



Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration; Fra Angelico at San Marco

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all Buddhist communities around 1200 and sank into oblivion.¹⁷ Identifying the post-850 periods as “Latter Days of the Law” may be misleading. An unwary reader of the catalogue might logically suppose that the pre-850 eras were *not* “Latter Days of the Law” whereas the opposite is true.

The problem is compounded by the critique of biological metaphors. Weidner notes: “Our perceptions of Chinese Buddhism, and by extension, Chinese Buddhist art, have been profoundly affected by the biological metaphors of growth, florescence, and decay. Images of decline permeate the literature of the field, from the scriptures themselves to modern studies of the scriptures and their illustrations” (p. 37). It is one thing for medieval monks to talk about decline, but quite another when we as interpreters of history formulate historical flux in similar terms. The former constitutes an object of historical inquiry in need of explication, the latter a problem of historiography—largely of our own making. If the Buddhist tripartite schema is indeed to be seen as a biological metaphor, which Weidner dislikes, why then choose a title for the volume that smacks of biological metaphor? In all fairness, Weidner is too perspicacious not to see the pitfalls of her flight of rhetoric. She does acknowledge that “*Latter Days of the Law* is used as the title . . . not only in its Buddhist sense, but also with a touch of irony, because another notion of decline has cast a shadow over modern investigations of Chinese Buddhism” (p. 37). So she is what one might call an ironist who describes things by using a vocabulary which she ultimately distrusts.¹⁸ While it is intellectually incorrect to use the decline metaphor, we can still characterize the post-845 periods as in decline by ironically making do with the metaphor—but of course, we do not really mean it: it is only a metaphor which we do not like anyway. Weidner’s subtle witticism could be lost on certain readers, who may leave the book with some confusion concerning the “decline.”

As a matter of fact, faulting the decline theory and biological metaphors does not really redress the neglected state of later Buddhist art, a plight that affects the study of pre-850 Buddhist art as well. Not that there is no formidable work being done, but either the individual case studies all too often slip into isolated self-entrenchment or the pursuit follows a nomadic path along already well-trodden “influence” trails. The scholarly languor in the study of Buddhist art results perhaps from the absence of some alternative narratives that might rally disparate studies into larger communities of discourse, so that even when differences exist, there is something substantial to disagree with. All this will change, and Weidner’s volume is a portent. In fact, the catalogue has forged ahead of—

and remains an embarrassment for—the study of pre-850 Buddhist art, which cries out for an equivalent volume of comparable scale. Weidner and her collaborators have done the history of Chinese art a tremendous service by charting alternative routes of inquiry—ones that could effectively compete with the Dong Qichang narrative, though they do not necessarily have to replace it. Had it not been for the vision or re-vision shared by Weidner and her co-writers, these otherwise canonically marginalized paintings might still be languishing in museum storerooms, a blind spot for students of Chinese art. Archaeology could well be pursued in our own backyards and basements, and grand revisionism may start as notes from the underground.

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GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN

Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration

Trans. Jane Marie Todd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 290 pp.; 1 plan, 22 color ills., 69 b/w. \$65.00

WILLIAM HOOD

Fra Angelico at San Marco

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. 354 pp.; 4 plans, 162 color ills., 97 b/w. \$60.00

The Life of Fra Angelico provoked Giorgio Vasari to make one of his most pointed interventions in the Counter-Reformation debate over the religious and aesthetic vocations of art: “Whenever [works of religious art] are produced by men of little belief who do not highly value religion,” he says, “they frequently excite dishonorable appetites and lascivious desires, so that the work is blamed for what is disreputable, while praise is accorded to its artistic qualities.” On the other hand, Vasari adds, this does not mean that only an “awkward, clumsy thing” can be devout. Fra Angelico’s historical position and personal virtues give him a special place in Vasari’s scheme, between the artistic deficiencies of “devout” medieval art and the religious indecorousness of the nudes of Vasari’s own day, “fine and good work” though it may be on aesthetic grounds.¹ Vasari was only the first in a long line of historians to make Fra Angelico a touchstone for reflections on the relation between medieval traditions of religious art and modern aesthetic ideals—a concern which already informs Fra Angelico’s reception in the work of historically minded artists such as Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Michelangelo. Since this order of historical reflection—which views individual artists within an “epochal” scheme of the history of art—formed the basis for the development of the modern discipline of art history, the way in which books approach Fra Angelico says a good deal about the standing and direction of the discipline.

The discipline, in that case, appears to be at something of a crossroads. Both books under review accept and work within the format of the single-artist monograph, itself a legacy of the Vasarian tradition, but in their framing and argumentation they resist its premises. They do so by forcefully demonstrating Fra Angelico’s embeddedness in medieval traditions: Hood places the artist within Dominican artistic and institutional conventions, and Didi-Huberman reads him as an exponent of a primarily scholastic tradition of exegetical practice and thought. For Hood, Fra Angelico’s art was “nourished by roots sunk deep in the middle ages” (p. x), and for Didi-Huberman it participated “in those long

and *Fangshan Yunjusi shijing* (The scriptural stone-carvings at the Yunju monastery of Fangshan), Beijing, 1978, 83.

16. Tang Yongtong, *Han Wei liang Jin Nan Bei chao fojiao shi* (A History of Buddhism from Han,

Wei, and the two Jins through Northern and Southern dynasties), Beijing, 1962, 818.

17. Nattier (as in n. 14), 4–5.

18. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, 73.

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, e scultori italiani* (1550 and 1568), III, ed. Rosa Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, Florence, 1971, 273–74. This passage introduces the Life of the original 1550 edition.

