

Liminal Leo: Mourning Leo Steinberg

by Ellen Handler Spitz

Earlier this year *artcritical* carried tributes to the great art historian Leo Steinberg, who passed away in March at the age of ninety, by [Laurie Schneider Adams](#), David Carrier and David Cohen. We are delighted to augment the record with this personal essay in remembrance by the distinguished scholar of art and psychoanalysis, Dr. ELLEN HANDLER SPITZ, whose tribute, very appropriately for *artcritical*, touches on Steinberg the maker.

Evenings, before his last debilitating fall, Leo would wait for me standing, posed nonchalantly—oxymoron fully in force—at, not quite *in*, the open doorway of his seventeenth-floor New York City apartment in an architecturally undistinguished modern skyscraper across from Lincoln Center. Normally, I would arrive at around seven, and when I was late, he would sometimes say he had begun to worry that I had forgotten. Which hurt and puzzled me because of its sublime incongruity. As if I could *forge!* There was no iconic cigarette any more (they were forbidden finally by a doctor who threatened him into compliance). Just the well-published knowing look, mischievous and boyish, despite his nearly ninety years. His contrapposto, like so much else about him, exuded complexity—message and mystery enmeshed. Standing at his open doorway, he occupied a liminal space, and Leo seemed to me in so many ways a liminal figure. He was waiting expectantly and, as I emerged from the elevator each time, the sight of him sent an electric current through my body. Partly reverence, partly pleasure, partly amazement. My awe of him never abated, and it returns even as I write these words.

Leo Steinberg (1920-2011) will be remembered as one of the most learned, eloquent, and original thinkers who ever graced the discipline of art history. His erudition and revolutionary ways of seeing art are, like his scholarly range, nonpareil, for he wrote luminously not only on the Italian Renaissance masters of his principal training, such as Borromini, Michelangelo, Raphael, and Leonardo, but delectably and perspicaciously on Velasquez, Rodin, Picasso, and on a host of twentieth-century painters including De Kooning, Pollock, and Johns. He famously said: “It is naïve to imagine that you avoid the risk of projecting merely by not interpreting. In desisting from interpretation, you do not cease to project. You merely project unwittingly. For there is no escape from oneself . . .” (*Other Criteria*, 1972).

At first, I wanted to bring him tokens—of esteem and affection—especially because he was largely shut in, confined to his apartment, and I once essayed a delicate bouquet of peach-colored scented lilies. He was not pleased. Do not bring me flowers, he said, for they simply die and must be thrown out, and that makes me sad. But why can't you simply enjoy them while they are alive? I queried in surprise. He remained adamant. Reluctantly, I gave up my floral offerings. He told me that at his time of life he wanted no presents of any kind. He reminded me of a colleague whose mansion near London's Hampstead Heath is filled with bric-a-brac and objets d'art amassed over decades and who now, rather than allow guests to arrive with gifts, encourages them to take away something every time they pay a visit. Leo gave me something every time I paid him a visit. He gave me words—intangible and priceless. I do not know in turn what I gave him, as he refused almost everything.

“The gloom of the mind and the light of the body” (1972, 93), he once wrote. Enunciating syllables with care, he would sometimes apologize that he was “not in good voice.” I knew what he meant, but to me that slight quaver cast an

incantatory spell. On one occasion, he told me an anecdote about his psychoanalysis with, as it happens, a former teacher of mine at Columbia, a fact that, not wishing to interrupt him (he did not like being interrupted), I forbore to mention. He started by referring to an article he wrote for *Life Magazine*. That was in 1968, and its opening gambit concerns a haunting watercolor by Picasso, painted during the Blue Period in 1904. The artist, in profile, then twenty-three years old, sits at a table gravely watching a girl sleep, her left arm bent to cradle her head. Clad in melting blue with a white scarf, the painter appears to be daydreaming, while the girl herself actually dreams. Discussing this picture with his analyst, Leo mentioned that he detected in it an inversion of aggression. He made no further comment. But I quickly knew. For, although the gaze of a male artist at an immobilized female figure tends to be conventionally seen as aggressive (male toward helpless female), Leo was constitutionally attuned to the less obvious. He detected in the scene an element of counter-aggression. Leo's analyst responded to his intuition with an empathic elaboration: What about the aggression that lies latent in a kept secret? He asked. The response impelled Leo to rise and begin pacing the room. With his inimitable brand of calm fervor, he described the encounter as an epiphany. Gazing into the distance, he explained the immensely liberating insight: within the throes of this exchange, he had grasped the wondrously empowering idea that his unconscious was actually *working with him* in his creative endeavors. The scene took on the aspect of a revelation, and I in turn reveled in the heightened intonation of his speech as he relived the dramatic story.

The two of us are seated face to face at a small table, only slightly unstable, located just outside his cramped, typically windowless city kitchen. We are surrounded by a sepia *mise-en-scène* of prints, statuettes, antiquarian books, papers, journals, and letters and equipped with tiny inverted bell-shaped etched glasses of a liqueur Leo has poured from a delicately tinted bottle, or, perhaps it is only I who sip the liqueur, as he often prefers a tumbler of apple juice. He urges me to eat. But in his presence I am never hungry. His incessant flow of words, associations, ideas, and images fills me to brimming so that I am unable to take in much food or drink and want for nothing except to be able to concentrate fully, to be absolutely present to this extraordinary intellect, which billows out far beyond the confines of the frail body it now inhabits. If only I could catch fast, grasp tight, hold on! But the elegant sentences flutter by on gossamer wings and vanish in the ether only to be replenished by others equally alluring. How can I embrace and preserve all this? He cannot live forever. His blue eyes smolder with an amber glow, his tapered fingers occasionally gesture to emphasize a point. His still thick grey locks curl tightly. Burning to reach out my arms in a hopeless gesture, I bring them in closer, self-consciously, toward my own body.

