Experiencing the Chapterhouse in the Benedictine Abbey at Pomposa

The Benedictine Abbey at Pomposa is located in the Po valley east of Ferrara, on the isolated and marshy coastline of the Adriatic Sea.[1] Established in the eighth century, it was an active and vibrant complex for almost a thousand years, until repeated outbreaks of malaria forced the monks to abandon it in the seventeenth century (Salmi 14). Notable monks associated with the abbey in its eleventh-century heyday include the music theorist Guido d'Arezzo (c. 991-after 1033), the pious abbot St. Guido degli Strambiati (c. 970-1046), and the writer and reformer St. Peter Damian (1007-72) (Caselli 10-15). The poet Dante called on the abbey, as an emissary for the da Polenta court in Ravenna, shortly before his death in 1321 (Caselli 16). His visit coincided with a great period of renewal under the administration of the abbot Enrico (1302-20), during which fresco cycles in the Chapterhouse and Refectory were executed by artists of the Riminese school. This investigation of the Chapterhouse (Fig. 1-3) reveals that the Benedictines at the Pomposa Abbey, just prior to 1320, created an environment in which illusionistic painting techniques are coupled with references to rhetorical dialogue and theatrical conventions, to allow for the performative and interactive engagement of those who use the space and those depicted on the surrounding walls.[2]

Fig. 1 Pomposa Chapterhous, interior view facing crucifixion (photo: author)

Fig. 2 Pomposa Chapterhouse, interior view towards left wall (photo: author)

Fig. 3 Pomposa Chapterhouse, interior view towards right wall
(photo: author)

The Chapterhouse was likely painted between 1310 and 1318. Most scholars agree that the Chapterhouse frescoes date, on stylistic grounds, to just slightly before those in the nearby Refectory, which are securely dated 1318 due to the presence of that date scratched into the *arriccio*, discovered when the frescoes were detached from the wall (Salmi 167-70). However, scholars have not agreed on the artist responsible. A long tradition, based on a now-lost inscription, ascribed the frescoes to Giotto (Salmi 152); twentieth-century scholars largely dismissed this attribution. Over the last century the paintings have been variously assigned to a number of artists, predominantly of the Riminese School. Hermann Beenken associated the frescoes with Pietro Cavallini (254). Mario Salmi connected them to an anonymous Romagnole follower of Giotto (167). The most recent scholarship favors the "Master of the Pomposa Chapterhouse" designation, acknowledging the lack of documentation and consensus (Volpe 126-31; Benati 158-65). This study shall follow that convention.

Although a standard iconography for chapterhouse decoration had not yet been developed by this time, one pictorial element is almost always present: the *Crucifixion*.[3] At Pomposa it is the only narrative

scene included, distinguishing it from the other decoration. The scene is prominently placed on the center of the wall opposite the entrance. The *Crucifixion* is flanked by windows, and beyond them, the figures of saints Peter (beyond the window to the left, in a somewhat ruined state) and Paul (to the right) (Fig. 4, 5).

