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The “Eternal Mystery of the Picture Plane:” Leo Steinberg’s Unfinished Study on Titian

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A man on a boat

The waterbus docks at the Rialto bridge, unloads and loads, then sets off down the Grand Canal. A foreign man in his forties boards, tucks his ticket in his pocket and takes seat inside. He came to Venice to observe some Titian masterworks in their original site. Once on the boat, he looks out and absorbs the reflections of the palaces bordering the canal, wavering with the flow of the water. He alights a few stops away, walks into the church of San Rocco. There his eye is caught by the shape of the main altar: too similar to the one framing Titian’s famous *Pesaro Madonna* in the nearby church of the Frari. He then searches his pocket, finds the waterbus ticket, pulls out his pen, and jots down a sketch of the altar (fig. 1).¹

It is August 3, 1965, and that man is American art historian and critic Leo Steinberg (1920-2011) (fig. 2).² At this moment he has embarked upon a journey into Venetian painting which will carry him away from places he is more familiar with, like Rome, Florence and Milan, where he has admired the works of artists such as Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Borromini, Pontormo, and Leonardo. Today his reputation as a Renaissance art scholar is tied to these names. That he ever had a specific interest in Titian and Venice has mostly been ignored. It has been known, however, to those who attended a lecture he delivered on October 21, 1965, at the Metropolitan Museum, which focused on Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, painted between 1534 and 1538 for the Venetian Scuola Grande della Carità (Venice, Gallerie dell’Accademia; figs. 3, 4).³ In addition, a few other scholars helped him by sharing ideas, giving advice on specific aspects of the research, or transcribing sources out of his reach. Among these, David Rosand has pride of place. In the opening footnote of his article on the Carità *Presentation*, published in 1976 in the *Art Bulletin*, Rosand acknowledged his “special debt” to Steinberg for exchanging views on the subject.⁴ Beyond that, to the best of my knowledge no mention of Steinberg’s inquiry on Titian has ever been made in any published [work](#). Yet, archival material deposited in the Getty Research Institute by Steinberg himself in the 1990s, and by bequest after his passing in 2011, shows that he carried on a research on Titian in the 1960s.

The holdings include a variety of items, beginning with a transcription of the Metropolitan lecture.⁵ The main bulk of Steinberg’s source material is a notebook of about forty pages, bearing the title “Tiziano” on the cover, containing notes and sketches from the mid-1960s on some of Titian’s paintings in Venice (fig. 5).⁶ This is complemented by a folder with research photographs, one with notes on the figure of the egg seller woman depicted in the foreground of the Carità *Presentation*, and an index file box replete with notes, bibliographical records, and bits of correspondence.⁷ Steinberg also added an annotated manuscript of Rosand’s aforesaid article along with a letter to Rosand (1973), which provides comments and feedback on his manuscript.⁸ Lastly, the records include the manuscript of a paper on Titian’s *Presentation* written by Robert W. Torchia when he was a graduate student of Steinberg’s at the University of Pennsylvania (1986).⁹ In addition to this,

one box bequeathed in 2011 contains the preparation notes for the Metropolitan lecture, photos and slides with comparative material.¹⁰

It is not the aim of this study to publish what Steinberg kept unpublished. Still, it is worth bringing to light and discussing the main points of interest that he developed throughout his “journey” into Titian’s art: if on the one hand it reveals an unsuspected facet of Steinberg’s work, on the other it brings new material into the field of Titian studies. While further elaboration on both points would require a separate discussion, the present article introduces the topic in general terms, and draws some conclusions on methodological aspects of Steinberg’s approach. I examine the arguments of the Metropolitan lecture, discuss the embryonic ideas contained in the notebook, and address the exchange with David Rosand. However, because the Titian project focuses on site-specificity, it is first necessary to contextualize this topic within Steinberg’s work.

Critical context: the picture plane and the spectator

The Titian research dates from a time when Steinberg had a major interest in the correlation between painting and the space of the beholder, which he pursued in the domains of both Renaissance and contemporary art. To explain how he intertwined the two fields, it is useful to recall the notion of “flatbed picture plane,” which Steinberg famously coined and discussed in his groundbreaking essay “Other Criteria” (1972) to describe what he considered a breakthrough innovation in painting that occurred around 1950.¹¹ Although Steinberg’s ideas are well known to his readers, it is worth summarizing them briefly.

According to Steinberg, artists like Rauschenberg and Dubuffet broke with the traditional “conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of worldspace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture,” as it occurs in illusionistic art.¹² Such pictures refute the optical order that was formerly regarded as intrinsic to painting; they “insist on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes.”¹³ Borrowing the term from flatbed printing press, Steinberg then concluded that “these pictures no longer simulates vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals.”¹⁴

Steinberg’s assumption is grounded in a fierce criticism of formalist approaches to painting. In particular he questioned Clement Greenberg’s definition of Modernism around the idea of a distinguishing impulse to a Kantian self-criticism, which would urge Modernist artists to use the “methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself.”¹⁵ With his counterargument, Steinberg aimed to reestablish the historical continuity of art as representational, which Greenberg had denied, in line with his own understanding of representation as a “central esthetic [*sic*] function in all art.”¹⁶

Steinberg attacked the very foundations of Greenberg’s critique. He firmly opposed Greenberg’s notional distinction between Modernists and Old Masters, based on different ways of tackling the tension between surface and illusion, between the material substance of the medium and the illusive power of representation. For Greenberg, the Old Masters strove to disguise this tension, dissemble the medium, and conceal art to show the figurative content. Modernist artists, conversely, sought to bring this tension to the fore and solve it, in an attempt

to reach a state of purity wherein painting is defined by its own technical procedures, not its figurative contents. This process would find expression in the emphasis laid on flatness as the defining feature of painting.

Steinberg took issue with Greenberg's assertion that "the Old Masters had sensed that it was necessary to preserve what is called the integrity of the picture plane: that is, to signify the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space."¹⁷ Steinberg challenged this idea, and argued that illusionistic art does not imply a lack of self-critical awareness.¹⁸ On the contrary, he countered, "all major painting, at least of the last six hundred years, has assiduously called attention to art."¹⁹ Painters have always shown concern for art and openly questioned their operation with the same consciousness Greenberg reserves for Modernists alone.²⁰

What matters most, for the purpose of this study, is the underlying principle of Steinberg's argument. For him, the failure of formalism is to consider Modernist painting as a self-contained scope, where self-reliant artists, completely absorbed in mobilizing "professional technicalities" to construct a critical discourse over their occupation, are supposed to conceive of art "in terms of internal problem-solving."²¹ What is missing from this picture, he contends, is the external environment with its implied viewer, with which any artist has to reckon. As he puts it: "all works of art or stylistic cycles are definable by their built-in idea of the spectator."²²

This interest in how painters create meaningful relationships between the pictorial plane and the onlooker is at the core of a number of studies on Italian Renaissance painting that Steinberg published between 1968 and 1975. In that period of time he released various articles on Michelangelo, Leonardo, Pontormo, and El Greco, in which he expanded on ideas he first discussed in a 1959 essay on Caravaggio's Cerasi Chapel.²³ This line of research would continue in Steinberg's writings on Picasso and Jasper Johns and spur the formulation of the notion of flatbed picture plane applied to abstract expressionism. It therefore lies at the very heart of Steinberg's thought, making of him a precursor and key figure of the studies on Renaissance art and spectatorship.²⁴

Steinberg's contribution in this area in relation to Renaissance art, though, has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Partly this is due to his original and very personal approach, which preempts any attempt to pin down and classify his methodology. It is natural that Steinberg, a student of the Institute of Fine Arts in New York in the late 1950s, resorted to the methodological tools made available to him by his tutors, including Erwin Panofsky and Richard Krautheimer. One of Steinberg's most influential works, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983, 1996), rests on a somewhat Panofskyan use of iconographic sequences, which may explain why it is at times categorized under the umbrella of iconology.²⁵ Still, as stressed by David Levi-Strauss, although Steinberg did not embrace the most recent postmodernist theory, his use of iconology was peculiar and different from that of his teachers.²⁶ He himself did not want to belong to that tradition.²⁷ As it will be shown, his study on Titian allows to measure the distance that separates him from Panofsky, which lies precisely in the importance attached by Steinberg to viewing experience.²⁸

Steinberg paid dearly for his idiosyncratic, unaligned methodological stance, which has met resistance and critiques from many quarters. In an interview of 1998 he recollected how Ernst Gombrich's scathing review of his book *Michelangelo's Last Paintings* (1975) negatively affected his motivation and sent him "into a tailspin."²⁹ The *Sexuality* itself, although it is now regarded as a magisterial study, soon became one of the most controversial art history books ever published.³⁰

By and large the accusations leveled against Steinberg have to do with overinterpretation and lack of objectivity. Steinberg has been often charged with resting an enormous weight of interpretation on a small point of security. In fact, his readings of artworks typically demand a certain amount of intentionality on the part of the artist, which, especially when dealing with the Old Masters, can hardly be ascertained from outside of the painting itself. Steinberg's critics see his personality encroach on both artworks and artists, imposing on them by dint of an admittedly eloquent, captivating prose. One of the main problems for them is that Steinberg's richly metaphorical language is naturally liable to construct, rather than identify, metaphors in the images it addresses.³¹

However, as both Joseph Koerner and Alexander Nagel suggest, what now art historians are likely to be worried about is not Steinberg's risk of overinterpretation, but his propensity to overdetermination.³² The crux of his scholarship lies in a deep-rooted belief in the coexistence of multiple layers of meaning and, consequently, levels of interpretation in the same artwork. From Steinberg's viewpoint, the objectivity of these concomitant readings can be called into question only when we mistake objectivity for one-sidedness, which drives one to construe coexistence as contradiction. This praise of multiplicity is overtly founded on the ambiguity of visual language, and reappears at various times in Steinberg's work.³³ In "Leonardo's Last Supper" (1973, 2001) he warns that when art historians put forward different views on the same object, the question should not be who is right, but why different opinions coexist.³⁴ Steinberg considered this "the most important question I ever asked in my professional life—" that is, "if twelve different interpretations of one architectural plan are possible, our task is not to vote for one of the twelve or to come up with a thirteenth, but to ask what it is in the work that makes such contrariety of opinions possible."³⁵

This attention to the inner structure of a painting is a staple of Steinberg's methodology, and drives his interest in uncovering how a painter coped with the visual problems posed by the spatial context, in relation with a beholder. Steinberg belonged to a generation of art historians who aimed to "find the picture's meaning occulted in the thing itself, to discover a structure that will resolve all interpretative debate," to identify a perfect coincidence between form and content.³⁶ He sought a holistic approach that not only draws on constant and meticulous observation, but poses the problem of harmonizing what one sees with what one says; hence the laborious work of verbalization that characterizes Steinberg's activity, and mostly annoys his detractors.³⁷

To scrutinize Steinberg's abandoned Titian project offers an opportunity to catch a glimpse of his inquiry at a stage when observation still prevails over verbalization. We can follow the construction of a theory a moment before its final delivery, before all the *pièces justificatives* have to be stitched together, when the possible layers of meaning and levels of interpretations do not require an absolute

control from the artist to square with the critic's interpretation in order to make sense. The unfinished status of this research gives us a chance to appreciate Steinberg's acumen and perceptiveness in analyzing artworks *in situ*. By removing the typical issue of gauging the validity of Steinberg's work against the degree of consensus it generates, it is possible to better evaluate the quality of his insights derived from direct observation, the lengthy development of a language appropriate to convey the complexity of visual properties, and the epistemological potential of his attitude towards visual art.³⁸

Steinberg was not interested in "larger theoretical formulations" (e.g., psychoanalytical or sociological).³⁹ He was, rather, concerned with how visual and spiritual experiences combine. "I don't write about a work of art," he declared, "until I have found the angle that gives it some spiritual or moral justification."⁴⁰ The focus of this moral sphere is, however, the painter, with his inherent interlocutor, the onlooker. Steinberg does not search for socially and culturally produced meanings, which only interest him inasmuch as they relate to the analysis of the problems that an artwork has posed to its author. This is not to say that he overlooked the significance of socio-historical contexts in the determination of meanings. However, since his earlier writings, he predicated a mediation between these contexts and the formal purity internal to the artwork, between *Kunstwissenschaft* and formalism.⁴¹ In fact, in Steinberg's analysis all attention goes to how an artist tackles problems and takes up challenges, an approach that is reflected in his inquiry on Titian.⁴² To look into it means to look into Steinberg's method, with (almost) no superstructure. While Steinberg's critical ideas can be more easily absorbed into a discourse on aesthetics or on the philosophy of art, the aim of this study is to evaluate how his approach can be incorporated into present-day art history, and actually put into effect, especially in the field of Renaissance studies.

