

THE POWER OF IMAGES

Studies in the History and Theory of Response



David Freedberg

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The Power of Images: Response and Repression

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. They do so in societies we call primitive and in modern societies; in East and West, in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. These are the kinds of response that form the subject of this book, not the intellectual constructions of critic and scholar, or the literate sensitivity of the generally cultured. My concern is with those responses that are subject to repression because they are too embarrassing, too blatant, too rude, and too uncultured; because they make us aware of our kinship with the unlettered, the coarse, the primitive, the undeveloped; and because they have psychological roots that we prefer not to acknowledge.

When we read in one Italian writer of 1584 that a painting will cause the beholder to wonder when it wondreth, to desire a beautiful young woman for his wife when he seeth her painted naked; to have a fellow-feeling when it is afflicted; to have an appetite when he seeth it eating of dainties; to fall asleepe at the sight of a sweete sleeping picture; to be mooved and waxe furious when he beholdeth a battel most lively described; and to be stirred with disdain and wrath, at the sight of shameful and dishonest actions

or in another of 1587 that

*
Curves are too emotional
PIET MONDRIAN

*
*Wir sehen es, aber
das tut
uns nicht weh.*
ABY WARBURG

*

since the eye is the most perfect among the exterior senses, it moves the minds to hatred, love and fear, more than all the other senses . . . ; and when the beholders see very grave tortures present and apparently real . . . they are moved to true piety, and thereby drawn to devotion and reverence—all of which are remedies and excellent means for their salvation,

two chief questions arise.¹ Are these both no more than the commonplace repetition of the old idea of the greater susceptibility of the eyes than the other senses? And are they simply to be seen in the context of late-sixteenth-century Italian art theory? Let us begin with some improbable examples.

I

The charming third-century Greek romance by Heliodorus known as the *Aethiopian Tale about Theagenes and Charicleia* has the following account of the birth of its protagonist, Charicleia. Her mother, Persina (who is queen of Ethiopia) writes to her about the palace bedroom, which was "garnished with pictures containing the loves of Perseus and Andromeda."

After Hydaspes had been married to me ten years, and we had never a child, we happened to rest after midday in the summer . . . at which time your father had to do with me . . . and I by and by perceived myself with child. All the time after, until I was delivered, was kept holy, and sacrifices of thanksgiving were offered to the Gods, for that the King hoped to have one now to succeed him in his kingdom. But thou wert born white, which colour is strange among the Ethiopians. I knew the reason, because while my husband had to do with me I looked upon the picture of Andromeda naked . . . and so by mishap engendered presently a thing like to her.²

A similar role is ascribed to pictures in another quite different context. In the course of an argument about divine creation in his polemic against the emperor Julian, Saint Augustine cites the medical writer Soranus, who tells of the tyrant Dionysius who,

because he was deformed, did not wish to have children like himself. In sleeping with his wife he used to place a beautiful picture before her, so that by desiring its beauty and in some manner taking it in, she might effectively transmit it to the offspring she conceived.³

We may be inclined to regard all this as little more than fictional re-workings of an old notion that goes back to Aristotle and crops up naturally enough in writers like Galen and Pliny: namely, that the child one gives

birth to is somehow impressed with the marks of the parents' imaginings at the moment of conception, but clearly there is more to the notion than just that.⁴ We need to examine the role of pictures and sculptures more closely.

At almost exactly the same time as the passage from Augustine was excerpted in Simon Majolus's 1614 encyclopedia, Giulio Mancini was composing his splendid compendium of information about painters and painting, the *Considerazioni sulla pittura*. At the end of a fairly technical discussion of the appropriate locations for pictures, he has this to say about the adornment of bedrooms:

Lascivious things are to be placed in private rooms, and the father of the family is to keep them covered, and only uncover them when he goes there with his wife, or an intimate who is not too fastidious. And similar lascivious pictures are appropriate for the rooms where one has to do with one's spouse; because once seen they serve to arouse one and to make beautiful, healthy, and charming children . . . not because the imagination imprints itself on the fetus, which is of different material to the mother and father, but because each parent, through seeing the picture, imprints in their seed a similar constitution which has been seen in the object or figure. . . . And so the sight of similar objects and figures, well-made and of the right temper, represented in colour, is of much help on these occasions; but they must nevertheless not be seen by children and old maids, nor by strangers and fastidious people.⁵

For all the attempt to provide a scientific, causal explanation for this belief in the efficacy of pictures (derived from Mancini's own reading of writers like Solinus), to us both the explanation offered and the belief itself seem improbable—if not completely fantastic. But when we encounter the Counter-Reformation view that one should certainly not have pictures in one's bedroom of those of whom one cannot possess the original, we begin to sense that the matter may not be so fantastic after all. If we cannot yet quite share the belief in efficacy, we can at least understand the fear and concern that lies at its basis in writers like Paleotti and Molanus (and there are many like them in the immediate wake of the Council of Trent).

But are these passages no more than testimonies to the repeated use of a commonplace, whose meaning has been drained from it by centuries of hackneyed and unthinking reproduction? For example: are we to dismiss the passages on the grounds that the Counter-Reformation critics of art were simply motivated by a prurient censoriousness; that Heliodorus was writing a pretty romance; that the quotation from Saint Augustine was merely an illustrative aside to a serious theological argument (though its seventeenth-century excerpter used it quite specifically in the context of females and generation); and that Mancini's account cannot be construed as anything

but the incredible repetition of a particular cliché about the power of art? It is worth considering the possibility not only that every one of these writers actually believed such notions, but also that we should take them seriously too.⁶

II

Let us move from the bedroom to the nursery. Part 4 of Giovanni Dominici's *Rule for the Management of Family Care*, written in 1403, is concerned with the upbringing of children. In order for one's offspring to be brought up "for God," the first of Dominici's recommendations is that one should have

paintings in the house, of holy boys, or young virgins, in which your child when still in swaddling clothes may delight as being like himself, and may be seized upon by the like thing, with actions and signs attractive to infancy. And as I say for paintings, so I say of sculptures. The Virgin Mary is good to have, with the child on her arm and the little bird, or the pomegranate in his fist. A good figure would be Jesus suckling, Jesus sleeping on his mother's lap, Jesus standing politely before her, Jesus making a hem and the mother sewing that hem. In the same way he may mirror himself in the holy Baptist, dressed in camel skin, a small boy entering the desert, playing with birds, sucking on the sweet leaves, sleeping on the ground. It would not harm if he saw Jesus and the Baptist . . . and the murdered innocents, so that the fear of arms and armed men would come over him. And so too little girls should be brought up in the sight of the eleven thousand virgins, discussing, fighting and praying. I would like them to see Agnes with the fat lamb, Cecilia crowned with roses; Elizabeth with many roses, Catherine on the wheel, with other figures that would give them love of virginity with their mother's milk, desire for Christ, hatred of sins, disgust at vanity, shrinking from bad companions, and a beginning through considering the saints, of contemplating the supreme Saint of saints.⁷

How much pictures (and sculptures) could achieve! And what a range of edifying functions they had! This edification was, in fact, one of the three functions explicitly attributed to all religious images throughout the Middle Ages (and for a considerable time after); but the candid faith in what images could do or bring about is very striking in this passage, and it calls out for comment. In what sense did they really have the effects attributed to them here? A view so strongly and attractively asserted must, one supposes, have had some grounding in firm belief, rather than in the straightforward repetition of a topos or of a notion commonly held.

