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Dear Dr. Hudečková:

Dr. Ivan Foletti has taken one of the most enigmatic and, hence, extensively studied palaeochristian monuments as the subject of his *Habilitation*, the enormous wood doors still in place on the main portal of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome. *Il nartece di Santa Sabina e le sue porte: tra immagine, liturgia stazionaria e "funzione regolare"* makes numerous significant contributions to scholarship on every level, not only to the work of art itself but also, through it, to the understanding of Christian artistic culture during the formative period more generally.

Dr. Foletti restricts his consideration of the individual panels to a catalogue at the end of the book. The contribution of the *schede* is, itself, not marginal, however; the analysis is acute and the research on every subject is formidable. Nonetheless, the organization suits Dr. Foletti's goal perfectly, which is not to debate fine points of iconography but to consider the bigger issues the doors of Santa Sabina raise.

As in his earlier published research, Dr. Foletti begins by reviewing the scholarly literature on his subject, which in this case starts in the seventeenth century; and he analyzes each scholarly contribution with respect and subtlety. The historiography is thorough and interesting; Dr. Foletti has read everything on his topic, it seems, including a long unpublished dissertation by a Japanese scholar working in Paris. The opening section is no mere *status quæstionis*, but a mature consideration of the roles the Santa Sabina doors have played in cultural history. How the religious monument came to be inserted into the history of art and its fate there are particularly revealing; and the ways in which the doors have been opened up by successive scholarly fashions—iconography, co-existence of styles, and performance are adeptly handled.

Dr. Foletti then sets a new course. Drawing on cultural anthropology, archaeology, texts, and significant *comparanda*, he takes up the question of the function of the space in front of the church during the fifth century when the doors were installed and offers a

radical new interpretation. He proposes that the portico, created at the intersection of two roads on the Aventine Hill, served various rather than a single purpose, most notably, serving as a space for preparing catechumens for rites preceding baptism and also for penance. The narthex was thus occupied by the uninitiated, those being prepared, and the clergy. In this way, the doors separated two worlds, but were part of neither; in a sense, they were a metaphor of the ritual itself. Moreover, because of the Santa Sabina narthex's particular configuration in being closed at the western end, the wood doors provided a focus, not only for teaching, but also for quiet contemplation and private devotion. As the number of pagans in Rome diminished after the fifth century, however, the space was given over more to penitence; and Santa Sabina was the destination of the papal stational liturgy on the Wednesday before Lent. Dr. Foletti's approach provides a paradigm for other study; avoiding a singular function and exclusive audience, it opens the doors up to a complex interpretation and for consideration over time.

Having established the functional situation in which the doors were seen, Dr. Foletti then subjects the organization of the panels to a detailed analysis. Recognizing the frustration to which other scholars have succumbed who have sought to find a unifying program, he studies the individual narratives in terms of liturgical practice and---more important---in the context of the rhetoric of preparation. He finds that, whereas the iconography is generally commonplace, the groupings around water themes, prophetic calling, Eucharist, the striving to confront God, the Magi, and Christ's Passion can be explicated by means of homilies and other texts that elucidate the use of the narthex space, and in turn, give meaning to the functions in the place. Situating his analysis in the particularly depressed status of Rome at the beginning of Pope Celestine's pontificate, he justifies his use of Ambrose; and seeing liturgy as a culture practice, he relates it to art. Dr. Foletti demonstrates that Ambrose was the dominant theologian in Rome at the time the doors were made; and citing the Bishop of Milan's interpretations, he builds a strong argument that, while there is no single meaning to any given scene, the overall themes rotate around baptism, exorcism, and preparation for initiation. Thus, Dr. Foletti's method offers a powerful paradigm that is rooted in the particular circumstances of the Sta. Sabina doors' moment of creation.

