Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?

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Abstract

This essay compares Michelangelo’s first Pietà with its medieval predecessors from the southern Low Countries. The purpose is to suggest that in reacting to Flemish models Michelangelo remained consistent in his views on Flemish art. In the particular ways he departed from those Pietàs Michelangelo radically redefined the enterprise of making Pietà sculptures and, hence, redefined the nature of the “art” itself. He did so by contrast with the Flemish works: Michelangelo’s core figures are inviolable (due to the change of material from wood to marble) and resistant to the physical transformations the Flemish works have undergone due to changing ritual and devotional agendas across time. Seeing these changes can shed light on the question of whether there was “art” before the Renaissance because they point up the greater object quality of Michelangelo’s sculpture, with its emphasis on material and authorship, in contrast with the devotion-bound and transformable physical nature of the Low Country examples.

This essay explores the relationship between Michelangelo’s first Pietà of ca. 1499/1500 (Fig. 1) and its predecessors from the late medieval north. As a prototype, the northern Pietà provided a site for the comparison and contrast of stylistic properties, which until recently offered Renaissance art historians some insight into non-Italian influences on the Italian sculptor. I return to this comparison here. However, my reasons for doing so are quite different from those of previous generations of scholars. Now I seek to highlight the northern precedents as clearly as the magnificent object that absorbs them. Furthermore, the question guiding this comparison is not one that earlier art historians would have asked, for only recently has our discipline become concerned with it: is or to what degree is the category of “art” (as we have come to define it) an appropriate interpretive name for the objects of art historical inquiry, in this case, late medieval Pietàs from the Low Countries.

This question has become especially important for the understanding of medieval objects, as this volume bears witness. Out of a growing responsibility to the historical and religious context, which is independently fascinating and important, medievalists have shown themselves eager to abandon such approaches as self-referential stylistic analysis. Now the field’s scholars seek wherever possible to incorporate the new, more socially sensitive methodologies. There is a greater emphasis than ever before on documenting the ritual uses of medieval objects and on developing strategies for uncovering the dynamics of socially constructed meanings. In the wake of these methodological shifts it appears that most medievalists currently operate on the assumption that our traditional view of the “art” of medieval art had been grounded more in nineteenth-century concepts of aesthetic judgment than in medieval practices or viewpoints documented in the written word.

Yet for this author many medieval objects, despite what the historical record proclaims of them, are possessed of what for want of a less loaded term, I would call immense artistic beauty. What is different about the Pietàs being discussed in this essay, however, is that viewed within the vast treasury of medieval art they are exceptionally inauspicious examples: for, in the Flemish Pietàs, conventional manifestations of aesthetic quality or artistic beauty do not appear. This in part helps to explain the patent lack of interest scholars have shown in them. Yet I want to remind us here that it was the northern medieval Pietà, and quite likely the Flemish ones, that Michelangelo fastened onto as models for his sculpture—a sculpture which would be acclaimed in nearly every epoch and by an inconceivably wide range of voices as one of the touchstones of artistic achievement at its highest. To what do we attribute the seeming paradox? Is the artistic greatness of Michelangelo’s Pietà a construct of nineteenth-century aesthetic priorities alone? Is it an interpretive paradigm rather than a condition inherent in the object? Is it an ongoing misconception of popular belief? By comparing it with its late medieval predecessors, I believe it possible to begin to answer these questions. By re-creating the comparison from a perspective of post-modern issues coursing through our discipline, the promise is held out for re-locating artistic issues in the objects (or not) and not merely, as has been the case for over a century, in the usual interpretive procedures we submit them to.

The theme of the Pietà, in which Mary holds on her lap the body of the dead Christ, has been one of the most popular Christian images since its appearance in the west at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Between 1300 and 1500 the Pietà was predominantly made as sculpture, although as the centuries progressed it became part of the repertory of painters. The origins of the theme are obscure, but there are a number of factors that can account for the sudden and
unexpected introduction of new iconographic themes to the repertory of Christian images in the period, of which the Pi-
età was one. There is no biblical reference to this event hav-
ing taken place after the crucifixion, although texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such as the poems and la-
ments of the Virgin in the vernacular, had probably come into play as sources. Pictorial treatments like icon paintings, ivory carvings, and manuscript illuminations of the lamen-
tation of the Virgin may have migrated from Byzantium to Europe via the Italian peninsula and then served as models or templates in pattern books for those workshops which had access to them.

