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REVIEW OF LEO STEINBERG, *MICHELANGELO'S PAINTING: SELECTED ESSAYS*, EDITED BY SHEILA SCHWARTZ, CHICAGO-LONDON, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2019

Michael Hill

The mid-1970s saw Leo Steinberg in the midst of a torrent of publications. In 1972, his near book-length account of Picasso's *Algerian Women* appeared in *Other Criteria*, an anthology of otherwise published material; also appearing that year was the revolutionary "Philosophical Brothel", spread over two issues of *ARTnews* (the essays were parts of a trilogy on the non-abstract dimensions of the artist, rounded out five years later by a study of *Three Women*). The very next year, Steinberg published in *Art Quarterly* a similarly lengthy and disruptive essay on Leonardo's *Last Supper*. 1974 saw in *Art Bulletin* a quieter but no less ground-breaking article on Pontormo's Capponi Chapel. The strange mix of journals reflected Steinberg's fecundity. New projects continued to ripen, including the revision of his 1960 doctoral dissertation on Borromini's church of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. This was an important taking stock, as it had been in San Carlo that Steinberg discovered he needed to write on topics to which he was suited. Here he asked the most important research question of his career: how is it that something so perfectly made can generate multiple and even incompatible interpretations?

Above all, by 1975 Steinberg was living in the world of Michelangelo's paintings. "The *Last Judgment* as Merciful Heresy" appeared in *Art in America*, an unusual location fitted to the experimental structure of the argument, which consists of fifteen mainly negative propositions. Each derive from the prior premise that since the time it was painted the mood has been mistaken – the *Last Judgment* conveys not retribution, but mercy. The falsehood was originally dissimulating and later due to the bad habit of not checking what can actually be seen in the painting.

"Merciful Heresy" was accompanied that same year by Steinberg's first purpose-written book, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings*, concerning the murals in the Vatican's Pauline Chapel. Although one of Steinberg's lesser-known works, it is something of a masterpiece of dogged interpretation. The paintings had always been occluded: Michelangelo's contemporaries found them grim and opinions didn't change much after that. They challenged Steinberg and he strived to understand the *Conversion of St Paul* in particular. Anachronisms were used to access the intended impact of the painting (a method Steinberg had advocated in "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self", written six years earlier). Thus dive-bombers on the beach in World War II helped him

understand the majestic onslaught of Christ "in a wasteland that offers no cover". Near the end of the third chapter, Steinberg asks one question after another: "did the painter recall" St Peter's epistle, "did he remember" a penitential psalm, "did he reflect" on the etymology of *conversus*, and "why those clusters of angels above", what do they mean? The questing voice eventually leads the reader to an epic vision of the fresco's dynamic centre, a first cause in which Christ the hammer strikes Paul the anvil; potential energy expands into a massive *serpentinata*, and the apparently disparate composition, which has left interpreters nonplussed for centuries, is given the shape of a single counter-balanced and symmetrical body. Steinberg's famously rich language is no more copious than here: angels around Christ are a "seraphic formation [that] seems tilted up in a frictionless ether"; later, those same angels regroup "like shoals of fish". The vividness of imagery stems from seeing the painting as a living body, while shifting metaphors are symptoms of the plight of retelling a vision whose very condition is Protean.

It comes as a surprise to see *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* anthologized in a collection of essays. The sense of its singular quality and mid-career importance had been affirmed by its original physicality. Phaidon published it as a coffee table book, a format made popular in the 1930s, where quick orientation via a generic text preceded the enjoyment of deluxe reproductions. Prima facie, such a format seemed perverse for Steinberg; yet it worked well, as if a scale suited to the argument had been discovered by accident. However, the disconnection of words and main images deflated Steinberg and it is gratifying to see the text now supported by the sort of photographs it deserves. The editor Sheila Schwartz, Steinberg's longtime assistant and now curator of his literary legacy, also augments the text with evidence that Steinberg continued to accumulate for the rest of his life. No less importantly, Schwartz's collection, the second in a series of five planned volumes of Steinberg's essays, enables one to see that Steinberg's account of the Pauline Chapel was embedded in a larger and continuously shifting account of Michelangelo's painting.