Middle Ages that Florence in the fifteenth century was far from repudiating" (p. 10). In adopting this thematic approach both authors abandon the effort to give a comprehensive treatment of the artist's corpus; they do not, however, go so far as to give up the institution of the single-artist monograph itself. They still believe, in other words, that there is a coherence, an authorial integrity which sets this artist's work apart—and which justifies his being made the subject of a "modern" single-artist monograph—despite his participation in premodern institutions and modes of discourse. This internal tension is, one might argue, a tacit acknowledgment of the special historical position that Fra Angelico has occupied at least since Vasari. Hood's solution is to take advantage of the rather unusual coincidence of this artistic personality with a defined institutional and patronal program, a situation which, one might argue, is itself characteristic of the period. The solution is a neat one, respecting both the novelty of the work and its corporate commitments. But even so, the fact that it moves into many diverse areas—Dominican traditions, Fra Angelico problems, early 15th-century Florentine art—raises the question of where the natural limits of such a study lie. The result is a rich book, but something in between a period study and a single-artist monograph, and without the "generic" coherence that either format provides.

The question of framing is more pointed in Didi-Huberman's case, since his entire approach to the artist is motivated by a thoroughgoing critique of the traditional procedures of art history. The original French edition of his study appeared in the same year as his *Devant l'image: Question posée aux fins de l'histoire de l'art* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1990), in which he proposes an alternative history of art to challenge the humanist tradition formed by Vasari, Kant, and Panofsky. As the Fra Angelico book is an extended practical application of the theoretical proposals of *Devant l'image*, it is worth summarizing them. Humanist art history, Didi-Huberman argues, employs a semiotics of the image which privileges its readability, and thus its availability to efforts of decipherment and interpretation. This understanding is in turn served by an emphasis on the image's mimetic function, its subjection to what Didi-Huberman calls the "tyrannie du visible." The *lisible* and the *visible* are, for Didi-Huberman, the "notions-totems" of a logical and metaphysical attitude whose implicit motto could be *savoir pour voir, voir pour savoir*. He aims to offer resistance to this

conception—not to replace it so much as to supplement it in the Derridean sense, to see it in dialectical relation to what it represses: the image's "unconscious," its opacity, its resistance to clarity and legible form. In this history, the image would be the site not of adequation, mastery, and intelligibility, but of a rupture (*déchirure*) in the visual field, a breach in the coded operations of the sign, a vulnerability (in all senses of the word) by which it is opened onto a dizzying series of associations well beyond the logic of "simple reason." It is an understanding of the image better served by the Freudian concepts of the symptom and of dream-work than by the procedures of iconography/iconology.

Didi-Huberman is not clear, in either book, about how this understanding of the image applies historically. He says that this critique, this "question posée" to the humanist tradition arose primarily from his conviction that the premises of modern humanist scholarship were inadequate to understanding the efficacy proper to Christian images. The theology of the Incarnation, dedicated to the mystery of an infinite, ineffable divine principle taking form in a human body, introduced a conception of the image which stressed its *limitations* as visual, iconic representation. The partial or total breakdown of mimetic representation becomes in a Christian context an effective means of expressing the mystery of the Incarnation and the presence of the divine in a fallen world. This conception of the sign, in Charles Peirce's terms, supplements the iconic register with the indexical: it participates in the economy of the relic, in which a vestige or a trace marks a direct intervention of the sacred which cuts across and disrupts the mere representation of appearances. This incarnational economy serves as the primary instance and model of *déchirure* which Didi-Huberman opposes to the "iconographism" of modern art history.

He equivocates, however, on the issue of the historicity of this dialectic. The entire orientation and tone of *Devant l'image*—presented, after all, as a meditation on the "fins de l'histoire de l'art"—suggests that he sees this dialectic as a model of the conditions of representation generally, and thus as a programmatic challenge to art-historical practice in a wide range of fields, at least within Western art.² At many times, for example, his argument bears close affinities to Rosalind Krauss's account of Surrealist challenges to modernism's "pure" visuality: the *informe* would appear to be an instance of *déchirure* at work.³ And yet there are also moments when

he clearly restricts his proposals, and his critique of post-Renaissance art-historical methodology, to the specific case of medieval Christian art. Some of the most polemical passages include qualifying phrases ("au moins pour ce qui concerne l'art chrétien") or other implicitly restricting gestures: for instance, in listing the sorts of objects which the premises of modern art history have excluded from consideration, he cites only medieval examples.⁴ Here Didi-Huberman appears to be making the somewhat more basic historicist argument that we should not impose modern conceptions of art introduced in the Renaissance (he points the finger at the usual suspects, Alberti and Vasari) on an earlier period better served by an anthropological or phenomenological approach to the image. At moments like this we have to do not so much with a dialectic between the visible and its unconscious at work throughout the history of art as with a historical succession from the "ouverture" of medieval art to a modern "tyrannie du visible" whose crucial juncture is the Renaissance.⁵

The equivocation remains unresolved because the concept of *déchirure* depends on the notion of active opposition. The disruptions that Didi-Huberman describes presuppose a regime of representation, governed by the notions of legibility and visibility, against which they are effective. But this structural dialectic is not effectively mapped onto his historical critique. The regime which he is interested in overturning is, by his own account, a legacy of the Renaissance, and yet the images which epitomize and effectuate the process of *déchirure* belong to the Middle Ages. Didi-Huberman's solution is to have medieval images work against a classical concept of mimesis, but he does not find it theoretically necessary to elaborate this concept on its own terms, as something different from the post-Renaissance model. Within the economy of his argument, the only tissue that medieval images rend and resuture is the modern, humanist fabric which he describes at length.

This predicament will look familiar to readers of postmodern critiques of modernity. Many aspects of postmodern practice and criticism, such as the critique of the autonomous artwork and of modern notions of authorship, have served to open the eyes of historians to aspects of medieval cultural practice that have remained obscured by post-Renaissance models. Contemporary semioticians have shown themselves to be

2. An example of the "programmatic" tone occurs in the following passage (*Devant l'image*, Paris, 1990, 220): "C'est pourquoi il est urgent de penser la représentation avec son opacité, et l'imitation avec ce qui est capable de la ruiner, partiellement ou même totalement. Notre hypothèse fondamentale revient à situer sous le mot complexe et ouvert d'incarnation la puissance d'une telle déchirure." The use of the incarnational concept as a general

model would seem to be confirmed by the appendix, where the Christian examples discussed in the text (Fra Angelico, Dürer) are supplemented by a reading of Vermeer and the elaboration of a concept of the screen, or *pan*, which is certainly meant as a general theoretical statement.

3. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, 1993, esp. chap. 2.

4. *Devant l'image*, 39–40: "C'est ainsi qu'elle a

exclu et exclut encore de son champ une série considérable d'objets et de dispositifs figuratifs, qui ne répondent pas directement à ce qu'un expert nommera aujourd'hui une "oeuvre d'art"—les cadres, les éléments non représentationnels, une table d'autel ou les pierreries votives qui encombrant la visibilité d'une image sainte."

5. I can think of no other way of reading the following dramatic passage, which closes his first

quite at home in medieval theology, with hermeneutically productive results. There is, perhaps, no better demonstration of the affinity between the rhetoric of poststructuralism and the rhetoric of scholasticism—and of its hermeneutic potential—than Didi-Huberman's book on Fra Angelico. These developments have naturally also revealed aspects of "Renaissance" culture—for example, those which come together in Hood's study—that do not fit simply into Burckhardt's vision of a humanist "discovery of the world and of man." This general trend has, in turn, had the salutary effect of provoking more critical investigations into the historical genealogy of modernity. As Stephen Greenblatt put it: "We are situated at the close of the cultural movement initiated in the Renaissance . . . [and] we respond with passionate curiosity and poignancy to the anxieties and contradictions attendant upon its rise."⁶ The danger, of course, is to conscript premoderns or early moderns in a battle against established modern paradigms.

All of this helps to explain why Fra Angelico assumes such special importance for Didi-Huberman. As an artist attached to a Christian understanding of the image but already informed by Renaissance, and specifically Albertian, ideals of picture making, he provides a case where Didi-Huberman's schema takes on real relevance. Everything that is forceful and illuminating in Didi-Huberman's analysis of Fra Angelico derives from his sensitivity to this tension; what is weak about it derives from his insufficient attention to its historicity. Since this sort of tension, in his view, characterizes Christian images generally, he most often reads Fra Angelico as a particularly eloquent exponent of a long exegetical tradition; the artist's works eminently embody, and do not significantly alter, the exegetical principles of Pseudo-Dionysius, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas. We are far, here, from the general spirit of Rudolf Berliner's "Freedom of Medieval Art."⁷ Only sporadically does Didi-Huberman read Fra Angelico in a more sharply historicized way, as an artist adapting, and thus reinterpreting, this tradition under changing conditions of representation. Such an approach would raise the possibility that, so far from being a "perpetual" (p. 8) problem of medieval image-making, the vacillation between iconicity and indexicality he describes, and especially its internalization within the medium of painting as we see it in Fra Angelico, is in many ways a response to this particular predicament, a predicament which Fra Angelico shared with several

other Renaissance painters discussed in this book.

The two guiding terms of Didi-Huberman's analysis are dissemblance and figuration, both of them to be taken in the special sense deriving from the theological concepts of *dissimilitudo* and *figura*. Within medieval theology, *dissimilitudo*, as a celebration of the nonresemblance between phenomenal and divine things, and *figura*, as a mode of establishing meaningful relations among different things and events, were considered means by which human thought approached the "mystery in bodies beyond bodies, eschatological destiny in stories beyond stories, the supernatural in the visible and familiar aspect of things" (p. 6). For Didi-Huberman, the pictorial equivalent of this exegetical practice is implicit in the visual language that it employs: dissemblance and figuration occur where the realm of visual resemblance and the "figurative" (in the usual sense of the visible aspect of a thing) is in some way disrupted or undermined.

In Fra Angelico, Didi-Huberman argues, this occurs most dramatically through the introduction of blotches or splatterings of paint: as material traces of pigment they have an indexical immediacy which cuts across the unified and distanced order of iconic resemblance and thus reveals relations between things normally kept separate, but meaningfully connected in the realm of exegetical thought. The first half of the book is devoted to an analysis of the role of some of these blotches in Fra Angelico's work. The second half studies these and other disfigurements within representations of the Annunciation, as means by which the parameters of historical time and physical space are disturbed in such a way as to open the "mystery" within the "history." Whatever one feels about the details of Didi-Huberman's readings, there can be no doubt that his attention to these features offers a very fresh and valuable way of approaching Fra Angelico. As with any strong reading, it has the effect of never allowing one to see the paintings in quite the same way again. Like Courbet's right hand after Michael Fried, or Christ's genitals after Leo Steinberg, the zones of inchoate color in Fra Angelico will, for any reader of this book, irrepressibly figure more largely in his or her experience and understanding of the work.

Most of the first half of the book is an extended meditation on a zone of indeterminate polychromy hitherto largely ignored in the Fra Angelico literature: the four panels of fictive marble which Fra Angelico painted under the so-called *Madonna of the Shadows* in

the dormitory corridor of S. Marco. Didi-Huberman reads these panels as the dissemblant other of the "representational" scene above, a Derridean *parergon* which participates in "the very way that the pictorial signs shift in the work, become *translata*" (p. 31). They open up the work, in other words, to the order of the figural, and thus to the "paralogic" typical of medieval sermons. Didi-Huberman is determined to put us inside this mode of thinking; his text does not merely gloss but also exuberantly enacts the exegetical mode, so that it reads almost as a self-description when he describes medieval exegesis as "a constant, almost delirious practice of invention and the blossoming of meaning unfolded" (p. 42). (It is perhaps the greatest achievement of Jane Marie Todd's translation to have reproduced this quality of Didi-Huberman's prose in a language much less amenable to it; apart from a few passages and minor residual moments—"retable," "Nicholas of Cues"—she avoids the principal pitfall of translations of French poststructuralism, which is to try to make English sound like French.) Lengthy expositions of the four-fold interpretation of Scripture, Pseudo-Dionysius's concept of *dissimilitudo*, and the medieval *ars memoriae* guide a labyrinthine journey through the symbolism of stones and rocks and their associations with the Incarnation (the "figure" of the Virgin, above all in scenes of the Annunciation), the Passion (the "figure" of Christ's tomb), and the rites of the liturgy (the "figure" of the altar).

