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Images of Jewishness in Italian Renaissance Art: Proximity, Agency, Caricature

Raquel Belden

Jewish life in the early Italian Renaissance was often defined in terms of Jewish proximity to the Christian majority. As Moses Shulvass and Elvin Kose observe, this was a group that was “not the master of its own fate,” and as such, their marginalized, regulated, and turbulent social experience warrants closer examination alongside the intersections of their Christian counterpart.¹ Of particular note is the way Jewish visibility was institutionally regulated and maintained in the public eye, both through distinctive dress and in high art.

Daniele da Norsa, a Jewish banker in fifteenth-century Mantua, presents a particularly potent case study of this paradigm of Christian power and Jewish subjugation. Daniele removed an image of the Virgin frescoed in a home he purchased, and despite having received permission from the bishop, he was publicly vilified and charged with vandalizing a sacred image.² He was then forced to finance two works of art—the *Madonna della Vittoria* and the *Norsa Madonna*—in retribution, an unusual and rather pointed punishment (Figures 1–2).³ Dana Katz interprets this punitive measure as a “scapegoating process” that “helped to construct a more coherent and unified polity, harmonizing disparate elements of Mantuan society.”⁴ This adoption of the art object as political propaganda thus reinforced preexisting power structures between Jewish and Christian peoples, forming an interdependent and dichotomized worldview wherein the Jew became both Other and outsider.



Figure 1: Andrea Mantegna, *Madonna della Vittoria*, 1496



Figure 2: Unknown Artist, *Madonna and Child with Saints and Norsa Family (Norsa Madonna)*, c. 1499

This essay will explore the means by which such processes were accomplished, as well as the backdrop that allowed for and even necessitated them. The works I have selected to demonstrate the thematic development of Jewish Otherness include Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel, the *Norsa Madonna*, Mantegna's *Ecce Homo*, and the *Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent* in the Parrocchia San Martino in Cerveno. A comparison of relevant sociohistorical evidence to vis-

ible markers of “Jewishness” formulated across these media reveals a consistent schema for portraying and exhibiting the “Renaissance Jew”—largely in terms of proximity, power, and influence. These issues arise as complex mediators of Jewish experience, defining both an individual’s fate and the group’s social identity. There thus emerges a thoroughly Christian perception of the religio-cultural Other—discrete, potent, precarious, and controllable—alongside a concomitant caricatured rendition of the Renaissance Jew, two halves of a codependent whole that actively maintained social hierarchy and perpetuated religious bigotry.

THE CONVENIENCE OF TOLERANCE

The Renaissance Jew occupied an ambiguous if not precarious position in society. Roberto Bonfil describes Jewish presence as typically “a circumstance abnormal enough to trouble a good Christian conscience” in the Renaissance, but the Jews nevertheless lived and worked in Christian towns and cities.⁵ During this time, the Jewish people were relatively mobile or itinerant, mostly due to routine expulsions from certain regions.⁶ Some regions would perform such evictions only to invite the Jews back and repeat the process, creating a perpetual climate of insecurity.⁷ When towns and cities tolerated Jewish presence, most had a distinct Jewish neighborhood in which most, if not all, of the Jews lived.⁸ Some Jews purposely segregated for reasons of safety and familiarity, but in larger cities these communities were created “under the pressure of the government or the populace,” leading to the institutionalization of the ghetto later in the period.⁹ These unique circumstances—routine invitations and expulsions, partial integration through segregation—were motivated both by economic conditions and a climate of religious tolerance constantly in flux. Jewish presence, when tolerated, was therefore often explained in utilitarian terms—it was needed, but not necessarily welcomed, creating for the Jew a distinctive and often turbulent social experience as present yet separate individual.¹⁰

Such attitudes may be explained in terms of contemporary Christian theology and thought. Just as the poor were “necessary” for the possibility of pious almsgiving, Judaism was considered the foil to Christianity, making possible the triumph of “good” over “evil” in the Christian imagination, the completion of salvation and the subsequent validation of their beliefs.¹¹ Jewish presence also made possible conversion campaigns: the conversion of the Jew was a celebrated event, and this gave the Christian man a cause to rally behind, making the Jewish presence both worthwhile and spiritually propitious.¹² Thus, while Christian leaders feared Jewish proximity and its potential social influence, the Jew served as a useful antithesis that allowed, in simple Lacanian terms, iden-

tification of the self through recognition of the Other.¹³ The Christian more actively realized his distinct identity by observing the disparate Jewish example. The legitimacy of Christianity was publicly reinforced where the Jew, the ultimate Other, could be converted. However, Jewish usefulness went beyond the scope of ultimate salvation into the political and economic realms of the mundane, further complicating their social role.

