Annibale Carracci

Annibale Carracci occupies an unenviable position in the history of painting. Most of his work predates Caravaggio and Rubens, but somehow it is inevitably sandwiched between theirs. Worse than this, they manage completely to bracket his efforts. The great painting of the seventeenth century and the best of modern painting to follow were built on the shoulders of Caravaggio and Rubens set ungraciously on the misunderstood body of Annibale's ideas, intuitions, and accomplishments. There is much truth to this complaint, and the literature is eloquent in arguing Annibale's case. But one thing seems to have gotten lost in the pleadings: how very difficult it is to look at Annibale's paintings.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that twentieth-century eyes need special practice and perhaps even special training to see anything at all in Annibale's work. In the Louvre, for example, his *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints* (plate 9) seems hopelessly remote when compared with such renowned paintings as Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin* (fig. 14) and Rubens' *Debarkation at Marseilles* (fig. 15). A lack of physicality makes Annibale's work hard to grasp. Yet his painting is so eloquent that it seems especially unfair that his Madonna should be overwhelmed so easily, first by Caravaggio's dramatic impact, then by Rubens' elitist success. But the ephemeral, eclectic, and careful character of Annibale's art represents a great risk.

There is a lot to admire in Annibale, but the way he addressed himself to the problems of painting in his time seemed to carry with it the seeds of failure. We feel that he could see the problems, he could work on them, but he could never really attack them. Annibale gives the impression of moving on to another painting, another problem, before he had finished with the one he had just begun. This may explain why we walk by his paintings so quickly in museums: we move on anticipating the next forceful impression, something that will develop and resolve what we have just seen. We feel a need for decisiveness and clarity when we confront Annibale.

This is certainly the case with the *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints*. This is a beautiful and deep painting, but the fact that it is so difficult to see, so difficult to comprehend, is not in its favor. What holds this painting back is the careful, hesitant quality of its naturalism. Because its action unfolds in such a shaky progression, our instincts question the artful, naive flow of figures, diminishing in size as they travel from lower left to middle right to top center. As they move away from us, their separation creates an awkward tremor of instability. In the end we are aware that these figures are being made *observably* life-size, drawn and colored from life and then pieced into a painted setting. The result is that their average body size, instead of appearing normal, feels as though it is a Mannerist elongation of dwarfed models, a kind of unconscious caricature. Annibale's hesitancy and self-consciousness leave his delicate pictorial inventiveness without a real focus.

Yet Annibale handles with credit the problem of Mannerist succession of Renaissance accomplishment. He moves on smoothly; he is neither too boxy nor too thin. He is natural, and he is classical; he is mundane, and he is spiritual. Most of all he is discreet; perhaps too discreet to make enough pictorial presence felt. Not that it is not there, but it is so hard to dig out that we feel the effort is hardly worth it. It may be difficult to admit, but our laziness is Annibale's doom. No quiet painter can hold the attention of a culture

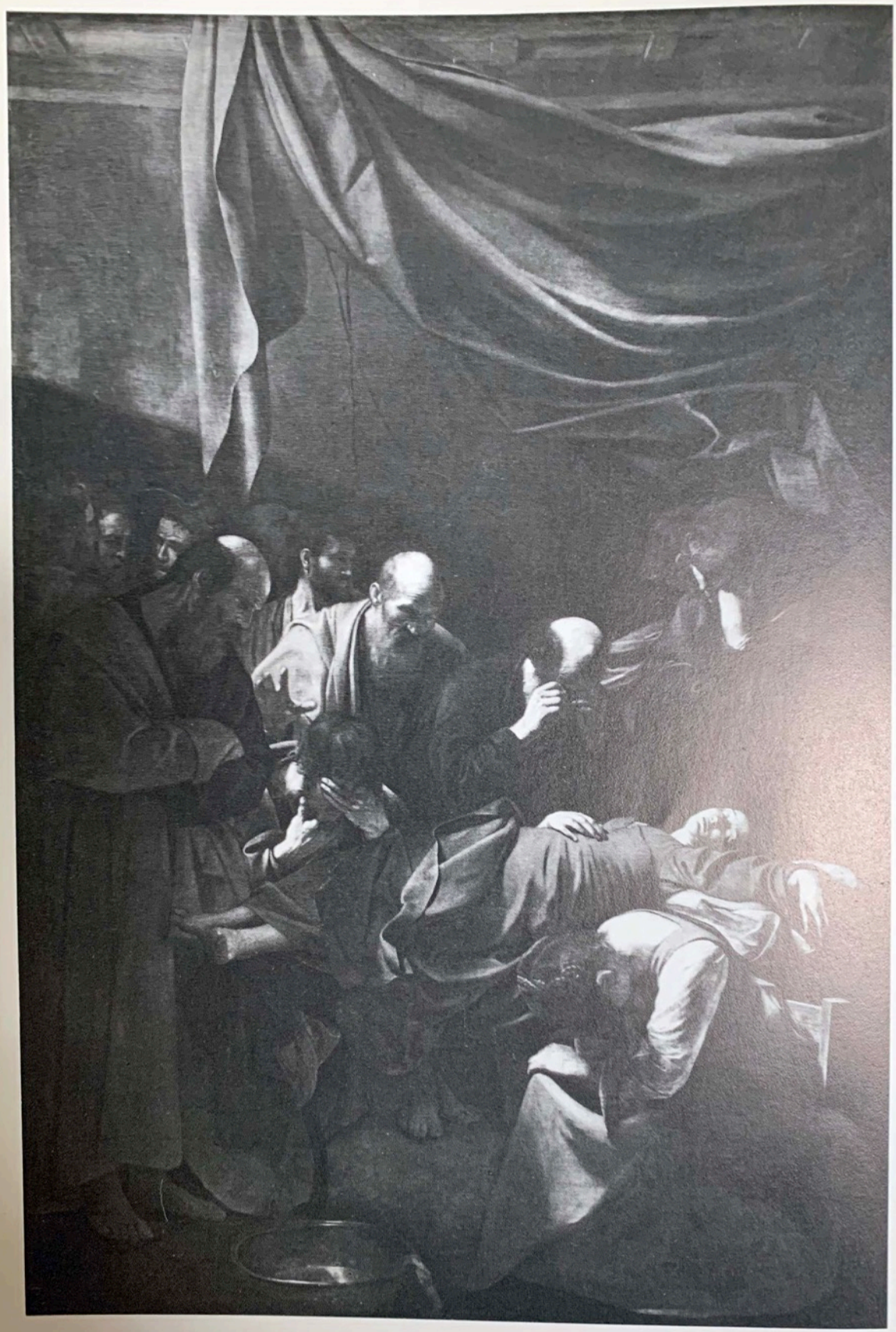

Figure 14 CARAVAGGIO
Death of the Virgin (1606)
Oil on canvas, 12 ft. 1 in. × 8 ft. ½ in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Figure 15 PETER PAUL RUBENS
Debarkation at Marseilles (1622–23)
Oil on canvas, 12 ft. 11 in. × 9 ft. 8 in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

for long. Quiet painting, even of great originality, is sure to be merely the subject of intermittent academic revivalism. Apparently Annibale's accomplishments are suggestive, even helpful, but not firm enough to build on—at least this is the way they seem if we have to understand Annibale through the eyes of Caravaggio and Rubens.

