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RALPH LIEBERMAN

Regarding Michelangelo's *Bacchus*

After telling his readers that Cardinal Raffaele Riario, the first important person Michelangelo met in Rome, was a man who “had little understanding or enjoyment of sculpture,” the artist’s biographer Ascanio Condivi goes on to say that during his first year in the papal city Michelangelo “never worked on any commission whatever from the Cardinal.” Then he states that the figure of *Bacchus* [Fig. 1] was carved at the behest, and in the house, of Jacopo Galli, “a connoisseur” and “Roman gentleman of fine intellect,” in whose family collection the work was, in Condivi’s day, still to be found.¹

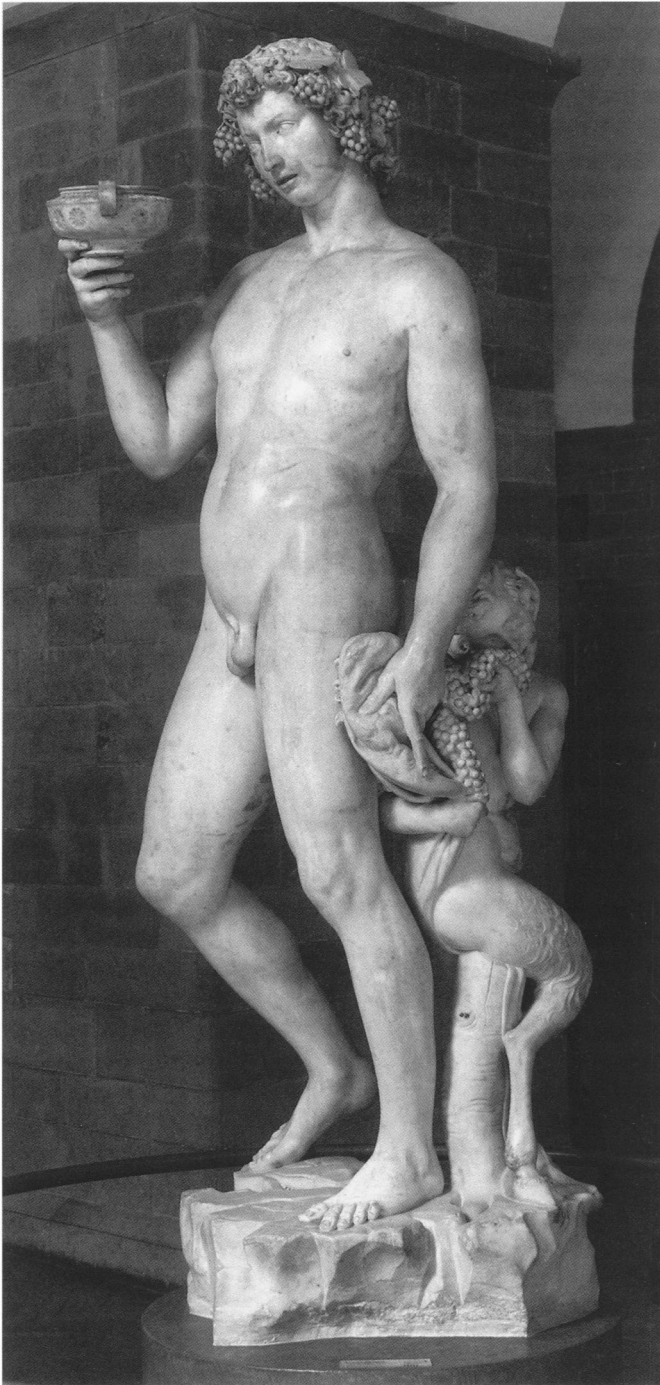
The claim that the Cardinal never asked anything of the young Florentine is disproved completely by Michelangelo’s earliest surviving letter. Written to Lorenzo di Pier Francesco de’ Medici on July 2, 1496, it contains Michelangelo’s report of his first encounter with Riario. Almost as soon as they had met, he wrote, “the Cardinal asked me whether I had courage enough to attempt some work of art of my own,” and then “we have bought a piece of marble for a life-sized figure...”² It is now clear from documents published in 1981 that it was not Jacopo Galli who paid Michelangelo for work on the *Bacchus* as it progressed, but the much-maligned Cardinal Riario himself.³

How the work came to belong to Jacopo Galli is unclear. A reference in Michelangelo’s second letter from Rome, written to his father almost exactly a year after the first, suggests that

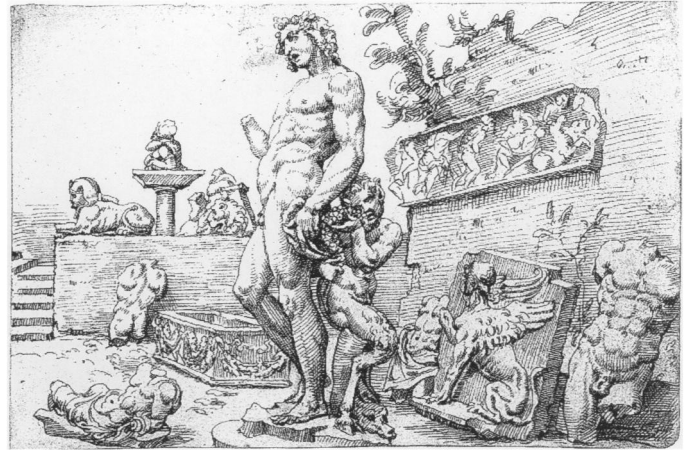
he was having trouble dealing with the Cardinal,⁴ and this has been taken as evidence that the original patron rejected the work, which was then acquired by Galli.⁵ If this is in fact what happened, Riario’s reasons for declining the *Bacchus* could well have been the same as those for which many later commentators on the figure have disliked it: the awkward pose, the somewhat vulgar face, and the softly effeminate body.⁶

