Freud and Michelangelo’s Moses Statue

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The relationship between Freud and Moses, Freud and Rome, and Freud and Michelangelo’s Moses (Fig.) Statue is complex.

Without question, Freud was highly identified with Moses. Clearly he saw himself, like Moses, as a designated leader of a small group with an uniquely powerful idea. His last book was Moses and Monotheism.

We know Freud often told friends that Rome was his favorite city and that his visits here brought special joy. We also know that he had an abiding interest in archeology, collecting antiquities, and that he often used archeology as a metaphor to describe his view of the dynamic unconscious. His two pivotal concepts, the dynamic unconscious and repression were often likened to the layering in an archeological dig. Naturally, Rome with its layers of ancient, mid-evil, renaissance, baroque, and modern fascinated him, as it does us today.

Paradoxically, Freud had a neurotic inhibition that prevented his visiting Rome. It was not until September of 1901, a year after the publication of the Interpretation of Dreams that he, through self- analysis, overcame that inhibition and made his first visit here. On that visit he went to see the Moses statue and returned to see it on his many subsequent visits.

The paper, The Moses of Michelangelo, has a curious history. Freud published it in 1917 anonymously in a major psychoanalytic journal. At the time, he saw the paper as having only a “certain resemblance to the methodology of psychoanalysis.”

Julius II and his Tomb

The original idea for a tomb for Julius II (Fig.) began in 1505. The Pope commissioned Michelangelo to design and execute the Tomb, really a mausoleum. It was to be centrally placed in the new Bramante St. Peter’s basilica that was just beginning construction.
The Tomb proposal arose from a colossally egotistical man, Julius II, working with a young sculptor who himself had overvaulting ambition. What originally was proposed was a mausoleum to rival that of the great Greek King Masuleus, one of The Seven Wonders of the ancient world. It is from Masuleus’ name that we get the word mausoleum. From its inception, the task was impossible to complete.

The Moses was to be but one of 40 statues imbedded in the Tomb. It probably was the first piece completed. Presently, besides the Moses, there are three competed statues, two Slaves both in the Louvre (Fig), The Victory (Fig.) in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and four partially completed Slaves (Fig.) in the Accademia in Florence.

The Tomb was to continue as a burden for Michelangelo long after Julius’ death, age 70, in 1513. Michelangelo struggled with the Rovere family, the descendants of Julius, until a compromise was reached in 1545. The compromise is the existing Wall Tomb in the San Pietro in Vincoli with the Moses as its centerpiece.

The Statue (Fig.)

The theme for the statue is taken from the Old Testament’s Exodus- 32. Exodus relates how Moses became divinely ordained to lead the enslaved Israelite people out of polytheistic Egypt to a land traditionally held as a gift to the Israelite people from God. In this Promised Land, Moses was to found a nation based on monotheistic beliefs.

The Old Testament story of their travail has been celebrated annually as Passover for over thirty five hundred years by the Jewish people. As related in Exodus, Moses and his small group of followers set out on a long and perilous journey west across the Sinai desert. On the perilous journey, at the foot of Mount Sinai his encampment rested while Moses ascended Mount Sinai. After a conscious producing theophany, he descended carrying the sacred tablets on which were inscribed what is now known as the Ten Commandments, the foundation of Judeo-Christian morality.

On re-entering the encampment, to Moses’s horror in his absence the Israelites had returned to pagan idol worship. He was enraged to find his people dancing around an image, the Golden Calf, the very antithesis of monotheism. An intemperate man of many moods, Moses in fury smashed the sacred revelations; an act that through countless centuries has been interpreted and reinterpreted.
During the Renascence with its renewed interest in Hebraic and Arabic scholarship, there was revived interest in Christianity in Moses. Theologically Moses became seen as typological Jesus, and Moses and Jesus parallels became a frequent subject of artist depiction. Those of you who visited the Sistine Chapel with us remember that on the North wall running as a series are the 15th century murals of scenes from the life of Moses that reverberate across to the South wall with corresponding murals depicting incidents from the life of Jesus.

The most frequently artistic depictions of the event shows an irate Moses holding the holy tablets high above his head about to smash them to the ground (Fig.). The Michelangelo Moses statue (Fig.) is different and Freud was fascinated by the difference.