Steinberg's research on Titian

In his 1965 lecture Steinberg stressed the importance of seeing Titian's *Presentation* in its actual location — which he presumably did during his stay in Venice earlier that summer. In the 1960s Steinberg spent three months in Europe every year and went to Venice more than once.⁴³ Fragmentary pieces of information on the time scale of the Titian project and related journeys are scattered throughout his files. Although it is not clear when Steinberg commenced his investigation, it can be assumed that much work had been done by the time he delivered the aforementioned lecture. He then carried on research between 1965 and 1968, in the same years when he published articles on other Renaissance artists.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Titian inquiry dovetails with issues discussed both in those articles and in other Metropolitan lectures, and should be regarded as part of a wider, coherent research agenda.⁴⁵

The files contain no trace of any research activity after 1968.⁴⁶ In 1973 the project seems to have come definitively to an end. On 19 June of that year, [after reading David Rosand's manuscript on Titian's *Presentation*, Steinberg typed a letter in which he commended the younger scholar: "reading David Rosand is . . . a continuing education. You have established yourself within three years or so as a major figure in the field, and I am impressed."](#)⁴⁷ By that time Rosand had already published two cutting-edge articles on Titian and Venetian Renaissance painting in

the *Art Bulletin* (1971, 1973).⁴⁸ It appears that before Steinberg left for Europe in March 1973, the two had spoken on the phone and agreed that Steinberg, who had committed to reading Rosand's manuscript, would send a paragraph for insertion in the text. Steinberg had missed an agreed deadline in May, but enclosed the addition in the aforesaid letter.⁴⁹ However, it was never included in the final version of the article, published three years later.

Steinberg updated his files after reading Rosand's manuscript in 1973, which suggests his interest in the topic was still alive at that time.⁵⁰ Furthermore, he was planning to prepare his counterproposal on the figure of the egg seller.⁵¹ However, he never did so, and gave up his aspirations to write on Titian. In September the *Burlington Magazine* published a short notice by Rosand presenting a previously unknown document related to Titian's *Presentation*.⁵² Steinberg took a different pathway and went on working on other subjects. As he announced in the letter of June 1973, that year he had scheduled his departure for Europe on 18 July. He would spend two weeks in Germany and one in Florence to revisit Pontormo, "about whom I have just completed a short piece."⁵³ Indeed, one year later, his "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel" appeared in the *Art Bulletin*.⁵⁴

In quitting the Titian project, Steinberg gave up publishing not only about the *Presentation*, but also about a handful of other outstanding works, such as the *St Christopher* (Doge's Palace), the *Pesaro Madonna* (church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari), and the *Annunciation* (church of San Salvador). Steinberg's notebook contains notes presumably taken before the paintings, as both the content and unsteady handwriting seem to indicate. A considerable number of cross-outs and amendments attest to his later efforts to fine-tune the wording to capture his impressions in evocative prose. In this way, the notebook registers the first stages of the evolution of language from its descriptive function to a more sophisticated level of expression. In Steinberg's critique, language is exploited for heuristic purposes to put to the test the critic's initial thoughts, and then transformed into a complex epistemological tool to extract information about the structure of an image. Not only does language support and inform visual analysis, but it also innervates the understanding and interpretation of meaningful visual constructs.

A good example of this process is provided by his account of the *St Christopher*, fitted in the space above a door at the foot of a narrow staircase hidden behind a wall in the Doge's apartments (fig. 6). The various clauses he rephrased and amended multiple times describe the gigantic figure in the fresco as a vector of spatial axes in relation with the actual physical setting (fig. 7):

At the sudden sight of this giant Christ bearer
At the sight of this colossus
who commands every spatial dimension
whose slanted limbs jot the converging diagonals of the stair's actual perspective of all
. . . [illegible word] power
whose massive body twists and countertwists, turning right while striding left, and
straining up while bearing down on his pole
the niggard space of the stair house melts or explodes out of existence.⁵⁵

One can get a sense of Steinberg developing his ideas sparked by the viewing of the painting, and the attempt to catch its visual relationships with the physical

environment by matching words not just with the forms represented, but with their spatial functions. As Lisa Florman observes, a metaphoric language of embodiment is preferred to that of merely conceptual apprehension.⁵⁶ Such an elaborate writing rubric discloses an inborn preoccupation with the argumentative efficacy of language, with a view to conveying concepts to an implied reader.

This analytical activity is concentrated in the first half of the notebook, where a section is devoted to each of the four paintings mentioned above. The analysis progressively gives ground to transcriptions — sometimes from a hand other than Steinberg's — of primary and secondary sources related to the history of the Scuola Grande della Carità. This was one of the six lay confraternities (*Scuole Grandi*) active in Venice, which worked as charitable foundations open to all citizens and played a key role in the social landscape of the city, an aspect that Steinberg did not miss to acknowledge in his study.⁵⁷

In the first place he devoted special attention to the original layout of the room where the painting is still preserved, the former meeting hall (*Sala dell'Albergo*) of the Scuola, which was incorporated in the *Gallerie dell'Accademia* when this opened in the early nineteenth century.⁵⁸ For this reason not only did he gather material about the history of the building, but he also endeavored to reconstruct the architecture at the time when the *Presentation* was executed, so as to understand from which viewpoints the brethren may have viewed the painting. This is documented by a number of sketches that fill the final pages of the notebook, showing various hypotheses of reconstruction of the former staircase leading from the lobby to the upper floor, where the room is located (figs. 8, 9). Lastly, the notebook is complemented by the bulk of annotations recorded in a file box organized in sections, which is the result of research conducted locally in the Marciana, Cini and Correr libraries, as well as in the State Archives, and by photographic material regarding Titian's *Presentation*, its spatial surrounding, and other paintings of the same subject.⁵⁹

Critical issues and direct observation

In the letter to David Rosand, site-specificity emerges as Steinberg's main concern with regard to Titian's *Presentation*. This probably explains how Steinberg, not a specialist in Venetian art, was attracted by this work. Just think of the unique situation of a painting preserved in a picture gallery, which at the same time has been hung on the same wall for centuries since its installation. These exceptional circumstances allow a modern spectator to observe the canvas in the facilitated conditions of a museum display, while the gap from the original viewing conditions is reduced to a minimum. However, in his notebook Steinberg bemoans that the painting "tends to be treated (and reproduced) as an easel picture, and to be criticized as such," that is, as "an autonomous pictorial structure, complete in its frame," which "might have been done anywhere (and) for any place."⁶⁰

This and other visual issues related to the site of the picture laid the foundations of Steinberg's analysis. Indeed, the notebook opens with a list of preliminary points and queries, which include:⁶¹

- The easel painting approach to the picture, typically taken on by previous scholars.

- The adjustment of the composition to the actual door that breaks up the contour of the canvas on the right — namely, “the ingenious device of the straight arch . . . by which the painter both acknowledges and neutralizes the real door in the field.”⁶²
- The reconstruction of the original frame.
- Other pictorial adjustments to the space of the room.⁶³
- The unification of icon and narrative through architectural elements borrowed from Sebastiano Serlio.

Especially the adjustment of the composition to the actual door stands out as the kind of anomaly that would have caught Steinberg’s eye, driving him to look closer and ponder, until a memory of something he had previously read would fall into place — as Steinberg himself described the process of his getting engaged in a topic.⁶⁴ In fact, some of the above aspects of the *Carità Presentation* had been brought to his attention by Panofsky during a course on Titian at the New York University in 1963. Steinberg, who audited Panofsky’s classes while he was a professor at the Hunter College, would later describe them as “exhilarating” in his preparation notes for the Titian Metropolitan lecture.⁶⁵

In his Titian course book, also preserved among the Getty papers, Steinberg annotated three issues raised by Panofsky, each describing a problem faced by Titian when he painted the *Presentation*: “A) to accommodate door at right; B) to include archit[ecture] against his natural bent; C) to include portraits of Confraternity members in procession of illustrious donors.”⁶⁶ Expanding on these observations, Steinberg focused on the problems posed to the painter by the constraints of the physical environment. A key argument in his analysis is that Titian himself turned these strictures into critical problems and creative guidelines that “suffuse and determine every feature of his conception.” As he postulates, “this subjection of given conditions to the pictorial program is the founding principle of Titian’s design.”⁶⁷ Steinberg did not miss the great opportunity, provided by the unique display conditions, to try to perform the same visual experience as the spectator for whom the painter originally designed his composition, so as to understand, through direct observation, what focal points Titian considered in relation to the viewer.

Panofsky’s observations were a constant point of reference for Steinberg throughout his Titian research, yet their views on the *Presentation* appear at variance with each other in many respects.⁶⁸ Numerous comments strewn in Steinberg’s files express criticisms of Panofsky’s approach, which is judged as not sufficiently engaged visually.⁶⁹ More generally, Steinberg challenged a number of assumptions made by previous scholars on the painting, for instance Panofsky’s interpretation of the egg seller as a personification of Judaism and the widely accepted identification of Anne with the young girl in yellow at the foot of the staircase.⁷⁰

Such dialectical confrontation with the opinions of former scholars was typical of Steinberg’s *modus operandi*.⁷¹ However, the object is the main catalyst of his attention.⁷² Steinberg overwhelmingly stressed the importance of constant, reiterated direct observation, which is demonstrated in his published works, and emerges clearly in the Titian papers. He had great confidence in his observational

skills, and considered viewing artworks in the flesh the essential starting point for critical inquiry in art history.⁷³

Steinberg's study of the *Carità Presentation* bears traces of meticulous visual analysis, starting from the examination of the physical context. He first addressed the ground floor portico at the junction between the building of the Scuola and the adjoining former church of the Carità, a "substructure" that predetermined "the awkward plan of the Albergo." (figs. 10, 11)⁷⁴ His attention then shifted to the interior setting. With the aid of a sketch of a measured ground plan (fig. 12), he spotted precise correspondences between the composition of the painting and the space of the room, which highlight significant areas of the depiction in relation to the position of the beholder.

