

Urban Sacred Symbols: Folk Devotion Elements' Subversive Revival in Naples' Urban Art

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Abstract

Naples is a city where religious values hold significant ways, evident in the plethora of symbols and devotional expressions adorning its streets. Votive offerings, small shrines, altars, and various sacred iconographies populate the urban landscape, reflecting a deep-rooted sense of community and devotion that transcends generational and social boundaries. Over the years, artists such as Ernest Pignon-Ernest (Nice, 1942), Francisco Bosoletti (Armstrong, 1988), and Neapolitan writers cyop&kaf have drawn inspiration from Naples' rich cultural and religious heritage in their work. Through their artistic endeavors, they have reimagined and reinterpreted traditional sacred symbols, infusing them with contemporary meaning and relevance. One notable project, *Quore Spinato*, by cyop&kaf, stands as a prime example of this phenomenon. This iconographic initiative delves into popular narratives and cults within Naples' Quartieri Spagnoli, challenging conventional perceptions of religious worship. By juxtaposing sacred imagery with gritty, visceral representations, the project offers a stark contrast to the idealized and ethereal depictions often associated with religious iconography. This contribution seeks to explore the intricate relationship between Neapolitan sacred symbols and their manifestation in urban art, particularly in the city's streets. Emphasizing the importance of a shared interpretation, both anthropologically and aesthetically, the study aims to uncover the underlying motivations and implications behind this symbiotic exchange.

Keywords

Urban art; Sacred symbols; Graffiti; Quore Spinato; cyop&kaf; Naples.

With its rich tapestry of history and culture, Naples stands as a testament to the enduring power of religious symbolism. This city's streets are adorned with a multitude of votive offerings, small shrines, altars, and various sacred iconographies, each reflecting a profound sense of community and devotion. The landscape of Naples, often referred to as an open-air museum, is not just a repository of historical artifacts but a living, breathing testament to the city's continuous dialogue with its spiritual and religious past. This paper aims to delve into the subversive revival of these sacred symbols in the context of Naples' urban art, examining how contemporary artists reimagine these elements to reflect current social and cultural realities. The juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, the traditional and the modern, is a recurring theme in the

urban art of Naples, which has become a canvas for the expression of complex cultural and spiritual identities. The city's urban spaces, particularly in areas like the city center and some of the most iconic neighborhoods like Forcella or Quartieri Spagnoli, are replete with images that speak to the persistence of faith in a modern, secular world. The transformation of these sacred symbols within the framework of urban art not only reaffirms their relevance but also challenges the conventional narratives that have long dominated religious iconography in southern Italy.

The historical landscape of Naples is replete with religious symbols that have evolved over centuries. From early Christian catacombs to grand Baroque churches, the city's architecture and public spaces have long served as

canvases for expressions of faith. This tradition of sacred art has persisted, deeply embedding itself into the social and cultural “fabric” of Neapolitan life. The evolution of religious symbols in Naples can be traced through various historical epochs, each contributing distinct layers of meaning and significance. Ancient and Early Christian influences, for example, laid the foundational iconography that would be revisited and reinterpreted by successive generations of artists and believers. The transition from the use of early Christian symbols to the elaborate and emotive imagery of the Baroque period, reflects a dynamic interplay between artistic innovation and theological doctrine. The role of these symbols in public life was not merely decorative; they were integral to the social reality, functioning as visual sermons that conveyed complex theological ideas to a largely illiterate population. The didactic function of religious art in Naples is particularly evident in the proliferation of frescoes and mosaics in churches and public spaces, which served both as objects of devotion and as tools for religious instruction.

The roots of Neapolitan religious symbols can be traced back to ancient times, where early Christians utilized catacombs for burial and worship. These underground cemeteries were adorned with frescoes and symbols such as the fish, anchor, and chi-rho, all of which conveyed early Christian beliefs and hope in resurrection. These symbols served not only as markers of faith but also as means of secret communication in times of persecution. The use of such symbols in the catacombs was not merely an act of artistic expression but a form of resistance against the Roman authorities who persecuted Christians for their beliefs. The symbols were subtle yet powerful assertions of identity and faith, enabling early Christians to communicate their beliefs and provide spiritual comfort to one another in times of great adversity. This early period of Christian art in Naples set the stage for the city's later development as a major center of religious art and culture. The symbolic language developed in the catacombs would later be adapted and expanded upon in the context of public worship, as Christianity moved from the margins of society to become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. The transformation of these early symbols into public religious art can be seen in the development of Christian

