

*Seen from Behind: Perspectives on the Male Body and Renaissance Art.* Patricia Lee Rubin.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 288 pp. \$60.

This book is a revelation. In six interlinked essays, Patricia Rubin brings into focus the “strangely overlooked” (7) motif of the male backside in Renaissance art. Enticing imagery of behinds, especially in sixteenth-century Italy, is used as a springboard to a series of reflections on masculinity and desire, including male homoeroticism. But the author also demonstrates the posterior’s potential to open up broader issues of representation. Key themes include reverse perspectives that challenge the dominance of frontal (and implicitly phallic-oriented) views of the male body. Rubin also persuasively opens up the phenomenon of what she terms “behindsight” in the history of European art.

The opening chapter surveys the male rump’s visual repertoire, establishing its semantic range. Men’s butts could be abject, as in satirical images of kissing ass, or derisive, as in the practice of mooning. But in Renaissance Italy views of male buttocks also became progressively idealized. Luca Signorelli exploited the bottom’s potential to signify both abjectly and aesthetically, notably in his murals depicting devils, damned and saved, in Orvieto Cathedral. Michelangelo played a key role in the “canonization” (43) of the rear in subsequent decades, effectively transforming the motif into high art.

The next two essays put issues of homoeroticism center stage. Riffing on the theme of an illuminating essay by medievalist Michael Camille (“The Pose of the Queer,” in *Queering the Middle Ages*, ed. Glenn Burger and Steve Kruger [2001]), Rubin analyzes, in her second chapter, the arm-akimbo motif: an upturned wrist placed, elbow bent, on a cocked hip. Famously, this is the pose

adopted by Donatello's *David*, a sculpture that, since the 1950s, has been the focal point for a vigorous debate on the artist's sexuality and the homoerotic valence (or not) of his art. Rubin deftly intervenes in this debate by foregrounding what she calls the artwork's "latency" (70), which explains its capacity, in certain times and places, to reverberate queerly. This allows her to sidestep arguments that Donatello deliberately intended to provoke illicit desires. The third chapter, shorter than its predecessor, develops the theme of desire for beautiful male bodies, this time in connection with paintings such as Parmigiano's *Cupid Carving His Bow*. Such works, while overtly amorous, teasingly leave the sexual inclinations of their beholders open to interpretation.

Next, Rubin turns to depictions of burly male nudes, legs splayed in a stalwart V-shaped stance, signaling virility and strength. Rooted in antiquity, the herculean ideal represented by this split-leg attitude reappears in Renaissance figure studies by the likes of Leonardo. But when viewers are only afforded a rear view of the subject's body, the interpretation of such imagery again "calls into play the subjectivity of the beholder" (143). Here, as throughout the book, Rubin is sensitive to the significance of the motif in question for earlier and later histories: the chapter's point of departure is Gustave Caillebotte's 1884 painting of a male nude drying after a bath.

The penultimate chapter focuses on the revival of freestanding statuary in Renaissance Italy, the competition between painters and sculptors to represent bodies from multiple viewpoints, and tensions between frontal perspectives (which art historians have tended, since the nineteenth century, to prioritize) and sideways or backside views (which Renaissance artists, making drawings after ancient statues, were encouraged to adopt as part of their training). The book culminates, in chapter 6, in a fascinating meditation on the spectral presence of backward perspectives on male nudity in European

art. Rubin's main focus here is the afterlives of Michelangelo's bottoms, especially as featured in his influential *Battle of Cascina* cartoon, which paves the way for an engaging argument about the back-and-forth temporalities of art's history.

This last essay is not conceived as a conclusion as such: fittingly, Rubin's analysis remains, like its subject, "open-ended" (8). This emphasis on interpretive openness is, indeed, one of the book's real strengths. I did spot a minor error in the bibliography: my own name has been transposed from Robert to Roger in a reference. But the book is exceptionally well documented, on the whole, and the prose is a genuine delight. Rubin has written a truly pioneering book, and I only hope that more studies of the male behind in art follow in its wake.

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