The Pontificate of Clement VII

History, Politics, Culture

Edited by

KENNETH GOUWENS
AND SHERYL E. REISS

ASHGATE
Chapter 20

Experiments in Art and Reform in Italy in the Early Sixteenth Century*

Alexander Nagel

Art at the Crossroads

The sixteenth-century controversy over images was just one aspect of a general shifting of ground that affected all aspects of cultural life in Italy at that time. The upheavals stemming from the invasions of Italy by foreign powers—the French incursion of 1494–95 and the Sack of Rome by imperial forces in 1527, most significantly—produced a new order of historical and political reflection that yielded some of the founding documents of modern political thought. In the religious sphere, a Europe-wide groundswell of reform activity in the years around 1500 produced a profound reevaluation of the modes and institutions of religious life that was only made more urgent by the outbreak of the Reformation in 1517.

The literary and artistic spheres were directly implicated by these developments. The emerging question of national identity raised by the invasions of Italy was addressed most consistently and acutely in the debates over a national language and literature, debates that produced the first essays in modern literary criticism. Concerns over religious reform led almost inevitably to the question of the function of cult images, a ubiquitous and now controversial feature of institutional religious life. The controversy over images produced a series of investigations into the semiotics of the image and the history of its functions in religious life, as well as an array of unprecedented efforts to legislate religious art, ranging from outright abolition to new forms of codification.

In both the literary and artistic spheres, the new watchword was decorum. If the ancient discourse of decorum primarily treated the problem of the literary genres, Renaissance literary critics expanded the discourse to address a new world where Latin shared the stage with emerging vernaculars, and where the distinction between religious and profane writing had emerged as a topic of raging debate. Arguably, the developments in the sphere of the visual arts were even more radical, as virtually no tradition of art criticism existed. A new body of art criticism and art history arose in direct response to the religious debates of the period.

The religious question was an important factor in the formation of early modern art criticism not only because in brute numerical terms religious images were by far the largest sector of art production in the period. In putting the question of decorum at the center of debate, the religious debates stimulated a new order of reflection on forms of classification and codification. In relation to the sphere of the visual arts,
they provoked the first art-theoretical efforts. When religious art became a "problem," it also became a category. The question of what made it different from secular art, and thus abstract questions concerning "art" as such, arose with a new urgency. The controversy over religious art was a principal enabling condition for the development of a secular criticism of art.

This essay puts several experiments in art and reform from the years of Clement VII's pontificate in the context of this larger history. These efforts were highly various and, as we shall see, on occasion mutually incompatible. Nonetheless, I believe it is possible to show that they were responding to a shared set of concerns. This is not to say that they reveal a "Clementine" imprint. Although several initiatives were undertaken during the years of Clement's papacy and involved personages, such as Gian Matteo Giberti, who were close to the pope, the point of this essay is not to discern a putative Clementine policy, or even to suggest a general Clementine pattern, in the matter of religious images. Instead, this essay insists on the contingency of the episodes under discussion, and attempts to establish connections among them not by recourse to the notion of an era marked by a pontificate but rather by setting them in the context of patterns and problems that run through the period and for the most part disregard the chronological markers of papal succession.

The crossroads between sacred and secular art was confronted early on by the Protestant Reformers. In the wake of Andreas Karlstadt's iconoclasm at Wittenberg in the winter of 1521–22, Franz von Sickingen, Luther's protector, proposed a sagesolution in 1522. Acknowledging that church images were all too often appreciated for their "art, beauty, and magnificence," rather than for their religious significance, he suggested that they should be used instead as "ornaments in fine rooms"—that is, in a secular setting—so that the effort and expense would not be in vain.¹ Sickingen's cultivated and accommodating sense of decorum was to become a point of doctrine for Calvin, for whom the veneration of images was inherently in contradiction to Christian belief. Of course, as a man of learning Calvin did not condemn image-making per se. He believed that as a gift from God it should be cultivated as an art and not confused with religion.²

The mood of caution with regard to images provoked by the outbreak of the Reformation was matched in Rome at this time under Pope Adrian VI, who, in the matter of art patronage, offered a bracing alternative to his lavish predecessor Pope Leo X. But this was soon to change with the election to the papacy of a second Medici, Clement VII, in November 1523. Michelangelo expressed the sentiments of

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² See, for example, J. Calvin, Institutio Christianae Religionis (Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1559), ed. A. Tholuck (Edinburgh: Clark, 1874), bk. 1, chap. 11, sections 12, 81.
many when, in a letter written days after the election of the new pope, he said: "You will have heard that Medici has been made Pope, to the joy of the whole world it seems to me; and around here it looks as if there will be a lot of art to be made." Beautiful, sumptuous religious art was to flower once again, but now in a post-Reformation climate, and new tensions began to show.

They are alluded to with characteristic levity by Federico Gonzaga, the marquis of Mantua, in a letter of May 1524 to his agent in Rome, Baldassare Castiglione, in which he asks Castiglione to see about getting a painting by Sebastiano Veneziano (later known as Sebastiano del Piombo), one of the new Medici pontiff's preferred artists. The painting, he wrote, "can be of any kind so long as it is not about saints, but a picture that is lovely and beautiful to look at (ma qualche picture vaghe et belle da vedere)." The phrasing (but something lovely and beautiful) implies that in Gonzaga's view religious pictures tended not to belong to the category of the lovely and the beautiful. Put another way, he is saying that secular subjects provide better opportunities for the display of artistic excellence and for the experience of aesthetic pleasure. What he was asking for, and Castiglione would have known it, was a good pagan story with a lush natural setting and some beautiful flesh in it—such as we see, for example, in Correggio's *Nymph and Satyr* (Figure 20.1) now in the Louvre, which Gonzaga commissioned at just about this time. Gonzaga was offering a softer, Italian, version of the sort of distinction being drawn more rigorously north of the Alps.

True to form, the polemicist and pornographer Pietro Aretino made the point in more brutal terms. Writing to Federico Gonzaga in October 1527, and very likely about the same unfilled commission, he says he is going to get Sebastiano to make the painting "of any subject he likes, as long as there are no hypocrisies, no stigmata, no nails." Here, in nuce, we have Aretino's theory of the separation of the genres,

6. B. Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 101–6, has argued against applying the term pornography, invented in the nineteenth century, to earlier periods as if it referred to a constant and objective class of representations. Nonetheless, I believe it can be applied to Aretino in view of the crucial role he played in the framing of modern notions of pornography. His deliberate advocacy of the categorical distinction between sacred and profane art made him both an early advocate of what we would call "freedom of expression" in the profane sphere (see his famous letter to Battista Zatti, in Talvacchia [1999], 85–6) and also one of the first to apply a modern code of censorship in the religious sphere. One of the express purposes of his *romanzi bassetiosti*, written in 1526 to accompany Marcantonio Raimondi's prints after Giulio Romano's *I Modi*, was to outrage "hypocrites" such as Gian Matteo Giberti, who had come down so severely against Raimondi in 1524 and then Aretino in 1525. In other words, they were deliberately framed as inaugural acts of pornography.
which he was to use to such devastating effect against Michelangelo in the 1540s. Aretino had no objection to erotic art—he even advocated it—but declared it hypocritical to confuse these impulses with the purposes of religion. It was a secularizing position in distinct contrast to the ideals of the humanist culture that had come to dominate papal Rome in the first decades of the sixteenth century, a culture devoted to the unity of piety and beauty in both the literary and the artistic spheres. After the sobering interlude of the pontificate of Adrian VI and the deepening awareness of the seriousness of the Protestant threat, this unity came under palpable pressures in the 1520s, and was literally ruptured by the Sack of Rome, which sent the artists and humanists clustered around the papal court scattering in all directions. As it happens, the experience of the Sack appears to have prompted Sebastiano himself to develop a new, more austere and “devout” style in his religious art. Under Aretino’s influence or not, the Aretian distinction between sacred and profane began to make itself felt well before an ethos and a code of aesthetic austerity became an established cultural mode in the decades after the Council of Trent.

The Measure of Divine Love

This is not to claim, however, that from this point on erotic beauty and religious devotion parted company. In fact, they continued to be conspicuously and innovatively joined even in works produced for the personages under discussion. Vasari tells us, for example, that Parmigianino painted his Madonna of the Rose (Figure 20.2), now in Dresden, for Aretino, before offering it to Pope Clement VII. One could not imagine a work that more conspicuously brings to a religious subject the charms of voghera, with all of its erotic enticements. Vasari praises the grace of the Virgin’s unusual garments, which make the flesh underneath appear “palpable and delicate.”