There is a way in which Annibale's painting belongs more to the eighteenth than to the late sixteenth century. His painting gives pleasure; it gives the opposite effect from the excitement that we feel with Caravaggio and Rubens. It may be that Annibale delivers what Caravaggio and Rubens withhold—satisfaction; or better, in painterly terms, a desire for untroubled resolution. Although Annibale has a soft, somehow indeterminate spatial presence that successfully defines his paintings, its clutter inevitably reduces them to a comfortable size, no matter how great the actual size may have been. As a result, we see Annibale's paintings in a very relaxed, conventional, almost bourgeois way; he anticipates a middle-class pictorial sensibility.

Annibale's *Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints* depicts Saint Luke with his brushes at his feet, contemplating the Virgin and the attending Saint Catherine. The overall atmosphere suggests a scene in which Vuillard is about to paint his mother and sister in a turn-of-the-century sitting room. This association highlights Annibale's ability to create a very personal, intimate space within the confines of a public altarpiece. The spatial presence here, the envelopment of Saint Luke coupled with the illumination of Saint Catherine, has a clarity and a naive expansiveness which achieves a level of spiritual expressiveness not often found in painting. It is the kind of spirituality that does not call attention to itself. It is, of course, the opposite of everything that Caravaggio and Rubens stood for.

Caravaggio probably would have been contemptuous of Annibale's reticence. Indeed, given the competitive edge of Caravaggio's personality, he doubtless took a lot of satisfaction from the fact that his confrontation with Annibale in the Cerasi Chapel featured two of his strongest and most inventive efforts against one of Annibale's more dated efforts. This is not to say that Caravaggio lacked respect for Annibale's work; Caravaggio probably learned a lot from the Carracci, and from Bolognese painting in general. The influence just does not show up easily, since Caravaggio's extremely economical working methods make it hard to tell what he was looking at when he was working. However, we might get some hints from the figures revealed by x-ray in his *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*. These figures have strong echoes of Annibale and Raphael, for example in Annibale's *Resurrection of Christ* and Raphael's *Stoning of Saint Stephen*, a theme which incidentally Annibale also took up later, indicating perhaps a particular interest in Raphael which he shared with Caravaggio.

There is one place where many believe that Annibale was able to outdistance Caravaggio: the paintings on the ceiling and walls of the Farnese Palace (fig. 16). These paintings do Annibale proud and would seem to challenge Caravaggio successfully. But Annibale's efforts in the Farnese, however beautiful and eloquent they may be, are oriented toward the antique, and as such are somewhat lost to us as painting. They remain idealized decoration that we cannot really bring into focus, an activity that in the end we cannot make convincingly pictorial. And this loss is true as well of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel (fig. 17), great as it may be. We are very hard pressed to see ceiling and mural decoration as a coherent visual experience after we have been conditioned by the self-contained, individualized paintings of Caravaggio and Rubens that sprang up unexpectedly at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Caravaggio's explicit declaration of picture making as a unique and self-contained activity and its cataclysmic implementation by Rubens rendered past and future mural painting literally dumb.

ARE WE?

The flatness of decorative mural painting made illusionism a necessity, but the literal extensiveness of the surfaces stretched the illusionism impossibly thin. The proliferation of intensely clever framing devices simply compounded the problem. Painting repeatedly demands a surface responsive to touch, and fresco painting, no matter how accomplished, always seems to deny tactility.

It may seem ungenerous to criticize Michelangelo and Annibale in this way, but the point I am trying to make, that the consequences of the great decorative efforts of the sixteenth century were disappointing for the future development of painting, deserves emphasis. Pozzo, Pietro da Cortona, and Tiepelo for that matter improved on the efforts of Michelangelo and Annibale, creating a more coherent and a more functional illusionism, but this was merely a mechanical triumph, a kind of illusionistic virtuosity without consequence.

Fortunately, this disappointment is not the whole story. In the magnificence of the Sistine Chapel and the Farnese Palace there is an abundance of great painting still to be appreciated, still to be reckoned with. The problem is how to gain access to it. We have narrowed our belief about what painting should really be to such an extent that almost everything good about the Sistine and Farnese decorations is unavailable to contemporary painting. For example, something as simple as a mobile viewpoint seems to be an anathema. We are so conditioned by the window of perspective that we stand motionless in front of it, waiting for painting to organize itself according to our acquired habits. It may be that we have to stop staring at painting and learn to scan a bit, trying to do with our two eyes what the average movie cameraman does with one when he tracks and zooms. Perhaps we could combine this more mobile, fluid way of seeing with painting capable of suggesting motion and extension. In theory then, if not in practice, we would be approaching painting that might rival Michelangelo and Annibale on their most difficult and heretofore inaccessible terms.

We have to acknowledge that two painters, Rubens and Caravaggio, who have an immense appeal to the modern sensibility owing largely to their contained, graspable pictorial power, found much of their strength in the great decorative painting of sixteenth-century Rome, in the work of Michelangelo, Raphael, and Annibale Carracci. The reason that Italian mural painting of the sixteenth century presents such a problem for us is that we are much more conditioned by the bounds of the fifteenth-century perspectival box than we realize. The painters of the sixteenth century were much looser with the rules than we imagine they should have been—fragmenting, distorting, and ignoring the theory of perspective whenever necessary.

Today, although we claim to be free of the bounds of perspective, we hold slavishly to a notion of a box view of a whole. It is as though Cubism has planted an ink-lined box in our brain which we immediately superimpose over any image that provokes an aesthetic response. To put it another way, the flatness of abstraction today, its sense of surface, has nothing whatsoever to do with any sense of surface of past art; it is simply the forwardmost plane, the windowed picture plane of the fifteenth-century perspectival box. It is this way because abstraction is historically self-conscious, a recent development that is instinctively cautious and conservative, apparently unable to shake the trauma of separation from representation; consequently, spatially, if not in other ways, it remains especially timid—almost retrograde.

The result of modern painting's restrictive view of flatness has been a negative reaction to the yielding surface of painting. Painting today is trying to be deliberately messy in order to deny the fragility and limits of the surfaces available to art. This is why the creation of grafitti has become such a natural expression of the current art-making sensibility. Art wants real, durable, extensive surfaces to work on; it does not want to be limited by the refined surfaces of recent abstraction, inertly pliant and neatly cropped cotton duck. Whether they know it or not, most of the young painters are reaching for the stucco of Rome. Let us hope it is for the stucco of sixteenth-century Rome rather than seventeenth-century Rome.

