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Michelangelo's Moses: "Madonna Androgyna" (A Meaning of the Artist's Use of Forefingers)

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No piece of statuary made a stronger impression on Sigmund Freud than Michelangelo's *Moses*. He regarded this deeply moving work as inscrutable and requiring interpretation as to the basis for its strong effect as well as for the sculptor's intentions (Freud, 1914b, pp. 212-213). The many interpretations that had been offered did not satisfy him.¹

The statue portrays Moses in a particular posture and with a terrible expression of mingled anger, pain and scorn. It is evidently meant to represent a particular moment in his life, and most writers have connected this with the moment when on his descent from Mount Sinai bearing the Tables of the Law under his arm he catches sight of the backsliding Israelites dancing around their Golden Calf. But at that point interpretations diverge. Freud followed his usual method of delving deeper, not through the general impression of the whole, but through searching for minute and apparently casual clues. These he found by observing, which no one else had, that the Tables were held upside down, and that the right hand, clutching the majestic beard, had some puzzling features in its details [Jones, 1955, p. 346].²

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¹ "... [N]ever, or scarcely ever, do modern scholars look at Michelangelo's works and ask themselves how they came into being and why" (*Times Literary Supplement*, 1973, p. 1585).

² Critics (Rosenfeld, 1951; Worbarsht and Lichtenberg, 1961; Marmor, 1971; Bremer, 1976) have noted Freud's injudicious use of scriptural texts as the basis of his study and have commented on its significance. To Bremer (1976), Freud's creation is that of nonbiblical Moses and is consistent with Freud's own identification with the heroic figure; Marmor (1971) regards the presence of horns on the Moses as proof of Freud's erroneous interpretation. Worbarsht and Lichtenberg (1961), also on the basis of the horned Moses, agree that Freud selected the wrong, i.e., the first, descent of Moses, but conclude that Freud nevertheless intuitively sensed what Michelangelo was trying to portray, namely, "the feeling of an oppressive, solemn calm" (p. 265). To Rosenfeld (1951), "the image of Moses hewn in marble by Michelangelo's master hand represents the children of Israel's internal image of their murdered father, transfigured, 'sitting there in his wrath forever.' ... the moment which Michelangelo caught was not only that of conflict between impulse and sublimation of impulse, but was still more that of transition from the earthly to the divine figure, from the living man to the spiritual hero" (p. 87).

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Freud (1914b) directs our attention to specific features of the *Moses* statue:

These are the attitude of his right hand and the position of the two Tables of the Law.... the thumb of the hand is concealed and the index finger alone is in effective contact with the beard. It is pressed so deeply against the soft masses of hair that they bulge out beyond it both above and below... [pp. 222-223]. We have assumed that the right hand was, to begin with, away from the beard; that then it reached across to the left of the figure in a moment of great emotional tension and seized the beard; that it was finally drawn back again, taking a part of the beard with it [p. 225].

There are some difficulties involved in this interpretation since the right hand is responsible for the tables which are upside down. The Tables are stood on their heads and practically balanced on one corner [Rothgeb, 1971, p. 89].

To continue with Freud's description of the statue:

The upper edge is straight, whereas the lower one has a protuberance like a horn on the part nearest to us, and the Tables touch the stone seat precisely with this protuberance... [p. 226]. It is to prevent this that the right hand retreated, let go the beard, a part of which was drawn back with it unintentionally, came against the upper edge of the Tables in time and held them near the hind corner, which had now come uppermost. Thus the singularly constrained air of the whole—beard, hand, and tilted Tables—can be traced to that one passionate movement of the hand and its natural consequences [p. 228].

Jones (1955) has written about Freud's observations regarding this posture:

The conclusion he came to was that the statue was not intended to represent Moses as about to start up and punish the disobedient people below, as so many commentators had assumed. On the contrary, Freud thought it could only be understood by postulating a previous movement, not a future one. Moses had been, it is true, on the point of starting up to denounce the rabble, and moreover had made certain movements in that direction. Then, however, observing that the precious Tables were about to slip from his grasp he contained

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tained himself with a mighty effort. The desire to preserve the Tables proved stronger than his anger (the contrary of the version in the Bible) [p. 364].

Freud (1914b) continues:

As our eyes travel down... the figure exhibits three distinct emotional strata. The lines of the face reflect the feelings which have won the ascendancy; the middle of the figure shows the traces of suppressed movement; and the foot still retains the attitude of the projected action... [p. 230]. The Moses of legend and tradition had a hasty temper and was subject to fits of passion.... But Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the Pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses... [p. 233]. In his creations Michelangelo has often enough gone to the utmost limit of what is expressible in art; and perhaps in his statue of Moses he has not completely succeeded, if his purpose was to make the passage of a violent gust of passion visible in the signs left behind it in the ensuing calm [p. 236].

Jones (1955) summarizes the statue's meaning for Freud:

[Michelangelo] has added something new and more than human to the figure of Moses; so that the giant frame with its tremendous physical power becomes only a concrete expression of the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man—that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself [p. 364].

Freud hesitated to publish his essay for a long time³ “probably because of his doubts about the correctness of his interpretation” (p. 365). He insisted on anonymity for what to Jones seemed thin reasons. ““Why disgrace Moses by putting my name on it? It is a joke, but perhaps not a bad one.” To Abraham he gave three reasons: (1) ‘It is only a joke’; (2) Shame at the author's amateurishness of the essay; (3) ‘Lastly because my doubt about my conclusion is stronger than usual; it is only because of editorial pressure (Rank and Sachs) that I have consented to publish it at all’” (p. 366).

³ In the year 1914, there appeared in *Imago*, a European journal of applied psychoanalysis, an anonymous essay titled “The Moses of Michelangelo.” The following footnote was attached:

“Die Redaktion hat diesem, strenge genommen nicht programmgerechten, Beitrage die Aufnahme nicht versagt, weil der ihr bekannte Verfasser analytischen Kreisen nahe steht, und weil seine Denkweise immerhin eine gewisse Ahnlichkeit mit der Methodik der Psychoanalyse zeigt” [**Freud, 1914a**, p. 15n].