8 An emblematic statement is that of Egidio da Viterbo, the preferred preacher of Julius II, who declared in his Historia viginti saeculorum that if in past times piety was combined with an unpolished manner and beautiful expression tended to be impious, it was the achievement of his own age to marry the two: “ut denique summae pictae summum elegantiam copulaverit.” Quoted by E. Wind, Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1968), 187. Perhaps the best single portrait of this culture, which mingled a developed taste for antique-inspired art and poetry, complete with nymph cults and bacchic invocations, with a rhetoric of religious renewal, is that offered by the late P. P. Bober, “The Coryciana and the Nymph Corycina,” JWCI 49 (1977): 223–39.


10 The most important figure in this development was the Dominican theologian Andrea Ghiberti da Fabriano, whose Degli Errori dei pittori, published in 1564, contains an articulate defense of medieval cult images, “which to modern eyes look vile, awkward, lowly, humble, without skill or art” as “honest and devout images.” See Trattati d’Arte del Cinquecento, ed. P. Barocchi, 3 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1960–62), 2:110–11. The best analysis of the consequences of this reappraisal for the artistic culture of the late sixteenth century is still Zeri (1957).

11 “Questo quadro fu dipinto per messer Pietro Aretino; Ma venendo in quel tempo papa Clemente a Bologna, Francesco glielo donò.” Vasari-BB, 4:541.
and claims that it would be impossible to see more beautifully worked hair in a painting. What did Aretino make of such beauties in a religious work? Certainly in later centuries it became the object of criticisms of a distinctly Aretian kind. In the eighteenth century Ireneo Affer proposed that the work was literally a travesty of religious art, that it was originally painted as a Venus and Cupid and then transformed into a Virgin and Child. But this does not mean that Aretino himself framed such a criticism. It is possible to argue that Parmigianino offered the painting to Clement VII because Aretino found the work—to use his words—hypocritical, but this would be no more than a hazardous guess. The more likely explanation is that Clement VII desired it and, as he was the more important patron, it was offered to him.

In a similar spirit Federico Gonzaga himself, in 1531, requested a Magdalen from Aretino’s friend Titian. He asked the painter to make the figure “as tearful as possible (lachrimosa piú che si può)” and yet asked him to “make every effort to make it beautiful (che vi meteste ogni studio si in farlo bello).” The wording alone indicates that, pace his letter of 1524 discussed above, in 1531 Federico certainly still believed in the conjunction of lovely and pious painting. Debates continue as to whether this work is to be identified with the painting now in the Pitti gallery in Florence, which on stylistic grounds can be dated to the time of this commission (Figure 20.3). In any case, the Pitti painting was very likely a work that Aretino

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12 Vasari-BB, 4:540–41: “Abbigliò ancora la Nostra Donna con modi straordinarii, vestendola d’un abito ch’aveva le maniche di veli gialli e quasi vergasi d’oro, che nel vero avea bellissima grazia, facendo parere le carni vere e delicatissime, oltre che non si possono vedere capelli dipinti meglio lavorati.”


14 Clement himself did not even leave Bologna with it, and the painting remained in the possession of the Gianni (Zane) family of Bologna, as Vasari (Vasari-BB, 4:541) states. Again, it is tempting to take this to mean that the painting was a hot potato, but there is simply insufficient evidence to support such a view. The fact that the painting was often copied (Vasari-BB, 4:541, says fifty copies had been made by his time) suggests, rather, that the painting was considered sufficiently orthodox to serve as a popular model.

15 Most recently, L. Zeitz, “Titian, nearer Freund...: Titian und Federico Gonzaga. Kunstpatronage in Mantua im 16. Jahrhundert” (Petersburg: Imhof, 2000), 56 (with further bibliography), leaves open the identification of the Pitti painting with Federico’s commission. D. H. Bodart, Titiano e Federico il Gonzaga: Storia di un rapporto di committenza (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998), 38, opposes the identification on the grounds that this picture hardly shows the Magdalen “lachrimosa piú che si può.” Against this argument it may be pointed out that none of Titian’s Magdalen is particularly lacrimeose. On the basis of an examination of X-rays of the painting, M. Ingenhoff-Danhäuser, Maria Magdalena: Heilige und Sünderin in der italienischen Renaissance; Studien zur Ikonographie der Heiligen von Leonardo bis Titian (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 1984), 80–88, argued that the Pitti painting reveals quick execution, confirming its identification with the 1531 Gonzaga commission, which was completed by Titian in a month. On the other hand, in his correspondence with Titian Gonzaga indicates that the Magdalen should be of the same size as the Saint Jerome Titian just painted for him or a little bigger (“della grandezza che è questo, o dua dita di più;” see Bodart [1998], 234). Gonzaga’s Saint Jerome has been convincingly identified with the painting in the Louvre (H. Wethe, The Paintings of Titian, vol. 1, The Religious Paintings [London: Phaidon, 1969], cat. no. 104), which measures 104.8 X 102 cm.; the Pitti Magdalen (Wethe, cat. no. 120), however, measures 84 X 69 cm.
would have known, and modern scholars have, again, seen it in rather strictly Are-
tinian terms, as an essentially hypocritical work, a straightforward case of erotic en-
ticement presented under a thin religious guise. Yet the fact that the painting was
produced in this milieu encourages a more nuanced view. The painting is, I think,
better understood as an effort to meet the challenge implicit in the letters I just
quoted—that is, as an effort to resist the emerging generic distinctions that Are-
tino was among the first to articulate, to assert that ravishing beauty and the highest art-
istry are (still) congruent with religious content. Whether or not we believe that it
met the challenge successfully, we must assume that in this case it was consciously
confronted.

It may be useful to start by questioning the validity of the title by which the
painting is known today: "The Penitent Magdalen." To my eye, the expression is not
one of penitence but of love and gratitude: these are not bitter tears of contrition but
rather tears of joy, the joy of the sinner giving thanks for mercy received. The
emphasis is not on the penitential striving of the sinner, but on the sinner as the grace-
filled recipient of divine love. Such a shift in emphasis in penitential matters was,
of course, advocated by Protestant theologians, but in this period it was also strongly
promoted by Erasmus, who maintained that it was consonant with the traditional sac-
ramental structure of the Church. In Titian's painting, the Magdalen turns away
from the waning light of the world behind her and is instead illuminated by a more
powerful and constant light. She does not clasp her hands in prayer but presses them
to her body. This is a gesture of response rather than supplication; it is the response
of the beloved softening under the light and heat of love. Her hair is luxuriant and
impossibly abundant, pressing to the contours of her body like so many filaments to a
magnet. It caresses her flesh, physically manifesting the force of attraction exerted by
the saint's beautiful form. If the painting is understood as a portrait of a sinner in the
flush of divine love, the erotic emphasis appears less inappropriate to the theme, and
the charge of hypocrisy loses force.

16 J. A. Crowe, Titian: His Life and Times with Some Account of his Family, chiefly from
New and Unpublished Records, 2 vols. (London: Murray, 1877), 1:350, declared, "It is
clear that Titian had no other purpose in view than to represent a handsome girl." Over a
century later C. Hope, Titian (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 75, asserted that "the
religious content is a decidedly minor element in the picture's appeal."

17 This reading thus proceeds along different lines from the interpretation of B. Aikema,
"Titian's Mary Magdalen in the Palazzo Pitti: An Ambiguous Painting and its Critics,"
JWCF 57 (1994): 48–59, although he too argues that the painting should be taken seri-
ously as a religious work. In Aikema's view the erotic enticements of the painting are
designed to put the viewer in a predicament of carnal temptation, to be overcome by the
(male) viewer's spiritual efforts. This interpretation thus presupposes a clean separation
between the erotic and the spiritual—in Aikema's words "a polarity between profane
sensuousness in the presentation, and edification in the iconography" (49)—that is at
odds with the view presented here, according to which the painting marks the extreme
and equivocal end of a neoplatonic tradition of humanist aesthetics in which beauty is
joined to spiritual pursuits, and thus reveals some of its latent conflicts.

