To Sow the Heart: Touch, Spiritual Anatomy, and Image Theory in Michelangelo's Noli me tangere *

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Long neglected and misunderstood, Michelangelo's Noli me tangere *(ca. 1531–32) features a puzzling figuration of its biblical subject, wherein Christ, rather than withdrawing from Mary Magdalene, touches her left breast with his finger. Following Augustine's interpretation that Christ at this moment sows the seed of faith in the Magdalene's heart, this article explains this unprecedented motif as a dissemblant sign for the implantation of faith in the soul, while arguing, on account of the gesture's resonance with issues of spiritual and sensual touching, that the painting makes an original theoretical statement about the making and viewing of devotional images more generally.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In most Italian Renaissance representations of the biblical event known as the Noli me tangere, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ near his tomb and, having heard his command not to touch him — "Noli me tangere" in Latin — withdraws her hands, formerly stretched out to grab him. Naturally enough, touch is dramatically withheld or entirely suppressed in these pictures, its very denial being a precondition of lucid storytelling. Yet there is one peculiar image of the subject that defies these generalizations, the *Noli me tangere* of Michelangelo (1475–1564). In his *Noli me tangere*, begun in 1531 (fig. 1), Michelangelo made a moment of touch the very center of his figural exposition, and in this sense, among others, his work has appeared to fly in the face of convention and decorum. The purpose of this essay will be to understand Michelangelo's seemingly eccentric decision to feature touch in a Noli me tangere scene, and to understand how touch in this work represents something more than what

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FIGURE 1. Michelangelo and Pontormo. *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1531. Florence, Casa Bounarroti. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

might at first be expected. Pointing to an experience beyond mere bodily contact, touch served as an inverted sign for incorporeal sensations, working even to elucidate the ways holy images should be used and made.

Commissioned by Nicolas von Schomberg (1472–1537), Archbishop of Capua and Governor of Florence, for the powerful Alfonso d'Avalos (1502–46) — who was himself working on behalf of his cousin, the pious

poetess Vittoria Colonna (1490–1547) — Michelangelo furnished a cartoon for the *Noli me tangere* in 1531 that was soon afterward executed in oils on panel by Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1557).[1] Although some of the initial documents suggest that Michelangelo was to paint the image himself, Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) writes that Michelangelo suggested to his patrons that Pontormo could most ably carry the design to completion.[2] It certainly was not unusual for Michelangelo to offer his cartoons to other painters, as he had done on a number of occasions for Sebastiano del Piombo (1485–1547).[3] And from the little that is known from the documents, Michelangelo's patrons did not much mind. One may note, however, the curious symmetry in Michelangelo's and Colonna's both having worked through middlemen in the commission and execution of the painting: it seems that, in response to Colonna's intermediaries, Michelangelo spoke through his own.[4]

Two versions of the painting survive today, one in the Casa Buonarroti in Florence and the other in a private collection in Milan, both probably carried out by Pontormo, perhaps with assistance from his workshop.[5] Although this essay focuses most of its analysis on the Florentine version, the similarities between the two far outweigh the differences between them. Indeed, the two versions differ primarily in terms of the specifics of their settings, for whereas both show a rising terrain with a city and battlements, the Florentine version features ascending stairs in the same place that the Milanese panel presents an open sarcophagus in the middle ground.[6] And while this essay will briefly consider the meaning of these backgrounds, it should be noted at the outset that its main concern is the two biblical protagonists, Christ and Mary Magdalene, who define the works' larger significance and whose figural comportment is most essential to this essay's reading.

[1]The details of the commission are complex: see Hirst and Mayr, which reviews the known documentation. Another such review is available in de Tolnay, 3:197. Wilde, 106, first determined that Colonna was the intended recipient.

[2]Vasari, 5:326.

[3]See ibid., 6:113, for a partial list of *disegni*, *cartoni*, and *modegli* provided to other artists.

[4]Perhaps the artist wished to speak through agents to remain aloof or because he thought of himself as a fellow aristocrat, as shown by the first passages of Condivi, 7.

[5]On historiography and attribution of versions, see Forster, 144–45; Berti, 1966, cl; Wallace, 1988, 446; Berti, 1993, 258–70; Costamagna, 215–17; Hirst and Mayr, 340. On another version by Battista Franco, see Sobotik, 4–8. It will be noted that the authorial priority of one or the other version is not essential to the arguments that follow.

[6]For further comparison, see Hirst and Mayr, 337, 340, which cites evidence that the image was meant for a small, private space. Vasari, 5:326, records that a second painting was painted from Michelangelo's cartoon for Alessandro Vitelli. For a color reproduction of the image, which could not be obtained for this publication, see Goffen, 2002, 319 (fig. 167).

At the moment of the *Noli me tangere*'s creation, Florence had only recently fallen to the imperial forces of Emperor Charles V (1500–58), an event that marked the fall of the republic and the return of the Medici to power there. Michelangelo had previously been enlisted in designing and overseeing the fortifications of the city, but with its surrender he of necessity turned his mind to other things.[7] During the 1530s and early 1540s, his approach to devotional art would evolve in new directions. After he moved to Rome in 1534 and in the years leading up to and beyond the unveiling of his *Last Judgment* in 1541, Michelangelo's religious art came to be defined largely by two related facts: his association with the Catholic reform movement and his friendship with Vittoria Colonna, which probably began in earnest only after 1536.[8] Alongside the famous fresco, Michelangelo was to produce a whole series of presentation drawings of devotional subjects for Colonna that reveal the extent to which they were mutually invested in the tenets of Catholic reform, especially its emphasis on Christ's gratuitous grace and the centrality of the Passion sacrifice. Indeed, the drawings can be seen as fundamentally upending the conventions of devotional art of the time, turning their backs on the economy of church commissions and image indulgences and focusing their power on the private devotional ends shared by the artist with his spiritual interlocutor.[9]

Another thing that much reform religion played down was the conspicuous commemoration of individual saints and even the cult of the Virgin.[10] For this reason, the *Noli me tangere* may appear to have little to do with what would come later in Michelangelo's religious art of the 1530s and 1540s, celebrating, it may seem, a moment from the life of a saint, Mary Magdalene. Yet that said, the *Noli me tangere*, however traditional it may appear in certain respects, was practically revolutionary in others. In fact, far from being entirely different from the reform images of his later work, Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* actually shows striking continuities between this earlier work and the reform art that would follow.

To show the ways in which Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* is important and original, it is useful to take a step backward and analyze the *Noli me tangere* in terms of its unique portrayal of its subject matter. And, for this

[7]For more on the fortifications, see Wallace, 1987.

[8]No documentation exists concerning the date of the beginnings of their friendship. However, Michelangelo permanently settled in Rome in 1534, and Colonna moved there in 1536, making 1536 a likely *terminus post quem*: see Buonarroti, 1963, 2:237.

[9]Further, see Nagel, 1997; Nagel, 2000, 169–87. For the larger context of Counter-Reformation culture in the artist's work, see De Maio.

[10]As discussed in de Tolnay, 5:57–67.

purpose, it is well to begin with a more thorough reckoning of the Gospel's account of the event and the work's place among other depictions of its subject. The Gospel episode illustrated here and in other Noli me tangere paintings is the dramatic moment in John 20:14–17, which has no real corollary elsewhere in the New Testament, and which may even appear to be in conflict with the other Gospel accounts of the discovery of the Resurrection in Matthew 28:1–10, Mark 16:1–10, and Luke 24:1–10.[11] Whereas the other gospels describe the Magdalene as only one of two or more witnesses to the event, John tells the initial discovery of the Resurrection through the Magdalene alone. Most depictions of the Noli me tangere portray the occasion as it is described in John, the aforementioned moment not long after the Resurrection when Mary Magdalene encounters Christ near his tomb and Christ commands her not to touch him with the words "Noli me tangere."[12] The reason, Christ himself goes on to explain, is that he will soon ascend to his father: "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Christ likewise commands Mary to convey the news of his Resurrection and immanent Ascension to her "brethren," which, after his departure, she does.

As mentioned above, representations of the scene generally show the complicated figural dynamics of this physically awkward moment, Mary reaching for Christ and Christ evading Mary's touch. In one example, a *Noli me tangere* in the Monastery of San Marco in Florence (fig. 2), Fra Angelico (ca. 1395–1455) captures these subtleties in figural terms.[13] Whereas the Magdalene kneels in front of Christ, her hands still open while being lowered from a putative embrace, Christ stealthily sidesteps her reaching hands, crossing one foot over the other, while his hand falls behind him in a gesture that stays his amazed companion. One reads reluctance in the Magdalene that she must give her Savior up so readily, and her left hand in particular seems to hesitate between touch and its denial even as Christ forbids contact.

Most other images of the subject adapt something like Fra Angelico's figural scenario. The small *Noli me tangere* (fig. 3) of Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445–1510) intensifies the emotional impact of Fra Angelico's more meditative figuration by showing Mary's head bent to one side in an attitude of longing, her arms animatedly spreading apart at the elbows to

[11]All biblical citations come from the Douay-Rheims Bible.

[12]On the depiction of the Magdalene more generally, see Mosco; Maisch; Geoffroy and Montandon; Apostolos-Cappadona.

[13]For more on the fresco, and on issues of attribution, see Hood, 239–42; Morachiello, 44; Didi-Huberman, 13–27, 162–263.

FIGURE 2. Fra Angelico. *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1438–50. Florence, San Marco. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

frame Christ's prohibitory gesture.[14] In the early years of the Cinquecento (ca. 1510), Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530) presented the Magdalene kneeling at left before Christ on the right, just like his Florentine forbears,

[14]Further on this work, which was part of the predella of the *Trinity Altarpiece*, see Lightbown, 1:109–12, 2:77–78; Heussler; Körner, 361–63; Dombrowski, 292–97.

FIGURE 3. Sandro Botticelli. *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1490–95. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

but showed Christ turning to face her rather than retreating with his back to her (fig. 4).[15] As one might expect, Mary's hands are outstretched, but withdraw from their attempt at touching Christ, her touch having been visually prohibited by Christ's hand. Christ's posture is fraught: he seems to step toward Mary even as the upper part of his body leans slightly backward, so as to avoid contact.

As can be seen in these examples, representations of the Noli me tangere frequently emphasize what it means to be deprived of physical proximity and tactile sensation. They offer dramatic portrayals of Christ's looming absence, an absence that, as Jean-Luc Nancy has suggested, causes the painter to "intensify the presence of an absence as an absence."[16] One could also say that they are therefore responses to the unrepresentable nature of the Christian faith, faith defined as belief in things that are impossible to touch or to see. They help the devout viewer capture something of the experience of what it would be like to have the opportunity to reach out, to attempt to seize or grasp divinity.

