

33 Meters of Immortality: Cy Twombly's *Ceiling* for the Louvre

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Nel 2006 Cy Twombly fu invitato a decorare il soffitto della Salle des Bronzes del Louvre. L'ultima commissione di questo tipo al museo risaliva al 1953, quando Georges Braque dipinse i suoi *Oiseaux* per il soffitto della Salle Henri II. Completato nel 2010, *Ceiling (le Plafond)* si allontana dalla linea 'tremolante' dell'artista pur mantenendo altre caratteristiche del suo linguaggio pittorico. Twombly ha trattato il soffitto come un dipinto da cavalletto di dimensioni monumentali: una superficie che ha riempito con un campo blu quasi monocromatico, che evoca il cielo e richiama la volta della Cappella degli Scrovegni di Giotto. Semplici motivi geometrici definiscono i contorni del soffitto, mentre i nomi di sette scultori dell'antica Grecia invitano il visitatore a una passeggiata nella galleria. Questo articolo mostra come Twombly partecipi della lunga tradizione della pittura decorativa costruendo una forte relazione tra lo spazio, il contenuto e il contesto della stanza: un luogo in cui lo spettatore gioca un ruolo decisivo. Con un raro esempio di pittura monumentale del XXI secolo, realizzato laddove non ci si potrebbe aspettare di incontrare l'astrazione, Twombly ha fatto il proprio ingresso nel pantheon dei grandi artisti del Louvre, guadagnando così, come disse un critico, «33 metri di immortalità».

In 2006 Cy Twombly was chosen to decorate the ceiling of the Louvre's Salle des Bronzes. The latest ceiling commission at the museum dated back to 1953, when Georges Braque executed *Oiseaux* for the ceiling of Salle Henri II. Completed in 2010, *Ceiling (le Plafond)* departs from the artist's signature trembling line while retaining other characteristics of his pictorial language. Twombly treated the ceiling as an easel painting of monumental dimensions: a surface he filled with an almost monochromatic blue field, evoking the sky and recalling Giotto's Arena Chapel vault. Simple, geometric motifs trace the ceiling's contours, while inscriptions naming seven sculptors from ancient Greece invite the visitor for a walk around the gallery. This paper shows how Twombly participated in the long tradition of ceiling painting by building a strong connection between the space, content, and context of the room: a site in which the viewer plays a decisive role. With a rare example of monumental 21st century painting, sited where one might not expect to encounter abstraction, Twombly made his entrance into the Louvre's pantheon of great artists, gaining, as one critic put it, «33 meters of immortality».

Keywords: Cy Twombly, Musée du Louvre, Ceiling Painting, Greek Sculpture

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Cy Twombly in the Louvre

In 2006 Cy Twombly responded to the Louvre's invitation to decorate the ceiling of the Salle des Bronzes, the only ceiling of the museum that remained empty until then.¹ A few years earlier, the museum had established a new policy introducing contemporary art in its galleries. The French François Morellet and the German Anselm Kiefer were the two other artists who had intervened earlier in the museum's space, but Twombly was the first contemporary artist to decorate a ceiling after Braque's *Oiseaux* (Salle Henri II) installed in 1953.² He was also the first American to receive such an honor. The Louvre's invitation was not the first public commission for the artist in France. In 1988, he made a drawing for the curtain of Opéra Bastille in Paris.³ But, the *Ceiling* (*le Plafond*), as Twombly simply called it, installed in 2010, just a year before his passing away, carries special significance. It could be seen as a testament of Twombly's artistic heritage, well preserved in the pantheon of all great artists. Strangely enough, the *Plafond* remains less known to the wider public. Twombly's *Ceiling* is mostly treated as an event in his life and biography⁴ and very rarely commented on the literature.⁵

Nevertheless, the work presents great interest: thanks to it, the artist joins decorative painting's long tradition which has been established by the greatest artists of the Renaissance and Baroque period. The 16th and 17th century painters established this tradition through a relationship created among the depicted subject, the surface and the spectator. In Andrea Mantegna's *Camera degli sposi* the vault decoration could be considered as the first ceiling painting starting this tradition:⁶ the composition's oculus that seems to open into a blue sky creates a three-dimensional effect of the vault as if it occupied real space on the roof above. Another celebrated example would be Andrea Pozzo's *Glorification of Saint Ignatius*, 1691-1694, in Rome. The painter transforms the surface of the ceiling into a fictive architectural structure that opens to sky. Pozzo's treatment of perspective creates a third dimension that pierces the ceiling wall and deceives the viewer, even though one is aware of the flatness of its surface. Pozzo's composition makes sense if it is seen from below and from a certain

distance. This concern for the spectator and his point of view, an issue that raises for the first time in the Renaissance,⁷ establishes the viewer as an important factor into the equation created between the surface and the subject. Their interdependence forms the basis of the spatial construction of the ceiling. Their crucial role makes us wonder how Twombly responds to this dialog.