Most Jews, including Daniele da Norsa, practiced moneylending as an occupation, granting small consumer loans and therefore invigorating local economies.¹⁴ This led to the group's widespread identification as usurers. In one fifteenth-century account, usury was defined as moneylending at any interest rate, exorbitant or not, and was deemed a sin by the Church.¹⁵ Law largely prohibited Italian Christian banks from the practice, and mendicant preachers often encouraged the relegation of the sinful necessity to the Jewish population.¹⁶ Recognizing the need for usury, papal dispensation allowed Jews in Rome to continue moneylending "as a mark of tolerance," a means of achieving economic stability, and an advantageous solution to the moral conundrum.¹⁷ The law of January 24, 1406, which had banned Jewish moneylending in Florence, was appealed and partially reversed almost immediately, "for relief from the consequent shortage of credit."¹⁸ In Urbino, Duke Federico permitted the Jewish presence for the interest of the Christian whole: Jewish moneylending was determined indispensable to the town's prosperous credit market.¹⁹ This recurrent "Jewish solution" was most often employed where local authorities were "not willing to deal with the problem of poverty at the administrative level" or burden themselves with recourse to taxation.²⁰ The state did not want to take care of the poor, the salvation of the Christian banks could not be jeopardized, and the city could benefit from taxing Jewish practices—an advantageous solution in all respects for the ruling elite.²¹ The Jews thus provided a convenient spiritual scapegoat, as well as a social one. For this they were rewarded lukewarm tolerance insofar as they were beneficial to the interests of the powerful; their presence was permitted provisionally, but not completely.

A similar attitude was adopted towards local prostitutes. Sex workers were permitted in many cities to protect women in the marriage market from assault and rape, thereby keeping them chaste.²² Like the prostitute's role in satiating the male sexual appetite without diminishing the supply of pure young women, the Jew assuaged poverty so the Christian banker need not commit sin. This crucial equivalency reveals both the lowly position of Jews in society, despite their usefulness, and the Christian tendency in the Renaissance to construct an economy of sin wherein certain social ills were permitted and thoughtfully relegated for the benefit of some greater good. These similarities caused an effective conflation of Jews and prostitutes under one umbrella of stigma, char-

acterized by femininity and uncleanness—most evidently, as I will demonstrate, in the Scrovegni Chapel.²³

Similarly, if Jewish identity became synonymous with usury, usury, in turn, increasingly became associated with prostitution, homosexuality, or general sexual deviancy—an association promoted by prominent writers like Dante and based on the authority of Aristotle.²⁴ Money borrowed at interest bred artificially despite its inherent sterility, and the Jew facilitated this process.²⁵ The association of the Jew with the prostitute was thus further complicated, the analogy extended, the individual stigmatized, and his presence made more consequential.

It is important to remember that not all Jews were moneylenders. Jews were also often doctors, better trained and less expensive than their Christian counterparts.²⁶ Others were humanists who, like Christian scholars, found success in princely courts and aristocratic circles.²⁷ Jewish scholars often taught Hebrew, both in courts and universities, to a non-Jewish elite as part of a classical and late scholastic education.²⁸ Finally, a significant portion of the Renaissance Jewish population made their living in the craftsmen and merchant classes, most commonly in tailoring and retail clothing.²⁹ Shulvass and Kose conclude that Jewish wealth was largely concentrated in the hands of a few elite, while most Jews were of the middle class and some were poor.³⁰ These differences created a range of social experiences among an often-homogenized or stereotyped group, whereby some may have been more affected by religious intolerance than others based on trade and class. Daniele da Norsa certainly represents an extreme case. Such diversity, however, was not actively cultivated in popular thought, and most Jews experienced some degree of discrimination and persecution even where they were outwardly tolerated.

USURY, PROMISCUITY, ATONEMENT: THE JEW IN MANTUA AND PADUA

As noted above, the Jews received some institutional protection in recognition of the important social functions they fulfilled: consciously alleviating poverty and effectively reinforcing Christian identity. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Italian Jews were at least superficially assimilated, donning typical dress, speaking local dialects, and living alongside Christian neighbors.³¹ In order for the Jews to fulfill both aspects of their social function, however, they had to remain present as Other—neither incorporated into nor exiled from society. They were thus systematically and routinely maligned and marked, most aggressively by Christian mendicant orders, in spite of superficial institutional protection.³²

Forms of anti-Semitic violence in Italy, while relatively mild in comparison to the remainder of Europe, were largely symbolic.³³ The sociocultural image

of “the Jew” was bolstered by fabricated and false accusations of ritual murder, image profanation, deicide, and host desecration.³⁴ The overriding themes of these multifaceted, complex accusations may be roughly summarized as, first, intentionally crafting a distinct and unambiguous Other and, second, ensuring that Other was considered less than human—a “pig,” a “leech,” a “bloodsucker,” a “martyr to the devil’s cause.”³⁵ Such a social profile would mitigate the effects of Jewish influence on the good Christian, while the Christian reaped the benefits the presence of the anathema allotted.

