

## The Mystery of the Missing Michelangelo

SERENE, gentle, graceful, yet strangely vacuous is the marble figure of a young boy, recently claimed by its owner to be Michelangelo's long-lost *St. John the Baptist*. Periodically authorities have fastened this label on other works only to have their findings eventually disputed. The current "rediscovery," an interesting if not altogether convincing story, points up the hazards of spectacular attributions when not accompanied by historical data. The provenance of a work does not necessarily provide the final answer, but it is a valuable tool never to be underestimated, and one that removes considerable guesswork from the scholar's job. In the present case, the sculpture remains without chronological documentation for roughly four centuries (1497-1900), thus forcing students to rely only on stylistic or intuitive evidence. At times, the inductive arguments used to establish the figure as an early Michelangelo seem perilously close to wishful thinking.

But let me hasten to add that the dissenter's eye is often far from infallible. I remember only too well, with chagrin, an episode that involved three small Picasso drawings. All were rejected by several museum curators, myself included. When the drawings were sent to the artist, however, he stood firmly behind them, claiming them irrefutably as his own, done, it is true, at an early age.

The gleaming marble statue, now reputed to have been carved by Michelangelo in 1495 at the age of twenty, did not come to light until 1900 when it was bought by an American dealer, Daniel Noorian, from an Italian agent who found it near Bologna. In 1942 Noorian's widow sold the sculpture at auction, where it was purchased by Piero Tozzi, a New York art dealer who had known the work for twelve years. At the time of the sale the statue was thought to be by Andrea Sansovino, a lesser contemporary of Michelangelo.

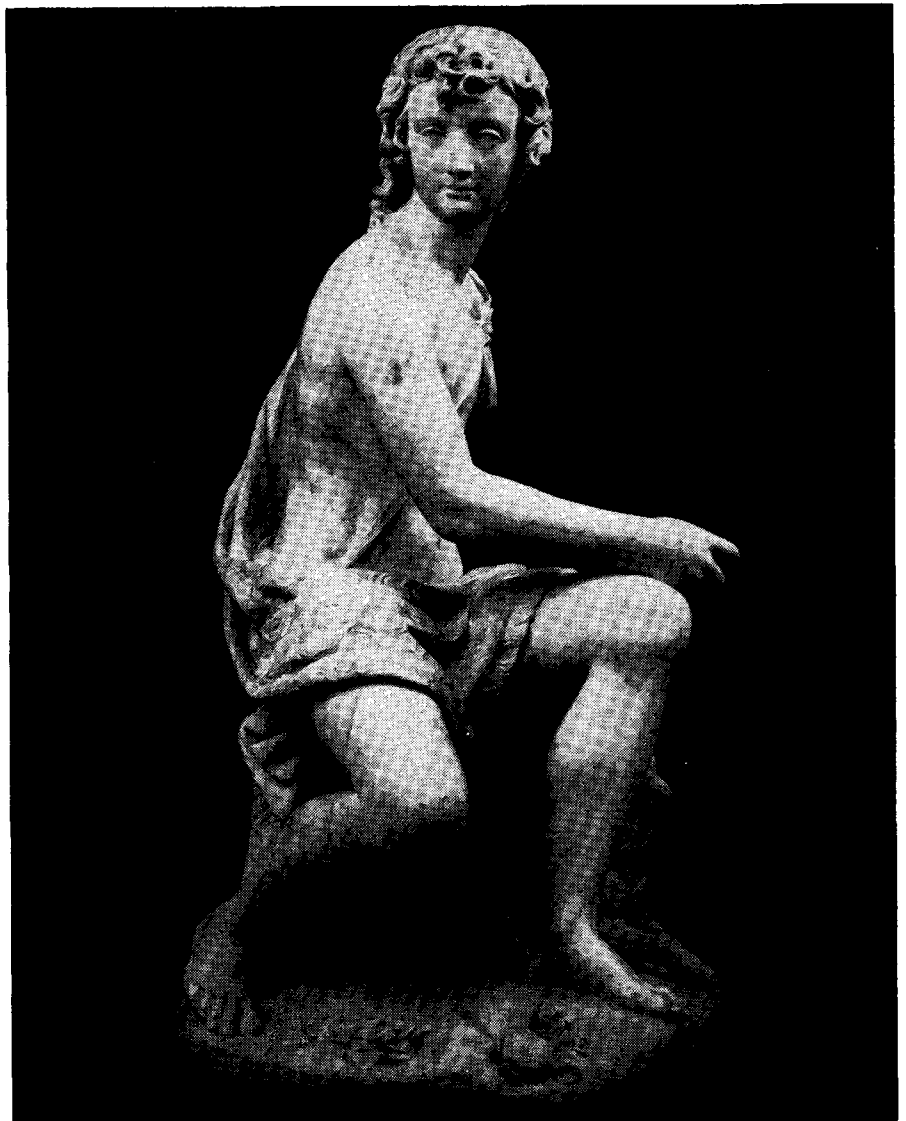
Slowly, as Tozzi lived with the sculpture and cleaned it himself, he came to the conclusion that it was, indeed, the elusive *St. John the Baptist*, a work we learn from contemporary accounts was commissioned by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici in 1495 shortly after Michelangelo returned to Florence from a year in Bologna. No known preliminary sketches or drawings exist, but

