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Fig. 1 Gerard David, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, Washington

Gerard David's Models for Motherhood

Susan Ross

Between 1505 and 1515, Gerard David created and sold, from his shop in Bruges, multiple versions of two different compositions, the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (Fig. 1) and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* (Fig. 2).[1] The small size and intimate tone of these paintings represented a turning point in David's career; one in which small paintings of the Virgin and child, rather than privately-commissioned, multi-paneled altarpieces, began to form the majority of his artistic output. Evidence from the underdrawing of several extant copies of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* suggests that they were conceived with an eye toward creating multiple copies for the open market.[2] This change in David's *oeuvre* may have been a response to the decline in the Bruges art market in the early sixteenth century. As the number of public commissions for art declined, artists were forced to produce paintings which had wide appeal and were salable on the open market. Within this context, small paintings of the Virgin and child were particularly popular, no doubt because they were well-suited for private devotion.[3]

It has been argued that the appearance of these mass-produced images of a humble Virgin and child suggests that David was an archaicizing and uninspired painter. For example, Erwin Panofsky wrote that these images were derivative versions of fifteenth-century paintings such as Robert Campin's *Virgin Before a Firescreen* (ca. 1430; National Gallery of London).[4] However, this conclusion does not take into account the possibility that widely available paintings of the Virgin and child which emphasized their intimacy may be evidence of a transition, not only in modes of artistic expression but also in the psychological function of art. The sheer number of copies of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* suggests that these paintings had a popular appeal and were therefore valuable, not only as works of art, but as images which struck a responsive chord in a wide audience.

An examination of David's paintings within the context of changes in social patterns during the first half of the sixteenth century yields a compelling explanation for the paintings' appeal. Such an analysis suggests that David used an established mode of expression, the devotional scene, to articulate a transition in Northern European values and norms. The evidence indicates that David chose scenes which had relatively few iconographic associations, and used them as a means of presenting Mary not as the Queen of Heaven, but as the model for an evolving ideal of motherhood.

The story depicted in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* had rarely been represented in Northern European art before the middle of the fifteenth century. Its first appearance seems to have been as a background vignette in Hans Memling's *Joys of Mary* (ca. 1480; Munich, Alte Pinakothek).[5] The narrative's source can be traced to the apocryphal Pseudo-Matthew, the *Golden Legend*, and Vincent de Beauvais's *Mirroir Historique*.[6] According to Pseudo-Matthew, on the third day of the family's journey into Egypt, Mary grew tired and stopped to rest under a date palm. She was hungry and asked Joseph to retrieve some of the fruit from the palm, but he was unable to reach it. The Christ Child commanded the palm to bend so that his father might pick some of the

Fig. 2 Gerard David, *Virgin of the Milksoup*, Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

fruit. Christ then commanded a miraculous spring to gush forth from the earth, so that the family could quench their thirst.[7]

David seems to have carefully followed this narrative in creating the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. He includes the family's donkey, which grazes to their right and serves as a reference to their journey. He also depicts Joseph striking fruit from a tree, though here David has substituted a chestnut for a date palm, perhaps in order to maintain the regional integrity of the scene.[8] Finally, David has included a portion of the miraculous spring in the lower right corner of the painting. In the center of this image, as with other versions of the scene, the Virgin sits on a rock and holds the Christ Child in her lap. In the Washington panel (Fig. 1), which generally is thought to be the prototype, Mary dangles a cluster of green grapes before her child's eyes. In other versions, Mary nurses Christ at her breast.

According to recent interpretations of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, the motif of Mary holding grapes is the key to the painting's meaning.[9] Art historians generally consider the depiction of grapes in devotional images to be a reference to the Eucharist. In David's painting, however, the grapes are green rather than red, and thus the link to the blood of Christ can not be so easily made. It has instead been suggested that the grapes are a metaphor for the breasts of Mary in her role as *Ecclesia*, and that the theme of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* is the idea that "spiritual nourishment provided directly by the Church is as important...as corporeal sustenance."[10] Thus, the narrative David represents is subordinate to a higher, spiritual truth.

Perhaps what is most fascinating about the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, however, is that although it refers to a miraculous episode, the scene is presented with an emphasis on familial intimacy rather than holiness. There is little indication that a holy family is even depicted in David's painting. The Virgin is more a modest young mother than the regal Queen of Heaven. She smiles tenderly at her very human-looking child. The diminutive figure of Joseph in the background is particularly unassuming; indeed, the source for this figure may have been a motif commonly found on the November page of French and Flemish Books of Hours, in which herdsmen knock down acorn to feed their swine.[11] David further de-emphasizes the sacred nature of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* by omitting other miraculous events typically associated with it, such as the Miracle of the Wheatfield and the Miracle of the Falling Idols.[12]

David illustrates a similar treatment of the holy figures in his version of the *Virgin of the Milksoup*. This composition has received little scholarly attention, in part because its narrative and symbolic associations are ambiguous. This image of the Virgin feeding porridge to the Christ Child has no biblical source and few precedents in the history of Northern Renaissance painting, although a number of similar images were created in the fifteenth century by Campin and his followers. The best known is Campin's *Virgin Before a Firescreen*, in which a chalice has been painted over the bowl of porridge which originally sat on the table next to the Virgin's bench.[13] However, such images of Mary which emphasize her humility and humanity were not prevalent until the early sixteenth century.

Iconographic interpretations of the *Virgin of the Milksoup* have suggested that David's painting serves as a visual metaphor for the transmission of grace through both the Virgin's milk and the Eucharist. Both are implied by the thin porridge of milk and bread that Mary feeds to the Christ Child.[14] Again, however, what is remarkable about this image is that David has treated the holy personages as humble, unassuming

figures. David presents the young Virgin dressed in a woolen gown and standing in an ordinary kitchen. She feeds the Christ Child from a bowl of porridge which rests on a rough wood table. Although Campin presents the Virgin in a similarly humble manner in *Virgin Before a Firescreen*, he nonetheless retains an indication of her holiness. Campin places her before a firescreen, which effectively functions as a halo in the painting. In contrast, David simply emphasizes the intimacy between the Virgin and child, and gives no indication of their holy status.

It has been argued that the secular quality of David's paintings reflects conditions in the sixteenth-century art market. Hans J. van Miegroet has written that contemporary art audiences preferred a more intimate and secular style of painting.[15] However, this explanation for the secularization of David's holy figures in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* only allows for a cursory understanding of the appearance of these paintings. It neither accounts for the significance of this change in taste, nor explains the process by which it took place. What the market theory does not provide is an answer to an essential question: Why did this change in taste occur?

In order to answer this question we must re-evaluate the idea of secularization. This concept must be expanded in order to address more than just the surface appearance of David's paintings. If we accept that the process of the secularization of holy images also includes a change in their psychological function for the viewer, we can better understand the appeal of David's paintings for his sixteenth-century audience.

Assessing the psychological function of an image assumes that it is possible to isolate the way original viewers may have internalized it and related it to their daily lives. This further rests on an assumption that images are an integral part of a society's collective psyche, or the storehouse in which a society keeps "historically transmitted patterns of meanings...expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, participate and develop their knowledge about, and attitudes toward, life."[16] The images included in this storehouse can thus be understood as the visual manifestation of a society's world view, as well as its values and beliefs.[17]

The psychological function of images relates to the way in which they correspond to the group ethos. Images may either confirm that ethos or controvert it, a function which is especially powerful when the images are of a religious nature. It is because religion can be thought of as a complex aspect of the cultural system, which through its rites, symbols, and beliefs, "tunes human action to an envisioned cosmic order and projects images of that cosmic order onto the plane of human experience," that religious images can be used to formulate a congruence between a particular metaphysic and daily life.[18] Such images, therefore, have the ability to confirm the "rightness" or "correctness" of a way of life in the mind of the faithful.

If we accept the notion that religious symbols express a particular world view, then a change in the appearance of these symbols suggests that the world view itself has been altered. How does this relate to secularization in art? It suggests that the appearance of a secularized Mary indicates a shift in the psychological function for which that particular symbol serves. The change in her appearance parallels an evolution in the world view which the symbol "Mary" expresses and confirms. Therefore, to secularize the image of Mary may be an attempt to relate her to the viewer's daily life.

This point is best illustrated through a comparison of fifteenth-century images of the Virgin and David's human, accessible image of the Virgin Mother. The figure of

Mary has generally been interpreted as a symbol of esoteric ideas such as intercession and redemption.[19] As *Co-redemptrix* or *Madonna Mediatrix*, Mary played an essential role in the heavenly plan for salvation. It was therefore appropriate that she was depicted as being above and beyond ordinary humans. The rich robes and elegant bearing of Mary in, for example, Jan van Eyck's *Virgin with the Canon van der Paele* (ca. 1436; Bruges, Groeningemuseum), are fitting expressions of her superhuman station. This presentation was suitable to the ethos of the fifteenth century, an era which is often presented as one in which people were encouraged to focus their attentions on heaven rather than on earth.[20] The faithful would meditate in front of paintings like van Eyck's, hoping to come into the presence of the otherworldly Virgin.[21] Thus, van Eyck's images and the devotional practices which accompanied them can be understood as embodiments of a particular world view in which the mystical or otherworldly components of spirituality were given primacy.

In David's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Virgin of the Milksoup*, Mary is not presented in such traditional iconographic roles. The artist instead depicted her engaged in her most human function as a mother. David's Mary seems to be equated not with abstract concepts but with human actions. This suggests that, at least for the artist and his patrons, the focal point of their religious ethos had switched from heaven to earth.

What evidence do we have that during the sixteenth century the world view transformed dramatically enough to alter the appearance of one of Christianity's most sacred symbols? At the time that David was painting the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup*, Northern European society was undergoing tremendous changes. These upheavals were not confined to religious matters, although the way in which religion was practiced eventually became one of the era's foremost concerns. Changes in market behavior, the development of new technology, and political realignments all contributed to the development of a new social order. Broad shifts in social patterns ultimately altered relations between classes and genders, and also affected the ways in which individual social units were organized.[22] While the reasons for these transitions are complex, taken as a whole they seem to represent a fundamental shift in the understanding of the way the world was ordered.

I believe that the primary factor which affected the appearance of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* was an evolution in the concept of the family, as well as a new understanding of the roles and responsibilities of its individual members. These changes in the formation of families and the relations within them were quite broad, but it is clear that women in particular were given a new role. In Northern Europe during this period, there was an ongoing debate concerning what constituted a good mother.[23] I believe that it was the evolution of the ideal of motherhood which sparked the transformation in representations of Mary from Queen of Heaven to that of a tender young mother.

Until the early sixteenth century, motherhood and holiness were generally seen as incompatible concepts. Sainthood and physical maternity were perceived and presented as alternatives. The hierarchy of sanctity ranked virgins at the top, followed by widows, and then wives at the bottom.[24] Physical motherhood was seen as a reminder of sexual activity and was therefore considered an obstacle to salvation. In addition, it was believed that family life hindered the soul from following Christ. As Clarissa Atkinson has pointed out, in the Middle Ages "true holiness required the

renunciation of physical comfort, sexual passion and all the joys and burdens of family life."[25] Therefore, female saints such as Priscilla, Elizabeth of Hungary, and Margery Kempe were praised for *parting* from their children, because maternal attachment was regarded as a worldly distraction which had to be renounced.[26] Even Mary, the mother of Christ, was praised more for her virginity than for her maternity. Although she was sometimes presented as the perfect mother, she received this attribution due to the suffering and pain she experienced upon losing her child, and not because she bore, nursed, and raised him.[27]

While the Catholic Church officially regarded celibacy and virginity as superior to marriage throughout the Middle Ages, by the fifteenth century a process of reconciliation between marriage, motherhood, and holiness had begun.[28] The change occurred slowly, but its beginnings are illustrated through the emergence of a new image of the Holy Family in art. As the institution of the family evolved from large groups based on loose kinship ties, to smaller units which bear a resemblance to the present-day nuclear family, the Holy Family seems to have emerged as its model.[29] Cynthia Hahn, for example, has suggested that the Holy Family in Campin's *Mérode Triptych* (1425-30; Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Cloisters) presents the viewer with a model for the ideal marriage. Such a union is based on *fides* and *sacramentum,* and also produces offspring.[30]

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the visual model of marriage and family suggested by the Holy Family was presented to men and women as a viable way of living a spiritual life. At this time, Catholic reformers such as Erasmus, Thomas Moore, and Juan Luis Vives began to assert in their writings the superiority of marriage as opposed to celibacy. Erasmus, in fact, called religious bachelorhood "a form of living both barren and unnatural."[31] He commended marriage on the basis of Christ's presence at the Wedding at Cana, and the fact that Mary, the apostles, and St. Paul had all married.[32] Erasmus' support of the married estate led him to devote seven colloquies and a long tract, *Encomium to Matrimony* (1518), to the subject. Erasmus' belief in the value of marriage was echoed by Vives, who addressed the topic in the second volume of *Instructions of a Christian Woman* (1523).

Within this social order, the role of women was specific and clear. Unlike their medieval ancestors, sixteenth-century women were encouraged to take an active role in their families and homes. They were encouraged to engage in a chaste sexuality with their husbands, and to actively try to conceive children. Thus, the ideal woman in the sixteenth century became the biblical figure of Martha, who oversaw her household, rather than her sister Mary, who sat at the feet of Christ.[33]

In addition to marrying and bearing children, women were also encouraged at this time to be more directly involved in raising their offspring. Rather than relegating their care to servants and wetnurses, sixteenth-century mothers were encouraged to take personal responsibility for the physical nourishment, spiritual upbringing, and education of their children. As a result, there was much concern surrounding the issue of breast-feeding.[34] By mid-century, it had come to be regarded as an embodiment of feminine virtue.[35] This new emphasis on breast-feeding was expressed in both visual images of the nursing Virgin and in written works. Erasmus, for example, exhorted mothers to nurse their own children, and stated in his colloquy, *The New Mother* (1526), that wetnursing was morally and physically unnatural, and that any woman who refused to nurse her child was only half a mother.[36] Luther and other reformers echoed

Erasmus' sentiments, adding that maternal nourishment would reinforce a proper moral, Christian training, and would thereby aid mothers in their duty to catechize their children.[37] Thus, in marked contrast to the medieval concept of female holiness, women in the sixteenth century were encouraged to fulfill their spiritual duties by performing as wives and mothers.

These changes in the roles and duties of mothers are registered in David's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Virgin of the Milksoup*.[38] Because of the emphasis on maternal nourishment and intimacy in David's paintings, I would suggest that they express the evolution which occured in the concept of female virginity and motherhood. This conclusion brings up the question of the relationship between text and image: Did writings such as those by Erasmus precede David's paintings or *vice versa*? I believe the answer to this question is that text and image arose simultaneously. Both writings and paintings should be understood as a result, rather than a cause, of the social changes described here, and appear as the consequence of a shifting ethos. However, unlike the texts discussed above, the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* had the unique ability to affirm the changes which were taking place by lending them the authority of a traditional religious symbol.[39]

Of course, David did not invent the image of the nursing Virgin. The image of *Maria Lactans* dates to well before the fourteenth century. However, this theme was not an especially popular one north of the Alps until the sixteenth century.[40] Northern European artists and patrons in the fifteenth century showed a marked preference for regal presentations of the Virgin and child. Although the nursing Virgin was sometimes depicted, as in van Eyck's *Lucca Virgin* (1434; Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut), artists usually placed her in a niche, in an ornamental garden, or seated on a throne. Even half-length paintings which emphasized the intimacy between the Virgin and child, such as those by Roger van der Weyden, still presented Mary dressed in rich fabrics and jewels, and placed her in an anonymous and otherworldly space. Images of a humble Virgin caring for her child proliferated only when a preference for active motherhood was manifested in the social consciousness. Changes in women's roles in Flanders during the sixteenth century opened up a freedom of association for a long-established image which, in turn, allowed David to approach the subject of the nursing Virgin in an innovative way.

This conclusion is particularly well illustrated by the numerous copies of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* which David painted. The panel in Washington (Fig. 1) is dated as early as 1505, and is considered to be the original version of this composition. The painting represents the early stages of the evolution of the ideal of motherhood; Mary is intimate with her child, but she is not yet actively nurturing him. In subsequent versions of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, such as those in New York (Fig. 3) and Oslo (Fig. 4), the composition was changed in order to almost entirely eliminate references to the narrative of Pseudo-Matthew, such as the donkey, the spring, and the figure of Joseph. The artist focused instead on the figures of Mary and Christ, who, seated in the center of the work, take up almost three-quarters of the composition. In these paintings, Mary suckles the Christ Child. Of course, it is possible that a sixteenth-century viewer would have attached traditional associations to the figure of Mary in these paintings. However, I feel that the emphasis on maternal nourishment and intimacy in the later versions of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* is significant. It suggests that as the concept

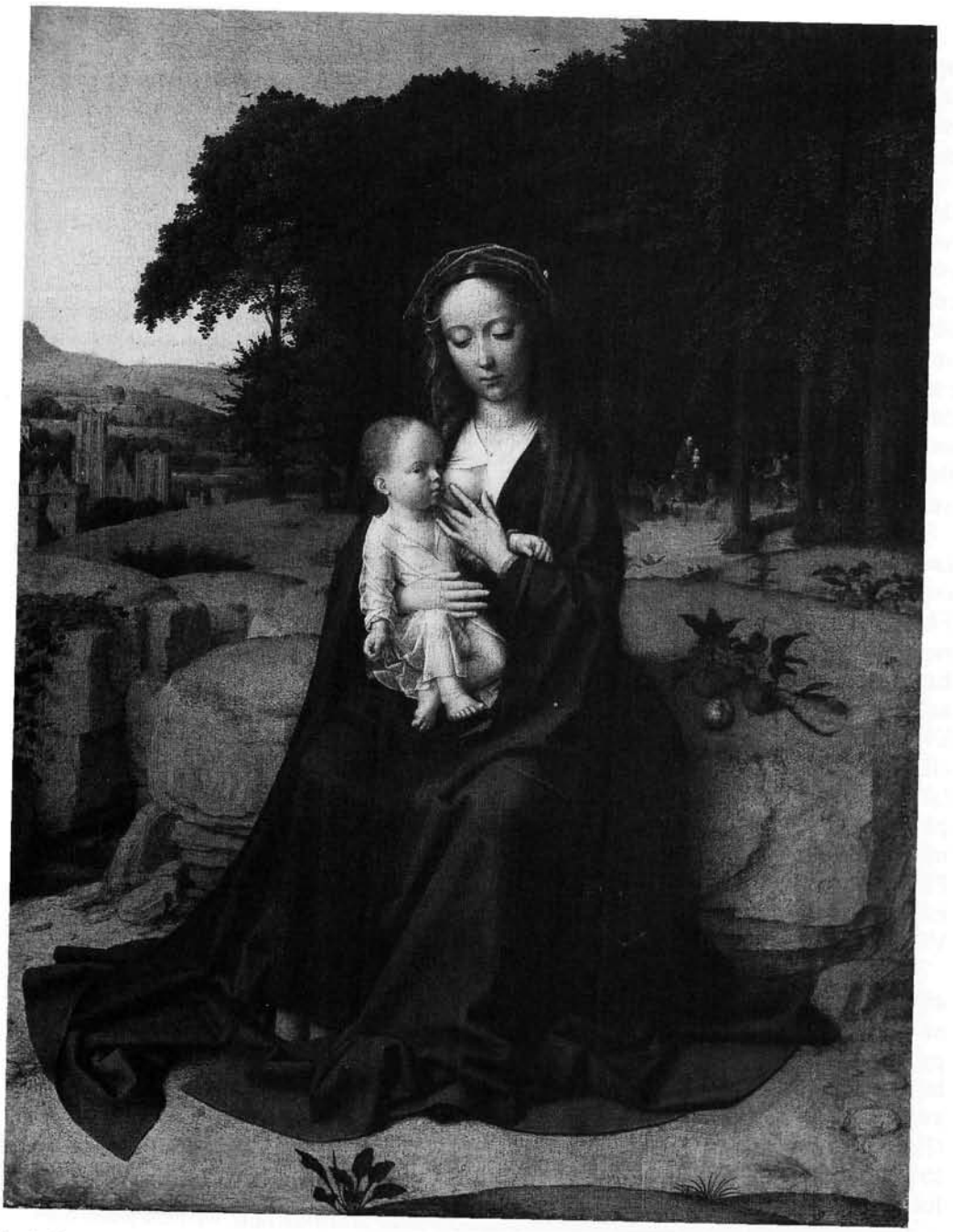

Fig. 3 Gerard David, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jules Bache Collection (49.7.21), New York

Fig. 4 Gerard David, *Madonna and Child*, Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo (Photo: J. Lathion © Nasjonalgalleriet)

of motherhood evolved, it became increasingly possible to understand Mary as a model for the new ideal.

David was not the only artist to use the figure of Mary to express this new ideal of motherhood. Around 1520, Adrien Isenbrandt also created versions of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. These paintings, like David's, focused on an unassuming young mother breast-feeding her child in a landscape. In addition, images of the Virgin feeding her child porridge also appeared around the time that David painted the *Virgin of the Milksoup*. For example, at some point after 1510, the Haarlem painter Jan Mostaert painted a *Virgin and Child* in which he similarly depicted a very humble-looking Mary seated at a wooden table feeding the Christ Child from a bowl of porridge. Perhaps the most intriguing image is a small painting by the Master of St. Sang in the Hamburg Kunsthalle. In this work, a plainly dressed Mary is shown breast-feeding her child while Joseph, who stands behind the nursing Virgin, extends a bowl of porridge toward her.

The contemporary appeal of Gerard David's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and *Virgin of the Milksoup* relates to the ability of the figure of Mary to embody and express new notions of motherhood. David's humble, human Mary was popular because she confirmed the new social order. However, by mid-century, the Church had returned to more traditional modes. During the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church became deeply concerned that the ideals of family and motherhood advanced by Erasmus and the Humanists had eroded the Church's institutional power and authority. In response, the Church enunciated doctrine which was intended to assert parochial authority and to diminish familial autonomy.[41]

As a result of the Catholic Church's reaction against the early sixteenth-century emphasis on families, motherhood was once again made largely incompatible with holiness. The Church stated its position on the relative merits of virginity and maternity at the Council of Trent: "If anyone says that the married state excels the state of virginity or celibacy, and that it is better and happier to be united in matrimony than to remain in virginity, let him be an anathema."[42] This ideology was expressed artistically in two important ways. First, images of Mary suckling Christ disappeared. Second, Mary's roles as *Mediatrix* and protector were once again emphasized. The Counter-Reformation effectively replaced the humble young mother with images of Mary in her previous roles as Queen of Heaven, *Mediatrix*, and protector. New figures, such as that of St. Monica, were presented as alternative role models for mothers.[43] Thus, the new model of motherhood communicated in the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* did not find continued expression in Catholic art past the mid-sixteenth century.[44]

The view of Gerard David which emerges from this analysis is one of a Janus-like artist. David, looking both backward and forward, was aware that his audience relied on the tradition of devotional painting to give expression to their concerns, yet also wanted images that related to their everyday lives. Paintings such as the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* signal a new form of religious art, one which was informed by the evolving concerns of the secular world. These paintings were not only devotional images, but were also models for motherhood in early modern Europe.

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2. It has been demonstrated that the multiple versions of the *Virgin of the Milksoup* were all created from a single cartoon. See Micheline Comblen Sonkes, "À propos de la Vièrge et Enfant à la soupe au lait. Contribution à l'étude des copies," *Bulletin de Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* 23-24 (1974-1978): 29-42.

3. Hans J. van Miegroet, *Gerard David* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1989), 229-41. Jean Wilson also describes the situation in the Bruges art market, in "The Participation of Artists in the Bruges *Pandt* Market, 1512-1550," *Burlington Magazine* 125 (1980): 476-79.

4. See Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting, Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 303-58. A similar conclusion concerning David's art was also advanced by Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Hans Memling and Gerard David*, trans. Heinz Norden, vol. 6 (Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1967-1976), 94-8. He compared David's work with that of earlier artists such as Jan van Eyck. From Friedländer's perspective, the archaic qualities of David's work marked the end of the fifteenth-century tradition of devotional painting. He concluded that David was the last member of the old guard, a painter, "slow-moving and barren of ideas [whose] imagination failed to encompass the process of growth." He did suggest, however, that the Bruges art market contributed to the artist's archaic tendencies: "The faithful insisted on compositions that had become familiar and dear to them, clung to ecclesiastical tradition, may even have rejected innovations as impious and insolent profanation....In Bruges, about 1500 in particular, the people were conservative-minded, lending support to the creative sloth of their painters." This opinion has been rejected in recent years by authors such as Hans van Miegroet, who argues that these small paintings are representative of David's stylistic versatility. See, for example, van Miegroet, *David*, 95-139.

5. M.L. Dufey Haeck, "La thème du repose pendant la fuite en Egypte dans la peinture flamande de la seconde moitie du XVème siècle au milieu du XVIème siècle," *Revue Belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'Art* 49 (1979): 45-76.