Surely, however, the most important factor that gave rise to the theme of suffering, loss, and motherly grief was the radical reorientation of spiritual culture that began to take place at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thir-
teenth century. The practices of devotion and its assisting imagery were totally transformed by the desire of clergy and laity to experience in a multitude of formats the humanity of Christ. Christ as man, son, infant, mortal sufferer—these were characteristics of the divinity the late medieval belief hungered to know, to feel, and to see. As the thirteenth century wore on, it bore new fruit in vigorous eucharistic practices, the visions and physically encoded messages of women, and pious devotions which moved out of official liturgy and into the everyday, ordinary sphere. The Pietà theme was one of the amazing documents of the change in spiritual climate that had overtaken most of the European continent by around 1300.

As with many of the new devotional practices and imagery the Pietà, as far as we know, first appeared in the Rhine-
land. So many sculptures from Germany have survived that quantity alone is good evidence that by the early fourteenth century there was in that part of western Europe a prolific and widespread devotion to the image of the Pietà. Cloisters seem to have been especially active patrons and users of Pietàs. In fact, nun’s convents such as Adelhausen in Freiburg-
im-Breisgau have thus far been the only setting in which scholars have been able to situate the sculptures securely. At the beginning of this century German art historians became researchers of the problem and published numerous studies of the Pietà’s stylistic development, its textual sources, and iconographic conditions that are to this day considered funda-
mental to the research. English-speaking scholars con-
tinue, for example, to use the German terms Vesperbild and Andachtsbild when referring to the Pietà, even though these terms are the inventions of modern scholarship.

The Rhineland and eastern portions of present-day Germany were not the only territories where the Pietà was popular during the later Middle Ages. In the predominantly Germanic language-speaking lands to the west of the Rhine, the use of Pietà sculptures was, if anything, more wide-
spread among the general populace than seems to have been the case in the Rhineland. In Flanders, Limburg, Brabant, and, to a lesser extent, Hainaut—all the duchies and coun-
ties that comprise the country known today as Belgium—
the Pietà was popular not only in church and convent but in cemeteries and homes, indoors as well as out, in wealthy parishes and humble rural shrines.

From the Rhineland the sculptural type moved outward toward the west, into the French domains, and south to the Italian peninsula. Michelangelo may well have known northern examples first hand in local churches, such as the Pietà in the church of San Domenico in Bologna. More importantly, the Pietà reached the peak of its popularity in the north in the last half of the fifteenth century—just about the time that Michelangelo received the commission to produce one. On 27 April 1498, Michelangelo was contracted by Card-
inal Jean Belhères de Lagrualas (also known as Jean de Villers de la Groselaye), former abbot of Saint-Denis, for “una Pietà de marmo . . . cioè una Vergene Maria vestita, con Christo morto in braccio.”

Given the timing of the commission and how firmly established the Pietà was by then as a northern image type, we may assume that for the cardinal’s contract the only sculptu-
tural prototype Michelangelo could have adopted was the northern one. A number of Michelangelo scholars have noted this situation before. De Tolnay and Krieglbaum cited north-
ern Vesperbilder as Michelangelo’s predecessors; Wölflin obliquely referred to the overemotionality of “earlier mas-
ters” of the theme; and the textbook authors of the last gen-
eration, John Pope-Hennessy and Howard Hibbard, continue to cite northern precedents, including French Pietàs.