this is not too surprising since it is said that the artist often carved directly without preparatory studies. Yet it does seem odd that this very young sculptor did not rely on some preliminary experiments before he embarked on so complicated a three-dimensional composition.

At the time the *St. John* was officially unveiled last month (in the unlikely but glamorous setting of a handsome Park Avenue mansion lent for the occasion), so also was a fully illustrated book called *Michelangelo's Lost St. John: The Story of a Discovery*. The volume, commissioned by Tozzi, was written by Fernanda de' Maffei, a little-known young Italian student who depends almost entirely on stylistic comparisons to

identify the work. She points out similar *contrapposto* poses in several later statues by Michelangelo, notably in his idealized portrait of *Giuliano* in the Medici Chapel, a figure executed more than a quarter-century after the *St. John*.

And yet almost any sixteenth-century artist under the spell of Leonardo da Vinci might have attempted an equally sophisticated *contrapposto* composition. Dr. de' Maffei indicates how the handling of drapery, toes, and hair in the New York sculpture parallels the treatment of these details in accepted works by the master. She compares the figure with two celebrated early marble groups—the *Madonna of Bruges* and the *Pietà*, the latter now on view at the New York



*St. John the Baptist*—Everything but the signature.

World's Fair. While these two comparisons appear valid on the surface, they cease to hold water after careful scrutiny. Both the *Madonna* and the *Pietà* are restrained, tender, and gracious, but both are infused with an inner fire and precision totally lacking in the New York sculpture, which seems curiously boneless for Michelangelo.

In addition, the book shows a drawing by Correggio "clearly copied," writes Dr. de' Maffei, "from the New York *St. John*." It is her theory that the sculpture went from Florence to Bologna in 1497 when Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco moved there. From that year until 1900 all further clues vanish. Dr. de' Maffei feels that "the drawing offers almost incontrovertible proof of the presence of the statue in the region of Bologna in the early sixteenth century," implying that Correggio could not have seen it elsewhere. Why not at Parma, which, of course, is also in northern Italy but can scarcely be considered a suburb of Bologna?

A host of other questions occur to me. Why has no outstanding Michelangelo scholar in America been quoted? What does De Tolnay, a specialist responsible for a definitive, multivolumed study of the artist, think? What does Panofsky, an authority on Michelangelo's iconography, think? What does John Phillips, curator of Renaissance art at the Metropolitan Museum, think? Where important new attributions are concerned, silence can sometimes be devastating. In his preface to the book, the critic Henry La Farge, who does not claim to be a Michelangelo specialist, mentions that several well-known Italian scholars were deeply impressed by the sculpture. Why one of these did not write the preface, or for that matter the entire text, is an interesting question.

It is hardly necessary to point out the fantastic divergence in monetary value between an authentic Michelangelo and a Sansovino. Ironically, the same sculpture can skyrocket into the millions or drop to a modest sum only because of the name attached to it. Esthetics, it would seem, have little to do with demand and supply. This is scarcely a new problem, but it is always one that captures the public imagination. Like an inanimate Cinderella, a work of art can be elevated to royal heights merely through the recognition of a name that fits.