6. This story does not appear in the Bible. Matthew is the only one of the four Evangelists to describe the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:12-15), and in his account he does not mention the family's rest.

7. *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts and Revelations*, trans. Alexander Walker (Edinburgh: 1890), 37.

8. James Mundy, "Gerard David Studies" (Ph. D. diss., Princeton University, 1980), 128.

9. See Mundy, "Gerard David Studies," 124-28; and idem, "Gerard David's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*: Further Additions to Grape Symbolism," *Simiolus* 16 (1986): 211-22.

10. Because the *Song of Songs* was generally understood in this period as a metaphor for Mary in her role as *Ecclesia* and Christ in his role as the Bridegroom of the Church, the grapes could symbolize not only the breasts of Mary, but also more generally, the "breasts" of the Church. This association was suggested by Honorius of Autun: "All of the things which have been said about the Church can also be understood about the Virgin, bride and mother of the bridegroom." See Mundy, "Gerard David Studies," 133-42.

11. The inclusion of this motif in the painting suggests that David was at least familiar with, if not actively involved in, book illumination. Friedländer maintains that David exerted a deep and enduring effect on the art of book illumination in Flanders. See Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 91. Weale also suggests that David may have been a member of the Bruges guild of book illuminators in his seminal article, "Gerard David," *Beffroi II* (1863): 223-34. For a complete treatment of this subject, see Diane Scilia, "Gerard David and Manuscript Illumination in the Low Countries, 1490-1509" (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1975).

12. The Holy Family fled Nazareth for Egypt because Herod had decreed that all male infants in Bethlehem be slain (an episode known as the Massacre of the Innocents). According to apocryphal legend, the Holy Family was pursued by Herod's men on their flight into Egypt. At the same moment that Joseph and Mary realized they were being followed, they saw a laborer sowing wheat in a field along the road. The infant Jesus picked up a handful of wheat seeds and flung them onto the ground. A wheatfield

miraculously sprung up and the family was able to hide in it from Herod's soldiers. This episode is known as the Miracle of the Wheatfield.

In another apocryphal tale, the people of Sotrina worshipped a god named Abraxas, to whom an idol had been erected in the temple. Three hundred and sixty-five other idols who paid homage to the statue of Abraxas were also housed there. When Mary and Jesus entered the guest house of the temple, the idols fell on their faces and the idol of Abraxas fell prostate on the floor before Jesus. This episode is known as the Miracle of the Idols. A complete account of the miracles associated with the Holy Family's flight into Egypt can be found in Joseph Gaer, *The Lore of the New Testament* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1952): 61-8.

13. The chalice which appears in the painting today was added sometime in the nineteenth century. See Jules Destrée, "Altered in the Nineteenth Century? A Problem in the National Gallery, London," *Connoisseur*, 10 (1926): 209-10.

14. Mundy, "Gerard David Studies," 219.

15. Van Miegroet, *David*, 95-139.

16. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 87-125.

17. Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 1473-99.

18. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 90.

19. For a history of the symbolic associations of the figure of Mary, see Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: the Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

20. See Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1949), 31-55, 220-24.

21. Harbison describes this process in *Jan van Eyck, the Play of Realism* (London: Reacktion Books, 1991), 169-87. See also van Miegroet, *David*, 229-41; Sixten Ringbom, "Devotional Images and Imaginative Devotions, Notes on the Place of Art in Late Medieval Private Piety," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6th ser., 73 (1969): 159-70; Lloyd Benjamin, "Disguised Symbolism Exposed and the History of Early Netherlandish Painting," *Studies in Iconography* 2 (1976): 11-24; and James Marrow, "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance," *Simiolus* 16 (1986): 150- 69.

22. For a complete treatment, see Herman van der Wee, *The Low Countries in the Early Modern World* (Brookfield, VT: Variorium, 1993).

23. See, for example, Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). A thorough treatment of the history of motherhood is also given in Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

24. Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 144.

25. Clarissa Atkinson, "'Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass': The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages," *Journal of Family History* 8 (1983): 131-43.

26. Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 168.

27. Ibid.

28. The Church regarded the natural family with suspicion, in part because the family competed with the individual's love for Christ. In addition, the Church feared that the natural family might pose a challenge to clerical authority. A general treatment of this subject is given in Rosemary O'Day, *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500-1900: England, France, and the United States of America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994).

29. Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien* (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1957), 149.

30. Hahn notes that the issue of Christ's paterity was the most complex issue in the marriage between Mary and Joseph. Although Jesus was not Joseph's son, Albert the Great asserted that by naming the child, Joseph had acted as Jesus' father. For further discussion, see Cynthia Hahn, "'Joseph Will Perfect, Mary

Enlighten and Jesus Save Thee': The Holy Family as Marriage Model in the Mérode Triptych," *Art Bulletin* 78 (1986): 54-66.

31. Erasmus, *A Ryght Frutefull Epystle in Laude and Prayse of Matrymony*, trans. Richard Taberner (n.d.), seg. Aiii-Avi, Bi-Bvi.

32. Ibid.

33. Merry Weisner, "Luther and the Death of Two Marys," in *Disciplines of Faith, Studies in Religion, Politics, and Patriarchy*, ed. Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper, and Raphael Samuel (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987): 300. For the story of Christ in the house of Mary and Martha, see Luke 10:38-42.

34. Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 157. See also Sheila Gottlieb, *The Family in the Western World from the Black Death to the Industrial Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 149-51. Gottlieb points out that official advice in favor of mothers feeding their own children was often couched in attacks on female vanity and sensuality. In addition, she asserts that while the historical record gives the impression that wetnursing was pervasive at this time, only a few wealthy, privileged mothers actually sent their children to wetnurses.

35. See, for example, Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 118.

36. *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, trans. Craig Thompson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965), 267-84.

37. O'Day, *The Family*, 42.

38. Craig Harbison "Some Artistic Anticipations of Theological Thought," *Art Quarterly* n.s. II, no. 1 (1979): 67-89, illustrates how the visual arts can and do anticipate theological developments before such developments are articulated in texts.

39. Geertz considers this a process of confrontation and mutual confirmation. Through religious beliefs and practices, "a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the world view describes; the world view is rendered emotionally convincing by being presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well-arranged to accommodate such a way of life...[this has] two effects....It objectivizes moral and aesthetic preferences by depicting them as the imposed conditions of life implicit in a world with a particular structure, [and]...it supports these received beliefs about the world's body by invoking deeply felt moral and aesthetic sentiments as experiential evidence for the truth." Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89-90.

40. Leo Steinberg, "The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion," *October* 25 (1983): 10.

41. For example, the Church forbade the laity from catechizing their children or celebrating Mass at home. See John Bossy, "The Counter Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe," *Past and Present* 47 (1970): 51-70.

42. Ibid., 68.

43. See Clarissa Atkinson, "'Your Servant, My Mother': The Figure of St. Monica in the Ideology of Christian Motherhood," in *Immaculate and Powerful, The Female in Sacred Images and Social Reality*, ed. Clarissa Atkinson, Constance Buchanan and Margaret Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 139-172.

44. It has been proposed that paintings such as the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* and the *Virgin of the Milksoup* were precursors to later Dutch genre paintings which featured mothers feeding their children. These later paintings can be understood as images of the period's notion of womanly virtue, an essential aspect of which was motherhood. For a discussion of this theory see Mary F. Durantini, *The Child in Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), and Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Fig. 1 Michelangelo, Stairs of the Laurentian Library (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)

The Source of the Laurentian Staircase

Robin O'Bryan

In 1559, under the auspices of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, Bartolomeo Ammannati began work finishing Michelangelo Buonarroti's staircase for the Laurentian Library in Florence, helping to bring to completion the grand project commissioned over a quarter of a century earlier by Cosimo's ancestor, Pope Clement VII (Fig. 1).[1] Giorgio Vasari summed up the fruits of these labors several years later in his *Lives* of 1568, praising Michelangelo's *licenza* and *fantasia*, and commenting specifically on the revolutionary design of the staircase in the library vestibule:

> And in this stairway, he made such strange breaks in the design of the steps, and he departed in so many details and so widely from normal practice, that everyone was astonished.[2]

As Vasari noted, the staircase's novelty stemmed from the proportion of stair to vestibule space, as well as its innovative, free-standing configuration, which James Ackerman has termed a "sculpture in the round."[3] "Nor [was there] any stair more commodious," Vasari claimed, its courtly appeal enhanced by the radical design of the steps and its many fanciful details.[4]

The staircase as Ammannati completed it was the product of numerous changes in design, for which several preliminary drawings by Michelangelo are extant. These sketches, mostly done between 1524 and 1526, show Michelangelo attempting to work out a pleasing solution for the relationship between the side wings and the main stair, as seen in the reconstructions by Rudolf Wittkower (Fig. 2).[5] What these drawings do not show, however, is the design of the central section of the staircase as it ultimately came to be constructed. Although scholars have generally conceded that the specifics for the staircase were left to Ammannati and others to handle, there has been seemingly little interest in addressing the issue of Michelangelo's role in articulating the final details, especially as they bear on the design of the central steps.[6] This is a particularly significant point, since by the time the staircase was actually realized, two new participants had been involved with the execution scheme, patron Cosimo de' Medici and architect Ammannati; their individual contributions have been largely ignored.

Focusing on the central portion of the Laurentian stair, this paper will examine the development of the library staircase by taking a two-fold approach which considers both form and content. This will involve reassessing Michelangelo's preliminary designs, as well as re-addressing the principal scholarship on the chronology of the staircase (as established by Wittkower), an effort which challenges Michelangelo's authorship in the elaboration of the executed scheme. An analysis of key details will show that the final plan for the staircase was conceived only in the late 1550s, when Ammannati was in charge of the project. Moreover, this date will prove to be pivotal, since it ties the staircase solidly to contemporary innovations in garden design, a connection that offers new meanings for the entire library itself.

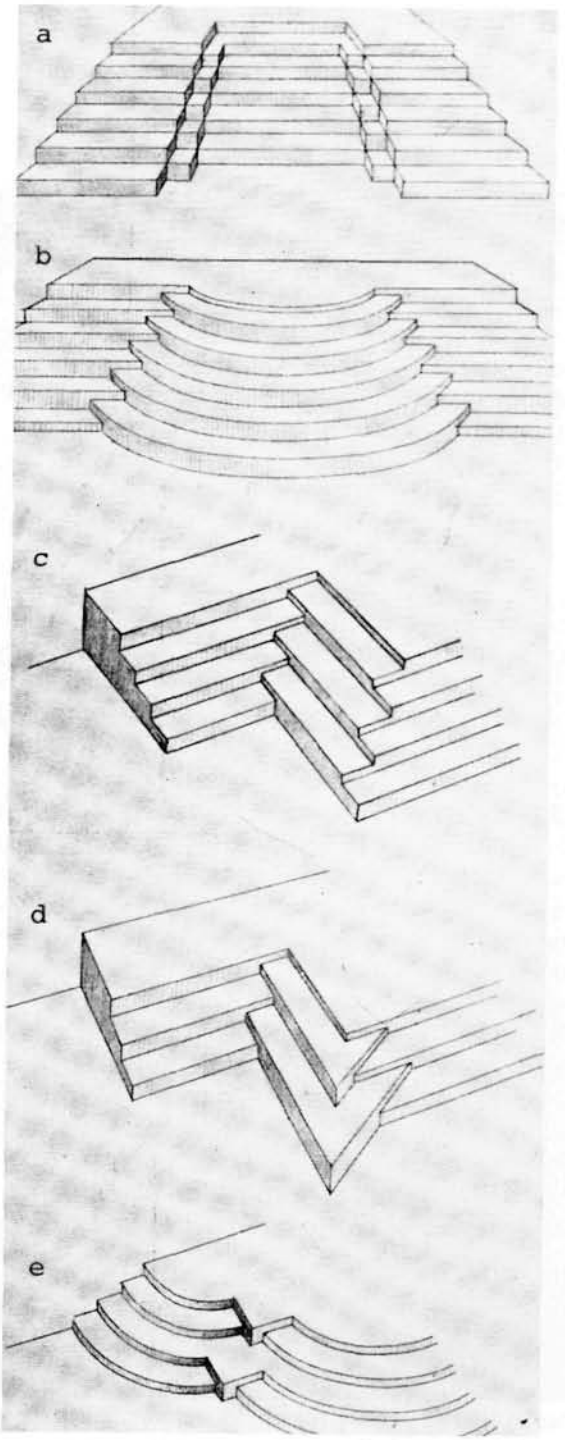

Fig. 2 Reconstructions of Michelangelo's ideas for the staircase. From Rudolph Wittkower, *Idea and Image*, with permission

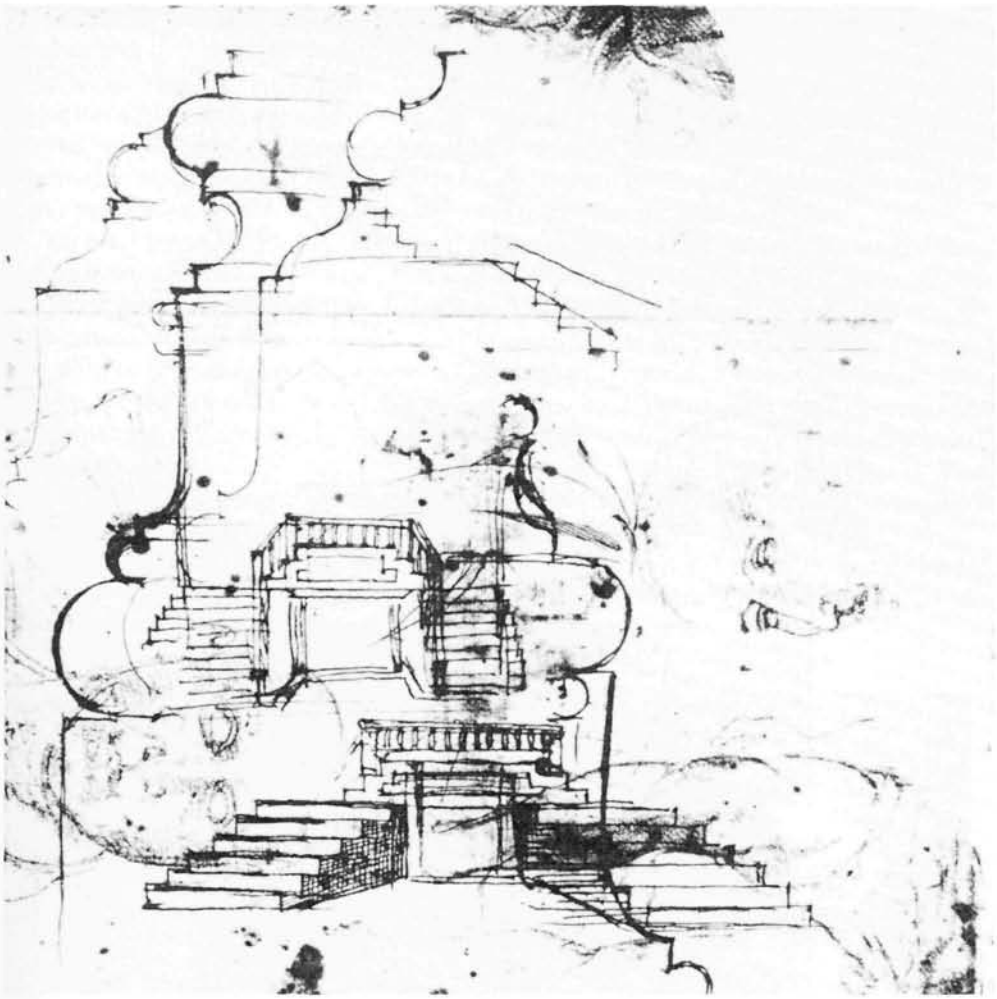

Fig. 3 Michelangelo, sketches for the staircase, detail, Casa Buonarroti 92 recto

One of Michelangelo's earliest plans for the staircase was based in part on Clement VII's request in 1525 for a staircase to take up the entire width of the vestibule.[7] In proposing this design specification, Clement was no doubt aware of the connotations of power and prestige that grand stairways conferred upon a patron.[8] In responding to Clement's wishes, Michelangelo may well have been guided by an Albertian dictum advising that: "Staircases should be allotted their own section of the floor, running free and unimpeded right up as far as the outermost area."[9] His literal application of this idea was accompanied by a borrowing of architectural novelties from contemporary prototypes.[10] The resulting scheme (Fig. 3), was a tripartite design based on a drawing by Giuliano da Sangallo for the Medici Villa at Poggio a Caiano (Fig. 4), which shows two stairways, each to the side of a main entrance.[11]

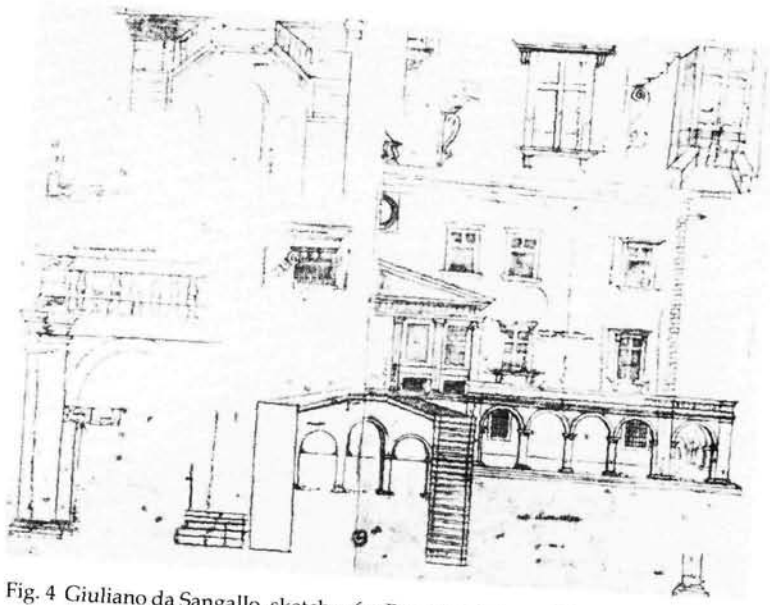

Fig. 4 Giuliano da Sangallo, sketches for Poggio a Caiano, Uffizi Disegno d'Arch

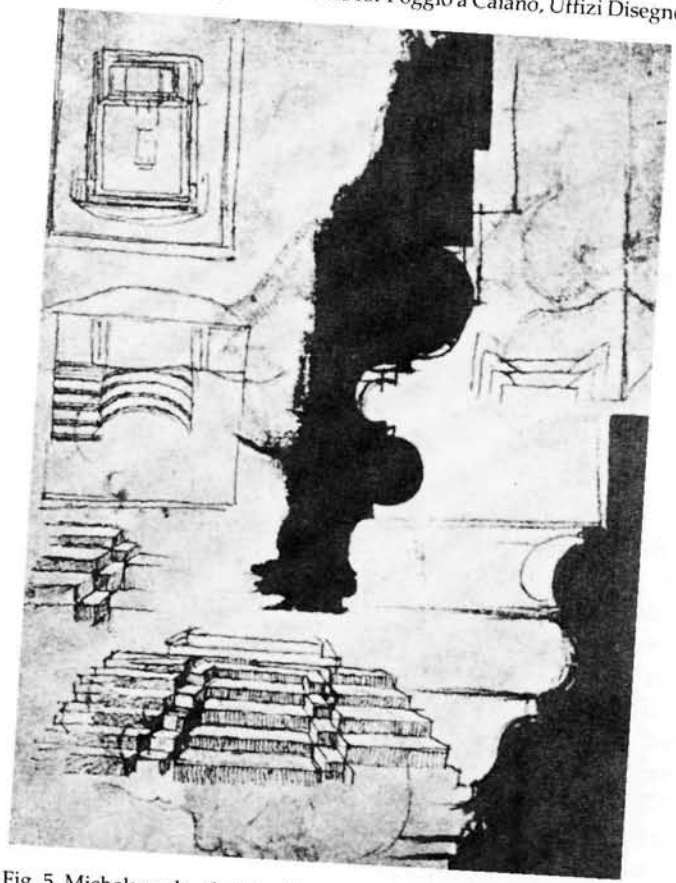

Fig. 5 Michelangelo, sketches for the staircase, Casa Buonarroti 92 verso

In another early sketch by Michelangelo, which also adhered to a tripartite scheme, the architect demarcated the three zones with a series of block-like forms which ran down a central section (Fig. 5). This design appears to have derived from Donato Bramante's monumental staircase in the Belvedere Cortile at the Vatican (1503-04).[12] Extremely influential for sixteenth-century architects, Bramante's stairway may have appealed to Michelangelo in its revolutionary design, while at the same time it served as an appropriate model to satisfy Cosimo's tacit "ceremonial" criterion.

Yet another of Michelangelo's early designs seems to have been patterned after a configuration of blocks and circular steps from a fresco by Filippino Lippi, in the Strozzi Chapel of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. In *Saint Philip Casting out the Devil* (Fig. 6), Lippi created a fanciful exedra which was approached by a stairway with a central projecting section of three tiers of rounded steps. This rounded stepped arrangement, adopted by Michelangelo in his design (Fig. 2 (b)), was a structural novelty rarely seen before this time.[13] Moreover, the top portion of Lippi's exedra reappears in Michelangelo's sketch with the "blocked" step formation, although in inverted form (See Fig. 5). This offers another indication that Lippi's steps may have influenced Michelangelo's design.

The preliminary plans for the staircase were well in hand by 1526, but financial difficulties prevented any work from being done on the library project until 1533. In

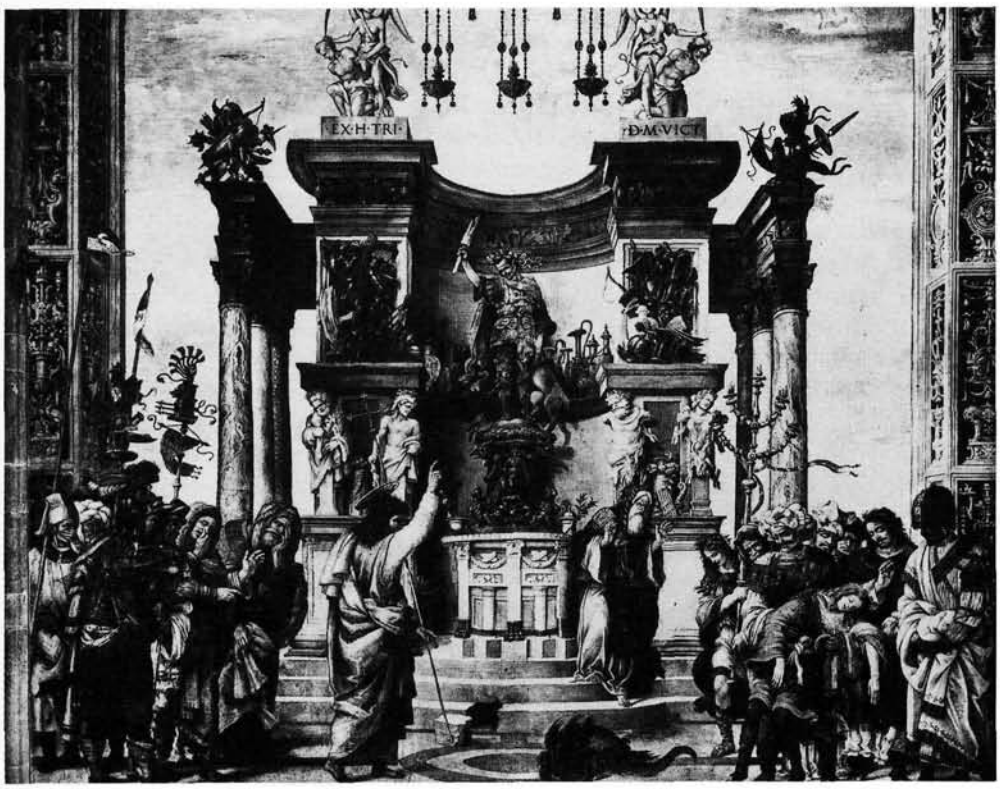

Fig. 6 Filippino Lippi, *Saint Philip Casting out the Devil*, Strozzi Chapel, S. Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)

August of that year a new contract was drawn up between Michelangelo and five stonemasons, which specifically contracted to have the staircase begun and completed by the end of March 1534. Michelangelo returned to Rome in November, visiting Florence again only briefly in May and June of 1534. The staircase was nowhere near complete. However, as Vasari was later to write, it was during this period that Michelangelo had several steps carved for the library project.