The field of possible northern precedents may be nar-
wed considerably, however, by concentrating, as I intend to in the following pages, on Low Country examples, that is, on objects that Michelangelo himself would most likely have identified as Flemish. There are two reasons to focus on Flemish Pietàs. First, by doing so the question guiding this essay and the others in this volume—was there “art” before the Renaissance?—can be answered with more certain evidence than once was the case. My book, Sculpture of Com-
passion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c. 1300–c. 1600, is the first comprehensive study in any language of the Pietà outside Germany. I cite it be-
cause my research for it uncovered new data, many of them documented, about the use, the physical settings, and the patronage of these sculptures, 147 in all. We are therefore no longer constrained in our comparison between the late medieval Pietàs and Michelangelo’s, as former generations were, by having to rely on stylistic information alone. For the first time our information on Pietàs is more precise and comprehensive.

Yet it is not the data alone that compel me to explore Low Country precedents. It is also that these Pietàs shed light on Michelangelo’s often cited views on Flemish art. Viewed in this essay through the highly focused lens of Pietà sculptures, Michelangelo’s statements become sharply revealing of
how and in what ways the master himself saw his work as standing radically distinct from the tradition on which it drew. And this in turn yields helpful clues for exploring the nature of the problem of “art” before Michelangelo’s time.

Although it remains to be studied systematically, there are signs that Michelangelo was quite sensitive to—and indeed I believe very in touch with—what was taking place in the Flemish religious art of his time.9 If one is inclined to accept what Francisco de Hollanda reports as at all accurate, then it seems that Michelangelo held quite decisive views on what, artistically speaking, he thought was happening up north. De Hollanda quotes the Italian artist as claiming that “Flemish painting . . . will . . . please the devout better than any painting of Italy. It will appeal to women, especially the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony . . . .”10 Widely quoted, this text offers a rich frame of reference to our problem. It offers abundant—and accurate—I might stress—symbolic understanding of the Low Country way of making and seeing religious imagery: all religious imagery, not just painting.

Secondly, just shortly after Michelangelo completed his Piètâ he was involved in making a sculpture that was destined for Flanders itself: The Virgin and Child for the Church of Our Lady in Bruges.10 It was sent to Flanders in 1506, and paid for in a first installment in 1503, which means that in all likelihood it had been carved concurrently with or immediately following completion of the Piètâ.11

If nothing else, the Bruges work suggests that for Michelangelo Flanders was not a foreign environment, either in terms of patronage or of artistic grounding. Thus the Virgin and Child may have helped shape those views on Flemish patronage the artist would become famous for. The Virgin and Child was purchased by a noble family of Flemish cloth merchants named Mosaren (Fr. Mouscron) for the Chapel of the Mouscron in Bruges, and perhaps Michelangelo’s notion that “certain noblemen” were lacking any sense of true harmony had arisen through the direct experience of their commission—the only Flemish one he ever received, as far as we know. Compared with local sculpture in Flanders, the Bruges Madonna has a bizarre, nearly alien sculptural presence there even today. Yet what must it have been like nearly five centuries ago for the “devotionally excessive” churchgoer to have looked upon a Virgin to whom, paraphrasing Wölflin, no one could venture to speak.12 The discomforting presence of Michelangelo’s Bruges work is telling.

Taking these signals together it appears that it was the devotional vigor of Flemish works and the religious enthusiasm of the audience who received them that arrested Michelangelo’s attention, attracting him negatively, so to speak. As we shall soon see, it seems that what repelled him devotionally, stimulated him artistically. This I hypothesize to have been the case when Michelangelo made his first Piètâ in Rome around 1500; this I hypothesize to illuminate at least certain aspects of the question of whether there was “art” before the Renaissance.

We now discuss the category, or genre, as it may appropriately be called, of Low Country Piètâs that Italian artists would have considered to be serious religious art—that is, public sculptures which, like Michelangelo’s own Piètâ, were costly, elaborate, and large enough to require commissioning. These works are typical Flemish church sculpture, common examples of the kind of religious sculpture that parishioners and visitors to the local parish and collegiate churches (Michelangelo included, had he visited there) would have been familiar with.13

A fine example is the Piètâ currently housed in the Stedelijk Museum in Leuven (Fig. 2).14 Dated to 1535, this oak Piètâ (h. 135 cm.) served as the central cult image in the Crossbowmen’s Guild Chapel of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-van-Ginderbuiten in Leuven. Rogier van der Weyden’s Prado Deposition was painted for the same chapel as this Piètâ and was originally situated on one of its altars. The figure of Mary has a small aperture on the right side, which testifies to the addition of swords, probably added in 1494 when the cult of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin was instituted at the chapel: the sculpture was painted, we suspect, first in the fourteenth century and again in the nineteenth century.