For those who doubt the newly crowned *St. John*, memories of three poorly articulated Picasso drawings should serve as a warning. Everything a master produces is not a masterpiece. But, alas, the only person who can give us the final answer about the *St. John* died exactly 400 years ago.

—KATHARINE KUH.



## TV AND RADIO

### Return to Normandy

**T**WENTY years to the day after General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower unleashed the Allied invasion forces for their D-Day assault on Hitler's Europe, he appeared on a CBS *Reports* program that recalled the Normandy landings. It was an arresting idea to take the former Allied Supreme Commander to actual locations on the Channel coasts and listen to his recollections of Operation Overlord. Yet the inevitable demands made upon the structure of the show by Eisenhower's participation robbed *D-Day Plus 20 Years: Eisenhower Returns to Normandy* of its chance for grandeur. The result was an interesting, low-key ninety minutes in which potential moments of historic excitement were flattened by recurrent dips to blandness, vitiating the force of the total effort.

The paradox of the program was implicit in the opening sequence. Dawn over the English Channel found CBS correspondent Dan Rather on the coast of Normandy vividly setting the stage "along this narrow stretch of sand and sea" for the battle between "the world of freedom and the world of tyranny." Along with scenes of "soldiers, sailors and airmen . . . about to embark upon the great crusade," we heard the voice of General Eisenhower giving the last alerting announcement from Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force.

It was a dramatic, heroic beginning, but its tension and mood were at once dispelled by shots of the general talking prosaically to CBS newsmen Walter Cronkite on a Normandy beach today as a nun shepherded a group of children past them. The contrast was deliberate: it quite properly stated the countervailing motifs of the show, yet it also foreshadowed the opposite pulls of event and recollection that were to trouble the dynamics of the hour and a half. For while contrast was an aspect of the show, it was not the show itself. Neither was General Eisenhower. His undoubted central importance notwithstanding, his memories and commentaries were dramatic only in the shadow of the Normandy drama. Unfortunately, every time Eisenhower, plunging into the past, began to generate an air of expectation, he would be called upon by the producers to shift to the present, and the mounting suspense would quickly tumble.

The general and Cronkite, in the

first big sequence, sat in the War Room of Southwick House, near Portsmouth, on the south coast of England. Now a Royal Naval School, in 1944 it was the forward tactical base of SHAEF. With the original invasion map in the background, the general described the final moments of invasion planning, the drama of the decision to go ahead in spite of the uncertain weather, and the emotional meetings between the commander and waiting paratroopers. He recalled how the Allies successfully kept the secret of the time and place of the landings; told how an English staff officer doubted the wisdom of the air drop that Eisenhower insisted upon; and he admitted drafting a message that would place all blame on himself should the invasion prove a disaster.

In all this, the audience willingly entered into the past with the general. But then the mind was wrenched back to the present as Eisenhower boarded a modern British frigate in Portsmouth Harbor. That adjustment made, once again the general won us to past involvement with the story of how Winston Churchill was kept from going along on the invasion. We heard the Prime Minister warning how much British and American manhood the coming "attack and grapple with the deadly foe" would cost. Then President Roosevelt led the American people in prayer, and Eisenhower sustained the tension briefly, describing the approach of the Allied naval units to Utah Beach. But he slackened it again as he returned to the present and moved over to Pointe du Hoc, the assigned target of the American forces on D-Day.

From Omaha Beach to Ste. Mère Eglise, where paratroopers landed to fight off German counterattacks; from Arromanches, where the artificial ports were built, to the hedgerows that temporarily stopped the Allied breakout, on to the American cemetery at St. Laurent-on-the-Sea, the general and the reporter kept making and breaking connection with the invasion plot. A lesser figure than Eisenhower might have served as an off-camera narrator. The essence of this format, however, was Eisenhower on camera—and the dilution of impact was inescapable. The lesson is plain. Even Achilles cannot play Homer. For Normandy as for Troy, the proper role of the warrior is inside the story, not rivaling it.

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.