Animadversions

Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*: The Missing Leg Twenty Years After

Leo Steinberg

"I never will have peace of mind till all honest men are of my opinion." — Jonathan Swift to Alexander Pope, 29 September 1725

I. The Nays Have It

This paper concerns the afterlife of a seven-page article, perpetrated by me and published twenty years ago in these pages (L, 1968, 343-353). The subject was Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*, about which the article said some alarming things that were promptly discredited — and to such good effect that the need to renew their discredit has been felt ever since. As an instance of art-historical irritability, the case is not without interest — at least to the author, who is still alive and keeps watching with fascination.

The occasion for the present retrospect is the appearance of yet another summary of Steinberg's thesis in Jack Spector's recent survey, "The State of Psychoanalytic Research in Art History" (*Art Bulletin*, LXX, 1988, 65). Following is Spector's paragraph in its entirety, footnote and all.

> Leo Steinberg wrote on "Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*: The Missing Leg," an iconographical interpretation of Michelangelo's breaking of Christ's leg in the sculpture. According to Steinberg, the sculptor acted in a fit of rage provoked by the recognition that the leg "slung" over the Virgin's thigh displayed a repugnantly and sacrilegiously direct sexual metaphor: responding to external pressures (potential criticism), he "destroyed it in despair." As is often true for Steinberg, Freudian ideas (for example concerning sexual repression) seem to have inspired him and to have provided him with the framework or background for controversial theories.[85]
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> [85]See John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, New York, 1985, I, 329: " 'The outright carnality of the symbolic slung leg' is discussed . . . and is related, implausibly, to a 'vast mediaeval tradition concerning the erotic association of Christ and the Magdalene.' "

What is striking here is the appeal to authority. Spector's footnote quotes just one sentence, but that very sentence, unknown to him, had been the subject of a pleasant, hitherto unpublished transatlantic exchange sixteen years earlier. A letter Steinberg wrote to its author, dated 7 August 1972, reads in part:

> Dear Mr. Pope-Hennessy,
>
> I hope you will permit an old admirer to draw your attention to a modest oversight in the catalogue section of your *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (2nd ed., 1970, notes on Michelangelo's *Lamentation* in the Florence Duomo, p. 339). . . . Your sentence reads: [as above, from " 'outright carnality' " to " 'association of Christ and the Magdalene' "].
>
> In my article, however, the symbolism of the "slung leg" was clearly related to the association of Christ and Mary. . . .
>
> I do not wish to attach undue importance to your inaccurate summation. We all read hastily at times. . . . But I cannot help noticing that a substitution of the Magdalene for the Virgin when an erotic association with Christ is under discussion has occurred before. A Rilke poem of 1906, in which the Madonna mourns the dead Christ as her lover, was printed by the publisher under the title "Mary Magdalene" and the poet had to republish it under the correct title "Pietà."
>
> I was reminded of this a few years ago when Albert E. Elsen published a friendly reference to my *Art Bulletin* piece and again substituted the Magdalene for the Virgin in the slung leg situation.[1] You have furnished the third instance of the identical error. I trust, however, that this is no more than coincidence, and that your oversight was a simple matter of haste and not an unconscious resistance to dwelling on the mythical son-lover motif in the Christological context. . . .

Pope-Hennessy's reply, dated 25 September 1972, was brief and, I think, not unkind. It began: "Dear Mr. Steinberg, So sorry for this Freudian confusion. . . ."

Irony nicely matched. Better still, a lapse understood to derive from unconscious resistance is freely acknowledged. But the gaffe reappears uncorrected in the book's third edition (1985, 329), and with a gain in authority sufficient to furnish Spector's note 85. Quoting Pope-Hennessy's bull, Spector saw neither the blunder in it, nor its source in "Freudian confusion."

Let me, before moving on, summarize the argument of that luckless *Art Bulletin* article. The four-figure *Pietà* of ca. 1547-55, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, was Michelangelo's largest, most complex carving (Figs. 1 and 2). It was intended for his own tomb. It crests in a bowed, beetling self-portrait. It is the only sculpture the artist tried to destroy. The following points were made.

[1] The error was honorably amended in the third edition of Elsen's *Purposes of Art*, New York, 1972, 153-154; the original slip had appeared in The Baltimore Museum of Art, *The Partial Figure in Modern Sculpture from Rodin to 1969*, 1969, 14.

1 Michelangelo, *Pietà*. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

2 Michelangelo, *Pietà*. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

(1) Christ's left leg is missing.[2]

(2) The leg, integral to the *concetto*, had been carved, at least in the rough.

(3) The general course of the now missing leg from hip to toe across the Madonna's lap is ascertainable. (No disagreement so far.)

(4) High Renaissance artists revived an antique symbolic form, wherein divine, mystic, or sacred marriage (the *hieros gamos*) is indicated by one partner's leg slung over the lap or thigh of the other. The "slung leg" motif. (No quarrel yet.)

(5) Michelangelo's concept of the *Pietà* as a sacred-divine *sposalizio* employs the symbolism of the slung leg to intimate Mary's union with the crucified Savior. (Here the ways part. Some deny that the posture of Michelangelo's Christ conforms with the slung leg motif. Steinberg had no

[2] A lack hardly noticed and rarely discussed — "so well does the figure in its truncated state seem to work," Steinberg wrote in his opening sentence. Cf. H. Hibbard, *Michelangelo*, New York, 1974, 284: "The implications of the slung leg over Mary's thigh may have become too overtly sexual for Michelangelo to tolerate — in any event, he removed it and it has rarely been missed." See further F. Hartt, *Michelangelo's Three Pietàs*, New York, 1975, 69: "That so few of the thousands of visitors to Florence each season should even notice that the left leg is missing furnishes even stronger evidence of the power of Michelangelo's conceptions and the supremacy of his genius." See also P. Fehl (1978), quoted on p. 485 below; and as late as 1981, A. Parronchi, writing in *La Nazione*, 21 July: "Recentemente si è fatto un gran caso di questa gamba mancante, alla quale prima evidentemente non s'era prestato attenzione."

such qualm and proceeded to claim certain gains accruing from his interpretation. Among them:)

(6) That the symbolism of the slung leg lent a closer thematic and formal coherence to the entire group.

(7) That the Magdalene in Michelangelo's composition stood for the redeemed sinner — "the counterpart of the Virgin in a bilateral scheme, . . . personifications respectively of penitence and immaculacy . . . bracing and being embraced, . . . a communion of lovers . . . folded within the limbs of Christ's body," etc.

(8) The final point came late in the argument (p. 345) and in the form of a question: whether the nuptial meaning here assigned to the "slung leg" could help explain Michelangelo's rageful attack on the sculpture in 1555. The tentative answer was arrived at as follows — I quote the concluding paragraph of the relevant section (p. 347):

> Michelangelo's figurative use of the human figure recalls the poetic idiom of those earlier mystics and preachers who described the ultimate religious experience in figures of physical love. . . . But poets and mystics had the freedom of figurative speech as an ancient charter. It was another matter to claim such poetic license in the concretions of palpable sculpture. Now, with the reformist atmosphere settling on Rome, Michelangelo may have felt certain resources of confidence failing: confidence that his intent would not be pruriently misunderstood, and confidence in the transcendent eloquence of the body — in the possibility of infinitely spiritualizing its anatomic machinery while still respecting its norms. Perhaps it was simply the vulgarization of his metaphorical idiom in the work of others that crowded and threatened his confidence. Or, more specifically, that the accelerating diffusion and coarsening of the slung leg motif during the very years of his work on the *Pietà* rendered the pose increasingly unacceptable. Such musings — for there seems no way to move them beyond conjecture — suggest alternative or additional motives for Michelangelo's destructive act. They keep open the possibility that he shattered his work . . . in despair: that he saw himself pushing the rhetoric of carnal gesture to a point where its metaphorical status passed out of control; that he felt himself crossing the limit of what seemed expressible in his art. His demolition then would be a renunciation, comparable to that which sounds again in the final lines of his sonnet:
>
> To paint or carve no longer calms
> the soul turned to that Love divine
> Who to embrace us on the cross opens his arms.
>
> The date of the sonnet falls within the year of the destruction of the *Pietà*.

So much for the original article. And now I gaze in perplexity at Spector's admittedly briefer summary. The article, he writes, is "an iconographical interpretation of Michelangelo's breaking of Christ's leg. . . ." Not so. The article sought to interpret the work, and the speculation concerning Michelangelo's reasons for removing the leg was presented as one possible consequence of that interpretation.

Similar misapprehensions by noted scholars have bedeviled that *Art Bulletin* article ever since its appearance. They make a bulging file from which the following ten issue herewith to defile in procession: Athena Tacha Spear, 1969; John Pope-Hennessy, 1970 and 1985; Benedict Nicolson, 1975; Frederick Hartt, 1975; Juergen Schulz, 1975; Robert S. Liebert, 1976; Philipp Fehl, 1978; Alessandro Parronchi, 1981; Charles Dempsey, 1984; Jack Spector, 1988.[3]

Athena Tacha Spear's Letter to the Editor (*Art Bulletin*, LI, 1969, 410) contained valuable observations on the work's present condition, observations deserving of more attention than they have received. But the thrust of her attack came from the position of formalism. "For an artist," she wrote, "a sculpture can be only a sculpture." Therefore no symbolic charge ought to be looked for, and considerations of symbolism could have no bearing on the artist's destructive act. "Michelangelo eliminated Christ's leg for the improvement of the composition." Which Steinberg answered as best he could.

The following year brought Pope-Hennessy's authoritative dismissal of the article as "implausible." He was right in a sense: it would indeed be implausible for Michelangelo's Christ to position a left leg on the lap of a Magdalene crouched at his right.

1975, a jubilee for Michelangelo, was a good year for the slung leg hypothesis, earning it three condemnations.

An unsigned *Burlington Magazine* editorial (CVII, 131-

[3] These ten constitute an imperfect consensus, since brief neutral or positive references to the slung leg hypothesis have appeared here and there, to say nothing of personal communications. But those cited below represent a fair record of what anyone interested in the *fortuna* of the hypothesis would find published.

132), written by the then editor, Benedict Nicolson, hailed "Michelangelo's 500th birthday this month" in dismay:

> . . . The avalanche of publications about the artist is unlikely to pause. Indeed, there seems little hope of any appreciable slackening until the world has run out of trees and all possible substitutes for paper have been exhausted. To express the wish for some diminution in printed offerings of Michelangelo in an issue of *The Burlington Magazine* containing three of these may seem a paradox. Yet those unlucky enough to be caught in the endless flow . . . would probably agree that things have got out of hand. . . . If neglect of what [past literature] has still to offer is one feature of contemporary Michelangelo studies, a craving for novelty is another, as academic advancement comes increasingly to depend on the manufacturing of "new" contributions. Some of the least appealing of these are "iconological," as authors strive to extract ever more "layers" of meaning from the artefacts (an exercise no more difficult — indeed less painful — than the skinning of an onion). . . . We have now reached a point in time when we can be informed with academic gravity that Michelangelo's *Pietà* in Florence Duomo is a deeply erotic work of art and that its "outright carnality" may have led the artist to smash the left leg.

Frederick Hartt's twofold objection to Steinberg's paper appeared in his *Michelangelo's Three Pietàs.* Since the technical side of his argument will be discussed below, I cite for the moment only his *coup de grâce* (p. 87):

> Steinberg goes both too far and not far enough. Images of erotic derivation used to characterize Christian love can be found by the thousands in any period of Christian art and thought, and no one seems to have condemned them, least of all Michelangelo himself, in whose poetry these images abound. They were intended — and should be regarded — not literally but as metaphors. Any overt erotic interpretation of the relation between Christ and the Virgin (or between Christ and the Magdalene, as Steinberg also proposes on the basis of literature recording her intense desire for Him) is tantamount to regarding the Eucharist as a cannibalistic feast. . . .

Here, it seems, the author is charged with regarding Michelangelo's motifs of embrace and enjambment as a "literal" representation of — well, of what exactly? We are agreed that the *Pietà*'s protagonist is a dead man and a deathless God. So the surge of his vital gestures cannot but bespeak his divinity. Had Steinberg proposed to read the *Pietà* "literally" as a moment of incestuous necrophilia *à trois*, with a hooded pander abetting, he should have been put away instead of being allowed to disgrace the *Art Bulletin.*

Juergen Schulz's survey, "Michelangelo's Unfinished Works" (*Art Bulletin*, LVII, 1975, 366-373) managed a fair, one-sentence summary of the contested thesis in half a footnote (n. 26): "Steinberg suggests that the missing leg of Christ functioned as a symbol of Christ's union with Mary, and that Michelangelo tried to break up the group because he recoiled from the carnality of the symbol." This is exemplary — gallantry before the kill: "It seems illogical, however, that in a work intended for himself, Michelangelo should first have chosen, then repudiated what was a very esoteric motive, and then, still later, given the 'carnal' work away for resale to a third party."

Comment: What Michelangelo gave away was a ruin from which Christ's left leg had been stripped. If indeed that slung leg offended, then the offending feature was no part of what Michelangelo "gave away for resale." As for the illogic of positing a Michelangelo who first chooses and then repudiates what he had chosen, it agrees well enough with the artist's explanation to Vasari of "why he had ruined such a marvelous work." It was, says Michelangelo, "because of the importunity of his servant Urbino, who nagged at him daily that he should finish it; and that among other things a piece of the Virgin's elbow had broken off, and that even before that he had come to hate it, and he had had many mishaps because of a vein in the stone; so that losing patience he broke it. . . ."

We gather that Michelangelo could come to hate what he had previously cherished. Meanwhile, since Schulz thinks it "illogical" to ascribe such inconstancy to the master, one would expect him to offer a more steadfast model. But in fact Schulz's Michelangelo is guilty of worse vacillation. After citing the artist's complaint that flaws in the stone (Michelangelo mentioned only one troublesome vein) had caused a piece of the Virgin's elbow to break off during the carving, Schulz speculates that multiple flaws "may also have cost him the left leg of Christ," a conjecture which has the advantage of removing the loss of Christ's leg from the sphere of motivated destruction to that of accident. If it just happened, one need give it no further thought.