Most important to note about this sculpture is the addition to the sculpture of various props such as swords, rings and clothing and of several layers of paint. The Piètâ from Tongeren saw similar additions (Fig. 3). It still bears the remains and holes of countless votive pins inserted for at least two centuries. I have argued elsewhere that the excessive restoration of the Tongeren Piètâ in 1953 should also be considered as one of the many ritual transformations the object has undergone.15 The alterations and additions to the core figures of the Leuven and Tongeren Piètâs took place across time, across the centuries, as a continual morphic process that is synonymous with and directly attributable to the devotional history surrounding the objects. Metamorphically changing appearance of the objects is typical of medieval Piètâs in the Low Countries, for most of them were visibly transformed for various cultic reasons, continuously until very recently.

Another comparatively well-known sculpture is the nearly life-size Piètâ from St. Michael’s in Bree, dating to the mid-fourteenth century (Fig. 4).16 This is one of the oldest Piètâs in the southern Low Countries, and for the earliest scholars it was an important object because it exhibited strong stylistic ties with Piètâs from the Rhineland. Although I have published this object elsewhere, there are a number of points worth repeating here for the purposes of the present discussion.17 Like the Leuven Piètâ, the Bree Piètâ has a recorded history of nearly continuous devotion, from the early formation of confraternities connected with it to its purportedly miraculous role in saving the town of Bree from the fire of the German cannons in 1944. It, too,
and emotive scene. Michelangelo, Condivi reports, had himself already pointed up this same issue when he defended his Virgin against the criticism that she appeared too young in relation to her Son; she is the “freshness and flower of youth,” Michelangelo said, proclaiming her greater calm.\textsuperscript{18} It could certainly be argued that such differences in expression and style are accounted for and dispatched simply by considering that Michelangelo was working in High Renaissance Rome \textit{ca.} 1500.

Knowing the stylistic context helps to account for the Cinquecento artistic dialect that Michelangelo spoke, in general. But specific solutions are manifested in his \textit{Pietà} that originate, as I am arguing here, not only in the generic ambience of Rome at that time. The only models for a sculpted \textit{Pietà} available to the artist in Rome were either northern or painted ones.\textsuperscript{19} His \textit{Pietà} was a beginning in the south—and it is very likely that the artist himself was fully aware of this.\textsuperscript{20} The cardinal’s commission gave Michelangelo a unique occasion to engage with the North in a kind of sculptural polemic, in which to explore specific sculptural challenges.

To begin with, Michelangelo chose marble, which, considering past treatment of the \textit{Pietà} as a subject, was a radical choice. Again, it may be argued that since the work was intended for a chapel in St. Peter’s and since it was to be a tomb sculpture, Michelangelo had little to say about the choice of material. Whatever may be accounted for by way of context, however, the result was a complete rejection of the stylistic subtexts and virtuoso over-manipulation that accompany oak or lindenwood. Of course marble embodies the sensibility of the Cinquecento, but by using it the artist avoided in principle the sculptural excesses and emotional anguish that so promptly identified the wood versions. Michelangelo did not incorporate the type or quantity of anecdotal details, which frequently explain the physical and psychological elaboration of the northern examples.

