

Michelangelo's Sculpture

SELECTED ESSAYS

Leo Steinberg

EDITED BY

Sheila Schwartz



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INTRODUCTION

Richard Neer

A dangerous model to follow." That is how Sir Ernst Gombrich described Leo Steinberg to readers of the *New York Review of Books* in 1977.¹ The dismissal illustrates the polarization of both the art world and the academy in the wake of the sixties. It is striking to go back to the first, 1976 issue of the journal *October*—which would quickly become a standard-bearer for avant-gardist theory—and to read, in its manifesto, a declaration of war against the "philistinism" of that same *NYRB* for effectively excluding contemporary art, film, and performance from its pages.² Steinberg himself published in *October*, and like the latter quickly went from the margins to the center of the discipline. By 1982, he was delivering the prestigious Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC—the very series in which Gombrich had cemented his own reputation with *Art and Illusion* some twenty-five years previously.³ By 1984 he was writing for the *NYRB* himself (the essay is reprinted in the present volume), and in 1986 he won a MacArthur fellowship. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that he was one of the most important and influential art historians of the last fifty years.

Professionally, however, Steinberg was always a bit of an outsider; although he occupied a distinguished chair at the University of Pennsylvania, he did not establish a lineage of students or build himself an institutional base by founding a journal or leading a research center. Nomadic between the academy and the art world, he affected a prose style that seemed designed to flout scholarly norms and published in what can seem a willfully scattershot way (those Mellon Lectures, for instance, never appeared in print).⁴ In an era of specialization,

he was as much at home in the Renaissance as in the twentieth century, publishing book-length studies of Michelangelo and Leonardo alongside seminal discussions of Rodin, Rauschenberg, Picasso, and others.⁵ All of which was, in retrospect, quite pointed—a rebuke of sorts to a discipline that revered him but to which he never fully subscribed.

Yet Gombrich had a point: Steinberg *was* dangerous. What made him so was his approach to evidence. Gombrich emerged from a German tradition of art history grounded in philology. The characteristic move of this school was to decode Renaissance paintings as quasi-allegorical statements of philosophical theses by reading their iconography on the basis of handbooks of emblems. Primary evidence for any such reading was not to be found in the picture itself, or even in groups of pictures, but in the emblem book. This approach was well suited to the academy, as it put a premium on erudition and established clear canons of evidence and evaluation. The trouble was that it gave the verbal priority over the visual, the book over the work of art, and was therefore intrinsically reductive. Still, under the aegis of Gombrich, Erwin Panofsky, and other doyens, this "iconology" dominated anglophone art history throughout the postwar era and into the present day.⁶

Steinberg was plenty erudite, but his formation was in art schools and museums, not in libraries. For him, emblem books and the like were at best circumstantial evidence, at worst distractions, leading the professoriate to impute their own philosophical ambitions and book learning to artists who operated by what he famously called "other criteria." The cardinal feature of his mode of argument was to find words for pictures

[xii] not by reference primarily to verbal cipher keys, but by comparison with other pictures. This tendency was at its most provocative in his book *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, first published in 1983. Steinberg documented an iconographic tradition whereby the Virgin Mary and others point at, fondle, or otherwise draw attention to the genitalia of the baby Jesus. There were few ready textual or theological sources for this tradition—it was purely visual—yet Steinberg documented its existence beyond dispute. He argued that the iconography represented an ongoing reflection by painters on the miracle of Incarnation, such that the emphasis on genitalia was a way to convey visually the miracle of the Word made flesh. Textual evidence here was important but always secondary, and one may observe that Steinberg's thesis (about the visual representation of the Word made flesh) recapitulated his method (which took seriously the imbrication of discursive content with the materiality of the picture). Naturally, the book sparked a firestorm of controversy, not just for the provocative nature of the argument but for the challenge it offered to the research protocols of the discipline (Steinberg responded in the second edition that appeared in 1996 under the imprimatur of the University of Chicago Press).⁷ If painting can be a form of nondiscursive thought and can produce its own, independent reflections on divinity and embodiment, then a philological art history can seem redundant or worse.

