A Capital, A Horse, and A Pair of Dangling Feet: Aha Moments in Western Art History and Beyond

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Abstract: This essay explores three "aha moments" encountered during the preparation and teaching of a Western art history course—instances of accidental discovery that led to deeper reflection and unexpected connections. The first centers on the human-headed capitals in the *Gospel Book of Otto III*, examining how these peculiar architectural details fuse classical authority with Christian sanctity while reflecting the Ottonian ambition to revive the Roman Empire. The second investigates Paolo Uccello's *Equestrian Monument to Sir John Hawkwood*, where the horse's anatomically impossible gait reveals the early Renaissance tension between scientific perspective and artistic vision, and considers Andrea del Castagno's subsequent homage through deliberate repetition of the "error." The third uncovers the dangling feet in the upper-left corner of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, a detail long overlooked that opens discussions of visual balance, spatial complexity, and the painter's poignant farewell to worldly pleasures amid declining health. Through these three case studies, the essay argues that attentive observation—opening eyes rather than loosening tongues—reveals art history as a living dialogue across centuries, where accidents, errors, and overlooked details often carry the most profound human emotions and creative insights.

Keywords: Western art history; Ottonian art; Renaissance perspective; Paolo Uccello; Manet; visual discovery; artistic innovation

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1. Introduction

The history of art carries the weight of human emotions. Indeed, art is the history of human emotion itself. To narrate art history is, therefore, a process of experiencing and sharing these very feelings.

Different works bring vastly different emotional experiences to the viewer. Consider the soul-piercing gaze

in Rembrandt's self-portraits, the suffering and tragic grandeur in Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, or the fervent passion and subtle undercurrent of anxiety in Van Gogh's *Lilacs*. Mark Rothko frankly admitted that his works were expressions of fundamental human emotions: "I'm not an abstractionist… I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions." (Rodman, 1957) Other artists, however, hoped their works would bring light-hearted and joyful feelings to the audience, as seen in the works of Renoir and Matisse. For Renoir, the artist's duty was to create beauty, providing a respite from life's hardships: "Why shouldn't art be pretty? There are enough unpleasant things in the world."(Renoir, J., 1962) In Matisse's view, art should be "a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair that provides relaxation from physical fatigue." (Matisse, 1908)

When it comes to light-heartedness and joyfulness, some artworks conjure these feelings up almost by accident. During my own preparation and teaching of a Western art history course, I have encountered many unexpected and enlightening moments, most of which stemmed from accidental discoveries. In the process of further research, more unexpected findings, deeper reflections, and new connections emerged. This article selects three accidentally discovered details to document the subsequent associations and findings. It is intended more as a progress report, for there is often no definite answer when it comes to artistic exploration.

2. Otto III and Man-headed Capitals

If not for an illuminated manuscript, the name of Otto III might not have been significant in the history of Western art. Look at *Otto III Enthroned* from the *Gospel Book of Otto III* (figure 1, left), what captures your attention first? Is it the vibrant and balanced colors, or the flattened and multi-perspective composition? Or, you are simply impressed by the in-the-face presence of the central figure: Otto III. Towering, even sitting, over the clergymen and barons at his sides, the solemn-looking pale-faced heavy-crowned young emperor (still a teenager then) holds a scepter in his right hand and a cross-inscribed golden orb in his left, both representing his universal authority. The four equally-solemn-looking men pay their gaze salute, their eyes reminding us of those of the 5,000-years-old Sumerian limestone statuettes of worshippers gazing at their gods (figure 1, upper right). If we observe a little more closely, we may notice the bird (an eagle?) that perches on the scepter and the two animal heads (lions?) and paws sticking out from Otto's throne, each observant and majestic in its own way.

If you stop looking now and switch your attention to the caption beside the image and start lamenting over the premature death of this ambitious young man and the collapse of his grand blueprint for the revival of the Roman Empire (exactly what I did the first time seeing this image), you may have missed some very unusual element in the picture—our first "aha" moment—the reddish-golden columns supporting the canopy behind Otto III (who is sure to crack his head if he stands up). These are not the common composite type, but are topped by two pairs of adorably clueless human heads supported by plant leaves, their square jawlines reminding us of the influential Roman emperor—Constantine (figure 1, lower right).

