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Michelangelo's Sculpture: Selected Essays

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Steinberg, Leo.

***Michelangelo's Sculpture: Selected Essays.* Ed. Sheila Schwartz.**

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. Pp. xiv, 226 + 121 colour, 127 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-226-48257-6 (hardcover) US\$65.

Leo Steinberg (1920–2011) is an itinerant multilingual art historian who understands visual analysis as well as literary style, as Sheila Schwartz explains in her Preface and Acknowledgments (vii–x). Schwartz does well to explain that Steinberg, a refugee from the Soviet Union and then Germany, wished to have his essays of sixty years and his unpublished lectures appear, for that is what Schwartz has achieved in a series of volumes, beginning with the book under review, followed by one on Michelangelo's painting and by others extending into modern and contemporary art (vii). Schwartz shows how ambivalent scholars can be when it comes to style: "Steinberg had a well-earned reputation as a writer of fine prose, which won him both praise and blame from fellow art historians" (vii). I am with Buffon, a natural philosopher, on style: without it, works do not endure, and the literariness of Steinberg is a strength, so it is unfortunate that Schwartz has to apologize for it in the face of a strange resistance. She is right to say, "And writing, he taught me in the more than four decades we worked together, was thinking" (vii). Steinberg wrote and thought well. Schwartz also aptly observes that "Put into the service of art history, his prose illuminated the subject, revealing what a more pedestrian style would keep hidden" (vii).

Schwartz sees the roots of Steinberg's art history in his training as an artist at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, where he became a skilled draftsman (viii). Steinberg understood the act of creating art and the connection between form and content. A fine stylist, Steinberg placed the visual above the meddling of the written word (viii). As Schwartz shows, Steinberg was aware of over-interpretation but also of the under-estimation of its meaning (ix). Image and text work together and against each other in Steinberg in productive ways, and Schwartz discusses his ways of preparing notes and later full texts for lectures, some of which he never published (ix). It is touching how Schwartz and Prudence Crowther closed Steinberg's apartment after his death and began to face his remaining documents (x).

As much as I admire E. H. Gombrich, I cannot agree with his view in 1977 that Steinberg is “A dangerous model to follow,” as Richard Neer reports in his Introduction (xi). As someone who writes about aesthetics and poetics in terms of mimesis and alternatives, I see Gombrich and Steinberg as both/and, not either/or (with apologies to Kierkegaard). Steinberg, as Neer notes, did not specialize, being at home with Michelangelo and Leonardo, Rodin and Picasso (xi). As Neer says, whereas Gombrich sought evidence in the emblem books to decode Renaissance paintings, while stressing the verbal, Steinberg was formed in art schools and museums, not in libraries, and sought words for pictures, finding evidence by comparing one painting with another (xi–xii). Gombrich may well have been responding to Steinberg’s challenge to a philological art history (xii). As Neer observes, Steinberg was not simply a formalist; he dissolved the object of art into an intricate network that included the intention of the artist and the response of the beholder (xii). This response is similar to what I have called elsewhere the drama of meaning or the theatre of meaning in which artist and beholder create the work in that space between them. Steinberg stressed openness and otherness in twentieth-century art, and not a fixed object we call art (xii). Criticism, historical scholarship, and evidence all become important (xii). Neer says that the volume has brought together Steinberg’s “scattered writings on the sculpture of Michelangelo” (xii).

Steinberg sees that in Michelangelo “anatomy became theology” (Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, 91 in Neer, Introduction, xiv): in other words, divinity through the flesh. Michelangelo anneals iconology, psychology, and formalism (xiii). Visual evidence frames the questions and answers that Steinberg supplies, for instance Christ’s leg slung over Mary’s thigh (xiii). Neer says that Steinberg’s work is a dangerous model to follow “only because it takes seriously the intractability of visual art, its resistance to verbal reduction of the sort Gombrich practiced” (xiii). Steinberg, according to Neer, is aware “that our criteria are always unsettled” or “other,” so Michelangelo and Steinberg are always now and then, natural and estranged (xiv). Intelligibility in art history is multiple imbrication and this is true for artist, beholder, and art historian.

Steinberg explores the metaphors of love and birth in Michelangelo’s *Pietàs*, saying that the copies avoid the qualities of adaptation and relaxation (1). Moreover, Steinberg provides a close interpretation of each sculpture: for instance, discussing the *Rondanini Pietà*, Michelangelo’s ultimate sculpture; the

phases it went through up to its last transformation in the year of Michelangelo's death in 1564, including its last transformation or mutilation the final week he was alive (43–44). After this range of sculpture in the first chapter, the volume then proceeds to the Roman *Pietà*, something the artist worked on from age twenty-three to twenty-five: "What we do know is that the work established the young Florentine artist as one who surpassed all sculptors living or dead, not excluding the excellent Ancients" (61). Steinberg sees this work as a turning point when the talented artist becomes the great one: "it is the moment when he forgets about what *he* can do to ask instead what *art* can do" (89).

In the *Medici Madonna*, Michelangelo introduces a madonna sitting with crossed legs as something trivial from observation or adapting a pagan precedent (91). Steinberg discusses the relation between body and soul in this sculpture as well as the problem of Mary's beauty—how it can avoid original sin or the raising of lust in the male beholder (96). The detail of a hand on the shoulder is part of Steinberg's intriguing interpretation (anatomy becoming theology), and he wryly says overinterpretation is something the person who makes that charge has not thought of (128). Steinberg juxtaposes interesting literary or verbal signs with visual ones in the matter of Michelangelo's sculpture. In 1553, Michelangelo wrote a poem about the peril of his soul carving things divine, and three years later he moved to destroy the Florentine *Pietà* (153). Psychoanalyzing Michelangelo falls short as good artists "preside over their work with eyes open" (178). Steinberg ranges widely and so talks about Michelangelo and two doctors (179).

This collection of Steinberg's essays is beautiful, scholarly, and a credit to Schultz, Neer, and Steinberg himself.

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