

Mannerist Staircases: A Twist in the Tale

Valerie Ficklin

Scholars differ greatly in their opinions on Mannerism. Art historians debate how to best define this style and the qualitative value which should be assigned to these works. Compared with High Renaissance works, Mannerist art could be defined as “abnormal or strange” in order to stress evocative emotional content. A chart in Frederick Hartt’s *History of Italian Renaissance Art* demonstrates the differences between the two periods. Hartt describes Renaissance art as “normal, direct, controlled, harmonious, and natural” respectively on the following topics: content, narrative, space, composition, and substance.¹ Mannerism, he describes as “abnormal, elaborate disjointed, conflicting, and artificial,” using the same dimensions he employed to analyze the earlier period.² More often than not, the sense of a divergence from the norm clung to works in the Mannerist style, but modern day viewers need to understand the distortion of forms in Mannerist works as manifestations of sixteenth century artistic theories and the stories they tell.

This paper will explore a particular motif that has been deemed bizarre in comparison to High Renaissance standards, namely spiraling staircases as a setting for figures.³ By examining the staircase in a painting by Jacopo Pontormo, entitled *Joseph in Egypt* from 1518 (National Gallery, London, Figure 1), and a set of stairs in a fresco by Francesco Salviati, entitled *Bathsheba Goes to David*, from around 1552 (Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti, Rome, Figure 2), one can see that form follows content in Mannerist works.⁴ Both of these artists did distort the form of the staircases used as backgrounds in High Renaissance works, but with purpose and reason towards the total statement of their work. By explaining the artistic theories behind these spiral staircases and the content they were intended to convey, this discussion will place these forms in their proper historical context.

Mannerist artists did transform the style of the High Renaissance by manipulating forms. Pontormo’s narrow, surreal staircase in *Joseph in Egypt* turns the wide, stable staircase of Raphael’s *School of Athens* (Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican

Palace, Rome, 1511, Figure 3) almost literally on its side. Pontormo’s stairs cut diagonally across the middle of the picture, seeming to hang in mid-air but for the few supports which connect them to the building they mount. Most High Renaissance artists used stairs to create order, symmetry, and balance in their works. Pontormo, however, emphasized the staircase with its precarious position and twisting form, thereby drawing attention to an object normally relegated to the background.

The stairs in Salviati’s *Bathsheba Goes to David* exemplify how important twisting forms remained throughout the Mannerist period and the extreme degree to which the serpentine line was taken. The staircase dominates the work, and rather than being a straight spiral, the staircase now has an even more fanciful backwards “S”-shaped curve. The sharpest curve visible to us in the stairs completely frames the middle figure of Bathsheba. The figure of Bathsheba closest to the viewer stands on a small set of stairs that are parallel with the picture plane: these stairs seem to push her out and into the space of the viewer. The third figure of Bathsheba stands at the top of the stairs, with only empty space below her, which heightens the precariousness of her position. Salviati has completely integrated the shape of the staircase and the figures in his work. The twisting, serpentine form not only gives the work an elegant, polished look, but also emphasizes each figure.

The convolution of forms, in fact, defines Mannerism for many scholars. Craig Smyth lists the use of unmotivated, contorted poses as a major convention of the style.⁴ *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, 1583, Figure 4) by Giovanni Bologna demonstrates the *figura serpentinata*, or serpentine figure, so prevalent in Mannerist art. Just as Giovanni coiled the three figures in his sculpture in a search for beautiful forms and a show of virtuosity, Pontormo and Salviati twisted their staircases, for precisely the same reasons.

The spiraling forms of Pontormo and Salviati’s stairs rep-

¹ Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1987) 580.

² Hartt 580.

³ Arnold Hauser, speaking of *Joseph in Egypt* says that “the most remarkable of the strange details of this architecture is the flight of steps ascending steeply into the air with no railings or support.” Arnold Hauser, *Manner-*

ism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1965) 186.

⁴ Edward Olzewsky and I discussed this idea at the Cleveland Symposium on March 4, 2000, in relationship to some of his own research. The idea that “content determines form” in Mannerism was first suggested by him.

⁴ Craig Smyth, *Mannerism and Maniera* (Vienna: IRSA, 1992) 47.

resent philosophical ideas of their day. The concept that a serpentine line has superior capabilities to convey movement has its roots in Neoplatonic theory. Plato and many other philosophers said that fire “is the most active of the elements,” and that the flame “is the most apt of all forms to movement.”⁵ Since heat constantly rises, the flame with its serpentine shape expressed movement and energy for these philosophers.