Wittkower argued that it was the *central* steps—specifically those with the volutes that appear in the executed staircase—which were fabricated during this phase of activity, and according to Michelangelo's detailed instructions.[14] He bases his argument on a section of the 1533 contract which required that "the steps of the staircase shall be fourteen, each to be of one piece, particularly the first seven with the *rivolte*, without any joint being visible."[15] Wittkower focused on the word *rivolte*, which he used as a parallel term to describe the volute configuration. This interpretation is based on his extrapolation of sixteenth-century definitions of the term, which, Wittkower believed, "can be understood only in its original sense of 'turning round' or 'turning back.'"[16] However, other definitions of *rivolte* show that the term need not convey the idea of subtle curving turns; period sources also equate the term with "revolution" and "sharp turns," definitions which allude to a more angular treatment.[17] This latter meaning is consistent with Erwin Panofsky's interpretation of *rivolte* as "notchboards," which Wittkower rejects, but which more accurately describes the areas linking the central stair with the side steps in several of Michelangelo's early sketches.[18]

With one exception (Fig. 2(b)), virtually none of the preliminary drawings displays the fluid curvature that Wittkower associated with the term *rivolte*, yet these designs are all relatively contemporary with the period in which the contract was drawn up. Moreover, the steps forming the central section in figure 2(b) could indeed be construed as "turning back" from the side wings, which would accord with an equally appropriate use of the term. Given the ambiguity surrounding the word *rivolte* and its potential for various interpretations, there is really no substantive argument to show that the 1533 contract was referring specifically to the *voluted* steps of the central section. Yet if some steps did remain from this early period as Vasari alleged, which steps might these have been?

A detail from Michelangelo's sketch from 1525 shows several oval "steps" positioned at the bottom of flanking twin staircases; above these ovals is a large void which constitutes a middle zone (Fig. 7). This design has special significance. Not only does it suggest that the *oval* steps were indeed those carved for the 1533 project, but it also implies that the central step design had not yet been formulated. In the executed staircase of 1559, the placement of the oval steps at the very bottom of the central section corresponds exactly to the way Michelangelo envisioned them in his early sketch (Fig. 8). This particular placement also explains why Ammannati would later use marble filling as a transitional device (visible at the bottom of Fig. 8), when he incorporated the oval steps with the voluted ones in executing the final scheme. Such a solution satisfies Vasari's claim that there were steps left in the vestibule after the 1533 project. More importantly, it sets the stage for Ammannati's authorship of the voluted steps.

There is further evidence to support a late 1550s date for the design of the middle steps, and thus Ammannati's creative intervention. With the death of Pope Clement VII in 1534, work on the library and stairway was suspended indefinitely; it was only around 1550 that the new Medici patron, Duke Cosimo I, initiated the library's

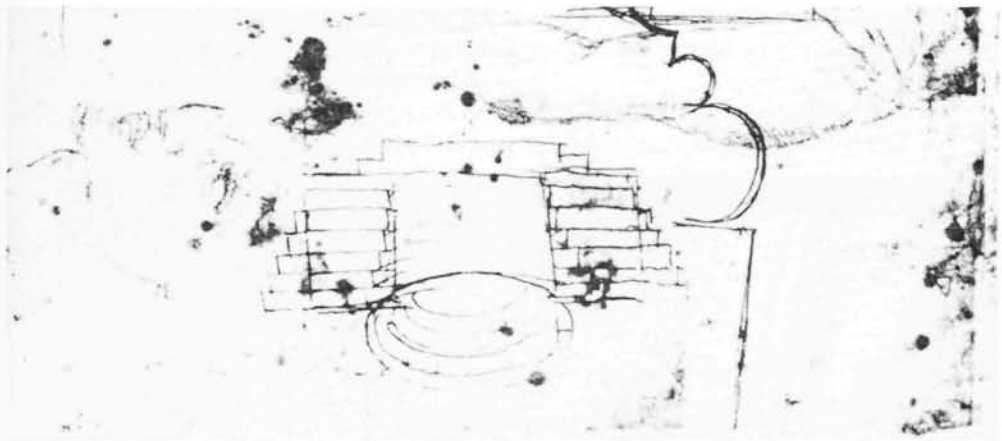

Fig. 7 Michelangelo, sketches for the staircase, detail, Casa Buonarroti 92 recto

completion. According to Vasari, Cosimo, following Michelangelo's own recommendation, enlisted the sculptor Niccolo Tribolo for the job of finishing the staircase.

Tribolo's efforts met with failure.[19] After putting four steps into position, he reached an impasse and realized that he needed more specific instructions to continue, since "the drawings and terracotta models that were available did not make clear *'la propria ed ultima risoluzione.'*"[20] He attempted to elicit this information from Michelangelo. According to Vasari:

> Tribolo asked him about the stairway for the library of San Lorenzo, for which Michelangelo had caused many stones to be prepared *although there was no model nor any certainty as to its exact form* [emphasis added]; there were some marks on a pavement and some rough designs in clay, but the true and final plans could not be found. However, despite the entreaties made by Tribolo, who invoked the name of the duke, all Michelangelo would say was that he did not remember them.[21]

Michelangelo's subsequent failure to aid Tribolo was interpreted by Wittkower as an angry response to Tribolo's abortive attempt to finish the staircase.[22] However, Michelangelo was likely unable to furnish Tribolo with the design specifics because he had indeed not yet formulated the final scheme. Michelangelo's method of working, which was predicated on changes and alterations made throughout a project's development, lends support to this idea.[23] Furthermore, although Wittkower maintained that Michelangelo could recall his original ideas years later, Michelangelo's recollection of his staircase plan, as discussed below, did not correspond to its actual realization.[24]

Tribolo died in September 1550, and the staircase project was once again put on hold. Five years later, Cosimo asked Vasari to contact Michelangelo for help in finally completing the staircase. Michelangelo's letter to Vasari in September 1555 is worth repeating in its entirety for the explicit instructions Michelangelo provides regarding the staircase design:

Fig. 8 Michelangelo, Staircase of the Laurentian Library (photo: Alinari/Art Resource, New York)

> As regards the staircase for the Library, of which I have heard so much, believe me, if I were able to remember what I proposed to do with it no entreaties would have been necessary.
>
> I recall a certain staircase, as it were in a dream, but I do not think it is exactly what I thought of then, because it is a clumsy affair, as I recall it. However, I will here describe it.
>
> Thus, if you take a number of oval boxes, each a *palmo* in depth, but not of the same length and breadth; first place the largest upon the paved floor, as far distant from the door in the wall as you require, according to whether the staircase is to be shallow or steep; upon this place another, which should be smaller in each direction and should project over the first one below as evenly as is required by the foot as it ascends, diminishing and narrowing them one after the other continuously as they ascend towards the door. The aforesaid section of the oval staircase should have, as it were, two wings, one on one side and one on the other, the steps of which should correspond to the others, but should be straight, not oval; these being for the servants and the middle for the master; from the middle upwards of the said staircase the ends of the said wings are towards the wall; from the middle downwards to the paved floor they, together with the whole staircase, are separated from the wall by about three *palmi*, so that the entrance to the vestibule is entirely unencumbered and is free on all sides. I'm writing nonsense, but I know very well that you and Messer Bartolomeo [Ammannati] will make something of it.[25]

It is important to note that at the time Michelangelo wrote this letter, his specifics relate to the designs he had proposed thirty years earlier. The sketch accompanying the letter corresponded to the plan of 1525 (Fig. 2(b)) (and offers additional indication that the oval steps were carved in the 1530's). No mention is made of the details, specifically the volutes, which came to distinguish the central stair in its final form.

Almost four years passed before any further action was taken. By December 1559, the staircase project had once again changed hands and Ammannati was put in charge of the entire undertaking. In January 1559, Michelangelo sent a model and a letter which explicitly left the details of the execution to Ammannati:

> I wrote you that I had made a little clay model of the Library staircase; I'm now sending it to you in a box, and as it's a small affair, I have not been able to do more than give you an idea, remembering that what I formerly proposed was free-standing and only abutted on to the door of the Library. I've contrived to maintain the same method; I do not want the side stairs to have balusters at the ends, like the main flight, but a seat between every two steps, as indicated by the embellishments. *There is no need for me to tell you anything about bases, fillets for these plinths and other ornaments, because you are resourceful, and being on the spot will see what is needed much better than I can* [emphasis added]. As to the height and length, take up as little space as you can by narrowing the extremity as you think fit. It is my opinion that if the said staircase were made in wood—that is to say in a fine walnut—it would be better than in stone, and more in keeping with the desks, the ceiling and the door.[26]

This letter provides a defining moment in the formulation of the final staircase design. For the first time, Michelangelo specified that seats be added to the side wings. This element does not appear in any of the preliminary drawings, and Ammannati must have put it into place based upon the model and the directives contained in the letter. The idea itself appears to have derived from the Belvedere stairway, where the side steps were designed to be used as seats for theatrical performances.[27] An anonymous French drawing (c. 1535), shows the configuration of these steps, the exact step formation that was used for the side steps in the executed Laurentian staircase (compare Fig. 9 and Fig. 8).

It is also in the 1559 letter that Michelangelo first gave Ammannati general guidance on the staircase proportions, and suggested that the staircase be made of wood instead of stone. Ammannati complied with these instructions by tailoring the size of the staircase balusters and plinths (see discussion below), and by conveying Michelangelo's request regarding the material of the staircase to Cosimo—a suggestion which was pointedly rejected.[28] Nowhere in this letter did Michelangelo provide instructions for the design of the central steps. On the contrary, his giving Ammannati *carte blanche* to devise "other ornaments" as Ammannati saw fit, easily suggests that Ammannati, once again, followed Michelangelo's directives when he embellished the central steps with volutes.

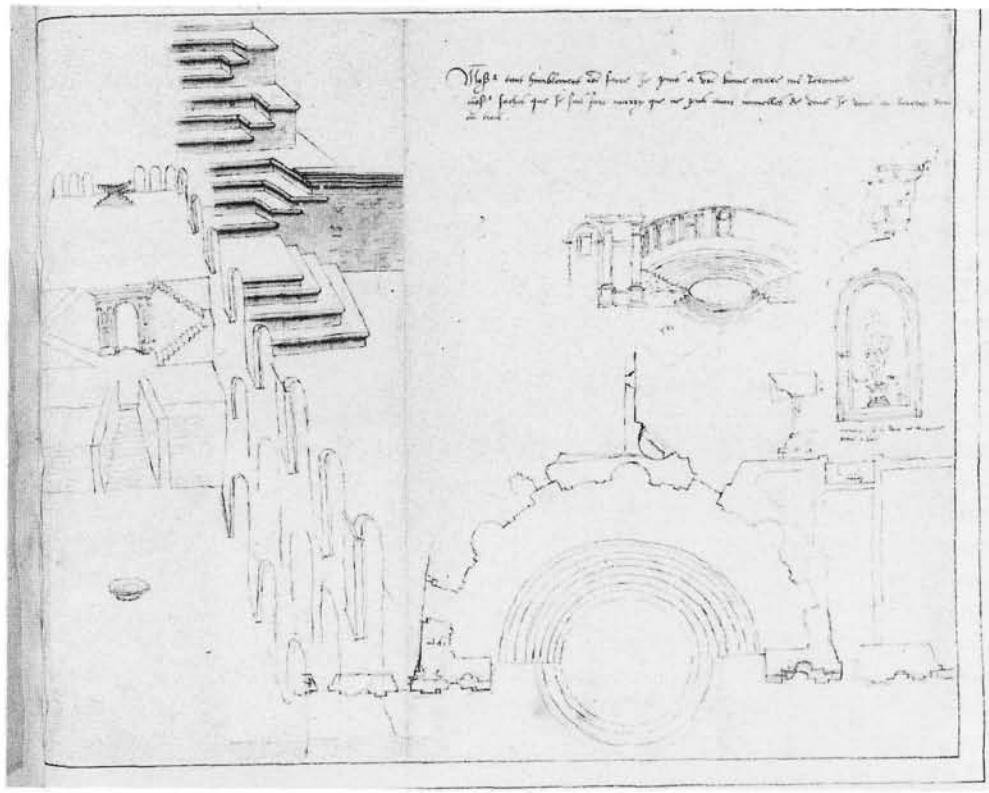

Fig. 9 French anonymous, view of the Belvedere Cortile (photo: The Royal Collection © 1998, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

The preceding examination of the chronology of the staircase, as well as the refutation of several of Wittkower's key points, has been necessary in order to establish the date by which the final design of the central stair came to be articulated. All indications suggest that the voluted steps were not planned until 1559, the point at which Ammannati was put in charge of the enterprise by Duke Cosimo I. Moreover, Cosimo's decision to assign the Laurentian project to Ammannati had a much greater significance than has been previously recognized. For it was Ammannati who brought to the staircase undertaking an acquired knowledge of Renaissance garden designs, expressly derived from projects having to do with the formal and thematic implications of water. This experience bears directly on his interpretation of the novel staircase in Michelangelo's vestibule.

Scholars discussing the Laurentian staircase have often pointed to its strong resemblance to flowing water. This analogy is especially apparent in a general view of the central stair, the curvatures at each side of the central section suggesting eddies, which form when water flows down an inclined plane (Fig. 10). It has been noted that the "steps appear to be pouring downward," and that the "viscous curves...pour downwards from the reading room to the floor."[29] John Templer makes a more explicit comparison to water, remarking that,

> ...the steps of the stair appear to flow out of the doorway to the upper level as if the whole stair is a stream....The flow of the steps is broken into three cascades by landings that form pools, and the extremities of the steps form volutes as if these are eddies in the current. The marble stair fountain then floats in a clay tile floor as if in a pool bridged by the top flight.[30]

He further observes that the volutes "are a decorative artifice that strengthens the visual comparisons of the stair to a motionless waterfall."[31] In effect, this produces what might be seen as a "water staircase," a novelty of design which was, in fact, contemporaneous with the development of the *catena d'acqua* (water chain) in Renaissance gardens of the mid-sixteenth century.

Two examples of such garden staircases are those at the Villa Lante at Bagnaia (Fig. 11) and the Villa Farnese at Caprarola (Fig. 12). In both cases, central water channels comprised of curvilinear forms flowing downward are flanked by a series of rectangular steps. The general schemes of these water stairways and the Laurentian Library staircase share similarities in their conception and design, a resemblance that surely is not coincidental. As John Shearman has observed, the development of the architectural staircase as "the most striking feature of a building," was closely related to "parallel experiments in garden architecture."[32] The question then to be asked is how and why is this relationship demonstrated by the staircase in the Laurentian Library? An examination of garden design in the mid-sixteenth century, beginning with the water chains at Bagnaia and Caprarola, may help to provide an answer.

Due to a paucity of documentary evidence, scholarship on the history and design of the water staircases at Bagnaia and Caprarola has remained speculative.[33] The water staircase at Bagnaia is generally dated to 1568, when it was constructed for Cardinal Gian Francesco Gambara shortly after he acquired the property in 1566.[34] The Bagnaia water chain is thought to have served as the model for that at Caprarola, which was built almost twenty years later for Gambara's relative and close companion, Cardinal

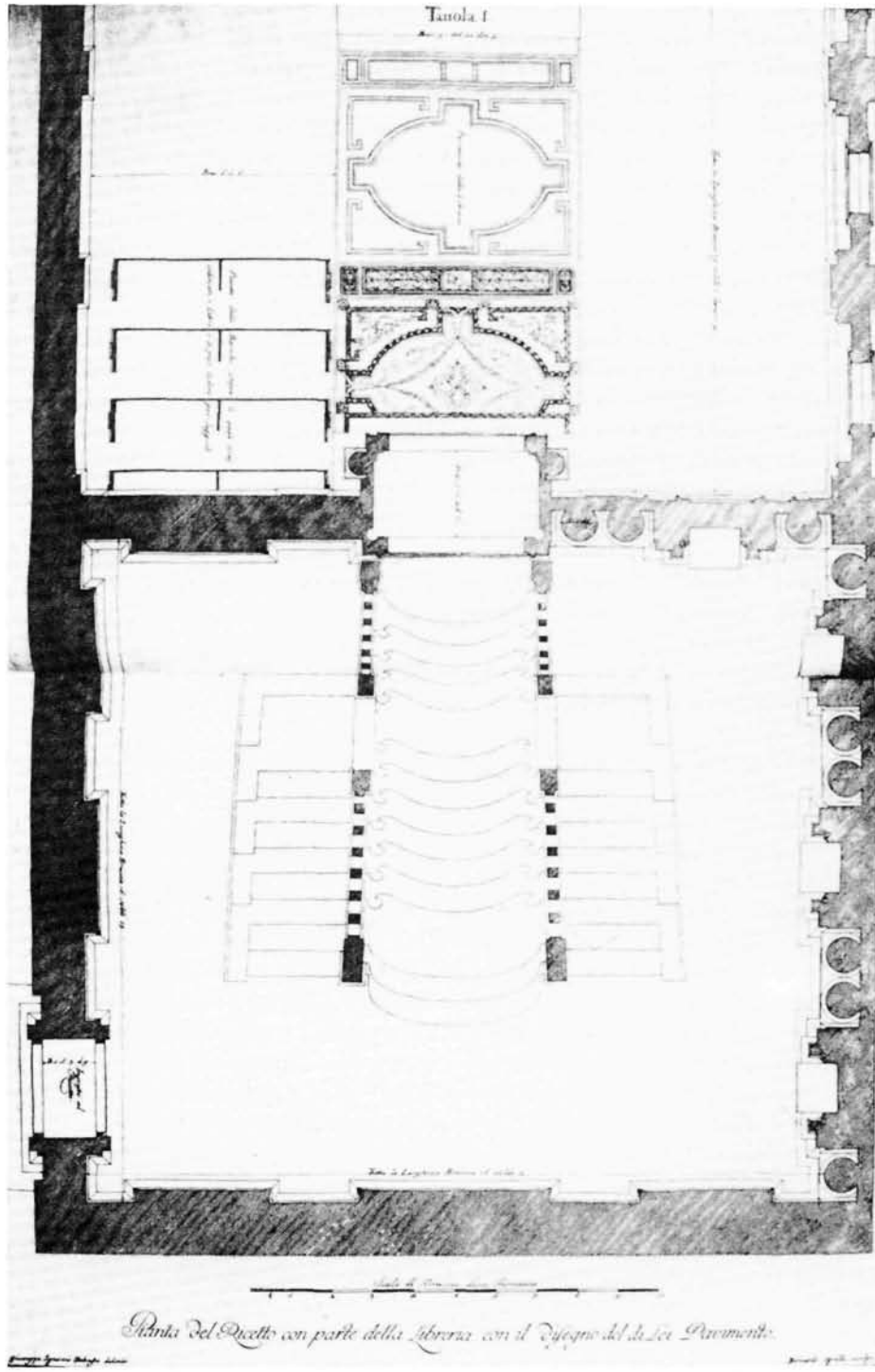

Fig. 10 Plan of the vestibule and staircase of the Library. From G. I. Rossi's *La Libreria Mediceo Laurenziana*, 1739, with permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University

Alessandro Farnese.[35] Although this traditional dating would seem immediately to rule out any question of influence on the Laurentian steps, the matter may not be resolved so easily. Based on stylistic affinities, scholars generally have credited Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola with the design of the water staircase at Bagnaia.[36] What is significant to note here is the fact that there is a strong possibility that he actually may have designed the water staircase well *before* its construction date in the 1560s. This suggestion has significant implications because Vignola had established a strong professional relationship with Ammannati in the early 1550s, and may have eventually come to share his ideas of plans for a water staircase with him, in the critical years preceding Ammannati's work in the Laurentian.

Between 1551 and 1555, Vignola was engaged as a hydraulics specialist at the Villa Giulia in Rome, part of a grand collaborative effort commissioned by Pope Julius III.[37] Vignola joined ranks with Vasari, Michelangelo, as the project overseer, and Ammannati, who was hired in 1552 to design several structures that were to incorporate water channeled from the Roman aqueduct nearby. The pope's secretary at the time was none other than Gian Francesco Gambara, who would later become cardinal and owner of the property at Bagnaia. It was perhaps during this period that Gambara first had the occasion to visit Bagnaia, which had recently come into the possession of the pope's brother, Count Balduino Del Monte.[38] Gambara may have met Vignola at this point, and conceived the idea of constructing a villa and garden that would "equal or surpass" that of Pope Julius at the Villa Giulia. Vignola may have spent the next several years formulating garden plans in anticipation of the eventual Bagnaia commission, and a water staircase might well have entered into these plans.

There is another indication to suggest that Vignola may have designed the water staircase during the 1550s. After his work at the Villa Giulia ended in 1555, Vignola remained actively involved in the planning of grand garden complexes. In 1557 he was at Caprarola, where the construction of several gardens based on his designs had begun.[39] It may have been sometime during this period that he first gained access to a descriptive report that undoubtedly influenced his conception for a water staircase at Bagnaia.

In 1556, an account was published which told of a fourteenth-century garden at Granada in Spain. Andrea Navagero, a Venetian envoy to the court of Emperor Charles V, wrote extensively of his travels in 1526, including a description of a garden staircase that was part of the palace complex at Generalife:

> On the upper part of these places, and in a garden, there is a wide staircase, leading to a flat elevation so skillfully carved, that the steps are hollowed in order to admit water, and the balustrades flanking it at both sides bear a channel on top, and since above there are taps to let out water, either the one letting it fall over the steps or the one letting it flow down the balustrade, canals can be opened at will, or even all of them at the same time, thus increasing the rush of water in such a way that the stairway is entirely flooded, and those going up it get wet, thus providing sport for fun and joking.[40]

This passage proved to be exceedingly influential for the development of the water staircase in Renaissance gardens, which similarly paired the flow of water with steps.[41] Moreover, it may ultimately account for the grand scheme of Vignola's water staircase

Fig. 11 Water staircase, Villa Lante, Bagnaia. From Claudio Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, with permission

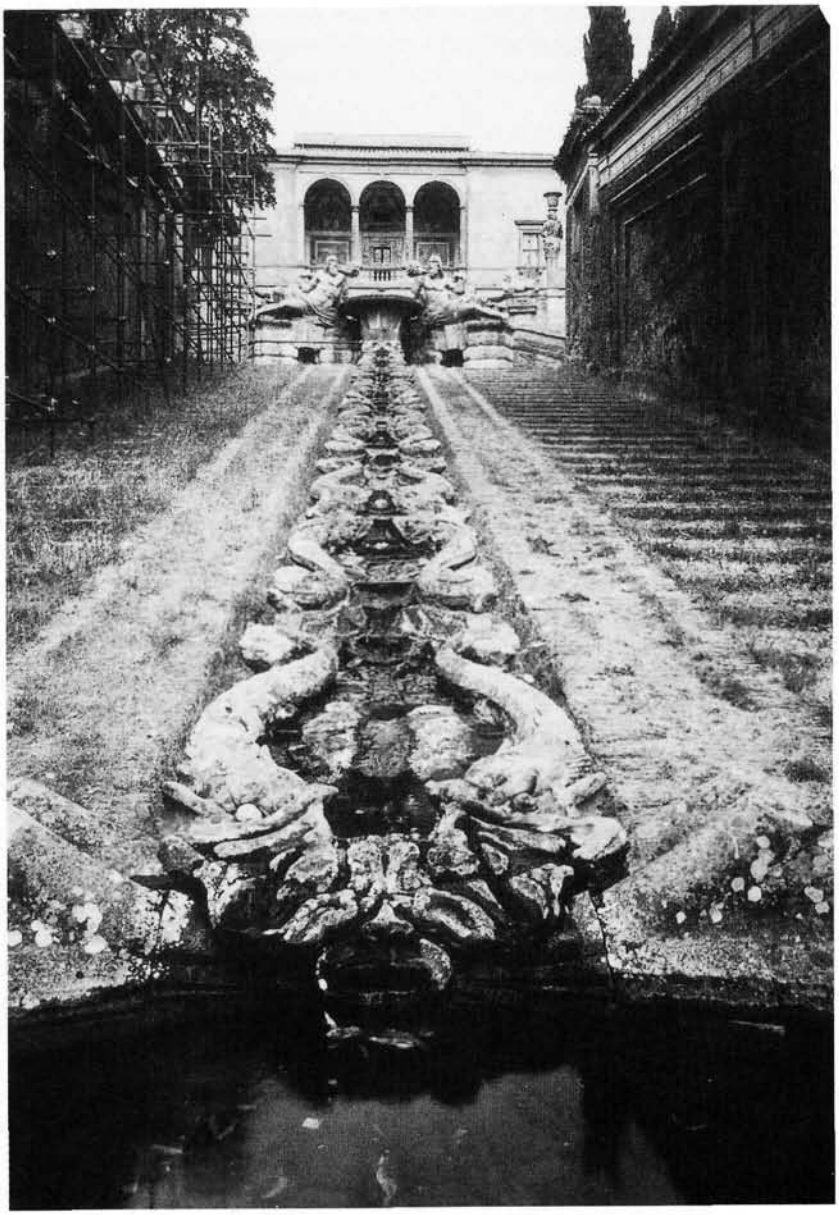

Fig. 12 Water staircase, Villa Farnese, Caprarola. From Claudio Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, with permission

at Bagnaia (and so ultimately for that at Caprarola). The date of the Navagero account should also be seen as significant since it precedes Ammannati's staircase by three years. Taken all together, this suggests that Vignola designed his Bagnaia water chain after 1556, and that it served to inspire Ammannati's rendering of the staircase in the Laurentian Library in 1559.

