

The frescoes of Peter Cornelius in the Munich Ludwigskirche and contemporary criticism

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PETER Cornelius, born in 1783 in Düsseldorf, first made a name for himself with his illustrations to Goethe's *Faust* and the *Nibelungen*.¹ In 1811 he went to Rome, where he became a member of the Brotherhood of St Luke, the circle of artists around Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr. These artists were described scornfully by contemporaries as Nazarenes, because they aimed to renew Christian art.² They did not strive after this goal, as they have often been accused, out of sentimentalism or bigoted hypocrisy. Their artistic perceptions were determined by the knowledge that they were living in an epoch of deepest crisis. The French Revolution, the end of the Holy Roman Empire of German nations, and the foreign rule of Napoleon over German countries were the historical events that formed the horizons of their experience. The dominating conceptions of art, as taught at that time in the academies, were, in their opinion, unable to confront the crises of the time. As an international style, classicism could not make a contribution to that discovery of a national identity that was being sought during the period of foreign rule. The accusation that they made to the representatives of classicism was that art had lost its connection with the life of the people. The development of an autonomous art, free of all external conditions, that had emerged as an aesthetic precondition around 1800, was in their eyes a path hastening the decay of art. They hoped to find a way out of this crisis of art by turning back towards the past, by orientating themselves towards the art of the late middle ages and the time of Dürer. By these means, they believed, a national art would be able to develop in Germany. Of fundamental importance to them were those propositions that Friedrich Schlegel had advanced in his 'Gemäldebeschreibungen' ('Descriptions of Pictures') of 1805.³ If – as could be read there – the original and therefore essential purpose of art was to serve religion, then the only way in which art could be guided out of its crisis and returned to its

primal condition was by engaging it once again with religious and public life. It was Cornelius who came to recognize in Rome that this goal could be achieved with no other art form better than with fresco painting.⁴ If artists were given the opportunity once more to decorate churches, town halls, or other civic buildings, then they would be able to exert an influence on public life once more. In this way artists might hope to make a contribution with their art to overcoming the general crisis of the period.

At first Cornelius did not have the opportunity of realizing this ideal. The commissions that he received in Rome from the Prussian consul, Salomon Bartholdi,⁵ and the Marchese Massimo⁶ were important 'test cases'; but they involved the decoration of private secular interiors and did not bring into play the higher goal. In 1818 Ludwig – then still Crown Prince of Bavaria – summoned Cornelius to Munich and commissioned him to decorate three rooms of the Glyptothek that had been built by Klenze.⁷ We know, from the comments of friends, that Cornelius accepted the commission with alacrity, because it gave him the opportunity of working in Germany, even though he had to content himself in the first place with the myths of antique gods and heroes. The commission that the King outlined to him in the autumn of 1828 to decorate the Ludwigskirche in Munich, gave him the opportunity of realizing the Nazarene ideal in a comprehensive manner for the first time.⁸

Following the destruction of the Second World War, the fresco cycle in the Ludwigskirche remains the single surviving major work by Peter Cornelius (fig. 10.1), and at the same time the most important sacred monumental painting of the Romantics in Germany. It is a difficult work. This is reflected in the fact that there was talk for a time in the 1950s of removing it as part of a scheme for renovating and rearranging the interior; and also in the fact that in recent art historical literature it has only received one detailed critical evaluation – that of Herbert von Einem.⁹

The frescoes were already the cause of dispute at the time of their inception. When completed in 1840, they were celebrated by a few as pioneering achievements; but they were rejected by most because they did not accord with the predominant critical standards. This conflict between intention and critical reception provides a highly instructive example of the complexities implicit in creating Christian art in the nineteenth century.

The chronology of the project is, briefly, as follows: in late summer 1827 the municipal council of Munich decided to erect a parish church in the new suburb by the Schwabinger Tor.¹⁰ Ludwig I took over this project,



Figure 10.1
Munich Ludwigskirche, interior.

in the face of some fierce opposition from the city. He commissioned Friedrich Gärtner to draw up plans for it. At the same time Peter Cornelius received the commission for the fresco decoration of the church. An initial scheme was rejected as being too expensive, but the project that Cornelius laid before Ludwig in July 1829 was approved. The design of the whole and the drawing-out of the cartoons took place first. It was not until 1836 that the building was completed sufficiently for Cornelius to be able to begin the execution of the frescoes. He himself only painted the fresco on the apse wall. The execution of the other frescoes was entrusted to a large staff of assistants. By the late summer of 1840 the fresco cycle was essentially complete.

The fresco cycle conceived by Cornelius was restricted to the area of the choir, the intersection of the nave, and the transepts. On the main-walls of the transepts are the *Birth of Christ* and the *Crucifixion of Christ*, facing each other. In addition, as single figures on each side of the windows, are the *Annunciation* and *Noli me tangere*. The flat end wall of the choir was filled with the *Last Judgement*. In the vault over the choir God the Father is represented, surrounded by a group of angels. In the vaults of the transepts there are the four evangelists as well as the four fathers of the church. The vault of the intersection of the nave contains the patriarchs and prophets and the different groups of martyrs and saints of the Christian church.

Cornelius had originally hoped to be able to decorate the whole church, that is the walls of the nave and aisles as well. His first programme, which was unfortunately not accepted, encompassed the whole history of Divine Revelation from the Creation to Salvation through Christ and beyond to the Last Judgement.¹¹ Since the proposed costs for this project went far beyond the amount that the King was prepared to pay, Cornelius had to reduce the scheme to what has been indicated above. He did this without narrowing the thematic frame of reference. As in the original scheme, the Creation and the Last Judgement formed the polarities of the programme.

Surprisingly, there is confusion in recent literature about the basic ideas behind the programme. Von Einem, and others before him, claimed that the theme was 'the Revelation of the Trinity of God'.¹² This is not incorrect, but it does not account for the bond that connects the two poles. The actual theme is the similar illustration of the *Symbolum Apostolicum* of the Christian Confession of Faith. Every fresco – from the

God the Father, the almighty creator of Heaven and Earth in the vault of the choir, up to the Judgement fresco and those in the vault of the crossing dedicated to the 'Sancta ecclesia catholica' – symbolizes a sentence of the Credo.

