

Revamping the Renaissance: An Annotated Bibliography

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Faster than ever, we continue to enter into an age of technology, performance value, and revision. It is because of our technological evolution that we feel so induced to take those few old things that still hold value and revamp them. In a debate ridden with inconsistent arguments and deceased witnesses, the restoration of the Sistine Chapel ceiling is one with staggering evidence on opposing sides. This argument is full of harsh refutations and intelligent rebuttals but little positive proof for either position. Approaching this dispute as an art history major, I have had a natural bias to shudder at the thought of the unjust revision of Michelangelo's masterpiece. I notice that with this bias comes a classic antagonistic approach to those in support of the restoration, and that I am quick to demonize them. So, pulling away from my tendencies, I am reanalyzing my approach to this topic and considering what I was previously terrified to consider: the restoration may have actually been for the better. Through this process I have realized that it is difficult for me to make an accurate assessment, considering I do not fully understand the process by which any piece of art is restored, let alone the frescoes of Michelangelo. So was the restoration a hasty and naïve choice that destroyed the monumentalism of one of our world's finest pieces of art? Or was it simply a healthy sprucing up that is being unfairly attacked?

Beck, James. Daley, Michael. *Art Restoration: the Culture, the Business, and the Scandal*. Great Britain: John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1993. Print.

With a title that describes art restoration as a "scandal," James Beck's opinion in the Sistine Chapel debate is obvious from the start. However, unlike some of his opposing sources,

he is quick both to present evidence and dismantle that of his opponents directly and in fine detail. In addition, Beck sometimes seems almost overcome with emotion that such an injustice could be committed. As such, his book is easily accessible to a multitude of audiences, whether it is an awkward college student or Brandt herself. In fact, so much of *Art Restoration: the Culture, the Business, and the Scandal* seems to be in direct response to Brandt's argument that the two could almost be read congruently.

Because Beck's piece so accurately addresses every aspect of the Sistine Chapel debate, it is both useful and a little intimidating, venturing into uncharted territories of ancient sources and Italian translations. His detailed variety, however, makes his argument an endlessly complex and believable one. Beck addresses, analyzes, and attacks reasons in favor of the restoration, ending each assault by reiterating his belief that this restoration was a mistake. While Brandt's reasoning focuses mainly on necessity, Beck instead argues that it was frivolous and avoidable, going so far as to state that the evidence of deterioration was neither recent nor "progressive" (71). As he so eloquently explains, "Over turning centuries of observation and much that is known of the history of Renaissance art, they assert that the darkening of the ceiling is the product of dust and soot together with glues applied as a varnish not just to shadows but over the entire painting" (65). This addresses two major issues of the debate: that of glue application and that of original colors. Beck continually emphasizes that Michelangelo consistently worked *a secco* and therefore the Ceiling's glue must have been his. In addition, he spends pages emphasizing that it is impossible that Michelangelo would have painted in such vibrant colors. Unlike Brandt's vague supportive evidence, Beck cites specific instances that point to Michelangelo's subdued use of color, including his first biographers, Paolo Pino, and even the

eulogy given at his funeral service. This method of attacking the opposition and overwhelming it with reputable evidence leaves Beck's position nearly indisputable.

Part of the reason that Beck's book is so relatable is that his argument is often emotionally driven; he is distressed by the injustice that has been committed. For instance, when he described Nippon Television's role in the restoration (suggesting that they may make money from it) his words are bitter and indignant. To someone already leaning towards anti-restoration, however, this style seems to be entirely validated, and only encourages the reader to see Beck as an ally.

Brandt, K. W. G. "Twenty-five Questions about Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling." *Apollo*: International Magazine of the Arts December 1987: 392-400. Print.

Although I have attempted to conduct my research with as little bias as possible, it is difficult to completely remove my opinions from my studies. As such, I have had the tendency to mentally portray Brandt as an antagonist, out to destroy art history. I am completely aware, however, that this is my emotional side, and I am ultimately confident that Brandt is entirely convinced of the justice being carried out through her work.

Her *Apollo* article is vaguely written both in evidence and supporting sources. She describes her input as "deliberately tactless" (392), and her article is dripping with explicit purpose and bias, masked in supposedly innocent questions. In addition, although her article is featured in a prestigious art journal, she rarely mentions specific sources for her bold claims. I cannot imagine the presumably reputable art historians who read *Apollo* being easily swayed by her article.

Brandt's main argument for the restoration is necessity. She describes "the effluvium of soot and grease" that covered the ceiling, and notes that cleaning crews were originally drafted a

mere six years after Michelangelo finished painting it (393). Her indistinct evidence begins here, as she begins to discuss previous restorations (which over-painted and added glue) but fails to provide documentation for such restorations. Brandt's lack of specific supportive evidence leaves her writing seeming illegitimate and shoddy. Although she presents her article as fact, little of it seems to be more than opinion.

Another significant aspect of Brandt's argument discusses the debate over Michelangelo's color theory, a topic that Beck attacks in depth. Those in favor of the restoration maintain that Michelangelo used vibrant colors, which are now finally being revealed. Brandt details that meticulous "observations and tests" have been conducted in order to differentiate between Michelangelo's original work and that which was added by restorers (393). However, Brandt does not specify if these assessments can determine any work he may have done *a secco*. While the majority of pro-restoration sources refute the idea that Michelangelo ever added to his dry fresco *a secco*, Brandt actually supports it. Brandt seems to attempt to woo her readers with the impressive concept of laboratory tests (much like in *Return to Glory*); however, she fails to give enough detail into the processes to hold the attention of her audience. As she continues to embrace the apparently intentional result of these ostentatious colors, spectators are left drawn to Beck's research, which specifically addresses her flimsy evidence.