In the second half of the 20th and in 21st century it is very rare to find painters undertaking such commissions. Among the few that have accepted this challenge are Mark Chagall, who was invited to redesign the ceiling for the Opéra Garnier (1964), a project initiated in the hope of modernizing the old-fashioned Parisian opera house.⁸ A similar task was undertaken by Andre Masson with his ceiling for the Théâtre de l'Odéon (1965). Earlier than that, Fritz Fröhlich had created a ceiling painting, *The Virgin Surrounded by Choirs of Angels*, 1954-1957, for the Engelszell Abbey (Schärding, Upper Austria) in an abstract idiom. During the same year (1957), Schwetzingen Palace's theatre ceiling was painted by Carolus Vocke.⁹ After seven years of debate on its restoration, the abstract artist Hann Trier was also asked in 1972 to create a new ceiling for the Charlottenburg Palace's White Hall which was destroyed during the Second World War. He was chosen to replace it with a new creation that had however to maintain strong affiliations with the eighteenth-century destroyed ceiling.¹⁰ This successful experiment was followed by other ceiling commissions to contemporary artists in Germany¹¹ which had suffered severe damages after the war.¹²

In all of these commissions, each invitation to intervene in an older monument merging contemporary art with the building's (and the nation's) history reveals a certain political engagement. It is a political decision to support the arts and culture (as it was the case for Malraux), as well as to preserve/restore a part of the nation's history (as for the Charlottenburg Palace) or even erase it (as it was the case for the Schwetzingen Palace). Louvre's aim was to engage traditional and contemporary art in a continuation of the museum's already established policy. Twombly had always been an artist whose work merged classical subjects with a contemporary idiom. Arcadia, Venus, Narcissus, Achilles, Dionysus, Proteus are some of the names which can be found on his canvases filled with scribes and doodles, marks and lines scratched, all along with classical references to Greek and Latin poets. The Opéra Bastille project gave him prior experience in public art commissions – which was also part of the Louvre's criteria. For the artist, the assignment became an even bigger challenge since this

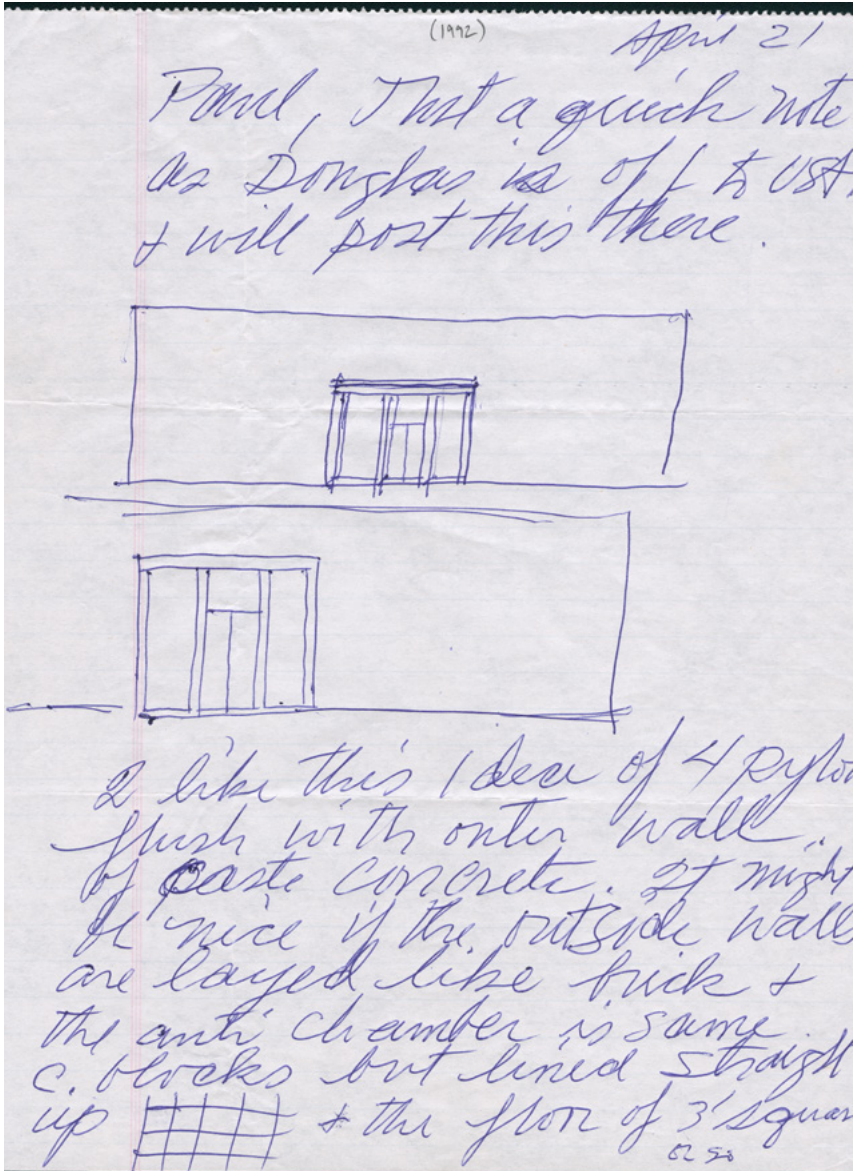
invitation came from one of the largest and most famous museums in the world. The Louvre is also a *château* where traditional ceiling would be expected to embrace its marble columns and golden details from the 16th century. The artist is constrained to respect the site, the architecture and the long history of the monument.

The room and its history

The Salle des Bronzes in the department of Greek antiquities, also known as Salle La Caze, is situated in the oldest part of the museum, connecting Richelieu and Denon wings. It was built by Pierre Lescot in 1547-1550. Throughout the years the room went through various changes (changed by Fontaine in 1820 and transformed by Lefuel in 1864). The last one dated from 1930, when its white ceiling was created and stayed that way until Twombly's intervention. The Louvre gave Twombly a *carte blanche*, a commission with no restrictions apart from the fact that Twombly had to take into consideration the room's size and create a site-specific work.¹³ However, the command would not be validated by the Commission of Historical Monuments if the condition of reversibility of the decor was not fulfilled. We cannot be sure if this shows a kind of mistrust towards contemporary art but, it definitely brings to mind the case of Chagall's ceiling for the Opéra Garnier where the ceiling was placed upon the old ceiling. According to the feasibility study realized in order to face the technical issues,¹⁴ the report attested the possibility of reversibility of the *Plafond* thanks to its disassembling in different parts.