To begin with, a visual axis running from the opposite wall, where the altar was formerly placed, lays emphasis on the two figures that can be identified with Joachim and Anne, namely the old couple depicted underneath the twin peaks in the background. Then, it can be observed that the positioning of Joachim bisects the opposite altar wall; and also that, from a viewpoint opposite to Joachim, the cornice of the colonnade on the left of the painting falls into line with the top of the actual left hand wall and first beam of the ceiling. On the other hand, from a viewpoint opposite to Anne, the middle beam appears to fall into line with the cornice of the palaces depicted on the right of the composition.⁷⁵ Such detailed correlations will sound familiar to the reader of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*. Indeed, Steinberg tackled Titian's *Presentation* from the same angle, in a quest to determine the visual axes generated by the intersection between the pictorial plane and the actual viewpoints, so as to infer from direct observation how the painter coped with the restrictions of the site, and exploited them in a creative way.

Steinberg's intoxicating sense of discovery that followed his findings is captured in a passage from the addendum to Rosand's article: "as an unexpected reward for acknowledging the Altar axis of the Albergo, we discover, within the painting, a new focus and a new central character — the real St Anne."⁷⁶ As he enthusiastically declared to Rosand, "the moment of discovery described in the above paragraph was for me one of rare exhilaration, confirming the justice of our [his and Rosand's] approach to the picture by way of its site."⁷⁷ For Steinberg, these were objective, indisputable material facts. What his detractors would probably contest is the trajectory of his conclusions.

Steinberg was indeed a scholar of an uncommon kind, who developed an "agonistic" vision of his profession:⁷⁸ not only did he seek to defy and overpower previous scholars to redefine the way we understand an art object; he also, and above all, confronted himself directly with the artists he studied, as though his taking up the challenge of penetrating their works equaled their taking up the challenge of creating meaningful compositions out of constrained viewing conditions. This performative quality of Steinberg's critical approach, the epistemological function of viewing and re-enacting, also with the aid of drawing, and the use of visual-artistic parameters to face and solve visual-artistic problems — all aspects that are rooted in the art education he received at the Slade School of Fine Arts, University College London (1936-40) — have been only recently brought to the fore by scholars, and are worth further research.⁷⁹

Adaptations to the site

The interest in site-specific paintings, which Steinberg developed since his earliest “Observations on the Cerasi Chapel,” led him to the conclusion that “probably the most important thing that any major innovation in art produces is a new relation to the spectator, or a new conception of what the spectator is.”⁸⁰ In the case of Caravaggio, Steinberg was not concerned with a viewer who typically approaches the paintings frontally, but with one who moves through a narrow space, and sees them obliquely. Likewise, in all of the four Titians he examined Steinberg addresses a spatial context where the beholder is invited or obliged to circulate, change viewpoint, and look askance: the *Presentation* and the *St Christopher* are hung above doors and housed in spaces accessed through, or directly facing, stairs; the *Pesaro Madonna* and the *Annunciation* imply a shift from oblique to frontal view and emphasize viewpoints not aligned with the picture plane, as in the Cerasi Chapel.

For Steinberg the creation of unexpected relations to the onlooker is not a purely formal matter, concerning just who views the painting and in what conditions or from which direction. A painting that is able to produce an innovative “conception of . . . the spectator” is seen, rather, as a consequence of the artist’s ability to convert the constraints of space-related viewing conditions into driving forces to create an original aesthetic form. In such situations, the picture acts as a polymorphic catalyst of multiple visual experiences, as an artifact bearing traces of human labor, of thinking and finding solutions to specific issues. Steinberg’s focus was on paintings that elicit responses from a viewer in motion and have the potential to generate different ways of seeing, therefore of reading it. Actually, one theory might be that his interest in the ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings rests on this appreciation of the many-sidedness of spatial experience in relation to an artwork.⁸¹

All this is exemplified by Steinberg’s analysis of Titian’s *Presentation*, which starts from the “pretty hopeless” spatial situation of the Albergo.⁸² In the Metropolitan lecture he lists the “cramping conditions” of the room, which he describes as: gamma- or L-shaped; of stunted proportions; drastically over-lit by southern exposure; and oppressed by a heavily decorated, old-fashioned ceiling (fig. 13).⁸³ Moreover, the entrance wall for which the painting was destined was pierced by a door. Finally, the focal point of the room, constituted by the altar originally placed at the opposite end of the room (whose wall is now open onto a corridor, accessed by a short steep staircase), fell well to the left of the center of the *Presentation* wall. As a result, this axis could not be used by Titian to emphasize the dramatic focus in the painting, whose narrative, according to the subject and format, had to run from left to right, therefore in the opposite direction. Steinberg therefore recognizes three focal points that Titian had to acknowledge in the painting: “the natural median of the pictorial field, a point to the left of it in line with the altar, and, well to the right, a narrative climax.”⁸⁴

As anticipated above, Steinberg argues that “this subjection of given conditions to the pictorial program is the founding principle of Titian’s design.”⁸⁵ This would be demonstrated by a series of adaptations to the site, which can be summarized as follows:

- The plane of the real wall is identified with the plane of the painted wall by means of planar architecture, where spatial recession is suppressed.
- The pictorial light conforms with the actual light of the room, coming from left.
- The color scheme is keyed to the gold-blue color scheme of the ceiling decoration.
- The composition is adjusted to the visual axes created by the layout of the room.
- The painted architecture continues the lines of the ceiling beams and wooden pilasters of the wainscot underneath.
- The pictorial space is adjusted to the opening of the actual right door.

Following these considerations, the ensuing examination of the *Presentation* is embedded in the observation of the space: each component is regarded as a response to a predetermined situation, a solution to problems posed by the shape of the room, which has guided the painter through the conception of his composition. Hence the insightful remarks on the non-receding character of the painted architecture; the identification of Anne and Joachim by way of their positioning in relation to the opposite wall; the harmonization of the colors of the Virgin's clothes (as well as Joachim's and Anne's) with the ceiling pattern; the natural light that "surges from left to right with increasing momentum," contrasted with Mary's supernatural *mandorla* that "casts no physical light on the beholder," and "remains visionary;"⁸⁶ and, lastly, the mountain tipping to the right to accentuate the internal movement of the scene.

From Steinberg's viewpoint, such visual evidence requires only that the critic assemble the elements in a coherent interpretation. His reading of the image is grounded in vision; no textual evidence, though relevant, is necessary to give it coherence. It would make no sense, for Steinberg, to construct complex interpretations that seek to stand as an intellectual construal detached from the visual, in an attempt to function as autonomous philosophical systems. This is not to say that interpretation is not an intellectual construction; rather, in this respect Steinberg's approach seems to remind of Kant's aesthetic ideas, which are a product of imagination, but combined with the action of the intellect.⁸⁷

Despite this strong emphasis on the spatial relations between the picture and the onlooker and on how these condition the viewing experience, Steinberg's work on Renaissance painting has struggled to gain a central position within the discussion on spectatorship. A possible explanation for this lies in the combined effect of two main factors. On the one hand, while Steinberg refused any engagement with sociological-Marxist theory, he simultaneously resisted developing a postmodernist theory on the power of images, which would move Renaissance studies away from the representational scope favored by iconology and into the broader field of visual studies. On the other hand, his decidedly visual approach is targeted towards detecting meaningful associations, which involve also — though not exclusively — iconographic matters.

Thus, notwithstanding his interest in uncovering interrelations that bring out the role of the viewer, Steinberg's work does not fit in the reductionist perspective

of structuralism, nor does it tally with the social and cultural turn incorporated into the agenda of post-structuralist art history. It retains, in contrast, some characteristics of iconological inquiry, in that it addresses content-related issues. The study of Titian's *Presentation* is emblematic. In analyzing every single detail of the composition and element of the *dramatis personae*, Steinberg seeks to attribute to each of them a specific role within the construction of meaning, at times proceeding by way of comparisons with the iconographic tradition — for instance by exploring the symbolism of the egg seller. However, his iconographic investigation is directed at clarifying what meaning a given element of the pictorial plane produces for the beholder, *hic et nunc*.

Although symbolism is involved in his research, Steinberg's art history is not concerned with unveiling hidden mysteries, disclosing allegorical interpretations, or drawing inter-textual relations. Its aim is not to decrypt symbols, but to reveal through attentive observation how the inner structure of an image creates, orders, and defines symbolic associations in the specific circumstances of its viewing. Symbolism is not predicated on external sources, but by reason of visual connections which activate meanings that lie within the frame of reference of the subject depicted. The study of Titian's *Presentation* illustrates well how Steinberg regards the symbolism of an iconographic motif mainly as a function of the viewer's experience, which is activated only once the motif has become visually meaningful in relation to the reality of the spectator. Symbolism in Steinberg's analysis is never inter-textual; it is, rather, structural and intra-visual. His tirade, in the *Sexuality of Christ*, against what he labeled as "textism," the inability of art historians to see pictures as primary sources and the "deference to farfetched texts," captures the unconventional nature of his approach.⁸⁸

Multiple levels of reality

A large part of Steinberg's analysis of the *Presentation* deals with the egg seller woman, or *Vecchia* (crone) (fig. 14), as he calls her, borrowing from the title of Giorgione's celebrated painting in the Accademia. This figure struck him because of both its distinctive appearance and its positioning on the very brink of the composition: [the](#)

[old woman is marvelously locked into the framework of the wall masonry; she is set against its coordinate system, and her sharp nose dips down to a horizontal which is exactly the eye level of the whole picture. We can tell from the treads of the stair that everything above this line is seen from below, while everything under it is seen from above.](#)⁸⁹

Steinberg took his cue from Panofsky's consideration that "in an artist of Titian's stature even space-fillers are significant."⁹⁰ However, he sternly disagreed with Panofsky's [understanding](#) of the *Vecchia* as an emblem of Judaism "superseded by the new faith."⁹¹ [In the Metropolitan lecture Steinberg listed four objections to that interpretation, which worth considering since they give a sense of how his reasoning differs from Panofsky's.](#)

[First, from the early seventeenth century onwards the local guidebooks speak of the egg seller as a country woman \(*villana* or *contadina*\). Such a "spectacular failure of communication" – as Steinberg would later call it in his notes – would be](#)

unimaginable for an artist like Titian, who would be aware that Jews “are never rendered as peasants.”⁹² Titian “would be a different kind of painter if his intended personification of something dead in the soul could become for the Venetians of the succeeding centuries an object of affectionate admiration.”⁹³

The second objection concerns a parallel Panofsky had established between Titian’s *Vecchia* and the Jewish merchants in Dürer’s woodcut of the *Presentation* from the *Life of the Virgin* series.⁹⁴ Placed in the foreground on the left, right before the flight of stairs that the Virgin has just started to climb, these would stand for Judaism. Steinberg counters that in Dürer’s image, “as in the story of Christ driving the money-changers out of the Temple,” the Jewish merchants are not intended in opposition to the new faith, “because after all the Temple he drives them out of is still the Jewish temple.”⁹⁵ The contrast is, rather, between sacred and profane, for they are expelled as profaners, not as Jewish.

