

# Twelve Paintings

## Tal Sterngast

Excursions in the Gemäldegalerie  
of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin



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## The Museum as a Safe Space

*Amor Vincit Omnia* (1601–02)

by Caravaggio

Caravaggio's painting *Amor Vincit Omnia* still has the power to halt viewers in their tracks. The boy's hand behind his naked body directs the viewer into the painting to the figure's other side. Although the painting addresses and is provocatively committed to confronting the viewer, it also orients them toward the back of the work. The painting evokes a space that opens to an illusionistic distance, an extension of the real space of the painter in the studio, and the viewer in the gallery.

In a radical search for the roots of abstract painting, the American painter Frank Stella asserted that Caravaggio invented a new kind of pictorial space that projects itself beyond the surface of the picture plane and into the space of the beholder, engulfing and subsuming it. We find ourselves caught up within this sphere, whose effect can be compared to a gyroscope, a spinning object capable of accommodating movement and tilt.<sup>1</sup>

The year 2017 may be remembered as a time when art was attacked from within. That summer, *Open Casket* (2016), a painting by the American artist Dana Schutz, was exhibited as part of the Whitney Biennial in New York and caused an art-world uproar. Schutz's painting depicts an iconic image of the African American struggle for equality, namely the 1955 photograph of the lynched fourteen-year-old Mississippi boy Emmett Till, whose mutilated body was exposed in an open-casket funeral that his mother insisted upon. Critics and artists demanded that Schutz's painting be not only removed, but also physically destroyed. In the heated discussion about "Black anguish, White guilt," or who does or does not have the right to use

<sup>1</sup> Frank Stella, *Working Space* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1986), pp. 1–22.



certain images in works of art, there was little debate about *what kind of painting* Schutz had made. No one seemed to be reaching beyond the intention and the work's being a cultural sign; something meant to be read and interpreted. Pictorial parameters and the ways the painting addresses its viewers seemed abolished from the general discussion. It is worth noticing that a peculiar feature of *Open Casket* that may have intentionally or unintentionally stimulated the furor was never addressed: there is a certain indifference to the subject matter, despite the artist's statements to the contrary. The work seems to have been shaped the exact same way that all Schutz's paintings were painted before or after it—as a jolly, Expressionist illustration. The painting circulated in the media, disconnected from its exhibition context—Twittered, Facebooked, and Instagrammed.

A few months later, two New York sisters in their mid-twenties launched an online petition asking the Metropolitan Museum of Art to remove or restrict the presentation of *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938) by Balthus. The subject of the painting, on view in the Metropolitan since the nineties, sits with her head turned, eyes closed, and a knee raised to expose her underwear. On the floor, a cat, a frequent motif in Balthus's paintings, drinks milk from a dish. The picture is boldly painted in warm brown tones. The pubescent model Thérèse Blanchard, who was about twelve at the time she sat as a model for Balthus, was the artist's neighbor in Paris. She appears alone, with her cat, or with her brother in a series of eleven paintings completed between 1936 and 1939. The painting is beautiful and prurient: the girl's cheek, nose, and lips are flush in reds and her arms lifted, as is her knee, in a revealing position that seems absurdly relaxed. Glowing and haptic, tactile and smooth, the exposed flesh of her hands and legs is both still and alive. Even the cat seems carved, just like the Cézanne-esque still life arranged on the wooden table behind Thérèse: glass vases, a can, and a Cubistically-depicted cloth that refers to the loose white underwear toward which our view is elegantly led—the heart of the scandal.

More than 11,000 people signed the petition, aided by a tailwind of outrage following the exposure of Harvey Weinstein's misconducts in Hollywood and the #metoo campaign. One of the petition's

initiators, Mia Merrill, who was an art history student at New York University, warned of the objectification and sexualization of children, which in her eyes the painting romanticizes.

Although admired by significant postwar artists (in Paris, Pablo Picasso acquired a painting from the *Thérèse* series while Balthus was still painting it), targeting Balthus was not an unexpected move. Throughout his career, the acclaimed and exceptional Polish-French painter, Balthasar Klossowski de Rola (1908–2001) was surrounded by an aura of forbidden erotic sensuality fused with an unquestionable timelessness. Over six decades the subjects of his figurative paintings remained primarily young girls, which he depicted in domestic interiors, street scenes, or landscapes blending Renaissance frescoes (Piero della Francesca and Andrea Mantegna immediately come to mind) with nineteenth-century French Realism and early Modernist figurations toward abstraction.

