

Cellini
and the Principles of
Sculpture

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Introduction

Sculpture, writes the painter, is an art of noise, dirt, and sweat. In contrast to painting, the picture of the mind, sculpture is the product of the body; it is the active pathway into the visual arts, the alternative to the contemplative life. Sculpture is, as it was with the ancients, an art of the hand, a *techne*, and as such, it is the very antithesis to painterly pastimes like poetry or music.

This argument, vividly articulated by Leonardo da Vinci in the Codex Urbinas, may well seem to encapsulate early modern painting's image of itself.¹ Thus, Rubens, coloring the canvas to recitations of Tacitus, reincarnates Leonardo's painter, "who sits at his easel at great ease, well-dressed, and wielding the lightest brush," "accompanied by music or readers of varied and beautiful works."² Portraits of painters, meanwhile, make similar points; the activities of Sofonisba Anguissola, Paolo Veronese (Fig. 1), and Paul Bril are sublimated into music; images of Raphael and Titian go so far as to suppress reference to manual practice altogether. As for the difference of painting from sculpture this entails, Antonfrancesco Doni, for one, suggested that personifications of Painting and Sculpture should be clothed differently, because the work of painting is "most pleasant," while that of sculpture is "bitter, hard, [and] exhausting."³ The painter Federico Zuccaro, in a lecture on "The Definition of Sculpture," began his characterization of the medium with a reference to sculptors' distinctive "trauaglio e sudore."⁴

By the end of the sixteenth century, such a view of the sister arts and their difference was a cliché. And for this very reason, apologies for *sculpture* become especially captivating. Sculptors, to be sure, were no less insistent than painters that their craft involved its specific intelligence. Yet faced with the question of whether their art was more *operative* than painting, defenders of sculpture, it turns out, might well agree that it was. Michelangelo portrayed himself not in the fine clothes of the gentleman, but in a protective turban (Fig. 2) – a reference to the very marble dust that Leonardo derided.⁵ Contemporaries of



1. Veronese, *Wedding at Cana* (detail). Paris, Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource).

Vincenzo Danti and Giambologna compared the sculptors to Hercules and to the Roman soldier Talassius. Bernini, among all the subjects of his early works, chose to place his face on the one that was most dynamic, the *David* who winds every muscle in preparation to unleash a strike. Adriaen de Vries, finally, favored an image of Vulcan, swinging his hammer amidst the heat and the soot of a foundry.⁶ Sculptors and their viewers knew condemnations such as Leonardo's, yet they did not reject the allegation that their craft was one of works. Rather, they began to ask what sculpture's very exercises might amount to.

That move is the subject of the present book. Its argument concerns the ways in which artists and their observers gave meaning to things people did when they made sculpture. At its center is a figure whose theory and practice supremely exemplified the expanse, and significance, of the Renaissance



2. Michelangelo, *Self-Portrait*. Paris, Louvre (photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource).

sculptor's field: the artist and writer Benvenuto Cellini. An heir to Michelangelo in a culture grappling with the question of what good works were, Cellini demonstrated an unparalleled concern with the functions that constituted the sculptural vocation. His works orient an understanding of the sculptural act.



Cellini claimed that his profession consisted of a definable array of *esercizi*, or *lavori*.⁷ The story he eventually told of his life was a tale of how he, uniquely, managed them all.

Born in Florence in 1500, Cellini was the son of an engineer. Fascinated with the mirrors and other ingenious objects he saw his father invent, and