Strachey, in **Freud (1914b)**, translates this passage:

Although this paper does not, strictly speaking, conform to the conditions under which contributions are accepted for publication in this Journal, the editors have decided to print it, since the author, who is personally known to them, moves in psycho-analytic circles, and since his mode of thought has in point of fact a certain resemblance to the methodology of psycho-analysis [p. 211].

Ten years later, in 1924, when his *Collected Papers* were being published, the disguise was lifted, revealing the author to have been Sigmund Freud, a sponsor of the journal and, it was later disclosed, also the author of the apologetic footnote.

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Ernest Jones concluded that “Freud had identified himself with Moses and was striving to emulate the victory over passion that Michelangelo had depicted ...” (pp. 366-367). Just as Moses had bent all his strength and will to preserve the precious Tablets, Freud had an overriding need to save something of his life's work, psychoanalysis, since many of his supporters had deserted him.⁴

Freud's analysis of the *Moses* statue has impressed even art historians over the years and has become something of a classic in the realm of aesthetics. On the other hand, a modern art historian (**Rosenthal, 1964**) characterizes Freud's zealous interpretation as “cinematographic” and suggests that when the statue is seen from a worm's-eye view, as it was meant to be,⁵ “Moses seems to look slightly upward with a suggestion of melancholy. He seems to be distressed and grieved rather than angry and scornful.” Furthermore, suggests Rosenthal, the “awesomeness of the prophet” is greatly enhanced by an upward view (p. 546).

This dispassionate professional counterproposal contrasts sharply with the almost violent rejection of Freud by his unauthorized biographer, **Emil Ludwig (1947)**. Depreciating Freud's explorations into the analysis of art, he writes:

After assuring us he knows nothing of art, Freud turns to Michelangelo's Moses. This profound work of sculpture had the greatest effect on him, seemed to fill him with lasting excitement. He writes little of the statue itself, however, or the masterful creativeness and composition it demonstrates; and he waits many years before he goes into the actual personality of the mythical Hebrew leader. He does fill twenty pages with remarks on the meaning of the position of hand and fingers. The principal thing to him about the statue seems to be that ‘one of the four fingers’ is placed so as to make a deep groove in the long beard [p. 243].

⁴ M. Bergmann (**Angel, 1975**) agrees with **Hans Sachs (1942)** that the *Moses* represented Freud's new ego ideal, but goes a step further.

If we translate the change of Ego Ideal—from Conquering Hero to Self-Conquering Hero—into developmental language, we may say that the Freudian Moses has renounced an immediate satisfaction (the punishment of the idolaters) for the sake of a delayed, more lasting and valuable one. The emphasis here is on ego-control, on the primacy of reality. In this sense, the *preservation* of the Tablets in Freud's Moses interpretation appears as an early signpost pointing to the advent of Ego Psychology.

By the same token, Moses' nearly yielding to his rage brings into focus the problems of hate and aggression which could not much longer be seen as mere products of ambivalence or wounded love. Thus, the threatening *destruction* of the divine Tablets may have had links [to] Freud's new theory

of Aggression, independent of Libido [p. 3].

⁵ **John Addington Symonds (1893)**, who did not find the statue aesthetically satisfying, had noted it was to have been observed from below: The Moses, which Paul and his courtiers thought sufficient to commemorate a single Pope, stands as the eminent jewel of this defrauded tomb. We may not be attracted by it. We may even be repelled by the goat-like features, the enormous beard, the ponderous muscles, and the grotesque garments of the monstrous statue. In order to do it justice, let us bear in mind that the Moses now remains detached from a group of enviroing symbolic forms which Michelangelo designed. Instead of taking its place as one among eight corresponding and counterbalancing giants, it is isolated, thrust forward on the eye; whereas it was intended to be viewed from below in concert with a scheme of balanced figures, male and female, on the same colossal scale [p. 354].

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Freud's critic is correct in the sense that Freud paid little attention to the artist himself, except to note Michelangelo's relationship to his patron Pope Julius II, for whose tomb the statue was commissioned. Freud's critic is also correct in that the psychoanalyst focused on the idiosyncratic aesthetic effect the statue had on himself rather than on why the artist was compelled to express himself in precisely the way he did. Perhaps Freud's emphasis on the forefinger detail in the light of his solipsistic interpretation needs augmentation from the standpoint of the artist rather than from that of the imaginative observer alone.

A careful examination of all the works of Michelangelo gave me my first clues regarding the artist's finger representations—in particular, his deployment of the forefinger. I was aided in my quest for answers regarding the artist by an observation of the Michelangelo scholar **De Tolnay (1969)**, who had noted some similarity of composition between the *Moses* statue conceived when the artist was thirty years of age and an early sculptural piece, *The Madonna of the Stairs*, executed when the artist was sixteen years old: "... [T]he gestures of her hands are found in the Moses of the Tomb of Julius II" (p. 79).⁶

When I compared Michelangelo's first extant piece of sculpture, *The Madonna of the Stairs*, with the *Moses*, the hand positions seemed almost identical (see **Fig. 1**). The left hand of the mother resembles the left hand of the Moses almost to an exact reproduction of the fingers. The right hands of the mother and Moses also resemble each other. I took an imaginative leap. Photographically, I superimposed *The Madonna of the Stairs* onto the *Moses* statue and I got the baby in the bosom of Moses (see **Fig. 2**). This gave me my first clue that there was a hidden pregenital aspect to the Moses statue and a lead as to why so much passion was evoked in Freud and his critic by the finger positions. It seemed that the beard of Moses could represent a fetishistic substitution of the mother's garment. The left arm is the baby-holding arm, and the right arm is used for uncovering the garment to expose the underlying breast. Could the white marble tablets then represent breasts? Would this explain why they are double? In another context, the **Sterbas (1956)** had already equated white marble and breasts and milk, just as **Eissler (1963)** had done for Newton with white light.