But even by the standards of its subject, Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* is unique, especially in the way that it alters the dynamic between the Magdalene and Christ, for here the dramatic denial of touch in other images of the subject is apparently offset by the visualization of an unexpected physical connection established by the two protagonists.

[15]Further on this work, see Freedberg, 1963, 1:11–12; Shearman, 1:24, 2:203–04; Natali, 28–35.

[16]Nancy, 51.

FIGURE 4. Andrea del Sarto. *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1510. Florence, Museo del Cenacolo di San Salvi. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

At first glance, the composition may seem more or less conventional: Mary is shown on the left, looking earnestly upon her savior, whereas Jesus turns to leave her, tilting his upper body to the right so as to avoid her reach. Mary's outstretched arms appear as if they had tried to clasp Christ in their embrace, for instead of showing her hands chastened as they reach toward Jesus, Michelangelo shows what seems to be the aftermath of an attempt at a more enveloping gesture. Like the other Marys who kneel before Christ, Mary's posture here assumes the character of an attitude preliminary to genuflection, her legs slightly bent at the knee.

FIGURE 5. Michelangelo and Pontormo. *Noli me tangere*, detail.

But while what Michelangelo develops here is in many ways comparable to the figurations of his forbears in general effect, there is one detail that appears to be without any precedent at all. Indeed, one witnesses something that seems to stand against the thrust of Christ's own pronouncement, for Christ, as he steps away from Mary, turns to do the very thing that he tells Mary not to do: he touches (fig. 5).[17] What is more, one realizes, too, that Christ's touch is of a most peculiar kind, for it might be supposed that his touch here is not only in violation of the sense of the scriptural passage, which implies that any physical contact whatsoever is inappropriate, but it also shows a touching of the Magdalene on her left breast. On two counts, then, it may seem an improper gesture.

2. Christ's Touch

When the subject matter of a figural painting is withdrawal — and, more specifically the imperative not to touch another person — any implication of willful contact between the concerned parties threatens to cost the whole figuration its intelligibility as narrative. For this reason, many images of the Noli me tangere make the gap between the Magdalene and Christ an absolute one.[18] This is not to say, however, that ambiguities do not appear

[17]Wallace, 1988, 448, was the first scholar to note this detail as strange, and as key to understanding the panting.

[18]On the reading of the "typical" Noli me tangere, see Didi-Huberman, 14–15.

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in images of the Noli me tangere, especially as regards Mary Magdalene. This is for the very reason that the status of Mary's touch remains uncertain in the biblical text itself: John records only Jesus's command to the Magdalene that she should not touch him, and does not record whether or not the Magdalene may have achieved her aim before the command was spoken.[19] And, indeed, Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* does not make an especially clear statement on this particular matter. Although one may judge that the Magdalene is pulling back her arms in response to Christ's prohibition, her left arm remains hidden from view. Because the arm is behind Jesus, there can be no final answer to the question of whether or not this Magdalene has touched or still touches her savior.[20]

Yet whatever the ambiguities of Mary's left arm, Michelangelo leaves no doubt that she, in the instant shown in the painting, has at very least begun to comply with Christ's prohibition. Nothing of this sort can be said, however, about Christ's own gesture. Not only do Christ's reaching hand and touching fingers appear to violate the very spirit of his own command, they also present themselves as of the utmost significance, both on account of their discordant place within the context of the subject matter, and due to their prominent placement at the center of the figural drama between the two protagonists. As if to underline the point, Michelangelo imagines Christ following the impact of his gesturing fingers with his own gaze.

There can be little doubt that Christ actually makes contact with the Magdalene's breast. An artist of the drawn contour, Michelangelo draws his boundaries crisp and clear, and when he wanted to show the absolute fact that contact had not been made, as in his *Creation of Adam* (fig. 6), he makes it apparent by the definitive gap separating two bodies or appendages. By contrast, Christ's fingers in the *Noli me tangere* not only transgress upon, they even penetrate beyond, the outer boundaries of Mary's garments. What is more, one can see in the Casa Buonarroti version of the painting that there is a slight indentation in the boundary contour of Mary's garment that covers her breast.[21] The indentation where Christ's finger subtly impresses the cloth with the skin underneath it confirms that, even as Christ's hand points and indicates, it also makes contact. Had Michelangelo wanted to show that the pointing finger of Christ's hand should be taken merely as indicative, eliminating any possibility of misreading the gesture as a moment of contact in a painting of a subject about the problem of such contact, he

[19]Nancy, 31.
[20]Wallace, 1988, 448.
[21]Ibid.

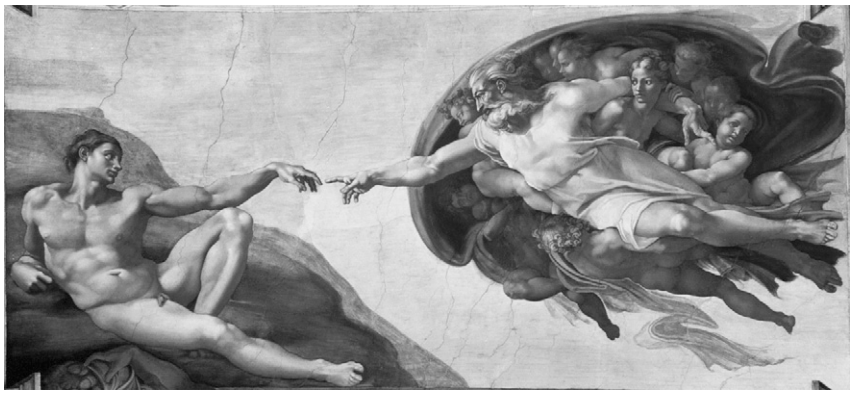

FIGURE 6. Michelangelo. *Creation of Adam*, ca. 1508–12. Vatican, Sistine Chapel. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

surely could have done so in a way that would not be confused with contact itself.

On the basic level of observed figuration, one may wonder at Christ's touching of Mary's breast. The gesture is problematic because, besides seeming to ignore Christ's own command to Mary, the touch may appear misplaced, full of an ornamental strangeness, even carrying a whiff of the erotic.[22] Of course, this reaction to the gesture comes about since, in touching one of Mary's breasts, which appear to protrude on account of her girdle, Christ makes contact with one of the female body's primary erogenous zones, a center of arousal of the flesh. Needless to say, no obvious explanation for such touching is referred to in the Gospel telling of the event, and no physical motive is readily available when observed simply according to the gestural dynamics of the two figures.

It seems highly doubtful that the gesture was intended as a sensual one. Christ's touching finger is placed with exceeding delicacy, even decorousness, and Mary and Christ are both shown in what seems to be a deliberately chaste fashion, fully clothed. The painting is nevertheless unlike many others of the Cinquecento in that the painter puts emphasis on neither the beauty of Christ's naked and idealized torso nor the unbound hair and comely appearance of the Magdalene, whose locks in the Michelangelo are done up in an intricate turban. In most respects, in fact, Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* contains few of the sensual, even romantic,

[22]Rafanelli, 2004, 283, detects "latent erotic tension" in Christ's gesture, and on 313, wonders whether this sensuality was not inspired by Titian's *Noli me tangere* in London, though her larger reading finally rejects the erotic implications.

FIGURE 7. Titian. *Noli me tangere*, ca. 1511–12. London, National Gallery. National Gallery, London/Art Resource, New York.

undertones that color some contemporary representations of its subject matter, such as Titian's *Noli me tangere*, where, as Daniel Arasse has shown, the pastoral landscape and the Venus-derived pose of Christ add considerably to the latent, not wholly canonical, sensuality of the scene (fig. 7).[23]

[23]Arasse, 84–85. Ibid., 103, compares more erotically-charged Renaissance images of the *Noli me tangere* to the more chaste design of Michelangelo. Also, on the sacred and profane in Titian's painting, see D'Elia, 2005, 20–22; Rafanelli, 2009, 36–45, which cites much of the literature on the painting.

With arguments such as these, one may be able to suppress the suggestion of strangeness, even prurience, that Christ's gesture admits to the painting, and yet, to do so might mean the loss of one of the painting's several dimensions, especially given that this gesture cannot help but excite the viewer's curiosity, to expose or even invite questions by its very oddity. It is well to recall here that Christ's gesture in the *Noli me tangere* hardly stands alone among Michelangelo's figural formulas in opening itself to this particular brand of inquiry, a brand known to critics in his own time. Contemporaries could and did construe Michelangelo's religious figurations as sometimes referring to indecent, even sexual acts, as happened, memorably, beginning in the 1540s, when writers like Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) attacked Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (fig. 8).[24] Pointing out the general nudity, the alignment of figures like St. Blaise and St. Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 9), the couples kissing in the clouds, and the men dragged down to hell by their testicles, Aretino and others wrote that Michelangelo had represented a scene that was libertine and scurrilous, and had thereby desecrated the papal chapel.[25]

Making the case for the undeniable peculiarity of the artist's manner, critics like Giorgio Vasari claimed Michelangelo's style was such that it fostered devotion, reflecting, because of its aesthetic perfection, the greatest of God's own perfect works.[26] In the case of the *Last Judgment*, they argued that the beauty of Michelangelo's fleshly bodies reflected the beauty of the soul contained inside them — and so, by painting beautiful nudes, the pious Michelangelo sought to glorify God, not to offend the moral sensibilities of his audience.[27]

Yet the controversy did not end with the *Last Judgment*, for Michelangelo apparently continued to make use of positions and gestures that could open themselves to misinterpretation. Writing of the artist's Florentine *Pietà* of about 1547–53 (fig. 10), Leo Steinberg argues that Michelangelo appropriated a figural position, the slung leg motif, typically used to show a couple's sexual attachment, to present the bodies of Christ and the Virgin, a device Steinberg thought unobjectionable, theologically

[24]On Aretino's praise and criticism of the fresco, see Barnes, 74–93. As ibid., 77, points out, Aretino in a letter of 1537 originally praised the work's *disegno*.

[25]Aretino's reservations are recorded in Dolce's *Aretino*: see Roskill, esp. 161–67. On the "erotic" alignment of St. Blaise and St. Catherine, see Gilio, 2:81.

[26]See Barnes, 89, who points out that Michelangelo expresses the view in a poem contemporary with the *Last Judgment*: poem no. 106 in Buonarroti, 1991, 238.

[27]For an example of these views, see Vasari, 6:69.

FIGURE 8. Michelangelo. *Last Judgment*, ca. 1534–41. Vatican, Sistine Chapel. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

speaking, because it recalled the period's allegorical notions of the spiritual marriage of the Virgin to Christ. In Steinberg's account, Michelangelo even damaged his image by breaking off the offending leg, having come to regret his use of such charged imagery.[28]

[28]Steinberg, 1968 and 1989.