The point of Didi-Huberman's analysis is not to reveal what the panels "signify" univocally, a mode of signification that he repeatedly associates with the Albertian *istoria* and with the standard procedures of iconography. He is instead interested in showing how they participate in a plurivocal, "figural" economy in which meaning is relayed from figure to figure and from place to place without taking on substance, producing something like a cloud of associations that "circle endlessly around a mystery" (p. 100). This mode of signification, he argues, imitates "not the aspect, but the process" (p. 96), and for that reason he pays special attention to the fact that the surfaces of the fictive marble are splattered with an array of dashes and speckles of rather dilute paint—an effect which cannot be produced by the careful work of the brush but instead involves a vigorous act of throwing. This mode of painting is the very negation of the normal procedures of the descriptive, "figurative" painter; it is instead something like a performative analogue to the mysterious process by which

chapter (*Devant l'image*, 64): "L'histoire de l'art échouera à comprendre l'efficacité visuelle des images tant qu'elle restera livrée à la tyrannie du visible. Puisqu'elle tâche de comprendre le passé, elle se doit de prendre en compte—au moins pour ce qui concerne l'art chrétien—ce long renversement: avant la demande il y a eu le *désir*, avant l'écran il y a eu l'*ouverture*, avant le placement il y a eu le *lieu* des images. Avant l'oeuvre d'art visible, il y

a eu l'exigence d'une "ouverture" du monde visible, qui ne livrait pas seulement des formes, mais aussi des fureurs visuelles, agies, écrites ou bien chantées; pas seulement des clés iconographiques, mais aussi les symptômes ou les traces d'un mystère. Mais que s'est passé entre ce moment où l'art chrétien était un *désir*, c'est-à-dire un futur, et la victoire définitive d'un savoir qui a postulé que l'art se déclinait au passé?"

6. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashion-*

ing: From More to Shakespeare, Chicago, 1980, 174–75.

7. Rudolf Berliner, "The Freedom of Medieval Art," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, xxviii, 1945, 263–88. This also means that we are far from the general premises of the work of Hans Belting; see, e.g., Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image in the Era before Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, Chicago, 1994, esp. 1–9 ("The Power of Images and the Limitations of Theologians").

the divine "seed" is disseminated in all things. Didi-Huberman suggests that the clearest concrete equivalent to this mode of investing things with sacramental meaning is the rite of unction, a rite used in funerary contexts as well as in rituals of consecration (of altars, for example). Again, one can quibble with the details of the reading, but it does compel one to look with a different eye at the color reproductions provided in the book. To imagine a painter in this monastic context flinging paint onto the panels beneath a Madonna, or applying indeterminate blotches of red paint to depict both the wounds of Christ and the flowers of a meadow—it is really beside the point whether this was done by Fra Angelico himself or by an assistant, in a state of inspiration or with evenheaded efficiency—is to begin to understand how, in the mid-15th century, the stuff of pictorial practice could be understood to partake in the way that sacred significance works, could be made to participate in something like the deliberate overdeterminations of ritual. (Given the importance of grasping this practice in corporeal and material terms, it is a pity that one of the most dramatic photos—a close-up of one of the four fictive marble panels—is out of focus and reproduced upside down.)

At moments like this, Didi-Huberman is in fact exploring points of contact between the highly textual culture within which Fra Angelico was trained as a Dominican friar and a nontextual visual culture which his images incorporated and refashioned. It is here that Didi-Huberman's work comes closest to the concerns of Carlo Ginzburg, whose approach to these aspects of culture is motivated by an interest in the hermeneutic status of "traces" and art-historical techniques of formal analysis.⁸ But Didi-Huberman prefers Freud to Sherlock Holmes and Giovanni Morelli, and he generally does not descend from the lofty realms of theological speculation. For this reason he is not interested, either, in the sorts of engagements with sacred images studied by Richard Trexler (which Trexler showed to be operative in lay and monastic contexts alike), even though his project, like Trexler's, proceeds from the premise that an understanding of the efficacy of religious images in this period is better served by "anthropological" approaches than by the application of post-Renaissance conceptions of the "work of art."⁹

Didi-Huberman certainly offers an alternative to modern art-historical discourse, even if many readers would be hesitant to call his approach anthropological. In general, his mode of exposition has very little to do with the ekphrastic mode championed by Renaissance writers and (he would add) perpetuated by modern art historians. He cannot simply describe what the images show precisely because he is interested in dissem-

blances, in the virtual relations between otherwise heterogeneous realms. This leads him to move abruptly from the register of visual reading, and the cool "art-historical" tone it promotes, to the exegetical register of "figural" developments, the heady realm of what he calls "associative thinking" (p. 173). The figural labyrinth can be entered at almost any point, and once Didi-Huberman enters it we are taken, over ten or twenty pages, through its infinite detours, which often means very far away from the image. This, in turn, means that some of his "arguments" cannot be held up to the usual standards of scholarship: they are exercises in exegesis, and can only be judged as more or less powerful demonstrations of the genre.

This does not change the fact that the works in question are historically specific—that they occupy a place within what the Russian Formalists called a "succession of systems"—and that their historicity is a key to understanding the way that they produce meaning. In Didi-Huberman's best moments, a historical sensitivity is embedded in attentive readings of the means by which specific images engage figural associations. But these remain isolated readings, and little effort is made to address the fact that they involve works which span over two centuries: the works are presented as variations of a general strategy rather than as historicized negotiations. A gesture toward this kind of historicized account occurs when Didi-Huberman suggests that the relation between the four fictive marble panels and the *Madonna of the Shadows*—the strong disjunction between spheres of dissemblance and resemblance—represents an "intensification" of the distinction between the historical and the allegorical registers already present in Giotto's Arena Chapel (pp. 65–66). More of this sort of analysis would have enriched his reading of the panels, clarifying specifically how the figural sequences invoked from theological texts apply to this, in the end, rather unusual case. He analyzes, for example, the associations produced in the multimedia context of the 14th-century Bardi di Vernio chapel, but does not ask how they are subject to change, a century later, when many of these claims had become internalized in painting—an overarching development, presupposed in Fra Angelico's work, whose greatest monument is Masaccio's *Trinity*. How is everything medieval theologians have to say about the stone as *figura Christi* affected by the fact that the stone here is painted?