Ambrose helps Dr. Foletti interpret such scenes as Moses Bringing Water from the Rock and the Ascension of Elijah; and the written exegesis allows Dr. Foletti to define broad categories for understanding the imagery, e.g. Water of Life, Vocation, Eucharist, and Vision of God. Dr. Foletti's method is particularly effective in explaining such uncommon images as the so-called "Acclamation." Building on the observation of Jean-Marie Spieser that the iconography relates to apse decoration, Dr. Foletti analyzes the scene in terms of its double function of providing a close-up image to contemplate and also as an introduction to the idea of Parousia, the subject also in the apse which could be glimpsed by passers-by through the doors. In this case, as in the others, the scene's significance can be comprehended only through understanding the ritual circumstances. In short, by grounding his reading of the diverse imagery in Ambrose's writings, Dr. Foletti is able to make a stronger case than any one before him for the deployment of the reliefs as instruments for teaching catechumens in the narthex when the mysteries were unfolding within the church. But he does not stop even with this satisfying interpretation; he asks additional questions, for example, whether the clergy also gained something from the reliefs. While he remains cautious, he suggests a papal-political reading as well, one that only the literati would comprehend.

Tackling the bigger issue of what kind of “program” the doors present, Dr. Foletti offers a convincing argument about what he terms “*logica associativa*.” Not rejecting altogether notions of chronological ordering, typological relationships, or eschatological thematics, he cites such works as the apsidal arch in Santa Maria Maggiore, the Brescia casket, and the five-part ivory diptychs; and he looks to the logic of Ambrose’s sermons to suggest that the individual identifiable episodes were meant to conjure up others, setting up a kind of chain-reaction of meanings. The idea is that, as in sacred scripture itself, the heterogeneity reveals a concerted message. And in a brilliant leap, Dr. Foletti connects the polysemia to steps in the initiation process and to the possibility that the doors also served the post-baptismal moment.

As important as the movements and formal ceremonies are for Dr. Foletti, the rituals’ rhetoric thus are seen to offer an even more effective key. This is perhaps the book’s most original contribution, which puts the analysis of texts—not just the information they contain—to work in understanding visual art. Previous scholars have tried to explain the stylistic diversity within the Santa Sabina doors, proposing the presence of local and foreign sculptors and other not completely satisfying explanations. Dr. Foletti makes a clear distinction between “manner” and “style” as a way of distinguishing groups based on workmanship and cultural purpose, complicating the basic observation by noting variations in the quality of execution that cuts across both stylistic groups, and analyzing such works as the ivory caskets in Brescia and Venice, and the famous example of the Arch of Constantine. Dr. Foletti extends his argument to other works as well, e.g. the Sant’Aquilino mausoleum and Saint Victor chapel in Milan, the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, and the mosaics of SS. Cosma e Damiano in Rome, stone sarcophagi, etc. Dr. Foletti also draws on classical authors—Cicero and Quintilian most notably—to refine his claims about rhetoric; but then he analyzes Augustine’s reinterpretation of the ancient authors to define more precisely a contemporary, Christian idea of rhetorical modes. In so doing, he demonstrates the fact that contemporaries would have recognized the distinct stylistic characteristics and thereby shows that, like differences in prose and poetry, visual style is a rhetorical element used to articulate the relationship of form to content. Dr. Foletti proceeds to use the rhetoric of style to distinguish groups among the panels, showing that, in presentation, too, the Acclamation scene remains isolated and, hence, of special importance. His overall argument is certain. The humble style is used for Christ’s earthly operations because the significance of the scenes is to assert Christ’s humanity, his simplicity, and his effectiveness. Miraculous events—Moses’ and Christ’s—are rendered in a way that reflects on divine power. And the elevated mode deployed to present the elevation of prophets and visions of God offers proof that the faithful will find salvation.

The writing of *Il nartece di Santa Sabina e le sue porte: tra immagine, liturgia stazionaria e “funzione regolare”* is clear and subtle; the precise and crystalline language serves Dr. Foletti’s nuanced analysis perfectly and suits beautifully his complex weaving of fact and interpretation. While Dr. Foletti acknowledges his debt to recent scholarly attention to function, liturgical performance, and audience reception, he raises the methods and other approaches to a higher plane still, articulating important new principles that, in turn, elevate Santa Sabina far beyond the precious physical monument still preserved on the Aventine Hill.

The work is thorough, original, persuasive, and important. In my opinion, there is no doubt that it reaches the level, scope, and value of a Habilitation in the discipline of art

history; indeed, Dr. Foletti's *Il narcece di Santa Sabina e le sue porte* surpasses it.

Sincerely yours,

Herbert L. Kessler
Professor Emeritus