Miraculous images, icons proven or claimed to work miracles, played a considerable role in Renaissance era faith and devotion in Florence, Italy. Florence was home to more than 40 image cults during this time, with images found in churches, oratories, and tabernacles both in the urban centers as well as in the countryside. Megan Holmes’ book, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, explores the effect of these images on Florentine peoples, politics, and religion. The miraculous images were a strong part of Florentine culture. In many ways, culture was built around these images and the way that they tangibly demonstrated the power of God to the people of Florence. These images became sites of votive petition, sacred intercession, and miraculous manifestations. Holmes’ book assumes truth in the claims that these images did, in fact, produce miracles. In my exploration of the book, I focused on the first part, which delved into the time and place that these images lived in.

Miraculous images are distinct from contemporary religious images, with the difference mostly lying in the way that they are displayed. Miraculous images typically had elaborate frames and tabernacle chapels built around them. Many were veiled, and
would be revealed on feast days and special occasions. Thankful supplicants would surround active miraculous images with ex-voto offerings to the divinity. In addition to their evident divine powers, the images were typically lively and engaging. They had engaging eyes, open lips, and ready, blessing hands. These aspects of the images displayed a sense of attentive responsiveness.

This aspect of Florentine religious culture has been largely pushed aside by art historians. It is easy to look at this sort of devotion and denounce it as idolatrous or superstitious and practiced by “folk” and “low-culture” people. Historically, many have ignored the miraculous histories of the images and focused instead on the sanctuaries and tabernacles built to house these works, or on the more progressive humanistic and perspective-focused works of the Renaissance. But upon a closer examination, one can see, as Holmes argues, that miraculous images were at the center of Renaissance religious life. Devotion to miraculous images was practiced by the rich and poor alike, with everyone from the Medici’s to rural peasants seeking intercession in their own most trusted image of Mary or Christ. Holmes would argue that miraculous image cults were among the most vital and dynamic sites of cultural activity in Renaissance Italy, surpassing the boom in aesthetics and art in general. In fact, Holmes would state that the Renaissance period was when miraculous images were the biggest deal and had the most
widespread belief, rather than the more commonly held belief that miraculous images were a medieval thing. Miraculous image cults were one of the very most popular ways for Renaissance people to worship and show devotion to God. Images were essential to their tangible faith. And, according to records and accounts, the miracles were real.

Most miraculous images depict Christ or Mary. These images typically started as normal devotional objects, and later, through miraculous activity, gained the status of miraculous image. In order for an image to be deemed miraculous, naturally, signs and miracles had to be manifested through them. These miracles often came in response to the prayers of the people who prayed before the images. The grateful people who had received miracles from the images often left ex-voto offerings in front of the image to show their thanks and commemorate the works done there. But, in addition to intercessory miracles, miracles of transfiguration were also a part of this tradition. In transfiguration, a change of appearance would occur of the material effigy. Tears would flow from the eyes of Mary, or the image would be seen somewhere that it didn’t belong. Both of these sorts of miracles made an image worthy of veneration. But, the miraculous images that acquitted public cults typically were the ones that continued to deliver. The most popular miraculous images performed repeatedly for a wide populous, were veiled most of the time, were recognized by religious authorities, had active custodians, and
generous patrons. Still, devotion would fluctuate. As seems natural, crowds would shift
their devotion from image to image depending on the amount and prominence of miracles
being attributed to the images. Competition certainly played a role in the upkeep and
presentation of these images. The sanctuaries that housed miraculous images certainly
wanted their images to be the favorite of the people. Because of this, the art boom in
Renaissance churches and the frenzy of patronage begins to make a lot more sense.

This study of miraculous images spans from 1250 – 1600 and focuses on Florence
and surrounding suburban and rural areas. It may be popular belief that the Renaissance
in Florence was all about the art. Now, it may be more accurate to believe that the
Renaissance was all about what the art could do.

**SLIDE TWO**

St. Basil once wrote, “For the honor shown to an icon applies directly to the living
model… He who venerates the icon, therefore, venerates in it the person of the one so
depicted.” This description certainly applies to the attitude of those involved in image
cults in the late-Medieval and Renaissance periods. Image cults come from the long
tradition of relic cults and early-Christian images like the Mandylion of Edessa in Syria
and the Christ of Paneas.

