Sight Unseen:
How Every Painter Paints Himself

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Chapter

3

Chapter Three

BATTLES FROM MICHELANGELO TO PICASSO

'For a painter, it is probably twice as interesting if, while painting a nest, he dreams of a cottage and, while painting a cottage, he dreams of a nest. It is as though one dreamed twice, in two registers, when one dreams of an image cluster such as this. For the simplest image is doubled; it is itself and something else than itself.'

Vincent van Gogh, writing to his brother, Theo[1]

If this account of the meaning and unity of poetic art, presented in segments on this website, was structured according to the sequence of events out of which it was produced, it would not be credible. Initially, I found my own observations hard to believe. On comparing the works of great masters, strange things happened: doors turned into columns, people into animals and pianos into artists among many other astonishing metamorphoses. The process was so pervasive and perverse that my eyes had to be trusted without my brain fully understanding the purpose. Over time sense emerged, irrational scenes became logical and continuity became apparent within the canon. Despite an intense search nothing similar has been found in the work of minor artists. Great masters, the vast majority of them, seem to have recognized under the surface of their predecessors' art an allegory on spiritual and artistic creation. In many instances paintings appear within paintings, artists are at work constructing their pictures or in a process that will be explained later they imagined themselves as God creating the world, their immortality assured.[2] Furthermore they depict themselves, metaphorically, as reincarnations of earlier great masters continuing and evolving the canon in new directions while maintaining its unity. Occasionally, I would happen on texts in which writers had identified similar processes in the work of individual artists but, because virtually all art scholars today are specialists, no-one had joined the threads to discover the continuity.

Fig. 1 Michelangelo, *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*

Fig. 2 Detail of fig. 1

One of Michelangelo's earliest sculptures, *Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*, depicts a scene in which stones are being hurled between the combatants (fig. 1). Paul Barolsky has noted that the choice of stones, weapons not specified by the classical poets, was Michelangelo's and is related to his medium of choice. The sculpture resembles the description of a battle-relief by the Greek sculptor, Phidias, in which he was said to have included his self-portrait as 'a bald old man holding up a great stone with both hands' (fig. 2).[3] This figure appears at the left of Michelangelo's sculpture and would appear to *represent* Michelangelo himself in the 'likeness' of Phidias, one great sculptor as a synonym for the other.[·] 'Phidias' holds a stone crafted from stone, thus blending reality with imagination in a battle that is on its principal level an allegory of creative struggle. Barolsky has written how in the life-story Michelangelo created for himself:

> 'he is in a sense one of his own sculptures, which are metaphors of the self.....Michelangelo's creation of himself is the central motive of his work.'[4]

[·] Throughout these essays and the website too the word *self-representation* refers to a figure or object that signifies the artist without resembling him or her. A *self-portrait*, as ever, means an actual likeness.

Fig. 3 Michelangelo, *Drawing for sculptures of David*

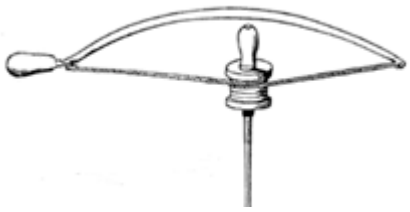

Fig. 4 Traditional sculptor's drill

Fig. 5 Michelangelo, *David*

On a drawing which includes sketches for sculptures of David (fig. 3), Michelangelo wrote: 'David with his sling / And I with my bow / Michelangelo.' The bow refers to the traditional drill used by sculptors which in modern Italian maintains its connection to archery through its name, *archetto* (fig. 4). It has therefore long been known that Michelangelo's enormous sculpture, *David*, is a representation of the sculptor with a sling in place of the sculptor's bow. (fig. 5).[5] Sculptor's *bow*? One must be alert to coincidence in art. That phrase recalls a Michelangelo drawing which scholars unanimously agree is of uncertain subject and cannot be explained, *Archers Shooting at a Herm* (fig. 6).[6] One of its inexplicable features is that all but one archer do not hold a bow!