Michelangelo’s Moses

Freud noted that Michelangelo’s Moses is not a Moses who is about to smash the tablets. The giant sits glaring to the left. There is no question about the intensity of his anger or the powerful emotions contained within his body. Freud noted in Moses’s right hand, he holds the Sacred Tablets. The index finger of the right hand fingers his long beard and the Sacred Tablets are about to slip from him. The positioning of the legs is such that he is about to rise up and thrust forward. Were he to, the tablets are sure to fall.

Freud visited the statue several times and had an artists make sketches (Fig.) of his impressions of the monolith. He included the sketches in his the 1917 paper (Fig.) . Freud came to a psychodynamic conclusion about what is being depicted. He reasoned that this is a complex Moses. Rage is in the eyes and in every muscle of the giant’s body, but the tension in the body and the fondling of his beard also show hesitation. Michelangelo’s Moses is a rageful, hot-tempered giant in conflict (Fig.)

What is the conflict? Freud suggested that while Moses is filled with rage at and disappointment with his followers, he must keep in mind that they are his followers and he cannot risk driving them away. Rageful retaliation would only make impossible what he is attempting to achieve. He must over-come his rage, and rather than retaliate he must re-new the faith of his followers in order to further his cause. In short this is no ordinary man and no ordinary Moses. Michelangelo gives us a great leader in conflict. Freud helps us see why beyond its technical virtuosity, it is one of the great artistic works of all time.
Freud and Art History

In Michelangelo’s Moses paper, Freud introduces a new paradigm for the study of artistic masterpieces. It is a paradigm that he is not to have confidence in until some 20 years later, when he acknowledged its authorship and included the paper in his collected works.

The paradigm he introduces is a form of interpretation in which the interpreter comes to conclusions regarding the power of an art piece. Until Freud, art history was predominately involved in documenting the history of art pieces: how they arose, their fate, and the cultural and social influences on the artist in making the piece. Freud provided a way to discover how and why great art affects us.

Thirteen years after the Moses paper in his monograph on Leonardo da Vinci, a work he always had pride in, Freud laid the groundwork for a second paradigm for the psychoanalytic study of art pieces, psychoanalytic biography. The Leonardo monograph is a brilliant study of how the artist’s early and continuing conflicts, conscious and unconscious, as part of his personality development, are reflected in the artistic depiction. Taken together, the psychoanalytic study of the art piece and the psychoanalytic study of the artist in relation to the art piece, Freud provides us with powerful tools toward more fully understanding creativity and the evocative power of art.

I want to return to what we can learn from the way Freud studied the Moses statue. His method for studying art is similar to his method for interpreting dreams. Dreams, like painting and sculpture, are essentially non-verbal. The images in both are visualized condensations of ideas and affects. But there are major differences and major pitfalls when it comes to their interpretation.

Schematically, in dream interpretation the analysand relates the dream. As the analysand relates the dream, the analyst freely associates to what he is being told about the dream. Essentially the first stage in the process is the analyst’s projecting onto the analysand’s thoughts. Essentially the analyst projects his freely associated thoughts onto the analysand’s thoughts that precede relating the dream, about the dream, and those that spontaneously follow relating the dream. We call these the associations to the dream. Of great importance, the analyst notes the inconsistencies, asides, and the apparent non-sequiturs in the analysand’s associations. He recognizes that these inconsistencies,
asides, and the apparent non-sequiturs are sudden shifts in meaning by which the unconscious attempts to express and at the same time disguise meanings that are being defended against and given expression in the dream images.

If the analyst were only to follow his associations and present his interpretation based solely on his associations, it would be “wild analysis.” However, “wild analysis” is the initial yet silent phase, in dream interpretation. “Wild analysis”, and this is critical, is progressively corrected and converted into a formulated interpretation of the analysand’s dream by the analysand’s associations. The analysand’s associations guide and allow the analyst to select among the analyst’s associations the analyst’s interpretation.

If the process proceeds freely, that is if the analyst’s countertransference is not overly interfering with his freely listening, there is an increasing convergence between the analyst’s and the analysand’s thoughts. Essentially it becomes a dialogue--a dialogue, silent on the analyst’s side, between the analysts’s conscious and unconscious and the analysand’s conscious and unconscious mind. The eventual formulated interpretation evolves out of this unique dialogue.