**SLIDE THREE**
The *Mandylion* is said to be an image of the true face of Christ imprinted on a towel, in the tradition of Veronica’s veil. This tradition for venerating images that Christ may have touched or that reveal the true semblance of Christ in the Byzantine and early-Christian eras sets the stage for the new trends in image cults in the Renaissance period. The draw of an image like the Veronica was towards both relic and image. It was said to be an imprinted “true likeness” of the face of Christ “not made by human hands”. This image, like many miraculous images to come after it, was an object of pilgrimage, a focal point of prayer, and displayed awesome powers of divinity. The Veronica and relics like it were fundamental to the conceptualization of the Renaissance-era miraculous image and its counterpoint, the idol.

**SLIDE FOUR**

One of Italy’s first significant images is the *Volto Santo* of Lucca. This image was quite prominent in the life of the Luccan people. It came to take the role of patron saint of the city and was even represented on Lucca’s coins. The *Volto Santo* cult in Lucca had an impact on the initial development of image cults in Florence and on the subsequent emergence of comparable civic image cults. The *Volto Santo* was special because it was said to at one point contain an ampula of Christ’s blood.

**SLIDE FIVE**
Deep care for relics certainly influenced the image cults of Renaissance Florence. In fact, there were many similarities between the veneration of miraculous images and relics. There was resemblance in the ways they were enshrined, how they were activated on feast days, their use in procession, prayers addressed to the related sacred intercessors that were made in times of need, and in votive offerings made when prayers were answered. Miraculous images came to be treated like holy relics, even though their link with sacred beings was through representation, rather than through materiality. In this way, image cults became so popular, in part, because they gave the people access to Christ and the Virgin, something which material relics could rarely do. These rituals and forms had before been reserved for the bones of saints. Now, a sort of specificity and locus could be provided for the transcendent and universal Christ and Virgin. For this reason, images of Christ and the Virgin became the new trend in image devotion. Richard Trexler has argued that relics, while of paramount importance to images in Renaissance Florence, did not inspire devotion to the same extent and in the same way as images. The results of this shift were thrilling. As Trexler wrote, “The city was filled with thousands upon thousands of potential miracle workers, powerful, intimate vessels of love and hate, spiritual ancestors dynamically affecting the civic cosmos.”

SLIDE SIX
With its introduction in 1292, the Madonna of Orsanmichele was the first prominent highly venerated image with a public cult in the city of Florence. This image was said to heal the sick, make straight the crippled, and visibly liberate people in distress, as is recounted in Giovanni Villani’s quote above. Before this cult was established in the late 13th century, miracle working images were not significant elements in religious devotional practices in Florence. It had not been introduced yet. But beginning with the *Madonna of Orsanmichele*, sacred intercession via painted and sculpted images gradually became an important aspect of Christian faith. Florence developed a rich sanctuary culture to support local devotion and pilgrims from afar.

In the 14th century alone, 13 new cults sprang up. The 15th century had 9 new cults, and the 16th century had a whopping 28 new cults. New cults typically rose up in connection to current events like plague, flooding of the Arno river, surges in penitential piety, political instability, or regime changes. The three centuries of miraculous image veneration in Florence can be seen in four distinct phases.

The first phase of miraculous image veneration spanned from 1292 to 1398. At this time, cults began to take root in both the city and countryside, and certain cults started to gain a civic dimension. In some cases, certain miraculous images were tied to certain groups or political figures or affiliations. This was a time, in Florence, of rapid
urbanization. The people would rush to whichever Madonna was in vogue at the time.

Throughout this phase, images of the virgin were most common and celebrated. The Madonna of Orsanmichele was the most prominent image at this time. Most images were painted panels with Madonna typology of the Virgin enthroned and facing to the front. Marian devotion was powerful, as the people were afflicted by recurring plague, famine, war, and overcrowding. Devotion to Mary was a powerful way of managing physical suffering. Many people appealed to images of Mary in impassioned prayer. “Oh Queen of Angels, Lady of the World, advocate of the people, come to the aid of your servant…” Prayers could be said in front of the image or at a distance. Many people began to leave ex-voto offerings in the form of candles, wax or silver body parts, and liturgical objects.