Steinberg annotated the aforementioned Titian course book with the following comments, with reference to this figure:

Workaday world – The same which by 1550, in the work of Aertsen, begins to displace sacred scene from the foreground. . . . The egg-woman, then, should be understood, somewhat as we understand the expelled money-changers in the Temple cleansing scenes — not as specifically Jewish, but as the mercenary working world . . . [illegible word] as such — the profane.

He then muses on what triggered her presence:

And why has inclusion here? Because that damned doorway made the intrusion of the real practical world a fact within the work already. It could not be licked, so it had to be joined. But it was the real world that intruded on his painting — not Jewry!⁹⁶

With ill-concealed irritation, Steinberg, of Jewish origins like Panofsky, rebuts — and this is his third objection — that “the kind of anti-semitism which Panofsky imputes to Titian was not characteristic of sixteenth-century Venice,” and “neither the cultural environment nor the iconography of the subject demanded it.”⁹⁷ Finally, Steinberg’s fourth objection fully clarifies his position:

the location of the old woman with respect to the door, and to the picture plane is such an important feature that it ought to be taken into consideration as a clue to her nature. She demands to be interpreted within the room and with reference to the picture plane.⁹⁸

For Steinberg, the *Vecchia* “is simply characterized as the here and the now, as the world, the link and transition from the real place to that of the fable.”⁹⁹ In this regard, he turned to his own advantage Panofsky’s suggestion that Giorgione’s famous *Vecchia* foreshadows Titian’s egg seller, for “this w[oul]d confirm my interpretation of the latter as world rather than O[ld] T[estament].”¹⁰⁰

In this way, Steinberg comes to the conclusion that the old woman represents one of the different levels of reality that coexist in the *Presentation*. The members of the Scuola, portrayed on the left, would embody yet another level of reality, acknowledging the visual and cultural world of the spectator. Titian has clearly

distinguished and distanced this group from the historical characters of the narrative, by placing the portraits of the *confratelli* on a different spatial plane. Almsgiving, a daily practice of the confraternity, is depicted on the very left, at the opposite end of the sacred event, whose divine nature is signaled by the *mandorla* of light swathing Mary. Among the *confratelli*, a begging woman with a child in her arms evokes the personification of Charity, from which the philanthropic institution takes its name. "It seems that Titian," Steinberg points out, "has raised the common routine of the Albergo to an idealized plane."¹⁰¹ His next remark, that the egg seller is dressed like the women who used to beg for charity in the room is less compelling, because unsupported. However, the observation deserves attention, for it enlightens how, by welding the fictive to the real space, the painting becomes meaningful for the viewer. For Titian, Steinberg argues, "the pictorial surface becomes a thoroughgoing symbolic structure on which he can chart and graph levels of spiritual status."¹⁰²

The recognition of shifting levels of reality determined by the relationships between the figures and the pictorial space recurs in Steinberg's work; in the Titian research, however, it is the main focus of attention. In pursuing this interest, Steinberg expanded on an idea that can be traced back to Heinrich Wölfflin, who identified different degrees of reality in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes, setting apart the Prophets and Sibyls from the narrative scenes.¹⁰³ Furthermore, he built on the study of the symbolic uses of space, to which Richard Krautheimer had introduced him.¹⁰⁴ Steinberg was thus pioneering a field that was then largely unexplored; still, it is not the topic in itself that was innovative, but how he tackled it.

In some respects, his argument can be likened to Sven Sandström's theory on Italian Renaissance mural painting, exposed in his *Levels of Unreality* (1963).¹⁰⁵ Sandström took the cue from Panofsky's well-known notion of disguised symbolism in Flemish Early Renaissance painting, where apparently naturalistic artifacts can take on allegorical signification, while they mingle with lifelike depictions of other objects without disrupting the fictive unity of space and time of the representation. This system of representation would supersede that of the high medieval era, which deployed both symbols and naturalistic objects "on the same level of reality — or, rather, non-reality."¹⁰⁶ From the very title of his book, Sandström develops this concept to explore the unstable balance between the decorative and the narrative in Italian mural painting, which Renaissance artists, in his opinion, were well aware of. On the one hand, both the decorative frame with its architectural illusionistic elements and the narrative depictions encircled by the frame can be appreciated in their own right for their distinctive levels of reality, one described as "objective," the other as "pictorial."¹⁰⁷ While the former is illusionistically correlated to the real space of the beholder, the latter is arranged according to distinct spatial principles. Each of them is a homogeneous, coherently organized, pictorial system. On the other hand, though, what they form altogether is a decorative system that, however illusionistic, reveals its incongruity precisely because it is constituted of parts that show different levels of reality. In the complex pattern of the Sistine ceiling, for instance, various types of depiction coexist (elements of fictive frames, Prophets and Sibyls, the *Ignudi*, the Old Testament scenes), each representing a different level of reality in relation to our viewing experience. They are mutually exclusive, because

we cannot see them all together at the same time as part of a consistent unifying level of reality, but only as discrete parts of a decorative system, which therefore reveals its quality as an object and its discontinuity with the real space of the viewer — in a word: its unreality.

Unlike Sandström, Steinberg deals with a single narrative painting, where there cannot be such a level of separation between pictorial elements as in multilayered decorative systems. However, within the depiction he identifies different levels of reality in relation to the viewing experience, and this is triggered by the combination of two components that, similar to frames in mural decorations, create continuity with the real space while at the same time revealing the otherness of the pictorial space. These components are the fictive arch adjusted to the actual door and the egg seller. Whereas the former is designed to mediate the outside world into the world of the picture, the latter partially disrupts this continuity and unveils the fictionality of the arch. Although included in the representation, the *Vecchia* is so placed at the margin of the depiction, isolated both spatially and narratively, that she short-circuits the fictive unity of the representation. She is an intrusion of the real world into the pictorial world, not entirely integrated within it, halfway between here and there. As Steinberg noted down in his files, this figure “is key to Titian’s thinking of actual space in relation to the eternal mystery of the picture plane, i.e. the nature of the artistic experience.”¹⁰⁸

Steinberg detected here one of those “internal safeguards against illusion” that old masters scattered in their paintings to ensure that “attention would remain focused upon the art.”¹⁰⁹ However, apart from discerning the correlation between the fictive arch and the *Vecchia*, he does not seem to have been able to pin down what exactly triggers this effect of intrusion. But Steinberg’s intuition is buttressed by a fact that can be appreciated and verified through observation. Indeed, it can be noticed that the spatial situation created by the fictive straight arch and the positioning of the egg seller is a spatial paradox. While this will need further discussion in a different forum, the reader of the present article may easily ascertain the illusionistic impracticality of Titian’s design by trying to reconstruct how the slice of ground on which the *Vecchia* sits would connect to the arch. If we are to believe that the straight arch simultaneously lies on the plane of the staircase and connects to the actual door, as the illusionism of the picture implies, it follows that the staircase and the actual door have to lie on the same plane, a situation that should exclude any possible space between the staircase and the arch/door. Here, however, is placed the *Vecchia*. Whether an unresolved issue of the coordination between the real and the fictive space, or the result of a miscalculation, or an intentional device to challenge the illusionism of the representation, this simple fact explains why this figure was so troublesome for Steinberg, and justifies his assumption that her symbolic presence precedes her iconographic identification.

Apparently it is the disturbance wreaked by her presence next to the arch/door that encouraged Steinberg to identify further levels of reality in connection with the positioning of the other figures across the pictorial surface. According to his reading, each of these levels reflects a psychological or spiritual condition of the characters, which becomes meaningful for the viewer, thus gaining symbolic signification. In this respect Steinberg’s attitude differs both from Panofsky, for whom symbolism is primarily textual, not affective, and from Sandström, who is

not concerned with the symbolism of the various levels of reality of a picture. Some similarities with Sandström's argument, however, can be noticed, for here too we can gather that the coherence of the depiction does not work on one and the same level of reality, but can be fully grasped only on a level of unreality, that of the painting — a point coherent with the one formulated in "Other Criteria," that Renaissance painters did not disguise the tension between surface and illusion.¹¹⁰

Steinberg may not have known Sandström's book, which is never mentioned in his Titian files and does not appear in the catalog of his personal library.¹¹¹ Be that as it may, their viewpoints are grounded in the same assumption that painting defines its modes of expression as a function of the interactions between the picture plane and the spectator, which contradicts the emphasis placed by formalism on the inner qualities of an artwork.¹¹² Yet Steinberg goes well beyond, by further associating the multiple levels of reality of Titian's painting with an alternation of different stylistic levels and representational modes, an idea that he was concurrently developing in his studies on Picasso.¹¹³ For instance, the portraits of the *confratelli* look detached from the narrative, and "their distinct reality status is expressed through a retrospective style" that recalls the local tradition of narrative cycles for the Scuole, *à la* Carpaccio and explain the "archaistic banality" that Roberto Longhi had sensed in the painting.¹¹⁴

Similar conclusions are drawn about Titian's *Jacopo Pesaro being presented by Pope Alexander VI to Saint Peter* (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum), where Steinberg identifies diverse levels of reality according to the stylistic rendering of each of the characters: Pesaro is a "real man" coming from our world, accompanied "by the shadowy portrait of his dead patron," while Peter evokes the prototype of a Gothic sculpture as he is "a symbolic effigy the Church". In addition,

we are given a contrast of spatial and temporal indices, an indication of place and mythological time in the relief on the base, and a background which refers back to the recent battle [of Santa Maura], so that foreground and background contrast not as here and there, but as *here* and *then*.¹¹⁵

In the *Pesaro Madonna* Steinberg sees a reversal of the previous scheme, with the donors now flat and hierarchical, whereas the saintly figures "look actual and real". The donors are therefore eternalized – this seems to be his conclusion – through their visionary experience, on the threshold between the real and the spiritual worlds.¹¹⁶

Like any other formal quality, stylistic handling and manipulation of pictorial tradition are embedded in the interrelation between the pictorial plane and the real space; they are not imposed by the master a priori or without taking into account the viewing experience of the spectator. In that respect, Steinberg would have soon found a valuable interlocutor, and a good ally and friend, in a younger scholar who was making his way in the field: David Rosand. However, whereas they shared an interest in a markedly visual approach, the ways they tackled and incorporated the socio-cultural context into their inquiries differed significantly. Peering into their exchange of ideas will help to better situate Steinberg's analysis.

The exchange with David Rosand

In the letter of June 1973 Steinberg amply commended David Rosand, and declared that reading him was “a continuing education.” After lauding the younger colleague for his advances in the study of Venetian art, Steinberg announced he would leave for Italy, yet miss Venice, and added: “but Venice is yours, my friend, and it’s in good hands.”¹¹⁷ In his turn, when Rosand published his article on the *Presentation*, he acknowledged Steinberg in the opening footnote and mentioned him twice in the text, accepting the identification both of a privileged visual axis from the altar and of the figures of Elizabeth and Zacharias.¹¹⁸

The two scholars had a similar approach to the picture, centering on the conjunction of form and content in the image’s structure. This may come as no surprise, knowing that Rosand also was educated as an artist.¹¹⁹ Rosand, however, brought his study to a more advanced stage. As Steinberg’s words of esteem suggest, he himself was certainly aware that Rosand had conducted a more systematic investigation of Venetian painting, and developed accordingly a more comprehensive view of the topic. His analysis of the *Presentation* is supported by a sound exploration of the socio-cultural environment in which it originated. As a result, his understanding of the role of the characters and of any symbolic implication attached to the picture is more profoundly rooted in the context of the Scuola, especially its devotional and liturgical practices in relation to the subject depicted. Tellingly, he brings to the discussion a description of the sacred drama staged during the feast of the Presentation, and other scriptural texts related to Divine Wisdom, which provide a basis to his reading of the picture.

