

Rescuing Art From Modern Oblivion

Leo Steinberg's brilliant and sometimes controversial contributions to the history of art not only enliven a stagnant discipline but uphold the idea of art as a continuity of creative acts. David Levi Strauss introduces a thinker who has challenged many of the critical shibboleths of our time—and, in doing so, helped us to see great works anew.

by David Levi Strauss

Is art history any longer relevant to contemporary American culture? Though reports of its demise are exaggerated, the discipline is certainly in crisis and has been under attack for years, from within the profession and without. In *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (1989), Donald Preziosi characterizes the tenor of these attacks in suitably apocalyptic terms: “What art historians do is changing—certainly too slowly for some and far too precipitously for others. . . . All the old road signs seem to have been effaced by adolescent graffitists or rewritten in extraterrestrial hieroglyphs by ivory-tower academicians whose heads swirl about in a starry semiological firmament.”

Disciplinary boundaries—the divisions of intellectual labor into discrete fields—are being rejected in favor of new theoretical methods that range across disciplines. Defenders of the old borders are charac-





The U.S. Postal Service's cropping of Giovanni Battista Cima's Madonna and Child (c. 1496–99) demonstrates the modern compulsion to deny or efface the central importance of Christ's sexuality in countless works of Renaissance art. That focus, argues Leo Steinberg (right), reflected the emphasis that Renaissance theologians placed on the Incarnation, or humanation, of Christ.



terized as recalcitrant relics. “The art historian,” writes Preziosi, “is as much an artifact of the discipline as are its ostensible objects of study.” The new generation of art historians is directed to look at advances in other interpretive fields as painful reminders of the inadequacies of its own discipline. In his structuralist treatment of art history, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983), Norman Bryson observes:

It is a sad fact: art history lags behind the study of the other arts. . . . While the last three or so decades have witnessed extraordinary and fertile change in the study of literature, of history, of anthropology, in the discipline of art history there has reigned a stagnant peace; a peace in which—certainly—

a profession of art history has continued to exist, in which monographs have been written, and more and more catalogues produced: but produced at an increasingly remote margin of the humanities, and almost in the leisure sector of intellectual life.

Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors* (1550) is often called the foundation stone of art history. It established the idea that art progresses through identifiable stages of development toward classic perfection. This myth of progress in art has proven hard to shake, no matter how much contrary evidence accumulates around it. Even today, when a close look at the 30,000-year-old paintings recently discovered in the Chauvet cave should be enough to put the myth of linear progress to rest forever, it persists in art history. And along with this belief in progress in art comes a reluctance to rethink established hierarchies and judgments. Art history is a fundamentally conservative institution, and Renaissance art history is the most conservative of all.

Academic art history arose in the 20th century, built on the work of historians such as Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the father of the modern objective historical school, who brought scientific method to historical analysis and believed it possible for history to present the past “as it really was,” free of complicating subjectivity. Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) developed a critical framework for evaluating, dating, and authenticating works of art based on formalist analysis in his *Principles of Art History* (1915), and the Englishmen Roger Fry and Clive Bell would later promote postimpressionism on mostly formalist grounds. But it was really in the 1930s, when the great refugee-scholars Fritz Saxl, Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, and Ernst Gombrich fled Germany and Austria to end up in England and the United States, that the discipline became popular as an academic subject.

At this point and for a while after, it was still possible to conceive of the history of art as a more-or-less orderly procession of masterpieces, based on a more-or-less reliable consensus about which art works should be included in this history and even about how they should be seen. Objectivity was the attainable goal. As long as this unified theory of culture held, the influence of the relative position of the viewer was not seen as a significant factor. We were all (or all of us who were thought to matter) still in the same story.

That is no longer the case. Art history is criticized for using obsolete and invalid methods to defend values that no one takes seriously anymore, from positions of imagined authority that are no longer recognized outside the field—in short, for being woefully out of touch. But the most serious challenge to the practice of art history is the reported loss of faith in the underlying principles on which it depends. In his influential essay, *The End of the History of Art?* (1987), Hans Belting describes this crisis as a “loss of faith in a great and compelling narra-

> DAVID LEVI STRAUSS is a writer and critic in New York, where he contributes regularly to *Artforum* and *The Nation*. Copyright © 1997 by David Levi Strauss.

tive, in the way that things *must* be seen.” That is, we are no longer all in the same story, and we are rapidly losing the will to imagine it. The real difficulty, Belting claims, is that “contemporary art indeed manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward; and that the academic discipline of art history no longer disposes of a compelling model of historical treatment.” Some of the most vehement critics of the discipline seem to be saying that the only way to save art history is to destroy it—to convince it to abandon its only real reason for being, namely, the imagination of continuity in art.

