

## READING GESTURES IN VALENTIN DE BOULOGNE'S PAINTINGS

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**Abstract:** This article is a close reading of the gestures in selected paintings by Valentin de Boulogne exhibited at The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art October 7, 2016 – January 16, 2017. The gestures are impelled by body motions, dramatic actions, as well as props, and fall into three categories: descriptive; rhetorical; and symbolic.

**Résumé:** *Cet article analyse les gestes représentés dans un choix de tableaux de Valentin de Boulogne, exposés au New York Metropolitan Museum of Art du 7 octobre 2016 au 16 janvier 2017. Les gestes trouvent leur origine dans les mouvements du corps et les effets dramatiques, voire dans les objets ou accessoires, et peuvent être classés en trois catégories : gestes descriptifs, rhétoriques et symboliques.*

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I saw the *Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio* show with a colleague and friend at the Met in New York on a mid-November afternoon of 2016; that show had travelled from Toronto, and many subsequently saw almost the same show a few months later at the Louvre.<sup>1</sup> That was my first encounter with Valentin; I knew nothing of him but that did not stop me from chattering about what I saw. This friend convinced me to present and write about Valentin. I still don't know more of Valentin today than what I have read in the catalog I bought from the Met. The catalog has lots of information about Valentin and his place in art history; the art scene of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Rome; the catalog documents the provenance of the paintings; what cleanings, imaging and restorations of some of the canvases have revealed; it speculates about his life and his patrons – there are very few verifiable facts, and much Valentin myths – “he was a *bon vivant* and a poor bohemian”<sup>2</sup>; and that even if he learned his craft and practiced his art in Italy, he was viewed in his lifetime as French as his nativeCoulommiers; the catalog re-views Valentin's past and present reputation in the *pléiade*

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<sup>1</sup> “Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, N.Y. October 7, 2016 – January 16, 2017, and at the Musée du Louvre, Paris, February 20, 2017 – May 22, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Annik Lemoine, “Bowing to No One: Valentin's Ambitions” in *Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio*, (New Haven and London: The MET, Distributed by Yale University Press, 2016),1.

of baroque art. There are substantial discussions of the various genres and pictorial conventions represented in the Valentin's *œuvre*. Emphasis is placed on the fact that, like Caravaggio, he painted from life – *pittura dal naturale* – indeed from canvas to canvas one comes to recognize his models; also noted is his close attention to facts: that his objects and materials are rendered in hyper realistic details, and lastly that his canvases are crowded and cropped – clearly not a 20<sup>th</sup>-century innovation. I was surprised not to find more than passing references to constant motion, to movement in Valentin's canvases, and especially his ability to capture the present moment which still has the memory of the just before, a present which already anticipates the immediate after. I was, to use a phrase current with my students, “blown away” by the way Valentin momentarily suspends narrative time, and invites the viewer to step into and engage with his drama. Perhaps “how does this suspension happen”? and “how does it work”? are too obvious matters for connoisseurs/curators to take special note, but I find these questions pertinent for this discussion as gestures are principally how Valentin achieves these effects. Hence the subject of this little article.



**Figure 1 :** Valentin de Boulogne, *Cardsharps* (c.1615).  
Gemaldegalerie\_Dresden copy 37 ¼ in x 54 in. [94.5 x 137 cm].

I was first “taken in” or rather “taken into” his framed dramas by the *hand* gestures, especially those which appear at the margins of the action, and are sometimes hardly visible. *Cardsharps*

(**Figure 1**) offers several examples: while the subject of the swindle holds his cards tightly in the closed fist of his left hand, and concentrates on his next move, he is unaware of the man behind him (upper right) signaling and preparing his partner, or of his rival responding by palming the needed card (lower left).<sup>3</sup> These are *descriptive* gestures, they sum up the narrative, they are visual synecdoche. They announce these gamblers as cheats. We know by the accumulation of coins next to the red-shirted player that he has thus far been winning. We also know that violence is anticipated, that sword play will conclude this game when the fraud is bound to be discovered; in preparation for swordplay, the man in the shadow signaling with the fingers of his left hand, also grasps the hilt of his sword with his right.

Once hand gestures are noted in one or two of his paintings, they are evident everywhere. But gestures are not only articulated by hands and fingers: eyes, head, arms, legs, feet – the whole body – can convey movement to emphasize idea, sentiment, attitude, mood, emotion, meaning.