Despite their symbolic nature, campaigns against the Jews had concrete, visible manifestations. Physical attacks on Jews were most common following inflammatory Franciscan sermons, but beyond these outright assaults, more subtle instances of aggression were commonly instituted legislatively.³⁶ Friars increasingly insisted upon government-enforced, visually distinctive markers of Jewishness, most commonly in the form of yellow circles of cloth worn on the chest.³⁷ In Ferrara, Perugia, and elsewhere, the wearing of such signs was enforced alongside a mandate requiring Jewish women and girls above the age of ten to wear earrings or a yellow veil.³⁸ At the same time, similarly “degrading costumes,” usually yellow in color, were also required for prostitutes.³⁹ The Jewish example, therefore, constitutes an effective “costume of prostitution” that strengthened the social identification of the Jew as vainglorious, promiscuous, and sinful.⁴⁰

From these selectively hostile and complex social conditions arose what Mark Zucker describes as a “Jewish stereotype,” a codified and repeated set of standards for visually portraying the Jew.⁴¹ These norms were frequently deployed in both popular engravings and high art. The Jew was nearly always depicted with a large nose and long beard, attributes that served to “exoticize” or orientalize the individual and indicate their Otherness.⁴² Sometimes the Jew was shown wearing glasses, indicating their spiritual blindness, or carrying a money purse, indicating their usurious greed.⁴³ The traditionally yellow “Jew badge” served as the final and most overt of these distinctions, a testament to the Christian power that defined his or her social role.⁴⁴

The Jewish badge eventually made its way from the cityscape to the world of high art, apparent in the *Norsa Madonna* on the two men’s clothes (see Figure 2). The inclusion of this symbol in a seemingly atemporal scene of Christian triumph—the Madonna enthroned—suggests a kind of defeat of Judaism, both locally and universally. The Jewish men and women are relegated to the lowest register, visibly subjugated and quite literally marginalized. The downturned eyes of the women, the yellow hat of the rightmost man, and the unforgiving verism of the group’s physiognomies further present the *Norsa* family in an unforgiving light. These iconographic choices may be seen as both faithful portraiture attuned to sociocultural specificities and as a subtle

form of caricature: the “Jewishness” of the family made exceedingly apparent, their perceived sinfulness manifesting in their solemn expressions.

Katz interprets this work as a “pictorial testament to the Jews’ victimization.”⁴⁵ While the Norsa family’s proximity may suggest a version of the *sacra conversazione* that subtly suggests theoretical inclusion, their lowly and separate position in the pictorial field effectively reflects their actual position in Mantuan society.⁴⁶ Considering the social realities described above, their grimaces, stereotypical features, and relegation to the bottommost register may be read as markers of defeat or subjugation. Moreover, the text above the Madonna reads “Defeat of the Jews’ Temerity,” reinforcing these ideas with almost didactic clarity.⁴⁷ The painting thus assumes the role of social artifact and social agent, both a documentation of harsh and oppressive reality and a means by which the Jewish individual was actively humiliated.⁴⁸ The *Norsa Madonna*, in effect, is thus a form of social commentary, written by the powerful and, quite literally, at the expense of the powerless.

The Scrovegni Chapel in Padua presents a comparable solution to a slightly different problem (Figure 3). The motivation of the chapel’s patron, Enrico Scrovegni (d. 1336), is commonly understood as an act of atonement. Enrico wished to expiate his family’s sins: his father had amassed wealth through usury, and here Enrico repurposes the wealth for sacred, rather than profane, purposes.⁴⁹ Both the *Norsa Madonna* and the fresco cycle in Padua thus have a certain penitential function, one forced and one voluntary. Both patrons were usurers, one Jewish and the other Christian, and most importantly, while the *Norsa Madonna* condemns the usurer, the Scrovegni Chapel redeems him.

This key distinction is made perhaps most apparent and most succinctly in the two presentations of small-scale church models to the Virgin Mary, present in both works and inviting one-to-one comparison. In Giotto’s *Last Judgment* in the Scrovegni Chapel, Enrico himself kneels piously, presenting his chapel, while the Virgin Mary extends an open arm to him (Figure 4). He stands on Christ’s right, the side of the elect, “a result of his renewed piety and charity” made possible by the abandonment of his former trade.⁵⁰ In the *Norsa Madonna*, St. Jerome performs the presentation instead of Daniele.⁵¹ By stripping the patron of his agency, the *Norsa Madonna* effectively denies him the same degree of redemption awarded to Enrico, both publicly and spiritually. Perhaps this is indicative of Daniele’s limited role in the punitive patronage, but as a Jewish individual, he may have wanted actively to distance his image from Christian iconography. In any case, Enrico’s image is ultimately (and quite publicly) ameliorated to a greater extent than Daniele’s. Enrico is offered forgiveness, while Daniele remains ambiguous and marginalized, pictured yet intentionally distinct from the *sacra conversazione*.



Figure 3: Scrovegni Chapel interior with fresco cycle by Giotto di Bondone, Padua, c. 1303–1306

The *Norsa Madonna*'s artist may have chosen to make such a pointed reference to the Paduan fresco cycle for the earlier work's own underlying anti-Semitic themes and iconography. Thematically, the program emphasizes the equation of usury with sexual deviancy, presenting examples of natural fecundity as direct parallel.⁵² According to Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona, the paired images of the *Visitation* and the *Pact of Judas* act as the paradigmatic embodiment of this overriding theme: the womb of Mary and the sack of money both representative of pivotal moments in salvation history, one productive and the other destructive (Figures 5–6).⁵³ All of which is in line with the tendency in Renaissance anti-Semitism, noted above, to conflate usury and sexual taboos—a weapon for stigmatizing and marginalization.⁵⁴