At this point, I conjectured to myself that in the sculptor's fantasy there was an unconscious identification with an angry mother who denies her breasts (tablets) to the idol (penis) worshipers, but recants and again offers the breasts—a theme consistent with Freud's thesis.⁷ In his paper Freud had an artist depict those penultimate

⁶ **Fehl (1968)** regards the Pope Julius tomb as "a significant structure in its own right" rather than the ill-fitting frame burst asunder by the splendid *Moses* statue. "Without the Moses the work not only is in scale in all its parts, it also introduces into a fitting central position the reclining effigy of the Pope. This work has been much maligned, but its quiet dignity becomes apparent when it is seen on its own and not as an appendage to Moses" (p. 86).

⁷ **Watkins (1951)**, like Freud, emphasizes the issue of restraint and sees the statue as the embodiment of one of man's greatest needs, i.e., the prevention of the more or less universally feared paternal punishment and the retention of an intact, prized body ego. He sees Michelangelo "portraying the father as *not* dropping the tablets, hence not castrating for the indulgence in infantile gratification in his absence" (p. 63). To him, the two tablets represent testes, and shattering would be castration. By the same token, the calf worship represents infantile oral dependence on the mother.

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FIGURE 1 Similarity of hand positions in *The Madonna of The Stairs* and *Moses*. (Photo, courtesy of Alinari/Editorial Photocolor Archives.)



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FIGURE 2 Moses as "Madonna Androgyna." (Photo, courtesy of Alinary/Editorial Photocolor Archives.)



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stages which could have anticipated the statue's final form. As it happens, copies do exist of two early sketches for the *Moses* statue by the artist himself; in the earlier conception only one tablet was drawn, but in the later sketch, two tablets were drawn, each on a separate knee—this bilateral placement may be even more suggestive of tablets as breasts than the final form of the statue.

Since these sketches of Michelangelo's plans for the Moses figure itself were in print (Wilson, 1876) at the time of Freud's writing, one wonders whether his perusal of them would have altered his ultimate theoretical speculations and his need for intervening examples. In his 1927 postscript to the original paper, Freud was confirmed in his earlier views by the discovery of a seated Moses figure from the twelfth century executed by Nicholas of Verdun, which to Freud's mind demonstrated "an instant during his storm of feeling" (1914b, p. 238).

Decades later, Servadio (1951) came into possession of another *Moses* statue which to him supported Freud's original theory and whose "face is that of an inspired and saintly man, not that of an angry leader." The face "seems to look imploringly towards Heaven, as if asking of God the relief and consolation which his people have refused him" (p. 95).

It appears to me that the search for a corroboration of Freud's original thesis by finding actual examples of those intervening stages postulated by Freud is a forced line of research and that a more fruitful approach would lead to the artist himself.

Most observers, including Freud, have responded to the *Moses* as a fearsome male authority with overtones of a deity or a primitive brute. My view of the statue as a concealed representation of a nursing mother led in another direction, seemingly contradictory but (as I realized as I learned more about the artist) consistent with his psychosexual development and character structure. An identification with an ambivalently loved and hated maternal figure could be projected into the *Moses* statue as well as into those madonnas of his who obviously appear so isolated from the child.

The arm positions of *The Madonna of the Stairs* and the *Moses* statue and Michelangelo's particular use of the forefinger—i.e., indenting it into a soft mass—suggested parapractic revelations of the artist's oral deprivation and longing for warmth in the infant-mother

relationship as well as of his unconscious maternal identification. The artist's homosexuality began to make sense. In fact, the theme of androgyny helped to explain another puzzling iconologic feature of this Moses representation: i.e., why did Michelangelo depict the great leader in a seated position when the usual depiction of the hero is in a standing position?⁸

⁸ Moses is not commonly represented in a seated position, and it has been suggested that the seated position of Michelangelo's *Moses* is inconsistent with Freud's interpretation (Bremer, 1976).

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Assuming that a pregenital maternal trait was imposed onto Moses by the sculptor, the seated position of Moses makes more sense because that position is customary for nursing.

The ambiguity achieved in the artist's incomparable bisexual synthesis might help to explain the unusual fascination of this work, commonly regarded as man's greatest sculptural attainment.⁹

If my interpretation of Michelangelo's indentation of the forefinger into a soft mass as evidence of unconscious memories (Ricoeur, 1976) relative to breast indentations accomplished by both mother and child in a breast-feeding situation is correct (Eisenbund, 1965; Linn, 1955; and Hoffer, 1949), could there be more evidence from the artist himself and possibly from others as to the validity of such equations? This question led to further scrutiny of the artist and of other sources.

When your attention is drawn to Michelangelo's forefingers, you are inclined to recall his vivid depiction of life itself being passed from Jehovah to Adam in the famous Sistine ceiling mural. However, should you then carefully peruse all of Michelangelo's known drawings, paintings, and sculpture, you may be impressed—as I was—by a uniqueness in Michelangelo's use of this digit which I would characterize as a parapraxis.¹⁰ He persistently represented the forefinger as indenting a soft mass or inside a fold. His forefingers stand out in his various media—drawings, paintings, and sculptures—and are consistent throughout his lifetime (see Fig. 3); I regard this as an idiosyncratic overcathexis and unlikely to have been executed consciously.¹¹ How can we apply this interpretation more usefully in extending our understanding, and increasing our appreciation, of the artist?

That Michelangelo was aware of the direct importance of the forefinger in relation to breast feeding is revealed in a number of his works in which the forefinger is brought into relation to the madonna's breast. In these instances, was he following

⁹ Theodor Reik (1964) writes in connection with the vicissitudes of the ancient mother-goddess of the Hebrew tribes: "She became a victim of the great religious and social reform we connect with the name of Moses. This tyrannical and intolerant leader of the Hebrew tribes and his followers banned the figure of the mother-goddess into that nether world. That removal was performed so radically that scarcely any trace of her previous existence remained in the official Hebrew religion. Occasionally Yahweh, the victor, took over her functions, saying 'As one whom his mother comforteth so will I comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.' Even the root of the goddess-idea was torn out: there is no feminine form of Adon, the name of the Lord." That there is a Mother Goddess concealed in the figure of Yahweh is the thesis of a work by Rollenbeck (1949). See also Rosenfeld (1951).