Again, partial answers to these questions can be drawn from the best moments in Didi-Huberman's analyses, but they are left implicit; the questions themselves are not clearly framed and investigated. It would have been illuminating, for example, to hear how the economy of the relic, which, in

Dagobert Frey's brilliant analysis, is predicated precisely on the efficacious collision of materials of radically heterogeneous semiotic status, was reconceived in terms of the pictorial conventions to which Fra Angelico subscribed, which for the most part obeyed the Albertian principle according to which ornamental elements (gems, stones, gold) were banished from the picture field but allowed on the frame.¹⁰ What happens, in other words, when we move from the strongly indexical character of the relic to the more abstract and mediated indexicality of the passages in Fra Angelico which Didi-Huberman describes? When viewed in this way, the extreme opposition between representation above and abstraction below, between "figurative" and "figural" in the arrangement of the *Madonna of the Shadows*—that is, what most interests Didi-Huberman in this work—begins to look less like a direct application of the principles of Pseudo-Dionysius than a historically significant reinterpretation of these ideas made in light of Alberti.

At times Didi-Huberman comes close to stating that the dialectic at work in Fra Angelico is the product precisely of this historical tension. In the introduction, for example, he presents his book as a response to the question: "How could paintings produced during Alberti and Masaccio's time have availed themselves of the theoretical means for arriving at a practice of dissemblance?" (p. 3). A few paragraphs later, he states that the book's fundamental hypothesis is that Fra Angelico's work "constitutes in some sense the foremost or limiting example of this practice" (p. 5). But even these declarative statements remain equivocal on the issue of historicity. Do the "theoretical means" undergo change given the historical predicament? Does "foremost" mean simply "most accomplished," or does it mean, as the word "limiting" (and as the original French, "le comble, l'exemple limite") seems to imply, something closer to "most extreme"?

In that case, Didi-Huberman would be proposing, to put it roughly, that by pushing this tradition to its limits Fra Angelico gave it its most profound interpretation. But this is not the argument pursued in the body of the book. Alberti is repeatedly made to oppose everything that Fra Angelico's "medieval" conception of the image presupposes: in *De pictura*, with its emphasis on the story and on the representation of appearances, "the whole of medieval propositions concerning *historia* and *figura* are precisely turned on their head and denied" (p. 42). It is a conception, Didi-Huberman argues, entirely "heterogeneous" (p. 44) to the categories of thought employed by Saint Antoninus, prior of S. Marco. Fra Angelico, he states, did not even have to choose between them; he approached the task of illustrating Scripture from within

8. The concern, which runs throughout Ginzburg's work, is most directly addressed in Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi, Baltimore, 1986,

96–125. See also his more recent assessment of the hermeneutic value of techniques of connoisseurship in "Vetoos and Compatibilities," *Art Bulletin*, LXXVII, no. 4, 1995, 534–36.

9. See Richard Trexler, "Florentine Religious

Experience: The Sacred Image," *Studies in the Renaissance*, XIX, 1972, 7–41.

10. Dagobert Frey, "Der Realitätscharakter des Kunstwerkes," in *Festschrift Heinrich Wölfflin*, Munich, 1935, 30–67. The relation between the stag-

the exegetical tradition shared by Antoninus, and that meant employing a pictorial practice of dissemblance, that is, opposing the opacity of the medium to the transparency of the representation, a practice of nonverisimilitude to the rhetoric of verisimilitude. He does not historicize Fra Angelico's solutions in relation to the Albertian system because in his account these practices constitute something like a universal imperative of Christian art: within an incarnational scheme, the sacred image "must attempt . . . to include in its visibility the invisible, and to include in its *storia* the unnarratable" (p. 35), and the painter-theologian "must" introduce "a crisis into every semblance" (p. 56). This in turn means that the regime being disrupted can only be described in ahistorical terms: it is "the familiar order of the visible" (p. 5) which privileges "the pure and simple narrative designation of a moment in history" (p. 9). On one occasion it is described, more tellingly, as "the ordinary economy of representation, in the sense this term is generally understood within the field of the so-called figurative arts" (p. 87).

It is, of course, senseless to apply this opposition to medieval art, given that the "field of the so-called figurative arts" is by Didi-Huberman's own account a legacy of the Renaissance; it is possible to apply it in the case of Fra Angelico only by making Alberti a proleptic representative of the entire Vasarian-Kantian-Panofskyan tradition which is Didi-Huberman's true enemy. This Didi-Huberman does not hesitate to do: "the [Albertian] notion of *istoria*," he states, "came to occupy the preeminent place in the entire humanist conception of painting, a place that art history, a 'humanist' discipline in Panofsky's famous expression, still maintains" (p. 44). Didi-Huberman is here, in effect, subscribing to a quite traditional view of the Renaissance, by which Alberti and the other great figures of Burckhardt's account really are full-fledged moderns—a view which has been challenged, revised, and refined especially vigorously ever since Panofsky's *Renaissance and Resuscitations*. As modern as one would like Alberti's conception of painting to be, it does not serve the purposes of a truly dialectical analysis to identify it as strongly as Didi-Huberman does with later conceptions of history and aesthetics. Moreover, Alberti's text merely proposed a theory, which during the 15th century was realized within the known categories and functions of painting only with significant adaptations. Fra Angelico, so far from subverting an already established and institutionalized modern regime of representation based on Albertian principles, was one of Alberti's first exponents and interpreters. His work epitomizes an early moment in a period when traditions of medieval art were undergoing radical re-

sion under new representational conditions, but an alternative, "modern" conception of painting had not yet taken its place—a situation of crisis and criticism that, as Warburg clearly saw, defines as well as any other criterion what we call Renaissance art.

