

## Article

# Devotion, Paintings, and the House: The Collections of Ercole and Giuseppe Branciforti, Princes of Scordia (Palermo, 1687–1720)

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**Abstract:** This paper interrogates familial devotion and its relationship with parts of the house other than the chapel. In detail, it aims to problematize the issue of the devotional/non-devotional use of paintings inside the house by moving the focus from this dual opposition to the active role of canvases, broadly defined. Informed by Jacques Derrida's and Pierre Bourdieu's writings, this paper argues for the structural nature of the paintings inside the house and their meaningful correlation with both the arrangement of the domestic interior and the practices of people experiencing those spaces. To do this, the paper challenges the overwhelming attention paid by early-modern scholars to Northern and central Italy and investigates a precise case study, i.e., Palazzo Scordia in Palermo (Sicily). The research draws upon primary sources and amongst these, upon two detailed inventories of furniture referring to two subsequent generations of an aristocratic clan residing in Palermo between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, i.e., Ercole and Giuseppe Branciforti, princes of Scordia.

**Keywords:** domestic devotion; Palermo; Spanish Sicily; aristocratic palaces; collections of paintings; catholic devotion; Bourdieu's habitus

## 1. Introduction

The theme of domestic devotion in the early modern age has received increasingly wide-ranging attention in the last few years.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have explored both domestic spaces exclusively designated for devotion, such as chapels and oratories (Hirschboeck 2011; Lillie 1998; and Mattox 1996), and devotional items located in other parts of the dwelling (Campbell et al. 2013; Musacchio 2008; and Anderson 2007). Particularly, the role of the house as a site for devotional practices of the family has been argued through an extensive examination of coeval treatises, religious literature, depictions of interior environments, and domestic objects listed in inventories. Indeed, a high number of religious paintings, crucifixes, and reliquaries emerge from inventories of Italian early-modern families, listed in different rooms of the house. The large quantity of items with possible devotional association led some scholars to presume that houses were entirely imbued with a sort of Christian spirituality, in continuity—albeit with the proper differences—with religious institutional environments outside the domestic, such as churches, monasteries, and convents. This perspective has been relevantly fuelled by the writings of Margaret Ann Morse (Morse 2018, 2013a, 2013b, 2007). As a result, the domestic has been finally freed from its long-relegation in the secular sphere. In this sense, the interdisciplinary project *Domestic Devotions: The Place of Piety in the Italian Renaissance Home* (2013–2017), conducted by the University of Cambridge, undertook significant research on domestic devotion by producing a 3-day conference in July 2015,

<sup>1</sup> This paper results from the thesis, which I wrote during my PhD programme at the Art History Department of the University of York, under the supervision of professor Helen Hills. The research gave priority to Italian, English, and Spanish-speaking scholarship, including translations from other languages into these three.

an exhibition in 2017, and four volumes (Brundin et al. 2018; Corry et al. 2018; Faini and Meneghin 2018; Corry et al. 2017). However, another issue arose from this result, that is, the problematic idea that the presence of religious images could bestow, per se, a devotional use on domestic objects and on any domestic space that housed them. Conversely, apart from rosaries or prayer books, the use of which is rather clear, the devotional use of a biblical scene engraved on a knife or on a hairbrush is not equally straightforward. This indeterminacy results from the fact that inventories report more quantitative than qualitative data (Nalle 2008, p. 256).

Notwithstanding, this paper does not aim to solve the question of the devotional/non-devotional use of images, but to problematize it by moving the focus from this dual opposition to the active role of canvases—broadly defined—inside the house. Informed by Jacques Derrida's and Pierre Bourdieu's writings, this paper argues for the *structural* nature of the paintings inside the house and their meaningful correlation with both the arrangement of the domestic interior and the practices of people experiencing those spaces. To do this, a precise case study has been investigated, i.e., Palazzo Scordia in Palermo (Sicily), thus challenging the overwhelming attention paid by early-modern scholars to northern and central Italy, which has been decried by the results of the project *Domestic Devotions* (Faini and Meneghin 2018, pp. 1–2; Corry et al. 2017, p. 7). Despite the lack of extensive research on early-modern Sicily, the collections of paintings seem to have been quite frequent in the greatest aristocratic abodes in Palermo since the end of the sixteenth century (Piazza 2018, p. 118). Amongst these, the collections examined here cannot be considered outstanding or particularly influential. This paper resists both the search for exceptionality and the generalization of the results. Rather, it aims to investigate the specificities of the selected case study, as it offers the occasion to relate with relative certainty the palace articulation, two inventories of paintings, and two precise historical figures, i.e., Ercole Branciforti Campolo Russo et Spatafora (ruled 1658–1687) and his son Giuseppe Branciforti et Morra (ruled 1697–1720), respectively, the second and third princes of Scordia. More than this, the collections of the two nobles marked an important period in the ascent of their family and in its establishment in the city, thus allowing us to explore intersections between architecture and issues of devotion, gender, and rank.

