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Vienna
Vittoria Colonna

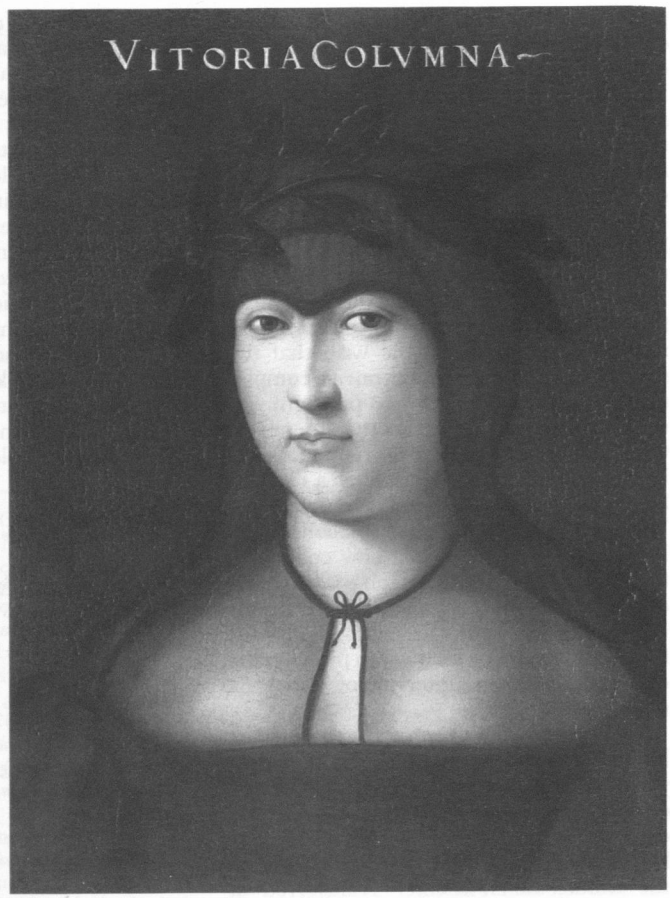
Vittoria Colonna has always been acclaimed as one of the greatest women of the early modern period both for her highly original poetry and for her deep religious commitment. Yet Vittoria's remarkable achievements have often been somewhat overshadowed by the overwhelming presence of her privileged relationship with Michelangelo. The superb exhibition organised by Sylvia Ferino-Pagden at the **Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna** (closed 25th May) tried to and partly succeeded in restoring the balance, insofar as Vittoria and not the artist was the centre of a well-planned and articulated historical enquiry. This show was the third part of a cycle dedicated to celebrated women of the Italian 'Renaissance'. After the great patron of the arts Isabella d'Este, and the painter Sofonisba Anguissola, it was now the turn of a famous literary figure. Yet this was a much more ambitious project: if the previous exhibitions centred almost entirely on the individual personalities concerned, the third panel of the triptych had a richer texture which brought to life one of the most tormented periods in the political as well as spiritual life of the Italian peninsula through a very intelligent selection of portraits, paintings, drawings, engravings, medals, bronzes, books and letters.

The exhibition was divided into five sections which are thoroughly documented in the weighty but handsome catalogue.[1] The latter contains a number of informative essays by distinguished scholars who have sketched an intellectual biography of Vittoria Colonna and her *milieu* in Ischia, Rome and Viterbo. The first part is not straightforwardly biographical. Ferino-Pagden writes on the false, presumed, 'true' and even invented portraits of Vittoria, thus offering a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of her *persona* from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Romeo De Maio, who has published many important studies on the marchesa di Pescara and her ambience, contributes a problematic essay in which the concepts of 'crisis of the renaissance' and 'irony' – for him a fundamental trait of Vittoria's personality – are not sufficiently developed, although, in fairness, his article has been shortened for editorial reasons. Finally Pierluigi Leone de Castris contributes a most interesting essay on culture and patronage at the court of the d'Avalos at Ischia: he identifies – among other things – a youthful portrait of the marchesa which represents her as an elegant, pretty young woman in contrast with her better-known, more severe widowed image, as documented in an engraving by Enea Vico and in a portrait on panel by Cristoforo dell'Altissimo in the Uffizi (Fig.75), the latter a copy after a portrait once in the 'museum' of Paolo Giovio in Como. Giovio knew Vittoria well: he had been a member of her intellectual circle at Ischia and wrote a passionate 'literary portrait' of his patroness which is translated in the catalogue; the copy of Vittoria's portrait in the Uffizi is therefore the most authoritative surviving evidence of her 'true' effigy.

The second part of the catalogue is devoted to Vittoria's poems and literary contacts. Tobia Toscano's pages make more widely known his archival discoveries presented at the 1988 congress on Vittoria Colonna in Naples (whose *atti* have yet to be published), while other articles deal with her close relationship with the most important writers of the time (Bembo, Castiglione, Giovio, Michelangelo) and with her own literary production. Two short essays by Carlo Vecce and Giorgio Patrizi address instead the fundamental issue of the female contribution to the history of sixteenth-century Italian literature. The extent of this social phenomenon, which was directly related to the increased acceptance of the vernacular as the dominant vehicle of literary discourse and exchange, has been investigated by Carlo Dionisotti in several publications which have inspired the best parts of these essays.

