charitable institutions, or who were involved in the administration of these places, became socially engaged through their link with all-female communities, which expanded well beyond the circumscribed domestic sphere of the household.

If there is a weak side of Chojnacha's book, it is probably the lack of a genuinely comparative perspective. She does not allow the reader fully to appreciate the peculiarities of the Venetian cases in comparison with other Italian contexts, like the much-studied cases of Florence or Rome, or other European realities; and she provides only short and scattered comments bearing on this question. Nevertheless, her study is a much-needed and well-balanced assessment of the private and public lives of women of lower status, and it offers an excellent understanding of the gender and class dimensions of early modern Venice.

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Leo Steinberg. *Leonardo's Incessant Last Supper*. New York: Zone Books, 2001.

The format of this book — an extended essay on one work of art — is itself a battle cry, and a part of its argument. According to Steinberg, Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* is a densely interwoven work whose full resonance of meaning requires slow unfolding, even if the "total harmonic effect" of the work is felt all at once by its viewer. Steinberg's implicit argument throughout is that Leonardo's interpretation of the *Last Supper* is a work of biblical exegesis in its own right, which is to say that it, too, demands careful examination and interpretation by a well-versed exegete. The model of transmission and commentary here is not very far from that of the Talmud, which Steinberg studied as a young man.

The difference is that here one of the "texts" is visual. If the world of biblical texts bristles with exegetical debate, in the world of biblical pictures Steinberg often finds himself all alone. Throughout his career Steinberg has been at pains to show that to read works of Renaissance art — such as the frescoes of the Sistine ceiling and Leonardo's *Last Supper*, not to mention any number of smaller devotional works — as well-behaved history paintings in the academic manner of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is to flatten them and to tame them, to fail to see their persistent confounding of temporal logic, to deny their invitations to polysemic thinking, to refuse the open structures by which they are connected to their physical environments and invite their viewers' participation.

The first order of business, therefore, is to break the spell of the academic discourse that has dominated painting and sculpture since the seventeenth century. In the case of the *Last Supper*, one must contend with no less an authority than Goethe, who in 1817 offered the classic reading of the painting as a drama occasioned by Christ's announcement that one of the apostles will betray him. In the Enlightenment reading the painting respects the dramatic unity of time by emphasizing the momentary response of the apostles. It engages the universal

language of human emotions, and addresses its viewers as ethical beings. The religious subject is little more than an occasion for great history painting.

Steinberg carefully reviews the entire history of interpretations of the action represented, including those that see the painting not as the announcement of betrayal but as the institution of the Eucharist. He argues that it is not necessary to choose one reading over the other. In his view, the painting is meaningfully ambiguous, containing both a historical and a sacramental dimension — “partnered into very coincidence, like the two natures of Christ” (p. 49), just as they are throughout Christian scripture and liturgy.

Leonardo’s figures literally embody these multivalent meanings. They can do so, Steinberg argues, because they are not real bodies but pictorial bodies. Through juxtaposition, overlapping, visual extension and other features of pictorial syntax, they are put into associative relations with other bodies and with other elements of the painting. Thus Thomas’s upraised finger rises perpendicular to Christ’s laterally extended hand and to Saint James Major’s outflung arm, “so that we could be hallucinating a phantom cross” (p. 71). This is not merely an allusion to the historical crucifixion but also a gloss on the meaning of the cruciform, crossing the “lateral” life and death of Christ on earth with the “vertical” promise of resurrection, of which Thomas was a conspicuous witness. The gestures of the actors have never been exposed to such careful scrutiny as they receive throughout this book and especially in Chapter IV. Throughout, Steinberg sees bodies behaving as they might at a given historical moment, and at the same time performing acts that figure the sacramental gestures of Christian ritual, because the acts of sacred history contain the principle of their ritualization, and that is what makes them sacred. The most overdetermined figure of all is, of course, Christ, and Steinberg devotes all of Chapter VII to the “Seven Functions of the Hands of Christ.”

The *Last Supper* is thus, according to Steinberg (adopting a phrase of Thomas Browne’s), “‘complexionally propense’ to ambiguity” (p. 137). Gestures have both a historical and a sacramental meaning. They are locally motivated and yet connected to the larger structure of the pictorial whole — “self-determined,” as Steinberg says, “yet intricate in a network of extraneous influence” (p. 128). The figures are self-willed actors in the open space of history, and yet it turns out they participate in an order that operates at the level of the image — that is, at a level external to the history and beyond even the consciousness of the actors themselves.

What occurs at the level of the body and the figure carries implications at the level of pictorial construction. Steinberg reminds us that at their inception the unified picture and the tools of perspective were above all occasions for a new order of metaphysical reflection. In the space opened up between the virtual world posited by perspective and its resolution on the two-dimensional plane, new kinds of associative relations became available for exploration, and thus a new and staggering array of applications for the figural imagination. The structure of perspective itself organizes the event as seen from a point of view outside the picture, outside the historical event. That is, perspective always sees the past event

in its application to the viewer's present, or in what exegetes called its tropological meaning. The act of artistic ordering thus becomes a putting to work of the divine design built into history. Here the opening out of the painting towards the viewer, the hallmark of perspectival construction, responds to the command of Christ's outspread arms. Chapters VIII and IX submit the projected space and framing of the painting to sustained and careful scrutiny, in the process thoroughly and fairly summarizing the voluminous past literature on this aspect of the work.

Given Steinberg's sacramental emphasis, it is no wonder that in this reading Leonardo's innovations should coincide with several notable archaisms: for example, the portrayal of Christ at a larger scale than the other figures; the return to a fourteenth-century arrangement where the table occupies, and blocks, the foreground of the painting; and the overt insistence on symmetry. But this is a sophisticated archaism that continually invokes radical innovation. The symmetry, for example, is animated by a dynamic counterpoint. The left side, cast in shadow and inhabited by Judas, is marked by downward movement and contraction, the illuminated right side by buoyancy and lift. Ten out of twelve hands on the left side, Steinberg notes, press down; on the right, ten out of twelve are aloft. Moreover, the composition is not inert but implies a movement from left to right, allowing the story to be read at a meta-narrative level as a passage from dark to light, from death to life. The larger eschatological picture thus dominates the painting, even as the singular moment initiates the story of the Passion.

Steinberg demands that we take the religious purpose of Renaissance art, and Renaissance artists, seriously. Over the last three decades, scholars in the early modern field have generally come to do the same, by studying patronage structures and the social institutions and codes within which art functioned, most of which were inextricably bound to religious life. Steinberg — here as in many other studies, beginning with his dissertation on Borromini's church of San Carlino — has taken the more direct route, right into the figural and rhetorical structures of the works themselves. He has consistently countered the tendency to reduce Renaissance narrative art to a linear and rational temporality, and to reduce Renaissance naturalism to a protoscientific investigation of the world. Instead, naturalism and narrative become engines of overdetermination, means of unfolding the paradox at the heart of the Christian theology of incarnation, which is that the spiritual can accomplish its purpose only by assuming flesh and residing on earth.

These imperatives continually challenged what art could be made to do, and gave scope to many of the innovations that we consider the most "modern" achievements of Renaissance art. That many of these innovations were later turned to secular purposes is part of the logic of unintended consequences that operates throughout the history of western art.

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