

The many meanings of a gestural motif

[Introduction to 'The hand on the breast' by Julius Lange]

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One of the persistent illusions of intellectual life is that we're now able to see things more clearly than earlier scholars did. We appreciate subtleties they simply blundered past; we're able to make the right distinctions and ask the right questions. All it takes, though, is a brief brush with a perceptive earlier writer to dispel this illusion. At least that was my experience when I read Julius Lange's remarkable 1887 essay, 'The hand on the breast.'

Lange trains his eye on a common enough but easy to overlook class of gestures: those that 'bend backward... to the subject that emits them.' I once examined this class myself—using the term 'body-directed gestures' (Cooperrider, 2014)—but I had no idea at the time I was in good company. Lange zooms in on two body-directed gestures in particular. Both involve, in broad strokes, a movement of the hands to the chest, but they are quite distinct in meaning. The first is what we might call the 'deep feeling' gesture: the hand is brought to the chest, often with the open palm pressed against it, as if to convey that one is experiencing some intense inner feeling. As Lange observes, the likely motivation for the gesture is that, when we experience pain or sudden sensation, we often bring our hands to the locus of that sensation. (We do this, he proposes, to apply a kind of soothing 'counter pressure.')

To the best of my knowledge, the 'deep feeling' gesture has escaped notice—or at least discussion—among contemporary gesture scholars, but there is no question it merits a close look.

The second backward-bending gesture is sometimes called 'self-pointing': one directs the hands to the chest to draw attention to oneself, to convey 'I,' 'me,' or 'my.' The gesture uses the middle of the chest as metonym for the whole self. (Outside of Anglo-European contexts, the nose sometimes serves this metonymic purpose.) In contrast to the 'deep feeling' gesture, 'self-pointing'—though never a focal topic—has occasionally been discussed by gesture researchers, beginning perhaps with Andrea de Jorio (de Jorio, 1832/2000) and continuing into the present (e.g., Fenlon et al., 2019; Kendon, 2010; McClave, 2000).*

The 'deep feeling' gesture and the 'self-pointing gesture' differ starkly in their emotional loading: the first runs hot, serving as a public display of intense private feeling; the second runs cold, with much of the indifference of an arrow symbol. Or so it would seem. Having drawn a line between these two gestures,

* The citations for this paper follow social science conventions.

Lange quickly smudges it, noting that ‘it can be nearly impossible to distinguish them in life and art.’ Contemporary gesture scholars may find themselves nodding in agreement with Lange here, and that nodding may continue as he adds: ‘In most cases there is a bit of each [meaning] in play.’ As he argues, even when we’re merely pointing to ourselves, the gesture may come intermixed with feelings ranging from ‘deep humility to the greatest pride’; and even when we’re bringing a hand to our chest to express intense feeling, the movement still remains ‘an expression of self-consciousness.’ In short, there may not always be one ‘ground truth’ communicative intention behind the gesture; multiple meanings may come together to motivate it.

The multiplicity of meaning proves to be a major theme of Lange’s essay. Not only in the sense that a particular hand-to-chest movement may involve more than one meaning, but also in the sense that, across particular instances, those meanings multiply. He doesn’t regard these meanings as discrete and all-or-none but more like shadings or flavors, present to greater or lesser degrees. As Lange walks through a long series of hand-to-chest gestures—most appearing in European art between the 17th and 19th centuries—his compendium of shadings grows. The action may communicate that one has received a lesson or a rebuke; that one wishes to convey thanks or confirmation; that one is in distress. In certain instances it may suggest ‘refined sentimentality’; in others ‘revolutionary enthusiasm.’ It might have a ritual quality in one context, a ‘loud declamatory’ quality in another, and an erotic quality in a third.

It is in part because of this multiplicity, presumably, that Lange treats the hand-to-chest movement as a ‘motif.’ (He evocatively likens such motifs to deities or spirits that exert their forces over artists.) Motifs are not as rigid and discrete as ‘symbols’; nor are they as gauzy and ineffable as ‘styles.’ There is a bit of each in play, we might say. The in-betweenness of the idea of a motif fits well with the in-betweenness of the hand-to-chest gesture. It is a gesture that emerges out of the confluence of universal expressive intuitions and local stylistic currents; it seems to sit on a spectrum—as Gombrich (1966) observed in his brief remarks on the gesture—between ‘natural symptom and conventional symbol’ (p. 393). This natural vs. conventional spectrum is one that gesture researchers have long grappled with (Cooperrider, 2019). It was once common to talk about whether or not a certain gesture was conventional or spontaneous. But, more recently, gesture scholars have become interested in phenomena that defy this binary—including ‘gesture families’ (Kendon, 2004), and ‘recurrent gestures’ (Müller, 2017). All these gestural phenomena have a stable core of meaning, with notable variation around that core. It’s tempting to say art historians would do well to import some of these terms, but it’s equally tempting to say gesture researchers might do well to think more about ‘motifs.’ The term suggests a concern with history—and with how variation around a core meaning changes over time—that is almost entirely absent in contemporary gesture studies.

Consideration of how art historians and gesture scholars approach bodily communication brings us to another key issue: how the gestures used in art

compare to those used in life. Unfortunately, Lange doesn't say much on this score. Art offers a window into life, of course, but it's not an undistorting window; art inevitably curates and stylizes life. A basic question that arises is about prevalence: Are the gestures most common in art the same as those that are most common in life? Not necessarily, for the reason Gombrich (1966) pointed out: some gestures are simply easier to paint than others. Only certain gestures are recognizable when captured in a momentary slice. A head shake, as he notes, can't be readily painted because there's no tell-tale moment. The hand-to-chest can, in contrast, because as it touches the chest it takes a pause. This pause—or gestural 'hold' as it's known (e.g., McNeill, 1992)—gives the artist an opportunity to pin the action down. And so it's quite plausible that, much as the head shake is dramatically underrepresented in painting, the hand-to-chest is overrepresented.

Questions about gesture in art and life become even more interesting in light of historical trends that Lange notes. He observes, for instance, that, in the 16th century, the hand-to-chest was associated with paintings of men but later became almost entirely associated with women. 'After originally expressing a feeling of responsibility,' he writes, 'it gradually became a sign of refined sentimentality more appropriate to the female than the male character.' Were these trends in portraiture mirrored in life itself? Did everyday use of the gesture ebb and flow in this way, shifting along with ideas about gender and bodily comportment? It's a tantalizing question but probably an unanswerable one. After all, as Gombrich (1966) noted, when it comes to past centuries, art is our best—is some cases our only—window into visual communication. As Lange brings his essay to a close, he notes another historical trend: by the time he was writing, the hand-to-chest motif had largely faded from art (except in public monuments). However, he observes, it remained vital in life.

One has to wonder how Lange might update his essay today if he could. Given his evident intellectual omnivory, I suspect he might be intrigued to know that psychologists have begun to examine the gesture as a spontaneous expression of *kama muta*, or the feeling of 'being moved' (Zickfeld et al., 2019). He might be further intrigued to learn that, at least among American adults in 2021, the gesture was more strongly associated with women than with men (Farley, Akin, & Hedgecote, 2021). Almost certainly he would note that the gesture became a signature of certain public figures—notably Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama—and that some see it as contrived (Stanley, 2016). These figures became known for using the gesture during televised speeches and interviews—highly visible settings that are increasingly designed for their 'optics.' We wouldn't want to call these settings art, of course, but nor are they exactly life. As Lange might have reminded us, there is a bit of each in play.

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