

## Yoni Ascher

### **The Drama of the Dead and the Living**

Theatrical design of sepulchral projects, which is usually associated with installations such as Bernini's Cornaro Chapel, was developed in Naples since the late fifteenth century, in a sequence of works. In fact, the meaning of some of these projects can be grasped only when one mulls over the theatrical considerations that constituted their design.

Guido Mazzoni made in 1492 for Alfonso II, then Duke of Calabria, a *Lamentation* group for the chapel of the Holy Sepulcher in the church of Santa Maria di Monteoliveto. This group had great influence on the theatrical approach of Neapolitan sepulchral design. Judging from Emilian precedents by Mazzoni the group, which presents realistic portraits of members of the house of Aragon, must have been installed in a painted semicircle stage, with a Calvary-like painted background. An inscription that was attached to it after the fall of the Aragonese dynasty elucidates the meaning of this group to sixteenth-century viewers: "Stranger, the pious figures which you see half-dead and expiring are images of the living and breathing piety of Aragon. They live but appear lifeless because of grief, so death, deceived, passed them by. Do not ask why they do not move: indeed, they have already escaped into Heaven." On the one hand the text implies the *Quem quaeritis* chants, from which developed liturgical drama, and on the other it connects the display of Biblical drama to the afterlife of its historical actors.

A few years later, the life-sized, freestanding image of Cardinal Oliviero Carafa kneeling in prayer was placed in the middle of the *Succorpo*, a new crypt under the choir of the cathedral of Naples, which the cardinal built to host the relics of San Gennaro, the city saint. The body of the saint was laid in a decorated sarcophagus under the altar of the new chapel, which was placed in the center of the chapel's space. The image of Carafa, kneeling in prayer before a prie-dieu, was placed in front of the altar, looking at it with open eyes. The most important event related to the saint is the miraculous liquefaction of his dried blood, which happens in special celebrations. The kneeling effigy of the cardinal was thus designed to be seen not only praying but also looking forward in a constant expectation for the next liquefaction to begin. The placement of the altar and the effigy in the middle of the chapel's space turned the image of the cardinal to be a participant of every religious event that takes place in the chapel.

When Caterina Pignatelli died in 1515 her brother Ettore, by that time a magnate of the Neapolitan court, built a small tumulus-like chapel where he could sit in solitude and watch her reclining marble image reading from a prayer book while a mass for her soul is being said in the church. Ettore owed his success to Caterina, who sacrificed her own career to provide him with financial and societal support. The theatrical aspect of this sepulchral project is better understood in light of the Neapolitan tradition of *De tumuli* poems, in which the lifelike marble figures are treated as living souls.

The presentation of lifelike marble images as actors in liturgical dramas became harder in the next generation, when the move toward severe Catholicism made female effigies almost disappear and all male effigies were displayed fully armored. Giovanni da Nola, the greatest sculptor of his days in Naples, overcame these restrictions to create several theatrical settings of sepulchral commemoration. In the twin tombs of Andrea and Ferdinando di Capua, from 1531, he used the presbytery walls and the light coming from the dome's windows to create a spectacle that uses the daily mass to enhance the visual message of Christian apotheosis. The iconography of the supplicant effigy of Riccardo Rota, now at the Tel-Aviv museum of art, cannot be fully explored as it is detached from its original setting, but its dramatic presentation creates theatrical reactions of visitors to the museum.