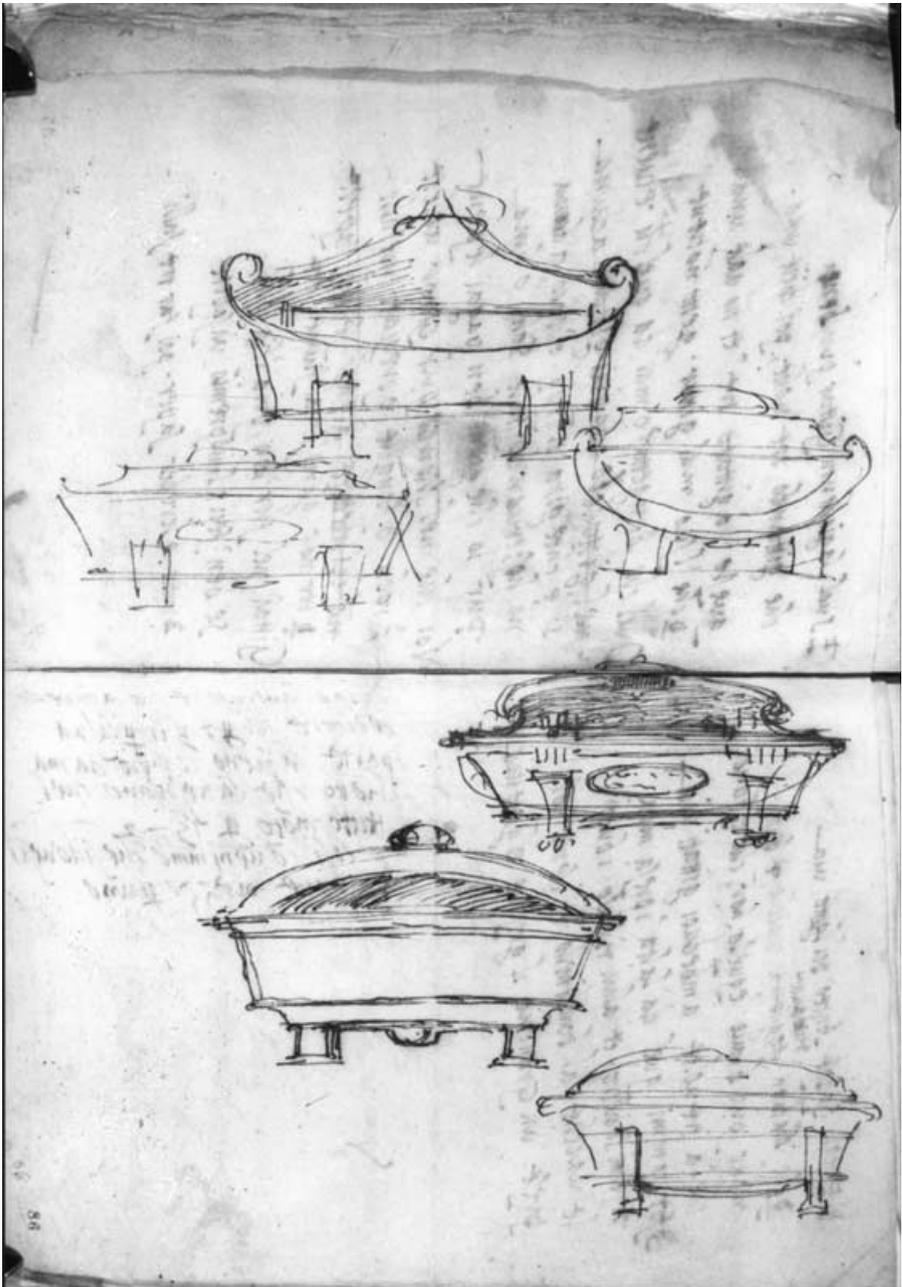
probably watching both Leonardo and Michelangelo at work, he decided at an early age to become an artist.⁸ In his teens and twenties, Cellini traveled between Florence, Siena, Bologna, Pisa, and Rome, passing through a number of goldsmiths' and painters' shops, making cameos, vases, rings, candlesticks, and other *minuterie* (all now lost or unidentifiable), seldom spending more than a few months with any one master.⁹ In 1528, he was in Mantua, working for Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, and in the late 1520s, he finally landed in Rome, where he became a die-cutter for the Pontifical mint.¹⁰ In 1535, this post lost, his reputation compromised by his murder of a rival goldsmith, and fearing the intrigues happening around the newly elected Pope Paul III, Cellini fled the city for Florence, where he designed a series of coins for Florence's first, short-lived Medici Duke, Alessandro I. After another brief stay in Rome, Cellini traveled to Padua, where he designed a portrait medal for Cardinal Pietro Bembo,¹¹ then on through Switzerland to France, where he made a medal for King Francis I.