Didi-Huberman's schema prevents him from bringing this historical situation fully to light, even though it is at the heart of the phenomena he is describing, and motivates some of his best readings—for example of paintings of the Annunciation by Lorenzo di Credi and Fra Bartolommeo. In the case of Fra Angelico, it prevents him from seeing how the recasting of religious images under Albertian auspices might precisely have suited Observant reforming ideals as espoused, for example, by Saint Antoninus¹¹—an affinity whose greatest monument is perhaps the S. Marco altarpiece. Here the blotches and disfigurements which interest Didi-Huberman play a less important role in the work of "figuration" than the very devices that are their putative antithesis: the promotion of Antoninus's religious ideals, the preservation of the altarpiece's liturgical (and thus exegetical) vocation, is accomplished by making *costruzione legittima* serve an ascetic and "figural" function. An effort to restore a significant relation between altar image and liturgy, the painting was a direct reaction against the narrative and descriptive excesses—the truly "modern" trends—of late Gothic painting. The fact that this altarpiece receives no more than passing mention (and is nowhere reproduced) is, perhaps, the clearest symptom of the book's limitation in this regard.

Works such as this could be left out because the framing of Didi-Huberman's study is not "objectively" delimited by the usual biographical, chronological, or geographical factors, and thus does not dictate the treatment of a defined body of works. William Hood's book is, in this sense as in many others, a true alternative to Didi-Huberman's. Its framing is less fluid and open-ended because it is objectively determined by Fra Angelico's work at the Florentine convent of S. Marco. This makes it a more solid book. Didi-Huberman's intention is to intervene radically in the way in which we look at Fra Angelico, but the reader who refuses to take certain leaps with the author will be inclined (mistakenly, in this reviewer's opinion) to disregard his views altogether. Hood's book is impossible to disregard, for there are too many important findings and too much careful, informed consideration in it; at the same time it does not attempt to alter our view of Fra Angelico so radically, even if it does enrich it appreciably. One is a violent, the other a harmonious instance of the continual process of reinterpretation which marks what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls effective history.

As Hood's study is focused on an institu-

tion, it is little surprise that the theme of corporate identity and tradition holds it together. It is a general and adaptable enough theme to encompass most of the works and issues treated in this long and varied study: almost always we are dealing with the affirmation of Dominican identity, but often it is the identity of the Observant branch of the order, and on occasion we are made to confront the question of the identity of this particular institution, which found itself in the rather special situation of having come under the spiritual guidance of Saint Antoninus, the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, and the artistic direction of Fra Angelico. Hood's observations generally gain in force and novelty as they approach this specific problem. In any case, such concerns give Hood's study a more concrete character than Didi-Huberman's: the meanings of Fra Angelico's art at S. Marco, Hood says, "are to be sought in behavioral customs rather than in theological abstractions" (p. x). Of course, since these customs include, by his own account, a highly developed faculty of "figural" thinking, the concerns of the two books merge. It is, however, up to the reader to put them together and to confront their incompatibilities: since Didi-Huberman's book apparently appeared too late for Hood, and in turn was only minimally edited in the English translation, neither author makes more than polite acknowledgment of the other's work.

Hood begins with an account of the (re-)foundation of S. Marco as a convent of the Dominican Observance, and then studies the three main areas of decoration at S. Marco in relation to Dominican traditions and trends in Florentine and Siennese art: the altarpiece, the decoration of the cloister and chapter room, and then the images for the dormitory. Although Hood's intention is no doubt to address all levels of institutional identity throughout the book, in fact there is a sort of progression: through the discussion of altarpieces we are introduced to Dominican traditions generally; in the chapters on cloisters and chapter rooms we gain a clearer sense of what separated the Observants from the Conventuals; and when we come to the dormitory frescoes we enter a sphere unique to S. Marco itself.

This summary, however, makes the book sound more unified and essaylike than it is. In fact, the themes of identity and tradition remain rather loose; they have the quality of a recurring motif rather than of a driving argument. This is an inevitable consequence of Hood's tendency to enter into lengthy investigations of often tangentially related local issues. In some cases Hood offers carefully argued solutions to notoriously knotty problems, such as the reconstruction of the Cortona polyptych; in others he gives thor-

ing devices of medieval reliquaries and the changing rhetorical claims of late-medieval painting is studied by Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion*, Berlin, 1981, chap. 4.

11. A proposal first made by Creighton Gilbert, "The Archbishop on the Painters of Florence, 1450," *Art Bulletin*, xli, no. 1, 1959, 75–87, the implications of which remain to be fully explored.

See also, more recently, idem, "Saint Antonin de Florence et l'art: Théologie pastorale, administration et commande des oeuvres," *Revue de l'Art*, xc, 1990, 9–20.

ough presentations of hitherto largely ignored material, such as the anonymous early 15th-century cycle in the chapter room of S. Domenico at Prato. One can only welcome these investigations, which have all the weight of a lifetime of thinking and research behind them, but they have the effect of slowing down the momentum and taking the edge off of any unifying argument: often the book has the quality of a highly informative survey (of an unusually framed and sophisticated sort) rather than of an essay. This is another way of saying that the book will probably only rarely be read through from beginning to end, despite its presentation as an unfolding sequence of chapters; it will more likely be read for its parts, by scholars and students interested in different aspects of Fra Angelico's art, Dominican traditions, or religious art of the period generally. (Wherever they turn readers will be confronted with unusually numerous color photographs of extremely high quality, most of them the work of Niccolò Orsi Battaglini.)