Credo-cycles are common in monumental decoration; but they usually occur in the form of a sequence of apostles or, occasionally (as in the example by Cosmas Damian Asam, formerly in the court church of the Castle at Bruchsal), they are shown as a sequence of personifications.¹³ Sequences of pictures, in which the Credo is depicted scenically, are predominantly to be found in graphic work, as can be seen in the multifarious versions in Block books.¹⁴ The vault frescoes of the Siena Baptistery can be cited as one of the few examples of scenic illustration in monumental painting. It is an example that Cornelius may have known, although he took no formal stimulus from it. The conception of the Ludwigskirche cycle was not a re-inscribing of a living iconographical tradition, but a new beginning and a conscious reconsideration of one of the central texts of the Church. That Cornelius considered this tradition deliberately and thoughtfully can also be affirmed by considering the individual frescoes.

The first picture that Cornelius designed and carried out as a cartoon was the *Crucifixion of Christ* (fig. 10.2). When he exhibited the cartoon (which was drawn in Rome in 1831) in Munich, the public reacted with a reserve bordering on irritation. This was possibly because the well-known theme had become uncommon in recent art. Classical theory had banned the theme from art as 'repugnant' material.¹⁵ Even the Brotherhood of St Luke had not attempted it previously. The main basis for the irritation lay however in the conception of Cornelius's picture, which presented the well-known theme in a strict and unspectacular form. One saw the group gathered around the cross, recognized the protagonists, those people who were familiar from the late medieval Calvaries, and missed precisely what distinguished those pictures: a pleasure in narrative detail. An article that Cornelius's pupil, Ernst Förster, published at that time made it clear that narrative was lacking in the work of the master, and complained that it did not address one's feelings.¹⁶ The introduction of an angel and devil above the crosses of the two thieves was considered to be disruptive and quite inappropriate for a history painting. Work containing such features appeared to be a relapse into forms of art that had been superseded long ago. This is exactly what Cornelius wanted. Twenty years later he wrote in

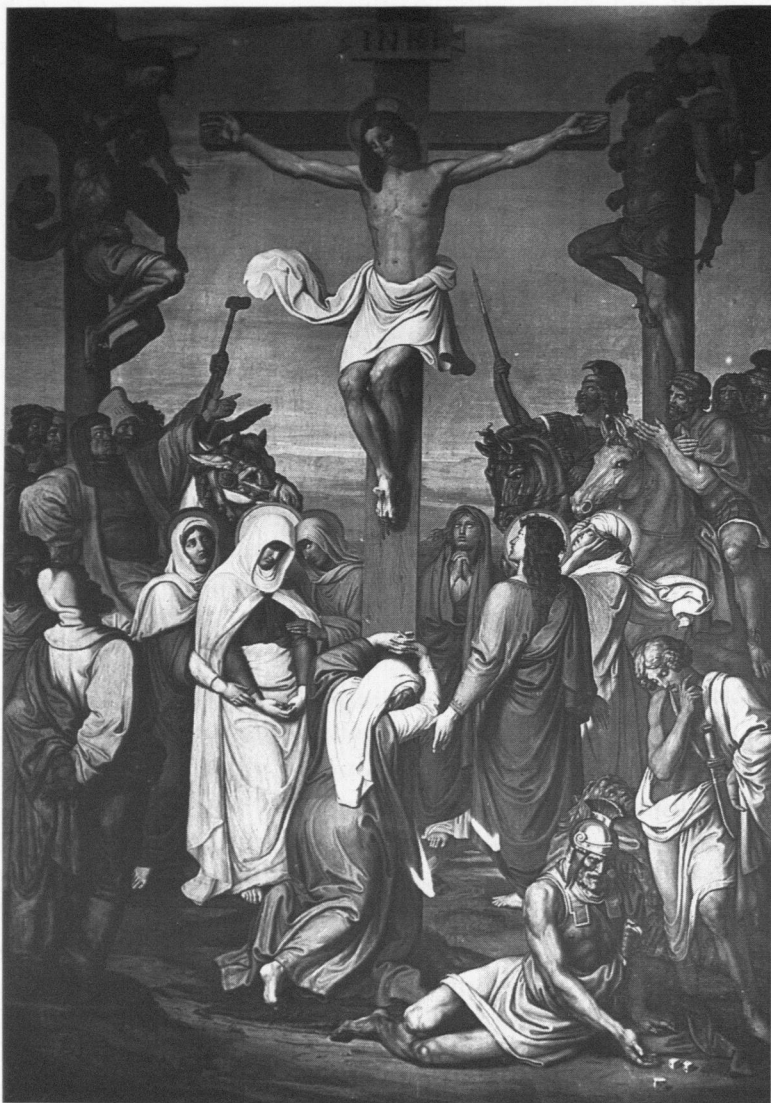


Figure 10.2 Peter Cornelius, *Crucifixion of Christ*, 1836–40, fresco, Munich Ludwigskirche.

a different connection, 'One must not be too liberal with angels and devils; you cannot eat pepper by the spoonful; ... only in exceptional circumstances should such means be used, for example with the Crucifixion, where Christ appears already as the future judge of the world.'¹⁷ Angel and devil were introduced as symbols, so that the spectator would make a connection with the eschatological meaning of the Crucifixion.