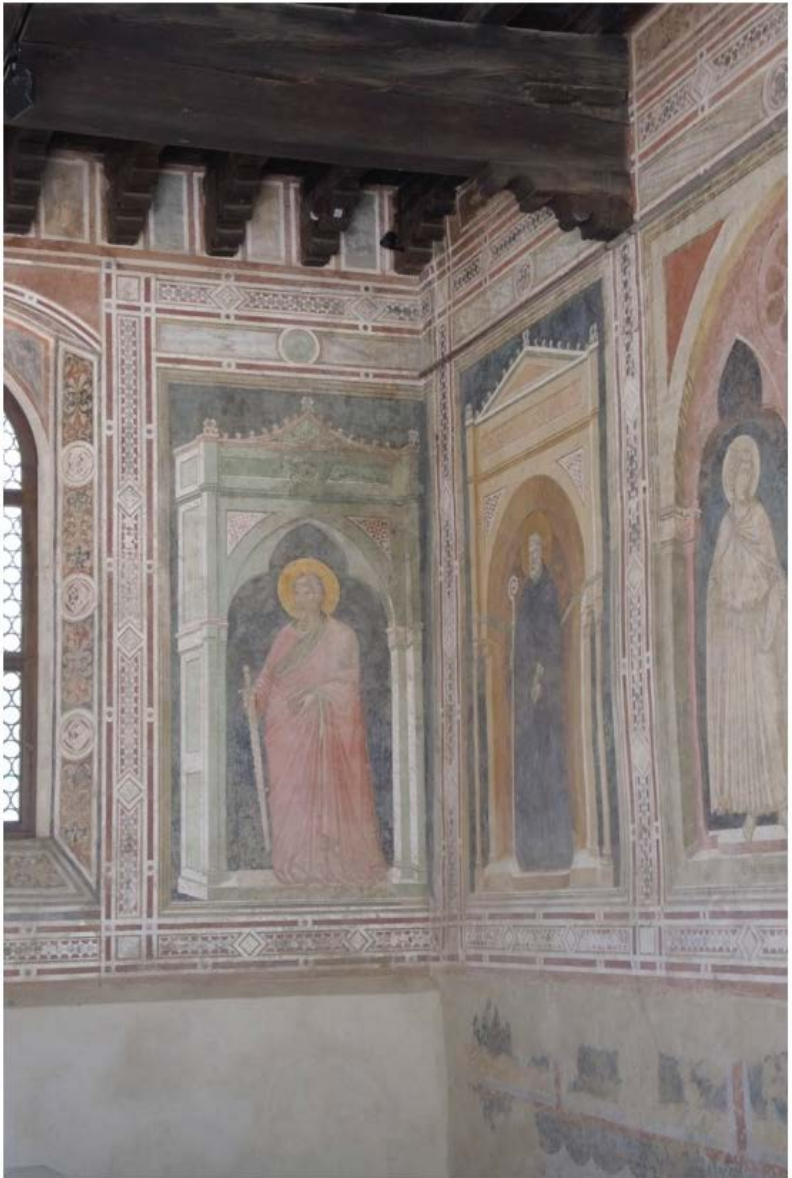Fig. 4 Pomposa Chapterhouse, detail of Sts. Benedict and Peter (photo: author)

Fig. 5 Pomposa Chapterhouse, detail of Sts. Paul and Guido, and Moses (photo: author)

On the side walls, adjacent to these apostles, are the figures of Saints Benedict (left wall, next to Peter) and Guido (right wall, next to Paul).

The remaining sections of the side walls depict twelve prophets, with three sets of paired figures on each wall (Figures 6, 7).

Fig. 6 Pomposa Chapterhouse, detail of prophets Ezekiel and Daniel
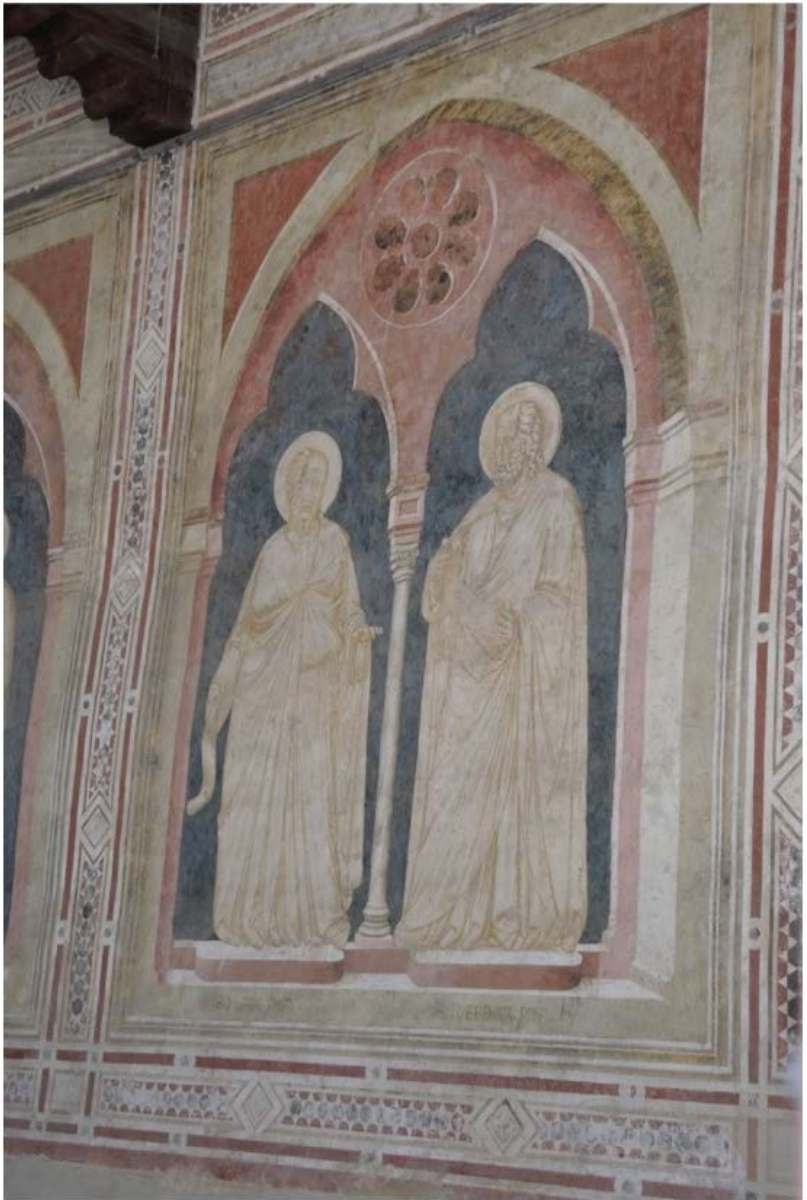(photo: author)