Let us start from the leaves supporting the heads. They might be a simplified form of acanthus leaves—a typical feature of the Corinthian capital, an ornate form of column capital invented during the second half of the fifth century BC, by the sculptor Kallimachos, as recorded by Vitruvius in *De Architectura*: The story takes

Figure 1 Left: *Otto III Enthroned*, folio 24 recto of the *Gospel Book of Otto III*, 997–1000; Middle: Otto II with the Vassal States Germania, Francia, Italia, and Alemania, ca. 985. Upper-right: Sumerian Statuettes with big blue eyes, ca. 2900–2300 B. C. E; Lower-right: Portrait of Constantine from the Basilica Nova, Rome, ca. 315–330 C. E.

place in the ancient Greek city-state of Corinth. A young local girl fell ill and passed away. Her nurse gathered the girl's cherished belongings into a basket and brought it to her tomb as an offering. To preserve the basket, the nurse covered it with a tile. The basket happened to be placed atop the root of a wild acanthus plant. When spring arrived, the acanthus leaves and stems grew from beneath the basket, spreading along its edges. Blocked by the tile, the leaves were forced to curl outward, forming elegant scroll-like shapes. The sculptor Kallimachos (hailed as the "master of perfection"), who happened to be passing by, was deeply inspired by this beautiful fusion of nature and human artifice. Taking this scene as his prototype, he designed a new type of capital adorned with acanthus leaves and featuring scrolls at its four corners, first applying it in the city of Corinth, hence the name "Corinthian."

The Corinthian capital became especially popular during Hellenistic and Roman times. Some iconic ancient Roman buildings, for example the Pantheon, the Temple of Jupiter, etc. prominently featured the Corinthian order to convey grandeur and opulence. The Romans further developed the Corinthian order into the Composite order (combining Ionic scrolls with Corinthian acanthus leaves), as seen in the Colosseum and the Arch of Titus. Quite by coincidence, I noticed an image (figure 1, middle) featuring Otto II, father of Otto III. Here the Holy Roman emperor is seen sitting beneath a canopy supported exactly by standard Corinthian columns.

Why did the standard Corinthian capitals turn into human heads a decade or two later, and exactly who do these heads represent? This seemingly simple question has led me on a search that has yet to yield results. The first part of the question seems easier to answer. We know that the primary focus of Otto II's reign was consolidating imperial power in Italy, countering Byzantine and southern Islamic forces. His art emphasized imperial unity and Roman heritage. Classical capitals served this image perfectly. However, Otto III's ideal was to recreate the glory and power of the ancient Roman Empire in a universal Christian state governed from Rome, in which the pope would be subordinate to the emperor in religious as well as in secular affairs. Consequently, his art had to transcend mere classical revivalism, necessitating the invention of a new visual language that fused classical authority with Christian sanctity. (Mayr-Harting, 1999) The human-headed capitals must be the product of this ambitious creation.

Exactly who do these back-to-back heads represent? This is the tougher part, as no definite answer is found

yet. The association with Constantine is not farfetched, as he was the first Roman emperor to convert to and support Christianity, and to Otto III he symbolized the ideal model of the unity of church and state. Another role model of Otto III's was Justinian, the 6th-century Eastern Roman (Byzantine) emperor who reclaimed parts of the former Western Roman territories and built the Hagia Sophia. Theophanu, Otto III's mother, was a Byzantine princess, and it is said that Otto III was prouder of his Constantinopolitan than his German roots. (Kleiner, 2010) However, Constantine and Justinian were both secular leaders, unfitting for the spiritual and sacred function that these pillars were meant to perform.