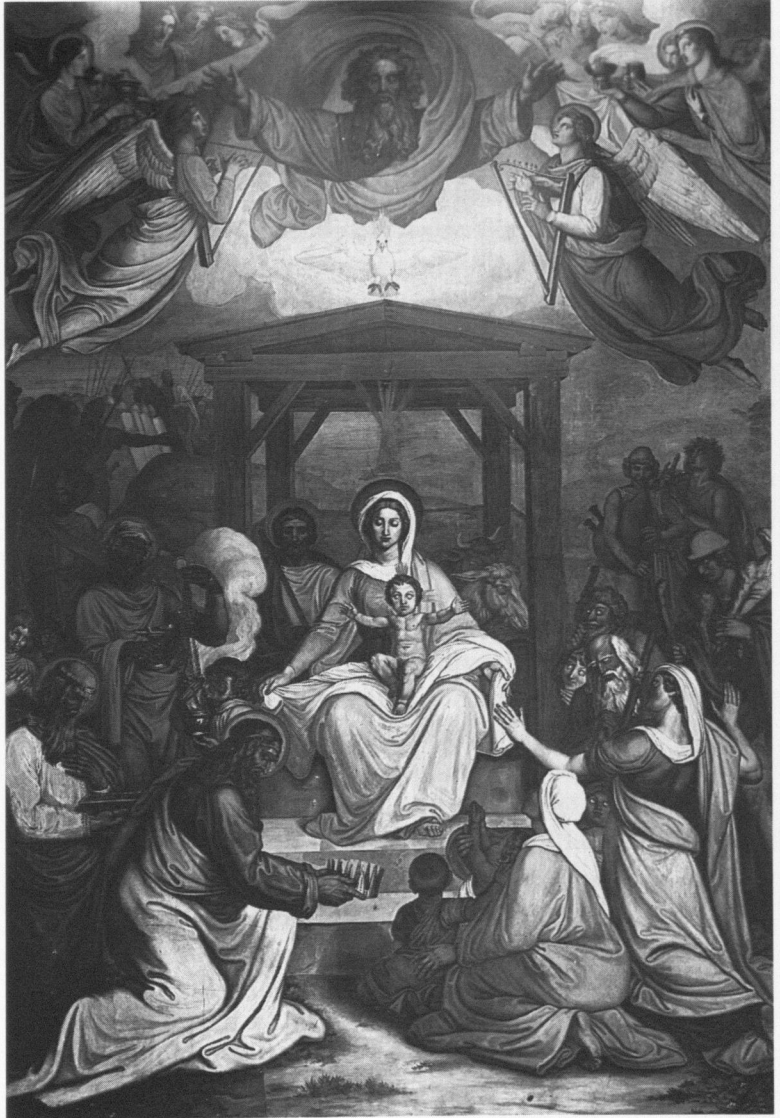


Figure 10.3
Peter Cornelius, *Birth of Christ*, 1836–40, fresco,
Munich Ludwigskirche.

The more or less openly expressed criticism of the *Crucifixion* was not without its effect on Cornelius. In the next cartoon, the *Birth of Christ* (fig. 10.3) – which was drawn in 1832–3 and which was intended for the main fresco of the left transept – he has certainly not revised his concept, but he did work it out in more detail. The structure of this picture is no less firm than that of the *Crucifixion*. Mary sits, frontally, exactly on the middle axis

of the picture in front of the stable, that rises above her like a *baldacchino*. With outstretched arms she holds a white cloth as an undercover for the Child, who sits on her lap and is turned to face the spectator, stretching out his arms in a blessing. The Mother of God and Child are the focus for both groups of figures, the Kings as well as the Shepherds, who press forward from the left and the right from the depths. While these groups are arranged in closely fitting symmetry, there dominates in the upper third of the picture a hieratically strict order around the central vertical, in which God the Father and Holy Spirit appear surrounded by angels. Through this pictorially determined vertical axis (which is already contained in the first surviving sketch), the idea of the Trinity is brought forward for the spectator into the foreground.

In several respects the design did not match the accomplishment of the idea. Cornelius had brought together in his representation the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Kings – two occurrences that took place at different times according to the Church calendar. From an art-historical point of view, this is not without precedent. Nevertheless this combination must have given offence to a public for whom the 'Unity of Time' was a binding law of history painting. The strictly frontal representation of Mother and Child must also have seemed strange to an age that still saw the Madonnas of Raphael as symbols of maternal love. Mary was emphasized by Cornelius as 'Theotokos', the bearer of God. The parallelism evident in the *topos* of the outstretched arms of the Christ Child and of God the Father – one of the *Leitmotifs* of the cycle – connects the two, proclaiming their complete identity.

The association of the Birth and the Adoration with the Trinity is also unusual, although not without precedent. It occurs in traditional iconography, particularly in those works dependent upon the vision of St Brigid of Sweden.¹⁸ Cornelius, however, did not draw on this. His representation was derived primarily from the iconography of the Baptism of Christ, which, like the Adoration of the Kings, can be interpreted as a revelation of the divinity of Christ. With the inclusion of the idea of the Trinity here, the thoughts of the spectator become linked to the dogma of the Incarnation.

Even more clearly than in the *Crucifixion*, Cornelius has de-historicized the biblical event in this representation. It was not the particular historical event, but its theological meaning that was important. In order to make the meaning unambiguous, Cornelius took care to eliminate traditional narrative and genre elements, without completely abandoning the framework of history painting.

Cornelius had received the impetus for this unusual way of representing the Birth from contemporary theology. Protestant theology of the Enlightenment had declared belief in the divinity of Christ to be outdated.¹⁹ For Kant, Christ was no more than 'The Ideal of God-pleasing Humanity'.²⁰ Even Catholic theology had become affected by these developments – although not to the same degree.²¹ Cornelius answered such doubts with his representation. In this respect he showed a remarkable closeness to the philosophy of religion of Schelling.²² Schelling – who concentrated completely on incarnation and the crucifixion in his Christology – emphasized above all the Word becoming Man, something that could not happen without the co-operation of the Holy Spirit. In this process the Word did not become deprived of its Godhead, but only of the form of God.²³ It is precisely this, it appears to me, that Cornelius wished to make clear in his work.

The most challenging task that Cornelius gave himself in the Ludwigskirche was the representation of the *Last Judgement* (fig. 10.4). It was, however, also the theme with which he had been concerned for longest. He designed it during a stay in Rome in the summer of 1833, and the fresco was carried out between 1836 and 1840.

The basic elements of the design are already visible from the entrance of the church. First there is an emphasis on the vertical in the centre of the picture. Then there is the division of the picture into three horizontal zones. The spectator is given an obvious point of reference in the forms of Christ, the apocalyptic angel beneath him, and St Michael on the ground. The ascension of the blessed on the left and the fall of the damned on the right provide the side columns of the composition. The upper zone rises above the movement and unrest that dominates in the lower and middle zones, by means of its almost static repose. Christ is enthroned between Mary and the Baptist, the apostles and the prophets. He expresses the judgement – which means condemnation or salvation – only by means of the way he is holding his hand. In the first design for the fresco – which is preserved in a drawing in Basel²⁴ – the Hand of Christ is held defensively against the side of the damned. In the final preparatory drawing in the Stadtmuseum at Munich²⁵ the solution that can be seen in the fresco has been arrived at. By these means the motif of the outstretched arm finally became the all-pervading *Leitmotif* of the divine throughout all the pictures in the cycle.

Previous art-historical knowledge obviously played a particular role in the conception of this representation of the Last Judgement. Here, too,



Figure 10.4
 Peter Cornelius, *Last Judgement*, 1836–40,
 fresco, Munich
 Ludwigskirche, interior.