Schulz adds that "a separate leg for the group did exist at one time." How does he know? An entry in the posthumous inventory of Michelangelo's studio (1566) lists "un ginocchio di marmo della Pietà di Michelangelo" — which Steinberg had taken for a relic of the original limb. Schulz, however, assumes that an unrecorded mishap deprived the original block of the mass from which to carve or recarve the left leg of Christ. Michelangelo, he thinks, then "intended" to supply the missing limb from a separate piece to be slotted into the hip, and surely the inventoried "ginocchio di marmo" indicates, indeed, proves the one-time existence of, this "separate leg." The latter would then have been smashed in a subsequent change of heart, for Schulz goes on to cite the familiar Renaissance aversion to "piecing." "Piecing was . . . considered a sign of technical incompetence. To an artist like Michelangelo, with his almost mystical conception of the integrity of the block, it must have seemed a defeat and a crime. Hence this final rage and rain of blows: Michelangelo could not abide the compromise that circumstances had forced on him." Thus Schulz's Michelangelo accidentally botches the left leg of Christ, proceeds — in violation of inner conviction and professional standards — to carve a replacement for piecing, and

then recoils from an operation so foul and criminal.[4]

It is gratifying to report that some years after this publication, Professor Schulz informed me of his own change of heart: he no longer believed that Michelangelo ever considered piecing a separate leg into the block.

The late Robert S. Liebert's critique of the slung leg hypothesis was launched at the CAA Convention in Chicago in January 1976. His talk, delivered at Howard Hibbard's session, "Non-Art Historians Look at Art," was entitled "Michelangelo's Mutilation of the Florentine *Pietà*: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry and Alternative to the 'Slung Leg' Theory."[5]

Setting aside Steinberg's "iconographic explanation," Liebert (I quote from his CAA abstract) proposed to answer the specific question "why the mutilation occurred *at that time*" (late 1555), and to respect "Michelangelo's *own explanation* — that he was so vexed by the nagging to finish it of Urbino, his beloved servant and companion for twenty-six years." Liebert speaks of the artist's anxiety during the five months of Urbino's terminal illness, and of his grief after Urbino's death in December. "It is unlikely," he writes, "given Michelangelo's state of mind at the time, that he dwelled on the esoteric meaning of the 'slung leg.' " Liebert continues:

> Michelangelo's explanation of irritation with Urbino is related to the uniform clinical observation in people who have lost the objects of their love either recently or early in life; namely, unconscious and unexpressed rage toward the abandoning loved one. The dynamics of this process explain the paradoxical blame that Michelangelo directed toward Urbino. At a deeper level, Urbino was an unconscious representation of Michelangelo's lost mother, who died when he was six years old. To the extent that Michelangelo both identified with the Christ in the *Pietà* . . . and identified Urbino with his mother, the manifestly beatific union of Christ and His Mother also aroused his associated latent feelings of rage and sadism. These were forced to the surface by the frightening circumstances in the eighty year old Master's life.

As a welcome relief from the leg-struck hypothesis, Liebert's CAA paper was warmly reviewed in the *Art Journal* (xxxv, 1976, 391). It seems also to be Spector's preference, since (following Liebert's subsequent book, 399, n. 12), he contrasts Steinberg's "external" causation with Liebert's "psychodynamic 'internal' explanation of the destructive act." And this gives us the third attempt in eight years to explain Michelangelo's maiming of the Christ figure by way of an alternative motive. In the formalist view, Michelangelo removed Christ's left leg because, as anybody can see, the work looks better without it. The fury that accompanied the adjustment is not taken into account.[6] In the technico-biographical sequence propounded by Wilde and early Schulz, it was the indignity of a paltry pieced leg that infuriated the artist, whether that leg had been from the start of a different marble (Tolnay) or a substitute for an original that had come to grief. Finally, in Liebert's intrapsychic alternative, the *Pietà en bloc* (the missing leg now no longer privileged) is attacked in "rage and sadism" as the dying of a dear servant reactivates the artist's rage over his abandonment by his mother seventy-four years before.

Comment: Liebert claimed for his thesis that it respected "Michelangelo's own explanation." But Michelangelo's explanation came in three parts. To Urbino's nagging it added the frustration of toil and mischance and, says Michelangelo, "even before he had come to hate it." So the eighty-

[4] Schulz's n. 26 credits the above scenario to "J. Wilde in his Courtauld Institute lectures" — "unknown to Steinberg." What Steinberg did know, and emphatically disbelieved, was a partial statement of the case as presented by Tolnay in 1960: "The left leg of Christ is lacking. It seems that it was originally made from a separate piece of marble. The purpose of the hole at the thigh was probably to serve as a slot for the insertion of this leg" (*Michelangelo: V. The Final Period*, Princeton, 1960, 149).

Wilde's Michelangelo lectures at the Courtauld (delivered during the 1950's) were published posthumously as *Michelangelo: Six Lectures by Johannes Wilde*, Oxford, 1978. The relevant passage (pp. 181, 184) reads: "But the left leg of the figure of Christ is missing. This is not due to the attempted dismemberment; it was Michelangelo himself who, for some reason or other, perhaps because of a defect in the stone, was forced to piece on a separate bit of marble for this limb. Indeed, I am inclined to think that this act, which he had committed in order to save his work, was the very reason for his despair and for giving up the sculpture. We are told by many sources that the method of piecing-on in sculpture was generally despised in the sixteenth century as not worthy of a true artist. It was certainly a major crime in the eyes of the man who had an almost metaphysical conception of the significance of the unviolated block."

Curious reasoning: Michelangelo, we are told, was thrown into despair over having committed a despicable crime; yet there is absolutely no evidence — and little likelihood — that the crime was committed.

A similar presentation of wild conjecture as matter of fact appeared in the *Burlington Magazine*, cxx, 1978, 226, in an article by D.L. Bershad: "Part of Mary's arm had broken away and the left leg of Christ had presumably suffered a similar fate since the sculptor had been seen at work on a replacement made from a different marble." This is sheer invention. (If Bershad had in mind the pretended eyewitness account of Michelangelo carving published by Blaise de Vigenère in 1597, the utter incredibility of that "source" was exposed in Steinberg, "The Missing Leg," Appendix A, 350-355.) Soon after, the notion of Michelangelo working on, or even considering the piecing of a separate leg, was briskly dismissed by L. Murray (*Michelangelo: His Life, Work and Times*, New York, 1984, 216): "The group remained unfinished because of a flaw in the marble; Michelangelo, in a rage, smashed the left leg of the *Christ* with a hammer. It never occurred to him to add a piece to a defective block or figure; his sculptures are monolithic and self-contained in form. As the Belgian sculptor Victor Rousseau said, 'You could roll them down a mountain and no piece would come off.' " (M. Rousseau had better choose the gentlest of slopes, lest Michelangelo's openwork treatment of peripheral limbs — three arms and one knee in the *Pietà* alone — damage his argument.)

Meanwhile, the conscientious attention to the limits of certainty contained in A. Tacha Spear's letter remains unconsidered. The literature in its present state lays down as historic fact that (a) "Michelangelo himself . . . was forced to piece on a separate bit of marble"; (b) that he was "seen to work on a replacement"; and (c) that "it never occurred to him" to do any such thing.

[5] Liebert's paper was published in the *Art Bulletin*, LIX, 1977, 47-54; the material appeared again in his book *Michelangelo: A Psychoanalytic Study of His Life and Images*, New Haven, 1983.

[6] See Appendix A for the troubled psychological origin of the formalist explanation.

year-old sculptor felt pestered to finish a work which, for whatever reason, he now wished to disown. It was to this loss of inward conviction that Steinberg's argument tried to address itself, while dismissing, perhaps too lightly, Urbino's nagging. Liebert, on the other hand, slighted parts two and three of Michelangelo's explanation, discounting the artist's declared aversion from what he had made. In the end, Liebert's campaign to make the Michelangelo case confirm modern clinical findings about the traumatic effects of childhood bereavement traduces the content of the artist's creation. A diagnosis that finds Michelangelo's images of the Madonna expressing — "at the deepest level" — unconscious sadistic rage against the abandoning mother seems simply wrong. Charles Dempsey's review of Liebert's Michelangelo book advised readers to get "a second opinion."[7]

It was at another CAA session (New York, January 1978) that Philipp Fehl took his stand, hoping to say the last word on the subject:

> On occasion scholars have remarked how very little, if at all, we miss, when we stand in front of the work, the missing leg. The work seems much more in keeping with itself without it (and that would explain Michelangelo's removal of the leg), and there, by and large, the matter rested until Professor Leo Steinberg, in a keenly reasoned inquiry, put the missing leg into the limelight of scholarly attention, so that for readers of the *Art Bulletin* at least it is no longer possible to stand in front of the work without worrying about the leg that is not there.
>
> For this, I take it, we are all sorry and no one, I think, more than my friend Leo Steinberg, whose concern was really on a quite different order. If I return to the subject it is with regret and apologies, but also in the hope, a paradoxical hope, admittedly, of putting the missing leg to rest [applause & laughter] — how else could one hope to do it — but by talking about it once more?[8]

Unlike Tacha Spear, Wilde, and Schulz, Fehl argued that the still visible preparations for a new leg (the square slot at the hip and the receptive depression on the Madonna's thigh, Fig. 1) are not Michelangelo's work; that they show only what Tiberio Calcagni, the short-lived disciple who patched the work up, had in mind. Fehl believes that Calcagni changed the design by arranging to widen the angle formed by Christ's legs, and that this change injected a dramatic emphasis which "conflicts with the silence of the scene and its decorum."

> It is generally taken for granted that the new leg was intended as a reconstruction and completion of the leg Michelangelo had destroyed. A close study of the marble makes it appear more likely that Michelangelo's left leg of Christ came forward at a much gentler angle, quite near, if not touching, Christ's hand — the legs close to one another, more like those in the *Rondanini Pietà* and in a number of Michelangelo drawings.

Comment: There are strong objections to Fehl's hypothesis; they are restrained by the fact that he never published the paper. And his hope of putting the missing leg to rest was not gratified.

On the contrary, *la gamba mancante* was suddenly missed even in Florence, whose population, one would have thought, was inured to truncated marbles. On 5 June 1981, it was reported in *La Nazione* (p. 12) that the *Pietà*, newly installed in the Opera del Duomo, "presented a sort of mutilation," the artist having smashed the Redeemer's left leg because its position across the knees of the Virgin belied the work's spirituality. The consequent deficit at the hip had stirred enough public interest to moot an international competition for the spare part; the winning entry (slated for separate display nearby "per non tradire la volontà di Michelangelo") to be rewarded with substantial prize money ("con un premio sostanzioso in denaro"). Five weeks later, the Michelangelo scholar Alessandro Parronchi, writing in the same Florence daily (21 July 1981), took up the subject in a tone appropriately ironic — his title, "Toh, le manca una gamba." Parronchi proceeded nevertheless to debate where and how the original leg would have lain; suggested that Michelangelo must certainly have wanted to shorten it to produce "una posizione sospesa"; and ended by piling his compost of scorn on that jejune *Art Bulletin* article of thirteen long years before:

> Il quesito non ha mancato di sollecitare alcuni studiosi, che si sono sbizzarriti in interpretazioni concettuali, come Leo Steinberg, che intravedeva nella posizione delle gambe del Cristo accavallate a quelle della Madonna, molto in accordo coi tempi, un significato erotico. Per analoghe vie si potrà inoltrare quanto si voglia senza alcun frutto.

His conclusion: ". . . la ragione che mosse Michelangelo fu certo soltanto formale, dettata da un senso dell'armonia regolato da leggi ferree. . . ." It is not clear whether the ironclad laws that regulated Michelangelo's sense of formal harmony determined the leg's final removal, the preceding effort to alter it, or its original disposition. All three perhaps. But that considerations other than "ragioni formali" never clouded the artist's mind, that's for sure.[9]

December 1984: the slung leg hypothesis now sixteen years old, but not off the hook. So when Charles Dempsey reviewed a new Steinberg product (*New Criterion*, III, 4,

[7] C. Dempsey, "Michelangelo on the Couch," *New Criterion*, I, April, 1983, 76; see also L. Steinberg, "Shrinking Michelangelo," *New York Review of Books*, 28 June 1984, 41-45.

[8] I have quoted from Professor Fehl's unpublished talk, which he kindly sent me. The quotation below is taken from Fehl's abstract of his 1978 CAA talk.

[9] The above colloquialism is borrowed from the great 19th-century American thinker Artemus Ward: "It ain't the things folks don't know that make them ignorant; it's the things they know for sure that ain't so."

73), he noted with satisfaction that it "differs significantly from Steinberg's earlier . . . studies of the art of Michelangelo," where "the unfortunate result was the creation of a Michelangelo capable of genuine blasphemy in the Florentine *Pietà* (of which Steinberg argued that Christ the bridegroom literally consummates his marriage to Mary as the Church). . . ." No comment.

"The Missing Leg" article had been excerpted (as its final note indicated) from a longer essay, which appeared in 1970 as "The Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo's *Pietàs*."[10] This complete version was generally overlooked until 1985, when Pope-Hennessy cited it in connection with Michelangelo's Roman *Pietà*: "dealt with in a perverse study by L. Steinberg."[11] The essay's nine-word title was then given *in extenso* and very nearly verbatim — except that *Pietàs* appeared in the singular and "Metaphors" was altered to "Metamorphosis." The procedure here is fairly subtle, and students of Pope-Hennessy's polemical style will register it as an advance. For where he would formerly hurl an epithet such as "truck driver" at a scholar he differed from,[12] now the Knight of Billingsgate deftly garbles a title, as if to intimate, by example, how perversity should be met. It is heartening to see a scholar in the ripeness of years still refining his gifts.

There followed a three-year lull during which, so far as I know, Steinberg's article escaped further censure — until Professor Spector remembered. To a summary of the excerpted *Art Bulletin* version in the context of "psychoanalytic research in art history" (wrong context, I think), he appended the requisite execration.[13]

I revert to Professor Frederick Hartt. His argument — that the posture of the *Pietà*'s dead Christ bears no relation to the slung leg motif — seems so radical that it must be presented in full. Hartt writes:

> We come inevitably to the recent contention of Leo Steinberg that the crossing of the now-missing left leg over the Virgin's left knee was an attribute of sexual possessiveness, that it was increasingly so recognized in the sixteenth century, and that this was the reason why Michelangelo started to destroy the group. It is undeniable that the slung left leg had the meaning Steinberg claims in the instances he cites; it is equally clear that all his examples prior to Michelangelo's own time show a leg thrown by a *living* figure [italics original] over the knee of another in such manner that the foot is free from the ground and points toward the observer. According to an engraving by Cherubino Alberti, presumably based on Michelangelo's group before its attempted destruction, the missing leg ran parallel to the outer plane of the original block of marble and the toes of the foot rested on the ground.[14] More important, the leg is that of a *dead* person [italics original] and was not thrown, but sank, into this position. . . . (pp. 86-87)

Comment: Hartt objects that the slung leg thesis equates dissimilar things. He observes that the left leg of the *Pietà* Christ must have touched down, whereas the slung legs of living lovers keep the foot "free from the ground," which is true in most cases. But Hartt overlooks the relative proportions of the figures involved. Normal partners to a slung leg alliance share one human scale. The Christ in the *Pietà* is at least one-and-one-half times life-size, and it is his exceeding stature — marvelously disguised by acute bends at the joints — that also brings down the foot. Thus Steinberg's interpretation of that missing limb, though still dis-

[10] The "Metaphors" essay appeared within a collection of papers entitled *Studies in Erotic Art*, ed. T. Bowie and C.V. Christenson, New York, 1970, 231-335. The volume includes an important study by O.J. Brendel, "The Scope and Temperament of Erotic Art in the Greco-Roman World," and a ground-breaking exploration, "Picasso and the Anatomy of Eroticism," by Robert Rosenblum. These two essays alone deserved better than the indifference that snubbed the book, whose title was soon usurped (as a subtitle) by *Woman as Sex Object*, ed. T.B. Hess and L. Nochlin, New York, 1972.