More likely candidates are biblical figures, the "apostles and prophets" who are considered the foundation of God's household (Ephesians, 2: 19 – 22). To be specific, they might be James, Peter and John, who are recognized as "the pillars of the church" (Galatians, 2: 9). However, given the even number—two heads for each capital, it is also quite likely that they represent the four Christian evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

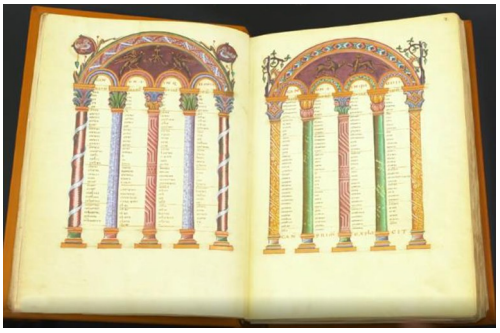

Figure 2 Screenshot of first page of the canon table in *Gospel Book of Otto III*

A later discovery proves this later estimation more likely. A video (created by Ziereis Facsimiles) displays a number of illustrated pages from a facsimile of the *Gospel Book of Otto III*. On the first page of the canon table (a system of dividing the four Gospels used in the Middle Ages) I find that each of the middle column supporting the round-headed frame has exactly the same human heads between a golden abacus and a maroon-colored shaft (figure 2). Its central position and the choice of colors (gold representing God, truth and divine revelation; maroon symbolizing solemn authority and weighty sacrifice) suggest the significance of the human-headed column, which is reconfirmed in the most important page *Otto III Enthroned*. This cleverly binds the supreme authority of the empire with the perfect harmony of the Gospels. As the patron, Otto III becomes associated with the most core doctrines through this highest grade of visual symbolism. Noticeably, in the central page the color of the shaft is different—more gold is used, possibly for visual harmony, as the abacus and shaft echo the color of the cross-inscribed orb in Otto's left hand, of the scepter in his right, and the Bible held by the clergyman at the front. If we look down for more gold, we will notice a real oddity—the lower position of the golden stylobates suggest that the columns are actually in front of the clergy and the barons, otherwise all these people would be floating in the air!

Only when I started to pay attention to Otto's artist's choice of colors had I noticed the floating quality of the central figures, which renders this image even more interesting. Having analyzed so far the significance of the accidentally-discovered human-headed capitals, I must admit that what *Otto III Enthroned* attracts me most, in

essence, is still the earnest cluelessness of the whole image—exactly like a page out of a whimsical children's picture book.

3. Uccello's Horse, and How It Performs a Miracle

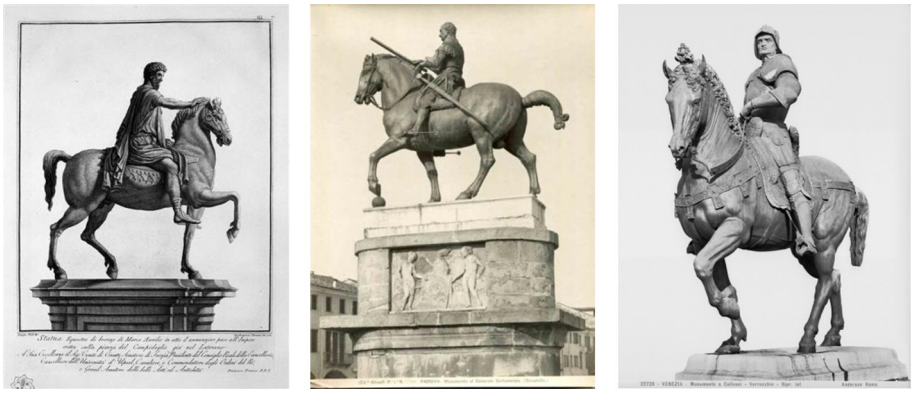

Figure 3 Left: Equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius portrayed by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, ca. 175 C. E.; Middle: Monument to general Gattamelata by Donatello, ca. 1445–1450; Right: Monument of Bartolomeo Colleoni by Andrea del Verrocchio, ca. 1483–1488.