FIGURE 9. Michelangelo. *Last Judgment*, detail.

Needless to say, Michelangelo had not yet decided on self-censorship in the *Noli me tangere*, and he probably did not need to. One might say that the *Noli me tangere* — a picture created for the private, theologically sophisticated, and aristocratic patron, Vittoria Colonna — is a painting that makes use of an atypical gesture that derives some of its visual interest from working in a dissemblant register, against the grain of the viewer's expectations of spiritual figuration. As such, it may be the first discernable case of Michelangelo's use of a type of figural poetics that, whatever

FIGURE 10. Michelangelo. *Pietà*, ca. 1547–53. Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

intention is determined for it, would later lead to the injurious response to the *Last Judgment* and the destruction of the Florentine *Pietà*. By opening itself to interpretation, however, the gesture calls to mind the long tradition that metaphorically characterized the Magdalene's love for Jesus as an

amorous one, likening it to the encounter of the bride and bridegroom in Canticles 3:1, just as had been done in discussions of the love of the Virgin Mary and her son.[29] Perhaps in confronting his viewers' expectation of decorous bodies with the subtle implication of the uncannily erotic, Michelangelo hoped to awaken them to the appreciation of some deeper meaning through a gestural *contrapposto* that points through and beyond sensuality and touch.

3. The Theology of Christ's Gesture

In its unusual rendering of Christ's touch, the *Noli me tangere* may be the most overt and intelligible presentation of the movement through sensual to spiritual experience in Michelangelo's oeuvre. If so, it is right to wonder what more specific meaning informed that sensual-yet-spiritual sign. In reviewing the literature on the *Noli me tangere*, one finds that, so strange is this touching, that it has so far gone without complete theological explanation. More than one scholar has agreed with Charles de Tolnay's characterization of it as Christ withdrawing from the Magdalene while pushing her away with a "repelling gesture."[30] But more recent engagements with the issue of Christ's touch in the painting have taken it more seriously. Importantly, William Wallace, the first scholar to study the gesture attentively, has claimed that Michelangelo followed a Northern tradition of the Noli me tangere, perhaps known to the artist from imported prints, like those of Lucas van Leyden and Albrecht Dürer (fig. 11), which show Christ touching the Magdalene on the forehead during their encounter in the garden. Considering the gesture as indicating a blessing, Wallace claimed that Michelangelo followed the North's lead, allowing his Mary simultaneously to point beyond physical touch to a spiritual sense, that is, "spiritual touch," that moves Mary away from earthly experience toward the heavenly kind.[31]

Yet whereas Wallace connected the iconography of Christ's touch to Northern images of the Noli me tangere, Lisa Rafanelli has questioned the link between them, pointing out that Christ's touch in the Northern images

[29]For example, Gregory the Great, 76:1190a. For more on this tradition, see Boyle, 121. The connection is discussed in Rafanelli, 2004, 38–39.

[30]De Tolnay, 3:110, also saw Christ as an allegory of Florence evading the grasp of foreign enemies, adding a political dimension to Christ's withdrawal. Others have agreed with de Tolnay's characterization of the withdrawal of Christ, including Goffen, 2002, 318. Freedberg, 1993, 178, saw the work as incommunicative of its story while emphasizing artifice.

[31]Wallace, 1988, 449.

FIGURE 11. Albrecht Dürer. *Noli me tangere*, 1509–11. Collection of the author.

likely took its cue from the cult of the Magdalene's cranial relic in Provence, where a piece of flesh was said to be preserved on the forehead of the saint's otherwise bare skull. From the thirteenth century onward, a legend explained this bit of preserved flesh by telling how Christ touched the Magdalene on her forehead after his Resurrection, making the point of

contact incorruptible. And although this legend was known in Italy and was indeed depicted by several artists there, including the Florentine sculptor Giovanni della Robbia (1469–1529) in the 1520s, these images, like their Northern European counterparts, show Christ touching only the forehead of the Magdalene.[32] The specificity of the site of touch in both the legend and all these works presumably means that those artists treated it as a particular miraculous occurrence, a physical demonstration of divine favor that resolved, controlled, or stabilized the more ambiguous scenario described in John's Gospel.

If Christ's touch of Mary's left breast in Michelangelo's painting cannot, then, be connected with the legend of the cranial relic, it remains to be discovered to what meaning this peculiar detail must be referred. In asking the question, one does well not to abandon completely Wallace's idea that the gesture indicates a spiritual touching, or Rafanelli's suggestions that it perhaps served as tactile proof of the Resurrection or an acknowledgment of the love that Mary bore for Christ, or as a gesture signifying the blessing and anointing of the heart itself.[33] Building on these insights, it may be agreed that the heart is touched spiritually, and further observed that the primary spiritual importance of the gesture appears to be underlined because Christ's eyes, rather than meeting Mary's, follow his hand to her breast and, by general implication, to the heart beneath it.[34] This observation is important, for the direction of Christ's gaze seems to imply that he sees into the Magdalene's very soul. Touched in this way, Mary looks forward at Christ's face, rather than at his fingers: it seems that the fuller significance of the action has suddenly hit her, not on account of the finger itself, but how it has transformed her inwardly, as if his image were seen internally.

In pursuing this analysis, the viewer will note how Michelangelo's scene recalls another post-Resurrection event, the probing of Christ's wounded side by St. Thomas, a scene canonically represented in Andrea Verrocchio's famous bronze for Orsanmichele (fig. 12). Perhaps, as David Franklin has posited, in the case of the *Noli me tangere* Michelangelo hoped that his viewers would remember how St. Thomas placed his fingers inside Christ's wounded torso, an episode that follows the Noli me tangere in John

[32]Rafanelli, 2004, 206–08, 283, 363–65. The legend first appeared in a late fifteenth-century Dominican book, *Aurea Rosa*, as first described by Mâle, 250–51. On this iconography, see also Réau, 2.2:557–59. For more on the relic, see Boyle, 121–22; Baert, 2007–08, 31–33.

[33]See Rafanelli, 2012.

[34]Rafanelli, 2004, 283, also sees the heart as indicated by touch in the painting.

FIGURE 12. Andrea Verrocchio. *Incredulity of St. Thomas*, finished 1472. Florence, Museo di Orsanmichele. Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

20:24–29, so that Thomas's touch should be contrasted with Christ's touching of the Magdalene.[35] Certainly this association of subjects belonged to an old tradition of both art and exegesis, and, in fact, both medieval and Renaissance artists often saw fit to combine or contrast these

[35]Franklin, 76.

two scenes.[36] In probing Christ's side, Thomas not only made contact with Christ's resurrected flesh, but also, indirectly, his heart — said to be pierced by the lance wound when Christ hung on the cross[37] — thus coming to believe in Christ's Resurrection through an organ of sense. Thomas empirically proved what the pious viewer today cannot himself prove, and therefore one consequently is, as Christ tells Thomas, even more "blessed" for believing without touching or seeing for oneself.[38] Thomas's touch was a touch seeking after belief — and, as shall be seen, belief is essential to the reading of Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere*, as well.

Reading the painting in this way, there are several possible interpretive avenues opened by this study of the gesture, avenues that point toward the inward reception of faith, and that might be better pursued in the writings of the Church Fathers. Yet at first glance, biblical exegesis appears to have little in common with Michelangelo's figuration. Many of the Church Fathers, from Jerome to Ambrose, took Christ's rejection of the Magdalene's touch as a censure of her alleged lack of faith, of her sex, or of the limitations of her supposedly carnal understanding more generally.[39] Jerome argued that Christ's denial was a rebuke to those "who seek the living among the dead," those who misunderstand Christ's promise of immortality.[40] Others were clearly bothered by the Magdalene (a mere woman) being the first witness of the Resurrection. Although Ambrose would call the Magdalene a new Eve because her witness reversed her gender's tarnished legacy as perpetrators of the sin of Eden, he also thought that she was not touched because she was female.[41] Mary was not worthy, and, like Gregory the Great after him,[42] Ambrose is more sympathetic with the doubting Thomas. Of the two major testimonies of the resurrected Christ, Thomas's doubt could provide certainty of the truth of Christ's Resurrection in the body to other believers who did not have the unique privilege of touching the wounds.[43]

[36]For example, Rafanelli, 2006. Cinquecento artists continued to link the two events, as can be seen in a drawing for a vault by Agnolo Bronzino (or Alessandro Allori) featuring the Ascension flanked by the Noli me tangere and Incredulity of Thomas (ca. 1540s or 1550s): see Griswold and Wolk-Simon, 29–30 (catalogue no. 24).

[37]Hamburger, 163.

[38]John 20:29.

[39]Rafanelli, 2004, 230–32.

[40]The Latin is "quaerebat viventem cum mortuis." For context, see Jerome, 22:990.

[41]Ambrose, 15:1845.

[42]See Gregory the Great, 76:1213.

[43]Ambrose, 15:1845.

Rafanelli has observed that many of these explicators essentially thought that Mary had to "become male" in order to properly grasp Christ in his resurrected state.[44] Above all else, this meant that Mary had to adopt the more abstract spiritual thinking attributed to men so as to be able to comprehend the full meaning of the risen Christ. In other words, the Magdalene had to rise from a physical to a spiritual perception of Christ, following the hierarchy of the senses, moving from the base sense of touch to the higher one of sight. Indeed, even when authors were not directly invested in discussing Mary's gender, they assumed that she was asked to make this movement from physical senses like touch to the higher kinds, such as sight or hearing.[45] Thus John Chrysostom deemed Christ's denial an instructive turning point in the history of faith, a reorientation of the believer from physical experience to spiritual contemplation of God.[46] In a sermon on the Ascension, Leo the Great said that the Magdalene at this moment represented the Church, which, given Christ's immanent Ascension, must now approach him, not in terms of "a human body" and its "fleshly perceptions," but rather in higher, immaterial terms.[47] As Leo has Christ say to the Magdalene: "thou shalt grasp what thou cannot touch and believe what thou cannot see."[48]

But whereas these theologians suggest spiritual alternatives to Mary's physical perception by touch, they in no way help to explain why it is Christ rather than Mary who does the touching, spiritual or otherwise, in Michelangelo's painting. If Leo's audience thought that they ought to emulate Mary, grasping what they "cannot touch" and believing what they "cannot see," one may wonder how Christ's touching might indicate an understanding of God through spiritual sense, and how his touch is different from the physical perception originally sought by the Magdalene.

This observation draws closer to an explanation for the gesture, whose significance, incompletely intuited by previous scholarship, seems to be that faith is what is here implanted in Mary's breast by Christ's touching finger. And, conveniently, a related image can be found in Augustine, the theologian who had the most impact on Michelangelo's art throughout his career. For just as Augustine was crucial to Michelangelo's development

[44]Rafanelli, 2004, 32–36, discusses this aspect of Gnostic interpretations.