I suggest that a similar experience takes place between the viewer of an art piece and the art piece. The viewer’s conscious and unconscious thoughts enter into a dialogue with the artist’s conscious and unconscious artistic communications packed into the art image. However, the process is at peril because there are no sequential associations from the artist to control the dialogue.

What is the corrective to the viewer’s thoughts in art interpretation?

Can we learn something from Freud about how to correct for this serious deficiency? I believe the method he used, without realizing it the prototypical method. He returned time and time again to the art piece.

One is astonished at how differently one reacts to a work of art on repeated visits. Our conscious and unconscious work on our thoughts about the art between the visits. Whole aspects, colors, limb positions, background details, and spatial relationships are changed. The analytic viewer carefully watches the distortions that he introduces after each visit. He studies how the art is affecting him. Gradually we realize that we are in active dialogue with the artist’s conscious and unconscious. We are unpacking the
artist’s thoughts and affects that he condensed into the image. Is it a perfect process, oh, my, no!—but neither is dream interpretation.

Let me illustrate how the condensations in art images, often thought to be errors, ambiguities or redundancies reveal themselves as multiple superimposed meanings—that is as artistic condensations, that enhance the evocative power of the art object.

It is often reported that Michelangelo’s *David* (Fig.) statue in Florence is marred by the fact that the magnificent young man’s feet and hands are overly large in proportion to the statue. This is sometimes explained that the statue was intended to be viewed from below; sometimes it is ascribed as being necessitated by the marble column from which it was carved; and sometimes it is called artistic error.

Repeated viewing of the statue and seeing it from various angles and perspective reveals that the large hands and feet are those of an adolescent, and as in an adolescent male they indicate what is yet to come. Through this artistic condensation, Michelangelo like nature itself, is making visible what is to come. Michelangelo’s heroic boy has within himself evidences of potential greatness.

Some of you may remember last year, we discussed that at the time Michelangelo created the St. Peter’s *pietà*, (Fig.) there was criticism, a criticism that lingers to today, of the fact that the Virgin’s face is younger than that of her dead Son. We discussed how that may be an autobiographical statement reflecting that Michelangelo was representing his personal concept of mother. We know that he was separated from his mother at birth and was given to a wet nurse in a near by village. We know that his mother died shortly after he was returned to her when he was at age 6. In fact, Michelangelo had a mother who never aged.

On another level, Michelangelo through this artistic condensation makes visible in the St. Peter’s *pietà* the universal wish to return to the mother of our birth. The statue becomes a representation of the cycle of birth, death, and return with implied re-birth. It is the mystical circle. There is not beginning and there is no end. It becomes a powerful visualization of Resurrection. In fact the statue when viewed from above is a circle (Fig.)—a yin/yang of life and death.

Returning to the *Moses* (Fig.)
As mentioned, Freud’s interpretation of Michelangelo’s Moses suggests that Michelangelo gives us a different Moses. Rather than a rageful Moses, Michelangelo’s Moses is a leader in conflict. He is torn between rage and the fear that his rage is about to destroy what he has set out to do.

Those interested in the psychoanalytic biographical approach will immediately point to a biographic understanding of the statue. Those who know the story of Michelangelo know that both he and Pope Julius II were impatient, irascible men with terrible tempers. In fact the face in the statue is Julius II (Fig.)

Michelangelo was widely known to be what the French call an infant terrible and the Pope what the Italians call a pontifice terribile. We know at one time in a confrontation between the two men, the Pope in a rage beat Michelangelo over the back with his cane. In response, Michelangelo stormed out of the Vatican and left for Florence leaving the Pope fuming. It took great diplomacy to negotiate reconciliation, but Michelangelo knew he eventually had to bow to the Pope’s will. Michelangelo knew what it meant to have to inhibit rage in order to accomplish a task.

Returning to the strange beginning of Freud’s paper, The Moses of Michelangelo, there are some interesting biographical facts underlying Freud’s writing the paper.

Freud was forty four when his work became recognized and that recognition was strongly related to the publication in 1900 of The Interpretation of Dreams. We know that the book met with little success, however, it did bring to Freud several of the most important people in the development of psychoanalysis—Sandor Ferenczi, Ernest Jones, and Carl Jung.

