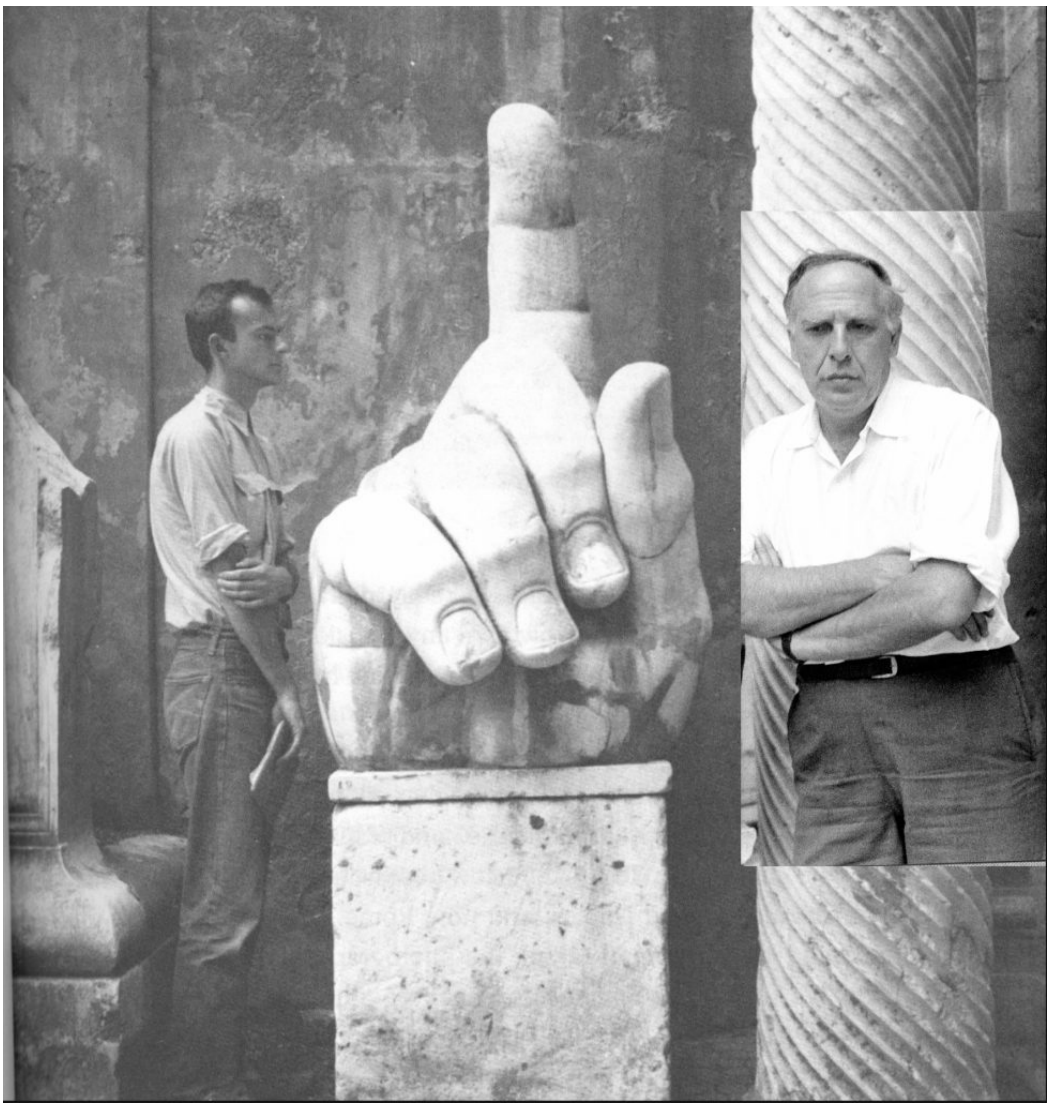
Fragments in Conversation: Imagining Twombly and Guston in Rome

In a quiet courtyard of the Capitoline Museum in Rome, the colossal hand of Constantine rests on its plinth, a fragment of imperial ambition and human scale. Here, Guston and Twombly meet, observing and responding to the same ruin through their very different artistic sensibilities; the hypothetical encounter becomes a meditation on gesture, history, and the ethical weight of mark-making, allowing the past to speak while their own practices converse across time.

The afternoon sun warmed the stones of the Capitoline Museum’s courtyard, its light striking the marble façades with a soft, diffuse glow. The colossal right hand of Constantine rested on a low plinth, isolated from other objects, a fragment of a once-magnificent imperial statue. Its scale was imposing even as a fragment, and the careful carving of the fingers and veins conveyed both power and a subtle human vulnerability.



A collage that I created from a photograph of Twombly (perhaps taken by Robert Rauschenberg) and Philip Guston at the Capitoline Museum in Rome.

The colossal right hand of Constantine, displayed on a plinth in the Capitoline courtyard, is a surviving fragment of a seated statue created between 313 and 324 AD for the Basilica of Maxentius. Originally part of an acrolithic composition, the emperor’s head and exposed body were carved from Parian marble, while the draped cloak was rendered in gilded bronze foil; this suggested both divine authority and imperial grandeur. The statue, which once rose approximately 10 metres, assimilated Constantine to Jupiter, portraying him as a god on earth; the raised index finger, now partially restored, likely held a sceptre, reinforcing the gesture’s symbolic assertion of power.

