

Thursday, June 26, 2008
“Contest of Ecclesia and Sinagoga”
by Dr. Dana Katz, Reed College

Recorder’s Report, Kimberly Lynn (formerly Kimberly Lynn Hossain), Western Washington University

Dana Katz centered her second lecture to the Institute around the representations of ecclesia and sinagoga, that is, around images of church triumphing over synagogue which painters deployed in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Christian devotional contexts. She used her reading of these images to reassess the boundaries of tolerance in this era. She began her lecture with an assessment of early modern theories of toleration, rooted in the thirteenth-century writings of Thomas Aquinas. She sketched a society in which authorities balanced the granting of privileges to groups which might bring economic benefits to a polity against the mandate to protect Christian society from perceived threats.

Within this frame, she used paintings of the contest between ecclesia and sinagoga to explore the extent and boundaries of such toleration within early modern Italian polities. She argued that the prevalence of such polemical imagery problematizes the longstanding perception of these early modern Italian states as models of toleration. In this lecture, she focussed especially on Urbino and Ferrara. Scholars have long elevated these two polities – among others – as models of early modern tolerance, for the range of protections which they offered their Jewish communities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. With these two cities as case studies, Katz explored the intersections between the painting of ecclesia’s triumph over sinagoga and changing political and religious climates in Urbino and Ferrara.

Dr. Katz has developed these arguments even more fully in her recent monograph. In her assessment: “Painting served to represent to the Christian society of Urbino the form and content of the duke’s policy toward Jews and, perhaps more importantly, to define the limits of tolerable behavior for non-Christians dwelling in the community.”¹ Thus, she has demonstrated that even in communities such as Ferrara and Urbino, which saw little or no evidence of physical violence against their Jewish populations in this period, there was an increasing violence in the imagery about Jews and Judaism. In this vein, the pictorial violence in ecclesia’s contest with sinagoga increased. Thus, painters – especially from after the turn of the sixteenth century – created narrative panels treating ritual murder, host desecration, and the imagery of sinagoga’s fall with escalating violence.

In this lecture, Dr. Katz unravelled the visual vocabulary of one such genre: the contest between ecclesia and sinagoga. She engaged in a particularly careful reading of Garofalo’s early sixteenth-century depiction of this theme, a work which hung in the refectory of the Augustinian monastery in Ferrara. In such scenes, painters like Garofalo systematically aligned a recognized set of visual parallels to argue for the triumph of ecclesia, painted in her full majesty, victorious through the sacraments and the scrolls of New Testament text over an abrogated law, an Old Testament appropriated as prophetic, and over sinagoga herself, visibly destroyed. (Her

¹ Dana E. Katz, *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 19.

explication of this painting forms the centerpiece of her book's third chapter: "Slaying Synagoga in Estense Ferrara."²) Thus, she analyzed the strategic deploying of such imagery – packed with a succession of Christian-Jewish antinomies – in spaces both overtly civic and religious, more and less accessible to the public. She concluded her chapter: "The Augustinians in Ferrara took a more personal approach by painting their views in the refectory for their own private consumption. In this way, the fresco served as a didactic tool that reminded the Augustinians that tolerance in the earthly city was merely a necessary evil, for entrance into the City of God came ultimately only to the faithful, and not to the Jews."³

In this manner, Dr. Katz highlighted the tensions inherent in these early modern negotiations of tolerance. She emphasized the centrality of Jews – and ideas of Jewishness – to what she nicely termed the "spiritual economy." She argued that pictorial evidence might be evaluated within an Augustinian notion of "Jewish witness," pointing to the persistent theme of emphasizing the supersession of the old covenant by the new in pedagogical Christian imagery. She demonstrated the exceptional assault on *sinagoga* in the Ferrara painting. In addition to the deploying of such tropes of anti-Jewish invective as blindness, in these images, *sinagoga*'s demise was violently and viscerally depicted. Garofalo packed the scene with a wide range of inversionary motifs: a broken scepter, a broken key, a fallen crown, and multiple associations to the demonic. *Sinagoga* appeared brutally deposed from her former throne.

Dr. Katz made her complicating of this paradigm of 'tolerance' even more profound with her analysis of such evidence as the marrying of text and image in this genre of paintings. She explained the clear argument – through narrative labels and strategically placed biblical quotation – advanced in the painting for a Christian theory of salvation; each bit of text served to emphasize the exclusion from paradise of the Jewish half of the scene, *sinagoga*'s defeated realm. Moreover, she charted the boundaries of this supposed regime of tolerance not only in iconography, but also in the patronage of paint. She recounted the case of the Nursa family, members of Mantua's Jewish community, who were required to sponsor the creation of Christian devotional art as a judicial penalty.

Throughout, Dr. Katz demonstrated the complex environment in which early modern princes elaborated policies of toleration. They navigated between political contests with the papacy and with local civic elites. They negotiated to attract Jewish and converso populations – to the extent such communities might bring economic benefits – even as they patronized the sometimes violently anti-Jewish pedagogical strategies of Christian imagery about salvation. The same authorities frequently sponsored both Jewish communities and paintings filled with anti-Jewish iconography. In short, Dr. Katz emphasized the ambiguities and ambivalence inherent in both early modern assertions of tolerance and historical of appraisals of policies of toleration.

² Katz, 69-98.

³ Katz, 98.