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Essays in Italian Mannerist Paintings

Francesco Salviati's *Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman*, from 1545, provides an exemplar of Mannerist portraiture. Above all else, it elevates the sitter by placing him in the immemorial sphere of art. No matter how ostentatious or marmoreal an image—witness Bronzino's statuesque portrayal of Bartolomeo Pantiatichi—the Mannerist portrait inevitably assumes an air of poignancy. In fact, the poignancy of the visage may ironically increase in proportion to its sculptural, inhuman presence. Without modern medicine, few Florentines could expect to live long lives; diseases brought on by man and nature truncated even the most noble of family lineages. Nobility would commission artists to capture both their likenesses in an ideal light and to characterize their beings through paint, as the work of art possesses a longer life span than any person.

This concern clearly rises to the fore in Salviati's lush yet reserved portrait of a dignified man. Salviati limits idiosyncratic details of the sitter; he wishes not to capture fleshy foibles, but rather a polished presence greater than any possible reality. His eyes gleam like two pearls; his lips part as two plump pillows of velveteen red. In this way, Salviati paints with a concern similar to Bronzino, for the painting attains a sculptural command—dignified, inaccessible, without flaw, safe from the ravages of time. Centered in the middle of the composition like most of Bronzino's sitters, the young man seems confidant and immovable, a slightly curving pillar in a temple of his own design.

Despite this statuesque presence, Salviati relishes the inclusion of details that somehow bring his sitter to uncanny life. Here Salviati, reveals an almost mythological

ability—a lá Pygmalion and Galatea—to turn stone into flesh. Unlike Bronzino, Salviati flushes his centered sitter with blood; his face seems rosy and warm instead of a waxen white. A downy mustache sprouts above his upper lip, and his perlescent eyes betray not only confidence but introspective reflection as well. His eyes shift to the left, which in Western art remains the provenance of the past. Though obviously robust in youth and wealth, the young man does not gaze confidently to the right, into the assured success of his future. Rather, his backward glance unveils a more contemplative nature, which seems defiant of his monumental stature within the taut composition of the painting.

Iconographically, Salviati includes all of the requisite elements of Mannerist portraiture. In his right hand, the young man grips a removed glove, a symbol of wealth also brandished by *Antea* in her portrait, by the Mannerist master Parmigianino. His hand, with its long figures, appears as delicate as gossamer. Twisting nonchalantly in a serpentine form, his left arm reveals a grace and ease that defies the uncomfortable pose. Behind the green veil separating the sitter in his contemporary garb from the distant religious scene filling the background, the beholder sees an exotic and even moody landscape. Like other patrons, the sitter clearly wishes to align himself to a saint who possesses the same admirable qualities as he; in this case, the erudite Saint Jerome reclines before a glimmering lake, with his lion and a strange creature emergent from a lilly.

Yet here too Salviati distances himself from the polished masters Parmigianino and Bronzino. In the black velvet costume, Salviati lingers far less over detail and surface ornamentation than Bronzino, his manner of painting feels unlabored and even a bit impressionistic. Salviati's fluid touch emerges most clearly in the background, where

energetic strokes and daubs of thick paint take the place of fan-brush smoothed flesh. Colorism also seems heightened by Salviati; the acidic green of the veil separating contemporary and ancient scenes contrasts with the flushed red of the sitter's cheeks, and the wild backdrop shows an attention to complementary, emotive color that does not appear in the more austere backdrops of Bronzino. Indeed, the billowing yellow clouds dividing a turquoise and red sky can only emanate from an artistic imagination wishing to roam free, to revel in colors liberated from rational or symbolic application. Through the background especially, Salviati reveals a *sprezzatura*, a freedom and grace, in his colorism and paint application. Even in a reserved portrait, Salviati indulges in the flair and ease that shows he can court paint and, seemingly out of whim, coax from it the qualities he desires—all with an ease similar to the timeless gentleman posing in the foreground. Baldassare Castiglione could celebrate both the patron and the painter as fine courtiers.

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Aligned just askew from the diagonal axis of the painting, Judith lifts her scabbard to slay her unsuspecting victim, the sleeping Holofernes. All figures monumental in size, she twists in a serpentine form before her eager helper. Her pinkish flesh, toned and muscled, resonates lilac even in the shadows, and differs from the copper-colored skin of her shadowed attendant and the tanned flesh of doomed Holofernes. The painting *Judith and Holofernes*, by Giorgio Vasari, contains all of the elements of his artistic treatise—design, grace, color, relief—but Vasari has forced it into a rigid dogma with little grace

himself. Despite the drama of the moment, the figures seem rhetorical and lack life; it reads less as an integrated painting and more as a collage.

