

devoted to Salviati and Vasari, two Roman-oriented Florentines who returned to the city, whose work could have been more profitably explored in relation to his.

The chapters are of value because Vasari's painting at least is rarely analysed as such, but in them Franklin comes up against the issue of value-judgements, which has always been a problem for Courtauld art historians. He can say that Vasari, according to his theory, was bound to believe that the work of his own time was greater than that of even his greatest predecessors, but he does not say directly that Vasari was mistaken or explain in his discussion of Salviati or Vasari in what ways their creativity was inferior, in the latter case very obviously, to that of the earlier Florentine artists he discusses.

Such judgements are, of course – like all historical judgements except those of factual accuracy – subjective, but they are also a necessary part of our understanding of the past and its relevance to the present. Courtauld art history, while inevitably making them, has always preferred to hide them in the bottom drawer. All in all, however, this a very good book and the values of the school to which it belongs are the chief British contribution to the history of art.

#### MICHELANGELO AND THE REFORM OF ART

##### Alexander Nagel

Cambridge University Press, 2000, ISBN 0 521 66293 3, £50 (cloth)

This is not only one of the most important books written on Michelangelo in recent years, but it is probably also the most challenging from a methodological point of view. In a vast bibliography, which is almost inevitably devoted to problems of detail, Nagel's book stands out for its redefinition of the relationship between form and content as well as for its original way of conceptualising formal analysis, connoisseurship, intellectual history and reception theory.

At the centre of the investigation is Michelangelo's lifelong engagement with the image of the dead Christ in the context of the religious debates of the sixteenth century. The first chapter, 'Transport and *Transitus*', focusses on the unfinished *Christ Carried to the Tomb* possibly painted for the Roman church of S Agostino in 1501 and now in the National Gallery. After a fine discussion of the connection between *historia* and *figura*, which according to Savonarola was what distinguished sacred history from secular history and poetry, Nagel argues convincingly that the many unusual features of the London panel derive from its ultimately abortive attempt to renew the conventions of the traditional altarpiece, the 'dominant' format – to use Jakobson's formulation – in the art of the late fifteenth century, through a notion of history painting inspired by antique visual models and systematised by Alberti in his *De pictura*. Michelangelo's crucial move was to adapt the formal structure of earlier iconographies like the *Lamentation* and the *Entombment*, which implied a lateral construction of the scene, to a frontal

presentation that would conform to altarpiece conventions of symmetry and frontality. This move was also intended to engage the viewer more directly on an emotional and even ethical level, but the unfinished state of the panel is a sign of the artist's broken ambitions, as the author explains in the third chapter.

Chapter Two deals above all with Fra Angelico's predella panel for the Medici altarpiece in S Marco, in which the image of the *Man of Sorrows* was transformed into a consistent entombment scene, and with Rogier van der Weyden's *Christ at the Tomb*, another Medici commission now in the Uffizi. Their compositions have been frequently compared with Michelangelo's work because in their attempt to dramatisate the static image of the *imago pietatis* in response to the requirements of modern narrative painting both panels were important forerunners of the *Christ Carried to the Tomb*.

In Chapters Three and Four, 'Humanism and the Altar Image' and 'The Altarpiece in the Age of History Painting', the author analyses Michelangelo and Raphael's responses to the problem of adapting a narrative theme like the *Carrying of Christ to the Tomb* to the altarpiece format in the context of humanism's analogous efforts to reconcile the revival of classic forms and ideals with a Christian culture of reform. If Angelico and Rogier van der Weyden expanded the traditional image of the *imago pietatis* by adding a landscape and other figures, Michelangelo inverted their procedure: he began to elaborate his ideas by adopting a narrative model based on a bacchic relief, such as the well-known one on a sarcophagus in the Vatican, but he also reintroduced the *Man of Sorrows* figure at the core of his composition. One of the most original claims made by Nagel in his book is that, in the period preceding the tensions triggered by the protestant schism, Michelangelo used consciously bacchic mysteries and antique visual models to restore the spirituality of Christian art in the service of a culture of genuine religious reform. Yet Michelangelo's plan to amend altar painting from within failed and his later representations of the Deposition, Lamentation and Pietà were undertaken in the private sphere. The challenge was however accepted by other artists of the sixteenth century and by Raphael in particular, who in his altarpiece for Atalanta Baglioni succeeded in producing a history painting that, according to Nagel, declared itself to be a departure from the altarpiece tradition. The transformation from altarpiece – with all the requisite devotional and liturgical functions – to collectable history painting was the result of a complex creative process, which institutionalised art historical procedures cannot explain. The work of art is not a static object, and Nagel's critical intelligence is at its best when he makes theory by redefining well-established art historical practices and by empirically suggesting new ways of looking at familiar paintings: 'to study this work [the Baglioni panel] simply according to the "normal" requirements of altarpieces in the period is to obscure its own claims to histori-

cal novelty and thus to fail fully to address the historical problems it raises. But to study it simply as a gallery picture is retrospectively to impose upon it a category whose very formation is part of the historical problem that demands to be studied.' (p. 137).

The second part of the book investigates the historical circumstances of Michelangelo's late works in an attempt to understand their supposed archaism. Many years after the failure of his *Christ Carried to the Tomb*, the artist returned to the theme of the dead Christ on several occasions even if he avoided any public statement on the matter. Michelangelo withdrew from the traditional institutions and repertoires of religious art. He developed instead the private form of the presentation drawing in order to redefine the traditional cult image in the context of the spiritual concerns of the Viterbo circle. It was a complex process which culminated in the artistic collaboration between Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna documented in his famous *Pietà* drawn around 1540 and in her passionate writings. Nagel's pages on the art of the gift contain some of the most inspired passages in this book.

In Chapter Seven 'Sculpture as Relic', the author analyses Michelangelo's late *Pietà* groups, hewn when the hopes of religious reform cherished by the circle around Vittoria Colonna had been dashed. He investigates with great elegance the paradox of these most private works executed in the most public of media, marble sculpture. Moreover, he resists the temptation of explaining in a superficial psychobiographical way the sense of conflict transmitted by these sculptures, preferring instead to analyse the tension between these works and their genre because this can be studied in historical terms. The book ends with a study of the *Rondanini Pietà*, the artist's last moving effort in his lifelong project to revive a Christian tradition of cult imagery based on the motif of frontal orientation. It was not only a formal fight, however. Another reason why Michelangelo invested his energies in this theme for over sixty years was that he was captivated by the religious as well as iconographical problems connected with the ambiguous state of Christ's body in the interval between his death and his resurrection.

A short résumé of this ambitious book cannot do full justice to the subtlety of the author's arguments, but in conclusion mention should be made of its unconventional approach to problems of style, connoisseurship and social history. It is refreshing to read that a 'question of attribution cannot be convincingly argued on stylistic grounds alone' without taking into account the historical conditions of cultural production (pp. 20-21), or that iconographical innovations are sometimes the result of formal rather than theological impulses (p. 67). *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* is essential reading for anyone interested in the European art of the sixteenth century or indeed in more general issues of method.