## 2. The Route towards the Chapel

Palazzo Scordia results from the connection of two different buildings, set in the *contrata Seralcadi*, a district of Palermo (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The original nucleus on the *vanella del fico* (the current via Trabia) in the mid-sixteenth century was a simple compound of houses, most probably set around the current courtyard (Nobile et al. 2000, pp. 29–38). The addition on via Maqueda was begun between 1600 and 1602, when this new road was created (Fagiolo and Madonna 1981, p. 45). Ercole Branciforti's *post-mortem* inventory, dated to 24 October 1687 and grouping his possessions in apartments and rooms, reveals that the *piano nobile*, the first and primary floor of the palazzo, was then divided into three apartments: the *quarto della Galleria* (the apartment of the gallery), the *quarto grande* (the big apartment) and the *casa piccola* (the small house).<sup>3</sup> The *quarto grande*, located in the oldest nucleus of the palace, was where the prince primarily dwelt with his wife. Whilst the main anterooms remained within or close to the *quarto della Galleria*, the prince's bedroom was in the northern extreme of the *quarto grande* preceded by two anterooms and followed by the chapel. Arguably, the location for a chapel

<sup>2</sup> In 1683, the words *palazzo grande* (the big palace) and *palazzo piccolo* (the small palace) were used to describe the family abode. ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2048, fols. 1378r–v. In 1702, the palace was still indicated as “duo palatia magna simul coniunta” (“two palaces joined together”). ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2076, fol. 1834r.

<sup>3</sup> ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2049, fols. 462r–509r. In his last will, the prince of Scordia was very clear about when, how, and under the surveillance of whom to compile the list. ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2048, fol. 1383r.

resulted from the position of the main dwelling and its correlated activities.<sup>4</sup> This proximity remains true also in cases where the use and importance of the chapel went beyond domestic boundaries. For example, Guarino Guarini's Shroud Chapel (1668–1694) was connected to both Turin's Cathedral and the apartments of the dukes of Savoy (Beldon Scott 1995, p. 628).



Figure 1. Palazzo Scordia. Manipulation of a Google Earth image.

In Palazzo Scordia, the main chapel was easily accessible from the bedroom of the prince. Conversely, the route from the anterooms to the chapel was through several narrow corridors (Viola 2019, pp. 286–309). The location was in line with the suggestions about building given by the Sicilian theologian and architect Giovanni Biagio Amico (Trapani, 1684–1754) in his 1750 treatise *L'architetto pratico* (Amico 1997, p. 63). In the second volume, dedicated to palaces and secular dwellings, Amico listed the main rooms on the *piano nobile* and located the chapel close to the bedroom (Amico 1997, p. 64). The statement “[o]ra gli appartamenti giusta il costume di Sicilia si dipongono così” (“now, the apartments according to Sicilian custom are arranged, as follows.” Amico 1997, p. 66) suggests that the author benefitted from direct knowledge of most residences already built in the area between Palermo and Trapani, where he lived and worked. This arrangement is anything but new: for instance, it is close to the sequence anteroom–bedroom–private oratory–private chapel that Sabina de Cavi argues to be repeatedly proposed in Spanish royal apartments (including the viceroy's apartments in Naples), after Juan de Herrera's articulation of Philip II's Escorial (De Cavi 2008, p. 168).<sup>5</sup> What is more striking is that the bedroom was deemed by Amico as a sort of watershed between anterooms and backrooms, constituted by a single room or divided in two rooms, the *camera di parata* and the real bedroom behind it. One could also add a further passage through the narrow spaces (*gabinetti*) flanking the bed-alcove, pushing the backrooms even further away. This complexity makes the boundary between anterooms and backrooms blurred and fuzzy. At any rate, the bedroom area was never thought to be off-limits, as family members, servants, and the closest friends continually crossed it. Amico himself reports the presence of servants who could be asked to sleep in the backrooms, or to cook there. He also mentions the existence of nannies, which implies the presence of children

