The Sculptor's "Last Will and Testament"

To H. W. Janson for his sixty-fifth birthday.

When we think of aged artists, among the first that occur to us — both in chronological terms and in terms of what might be called popular artist-imagery — are artists of the Renaissance: Leonardo who died in 1519 at 67; Michelangelo who died in 1564 at 88; Titian who died in 1576 at either 89 or 99, depending on when one assumes he was born. The fact that these names spring to mind is not an accident, nor did Renaissance artists regularly live longer than their predecessors. It is rather due, I think, to the fact that they conceived of themselves and their old age in a new way. The famous self-portrait drawing by Leonardo is a case in point (fig. 1): its style leaves absolutely no doubt that it was done around 1512, when Leonardo was 60, whereas he represents himself as a kind of Methuselah, hoary with years. Michelangelo may have portrayed himself as the old and vanquished figure in his Victory group made for the Julius tomb, when he was no more than middle-aged (fig. 2). Another instance is a picture by Titian in which he uses his own profile as the very personification of time past (fig. 3). It is almost the reverse of what we would take today as the normal bias in self-presentation.¹


The phenomenon has been discussed, in a different framework, by C. Gilbert, "When did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?," Studies in the Renaissance, XIV, 1967, pp. 7-32.
   Photo: Alinari

   Photo: Alinari
middle of the sixteenth centuries for their own
tombs. I am eliminating analogous works by
painters partly for simplicity's sake, and partly
because certain aspects of the matter are related
to the Renaissance sculptor's conception of his
medium. As far as sculptors' monuments are
concerned, however, those to be discussed are
the first and most important ones from the
period. 2

This is in itself a significant point, since
earlier examples are extremely few. Many classi-
cal funerary monuments are preserved in which
the deceased is identified as a sculptor by an
inscription (fig. 4) or the subject represented
- either the tools of the profession (fig. 5) or the
artist at work (fig. 6). It is rarely possible, how-
ever, to determine if he was himself the maker.
Upon consideration it also becomes apparent
that these works are really only distinguished by
their inscriptions or subjects, and one suspects
that the artist did not think of his own tomb as
being in any fundamental sense different from
those of other people. 3

Although the artist was by no means so

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2 To my knowledge, artists' tombs have never been system-
natically collected, nor has artist-commemoration been
treated as a coherent subject; what follows is offered as a
limited and necessarily tentative step in that direction. This
paper is a kind of epi-prologue to my essay, "Bernini's
Death," Art Bulletin, LIV, 1972, pp. 158-86 (also
"Aftetthoughts on 'Bernini's Death,'" ibid., LV, 1973,
pp. 429-36). After correcting the proof I learned, courtesy
Mr. Eric Apfelstadt, of the following dissertation dealing
with Italian artists' tombs of the Renaissance, which I have
thus far been unable to consult, but which I gather is to
be published: G. Schütz-Rautenberg, Künstlergräber der
italienischen Renaissance, Munich, 1971, cf. Kunstchronik,
XXIV, p. 230.

The task of gathering the material has been greatly
facilitated by the willing and careful assistance of Edith
Kirsch.

3 The physical evidence for artists' commemorations in an-
tiquity consists of monuments with inscriptions mentioning
the profession and/or depictions of tools or actual practice.
See in general, most recently, A. Burford, Craftsmen in
Greek and Roman Society, Ithaca, N.Y., 1972, p. 180f. on
sculptors' epitaphs. On the epigraphical material especially,
J.M.C. Toynbee, "Some Notes on Artists in the Roman
World," Collection Latomus, VI, 1951, pp. 17-33; I. Cal-
abi Limentani, Studi sulla società romana. Il lavoro artistico,
Milan-Varese, 1958; idem, in Enciclopedia dell'arte antica,
7 vols., Rome, 1958-66, IV, pp. 870-75. Monu-
ments with representations of tools and sculptors at work
have been variously collected: O. Jahn, "Darstellungen
antiker Reliefs, welche sich auf Handwerk und Handels-
verkehr beziehen," Akademie der Wissenschaften, Leip-
gzig. Philologisch-historische Klasse. Berichte, XIII, 1861,
pp. 294-304; H. Blümmer, Technologie und Terminologie
der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern, 4
vols., Leipzig, 1875-87, III, pp. 217-26; H. Gummerus,
"Darstellungen aus dem Handwerk auf römischen Grab-
und Votivsteinen in Italien," Jahrbuch des deutschen
archäologischen Instituts, XXVIII, 1913, pp. 93-118,
121-26; W. Deonna, "Ex-voto déliens," Bulletin de cor-
respondance hellénique, LVI, 1932, pp. 411-90.

Only the inscriptions guarantee the profession, since
the subjects might be included for other reasons. In neither
case can it be assumed that the artist himself executed the
work. Indeed, I have found only one instance in which a
sculptor evidently made a monument for himself—that
recorded in the inscription on a hem in the Vatican (fig. 4)
referring to a tomb, a stele and portraits which Zeno of
Aphrodisias carved for his wife and son, and intended for
his own burial (cf. W. Amelung, Die Skulpturen des
158-60, no. 135). The tombstone in Reggio Emilia (fig. 5)
is a group monument which includes a marmornariai, whose
tools are shown in the lower section (Gummerus, pp. 105,
122, no. 58). In the Villa Albani relief (fig. 6) the inscrip-
tion identifies the seated artist as the deceased, who held
civil office and probably adopted the name of the sculptor
Alcamenes in reference to his own profession (W. Helbig,
Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer
Altäre in Rom, 4th ed., 4 vols., Tübingen, 1963-72,
IV, p. 240, no. 3264).
4. Herm statue of Zeno of Aphrodisias, Museo Vaticano, Rome
   Photo: Vatican

5. Roman tombstone, Musei Civici, Reggio Emilia
   Photo: Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

6. Roman relief, Villa Albani, Rome
   Photo: Alinari
obscured in the Middle Ages as is sometime imagined, only architects seem to have had sufficient status to warrant funerary monuments. In the one recorded instance I have found of a medieval artist carving his own tomb, he showed himself as an architect (fig. 7). In our context the sculptor did not emerge from this kind of personal and professional anonymity until December of 1476 when the Sienese painter and sculptor Lorenzo di Pietro, called “il Vecchietta,” petitioned the syndics of the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala for a funerary chapel for himself and his wife Francesca in the hospital church. Vecchietta was then 66. He stipulated that the chapel was to be dedicated to the Saviour and promised to decorate the altar with two works of his own creation: a figure of Christ about 1.5 meters high (that is, life-size), on which he was already engaged, and behind the altar a panel painting of about 2.5 by 1.5 meters, according to a drawing on parchment which he submitted with the petition; he wanted to be buried in the chapel.

