

Imitating Michelangelo: Three Mannerist Artists and their attempts to outshine “il divino”

Morten Steen Hansen
In Michelangelo's Mirror. Perino del Vaga, Daniele da Volterra, Pellegrino Tibaldi. University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press 2013. 218 p., ill. ISBN 978-0-271-05640-1. \$ 94.95

Morten Steen Hansen focuses on three understudied painters of the Roman Mannerist circle in the mid-sixteenth century. Perino del Vaga and Daniele da Volterra are each devoted a chapter, and Pellegrino Tibaldi's frescoes for the Poggi Palace and chapel, both in Bologna, are given a chapter each. The situation addressed here is the division at mid-century between rival schools of followers of Raphael and Michelangelo in Rome. Raphael's adherents have received much more scholarly attention, viz., Giulio Romano, Polidoro da Caravaggio, Perino del Vaga, Giovanni da Udine, et al. In fact, few would describe the adherents of Michelangelo to be a school at all, for unlike Raphael, who had a large well organized workshop that trained a whole generation of artists, Michelangelo showed little interest in cultivating disciples. The study of how these younger painters related their art to each of the giants is an interesting and timely topic. Hansen shines the spotlight on the issue of imitation, as his title implies. “The kind of imitation examined here,” he says, “is demonstrative in kind, and often polemical.” (6) He shows how imitation can be ambiguous and ironical, and contrasts this with the kind of imitation Raphael engaged in, which does not rely on or expect recognition, (7) more like what we call influence.

PERINO DEL VAGA

The author fashions his Chapter 2 on Perino del Vaga, (Raphael's principal student working in Rome from the mid 1530s till his death in 1547), around this rivalry between the followers of Raphael and Michelangelo. In the structure of the book Perino exemplifies the challenge of accommodating the ‘Divine’ Michelangelo to Raphaelism. Hansen reviews the discussions of Michelangelo and Raphael in Vasari's *Lives* and Lodovico Dolce's 1557 dialogue *L'Aretino*, which he rightly characterizes as pitting them against each other: Raphael the practitioner of grace, loveliness (*vaghezza*), and pleasing color, against Michelangelo the advocate of the hard muscled superhero, the embodiment of energy and strength.

In Hansen's interpretation of Perino's Sala Paolina frescoes (Castel Sant'Angelo), Perino paints the Alexander panels as hyperbolized Michelangelo bodies, which Hansen calls ironic but which would more accurately be dubbed parodic. They do not state one thing but mean the opposite (irony), in which case the intended meaning would be that Alexander was not a heroic solver of problems or doer of deeds. What Hansen cleverly points to is the ridiculously exaggerated bulk of the bodies – the Michelangelesque figure on steroids – in contrast to those that inhabit other parts of the cycle. What doesn't come clear here is Perino's larger purpose: why is he lampooning Michelangelo? Is it just to champion his own master and artistic hero Raphael?

Hansen reproduces the Saint Michael at the head of the Sala and its model, Raphael's *Saint Michael* (Paris, Louvre), but does not discuss them. Shouldn't it be argued that Perino's imitation of Raphael has a quotient of hyperbole in it, gentler

parody than the Michelangelesque Alexanders, but there nonetheless? Hansen might have strengthened his case by noting the tone of jest that permeates the room. He illustrates the *trompe l'œil* figures in a doorway, the crouching monkeys, the smirking hermaphroditic caryatid, but treats them with high seriousness as references to Zeuxis and Parrhasios rather than as clues to the jesting spirit of the cycle. By injecting a note of self-deprecating wit, the artist subverts the outrageous self-vaunting of Pope Paul having himself presented as the reincarnation of Saint Paul and the emperor Alexander. Understood in this way Perino's parody participates in and contributes to the spirit of the cycle and transcends any personal polemic against Michelangelo.

DANIELE DA VOLTERRA

In Chapter 3 Hansen presents Daniele da Volterra as Michelangelo's defender against the attacks on the *Last Judgment*, unveiled in 1541, and as the self-fashioned closest adherent to the great master. It should be noted that the strongest criticism of the fresco, by Gilio, was not released until 1564, a few months after Michelangelo's death. What criticism there was in the 1540s was more whispered than broadcast until Aretino published his notorious letter in 1550. Nevertheless it is plausible that Daniele intended to champion Michelangelo in the *Presentation of the Virgin* in the Della Rovere chapel (Trinità dei Monti) where nudes as beggars receive alms, by insisting upon the traditional association of nakedness and poverty and its propriety in a church decoration.

There can be no doubt that Daniele presented himself as Michelangelo's admiring imitator. As soon as Perino del Vaga died in 1547, Daniele inserted himself into the vacancy, and he received the master's support for the commission to complete the Sala Regia. As the architect of St Peter's and the painter of the pope's chapel, the Cappella Paolina, Michelangelo had access to Paul III. Just as Sebastiano del Piombo had previously been the recipient of cartoons and drawings from Michelangelo, so Daniele, in Hansen's narrative, regularly used drawings from Michelangelo's

