

The Dream of St. Ursula by Carpaccio: What it Reveals About Late 15th Century Female Spirituality

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Abstract

In June of 2023, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C and the Palazzo Ducale in Venice concluded an extremely rare exhibition on Carpaccio's art. Carpaccio's art has rarely left Venice, as his most important works are too large or too fragile. This exhibition, the first exhibition of Carpaccio's art outside Italy, has slowly reinvigorated interest in Carpaccio's works. Though often overshadowed by his contemporaries, Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, and Titian, Carpaccio is the most effective in conveying the realistic Venice in 1500. (Butterfield, 2023) This paper takes Carpaccio's most renowned piece of work, the Cycle of Saint Ursula, to investigate the extent of female power in the household and the religious sphere, referencing historical sources and analyzing the contents of St. Ursula's room. This paper argues that women in Venice in the late 15th and early 16th centuries were restrained rather than empowered by intertwined responsibilities in the domestic and spiritual spheres.

Keywords: Vittore Carpaccio, Saint Ursula, The Cycle of Saint Ursula, The Dream of St. Ursula, Venice, Quattrocento, Cinquecento, Venetian Art, Feminist interpretation, Female Spirituality, The Golden Legends

The Dream of St. Ursula by Carpaccio: What it Reveals About Late 15th Century Female Spirituality

The Dream of St. Ursula by Carpaccio is an oil painting created in 1490 as part of the series Cycle of Saint Ursula for the Venetia Chapel Scuola di Santa Orsola. Now displayed at the Galleries of the Academy of Venice, the narrative cycle highlights the significant events of St. Ursula's life. Unlike the other panels that depict the landscapes, in this particular panel, the Dream of St. Ursula, Carpaccio invites the viewer into the interiors of a spacious room, enhanced by uniform lighting. The floors, walls, and ceilings of the room are modestly decorated with delicate furnishing. On the left, St. Ursula rests serenely on her bed, which, with its tall bed posts, takes up almost the entirety of the room. St. Ursula faces the door on the right, from which an angel walks in amid rays of golden light that illuminate the room.

To give a brief overview of the tale of St. Ursula, according to the Golden Legend, a compilation of the stories of Saints from c. 1290. St. Ursula was born a Christian princess of Britain, daughter of Maurus (or Notus). As a young girl, she was distinguished by "her virtuous life, her wisdom, and her beauty", and was famed for her holiness and purity and her always delightful speech. (Ryan & Duffy, 2012, p. 642) It is said that "Lovelier woman there was not alive." (Ruskin, 1912, sec. 12) The words of praise were then so wildly circulated, in no time they reached the ears of the King of Anglia, who, pleased by Ursula's supposed perfection, entreated with lavish gifts and malicious threats to have Ursula betrothed to his son. Though her father King Maurus was reluctant upon the request, with Ursula's consent he gave his blessings. It was, however, based upon conditions that Ursula herself proposed, which the King of Anglia readily agreed upon. The conditions are as follows: both the King of Anglia and his son are to be baptized, while Ursula would be allowed a three-year pilgrimage accompanied by a thousand virgins. As the marriage was settled, Ursula set off on her pilgrimage. In her trip, Ursula spread the Christian faith to her followers and to wherever she set foot. She passed through Cologne, Basel, and Rome, where the Pope joined the party too. Unfortunately, her spiritual influence

threatened the Roman commanders Maximus and Africanus, who sent word to Julius, the commander of the Huns, to slaughter the procession at Cologne. Hence, the virgins, the accompanying bishops, and the newly arrived—Ursula's husband, mother-in-law, and sister-in-law-- were butchered by pagans and martyred at Cologne. (Ryan & Duffy, 2012, pp. 642–645)

The Golden Legend's account of St. Ursula was most likely roughly similar to what Carpaccio understood of St. Ursula's tale, since from 1470 to 1530, The Golden Legend was also one of the most widely reproduced books in Europe. (Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook: The Golden Legend (Aurea Legenda), n.d.) Yet, Carpaccio took his liberties to modernize St. Ursula, a princess from the early Middle Ages, supposedly martyred 238 AD, by depicting her as a pious young girl in upper-class 15th-century Venice, as one would infer from the interior design of St. Ursula's room. (Ryan & Duffy, 2012, p. 645) The two window frames on the opposite wall show Venetian architectural tendencies in the Renaissance to reintegrate Roman classical forms, merging these inspirations into Venetian structural elements. The upper portion of the frame is round with a large radius, while the lower portion is in the form of a pilaster, whose capital is a stylized and compressed ionic column. The painting similarly includes Renaissance Venetian stylistic innovations of the period. Notice that the windows are pedimented with glass. The practice is newly introduced to Venetian architecture in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Similarly, the bed in which St. Ursula rests is also uniquely Renaissance Venetian. Structured in light and sturdy iron, decorated with a cloth canopy, and raised at the base by painted chests; it frequently reappears in recorded 15th-century Venetian inventories (Brown, 1997, p. 117). In addition, St. Ursula's room is dotted with expensive furniture signifying her status. Like most aristocratic Venetian homes, the ceiling is coffered, and the tile floors are covered with luxurious carpets imported from the east. (Brown, 1997, p. 230)