Perhaps Vasari too consciously thought of the artistic giants while painting his *Judith*, for the work feels diminutive—cautious and overly imitative. In all aspects, Vasari pays homage to Michelangelo, the bearer of the palm of all ages. He perpetuates the concepts of grace, relief and facility through the simplest of means. Rather than integrate the Michelangelsque into his artistic schema, Vasari simply quotes Michelangelo directly to achieve the same sculptural, serpentine effects. In fact, Vasari paints an imposter Judith: her pose, angle, tilt, musculature, and facial features all mimic the Libyan Sibyl painted by Michelangelo decades earlier on the Sistine ceiling. Certainly, Judith engages in a pose of difficulty made graceful by the assuredness of balance and artistic execution, but this element already played an integrated role in the Libyan Sibyl. By literally transcribing the sibyl from the ceiling into the heroic Judith of the painting, Vasari guarantees artistic results.

Vasari recognizes that by studying the masters, one may capture the graceful style with increasing ease. He writes in his *Lives of the Artists, Part III* preface, "But the important fact is that art has been brought to such perfection today, design, invention and coloring coming easily to those who possess them, that where the first masters took six years to paint one picture our masters today would only take one year to paint six, as I am firmly convinced both from observation and experience; and many more are now completed than the masters of former days produced." How much easier then, to copy rather than integrate the work into a unique visual incarnation. Although Vasari follows his own construct, he ignores the role of inventiveness in a painting. Inventiveness

distinguishes an artist from a craft person, and little in the Judith painting rises to more than rote application of craft.

The design—clear, delineated lines and metallic, lustrous modeling—evidences the Florentine concern with sculptural modes of painting. No chiaroscuro exists, or soft blurred modeling in the vein of the Venetians. Drawing underlines the painting with a visual acuity reminiscent of the Doni Tondo by Michelangelo, and paint application only exists as a transparent medium to reflect light through carefully applied layers. Vasari does display a wide breath of color knowledge, a refreshing technique in a painting otherwise bleached of brazen ambition. Contrasting pinkish-white skin tones and copper colors remind the beholder of Bronzino's *Allegory of Venus with Cupid*, where blanched flesh resides next to warmer, more copper skin tones. However, in the *Judith*, color choice seems arbitrary and fails to characterize the figures in a contextual sense. With reserve and artistic acumen, Vasari expands his palette to surprisingly great lengths in the piece, but when mixed into an obviously derivative piece, the beholder must wonder about the origins of the very different skin tonalities. By her pale skin tone, does Vasari imply that Judith is a creature lurking in the night, and Holofernes an active denizen of the sunlit day? Vasari leaves the beholder with little answer, and one must wonder if he simply lifted the color choice with the same bluntness applied to the overall figures.

With regard to surface detail, Vasari reveals attributes of Bronzino, especially in the jeweled brocade of Judith, which glimmers like the gold and ruby jewelry about the neck of Duchess Eleanora, in his famous portrait of the regal Florentine. Most details reside in the decorative features, in the hairs that curl atop the heads of Holofernes and Judith with a facility reminiscent of Parmigianino. In this way, the composition

concentrates entirely upon the interaction of muscle-bound figures; Vasari suggests the scene only by way of the corner of the bed sheet and the lifted veil of a bed curtain. Like Michelangelo and many other Mannerists, Vasari focuses upon the human figure as the supreme subject matter. He crowds the picture plane with only a remote hint of perspective or space. In this way, the work possesses sculptural rather than painterly concerns. No vigor exists in the brush strokes, and Vasari models objects in a warm unknown light source. With these intertwining figures, Vasari depicts not a scene but rather an arrangement of clipped quotations lifted directly from the art of the master sculptor, Michelangelo. His painting, unlike that of many of the contemporaries he so dearly admires, fails to soar to the heights of Parnassus.

