
This is the latest book by Alexander Nagel, professor of Renaissance Art History at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University. Once again Nagel’s original and engaging interpretations of Italian art of the early sixteenth century convincingly demonstrate how avant-garde Renaissance art was. Nagel’s earlier books include Michelangelo and the Reform of Art and Anachronic Renaissance (reviewed in ARLIS/NA Reviews, Aug/Sept 2010).

In The Controversy of Renaissance Art, Nagel provides an insightful reading of Italian art produced between 1490 and 1540 during an era of religious controversy concurrent with the Reformation in northern Europe and preceding the Counter-Reformation in Italy. He contends that the role of art in Christian worship was a central issue in Reformation debates.

Nagel voices many of the questions that were posed by reformers and artists of the era: “What is an image?” “What role, if any, should images play in religion?” “What role have they played in the past?” “Could images reliably convey sacred truth and power?” “Do they reliably refer to the personages and mysteries they represent?” “Does Christian art merely present pagan figures in a new guise?” “Are religious images distracting, misleading, or simply too beautiful?” “Are they too bound up in the interests of private patronage?”

Solutions to these challenging questions were sought by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Fra Bartolommeo, Giorgione, Michelangelo, Raphael, Rosso Fiorentino, Andrea and Jacopo Sansovino, and Andrea Riccio through artistic experimentation and the creation of new art works. Through their works these artists reformed religious art in Italy by metaphorically breaking and reconfiguring religious imagery through what Nagel terms “soft iconoclasm,” as opposed to the outright destruction of sacred art that occurred in Northern Europe.

Nagel divides his book into three sections each of which examines a particular medium with its associated controversies and artistic resolutions. The author first looks at painting, followed by sculpture, and then architecture. In each section Nagel offers close readings of a number of key radical artworks of the era, including Rosso Fiorentino’s painting of the Dead Christ (which is reproduced on the cover-jacket and endpapers), Andrea Riccio’s bronze Pascal candelabrum, and the Vicenza high altar. Nagel supports his study with extensive and informative notes and bibliography.

The University of Chicago has produced the book with a durable cloth binding, many full-page color illustrations, and a substantial index. Readers will be pleased to find that the figures and associated discussions appear in close proximity.

In sum, Nagel’s book represents an important contribution to the field, and any academic library that supports a program of advanced study in Renaissance art history will want to acquire The Controversy of Renaissance Art.

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