The loss of Cellini's precious metalworks creates the rather skewed impression that Cellini was, in the 1530s, primarily a coin-maker. Both extant works and textual records, however, document the phase of his career that began when the artist, having returned to Rome, entered the circle of Ippolito D'Este, the new Cardinal of Ferrara. The cardinal encouraged Cellini to think about works on a new scale, and, securing Cellini's freedom after he had been imprisoned for theft, arranged the artist's most consequential move: a transfer to the court of the French king at Fontainebleau.¹² Cellini was invited to France to make a series of twelve silver candleholders, scaled to the size of the king and formed in the image of Roman deities, for Francis's dining room. Of these, however, only a few seem to have progressed to the design stage, and only one, no longer extant, was carried out. Rather than seeing to his assignment, Cellini used the opportunity of his new court position to test the bounds of his previous artistic profile. While he continued making metalworks, these would now include such fantasies as the great Vienna *Saltcellar*. The tiny building the *Saltcellar* featured (Fig. 3) reflected Cellini's still bigger visions – to redesign Fontainebleau's Porte Dorée, outfitting it with monumental bronze ornaments, and to construct for the chateau a titanic fountain. When Cellini returned to Florence in 1545, now to work for Alessandro's successor, Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, it was similarly grand projects that he would pursue. Assigned to undertake a large bronze *Perseus*, he expanded his design beyond what had been stipulated in the original commission, incorporating marble as well as metal, *histoire* in relief as well as sculpture in the round, and seven independent figures in place of the original one. At the same time, Cellini exploited the time and resources that came with his salaried position to work on a number of independent projects, including a series of free-standing works of stone.



3. Benvenuto Cellini, *Saltcellar* (detail: *Tempietto*). Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Beginning in 1554, the year in which the *Perseus* was unveiled, Cellini's efforts began to be shadowed by compromises and disappointments. He spent the better part of a decade developing plans for his own tomb, negotiating a space allotment with the brothers at two churches, designing its basic components (Fig. 4), stipulating which artists, following his demise, should execute its ornaments, carving with his own hand its centerpiece, a marble *Crucifix*. By the late 1550s, however, Cellini had failed to secure a location for its display; eventually, he gave the *Crucifix*, a fragment of larger plans, to the Duke.¹³ Still more frustrated was Cellini's pursuit of the commission for the largest public project that came available in those years, the *Neptune* fountain Cosimo envisioned as the succession to the *Perseus* in the Piazza della Signoria. Having convinced the Duke to allow a competition for the assignment, Cellini spent months preparing first a small wax design, then, in the sealed-off bay behind the *Perseus*, a full-scale gesso mock-up of his idea, only to lose the commission to Bartolommeo Ammannati.¹⁴ Assigned to make a series of bronze reliefs for the pulpits of the Florence cathedral, his work on these was interrupted when Cellini was imprisoned, twice, for assault in 1556, and for sodomy in 1557.



4. Cellini, Drawings of Tombs, Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana.

Cellini returned to the reliefs with a revised scheme in the early 1560s, but completed none of them. When, in the spring of 1564, it was decided that the newly formed Florentine Accademia del Disegno should hold elaborate obsequies for the deceased Michelangelo, Cellini submitted a detailed proposal

for the appearance of the catafalque. It was rejected.¹⁵ When the city's artists collaborated on far more extravagant urban decorations for the wedding of Grand Duke Francesco I, Cellini did not participate.¹⁶ In his final years, the artist who had earlier boasted about his triumphal advancement from goldsmith to monumental sculptor opened a new goldsmith's shop. By the time of his death in 1571, designs for the objects this shop produced seem to have been his only artistic possibilities.¹⁷