Considering this, it is understandable why Steinberg never published his study. He was an outstandingly accurate writer, who took plenty of time to hone his ideas and set them forth in the most appropriate way. After the Metropolitan lecture, his thoughts on Titian had not yet developed into academic writing by the time Rosand completed his research on the same topic. Steinberg’s interest in the subject was seemingly discouraged by Rosand’s findings and diverted towards other areas of research — Michelangelo and Picasso in particular. What the younger scholar offered was an analysis embedded in the world of a spectator socially and historically circumscribed. Steinberg, although clearly aware of the importance of socio-ideological contexts, as demonstrated by his references to the reality of the Scuola della Carità, its charitable activities, and the strong sense of identity of its *confratelli*, did not incorporate such analysis into his agenda.¹²⁰

It is this contextualization that marks a distinction between Steinberg’s and Rosand’s approaches. Unlike Steinberg, Rosand delved into the city and its civilization, which would allow him to be established quickly as a leading figure in the field of Venetian art. Accordingly, his reading of the Carità picture stresses the distinctiveness of Venetian decorations on the whole and emphasizes how Titian’s composition gratified the Venetians’ characteristic sense of identity.

It would be erroneous, though, to consider context as entirely absent from Steinberg’s inquiry. It is just that in the first instance he looks at paintings as part of *spatially determined* contexts, not as mere functions of *socially defined* contexts. Social meanings are not excluded, but brought into play through the interrelation between the picture, the world with its social structure, and the beholder as a social being.

To better grasp this point, it is worth citing Alexander Nagel, who has forcefully described Steinberg's critical stance with regard to his early study on the Cerasi Chapel. According to Nagel, once Steinberg

connected the Caravaggios to their environment, he could easily have decided to pin them down again by making them a function of "context," that is, by positing the determining factors of programmatically positioned viewers and specific church rituals — an "institutional" and "functional" explanation answering to the basic iconographic impulse to explain pictures by reference to an external program. This kind of institutional determinism was to become the industrial norm of scholarship in the next decades. Instead, what mattered to Steinberg was the idea of an opening of aesthetic space to "potential intrusion," a "disorderly flux" destabilizing the boundaries between life and art — an art work, in short, that achieves a "terrible actuality."¹²¹

Rosand's work is too strongly embedded in the analysis of the pictorial components, too sensitive to how the structure of the image relates to the spectator, and, therefore, too far-reaching in its conclusions, to be charged of "institutional determinism." Rosand himself advocated that an art historian must appropriate and master the "language of pictorial expression." In a 1974 article, he acknowledges that "our experience of modern art . . . has awakened an awareness of the fundamentals of art," thus disclosing to art history the "theoretical foundations of criticism." In particular he praises Meyer Schapiro's pivotal contribution to defining the "characteristics of the pictorial field" and of the "functioning constituents of pictorial art," after which there can no longer be a "merely impressionistic" criticism in the analysis of medieval and early modern art. For Rosand art history must focus on the "language of pictorial expression," that is, "its vocabulary, its grammar and syntax," and "need not remain dependent upon extrinsic perspectives." He finally draws the conclusion that "the meaning of an image, in its richest and continuing sense, resides essentially in its structure."¹²²

Nagel's observations, however, are useful to understand how Rosand, by addressing a set of institutionalized behaviors and conventions, somehow complemented Steinberg's study of Titian, in a way similar to how Joseph Connors' work harmonized with Steinberg's study on Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.¹²³ Steinberg confined his interest to the interplay between the painting and the spatial environment, and pointed to the painter's artistic challenge in relation to the viewer's response. This aspect is also encompassed by Rosand's study, where the author stresses that the "essential imaginative impulse behind each of the iconographic passages . . . is always pictorial, the conceptual realization always visual." Moreover, Rosand posits that the figures "operate on several levels of significance," which is somewhat in keeping with Steinberg's idea of different levels of reality functioning in the picture.¹²⁴ Still, the analysis of the structural and pictorial qualities of the image forms the basis for an interpretation that considers the painting as the product of the artist's original response to a programmatic set of functions provisioned by the patrons.

For his part, Steinberg acknowledges a socially defined spectator, and is conscious that the personal or collective expectations of the onlooker are projected onto the visual experience. This includes himself as a critic, as part of a chain of opinions built over time and epochs, which add to the understanding of an artwork.

However, Steinberg was not specifically interested in investigating social processes as generators of meaning-making. As Michael Hill points out, for Steinberg “the principle standard for interpretation is that of internal consistency,” where the single elements of an artwork are to be assessed “by reference to its entire creative logic, while divining that logic from prolonged formal analysis.” This “poetical approach” constitutes “an alternative to the social history of art, in which art is seen as an end product of material and cultural factors.” Accordingly, interpretation stems from a conversation between the artwork and the beholder, and occurs when the former awakens the latter’s imagination through attentive observation and a process of internalization.¹²⁵

Along these lines, for Steinberg symbolism is not a fixed iconographical or structural element operating within the inner logic of the depiction, but an inherent function of the act of beholding, triggered by the pictorial devices that the artist expressly contrived so as to kindle the response of a built-in viewer. Meanings are not merely imposed by the artist on the spectator, but originate from the “living encounter” between this and the artwork.¹²⁶ For Rosand, instead, symbolism is activated at the junction point between the visual strategies mobilized by the artist, the programmatic text of the picture, and the recognition of conventional functions on the part of an informed viewer.

This substantial difference between Steinberg’s and Rosand’s readings of Titian’s *Presentation* is exemplified by the only point of disagreement between them, that is the interpretation of the *Vecchia*. Like Panofsky, Rosand identified her with the Synagogue. He considered her as a symbolic component coordinated with the general theme of Mary as Divine Wisdom, which would command the arrangement and signification of various elements of the composition.¹²⁷ For Steinberg, instead, she is but an intrusion of the real world into the world of the painting. Her symbolic implications are a function of vision, for, by virtue of her pictorial essence, she designates a level of reality recognized by the onlooker. To function as symbol, she does not require a textual referent, other than the pictorial text itself, which denotes her as a symbolic reminder of a reality external to the sacred narrative enacted in the picture.¹²⁸

Of course it is legitimate to expect such act of recognition from viewers, like the brethren of the Carità, whose aesthetic disposition towards the picture would presumably fall under the rubric of what Pierre Bourdieu calls “popular aesthetic,” that is, as a tendency towards establishing a “continuity between art and life, which implies the subordination of form to function,” as opposed to a tendency towards being absorbed in the cultured aesthetic of the pure gaze.¹²⁹ To the brethren, one may contend, the egg seller would be likely to appear as a link between the reality of the representation and that of the institutionalized, socially fraught space of the Albergo. This would facilitate the application of the schemes of their ethos to the picture in relation to the functions fulfilled by the room as one of the spaces where the life of the Scuola took place. Accordingly, Steinberg lays emphasis on the representation of almsgiving in connection to the portraits of the *confratelli*, and suggests that the *Vecchia* resembles one of the poor women assisted by the Scuola. I suspect, however, that for Steinberg the activation of such a symbolic function goes well beyond a mere act of self-inclusion. As any beholder is able to distinguish between the individualized effigies of the *confratelli* and the historical characters,

even without being contemporary to the portrayed sitters or informed about their identities, so too would anyone, at any time in history, recognize that the *Vecchia* is, structurally, an element of everyday life, removed from the sacred narrative and placed on the threshold between the real and the fictive.

Conclusions: decorum and viewing experience

The *Carità Presentation* is perceived by Steinberg as having an enduring effect on the modern spectator by dint of its dynamic relationship with the space where the viewing experience is performed. Within this space the historicized viewer was invited to respond to the picture in a personal way within a range of meanings anticipated and prompted by the picture itself in conjunction with its socio-cultural context. Within the same space, the picture still invites the modern critic to retrace that same frame of meanings by combining the viewing experience with historical investigation. That is why the preservation of the painting's site-specific qualities is crucial.

This attitude is embedded in the belief that the relationship between an artwork and its beholder is not fixed in a given historical context, but can be appropriated and revitalized by any viewer through mindful observation.¹³⁰ When a picture commands the attention of the spectator, this is enabled to track down the mechanisms of the picture by putting them to the test. In a sense, the picture itself provides evidence of its internal functioning by disclosing it through visual experience. Therefore the interrelation between the picture plane and the beholder in the surrounding space is seen by Steinberg as a matter of fact and a piece of evidence of the artist's agenda.

While to the most skeptical this may seem an interpretive tour de force, one may go so far as to argue that such an approach has, on the contrary, a strong heuristic potential. For the conceptual framework in which it is grounded rests on a key principle of Renaissance art, one that, by defining the criteria of appropriateness of the representation to the context, was meant to provide the artist with objective parameters throughout the creative process. That concept is decorum, and its kinship with site-specificity suggests that the relevance of this aspect to Renaissance art has been underestimated to some extent by Steinberg's critics.

Steinberg was mainly concerned with the function of the picture plane as a link between the world created by the depiction and the preformed world of the surrounding reality, an issue connected with the twofold nature of the picture plane both as an opaque surface with a configuration and as the transparent carrier of a representation.¹³¹ While these matters are central to twentieth-century art, they also forcefully emerge in sixteenth-century Italian art theory, where representation is understood as resulting from the capacity of the mind to form internal ideas and connect them with the external world.

Decorum is the linchpin that connects the inner and the outer worlds, as it sets the criteria of order and proportionality to which the representation is to be keyed. It superintends the process of objectification of the world imagined by the artist — a process in which, [as Robert Williams has pointed out](#), the spectator plays a key role.¹³² Decorum regulates the relation between the picture and its setting and function, as well as between the things depicted and those in nature and, finally, between the various parts of the depiction. It provides the guiding principles to

create a system of absolutes that correlates the “order of the of illusion” to the “order of the world.”¹³³ This should occur in such a way that, while, on the one hand, the idea in the artist’s mind takes on visible shape and extends into the world of experience, on the other the contingency of experience is subsumed in the supreme order of the representation. As a consequence, the subjective world imagined by the artist is objectified through the encounter with the world to which the viewer belongs; in turn, the subjective response of the viewer is objectified in the absolute system of the depiction. It is in this way, beyond the contingency of everyday life, [and not by subjugation to it](#), that the representation fulfills socio-cultural functions for its historicized audience. By applying the laws of decorum, the artist seeks to generate an interplay between “representation as a whole” and “reality as a whole,” the subjective and the objective experience, the private and the public sphere, relating individual imagination to social practice.¹³⁴

Steinberg’s attention to site-specificity is oriented towards the identification of principles that may have guided the artist through this process of objectification of the imagined world. This does not just entail the appropriateness of the representation to setting and function, but concerns the wholeness of the system, how it is coordinated with the real world through composition, style and naturalism. Steinberg’s analysis pivots on the principle of decorum, placing emphasis on the viewing experience to go back to the original ideas in the artist’s mind, in search for criteria that do not stem from either the artist’s or the critic’s whim, but lie in the objective conditions of the spatial context. Though viewers respond subjectively to the picture, they are all confronted with the same spatial situation, which provides an actual palimpsest commanding both the inner order of the depiction and the viewing experience.