The second phase, from 1399 to 1493, was triggered by the Bianchi penitential movement. The Bianchi movement was inspired by a vision of the Madonna appearing to a peasant and warning that Christ was prepared to wipe out a third of the world’s population unless people demonstrated extreme penitence and ceased their fractious behavior. The people of the Bianchi movement produced elaborate crucifixes in Florence, eight of which were said to be miraculous. These crucifixes had been carried in Bianchi processions.
Mirroring the intensity of this movement of penitence in Florence, ex-voto offerings became more elaborate too. Votive offerings began to be mass-produced and sold both within the sanctuaries and by licensed vendors. Multi-media life sized effigies were also introduced. Ex-votos were a critical sign of both the activation and the continued efficacy of an image cult.

**SLIDE EIGHT**

The third phase, from 1494 to 1530 coincided with the disintegration of Medici hegemony in Florence. At this time, the people were very sensitive to regime changes as a result of all of the political turmoil. At this time, the *Madonna of Impruneta* became quite famous with the people of the new Revolution under Medici. This image was so politically associated that modern historian Franco del Grosso declared it a “Republican Queen”. So, when the republic fell in 1530, the *Madonna of Impruneta* fell with it.

**SLIDE NINE**

The fourth and final phase from 1531 to 1599 coincided with the establishment of the Medici dukedom in Florence. At this time, also, female enclosure in the city affected image cults as well as the changes in devotion encouraged by the Council of Trent. When the Medici stepped into power of the Florentine dukedom, the *SS. Annunziata* became the principle cult of the Medici court. The Medici would make numerous diplomatic gifts of
giant copies of the Annunziata image as well as of the virgin’s face. This image in particular was said to be a “true likeness” of the virgin. But many of the new image cults in the city were responsive to the change in female monasticism. The number of cloistered women rose considerably, and so did the amount of image cults located in nunneries. In general, men were highly involved in the administration of image cults, but the women of Florence were the habitual daily devotees. The sanctuary provided women with a public stage for exercising piety, a valued virtue for women of elevated social rank. The rise in female enclosure in the city limited the participation of these women in the public image cults. Image cults within nunneries allowed nuns the possibility of partaking in this valued form of contemporary worship. The devotional practices of nuns gave rise to a much more fluid and less regulated form of imagistic devotion. Many of the images were readily accessible to the women within their daily cycle of prayer, work, and leisure.

By this point, there were a great number of image cults. Sacred immanence at this point was fairly diluted, and even commonplace. Additionally the visual culture was starting to coincide with the religious sanctuary. Because of these critiques, many image cults came under sharp criticism from both Protestant reformers and critics within the Roman church.
Renaissance miraculous images were closely associated with specific places in the natural and built environment of the city. The physical places associated with the images became sacred places. But, also, these urban sites endowed the images with distinct identities, like “crucifix of San Giovanni.” Miraculous images tended to be situated in accessible and well-frequented urban locations. The cult of the *Madonna of Orsanmichele* was an extremely popular image cult, and it was located in the city grain market. Interestingly, parish churches were not often involved in this movement. The images were elsewhere, and often sanctuaries would be built up around them, or they would be moved. In the countryside, street-side tabernacles were common.

The people were very open-minded about miracles at this time in religious history. To them, virtually any sacred image had within it the potential to be the site or agent of miracles. The people came to expect signs and wonders of divine intervention to push through the mundane of Italian life.

Once an image cult became popular, it did not always remain popular. Cult devotion commonly fluctuated, especially with such a proliferation of images in the city. Also, some images were quite specific. For example, the *Madonna della Teste* in Santa Maria Novella specifically protected people during plague visitations.
In the case of the Madonna of Orsanmichele, the image was a fresco located on a pillar of the open loggia in the grain market. This image became so quickly famous, that even when a fire destroyed the fresco in 1304, a new image was produced by 1347 by Bernardo Daddi and instantly accepted as a replacement. The image was ritually veiled and enshrined.

**SLIDE 11**

In 1382, the grain market function of the building ceased to allow the focus to be on the Madonna. The walls were enclosed.

**SLIDE 12**

And toward the end of the 14th century, a program of stained glass windows were designed for the oratory by Franco Saccetti and installed within the arches, representing both scenes from the life of the virgin and relevant Marian miracle stories. This Florentine cult site, originally a simple grain market, eventually developed into a place of high liturgical and extra-liturgical celebration. Prayers were sung every evening before the image, and a local monastic clergyman would deliver a sermon on Sundays. The image and its reputation transformed the grain market into a holy place.