Ceiling painting has always been a particular site-specific artwork demanding the painters to adapt their piece to its surface. Contrary to a painting seen on a wall which is vertical and therefore «parallel to the verticality of the viewer, perpendicular to the line of sight»,¹⁵ the situation of the eye with regard to the tableau changes significantly in ceiling painting: a ceiling is horizontal but the figural elements must be represented still as vertical.¹⁶ To erect a «(vertical) tableau on a horizontal ceiling, in compliance with the rules of perspective representation, a ceiling painting had to be “illusionistic”». ¹⁷ This means that painters should create an illusion of deep space beyond the plane of the ceiling. The viewer should be led to believe that he/she is seeing the subject beyond the surface of representation.¹⁸

As contemporary artists would not have to think of traditional painting's rules such as perspective, at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, in particular, they have interpreted the illusionistic charge with innovation. For example, Lucio Fontana



1. Cy Twombly, *Letter to Paul Winkler* dated April 21, 1992. The Menil Collection, Houston. Credits: Courtesy of Menil Archives / © Cy Twombly Foundation.

created a three-dimensional, neon construction to decorate the ceiling of Milan's Triennale (*Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano*, 1951) that would be seen from below. Suspended from the ceiling, the construction seems to grow in the space above the spectator's head. James Turrell cut off the roof to create his 'topless' *Meeting* (1980-1986/2016). This contemporary version of ceiling painting replaces it by eliminating the top interior surface of the room. More recently, in 2008, Miquel Barceló at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva created three-dimensional forms which grow from the ceiling. They resemble stalactites in different colors and transform the

room into a circular cave. Each interpretation experiments with the illusion of deep space beyond the flat surface of ceiling's wall, either by transforming the illusionistic wall-penetrations (seen in Mantegna's and Pozzo's decorations) to a literal opening that gives direct access to the sky (Turrell), or by creating an artwork that creates a three-dimensional effect (Fontana, Barceló).

Twombly also had to deal with the traditional characteristics of ceiling painting and thus take into account that the painting should embrace the whole room and be seen from below.¹⁹ In addition to these difficulties intrinsic to the nature of ceiling painting, the size and the form of the gallery made the *Ceiling* a quite particular project. The Gallery of the Bronzes is 33 meters long and of a rectangular form; or as Twombly put it: «the room is like a glorified corridor because it's long and narrow».²⁰ As a consequence, «[it] has no center. And the whole idea of the original maquette was to take its length into account».²¹ To the 4,300-square-foot room we should add that the nine-meter-high ceiling would interfere with the artwork and the spectator and could change not only the perception of colors but also the perception of the whole painting.



2. Cy Twombly, *Interior*, Bassano in Teverina, 1980 (printed 1998), impression sur carton. Credits: © Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio.



3. Cy Twombly, *Sketch for the Ceiling*, 2006, work on paper. Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre. Credits: Musée du Louvre /© Cy Twombly Foundation.

However, the gallery's size did not intimidate Twombly. As he asserted, he was very familiar with spacious rooms: «I love big spaces! I live in Italy and it's full of big spaces. So, I feel very much at home in large spaces».²² As the painter had admitted to Nicholas Serota: «I would have liked to have been an architect but I'm not good at mathematics».²³ The artist always paid great attention to his paintings' disposition in space, especially the series, wanting to arrange their order and place in connection to the gallery room. A first example would be *Nine Discourses on Commodus* (1963), a series whose narrative and sequence were based on its installation in a specific order.²⁴ *Fifty Days at Iliam* (1978) was another polyptych for which Twombly designed its arrangement in space paying special attention to its disposition and installation.²⁵ The painter had also admitted that his paintings *Blossoms* were also created for «a particular architectural space»: «it was planned [for the exhibition in Avignon] for a reason... architectural reason. I get very stimulated by architecture», as the artist revealed to Serota.²⁶ His architectural concerns had already surfaced when Twombly designed the Pavillon in Houston to host his paintings at the Cy Twombly Gallery. His first sketches can be found in his correspondence with the director Paul Winkler (fig. 1); those drawings were brought into life by Renzo Piano in a building where local materials were used, according to the artist's wishes.²⁷

Twombly's preference for large spaces can be linked to his own houses in Italy (in Rome, Bassano in Teverina or Gaeta) and his experience of living and working in these vast chambers. All of them were old residences, some of them dating back to 16th century, which maintained the spacious architecture of Italian Palazzos with high ceilings and large rooms. After their purchase, the painter was involved in their renovation and their configuration so as to create similar large rooms that, one after the other, would connect with a «straight line of doors»,



as the painter would describe it (fig. 2).²⁸ In that sense, his houses' rectangular space and the elongated rooms filled with light, resemble the museum's «glorified corridor» as Twombly saw the Louvre gallery. Like the Louvre, his houses would adapt and become the place where his work could coexist with Baroque and Rococo architecture, where antique statues that the artist collected could coexist with his sculpture and painting as well as the contemporary art of his collection. Twombly had to create a similar space for the Louvre, functioning in the same way.

Making and installing the Ceiling

If his Bastille curtain was marked with the trembling line of his particular doodling, Twombly reacts differently for this particular commission:

This was a very different kind of project. And my approach to it wasn't at all the same. I wanted to make something that was above all, a response to this particular space, the artist says.²⁹

Having a photograph of the Salle des Bronzes on the working table on his studio in Lexington,³⁰ Twombly prepared the maquette for the *Ceiling* (fig. 3), the one that he offered later to the Louvre. The artist seems to treat the ceiling as an easel painting of huge dimensions, a rectangular plane surface that he fills with a blue paint and floating motifs recalling Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua. The artist draws round disks that go around the rectangle tracing the contour of the ceiling and leaving the middle of the surface a blue monochrome. Contrary to the illusionistic perspective of the ceiling tradition,

4-5. Photographs of the studio in Lexington, Virginia working on the *Ceiling*, 2006. Credits: photo Mario Pellicciaro / © Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio.