We could return to *Cardsharp* to complete our reading, but 'tis best to look at a very different work. This *John the Baptist* includes hands gestures, as his right grasps a staff, and his left points heavenward (**Figure 2**). But clearly the young boy's whole body is in movement: he is in the process of rising and is about to march. We see that he has been in a seated position and that he is halfway through raising himself up: his right forearm is pushing against the red-covered plinth to help the leg and thigh muscles – the boy does not have much abdominals to help, and as he leans right, his back muscles are probably not strong. The aid the red covered plinth provides is both physical and spiritual. The body gesture is no Laocoönian twist; he is not torn. The body gesture is a "rising", an "annunciation" of the "coming". The news and mission compel him up and forward. The left arm and hand are raised and both declare the "good news" and signal the commencement of a new journey – "grab your staff pilgrim!" Or in the context of these days – "*En marche!*" This last phrase, or something like it, is addressed to the viewer, for the boy's eyes are fixed on the viewer and the boy's open mouth is not silent.

The gestures in this *John the Baptist* engages the viewer differently from those of *Cardsharp*: while *Cardsharp* narrates a cautionary tale against tavern gambling, the gestures of *John the Baptist* are not *primarily descriptive*, they especially make a claim on the viewer to also "rise," "to follow", to respond to the "good news". These gestures are hence *rhetorical*. There are also three other ("coded") items which must be known in order to be understood: the lamb on the lower right symbolizing Jesus' shedding of his blood to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29, 1:36); the red covering (associated with martyrdom, the Second Coming and Revelation); and the animal skin barely seen covering the

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<sup>3</sup> Not yet fully erased is the unfinished previous iteration of the right arm and hand ready to place down a card; this painting is unfinished.



**Figure 2 :** Valentin de Boulogne, *Saint John the Baptiste* (c. 1620-1622) in Cathédral of Saint John the Baptiste, Saint-Jean de Maurienne, Auvergne–Rhône–Alpes. 70 ½ x 52 ½ in [178 x 133 cm].



boy's loins (the Baptist's traditional wear). These "coded" items are *symbolic gestures*, and it is the symbolic gestures which define the "Good News" which I need not here review. Gestures then in *John the Baptist* as I read them in Valentin's work, are inherent not only in the details of the narratives of his dramas, but organic to the complex organization and composition of his spaces. Reading a few of his works will illustrate and elaborate the points already noted. *The Denial of St. Peter* (**Figure 3**) is our next focus.



**Figure 3:** Valentin de Boulogne, *The Denial of St. Peter* (c 1615-17). Fondazione di Studi Storia dell'Arte, Roberto Longhi, Florence. 67 ½ x 94 7/8 in [171.5 x 241 cm]

In *The Denial of St. Peter* hand gestures dance left to right across the mid canvas, each describing their portion of a larger ongoing narrative of betrayal. Starting on the lower left: St. Peter has previously left the court yard where he has thrice been identified by servant women as being a follower of the Nazarene, and has thrice denied it (thrice doubling of betrayals). By relocating the narrative from a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jerusalem courtyard, to a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Rome tavern, Valentin does more than update the scene, he also creates a fourth sequel to the Gospel narrative. Peter has now wandered into a tavern and is about to warm his hand over a brazier, when for the fourth time a woman servant gets hold of his brown cover with her right hand to “discover” him, and, as her open right hand indicates, positively identify him. Already, the hands of a man at arms behind St. Peter are ready to grab hold of him.

On the right half of the canvas, a group of four are focused on a game of dice. Ignoring the activity next to him, the bare-headed soldier next to the woman servant has his right hand pressing down the stone plinth as if to keep it stable, and his left holding his chin as if to prop himself up; he waits for the three dice still suspended in the air, to fall on the surface and determine the fate of the play and perhaps of his life; what is playing out next to him is of no interest to this young soldier, it has no significance for him. The helmeted soldier next to him has just thrown the dice. His hand casts a shadow on the table – an ominous emblem of the transience of fortune.<sup>4</sup>

The red-sleeved man with his back to the viewer is pointing across to St. Peter, the woman servant, and policeman as he addresses his companion furthest right who also refers to the latter group with his thumb. As the pointing fingers indicate, these men are aware of what the woman servant has roiled up. The two men are not only “signaling” information to each other, they have eye contact and the open mouth of the red-hatted man on the upper right indicates conversation. Are these soldiers casting lots over St Peter’s cloak? What is Valentin suggesting in the descriptive gestures of the hands? That life is fragile, and change of fortune inevitable; that in the everyday world betrayal is a constant. Of one thing we are certain, the next moment is going to be brutal. Rhetorically, these gestures ask the witnessing viewer: where do you stand?