We know that Otto III (reigned 996—1002) dreamed to revive the glory of the ancient Roman Empire. He traveled to Italy multiple times during his reign and resided there for extended periods. During his intermittent years of residence in Rome, he must have seen the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius (figure 3, left). This statue is the only large-scale ancient bronze equestrian statue to survive to the present day, primarily because during the Middle Ages it was mistakenly believed to be a statue of Emperor Constantine (the first Christian emperor), thus escaping being melted down. (It remains a mystery how the meditative features of Marcus Aurelius could be mistaken as those of the square-jawed Constantine.) During the Renaissance, its classical authority and technical achievement made it an important object of study for artists. Donatello's Equestrian Statue of Gattamelata (figure 3, middle) was the first large bronze equestrian statue of the Renaissance and was clearly inspired by this classical prototype.

Marcus Aurelius's and Gattamelata's statues are included here for visual reference (please take a close look at the horses' legs). The protagonist of our second "aha" moment is Donatello's friend, Paolo Uccello (1397—1475), and his fresco *Equestrian Monument to Sir John Hawkwood*, still preserved in the Florence Cathedral (figure 4, left). This fresco predates Donatello's Gattamelata by nearly a decade and influenced Donatello's work, as well as the equestrian statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni (figure 3 right) by Andrea del Verrocchio, who unfortunately lost his life while working on the statue.

Paolo Uccello was an early Renaissance "tech geek," utterly obsessed with the emerging technique of linear perspective. According to Giorgio Vasari, "Paolo Uccello would have been the most delightful and inventive genius in the history of painting from Giotto's day to the present, if he had spent as much time working on human figures and animals as he lost on problems of perspective…" Interestingly, his nickname "Uccello" means "bird" in Italian, as he loved to depict animals. The subject of the fresco, Sir John Hawkwood, was a legendary

Figure 4 Left: Paolo Uccello: *Equestrian Statue of John Hawkwood*, 1436, fresco, 820 x 514 cm, Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence: Right: Andrea del Castagno: *Equestrian Monument to Niccolo da Tolentino*, fresco, 1456

English mercenary captain in the service of Florence. To commemorate him, the Florentine authorities commissioned Uccello to create a monumental fresco inside the cathedral with a simulated bronze effect. This achieved the commemorative purpose while saving costs, as bronze equestrian statues were extremely expensive. Uccello employed perspective techniques like *di sotto in sù* (foreshortening viewed from below), attempting to give the 8-meter-high fresco a realistic, three-dimensional, protruding effect when viewed from below by spectators. The fresco has two viewpoints: the horse and rider are painted as if on level with the spectator, and the cenotaph is seen as if from below.

Uccello's contemporaries were astounded by the convincing form in which he painted rider and horse. (Buchholz et al., 130) Sir Hawkwood sits haughtily on horseback. The horse is glossy as if carved from marble, its proportions perfect, and the red accessories on it are dignified and elegant. Yet, in truth, this horse could not stand at all. While reading Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, I came across a shocking discovery: "This work was and is still considered to be a most beautiful painting of this type, and if Paolo had not represented the horse as moving his legs on only one side—something horses cannot naturally do, since they would fall—this work would have been perfect, because the proportions of that horse, which is huge, are quite beautiful." It turns out that, due to his excessive focus on geometric perspective calculations, Uccello neglected the realistic anatomical structure of a horse, resulting in unnatural leg movement that makes the horse appear to be moving both legs on the same side simultaneously. The walk of a horse is a steady, four-beat gait. The sequence of hoof falls is generally: left hind → left fore → right hind → right fore. At any given moment, a horse keeps at least two or three feet on the ground; it never lifts both legs on the same side (left or right) off the ground and swings them forward completely simultaneously. (Evans et al., 2020) In class, I asked students to observe the fresco carefully and see if there is any problem, and one student did point out the horse's legs, which greatly enchanted the class.