Twombly wanted to preserve the flatness of the ceiling. This way his circles would give the impression of floating.³¹ Among these motifs, inscriptions in Greek with the name of seven sculptors from ancient Greece complete the composition: Praxiteles, Phidias, Myron, Polykleitos, Lysippos, Skopas, Cephisodotus.

The artist was inspired by the blue color found in a reproduction of a Japanese cloth.³² As it can be observed from the photographs that document the painter in his studio working on the *Ceiling*, a picture of his “source” can be seen glued on the wall in front of his desk (fig. 4-5). It is the same hue of blue color which is found in Twombly’s first maquettes, also glued above the Japanese reproduction. The latter might have also given to the artist the main idea of the whole composition. As in the *Ceiling*, the Japanese source’s blue monochrome functions as a background to its motifs which also happen to be round disks (possibly representing flowers) in blue and yellow hues. This influence and reference to the Far-Eastern culture confirms and reinforces the claim that the artist’s late work (after 1980) embraces a tendency towards oriental aesthetics.³³ Concerning Japanese culture, in

6. Photograph of the work in progress in the studio near Paris, 2008-2009.

particular, after visiting Japan in 1996, Twombly enriches his painting with haikus written by major Japanese poets in 2007. The studio photographs also show that next to his maquette, the artist had been working on the flower motifs which are found in *Untitled* (2007) that contains haikus. It seems that during 2006-2007, when these works must have coincided, the artist was fascinated by a certain *japonisme* that the *Ceiling* testifies to. This underlying presence of oriental culture merges with the predominant reference to the Greek-roman world as both references coexist in the same work.

After completing the drawing, Twombly called his friend artist Barbara Crawford to mix the colors for him and paint the maquette. She would later do the same for the actual work when with two other painters, they brought this project to life. For the first time in his career, Twombly's work was executed by assistants that painted the *Ceiling* in a studio near Paris (fig. 6).³⁴ The technique that was chosen is known as the *marrouflage*: the painters painted Twombly's composition on strips of connected canvas which were then glued to the ceiling, not unlike a «grand version of wallpaper», a common process from the 16th to the 19th century but less commonly used in recent years.³⁵

The initial maquette, its composition, its colors and its spontaneity had to be transferred to scale. In order to keep the original spirit, the painters had to invent their own tools: brushes had to be replaced by brooms (something that Twombly himself found very amusing)³⁶ that could correspond to the maquette's quick brush strokes and give the same effect of movement, gestuality and spontaneity. The act of painting was translated into a sort of dancing over the surface. From a technical point of view, the paint was changed from acrylic to oil.³⁷ The painters also had to go through several trials to achieve the blue color adapting it to the changing lighting conditions of the room. In fact, Twombly, who followed the project very closely, paid great attention to the blue color. He did not want a saturated color, but a washed out blue that would give the impression of a watercolor on the ceiling.³⁸

Underneath the Louvre's sky

It is quite interesting to make a quick comment on the works' reception from the press. As it is expected, all different reactions (neutral, positive and even negative) can be witnessed. But no matter the critique, the majority of voices seemed to register shock or disappointment that the *Ceiling* did not look like any other 'typical' Twombly painting.³⁹ It is true that we do not see Twombly's characteristic signs, the scribing and doodling covered under a thick

palimpsest of paint as a familiar spectator with Twombly's work would expect. As Twombly explained:

I couldn't conceive of anything I did before as something that could be used for a ceiling, the main thing was to make something that worked in this room. It had nothing to do with any previous work or the way I generally proceed.⁴⁰