Of these Jung had a special place in Freud’s thoughts. Jung was 25 when he became interested in Freud’s ideas. Jung, working in the Burghölzli Hospital in Zurich, was attracted to Freud’s theories because in reading the Interpretation of Dreams he recognized that much of what Freud was writing about helped him understand his psychotherapeutic efforts with schizophrenia.

At that time the Burghölzli under the great Eugene Bleuler was one of the leading mental hospitals in the world and Bleuler was the world’s acknowledged expert on schizophrenia. In fact it was he who gave us the word schizophrenia.
Freud was delighted that this young protégée of Bleuler, Jung, was interested in his work. In 1909 Freud was invited to give a series of lectures in a symposium at Clark University in the United States. It was the first time that an university had given him acknowledgement. He chose as travel mates, Ferenczi, Jones, and Jung.

On the visit to America, Freud and Jung had many talks, compared fantasies, dreams, and the like, and Jung professed complete loyalty to the principles of psychoanalysis. After the lecture, Jung continued to travel in the United States and was quickly widely accepted in the U. S. In fact, Jung made several trips to the United States subsequently.

Freud and Jung developed a large correspondence and in 1910 Freud made Jung then 35, Chairman for Life and the first Editor in Chief of the newly formed Journal of the International Psychoanalytical Association --obviously an extremely prestigious role. The appointment also set up an intense rivalry among Jones, Ferenczi, and Jung.

Freud heard, probably from Jones and Ferenczi, that although Jung professed loyalty, when he lectured away from Freud, in order to gain favor with his audience, he would deviate from Freud’s ideas. Freud at first dismissed their criticism of Jung as “sibling rivalry.”

Another difficulty was in the making between Freud and Jung. In 1904, Sabina Speilrein, a medical student from St. Petersburg studying in Zurich suffered a schizophrenic episode and was being treated by Jung at the Burghölzli. Jung was to treat Sabina until 1914.

Around 1910 Freud received correspondence from Sabina’s mother saying that her daughter revealed to her the Jung was having sexual relations with Sabina. Freud dismissed the accusation writing the mother that it was common for young women to fall in love with their doctors during psychoanalysis and that it probably was phantasy.

Before long, Jung’s wife, Emma, wrote Freud’s wife, Martha, asking her to intervene. Sabina’s mother insisted that Speilrein travel to Vienna for consultation with Freud. By 1913 Freud admitted to himself that Jung had serious character flaws and had confirming evidence that Jung was talking against Freud in lectures. He also learned that in 1914, Jung was dismissed from the Burghölzli because of his sexual involvement with Sabina.
It was during the time of having to come to grips with the fact that he had made a serious error in elevating Jung to a high position in psychoanalysis that Freud wrote *The Moses of Michelangelo*. The paper was written as he was struggling with the realization that his “heir apparent,” as Freud liked to refer to Jung, betrayed his trust in him. Because of the high place he himself had assigned Jung in psychoanalysis, Freud knew that how he reacted to the Jung situation might seriously effect the future of psychoanalysis. He like Michelangelo’s *Moses* was the furious leader who knew that rage and retaliation could only jeopardize the psychoanalytic movement. It could be strongly argued that writing the paper was part of Freud’s working through his struggle with what to do about Jung.

The Wall Tomb (Fig.)

A few non-psychoanalytic comments about the Basilica di San Pietro in Vincoli and the Wall Tomb of Pope Julius II.

The basilica was begun in 432 AD and completed in 440 by the Emperor Constantine. It was built to honor a significant relic of Saint Peter’s.

Tradition has it that the chains that bound Saint Peter in Jerusalem were brought to Rome by Constantine’s mother, Helena. When the chains were placed near the chains which bound St. Peter in the Mamertine Prison on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, the chains miraculous fused. A great church was built to honor the fused chains. They are enshrined in a crystal reliquary box beneath the main altar.

Although the basilica has undergone major renovations during the reign of Sextus IV, Julius II, and again rather unfortunately in 1875, San Pietro in Vincoli, is important because it is one of the least altered of the Roman 4th century, Constantine churches. It gives us an idea of what the early churches were like and what Saint Peter’s Basilica was like before its destruction and replacement with the Bramante building we now know.