Carpaccio's artistic decision to modernize St. Ursula may raise some eyebrows. Some may even question if that was truly Carpaccio's intention. It was. The Cycle of St. Ursula spearheaded the artistic style popular in the 1500s which Patricia Fortini Brown termed the "eyewitness style". Unlike medieval fantastical styles that also fascinated the public with mystique, the eyewitness style's purpose

is to “create believable portrayals of sacred events through a naturalism of execution and an attention to the details of figures and setting” (Morse, 2007, p. 153). Carpaccio practices both styles, and his painting Saint George and the Dragon perfectly encapsulates the former. (Fig.5) However, in this case, Carpaccio makes the deliberate choice to paint in the “eyewitness style” to, firstly, emphasize the actuality of St. Ursula’s life events by placing them in a Renaissance Venetian setting familiar to his audience, and second, underline her virtue through according to Venetian standards of female religious piety. Therefore, while it is a religious work of art, an ode to the sanctity of St. Ursula, it also incorporates the style of a genre painting. With an “objectivity that reminds one of Vermeer”, Carpaccio portrays scenes from Venetian private life, to reflect the ideal, the canon of Christian virtue for 15th century Venetian women. (The Dream of St Ursula by CARPACCIO, Vittore, n.d.)

Like many Renaissance painters, Carpaccio fully exposes the interiors of St. Ursula’s room in stunning realism, which was made possible by his skillful portrayal of space and detail. The spaciousness of the room is conveyed through Carpaccio’s meticulous use of linear perspective, rendered by the rigid orthogonal lines depicted as the clear-cut edges of St. Ursula’s bedroom. To reveal as much of the room’s contents as possible, he makes some adjustments to the room’s perspective, zooming out and shifting the vanishing towards the upper left. By this Carpaccio was able to depict, with greater detail, St. Ursula on the left and furniture next to the walls and on the floor. Due to his adjustments to perspective, all objects in the room are reduced to a small scale, dwarfed by the height of the bedroom ceiling, yet with Carpaccio’s crisp style and accuracy, the viewer can recognize objects with no less clarity. For instance, at first glance, one immediately notices the decorative undulations of St. Ursula’s bedposts, despite them being extremely thin. (Fig. 1) As a result, many scholars (many of whom I have cited in this essay) have referenced this painting in discussing Venetian domestic norms, due to the fact many items in the room can be easily identified. I have also referenced many items previously in identifying the room as Venetian and will continue citing them in discussion of Carpaccio’s representation of Venetian Christian piety.

The first and most important item in the room is attached to the walls behind St. Ursula’s bed: a

religious painting for private devotion. (Fig. 3) Often referred to as *formenti* in Venice, devotional paintings are usually portraits of Madonna and Child, hung with a votive candle or lamp in front and a metal container filled with holy water underneath. (Morse, 2007, pp. 166, 168) The significance of the *formenti* lies in its function as an “unofficial focal points for religious meditation”, much like a private altar. (Morse, 2007, p. 168)

As the devotional painting creates one space for religious meditation, books create a second one. Venice was an important center of book production at the time, with Books of Hours, the Divine Office, Breviaries, Psalters, missals, hagiographic literature, and the Bible being the most popular. (Morse, 2007, p. 166) In the far-right corner, in what seems like a reading space, we find a three-legged stool next to a table, both covered in crimson cloth. Books are scattered on the table, along with an hourglass. Next to it is a cupboard, which, with its doors ajar, reveals books, some organized and stacked neatly, some flipped open to indicate Ursula’s studies.

The placement of religious paintings and religious books within a domestic setting is a sign that Venetian understanding of the religious piety of women extends to secular spaces. Religious objects are juxtaposed with lighthearted forms: a white dog crouched by the bed, and two blue slippers scattered by the bedside that St. Ursula had probably taken off before climbing into the sheets. Carpaccio emphasizes the importance of persistent devotion not only by showing two religious spaces in one room, but also by showing them in use: the votive candle is lit in front of the devotional painting, and the books are left on the desks after a session of reading. Carpaccio’s emphasis on consistent devotion most likely found its roots in the writing of authorities at the time, who took “the monastic ideal as a model for domestic spiritual behavior.” (Morse, 2007, p. 170) For instance, *Décor puellarum*, printed in 1471 Venice, outlines a spiritual routine for young girls, which involves a series of prayers and chores that last throughout the day. (Morse, 2007, p. 170)

The above-mentioned objects reveal another religious expectation for 15th-century Venetian women: women were not just expected to own unflinching piety, there are also demanded to be dependable wives and mothers. In Venetian terms,

motherhood entails the responsibility of maintaining moral households and raising virtuous Christian children, which is primarily executed by the display of religious items acting as the “paradigm”. (Morse, 2007, pp. 179, 180) St. Ursula, not yet a mother, is shown to offer moral and spiritual guidance to her husband instead, who, according to legend, converts to Christianity under her influence. Carpaccio highlights St. Ursula as a moral guide to her husband, appealing to his Venetian audience. He does so by including him in her pilgrimage with the virgins and her attendants, contradicting the account of The Golden Legends. (Morse, 2007, p. 110)