[11] See the "Appendix of Additions and Corrections" to the third edition of Pope-Hennessy's *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, New York, 1985, 451.

[12] *New York Review of Books*, 1 May 1980, 44. Pope-Hennessy was referring to H.W. Janson.

[13] Spector's hundred-word précis of Steinberg's thesis is framed by one introductory sentence and one terminal note, whose respective fallacies have been pointed out (p. 482). In between come three interesting distortions.

(1) We are told that Steinberg interprets the artist's destructive act as a response to "external pressures (potential criticism)." Steinberg had spoken of Michelangelo's loss of confidence in the validity of his idiom, exacerbated by a changed climate — an interaction, in other words, of internal and external forces.

(2) What Steinberg at his most outré had described as "a direct sexual metaphor" to signify mystic marriage, Spector further qualifies as "repugnant" and "sacrilegious."

(3) In Spector's summary, Michelangelo initially repressed the erotic meaning of the slung leg, then, after eight years, suddenly realized what he had done. It was presumably this fiction of protracted repression that earned the "Missing Leg" paper its place in a survey of "Psychoanalytic Research." But Steinberg had written (p. 344): "In Michelangelo's marble group, the themes of love, death, and communion are intimately interfused. There can be no question that he conceived the action of the left leg in perfect awareness of what it meant." Thus no "Freudian ideas . . . concerning sexual repression" had anything to do with the case. In fact, nowhere in Steinberg's writing is sexual repression imputed to works discussed or to their makers — only to their conditioned reception by the public, art scholars included.

[14] There is no reason to imagine Cherubino Alberti's engraving "based on Michelangelo's group before its destruction." When the *Pietà* was smashed, Cherubino was two years old, and his engraving ("The Missing Leg," fig. 3) is dated to the pontificate of Gregory XIII (1572-85). It supplies the missing leg as it supplies landscape setting — to make a full picture. And the same goes for the restored leg in Sabbatini's painted version of the *Pietà* in the Sacristy of St. Peter's (ca. 1575; *ibid.*, fig. 4). None of the known adaptations date from before the mid-seventies, and all restore the missing leg to what they take to be its probable disposition.

For El Greco's ingenious use of the *Pietà* Christ figure — accepting its one-legged condition! — see L. Steinberg, "An El Greco 'Entombment' Eyed Awry," *Burlington Magazine*, CXVI, 1974, 474-477.

missible as conjecture, may not be dismissed because the foot fails to hover.[15]

As for Hartt's perceptive discrimination between the quick and the dead, the distinction fades when we summon an insight from another part of his text (p. 80): that Michelangelo's Christ is "mysteriously alive in death as in all great *Pietàs*." Indeed; and what is it that vivifies these dead Christs? Is not gestural capability — the sense of a living will at work in those defunct members — part of their mystery? Hartt would distinguish a living leg thrown or slung from "that of a *dead* person [which] was not thrown, but sank into this position. . . ." Yes, because dead persons, true to their human nature, make lifeless corpses. But the Trinity's Second Person in its humanation does not produce a corpse of that kind. Why, then, invoke the flaccidity of normal cadavers to deaden, on paper, a Michelangelo limb which none of us ever saw? Why declare this missing member to have conformed to legs of all corpses, rather than to its own body with its puissant embracing arm? Is it because that leg in place would accost the Madonna's lap?

A protest not unlike Hartt's was raised against my more recent observation — that the dead Christ is frequently represented laying a demonstrative hand on his groin. Such Christs, it was said, since they are represented as dead, cannot be held responsible for where their limbs fall; the hand in question must have been put there by one of the mourners. To which I replied that a posture contrary to Christ's intention would be unacceptable to his corpse.

> Christ in his dual nature . . . undergoes nothing but what he wills. . . . The very doctrine of the Incarnation demands it: it requires that everything done to Christ be attracted, that it be suffered and at the same time elicited or commanded, so that passive and active concur in unison with Christ's concurrent natures. . . . Few, admittedly, had Michelangelo's imaginative resources in making a deposed Christ seem both expired and vital. But . . . every [Renaissance] artist understood that no member of the crucified body rests or falls except by the acquiescence of Christ's other nature.[16]

Concerning the dead Christ of the Florence *Pietà*, Hartt might be answered: yes, this leg that "sinks" into position to concede its mortality, it also, at the same time, *assumes* the posture that enfolds the beloved. The literalism that wants a man either-or, dead or alive, is "the letter that killeth," inappropriate to Christ's dual nature and to "all great *Pietàs*."

Furthermore: Hartt's objection that the Christ's posture fails to resemble earlier models of the slung leg rests on a misunderstanding. Steinberg's argument does not claim similarity of appearance (what we call "look-alikes" — which is not what Michelangelo seeks). At stake is the identity of an action, its feel and import. It has to be danced to be known. Whether the foot in question does or does not plant its ball on the ground, whether the toes point hitherward or away, is irrelevant. If no standard slung leg *resembled* the pose of Christ in the *Pietà* (as indeed nothing could!), the dissemblance would not affect the case, which states simply enough that if one of two adjoined seated adults drapes a leg over the other's thigh, an erotic connection is forged. The argument holds irrespective of external appearance. Offered to intuition, it addresses a level of understanding apart from and beneath art-historical methodology. Was it this lowly appeal to bodily empathy that led some protesters to fend it off with the dismissive term "esoteric"? The slung leg esoteric? In our context, the term means no more than that the motif had not been previously catalogued. But yield to intuition — better still, stage the motif with an obliging friend — and you know instantly that it's not esoterica you're exploring, that the posture of the slung leg forms an erotic bond no matter how angled or by whom performed, whether the actors are Groucho Marx or Dionysus, whether we are shown fabulous lovers or even Christ.

II. What Seems to be the Outrage?

The explicit objections to Steinberg's thesis come down to two: first, that the erotic tenor of the standard slung leg is falsely imputed to the *Pietà*; and second, that the "esoteric" significance of the motif, even if correctly imputed, would not account for the final mayhem. But supposing the author wrong on both counts, why twenty years of recrimination? Is it customary in the humanities to keep exorcising a wrong-headed thesis, the way orthodox theologians used to denounce bygone heresies? What was it that had brought on the trauma? Not, surely, the base appeal to bodily intuition?

Was it the sting of the word "carnal" Steinberg had used? Several of his critics single it out, as if such vile usage were enough to incriminate. Let us take the word under consideration.

[15] There is a further reason why Hartt's distinction between a foot "free from the ground" and a foot "on the ground" fails to impress me as the true motive for his resistance. In his comments on the Christ Child in Michelangelo's *Tondo Taddei* (*Michelangelo: The Complete Sculpture*, New York, 1968, 9), Hartt accepts with enthusiasm the figure's alleged derivation from a high-stepping putto in a Medea sarcophagus — even though the Child in the tondo has its forward foot solidly *on* the ground, while the supposed model's floats free. But in this instance, because Hartt likes the conclusion he draws from the comparison, the difference between tread and hover does not seem to count.

For the oversize of the protagonist in the *Pietà*, cf. Tolnay (as in n. 4), 87: "It is noteworthy that [the Christ's] dimensions are much larger than those of the three surrounding figures, a fact which is not apparent at first because of his position." The recourse to relative disproportions among human figures within a system of ostensible naturalism is an intriguing instance of license in Renaissance art, deserving of more attention. An outstanding example of a discreetly aggrandized Christ is discussed in Steinberg, "Leonardo's *Last Supper*," *Art Quarterly*, XXXVI, 1973, 303-304.

[16] L. Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, New York, 1983, Excursus XXXV, "Not Other Than Willed," 189-190.

Tracking the entry "carnal" through dictionaries of the past hundred years is intriguing sport: you can watch slippery connotations being sorted and shuffled as lexicographers try to protect a root meaning from millennial abuse. The twenty-four-volume *Century Dictionary* of 1889 segregates four distinct senses of "carnal," but lumps "pertaining to the flesh or the body" together with "lustful; gross; impure." The finer breakdown in the OED (1928) yields six meanings, of which half are opprobrious. Passing from Webster I (ed. 1925) to Webster III (1961), one detects a renewed slippage in the word's moral reference. In 1925, "carnal" meant:

1. Fleshly; bodily; as *carnal* interment; the carnal mother of Christ. *Obs.* or *R.*
2. Pertaining to the body as the seat of the appetites; sensual, hence, material; . . . opposed to *spiritual*. . . .
3. Flesh-devouring; bloodthirsty. *Obs.*[17]

In Webster III, the range of meanings is amplified by pejoration:

1a. Bodily, corporeal. . . .
b. consanguineous and bodily in relationship (the carnal mother of Christ)
c. *obs.* Bloodthirsty
2a. marked by sexuality that is often frank, crude, and unrelieved by higher emotions
b. . . . given to crude bodily pleasures
3. Unspiritual, etc.

Faced with these multiple shadings, how do we ever know which applies? When a given phrase attaches "carnal" to the mother of Christ, or affirms "the carnal presence of the Eucharist"; when "the sword which was set before the Gate of Paradise" is called (by Durandus) "a carnal observance"; when Saint Bernard (in modern English translation) calls the love of Christ "in a way carnal because it especially moves the human heart to be attracted to Christ's humanity," what tells us to exclude Webster III, 2-3? And if the answer is context, then how were "carnal" and "carnality" contextualized in that 1968 *Art Bulletin* article? Does not an argument that addresses the symbolism of multiple mystic marriage to the deposed Crucified preclude debased connotations? Yet as the word is haled into polemics, you hear it plummet on Webster III's scale, from 1a to 2-3.

In Steinberg's article, that scare word strikes twice: once where "the rhetoric of carnal gesture" in sculpture is contrasted with the abstractness of verbal tropes (p. 347); and again in a subhead framed as a question about "the outright carnality of the symbolic slung leg" (p. 345). Needless to say (correction: it now needs saying), the *Pietà* itself is nowhere labeled a "carnal work." It is in the context of the *hieros gamos* that a metaphorical gesture and a symbolically disposed limb are called "carnal," and this for good reason, since carnality admits of degrees. So, among available tokens of conjugal union, some — like the joining of hands, the placing of a ring on a bride's finger, or of a hand on her shoulder — project a symbolism less carnal than that of laying a leg over her thigh. Yet all are symbolic nuptials, signs that stand for the becoming "one flesh" which marriage (we speak in symbols) is said to effect. None *literally* stage or present marital consummation.[18] If the phrase "the carnality of the symbol" brings a contextually absurd "literal consummation" to a reader's mind, then that mind is the troublemaker.

But Steinberg wrote "outright — outright carnality — and this was unwise. The phrase irked his censors to the point of forgetting that the article's first two pages make a half dozen explicit statements harping on the mystic significance of the motif, and call the slung leg exactly ten times "a symbol," "a symbolic form," a "purely symbolic action," "a token gesture," a "conventional sign"; and

[17] The subdefinition of "carnal" as carnivorous, flesh-eating (or flesh-devouring), ravenous, bloody, bloodthirsty, etc., should surprise most users of English. And I suspect — against an entrenched lexicographic convention — that "carnal" does not, in fact, *have* that meaning. It assumes that meaning, exceptionally and irresistibly, within one powerful passage in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, iv, 4. Queen Margaret is speaking of the king's recent fratricide to his mother, the duchess of York: "That dog, that had his teeth before his eyes,/To worry lambs and lap their gentle blood;/ . . . this carnal cur/Preys on the issue of his mother's body. . . . " This is the only citation adduced in English dictionaries of the past one hundred years to support the alleged "flesh-eating" meaning of carnal. Having neglected to comb the corpus of English literature, I cannot confidently assert that this cannibalistic sense occurs nowhere else; but since the lexicons cite no other example, I tentatively conclude that we are dealing not with a variant meaning, but with a one-time bardic feat, a glorious instance of the power of poetic context to divert a common word to an unheard-of meaning *ad hoc*.

[18] Consider the carnality quotient in the following three instances. The first records a royal proxy wedding in the year 1514, the parties being an English princess, sister of Henry VIII, and a decrepit French king. The document reads:

> Consummation of the marriage by proxy between the Princess Mary and Lewis XII. Last Sunday the marriage was concluded *per verba de praesenti*. The bride undressed and went to bed in the presence of many witnesses. The Marquis of Rothelin, in his doublet, with a pair of red hose, but with one leg naked, went into bed, and touched the Princess with his naked leg. The marriage was then declared consummated. The King of England made great rejoicing, and we at Abbeville did the same. 18 Aug. 1514.

(See Great Britain, Public Record Office, *Letters and Papers . . . of the Reign of Henry VIII . . .*, I, Pt. 2, 1509-14, London, 1862, 861; cited in Steinberg [as in n. 10], 274.)

My second instance is an engraving after a lost painting by Luca Cambiaso, datable roughly to the mid-16th century, and perhaps remotely indebted to the Florence *Pietà*. The subject is Venus lamenting the slain Adonis, whose left leg is slung over hers (Fig. 3).

The third instance comes from *Othello* (iii, 3, 424), where Iago, goading Othello's jealousy, slanders the innocent Cassio by evoking a mental image of what a bedded lover would do. As they slept side by side, says Iago, Cassio repeatedly betrayed his lust for the Moor's wife — "then laid his leg/over my thigh, and sighed."

So we have in one instance a formal state ceremony that weds a young woman vicariously to an old impotent; in another, a corpse that declares itself amorous; in the third, the account of a restless sleeper whose love object is being dreamt. In each case, the nuptial or erotic meaning is conveyed by the play of a leg; symbolic because in each case — impotence, death, or sleep — "literal consummation" is out of the question.

3 G.M. Le Villain, engraving after Luca Cambiaso, *Venus and Adonis*

thereafter repeatedly a trope, metaphoric, figurative, etc.[19] In the dim view, that looming "outright" emphasizing "carnality" overwhelmed context and sense. If only Steinberg had written the *sheer physicality* of the symbol, all might have been well, and the article, caught up in the sludge of unwanted Michelangelo publications, would have gone the way of all trash. But alas, he wrote "outright carnality," which I, his gray senior, have often reproached him for — encountering no resistance, since his temperament is the sort that delights in being critiqued.