Fig. 7 Detail of prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (photo: author)

All sixteen figures are situated in illusionistic architectural settings. Apostles Peter and Paul stand under stone canopies, seemingly constructed of white marble, with sections of colored stone set in patterns. The structures appear solidly built, but do not completely

enclose the figures, as dark blue backgrounds are revealed behind them. Some features of these structures resemble *ciboria,* or altar canopies, which may reflect the sacred presence of these saints. Saints Benedict and Guido are set in substantial architectural niches, with rounded arches, free-standing side columns, and gabled tops. The frieze and spandrels are painted to simulate colored stones. The six pairs of prophets are placed within architectural settings that strongly resemble the bifurcated windows and doorway of the entrance wall of the chapterhouse, with a rosette detail added in the peak of the outer arch. Each prophet stands under a smaller, trilobed, pointed arch, a detail similar to the inner arches of the structures of the Apostles. One striking feature of the prophets is that they are painted in *grisaille*, while their surrounds are in full color, creating the effect of pink and white marble encasing sculptures that pop against dark backgrounds.

Each of these canopies or niches is painted illusionistically, dissolving the boundaries between real and fictive architecture. This allows the painted figures within them to better interact with the real figures inhabiting the space, and prompts the following question: For what reason did the Benedictines here seek to create this environment? This decoration is not explicitly replicated in other Benedictine chapterhouses, yet each facet does represent a concept or ideal of great significance to the order, and, in fact, numerous other monastic complexes of the Middle Ages and Renaissance reveal decorative programs with similar subjects. However, the illusionistic aspects of this space are unusual, perhaps unique in this period, and may only be fruitfully considered after an examination of the subjects represented, some comparative examples, and their Benedictine context.

The Chapterhouse functions as an assembly or meeting room, where business was conducted.[4] After the eleventh century, when one was constructed at the Benedictine monastery at Cluny, a chapterhouse may be found in almost every monastic complex in Western Europe (Stein-Kecks 157; Braunfels 36). As Charles McClendon has noted, the similar features of numerous monastic complexes are due to consistent "communication and exchange" and extensive travel, producing the sharing of architectural forms and ideas (71). For the Benedictines, the chapterhouse was a space for gathering every day after morning mass: to read a chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict* (hence, the likely origin of the name of the room), conduct official business, and assign penance for infractions (Braunfels 11; Stein-Kecks 168). It was also a place where profession is made, abbots are elected, and donations are received (Braunfels 10-12; Stein-Kecks 168-69). In short, it was a place for

business and collegial interaction, but not socializing, nor studying, nor prayer. These activities would take place elsewhere, as every part of the monastery had a specific purpose, and the physical layout and decoration of each space coordinated with that function. This is true at Pomposa, as in other complexes of the period.