Mancinelli, Fabrizio. Colalucci, Gianluigi. *The Sistine Chapel: the Art, the History, and the Restoration*. New York, NY: Harmony Books, 1986. Print. Relevant pages: 218-265.

Congruent with his interview in *Return to Glory*, Mancinelli's writing in *The Sistine Chapel* tends to err on the side of being non-argumentative. Instead, he disregards that there is a dispute at all, and simply uses his forty-seven pages to praise both Michelangelo and the restoration. Research subjects such as those concerning the Sistine Chapel typically include

photographs as evidence in their literature. At first glance, the source can therefore seem immature or illegitimate. However, it is entirely necessary, despite the wide range of photographs available, to include such visual evidence.

Although Mancinelli seems to have aimed for a more elementary audience than that of Brandt, Mancinelli's writing is better constructed and includes proof that appears valid and pertinent. So while he does not specifically address an argument, he insists that the restoration was entirely necessary and that Michelangelo is now truly revealed.

Despite his passive approach, Mancinelli addresses the debate's common concern of Michelangelo's color use. However, he uses specific and indisputable evidence to support the typical pro-restoration claims. "This new character of Michelangelo makes much better sense of his historical position, and particularly of the influence he exerted almost immediately on his contemporaries and especially on the Florentine Mannerists Rosso and Pontorno" (218). He continues to reference reputable sources such as Vasari, Michelangelo's first biographer, and integrates the use of footnotes throughout his text.

To emphasize the dirt that the Chapel has suffered, Mancinelli notes that by the time *The Last Judgment* was completed, the Ceiling was already covered in grime, a fact also noted in Brandt's article. As such, authorities hired a regular group of cleaners to prevent the damage suffered by Michelangelo's other work.

Throughout his writing, Mancinelli uses the tact common mainly to Beck, in which he disperses praise for Michelangelo amongst technical art jargon, convincing the reader into viewing him as a proponent. While his research is presented in an entirely reasonable manor, in this instance Mancinelli had the unfortunate occurrence of being read directly after Beck. Even with his footnotes and ancient references, it is still incomparable to Beck's depth.

Newman, Edwin. (Narrator). (1986). *Return to Glory: Michelangelo Revealed*. [Documentary].
(Available from Crown Publishers Inc., 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019).

The documentary, *Return to Glory: Michelangelo Revealed*, produced by the Nippon Television Network, is a combination of accurate examples, useful interviews, and deliciously blunt bias. Noting that the corporation who funded the video also happened to fund the restoration itself, it comes as no surprise that they would create a product to sway any and all critics while the process was still underway (Beck & Daley, 64). The video's position on the restoration poses the restorers as very pro-Michelangelo, a distraction tactic similar to that of Mancinelli. Throughout the production, they praise his craft, and stress that they simply intend to reveal his "original luminosity." Interestingly, the video is not presented in a format made to dispute critics, but simply states the opinion of the creators, as if suggesting that their work is so honorable that there could be no debate at all. As such, their argument is merely that they wanted to preserve the art piece. According to the head art historian in charge of the restoration, Fabrizio Mancinelli, he and his coworkers "realized" that the glue that resided over the ceiling had begun to pull away, taking the plaster with it. Because of this, their work became "urgent." It should be noted, however, that Beck asserts that the tests were not continued over a period of time which would have allowed for a pattern to be discerned.

It was more difficult, when watching this video, to demonize the restorers as I had done previously with Brandt. Instead of a harsh faceless article, I was presented with the restorers themselves. Instead of vague evidence there was actual footage. Instead of an argument, there were simple statements, convincing me of the restorers' true belief that they were helping Michelangelo's work. The video format certainly provided a more apt mode of presenting their argument, as it allowed their message to be dispersed throughout images from the masterpiece

itself. This format not only captivates the audience in utter awe of Michelangelo's talent, but also is accessible to a wide variety of viewers. However, because of the video's non-confrontational approach to the debate, there is little reason to believe that serious critics such as James Beck would find any substance to the mellow film. This source's use of footage of chemical tests on the frescoes paired with pans of the majesty that is Michelangelo's ceiling can cause the audience to swoon and trust the restorers. However, this video is not not nearly critical enough, nor does it address the main oppositions enough, to *convince* a critic that the restoration is beneficial, though it may reassure an inexperienced tourist.

Throughout these annotations, I have described my approach to each source as antagonist or proponent. Each author attempts to give the impression that he or she is doing Michelangelo a favor because, essentially, everyone in this debate argues purely out of adoration for his art. Every photo, both pre-restoration and post-restoration, has left me literally breathless. The majority of my evidence points towards the benefits of this restoration; however, the strength of Beck's book seems to outweigh them all. Regardless, my final position on this topic is a typical middle ground. While I hold reservations about the process of art restoration, I do believe that it can be helpful in moderation. As such, I think it is most likely that Michelangelo did apply his own layer of glue that did slightly dim the colors. However, I think that his original colors were somewhere in between the filthy grays and gaudy rainbows visible today. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes have had one of the largest impacts on the human race out of all great works created. The cultural significance of attempting to revive such an amazing piece is one that both pushes us forward and hinders us, afraid to touch them anymore. The more our technology develops, the more social debates develop and demand of us new ethical decisions.

“Revamping the Renaissance”

Works Cited

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