¹⁰ In discussing Shengold's (1972) paper on Freud and Abraham regarding plagiarism, Sterba (1971) preferred the translation "slip-action" to the world parapraxis, which he would regard as an oversight of minor importance. Massive repression is operative in the gross slip-action and plagiarism discussed in that paper. Perhaps the same could be said with regard to this repetitive detail I am speaking of—it is too important a style of expression in its consistency and chronicity to be regarded as a parapraxis, a term which is used here simply to refer to an unconsciously determined repetition-compulsive action although not a slip-action in the strictest sense.

¹¹ It should be mentioned that other artists have exaggerated the forefinger in their paintings, particularly the Mannerists, of whom Michelangelo was one of the earliest. In addition to using the Mannerist style, Michelangelo was copied by followers. See, for example, Arnold Hauser (1965).

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FIGURE 3 Typical forefinger deployments. Details from *The Bruges Madonna* (left) and *The Last Judgment* (right). (Photo, courtesy of Alinari/Editorial Photocolour Archives.)



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the example of other artists; were they his own spontaneous creations; or, most likely, was he copying actual models?

Numerous artists, current and past, depict the importance of forefinger-breast relations: they show the use of the mother's forefinger to help press milk from the breast nipple, to facilitate sucking by proper placement of the nipple in the infant's mouth, and to help keep the baby's nasal passages clear. Likewise, in many works, the forefinger of the nursling is seen grasping or touching the breast during that intimate contact with the mother.

Focusing on hand positions in a random series of madonna paintings permits a crude but unique form of classification of such paintings depending on the form of breast displacement depicted. These divisions are arbitrary, but can be a meaningful way of looking at the art materials pertinent to my original thesis.

The Madonnas Lactata: This group includes all madonnas where the infant is either suckling at or touching the breast. The forefinger's importance is evident in both mother and child.

The "Breast-Reacher" Madonnas: I call these reachers because the infant's hand is reaching for or toward the breast, whereas the breasts themselves are not evident. The meaning, however, seems clear.

The "Fruit" Madonnas: These pictures illustrate the close association of breast and fruit and appear to suggest that the artist symbolically elaborates breast into fruit. In Christian iconography (Ferguson, 1961) "fruit is often used to suggest the twelve fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, patience, modesty, temperance, and chastity" (p. 31). Each specific fruit, such as apple, cherry, fig, grape, lemon, orange, peach, pear, plum, pomegranate, and strawberry, is associated with a variety of spiritual and ethical qualities and certainly not with secular breast feeding. (A sagittal section of the human breasts with their lobular arrangements suggests their affinity to the pomegranate.)

The "Breast-Garment" Madonnas: This group of madonnas reveals a further move in displacement from a whole organ, the breast, to an organ part or function. In these depictions, imagine the flowing lines of the mother's garment as representing the skin of the breast or the flow of breast milk. ("Whenever we bring a foreign body into relationship with the surface of the body—for it is not in the hand alone that these peculiarities are developed—the consciousness of our personal existence is prolonged into the extremities and surfaces of this foreign body, and the consequence is—feelings, now of an expansion of our proper self, now of the acquisition of a kind and amount of motion foreign to our natural organs, now of an unusual degree of vigour, power or resistance, or steadiness in our bearings" [Flaccus, 1906, quoted in Flugel, p. 34]. Another quote from Lotze is pertinent: "clothing, by adding to the apparent size of the body in one way or another, gives us an increased sense of power, a sense of extension of our bodily self—ultimately by enabling us to fill more space" [quoted in Flugel, 1930, p. 34]. An outstanding

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example of skin as garment is Michelangelo's self-portrait as St. Bartholomew in *The Last Judgment*.)

In Christian iconography, "the cope, the richest and most magnificent of ecclesiastical vestments, is a large cape fashioned in the form of a half circle. Its symbolic meaning is innocence, purity, and dignity" (Ferguson, 1961, p. 157). "The morse, or brooch, is a clasp used to fasten the front of the cope" (p. 158). In my view, the brooch may also be seen as a displaced breast.

"Book" Madonnas: Learning, Tablets, and Breast Feeding: The penultimate series of book madonnas illustrates the displacement from the breast to the book.

A series of medieval German Sophias (Neumann, 1955) permits us to draw an equation between breast-feeding and learning, flowing garments and the flow of milk, to an ultimate identification of tablets as breast representations. In these depictions one may note the flow of lines from the madonna's cope directly into the mouths of the supplicants. By the same token, a close relationship between the bird and the

book is demonstrated by the art historian **H. Friedmann (1946)** in his detailed analysis of goldfinch madonnas. It is noteworthy that he finds this connection puzzling and concludes that the symbol of fertility links the scroll, the bird, and the mother.

In a relatively small number of paintings, the goldfinch is placed near or directly in contact with a small scroll or piece of paper on which a variety of legends is inscribed. The fact that there is no basic similarity in the wordings on these scrolls indicates that it is not the message that is compositionally or symbolically related to the bird, but the scroll itself. As pointed out elsewhere in this work, the goldfinch is, to some extent, a substitute object for the little scroll or scroll box usually held by the Christ Child in early pictures done under Byzantine influence. Not a few of the earliest goldfinches are decidedly cylindrical in shape, as though the artists still had the scroll case form in mind ...

It is, of course, quite possible that the juxtaposition of bird and paper is without particular significance, but it is more likely that some connection did exist in the mind of the painter or the patron in each case. The only connection that I can suggest is the fact that the Italian words for goldfinch, the bird with a 'message'—*cardellino*, and for scroll [a message]—*cartellino*, are so very similar that they probably appealed to the pun loving, anagrammatically inclined Renaissance mentality and may have been placed together for this reason. Italian art is certainly not wanting in instances of this kind.

Possibly related to the bird-and-scroll motif is the placing of the goldfinch close to an open book as we find in the lower foreground in Fungai's "Madonna and Child, with the young St. John and Angels." In this connection, it may also be recalled that in Raphael's "Madonna of the Goldfinch" ... the goldfinch has temporarily taken the attention of the group away from the book which the Virgin had been reading. This is, however, apparently not intended as a conflict or competition between the goldfinch and the book (apparently Holy Writ) but as a naturalistic bit of genre serving as a vehicle for the introduction of one of the bird's many symbolic meanings—in this case, Fertility [pp. 118-119].