The dismissal of Cardinal Riario as a philistine by Condivi, who seems to have written his biography of Michelangelo at the artist’s dictation,⁷ is colored by his memory of an old annoyance. It is entirely in character for Michelangelo to have slandered the Cardinal by claiming that the man had no taste, and had never asked him for any work of sculpture. To blame such an attack on faulty recollection of an event then more than 50 years old is entirely to misunderstand Michelangelo’s character, for in truth he was often quite mean-spirited, and he remembered every slight ever done him. Late in life, when talking to Condivi, he was vicious about people who claimed to have taught him anything, and had nothing good to say about anyone who had either failed to appreciate his genius immediately, or who had shown reluctance to pay him what he thought his works were worth.⁸

Condivi’s remarks about Cardinal Riario are exaggerated and unfair—the palace he built for himself shows that he was



1) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.



2) Maarten van Heemskerck, «Bacchus in garden of Jacopo Galli's house», ca. 1534, Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett. After Wallace, *Michelangelo, The Complete Sculpture, Painting, Architecture*, Southport, Connecticut, 1998.

not by any means a man of poor taste—but Michelangelo may be excused for suggesting that the patron who rejected *Bacchus* had little understanding of sculpture, for the statue is a radical work, and the Cardinal, presumably put off by what he saw, seems not to have grasped its revolutionary aspects.

Bacchus is more imaginative, experimental and inventive than either the *Pietà* or *David*, the two great sculptures with which Michelangelo followed it.⁹ While the level of the carving and the resolution of compositional problems in the *Pietà* is extraordinary by any criterion, the arrangement and attitude of the figures were not new; examples of the Virgin holding her dead son in her lap were known in Florentine painting at least a decade before Michelangelo began work on the group, and his apprenticeship as a painter in Ghirlandaio's shop in the late 1480s would have made him fully aware of them. *David* is astounding for his size, and for the skill with which Michelangelo overcame the difficulties of scale and of a shallow block, but the figure type is well known, and can be traced back through Donatello and Nicola Pisano to antique art.

Bacchus, on the other hand, is entirely unprecedented. In most free-standing classical portrayals of him there is usually nothing that suggests drunkenness or dissipation; he is identified only by his attributes—a drinking cup, grapes and leaves in his

hair—and without the references to wine that he carries, most antique examples could be mistaken for Antinous, Doryphoros, or any other sober male figure.¹⁰ In Michelangelo's treatment, on the other hand, we understand from the figure's reeling pose that he is experiencing the effects of his wine, and the stunning conjunction of character and behavior weds form to content at a level unknown in earlier Renaissance sculpture. Michelangelo's profound exploration of the nature and personality of his subject led him to create a figure difficult to accept by someone anticipating a more traditional representation, and Cardinal Riario was not prepared for a Bacchus who behaves in a drunken, indecorous way and who, "in brief. . . , is not the image of a god."¹¹

Despite the fact that much of the criticism of *Bacchus* is for his ungainly pose, one of the most striking aspects of Michelangelo's rendition is the thorough analysis and understanding of ancient art it manifests; only a sculptor supremely sensitive to the nature and subtle possibilities of classical *contrapposto* would have been able to manipulate it to create a figure of such flawlessly controlled disequilibrium.¹² The group is prophetic in that in Bacchus, and even more in the satyr who attends him, are to be discerned the origins of the *figura serpentinata*, to become familiar two generations later, but here the poses Michelangelo gave his figures do not make them exercises in elegant artifice; Bacchus himself is in some ways an example of almost brutal realism.

The earliest image we have of the *Bacchus* is a drawing by Maarten van Heemskerck, datable to the mid-1530s, that shows the statue in the garden of Jacopo Galli's Roman palace [Fig. 2].¹³ Heemskerck selected the view that has become the standard one in photographs, showing Bacchus from a position roughly 45° to the viewer's right of fully frontal. It is not mere coincidence that he and modern photographers show the group from that angle, for in many respects it is the most informative, and best reveals the extraordinary skill with which Michelangelo contrived the unbalanced pose of Bacchus: the oddly positioned shoulders, the backward lean, the slack protruding belly, and the unstable position of the right leg. And it is this view that best reveals the subtly rhyming poses of Bacchus and the satyr behind him: the parallel bent arms holding in one case wine, in the other grapes; the balance of the projecting right knees; the similar tilt of the heads; the complementary twist of the torsos.¹⁴ Anyone circling the statue is brought to the same viewpoint. From farther around to our left, the face is hidden by the upraised cup [Fig. 4]. We certainly want to know what Bacchus looks like, so we walk around to the right in order to see him more fully. When the face is no longer eclipsed by the cup [Fig. 5] and we can see it completely, we begin to realize that there is something behind his left leg that was almost entirely invisible before. When we move

a few steps farther around to the right to see it, we have been led quite effectively to the position from which both Figure 1 and the Heemskerck drawing were made. In this view the reeling of the figure, its most distinctive and innovative aspect, is seen at its most dramatic, and we have been steered toward it with consummate skill. Nonetheless, the standard view is not the only important one, and by relying on it to the exclusion of others, art historians have tended to overlook the most significant and original aspect of the piece.