We move over to the couch, where Leo has taken out a portfolio to show me his life drawings, which he deprecates, some made when he was an art student at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, and also a strange little childhood sculpture of a horse he has kept since he was a boy. He talks about the value of a sure line and the problems students have with drawing extremities—feet and hands. Sternly, he deplores a hesitant line, one that staggers at the edges, lurching, limping, redirecting and correcting itself. He wants me to take note that *he* had no fears about completing the human form. Nor did *his* hand limp. I sigh, shyly recalling a moldering black portfolio filled with my own youthful life drawings on newsprint done at the Art Students League in New York and in Boston at the Museum School, but I do not speak of them. Leo's drawings appear skillful and beautiful to me, but to him they are merely academic, devoid of spark or originality. I had, he insists, nothing new to say as an artist; on the contrary, I realized

that when I gazed at art, I could see what others failed to find. Thus, Leo Steinberg left the studio forever and turned exclusively to the study of art—to gazing intently for years—and to the alchemy of written words.

One evening in a conversation on education, I am lamenting that children no longer memorize poetry. Leo leans back, and in a voice made soft only by lack of strength starts reciting to me, line-by-line, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. My eyes fill with tears as I listen. Here was a man whose mother tongue was Russian, who learned Hebrew, Latin, also German, English, Italian, and I do not know what others and who sits calmly before me at the end of his life declaiming these glorious lines of seventeenth-century blank verse, and he goes on until I beg him to stop because I cannot bear it. Will there ever again be anyone in the world who can do this? Now that people depend on Google and such. Furthermore, Leo knows the Hebrew Bible chapter and verse; citing passages when we talk, he refines my understanding and teaches me. His family, having moved to Germany from Russia, went on to England to escape the Nazis and thence he came to New York. One of Leo's best stories involves the renowned art historian and distinguished immigrant European scholar of the era, Erwin Panofsky.

In answer to a question I pose, Leo tells me that one morning he had been studying in the library of the Institute of Fine Arts. Emerging in the company of a fellow student, he enters a nearby café where they are astonished to find Panofsky and his wife occupying the next booth. Leo goes over to the great man, introduces himself as an Institute student, says he has been reading all morning, and quips that it is most unusual to come out of the library and encounter in person the very author whose work one has been studying for hours! Panofsky asks him what he has been reading, and when Leo hands him the used book, Panofsky spies, written inside in small letters, a name he knows. Startled, Panofsky tells Leo that this was his first student. He recalls how concerned he had been for the young man, who was a Jew. Panofsky feared that, because of rampant anti-Semitism in Germany, there was a chance the student would not be allowed to pass his doctoral exams. To help him, expressly to sit on his committee and assure his success, Panofsky returned to Germany. Afterwards, he helped the young scholar obtain a teaching post in America. Leo now gets up slowly to find the book as he wants to show me Panofsky's inscription, for on that serendipitous occasion Panofsky had signed the book to Leo: To Leo Steinberg from Erwin Panofsky in the Apostolic Succession, or words to that effect. Needless to say, Leo relishes the bittersweet irony of this. For, whereas "Apostolic Succession" denotes an ecclesiastical doctrine of inheritance of spiritual and sacramental authority which passes from early Christianity to the present—from the twelve Apostles to present day Catholic bishops worldwide—in Panofsky's inscription the term refers to the successive waves of disenfranchised Jews who fled from a dangerous Europe to America, Jewish students, that is, of art history like himself and his student and Leo: a very different laying on of hands.

I am brooding now. On other stories that lurk untold in the pockets of this protean mind, this intensely lived life, this congested psychic space. Leo picks up *Other Criteria*, his acclaimed magnum opus in which the original Picasso essay was republished, and reads to me from it. He mentions brief remarks on Jeanne Claude he must deliver at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He turns to his unfinished, never-to-be completed work on Michelangelo's *Doni tondo*, a propped print of which has adorned his worktable for as long as I can remember. In one of the bookcases under the windows on which a long row of small bright plastic cigarette lighters supply the only kitsch and spark of saturated color, he searches for and reads to me a Tennyson poem, in which the poetic speaker cannot tolerate the carefree

joy of a young girl and suffers murderous impulses towards her. Leo knows why, for he has experienced this himself. The room seems suffused with russet; it has grown late. Melancholy descends. I glance furtively at the row of darkened windows facing southeast over the unvarnished city. Awkwardly, I find my wrap, and Leo insists on going downstairs with me, a practice that will cease as his strength ebbs. After he has said goodbye and I am safely in the taxi, I feel blank. *He will die*, scream the speeding traffic and indifferent strobe lights that flash across my strained face.

Yet, the months pass, and especially after his fall and enforced restriction to a single chair even for sleeping, Leo seems to relax into a mode of resignation. I have saved several of his voice messages on my cell phone so that I can still listen to the timbre of his modulated voice and meticulously chosen words. But, as with my father, it happened in March and caught me by surprise. In spite of everything. He was also ninety: a grand age. Now Leo Steinberg has become, for the world, as Wallace Stevens titled one of his poems, a man made out of words. He was never merely that. He lived fully, as again per Stevens (from "Esthétique du Mal"), in a physical world, and yet he knew that desire could be difficult to tell from despair.