<sup>4</sup> In aristocratic palaces of early-modern Italy, this frequently excluded the ground floor, which was mostly used for services such as stables and warehouses, but could easily include upper floors, if inhabited by members of the family, in addition to the *piano nobile*.

<sup>5</sup> In this case, oratory and chapel are not synonyms, the former being a non-consecrated religious space from which to watch the services celebrated in the latter.

(Amico 1997, p. 67). To sum up, from Amico's description a difference between anterooms and backrooms emerges as realized not through a clear-cut separation but a nuanced gradation implying the crossing of numerous subsequent thresholds. This crossing enabled the palace inhabitants to distance the outside world, even though they did not isolate themselves completely from it.

In the house, the position of the paintings with a religious theme seems to follow the gradualness of this transition from the anterooms to the backrooms. The 1687 inventory, compiled after the death of Ercole Branciforti, allows us to relate the articulation of the house with the location of the paintings, thus revealing that in the main dwelling, the number of religious depictions increases when approaching the bedroom area and the chapel. At the time of Ercole's death, there was only one depiction of a biblical scene in the Sala out of 225 canvases hanging on its walls (0.44%) and 1 out of 31 in the first anteroom (3.22%), whilst the second anteroom accommodated 9 depictions of Christ, the Madonna, and other Saints out of 14 paintings with various subjects (64.28%), and 3 out of 4 paintings had a religious subject in the bedroom (75%).<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, in the chapel there were only religious images (100%). This suggests a connection between these paintings and the location of the chapel. According to Caroline Anderson, along with the subject depicted, "another way in which an artwork's meaning was elicited was through its placement" (Anderson 2007, p. 79). Anderson's doctoral thesis focuses on the importance of the belongings and domestic spaces in forming confessional identities in Florence between 1480 and 1650. Examining a large number of inventories, she compared the paintings' locations to what was prescribed by Silvio Antoniano's *Dell'Educazione Cristiana e politica de' figlioli* (1609) and Giulio Mancini's *Alcune considerazioni appartenenti alla pittura come di diletto di un gentiluomo* (1617–'21). For Mancini, paintings "should be distributed, in an orderly manner, and in specific principal places that took into account their subject matter" (Anderson 2007, p. 80). Particularly, he prescribes the use of the bedroom area for religious depictions (Mancini 2005, p. 49). Anderson's findings confirm that Mancini's advice more or less mirrored the contemporary practice in Florence and that sacred images frequently were in *camere*, being the generic term *camera* defining both the bedroom and the rooms close to it (Anderson 2007, pp. 79–80). This offers an interesting insight into the association between religious paintings and what Mancini calls "i luoghi ritirati" ("withdrawn places") even though not a univocal interpretation. Mancini himself confuses the rules he has just proposed by suggesting for the bedroom, besides the religious subjects, also lascivious depictions that can foster the excitement of the couple (Mancini 2005, p. 48).

### 3. Devotional or Non-Devotional?

At this point, the question resulting from these data would be whether the increase in religious paintings along the path to the chapel was also marked by an increase in their devotional use. The fact that Mancini prescribes the bedroom and rooms close to it to be the most suitable place for "le cose di devotione" ("items for devotion") in every type of house leads us to dwell further on the meaning of the word "devotion." To do this, however, it is necessary to consider both theoretical indications and common practices. As to the former, the work of the theologian Lodovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750), although published in a later period, is particularly informative as well as connected to the context of the case study under investigation.<sup>7</sup> In 1747, Muratori stressed that the moment a person is christened they enter into a pact of love with God, a sort of contract between two parties (Muratori 1747, p. 3). The mortal party "obliges and devotes himself to a regular and affectionate homage to his Creator, and to a total obedience to His will and laws" (Muratori 1747, pp. 3–4). This commitment is called "devotion" and is usually put into effect through acts of mercy and worship, which can be facilitated

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be in line with results of other investigations. For Brundin, Howard and Laven, "the bedchamber was the room most likely to contain religious objects and images" (Brundin et al. 2018, p. 64).