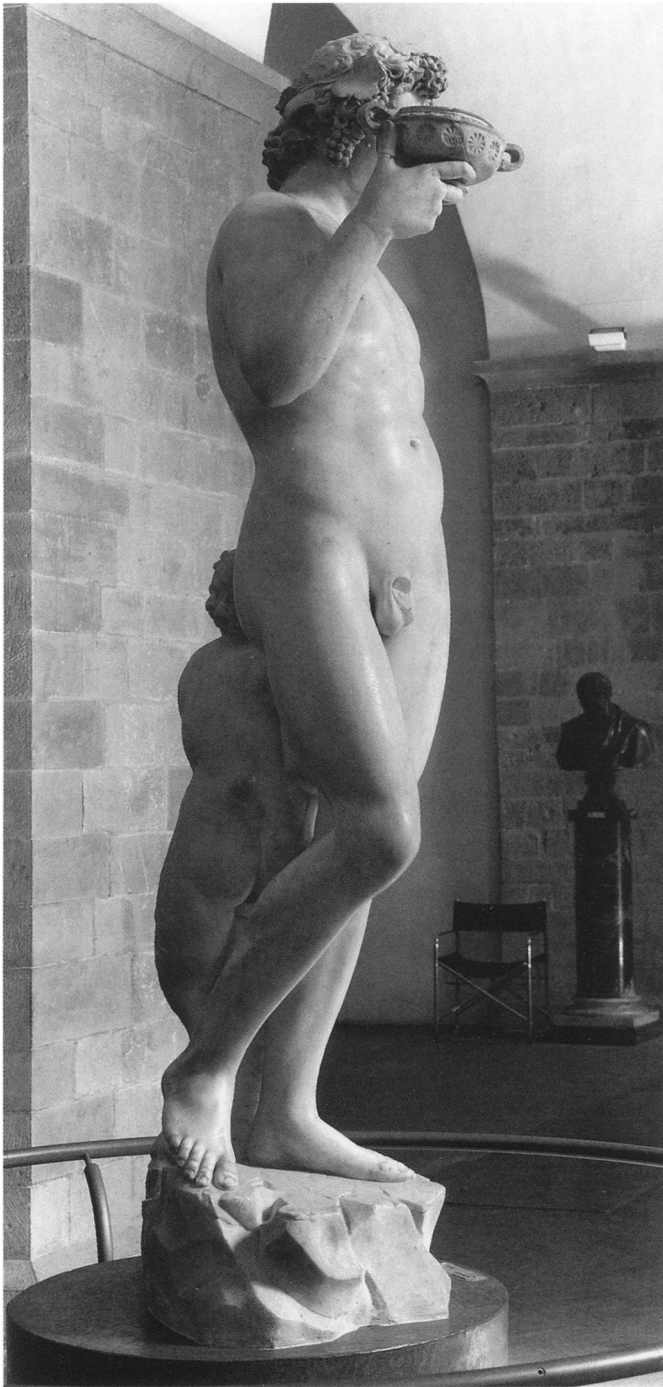
When we see the figure from his right, in close to profile [Fig. 3], there is no trace of the lean that dominates some of the other views.¹⁵ The jutting knee and raised heel of the right leg do not appear awkward, and the tilt of the head, obscured by the cup, is largely undetectable. We see a bit less of the left shoulder than we would in a classically postured figure, and we might find something curious about the almost total eclipse of the left arm, but the pose of the slender figure is elegantly straight, perfectly stable, and dignified.

As we move counter-clockwise around the sculpture we soon see it from the point at which its silhouette is the tightest and most closely limited to the figure of Bacchus alone [Fig. 4]. In this view, the outline of the body is interrupted only slightly by a bit of drapery at the left thigh and by part of the satyr visible behind the right knee. At this angle too, the figure still appears quite relaxed and balanced, with no trace of awkwardness. The cup obscures the facial features entirely and is seen against the grapes, which seem to hang down into it, so that there is a witty fusion of grape and wine, of cup and god.

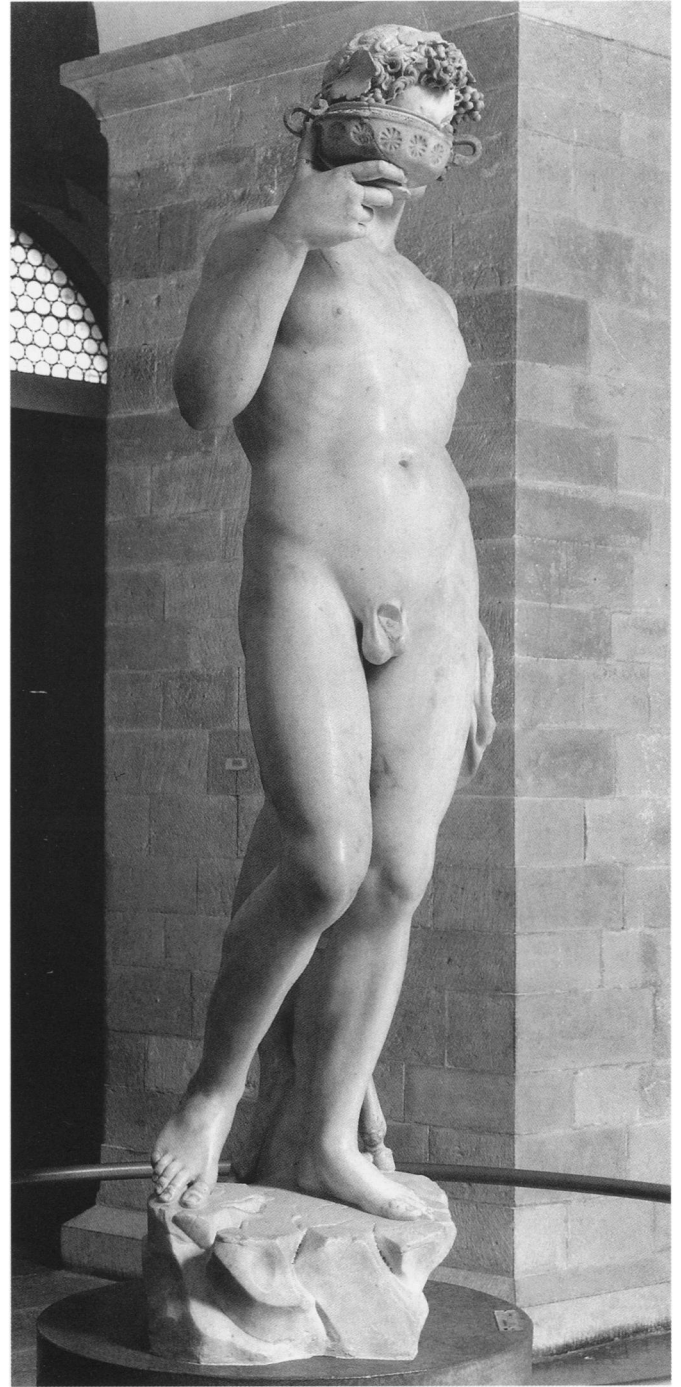
It is when we move around to a place from which the face is no longer obscured [Fig. 5] that we begin to sense a change in the figure. In this view the head tilts toward the cup in a curiously destabilizing way, and while his right hand and knee project toward us, his left shoulder is drawn back oddly. This makes Bacchus appear to be falling backward but reaching forward with the cup to keep his balance.