18 For a discussion of these developments, see W. David Myers's paper in this volume.
The painting commissioned by Gonzaga in 1531 was intended as a gift for Vittoria Colonna, the noble widow and poet renowned for her sobriety and piety. Whether or not the Pitti painting (or a version of it) was the gift in question, it offers a kind of limit-case. We know Colonna received a Magdalen by Titian: what would she have made of this, the most erotic of the several Magdalen types that Titian produced? As it happens, no one was more aware of the suitability of erotic rhetoric in the context of divine love than Vittoria Colonna. In her spiritual tracts one finds passages of an erotic intensity to rival Titian. In her poetry the most consistent theme is the impact of divine grace on earthly things: the earthly fogs and darkness part to let in divine light; the cold, obdurate resistance of earthly matter softens and gives way under the heat of divine love. When she describes the effect of this light and heat on the person and body of the believer, the metaphors are ones of loosening and quickening, and carry erotic associations: knots are loosened, hair is released, clothes are removed, hearts melt like snow, bodies are penetrated with divine heat, stumbling spirits are aroused. Her favorite verbs are *accendere*, *inflammare*, *discogliere*, *dissolvere*, *sgombrare*, and *spogliare*.

Mary Magdalen’s conversion and penance highlight the shedding of her ornaments, her jewels, her rich clothing, the undoing of her elaborate hair dressing—the despoiling, in short, of all the trappings of her life as a harlot. In Titian’s painting, Mary Magdalen has rid herself of all her ornaments and stands naked before God in her true beauty, her hair loose and her body receiving the light and heat of divine love. The idea is not far from one of Colonna’s poems where the Magdalen, addressed as the “enflamed and spirited lady (*Donna accesa animosa*),” is described as having left behind her all that is not pleasing to the Lord. Colonna mirrors herself in this beautiful model (“*mi specchio e tergo / nel bello esempio*”), and feels herself freed from evil knots. Using similar language in a letter to Costanza d’Avalos Piccolomini, Colonna proposed that they take as models the Magdalen and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, and specifically invoked their physical beauty: “Let us mirror

19 I do not agree with the hypothesis of M. Oeh, “Vittoria Colonna and the Commission for a Mary Magdalen by Titian,” in Beyond Isabella: Secular Women Patrons of Art in Renaissance Italy, ed. S. Reiss and D. Wilkins (Kirkville, Mo.: Truman State University Press, 2001), 193–223, that this was a commission engineered by Vittoria Colonna through powerful male intermediaries. The correspondence (see Bodart [1998], 234–46) clearly indicates that the initiative was Gonzaga’s, acting in an effort to satisfy with a gift a wish of Colonna’s that had come to his attention.

20 See Nagel (2000), 179–85 for a close analysis of the rhetoric used in her *Pianto sopra la Passione di Cristo*.


ourselves in the works of their most beautiful bodies and the thoughts of their shining and holy minds." As in Titian’s painting, for Colonna the physical beauty of the saint, and her susceptibility to love, is of a piece with her spiritual illumination.

It is safe to conclude from this evidence that Vittoria would have been fully capable of appreciating Titian’s painting in spiritual terms, and specifically in the terms of her emphatically grace-centered spirituality. A parallel instance of Colonna’s receptivity comes in the case of Aretino’s religious writings, with their highly erotic descriptions of Mary Magdalen and other saints. We may believe them to be “hypocritical” works, and we may be correct in doing so, but Colonna herself appreciated them, and even encouraged Aretino to write more of them. And yet it is open to question whether the verbal and the visual spheres are quite so parallel. It is one thing to describe verbally the beauty of the Magdalen and to declare that she is enflamed with divine love, but it is another to show her naked flesh palpably glowing under a shower of warm light. As everyone at the time recognized, Titian’s ability to describe flesh and the effects of light far surpassed anything that had been seen before in painting. As a result, Titian pushed established verbal traditions into new territory, bringing a new and startling concreteness to the erotic metaphors that had been part of the Christian spiritual tradition at least since Origen’s commentary on the Song of Songs.

The Pitti Magdalen thus represents an experimental extreme from which Titian could only retreat: the Magdalen he painted later in life are all clothed. Only later, when Baroque style had discovered a new mode of decorum in religious art, was it safe once again to represent the Magdalen nude. Rubens’s nude Magdalen is not troubling in the way Titian’s painting is, in part because Rubens participated in a well-established system of artistic reference in which, among others, Titian himself had become canonical. Rubens’s Magdalen in some ways insist more emphatically on the saint’s nude flesh, and yet the effect is neutralized by the fact that they are so clearly presented as art. The figures may be literally nude, but their fluent participation in a coherent aesthetic code in effect clothes and distances them.

Mystical Christocentrism

Other works from the Clementine period may seem like exercises in extreme aesthetic refinement, and yet deserve to be re-read as experiments in reform-minded revisionism. Rosso Fiorentino’s Dead Christ of 1527 (Figure 20.4), for example, was a concerted effort to put the rhetorical refinements of contemporary painting in the service of revisiting fundamental theological doctrine. In this sense it is characteristic of the experimental efforts in art and reform that took place in Italy in the wake of

23 V. Colonna, Carteggio, ed. E. Ferrero and G. Müller (Turin: Loescher, 1892), 302: “Hora spicchiamoci nel ne le opere dei bellissimi for corpi, et i pensieri delle sante et chire menti imitando...” (henceforth cited as Colonna, Carteggio). The passage is cited by U. R. D’Elia, The Poetics of Titian’s Religious Paintings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), chap. 4. I wish to thank Professor D’Elia for sharing her book manuscript with me at a pre-publication stage.

24 See Colonna, Carteggio, 150–52.
the Reformation, and that mark Clement's pontificate in particular. Here again, the fact that it was made for the bishop of Borgo San Sepolcro Leonardo Tornabuoni, whose commitment to reform got him into political difficulties in his diocese, should warn against seeing the painting simply as a work in which a religious subject served as the pretext for an exercise in extreme aesthetic refinement. John Shearman has demonstrated that we here see Christ within the tomb, surrounded by angels holding a vigil on the eve of the Resurrection. Scholars have emphasized the unstable temporality of the painting and the various signs of an incipient stirring within the figure of Christ. (That right arm touches the leg and knee, but can we say that it is resting on them?) It has also been observed that this arousal unfolds in a highly erotic key. The bodily rhetoric is, indeed, not far from that of Correggio's painting (Figure 20.1) as Regina Stefaniak has observed. It is also close to that of Titian's Magdalen (Figure 20.3) whose absorption in divine love is interpreted as a love ecstasy.

In opposition to a prevalent tendency in late medieval art to emphasize Christ's mortal suffering in the Passion, Rosso's burnished, beautiful Christ alludes instead to the coming post-resurrection glorification of the body. The painting was an effort to retrieve and preserve the mystical, sacramental significance of the figure of the dead Christ and, accordingly, it mingles extreme refinement with fairly overt archaism. The painting shows a quite traditional adherence to the image type of the Man of Sorrows. In its traditional form, the type shows Christ after death and yet mysteriously upright and actively dispensing his benefits. The Man of Sorrows thus served as a synoptic emblem of the significance and benefits of Christ's Passion. That Rosso consciously framed his Christ in line with this tradition is clear not only from the visual evidence but from the artist's own verbal testimony. In a notarial instrument of 1527 Rosso called the panel a "figura domini nostri Iesu Christi in forma pietatis," which is to say a Christ in the form of the imago pietatis or Man of

25 On Tornabuoni, see D. Franklin, Rosso in Italy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 139, with further bibliography. According to S. Freedberg, Painting in Italy, 1500–1600 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 131, the painting's "sensuality is confused with an aestheticism that seems more important than the picture's meaning of religiosity." The fact that it was made for bishop Tornabuoni, moreover, suggested to Freedberg that the work "may be the most immediate evidence we possess of religiously as well as morally cynical attitudes within elite circles of contemporary Rome."


27 R. Stefaniak, "Replicating Mysteries of the Passion: Rosso's Dead Christ with Angels," RQ 45 (1992): 677–738. For the comparison to Correggio, see 703.


Sorrows. What he did to this tradition was, in a sense, to rationalize it by giving it a concrete place within the chronological narrative of Christ’s Passion. Whereas the Man of Sorrows belongs to no one moment in the Passion narrative, here we are shown a quite exact moment, just prior to Christ’s reawakening.