7. Tomb portrait of Eudes de Montreuil, engraving (after Thevet, Les vrais pourtraits . . . , fol. 503)

Photo: The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

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in whatever place possible. The request was
granted in February of the following year, and the
chapel was mentioned as finished in the testa-
ment Vecchietta made, sound of mind but
languishing in body, as he said, in May 1479, a
year before he died. Both works still exist (figs.
8,9). The painting, which shows the Madonna
and Child with Sts. Peter, Paul, Lawrence and
Francis before an apse, is in the Gallery of Siena;
it bears the inscription, “This is the work of the
sculptor Lawrence son of Peter, alias the Old Man,
for his devotion.” The bronze figure of the
Risen Christ, now on the high altar of the hospital
church, is inscribed, “The Sienese painter Law­
rence son of Peter, alias the Old Man, made this
work in 1476 for his devotion.” (He had his
curious nickname, incidentally, by the time he
was 31.)

The panel painting and the statue, both to-
gether and separately, were novel works in several
respects. The genesis of Vecchietta’s idea was in
the Cathedral of Siena, where since the early
fourteenth century Duccio’s famous Maestà had
occupied the high altar (fig. 10). Beginning be-
fore the middle of the fifteenth century, and
reflecting a great efflorescence of the cult of the
Holy Sacrament in Siena and elsewhere, there is
record of a series of works made to be placed on
the high altar in devotion to the Eucharist. These
included several tabernacles in gilt wood and
silver to contain the Host, in accordance with the
blossoming custom of reserving the Host sepa-
rately on the high altar (rather than in niches
set in the wall in less conspicuous locations); there
were also several statuettes of Christ, one of which
Vecchietta had himself executed, to be placed on
the high altar in front of the Maestà on special
occasions like Eastertime and the Feast of Corpus

6 Summaries of the information concerning the chapel may
be found in J. Pope-Hennessy, Italian Renaissance Sculpt­
ture, London and New York, 1971, p. 306f.; G. Vigni,
67, 80, 83; and most recently the study by H. W. van Os,
“Vecchietta and the Persona of the Renaissance Artist,”
in L. Lavin and J. Plummer, eds., Studies in Late Medieval
and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss, New
York, 1977, pp. 445-54, esp. pp. 451ff., where several of
the observations made here are anticipated. The texts of
the petition and testament were published by G. Milanesi,
Documenti per la storia dell’arte senese, 3 vols., Siena,

Vecchietta was assumed to have been born in 1412
until C. del Bravo determined that he was baptized on
August 11, 1410 (Scultura senese del quattrocento, Flo-
rence, 1970, p. 60). The earliest use I have noted of his nick-
name—for which I have found no explanation in the
sources—is in a document of April 4, 1442 (Milanesi,
Documenti, II, p. 369).

The inscriptions: on the Risen Christ, OPVS LAV­
RENTII PETRI PICTORIS AL VECCHIETTA DE SENIS
MCCCCLXXVI-P SVI DEVOTIONE FECIT HOC (Vigni,
Vecchietta, p. 83); on the altarpiece, OPVS LAVRENTII
PETRI SCVLTORIS ALIAS EL VECCHIETTA OB SVAM
DEVOTIONEM (thus E. Jacobsen, Das Quattrocento in
Siena, Strasbourg, 1908, p. 52, and C. Brandi, La regia
pinacoteca di Siena, Rome, 1933, p. 310, no. 210; the
fourth word is given as “pictoris” by Vigni, Vecchietta, p.
80, but close scrutiny shows that this was a change from
its original form); see also n. 8, below.

Photo: Alinari
Domini. Vecchietta was making a coherent, stable and wholly monumental version of this disparate and temporary arrangement at the cathedral for his own funerary chapel. In doing so, he created what, so far as I can discover, the first altar in which a monumental painting and a monumental sculpture were combined in a unified, preconceived design — an important event in the history of relations between the arts. At the same time, Vecchietta's intention was also to demonstrate his prowess in both media; this was surely his point in calling himself a sculptor in the inscription on the painting and a painter in that on the sculpture, as though this purely artistic feat was in itself the act of devotion to which both inscriptions refer.

7 The documents concerning the sacramental works for the high altar of the Duomo have not been carefully sorted and studied; they are published or referred to in Milanesi, Documenti, II, pp. 220, 239f., 369, III, pp. 61, 62; S. Borghesi and L. Banchi, Nuovi documenti per la storia dell'arte senese, Siena, 1898, p. 269; V. Lusini, Il duomo di Siena, 2 vols., Siena, 1911-39, II, p. 48, n. 1, p. 49, nn. 1-2, p. 55, nn. 1-2, p. 56, nn. 1-2; I. Machetti, 'Orafi senesi,' La Diana, IV, 1929, pp. 69, 72, 75, 96, nn. 185-6, pp. 207-9; Del Bravo, Scultura, p. 64, n. 185; also the inventory of 1467 published by J. Labarte, 'L'église cathédrale de Sienne et son trésor d'après un inventaire de 1467,' Annales archéologiques, XXV, 1865, pp. 263, 268, 276 (cf. J. Braun, Der christliche Altar in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung, 2 vols., Munich, 1924, II, p. 635).

On the Feast of Corpus Domini in Siena, cf. Lusini, Duomo, II, pp. 55, 56, n. 1; J. Pope-Hennessy, Sassetti, London, 1939, p. 8f. A key event was the transfer of the celebration from the church of the Carmine to the Duomo in 1447.
The painted altarpiece is notable on several counts, one of them purely stylistic. Although in a ruinous state, it must have been, as one recent critic has said, "not only Vecchietta's masterpiece but one of the greatest creations of the fifteenth century in Siena (with) a unity and sense of monumentality unusual (he might well have said unprecedented) in Sienese painting." This effect is due at least partly to the way in which the figures are isolated against a grandiose apse with a coffered vault, an unprecedented compositional device. Vecchietta evidently wanted to echo in his own chapel the form of the hospital church itself (fig. 11), establishing a new kind of sequential link between sculpture, painting and the architectural context. Finally, the subject of the altarpiece — ostensibly an ordinary sacra conversazione, the Madonna and Child with saints — is really quite extraordinary. Saints Peter and Paul are shown in their traditional capacity as guardians of the mother church and intercessors for the persons kneeling beside them. But rather than

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8 It is important to note that, judging from the inscriptions given in Vigni's catalogue of the artist's works (Vecchietta, p. 73ff.), once Vecchietta began to include his profession, i.e., after about 1460, he always called himself "sculptor" on paintings and "painter" on sculptures.

portray himself and his wife as supplicants, as would have been normal in such a donor picture. Vecchiena showed their name-saints, Lawrence and Francis, in this guise. This explicit act of self-denial betrays a kind of alter ego, or rather alter non-ego, of the individual pride and assertiveness we usually associate with the Renaissance — a crucial point to which we shall return later.

