

RESEARCH REPORTS

BALSDON FELLOWSHIP

Divergent judgements: works of art in contention, Rome 1540–1610

The research I undertook during the period I held the Balsdon Fellowship at the British School at Rome was for my book on religious art in Rome in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There has been a long-standing interest among art historians in the relationship between the visual arts of later sixteenth-century Catholic Europe and the Counter-Reformation. Work on the subject has run into intractable problems, because, in my opinion, scholars have deployed problematic ideas of period style to think about the art and used rather simplistic notions of the Counter-Reformation to consider the culture within which the art was produced. I have tried to develop ways of sidestepping some of these methodological problems.

Firstly, I have concentrated on Rome in order to focus on one particular regime and one particular cultural context, albeit a particularly important one. I have tried to identify and analyse the principles, rules and guidelines that were set out in the period itself to guide regulatory authorities and to inform artists and their patrons about what the purposes of religious art were and the appropriate ways of achieving them. There were universal formulations, such as the decrees of the Council of Trent; there were the regulatory decrees of the cardinal vicars of Rome; there were treatises; and finally an array of miscellaneous statements, as, for example, the foundation documents of the Accademia di San Luca. It often has been assumed that by analysing works of visual art of the period in terms of these rules and principles it would be possible to deduce which were likely to have been problematic. But this is an unsatisfactory procedure because it is built upon layers of largely arbitrary assumption, not least because the officially proclaimed precepts were sometimes mutually contradictory.

So, secondly, I have tried to build my arguments around actual cases where controversies developed over works of religious art. There were those that provoked acts of censorship, most prominently Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, which was eventually subjected to corrective interventions. Equally, some of Caravaggio's altarpieces were removed from the altars for which they were designed. Such cases are documented reasonably well, but actually not understood very well. I had to try to separate conjecture from what is actually known about these famous examples, in order to define more clearly what caused the difficulties. But I have also identified many other cases where controversies arose.

My basic argument is that underlying the controversies provoked by certain images in sixteenth-century Rome were recurrent and ultimately irresolvable problems of Christian religious painting and sculpture. One of these was the problem of the relationship between the artist and the meaning attached to the work he produced. The artist was a craftsman equipped with skills that allowed him to transform his materials into an image; the resulting image was expected to edify and to command veneration. But the artist was human: perhaps unable to make a suitable image, or so determined to show off his skill that this became an end in itself. This was connected with another issue: the problematic relationship between response to a manufactured object and spiritual devotion. These millennial problems became acute in the context of the extraordinary development of the visual arts in the sixteenth century, most powerfully with the work of Michelangelo. His *Last Judgement* for the Sistine Chapel, caught up in the most violent polemics from the moment of its unveiling in 1541, sensitized observers to those problems in a way that had not occurred before. What emerges in that case is an argument about the way in which artistry — or artistic skill — should be deployed in relation to the primary objective of religious painting: to arouse devotion in the spectators. And it seems to me that we have a text that suggests a self-consciousness about this. Francisco de Holanda's report of conversations with Michelangelo that purportedly took place in Rome in the autumn of 1538 includes a famous passage in which Michelangelo distinguished between the kind of painting that will move the naturally devout and the kind of painting that will move those who are not so. Those who are naturally devout will weep when they see dignified saints and beautiful angels — they are, after all, the kinds of phenomena to which no one could possibly object. However, such representations will not affect those who are not already inclined in that direction. What the latter need are works in which the artist deploys every means available to achieve persuasiveness. Such work may need to be difficult and challenging.

One important implication of this is that there were no agreed criteria for judging what a devout image would or should be. Acceptability will have depended upon many things, including context and audience. It is also clear that the arguments cannot be reduced to ecclesiastical versus lay positions: a work of religious art that does not achieve its purpose is quite as susceptible to a secular rhetorical critique as to a religious one. Finally, it is clear that the potential power of visual art exercised a fascination: even some of those disappointed by specific works of Michelangelo and Caravaggio could feel that if only their skills were harnessed correctly, a profoundly devout art might result. My hope is that my results will be able to throw radically new light on that old theme of art and the Counter-Reformation.

I should end by saying how stimulating it was to be member of the scholarly community of the School for three months. I am particularly grateful to Sue Russell, Valerie Scott and Maria Pia Malvezzi for all their help and support.

MICHAEL BURY

(*History of Art, University of Edinburgh*)