Admittedly, without the confirmation provided by period documents, the preceeding scenario can only remain speculative. However, the stylistic similarities between the staircases by Vignola and Ammannati are too striking to be discounted, especially given the confluence of events that occurred in the period leading up to the Laurentian project. Moreover, Vignola is known to have exerted an important influence on Ammannati's work during their time together on the Villa Giulia project—traces of which would appear in Ammannati's architecture years later.[42] While their professional affiliation officially ended with the Villa Giulia project, Ammannati undoubtedly maintained a life-long interest in his mentor's work. In 1576, he was invited by Cardinal Farnese to Caprarola to survey the project there and to submit his opinion of Vignola's efforts, which he praised highly.[43]

While Vignola's water staircase design may have provided Ammannati with a formal prototype for the Laurentian staircase, there were other models which paired water with stairs which also may have inspired Ammannati's novel solution to the Laurentian vestibule. Throughout the region of Latium, there were a number of architectonic water cascades associated with Roman ruins.[44] Sometimes these were monumental constructions, such as the so-called *Auditorio di Mecenate* in Rome, where the stairway was configured as a huge semicircle with holes in the upper steps through which water ran down. A period engraving shows that this structure was similar in appearance to the exedra at the Belvedere Cortile, illustrated in the mid-sixteenth century by Sebastiano Serlio (Fig. 13).[45] Other smaller cascades were placed in more intimate settings, with water steps set within niches located in the gardens and peristyles of private houses (Fig. 14). In the via S. Basilio in Rome, for example, a domestic dwelling featured a water staircase constructed of simple slabs of marble with superficial engraving to represent steps, which, if known, may have had special significance in terms of the way the Laurentian steps were carved.[46] In Albano, about 30 kilometers south of Rome, a water staircase was accessible to Renaissance artists, who might have become aware of it by visiting the location firsthand, or through a circulated drawing (now in the *Codex Destialleur*). Vignola and Ammannati may have even explored this site together during their work on the Villa Giulia. The Albano water steps probably provided Vignola with a prototype for the two small water stairways that were part of a garden he purportedly designed for Pope Julius' brother at a neighboring villa, and Ammannati used water channels like those found at Albano in his work at the Villa Giulia.[47] Apart from offering another model which combined water and stairs, the Albano water staircase was especially influential for Ammannati because of its association with the ancient nymphaeum.

The nymphaeum was essentially a vaulted fountain house, often erected at the source of a spring. During the Renaissance it retained its Greek connotation of serving as a sanctuary or temple of the nymphs. Particularly prominent during the first century A.D., nymphaea generally followed two principal lines of development: that of an enclosed architectural space which contained fountain niches and often water stairs, and an architectural facade.[48] Of the latter, the Septizodium near the Palatine in Rome

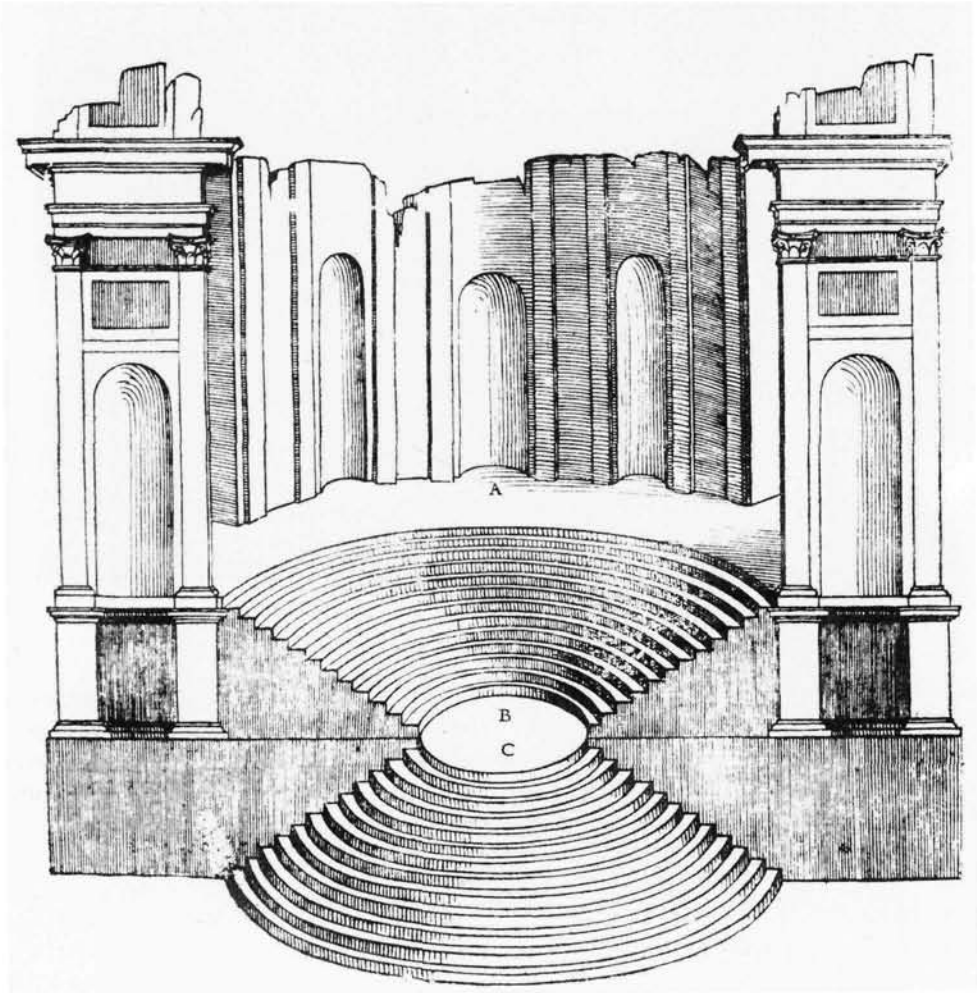

Fig. 13 Sebastiano Serlio, Exedra of the Belvedere Cortile. From *The Five Books of Architecture*, with permission of Dover Publications, Inc., New York

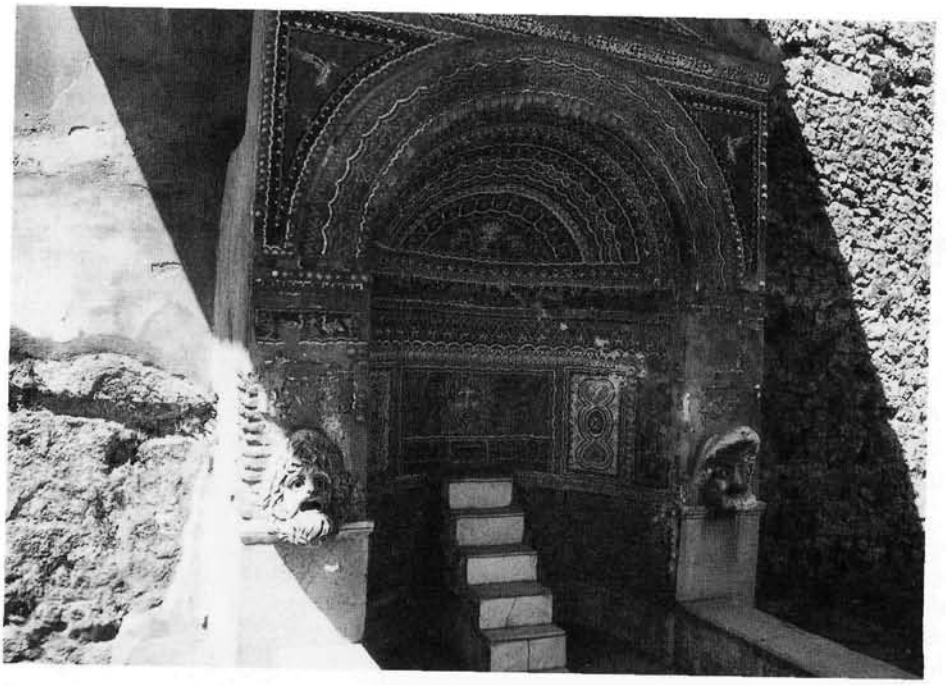

Fig. 14 Water Cascade, Pompeii (photo: Author)

was still visible during the Renaissance (Fig. 15). Thought to be part of the imperial palace of Septimius Severus, it was studied extensively and widely copied by architects in the early sixteenth century.[49] Another facade was the Temple of Marius, a *mostra d'acqua*, or terminus for aqueducts carrying water to Rome, "which served to remind the populace to whom they should feel grateful for the water."[50]

Renaissance humanists and architects adopted this antique form with enthusiasm. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, so many nymphaea were constructed in Rome, Jacopo Sansovino was inspired to refer to them as *"fontane alla Roma."*[51] One of the earliest of these recreated nymphaea was a fountain niche and grotto constructed by Giovanni da Udine between 1519-23 for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici at the Villa Madama in Rome.[52] In 1523, Giulio Romano painted an imaginary nymphaeum on the window embrasures of the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican, which depicted a fountain in the center of a convex/concave stair configuration (Fig. 16). Romano's depiction of the staircase was based on Bramante's exedra in the upper level of the Belvedere Cortile (Fig. 13),[53] itself converted into a nymphaeum with the addition of a fountain in a 1550-53 project for Pope Julius III.[54] This conversion is particularly noteworthy as it shows the importance of fountains and stairs in the conceptual recreation of nymphaea, ideas which gained prominence with the development of grand garden complexes in the mid-sixteenth century.

At the Villa Giulia, Ammannati created a "classical nymphaeum *par excellence*" for Pope Julius in 1552.[55] There, a complex system of interior and exterior staircases connected three different levels, and led to what has been called "the primordial

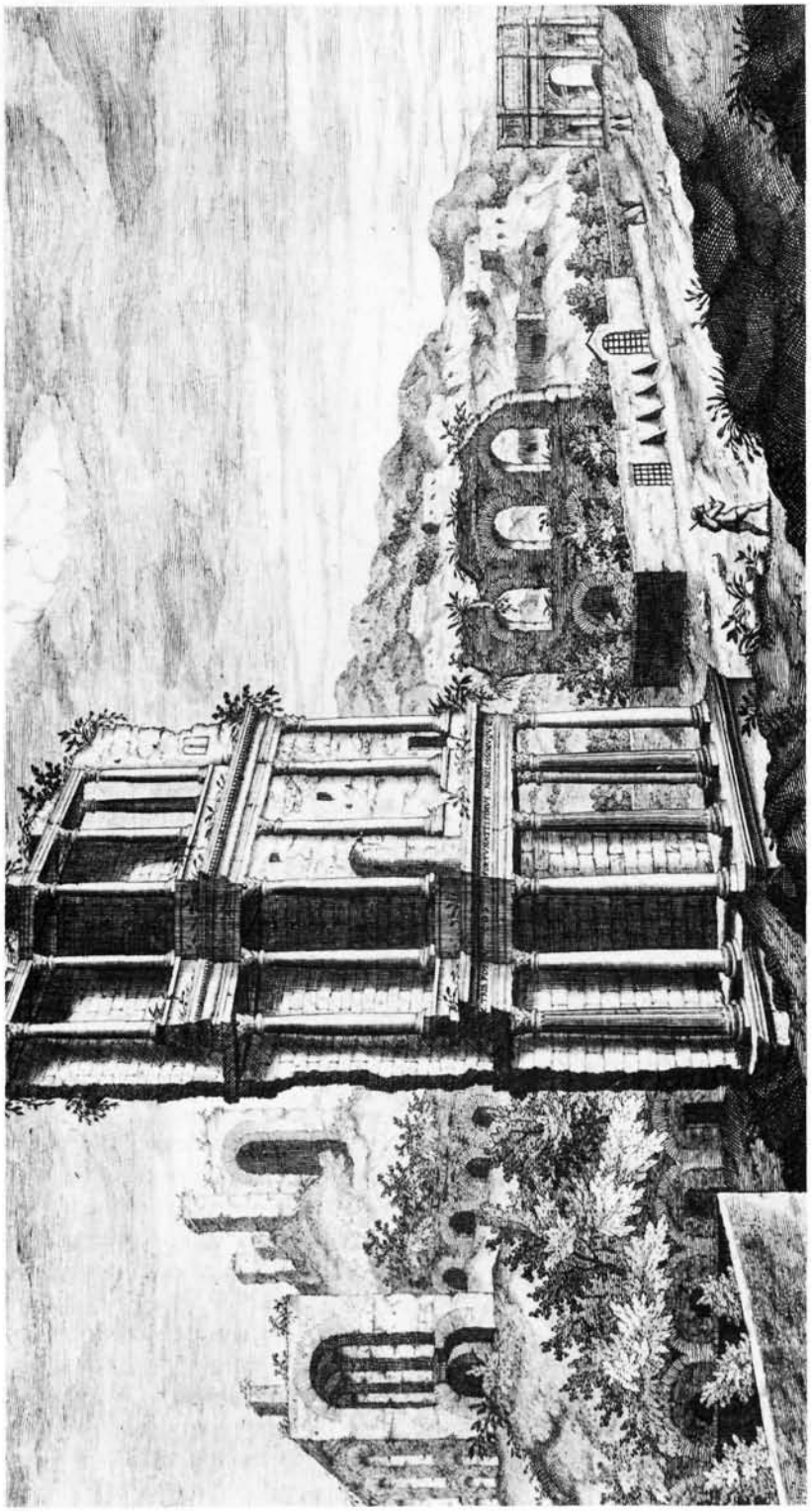

Fig. 15 Aegidius Sadeler, *Septizodium*, engraving, with permission of the Garden Library, Dumbarton Oaks

gushing forth of the 'water'...the perspectival 'fire' [the focus of the entire composition]."[56] This perspectival effect was suggested by Ammannati himself:

> ...in the background, one can see the height of beauty of this entire structure, both in terms of the quantity of marbles and ancient statues, and in the beautiful *Aqua Virgo*...as this is the primary site, and from here one can see everything; and one can fairly say that this is the point of the perspective.[57]

Fig. 16 Giulio Romano, imaginary nymphaeum, Sala di Costantino, Vatican (photo: Author)

This passage is particularly relevant as it has implications for how Ammannati executed the central section of the Laurentian staircase less than five years later.

A detailed analysis of the staircase elements in the Laurentian vestibule has shown that Ammannati modified the proportions of the balustrade handrail, the moldings on the pilasters, the diameter of the balusters, and the volutes of the central steps.[58] In interpreting Michelangelo's written instructions on the diminishing scale of the oval steps (in order to minimize the enormity of the stair's proportion to the vestibule space), Ammannati essentially created a powerful scenographic effect, just as he had at the Villa Giulia. Once again, the source of this perspectival focus hinges on the element of water. If Ammannati visualized the central stair of the Laurentian as water coming down into the vestibule, might he also have conceived the vestibule space as a sort of nymphaeum?

A look back at Giulio Romano's imaginary nymphaeum in the Vatican may help to answer this question (Fig. 16). Flanking the circular steps are pedestals for statuary which bear a strong resemblance to the newel posts Ammannati used to offset the three oval steps at the base of the stair in the executed Laurentian Library staircase (see Fig. 1). Moreover, in its exterior surface treatment Ammannati may well have interpreted the staircase wall of the vestibule as a nymphaeum facade, much like the Septizodium (which earlier in the century was thought to be part of a vestibule).[59] With the addition of stairs, the vestibule wall essentially becomes a kind of fountain niche (such as that depicted in Fig. 14).

There are other indications which suggest that Ammannati may have read the vestibule as an appropriate space for his water staircase. While one of the most salient features of the nymphaeum was its association with water, it was the relationship to the grotto, the source of this water, which defined the character of many nymphaea throughout the cinquecento. The fashion for grottoes appears to have reached Rome

from Naples at the beginning of the sixteenth century, spreading rapidly and becoming especially popular during the years 1543 to 1563.[60] Primarily, these grottoes were rustic creations, evoking actual caves. However, grottoes could also be suggested by the presence of a niche.[61] By mid-century, the grotto was sometimes subsumed into the ancient chamber nymphaeum, which was, in actuality, an artificial grotto.[62] Ammannati may well have conceived of his water staircase as an appropriate complement to Michelangelo's vestibule, by interpreting the entire vestibule space as a sort of grotto.

Whether Michelangelo himself meant for the vestibule to be read in this way is open to conjecture. However, his sensitivity with regard to issues of lighting may serve as some indication of his intent. Originally, the plans for the vestibule called for it to be lit from above, by a series of *lume per di sopra* or skylights.[63] Such an architectural device would have echoed the effect of subdued lighting associated with the "grottoes" of the Domus Aurea and Hadrian's Villa, from which the idea may possibly have been derived.[64] Similar lighting effects were produced in Michelangelo's New Sacristy, which has been likened to both a crypt and a grotto.[65] The skylights in the library vestibule were never executed, and it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the windows, which now function as the principle natural light source in the vestibule, were added. In the intervening years, the vestibule depended on the reading room beyond the staircase, the small door on the side wall, or lamps (which may have been positioned in niches along the bottom walls), for its lighting.[66] The primary effect must have been crypt-like and similar to the New Sacristy; the grotto association of the vestibule being further suggested by the undressed walls of the third tier, their rustic surfaces simulating cavernous regions (Fig. 17). Moreover, rough-hewn stones remained on the floor of the vestibule throughout the sixteenth century, a circumstance which would have reinforced associations with a grotto.[67]

The relationship between darkness and the grotto was undoubtedly enhanced by Michelangelo's addition of twenty-four bat heads onto the capitals of the vestibule columns, an element that may be particularly significant for its symbolic implications.[68] As natural denizens of caves, bats were used by Renaissance artists to convey moods and ideas connected with caves and darkness. One of Michelangelo's peers, Giuliano Bugiardini, played on this association when he "added bats and other things suggestive of darkness" to accompany a picture he drew of Michelangelo's *Night* in the New Sacristy.[69] In a letter of 1551, Annibale Caro, a humanist advisor on decorative schemes, recommended adding bats to the grotto in the nymphaeum at the Villa Giulia.[70] Ammannati could scarcely have failed to remember this suggestion years later when he set to work in the Laurentian vestibule, under the watchful eyes of Michelangelo's nocturnal sentries.

For Ammannati to read Michelangelo's vestibule as a grotto, and to subsequently design a stairway suggesting flowing water, would have been a witty and appropriate response to the space. Such an interpretation of the vestibule would have effectively played off the grotto's traditional function as a source of water, although in this instance, the water flows down *into* the grotto, rather than *from* it. Similar conceits were often at work in the recreation of artificial grottoes in the Renaissance: "The presence of water—actual or implied—[was] the *sine qua non* of the garden grotto."[71] Moreover, this play with water is significant. Not only had Ammannati been involved intimately in several garden projects in the years preceding his work on the Laurentian staircase,

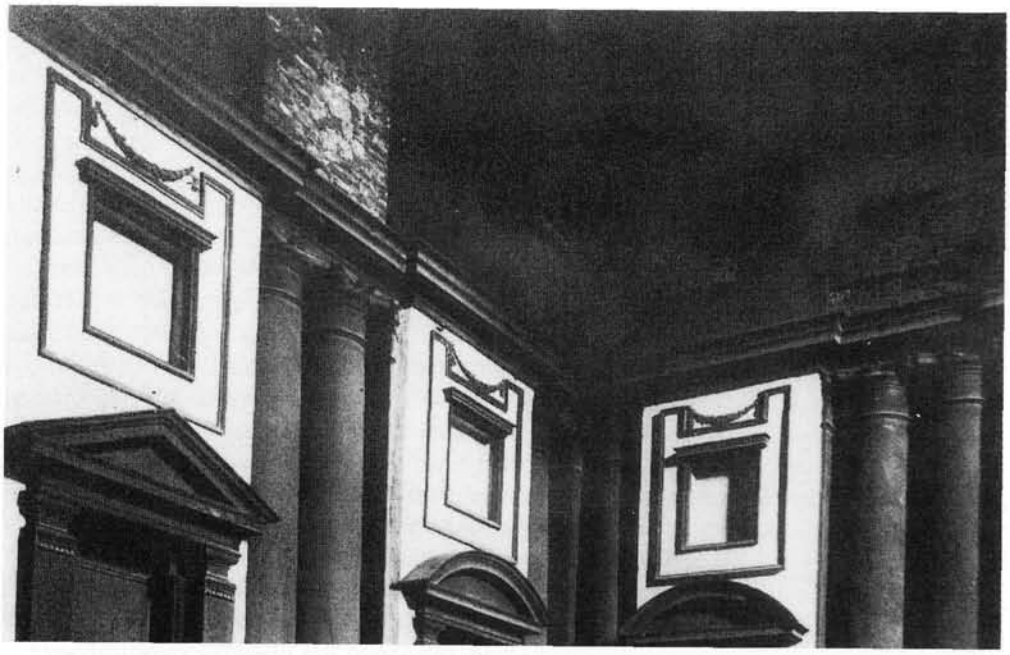

Fig. 17 Northwest corner of the vestibule before completion. From Rudolph Wittkower, *Idea and Image*, with permission

but many of his projects had involved, either directly or indirectly, an association with water.

In 1545, Ammannati created a grotto/nymphaeum/fountain structure in the Palazzo Gualdo in Vicenza, followed by his *grotte* and nymphaea for the Villa Giulia project in 1553.[72] In 1555, he was commissioned by Duke Cosimo I to build an elaborate wall fountain for the recently restored Sala dei Cinquecento of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. Two other fountain projects for Cosimo followed: the fountain of Hercules to complement the allegorical water scheme at the garden of Castello (1559), and a fountain of Neptune (begun 1560) which was installed in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Significantly, this latter fountain incorporated the conceit of flooding as an integral part of its design.[73] Ammannati's fountain projects for Cosimo have special relevance, as they help put into context the impetus for his novel design for the Laurentian staircase, a design which ultimately might have been meant to complement the duke's political and dynastic ambitions.