Accordingly, Steinberg focuses on how Titian correlates the internal world of the picture and the external world of the onlooker. This happens not by means of mere illusionism, which would imply the temporary effacement of the boundaries between the real and the depicted, thereby of the picture plane as such. On the contrary, the artist coordinates the experience within the image with the experience without while keeping the boundaries partially intact, that is by acknowledging, instead of obliterating, the “cramping conditions” of the room. As a result, the picture plane is not a mere continuation of the beholder’s reality, as the paradox that short-circuits the illusionism of the arch/door reiterates. In fact, the picture contains multiple levels of reality, which beckon and attract the spectator into the world of the representation while also drawing attention to the configuration of the picture plane and making one aware of the act of viewing. It can be added that these multiple levels form a variety-in-unity, which displays the ability of the artist to create a coherent system reflecting and normalizing the variety of the real world. The variation of styles within the picture is part of this multiplicity.¹³⁵

Thus empowered by the relation with the order of the world surrounding it, the representation intersects and commands the experience of the onlooker. This crucial point of Steinberg’s reasoning is well captured in the closing notes of the Metropolitan lecture: the “wall — identified with Titian’s pictorial plane — is inserted into a man’s path [~~“spiral ascent”~~ crossed out], as the pivot of his motion. His first sight of the picture makes it the ideal and visionary fulfilment [*sic*] of his own ascent.” The painting, which is the final step and highest point of an ascension

through the staircase from the ground floor lobby, completes and transforms that kinetic experience into a visionary experience (fig. 15). The picture plane “puts itself at a point in the world [“becomes the very world” crossed out] but with such a commanding power and imagination that the world must dance to its tune [“attendance on its dance” crossed out].”¹³⁶ The objects depicted gain significance as a function of a viewing experience performed in the actual world, but it is the picture itself that dictates the rhythm of that experience.¹³⁷ It is the aim of Steinberg’s study to revive that rhythm, through an embodied viewing experience.

Lisa Florman has argued that the metaphoric language employed by Steinberg to examine Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* “gives voice to positions actually articulated” in the painting, therefore it would be erroneous to see it as an expression of the critic’s subjective feelings.¹³⁸ This applies even more so to site-specific pictures such as Titian’s *Presentation*, where the spatial context provides an objective framework for the beholders’ shared experience. Along these lines, for Steinberg the site is the arena where the critic becomes enmeshed with the picture and performs a creative act akin to that of the artist, just in the reverse direction: whereas the artist considers the actual spatial context to objectify an imagined world through the depiction, [through the spatial experience](#) the critic seeks to reestablish the original relation between the depiction and the spatial context to track down the artist’s intentions.

To harmonize the world of the spectator with the world of the picture is an ambitious endeavor. It requires that first the subjectivity of the experience be pitted against the objective configuration of the picture plane. However, once the attention is shifted towards its representational aspect, the picture plane becomes the subject that governs the viewer’s experience, exploiting the objectifying circumstances in which that experience occurs. It is in this principle that Steinberg grounded his belief in the “mutual dependency of aroused viewer and pictorial structure”, without which, as he put it, “there is no picture.”¹³⁹

Abstract

In the mid to late 1960s art critic Leo Steinberg carried out a research on Titian, which was never to be published and has remained unknown to scholars so far. By examining research material now held by the Getty Research Institute, this study reconstructs Steinberg’s inquiry on the topic and discusses more broadly its methodological significance in relation both to his critical thinking and to key issues concerning the study of Renaissance art. In particular, it deals with Steinberg’s interest in the relationships between the picture plane and the real space, site-specificity, and the spectator’s engagement. Steinberg’s critical attitude is analyzed by comparison with that of Erwin Panofsky and David Rosand, with whom he was principally concerned throughout the investigation of Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin*. Finally, the article evaluates how today Steinberg’s approach can effectively serve the analysis of pre-modern artworks from an alternative perspective to mainstream art history.

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Fig. 14: Titian (Italian, ca. 1490–1577). *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, detail of the egg seller woman, 1534–38, oil on canvas, 335 x 775 cm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia. Photo: Matteo De Fina. Copyright: Gallerie dell'Accademia.

Fig. 15: Leo Steinberg (American, 1920-2011), notebook on Titian, page showing sketches and notes for the reconstruction of the former staircase leading from the ground floor to the Sala dell'Albergo of the Scuola Grande della Carità, Venice. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

I wish to acknowledge the BA/Leverhulme Small Research Grant for support in funding the research. The first steps of this work were taken in 2012, when I made a preliminary examination of the material. I am most grateful to Thomas Gaetgens and Alexa Sekyra for inviting me back to the Getty Research Institute in 2015 to study the Steinberg Papers more thoroughly. A shorter version of the article was presented at the annual conference of the Renaissance Society of America, Chicago, March 30, 2017. Special thanks to Daniele Di Cola, Michele Di Monte, Gail Feigenbaum, Jérémie Koering, and Sheila Schwartz for reading the manuscript and providing invaluable advice. I am deeply indebted with Celeste McNamara for proofreading the first version of this article. I would also like to show my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of the Getty Research Journal for their constructive comments.

¹ Getty Research Institute, Leo Steinberg research papers, Series III, Titian research, 1965-1986, box 8; subsequent references to this collection will be given as Leo Steinberg research papers, followed by the box and, when available, folder and page numbers.

² An important biographical source on Steinberg is: Leo Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," interview by Richard Candida Smith, February 17-18, 21, 1998, Getty Research Institute, Art History Oral Documentation Project, <https://archive.org/details/gesturaltraceleo00stei>. For a general survey on Steinberg's life and works, see: Rosalind Krauss, "The Slung Leg Hypothesis," *October* 136 (Spring 2011): 218-21; Achim Hochdörfer, "Passages: Leo Steinberg (1920-2011)," *Artforum International* 50, no. 2, (2011): 57-62; Richard Brilliant, "On or about Leo Steinberg," in "In memory of Leo Steinberg (1920-2011)," *Notes in the History of Art* 31/32, no. 4/1, special issue (Summer 2012/Fall 2012): 32-35; Michael Hill, "Steinberg, Leo," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6: 44-48; Daniele Di Cola, "L'arte come unità del

molteplice. I fondamenti critici di Leo Steinberg (1920-2011)” (PhD diss., Università di Roma La Sapienza, 2016-17); Sheila Schwartz, preface to Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo’s Sculpture: Selected Essays*, ed. Sheila Schwartz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), vii-x; [Sheila Schwartz], “Leo Steinberg: Chronology,” *ibid.*, 209-11; *Leo Steinberg Now. Il pensiero attraverso gli occhi*, ed. Guillaume Cassegrain, Claudia Cieri Via, Jérémie Koering and Sheila Schwartz (Rome: Campisano, forthcoming).

³ As reported in the header of the lecture transcript (see note 5 below), this was part of four lectures titled “Four Paintings,” delivered at the Metropolitan Museum. These included lectures on: Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo*; Picasso’s *Women of Algiers*; and Rauschenberg’s *Bed*. Sheila Schwartz, email message to author, March 21, 2017; Daniele Di Cola, email message to author, March 24, 2017.

⁴ David Rosand, “Titian’s Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola della Carità,” *Art Bulletin* 58, no. 1 (March 1976): 55-84. A revised and expanded version appears in David Rosand, *Painting in Sixteenth-Century Venice: Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 62-106.

⁵ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 1. Subsequent references to this material will be given as Steinberg, “Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple,” followed by page numbers.

⁶ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 4; subsequent references to this will be given as Steinberg, “Tiziano,” followed by the page numbers.

⁷ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folders 1 and 3; box 8.

⁸ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 2. Rosand’s manuscript is titled “Lux Mundi: A Reading of Titian’s Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple.”

⁹ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 5.

¹⁰ Getty Research Institute, Estate of Leo Steinberg: Professional Papers (© Sheila Schwartz), box 13A.

¹¹ Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 55-91, based on a lecture given at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in March 1968. On the flatbed surface theory: Sylvia Harrison, “Leo Steinberg: Pop, “Post-Modernist” Painting and the Flatbed Picture Plane,” in *Pop Art and the Origins of Post-Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96-117; John Cunnally, “Antiquarianism and the Origins of the Flatbed Matrix,” in “In memory of Leo Steinberg,” 6-12. See also Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of the Time* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 190-95, who points out how the study of the relationship between spatial constraints and Renaissance painting was key for Steinberg to develop his flatbed theory.

¹² Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 82.

¹³ Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 84. See: John Cunnally, “Antiquarianism,” 7; Harrison, “Leo Steinberg,” 97.

¹⁴ Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 84.

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art & Literature* 4 (Spring 1965): 193, quoted in Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 67. Greenberg’s article was first published in a slightly different form in *Arts Yearbook*, 1 (1961): 101-08. Steinberg developed

the same argument against formalism also in: Leo Steinberg, "The Twin Prongs of Art Criticism," *Sewanee Review* 60, no. 3 (July-September 1952): 433-444; Leo Steinberg, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind," *Partisan Review* 20, No. 2 (March-April 1953): 194-212, republished in *Other Criteria*, 289-306. On Steinberg and Greenberg see: David Levi Strauss, "Rescuing Art from Modern Oblivion," *Wilson Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 34-49, republished as "It Has to Be Danced to Be Known: On Leo Steinberg," in *From Head to Hand: Art and the Manual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167-84; Michael Hill, "Leo Steinberg vs Clement Greenberg, 1952-72," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 14, no. 1 (2014), pp. 21-29.

¹⁶ Steinberg, "The Eye is a Part of the Mind," 291.

¹⁷ Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 103-04, quoted in Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 91.

¹⁸ Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 68-77.

¹⁹ Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 71.

²⁰ As stressed by Harrison, "Leo Steinberg," 99-110, Steinberg was here attacking two main tenets of Greenberg's formalist theory: self-definition and self-criticism.

²¹ Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 81, 77.

²² Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 81.

²³ Leo Steinberg, "Observations in the Cerasi Chapel," *Art Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (June 1959): 183-190. For Steinberg's complete list of publications, see Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Sculpture*, 213-18.

²⁴ David Carrier, "Art and Its Spectators," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 1986): 5-17; Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, "The Spectator: Riegl, Steinberg, and Morris," in *Writing Art History: Disciplinary departures* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 2010), 90-108; Daniele Di Cola, "Leo Steinberg e lo spettatore. Caravaggio, Velázquez, Picasso," in *Leo Steinberg Now* (forthcoming).