<sup>7</sup> Muratori's ideas about devotion were summed up and spread by a Sicilian treatise (Di Maria 1772). Yet, his relationship with the city started earlier, as Muratori's outspoken opposition to the city's cult of the Immaculate Conception provoked debates in Palermo since the 1714 publication of his *De ingeniorum moderatione in religionis negotio* (Turco 2006, p. 433).



by objects. Muratori argues that even if love, respect, and obedience should be obvious consequences of the agreement, material objects are needed in order to excite the devotion of the uneducated as the sepulchers of Saints and their relics did, because “[b]ooks are not for them; to move them they need material objects, that should catch their eyes and ears” (Muratori 1747, p. 331). He then explains the role of images by way of examples, at the same time warning against idolatry. So far, his contribution is anything but new, as Muratori himself recalls Gregory the Great (540–604)’s definition of pictures as “books for the ignorant” (Muratori 1747, p. 331).<sup>8</sup> However, he adds later that “even people eminent for their intelligence or holiness, praying in front of the sacred image of crucified Jesus, feel their imagination helped by that most pious object and their mind moved to holy thoughts and affection.” (Muratori 1747, p. 332). In this way, Muratori includes people of various social and cultural levels in the same discourse; nevertheless, warning all of them against drifting from devotion to superstition.<sup>9</sup> To sum up, for Muratori, devotion is articulated by an action, typically a prayer or an act of mercy, that makes the relationship between God and the devotee effective. In other words, the painting of the Madonna della Grazia, placed on the chapel altar in Giuseppe Branciforti’s time, is more likely to be a devotional image than the depiction of David beheading Goliath, hanged in his father’s gallery among dozens of other paintings with different topics, simply because a gallery was unlikely to be used for praying.

Despite the warnings of theorists like Muratori against superstition and idolatry, it has been argued that the images were also associated with a role independent of any voluntary act of the faithful and considered acting by themselves. According to Corry, vision was perceived as capable of affecting people’s life. That is why, for instance, “the fifteenth century Lombard humanist Maffeo Vegio suggested that parents keep an appropriate religious picture in view during conception to ensure the birth of a well-formed child and advised parents not to let children see images of the devil” (Corry 2017, pp. 67–68). Muratori himself describes the role of images as active, when he admits that images, as well as processions, acts of mercy, and pilgrimages, could “move devotion” (“muovere la divozione”). This vague expression implies a broad range of uses: images can act as a focus for either group or individual worship and they might also provoke responses, thus encouraging the practice of devotional acts, e.g., as they showed edifying episodes or figures to be imitated, such as the Good Samaritan or Saint John preaching in the desert.<sup>10</sup> These uses can imply both the conscious and the unconscious participation of the faithful. Extending Muratori’s thought further, it could be asserted that images might be reminders of the ongoing pact with God, in the sense that they could remind the faithful that God protects their family in return for prayers and acts of mercy. The encouragement towards these devotional practices could also occur independently of the devotee’s awareness. Yet, the reasoning can go further, as images themselves might guarantee God’s protection even in the absence of a response from the faithful. Although Muratori would hardly have agreed with this, his contemporaries may have thought in this way. Caroline Walker Bynum’s work on late medieval art posits that for all the emphasis theorists put on seeing beyond the images, people kept considering them a “locus of the divine” per se (Bynum 2011, p. 65). Bynum’s oeuvre, focusing on the pervasive Christian concern with materiality, argues that devotional images often drew the viewer to themselves, as holy matter instead of guiding him/her beyond themselves, and this regardless of the viewer’s education or social status (Bynum 2011, p. 267). Reflecting on the active role of images, David Freedberg argues for the effectiveness of religious images, which could become objects of devotion spontaneously, thus motivating different responses, that is, different actions and behaviours of the beholder (Freedberg 1989, p. 96). Following Freedberg’s thought, Brundin, Howard and Laven argue

<sup>8</sup> A brilliant summary of the centuries-long debate about images in the Cristian world can be found in Bynum (2011), pp. 44–52.