Why did he do it? I knew him well at the time, and I remember his motives. His "carnality of the symbolic slung leg" — and with the added emphasis of "outright" — was intended to honor Michelangelo's daring in suffusing a hallowed context of death and grief with erotic energy. The words Steinberg used were a measure of his amazement at what Michelangelo's art dares to do. If in 1968 he thought it correct to recognize a willed tenderness in the dead Christ's communion with his supporters — in the arm that endears the Magdalene, in the "delegated caress of the shroud," in the tilt of the head that knows upon whom it falls, and finally in the leg that had twined with the Virgin — seeing a mystical connotation borne by a gestural sign of outright carnality — then he was carried away by the boldness of Michelangelo's thought.[20]

Meanwhile, the possibility that the nuptial symbol in the *Pietà* might be mistaken for libidinous congress (or that his text might be taken to so construe it) never entered his mind. He even resisted saying that the posture is not sexually functional, for this seemed self-evident and therefore too condescending to say. He assumed that Michelangelo's bonding motif in all its directness would be understood as a metaphor.

Perhaps it was so understood by some, or even by a majority of *Art Bulletin* readers. We'll never know, since the published record only bristles with opposition — some of it reasoned, some almost instinctual and vehement in wanting the slung leg hypothesis quashed. And the reason why still eludes, so I press on.

Implicit in the hypothesis are two threatening provocations that may well cause honest folk to recoil. One touches the incest taboo, the other, our disapproval of lively corpses. Both issues are serious enough to be squarely faced.[21]

Did the resistance spring from a primitive fear of incest, a scruple that would reserve the Bride-of-Christ epithet for the human soul, or for Ecclesia (or for Saints Mary Magdalene, Lucy, and Catherine as well as all nuns), but deny it to Christ's carnal mother? Modern consciousness has been slow to retrieve the medieval concept of the Madonna as preeminently the Sponsa of the Song of Songs. What had

[19] One is almost ashamed to find the author so repetitive within a couple of pages. His hypothesis claimed that a mystery, a *cosa divina*, was being attempted — a *sposalizio* prevailing over defeated death, the symbolic form of a lover's approach being assigned to the Crucified.

[20] The motif of drapery diverted to a caress was first described in "The Missing Leg," 345: "The drapery fold between the Magdalene's breasts that flows down her abdomen is not her own garment but the loose end of Christ's winding sheet. Released from his chest, it presses gently against her body. The delegated caress of the shroud confirms the Magdalene as an object of love." A subsequent fuller discussion of the motif — "the most intimate intermingling of personal garments in Renaissance art" — focuses on Michelangelo's attempt to ensure that this errant drapery fold would pass unnoticed (see Steinberg, "The Case of the Wayward Shroud," in *Tribute to Lotte Brand Philip: Art Historian and Detective*, ed. W.W. Clark, C. Eisler, W.S. Heckscher, and B. Lane, New York, 1985, 185-192).

In brief: Michelangelo had his compliant biographer Condivi climax his praise of the *Pietà* with the observation that the work was remarkable chiefly [*sic!*] for keeping the draperies of the various figures distinct from each other. Whereas the *Pietà* is the one work in which draperies intermingle. In Condivi's encomium, the criterion that is finally said to make the supreme masterwork of the world's greatest artist deserving of highest praise is an absurd anti-climax. But it makes sense as a calculated denial, designed to divert attention.

(The article cited above further contains a first notice that the Virgin's right hand is not, as used to be thought, "entirely hidden." The carving of it is rudimentary and easily missed; but it is there and, once seen, activates the Virgin's whole posture.)

[21] There may be a third cause for resistance, though it seems remote: an uneasy suspicion of that Gnostic heresy which denied the authenticity of Christ's terrene body, so that he would never have suffered a true human death. Any suggestion of liveliness in Christ's corpse might thus be suspect on doctrinal grounds — in the 4th century, but hardly today.

once been a commonplace was being resisted.[22] But those of us who read iconography in the 1950's took it for granted that, from the twelfth century onward, the Virgin as Bride of Christ was interchangeable with Ecclesia. The message is explicit in Rupert of Deutz's commentary on Canticles:

> The pious reader may apply this exposition of the Canticle to our Lady Saint Mary, not thereby contradicting the fathers of former days who rather interpreted the Song with regard to love for the Church, but on the contrary, completing their interpretation, since the present exposition gathers together the loving voices of the great worldwide Body of Christ, and unites them in the single and unique soul of Mary, beloved of Christ above all. For there is nothing that cannot be applied to her, which has been said or can be said of the Church. . . .[23]

And compare the terse wording which Panofsky liked to quote from the Canticles commentary of Honorius of Autun: "Everything that is said of the Church can also be understood as being said of the Virgin herself, the bride and mother of the bridegroom."[24]

Accordingly, in twelfth-century manuscript commentaries on the Song of Songs, the inhabited "O" of the opening *Osculetur me osculo oris suo* ("Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth") may show either the mothered Christ Child, or else the adult Christ embracing Mary-Ecclesia, his ordained Bride and consort. The famous apse mosaic at S. Maria in Trastevere, Rome (before 1143), shows the royal couple enthroned, each holding a scroll inscribed with verses from Canticles as adapted to the liturgy of Assumption Day. The scroll held by Christ reads: "Come, my chosen one, and share my throne." The Virgin's scroll quotes: "O that his left hand were under my head and his right hand embraced me" — and the right arm of Christ actually does embrace.[25] Thereafter, until the mid-fourteenth century, the graphic motif of the embrace, sanctioned by Canticles, persists in manuscript illuminations displaying Christ and Mary-Ecclesia as Sponsus and Sponsa.

But though the Virgin's bridal status was now assured, artists continued to treat her symbolic bridehood under one general caution. Since, in a literal sense, a mother-son marriage must be incestuous, pictorial allusions to Christ's mystic espousal of Mary were confined either to allegory and eschatology or to narrative situations that excluded Christ's adult ministry. Renaissance artists might introduce a marital symbol in Infancy scenes, but only because the Child's tender age guaranteed innocence. In Filippo Lippi's symbolic setting of the Incarnation (Fig. 7), the "Infant Spouse," adduced by angels, affiances himself to the Virgin by laying a hand on her shoulder — rehearsing, as he often does in Madonna icons, an ancient rite of marital appropriation.[26]

Like-tending symbols that address the nuptial sense of the Incarnation abound in Renaissance Annunciation scenes. Some of these portents are still unidentified, or subject to excited conjecture. Back in the late 1950's, one such conjecture stirred the excitable graduate student who, ten years later, published our irksome *Art Bulletin* piece. Observing that the antique ceremonial manipulation of the bridal *flammeum* recurred in some sixteenth-century Annunciations, he reasoned that when Mary is shown lifting the veil from her face, the artist must be referring to the velation that once defined ancient spousehood. The gesture is known from classical Greece, where it may identify Hera as the consort of Zeus (Fig. 9), or a mortal wife on an Attic grave stele. In imperial Rome it defines Pudicitia, the goddess who personifies the chastity of the *univira* — wife or widow who has known only one man (Fig. 10). And it is surely with this meaning of sacred marriage that the gesture is given to the Virgin Annunciate: by Titian in the 1560's and by Tiarini and Rubens (Prague) sixty years later (Figs. 11, 12).[27]

More commonly, nuptial symbolism marks the distal end of the narrative; it may occur at the Virgin's Assumption,

[22] A recent personal letter (dated 10 March 1988) from a Catholic theologian at a major American school of religion informs me of "a deepseated Christian theological motif, recently revived by Rosemary Reuther and other feminist theologians, that Mary symbolizes the church." It surprised me to learn that theologians needed to be reminded of a "motif" so familiar to art historians.

[23] Rupert of Deutz, *Pat. lat.* CLXIX, 155, quoted in H. Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church,* trans. S. Bullough, New York, 1961, 49.

[24] Honorius of Autun, *Pat. lat.* CLXXII, 494, in E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character,* Cambridge, MA, 1953, 145. The Mary-Ecclesia equation as it emerged from interpretations of Canticles is discussed, with abundant citation of sources, in J. Glatzer Wechsler, "A Change in the Iconography of the Song of Songs in 12th and 13th Century Latin Bibles," in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer . . .,* ed. M.A. Fishbane and P.R. Flohr, Leiden, 1975, 73-93, esp. 78-80 and n. 19.

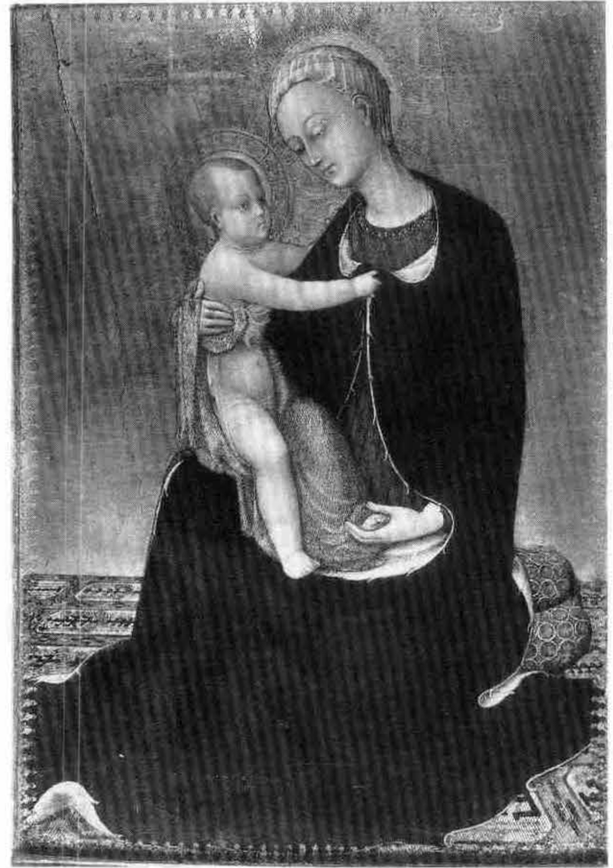
[25] The verse on Christ's scroll — *Veni electa mea et ponam in te thronum meum* — paraphrases Canticles 4:8; see E. Kitzinger, "A Virgin's Face: Antiquarianism in Twelfth-Century Art," *Art Bulletin,* LXII, 1980, 8. Manuscript commentaries on Canticles containing illuminations of Mary-Ecclesia and Christ embraced as Bride and Groom are cited or reproduced in the following: Wechsler (as in n. 24), 82-85; Hans Wentzel, "Die ikonographischen Voraussetzungen der Christus-Johannes-Gruppe und das Sponsa-Sponsus-Bild des Hohen Liedes," *Heilige Kunst: Jahrbuch des Kunstvereins der Diözese Rottenburg,* Stuttgart, 1952, figs. 6, 7; Wentzel, "Unbekannte Christus-Johannes-Gruppen," *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft,* XIII, 1959, figs. 11, 12.

[26] Instances of the hand-on-shoulder motif preceding the Lippi occur in the *Gualino Madonna,* ca. 1300 (Turin, Galleria Sabauda), and in works by Pietro Lorenzetti (Fig. 4), Vitale da Bologna (Fig. 5), Paolo di Giovanni Fei, ca. 1400 (Altenburg, Staatliches Lindenau-Museum), and Sassetta (Fig. 6). Later examples include Raphael's *Colonna Madonna* in Berlin, a Schelte à Bolswert engraving after Parmigianino (Fig. 8), and, above all, Michelangelo's *Madonna Medici.*

My attempt at a chronological survey of this conjugality-appropriation motif, from antiquity to the 19th century, has unfortunately outgrown the scope of this paper. The material will be presented, circumstances permitting, within a study of Renaissance gestures whose significance masquerades under the appearance of naturalism.

[27] A study of the velation motif as a token of the bridal or married state from antiquity to the seicento has grown to a longueur matching that of the hand-on-shoulder motif. The matter is planned for inclusion in the above-mentioned project.

4 Pietro Lorenzetti, *Madonna and Child*. Arezzo, S. Maria della Pieve



6 Sassetta, *Madonna of Humility*. Pinacoteca Vaticana

5 Vitale da Bologna, *"Madonna del Ricamo."* Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale (photo: Pinacoteca)

7 Filippo Lippi, *Madonna and Child with Angels*. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

8 Schelte à Bolswert, engraving after Parmigianino, *Madonna and Child*

as when she is welcomed by Christ bearing a banderole with a legend from Canticles, "Veni, Electa mea"; or at Mary's coronation in Heaven, being joined to Christ by the Father officiating; or when, following her Assumption and Coronation, she shares Christ's majesty as queen of the angelic host.

These are what we may call "safe" situations. They polarize the symbolism of the Son's spousehood at the state of the neonate and the Resurrected. But what of historic or quasi-historical moments such as Entombment, Lamentation, Pietà? Do such *istorie* offer occasion for the forbidden nuptials of Son and Mother? Would even Michelangelo dare to trap such a finespun trope in still earthbound bodies? In 1968, Steinberg wondered to see the sculptor so bold: in the Florence *Pietà*, the sign of mystic espousal, instead of being retained at the incarnational moment or deferred to eschatology, was implanted in historical time and assigned to a body still warm from its humanation.

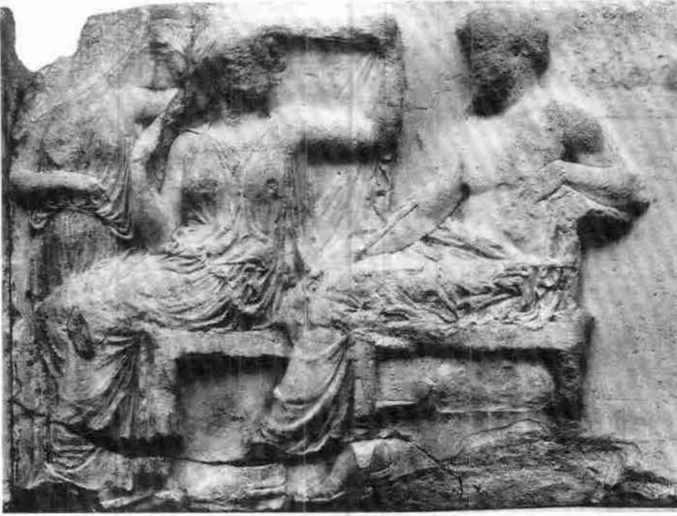
But I now find that Michelangelo, here as often elsewhere, was drawing on precedent, specifically on a tradition deriving from the Tuscan trecento. The daring new iconography, which allows the dead Christ a clear spousal gesture, appears to be the invention of Taddeo Gaddi's late years. Gaddi's *Pietà* panel at Yale (Fig. 14) shows the Christ between John and Mary, held up in his coffin. Of his deadness we are to be in no doubt. His eyes are closed, he is canopied by weeping angels, and his posthumous wound is fingered by the Virgin's right hand. Yet he returns Mary's embrace, his right arm extended in an autonomous gesture such as no corpse performs.[28]

How should this anomaly be received? There are, theoretically, three ways to respond. The first — an unrealized option — is to shudder at the grisly predicament of a woman in a cadaver's embrace. But no such response is likely to have occurred, because the picture does not invite it.

