus to piety, and provided examples for the faithful to follow. Of course, the cult of an individual saint requires icons as catalysts to contemplation (perhaps the most famous Baroque example is Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*). In this way, the Christ-imitating saint becomes an object of cultic devotion and is represented by visual imitations in the form of sculptures or paintings.

A certain affectation characterizes the European Baroque—figures, sculpted or painted, communicate distinct emotional states meant to inspire in the spectator an emotional response of proportional intensity. For this reason, the Baroque style was particularly well suited to constructing images with an ideological bent. Baroque art emotes, demanding of the viewer a concomitantly intense response. The Baroque artist has little interest in creating images that inspire neutrality or indifference.

The Church of St. Ignatius in Rome is a central monument to the cult of St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuit order. The beatification of Ignatius in 1609 and his subsequent canonization in 1622 validated the order and created new opportunities for visual hagiography. Until Ignatius’s canonization, images of him as “saintly” were

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<sup>13</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque* (London: Collins, 1964), 86.

prohibited.<sup>14</sup> When the opportunity arrived, however, to visually celebrate Ignatius's officially sanctioned place in the community of celestial saints, the Jesuits took full advantage.

Giovanni Paolo Oliva, the General of the Society of Jesus from 1664 to 1681, summoned Andrea Pozzo to Rome in 1681 to undertake the prestigious commission of designing the visual program in the Church of St. Ignatius and painting the monumental ceiling fresco.<sup>15</sup> Though he died before the completion of the Church of St. Ignatius, Oliva himself is a figure worth noting because of his indelible contribution to the Jesuit Baroque. One scholar went so far as to posit, "If, instead of a 'style Jésuite,' historians had postulated a 'style Oliva,' their case would have been very much stronger."<sup>16</sup>

The reason for this is Oliva's role as patron of some of the greatest Baroque artists in Rome, including Bernini, Baciccio, and Pozzo.<sup>17</sup> Oliva understood Baroque art's potential for emotional impact through its stylistic emphasis on lush visual beauty and lavish decoration. He said of Baroque churches:

As they are solely dedicated to God, they cannot in any way attain the infinite merit of the Trinity either through their splendor or through the richness of their architecture and decoration. So it is that in our churches both Ignatius, our father, and all of us, who are his sons, try to reach up

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<sup>14</sup> Levy, 127: "Responding to Protestant criticism of the cult of the saints, the Church aimed to test spontaneous cults before they became sanctioned ones, to ensure that all candidates for sainthood met the Church's rigorous standards of heroic virtue."

<sup>15</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, "East and West: The Jesuit Art and Artists in Central Europe, and Central European Art in the Americas," in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), 274.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Haskell, "The Role of Patrons: Baroque Style Changes," in Baroque Art: The Jesuit Contribution (New York: Fordham University Press, 1972), 57.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.



to the sublimity of God's eternal omnipotence with such appurtenances of glory as we can (to the best of our powers) achieve.<sup>18</sup>

“Such appurtenances of glory” refer back to the notion of art as a tool used in service of Christian ideology. The phrase no doubt also included the Baroque visual trickery employed by Pozzo. His fresco overwhelms the viewer with its monumentality and grand-scale display of technical virtuosity. *The Worldwide Mission of the Society of Jesus* (fig. 1), painted between 1691 and 1694, occupies the commanding position in the center of the church nave. Pozzo's intention for the image is best articulated in his own words: “My idea in the painting was to represent the works of St. Ignatius and of the Company of Jesus in spreading the Christian faith worldwide.”<sup>19</sup>

Pozzo's objective is clear, and the image reflects that clarity. In the center of the colossal composition, Ignatius is visible carried aloft on a cloud; he seems to rise upward through the ceiling of the church to the vision of Heaven beyond (some texts refer to the image as *The Apotheosis of Ignatius*). He is surrounded by a swirl of angels and supernumeraries, but his attention is devoted to the figure of Christ, holding his cross, who hovers above Ignatius. Christ beckons to Ignatius with his right arm—a gesture echoed by Ignatius's raised left arm. A powerful beam of light emanates from the wound in Christ's side and is reflected off Ignatius and spread to the four corners of the globe, represented as allegorical figures of Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