Given this dire state of affairs, it is perhaps not so surprising that one of the most persuasive advocates for the continuing relevance of art history (and, by extension, of the humanities as a whole) to contemporary life and thought is a 77-year-old scholar who seems to be regarded with suspicion, if not outright hostility, by a significant portion of the art history establishment. Although Leo Steinberg has received an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute for Arts and Letters (1983), the Frank Jewett Mather Award for Distinction in Art Criticism from the College Art Association (1984), and a MacArthur Fellowship (1986), he has always had a conflicted relationship with the art history establishment. For much of his long and distinguished career, he has been often treated as an apostate, a cantankerous and deluded exegete, even a dangerous heretic. When the great art historian Meyer Schapiro died last year, the critic and philosopher Arthur Danto wrote in *The Nation* that Schapiro was “too brilliant to ignore but, from the perspective of the establishment, too radical to accept.” This seems also to be Leo Steinberg’s contemporary predicament.

To one approaching Steinberg’s work from outside the profession of art history, say, as a contemporary art critic, Steinberg seems at first an unlikely controversialist. Rather, he appears to be a steadfast defender of the traditional values of art historical analysis, using the old tools of iconography and iconology handed down to him by his teachers rather than the newer ones favored by postmodernist theory. It is the way he uses these tools, and what he makes with them, that is different. But Steinberg’s work over the last 50 years has frequently drawn outraged responses and censorious remarks from defenders of the faith—forcing us to ask, Just what faith is being defended?

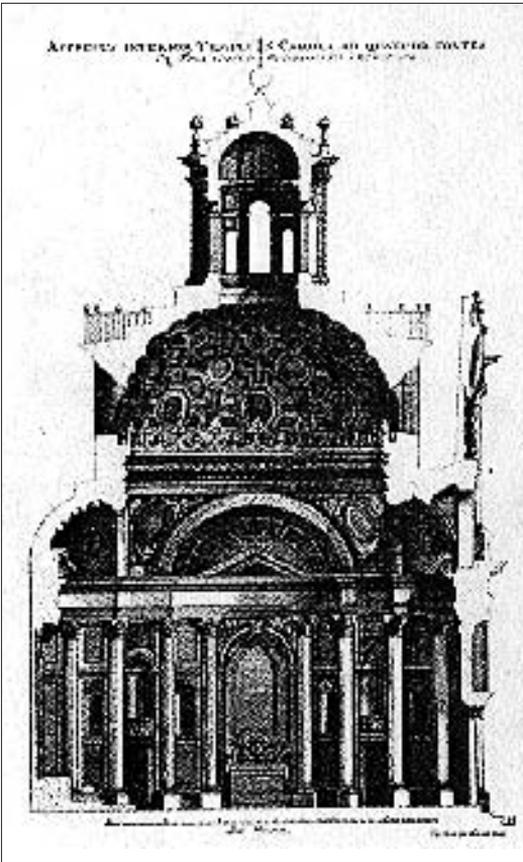
Leo Steinberg was born in Moscow in 1920 and lived in Berlin and London before emigrating to the United States in 1938. Having studied at the Slade School of Art in London, he entered the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University in the mid-1950s (Ph.D., 1960), where he studied art and architecture with, as he later wrote, “two great masters, Professor Richard Krautheimer and Professor Wolfgang Lotz.” In 1958 and ’59 he was a guest of the American Academy in Rome, where he researched and wrote his dissertation on the first major work of the baroque architect Francesco Borromini (1599–1667). *Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane: A Study in Multiple Form and Architectural Symbolism* (1977 revised and expanded) looks forward, both in style and substance, to Steinberg’s later writings. “Our study,” he wrote, “has

attempted to lay a heavy symbolic burden on S. Carlino—heavier perhaps than any building will bear. What we imply is that Borromini, being called on to build his first church, had asked himself—what is a church; what does it stand for? His answer—if our hypotheses are at all credible—is that the church building is a microcosm of the Church universal; therefore it stands for the See of St. Peter and the mystic Body of Christ, for the world’s circuit suffused by the Cross, and—in the singleness of its substance and its manifold forms—for the nature of God.”