The contrast between natural and unnatural procreancy in the Scrovegni Chapel corresponds to another contrast, namely, between believe and unbeliever.⁵⁵ In the *Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple*, the menacing physiognomy of the heavily bearded Jewish priests indicates “their sinister intent”



Figure 4: Giotto, *Last Judgment*, detail of Enrico offering the Chapel, Padua, c. 1305

(Figure 7).⁵⁶ They reappear as the same conspirators in the *Pact of Judas*, a continuity that deviates from or reimagines biblical tradition for the purposes of cohesive narration.⁵⁷ Judas's hooked nose, prominent brow, and deep-set eyes border on caricature, conforming almost exactly to Zucker's description of the "Jew stereotype".⁵⁸ Judas, in both the *Pact* and the *Kiss* scenes (Figure 8),



Figure 5: Giotto, *Visitation* from the Scrovegni Chapel cycle, Padua, c. 1305

is clad entirely in yellow, the contemporary sartorial color of the Jew (or, perhaps in keeping with the themes of unnatural sexuality, of Jewish women specifically).⁵⁹ The presence of these distinctions implies the act of decide—that is, Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion and death of Christ.⁶⁰ To complete the cycle in the hellish realm of the *Last Judgment*, among the damned and the



Figure 6: Giotto, *Pact of Judas* from the Scrovegni Chapel cycle, Padua, c. 1305

usurious are conspicuously circumcised men, their genitalia identifying them as Jewish.⁶¹ Thus, the visual program's emphasis on usury and deicide may serve to ultimately "construct an extreme of moral depravity" that effectively displaces the hatred once directed at the Scrovegni (now positioned among the saved) to the generic Jew-type, a near-textbook example of social scape-

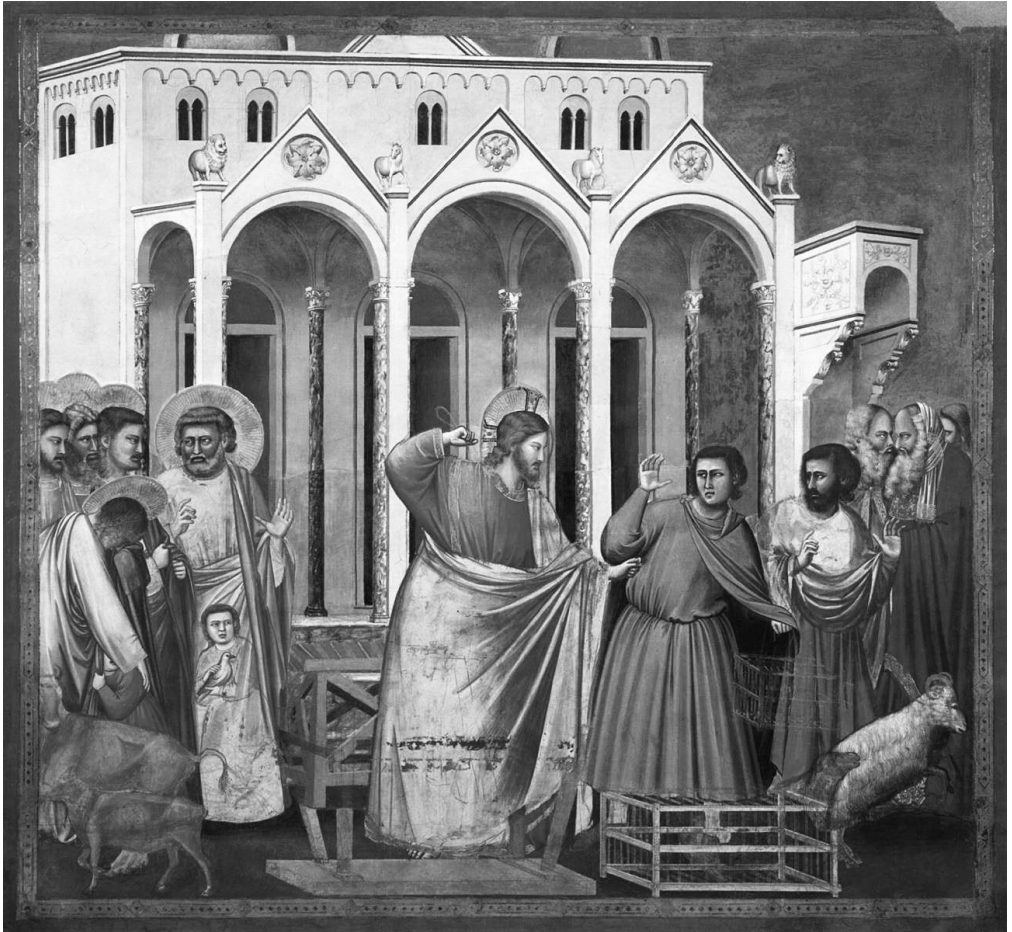


Figure 7: Giotto, *Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple* from the Scrovegni Chapel cycle, Padua, c. 1305

goating.⁶² Scrovegni thus not only atoned for his and his father's sins, but also proffered a substitute villain to occupy his family's former place in the Paduan social imagination. This is comparable to the public vilification of Norsa in the *Norsa Madonna*, which likewise constructed a dichotomy of good/evil, powerful/powerless, and triumphant/defeated along the lines of believer/unbeliever, Christian/Jew.

