

## Michelangelo's principles or Panofsky's?

Review of:

*Michelangelo's Design Principles, Particularly in Relation to Those of Raphael* by Erwin Panofsky, edited by Gerda Panofsky, translated by Joseph Spooner, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020, ISBN 978-0-691-16526-4

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In the remote mountain monastery of St. Gall, Switzerland, a Florentine humanist on the hunt for rare and forgotten manuscripts suddenly stumbled across something that took his breath away. Later that day, Poggio Bracciolini excitedly wrote to his friend Guarino of Verona: 'Amid a tremendous quantity of books, I found Quintilian still safe and sound, though filthy with mould and dust. For these books were not in the library, as befitted their worth, but in a sort of foul and gloomy dungeon at the bottom of one of the towers, where not even men convicted of a capital offense would have been stuck away.' The Roman writer's famous treatise on rhetoric was known, but previously only in fragmentary *mutili*. Poggio was enough of a scholar to recognize what he was now reading: the complete *Institutio Oratoria* – preserved in this remote place, safe from the disruptions of the world, until this December day in 1416.

Something like this episode occurred in June, 2012. In a neglected safe in a dusty basement office of the Central Institute for Art History in Munich, a researcher pulled out some yellowed, disintegrating binders and recognized he had discovered Erwin Panofsky's unpublished post-doctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*) on Michelangelo. Granted, Panofsky is no Quintilian but the excitement of discovery is palpable and the addition of a major scholarly work – thought to have been lost --by one of the most prominent figures of the field must be greeted with enthusiasm. And, so we welcome this substantial contribution and its publication, first in German (De Gruyter, 2014) and now in English (Princeton, 2020), even if, like Poggio's re-discovered Quintilian, it may turn out to be less important than one first assumes.

In the late spring of 1920, the twenty-eight year-old Erwin Panofsky submitted his Habilitation thesis to the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Hamburg. His examiners included his champion, Gustav Pauli (Director of the Hamburg Kunsthalle), as well as the historian Max Lerner, philosopher Ernst Cassirer, and Dean Otto Lauffer. A trial lecture on the topic of 'Die Entwicklung der Proportionslehre als Abbild der Stilentwicklung' (published 1921) completed the Habilitation process and Panofsky began his teaching career at Hamburg. Over the subsequent years, he revised the unfinished manuscript, and he occasionally mined

it for articles that he published, but the thesis was left behind when he departed Germany for the United States in 1934. Panofsky himself was convinced that the manuscript had been lost, telling Egon Verheyen in 1964, 'My "Habilitationsschrift" was concerned with the stylistic principles of Michelangelo, seen against the background of the development of art from Egypt to Bernini. It was much too ambitious an attempt ...'. As the book's editor, Gerda Panofsky, observes: 'His text, frozen in time, is a historical monument in the discipline of art history' (p. xxvii). Indeed, it is less important to the scholarship of Michelangelo than it is to the history of Art History.

The story of the manuscript's peregrinations during the world war and its re-discovery in the most unlikely place, a safe in the basement of what once was the administration building of the National Socialist Worker's Party in Munich, is related in compelling fashion by Gerda Panofsky who also painstakingly checked the transcription, translation, and every bibliographic reference, as well as shepherding the manuscript through both its German and English editions. Her invaluable, sixty-five page introduction provides a fascinating account of Panofsky's life and career and his intellectual trajectory, with special regard to his engagement with Michelangelo studies and his gradual disengagement from that early passion, especially after his move to the United States. She also offers a lucid introduction to some of the main ideas and concepts the reader will encounter in the lengthy, sometimes confounding, occasionally turgid thesis. Have dissertations ever been exciting reading?