Eighteen years later, when this work was published in a series of outstanding dissertations in the fine arts, Steinberg introduced it as “my old polemic and disguised manifesto, belaboring a proposition nobody would now contest, to wit, that the bravest baroque architect made his first building structurally contrapuntal in the service of a symbol [signifying the Trinity]; and that the building’s message could be read in the eloquence of its forms, *if only these were read closely enough*” (emphasis added). That last pendant clause is a significant qualification, one that would expand in importance throughout Steinberg’s subsequent career.

The seeds of Steinberg’s heresy, glimpsed in his dissertation, can be

seen more clearly in one of his first published essays, “The Eye Is a Part of the Mind” (1953), which he later called “a rite of passage, a declaration of independence from formalist indoctrination.” In this essay, Steinberg took on the reigning orthodoxy of formalist art history (represented by Roger Fry and Clive Bell), its institutional inheritors (such as Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art and Albert C. Barnes, who formed the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia), and the contemporary critics who brought its methods to bear on modern art (led by Clement Greenberg, who championed American abstract art as superior to, and purer than, the previous art of Europe). One of the central tenets of formalism was that representation had little to do with advanced art.



Longitudinal section of Francesco Borromini’s S. Carlo alle quattro Fontane, the subject of Steinberg’s dissertation.

Steinberg's essay attempted to show "that representation is a central esthetic function in all art; and that the formalist esthetic, designed to champion the new abstract trend, was largely based on a misunderstanding and an underestimation of the art it set out to defend." "What matters," Steinberg wrote, "is the artist's intent to push the truth of his representation to the limits of what is felt to be depictable. The changing pattern of these limits is the preoccupation of the history of art."

Steinberg was not arguing against abstraction in favor of representational art. Rather, he was objecting to reductive approaches to art, abstract or not, that treated it as detached from the sensible world of which it is a part. His main objection was that this kind of thinking is patently ahistorical. To treat abstract works as "simply painting," he wrote, "as though they had no referent outside themselves, is to miss both their meaning and their continuity with the past. If my suggestion is valid, then even non-objective art continues to pursue art's social role of fixating thought in esthetic form, pinning down the most ethereal conceptions of the age in vital designs, and rendering them accessible to the apparatus of sense."

This cogent description of art's social role could be usefully applied to Steinberg's own work as scholar and critic, teacher and lecturer, over the subsequent four decades. He taught drawing and art history at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York from 1961 to 1975, and ended his teaching career as Benjamin Franklin Professor at the University of Pennsylvania (1975–91). His lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio School in New York, Columbia University, and elsewhere are legendary among artists and art lovers. Few scholars of our time have so enlivened the traditional art history magic-lantern show (lecturing with slides) as has Steinberg.

When Steinberg focuses his attention on a work that people think they know, such as Michelangelo's Florentine *Pietà*, or works that experts have agreed are lesser ones, such as Michelangelo's last paintings, he brings new insight and analysis to these variously occluded works, making them once again visible. This often involves the radical questioning of long-held views. Reviewing Steinberg's 1975 book on Michelangelo's last paintings, *New York Times* art critic John Russell wrote:

Professor Leo Steinberg is before all things a rescuer. To the discipline of art history he brings a chivalric intent and, with that, a depth and a density of emotional commitment which are quite exceptional. When we read him we feel ourselves in the company not of one of art history's accountants, but of an ardent and vulnerable nature which is stretching itself to the utmost.

He excels on disputed ground. If it is (or was) the general opinion that Jasper Johns is an impudent prankster, or that the substance of late Picasso is glib and repetitive, or that there is only one right way to look at a new painting, then Leo Steinberg will get right in there and straighten things out. In dealing with older art (as he more usually does) he likes, equally, to tussle with a subject to which injustice has been done. In such cases, and without shirking any of the drudgeries of pure scholarship, he invests his summing-up with insights that belong to our generation alone.



Of Las Meninas (1656) by Diego Velázquez, Steinberg writes that it is “in no sense a conventional picture. It undertakes a lot more, being concerned with nothing less than the role vision plays in human self-definition.”