For it is in the everyday early 17<sup>th</sup>-century world of Rome that this narrative takes place, and the larger narrative is told in gestures not only in the hands of characters presented, but in their heads, eyes, mouths, and body motions. More, as is often the case, in the “coded” symbolic items, or symbolic gestures. The almost symmetrical grouping of three figures on the left and four on the right has already been noted; I note almost symmetrical, because the three on the left are given more prominence if slightly less horizontal space. As in the Gospel narratives, a servant woman (note that her mouth is

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<sup>4</sup> The game played with 3 dice is *riffa*, an illegal game because believed to be susceptible to cheating.

open, her eyes are fixed on St. Peter) denounces the fisherman as a follower of Jesus; Peter recoils, his left shoulder heaves as he turns his back to his accuser, his head bends away from her, and he openly mouths his denial. The soldier behind him has his eyes fixed on the servant woman, and seems to ask for certitude: are you sure? The dice playing soldiers also seem to want the assurance of a stable playing surface. We have already noted one pressing down on the surface, the other is holding on to the corner as if to stabilize the Roman ruin on which they are playing. They seem unaware and careless of what is occurring around them, they are only concerned about the rolling and airborne dice.

One notes that the dice-playing surface is not a tavern table but a Roman architectural fragment which retains a bas-relief. This is one of those “coded” *symbolic gestures* which require special knowledge. The Met catalog usefully informs us that Valentin appropriated both a 1<sup>st</sup>-century C.E. terra cotta low relief – *Hercules and the Allegory of Winter*, now in the Louvre (Hercules is carrying a bull on his shoulder, followed by an allegory of one of the seasons, also bringing food) – and of a similar representation, a Figure from an engraving of the wedding of *Peleus and his Veiled Bride*.<sup>5</sup> An amalgamation of two ancient representations, this Roman architectural fragment and high relief is an appropriation and largely Valentin's invention, and an intentional symbolic gesture. The bottom of the architectural fragment is cropped so that we have three quarters of the figures, and is framed to not only echo but to contrast the larger composition. This is so not because of obvious color contrast, but because the progress of the figures on the relief is from right to left whereas that of those above are essentially from left to right. We see this especially in the gestures of the hands. In the relief, hands also run across the mid-section of the depiction. These hands however do not describe “suspended time” in a present narrative, or conflict; on the contrary, they convey a cyclical perennial festivity, the stable plenty and renewal of the seasons, a renewal in marriage. This “subtext,” this *symbolic gesture*, this recollection of a pagan myth, however else it may function – e.g. Valentin's rejection of the paradigm of beauty offered by the idealistic style of classical Greece and Rome – it is also certainly a rhetorical critique of early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Christian Rome practice.

In *Fortune Teller with Soldiers* (**Figure 4**), another of Valentin's tavern cautionary dramas, hands gestures are prominently highlighted to describe the nefarious activities of all involved. From left to right we see a young boy, perhaps the gypsy Fortune teller's child, lifting a man's cloak to untie his purse. Even as he is himself being pickpocketed, the man's right hand is furtively feeling his way into the Fortune Teller's apron pocket; and with a sidelong glance at the viewer, he also beckons her or him to silence with his right index finger over his covered mouth. The gypsy Fortune teller has gingerly taken hold of the fingers of the young soldiers open palm with her left hand. As a distraction,

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<sup>5</sup> Annik Lemoine and Keith Christiansen, “Catalogue,” in *Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio*, 117.





**Figure 4:** Valentin de Boulogne, *The Fortune Teller with Soldiers* (c. 1618-20). Toledo Museum of Art. 58 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 93 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (149,5 x 238.5 cm)



**Figure 5:** Valentin de Boulogne, *Concert* (c. 1615). Indianapolis Museum of Art. 47 x 62 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in (119.4 x 158.7 cm)



she holds a glass ready to toast him a good fortune along with his companions behind him. As with the man on the far left, the soldier on the far right also addresses the viewer who has just come upon the scene. Whereas the man on the left asks for silent collaboration to his theft (we are to assent that stealing from a gypsy is both fair and fun), the man on the right is melancholy. The older beards should be protecting the young naïve recruit in their charge. The soldier on the far right addressing the viewer knows he is allowing a betrayal of duty; even as he would pass it off as a common place practical joke. The melancholy in his eyes and facial gesture invites us to critical examination of the scene; these gestures rhetorically asks the viewer: do you really want to come in here, participate in this? Or should you not raise an alarm? While the white wine is flowing, there is no joy on any of the faces present, and if past is prologue, it has set the stage for the young soldier's future.

