Image as Relic: Moretto's Funerary "Portrait" of Angela Merici

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In 1540, il Moretto da Brescia painted a bust-length representation of Angela Merici on the occasion of her death.[1] Moretto's picture shows the holy woman's corpse seated upright against a dark background. Located in the Oratory annex of the church of Sant'Orsola as late as 1758, the work has since been lost.[2] Thankfully, there are extant copies in Brescia's Centro Mericiano (Figure 1) and Casa Sant'Angela,[3] as well as in the sacristy of the Duomo of Desenzano.[4] Scholars largely agree that the copy at the Centro Mericiano is by Moretto himself. Additionally, the painting is reproduced in Domenico Cagnoni's 1768 engraving (Figure 2), published in a life of Angela Merici by Carlo Doneda.[5] This paper will explore the ways in which Moretto's inventive image type, and copies of it, satisfied the needs of Angela Merici's newly founded Company of St. Ursula in the years immediately following her death.

Angela Merici was a female mystic from the north Italian town of Desenzano.[6] She spent nearly twenty years in Brescia, serving as spiritual guide to the townspeople and establishing her atypical female religious order, the Ursulines. Merici's Company of St. Ursula allowed unmarried women and widows to lead a life devoted to Christ while remaining a part of the secular world.[7] This was achieved through an inspired arrangement in which widows served as spiritual mentors to unmarried virgins. The Company of St. Ursula emphasized virginity, education, and personal union with God. It welcomed women of all ages and social classes, who continued to live at home while observing their religious responsibilities.[8] Perhaps most radically, the Company was characterized by a female autonomy not found in sixteenth-century convents, which were commonly under surveillance from a male authority, such as a bishop or prior.[9] In 1535, Merici received ecclesiastical approval to gather into a community the informal group of women under her spiritual care. Thus, she established the Ursulines with herself as mother-general, only to pass away a mere five years later.

Prior to her death, Merici dictated her simple Rule to close friend and chancellor, Gabriel Cozzano, and named her successor as mother-general of the Ursulines, Lucrezia Lodrone.[10] Yet the qualities that made Merici's Company so original and attractive to the women of Brescia, its autonomy and individualism, required a charismatic leader. Ultimately, the Ursulines' reliance on Merici's guiding hand left them vulnerable after her death, both from within the group and from without. Societal anxieties about uncloistered virgins coincided with dwindling numbers in the Company as many original members left to marry or take the veil. Additionally, in 1545 Lodrone attempted to impose standard attire within

1 Also in 1540 Moretto executed a horizontal panel featuring the dead Merici in a supine position. This panel covered her sarcophagus, which was interred under the Church of Sant'Afra. Unfortunately, Merici's tomb, and Moretto's painted panel, were destroyed in an Allied bombing in 1945. Both paintings are discussed in Pier Virgilio Begni Redona, *Alessandro Bonvicino: Il Moretto da Brescia* (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 1988), 540-542; and Pier Virgilio Begni Redona, "Ritrattro funebre di Sant'Angela Merici," in *Alessandro Bonvicino: Il Moretto*, ed. Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua (Brescia: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1988), 127-128. One cannot discount the idea that these paintings were based on a death mask of Merici, though no record of such a mask exists. This notion is suggested in Antonio Cistellini, *Figure della riforma pretridentina: Stefana Quinzani, Angela Merici, Laura Mignani, Bartolomeo Stella, Francesco Cabrini, Francesco Santabona* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1948), pl. 2.

2 Angelo Facconi, Archivio Segreto Vatican, S. C. Rituum, Processus 340, fol. 701. In Luciana Mariani, Elisa Tarolli, and Marie Seynaeve, *Angela Merici: contributo per una biografia* (Milan: Ancora Milano, 1988), 202-203.

3 Begni Redona, "Ritratto funebre," 540.

4 Ibid., 541.

5 Carlo Doneda, *Vita della B. Angela Merici dal Desenzano, Fondatrice della Compagnia di Sant'Orsola* (Brescia: Giambattista Bossini, 1768).

