

The Antipodes of Modernity

Distinguished Scholars' Session in honor of Leo Steinberg

(Speakers: David Rosand, Samuel Edgerton, Rosalind Krauss, Alexander Nagel, Leo Steinberg)

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Alexander Nagel

I distinctly remember the first time I sat down to read Leo Steinberg. I remember the actual scene of reading, something I almost never do. I was in my first year as an undergraduate at Berkeley, I was in one of the reading rooms in the art history dept., and the book in front of me was *Other Criteria*. I remember being daunted by the stark black cover, which symbolized for me a kind of challenge, a challenge that I associated with criticism, with struggle in the name of an idea, with a certain productive negativity, with twentieth-century art. *Confrontations* with twentieth-century art, I liked that. I liked the straightforwardness of its multiple meanings: this was going to be a direct face to face with art, an art that made that face-to-face something confrontational, an encounter with the problem of art itself. I don't remember any of my responses to the book's arguments, I suppose because these have since become so fully absorbed into my own thinking. The memory that remains is the overwhelming effect of an encounter with a personal voice, of being in the presence of a companionable and aggressive interlocutor. This must be why I did something that I almost never do as a reader: I produced a very clear idea of what this big-voiced Leo Steinberg looked like—an absurdly inaccurate one, as it turns out. (To my great embarrassment on this august occasion, I will admit that the Leo Steinberg in the head of this 18-yr old reader was big, musclely and bald.)

In any case, I now recognize that the voice I was responding to was unusual because it has a premodern feeling, it seems almost to belong to a world that existed before scholarship came to be domesticated in the form that we know it, before literary writing and academic writing were divorced, before pleasure had ceased to be a central part of rhetoric, teaching, and scholarship. There are times when his writing reminds me of Erasmus. As a polemicist he has all the verve and spark of Saint Jerome. In his combination of wisdom and playfulness he reminds me of Montaigne, and Thomas Browne. And then Shakespeare runs right through him.

But I don't want to dwell on the uniqueness of Leo's style, and I certainly don't want to foster a cult of personality. It is too easy to attribute Leo Steinberg's insights to a presumed idiosyncratic brilliance. And though there is no denying the brilliance, I want as much as possible to keep my remarks impersonal, to deal with structural principles and conditions that are presupposed by his project and shape it even if they are not overtly declared in his writing. In this way also it may be possible to say something about what his work and example might hold for the future, for those of us who aren't Leo Steinberg.

One important structural condition of his work is the fact that he has studied both renaissance and twentieth century art, a fairly rare conjunction. It doesn't need restating that with few exceptions the major scholars of renaissance art in the last century have been either openly hostile to or uninterested in modern art. The **medieval**/modern axis, on the other hand, has felt, until recently, like the more natural alignment: one understands why, for example, Meyer Schapiro for the most part avoided renaissance art,

finding in both modern and medieval art liberating alternatives to the weight of classicism. The nineteenth century had embalmed renaissance art, and in a different way enshrined Gothic, and Schapiro naturally felt attracted to studying the alternatives in Romanesque and Modern. (Other examples of medievalist/modernists: Werckmeister, Belting, Sedlmayr. Not many cases, but significant ones.)

It is on the other hand unusual even today to see the modern and the renaissance brought together; it still seems an odd fit. And that is because to be both a modernist and a renaissance scholar entails a more direct confrontation with post-enlightenment values, and a more deliberate overturning of them. You might say that over the last three decades the early modern field as a whole has been slowly working toward such an overturning, by studying patronage structures and the social institutions and codes within which art functioned. Leo Steinberg took the more direct route, right into the figural and rhetorical structures of the works themselves. He took canonical works of renaissance art—and you can't get much more canonical than the Sistine ceiling and the Last Supper—and trained our eyes in pre-enlightenment seeing.

He showed that to read these works as well-behaved history paintings is to flatten them and to tame them, to fail to see their persistent confounding of temporal logic, to deny their invitations to polysemic thinking, to refuse the open structures by which they are connected to their physical environments and invite their viewers' participation. He made these insights initially in the fifties and sixties, well in advance of much of the scholarly work that would provide the social-historical contexts, the institutional and

cultural frames, for such readings. He saw renaissance art differently, I would claim, because he had been looking closely at the art of his own time, which was everywhere breaking down the frame of the work of art. He followed the artists, who are more sensitive, if more volatile, seismographs than the scholars, who usually need a generation to digest and apply what the times are telling them.

In Rauschenberg and Johns and Dubuffet he saw new preconditions at work that no longer obeyed the laws of the “picture” as it had been institutionalized in a centuries-old tradition of European painting. What he saw was a new conception of the work as a surface for operational processes, the work conceived (although not necessarily worked or displayed) as a horizontal plane, a field carrying associations to maps, or newspapers, or charts, or flags, or floors, or beds rather than to the idea of an upright face to face with a visual picture of the world. The formulation of the principle—what he called the flat-bed picture plane—was made urgent by the art of the fifties but it opened the door to a re-reading of modernism as a whole, as Rosalind Krauss very clearly saw. I say the revision was made urgent but of course in the fifties in fact there weren’t many people besides Leo who felt urgently about seeing art in this way at all.