Figure 6 reveals that there is a point from which we can see Bacchus leering playfully at us through the handle of his wine cup as though through a lorgnette. It is clear that this was intended, for the pupils and irises are drilled so that when we line up the cup handle and his right eye, Bacchus looks straight back at us.¹⁶ This representation of the drunkard's childish delight in looking at things in odd ways is unparalleled, and must have been one of the most unsettling aspects of the piece when it was new.

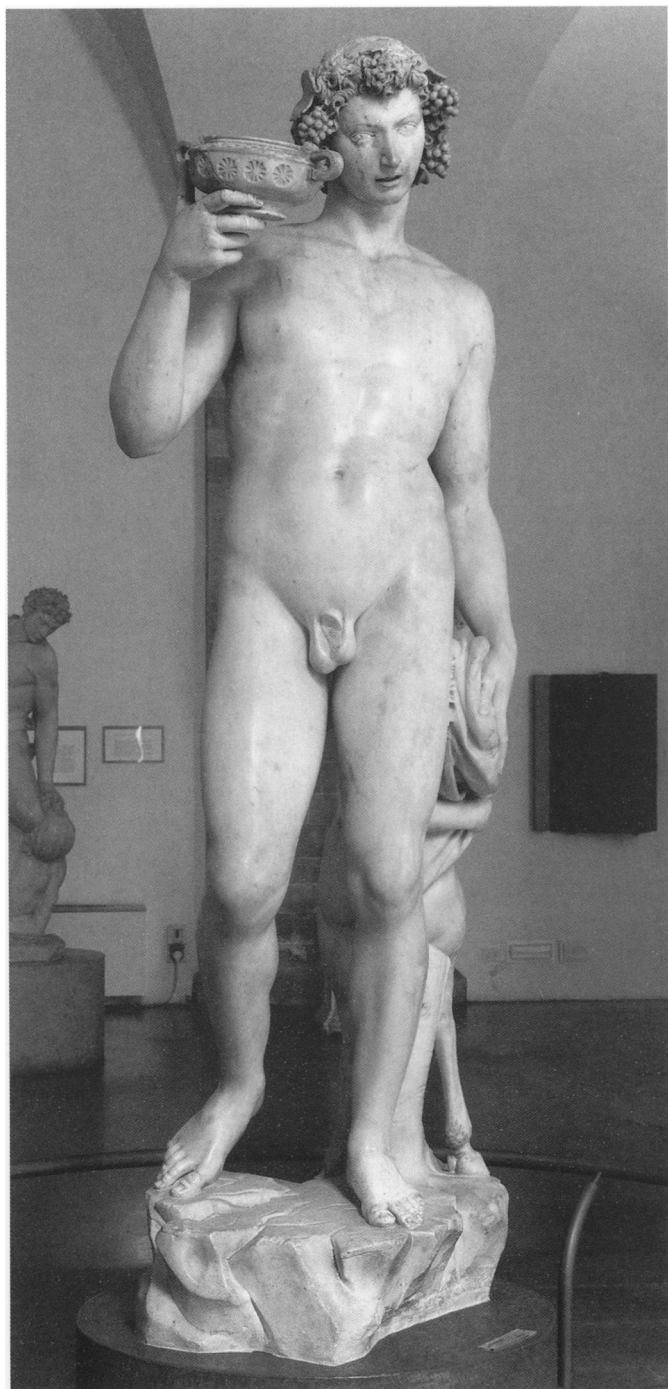
As we continue counter-clockwise around the figure we come to the familiar view [Fig. 1] by which the figure is almost invariably represented when only a single picture of it is allowed.