There has been a recent trend (or is it recurrent?) to revive and reprint the writings of the field's elder statespersons. In Art History – and specifically relevant just to Michelangelo -- this includes Aby Warburg's nearly 900-page volume, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* (Getty, 1999), Edgar Wind's writings on Michelangelo, collected in *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo* (Oxford, 2000), and a re-issuing of John Addington Symonds, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* (Philadelphia, 2011). At least, Panofsky's *Michelangelo's Design Principles* is entirely new, but one cannot help but ask – as in the case of the above publications: what is the readership for these works? What impact will they have on current scholarship and methods? It is almost cruel but let me be candid: how many readers will plough through 272 pages of the 100-year-old *Design Principles* --and more importantly, have it affect or influence their thinking? As a historian, I am interested in historical artefacts for their own sake; in this case, we have a curious historical artifact, a welcome addition to the history of Art History.

The manuscript was discovered in 2012 and published in a luxurious German edition in 2014, of which more than half the volume is devoted to reproducing a colour facsimile of the entire Panofsky thesis. One sees Panofsky's typewritten manuscript, his many hand-written additions, corrections, marginal and footnote notations, pages of insertions, deletions etc. It is a bibliophile's dream! Beautifully reproduced so that one can easily read the typescript and much of the scribbled German, if your paleography is up to snuff.

As a scholar of Michelangelo, I did not hesitate to fork over \$140 to purchase this volume in 2014. I was excited by it, perused it, read sections of it. As many scholars do, I looked intently at parts of the book that might be relevant to my current concerns. As I was then writing a book on Michelangelo as an architect in his 70s and 80s, Panofsky's focus on Michelangelo and Raphael, and his complete exclusion of any discussion of architecture, were not directly relevant. Moreover, the type and style of art history appeared dated. Mine was a superficial but probably not uncommon assessment of the book, which received few reviews, mostly news items announcing the stunning discovery.

As far as I know, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, the book raised scarcely a blip on the scholarly horizon. Sad, but true. Part of the reason was the language barrier, which has become increasingly an issue in recent times. German, the foundational language of Art History, is no longer as central, at least not in the teaching and expectations of the Anglo-Saxon world. As Christopher Wood points out in his recent *A History of Art History* (Princeton, 2019), there has been a general erosion of foreign language skills, especially in America. I too am guilty. I perused Panofsky's German text for what I currently needed, decided that it had little to offer me immediately, and I set the beautifully produced volume on my shelf: consulted but not 'read.' Now, after a heroic five-year labour of translation, the book has appeared in English, without the facsimile of the manuscript, but with a nice selection of black and white period photos of the type that Panofsky used to write his unillustrated thesis. And now, reading the book *in toto* rather than selectively, I can share some key insights and what the reader of this review may wish to know.

Panofsky's ambition was no less than to define the fundamental design principles of Michelangelo's art and especially as they could be articulated in contradistinction to the art of Raphael. He began the thesis in Hamburg in 1919, having made just one brief holiday visit to Italy in May 1911. His stay at the Grand Hotel de Bains on the Lido in Venice was cut short by the same outbreak of cholera immortalized by Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice*. Conscripted for military service at the outbreak of World War I and classified to serve on the home front in Kassel and Berlin from 1914 to January, 1919, Panofsky never had an opportunity to see the art of Michelangelo and Raphael in Italy before writing his thesis. He was instead dependent upon the superb German museums and their important plaster cast collections (which included many examples of Renaissance and Michelangelo sculptures, both round and relief). His ideas of Michelangelo's paintings derived from black and white photographs, for which Ernst Steinmann's luxurious two-volume publication, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle* (1905) was an especially important resource. This is similar to how Johann Winckelmann, ensconced in a library in Dresden without ever having visited Greece – wrote one of the foundational works of art history: *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* ('Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture' 1755). What I most appreciate about Panofsky, which I only learned from

having read this book and Gerda Panofsky's fascinating introduction, is how he altered and expanded his thinking once he encountered the actual works of Raphael and Michelangelo in Italy. But that did not occur until after he wrote his intellectually ambitious, albeit visually hampered treatise on 'Michelangelo's Design Principles'.

