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Domenico Beccafumi's *Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law* depicts the people "caught in the act" of idol worship and horrified by what Moses, in his righteous anger, is about to do.

Domenico Beccafumi (c. 1485-1551), MOSES BREAKING THE TABLETS OF THE LAW (c. 1529-1535). Painting on wood. 77 1/2" x 54 3/4". Duomo, Pisa, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Righteous Indignation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Moses becomes furious when he returns from Mt. Sinai with God's ten commandments and discovers that the people are worshipping a golden calf: "As soon as he came near the camp, and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:19). As he witnesses both idolatry and extreme wickedness by God's people, Moses' righteous indignation manifests itself in a rage of destruction. Domenico Beccafumi, a Mannerist or Late Renaissance artist from Siena, Italy, paints the people "caught in the act" and horrified by what Moses is about to do.

The artist heightens the action by an exaggerated pose, with Moses' left hip slung dramatically outward to create a strong diagonal leading our eyes up to the tablet in his hand. His golden robe and the *changeant* drapery (changing colors of yellow, pink, and blues) of the woman in the foreground are characteristics of the Mannerist style. The reclining male figure in the left foreground, almost nude, further emphasizes this elongated body type often used by Michelangelo in his sculpture and paintings in the sixteenth-century. This figure may also symbolize the aftermath of the people's reveling before the idol. Sydney Freedberg describes the painting: "These brilliantly precise manipulations of *Maniera* forms are infused with a renescent power of narrative imagination."¹

Beccafumi, like the other Mannerist artists of his time, reacted against the classicism of the Renaissance by changing the proportions of the body and using bright, vibrant color palettes such as those found in the Sistine Chapel ceiling figures by Michelangelo.² We are uncertain as to whether Beccafumi actually saw the ceiling but Vasari states that Beccafumi was exposed to the first generation of Mannerist painters in Florence, namely Pontormo and Rosso. Beccafumi then brought that style to Siena and, as in the case of this painting, to Pisa.

NOTES

1 S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, third edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 244.

2 Fiorella Sricchia Santoro, "Beccafumi, Domenico," *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T007187 (accessed September 8, 2014).