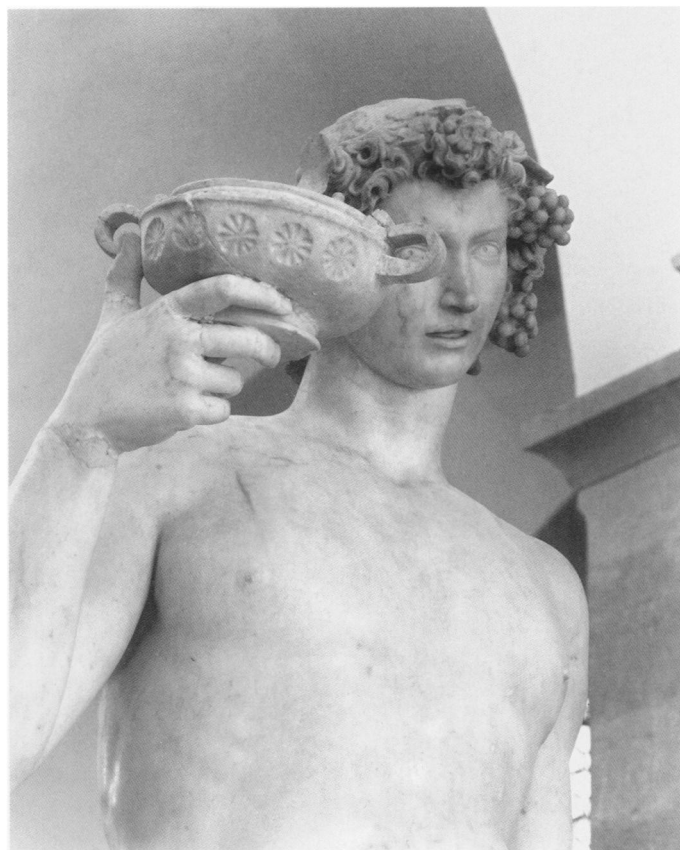
3) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.



4) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.



5) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.

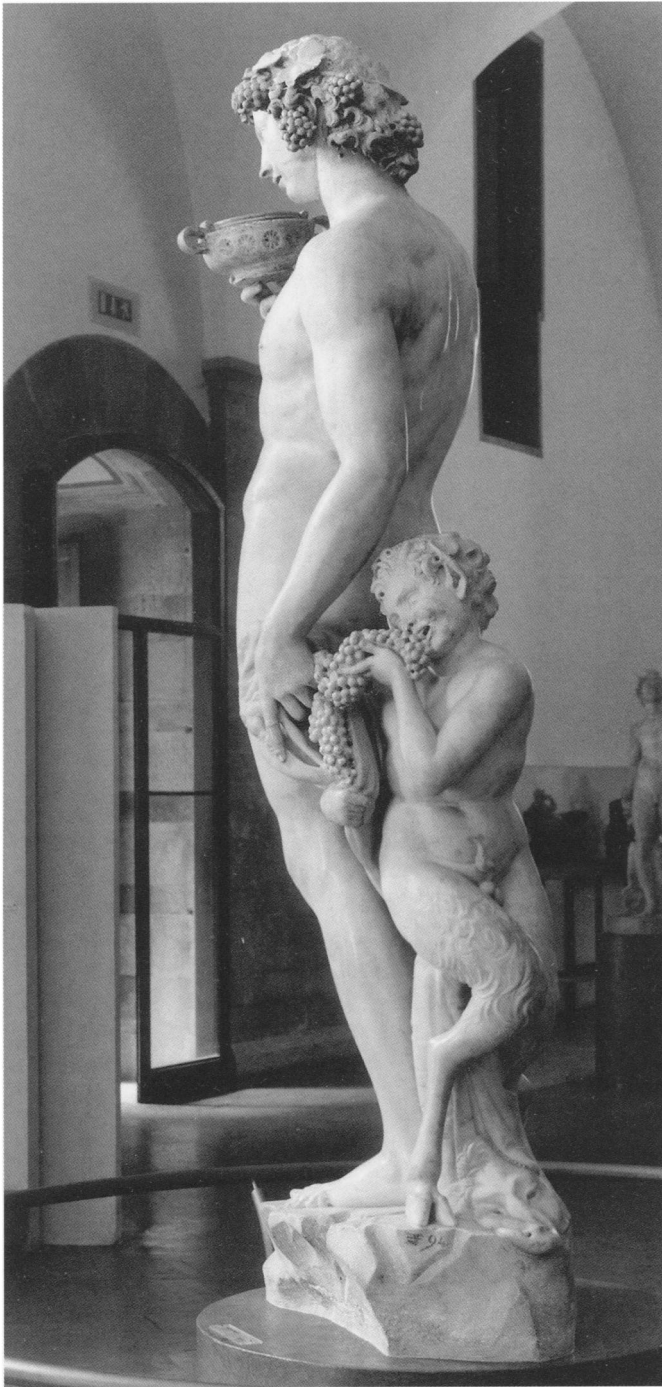


6) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.