[45]Ibid., 230–33. On the senses and their relative hierarchy, see also Summers, 1981, 353–54; Summers, 1987, 32–41.

[46]Chrysostom, 59:467–74.

[47]Leo the Great, 54:398–99: "hoc est, nolo ut ad me corporaliter venias, nec ut me sensu carnis agnoscas; ad sublimiora te differo, majora tibi praeparo."

[48]Ibid.: "apprehensura quod non tangis, et creditura quod non cernis." Translation, with alternations, from Leo the Great, 1994, 189.

of the larger theological scheme of the Sistine Ceiling, passages in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* point toward an imagery resonant with the strange touch at the center of Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere*.[49] In the *Tractates*, Augustine writes that Christ, in telling the Magdalene not to touch him, was "teaching faith to the woman who recognized and called him Master, and that Gardener was sowing a grain of mustard in her heart as though in his garden."[50] By the mustard grain, Augustine of course refers to Christ's words in Matthew 17:20 that a person with even a little faith, faith the size of a tiny mustard seed, could move mountains, and that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, in that this seed itself is small but grows upon planting into a great tree, harboring birds in its shade.[51] Following the words of the Gospel where Christ is described as disguised as a gardener, Michelangelo shows Christ, hoe under his arm, sowing faith in the heart of the Magdalene by means of his touch: planting her heart so that a mustard seed might grow large there.

The imagery referenced here has no obvious precedent in art, although other images of the subject may make reference in other ways to the idea of sowing faith. Confronted with what he called the "relative disfiguration" or "dissemblant similitudes" of the red dots of paint that represent both Christ's nail wounds and the flowers on the ground nearby, Georges Didi-Huberman reads Fra Angelico's *Noli me tangere* as connoting something larger than a mere story, showing Christ "*'sowing' his stigmata* in the garden of the earthly world, just before going to rejoin the right hand of his Father in heaven" (fig. 2).[52] Didi-Huberman did not make this connection by way of a specific text, relying instead on the posture of the figures and Fra Angelico's spots of color to convince his readers. And indeed, one need only compare the posture and gesture of Christ in the painting to that of certain sowers in other artworks to see a sort of family resemblance, the figure moving forward in one direction, while casting seed by a hand stretched outward or back behind him. It may well be the only other image of the scene in the period cognizant of Augustine's sowing imagery.

[49]On Augustine and the Sistine Ceiling, see Gill, esp. 173–200.

[50]Augustine, 1995, 58; Augustine, *Patrologia Latina*, 35:1957: "Jesus quippe mulierem quae illum magistrum agnovit et appellavit, cum haec ei responderet, fidem docebat; et hortulanus ille in ejus corde, tamquam in horto suo granum sinapis seminabat." Gregory the Great would repeat the image of Christ sowing faith in the heart in *Patrologia Latina*, 76:1192.

[51]Mark 4:30–32, Matthew 13:31–32, Luke 13:18–19. Or, in Luke 17:6, command the mulberry tree to be "rooted up" and "transplated into the sea."

[52]Didi-Huberman, 20–21 (italics in original). Referenced in Arasse, 101.

Although Christ sows Mary's heart in Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere*, the motif of the planting finger is far more precise than its counterpart in Fra Angelico's painting. Rather than sowing his stigmata broadly about, Michelangelo's Christ aims to plant his single seed in the specified position. In this way, Christ's sowing of faith takes on a personal dimension in the Michelangelo painting that it does not necessarily claim in Fra Angelico's image, where Christ's largesse, rather than his discrimination, is emphasized. So while it may be that Fra Angelico actually references Augustine's imagery of sowing, it does not make the planting of the seed in the heart explicit. It was left to Michelangelo to represent Augustine's imagery of the sowing of faith in the Magdalene's heart more or less completely, thus, as will be shown, underlining how the viewer's own individual reception of faith in Christ is at issue in the work.

The personal quality found in Augustine's interpretation of the Noli me tangere event and Michelangelo's adaptation of that interpretation in the image, was presumably deepened by an awareness of the sowed seed's whole spectrum of scriptural allusiveness. After all, by locating the place of sowing the seed as the heart, Augustine combines the allegory of the mustard seed of faith with another horticultural image in yet another biblical passage, for the idea that the seed is planted in the heart does not appear in the parable of the mustard seed itself. Rather, it calls to mind Christ's parable of the sower, a parable that appears only in the three synoptic Gospels, in Mark 4:1–20, Matthew 13:1–23, and Luke 8:1–15.[53]

In the parable of the sower, Christ teaches about a farmer who scattered seed in four places: a roadway, rocky ground, a thorny tangle, and, finally, good soil. Afterward, the reader learns that his seeds have failed or succeeded in different ways, according to where the farmer sowed them. Strewn on the roadway, the seed is plucked up by birds, or trampled underfoot by travelers; on the rocky ground it sprouts quickly but then perishes in the heat of the sun; among brambles, the sprouting seeds are choked by hardier weeds; only on good ground does the seed grow into a flourishing plant. In this way, the parable emphasizes how the seed must find the right place to grow. The association of the growing place with the heart happens in the place where Christ explains the parable of the sower to his disciples. In these passages, Christ makes use of the imagery of the planting of the heart when he explains that the seed sown on the roadway is like the gospel heard by a person but then "the devil cometh, and taketh the word out of their heart,

[53]Perhaps this was another way in which Augustine might point out the harmony of the four Gospels that seemed to differ on so much else.

lest believing they should be saved." On the other hand, those seeds planted on good ground are like those "who in a good and perfect heart, hearing the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit in patience."[54] In connecting the Christ disguised as a gardener with the parable of the sower, Augustine crafted his interpretive reading of the Magdalene's encounter with the newly risen Christ.

Beyond the rich scriptural references that combined in Augustine's sowing-of-the-heart metaphor, there may have been another reason that Augustine's reading of John had so much resonance for Michelangelo and his patron, Vittoria Colonna: and, as it happened, these reasons were not simply exegetical and scriptural, but poetic. Saturated with the poetry of Petrarch, Michelangelo must have seen how the metaphor of the planting of the self could be used in amorous contexts, as in Petrarch's verses in the *Rime sparse*, where the poet combines imagery of the sowing of hearts with that of love, writing of his heart as the center of competing claims of the lover's happiness and pain: "At your appearance anguish and pain flee, and at your departure they return together; but because my enamored memory closes the entrance to them then, they do not come past the external parts. Thus if any good fruit is born from me, from you first comes the seed; in myself I am as it were a dry soil tilled by you, and the praise is yours entirely."[55] Here in Petrarch's poem the lover's entirely decrepit, or "dry," soil is sowed with the beloved's "seed" so as to flourish with "good fruit." The idea of the abjectness of the lover, and his attribution of all good things to the beloved, would have amplified the power of Augustine's analysis of scripture, while also tinting his reading with the implications of the amorous poetic tradition itself, making the receiver of the seed something like the lover in veneration of Laura, Petrarch's muse.

Dwelling on the metaphor of the sowing of the self, Michelangelo actually returned to this very theme in a poem of the 1550s, reworking the Petrarchan exemplar as a devotional work. In it, Michelangelo asks God to plant his "feeble soil," so as to make him "sprout" with "pure and pious deeds":

[54]Matthew 13:19; Luke 8:12–15.

[55]Petrarch, "Poem 71," 160: "Fugge al vostro apparire angoscia et noia, / et nel vostro partir tornano insieme; / ma perché la memoria innamorata / chiude lor poi l'entrata, / di là non vanno da le parti estreme. / Onde s'alcun bel frutto / nasce di me, da voi vien prima il seme; / io per me son quasi un terreno asciutto / colto da voi, e 'l pregio è vostro in tutto."

The prayers I'd make would certainly be sweet
if you granted me the strength to pray to you;
for in my feeble soil there's not one part
good for fruit, that was born by itself.
You alone are the seed of pure and pious deeds,
which sprout up wherever you strew yourself;
no one can follow you by his own power
unless you show him the path of your holiness.[56]

Of course there is an important difference between Michelangelo's image of God the sower and the Gospels' own parable of the sower, for whereas Michelangelo's describes God as sowing the seeds that sprout good things "wherever" they fall, Christ preaches how the soil where the seeds of faith fall makes all the difference to whether faith and goodness take hold there.[57] As Charles de Tolnay has pointed out, the poem takes up the preeminent reform ideals of gratuitous grace and salvation by faith alone.[58]

Vittoria Colonna, the ultimate recipient of the painting, was certainly aware of the potential inflections available within the Petrarchan model, and indeed, she, too, later transformed the imagery of Petrarch's love poem into a pious sonnet, naming the place of the sowing as the heart itself:

Humility, with ploughshare sharp and strong,
its furrows deep within my heart must make
and all the bitter stagnant waters take,
clearing away the earthly and the wrong,
lest these should drown, and those choke up the seed,
cumbering the ground with rubbish and the weed.
Nay! rather spread a better soil around,
and pray that gentle dew from heaven be found,
and the heavens' love to fructify the flower,

[56]Buonarroti, 1991, 487. From an incomplete sonnet, Saslow's no. 292, dating probably after 1555: "Ben sarien dolce le preghiere mie, / se virtù mi prestassi da pregarte: / nel mio fragil terren non è già parte / da frutto buon, che da sé nato sie. / Tu sol se' seme d'opre caste e pie, / che là germuglian, dove ne fà parte; / nessun propio valor può seguitarte, / se non gli mostri le tuo sante vie."

[57]One may take the passage as an indication of how Michelangelo in later life had reconceived the nature of faith in line with other religious reformers in Italy at his time, just as one might refer it back to another, seemingly different, tradition of horticultural metaphors, namely, that found in love poetry.

