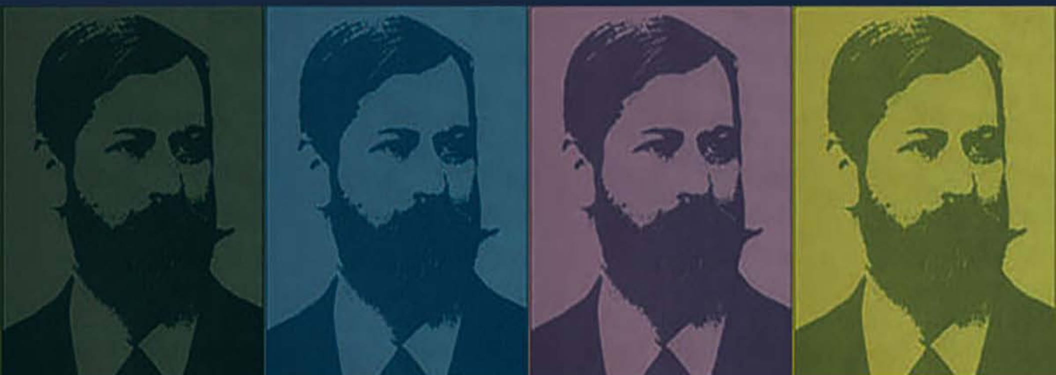
DONALD KUSPIT

FREUD AND THE VISUAL ARTS



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Donald Kuspit

As Louis Fraiberg noted in 1956, “Only twice did Freud essay . . . detailed analyses of painting and sculpture: most of his application to art was in the field of literature” (p. 88). Fraiberg gives two explanations for this fact: (1) “Literature . . . since its medium, like that of psycho-analysis, is language, lends itself readily to scientific investigation without the necessity of constructing a new symbolic foundation” (p. 82), and (2) “And in literature, the presentation of the themes which interested him was on the whole more explicit and lent itself more readily to study, being closer to the kind of material which he obtained from his patients” (p. 88). More particularly, Richard Sterba (1940) observes that “Freud uses poetry as a paradigmatic basis for his investigations in the field of the psychology of art because, of all the material employed to form the work of art, poetry stands nearest to the dream and the fantasy, those all-important objects of psychological research. It may also be that the art of poetry lay nearest to Freud’s own creative expression” (p. 262).

Now I have the difficult task of insisting that while all this is so, there is more than meets the eye with respect to Freud’s preference for the literary over the visual arts. 1 will argue that there is a certain calculated reluctance in

Freud’s withdrawal—as I want to characterize it—from the visual to the literary. It short-circuits his analysis of Leonardo’s paintings: the Mona *Lisa* (1503-1506), the *Virgin and Saint Anne with the Christ Child and the Young John the Baptist* (1500-1501), and Michelangelo’s sculpture Moses (1513-1515), to name the works of visual art Freud dealt with most extensively. Freud himself said, at the beginning of his essay “The Moses of Michelangelo” (1914), that while he was “no connoisseur in art . . . works of art do exercise a powerful effect on me, especially those of literature and sculpture, less often of painting” (p. 211). The only explanation he offered was his need to “explain to myself what their effect was due to, noting, almost as an aside, that wherever I cannot do this, as for instance with music, I am almost incapable of obtaining any pleasure. Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me” (p. 211).

Presumably works of literature and sculpture were easier for Freud to analyze and explain than works of painting and music, which no doubt had their effect but did not afford much pleasure. In a sense, he resisted being moved by them: the unpleasure of being unable to analyze them cancelled out the pleasure they could have given him. He became indifferent to them on principle. Sculpture escaped this fate because it was essentially three-dimensional literature for Freud. Indeed, it could be understood through literature, from which it was derived. It represented figures—for example,

Moses—who were already celebrated in literature, whether for their deeds or ideas. Once a person was famous enough on paper, he would be represented —monumentalized—in space, as though to satisfy curiosity about his appearance—even if no one remembered what he actually looked like. Artistic fantasy would make him look important—and signal his superior place in society. Visual representation derived from literary representation—visual fame from literary fame. Visual fame consolidated literary fame, absolutizing it. Michelangelo's Moses, in effect, resurrected the body of the biblical hero, confirming his importance for civilization, the nobility of his person, and the authority of his mind, that is, the immortality of his ideas. The ideas were beyond criticism, and he was beyond reproach.

