

Concepts of iconology: From Visual Lexicon to Social Memory

13 April 2023



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Table of contents from Robert Nelson & Richard Schiff, *Critical Terms for Art History* (1996)



Cesare Ripa

*Iconologia overo Descrittione dell'imagini
universali cavate dall'antichità et da altri
luoghi (1593)*





particolarmente si vede espressa nel dipingere, & nello scolpire; ilche si mostra nel pennello, & nello scarpello, & perche in alcune altre non imita, ma supplisce à i defetti d'essa, come nell'Agricoltura particolare, però vi s'aggiunge il palo fitto in terra, quale con la sua drittura fa, che per vigor dell'arte cresca il torto, & tenero arbofcello.

A S T I N E N Z A.

DONNA che con la destra mano si ferri la bocca, & con l'altra mostri alcune viuande delicate, con vn motto, che dica.

N O N V T O R N E A B V T A R.

Per mostrare, che il mangiare cose delicate fa spesso, & facilmente precipitare in qualche errore, come l'astenersene fa la mente più atta alla contemplatione, & il corpo più pronto all'epere della virtù, & però dicefi esser l'astinenza vna regolata moderatione de' cibi, quanto s'appartiene alla sanità, necessità, qualità delle persone, che porta all'animo eleuatione di mente, viuacità d'intelletto, & fermezza di memoria, & all

E r a t o.

Tien con la destra mano vn corno di diuitie pieno di fronde, fiori, & di uersi frutti, & con la sinistra mano vn flauto, & dalla medesima banda vi è vn Cupido, che con la sinistra mano tien vna maschara, & con la destra vn'arco con la corda sciolta.

P o l i n n i a.

Tien con la destra mano vn legno simile ad vna misura, & con la sinistra vna maschara, & per terra vn'aratro.

C a l l i o p e.

Con la destra mano tiene vn libro, & con la sinistra vn pifaro, & per terra vna maschara.

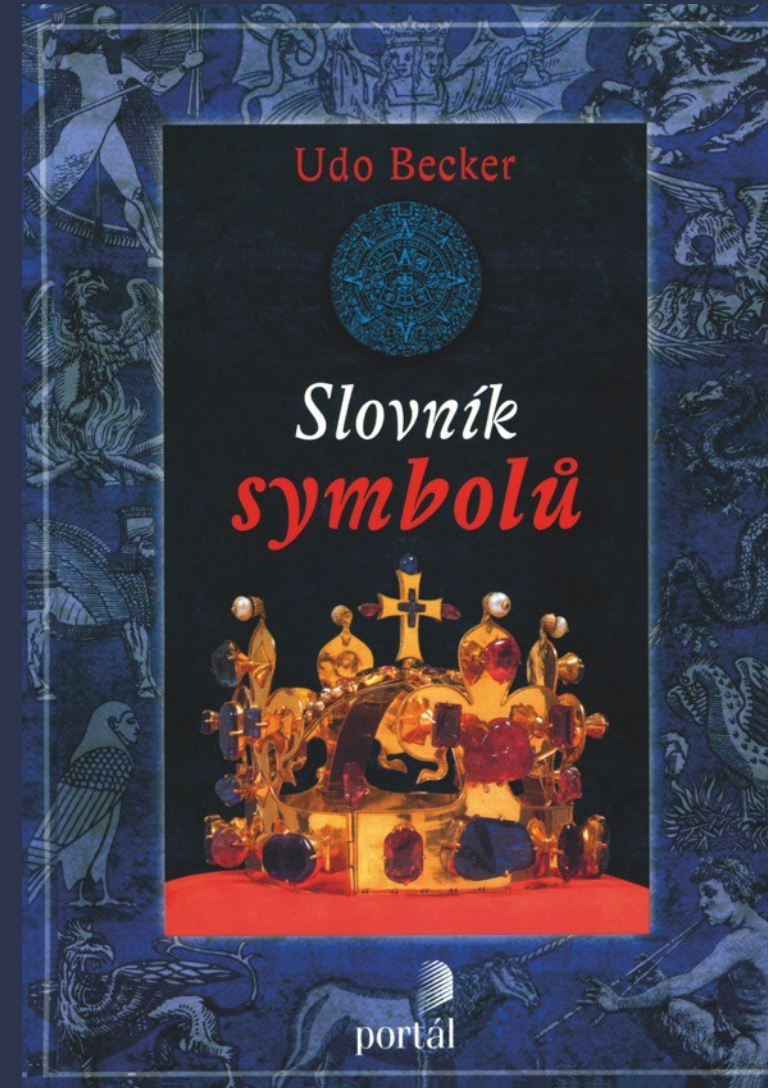
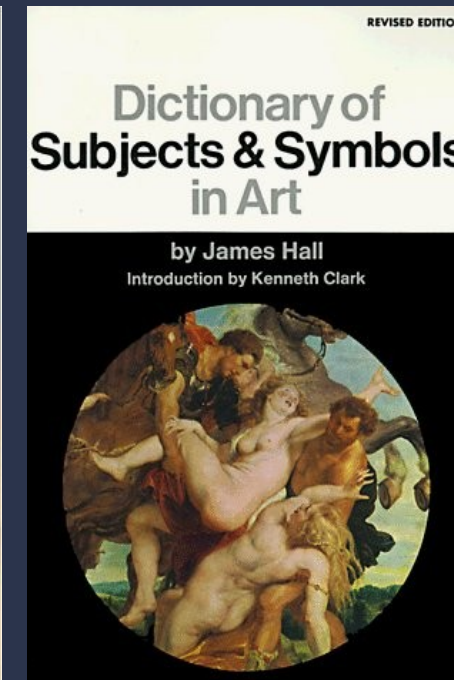
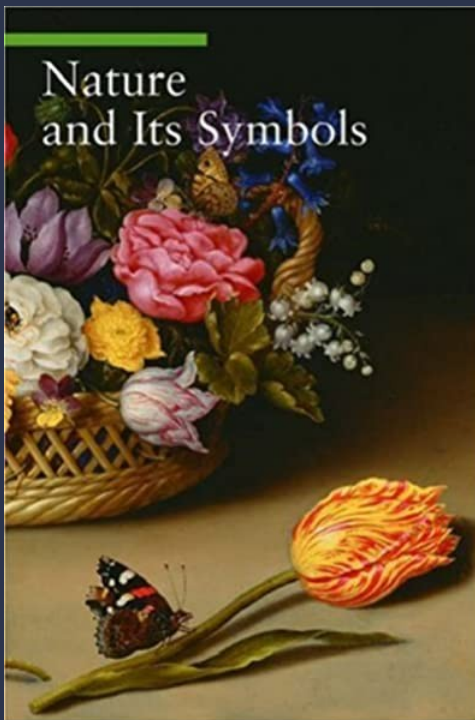
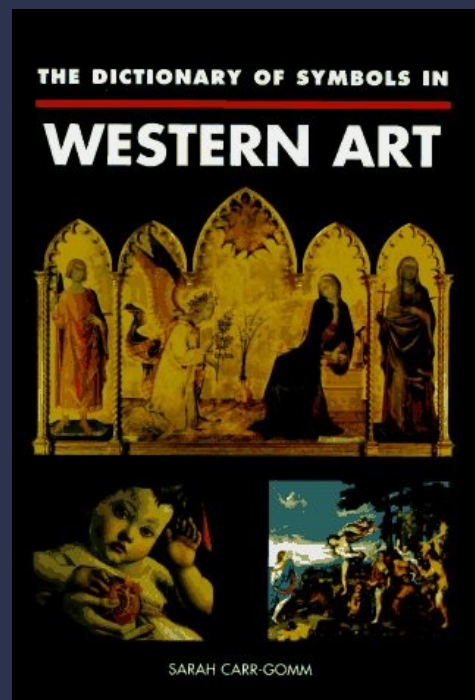
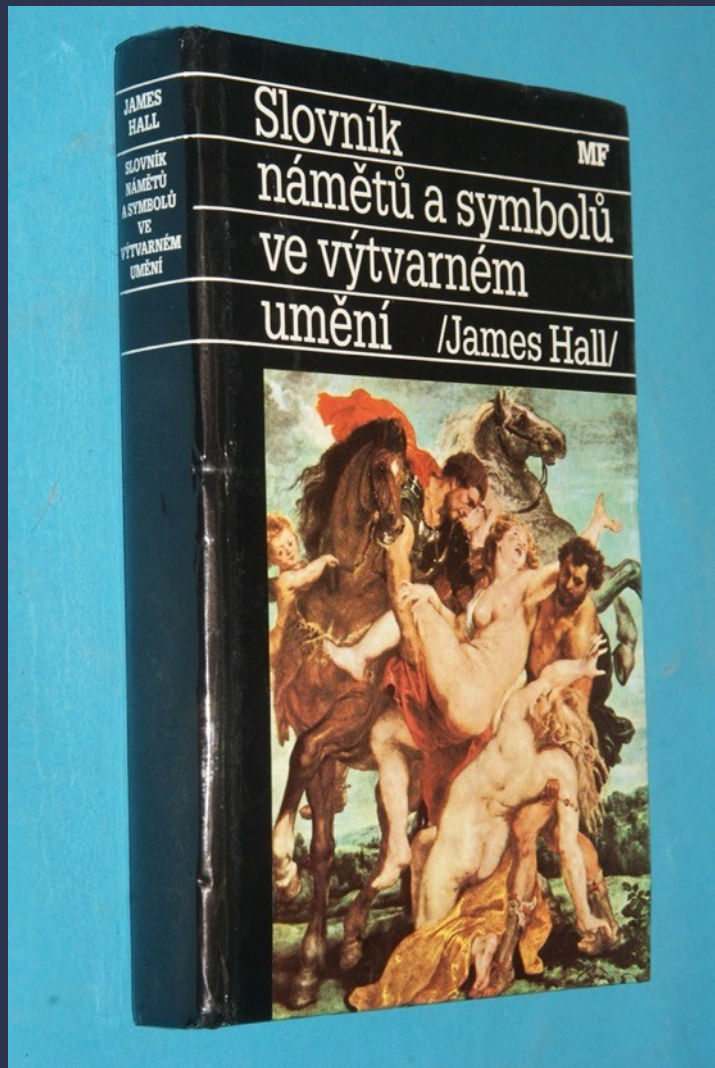
V r a n i a.

