Throughout his sixty-year career, the art historian Leo Steinberg (1920–2011) was a prolific lecturer and contributor to scholarly and other publications. His work focused primarily on Michelangelo and Picasso, but it also ranged widely across Renaissance, Baroque, and twentieth-century art. He was also a famously fastidious writer. In 1982 he was invited to give the annual A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. But rather than publishing his lectures soon after delivery, as is the custom, he continued to revise and update them for the rest of his life. So when he died there was every expectation that a significant corpus of his output would remain unpublished and that those interested in his other writings, such as celebrated essays on Velázquez’s Las Meninas and Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, would have to scrounge around eBay for copies of them.

Happily, Steinberg had other ideas in mind. Shortly before his death, he directed Sheila Schwartz, his longtime associate, who worked with him from 1968 to his death, to arrange for the posthumous publication of essays written and lectures delivered throughout the course of his
career. The first volume, devoted to Michelangelo’s sculpture, appeared this November. It is to be followed in the spring by one on Michelangelo’s painting, and thereafter by volumes on Old Masters, Picasso, and modern masters. These new publications are, on many levels, occasions to celebrate.

Five of the nine essays in this volume focus on the Pietàs—the one in St. Peter’s (1498–99), the Florentine Pietà (1547–55), now in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo, and the Rondanini Pietà in Milan (begun in 1552 and still being worked on a week before Michelangelo’s death in 1564)—and the Madonna in the Medici Chapel in Florence (1521–34). But it should be said at the outset that Ms. Schwartz’s was no simple task of anthologizing. In order to create a cohesive publication that best represented Steinberg’s thinking, Schwartz had to cross check various versions of different lectures and articles from the entirety of his career, eliminating redundancies and forging transitions throughout (all without the author around to answer questions or vet the final result). It’s hard to imagine a more dedicated act of literary stewardship.
Despite being a tenured faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania for nearly two decades, beginning in the mid-1970s, and receiving a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 1986, Steinberg was always considered something of a renegade among art historians. (Richard Neer opens his introduction to this volume by quoting Sir Ernst Gombrich on Steinberg in *The New York Review of Books*.)
in 1977: “A dangerous model to follow.”) That’s because he straddled two worlds. One was art history, which insists that only those arguments are valid which can be substantiated by documentary evidence such as letters, contracts, and bills of sale. The other was art criticism, where the emphasis is on the writer’s individual response to works of art, one informed by, yet not confined to, primary sources and the existing literature.

At root, Steinberg was an iconologist. In his view, artists were a species of cryptographer, people who spoke in code, their codes symbols of their own devising and which it was the art historian’s job to decipher and interpret. “What does this image mean?” was his abiding question. To that end, he didn’t reject traditional art historical method so much as insist that it was but one avenue to understanding among many. The others included: close, first-person study of the artwork in question; the viewer’s physical experience (“I once asked some pre-med students at the University of Pennsylvania whether they thought this body [Christ’s in the Roman Pietà] was dead; they laughed.”); paying attention to, rather than dismissing, the opinions of philistines and other dissenters (“faultfinders often see more acutely, more independently than the encomiasts whose acclaim is rarely specific”); and citing copies and as many other possible iterations of a subject such as the pietà down the history of art—in occasionally exhausting abundance—and interrogating them for what they could reveal about the object under consideration. It was these last, more than any paper documents, that were the “texts” that Steinberg found most reliable, most likely to make an interpretive case.

This methodology led him to advance a number of bold, even unorthodox opinions about Michelangelo. In Steinberg’s view, the figure in Michelangelo’s art existed not just as a celebration of human beauty, a carrier of emotion or of implied narrative. It was the means of giving concrete, symbolic form to certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Or as he writes in “Body and Symbol in the Medici Madonna,” “In Michelangelo’s hands, anatomy becomes theology.” And so, he argues that, in the Roman Pietà, the significance of the oft-commented-upon youthfulness of the Virgin must be considered alongside Christ’s youthful manliness to understand her as the Bride of Christ, a longstanding theological concept but one never before so overtly expressed in visual art; that the artist hacked away Christ’s left leg in the Florentine Pietà because, though wanting to express a similar idea, he was afraid that, draped as it was across one of the Virgin’s, it would be read as a purely carnal symbol (the way the same motif functions in Rodin’s Kiss) rather than as the intended one of spiritual matrimony; that Mary’s crossed legs in the Medici Madonna symbolize her eternal virginity. These pieces are as dazzling to read as they are exciting to ponder. Every time you think that the limb Steinberg has ventured out on is about to break, he slips underneath another persuasive strut to support himself. The result is some of the most intellectually stimulating art history and pleasurable prose to be found anywhere.