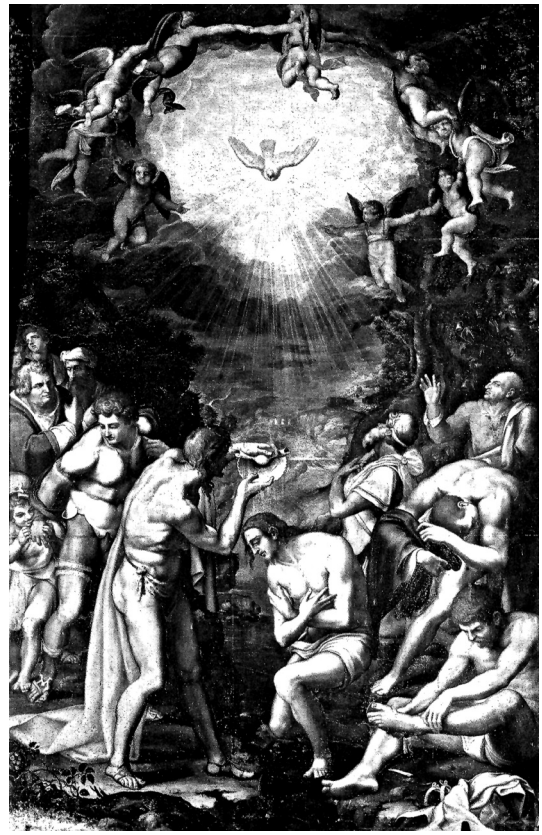


Fig. 1 Michele Alberti after Daniele da Volterra, Baptism of Christ, San Pietro in Montorio, Rome (Hansen, fig. 90)

closely guarded inventory. Hansen would have us believe that when Daniele based his John in the *Baptism of Christ* (Ricci Chapel, San Pietro in Montorio; fig. 1) on a study for a soldier originally made for the *Battle of Cascina*, the patron Ricci and the public were intended to recognize it as a Michelangelo invention, and even recognize it as an homage to the master because John is the patron saint of Michelangelo's native city of Florence. But we must ask: How did the public know this drawing, never before published or printed, to be Michelangelo's? The quotation itself is not in doubt, but that the painter intended anything more than the usual *maniera* appropriation of a good design is implausible.

PELLEGRINO TIBALDI

Chapter 4 is the heart of the book, dealing with Pellegrino Tibaldi's Ulysses cycle for Bishop Giovanni Poggi's palace in Bologna. This was the subject of Hansen's dissertation (see also Marcus Kiefer, *Michelangelo riformato*). Pellegrino Tibaldi

in Bologna: die Johanneskapelle in San Giacomo Maggiore und die Odysseus-Säle im Palazzo Poggi, Hildesheim 2000); the rest was appended to frame the central argument about imitation of Michelangelo. He argues justly that Tibaldi has been relegated to the rank of “mediocre” in modern scholarship, but we need to understand why he was highly regarded in his own day (10f.). Hansen rejects the interpretation that Ulysses, the wily and audacious adventurer who time and again succeeds by means of his diplomatic skills, is a stand-in for the patron whose career in the church had been as a papal diplomat. Associating the patron with the hero was the expected model for Cinquecento palace decorations, beginning with the Stanza di Eliodoro (Julius II, then Leo X); the loggia of the Villa Farnesina (Agostino Chigi); the Sala Paolina (Paul III), and probably the Palazzo Sacchetti (Giovanni Ricci).

In a circuitous argument that is difficult to follow, Hansen would make the hero of the cycle the painter himself. He identifies the theme, played out in terms of Tibaldi’s style borrowed from Michelangelo, as the painter’s audacity in imitating that great master. Hansen pushes further to suggest that by removing that style from the Vatican to a secular palace and casting Michelangelo’s artifice as “seductive, illusory, of the senses, and with no more substance than blowing air” (121), this “divine authority” is reduced to stimulating sexual curiosity or laughter. In this quite nasty interpretation Tibaldi becomes a cheerful deflator of his hero Michelangelo’s hubris.

Hansen’s substitution of the painter for the patron as the protagonist of the cycle is not credible. It ascribes far too much agency and license to the artist, an error we find often these days in trendy art history, as though the writer can’t appreciate the difference between the sixteenth century and the twenty-first. Where Hansen sees Ulysses emasculated and ridiculed, this reviewer sees wit and humor and delightful mock-heroics. The valiant little Ulysses, in contrast to the giant Cyclops, climbs on a rock to blind Polyphemus. He is dauntless, effective, a great talker, lucky because he is aided by the gods.

What is interesting but neglected by the author is how important Raphael is to the designs of these frescoes (see Marcia B. Hall, *After Raphael. Painting in Central Italy in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge 1999). Whereas Michelangelo, as the source of Tibaldi’s figure style, shapes the Michelangelesque look of the cycle, close examination reveals numerous borrowings from Raphael, especially in format and motif. These are only sometimes lightly touched upon in passing, but if taken seriously would show sourcing shared between the two masters in nearly equal measure to what we saw in Perino’s Sala Paolina. Discussion of color is entirely absent.

It would perhaps have been wiser to omit the final chapter on Tibaldi’s Poggi chapel. Hansen’s understanding of the evolving attitudes in the years of the Counter-Reformation seems incomplete and flawed. The Poggi chapel iconography has defied interpretation by scholars to date and Hansen’s chapter does not dispel the confusion and uncertainty. He correctly characterizes the subject matter as ambiguous and difficult to access. It would have been useful to refer to other mid-century paintings, such as Bronzino’s in nearby Florence, of which the same is true, to make the point that this is a defining characteristic of *maniera* religious art.

Despite the interest of the subject and its potential, the book suffers from inadequate editing. It appears to be another victim of the current American system requiring a book for tenure. The pressure of that clock has resulted in a product that would have benefited from more time in the oven.

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