Ideas on the beauty of a turning human form had their origin in the work of the artists of the High Renaissance. Artists, such as Michelangelo and Leonardo, took up the Neoplatonic idea about the flame and translated this concept into the world of art to mean that figures which follow a serpentine line evoke the greatest movement. The first time the term *figura serpentinata* was used in reference to sixteenth-century art in Italy was in G. P. Lomazzo’s discussion of Michelangelo’s ideas on art in his book *Trattato dell’Arte della Pittura* published in 1584.⁶

Michelangelo once gave this advice to his pupil Marco da Siena, that one should always make the figure pyramidal, serpentine, and multiplied by one, two or three. And in this precept, it seems to me, is contained the secret of painting, for a figure has its highest grace and eloquence when it is seen in movement—what the painters call the *Furia della figura*. And to represent it thus there is no better form than that of a flame, because it is the most mobile of all forms and is conical. If a figure has this form it will be very beautiful... The painter should combine this pyramidal form with the *Serpentinata*, like the twisting of a live snake in motion, which is also the form of a waving flame... The figure should resemble the letter S... And this applies not only to the whole figure, but also to its parts... The figure will not appear graceful unless it has this serpentine form, as Michelangelo called it.⁷

Michelangelo’s figure of *Jonah* (Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Rome, 1512, Figure 5) demonstrates his interest in twisting figures. The ability of an artist to create living, moving figures raises him to the rank of God, who created the first living human forms.⁸ The serpentine form, then, was only a means to an end, that of giving movement and life to the representation of human forms, and in Pontormo’s and Salviati’s

cases, even architectural forms.

The stairs, however, do not serve Pontormo and Salviati in a purely aesthetic function. This form also adds to the viewer’s understanding of the narrative represented in the work. In both Pontormo and Salviati’s works, the stairs help to convey information about time. A painting is limited to having only one, unmoving existence. However, by using a serpentine form these two artists were able to add a temporal element to an atemporal medium.

In order to discuss the part the stairs play in separating different periods of time in *Joseph in Egypt*, one must decide what event Pontormo portrayed in the left foreground. One sees Joseph talking urgently with the Pharaoh in the front left corner, while in the background on the right, one sees Joseph’s father dying. The stairs divide these two different periods of time, leading one to believe the difference between them must be significant. Two common interpretations of the scene in the left foreground inform the viewer with regard to which half of the painting shows the earlier event.

One interpretation of this group in the left foreground is that Joseph is presenting his father to the Pharaoh, which would make this earlier than the deathbed scene in the right background.⁹ Joseph led his father up the few steps to meet Pharaoh, and now his son seems to be leading him up the stairs. The Joseph who climbs the spiraling stairs, looks back over his shoulder, at himself as a young man, standing with his father. This, however, seems the weaker of the two possible interpretations of the foreground.

Another interpretation of the group in the lower left is that Joseph in purple, his sister in pink, and his brother in blue are asking Pharaoh for permission to bury their father in Canaan.¹⁰ This would, of course, be after the scene of Jacob dying in his bed on the right side of the painting. The latter idea makes more sense, because none of the figures with Joseph in the left foreground actually look like his father. However, the older woman in pink and white standing behind Joseph in the left foreground does resemble the woman leaning over Jacob on his deathbed and the bald man in blue in the front resembles one of those gathered around the deathbed in the upper right, making these figures Joseph’s siblings.¹¹ As support for this second interpretation, rather than the presentation of Jacob to Pharaoh, is the fact that none of the panels, of the cycle of which *Joseph in Egypt* was a part, repeats a scene from another work in the program and Granacci composed a panel called *Joseph Introduces His Father to Pharaoh* (Uffizi,

⁵ David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1981) 413.

⁶ David Summers, “*Maniera* and Movement: The *Figure Serpentinata*,” *Readings in Italian Mannerism*, ed. Liana Cheney (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) 273. According to Summers, though Lomazzo published his book twenty years after Michelangelo’s death, “few writers have found it possible to reject the notion of the *figura serpentinata* as Michelangelo’s, since it seems to correspond precisely to such works as the *Victory*, in which not only *contrapposto* but continuous spiral movement were explored with a clarity and consistency that argues for the conscious application of theoretical principles.”