All three of Ammannati's projects for Cosimo served as reminders for what the Medici Duke considered to be one of the most important achievements of his reign, the construction of aqueducts which brought water to Florence. Water was still relatively scarce in Italy at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and as a valuable resource, its symbolic properties were often exploited in the allegorical programs of garden plans. Decorations constructed especially for the worship and display of water—grottoes, fountains, nymphaea, and the like—served as the most important features of these garden designs. They connoted the elevated status of the patron who could afford to surround himself with this precious commodity, and at the same time

offered a source of amusement for sixteenth-century Florentines who "were fascinated by the properties of water."[74] Cosimo's desire to infuse his surroundings with water was thus seen to be a measure of his gracious and benevolent rule, and an eloquent statement of his artistic patronage. In these commissions devoted to water Cosimo also paid homage to his Medicean ancestor, Pope Clement VII, "whose fondness for fountains and waterworks was almost proverbial in his day."[75]

Aqueducts and grand fountains became important features in the development of Cosimo's official propaganda. After assuming power in 1537, Cosimo began to transform the grounds at Castello into a lavish garden with fountains supplied by aqueducts, taking full advantage of the villa's proximity to nearby springs and the site of an ancient Roman *castellum*, or reservoir. The allegorical program of the garden celebrated the waters of Florence and Tuscany for bringing fertility, harmony, and virtue to the region, just as Cosimo himself had done.[76] An aqueduct constructed by Cosimo in 1555 brought fresh water from a spring in the hills near the Pitti Palace to the grottoes and fountains of the Boboli garden complex. From there, the water traveled across the Arno to fountains throughout Florence, where it supplied the general populace with fresh spring water "originating, symbolically, if not actually, from [Cosimo's] garden on the hillside overlooking the city."[77] This same aqueduct also supplied Ammannati's fountain in the Palazzo Vecchio. Embued with a sophisticated allegorical and propagandistic message, the placement of this aqueduct-fed fountain in a grand reception hall, which paid homage to Medici greatness, was meant to emphasize the importance of water to Cosimo's princely and political intentions.[78] This aqueduct further supplied the Neptune fountain directly outside the Piazza della Signoria, which had always been the historic center of Florentine civic life. The fountain thus served as "an ideal symbol of Good Government"—a veritable *mostra d'acqua* — which once again reflected greatly upon Cosimo as the princely provider.[79]

The importance of water to Cosimo's propagandistic interests was made explicit in these politically-charged venues chosen to maximize his message. In the Laurentian vestibule, a similar declaration, symbolized by the staircase which evokes the flow of water, would serve as a thematic and contemporaneous counterpart. This water metaphor was also an appropriate and symbolic reference to Cosimo himself, especially in that through it, he was able to place his stamp upon a project begun by his Medici ancestors. Indeed, upon bringing the library project to completion, Cosimo had his own *imprese* inserted among those of Clement VII in the windows of the reading room.[80] Moreover, reading the bat-filled vestibule as a grotto would appropriately refer to Cosimo yet again, in that the grotto was used as a "metaphor of the cosmos," the association reinforced by the obvious reference to water as a generative element of the cosmos.[81] Such recondite symbolism would have played well into Cosimian iconography, which built on the linguistic similarity between "Cosimo" and "cosmos."[82]

There are other connotations for Ammannati's water staircase, however, which again find a common thread in garden iconography. As at the Medici palace at Castello, Renaissance garden schemes were often based upon sophisticated allegorical programs incorporating established themes from literary topoi, many of which had their origins in antiquity. In the sixteenth century, one of the most culturally pervasive of these topoi, and one which was intimately linked to the garden structures of the nymphaeum, the fountain, and the grotto, had to do with the theme of the nymphs and muses.[83] As the mythological sanctuary of the nymphs (from which its name derives),

the nymphaeum historically had been conflated with the grotto. Both were associated with water/springs, since nymphs were "tutelary divinities of the sources," and sources originated in grottoes.[84] In a further conflation, nymphs were equated with muses, benefactors of all knowledge, and their sanctuaries, musaea, became regarded as "sources of poetry and humanistic education."[85]

In paying homage to these themes, Renaissance artists and their patrons took further delight by playing on these manipulations of the mythical tradition. Inspired by ancient accounts, they advanced the convention which interpreted the nymphaeum/grotto not only as a place sacred to the nymphs and muses, but also as a site intended for intellectual pursuit.[86] In turn, fountains, as symbolic evocations of the source/spring over which the nymphs and muses presided, came to assume an added importance, frequently endowed with esoteric iconographical programs which were meant to stimulate intellectual activity.[87] Ammannati's fountain complex at the Villa Gualdo in Vincenza, for example, was "dedicated to genius, the *Lymphae*, and to the *Camoenae*"—"genius" serving as a reference to the spirit of poetic inspiration, *lymphae* being classical water nymphs, and *camoenae* identified with the muses.[88] While in this case the water flowing throughout the complex alluded to the presence of the nymphs/muses, sometimes the evocation of the nymphs in fountain design took a more literal form. The image of the "Sleeping Nymph," which was accorded cult status in the sixteenth century, was reconfigured in numerous fountain structures and served to signal the presence of the muses, who "presided over newly reborn academies of learning."[89] At the court of Pope Leo X, two of his humanist advisors had gardens equipped with sleeping nymph fountains, and it was there that they assembled friends for "discussions, poetry reading, Greek lessons and other humanist activities."[90]

Cosimo, like his contemporaries, was well aware of the potency of such symbolism in reflecting the sophistication of his artistic patronage and his reign, as well as in supplying nuances of meaning that coincided with his own propagandistic initiatives. At their most basic level of meaning, any forms or allegorical programs which referred to the muses would also invoke the myth of the Golden Age, a recurring theme in Medicean programmatic expressions.[91] The iconographical program for the newly restored Palazzo Vecchio, where the entire decorative system was developed around the celebration of Medicean ancestors, included in Cosimo's secret study a room devoted to one of the muses.[92] The allusion to the muses here has further symbolic significance, since muses also were associated with memory. Their presence in the decorative program acted as a useful mnemonic device to remind visitors of the contributions of Cosimo's famous predecessors.[93] In Ammannati's fountain for the Sala dei Cinquecento, figures of the river god Arno and the Spring of Parnassus alluded to Florence as the home of the muses. Thus, the fountain itself was transformed into an allegory of the city, whose intellectual and artistic excellence was owed to Cosimo's rule as an enlightened patron.[94]

The Laurentian Library was the first secular library of the Renaissance. What better way to pay homage to Cosimo's contribution to Florentine intellectual life than by evoking here the springs of the muses? In its allusion to water (the staircase), juxtaposed with the nymphaeum/grotto (vestibule), the Laurentian Library similarly serves as a sanctuary of the muses. In its liquid metaphor, the staircase becomes a literal and figurative "source," leading beyond the vestibule to the locus of divine wisdom discovered in the reading room above. This architectural allusion to the nymphs/

muses appropriately recalls the ancient connection between books and muses, who are the "*protectrices et inspiratrices*" of the Arts and Sciences—an alliance which was realized in several other Renaissance libraries depicting muses in their decorative programs.[95] Moreover, this relationship between muses and the concept of learning ultimately led to an architectural parallel which bore "on the proximity of libraries and grottoes."[96]

This connection can be traced to antique tradition, which conceived both the library and grotto not only as settings for learned discourse and study, but also as sites given to pleasurable distractions, according to the ancient formula of *studium e otium*—study and leisure.[97] In the sixteenth century, this conceit was manifested in the humanistic *topos* of "*biblioteca sive musaeum*" ("library or museum"), the term given by Pietro Bembo's contemporaries to his library in Padua. There, *objets d'art* were included among the literary holdings, thus offering the visitor opportunity to pursue both intellectual and leisurely entertainments.[98] This conceptual framework is apparent in the Laurentian Library: while the books are there for learning and study, the visitor may simultaneously derive sensory enjoyment from Michelangelo's inventive architecture and Ammannati's fanciful staircase. Libraries, like grottoes and nymphaea, were similarly perceived as places of spiritual retreat. In the sixteenth century, the architect and antiquarian Pirro Ligorio pronounced that grottoes,

> ...were all places where one could perceive the morality of the liberal arts, delectation, the acuteness of the mind, the perspicacity in seeing things that illuminate the intellect and make it learned and guide it by the spiritual way.[99]

Ligorio's ideas on the mystical nature of the cavernous setting could well have been conceived with the library in mind.

Ligorio's musings have been related to Plato's allegory of the cave, a well-known *topos* in the Renaissance, and one which responded to the symbolic evocations of recreated grottoes.[100] According to Platonic thought, a distinction is made between the senses and intelligence, whereby "those with intelligence search for the light; the senses are comparable to the shadows that project in the rear of the caverne; one [then] mounts the steps of intelligent thinking."[101] Translated to the Laurentian vestibule, the visitor emerges from the dark and shadowy recesses of the bat-filled "grotto" to climb stairs that will lead toward enlightenment, both literally and figuratively.[102] While such esoteric symbolism would have resonated with Cosimo's own hermetic interests, this reading was also consistent with the humanism of his Medicean forebears. Lorenzo de' Medici's villa at Poggio a Caiano was outfitted with a portico frieze which depicted a progression "from the dark Caverne of Eternity...to the radiant sunrise of the dawning day," and has been interpreted as having similar Neoplatonic implications.[103] In 1518, the first published edition of Porphyry's *De antro nymphaeum* was dedicated to Leo X. Originally written in the third century, Porphyry's tract was a symbolic interpretation of the grotto directly based on Plato's ideas, consecrating man-made caves to the cosmos and the nymphs.[104]

A Platonic reading of the Laurentian vestibule focuses specifically on the role of the steps, as symbolic allusions to the ascent to a higher plane. However, it is also relevant to readdress the role of water in this exegesis. As a primary element in the sustenance of life, water also served for the ancients as a metaphor for the source of intellectual and mystical thinking.[105] In the Renaissance, similar associations with water were mani-

fested in sixteenth-century gardens, where fountains were "conceived as stations en route to illumination, often connected by lines of water that mapped the progress of the visitor along a strictly predetermined and allegorically saturated path"[106] Such symbolism was greatly enhanced when water was combined with steps, as in the gardens at Caprarola and Bagnaia, where "the downward flow of water encourages climbing up to find its source."[107] A similar effect is generated by the design of the staircase in the Laurentian Library, in which the "visitor seeks to mount toward the goal" presented by the downward flow of the central steps.[108] This natural psychological response is in perfect accord with the stair's symbolic implications.

It has been observed that it was Bernini who "gave the first impulse to the petrification of water falls" in his development of grand stairways.[109] However, the seeds for this original conception seem to have been initially planted by Ammannati. The fact that the Laurentian staircase's final design was formulated during the same period that garden programs were being developed, and for a patron whose political and artistic propaganda was strongly tied to the celebration of water, further indicates the importance the garden theme played in the elaboration of Ammannati's idea. The conflations of architectural form and the potential for symbolic readings which inspired the Laurentian scheme thus find perfect resonance in the grotto,

> a place of repose and reunion, or of solitude, seclusion, and shade; a site of assemblages for learned discourse; a museum...; a sanctuary of muses and an abode of nymphs; a locus of enlightenment and poetic inspiration; a harbor for springs and fountains....[110]

In its rippling downward passage, Ammannati's "source" becomes one with the vestibule grotto, offering an eternal haven for the muses that inspired Michelangelo's artistic soul.

University of Virginia

1. I am deeply indebted to the following individuals for their help in securing permission for the illustrations that appear with this article: Mr. Ralph Lieberman of Watertown, Massachusetts; Ms. Linda O'Brien in Florence; Ms. Naomi Pritchard of Thames & Hudson Publishers in London; and Mr. John Witt of Bristol, England.

2. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, trans. George Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), 366-67.

3. James Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 43. According to Rudolf Wittkower, the free-standing staircase was unknown before Michelangelo's Laurentian project. See Wittkower, "Michelangelo's Biblioteca Laurenziana," in *Idea and Image, Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 60.

4. Vasari, *Lives*, 366-67.

5. An earlier sketch for the staircase, given to Clement VII in April 1524, displays none of the novelties of structure that the later series of designs demonstrates. In the former, Michelangelo essentially duplicates the traditional stairway for the east end of a church, with "twin stairways placed left and right against the walls leading to a raised choir, and embracing the entrance to a crypt." Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 27.

6. One of the few to make more than passing mention of Ammannati's role in this matter is Filippo Camerota. See Camerota, "Ammannati e la Prospettiva Architettonica," in *Bartolomeo Ammannati, Scultore e Architetto, 1511-1592*, ed. Niccolo Rosselli Del Turco and Federica Salvi (Firenze: Alinea, 1995), 242-53. Curiously, the assessment of the eighteenth-century architect Giuseppe Ignazio Rossi is rarely brought into discussion. Writing less than two hundred years after the staircase was completed, Rossi

observed that the staircase, although grand and beautiful, was known to have not been the work of Michelangelo. See Rossi, *La Libreria Mediceo Laurenziana* (Florence, 1739).

7. Clement VII's wishes were made known in a letter written by Giovan Francesco Fattucci, the *provveditore* (purveyor of the works) at San Lorenzo, to Michelangelo in April 1525. See Karl Frey, *Sammlung Ausgewählter Briefe an Michelangiolo* (Berlin, 1899), 250.

8. Lise Bek, "The Staircase and the Code of Conduct," in *L'Escalier dans l'architecture de la Renaissance. Actes du colloque tenu à Tours 22 au 26 mai 1979*, publication of Centres d'études superieures de la Renaissance (Paris: Picard, 1985), 118. Bek comments upon the ceremonial role of the staircase in the fifteenth century, whereby a magnificent staircase leading to a small entrance door "underline[d] the elevation of the audience hall and the elevated position of the ruler."

9. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, et al. (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1994), 31.

10. In his early architectural works, Michelangelo borrowed liberally from his fellow artists/architects. For example, the paired inset columns of the Laurentian vestibule was a device which first appeared in a Leonardo da Vinci sketch, as did the motif of the consoles hanging from the window frame in the reading room. See, respectively, Peter M. Wolf, "Michelangelo's Laurenziana and Inconspicuous Traditions," *Marsyas* 2 (1964): 17, and Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 217.

11. This connection between Michelangelo's Laurentian sketch and the Sangallo drawing is discussed in Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 42.

12. This staircase, now destroyed but depicted in a painting by Perino del Vaga in the Castel Sant' Angelo (c. 1537), was similarly divided into three sections with block-like forms running down the middle.

13. According to John Templer, curved steps were used infrequently until later in the Renaissance. See Templer, *The Staircase: History and Theories* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1992), 32.

14. Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 41. Wittkower states, "It is clear that the present steps belong to two periods. All the middle steps must be of 1533/34; they must therefore have been made according to Michelangelo's detailed instructions."

15. The contract dictated that the stair be made "according to the method, shape and size not so much of the drawings kept in the cloister but according to the small terracotta model made by Michelangelo, which each of the above named masters [the five stone masons] has seen." Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 35.

16. Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 239.

17. For example, the definition of *rivolta* given by Constanzo Ferrari and Joseph Caccia, *Grand Dictionnaire, Français-Italien et Italien-Français* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1645), 723, begins with "*rivolgimento* [upheaval/revolution], *action de tourner, revolution...*" Similarly, Wittkower's source defines *rivolta* as, "La parte stessa che si volta, Gomito [sharp bend]." See Niccolo Tomasso and Bernardo Bellini, *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, vol. 16 (1625; reprint, Milan: Rizolli, 1977), 540.

18. Panofsky's terminology appears in "Die Treppe der Libreria di S. Lorenzo; Bemerkungen zu einer unveröffentlichten Skizze Michelangelos," *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaftt* 15 (1922), 262ff. The connecting areas between the central and side steps as illustrated by Michelangelo conform to contract specifications which called for a lack of visible joints, or "senza che si dimostri alcun convento." "*Convento*," Wittkower reminds, is defined as "spazio tra due cose commesse come pietre, mattoni, legni" ("space between two things joined together as stones, bricks, wood"). See Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 238.

19. For a discussion on Tribolo's involvement in the staircase project, see Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 35-37. The four steps referenced here may have been the oval steps (four being the same number that appear in the executed staircase).

20. See Vasari, "Life of Michelangelo," in *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence and Sansoni, 1906), 7, 236.

21. Vasari, *Lives*, 400.

22. Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 37. Specifically, Wittkower notes that Tribolo, "betook himself to Rome, explained the situation to the master and received...not a word of help. Michelangelo had not

forgotten all about it: years later he could remember his original ideas perfectly well. His obstinate silence was due to anger at Tribolo's ill-considered procedure."

23. This was actually common procedure during the Renaissance. As Wallace observes, "design and execution were inextricably linked." Michelangleo's approach to architecture was thus similar to his approach to sculpture, which allowed for decision making and alterations in mid-course. See William Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 137.

24. Ibid., 37.

25. *The Letters of Michelangelo*, trans. and ed. E. H. Ramsden (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963), 2, 157-58.

26. Ibid., 186.

27. Michelangelo had renewed his acquaintance with the Belvedere staircase in the mid-1550s, when he was involved with several projects at the Vatican for Pope Julius III. For more on the theater seats planned for the Belvedere, see James Ackerman, *The Cortile del Belvedere* (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1954), 17.

28. Cosimo thought that a stone stairway would provide for greater optical rapport with the vestibule space. See Filippo Camerota, "Ammannati e la Prospettiva Architettonica," in *Bartolomeo Ammannati, Scultore e Architetto, 1511-1592*, ed. Niccolo Roselli Del Turco and Federica Salvi (Firenze: Alinea, 1995), 249.

29. See, respectively, Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 43; John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1967), 75.

30. Templer, *The Staircase*, 32.

31. Ibid., 34.

32. Shearman, *Mannerism*, 116.

33. For example, many of the records for the Villa Lante have been lost or destroyed. See Claudio Lazzarro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 319. While the gardens at Caprarola have been generally well-documented, there is still no actual evidence confirming the authorship of the water staircase there. Lazzarro has commented on the problems surrounding the study of water staircases in general, noting that while "water channels later evolved into the water chains and water stairs of the sixteenth century...the stage and development can only be speculated, since the evidence in documents and descriptions is fragmentary and scattered." See Lazzarro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, 86.

34. This dating, accepted by most scholars, is based on a document dated to 1568, which also notes Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola's presence at Bagnaia. See David Coffin, "Some Aspects of the Villa Lante at Bagnaia," in *Arte in Europa; Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Edoardo Arslan*. vol. I (Milan: Tip. Artipo: 1966), 570.

35. David Coffin has concluded that the Villa Lante staircase was the prototype for Caprarola. See Coffin, "Some Aspects of the Villa Lante," 573.

36. This is the generally accepted attribution. See for example, Coffin, "Some Aspects of the Villa Lante," 573, and Angelo Cantoni, *La Villa Lante di Bagnaia* (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1961), 46.

37. For more on this project, see John Coolidge, "The Villa Giulia," *Art Bulletin* 25 (1943): 177-225.

38. See Cantoni, *La Villa Lante*, 10.

39. For a discussion of Vignola's activity at Caprarola, see Loren Partridge, "Vignola and the Villa Farnese at Caprarola, Part I," *Art Bulletin* 52 (1970): 81. For a specific discussion of the water staircase there, see Georgii Loukomski, *Vignola* (Paris: August Vincent & Co., 1927), 50-51.

40. This letter is included in a collection by G.B. Ramusio, *Lettere di diversi autori eccellenti non piu date in luce...con molte lettere del Bembo, del Navagero...* (Venice: Giordano Ziletti, 1556), 719 ff. Cited and translated in Elisabeth MacDougall, "Introduction," in *Fons Sapientiae, Renaissance Garden Fountains*, ed. Elisabeth MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1978), 10.

41. See Robert W. Berger, "Garden Cascades in Italy and France, 1565-1665," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33 (December 1974), 304.

42. For example, Ammannati's use of rusticated blocks in the Pitti Palace in Florence (c. 1558) may have derived from Vignola. For a discussion of Vignola's influence on Ammannnati, see Peter Murray, *The Architecture of the High Renaissance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 207, 225.

43. See Coffin, *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome*, 286.

44. Berger has refuted the importance of antique forms in the development of the water staircase in sixteenth-century gardens, since he contends that most were unknown during that time. See Berger, "Garden Cascades," 310.

45. Although the *Auditorio* supposedly had not been fully excavated until the eighteenth century, its resemblance to the Belvedere exedra is so striking as to suggest that Bramante may have based his work on the Roman prototype. For an illustration and brief discussion on the *Auditorio*, see Norman Neuerburg, *L'Architettura della Fontane e dei Ninfei nell'Italia Antica* (Naples: Gaetano Macchiaroli Editore, 1965), 204-05.

46. The via S. Basilio stair is mentioned in Neuerburg, *L'Architettura della Fontane*, 99.

47. Berger contends that Vignola almost certainly knew of Albano. See Berger, "Garden Cascades," 10. On the garden for the pope's brother, see Marcello Fagiolo and Maria Luisa Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie: I Teatri dell'Acqua, grotte, ninfei, fontane*, trans. Anthony Shugaar (Milan: Franco Maria Ricci, 1990), 173. On Ammannati's use of water channels from Albano, see Frank Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum: Its Origins and Development in Rome and Vicinity* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1981), 135.

48. Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 164.

49. Although, as Elizabeth MacDougall notes, it was not actually recognized as a nymphaeum in the Renaissance. See MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues, and Flowers* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1994), 65. According to Naomi Miller, Ammianus Marcellinus provided an early reference linking the Septizodium to a nymphaeum, in describing "[a] much frequented spot, where the emperor Marcus Aurelius erected a Nymphaeum of pretentious style." See Miller, *Heavenly Caves, Reflections on the Garden Grotto* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), 21.

50. See Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 164.

51. George Wicker Elderkin, "The Natural and the Artificial Grotto," *Hesperia*, 10 (1941): 132. Sansovino's epithet offers an example of the conflation of the term which accompanied the architectural form.

52. An antique precedent for this particular nymphaeum may have been at Tivoli where Raphael, who was heavily involved with the Villa Madama project, participated in an archaeological excursion with Andre Navagero. This was the same Navagero who later wrote about the water staircase at Granada. See Norman Neuerburg, "Raphael at Tivoli and the Villa Madama," in *Essays in Memory of Karl Lehman*, ed. Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York: Institute of Fine Arts, 1964), 227-31.

53. On Bramante's exedra having provided Romano with a staircase prototype, see Frederick Hartt, *Giulio Romano*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 40.

54. This project involved both Vignola and Michelangelo. See Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 131-32.

55. Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 39. For more on the Villa Giulia project, see John Coolidge, "The Villa Giulia, A Study of Central Italian Architecture in the Mid-Sixteenth Century," *Art Bulletin* 25 (1943): 177-225.

56. Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 172.

57. Unidentified letter by Ammannati, quoted and translated in Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 28, 172. The original text reads:

    ...nel ultimo piano si vede l'estremo della bellezza di tutta questa fabbrica, si per la quantita di marmi e statue antiche, si per la bellissima acqua Vergine...per esser questo il luogo principale, e di quivi vedersi il tutto; et ben si puo dire che questo sia il punto della prospettiva.

58. Camerota noted that the balustrades vary in measurement from 13 cm at the beginning of the stair to 8.5 cm at the door, the moldings of the pilasters vary from 40 to 34 cm, the diameter of the balusters from 15.3 to 10.8 cm, and the volutes of the central steps from 30 to 24 cm. Moreover, he concludes that the volutes were added to the steps to emphasize a perspectival effect. See Camerota, "Ammannati e la Prospettiva Architettonica," 249. Wittkower interpreted these differences in measurement as a confirmation that the various elements belonged to different periods in the staircase construction. See Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 40-41.

59. For example, Shearman wrote that the Laurentian vestibule, "seems to have been turned outside in, for the massive treatment of the interior walls belongs by tradition to exteriors." Shearman, *Mannerism*, 75.

60. For more information on sixteenth-century grottoes, see Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 140, and Naomi Miller, "Domain of Illusion: The Grotto in France," in *Fons Sapentiae, Renaissance Garden Fountains*, ed. Elisabeth MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1978), 182.

61. Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 110.

62. Ibid., 140.

63. Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 18-19.

64. The *cryptoportici* at both sites were lit from above by openings in the ceiling which served a function similar to that of skylights, a design which may have sparked Michelangelo's interest in experimenting with lighting sources in the library project. While Michelangelo's presence at the Villa Hadrian is generally accepted, there has been little scholarly effort to place him at the site of the Domus Aurea. This is puzzling considering the fact that the subterranean ruins were visited by most of his artistic contemporaries, and he was himself recorded on the spot in 1506, when he assisted the Sangallo in unearthing the Laöcoon. (Michelangelo's purported knowledge of the Domus Aurea as it relates to the development of his architecture *alla grottesca* will be dealt with in my forthcoming dissertation, "The Grotesque in Medici Taste and Patronage.")

65. See, respectively, De Tolnay, *Michelangelo, Sculptor, Painter, Architect*, trans. Gaynor Woodhouse (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 1975), 39; Eugenio Battisti, *L'Antirinascimento* (Italia: Garzanti Editore, 1989), 1, 208.

66. Guglielmo d'Ossat indicates that the original design of the vestibule illustrated niches in which lamps could be placed. See d'Ossat, "Architecture," in *The Complete Works of Michelangelo* ed. Charles de Tolnay (New York: Reynal and Company, 1965), 306.

67. Wittkower, "Biblioteca Laurenziana," 55.

68. It should be pointed out that while the appearance of bats in the Laurentian vestibule is commonly overlooked by modern scholars, the bat as a Michelangelesque motif seems to have had much more significance in centuries past. For example, the frontispiece of Giuseppe Ignazio Rossi's 1739 book contains a cross-section view of the library plan, and illustrates a large bat with outspread wings hovering over the profile of the reading room. See Rossi, *La Libreria Medicco Laurenziana.* The best source for information regarding the bats of the Laurentian vestibule is Giulio Carlo Argan and Bruno Contardi, *Michelangelo, Architect* trans. Marion Grayson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).

69. *The Letters of Michelangelo*, vol. 1, xlv.

70. Caro had been approached by a member of the pope's staff about suitable images to decorate a grotto at the villa. See letter to I. Soperchio, dated 15 May 1551, published in A. Caro, *Lettere familiari*, ed. Annibale Greco, vol. II (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1959), 99-100.

71. Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 8.

72. On the Palazzo Gualdo project, see Peter Kinney, *The Early Sculpture of Bartolomeo Ammanati* (New York: Garland Press, 1976), 167.

73. Malcolm Campbell, "Observations on Ammannati's Neptune Fountain: 1565 and 1575," in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Craig Hugh Smyth* ed. Andrew Morrogh, et. al. (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1985), 2, 123.

74. Campbell, "Observations," 123.

75. See Philip Jacks, "The Simulachrum of Fabio Calvo: A View of Roman Architecture all'antica in 1527," *Art Bulletin* 72 (Fall 1990): 453-81.

76. For more on garden symbolism, see Lazzarro, *Italian Renaissance Gardens*, 174ff., and David R. Wright, *The Medici Villa at Olmo a Castello: Its History and Iconography* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton, 1976), 217.

77. Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, 191.

78. On the fountain in the Palazzo Vecchio and its symbolic implications, see Detlef Heikamp, "Ammannati's Fountain for the *Sala Grande* of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence," in *Fons Sapentiae, Renaissance Garden Fountains*, ed. Elisabeth MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1978), 117.

79. Heikamp, "Ammannati's Fountain," 123-24.

80. See Giuseppe Marchini, "Le Vetrate della Biblioteca Laurenziana," in *San Lorenzo* ed. Umberto Baldini and Bruno Nardini (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1984), 264-66. These *imprese* included the three feathers above a crown, the capricorn, and the falcon.