The great bronze Resurrected Saviour (fig. 9) is the first monumental, isolated such figure of Christ in Italian art and the first used as an altarpiece. It contributed mightily to that epochal process of the Renaissance wherein sculpture was liberated from the architectural matrix to which it had been confined in the Middle Ages. The conception of the figure is also new in this context; it alludes to a tradition that is fundamental to the whole phenomenon with which we are concerned. The type of the standing, seminude Christ holding the crossed banner and looking sideward and down toward His outstretched right hand, is based on a common image that had been created specifically to convey the essence of the Eucharist as a sacrament. A well-known instance is the panel by Giovanni Bellini in the National Gallery in London, which may actually have served as the door of a sacrament tabernacle containing the Host (fig. 12). Christ's gesture and attention are directed toward the chalice, so that the relation between His sacrifice and the sacrament is made clear. The derivation of Vecchiena's figure from this tradition may be traced through his own small image of the Saviour standing on a chalice that crowns the bronze ciborium for the Host which he had made a few years earlier for the high altar in the hospital church (fig. 13). This

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10 His testament makes clear that the names Peter and Paul would also have had various personal associations for the artist (Milanesi, Documenti, II, p. 366f.)
was the first such free-standing, figured ciborium, a notable step in that process of isolation and exaltation of the sacrament of which we have spoken.11

Part of the evidence of the seminal importance of Vecchietta’s statue is the fact that it must have been among the chief inspirations for the next great isolated sculpture of the Resurrected Christ, that executed in marble in the second decade of the sixteenth century by Michelangelo for the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (fig. 14). Some years before, Michelangelo had presumably visited Siena in connection with a commission he had for sculptures in the Cathedral, and Vecchietta’s funerary


Vecchietta’s ciborium was commissioned in 1467 and is signed and dated 1472 (cf. Vigni, Vecchietta, p. 81f.); it was moved to the high altar of the cathedral in the early sixteenth century and replaced by the Risen Christ from Vecchietta’s funerary chapel. For detailed photographs, see Del Bravo, Scultura, pls. 301ff.

The place of Vecchietta’s ciborium in the history of such monuments is noted by H. Caspary, Das Sakraments­tabernakel in Italien bis zum Konzil von Trient, Munich, 1965, pp. 62-65.

Vecchietta’s adaptation of the type from the purely sacramental tradition is accompanied by a subtle shift toward eschatological content. In the figure for his funerary chapel the chalice on which the ciborium Christ stands is replaced, as it were, by the maiden-headed serpent which Christ crushes underfoot as a sign of his victory over original sin.
chapel must have greatly impressed him — affecting not only his early Minerva Christ but also, much later, his own idea for a tomb monument.\(^1\)

Vasari tells us that Michelangelo made the Pietà now in Florence Cathedral for an altar in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, where he intended to be buried (fig. 15).\(^2\) The familiar facts that Michelangelo represented himself in the guise of Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea who supports the limp body of Christ, and ultimately tried to destroy the group in a fit of rage when an importunate servant pressed him to finish it, seem an integral part of the sense of


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\(^1\) Vecchietta's figure has also been cited as precedence for that of Michelangelo by Schiller, *Iconography*, II, p. 204, n. 30; Eisler, especially, has related the Minerva Christ to the sacramental tradition ("Golden Christ," p. 242ff.).

Michelangelo was required to visit Siena by the terms of his contract of 1501 for the Piccolomini altar in the Duomo (cf. the summary in C. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo*, 5 vols., Princeton, 1943-60, I, p. 228).


Photo: Alinari
pathos the work evokes; indeed, it has always been understood as a deeply moving and highly personal statement on last things by the aging artist whose poems and letters show that he had been preoccupied, even obsessed, by the idea of death nearly all his life. What has not been appreciated is precisely its relationship to the mortuary tradition that concerns us, which sheds much light on the innovative character of the work, both in content and in form.

According to Vasari, Michelangelo at the end of his life did not draw up a formal will but instead, in his usual lapidary fashion, "left his soul to God, his body to the earth, and his property to his nearest relations." Michelangelo had drawn up a formal will many years before, however, on the occasion of an almost fatal illness. We do not know the text of the will, which is mentioned in a letter of January 9, 1546, to Michelangelo's nephew from a friend who had brought the artist into his house and nursed him during the emergency; but it was clearly a complete document, lacking only the notary's signature, never carried out because Michelangelo's health improved. A variety of quite independent considerations suggests that Michelangelo began the Pietà at about this time, that is, when he was 70, and it seems obvious that this near escape from death spurred him to think seriously of his own tomb. The fact that Michelangelo wrote a will is important in another sense, as well, for it illuminates a passage in one of his latest and most troubled sonnets about death, which begins:

Certain of death, but not when it will be,
Life's short, and I have little of it left ...

The opening phrase, "Certain of death, but not when it will be," is immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with notarial documents of the period as a formulary in wills; it occurs over and over again as part of the introductory rationale for drawing up the document. "I, the testator, considering that nothing is more certain than death and nothing more uncertain than the time

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14 The old man was already described as a self-portrait by Vasari, who, like Condii, refers to it as Nicodemus; visually, however, there is nothing to distinguish the figure from Joseph of Arimathea, with whom he has often been identified by modern writers. The problem has been discussed by W. Stechow, "Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus?", in W. Lotz, ed., Studien zur toskanischen Kunst. Festschrift für Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich zum 23. März 1963, Munich, pp. 289-302.

15 Michelangelo's attitude toward death has been related to the Ars Moriendi tradition and Savonarola by A. Tenenti, Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento, Turin, 1957, p. 317f.; cf. De Tolnay, Michelangelo, V, pp. 15, 97.

16 "... con conoscimento grandissimo fece testamento di tre parole, che lasciava l'anima sua nelle mani de' l'ddio, il suo corpo alla terra e la roba a' parenti più prossimi..." (Barocchi, Michelangelo, I, p. 116).

17 "... Michelagnolo, quale certo ha hauto gran male et si è degnato venire qui in casa come l'altra volta, dove di già è tanto migliorato che si può dire guarito, e state di buona voglia; confessosi et comunicossi et ordinò il testamento quale io scrissi; poi non lo ha rogato per notaro per essere tanto migliorato che non ci è più pericolo..." (Luigi del Riccio to Lionardo Buonarroti, E. Steinmann, Michelangelo e Luigi del Riccio, Florence, 1932, p. 57).

Concerning Michelangelo's illness on this occasion (he had also fallen sick and been taken in by Del Riccio in the summer of 1544), see E. H. Ramsden, The Letters of Michelangelo, 2 vols., London, 1963, II, pp. 269f.