More than that, as a medium marble resolutely insisted on itself \textit{as itself}; it would forever remain materially nude. It could not be because of the material be dressed and undressed with extraneous matter, for Michelangelo had already decided upon a permanent garment \textit{in stone}. This, when the contract had ambiguously requested that, “The Master is to make a draped Virgin Mary [una Vergine Maria vestita].” The marble figures would not be processed, painted, riddled with votive pins, or permitted to become the object of continual, physical metamorphoses across time—metamorphoses which in the northern works were the direct result of that devotional vigor that apparently so offended Michelangelo. Marble is inviolable and if nothing had been changed about the \textit{Pietà}-type than the choice of marble as the material, then Michelangelo would still, for all time, have transfigured the nature, indeed the very essence, of the \textit{Pietà} from what its medieval incarnation had been.

Michelangelo’s object was meant to be untouched, except by the artist himself; it was made to stay purely itself,
eternally preserved in its “original” state. The material therefore takes precedence; and in this way the object slowly emerges in the beholder’s critical consciousness as one that is first and foremost about medium, rather than subject matter.

The Pietà became an “object” in Michelangelo’s hands; it was able, indeed I believe it was expected, to be understood and experienced most fully as sculpture—a sculpture being art. It was understandable as sculpture, for the beholder’s most informative point of reference would have been to the medium of sculpture rather than to the iconographic or devotional indicators—not only to Italian sculpture, to his forebears, such as Verrocchio and Jacopo della Quercia, but for full understanding, reference would necessarily have had to extend to northern sculpture as well. As a sculptural type the Pietà posed Michelangelo with an artistic problem, with what Wölfflin referred to as the “exceedingly difficult task [of placing] the body of a full grown man on the lap of a seated woman.”21 Invoking this kind of referenced understanding, in which the spectator is made aware of the past and conscious of visual sources, was the object’s humanist project and the sculptor’s humanist, intellectual achievement. And this achievement became fully appreciable only with knowledge of earlier northern and contemporary models.

With this solution, technically self-conscious and empty of any devotional cues whatsoever, the medieval Pietà, and the Flemish ones in particular, became not very “artistic” remnants of the pre-modern past, and have remained so ever since. In this way, Michelangelo’s Pietà was a crucial part of the beginning of a modern, a very unmedieval, definition of sculpture. This definition was grounded in the principles of the medium rather than the rules of the craft; it arose from a belief in the conceptual characteristics of making and understanding. These principles were distinctly absent from the sculptural ambience of the North in which the Pietà type first arose.22 In the Middle Ages it was the active and believing (one might even say loving) user, the miraculous and continuous setting, the localized devotional practices that
defined the sculptures and gave them value. Connoisseurship, authorship, reference to previous examples were not things the medieval devout seemed to have had much interest in. The intellectual satisfaction of understanding the expressiveness of the medium, along with other such kinds of humanistic taste and pleasures, are nowhere in evidence in Low Country use of Pietàs.

Several summers ago I visited a shrine in Helshoven (Belgium) which is on the old Roman road from Tongeren to Sint-Truiden. There is still a Pietà being venerated there. It is a cheap replica of a Pietà that the local people believed had been there since the Middle Ages. My research indicates that there was even an earlier replica, venerated in the seventeenth century. This shrine works, as it has since the Middle Ages, a miracle that I find particularly appropriate to the image of the Pietà. It helps to bring stillborn children back to life, so that they can receive baptism, die, and go to heaven. What matters to the cult is not so much the “object” itself, who sculpted it, or what material it is made of, or even whether the original is the one that remains there. It is not the formal properties of the cult object, its material, or even its originality that matter. What matters is that the sculpture—better termed not sculpture with its implications of high art but statue—has been in the continuous possession of generations of believers. It is thus precisely a lack of distance between object and believer that characterizes the beholding experience in the Low Countries, rather than the distance that comes, as it does in Michelangelo’s Pietà, from calling on the full awareness of the spectator to appreciate from a knowing distance the object, to be conscious of visual references and of its materiality and its artistic distinctness from past and present. This awareness, intellectual, conscious, visually learned, is what enables the spectator to objectify the object as art rather than to be stimulated by it to a devotional response.

