ITALIAN HIGH RENAISSANCE & BAROQUE SCULPTURE

John Pope-Hennessy

PHAIDON

ITALIAN HIGH RENAISSANCE & BAROQUE SCULPTURE

John Pope-Hennessy

Paperback edition

Frontispiece
Andrea Sansovino
The Holy Family
Basilica della Santa
Casa, Loreto
(detail of plate 180)
marble

ITALIAN HIGH
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& BAROQUE
SCULPTURE

An Introduction to Italian Sculpture

Volume I
Italian Gothic Sculpture

Volume II
Italian Renaissance Sculpture

Volume III
Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture

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THE THREE VOLUMES of this *Introduction to Italian Sculpture*, though conceived together, were published separately. The first, *Italian Gothic Sculpture*, was issued in 1955. Its text and notes were more summary than those of the two succeeding volumes, and both were substantially expanded for the second edition of 1972. The second volume, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, was published in 1958, and was revised for a second edition in 1971. The third, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, was published in 1963 and was reissued in 1970. In 1985 a facsimile edition was published of all three volumes, with an appendix of updated bibliography. In this new edition every attempt has been made to assimilate the ever growing literature of Italian sculpture. Once more the bibliographies have been brought up to date, now to the year ending 1993, and notes on individual sculptors have been extended. It should, however, be stressed that the catalogue of each sculptor's work has been conceived, not as an annotated bibliography but as an informed, though none the less personal response to works of art. In the forty-odd years that have gone into the writing and rewriting of this book I am happy to say that the personal nature of that response has only increased.

As in the second and third editions I have been indebted to assistants for help with the notes and bibliographies. Many of them are mentioned individually in the catalogue, but a specific acknowledgement must be made to Dr. Jonathan Nelson, who has contributed great time and insight to the matter of the bibliographies. Once again, I owe an incalculable debt to Mr Michael Mallon, without whose selfless help these volumes could never have been produced.

The form of previous editions was determined jointly by me and the publishers, Phaidon Press. This new edition was planned by Phaidon Press alone, who have also redesigned the illustrations.

In the preface to the first edition of *Italian Gothic Sculpture* I wrote that 'these volumes will have served their purpose if they are successful in inducing the art lover to consider Italian sculpture *pari passu* with Italian painting and in persuading students to devote some part of their energies to this rewarding and neglected field.' The situation is very different today. The galleries of the Museo Nazionale in Florence, once destitute of visitors, are now uncomfortably full, and the history of Italian sculpture is taught in universities and colleges on the same basis as the history of Italian painting. Scholars have ranged freely over the whole field. The results they have produced vary according to the nature of the problems and the capacity of individual art historians to solve them. On every major sculpture there is still ample scope for historical, documentary, stylistic and technical research, and on no artist has the last word been said. For this reason the three volumes are once more described, not as a history but as an introduction to Italian sculpture.

John Pope-Hennessy★
Florence, March 1994

★ John Pope-Hennessy died in Florence on 31 October 1994. Though he did not live to see these volumes through the press, he did personally attend to all revisions and additions made to the text.

THE LITTLE THAT WE KNOW about the attitude of sculptors in the fifteenth century to the art of their own time comes from the *Commentaries* of Ghiberti. For the sixteenth century the sources are richer and more informative, but one of them transcends all others in importance, Vasari's *Lives*. Not only was Vasari on terms of friendship with most of the great sculptors of his day, but he supplies, in the prefaces to the three sections of the *Lives*, a precise account of the view which artists in the middle of the century took of the present and the past. For Vasari the history of Italian art falls into three sections, the first a pre-history running down to the end of the Trecento, the second the Early Renaissance – the period, that is, between the competition for the bronze doors of the Baptistery in Florence in 1400 and the emergence of Michelangelo – and the third 'the modern age'. It is the modern age, or High Renaissance, that is the subject of this book.

