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“The Reintegration of Sculpture in the Baroque: Ensembles and Decorations”

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Introductory Remarks

When I was a student it was a cliché of art history that a great achievement of the Renaissance was to have liberated sculpture from its dependence on architecture. The development from Chartres cathedral to the Sabines of Giovanni Bologna was viewed as a continuous process whereby figure sculpture became increasingly monumental and self-sufficient. Moreover, whether explicitly or not, this process was regarded as irreversible, and sculpture other than free-standing monuments became, somehow, “ornament.” Yet, I hope you may agree that these generalizations constitute only a half-truth. The process was in a sense reversed. It is as difficult to imagine a Baroque church without a great panoply of sculptured decoration as it is to imagine a church by Brunelleschi or Alberti with one. Indeed, the first five talks you will hear this afternoon discuss works part of whose significance lies in what can only be described as their sculptural “orchestration.” In the first, two pairs of tombs wedded to the walls of the chapels designed to contain them, are given a veritable incrustation of narrative reliefs illustrating the lives of the deceased. In the second, the city itself was animated by a series of monumental sculptures which performed as silent actors in a kind of mystery play without a stage. In the third and fourth, elaborate stucco figure compositions populate the vaults of religious and secular buildings. The fifth celebrates a colossal marriage between landscape and sculpture, in which the distinction between the two is all but obliterated.

Although none of these monuments was without precedent, they are symptomatic creations of the Baroque. And a major factor they have in common is that single sculptures were not thought of in isolation, but in relation to a larger environment of which they formed an integral part.

It is not hard to find analogies for this development in other areas. Panofsky's study of art theory revealed the displacement of the Renaissance quest for objective, fixed rules of design, by an wholistic view in which the subjective perception of the reciprocal influences of the elements upon one another was paramount. In iconography, Emile Mâle described the "programmatic" kind of imagery that characterized the period following the Council of Trent. The medieval overtones in all this are not false notes, moreover: both Panofsky and Mâle were able to demonstrate important scholastic revivals in their respective domains.

But of course a fundamental difference remains from the medieval attitude. For us, it lies in the fact that the transformation was brought about without violence to the integrity of the individual achieved in the Renaissance; the individual participates in the whole not out of dependence, but by a passionate act of free will, as it were. To say that this organic synthesis between the whole and its parts, between the individual and the environment, was the great achievement of the seventeenth century, would be to mouth another cliché. What does bear emphasizing, I think, is that Baroque decoration—or rather the "decorativeness" of Baroque style—far from being superfluous, was one of the very crucibles in which the synthesis took place.