6 For the most recent and thorough account of Angela Merici's life, see Mariani, Tarolli, and Seynaeve, *Angela Merici*.

7 Angela Merici's spirituality is explored in Charmarie J. Blaisdell, "Angela Merici and the Ursulines," in *Religious Orders of the Catholic Reformation*, ed. Richard L. DeMolen (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 99-137; Cataldo Nero, ed., *Angela Merici: Vita della Chiesa e spiritualità nella prima metà del Cinquecento* (Caltanissetta: Salvatore Sciascia, 1998); Gianpiero Belotti, ed., *Angela Merici: La società, la vita, le opere, il carisma* (Brescia: Centro Mericiano, 2004); Querciolo Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self in Renaissance Italy: Angela Merici and the Company of St. Ursula (1474-1540)* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

8 Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self*, 29-30. Ursulines were expected to attend Mass daily and to confess and take communion monthly. Additionally, the Company met as a group once a month for spiritual discussion.

9 Ibid., 31-34.

10 Ibid., 198-99.

the Company, straying from what many felt were Merici's true intentions for the Ursulines, causing a schism within the group that lasted until 1559.[11] The Company of St. Ursula only remained united and relatively unchanged from 1540-45, a mere five-year period following Merici's death.

At the passing of such an important figure, the commissioning of a posthumous portrait was to be expected; however, Moretto's painting is not a standard portrait at all. Customarily, a funerary portrait depicts the deceased looking their best, in the peak of health, and most importantly, *alive*. Moretto, conversely, depicts Angela Merici's corpse, dressed in the habit of a Franciscan Tertiary, the white head-covering of which effectively acts as her burial shroud.[12] The plain, dark background and unembellished treatment of Merici's habit help focus the viewer's attention on her face which Moretto takes pains to describe with unflinching accuracy. The artist faithfully records how facial muscles slacken in death, causing Merici's mouth to droop disturbingly on the left side. Her unseeing eye, barely visible through a half-closed lid, affirms the lifelessness of her body. She returns the viewer's gaze, yet she sees nothing.

The painting most closely resembles a death mask, in that it accurately records the features of an individual postmortem. Contemporary sources indicate that death masks were common during the early modern period. Giorgio Vasari, in his life of Andrea del Verrocchio, notes their affordability and consequent ubiquity in fifteenth-century Florence.[13] Cennino Cennini, in his *Il Libro del'Arte*, provides instructions for mask casting, further indicating their prevalence.[14] Eric MacLagan too, in his article "The Use of Death-Masks by Florentine Sculptors," noted the widespread use of the form in the fifteenth century.[15] MacLagan contends that most death masks were used to create inexpensive terracotta busts that depicted the deceased with open eyes.[16] Surviving examples of death masks used for display show that the faces were painted and reworked to give the appearance of life.[17] For example, two late fifteenth-century terracotta busts likely modeled from death masks, pictured in *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* (September 1923) portray a man and a woman with open eyes and lifelike polychromy.[18] According to Vasari, such busts as these were displayed on domestic façades and interiors.[19]

While some death masks were reworked and displayed in the home, others served as models for more polished portraits. Such is the case with a death mask of Battista Sforza (Figure 3),[20] who is rendered in a marble portrait bust by Francesco Laurana from *c*. 1474 (Figure 4) and a painted portrait by Piero della Francesca from *c*. 1472 (Figure 5).[21] These posthumous works show the sitter as youthful and attractive, in contrast to the lifeless features and skin of Battista's death mask. While Laurana and Piero use the mask's facial structure as a guide for their representations, more unsightly effects of death are smoothed away in their formal depictions of the deceased.[22] These examples make clear that paintings and sculptures made from death masks were not only idealized, but also given a lifelike appearance through applied color and facial expression.

Moretto's representation of Angela Merici participates in the same memorializing function as a death mask, yet differs greatly in intent. The painting neither offers the illusion of life, nor was it a tool for the creation of more conventional portraiture. Instead, Moretto's painting was an end in itself. Quite radically the artist has invented a new type of painting in which the sitter is depicted after death in a finished work. That Moretto intended the painting to be a finished composition cannot be doubted in light of its being hung by the Church of Sant'Orsola, and the subsequent production of several copies.

The creation of a work so unique in its subject, unrefined surface, and faithful copies may be understood by examining the historical moment. Merici's death occurred in the middle of a sixty-five year period Peter Burke has called the "crisis of canonization."[23] Indeed, the Church did not canonize a single saint from 1523 to 1588, perhaps hoping to avoid

11 Ibid.; Gabriella Zarri, "Ursula and Catherine: The Marriage of Virgins in the Sixteenth Century," in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, ed. E. Ann Matter and John Coakley (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), 198-199.

12 Mazzonis, *Spirituality, Gender, and the Self*, 14.

13 Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini (Florence: Sansoni, 1966), 543-44.

14 Cennino Cennini, *Il libro del'arte o Trattato della pittura*, ed. Fernando Tempesti (Milan: Longanesi, 1975), 146-52.

15 Eric MacLagan, "The Use of Death-Masks by Florentine Sculptors," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 43, no. 249 (December 1923): 302-304.

16 Ibid., 303.

17 Ibid.

18 Luitpold Dussler, "Unpublished Terra-Cottas of the Late Quattrocento," *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 43, no. 246 (September 1923): 128-131.

19 Vasari, *Le vite*, 544.

20 This death mask from 1472 is now in the Louvre's collection.

21 For Piero della Francesa's portrait, see Carlo Bertelli, *Piero della Francesca*, trans. Edward Farrelly (New York, 1992), 224; and Ronald Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca* (New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1992), 230, 234. For Francesco Laurana's portrait bust, see Chrysa Damianaki, *The Female Portrait Busts of Francesco Laurana* (Rome: Vecchiarelli Editore, 2000), 55-63.

22 The illusionistic quality of Laurana's marble bust would have been greatly accentuated by polychromy, which unfortunately no longer remains.

23 Peter Burke, "How to Be a Counter-Reformation Saint," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500-1800,* ed. Kaspar von Greyerz (London: German Historical Institute, 1984), 45-55.

the negative publicity of Protestant criticism.[24] Still, the Ursulines fostered Merici's cult, buoyed by phenomena such as miracles and divine light surrounding her incorruptible remains.[25] Even without official sanction, the Company of St. Ursula accorded their leader the reverence due a saintly intercessor. Such behavior was by no means exceptional. It was this same spirit that had given rise to the cults of countless local saints throughout the peninsula since the early Christian era, try as the Church might to extinguish these devotional fires.[26] Traditionally, the locus of a saint's veneration was a shrine housing relics, potent remnants of the holy person's earthly life. Relics could also conveniently be dispersed to numerous sites, so devotees farther afield might be granted access to their sanctity. Due to the ill-timed Protestant threat, and the Church's reticence in granting canonization during this period, the Company of St. Ursula was deprived of a saint and of a saint's relics. Rather, Moretto's painting acts as a surrogate for Merici's relics, allowing her followers to effectively "possess" her body.[27]

Of course, Moretto does not depict his subject's full body here.[28] Instead, the artist truncates Merici's figure to bust length, a compositional choice which, in tandem with his cadaverous sitter, is surely a play on the reliquary bust. The utter strangeness of picturing a corpse seated in an upright position is far more understandable as reference to the reliquary bust tradition. In addition, by using the bust-length format, Moretto links his subject to her religious exemplar, St. Ursula, whose polychromed wooden reliquary bust was famously displayed in Cologne.[29] The renown of the St. Ursula bust was increased by the translation of the relics of many of her ten thousand virgin companions in similarly-styled reliquaries.[30] These distinctive busts became closely associated with the saint's hagiography, which so greatly inspired Angela Merici. Contemporaneous Italian examples of painted wooden reliquary busts, such as that of St. Fina from San Gimignano (Figure 6), closely resemble their northern counterparts, providing humble examples of female religiosity closer to home.

Despite the Renaissance obsession with portrait likenesses,[31] reliquary busts generally eschewed such specificity,[32] instead presenting saints as universal exemplars through generalized facial features. Scott B. Montgomery notes the idealized faces of the reliquary busts made at Cologne, and convincingly argues that the busts of the holy virgins lack distinguishing features as a means to foster group identity, even though each bust is labeled with a particular saint's name.[33] The reliquary bust of St. Fina, too, portrays a generically pretty young woman with whom any female worshiper might identify. In contrast, Moretto paints a highly individualized rendering of Angela Merici's face. While Moretto's composition formally connects Merici to female religious of the past in keeping with reliquary tradition, his realistic depiction of the deceased's physiognomy satisfied contemporary norms of funerary portraiture. Moretto further upsets genre distinctions by depicting Merici's *dead* body, subverting the traditional role of a reliquary head as signifying the saint's "living" presence.[34] Montgomery, in his article "Fashioning the Visage of Sainthood," notes how the open eyes and parted lips of the reliquary bust of Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi (Figure 7) fostered a sense of reciprocal communication between the viewer and the object of their veneration, as if she might at any moment move to speak.[35] The wooden reliquary busts of the holy virgins of Cologne similarly gaze out at the viewer, creating a visual dialogue with the faithful. In Moretto's painting, Merici's postmortem state frustrates such an interaction, emphatically denying

24 Ibid., 45.

25 Giovan Battista and Nazari De Sayani, *Le justificazioni della vita della Reverenda Madre suor Angela Terzebita* (Mariani, n.d.), 595-602.