What made it natural for *him*, I think, was an already sustained exposure to premodern modes of art-making and art-installation—the heterogeneous media at work in a chapel setting, for example, or the worked and discontinuous surfaces of altarpieces. Here was an art that did not obey (in fact did not know) the boundaries of the easel painting, an art that integrated the act of seeing in a labor and participation of the body, an art that put

dissimilarity and disjunction in the service of associative meaning. When in the early seventies Leo Steinberg returned almost full time to the study of early modern art, therefore, he was in a good hermeneutic position, poised to benefit from a fusion of horizons.

In his dissertation and its later revision, Leo Steinberg studied Borromini's church of San Carlino and saw in it an architectural fugue of three different systems of geometry and ornament superimposed in constantly shifting relations, producing a resonance of meanings at once unutterably complex and harmoniously unified. Associative thinking of this kind is, in a sense, more naturally suited to the symbolic interpretation of architecture; it has been Leo's continued challenge and provocation to extend this mode of reading to figurative art as well, and so to break the spell of the academic discourse that had dominated painting and sculpture since the seventeenth century.

He has consistently countered the tendency to reduce renaissance narrative art to a linear and rational temporality, and to reduce renaissance naturalism to a protoscientific investigation of the world. Instead, naturalism and narrative become engines of overdetermination, means of unfolding the paradox at the heart of the Christian theology of incarnation, which is that the spiritual can only accomplish its purpose through a residence on earth. Naturalism and narrative, the body and history, are—in these readings—the plastic media of a divine plan that operates in and through them almost like their unconscious. These readings are thus undertaken in the spirit of an exegetical tradition still very much alive in the renaissance, according to which sacred events,

though embedded in history, also contain what theologians typically called a “mystery,” “sacrament,” or “figure”—a spiritual meaning that breaks through history, or rather reveals history in a topological configuration rather than a linear one. The exegetical reading does not only read the script of history but sees that it is written on a vast surface or screen, a surface that can be folded, twisted, or rolled up in God’s hand. The very word *figura* suggests the role that the visual arts have to play in figuring this kind of meaning, in their capacity for juxtaposition, layering, and displacement, in their capacity to stage dialogues among media, and in the inherent capacity of a picture, as Leo says, to weave duration into simultaneity.

And so where art historians traditionally have looked for and seen purposeful action in renaissance paintings Leo Steinberg has preferred to sing the body exegetic. For centuries people have been scrutinizing Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam, and they have been, you might say, perpetually caught in a moment of suspense, the moment indicated by the two pointing digits, that moment that seems the very symbol of momentousness. On the reasonable assumption that God is ambidextrous, Leo instead looked at the rest of God’s figure and saw time out of God’s mind: he saw two angels in a foul mood gathering themselves for their rebellion and fall—that is, their fall and ultimately Adam and Eve’s—, and thus found a key to understanding the entire figural family gathered in by God’s left arm: the as yet uncreated Eve spying her future spouse from the crook of God’s elbow, and the infant Christ, tapped by God’s other pointing index, the only figure in the entire ceiling that looks out at us.

When reading for the story cedes to this kind of unfolding, one learns something generally about premodern modes of attention, about how one verse in scripture can spawn whole sermons. When Leo, in his undergraduate course on Michelangelo, takes two whole lectures to discuss the one scene of the Flood from the Sistine ceiling, he does something that is unusual for historians of renaissance art, but that would have been natural for any renaissance commentator. Of course, in the renaissance they did this with texts, not art, and the irony is that when the tools came into existence to write about art in this extensive way, the art itself tended to be reduced to scientific demonstration or psychodrama.

[Paragraph omitted when I learned that Leo was going to discuss the Last Supper at length:] In Leonardo's Last Supper Leo Steinberg sees bodies behaving as they might at a given historical moment, and at the same time performing acts that figure the sacramental gestures of Christian ritual, because the acts of sacred history contain the principle of their figuration, and that is what makes them sacred. The most overdetermined body of all, in this and other works, is, of course, Christ's, and Leo's work has trained attention more carefully than anyone before him on the ways in which late medieval and Renaissance art put this body to figural use. Throughout his many readings Leo Steinberg shows that the innovations of the art of this period—its naturalism, its interest in the human body—gave new scope to what has been called the incarnational emphasis of renaissance theology.