[58]De Tolnay, 5:57.

nor idly wait until the last awful hour,
when all is swallowed in eternal night,
O Humble One! do not leave me in such plight!
But manifest Thyself to this sad heart!
Banish dark thoughts, and bid my pride depart![59]

Like Michelangelo's poem, this poem is addressed to God, who is called to inseminate the author. Both poems offer a frank assessment of a distinct spiritual lack, the need to pray well and the need for humility, respectively, that the seed will help to remedy. In their conversational addresses of Christ, the implicit interlocutor of both poems, the authors highlight the particular rhetoric of the Noli me tangere as one of direct address, as a pictorialization of the author's longing for spiritual insemination with divine grace, a private act that would result in flower and good fruits for the soul, a soul located explicitly in the heart, which is of itself barren.[60] These things may explain, in fact, the surprisingly bare ground in the two primary versions of the painting, which, unlike many other images of the subject, do not show luxuriant vegetation and blooming growth. Rather, in them the seed is but planted, and is yet to germinate in the heart's ground.[61]

4. Inside the Heart: The Seed as Image

Considering the painting in light of Augustine's exegesis, one realizes that Michelangelo did more than show the planting of the mustard seed of faith in Mary's heart: the artist explored the other aspects of Augustine's interpretation in his own visual terms. Michelangelo developed here a sort of poetics of the heart that amplified Augustine's meaning, particularly his statement in the *Tractates* that Christ must now be believed in through "internal perception," that from the moment of the Resurrection onward, Christ can only be worshipped as reunited with the Father, as fully and

[59]Roscoe, 101; Colonna, 104 (poem SI: 39): "Con vomer d'umilità larghe e profonde / fosse conviemmi far dentro al mio core, / sgombrando il mal terreno e 'l tristo umore, / pria che l'aggravi quel, questo l'innonde, / tal ch'altra poi miglior terra il circonde, / e più fresca del Ciel pioggia lo irrore, / onde la vite del divino amore / germini frutti, non labrusca e fronde. / Ma pria che l'ombra in tutto la ricopra / e poscia indarno fra le vane foglie / aspetti il caldo del celeste raggio, / Lui, che fu sol umil, prego che scopra / Se stesso al cor, poiché da me sempre aggio / tenebrosi pensier, superbe voglie."

[60]In their conversational dynamic the poems resemble the scheme of intimate conversation in Petrarch's poetry: see Cropper.

[61]It is likely that the stairs in the Casa Buonarroti panel allude to Christ's coming Ascension, which he mentions to Mary in his command not to touch him. In the Milan panel an open sarcophagus is presented, merely setting the scene of the Resurrection itself.

completely God: "otherwise [Christ] is not rightly touched, that is, otherwise one does not rightly believe in him."[62]

In Augustine's exegesis, Mary's bodily movement shows her dawning of faith, her coming into "internal perception." Where one reads in the Gospel that Mary turns to see Christ upon recognizing his voice, Augustine calls Mary's movement a "turn of heart," taking her physical turning as representing the Church's "conversion" of the gentiles, who did not recognize Christ's divinity in the flesh of the historical Incarnation, but only after his Resurrection and Ascension.[63]

Michelangelo's portrayal of the Magdalene's conversion registers in larger terms the stakes of Augustine's passage. While Michelangelo's Mary does not make a full turn but rather merely twists her torso toward Christ, the viewer understands a sort of change, a realization in her staring eyes and parted lips of what she experiences in Christ's countenance.[64] It is as if she is suddenly aware, filled with a new self-knowledge, and that by not touching, she now touches, just as she is touched more deeply by way of sight.[65] At the same time, Christ himself turns, and as he does so his left hand, holding the hoe, rests just below the heart of his own breast, perhaps signaling a communication streaming from one heart to another across Christ's body in an unfurling of gestures that reify the communication between the hearts of the sower and the sowed. This transfer is underlined, as has been noted, by Christ's eyes, which follow the trajectory of his arm and fingers to Mary's breast, seeming to underscore that he effects an implantation of his own countenance as the very image of faith therein. It would appear that what was a seed of faith in Augustine's *Tractates* has been translated into an image of faith, that is, an image of Christ's face, in Michelangelo's painting. The image of the divine face has become here the seed of spiritual change in the recipient.

The recipient of this image of faith, the place of sowing, the site of Augustine's desired "internal perception," is the heart. Like numerous other theologians, Augustine thought that internal spiritual perception took place in this organ, and he repeatedly wrote about spiritual perception of God in terms of a spiritual sight carried out with the "eyes of the heart."[66]

[62]Augustine, 1995, 59; Augustine, *Patrologia Latina*, 35:1957 (slightly modified): "Ejus quippe intimis sensibus quodammodo ascendit ad Patrem, qui sic in eo profecerit ut Patri agnoscat aequalem; aliter non recte tangitur, id est, aliter non recte in eum creditur."

[63]Augustine, 1995, 58–59; Augustine, *Patrologia Latina*, 35:1956–57.

[64]On the turning figure as metaphor of conversion and revelation, see Cranston, 2003.

[65]On sight as touch in the *Noli me tangere*, see Baert, 2006b, 46–48; Baert, 2006a.

[66]Further on metaphorical eyes in the body and soul in Augustine, see Miles; also discussed in Kleinbub, 120–45. Buonarroti, 1991, 411 (poem 243, ca. 1545), speaks of the "eyes of his heart" ("occhi del mie cor").

For Augustine, the heart was a place where the soul appears to have read, pictured, and imagined what the physical eyes could not.

The preeminent position of the heart in Augustine's discussion derives from the heart imagery he knew from scripture and earlier exegetes. Taking his cue from St. Paul — who considered the heart the inmost center of the person and the place where Christ was incarnated for each individual separately — Augustine saw the heart as the unseen seat of the soul, and thus the very essence of the self.[67] Moreover, following earlier Church Fathers like Origen and Ambrose, Augustine could even imagine the heart as a book on whose pages the secret thoughts and actions of every person were written, there to lay hidden until the Last Judgment.[68] The imagery of the book of the heart, moreover, must have been compelling for Michelangelo, for in one poem he speaks of his "bewildered heart," a heart that distressed him so much spiritually that he offers himself as a "blank page" to his friend, Colonna, so that she might write upon him with her "sacred ink, so that / love's deceptions may vanish and mercy may write the truth."[69]

If the heart could stand for the book of the self, the most intimate treasury of one's thoughts and personal faith, or even a sanctuary or house for the soul,[70] one also sees it imagined regularly in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance as the metaphorical and, frequently, the physical center of the body's total operations. The instigator of this tradition, Aristotle in *De anima*, viewed the heart as the prime mover of the body, being the organic impetus of everything from thoughts and sensation to action.[71] Despite Aristotle's ideas about the heart having been the center of much dispute ever since Galen, medieval authorities, particularly the Islamic philosopher Avicenna, helped to preserve and promote many of the heart's prime Aristotelean functions, arguing that rival organs, like the brain, which had been proposed as alternative seats of the self, were only the heart's instruments.[72] Along this line, Thomas Aquinas's *De motu cordis* claimed that the pulsations of the heart were directly derived from the pulsations of the soul, making the heart the essential point of contact between the spirit and the flesh in man's anatomy, the one meeting place of spirit and body.[73] It was at the seat of the heart, therefore, that the larger spiritual world

[67]Jager, 9–10, 13–15.

[68]Ibid., 20–26.

[69]Buonarroti, 1991, 319 (poem 162): "Porgo la carta Bianca / a' vostri sacri inchiostri, / c'amor mi sganni e pietà 'l ver ne scriva."

[70]Hamburger, 151–58.

[71]Webb, 14–15.

[72]Ibid., 19–22.

[73]Ibid., 21–22.

could reveal itself within the physical body. Indeed, as Heather Webb has argued, Dante may have even imagined the heart's movements as a sort of circular motion that reflected in microcosm the larger movements and circulations of the heavens themselves.[74]

The key, however, to understanding the heart's processes was its spirits (*spiritelli* or *spirti*). Many Renaissance people thought that these spirits moved throughout the body and had their center in the heart, where they were distilled from air or the blood.[75] Being quasi-physical substances, these spirits stood ontologically between the corporeal and incorporeal, and had the primary function of carrying images and messages from receptive external sensory organs (like the eyes), to inner organs (like the heart), where they might be contemplated by the soul. They could even fly from one heart to another through the gateway of the eyes, in a process fostering the circulation of images, ideas, and feelings among people.[76]

Michelangelo was fully aware of ideas about the circulation of spirits inside the heart and throughout and outside the self. Indeed, Michelangelo, following in Petrarch's footsteps, writes about how these "spirits" flow through his body, both traveling "out of my heart and through my outer shell" when he sees his beloved, so that his soul in elation seems ready to leave his body; or, returning "in excess to my heart" when the beloved takes leave of him, plunging him into misery.[77] The poem's point is that when Michelangelo is with his beloved the spirits in his heart travel to her, dispersing in acts of interpersonal exchange that suddenly and painfully cease when she is not present.

Michelangelo must also have been aware of the Aristotelean idea that images could impress themselves on the substance of the heart like a seal impresses its image in wax.[78] This stamping of the body's insides by way of the image is relevant because it is possible to imagine that the image of Christ's visage is impressed by way of the pressure of his fingers on Mary's breast in Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere*. The concept of the impressed heart was not merely figurative, either. Katherine Park describes how, beginning in the late Middle Ages, barber-surgeons and doctors were often called upon to dissect the dead bodies of holy persons to confirm their sanctity through

[74]Ibid., 26. The heart for Dante, following Aristotle, was the site where blood was "perfected" to become semen, so that the heart could be considered to have implicated itself directly into the very propagation of souls.

[75]Ibid., 28.

[76]On spirits, see Dempsey, 1–61; Cole, 2002.

[77]Buonarroti, 1991, 311 (poem 157): "spirti della vita."

[78]Aristotle, II.12, 42–44; Caciola, 31–78.

images impressed on stones found in their hearts. In the holy autopsy of Chiara of Montefalco (1268–1308) of 1308, images of the crucifix and miniature instruments of the Passion were found in Chiara's heart, apparently confirming her claim that Christ had planted himself there, a claim literally celebrated in commemorative images.[79] Later, in 1320, the visionary Margherita of Città di Castello (1287–1320) was opened to find three stones stamped with the images of the Christ Child, the Holy Spirit, Mary, Joseph, and even the penitent Margherita herself.[80]

Interestingly, these holy autopsies continued until the end of the Cinquecento, and although the discovery of images in the bodily organs became less frequent, anatomical abnormalities could still be seen as evidence of the divine impress on saintly remains. The heart of Colomba of Rieti (1467–1501) was found in 1501 to be made out of a substance like wax, implying, Park has noted, that it could carry divine impressions.[81] Moreover, the autopsy of St. Philip Neri (1515–95) in 1595 revealed that the saint's heart was greatly enlarged, having broken two ribs, a sign that Neri had needed an enlarged heart in order to see the large quantity of divine visions that were revealed to him.[82] Even more to the point, Michelangelo's friend and anatomical collaborator, Realdo Colombo (ca. 1516–59), carried out in 1556 the autopsy of no less a personage than St. Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), whose body was found to contain an unusually large number of stones.[83] Although these stones neither yielded images nor presented themselves in the heart, they were a prodigy that nevertheless must have relied on the long tradition of sacred heart images in order to be legible as putative physical proof of the saint's spiritual attainments.

Although Colombo's *De anatomica* of 1559 would disparage many of the beliefs associated with the heart by previous writers[84] — and no doubt Michelangelo was aware of these scientific findings in the years of their acquaintance, especially Colombo's theory of the primacy of the brain over the heart[85] — Michelangelo's poetry and artwork from before this time

[79]Park, 2010a, 62; Park, 2010b, 47.

