

*Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Art of the Figure.* Michael W. Cole.  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. xiv + 192 pp. \$45.

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This slim, elegant, beautifully designed, and copiously illustrated book is an intense meditation on the concept of force in Italian Renaissance art and aesthetics. Departing from an analysis of the sharp differences between Leonardo's *Battle of Anghiari* and Michelangelo's rival *Battle of Cascina*, the author explores the power of the figure in art (the *figura sforzata*) and, doing so, he offers a fresh view of various shifts of style from the early Renaissance to the High Renaissance and mannerism. At a certain point, Cole refers to the "threads" of his book, a suggestive term, since it reads as a text that (in the root sense of the word) is beautifully woven together. The book ranges from Lorenzo Ghiberti, Filippo Lippi, and Antonio Pollaiuolo, to Filippino Lippi, Bernardino Pinturicchio, Luca Signorelli, Fra Bartolommeo, and beyond. It is rooted in the writings of Cennini, Ghiberti, Alberti, Gauricus, Vasari, Pino, Gilio, and Borghini. In its mode of analysis and making of analogies, it has something of the feel of Baxandall's great *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Like Baxandall's book it is scarcely introductory in character. Its sophistication and refinement of thought demand of the reader patience and deliberation. In our age of extreme velocity, this book is to be read slowly and with care. The author's topic is especially timely since, as it has been observed, force is a fundamental principle in our world of modernism.

*Force* can mean many things. It suggests the power of images, the energy or vigor of drawing or contour; it pertains to the boldness of artistic execution; to violence and virility; to *bravazza* or *bravura*; to the rendering of storms, battles, and bestiality; to courage; and much, much more. Cole quotes from Arnold Hauser (remember him?), who refers to the forceful and even acrobatic poses of mannerist figures, which are "affectedly dance-like or tortured." We might follow this lead back to Vasari's sense of *gagliardezza*, a word that, conveying vigor, recalls the fact that it is derived from *gaillard*, a dynamic dance.

Cole's topic is vast but highly suggestive. He opens up for discussion many possibilities of understanding. He prompts one to think, for example, of the force in Giulio Romano's inventions of the furious fornications of acrobatic figures in Raimondi's *I Modi*. He prompts one to look again at the ways in which Botticelli, ever so vigorously or forcefully, renders sinners in hell — and with astonishing variety. Cole is well aware that his subject extends far beyond the covers of his book. He speaks of Michelangelo's representations of bound figures as the artist's effort to render "a kind of force," knowing full well, although he does not say so, that Michelangelo's poetry abounds in the language of binding or confinement (*lacci, catena, carcere, prigionie, legato*, etc.), words that convey the powerful sense of force pertinent to his art. Cole has been wise to offer us a kind of prolegomenon to his subject rather than exhaustive treatment of every connotation and implication of force in the art and literature of the Italian Renaissance.

Although Cole's numerous aperçus are too many to be cited in this brief review, surely one needs to mention the numerous analogies he establishes between the forceful actions of the human body and the functions of machines or weapons. His observations about the force of the bow in Antonio Pollaiuolo's art or about Michelangelo's comparison of his own body to the tension of a bow are exemplary. His various discussions of mechanics and the mechanics of the human body, especially in regard to Leonardo, are filled with stimulating and delightful surprises. I find especially enticing Cole's several allusions to "play." Although playfulness is not a subject or rhetorical mode that Cole or most other art historians of the Renaissance much employ, he is nonetheless charmingly playful when he entitles the instructive section of his book on the technical aspects of drawing "Nine Ways of Looking at an Outline" — a sly allusion to Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

There are far more than nine or thirteen fresh ideas in Cole's pregnant book, which will command a broad readership. It is a great stimulant to thought, and I am confident it will prompt much further reflection.

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