



AAH 2010 Conference Preview

Papers by Courtauld Institute of Art postgraduates

Friday, 12 March 2010
15.00, Research Forum South Room

ABSTRACTS

Jack Hartnell

Spiritual Batteries: The Price of Reanimation and the Death of the Relic

'Body-Part' reliquaries engage in a contradictory relationship with notions of mortification. On the one hand they house a relic, a permanent reminder of decay, mortality, and the transience of human life. Yet their form simultaneously extends these finite remains, associating their contents with notions of enduring holiness and with a physical afterlife of worship. Medieval artisans and viewers effectively reanimated the dead through their enshrinement in this way. Yet the picture is somewhat more complex. There is within these objects another paradox: that of visibility. Despite being created to house holy remains, these reliquaries often completely obscured their contents from view, clouding notions of spiritual and material hierarchies in these composite objects. Does its role in channelling the efficacy of the relic mean that the ultimate spiritual power of the ensemble rests instead with its container? Is bone inferior to gold, gems, and crystal? Does it even matter if the relic is there at all? Through a series of case studies this paper will suggest that whilst successful reanimation of the image of the saint served to negate their mortal death in the medieval mind, this was achieved through a sidelining of their physical remains. Relics were spiritual batteries that powered the reanimated saint, but they were not so much enshrined as imprisoned. The saint could 'walk again' in processions and 'speak' to its congregation but the relic was rendered impotent in the ensemble, dying its own death out of sight and out of mind.

Jim Harris

From Holy Wounds to a Good Kicking: Vasari, Donatello and the Varieties of Violence

Donatello's *Bardi Crucifix* in Santa Croce, Florence, is celebrated primarily as the loser of a contest between Donatello and Brunelleschi to produce the more exquisite Christ. The story, though not a Vasarian invention, achieved its most fully realised form in the two sculptors' *Vite*. As a result, Brunelleschi's characterisation of Donatello's corpus as a *contadino*, or peasant, is often cited in support of a formal reading of it as an over-muscled, retardataire product of a sculptor as yet unable or unwilling to escape the trecento. Conversely, Brunelleschi's Christ, carved in response to Donatello's, is seen as among the first, fully idealising representations of the human form made in the Renaissance.

It is difficult, however, to sustain an analysis rooted in the contrasts between the two figures, whose similarity is perhaps more striking than their difference. A more fruitful line of inquiry is to attempt to understand what Vasari found so unsettling about

Donatello's Christ that he dismissed it with the oddly specific term *contadino*, and what, for Vasari, the connotations of that word were.

This paper, therefore, will discuss the *Bardi* Christ in light both of what it does not possess; the exaggerated, hyper-described wounds demarcating the individual acts of Christ's torture and disfigurement, typical of many trecento and quattrocento corpses, and what it does; the suggestion of another kind of violence, less appropriate to the Passion, which made this corpus, for Vasari, an unworthy synecdoche for the other body of Christ, the Florentine faithful gathered for the sacrament.

Edward Payne

Britain's Bête Noire? The Reception of Ribera in the Nineteenth Century

The art of Jusepe de Ribera prompted a range of contradictory responses from various audiences in nineteenth-century Britain and France. Poets, travel writers, critics and artists reacted to his work, especially his striking depictions of corporal violence, at once with admiration and displeasure. Lord Byron's epic poem, *Don Juan* (1823), declares that 'Spagnoletto tainted / His brush with all the blood of all the sainted', and in 1845, Théophile Gautier dedicated two poems to the artist, one of which exclaims: 'Toi, cruel Ribera, plus dur que Jupiter'. While the artist's portrayals of human suffering fired the Romantic imagination, Richard Ford's *Hand-book for Travellers in Spain* (1845) states that Ribera was 'unpopular in England', and William Stirling-Maxwell's *Annals of the Artists of Spain* (1848) confirms that Ribera's 'passion for the horrible was little likely to produce a favourable impression of Spanish taste'.

Through a close study of these varied responses, this paper investigates why Ribera was not as highly regarded in Britain as he was in France. It considers the shared enthusiasm for the art of Diego Velázquez and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, and it explores nineteenth-century attitudes towards extreme imagery, for the Sevillian artists not only upstaged Ribera in popularity, but also oppose him in their production of predominantly non-violent works. Although the reception of Ribera has aroused surprisingly little scholarly attention, this paper aims to demonstrate that it is an integral part of the history of his oeuvre and central to an understanding of his artistic production as a whole.