If, as Harold Blum (1991) writes, "Moses came to life, reborn as Freud's idealized self, object, and self-object, alter ego and ego ideal, replacing Fliess" (p. 516), Michelangelo's Moses also symbolized Freud's wish to be famous and immortal for his writing. When Freud relinquished Fliess, Blum writes, "the sculptured Moses was further utilized as a concrete 'living' presence, a partially externalized object and self-representation serving the remodeled internalization and consolidation of Freud's analytic ideals and identity" (p. 516). There was even more—competition with Moses, amounting to hubris: Moses's heroism led the children of Israel out of physical slavery, and Freud's ideas would lead them—all of mankind—out of mental slavery. Freud not only wanted to be larger than life, like Michelangelo's statue, but larger than

Moses. Did he dare think that psychoanalysis was more important than the Ten Commandments, or at least as important? Both were received with great ambivalence, and continue to be.

Freud, then, wanted intellectual pleasure from art, not sensuous pleasure. I think he was interested in Leonardo because he had been stuck on the horns of the same dilemma as Leonardo—the choice between the sensuous pleasure of art and the intellectual pleasure of science—and like Leonardo, if with less agony and earlier in his life, he chose science rather than art, or rather subsumed the latter in the former. Like Leonardo, Freud (1910) had "an insatiable and indefatigable thirst for knowledge" (p. 75), "saw countless other problems arising" behind the first one (p. 77), "controlled and subjected [his affects] to the instinct for research" (p. 74), and "did not love or hate, but asked himself about the origin and significance of what he was to love and hate" (p. 74). Converting] his passion into a thirst for knowledge, like Leonardo (p. 74), Freud discursively read what he saw rather than enjoying it spontaneously. Freud identified with Leonardo and Moses because they were both intellectuals who had repudiated the life of the senses and brought their emotions under control. According to Freud, Michelangelo showed Moses in the act of doing so. More precisely, they analyzed and bent the life of the senses and emotions to a higher, more mature purpose—the life of the mind. Two years after his study of Michelangelo's Moses, Freud declared, in his essay, "On Transience" (1916), that "it was incomprehensible .

. . that the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it” (p. 305). But he could not enjoy beauty unless he could intellectually dissect it. As he said, he abhorred the “state of intellectual bewilderment” an aesthetician regarded as “a necessary condition” for a work of art to achieve its greatest effect (Freud 1914, p. 212). Such intellectual bewilderment was in effect capitulation to purely sensuous pleasure.

In dealing with art, only comprehension gave Freud pleasure, and literature gave him pleasure because it was, for him, the most readily comprehended art. It could be easily read and intellectually analyzed. In contrast, painting and music could not be read in the same straightforward intellectual way, however much music, like literature, used a comprehensible language, and thus could be systematically analyzed. As far as I know, Freud never learned the language of music, although the music he liked was accompanied by language, as though that alone made it meaningful. One of Freud’s favorite works was Mozart’s Don *Giovanni,* which, like all operas, involves a text the music presumably translates, or at least that is correlate with the music, making it easier to follow, if not comprehensible in its own terms.

As for sculpture, “the statues of ancient deities that adorned Freud’s study and desk . . . had many meanings for Freud,” as Blum writes (1991), “including concrete representations of images and of the past in the present;

loss and replacement; death and immortality” (p. 524). In other words, they were important for what they symbolized and how they could be read—translated into words, into writing, into literature—not because they were beautiful works of art, all the more intriguing because of the way the artist who made them used the material medium to make them sensuously appealing. They were emotionally engaging because of their psychological meaning, not their aesthetic appearance, which is, as Freud himself acknowledged in his discussion of Leonardo, the real “artistic achievement.”