iconography in Naples' churches and basilicas, where the motifs of the catacombs were translated into grand architectural and artistic projects that sought to glorify God and instruct the faithful. During the medieval period, the construction of churches and monasteries intensified, and religious iconography became more prevalent in public and private spaces. The transition from the medieval to the Renaissance period in Naples was marked by a significant shift in the representation of religious subjects. While medieval art tended to be more symbolic and abstract, reflecting the transcendence of the divine, Renaissance art introduced a new emphasis on naturalism and the human experience. This change was partly driven by the broader cultural movement of humanism, which sought to reconcile the religious and the secular by exploring the relationship between humanity and the divine. The Renaissance also saw the rise of patronage by wealthy families and religious institutions, who commissioned artworks not only as expressions of piety but also as symbols of their own power and status. The result was a flourishing of religious art that combined technical mastery with profound spiritual depth, creating works that continue to inspire and move viewers to this day.

The Baroque era marked a significant expansion of religious iconography in Naples. The Counter-Reformation spurred the creation of elaborate churches filled with dramatic, emotive artworks designed to inspire awe and devotion. This period also saw the proliferation of votive offerings and small shrines in public spaces, reflecting a more personal and communal engagement with sacred symbols. These offerings, often in the form of *ex-votos*, represented prayers for healing, protection, and gratitude, embedding religious devotion into the everyday life of Neapolitans. The Baroque period in Naples was characterized by a fusion of art, architecture, and religion that sought to engage the senses and emotions of the faithful. The Catholic Church, through the Counter-Reformation, sought to reaffirm the role of visual art in promoting religious devotion, and Naples, as a major center of Baroque art, played a crucial role in this effort. The city's churches were transformed into theatrical spaces where the boundaries between the sacred and the secular were blurred, creating a sense of divine presence that was both immediate and overwhelming. The use of

light, color, and movement in Baroque art was intended to create an immersive experience that would draw the viewer into a direct encounter with the divine. This approach was particularly evident in the use of religious iconography, which was often presented in a highly emotive and dramatic manner, designed to evoke a deep emotional response in the viewer.

In contemporary Naples, the sacred symbols that have defined the city's cultural heritage are undergoing a transformation. Urban artists are engaging with these traditional elements, reinterpreting them in ways that speak to modern audiences and address contemporary issues. This section explores the works of three prominent artists — Ernest Pignon-Ernest (Nice, 1942), Francisco Bosoletti (Armstrong, 1988), and cyop&kaf — who have significantly contributed to this continuous dialogue. The recontextualization of religious symbols in urban art represents a new chapter in the long history of Neapolitan iconography. While these symbols have traditionally been associated with the institutional Church and its teachings, contemporary artists are using them to explore a wider range of social, political, and cultural themes. This shift reflects the changing role of religion in contemporary society, where traditional beliefs and practices are increasingly being questioned and reinterpreted in light of new realities. In Naples, a city where religion has always played a central role in public life, this process of reinterpretation has taken on a particularly urgent significance. The works of Pignon-Ernest, Bosoletti, and cyop&kaf demonstrate how artists are using the city's rich religious heritage as a starting point for a broader exploration of issues such as identity, memory, and social justice. By engaging with these symbols in new and innovative ways, these artists are helping to redefine the meaning of the sacred in a modern, secular world.

Ernest Pignon-Ernest, a pioneer of street art, has utilized Naples' rich religious iconography to create powerful installations. His works often incorporate images of the Madonna, saints, and other sacred symbols, which he places in unexpected urban contexts. By doing so, Pignon-Ernest challenges viewers to reflect on the presence and significance of the sacred in modern society. His art serves as a bridge between the historical reverence for religious

symbols and their contemporary reinterpretations, prompting a dialogue about the role of faith in public spaces. Pignon-Ernest's approach to religious iconography is characterized by a deep respect for the traditions of the past, combined with a willingness to challenge and reinterpret those traditions in light of contemporary concerns. His installations, which often involve the placement of life-sized images of religious figures in public spaces, create a powerful contrast between the sacred and the profane, inviting viewers to consider the ways in which these two realms intersect in their own lives. Pignon-Ernest's work in Naples, in particular, reflects his interest in the city's complex relationship with its religious heritage.