[80]Park, 2010b, 49–50. Later, the holy autopsy of Bernardino of Siena's (d. 1444) heart revealed an image, "the good Jesus," because he thought of little else, as discussed in ibid., 180. Other holy autopsies found hearts removed by Jesus or waxen hearts, ready to be impressed by God, as shown in ibid., 177.

[81]Ibid., 170–73, 177.

[82]Park, 2010a, 71.

[83]Ibid. Further on Michelangelo and anatomy, see Summers, 1981, especially 20–26, 397–405, 430–43; Elkins; Hall, 63–102. See also Moes, 517, 525.

[84]Particularly those of Aristotle and Galen: see, for example, Colombo, 175 (bk. VII).

[85]Summers, 1981, 433–34.

appear continually to consider the heart an organ awaiting the impress of images, both amorous and divine.[86] This was certainly the case when, in a poem mourning the loss of his father in 1531, Michelangelo writes about how the "living" image of his father was "carved," rather than merely painted, in his heart, making clear the forceful and fixed nature of three-dimensional heart images.[87] The fine line between sacred and profane is often crossed in Michelangelo's poetry, and the heart image could well be of the beloved, such as when the artist suggests in a poem that, now that the image of the beloved is in his heart, he is "dearer" to himself, in the same way that "a stone to which carving has been added is worth more than its original rock."[88] Another poem conflates the sacred and profane altogether by combining the heart image of his beloved with that of the cross, using the language of the stamping of a printmaker's plate to do so: "Lady, as I've already carried the image / of your face pressed into my breast for a long time, / now that death is approaching, / let Love stamp my soul with copyright. . . . May it through storm or calm, / be safe with such a sign / to act like a cross against its enemies; and return to heaven."[89]

Other Michelangelo poems speak of how images, having entered the eyes of the body, travel to the heart, there to become something larger. In one, Michelangelo asks: "O God, O God, O God / How can someone pierce my heart who doesn't seem to touch me? / What is this thing, O Love, / that enters the heart through the eyes, / and in the small space inside it, seems to expand?"[90] Although Michelangelo here takes up the Petrarchan tradition of love poetry to describe a sort of internal experience that feels like touch but is not — a situation that stands in some metaphorical, if not entirely figural, relation to the Noli me tangere incident as the artist depicted it — he deploys imagery of the expanding heart, even implicitly the enlargement

[86]In a survey of the poems that Saslow and others suppose to have been created toward 1550 and afterward, one observes that Michelangelo continues to make use of the heart and its metaphors.

[87]Buonarroti, 1991, 203–05 (poem 86).

[88]Ibid., 212–13 (poem 90): "come pietra c'aggiuntovi l'intaglio / è di più pregio che 'l suo primo scoglio."

[89]Ibid., 446 (poem 264): "Come portato ho già più tempo in seno / l'immagin, donna, del tuo volto impressa, / or che morte s'appressa, / con previlegio Amor ne stampi l'alma. . . . Per procella o per calma / con tal segno sicura, / sie come croce contro a' suo avversari . . . ritorni." Here Saslow's translation has been altered to bring out the printing imagery by using language from Creighton Gilbert's translation of the same poem, labeled no. 262: see Buonarroti, 1980, 148.

[90]Buonarroti, 1991, 76 (poem 8): "O Dio, o Dio, o Dio, / come mi passa el core / chi non par che mi tocchi? / Che cosa è questo, Amore, / c'al core entra per gli occhi, / per poco spazio dentro par che cresca?"

of the heart, that clearly relates it to the long tradition discussed above. In fact, for Michelangelo and others before him, the more capacious the heart and the purer the seer, the more could be seen by way of the organ. In another place, Michelangelo speaks of how God does not show himself to every person in the same way, but rather "more or less clear and radiant / in proportion to how much one's sickness has dulled / one's mind to the evidence of divinity," that is, in proportion to how far sin has led one astray.[91] Michelangelo goes on to describe how some hearts may receive Christ better than others: "In a heart that is more capable, one might say, / his face and worth are grasped more readily, / and only to such does he make himself guide and light."[92] Remarkably, with this poem, Michelangelo very nearly offers a description of the spiritual interaction of Christ and the Magdalene in his *Noli me tangere*.

5. Theory and Practice of the Devotional Image

The *Noli me tangere* was not Michelangelo's only painting to deal explicitly with the issues of the image's reception internally in the heart. For Michelangelo this process of implantation of the image in the heart appears to have been a process relevant to all images. What the *Noli me tangere* helps to do, then, is to postulate something like a theory of images in Michelangelo, a theory encompassing the image's implantation in the self, its inward contemplation, and even its serial dissemination. It is a theory that speaks not only to the collaborative creation of the *Noli me tangere*, but also to the role of the viewer before the resulting work.

To better understand how these ideas about the image are expounded in the *Noli me tangere*, however, it is best to consider a further example of the heart-implanted image in Michelangelo's oeuvre. In the *Brazen Serpent* on the Sistine Ceiling (fig. 13),[93] the artist represented the heart's internalization of the image in a scene where the Israelites on the left, who look upon the bronze serpent as God instructed them, are healed of the wounds of those venomous serpents whose fury destroys the disobedient Israelites who pay no heed to God's commands. On the left, a man supports a woman while pointing to and even physically pressing on her heart, just as,

[91]I accept Saslow's reading of the passage. Buonarroti, 1991, 462 (poem 273): "A me d'un modo e d'altri in ogni altrove: / più e men chiaro o più lucente e terso, / secondo l'egritudin, che disperso / ha l'intelletto a le divine pruove."

[92]Ibid.: "Nel cor ch'è più s'appiglia, / se dir si può, 'l suo volto e suo valore; / e di quell fassi sol guida e lucerna."

[93]For more on the Sistine *Brazen Serpent*, see de Tolnay, 3:97–101. On Michelangelo and the theme of the brazen serpent, see Joannides.

FIGURE 13. Michelangelo. *Brazen Serpent*, ca. 1508–12. Vatican, Sistine Chapel. Scala/Art Resource, New York.

at the same time, a baby points to the center of his father's forehead, signaling how these two figures perceive the image internally, and thus spiritually, likely in terms of the brazen serpent's higher significance as a prefiguration of Christ's death on the cross (fig. 14).[94] Like the face of Christ in the *Noli me tangere*, the brazen serpent is an image of faith, as the Gospel itself makes clear: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him, may not perish; but may have life everlasting."[95]

In the *Brazen Serpent* Michelangelo shows that the bronze image has made its impact, for having entered the woman through her eyes, it has grown in her heart to become something larger, if unseen. For this reason, her husband's pointing hand designates an effect beyond mere touch and corporeal contact. It speaks to the impress of images on the inner body and spiritual self. In the same way that one says metaphorically that one is touched inwardly by an image that speaks to one intimately, tactility here is again metaphorically converted, designating something more than the haptic experience of the fingertip to represent a deeper, internal impact on the soul. And it is this idea that also informs Michelangelo's famous fingers in the *Creation of Adam*, where the anticipated touching of two digits will consummate man's creation by the insertion of a divine soul into Adam's

[94]On the brazen serpent as a sign of unseen divinity, see Cole, 2009, 69–73.
[95]John 3:14–15.

FIGURE 14. Michelangelo. *Brazen Serpent*, detail.

earthly husk (fig. 6).[96] Here Michelangelo again arouses the viewer's tactile consciousness in order to refer it to a spiritual touching and, as Paul Barolsky has written, scripture often equates the divine finger with divine spirit, making the *Creation* a divine "inspiriting" of the first man.[97] To make use of Charles Peirce's semiological terms, one might say that touch here is signaled iconically but signifies symbolically. As a symbolic sign, touching (or nearly touching) fingers signal an otherwise invisible spiritual sensation beyond what its mere physical self suggests.[98]

Yet if the figurative representation of touch in Michelangelo's works could refer beyond merely haptic experience, it could also speak to the touch of the artist himself. Usually when considering an artist's touch in a work of art, one thinks of the traces of his hands on that work's surface, as might be found, for example, in the impasto effects of the painter's brush.[99] In the case

[96]Wallace, 1988, 449, juxtaposed these two images of touching.
[97]Barolsky, 40–42.
[98]On modes of signs, see Peirce, 98–119.
[99]On the effect of impasto surfaces in Titian, see Cranston, 2010.

of Michelangelo, it is the *non-finito* works in marble that immediately come to mind, works where the clear parallel lines of the rasping chisel indexically signify the impact of the sculptor's body on the surface of the stone.[100] Speaking about the indexical touch of the artist in the *Noli me tangere* is decidedly different, however, not only because it is not a sculpture, but also because the painting was a collaborative work and, for all intents and purposes, Michelangelo did not literally touch the painting at all.

It is well to note here that, according to Antonio Mini (1506–33), Michelangelo, having been approached for a painting, created the cartoon in a brief moment of creative fury.[101] Vasari reports that Michelangelo then suggested that Pontormo execute it in paint.[102] For Vasari, Michelangelo's collaboration with Pontormo did not only represent a practical division of labor, but also a collaboration of artists working in two different, if overlapping, capacities. Echoing his praise for earlier collaborative works involving Michelangelo's designs, like Sebastiano's *Resurrection of Lazarus*, Vasari commended the *Noli me tangere* for combining the grandeur of Michelangelo's *disegno*, that is, its design and drawing, with the *colorito*, or coloring, of Pontormo.[103] Defining the two artists' roles according to these terms, Vasari implicitly ranked the labors of Michelangelo and Pontormo in a sort of artistic hierarchy: Michelangelo, the intellectual designer, worked according to inspiration, whereas Pontormo, the executant painter, made use of his skilled hands, doing what was for Vasari essentially manual labor.[104]

By categorizing the roles of Michelangelo and Pontormo in the creation of the *Noli me tangere* in terms of *disegno* and *colorito*, Vasari sought to indicate something else about their work as well. Because later Florentine art theory, which would claim Michelangelo as an authority and mouthpiece, conceived *disegno* as intellectual and *colorito* as superficial and material, it could also conceive them as being, respectively, male and female.[105]

[100]On these indexical traces and the artist's *non-finito*, see Gilbert; Schulz.

[101]Barocchi and Ristori, 3:340–41 (letter of Antonio Mini to Antonio Gondi, 26 December 1531), where Pontormo's coloring is also discussed: "L'ebe a fare in furia." As cited by Wallace, 1988, 450n33.

[102]As described in the "Life of Pontormo" and "Life of Michelangelo" in Vasari, 5:326, 6:113.