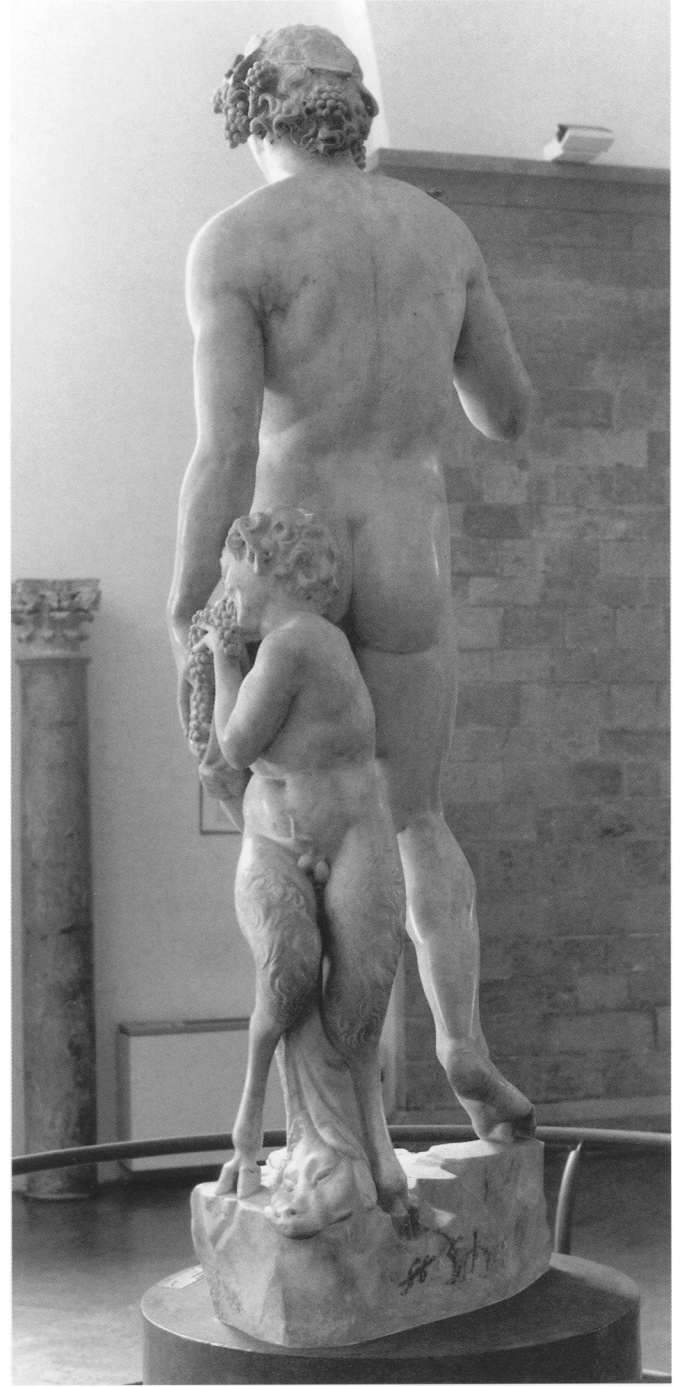
Seen from farther around to our right, a bit beyond full profile [Fig. 7], Bacchus again seems stable; the body of the satyr hides the right leg, and the drawn-back left shoulder and the lolling head are not apparent.

When we have gone three quarters of the way around the statue from where we began with Figure 3, and see it from behind [Fig. 8], Bacchus seems to be striding directly away from us, reaching back with his left hand to pull the gluttonous little satyr along. Here there is no lurching lack of balance, and no evidence of the stupefaction that had first begun to be clear in Figure 5.

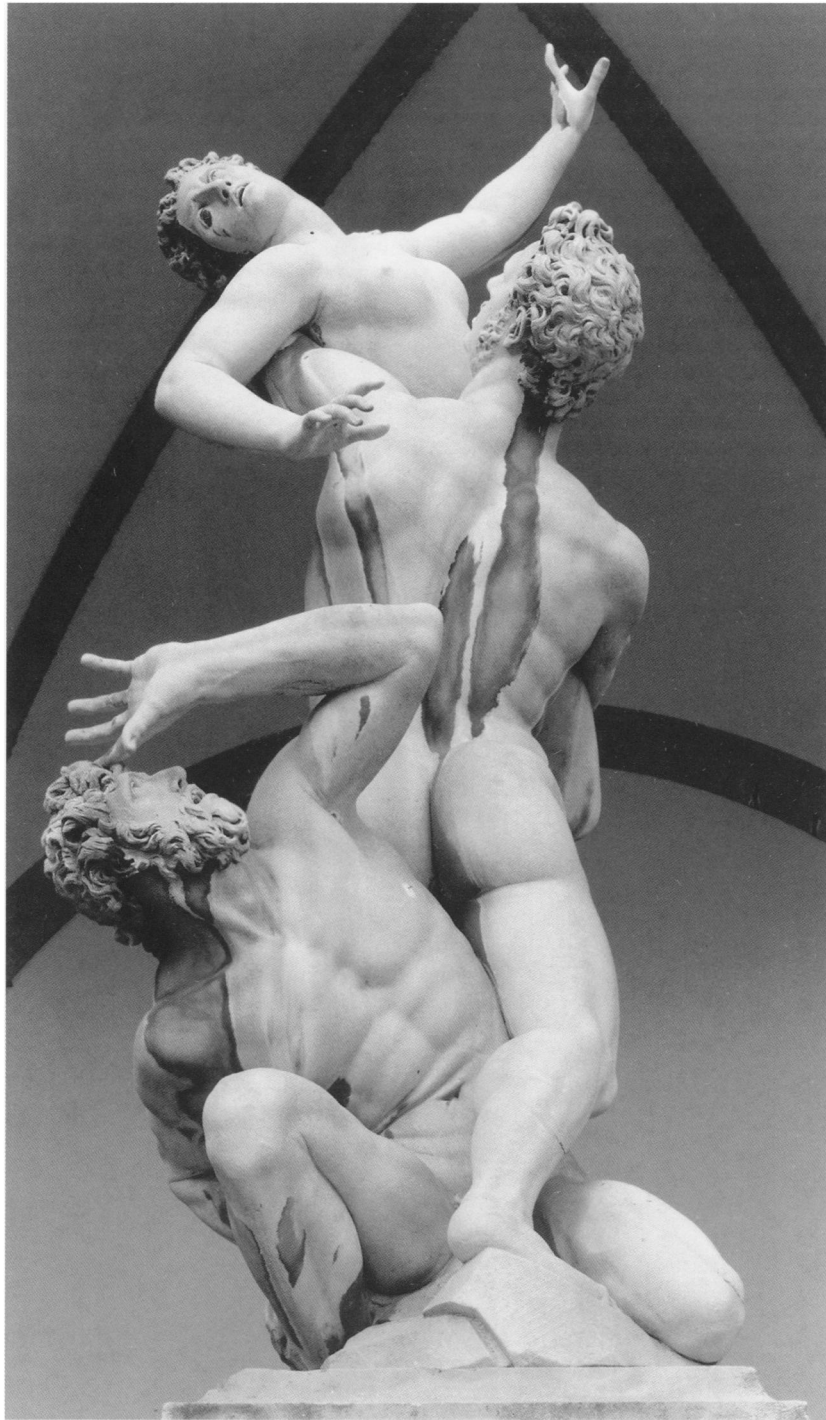
This brief circumnavigation of *Bacchus* makes it clear not only that the piece is highly effective from more than one angle, but also that from different viewpoints Bacchus appears to be in quite different states. When we relinquish the principal



7) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.