Figure 16 ANNIBALE CARRACCI
Farnese Gallery (c. 1597–1600)
Ceiling fresco
Farnese Palace, Rome

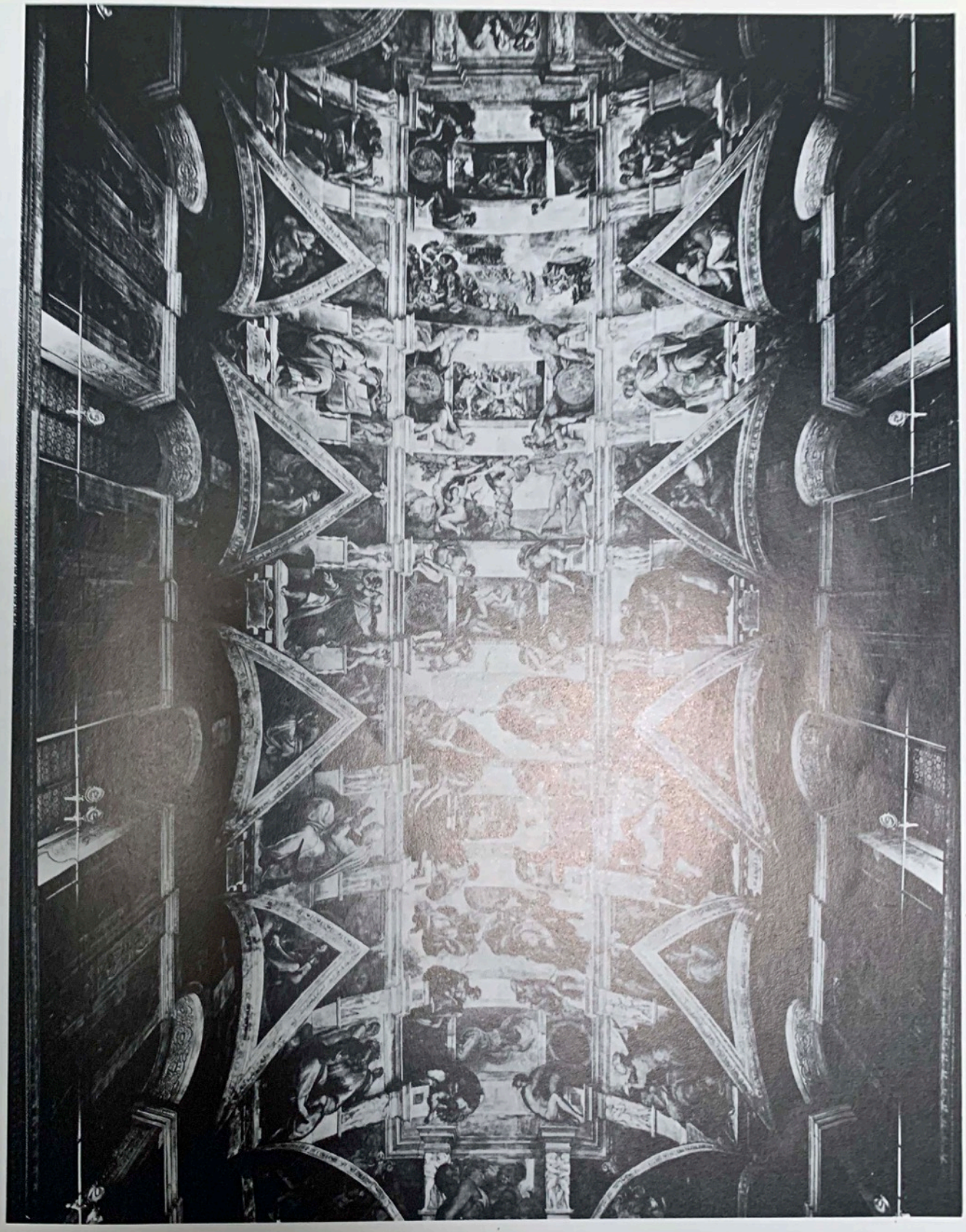

Figure 17 MICHELANGELO
Sistine Chapel (1508–12)
Ceiling fresco
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome

In one way Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel gives us an object lesson about the perils of painting in the sixteenth century: he stresses the limits of the enframing window. The trompe-l'oeil architecture and statuary painted around every scene dwarf most of our sense of pictorial happening within these devices. All the activity takes place around the painted pictures. The message here is clear—that measured space catering to our idea of proper visual orientation is overcome by a natural flow of painterly pictorial energy expressed ironically as trompe-l'oeil sculpture. Mannerism becomes inevitable because painting wants to break the bounds of mechanical measurement—or for that matter, any kind of rational, objective measurement.

In case we missed the message on the ceiling, Michelangelo reinforces it on the wall. The *Last Judgment* shares the messiness, the serpentine shallowness, that we see around us today—but, of course, on a slightly higher plane. This anxious messiness shows that contemporary painting needs reform, much as Mannerist mid-sixteenth-century painting needed reform, but we need reform in the energetic manner of Rubens and Caravaggio rather than in the mild manner of Annibale's well-meant and gifted academicism.

Annibale was a truly inspired painter, but when he tried to do more for painting than just make it, he got into trouble. In a sense, no one needed the Bolognese to reform painting toward the end of the sixteenth century. All the Carracci had to do was to make art; to paint on a level with Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Tintoretto and still acknowledge the insights of the likes of Correggio, Parmigianino, Bronzino, and Rosso Fiorentino. In a way they did get it right, but perhaps their academic sense of completeness—the fact that they could not leave anything out, like, say, Barocci's lovely, oscillating color—made it impossible for them to become focused enough to attack painting in the way that Rubens and Caravaggio did.

Acknowledging Annibale Carracci is the long way around to Rubens, but it is the route of choice because Annibale so aptly exemplifies a nagging notion we have about the difficulty of looking at painting in general and individual paintings in particular. This difficulty confronts us when we think of Rubens: his work in general, and his paintings in particular. In the case of Caravaggio, once we have grasped his intensity the paintings open up to us; the success and convincing realism of the illusion lead us into painting. With Rubens it happens the other way around: painting always comes first, and the sense of the painting is so present that it becomes very hard to distinguish any other reality. In a world made up only of painting, there is little room for us. Sometimes painting guided by Caravaggio becomes so intensely self-involved that we feel like voyeurs; whereas its opposite, painting described by Rubens, becomes so completely pictorial that it turns self-consumptive in front of our eyes, announcing a world of its own, a world excluding us. This gives us an uneasy feeling in the face of Rubens' work: we feel that his painting revels in its own glory, and the truth is we want it to revel in our glory.