Returning to the fresco decoration, the importance of the four saints represented must be carefully considered. The Apostles Peter and Paul are commonly represented in religious art, regardless of the order that commissioned the work, or the type of space where they are situated. Their significance is universal, due to their close connection to Christ, their leadership among Jews and gentiles, and their role in establishing the Christian community in Rome. The Benedictines placed a great deal of significance on the concept of hierarchy. The decoration in the Chapterhouse is arranged to reflect the order they sought in all aspects of their life. Peter and Paul represent the next tier of the hierarchy, second only to Christ himself, as figures who continued his work on earth. A large number of Benedictine monastic complexes, or churches situated within them, were dedicated to Peter and Paul together, such as at Cluny, Canterbury, and Hirsau, or to Peter individually, including those at Moissac, Perugia, Civate, Fontanelle, Aosta, and Burgos. Additionally, the importance of Peter and Paul to the Benedictines can be noted through a legend that they commissioned the building of Cluny III, appearing to Abbot Gunzo of Baume in a dream in which they laid out the architectural plan of the complex with ropes (Braunfels 59). Their arrangement in the Pomposa chapterhouse, flanking the *Crucifixion,* reflects that weighty position.

Two additional saints are depicted on the side walls: Benedict, founder of the order, and Guido, an abbot at Pomposa in the eleventh century. Depictions of Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 543) are often found in churches and monasteries of the order, either in iconic representations or narrative scenes. Early images of St. Benedict in Italy can be found at the Sacro Speco in Subiaco; later examples include the well-known cycles at San Miniato al Monte, Florence (1387), the Badia Fiorentina (c. 1435–39), and at Monte Oliveto Maggiore (1497-1513) (Kaftal 125-28). St. Benedict is a role model for all men of the order, an important intercessor, and a guiding force in every aspect of their existence, lived according to his *Rule*. In the abbey at Pomposa his likeness is painted three times: in the chapterhouse, in the adjacent church, and as part of a *Deesis* scene in the refectory across the cloister (again, paired with St. Guido).

In contrast, the cult of St. Guido is local, and artistic representations of his life are limited to depictions in the chapterhouse, church, and refectory of the Pomposa Abbey (Kaftal 392-94). Guido degli Strambiati, born about 970 to a wealthy family in Ravenna, abandoned that life before marrying, became a hermit, then joined the monastery at Pomposa, and became abbot in 1002 (Ropa 43-47; Laghi 7-107). He worked to reform the abbey and institute a greater sense of morality until his death in 1046, most notably transforming water into wine at a dinner with Gherardo, Archbishop of Ravenna, who had doubted the sanctity of the monks at the abbey (a scene depicted among the frescoes in the refectory).[5] Saints Benedict and Guido represent the next level of the hierarchy, moving from the apostles to saints particularly connected to their order and their abbey. In the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the abbot is seen as one who "holds the place of Christ" (Fry 22). A modern commentary on the *Rule of St. Benedict* elaborates on this concept, describing the position of the abbot "in the line of apostolic succession, heir to that teaching that comes down from the apostles and that they in turn received from Christ." (Fry 349). For the Benedictines who would gather daily in this space, these four figures are links in the chain that bonds them to Christ himself. Thus, the arrangement of the frescoes in the Chapterhouse reflects the notion of hierarchy, a theme woven throughout the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Beyond the four saints, twelve (primarily) Old Testament figures, commonly regarded as prophets, but better described as forerunners of Christ, are depicted in the Pomposa Chapterhouse. They are paired, standing as if in doorways, in six niches, three on each side wall. The frescoes on the right wall are in better condition and the figures are clearly labeled. Next to the figure of St. Guido are Moses and David, Jeremiah and Isaiah, Joel and Habakkuk. On the left wall, next to the figure of St. Benedict, are Hosea (sometimes identified as Sofonias) and Amos, Ezekiel and Daniel, Zechariah and John the Baptist. It should be noted that not all scholars have agreed on these identifications, largely due to the fact that the left wall is in a poor state of conservation and there are paint losses. For example, Mario Salmi identifies as Hosea the same figure that Cetty Muscolino and Letizia Caselli refer to as Sofonias (Salmi 149; Muscolino 44; Caselli 74). The figure this author identifies as Ezekiel is damaged and not clearly labeled, and is therefore not specifically named by either Salmi or Muscolino (Salmi 149; Muscolino 44). Caselli notes the lack of legibility but states that the figure may be Ezekiel (74). Neither Hermann Beenken nor Alessandro Volpe name any of the prophets. While the identification of this figure may not be as clear

as others, it is difficult to believe that an extensive cycle such as this one would not include Ezekiel, a major prophet.