However, as Vasari says, Uccello's work does have a timeless beauty to it. Despite its flaws, it represents

the passionate, somewhat clumsy, yet utterly sincere exploration characteristic of the early transformative phase of the Renaissance. After Uccello, perspective became a tool mastered by painters, no longer requiring the extreme and solitary exploration that Uccello undertook. However, the story does not end here. While searching for a clearer version of Uccello's fresco, I noticed another, similarly massive equestrian fresco with a very similar composition right next to it, seldom mentioned in art survey books. This is Andrea del Castagno's *Equestrian Monument to Niccolò da Tolentino* (figure 4, right), painted in 1456. This fresco was created 20 years after Uccello's. In those two decades, Uccello's unscientific treatment of the horse's legs must have been well-known in Florentine art circles. Donatello's equestrian monument to General Gattamelata, finished about 10 years later, clearly demonstrates this awareness. Did Castagno seize his opportunity to correct Uccello's mistake?

The answer is: No. Uccello's horse lifts its right legs together, while Castagno's horse lifts its left legs together!

In Renaissance Florence, there was fierce competition among artists, but also profound study and dialogue with predecessors. In my view, Castagno having his horse inherit the same-side leg lift serves as an homage-imitation to Uccello rather than a corrective-surpassing. He did not choose to say, "You painted it wrong, let me show you the right way," but instead used a similar form to pay tribute to Uccello. Although the contract indeed stipulated that Castagno's fresco was to be painted in "the same manner and form" as that of the Hawkwood (OPALife 2022), regarding the handling of details, the artist could not have been without his own choices. To me, Castagno's choice is deeply moving. Perhaps the resonance of the two works also reveals a deeper possibility: artists of that era may have shared an unspoken understanding that "art can transcend absolute nature." Castagno might have realized that the "awkwardness" in Uccello's painting was precisely what made it uniquely iconic. Therefore, he chose to inherit this right to artistic distortion and to defend artistic freedom. Together, they seem to tell the viewer: Here, concept and beauty can take precedence over the mere replication of nature.

In fact, although Uccello was fascinated by perspective, he was not interested in using it simply for realism. Many of his works have a distinct personal style where the science of perspective serves more for decoration than faithful reproduction. For example, in the London panel of *The Battle of San Romano* (figure 5, left), a series of three panel paintings commemorating the 1432 Florentine victory over Siena, Uccello's pioneering use of linear perspective is vividly combined with decorative color and stylized forms to create a dynamic, almost theatrical representation of medieval combat. The composition is dense with lances, armored knights, and fallen soldiers, carefully arranged to emphasize perspectival depth. In *St. George and the Dragon* (figure 5, right),

Figure 5 Left: Paolo Uccello *The Battle of San Romano*, ca. 1438–40;
Right: *St. George and the Dragon*. ca. 1456

Uccello depicted the dramatic battle in the form of a fairytale scene. The tender figure of the King's daughter is painted according to ideals of elegant beauty of the International Gothic style. The horse carrying St. George, which gallops diagonally into the picture, is painted with the newly discovered central perspective. (Buchholz et al., 130) The white horses in these paintings all raise their fore legs, something a natural horse can do, but they still look more fantastic than real. Perhaps that is why Uccello's works have an enduring charm.

4. Manet's Farewell, and the Dangling Feet

Uccello the Florentine may seem to have little to do with the Parisian Édouard Manet, except that a few of Uccello's works, including a panel of *The Battle of San Romano*, are in the Louvre, where Manet frequented in his youthful days (1850s) to copy the works of the old masters. However, Uccello was not among Manet's favorite painters. Manet's preferences lay elsewhere: with the Venetian School (Titian and Veronese), the Spaniards (Velázquez and Goya), the Dutch (Frans Hals and Rembrandt), and his fellow Frenchmen Watteau and Chardin (Proust, 1913). A stronger link might be found in Delacroix, whom Manet much admired, who wrote in his journal about the Louvre panel of *Battle of San Romano* that it "has a ferocity and a grandeur that are astonishing", though his opinion of the Louvre panel was not entirely positive, as he felt that Uccello was "preoccupied with difficulties to overcome, and with the desire to display his knowledge, to the detriment of the ensemble." To Delacroix, Uccello's works and techniques must have looked outdated, compared to the more recent Baroque grandeur and Dutch super realism. However, to the postmodern viewer, many of Uccello's supernatural works still appear refreshingly modern. His work has a childlike wonder that sets it apart from—and, in some ways, above—that of many later masters.