26 For further discussion of the tension between local cult-making and ecclesiastical control, see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 30-33.

27 Like holy relics, this painting could be replicated to facilitate reverence at multiple sites concurrently. Begni Redona suggests that the Ursulines commissioned a copy of Moretto's painting each time a new Company was established, though he provides no documentation to support this supposition. Begni Redona, "Ritratto funebre," 540.

28 Moretto did, in fact, paint Angela Merici's full corpse in a supine position on a wooden panel used to cover her sarcophagus (cf. note 1). The Accademia Carrara in Bergamo holds a copy from *c.* 1600-1610 now attributed to Bartolomeo Cesi. See Dell'Acqua, *Alessandro Bonvicino*, 127.

29 For information on St. Ursula's hagiography and the discovery and display of her relics at Cologne, see Joan A. Holladay, "Relics, Reliquaries, and Religious Women: Visualizing the Holy Virgins of Cologne," *Studies in Iconography* 18 (1997): 67-118.

30 Ibid., 78-85.

31 See Irving Lavin, "On the Sources and Meaning of the Renaissance Portrait Bust," in *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, ed. Sarah Blake McHam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

32 Scott B. Montgomery, *St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 64. Donatello's reliquary *Bust of St. Rossore* from *c.* 1424 is a notable exception and is highly individualized. See Anita Moskowitz, "Donatello's Reliquary Bust of Saint Rossore," *Art Bulletin* 63, no. 1 (March 1981): 41-48.

33 Montgomery, *St. Ursula*, 64.

34 Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 86-105. Peter Brown discusses at length the devotional understanding of *praesentia* as regards saints' relics.

35 Scott B. Montgomery, "Fashioning the Visage of Sainthood: The Reliquary Bust of Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi and the Holy Portrait in Late-Medieval Florence," in *Italian Art, Society, and Politics: A Festschrift for Rab Hatfield,* ed. Barbara Deimling, Jonathan K. Nelson, and Gary M. Radke (Florence: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 38.

her living presence, but instead stressing the holy woman's presence in the hereafter, where she acts as intercessor on behalf of her followers.

Reliquaries like that of Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi were displayed in the church, and sometimes processed, on feast days. These activities made the reliquary public, visually accessible to any worshiper who participated in the day's events. This inclusiveness is reflected in the outward gaze of the figures, inviting active exchange with the worshiper. Conversely, Moretto's painting and its copies were displayed in less-trafficked areas, where only a select audience, *i.e.* clergy, confraternities, and members of the Company itself, would see them. Anabel Thomas, in her book *Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy,* discusses the types of religious imagery that were more commonly found in "private" spheres of a religious community, as opposed to images displayed to the general public, finding that depictions of contemporary females were generally kept out of common areas.[36] The modes of decorum that required the safety of clausura for sixteenth-century virgins included protection from visual violations as well. Although Angela Merici was a remarkably public figure in Brescia during her life, it is understandable that such an unguarded portrayal of a holy woman as Moretto's painting necessitated restricted viewership. In Moretto's treatment of Merici's face he focuses almost grotesquely on the more unpleasant effects of death, such as sagging flesh and exposed eyeball. This unidealized depiction of a religious female challenged contemporary notions of propriety, and would not have been suitable for public view. Ironically, by portraying Merici thus, Moretto succeeds in suggesting an intimacy between his subject and the viewer. As we behold the remains of the holy woman, we are privileged attendants at her deathbed.

Moretto also created a sense of veracity and immediacy through his painterly application of thick, unblended brushstrokes, as though he quickly captured Merici's features before she was interred. Moretto gently models Merici's visage with soft light, respectfully describing the familiar features of this revered figure. It is in representing her garment that Moretto abandons his careful observations, and indicates folds of fabric with almost amateurishly applied swaths of brown paint. There is no true sense of a human form beneath the wide curving lines of unmodulated pigment that make up Merici's robe. The seemingly unfinished surface suggests that the artist had neither the time nor inclination to idealize or fictionalize Merici's appearance. Moretto here modifies his usual style of precise brushwork to produce a heightened communion between viewer and subject. A comparison of the painting with his other portraits underscores just how calculated is Moretto's depiction of Merici. In the artist's portrayals of women such as *Woman in White* (Figure 8), he adheres to conventions of sixteenth-century Italian portraiture. His sitter is finely attired and artfully arranged. The painting is characterized by a close observation of detail and a tightly-worked surface. In contrast, Moretto uses a painterly and abbreviated style in his depiction of Angela Merici, a method unique in his oeuvre and charged with meaning. Ultimately, the marks Moretto makes are what give the painting "life." Just as the face provided by a reliquary bust enlivens the enclosed relics in the eyes of believers, Moretto's expressive technique helps Merici's followers establish a feeling of communion with their lost loved one.