The second way is to overlook the motif — one pretends it's not there. This is the course taken hitherto by writers on trecento art. Even where the Gaddi panel or its ample progeny are discussed, the motif of the embracing corpse is passed in silence.

The third way is to acknowledge a mystery. Assume that these defunct Christs, instead of projecting the historical Jesus forward to his last earthly moments, were retrojected from the trecento image of the Man of Sorrows. It is as though the *imago pietatis* which shows the Crucified standing erect in his tomb, unsupported, sometimes open-eyed, earnestly displaying his wounds, had prompted the *Pietà* painter to ask: if the dead Christ can be alert enough to show his stigmata, he surely can show his love. So then, instead of protesting that a dead body cannot will an embrace, we allow a symbolic function. On the contrary, we say, it is precisely the expiration of Christ's human nature that permits demonstrative action to the godhood still in the body. What we see is the Bridegroom's embrace, proper to the celestial Christ, but now assigned to the auspicious corpse hastening the theophany; so that the Virgin, chosen mother and bride-elect, becomes the recipient of the love of a Christ still enfleshed. And this new motif must have met a religious need, for the dead Christ's embrace of the mother is repeatedly re-enacted during the latter trecento

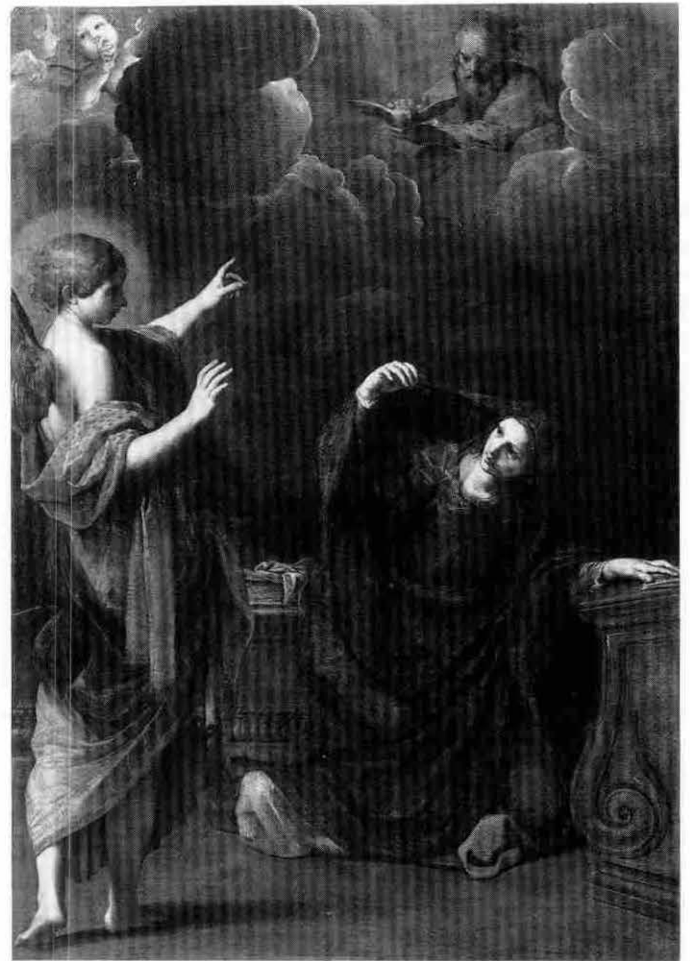
[28] The panel is catalogued among "Works Largely by the Shop of Taddeo Gaddi" in A. Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné*, Columbia, MO, and London, 1982, no. 62. But the daring symbolism we now observe may yet earn it a higher grade.



9 Parthenon, East Frieze, *Hera and Zeus*. London, British Museum

10 Aureus of Herennia Etruscilla, wife of Decius, 249-251 A.D. New York, American Numismatic Society (photo: Society)

11 Titian, *Annunciation*. Venice, S. Salvatore



12 Alessandro Tiarini, *Annunciation* (before cleaning). Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale (photo: Pinacoteca)

and down to the 1420's (Figs. 14-18).[29]

During most of the fifteenth century, the symbol of the animate corpse is withheld; it would have offended the rational naturalism advocated by Alberti and practiced by the great Florentines he admired. When Alberti speaks of the proper way to depict the dead, he commends a Roman relief representing the slain Meleager, because "in the dead man there is no member that does not seem completely lifeless; they all hang loose; hands, fingers, neck, all droop inertly down, all combine together to represent death." There follows a general rule: "To represent the limbs of a body entirely at rest is as much the sign of an excellent artist as to render them all alive and in action. So in every painting the principle should be observed that . . . the members of the dead appear dead down to the smallest detail."[30] Surely this admonition was not meant to exempt — if it was not actually aimed at — images of dead Christs who embrace.

But just such images may have positively inspired Alberti's older contemporary San Bernardino. In his sermon, "On the Passion of Christ," the preacher visualizes the Mater Dolorosa at Christ's descent from the Cross: "Rushing into his embraces and kisses, she could not be sated of her beloved, albeit dead" *(In eius amplexus et oscula ruens, de suo dilecto, licet extincto, satiari non poterat)*.[31]

NB: not the bereaved mother but her crucified Son; it is he, the *dilectus* of the Song of Songs, who, in despite of death, bestows kiss and embrace. The conceit is audacious, because a continuous tradition of exegesis, Jewish and Christian, had warned against reading the amorous verses of Canticles in a physical sense. When Origen, initiating the Christian tradition, comments on Canticles 2:6 — "his left hand is under my head and his right hand shall embrace me" — he insists that the carnality of the wording yield to spiritual interpretation. "The picture before us in this drama of love is that of the Bride hastening to consummate her union with the Bridegroom. But turn with all speed to the lifegiving spirit and, eschewing physical terms, . . . do not suffer an interpretation that has to do with the flesh and the passions to carry you away."[32]

Of course, Bernardino respected such warnings. But in crediting the expired Christ with amative capability, he was relying on the deadness of him to ensure the metaphoricity of "his embrace." And a like confidence must have guided Taddeo Gaddi and those trecento painters who followed Gaddi's example. In their pictures the anomaly of the nimble corpse was to be understood as heuristic — outright carnality overruled by the palpable paradox.

But what of Alberti? It seems unlikely that he missed the visionary intention of those earlier painters. But he would have counseled a practitioner of his day to learn how to make a corpse look convincing, before putting it through its metaphorical paces; a corpse that could buss and caress would be nothing to marvel at if it never looked dead. In other words, in Alberti's view, spirituality of intention could only redouble the need for rigorous verisimilitude.

Before long, a handful of painters in Northern Italy felt ready to try again. If Alberti had wanted the motions of the body to reveal those of the soul, and if Christ's divine soul lingered in his mortified body, then Christ's was a case special enough to suspend the order of death. Thus, by the 1460's, the dead Christ's caress of the Virgin reappears in the work of Cosimo Tura, and thereafter in pictures by Crivelli, Butinone, Marziale (Figs. 19-21). Each of these fervid realists seeks to endow the corpse of the Crucified with a mysterious vitality signaled by its faculty of embrace. And this is precisely what Michelangelo, in that 1968 article, was said to be doing — urging naturalism into the furthest reaches of metaphor.[33]

All this seems to me orthodox, even obvious. What then accounts for those slurs of perverseness, blasphemy, implausibility, far-fetched exotica, and so on, which still pur-

[29] Fig. 13 reproduces a disturbing *Pietà* — the center finial of a considerably restored polyptych — in the Bologna Pinacoteca Nazionale. The work is attributed to the still shadowy personality of the Pseudo-Jacopino di Francesco, and its conjectural date has been recently rolled back from "after 1360" to the 1330's. As is usual in these affairs, iconographic considerations — not even so outrageous a feature as the dead Christ's embrace of his mother — hardly enter into debates over chronology. Nor does the motif seem to have attracted imitators in Bolognese painting.

The group of late 14th- and early 15th-century works that take up Gaddi's iconography includes (in addition to those reproduced): Maestro di Santa Verdiana, *Pietà*, 1395-1400, detached fresco, Florence, S. Miniato al Monte (M. Boskovits, *Pittura fiorentina alla vigilia del Rinascimento 1370-1400*, Florence, 1975, fig. 358); and a Rimini School *Madonna and Saint John with the Man of Sorrows*, Strasbourg, Musée des Beaux-Arts (G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, Greenwich, CT, 1972, fig. 733).

Once we recognize the late trecento motif of Christ appearing as an embracing corpse, a question arises. To what extent, if at all, was the motif influenced by the "macabre" imagery that followed the experience of the Black Death? "La danse des morts" is first recorded in French literature around 1370, and the graphic motif of the self-motivated skeleton as a symbol of generic death seems to emerge in this period. (The distinction between the 14th-century Death symbol and the motile skeletons of Roman art is discussed in L.E. Jordan III, "The Iconography of Death in Western Medieval Art to 1350," Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN, 1980, esp. chap. V — with ample citation of earlier literature.)

[30] Alberti, *De pictura*, II, 37, trans. C. Grayson, *Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting and Sculpture. The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, London, 1972, 75-77.

[31] Bernardino of Siena, *Opera omnia*, Florence, 1950, II, 267, Sermo 55, 3, 2. Later in the same sermon (3, 3), "she embraced her beloved with the inexplicable tenderness of love" (*amplectebatur dilectum suum inexplicabili amoris dulcedine*). When the Virgin meets the Holy Women, they bring her "garments and veils for her new and sad widowhood" (*portata sunt vestimenta et capitis vela novae et maestae viduitatis*). Viduity, says the preacher, though it was a son, not a spouse she had lost.

[32] *Pat. lat.* XIII, 162-163; trans. R.P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies* (*Ancient Christian Writers*, XXVI), Westminster, MD, 1957, 200.

[33] In addition to the works here reproduced and Tura's *Pietàs* (E. Ruhmer, *Tura: Paintings and Drawings. Complete Edition*, London, 1958, pls. 47 and IX), I cite: Crivelli's *Pietà* panel at The Metropolitan Museum of Art; his heavily restored, later *Pietà* in the Fogg Art Museum; and Butinone's *Pietà*, formerly in Berlin (B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Central Italian and North Italian Schools*, London, 1968, III, pl. 1344. In each of these pictures, the dead Christ's embrace is surely allusive, and it is noteworthy that in each instance emphasis is laid on the mother's old age, as though to widen the generation gap and thereby distance the specter of incest.

sue the slung leg hypothesis? The suggestion that Michelangelo's Christ might configure the heavenly Bridegroom seems innocuous enough, for even if the spousal motif had gone unnoticed in earlier *Pietàs* of the Gaddi or the Crivelli type, it had been recognized in the Florence *Pietà* itself: Tolnay long ago had described the work as "a kind of ultimate sposalizio." As for the élan of its protagonist corpse, Frederick Hartt, in the very essay that attacks Steinberg's thesis, sees Christ's right hand, "powerful as if it were still alive, . . . press into [the Magdalene's] back between the shoulders." He stresses "the special favor indicated by this embrace," and observes on the Magdalene's diadem a "winged *amorino* — symbol of love."[34] Clearly, neither Christ's alleged spousehood (Tolnay) nor his bestowal of a posthumous "favor" by dint of gesture (Hartt) disturbed anyone.

Ah, but these blameless scholars steered clear of the lower body. Tolnay saw "the heads of Christ and Mary . . . fused together: they penetrate each other as do their feelings." Hartt observes an embracing arm and cites a love symbol worn on a brow. Perhaps Steinberg trespassed in not respecting the lower limits of iconology.

III. In Praise of Legs

I think we have arrived at the crux. What Steinberg's critics found unacceptable (though they never came out with it) was the scandalous notion that Michelangelo would involve an inferior limb in Christological symbolism. Is it thinkable? Can such high emprise be entrusted to legs? We know legs to be serviceable appendages, adapted to the drudgery of maintenance and locomotion. For the rest — especially where devotional art is concerned — the less said about them the better. In an age when good taste abounded, Bishop Guglielmus Durandus praised Byzantine bust portraits of saints for showing the figures "only from the navel upward, and not below it, in order to remove all occasion for foolish thoughts."[35] And in modern times, Goethe declared that "all ethical expression pertains only to the upper part of the body."[36] Now this is serious. Suppose it were true: then the very idea of a Christ addressing a nether extremity to the Virgin would amount to charging Christ with unethical conduct! And then indeed it becomes the duty of honest men to cry blasphemy. (And they have.)

But with all due disrespect to his eminence, Goethe's dictum, served up as a Universal, is silly. Delivered in the context of an essay on Leonardo's *Last Supper*, it belongs properly whence it derived, i.e., to the lesser universe of table manners. And no such decorum (*Tischzucht* in German) inhibits Michelangelo's management of the human physique. His bodies don't hierarchize at the girdle. Think of Sebastiano del Piombo's remark about Michelangelo's statue of the Risen Christ for S. Maria sopra Minerva: that the knees alone were worth more than the city of Rome.[37] A fellow artist said that. People who do not habitually draw or dance rarely conceptualize at this level. They quarantine spirituality at the top.

That Christ's corpse can stir, that one of his undead arms may hug the Magdalene or the Virgin, that his hand may fondle, his head turn to console, his lips adjoin the Madonna's in a kiss of his mouth — all these motions, once they are shown to occur in Pietà imagery, will be gladly indexed s.v. "Iconography," provided that such posthumous symptoms pertain only to the superior moiety, the loftier portion, that better half whose tenders of amplexion and osculation have been so long in service to metaphor that they glide effortless into given figures of speech. "Diesen Kuss der ganzen Welt," writes Goethe's most illustrious colleague; and Joyce, gently mocking, has this same item, *die ganze Welt*, folded in a summer evening's "mysterious embrace": such being the tropological aptitude of lips and arms. But legwork? Would a Renaissance artist have stooped to engage the apparatus beneath the waist in the symbolism of divine love?