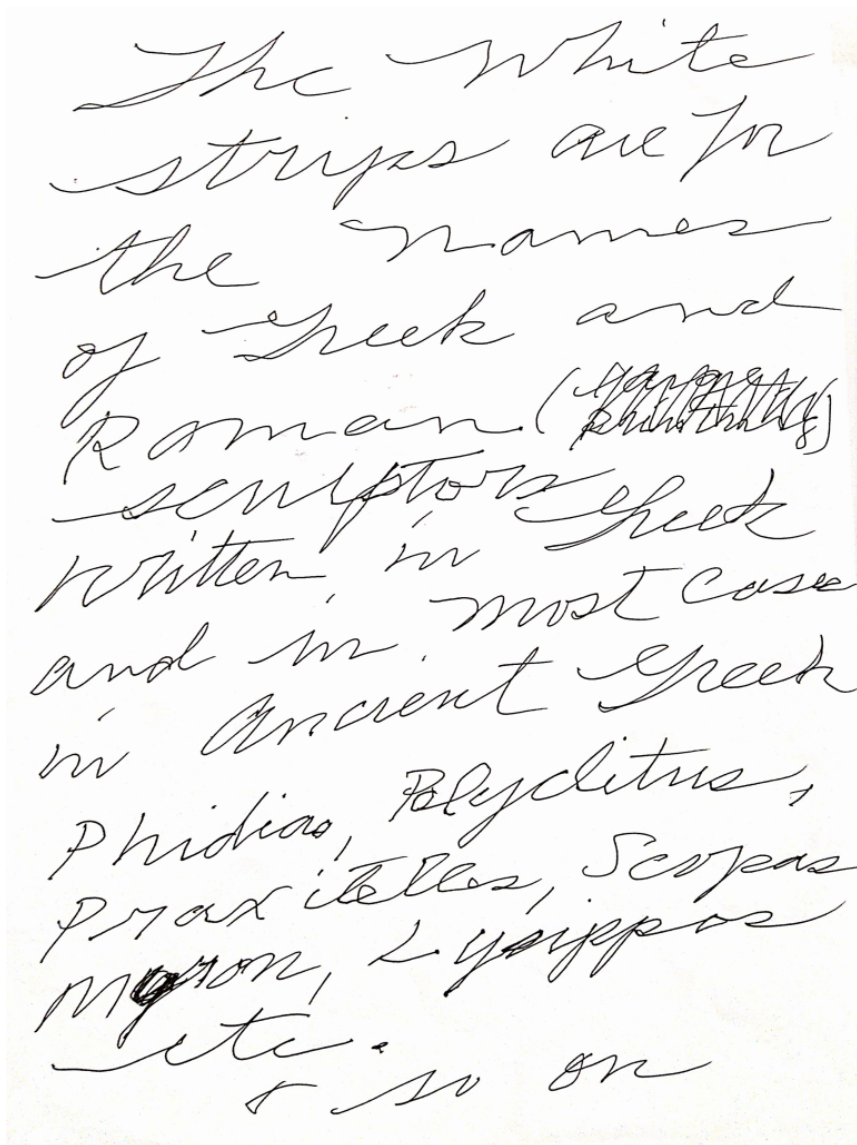


7. Cy Twombly, *The Ceiling*, 2006-2010, oil on canvas marouflée, 3.374 x 1.180 cm or 398 m². Paris, Musée du Louvre, Salle des Bronzes, view of the room, 2019. Credits: Author's photograph © Cy Twombly Foundation.

As a matter of fact, a 'classic' Twombly painting could be impossible to imitate, no other painter/assistant would be able to reproduce his gestures or writing. The painter's unique handwriting, the rapid dripping acrylic paint could not be suitable for a ceiling. It is also true that, as we have already pointed out, ceiling painting cannot be treated as any other tableau. If the vertical parallel to the spectator is no longer respected, the abstract tableau cannot work on a horizontal plan because, as explained earlier for the case of a traditional ceiling decoration, there are no figural elements which could be represented as vertical with the use of an illusionistic perspective. Twombly does not have the means of figurative language to create an illusionistic, vertical tableau on a horizontal ceiling.

Even though it seems very different from the rest of his production, Twombly's quasi-abstract monochrome and geometrical composition of the *Ceiling* still carries many characteristics of the artist's pictorial language. The spectator is taken by surprise when he first enters the gallery (fig. 7). The deep blue ceiling appears like a sky in *trompe l'oeil* that takes over the whole room and the viewer's space: «the blue is for the sky [...] I left the ceiling open for the blue sky»,⁴¹ the artist confirms. Echoing Giotto, this open blue sky recalls the starry skies of Medieval ceiling painting that represented Heaven in a more conceptual way.⁴² It goes without saying that this blue could also bring to mind the blue of the sea, especially if we think of another series of paintings, *Leaving Paphos Ringed with Waves* (2009), in which the artist uses a similar intense blue to paint the watery background of his boats. The artist himself would also link this blue color to the view from his studio in Gaeta,⁴³ a window opened up to a monochrome blue seascape.

The painting invites the spectator for a walk and directs his movement from one side to another. As in any abstract painting, there is no specific point of view but multiple. In order to discover the painting, the ideal viewing position is always just ahead. Following the rectangle shape of the room, the spectator realizes the simplicity of the composition, what the artist has described in his intension to create something 'not busy', in which motifs are not fighting with each other.⁴⁴ This simplicity recalls Greco-Roman architecture which is also implied by the rectangular gallery and the four white columns in Corinthian order at both ends of the room like in a Greek temple. The light entering in abundance from the side windows fills the seemingly empty space reminding of Twombly's *enfilade* apartments. The gallery's horizontal cornice and its crown molding are supported with decorative corbels, evoking neoclassical architecture.⁴⁵ The white-ochre walls are not only



8, Letter written by Cy Twombly to Marie-Laure Bernadac, accompanying the first maquette of the work, 2006, Archives de Marie-Laure Bernadac à la Délégation des Archives du Musée du Louvre. Credits: Archives du Musée du Louvre / © Cy Twombly Foundation.

similar to the marble walls of Greek temples, but also to the colors of the Houston Pavillon that Twombly had chosen in the past. They present a neutral background to the ceiling and thus (as they have the same color as some of the circles) a harmonious result is achieved.⁴⁶ This strong relationship between the *Ceiling* and the architectural space defines the perception of the artwork.

Concerning the composition itself, the floating round motifs encourage to move along and cross the «glorified corridor». For Twombly they represent shields, but as the artist himself realizes nobody sees it as shields, they think of it as planets,⁴⁷ or even coins, I would add, since the artist underlines that his work's «subject was the objects in the

room».⁴⁸ Twombly achieves by a very well-defined motif to create this ambiguity which is very common in his abstract motifs.⁴⁹ Twombly's intention and interpretation of the motif is not without importance considering the shield-motif in his pictorial vocabulary. It doesn't only bring to mind *Shield of Achilles* (1978) that he paints and chooses as his first painting for the series in the monumental series *Fifty Days at Iliam*, but also recalls Homer and the well-known passage in the *Iliad*.