There are several other noteworthy elements within this passage. The enumeration of so charming and various a list of subjects is unusual; and it provides remarkable literary corroboration of the kind of images available at the turn of the fifteenth century. Many of these kinds of pictures, it is true, we already know from our experience of museums; but here is as clear a contemporary description as one could wish of at least one set of functions. It is also a telling and straightforward reminder of the need to consider all possible uses of images, and all possible images, from high use and high art to low use and low art. But in the context of our discussion it has an evidential status that transcends such purely antiquarian and functional issues. Its importance lies in the overall assumption of the effectiveness of images—to the extent that they have the potential to affect even (or perhaps especially) the youngest of viewers, and affect them not just emotionally, but in ways that have long-term behavioral consequences. It is hard to know what to make of the best modern commentator's view that Dominici (who illuminated manuscripts himself) "did not rank painting very high, considering it useful for small children's religious education."⁸ We may well ask ourselves on just what basis the commentator *would* have Dominici rank pictures high? Or in what sense the education of small children rates as a baser criterion of status than any other?

Be that as it may, Dominici appears to assume that effectiveness proceeds from a kind of identification between beholder and what is represented by the image. The child delights in the pictures, because they are "*like himself*"; and so he will be seized upon by the like thing, with actions and signs attractive to infancy. He "*mirrors himself* in the Holy Baptist," while girls will acquire girlish virtues by seeing the same qualities exemplified by the appearance and action of female saints. In addition to the problem of identification, two more issues should be noted here: first, the unproblematic equation of painting with sculpture (at any rate with regard to effectiveness); and, second, the apparent belief that contemplation leads first to imitation and then to spiritual ascent. We will return to them, but first let us move from conception and childhood to death and consider responses to pictures not at the beginning of lives but at the end.

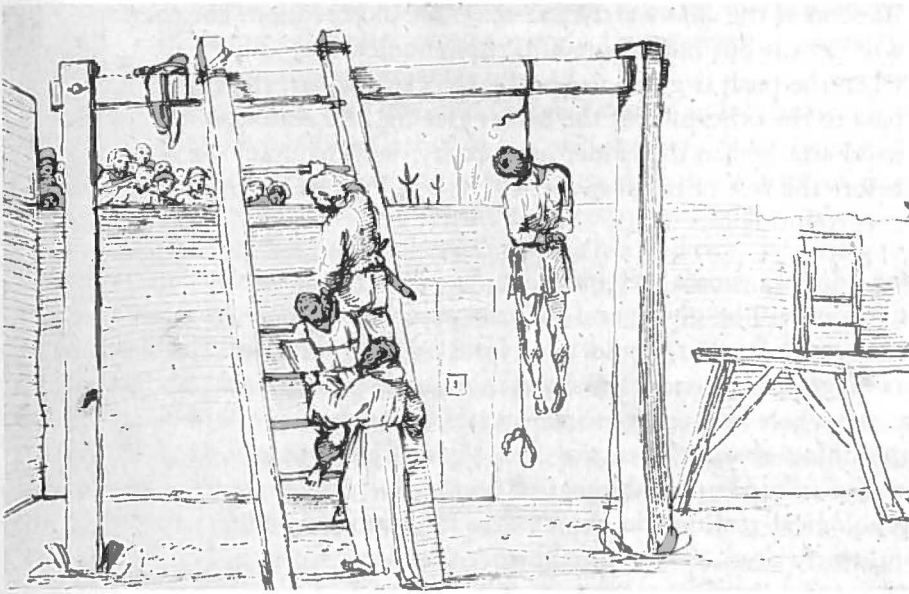
III

What comfort could anyone conceivably offer to a man condemned to death, in the moments prior to his execution? Any word or action would seem futile, and it would be as nought beside the inner resources or human weakness of the condemned person. But in Italy between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, brotherhoods were set up to offer a kind of solace; and the instruments of consolation were small painted images.⁹ A fair

number of these *tavolucchie*, or *tavolette*, as they were alternatively called, survive, and their use is attested by a considerable amount of supplementary visual evidence (cf. figs. 1 and 2). Each *tavoletta* was painted on both sides. On one side was a scene from the Passion of Christ; on the other side, a martyrdom that was more or less relevant to the punishment to be meted out to the prisoner (figs. 3 and 4). This martyrdom the brothers would "relate in some inspirational way to the actual plight of the prisoner as they comforted him in his cell or prison chapel during the night before his morning execution."¹⁰ On the next day, two members of the brotherhood would hold one of the pictures before the condemned man's face all the way to the place of execution. Then, as described in the surviving *Istruzioni* for the Florentine Compagnia di Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio:¹¹

1. Brother of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato in Rome holding a *tavoletta* (from Corrado Ricci, *Beatrice Cenci* [Milan, 1923]).





2. Annibale Carracci, *A Hanging* (drawing; ca. 1599). Windsor Castle, Royal Library. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.



3. Above: *Tavoletta* showing the Lamentation; a Crucifixion on the obverse (seventeenth century). Rome, Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato.

4. Right: *Tavoletta* showing the beheading of Saint John the Baptist (seventeenth century). Rome, Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato.

As soon as the *afflitto* arrives at the place of execution, the comforter will permit but not exhort him to say something edifying . . . and when the push is given to him by the executioner, the comforter will pass to the other side of the ladder [see fig. 2]. And keeping always a hand attached to the ladder for security, will maintain the *tavoletta* before the face of the suspended *afflitto* as long as he thinks he has not departed this life.¹²

More edifying words will pass; there will be opportunity for confession; absolution will be given; and the man expires.

