**SLIDE 1**

Hi, my name is Michelle Zillioux and today I will be presenting *The Missing Picture: Early Modern Venetian Attitudes Towards Disability.*

**SLIDE 2**

Before we begin, let's take a moment to peek into the past. It's June 1664 in the city of Venice. Over a century after the Protestant Reformation, the city has been sponsoring the Holy Office, a facet of the Inquisition in Venice meant to weed out heresy and witchcraft in the wake of the Counter Reformation. A middle-aged woman, Cecilia Ferrazzi, who has made a living boarding and raising young girls, has been brought before the Holy Office under accusations of several things. Among the many charges brought against her, the officers are most concerned with accusations that she has been giving confession to her wards, a job that is strignintantly preserved for men -- particularly priests. Over the course of her trial, Ferrazzi is able to dictate her autobiography for the record, and she admits to many things including having had numerous visions of the Virgin Mary and the Devil.

According to Anne Jacobson Schutte, Ferrazzi's trial belies more than just a trial held against a woman who has been performing a man's job. Prior to her arrest, Ferrazzi had a reputation among those who knew her as either a saint or a victim of possession. This is because she was known to frequently suffer mysterious illnesses and intense visions. Their frequency also brought about worries about her mental stability. It is entirely possible that this aspect of her life was a situation that the governmental and religious powers of Venice wished to control. Ferrazzi was not the ideal candidate for sainthood because of her background. She was not the symbol the republic needed, and both the Church and the republic sought to keep sainthood an exclusive club. Because of this, her intense visions, whether they were borne of holiness, possession, or mental disabilities, as those around her around her believed, were used against her in court so that the image of the republic could be controlled.

**SLIDE 3**

This is where we touch on the issue of today's presentation: early modern Venice appears to have a pattern of prioritizing its public image over all else. People whom the powers of the republic might have seen as "undesirable," such as people with mental disability and/or in poverty, were forcibly hidden from the narrative of the republic. Several other stories involving the Venetian government and people with diverse mental health conditions, which we will touch on throughout this presentation, reveal a pattern of this kind of prioritization of a positive public image in early modern Venice.

Over the course of my time researching early modern Venice, I have found that there is a considerable dearth of art depicting people with mental disabilities. There also has appeared a trend among Venetian governmental and religious leaders to carefully tailor the public perception of the Venetian republic by the outside world. Today, we shall explore the relationship between these two characteristics of the republic. I will argue that the lack of early modern Venetian visual culture depicting people with diverse mental health conditions is reflective of the republic's efforts to maintain a serene and controlled public image reinforced by the much studied "Myth of Venice."

**SLIDE 4**

As a proud republic, Venice took its public image very seriously -- and it is this characteristic that we must understand to see how it connects to the vacuum of art depicting people with mental health disabilities. In a time when the republic would be in competition with the Catholic Church and Italian city-states to remain autonomous and powerful, it was important that Venice retained renown as a strong and stable power. Venetian efforts to do so culminated in the "Myth of Venice," a myth carefully curated by the people of Venice and spread throughout Europe. This myth painted Venice as a serene and powerful city-state with great control over its land, people, and competitors. For the most part, this myth held truth as the republic remained independent and stable one up until 1797. The potency of this myth speaks to its importance to the character of the city, and its durability speaks to how tight a grip Venetians kept on their reception by the outer world. It can come as no surprise then that the Venetians might have wanted to limit art, a very influential medium seen by many, from depicting "undesirable"

subjects such as people with mental disabilities to present only ideal images of the republic.

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Venice's government is what nursed the republic to its true potential, as it is what contributed the most to maintaining the Myth of the republic. Led by the doge, the head of state elected by Venetian aristocracy for life, the government consisted of several governing bodies composed by the city's nobles.

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One of the more important bodies was the Council of Ten, which held authority over the majority of actions taken by the government. As a whole, Venice's government has a reputation among historians for being extremely strict -- something it had to be in order to maintain agency against the Roman Catholic Church, which had considerable political control over much of Italy, and to maintain its positive public image. As we will discuss later, this necessity plays into what kind of art was produced during this time, and thus will help to tell us a lot about the attitudes of Venetians towards mental disability.