Otherwise, why bother to write about a work that has already been so exhaustively scrutinized? Introducing in 1981 his extraordinary work on Velázquez' *Las Meninas*, first written as a lecture in 1965, Steinberg notes, “Writing about a work such as *Las Meninas* is not, after all, like queuing up at the A&P. Rather, it is somewhat comparable to the performing of a great musical composition of which there are no definitive renderings. The guaranteed inadequacy of each successive performance challenges the interpreter next in line, helping thereby to keep the work in the repertoire. Alternatively, when a work of art ceases to be discussed, it suffers a gradual blackout.”

Although Steinberg is known primarily for his masterful writings on historical subjects—especially the works of Michelangelo, Man-

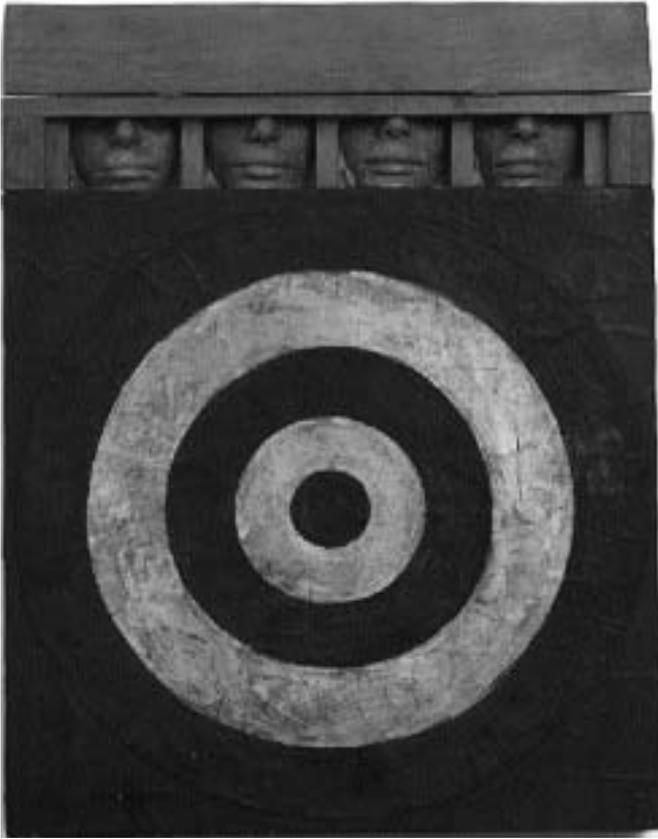
tegna, and Velázquez—his writings on modern and contemporary art are models of engaged criticism. The works collected in *Other Criteria* (1972) range from short reviews to polemical essays and extended considerations of particular works by selected artists, including Jasper Johns, Picasso, and Rodin. The reviews all date from the same, unfortunately short, period of time. “In those days, the mid-1950’s,” writes Steinberg, “practicing art critics were mostly artists or men of letters. Few art historians took the contemporary scene seriously enough to give it the time of day. To divert one’s attention from Papal Rome to Tenth Street, New York, would have struck them as frivolous—and I respected their probity. . . . With each passing month, these pieces got harder to do. Commenting on a life’s work in a week’s writing became a preposterous challenge. Tom Hess is right—it takes years to look at a picture. I succumbed to exhaustion after ten months and never reviewed again.”

This early retirement must be counted as one of criticism’s signal losses. Though no longer writing reviews, Steinberg has continued occasionally to address works and issues of contemporary art. In a brilliant and prophetic essay from 1962 that grappled with the difficulties of Jasper Johns’s early work, Steinberg articulated the values of criticism in its relation to history:

A work of art does not come like a penny postcard with its value stamped upon it; for all its objectness, it comes primarily as a challenge to the life of the imagination, and “correct” ways of thinking or feeling about it simply do not exist. The grooves in which thought and feelings will eventually run have to be excavated before anything but bewilderment or resentment is felt at all. For a long time the direction of flow remains uncertain, dammed up, or runs out all over, until, after many trial cuts by venturesome critics, certain channels are formed. In the end, that wide river which we may call the appreciation of Johns—though it will still be diverted this way and that—becomes navigable to all.