MANTEGNA'S *ECCE HOMO* AND RELIGIOUS SEGREGATION

The visible distinctions between Jew and Christian apparent in the *Norsa Madonna* and the Scrovegni Chapel were neither isolated incidences nor merely



Figure 8: Giotto, *Kiss of Judas* from the Scrovegni Chapel cycle, Padua, c. 1305

coincidental; as we have seen, these segregationist attitudes were actively cultivated by members of the Church.⁶³ Rather than emphasizing the similarities between the Abrahamic religions, the Observant Franciscans in particular indiscriminately deemed Jews “usurers and enemies of the poor.”⁶⁴ As a result, they were among the earliest promoters of the separation of the Jews, condemning the “promiscuous mingling” of the two religious groups in Italian cities as unnatural and unseemly.⁶⁵ Bernardino da Siena compared the usurious Jews to “leeches” and declared them the “capital enemy of all Christians,” his language both intentionally dehumanizing and actively ostracizing.⁶⁶ Blood

libel followed quite naturally: the ultimate and most heinous picture of greed, charged with associations of the blood of Christ at the hands of the Jewish population that so readily crucified him.⁶⁷

Mantegna's *Ecce Homo* provides evidence of the visual tradition surrounding accusations of deicide, continuing what was subtly implied at the Scrovegni Chapel (Figure 9). In many ways, Mantegna's is the more severe accusation, its formal devices insisting even more perceptibly upon the Jewishness of Jesus's tormentors. The yellow turban of the rightmost tormentor, the "pseudo-Hebrew" lettering on the hats of the other three, and the snarled and creased physiognomies of the group are congruous with Zucker's "Jew stereotype" and with conventional Jewish representations of the period.⁶⁸ Words from the Bible are advertised with remarkable clarity: *trompe-l'œil* pieces of paper—reading "Crucify him, take him and crucify him"—didactically link the death of Christ to these few individuals.⁶⁹ The incorporation of contemporary visual markers may go beyond mere identifiers to suggest continuity between past and present: the Quattrocento Jews are just as culpable by proxy of their non-belief as those ancients who actively called for the execution of Christ.

The clear contrast between the ugliness of the depicted Jews and the relative youth and beauty of Christ further emphasizes the distinction between Christianity and Judaism, believer and unbeliever—an visual approach employed in the Scrovegni Chapel and the *Norsa Madonna*, and correlating to the social practices that led to widespread expulsions and later ghettoization of the population. While this presentation may have been meant primarily to convey the godliness of Jesus, when considered alongside the work's clear use of Jewish tropes and sartorial markers, the message may be easily read as anti-Semitic.

However, Mantegna's *Ecce Homo* is perhaps more significant for its differences, the unique and critical ways it deviates from any established tradition. In typical representations of the *Ecce Homo* narrative, Christ is usually shown in the clutches of Roman guards or standing next to Pontius Pilate, and he is in either case presented apart from the crowd that demands his death.⁷⁰ Here, spatial proximity is exploited to create (in Dawson Carr's words) "chilling results."⁷¹ The Jews are able to touch Jesus, putting him in imminent danger. Their words, written above, become ever more sinister as the viewer gains an immediate sense of cause and effect. Jesus confronts the viewer directly, uncomfortably close and unable to be ignored. He is outnumbered, bound, and crowned mockingly with thorns. The Jewish population here has both power and agency, able to fulfill their threats by virtue of their proximity to Christ's body. This compositional device, the "painter's goal of empathetic involvement," and contemporary sartorial marks all actively encourage Jewish/Christian separation, communicating with rhetorical clarity a remarkably

