Chapter 18

Maarten van Heemskerck’s *Caritas*: Personifying Virtue, Animating Stone with Paint, Imaging the Image Debate

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Portraying the noblest of Christian virtues as an antiquity on the verge of animation, Maarten van Heemskerck conceived *Caritas* for an audience eager to extol sacred art’s centrality for worship [Fig. 18.1].¹ Van Heemskerck’s choice to depict the embodiment of this particular virtue in this particular manner establishes the image debate, the status of good works, and the instructive capacity of art as the painting’s discursive axes. Unlike contemporary images of *Caritas*, Van Heemskerck’s painting broadcasts its transcendence of the materials of art, and thereby embodies and enlivens its ostensible subject, implicitly challenging the Reform notion of *sola fide* and the Reform contention that sacred art is only wood, paint, and stone that distracts from true spirituality. Drawing from his first-hand knowledge of a range of sculptural sources, Van Heemskerck used his skill at mimicking surface textures to portray Caritas as if hewn from marble, even as he left visible traces of paint and mobilized the personification and its allied figures, making them move in a lively manner. Portraying stone figures as if they were animated suggests art’s most problematic aspect for Reformers: the idol worshipper’s belief that the portrayed inhabits the object. But this same device highlights the painting’s status as a manipulation of material that refers to its prototype. With *Caritas*, Van Heemskerck thus deployed the personification of this virtue to enact and confirm art’s edifying capacity.

Figure 18.1  Maarten van Heemskerck, Caritas (c. 1545). Oil on Panel, 715 × 365 mm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemaeldegalerie, Vienna, Austria (Inv. No. GG2683).

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