Not much benefit would arise from arguing whether words or images were of greater consequence on such an occasion; and one might well feel that the whole business was ineffectual. Certainly one would be justified in maintaining that the practice was clearly institutionalized, and that its roots lay in conventional views of death which were out of touch with its psychological reality—in short, that it served the living better than the imminently dead. One might furthermore insist that the practice is to be seen specifically in the context of the distinctive functions and status of images in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy; but even if that context is narrowly specified, one is still left the problem of effectiveness—even if only imputed.

This is an eyewitness account of the execution of Pietro Pagolo Boscoli, who was condemned to death on 22 February 1512 for his participation in an anti-Medicean plot:

And as he ascended the stair he kept his eyes on the *tavoletta*, and with most loving accent said: Lord thou art my love; I give thee my heart . . . here I am, Lord; I come willingly. . . . And this he said with such tenderness that all who heard him were in tears. . . . And halfway down the stairs he met the Crucifix, and said: What ought I to do? And the friar replied: This is your captain who comes to arm you. Salute Him, honour Him and pray that He gives you strength. . . . And while descending the second flight of stairs, he continued praying, saying: *In manus tua, Domine.*¹³

Could an image really do all this, could it be that affecting and so consoling? Perhaps it is all in the report. One might feel, reading this, that Pago was unusually courageous and stoical in the face of death; that he was clearly an educated and quite learned man; and that the eyewitness may somehow have wished to glamorize his end. But this is not the point. The question is this: Why was it felt that images rather than just words could serve such a function, that they could in any way be effective under such conditions? For the condemned man they may or may not have achieved their supposed purpose, but the institution as a whole was based on a judgment about the

efficacy of images that was predicated upon a belief in their inevitable power. And that social belief cannot merely be regarded as ostensible; it appears to reflect a cognitive reality.

Say we recall the fact that one could receive a papal indulgence for kissing the *tavoletta* (a *Kusstafel* in German); but still we would not have resolved the question: why kiss an image at all? Even if it is a matter of relevant decorum, of a ritualized act, we would persist in wondering about the historical and the nonhistorical origins of such a practice. We still need to know about the fundamental impulses that are institutionalized in these ways. That is the issue at stake—the analysis of the deep end of such practices, not the superficial, ostensible level.

It is worth remembering that a variety of other images may be associated with the kind of function served by the *tavolette*, from Fra Angelico's *Lamentation* (fig. 5), which hung in the little chapel of Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio in Florence (where the condemned man heard his last mass), to the paintings by Benozzo Gozzoli—a *Deposition*—and by several sixteenth-century artists at his last stops before his execution.¹⁴ From the condemned cell, all along the route, and then finally on the scaffold itself, images were provided in the hope that the *affitto* would—at the very least—be provided with lessons and with solace and comfort. Of course later the provision of such images became habitual; but we cannot simply allow the problem—just as with pictures in bedrooms—to rest there.

5. Fra Angelico, *Lamentation* (ca. 1440). Florence, Museo San Marco. Photo Alinari.



IV

It is obvious that paintings and sculptures do not and cannot do as much for us now. Or can they? Perhaps we repress such things. But did they ever? Perhaps the cases I have cited are no more than some rather conventional ideas dressed up as empirical reports. If the first answer is correct, then we must examine the matter of repression more closely. If the second answer is correct, then we should consider the relations between convention and belief with greater precision (since most reporters presumably believed what they were reporting).

There is abundant historical and ethnographic evidence for the efficacy of images. But how are we to evaluate the material? What status are we to attach to the reports? Let us say that the evidence for efficacy can only be articulated in terms of cliché and convention, and that we are increasingly ignorant of those clichés and conventions. Some we retain, like the belief that the eyes of a good portrait follow one round the room; others we lose, like the belief that a picture of a fair and naked person in the bedroom will somehow improve the offspring we conceive. This raises another issue: that of the relation between convention and belief, and then behavior. Does a convention become naturalized in a culture, so that clichés about images may actually provoke behavior that meets the terms of the cliché? Repeat an idea often enough, and it can (but need not) form the basis for an action. But how do conventions become naturalized? And what do we mean when we say that they do?

Perhaps images no longer work in the ways I have begun by reporting precisely because contexts are so different. How, then, is one to describe the extent to which context conditions response? If it does, always and wholly, then we must leave behavior and emotion outside the realm of cognition; but before we do so, consider the other side of the coin.

The great iconoclastic movements of the eighth and ninth century in Byzantium, of Reformation Europe, of the French Revolution and of the Russian Revolution have been much studied. From the time of the Old Testament, rulers and public have attempted to do away with images and have assaulted specific paintings and sculptures. Everyone can produce an example of an attacked image; everyone knows of at least one historical period in which iconoclasm was either spontaneous or legitimized. People have smashed images for political reasons and for theological ones; they have destroyed works which have roused their ire or their shame; they have done so spontaneously or because they have been directed to do so. The motives for such acts have been and continue to be endlessly discussed, naturally enough; but in every case we must assume that it is the image—

whether to a greater or lesser degree—that arouses the iconoclast to such ire. This much we can claim, even if we argue that it is because the image is a symbol of something else that it is assailed, smashed, pulled down, destroyed.

Historians of art and of images have been strikingly apprehensive and diffident about assessing the implications for their study of the great iconoclastic movements; and they have been even more reluctant to acknowledge the strain of antagonism that manifests itself on more apparently neurotic levels, as in the increasingly abundant assaults on pictures and statues in museums and public places—to say nothing of the private, unknown act. The response to any inquiry about motive is likely to be one of great caution, even fear, and then to categorize out the motive of the assailant: “The assailant and his motives are wholly uninteresting to us; for one cannot apply normal criteria to the motivations of someone who is mentally disturbed.” This is what the director of public relations claims when an object, major or minor, is attacked in his museum.¹⁵

We easily concur; we do not vent our anger in this way on images in public places. The image—or what is represented on it—may rouse our shame, hostility, or fury; but it would certainly not cause us to wreak violence upon it; and we certainly would not break it. Or would we? No one can answer the question with complete confidence. For whatever reasons—whether directly related to the image or not, to the way it looks, to what it represents, or to the general emotional state in which we may or may not be—we recognize the potential for such a lapse in ourselves. We can all acknowledge the narrowness of the border between the kinds of behavior manifested by the iconoclast and “normal,” more restrained, behavior. And although for the most part we absolutely prefer to isolate such deeds, to put them well beyond the psychological pale, still we recognize the dim stirrings of antipathy and involvement that outleaps control in the iconoclast. The issue that presents itself to us is one of repression.