The Wall Tomb of Julius II was completed in accordance with Michelangelo’s design in 1547, thirty four years after Julius’s death. It represents a series of compromises and re-negotiations with the della Rovere family that plagued Michelangelo all those years. From the free standing, three-tiered, forty seven statue mega-structure that was to occupy the center of Saint Peter’s Basilica, the tomb was reduced to a wall tomb with three statues and surrounding decoration. In that San Pietro in Vincoli was the
Rovere family church and Julius had been cardinal there when he was elevated to pope, as a compromise, in Vincoli as opposed to Saint Peter’s was chosen as the site for the greatly reduced tomb.

Aside from the Moses completed in 1503 are two side statues completed around 1540. The statues are traditionally labeled the sisters Leah and Rachael according to Vasari and Condivi. Allegorically, Rachael (Fig.) is vita contemplativa and Leah, vita attiva. Rachel (Fig.) in prayer is dressed nun-like with a head veil. Leah (Fig.) holds a diadem in one hand and a sprig of laurel in the other.

The central Virgin (Fig.) was rough hewn by Michelangelo and given to several lesser artists and their assistants for completion as were the side statues, the sibyl and the prophet.

The central piece is the Michelangelo’s Moses. Above Moses in a curious Etruscan pose is Julius lying on an empty sarcophagus (Fig.). Julius is actually buried next to his uncle Sextus IV under a simple slab in front of a monument of Clement X in St. Peter’s. As was stipulated, Julius’s face in the reclining statue on the sarcophagus was carved by Michelangelo but the sarcophagus and the flanking statues were carved by Michelangelo’s assistant Urbino, who also did all the surrounding, flourishes.

Over the years, there has been much controversy about the horn-like protuberances on Moses’ head (Fig.) It is generally held that the controversy revolves around an early mis-translation in the Latin Vulgate. Generally it is felt that the original Hebrew (keren) should have been translated as “radiance” rather than the Latin cornu, horns. Essentially the Hebrew Bible records that “Moses emitted light”. Most artistic representations in the early Renaissance show Moses with forehead radiations (Fig). During the late Renaissance when Roman Catholicism was highly involved in disassociating itself from its Hebrew origins and highly reactionary to Lutheran change, the anti-Hebraic mis-translation was emphasized. Rather than the antecedent of Jesus and an enlightenment, Moses became the leader of a misguided tribe, essentially a devil with horns (Fig.) Interestingly, Freud in his Moses and Monotheism book applied a secular meaning. He advanced the idea that the biblical term meant that Moses had an exceptionally prominent forehead, which in English we call bossing. Bossing traditionally is associated with great intellect.
Another bit of lore surrounding the statue concerns the small fissure in the marble of the right knee (Fig.) Lore has it that Michelangelo after he had completed this life-like piece, in a fit of rage, struck the statue and said, “Now speak!” Of course, this never happened.

In summary:

Freud in 1914 rather reluctantly offered a new paradigm for the study of art. He advanced the idea that studying art from a psycho\textit{dynamic} point of view adds richly to our understanding of an art piece. Without specifying it, he approached the art piece as he approached dreams. In the \textit{Moses} statue, Freud studied (that is, freely associated to) the apparent inconsistencies and the condensations within the image. Whereas in dream interpretation, the analyst’s thoughts are guided by the analysand’s associations; in art appreciation the guide is less clear. The essentially corrective, the guide, comes from a continuing self-study of the viewer’s changing responses as the art piece is visited repeatedly over time.

In effect, in both dream interpretation and art appreciation, an intimate dialogue is established between the expressed conscious and unconscious representations and the viewer’s conscious and unconscious responses. To be more specific, the analyst silently and progressively enters into dialogue with the dreamer’s conscious and unconscious just as the art appreciator personally and progressively enters into a dialogue with the artist’s conscious and unconscious. Both have their perils as the meanings within the condensations are unpacked.

Later in his study of Leonardo da Vinci, Freud added another important paradigm to understanding art work, the relation of the personality development and personal experiences of the artist to the art piece. Of importance to us, is that in combining these paradigms, the study of the art piece in relation to the viewer and the art piece in relation to the art maker, Freud vastly enriched the study of art and our appreciation of art.