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To confirm the pregenital theme in the artist's depiction of Moses, I will draw one more analogy—the hair-breast equation to be discussed later in this paper.

With regard to the *Moses* statue, **De Tolnay (1970)** had noted: "This Moses was unconsciously prepared for a long time in the work of Michelangelo himself: the two hands of the statue are anticipated a quarter of a century earlier in the Virgin of the Stairs" (pp. 41-42). Moreover,

it is not unusual for an artist to reveal in his earliest creative attempts the whole essence of his genius in embryonic form. Only in the second stage does he try, through the acquisition of technical ability, to make his personal conceptions conform to the requirements of his age, although sometimes this at the expense of his originality; and in the final period he may achieve a true integration of external ability with his original artistic vision [**De Tolnay, 1969**, p. 75].

My question is: What can the psychoanalyst contribute to the understanding of the "original artistic vision"? First, a few words about my style of approach.¹² I agree with **Wollheim (1973)** that "the psychology of gesture is sadly underdeveloped" (p. 196).¹³

"Freud believed that all human behavior is meaningful and explainable and that every gesture, slip of the tongue, every mannerism, is a valid expression of personality" (**Spector, 1969**, p. 78).¹⁴ Freud compared his analysis to the work of the Italian connoisseur, Giovanni Morelli, whose contention was that

Every true artist is committed to the repetition of certain characteristic forms or shapes.... To identify the characteristic forms of an artist, we must go to those parts of the painting where ... conventional pressures are likely to be relaxed.... We must take seriously the depiction of the *hand*, the drapery, the landscape, the ball of the thumb, or the lobe of the ear [quoted in **Wollheim, 1973**, p. 181; italics added].

Because trifles can more readily slip past the barriers of attention, they may be

¹² It was, indeed, an art historian (**Panofsky, 1939**) who in his distinction between iconology and iconography provided the rationale for many amateur efforts as art historian. "... [W]e need a mental faculty comparable to that of a diagnostician—a faculty which I cannot describe better than by the rather discredited term 'synthetic intuition' and which may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar" (pp. 14-15). This point of view is echoed by a sociologist of art (**Deinhard, 1970**): "Where progress ... has been made ... to achieve a deeper understanding of art or new insights into its significance for human existence... it has not come from the ranks of the 'professionals' in the art field in the narrower sense of the word" (p. 2).

¹³ My interest was primed by exposure to some earlier research on hand gestures under the tutelage of a Freudian psychologist, **Krout (1933, 1939)**. According to **Spiegel and Machotka (1974)**, "Though Krout's experiments were ingenious, their yield of information was low" (p. 68). More recent emphasis on the language of desires and related vicissitudes of meaning (**Sawyer, 1973**, p. 221), along with the renewal of interest in matters of empathy which had been explored earlier toward the end of the last century (**Spector, 1972**, p. 124), now permits some broadening in our analysis of plastic works of art and their creators.

¹⁴ However, according to Ricoeur, "Freud's phrases about every move being a gesture needs spelling out; gestures are for someone even when the message is covert and out of awareness" (quoted in **Sawyer, 1973**, p. 221).

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revelations of expression (Wollheim, 1973, p. 215). According to Morelli, "every painter has his own peculiarities which escape him without his being aware of it" (quoted in Wollheim, 1973, p. 194).

Freud saw Morelli's method of inquiry as closely related to the technique of psychoanalysis: "It, too, is accustomed to divine secret and concealed things from despised or unnoticed features from the rubbish-heap, as it were, of our observations" (quoted in Wollheim, 1973, p. 183).

Actually, however, both Freud's approach and mine diverge from that of the connoisseur; the value of the overlooked detail for Morelli was for its elucidation of the artist's style,¹⁵ whereas for the psychoanalyst it represents a clue betraying the artist's repressed feelings and ideas.¹⁶

Freud himself paid little attention, however, to the personal motivations of the artist¹⁷ and concentrated his major attention on the subject, Moses,¹⁸ and on the artist's successful aesthetic accomplishment.

It is now over six decades since Freud's essay on Michelangelo's *Moses* was published, and there has been no re-analysis of the *Moses* statue from a psychoanalytic perspective. This is hardly surprising since little new data about the artist which would be psychologically impressive have been discovered. We have many poems and letters of the artist, but anamnestic data remain limited. Two very old biographies by Vasari (1568) and Condivi (1553) and those more recent ones by Grimm (1896), Symonds (1893), and Rolland (1912) provide the somewhat insubstantial basis for the trickle of references we do have to the artist's psychodynamics, and psychopathology. The paucity of the kind of biographic data which might even allow for speculation has obliged interested psychoanalytic investigators to turn to the art works themselves, much as I am doing.

The Hair-Breast Equation

Earlier, I suggested that the *Moses* beard was a fetishistic substitute for the maternal garment in *The Madonna of the Stairs*. I will now strain your credulity by making a symbolic equation between hair and breast milk in order that the

¹⁵ Iannarelli (1968), of the University of California (Hayward), has developed a system of personal identification using the external ear as a supplement to fingerprinting.

¹⁶ "... [A] statue may be treated exactly like a dream. In both cases interpretation involves the same attention to unnoticed *details*, the same sort of separate treatment—analytic in the strict sense of the word—of each of these details taken in themselves, especially those that are disregarded or ignored ('the rubbish heap, as it were, of our observations' [Freud, 1914b, p. 222]). This is true of the position of the Moses' right-hand finger in relation to the draping of his beard ..." (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 17).

¹⁷ According to Spector (1972), Freud "treated the drives and motivations of Moses as seen in Michelangelo's statue without the slightest allusion to sexual matters" (p. 99).

¹⁸ Kohut (1977) thought it characteristic of Freud to respond "most deeply to the Moses statue—the finished rendition of a strong, fully cohesive self" (p. 289, n. 11).

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forefinger's indentation of the beard of Moses may constitute evidence for Michelangelo's concealed feminine identification.¹⁹

De Tolnay (1969), when he establishes a connection between the flowing-beard representation and the flow of water, is the bridge; he describes the flow of the *Moses* beard as a "cascade." I would like to extend the analogy to the flow of breast milk.