The dating of the Pietà has been most thoroughly discussed by A. Pettig (Michelangelo Buonarroti letzte Pietà-Idee, Bern, 1960 [Basler Studien zur Kunstgeschichte, N.F., II], pp. 37-46), who concludes that the work was begun in 1547, essentially in agreement with previous opinions; it seems that heretofore only Pettig (p. 44, n. 16) has referred to the illness in this connection, albeit incidentally.
and place of its occurrence, etc. . . ." In Michelangelo’s sonnet the fatal conundrum of absolute opposites expressed by this usually banal cliché — certain promise, uncertain fulfillment — becomes the paradigm for the enigma of faith and the mystery of salvation itself. The last verses read:

When will it be, O Lord, what we await,
Your true believers? . . .
What good to promise men so great a light
If death comes first, pinning us just the way
We are attacked, with no escape at all?

There had been a tradition for giving Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea the features of a real man, but Michelangelo was the first to make the figure a self-portrait. In doing so, Michelangelo introduced a new element of ambiguity, since according to legend Nicodemus had been a sculptor, and according to the gospels Joseph of Arimathea had provided his own tomb for Christ’s interment. The subject of the group is equally ambiguous: the body of Christ is displayed as in a traditional lamentation, but the only precedents in which Nicodemus or Joseph holds Christ in this way, that is, frontally from behind, relate to the entombment (fig. 16). I have no doubt, in fact, that Michelangelo deliberately fused these two themes in order to express visually that same kind of suspended animation, or rather suspended inanimation, which in the poem relates the paradoxical natures of death and salvation. When one considers that Christ may be thought of as descending not simply into his “ordinary” tomb, the altar, but into that of Michel-

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19 I quote from the translation of C. Gilbert, Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo, (ed. R. N. Linscott), New York, 1970, p. 164f., no. 293. The Italian text is as follows:

Di morte certo, non già dell’ora,
la vita è breve e poco me n’avanza;
diletta al senso, è non però la stanza
a l’alma, che mi prega pur ch’i’ mora.

Il mondo è cieco e ’l tristo esempio ancora
vinci e sommerge ogni prefetta usanza;
spent’è la luce e seco ogni baldanza,
trionfà il falso e ’l ver non surge fora.

Deh, quando fie, Signor, quel che s’aspetta
per chi ti crede? c’ogni troppo indugio
tronca la sperme e l’alma fa mortale.

Che val che tanto lume altrui prometta,
s’anzi vien morte, e senza alcun refugio
ferma per sempre in che stato altri assale?


A fundamental contribution to the study of such documents is M. Novelle, Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIème siècle, Paris, 1973, including (pp. 657-72) a survey of French notarial formularies for testaments.

20 Vasari identifies as a portrait of Michelozzo the figure of Nicodemus in Fra Angelico’s Deposition from S. Trinità (cf. Stechow, “Joseph,” p. 300).

21 I.e., the sarcophagus is always shown; see the material assembled in Stechow, “Joseph.” I reproduce (fig. 16) the example which De Tolnay (Michelangelo, V, pp. 86, 151) regards as closest to Michelangelo.

22 John Shearman has suggested that the dead Christ in Pontormo’s S. Felicità altarpiece of the late 1520’s is being lowered into the “altar-tomb” below (Pontormo’s Altarpiece in S. Felicità, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1971 [Charlton Lectures on Art, no. 51], p. 22).
angelo himself, it begins to become apparent what being an artist and dying meant to him.

Another aspect of the Pietà that can be specifically related to its function is that, so far as I can discover, it is the first isolated, monumental, multi-figured group cut from a single block since antiquity. Multi-figured groups had often been carved from single pieces of stone, but never in isolation and on this scale; conversely, large, isolated monolithic groups were common by this stage in the Renaissance, but not with so many figures. Much of the significance of this point lies in the fact that the technical feat of carving big, complex monolithic groups is one of the frequent topoi in classical literature on art. Pliny notes with admiration that this or that work was carved *ex uno lapide*, and this idea, like those generally of free-standing sculpture and grandness of scale, became a major field for emulation of the ancients and an important aesthetic ideal. Pliny makes this statement about two of the most famous of all ancient sculptures, both of which were rediscovered in Michelangelo’s lifetime, and both of which were found instead to be pieced together from several blocks. The first of the works in question, now in the Vatican museum (fig. 17), shows Laocoon and his two

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23 Michelangelo’s group is 226 cm. high. Dr. William Forsyth has called my attention to the monolithic character of certain under-life-size, multi-figured sculptures that form part of French Entombment groups (W. H. Forsyth, *The Entombment of Christ, French Sculptures of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970, cf. p. 51, fig. 63). In Italy perhaps the nearest precedent would be Andrea Sansovino’s and Francesco da Sangallo’s groups of St. Anne, the Madonna and the infant Christ, from the first quarter of the century (Pope-Hennessy, *High Renaissance*, pp. 349f., 356).

sons being strangled by Athena's serpents; Pliny describes it as a collaborative achievement of three sculptors who carved it from one block. It is no exaggeration to say that one of the great events in the history of European culture was the accidental rediscovery of the Laocoon in Rome on January 14, 1506. The impact was meteoric — here at hand was one of the fabled masterpieces described by a hallowed writer of antiquity. Its influence was immediate and vast, and many scholars have emphasized its effect on Michelangelo's work. He was, we know, among the first to see the new prodigy, which he is said to have declared a "miracle of art"; he may have used the term advisedly, since an absolutely contemporary account tells us that Michelangelo pointed out that it was not carved from one block at all, but was adroitly composed of some four pieces. Indeed, it was said to be impossible "to make secure three life-size statues, joined in a single block with so many and such wonderful groups of serpents without artificial means." We know today that there are at least seven parts. Copies were made by many artists, one of whom, Baccio Bandinelli, claimed that he would surpass the original. His copy (fig. 18), which dates from 1520-25 and is now in the Uffizi, is full-scale; in a sense, it certainly does surpass the
original: it consists of only three pieces.25

The second sculpture of this kind is again one with which Michelangelo was closely involved — the group now in the Naples Museum, known as the Farnese Bull (fig. 19). This huge “mountain of stone,” as it was called, was discovered in Rome in early January of 1546 at the very moment Michelangelo was
deadly ill. Later that year he became the architect of the Palazzo Farnese and had the work restored as a fountain and installed in a courtyard of the palace. In this case we have no direct evidence that Michelangelo realized it was pieced together, but we do have the indirect report that someone who knew him well was perfectly aware of its true nature.26


Michelangelo’s dictum is reported in J. B. Boissard, Romanae urbis topographiae et antiquitatum. 2 vols., Frankfurt, 1597-1602, I, p. 13f.: “Hanc Michael Angelus dicit esse miraculum artis singulare: in quo divinum artificium debeamus suspicium ingenuum potius quam ad imitationem nos accingere” (cited from Barocchi, Michel-angelo, IV, p. 2101).