V

Let us briefly return to Giovanni Dominici. The passage in which he insists on the beneficial inculcatory effects of pictures and sculptures concludes—to us a little surprisingly—in a way that speaks to one of the fundamental fears of all art and, indeed, of imagemaking. This takes us one step further, from belief in the power of images to actual response:

I warn you, if you have paintings in your house for this purpose, beware of frames of gold and silver, lest they [your children] become more idolatrous than faithful, since, if they see more candles lit and more

hats removed and more kneeling to figures that are gilded and adorned with precious stones than to the old smoky ones, they will only learn to revere gold and jewels, and not the figures, or rather the truths represented by those figures.¹⁶

Here is the old fear of idolatry, but here too is the neat sociological evidence of history. The fear of idolatry (theoretically outlined over endless centuries) may well not have persisted as acutely as it did if Dominici, like so many others, had not observed the lit candles, the hats removed, the kneeling to figures. To what an endless variety of behavior do images arouse and provoke one! But in Dominici's passage, too, are the rudiments—as elsewhere in the Middle Ages and after—of a strict semiotics of visual signs. Here is the most explicit insistence that one should not focus on the materiality of the sign—the gold and jewels—but on the “figures,” or (better still) on “the truths represented by those figures”: *alle figure ovvero verità per quelle figure rappresentate*.¹⁷ There could be no clearer way, then as today, of talking about the power of images than by making those necessary distinctions, now codified in the simple Saussurean terms of sign, signifier, and signified. In his avowal of the possibility of the allegorical, Dominici has a clear sense of something that is still beyond (or behind) the signified, and distinguished from it.

For Cardinal Dominici the beneficence of images accrued from the belief that the exemplary beauty and actions of what was represented on them would somehow help assure like qualities in the living young beholder: “If you do not wish to or cannot make your house into a sort of temple, if you have a nurse, have them taken often to church, at a time when there is no crowd, nor any services being said.”¹⁸ For writers like Molanus and Cardinal Paleotti, the potential danger of images arose from a similar belief. Have a picture of someone in the bedroom, and you might want to possess that person (adults presumably being more capable of moving from the desire to imitate the admirable to the desire to possess the admirable): that is why it was recommended not to have pictures in one's bedroom of those of whom one could not possess the original. What joins all such writers in their views of the effectiveness (good and bad) of images is the tacit belief that the bodies represented on or in them somehow have the status of living bodies. The issue is absolutely not one of mere reminding (the images do not just remind one—in exemplary or dangerous fashion—of loved or admired figures), for if it were, the paintings or sculptures would not have the effectiveness they do.

It is perhaps in this area more than any other that we may examine the issue of repression most clearly. We fear the body in the image, we refuse to acknowledge our engagement with it, and we deny recognition of those aspects of our own sexuality that it may seem to threaten or reveal. For

example: in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, both in Italy and Northern Europe, hundreds of images were produced which showed the infant Christ's genitalia at the center of the composition, or with significant attention focused on them. There are paintings where Christ's legs seem deliberately splayed to reveal his pudenda, where his Mother (or in a few cases Saint Anne) touches them, and where the adoring Magi focus their gaze on his groin (cf. figs. 6 and 7). But as Leo Steinberg has recently and compellingly pointed out (in a discussion of the theological underpinnings of such pictorial emphases), historians have resolutely failed to notice just this aspect of what such pictures show. When he did point out what now seems obvious, the noise of disapproval was very loud, and accusations of frivolity were widely leveled. Either the pictorial facts were blatantly denied, or they were explained away in such contorted and embarrassed ways that the more or less impartial observer could be left in doubt of the extent of the repression.¹⁹

But this moves some distance from questions of effect and efficacy. It also may seem to demonstrate little more than straight prudishness. With the paintings adduced by Steinberg, it might be claimed, we deal with pictures whose substance touches on too intimate a part of ourselves ever to be dealt with without embarrassment; and so the repression is not so complicated. But the lessons of such pictures (and Steinberg's analysis) go far beyond the simple demonstration of the response that is prudish. It is not only the generations who have failed to notice; it is the attitude of the reviewers who reveal the extent of what they cannot bring themselves to acknowledge.

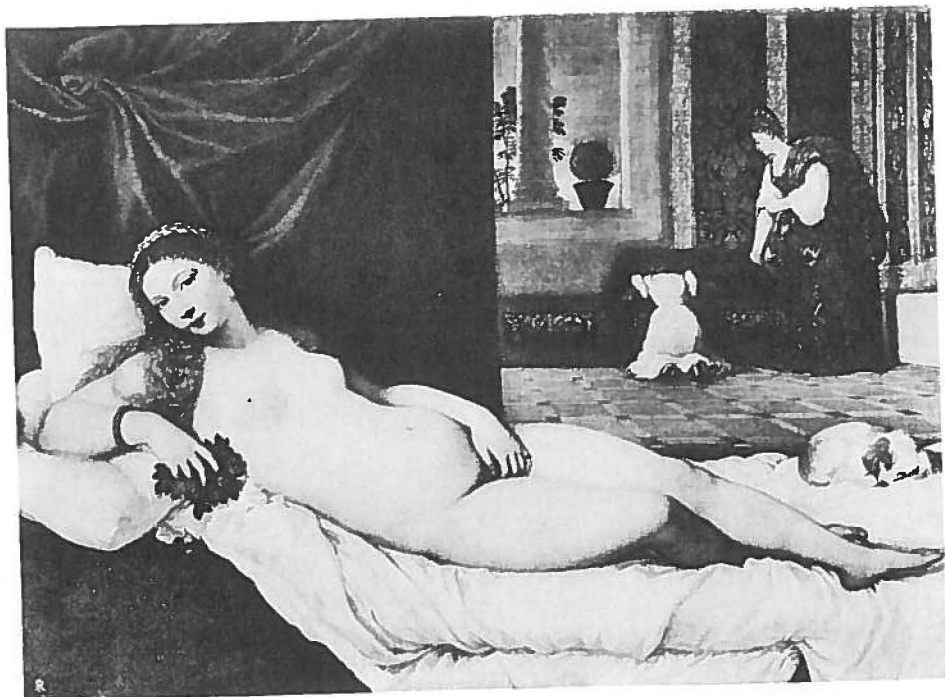
The same might be said—to take only one further example—of any number of discussions of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 8). Either they dwell on the classical beauty of the nude (or some other such ideal standard) or they overextend themselves in complex iconographic interpretations.²⁰ Twenty-five years ago, it was argued that despite her clearly individualized features this was no particular woman; she was Venus herself. Nor was she the common sensual Venus of classical mythology; she was the celestial—the cosmic—Venus, typifying and celebrating the joys of marital fidelity and domesticity.²¹ Some of these interpretations may even have some truth in them, but it is only in recent years that scholars have begun to suggest—or to revive a much older idea—that at least one kind of response (and possibly even the *raison d'être* of the picture) had to do with male sexual interest in the beautiful female nude that is Titian's Venus, or say, Giorgione's Dresden Venus (fig. 9).²² It is true that there are sumptuous colors and ravishing paintwork in Titian's picture; there are charming elements like the richly attired lady in the corner and the girl crouching over the chest, the urn, the landscape, and the little dog delightfully curled up at the foot of the bed. We may indeed be charmed by these things, as we may assume many people once were too. But it would be wrong not to admit to