But, as Fraiberg remarks, for Freud the “psychology of aesthetics . . . was explicitly ruled out as unprovable” (p. 86). Indeed, it was played down, if not dismissed as altogether beside the psychological point. As Sterba points out, while the “aesthetic side of the work of art has a . . . fore pleasure effect” for Freud, that is, “it seduces the individual into the enjoyment of forbidden instinctual wish gratification without his even becoming conscious of the original sources of his pleasure.” It is “at the same time . . . considerably overestimated. It is valued as if the entire quantity of pleasure caused by the work of art were brought about by the aesthetic features, while actually the real sources of pleasure remain for the most part unconscious” (p. 267). So aesthetics is deception and self-deception, all the more so because aesthetic qualities cannot be quantified; they get in the way of understanding the psychological truth, which affords intellectual pleasure. Clearly there is a parallel here between fore pleasure and orgasmic pleasure and aesthetic

pleasure and intellectual pleasure. Freud seemed to have experienced what Winnicott called an “ego orgasm” from intellectual analysis. The paradox of art for Freud is that just when it is most successful as art it hides, even falsifies, the psychological truth. It is the irony of sublimation: aesthetic sublimation is a big lie, psychologically speaking, however necessary socially.

In short, visual art was a form of text for Freud, or had to be turned into a text, or was dependent on some preexisting text, rather than an aesthetic experience of value for itself. It was always secondary to and derivative from something written, that is, to words, which could be readily understood and analyzed. Freud’s analysis of Leonardo’s art was heavily dependent on Dmitry Sergeyevich Merezhkovsky’s *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci,* one of his favorite novels, as Fraiberg notes. Freud read Leonardo’s art through the book—saw it through the filter of Merezhkovsky’s romanticization of Leonardo’s life and fame—rather than looked at it with fresh eyes, in an unprejudiced if informed way. Similarly, Freud’s Moses was the legendary, romantic figure in the Old Testament; Michelangelo’s Moses was a secondary elaboration of this unusual figure, confirming his significance. The linguistic reduction of visual art, which was the first step in its de-aestheticization—one wonders how sensitive Freud was to the aesthetic character of literary works of art, how much he delighted in them, or whether he was even aware of them —was a matter of course for Freud, and works of visual art that could not readily submit to it were placed in the limbo of “unresolved riddles to our

understanding” (Freud 1914, p. 211).

No matter how much Freud hoped, as he said in his Michelangelo essay, “that the effect of the work will undergo no diminution after we have succeeded in thus analyzing it” (p. 212), that is, reducing it to text or disclosing it as text, he was more interested in the analysis than in its effect. Indeed, the verbal analysis was a way of controlling the effect—keeping it from becoming overwhelming—and finally a substitute for it, and even, I dare say, in Freud’s psyche, for the work of art. Freud’s essay on Michelangelo’s Moses is certainly more than an ordinary souvenir of an experience of art, and even more than the usual intellectual momento mori left after the murderous work of analytic dissection. On some emotional level it is competitive with it, and means to replace it by rationalizing it. If, as T. W. Adorno (1984) says, “works of art, do not, in the psychological sense, repress contents of consciousness,” but “rather, through expression they help raise into consciousness diffuse and forgotten experiences without ‘rationalizing’ them” (p. 82), then Freud rationalizes artistic expression by naming and analyzing the diffuse and forgotten experiences it helps raise into consciousness, which in a sense is to undermine its purpose and neutralize its emotional effect. It is to treat the work of art as a means—a secondary *via regia* to the unconscious, the dream being the primary road—rather than a sublime end in itself. To put this another way, if, as Alfred North Whitehead (1955) wrote, “the work of art . . . unlooses depths of feeling from behind the frontier where the precision of

consciousness fails” (p. 270), Freud thinks it is possible to treat the depths of feeling precisely without the special mediation of the work of art.

For Freud, it seemed, “the Word was God,” as John 1:1 states, even if, as Freud stated (1900), “visual images constitute the principal component of our dreams” (p. 33), which are spokesmen for that dynamic god called the unconscious. Presumably when Sterba said that “the art of poetry lay closest to Freud’s own creative expression,” and characterized poetry “as nearest to the dream and the fantasy,” he was calling attention to the abundance of images that can be found in Freud’s writing. But these images are not strictly visual; they are words that describe and evoke what can be seen—word-pictures, not painted pictures, which, as Paul Gauguin said, present themselves all at once rather than in a logical, orderly way, like Freud’s literary images. Freud really could not abide painting, or at least was seriously insensitive to it, as I hope to show in my discussion of the lacks in his discussion of Leonardo’s paintings, because, in contrast to sculpture, it is forcefully and unmistakably visual, whatever its literary references. But even in his treatment of Michelangelo’s Moses there is a serious lack of attention to the sculpture’s appearance as a visual whole.