Bandinelli’s boast is recorded by Vasari, ed. Milanesi, VI, p. 145, “Baccio rispose che, non che farne un pari, gli bastava l’arumo di passare quello di perfezione.” On Bandinelli’s copy of the Laocoon, cf. D. Heikamp, ed., “Vita di Baccio Bandinelli,” in P. della Pergola, et al., eds., Giorgio Vasari. Le Vite ..., Milan, 1962ff., VI, p. 27, n. 1. The work was damaged during the fire in the Uffizi in 1762 and extensively restored; I am indebted to Michael Mezzatesta for determining that the three figures are carved from separate blocks. This is the point of an evidently derisive allusion in a letter of February 11, 1520, from Leonardo Sellaio to Michelangelo: “Avete a sapere ch’ho Baccio à fatto un cartone d’uno La­chonte, e menò Bastiano a vedello; e Bastiano mi dice che non à una paura più di resuno, se non di voi. Allo a fare di marmo, e fallo di pezzi” (italics mine; G. Poggi, Il carteggio di Michelangelo, Florence, 1965ff., II, p. 216). Perhaps related to such criticisms is the complicated impresa with the motto CANDOR ILLESVS (whiteness unsullied) sculptured in relief on the sides of the pedestal of Bandinelli’s group; the impresa was employed in defense of his reputation by Clement VII, at whose behest the work was completed, and by the noble Bandinelli family of Siena, from which the sculptor claimed descent (cf. J. Gelli, Motti diverse imprese di famiglie e di personaggi italiani, Milan, 1916, p. 142ff.; A. C. Minor and B. Mitchell, A Renaissance Entertain­ment. Festivities for the Marriage I, Duke of Florence, in 1539, Columbia, Mo., 1968, p. 126; H. W. Kaufmann, “Art from the Wedding of Cosimo de’ Medici and Eleonora of Toledo (1539),” Paragone, XXI, 1970, no. 245, p. 57). A drawing for the impresa is among the Bandinelli papers in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, Acquisti e doni, filza 141.

Dott.ssa Silvia Meloni Trkulja of the Soprintendenza at the Uffizi has been most helpful with my various inquiries concerning Bandinelli’s Laocoon.
Thus, just as Michelangelo began to plan his own monument, the heroic claim of antiquity to have created multi-figured monolithic sculpture had received another serious blow. This is what Michelangelo achieved (or presumably would have achieved had he not broken it) in the Florentine Pietà, at the cost of immense labors of mind and body. We tend to appreciate mainly the work's formal and expressive qualities, and its unfinished state; Michelangelo's contemporaries understood it in the present context, as well. Vasari already saw the point in the first edition of his life of Michelangelo, published in 1550, which must have been written not long after the Pietà was begun: "One can suppose that this work, if he should leave it to the world finished, would outstrip all his other works for the difficulty of extracting from that block so many perfect things." Ascanio Condivi, whose biography of Michelangelo was published in 1554, calls it a "cosa rara," a "rare thing and among the most laborious works he has done so far." Ultimately indeed, it was this aspect of the sculpture si può riconoscere. Ciò io ho sicuramente letto, non sono due anni, in una lettera stampata di scrivitore del secolo XVI, il quale avvisava come nuova tale scoperta da eccellenti scultori di quei tempi fatta ad un suo corrispondente, il quale, se non ert, si era il sig. Gabriele Serbellone; pur della persona, cui era diretta quella lettera, non m'accerto: bensi sono certissimo dell'asserzione che detto gruppo del Toro fosse commesso: onde falsa viene ad essere la commune credenza. Di ciò con diligentissimo di suo perito si può scoprire la verità, sempre che sia voglia." Gabriele Serbellone (1508-80) was a cousin of Pius IV and overseer of the Papal fortifications; he is mentioned in Vasari's life of Michelangelo (Barocchi, Michelangelo, I, p. 114f.; cf. U. Thiem and F. Becker, Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart, 37 vols., Leipzig, 1907-50, XXX, p. 105). I have not been able to identify the publication to which Carrara refers.
that sanctified it as a work of art; so Vasari intimates in his second edition, published in 1568 after Michelangelo’s death: “A laborious work,” he says, “rare in one block, and truly divine.”

The remaining two sculptures we shall consider might be described as doubly interrelated, since they were conceived in direct emulation of Michelangelo and in direct competition with each other. One of these is the life-size crucifix with the body of Christ in white marble and the cross in black, now in the Escorial in Spain, signed and dated by Benvenuto Cellini in 1562 (fig. 20 and cover). The work had a rather picaresque origin in a vision Cellini received in 1539, while he was imprisoned in the Castel Sant’Angelo, and described in his autobiography. The crucified Christ appeared to him in his miserable cell, as did the Madonna and Child, accompanied by two angels and St. Peter. He made a record of the vision at the time in a drawing and in a wax model, but we first hear of it as a tomb project in a will Cellini drew up on August 10, 1555, during an illness when he was 54. His plan was to execute the crucifix in marble and to affix it to a pier in the church of Santa Maria Novella, facing the famous painted wood crucifix of Brunelleschi, which had helped to inaugurate the Renaissance more than a century before. He stipulates that should he die before he could carry out the work, it be executed by the best available sculptor, expressly forbidding that the commission be given to any children, descendents or associates of his arch-rival, Baccio Bandinelli. Above the marble version of what Cellini fondly and repeatedly referred to as “il mio bel Cristo” (my beautiful Christ), there was to be placed a large marble relief tondo representing the Virgin and Child with an angel and Saint Peter; on the ground below there was to be a small marble coffin (“un poco di cassonino”) for his body. The original wax model of the crucifix was also to be installed, in a glass case. The tomb project underwent innumerable changes thereafter and ultimately failed completely. Cellini never did get a tomb of his own; when he died, in 1571, he was buried in the common grave of the Florentine artists’ Academy in Santissima Annunziata. He persevered only in the execution of his “bel Cristo” and the black marble cross; in the end he sold it to Duke Cosimo de’ Medici, intending to make another one for himself. Cosimo’s son in turn presented it to the King of Spain. Perhaps because of its nudity, it was installed in the retro-choir of the Escorial; its arms were broken, evidently in the Spanish war of independence.