The new sensitivities of identity politics, lately reloaded and bluntly articulated in the art realm, have reduced both Schutz's and Balthus's paintings, and maybe painting in general, into literal pictures in which one sees an image within the circulation of media images, equivalent to an advertisement in its impact. Such reductive evaluation is remarkably questionable, if not plainly cant. More sexualization, appearances of abuse, and objectivization can be found in a Calvin Klein ad than in any given painting. Moreover, images circulating through social media, pervading every bit of our awareness today, are created by internalizing these very parameters of "objectifying," which are now utilized as both self-expression and a business strategy. This new wave is a zeitgeist powered by good grounds and reasoning that is nevertheless blind to ambivalence, thus abolishing a forceful source of interest, beauty, and gravity that has been fueling visual art for thousands of years. *Thérèse Dreaming* presents a duality within the complex relationship Balthus establishes with the painting's beholder: one in which the artist's own vulnerability is also involved, an evident identification with the seductive girl on the threshold of adulthood and clearly displayed in the painting.

In Jacques Lacan's theory of psychological development, the mirror stage is described as the moment in which the child discovers

its own subjectivity—its separateness not only from the surrounding world but also from its mother. Transposed into a historical framework, according to Michael Fried,<sup>2</sup> Caravaggio's mirror image is a "moment" in art history in which the primordial self-enchantment of art making is confronted with self-awareness, with the artist celebrating the discovery of his detached artistic self and simultaneously expressing the traumatism this entails.

Why, then, such outrage? That artworks can incite aggression, or even violence, is historically evident, but do these incidents indicate something beyond themselves? In 1997, about twenty years prior to the New York petition and shortly after the inauguration of the new exhibition spaces for the Gemäldegalerie's painting collection in Berlin, many paintings from the collection had to be put behind glass (the exhibition architecture did not take this into consideration; today the unplanned reflections when viewing the paintings is inevitably noticeable). The protective glass was ordered because a man who had been damaging artworks with acid since the 1970s was said to have booked a hotel room in Berlin.

While the man's personal pathology may remain opaque, I would speculate that the urge to performatively damage artworks individually or collectively is inherent to the complex relationships between visual art and its viewers. And that, possessing symbolic meanings, they reoccur metamorphosed throughout history, driven by archaic powers, first theologically laden, then secularly modernized. In the late summer of 1794, Abbé Henri Grégoire, bishop of Blois, presented to the French National Convention a report about the destruction caused in the early months of the French Revolution: "A hateful distortion of revolutionary principles," he wrote. His report's title included a new term, "vandalism," which immediately became a household neologism describing systematic revolutionary violence and acts of cultural destruction against art and architecture. With negotiable historical accuracy—rooted in French chauvinism, he made an effort to distinguish between the noble Frankish tribes and the barbarian Vandals—Grégoire was referring to the sacking of

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton, 2010).

Rome in 455 by the East Germanic tribe of Vandals that finalized the demolition of the Roman Empire, leaving the following generations with only fragments and remnants of Roman art.

On March 10, 1914, the suffragette Mary Richardson entered the National Gallery in London and gashed Venus's back in Diego Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647) with a meat chopper, wounding the painting as if it were human flesh. She was protesting the arrest of a fellow suffragette, questioning in her act the meaning of (female) beauty. "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history," she later wrote "as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as color and outline on canvas." In 1974, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Tony Shafrazi told the guards, "Call the curator. I am an artist," minutes after he spray-painted the words "Kill Lies All" high across Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). He later became a leading art dealer and gallerist in New York. In 1975, Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (1642) was slashed with a bread knife by a man fighting off a museum keeper, telling bystanders he was doing it for the Lord's sake. This is just a brief list of peculiar, highly poetic incidents of art vandalism.

This specific type of aggression toward pictures is connected to the disputes over art that preoccupied the art world in 2017. In the past three years, countless further cases of canceled exhibitions, censored or Photoshopped artworks and films have shown that the tables are turning from aesthetic concerns internal to the artwork to more political concerns. The paradigms of thinking about art and its exhibition are shifting.