This idiosyncratic depiction of Angela Merici shows Moretto's purposeful manipulation of conventional portraiture and his own style in an effort to satisfy the needs of the Ursuline order. The Company had relied too heavily on their founder's leadership, which left them ill equipped to carry on after her death. Moretto paints for them a representation not of the woman whose legacy they struggled to sustain, but of her physical remains. In this, the Ursulines carried on a tradition of veneration with links to early Christianity, and most profoundly, to their order's namesake. Emphasizing the emptiness of Merici's mortal body, Moretto's work instructs its viewer to seek Merici's intercession in the celestial realm. Through copies of the painting, Ursulines were able to tangibly extend that promise of intercession anywhere their members gathered.

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[36] Anabel Thomas, *Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 126-27.

Figure 1. Moretto da Brescia, *Funerary Portrait of Angela Merici*, 1540, oil on canvas, 45.7 x 57.2 cm. Centro Mericiano, Brescia.

[*above, left*] Figure 2. Domenico Cagnoni, *Portrait of Angela Merici*, 1768, engraving, *Vita della B. Angela Merici da Desenzano*.

[*above, right*] Figure 3. Francesco Laurana (attributed to), *Funerary Mask of a Young Woman: Battista Sforza (?)*, 1472, painted terracotta, 19.2 x 12.8 x 47 cm. Louvre, Paris, RF 1171. Photograph courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York, New York.

[*right*] Figure 4. Francesco Laurana, *Bust of Battista Sforza*, *c*. 1474, marble. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. Photograph by George Tatge, 2000, courtesy of Alinari / Art Resource, New York, New York.

Figure 5. Piero della Francesca, *Battista Sforza, Duchess of Urbino*, 1465, tempera on wood, 47 x 33 cm. Uffizi, Florence. Photograph courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York, New York.

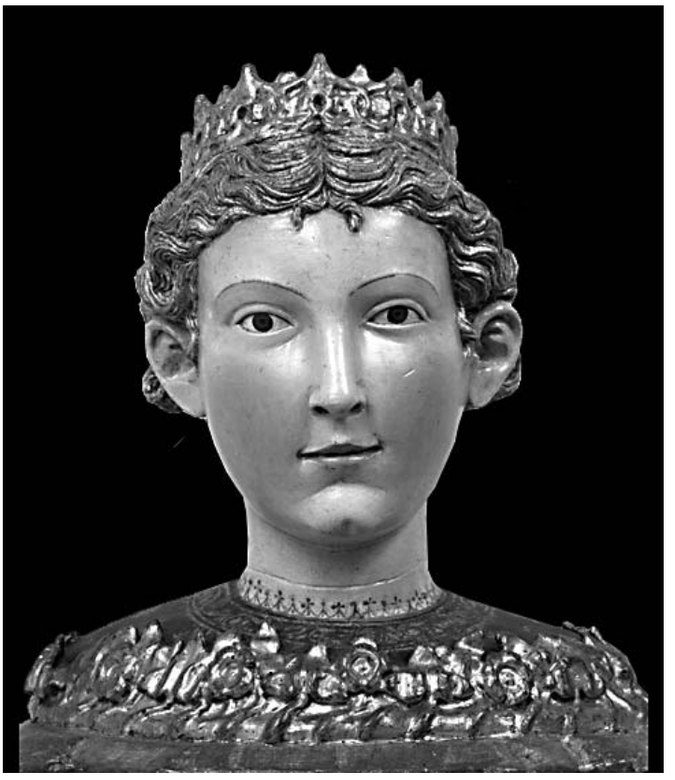

Figure 6. Attributed to Mariano d'Agnolo Romanelli, reliquary of St. Fina, *c*. 1380-90, polychrome wood. Museo Diocesano, San Gimignano.

[*above*] Figure 7. Portrait bust of Beata Umiliana de' Cerchi, Santa Croce, Florence. Photograph courtesy of Alinari / Art Resource, New York, New York.

[*right*] Figure 8. Moretto da Brescia, *Portrait of a Lady in White*, *c*. 1540, oil on canvas, 106.4 x 87.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.