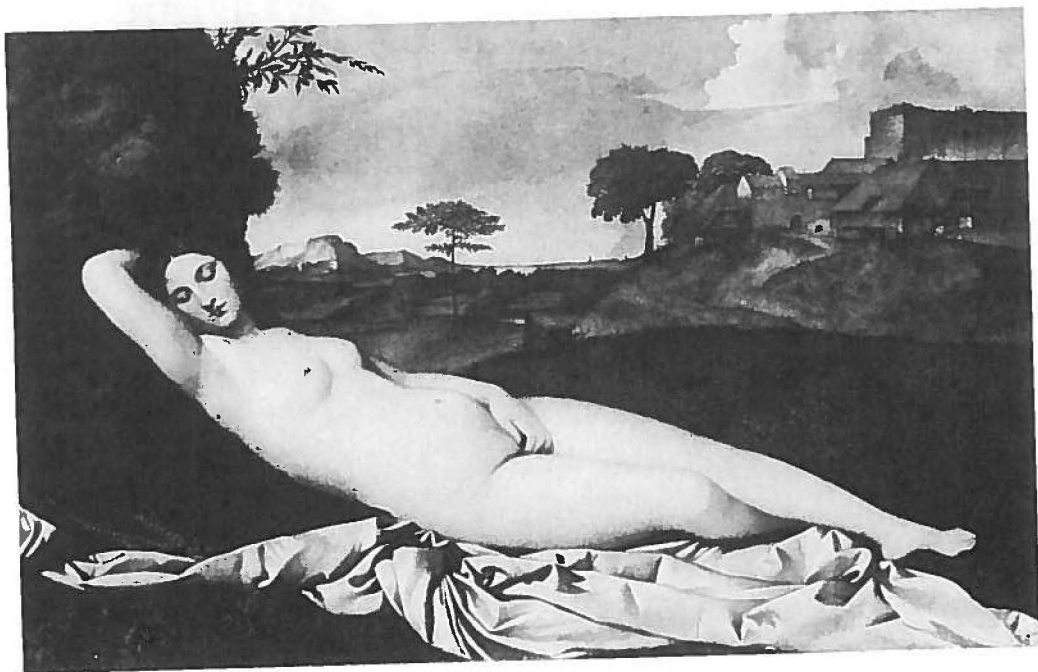
6. Hans Baldung Grien, *Holy Family with Saint Anne*
(1511; Geisberg, 59).



7. Paolo Veronese, *Holy Family with Saint Barbara and the Infant Saint John* (ca. 1562–65). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo Alinari.



8. Titian, *Venus of Urbino* (1538). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Photo Alinari.



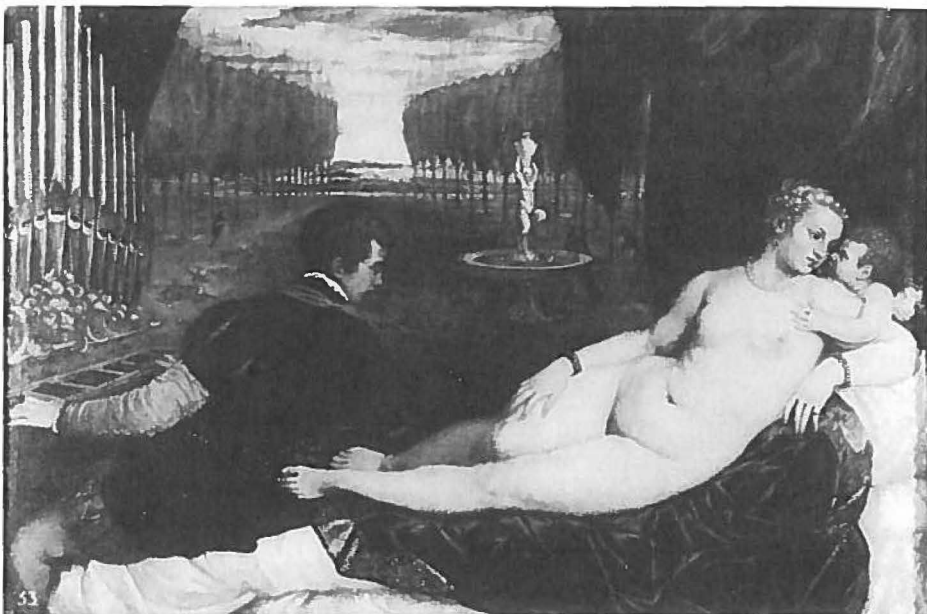
9. Giorgione, *Venus* (ca. 1510). Dresden, Gemäldegalerie. Photo Alinari.

the possibility of the response that has to do with sexuality, with the love of looking, and with the projection of desire.

A male description of what appears to be the main object of the picture, of what by any reckoning any describer would count as the main focus of attention and (one might suppose) the main focus intended by the painter, could run as follows: a naked young woman looks frankly at the beholder; her chestnut tresses fall over her naked shoulders; her nipples are erect; with her left hand she only half covers her pudenda—she almost toys with them—while the shadow around them suggests (if it does not actually indicate) her pubic hair. She is completely naked except for the ring on her little finger and the bracelet around her wrist. The sensuality of the representation would have been plain to many and may well continue to be so. But not many will admit to this—at least not if they are well schooled. The texts and monographs mostly avoid acknowledging the overt sexuality of such paintings; the obfuscations are extraordinary. Dense iconographic readings and sensitively aesthetic evaluation of form, colors, handling, and composition are the convenient categories of description for pictures like these; but they obscure the analysis of response. They also enable the repression of feelings that pictures such as these may still evoke.

Of course the matter is more complicated than simply evading what some people might conclude to be the “sexual invitation” of pictures like the *Venus of Urbino* or the many versions (e.g., fig. 10) of Venus with a lutenist or organist (usually taken to be Neo-Platonic allegories).²³ It is hard to be sure, in the first place, of the precise nature of the painter's intention—it may, after all, have been mixed. Perhaps he wanted to paint an erotic picture, but he may also have wanted to do the colors well and lusciously. Second, while the sexual element in these pictures can hardly be denied, there may well have been other factors that determined their purchase and that still arouse our appreciative or negative response—such as the artist's skills in making a good painting. But there is a great deal more that we tend to forget, evade, deny, or repress. These are relations that will be hard to define.