Although this analogy seems, at first, far-fetched, it can be supported by the close embryological association between the developing hairs and sebaceous glands: mammary glands, as it happens, are a variation of sebaceous (i.e., sweat) glands (Arey, 1940).

Veszy-Wagner's (1963) study of the bearded man gives evidence of the defensive role of this type of hirsutism in protecting against feminine wishes in the male and against the outbreak of a dominance of the bisexual (female) component and the feminine identification in the male.

My emphasis is not so much on the defensive use of the beard, but rather, on the expressive, though disguised, use of the beard as a simultaneous representation of the flowing breast and as a phallic representation.

Perhaps at this point, a clinical example of the hair-breast equation from the clinical analysis of an actual patient will help clarify my meaning regarding such bisexual representations in mental life.

A rare opportunity presented itself in the case of an analysand who became a father for the second time. Two weeks after the birth of his second daughter, and during the night while his wife got up to breast-feed the baby, he had what he called a peculiar dream; in that dream, a hair was growing in his mouth.

Associations to that "peculiar" dream detail led to a penis-hair equation, a penis-breast-hair equation, and penis-baby in mouth-vagina associations. He himself had been breast-fed until nine months of age. He felt his first daughter was breast-fed "too long"—until eighteen months of age. He had been impatient as a child and became irritated when he didn't get what he wanted. He recently recognized feelings of being neglected by his wife, feelings which he shares with the older daughter who also feels somewhat neglected and mildly resentful. He recalled that this daughter used to snuggle up to his breast and try to suck on it, complaining of the hairs around his nipple. He associated this to the hair in the dream.

He declares in his further associations that he wants his wife to breast-feed the new baby—he is almost fanatic about it, and he notes with ambiguous envy that when the baby cries his wife's breasts automatically begin to flow and drench the front of her dressing gown.

Ultimately, he vainly equates the creativity of the woman

¹⁹ I owe the phrase "hair-breast equation" to the imagination of one Fabius Zachary Snoop, probably a pseudonym, who in his monograph on the breast formulated the words for the idea I had been grappling with.

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to his own creative hobbies. Thus, this patient not only demonstrates the hair-breast equation, but the reactive identification with the creative woman, much as I postulate about Michelangelo himself.

Michelangelo's Psychology

Except for idiosyncratic emphasis, psychoanalytic students of Michelangelo's character agree in their general formulations. Preoedipal trauma and oral and anal fixation stand out, and the artist's homosexual character is seen as a perverse solution to his unresolved maternal loss in childhood. His creative work is seen as an identification with his substitute caretakers and as a reparative effort to undo these early traumata and later ones, too.

It is agreed that enforced early separation from his sickly mother made him a unique sibling in engendering feelings of rage over abandonment and that these feelings became fixed in his character as oral rage. Some actually saw his career choice as positively related to living with the foster parents—stonecutters—and believed that to some extent furiously carving into marble represented a sublimated destructive rage toward the abandoning breast. Sterba (**Sterba and Sterba, 1956**) noted that the only warm madonna done by Michelangelo is *The Doni Madonna* in which the stone quarries of his childhood are depicted in the background. His conclusion is that to the stepmother, Michelangelo was grateful. In general, it is agreed that he made a hostile identification with the abandoning mother which was re-enacted in his homosexuality and creativity, ascribed by some as envy of women's power to create.

The trauma of maternal separation, cruelly enhanced by the death of his biological mother at six and the loss of his stepmother at ten, along with the influence of an unempathic father, forced upon him an isolation and loneliness never to be overcome.

Frank (1966) saw him as a depressive, whose unresolved mourning for his mother losses is evident in his last work, the *Pietà Rondanini*, representing the old and dying artist's poignant reunion with the mother, now represented as death. **Mohacsy (1976)** saw the last work in a similar fashion. "In this final work of Michelangelo's old age, we have come full circle: to a representation of genuine infantile fusion with the mother, as a final appearance of the need for symbiotic union that accompanies us as a driving force from birth to death" (pp. 512-513).

Peto (1979) essentially agrees with Frank and Mohacsy but emphasizes the artist's conflict. He calls Michelangelo "a life-long depressive who feared independence from and fusion with the mother" (p. 184).

The **Sterbas (1978)**, in their most recent reflections on the artist, attest to his "deeply ambivalent relationship to his mother" (p. 170). Stubbornness, money grubbing, slovenly habits, and inability to finish work

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suggested anal fixations to **Clark (1927)**, who characterizes the artist as a compulsive neurotic. Other emphases on his paranoid, masochistic, and hypochondriacal nature suggest pregenital fixations which prevented the development of an oedipal state and resulted in the failure of heterosexual achievement even without marriage. **Eissler (1971)** goes so far as to suggest heterosexual immaturity as rather characteristic of great and creative men (p. 533).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the taming of intense aggression played a prominent role in Michelangelo (**Sterba and Sterba, 1956**). His vengefulness and narcissistic rage alienated him from many who considered him obnoxious and hateful. He was highly perfectionistic and idealistic and capable of the highest achievements, which are regarded by some discerners as reparative efforts to overcome inner destructive urges.

Michelangelo's grandiosity may have reached the proportion of an identification with Christ late in life.

The unsuccessful struggle to personal individuation on a psychosexual axis reflected a deep symbiotic attachment to cold, unempathic caretakers. One author (**Liebert, 1977**) saw "the yearning for eternal union with an idealized powerful paternal transformation of early maternal figures...lost in early childhood" (p. 517). **Oremland (1978)** saw in the Pietàs the way in which "Michelangelo portrayed a continuing evolution of the themes of return to, reunion, and union with the mother of infancy" (p. 565). These notions closely approach what I have suggested as depicted in the androgynous madonna, Moses.

Michelangelo's Narcissistic Character

Earlier attempts to place the artist's personality in the oedipal-conflict framework have afforded us the diagnosis of a latent (or overt) homosexuality, as if perverse formations and acting out would explain his character.