This is a rhetorical question and not one for sedentary savants. Better to ask a dancer, a gymnast, or one who habitually draws — anyone whose perception of the human body is not predetermined by the divisive effect of a tabletop. For a dancer, as for Michelangelo, limbs function in an egalitarian system of thoroughgoing expressiveness. Structure is unitive, not rank-ordered. Or say that the body is divisible in more ways than one: equatorially, if you like, as in common speech when we sort arms and legs; bilaterally, if you want to part right from left; or bendwise, chiastically. In a famous Michelangelo drawing of Christ resurrected (Fig. 22), one axial surge, symbol of the ascent, aligns a raised arm with an opposite leg, each in extension; leaving two foreshortened members to form a meandering counterpoint. Here, as again in the Florence *Pietà*, each leg pairs with an offside arm. But whether we parse along crossed diagonals, or flanking a median, or at the waist to segregate base from noble, the parcels are our making. Michelangelo's habit is rather to think the body from center out; power generated at the midriff sends forth equivalent vectors, which we call limbs. Is it likely that such choreography would denigrate legs in emulation of Goethe's bisected diners or to forestall Durandus's "foolish thoughts"?

Before returning to the Florence *Pietà*, it may be well to consider some of Michelangelo's other religious works with regard to the lower members — to see just how the artist makes them participate in structures of meaning, the goal of this exercise being not so much to argue that legs are

[34] Hartt (as in n. 2), 80. For the quotation from Tolnay, see Tolnay (as in n. 4), 87.

[35] Durandus, *Rationale divinorum officiorum*, I, 3, 2.

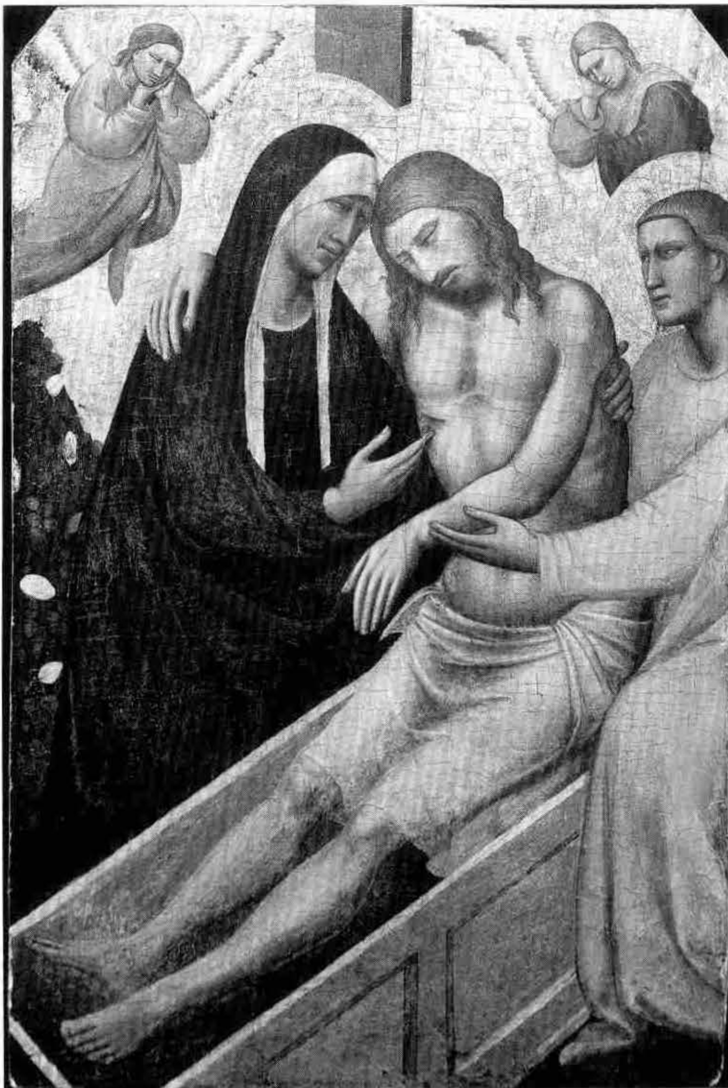
[36] "Jeder sittliche Ausdruck gehört nur dem oberen Teil des Körpers an"; J.W. von Goethe, "Joseph Bossi über Leonardo da Vincis Abendmahl zu Mailand," *Über Kunst und Altertum*, I, 1817. Hearing the above words quoted in conversation, Siegfried Gohr of the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, produced two instant reactions: at first the word "Feigling," then the reflection that Germany had never created a native school of dance, and that even today every major dance school in Germany is headed by an imported foreigner.

[37] Sebastiano in Rome to Michelangelo in Florence, 6 Sept. 1521, in P. Barocchi and R. Ristori, eds., *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*, II, Florence, 1967, 314.

13 Pseudo-Jacopino di Francesco, *Pietà*. Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale (photo: Pinacoteca)

14 Taddeo Gaddi, *Entombment*. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery (photo: Gallery)

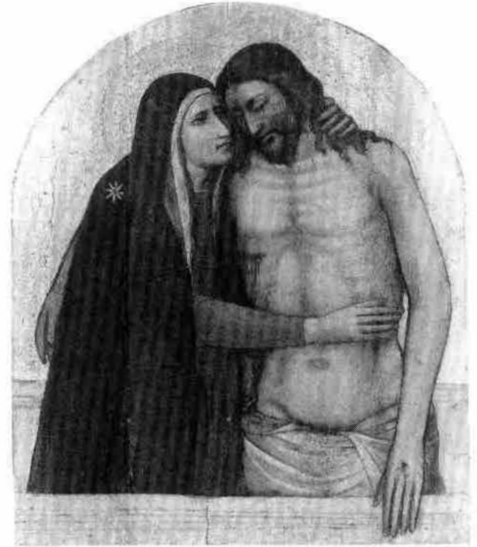
15 Florentine, late 14th-century, *Pietà*. Florence, Marcello Guidi Collection

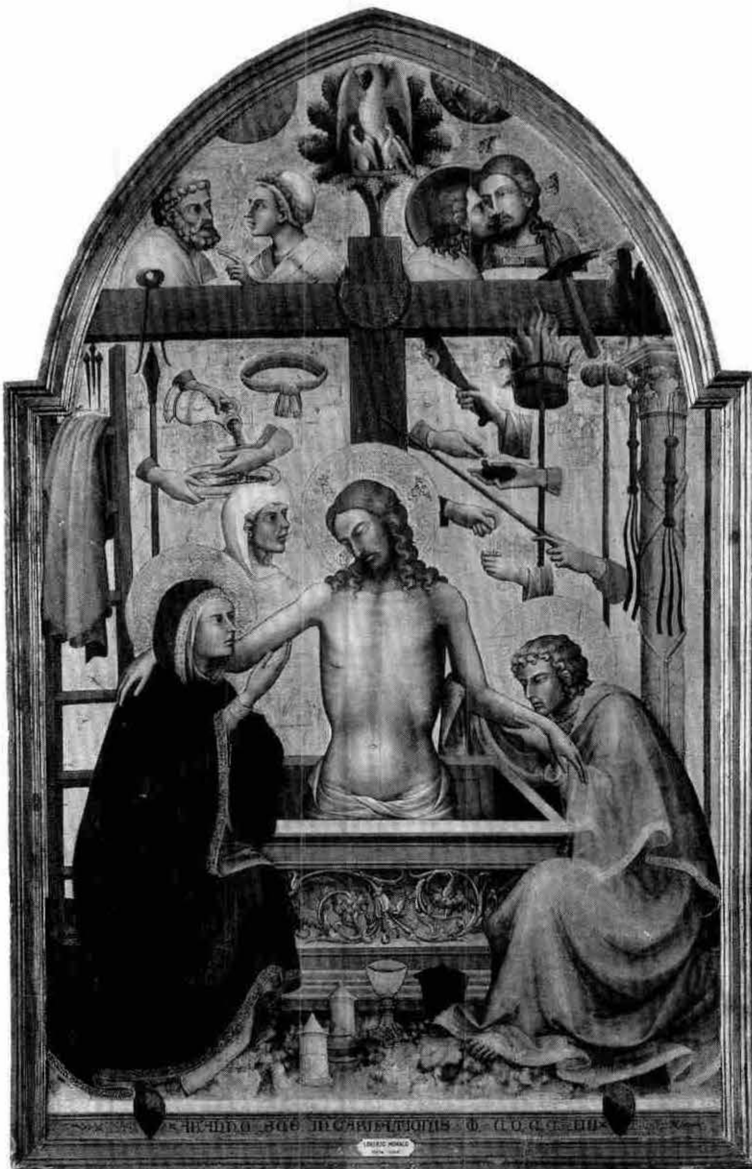


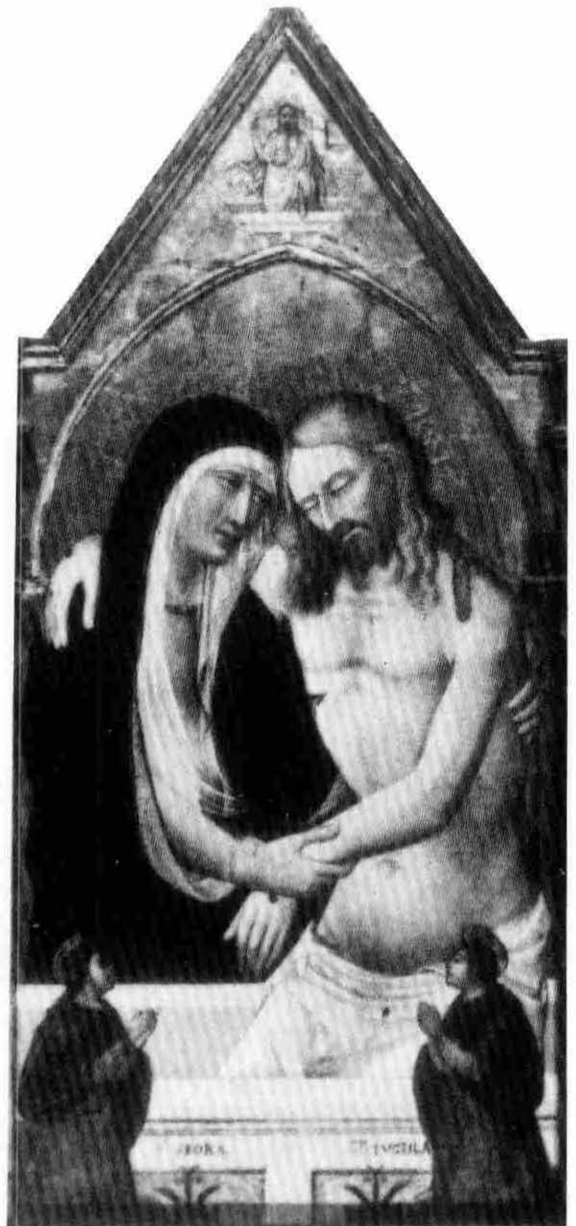
16 Niccolò di Pietro Gerini, *Pietà*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Johnson Collection (photo: Museum)

17 Lorenzo Monaco, *Madonna and Saint John with the Man of Sorrows*. Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia

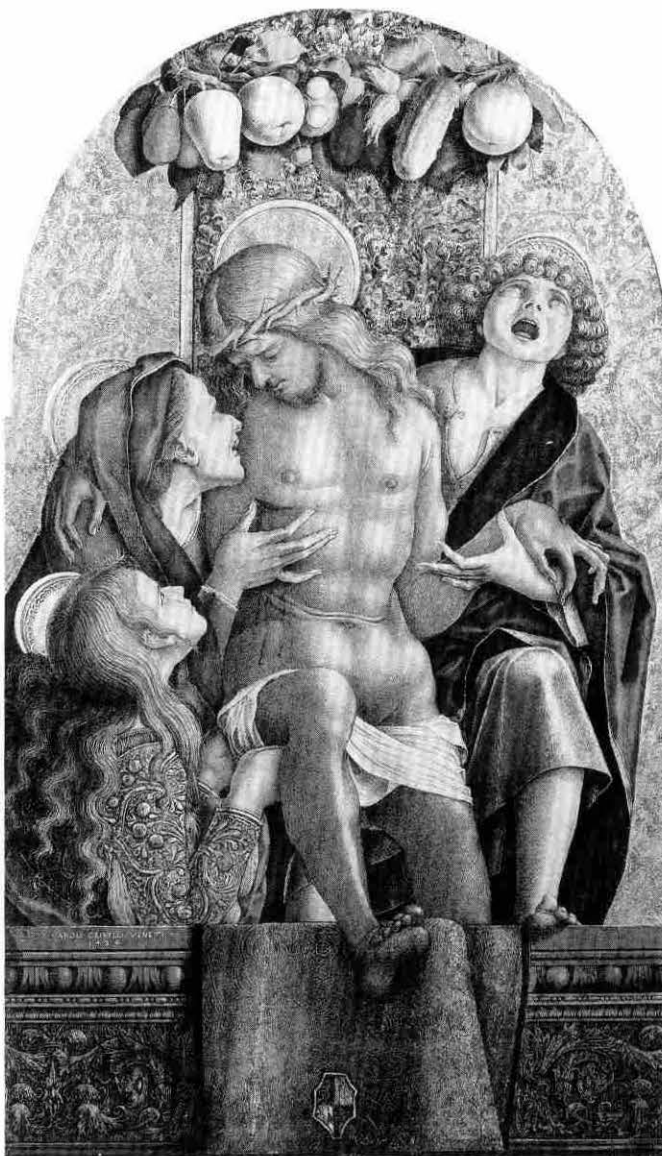
18 Mariotto di Cristofano, *Pietà*. Carda, Parrochiale







19 Carlo Crivelli, *Pietà*. Detroit Institute of Arts (photo: Institute)



20 Carlo Crivelli, *Pietà*. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (photo: Museum)

important, but that the unity of the body is. To avoid overkill, I cite only seven examples.

The *Bruges Madonna* of 1503-05 (Fig. 23) shows the divine boy held between Mary's knees, i.e., in manifest filiation. His pose is curious, at once eager and hanging back, one tiny hand squeezing the mother's thumb, while the other clutches her thigh. Yet his legs, like his lowered glance, point the direction to go — though again not without equivocation, since the dipping toes seem irresolute. One would think of a foot testing waters were it not for the load of foreseen sorrow that weighs from the apex down. Mother and Son know that the pending step is not lightly taken. So the contrapposto of the sleek naked Child, whose head and legs overrule hesitant hands, arms, and shoulders, compounds the whim of an infant, clinging and wanting out, with the will of one whose native childishness sways with foreknowledge. The contrapposto is both psychologized and theologized. Hence the conflicted stance, the smooth glide of the lower body drawn by its leading limb to produce a posture that both relucts and performs; a posture ambivalent even at this unstable footing, where a heel lingers in a hammock fold of the mother's skirt, as if the wavering between safety and venture could be epitomized in one foot.[38] What we see is protectedness at the steep of a precipice, and a compositional system aimed at a ripple of infant toes about to touch down. As the boy issues, his condition *ex Vergine* becomes his visible attribute. Call it "whenceness"; it defines his incarnate nature as Mary's issue. The overt derivation from these maternal loins and the imminent footfall are as doctrinal as the Creed.