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Of course, the character of Venetian society and culture was partly a result of the city's geography and governmental bodies. It should be known that Venice was primarily Christian, -- although the city accepted practicing Muslims and Jews into the city with relatively more religious tolerance than other city-states during this time -- despite its rocky relationship with the Church in Rome. Venice's relative religious tolerance fed into its image as a serene, unified, and strong republic, as the government was able to handle differing attitudes and beliefs, as well as allow the labor of welcomed foreigners to boost the economy. The Venetian government's supposed religious tolerance was fairly shallow, however, as Muslims and Jews (the latter group of which were placed in ghettos), were limited in their freedom because of laws such as a mandated curfew, and were regularly victims of prejudice. In the case of religion, it

appears that Venice once again controlled its image by exploiting the benefits of religious tolerance while keeping a stern grip on the movements of non-Christian people within the city.

We see a pattern of control again in other aspects of Venetian society. Venice boasted several Catholic confraternities and scuole, which were established to bring certain select groups of people together to carry out specific roles within Venetian society. Some of these scuole were devoted to charity, as the city cared heavily for the serenity and idealism of their republic. Charity often included efforts to keep the poor off the streets -- although this appears as a religious deed of kindness and human care, as the republic's religious tolerance might have, David D'Andrea argues in his essay, "Charity and Confraternities," that these were actually efforts to remove unfavorable people from sight to improve the image of the republic. Controlled choices such as these are ones that Venetians make again and again in its early modern history, and a characteristic that is reflected in the dearth of mental disability representation in Venetian art.

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So far, we have discussed the ways in which Venetians have sought for its general political and territorial image to be viewed in a very positive and particular manner, so this leaves the question: what exactly does this have to do with Venetian art? Well, to put it simply: Venetian artists strove for ideal images in their art just as much as the Venetian governmental and religious powers sought to make the republic seem ideal. As exemplified by Venetian Renaissance artists such as the Bellini family, as well as Titian and Giorgione, early modern Venetian art can be described as an idealized style of art that sought to capture the bright color and light unique to Venice's geography. Unsurprisingly, an idealized art style meant ideal subjects within Venetian paintings.

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The Venetian tendency to depict ideal subjects in their artworks can be seen in paintings of the ill or physically disabled. Now, one might wonder how it is possible to argue that the lack of art depicting people with mental disabilities was purposeful or a symptom of societal beliefs. Of course, disability is common to the human condition, so it makes sense that Venetians would have had experience with diverse health conditions during this time. In fact, their awareness is present in the artwork of this time, which appears only to experience an absence of representation in the case of *mental* disabilities, not physical. Although not all that common either, images of physical disability or difference, as well as illness (which was likely conflated with disability), were captured by many Venetian artists. Take for example a series of paintings completed by Tintoretto between 1549 and 1559, *St. Roch Healing the Plague-Stricken* and *Christ Healing the Paralytic*. Both paintings capture a theme prevalent among images of disability, physical difference, and illness during this time: divine healing.

Let's take a moment to pause and consider the way in which the "divine healing" trope might reflect Venetian attitudes towards disability. In the school of Disability Theory, there is a concept often referred to as the Medical Model of Disability. This model operates under the popular belief that disability is caused by biological problems akin to illness and that it must be cured in order for the person with the disability to lead a happy, productive, and healthy life. Think back to the stories you may have read, or the movies where you may have watched, in which a character is disabled. A wheelchair user, for example. That character often views their inability to walk as a source of unhappiness, and it is only when -- or, *if* -- they regain the ability to walk by the end of the story that they find happiness again.

In many ways, these paintings by Tintoretto are very similar to these stories. As mentioned earlier, these paintings depict moments of divine healing, where a holy figure -- here, St. Roch and Christ -- perform a miracle to heal the sick and the paralyzed. These paintings thus reflect a societal belief that the "different" must be healed. God's intervention shows just how miraculous and important curing the different is -- it is as if God returns them to a "perfect" state. Because the second painting, in which Christ cures a paralytic, blatantly depicts an instance in which disability is "fixed" as a gift from

God, it is difficult to separate a societal understanding of disability as something to be cured from the work.