Ignatius serves as a catalyst for Christ's message of salvation—he is a mirror reflecting the light of Christ, radiating the light outwards to all corners of the known

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<sup>18</sup> John Paul Oliva, in a sermon, as quoted in Haskell, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Pozzo, as quoted in Levy, 151.

world. This is a clear reference to the highly successful missionary activities the Jesuits were known for. By this point in the order's history, the Jesuits had expanded into territories as far flung as China, Europe, and New Spain, and in each of these localities achieved an unprecedented degree of success.<sup>20</sup> It is only appropriate, then, that Pozzo cast Ignatius in the role of mediator between God and man, since his order had been responsible for the rapid and widespread dissemination of Catholicism to all parts of the globe (fig. 2).

By showing Ignatius as a luminescent mirror of Christ's light, Pozzo is also offering a subtle play on Ignatius's name, a close epistemological corollary to the Latin word for fire: *ignis*.<sup>21</sup> Ignatius radiates light, a holy fire. This is a visual tradition familiar to anyone able to recognize a saint in a painting by his or her glowing nimbus. In Ignatius's case, Pozzo carries the iconography of fire and radiance even further than the requisite halo. He included in the composition four torches, visible in the corners of the nave, to represent Ignatius's role in illuminating the regions of the world "darkened" by the absence of the true faith.<sup>22</sup>

Though a hagiographical image, Pozzo's fresco denies Ignatius any individual agency: he is a mirror, no more. He mediates between Earth and Heaven in a way consistent with the Jesuit way-of-proceeding: he is active in disseminating the Word of God through being decidedly of the world, not apart from it. As Kaufmann says, "In

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<sup>20</sup> See Bailey's *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 199).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 155

<sup>22</sup> In the Chapel of St. Ignatius in the Roman Church of the Gesù—designed by Pozzo—Pozzo strategically placed a small window behind the head of a sculpture of St. Ignatius by Pierre Legros. The window is not visible to the viewer looking up at the figure of Ignatius, and at a certain time of day, the sun would shine through the window, creating a "divine" halo highlighting Ignatius's head. This device recalls Pozzo's background in designing theater sets and lighting effects for Jesuit drama (fig. 4).

contrast with the usual glorification of saints of the sort that depicts them in Heaven, Pozzo celebrates the impact in this world of forces belonging to the next.”<sup>23</sup>

Pozzo employed many Baroque stylistic tricks to increase the efficacy of his message, including perspective, a subject on which Pozzo was expert. His treatise on the rules of proper perspective for painters and architects<sup>24</sup> exhibits a fascination with and delight in the visual orderliness of the God-created universe.<sup>25</sup> The influence of Pozzo’s treatise is difficult to calculate, although one scholar notes, “the inventions he illustrated became popular sources for various kinds of designs for churches, especially but by no means exclusively for Jesuit churches, in lands spreading from the Andes to the Ukraine.”<sup>26</sup> Through the use of perspective, Pozzo’s ceiling fresco demonstrates that Reason, which sought to order the world into a mechanistic system of rules and laws, could be used in the service of emotion. Perspective is employed to extend the “space” of the church beyond the earth-bound ceiling and upwards to the ethereal sphere of angels, saints, and the Trinity.

Pozzo’s highly rational illusionism heightens the viewer’s emotional experience through its suggestion of infinity, of a visual space without end that approximates the Christian notion of Heaven. This idea is further enhanced by the spatial relationship that frames the viewer’s perception of the fresco: the audience must crane its collective neck skyward to soak in Pozzo’s panorama, with the figure of Christ functioning like a substitute sun, emanating rays of divine grace and love.