*Amor Vincit Omnia* is undoubtedly the most provocatively confrontational picture in Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's oeuvre. The work's original owners, the Marquis Vincenzo Giustiniani and his brother, the Cardinal Benedetto Giustiniani, are said to have kept it behind a dark curtain, disclosing it to visitors only after certain conditions were fulfilled. The banker and the cardinal, both intellectuals, were Caravaggio's most significant patrons and two of the most advanced art collectors in the 1590s and early 1600s in Rome. Such was the circle of Caravaggio's supporters, consisting of the elite of

the Roman aristocracy, banking, and high clergy; people of exquisite taste who knew to appreciate the kind of elaborated scopophilic occurrences that Caravaggio's paintings offered.

Indeed, the painting, which has been in Berlin since the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III purchased it from the Giustiniani Collection in 1815 alongside five other Caravaggio paintings, of which only two survived World War II, attracted resumed attention in Berlin in 2014 with an open letter that demanded it be removed from the exhibition due to its confrontational child sexuality.

The portrait that shows Eros in sharp mirrorlike high-contrast realism glares with an unconcealed, evident seduction. As is often the case with Caravaggio's paintings, we can sense the presence of the particular model. Here, the sitter, not older than thirteen, is wearing meticulously depicted feathered wings. Despite his young age, his smile seems experienced, as does the positioning of his naked body. His left leg is folded backward in a ninety-degree straddle, while the right leg touches the floor. Smiling disparagingly and enticingly at the viewer, he seems to be enjoying himself despite the absurd, clearly unstable posture.<sup>3</sup> His left arm and hand reach behind him, indicating the source of pleasure he is offering the viewer. The sitter has been identified as Francesco Boneri, who probably lived with Caravaggio and may have also shared his bed. Boneri modeled for Caravaggio in subsequent paintings. Later, he would become a painter himself and to be known as Cecco del Caravaggio. The boy seems to be leaning his weight between a covered bench and a blue globe with yellow stars. On the floor and the bench several objects are masterfully rendered: a suit of armor, musical instruments, a notebook, a quill pen, a compass, and a laurel wreath.

In *Amor Vincit Omnia's* gyroscopic composition (to follow Stella's metaphor) the orthogonals, instead of appearing to be anchored at the image's periphery and projecting themselves inward to the vanishing point, appear to project themselves outward from a central axis that coincides with the figure's penis and resumes with the points of the bow, wings, and feet. As the painting's title (in English, "love conquers all") proposes, love, or, in this case the anatomical instrument of male physical love, supersedes all dimensions adorning Eros: death (the black wings), music (musical instruments),

knowledge (the notebook, quill pen, and compass) and war (armor, laurel wreath).<sup>4</sup> But this victory—implied in the V-shaped protractor and in the enlarged letter “V” opening the song in the notebook, as well as the name of the patron Vincenzo Giustiniani—may be just as unstable as Eros himself, leaning on the globe.

The Metropolitan Museum in New York rejected the petition for the removal of *Thérèse* and stood by its commitment to display the painting. The Whitney refused to take Dana Schutz’s painting down. The Gemäldegalerie rejected the idea of hiding *Amor Vincit Omnia*. However, the demand to provide clarification to the masses or ultimately replace the picture (“They can easily hang another painting,” the Merrill sisters’ petition to remove Balthus’s canvas reads) seems to aim at an organization of the art exhibition within the logic of a “safe space.” If the images confront us with feelings we can’t bear and will make us explode in insult or triggered injury, we need to be protected from them. But who issues the safety certificate? Clearly the relations between art and the masses, the way they were established since the nineteenth century, are in flux again today. An old question vehemently returns—is art for the many or the few?

The dissolving of art into the circulation of images in the world ushers a confusion between literality and a figurative, metaphoric language. But the form of the painting is its content. Art is insinuated with totalitarian requirements that it does not and should not possess. To argue against the subjunctive, to replace the figurative with the literal, means disguising a power struggle in a dispute that is neither ethical nor aesthetic, only political.

3 *Un quadro con un Amore ridente in atto di dispregiare il mondo* (a painting of a laughing Amor, full of scorn for the world) was found in the painting’s caption in Vincenzo Giustiniani’s inventory.

4 Some of the standard trophies representing the seven liberal arts of proper intellectual learning. Since medieval times, these were comprised of the three arts of the trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the four arts of the quadrivium: geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music.