All this may be laboring the obvious. It will be held that we have, after all, become increasingly candid about sexual representation and its production and consumption. Perhaps there are very few left who care about or are taken in by the plodding and bookish evasion of meanings and import. But a sufficiently significant number remain, and the cases cited here are extreme examples of a general tendency. We go into a picture gallery, and we have been so schooled in a particular form of aesthetic criticism that we suppress acknowledgment of the basic elements of cognition and appetite, or admit them only with difficulty. Sometimes, it is true, we are so moved that we may be on the verge of tears; but for the rest, when we see a painting we speak of it in terms of color, composition, expression, and the



10. Titian, *Venus with an Organist* (ca. 1545–48). Madrid, Museo del Prado. Photo Mas.

means of conveying things like space and movement. It is the cultured layman or intellectual who most readily articulates this kind of response even though occasionally there may be a sneaking feeling that it has deeper psychological roots, which we prefer to keep buried or simply cannot ex-hume. We refuse, or refuse to admit, those elements of response that are more openly evinced by people who are less schooled. In such cases we are either being psychologically unanalytic, or discomfort with ruder feelings prevents their articulation.

VI

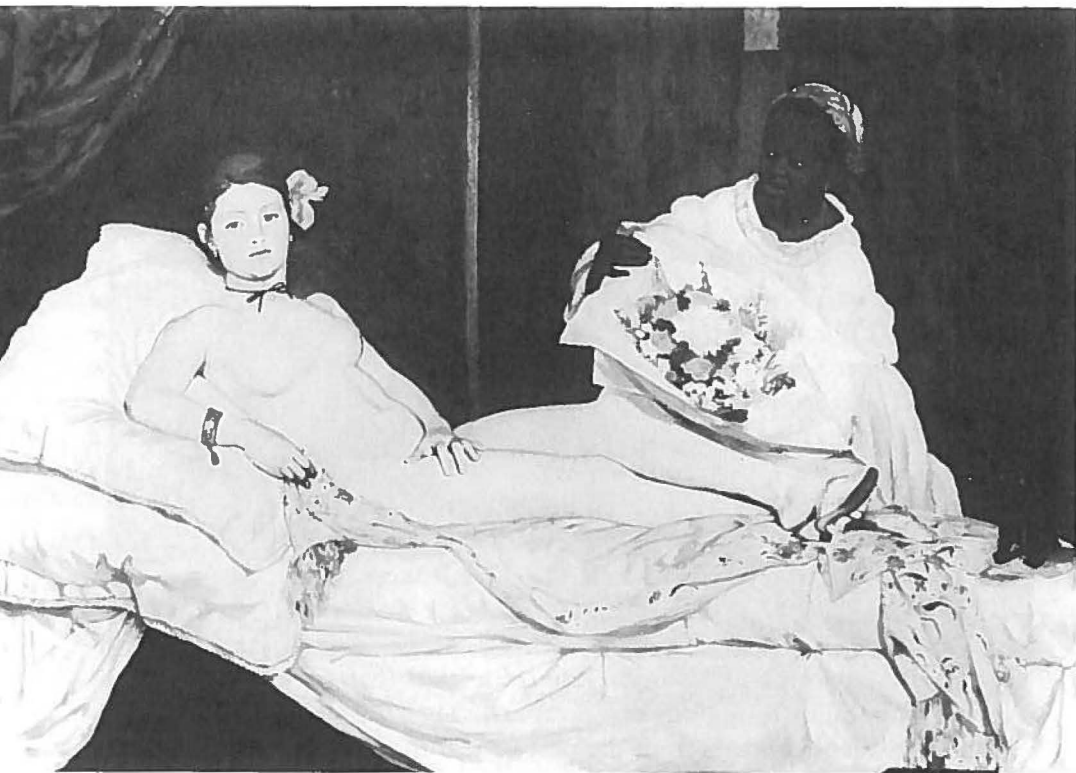
But how do we test these claims—however obvious—about responses to pictures such as the Venuses of Giorgione and Titian, and how do we refine our conclusions? For whatever the seductive pleasures of these images, no one would claim that the modern beholder's response is likely to be the same—or as strong—as that of the sixteenth-century viewer. Let us deal with immediate possibilities first, and then explore others.

We can claim that the very obviousness of the matter provides sufficient evidence—it is a picture of a naked woman and so the male sexual response comes to the fore; it is a beautiful picture of a beautiful naked woman, and so the male sexual response, given male conditioning, is primary. This is to elevate assumptions we automatically make (once freed of repression) to the

status of the evidential; and in some courts that would not be misleading—especially in those courts that must decide on the possibilities of retrieving what is fundamental in the matter of response. Second, we grant a similar status to intuition. We intuit the plausibility of the sexual reading, so do others whom we know, and we accord the judgment intersubjective validity. Third, we collect data from actual beholders and conduct a sociological survey. This is just the course that those skeptical of my claims so far are likely to advocate (the claims are too apodictic; they have a certain air of plausibility; but they are unproven). But for such evidence to be used, one would still need models of psychological and cultural conditioning, of how to take account of varieties of schooling, of differences in the far and obscure corners of one culture, and of the awe that one feels when one enters a museum and sees a picture in an elaborate gilt frame behind the neatly draped scarlet rope (to say nothing of bulletproof glass).

The fourth possibility for testing is continuous with the methodological and ideological predicates of this book. We consider powerful responses and discernable patterns of behavior that we know from people around us or within ourselves. That may mean looking at more everyday forms of imagery or clear forms of historical use (of a kind that sometimes, but not generally, pertains to high or canonical art). Then we seek equivalent models or equivalent contexts from the past or within the realms of art, and we strive to avoid circularity.

Let us return to the case of the *Venus of Urbino*. The picture is plainly erotic, even though *our* perception of its sensuality may be comparatively muted. It is both a truism and a commonplace that the expansion of methods of reproduction—above all of photography—has frequently had the result of turning the shock of first sight into the near-indifference of familiarity. In any case, since 1538 people have become used to still more candid pictures, like Manet's *Olympia*, or the centerfolds of a wide range of magazines (cf. figs. 11 and 163). It is precisely responses to these that one should not neglect in considering images like Titian's Venus. Even now, with a picture like this, we must repress a great deal to avoid admitting to the consequences of scopophilia and the desirous act of looking. It is not extravagantly hypothetical to imagine how much more direct an appeal such a picture must have made to the sexual responses of some sixteenth-century beholders, before Manet, before *Playboy*, before the plenitude of reproductive processes from printmaking to photography. The reason that it is not extravagantly hypothetical will emerge from the abundance of historical evidence I will bring forward. None of this, however, is to claim that modern beholders respond in the same way to sixteenth-century pictures as sixteenth-century beholders did, or that Indian erotic sculptures arouse the same responses in Westerners as in Indians. The aim is to plot responses, and then to consider why images elicit, provoke, or arouse the



11. Édouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863). Paris, Musée du Louvre.

responses they do; the issue is why behavior that reveals itself in such apparently similar and recurrent ways is awakened by dead form.