As far as I know, no one has observed just how close we are to that moment. The torch-candles to either side of Christ’s body are not lit but give off thick plumes of smoke even as the embers still glow, just as candles do immediately after having been blown out. With the candles extinguished, we must ask how the painting is lit, and we notice that light is clearly shown to enter from the left foreground, reflecting sharply against Christ’s shins. The curling smoke lifting from the candles indicates that the light is entering from the same direction as the gust of wind that has blown the candles out. The angels’ vigil is over, the stone has begun to roll away, and Christ comes alive as the new day breaks in. Christ’s head, like the candle smoke, is thrown back by the incoming wind and light. It is as if with the candles out he has been lit up, like the large Paschal candle that is ceremonially lit on the morning of every Resurrection Sunday. His body twists in the same direction as the cooled candles and reaches the same height; his head tilts up, throwing back his flame-like red hair.

This is not merely to advocate a change in title, from the Dead to the Undead Christ. To entertain this unprecedented subject is to appreciate the strangeness of what we see. Light enters the tomb, and we are allowed a privileged glimpse into a world that is not the ordinary external world of naturalistic painting, but a new and transfigured reality. This is no longer the earthly body of Christ but the volatile, resurrected (or resurrecting) body, the subtle body that is there and not there, the body that can pass through walls, the body that Mary Magdalene is allowed to see but not touch, or, conversely, the body that the apostle Thomas can probe forensically and yet, at Emmaus, disappears from one moment to the next. Rosso’s Christ has, in short, undergone the process that platonizing humanists of the period liked to call immutatio: the transmutation of heavy earthly matter into subtler spiritual form. Descriptions of the process usually involved metaphors of purification and volatility, often invoking the image of the body consumed by sacrificial fire.31

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31 The famous neoplatonist, biblical scholar, and kabbalist Francesco Zorzi, for example, in his *De Harmonia Mundi* (Venice: Vitali, 1525), second canticle, third tone, chap. 12, states that through Christ’s death he was transformed into a spiritual nature (“transmutatus in naturam spiritualm”). Having been burned as a sacrifice on the cross in the flames of divine love, Christ’s body assumed the nature of that spiritual fire and underwent the corresponding changes: “his vulnerable, opaque and heavy body having been transmuted into a body that was agile, translucent, and invulnerable (mutato corpore passibili, obscuro, et gravi in corpus agile, lucidum, et impassesibile),” he could pass through closed doors, and appear and disappear at will. Another famous neoplatonist and a friend of Zorzi, Giulio Camillo, in his treatise “De l’Humana Deificatione” (probably ca. 1540), likened the different “states” of bodies to different forms of representation. The body became subtler as it passed from the actual bodily state to that of a marble statue, from the statue to a painting (he invokes the portrait made of him by Titian), from a painting to a reflection in a mirror, and finally to a pure and invisible state as it passes through the air. See C. Vasoli, “Uno scritto inedito di Giulio Camillo: ‘De l’Humana Deificatione,’”
interpretations, the beautiful body that has emerged from this process is distinctly androgynous, as it were purified to a pre-gendered state. The conception of the transfigured body extends to the entire painting. Passages of overt carnality (such as the angel's hand delicately palpating Christ's wound) inhabit a space that is compressed, ambiguous, unplotted. Spatial ambiguities abound: Do those candles stand on the ledge of the sarcophagus, or do they reach the ground? To which angel does that palpating hand belong? The crude sense impressions of the external world are left behind, and we are offered instead a subtler, and thus more volatile, vision that corresponds to a higher, divine knowledge.

Resurrection, Restoration, Reform

Unusual as it is, Rosso's painting in several ways epitomizes efforts to reform religious art in early sixteenth-century Italy. The intense emphasis on the mystery of resurrection, in fact, adapts a topos of reform rhetoric, in which Christ's resurrection was often adduced as a metaphor—indeed, the metaphor—of purification and restoration after abuse and exposure. Through the Resurrection the afflicted body of Christ is once again made pure and beautiful, the blood and signs of affliction removed like so much overpainting on a picture. At times this idea was put concretely into practice by reformers, notably by Gian Matteo Giberti, who rose within the church hierarchy as a protégé of Leo X and became Clement VII's datary and close advisor. After taking up residence as bishop of Verona in 1528, he initiated pastoral visits, during which he ordered the blood depicted spouting from Christ's hands removed from paintings of the Crucifixion, because it was unfitting to show

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32 The idea that the original state of humanity was androgynous was a familiar notion in humanist circles. Apart from the famous fable told by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium (189–191d), according to which originally human beings were double (and for the most part heterosexual) and only later cut in half, a tradition of commentary arose in the Judeo-Christian tradition around the ambiguous switch from singular to plural in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him: male and female created he them." Philo and Origen took this to mean that the original man was androgynous and that the division into two genders belonged to a later and degenerated state of humanity, an interpretation that was enthusiastically received in the Renaissance by Pico della Mirandola, Agrippa of Nettesheim, and Leone Ebreo, among others, who in turn referred the idea back to the hermetic texts that they believed to predate both the Mosaic texts and Plato. See Wind (1968), 212–13. Given this background, it was but a short step to imagine that Christ, the new Adam, should return, post mortem, to the original and pure state of androgyny.

Christ in an agonizing state when he triumphed over death, was resurrected, and ascended into heaven.\textsuperscript{34}

What Giberti did through physical restoration, artists of the day accomplished by offering "purified" alternatives to the art of their precursors. The distracting naturalistic details of late quattrocento painting were eschewed by many High Renaissance painters in favor of an idealizing return to the monumental figure. In several instances, such as in Rosso's painting, this involved a purification on the iconographical level, a return to the figure of Christ as the main subject of Christian art, a trend that itself can be seen as a form of restoration, requiring the removal of the accretions of hagiographic piety that had accumulated throughout the late Middle Ages. It may surprise those who are not specialists in late medieval art, but to put Christ and not the Virgin in the center of altarpieces was a quite unusual thing to do by the end of the fifteenth century, and yet attentive artists and patrons could see the figure of Christ at the center of ancient altarpieces—most spectacularly, perhaps, on the twelfth-century Pala d'Oro on the high altar of the church of S. Marco in Venice. After 1500, however, this Christocentric focus was reasserted with increasing frequency.

A good example of the trend is Titian's altarpiece of 1519–22 in the Brescian church of SS. Nazaro e Celso (Figure 20.5), which was painted for the papal legate to Venice, Altobello Averoldi. Despite the dedication of the church to Saints Nazarius and Celsus, their figures are relegated to a side panel, while the center shows the more universal eucharistic theme of the Resurrection. Christ is shown, one might say, just moments after the scene that we see in Rosso's panel, and in the place of Rosso's hermetic obscurity we have Titian's dramatic triumphalism. This Christocentric emphasis was a willful reorientation that moved the content of altarpieces away from the individual sphere of private patrons and their patron saints and towards a more "public" and high-minded piety, promoting, as Peter Humfrey has put it, "an emphasis on the eucharistic connotations of the Christian altar in general, at the expense of the hagiological connotations of one altar in particular."\textsuperscript{35} The patron of the polyptych, Altobello Averoldi, was noted for his reform-minded orientation and, as a papal


\textsuperscript{35} P. Humfrey, "Altarpieces and Altar Dedication in Counter-Reformation Venice and the Veneto," RS 10 (1996): 376. The decision to put Christ and not a saint in the center appears to have been a momentous one, as Averoldi's initial scheme for the altarpiece was much more traditional, involving a triptych with three large figures, very likely the three dedication saints, Sebastian, Nazarius, and Celsus, in separate panels, together with a diminutive donor figure of Averoldi. See the letter of 20 December 1520 from Duke Alfonso d'Este's ambassador to Venice Jacopo Tebaldi to the duke, in which he says that Titian told him "come in la palla ch'el li fa fare dicto Legato [Averoldi], non gli va altr'che tre figure grande, espo Legato in junta figura picciola..." quoted in E. Lucchesi-Ragni, "Le vicende del politico," in Il Politico Averoldi di Titano restaurato, ed. E. Lucchesi-Ragni and G. Agosti (Brescia: Grafo, 1991), 92. The altarpiece was installed in May 1522; sometime during 1521, therefore, the change was made to the present program. Averoldi was in Venice from 1517 to 1523; it is likely that there he came into contact with currents of religious thought that suggested a more Christocentric emphasis.
The Revival of the Antique and Reform as Repristinatio

In general, the reform-minded return to an originary, powerful, Christocentric focus in early sixteenth-century Italian art—a form of humanist repristinatio undertaken within a heady atmosphere of antique revival—is remarkable for its rarefaction and ineffectuality. The 1510s and 20s in particular saw a veritable vogue of putting freestanding all'antica statuary on Christian altars. This trend, which may seem like an example of encroaching Renaissance paganism, was in fact promoted within a humanist culture committed to the ideal of reform. Piero Valeriano, for example,

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linked the emphasis on the nude in antique statuary with the pure forms of primordial wisdom, "Antiquity," he wrote:

being less vice-ridden, philosophized more plainly and frankly about each and every thing; nor was there at that time anything in the human body that was considered disgraceful either by sight or name. However, with the development of bad customs, many things had to be declared foul both in deed and in speech.