One only hopes, in any case, that the book's buried treasures will not be missed. We would not know from the table of contents that this book contains the richest account now available of Giovanni Consalvo's frescoes in the Chostro degli Aranci at the Badia. Nor would we know that embedded in the chapter on the S. Marco altarpiece is an excursus in which Hood proposes, plausibly if not conclusively, that the Annalena altarpiece was originally made for the Medici transept chapel in S. Lorenzo—a hypothesis with important implications for debates on the rise of the Renaissance *pala* and its ideological significance. Likewise, tucked into the chapter on Fra Angelico's earlier altarpieces is an illuminating section on the development of his techniques of modeling. Hood shows that after incorporating the lessons of Masaccio's chiaroscuro and the example of Ghiberti's sculptural massing, Fra Angelico developed a system of color modeling that, while preserving these attainments, reintroduced the high-keyed tonality and brilliant chromatism characteristic of traditional altarpiece painting. So far from being a mere formalist exercise, this analysis reveals Fra Angelico grappling, at a fundamental pictorial level, with the problem of reinterpreting and reclaiming traditions of religious images under changing artistic conditions—a problem we see him confronting in several other ways throughout the book. At moments like this, as well as in his remarks elsewhere on Fra Angelico's manipulation of different degrees of realism, Hood's analysis comes close to addressing the pictorial tensions studied by Didi-Huberman. Their approaches to the problem are, however, illuminating in very different ways. For Didi-Huberman, the tension is violent and characteristic of Christian images generally. This allows him to attend to hitherto ignored passages in Fra Angelico's works, and above all to develop a very rich account of the theological issues at stake in his art. For Hood, the tension is historically specific and more harmoniously resolved. This leads him to pay closer attention to the

historical circumstances in which Fra Angelico worked, and to give more balanced and consistent attention to the paintings under study.

Hood's sensitivity to the historically specific tensions that mark Fra Angelico's works is informed and deepened by his awareness of institutional and patronal traditions. He pays careful attention to the anomalous character of S. Marco as an institution of the Dominican Observance, and plausibly points to the special qualities of Cosimo de' Medici's patronage as its primary cause. He traces the evidence surrounding the split between the two Observant convents of S. Marco and S. Domenico at Fiesole and convincingly relates it to the greater economic ease and more sophisticated intellectual and aesthetic atmosphere which had come to distinguish the former under Cosimo's patronage (p. 38). This understanding of S. Marco's place within the Dominican Observance informs Hood's approach to the artistic innovations introduced there, prompting him to suggest, for example, that the Renaissance *pala*, as embodied in the S. Marco altarpiece, was a form that Cosimo may have wanted to associate with his patronage (p. 45).

Hood's approach, therefore, allows us to imagine a scenario where avant-garde artistic and intellectual developments are placed in the service of a highly retrospective Observant program. Such an approach effectively counters some familiar narratives of progress in Renaissance art, and in turn sheds light on certain hitherto obscured conflicts within the religious and artistic cultures of the period. For this would have been an effort at reform of a very special kind, one that one would not necessarily have been appreciated by conservative contemporaries: there were perhaps very few people in 1443 who could see the S. Marco altarpiece as an instrument of reform, as the proposal for a new contract between altar image and liturgy—that is, as anything other than, in Hood's words, "a radical departure from the venerable models known in Dominican art" (p. 98). Hood clearly believes that to see it merely as a radical departure would be to miss the ways in which its novel features were designed to serve only more effectively the purposes of a Dominican Observant altarpiece. But such an analysis is impeded by the fact that his descriptions of the claims of the new format remain rather vague: "in the San Marco panel Fra Angelico closed the gap between the world of the altarpiece and the world of the viewer, and managed so to camouflage the elision of one of these worlds with the other that the frame, still every bit as architectural as Lorenzo di Niccolò's, was among the first examples of an Albertian window onto space" (p. 45).

Without a sustained analysis of the consequences of the new mode of picture construction, Hood's illuminating discussion of the relation of the altarpiece's iconography to traditional Dominican themes is not completed by an account of its structural and functional effectiveness. How has the relation between inside and outside, between image and liturgy been reconceived in the new type

of altarpiece? In a later discussion of the *Adoration of the Magi* fresco in Cosimo's cell, Hood makes the inspired suggestion that the S. Marco altarpiece would have provided a fitting welcome for those making offerings at the altar on the all-important feast of the Epiphany, but he does not explain how this possibility is a function of the new mode of picture construction, and in what sense it is a result of a reinterpretation of the very function of altarpieces. He points to the frontality of the Christ Child and states that the kneeling figures of Cosmas and Damian "extend the picture's psychological field outwards to embrace those processing towards its image" (p. 251). But both these features, the frontal address of the Christ Child and the positioning of *Rückenfiguren* in the foreground, were commonly enough seen in late Gothic altarpieces. Their novel effectiveness here, to which Hood is responding, is due to the fact that the entire image has been submitted to a new and systematic mode of construction which dictates, among other things, that the picture plane be understood as an arbitrary and notionally nonexistent incident in a visual continuum. Fra Angelico's application of this system—and especially its implications for the relation between picture and frame, between inside and outside, between the image and the structures of the liturgy—needs, however, to be carefully analyzed if the picture's claims, and specifically its effectiveness as an Observant critique of trends in late Gothic altarpieces, are to be thoroughly understood.

Hood's book gathers a forcefulness and momentum in the final sequence of chapters on the frescoes in the convent's dormitory. Hood explains the themes of the frescoes in relation to the functions of the parts of the dormitory in which they were situated. The southern corridor, which housed the novices, contains the most restricted iconography: images of the crucified Christ with Saint Dominic in various attitudes of prayer or devotion. The guiding example here, Hood proposes, is Saint Dominic's nine modes of prayer as recorded in the 13th-century text *De modo orandi*, a treatise well known in Dominican circles and adapted by Saint Antoninus himself in his *Chronicon*. The treatise, purportedly based on a firsthand witnessing of Saint Dominic praying before a crucifix, proceeds from the premise that the adoption of certain physical postures encourages and sustains an appropriate spiritual state. The images thus accompany and serve the program of the trial year, by which the novices, following the example of the founder, are reshaped—through a physical process of incorporation—into the corporate consciousness of the order.

Hood proposes that the same basic idea persists in more sophisticated form in the clerics' (east) corridor, where the iconography becomes more varied. One of the problems here is that the Dominican Constitutions (which Hood has usefully provided, transcribed by Crispin C. Robinson and translated by Simon Tugwell, in an appendix) prescribed that each cell have an image of

Saint Dominic, the Virgin, or Christ Crucified, and yet these cells show a variety of biblical themes. This is one instance, Hood shows, where in the special case of S. Marco Dominican traditions were interpreted in novel ways. As beginners, the novices all meditated on the basic image of a crucifix; Saint Dominic is shown in a different posture or "modus" in each one, and Hood suggests, not unreasonably, that the novices rotated throughout the year in order to be trained in each one. In the clerics' corridor, by contrast, the themes are more varied because its inhabitants were more practiced in the art of "figural" thinking.