This total pictorial immersion seems strange to us at first because the fullness, completeness, and largeness of Rubens' scale of working make the paintings hard to read. There is very little conventional adjustment of pictorial space, very little accommodation to the idea of organizing observed nature into a pictorially manageable format. This brusqueness makes the illusionism that is there a bit artificial, and it reinforces our sense that these works have an abstracted, almost dislocated quality that is thrust gratuitously upon us. But herein lies their most enduring and original quality: by being so completely motivated by painterly and pictorial qualities, these works are very close to the spirit and intent of twentieth-century abstract painting. The basic construc-

tion and illusionism of Rubens' paintings create a self-contained, expansive whole that appears accessible to and certainly instructive for painting today.

We can see Caravaggio manipulating his illusionistic gifts to create a real figurative presence in painting, indulging his talent for naturalism in the salvation of idealism (exactly what Annibale wanted to do but could not quite find his way to do); then a few years later we see Rubens, eyes barely uplifted from Caravaggio's drama, working toward the creation of a real presence for the activity of painting itself, quietly downgrading idealism by letting his naturalistic impulses drive painting. Rubens' success scrambles the ambitions of Annibale and Caravaggio, leaving a great gift burdened by a great responsibility.

Grasping the halter of seventeenth-century culture, Rubens tells us that the ethical imperative in painting is found in recognizing what God wants us to do, and what God wants us to do is create for ourselves. Here the difference between the Catholic and Protestant viewpoints is underscored. Both Catholic and Protestant would argue that naturalism in painting reflects our observation of what God wants us to see. We record and study what we see. But these words—*record, study,* and *see*—have different meanings. For the Protestant sensibility these activities lead to a search for accuracy, a desire for understanding that is expressed in an inevitable displacement of painting in favor of craft, ensuring, in turn, an unavoidable pictorial impoverishment. For the Catholic these same activities—the absorbed record of what we see—lead to the responsibility of creation, a desire for knowledge expressed in a commitment to the *potential* of painting.

This is the core of Rubens' greatness: as much as he gave, as much as he accomplished, the potential for continued development is always there. We desperately want painting to be real and true, but most of all, although we will not admit it to ourselves, we want it to be stable. In this sense Rubens will always leave us unsatisfied. He gives us an enormous amount; but it is not there to be possessed, it is there to be used. We acquire working capital, not savings.

The momentum that Rubens gave to painting still runs freely today, and it will continue to do so as long as we want to create painting. That is, the momentum will serve us as long as painting seeks to be universal—as long as it remains Catholic and does not become Protestant and provincial. It could be that the Jesuit Counter-Reformation did more for painting than painting did for it.

Confidence drives painting. Perhaps nothing could help dispel the manic diversity that surrounds and engulfs painting today better than the broad sweep of Rubens' brush. His sureness about painting, anchored as it was in the service of God, would be a boon. It was his reaction *to* the painting preceding and surrounding him, rather than *against* that painting, which propelled his work and the painting that followed him. It is this kind of positive, progressive moment that seems so hard to find today.

In looking at Pollock's work, we can see a good example of the kind of problem that faces abstraction now, particularly in what we call overall painting. To go anywhere with the thin paint skeins that Pollock activated, we have to give them more moment and definition. We have to imagine a kind of tubular displacement and disposition of fluid pigment, as if it were coming out of a hose and could hold itself together, keeping its definition until it chose to disperse itself for dramatic effect, and then regaining its definition and composure in order to move on again to drive painting toward completion. This is the way in which Rubens activated Mannerist entanglement and shallowness; he made it flowing and expansive, creating in his Last Judgments a sureness

Plate 9 ANNIBALE CARRACCI
Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints (1592)
Oil on canvas, 13 ft. 2 in. × 7 ft. 5 in.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Plate 10 JACKSON POLLOCK
The She-Wolf (1943)
Oil, gouache, and plaster on canvas, 41⅞ × 67 in.
Collection: The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Purchase

Plate 11 PETER PAUL RUBENS
The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (c. 1618)
Oil on canvas, 17 ft. 6½ in. × 12 ft. 11½ in.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Plate 12 PETER PAUL RUBENS
The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier (c. 1618)
Oil on canvas, 17 ft. 6 in. × 12 ft. 11 in.
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

for pictorial coherence that was at such peril in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. In Pollock it is not the coherence that is at stake, but rather the depth of the available space and the expansiveness of delimiting boundaries. A fear is aroused that shallowness and constriction will be our perpetual companions. Today, running around and dripping paint on bare canvas does not carry with it a sense of aesthetic excitement, does not create enough of a pictorial sensation or illusion. More important, it does not create enough working space. We want paint to build a pictorial space that accommodates the reach of all our gestures, imaginative as well as physical. This is what Rubens' paint does with the bodies in the *Last Judgment*, where pictorial construction simply overwhelms pictorial drama.

Of course we do not have access to the kind of figurative illusionism that Rubens had at his disposal. On the other hand, we do not have its limitations either. We should be able to expand Pollock's pictorial space and to follow the lead of his paint skeins. Painting desperately needs the literalness, immediacy, freedom, and clarity of the drip paintings. They represent the kind of bright, confident explosion of painting that Rubens so often ignited.

Great painters are great because they give momentum to culture. They are also great because their work has a seemingly endless potential for growth; even after they are gone, we sense that their work is expanding and that new things are to come. Sometimes great painters slide into each other, creating new forces and new possibilities; and even though we appreciate the newness we are, in fact, more impressed that the echoes and resonances of these creations still embody both the past and the present. The reason we can imagine Rubens pushing Pollock is that the *Laocoön* ripples through both of them.

There is a good reason for linking Rubens to Pollock, for linking the power and sense of pictorial potential developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century with similar aspirations confronting twentieth-century abstraction. Rubens always suggests expansion. Indeed, he suggests a paradox that abstraction sorely needs to comprehend—uncontained wholeness, wholeness that is not neatly bounded or trimmed. Looking at Rubens, we see Pollock's painting as tight. This realization underscores the problems facing what is now called formalist abstraction. An exaggerated idea of Pollock's freedom, his working method, has been overwhelmingly influential and very thoroughly absorbed, but somehow the aesthetic stature of the actual paintings keeps being questioned. Succeeding painters confront Pollock with restless, competitive anxiety. They want to use the potential they sense is there, but they do not want to be controlled by the niceties of Impressionism and Cubism that formed Pollock. The splayed-out, lava-like quality of painting today indicates a desire to move with the freedom and abstractness of Pollock without succumbing to a result that can be reduced to a whole defined by a coherent, continuous surface. It is as though painting today believes that primitivism is the only safe way to guarantee pictorial drama. Pollock's refinement and his harnessing of energies seem to be an understatement, posing an unnecessary limit to the pictorial potential that he discovered and developed.