Cornelius is not simply carrying on a living iconographical tradition, but has created a design that is in dialogue with works that he saw as artistic prototypes. The range of these works is relatively narrow, and is limited for the most part to ones of Italian origin. Those that were of particular importance to him were the Judgement fresco in the Campo Santo in Pisa, Giotto's fresco in the Arena Chapel, Signorelli's cycle in Orvieto, and, above all, Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel. He ignored

the innumerable Judgement depictions in the art of the late Renaissance and the Baroque. It is not possible to go into all the art historical connections here. Two works will be used to exemplify the process.²⁶

Cornelius had studied closely the frescoes of the Campo Santo in Pisa during his first stay in Italy. He took over certain motifs from the representation of the Last Judgement there, without copying them precisely. Above all, the emphasis on the vertical axis and the relationship of Michael and the apocalyptic angel surrounded by trumpeting angels are prefigured there. The narrative treatment of the bodies in the scene in which the good become separated from the wicked may have remained in his memory from there. On the other hand the comparison shows how Cornelius handled the resurrection of the bodies in a restrained manner and how he avoided the depiction of the punishments of hell.

Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel undoubtedly played a key role for Cornelius. He took the basic idea of the arrangement of the composition from Michelangelo, including the division of the work into three zones. Similarly, the motif of the ascending and descending souls relates back to Michelangelo. Despite this, the difference between the conceptions of the two works is great. It has been asserted frequently, with justice, that Michelangelo has visualized the 'Dies Irae'.²⁷ A huge movement emanates from the figure of Christ, a dynamic that is at the same time centripetal and centrifugal. The most violent movement is to be found in the middle zone. The group of trumpeting angels appear as a multitudinous echo of the form of Christ. The ascension of the souls on the left side of the picture is no gentle movement, but rather an energetic conquest of gravity. The fall of the damned on the opposite side is a raging battle. In the lower zone, on the left side, the resurrection is shown as an awakening in which the leaden weight of the sleep of death can still be felt. The right half of the picture includes the representation of hell. In this, the old motif of the damned being driven through the Jaws of Hell is replaced by Charon, who drives the souls towards Minos, the judge of their doom.

In the fresco in the Ludwigskirche there is also a large variety of motifs suggesting movement. Despite this the spectator does not get the sense of a dynamic event taking place in the present. Unlike Michelangelo, Cornelius represents the zone of heaven as one of rest. There is no perceptible force emanating from Christ that could be understood as the cause of all the movement. The subsidiary figures are arranged in strict order around him. The motif of Deesis, that Michelangelo abandoned in favour of the unprecedented representation of Mary sitting near Christ,

has been revived by Cornelius. He appears to have taken it from Raphael's 'Disputa', as well as that of including the apostles as assistant judges.

The tendency towards schematization can be seen clearly in the group of angels beneath Christ. The angel of the Apocalypse displays the Book of Life virtually without movement. Only the expression on its face, surrounded by flying hair, makes us aware of a huge inner turbulence. The greatest amount of movement is found, naturally, in the falling group of the damned. It is here that are found the most connections between the fresco of the Ludwigskirche and that in the Sistine Chapel. By contrast, Cornelius has represented the movement of the ascending souls in a far more schematic manner than Michelangelo.

Cornelius has sought to find his own conception, in which he could be released from Michelangelo. He did this partly by reverting to older iconographical traditions for specific motifs. The principal difference, however, lies in the overall interpretation. This becomes particularly clear when one considers the relationship of figure to surface and pictorial space in each work. In the literature on the subject, attention has been drawn to the 'ungraspable spatial structure' in Michelangelo's work.²⁸ The individual groups in the middle zone appear to press forward from an unmeasurable depth. Their position is not clear to the spectator. The unreality of the pictorial space might seem to militate against this being a contemporary occurrence. Yet the actions of the figures here are emphasized with the greatest decisiveness. The non-illusionistic world of the figures appears to press in from above into the real space. Our world and the world beyond coincide in Michelangelo's fresco with unprecedented force.

Cornelius did not construct his pictorial space as the site of an actual imaginable event. The depth of the individual groups is limited to a minimum. The sense of space is determined through the perimeters of the actions of the figures. This – together with the strict order imposed on the whole – leads to an emphasis on flatness. The effect is strengthened by an additional formal characteristic. This is the way in which the size of the figures is increased towards the top of the fresco.

Michelangelo also increased the size of certain figures. He did it suddenly, however, so that one gets the impression of Christ and the groups surrounding him rushing forward, as though breaking through into our space from the one beyond. With Cornelius, however, this is not the effect suggested. The enlargement is gradual, so that a sense of unity is emphasized. The prototype here is not Michelangelo but the Byzantine

Mosaicists. Cornelius would have known their work through Venetian examples. The purpose of such an effect was, according to Otto Demus, to show the reality of the picture as being independent of the spectator.²⁹

The strict formal arrangement, the flatness of the figurative groups, and the inverted perspective militate decisively against any idea that individuals, particularly amongst the damned, might perhaps awaken, that here a contemporary event could be taking place. In his detailed analysis of the cartoon of the *Last Judgement*, Ernst Förster wrote that, 'the basis of the representation of Cornelius was not, as it was for Michelangelo, the *experience*, but the *thought*; while everything is about the moment in the former, in the latter the question of the moment is inappropriate. What is represented does not advance outwards, but goes uninterruptedly into the soul of man.'³⁰

Cornelius has structured his picture in such a manner that it presents the Last Judgement in its entirety rather than offering the spectator the fiction of being present at a specific moment within the process. The main weight of the meaning of the work, as was constantly emphasized in Cornelius's circle, rested on its theological content.

In a criticism of the Cornelius frescoes, Franz Kugler wrote that the representation of the Judgement was 'merely a fantasy that the nineteenth century will have difficulty in considering as objective'.³¹ The religious criticism of the Enlightenment was hardly as successful anywhere as it was in its dismantlement of traditional Christian eschatology.³² For Kant, this eschatology was only a moral postulate. The future for him lay only in the conception of the endless progress of history. In his poem 'Resignation' (1796), Schiller sought to follow Kant in asserting that virtue must not be exercised for gain – something that would have to be waited for until eternity – but should be practised unconditionally. Fulfilment must be sought in the world and in its history. He expressed this secular eschatology in a sentence that became a proverbial saying 'Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht' ('The history of the world is the Last Judgement').³³

Romantic Catholic theology faced the task of re-establishing an eschatology that would both accord with tradition and be acceptable to the present.³⁴ The theology of the Tübingen school played a leading role in this. Franz Anton Staudenmaier, a pupil of Adam Moehler, was particularly concerned with the problem of eschatology.³⁵ His deliberations began to be published at the time that Cornelius was working on the design for the