Throughout the middle ages free-standing statues had stood as the very emblem of the pagan idol. In the early sixteenth century, however, they were promoted in Christian settings in an effort to restore a sense of substance, concentration, and purity in Christian images, occasionally in explicit counterpoint to the now no longer entirely reliable vaghezza of oil painting. In certain cases, such as that of Michelangelo, it is possible to see the trend as a throwback to the times "before painting," when sculpture predominated on the Christian altar—so to speak, a Romanesque revival in Roman style. A drawing by Baldassare Peruzzi, now in the British Museum (Figure 20.6) offers an explicit assertion of the new aesthetic, virtually allowing us to overhear the real "shop talk" surrounding these issues. He shows two schemes for a chapel, both of them carrying a statue on the altar. The one on the right, however, is much busier, less unified. Underneath this one, Peruzzi wrote: "Modernaccia per accomodare le storie." The "nasty modern style" refers to the busy and pictorial all'antica aesthetic of the quattrocento, which was detail-oriented and tended toward pictorialism (the reliefs on either side of the portal). Even the


41 For the drawing, see J. A. Gere and P. Founcey, Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Raphael and his Circle (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1962), cat. 247, 146-7. They misread Peruzzi's "o" as "e", thus yielding "Modernaccia," which they interpret as a diminutive (!) of modano, model.

42 C. L. Frommel, Baldassare Peruzzi als Maler und Zeichner (Vienna: Schroll, 1968), cat. no. 105e, proposed that the "modernaccia" design was modeled on the portal of S. Petronio in Bologna by Jacopo della Queria, a view also held by H. Burns, "Baldassare Peruzzi and Sixteenth-Century Architectural Theory," in Les Traités d'Architecture de la Renaissance, ed. J. Guillaumé (Paris: Picard, 1988), 207-26, 218. Frommel also proposed that this sheet records a design for the Saint John the Baptist chapel in the Siena Duomo, a view espoused by a number of scholars, including M. Tafuri, "Giulio Romano: Language, Mentality, Patron," in Giulio Romano, trans. F. Barry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29. Given that the Baptist chapel was equipped with a famous statue by Donatello, it may be asked why the statues in the two Peruzzi sketches are
statues on the altar register the difference between the two modes. In the "modernaccia" design, the statue resembles Vecchietta's Christ in Sta. Maria della Scala in Siena and appears to be set against a wall niche. In the design that Peruzzi prefers the statue is presented fully in the round and bears comparison with Michelangelo's Minerva Christ (Figure 20.8).

The "High Renaissance" style that Peruzzi prefers is precisely not modern: it is meant to be pure and timeless, archaic and thus uncontingent, universal. The drawing thus offers a rare self-referential moment, suggesting that much of what we call "High Renaissance" style was a conservative and even reactionary backlash, a self-conscious cultural intervention against the labile modernism of the quattrocento. To see it that way makes it possible to understand it within the rhetoric of reform that dominated the period. This in turn helps to explain why we call the High Renaissance was such a brief episode, and was so quickly followed by the strange experiments of the art of the 1520s and after.

The idea of a "styleless" and universal mode modeled on statuary was so powerful that painters themselves came under its spell. Fra Bartolommeo's altarpiece representing the Salvator Mundi of 1516 for the Billi chapel in SS. Annunziata, now in the Pitti Palace (Figure 20.7) for example, is a striking effort to castigate painting in favor of a sculptural conception, and with somewhat strange results (where is Christ understood to be standing?). The idea also took real sculptural form, for example in Michelangelo's Risen Christ in the church of Sta. Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (Figure 20.8).41

The most overdetermined experiment of this kind was, of course, Johann Goritz's pier-altar at Sant'Agostino in Rome, which carried Andrea Sansovino's marble group of Saint Anne, the Virgin, and Child and Raphael's fresco of Isaiah above. Every year on Saint Anne's feast day a poetry contest was held in which the foremost humanists in Rome attempted to outdo each other in celebrating Goritz and the work of Sansovino and Raphael.42 These poems were collected and published in an anthology entitled Coseviana (after the Latinized form of Goritz's name) by Blosio Palladio in 1524. They represent the efforts of professional cultural interpreters to assess and to shape the significance of a new and momentous cultural development. It is interesting to note that, contrary to the inclinations of modern art historians, Sansovino's marble group received much more attention from these poets than Raphael's painting. Fresco painting on piers was a well-established medieval tradition. The free-standing group in marble, instead, seemed a momentous and categorical departure from contemporary practice. It advertised, loudly, that something new was going

different one from the other, and yet are, unlike Donatello's Baptist, both nude. Moreover, Peruzzi's sketches both clearly show Saint Luke at the top of the arch.


44 For these feasts, see J. H. Gaisser, "The Rise and Fall of Goritz's Feasts, RQ 48 (1995): 41-57.
on here, something that had not been seen since Roman antiquity. The form in which the poets responded—epigrams in the Greek and Roman tradition—only served to confirm the atmosphere of self-conscious antique revival.

In these poems Sansovino’s sculpture is consistently celebrated as a triumph of Christian piety, an achievement that supersedes the achievements of antiquity. And yet the reference and return to antique forms remains, for the poets, the basis of its virtue and spiritual significance. In a poem by Jacopo Sadoleto on the recently discovered Laocoön group, Goritz is celebrated as the genius who has dared to “restore to our age ancient images.” The group is consistently praised as a Christian triumph over the pagan cults, and yet its virtues and Christian significance are continually described in pagan terms: the figures are referred to in the plural as “gods” and “deities,” the Virgin is invoked as the “mother of the Thunderer” and the queen of Mt. Olympus, and, in a poem by Baldassare Castiglione, the three figures are asked to distribute their gifts through the good offices of Ceres and Bromius.

Despite the talismanic rhetoric, this was a rather abstract form of iconophilia. The humanists who celebrated such works were in fact far from engaging in real pagan idolatry as they were from participating in the forms of Christian image worship common in their time. The talk of images coming alive and responding to supplication is less the reflection of a real cult than a series of adaptations of tropoi from the epigrammatic tradition. The free-standing marble statue, which inspired loathing in the Church fathers and fearful awe in the Christian Middle Ages, was here neutralized in an atmosphere of self-conscious and retrospective humanist spirituality. In their nostalgia for a substantial, powerful Christian art based on antique models, the Roman humanists—among them some of the most prominent reformers of the day—came up with antiquarian fantasies.

During Clement’s pontificate the cultural weakness of these fantasies became more visible, or was at least pointed out with increasing insistence. A year after the publication of the Coriciana, in 1525, Francesco Berni, a poet and humanist in the circle of Gian Matteo Giberti, wrote a scathing attack on just the sort of infusion of pagan references in Christian poetry found in the Coriciana. “They call our Lord Jesus Christ now Jupiter, now Neptune, now the Thunderer, now the Father of the gods ... the most monstrous and unspeakable things you ever heard.” His attack was followed up three years later by the withering critique offered by Erasmus in his Ciceronianus of 1528, where the northern humanist berated the paganizing tendencies especially prevalent among Roman humanists. In the arena of poetry, he took direct aim at Sannazaro, whose De Partu Virginis was celebrated by Italian humanists as a marriage of Latin elegance and Christian content:

46 See the poems by Biojo Palladio, Girolamo Dello, Francesco Anisio, Bernardino Dardano, and Castiglione, in Coriciana (1997), nos. 56, 127, 143, 171, 276, 379.
But in Sannazaro's case, what was the point of all those invocations of the Muses and Phoebus? And what do we make of it when he depicts his Virgin meditating especially on the sibyline oracles, when he inappropriately brings in Proteus prophesying about Christ, and fills everything with nymphs, hamadryads, and nereids?  

