

MoMA

The Museum of Modern Art

Clarence Kennedy

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Source: *MoMA*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), p. 3

Published by: [The Museum of Modern Art](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4380606>

Accessed: 05/06/2011 08:40

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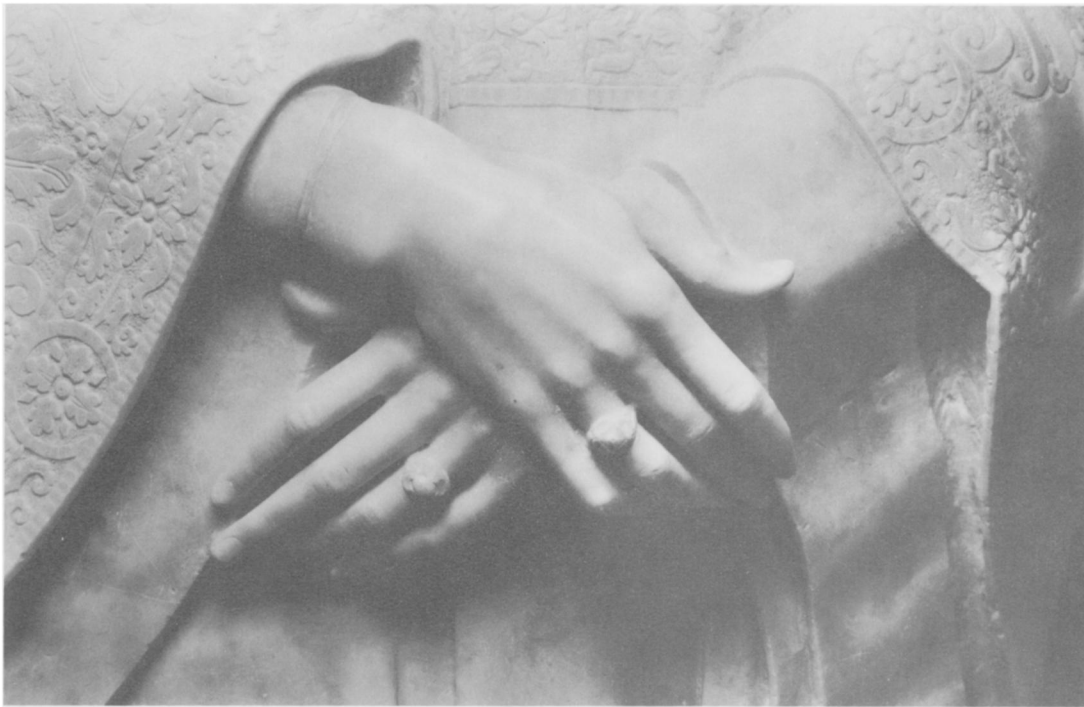
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*Hands from Above, the Figure of the Cardinal. Plate XVI in Clarence Kennedy's portfolio *The Tomb by Antonio Rossellino for the Cardinal of Portugal*. 1933. 6½" x 10½". Gift of Mrs. Lester Talkington in memory of her father, Clarence Kennedy.*

Clarence Kennedy

The appreciation of a sculpture depends on experiencing its spatial presence. The space is defined by the work's shape, size, and surface. A photograph, being a two-dimensional image, can only suggest these properties. Not infrequently, we are shocked when we see an original for the first time, having known it only through photographs. The size seems wrong, the space around it different from what we imagined, the surface unfamiliar. To a certain extent, of course, this is inevitable; no photograph can ever duplicate the spatial reality of the original. But the photographer can make pictures that are intelligent translations.

Clarence Kennedy (1892-1972) was an art historian who made such pictures. A professor at Smith College, he took up photography in the 1920s to document the sculpture of the Italian Renaissance. Frustrated by the lack of good visual material available to his students, he wanted his photographs to convey the artistic presence of the work without sacrificing a clear description of physical structure. The result was interpretative analysis—visual statements of the qualities he found basic, characteristic, and moving.

The photograph reproduced here is from *The Tomb by Antonio Rossellino for the Cardinal of Portugal*, a portfolio Kennedy produced in 1933. The portfolio, given to the Museum by Mrs. Lester Talkington in memory of her father, Clarence Kennedy, consists of an introductory text, set in a type of his own design, and thirty-four magnificently printed original photographs. The tomb, in San Miniato al Monte, Florence, was made by the fifteenth-century Italian sculptor Rossellino.

In one sense, it distorts this photograph to remove it from the intended context—a group of carefully constructed and selected views of a sculptural monument. The functional purpose of the portfolio is evident in its organization: first the work is shown in its entirety, and then it is explored, section by section. The small details of carving are always anchored within the whole, located in a previous, more general shot.

But it is in the details that Kennedy's work is most glorious as *photography*. These pictures were not necessary for an adequate presentation of the sculpture. Rather,

they were prompted by his own reaction to the work. They are the answers to questions he asked of the piece. Because the questions were intelligent and knowledgeable, the answers are revealing.

The precision with which Kennedy analyzed his subject required a sure command of his medium. Each sculpture and every detail represented a new problem that demanded a unique solution. This photograph is an analysis of the reserved, controlled play between the plasticity of the hands and the flat, linear patterns of the garments beneath.

One of the most characteristic features of Kennedy's work is his concern for lighting. (It is interesting to note that the title of his Ph.D. dissertation—Harvard University, 1924—is *The Effect of Lighting on Greek Sculpture*, and that he designed the lighting for the exhibition of Renaissance sculpture held at The Museum of Modern Art in 1940.) In this picture, Kennedy chose a soft light, strong enough to describe the modeling of the hands, but not so strong as to obliterate the delicate design that ornaments the robe, or the flat folds of the cloth beneath. There are no deep shadows or intense highlights; even the highly polished hands are rendered within a scale of middle grays. This understatement corresponds to the style of the sculpture itself.

Kennedy's intelligent depiction of shape and surface is not the product of lighting alone. He was sensitive to the importance of the frame—the edges of the photograph that define its content. Here the hands are the center of the picture, but the surrounding garments create a coherent, structured space that emphasizes the plasticity of the hands. The garments also form a pattern that establishes the rhythm of the photograph's formal organization.

The choices of lighting and frame were informed decisions—the result of Kennedy's understanding of both photography and the subject. Certainly his mastery of both areas is unique. But what gives his work eloquence is his ability to analyze the subject in terms of independently satisfying formal compositions. It is this quality that enables the photographs to transcend their original documentary function.

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