Tien con la destra mano vna tauola bianca, appoggiata alla coscia, & con la sinistra vn specchio.

N A T V R A.



DONNA





Iconology as Visual Lexicon

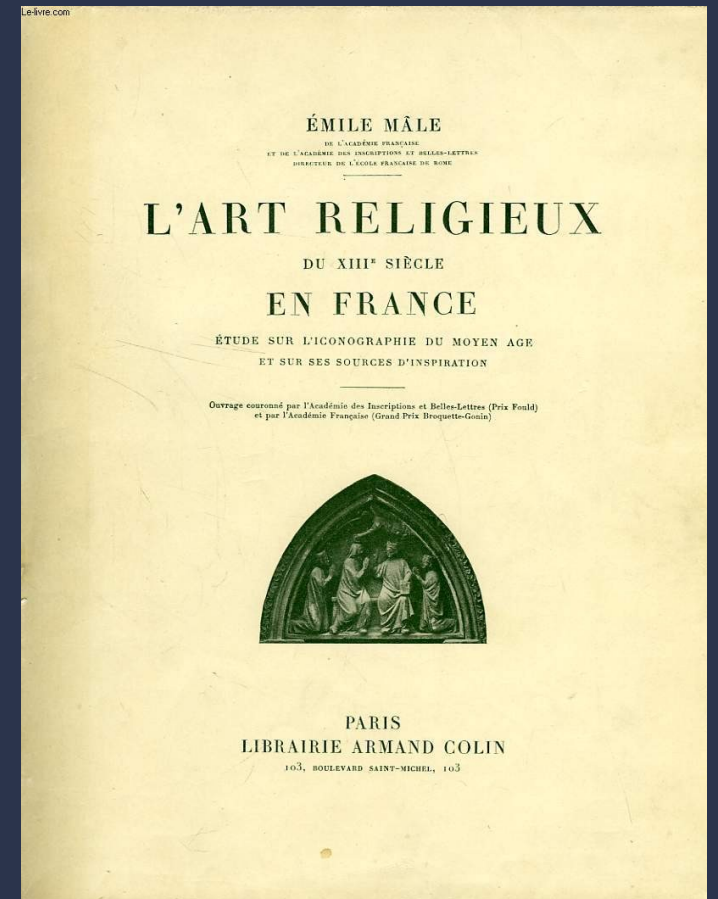
Emile Mâle (1862-1954)

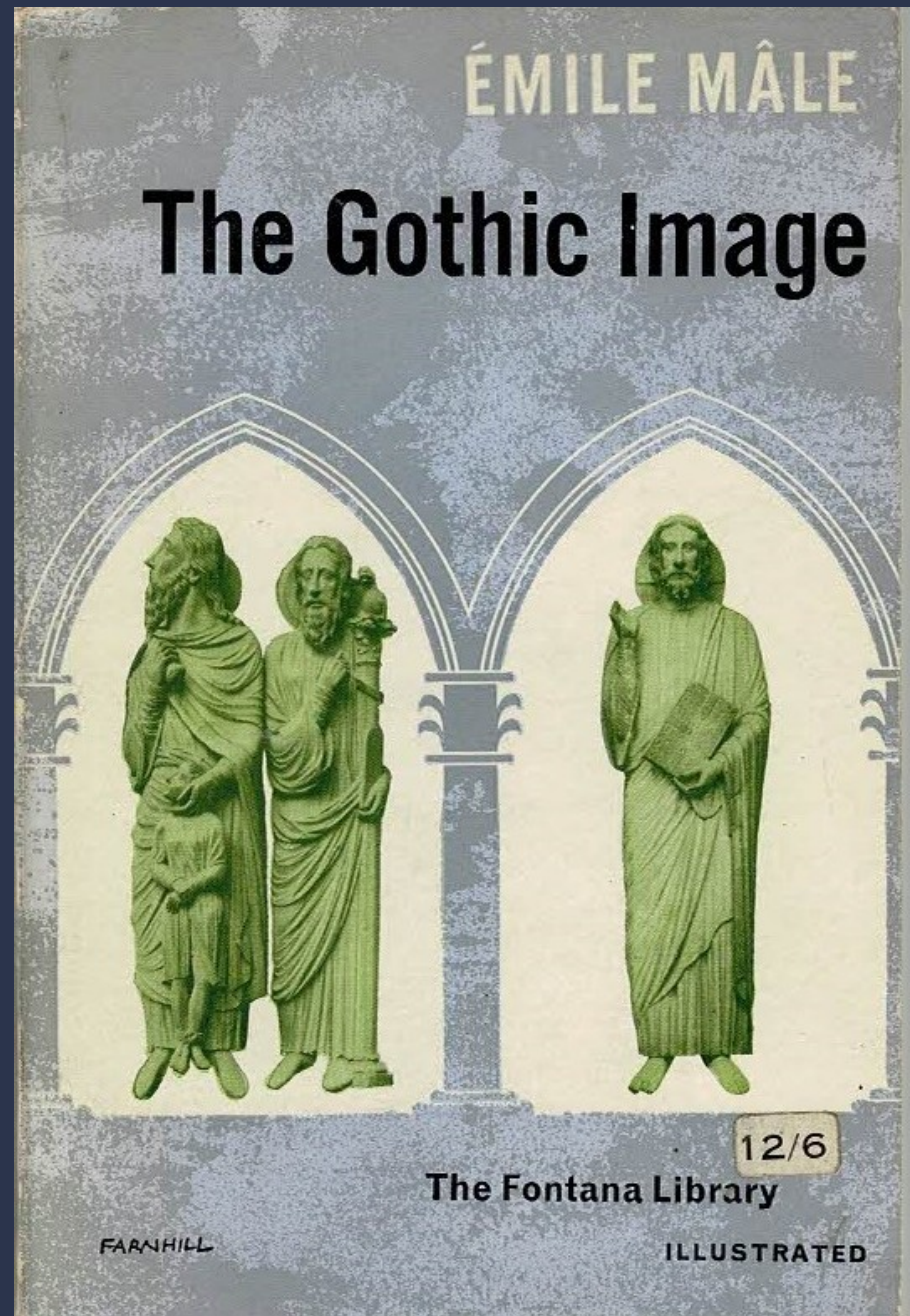
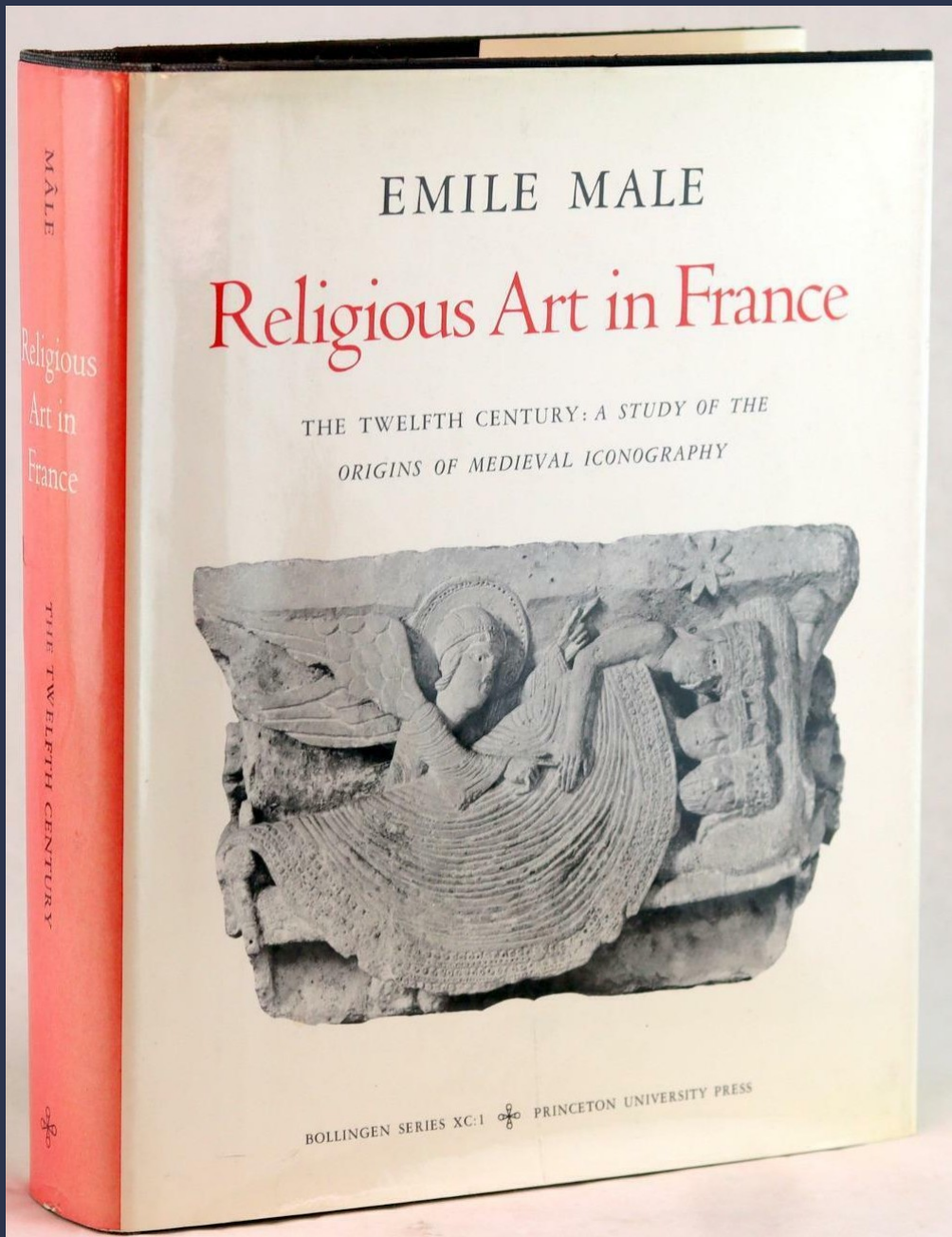