Artistically speaking, no element in a good work of art has priority over any other. Whatever hierarchy seems to be established by placing one element more front and center than the other elements is a rationalist

illusion. Who, really, is to say that Mona Lisa's smile is more important and visually privileged than the raw landscape behind her, or for that matter that the smile is more complex and strange than the landscape? Who is to say that Moses' beard and hands, of which Freud makes so much, are more relevant to the plasticity of Michelangelo's sculpture than the muscles and tension of Moses' body, which modify those of the *ignudi* [nude] seated on the cornice projections of the Sistine Chapel ceiling—completed a year before (1512) work was begun on the Moses—without destroying their dramatic character? Only everyday perception, which determines what must be seen on the basis of its practical importance—rather than aesthetically attuned perception, which is ready to see whatever is to be seen without prejudging its importance—can prefer one to the other. Leonardo, as we know, was a master of landscape, and I believe that for him the face was simply another kind of natural terrain, and not the most difficult one to scientifically analyze. The swirl of water and the geology and topography of the Po valley took precedent over it. Similarly, Michelangelo was a master of the body, and it is the expressive positioning of the body that takes precedent over its religious narration in his art. Indeed, the unprecedented plasticity of Michelangelo's bodies is the point of his art.

As far as I know Freud never dabbled in painting, or for that matter wrote poetry, even as a hobby. In fact, we know that he was happy when his adolescent son Martin recovered from "his attacks of poetitis" (Young-Bruehl

1988, p. 44), which of course makes psychological sense in view of Freud's assertion that the mechanism of poetry is the same as that of hysterical fantasies, as he wrote in his analysis of Goethe's *The* Sorrows *of Young Werther* (quoted in Fraiberg, p. 94). One had to be cured of poetry, inasmuch as it was a symptom of hysteria. Or else one had to enlist it in the service of reason—psychoanalytic science—as Freud does by way of his use of analogy and metaphor. Horace said that art should serve morality; Freud suggests that it should serve psychology. It seems that he was more than happy to save people—and himself—from the fate of being an artist, literary, or visual, however much he admired such literary artists as Shakespeare, Goethe, and Arthur Schnitzler, and seemed to have regarded them as his most serious competition in the realm of psychological understanding. To Arthur Schnitzler he wrote: "Whenever I get deeply absorbed in your beautiful creations I invariably seem to find beneath their poetic surface the very presuppositions, interests, and conclusions which I know to be my own" (Rose 1987, pp. 14-15). Clearly Freud was conflicted about art.

Particularly visual art, as I am strongly suggesting. Freud's withdrawal, as I called it earlier, from the visual to the literary, is an example of what might be called the "downcast eye syndrome," to use Martin Jay's term (1994). It is responsible for the incomplete attention he gave to Leonardo's paintings and Michelangelo's sculptures. He did not see them in their visual completeness, but rather selected certain elements for psychoanalytic

interpretation, because of a fear of being taken in by visual appearances, a certain resistance to accepting them on face value. Freud wrote (1900) that "a thing that is pictorial is, from the point of view of a dream, a thing that is *capable of being represented"* (p. 340). It is this unconscious thing—the dream's latent content—that is important, not its pictorial representation—the dream's manifest content. The issue for Freud is to reverse the "transformation from [unconscious] idea into sensory image" (p. 535), not to idolize the sensory image, as though it was a special achievement of unconscious art, a creative triumph of the imagination—even if it is.

Why did Freud castrate his vision, as it were—blind himself like Oedipus? Jay suggests an answer. Freud, he wrote, admired "Charcot's observational skills," which were clearly in evidence "in the theatricalized amphitheater and photographic studio of Charcot's clinic at Salpêtrière" (Jay 1994, p. 331). As Freud wrote:

> Charcot was, as he himself said a "visual," a man who sees. . . . He used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day, till suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him. In his mind's eye the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave way to order. . . . He might be heard to say that the greatest satisfaction a man could have was to see something new—that is, to recognize it as new; and he remarked again and again on the difficulty and value of this kind of seeing. [Jay 1994, p. 331]

In a sense, Charcot, like an artist, studied his model—in his case a

symptom—until it made pictorial sense to him, which is when he thought he understood it.