1975 was also when Steinberg left Hunter College in New York to take up the post of Benjamin Franklin Professor of Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. There he initiated a graduate seminar on Michelangelo, which included a lecture that would be decades long in development, "*The Last Judgment* and its Environs". If this were being taught in a studio today it would be called situated painting. Although it may seem unsurprising that a fresco might be related to its wall, it is well to remember that it was Steinberg himself ("Observations in the Cerasi Chapel", *Art Bulletin*, 1959) who had helped make the approach acceptable to art historians. In "Environs" he started from first principles, defining site in the broadest sense as the limit against which the artist pushes. Steinberg seemed to forget that we already know what context is, and defined it again, in an active and even urgent manner, such that the artist

moves as if in an arena. The compelling tone suits the investigation, in which propositions about visual peculiarities are tested against the physicality of the chapel. Steinberg found that the figural groups on both sides of Christ are set in torsion against the real stone cornice that projects from the adjacent walls, while the illusionistic depth of the scene, its z axis, appears to factor in the actual cant of the wall, installed at Michelangelo's command. Finally the reader sees what is going on, and it is as if the fresco is being witnessed face to face: "The painting […] represents an Advent, a Coming. And we suddenly realize that the supreme gift of this moment that we call the Last Judgment is Christ come to take over". For Steinberg, the meaning of the fresco was revealed as an outcome of an encounter. The beholder is folded into the beholden and the essay concludes with the promise of the embrace offered by the *Last Judgment*, "if you let it work upon you, and allow yourself to be taken in".

Steinberg's approach enacts the demand of the viewer that was made in the immortal final line of Rainer Maria Rilke's 1907 sonnet on the Archaic Torso of Apollo, "you must change your life". Rilke wrote the poem in wake of his relationship with Rodin, and in fact one of the epigraphs to his study of the sculptor is likewise illuminating, namely Emerson's maxim: "The hero is he who is immovably centred" (on the complex impact Rilke's monograph had on Steinberg, which he read at ten years of age, see the 1971 preamble to "Rodin", in *Other Criteria*). The voluminous writings of Steinberg have him forever circling the self, whether of the artist or the interpreter. This was not a concern with personality, which he scorned, but with the platform of viewing and acting; and as Steinberg needed to walk in different realms, his sense of self had to be agile, constantly adjusting to context and criticism from within. His work on Michelangelo's painting is replete with selfhood, from the section on "The Confessional Self" in the essay on the Sistine *Deluge*, in which painted characters act out Michelangelo's grudging acceptance of his destiny as a papal painter, to the chapter on "The Included Self" in the study of the Pauline chapel, in which the self-portrait functions not as sly testimony but as passionate surrender, one whose end is expressed in a terse style of conviction: "his [Michelangelo's] self-projection into the role of Saul is a petition". And someone else was always a negative mirror for Steinberg's own sense of self. A characteristic formulation of Steinberg is, "It begins to dawn on one how much […] is needed to understand" (from "A Corner of the Last Judgment"). Such a thought is a normal part of research, as material newly garnered creates fresh views. But Steinberg wrote the draft into the finished report, since the process of comprehension was a part of what is comprehended, as he indeed argued in "The Eye is a Part of the Mind", a 1953 sortie into formalist critical territory.