Ironically, these last two points, which contribute to the poignancy of the crucifix’s history, also reflect essential features of its greatness. Cellini was literally impassioned by the work, far more so than by anything he had done before, and he constantly speaks of it, in his autobiography, his treatise on sculpture, his letters, his diaries, and his innumerable wills. Let me quote some of these passages to give you an idea of how he conceived it. “I have begun for pleasure,” he says in the autobiography, “to make one of the

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most laborious works that has ever been made in this world: this is a crucifix of whitest marble, on a cross of blackest marble, large as a living man ... no one has ever undertaken a work of such extreme laboriousness; even I would never have agreed to do so for any patron, for fear of shaming myself." In a petition to the administration of Duke Cosimo for payment, he describes it as "the crucifix I made of marble three and a quarter braccia high on a cross of black marble, at my own expense and for my own satisfaction, solely to see whether I could with my art surpass all my predecessors, who never attempted such a work; if they did, and as I more than once heard, they failed; whereas I succeeded, with the Lord's help and my extreme labor, and also at my great expense, by the grace of God." In his treatise on sculpture he speaks of the work as "among the most difficult one can do in the art, that is, dead bodies. This was the image of Jesus Christ our Saviour hanging on the cross, to which I devoted the greatest study, laboring on this work with the affection proper to the subject, and the more eagerly for knowing that I was the first to execute a crucifix in marble ... And I placed the body of the Crucified on a cross of black Carrara marble, a stone most difficult to manage because it is very hard and very prone to shatter."29

We are struck perhaps first of all by the sensuous quality of Cellini's feeling for the beauty of the sculpture, which goes beyond the starkly elegant contrast of the white figure against the black cross. He was in love with his "bel Cristo" as he loved the body of Christ, that is, the Eucharist, itself. Old photographs show that the loins of the figure were once covered with real drapery,
and we know that this had long been a common practice. But I have no doubt that Cellini intended his Christ to be seen nude. There were in fact various traditions that seem to converge in Cellini's figure. Christ might be shown nude on the cross as a sign of his humiliation (fig. 21); a medieval legend told that the Virgin used her own veil to cover him. In the Renaissance the ancient concept of heroic nudity came to signify moral perfection and was brought to bear by Michelangelo in his recently rediscovered early crucifix of polychromed wood for Santa Spirito, which I feel sure was also meant to be seen undraped (fig. 22). One of my reasons is precisely the influence upon Cellini of its pioneering, contrapposto design, with the head falling to the left and the body twisted to the right. This paradoxical combination of humility with divine innocence and perfection is evident in another work of Michelangelo's we know was originally conceived nude, his Risen Christ in Santa Maria sopra Minerva (fig. 14). Finally, we may recall a series of late crucifixion drawings by Michelangelo (fig. 23) and his Rondanini Pietà (fig. 24), in

21. Rohan Master, Crucifixion, Bibl. Nationale, Paris, MS Lat. 9471, fol. 27
Photo: Bibli. nat. Paris

22. Michelangelo, Crucifix from Santo Spirito, Casa Buonarroti, Florence
Photo: Gabinetto Fotografico, Sopr. Gallerie, Firenze

Cellini’s sculpture is also, as he repeatedly emphasized, the first monumental figure of the crucified Christ carved in the round in a single block of stone. Cellini has always been treated as an incorrigible braggart, a classic exemplar of the unabashed egoism that was one of the quainter byproducts of the recovery of individual pride and self-esteem in the Renaissance. Already in the eighteenth century, and consistently thereafter, his claim regarding the crucifix was dismissed, several instances that were presumed earlier being cited in evidence. In fact, none of the precedents is relevant; indeed, they betray a certain volition to discredit Cellini: one was a crucifix made of wood, not marble; a second turns out to have been executed much later; a third and fourth show that Cellini’s claim was misunderstood, since they are not crucifixes at all but standing figures of Christ. Cellini knew exactly what he was saying; so far as I can determine, he was the first to achieve this extraordinary feat of daring and painstaking craftsmanship. I suspect that one of his motives for using marble of a contrasting color for the cross was to underscore the accomplishment.\footnote{It seems that the confusion was introduced by D. Moreni, \textit{Delle tre sontuose cappelle medicee situate nell’imp. basilica di S. Lorenzo}, Florence, 1813, p. 232: “... come potrà mai sostenersi dal Cellini il vanto, ch’ei s’arrogò di essere stato di tutti il primo a scolpire un Cristo di marmo? Sappiamo pure esservene uno nella Chiesa maggiore d’Orvieto sculto da Raffaello da Montelupo figliu del predetto Baccio, nato circa il 1496; altro in Bologna all’Altaire principale della Chiesa de’ Servi di Maria fatto circa il 1533 dal nostro Montorsoli, ed altro finalmente scolpito in Roma dal nostro Iacopo Sansovino nato circa al 1479, per la Confraternita del Crucifisso di S. Marcello.”}


23. Michelangelo, *Crucifixion*, drawing, Windsor Castle
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24. Michelangelo, Rondanini *Pietà*, Castello Sforzesco, Milan
Photo: Alinari
It is important to realize, however, that while Cellini was the first to accomplish the feat, he was not the first to think of it. Among the drawings made by Michelangelo for his intimate friend and spiritual companion, Vittoria Colonna, mentioned frequently in the correspondence between them around 1540, was a crucifixion in which Michelangelo returned to the long obsolete medieval tradition of showing Christ alive on the cross. The whole composition, which was to include the Virgin and St. John standing beside the Cross, is known only from copies (fig. 25). The correspondence with Vittoria Colonna refers to a drawing, but a sketch by Michelangelo giving the shapes and dimensions of the blocks to be ordered from the quarry proves that he also intended to execute the composition in marble (fig. 26). It would have been an enormous work: the figure of Christ nearly seven feet high, those of the Virgin and St. John about six and a half. It would thus have recalled the great Calvary groups that were among the first monumental sculptures produced
at the end of the Middle Ages, with one crucial difference. The relative sizes of the blocks in Michelangelo's sketch show that the figure of Christ was to be carved in the round, that is, separately from the cross and, of course, from a single block. The sketch cannot be dated accurately, but since the composition was designed for Vittoria Colonna, the plausible suggestion has been made that the project was conceived as a memorial of some sort after her untimely death, one of the saddest tragedies Michelangelo suffered. She died in February of 1547, just a year after Michelangelo's own near-fatal illness, and it is truly awesome to imagine him brooding over this project and that for his own tomb at the same time. From a somewhat later period we have the record, again in the form of a block sketch, of still another project by Michelangelo for a monolithic crucifix.32

No doubt Cellini knew of Michelangelo's crucifix ideas, as he did of the Pietà, and I also presume he was referring to Michelangelo's unfulfilled ambition in the passage I quoted where he says that previous attempts at such a work — and he had heard of some — had failed. Cellini maintained that all he knew he learned from Michelangelo (though he had never been his pupil),33 and the Escorial Crucifix, which follows Michelangelo in its composition, its nudity and its technical grandeur and virtuosity, is perhaps his most profoundly Michelangelesque work. These references, far from unconsciously betraying an impoverished mannerism, are deliberate evocations of the master; through them Cellini was

32 On the theme of the Colonna crucifix composition, see Hausselt, Kruzifixus. On the Casa Buonarroti block sketch, see De Tolnay, Michelangelo, IV, p. 155, fig. 174, V, pp. 60, 132, who also suggests the connection with Vittoria Colonna's death. For the second marble crucifix project (with a Y-shaped cross), see ibid., IV, p. 155, V, p. 223, no. 253.