Emile Mâle (1862-1954)

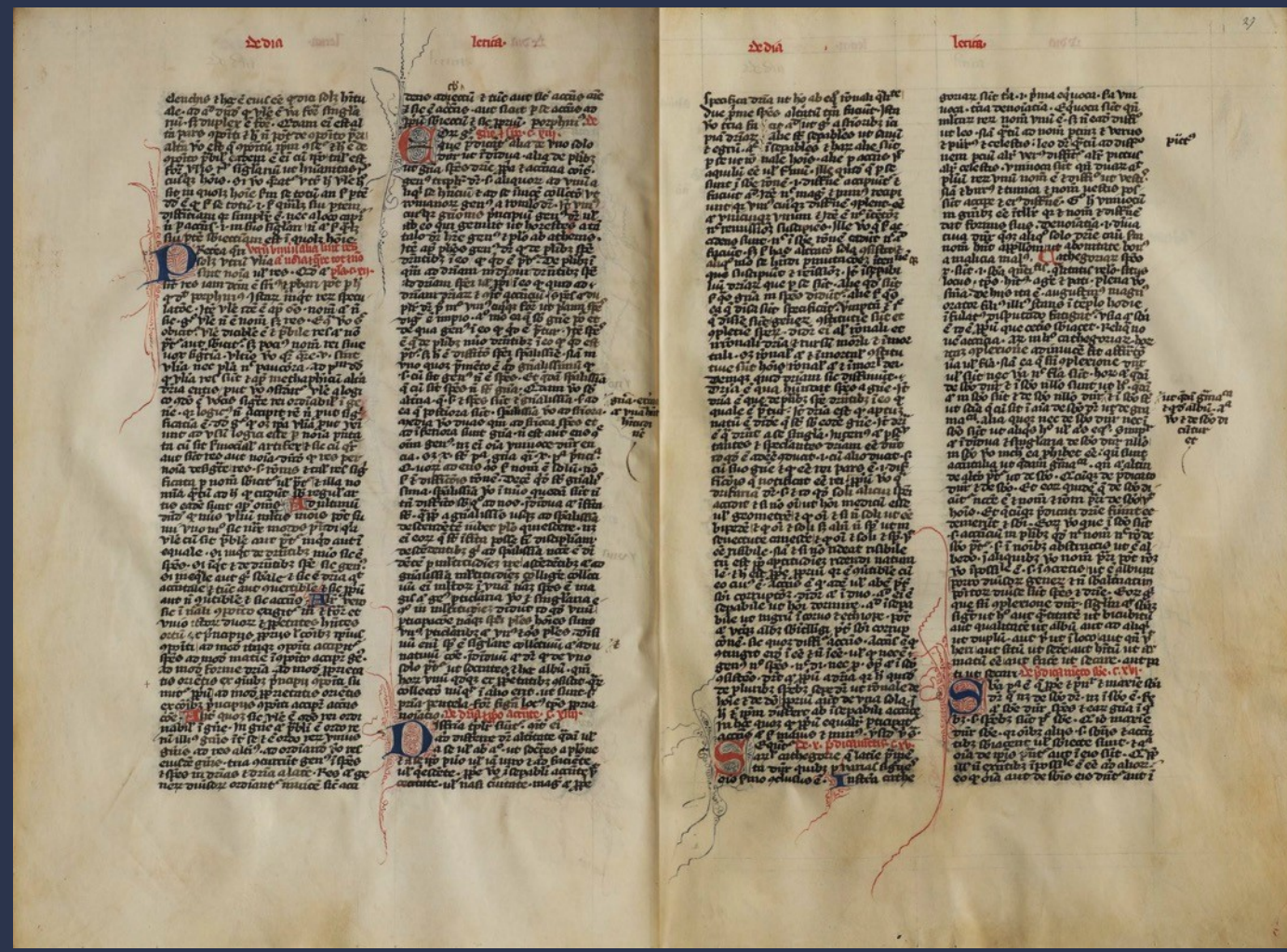
- *L'Art religieux du XIII^e siècle en France* (1899). Translated into English as *The Gothic Idol*.
- *L'Art religieux de la fin du Moyen Âge en France* (1908)





'If we impose our categories on mediaeval thought, we run every risk of error, and for that reason we borrow our method of exposition from the Middle Age itself. The four books of Vincent of Beauvais's *Mirror* furnish us with the framework for the four divisions of our study of thirteenth century art.'

Mâle, *The Gothic Idol*, p. 23



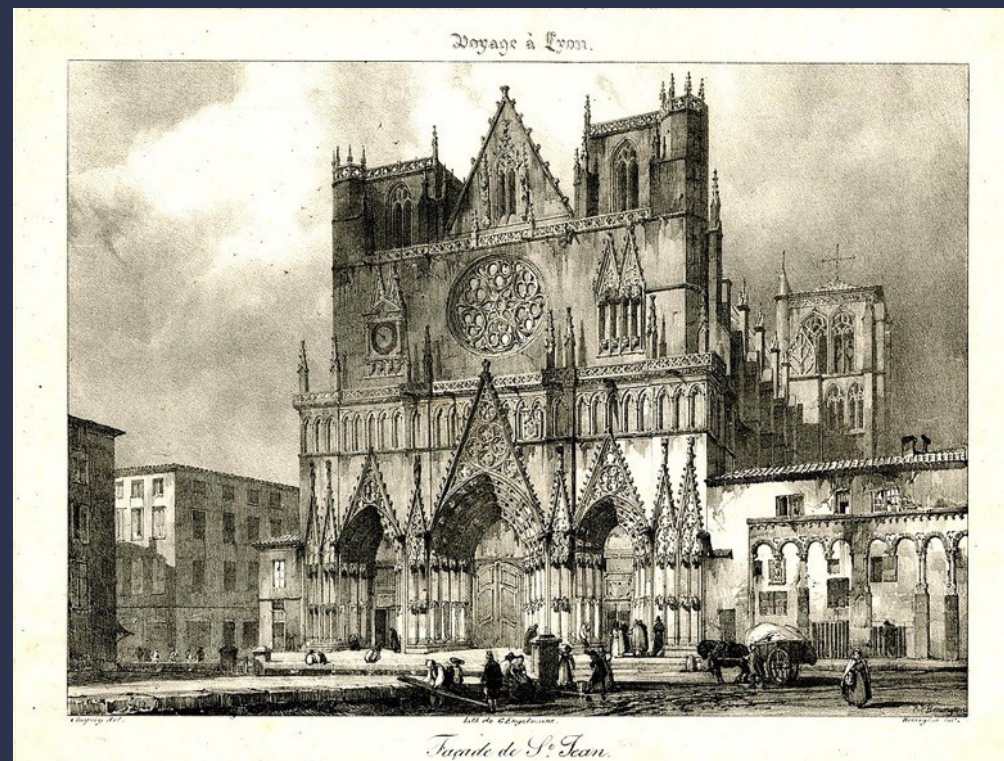
Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum maius* (1235-64)

Manuscript from the 14th century

‘The third characteristic of mediaeval art lies in this, that it is a symbolic code. From the days of the catacombs Christian art has spoken in figures, showing men one thing and inviting them to see in it the figure of another. The artist, as the doctors might have put it, must imitate God who under the letter of Scripture hid profound meaning, and who willed that nature too should hold lessons for man.

In mediaeval art there are then intentions, a knowledge of which is necessary to any real understanding of the subject. When for example in scenes of the Last Judgment we see the Wise and Foolish Virgins to the right and left hand of Christ, we should thereby understand that they symbolise the elect and the lost.’

Mâle, *The Gothic Idol*, p. 15



‘The whole world is a symbol. The sun, the stars, the seasons, day and night, all speak in solemn accents. Of what were the Middle Ages thinking in the wintertime when the days were shortening sadly and the darkness seemed to be triumphing for ever over the light ? They thought of the long centuries of twilight that preceded the coming of Christ, and they understood that in the divine drama both light and darkness have their place.’



Iconology and Symbolic Forms

Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)





Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)

STUDIES IN ICONOLOGY

*Humanistic Themes
In the Art of the Renaissance*

BY
ERWIN PANOFSKY

Icon Editions



A Member of the Perseus Books Group

Studies in Iconology, first published in 1939

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION

ACT OF INTERPRETATION

I *Primary or natural* subject matter—(A) factual, (B) expressional—constituting the world of artistic motifs.

Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).