<sup>9</sup> Muratori expressed his fears mainly in *De superstitione evitanda* (1727). This book supports a Christocentric devotion, exclusively founded on the Bible and on tradition.

<sup>10</sup> On the assumed supportive role of images for spiritual improvement, see Corry (2018), pp. 320–321.

that the reading of religious images had an unstable subjective dimension, since the image could act on the faithful on several levels and with different results (Brundin et al. 2018, pp. 175–90).

I do not want to dispute these arguments but only observe that precisely because of the relativism resulting from this view, it is appropriate to consider the cautious warning of those—like Silvia Evangelisti—who argue that the capacity of objects to act as devotional tools closely depended on their specific use and on the meaning they had for their users, which can be rarely fully grasped from inventories (Evangelisti 2013, p. 395). This is particularly problematic in the case of paintings, since in inventories, the depicted subject mattered less than the gilded frame of a painting or its relative size (Musacchio 2008, p. 211). In other words, this perspective runs the risk of fuelling an unconstructive and infinite discussion on what was devotional and what was not. As Elizabeth Carroll Consavari realized about Venetian collections (Carroll Consavari 2013, p. 153), the second risk is to isolate devotion from other decisive factors, an approach that can lead to an underestimation of the weight that the images had in the active interaction with the beholder. Elements such as the taste, political view, and social position of those who purchased, positioned, and observed the canvases were tightly intertwined with their religious beliefs and could influence their response. Likewise, isolating a painting from others hanging in the same room, because they are not religious in theme, prevents us from perceiving their collective action on the observer.

In order to explore the relationship between the paintings and the choices of their owner, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* can be useful. For Bourdieu, the *habitus* is “the system of structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1995, p. 72). In other words, even if apparently determined by the achievement of a future aim, practices are determined by the interiorization of antecedent models (Bourdieu 1995, p. 73). Consequently, the acts of purchasing, displaying, or contemplating specific paintings, were—consciously or unconsciously—produced by the *habitus* of a ruling class which invested its economic and cultural capitals to perpetuate its distinction from “the other” through a luxury lifestyle (Bourdieu 1996, pp. 283–95) and the appropriation of cultural goods, like paintings (Bourdieu 1986, p. 246).<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu's *habitus* does not imply a mechanical repetition of models (Bourdieu 1995, p. 95). Rather, it ceaselessly adjusts to the demands inscribed as potentialities in any situation by engendering thoughts and actions consistent with different conditions. Regarding the case study, this means that, although the general objective remained that of aristocratic distinction, the purchase of the canvases and their location in the house could vary according to conditions that were susceptible to change, such as personal preferences and family strategies.

The complexity and instability of the relationship between the paintings and those who bought/positioned/observed them emerges significantly when owners and users of the house changed. The two inventories, which were compiled after the deaths of Ercole Branciforti and of his son, Giuseppe Branciforti et Morra, in a span of little more than thirty years (1687 and 1720), allow us to analyse this relationship.

#### 4. Paintings as Ornament of the House (Ercole)

Having inherited titles and fiefs from his father Antonio in 1658, Ercole Branciforti showed a particular dedication to the family residence in Palermo that his father had abandoned for a long time. This dedication was part of a plan to establish the lineage in the city after the family power had been secured by a stable feudal authority in the countryside. After the revolt of Messina against the Spanish authority (1673–1678), its repression, and the deliberate degradation of the city by the Spaniards, Palermo became the stable location of the Spanish viceroy court and, therefore, the most attractive place for Sicilian aristocracy (Ligresti 1992, pp. 84–85). Analogously to what occurred in greater European courts, the proximity to the viceroy, even if it put the aristocrats under his control,

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<sup>11</sup> It must be noticed that in the early-modern society this *otherness* could be generated by a difference of rank as well as by other discriminating factors, such as gender and age.