²⁵ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, rev. ed.), originally published as an article in *October* 25 (Summer 1983): 1-222. All other citations refer to the 1996 edition. On the methodological underpinnings of *The Sexuality of Christ*, see Levi Strauss, "Rescuing Art," 43-49; Brilliant, "On or about Leo Steinberg," 34-35; Richard Neer, introduction to Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Sculpture*, xii. An example of Steinberg's book being classified under the limiting rubrics of iconology is provided in Anne D'Alleva's *Methods & Theories of Art History*, 2nd ed. (London: Laurence King, 2012), 22.

²⁶ Levi-Strauss "It Has to Be Danced," p. 170.

²⁷ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 87-89.

²⁸ A similar argument is compellingly developed by Lisa Florman, in relation to Steinberg's reading of Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. Lisa Florman, "The Difference Experience Makes in 'The Philosophical Brothel'," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 4 (December 2003): 769-83. Florman has stressed how Steinberg moved away from Panofskyan iconology and embraced, rather, a tradition that traces back to Alois Riegl.

²⁹ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 147; cf. p. 122. See Ernst H. Gombrich, "Talking of Michelangelo," review of *Michelangelo's Last Paintings*, by Leo Steinberg,

New York Review of Books January 20, 1977, 17-20, republished as 'Michelangelo's Last Paintings', in *Reflections on the History of Art: Views and Reviews* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1987): 81-90. An illuminating comment on Gombrich's reaction against Steinberg's Michelangelo book is provided by Neer, introduction, xi. See also David Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation: Two Modes of Art History Writing," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 20-31.

³⁰ See Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 399-439; Steinberg, "Retrospect," in *The Sexuality of Christ*, 217-392.

³¹ See, for instance, Paul Joannides, review of *Michelangelo's Last Paintings*, by Leo Steinberg, *Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 883 (October 1976): 712.

³² Joseph Leo Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, by Leo Steinberg, *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 4 (December 2004): 780-81; Alexander Nagel, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, by Leo Steinberg, *Renaissance and Reformation*, n.s., 26, no. 1 (Winter 2002) 65-67.

³³ Steinberg argued that the rejection of subjectivity and suspension of value judgments are ultimately unhistorical, because they remove artworks from the experience of art and life. Leo Steinberg, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," *Daedalus* 98, no. 3 (Summer 1969): 824-36; republished in *Other criteria*, 307-21. In "Other Criteria" he reprimands the single-mindedness of formalism, which expects the Kantian self-definition of painting to go in one direction only. Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 67, 71, 74, 76-79.

³⁴ Leo Steinberg, "Leonardo's Last Supper," *Art Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1973): 310, 356, 369; republished in a revised version as *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 43, 147. On the notion of ambiguity developed by Steinberg in his Leonardo article and book, see Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 780-81; James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 88-96, 119-20.

³⁵ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 37. Here Steinberg refers to his study on Borromini's church of San Carlino. See Leo Steinberg, *Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane: A study in Multiple Form and Architectural Symbolism* (New York: Garland, 1977).

³⁶ Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 782. Steinberg himself acknowledged that his approach to Borromini's architecture drew upon Krautheimer's interest in the iconography of architecture. See Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 36.

³⁷ Steinberg's holistic approach is analyzed by Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 780-82. The decisive importance of verbalization and writing style as inextricable elements of critical interpretation is thoroughly discussed in relation to Steinberg's work by Carrier, "Art and Its Spectators;" Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation;" David Carrier, "Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art Historical Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 333-347, republished in *The Aesthete in the City: The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 51-71; Lisa Florman, "The Difference," 775-77. See also Schwartz, preface to Leo Steinberg, vii-viii.

³⁸ The problem of the relation between the consensus gained by art historical interpretation and its objectivity is examined with reference to Steinberg by Carrier, "Erwin Panofsky."

³⁹ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 105. Steinberg admitted his lack of interest in Marxist or Freudian theory (*ibid.*, 27-30).

⁴⁰ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 24.

⁴¹ Steinberg, "The Twin Prongs."

⁴² Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 154-60.

⁴³ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 145. In the Titian papers Steinberg did not record his travels to the lagoon. However, he noted down his visits in his annual diaries, owned by his former assistant Sheila Schwartz: July 28/August 5, 1957; July 23/27, 1960; July 31/August 11, 1965 (August 10, 1965: "10am Sr Umberto Rossi at Accademia"); October 1966 (October 18: "11am Correr for photos;" no indication of when he arrived in Venice, the previous entry is for Rome on October 13; he left Venice on October 22). According to Schwartz, Steinberg did not go to Venice in the following years; if he ever went to Venice again, it would have to be in the 1980s or later, when he travelled in Europe. Sheila Schwartz, email messages to author, March 23, 2017; April 28, 2017.

⁴⁴ A postcard to Steinberg in New York, containing information about nineteenth-century drawing of the compound of the Carità by Francesco Lazzari, was sent by Juergen Schulz from Venice in late August or early September of 1965. Steinberg noted in pencil: "Answered Nov. 21 '65." The postcard is inserted in a letter by Doug Lewis, dated December 17, 1966, sent to Steinberg from Venice, containing a list of drawings of the Carità by Lazzari and of a set of drawings by Tranquillo Orsi which Steinberg, Lewis points out, had not mentioned. In a letter to Cornelius Vermeule, dated July 1, 1966, Steinberg asked advice about the detail of the cuirass in Titian's *Presentation*; he also referred to a trip to Venice planned in October that year. A request slip printed in English, presumably from a New York library, dated September 1, 1966, testifies to Steinberg carrying on research on Titian. A letter of October 26, 1966, from Ferruccio Zago in Venice to Steinberg in New York, contains the typed transcription of documents from the State Archives in Venice, related to the Scuola della Carità. In a clipping from the *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, on which the date "Oct. '66" was added in pencil, the name of James Bruce Ross was circled, presumably by Steinberg, with a note "for Venice" added on the margin. Two sections of Steinberg file box are named "bibliography '65" and "bibliography '66". While there is no apparent mention to any research activity in the year 1967, two letters from Joe Masheck concerning another detail of the *Presentation* are dated February 27, and July 15, 1968. An annotation on the first letter reads: "Answered April '68." Finally, in his file box Steinberg took note of Laurine Mack Bongiorno's article on the Arena Chapel, published in the *Art Bulletin* in March 1968. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8.

⁴⁵ Steinberg's notes suggest that he was planning to collect the lectures in a book. In an undated note he itemized eight studies preceded by an introduction, and encompassed them in a curly bracket pointing to the inscription: "9 Met lectures." The list includes the following items: Introduction; Leonardo, *Last Supper*; Michelangelo, *Doni Madonna*; Titian, *Presentation*; Caravaggio, Cerasi [Chapel];

Velazquez; Picasso; Johns; Rauschenberg. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8. On another instance, Steinberg mentions an unspecified book project: "This matter is part of a larger fabric in a book I am now doing for Princeton." Leo Steinberg to Cornelius Vermeule, 1 July 1966, Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8. The author was not able to identify whether the [two notes refer](#) to the same collection of lectures.

⁴⁶ The only exception is an annotation on the back of a photograph of a painting, which refers to its auction sale in March 1972. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8. According to Sheila Schwartz, Steinberg never worked on the Titian research after that date. Sheila Schwartz, oral communication, May 2017.

⁴⁷ Leo Steinberg to David Rosand, 19 June 1973, Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 2. Subsequent references to this material will be given as Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, followed by page numbers.

⁴⁸ David Rosand, "Titian in the Frari," *Art Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (June 1971): 196-213; David Rosand, "Theater and Structure in the Art of Paolo Veronese," *Art Bulletin* 55, no. 2 (June 1973): 217-39. By June 1973 Steinberg had read the first of Rosand's articles, but not completed reading the second, which had just come out. Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 1. The same brief passage, in a loose sheet attached to the letter (*ibid.*), reproduces the text written longhand in a loose sheet appended to Steinberg's annotated copy of Rosand's manuscript of his article on Titian's *Presentation*. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 2.

⁵⁰ In a research file Steinberg annotated: "for closest antique source & meaning as Alimentia / Charity of the State / See now (1973) Rosand ca 73." Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8.

⁵¹ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 3.

⁵² David Rosand, "Titian's 'Presentation of the Virgin': The Second Door," *Burlington Magazine* 115, no. 846 (September 1973): 602-603.

⁵³ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel," *Art Bulletin* 56, no. 3 (September 1974): 385-399.

⁵⁵ Steinberg, "Tiziano," [6r].

⁵⁶ Florman, "The Difference," 777.

⁵⁷ On the structure and activities of the Scuole Grandi, see Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 33-192; Jonathan Glixon, *Honoring God and the City: Music at the Venetian Confraternities, 1260-1807* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3-191.

⁵⁸ Sandra Moschini Marconi, *Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia*, vol. 1, *Opere d'arte dei secoli XIV e XV* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato), vii-xxxiv, *passim*.

⁵⁹ The notes are organised in the following sections: "Venice contacts;" "History – General;" "Titian – Presentation;" "Abstracts;" "Bibliography '65;" "Bibliography '66;" "Cuirass;" "Scuole;" "Carità B[ui]ld[in]g History;" "Material Facts" "Antique Q[uestion];" "Modern Q[uestion]'s;" "Reality Levels;" "Old Crit[icism];" "As easel p[ain]t[in]g" "Iconography;" "St. Anne;" "Vecchia;" "Color;" "Details / Stair –

Door – Cuirass;” “Caritas Fig[ure] / of Collection made for Deluge;” “Venetian P[ictorial] P[lane];” “Other Titians;” “Pictures;” “Other Presentations.”

⁶⁰ Steinberg, “Tiziano,” [inside cover]. See also the transcript of the Metropolitan lecture (*ibid.*, folder 6, p. 9). This argument was key to Steinberg’s in his discussion of site-specificity, and recurs in his writings, for instance in “Other Criteria,” where he stigmatizes “our habit of lifting a partial work from its setting – transposing a detached fresco or predella panel into the category of easel painting.” Steinberg, “*Other Criteria*,” 71. See also Steinberg, “Observations in the Cerasi Chapel,” 183. During his Titian research he made the same remark about the Dresden *Tribute Money*. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8.

⁶¹ Steinberg, “Tiziano,” [inside cover, 1r].

⁶² The door on the left was opened later in 1572. See Rosand, “Titian’s ‘Presentation of the Virgin’: The Second Door.”

⁶³ Namely: the light source matches that of the room; the colonnade on the left is flush with the room windows; the color scheme is keyed to the gold-and-blue pattern of the ceiling decoration; the receding lines are aligned with the ceiling beams and the pilasters of the wainscot when observed from the altar; the staircase is a continuation of the actual staircase ascending from the street level; the composition develops laterally like a procession to conform to the long wall, while at the same time it has a centralized focus that acknowledges the visual axis from the altar. These initial observations were further explored and detailed by Steinberg, who singled out the adaptations to the site contained in the painting throughout his Metropolitan lecture (see below).

⁶⁴ Steinberg, “The Gestural Trace,” 195-96.

⁶⁵ Getty Research Institute, Estate of Leo Steinberg: Professional Papers (© Sheila Schwartz), box 13A, 11.

as he would described them two years later in his notes for the Titian Metropolitan lecture.

⁶⁶ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 28b, 63r. Cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 36.

⁶⁷ Steinberg, “Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple,” 13.

⁶⁸ See for instance Steinberg’s dissatisfaction for a comparison between Titian’s picture and Baldassarre Peruzzi’s *Presentation of the Virgin* in Santa Maria della Pace, Rome, drawn by Panofsky during his Titian course. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 28b, 64r). Cf. Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 37.