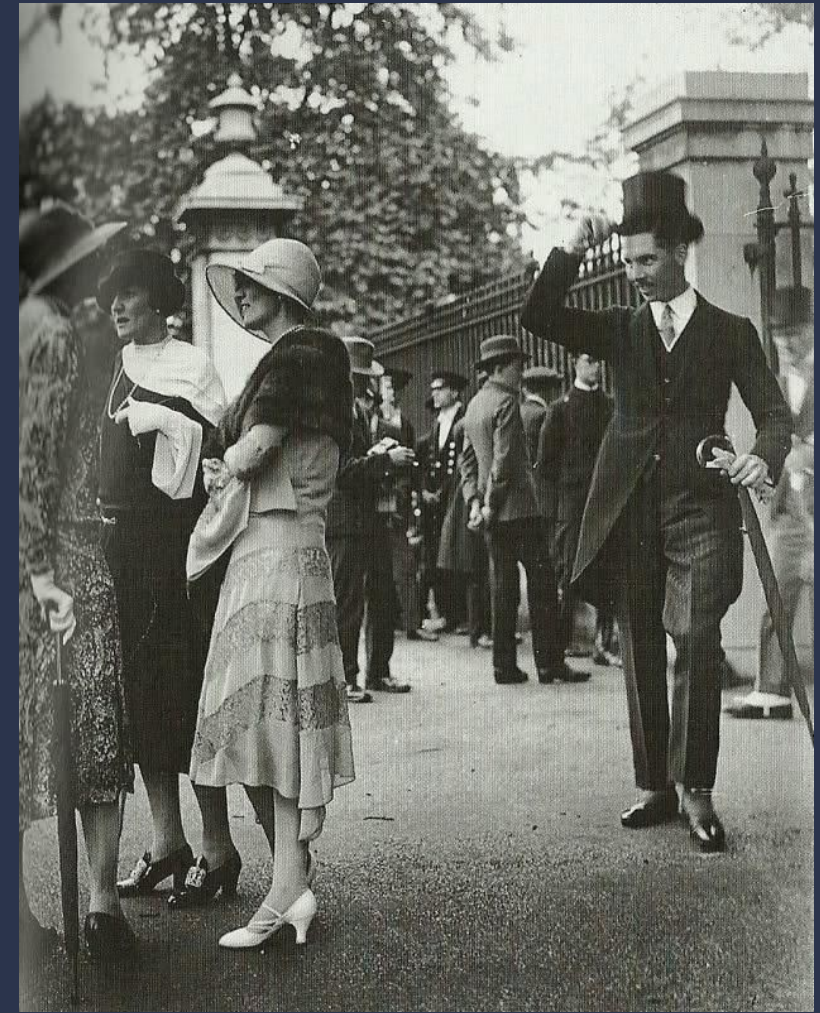
II *Secondary or conventional* subject matter, constituting the world of *images, stories* and *allegories*.

Iconographical analysis.

III *Intrinsic meaning or content*, constituting the world of “*symbolical*” values.

Iconological interpretation.

When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat, what I see from a *formal* point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. When I identify, as I automatically do, this configuration as an *object* (gentleman), and the change of detail as an *event* (hat-removing), I have already overstepped the limits of purely *formal* perception and entered a first sphere of *subject matter* or *meaning*. The meaning thus perceived is of an elementary and easily understandable nature, and we shall call it the *factual meaning*; it is apprehended by simply identifying certain visible forms with certain objects known to me from practical experience, and by identifying the change in their relations with certain actions or events.



Studies in Iconology (New York, 1962) p. 3

However, my realization that the lifting of the hat stands for a greeting belongs in an altogether different realm of interpretation. This form of salute is peculiar to the western world and is a residue of mediaeval chivalry: armed men used to remove their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions and their confidence in the peaceful intentions of others. Neither an Australian bushman nor an ancient Greek could be expected to realize that the lifting of a hat is not only a practical event with certain expressional connotations, but also a sign of politeness. To understand this significance of the gentleman's action I must not only be familiar with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization. Conversely, my acquaintance could not feel impelled to greet me by removing his hat were he not conscious of the significance of this feat. As for the expressional connotations which accompany his action, he may or may not be conscious of them. Therefore, when I interpret the removal of a hat as a polite greeting, I recognize in it a meaning which may be called *secondary* or *conventional*; it differs from the *primary* or *natural* one in that it is intelligible instead of being sensible, and in that it has been consciously imparted to the practical action by which it is conveyed.

And finally: besides constituting a natural event in space and time, besides naturally indicating moods or feelings, besides conveying a conventional greeting, the action of my acquaintance can reveal to an experienced observer all that goes to make up his 'personality.' This personality is conditioned by his being a man of the twentieth century, by his national, social and educational background, by the previous history of his life and by his present surroundings, but it is also distinguished by an individual manner of viewing things and reacting to the world which, if rationalized, would have

to be called a philosophy. In the isolated action of a polite greeting all these factors do not manifest themselves comprehensively, but nevertheless symptomatically. We could not construct a mental portrait of the man on the basis of this single action, but only by co-ordinating a large number of similar observations and by interpreting them in connection with our general information as to the gentleman's period, nationality, class, intellectual traditions and so forth. Yet all the qualities which this mental portrait would show



Iconographical analysis, dealing with *images*, *stories* and *allegories* instead of with *motifs*, presupposes, of course, much more than that familiarity with objects and events which we acquire by practical experience. It presupposes a familiarity with specific *themes* or *concepts* as transmitted through literary sources, whether acquired by purposeful reading or by oral tradition. Our Australian bushman would be unable to recognize the subject of a Last Supper; to him, it would only convey the idea of an excited dinner party.

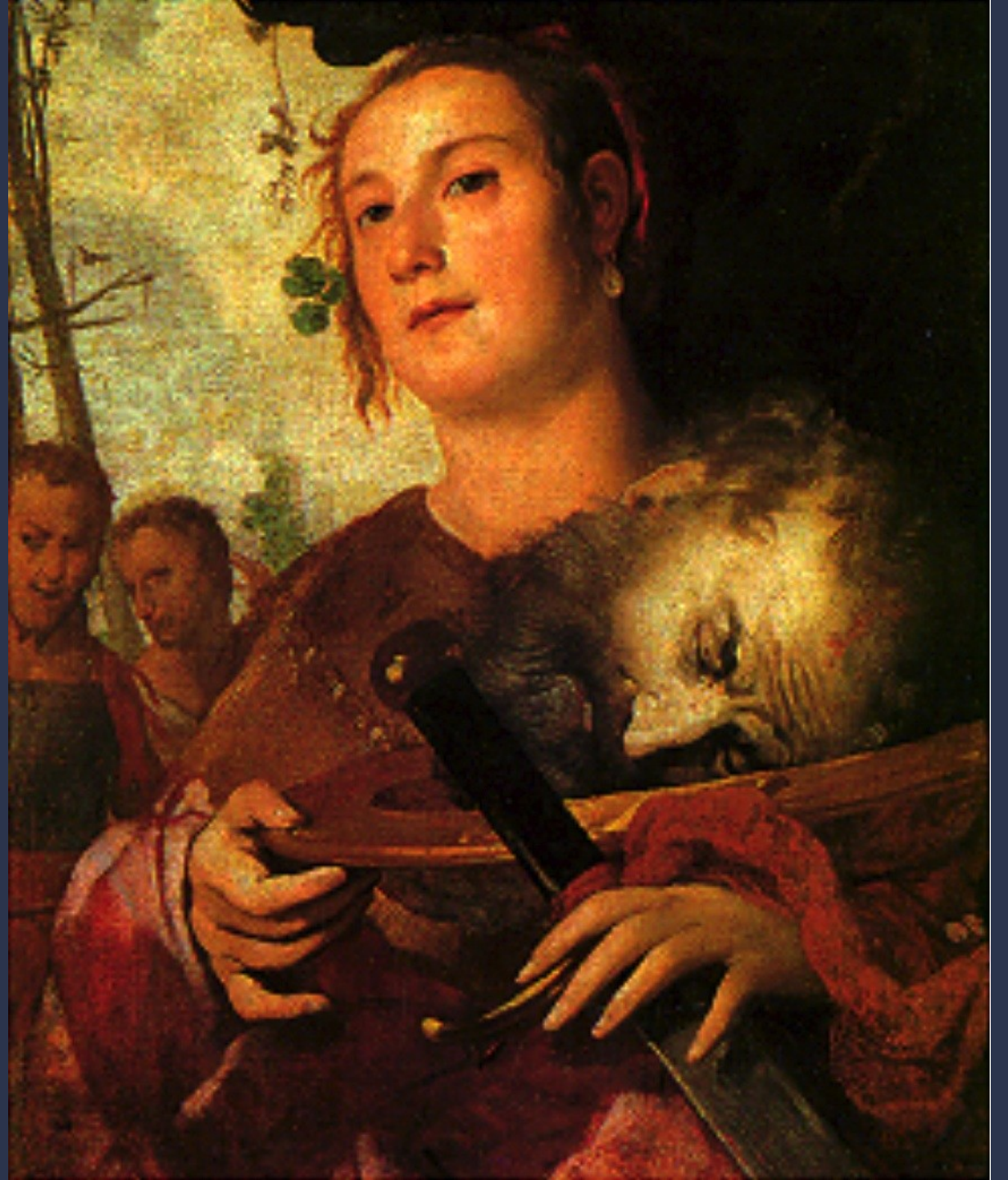
Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (Oxford, 1939) p. 11

Rogier van der Weyden
Adoration of the Magi, the right wing from the Bladelin
Altarpiece, ca. 1450

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION
I <i>Primary</i> or <i>natural</i> subject matter—(A) factual, (B) expressional—constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis).
II <i>Secondary</i> or <i>conventional</i> subject matter, constituting the world of <i>images</i> , <i>stories</i> and <i>allegories</i> .	<i>Iconographical analysis</i> .
III <i>Intrinsic meaning</i> or <i>content</i> , constituting the world of " <i>symbolical</i> " values.	<i>Iconological interpretation</i> .

EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION (<i>History of Tradition</i>)
<i>Practical experience</i> (familiarity with <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).	History of <i>style</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> were expressed by <i>forms</i>).
<i>Knowledge of literary sources</i> (familiarity with specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i>).	History of <i>types</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific <i>themes</i> or <i>concepts</i> were expressed by <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).
<i>Synthetic intuition</i> (familiarity with the <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i>), conditioned by personal psychology and " <i>Weltanschauung</i> ."	History of <i>cultural symptoms</i> or " <i>symbols</i> " in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i> were expressed by specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i>).