Similar issues came up in sacred oratory. In a letter of June 1525 (probably addressed to Marcantonio Michiel), Girolamo Negri complained of a Ciceronian sermon delivered by Pietro Alcionio before Clement VII on Pentecost, in which "[H]e called our ceremonies 'sacred games' ["ludi sacros"] and 'Christian rites,' ["Christianana sacra"] as if in the manner of superstitious antiquity we present games or feast publicly in the midst of rites."  

Berni, in his Dialogue against Poets of 1526, also ridiculed the "monstrous" paganizing language of certain humanist writers, in which Christian rites are called "games and festivals ["giuochi e feste"], as Alcionio did, for example, and what's worse, in an oration on the Holy Spirit."

Again, the devastating blow came in the Ciceronianus of Erasmus. He condemned specifically a Good Friday sermon given by a Ciceronian that treated Christ's death like the death of an ancient hero. The orator, in Erasmus' paraphrase, lamented the fact that "some [heroes] were awarded a gold statue in the forum, others became the recipients of divine honours; but Christ, in return for his benefits, received from the thankless Jewish race not a reward but the cross...."  

Sylvana Seidel Menchi convincingly identified the object of Erasmus' scorn with Battista Casali, who, in a Good Friday sermon delivered in 1510 in the Sistine chapel, compared Christ to several ancient heroes and deplored the fact that whereas they were honored for their good deeds with statues in the forum, "Christ, who deserved a statue, received instead a cross."

The question touches on a central problem of humanist culture: are the forms and the media borrowed from the ancients ideologically neutral, or tainted with the culture of paganism? Lorenzo Valla argued that eloquence, as embodied in the greatest Roman writers, was a neutral art that could be used either for good or for evil. He likened it to gold, which can be used to ornament worthy things, like Aaron's vestments, the ark of the covenant, and the temple of Solomon, or can be turned to secular ends like the adornment of a private house, which brings nothing to the

48 D. Erasmus, Ciceronianus, in Erasmus, CWE, 28: 437.
52 S. Seidel-Menchi, "Alcuni atteggiamenti della cultura italiana di fronte ad Erasmo," in Eresia e Riforma nell'Italia del Cinquecento (Florence: Sansoni, 1974), 71–133, at 106–7, n. 169. J. W. O'Malley, Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal court, c. 1450–1521 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979), has shown that Erasmus's complaints are not borne out by the vast majority of the orations produced at the papal Curia in these years, which show a great sensitivity to their sacred setting and content. He accepts Seidel-Menchi's identification of Erasmus's Ciceronian preacher with Casali (60), but contends (30, n. 94) that this oration does not as a totality "correspond to what Erasmus so globally condemns."
veneration of God.\textsuperscript{53} In this Valla was adapting an argument, and a metaphor, developed by Augustine in his \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, where the Church father advocates appropriating heathen wisdom and turning it to Christian purposes, as the Jews did when, fleeing Egypt, they took “vessels and ornaments of gold and silver, and garment ... designing them for better use.” The heathens may have prostituted the gold and silver to the worship of devils (that is, used them to fabricate idols), but these precious materials are not in themselves bad; originally they were “dug out of the mines of God’s providence,” and were destined “to their proper use in preaching the gospel.”\textsuperscript{54} Erasmus was a reader of Valla and Augustine, and in principle also believed that the study of ancient letters and the cultivation of good Latin could be used to Christian ends and could serve as instruments of Christian reform. What he objected to was the direct importation of what he called “the monuments of paganism,” that is, pagan content and vocabulary.\textsuperscript{55} “[W]hen it comes to vocabulary,” he said, “our pagan way of thinking imposes on us.”\textsuperscript{56} The orators and poets he targeted had introduced actual turns of phrase, invoked actual pagan gods and institutions—that is, pagan content and iconography—in their efforts to use good Latin. They had imported, as it were, the statues direct, rather than recasting their gold and silver in Christian form.

Metaphors from the visual arts—such as the recurring gold and silver statues—were continually invoked in this debate, but the analogy was not entirely fitting. In the case of the visual arts it was even less easy to distinguish between medium and content than in the case of texts. Here aspects of what we would call the rhetoric of ancient art, such as nudity, and generic categories, such as the free-standing statue, were anything but neutral media in Valla’s sense. In the case of the free-standing statue, conspicuously, form is iconography, as we see from so many medieval and Renaissance images where the statue in the round is shorthand for idol. Recast or not, statues—whether of gold and silver, or bronze and marble—were as a type associated with paganism. Erasmus draws the distinction clearly enough. Despite his many caveats and criticisms he supports the learning and adoption of ancient eloquence. “Any young candidate for eloquence,” he affirms, “must always have Cicero in his pocket—and in his heart.”\textsuperscript{57} But when it comes to statues—ancient eloquence in visual form—his rejection is categorical:

\begin{quote}
Bulephorus: And if someone decorated our churches with the sort of statues that Lysippus made in ancient times to adorn the temples of the gods, would you say he was like Lysippus?

Nosononus: I wouldn’t.

Bulephorus: And why not?
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{54} Augustine, \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}, II, 40. I quote from the translation of J. F. Shaw in the \textit{Early Church Fathers} collection, http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/. I wish to thank Konrad Eisenbichler for bringing this passage to my attention.

\textsuperscript{55} Erasmus, \textit{CWE}, 28:396.

\textsuperscript{56} Erasmus, \textit{CWE}, 28:395.

\textsuperscript{57} Erasmus, \textit{CWE}, 28:439.
Real Presence as Antidote

Given these tensions, it is little surprise that even the strongest promoters of a refined Christian art based on antique models were acutely aware of the dangers involved. The protégé of Leo X and Clement VII, Gian Matteo Giberti, for whom Berni worked as secretary until 1531, expressed these concerns most succinctly in a letter of 1533 to Giovan Battista Mentebuona. The letter concerns the maintenance of the Santa Casa of Loreto, of which Giberti was governor and which he was having decorated by the same Andrea Sansovino. His main aim, he said, was that “the honor of God and the salvation and care of souls” be well maintained,

but without that one could collect a million gold ducats and have the statues made by Praxiteles, not to say by Sansovino, and I would not esteem it in the least; because these things, if they are accompanied by the former [the good care of souls] even if they were mediocre would seem to me most sufficient, but if cultivated at the expense of these concerns, then I would deem them as nothing.60

This attitude was close to that of Erasmus, and only confirms the picture we get of Giberti’s remaining loyal to Erasmus despite the opposition of his friends Alberto Pio da Carpi, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Girolamo Aleandro, and Egidio da Viterbo.60 The attitude is also close to that of Gasparo Contarini, who stressed the socioeconomic aspect of the argument, asserting that funding for church ornaments should not

58 Erasmus, CWE, 28:382.
59 Giberti to Giovan Battista Mentebuona, 26 April 1533, in Lettere di XIII huomini illustri (Venice: Franceschini, 1582), cc. 59v–60v: “Il provveder a un Governatore che sua Santità si degnerà pensare chi possa occorrere, & ancor’io andarò investigando, è buon rimedio: così d’affittare, & compatti & simil cose: le quali io apprezze, quando il principal de l’honor di Dio, & salute, & rimedio delle anime, sia bene, ma senza quello, si potria trarre di la un milion d’oro, & far le statue di man di Praxtile, non che del Sansovino, ch’io non lo stimerei niente, & quello, che accompaghato col primo, per medico che flisse, mi parria amplissimo, a questo modo, ampio a sua posta, non mi pariente.”
60 On Giberti’s loyalty to Erasmus, see A. Prosperi, Tra Evangelismo e Controriforma: G. M. Giberti (1493–1543) (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969), esp. 106. On the gathering of criticism of Erasmus in Italy in the 1520s, see S. Seidel-Menchi, Erasmo in Italia, 1520–1580 (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1987), esp. chap. 2. Seidel-Menchi’s chronology of Italian humanist disillusionment with Erasmus has been revised by John Monfasani, “Erasmus, the Roman Academy, and Ciceroanism: Battista Casali’s Inevitable,” Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook 17 (1997): 19–54, who convincingly dates Casali’s Inevitable against Erasmus to 1518–19 (in contrast to Seidel-Menchi’s dating of 1524) and interprets it as a response to Erasmus’s attack on Italian Ciceroians in the 1516 edition of Saint Jerome. (My thanks to Kenneth Guewens for this reference.) The new dating of the Inevitable may be valid, but it does not necessarily support Monfasani’s larger contention (30) that “we have to see the year 1516 as the turning point when many Roman humanists and Casali particularly began to sour in their attitude toward Erasmus.”
take precedence over the relief of the poor.\textsuperscript{61} This argument was pursued in turn in the 1530s by Tullio Crispoldi, Giberti’s close associate in Verona, who felt that charitable institutions, just governance, and good schools please God “more than sacrifices,” and deserve more expenditure than the ornamentation of churches.\textsuperscript{62} In general, Giberti’s attitudes toward art developed in line with his move away from the cultivation of \textit{bonae litterae} and toward a stronger focus on \textit{sacrae litterae} after the Sack.\textsuperscript{63}