Without the invention displayed by Salviati in the neighboring portrait, the *Judith and Holofernes* at the Saint Louis Art Museum lacks the breath of life that painters must instill to make their narratives real and alive. The viewer cannot feel the dynamics of the lifted scabbard about to plunge through the neck of Holofernes; rather, the raised arm seems frozen, sculptural and rhetorical. Unlike Salviati, who introduces some incidental detail into his portrait, the Judith seems rhetorical rather than real. That arm will never fall. In this way, it falls short of Michelangelo, the originator of the imitative style practiced by Vasari. His figures, such as Saint Matthew, seem to writhe before the eyes of the viewer, in defiance of a material even more foreign to motion than paint—stone.

Analyzing the paintings of Parmigianino, Vasari concludes that beyond his mastery of hair and surface detail, the artist has some enlivened the paint beneath his quickening brush: “as many of his paintings show, the faces laughing, the eyes speaking, the very pulses seeming to beat, just as his brush pleased.” Although Vasari has easily

achieved the grace, design, relief, and coloring requisite in a successful Mannerist painting, his Judith lacks the deeper emotive qualities that give viscera to the glamorous sheen of Mannerist painting. Aside from the fact that the arm seems frozen in its deathly arc, the beholder senses little drama in the painting. Holofernes, unlike a marble sculpture by Michelangelo, or the similarly copper-colored figure in Bronzino's London *Allegory*, has no pulse in the first place. Vasari illustrates, rather than characterizes, his Mannerist code; Holofernes and Judith remain ideas taken out of context—they fail to come to life through the graceful invention of the artist. Although superficially an ideal Mannerist painting, Vasari's *Judith and Holofernes* works best as a reference to more vital and ambitious works of Italian Mannerism.

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Even as they resonate with eerie emotion, Jacopo Pontormo's religious paintings continue to stymie the intellect. Pontormo rarely illustrates Biblical scenes. Rather, he characterizes his scenes by suffusing his figures with palpable emotion. At times, his characterizations become complex, detached, and even elusive; figures stare off from the limits of the picture plane and into the beholder's space, their almond-shaped eyes adrift in distant wonderment. One need only travel to Florence—to the Capponi Chapel at the Church of Santa Felicitá— to witness Pontormo at his enigmatic apex. His altarpiece for the chapel seems iconographic, as it follows a long line of entombment scenes in Italian art. At first glance, Mary swoons in pity and horror as other mourners prepare to lower the limpid corpse of Christ into his cavernous tomb.

Many artists treat the Passion cycle in a condensed chronological manner, painting Mount Golgotha and the Calvary in the far distance, the descent from the cross and the lamentation in the proximate foreground, and then a dark grotto at the very front of the picture plane. Yet Pontormo's altarpiece deviates from the path prescribed by these other paintings, and as a Mannerist work of art, the boundaries of the picture plane become surprisingly porous. The artist clearly hoped to incorporate the pendative and dome frescoes—painted by his hand but now destroyed— into the overall Chapel narrative. At the same time, the viewer remains not a passive, cerebral receptacle for the imagery, but rather an active participant in its formation. Given this added complexity, and the evanescent nature of the altar's primary players, the viewer and the frescoes, then one has even less to reference when approaching Pontormo's swirling, vivid altarpiece.

Art historians John Shearman and Leo Steinberg do not even agree upon the sphere to which the altarpiece ultimately communicates. Indeed, the altarpiece vacillates between the celestial and the terrestrial, between the heights of the heavens and the depths below the earth. A circle of seemingly weightless youths hovers above Mary, as she recedes into the picture plane with the assistance of her servants. On the far right of the painting—somewhat in the distance despite the shallow pictorial space—stands Pontormo himself. Transfixed in a wistful melancholy, gazing out to the beholder, he tilts his head slightly to the skies and upturns his lips into the hint of a smile. At the lower tier of the incongruously stacked composition, two youths attempt to bear the weight of Christ's ungainly body—one even crouches below him in an attempt to support him with his shoulders. Yet Christ's superhuman girth fails to rein in the attention of the two

youths— distraught, they stare left and right, and seem distracted from the monumental burden they share.

The radiating arms of these figures nearly touch at the empty center of the composition, like spokes on a wheel. With the gestural sweep of the upper figures, Christ seems willed to the air, yet by his size and positioning, he seems leaden and earthbound. The wheel, metaphorically, turns and turns, and the viewer knows not when it ceases. In this way, Pontormo summons an uncanny tension between weight and weightlessness, between the odd aviary mourners—who rise up to paradise—and the inevitability of entombment. Through its arrangement, the altarpiece invokes the ever-whirling cycle of life and death.