81. On the grotto as a metaphor for the cosmos, see Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 7.

82. For example, the "Cosimo/cosmos" connection underlay the iconographical program of the Sala degli Elementi in the Palazzo Vecchio. See Karla Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici; 15th-18th Centuries*, vol. I (Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1981), 93.

83. MacDougall observes that there was scarcely a garden program in the sixteenth century that did not yield in some way to the *topos* of Apollo, the muses, Pegasus, and Mt. Parnassus or Mt. Helicon, all mythological themes built around the *topos* of the nymphs and the muses. MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues, and Flowers*, 121.

84. Neuerburg, *L'Architettura della Fontane*, 21. See also, Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 3, and Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, 87.

85. MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues, and Flowers*, 108.

86. For example, Plutarch spoke of the nymphaeum near Mieza, where Aristotle instructed Alexander, as a place conducive to study. In Alexandria, the grottoes formed part of the sanctuaries which served as meeting places for poets and philosophers. See Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 11, 27.

87. MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues and Flowers*, 77.

88. Kinney, *The Early Sculpture of Bartolomeo Ammanati*, 183.

89. On the "Sleeping Nymph," see MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues and Flowers*, 35-71.

90. Elisabeth MacDougall, *"L'Igegnoso Artifizio*; Sixteenth Century Garden Fountains in Rome," in *Fons Sapentiae, Renaissance Garden Fountains* ed. Elisabeth MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1978), 96-97.

91. On Golden Age imagery, see Janet Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). On the association of the muses with the Golden Age, see MacDougall, *Fountains, Statues and Flowers*, 77. For more on the importance of the muses to Medici iconography, see Philippe Morel, *La Villa Medicis* (Rome: Ecole Francaise de Rome, 1991), 3, 193 ff.

92. For information on the decorative program of the study, see Patricia Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari, Art and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 200, and Alessandro Cecchi, *Palazzo Vecchio* (Firenze: Scala, 1989), 84.

93. On the muses and memory, see Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 176.

94. On the fountain's symbolism in relation to the muses, see Heikamp, "Ammannati's Fountain," 127. On Cosimo as enlightened patron, see Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 199.

95. Liliane Châtelet-Lange, "Le 'Museo di Vanves' (1560); Collections de sculptures et musées au XVI siècle en France," *Zeitschrift fur Kunstgeschichte* 38 (1975): 280.

96. Miller, "Domain of Illusion," 188.

97. Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 41.

98. According to Châtelet-Lange, from the beginning of the fifteenth century the term "musaeum" seems to have been associated with quiet places of study, hence its conflation with the library. Moreover, this terminology ultimately plays on the ancient prototype of the library/musaeum, such as Alexander the Great's celebrated musaeum, which included among its literary works statues, portraits of exemplars, and natural curiosities. See Châtelet-Lange, "Le 'Museo di Vanves,'" 280.

99. Translated and quoted from unpublished manuscript by Ligorio. In Fagiolo and Madonna, *Roma delle Delizie*, 188.

100. Naomi Miller, "Domain of Illusion," 188.

101. Pierre Saintyves, "Les Grottes dans les cultes magico-religieux et dans la symbolique primitive," in Porphyre, *L'antre des nymphs* trans. Joseph Trabucco (Paris: Emile Nourry, Editeur, 1918), 102.

102. Gabriele Morolli sees the Laurentian vestibule as a "Platonic cavern," reinforced by the presence of the bats on the columns, which, he reminds, are perceived as "emblem[s] of man lacking knowledge of science." See Morolli, *"Il Ricetto e l'ordine della notte: Michelangelo e Durere?,"* in *San Lorenzo, L'architettura: 393-1993* ed. Gabriele Morolli and Pietro Ruschi (Firenze: Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1993), 129-131.

103. Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art*, 77.

104. For more information, see respectively, Battisti, *L'Antirinascimento*, 209; Alvarez, *The Renaissance Nymphaeum*, 5; Miller, "Domain of Illusion," 177.

105. MacDougall, "Introduction," *Fons Sapentiae*, 5.

106. Ibid., 4.

107. Lazzaro, *The Italian Renaissance Garden*, 103.

108. Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo*, 43. Templer has analyzed the psychological effects generated by the enclosed stairway in the Laurentian, observing that, "One entered the stairhouse and was entertained by its theatrical devices to draw one's attention to the stair and to the top and bottom. One then left the container and passed into the next spatial unit in the sequence." Templer, *The Staircase*, 122.

109. Shearman, *Mannerism*, 220.

110. Miller, *Heavenly Caves*, 7.

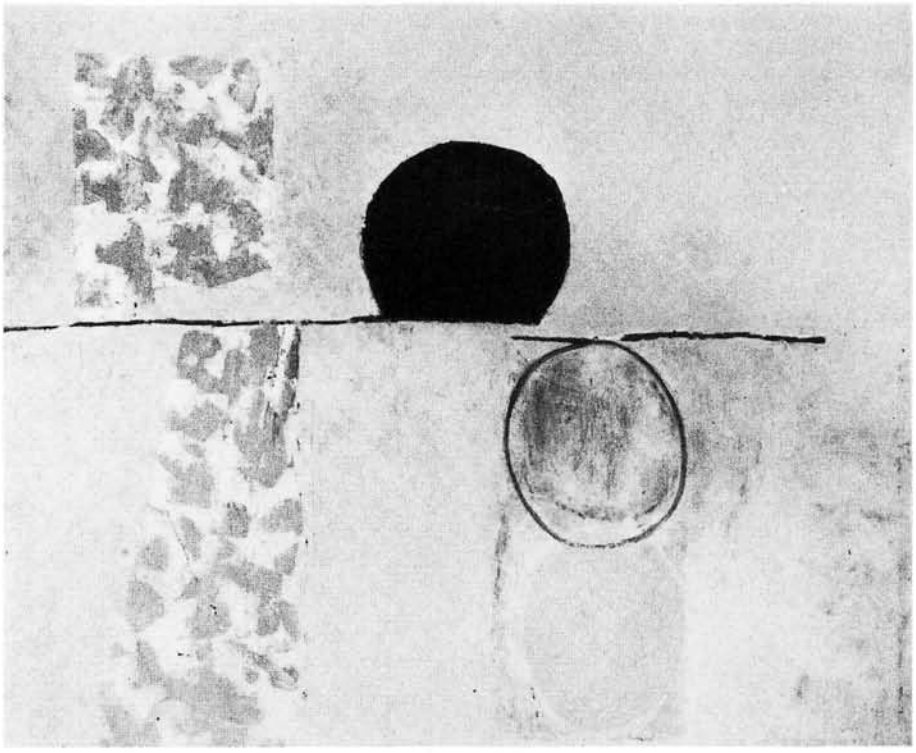

Fig. 1 Teiji Takai, *Blue Composition*, 1957, Collection unknown. From Anne L. Jenks and Thomas M. Messer, *Contemporary Painters of Japanese Origin in America* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1958), plate 27

A "Delicate" Difference
The Critical Reception of Japanese Abstract Expressionism

Karen Fraser

Kenzo Okada arrived in New York City in 1950, one of many Japanese artists who came to the United States after World War II, seeking an escape from the confines of the contemporary Japanese art community. Okada, an established and respected artist in Japan, painted Western-style figures and landscapes in a Post-Impressionist style. However, within two years, the influence of the New York School completely transformed his representational images into painterly abstractions. In 1953, Okada's new abstract work was featured at the Betty Parsons Gallery in the first of six solo shows he had there over the next decade.

During this period, his work and that of other Japanese abstract artists based in New York received generally positive critical attention from the New York press. The supportive critical response toward Japanese art is striking because it occurred just as the New York School of Abstract Expressionism moved into the mainstream and gained popular acceptance among both critics and the public. The response is also paradoxical, for it seems highly surprising that critics writing about a movement conventionally conceived of as "American" would willingly praise the work of the Japanese who, only a few years earlier, had been considered a wartime enemy. Cultural historian Warren Cohen has claimed that "virtually every act in the movement of art between cultures has political implications."[1] The postwar influx of Japanese artists to America coincided with new world roles for both the United States and Japan, strongly suggesting that critical acceptance of their work also had political significance.

This essay focuses on Japanese artists who came to New York City and began exhibiting their work during the 1950s. I believe that the positive critical response Japanese Abstract Expressionists received was shaped by numerous factors which created a climate conducive to their critical and cultural acceptance. Moreover, this acceptance was implicitly political, as it consistently posited the Japanese artist as Other. In doing so, it was both crucial in defining a new American art, and was directly related to the United States' new identity as a world leader. This study examines the language chosen by reviewers to describe and define these artists, and the identity thus fabricated. It also considers the underlying cultural implications of this construction. My approach is deconstructive in the sense of examining language for the hidden meanings it reveals. My argument relies on a methodological model of post-colonial discourse, which analyzes the politics and formation of cultural identity through language.[2]

This study centers primarily on critical reviews of five abstract painters—Okada, Genichiro Inokuma, Teiji Takai, James Suzuki, and Yutaka Ohashi—but also includes reviews of other artists, including Saburo Hasegawa, Shiko Munakata, and Minoru Kawabata. These artists worked in a similarly lyrical abstract style which hovered midway between the action painting of Jackson Pollock and the color field canvases of Mark Rothko. Inokuma, Hasegawa, Ohashi, Takai, and Suzuki were featured in a 1958 exhibition at the Institute of Fine Arts in Boston organized by Thomas Messer and Anne Jenks, *Contemporary Painters of Japanese Origin in America*.[3] The curators contended that

the Japanese artists' work shared a number of similar characteristics. They marked this work as "Japanese," and differentiated it from contemporary non-Japanese abstraction. Similar ideas were articulated in numerous reviews written about these artists. They were repeatedly characterized as having certain traits believed to be innately Japanese, such as an inbred sense of design and good taste, intuitive understanding of abstraction, and a natural capacity for creating harmonious, serene compositions. These critical conventions were in many ways identical to those used by European critics to define Japanese art in the nineteenth century. In her text, *The Critical Reception of Japanese Art in Late Nineteenth Century Europe* (1982), Elise Evett has argued that Europeans viewed the Japanese as intuitively artistic and primitive beings.[4] The mid-twentieth-century stereotype of the Japanese artist was similar. This essentialist interpretation, a cultural construction imposed upon Japanese artists, was crucial and necessary for their acceptance. Conformity with this stereotype was the condition for their critical approval.

Okada and his peers were not the first Japanese artists to come to the United States. In the early part of the twentieth century, many Japanese artists came to America, some remaining permanently. Between 1902 and 1918, at least sixty-seven students at the National Academy of Design in New York listed their nationality as Japanese.[5] Yasuo Kuniyoshi, who came to the United States in 1906 at age thirteen, is the best known of these early immigrant artists. Kuniyoshi was prohibited from becoming an American citizen by the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924. Nevertheless, he considered himself to be an American, and even had a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1948.[6] Although he received all of his artistic training in the United States, American critics generally dismissed his art as derivative. He was seen as a non-Westerner working in Western styles.[7]

The response to Kuniyoshi's work would foreshadow the problems encountered by Japanese Abstract Expressionist artists working in the United States many years later. Critics defined Kuniyoshi primarily by his nationality, largely disregarding his training and upbringing. In the 1950s, critics similarly based their approval of Japanese abstract artists on perceived national and cultural characteristics. The implications of this are especially intriguing when considering the escalating racial tensions and strong sense of nationalism in the United States as it emerged as a world leader in the post-World War II era.[8]

Additionally, the United States, and specifically New York City, took on increasing importance in the international art world at this time. Although initial reactions to Abstract Expressionism were extremely negative, critics and historians came to view it as the first significant, original, exclusively American contribution to modern avant-garde art. Several explanations have been offered as to why the New York School achieved such acclaim. Critic Clement Greenberg argued in his pivotal essay of 1955, "'American-Type' Painting," that pure aesthetic achievement and stylistic innovation merited Abstract Expressionism its status.[9] Irving Sandler's 1970 text, *The Triumph of American Painting*, further developed this argument by contending that new formal developments and a new method of symbolic representation made Abstract Expressionism so significant.[10] Sandler's title alone testifies to the sense of nationalism associated with the movement. Abstract Expressionism was a triumph, a cultural victory for the United States, and evidence of American domination in art as well as in politics and economics.

Serge Guilbaut, in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), has argued that Abstract Expressionism had additional political significance. Guilbaut asserts that Abstract Expressionist paintings represented anti-Communist political ideology.[11] He argues, furthermore, that Abstract Expressionism was exploited by the United States government as a political weapon during the Cold War. The Abstract Expressionist was portrayed as an independent, free-thinking individualist who embodied positive American values. This figure was, therefore, the perfect icon to contrast against the evils of Communism.

Another hypothesis ties the development of Abstract Expressionism to the contemporary intellectual vogue for Existentialism, with the Abstract Expressionist canvas representing a physical embodiment of the Existential hero's angst and despair.[12] Other recent scholarship has delved into the social and cultural atmosphere surrounding the New York School. In *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* (1993), Michael Leja reconstructs the emergence of the new "Modern Man," a figure which he identifies throughout American culture.[13] This "Modern Man" was troubled, violent, and primitive—traits he developed in response to the turmoil of the twentieth century. Leja asserts that the legendary Abstract Expressionist and his non-objective art were simply one manifestation of this cultural construction.

Regardless of the specific interpretation, these theories all discuss Abstract Expressionism as an explicitly American phenomenon. Further, these critics and art historians have focused exclusively on the New York scene. Finally, the emphasis has been almost wholly on white, male artists. It might seem anomalous that Japanese artists should have merited any recognition in a movement which historians have perceived to be so limited and nationalistic. The fact that these artists did receive critical acceptance strongly implies that their approval must have been granted conditionally.

Information in English about the artists considered in this study is scarce, and reproductions of many of their works are difficult to find. Although each artist had several solo exhibitions in New York which were positively reviewed by contemporary American writers, there are few full-length articles or monographs concerning their work. My research thus concentrates on numerous short reviews culled from contemporary periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Art News*, and *Art Digest* (known as *Arts* after 1955). The dearth of written and visual materials on any single artist in my study is important to note; however, although I do address individual artists, it is criticism of the Japanese artists as a whole that provides conclusive evidence for my theory. I am concerned with the general stereotype of the Japanese artist; my focus is not on the individual, but on the broader context of art criticism.

For the Abstract Expressionists, the power of the critic was especially potent; the persistent efforts of Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were largely responsible for authenticating the movement. Although Abstract Expressionism initially received very little critical and cultural support, over the last quarter century critics have defined the movement as the epitome of Modernism. Contemporary scholarship is only now challenging the notion that Abstract Expressionism was the exclusive domain of the New York School, with critical approval limited to white, male, establishment artists.[14] This study further questions this generally accepted model.

An examination of reviews of Japanese abstract painters' solo exhibitions throughout the 1950s reveals that the critical response to their work was almost unanimously positive. Moreover, the language used by various critics to discuss their art is strikingly

similar. Scholar Marianna Torgovnick, in describing Western concepts of the primitive, has written: "They exist for us in a cherished set of dichotomies—by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisal, ideal—or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate or, alternately, what we should fear."[15] She further defines primitivism as a notion, "inexact and composite...[which] habitually and sometimes willfully confuses attributes of different societies."[16] Critical reviews of Japanese Abstract Expressionists focused on just such an inexact image of the Japanese as primitive, gentle, intuitive, yet at the same time, artistically refined. The 1950s stereotype of the Japanese artist, identical in many ways to that of the late nineteenth century, emerged in virtually all writings about Japanese art and artists. The language employed by critics and reviewers conjured up an image of the Japanese aesthete, and consistently attributed certain characteristics to this image. These attributes overlap and are not necessarily easy to categorize, but together they created a very specific image of the Japanese artist.

One quality that the Japanese supposedly possessed was "good taste." Okada, for example, had "natural grace and a taste for dispersed, ethereal impressions."[17] *New York Times* critic Stuart Preston described Okada's work as "a triumph of taste," while another critic found his paintings to be "superior examples in taste, balance, and graciousness."[18] Inokuma, too, displayed "restraint and quiet good taste," as well as a "sense of elegant balance and poise."[19] Hasegawa's show of 1954 featured prints created with a "deft delicacy," which made them "decidedly elegant designs."[20] Takai's abstractions of 1956 were also described as "tasteful," while Ohashi had "a special kind of good taste," and Kawabata's paintings exhibited "Japanese restraint and good taste."[21]

Paintings by the Japanese artists were often defined in "feminine" terms. Words such as *delicate*, *sensuous*, and *exquisite* were frequently used to describe their use of color and their compositional arrangement. Critic Sam Hunter commended Okada's "exquisite color sense," which he also described elsewhere as "tender."[22] Another writer praised Okada's "delicacy and resonance of color," while *New Yorker* critic Robert Coates described Okada's work as "delicate."[23] Inokuma was "an accomplished, delicate painter," commended for his "spontaneity" and "delicacy," and praised for his "subtlety of compositional equilibrium [and] delicacy of detail."[24] Ohashi's work was "abstract expressionism in exquisite containment," while Takai's paintings were "delicately colored perceptions."[25] Preston described Okada's color as "sensuous," and his pictures as "sumptuous," while Hunter appreciated Okada's "atmosphere of hushed, sensuous refinement."[26] Inokuma's work, too, had "a sensuous presence," while Ohashi's paintings had "sensuous awareness," and Suzuki used "inherently sensuous color."[27]

Works by the Japanese painters were also frequently described as serene and harmonious. Okada's work was "deeply felt, quietly persuasive," his images "objects for contemplation rather than means of communication."[28] Preston felt Okada's work was "softly intuitive" with a "serenity" stemming from the artist's "superior esthetic tact."[29] Hunter praised Okada's "mood of dreaming, impassive serenity," and "intuitive rightness of effect."[30] Inokuma's work, too, was "intimate and harmonious, suspended in serenity, yet vital."[31] Ohashi's compositions had "an immense visual serenity," and his abstractions were "discreet, subtle harmonies of shapes." Takai's "tranquil abstractions" produced "a mood of freshness and solitude."[32]

A collective image emerges from these reviews of serene, intuitively artistic, delicate, and refined Japanese painters. Reiterations of the Japanese artistic stereotype in general commentaries from the 1950s and 1960s further focused this image. Elise Grilli, in the 1964 exhibition catalogue *Contemporary Japanese Painting*, asserted that the Japanese artist's "deeply submerged visual memory" meant that he "does not need to pass through realistic representation to arrive at abstract design. It is his birthright."[33] In another catalogue from 1966, David Kung claimed that the Japanese artist had a faculty for simplification, a "desire to enrich substance by an act of simplification," as well as a "profound sense of serenity."[34] Another source described the perpetual desire of the Eastern artist to merge with nature: "The Eastern artist has tried to express not the personal will, but acceptance of nature; not the individual act, but the harmonious integration of personality through union with all organic life."[35] A later essay commented that the Japanese artist received "as if by birthright, or at least by experience and training, not only the sensitivity to line, drawing, and graphic expression derived from calligraphic traditions, but also an extraordinary mastery of subtle color and space relations."[36]

In 1958, Messer and Jenks coined the term "Nipponism" for an exhibition of contemporary Japanese painters. In their catalogue, they argued that the work of Japanese abstract painters in the United States shared a number of distinctively Japanese characteristics. One fundamental quality was the drive to create elemental forms, a "deeply ingrained instinct for shapes, freed suddenly from any representational obligation—shapes executed with consummate and innocent skill." Messer and Jenks emphasized the instinctive and natural creative process of the Japanese, claiming that the work of the Japanese artist was "felt, not measured," and that the shapes were "neither violent nor hurried [nor]... the result of intense intellectual analysis." While asserting that such elemental forms were fully nonrepresentational, Messer and Jenks also claimed that these shapes were suggestive of nature. The authors commended the Japanese ability to feel an "immediacy of experience," and identified a harmonious attitude underlying the simplicity of Japanese paintings.[37] In a separate article on the movement, Messer described the "instinctive sureness, the unerring command over form and the events of quality" marking their works, and declared that these "paintings based simply on shapes and sensuous colors...establish contemplative moods."[38]

Such descriptions clearly defined a stereotype of Japanese artists. They possessed certain "innately Japanese" artistic characteristics: an inbred sense of design, color, and refined good taste, an intuitive understanding of abstraction, and a natural capacity for painting harmonious, contemplative images. The Japanese artist's supposedly instinctive artistic nature, combined with other Japanese "traits" such as a profound sense of serenity, a gentle disposition, and a harmonious integration and intuitive connection with nature, suggest the more benign characteristics of the "primitive" stereotype. The perception of the Japanese as primitive was further strengthened by both historical precedent and the Abstract Expressionists' interest in the primitive. The term "primitive"was extended by these American artists to include all elements which they considered exotic or unfamiliar.[39]

A stereotype of the Japanese artist as "primitive" was not new. In the late nineteenth century, both *yoga* (Japanese Western-style painting) and traditional Japanese art were found in Europe. European critics responded enthusiastically to Japanese woodblock prints and other native Japanese styles, but had very negative reactions to

Western-style Japanese art. Evett has argued that the positive reaction European critics demonstrated toward traditional Japanese art centered on a stereotype of the Japanese artist as simple, primitive, and childlike. This image directly opposed that of the Western artist. Evett has stated that all nineteenth-century writers remarked on "what they perceived to be a peculiarly intense sympathy with nature..." and "...extraordinary powers of observation." These qualities "perpetuated a vision of the Japanese as simple, innocent, primitive people living in blissful harmony with gently, nurturing, benign nature," with the "intense quality of their observation...explained by their rapport with nature."[40]

Such interpretations are very similar to those of the 1950s. The special position occupied by the Japanese (as well as other "primitives") in the nineteenth century had allowed the European artist to define his own position. Since he merely observed and "imitated" the intuitive, primitive artist, the Western artist maintained his integrity as a rational and intellectual individual. In the 1950s, the American artist again defined himself against the more primitive Japanese artist. While the Japanese artist intuitively understood abstraction and was instinctively able to paint abstractly, the Western artist worked towards abstraction intellectually.

Evett has also discussed how positive aspects of the primitive stereotype were easily inverted and viewed as negative. She has written:

> Just as primitive people could be seen as simple, innocent, pure, and in touch with nature, they could also be seen as simple, backward, unaware, and involved in a crippling attachment to nature that did not allow them the objective distance for analyzing and understanding it.[41]

This negative stereotype characterizes European criticism of *yoga* painting. Western-style Japanese artists were quickly dismissed as poor imitators. They were criticized for being incapable of observing and rendering reality. The American reaction to *yoga* art was similar. James Jackson Jarves, one of the first Americans to study Japanese art, commented in 1876 that "...recent attempts to imitate [Western art]...are striking failures."[42] Jarves argued further that elements of Japanese and Western art should not be mixed, claiming that "either system must be kept to itself, intact, or wholly abandoned."[43] Regardless of the actual quality of *yoga* paintings, this negative reaction was conditioned by a need to maintain an image of the Japanese artist as primitive. Allowing Japanese artists to occupy the same position as European and American artists would have been entirely unacceptable.

The 1950s critical reaction to Japanese artists also defined them in relation to Western artists. The Japanese artists worked mainly in a painterly, lyrically abstract style that could easily be described in "feminine" terms. This style could also be compared to Japanese tradition. It seemed to rely on traditional Japanese abstraction, but also utilized elements of modern abstraction; thus, it never appeared to be totally "traditional." When an artist endeavored to break out of this delicate and evocative stylistic confine, his efforts were not greeted kindly. Okada's attempts at a dynamic abstract style close to action painting, for example, were criticized for "paring out beauty," and being "lifeless" and "monotonous."[44] Paintings in the initial American exhibition of the Japanese avant garde group Gutai, at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1958, were viewed as poor derivations of action painting, and were described as

"disappointing" and "immature exaltations[s] in self-discovery."[45] The Japanese had to create paintings which could be described stylistically within a feminized, intuitive stereotype. To do otherwise was to violate the domain of Western artists.

The feminized image of the Japanese artist was reinforced in a broader cultural context by the post-war American tendency to focus on the more tranquil and "feminine" aspects of Japan. In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), cultural anthropologist Ruth Benedict dichotomized Japanese society into artistic (feminine) and militaristic (masculine) components.[46] After defeating Japan and effectively thwarting Japanese militarism, Americans naturally reframed the Japanese in feminine terms. It has been suggested that this helped repress negative wartime memories.[47] American and Japanese roles during the Occupation further polarized the two nations. Many Americans viewed the Japanese as innocent victims who merited compassion, pity, and assistance.[48] Under the direction of General Douglas MacArthur, the United States was largely responsible for restoring order in Japan by establishing a democratic government and rebuilding Japanese cities. The United States, as a strong and powerful conqueror, assumed a benevolently "parental" role, which thus positioned the Japanese as "child-like."