Last Judgement. They cannot be taken as a source for this, but they do provide an instructive parallel. The basic idea of this eschatology could have been communicated to Cornelius through Ignaz von Doellinger, who taught at the University of Munich and was a friend of Cornelius, and who was particularly closely involved in the Tübingen theology. Staudenmaier, who was deeply influenced by the philosophies of history of Schelling and Hegel, brought world history, the history of the Passion and Salvation of Christ, and the history of revealed religion together into one. History was for him the self-revelation of God. The Creation is the first step in this revelation, and the goal is its completion, to which God leads Man via the Passion and Salvation of Christ. Staudenmaier made a distinction in the traditional manner between individual and general judgement, but tended also to identify them. Both received thereby a new weight, in that they lose their unique meaning as a precise occurrence at the end of the life of the individual, since the process of redemption that guides the 'Divine principle in History' is a continually progressive one.³⁶ The idea of an immanent Judgement completing itself in history becomes reconciled by Staudenmaier with Christian eschatology in a detailed and fundamental synthesis. In theology this concept has been termed 'present Eschatology' (*Präsentische Eschatologie*).³⁷

Various utterances from Cornelius's immediate circle of acquaintances bear witness to the fact that this view of history lay behind the artist's conception. The evidence of Förster has already been cited above. Another reviewer wrote of the picture of the 'Apocalyptic Angels': it 'is, as I recall having heard, described by the master himself as an *Allegory of Conscience*. It represents the inner side, indeed the innermost being, the ethical character of the judgement.'³⁸ The concept of 'present Eschatology' is being played upon here without being made specific.

It is by means of this specific, and (in the 1830s) highly contemporary, interpretation of eschatology that the particular conception of the Judgement picture of Cornelius becomes distinguished from that of Michelangelo, despite all the formal relationships between them. Cornelius does not present the spectator with the actually unimaginable occurrence at the moment of judgement, but indicates instead the basic idea of eschatology. The subject of representation becomes thereby raised above the relationship with time. It is no longer a distinct moment, indicating the end of the world, for that which is represented stands above time. The present is however also included in it, in its transcendent aspect.

It is not only in the conception of the Judgement that a relationship can be found with the topical Catholic theology of the day. It will not be possible to go into other connections in detail here. However, two important points should be noted. In his first conception, Cornelius wanted to depict the whole history of the Revelation in the Ludwigskirche. He was grasping thereby a theme that had particular weight in theological discussions. After the criticism of religion during the Enlightenment, which had discarded every notion of divine revelation, theology was called upon to restore this supporting column of the Church's doctrinal structure. The problem of revelation played a key role for the Tübingen theology.³⁹ It is of particular importance for Cornelius that Ignaz von Doellinger gave a series of lectures around 1830 in Munich on 'historical dogmatism', that encompassed the whole realm of the original revelation up to the 'completed revelation' of the Last Judgement – the theme that was to be painted in the Ludwigskirche.⁴⁰ It should also be borne in mind that Schelling held his lecture on the 'Philosophy of Revelation' in Munich at exactly the same time as Cornelius was conceiving his programme.⁴¹

Cornelius's decision to make the Credo the basis of the whole programme was no less topical. In the theology of the Enlightenment its meaning was brought radically into question both through rationalist doubt about the central article of faith and through historical investigations into the history of the origins of the *Symbolum*. In the Catholic renewal movement that was directed against the theology of the Enlightenment there emerged a sustained revalorization of the apostolic symbols. The turn-around of the conception can be established very well in the *Handbuch der christlichen Kirchengeschichte* (Handbook of Christian Church History) of Johann Nepomuk Hortig. In the first volume, which appeared in 1827, the meaning of the *Symbolum* is still given in relative terms, the legend of its origin is rejected, and an origin in the fourth century is accepted.⁴² When Döllinger reworked the Handbook six years later, he replaced the relativistic passages with sentences, in which the *Symbolum* became characterized as a 'general, unfailing rule of belief' by means of which everyone could 'grasp that which is to be believed without fear of error'.⁴³

Recent theological research has brought to light the fact that, in Tübingen theology and in the early writings of Döllinger, there is no intention of investigating the central question of faith in relationship to the whole of the tradition. Instead, there is a deliberate focus on origins,

because it is there that one could expect to find the tradition at its purest. The term 'theological Classicism' was coined for this attitude.⁴⁴ This is perhaps a little misleading, since the approach seems typically Romantic. In any case, it brought about a revalorization of the *Symbolum*, and Cornelius matched this with the conception of his programme.

A further aspect is important in this connection. Cornelius is recorded as having said 'The Ludwigskirche is the Church of the future! It will receive nothing from my hand, that every Protestant, so long as he is still a Christian, could not acknowledge with conviction.' In fact his approach was Ecumenical. For the Credo that formed the basis of the programme was in the end fundamentally the same as the ones for both the Catholic and the Protestant church. In his intention of creating a pictorial cycle, in whose contemplation members of both Christian confessions could unite themselves, Cornelius did not stand alone at the time the frescoes were conceived. The idea of the Ecumen (*Ökumene*) played a large role for the Regensburg Bishop Sailer, for example, and also for his pupil Ludwig I, who was closely involved with the idea at the beginning of his reign.⁴⁵

As a result of the analysis of the theological content of the frescoes of the Ludwigskirche, it can be confirmed that this work is deeply rooted in the intellectual and spiritual climate of Munich around 1830, the time when Cornelius conceived the programme. However, when the painter presented his completed works to the public in 1840, this climate had changed decisively and the criticism that he received for his work was for the most part negative. It seems astonishing at first that the numerous arguments levelled against his work were not actually artistic ones. When Cornelius made the claim that this work made visible religious truth in a form that was valid for the present and the future, he was delivering it not only into the hands of the art critics, but also into those of the theological critics. Here the new polarization of denominations, which became evident with the so-called 'Cologne Confusion', made itself felt in a negative manner. The ecumenical tendency of the programme was no longer topical. In the Catholic theology of the 1840s there was a clear withdrawal from idealist Romantic theology towards a neo-scholasticism. The intellectual content of Cornelius's work could not be supported by this development. It was not defended on the Catholic side and indeed was soon ignored altogether.

In political journalism the voices of Protestant critics were dominant.

