



Michelangelo's Florence Pietà

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# Letter

## Michelangelo's Florence *Pietà*

In Michael Cole's recent review of Alexander Nagel's *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (*Art Bulletin* 85 [2003]: 194 and n. 3), a remark involving a statement of mine about Michelangelo's Florence *Pietà* may have caused confusion in the minds of some readers, in respect both to my statement and to its evaluation of Michelangelo's contribution in that sculpture. This letter is intended to provide clarification. Cole states, "Nagel's claim that the Florence *Pietà* 'was to be the first multigure group carved from a single stone' (p. 202) is, in a certain sense, true, though we may wonder whether this way of putting things overinscribes the separation between that work and Michelangelo's earlier sculptural practice." In a note Cole adds that Nagel credits me for the observation without providing a reference, nor does Cole.

The formulation in question occurs in an essay of mine discussing the extraordinary pains certain sculptors took to give form to their devotion by creating surpassing tours de

force for their memorials.<sup>1</sup> I quote the relevant passage in context here so the reader may judge the significance of the idea:

... so far as I can discover, [the *Pietà*] 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.

My point was that the Florence *Pietà* includes *four* figures, a feat no one since antiquity had conceived of attempting, surpassing even the Laocoön, antiquity's fabulously pseudomonolithic, three-figured *exemplum doloris*.

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## Note

1. Irving Lavin, "The Sculptor's 'Last Will and Testament,'" *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin* (Oberlin College) 35 (1977-78): 20; see further, idem, "Ex Uno Lapide: The Renaissance Sculptor's Tour de Force," in *Il cortile delle statue: Der Statuenhof des Belvedere im Vatikan*, ed. Matthias Winner et al. (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1998), 191-210.

## Response

The assertion made in Professor Lavin's excellent and influential 1977-78 article that Michelangelo's *Pietà* was the first postclassical, isolated, monumental, monolithic statue with four figures has, to my knowledge, never been challenged. The line Professor Lavin cites from my review was directed not at his arguments but at those of Alexander Nagel.

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