Francesco Maffei
Judith or Salome? (1650-60)





Icon
Editions

IN-3

\$5.95

Volume Two Plates

Early Netherlandish Painting

Erwin Panofsky

Erwin Panofsky
Early Netherlandish Painting (New York, 1953)





Jan van Eyck
Man with a Turban (possible self-portrait) (1433)

Jan van Eyck
The Arnolfini Betrothal (1434)





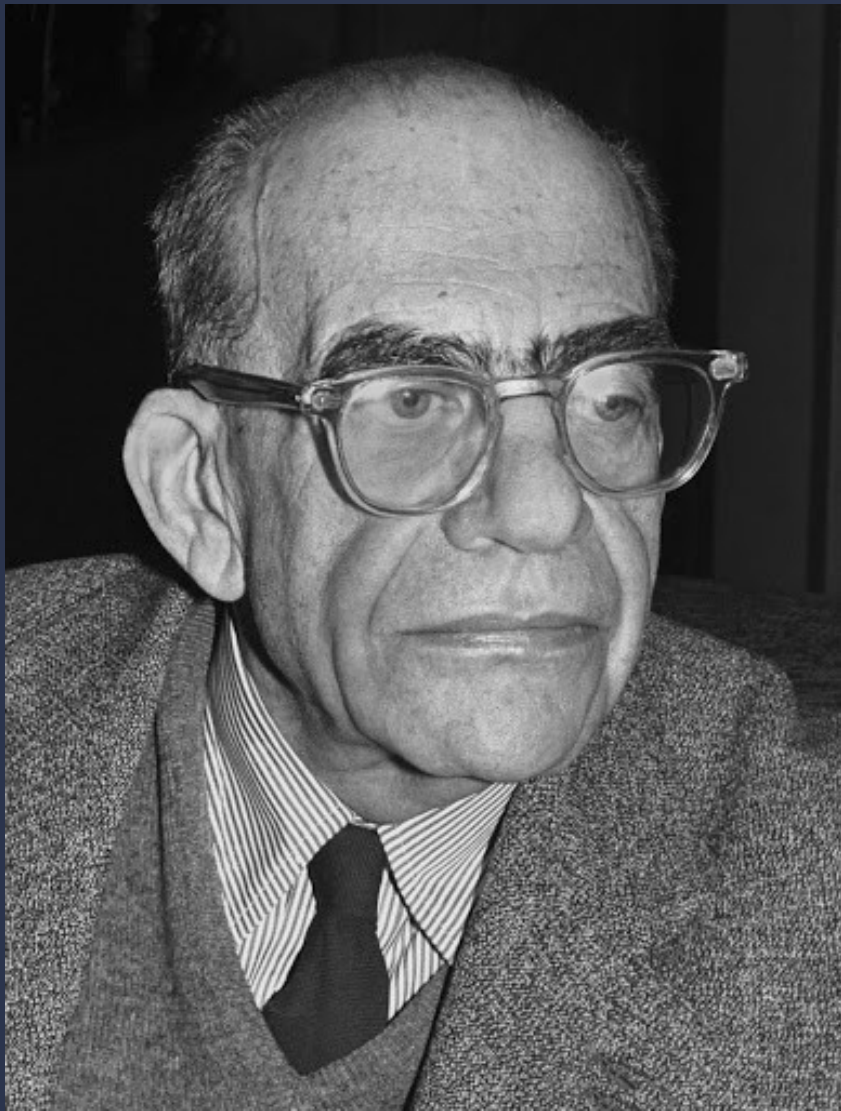
|Jan van Eyck
Madonna of Chancellor Rolin (1435)

Anon, The Wilton Diptych (ca. 1395-99)



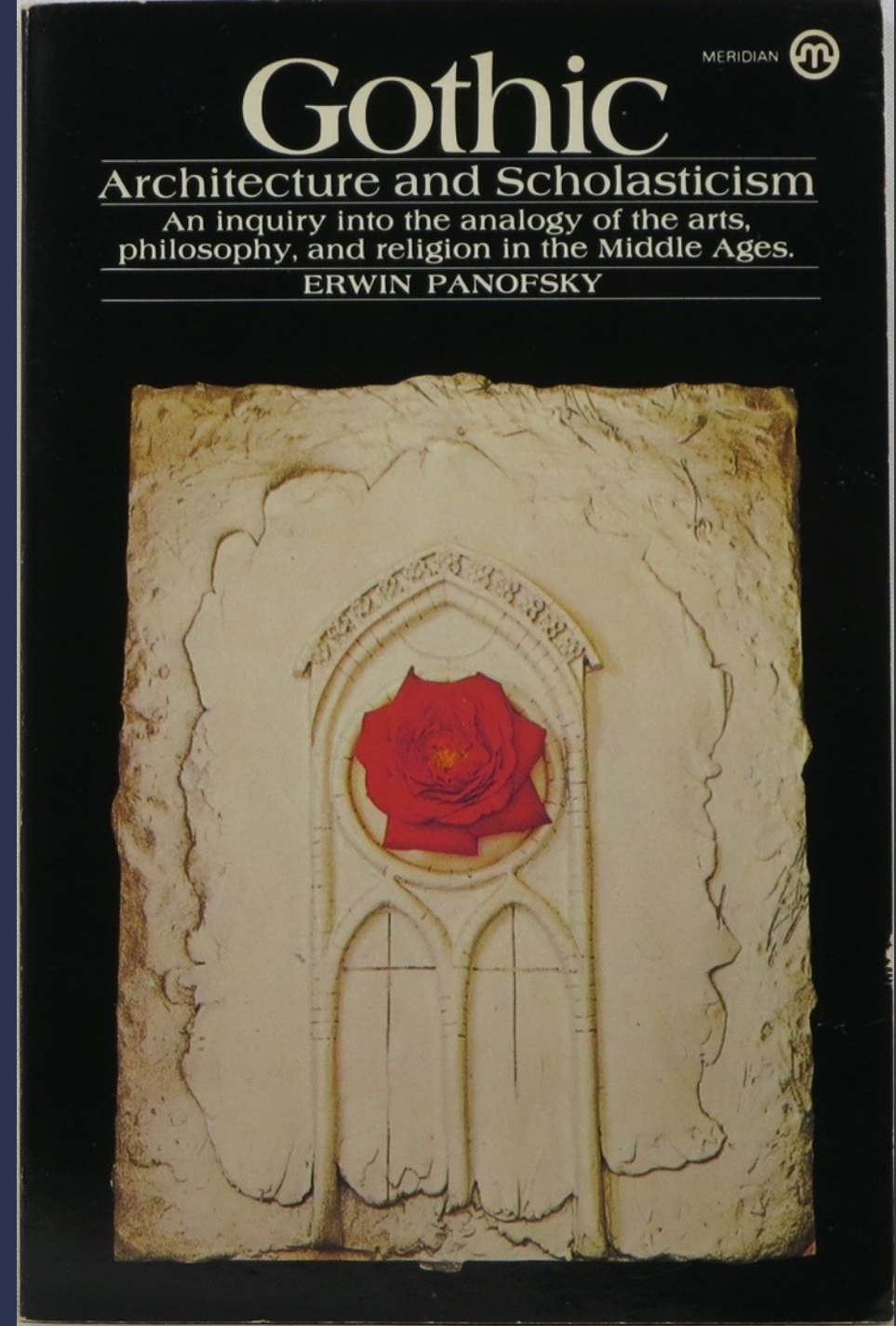


Jan van Eyck
The Madonna in the Church (ca. 1438-40)
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin



Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968)

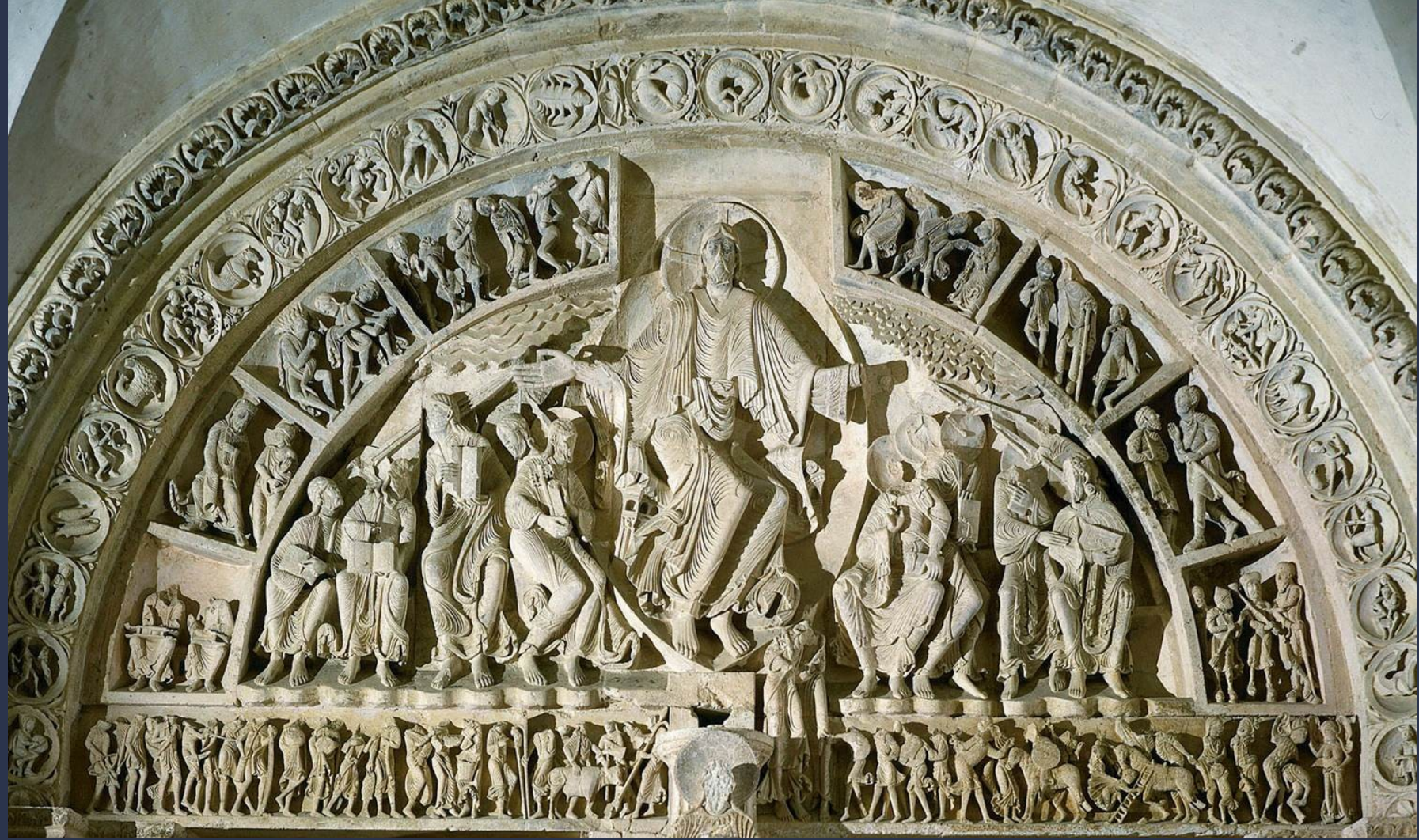
Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism (1951)