Now as Jay points out (p. 332), while Freud “steadfastly continued to value clinical observation . . . he gradually distanced himself from Charcot’s ocular centric method.” He came to “stress . . . the interpretation of verbally reproduced phenomena such as dreams or slips of the tongue, as opposed to the mere observation of hysterical symptoms or physiognomies,” which “meant that listening was more important than seeing” (p. 334). Looking stays on the outside—on the surface—while listening tells one what goes on in the inside—in the psychic depths. Literature, it should be noted, was Freud’s preferred art because it deals with both the inside and outside—psychic activity as well as physical appearance. As Michel de Certeau writes, Freud in effect “adopt[ed] the style of the novel,” that is, a kind of literature, which was “to abandon the case study as it was presented and practiced by Charcot in his Tuesday sessions. These consisted of observations, that is to say “coherent charts or pictures, composed by noting the facts relevant to a synchronic model of an illness” (Jay, p. 335). Similarly, Derrida notes “the movement from optical metaphors of the psyche (‘a compound microscope, or a photographic apparatus’) in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to more scriptural ones in his later work, such as what Freud called a ‘mystic writing pad’” (Jay, p. 335). Thus Freud toppled another father figure, declaring his methods obsolete and his results inadequate, that is, his work pseudo-

scientific.

But the change involved more than the rectification of a theoretical error, that is, “the temporality, spacing, and difference that had been banished from Descartes’s famous ball of wax was restored as Freud ‘performs for us the scene of writing,’ an *écriture* that combined absence with presence and defeats any direct visual representation” (Jay, p. 335). Rather, the shift from the optical to the graphic involved technique and therapy; in distancing himself from what could be seen and emphasizing what could be heard, Freud was distancing himself from appearances and emphasizing associations. While he accepted Friedrich Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as “the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Jay, p. 332) and thus can be seen, what is in fact seen makes no psychological sense and has no therapeutic relevance unless it can be interpreted, and it cannot be properly interpreted unless one has associations to it.

As Freud stated again and again, dreams were to be approached by way of the dreamer’s verbal associations to them. To be seduced by the dream’s unusual appearance was to miss its psychological point. For Freud, the dream was an “unconscious puzzle picture,” to use Sterba’s expression (1940, p. 262), with the weight on “unconscious puzzle” rather than “picture.” One could best understand its logic by the apparently tangential approach through

the associations of the dreamer. To admire its inventiveness, to be fascinated—taken in—by its exciting appearance, to aesthetically celebrate its perplexing details, was to defend against its psychological meaning, blind oneself to its psychological purpose. In a sense, the visual appearance of the dream distracted from its meaning, and was incidental and even accidental—contingent on circumstances, that is, the so-called "day residue," as well as unconscious wishes and conflicts. Freud made this point decisively in a letter to Andre Breton, who had asked Freud to write an introduction to *Les Vases communicants,* a collection of some fifty dreams by various surrealist artists dedicated to him. Freud rejected the idea, writing that "a mere collection of dreams without the dreamers' associations, without the knowledge of the circumstances in which they occurred, tells me nothing, and I can hardly imagine what it would tell anyone" (Davis 1973, p. 128). Thus, no matter how much Freud was aware of "the powerful symbolic resonance of the eyes," as Jay says (1994, p. 332), from the phallic "gaze of Medusa" to Oedipus's castrative self-blinding, and to his discussion of the "triumph of the eye over the nose" in *Civilization and Its Discontents*—no doubt in part a criticism of Fliess, who was stuck on the nose—therapeutic technique was more than a matter of exchanging glances with the patient, as Freud's position behind the couch confirmed. It involved detached intellectual analysis, whatever else might be emotionally involved.

Like a latter day Tieresias, Freud in effect sacrificed sight to insight. He

turned away from the symptom toward the association, from the theatrical appearance to the psychological meaning, from the dream's manifest content —a theatrical symptom—toward its latent content. The symptom is visible to the naked eye, the association is visible to the mind's eye—reason's eye. In contrast, Charcot fetishizes and aestheticizes the hysterical symptom by photographing and staging it—giving it center stage, presenting it as a public performance—under the illusion that he thereby understands its significance. No doubt he partly does; it is a performance, theatrical. But the performance is its end, not its origin, its appearance not its inner reality.