But let us not be too guarded in our awareness of the changes of context, both visual and historical. Of course it is possible for a male to gaze upon the revelation of naked female form without being sexually aroused, but even with a picture as ancient as Titian's we count the fact that this is no casual unveiling. Once such forms are presented as paintings, the spectator is invited to dote on the body in the picture and to engage those feelings of possession and fetishism from which, as long as he looks at the picture, he chooses not to escape.

But analysis is complex and difficult. If we are to understand the relations between sixteenth-century paintings such as the *Venus of Urbino* and the sexual feelings of men and women, we have to begin by setting them in the context of a wide variety of related material. Apart from, or in the absence of, written documents, the phenomenological evidence is primary; but a necessary refinement must ensue, and that pertains to the selection of images. We may take the image in the centerfold (the closer in composition and color to the problematic case the better) and consider the phenomenology of scopophilia and arousal; but to this procedure we must join the

historical and contextual one, as we ponder the kinds of response that other forms of apparently erotic imagery may have been capable of arousing. For the sixteenth century, for example, we might take prints such as the *Modi* after Giulio Romano and the *Lascivie* of Agostino Carracci (see figs. 168 and 164 below); but then we are presented with a combination of erotic naked form and strong sexual suggestiveness (or even the sexual act itself). With German nudes of the first part of the sixteenth century the problem is similar. In considering paintings such as those of the Cranachs, we should also turn to the extraordinary erotic prints of Sebald Beham and his circle, where the genital orientation is possibly even more blatant than in the Italian prints, and where the male gaze is even more directly implicated.

Thus we confront the initial complexities of analysis. There are more. Some problems disappear; others persist. Perhaps it might be argued that these prints are not art, but that is hardly the issue: whether or not they are art, they evoke responses that we must take into account when we consider works that *are* regarded as art. Perhaps it will be objected that the prints are reproductive images, on paper, in black and white, lacking the delicious modulations of color of Giorgione and Titian; but then we must ask these questions: What are the consequences of reproduction for the aura of the image? Do we respond more strongly—violently, demonstrably—to the painted picture hung in a public place or to a small print such as one by Sebald Beham, which we can keep with us and produce when we like, doting on it privately? Which gives the greater frisson? It might also be desirable to establish a distinction between the erotic and the pornographic, or at least to devise a sliding scale, beginning with a work that presents the nude cold, as it were, then passing to something that more blatantly suggests sexuality, and terminating with the representation of the sexual act itself. But here we stop ourselves and pause as we recognize the further difficulties that arise from analytic refinement.

For example: The erotic-pornographic distinction may only be semantically real (and intersubjectively variable); we may not need the distinction at all in our analysis of response. After all, it is not uncommon to find that the suggestive turns out to be more provocative than the blatantly descriptive. But with images from the distant past, it may well help to establish the limits of the publicly acceptable and the borderline between that which rouses shame and that which does not.²⁴ Modern beholders may no longer find the *Venus of Urbino* especially arousing, not only because they have seen so many reproductions of it and many others like it, but because sexual imagery can now go so much further. One has only to consider the vastly greater sexual expressiveness and exposure in popular imagery—from billboards to pornographic magazines—over the past few decades. But even with regard to the sixteenth century, one will still need to know how far Giorgione and Titian pushed beyond the normal conventions of represent-

ing the nude figure. Did they transgress the conventions just sufficiently to arouse the prurient, or much more, or not at all?

VII

Such are the multiplicity of models and controls that inevitably present themselves to the analyst of the history and theory of response. Some questions can only be answered by more historical research, others by more sophisticated phenomenological and psychological techniques. But all are predicated on the examination of as wide a range of imagery as possible, both high and low, both canonical and everyday. Without popular imagery, we can say little about the likely effects of the possible response to other forms of imagery. Here, if anywhere, historians of art acting as historians of images can come into their own, for here they utilize their old skills in assessing the comparative styles of different forms of art and imagery. They see differences and distinction where others may not, and then they may proceed to judge the role of style in engendering particular responses and particular behavior. In doing so they renounce the primacy of the traditional concerns of the history of art: speculation about the genesis of individual works of art, the attempted retrieval of historical-aesthetic categories, the assessment of the status of both creator and object (particularly when it is conceived of as high art), and in general the privileging of the upper end of the scale at the expense of the lower. The ethnography and everyday history that form the subject of this book have, it is true, been raided for the provision of illustrative and comparative material for many of these traditional concerns; but on the whole this kind of material has seemed too complex, too diffuse, and, at the same time, too embarrassingly trenchant to merit any kind of comprehensive analysis or overview.

The obstacles in the way of assessing past responses, indeed of reclaiming them from history, are clear, and I have already alluded to many of them. It will be held that response is dulled as a result of familiarity or reproduction; that the schemata and limits of representation vary and were not the same in the past as they are now; and that the very fact that a work is displayed in a museum, that it is acknowledged and recognized as canonical or as a masterpiece, powerfully conditions response. All this is true, and it may well be the case that in the domain of high art the spontaneous response is indeed the intellectualizing one. Nevertheless, I proceed in the belief that however much we intellectualize, even if that motion is spontaneous, there still remains a basic level of reaction that cuts across historical, social, and other contextual boundaries. It is at precisely this level—which pertains to our psychological, biological, and neurological status as members of the same species—that our cognition of images is allied with that

of all men and women, and it is this still point which we seek. No claim is to be made here that twentieth-century beholders respond to sixteenth-century images in the way sixteenth-century beholders might have (although we well may). But if we attend to our own responses to, say, the centerfold, we may be in a better position to understand contemporary responses to the nudes of Giorgione and Titian (or for that matter of Giulio Romano); and we cannot begin to understand either the motivations for or the effectiveness of, say, the images of traitors painted by Andrea del Sarto on the walls of the Palazzo Vecchio or the fourteenth-century frescoes of the banishment of the duke of Athens before we recall the posters produced by the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the spring and summer of 1968.