Much in this way, image cults could also serve to consecrate controversial spaces in the city. They brought a Christian perspective to wherever they were placed. For
instance, the *Madonna* at San Michele Nerteldi was situated across from a bathhouse that was a site of prostitution in the city. It is said that the image miraculously closed her eyes as a statement against the acts of dishonesty before her. Many people responded to this miraculous act with great reverence. That place was forever changed because of the cult surrounding that image and its actions as animated judge of moral conduct.

By the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, image cults were fully integrated into both the religious and cultural life of the city. It was not uncommon for a Florentine person to direct their devotion to multiple images in accordance to the specific needs they saw in their life. Some images, like the *SS. Annunziata* or the *Madonna of Orsanmichele* were associated with high-profile or municipal problems, while more local and less-famous smaller image cults could deal with problems like childbirth, whooping cough, and plague.

Image cults were also quite popular in the Florentine *Contado*, or the land extending roughly 25 miles in all directions from the city. By the end of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, most towns in the Florentine contado had at least one image cult.

**SLIDE 13**

These images were usually located in or at the edges of town, or along well-frequented roads. Within religious and literary culture during this period, unfortunately
rural image cults and imagistic devotion were sometimes presented in a negative light, in contrast to the more sophisticated urban practices. There was a clear stereotype in place of literal-minded, ignorant country bumpkins who were overly superstitious and could not distinguish true religion from magic or sorcery.

Within the contado, a common rhythm was found for building up an image cult. First, an image would be seen to have miraculous activity, and a cult would form around it. That cult would begin to want to build a church at the site where the image was located. There would be competition for the design of the new church, and the commission would often be awarded to an up-and-coming artist. The cult would want the church to be impressive and visible from afar, and to definitely have a distinctly modern and Florentine look. The precise orientation of the centralized structure was predetermined by the position of the miracle-working fresco that the church was being built for. This is how so many of the beautiful sanctuaries scattered across the Florentine contado came to be.

SLIDE 14

The Madonna of Impruneta was a contado cult, and it became quite famous following a spectacular weather miracle in 1354. Because of its distance from the city, it was carried to Florence on occasions when, in the words of a 15th century commentator,
“the whole republic will be shaken by fear” in times of war, plague, extreme weather, civil disturbance, and military triumph. Along the way, the cult picked up an elaborate foundation legend, came to be considered a “true likeness” of the virgin, and was said to be painted by the evangelist St. Luke. While these claims may be sensationalized, the image was remarkably famous for one not primarily located in the city center. What was interesting, however, was that it was claimed that this Madonna really only worked miracles when she was processed to Florence. According to Richard Trexler, “Pilgrimages to visit her were common. But, in general, she was that type of image which did not manifest her power [at home], but had to be taken abroad. No rooted tradition of miracles was attached to her temple. This was expressed iconographically by her being veiled while there. Her potential was stored, that is, until her help was needed in Florence. This was her field of action.”

But, it has been found that this claim is not exactly true. This may be what the urban people of Florence wished to be true, but the processional life of this Madonna was also complimented by a rich and active sanctuary existence with plenty of local devotion and miracles. But urban condescension shows through in this account.
The examination of miraculous images and the cults surrounding them sheds a great deal of light on the cultural and religious framework of the Italian renaissance.

From the perspective of an artist, any image had the potential to have the power to work miracles. It is not unlikely artists had this in mind as they produced typological images of Mary and Christ. Additionally, many prominent artists were commissioned to build or decorate the sanctuaries that housed the images or to create sculptures to be used as ex-voto offerings. The cultural veneration of miraculous images drove and bolstered the art community. This tradition is the undercurrent of the renaissance, and definitely speaks to the common person’s care for art. Devotion to a miraculous image was a part of everyday life for the typical Florentine person, and so their interactions with other sorts of art would be molded by that focus. The Florentine people did care about art, but in many cases, their focus was on what the art could do for them, and especially, what it pointed to. Art was a manifestation of holiness. Beyond the civic, cultural, and political implications of image devotion, the people felt that they were seeing the face of God, and that made all the difference.