Most people—especially those who belittle a critic’s work—do not know, or pretend not to know, how real the problem is. They wait it out until the channels are safely cut, then come out and enjoy the smooth sailing, saying, *who needs a critic?*

In the light of such engagement, Steinberg came to see formalist criticism as a retreat into aesthetic protectionism. As criticism moves away from the world into a defense of art for art’s sake, Steinberg believes it also moves away from art. In the title essay of *Other Criteria*, originally given as a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1968, Steinberg wrote, “I find myself constantly in opposition to what is called formalism. . . . I dislike above all [its] interdictory stance—the attitude that tells an artist what he ought not to do, and the spectator what he ought not to see.” This concern for the rights of artists and spectators was more than a momentary polemical stance. Steinberg has always addressed in his writings not only other art historians but artists and viewers of art. In so doing, he



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Jasper Johns's Target with Four Faces (1955). Says Steinberg, "Johns doesn't give us the commonplace in a painting . . . but the commonplace as a painting. This is different."

has refused to retreat behind the disengaged superiority of the specialist, or an imagined "objectivity." In railing against the constraints of formalism, he was also striking out against the concomitant "disdain of subjectivity" that underlies it. In "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," he says, "With the disdain of subjectivity goes the demand that value judgments be eliminated from serious investigations of art since they cannot be objectified. . . . In protecting art history from subjective judgments, we proscribe the unpredictable question into which value and personality may surely enter, but which pertains to art because of art's protean nature." If art history (and also art, it must be said) is to be relevant outside its own sphere, Steinberg realized, it must continue to ask these "unpredictable questions."

Steinberg distrusted the claims that Clement Greenberg and others made for modern art at the expense of historical art, in effect separating modern art from everything that preceded it. "Greenberg's theoretical schema keeps breaking down because it insists on defining modern art without acknowledgment of its content, and historical art without recognizing its formal self-consciousness," Steinberg writes. Considering Jasper Johns's use of given

designs (the American flag, targets, light bulbs, cans of Ballantine Ale), Steinberg compares this recognition of prestructured forms to the way “artists formerly accepted the anatomy of the body.” Responding to those who would accuse Johns of insufficient originality for using these prestructured forms, Steinberg points out that “the best storytellers, such as Homer and Shakespeare, did not, like O. Henry or Somerset Maugham, invent their own plots.” And Steinberg counters Greenberg’s reduction of Old Master painting to an impure “illusionism” or slavish mimesis with historical examples:

Some of the Old Masters overruled the apparent perspective by dispersing identical color patches as an allover carpet spread (Pieter Bruegel, for instance). Some worked with chromatic dissonances to weave a continuous surface shimmer like mother-of-pearl. Many—from Titian onward—insured their art against realism by the obtrusive calligraphy of the brush—laying a welter of brush-strokes upon the surface to call attention to process. Some contrived implausible contradictions within the field, as when the swelling bulk of a foreshortened form is collapsed and denied the spatial ambience to house it. All of them counted on elaborate framing as an integral part of the work (“advertising the literal nature of the support,” as Greenberg says of Collage)—so that the picture, no matter how deep its illusionism, turned back into a thing mounted there like a gem. It was Michelangelo himself who designed the frame of the *Doni Madonna*, an element essential to the precious-mirror effect of its surface.

In “Other Criteria,” Steinberg challenged the separation of modernism from all that had come before it, and so sought to head off the crisis to come in art history. In suggesting (in 1968) that “Modernism may have to be redefined—by other criteria,” Steinberg presaged the claims of postmodernism, and 20 years later this early opposition to modernist theory helped make Steinberg one of the few art historians embraced by theorists of postmodernism such as Hal Foster and Craig Owens. The most astute critic of Greenbergian doctrine, Rosalind Krauss (currently Meyer Schapiro Professor of Modern Art and Theory at Columbia University), has long been a champion of Steinberg’s work and has published two of his most influential essays in her journal *October*.

One of these essays, published in *October* in the summer of 1983 and subsequently as a book by Pantheon in 1984, has now appeared in a second “revised and expanded” edition from the University of Chicago Press: *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1996). This beautifully produced edition includes the original essay and its “excursuses” (including “collateral matter, additional illustrations, and expanded quotations, as well as polemics, digressions, and unseasonable interruptions I could not resist”), followed by a “retrospect,” nearly as long as the original essay, in which Steinberg further expands on the original work and addresses the



criticisms it engendered when first published. As one artist friend told me after reading the new edition, “The first part changed forever the way I will look at Renaissance art, and the second part made me see why.”