In the Met exhibition, the curators included cases in which 15<sup>th</sup>- and early 16<sup>th</sup>-century swords, exactly like those we encounter in many of these paintings, as well as baroque musical instruments, were displayed prominently next to the paintings. I confess there is still enough boyhood Alexander Dumas and Rafael Sabatini left in me to be attracted to the sword displays as well as to the baroque instruments; but I did wonder why the curators felt the need for such, as the sword and hilts are so meticulously rendered in the paintings, and unlike the old musical instruments, not as beautiful or as presently exotic. If the curators meant to bring attention to Valentin's insistence on exact details, and corroborate his fidelity to facts, their goal was met. But if the swords are not "coded" or quite "symbolic" gestures in the way the "Lamb" functions in the *John the Baptist*, or the bas-relief in *The Denial of St. Peter*, they nevertheless carry weight as gestures: they are a constant reminder of the prevailing tension and impending violence about to explode – and symbols of power. The man whose back is turned from the viewer does more than clarify two groups of figures arranged on either side of him on converging diagonals. The convergence is a rhetorical gesture of opposition. The red-shirted man's cuirass and sword define the "red line" the young man's extended arm and open palm has, perhaps unwittingly, crossed. Confrontation between the two groups is imminent. Symmetrical, fluid, rhythmic as grouped figures on the canvas may be, the composition's movement and narrative are nevertheless tense. Even the architectural fragment which serves as a table is neither horizontal, nor quite diagonal, but askew, just crooked enough to convey disharmony and unease. Unlike the other architectural fragment we looked at, this one is left in the dark, and directs us into the dark.

If musicians often replace gamblers around the table of Valentin's taverns, pickpockets are always present, predators are always about. *Concert* and *Musicians and Drinkers* are illustrative (**Figures 5 and 6**).

We have already seen the hand and body gestures of the man in the red hat (though reversed) in *The Denial of St. Peter* – recall the young soldier watching the falling dice. Similarly, the soldier

pouring himself a fresh glass echoes the gesture of the one in *The Fortune Teller with Soldiers* as well as one in *Musicians and Drinkers*. These recurring figures in Valentin's composition can be attributed to the cast of models who re-appear from canvas to canvas, as well as to the demands of the conventional genre which required at once attention to music, merrymaking, drinking, and some kind of larceny. The cautionary tale: too much indulgence in the first three made one an easy mark for the latter. As always, originality lies not in the subject, but in the treatment of the conventions, and how they are transformed. Gestures and the movements they engender are how Valentin engages his viewers.

A "concert" is an agreement in design or plan: a union formed by mutual communication of opinion and views; it assumes contact, connection, association, and relationship. What is striking about the accumulated gestures of *Concert* (**Figure 5**) is that they convey not contact, connection or relationship among the figures, but underscore their disconnected lives. The gypsy woman on the left has entered the tavern; her left hand is begging for coins from the red-hatted man. He avoids her pleading eyes, looks at her empty left hand, and his open mouth signals her dismissal and his lack of charity. Meanwhile the gypsy is lifting a handkerchief from the back pocket of the strumming lute player who only notices the approach of the viewer. The flutist has also noted the oncoming viewer – perhaps a more promising customer. While the musicians are playing next to each other and surely performing the same song, they are not "in tune" with each other: there is no eye contact, no gesture of any kind indicating one is musically responding to the other. Indeed, the gestures of the flutist's eyes and face describe him as gazing inward – perhaps focused on his alcoholic headache – note his furrowed forehead and roseate cheeks. Or perhaps it is a pensive gaze, he is lost in reverie, or he is even attentive to his music. What he is not attentive to is to the lute player on his right (left on the canvas), his musical companion; he is not in "concert" with him. The pie on the table remains unshared and uneaten; the soldier drinks alone. In spite of the diagonal groupings in which the figures left and right move toward each other, there are pointedly no gestures of contact. Whatever pretended conviviality may have preceded this moment, it is now dissipated, and melancholy isolation and torpor is the reality at hand. The viewer, invited onto the scene by Valentin's composition, is also isolated and left out.

A similar sense of isolation, of alienation pervades the painting variously known as *Musicians and Drinkers* or *Gathering in a Tavern* or *The Guileless Musician* (**Figure 6**).

