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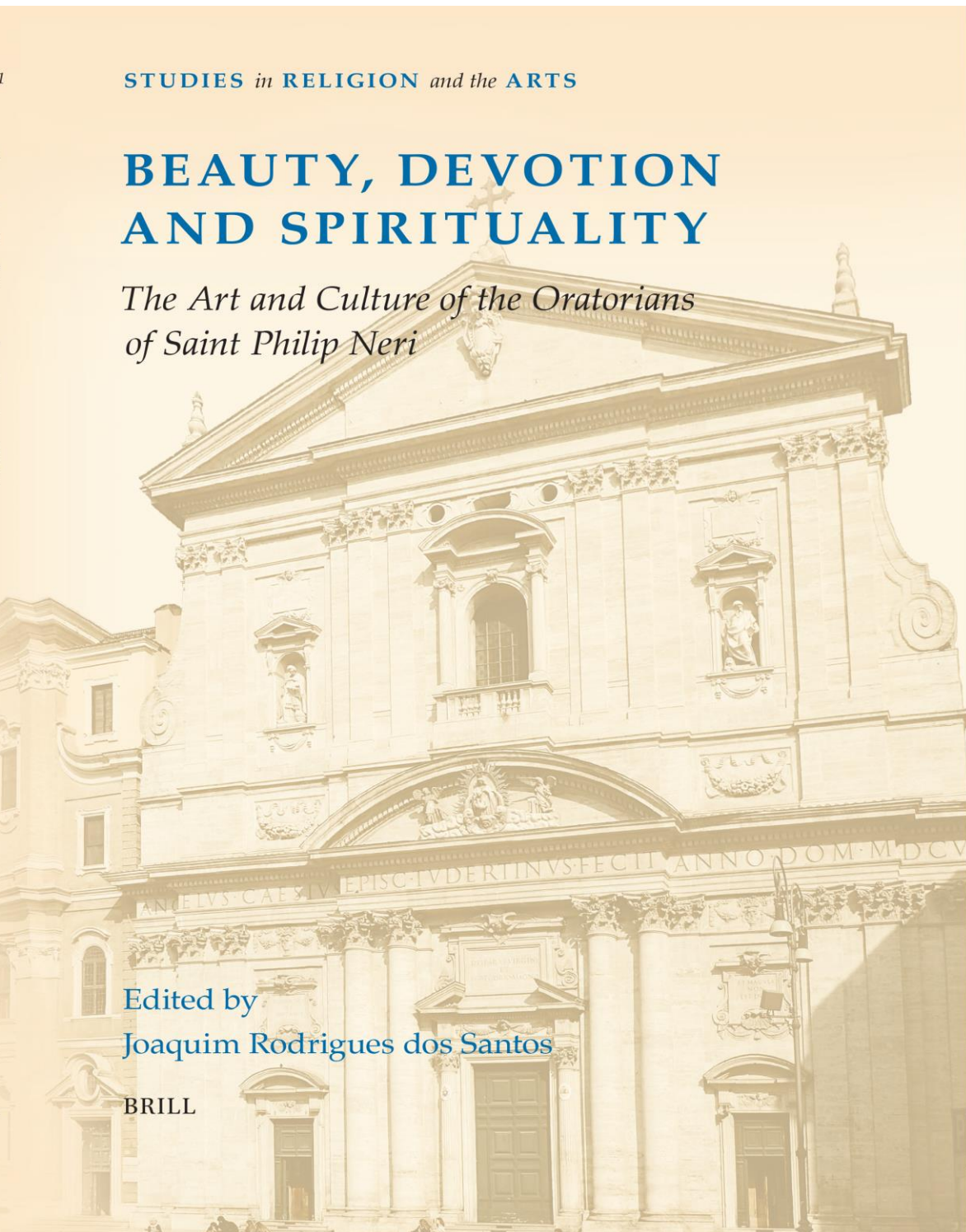
STUDIES in RELIGION and the ARTS

BEAUTY, DEVOTION AND SPIRITUALITY

*The Art and Culture of the Oratorians
of Saint Philip Neri*

Edited by
Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos

BRILL



Beauty, Devotion and Spirituality

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Foreword

After some years living in a religious congregation and carrying out pious works in Rome, Saint Philip Neri (1515–1595), usually identified as the *Third Apostle of Rome*, saw the *Congregation of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri* formally recognised by a papal bull in 1575. The members of the congregation – usually known as Oratorians – were secular priests living together under a religious rule without having taken religious vows. From early on, the Oratorians were in close connection with parishes, serving as clergy and getting involved in apostolate, assistance and education, as well as in the production of art. Later on, numerous Oratorian congregations were established across Europe, as well as in America and Asia. These congregations functioned autonomously, but maintained close connections with one another, forming a kind of confederation; unlike religious orders, they were not subordinate to a central authority.