[103]See Vasari, 5:326. D'Elia, 2006, 96–100, offers some highly interesting points about Colonna's evolving understanding of *disegno* and *colore*, which point up important differences and similarities with Vasari.

[104]Vasari, 5:326, speaks of Pontormo's diligence ("diligenza").

[105]On the gendering of art theory in the Cinquecento, including some strange inversions of the period's normative template, see Summers, 1993; Sohm, especially 773–85: Jacobs; Agoston.

This gendering of *disegno* and *colorito* resonated with the Aristotelean theory of procreation, considered viable by many well into the Cinquecento, whereby it was thought that men provided the design of the child, and women the inferior physical substance.[106]

While it is true that Vasari's loaded terminology, developed toward the middle of the Cinquecento, may not directly reflect Michelangelo's own thinking about these matters, Michelangelo must have possessed a rudimentary rationale to explain his participation in collaborative undertakings, even if such collaborations were hardly unprecedented.[107] It can be shown that Michelangelo held biases that privileged his mental activities as a designer, and even contextualized these in gendered terms. For example, the artist's statements of his reservations about the medium of painting are early and well-documented, and show that he held painterly execution — the act of realizing or materializing the *opera* in colors — in lower regard than his work as a designer and sculptor.[108] Certainly the artist agreed with Vasari in associating some aspects of painting with the feminine, and he allegedly insulted his early collaborator Sebastiano, saying that Sebastiano practiced a "woman's art" by painting in oils.[109]

Given these things, it is not surprising that the division of labor in the *Noli me tangere* is consciously registered, not only in the painting's facture, but also through the work's design, for the painting's very figuration reverberates with the deeper significance of the Gospel and of theories of art-making. In other words, the *Noli me tangere* goes beyond its ostensible subject matter to describe something about the division of labor, the difference between design and execution, the mental capacities of art and its physical materialization. In determining to show Christ's planting of the seed of faith in the heart of the Magdalene, Michelangelo appears to have found a parallel between Christ's work and his own, so that Michelangelo, too, could be seen as planting something like the spiritual seed, or idea of the composition, in the breast of Pontormo, who then causes the idea's realization in outward terms.

If Michelangelo considered an asymmetrical, even gendered, division of labor to obtain in the *Noli me tangere* — wherein his figuration of Christ planting his image in the breast of the Magdalene simultaneously refers to

[106]On the Aristotlean aspects of the *disegno* and *colorito* debate, see Summers, 1993, 254–56.

[107]On other collaborations, see Sheard and Paoletti.

[108]For example, see Buonarroti, 1991, 70–72 (poem 5, ca. 1509–10), wherein the artist declares he is not a painter.

[109]See Vasari, 5:102, where the insult is leveled by the master in order to show the superiority of fresco. Sohm, 786, shows that this comment had a long legacy.

his own planting of a *disegno* in Pontormo — the master did not always see this work in strictly gendered terms. In actual practice, what theorists and Michelangelo himself seem to have read as the gendered poles of the mental and manual in painting could be complicated in other contexts involving images. As has been seen, Michelangelo's poems often cast the artist-poet as the passive recipient of images radiating from the active beauty of the female beloved.[110] In poetry, at least, Michelangelo could imagine the recipient of the image as male or female, though the image or its possessor is nearly always portrayed as active and dominant, subduing and overwhelming the defenses of a passive subject.

It should be pointed out, however, that in Michelangelo's view the person receiving the image did not remain passive for long. In fact, the well-conceived image could expect to be repeatedly registered by a sequence of viewers through a serial implantation, a consecutive impregnation of subsequent persons, both collaborators and viewers, by means of the catalyzing effect of the image. A case in point is Michelangelo's only other collaborative work undertaken with Pontormo in ca. 1532–33, the *Venus and Cupid* (fig. 15), begun after the completion of the *Noli me tangere*.[111] Like the *Noli me tangere*, this painting appears to reify the artist's ideas about the internalization of the image. Just as the heart of the Magdalene, the image-recipient, in the *Noli me tangere* is indicated, so Venus indicates her own heart in the *Venus and Cupid*, showing how it is acted upon by her infant son, Cupid.[112] In this incestuous arrangement, Venus, not unlike the speaker in Michelangelo's love sonnets quoted above, has allowed the image of a potential love, embodied by Cupid, to invade her through the gazing eyes: and now, with the image having reached the heart, it grows, with the result suggested by the masks and statuette on the left, which may symbolize the lies of the lovestruck dreamer's distorted imagination.[113] Here again the image echoes more than the imagery of the touched heart, representing also the *disegno* of Michelangelo, demonstrating how the image, both artistic and amorous, might be realized, substantiated

[110]As, for example, in the above-cited Buonarroti, 1991, 212–13 (poem 90).

[111]Further on the *Venus and Cupid*, see *Venus and Love*. See also de Tolnay, 3:108–09, 194–96.

[112]Besides indicating the organ where the love image is lodged, Venus's finger indicates the wounding of her heart by Cupid, an Ovidian idea, discussed in Keach. See also Nelson, 46. Wilde, 2:93, notes that in the preparatory drawing for the composition, Michelangelo shows Cupid aiming his bow at Venus.

[113]For more on the masks and statuette, see Nelson, 48–50. On Michelangelo's masks as symbols of deception, counterfeit, and dreams, see Ruvoldt, 103–04. On the putative autobiographical quality of the artist's masks, see Paoletti, esp. 438. Further on the meaning of masks more generally, see Barasch. Further on the statuette, see Milanesi.

FIGURE 15. Michelangelo and Pontormo. *Venus and Cupid*, ca. 1532–33. Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia. Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

through its execution by Pontormo. In this painting's exteriorization of the heart's touching, Michelangelo's control and mastery is thus channeled through an instrumental follower, who calls the designer, as the Magdalene called Christ, "master" or "teacher."[114]

Even as Cupid masters Venus, Cupid will soon himself be mastered by Venus's beauteous visage.[115] Indeed, to make this clear Michelangelo shows how Venus, while looking into the eyes of Cupid, removes an arrow from his quiver, with the point aimed at Cupid himself.[116] This arrow will presumably graze Cupid, causing Venus's image to invade his heart just as his had invaded her own. Through this reciprocal action, in fact, both original image and recipient are implicated. And the image will not stop its propagation with the two lovers, either. Whereas Cupid will absorb the image of his mother, the male viewer of the painting will in turn be touched by the beauteous image of the naked Venus. The acts of image-reception

[114]Vasari makes clear how Pontormo comes to see Michelangelo as his model: see Vasari, 5:326.

[115]The idea that Cupid may himself be wounded is present in an anonymous contemporary sonnet, as mentioned in Nelson, 45, with the sonnet reprinted and discussed as cat. 30 at ibid., 201–02.

[116]Cupid appears to be watching Venus's pulling of the arrow.

within the painting are thus echoed in the actual world looking in on the microcosm of the work itself. The image becomes the origin of subsequent acts of image implantation, breaking down the barrier between the image and its real-world propagations.

There are important implications to the pictorial suggestions of image-reception and image-dissemination discussed above. As has been mentioned, the person for whom the *Noli me tangere* was commissioned was Vittoria Colonna, later Michelangelo's great friend, who was particularly devoted to Mary Magdalene — even writing poems in the saint's honor — and who also commissioned several depictions of the saint.[117] As these poems and paintings make clear, Colonna took the Magdalene as a guide to the proper conduct of female Christian life, seeing the saint as an exemplar whose love of Christ and loyalty to his cause had earned her a place very close to him, at or above the level of the male apostles.[118]

There is no documentary evidence concerning how much of this Michelangelo knew when he was approached by Colonna's intermediaries to carry out the painting, nor is it known what Colonna thought about the *Noli me tangere* or whether she gave the artist instructions. On the other hand, Colonna's directives to Titian (ca. 1490–1576) survive, and these are of some interest since the Venetian painter was approached to paint an image of Mary Magdalene at the very same moment as Michelangelo was asked to undertake his *Noli me tangere*.[119] In conveying the offer of commission to Titian, it was specifically requested that the painter's image of the saint be "as tearful as possible."[120] Judging from the painting Titian made in response, presumably the *Penitent Magdalene* at the Pitti Gallery,[121] Colonna got everything that had been asked for: an image where the saint — shown praying in a landscape, her nudity barely covered by her undone hair — tearfully repents her misdeeds, thereby soliciting pity from

[117]See Debby, which features relevant examples of the poetry.

[118]Colonna even helped aid reformed prostitutes at S. Maria Maddalena delle Convertite in Rome. For the documentation of Colonna's interest in and association with the Magdalene, see, for example, Hirst and Mayr, 336; Wood, 195–207.

[119]On the commission, see Ingenhoff-Danhäuser, 81–91; Hirst and Mayr, 336. Further on the painting, see Debby, which features relevant poetry; Aikema. Several years earlier, perhaps around 1533, Colonna may have approached Isabella d'Este for a painting of the penitent Magdalene by Correggio, as noted in Hirst and Mayr, 343; Ekserdjian, 172.

[120]"[L]acrimosa più che si può." The request for the commission came indirectly by letter from Federigo Gonzaga. For the transcribed document and bibliography, see Ingenhoff-Danhäuser, 86. On Titian's depiction of the Magdalene, see Goffen, 1997, 171–92.

[121]On the identification of this panel with Colonna, see Wood, 195.