allowed them to take advantage of his manifestations of favour and to maintain, through the complex court etiquette, the power ensuing from them (Elias 1980, pp. 97–100). Additionally, according to Ronald G. Asch, the court temporarily worked also as a bulwark against the ascent of the new urban nobility that struggled to make its way in a world of conspicuous consumption (Asch 1991, p. 4). Consequently, it is understandable that Ercole paid all the debts related to the house in Palermo and started to renovate it.<sup>12</sup> In his 1683 will, Ercole reported that he had done “a lot of good works” (“molti benefatti”) on the larger of the two buildings, even if it had not been completed by that time.<sup>13</sup>

The realization of a sort of familial iconographic programme was part of Ercole’s renovation, since the Sala and the Galleria at the *piano nobile* were already full of paintings by 1687.<sup>14</sup> The huge Sala, which was the first room to be seen by visitors to the *piano nobile*, housed 225 paintings of different size and with various subjects.<sup>15</sup> Among the canvases, there were many iconographies related to classical mythology, some scenes from Dante’s *Inferno*, several landscapes, portraits of famous philosophers and humanists such as Aristotle and Petrarch, and one painting depicting a scene from the Old Testament, Susanna and the Elders. Featuring subjects drawn from the recent and distant past might have been a way to bestow a cultured aura on the house. Considering the openness of anterooms and the Sala, “dov’è lecito venir ad ognuno” (“where it is licit to come to everyone”) even Mancini suggests hanging there images like portraits or historical depictions (Mancini 2005, p. 49). For Anderson, the reason for this suggestion was to impress and influence visitors waiting in the Sala or negotiating business with the Master in the anterooms (Anderson 2007, p. 80).

The importance attributed by Ercole to this operation emerges from his own words when, in his last will, he left his heir the choice of selling home furnishings “with the exception, however, of the paintings, which must always remain as ornament to the house.”<sup>16</sup> Even in the case of relatively mobile elements, like paintings, the word “ornament” cannot refer solely to the embellishment of the house. Jacques Derrida’s reading of Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1760) warns against the reiterated attempts of drawing a line between the work of art (*ergon*) and its accessories (*parergon*), between the *internal* meaning of architecture and its *external* circumstances (Derrida and Owens 1979, p. 26). The philosopher highlights how ornament disturbs this attempt, because it is neither simply inside nor simply outside the work. Rather the *parergon* “has traditionally been determined not by distinguishing itself, but by disappearing, sinking in, obliterating itself, dissolving just as it expends its greatest energy” (Derrida and Owens 1979, p. 26). Paintings articulated the family identity in every room of the palace, as the owner perceived and fashioned it.<sup>17</sup> The “Casa” that Ercole mentioned was the family abode but also, in the broader sense, the Scordia *casato*, a relatively young lineage in comparison with the other powerful branches of Branciforti.

Ercole’s purchase of the paintings was intrinsically connected to the structural works on the palace conducted by him, with the aim of decorously settling the family down in Palermo, which had just become the most important city in Sicily. The entire environment of the Sala, including an amazing frescoed vault, was a sort of introduction to the family and to its relatively recent claims to high nobility. A painting depicting Sicily probably made the identification of the family’s fiefs

<sup>12</sup> The effort must have been considerable, since the amount of Antonio’s debts (ca. 21,000 onze) was more than the whole annual income of the Scordia family (ca. 15,000 onze) estimated at the beginning of the eighteenth century. ASP, *Corte Pretoriana*, n. 5874, fol. 81r. Candela (1996), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Honofrio Sardo Fontana, vol. 2048, fols. 376r–389r.

<sup>14</sup> ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2049, fols. 1479v–1484v.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., fols. 1479v–1481r.

<sup>16</sup> “[E]sclusi però li quadri, li quali sempre debbiano restare per ornamento della Casa.” Ann Matchette wrote that “testamentary mandates of barring the sale of furnishing or collections by heirs have been deployed by scholars in order to advance an argument that objects, identity, and family honour were inextricably linked.” Matchette (2006), p. 705.

<sup>17</sup> Renata Ago argues that inalienable items were supposed to be capable of prolonging the memory of the testator among the living. Yet to talk about the deceased, they had to belong to his/her social sphere to be socially acknowledgeable, like the family palace or the collections inside it. By passing from one generation to another, these goods implemented continuity and transmission of family’s identity/identities. Ago (2013), pp. XVII–XIX. Amongst these kinds of items, the scholar lists also the paintings. Ibid., pp. 137–56.

possible for any visitor.<sup>18</sup> More than this Ercole fashioned a cultural identity supporting the title purchased by his father Antonio, claiming a noble spirit beside the riches of his properties. In this respect, the only biblical depiction present in the Sala, Susanna and the Elders, is more likely to be just another item contributing to Ercole's image rather than a strictly devotional object. Yet the inventory reveals something else going on in the anterooms.