The Church of Santa Maria in Vallicella, Rome, was granted as the headquarters of the first Congregation of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri; it was completely renovated soon after, and consecrated in 1577. This church is an artistic masterpiece, containing works of some of the most renowned artists and architects from the 16th century onwards. Whilst it is believed that Oratorians never developed their own brand of “artistic style” – unlike other religious institutions – the fact remains that they sponsored a vast number of works of art from well-known artists, often of great significance, forming a corpus that is yet to be studied in due depth.

In fact, while major Oratorian churches, such as the ones in Rome, Turin, Genoa, Lodi and Vicenza are well-studied, documented and widely-recognised, other Oratorian churches are still insufficiently known outside the local region – especially the Oratorian buildings outside Italy, but also some Italian ones. The same is true with other forms of art belonging to the Oratorians or their patrons, namely paintings, sculptures and decorative arts. And even main artists working for Oratorians were also studied in depth, such as Francesco Borromini, Filippo Juvarra, Pietro Antonio Corradi, Guido Reni, Domenico Zorzi, Carlo Maratta and Pietro da Cortona, among others, while other artists are still understudied.

We cannot say the Oratorian art is unknown or unstudied... While the life and history of Saint Philip Neri, his congregation and his most prominent Oratorian followers are undoubtedly well-known due to numerous publications (which do not need to be mentioned here), the art produced under Oratorian patronage is still poorly known, with the exception of a couple of general books mainly on major Oratorian art pieces.

Outside this kind of “jet-set” Oratorian artistic production, how can we understand the art and culture of the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri? How can we develop a general perspective of the Oratorian art in less-known Oratorian buildings in Italy, or especially in other countries where Oratorians had an important presence, such as Spain, Portugal or the United Kingdom? Or even in the overseas territories of European colonial powers, as New Spain, Brazil or Portuguese India, where the Oratorian activity was, at some crucial times, fundamental for the Catholic establishment?

The truth is that the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, as well as their artistic production, were many times neglected in favour of other bigger religious orders, with more power, wealth and a more effective propaganda apparatus, such as Jesuits, Franciscans, Benedictines, etc. Despite being known as an influential Catholic institution – in some cases with its members even seen as opponents of the Jesuits, counterbalancing thus their power and, after their expulsion from some countries, inclusively substituting them – its establishment in territories outside Italy was not impressive enough to grasp the interest of modern art historians (beyond the masterpieces and celebrated artists).

Fortunately, in the last decade, several researchers have launched investigations into the art and culture associated with the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, bringing new insights which were absent from previous critical interpretations. These new insights focused on churches, paintings, sculptures, jewellery, music, treatises and even other forms of spirituality, culture and action underestimated until then. New artists who worked with the Oratorians became known, as well as their artworks. Connections between Oratorian congregations and between Oratorians and local communities were analysed, as well as their political relevance. But despite all these advances in bringing to light the Oratorian art and culture in the last decade, a broader overview on this theme was still missing.

This is where this book of essays comes in, with its effort to close this knowledge gap, and intending to discuss the art and culture produced or associated to the Oratorians of Saint Philip Neri, especially focusing on issues still little known by most people, including many experts. This book is intended to be a key work in the studies on Oratorian art, in which the authors will focus on this very important artistic production, commonly forgotten when compared with other religious productions of art.

Joaquim Rodrigues dos Santos

There is scant research on the art produced under the Congregation of the Oratory of Saint Philip Neri, with the exception of a couple of general books focused primarily on major Oratorian art pieces. Therefore, this book of essays aims to discuss the art and culture produced by or associated with the Oratorians by providing a broad overview focused especially on rarely investigated issues. The authors focus on this very important artistic production, commonly forgotten when compared with other religious productions of art, by covering geographical areas spanning from Sri Lanka to Mexico, including Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, India and Brazil.

JOAQUIM RODRIGUES DOS SANTOS, Ph.D. (2012), researcher at the ARTIS - Institute of Art History, School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon. His research focuses on the history and preservation of Portuguese architecture. He has published several essays on this subject.



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