It is no accident that it was in the late 1550s and in the 1560s that Cellini first turned seriously to writing about himself, filling books with comments on his earlier practice, verbally defending the honor that his works had done him. These texts, it is often said, betray Cellini's extraordinary vanity. What should not be overlooked, however, is that the texts also illustrate Cellini's exceptional keenness to the workings of his world. From his writings, it is evident that Cellini read broadly. He announces that he consumed the Bible, the *Divine Comedy*, and Giovanni Villani's *Chronicles*.¹⁸ His own poetry, some of which was published in his lifetime, testifies to his familiarity not only with Petrarch, but also with Laura Battiferri, Francesco Maria Molza, and other major Cinquecento writers.¹⁹ He certainly knew the work of Ariosto and Bembo, and probably that of Francesco Berni; he exchanged burlesque *proposte* and *risposte* with other poets of his city.²⁰ Both Benedetto Varchi and Antonfrancesco Grazzini praised his compositions; another contemporary noted his knowledge of Dante.²¹ The forms of his *Trattati* – also published, in edited form, in his lifetime – suggest his familiarity with “recipe books” and other works of applied science.²² His allusion to Narcissus in his famous 1547 letter to Varchi indicates that he knew Alberti's *Della Pittura*, probably in its recent vernacular publication; elsewhere, he announces his awareness of the writings of Sebastiano Serlio and Leonardo da Vinci.²³ While he may not have joined his younger brother in attending a proper Latin school, the fact that his father read medical literature and composed Latin epigrams, and that the artist's own friends addressed Latin poetry to him, suggests that he may even have had a basic proficiency with that language.²⁴ Nor was Cellini's knowledge merely bookish. His pages consistently bespeak his eagerness to converse with experts in other fields, learning about contemporary practices, and boasting about his own knowledge. He followed a Sicilian priest to learn about the art of necromancy, he went to a metallurgist to learn about mines, he associated with students of alchemy. Throughout his life, he followed the work of medical doctors. He fought with soldiers, he performed with musicians. He befriended intellectually more illustrious contemporaries, and was confident enough of his abilities to challenge an eminent poet like Luigi Alamanni when contriving conceits for artworks. Operating between the *bottega* and the court, tirelessly traveling between cities and countries, Cellini had access to the widest learning.

All of the evidence suggests that Cellini was prepared to engage the thinking of contemporaries in myriad fields with knowledge, decorum, and wit. When it is remembered that this person also authored a short work of architectural theory, two discourses on *disegno*, and an essay on pedagogy – and that he documented his undertakings not only in scores of poems and in a lengthy autobiography, but also in volumes of letters and *ricordi* – it is little wonder that Cellini later became a case study for nineteenth-century theorists of the *uomo universale*.²⁵ Goethe, admiring what he referred to as the *Allgemeinheit* of Cellini's talent, deputized the goldsmith to speak for the entire craftsman's rank.²⁶ Burckhardt, promoting Cellini as a man "who can do all and dares do all," promoted the artist as a paragon of individual expansiveness and perfection.²⁷ Opinions like these suggest that Cellini has been fundamental not only to the historiography of sixteenth-century art, but also to that of the Renaissance as such; it is significant, therefore, that they are opinions the artist himself cultivated.

Cellini's writings portray their creator as an actor of seemingly limitless versatility. What is striking, though – and what is missed in the arguments of the nineteenth-century historians – is how Cellini keys his performative flexibility to a sense of professional specificity. In his *Discourse on Architecture*, Cellini writes scornfully about a Ferrarese haberdasher who decided one day to make buildings rather than buttons. One could not but fail to make good designs, Cellini supposed, when one approached the task without training as a painter or sculptor.²⁸ In the preface to his *Treatise on Goldsmithery*, similarly, Cellini attacks what he describes as the artistic equivalents of suburban storekeepers, directionless workers who sell bread one day and pharmaceuticals the next, who try to do everything rather than learning the right practice of any single métier.²⁹ The haberdasher and the jack-of-all-trades, for Cellini, were foils to his own life's virtue; they indicated how his own achievements, far from proving infinite competency, began with the coherence of personal *Bildung* and vocational trajectory. Cellini discriminated a connectedness to his life; at points throughout the *Autobiography*, he notes the episodes that count as digressions from the central narration he wants to relate, that of his professional progress.³⁰ Conversely, when Cellini attributes to himself the incredible accomplishments he does, he delights in suggesting how these draw on, or reflect, his skills as an artist. Preparing for a duel, Cellini compares his swordsmanship to his "other art."³¹ Escaping from prison, he employs a ruse involving the modeling of fake door hinges in wax.³² Challenged to bring a beautiful date to a dinner party, he 'makes' one by disguising a young boy with golden ornaments.³³ Assisting at a surgical operation, Cellini applies his knowledge of cutting instruments to the invention of a scalpel.³⁴ Episodes like these argue that, if the artist was "universal," then his universe was anchored in his occupational identity and enabled by his art. "I resolved," Cellini writes at one point, "to devote all my

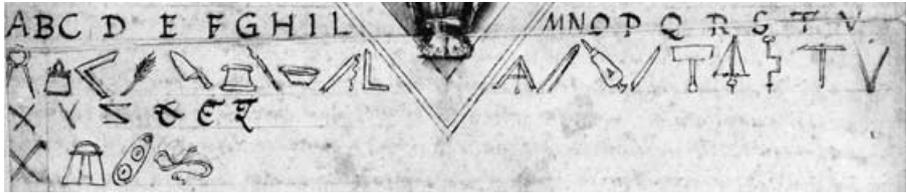
powers to working in all [my] professions equally.”³⁵ Scope, he suggests, is a virtue, but only when it is professional. Cellini’s universality depends, in large part, on the artist’s application of his wit to his most repetitive operations. Herein, the present book suggests, lies Cellini’s enduring historical value: His art and writings, which constitute the most informative late Renaissance source on sculptural technique in his day, also present acutely perceptive reflections on contemporary sculptural poetics.

This book thus posits an alternative to the views represented by the great modern study of what is now generally held to be the artist’s *oeuvre*, John Pope-Hennessy’s 1985 monograph *Cellini*. Above all, it resists Pope-Hennessy’s premise that Cellini’s writings were “true to tone as well as fact,” as well as his consequent remark that Cellini should be admired, above all, for having “had a tape recorder built into his personality.”³⁶ This resistance is not based so much on proofs of the extent to which Cellini wrote fictions about himself and others – although such proofs can be and have been given.³⁷ Rather, it rests on the sense that the transparent, factual histories to be found in Cellini’s writings are not always the aspects of those documents that best serve an account of Cellini as an artist. The present book is not primarily concerned with Cellini’s reliability as a witness or reporter; it is concerned, instead, with how Cellini understood his own exercises in relation to the things he saw going on around him, and with what that understanding, in turn, reveals about the sculptural profession in his time.



To understand Cellini’s art of sculpture, it is necessary to begin with Cellini’s representation of that art in his sculptural works. For while Cellini’s writings no doubt contribute immeasurably to his interest – the artist himself, in fact, claimed to merit attention because he, unlike his expert colleagues, did not fall into the “error of silence” – this ought not disguise the degree to which his silent art was already discursive.³⁸ Cellini referred to the competing proposals for his *Saltcellar* as “designs made with words,” effectively putting them on par with the designs he made with his hands.³⁹ The base of the *Perseus*, which, with its Hermathenic program, nods to the Florentine literary academy, also includes the figure of the “*Iddea della Natura*,” whom Cellini later promoted as the ideal protectress of the artists’ academy. In his poetry, Cellini refers to his *Perseus* as his “book.”⁴⁰ Later, he would invent an alphabet constituted entirely by tools (Fig. 5).⁴¹

Cellini’s objects themselves tell the first version of the story the artist later repeats in his *Vita* and *Trattati*; they are the primary evidence of the kinds of artistic choices he faced while moving through his successive fields of practice. These sculptures, while ostensibly wide-ranging in subject, share a consistent



5. Cellini, Design for the Seal of the Accademia del Disegno (detail). London, British Museum. © The British Museum.

aim: They seek to demonstrate the artistry inherent in the various acts they represent, and to relate that artistry to Cellini's own. As the chapters that follow will argue, Cellini turned to such subjects as the provision of salt, or the spilling of blood, or the "mastering" of a competitor, for their implications about his own sculptural labors. Cellini's imagery traced the changing conditions of his artistic office; by coordinating this imagery with his later writings, the book will suggest, it is possible to reconstruct the strategies with which Cellini fashioned his career. The studies that follow maintain that Cellini's art takes its real significance from its complementarity to the discussions of sculptural performance that constitute the major part of Cellini's later writing. Unlike Pope-Hennessy's book, which aimed to offer a comprehensive, biographically organized survey of Cellini's sculptural output, the present study will concentrate on a number of passages in Cellini's sculpture that are, like Cellini's writings, informatively self-referential. These passages, which highlight the different operations his sculpting involved, help to define key qualities of Cellini's and his contemporaries' artistic theory and practice.

The book consists of four semi-monographic chapters, each of which treats one field in which the artist worked. The first chapter, on Cellini's labors with precious metals, looks especially at the *Saltcellar* Cellini invented in Rome in early 1540 and reformulated in France in the years immediately following. It argues that that object's central idea, the union of earth and water responsible for the generation of salt, conceives composition in a manner that likens the intelligence of the goldsmith to that of the natural historian. As such, it suggests, the work speaks to the question of what the peculiar wisdom of one in Cellini's original profession might be. As a *summa* of Cellini's work as a goldsmith and as a crucial move toward more ambitious undertakings in metal, the *Saltcellar* illustrates some of the ideas that will emerge throughout the book as principles of Cellini's sculptural art.

Chapter 2, on bronze statuary, concerns the making of Cellini's colossal *Perseus* in Florence a few years later. The chapter proposes that the *Perseus*, while competing with the colossal works of stone already present in its intended setting, also depended upon the history of goldsmithery, both the personal history Cellini represented by virtue of his own training, and the broader local history

that had charged the goldsmith to attempt ambitious casts. These motivations converged in Cellini's modification of the *Perseus's* commissioned appearance to include a prominent representation of Medusa's blood. Both advertising the work's condition as *infused*, and evoking the mythical hardening of liquid into coral, the statue's blood emblemized the scene of casting in which the work originated. If the *Saltcellar* reminds the viewer how goldsmithery involved a basic expertise in metallic composition, the *Perseus* illustrates the reapplication of that expertise on a colossal scale.

The *Perseus*, no less than the *Saltcellar*, was a transitional work, establishing Cellini as the head of a workshop that turned out large works not only in bronze, but also in marble. While Cellini's skill in metal was never doubted, his expanded role presented particular challenges. The third chapter consequently looks at Cellini's first exercises as a marble sculptor, viewing these exercises against the cultural and political background that conditioned his new medium. It proposes that Cellini's first independent work in stone, the *Apollo and Hyacinth*, acknowledged his situation not only by raising the topic of artistic mastery, but also by challenging the grounds on which his anticipated rivals could diminish his achievement. The conception of marble sculpture entailed by the *Apollo* would inform all of Cellini's works in that medium. And the difficulties that work involved provide a kind of view in negative of the metal-worker's specialization.

Chapter 4, finally, considers Cellini's *disegno*. Stepping back from the series of professional maneuvers that constituted Cellini's career, the chapter highlights a broader issue raised throughout the artist's late sculptures and writings: that of how the practice of the sculptor accorded with broader ideals of good action. Like the previous three chapters, it suggests that Cellini aimed to produce not only particular kinds of images, but also particular kinds of works; far from being transparent depictions of their subjects, his artworks always define, through those subjects, a mode of constituent artistic labor. The final chapter begins with Cellini's assertion that design is the first principle of virtue, and proceeds to discuss the intersection, in Cellini's time, of sculptural and moral theory. The chapter considers the implications of this intersection for contemporary representations of heroism; looking in particular at the dialogue between Cellini, his predecessors, and his successors in the Florence's Piazza della Signoria, it examines some ways in which artists like Cellini could both establish and pursue particular forms of excellence.

Following Cellini, more or less chronologically, through his experiments with different materials, the chapters in this book double the self-portraits Cellini himself composed in his own professional histories. Throughout the book, nevertheless, it will remain important that Cellini's thoughts and actions were, in important ways, *not* personal. The possibility that Cellini's works carry the meanings that these pages attribute to them requires that others – other

artists, but also different kinds of experts – thought or could have thought similarly about the topics or issues that the working sculptor encountered. Cellini, the book implies, should no longer interest us as a misplaced Romantic hero; instead, he should interest us because his curiosity, his artisanal flexibility, and his vocational situation coordinately allowed him to filter, interweave, and re-articulate standard discourses in his time. Cellini's works, as the book's conclusion will suggest, particularize more general topics, but precisely on account of this, they constitute an outlook on a field of shared concerns. Because of the way Cellini approached both sculpture and writing, an analysis of his occupations can have yields for the broader study of late Renaissance art.

Primary among these yields is a contribution to the history of the sculptural medium. In the last several decades, art historians have developed an increasingly refined critical and historical apparatus for thinking about painting; there are now good articles and books devoted to perspective, color theory, light and shadow, pictorial composition, and related topics. The existing armory for dealing with the category of sculpture, however, remains considerably more limited. On the whole, discussions of sculpture as such have focused on two topics: The arguments adduced to defend the side of sculpture in what have come to be called the “paragone” debates, and the technical and symbolic ways in which sculptors used materials.

Scholarship on the first of these topics has been concerned primarily with the form and sources of the *paragone* as a literary phenomenon. Few discussions of the *paragone*, and in particular of the *paragone* in its sixteenth-century form, have shed light on sculptural practice, let alone actual sculptures.⁴² As two of the most consequential Cinquecento *paragone* exchanges were those prompted by Benedetto Varchi's *Lezzioni* in the late 1540s and by the death of Michelangelo in the early 1560s, and as Cellini was a major voice in both of these, Cellini's contributions to the *paragone* invite consideration.⁴³ At the same time, a study of Cellini that is also to be a history of art must deal with what can be understood as a sort of by-product of the *paragone*'s occasion: the possibility of thinking through actual sculptural projects in terms of medium. This book will work from the assumption that Cellini's own literary history legitimates bringing topoi from the *paragone* arguments to bear on Cellini's sculptural works. Because sculptures are the book's real object, though, the book will also proceed cautiously here. Taken in themselves, *paragone* writings are insufficient theoretical sources for the discussion of late Renaissance sculpture. The lines they draw are frequently too sharp: That writers could agree with Leonardo, for example, that sculpture is a distinctively operative art, does not mean that there is *no* act of painting, or that painting in Cellini's day could not sustain the sort of analysis that the *paragone* seems to recommend for sculpture. At the same time, the picture the *paragone* presents is often not sharp enough. Because

its topics are conventional and even formulaic, *paragone* writings can fail to capture what a particular sculptor is doing with a medium.

The book maintains that the *paragone* was not the only discourse that enabled thoughts about the sculptural medium, and in this, it at least partially adheres to the intuitions of a growing literature on sculptors' materials. Particularly since the publication in 1980 of Michael Baxandall's *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, scholars have become newly interested in questions of how and why sculptors used the stuffs they did.⁴⁴ Studies now inquire not only into the "natural" properties of stones, woods, and metals, but also into the broader conceptual and institutional conditions of sculptural production.⁴⁵ On all of these topics, Cellini's writings are informative and to date underutilized texts, and the degree to which the present book follows Baxandall's cue will be immediately evident. Though the materials of sculpture are protagonists in this study, however, they are not its primary subjects. Indeed, the topic here – the sculptor's act, the kind of performance that a sculptor could undertake when exploring a given conjunction of subject and medium – is in some ways the opposite of, or counterpart to, that of the sculptor's material. A guiding thought through each of the following chapters is that the sculptor's work amounts to a repertoire of procedures (composing, casting, carving, modeling, drawing), and that these procedures realize not only the material, but also the artist. In part, the idea is to mine Cellini, his sources, and his critics for a historically apt language to describe what artists were thought to be doing when they made three-dimensional objects. In part, it is to ask how taking up one or another sculptural approach gained resonance on analogy to other sorts of practices (alchemy, medicine, necromancy, combat, statecraft) that contemporaries cared about. In Cellini's time, artists believed that when particular tasks were done in particular ways, they could assume an almost allegorical status, typologically duplicating the deeds of heroes, of nature, of God. Michelangelo viewed marble carving, the stripping away of skin to reveal the purged form beneath, as a model of redemption; Cellini, similarly, understood an act like designing as a path to a more general condition of excellence. One sort of artistic practice might show Cellini to be devout, or divine; another might prove him magisterial, or wise. The book will consider the ways in which sculptors' acts contributed to their vocational identity, informed their thinking about the cultural roles they played, and affected the kinds of imagery they made.

Beyond its contribution to the history of the sculptural medium, finally, the study may have a more general yield, one pertaining to our understanding of the historical phenomenon sometimes called "Mannerism." The great Cellini scholar Piero Calamandrei once pronounced that, were it not for the existence of the *Autobiography*, "We would hardly be able to distinguish Cellini from the other mannerists of his time."⁴⁶ While it is a goal of this book to work against the prejudices that motivated that comment, a more neutral restatement