Figure 6 Édouard Manet, *The Races at Longchamp*, 1866

Despite their vastly different styles and eras, Uccello and Manet share the DNA of Modernity. They both challenged the conventions of their time and were controversial for their innovative works. Uccello managed to combine the newly discovered linear perspective with his unique vision and imagination. By comparison, Manet sacrificed academic visual illusion for the sake of "painterly truth"—acknowledging the canvas as a flat surface. With Uccello's horses in mind, let us have a look at Manet's early representative work, *The Races at Longchamp* (figure 6), considered his homage to the tradition of horse painting. Manet drastically simplified the details, with the horses and jockeys almost reduced to swiftly passing colored silhouettes. The background crowd is rendered as shimmering patches of color, while the horses rush toward the viewer, leaving no time for close examination. Compared to Uccello's elegantly decorative horses, Manet's horses are modern, momentary, and serve as symbols of visual impressions.

Our third "aha" moment appears in Manet's painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (figure 7, right), which is widely recognized as Manet's most important later work. In this all-too-familiar painting, a barmaid stands behind the counter at the Folies-Bergère (a variety show venue) in Paris, with a mirror behind her reflecting the bustling entertainment scene, creating a contrast with her calm and detached expression.

Figure 7 Left: Édouard Manet, Study for *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882;
Right: Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882;
Below: Detail: a trapeze artist who is performing above the restaurant's patrons

Aspects of this painting that have garnered much attention include its theme of modernity (depicting emerging Parisian entertainment venues and capturing the glamour and alienation of 19th-century urban life); visual contradictions and mirror paradoxes (logical inconsistencies between the mirror's reflection and the realistic perspective); the barmaid's expression (appearing detached amidst the hustle and bustle, with vacant eyes); and still-life-like details (the exquisite and vivid bottles, roses, oranges, and other items on the counter contrast with the blurred background, showcasing Manet's sensitivity to texture and color).

However, some factors are often overlooked, such as Manet's health condition while creating this painting. By the time he painted it, Manet was already in the tertiary stage of syphilis, suffering from complications like rheumatic pain and ataxia, which limited his mobility. He had less than a year left to live. Most of his work was completed in his studio, with scenes constructed based on sketches, memory, and posed models, rather than on-site painting. His illness also affected his fine brushwork, but conversely strengthened his use of broad, summary techniques and hazy atmosphere. The painting's colors are bright, yet they conceal the melancholy of life's final chapter. To me, this painting seems more like Manet bidding farewell to the world as he knew it. With his gaze and brushstrokes, he passed over everything familiar, softly saying goodbye.

Yet, I had overlooked an important detail. When I was sharing my feelings about this painting in my art

history class, a student raised her hand and asked, "How is it that there is a pair of feet in the upper-left corner of the painting?" I was stumped by the question because I hadn't noticed that corner before, for all those years since I first saw the painting decades before. What a surprise! I honestly replied that I didn't know and needed to look into it.

After searching post-class, I learned that the pair of feet in green shoes, located at the edge of the mirror's reflection in the upper left corner, actually belongs to an aerial acrobat (or a trapeze performer), hinting at the Folies-Bergère's hybrid nature as both a music hall and a circus venue. I also found a preliminary sketch for this painting, which did not yet include these feet, and the barmaid's reflection in the mirror was more realistic (figure 7, left).

There are various interpretations regarding these feet in green shoes. Some critics have discussed their visual and spatial functions. For instance, Anne Coffin Hanson suggested that Manet used fragmented imagery (like feet, blurred figures) to imply a sense of dynamism in the scene, rather than static realism (1977); T. J. Clark proposed that the suspended feet suggest the unreality of the space (1984). Other scholars view the feet as symbolizing the audience's voyeurism in entertainment settings. For example, Robert L. Herbert interpreted the painting as a microcosm of Paris's entertainment industry, with the suspended feet hinting at hidden desires and viewing relationships within the venue (1988). Scholars' opinions vary, and are inspiring in different ways.