These images -- the second in particular -- thus tell us two things that are important to our purposes: firstly, that disability was very much something Venetians were aware of; secondly, that disability, illness and difference were all considered negative characteristics that had to be healed or purged.

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As I mentioned earlier, it quickly became apparent to me as I researched this topic that there are few, if any, available works of art from early modern Venice depicting people with mental disabilities. Although I cannot responsibly argue that this means there are no images of mental disability at all, as it could very well be that we have lost images to the hands of time, or that there are images hidden away from where I currently have access, I do believe that this dearth does mean that there were few images of the topic created during the early modern era in the first place.

One could argue that such a lack of depictions of diverse mental health conditions is common to Europe during this time, however. Mental disability is, in fact, less visible than its physical counterpart, and contemporary understandings of mental disability are much different than they would have been in early modern Europe. This argument, however, fails in light of the hundreds of artworks from northern Europe and other Italian states such as Florence that do depict diverse mental health conditions, and thus indicate that the lack of representation is possibly unique to city-states such as Venice.

Despite not being as visible as physical disability, many mental health conditions were identified and given iconology so that it was recognizable, along with several other intangible concepts. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, first published in 1593, compiles many of these icons, one of the most famous being that of Melancholy. According to historian Sander L. Gilman, it was typical of early modern European artists to depict melancholy, an umbrella term for a nuanced mental health condition akin to depression, in their works. A traditional depiction of melancholy, as seen here in Albrecht Dürer's famous 1514 engraving *Melencolia I*, would be the condition personified by a person who sits

with their head in their hand and their gaze unfocused, making them look lost in thought. A 16th century Italian etching by an anonymous artist mimics this pose, its subject sat in a dark corner and forlornly gazing into her lap with her face in her hand.

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Other artists such as Hieronymus Bosch, a Dutch painter, also famously created works that clearly depict subjects with mental disabilities. Take for example here Bosch's *The Extraction of the Stone of Madness*, which depicts the surgical removal of the "stone of folly," which was believed to sit in a person's head and cause madness. The surgery here reflects the "divine healing" present in Tintoretto's works, thus showing both that mental health difference was in the consciousness of Europeans and seen as something to be cured during this time.

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Now that we have established that mental disabilities were both known and seen as an unfavorable issue in early modern Europe, we can turn to discussing just why it is that Venice is lacking art depicting people with mental disabilities. At the beginning of this presentation, I told the story of Cecilia Ferrazzi. Her case is not the only one in which Venetian bodies of power sought to control the narrative for the sake of public reception of the republic. Guido Ruggiero, a Venetian scholar, details three cases where people accused of murder were excused from typical punishment as the court determined them to be insane. In all three cases, instead of full imprisonment, the defendants were exiled from Venice. This removed responsibility for the care of mentally unwell people from the government, and eradicated the presence of unwanted persons from the republic entirely. We see this removal of undesirable sights or persons from view of the public or from the city entirely in the city's treatment of the poor, for whom charities were devoted to taking off the streets so that the city looked cleanly, peaceful, and serene as the "Myth of Venice" suggested.

Seeing this practice occur multiple times in Venice, it is possible to expand this line of thinking to Venetian art. It is highly possible then, that the republic wished to discourage visual representations of those with mental disabilities as an offset of its

efforts to maintain a positive, serene image of the republic. The absence of these representations would be beneficial to their reputation; if the art of Venice only depicted what was positive or ideal about the republic, then those who would see the art would see only what is good about Venice. Contrary to reality, Venice could appear idyllic and its Myth would be reinforced.

As we have seen today, bodies of power in the early modern republic of Venice, Italy, cared a considerable amount for the public image of the city-state. It's reputation was continually reinforced from every aspect of the republic from its geographic location, to its government, to its charity efforts. The handling of people with diverse mental conditions, reflects this obsession with its image. Nevertheless, given what has been discussed today, it is no surprise then that there is a considerable lack of art depicting people with mental disabilities, despite the obvious presence of mental disability iconologia and art in other parts of Europe during this time, as manipulating images of the republic meant the republic could maintain its mythical image.