In undertaking to write this essay I have sought to establish that Michelangelo’s Pietà was a progenitor of what for this scholar continues to embody the illusive but present characteristics of high aesthetic achievement in the west. Among other features, those characteristics privilege the original intentions and controls of the artist, something with which the sculptors of the Flemish Pietàs discussed here were for the most part unfamiliar. Unlike the northern models from which its inspiration was drawn, Michelangelo’s Pietà does not participate in ritual change; it resolutely refuses to. The comparison, then, has pointed up two quite antithetical approaches to the sculpted object, poles which have to do with the degree to which the object was made, or not made in Michelangelo’s Pietà, to be submitted to transformative ritualization.

Art, as I have defined it around Michelangelo’s Pietà, has something to do, then, with the transcendent inviolability of an original object, and its resistance to ritual change. This inviolability stands over and against the re-personalization of the appearance of religious objects that was dictated by and in fact synonymous with ritual devotion, something that figures so prominently in both the use and meaning of Flemish Pietàs.

These distinctions, apparent in the comparison elaborated upon in this essay, suggest perhaps that the concept of art as Michelangelo knew it was not so foreign to the Middle Ages, after all. For if, as I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, we recognize that the Flemish Pietàs are exceptionally auspicious examples of medieval art and that they differ significantly from Michelangelo’s Pietà, then art historians may want to reconsider the interpretive strategies being currently applied to the treasury of medieval objects. If we interpret these objects primarily as accessories to liturgy and ritual devotion, that is, as cultural “texts” alone, we threaten to make them indistinguishable from works like the Flemish Pietàs. But if we do as Michelangelo himself had done, and recognize artistic differences among medieval objects, then the question of whether there was art before the Renaissance may begin to be answered, and answered now with the knowledge that certain objects can serve ritual functions and at the same time be possessed of the characteristic defined in this essay as the artistic quality that comes from the mode of handling—a characteristic that, as we know, artists will eventually pursue as an end in itself.

NOTES

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1. Most of the material on the Pietà discussed in this essay is elaborated upon in my study, Sculpture of Compassion: The Pietà and the Beguines in the Southern Low Countries, c. 1300–c. 1600 (Brussels and Rome, 1992).


4. For a review of the German literature on the Pietà, see Ziegler, *Sculture of Compassion*, 25–51.


10. De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 156–59. Dating and attribution of the Bruges work are not certain. De Tolnay says, “We do not know exactly where or at what time Michelangelo executed this statue.” But it seems to have been already finished in 1506, and probably by 1503, when it was first paid for, if not earlier. See also n. 11.


13. For other examples of large-scale Pietàs, see Ziegler, *Sculture of Compassion*, inv. nos. 3, 6, 10, 14, 51, 52, 80, 101, 114, 115, 116 and Sluter’s now lost Pietà, inv. no. 147.


16. Ziegler, *Sculture of Compassion*, 216–17, inv. no. 1; and Ziegler, “Virgin as Object.”

17. See note 15 above.


19. On the issues of northern and painted models, De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 148–49. A fresh look at this situation is in order.

20. It was at this same time, 1480–90, that the Pietà subject became popular in Florence, “as proved by a whole series of such works then being executed by Jacopo del Sellaio, Perugino, Raffaellino del Garbo, Giovannni della Robbia and the school of Ghirlandaio,” according to the De Tolnay, Michelangelo, 148. This situation strengthens my point.


22. It is interesting to listen to Jules Helbig deplore the “condition” of Low Country religious sculpture, which he would like to try and turn into “modern” objects in precisely the sense that I am developing for Michelangelo’s Pietà: “Among the statues and groups of the Virgin Mary, there are works of value; however, they were abandoned to devotion, which saw in them only an incitation to piety. It is rather strange that no one has thought of examining them from the point of view of art: it is true that most of these Virgins were clothed with rags often adapted to the fashion of the day, and many of the statues have been mutilated so as to render them more adaptable to these ridiculous costumes.” Jules Helbig, *L’Art Mosan depuis l’introduction du Christianisme jusqu’à la fin du XVIIIe siècle*, 2 vols. (Brussels, 1906), I, 124.