Charcot is transfixed—dare one say hypnotized?—by its novelty—its artistic novelty, as it were—while Freud realizes that the symptom represents an ancient conflict, inherent to being human. The visible symptom is not there to be mirrored—its appearance clinically elevated, as it were, by being made rabidly public—but to be understood, and the way to do so—to access its psychological meaning—is through the verbal associations of the person who has it.

Now all of this emphasis on the verbal meant that Freud did not see certain things in visual art, or seriously attend to what he saw. He was undoubtedly a good observer, but when he observed something that he could not analyze or rationalize he turned away from it, ignoring it as though it did not exist. Thus, in his discussion of Leonardo's paintings there is no mention

of the reason for their fame, indeed, the reason they are original and distinctive: their *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato.* As Marilyn Stokstad (1995) notes, "Leonardo created the illusion of high relief by modeling the figures with strongly contrasted light and shadow, called *chiaroscuro,"* and he "unified his compositions by covering them with a thin, lightly tinted varnish, which resulted in a smoky overall haze called *sfumato"* (pp. 686-687). Is it that the painting's skin of light and dark is beyond association, being a purely visual phenomenon? Or does it evoke depths of feeling impossible to name and analyze—depths that can only be acknowledged rather than brought into focus, for to do so was to dissipate them? Similarly, Michelangelo's Moses, whatever moment it depicts—Moses about to hurl the tablets, breaking them to pieces, or restraining himself from doing so, as Freud ingeniously argued—shows a muscular hero of superhuman strength. It is one in a long line of Michelangelesque bodies—positioned somewhere between the *ignudi* and the figures of the Medici on their tombs—and it makes its point as a body, not as an idea.

Skin and body—Freud stays away from them, even though, as he himself stated, the body ego is the most fundamental ego, and, as Didier Anzieu asserts, the idea of the skin ego was already latent in Freud's comments about the skin as an erogenous zone. Skin and body are sensuous sites, and sensually engaging. With a certain puritanical forbearance, Freud (1910) neglects to deal with them in depth or otherwise, although he does

acknowledge, agreeing with other observers, “the contrast between reserve and seduction, between the most devoted tenderness and a sensuality that is ruthlessly demanding” in the smile of the Mona Lisa (p. 108). But Freud misses the artistic point of the picture, namely, the contrast between light and shadow that gives it—and the smile—its elusive substance.

Freud (1910) says that “what interested [Leonardo] in a picture was above all a problem” (p. 77), and he emphasizes the incompleteness of many of Leonardo’s works, or the delays attendant upon their creation, and the fact that several became ruins within his own lifetime because of technical problems in their production. But the fact of the matter is that despite all these problems—and Meyer Schapiro points out that Leonardo had one of the largest oeuvres of any Renaissance artist, and delivered works with greater promptness than most—Leonardo achieved original artistic solutions to the problem of representing atmosphere and volume which made him famous, and had enormous influence on the history of art. Similarly, Freud obsesses about the position of the hands of Michelangelo’s Moses, ignoring the fact that he makes his impression through his body, of which the hands are only a small, however noteworthy, part. Of course the right one rests on the tablets of the Ten Commandments—a book—and the left one points toward it, clearly indicating that it is the most important part of the statue. But that is only narratively, not artistically; artistically, the body is all important. The book is its attribute, not its essence. The body is of primary importance, the

book of secondary importance—just the opposite of what Freud, following convention, assumes. Indeed, I venture to say that the contrast between the textures of the muscles of Moses' arms and his beard—two kinds of skin—has more expressive, quintessentially artistic carrying power than the hands, whether pointing to the tablets of the law or by themselves.

