(Im)material Michelangelo: Toward a Visual Historiography of Sculpture Between Reproduction and Art-Historical Enquiry

International conference organized by Giulia Daniele (RAHN) and Daniele Di Cola (Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies).
In collaboration with the Bibliotheca Hertziana, promoted by the Rome Art History Network (https://www.romearthistorynetwork.com).

Reproducing, representing, copying, or recording an artwork is the inevitable result of an interpretation, which can reveal some neglected aspects of the original model, as well as disguise or change many others. This is due both to the intentions of those involved in making or in requesting the copy or the reproduction and to the intrinsic difficulties of the "translation" process from one medium to another. These problems are shared by "artistic" copies as much as by documentary or scientific reproductions, a fact that undoes the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, between classic media (e.g. painting, sculpture, engraving) and the "mechanical" reproduction typical of the new media (photography, video, digital technologies). For these reasons, reproductions of an artwork (independently of the medium used) could become a useful source for reconstructing the historiographic path of the work itself, something we could define as "visual historiography" [Johnson 2013]; they can document how a specific artwork has been observed and interpreted over time, sometimes in close connection with the textual sources of art literature and art criticism, while at other times actively influencing their very formation.

Considering these general and methodological premises, the conference intends to examine the reproductions and copies, through different media, of Michelangelo Buonarroti’s sculptural works, exploring and investigating them as evidence of the artist’s "visual historiography", from the 16th century to today. In fact, Michelangelo’s uninterrupted legacy provides a wide-range of visual documentation relating to his sculptures, now found all over the globe, making it possible to record the continuous mutations and transformations of the reception of his plastic works over time: from pictorial and graphic copies, to the mise en abyme of his sculptures in narrative and celebratory paintings; from plastic copies, such as small bronzes, to the diffusion of plaster casts for academic collections; from the engravings included in the first art-historical texts to the diffusion of mphotography; from video shootings in films and documentaries to the scans and the virtual of the Digital Michelangelo Project. Most of these examples, and well before the invention of photography, had (and still have) the purpose to document Michelangelo’s sculptures for their physical and material qualities (e.g. as sculptures), reproducing them not just as artistic to imitate. If representing sculpture in another medium is often a great challenge, due to its three-dimensionality and its intrinsic relationship with space, in the case of Michelangelo’s works this has raised additional
problems because of his particular way of dealing with the material, exposing overtly the traces of
the working process, the uneven treatment of the surfaces and the use of fragmented or sketched
elements, according to the well-known poetics of the non finito. The “translation” of these aspects
usually led to a necessary "remediation" between original and copies. The copies can in fact
change or reinvent the sculptures, completing some parts Michelangelo had left unfinished, or
they can respect the formal appearance of the originals. They can represent a sculpture from a
unique and conventional point of view or, on the contrary, the experiences of its interaction with
the beholder. They can decontextualize and recontextualize a sculpture; transfiguring
its objecthood and its material aspects or emphasizing them by means of the plastic forms or the
magnification of details.

The conference, in brief, intends to investigate "how" and "why" Michelangelo's sculptural works
were copied, represented and documented, and which factors (social, economic, cultural, etc.)
influenced the creation and diffusion of these reproductions, considering in particular:
a) how these images should be interpreted in terms of "visual" evidences of the aesthetic, historio-
graphic, and critical transformations concerning the most characteristic formal features of
Michelangelo's sculpture.
b) the functions and meanings of the reproduction of the physical and spatial qualities, or the
materials and techniques of Michelangelo’s sculpture, and the issues and challenges raised by
the process of translation.

Proposals addressing these historical, theoretical, and methodological problems will be parti-
cularly welcome, especially if they take the form of case studies concerning the reception of individual
Michelangelo’s work, the use of specific media, the activity and impact of individual artistic and
historical figures (treatise writers, art historians, etc.) who had an outstanding role in the develop-
ment of the "visual historiographical" discourse on the artist.

The conference is organized by Giulia Daniele and Daniele Di Cola, in collaboration with the Bibli-
otheca Hertziana, thanks to the initiative of the Rome Art History Network (RAHN) (http-
s://www.romearthistorynetwork.com).

The call for papers is addressed to scholars who will have completed their PhD before the confer-
ence date.
A short abstract (max 2000 characters, including spaces) and a CV must be submitted by June
5th, 2020 to the following address: michelangeloimmatereale2020@gmail.com.
Presentations should be in either Italian or English.
The publication of the conference proceeding will be taken into future consideration.
Please note: unfortunately, the organizers will not be able to cover any travel or accommodation
expenses.

Selected bibliography:
- Barnes, B.A., Michelangelo in Print: Reproductions as Response in the Sixteenth Century, Farn-
ham
2010 [in particular: pp. 144-165].
- Der Göttliche. Hommage an Michelangelo, cat. della mostra (Bonn, Kunst und Ausstellungshalle
der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 6 February - 25 May 2015), curated by Satzinger, G., München
2015.
- Ri-conoscere Michelangelo: la scultura del Buonarroti nella fotografia e nella pittura dall'Ottocento a oggi, cat. della mostra (Firenze, Gallerie dell'Accademia, 18 February - 18 May 2014), curated by Maffioli, M., Bietoletti, S., Firenze 2014.

Reference: