

The microscopic and the colossal. The mystery of Michelangelo's seal ring and Hegel's cryptic reflections

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ABSTRACT

The present paper offers a philosophical reading of a brief yet cryptic hapax in Hegel's Berlin *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1820-1821): the reference to the so-called "seal ring of Michelangelo". Rather than treating this mention primarily as a problem of attribution or reception history, the essay interprets it as a philosophically charged figure within Hegel's system of art. The microscopic carnelian gem, depicting a Bacchanalian scene, is shown to function as a conceptual counterpoint to Michelangelo's usual association with the colossal, thereby destabilizing a central polarity in Hegel's philosophy of art between monumentality and microscopic dimension.

By foregrounding the philosophical significance of scale, the article proposes that the seal ring functions as a microcosm within the macrocosm of Hegel's aesthetics. Read in this way, the passage reveals a latent "micrological" dimension of Hegel's philosophy, in which the smallest work of art discloses essential tensions between antiquity and modernity, form and excess, vision and feeling, sobriety and bacchanalian revel.

KEYWORDS

Hegel's Aesthetics; Michelangelo; Glyptic art; Seal ring; Bacchanal; Nude;

Nichts ist vielleicht schwerer
als eine sichere Kenntniß von geschnittenen Steinen
J.W. Goethe

Das Wahre ist der bacchantische Taumel, an dem
kein Glied nicht trunken ist,
und weil jedes, indem es sich absondert, ebenso
unmittelbar sich auflöst,
ist er ebenso die durchsichtige und einfache Ruhe.
G.W.F. Hegel

1. *The "Siegelring" in Hegel's Berlin Lectures on Aesthetics*

In a passage from the first course of *Lectures on Aesthetics* held in Berlin in the winter semester of 1820-21, Hegel mentioned

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a small and extraordinary piece of glyptic art, known as the ‘Siegelring des Michelangelo’ (or *Cachet de Michel Ange*):¹

die Edelsteine sind zu erhobener Arbeit, Camäen, und zu vertiefter, Intaglios, gebraucht worden. Die Kunst der Alten ist darin höchst vollkommen gewesen; so z. B. sind auf dem Siegelringe des Michael Angelo 9 Figuren von höchster Schönheit, die, selbst durch das Vergrößerungsglas betrachtet, die höchste organische Schönheit zeigen. diese Kunst ist eine Kunst des Gefühls zu nennen, denn bei dem Schleifen der Steine muß der Künstler sich fast nur auf sein Gefühl verlassen, da er fast gar nicht dabei sehen kann (GW 28.1, p. 151).

It is probably the smallest work of all those mentioned in the Berlin Lectures on Aesthetics: a carved carnelian, 15.5 mm long and 12 mm wide, which stands out for its ‘balanced’ Dionysian and Bacchic atmosphere, also known as ‘Vendanges’ or ‘Bacchanalia’. This microscopic work of art has so far been given little consideration by international *Hegel Forschung*.² In the posthumous edition of Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics edited by Heinrich Gustav Hotho, as well as in all its countless translations, no mention is made of this work of art. One wonders: what is the reason for such silence? The explanation may lie in the arbitrary selection made by Hotho, Hegel’s pupil and future art historian, who published Hegel’s *Aesthetics* (1835-38; 1842³) completely ignoring the first Heidelberg course of 1818³ and excluding the manuscript sources of the auditors who documented the first Berlin course of 1820-21, in order to use exclusively sources from the second (1823), third (1826) and fourth (1828-29) Berlin courses, in which there is no longer any reference to the seal ring – although references to gems (and the use of magnifying glasses) still appear in these later courses (Kehler 1826, p. 180), as well as to “Steinkunst” and the sentimental involvement implicit in its creation (Heimann 1828-29, pp. 102-103; GW 28.3, p. 1108).

¹ This research was conducted within the Project “Intersections: Real museum, ideal museum, virtual museum with and beyond Hegel” at the Italian Institute of Germanic Studies in Rome, Italy (2023-2025). – We must point out here (as authors of this essay) that we had the opportunity to admire the so-called ‘seal ring’ or ‘Bacchanal’ at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris, where it is currently kept (see <http://medailles-antiques.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/c33gbf716>), and to have a valuable conversation with Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet, Director of the Department of Coins, Medals and Antiquities, to whom this article owes a great deal. See Avisseau-Broustet 1997.

² A single reference can be found in Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov’s commentary in GW 28.4, 1312.

³ For a more complete contextualisation of the extraordinary discovery of over 5,000 pages of manuscripts documenting almost all of Hegel’s lectures in Heidelberg, including a manuscript by F.W. Carové that contains the complete text of G.W.F. Hegel’s first aesthetics course in 1818, see Vieweg, Illies, Iannelli, Fuchs 2023.

Therefore, Hegel refers to Michelangelo's seal ring only once in his Berlin Lectures, making it a *hapax*. This brief, passing reference is rather cryptic to us today, although it may have been easier for Hegel's contemporaries to decipher. One might wonder: was the philosopher alluding to an ancient seal that Michelangelo owned and wore? Or did he suppose that the modern master had been inspired by such a tiny masterpiece of antiquity to create other works of the Italian Renaissance? In his Lectures on Aesthetics held in Berlin, Hegel refers to this carving in the section dedicated to sculpture and therefore to the "art of the ancients". According to Hegel, therefore, the seal ring in question does not appear to have been created during Michelangelo's lifetime, but rather to be an ancient piece owned by the great master. Furthermore, Hegel states that nine figures are depicted on this seal ring, which can be observed through a "magnifying glass", which is an important but at the same time misleading indication, because in reality there are more figures: as many as 12 or even 15, depending on whether or not one considers the secondary figures, namely a child and two cupids carved into the carnelian. Furthermore, one may wonder whether Hegel is referring here to a direct experience of such a precious gem⁴ or to an indirect aesthetic reception, mediated by casts and copper engravings or copies. Furthermore, we can discuss the function and meaning of this reference within the Lectures on Aesthetics, i.e. within Hegel's artistic system. Finally, this reference to the seal ring seems to contradict the conception of Michelangelo as an artist of the colossal, which is found both in Aesthetics (for example, GW 28.1, p. 120) and in the Philosophy of World History. Therefore, it is possible to broaden and also problematise, more generally, Hegel's complex relationship with Michelangelo, recently masterfully discussed by Paolo D'Angelo (2019) in relation to Raphael and Leonardo.

2. A brief history of the mysterious seal ring

The history of the seal ring is recounted in detail (albeit not without errors in dating and attribution) in Pierre-Jean Mariette's *Traité des pierres gravées* (1750), which describes the events sur-

⁴ This does not, of course, refer to direct use by the philosopher, because the seal was kept in Paris and Hegel did not visit the city until 1827, several years after mentioning it in his first Berlin course on aesthetics in 1820-21. Rather, it alludes to the possible account of an experience shared with Hegel by other intellectuals of the time or simply imagined.

rounding the ‘cachet de Michel Ange’. The gem was purchased in 1686 by King Louis XIV from the son of the collector Toussaint Lauthier. It was in fact considered to be the property of Michelangelo (Schnapper 1988, pp. 166-157; see also Murr, 1804, pp. 211-213; Meyer 2000, pp. 399-415):

Un orfèvre de Boulogne nommé Augustin Tassi l'eut après la mort de Michel Ange, et la vendit à la femme d'un intendant de la Maison des Medisis. Au commencement du dernier siècle le sieur Bagarris qui a été en garde du Cabinet de Henri IV, l'acheta des héritiers de cette Dame, qui étaient de Nemours, huit cents écus, somme bien considérable (...). Le sieur Lauthier le père l'eut après la mort de cet Antiquaire, de Madame duMay son héritière (...) or ce font les enfants dudit sieur Lauthier qui l'ont vendu au Roi Louis XIV (Mariette 1750, p. 60).⁵

The piece was praised by Mariette as the most beautiful piece belonging to the King and perhaps of the world (*Ibid.*). Louis XIV also particularly appreciated it and often wore it on his finger. Since 1719, the stone has been kept in the *Musée du Cabinet des Médailles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France* (Dumersan 1819, pp. 34-35).⁶ It should be noted that in the 18th and 19th centuries, gems were highly praised, both economically and scientifically (Hansson, 2014). The price of a seal ring could therefore be higher than the cost of a painting or sculpture by Michelangelo. The material used for this microscopic masterpiece is carnelian, known since ancient times to turn red and slightly translucent when heated. Before the French Revolution, it was not unusual for these pieces to be made into rings, but then the gold was melted down, which may explain why Michelangelo's more recent seal ring is so called, even though there is no longer a ring.

Winckelmann mentioned the seal in his description of Baron von Stosch's collection as a “Pâte de verre tirée du Cab. du Roy de France. Une Bacchanale connue sous le nom de Cachet de M. Ange” (Winckelmann 1760, p. 285). He was familiar with Mariette's writing (see Pomian 2000). In fact, the seal ring is also mentioned by several of Hegel's contemporaries: from Karl Philipp Moritz (1791) to Johannes Gurlit (1798, pp. 24-26).

Moritz describes the carnelian as:

der schönsten Werke des Alterthums, das unter der Nahme: der Siegelring des Michel Angelo, allgemein berühmt ist (Moritz 1791, p. 247).

⁵ See also Murr, 1804, pp. 211-213; Meyer 2000, pp. 399-415.

⁶ The Cabinet du Roi was the only museum in Paris on the eve of the Revolution. See Pomian 2021.

Scholars such as Goethe in Weimar and Christian Gottlob Heyne in Göttingen were collectors.⁷ In his role as Director of the University Library (now known as the *Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen*), Heyne had acquired, in addition to all the archaeological literature available at the time, plaster casts of ancient statues and a series of dactylotheques (see Kockel & Graepler & Angelova 2006). Until the mid-19th century, before photography made it easier to document works of art, casts circulated widely, particularly in Italy, a favourite destination on the Grand Tour.⁸ Since he did not travel to Italy, it is quite likely that Hegel may have seen the work elsewhere, perhaps in Weimar, through a copy or drawing, or through an account (Heres 1977, p. 193; Buschmeier 2013). The *Klassik Stiftung* in Weimar has a superb drawing of the ‘Siegelring’ by the Danish-German painter Asmus Jacob Carstens, one of the most committed artists of German Neoclassicism (Fig. 1).⁹

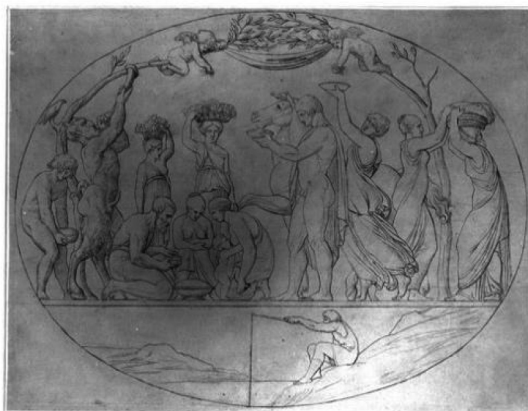


Fig. 1
 Asmus Jacob Carstens (1754-1798)
Bacchanal nach dem sogenannten “Siegelring des Michelangelo”
 Klassik Stiftung Weimar
 Available at <https://www.klassik-stiftung.de/digital/fotothek/digitalisat/10-2020-0063/>

⁷ On Goethe’s encyclopaedic collection, see Iannelli 2025.

⁸ An 18th-century copy is preserved, for example, in Palazzo Pitti in Florence: <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/0900130404>

⁹ <https://www.klassik-stiftung.de/digital/fotothek/digitalisat/10-2020-0063/>

Over time, several drawings and engravings were made and published, more or less faithful to the original.¹⁰ The first was the drawing by Madame Élisabet Sophie Cheron in 1709 (preserved at the British Museum; Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Élisabeth-Sophie Chéron and Bernard Picart, ca. 1709, brush drawing with grey-brown wash, touched with white, pen and black ink, 15 x 18.5 cm (oval). British Museum.

Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum.

This sparked a heated debate in early 18th-century France, focusing on the subject depicted in the engraving, its possible author, its date and the accuracy of the ‘reproduction’, which some believed should be more pictorial and others more minimalist. For some, the carnelian, which was engraved during the time of Alexander the Great, depicts him as a god during the grape harvest with his warhorse. This is attested by Murr, who recalls the position of the Jesuit theologian and philosopher René-Joseph de Tournemine (1661-1739):

Il fit un éloge pompeux de la cornaline antique et de la copie qu’en avait faite Madame Le Hay, dans une description de ce monument qu’il publia peu de temps après que l’estampe en eut paru. Ce fut là qu’il avança que cette antique était un

¹⁰ For example, the much-discussed drawing by Madame Chéron from 1709. On this see Altun, 2024; Mariette reproduces an engraving, which is actually very different from the original. On the subject of reproductions, see Décultot 2010; Casazza and Gennaioli 2010.

ouvrage de Pyrgotèles, que le sujet était une vendange, et qu'Alexandre qui s'en servait de cachet, l'avait fait graver, lorsque vainqueur des Perses, et méditant la conquête des Indes, il affectait de prendre le nom et les ornements de Bacchus (Murr 1770, p. 351).

For others, it is a banquet in honour of Bacchus and in commemoration of his rebirth. Still others believe it depicts a festival in Athens called Puanepsie, during which the victorious return of Theseus from the Minotaur was celebrated (see Meyer 2000). Unless it is considered a simple scene of the grape harvest ('Vendanges'), in which people are engaged in various activities and the man in the centre is simply the owner of the vineyard (Murr 1770, p. 351).

In modern times, it was customary for Renaissance artists to take motifs from ancient gems and draw inspiration from them for drawings, paintings or sculptures. It is possible that Michelangelo was inspired by an ancient piece of this type when painting the figures in the Sistine Chapel. Among the engraved figures, there are, on the right, two women participating in the Bacchic grape harvest, carrying a covered basket. The composition of the seal ring is reminiscent of a fresco by Michelangelo (from 1508) that decorates a vault of the Sistine Chapel (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3

Michelangelo Buonarroti: 'Judith and Holofernes' Sistine Chapel (detail).
Apostolic Palace of the Vatican, Fresco 1509.

Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo,_Judith_and_Holofernes_03.jpg

This fresco immortalises the bloody but ‘serene’ scene of Judith and her servant helping her carry the severed head of Holofernes, which lies half-covered by a cloth on a large tray, on which the severed head of the commander is visible, which some believe to be nothing more than a secret self-portrait of Michelangelo himself.

It is possible that Michelangelo was inspired by the ancient Bacchanalia (and therefore drew on ancient beauty) for these figures in the Sistine Chapel, or rather by the seal ring, as some authors believe (Meyer 2000). For a long time, it was believed that the seal ring was ancient. The original was initially attributed to Pyrgoteles, an ancient Greek engraver, as did Tournemine.

At the end of the 18th century, Murr (1770) contributed to spreading another line of attribution supported by the ‘connoisseurs’ of the time, according to which the carnelian was made by the refined Italian engraver Pier Maria Serbaldi da Pescia (1455-1522), based on an iconographic association evoked by the image of the fisherman engraved on the bottom of the gem:

Tous les Connoisseurs sont à présent d'accord, que Pier Maria da Pescia [...] ait gravé cette Pierre d'après le dessin de Michel-Ange, comme la figure du pêcheur dans l'Exergue l'indique clairement (Murr 1770, I, p. 375).

The carnelian artwork would therefore date back – according to 18th-century European connoisseurship – to the 16th century and would have been created by Pescia based on the model of the great Italian artist. It could therefore have a macabre (indirect) reference to the severed head of Holofernes painted by Michelangelo, even though the severed head is not visible in the seal. These hypotheses were mostly corroborated (indirectly) by an undisputed authority such as Giorgio Vasari. Murr himself refers to Vasari. Pescia was praised by Vasari (1568, III, vol. I, p. 291) as a “great imitator of ancient things” (“grandissimo imitatore delle cose antiche”), a model of expertise in carving:

quest'arte tanto difficile, poi che intagliando in cavo, che è proprio un lavorare al buio, da che non serve ad altro che la cera per occhiali a vedere di mano in mano quel che si fa [“this art so difficult, since carving in hollow, which is like working in the dark, where nothing but wax glasses are needed to see what one is doing from hand to hand” (*Ibid.*; Our translation)].

Pescia was later identified by Italian antiquarians (Raspe, 1772, pp. 636-637) and then by European connoisseurs as the probable author of a carving that was controversial for its extraordinary beauty, difficult to imagine at the dawn of modernity.

Precisely for the same reason, namely its unrivalled beauty, many intellectuals, such as René-Joseph de Tournemine, came to the opposite conclusion and thought that the seal that enchanted Hegel was ancient, ruling out the possibility that such a superb carving could have been made during the Renaissance (Murr 1804). Hegel (GW 28.1, p. 151) seems to be of the same opinion when, in the semester of 1820-21, he emphasises “die höchste organische Schönheit” (the highest organic beauty). The carnelian gem he so admired, in which the art of the ancients was absolutely perfect, was perhaps too beautiful for him to have been conceived in the modern age.

Yet this microscopic and mysterious work may not be ancient at all. The work of art may have been called ‘Michelangelo’s seal ring’ not only because it may have been carved by Pescia or because it belonged to the Italian master, but also because Michelangelo may have conceived the entire scene. Pescia would then have carved the stone based on his design. However, there is no reliable evidence that Pescia is the author of the work: this is an assumption made by 18th-century connoisseurs, which was already circulating in the antiquarian tradition, based mainly on the figure of the fisherman in the exergue, interpreted as the ‘speaking signature’ of the modern engraver, conveyed by Murr (1770), which he himself would later deny.

Murr’s only plausible ‘onomastic’ hypothesis – which, however, defines, with extreme caution, as mere conjecture – is that the author was Allion (Murr 1804, p. 236). The fisherman in the exergue could therefore be a logograph of an ancient engraver, and the Greek term ἀλιεύς / alus (fisherman) could allude to the name of the ancient engraver, hence the possible connection with Ἀλλίων/ Allion, the presumed Greek engraver of high-quality gems.¹¹ The association with Michelangelo would then be merely a question of a collector’s item, suggested by the fact that the carnelian was in his possession. Murr (1804, p. 244) concludes, however, that ‘la gravure est grecque et très ancienne’, but explicitly rejects that it was made by Pyrgoteles (according to the attribution put forward by René-Joseph de Tournemine), and distances himself from the hypothesis, still supported by him in 1770, of the possible authorship of Pier Maria da Pescia, who, among other things, does not sign any of his works with the image of a fisherman.¹²

¹¹ The recurring name (Ἀλλίων), often in the genitive form on gems, was in fact an indication of forgery and confusion with Dalion (Δαλίον), a gem engraver who lived at the beginning of the Roman Empire. On the question of the gems of the engraver Allione, cf. Tassinari 2015.

¹² We are grateful to Mathilde Avisseau-Broustet for this observation.

Murr (1804, p. 210) himself therefore felt the need to return to this “chef-d’œuvre de la Gravure” at the beginning of the 19th century, aware that a definitive answer on the authorship of the mysterious seal was difficult, stating: “et pour moi je ne doute nullement que, si le Graveur revenait, il ne parût étonné de toutes les idées singulières qu’on lui prête” (Murr 1804, p. 238). By opting for the ancient attribution of this microscopic and mysterious engraving, he nevertheless paved the way for the Hegelian interpretation.

3. *The microscopic in the field of Aesthetics*

This tiny work of art undoubtedly deserves our attention, even from a speculative point of view, for the theoretical challenges it poses to interpreters of philosophy, and in particular of Hegelian Aesthetics. The mysterious work of art and the mention in the Berlin course of 1820-21 seem at once unique but also exemplary of the way Hegel refers to works of art in general, of how his reflection on the whole is intertwined with his reflection on the individual piece.

In any case, this example highlights not only the organic beauty and artistry of the ancients, but also the value of the microscopic in the field of Aesthetics. Therefore, in the Philosophy of Art – as in Michelangelo’s assessment – one must not only consider the colossal, but also the smallest and the masterful artistry of the smallest. Hegel’s Aesthetics can therefore also be read under a ‘microscope’, as if it were a macrocosm containing countless microcosms. The entire architecture of the Lectures on Aesthetics, if not Hegel’s philosophy in general, therefore deserves to be observed with a ‘magnifying glass’.

If we consider the passage in the 1820-21 lectures, we can see that this tiny masterpiece has a specific function here, namely to constitute the transition from classical ancient art to modern or romantic art and, in addition, to convey the transition from sculpture to painting. In the 1823 Lectures on Aesthetics, for example, this transition is implemented through a reference to bas-relief in antiquity (GW 28.1, p. 472; en translation, p. 388). The seal ring therefore has a function similar to that of bas-relief: like a bacchanal, it is a representation of a group in terms of content and, from a formal point of view, still a sculpture. From a systematic point of view, considering the logic that runs through and ‘shakes’ the material, it can be seen as a transition

from space (i.e. three dimensions) to surface (and therefore two dimensions). This also means a reduction, from the logic of space to the logic of time, from the logic of exteriority to the logic of interiority. The ambiguity of the work (poised between antiquity and modernity, between sculpture and painting) can be explained in terms of artistic technique and, consequently, its function within the philosophical system.

Hegel's interest in this work of art does not only concern the relationship between the observer and the work of art through the reference to the magnifying glass, but also the artist's relationship with his work and his labour, where the philosopher refers to the polishing of stones (*"Schleifen der Steine"*) and an art of feeling (*"Kunst des Gefühls"*) (GW 28.1, p. 151). This is therefore not just about history, not just about the work of art itself, but also about a transcendental relationship between the senses. The passage thus documents a 'hyper-aesthetic' deepening and shows, using the example of the most microscopic work of art, that Hegel's *Philosophy of Art* does not entirely exclude openings towards an underlying theory of sensitivity¹³ and, in some cases, even sensuality. Here Hegel links the power of 'mental vision' with that of feeling as a whole, because the art of carving is a 'blind' art, in which the true guide is not the eye but the passion that skilfully moves the artist's hands. On the other hand, feeling is an essential principle of painting and Romantic art.

It is worth remembering that an explicit section dedicated to numismatic art was only introduced in the 1828-29 semester, at the end of the discussion of sculpture, which should not be considered either a curiosity for cultured connoisseurs or a particularly refined addition (Heimann 1828-29, pp. 102-103; GW 28.3, p. 1108). In this section on numismatic art, there are observations on the art of stone, in which Hegel does not refer to the seal ring, but may evoke it implicitly, especially since the reference to the need for a magnifying glass reappears:

Die Edelsteine sind klein; aber ganze Scenen sind auf ihnen vorgestellt. Im Schneiden der Steine hat man es zwar jetzt weit gebracht, aber diese Kunst des Fühlens ist im Alterthum einzig. der Künstler kann nicht sein Bild vor Augen sehen, sondern nur das Gefühl ist die einzige Leiterin bei der Arbeit gewesen. In these gems, sculpture indulges in all kinds of representations. Rarely are the subjects taken from the period after the Trojan War [...], but the labours of

¹³ Since the time of Nuremberg, aesthetics as understood by Hegel, following Schelling and the Romantics, i.e. as the *Philosophy of Art*, has been clearly distinguished from Aesthetics as *"Wissenschaft des Sinnes"* (GW 28. 3, p. 909), theorised by Baumgarten, but there is no shortage of sensitive and sensual incursions.

Heracles are found in them. When viewed through a magnifying glass, the artistry of the organic becomes even more apparent. Everything seems to be alive (GW 28.3, p. 1108).

This structural innovation is likely attributable to the contemporary debate sparked in 1827 by the publication of the list of carved stones preserved in the Berlin museum. It was a description of Stosch's collection of precious stones, translated from French by Bolzenthalt, edited by Winckelmann and dedicated to Cardinal Albani. In 1826, Carl Gottlieb Reinhardt made casts of the gems in question, which allowed contemporaries to 'see' the 3,442 stones, as Winckelmann had described them, for the first time. The inventory was examined by Goethe himself in 1827 and most likely aroused Hegel's interest, as the volume is listed in the catalogue of his library (GW 31.1, p. 957).

4. Blinding nudes: bacchanalia and organic beauty between Michelangelo and Hegel

Hegel's brief reference to the seal ring during his Lectures on Aesthetics in the winter semester of 1820-1821 does not concern the subject of the work, namely the depiction of a bacchanal or a grape harvest, and therefore does not contribute to the heated debate on the matter. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that it is simply a grape harvest is bizarre, since the presence of naked nymphs, a faun and a satyr with an erect phallus would be rather difficult to explain. The main character, placed in the centre, wears no weapons, helmet, armour or other symbols of royalty. His only garment is a cloak over his shoulders.

If, on the other hand, we assume that this is a bacchanal scene, in which the god Bacchus is placed in the centre between satyrs and nymphs, it is possible to establish closer links with Michelangelo's work and also with Hegel's philosophy. Although this connection is not explicitly mentioned in literature, the posture of the main male figure on the seal is similar to that of the god Bacchus with a cup in his hand and a swollen belly, as sculpted by Michelangelo himself around 1496-1497 and preserved in the *Bargello National Museum* in Florence (see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Michelangelo Buonarroti: 'Bacchus with Pan'

Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Michelangelo_Bacchus.jpg

According to Vasari, Michelangelo's statue arouses the admiration of the viewer because

nella qual figura si conosce, che egli ha voluto tenere una certa mistione di membra maravigliose, e particolarmente havergli dato la sveltezza della gioventu del maschio e la carnosità, e tondezza della femina: cosa tanto mirabile, che nelle statue mostrò essere eccellente più d'ogni altro moderno, il quale sino allora havesse lavorato (Vasari 1568, III, vol. 2, p. 721);

[“in this figure, one can see that he wanted to maintain a certain mixture of marvellous limbs, and in particular to give it the agility of male youth and the fleshiness and roundness of the female: something so admirable that in his statues he proved himself to be more excellent than any other modern artist who had worked until then”. Our translation].

This also corresponds perfectly to Hegel's description of representations of Bacchus in classical art:

er geht in das Weibliche, Hermaphroditische über, wo [sich] die männliche und weibliche Form des Geschlechts aufheben (Heimann 1828/29, p. 152; GW 28.3, p. 1100).

The Bacchanalia are therefore not only a theme in Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics, but also in his Philosophy of Religion. The preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* refers to a definition of truth itself as Bacchic delirium:

The truth is the bacchanalian revel where no member is sober, because, in isolating himself from the revel, each member is just as immediately dissolved into it – the ecstasy is likewise transparently and simply motionless. Judged in the court of that movement, the individual shapes of spirit do not stably exist any more than do determinate thoughts, but they are also equally positive, necessary moments just as much as they are negative, disappearing moments (GW 9, p. 35; PhS 2018, p. 29).

Hegel therefore associates truth with Bacchic intoxication, but he also relates feelings of calm and moderation with the concepts of movement and excess. On the other hand, he mentions mysteries, orgiastic rites and Bacchic festivals in his Philosophy of Religion (GW 18, 250-258-276).

In the manuscript (partly written by Ascheberg, partly transcribed from the notebooks of other students) documenting the 1820-1821 course of Lectures on Aesthetics, we read:

Bei den höhern Gebilden der Skulptur soll die Gestalt in der Ruhe, in dem Beruhen auf sich selbst, dargestellt werden; und daher darf sie auch wenig in Beziehungen mit der Äußerlichkeit kommen (GW 28.1, p. 143).

The reference to “organic beauty” (GW 28.1, p. 151) is therefore a reference to the dazzling beauty of the human body, in particular to nudity, to the absence of clothing, which Hegel repeatedly considers mechanical and artificial in his lectures, especially when thinking of contemporary fashion (GW 28.1, p. 470; en. tr. p. 386). Hegel distinguishes between organic beauty (“die bloß sinnliche organische Schönheit”) and spiritual beauty (“geistige Schönheit”); it is a question of “concealing the parts that have animalistic needs” (“die Theile zu verbergen, die animalisches Bedürfniß haben”), that is, hiding the most erotic and sensual parts of the body, which in reality does not happen in the Bacchanal (Heimann 1828/29, p. 153; GW 28.3, p. 1101). According to Hegel, “awareness of the spiritual” constitutes “the basis of shamefulness” (“das Bewußtsein des Geistigen” constitutes “den Grund der Schamhaftigkeit”, *Ibid.*). The Greeks seem not to respect this dimension of spirituality, but in reality this is due to the fact that they are above this feeling of modesty (Heimann 1828/29, p. 153; GW 28.3, p. 1102). For this reason, nudity is a typically Greek characteristic both in war and in art. In Greek sculpture, this nudity mainly concerns male figures,

while female figures are generally clothed. Hegel observes that in Greek art, only one in ten female figures is naked (*Ibid.*). The same applies to Michelangelo's seal ring.

The scandal of nudity (which therefore coincides with the question of organic beauty) is at the heart of the aesthetic debate in 15th-century Italy. For Vasari, the greatest difficulty in art lies in representing the nude ("difficoltà nell'arte degli ignudi"; Vasari 1568, vol. 6, p. 401). Michelangelo's "most perfect" ("perfettissime") yet "most dishonest" ("disonestissime") nude figures (so Ludovico Dolce; see Lazzarini 2010, p. 112) are at the centre of this debate. Michelangelo was accused of his representation of humble men, perceived as vulgar and obscene, in contrast to Raphael's representation of immortalised nobles (see Lazzarini 2010, p. 110). The controversy also concerned the representations of nudes in the Sistine Chapel. According to Vasari (1568, III, vol. 2, p. 733), they astonish the viewer. It should be noted here that Michelangelo himself was an admirer of ancient gems and, in these microcosms of stone, for example in Lorenzo de' Medici's collection, he sought, more or less intentionally, what Warburg would later call "Pathos-formel", which would shape his artistic aesthetic macrocosm (see Dunkelman 2010) and also his 'ignudi'. However, the impetuous nudity that triumphs in the Sistine Chapel also brings with it accusations of "blasphemy and irreligiousness" ("impietà di 'nreligione") and condemnation for inadequacy. Michelangelo was accused of valuing art more than faith ("per istimare piu l'arte che la fede") and of having no respect for the dignity of the sacred place (the "maggior tempio di Dio"; Aretino 2000, pp. 130-131). According to Pietro Aretino, his figures would make even prostitutes close their eyes in embarrassment and shame, as we read in a letter to Alessandro Corvino:

egli nel soggetto di sì alta istoria, mostra i santi e gli Angeli, quegli senza veruna terrena onestade, e questi privi d'ogni celeste ornamento. Ecco i gentili ne lo sculpire, non dico Diana vestita, ma Venere ignuda, le ricoprano con il gesto de la mano le parti che non si scoprano, e il circonspetto ingegno per istimare più l'arte che la fede, non pure non serva il decoro ne i martiri, né in le vergini, ma rilieva in modo i rapiti per i membri genitali e virili, che farien non che altro chiuder gli occhi per vergogna a i postriboli. Ne le mura d'un bagno delizioso, e non in le facciate d'un coro superno, si richiedeva la libertà del far suo (Aretino 2000, pp. 130-131);

[In the subject of such a lofty story, he shows the saints and angels, the former without any earthly modesty, and the latter devoid of any heavenly adornment. Here are the pagans in sculpture, not Diana clothed, but Venus naked, covering with the gesture of their hands the parts that are not uncovered, and the circumspect ingenuity to esteem art more than faith, not only does not serve decorum in martyrs or virgins, but also highlights in such a way those who are enraptured by their genital

and virile members, that they would do nothing but close their eyes in shame at the brothels. Within the walls of a delightful bath, and not on the facades of a heavenly choir, the freedom to do one's own thing was required; Our translation].

Michelangelo is said to have depicted scenes of baths or brothels that he had observed in Rome in the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel (Lazzarini 2010; Kington 2010). This could also explain why the dazzling beauty of the mysterious miniature mentioned by Hegel must be viewed with a 'magnifying glass'. In addition, historical and artistic research in recent decades has uncovered another Cornelian 'Siegel', depicting Apollo and Marsyas, attributed to Nero and preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, as a possible inspiration for the nudes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, showing how intersections between past and present, as well as between ancient and modern, are not only possible but inevitable (Dunkelman 2010, p. 368).

5. The Last Judgement in the balance: between condemnation and exaltation of eroticism

Hegel, for his part, revered the great Italian master as an artist of the colossal and the terrible: "Hier ist Michael Angelo sehr groß; indem er das Maaß des Menschlichen fast überschreitet, hält er es doch immer noch fest". (GW 28. 1, p. 169). He hoped to be able to admire Michelangelo's work in person, although he was aware of the difficulty of doing so in Germany without undertaking that journey to the Bel Paese, dreamed of in his youth with his friend Schelling, which in reality never came to fruition (see Vieweg 2017; Iannelli 2024, pp. 71-89).

In fact, in 1822, there was an episode, documented in letters to his wife Marie, in which Hegel, not without emotion, imagined himself finally standing before a work by Michelangelo when he visited the tomb (by an unknown artist) of the Duke of Nassau-Oranien in Breda, then attributed to the Italian master. Here are Hegel's excited words:

Instead of travelling straight ahead, I have been unable to resist the temptation to get off here to see a monument by Michelangelo. By Michelangelo! Where else in Germany can one see a work by this master? (Hegel, *Briefe*, III, p. 360; *Letters*, p. 597).

On the contrary, Hegel does not comment on the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel in his Lectures on Aesthetics, but refers to them indirectly in his course Lectures on the Philosophy of World Histo-

ry. If we compare the two passages taken from these two different lectures, Michelangelo appears as the brilliant artist who combines both dimensions of the work of art: the smallest and the largest, but also one who connects ancient and modern art. In the Berlin course on Aesthetics, Michelangelo is mentioned in connection with the seal ring, i.e. evoking the microscopic, and in the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History in connection with St. Peter's Basilica, i.e. mentioning the most colossal architectural structure. Suggestively, both works can be linked to the frescoes in the Sistine Chapel.

In the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, the famous passage on Michelangelo is found in the section dedicated to the "Germanisches Weltreich", more specifically in the so-called third epoch, where Hegel addresses "die Kunst, die Verdorbenheit der Kirche, und die Reformation" ("art, the corruption of the Church, and the Reformation") in the section dedicated to the modern age (GW 27.1, p. 442). Here, we move from the Middle Ages to the modern age, and not only historically. The course of history also corresponds to aesthetic deduction, to the transition to the principle of interiority, that is, to the principle of romantic art. It reads:

The Athenians used the money of their allies [in the Dehan League] for an and for the temple of Athena, and for this reason they lost their support. Just as this was the misfortune of Athens, so too this structure, St Peter's, which Michelangelo adorned with the image of the Last Judgment, became the last judgment on this proudest and grandest structure of the church – a last judgment on the church itself in its corruption (VPWg 1822-1823, p. 498; en. tr. p. 503).

From the Philosophy of History, including in the last Lecture of 1830-31, we know that Hegel considered St. Peter's Basilica a symbol of decadence and Italy a country that now belonged to the past of world history, as confirmed by this laconic observation: "Das jüngste Gericht des Michelangelo hat das jüngste Gericht der Kirche gebracht" (*Heimann 1830-31*, p. 205). However, it cannot be ruled out that by appreciating this 'Kornelstein', which for many interpreters at the time (and today¹⁴) was not at all ancient, Hegel perhaps appreciated – even without knowing it – the most secret and sensual Roman atmospheres hidden in the Sistine Chapel and the artistic skill of a 'mysterious' artist, which suggests that there were many short circuits between the individual arts, between a composed and a Dionysian vision of the classical, just as there were many ambiguities between antiquity and modernity, as well as between the known and the unknown.

¹⁴ Z. B. Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov in GW 28.4, p. 1312.

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List of Abbreviations

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The following abbreviations for other Hegel's works have also been used

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| <i>Letters</i> | <i>Briefe</i> , ed. by Johannes Hoffmeister, 4 vols. Meiner, Hamburg 1952. |
| <i>Letters</i> | <i>The Letters</i> , ed. by Clark Butler, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984. |
| <i>PhS</i> | <i>The Phenomenology of Spirit</i> [1807], ed. by Terry Pinkard, CUP, Cambridge 2018. |

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