⁷ John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967) 81.

⁸ Summers, *Michelangelo* 14.

⁹ Allan Braham, *Italian Paintings of the Sixteenth Century* (Toronto: Williams Collins Sons, 1985) 62.

¹⁰ Peter Lynch, “Patriarchy and Narrative: The Borgherini chamber decorations,” *diss.*, Yale U, 1992, 148.

¹¹ Lynch 147.

Florence, c. 1515-17).¹² The scene in the left foreground simply makes more sense as Joseph and his siblings asking for permission to take their father's body back to their homeland. This would make the stairs a separation between a time when Jacob was alive and after he had departed this world, a very significant temporal difference. This division of space and time by the stairs adds to the viewer's understanding of the narrative and the theme of the work.

The stairs also add a philosophical dimension—about the passage of time and its cyclical nature. Joseph and his two sons who climb the spiral staircase seem to represent the cyclical nature of families.¹³ Joseph climbs to be at the deathbed of his father, with his two sons, who will, then, in turn, outlive their own father. The emphasis on the different generations of the family, represented by Jacob, Joseph, and Joseph's two sons, the continuation of the family with Jacob's act of blessing Joseph's second child, and finally the scene of the death of Jacob, bring forth the notion of the continually revolving nature of families. Jacob's wife, Asenath, makes one of her two appearances in the entire cycle, which consisted of fourteen works, at the top of the stairs. She embraces her son as he climbs to meet her. Pontormo's choosing to represent the mother of Joseph's children on the stairs underlines this section of the painting as symbolic of family.

Pontormo was also aware that his patron, Salvi di Francesco di Salvi Borgherini, was of an age where the continuation of his family reputation and name was utmost in his mind, since he was seventy-nine years old when the work was commissioned in 1515.¹⁴ The scenes of the imminent death of the father, the next two generations climbing the stairs, and the request for burying the father would all have been very meaningful to the elderly Salvi. As one generation passes, another rises to take its place, and history repeats itself. The form of a spiral does the same thing; it repeats itself. The serpentine form of the steps, not only allows for visual clarity in the composition, but also makes a philosophical comment on the nature of time and the life cycle.

These images about the cyclical natures of families would have had special resonance in their intended context; Borgherini commissioned this work for the bedchamber of

his son and his new wife. The painting of *Joseph in Egypt* would have served as a constant reminder to the newlyweds to continue the cycle of generations by raising their own children. The spiraling stairs symbolically convey the message that every family must experience the passing of one generation so that another can rise to take its place.

Another figure in the painting also serves to underline Pontormo's interest in "the sequence of generations."¹⁵ On the bottom step of Pharaoh's palace in the left foreground, sits Angelo Bronzino, a beloved pupil of Pontormo. Pontormo must have chosen to include Bronzino as a symbol of the next generation of artists. The younger artist is shown in contemporary dress and so points to Pontormo's own period. Pontormo realizes that he, too, is a part of this cycle of replacement that time and death make inevitable. The spiraling form of the stairs gives visual expression to the idea of the cyclical nature of time, a theme which Pontormo carried out even in the smaller details of his painting.

Salviati's winding staircase in *Bathsheba Goes to David* helps one to further understand Mannerist artists' reasons for distorting forms. Anyone who sees Pontormo's work and then Salviati's work can see the connection between the two staircases. The twist of Salviati's staircase, however, is even more dramatic than that of Pontormo. It follows an "S"-curve of Salviati's own invention.

Knowing the audience for which this fresco was intended helps to place the work in its proper historical context. *Bathsheba Goes to David*, part of the fresco series on the life of David that Salviati completed, decorated the *sala grande* in Cardinal Giovanni Ricci's palace, located on the Via Giulia, "the most fashionable street in Rome" during the High Renaissance.¹⁶ Ricci used the room as a place to receive guests; therefore, it had a very public role.¹⁷ Jan de Jong, in fact, purports that the reason Ricci chose Salviati, a well-known artist, to decorate this official room was "as a way to show off and to gain social prestige."¹⁸ *Bathsheba Goes to David* would have been seen by almost all of the visitors to the home of Cardinal Ricci. The fresco, would convey a message to the many prominent people who visited the churchman.

Salviati's stairs truly have a serpentine shape, which re-

¹² Lynch 148.