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<sup>23</sup> Kaufmann, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Pozzo, *Rules and Examples of Perspective Proper for Painters and Architects* (New York: B. Blom, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Levy states, somewhat reductively, that “Pozzo published his treatise because he had a powerful institution seeing to it that Jesuit designs were out in the world,” 226. Levy’s single-minded obsession with power has an ideological tone not dissimilar to the Jesuits’ single-minded obsession with disseminating the faith.

<sup>26</sup> Kaufmann, 276.

The dizzying effect the ceiling has on the viewer begins with Pozzo's own intoxication with the possibilities of both the space (the ceiling) and the medium (fresco). In the first place, Pozzo chose to paint the ceiling in such a way that its illusionary perspective would only make sense from one exact spot in the church (indicated by a mark on the floor).<sup>27</sup> From elsewhere, the logic of his forced one-point perspective falls apart and the image becomes a chaotic composite of collapsing columns and disorienting figure relationships (fig. 3).<sup>28</sup>

Pozzo's favoring of one position above all others seems odd. The church is a vast space and the ceiling fresco is the centerpiece of its visual program. Waterhouse notes of the indicated mark, "It is not a point at which the worshipper in the Church would naturally place himself, and one may be permitted to wonder if the Jesuits conceived this bizarre scheme of decoration as a lesson to those who were not altogether on the correct spot in their religious beliefs."<sup>29</sup>

Though this is a possible explanation, Pozzo himself addresses the issue in his treatise on perspective: "Perspective is but a counterfeiting of the Truth, the painter is not oblig'd to make it appear real when seen from *any* part but from *one* part only."<sup>30</sup> Pozzo not only acknowledges the image as a counterfeit, he embraces the idea (as Oliva, the Jesuit General had done previously). The truth, in Pozzo's terms, is the natural reality created by God. The painter can only approximate that which God has already invented, and this returns us to the notion of Christian art being the only worthwhile kind of art:

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<sup>27</sup> Ellis Waterhouse, Italian Baroque Painting (New York: Phaidon, 1962), 75.

<sup>28</sup> Waterhouse amusingly likens this experience to how "Samson must have felt after he had started work on the Temple at Gaza," 75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> Pozzo, in "An Answer to the Objection made about the Point of Sight in Perspective" from the appendix of his own Rules and Examples of Perspective.

because God created everything, images can only reflect the beauty and order of God's creation. Artists become "sub-creators."

Consequently, Pozzo's image is an incitement to piety in the Tridentine sense of creating a cult of a saint and of catalyzing contemplation. However, the image is uniquely Jesuitical in its emphasis on a highly individualistic form of contemplation. As far back as Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, the notion of personal reform through penance, prayer, and good works informed the Jesuit worldview. Ignatius's approach was "introspective, analytical, and psychological."<sup>31</sup> Pozzo's perspective involves the viewer on an individual basis—invites participation by privileging the one person who is able to stand in the correct position and look up at the vast and awe-inspiring apotheosis of Ignatius.

Pozzo's use of poetic space to dissolve the ceiling into an allegorical vision (a vision meant to be viewed, ideally, one person at a time from a fixed point) is propaganda at its most ruthlessly effective; which is to say, at its most heartfelt. Pozzo fully subscribed to the ideology his image represented, and so the ceiling fresco is, first and foremost, a devotional image. Pozzo employed his varied gifts as a painter, perspective theorists, illusionist, and architect to construct an image that communicates its hagiographic message clearly: St. Ignatius of Loyola is God's instrument used to spread His word to all the nations. In this view, Ignatius has ceased to become a flesh-and-blood corporeal being and is replaced by a constructed identity that conflates with that of his order—he is a figurehead for the Jesuits. Pozzo's image has no pretense towards describing a historical event, but rather serves simultaneously as an allegory of sainthood, a triumphant endorsement of the Jesuit order and its missionary works, and as a striking demonstration of Pozzo's own mastery of the Baroque style.

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<sup>31</sup> McNally, 4.

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