Steinberg did not, however, sequester art in its own little domain of disinterest or formal autonomy. On the contrary, he stressed a constitutive relation to beholders. Of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, for instance, he declared, "Without the mutual dependency of aroused viewer and pictorial structure *there is no picture*."⁸ Taken literally, this means that Picasso's masterpiece is not a physical object at all, but a *relation* of viewer and structure, a "mutual dependency." So far from making him a formalist, then, Steinberg's emphasis on perceptual proof led him to dissolve "the object" into a complex network that included both the artist's intentions and the beholder's response. Encounters with Robert Rauschenberg in the 1950s had prompted this insight: "I sud-

denly understood that the fruit of an artist's work need not be an object. It could be an action, something once done, but so unforgettably done, that it's never done with."⁹ This thought became a truism for art critics of the 1960s and beyond.¹⁰ Its application to historical scholarship, on the other hand, is not straightforward—and it is here that, increasingly, Steinberg concentrated his energies.

If artworks are not reducible to physical objects, then what do art historians study? Steinberg's best writings attend, more or less explicitly, to *criteria*. This term does not refer solely to normative standards of evaluation, although that is part of it. It can also refer to the deeper patterns of agreement and disagreement by which we come to apply or withhold concepts like "artwork," "intention," and "object" in the first place. As the philosopher Stanley Cavell once put it, "we do not first know the object to which, by means of criteria, we assign a value; on the contrary, criteria are the means by which we learn what our concepts are, and hence 'what kind of object anything is.'"¹¹ Steinberg, as usual, took a large view. In his first book of essays, aptly titled *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (1972), he argued that the predicament of twentieth-century art was, precisely, a perpetual openness, an "otherness," to criteria in every sense: it is not settled in advance what is or is not (good) art. Criticism, in this situation, amounts to a sounding or testing of attunement in criteria with both the work and the reader amid an ongoing "shakeup which contaminates all purified categories."¹² Historical scholarship, on the other hand, demands a second-order reflection on these same relations, these same shakeups. Along with criteria of evaluation, and criteria of concepts, a third notion of criterion imposes itself: that of evidence. What counts as proof in the historical study of art? What secures an account of a Cinquecento sculpture under these conditions? Steinberg's art-historical writings explore, and offer, "other criteria" in this sense: ones that are not given in advance but that, like the writings themselves, seem always in need of discovery.

The present volume collects Steinberg's scattered writings on the sculpture of Michelangelo. Their subject

matter ranges from the great *Pietà* in St. Peter's basilica to doubtful pieces like the so-called *Fifth Avenue Cupid* in New York. Arguably, however, a single idea animates them all, encapsulated in a phrase that recurs several times in these pages: "In Michelangelo's hands, anatomy became theology."¹³ Michelangelo, that is, extrapolated from the body, from the vitality of flesh, to godhead: he understood divinity through, by means of, the carnal. This thought upends the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, whereby the immaterial and transcendent deity takes on a body in the miracle of Christ's birth (the exact nature of the relation being the stuff of theological debate down the ages). It also upends the traditional hierarchy of art-historical interpretation, which would see the Renaissance artist as "a sort of illustrator of foregone poetics."¹⁴ The resulting essays are of a piece with Steinberg's work on the sexuality of Christ, but drill down into the oeuvre of a single master instead of surveying a broad epoch. Again and again, we see the sculptor "thinking theologically within his own idiom."¹⁵

Steinberg's Michelangelo typically proceeds by "adaptive borrowing," creatively reusing older motifs and symbols to produce a new "bodied theology" all his own.¹⁶ Even a stock pose "may have various meanings, more than one at a time—or none, depending on context," and the task of the historical critic is to delineate that context and tease out those meanings, if any.¹⁷ In two essays on the *Medici Madonna* (chs. 3 and 4), for instance, Mary's crossed legs emphasize her perpetual virginity while giving prominence to the fruit of her womb; Christ twists in such a way as simultaneously to nurse and to adopt the pose of a bridegroom, revealing his dual nature. Here it is the interaction, the mutual inflection, of motifs that matters: their significance is relational, not inherent. In like fashion, a programmatic piece on the *Pietà* in Rome (ch. 2) analyzes the work into three components: "affect," "theological symbolism," and "the dictates of structure."¹⁸ To each there corresponds a separate branch of art-historical inquiry: psychology, iconology, and formalism. Michelangelo's specific achievement was to anneal the three in an act of "sheer power" that entailed willful distortions of anatomy and proportion.¹⁹ For example, Steinberg

notices that the dead Christ has the toned muscles and pumped-up veins of a living body; he identifies this mysterious vitality with "the mystery of Christ's two natures" and declares it "the true subject" of the work.²⁰