¹³ This idea about the cyclical nature of revolving stairs and of the process of a child growing to manhood, becoming a father and having his own child occurred to me upon contemplating the meaning of the stairs in Pontormo's work on Joseph. After reading about Pontormo's fresco called *Vertumnus and Pomona* and the word at the bottom of the fresco "GLOVIS", which reads "SI VOLG(E)" backwards or "it revolves," my thesis seemed to have support from the artist's other works. "It revolves" referred to the constant rule of the Medici over time. The fresco of *Vertumnus and Pomona* dates from 1519 to 1521, which means it was done almost immediately after the panel about Joseph's family. The information about the fresco comes from Doris Krystof, *Jacopo Carrucci, known as Pontormo* (Köln: Konemann, 1998) 78.

¹⁴ Lynch 211.

¹⁵ Krystof 37.

¹⁶ "The Palazzo Sacchetti," *The Connoisseur* 148.597 (1961): 181. The room is sometimes now referred to as *Salone del Mappamondo*, due to two large seventeenth-century globes which now stand in the room.

¹⁷ Jan L. de Jong, "An Important Patron and an Unknown Artist: Giovanni Ricci, Ponso Jacquo, and the Decoration of the Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti in Rome," *The Art Bulletin* 73.4 (1992): 135. Jan De Jong mentions that Hewett and Andres call the *sala grande* the winter audience room, without citing their source. However, De Jong points out that since the room is located on the northeastern corner of the building this would have been a poor choice in that season.

¹⁸ De Jong 136. The artists who did the other private rooms in the palace were decidedly less well-known. Jan de Jong says we should perhaps "assume that Ponso (Jacquo) spent some time assisting Salviati in painting the *sala grande*." De Jong 137. However, no other authors even suggest this and De Jong's only evidence for such a statement is that some of the figures in

lates to the message of the fresco. The serpent evokes ideas of sin and evil, due to its role in the story of Adam and Eve. Bathsheba climbs the serpentine stairs to commit the sin of adultery with David. One glimpses this sinful act through the window of the tower. The content of the fresco helped to determine the snake-like form of the stairs. Salviati and Ricci had special reason to emphasize the idea of sin with the serpentine stairs due to the debates current at the time.

“Sin” formed the core of one of the arguments during the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. The Catholics held to the belief that in order for one’s sins to be absolved, a person needed to complete three actions: contrition, confession, and satisfaction, while Protestants thought contrition and faith alone were enough to receive forgiveness from God.¹⁹ Church theologians battled over sin and forgiveness; such discussions were topical. Christian scholars often scrutinized the biblical figure of David, as he sinned against God and then received forgiveness. The serpentine form of the stairs which supports Bathsheba’s sinful ascent resonates strongly with the issues of the artist’s own day. Salviati’s choice of a snake-like staircase

in conjunction with the subject matter of the work supports a reading of the serpentine form as intended to evoke notions of sin, rather than a mere arbitrary distortion.

Traditionally, scholars have conceived of Mannerism as strange, bizarre, or abnormal. Mannerist art does include passages with forms which seem unusual to a modern-day viewer. However, when one contextualizes these works in terms of sixteenth-century Neoplatonic theories and the resulting love of serpentine forms, the spiraling staircases seem appropriate. Also in view of the narratives these works depict and the settings for which they were destined, the unusual forms in them speak not of mere artificiality, but of communication on the part of the artist through even the smallest details. Pontormo’s stairs lead the viewer to contemplate the cyclical nature of families and Salviati’s staircase reminds the viewer how all humans can fall into sin. The study of these staircases shows that for Mannerist artists, content determined form.

University of Alabama at Birmingham

the David series resemble some of those in the rooms done by Ponsio, which could be explained merely by the influence of Salviati.

Francesco Salviati’s Fresco Cycle of the Life of King David for the Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti in Rome within Its Cultural Context,” thesis, U of California, Riverside, 1994, 26.

¹⁹ Allegra Fortunati, “David as Penitent, David as Pope: An Interpretation of



Figure 1. Jacopo Pontormo, *Joseph in Egypt*, c. 1518, oil on wood, 96 x 109 cm, National Gallery, London. Printed with permission of the National Gallery, London.