The third section is dedicated to the complex issue of the spiritual renewal of the Italian peninsula. The intense religious behaviour and sentiment in many circles were certainly spurred on by the unrest triggered by the German Reformation, but some of their roots were in the internal reform movements of the Church which had been active well before the outbreak of German protestantism. The essays by Gigliola Fragnito on the so-called heterodox movements, by Leatrice Mendelsohn on Varchi's *Lezzioni* and by Hans Aurenhammer on the impossibility of determining the

74. *Noli me tangere*, by Pontormo after a cartoon by Michelangelo. 1531–32. 124 by 95 cm. (Private collection, Milan; exh. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).



75. *Vittoria Colonna*, by Cristoforo dell'Altissimo. c.1550. 59 by 44.5 cm. (Uffizi, Florence; exh. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

religious belief of an artist from his paintings, contain interesting observations. Yet the article by Adriano Prosperi, which owes much to the research of David Freedberg, is perhaps the most stimulating. The author does not confine himself to accumulating archival information and erudite quotations but asks questions that have great historical relevance. After having observed that historians have not paid enough attention to the different meaning of concepts such as *immagine* and *figura* (in Auerbach's sense) at the time of the Reformation and of the Counter-Reformation, he examines through a series of well-chosen and sometimes little-known but meaningful examples the relationship between painting and faith in the early modern period.

The fourth section was dedicated to the intimate intellectual exchange between Michelangelo and the marchesa. This was perhaps the most exciting part of the exhibition for the art historian and not only because of Michelangelo's many autograph drawings on show. In the catalogue the excellent essay by Sylvie Deswarte-Rosa offers a detailed analysis of Francisco de Holanda's Roman sojourn and of his celebrated *Four Dialogues*. Her study is based on her deep knowledge of the Portuguese artist who had privileged access to the circle of S. Silvestro al Quirinale through his good diplomatic contacts Emidio Campi instead 'attempts' – as the title of his essay underlines – a theological interpretation of Michelangelo's drawings for Vittoria Colonna by pointing out the probable influence of Valdés on her intentionally allusive language as well as the major rôle played by Bernardino Ochino in the marchesa's entourage around 1540. Yet the true gem of the entire enterprise is the masterly essay by Michael Hirst and Gudula Mayr who have developed further some unpublished notes of Johannes Wilde on Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* for the Marchesa di Pescara.

In their essay the repetition of previously established facts is kept to a minimum and used only insofar as it serves to clarify the context of highly original observations which give us a new picture of the complex relationship between Vittoria, Michelangelo and Pontormo (Fig.74). First of all Hirst and Mayr confirm the accuracy of Vasari's account of the rôle played by Nicolas von Schomberg, the Archbishop of Capua, as mediator between Michelangelo and Alfonso d'Avalos, who ordered the *Noli me tangere* for his adoptive mother Vittoria. They then point out that three letters from the correspondence between Michelangelo and the prior of S. Lorenzo Giovanbattista Figiovanni date these contacts to the year 1531. This means that the relationship between Vittoria and the artist dates from before 1534 when Michelangelo moved permanently to Rome. Moreover, they rightly argue that this important commission must be interpreted against the background of Michelangelo's difficult situation after the fall of the Florentine Republic. His active rôle in the defence of the city against the Medici had annoyed his old patron Clement VII and for a few months Michelangelo continued to fear for his life. Even if he was forced to work day and night in the Medici Chapel and even if he needed the Pope's consent before accepting any other work, as a letter of the Mantuan ambassador in Florence asserts, he might well have thought that the *Noli me tangere* would have secured him useful political alliances with von Schomberg and d'Avalos, as Figiovanni suggested.

Equally interesting are their observations on the iconography. The marchesa was particularly devoted to the Magdalen, not least because she belonged to a group of noblewomen who supported a *Casa delle Convertite* in Rome, a shelter for women who wanted to abandon prostitution. In contrast with the vagueness of the associations between art and culture suggested in other essays, Hirst and Mayr point out concretely that in her writings Vittoria underlined the Magdalen's important rôle as the first witness of Christ's resurrection, precisely as she was represented in Michelangelo's cartoon and Pontormo's panel.

The last part of this very rich contribution deals with the painted versions of the *Noli me tangere*. Michelangelo's composition was so successful that many patrons, for example the powerful Alessandro Vitelli from Città di Castello, wanted a replica of the panel Pontormo painted for Vittoria Colonna. Today at least four versions survive and the most pressing issue is to identify which one was produced for Vittoria and which one was painted for Alessandro. Two mediocre panels attributed to Battista Franco were

certainly not made for these demanding patrons. Of the two remaining versions, a panel in a Milanese private collection is almost unanimously attributed to Pontormo, while the panel in the Casa Buonarroti is a typical work of Bronzino, even if some scholars have expressed doubts about this attribution. Through an impeccable philological analysis of the sources and of the paintings (pentiments, iconography, size of the preparatory cartoons) Hirst and Mayr demonstrate that the smaller version in the private collection is the original version painted by Pontormo for Vittoria, while the panel in the Casa Buonarroti must have been a larger version for Alessandro Vitelli.