33 "'... io mi fido tanto dell'uma faticosi e disciplinati studii, che io mi prometto di quadagnarmi la palma, se bene e' ci fussi quel gran Michelagnolo Buonaroti, dal quale, e non mai da altri, io ho imparato tutto quel che io so' (Vita, Bk. II, ch. 100, ed. Ferrero, p. 567).
27. Baccio Bandinelli, *Pietà*, SS. Annunziata, Florence

Photo: Alinari
able to say in sculpture, as he did in words, with justifiable pride and due humility, that he had succeeded where all others had failed.

The final monument of our series is the group of the Pietà placed by Baccio Bandinelli at the tomb he provided in a chapel in Santissima Annunziata in Florence, for himself, his wife and his parents (fig. 27). Bandinelli is easily the most maligned and misunderstood of all the artists of this period. He, too, had the temerity to compete with Michelangelo, and Vasari reports that Bandinelli conceived the project after learning of Michelangelo’s plans for his tomb in Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Cellini, on the other hand, claims that Bandinelli, his great antagonist and bête noire, was inspired after hearing about the crucifix he had undertaken. The Pietà had been begun from Bandinelli’s model by his young son, Clemente; the two quarreled, however, and Clemente went to Rome in 1555, where he died before the year was out. Bandinelli had entered into negotiations with the church by 1558. He hoped to place the work before the high altar with the Holy Sacrament, but instead was ceded the altar of a nearby chapel, which was rededicated to the Pietà. Bandinelli closed in the altar and adapted it as a pedestal for the sculpture, shortly before he died at 66 in February, 1560.34

Bandinelli’s brutal image is as extraordinary in its way as were Michelangelo’s Pietà and Cellini’s “bel Cristo” in theirs. He shows Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea supporting the upper part of Christ’s body on one knee while the lower part extends laterally, the buttocks resting on a block which bears an inscription that includes the artist’s name and a reference to his tomb. This painful cube, before which the instruments of the passion are gathered in a kind of still-life, recalls the stone inscribed with the artist’s initials, on which the despairing Man of Sorrows sits in the title page of Dürer’s Small Chassonae marmoriis, erexitum seu elevatum a terra per spaciwm conveniens, cum suis basis et ornamentis, in quo voluit sepelliri eius cadaver et sue uxorius. Et ad pedes ipsius construxit voluit alium sepulcrum subterraneum pro filiis et descendendibus dicti testatoris. In quibus omnibus expendi voluit et mandavit ad minus florensis ducentis [i.e.] aurii largis [i.e.], de libris 7 pro floreno. Et in funeralibus dicti testatoris voluit fieri illa impensa de qua proit videbitur inscriptis suis hereditibus.”

(Florence, Archivio di Stato, Notarile Antecosimiano, notaio Piero di Lodovico Gemmarri, filza G 103, 1534-56, fols. 44-47, cf. fol. 44 verso; I am indebted to Prof. Giuseppe Pansini, Director of the Archivio di Stato of Florence, for his help in locating this document, and to Dr. Gino Corti for the transcription).


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34 On Bandinelli’s Pietà, which was first to be accompanied by (now lost) figures of Sts. John and Catherine of Siena, see the summaries in Pope-Hennessy, High Renaissance, p. 364ff., and Heikamp, Vita (cited in n. 25 above), p. 75ff., n. 3.

A passage in Bandinelli’s will, which he made out on May 9, 1555, shows that he was already planning a monument in Santissima Annunziata, although there is no reference to the Pietà:

“In primis quidem animam suam humiliter recommendavit omnipotenti Deo eisque glortiosi [sic] semper Virginis Matris Marie totique curie celestiali Paradisi quando a corporis nexibus separarit contingit. Eiusque corporis seputaturam elegit et esse voluit in ecclesia Annuntiata de Florentia, in tumulo, per eum construendo. Et quando tempore mortis non foret constructum, voluit et gravavit inscriptos eius heredes de faciendo unum sepulcrum ad usum
Passion (fig. 28). According to Vasari, the features of the old man are Bandinelli’s own, and the observation is confirmed by a self-portrait in relief which appears, along with one of the artist’s wife, on the back of the altar. This must be thought of as alluding as much to the precedent of Michelangelo and to the art of sculpture generally, as to Bandinelli himself.

From both a formal and technical point of view, Bandinelli’s Pietà is again best understood against the tradition of monumental, monolithic multi-figured groups that became a major theme in sixteenth-century sculpture. Such groups tended to be conceived as compact, massive agglomerations of forms, as we saw in Michelangelo’s Pietà, or else the composition might develop vertically, as in Michelangelo’s earlier Victory group (fig. 2). In either case, the sense of a coherent rectangular block, at least as high as it is wide, remained. In defiance of all tradition Bandinelli created an altarpiece in which the composition is asymmetrical and the width exceeds the height. The type had existed in painting, as in a work of the 1520’s by Girolamo Savoldo in the Cleveland Museum (fig. 29), and Bandinelli had himself adopted it some years before, in a Pietà with the body of Christ supported by a kneeling angel for the high altar of Florence Cathedral (fig. 30); this was not in fact an isolated image, but was seen
29. Girolamo Savoldo, *Dead Christ with Joseph of Arimathea*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Hanna Fund 52.512

30. Baccio Bandinelli, *Pietà*, S. Croce, Florence

Photo: Alinari
with a seated figure of God the Father placed behind it on the altar (fig. 31). The most relevant sculptural context in which such an asymmetrical, horizontal format occurred was in tombs, for which the old classical type of the semi-recumbent figure had been revived not long before (fig. 32). This reference again seems deliberate, suggesting as it does the dual nature of the monument, which served for the artist's own tomb and that of Christ, as well.35

One major formal distinction between Bandinelli's Pietà and its predecessors also has a

35 Savoldo's composition was cited as precedent for Bandinelli's by Stechow, "Joseph," p. 298. Bandinelli's works for the choir of Florence Cathedral have been studied by D. Heikamp, "Baccio Bandinelli nel Duomo di Firenze," Paragone, XV, 1964, no. 175, pp. 32-42; summary in Pope-Hennessy, High Renaissance, p. 356f. It may be noted that the Pietà for the Duomo also contains a personal reference: the band supporting the angel's garment is decorated with scallop shells and daggers, emblems of the Order of St. James, in which Bandinelli had been awarded a knighthood.


The inscription on the base of the Annunziata Pietà introduces a curious, and I suspect deliberate, double allusion to the self-portrait and to the image of Christ; in the third word of the third line, the second and third letters have alternates superimposed so as to allow two equally correct readings: ... SVB HAC SAL[ER]VATORIS IMAGINE,/A SE EXPRESSA, ... (Vasari, ed. Milanesi, VI, p. 190, gives only the SERVATORIS reading).
technical aspect. This is what might be called its open composition. In contrast to Michelangelo's Pietà, empty space is at least as important as solid mass; perforations under the torso, left arm and legs of Christ leave daringly large portions of the marble unsupported. Indeed — and this Bandinelli's Pietà shares with Cellini's crucifix—the original block seems to have disappeared, as if by some "miracle of art."