8) Michelangelo, «Bacchus», Florence, Museo del Bargello.
Photo: author.



9) Giovanni da Bologna, «Rape of the Sabines», Florence, Loggia dei Lanzi. Photo: author.

one and walk around the figure, we become aware of the temporal aspect of the work, for Bacchus appears in a constant transition from a stable pose to an unstable one and back again, losing his balance momentarily and then regaining it. As we move around him we see him sway, as anyone fuddled with too much drink would do.¹⁷

The effect of circling *Bacchus* is quite different from moving around a fully-developed late sixteenth-century serpentine group such as Giovanni da Bologna's *Rape of the Sabines* [Fig. 9], with its powerful cork-screw arrangement of torsos and limbs. Although Giambologna keeps the viewer in motion by avoiding any sort of principal view, the action taking place is always the same, and there is no sense of change or development as we alter our vantage point. Michelangelo, on the

other hand, often surprises us, and on our walk around his figure we are rewarded with several views of Bacchus in which we observe different states of mind and body.

Michelangelo never carved another figure like *Bacchus* and, for the most part, sixteenth-century sculptors did not continue along those lines in their treatment of individual figures or groups. Not until the early seventeenth century, in the work of Bernini, do we find works that suggest anything comparable. As we were intended to see *Apollo and Daphne*, first on entering the room for which it was made and then walking around the group to see more of it, we experience the action of the story and watch Daphne becoming a laurel tree.¹⁸ Bernini, who revered Michelangelo, appears to have learned something in this regard from *Bacchus*.

I thank Paul Barolsky and William Wallace for their helpful comments and suggestions. This essay is in honor of Emma Rebecca Bardei.

¹ *'The Life of Michelangelo,'* by Ascanio Condivi, translated by Alice Sedgwick Wohl, edited by Hellmut Wohl, 2nd edition, 1999, pp. 21 and 23. Condivi's biography was published in 1553. The statue was bought by the Medici around 1570, and moved to Florence, where it had been installed in the Uffizi by 1591. In 1871 it was taken to the Bargello. (For an account of the placement of the work both in the Uffizi and the Bargello, see Paola Barocchi, "Il Bacco di Michelangelo/Michelangelo's Bacchus", *Lo Specchio del Bargello*, No. 8, Florence, 1982).

² Letter of July 2, 1496. E. H. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, London, 1963, I, p. 3.

³ Michael Hirst, "Michelangelo in Rome: an altar-piece and the 'Bacchus,'" *Burlington Magazine*, CXXIII, October, 1981, pp. 581-593, esp. Appendix C: "Michelangelo, Cardinal Riario and the Bacchus," pp. 590 and 593.

⁴ Letter of July 1, 1497. Ramsden, *The Letters of Michelangelo*, I, p. 4.

⁵ See Michael Hirst, *The Young Michelangelo: The Artist in Rome, 1496-1501*, London, 1994, Ch. II, *The Bacchus*, pp. 29-35. Jacopo Galli may have bought Bacchus from the Cardinal, or it may have been a gift. Galli's house was quite close to the Palazzo della Cancelleria, the grand house that Riario was building in the 1490s, and Galli seems to have been in the Cardinal's circle. Hirst cites evidence that Michelangelo may have lived in the Galli house while he was working on Bacchus, and suggests that the sculpture, although paid for by Riario, may have been carved in the Galli garden, simply remaining there after it was rejected (pp. 31-32).

⁶ There is a long bibliography of negative opinions of the Bacchus, which has been called "false," "incorrect," "unworthy" of the artist, "repulsive," and "wanting in unity," while specific details of it are cited as "most revolting" mistakes, "brutal," and "inharmonious." Even a critic so sympathetic to Michelangelo as John Addington Symonds had serious reservations about the piece, writing that it "leaves a disagreeable impression on the mind... because it is wrong in spiritual conception—brutally materialistic where it ought to have been noble or graceful... If Michelangelo meant to carve a Bacchus, he failed; if he meant to imitate a physically desirable young man in a state of drunkenness, he succeeded." For the *fama critica* of Bacchus, and the remarks quoted here, see Giorgio Vasari, *La Vita di Michelangelo, nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, edited with commentary by Paola Barocchi, Milan and Naples, 1962, II, pp. 62-67.

⁷ For Michelangelo's role in the creation of Condivi's biography of him see Paul Barolsky, *Michelangelo's Nose: A Myth and its Maker*, College Park and London, 1990, esp. pp. 61-62.

⁸ Michelangelo told Condivi he had never studied with Ghirlandaio, although Vasari was aware of the apprenticeship contract. Condivi never mentions the name Bertoldo, even though it is clear that Michelangelo knew him and almost certainly learned a good deal from him. The letters of Michelangelo contain instances of his extreme irritation with people who asked for things and rejected them (see William E. Wallace, "Manoeuvring for patronage: Michelangelo's dagger," *Renaissance Studies*, XI, No. 1, 1997, pp. 20-26). Vasari tells the story of how Michelangelo punished Angelo Doni for an initial reluctance to pay the artist's asking price for a painted tondo by making him pay double the original amount (Barocchi, *Giorgio Vasari, La Vita di Michelangelo, nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, I, pp. 23-24). Whether Vasari described the event as it happened, or even if it did, is not entirely clear (for some of the older views on its veracity, see Barocchi, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 247-248). Paul Barolsky kindly shared with me an unpublished essay on the importance of the Doni anecdote for our understanding of Vasari.