‘It has justly been remarked that the gentle animation that distinguishes the Early Gothic figures in the west facade of Chartres from their Romanesque predecessors reflects the renewal of an interest in psychology which had been dormant for several centuries; but this psychology was still based upon the Biblical—and Augustinian—dichotomy between the “breath of life” and the “dust of the ground”.’

Panofsky, Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism, p. 6-7



L: Sculptures of the Prophets from the West Front Royal Portal of Chartres Cathedral (mid-12th century CE)

R: Tympanum sculptures of Vézelay Abbey (ca. 1120-30)

The infinitely more lifelike —though not, as yet, portrait-like — High Gothic statues of Reims and Amiens, Strassburg and Naumburg and the natural — though not, as yet, naturalistic — fauna and flora of High Gothic ornament proclaim the victory of Aristotelianism. The human soul, though recognized as immortal, was now held to be the organizing and unifying principle of the body itself rather than a substance independent thereof. A plant was thought to exist as a plant and not as the copy of the idea of a plant.'

Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, p. 6-7



Margrave Ekkehard II and Uta, Naumburg Cathedral (mid-13th century)



L: Portrait of St. Anselm of Canterbury, (1033-1109) Canterbury Cathedral (late 12th century CE)



R: Pierre Abelard (1079-1142) and Héloïse d'Argenteuil (ca. 1100-1163/64)



‘ we can observe, it seems to me, a connection between Gothic art and Scholasticism which is more concrete than a mere “parallelism” and yet more general than those individual (and very important) “influences” which are inevitably exerted on painters, sculptors, or architects by erudite advisers. In contrast to a mere parallelism, the connection which I have in mind is a genuine cause-and-effect relation; It comes about by the spreading of what may be called, for want of a better term, *a mental habit* ...’

Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* p. 20

L: The beginning of St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* (1094-98)

“Sacred doctrine” says Thomas Aquinas, “makes use of human reason, not to prove faith but to make clear (*manifestare*) whatever else is set forth in this doctrine.” ... We take it for granted that major works of scholarship, especially systems of philosophy and doctoral theses, are organized according to a scheme of division and subdivision, condensable into a table of contents or synopsis, where all parts denoted by numbers or letters of the same class are on the same logical level ... However, this kind of systematic articulation was quite unknown until the advent of Scholasticism.’

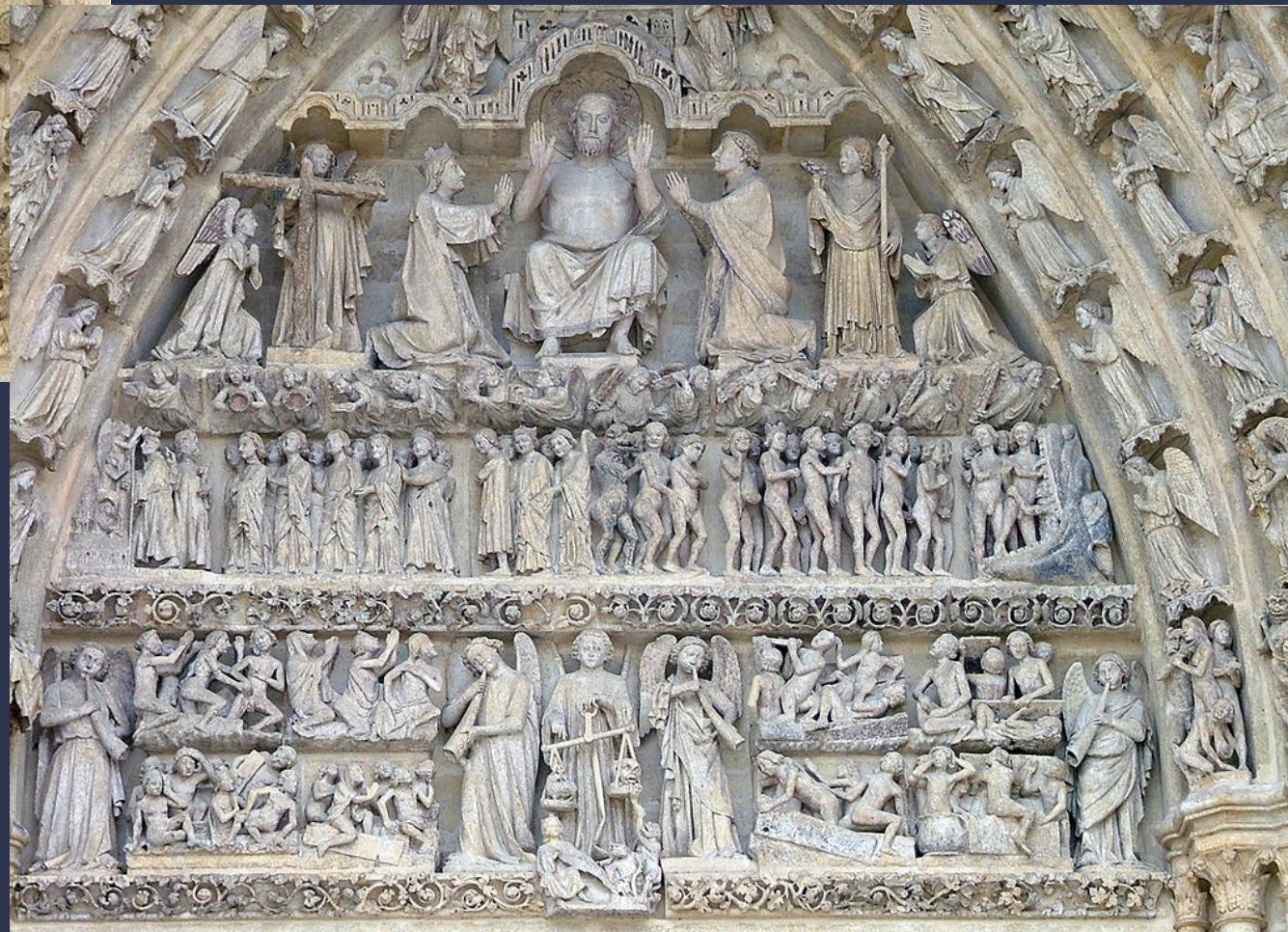
Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* p. 29 and 32

Carlo Crivelli, Portrait of Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) (1476)





L: Autun Cathedral, Last Judgement West Portal
(ca. 1130)



R: Amiens Cathedral, Last Judgement West Portal
(120-1236)



Reims Abbey (1211-1345)



Maria Laach Abbey (1158)





Criticisms of Iconography



- Panofsky's idea of *intrinsic meaning* was never clearly articulated – but it *seemed* to be about unconscious meanings and symbolic values of a culture
- However this was eclipsed by the social history of art in which such unconscious meanings are reinterpreted as **ideology**. But this means that iconology is perhaps blind to the **political** meanings of symbols
- Iconology easily degenerated into a mere cataloguing of symbols and images – and forcing them into pre-existing categories. It seems reluctant to accept ambiguity and contradiction. It treated artworks as puzzles to be 'solved'