Notably, the entombment scene lacks the requisite dark grotto, and the primary figures of the foreground seem to swivel Christ in a subtle release from the two-dimensional surface of the canvas. John Shearman, in his article, *Only Connect, Art and Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*, asserts that despite its mystifying contradictions, the altarpiece has a distinctly terrestrial orientation. Christ spills out of the picture, his body an offering to the three-dimensional space of the chapel, the world beyond the picture frame. Though his tone is far from authoritative, he posits that Pontormo drew upon Raphael and especially Tintoretto by incorporating the chapel space as the physical end of the illusory scene. He notes, however, that Pontormo pushes these boundaries beyond his more tentative predecessors. But in the final analysis, Shearman only equivocates with regard to "whether He is to be placed like the Eucharist on the altar, or whether we should conceive the real burial vault as His destination."(Shearman, 93)

In the dissenting article *Pontormo's Capponi Chapel*, Leo Steinberg believes that Shearman captured the essence of the painting, but failed to identify its context. While Shearman favors entombment and the chapel space, Steinberg shifts his vision higher, to the dome of the Capponi chapel and to God on high. It is a difficult point to prove, given the immediate iconography of the scene—even absent the tomb or the crosses in the distance. He begins by differentiating the sway of the virgin from the traditional entombment swoon. By clarifying this distinction from the onset, he reveals Pontormo's aversion to rhetoric. Instead, Christ slips from her lap, a subtle indication of his immaculate conception and birth, but a more definitive statement of his leap into a world fraught with treachery and sin. Though he does recognize the St. Peter's pietá of Michelangelo as a direct model for Pontormo's figure of Christ, Steinberg fails to mention another virgin with child sculpture by Michelangelo, where the Christ child precariously teeters off of her lap. This effect lends the sculpture an undeniable anxiety, which evidences itself in the Pontormo as well. Mary swoons not; instead, she relinquishes her child.

But to a dark and lonesome tomb? Steinberg argues that the surrounding figures negate a downward thrust. During the Italian Renaissance, gesture stood as an important indicator of action. Steinberg pointedly asserts that the youths holding Christ do not look down or to the left, both traditional points indicating death. For all the weight of Christ, they also seem, oddly enough, light on their toes. The gestures of the altar figures, as a whole, indicate an upward dynamism. Indeed, as the drawing of God indicates, the now absent dome fresco provides the proper context in which to place the altarpiece. Here, God swivels to greet the redemptive offering of Christ upon his death. His gesture is all-

embracing, and he shuns a mere benediction. Implicitly, Steinberg suggests that such poses aspire to rhetoric, while Pontormo sought the more entrenched emotions of the celestial father. In this way, Pontormo characterizes not only the pathos of Christ and his dominion, but of the Capponi chapel itself. Anticipating his death, Ludovico Capponi commissioned Pontormo to paint the mausoleum space. According to Steinberg, he envisioned a "Throne of Grace", where God's pity saves man from his sin. After death, humanity seeks justice through divine understanding.

One art historian looks down and to the spectator; the other, up and to God (and a non-existent fresco). In between, one encounters an altarpiece devoid of stagnant rhetoric. Instead, a whirlwind of figures spiral around an axis with a momentary, centripetal force—the figures neither bound to the earth nor fully enthroned in the sky. Of the two critics, Leo Steinberg offers a more successful analysis, only because he embraces the mysterious complexities of Pontormo. Throughout the image, Pontormo negates the conventional elements of an entombment scene. For a chapel infused with cold bodies in its sterile stone, only an altarpiece reflective of enlightened redemption—and not of death and lamentation—seems appropriate. An entombment scene merely mirrors the pragmatic purpose of the chapel, in an admittedly more dramatic manner. A scene of Christ as an offering to God, meanwhile, creates an atmosphere acclimated for the soul's uplifting. As it sheds its body, the soul soars from its weighty corpse, from the corruption and burden of this world, and into the sublime forgiveness of God. With great subtlety, Pontormo most likely directed his Christ upward, toward the option of greater transcendence and meaning. In this way, Ludovico Capponi and his family could rest in eternal peace, with a visionary glimpse of salvation at the center of his small mausoleum.