The inscriptions that need to be read, also encourage the moving around. The *Ceiling* would not be the same if it wasn't for the inscriptions in the white stripes. They are very carefully thought and placed to give balance to the composition. All of them face towards inside the center of the painting, the spectator is constantly surrounded. It is the first time that Twombly's characteristic bad handwriting, the *écriture gauchère*, as Roland Barthes would call it, is missing. Indeed, his own handwriting is like an abstract writing, messy and almost illegible. As we can see in a letter which accompanied the first maquette of the artist and addressing to the Louvre's chief curator, a very careful reading is required (fig. 8). The words are written in cursive script which is not very different from his (abstract) drawings of the 1960s. However, for the *Ceiling* Twombly explained: «I wanted the names to be clear and legible, they stabilize the circles».⁵⁰ He did not only intend a writing that could be accessible to his viewer but also letter-forms that could play a role for the whole structure.

Even without his own handwriting and, as it is the case for all of the artist's works since the late 1950s, Twombly uses the canvas as a medium for writing, drawing and painting, without distinction. As we have argued elsewhere, for Twombly writing and drawing are synonyms.⁵¹ The inscription is thus charged with two functions, as a motif to be looked at and as a word to be read. The spectator is a reader and a viewer at the same time. But can the viewer actually read? The inscriptions are in Greek. Twombly asked a friend of his to write the names of the sculptors for him in Greek. Each name is written in a different way, representing variations of the Greek alphabet.⁵² As Twombly says, the Louvre's curator suggested to correct that with inscriptions in the standardized alphabet. The artist kept it because «anything too perfect has to have a mistake or the gods will take it away».⁵³ Our hypothesis is that Twombly found among those letters some of his own letter-shapes that he would use to transcribe the names on his canvas and even charge it with meaning, like Achilles' A, written with a phallic triangular shape.⁵⁴

Words in Greek are also a very common element in his earlier work. For example, in *Ilium (One Morning Ten Years Later), Part I*, 1964-2000, Twombly wrote the name of Achilles in red pencil and in Greek: Ἀχιλλεύς. Another word is λευκό and Αρχιλοχος. To our knowledge, Twombly did not read or write Greek. He copies the letters of an unknown alphabet. Writing then comes back to drawing: each letter is treated like a drawing, each sign is a motif in its own right. Twombly finds Greek letters beautiful and, when he presents them to a non-Greek speaking audience, he takes away writing's function as communication and gives it a pictorial value that everyday use of writing tends to lose.

The inspiration behind the inscriptions might be found in antiquity. Greek artists used to accompany their motifs with inscriptions explaining *who is who*. Phidias would even write his name on his mug.⁵⁵ Twombly has two different series of lithographs assembling *Six Latin Writers and Poets* (1975) (Tacitus, Horace, Catullus, Apollodorus, Ovid and Virgil) and *Five Greek Poets and a Philosopher* (1978) (Homer, Sappho, Pindar, Callimachus, Theocritus and Plato). The seven sculptors in this group complete the previous homage to Greco-Roman heritage by presenting «a pantheon of classical Greek sculpture from the 5th and 4th century».⁵⁶

As Richard Leeman points out, these are sculptors whose work only survived by copies and evocations in the texts of Pausanias or Pliny.⁵⁷ Barthes is the first to speak of the inscription's «absolute power of evocation»⁵⁸ in Twombly's work. Through the written names and as an effect of the «nominalist glory» (Barthes), «language makes it possible to evoke what is no longer there».⁵⁹ At the same time, in an allusive way, Twombly writes a word and implies several others. As Barthes put it when writing on Twombly's *Virgil* painting (1973), by writing 'Virgil',

it is already a commentary on Virgil, for the name, written by hand, not only summons up a whole idea (albeit an empty one) of ancient culture, it also acts like a quotation: from a time of old-fashioned, calm, leisurely, quietly decadent studies: English prep schools, Latin verses, desk lamps, delicate writing in pencil.⁶⁰

By writing Phidias or Praxiteles, Twombly brings to his spectator's mind not only Greco-Roman art and culture but also all the Greek courses he might have taken at school and all the tutoring on how to write and read the Greek alphabet.

Content, context and space

Once the viewer has experienced the space around him and has also acknowledged the exhibited Greco-Roman bronze objects, coins and jewels, the spectator can easily realize the unity between the ceiling's subject referring to Greece and the content of the Salle des Bronzes. Twombly confirms that the inspiration behind the work was the room itself: «when I saw the bronzes in the room that naturally determined the ceiling».⁶¹ As a result, in the fashion of all great décor painters, he adapts the old triptych subject/surface/spectator to the site's acquisitions and maintains their strong relationship and thus continues the great decorative painting tradition. This way, the painter creates a coherent whole which is constructed firstly by the inscriptions in Greek evoking Greco-Roman art, that reflect the Greek antique objects exhibited underneath, even though there are no sculptures by the artists of the *Ceiling* exhibited in the Bronzes gallery. As Leeman correctly remarks, the objects and the sculptures in the room are in fact anonymous. A «sort of optical illusion» is created between the names on the ceiling and the absent names of the jewels or vases in the exhibited windows.⁶² In addition, the round ambiguous motifs standing both for coins and shields cannot but reflect the antique bronze coins, weapon and objects of everyday life. The *Ceiling* establishes an architectural and decorative ensemble.

Spectator is no longer a passive viewer of the painting. He has to spend time looking at the works (above and underneath). He has to be entirely present mentally to make the necessary connections, but also physically: he has to experience the room. Walking around the room is the only way to bring himself closer to the tiny bronze objects and the huge ceiling painting. The painting and the room can be conceived as a whole thanks to the smooth transition from ceiling's pictorial space to real space, from ceiling's subject to room's content. Twombly builds a strong connection between space, content, and context of the room and the spectator – but it is the spectator's physical and visual experience which conditions both perception and understanding of the ceiling painting.

