



The Art and Visual Culture of Solitude: Interiority and Interior Spaces in post-Tridentine Europe

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The desire to retreat to a private, 'secret' location, away from the worries of business and daily cares for the purpose of study and self-reflection has a long tradition in Western culture. By the early modern period fictionalized or fictional places of study and solitude such as Pliny's 'diaeta', Quintilian's 'clausum cubiculum', and Petrarch's retreats at Vacluse and Avignon had long achieved cult status in circles of the learned elites. Although there is a growing body of literature on the early modern *studio*, the *studiolo* and other spaces that served the pursuit of knowledge and the collecting and display of art (Liebenwein 1977, Thornton 1997, Campbell 2004, Cole 2005), sites that were more directly oriented toward the performance of prayer and meditation have received little attention from scholars. This is particularly surprising because after the publication of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* in 1548, a broad dissemination and diversification of meditation practices led to a marked increase in interest in what was then called 'mental prayer', 'colloquy within oneself' (Puente 1609), or 'celestial eloquence' (Drexel 1636). Aimed at the transformation and reformation of the soul, which was itself compared to an 'interior castle' (Teresa of Avila) or an 'inner theatre' (Descartes), these 'mental' or 'spiritual' prayers could be performed in any place, from public interior spaces to the open countryside. This project is about the ways in which this abstract and ubiquitous space of prayer was conceived, imagined, represented, and actually built in the early modern Catholic world.

The project addresses this lacuna in scholarship by studying more closely what can be called the material and visual culture of religious interiority, which began to emerge at the end of the sixteenth century. This turn to interiority, motivated largely by a new interest in the writings of Augustine, was perceived as a kind of 'interior reform'. The refashioning and reformation of the soul, the religious self, the 'interior man' (*interior homo*) lay at the very center of sixteenth-century religious reforms. In Catholic culture, which is our focus here, 'mental prayer' was closely associated with practices of self-scrutiny and self-reflection; private religious experiences were linked to the rituals of the sacrament of penance fervently advocated by the Jesuits, other new religious orders, and church dignitaries in the second half of the sixteenth century. As a result, the private space of prayer was oriented toward the public space of the church, where the means of salvation were administered.

In this project it will be argued that toward the end of the sixteenth century a particular tendency developed in elite Catholic circles interested in religious reform. This tendency



The Interior Art, Space, and Performance

Early Modern to Postmodern

constituted a virtual conflation of the place of self-reflection and mental prayer with the desert or wilderness (*eremus*) into which the early Christian anchorites withdrew to converse exclusively with God. With the revival of this eremitic spirituality, spurred especially by Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits (see the individual contributions in Backus 1997, in particular Bertrand), desert imagery also entered, or rather re-entered, the visual repertoire of religious art. In written contemporary sources the 'wilderness' of the early Church Fathers is described as a hybrid site, composed of elements of both a *locus horribilis* or *locus melancolicus*, and a *locus amoenus*. Period descriptions of images of landscapes with hermits also emphasize the ambivalent quality of the early Christian wilderness, at once horrible and pleasing, devout and haunted by demons. This project will elucidate how this new imagery and iconography of the early Christian desert – an 'eccentric' and 'marginal' place, which had nevertheless central importance in early modern humanist and religious thought – could be adapted to meet both the religious and recreational needs of individual viewers.

A primary aim of the project is to investigate the range of novel and 'modern' artistic means and devices that were employed to restore within religious culture the image and imagination of the Egyptian desert, with its various afflictions, temptations, and spiritual rewards. Images of hermits in the wilderness connected their early modern viewers to the hermits in ancient near eastern Egypt, the birthplace of both 'mental prayer' and, as will be shown, 'interior temptation'. Focusing on the period from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century – when discussions of religious inwardness and mental prayer were at their most intense and heated – a variety of visual and textual media will be considered. A central theme will be the multiple and changing relationships between (printed) images, texts (that often accompanied images), constructed sites ('modern' hermitages and hermit gardens), and religious performances.

Proceeding from Foucault's understanding of 'heterotopian places' as 'places outside of all places' that juxtapose, reflect, and comprise other spaces (Foucault 1967/1984) the project investigates the meanings and uses of hermit imagery and iconography in post-Tridentine 'interior spaces' dedicated to the cultivation of the religious and cultural self. Adopting a term recently coined by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood (Nagel / Wood 2010) I call them 'anachronic' spaces in that they refer to and recreate different origins, sites, and identities – the dawn of Christianity and the present age of religious reform, the 'vast solitude' of the desert of the anchorites, and the 'innermost chamber' of the mind.



The Interior Art, Space, and Performance

Early Modern to Postmodern

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