How, then, should we proceed? The first task must be to proceed as ethnographers and record as much as possible of all sections of society; we must then act as cultural anthropologists, attending to as wide a range of societies as practical. This is not to deny that different classes respond differently and that social and cultural contexts condition response; nor is it to deny that images are encoded in such a way as to communicate specific things to specific cultures or groups (the cultures or groups from which they emerge). But our concern is not primarily with interaction at this level. It is to mine what lies below the overlays of schooling, of class consciousness and conditioning, right down to the reflections and symptoms of cognition.

The scope of this investigation—as I have already insisted—covers all visual imagery, not just art. In order to understand our responses to “high” art we need the general and specific evidence supplied by responses to “low” images.²⁵ The history of art is thus subsumed by the history of images. There is and always has been a place for the history of what is and has been regarded as art, but that is not the present domain. The history of images takes its own place as a central discipline in the study of men and women; the history of art stands, now a little forlornly, as a subdivision of the history of cultures.

VIII

In the “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to his youthful *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin recommended an ascetic apprenticeship, whereby the philosophical explorer eschews both the inductive and the deductive approach and immerses himself in the most minute details of subject matter: “The relationship between the minute precision of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute details of subject matter.” This was the only way to save the phe-

nomena, Benjamin platonically insisted. Thus he directed himself to a vigorous attack on induction: "The attempt to define ideas inductively—according to their range—on the basis of popular linguistic usage, in order then to proceed to the investigation of essence can lead nowhere." The attack on induction led him to single out R. M. Meyer for criticism:

Thus the inductive method of aesthetic investigation reveals its customary murky colouring here too, for the view in question is not the view of the object resolved in the idea, but that of the subjective states of the recipient projected into the work; that is what the empathy which R. M. Meyer regards as the keystone of his method amounts to. This method, which is the opposite of the one to be used in the course of the current investigation, "sees the art-form of the drama, the forms of tragedy or comedy or character of situation, as given facts with which it has to reckon. And its aim is to abstract by means of a comparison of the outstanding representatives of each genre, rules and laws with which to judge the individual product. And by means of a comparison of the genres it seeks to discover general principles which apply to every work of art."²⁶

Now this is very astringent, and much of it may seem to apply to the present endeavour. But let it not be thought that this is an "aesthetic investigation." Let no one think that I will seek general principles to apply to every work of art (nor even to "art" in general). I will certainly not seek to abstract genres, however pressing the issue of genre and conventional form may or may not turn out to be. Nevertheless, the process of investigation will indeed be inductive. While I am concerned with fragments and proceed by minutely examining them, as Benjamin recommended, I view the whole of human relations with figured imagery in order to lay out certain aspects of behavior and response that may usefully be seen to be universally and transculturally markable.

There are, of course, plenty of other places where the inductive method is laid to waste. But Benjamin's argument is especially interesting because it is avowedly concerned with the relations between science and art in the analysis of art. This book, it will be seen, is not to be concerned with art above all. It will, however, be concerned with aesthetic issues (but not with issues in the realm of philosophical aesthetics). The enterprise is wholly different from that of Meyer assailed by Benjamin. It is not, to begin with, predicated on the hypostasis of any aesthetic category; indeed it is vigorously opposed to that. A naive assumption may be that it hypostasizes response or particular kinds of responses, but nothing could be farther from the case. It does not set out to determine what responses are or are not, nor, indeed, what response is or is not. It is concerned with the modes of talking about behavior that beholders themselves can recognize, and about behavior

and interaction that cannot take place without the presence of the figured object. It will, of course, also have to concern itself with the "subjective states of the recipient projected onto [if not into] the work." And empathy, as in Meyer, is also at work; but it is a rigorously phenomenological empathy, which may or may not repeat the examples of historical and ethnographic empathy recorded in these pages, and which we will explore philosophically and historically in a number of later chapters.

But have I not, in the outline of examples of efficacy and potential efficacy, and of possible arousal, mixed issues of emotion and cognition? I may seem to have allowed one explicit and one implicit category to overlap too easily (since there has been no claim that this book will deal with the vagaries of emotion.) Although much in these pages will rouse the disagreement of the author of *Languages of Art*, and although the task is wholly different from his, Nelson Goodman's statements, as he nears the end of that book, may stand for one of the mottoes of this one:

Most of the troubles that have been plaguing us can, I have suggested, be blamed on the domineering dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive. On the one side we put sensation, perception, inference, conjecture, all nerveless inspection and investigation, fact and truth; on the other, pleasure, pain, interest, satisfaction, disappointment, all brainless response, liking and loathing. This pretty effectively keeps us from seeing that in aesthetic experience *the emotions function cognitively*. The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses. (Goodman's emphasis)²⁷

The only differences are that we might replace the category of "aesthetic experience" with something much broader (say, the apprehension of real images), and that our scope extends beyond "the work of art" to all images. But in his final emphasis, Goodman makes at least one concession in this direction, and the general statement holds. It comes after the claim that "symbolization [i.e., in the broad Goodmanian sense of referring to all images] is to be judged fundamentally by how well it serves the cognitive purpose," and after some diversion down the byway of "aesthetic excellence"

this subsumption of aesthetic under cognitive excellence calls for one more reminder that the cognitive, while contrasted with both the practical and the passive, does not exclude the sensory or the emotive, that what we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles as well as grasped by our minds, that all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the organism participates in the interpretation of symbols.²⁸

I mean "the interpretation of symbols" in the broader sense; this will not be a book about hermeneutics.

When we think again of the initial examples, we are still left with these problems: What credibility can be attached to such apparently incredible tales? In what senses can images have the effectiveness attributed to them there, and in what ways can we talk about that effectiveness? What are the links between the bedroom tales and the case of responses to imagery seen as erotic; or between the powerfully consoling image and the refinement of emotional sensitivity through concentration? The links have to do with the possibility of arousal and ascent by picture (and by sculpture too, but that, as we shall see, is a slightly different case). Following arousal and ascent, a whole variety of peculiarly symptomatic effects ensue. Why? How? And in what sense that we can still understand? Of course it is not just a matter of sexual arousal or meditative ascent. In the following chapters, I will consider instances of arousal to tears, to militant action, to follow causes, to make long journeys, to make other images like the one that has deeply moved us, to destroy that which disturbs us, as if we acknowledge, in that very act, its power. Without embarking on theories of representation, we must also consider how images are made to work in these ways. But I have begun with specific examples because they pose the following questions most acutely of all: Why do we ignore the evidence for the effectiveness and provocativeness of images? How may we speak about such matters? Why are we aroused by the body in the lifeless image and what do we postulate in its absence? These are the questions to which we must now turn.