Chapter 1, 'Raphael and the Works of Michelangelo' describes the many formal borrowings from Michelangelo's art by Raphael, first in Florence and then, with greater maturity after the younger artist's move to Rome where 'he began to grasp Michelangelo's art more from the aspect of its substance and expressive potential.' (p. 27) Michelangelo had a 'vivifying and intensifying effect' on Raphael's borrowings. Conversely Michelangelo is presented as the most independent genius in the history of art, although Panofsky explores the various 'stimuli' that inspired him: largely antique art, but also the expected duo of Jacopo della Quercia and Donatello, and the 'more than mere incidental stimuli' of Luca Signorelli's San Brixio's Chapel in Orvieto. Part I of Panofsky's thesis reads as a familiar review of sources and influences, written as a history of motifs and styles much influenced by his teacher Heinrich Wölfflin. There is little here that will surprise the reader, and much to irritate one who has little patience with an antiquated method of formal analysis in which every bodily pose, gesture, and arrangement of a limb is traced to an antique or modern source. However, this is merely the formal groundwork for the more theoretical design principles that follow in Part II.

Panofsky begins to articulate the fundamental principles of Michelangelo's art in Part II, Chapter 2: 'The Design of the Body in Michelangelo'. Once again, we are on familiar ground, although it was probably less familiar in 1919, when Panofsky introduces his idea of the essentially 'planar nature' of Michelangelo's art by invoking Giorgio's Vasari's well-known metaphor of a figure emerging from a block, plane by plane. Based on his observations of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures – with reference to the *Victory* and *Accademia Captives* in particular -- Vasari developed his vivid, if misleading metaphor to describe marble carving as a gradual issuing forth from the block, like a figure that emerges as it is raised little by little from a tub of water.<sup>1</sup>

For Panofsky, Michelangelo is an artist who affirms the plane and his figures are aligned to a single 'satisfactory' viewpoint. As his teacher, Wölfflin, would characterize it, this is a *Reliefstil* ('Relief Style'), an adherence to the principle of planimetric design which employs a *linea centrale* (a principle of styling around a central axis), not only to hold volumes together in a coherent manner, but also to balance and regulate the scope of movements. Even when Michelangelo attacked a block from multiple sides – as is evident in the *Accademia Captives* – he did not

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. Rosanna Bettarini, 6 vols. Florence, 1966-1987, 1:120. On the misleading character of Vasari's metaphor, see William E. Wallace, 'Michelangelo: Separating Theory and Practice'. *Imitation, Representation and Printing in the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Roy Eriksen and Magne Malmanger (Pisa and Rome, 2009), 101-117.

forgo the principle of uncovering the figure by planimetric means. Because he always observed the plane, Michelangelo's approach can be called 'cubic thinking' and thus he is not departing from but broadening 'Classic' principles. He was observing 'cubic constraint' and, every sculpture, always maintained a *veduta principale*, that is, a primary and single viewpoint. Panofsky rescues Michelangelo from any imputation of a multi-viewpoint Baroque, or worse, Mannerist style, by concluding that 'Michelangelo is as far from belonging to Classic art [of which Raphael is the exemplar] as he is from being the precursor of the Baroque; instead, he constitutes, as it were, as an artistic era in himself.' (153)

When Raphael borrows motifs from Michelangelo, he transforms them, or, in Panofsky's terms 'reformulates' them, according to the principles commensurate with the general tendency of Classic art (the capital C is, of course, important throughout the discussion). 'Every time Raphael put figures by Michelangelo to use in his own compositions, he always strove to transform the figures into a construct curved around the *linea centrale* that seemed alive from within in coherent momentum.' (98) If this makes you feel a bit woozy, try the same in the original German: 'So oft Raffael Figuren Michelangelos in eignen Kompositionen zur Verwendung brachte, und so verschieden die künstlerischen Absichten waren, die ihn von Fall zu Fall dabei leiteten: stets war es sein Bestreben, die Gestalt zu einem Gebilde zu formen, das, um eine *linea Centrale* sich rundend, von innen her in einheitlichem Schwung belebt erschien.' One must acknowledge the heroic five-year effort by the translator, Joseph Spooner, to render this prose into semi-comprehensible English.