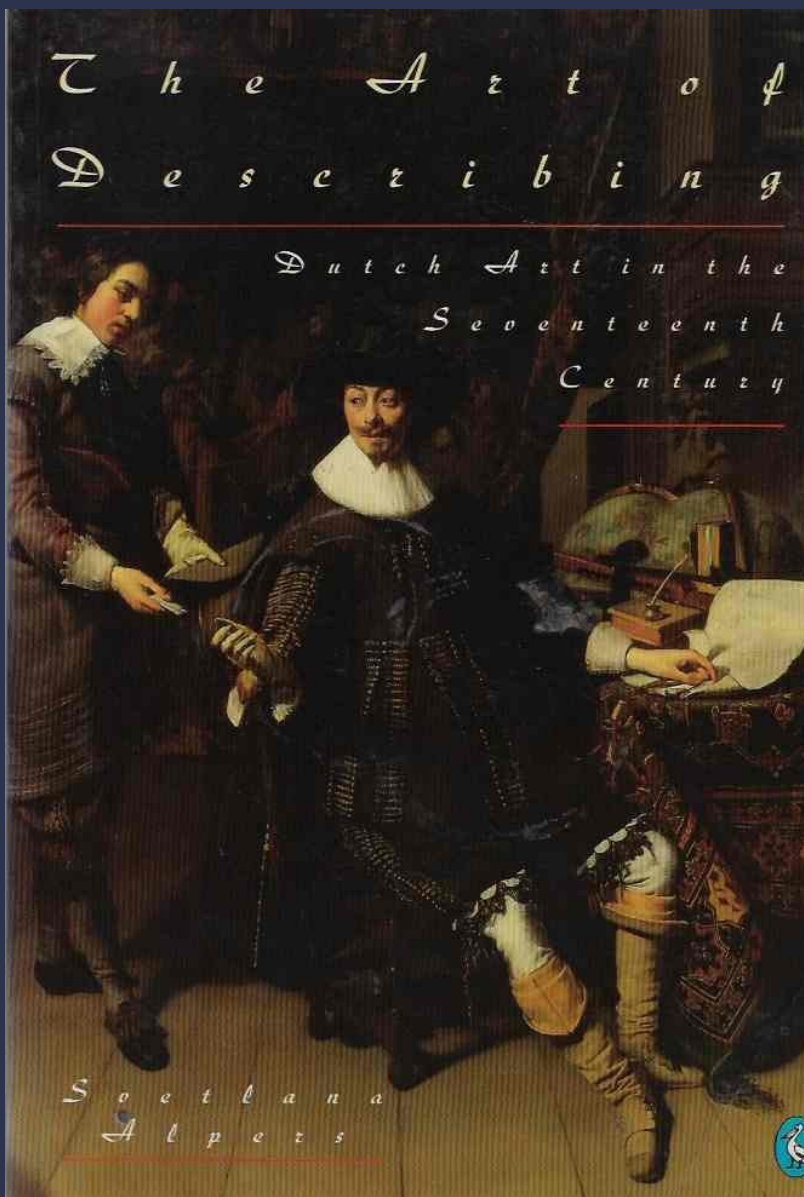


Dosso Dossi, Travellers in a Wood (1520)
Giorgione, The Tempest (1508)



‘ ... along with a complex allusive logic of learned reference, assumed so widely in recent studies, other developments must be emphasized: there are pictures with no subject at all (Dosso); there are those with ordinary surface subjects in which it is really correct, and not merely obscurantist, to reject symbolic depths (sleeping Child theme, Tempest); and there are also those which have capricious subjects determined by an artist's personal stress (Flagellation, Ficino theme). All these have been alleged by the "romantic" historians perhaps for the wrong reason that they disliked the "inartistic" exactitude of iconology, and perhaps muddling them together and applying them without justification. Yet if these intuitions are examined, it would seem equally wrong, and perhaps equally the result of cultural pressures, to apply too far the idea of cultural precision.’

Creighton Gilbert, ‘On Subject and Not-subject in Italian Renaissance Pictures,’ *Art Bulletin*, Sep., 1952, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Sep., 1952) p. 216



To a remarkable extent the study of art and its history has been determined by the art of Italy and its study. This is a truth that art historians are in danger of ignoring in the present rush to diversify the objects and the nature of their studies. Italian art and the rhetorical evocation of it has not only defined the practice of the central tradition of Western artists, it has also determined the study of their works. In referring to the notion of art in the Italian Renaissance, I have in mind the Albertian definition of the picture: a framed surface or pane situated at a certain distance from a viewer who looks through it at a second or substitute world. In the Renaissance this world was a stage on which human figures performed significant actions based on the texts of the poets. It is a narrative art.

Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago, 1983) p. xix

The definitive place of Italian art in both our tradition of art and our tradition of writing about it means that it has proved difficult to find appropriate language to deal with images that do not fit this model. Indeed, some innovative work and writing on images has come out of a recognition of this difficulty. It has been done on what might be called nonclassical, non-Renaissance images that would otherwise have been seen from the perspective of the Italian accomplishment.

Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. xx and p. xx1

What Panofsky says of Van Eyck is quite true. But the “ordinary standards” that he calls on are none other than the expectations of narrative action created by Italian art. Although it might appear that painting by its very nature is descriptive—an art of space, not of time, with still life as its basic theme—it was essential to the Renaissance aesthetic that imitative skills were bound to narrative ends. The *istoria*, as Alberti wrote,



Paulus Potter, Young Bull (1647)

Accepting the relativity of size, as revealed to the eye strengthened by the lens, raises the question of the truth or status of vision. We see a crevice in one way when it is enlarged by a lens to the size of a city gate, and in another way when it appears much smaller than a city gate. Which view is the true one? How do we define the identity of things in the world when they are seen as so variable in size? Can we trust our eyes?

Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, p. 22



L: Jan Vermeer, *View of Delft* (1660-1661)

R: Jan Vermeer, *The Art of Painting* (1666-68)





Iconology as Social Memory

Aby Warburg (1866-1929)



Aby Warburg (1866-1929)



[H. 40.11.]
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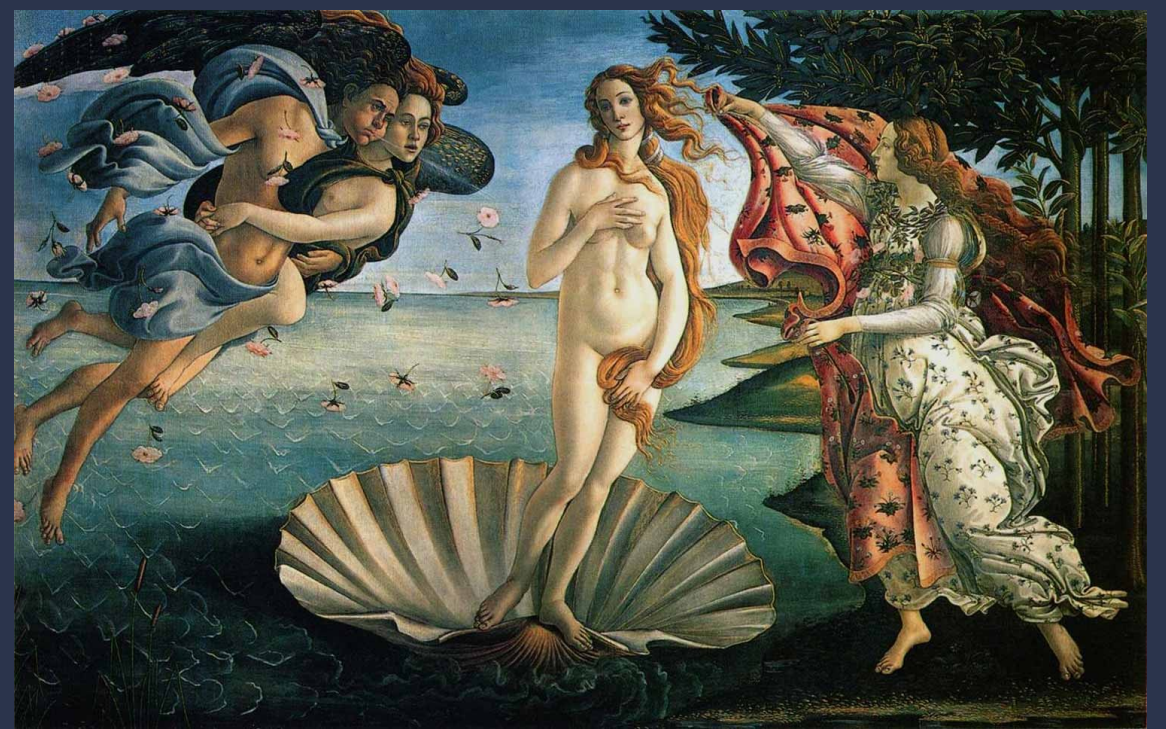
Handexemplar.
Leipzig 1892

SANDRO BOTTICELLIS
„GEBURT DER VENUS“
UND
„FRÜHLING.“

EINE UNTERSUCHUNG
ÜBER DIE VORSTELLUNGEN VON DER ANTIKE IN DER
ITALIENISCHEN FRÜHRENAISSANCE.
VON
A. WARBURG
DR. PHIL.
MIT 8 ABBILDUNGEN.



HAMBURG UND LEIPZIG.
VERLAG VON LEOPOLD VOSS.
1893.



It is possible to trace., step by step, how the artists and their advisors recognised the antique as a model that demanded an intensification of outward movement, and how they turned to antique sources whenever accessory forms – those of garments and of hair – were to be represented in motion.

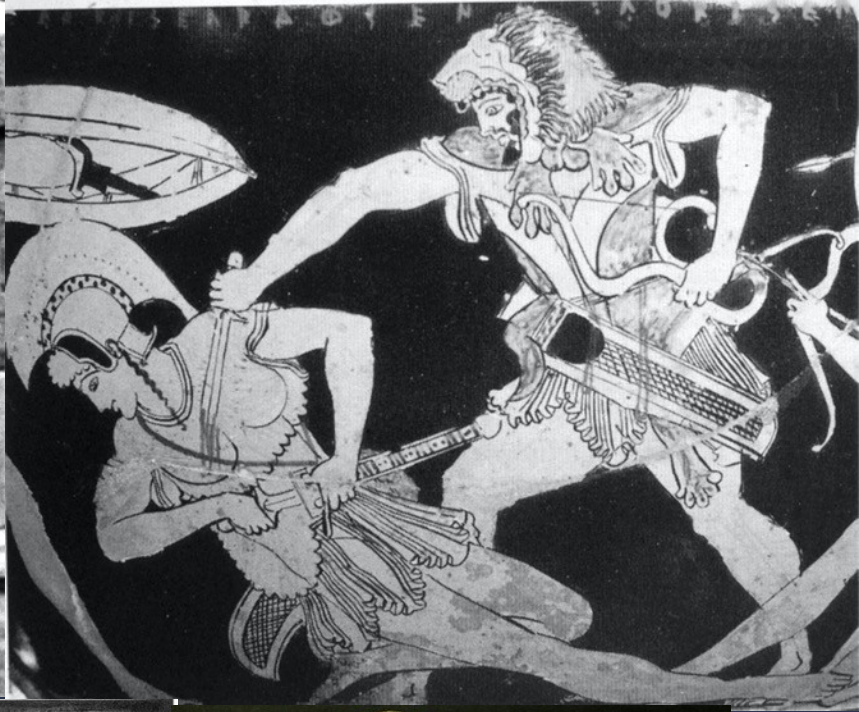
It may be adduced that this evidence has its value for psychological aesthetics in that it enables us to observe, within a milieu of working artists, an emerging sense of the aesthetic act of “empathy” as a determinant of style.’