In sculpture the heroes of Vasari's three sections are Nicola Pisano, Donatello and Michelangelo, and his criterion of judgement is their relationship to the antique. Whereas Nicola was no more than an agent by whom the art of sculpture was improved, the works of Donatello 'are up to the level of the good antiques', while those of Michelangelo 'are in every respect much finer than the ancient ones'. This theory of continuous upward progress was fortified by the belief that a similar development had taken place in Greece, where the three phases were represented by Canachus, whose statues were lacking in vivacity and truth, Myron, who 'endowed his works with such excellent proportion and grace that they might be termed beautiful', and Polyclitus, by whom 'absolute perfection' was attained.

In one respect Vasari recognized that this analogy might be misleading, in that the motive power behind Greek sculpture was self-generated, whereas Renaissance sculpture was a renewal, and its course was therefore influenced by the availability of antique sculptures. During the first phase 'the admirable sculptures … buried in the ruins of Italy remained hidden or unknown'; the second was one of discovery, though so exiguous were the remains that sculptors were necessarily guided by the light of nature rather than by that of the antique; in the third phase more and better sculptures became known. 'Some of the finest works mentioned by Pliny', writes Vasari, 'were dug out of the earth, the Laocoön, the Hercules, the great torso or Belvedere, the Venus, the Cleopatra, the Apollo and countless others, which are copies in their softness and their hardness from the best living examples, with actions which do not distort them, but give them motion and display the utmost grace'. This made it possible for sculptors in Vasari's day to attain 'the zenith of design'. This view was not peculiar to Vasari; it was held universally, and is accountable for the main difference between Early and High Renaissance sculpture, that the background of the first is a sense of struggle towards a distant goal, while that of the second is a feeling of achievement, the sense of life lived on a plateau from which the only advance possible is a descent.

plate 1
Michelangelo

Pietà

St Peter's, Rome
(detail of plate 14)

What Vasari, writing in 1550, could not foresee was that the revolution which was associated with the name of Michelangelo would be followed by two further stylistic revolutions led by Giovanni Bologna and Bernini, and that these later revolutions would also spring from the action of classical sculpture on the creative imaginations of great artists.

Growing familiarity with the antique, especially with Hellenistic sculpture, had the practical result that it led to changes in technique which are apparent initially in the work of Michelangelo. The best account of Michelangelo's technical procedure is given by Cellini in his *Treatise on Sculpture*. Michelangelo, Cellini tells us, was in the habit of drawing the principal view of his statue on the block, and of beginning the sculpture on this face as though it were in half-relief. Gradually the image, covered with its penultimate skin, was disclosed, and then, with a file and small-toothed chisel, this last skin was removed, leaving a figure modelled with the same veracity and freedom as an antique sculpture. The classic example of this technique is Michelangelo's unfinished statue of St Matthew (plates 33, 35). Vasari stresses that technical advances in the sixteenth century enabled painters to turn out more and larger works; advances in technique also permitted sculptors to carve more rapidly and on a steadily expanding scale. The creative vistas that were opened up by this new technical facility can be gauged from the contract with Michelangelo for 12 more than life-size marble statues of Apostles to be delivered at the rate of one a year, and from the

impractical first project for the tomb of Pope Julius II. According to Vasari, Michelangelo at first worked from a small model, but became a convert to the full-scale model while engaged on the Medici tombs. Full-scale models were invariably used by Giovanni Bologna. One advantage of employing them was that the execution of the marble could be entrusted to other hands. This contingency is first openly discussed in the case of Michelangelo, who was forced by circumstances to delegate the carving of certain statues for the Medici Chapel and the Julius tomb. In most of Giovanni Bologna's marble sculptures assistants played a material part. The use of full-scale models was pressed to its logical conclusion by Bernini in a number of large works – the monument of the Countess Matilda, the Fountain of the Four Rivers, the Chair of St Peter, the tomb of Pope Alexander VII – in the execution of which he himself had practically no share. No exception was taken to this practice at the time – it was the prerequisite of superhuman productivity – but in judging the sculptures that resulted as works of art, a firm distinction must be drawn between the sculptor as designer and the sculptor as executant.

High Renaissance sculptors are distinguished from their predecessors by a concern with style, that is with the form in which their works are cast. In sixteenth-century art theory painting and sculpture are commonly presented as branches of *disegno* or design, and the prevailing faith in a style-concept applicable to both arts gave rise, at very beginning of the century, to the suggestion that the marble block from which Michelangelo