'The Organization of the Form in the Plane' (Chap. 3) develops the above concepts at greater length and with ever greater subtlety and sophistication, although, I suspect, most readers by this point will begin to weary of the concepts, arguments, and sentences of Teutonic length. We learn that Michelangelo's design principles most clearly manifest themselves at the very moment when the artist achieves a stylistic apogee, with the four allegorical sculptures in the Medici Chapel. For Panofsky, the figure of *Dawn* is exemplary in that the body is disposed in four purely frontal planes, including the 'plane of the countenance, turned towards us in a fully frontal view'. (189) Really?

Thus, we discover, if it has not been evident all along, that one of Panofsky's principal insights is that a single viewpoint governs Michelangelo's art, and his sculpture in particular. Ultimately, it is 'relief-like,' obliging the beholder 'to look at his figures from one pre-determined side only....' (202) But, here I take my leave, for I have a very different idea of Michelangelo's sculpture, and even his painting. I believe Michelangelo made art that reveals itself through time and space, from multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Despite this disagreement, Panofsky makes us think and look afresh at the art, and the book under review prompts one to reflect on larger issues regarding the field, the scholarly endeavour, and the role of publishing in assisting and shaping our efforts.

In fall 1921, Panofsky finally was free to make a three week trip to Italy where he encountered, for the first time in person, Michelangelo in Florence and Rome. From the Hotel Santa Chiara in Rome, close to the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva (still in business today), Panofsky wrote a letter recounting his first experience with Michelangelo's paintings. His *permesso* to visit the Sistine Chapel would only arrive the following day; therefore, he described his visit to the Pauline Chapel: 'the space is much larger and more beautiful than I thought', he wrote, 'their colouration is subdued, but unlike that of the atrocious frescoes by Vasari in the Sala Regia, it is not the slightest bit watery. The style and state of preservation are marvelous... I think that a few things concerning Michelangelo's late style have dawned on me.'

Panofsky was awestruck by his first experience of Michelangelo's fresco painting, which was not the more familiar Sistine Chapel, but the comparatively little known and much less admired Pauline Chapel. He appreciated a 'late' Michelangelo when many scholars and the general public were mostly enamoured with the artist's early works and heroic rise to fame. And, when he experienced Michelangelo in Florence, Panofsky was inspired to write an article about the Laurentian Library staircase, rather than about the 'planimetric' character of the Medici Chapel figures that were central subjects in his thesis.<sup>2</sup> Both cases demonstrate that Panofsky's thesis was more important for launching his career than for shaping or governing his thinking and publications once he actually experienced actual examples of Michelangelo's art. One admires his intellectual humility when he admitted upon the conclusion of his trip, 'Italy will mature me, or at least change me.'

After Panofsky immigrated to the United States in 1934, he largely ceded the field of Michelangelo studies to Johannes Wilde and Charles de Tolnay; nonetheless, he still had important things to contribute. As part of the Mary Flexner Lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College in 1937, Panofsky wrote a hugely influential essay, 'The Neoplatonic Movement and Michelangelo' that was subsequently published in *Studies in Iconology* (1939). We hear echoes of his Habilitation thesis when he writes of Michelangelo's style gradually developing in a direction opposite to classical ideals: 'His violent yet inhibited *contrapposti* had expressed a struggle between the natural and the spiritual. In his latest works this struggle subsides because the spiritual has won the battle.' Some of the concepts, terms, and contrapositions are the same, now couched in a more comfortably fluid prose, and a far broader view of Michelangelo's art.

It is scarcely fair to hold a thesis – one that Panofsky himself largely abandoned -- accountable to a high measure of clarity and prose style. His Habilitation thesis reads like most theses – admired by the members of its review committee and loved only by one's adoring mother. Written about two of the most

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky, 'Die Treppe der Libreria von S. Lorenzo. Bemerkungen zu einer unveröffentlichten Skizze Michelangelos', *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* 15 (1922):262-74.

significant artists of all time, Panofsky's *Michelangelo's Design Principles* offers us a welcome opportunity to observe the maturing of one of the great figures of Art and Intellectual History.

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