At the heart of this collection, however, stand two essays devoted to the late *Pietà* that Michelangelo carved for his own tomb but mutilated before completion.²¹ Both exhibit Steinberg's characteristic moves. As usual, he frames his research questions in terms of visual evidence: Why was Christ's leg originally slung over the Virgin Mary's thigh, and why did Michelangelo later hack it away? As usual, he seeks answers in the visual as well. First, in one of his most characteristic, provocative, and ingenious moves, Steinberg identifies the most salient elements of the work by comparing the original to copies made of it by a wide range of artists down the years. We are quite used to scholars employing contemporary *verbal* accounts of a picture or a statue to guide their readings, but Steinberg often put more faith in the *visual* responses of fellow artists. Like many brilliant ideas, this one seems obvious in retrospect, but its radicalism should not be underestimated: it opens art history to a completely different sort of argument and demands a completely different kind of erudition, one that is visual rather than literary. Second, he observes that the original pose of the leg was a stock motif with nuptial or even erotic overtones; thus, by means of pose, Michelangelo represented the dead Christ as the bridegroom of his mother, Mary. Steinberg then provides a comprehensive account of the sculpture in terms of the verbal and visual tradition of the marriage to Christ in medieval theology and argues that Michelangelo's decision to alter the work was most likely motivated by discomfort with this specific, highly charged feature. The result, although dated somewhat by its Freudian terminology, is still more germane to the actual work of art—more relevant and more convincing—than many a thickly documented cultural history. Yes, it's a dangerous model to follow, but only because it takes seriously the intractability of visual art, its resistance to verbal reduction of the sort that Gombrich practiced. Maybe it's art itself,

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and the very idea of a nondiscursive rationality, that is dangerous—at any rate, to art history as an academic discipline.

Steinberg himself was perfectly alive to this danger and took it seriously. “Shrinking Michelangelo” (ch. 7), his one review for the *NYRB*, sees him panning a monograph that found all of Michelangelo’s works to be aftershocks of Oedipal fantasy. Steinberg dismisses the book as an unwitting parody of psychoanalytic theory, but his animus seems overdetermined: in fact, the book was also an unwitting parody of his own approach. Reading Michelangelo’s *Taddei Tondo* and *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve*, for instance, the author had in each case identified a stock motif out of antique sculpture, assigned that motif a symbolic significance, and then taken it as a key to the work as a whole—rather as Steinberg himself had done time and again in his own essays. Steinberg’s response, therefore, is at least partly a way to distance himself from such misapplications of his method and, by extension, from the charges that Gombrich had leveled in the same journal a few years previously. To that end, he criticizes the book on both factual and theoretical grounds. It replaced the complex play of citation and adaptation in Michelangelo’s sculpture (and Steinberg’s readings thereof) with a crude symbology, which exactly missed the imbrication of motif and context that Steinberg stressed. What really draws his ire, however, is the implication that Michelangelo’s works were failures on their own terms: defenses against unwelcome fantasies, they none-

theless revealed, indeed were the prime evidence for, those same fantasies. For Steinberg, as we have seen, perceived infelicities, like the veins of the dead Christ, need to be taken seriously when it comes to such “carefully pondered symbolic structures” (the pun on “ponder,” suggesting both thought and weight, is typical).²² Like vulgar iconology, vulgar Freudianism failed to take art seriously, and so reduced it to the reflex of a prior discourse, be it philosophy or fantasy.

These essays remain challenging even as the world in which they were written has receded into the past. Contemporary art is no longer excluded from the academy; on the contrary, the new “philistinism” may be the consignment of historical art to the dustbin as museums and universities chase wealthy donors at Basel, Miami, or Kassel.²³ Yet Steinberg is no less urgent in this predicament than he was forty years ago: his acknowledgment that our criteria are always unsettled, always “other,” obviates easy distinctions between historical and contemporary and suggests that he, like Michelangelo, is both permanently contemporary and permanently alien. He recurs continually to the idea that the imbrication of multiple criteria in art-historical scholarship is not an impediment to, but a condition of, intelligibility. Yet the special brilliance of these essays is to show that *this problem was Michelangelo’s as well*. Is there an academic or curatorial analogue to Michelangelo’s “bodied theology,” an approach to historical works of art that acknowledges the mutual dependency of, say, a *Pietà* and its multiple beholders? If so, it is to be found in these pages.

NOTES

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. A full list of Steinberg's publications appears on pp. 213–18.

2. See "The Gestural Trace," Steinberg's interview with Richard Cándida Smith for the Getty Research Institute's Art History Oral Documentation, 2001, p. 21. Available online at <https://ia801707.us.archive.org/18/items/gesturaltraceleooostei/gesturaltraceleooostei.pdf>.