It is amazing that Pollock's accomplishment, so universally felt, has provoked so much confusion and produced such unsure results. Still, we know that we need to use Pollock. We see the potential: in the speed of the moving line, in the encapsulation and entanglement of shallow space, and in the sheer beauty of the painting's literalness, what amounts to the embodiment of its abstraction. Interestingly enough, the potential we feel in Pollock is much like the potential we would ascribe to Italian Mannerist painting in the late sixteenth century—the painting whose potential Rubens realized so beautifully.

There is another way in which painters today seem to engage Pollock that arrests our attention. We have already noted their confident attachment to primitivism, and—if we are not overcome by the aggressive posturing of youth—we can see some legitimate sources for their appraisal in Pollock himself. The drip paintings may present them with problems, but they apparently find the early and later work quite accessible. A generous view of what is going on in painting today could find a lot of feeling for Pollock's early work, for example, *The She-Wolf* (plate 10), as well as an interest in Pollock's later work such as *Frogman* (see fig. 27), whose stained black figuration remains challenging to this moment.

That these paintings have a core of irrepressible human figuration does not bode well for abstraction, but at least the younger American painters seem to recognize the value of tension and conflict in both Pollock's early and late work. Unlike their European contemporaries, they do not seem to see this work simply as a sanction for yet another return to representational figuration, sensing instead something that leads back into the heart of painting. Perhaps what set off Pollock's imagination will come through again in painting, and it is certainly possible that some of what comes through will help to reassert and rebuild abstraction.

These thoughts about Pollock come from thoughts about Rubens. Our immediate impulse is to reverse the flow to see what Pollock can tell us about Rubens, but it becomes too difficult. Rubens is such a complete and overpowering artist that it is impossible to approach him casually without risking confusion, even bewilderment. When we think about his work we have to consider organization; we have to think of broad periods of equal substance—early, middle, and late. With Pollock the sequence is uneven; the question of potential is focused on the drip paintings (fig. 18). Rubens, however, does not force such selectivity. Everywhere we look, we see potential for painting. The early, middle, and late paintings all burst with potential energy—to be sure pictorial energy, not physical energy. Still our imagination is tempted to confound the two. For example, if we put a Poussin and a Rubens on the middle of an inclined plane, we know the Poussin will come shooting down like a slug of lead. With Rubens, however, there are more graceful options (fig. 19): we recognize that he has the weight to slide down the plane, as well as the strength to regain the top. If need be, he could even drag Poussin back up the ramp. Rubens is weighty, but he is never inert. He is always capable of generating energy more than equal to his mass, always capable of moving himself and others.

There is something special about artists who have complete, sustained careers. The work from each stage of their development contributes to succeeding art; it is not confined simply to contributing to its own development. It is clear that any stage of Rubens' work will yield energy that is usable today. But our closeness to Pollock makes us less sure that this is true of his work. We know that American regionalism, Picasso, and Surrealism all had an influence on Pollock's early work, but the drip paintings produced after the Second World War somehow obliterated these mixed sources. Now since these sources, including the early work, are in a sense no longer there, the effect of the drip paintings is to call into question—albeit somewhat after the fact—the efficacy or value of trying to use these consumed sources, or even of trying to gain access to them directly from the early work itself. What I am suggesting is that we were left stranded when Pollock's success killed off his pictorial sources, that the drip paintings consumed American regionalism, Picasso, Surrealism, and Pollock's own early paintings in an effort to ensure abstraction's dominance over the realism of the day, and perhaps of the past. In effect, the mirror of our progress reveals the picture of American abstraction destroying its roots.

We see a strong contrast when we compare the potential of Pollock's early work with that of Rubens' early work. Pollock's early work seems to have come into being only to be consumed by later, more necessary work. This is very differ-

Figure 18 JACKSON POLLOCK
Number 3, 1949: Tiger (1949)
Oil, enamel, metallic enamel, string, and cigarette fragment on canvas mounted on fiberboard, 62⅛ × 37¼ in.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Figure 19 PETER PAUL RUBENS
Three Graces (1638–40)
Oil on panel, 7 ft. 3 in. × 5 ft. 11 in.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

ent from the case of Rubens, where the early work successfully perpetuated itself and its sources (for example, Tintoretto and Caravaggio) so magnificently. This conforms to the way we believe art should behave. Of course, the story of the demise of Pollock's sources is an exaggeration, but one that reflects a widely shared fear—a fear that abstraction will uncouple us from the glories of the past, a fear that modernism's adventuresome self-involvement will turn out to be just that, leaving the past untouched and ungraspable.

The question becomes even more difficult in Pollock's later work, in the figurative black-stain paintings. If this work is informed and driven by the drip paintings, as seems obvious, is there something here that we are missing? Is it possible that the only useful thing about these paintings is the mechanical device employed by Pollock, the staining technique picked up by Frankenthaler and Louis? The results produced by this development have been correctly praised, but perhaps not properly appraised. Not much thought has gone into consideration of the obvious fact that Pollock stained with black, not color. If we remember Picasso in *Guernica*, and acknowledge Motherwell's intuition about the pictorial power of black, we might guess that Pollock had a sense of powerful pictorial drama in mind in his loosely associative, instinctive Rorschach figuration driven by black staining—a kind of essentially abstract, blackly veiled Goya paying homage to the sources that were consumed by the drip paintings. But it is certain that the one thing he did not have in mind was the colored abstraction of the 1960s; not that this wasn't a brilliant and inventive leap, but we should not forget that there is still a lot left behind in the late Pollocks and that the best may still be to come—especially since the first discontinuous leap has come to such a pale, freakish end. But even here there is cause for hope. We have only to look at what Rubens did with Franz Floris.

Rubens certainly was in touch with the Mannerist sensibility of Italian painting before he came to Italy, and this familiarity may have helped him to absorb it and to build on it as well as he did. He brought a sense of motion to what he saw that has propelled painting ever since. The sense of painting that we have today is formed by the space that Caravaggio created being set in motion by the force that Rubens supplied. It is important to see Caravaggio and Rubens in this way because it tells us how we think about painting, especially how we think about why things seem right in painting and about why we think certain paintings are great.

To put it simply, our notion of what aesthetically proper visual organization of painting should look like is based on the notion of a perspectival box, a container for measurable space. This container is basically a free-floating cube, although our senses will tolerate a sphere. Painting has to be organized in such a way that it remains poised within the limits of these notions; otherwise we tend not to like it. This explains why Giotto and Botticelli do not satisfy us. The justification for the aesthetic harmony that we experience in the face of Giotto's flatness and Botticelli's stiffness is unconvincing, and it will always remain that way. Although we acknowledge that these two painters have made great art, we will never see their deployment of pictorial space as resolved. They will always belong to a tolerant notion of art that accommodates the activity of painting before it became the activity we know today—the activity of making coherent pictorial objects, pictures that do not conflict with our present notion of visual focus and organization.