⁹ That Bacchus is in some respects more developed than the Pietà was felt by at least one earlier writer; a century ago Wölfflin attempted to account for its unexpected character by suggesting that it must have been carved later (see John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 3 volumes, London, 1963, catalogue volume, p. 9). Although it gained little support before the discovery of documentary evidence set it aside entirely, the idea is not an uninteresting one, for even if Bacchus is the earlier chronologically, there is still reason to regard it as more advanced conceptually.

¹⁰ In relief sculpture, on the other hand, especially sarcophagi, Bacchus is often shown drunk, but in almost all ancient life-size free-standing examples he is represented in a more restrained manner. For an example of the Doryphoros type as Bacchus see P. P. Bober and R. O. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture; A Handbook of Sources*, London and New York, 1986, fig. 71.

¹¹ Johannes Wilde, *Michelangelo: Six Lectures*, Oxford, 1978, p. 33.

¹² Some years ago Craig Smyth pointed out an interesting parallel between Bacchus and Antonio Rizzo's Adam from the Arco Foscari in Venice. Bacchus reverses canonical Renaissance *contrapposto*—his right shoulder is forward over the free leg, his left shoulder back on the side of the engaged leg—in a rare arrangement that is also found, although in a much more understated way, in Rizzo's Adam. Tullio Lombardo's figure of Adam, part of the tomb of Andrea Vendramin now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, hints at this reversal as well. Smyth argues convincingly that Michelangelo, who was in Venice in 1494, would likely have seen both those pieces, and that they influenced his thinking when he began to work on Bacchus two years later. See Craig H. Smyth, "Venice and the Emergence of the High Renaissance in Florence: Observations and Questions," in *Florence and Venice: Comparisons and Relations*, I, *The Quattrocento*, Florence, 1979, pp. 209-249, esp. pp. 210-213. If the *contrapposto* suggested in the Venetian statues of Adam in fact inspired Michelangelo, it is nonetheless the case that he dramatically exaggerated it to such a degree that it would have been inappropriate for a figure of anyone but the drunken Bacchus.

¹³ In the drawing the right arm is shown broken off above the wrist. It is not clear when the statue was damaged, but the original hand with the cup was preserved, and appears to have been reattached by the time Condivi described the piece (Charles de Tolnay, *The Youth of Michelangelo*, 2nd edition, 1947, p. 142). Heemskerck shows Bacchus among fragments of antique sculpture belonging to the Galli family, and in the drawing it takes on the character of an ancient fragment. For an interesting reading of Bacchus as a deliberately ambiguous work—designed "to tease the viewer with uncertainty as to whether it was ancient or modern"—and a discussion of the artist as forger of antiquities, see Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture*, New Haven and London, 1999, pp. 201-205. Barkan illustrates a drawing of Bacchus from a sketchbook at Trinity College, Cambridge, dated ca. 1550, that also shows the hand and cup sheared off (p. 205, fig. 3.94), and points out that after about 1550 the statue is never again represented as broken (p. 202).

Other damage to the piece is more problematic. The Heemskerck drawing, and the Cambridge drawing illustrated by Barkan, show the penis missing, and it still is. There seems to be no way to determine whether the statue was originally carved to look as though it were a mutilated antique, or if the organ was once present but removed some time before Heemskerck made his drawing in the 1530s.

¹⁴ Heemskerck's view of Bacchus is slightly distorted, with the right shoulder appearing to be dropped more than it is (compare Fig. 1).

The drawing closely resembles what one would see in a modern photograph made with a wide-angle lens from close to the figure. Distortion of this sort in fact has nothing to do with lenses, but is a function of the distance of the viewer from the object, whether he looks through a camera or with the naked eye. Heemskerck's exaggeration of the sagging abdomen, on the other hand, is a subjective response to the work.

¹⁵ We do not know where the *Bacchus* was originally intended to stand, or from what angle he was first to be seen. There is no external evidence that Michelangelo accommodated a particular setting in any way, but the Heemskerck drawing allows a modest circumstantial argument for how the visitor initially saw the statue in the Galli collection; if one descended to the garden by means of the steps that appear at the left edge of the drawing, the first view would have been something quite close to what we see in Fig. 3.

¹⁶ It seems likely that on its present pedestal in the Bargello, *Bacchus* is a bit higher off the ground than he was in Jacopo Galli's garden, and the viewing position from which we see his right eye through the cup handle is therefore now at a greater distance from the statue than it was originally. As a result, some of the intensity of the

figure has been lost. The photograph may give a stronger impression of drunkenness seen from up close than is presently to be gained in the gallery, but it appears to reflect accurately the original experience of the work.

¹⁷ James Hall has recently suggested that "the viewer of *Bacchus*, by having to circumnavigate it, would be encouraged to feel a suitable state of inebriation" (*The World as Sculpture: The Changing Status of Sculpture from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, London, 1999, p. 65), which seems to overstate the dizziness induced by a thoughtful walk around the statue, and entirely overlook the fact that the point of the journey is to set not the observer, but Bacchus himself, in motion. Hall is correct when he says that the figure "was made to be walked around" (p. 63), as is Howard Hibbard when he states that "the composition begs to be seen from several points of view around 180 degrees," (*Michelangelo*, New York, 1974, p. 41) but neither of them considers the different ways one sees Bacchus when doing so, nor how those views contribute to the meaning of the work.

¹⁸ Joy Kenseth, "Bernini's Borghese Sculptures: Another View," *Art Bulletin*, LXIII, June, 1981, pp. 191-210.