The pairings of the prophets demonstrate specific relationships: Moses and David are the earliest figures chronologically, highly regarded as a legislator of the thirteenth century BCE, and a king of the eleventh century BCE, respectively, in addition being seen as direct prefigurements of Christ. Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, are considered the four "major" prophets, living between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. Each one recorded significant prophecies, and played a notable role in the courts of the period, or in the Babylonian exile. Hosea, Amos, Joel, and Habakkuk are considered "minor" prophets. The final pairing advances into the New Testament, and closer to Christ. Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist, notably struck mute for not believing the angel who revealed to him that his previously barren wife, Elizabeth, would finally bear him a son; he regained his voice after following instructions to name the boy John. The prophecies and actions of John the Baptist connect all of the earlier figures to Christ, again, serving as links in a long chain.

The prophets serve many roles: they are messengers, delivering the law and communicating the voice of God to the people (Lundbom 32). Jewish tradition holds that they are the guardians of that law, serving and protecting it, while Christians see the prophets largely as the forerunners of Christ, predicting his birth and what his life will mean (Hutton 5-6). The prophets often call for justice and promote equity, especially among the disenfranchised, and they speak out against corruption and disobedience (Lundbom 2). They may be seen as symbols of hope as much as they are often forecasters of doom. In all of these roles, they serve as models and guides, well-positioned to assist the Benedictines at Pomposa.

A few physical aspects of the prophets must be noted. In contrast to the saints, who are all depicted frontally, the prophets appear in variable positions: some in three-quarters poses, others in profile. They turn towards one another, as if in conversation, and this significant interaction will be explored in greater detail. As noted previously, the prophets are painted in *grisaille*, unlike the saints, although the doorways in which they are set are not. This unusual feature sets them apart, demanding the viewer's attention, and must be examined further in order to understand the role these figures play.[6] Beenken notes that the prophets are painted in monochrome, but does not imply that this is unusual or intriguing in any way (254). Salmi also mentions their depiction in *grisaille* and states that the artist must have seen Giotto's

Virtues and *Vices* in the Arena Chapel, but he does not further explore the significance or examine how this aspect contributes to the illusion created in the space (149-56). Other scholars have perpetuated the notion that the prophets are intended to represent marble sculptures (Volpe 127; Boskovits 126). There are some examples of *grisaille* used in manuscript illumination and stained glass of this period, largely associated with the Cistercian order. However, few examples of *grisaille* painting exist in fresco decoration prior to 1316, when this cycle was begun. Giotto's aforementioned depictions in the *dado* of the Arena Chapel in Padua, very likely known to the "Master of the Pomposa Chapterhouse," are probably the most significant examples (Volpe 128; Salmi 156). Scholars who have considered those frescoes have noted their distinct separation from the narrative scenes, which are rendered in naturalistic color, as describing various levels or states of reality (Cole 341; Jacobus 102). In other words, they help to focus the viewer's attention on differences. In the Pomposa chapterhouse the prophets are intentionally separated from the saints, by their coloration as well as the settings in which they are placed, for the purpose of articulating the different roles that they play. One author has described their monochromatic aspect as being associated with their existence "far from actual time" (Caselli 74). The prophets are indeed from a more ancient period of history, but the employment of this particular coloristic effect is more explicit. The use of *grisaille* strongly contributes to the illusionism of the paintings by simulating the texture of a different material, an important feature of *trompe l'oeil* painting (Kubovy 70-71). The various reasons for the distinct nature of the saints and prophets will be clarified through an examination of the figures in a larger Benedictine context.

       The history of Benedictine art reveals extensive depictions of saints (including apostles and abbots) and prophets. The most notable examples are found in the cloister and on the south portal at St. Pierre-de-Moissac.[7] Almost-life-size depictions of the apostles appear on the corner piers of the cloister, with Peter and Paul at the southeast point. The narrative capitals of the cloister columns depict scenes from the lives of prophets Daniel, David, Habakkuk, and John the Baptist, and the lives of saints Peter, Paul and Benedict. On a pier in the east gallery, opposite what was once the door to the chapterhouse, is a representation of Durand, the first abbot at Moissac (in the eleventh century). On the south porch the impressive trumeau depicts St. Paul on the west side, opposite the figure of St. Peter on the west jamb, and the prophet Jeremiah on the east side, facing Isaiah on the east jamb. Smaller figures of Peter and Paul appear again just above the springing of the arch, and on the exterior

south wall, figures of St. Benedict and Roger, a twelfth-century abbot at Moissac, are set above the engaged columns. Throughout this space, we find depictions of the apostles Peter and Paul, St. Benedict, and local abbots of past centuries, with various prophets, just as we find at Pomposa.

