ad arte riesumati, che rendono purtroppo ancor più mefitica l'aria della madrepatria in questo scorcio, tutt'altro che eroico ed esaltante, di secondo millennio.

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Alexander Nagel. *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2000. Pp. Xvi, 303.

Michelangelo's reputation as one of the definitive artists of the Renaissance, together with Da Vinci and Raphael, was long thought to rest on pure genius. We now know how important the work of an early publicist like Vasari was in establishing that reputation for genius, but still like to believe that genius means creation ex nihilo, or, at most, ex classico – thinking of the inspiration which many Renaissance artists, thinkers, and writers drew from the ancient Roman past. Vasari may not have coined the term *rinascimento*, but he certainly popularized it as a process by which Roman models inspired a movement towards an enlightened future, and he set up Michelangelo – divine, inspired, unique – as the heroic realization of this thrust forward. We have so adopted Vasari's way of thinking that we may be surprised to realize how much Michelangelo took inspiration from late medieval models, or deliberately used archaic forms to promote religious reform. In this significant work, Alexander Nagel challenges us to think outside of familiar dichotomies and see Michelangelo as an artist whose manipulation of past and present goes far beyond the Vasarian model. As much as he employed new forms and techniques, Michelangelo was troubled by the loss of interiority and reverence in religion and aimed to recover these through a selective appropriation and reinterpretation of archaic forms drawn both from the ancient classical and the recent christian past. As the artistic developments of the quattrocento challenged traditional religious imagery, Michelangelo aimed with a form of archaism to revive and reform them. His experiments in painting, drawing, and sculpture worked dynamically with past and present, and evolved over time from hope and determination to melancholy regret. Nagel sets Michelangelo's evolution in the context of artistic developments of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries both in Italy and in Northern Europe, and offers abundant illustrations to a wide range of artists in order to trace this development.

Nagel focuses on Michelangelo's treatment of the dead Christ. He deals first with altarpieces, then moves to the new form of presentation drawings, and turns finally to the late sculptures. Altarpieces had been the high point of easel painting, but their

usually static compositions (as in the *sacra conversazione*) were overshadowed in the Renaissance by the active scenes in history paintings produced for the galleries of private patrons. By the end of the Quattrocento, altarpieces were being re-shaped by those narrative conventions. The result was altarpieces that depicted action which was about to move out of the frame and, by extension, out of the sacred space that the altar defined. Michelangelo aimed to reconnect the altarpiece with its liturgical setting by restricting narrative movement in such a way as to emphasize its relation to the altar. By the 1530s, Michelangelo moved in a new direction in part through his relation with Vittoria Colonna and the circle of spirituali around her. In line with this group's refined aesthetic sensibility and emphasis on spiritual interiority, he moved away from the public institutional altarpiece to the presentation drawing, a new category of drawing which took it not as a preliminary sketch but as a finished work in its own right. Understood in this new way, the drawing could become the focus for intensely personal spiritual meditation, particularly when it featured such themes as the Man of Sorrows and Pietà. Yet the hope of the spirituali for a union of the aesthetic and the spiritual could not be sustained long beyond the end of the 1540s, when the politics of reform moved towards more dogmatic statements of religious truth and so marginalized those who found truth in ambiguity or interiority. Michelangelo retreated into the very personal message of the late Florence and Rondanini Pietà sculptures, stripping the more modern forms without restoring the earlier, and thus expressing the difficulty of reform by depicting the incomplete and fragmentary – what Nagel calls “a slow iconoclasm.”

This is not an introductory study. These notes give only a hint of the complex arguments advanced by Nagel in a densely argued work that assumes a high level of familiarity with art historical scholarship of the twentieth century and with the technical language of that scholarship. Yet it is a rich mine of insights which, like Michelangelo's own procedure in the late sculptures, strips away the accretions of later mythmaking in order to depict an artist all the more complex, paradoxical, and irreducible.

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