We like Caravaggio because he took the action in the box and brought it up and out, lighting it in such a way that we experience it as immediate pictorial action kept easily in focus. We like Rubens because he enlarged Caravaggio's vision. He put Caravaggio's presence into motion in an expanded space, a space, however, whose ambitions we ignore

in favor of its generalities because they politely conform to the space we like—the balanced, measurable, seemingly undistorted space born with Alberti.

I call attention to this simple notion to help explain why abstraction does not have real access to as much of the history of art as would seem likely. Painting that could be very useful as a source—for example, painting at Lascaux, painting in Egyptian tombs, ancient and Byzantine mosaics, medieval manuscript illumination, Islamic tile decoration, to say nothing of ethnic and Oriental art—all this work is incompatible with our understanding of coherent pictorial structure. Abstraction in the twentieth century never really makes use of what it has seen because it has instinctively withdrawn into a post-Renaissance shell—a soft, neat version of what Rubens and Caravaggio had made into a dynamic spatial caldron for pictorial figuration.

What this means is that abstraction cannot accept anything that has a sense of the unbalanced. Everything that we see as pictorial must be correctly weighted; all the action within the depicted space must be evenly distributed. The reason for this seems to be that we cannot imagine any contained spatial whole that is not balanced. Deformed space is a concept alien to our bodies; we demand balance and even distribution. It is as though we cannot bear that the boat should tip or that the ball should fly untrue. Disorganized space encourages our overwhelming fear of eccentric motion.

It is interesting that the first artists to use perspective did not seem to feel the imperative of measured spatial coherence. In Italy and elsewhere they went on painting the way they always had, with the usual slapdash adaptations to new devices and ideas; and by the end of the sixteenth century the die was cast. Mechanical perspective was pretty much spent, along with a lot of dramatic variations supplied by the great Mannerist painting of Tintoretto and Michelangelo. It merged with atmospheric perspective and the light of developing chiaroscuro to create a new flexible box of averaged pictorial space. This notion of space that had developed by 1600 is one that we like and will not let go of. This is the notion that, to be right, the space in painting should be weighted and balanced in such a way that its dispersal averages out for us in a coherent manner—that we can take the action we see in a painting and feel that its distribution makes sense. This notion implies that we can take what we see in a large altarpiece such as Rubens' *Assumption of the Virgin* and put it in a hand-held glass ball, where reduced it is manageable and seeable in one glance.

Almost everyone who looks at pictures is quick to note how little the appearance of things in paintings has to do with the way we actually see things. However, if anyone were to attempt to make things look in painting the way they look when we record our perceptions, the result would be labeled perceptual psychology, not art. For some good reasons, then, our idea of art has come to be framed by the conventions of the early seventeenth century, which have left us a boxy, coherent whole whose interior transitions and displacements are beautifully averaged out. It is in its ability to smooth the transitions between separate pictorial areas and actions, culminating in its mastery of the landscape, that seventeenth-century painting clearly demonstrated its control over the energies that the sixteenth century had sent shooting through the alleys of perspective.

But our admiration for this knack of spatial averaging which smoothed over the rough spots of Renaissance painting might be mistaken. We have formed a large part of our basic notion of modern painting around the least of the accomplishments of the seventeenth century. But its greatness has to be more than its ordinariness. In the end, it comes down to this: abstraction has left behind the tradition of figurative painting that began with the Renaissance, and instead has taken with it the worst illustrational bias that Western figurative art had developed: its notion of averaging effects, of

smoothing over spatial transitions. This has had disastrous effects because it forced abstraction to start out cautiously. Abstraction has come to be in need of extraordinary effects rather than average effects—in need of bold displacements rather than smooth transitions. In spite of all that has been said about the "radical" visual orientation of the early twentieth century, its aesthetic instincts seem essentially conservative, and we appear content now to accept this, to look for manageable and stable space that we can hold in our hands. Recently the only new ideas introduced into that space have lost themselves in a fluff of atomized color that blends harmlessly into its own background, erasing whatever incidental figuration may have been emerging.

Let me put this another way. No one wants abstraction to turn itself around to accommodate the innate taste for illusionism; but abstraction has to recognize that the coziness it has created with its sense of reduced, shallow illusionism is not going anywhere. Caravaggio and Rubens made manageable pictorial sense out of the dynamic illustrative diversity of sixteenth-century painting, building a strong base for future painting. What we need today is a similar base for the future of our own painting. The question is, where will we find the building blocks for this base? In one sense it seems obvious that they should come out of the diversity of twentieth-century painting. Unfortunately this diversity seems to be riddled with weaknesses; we are likely to be working with blocks of styrofoam rather than marble.

There was a substance to the problematic illusionism of Correggio, Giulio Romano, Tintoretto, and the Carracci, to name a few examples. We believe that there is substance to the equally problematic illusionism of Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. But the fact is that the abstract painting of the last twenty years has not been able to pull things together in the way that Caravaggio and Rubens did at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Somehow painting today, especially abstract painting, cannot bring itself to declare what Caravaggio and Rubens demonstrated again and again—that picture building is everything.

Abstraction seems to be lost in a dream in which the materiality of pigment reveals painting. It puts too much hope in the efficacy of clever, random gestures. What is needed is a serious effort at structural inventiveness. What Morris Louis did for a while twenty years ago, following the lead of Barnett Newman, remains more of a promise than a fulfillment. But if his promise were read rightly—if the structural potential of his spatial dynamics were understood and the disjunctive intensity of his color appreciated—his painting could lead to a new beginning. As it stands, those who are most taken with his work do the least with it.

Morris Louis (fig. 20) was nearly the last abstract painter to hint at the potential that abstraction might have for creating a full and expansive pictorial space like that of Rubens. If we stop for a moment and think of Rubens at his most successful, we begin to recognize the development of a definition and delimitation of painterly ambition that sets an important example for the future of abstract painting. We need ambition to drive abstraction out of its miasma of self-satisfied materialism; and if by chance abstraction's current obsession with the tactility of pigment should turn out to be a step in the right direction, Rubens would be a natural: the perfect teacher to show us how to keep painting moving, how to keep it from lying inert on the surface of the past.