Benedictine written sources emphasize similarly the significance of these figures. In both the *Rule of St. Benedict* and in the *Dialogues of Gregory the Great* there are numerous references to prophets and apostles, and many figures of both types appear intertwined with the figure of St. Benedict and his followers, as guides, parallels, and exemplars. The prophetic gifts of St. Benedict are discussed at length in the *Dialogues* (Gregory 2: 21, 88-89; Wansbrough 149-50), and in one passage he is likened to David (Gregory 2: 8, 70-72). When Deacon Peter questions how Benedict could have traveled in a dream to instruct the abbot at Terracina on how to build his monastery, Gregory offers this comparison, "We have it on the authority of holy Scripture that the Prophet Habakkuk was lifted from Judea to Chaldea in an instant, so that he might share his dinner with the Prophet Daniel . . . as the prophet came in body with food for the body, Benedict came in spirit to promote the life of the soul" (Gregory 2: 22, 91). When Peter inquires as to whether Benedict worked miracles though prayer or at will, Gregory replies that he worked them in both ways, as the apostle Peter had done, and provides examples from the lives of both saints (Gregory 2: 30-32, 98-101).

These connections are made explicit in numerous artistic representations. For example, the sculpted capitals in the cloister of Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire pair the story of the monk Romanus bringing bread to St. Benedict with that of Habakkuk bringing food to Daniel in the lion's den (Verdier 117-87). More specifically in the context of a chapterhouse, displaced twelfth-century sculptures from the ruins of St. Mary's Abbey in York have been reconstructed into a plan that positions twelve figures of the Old Law (prophets) under twelve figures of the New Law (apostles), attached to the vault responds in the five bays of the chapterhouse (Wilson 114). The concept of figures representing the Old Law and the New Law has only been briefly considered with regard to the chapterhouse at Pomposa, by Mario Salmi, without any detailed explanation (Salmi 152).

Finally, brief mention should be made of the concept of the *vita apostolica*, as promoted in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. This philosophy encourages members of the community to live together, hold everything they have in common, and embrace the life of the apostles. It is this directive that is at the heart of communal life, and encourages active

imitation of the apostles. In the twelfth century this concept is popularized anew, and modern scholars have connected works of art of the Romanesque period with the mental pilgrimage associated with it (Seidel 33-42; Forsyth 75-82). Chapterhouse decoration throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance has been linked to a similar practice, that of the imitation of Christ, and the decoration of the Pomposa Chapterhouse fits squarely in this tradition (Stein-Kecks 177).

We may conclude from these examples that both prophets and saints inspired the Benedictines and provided specific types of role models for them. The figures depicted in the Pomposa chapterhouse reflect the legacy of earlier, medieval examples from across Western Europe. The illusionistic style in which they are painted moves them beyond their predecessors, and allows the figures to function in a more focused and emphatic manner, in the setting of the relatively new chapterhouse environment.

In the past few decades increased attention has been paid to the important role of the spectator in viewing art. John Shearman's groundbreaking book *Only Connect…Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* focused our attention on angles of viewing, gazes, framing devices, and other physical aspects of artworks that are intended to produce a response. The use of perspectival painting and illusionistic elements plays a large role in this. Thinking of the developments in artistic representation and theatrical convention as running on parallel tracks can assist us in understanding how art can help us function in a specific way, even in the context of everyday activities (Saslow 155-79). Illusionistic painting, as found in the Pomposa Chapterhouse, dissolves the solid walls of the building, allowing the Benedictines meeting in the space to attain a stronger connection to the figural exemplars they see around them. The saints and prophets appear to be physically present, despite the distance in time and space that is known to exist. They stand in niches, or under canopies, or in the threshold of a doorway, placed beyond the surface of the wall, thanks to the effects of the masterful and purposeful painting. The limited space of the Chapterhouse is expanded to include these advisors, who watch over their spiritual descendants, close enough to guide and mentor.