This means going well beyond the traditional practices of iconography, well beyond a lexicographic, discursive code and into the literally uncharted but overdetermined territories of the body. Even the most vivid written account of the passion is not bound to describe all the limbs of the body in the way that an artist must, and to follow the artists is to open oneself to a form of carnal knowledge that tests the boundaries of traditional academic analysis. In his classes, Leo does his best, through an analysis of texts and comparative images, to convey the erotic charge of the gesture of slinging one's leg over the thigh of another, but in the end he tells the students: "Go home and try it with an obliging friend, you'll see what I mean."

What occurs at the level of the body and the figure carries implications at the level of pictorial construction. Leo Steinberg reminds us that at their inception the unified picture and the tools of perspective were above all occasions for a new order of metaphysical reflection. In the space opened up between the virtual world posited by perspective and its resolution on the two-dimensional plane, new kinds of associative relations became available for exploration, and thus a new and staggering array of applications for the figural imagination. Superimpositions, juxtapositions, and implied extensions produce meaningful junctures not unlike the transitional meeting of melodic strains in polyphonic music. The figures are self-willed actors in the open space of history and yet it turns out they participate in an order that operates at the level of the image—that is, at a level external to the history and beyond even the consciousness of the actors themselves. The structure of perspective itself organizes the event as seen from a point of view outside the picture, outside the historical event. That is, perspective always sees the past event in its

application to the viewer's present, or in what exegetes called its tropological meaning. The act of artistic ordering thus becomes a putting to work of the divine design built into history.

I won't struggle any more to recapitulate Leo's arguments or describe his mode of reading. You can see how a re-reading of renaissance art along these lines might complicate the larger historiographic picture. The works Leo Steinberg studies, and the readings he gives them, open onto dizzying questions about the career of art in the west, analogous to those raised by Erich Auerbach when he gave Christian ideas and forms a pivotal and shaping role in the history of Western literature. Leo Steinberg is not only revealing that an inherited exegetical sensibility is still at work in the renaissance. He is also implicitly asking what happens when these ideas are gathered into and shape a new conception of art.

The renaissance picture, on this view, emerges as an extreme consequence of the larger process, vividly described by Wilhelm Pinder in the 1920s, by which the kinetic, temporally inscribed, and polymorphous experience of the sacred space of the church is gathered into the predominantly visual experience of the late medieval image. The multiplex meaning formerly distributed in different images, different media, and in a coordination of performance, text, and image comes to be concentrated in a single work governed by notions of subordination, autonomy, and ultimately the controlling vision of the artist's genius. The result of this process is that powerful—one might say, incarnational—claims are made for the body of the work of art as such. The work itself

now claims a hermeneutic thickness, it demands to be treated as an object of exegesis in its own right, quite apart from the sacredness of the subject matter. The condensation of the work of art in this sense was, paradoxically, combined with an insistent rhetoric of disembodiment, a complete repudiation of the material and heterogeneous origins from which it sprang, a celebration of a sublimatory visual experience and in the end a whole ideology of visuality. To see the work of art coalesce under *these* conditions is to bring newly into view its post-Christian afterlife—it is to throw a dialectical light on this strange notion of visuality, and on the peculiar numen that has remained attached to the work of art in the secular modern world. It is also to begin to ask whether such a notion of art ever fully coalesced at all, whether the victory for enlightened visuality was ever really won, whether the forces of repression that went into shaping it didn't mark it with inexorable internal conflicts from the start. Perhaps it is time to look again at the academic era of art and see it in its strangeness.

Leo, it seems to me, has facilitated the view of this larger picture by choosing consistently to work at the antipodes of the modern “work of art,” when the idea was in volatile formation (renaissance) and when the idea was productively coming apart (twentieth century). A generation earlier, the dominant figures in the two areas, Greenberg and Panofsky, were working in the opposite way, from the modern work of art out: Panofsky projected a Kantian conception of art back into the renaissance and Greenberg, using a logic of refinement, found a way of seeing it right through modernism. Leo Steinberg's work instead helps to recognize in Duchamp's antiretinalism a kind of structural response to Leonardo's defence of painting as a “cosa

mentale.” He makes it possible to see that the easel picture is the aberration, whereas installation art—whether in the form of the Medici chapel or the Merzbau—is the norm. He helps to bracket and defamiliarize the enlightenment.

The field of renaissance art is, shall we say, constitutionally more resistant to the restless critical turnover that characterizes the modern field, and Leo Steinberg’s work has not gotten the active and productive reception in the renaissance field that it has gotten from the modernists. Renaissance scholars have reacted above all to the highly personal tone of his writing, which is anomalous in renaissance studies, and they have been quick to reduce his concerns to idiosyncratic opinions. When they have responded to his arguments, they have tended to respond to them, as it were, one by one. His reception in the modern field is, I think, a lesson here, in that it showed that one can build on the implications of his insights, and take them in startlingly new directions, without doing what he does. A cultivation of this faculty for abstraction and reapplication is, it seems to me, the deep lesson embedded in his arguments, even if it were to produce a legacy that he would, happily, not recognize as his own.