The original essay examines in voluminous detail (aided by more than 250 illustrations) the prominent display of Christ’s genitals in Renaissance painting and sculpture—a recurrent “*ostentatio genitalium*” to complement the *ostentatio vulnerum* (the ritual showing forth of the wounds) of Christ. In picture after picture, the penis of Christ—as an infant, on the cross, and in resurrection—is not merely visible but ostentatiously *displayed*. In many examples, this *ostentatio* is the focus of the composition. The Madonna displays the infant Christ’s genitals to the inquiring eyes of the Magi,

or the wealthy donors who commissioned the paintings, or to any other viewer who might doubt that Christ was incarnated as fully human and complete in every detail. In paintings of the crucified Christ, there is special emphasis on the extravagant knots and flights of his loincloth, and there are all those pietàs, with Christ shown holding his groin. There are even a sizable number of Christs ithyphallic in death. “All of which,” Steinberg points out, “has been tactfully overlooked for half a millennium.” Why? How? And most important, What does it all mean?

While revealing this long-overlooked aspect of Renaissance art, Steinberg speculates on its theological significance as evidence of the *humanation* (Steinberg resuscitates the older term as preferable to its replacement, “Incarnation”) of Christ. “In celebrating the union of God and man in the Incarnation,” he writes, “Western artists began displacing the emphasis, shifting from the majesty of unapproachable godhead to a being known, loved, and imitable. . . . Realism, the more penetrating the better, was consecrated a form of worship. . . . To profess

that God once embodied himself in a human nature is to confess that the eternal, there and then, became mortal and sexual. Thus understood, the evidence of Christ's sexual member serves as the pledge of God's humanation."

Even before the Renaissance was over, this new realism employed by Western artists prompted censorial actions by ecclesiastical conservatives. Michelangelo's *Risen Christ*, carved in marble for the Sta. Maria sopra Minerva in Rome in 1514, showing a Christ "complete in all parts of a man" was "disfigured by a brazen breechclout," as Steinberg puts it, by church officials. All two- and three-dimensional 16th-century copies of the statue added aprons to cover the offending member. In Steinberg's view, this misplaced modesty effected a denaturing or *de-humanation* of Christ that has continued into the modern age. "If Michelangelo denuded his *Risen Christ*," writes Steinberg, "he must have sensed a rightness in his decision more compelling than inhibitions of modesty; must have seen that a loincloth would convict these genitalia of being 'pudenda,' thereby denying the very work of redemption which promised to free human nature from its Adamic contagion of shame." It is this "possibility of a human nature without human guilt" that has been obscured in the "modern oblivion" that Steinberg decries in his book.

The Sexuality of Christ is clearly a work of genius, and Steinberg's address, as always, is generous, directed toward any intelligent reader. What is not so apparent to the nonspecialist reader is the revolutionary content of the essay in terms of art history. Such a reader is somewhat surprised to learn that the book was greeted by a storm of protest from some art historians (and at least one formidable philosopher) when it first appeared. As one commentator noted,



Michelangelo's Risen Christ (1514–20) has stood in Sta. Maria sopra Minerva in both its original (opposite page) and covered states.

“No subject is more taboo in art history than the sexuality of Christ.” Or, one might add, in Christianity itself. But we are told that theologians were generally convinced or at least intrigued by Steinberg’s analysis. It was the art historians who were outraged. A number of them took Steinberg’s thesis as an affront to the profession.

In his “reintroduction” to the second edition, Steinberg writes:

Gladly would the present publisher have issued this book in a second edition without doubling its size, but I said no; I would not deprive it of the interest accrued since 1983. The book had elicited questions that could not be dodged without gross discourtesy, especially those posed in goodwill or in good-natured banter, and more especially those intended to kill. These last were the more intriguing to deal with, but I have tried to resist playing favorites. . . . To review judgmental decisions, to make judges accountable for their opinions, seems only just. It is also good sport.