⁶⁹ Steinberg, “Tiziano,” [5v]; Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, pp. 2-3; Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 2, pp. 29, 37; *ibid.*, “Notes,” pp. 5, 25 (annotations to Rosand’s manuscript); Leo Steinberg research papers, box 28b, 63r, 64r, (Panofsky’s course notebook).

⁷⁰ Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 38. The scholars recorded by Steinberg for misidentifying the figure of St Anne were: Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Hetzer, Kleinschmidt, Suida, and Hans Tietze. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8. Cf. Joseph Archer Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *The Life and Times of Titian, with Some Account of His Family* (London: Murray, 1881), 2:32; Theodor Hetzer, *Tizian: Geschichte seiner Farbe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1935), 119; Beda Kleinschmidt, *Die heilige Anna: ihre Verehrung in Geschichte, Kunst und Volkstum*

(Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1930), 200-01; Wilhelm Suida, *Tiziano* (Rome: Valori plastici, [1933]), 60; Hans Tietze, *Tizian: Leben und Werk* (Vienna: Phaidon, 1936), 150.

⁷¹ For further discussion of this problem, see Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 777.

⁷² Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 192: "It's always a painting, the work, and usually what has to happen is that a problem formulates itself in my mind, which very often takes the form of a disparity between what I think I know, what I have read or heard, and what I see in the painting."

⁷³ Steinberg proudly recounted that "David Rosand once told me that undergraduates like my work, but graduate students feel as if the ground were taken from under their feet. Here, they think, is a man, who gets ideas from just looking at the pictures, instead of reading the literature. Of course I do read the literature, but it's not the essential in my work." Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 172.

⁷⁴ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 8.

⁷⁵ Steinberg, "Tiziano," [2r].

⁷⁶ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 2; cf. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 2. The passage continues as follows: "She is not the stately young woman at the foot of the stair, who has usually passed for St Anne in the Titian literature. She is the ecstatic old woman to whom Joachim turns as she raises her hands in prayer. The Virgin's parents, half lost to us if we attend only to the processional axis of the composition, move into focus when seen on the Altar axis, midway between the blessing Christ of the ceiling and the twin peaks of the horizon."

⁷⁷ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 777.

⁷⁹ The importance of Steinberg's art education has been stressed by Sheila Schwartz, who also reminds that Steinberg taught life drawing at Parsons School of Design in New York from 1948 through to the 1950s. Schwartz, preface to Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Sculpture*, viii. Cf. [Schwartz], "Leo Steinberg: Chronology," 209-10. For further discussion of this topic, see Daniele Di Cola, "Disegno e danza "guide migliori dell'erudizione." Esperienze e metafore del corpo nel pensiero di Leo Steinberg," in *In corso d'opera* (2), ed. Claudia Di Bello, Riccardo Gandolfi, and Monica Latella (Rome: Campisano, 2019), 295-302; Jérémie Koering, "Dessiner voir. Steinberg et l'enquête graphique," in *Leo Steinberg Now*, forthcoming.

⁸⁰ Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 47.

⁸¹ Kerr Houston has drawn a stimulating connection between Steinberg's interest in these issues and the notion of "kinetic" art developed in the same years by James Ackerman, another former student at the Institute of Fine Arts, in relation to Michelangelo's architecture. Kerr Houston, "Towards a Kinetic Architectural History: James Ackerman and the Moving Viewer, 1942-1961," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 16, no. 5 (2015), 622-32. Cf. James S. Ackerman, *The Architecture of Michelangelo* (London: Zwemmer, 1961), of which Steinberg owned a copy. The Library of Professor Leo Steinberg, p. 218, www.arslibri.com/collections/LeoSteinbergLibrary.pdf.

⁸² Getty Research Institute, Estate of Leo Steinberg: Professional Papers (© Sheila Schwartz), box 13A, 22.

⁸³ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 13.

⁸⁴ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 12-13.

⁸⁵ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 13.

⁸⁶ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 13-14.

⁸⁷ For an understanding of Steinberg's approach within the frame of Kantian aesthetic judgment, see the illuminating analysis by Stefano Velotti, "Per un giudizio estetico "thick." Steinberg, Johns e l'arte contemporanea," *Paradigmi. Rivista di critica filosofica* 2 (2010), 67-85. It is worth mentioning that in 1954 Steinberg took summer course in philosophy at Columbia University on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. [Schwartz], "Leo Steinberg: Chronology," 210.

⁸⁸ Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 220.

⁸⁹ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 24.

⁹⁰ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 5. Cf. Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 37.

⁹¹ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 5. Cf. Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 38.

⁹² [Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 3.](#)

⁹³ [Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 5-6.](#)

⁹⁴ Panofsky, *Problems in Titian*, 38

⁹⁵ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 6.

⁹⁶ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 28b, 64v.

⁹⁷ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 6.

⁹⁸ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 6.

⁹⁹ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 25. This reading reminds closely Steinberg's observations on the soldiers entering the pictorial plane in Michelangelo's *Crucifixion of St. Peter* in the Cappella Paolina. Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo's Last Paintings: The Conversion of St. Paul and the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the Cappella Paolina, Vatican Palace* (London: Phaidon, 1975), 33, 38-39. I am grateful to Daniele Di Cola for drawing this to my attention.

¹⁰⁰ Leo Steinberg research papers, box 28b, 19.

¹⁰¹ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 18.

¹⁰² Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 25.

¹⁰³ *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance*, transl. Peter and Linda Murray (London: Phaidon, 1952), 52-53.

¹⁰⁴ On Krautheimer's lesson and its influence on Steinberg, see Steinberg, "The Gestural Trace," 34-40.

¹⁰⁵ Sven Sandström, *Levels of Unreality: Studies in Structure and Construction in Italian Mural Painting during the Renaissance*, *Figura: Uppsala Studies in the History of Art*, n.s. 4 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1963).

¹⁰⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 1:140. Cf. Sandström, *Levels of Unreality*, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Philipp Fehl, review of *Levels of Unreality: Studies in Structure and Construction in Italian Mural Painting during the Renaissance*, by Sven Sandström, in "Oriental Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1965), 124-26.

¹⁰⁸ Getty Research Institute, Estate of Leo Steinberg: Professional Papers (© Sheila Schwartz), box 13A, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 72.

¹¹⁰ Steinberg, "Other Criteria," 68-77.

¹¹¹ The Library of Professor Leo Steinberg, www.arslibri.com/collections/LeoSteinbergLibrary.pdf. That Sandström book does seem to not appear in Steinberg's notes has been confirmed by Sheila Schwartz, email message to author, March 21, 2017.

¹¹² Like Steinberg, Sandström overtly opposes the "exclusively formalistic attitude towards a work of art." Sandström, *Levels of Unreality*, 10. Moreover, Sandström's interest in these matters was grounded in his study of Odilon Redon, which can be paralleled to Steinberg's coupling of Renaissance and contemporary art (*ibid.*, 8).

¹¹³ See, for instance, Leo Steinberg, "The Algerian Women and Picasso At Large," in *Other Criteria*, 125-234. Interestingly, in his Metropolitan lecture on Titian Steinberg observed that Picasso "is not the mere agent, or instrument of his style, but may be its master; he can be the master of several styles, manipulating and juxtaposing them from the most varied motives" even within the same work, and "he can even use style as content, to give direct expression to subject matter." Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 22.

¹¹⁴ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 23.

¹¹⁵ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 21.

¹¹⁶ Steinberg, "Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple," 21-22.

¹¹⁷ Steinberg, Letter to Rosand, p. 1: "You have established yourself within three years or so as a major figure in the field, and I am impressed."

¹¹⁸ Rosand, "Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola," 56n, 64, 74.

¹¹⁹ This parallelism has been noted also by Karen Wilkin, "An Appreciation: He Brought Venice and Its Artists to Life," *Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2014.

¹²⁰ As noted by Robert Storr: "One will not find much about the social and political dimensions of art in Leo's writing In conversation, though, Leo was alert to the realities of power and the potent illusions of ideology in which art was inextricably bound. How could a student of the Renaissance not be? . . . If he chose to focus on what pictures mean, it was because pictures were, in his understanding of them, essentially orderly and intentional." Robert V. Storr, "Leo's Lessons," in "In memory of Leo Steinberg," 63. On Steinberg's lack of interest in the social context, see also Koerner, review of *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*, 780.

¹²¹ Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, 194.

¹²² David Rosand, "Art History and Criticism: The Past as Present," *New Literary History* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1974): 443-44. Revealingly, Rosand mentions Steinberg a few times in the notes to his article (*ibid.*, 436n5, 439n12, 441n15, 445n24). See also Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," *Semiotica* 1, no. 3 (1969): 223-242; reprinted in *Simiolus* 6, no. 1 (1972/73): 9-19.

¹²³ See Michael Hill, "Steinberg's Complexity," in *The Baroque in Architectural Culture, 1880-1980*, ed. Andrew Leach, John Macarthur, and Maarten Delbeke (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 217.

¹²⁴ Rosand, "Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola," 70, 76.

¹²⁵ Hill, "Steinberg's Complexity," 214-15.

¹²⁶ Leo Steinberg, "Velazquez' "Las Meninas"," *October* 19 (Winter 1981): 54.

¹²⁷ Rosand, "Titian's Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola," 70-73.

¹²⁸ In a loose sheet filed in a separate folder titled "La Vecchia", Steinberg summarized his reservations on Rosand's reading of the egg seller in twelve points, annotating the manuscript's page numbers that perplexed him. Some of the arguments build on the four objections to Panofsky he had developed in the Metropolitan lecture. Leo Steinberg research papers, box 7, folder 3.

¹²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 4. On the limitations of Bourdieu's notion of "popular aesthetic" in relation to Kantian aesthetic judgment and in comparison with Steinberg's approach, see Velotti, "Per un giudizio estetico," 71.

¹³⁰ Hill, "Leo Steinberg vs Clement Greenberg," 23. Cf. Hill, "Steinberg's Complexity," 211; Brilliant, "On or about Leo Steinberg," 35.

¹³¹ Richard Wollheim, "On Drawing an Object," in *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 22-30.

¹³² Robert Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Italy: From Techne to Metatechne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 73-122.

¹³³ Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 99.

¹³⁴ Robert Williams, "Italian Renaissance Art and the Systematicity of Representation," in *Renaissance Theory*, ed. James Elkins and Robert Williams (New York: Routledge, 2008), 172.

¹³⁵ Williams, *Art, Theory, and Culture*, 85-89.

¹³⁶ This is compared to Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*, which "formed for itself a P[ictorial] P[lane] conceived as a perfect crystal sphere, a sacred self-existent place, a world apart." Getty Research Institute, Estate of Leo Steinberg: Professional Papers (© Sheila Schwartz), box 13A, 37r-v.

¹³⁷ While this emphasis on art and experience has many points in common with phenomenology and more in particular with John Dewey's thinking, it is not the aim of this study to elaborate on this topic. On the parallelism with Dewey, see: Harrison, "Leo Steinberg," 101; Hill, "Steinberg's Complexity," 215-16; Di Cola, "Leo Steinberg e lo spettatore," forthcoming.

¹³⁸ Florman, "The Difference," 780.

¹³⁹ Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," 47.