As in the case of other geniuses, there was extensive arrestation of libidinal and aggressive development and therefore little, if any, oedipal conflict. The nuclear psychopathology of our subject is related more to the development of the self. The nature of his object ties was essentially narcissistic, and he was caught in the grip of chronic narcissistic rage.

It is not clear that Michelangelo was ever psychotic; at worst he was borderline, and at best he suffered from a narcissistic personality

disorder. Undoubtedly, he experienced early trauma related to the nature of the mothering. His real mother's sickness seems to have had a particular impact on this second of five boys, the only one to be farmed out to a stepmother, at least for longer than the usual length of time.²⁰ His real mother, who presumably visited him and then abandoned

²⁰ It may not have been uncommon for children to be put out to wet-nurse in fifteenth-century Italy (Ross, 1974). However, the historian Trexler (1973-1974) recalls the realities of infanticidal deaths and threats of abandonment children had to live with.

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him on weekends, was finally lost through death altogether when he was six years old, and he was forced to abandon his stepmother at ten when he returned to his father and brothers.

Delayed in his education, he exhibited an early capacity for drawing which was fiercely resisted by an unempathic father who finally yielded to his son's artistic career by providing that he be well cared for financially.

Michelangelo began a lifelong series of vulnerable attachments to idealized males, including Lorenzo the Magnificent whom he also lost prematurely. His relationships to authorities remained tentative so as to avoid further narcissistic injury through abandonment. The only close attachments he could maintain were those in which young men functioned as selfobjects whom, in a sense, he mothered as he would ideally like to be mothered.

His poetry gives convincing evidence of his narcissistic attachments to boys, though in the past this work has been seen only as a perverse formation based on structural conflict.

My contention is that he never escaped from a symbiotic attachment to the frustrating maternal objects with whom he identified. Furthermore, my analysis of the *Moses* statue as an androgynous madonna is in support of a self structure which did not see others as separate and autonomous, but rather as extensions of himself.

This diagnosis would explain his rages—they were consequent to seeing others as flawed, imperfect, and thus offensive and to be blotted out whenever they did not succumb or yield to his grandiose expectations.

Michelangelo had great empathy for himself but little for others, except insofar as they provided him with a kind of support which filled an inner emptiness and despair caused by early trauma. How he was able to transform his misery into such masterful creativity remains mysterious. I dare not go beyond those connections I have made and seriously attempt to explain his creativity.

Like other geniuses, Michelangelo was able at times to withdraw his narcissistic investment from his ideals and from the self and employ them in the service of creative activity. Students of Michelangelo will recall that he openly stated that he owed his artistic capacity to the deity, indicating that he (i.e., his self) was not the initiator, source, or shaper of his products.²¹

Having been alone, abandoned, and unsupported as a child, perhaps he was better prepared than most to enter into those lonely areas that had not previously been explored by others.

Oral Trauma, Aggression, and Scopophilia

It is not my intention to ascribe the artist's choice of career or his creativeness entirely

²¹ Perhaps this is a personal variant of what Kris (1952) refers to as "the divine ascent of genius" and which he relates to the myth of the birth of the hero. As an example, he cites Vasari's mythological style in his biography of Michelangelo (pp. 73-74).

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or directly to preoedipal, particularly oral, traumata and the unsuccessful resolution of infantile conflicts.²²

The question I wish to consider is whether it is possible for ambivalence toward mothering figures to become incorporated into a stable defensive structure, or even better—and going beyond defensive synthesis—into creative adaptations which may, under close scrutiny or under lapses such as parapraxes, reveal those underlying components which exist even in noncreative individuals in greater or lesser degrees. This in no way detracts from the greatness of the artist or his accomplishments.

Michelangelo certainly had the background for severe oral trauma and reactive rage. All character descriptions attest to his irritability and tension. Furthermore, we have evidence from his life style and his poetic creativity that genital cathexis was retarded by the intensity of his preoedipal fixations. Some scholars (e.g., Eisler) sense intense struggles not to succumb to passivity, a factor that is exemplified in the creative works themselves.

What may have begun as oral, biting rage toward the breast could have been diverted into claw chiseling into marble, a breast symbol (Sterba). If this is so, it is suggested as preconscious in the artist himself when he said that if he was good for anything, it was because he suckled among the chisels and hammers of stonecutters, an obvious reference to the nurturant stepparents. Michelangelo's humorous remark, "I sucked in marble dust with my mother's milk" represents to my mind a hypnagogic determinant in his art work, a memory trace inherent in the blank hallucinations described by Stern (1961).²³

Indeed, one student of the artist's life (Besdine, 1968, 1970) suggests, under the title "The Jocasta Complex," that Michelangelo was overwhelmed by an intense intrusiveness characteristic of those mothers who facilitate the development of homosexuality in boys who may also eventually become paranoid-masochists.

To my mind, the repetitive pattern of forefinger indentations, which I regard as a parapraxis, suggests such a degree of oral frustration and consequent fixation as

²² **Coltrera (1965)** points to a pertinent issue from the analysis of the other great Renaissance artist, Leonardo. "Even more interesting is Leonardo's phenomenological understanding of his cognitive style which encompasses a broader view of orality than the narrower view of orality taken by Freud and Eissler in the case of Gioconda's smile. The master's consideration of the eye and the hand as a conjoined cognitive event is compatible with the role assigned to the trinitarian relation between the eye, hand and mouth by Piaget and Hoffer in beginning cognitive epigenesis during the oral stage" (p. 661).

²³ One may wonder whether the artist's description is a reflection of his having experienced those "blank hallucinations" described by **Stern (1961)**, i.e., stereotyped sensory perceptions without appropriate external stimuli and which may include "sandy, gritty, and doughy feelings in the mouth" (p. 205). These hallucinations represent defensive repetitions of responses to oral deprivation, the sensations reflecting the subjective experiences of the traumatized infant.

In this same regard **Spitz (1955)** saw all perception as beginning with the oral cavity and refers to Isakower's assumption "that the combination of the oral cavity with the hand corresponds to the model of what he defines as the earliest postnatal ego structure, and that the sensations of the oral cavity are probably unified with those of the external cutaneous covering" (p. 220).