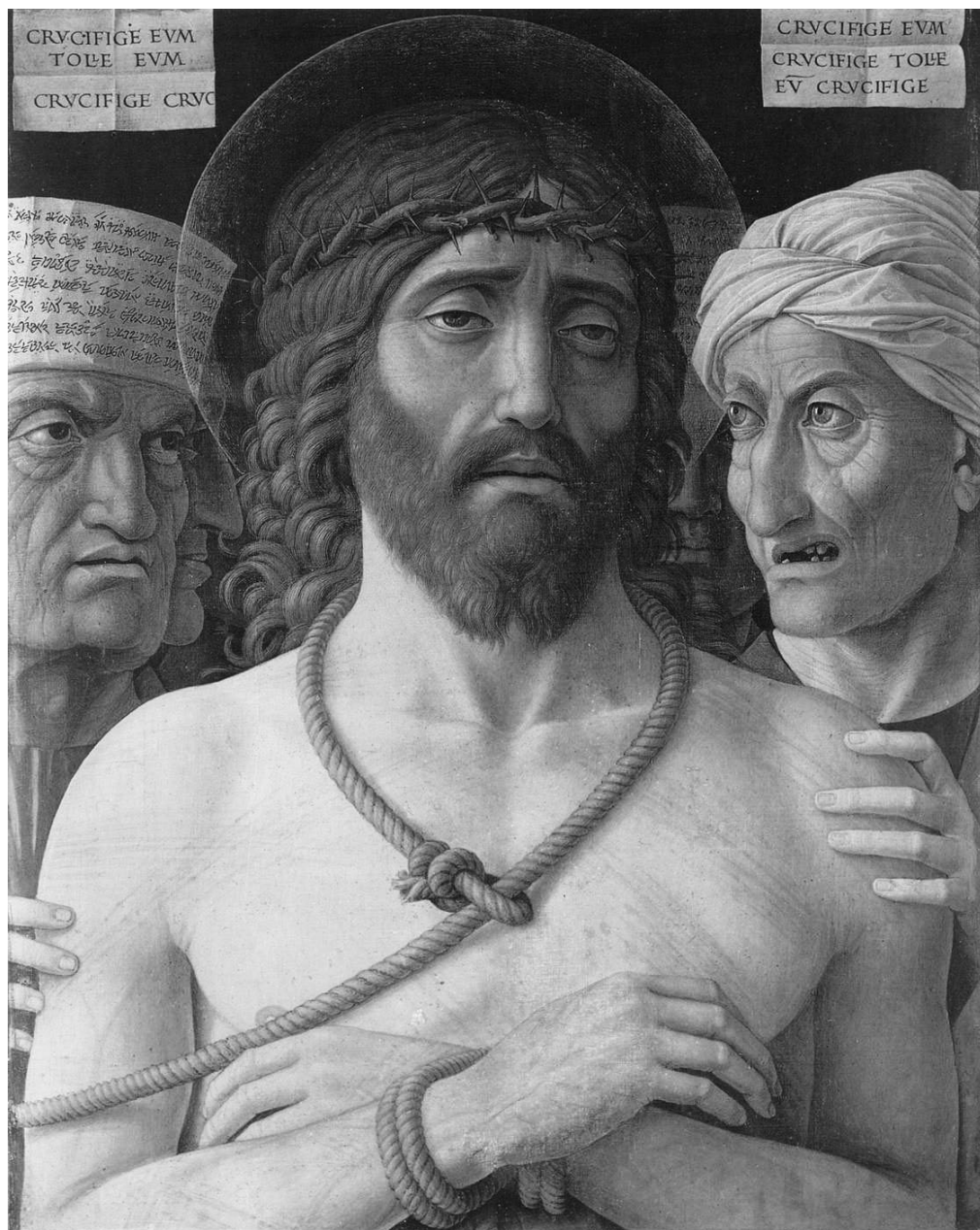


Figure 9: Andrea Mantegna, *Ecce Homo*, c. 1500

consistent message: the Jew only has power if he infiltrates the Christian body, physical or social.⁷²

To be sure, the *Ecce Homo*, the Scrovegni Chapel, and the *Norsa Madonna* are by no means solely anti-Semitic objects. The *Ecce Homo*'s *pathos* cannot be interpreted as base fearmongering; it served, perhaps principally, to encourage Christian viewers to identify their own suffering with that of Christ.⁷³ Moreover, Scrovegni was likely sincere in his atonement, patronage, and spiritual anxiety. However, these objects function in multifaceted ways, and while such propaganda may not have been the primary motivation behind their creation, this implicit anti-Semitism is unavoidable. It is appropriate, therefore, to consider why Mantegna may have adopted the compositional format he did in light of his sociocultural realities.

THE EFFICACY OF BLAME:

THE CAMPAIGN AND CULT OF SIMON OF TRENT

The deicidal implications of the *Ecce Homo* were certainly not practiced in the vacuum of high art or limited to the realm of visual experimentation. On the contrary, the tendency to implicate the Jews readily observed in the formal language of Mantegna carried over to contemporary events, perhaps nowhere more clearly than the events in Trent in 1475, surrounding the death of two-and-a-half-year-old Simon Unferdorben.⁷⁴

Days after the young boy's mysterious disappearance, on Easter Sunday, some Jewish members of the community found Simon's body in a cellar, likely having been disposed in a nearby ditch earlier in the week.⁷⁵ Prior to this discovery, blood libel allegations against the Jews had already been circulating, sending many of them into hiding preemptively.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, these accusations occurred against a backdrop of the work of anti-Semitic and influential Mendicant preachers, who "insisted in their sermons above all on the ancient myths of ritual murder."⁷⁷ Such (wholly false) accusations can be found already in England in 1144, and they typically charged that the Jews targeted boys under the age of seven to harvest their blood for use in sacred rites or to bake in the Passover matzah.⁷⁸ All of this encouraged the immediate conviction of Trent's Jewish community. After bringing the boy's body to the authorities, the Jews faced trial, were found guilty of "ritual murder," and were promptly sentenced to death.⁷⁹ Simon, in turn, was beatified in the Church, his body believed to work miracles.⁸⁰ His corpse was preserved, mummified, and put on display in a glass casket in his baptistery church of Saint Peter's.⁸¹ He became, quite conveniently, a symbol of Christian purity bolstered by the perceived qualities of Jewish Otherness: corruption, depravity, and thirst for innocent blood. A devout cult grew around this symbol, as more individuals came forward claiming the miraculous effects visiting his reliquary had upon their various afflictions.⁸²