There is nothing that can be "proven" about the aesthetics of Leonardo's *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato* and the dynamic textures of Michelangelo's Moses, but that fact is beside their qualitative point. No doubt their emotional effect can be analyzed, but they have too appreciated and enjoyed first. Freud doesn't do so. I want to suggest that the reason is akin to the reason he was reluctant to engage music. Kohut (1978) writes:

> Pure music cannot be translated into words. The world of pure sounds cannot be mastered with the main instrument of logical thinking—the neutralizing, energy-binding functions of the mind—which Freud calls the secondary processes of the psyche. It surely is the explanation for the specific quality of pleasure in music. Stimuli which cannot be mastered through translation into words (or comparable symbols used in logical thought) mobilize much greater forces, and perhaps also forces of a different distribution corresponding to a very early ego organization. This energy is required to withstand the influx of a chaotic stimulation; it becomes liberated when the form of music transforms the chaos into an orderly stimulation that can be dealt with comparatively easily. [I, p. 145]

Kohut suggests that Freud could not tolerate the regression induced by music, which, I suggest, is also induced by such purely aesthetic phenomena as atmosphere and texture, that is, *sfumato, chiaroscuro,* and pure plasticity,

all of which mingle surface and depth indistinguishably and illogically.

They cannot be translated into words, and what makes them particularly treacherous in Leonardo's paintings and Michelangelo's sculptures of the body is that they are not subsumed by form, but seem to exist for their own dynamic selves. However much Leonardo's *chiaroscuro* may create the illusion of high relief and model figures, and however much his *sfumato* may unify the composition, they are independent sensuous phenomena that can be appreciated apart from their pictorial purpose, that is, from the form-giving character of the figures and the composition. Similarly, however much the textures of Moses' body may serve to define its form, they are sensuous phenomena in their own right. They cannot be intellectually neutralized, but remain sensuously autonomous and arousing. For Freud they were unanalyzable; they could not be rationalized away into form, or even given psychological form. And thus Freud looked through and around them. He attended to the figures that had rational form rather than the seemingly formless irrational elements in Leonardo's paintings and Michelangelo's sculpture. The latter were threatening, and more subtle than the smile Leonardo formally depicted and the dramatic moment Michelangelo narrated, and, I think, offer a greater clue to their creativity than the figures they represented.

I want to conclude by remarking the striking difference between Freud's

approach to Leonardo and Michelangelo and Karl Abraham's (1937) much more visually sensitive approach to Giovanni Segantini's paintings. Abraham's lively essay about Segantini is written in an altogether different spirit and with an altogether different sensibility than Freud's somewhat sober essays on Leonardo and Michelangelo. Abraham is not only interested in the psychological meaning of Segantini's art, that is, the way it can be interpreted —the words it can be translated into—but in Segantini's "disintegration of color," as he calls Segantini's particular brand of Impressionism (p. 482). It is what made Segantini famous, and it is not easily described in words. It is at best poetically evoked by them. Color is in fact ineffable, beyond being simplistically named. Experientially, it is a "chaotic stimulation," to use Kohut's phrase, however much it can be scientifically analyzed, that is, made to seem rational. Abraham repeatedly talks about Segantini's "yearning for light and color" (p. 482), his "luminous colors" (p. 497), his use of "the lightest and most brilliant shades of color" (p. 497). He associates Segantini's colors with his "eroticism"—with "sexual excitement" (p. 480)—but he also appreciates them as aesthetic phenomena in themselves, ultimately unanalyzable—delightfully irrational.(Note 1)

I don't know what Freud thought about Abraham's essay, which was originally published in 1925, but we do know that in a 1922 letter Freud found an expressionistic drawing of Abraham's head "horrifying," adding that the artist was "the all-too-undesirable illustration of Adler's theory that it is

just the people with congenital defects of vision who become painters and draughtsmen" (Kofman 1988, p. 222). He also remarked that Abraham's "tolerance or sympathy for modem art" was "a trifling flaw in [his] character." I think that Freud's intolerance or lack of sympathy for it is a major flaw in his mind if not character. For it suggests how blind Freud was to the purely visual factor in art, if we accept Clement Greenberg's argument that modem art at its abstract best pursues aesthetic-sensuous quality—pure visuality—independently of any literary purpose.