In my view, from a compositional perspective, the suspended feet in green dancing shoes in the upper-left corner echo the green bottle in the lower-right corner of the painting, thus creating visual balance, besides adding spatial complexity and dynamism, as Hanson suggests. It is truly a stroke of genius. Considering Manet's declining health, the suspended feet in the painting, the dreamlike lighting, the barmaid's tranced expression, and all the surrounding glitz and glamour evoke thoughts of life's uncertainty and fleeting pleasures. Most importantly, this detail, which I had once overlooked, taught me that in teaching art history, attentive observation and personal experience must always come first. Here Gombrich's words drive home: "I want to be quite frank about this danger of half-knowledge and snobbery, for we are all apt to succumb to such temptations… I should like to help toopen eyes, not to loosen tongues. To talk cleverly about art is not very difficult, because the words critics use have been employed in so many different contexts that they have lost all precision. But to look at a picture with fresh eyes and to venture on a voyage of discovery into it is far more difficult but also a much more rewarding task." (Gombrich, 1995)

Although Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is generally regarded as the summation of his art, from the perspective of contemplation and quiet reflection, I believe that the series of still-life paintings of flowers in vases created by Manet in the final stage of his life (1882–1883, already partly paralyzed) represents the most moving chapter of his artistic career. These works employ free and unrestrained brushstrokes and a concise composition. The colors are bright and bold, with swift and spontaneous brushwork that even carries a sense of being "unfinished" (figure 8). The petals are rendered as loose patches of color, and the interplay of light and shadow is full of dynamism. These simple and pure works possess a power that strikes directly at the heart. They mark Manet's return to the essence of art at the end of his life—stripping away grand themes to explore the most fundamental elements of painting through the most ordinary (or extraordinary) subjects: light, color, and brushwork. "It is moving to look at these enchanting impressions of the loveliness of the natural world, given what we know of the advanced state of Manet's illness when he painted them. In April 1883 he had a leg

Figure 8 Left: *Flowers in a Crystal Vase*, c. 1882; Middle: *Vase of Lilacs and Roses*, 1883. This was the artist's second-to-last painting; Right: *Flowers in a Crystal Vase*, c. 1882

amputated; a few weeks later he died in considerable pain." (Feist, 2013) When one thinks of the pair of feet suspended in mid-air in *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, it is truly heartbreaking.

5. Conclusion

This essay originated from a recollection of the interesting, delightful, and eye-opening moments during the preparation and teaching of a Western Art History course. From numerous "aha" moments, three of the most impressive ones were selected: the man-headed capitals in the *Gospel Book of Otto III*, the impossible gait of the horse in Paolo Uccello's *Equestrian Monument of John Hawkwood*, and the dangling feet in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Through the process of reflection, material collection, and writing, even more details and connections were discovered: the double-headed capitals in the canon tables of the *Gospel Book of Otto III* and the floating quality of Otto III's subordinates; Castagno's imitation of Uccello's horse as an homage; Manet's horses; and the modernist trait he shared with Uccello—the same spirit of exploration and innovation. The joy of exploration and discovery knows no bounds. As Confucius says, "To know it is not as good as to love it, and to love it is not as good as to take delight in it."

When it comes to exploration and innovation, even the unknown artists of the Reichenau Island School who illustrated the *Gospel Book of Otto III*, though undoubtedly guided or constrained by doctrinal and symbolic systems, still found ways to express their creativity and emotions through their choice of colors, forms, and countless nuanced details that silently communicate with discerning viewers (remember the adorably clueless square-jawed faces planted in acanthus leaves?). This brings to mind the famous quote by John Ruskin: "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last." Indeed, art is by no means mere decoration; it speaks directly from the eyes to the heart. Whether in architecture, sculpture, painting, or nearly any human creation, art reflects the inner world of the creator and the collective spirit of the age in a way that is difficult to falsify. More importantly, it does not impose a single interpretation.

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