Hood shows that the selection of scenes corresponds in large measure to the cycle of feasts called the *temporale*, which celebrates the chief events of Christ's life, as well as mysteries such as Corpus Christi. He notes that one of the features of the Observant movement was to restore the precedence of the *temporale*, with its Christological emphasis, over the *sanctorale*, the cycle of saints' feasts and in particular those of the Virgin Mary, which had seen such tremendous growth in the later Middle Ages. For a cleric embedded in this ritual structure and in the logic of medieval sermons, the experience of the events of Christ's life is always already liturgically mediated; it is just one point of entry into a series of concentric meditations on the mysteries of the Christian faith. To use Erich Auerbach's terms, the sacred event is always susceptible to being taken out of its position within the chronological, historical register and connected, as a figure, to other events and mysteries within an "omnitemporal" theological scheme, an operation accomplished in the liturgies for every feast of the Christian calendar.¹² For this reason, as Hood somewhat laconically puts it, "a scene from the life of Christ might be understood as representing him just as much as a Crucifix did" (p. 224); this is why, moreover, the scenes are shown in stripped-down fashion and as the objects of meditation by exemplar figures such as Saint Dominic or the Virgin. Here, again, one is rewarded by reading Hood together with Didi-Huberman: Hood's understanding of the modes of liturgical thinking presupposed in the cleric's wing can be effectively supplemented by the more extensive study that they receive in Didi-Huberman's book, and Didi-Huberman's account of the disruption of spatial and temporal coordinates in Fra Angelico's paintings is enriched by Hood's attention to the patterns of Dominican life and to the role played by these exemplar figures. Throughout, Hood

effectively contrasts the rather abstract approach adopted in the Dominican context, which pervades Dominican texts such as *De modo orandi* or Jacobus of Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, with the more concrete-minded and historiated approach typical of Franciscan piety, as exemplified in the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. The differences in the ethos of the two orders, so often reduced to a cliché in studies of the period, is here once again made historically meaningful.

The north corridor cells were inhabited by less well educated, largely non-Florentine lay brothers. Hood connects the frescoes, more narrative in character than the frescoes in the clerics' wing, to the domestic chores and tasks that the lay brothers performed in the convent. He gives careful attention to the special case of Cosimo de' Medici's double cell at the end of the corridor. A sensible account of the relation of the scene of the *Adoration of the Magi* to Cosimo's political ambitions is sharpened by some concrete proposals concerning the disputed function of the niche containing the *Man of Sorrows*, which Hood plausibly argues was designed as a tabernacle for the Eucharist. Hood is no doubt generally right in stressing the function of the cell as a place where Cosimo could recapitulate his devotions within a sphere more explicitly connected to his and his family's private concerns, and he draws especially important parallels between the fresco and the altarpiece which stood on the high altar of the church, but some readers might wish to wait for more concrete evidence before accepting his proposal that the niche originally incorporated a consecrated altar at which Cosimo had private masses said.

Both of these books offer unique approaches to the problem of framing thematic studies on Fra Angelico. With great vigor and erudition, they amply demonstrate, in different ways, the artist's attachment to medieval traditions—and in both cases this entails a partial dismantling of the structure of the traditional single-artist monograph. In this way both books, implicitly and explicitly, make a reevaluation of Renaissance art the occasion for a rethinking of the very project of writing art history. If this makes them representative of this juncture in the history of the discipline, then I, for one, am happy to be part of it.

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DAVID BINDMAN AND MALCOLM BAKER

Roubiliac and the Eighteenth-Century Monument: Sculpture as Theatre
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
421 pp.; 16 color ills., 289 b/w. \$65.00

MARIE BUSCO

Sir Richard Westmacott, Sculptor
New York: Cambridge University Press,
1995. 224 pp.; 186 b/w ills. \$110.00

It has often been observed, by Barbara Stafford and others,¹ that the study of 18th-century visual culture has long been neglected by most art historians, especially by those in this country. Relatively few American colleges and universities offer a specialized survey course of the period in their curricula, and even in introductory classes it is often misleadingly characterized as either an enfeebled, late Baroque or, worse, an aristocratic frivolity that serves pedagogically only as a foil to the more didactic (and hence "better") art of the Neoclassical era. The one major exception to this state of affairs has been the history of architecture.² And the comparative indifference to the 18th century in the art-historical canon has an ironic corollary within the field; namely, the entrenched francocentrism of most specialists. Moreover, the cultural gallicanism of 18th-century studies has contributed to the privileging of painting over sculpture, since the lion's share of scholarly scrutiny has fastened onto Rococo and Neoclassical painting. Thus, a significant monographic study of the French sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac is a most welcome addition to the growing literature on 18th-century sculpture.

The term monograph, in its traditional sense, is a bit of a misnomer for the ambitious study by David Bindman and Malcolm Baker, which concerns itself only with Roubiliac's ecclesiastical monuments and which places them into a brilliantly researched and painstakingly re-created context that, in itself, is a major contribution to our understanding of the period.³ It is a far cry from the brief "background" section provided in traditional monographs so that, the unpleasant "history" quickly outlined, the serious task of tracing the stylistic development of an artist's oeuvre—based almost exclusively on internal, formal "data"—may begin. Indeed, this book could well serve as a paradigm for a contextualized, interdisciplinary approach that might intellectually reinvent the now moribund monograph.

1. Barbara Maria Stafford, "The Eighteenth Century: Towards an Interdisciplinary Model," *Art Bulletin*, LXX, 1988, 6–24.

2. In Britain, France, Italy, and central Europe, the history of architecture has always been afforded more sustained scholarly inquiry than the other visual arts. This may have something to do with a continuing interest in the cultural context of absolutism, which produced some of the century's most memorable buildings.

3. Malcolm Baker is presently preparing a study of Roubiliac's nonfunerary production.

12. Erich Auerbach, "Figura" (1929/1944), in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Minneapolis, 1984, 11–76.