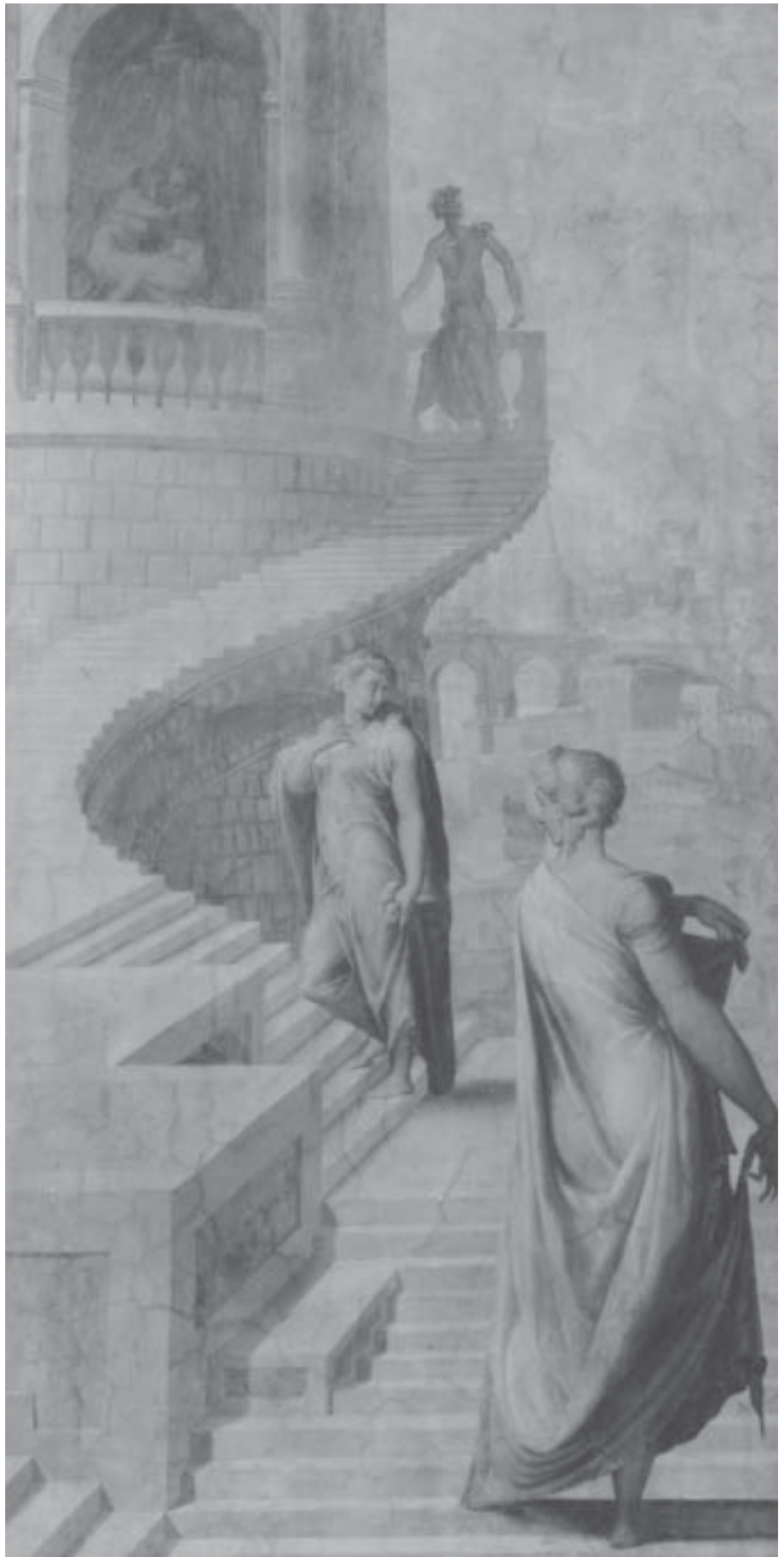


Figure 2. Francesco Salviati, *Story of David [Bathsheba Goes to David]*, fresco, c. 1552, Palazzo Ricci-Sacchetti, Rome. Printed with permission from Scala/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 3. Raphael, *School of Athens*, 1511, fresco, c. 19' x 27', Stanze di Raffaello, Vatican Palace, Vatican State, Rome. Printed with permission from Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 4. Giovanni Bologna, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1583, marble, c. 13' 6", Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence. Printed with permission from Alinari/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 5. Michelangelo, *The Prophet Jonah*, 1512, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Vatican Palace, Vatican State, Rome. Printed with permission from Alinari/Art Resource, NY.