painting. Judovitz analyzes the ambiguous shifts between the secular and the sacred in the Newborn Child and the Adoration of the Shepherds, which, she suggests, seek to evoke the mystery of Incarnation through the juxtaposition of spiritual as opposed to physical illumination and the double illumination of the Christ child and the candle. Shadows also play a preponderant role in St. Sebastian Tended by Irene, in which his spiritual passion and martyrdom are evoked through a single arrow and a drop of blood, functioning as a punctum, which reaches out to directly engage the beholder. For Judovitz, St. Sebastian both recalls the martyrdom of painting provoked by iconoclasm but also offers hope for renewal and redemption through its hidden geometric scaffolding.

In the epilogue, Judovitz addresses the insoluble dilemma of the reception and impact of La Tour’s paintings during his lifetime due to the absence of historical evidence. Writing a century later, Dom Augustin Calmet noted that La Tour’s St. Sebastian was held in high regard by Louis XIII (105). Although the glowing illumination, humble naturalism, and spiritual dimension of La Tour’s paintings continue to resonate with twenty-first-century viewers, it is impossible to gauge their impact on his contemporaries. Judovitz’s densely argued, meticulously researched, and beautifully illustrated study opens the door to the broader artistic, religious, and philosophical implications of La Tour’s mysterious paintings through her insightful readings and broad interdisciplinary perspective.


Giancarla Periti’s engaging and well-illustrated book on the visual culture surrounding patrician religious women in Renaissance Italy investigates the inherent contradictions between rules of monastic decorum that were understood to guide female religious communities in the late medieval and early modern period and the material splendor once actively promoted within their conventual spaces. Based on analysis of extant artistic and architectural evidence largely
found in Parma, Brescia, and Milan, as well as extensive archival and secondary sources, Periti argues that, in spite of efforts to limit the access of the secular world to female religious spaces and promote visual cultures of modesty with them, monastic spaces inhabited by aristocratic women demonstrate acute affinities with refined courts in their social organization and material decoration. The aim of the book is to reconstruct and examine “monastic spatial contexts and the historical modes of looking at images made for noble religious women” (4). The chapters examine a variety of works in different mediums, including panel paintings, frescoes, maiolica tiles, wood intarsia, and pietra serena inscriptions, to establish the motivation for and use of art in elite Benedictine female convents during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries before the Council of Trent and to offer new interpretations of works by leading artistic figures in northern Italy, ultimately with the goal of offering a contextual understanding the decorative program created by Correggio in 1518–1519 at the convent of San Paolo in Parma.

The first chapter establishes the rich context for understanding the complex ideologies embedded in the architecture of female religious spaces and the attendant social behavior performed in them to define patrician nuns in terms of their “institutionalized liminality” (22). As opposed to a complete renunciation of familial and civic ties expected of female religious, the patrician nuns under investigation retained and made use of their secular identities to subvert controls normally placed upon their bodies and minds. As Periti demonstrates, patrician nuns often were distinguished by material signs of their status, including elaborate garments and accessories, and by their sustained access to the secular world outside the convent’s walls.

Chapter Two reconstructs the physical experience of engaging with the decoration of the convent of San Paolo in Parma in an effort to redefine the gaze, touch, and perception of nuns in relation to their decorated surroundings within the convent. Periti proposes a new interpretation of Jacopo Loschi’s frescoes, today preserved in detached and fragmented form in the conventual museum, as the original decoration of the Chapter House, which she argues represented living female members of the San Paolo community, including the Abbess Maria Benedetti, the noblewoman (and former wife of the signore Pier
Maria Rossi, Antonia Torelli, and the abbess’s sister Simona. While based on circumstantial evidence, Periti grounds her claim within the institutional politics of the convent and the struggles demonstrated by Benedetti and Torelli in archival documents to maintain independence from local ecclesiastical regulation. In this context, Loschi’s paintings are framed as an assertion of female authority and agency. In the same chapter, Periti offers a reconstruction of the tin-glazed, or maiolica, tiles of the original floor pavement—today removed to the Galleria Nazionale of Parma—as products of two distinct, but related, patronage campaigns under Abbess Maria Benedetti (after 1475) and Abbess Giovanna Piacenza (after 1507). While again Periti’s claims in this section are based on circumstantial evidence, she grounds her argument within the complex political context of the convent’s shifting allegiance from Rossi to the Sforza family after 1477 and connects the iconography and medium of the tiles to distinct emblems and tastes of the Sforza. Particularly convincing is the author’s approach to the maiolica tiles as *picturae* (paintings), whose meanings were only activated through the simultaneous movement and visual engagement of the nuns who tread upon them with downcast eyes. The portraits of living members of the convent found in Loschi’s Chapter House paintings were matched by portraits found in the maiolica tiles, a claim that Periti explores to investigate the genre of what she calls “convent beauties” (57) and uses to recontextualize Jacometto Veneziano’s sumptuous oil painting of a *Portrait of a Nun from San Secondo* (ca. 1485–95) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as “material evidence of a courtly monastic tradition” (60). The male counterpart to these female convent beauties was also represented in the maiolica tiles, at times with inscriptions that record love messages connected to “games of courtesy and gift exchanges between lovers” (63). These and other tiles bearing representations connected to court culture are held up as evidence of the ties between the secular and sacred worlds embodied in the personal histories of patrician nuns.