Franz Kugler has already been mentioned above. Friedrich Theodor Vischer stated that Cornelius had squandered his talent here: 'A work of art cannot give me true pleasure if it forces upon me the crass dogmatism of dark and departed centuries, so that I have to master my indignation at the raw material, before I can allow myself to admire certain abstract and formal qualities'; 'Michelangelo painted a subject which the whole world believed at that time, which every contemporary felt in his veins; and Cornelius paints the same thing for the critical nineteenth century.'⁴⁶ The Protestant, Hegelian Vischer could concede no right of existence to a work of art created on the basis of Catholic theology.

The criticism of the content was only successful in so far as the fresco in many respects did not correspond to the dominant presumptions of the time. The principle of forming what Cornelius himself described as a 'historical-symbolic' representation was emphatically *not* realistic and *not* sensuously aesthetic. The colour, for example, was kept restrained because it was a directly sensuous element, so that a pure aesthetic or emotional perception would be prevented. The manner of presentation and the symbols integrated into the representation were to be understood as readable indications to be seen not with sensuous but with spiritual eyes. Therefore Cornelius disappointed the artistic expectations dominant at that time in the Catholic Church, for which the utterances of Cardinal von Wessenburg can be taken as representative. Above all, Wessenburg demanded of a Christian image that it should bring truth and beauty before the eyes in a manner corresponding to feeling.⁴⁷ Cornelius, however, was of the opinion that an art that satisfied itself with an appeal to the emotions could never achieve religious truth.⁴⁸

He also disappointed those for whom beauty was the key concept of artistic understanding. This was all the more serious because his patron, Ludwig I, was also of the opinion that sensuous effect was the decisive criterion of aesthetic perception. 'A painter must paint. Otherwise I cannot use him.' With these words he let Cornelius go, because he found the frescoes in the Ludwigskirche disturbing in their colour effects.⁴⁹ For Cornelius, however, colour was subordinate to form, and even the latter was not an aim in itself, but the means of expression.

A more important factor in the condemnation of the frescoes was an 'art historical miseducation' amongst the public.⁵⁰ Educated connoisseurs, including the Bavarian King, could not discard their art historical knowledge when perceiving Cornelius's fresco. The work of Cornelius

was seen from the beginning in terms of a *paragone* with Michelangelo. They had expected an outbidding of the Italian on his own terms and could not accept that Cornelius had responded with a concept that was quite different in its principles. Part of the problem here was that Cornelius could not make the distinction clearly enough himself, because the ideal of the style to which he maintained allegiance was in fact derived from a contemplation of Renaissance art. This ideal prevented him from moving in the direction of abstraction, as the Beuron School did, decades later.

There was also something else that was decisive for the lack of success of the frescoes. The conception of Cornelius was not reconcilable with the tendencies of topical history painting. A new move towards historicism had come in the late 1820s, and brought with it a demand for perfect historical accuracy in history painting. In the year following the completion of the Ludwigskirche the so-called 'Belgian pictures' were shown in veritable triumph in several German cities.⁵¹ These pictures made the claim of showing history as it would have appeared to actual eye-witnesses. The spectator was invited to share the experience of history before the picture. The dominance of this form of reception, which took pictures to be exact reproductions of reality, can be gauged from further developments. The photograph and the panorama were the media that were appropriate for this kind of reception. Cornelius saw this tendency of history painting towards intentional exact reproduction of reality very clearly and worked consciously against it in his frescoes with a manner of working in the pictorial structure and motifs that has already been explained, because he was convinced that the religious truth that he wanted to represent went beyond historical reality. What Cornelius conceived of as cues for interpretation were simply taken by his contemporaries to be artistic faults.

The problem that is brought to light here in no way concerned only the works of Cornelius, but was a general problem for religious art at that time. For a large part of the public, artistic perception and religious understanding had become impossible to reconcile with each other. A religious understanding grounded in metaphysics that treated the words of the Bible above all as metaphors, and that basically denied the character of potential reality to visionary conceptions such as the Last Judgement, could not be reconciled with the outlook of an audience that expected the simulation of realities.

Hegel had analysed the relationship between art and religion from the

point of view of his system, and in his much-cited thesis on the 'End of Art' had arrived at the conclusion that:

Art in its beginnings left remaining something still mysterious, a mysterious presentiment, a longing, because its forms have not completely laid out for pictorial perception their full content. Once the perfect content has entered into the art form, so the further seeking spirit turns from this objectivity back into its inner resources and pushes forwards. Such a time is ours. One can hope that art will continue to rise and perfect itself, but its forms have ceased to be the highest needs of the spirit. Although we may still find images of Greek Gods excellent and see God the Father, Christ and Mary still represented so worthily and perfectly, it is no good: our knee will no longer bow before them.⁵²

From the perspective of those who accepted this thesis, the attempt at a renewal of Christian art of the kind undertaken by Cornelius was hopelessly anachronistic. Between the artist on the one side, whose goal was revelation through art – the visualization of acts of faith valid within his church – and his critics on the other side who doubted fundamentally the possibility of such a visualization or of revelation in general, or both, there was no path of enlightenment.

The deep divisions that are revealed by the history of the reception of Cornelius's frescoes (and which, when we consider the different intentions of the patron and the artist, could be seen already in their original specifications), make it clear that we would be making a premature judgement if we conceived of a work of art such as this as an expression of the *Zeitgeist*. In attempting to characterize this work here in terms of its context in intellectual history, I am working with the assumption that a work of art is an answer (perhaps only one of many possible answers) to a question that occurs at a particular time in a particular place. The question that Cornelius posed for himself in Munich was: how is it possible for monumental sacerdotal decoration to be in a particular sense Christian art – that is, an art that would both be correct in terms of the concept of art that had been achieved through historical and theoretic reflection and (following on from the necessary requirement of truth that came with this conception) answer to the level of theological knowledge existing at present?

The argument about whether the answer Cornelius had given with his cycle was right or wrong was as violent as it was because all who became

involved in it proceeded from the assumption postulated in the art theory of classicism and idealism that there was only 'one true art'.⁵³ Every side claimed the concept of 'true' art for itself, unaware, apparently, that the decline of this concept had already begun and that they were doing no more than contributing to a collapse that was, in terms of intellectual history, unavoidable.