Fulfilling its genre, music, drinking, eating, whoring, and thieving are represented in these figures, and in spite of the common goal of the courtesan, gypsy, and swordsman to distract and manipulate the "guileless" flutist, all of the figures, as in *Concert* remain profoundly alone. While the spatial composition of the painting, the disposition of the figures on the canvas is certainly harmonious – they even "sing" (bodies and heads are placed as if notes on a musical score), hands, eyes, facial and body gestures speak of their detachment from each other, of their isolation. As in the Indianapolis *Concert*,



**Figure 6:** Valentin de Boulogne, *Gathering in a Tavern* or *The Guileless Musician* (c.1625).

Musée du Louvre, Paris. 37 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 52 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (96 x 133cm).

there is no eye contact between the figures, their activities and hand gestures are self-serving, they are all self-absorbed. The predators are actively diverting the attention of the flutist: the hand gestures describe the activity: the swordsman is pouring wine, the courtesan is offering a piece of meat, and the gypsy giving a toast while she picks his pocket. Their body and facial gestures express connote a “contrabass”, a lower narrative register: all of the persona perform routinely, none of them are present to the action of the moment. This is especially evident in the eyes and expression of the courtesan. Pretty, obviously still very young and not yet battered, she stares into some indeterminate space: it is the inward gaze, not unlike that of the young flutist of the *Concert*. Unlike that young man, she does

not appear intoxicated: her face, neck and bosom are pale and clear. While her right arm leans upon shoulder of the man – her “familiar” – next to her, there is no intimacy between them. Her hand hangs loosely, she does not touch or caress; he, concentrating on his pour, ignores her presence. What is she erasing and denying as she proffers that piece of meat (clearly a synecdoche)? Is she aware of what she is doing? Is she thinking about her future, and what will have become of her?

The gypsy’s face is uncharacteristically reflective. As she picks the boy’s pocket of his chain, she must focus on any sign that he has become aware of her hand, so she watches his neck and shoulder muscles. But there is also gravity in the set of her mouth, and in the downward movement of her white sleeve, a sense of fleeting time. Ephemeral too are the boy’s reveries and music. Even as he indulges his senses in their luxury, emptiness and futility are evident in the embedded *Vanitas* of this painting. Though not as explicitly contextualized as they are in the symbolic *Vanitas* produced about this time period in Flanders and the Netherlands, many of the motifs are there: beside hearing, the evanescence of sight, touch, taste, and perhaps smell is evoked. While the gypsy woman still retains her charms, she is no longer as young as the courtesan. Boy and man offer a similar juxtaposition: the youth’s inward inspiration is supplanted by the man’s need for wine’s intoxication. There are other common *Vanitas* symbols of luxury and impermanence of earthly delights: the time piece at the end of the chain the gypsy is pulling out of the boy’s pocket; the man’s rich yellow silk sash, as well as the ostrich feather in his cap. Grounding it all is the architectural remnant of the long past Roman Empire.

One can readily assent to consensus appreciations that there “are in his paintings a psychological acuity and a pervasive melancholy; suspended forms and meanings; and the constant implication of the beholder” (Lemoine 2). But this observation brings us back to our opening question: how are the “psychological acuity,” the “pervasive melancholy, the suspended forms and meanings,” the “constant implication of the beholder” and more, effected – in short, “how does it all work”? One can argue that *all* aspects of Valentin’s paintings, from spatial compositions to the flesh tones of his figures are particular gestures in that they participate in the drama playing out before us. The ascending diagonal of the seven figures of *Fortune Teller with Soldiers* (**Figure 4**), for example, is ironic as their unity implied by the composition is belied by the narrative of betrayal. The old beards should be protecting the young bare-headed naïve recruit; instead they allow him to be scammed. We have also seen how the skin tones of the courtesan in *The Guileless Musician* (**Figure 6**), and that of the flutist in *Concert* (**Figure 5**) are narrative gestures. Descriptive, rhetorical and symbolic gestures are organic and integral to Valentin’s *œuvre*; these gestures work together, and can sometimes at once be descriptive, rhetorical and symbolic (e.g. the courtesan’s arm on her pimp’s shoulder). The results are complex narratives which begin and continue well beyond their pictorial frame, have depth before and behind the flat



canvas; narratives which insist on affirming the humanity of both the meanest and the most exalted of his figures, and that are always challenging the responses of the viewer.

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