Steinberg’s retrospect is in great measure a reply to one particular criticism leveled at *The Sexuality of Christ* by the eminent British philosopher (and author of the magisterial *Painting as an Art*, 1984) Richard Wollheim. Reviewing the original book for the *New York Times Book Review*, Wollheim called Steinberg “one of the sharpest intellects working in art history,” and the book “an exotic feast for which we should be grateful.” But he also warned readers to be wary of Steinberg’s proofs. “The most disturbing aspect of this strange, haunting book, with its great boldness of conception,” cautioned Wollheim, “is the resolute silence it maintains on all alternative views.” In other words, the great man had lost his *objectivity*, and had therefore compromised his professional authority. The striking of this velvet-covered mallet had the effect of calling Steinberg to order.

In his retrospect, Steinberg the advocate sets out to answer each and every counterargument ever made in print to refute his original findings and interpretations. (He mentions the many positive responses from colleagues and other reviewers only briefly, in a footnote.) Such a text might have read like a legal brief, and there are times when the litigious intent does threaten to overwhelm both reader and writer, and the relentless rehearsal of evidence to induce a kind of penis ennui. Responding to the comments of the British Renaissance specialist David Ekserdjian, Steinberg wryly characterizes his own excessiveness in this way: “The charge was made in one sentence—and I now answer in six long-winded pages, like an exegete expatiating on a scriptural verse.” What redeems this obsessive “antirrhethikos” (an answering back) is the astonishing clarity, insight, and humor of the writing. No matter how complex the arguments and counterarguments become, and no matter how often they are repeated, Steinberg’s language is always fresh—an enactment of the truth that clarity and

depth are complementary. For an innocent (nonexpert) reader, the pleasures are considerable.

Steinberg's writing has always been remarkably accessible, coming as it does out of a generosity of address that is especially rare in writing on art. Unfortunately, the general reader for whom Steinberg writes has lately become an endangered species, due, among other factors, to the impoverishment and consolidation of the publishing industry. (By the time Panofsky's *Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* was reissued in 1971, the great humanist already found it necessary, in his preface, to enclose the "general reader" in quotation marks, signaling the precariousness of its referent.)

In addition to its other attractions for a general readership, *The Sexuality of Christ* is a glimpse into art history's internecine conflicts. Charles Hope, of the prestigious Warburg Institute in London, reviewed *The Sexuality of Christ* in the *London Review of Books* in 1984. In his "answer back" to the dismissive review, Steinberg describes Hope as "an art historian widely admired for his zeal in policing the field." Downplaying the significance of the *ostentatio genitalium*, Hope wrote, "There is nothing special about the fact that Christ's genitals are depicted in so many paintings of the Madonna. In Renaissance art virtually all babies are shown naked, or at least naked below the waist. The genitals are, in a sense, the attribute of babyhood, and for many people they are also rather cute." To which Steinberg replied:

No doubt; and this must be why the high-throned Madonna in Figs. 5 and 82 presents her boy's penis to the protégés of the Theological Virtues, as if to say, "Cute, don't you think?"

The remark about genitals being the attribute of babyhood is a surprise. One expects to hear protests that babyhood pervades an infant's whole mind and body, so why pick on the penis? Has Hope succumbed to SC's [*The Sexuality of Christ's*] insidious fetishism? On the contrary; the observation is designed to resist it. If we can be persuaded that all babyhood is ("in a sense") defined by the genitals, we shall have further reason to deny special status to the Christ Child's.

But that is a hopeless task. No appeal to babyhood's alleged attribute, to naturalism or stylistic coherence, to Renaissance fashions in putto dress or the cuteness of teeny penises—no amount of such baby talk explains what we are given.

But it is the blandishments of *The Sexuality of Christ's* two principal accusers, Richard Wollheim and the medieval historian Caroline Bynum, that drive Steinberg over the edge of professional decorum. Following Wollheim's criticisms, Caroline Bynum wrote that "Steinberg's reading of a number of pictures of the adult Christ in which he sees an actual erection under the loincloth is questionable." Later on she refers to "some of the legitimate questions critics [i.e. Wollheim] have raised about Steinberg, such as the question of

how much of the artistic attention to genitals is simply naturalism, or doubts about what certain painted folds of drapery really conceal.” The reference is to Maerten van Heemskerck’s *Man of Sorrows* of 1532, in which Christ’s loincloth clearly delineates an erection. After a parenthetical sigh—“(What follows is written with a touch of exasperation; I hope it shows.)”—Steinberg offers a painstaking description of the plainly illustrated picture and then writes:

Now if Wollheim and Bynum have “legitimate . . . doubts about what certain painted folds of drapery really conceal,” do they have an alternative, non-phallic candidate for this nuisance that detains the cerasment before its last cadence? What sort of “stylistic feature” would they have us think lurks under that cloth? Stray undulation? Random updraft? Hot air? Renaissance draperies are spirited dialogues with the body, and to belabor them with description is tiresome. But it needs doing to call a pretentious bluff: the affectation of rigorous standards by hit-and-run scolds who pronounce the erection motif to be “questionable,” but frame no question and stay for no answer.