In Vienna two magnificent paintings by Rubens, *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (plate 11) and *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier* (plate 12), show us an artist working at the height of his powers. These paintings are often overlooked because they do not have an immediate appeal to our contemporary sensibility. Work from both earlier and later periods is clearly more popular; we assume that the religious emotion elicited by *The Descent from the Cross* and the sensual interest aroused by *The Three Graces* are somehow more

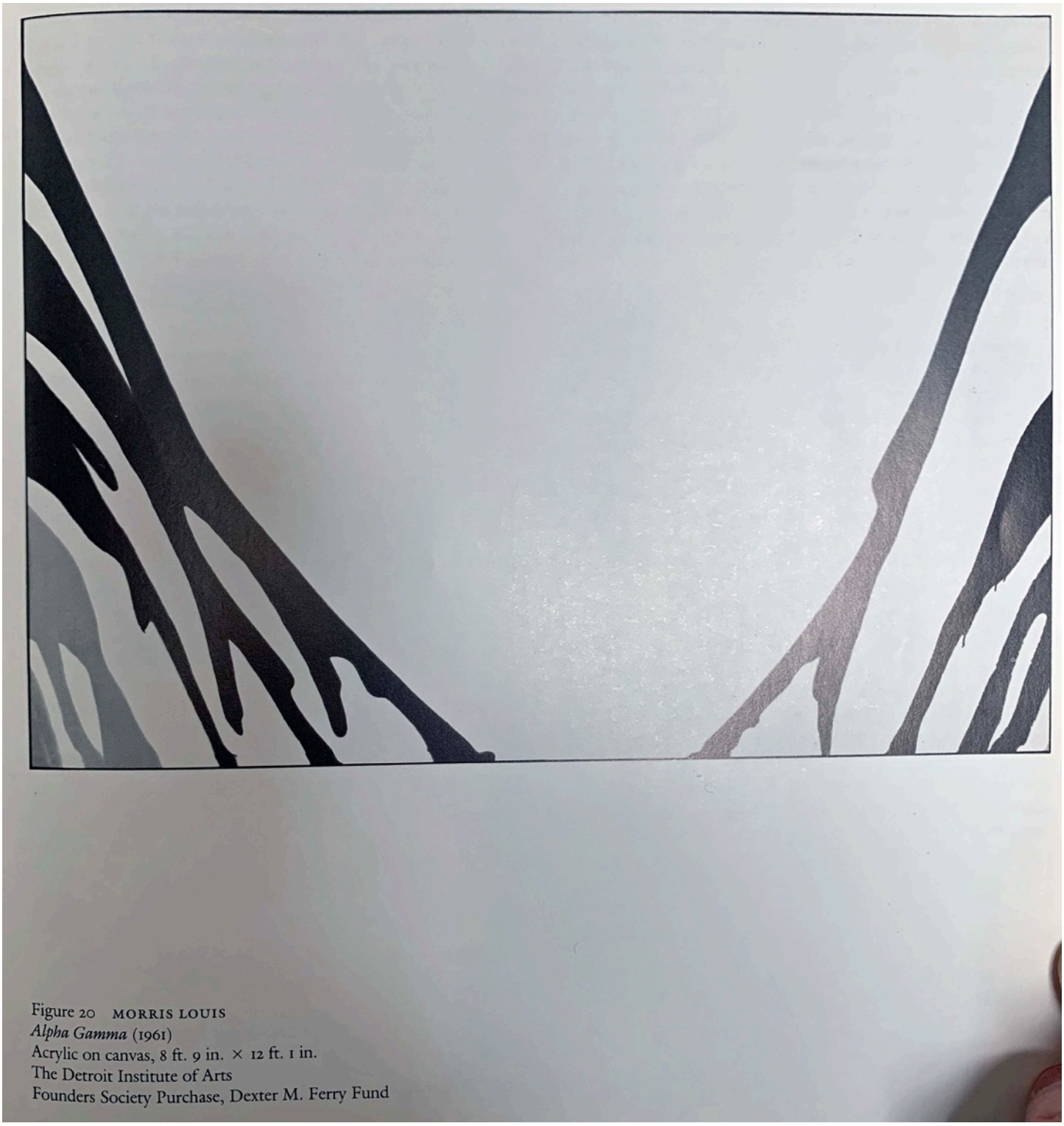

Figure 20 MORRIS LOUIS
Alpha Gamma (1961)
Acrylic on canvas, 8 ft. 9 in. × 12 ft. 1 in.
The Detroit Institute of Arts
Founders Society Purchase, Dexter M. Ferry Fund

acceptable than the overt propagandistic bias of *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius* and *Saint Francis Xavier*. But we would be making a big mistake to dismiss these paintings too quickly simply because we believe that artists are at their best going against the grain of society. The truth is that in these paintings of St. Ignatius and St. Francis, Rubens was doing what society most wanted him to do. He believed what society believed, and he had the ability to put before it a stunning vision of its own beliefs and hopes. As in all great painting, a miracle was recreated. We have only to go to Vienna to see this particular miracle preserved.

Belief served Rubens well, and it seems natural to suppose that his religious convictions were a source of his tremendous confidence. But we cannot help wondering if there was something more than the sure support of God that drove Rubens' confident and ambitious attack on painting. It is possible that he noticed how closely the necessities of religious belief matched those of artistic vision. For the man in search of belief, the biggest problem lies in accounting for the world that he senses must surround the world that he sees. Rubens knew that for the artist, the same accountability held true. In order to be convincing, painting had to account not just for the real world but for the other worlds—heaven and hell.

In another less obvious sense, perhaps, Rubens knew that painting in trying to create its own contained pictorial reality had to account for the uncontained, nonpictorial reality that surrounded it. To put it another way, Rubens knew that the success of painting depended on its ability to reach out, to create pictorial space which would in turn appear to be expanding into the real space surrounding it. Rubens recognized that Caravaggio's declaration of a truly independent space for painting was a sticky proposition. Ever the statesman, he saw the need for an independent pictorial space to establish its ties with the everyday space of perceived reality.

What is remarkable about Rubens' perception is that he was able to act on it without recourse to dominating illusion. His work always declares itself as painting. The loose brushwork and slippery line drawing that actually make up the figures in his paintings are never overcome by the sense of real presence embodied in them, as is the case with Caravaggio. It is one thing to be successfully "real" as Caravaggio was and to be able to extend that sense of realness into an enlarged sense of pictorial space, one that seems to break the boundaries of the picture surface; it is quite another thing to be as unabashedly artificial as Rubens was and still to be able to extend that sense of driven painterly activity into a similarly enlarged, engaging pictorial space. Obviously, abstraction today is taken with the example of Rubens because his naked painterliness seems more accessible than Caravaggio's rabid realism. Somehow we are more confident about what we can do with raw pigment than we are about what we can do with raw illusion; a preference is registered for tactile over depicted reality. Even realist painting is a witness to this bias today.

Since this discussion about the pictorial intensity of Rubens and Caravaggio and the value of this intensity for twentieth-century abstraction has been an argumentative one, we might do well to look at Rubens' two great paintings, *The Miracles of Saint Francis Xavier* and *The Miracles of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, and let them speak for themselves. If we feel that the mere presence of these paintings is not enough, we can fall back on the techniques of art history and summon support for the paintings from earlier sources. In the case of these two paintings from Vienna, it would be natural to look to the two major sources—northern and southern, Flemish and Italian—of Rubens' inspiration.