Carpaccio’s depiction of the virgin also provides us with an abundance of information about Venetian understanding of Christian virtue for women. (Fig. 4) We find St. Ursula covered in a crimson red carpet, which captures the viewer’s attention. St. Ursula lies stiffly, her limbs straight under the neatly spread bedsheets. Her physical form is concealed to deprive her of any sensuality or attraction. Little skin is shown except her face and her right upper arm, which are pallid in contrast with the vibrant red of the sheets, creating a sense of purity. St. Ursula’s face is illuminated by the light coming in from the door, her head sunken within the smooth, unruffled pillows, her cheek resting on the palm of her right hand. With her eyes closed, her expression is serene and tranquil with sleep, but with her lips compressed she is solemn. Her figure is so thin, so fragile, rendering her almost childlike. Employing *The Dream of St. Ursula* as a symbol in his novel *Il Fuoco* in the 19th century, D’Annunzio underlines, correctly, the childlike qualities of St. Ursula in this painting: “Infantia is the simple word that radiates morning freshness around the head of the sleeping saint. . . . Chaste and naïve”. (Meyers, 2013, p. 187) Thus, it could be inferred that the Venetian interpretation of Christian virtue for women consists of childlike innocence but not childish imprudence, chastity, and reserve.

The Golden Legends has presented St. Ursula as a woman of independence and charisma who was incredibly influential. Not only was she an advisor to her father, as a princess she was not a powerless pawn in the grander scheme of things, but an autonomous individual who made her own decisions on marriage and even drafted the terms for it. Being a proactive leader of a thousand virgins and a successful advocate of the Christian faith comes to show her leadership

and authority as a woman. The historical St. Ursula would not have appealed to Renaissance Venetian conventions, since her virtue is of a very different kind compared to Renaissance Venetian expectations for female virtue, which Carpaccio certainly takes into account when communicating her piety and devotion to his audience. Through analyzing the deliberate choices of Carpaccio in *The Cycle of St. Ursula*, and this panel in particular, we find the implementation of feminine virtue is restricted to domestic spheres in Renaissance Venice, their influence confined to her husband and her children. In traditional scenes where St. Ursula asserts her dominance in the public sphere, her presence is arbitrarily dimmed. In public spaces, instead of being illustrated in proactive leadership positions she is prescribed in *The Golden Legends*, she is shown as a “passive object of others”. (Rodini, n.d., p. 98) Only in the dream scene is she finally the prominent figure, because according to Venetian standards, it’s where female virtue belongs—within enclosed boundaries of the home.

In conclusion, Carpaccio adapts the story of St. Ursula from *The Golden Legends* to align with Venetian values of virtue. Thus, by analyzing the cycle, *The Dream of St. Ursula* in particular, we were able to reveal the religious expectations Venetian society held of women in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Venetian society expected women to be consistent in their religious practices, frequently worshiping and reading throughout the day. They were tasked with offering religious guidance to their families: their husbands and their children by setting up religious items throughout the house. Female virtue was defined by innocence and chastity because they were expected to be pure but still aware of and compliant with strict Christian decrees. Lastly, Venetian women were presumed to exercise their virtue only within their households, under the dominion of their male supervisors, whether that be her father or husband.

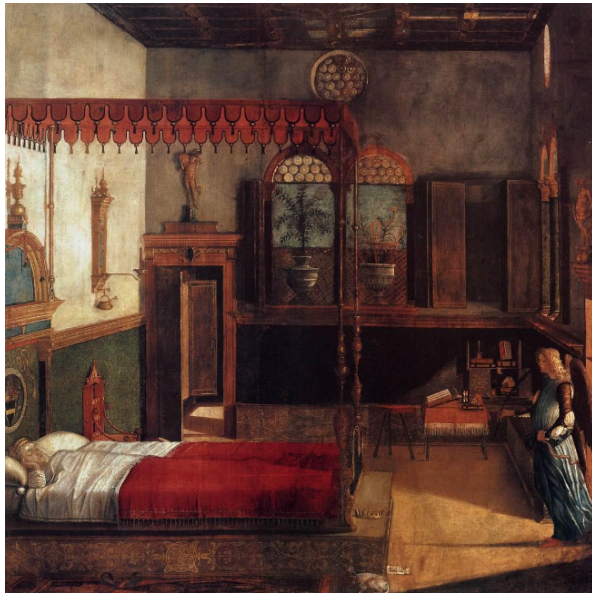


Figure 1 The Dream of St. Ursula by Carpaccio in full



Figure 3 The Dream of St. Ursula detail



Figure 2 The Dream of St. Ursula detail



Figure 4 The Dream of St. Ursula detail



Figure 5 Saint George and the Dragon by Carpaccio

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