It has already been noted that pairs of figures are commonly seen in Benedictine art. They provide an opportunity to see one figure guiding another, for role models to be identified, and for comparative actions to be observed. Yet, another aspect must be examined: in the Pomposa chapterhouse, the paired figures of saints and prophets are engaged in conversation, or more specifically disputation. They actively gesture,

and turn towards one another. The important tradition of disputation, from antiquity through the Middle Ages, has been recently considered by Alex Novikoff. The Benedictines were consistently engaged in the practice of dialogue and debate, as evidenced principally by the format of the *vita* of St. Benedict: the *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory the Great, written in the sixth century. The tradition was especially strong at Pomposa, the home of Peter Damian, who wrote one of the great dialogues of the period, *Antilogus contra Judaeos*. By the thirteenth century public disputations had become popular and widespread, and Novikoff emphasizes that they "share much in common with the forms of dramatic performance that are documented during this era and that also tended to efface distinctions between actor and audience, spectacle and daily life, ritual and representation" (143).[8]

  We have ample evidence that the Benedictines were engaged in dramatic productions. At Montecassino, in the early twelfth century, a passion play was performed (Wiles 57), and the monastery at Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire is considered the birthplace of Easter drama (Cohen 328). Given the increasingly prominent performances of all types that were known by the early fourteenth century, it should not surprise us to see aspects of disputation and performance playing out on the walls of the Chapterhouse at Pomposa. Even the manner in which the paired, disputing figures are placed in arched openings strongly recalls theatrical conventions. They evoke the figures standing in niches on the *scaenae frons* of ancient theaters, or in the spaces called houses, mansions, or booths in medieval performances (Kernodle 29-32, 85). Here in the Pomposa Chapterhouse, the artist clearly employed illusionistic painting techniques in order to replicate those types of figures. He created an environment for the drama of everyday life, and the imagined conversations facilitated by the saints and prophets in dialogue on the surrounding walls. The importance of the illusion created by these frescoes cannot be overstated. In a space where the religious community gathered and discussed their guiding principles, they were keenly aware of the performative and interactive focus required. The strong connections between rhetoric and disputation, and theater and performance, allow us to see the chapterhouse as a space where the frescoed figures demonstrate the actions in which real figures should be engaged.

  Medieval liturgical drama and rhetorical performance sought to elicit emotion and promote imitation, as did the art of the period; the frescoes executed by the Master of the Pomposa Chapterhouse share this goal. It is achieved through the use of naturalistic and illusionistic

techniques in painting and incorporation of theatrical and rhetorical devices. The Benedictines of Pomposa Abbey, and the painter of their chapterhouse, attempted to create in this space fresco decoration that serves and supports the principal concerns and tenets of the order. They sought to employ novel artistic and performative techniques to engage the members of their community, allowing them to identify with, seek guidance from, and carefully imitate Christ, the apostles Peter and Paul, Saints Benedict and Guido, and the prophets. In this way, the unusual illusionistic frescoes in the Pomposa chapterhouse blur the physical boundaries of the room and engage the Benedictines in a productive and purposeful manner.

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NOTES

[1] Key bibliography on Pomposa Abbey includes Caselli, *L'abbazia di Pomposa. Guida storica e artistica* (1996); Hauer, *Erneuerung im Bild: di Benediktinerabtei Pomposa und ihre Wandmalereien des 14. Jahren* (1998); Salmi, *L'abbazia di Pomposa* (1996); and Samaritani and Di Francesco, *Pomposa. Storia, arte, architettura* (1999). For information obtained through restoration and conservation efforts see Muscolino.

[2] In addition to Salmi (149-161), and Caselli (71-76), principal examinations of the chapterhouse frescoes include Beenken; Muscolino; Hauer; and Volpe (126-13).

[3] Chapterhouse decoration from the thirteenth century, with particular attention to the importance of *Crucifixion* images in that space, has been examined by Boskovits. The lack of an established chapterhouse iconography has been previously noted by both Wilson (115); and Stein-Kecks (173-74).

[4] For further bibliography regarding the Benedictine way of life and the position of the chapterhouse within it, see Kardong; Butler; Lawrence; and Horn and Born, which remains one of the best examinations of a Benedictine monastic complex and the particular distribution of physical space.

[5] For a detailed discussion of the Pomposa Refectory frescoes and the depiction of St. Guido's miracle, see Fleming.

[6] On the use of *grisaille* and polychromed sculpture see Krieger; Jolly; and Bradley.

[7] For more detailed information on the sculptures at Moissac see Shapiro; Talbot; and Rutchick.

[8] See also Enders for more on the relationship between quodlibetical disputations and dramatic performances in the late Middle Ages.

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