Figure 10: Unknown Artist, *Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent*, Parrocchia San Martino, Cerveno, late fifteenth century

The growing popularity of this cult owed much to visual culture, involving both the dissemination of prints and the creation of frescoes in public spaces depicting the boy's murder, his dead body, and his soul in triumph.⁸³ Frescoes were painted for the Church of Sant'Andrea in Malegno and for "the parish churches of Cerveno, Esine, Pisogne, and Pian Camuno, in addition to village churches near Vicenza and outside Brescia in the Val Sabbia."⁸⁴ These were executed for a "generally unlettered audience," drawing upon grossly reductive stereotypes for the purposes of didactic clarity and legibility—both to tell the story of Simon and to vilify general Jewishness.⁸⁵ Particularly emblematic of anti-Semitic attitudes and of the visual campaign itself is the Cerveno example, done for the Parrocchia San Martino, which condenses many tropes, stereotypes, and key iconography in a single telling image (Figure 10). In this conception, Jewish individuals surround Simon on all sides, identifiable by their prominent circular badges, some marked by exoticizing beards, rich robes, or headgear. These are orientalizing features that ultimately distinguish Other-

ness, as noted by Zucker.⁸⁶ The “lavish brocades” worn by the group are clear violations of contemporary sumptuary laws, apparently meant to indicate the supposed vainglory and criminality of the Jew-type.⁸⁷ The nose of the man to Simon’s immediate left is noticeably hooked and quite large, and the sneering face of the man to his left suggests depravity in the context of the boy’s murder. The group carries out the murder methodically, almost theatrically, pointing and gesturing and aiding the illiterate in unambiguous understanding.

The Cervo fresco explores themes similar to those constructed at the same time by Mantegna, but here, Jewish proximity has accomplished its imagined nefarious potential. The Jews surround the centrally placed Christian body in a compositionally crowded scene. As in the *Ecce Homo*, ugliness and distinctive dress serve as visual devices that link “physical difference with evil and sin, impurity and infamy” in a way that firmly distinguishes the Christian individual.⁸⁸ Because Mantegna was a beneficiary of the Gonzaga family, who actively partook in the cult of Simon, it is not entirely implausible that the composition of the *Ecce Homo* was indeed in some way related to this specific tradition of anti-Semitic rhetoric, to some degree conflating the figures of Jesus and Simon through such compositional similarities.⁸⁹

The corporal nature of the interactions depicted in the San Martino fresco seems particularly relevant in this comparison between Mantegna and the Cervo artist. Men methodically chip away at the boy’s flesh, inflicting several wounds—most notably puncturing his limbs and feet, lancing his side, choking him with a cloth, and cutting his penis. Most of these injuries are similar to those sustained by Christ, during both his Crucifixion and his circumcision, and they are largely congruous with the state of Simon’s found body: marred by cuts, holes, and bruises with evidence of strangulation.⁹⁰ Though there is no obvious or direct correlation of Jesus’s suffering to pair with the choking of Simon, the action forces Simon to bow his head, perhaps an allusion to John 19:30, where Christ “bowed his head and gave up his spirit” upon the cross. Moreover, Simon is also splayed out in a way that recalls Crucifixion imagery, displaying his wounds in his martyrdom.⁹¹ Within the Church of San Martino, an image of Christ’s Crucifixion is depicted in the lunette directly above the *Martyrdom of Simon*, readily inviting visual comparison between the similarly posed individuals and, consequently, encouraging conceptual conflation.⁹²

This conflation was cultivated almost immediately following the discovery of Simon’s body. Giovanni Mattia Tiberino, one of the doctors who examined the boy’s corpse, described the murder as “a great thing ... which has never been heard of before, since the passion of Our Lord to our own age” in a letter to the people of his native Brescia.⁹³ He went on to describe Simon’s blood as “sacred,” his death as analogous to Christ’s own suffering, and he pointedly

emphasized the bowed head of the boy.⁹⁴ This type of language helped fashion the visual tradition that borrowed so heavily from Crucifixion imagery.⁹⁵ The quick formation of this narrative, which imagined a Jewish tendency toward murder of the pure and godlike, helps to explain the Cervenio composition.

Moreover, in the Cervenio fresco, the Jewish practice of circumcision is obliquely referenced in the mutilation of the boy's genitals.⁹⁶ The circumcision of Christ and his Passion were linked in Christian theology, both means of purification and redemption through bloodshed.⁹⁷ Like the presence of the circumcised men in Giotto's Last Judgment, this reading of Christ's circumcision functions as a broad critique of the institution of Judaism, particularly when combined with generic caricature. Further, Katz speculates that the emphasis on the boy's bleeding genitalia is also "infused ... with an element of the homoerotic, a tension made manifest by the Jews' thorough probing and surgical dissection of Simon's naked body."⁹⁸ Thus, the connection between deviant sexuality and Judaism, made evident in the Scrovegni Chapel, is here reinforced, the corporality of the *Ecce Homo* sensationalized and made even more imminent. The emphasis, therefore, is not on an isolated incidence of Jewish criminality, but on some perceived notion of widespread Jewish defectiveness, promiscuity, and corruption.