Most of Steinberg's papers are now on deposit at the Getty Research Institute. Temporarily held back were those needed for these volumes.

3. "The Gestural Trace," p. 19.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 27. Steinberg's several editions of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, all heavily annotated, are now in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.

6. Richard Shiff, "Our Cézanne," *Source*, 31–32 (Summer–Fall 2012), special issue in memory of Leo Steinberg, pp. 27–28. See also Shiff's review of Steinberg's *Incessant Last Supper*, *Artforum* (May 2001), esp. p. 24; and Yve-Alain Bois's introduction to Steinberg's second Norton Lecture at Harvard, October 18, 1995: "his writings reintroduce a dimension of pleasure in the dry and often polemical field of art history—the sheer sensory pleasure of language; as if to compensate, through exquisite linguistic elegance and precise stylistic economy, for the unbridgeable gap between images and words."

7. "The Gestural Trace," p. 5.

8. A selection of about seventy drawings, dating from the 1930s to the 1990s, was exhibited at the New York Studio School, January 31–March 9, 2013: *The Eye Is a Part of the Mind: Drawings from Life and Art by Leo Steinberg*, catalogue with essays by David Cohen and Jack Flam. The drawings were sold to benefit the school's scholarship fund. Steinberg had long supported the Studio School for its emphasis on primary drawing skills, donating lectures from the 1960s on.

9. "The Gestural Trace," p. 89, among other places.

10. Quoted from pp. 154 and 137 below.

11. Quoted from p. 154 below.

12. These characteristic passages are from Steinberg's "A Corner of the *Last Judgment*," *Daedalus*, 109 (Spring 1980), pp. 211, 208, and 210.

13. From the preface to Steinberg's *Michelangelo's Last Paintings: The Conversion of St. Paul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the Cappella Paolina, Vatican Palace* (London and New York, 1975), p. 6.

14. "Michelangelo's Florentine Pietà: The Missing Leg," published in the *Art Bulletin* in 1968, was republished, with revisions, in "The Metaphors of Love and Birth." It appears in this volume in its revised form.

15. "The Gestural Trace," p. 1.

16. *Ibid.* for Steinberg on Merce Cunningham, who never allowed his dancers to improvise on stage, lest they fall back on clichés.

INTRODUCTION

1. E. H. Gombrich, "Talking of Michelangelo," *New York Review of Books*, January 20, 1977, p. 19; reprinted in Gombrich, *Reflections on the History of Art: Views and Reviews* (Oxford, 1987), p. 90.

2. Editors, "About October," *October*, no. 1 (1976), p. 4.

3. E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1961).

4. The title was "The Burden of Michelangelo's Painting." Some of these lectures are scheduled to appear in the next volume of Steinberg's essays, again under the imprimatur of the University of Chicago Press.

5. *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York, 1972); *Michelangelo's Last Paintings: The Conversion of St. Paul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the Cappella Paolina, Vatican Palace* (London and New York, 1975); *Encounters with Rauschenberg (A Lavishly Illustrated Lecture)* (Chicago, 2000); *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (New York, 2001).

6. On Steinberg and Panofsky, see David Carrier, "Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art Historical Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 47 (1989), pp. 333–47; Lisa Florman, "The Difference Experience Makes in 'The Philosophical Brothel,'" *Art Bulletin*, 85 (December 2003), pp. 769–83.

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7. "Retrospect," in the revised and expanded edition (Chicago, 1996).

8. Leo Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel" (1972), as revised in *October*, 44 (1988), p. 47. Italics added.

9. Steinberg, *Encounters with Rauschenberg*, p. 22.

10. See, for instance, Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York, 1973); Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon, 2002).

11. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford, 1979), p. 16. Compare Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 15: "I am alone with this thing, and it is up to me to evaluate it in the absence of available standards. The value which I shall put on this painting tests my personal courage."

12. Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 91.

13. This line concluded Steinberg's essay on the Florentine *Pietà* when it first appeared in 1968, but dropped out of the expanded version, reprinted here in chapter 1. It then popped up again in two subsequent studies: twice in an essay on the *Medici Madonna* (see pp. 103 and 128), and once in a return to the *Pietà* that appeared in 1989 (see p. 151). Rosalind Krauss, in her moving obituary of Steinberg, zeroed in on the importance of the essay on the Florentine *Pietà* to Steinberg's thought. See Krauss, "The Slung Leg Hypothesis," *October*, no. 136 (2011), pp. 218-21.