Fig. 6 Michelangelo, *Archers Shooting at a Herm*

Given Michelangelo's association of sculpture with archery, it is significant that the action and strength needed to pull back a bow-string recalls the action and strength required of a sculptor in his hammer arm. The sculptor's other arm is extended in front to hold a chisel like the archers appear to do. Just as

figures by Manet ‘paint’, Michelangelo’s ‘sculpt’(fig. 7-8). Inexplicably on the surface level, the archers also fire *at a stone sculpture*, the herm at right, and thus metaphorically represent the force of a sculptor and the violence of artistic creation. There is logic to the missing bows and the use of sculpture as a target. It is the *same* underlying theme as that in *The Battle of the Lapiths*; only the surface story, the outer form, has changed. The face on the herm, being ‘sculpted’ by the archers, has even been thought to resemble Michelangelo, a subject for later discussion though it is worth rembering that *David* too is a self-representation.[7]

Fig. 7 Cut-out of Michelangelo’s *Archers* (a sculptor at work)

Fig. 8 Cut-out of *Soap Bubbles* (a painter at work)

Fig. 9 Monogram of Thomas Mann

Nor is there is anything socially- or culturally-specific about Michelangelo's use of arrows to represent the tools of his craft. Thomas Mann, in the twentieth century, described how an artist might be well-disposed and loving as a private person but as an artist must resort to force. He wrote that:

> 'the only weapon given to the artist, with which to react to such experiences…is that of expression, his power of denoting; and this reaction…will be the more violent, the greater the sensibility of the center the experience has touched. This is the origin of that cold and merciless accuracy in description: this, the tensely drawn bow from which the *word* flies, the sharp, feathered word, that whirs and hits and lodges quivering in its mark. – And the stern bow: is it not, as well as the gentle lyre, an instrument of Apollo?'[8]

Mann's own monogram was a combination of a bow and arrow with a lyre (fig. 9).

Just as Manet's art helps explain Michelangelo's, so too can it help explain Picasso's. Picasso's prolonged meditation on the theme of artist and model is well known. Hundreds of his drawings and paintings are scenes in a studio, an obsession thought to be unique among great masters. It is not; it is just more obvious. Let us start, though, and look at those works by Picasso which do *not* appear to depict either an artist or a model.

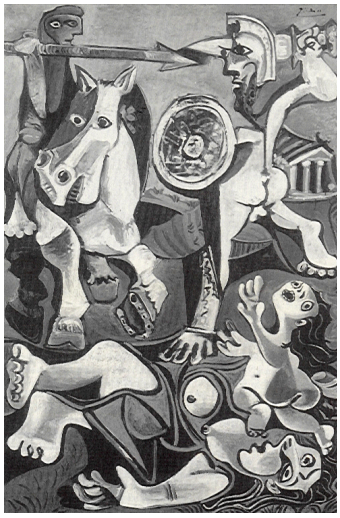
Fig. 10 Picasso, *The Rape of the Sabines*


Fig. 11 Picasso, *In the Studio of the Female Painter. 20.1.54 I* (detail inverted)


Fig. 12 Picasso, *Woman Painter and Model* (detail inverted)


Fig. 13 Picasso, Sketch for *Rape of the Sabines*

Picasso, while at work on a series of studio scenes, took time out to paint *The Rape of the Sabines* (fig. 10). It has been claimed, on the basis that it appears to depict a battle that it was a response to the Cuban missile crisis or the culmination of a long sequence of anti-war statements from *Guernica* through *Massacre in Korea* to *War and Peace*. Karen Kleinfelder, however, suspected that it was really art that was behind this battle when she noted that three days after Picasso finished the *Rape* he returned to drawing images of artists and models (fig. 24). She asked:

> 'What could account for this abrupt turn of events? Had the aging artist simply shifted away from the political to focus on more personal, private concerns, or could there be a more covert link? Instead of a warrior with upraised sword, we now find a painter who lifts brush to canvas; instead of the fallen woman, who lies helpless and crushed under the feet of the combatants, we now find a nude model in a state of recline draped on the studio divan.'[9]

One need not look far to confirm her suspicions. The form of the sword and shield held by

Picasso's foot soldier had already been used by him for the figure of female painters nine years earlier (figs. 10-12). He even considered using a palette-form for a helmet in a sketch for *The Rape* with a cut-out in the rear to suggest a thumb-hole (fig. 13). In the finished work, however, Picasso does not caress his model as in the sketch but struggles, like Michelangelo and Phidias, to create great art.