The *Ceiling* stands for a décor, a permanent installation and a work *in situ*,⁶³ since, as we have shown, the oeuvre was conceived for this room and from his room. It is now a part of the museum's structure and history. Since its installation, it follows the museum's changes and evolution as a living thing. At the moment, the Salle des Bronzes is being transformed and, in 2022, will no longer accommodate Greek but Etruscan antiquities. Right now, the room is empty having as the

only exhibit, Twombly's *Ceiling*. The visitor will no longer have the possibility to undergo the full esthetic experience that the *Ceiling* was supposed to offer in connection with the room's context. However, this cannot minimize Twombly's contribution to ceiling painting tradition. With his rare example of abstract ceiling painting, he manages to combine decorative painting tradition and 16th- century-architecture with abstraction. This way, he gains his well-deserved *33 meters of immortality*⁶⁴ and enters the pantheon of all great artists.

¹ Cy Twombly, Richard Leeman, Guillaume Fonkenell, *Cy Twombly. The Ceiling. Un plafond pour le Louvre*, Éditions du Regard, Paris, 2010.

² Throughout the centuries, the museum had always had this policy of inviting contemporary artist to dialogue with classical art, such as Delacroix's ceiling in the 19th century. After Braque, it had stopped and it was in the 2000s when this policy was renewed with the intention to invite one artist per year (Pauline Guelaud, in charge of the program of contemporary art at the Louvre Museum at the time, interview with the author, June 2019).

³ The curtain realized after the Twombly drawing was presented for the first time at the opening night of the Opéra Bastille in 1988.

⁴ Mahault de Raymond-Cahuzac, *Cy Twombly au musée du Louvre: points de vue sur The Ceiling (2010)*, sous la direction de Catherine Wermester, Mémoire de Master I en Histoire de l'art, Université Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne, 2017.

⁵ It is not even a part of the catalogues raisonnés nor of his paintings nor of his drawings (See *Cy Twombly. Catalogue raisonné of the paintings*, edited by Heiner Bastian, 7 voll., Schirmer/Mosel, München, 1992-2018, and Nicola Del Roscio, *Cy Twombly. Drawings*, 8 voll., Schirmer/Mosel, München, 2011-2017). To our knowledge, the maquette of the work stored in the Louvre has never been shown.

⁶ Sven Erik Åke Sandström, *Levels of unreality: studies in structure and construction in Italian mural painting during the Renaissance*, Almqvist & Wiksells, Uppsala, 1963, pp. 128-129.

⁷ Janetta Rebold Benton, *Perspective and the Spectator's Pattern of Circulation in Assisi and Padua*, «*Artibus et Historiae*», X, 19, 1989, p. 50.

⁸ It was part of André Malraux's policy to renew the opera's audience, restore its dignity and support contemporary art. Malraux's first commission was

Braque for the Louvre (1952) and more followed: Utrillo for the Hôtel de Ville (1955) and Picasso for the Unesco Building (1958). Mathias Auclair et Pierre Provoyeur, *Le plafond de Chagall à l'Opéra Garnier*, Gourcuff Gradenigo, Paris, 2014, pp. 11-13.

⁹ During Schwetzingen Palace's theatre renovation (1937), Franz Schilling executed a ceiling showing Apollo and the Muses and a swastika. In 1957, Carolus Vocke was called to replace the previous ceiling and thus erase the Nazi symbol. See Florian Dölle, *The White Hall in focus*, in *Clashing styles? Modernism in the Reconstruction of Charlottenburg Palace*, virtual exhibition set on *Google Arts & Culture*. <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/schloss-charlottenburg?hl=en> (last accessed December 2021).

¹⁰ On Trier's selection see Jule Sophie Christ, *Part 1 - A ceiling as a problem: the path to Hann Trier*, in *Clashing styles?*, cit., <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/DwXRqqExH-OKJw?hl=en> (last accessed December 2021).

¹¹ Hann Trier also designed the ceiling for the staircase in the New Wing of Charlottenburg Palace (1974) and later on the ceiling and mural of the Reading Room at Heidelberg University (1979). Peter Schubert designed another ceiling painting at Charlottenburg Palace (1976-1977). See Florian Dölle, *The White Hall and what came after: Modernism in reconstruction*, in *Clashing styles?* cit., <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/eAWhlRSBtbbtQ?hl=en> (last accessed December 2021).

¹² For more examples of lost ceiling paintings and the solutions to restore or recreate them see Dölle, *The White Hall in focus*, cit.

¹³ de Raymond-Cahuzac, *Cy Twombly au musée du Louvre*, cit., p. 43.

¹⁴ A feasibility study was realized in April 2007, unclassified file in the Archives of the Louvre.

¹⁵ Lincoln Rothschild, Irma B. Jaffe,

Painting and Perspective, «*The American Scholar*», XL, 2, 1971, p. 328.

¹⁶ Carl Goldstein, *Studies in Seventeenth Century French Art Theory and Ceiling Painting*, «*The Art Bulletin*», XLVII, 2, 1965, p. 243.

¹⁷ This way the spectator has the impression that he/she is «seeing the subject beyond the surface»: *ibidem*, p. 245.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 240 and 245.

¹⁹ Barbara Crawford, chief painter of the project, remembers that it was in fact Nicola Del Roscio that tested for the first time the maquette, once the first version was done (Barbara Crawford, interview with the author, June 2019) Marie-Laure Bernadac, chief curator for the Louvre at the time, testifies the same reaction when they first received the maquette (Marie-Laure Bernadac, interview with the author, June 2019).

²⁰ Cy Twombly, Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Interview*, in Twombly, Leeman, Fonkenell, *Cy Twombly*, cit., p. 14.

²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15.

²² Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit. p. 15.