NOTES

1. Freud says nothing about the colors in Leonardo's paintings, and it seems unlikely that he would have much tolerance for Segantini's impressionist use of gestalt-free color-gestures, as Anton

Ehrenzweig calls them. According to him, they are the carrier of unconscious affect in modem art. As Marion Milner (1987) points out, color "is very closely bound up with the feelings" (p. 225). For Freud, such physically raw, colorful gestures would probably have represented unchanneled or unbound id energy, and as such unintelligible and dangerous in itself. Fie would be defensively intolerant against its direct expression, even in symbolic form. This is no doubt why he preferred the clear and distinct—well-constructed, carefully controlled, intelligible—forms of

Renaissance art to the more loosely constructed, often unclear, and indistinct forms of modern art. For him the former probably symbolized integration, the latter disintegration.

Also, since Impressionist works are more forthrightly and consummately aesthetic—sensuously explicit, as it were—than Renaissance works, they would seem to contradict Freud's devaluation of the aesthetic, that is, his relegation of it to a subsidiary role—in effect the sugarcoating on the bitter psychological narrative. Or else he would be faced with the unhappy possibility that works of art can be all regressive foreplay—lyric tour de forces of arrested sexual development, as it were.

Clearly epic, "well-armored" Renaissance works of art lend themselves more readily to Freud's intellectual approach to art, that is, his intellectual defense against it and the feelings it arouses. If, as has been argued, modem art is closer to the essence of art—transformative engagement with the material medium, as Milner says, involving intense emotional investment in it—than Renaissance art, then Freud's vituperative indifference to Expressionism and, implicitly, Impressionism, indicates that he completely missed the basic point of art. He missed the complex relational and even libidinal psychodynamics of Michelangelo's engagement with stone and Leonardo's with paint.

There is no doubt that the ego—Freud's ego—is entitled to its reflections on the finished work of art, but they tend to miss what is specific to art as art, however insightful they may be into its narrative and social import and function. No doubt it is those most people latch on to, because they are familiar, but in doing so they miss the fact that art is not simply a delivery system for known information and ideas. In mediating them art transforms them into something unfamiliar, at least if it is credible as art; transforms them into aesthetic substance, thus peculiarly transcending them. We do not look at Vincent van Gogh's wheat fields to learn how to plant wheat nor do we expect a familiar homey feeling from Paul Cezanne's still lives and interiors, at least if we are interested in experiencing them as art rather than as a kind of reporting, at which they no doubt miserably fail.

Freud offered a new reading of Michelangelo's Moses, for which we are grateful, but his reading does little to change our experience of the aesthetics of the sculpture—although it does remind us how subtly Michelangelo could work with fingers—which is what has given it a more prominent place in the history of art than other Renaissance and Mannerist representations of Moses. These include the Moses in Botticelli's *Punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram* (1481-1482), Rosso Fiorentino's Moses *and Jethro's Daughters* (ca. 1523), and Tintoretto's Moses *Striking Water from the Rock* (1577-1581). Art history prefers Michelangelo's Moses to theirs for aesthetic reasons, rather than because Michelangelo's reading of the story of Moses is

ingeniously novel—according to Freud—compared to theirs.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the Renaissance scholar Frederick Hartt (1974, p. 457) thinks that "Moses holds the Tables of the Law . . . not in anger but with prophetic inspiration." This suggests that Freud, who thought Michelangelo's Moses was trying to control his anger at the children of Israel, and did so successfully, showing his ego strength, may have projected his own anger into Moses. Among other things, this would be anger at the fact that his inspiration—psychoanalysis—was insufficiently recognized and appreciated by the world, just as in dancing around the Golden Calf the children of Israel did not recognize and appreciate the hard-won achievement of Moses. Just as Moses' narcissism was offended—was it anger he experienced, or rage?—by the indifference of the children of Israel, all too eager for pleasure (dance is euphemism for orgy), which suggested the difficulty the Ten Commandments would have making their way in the world, so Freud's narcissism seems to have been injured by the difficulties psychoanalysis had making its way in the world, and even among its adherents, who offered alternative—non-Freudian—versions of it. But if, as Hartt says, Michelangelo's statue is "symbolic rather than anecdotal," as Freud thought, and Michelangelo shows us Moses in a state of inspiration rather than at a moment of anger—and Hartt offers convincing evidence that this is the case (it has in part to do with the fact that the statue was meant "to have occupied a comer position on the second story" of the tomb of Pope Julius II, and thus "seen sharply from below")—then

Freud missed its basic meaning.

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