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to make neutralization impossible and to result in a permanent narcissistic vulnerability. The highly creative person, or genius like Michelangelo, is perhaps able to synthesize a relatively stable character structure and style of work so as to make it appear almost autonomous and independent of instinctual conflict. In his case, ego factors predominate. We are impressed by his ability, almost harmoniously, to depict fierce aggression, exquisitely controlled. It is precisely this exquisite control which Freud saw in his favorite, the *Moses* statue. It must have coincided with a similar resolution within Freud himself, a brother artist in a sense, since Freud was obliged to restrain his own potentially destructive aggression in the face of organizational squabbles, so as to maintain the viability of psychoanalysis as a movement.

When I mentioned earlier the oral destructive rage toward the abandoning mother, I did not suggest that claw chiseling into marble is a substitutive displacement and sublimation of breast-biting. Rather, it constitutes a regression in the service of creativity in the service of the ego (Kris); or, perhaps more accurately, a transmutation of primitive drive energies along with archaic grandiose configurations (Kohut).

Researchers of the early mother-child relationship have related hand erotism and tactile perception to the nursing situation, and connect aggression with oral frustration: according to **Spitz (1955)**, "the child learns to grasp by nursing at the mother's breast and by combining the emotional satisfaction of that experience with tactile perceptions. He learns to distinguish animate objects from inanimate ones by the spectacle provided by his mother's face in situations fraught with emotional satisfaction."

Spitz is further quoted in **Almansi (1960)**, who writes that "at the age of three months, when the child is deprived of the nipple, its eyes deviate from the mother's face in the general direction of the breasts thus leading to the superimposition of these two percepts which then become fused. At this age level the aggressive drive comes to the fore as a consequence of the repressed frustration experienced at the breast" (p. 68).

Almansi demonstrated in all four of his face-breast-equation cases that the phenomena involved were indissolubly bound to the liberation of large amounts of aggression—specifically, aggression reactive to oral deprivation. He adds two considerations which may have special relevance for the origins of scopophilia. "Three cases were strongly scopophilic, and their scopophilia was indissolubly linked with early visual sensitization due to the feelings of oral deprivation and object loss" (p. 69). Moreover, Almansi's "material sheds some light on the origins of the process of incorporation through the eye and of the equation of 'to look at' and 'to devour' which have been discussed by **Fenichel (1935)** and others" (p. 69).

Herrman (1924), in a presentation to the Hungarian Psychoanalytic Society in 1924, referred to "manifestations of hand erotism in sucking infants, the origin of these phenomena (the act of clinging to the mother), and their connection

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with oral erotism" (p. 506).

Phyllis Greenacre (1959) has referred to the rhythmic use of the object as reflecting the nursing situation.²⁴ Sculpture can be regarded as a rhythmic use of the object.

My suggestion is that the artist's work reflected memory traces of both mothers and his interaction with them. These memory traces remained repressed, but were later elaborated into a sublimation through a process of creative transformation and resulted in a product which could permit the original experiences by others through an empathic capacity.²⁵

While finishing the preparation of my thesis, I was delighted to find support for my idea in a brilliant re-examination of Freud's views on works of art by the philosopher **Ricoeur (1976)**. He disavows Freud's disclaimers regarding the understanding of creativity and shows how psychoanalytic interpretation of art works and the artist's intentions can be justified by the psychoanalytic theory of dream formation, including the concepts of representability, staging, substitution, and the sign effect. To Ricoeur, "the same interplay of representability and substitution which is already functioning in dreams and memory continues in esthetics" (p. 21).

Thus, he clarified for me my concept of mnemonics in regard to Michelangelo's early breast-feeding experiences and presumed traumas. As he puts it, "...humanity *had* to create works of art just as it has to dream.... If primal 'representation' is impossible, if a *lived* institution is impossible, perhaps the only way to rediscover one's childhood, which is behind one, is to create it before oneself, in a work" (p. 23).

In a way, what Freud did with a memory of Leonardo, I try to do with "the marble statue of Moses... treated... as a fantasy objectified in stone" (Ricoeur, 1976, p. 16).

Summary

Freud's aesthetic analysis of the *Moses* of Michelangelo attends largely to the emotions of the viewer and contains elements of his projective identification with the mythical Hebrew leader. Those gestures and postural elements upon which

²⁴ "... [D]uring even such mild strain as that of prolonged nursing, many babies develop rhythmical playful movements which accompany the nursing. Thus the baby, simultaneously with sucking at the breast or bottle, may play with its hands over the mother's breast or clothing, may later develop a rhythmic touching of its own cheek or pulling at the lobe of its own ear, or touching a lock of its hair, or the edge of the blanket. This seems to be an early manifestation of the use of the transitional object which is both me and not me (Winnicott, 1953). What I would emphasize now is not especially the intermediate quality of the object but the playful comforting rhythmic use of it which is also significant" (Greenacre, 1959, p. 70).

²⁵ We are, of course, in the realm of theory with regard to the role of empathy in aesthetic appreciation. For some divergent views see Kris (1952, p. 55), Robinson (1963), and Worringer (1953).

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Freud based his theory, when examined as to the sculptor's intentions, may reveal the artist's idiosyncratic personal development. An overcathexis of the forefinger and a repetitive deployment of that digit in the art works of Michelangelo are related to unresolved infantile tensions of an oral and narcissistic nature.²⁶

The *Moses* statue, when compared with his earliest sculptural work, *The Madonna of the Stairs*, suggests it may be an "androgynous madonna" which conceals within it evidences of the artist's bisexuality. This aesthetic conclusion contrasts sharply with the usual appreciation of the figure as masculine, even brutish.

Repetitive elements in the style of an artist as well as un-self-conscious overcathexes may yield clues to the character structure of the artistic creator; in the past they may have been interpreted in a formal art-historical sense or for the purpose of connoisseurship.

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²⁶ Focusing on a small detail in an artist's work and extracting broad meanings therefrom may violate some Gestaltist preferences. With regard to the limitations of isolating repetitive elements in an artist's work, see Kanter and Pinsky (1973) and Kris (1952).

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