The phrase "begins to dawn" suggests that art history is a voyage. On that score, Michelangelo was a guide through Christian theology par excellence. In a 1998 interview (available in the Getty online archive), Steinberg said that he thought of

Michelangelo as one of those rare individuals – St Augustine was another – who had absorbed Christianity in its totality and who thus spoke of its worldview with an originality that others could only partly match. Steinberg was enraptured by Michelangelo, and the upshot is that his painting is shown and not told. Such a subtle distinction might be no more than a matter of voice were it not the result of Steinberg's belief that interpretation remains provisional because it springs from a vantage that is inside time – there is no providential spot from which the artist can be correctly seen (the mobility implied by such a position is reinforced by Steinberg's language, in which things are parts of continuums: even stillness is rendered in the dynamic form of "unmoving"). Conversely, Steinberg often chided his colleagues for not looking more wholeheartedly. There are a hundred variations in Steinberg's corpus of the scolding that one historian received for not slowing down: "his glimpse of a Michelangelo picture is as from a speeding car bound for the library" ("All about Eve"). This was not a preference for images over texts: as Alexander Nagel points out in the introduction to the collection, Steinberg's arguments were always nested within primary written sources and historiography. It was simply wariness at treating images as vessels that await their fill with words; more deeply, it was an attitude that had artworks as active agents in the formation of art historical knowledge. The result was that for Steinberg visual analysis was not the supporting evidence, but the argument itself.

This is a method of teaching as much as writing. Some of the essays in this volume never got beyond the lecture hall and are here published for the first time, namely the chapters on the *Doni Madonna*, the *Deluge* in the Sistine Chapel ceiling, another on the *Ancestors* underneath, and the "The *Last Judgment* and Environs". The pedagogical atmosphere of the live classroom is apparent in these pieces, which include many observations made by students. My favorite is one who noted that in the *Last Judgment* St Peter was not holding onto the keys as his attribute, but handing them back to Christ. This is a detail that speaks of the whole, as the scene is at the end of history and Christ's power on earth is being returned. The student is unidentified, but what I take to be his or her rhetorical role is to convey the safe space of curiosity, in which an image may yield its truth to open-minded eyes.

Unorthodox academics often see students, rather than peers, as their true constituents. When it first came out as a book, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* was one of two art history nominations (the other was *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, by Robert Rosenblum) for the 1976 National Book Award in Arts and Literature. Yet what Steinberg remembered was the carping. E.H. Ramsden pointed out that he got his dates wrong, while Ernst Gombrich chastised him for excessive license. To Steinberg's ears the school masterly tone of the criticisms was meant to put him in his place. In a review in *Burlington Magazine,* in which the verve of the text was praised, Paul Joannides called Steinberg's method "associational formalism".

To a casual reader the phrase, evoking imagination and rigour, sounds harmless. For Steinberg, however, no slur could have been better contrived, as it implied that he extemporized from mere vision and did not test against fact.

Although Steinberg was aware of his renown, he harbored a feeling that his work was futile. Indeed, his style of analysis was perforce a solitary mode and reward was negative, success being measured by the sense in which, as he wrote in the introduction to "Michelangelo's Last Paintings", the "picture seems to confess itself and the interpreter disappears". Perhaps this contributed to his abiding suspicion that he was barely tolerated by his colleagues. In the abovementioned interview, he predicted that, "In the year 2020, assuming that people still read and take an interest in art history […] most references to my work in professional literature will be disagreements and sneers".

It's nice to see that Steinberg got it wrong. The flourishing scholarly interest in his legacy starts from a conviction that he is a model worth following. Beyond the encomia that appeared after Steinberg's death in 2011, his findings and method continue to be discussed by students of art, philosophy, and aesthetics. The symposium *Leo Steinberg Now,* held in Rome in 2017, was remarkable for its broad scope, featuring renowned critics and curators of modernism, along with specialist art historians of the Renaissance and Baroque. More recently, Giorgio Tagliaferro, Daniele di Cola, and Kerr Houston, among others, have published substantial studies on Steinberg, each one coming at the topic from an understanding that art history is connected to the creative arts as much as the humanities. This surely is one of the preconditions for the so-called "material turn" of the discipline in recent times, as it demands that otherwise bookish scholars engage with how things are conceptually and physically made. Steinberg's lack of influence, self-declared and often restated by admirers, is untrue.

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Michael Hill

Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo's painting: selected essays*, is an anthology of the author's published and unpublished essays on the artist. The book is a volume in the collected essays of Steinberg, edited by his long-time assistant, Sheila Schwartz.