In the realm of church ornament such an attitude could lead to a mild form of aniconism. Giberti’s solution at the Duomo of Verona in the 1530s was to place a sacrament tabernacle as the central focus of the high altar (Figure 20.10), a solution that takes its place as one of a restricted but significant series of such interventions at the high altars of major churches in the early part of the sixteenth century, including the cathedrals of Florence (1497 and 1504), Siena (1506), and Vicenza (1530s). The significance of these early cases has been obscured by the later success of the trend. The sacrament tabernacle on the high altar became a standard feature of ecclesiastical furnishing after the Council of Trent, and obligatory as of 1590.\textsuperscript{64} In the early sixteenth century, however, to replace the sculpted or painted image (the traditional focus of high altar decoration) by a container for the host was an unusual and polemical gesture. It was a critique of contemporary practice—in several cases motivated by distinct reservations about the reliability of images—and not, as it was later to become, the obedient application of institutional orthodoxy. At the four sites mentioned it caused acute controversy.

The diarist Luca Landucci informs us that on 29 November 1497—that is, under the regime of the reformer Girolamo Savonarola—the crucifix on the high altar of Florence Cathedral was taken down and was replaced with a carved wooden tabernacle for the host.\textsuperscript{65} Within three weeks of Savonarola’s arrest, on 2 May 1498, the


\textsuperscript{62} T. Crispoldi, \textit{Alcune interrogazioni delle cose della fede et del stato ovvero vivere de Christiani} (Verona: Antonio da Portesc, 1540), fol. B1iv: “et però che tu devi sapere che a fare misericordia et iudicio et ad haver scientia di Dio cose che a Dio piaccione più che il sacrificio, noi facciamo molti magiori spese di quelle che facciamo per il choro et per li ornamenti delle chiese...” Quoted by Prosperi (1969), 282, n. 282.

\textsuperscript{63} Prosperi (1969), 106.


\textsuperscript{65} L. Landucci, \textit{Diario Fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516}, ed. I. del Badia (Florence: Sansoni, 1883), 160: “E a di 29 detto, si levò el Crocifisso dell’altare di Santa Maria del Fiore, e posesi quaggiù di sotto, dove seggono e Calonaci, e posono in su l’altare maggiore un tabernacolo di legname per el Corpo di Cristo, che non era ancora dorato, a vedere se piaecva;” and ibid., 174: “E a di 2 di maggio 1498, si levò quel tabernacolo che’era stato posto in Santa Maria del Fiore all’altare maggiore, per tenere el Corpus Domini, e ripososi el Crocifisso com’era prima.” G. Poggi, \textit{Il Duomo di Firenze: Documenti sulla decorazione della chiesa e del campanile tratti dall’archivio dell’Opera}, ed. M. Haines, 2 vols. (Florence: Edizioni Medicee, 1988), doc. 1217, indicates that this wooden taber-
tabernacle was taken down again, and the crucifix replaced there as before, showing fairly clearly that the placing of the tabernacle was understood as an ideological gesture with Savonarolan associations. In 1504 the idea was revived, and now it was none other than Andrea Sansovino who was hired to make a marble tabernacle for the high altar, a project that, like the Great Council Hall, never reached completion.66 (Andrea Sansovino’s Corbinelli chapel in Sto. Spirito may give some idea of what this tabernacle would have looked like.)

In 1506, Duccio’s Maestà was taken down from the high altar of Siena Cathedral and replaced with a sacrament tabernacle, the one by Vecchietta already in use across the piazza at the church of the Ospedale della Scala. The motivations of Pandolfo Petrucci in doing this, and the possible connections to the Florentine intervention, have not been sufficiently clarified.67 But clearly it captured the imagination of many, not least of all Domenico Beccafumi, who in his depictions of the Communion of Saint Catherine of 1512–13, showed a similar tabernacle on the high altar where Raymond of Capua celebrates Mass—an arrangement that would have been very unusual in Saint Catherine’s time and was a novelty in Beccafumi’s, but one that nonetheless could stand as exemplary, and even archaic.

Something of a trend developed after this: at S. Marco in Venice it was unthinkable to remove the Pala d’Oro, but as close as possible, in the apse directly behind, a sacrament altar was commissioned in 1518 from Lorenzo Bregno by the powerful Procuratori di San Marco de supra.68 In Siena, the high altar got a new push

67 The best account of the project, which involved the removal of the choir to the rear of the high altar, can be found in E. Struchholz, Die Choranlagen und Chorgestühle des Sieneser Doms (Münster: Waxmann, 1995). See also A. Pfeiffer, Das Ciborium im Sieneser Dom: Untersuchungen zur Bronzeplastik Vecchiettas (Marburg: Phillips-Universität, 1975). H. van Os, Sienesi Altarpieces, 2 vols. (Groningen: Bouma’s, 1984–90), 2:207–12, has put this and other interventions in the general context of reform initiatives in the Quattrocento. The best evidence I have found for Petrucci’s motivations comes from the Historiarum Senesi of the chronicler Sigismundo Tizio, Biblioteca Comunale, Siena, MS. B.III.12 (vol. 7), who says, fol. 3, that the choir was moved “ut spatiosior, aequque amplior fieret ecclesiam.” A dissertation on Petrucci’s art patronage by Philippa Jackson now under way (University of London, Warburg Institute) will, it is hoped, shed some light on this intervention, and in particular its associations with projects by Francesco di Giorgio, a favorite artist of Petrucci’s.
when, after the Sack of Rome, Baldassare Peruzzi returned to his native town to take over the project. In Vicenza Cathedral, Aurelio dall’Acqua, who was associated with heterodox circles in Venice, had a sacrament altar built in the 1530s that is notable for being virtually aniconic (Figure 20.9). We have the receptacle for the sacrament in the center, and otherwise abstract designs made up of marbles and semiprecious stones from Dall’Acqua’s collection. The only figural elements are the two angels to either side of the receptacle for the host, an arrangement that would have been defensible even to the purest iconophobe on the grounds of a parallel with the ark of the covenant. It is perhaps the most “abstract” altarpiece produced during the Italian Renaissance.

Gian Matteo Giberti’s Verona Cathedral: a Matrix for the Body of Christ

It is likely that some of these precedents informed Giberti’s plans in Verona Cathedral (see Figure 20.10), which were carried out during the 1530s. Giberti’s renovations involved primarily new fresco decoration in the apse, new pavement in the choir area and throughout the church, the refashioning of the high altar area with new choir stalls along the apse wall, cantoria balconies, and Michele Sanmicheli’s tornacoro extending in a semicircle before the choir. Behind the high altar stood a tempietto-like tabernacle made of marble and crystal curried aloft by four bronze angels. The tabernacle, whose whereabouts are unknown, thus served as a precedent for those placed later in the century in Milan Cathedral and in the Sistine Chapel in Sta. Maria Maggiore in Rome. Scholars have often likened Sanmicheli’s tornacoro to paleo-Christian models, such as the choir screen in Old St. Peter’s. A closer precedent, I believe, is the eleventh- and twelfth-century decoration of the cathedral at Torcello. There we have not only the iconostasis but a similarity in pictorial program: the Antucnication in the spandrels, the Virgin in the apse (at Torcello stationary, at Verona as an


70 M. Morresi, “Cooperation and Collaboration in Vicenza before Palladio: Jacopo Sansovino and the Pedemuro Masters at the High Altar of the Cathedral of Vicenza,” JSAH 55 (1996): 158–77. The sacramental emphasis and the aniconic tendencies in evidence here were not among Morresi’s concerns in this article.