The feminine image of the Japanese artist stands in contrast to the powerful, masculine image of the American Abstract Expressionist. Perhaps this image is best embodied in the figure of Jackson Pollock. As has been noted elsewhere, the language used by Greenberg to discuss Pollock and his art:

> ...shows a constant recourse to manifest male power. There the artist, full of energy, is defined by his forcefulness, his frustration, his innate violence—a rugged and brutal character reminiscent of the myth of the all-conquering hero. The work itself is situated in the same terms: monumental, brave, intense, extravagant, and powerful.[49]

This virile image was reinforced in both art periodicals and the popular press. The following description of Pollock ran in *Time* magazine in 1955:

> Jackson Pollock, at 43 the bush-bearded heavyweight champion of abstract expressionism, shuffled into the ring at Manhattan's Sidney Janis Gallery, and flexed his muscles for the crowd with a retrospective show covering 15 years of his career. The exhibition...reached a climax with the year 1948, when Pollock first conceived the idea of dripping and sloshing paint from buckets onto vast canvases laid flat on the floor. Once the canvases were hung upright, what gravity had accomplished came to look like the outpouring of Herculean energy...friend and foe alike crowded the exhibition in tribute to the champ's prowess.[50]

The contrast between the Americans and the Japanese is striking. The *Time* article evokes a vivid image of Pollock, the father of action painting. He is a heavyweight champion who flexes his muscles to create art imbued with a Herculean energy. As often as terms such as "delicate" were used to describe the Japanese, adjectives such as "powerful" were used to describe Pollock. Greenberg characterized Pollock as "the

most powerful painter in contemporary America," frequently referred to his "powerful originality," and described his work as "American and rough...and...brutal."[51]

Other critics also described Pollock as violent and powerful. In discussing his artistic development, they often refer not to his artistic *skill* but to his *power*.[52] Hunter defined Pollock's paintings as "a calligraphic metaphor for a ravaging, aggressive virility."[53] Leo Steinberg asserted that his work was "evidence of mortal struggle between the man and his art."[54] Even American painters whose work was less active than Pollock's were described with similarly masculine language. Paintings by Adolph Gottlieb, stylistically similar to work by Takai, were described as made of "powerful forms" and had "muscular grace."[55] Such commentaries helped define a heroic American artistic persona that was larger than life, and infused with masculine qualities and mythic strength.

The intellectual approach of the American artist further differentiated him from the intuitive Japanese artist. It was assumed that the American artist, though he might desire to paint intuitively, could not help but be rational and intellectual. Pollock himself affirmed that he did, in fact, direct his process, when he said, "I can control the flow of the paint; there is no accident."[56] Similarly, the elemental shapes in Gottlieb's "burst" paintings (stylistically similar to works by some of the Japanese artists), were built on "carefully ordered foundations [which] are basic to a man who believes 'the act of painting must be rational, objective and consciously disciplined.'"[57] Rothko, whose "multiforms" of the late 1940s are akin to Okada's work, also stressed the deliberateness of his artistic process. In a lecture at the Pratt Institute in 1958, Rothko discussed the various ingredients that made up his paintings and how he carefully measured them.[58] Rosenberg described his approach as "rationally calculating what was irreducible in painting."[59] Though their paintings were stylistically similar, the Western artist's work was thought to be powerful, rational, and ordered, while the Japanese artist's was considered delicate, intuitive, and instinctual.

Interestingly, work by American *female* Abstract Expressionists was analyzed with language similar to that used to describe works by Japanese artists. When paintings by American women were interpreted as delicate and feminine, however, the implications were resoundingly negative. Art historian Anne Wagner has described the critical response to Lee Krasner's first solo exhibition at Betty Parsons in 1951, in which Krasner attempted to assert an artistic independence from her husband Jackson Pollock:

> They made it clear that all fourteen canvases manipulated finely adjusted planes of color—muted yellows, grays, and mauves, they say—in ways that read as "quiet," "discreet," "harmonious," "restrained and pacific," "majestic and thoughtful," "quietly innocuous," "sweetly cultivated," and yes, "worked out with feminine acuteness."[60]

Wagner argues that Krasner would have interpreted this response as a failure, "a kind of neutrality too easily equated with the condition and mental habits of womanhood." Krasner thus abandoned "a pictorial strategy on which the label feminine could be hung."[61] Helen Frankenthaler suffered from similarly dismissive critical responses:

> Constructing a special category for [Frankenthaler's] work in which color and touch are read as "feminine," [critics] ceased examining it in relation to its

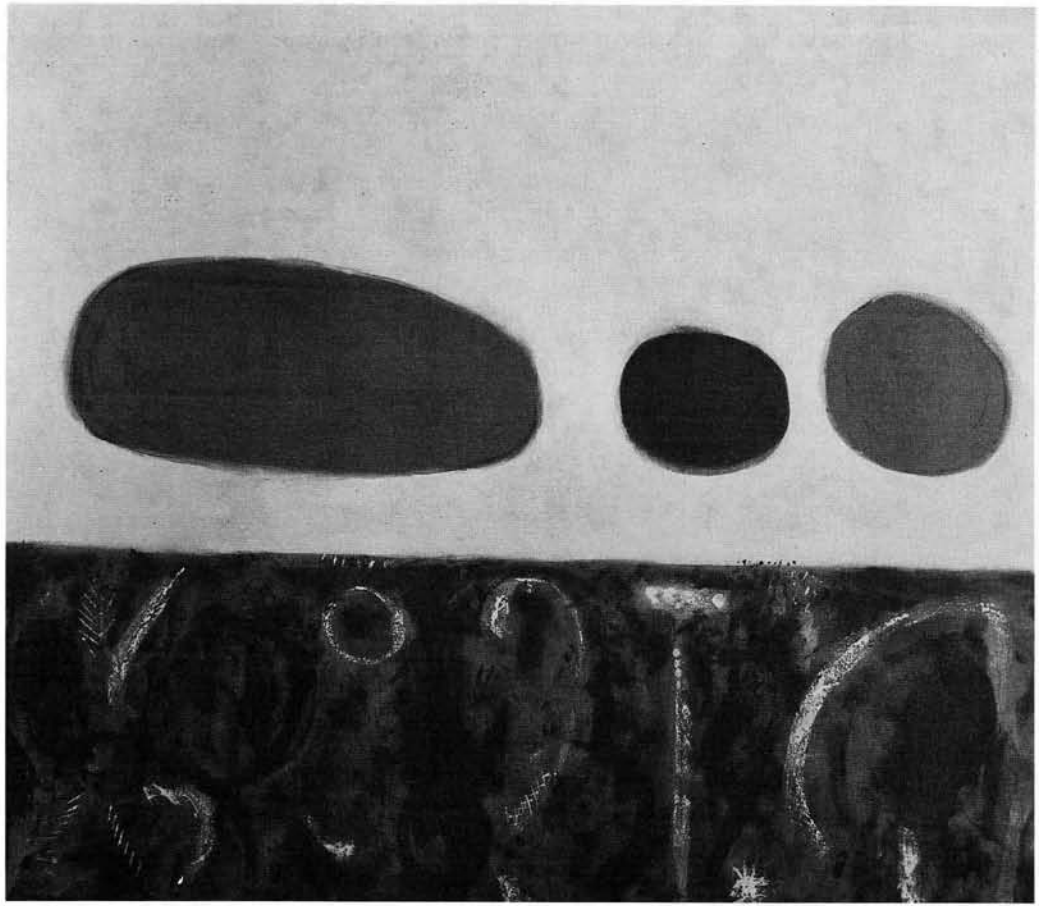

Fig. 2 Adolph Gottlieb, *Sea and Tide*, 1952 © Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

> specific historical context and instead linked it to an unchanging and essentialized tradition of women's work.[62]

The innate and "feminine" artistic nature of the Japanese artists allowed them a certain access to the critical dialogue. Western female artists, on the other hand, were not allowed to be "feminine."

Despite critical descriptions of Japanese artists' paintings as feminine, their work is not so easily differentiated from work by American artists. If one compares Takai's *Blue Composition* (Fig. 1), of 1957, to Gottlieb's *Sea and Tide* (Fig. 2), from 1952, stylistic similarities are certainly apparent. For example, both compositions incorporate a horizontal element that can be interpreted as a horizon line. Both images utilize elemental forms: circles and rectangles in the Takai, circles and an oval in the Gottlieb. Finally, both have areas where thicker pigment is applied in a more active, painterly manner. Is Takai's image obviously more "delicate" and Gottlieb's more "muscular?" The two images seem close enough stylistically that a viewer might presume they were by the same artist.

Equal (Fig. 3), another Gottlieb work from 1964, is similar to an Okada painting, *Blue*, dated 1959. Okada and Gottlieb employ virtually identical visual elements: circles and elongated, thick lines carefully positioned on a larger, contrasting color field. Both artists utilize only a few colors: white and shades of blue for Okada, black, white, and flesh tones for Gottlieb. The only obvious difference between the two is that the surface of Okada's painting appears to be thicker than that of Gottlieb's. Is *Blue* more refined, more harmonious, more serene than *Equal*? Again, the two paintings are impossible to differentiate in such terms.

Okada's *Work* (Fig. 4), of 1953, can be compared to paintings by Philip Guston, another New York School artist. *Work* and Guston's 1957-58 *Passage* (Fig. 5), are painterly and active, with pigment applied thickly in both. Both paintings again are composed of elemental shapes, with contrasting color used to define the forms. Okada's palette is more monochromatic and slightly cooler, but both artists explore the negative/positive relationship of forms through color. Again, it is difficult to describe Okada's painting in more "feminine" terms than Guston's.

Paintings by both Okada and Inokuma bear a stylistic resemblance to some of Rothko's work, particularly his early color experimentations, the "multiforms" of the late 1940s. Inokuma's *Accumulate* (Fig. 6), from 1957, and Okada's *Number 3* (Fig. 7), of 1953, can both be compared to Rothko's 1948 work, *Untitled* (Fig. 8). All three paintings have elemental shapes; each composition is formed by overlapping rectangles and bars of color. In *Accumulate* and *Number 3*, line is more defined, giving the forms more tension than those in Rothko's work. *Untitled* and *Number 3* share similar earth-toned color schemes, with both complementary and contrasting streaks of color. While Okada's "intuitive" color was defined as sensuous and delicate, Rothko's use of color in these works was described as "handsome, surprising, and disquieting," and exhibited "confident daring." He was described as "one of the most gifted manipulators of color."[63] Such descriptions again support the standard interpretation of the Western artist (Rothko) as controlling of his work, while the Japanese artist's work (here exemplified by Okada), comes together instinctively.

These comparisons illustrate that the actual art of Japanese and Western artists was not formally dissimilar, yet the language critics used to describe it was strikingly

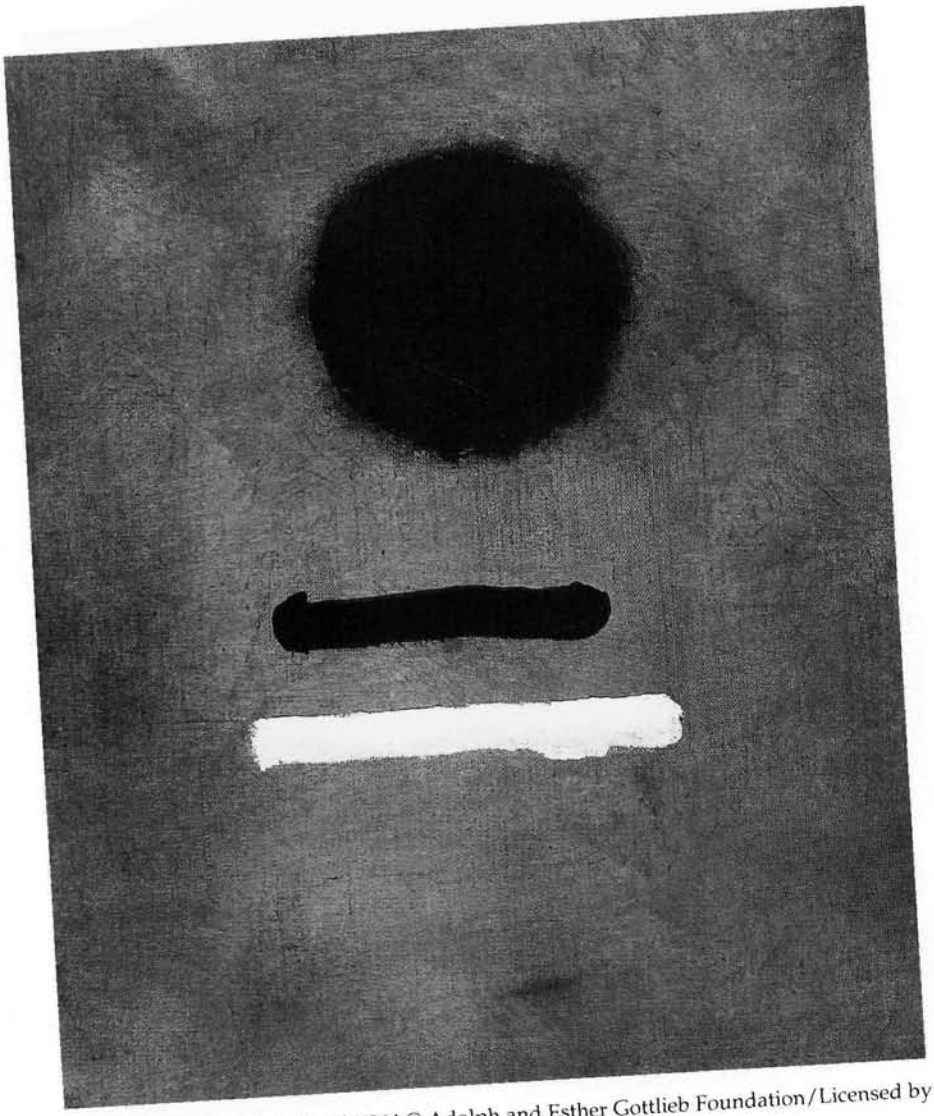

Fig. 3 Adolph Gottlieb, *Equal*, 1964 © Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

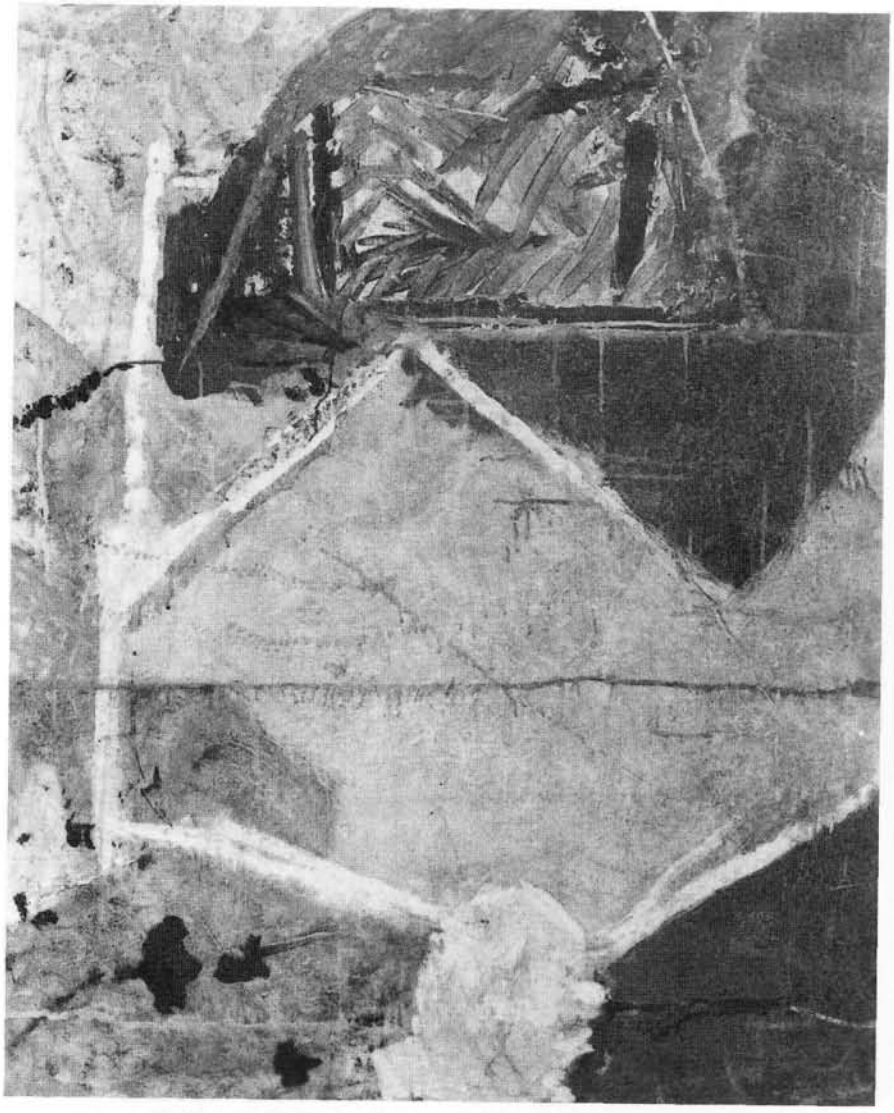

Fig. 4 Kenzo Okada, *Work*, 1953, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo

Fig. 5 Philip Guston, *Passage*, 1957, Private Collection, Courtesy of McKee Gallery, New York

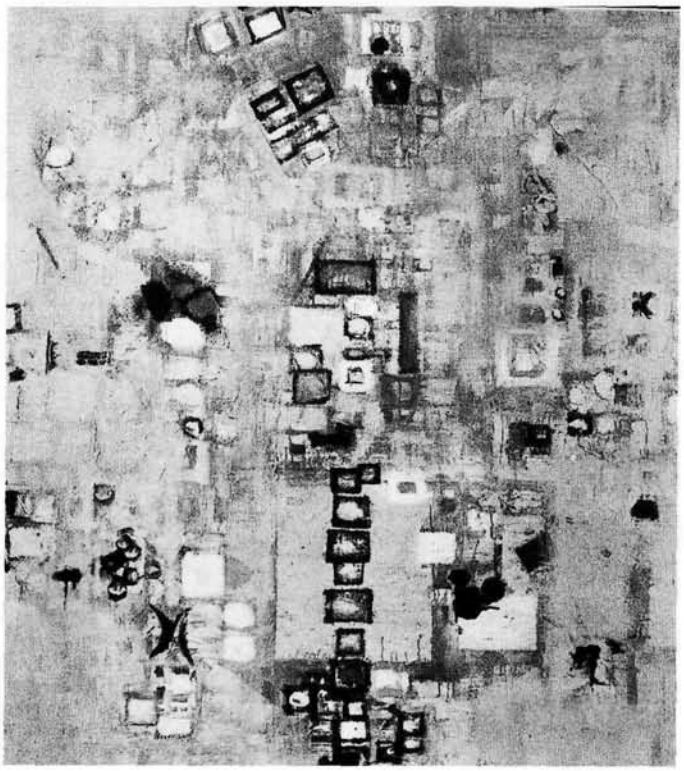

Fig. 6 Genichiro Inokuma, *Accumulate*, 1956-57, Collection unknown. From Anne L. Jenks and Thomas M. Messer, *Contemporary Painters of Japanese Origin in America* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1958), plate 9

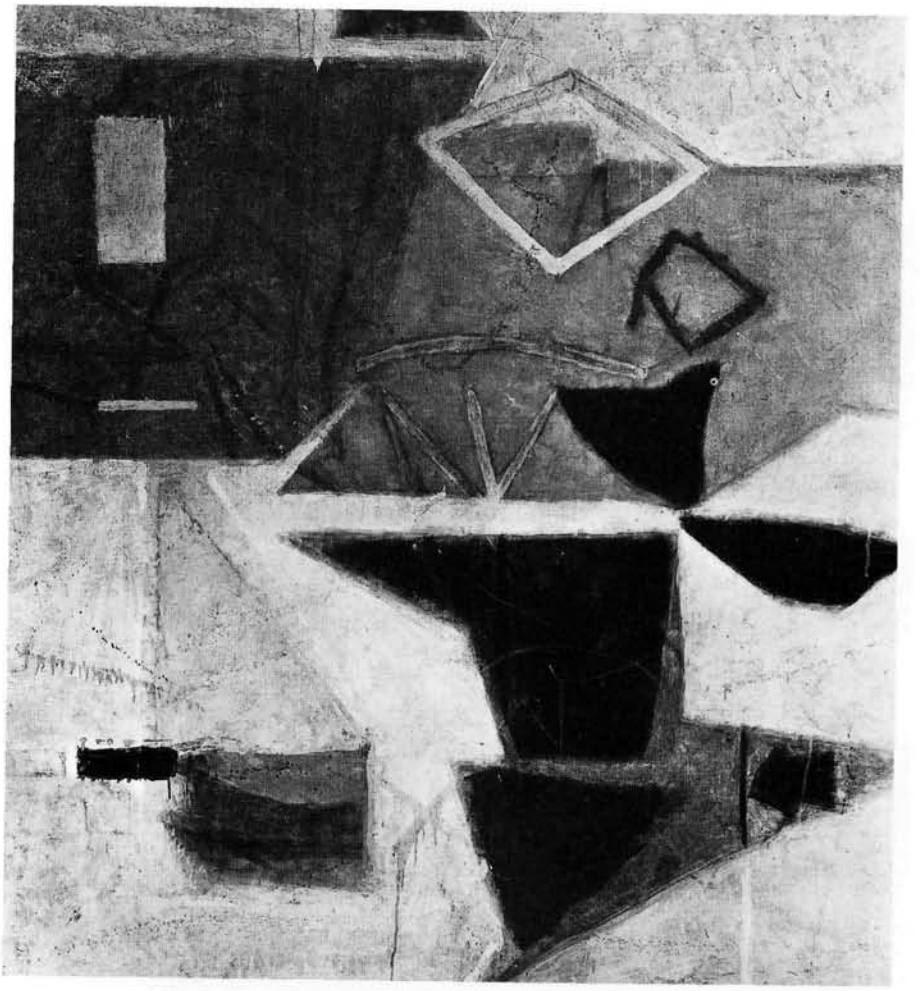

Fig. 7 Kenzo Okada, *Number 3*, 1953, Museum of Modern Art, New York (photo: © 1998 Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Fig. 8 Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, c. 1948, Museum of Modern Art, New York © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (photo: © 1998 Museum of Modern Art, New York)

different. This contrast in language both depended upon, and reiterated, a culturally constructed stereotype of the Japanese. By using such language repeatedly, critics not only utilized the myth but actually helped to perpetuate it. It is certainly possible to imagine evocative descriptions which are not so imbued with feminine associations. For example, terms such as *muted, subdued, luminous,* and *pale* could describe colors and forms that these writers define as *exquisite, delicate, serene,* and *sensuous.* One critic's description of Okada illustrates an alternative method for discussing style:

> ...his work is extremely eclectic, and yet it is strongly original; he uses occasional drips and spatters, but with such impersonality that no brush or hand-movement is implied. Again, where the individual forms have the look of non-art, as if they were not "painted," the painting as a whole is powerfully composed—in fact the formality of the composition is the first thing that strikes the eye...this formality itself is intensely personal. The paintings are wholly abstract, very large and somber, and from the point of view of articulation they are quite simple. A great deal of the strength seems to proceed from the imbalance (or balance) of large masses or areas, an effect in itself not unlike Malevitch and Kline. Okada uses a level surface, and yet places great emphasis on texture, creating effects like the weathering of smooth cement or hardwood. The colors are cool, sometimes cold tans and grays and muted earth colors. He is clearly among the important painters on the scene today.[64]

This writer very accurately conveyed the essence of Okada's work, yet completely avoided feminized, poetic language and reliance on the Japanese artistic stereotype. This rare commentary is one of only a few which did not relate to the constructed image.

Those critics who did utilize the construct conveniently ignored pertinent facts. As art historian Michael Sullivan has commented, "[I]t is rare to find a Japanese painter who comes to the West reasserting his 'Japaneseness.' Generally the acceptance of Western art is whole-hearted, for that is after all what they come for."[65] Japanese artists who came to the United States generally did so to declare their individuality and to find artistic freedom. Many, including those in this study, had a life-long interest in the West. They received much or all of their training not in traditional Japanese art, but in European styles. Many traveled in Europe, and most cited Western sources as primary artistic influences. Okada studied European art at the Tokyo Academy of Art and then in Paris for three years.[66] His pre-1950 work, influenced by Paul Cézanne, André Derain, and Edouard Vuillard, appears very Western. Inokuma also received Western academic training at the Tokyo Academy of Art, where he studied from 1922 to 1926. He then lived and studied in Europe from 1938 until 1940. Henri Matisse was his greatest influence; in fact, it was Matisse's interest in Oriental styles that first turned Inokuma's attention to Japanese traditions. Takai, too, received Western academic training. His influences included Fernand Léger, José Orozco, and Diego Rivera. Suzuki took only one class in Japanese art. He came to the United States at age 19, and by the time he had his first solo exhibition in New York in 1957, he had received far more artistic training in the United States than in Japan. With so much of their training focused on Western styles and techniques, the perception that these Japanese artists worked in an intuitively abstract "Japanese" manner seems especially hollow.