Pictures like Susanna and the Elders in the Sala or the *Carità Romana* in the second anteroom could exhort female members of the family to virtuous behaviour, but also allude to the recurrent phenomenon of couples in which husbands were much older than wives. It is worth noticing that a depiction of Susanna was also in the Sala of the *casa piccola* so that it welcomed the visitor at both the two different entrances of the first floor. These suggestions were part of a patriarchal cultural system, so familiar to be embedded in everyday life. It is hard to determine how conscious was the acceptance of these cultural tropes. Yet, given the prominent positions of these paintings in the house, it is possible to argue that these images were deliberately displayed to an outside audience to stress the belonging of the Master to this cultural system. As a male counterpart, three depictions of King David were distributed in the rooms of the *quarto della Galleria*, together with five portraits of the kings of Spain hanging in the first anteroom, i.e., at the entrance of the apartment, which was most probably used for public events and had to display the family's loyalty.<sup>19</sup> Instead, the portraits of the family's ancestors were hung beside Ercole's own portrait in the first anteroom of the *quarto grande*, where Ercole himself dwelt.

As already seen, in the three apartments, from the first anteroom to the backrooms the number of religious paintings slightly increases. Among these, there were many depictions of Jesus Christ and male Saints, such as Saint John and Saint Sebastian. In comparison, the depictions of the Virgin Mary are scarce, just eight, and, of these, only five in the main dwelling. Even fewer are the depicted female characters: the *casa grande* had only one painting with a female subject, a depiction of a "female saint martyred by a tyrant," in the main bedroom. The violence of the theme seems increased by its proximity to a depiction of battle and the scene of Christ expelling the merchants from the temple (the only episode of the Gospel showing Christ angry), hung in the same room. Although the chapel was already located close to the bedroom and furnished with eleven religious images, it does not seem to have affected the choice of the paintings for the bedroom. Neither were located there the lascivious depictions suggested by Mancini. Rather, an atmosphere of male domination must have transpired from its pictures. Obviously, daily practices do not always correspond to theoretical indications, such as Mancini's, but these indications often reflect a widespread practice. At issue here is the effect that a divergence from this practice could provoke. If all these paintings were reflections of an individual attitude towards life and people, in the case of the main apartment, they would be related mostly to the chief of the household, Ercole, who lived there and most probably bought the paintings, since the palace was almost abandoned before his time. It is definitely not a fully reliable method to understand an individual's personality, but it gives a vague clue about the environment of the inside and about the relations between the two sexes in a space that would have framed their intimacy. Surely, the sight of the only depiction of the Virgin Mary present in the bedroom must have been a source of relief for the wife.

## 5. Roots in the City's Devotion (Giuseppe)

A change occurred in the Scordia palace under Ercole's heir. Giuseppe did not alter the Sala arrangement and left many paintings in the anterooms as his father located them, but variously changed the other rooms, moving extant paintings and purchasing new canvases. A large number

<sup>18</sup> ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Honofrio, vol. 2049, f. 1480v.

<sup>19</sup> Sicily was under the rule of the Spanish crown for a long period, i.e., the House of Aragon from 1282 to 1516, the House of Habsburg from 1516 to 1700, and the House of Bourbon from 1700 to 1713.