I use that phrase here in order to recall the

Laocoön, which in some respects perhaps the chief precedent for Bandinelli's Pietà; it was said to be impossible to execute such a work in a single block, not only because of the figures, but also because of the coils of snakes that hang free and bridge the spaces between them.36

The works we have discussed are the first major monuments since antiquity produced by sculptors to commemorate themselves.37 As such, prepared the memorial, not that he actually made the statue for this purpose. Nevertheless, the use of an ideal figure type and the theme of the Pietà, which appears in the predella beneath the niche in a drawing in the Louvre (substituted by an Annunciation in the final execution), relate to the works considered here; also, the form of the monument, without an altar, anticipates Cellini. (For bibliography on the Tasso monument see Paatz, Kirchen, I. 31. 40. n. 53.)

36 See p. 21 and n. 25 above.
37 One work omitted from our main discussion deserves special notice, the monument of the Tasso family of woodcarvers in Sant' Ambrogio, Florence, mentioned by Vasari—a wall tabernacle with a niche containing a life-size wooden figure of St. Sebastian by Leonardo del Tasso (born 1466). An inscription on the tomb slab in the pavement before the tabernacle recorded Leonardo as the author of the statue and the date, 1500. It is not clear that Leonardo himself
they bear eloquent testimony to the development whereby the Renaissance artist emerged from the medieval craft tradition. This being said, however, three additional factors which they share must be considered in order to see the development in a just, if somewhat paradoxical perspective.

First, the group includes no tombs or sarcophagi, properly speaking; we are dealing almost entirely with altarpieces. The artist was simply buried in the pavement. The only exception is Cellini’s crucifix, which was to be attached separately to the wall, with just a “poco di cassoncino” for himself on the ground below. This is in striking contrast to the usual funerary conventions of the period, and to the tombs provided for themselves by sculptors of the next generation, like Alessandro Vittoria and Giovanni Bologna. Second, in each case the work clearly represents an unprecedented effort on the artist’s part to innovate in form, in content, in technique. He sought to outdo his forerunners, his contemporaries, and especially himself, through what can only be described as a supreme self-sacrifice. The third point is that all the works have a common theme in the sacrifice of Christ. Patronymic saints, and even the Virgin, play only a secondary role, while other subjects do not exist. The focus is overwhelmingly on the Lord’s body, that is, the Eucharist. This reflects, but is not fully explained by, the general tendency of the period to isolate and emphasize this central mystery of the faith.

I believe these factors, disparate as they appear, have a common link in that same medieval tradition which seems the very antithesis of our notion of the Renaissance artist. I am not suggesting, as to the first point, that these artists were inhibited by modesty, but that the idea of making for themselves the kinds of tombs they made for other people simply never occurred to them — and precisely because they were artists. The artist was unique, after all, in that he claimed the status of a liberal art for his activity, and yet he worked with his hands. This anomalous situation is reflected in the anomalous phenomenon of commemorative devotional monuments without commemorative tombs.

To this tradition may also be traced the thread of technical tour-de-force that runs through the monuments. The artist went to ex-cruciating pains not only as a form of self-expression but as a form of deliberate self-abnegation, as well. Cellini said of his crucifix that he undertook it with the thought that even if it failed, he would at least have shown his good intention. It sounds like a modern, almost tragic version of the charming medieval story familiar from Anatole France and Massenet of the Jongleur de Nôtre Dame who, having no other gifts to offer the Virgin on her feast day, approached the altar and performed his juggling act with such fervor and devotion that his prayer was heard.

Finally, the element of personal sacrifice involved not merely the generic effort to perform a difficult task, but again the very fact of being an artist and therefore tending to identify with Christ’s sacrifice in a special way. The metaphor linking God and the artist is an ancient one, deeply ingrained in the Christian tradition. God the painter, God the sculptor, God the architect of the world, are ideas that occur frequently in medieval theological treatises to illustrate divine creativity. In the Renaissance the relationship became something other than metaphorical, expressing a special bond between the supreme creator and the artist. The reference underwent a crucial reversal: whereas before the artist was used to illustrate God’s creativity, now in the flood of sixteenth-century treatises on art, the artist’s creativity was likened unto God’s. And as the Eucharist was God’s supreme creative act, so its representation became the noblest and
most demanding task the artist could perform—particularly the sculptor, who claimed that his work was most God-like, mainly for two, interrelated reasons: it was most three-dimensional, and it was most difficult. Michelangelo and Bandinelli portrayed themselves as they did in their Pietàs because, both literally in the action of the work and figuratively in their capacity as sculptors, it is they who display the body of Christ. 38

What has all this to do with old age? Although I fear it will seem like reducing the sublime to the ridiculous, the answer, I think, lies in the reasons for which these works were made. We have direct testimony only in the cases of Michelangelo and Cellini, but their evidence is significant because it is consistent. Vasari reports that Michelangelo undertook his Pietà for “pleasure and to pass the time and, as Michelangelo himself said, because exercising with the mallet kept his body in good shape.” Cellini in his autobiography says that he undertook in his crucifix one of the most difficult works ever made in this world, “for pleasure.” 39 I think we should take such statements seriously; indeed, they focus on what, in the final analysis is perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of these sculptures—they were created exclusively for the artist’s own benefit, and in this sense constitute our first “pure” works of art. For the men who conceived and executed them, old age and death were truly an end in themselves.

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On the nobility of sculpture see, for example, the ironic passage in Michelangelo’s letter to Vasari on the comparison of the arts, “... se maggiore giudizio e difficoltà, impedimento e fatica non fa maggiore nobiltà, la pittura e scultura è una medesima cosa...” (P. Barocchi, ed., Trattati d’arte del cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma, 3 vols., Bari, 1960-62, I, p. 82). “Giudizio” here certainly relates to the three-dimensionality of sculpture, as do the concept of multiple-viewpoints (L. O. Larsson, Von allen Seiten gleich schön. Studien zum Begriff der Vielansichtigkeit in der europäischen Plastik von der Renaissance bis zum Klassizismus, Uppsala, 1974) and the notion that God, in making man in his own image, was acting as a sculptor (Barocchi, Trattati, I, pp. 48, 68, 381, n. 13).

39 “... facendo in quello Cristo morto, per dilettazione e passar tempo e, come egli diceva, perché l’esercitarsi col mazzuolo lo teneva sano del corpo” (Barocchi, Michelangelo, I, p. 82); the Cellini passage is quoted in n. 29 above.