Although critics overwhelmingly discussed work by these expatriate artists in Japanese terms, there were certainly interpretations contradicting the stereotype. While authors such as Messer and Jenks alleged that a definitive Japanese style did exist, others claimed it was not possible to determine an artist's nationality when viewing abstract works. One reviewer of an exhibit of Japanese abstract art claimed that the paintings evinced no feeling or sense of Japan, and commented on "...the peculiar leveling effect of abstraction. Though it fosters a great variety of individual expression, it tends to suppress the national and regional traits which once set one art off from another."[67] Japanese writers insisted that characteristics typically interpreted as "Japanese" actually had little to do with Japan. One Japanese critic condemned those "who seek in current painting something 'Japanesque' or 'Japanesy,' [meaning] 'softly colored, delicate executions of large and hazy forms.'"[68] Another Japanese writer maintained that Okada's work, interpreted by American critics as very "Japanese," bore little resemblance to Japanese tradition.[69] These repudiations by Japanese writers further disrupt essentialist notions of an innate national artistic identity.

The complications inherent to the idea of an essential or national artistic character are well illustrated by Okada's experience. Significantly, the American Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924, which prohibited Japanese immigrants from becoming American citizens, was repealed only in 1952, just two years after Okada's arrival in the United States. He did not become an American citizen until 1960. However, Okada was represented by one of New York's most influential galleries, Betty Parsons, and as early as 1954, his painting, *Solstice*, was included in the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition, *Younger American Painters*. *Solstice* was also included in the *61st American Exhibition of American Painting and Sculpture* at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1954, where it won an award. In 1955, Okada received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Prize,[70] and that same year, he represented the United States at the São Paulo Biennale.[71] He also represented the United States and won an award at the Venice Biennale of 1958. Okada was not yet a citizen, and his work was defined in opposition to masculine and powerful "American" Abstract Expressionism, yet he won American awards and represented the United States internationally. Was his work "Japanese" or "American?" His anomalous position challenges the notion that Abstract Expressionism was indeed masculine, monolithic, and solely "American."

Henry Louis Gates maintains that language indicates both differences between cultures and their possession of power.[72] The term "colonization," more often associated with European intrusion into Africa and the Far East, does not immediately come to mind when considering foreign immigration into the United States, but the 1950s response to Japanese artists in the U.S. can certainly be seen as a type of "domestic colonization." The Japanese were kept in a position separate from, yet complementary to, American artists. The United States (the powerful) imaged the Japanese (colonial subject) as benignly primitive, feminized, and ultimately non-threatening. As a conquered former enemy, the Japanese confirmed American strength; as child-like, feminized primitives, they also testified to American benevolence and superiority. The stereotype of the colonial subject is an "ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, over-determinism, guilt, aggressivity."[73] The 1950s stereotype of the Japanese artist was just such an ambivalent composite—reflecting back what America desired to see.

The original Abstract Expressionists distrusted Western civilization and viewed themselves as separate from mainstream American culture. This further complicates the notion of "domestic colonization." Abstract Expressionism initially received very negative reviews. There was "widespread indignation, even fury, against the current of anti-art in New York painting,"[74] and it took well over a decade for the movement to receive popular and critical acceptance. Because these artists identified with and emulated primitive or colonized peoples, they might even be defined as "anti-colonial." In viewing themselves as separate from the mainstream, they, in a manner, colonized themselves.

Thus, there were two "colonized" groups: New York School artists whose "otherness" was self-imposed, and Japanese artists upon whom "otherness" was imposed. As Michael Leja has claimed,

> Cross cultural borrowing in which the borrowed culture is constructed as primitive is part of a larger exercise of unequal power relations between the two cultures. Naming the other "primitive" is itself an exercise of power which historically has coincided with other forms of direct and indirect economic and political exploitation.[75]

The 1950s view of the Japanese as feminized, primitive, and Other was political in several senses. This perception was inherently connected to the United States' new role in world politics. Maintaining authority over the Japanese, a former enemy, helped the United States assert and define itself as a world power.

The gendered difference which was articulated between Japanese and Western artists might be termed racial rather than cultural. Artists such as Rothko and Hoffman were not American but European; they were part of the wave of European artists who flocked to New York both prior to and during the war. However, these Abstract Expressionist artists were not considered different or Other by mid-twentieth-century American critics. They easily assumed, or had ascribed to them, the heroic American Abstract Expressionist persona which emerged in the 1950s and which became the accepted model during the next several decades. Japanese artists, on the other hand, were clearly marked as Other by contemporary writers.

The New York School's "self-colonization" shifted into the Heroic American Abstract Expressionist paradigm of the last quarter century, while work by the Japanese artists has largely been forgotten.[76] It is possible that the work of the white, Western, male painters was more significant and ultimately more important than that of the Japanese artists. However, it is also possible that critics and historians, when writing the history of Abstract Expressionism, chose to ignore the presence of the Japanese. I have attempted to illustrate that Japanese artists received critical and cultural support during the 1950s, and that critical responses to their work centered on a stereotype which ultimately helped define "American" Abstract Expressionism. The fact that these Japanese artists enjoyed a positive reception challenges the modern perception of Abstract Expressionism as being embodied solely in the heroic, white, male painter. The work of these Japanese painters should encourage us to further question these paradigms.

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1. Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 204.
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3. Thomas M. Messer and Anne L. Jenks, *Contemporary Painters of Japanese Origin in America* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1958).
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Dr. Keith Christiansen

An Interview with Keith Christiansen

P.J. Switzer and Jennifer Dework

Currently the Jayne Wrightsman Curator of Art in the Department of European Paintings, Keith Christiansen has been a member of the staff at the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1977. Dr. Christiansen's original interest was in the area of fifteenth-century Sienese art. He completed a doctoral dissertation at Harvard University in 1977 on Gentile da Fabriano, and his research resulted in a monograph which was awarded the Mitchell Prize in 1983 for the best first book in art history. Dr. Christiansen's other awards include a Fulbright Grant to Italy in 1975 and the Alfred H. Barr Jr. Award in 1988 for distinguished catalogues. His curatorial projects at the Metropolitan Museum have ranged from art of the early Renaissance to Caravaggio. He has served as Adjunct Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University since 1985, and has also taught at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Dr. Christiansen's most recent endeavor was the exhibition, Giambattista Tiepolo, 1696-1770, *in the fall of 1996. Dr. Christiansen was the editor and principal author of the accompanying catalogue.*

This interview was conducted on May 15, 1997, in Dr. Christiansen's office.

Rutgers Art Review: What brought you to the study of art history?

Keith Christiansen: I fell into art history. I'm from California and art history was not part of the curriculum. I spent my junior year of college in France, and I would say that had a very strong impact. The first real art history classes I took were in France. I traveled a great deal. Those were the days when it cost nothing. You had your Eurailpass and for $350 you went anywhere. I spent a lot of time in museums and decided then that I wanted to be an historian. I entered the medieval studies program at UCLA, but realized by the end of the first semester that I was not cut out for it. Medieval Latin did me in. At the same time, I had enrolled in a seminar on Leonardo da Vinci, which I enjoyed. I shifted departments at the end of my first semester.

RAR: It would be helpful if you could briefly go over your educational background.

KC: As I said, I'm a West Coast person, and my education was that of the 1950s-1960s public school system. I grew up in Seattle, Washington, and moved to California when I was thirteen. I did my undergraduate work at UC Santa Cruz, and then three years of graduate school at UCLA. In my third year at UCLA, my advisor said, "Look, if you're really serious about this, I think you ought to go to Harvard." She had been a pupil of Sydney Freedberg's, and wrote to him on my behalf. At the same time, I was also thinking of a career as a restorer, since one of the things that had originally brought me to art history was an interest in making art. I applied to Harvard, but I also went to Cooperstown, New York for an interview in conservation. I actually took bone-head chemistry during my third year as a graduate student to demonstrate my seriousness. I did not get accepted at Cooperstown, so Harvard it was.

RAR: Which of your professors was most influential?

KC: I find that a difficult question to answer. Not because I was particularly directed, or because I was impervious to influence; far from it. Rather, it is because so frequently the people who really molded the way I thought about things were authors I had never met. You see, when I was at UC Santa Cruz there were no professional art historians on the faculty. I suppose that is one of the reasons I have such a dilettantish approach to art history — which may not be altogether bad.

RAR: Actually, that brings us to the next question. Who are the people outside the academic world that had a particular influence on you?

KC: Let me preface my remarks by saying that I think a person's take on things — including academic studies — is a complex matter. You can look back and put things together and say, "Oh yes, this was important," but in a real sense we are reconfiguring our past. The current tendency to identify yourself by race, orientation, political position, etc., strikes me as no less disingenuous.

In regard to influences, there are many. For example, in high school I had a couple of English teachers who were absolutely extraordinary and inspired a love of both literature and opera. They took me to my first opera performance. That was certainly a formative moment, although only when I began to work on Tiepolo did it intersect with my work as an art historian. I also had some wonderful professors as an undergraduate, particularly in French literature, and I attach enormous importance to a two-year course on Western and non-Western civilizations. At Santa Cruz, I also met two people who became my dearest friends. One taught art, and to this day I derive enormous pleasure from going to exhibitions and museums with her. The other, her husband, who died a few years ago, wrote poetry and was perhaps the most entertaining and brilliant person I have known, as well as the most vehemently anti-academic. Whenever I pick up a "trendy" article written in what I call "Deutsch-English," I think of what fun he would have had with it.

Then there were the books. The first three art history books I read were Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art*, Kenneth Clark's *The Nude; A Study in Ideal Form*, and Heinrich Wölfflin's *Classic Art*. I have no idea what their impact on me was, which may be a sign of their enormous influence. This year I re-read Wölfflin and was astonished at his insights and mastery of the critical language of Renaissance writers. He is sometimes presented as the inventor of formal analysis, but that hardly does him justice.

I can also distinctly remember reading Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* and Émile Mâle's *The Gothic Image*. Those two works really opened windows in my California-centered imagination and struck a responsive chord. The same is true of Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, which I read my first year in graduate school, and of Denis Mahon's *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory*. In 1985, on the occasion of the Caravaggio exhibition I co-organized at the Metropolitan, I met Sir Denis. Later, we co-authored two articles on Caravaggio. We have become good friends and for this I feel very fortunate. He belongs to a truly extraordinary generation of scholars, to which mine is deeply indebted.

What I want to add is the importance of travel and access to great works of art as a primary intellectual stimulus. It was during my junior year abroad that I fell in love with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian painting in general, and Sienese painting

in particular. I had never heard of the Lorenzetti brothers or of Sassetta, but they became key figures in my pantheon. The intellectual interest came later. Moreover, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century painting provided me with access to other artists. I came to Domenichino through Ghirlandaio, and to Guido Reni through Vitale da Bologna, which sounds a bit strange. To me, the important thing in studying the past is to come through some door and then explore the room that you've entered. The door is whatever it is. For me, it was a passion for fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art.

RAR: How did you become interested in museum work?

KC: During my academic career I never thought of working in a museum. However, I always loved objects. I think that one of the important things was the fact that I came to art in a roundabout way, rather than via an art history course, where I might have been inclined to apply categories to objects. When I fell in love with the Lorenzetti and Sassetta, I had never heard of them. I became interested because of a visual response, not because, for example, I was interested in the idea of the commune and communal arts, or of religious revivalism and monastic movements of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. I tend to see works of art as pieces that can be fitted into a larger puzzle, but my first response is to the individual object. Without knowing it, I was a true museum person.

My advisor at Harvard was James Ackerman, and he saw it right away. When I would try to write ambitious, synthetic papers, he would say, "Well, you know Keith, we don't all have to be the person with the great idea. There's room for the connoisseur." I thought, "What a disparaging thing to say!" But then I realized that my real love at Harvard was to go to the director's office and ask for the key to the storeroom. At that time security was not the concern it is now, and I would spend a couple of hours alone looking at things. When I took my exams at Harvard, there were general essay questions, a section on historiography and one on connoisseurship, in which specific objects were put before you. I could hardly wait for the connoisseurship section. I was anxious to see what they were going to put before me, and how I might articulate my response to it.

Despite this, the reason I am now working in a museum is serendipitous. I went to the College Art Association's annual convention and subjugated myself to those humiliating interviews, out of which came nothing. I have to say, that for me, there is no greater indictment of the academic world then the way job-seekers are treated. In the end, I was offered the possibility of a one-year job, substituting for someone who was going on leave. Then I received a call from Freedberg's office, "Keith, what do you think about working at the Met?" I responded, "I'm not in a position not to think about working at the Met. It sounds great!" "Well," he replied, "There's a possibility of hiring a curator there. Just keep quiet and we'll see if this position actually opens up. Then you can go down and see John Pope-Hennessy about it."

There's a story behind this. You see, the year I started my thesis work on Gentile da Fabriano, Pope-Hennessy came to the Fogg Art Museum to give a lecture on Donatello. He had just taken over the directorship of the British Museum after his long tenure at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Now, this was a person whose writings I deeply admired. In fact, I patterned my thesis on his Fra Angelico monograph. You can see how old-fashioned I was right from the outset. Of course, the so-called "new art history" was something still on the horizon, but whereas some in my generation have

made the switch-over very easily, I missed the wave. But I never surfed at Santa Cruz either!

In any event, Pope-Hennessy was preparing the second edition of his Fra Angelico book. He gave the lecture, and it was arranged that graduate students would meet him. After the lecture, we were all very excited and convened in Warburg Hall, where the beautiful *Crucifixion* by Fra Angelico used to hang. I can see the scene today. There he stood, with a covey of students around him. Dead silence. The "Great Man" was there, and nobody dared to speak. I thought the situation ridiculous: were we just going to stand and stare at this person looking at a picture? I thought, "Somebody's got to break the ice." I made some superficial comment, such as: "Isn't it marvelous? Don't you love the way the kneeling cardinal looks up and the way his hands are clasped. I can never get over the expression on John's face." Of course, he immediately began to talk. Then he turned around and said that there was a picture he needed to see in storage. The director of the Fogg said, "Keith, why don't you show it to him since you know the storeroom." Of course, I was flattered. While we were in the storeroom I asked if he would also like to see two Nicolas Poussins, which were temporarily off view and for which I had a particular fondness. Again, we chatted about them in general rather than art historical terms.

This apparent non-event began a chain of equally serendipitous meetings. During the next year and a half, when I was in Florence doing thesis research, I ran into him twice more: once when I was beginning, and then again on the day I was closing my bank account and preparing to leave. He was standing in line ahead of me, I said hello, and he invited me for drinks. As it turned out, he had just accepted the post as the head of the department of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum. One thing led to another, and I was offered a curatorial position. I've been at the Metropolitan ever since, which is twenty-one years now.

RAR: How has working in a museum affected your approach to art history?

KC: When I came out of graduate school, my main interests were academic ones: subjects that challenged me intellectually. One of the things that it took me a long time to come to grips with was that there are more issues than those one would work on for an article, scholarly journal, or a book. Among the memorable experiences I had working with Pope-Hennessy for ten years was his extraordinary combination of visual response and academic interest, and the way they came together in the museum's collection.

The things that interested him weren't *recherché* points that only somebody who had read certain articles would be able to understand. They were issues that turned one back to the object. I think that what I had always admired in Pope-Hennessy's work was the way he began with an object and then branched out to a variety of questions. Twenty years ago these were likely to be articulated as questions of patronage, function, influence, and so forth. Now we would add a further range of issues. I would say that this concern with the individual object has come to frame the sorts of things that I am interested in. I love historical studies and cultural studies that establish backgrounds or contexts. I think, however, that if you are writing about an individual work and do not enhance the way one sees or experiences that work, then something is wrong. It might be material that is interesting in and of itself, but I only feel really engaged when it changes the way I actually see or experience the work of art.

The task of the art historian is to question categories, and I think that opening up new approaches to the study of a period is very important. I have problems, however, when we get further and further away from the actual works of art and begin to play intellectual games that either have very little to do with the period in question, or with the objects that are the focus of the study.

RAR: Let's talk about the exhibition you organized last year on Giambattista Tiepolo. How do you deal with an artist who, some might say, really needs to be seen *in situ* to be fully appreciated?

KC: Exhibitions are very artificial commodities. They can, however, have a real impact. Anybody who studies the history of exhibitions will know that they can act as a catalyst for a generation of scholars. People going to an exhibition have the possibility of responding to objects in a way that they might not have, had they been in a different context. Think back to the landmark exhibition of Early Netherlandish painting held in 1902 in Ghent. This was a catalyst for Hulin de Loo and Max Friedlander. It also played a part in Huizinga deciding to write *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Think of the great Baroque exhibitions held in Bologna in the 1950s. These exhibitions marked the end of the study of Baroque painting as a highly specialized subject involving only a handful of scholars. They made Baroque painting something that was accessible to a much wider audience and they galvanized a whole generation of students, who perhaps saw Guido Reni and thought, "This is somebody worth studying." In a similar fashion, I have been told by a number of students who went to *Painting in Renaissance Siena, 1420-1500*, held at the Metropolitan in 1989, that it was a determining factor in their decision to study Sienese painting.

With Tiepolo, it is perfectly true that anybody who really wants to appreciate his stupefying achievements has to go to Würzburg, the Palazzo Labia in Venice, or the Villa Valmarana in Vicenza. On the other hand, I think that you could visit each of those buildings individually, or see an altarpiece *in situ*, and not receive the same jolt you do walking into a room filled with his paintings.

When you organize an exhibition, you operate within limits, the same way you do with a book. You must first define what issues you can address. The success of an exhibition is measured by whether those issues are addressed in a comprehensible fashion and whether they ignite the imagination. My criteria for the success of an exhibition is not the number of people who come through the doors, but the number of people who are moved to think about the subject in a different way.

This is why I'm always intensely curious about the way students, for example, react. With Tiepolo, I was very pleased with something my teenage daughter said one night. We were at the dinner table and I was lamenting, "Well, you know, in the end Tiepolo was only visited by two hundred thousand people." This is a respectable showing, but far short of the four hundred thousand that will visit an Impressionist exhibition. My daughter said, "Oh, but Dad, you know this was an exhibition for people who really love painting and who are really interested." It turns out a number of her classmates had seen the show and were awed. That's really more important than a good review.

RAR: Regarding the newspaper reviews of the Tiepolo exhibit, it was intriguing the way critics wrote about Tiepolo, using terms such as "vacuous," and stating that he

"lacked emotional weight." How did you respond to these criticisms and did you ever feel that the criticism was personal?

KC: No, I never took it personally. I have never responded to criticism publicly. Exhibitions give a curator different levels of satisfaction. It is the same with articles: some you are quite proud of and others make you think, "Well, you know, I should have worked a bit more on that one." When I finished mounting the Siena exhibition in 1989, I felt, "This is what Sienese painting means to me. There are other ways of looking at it, but this is what drew me to it. If other people come and get excited, that is enough." I felt great satisfaction. When I finished Tiepolo, I walked through the galleries and I felt that same sense of satisfaction. I thought, "This is the artist whom I really love. Other people can come, they can look at it the way they want, and they can see it the way they're going to see it. However, there is in this show all the various guises of his imagination; the ways of seeing and the modes of painting that I think are there. Those who are responsive will see it too." Interestingly, the people who shared my response were collectors rather than critics. Collectors, on the whole, are much more open-minded. A number of them came up to me and said how the show had completely transformed the way that they saw the artist. Too often critics come with their own preconceptions and critical agendas.

I think one of the crises of art history today is the lack of truly informed critics in the popular press. I am constantly astonished about the degree to which those who are responsible for providing a lens for the public are not in a position to do so. As Professor William Barcham, one of the co-authors of the exhibition catalogue, joked to me, "Well, you can imagine that many of these journalists must have taken a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century art history course and Tiepolo simply wasn't mentioned. So they came to think that he doesn't count."

It is remarkable the degree to which we still live in a period in which even intelligent and cultured people are dominated by the old categories laid down by John Ruskin, combined with the aestheticism of the Bloomsbury School. This despite current trends in academic circles. There is also a notion that for an artist to be important, he has to speak to the modern experience. Why? The twentieth century didn't exist when Tiepolo was painting. How could he possibly be thinking of addressing a generation that he didn't know? Annibale Carracci predicated the whole vocabulary of classicism on a notion of idealist timeless values which, in retrospect, was peculiar to the seventeenth century. The job of the critic is to try to pull him or herself out of the twentieth-century experience, to view these things in some sort of historical context, and then to bring that context to life. The inability to objectify your experience is a very troublesome issue, and the emphasis on subjectivity by some art historians is very dangerous.

RAR: It seemed as if many of the critics came in to the exhibit with their reviews already written. How could you look at the *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha* and say that Tiepolo lacked emotional weight?

KC: I sometimes feel this too. For example, I was sent a review from the *London Telegraph* about a Baroque exhibition at the National Gallery and I thought, "This review could have been written one hundred years ago, the flavor of Ruskin is so strong." I'd have to say the same thing with Tiepolo. A friend commented to me, "You

know, all these people stand in front of the pictures and think that they are experiencing something that is their own, but what they are experiencing is an uncritical reaction and bias that has been inherited from a previous generation." This is true, and it raises the problems facing a curator in presenting works of art to the public and the real issues in the teaching and study of art history. I don't mean to play down specialized studies, of which I do a number myself. However, the larger issue is the way our cultural legacy is made comprehensible and vital to people at large. Of course, the range of preparedness is enormous. It is my experience from giving lectures at the Metropolitan that New York is unique in having a large number of extraordinarily cultured people. They may not know Baroque painting, but they are passionate about early music, or they love metaphysical poetry, etc. I frequently receive very interesting questions that I had never thought of but that people raise from another line of interest. On the other hand, there is also a public that is completely ignorant. Everything is new to them. It is particularly for that public that critics who write for newspapers can open a door—or close it. This is where my irritation comes, because the public would be perfectly open to an experience if they were told it is legitimate.

RAR: How does working with other institutions, especially ones outside the United States, affect an exhibition?

KC: Organizing an exhibition is an administrative nightmare. I've worked with Florentines, Sienese, Romans, Neapolitans, Bolognese, and now with Venetians. It's an educational experience, but I'm an Italophile. You do come to understand how strong regional traits still are in Italy. A great deal of the success of an exhibition depends on how you get along with people and the sorts of relationships you are able to establish. This is true in academic life as well. Look at it as a graduate student maneuvering a thesis through advisors who don't talk to each other. That's the way organizing an exhibition can sometimes seem.

RAR: How do you think the Tiepolo exhibition re-established his status in the history of art?

KC: I don't know that it did, or could hope to do so. I think it will require another ten years to see if some student responded to it and decided to take up the matter.

RAR: You mentioned earlier that your primary interest is the early Italian Renaissance. However, in addition to Tiepolo, you've done exhibitions on Caravaggio, Ribera, and Mantegna. How you feel about organizing an exhibition that is not in your field?

KC: I've always started reluctantly. One of the reasons I did the Siena exhibition right after the one on Caravaggio was because I feared being pulled away from an area of specialty, a territory that I felt was really what I was most interested in. In any job, whether at a university or a museum, the institution plays a very large part in the direction your studies or interests take. The idea of doing an exhibition on Tiepolo was not something that originated with me. But I long ago left specialization behind simply because it was not viable in my work. I can't keep up on the bibliography of any given subject. I don't keep up on current art historical writing because when I'm working on one project or another, I can only manage to do the reading necessary to carry off that

project. It is a bit like a never-ending graduate career in which you always have a seminar paper due. Fortunately for me, I happen to have loved my graduate years!

The great pleasure of working at this institution is that I have gotten to know a fairly wide spectrum of Italian painting. The real difficulty is that because so much of my work is linked to exhibitions, I find that I have to move on to another area just when I feel that I'm getting into a subject. When I finished the Mantegna exhibition I felt that what I would really like to do is write a book on the creation of the humanist artist, because I think that Mantegna is the key figure. But this is not going to happen. In a similar vein, with Tiepolo, I would really like to write a book with a series of essays addressing different aspects of his art: Tiepolo and the theater; Tiepolo and the notion of artistic invention; and so on.

RAR: What advice do you have for graduate students looking to enter the museum field?

KC: I would certainly encourage students to consider museum work. When I went to the Fogg in the seventies it was not beneath contempt to become a museum curator. Maybe this was a peculiarity of Harvard, I don't know. Obviously, one of the reasons I considered it was simply because it was a job, but I also thought, "Pope-Hennessy is here, so obviously there is a commitment to scholarship." I think that one of the most unfortunate tendencies in some academic circles right now is the denigration of museums and people who work in museums. I think that most of what is said is not only false, but based on total ignorance as well as arrogance of the most unforgivable sort. It is a shame students aren't encouraged to think of a whole spectrum of careers besides teaching: curatorial, publishing, or dealing. I have learned an enormous amount from dealers and restorers, and I think it is simply foolish to cut yourself off from all these spheres. I do believe that some students are more suited for academic work, but they will miss a lot of fun!

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