[38] The "hammock fold" had appeared before: in Cosimo Tura's little *Madonna* panel at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and in a pen and ink sketch for a Virgin and Child by Marco Zoppo (A.E. Popham and P. Pouncey, *Italian Drawings. . . in the British Museum: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, London, 1950, pl. ccxxv). Tura has the boy fast asleep, nestling within the fold; Zoppo has him stepping out in brisk, lively action. The notion of using the hammock fold to project a psychology of internal conflict is entirely Michelangelo's.

21 Marco Marziale, *Pietà*. Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts (photo: Museum)

In the *Doni Madonna* (1506; Fig. 24) — the first Madonna to show a bare arm and shoulder — the crouch of legs is pure Martha Graham. Michelangelo's Virgin sits lower than any previous *Madonna humilitatis*, lower than any sedent figure had ever sat; her legs so disposed that they define the plane of the earth as a lily pad defines a surface of water. And then she leans back at ease between the parted knees of the father, whom we are content to call simply Saint Joseph, without questioning this unspeakable intimacy. There is action here for which we have no apt wording. For though common speech allows for a person resting in, or falling into, another's arms, no idiomatic expression permits falling into another's legs, or resting enjambed. Yet this is what the *Doni Tondo* would give us to see if our glance were uncensored: a Madonna enjambed, whose upper arm reposes on a familiar masculine thigh.

But there is no reason to flinch, for the picture is orthodox. I have long pleaded that this Saint Joseph is a transparent mystery, meant to be understood as surrogate Father and surrogate Husband. In both capacities he stands in God's place. And the interposition of the young Mother in the fork of his legs defines her as Daughter and Bride of God. What Petrarch had called "the three sweet dear names" that unite in the Virgin — those of Mother, Daughter, and Bride — the picture blazons as her triune predicate; not one by one, but in one sensible grasp.[39]

No compression of language attains such instantaneity. Yet this instantaneity is the heart of the Mariological creed. Whereas all women who become brides and mothers relate severally to father, husband, and child, Mary alone, affianced to the whole Trinity, was *his* daughter whom she bore and espoused — "figlia del tuo figlio" and Sponsa Dei. And the Tondo sees her in the totality of her nature: as the Child's cherished mother, as beloved consort reclined at a husband's thigh, and as favorite daughter nestled between fatherly knees. The legs of this more-than-Joseph, and those of the Virgin, and those of the Christ Child as he mounts from the father's bosom into the mother's arms — these lowly limbs pace an entire theology.

And why does the Virgin in the Medici Chapel support the Child on crossed legs? No earlier Madonna had been cast in such posture, and after the Counter-Reformation

[39] The above interpretation of the *Doni Tondo* remains unpublished. In lecture form it was first presented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on 14 Oct. 1965, and two years later at Yale and Columbia. A five-hundred word condensation was written (on a dare) for *Vogue*, Dec. 1974, 139. A full statement of the case formed the subject of the first two of my Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, in 1982.

The Petrarch quotation in the foregoing text paragraph — "tre dolci cari nomi ai in te raccolti, madre, figliuola e sposa" — is taken from his *Canzone*, "Vergine bella, che di sol vestita." Cf. the closing lines of the "bellissimo spirito" that conclude Vasari's praise of Michelangelo's Roman *Pietà*, where Christ is addressed as "Sposo, figliuolo e padre," the Madonna as "Unica sposa sua figliuola e madre."

the pose was pronounced improper.[40] May we suspect that Michelangelo had some meaning in mind? I have suggested that — given the gravity of the work and the setting — the pose was less likely to be a casual genre motif than a symbol of closure, of the Virgin as the Closed Gate of Ezekiel's vision, the single scriptural proof of her perpetual virginity. "This gate shall be shut," says the Prophet; "it shall not be opened, and no man shall pass through it; because the Lord the God of Israel hath entered in by it, and it shall be shut" (Ezek. 44:2). Saint Augustine comments: "This closed gate in the house of the Lord is Mary . . . who remained ever *virgo intacta* . . . " The interpretation became canonic and was repeated unceasingly, down to Saint Antoninus of Florence, for whom Mary is the miraculous city "which Ezekiel beheld in his last vision, by which the Lord alone entered and issued, and whose gate remained closed." In the *Madonna Medici*, the Child rides Mary's foreclosing thigh like a clamp. Two autonomous wills are involved, and both wills at one. Clamping down, the Child seals what is already self-sealed by volition.[41]

As for the late Michelangelo cartoon at the British Museum, known as the *Epifania*, Ernst Gombrich has beaten me to it. In a paper published in 1986, he showed that its subject was Mary's perpetual virginity, an interpretation, he writes, "clinched by the strange gesture of the Virgin, who is represented pushing St. Joseph away. . . . There could be no clearer way of indicating the doctrine . . . that Mary never had intercourse with Joseph. Once we see the group in this light we may also notice the strange ambiguity of the gesture of Mary's right hand and her relation to the Christ Child, whom she appears to be holding by a leading string." "Her relation to the Christ Child": the phrase succeeds in evading (with a delicacy shaming the present paper) any direct mention of Mary's legs. We are merely alerted to how these members further the definition of an article of faith.[42]

The *Pietà for Vittoria Colonna:* once again we are offered a vision of Christ *ex Vergine* — but of a Christ aborn-

22 Michelangelo, *The Risen Christ*. Windsor Castle, Collection of Her Majesty the Queen

[40] See Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura* (1649): "What can be more foreign to the respect which we owe to the purity of Our Lady the Virgin than to paint her sitting down with one of her knees placed over the other, and often with her sacred feet uncovered and naked. Let thanks be given to the Holy Inquisition which commands that this liberty be corrected" (Bk. II, chap. 2; ed. F.J. Sanchez Canton, Madrid, 1956, I, 289).

The statement made here (and in L. Steinberg, "Michelangelo's Madonna Medici and Related Works," *Burlington Magazine*, CXIII, 1971, 145) that no Madonna before Michelangelo's assumed the cross-legged posture needs to be modified: a few Early Christian sarcophagi representing the Nativity or the Adoration of the Magi (one in the Duomo at Mantua, another at S. Vitale, Ravenna, three others surviving in scattered fragments) retain the common antique motif of the cross-legged seat (J. Wilpert, *I sarcofagi cristiani antichi*, Rome, 1929, I, pl. XXX; II, fig. 181, pls. CLXXXXVIII, 1, CCXXIV, 3; and W.F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art*, New York, 1961, fig. 179). Thereafter, the motif is abandoned — except for one unexpected occurrence in the Book of Kells, fol. 7v — a reference kindly offered by Susan Petty of Southern Methodist University, Dallas.

[41] The present interpretation of the *Madonna Medici* (unpublished) was first presented in my Gauss Lectures at Princeton University, October, 1985.

Quotations in the foregoing paragraph are from Saint Augustine, Sermon 195, *Pat. lat.* XXXIX, 2107; and Saint Antoninus, *Summa theologica*, tit. 15, cap. 3, reprint of 1740 ed., Graz, 1959, IV, 924. I thank S. Y. Edgerton, Jr. for this reference.

[42] E.H. Gombrich, "Michelangelo's Cartoon in the British Museum," in *New Light on Old Masters: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance, IV*, Chicago, 1986, 175.

The following passage from A. Jameson's *Legends of the Madonna* (1852; London, 1903, 381) is worth rereading, since it offered a first inkling of the work's theological orientation: "The exact meaning of the subject has often been disputed. It appears to me, however, very clear, and one never before or since attempted by any other artist. Mary is seated in the centre; her Child is reclining on the ground between her knees; and the little St. John, holding his cross, looks on him steadfastly. A man coming forward, seems to ask of Mary, 'Whose son is this?' She most expressively puts aside Joseph with her hand, and looks up, as if answering, 'not the son of an earthly, but of a heavenly Father!' There are five other figures standing behind, and the whole group is most significant."

Though Jameson was unaware that Michelangelo's specific theme was the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, she saw more clearly in 1852 than did the outstanding connoisseur of a half century later. Unlike Jameson, the following from B. Berenson may not be worth quoting, but perhaps it deserves a smile (the same Michelangelo cartoon is under discus-

23 Michelangelo, *Bruges Madonna.* Bruges, Notre-Dame

24 Michelangelo, *Doni Madonna.* Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

ing and sepulchered in one act. The image is eucharistic. At the verge of Christ's grave, Mary as Church sits upright as on a birthing stool and, with midwifing angels cooperating, engenders the sacrificial body.[43]

And then there is Michelangelo's ultimate and most private work, the uncommissioned *Rondanini Pietà*, a marble on which he was still engaged two weeks before his death at eighty-nine. Here the Madonna's vesture exposes the knee and is slit to mid-thigh — an affront to traditional inhibitions which no art historian has yet faced up to, and that includes me. I am awed by it, but I don't understand.

One final instance: Christ's posture in the *Last Judgment* fresco. In the literature of the past 150 years, almost every account of the subject states *in no uncertain terms* what this Christ is doing. But some see him seated; others as standing; others again as rising or springing up; and some as advancing with a vigorous stride. And each writer is sure of his reading, confident that a body cannot perform more than one of these acts at a time. The writers are being as reasonable as had been the many sixteenth-century copyists and adapters of Michelangelo's figure, some of whom would adjust the posture into a stance, others into a sitting position or forward stride. Meanwhile, the evidence of Michelangelo's few extant sketches for this part of the fresco is of no help; it only indicates that the *concetto* was not always equivocal and that the artist must have striven for a definitive mystification — a figure interpretable in at least three distinct phases, three concerted postures that are anatomically incompossible, inexpressible in word or phrase, and, as the copyists were to discover, inimitable. Yet this triple allusiveness of the pose makes lucid sense. As presiding judge, holding session, Christ sits in the judgment seat. As the Christ of the Advent, the Second Coming, he must advance. And (this is Jack Greenstein's insight) since the Last Judgment fulfills what had been prefigured at the Transfiguration — when Jesus rose upright between Elijah and Moses (of whom Saints John and Peter are the New Testament antitypes) — he must stand.[44]

Does such thinking seem too far-fetched? Though Renaissance writing on art is rarely hospitable to multival-

sion): "The motive is original. The Madonna, lightly seated, listens eagerly to the impassioned discourse of the Evangelist, while with one hand she silences Joseph. Of what is the Evangelist speaking? Perhaps of the Christ Child Who, unaware and unconcerned, is nestling roguishly at His Mother's feet, making believe that He will not play with the infant John. This, at least, is my interpretation of the cartoon, so splendid besides as a composition, concerning which much might be said would space permit" (B. Berenson, *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* [1903], 2nd ed., Chicago, 1938, I, 231-232).

[43] For a detailed discussion of the design and symbolism of the *Pietà for Vittoria Colonna*, see Steinberg (as in n. 10), 265-270.

[44] J. Greenstein's close discussion of the subject will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Artibus et historiae* under the title " 'How Glorious the Second Coming of Christ': Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* and the Transfiguration." The deliberate multivalence of Christ's posture in the *Last Judgment* fresco was expounded in L. Steinberg, "Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America*, LXIII, Nov.-Dec., 1975, 50.

ence, we do find its like in the symbolic thought of the Middle Ages. Thus Adam Scotus: "Vide Filium hominis ambulantem, vide sedentem, vide et stantem. Ambulantem in mortalitate, sedentem in glorificatione, stantem in aeternitate."[45] The motive pattern is similar to Michelangelo's image, except that the theologian arrays his triplicity in neat sequence, the painter in coincident manifestation. A God-man at once striding, sitting, and standing — a lode of doctrine in one pair of legs, because the artist habitually vests his vision of Christian mysteries in a corporeal symbolism that comprehends the body from top to toe.

In the 1968 *Art Bulletin* article, Freud's famous maxim "anatomy is destiny" was quoted and followed by: "In Michelangelo's hands, anatomy became theology." No wonder Steinberg found mystic spousehood in a slung leg. And though his hypothesis has been ten times dismissed these last twenty years, I continue to find it sound in doctrine and even persuasive, for it completes the body of Christ not anatomically only, but as a coherent *concetto*.

Michelangelo was carving a body which, in the words of Leo the Great, was "able to die in respect of [its human nature], unable to die in respect of the other."[46] This radical paradox is the foundation of orthodoxy, and it was within this paradox that the sculptor of the Florence *Pietà* defined his task — to incorporate death with survival, mortality and undeathliness without contradiction. The result is a revelation: a body of Christ, wherein the estranged natures of man and God reconcile in cross-rhythm and each limb sustains the theophany. And I do mean each limb, and all in concert. They need to be itemized lest one of them escape the mind's eye.

Item. Left arm. Sequent to the fall of the head, it strays like a twisting tag from the shoulder, drifting backhand against a collapsing knee. We recognize its crippling pronation as an ancient indicator of death, for this is how slain Niobids on Roman sarcophagi relinquish their done-with arms. But Michelangelo re-enacts the motif with an exacting, demonstrative torsion. Along with the flagging head, Christ's left arm signals not simply cessation, but death achieved: *consummatum est*.[47]

Item. A broken reed — the right leg. A wasted limb thinned to its skeleton, fit partner to the abandoned arm grazing the knee.

Item. An empowered right arm, strong in the circling sweep that embraces the penitent. Sprung from a corpse, it testifies to an ulterior nature, touching but incomprehensible.

This leaves one extremity unaccounted for, to wit, the left leg, which is lost to us and which, to one scholar's regret, keeps *Art Bulletin* readers worrying about what is not there. But what ought to concern us is the sense of the whole. Just what is the detriment of that loss? Shall we mutter "good riddance" because we admire the residue? Or did the now missing leg play an integral role in this body drama, in which cross-paired lifeless and deathless limbs interweave and two piteous members cave in together against the others' outreach?

In the opening paragraph of his 1968 article, Steinberg wrote: "Michelangelo planned a whole, and whatever that whole was meant to embody he lived with for some eight years. . . . And any thought that Michelangelo entertained for nearly a decade is worth thinking again." To which the critics reply that no Michelangelo thought, other than formal and anatomical, ever invested that nether region, hence no symbol to ponder. A leg is a leg, and a corpse's leg is dead weight, and "for an artist, a sculpture can be only a sculpture," and so on. Anything rather than admit a leg into a structure of meaning.