Their final observations on the stylistic aspects of the panels and on the visual rhetoric of the composition such as the ambiguity of the protagonists' body-language which conveys tension and reserve, acceptance and detachment, is also very fine. No one should overlook their conclusions concerning Michelangelo's meditation on the problem of how to represent a two-figure composition effectively, not only in the *Noli me tangere* but also in the *Christ and the Samaritan woman* and the *Christ taking leave of his mother*, or their 'discovery' that this last cartoon was originally designed for Cardinal Giovanni Morone.

This section of the exhibition was further enriched by the copious small copies after drawings by Michelangelo owned by the Kunsthistorisches Museum (one of them was purchased at the Dorotheum as late as 1996) juxtaposed with the corresponding originals – an interesting glimpse into the history of taste, collecting and reception.

The fifth and last section on Vittoria's myth in the nineteenth century was a most enjoyable coda to a particularly rewarding exhibition which could boast some spectacular loans from museums in Madrid – above all the recently restored paintings by Titian and Sebastiano – Washington, London, Florence, St Petersburg and many smaller institutions: such a battery of masterpieces from all over the world was a tribute to the scholarly importance of the project and to the academic respect enjoyed by the organiser and her collaborators. It is rare to see an exhibition in which the quality and/or specific historical significance of the objects exhibited is so consistently high and thoughtful.

The merits of this exhibition and the virtues of its catalogue are so many that only three critical points can be briefly raised as a basis for further debate.

First is the question of prints after Michelangelo's drawings, numerous examples of which were in the exhibition. Because each project was treated separately, there was no coherent discussion about the function of these reproductive images. Vasari claimed that Michelangelo did not like engravings and yet – to mention one example – the deeply private *Pietà* today in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was published by Bonasone as early as 1546,[2] a date which requires an explanation, since Vittoria was still alive (she died in February 1547). How and why did Bonasone obtain this sheet to engrave, if this was a private affair between the marchesa and Michelangelo? Did he work from another drawing by Michelangelo of the same composition? Or did he get the original from Vittoria herself? There are various possible answers to these questions, but is it not reasonable to suggest that such drawings were intended from the very beginning for a wider audience and circulation than generally assumed? After all we know that Vittoria wanted to show Michelangelo's unfinished *Crucifixion* to some members of Cardinal Gonzaga's retinue.

Secondly, Titian's *Magdalen* in the Pitti can hardly be the version the artist is documented as having painted for Vittoria. It has been recently argued that even such an overtly erotic image was commissioned with moralising aims because the provocative sensuality of the Magdalen was intended as a warning against seduction;[3] such an interpretation surely implies a male viewer and Titian's *Magdalen* in the Pitti would have certainly appealed more to Francesco Maria della Rovere than to Vittoria Colonna. A firmer provenance for the painting needs to be established.

Thirdly, this cycle of very important exhibitions claimed to uphold a feminist perspective. Yet what may seem challenging in conservative Vienna can be interpreted as conservative in – say – postmodern California. Monuments to women are not new, as Vittoria Colonna's example clearly shows. Over twenty-five years ago Linda Nochlin explained why 'there have been no great women artists'.[4] She argued polemically, ironically and up to a point incorrectly that 'there are no women [artist] equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol',[5] because our institutions have been and often still are male-dominated structures. In a paper read at the Women's Caucus for Art in 1978 Svetlana Alpers argued forcefully for a different strategy in the feminist discourse: it is not enough to claim that women should be written into art history: 'it is not the gender of makers, but the different modes of making that is at issue'.[6] This is also why gender studies have almost everywhere challenged the problematic notion of feminist studies.

Independently from these different perspectives *Vittoria Colonna* remains one of the most exciting exhibitions in recent years. Ferino-Pagden was not only able to put together a 'dream team' of highly qualified specialists, but she orchestrated their work in an impeccable way. The complex structure of this show is in itself a major contribution to our understanding of Vittoria Colonna and her *milieu*. It constitutes the best compliment to her important historical rôle as well as to the society which produced her.

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As far as the reception of Michelangelo's *Pietà* is concerned, one can add to the items listed in the catalogue the tabernacles of Ludovico and Jacopo del Duca for S. Maria Maggiore in Rome and for Padua which were recently discussed by Jennifer Montagu in her Mellon lectures. See J. MONTAGU: *Gold, Silver & Bronze. Metal Sculpture of the Roman Baroque*. Princeton [1996], pp.19–32.

[2] See B. AIKEMA: 'Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and its Critics', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, LVII [1994], p.55.

[3] The title of her essay was of course intentionally provocative and ironical. See L. NOCHLIN: 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', *Art News*, LXIX [1971], reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, New York [1988], pp.145–78.

[4] *Ibid.*, p.150.

[5] S. ALPERS: 'Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art', reprinted in *Feminism and Art History, Questioning the Litany*, ed. N. BROUDE and M.D. GARRARD, New York [1982], p.198.