73 I am grateful to Michelangelo Sabatino for initially bringing forward this precedent in a graduate seminar presentation at the University of Toronto.
Assunta), the apostles below, and the founding bishop saint at bottom (at Torcello Saint Heliudorus, at Verona Saint Zeno). The two cathedrals in fact share the same dedication, to Mary Mother of God.\textsuperscript{74} Moreover, a concrete link to Torcello was part of the administrative responsibility of the bishop of Verona: in 814 the church of Sta. Bosca at Torcello, next to the Cathedral, was given in benefice to the convent of S. Zeno in Verona.\textsuperscript{75}

At Torcello the iconostasis is quadrangular, while at Verona the semicircular form responds to the apse, producing an elliptical presbytery. As Derek Moore has pointed out, Vitruvius recommends the ionic order for temples dedicated to feminine deities, and here it is appropriately used in a church dedicated to Mary Mother of God, the same dedication as at Torcello.\textsuperscript{76} I believe the dedication informs the program still more deeply. The tornacoro can be interpreted as an extension of the Marian program that fills the apse, making for a feminine ovoid enclosure encircling the tabernacle containing the body of Christ. Myron Laskin pointed out that in the fresco decoration there is no scene from the story of the Virgin’s life between the Annunciation and the Assumption, with the result that the figure of Christ appears nowhere in the fresco program.\textsuperscript{77}

Instead of an image of Christ, his actual body was presented in the tabernacle at the high altar—a significant difference from Torcello, where the mosaic apse shows an image of the Virgin carrying the Christ child. The arrangement at Verona thus responds to the dedication to Mary Mother of God, but in a way that epitomizes Giberti’s conception of the Virgin’s role within his Christocentric theology. As Alessandro Serafini has shown, for Giberti and his circle, the Virgin was not an object of veneration in her own right but was to be honored above all as the vehicle by which Christ was made flesh. Tullio Crispoldi, Giberti’s close associate, made this bias clear when he insisted on the great honor done to humanity by God when he was born of “one of our women”—a subtle but significant demotion of the Virgin with regard to traditional Marian piety.\textsuperscript{78}

The new choir introduced by Giberti thus functioned as an architectural staging of the mystery of the incarnation. The semi-circular tornacoro surrounded the now-lost central tabernacle like the peristyle of a circular temple surrounding the central

\textsuperscript{74} For the transcription of the inscription commemorating the dedication of Torcello Cathedral in 639, see R. Polacco, \textit{La Cattedrale di Torcello} (Treviso: Canova, 1984), 10. Verona Cathedral is dedicated to Santa Maria Matricolare, Torcello to Maria Genetrix.


\textsuperscript{76} Moore (1985).


\textsuperscript{78} A. Serafini, “Gran Matteo Giberti e il Duomo di Verona. 2: Gli affreschi di Francesco Torbido,” \textit{Venezia Cinquecento} 8 (1998): 21–142, at 38, quoting Crispoldi’s \textit{Meditationi dichiarative del Paternostro, ad exercitio di fede et di charitad, massimamente circa il perdonare, et insieme alcuna cosa de l’Ave Maria, et de tutti Santi, et de li Morti} (Venice: da Sabio, 1534), c. 331r: “O Signor mio Giestà Christo quanto honore hai fatto a la nostra generazione, che ti volesti fare homo et pigliare carne de la carne nostra, et haver madre una de le donne nostre....” As Serafini notes, this is not the only place in Crispoldi’s writing where the expression comes up.
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cella. The real architecture of the presbytery and the metaphorical micro-architecture of the tempietto-tabernacle were thus made to work together. As it happens, this idea was made explicit in the most important episode in the reception history of Giberti’s intervention, the tabernacle installed on the high altar of Milan Cathedral under the direction of Carlo Borromeo, a great admirer of Giberti’s. When Pellegrino Tibaldi installed Pirro Ligorio’s tabernacle on the high altar, he surrounded it with a colonnade, producing a temple-like arrangement with the peristyle surrounding a cella.79

The architecture was thus understood as an animated body containing Christ’s presence. The bodily metaphor was invoked by Giberti himself, who, according to a contemporary biographer, intended the sacrament tabernacle to stand in the core of the church like the heart in the breast.80 Or, like Christ in the Virgin’s womb? Saint Antoninus, whose complete works were published by Giberti at this time, once drew the parallel between the Virgin, through whom Christ was made flesh, and the priest at the altar, through whom the Eucharist is consecrated in the Mass.81 Here, where the perimeter of the presbytery itself is conceived as the “virginal” matrix for the


sacrament, the parallel is made concrete. The Virgin is associated with architecture, that is, with the earthly physical matrix that houses the divine. And in that sense the architecture, with the Virgin, is kept in its proper place: it is earthly, it is human, and yet it contains that which is divine and beyond human manufacture. The entire project was a search for a subtle compromise, an effort to re-evaluate and justify on new grounds the role of church architecture and ornament in the wake of the Reformation.

If Giberti’s interventions were later to be taken as a model for the reform of church architecture by Carlo Borromeo, they were largely misunderstood in their day. Giberti died in exasperation, defending himself against criticism from both sides: criticized on the one hand for excessive expenditure on church ornaments, on the other he faced the flat charge of iconoclasm, of using church renovation as a pretext for removing images of the saints.82 This absurd predicament in a sense epitomizes the phase of reform before the Council of Trent, when Catholic reformers commonly found themselves in the odor of heresy, and in the immediate company of Protestant sympathizers, even as they found new ways to promote traditional forms and institutions of worship, sometimes under the direction of the papacy. The watchword was reconciliation; Giberti and his associates believed they could bring about renovation through conservation and revival, rather than through an extreme reformist rejection of the institutions of the church. Thus, the cult of the Virgin was maintained, but her role in the larger program of redemption was significantly altered. Images as such were not eliminated but were reformulated, and the great alternative to images was not the Word, as in the Protestant North, but the eucharistic Body, the central sacrament of Church ritual. As a result, we have a paradoxical situation where a deeply conservative desire for reform and reversion motivated radical innovations in religious art and church architecture: in the name of restoring a Christological emphasis associated with the early Church, Italian reformers embraced highly experimental artistic forms and ideas.

The paradox was expressed with emblematic clarity by Jacopo Sadoletto in a letter of 1528 to Clement VII in which he celebrated the Pope as “the author of a new age, of new times, new institutions, new morals, but nonetheless, the newness of these would draw as near as possible by imitation to that holy and pious antiquity [of the early Church].”83 The sentiment was typical of this phase of unsystematic reform in the period before the Council of Trent—as were the misunderstandings that followed from such paradoxical formulations. Historians of religion have done a great deal to clarify this once obscure history, but its implications for the history of art, and specifically for our conception of the periods art historians conventionally call the “High Renaissance” and “Mannerism,” remain to be fully explored.

Figure 20.1: Correggio, Venus, Satyr and Cupid, ca. 1524–25, Paris, Louvre.
Figure 20.2: Parmigianino, *Madonna of the Rose*, ca. 1530, Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Alte Meister.
Figure 20.3: Titian, *Mary Magdalen*, ca. 1531, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.
Figure 20.4: Rosso Fiorentino, *The Dead Christ with Angels*, 1527, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.
Figure 20.5: Titian, *Averoldi Altarpiece*, 1519–22, Brescia, SS. Nazaro e Celso.
Figure 20.6: Baldassare Peruzzi, *Two Projects for a Chapel*, ca. 1530?, London, British Museum.
Figure 20.7: Fra Bartolommeo, *Salvator Mundi*, 1516, Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti.
Figure 20.8: Michelangelo, *Risen Christ*, 1519–21, Rome, Sta. Maria sopra Minerva.
Figure 20.9: Giovanni da Porlezza and Girolamo Pittoni, possibly on design by Jacopo Sansovino, high altar (detail), 1530s, Vicenza, Cathedral.
Figure 20.10: Verona Cathedral, view of tornacoro and high altar, 1530s.