NOTES

1. For Peter Cornelius, see F. Büttner, *Peter Cornelius. Fresken und Freskenprojekte* (Wiesbaden, 1980) vol. 1 (with citations of earlier literature).
2. For the artistic outlook of the Nazarenes, see K. Andrews, *The Nazarenes. A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford, 1964); J. C. Jensen, 'I Nazareni, das Wort, der Stil', in *Klassizismus und Romantik in Deutschland, Gemälde und Zeichnungen aus der Sammlung Georg Schäfer, Katalog der Ausstellung im Germanischen Nationalmuseum Nürnberg 1966* (Schweinfurt, 1966); Büttner, *Peter Cornelius*, pp. 117ff.
3. F. Schlegel, 'Gemäldebeschreibung aus Paris und den Niederlanden in den Jahren 1802–1804', in Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. IV, *Ansichten und Ideen von der christlichen Kunst* (Munich, 1959), pp. 79ff.
4. Letter to Görres, 4 November 1814, published by E. Förster, *Peter Cornelius* (Berlin, 1874), vol. I, pp. 152ff.
5. Büttner, *Peter Cornelius*, pp. 76ff.; R. McVaugh, 'A Revised Reconstruction of the Casa Bartholdy Fresco Cycle', *Art Bulletin*, 66 (1984), pp. 442ff.
6. K. Gerstenberg and P. O. Rave, *Die Wandgemälde der deutschen Romantiker im Casino Massimo zu Rom (Jahrbuch des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft 1934)* (Berlin, 1934); S. Susinno, 'Die Fresken des Casino Massimo in Rom', in *Die Nazarener in Rom. Ein deutscher Künstlerband der Romantik. Überarbeitete deutsche Ausgabe des Katalogs der Ausstellung Rom 1981* (Munich, 1981), pp. 88ff.
7. Büttner, *Peter Cornelius*, pp. 125ff.; K. Vierneisel and G. Leinz (eds.), *Glyptothek München 1830–1980, Katalog der Ausstellung München* (Munich, 1980), pp. 14ff. and 576ff.
8. E. Schleich in O. Hederer, *Die Ludwigskirche in München*, Grosse Kunstführer 9 (Munich, 1977), p. 1.
9. H. von Einem, 'Peter Cornelius', *Wallraf-Richartz Jahrbuch*, 16 (1954), pp. 134ff.; F. Büttner, 'Bau und Ausmalung der Ludwigskirche', in P. Pfister (ed.), *150 Jahre München – St Ludwig* (Weissenhorn, 1994) pp. 121ff.
10. For the history of the building of the Ludwigskirche, see F. Büttner, 'Die Planungsgeschichte der Ludwigskirche in München', *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, 35 (1984), pp. 189ff.; W. Nerdinger (ed.), *Friedrich von Gärtner. Ein Architektenleben 1791–1847* (Munich, 1992), pp. 26ff. For the history of the origin of the frescoes, see Förster, *Peter Cornelius*, vol. II, pp. 3ff.
11. The letter in which Cornelius outlined the programme was destroyed in the

- Second World War. It was referred to by M. Spindler, *Briefwechsel zwischen Ludwig I. von Bayern und Eduard von Schenk 1823–1841* (Munich, 1930), p. 400.
12. Von Einem, 'Peter Cornelius', p. 136.
13. E. Wernicke 'Die bildlichen Darstellungen des Glaubensbekenntnisses in der deutschen Kunst des Mittelalters', *Christliches Kunstblatt* (1887), pp. 102ff.; K. Künstle, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst* (Freiburg, 1928), vol. 1, p. 181. For Asam, see B. Bushart and B. Rupprecht (eds.), *Cosmas Damian Asam. Leben und Werk* (Munich, 1986), pp. 84ff.
14. P. Kristeller, *Decalogus, Septimania poenalis. Symbolum Apostolicum. Drei Blockbücher der Heidelberger Universitätsbibliothek*, Graphische Gesellschaft, 4th edn (Berlin, 1907); P. Kristeller, *Symbolum Apostolicum. Blockbuch-Unicum der K. Hof- und Staatsbibliothek zu München*, Graphische Gesellschaft, 23rd pub. (Berlin, 1917).
15. See J. H. Meyer, 'Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst', in W. v. Löhneysen (reprint edn.) *Propyläen, eine periodische Schrift hrsg. von J. W. v. Goethe* (Darmstadt vol. 1, 1, 1798, 1965), pp. 69ff.
16. E. Förster, 'Zeichnungen von Cornelius und Overbeck, öffentlich ausgestellt in der Akademie der bildenden Künste in München', *Kunstblatt*, 1831: 97 (13 December 1831), pp. 381ff.
17. Letter from P. Cornelius to J. Schlotthauer, Berlin, 7 April 1852 (Düsseldorf, Heine-Institut, no. 2186).
18. G. Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst* (Gütersloh, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 88ff.
19. K. Barth, *Die Protestantische Theologie in 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich, 1947), p. 143.
20. I. Kant, *Die Religion in den Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, p. 75; see Barth, *Die Protestantische Theologie*, pp. 56ff.
21. See B. Willems, 'Soteriologie. Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart', in M. Schmaus, A. Grillmeier, L. Scheffczyk, and M. Seybold (eds.), *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. III, fascicule 2c (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna, 1972), pp. 48ff.
22. H. Riegel, *Peter Cornelius, Festschrift zu des großen Künstlers hundertstem Geburtstage* (Berlin, 1883), pp. 82ff.
23. F. W. J. von Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. II/2, *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, (Stuttgart and Augsburg, 1858), pp. 153ff.
24. M. Krafft (ed.), *Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett. Zeichnungen deutschen Künstler des 19. Jahrhunderts aus dem Basler Kupferstichkabinett, Katalog zur Ausstellung, 1983/3* (Basel, 1982), pp. 6ff.
25. J. Maillinger, *Bilder-Chronik der Königlichen Haupt- und Residenzstadt München. Verzeichnis einer Sammlung von Erzeugnissen der graphischen Künste zur Orts-, Cultur- und Kunstgeschichte der bayerischen Capitale vom 15. bis in das 19. Jahrhundert* (Augsburg, 1886) vol. IV, no. 1231.
26. See Von Einem, *Peter Cornelius*, pp. 143ff.