Today, the hand conveys a mixture of monumental force and fragile humanity. The work's fragmentary state, seen alongside other preserved sections of the colossal statue, including the head and central arm, reveals the sculpture as a ruin that still communicates its historical and political ambition. As isolated fragments, these remnants encourage reflection on the passage of time; the vulnerability of even the most imposing symbols; and the ethical and aesthetic weight of human representation, themes that resonate profoundly with both Guston's and Twombly's concerns in painting.

> τῷ σωτηριώδει σημείῳ, τῷ ἀληθεῖ ἐλέγχῳ τῆς ἀνδρείας τὴν πόλιν ὑμῶν ἀπὸ ζυγοῦ τοῦ τυράννου διασωθεῖσαν ἠλευθέρωσα, ἔτι μὴν καὶ τὴν σύγκλητον καὶ τὸν δῆμον Ῥωμαίων τῇ ἀρχαίᾳ ἐπιφανείᾳ καὶ λαμπρότητι ἐλευθερώσας ἀποκατέστησα. -- Eusebius
>
> Under this singular sign (*singularius signum*), which is the mark (*insigne*) of true excellence, I restored (*restituo*) the city of Rome, the senate, and the Roman people, torn away by the yoke (*iugo*) of tyrannical rule (*tyrannicus dominatio*), to their former freedom (*libertas*) and nobility (*nobilitas*). -- tr. Rufinus

Guston leaned against a nearby column, sketchbook resting loosely in his hands, eyes fixed on the hand with an intensity that seemed to challenge the world to respond. "Even as a fragment," he said, tapping his fingers against the page, "this hand carries a grotesque weight. It's absurd, monumental, human. Every mark here insists on being read as a statement of power and presence. It reminds me of the hooded figures or the shoes in my later paintings: blunt witnesses to human absurdity and moral consequence."

Guston shifted slightly, letting the weight of the fragment press on him as he traced an invisible line from the marble back to his sketchbook. "Even fractured, it asserts authority; even incomplete, it demands a response. The hand is absurdly large, but it is human; its veins, its fingers, its tension—all of it insists that someone, somewhere, bore responsibility for the act. There is a moral weight in these gestures, whether carved in stone or brushed on canvas."

Twombly stood a few paces away, tilting his head sideways as he traced the subtle fractures in the marble. "I understand," he said, voice calm, almost lyrical, "but for me the incompleteness is essential. The gesture does not exist merely to confront; it exists to be felt, to be remembered.

The cracks, the missing pieces, the space around it—all of that creates a dialogue between past and present. My marks are like that; they do not dominate the surface; they listen to what is already there, extending the story rather than imposing it. Even in ruin, the hand speaks, but it allows us to speak back." His words echoed the improvisatory gestures and calligraphic lines of *Fifty Days at Iliam,* where each mark floated between presence and absence, between history and recollection.

Guston drew a blunt, quick line across his sketchbook, a gesture almost corporeal in its insistence. "I grant you that," he said, "but there is an ethics in confrontation as well. The past presses on us, and the fragments of history demand recognition; silence or mediation is not always sufficient. When I paint, I confront moral and historical weight directly. This hand, monumental though incomplete, insists that someone accounted for every gesture, every line, every mark. There is responsibility in scale and in execution; the fragment reminds us that grandeur is inseparable from human intention and consequence."

Twombly's gaze lingered, following the curvature of the knuckles and the subtle slope of the wrist. "And yet there is also an ethics of receptivity," he said. "Not every gesture must dominate; some exist to be extended or echoed. In its incompleteness, the hand allows us to inhabit the space it leaves, to feel the gestures that preceded us. The hand already exists. Our gestures extend it, converse with it, but do not dominate it. In its incompleteness, it teaches humility. Every mark we make can be a response rather than a statement. Painting is similar; we mark, we trace, we respond, but we do not always impose. The ruins speak to us precisely because they permit reflection as well as recognition."

For a long moment, the courtyard fell into silence, the distant shuffle of tourists paling against the quiet gravity of the fragment. Guston's gaze remained intense and corporeal, measuring the hand as if willing it to yield its secrets, while Twombly's eyes drifted over the fractures, absorbing the residue of centuries. The colossal hand became a mediator between them, embodying the convergence of human ambition, ethical responsibility, and historical fragility. In that shared attention, both understood the stakes of gesture and mark; one through confrontation, the other through evocation, and both through fidelity to what remains.

Finally, Guston nodded toward the fragment. “They wanted to make power eternal,” he said, “but what survives is fragmentary, grotesque, human. That is the lesson for us: every action, every word, every figure, every mark carries weight.” Twombly turned back, eyes following the line of the fingers. “And in that fragment, in the silence between gestures, I feel history breathing. Painting is its echo—not the hand itself, but the trace it leaves, its shadow.”

Source: https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/twomblygustonrome/