14. See ch. 2, "The Roman *Pietà*: Michelangelo at Twenty-Three," p. 71.

15. Ch. 4, "Body and Symbol in the *Medici Madonna*," p. 95.

16. "Adaptive borrowing": "Body and Symbol in the *Medici Madonna*," p. 120; "bodied theology": "The Roman *Pietà*," p. 68.

17. "Body and Symbol in the *Medici Madonna*," pp. 100-101.

18. "The Roman *Pietà*," p. 70.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 83. Florman, "The Difference Experience Makes," stresses the Nietzschean element in Steinberg's work; there is certainly something Dionysiac in his conception of Michelangelo.

20. "Body and Symbol in the *Medici Madonna*," p. 103. [See also "The Roman *Pietà*," p. 73; —Ed.]

21. For a recent monograph on this work, with thorough technical discussion, see Jack Wasserman, *Michelangelo's Florence Pietà* (Princeton, 2003).

22. Ch. 7, "Shrinking Michelangelo," p. 177. Steinberg liked the pun so much that he used it again in his lecture on the *Medici Madonna*, p. 120, "a deeply pondered work."

23. It was recently estimated that 80 percent of current graduate students in art history are working on contemporary artists; see Richard Meyer, *What Was Contemporary Art?* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), pp. 10-11.

ONE

1. The full text was first published in Giovanni Gaye, *Carteggio inedito d'artisti* (Florence, 1840), vol. 2, p. 500. See Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: The Final Period* (Princeton, 1960), pp. 68-69. Two centuries later, Tobias Smollett had a similar reaction. Visiting Rome, he was "not at all pleased with the famous statue of the

dead Christ in his mother's lap, by Michael Angelo. The figure of Christ is as much emaciated as if he had died of a consumption; besides, there is something indelicate, not to say indecent, in the attitude and design of a man's body, stark naked, lying upon the knees of a woman"; *Travels through France and Italy* (1766).

2. For the physiological differences between sleep and death, see John Glaister's standard *Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology* (Baltimore, 1957), pp. 110-11, where the changes following death are summarized. Immediately after death, there is general and complete muscular relaxation, called "primary flaccidity" to distinguish it from the secondary flaccidity which follows the departure of rigor mortis. The primary condition lasts several hours, often as many as ten or more. It gives way to a progressive rigidity as dehydration brings about a shortening of the muscle fibers, causing the arms and legs to bend and the fingers to curl. Depending on atmospheric conditions, rigor mortis may last several days. Many late medieval representations of the dead Christ may be intended to represent this state.

Michelangelo's Christ is obviously not an object for medical postmortem examination. It exists in a poetic realm—open to faith and hope as forensic medicine rarely is—where the fraternity of sleep and death is a natural law; Homer knew as much when he called sleep and death "the twin brethren" (*Iliad*, XVI, line 673). But it is certain that the sculptor understood the respective anatomies of sleep and death. He knew that a sleeper's muscles retain some tone, and that his surface veins remain blood-filled—as do the limbs and the veins of this Christ. Thus, whether seen with professional or devotional eyes, Michelangelo's Christ is a body asleep. In the language of metaphor, its "inaccuracies" as a corpse are the pledge of its waking. For Michelangelo, as for St. Paul, the Risen Christ is "the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20). Cf. also St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (200-258), epistle 62: Christ himself is "the lion of the tribe of Judah [who] reclines sleeping in his Passion"; in *Fathers of the Third Century*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 5 (Grand Rapids, MI, n.d.), p. 360. For twentieth-century reactions by the medical profession, see pp. 72-73 below.

3. For the disputed attribution of this work either to Lorenzetto's young pupil Nanni or to the aging master himself, see Rudolf Wittkower, "Nanni di Baccio Bigio and Michelangelo," in *Festschrift Ulrich Middeldorf* (Berlin, 1968), pp. 248ff.

4. Tolnay, *The Youth of Michelangelo*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1947), fig. 176 and p. 146, misattributes the print to Bonasone, despite its legend, "Antonius Salama[n]ca quod potuit imitatus ex[s]culpsit 1547."

5. Wittkower, "Nanni di Baccio Bigio and Michelangelo" (above, note 3) sees "a criticism of the original" in the changed head position of the 1532 copy, but seems to regard other changes "which Nanni felt free to incorporate" in his imitations as "personal vagaries." It is important to stress that Nanni moves in a stream. Pope-Hennessy suggests as much when he cites Montorsoli's "copy"—with its haggard old Virgin—as evidence that Michelangelo's "break with conventional iconography was not uni-