This visual campaign served to reinforce notions of anti-Semitism, stoking fear among the Christians about the possibilities of Jewish proximity. By conflating Simon and Christ, the issue is made particularly relevant, effectively symbolizing widespread religio-cultural conflicts and perceived incompatibility between the two groups. The Simon of Trent case thus becomes the culmination of the rhetoric present first in Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel and throughout anti-Semitic art, leading to the deaths of some, the persecution of many, and, it seems, the generally negative characterization of Jewish identity in the Renaissance social imagination.

TRACING INTERSECTIONS OF PROXIMITY, CORPORALITY, AND SEXUALITY

Much of this negative characterization is indebted to the themes of corporality and proximity, which arise with great consistency and with clear consequence in the works discussed above. Giotto relied upon the clear dichotomies of believer/unbeliever, redeemed/damned, and fertility/barrenness to communicate the conversion of Enrico. This duality is conveyed most clearly in the *Kiss of Judas*, where the Savior and the traitor are joined together in an embrace—one beautiful, the other subhuman; one innocent, the other empowered by his nearness to innocence. Mantegna's *Ecce Homo* employs similar strategies in distinguishing Jesus from the Jews, their differences further reinforced through a rigorously expository language of contemporary symbols and sartorial mark-

ers. In this instance, proximity is used in a twofold way and to different ends: the Jews closing in on Jesus, Jesus directly confronting the viewer. The whole creates a congested scene, imposing upon and denying relief to the viewer. In the Simon of Trent imagery, particularly in the Cervenno fresco, this proximity reaches an extreme, as the Jewish caricatures literally invade, penetrate, and desecrate a Christian symbol of purity. In this sense, these works do seem to be in dialogue, taking from and building upon a preexisting repertoire of Jewish stereotypes in the service of diverse aims and in the formation of consistent themes.

The *Norsa Madonna*, however, holds out the possibility of inverting and effectively subverting these same devices, providing a solution to the problem of Jewish usefulness and influence. The same formal choices are present to distinguish the Other: the stereotypically “Jewish” nose, the men’s long beards, the Jew badge, and the unflattering verism that captures every wrinkle of the group. In this composition, however, the *sacra conversazione* is coopted and repurposed, functioning as a cautionary and didactic object: Jewish proximity is contained in its marginalization and serves as proof of Christian triumph. These Jews are not dangerous, as Mantegna’s or Giotto’s are, because they are kept at a safe distance and under Christian control. These same attitudes are clearly reflected in the period’s legislative policies: routine expulsions to maintain insecurity, distinctive markers to maintain visibility, and eventual ghettoization to marginalize completely.

Anti-Semitic art, therefore, was a means of defining social structure and communicating didactically the need for strict regulation over the Jewish population. Proximity figures prominently both in terms of problem and solution. If Jews were necessary, they were hated both for and despite their usefulness. In early Italian Renaissance society, Jews thus became a convenient and recurrent scapegoat for alleviating social woes, a repository for blame that effectively diverted attention from any true causes of unrest or poverty. In such cases, Christian identity became bolstered through the visibility of the Other, and Christian leaders could effectively assume paternal roles against the perceived threat posed. This created and reinforced hierarchy, both along religious and class lines. High art became the vehicle for this paradoxical paradigm, visualizing obliquely these complex and rigorously cultivated attitudes. While sartorial laws made the Jew both distinct and more visible, high art emphasized religio-cultural differences and the threat of Jewish influence, through conservative didacticism at best and inflammatory fear-mongering at worst. The same conflicting attitudes espoused by the Christian mendicant preachers and Christian-run governments thus became visualized, concrete manifestations: the Jew is present, Other, dangerous, and must be denied agency.

These two realms of the mundane and the aesthetic arise as deeply engaged, continually buttressing one another. These cultural products were not

sterile artifacts, but rather highly consequential influencers of behavior and attitude, as evidenced by the cult of Simon. The Renaissance Jew as product of the social imagination thus emerges as an archetypal individual, stripped of individuality and agency, reduced to a set of stereotypical tropes in the public view. While this surely lacks veracity in any practical application or understanding of the actual nature of the population, the widespread choice to depict them as such is deeply revealing.

Movement, agency, proximity, and control become the interrelated motives of governing the social body, bespeaking both the value and detriment of the Other—profoundly hated yet ever-crucial, maintained yet marginalized, indispensable yet persecuted. This Other was caught in a cycle of hate, blame, and punishment made visible throughout time and across media, pervading nearly every facet of his social experience. He made possible this very hierarchy by virtue of his symbolic value: his practical and theoretical usefulness was exploited and dispensed with as was convenient, while his humanity was stripped and regularly forgotten. The Renaissance Jew was victim of caricature, and while his conception in the social imagination was incorrect, it was nevertheless potent and determinative of his experience socially, both as conceptual symbol and as deeply persecuted individual—worker and agent, anathema and target, function and, most fundamentally, human.

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NOTES

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