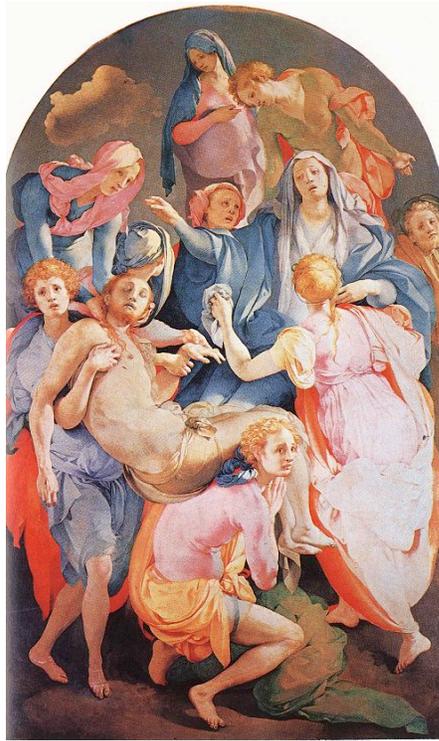


Joshua Korenblat



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 seem 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 Felicità—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 pendant 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—at present one has even less context for 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—distracted, 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 does not know 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 around 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 does not swoon; instead, she relinquishes her child.

But does she give up her child to a tomb, dark and lonesome? 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.