of paintings were set in what the inventory compiler called “camerini” (small rooms), which may be identified with the backrooms between the courtyard and the additional structure on via Maqueda.<sup>20</sup> Excluding 16 geographic maps, 24 out of 55 paintings set there had a religious subject. Amongst these, depictions of the Virgin and female Saints, like Agatha, Ann, Catherine, Mary Magdalene, outweighed the male Saints. It is remarkable that a small depiction of Saint Rosalia, patroness of Palermo since 1624, finally appears. Lacking family payment registers, the purchase of new paintings by Giuseppe’s mother, Giovanna Morra, could not be excluded, as she shared with her stepson the tutelage of the legitimate heir and the administration of family assets for ten years after Ercole’s death. However, the list refers to Giuseppe’s possessions at the time of his death and this means that in any case, he approved this arrangement. Collecting paintings was a widespread custom for aristocrats to enhance the palace’s magnificence and the casato’s glory. As Edward L. Goldberg argues in relation to Leopoldo Medici’s collection, a specific selection of items could also be used to distinguish the contribution of one member of the family amongst those of his predecessors (Goldberg 1983, p. 23). According to Goldberg, Leopoldo de’ Medici tried to isolate his voice from previous patrons of his family through a relevant specialization of his interests. In this case, the diversification, established by Giuseppe’s contribution apparently aimed to further root the family in the cultural and religious life of the city.

In this sense, a significant parallel emerges from the comparison of the princes’ personal attitudes towards religious matters as they can be inferred from Ercole’s and Giuseppe’s last wills. Dated to 1683 and 1715, respectively, and arguably the richest sources about these two figures, these documents are highly conditioned by the perspective of the paterfamilias and consequently focused primarily on the issues of the preservation of wealth and the perpetuation of the family (Matchette 2006, p. 705). Nevertheless, some spiritual concerns of the two princes emerge between the lines. Above all, they kept alive the connection with the main fief of Scordia through acts of mercy, namely annual donations to the Franciscan convent founded by Antonio, dowries given to two needy female orphans from Scordia on Saint Roch’s day, and the custom to be buried in the church of the above-mentioned convent. It is not unusual to find within wills pious bequests to religious institutions “for which the testator wished to display a devotional preference” (Rusconi 1992, p. 310). Yet this act suggests also how much their devotion was connected to the establishment of the family’s authority in the fiefs. However, a slight difference in attitude emerges between Ercole and Giuseppe. Although Giuseppe followed his father’s example with charitable acts in Scordia, he also included in his will the possibility for his vassals to file a complaint, within two months of his death, for any wrongs suffered in order to receive compensation in cash.<sup>21</sup> Leaving aside any doubts about the efficacy of this arrangement, in any case, it shows how Giuseppe apparently distanced himself from the despotic attitude towards peasants that had been typical of the heads of the family since his grandfather’s rule (De Mauro 1868, pp. 186 and 191). Most probably, he needed to adapt to the new conditions of the family in the polished environment of the city. Similarly, Giuseppe showed a different attitude towards Palermo. The general recommendation of Ercole’s soul to the Saints of the Heavenly Court was replaced by Giuseppe’s specific invocations to precise Saints in his will. Among these, Saint Francis of Paola, Saint Rosalia, and the Immaculate Conception of Mary are noteworthy, since these cults were tightly connected to the city of Palermo more than to the town of Scordia.

## 6. Conclusions

In line with investigations on other contexts, this case study has illustrated that the path approaching the chapel from the rest of the house was characterized by the crossing of numerous consecutive thresholds marked by an increase in religious images hanging on the walls. However,

<sup>20</sup> It cannot be discounted that the small apartment on via Maqueda was occupied by Ercole’s widow, until her death in 1701.

<sup>21</sup> ASP, *Notai defunti*, Not. Sardo Fontana Francesco, vol. 2190, fol. 299r.

not only the devotional use of these paintings remains mostly obscure and unverifiable, but its investigation seems also to limit the exploration of the relationship between the depictions and people in the house.

After years in which the early-modern house has been assessed as a secular place alien to devotional practices, the risk is now to go towards the opposite extreme; that is, the univocal interpretation of the house as a “devotional place,” thus neglecting the complexity and the instability of meanings that spaces, images, and objects sustained in the domestic environment. To avoid this, I have proposed to interpret the purchase and location of the paintings in the house considering Bourdieu’s *habitus* as the source of these moves. This allows us to investigate the arrangement of religious paintings beyond their strictly devotional use, including questions of power, lineage, gender, taste, and so on. Furthermore, the comparison between the two different collections of canvases showed that the relationship between the paintings and the inhabitants of the house could change. The differences emerging from Ercole’s and Giuseppe’s collections illuminate two different attitudes towards family and the city: although produced by the same attempt of distinction, their actions adapted to different conditions.

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