One of the most entertaining pieces in the book is “The Florentine Pietà: The Missing Leg Twenty Years After,” from the September 1989 issue of The Art Bulletin, in which Steinberg catalogues, and responds to, two decades of scholarly reaction to his interpretation by eminences and Michelangelo scholars such as Sir John Pope-Hennessy, Frederick Hartt, and others. It offers a vivid demonstration of what one has always heard about academic politics—its pettiness and cutthroat nature—putting one in mind of the observation attributed to Henry Kissinger, that “the reason university politics is so vicious is because the stakes are so small.”

One common denominator of the attacks is the effort to impeach Steinberg’s credibility by deliberate misreadings and misquotations, most flagrantly by Pope-Hennessy in an appendix to the third edition of his landmark study, Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture, in which he altered Steinberg’s original title, “Metaphors of Love and Birth in Michelangelo’s Pietàs” to read “Metamorphosis of Love and Birth in Michelangelo’s Pietà”—singular. Still, in responding to the Pope’s sleight of hand, Steinberg shows that he could give as good as he got:

The procedure here is fairly subtle, and students of Pope-Hennessy’s polemical style will register it as an advance. For where he would formerly hurl an epithet such as “truck driver” at a scholar he differed from [this was H. W. Janson], now the Knight of Billingsgate deftly garbles a title, as if to intimate, by example, how perversity should be met. It’s heartening to see a scholar in the ripeness of years still refining his gifts.

Also included here is a 1996 essay he wrote for ARTnews dismissing the attribution of what is now known as the Young Archer as a youthful work by Michelangelo. The attribution had been made in 1995 by Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, a professor at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, after closely examining a marble statue that had long graced the lobby of the French Consulate on Fifth Avenue without attracting any notice at all. The claim put her on the front page of The New York Times and on Charlie Rose a few months later. I was ARTnews’s executive editor during this episode, and so I got a firsthand view of Steinberg’s fastidiousness as a writer.

We’d been trying to find a scholar to comment on the attribution, but everyone we approached turned us down—academic politics again. Then, Steinberg’s essay came in over the transom. This was a surprise, to say the least, since he and my boss, Milton Esterow, had had a legendary falling out two decades previously over the way the magazine had handled Steinberg’s Demoiselles essay.

Steinberg reminded me of this when I called to say we’d like to run his piece. Ever since that unpleasant experience, he said, “You editors have writers’ contracts; I have editors’ contracts,” and went on to explain how this was to work: “Your boss puts $1,000 into an escrow account, and if my article appears with any change, no matter how small, that I haven’t approved, the money automatically defaults to his favorite charity.” As I listened, I frantically tried to figure out a way to let him know that his idea would never fly with Milton, when he concluded with, “But you
seem like a reasonable person, so if you can assure me that . . .” I did, and the article went forward. But I was on such tenterhooks throughout the process that when, close to the end, I thought some minor punctuation change was called for, I made sure to check with him. Came the reply: leave it be.

The statue has been on display at the Met for ten years, yet nearly a quarter-century on the attribution is no more compelling than it was originally. Every time I see it, I feel a stab in my gut and the words “dead stone” play in my head. Given its current display, Steinberg’s observations are worth quoting:

I do not recognize the young sculptor’s hand or mind in the statue’s presumable gait (the legs from the knees down are lost); it suggests the light footfall of one delighted to be moving along. Nor can I find Michelangelo in the ease of the figure’s frictionless spiral motion, as seen especially from sides and back. The sentiment of the cocked head seems too cozy, as does the smooth drop from chest to left thigh . . . . This Fifth Avenue sculptor dreams silhouettes, charming in linear flow, but without stress of substance . . . .

As I see it, incoherence prevails, along with a sweetish allure that I find foreign to the twenty-year-old Michelangelo, who had done the figures of the San Domenico altar and was conceiving the Bacchus and the Roman Pietà.

One of the special pleasures of this book is the priority it gives to the act of looking. Steinberg was a relentless scrutinizer of artworks, and in these pages we feel ourselves being led by our eyes around and through Michelangelo’s work. Often the revelations are large, as in his explanation for one of the ways the artist got the body of a grown man—Christ—to fit across the lap of the Virgin:

[T]he sculptor keeps expanding the Virgin’s physique from the top down. The augmentation begins at her head, a small head enveloped in many layers of drapery. And this superfluity of cloth, rather than the head itself, scales the next phase. Those turbulent draperies mask a continuous escalation of shoulders, bosom, and waist; they luxuriate about knees and legs that seem measureless.

Elsewhere, his eye will zero in on a telling detail—such as, in the Florentine Pietà, the loose end of Christ’s winding sheet that falls between him and the Mary Magdalene figure at the left—prompting him to dilate on its symbolism.

And herein lies the importance of this volume and the entire series. Steinberg returns the act of looking to center stage, insisting on it as the primary, indispensable instrument for understanding works of art. In an intellectual climate that holds that reading—critical theory—is the only true path to wisdom, the return of Leo Steinberg’s singular eye and mind could not be more timely or necessary.

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1 Michelangelo’s Sculpture: Selected Essays, by Leo Steinberg, edited by Sheila Schwartz; The University of
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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 37 Number 6, on page 50
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