The polemical vociferousness in the retrospect will surprise those who still think of art history as a gentle profession, but it will delight those who have had enough of art history’s “stagnant peace,” and who recognize what is really at stake in such conflicts.

The subject of Christ’s sexuality and humanation is a compelling one, and it emerges as a part of what may be seen as Steinberg’s subject at large, something that has recurred throughout his work and grown more incisive and insistent of late: namely, the ever-mysterious relation between the erotic and the spiritual, and between sensual apprehension and mental understanding or verbal articulation. Steinberg’s deep understanding of art comes out of his physical experience of actual works, never out of books (although he is one of the most erudite scholars working today). His impatience with art historians who develop bookish theories about works of art without ever really looking at what is before them sometimes erupts into rage. To him, these art historians and critics are like the late-16th-century writer Lomazzo, whose comments on Michelangelo’s *Pietà* Steinberg once dismissed with the line, “But he was writing from memory, after having gone blind.”

One of the most persistent criticisms leveled at *The Sexuality of Christ* has been that Steinberg relies too much on the evidence of the pictures themselves and not enough on more “authoritative” substantiating texts. The hapless Charles Hope says the art historian’s task is to “understand what the art of the Renaissance meant to people at the time *by reading what they said about paintings* and about their faith” (Steinberg’s emphasis added), to which Steinberg adds, “What we ourselves think we see in the pictures is most likely capricious.” While of course drawing copiously from historical written sources to support his theological speculations, in *The Sexuality of Christ* and elsewhere Steinberg treats pictures themselves as primary sources. This is appar-

ently something that is just not done in reputable art history, especially in Renaissance art history. Any conclusions about the meaning of pictures must be supported by contemporary written texts, and texts always trump pictures if the two differ.

This textual prejudice becomes a special target of Steinberg's scorn: "Textism as I define it is an interdictory stance, hostile to any interpretation that seems to come out of nowhere *because it comes out of pictures*, as if pictures alone did not constitute a respectable provenance. . . . To my mind, the deference to far-fetched texts with mistrust of pictures is one of art history's inhibiting follies. It surely contributed to the obnubilation, the Cloud of Unseeing, that caused Christ's sexual nature as depicted in Renaissance art to be overlooked." This insistence on looking, rather than overlooking, is Steinberg's signature. The literature of art history is rife with interpretations of works of art that seem entirely plausible—until one really looks at the work itself. This is not to say that the eye, even Leo Steinberg's eye, is always right. Like the mind of which it is a part, the eye is fallible. But it is always the point closest to the object under scrutiny. Steinberg's conclusion to the original essay of *The Sexuality of Christ* is an appeal for just this kind of "objectivity":

I have risked hypothetical interpretations chiefly to show that, whether one looks with the eye of faith or with a mythographer's cool, the full content of the icons discussed bears looking at without shying. And perhaps from one further motive: to remind the literate among us that there are moments, even in a wordy culture like ours, when images start from no preformed program to become primary texts. Treated as illustrations of what is already scripted, they withhold their secrets.

These lines—regarded as evidence of Steinberg's impertinence and apostasy by art historians who disagree with him—are, on the contrary, an impassioned argument for the continuing relevance of art history. As a critic (it is really only an excuse to get close to works of art), I am drawn to works of art and literature that change the way I perceive the world. Leo Steinberg's writings do this again and again. The overwhelming effect of his writing—on Michelangelo's *Pietà*, or Picasso's *Sleepwatchers*, or Hans Haacke's installations—is to include the reader in his passionate seeing. In his imagination of a public for art, he recognizes that the relation between art and its public does not just happen; that the connection must be *made*. "Making things relevant is a mode of seeing," he once wrote. Of this seeing, Steinberg has made a literature. And he has always been clear about what is at stake: "The objects of our enquiry depend for their sheer existence on admiration. Art is cherished, or it does not survive."