«I miei disegni nascono dal mio approccio ai luoghi. Non si tratta di disegni esposti per strada. Sono disegni che quando metto in relazione con un luogo, devono in qualche modo riattivare, esacerbare il potenziale suggestivo, interagendo con la forza del luogo stesso.»

By placing his images in locations that are often overlooked or neglected, he draws attention to the ways in which sacred spaces can be found in the most unexpected places, and challenges viewers to reconsider their own assumptions about the nature of the sacred.

Francisco Bosoletti's murals in Naples blend mythological and religious themes with contemporary social narratives. His use of chiaroscuro and dramatic compositions evokes a sense of reverence and awe, drawing on the emotional intensity of Baroque art. His works often depict scenes that merge the sacred with the everyday, creating a visual commentary on the enduring relevance of religious symbols in a rapidly changing world. His murals in the Quartieri Spagnoli, for example, reflect the neighborhood's historical and spiritual significance, while also addressing modern social issues. Bosoletti's work is characterized by a deep engagement with the symbolic language of Neapolitan culture, which he uses to explore themes of memory, identity, and resistance. His murals, which often feature larger-than-life figures rendered in a highly realistic style, draw on the techniques of Baroque art to create images that are both visually striking and emotionally resonant. By blending elements of the sacred and the secular, Bosoletti's work challenges viewers to consider the ways in which

these two realms are intertwined in contemporary life. His murals in the Quartieri Spagnoli, in particular, reflect his interest in the ways in which religious symbols can be reinterpreted and repurposed in response to contemporary social and political realities.

Neapolitan artists cyop&kaf take a more subversive approach to religious symbols. Their project *Quore Spinato* delves into the heart of popular devotion in the Quartieri Spagnoli, juxtaposing traditional sacred imagery with raw, visceral depictions of urban life.

«Tutto quello che c'è stato in mezzo, tra me e ogni singola pagina scritta tra le righe e le rughe di questo meraviglioso quartiere, è storia privata che non merita mercimonio. Quando mai l'amore si è messo in mostra? Solo chi sbandiera partecipazione, riqualificazione, intervento sociale costruisce carriere mettendosi in vetrina come certe vecchie prostitute. Qui non c'è nulla da dimostrare e molto da fare ancora. Intanto ho dipinto senza freno certe mie inquietudini (che credo siano anche di molti altri) che spesso inquietavano a loro volta; e allora non mi sento neanche di tacere che molti considerano terrificanti le mie opere e allora intervengono chiedendo di disegnare cose più allegre, floreali, carine (è la dittatura del carino!). Non li assecondo. Perché se da un lato è prezioso il loro coinvolgimento emotivo, dall'altro lo è anche la mia autonomia. Se mi mettessi a consolare rischierei di accomunarmi ai tanti che continuamente cercano di nascondere il disastro sotto il tappeto. Dunque insisto dipingendo le mie ossessioni, che sono poi quelle che l'humus circostante alimenta e se possibile aumenta.»

This stark contrast challenges conventional notions of sanctity and highlights the complex, often contradictory nature of contemporary faith. By placing sacred symbols alongside representations of violence, poverty, and resilience, cyop&kaf invite viewers to engage with these icons in new and profound ways, prompting a reevaluation of their significance in nowadays society. The work of cyop&kaf represents a radical departure from traditional approaches to religious iconography, which have tended to emphasize the transcendent and the otherworldly, as well as from traditional graffiti writing in certain ways. In contrast, cyop&kaf's work is grounded in the realities of

contemporary urban life, and seeks to explore the ways in which religious symbols can be used to reflect and critique the social conditions of the present. Their project QS is particularly notable for its use of imagery that is both deeply symbolic and intensely personal, reflecting the artists' engagement with the cultural and spiritual heritage of their city. By placing religious symbols in the context of the Quartieri Spagnoli, a neighborhood known for its complex social dynamics and its deep connections to popular devotion, cyop&kaf challenge viewers to reconsider their assumptions about the nature of faith and its role in contemporary society.