Noble religious female spaces—in particular nuns’ choirs—are the focus of Chapter Three. Periti argues that the range and quality of objects and images that adorned these spaces were a means to assert the status of their inhabitants and to ensure a continuity with their secular female counterparts outside the convent. Particular attention
is given to Girolamo Romanino and Bernardo Luini’s frescoes for nuns’ choirs at Santa Giulia in Brescia and San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore in Milan, respectively, and Luchino Bianchino’s intarsiated choir stalls at San Paolo in Parma (today at Santa Teresa del Bambin Gesù). Periti fleshes out the context for these commissions and their iconography within the political dimensions of female conventual authority, particularly tied to abbesses’ elite familial identities and ties to ruling parties. At the same time, Periti establishes a wider range of humanist subjects as appropriate for the decoration of female religious spaces than has been previously acknowledged and emphasizes the nuns’ overt appreciation and demand for aesthetic refinement in their artistic commissions.

Chapter Four turns to Giovanna Piacenza’s abbatial apartment at San Paolo in Parma as an adaptation of male ecclesiastical palace spaces. Periti’s nuanced understanding of the diverse spatial paths offered to visitors from the outside and nuns on the inside of the walls enables her to suggest a convincing multivalent reading of the convent’s decoration made during Giovanna Piacenza’s tenure as abbess. The chapter investigates the sites of encounters with visitors—the convent’s gates, garden loggia, and audience hall—to explore their “semantic richness” and conceptualize the convent as a “conventual court” (110). Periti provides a detailed analysis of the relatively understudied inscriptions found in intarsia friezes by Marco Antonio Zucchi as cryptic, witty word puzzles and “passages of ethical import” (116) that were in alignment with word games popular in the Italian courts and featured in courtly literature, such as Baldassare Castiglione’s Libro del Cortegiano. Likewise, the tituli carved into pietra serena lintels of the abbess’s apartment are approached as erudite signs of her patronage and learning that invited the nuns “to reflect on ethical and spiritual matters” (123).

Periti’s investigation of Alessandro Araldi’s painted ceiling of one of the rooms of the abbatial apartment of San Paolo—the theme of Chapter Five—posits the decoration as an assemblage of Classical, Christian, and occult sources that communicated sophisticated messages pertaining to female virtue to the patrician nuns. Emphasizing the decoration as an open invitation for nuns to disregard their instructions to maintain a downward gaze, Periti investigates the
secret knowledge of magic embedded in the iconography of the various registers of signs and images within the decorated room. Periti invites her readers to make links between Araldi’s frescoes and the woodcut illustrations of the enigmatic *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and a variety of other source material, including local frescoes in Parma, prints produced by Marcantonio Raimondi, and Andrea Mantegna’s pictorial conceits at the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua. By exploring the visual culture that informed Araldi’s work, and the intellectual traditions that it may have instigated in the minds of patrician religious women, Periti lays the foundation for her approach to the decoration in the remaining room in Giovanna Piacenza’s abbatial apartment.

As promised, the last chapter of the book culminates in an analysis of Correggio’s “revolutionary” paintings in the private chambers of Abbess Giovanna Piacenza (167). Periti aims for a recovery of “the full import of images that stage a spectacle for ambulatory viewers, whose gazes and movements complete the decoration and make it a living presence” (172). While claims to recovering the active, sentient, and ambulatory spectator are asserted here (and throughout the book), the chapter’s strength lies less in a somatic exploration of viewership and more in the author’s command of the vast repertoire of Latin, Greek, Egyptian, and Arabic textual sources that informed viewers’ intellectual appreciation of its content. Grounded in erudite consideration of literary sources in circulation in Parma in the early sixteenth century, the chapter reconceives Correggio’s pagan subjects and allegories as contingent on the *serio-ludic* poetic conception.

Considering the complete or partial destruction of many of these patrician female religious spaces and the widespread displacement of their original decoration, Periti’s arguments throughout the book rely on a certain level of hypothetical reconstruction to establish her claims. Indeed, the loss of a comprehensive visual and material register of patrician female religious spaces necessarily limits the extent to which one can analyze the relationship between embodied viewers and their sensory activation by and reception of the artistic decoration that once enfolded them into viewing scenarios. Yet, the lavish and extensive illustrations of extant works, coupled with helpful floor plan reconstructions, provide visual evidence to the reader that is thoughtfully explicated in the text. Periti’s book provides important
groundwork for the recovery of female patrician religious sensibility in relation to Italian Renaissance visual and material culture and convincingly presents these conventual spaces as courtly spaces run by and for patrician women in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.


The four-hundredth anniversary of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682) yielded significant curatorial projects to commemorate the birth of one of the most celebrated painters of the Spanish Golden Age. *Murillo: The Self-Portraits* documents his two celebrated self-depictions in the holdings of New York City’s Frick Collection and London’s National Gallery, respectively. Both gallery-hosted exhibitions devoted to the understudied identity of Murillo as a portraitist, the Frick Collection being the first ever to have displayed Murillo’s only two known self-portraits. In March 2018, rounding up Murillo’s anniversary, a four-day symposium conjoined art historical and historiographical commentaries with a thematic exhibition at the Capuchins convent in Murillo’s native Seville. “Murillo and the Capuchins of Seville” reassembled in original setting Murillo’s series of altarpieces he executed for the Capuchins of Seville. The altarpieces, dispersed among several owners and institutions, were brought together in the Capuchin convent of Seville for the first time.

As a token of remembrance, the curatorial idea to focus *Murillo: The Self-Portraits* on the painter’s activity as portraitist is relevant. The editors, Xavier F. Salomon and Letizia Treves, wrote essays to investigate the career of Murillo by way of his portraits of Sevillian people, dignitaries and, more especially, his self-depictions. The emphasis on the self-portrait associates the Spanish Baroque mode with the Italian Renaissance slogan “every painter paints himself.” Yet the book accomplishes even more than a substantial context for the self-portrait as an artist’s highest mode of self-expressing. Xavier F. Salomon underscores the Sevillian environment in which Murillo received formation at a