Fig. 14 Picasso, *Bather Opening a Cabin* (1928)

Fig. 15 Picasso, *A Painter* (1932)

Fig. 16 Picasso, Detail of *Variation on Las Meninas* 28 (1957)

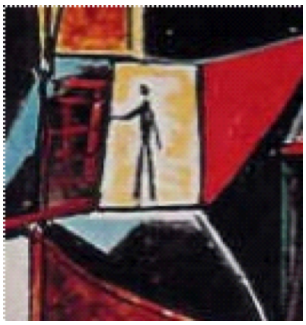

Fig. 17 Picasso, Detail of *Variation on Las Meninas* 3

Although a scene at the seaside is far removed in time and tone from *The Rape* it depicts, once again, an artist at work (fig. 14). The bather, normal perception tells us, turns a key in the cabin door but true perception sees an artist at work, the key representing a **P**-shaped brush for Picasso (fig.15). The tricks that artists play, as Robert Louis Stevenson remarked, may seem trifling but are not. Here Picasso's artist painting on the door with a key refers back to the chamberlain in the background of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* whom Picasso, in his variations, depicted painting on the open door (figs. 16-17). The Spanish courtier, perhaps a cousin of the artist, was called Velázquez and the symbol of his office was a key. Albrecht Dürer, whose name refers to 'Doors' and who used open doors throughout his *oeuvre* was clearly on the same wavelength.[10] Of course, doors and perception have long been linked, as in Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*. Join me for future essays in this series and we will walk through some of them.

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NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

[1] Van Gogh, *Lettres à Theo*, p. 12, cited in Bachelard, 1994, p.98.

[2] In the meantime you can access the theme The Artist as Christ for an explanation of how artists can conceive of themselves as God.

[3] Barolsky, 1990 (A), p.107

[4] Barolsky, 1990 (A), p.140

[5] Seymour, 1967, p.7, 16.

[6] Frederick Hartt in a catalogue of Michelangelo's drawings made a typical comment about *Archers Shooting at a Herm*: 'This is also an enigma, which has so far successfully eluded all attempts at interpretation'. He ends by writing: '…we must await the exact text, if any.' (Hartt, 1971, pp. 252-3).

[7] The figures of the archers resemble the principal figures in Michelangelo's other presentation drawings, whether depicting Phaeton, Ganymede or Tityus. They have all been identified as surrogates for Michelangelo linked through their common appearance. It follows that the archers must be as well (See Testa, 1979, pp. 45-72). Related to the concept of the sculptor as an archer is a manuscript page by Michelangelo on which he wrote a sonnet. In the poem he described himself painting the Sistine ceiling, standing up, the brush continually above his head, the paint dripping down. Then he added the line: 'And I am bending like a Syrian bow'. In the margin of the same page is a relatively crude drawing of what he looked like painting the ceiling, his back arched. Irving Lavin has described the sketch as 'depicting his twisted body as the bow, his right arm holding the brush as the arrow, and a figure on the ceiling as the target' (Lavin, 1993, p.220). That concept of Michelangelo as a painter is a close match with the new interpretation of *Archers Shooting at a Herm*. The analogy between archery and painting was also used by Alberti in his 15th century treatise, *On Painting*: 'Let no-one doubt that the man who does not perfectly understand what he is attempting to do when painting, will never be a good painter. It is useless to draw the bow, unless you have a target to aim the arrow at.' (Alberti, 1991, p.59). For the identification of the herm as a self-portrait, see Clements, 1965, p. 113; for other explanations of the *Archers* drawing, see Panofsky, 1962, pp.225-8 and Summers, 1981, pp.304-7. Other details in the drawing, such as the putti, are explained in the article, "Michelangelo's Art through Michelangelo's Eyes",.also available at www.everypainterpaintshimself.com.

[8] Thomas Mann, *Rede und Antwort* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag) 1922, pp. 13-5, cited in Campbell, 1968, p. 329. Using a similar metaphor in reverse, Ludovico Dolce in the sixteenth century wrote of Titian's *Venus and Adonis* 'for if a marble statue could, with the shafts of its beauty, penetrate to the marrow of a young man…then what should this figure do which is made of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe?' (cited in London 2003, p. 132)

[9] Kleinfelder, 1993, pp. 100-1

[10] Koerner 2002, p.20