27. See J. Sauer in F. X. Kraus, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, vol. II, 2, *Italienische Renaissance* (Freiburg, 1908), p. 542.
28. R. Feldhusen, *Ikonologische Studien zu Michelangelos Jüngsten Gericht* (Unterlengenhardt and Bad Liebenzell, 1978), p. 52.
29. O. Demus, *Byzantine Mosaic Decoration* (New York, 1976), p. 33.
30. [E. Förster] 'Das jüngste Gericht von Cornelius', *Kunstblatt*, 1835: 98 (8 December 1835), p. 405.
31. K. Kugler, *Kleine Schriften und Studien zur Kunstgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 1854), vol. III, pp. 543ff.
32. See P. Cornehl, *Die Zukunft der Versöhnung. Eschatologie und Emanzipation in der Aufklärung, bei Hegel und in der Hegelschen Schule* (Göttingen, 1971).
33. See K. Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (Munich, 1988), p. 137.
34. See P. Müller-Goldkuhle, *Die Eschatologie in der Dogmatik des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Beiträge zur neueren Geschichte der katholischen Theologie 10 (Essen, 1966), and I. Escribano-Alberca, 'Eschatologie. Von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart', in M. Schmaus, A. Grillmeier, L. Scheffczyk, and M. Seybold (eds.), *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. IV, fascicule 7d (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna 1987).
35. For Staudenmaier's eschatology, see Müller-Goldkuhle, *Die Eschatologie in der Dogmatik*, pp. 126ff. The most important early writings of Staudenmaier in this context are: *Enzyklopädie der theologischen Wissenschaften als System der gesamten Theologie* (Mainz, 1834); 'Das göttliche Prinzip in der Geschichte und seine Bedeutung für Philosophie und Theologie', *Jahrbücher für Theologie und christliche Philosophie*, 4th year (1835); *Der Geist der göttlichen Offenbarung oder Wissenschaft der Geschichtsprinzipien des Christenthums* (Giessen, 1837).
36. Staudenmaier, *Der Geist der göttlichen Offenbarung*, p. 161.
37. *Präsentische Eschatologie* is the eschatology seen above all in the nineteenth century in the circles of German idealism. See Cornehl, *Die Zukunft der Versöhnung*, pp. 83ff.
38. 'Mittheilungen über die neuesten Kunstunternehmungen in München', *Kunstblatt*, 1835: 78 (29 September 1835), pp. 322ff.
39. J. R. Geiselman, *Die Katholische Tübinger Schule. Ihre theologische Eigenart* (Freiburg, 1964), pp. 80ff.; L. Scheffczyk, 'Die Offenbarung. Von der Reformation bis zur Gegenwart', in *Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, M. Schmaus, A. Grillmeier, L. Scheffczyk, and M. Seybold (eds.), vol. I., fascicule 1b (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna 1977), pp. 79ff. ('Die theologische Erneuerung im 18. Jahrhundert').
40. See J. Finstelhölzel, *Ignaz von Döllinger (Wegbereiter heutiger Theologie)* (Graz, Vienna, and Cologne, 1969), p. 52.
41. See the letter from J. Schnorr von Carolsfeld to C. C. J. von Bunsen, Munich, 16 November 1828: 'Schelling liest Philosophie der Offenbarung und alle Welt läuft um zu hören. Ringseis und Schubert sind bis jetzt ganz mit Schelling zufrieden und versprechen sich die schönsten Früchte von seinem Wirken' (Berlin, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, rep. 92, Bunsen,

- Signatur B 123, fol. 29). Sulpiz Boiserée was also amongst those attending Schelling's lecture. Since all those named were close friends of Cornelius one can presume that he was well informed about Schelling's lecture.
42. J. N. Hortig, *Handbuch der christlichen Kirchengeschichte* (Landshut, 1827), vol. 1, p. 187.
 43. I. von Döllinger, *Geschichte der christlichen Kirche* (Landshut, 1833), vol. 1/1, p. 74.
 44. J. R. Geiselmann, 'Johann Adam Möhler und die Entwicklung seines Kirchenbegriffs', *Theologische Quartalsschrift*, Year 112 (1931), esp. pp. 14ff.
 45. F. W. Kantzenbach, *Johann Michael Sailer und der ökumenische Gedanke* (Nuremberg, 1955), pp. 36ff.; H. Gollwitzer, *Ludwig I von Bayern. Königtum im Vormärz. Eine Politische Biographie* (Munich, 1986), pp. 514ff.
 46. F. T. Vischer, *Kritische Gänge*, ed. R. Vischer (Munich, 1922), vol. v, p. 42. (First published in *Deutsche Jahrbücher für Wissenschaft und Kunst* (1842).)
 47. I. H. von Wessenberg, *Die christlichen Bilder als Beförderungsmittel des christlichen Sinnes* (2nd edn; St Gallen, 1845), vol. 1, pp. 12ff.
 48. For the development of Cornelius's religious pictures up to the Ludwigskirche, see F. Büttner, 'Subjektives Gefühl, künstlerisches Ideal und christliche Wahrheit. Das religiöse Bild im frühen Werk von Peter Cornelius', *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch*, 52 (1991), pp. 37ff.
 49. Förster, *Peter Cornelius*, vol. II, p. 152.
 50. H. Wölfflin, 'Über kunsthistorische Verbildung', in J. Gantner (ed.), *Kleine Schriften (1886–1933)* (Basel, 1946), pp. 195ff.
 51. J. Burchardt, 'Bericht über die Kunstausstellung zu Berlin im Herbst 1842', *Kunstblatt*, 1843: 4 (12 January 1843), p. 15; F. Kugler, 'Neues aus Berlin', *Kunstblatt*, 1843: 6 (19 January 1843), p. 1. In opposition to these, from Cornelius's circles was E. Förster, 'Aus dem gegenwärtigen Kunstleben am Rhein und in den Niederlanden', *Kunstblatt*, 1843: 6 (19 January 1843), pp. 110ff. For the dispute about the 'Belgian pictures', see P. Schoch, 'Die Belgische Bilder', *Städel-Jahrbuch*, N.F., 7 (1979), pp. 171ff.; C. Heilmann, 'Zur französisch-belgischen Historienmalerei und ihrer Abgrenzung zur Münchner Schule', *Die Münchner Schule, 1815–1914, Katalog der Ausstellung München* (Munich, 1979), pp. 47ff.
 52. G. W. F. Hegel, *Ästhetik*, ed. P. Bassenge (Frankfurt, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 110.
 53. The process of dichotomizing 'higher' and 'lower', 'more true' and 'more false' art has been investigated recently mostly in literary scholarship. See C. Bürger, P. Bürger, and J. Schulte-Sasse, *Zur Dichotomisierung von höher und niederer Literatur* (Frankfurt, 1982). For art history, see F. Büttner, 'Bildungsideen und bildende Kunst um 1800', in Reinhart Koselleck (ed.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert, Teil II, Bildungsgüter und Bildungswissen*, Industrielle Welt, Schriftenreihe des Arbeitskreises für moderne Sozialgeschichte, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and M. Rainer Lepsius, 41 (Stuttgart, 1990), pp. 69ff.