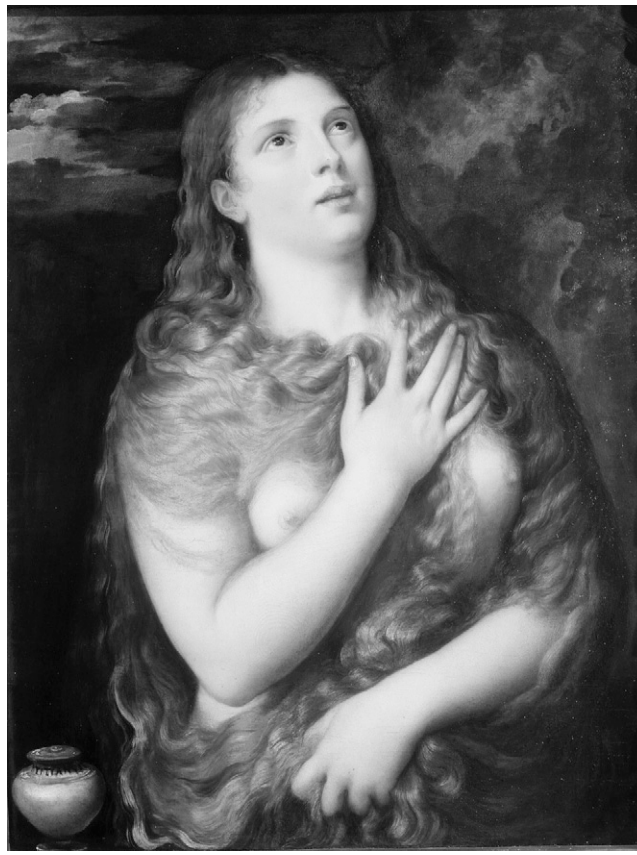

FIGURE 16. Titian. *Penitent Mary Magdalene*, ca. 1532–34. Florence, Galleria Palatina. Alfredo Dagli Orti /The Art Archive at Art Resource, New York.

her viewers (fig. 16). By combining the sensual *Venus pudica* pose with the rapt countenance of a visionary saint in his image of the Magdalene, Titian conveys how the saint, like the viewer, must struggle against the temptations of the body to gain her spiritual reward.[122] Judging from Colonna's poems, the poet saw this struggle as essential to her devotion of the Magdalene's image.[123]

Although Colonna, an active patroness, presumably provided Michelangelo his subject matter and possibly ideas about its interpretation, Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* is not in the least like the sensual, tearful painting asked of Titian. Although Michelangelo's portrayal of Christ's

[122]Ibid., 197.
[123]Ibid., 199–201.

touch has been read here as potentially erotic, its sensuality is of a much lower intensity than Titian's, depending on a single gesture rather than the full-fledged embodiment of the Magdalene's physical beauty. Moreover, whereas the wonderment evident on the Magdalene's face in the *Noli me tangere* has been noted, the scene is not one that could be described as sorrowful. The emotion expressed is the saint's astonishment before the image, her conversion by an image of faith, namely, Christ's visage. Nothing here arouses pity or penitence.

Probably Colonna or her agents were savvy enough to understand that Michelangelo was not interested in the more affective aspects of religious art. Although Colonna frequently avowed the seemingly simple, emotional expression of religion, she could simultaneously and even paradoxically embrace its more intellectual aspects, much as other members of her religious circle would do.[124] She and Michelangelo would later debate these ideas. According to Francisco de Hollanda's *Roman Dialogues*, Michelangelo would criticize Flemish painting in conversation with Colonna, despite his friend's admiration for these paintings' display of piety. He claimed they were a shallow source of religious effusions, saying "Flemish painting . . . will, generally speaking, Signora, please the devout better than any painting in Italy, which will never cause him to shed a tear, whereas that of Flanders will cause him to shed many and that not through the vigour and goodness of the painting but owing to the goodness of the devout person." He went on to state that Flemish art appeals most to old and young women, monks, nuns, and ignorant noblemen, and that Flemish painters worked with "a view to external exactness of such things as may cheer you . . . as, for example, saints and prophets."[125] At least in the first of Hollanda's four dialogues, it seems that the emotional stimulation of the viewer, the mirroring of a painted subjectivity by one's own emotions, was not consistently among Michelangelo's foremost artistic aims. Michelangelo looked to represent the indwelling order and meaning of things rather than mere surface detail,[126] and by mentioning the faults in the eyes of "young" and "old" — rather than mature, intelligent women like Colonna — Michelangelo's comments show that he did not include Colonna in the category of those naively drawn to the errors of the Flemish painters.

[124]D'Elia, 2006, 100–03.

[125]It is interesting that the artist strategically excludes middle-aged women, like Colonna herself. For the text, see Hollanda, 77 (dialogue 1).

[126]And it should be noted that in the other dialogues, Michelangelo even supports the idea that religious art should bring one to tears. Agoston, 1189–92, points out Michelangelo's inconsistencies in discussing these matters in the *Four Dialogues*.

But Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* did more, of course, than eschew the outward manifestation of tearful piety and emotion. Reflecting that Michelangelo was almost certainly aware of the intellectual and spiritual eminence of his patroness, he appears to have crafted an image that not only honored her intelligence, but also, as Rafanelli has pointed out, gave special emphasis to her cherished role model, the Magdalene. Indeed, by presenting the Magdalene as not kneeling on the ground and as occupying an almost equal position to Christ, Michelangelo may have sought to reify his patron's idea that the Magdalene ranked at least as high as the apostles.[127]

Beyond the ways in which Michelangelo may have accommodated Colonna's thinking, one may presume that Colonna was likely able to perceive and understand the larger devotional concept that Michelangelo had invented for the picture as a whole, especially that of the indwelling image of faith. Indeed, Colonna herself would explicitly state in a letter that she believed Michelangelo's works were the product of divine grace, thus making them particularly effective in centering her devotions.[128] Michelangelo's poem quoted above, wherein he writes that his "feeble soil" must be planted by God's "seed" to bring forth "pure and pious deeds," means that he believed essentially the same thing.[129] Repeating this belief in the grace-given image dwelling in the artist, Colonna prays in another letter that she will find that Michelangelo retains the image of Christ in his soul, just as he had when he made his drawing, the *Samaritan Woman*, for her.[130] To the same extent that Colonna's words indicate her and Michelangelo's ever-growing involvement in the theology of Catholic reform, they certainly underline an interesting and highly relevant theory, presumably most fully developed by the two friends in tandem, that spelled out the anatomy of devotional image formation and image effect: God graciously planted images in Michelangelo's soul so that he could then subsequently plant them in Colonna's, just as she might plant the divine image in the artist by way of her own poetry.

Here again it is important to bear in mind that Michelangelo's *Noli me tangere* was distinctly not a typical devotional work. Although the picture

[127]Rafanelli, 2004, 276–84.

[128]De Tolnay, 5:61, makes this very point, citing and translating a letter from Colonna where she writes: "I had the greatest faith in God that He would give you a supernatural Grace to make this Christ" ("Io ebbi grandissima fede in Dio che vi dessi una gratia sopranaturale a far questo Cristo"). For the original Italian text, see Barocchi and Ristori, 4:105 (letter 969).

[129]Summers, 1993, 247, shows how Michelangelo was imaged as a passive dreamer, a "potential womb of forms," forms implanted in him by inspiration.

[130]See Barocchi and Ristori, 4:169 (letter 1012, dated July 20 [1543?]). De Tolnay, 5:64, cites the same, dating it from 1541.

obviously takes up an important moment from the life of Colonna's favorite saint, it does not show the Magdalene alone, as in Titian's painting. It is not a typical devotional painting focused on the image of a particular saint, but rather presents a scene where Christ, not the saint, is the foremost protagonist, the person who does the touching. In this way, the *Noli me tangere* looks forward to Michelangelo's later images made under the influence of Catholic reform.

While this centering of the religious image on Christ was admittedly a feature of Michelangelo's earliest attempts at religious painting,[131] the tendency would only grow over the course of the 1530s and 1540s as the master increasingly involved himself in the theology of Church reform.[132] It would culminate, in the estimation of Charles de Tolnay, in his depiction of the *Last Judgment* (fig. 8), where the Virgin, who is often shown as an active intercessor for sinful mankind, plays a secondary role to Christ, who dominates the physical and spiritual action of the composition from its center.[133] And whether or not one follows de Tolnay in this estimate, one needs only note how Michelangelo's later art, particularly his sculpture, focused not on the saints but on scenes from the life of Christ and his Passion.

Considered in the context of his development, the *Noli me tangere* may be viewed as an important moment in the artist's evolving emphasis on the pious person's personal relationship with Christ. And this indicates how the *Noli me tangere* anticipates important devotional aspects of images that are generally seen as typical of those produced for Colonna at the height of her friendship with Michelangelo late in the decade, when he was more fully under the influence of her reformist circle. If it is assumed that Michelangelo at this early date made these particular choices in the painting, it would show that he, as much as Colonna, already perceived the ultimate goals of devotional imagery as they would both come to understand them by the end of the 1530s.[134] On the basis of this discussion, it is even worth considering again that Michelangelo's highly-finished presentation drawings of Christ's Passion for Colonna were drawn for this special purpose, the choice of medium being related to the goals already enunciated in the *Noli me tangere*'s representation of image-reception, insofar as the devotional image speaks to the individual, lodges in her heart, is reified internally and in the soul, rather than trapping itself on the surface of the work, in the colors of a painted design.[135]

[131]Nagel, 2000, 25–140.
[132]As de Tolnay, esp. 5:57–67, points out.
[133]Ibid., 57–58.
[134]That understanding is discussed, as we have seen, in Nagel, 2000, 169–87.
[135]Ibid.

It has been observed that Colonna played a role of spiritual guide to Michelangelo that resembles the one that Beatrice played for Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, a poem well known to the artist.[136] Michelangelo even celebrated Colonna's role as his Beatrice in his poetry, her special medium:

> There is no one, my lady, who can reach
> your lofty, shining diadem
> over the long steep road,
> if you don't add to it humility and kindness;
> the ascent increases, and my strength grows weak,
> and I'm short of breath halfway along the route.[137]

In the painted *Noli me tangere*, however, the roles of devotee and spiritual guide are seemingly reversed, with Colonna taking the place of the Magdalene in the painting, and Michelangelo, implicitly, the role of Christ implanting the seed of faith through his image. And so, just as Christ commands the Magdalene in the Gospel to go forth and spread the news of his Resurrection and coming ascension to the apostles — "go to my brethren, and say to them"[138] — Colonna receives the image of the Magdalene and becomes the witness of what she has seen. In other words, Michelangelo's image speaks directly to Colonna, compelling her to carry the image of faith received from the painting, as the Magdalene carries that of Christ, to all those who wish to have news of his Resurrection. Following the example set out in the *Noli me tangere*, a picture about devotional images, Colonna finds a new role as the recipient of Michelangelo's design, and through it Colonna and other viewers are summoned to propagate the image of faith, that is, to be touched by Christ, and to touch others' hearts in turn.

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[136]Thanks to Sara Adler for bringing this aspect of the relationship to my attention. On these matters, see de Tolnay, 5:52. On Michelangelo's profound knowledge of Dante, see, for example, Condivi, 61, who says that Michelangelo had practically memorized the whole of his poetry ("ha quasi tutto a mente"); Vasari, 6:111, where the master is described as admiring and imitating Dante's poetry, using it in his own concepts and designs. Agoston, 1185–86, observes how Colonna seems to have dominated Michelangelo, as if she were male and he female, reversing expectations of gender in their relationship. On Colonna's dominant or leading position vis-à-vis the artist, see also Brundin, 73–79.

[137]Buonarroti, 1991, 309 (poem 156): "A l'alta tuo lucente diadema / per la strada erta e lunga, / non è, donna, chi giunga, / s'umilità non v'aggiugni e cortesia: / il montar cresce, e 'l mie valore scema, e la lena mi manca a mezza via." Cited by de Tolnay, 5:52, as an example of Michelangelo's casting of Colonna as Beatrice.

[138]John 20:17.

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