Quore Spinato serves as a prime example of the subversive revival of sacred symbols in Naples' urban art. By exploring popular narratives and cults within the Quartieri Spagnoli, challenging traditional perceptions of religious worship through its iconographic and narrative elements, the project, which consists of a series of murals and pictorial interventions, reinterprets some sacred symbols and narratives through a gritty, urban lens, delving into the local cults that have shaped the spiritual landscape of the Quartieri Spagnoli. The use of vibrant colors, stark contrasts, and raw imagery creates a visual language that resonates with the area's history while addressing modern social realities. The iconography of *Quore Spinato* is rich and multifaceted, drawing on traditional religious symbols while infusing them with contemporary meaning. One notable mural depicts the Virgin Mary surrounded by barbed wire, a powerful metaphor for the interplay between sanctity and suffering. This imagery challenges viewers to reconsider the role of religious symbols in a world marked by conflict and hardship. Another significant piece features San Gennaro, Naples' patron saint, depicted with a modern twist. The saint, traditionally revered for his miraculous protection of the city, is shown with graffiti and urban elements, symbolizing the ongoing struggle between faith and the realities of urban life. This reinterpretation invites viewers to reflect on the enduring power of these symbols and their relevance in contemporary society. The narrative aspects of *Quore Spinato* are equally compelling, weaving together stories of faith, resilience, and defiance. The project incorporates elements of local folklore and popular devotion, presenting them in a way that resonates

with contemporary audiences. By highlighting the stories of ordinary people and their interactions with the sacred, cyop&kaf create a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally relatable. The impact of the pictorial project extends beyond the realm of art, influencing the social and cultural landscape of the Quartieri Spagnoli. The project has sparked conversations about the role of religious symbols in modern society, prompting a reevaluation of their significance and meaning. It has also fostered a sense of community and collective identity, as residents engage with the artworks and their underlying messages.

The subversive revival of sacred symbols in Naples' urban art has significant anthropological and aesthetic implications. From an anthropological perspective, these artworks reflect the evolving nature of communal identity and collective memory. They reveal the ways in which contemporary Neapolitans engage with their cultural heritage, negotiating the tension between tradition and modernity. The process of reinterpreting religious symbols in urban art can be seen as a form of cultural negotiation, where traditional beliefs and practices are adapted to new social and cultural contexts. This process is particularly evident in Naples, where the city's rich religious heritage is constantly being reinterpreted and repurposed in response to contemporary realities. Aesthetically, the integration of sacred symbols into urban art demonstrates the power of visual language to transform and recontextualize cultural icons. These artworks challenge conventional notions of beauty and sanctity, offering new interpretations that resonate with contemporary audiences. They highlight the dynamic interplay between the sacred and the secular, creating a rich, multifaceted visual dialogue. The use of religious symbols in urban art also raises important questions about the nature of cultural appropriation and the role of the artist in society. By reinterpreting traditional symbols in new and innovative ways, artists such as those cited and explored as case studies are helping to redefine the meaning of the sacred in a modern, secular world.

The revival and reinterpretation of sacred symbols in Naples' urban art underscore the city's unique ability to merge the past with the present. Contemporary urban artists are at the forefront of this movement, using

their work to explore and redefine the role of religious imagery in contemporary society. By engaging with these symbols in innovative ways, they contribute to a broader understanding of Naples' cultural and spiritual landscape. Through this perspective, we gain insight into the motivations and implications behind the integration of sacred symbols into urban art, emphasizing the importance of a shared interpretation that bridges anthropological and aesthetic points of view. Naples, with its rich history and vibrant culture, continues to serve as a living canvas for this ongoing exploration, offering a testament to the enduring power of religious symbols in shaping communal identity and cultural expression. The city's urban art, which draws on a deep well of religious and cultural symbolism, offers a powerful commentary on the ways in which traditional beliefs and practices are being reinterpreted in response to the challenges of the modern world. This ongoing dialogue between the past and the present, the sacred and the secular, is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of Naples' cultural and spiritual heritage. The analysis of artists like Ernest Pignon-Ernest, Francisco Bosoletti, and cyop&kaf provides a window into the ways in which sacred symbols are being reinterpreted and recontextualized in response to contemporary social and cultural realities. Through their work, these artists challenge viewers to reconsider their assumptions about the nature of faith and its role in contemporary society, offering new and innovative perspectives on the meaning of the sacred in a rapidly changing world.

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