Warburg, ‘Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and *Primavera*’ in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* p.

‘In the late 15th century the antique as a source of poised and measured beauty – the hallmark of its influence as we have known it since Winckelmann – still counted for comparatively little. The figures of ancient myth appeared ... as figures full of life and colour, in the festival pageants through which pagan *joie de vivre* had kept its foothold in popular culture.’

Warburg, ‘Sandro Botticelli’ (1898) in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, p. 161





DIE
GEBURT DER TRAGÖDIE

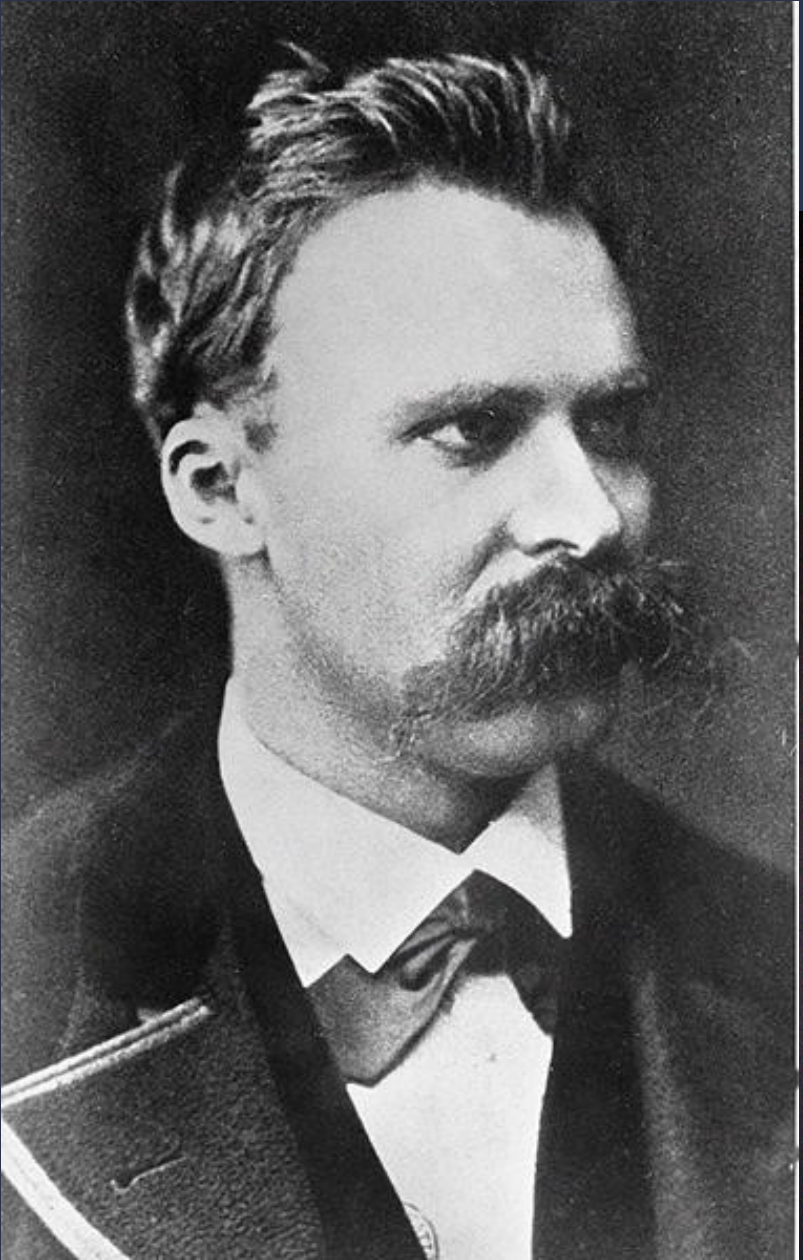
AUS DEM
GEISTE DER MUSIK.

VON
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE,
ORDENTL. PROFESSOR DER CLASSISCHEN PHILOGIE AN DER
UNIVERSITÄT BASEL.



LEIPZIG.
VERLAG VON E. W. FRITZSCH.

1872.



Friedrich Nietzsche (1873)
Source: Bridgeman

Laocoon, 1st century BCE





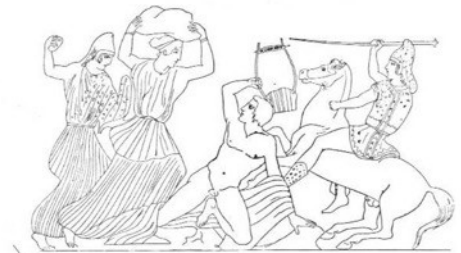
Albrecht Dürer
Death of Orpheus (1494)



a. DER TOD DES ORPHEUS.
 Fragmentierte Schale (nach Journ. Hell. Stud. 1888), Athen.



b. DER TOD DES ORPHEUS.
 Vase aus Nola. Louvre, Paris.



c. DER TOD DES ORPHEUS.
 Vase aus Chiusi (nach Annali 1871. Tav. d'agg. K.).



d. ORPHEUS UND EURYDIKE.
 Truhe gemalt von Jacopo del Sellaio. Privatbesitz, England.

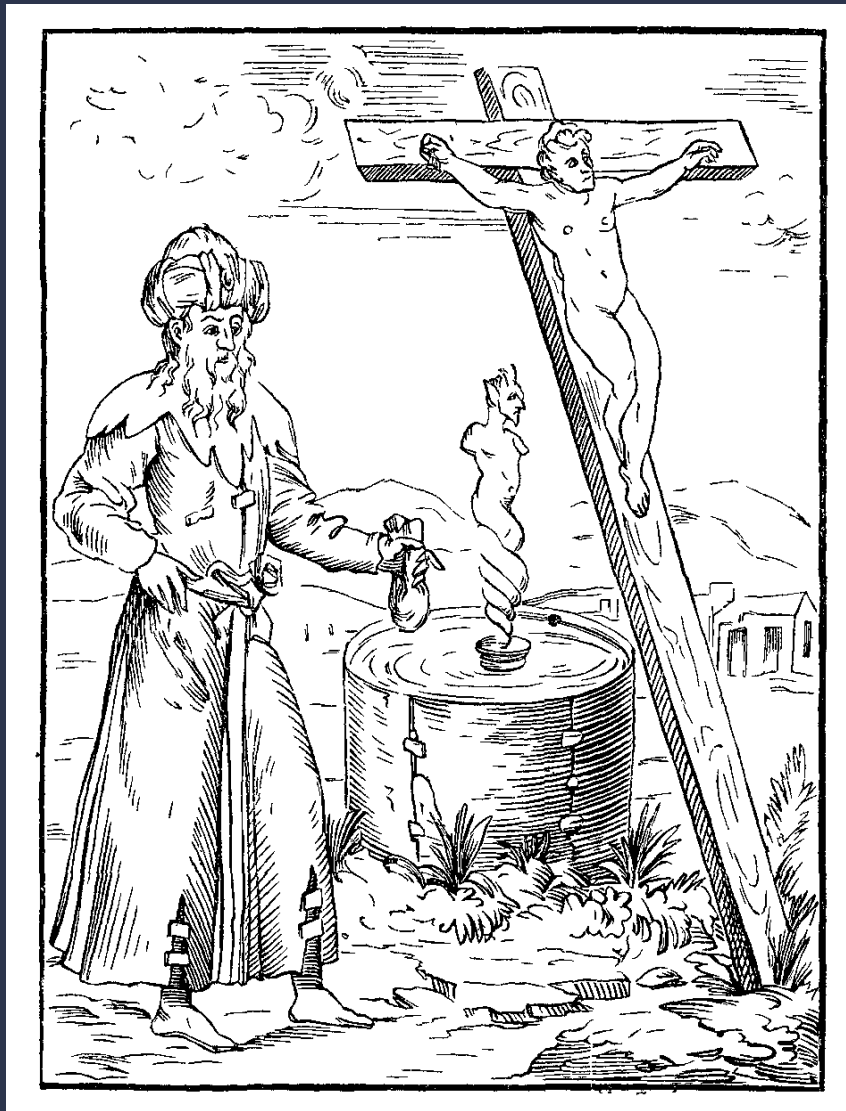
TAFEL I.

'I am by no means ashamed of being a Jew. On the contrary, I attempt to show to others that representatives of my kind are well suited to using their talents in order to fit in as useful members into the development of culture and the state.'

Aby Warburg, Letter to his mother, 26 January 1887



Aby Warburg on military service in Karlsruhe (1892-1893)



Legend of the Jew calling the Devil from a Vessel of Blood, from
Pierre Boaistuau, *Histoires Prodigieuses* (Paris, 1560)



L : Lucio Tosani - Medallion of the legend of Simonino di Trento (Palazzo Salvadori, Trento, 1515)
 R: The legend of Simon of Trent, from Hartmann Schedel, *Weltchronik* (1493)

'Death of Orpheus: Return of the eternally unchanging beast, genus: homo sapiens' (Warburg)



L: The Pogrom in Białystok, 1906
R: Members of the Jewish workers' Bund, with colleagues murdered in the 1905 pogrom.