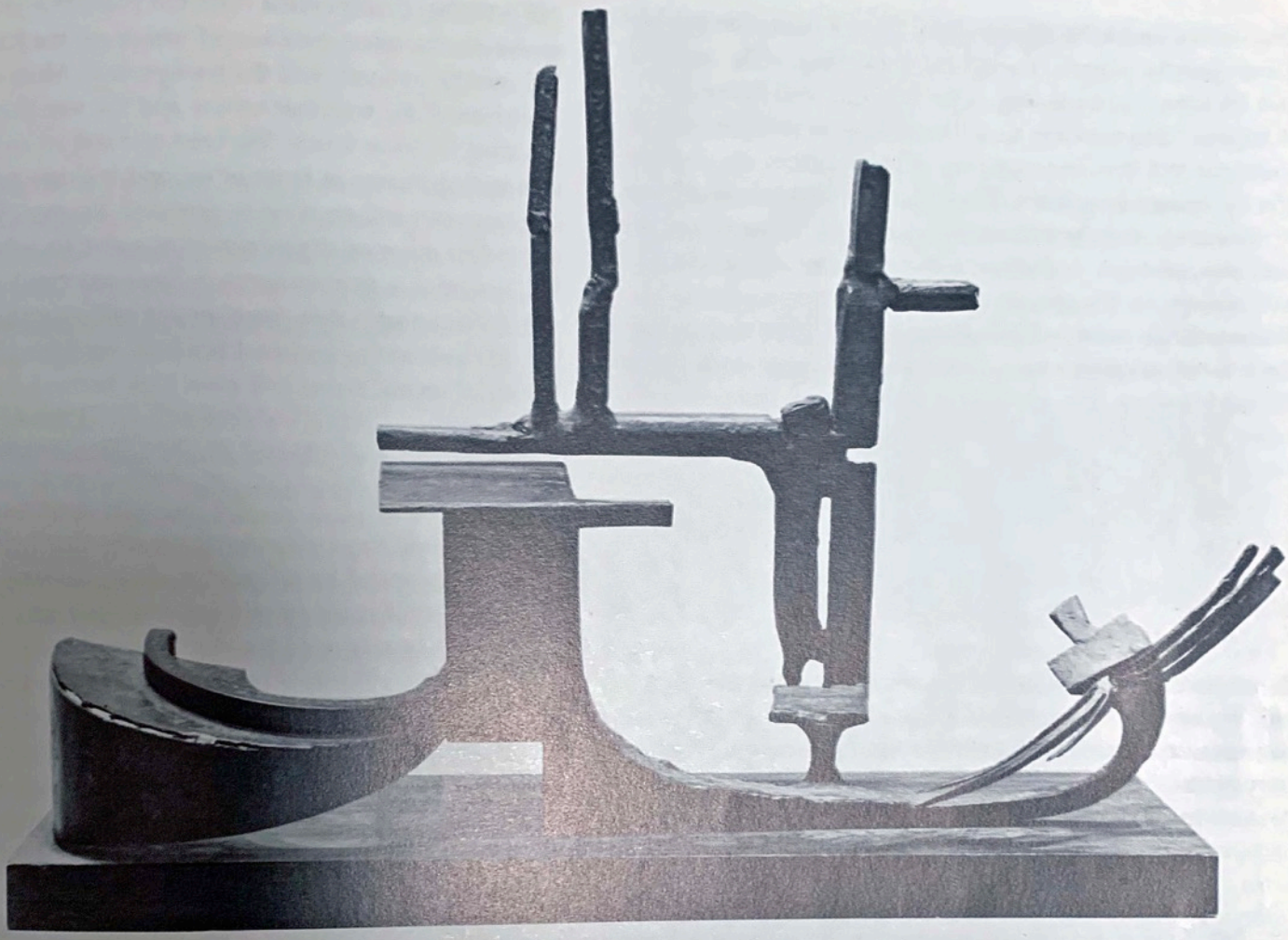

Figure 21 JULIO GONZALEZ
Reclining Figure (c. 1936)
Iron; height 9¾ in.
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

The architectonic backgrounds in *Saint Francis Xavier* and *Saint Ignatius* suggest the northern painting of Rogier van der Weyden, Jan Gossaert, called Mabuse, and Albrecht Altdorfer, although the actual models seem to come out of Genoese and Venetian painting. Rubens put to use some of the lightness and solidity of northern painting in an attempt to round out the theatrically flat quality of Venetian painting and also, perhaps, to diffuse and restage the harsh lighting of Caravaggio. The paintings in Vienna seem to present Rubens at his most independent, and it may be that going back to his northern roots makes him seem especially free of Italian painting. The mixture of hotness and coldness in the color of these paintings draws an easy applause from the north and the south. But more than this, the sense of hotness and coldness carries over into the whole tenor of the painting. The religious emotion swings back and forth from detachment to engagement, echoing the sensibilities of Rogier van der Weyden from the north and Caravaggio and the Carracci in the south.

North and south, hot and cold seem obvious to the point of begging comment, but in Rubens their entanglement amounts to something worth noting. The sense of temperature given to this colored pigment and the swirling articulation of space that envelops it are remarkable, creating a bouyancy that belies the weight of the paintings' organization and depicted structure. In these paintings a modest amount of flesh is capable of moving a massive amount of marble. This sense of corrected imbalance, the feeling that the perched figure is as heavy as the pedestal it stands on—or the other way around, that the pedestal is as light as the figure it supports—gives Rubens a powerful picture-building technique. There is a sense here of sculpture's strength wrapped in a gauze of pigment. It is as if a thorough cleaning of these paintings would bare a Gonzalez-like skeleton (fig. 21), showing us how Rubens made painting leap from platform to platform.

All painting is suspended from the platforms of its various grounds, the most common of which are the foreground, the middle ground, and the background. Most of us tend to understand the way that we see and the way that we look at painting in these terms. We tend to think of seeing in terms of locating things in front of us, and it seems natural to organize our information in terms of distance. When we apply this sense of organization to painting, what we often fail to notice is that we severely limit painting's sense of space. We assume that since we are willing to look off into the distance to the pictured horizon, we have given painting plenty of room. Some will even look beyond the horizon to sight infinity as vision's abstract target. The crucial point, however, is that we almost always limit our view of painting to the distance in one direction.

The one thing more than anything else that both *Saint Francis Xavier* and *Saint Ignatius* do in Rubens' painting is to remind us that we should see ourselves on a pedestal if we want to be true viewers of painting, because elevated on a pedestal we will surely be reminded of the space all around us—the space behind us, next to us, below us, and above us—in addition, of course, to the space in front of us, which we have so often taken as being the only space available to us as viewers. No one makes it clearer than Rubens how dearly painting wants to use all of the space that is available to the human imagination.