Yet this much must be said in fairness to Steinberg's critics — they probably feel protective of Michelangelo, as if the man had been meanly maligned, as if the bid to charge the absconded leg with significance brought shame to the artist. In their perception, the slung leg hypothesis would accuse Michelangelo of parading eroticism, albeit symbolic, in naked show — *ad oculos* rather than to the ear. And this, in a monumental devotional work, must not be allowed. Molanus, the stern Counter-Reformation censor, warned in 1570 that if lascivious books were justly outlawed under the Tridentine rule, "how much more important that pictures of this sort be prohibited. . . . " "Language," Molanus continues (with an apt bow to Horace), "speaks to the ears; pictures speak to the eyes . . . and often descend more deeply into the heart of man. . . ."[48] From this doctrine — which would apply *a fortiori* to sculpture — it follows that an erotic bond presented to sight titillates more perniciously than even the frankest verse from the Song of Songs. And we might add that visual images lack the safeguard of deniability; they cannot say and gainsay in one breath. The preacher who invokes the joy of the bride — "my Beloved . . . shall lie all night betwixt my breasts" (Cant. 1:13) — adds the instant assurance that the phrase is mysteriously meant, since she who is speaking is the human soul offering her bosom to the Logos, the Word. It takes a lot more persuasion to subtilize an embrace carved

[45] *Pat. lat.* CXCVIII, 295. Adam Scotus: a Premonstratensian, later Carthusian, spiritual writer; Abbot of Dryburgh Abbey in Berwick, Scotland, ca. 1184; died probably ca. 1212. I have Dr. J. Freiberg to thank for this welcome reference.

[46] From the *Tome* of Leo the Great (449): "And so, to fulfil the conditions of our healing, the man Jesus Christ, one and the same mediator between God and man, was able to die in respect of the one, unable to die in respect of the other"; trans. H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, Oxford, 1947, 71.

[47] The motif of the pronated dead arm was originally identified in connection with Rodin's response to the *Pietà*; see L. Steinberg, "Rodin" (1963), rev. and rep. in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York, 1972, 402. But it was not Michelangelo who re-invented or revived the motif: a poignant example of it, similarly combined with the droop of the head, occurs in a terracotta *Pietà* of the 1470's, which Ruhmer attributes to Cosimo Tura (Ruhmer [as in n. 33], pl. 46).

[48] J. Molanus, *De historia SS. imaginum et picturarum* . . . (1570), Louvain, 1771, 120, 121: "Quanto ergo magis prohibendae sunt hujusmodi Picturae. . . . Lingua loquitur auribus, Pictura loquitur oculis . . . & frequenter altius descendit in pectus hominis."

in perdurable marble. If that embrace is performed by a leg, it can take twenty years.

The *Pietà* was begun sometime in the latter 1540's, that is to say, under a friendly pontificate. Paul III (reigned 1534-49) was an art-loving patrician who defended the artist against all carpers and kept their latrations subdued. It was during these sheltered years that the septuagenarian Michelangelo conceived his tomb monument, conceiving it as a wished-for communion with Christ, expressible through carnal means. That he was aware of his symbolism should be taken for granted. To think otherwise is to beggar Michelangelo's understanding of body language and pronounce him subliterate in his own idiom. It serves no purpose to imagine him blind to what we finally notice. But latelings are better than no witness at all. So Tolnay (1960) perceived an implied *sposalizio* in the meeting of Christ's head with Mary's; Hartt recognized a love motif in the right arm's "embrace"; and Steinberg, expatiating on one ardent leg, observed incidentally that a sling loosed from the dead man's chest passes between the Magdalene's breasts to cascade down her belly — the "delegated caress of the shroud." The consistency of these inventions argues a confidence that cannot be other than willed.

But during the half decade following the death of his papal champion — as the murmurs against the *Last Judgment* grew loud and the Inquisitor Pope Paul IV pressed to have the offending fresco destroyed, while zealots decried the artist as an "inventor of obscenities" — during these years, 1552-55, Michelangelo did a number of strangely negative things that betray faltering confidence. He sought to deny the "caressing shroud," lamented his former "error" in making art his "idol and sovereign," promised to abjure sculpture and painting (sonnet, 1554; Girardi 285), confessed misgiving about the rightness of his *concetti* (see below), and finally smashed the *Pietà*, most effectively and irremediably the left leg of Christ. Are not these actions — disclaimers, renunciation, doubt, demolition — interpretable as symptoms of inward change exacerbated by a changed climate?

Undoubtedly, the artist's attempt to destroy the *Pietà* was overdetermined, as one gathers from the multiple explanations that gushed from him as soon as Vasari asked. No doubt, the exceptional obduracy of the stone was an irritant. The loss of "part of the Virgin's elbow" must have come as a shocking humiliation. Perhaps, too, the nagging of his dying servant Urbino got on his nerves. And we know from Vasari that something in the actual shaping of that slung leg had gone awry, whence the sculptor's attempt to alter it. But let's not discount the possibility that some of these mishaps occurred *because* he had "come to hate the work even before," or rule out his apprehension that the meaning of Christ's leg entwined with the Virgin — originally a pagan symbol and the last of its kind to appear in his oeuvre — might disqualify the work as intrinsically unsound and render it offensive to fellow Christians. A dead Christ, still incarnate, marrying all within reach by way of arms, legs, and drapery — this is how the scoffers who were scandalized by the *Last Judgment* might have interpreted the *Pietà* had they looked with attention. So little is needed to rob symbols of their mystique, as the artist had learned to his cost. No longer was the intended spirituality of his symbols guaranteed by reliance on poetic traditions enshrined in indefectible Scripture and liturgy. These could not be misguided; but no inerrancy attended his own *concetti*, so that the risk he was running in offering to express mystic union by stark carnal means became insupportable. The 1968 *Art Bulletin* article suspected a failure of confidence at the very center of Michelangelo's creative will, despair about the validity of painted or carved figuration as a vehicle of divine knowledge and service.

In 1552, even as he was laboring on the *Pietà* and three years before he moved to destroy it, Michelangelo penned three lines of verse (Girardi 282) to vent his anxieties. He feared for the state of his soul and deplored his perhaps misguided temerity as pretender to divine mysteries:

> Con tanta servitù, con tanto tedio
> e con falsi concetti e gran periglio
> dell'alma, a sculpir qui cose divine.
>
> (In such bondage, with so much vexation,
> and with false notions and great peril
> of soul, here to carve things divine.)

False, possibly perilous notions in chiseling divine things? Though we cannot be sure to what he refers, we do know what sculpture Michelangelo was then working on. Is there nothing in the *Pietà* that might have troubled the artist's mind as a "falso concetto"?

Appendix A

The Specter of the Impossible Leg (or The Phantom at the Opera del Duomo)

The formalist explanation of the artist's destructive act emerges early from a passage in H. Thode's great work, *Michelangelo und das Ende der Renaissance* (III, Berlin, 1912, 695-696, adapted from his *Kritische Untersuchungen*, II, 1908, 278). Thode begins by asking what motives might have led the artist "to destroy this sublime work." He proceeds to list what he takes to be several compositional flaws, arriving at last at the work's principal fault. Here the argument is so dense, and at the same time so evasive, that it needs to be quoted in full. (My translation is followed by the original German.)

> For the left leg of Christ there is no room at all; it would have had to pass through Mary's lap. The only way to accommodate it would have been to let it hang down in front over Mary's leg. One sees in what predicament the artist was placed. A short stump of the leg is indeed visible [and] a hole at its center shows that the master had considered this expedient. But this would have yielded a posture both unattractive and impossible. Unattractive because the compressed bunching of the leg, Mary's arm, and Christ's arm would have produced a confusing effect. Thus it was a matter of specific inadequacies, indeed, of irremediable faults, which threw Michelangelo into such despair that he himself laid a destructive hand to the work.
>
> (Für das linke Bein Christi aber ist überhaupt gar kein Platz

vorhanden; es müsste durch den Schooss der Maria hindurchgehen. Die einzige Möglichkeit, es anzubringen, wäre die gewesen, es vorne über Marias Bein herabhängen zu lassen. Man sieht, in welcher Verlegenheit der Künstler sich befand: in der That ist von dem Beine nur ein kurzer Stumpf sichtbar. Ein Loch in dessen Mitte verräht, das der Meister an jenen Ausweg gedacht. Dies aber hätte eine nicht nur unschöne, sondern unmögliche Stellung ergeben. Unschön, denn das Bein, der Arm der Maria und der Arm Christi hätten in ihrer Zusammendrängung den Eindruck des Gehäuften und in den Linien Verwirrten hervorgebracht. Ganz bestimmte Unzulänglichkeiten, ja unverbesserliche Fehler also sind es gewesen, welche Michelangelo in solche Verzweiflung versetzten, dass er selbst zerstörend Hand an sein Werk legte.)

The above passage, dominated by resistance to the action of Christ's left leg, is psychologically interesting. Thode makes the implicit assumption that Michelangelo conceived Christ's body piecemeal, or at least one leg short, the artist discovering, when he finally got around to completing the figure, that the grouping simply did not allow for a two-legged Christ. Thode next observes the prepared stump at the hip and concludes that the master briefly considered adding a separate leg to hang over the Virgin's thigh, which, however, would have yielded an ungainly and impossible posture — "unschön" and "unmöglich." The argument, then, runs no-yes-no: there is, says Thode, no possible place for that leg, because the only possible place for it is impossible. But what makes it "impossible" (apart from looking "unschön") remains unexplained. Coming from one of the finest minds that ever strayed into the field of art history, this tortured sequence of perception-evasion-denial seems profoundly revealing. In the end, Thode's troubled resistance to the leg's posture shows more sensitivity than the nonchalance of later writers who contemplate Christ's leg slung over the Virgin's thigh and think nothing of it, dismissing it either as a failed compositional feature, as the effect of gravitation (Hartt, p. 486 above), or as a convention (Parronchi, p. 485 above).

Thode's surmise that a leg hung over the Virgin's lap would have disfigured the work was followed by H. von Einem, who thought it unquestionable that the leg's absence was an artistic plus (*Michelangelo: Die Pietà im Dom zu Florenz*, Stuttgart, 1956, 6). Convinced that the leg in its original position must have looked gauche, he concluded that this might explain why the work was abandoned; he did not say, however, that the leg was destroyed to improve the design. Indeed, in an earlier essay, Von Einem stated explicitly that the removal of Christ's left leg could not be ascribed to aesthetic preference since this would entail a disjunction of form from content incompatible with 16th-century attitudes ("Ob das Fehlen des linken Beines Christi künstlerische Absicht ist, darf füglich bezweifelt werden. Eine solche Loslösung der 'Form' vom 'Gegenstand' würde der Kunstauffassung des XVI. Jahrhunderts völlig widersprechen . . ."; "Bermerkungen zur Florentiner Pietà Michelangelos," *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, LXI, 1940, 77-79).

It was Tacha Spear (p. 482 above) who took the next step. Writing in the last flush of formalism, she asserted that the artist removed the leg "for the improvement of the composition," wherein she was to be seconded by P. Fehl and Parronchi (p. 485).

To my mind, an argument that declares the work to be bettered by amputation has little merit. It may as well be applied to the *Winged Victory* or the choir of Beauvais. As Steinberg wrote in answer to Tacha Spear's letter to the *Art Bulletin* (LI, 1969, 411): "The leg whose *absence* is said to improve the design of the Florentine group is not Michelangelo's work. No one alive ever saw what Michelangelo carved in that place. To judge whether the group gains or suffers by replacing the missing leg, we restore it from our own imagination. We imagine a leg in that slot, and it is hardly surprising if a leg of our imagining fails to measure up to the master."

Now it is entirely possible that as the carving progressed from 1547 to 1555 something went wrong: an accidental loss, perhaps, or the frustration of an intended shift which the available mass of marble could not accommodate. We shall never know. But we do know that the now-missing leg satisfied the sculptor for some eight years. Some virtue it must have had — even if it finally disappointed the most self-critical genius in the history of art.

Appendix B

The Slung Leg Hypothesis, Gathering Notoriety Overseas, Enters Upon Its Third Decade

Last year, Professor Andreas Prater of the University of Giessen published a short scholarly monograph on Cellini's saltcellar in Vienna (*Cellinis Salzfass für Franz I*, Stuttgart, 1988). Discussing the confronted personifications of Terra and Neptune and their overlapping extremities, the author explained the interlaced footwork as symbolic of the marriage of land and sea — and adduced the slung leg of Michelangelo's Florence *Pietà* as a comparable instance of symbolic "sposalitio und unio mystica" (pp. 35-36). Not a connection I would have thought of, but it served his purpose, and it was done briefly and handsomely.

At about the same time, Prater published a signed, one-page inspirational on Michelangelo in the West German art journal *Pan* (Heft 5, 1988, 52), subtitled "Ardent Love for the Cold Stone" ("Heisse Liebe zum kalten Stein"), of which a near third dealt with the missing leg of the Florence *Pietà*. Here Prater retold the story of Vasari's nocturnal visit to Michelangelo's workshop, and how the artist dropped his lantern when he saw Vasari ogle the leg that lay across the Madonna's lap. "This posture," we read, "was audacious and, as a sign of physical devotion [als Zeichen körperlicher Hingabe], was familiar to any art connoisseur of the time from innumerable secular works. All too late, Michelangelo recognized the awkward situation to which he had been brought by his love of the stone. He smashed the treacherous leg and gave the sculpture away . . . " So the fiction that the slung leg's meaning only dawned on the artist after eight years of imbecile innocence is being cast abroad, to become henceforth what everyone knows.

And it is this same folly that returns in the *Art Bulletin* of March 1989, p. 64, where Valerie Shrimplin-Evangelidis (following Spector) supposes Steinberg to have said that Michelangelo destroyed the slung leg "because of a sudden awareness of its sexual connotations." Since he had written that Michelangelo conceived the slung leg "in perfect awareness of what it meant," we must conclude that the author was reading in accord with a rooted educational principle: that the inattention brought to a disparaged text should be directly proportioned to its disparagement.

Shrimplin-Evangelidis has an answer to the rhetorical question that closed the foregoing article: whether anything in the *Pietà* might have given the artist cause for anxiety. Yes, she argues, it was his self-portrait in the figure of Nicodemus. For this would have stamped him as one of the Nicodemites (loyal Catholics of crypto-Protestant leanings), liable to persecution under the new heresy-hunting Pope Paul IV. One is led to ask why, in that case, Michelangelo allowed the work out into the world; why he did not knock off the head, or at least deface its likeness. The answer

comes in Shrimplin-Evangelidis's final footnote (n. 80): "If the religious connotation argued above was a reason for Michelangelo's attempted destruction of the work, it may be asked why he did not attack the significant self-portrait in the Nicodemus figure. This is explained by the fact that the statue is 226cm high (7'5") and that Michelangelo was of medium stature, and then an elderly man. . . ."

He couldn't reach it, you see; so he murdered a telltale leg.

Leo Steinberg's books include Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art *(New York, 1972),* Michelangelo's Last Paintings: The Conversion of St. Paul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the Cappella Paolina, Vatican Palace *(New York, 1975), and* The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion *(New York, 1983)* *[Department of the History of Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6311]*

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