²³ Interview to Nicholas Serota, *History behind the thought*, in Nicholas Cullinan, Tacita Dean, Richard Shiff, *Cy Twombly: cycles and seasons*, Tate Publishing, London, 2008, p. 46.

²⁴ In fact, Cullinan suggests that a reason why *Nine Discourses on Commodus* was severely criticized might have been the disorganized and confusing order in which the series was first presented at the Castelli Gallery in New York. Nicholas Cullinan, *Nine Discourses on Commodus, ou le magnifique 'fiasco' de Cy Twombly*, in *Cy Twombly*, edited by Jonas Storsve, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2016, p. 84.

²⁵ For more details see Carlos Basualdo, Richard Fletcher, Emily Greenwood, Olena Chervonik, Nicola Del Roscio, Annabelle D'Huart, *Cy Twombly: Fifty Days at Iliam*, Philadelphia, PA, 2018, pp. 20-21, 25. For an analysis

on how the space could affect the painting's interpretation see Anthi-Danaé Spathoni, *De la toile à l'espace de la galerie, le champ de bataille de Cy Twombly*, in Eadem, *Twombly. A Selection of Essays*, Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio, London, 2019, pp. 11-27.

²⁶ Interview to Serota, *History behind the thought*, cit., p. 53.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 46. The correspondence of the artist with the director can be found in the Menil Archives.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 20.

³⁰ Twombly had visited the gallery with Marie-Laure Bernadac before proposing the drawing for the *Ceiling*. Marie-Laure Bernadac remembers that Twombly's maquette arrived very shortly after their visit (Bernadac, interview with the author, 24 June 2019).

³¹ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit. p. 13.

³² In the Louvre's catalogue, a published fragment of the reproduction is described as a Japanese print. However, Barbara Crawford remembers Twombly speaking about a cloth (Crawford, interview with the author, June 2019).

³³ Thierry Greub was the first to underline this tendency and diversity in artist's aesthetics. See Thierry Greub, "He was a traveler". *L'esthétique (extrême-) orientale de Cy Twombly*, «Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne», 138, 2016-2017, pp. 85-99.

³⁴ When the *Ceiling* was painted in a studio outside Paris, Barbara Crawford was the "chief" painter of the project working along with the painters Laurent Blaise and Jean de Seynes. Twombly used to have daily follow ups, and the painters were following the artist's directions, as if it were a conceptual work.

³⁵ Grant Rosenberg, *Letter from Paris: A Twombly Ceiling*, «The American Scholar», 78, 2, 2009, p. 8.

³⁶ *Rapport de la réunion avec Cy Twombly le 6 mai 2008 au Louvre Salle des Bronzes*, consulted in the Archives of the Louvre, unclassified file.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ For a review of the press, see de Raymond-Cahuzac, *Cy Twombly au musée du Louvre*, cit.

⁴⁰ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁴² Sandström, *Levels of unreality*, cit., pp. 26-27.

⁴³ Pauline Guelaud remembers the artist talking about his studio window (Guelaud, interview with the author, June 2019).

⁴⁴ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit. p. 13.

⁴⁵ Referring in particular to the Greco-Roman architectural ornament to support the cornice, γεισῆπους.

⁴⁶ This homogeneous ensemble is the source of the recent debate between the Cy Twombly Foundation and the museum, and a lawsuit which followed, accusing the museum to have changed the color of the walls and thus distracting the whole. The new reddish gallery does not respect any more the architectural ensemble the ceiling was built for. See Naomi Rea, *The Cy Twombly Foundation Has Escalated Its Battle Against the Louvre, Filing a Lawsuit Against the Museum Over a Renovated Gallery*, «Artnet News», 17 March 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/cy-twombly-foundation-lawsuit-louvre-1952189> (last accessed December 2021).

⁴⁷ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 16.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Isn't it in the same series *Achilles' Vengeance* that the main motif hesitates between a char and a phallus?

⁵⁰ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 15.

⁵¹ For more details on the subject see Anthi-Danaé Spathoni, *Lignes, lettres et linéaments abstraits. Paul Klee et Cy Twombly*, «Zwitscher-Maschine: Journal on Paul Klee», 6, 2018, pp. 68-78.

⁵² The name of each sculptor is written in the way it used to be written during his lifetime. Twombly's intention was, for example, to write *Praxiteles* in the Greek letters that were used in the 4th century BC when the artist was alive.

⁵³ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 16.

⁵⁴ For example, the A in Praxiteles is different from the A in Phidias, as in *Fifty days at Ilium* some letters for the Achaeans were different from the ones used for the Ilians. This is because Twombly's letters of names are charged with meaning. The painter finds that the shape of A «has a phallic aggression like a rocket. A is for Achilles» (interview with the artist by David Sylvester, *Interviews with American artists*, Pimlico, London, 2002, p. 178). In Praxiteles we find Achilles' A written in the same phallic triangular shape as in *Vengeance of Achilles* (1962).

⁵⁵ «As for the writing, the Greeks always wrote on everything, you know. Even on a little cup, they would write "I belong to Phidias" or things like that»: Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1982, p. 150.

⁵⁹ Richard Leeman, *The universal ocean of things*, in Twombly, Leeman, Fonkenell, *Cy Twombly*, cit., p. 50.

⁶⁰ Barthes, *L'obvie et l'obtus*, cit., p. 150.

⁶¹ Twombly, Bernadac, *Interview*, cit., p. 15.

⁶² Leeman, *The universal ocean of things*, cit., p. 49.

⁶³ de Raymond-Cahuzac, *Cy Twombly au musée du Louvre*, cit., p. 92.

⁶⁴ Rosenberg, *Letter from Paris*, cit., p. 10.