1.1 Toppling Saddam statue in Baghdad.

The incessant broadcast and print recycling of the April 2003 Reuters photograph of US soldiers and Iraqi civilians toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad revealed the importance of art--specifically commemorative sculptural portraits--to the Iraqis. It also demonstrated importance of media images to people all over the world. What do such images mean? Why are they so important?

In a television-dominated society, each person must develop the ability to create his or her own context for the unavoidable flow of images. As viewer-consumers of the media, we must learn to “read” the language of visual images.

Much like the words in a spoken language, images never have a singular, fixed or transparent meaning. They change over time and according to context. Think of what the word “cool” meant in New York City 1900 and what it meant in to the Beatniks in 1960. Or what
being “hot” meant in 1900 and what it means now.

We can approach understanding images, in all their complexity, by examining some of their intended, evolving, and received meanings. We must develop critical awareness of mass media images in order to be able to understand, interpret and evaluate their significance for our lives. When we do so, we become what cultural critic bell hooks calls “enlightened witnesses.” If we do not develop such awareness, we may be hypnotized by the constant, often numbing repetition of mass media images.

Learning to read a new language is very complex. Imagine you don’t know Hebrew, but want to learn to read Hebrew texts. First, you would have to learn the basic signifying units (the Hebrew alphabet). You would have to learn the words (vocabulary) and the grammar (the way sentences are put together). Then you would have to learn how this information is conveyed. (Informal handwriting, scrolls and printed books are examples of different ways of communicating linguistic messages in Hebrew.) Finally, you could begin to read in Hebrew. As you did so, you would have to learn about historic changes in Hebrew usage, for example, how written Hebrew from five centuries ago was quite different from spoken Hebrew today. Such historic change is also evident in other languages, like English—as you probably learned while studying Shakespeare.

To learn the language of visual images, we need to understand the basics of visual form (color, line, shape, etc.) and composition (how forms are arranged in relation to each other). We also need to study the modes of delivery—that is, the media with which these visual messages are presented to the viewer (whether via paintings, photographs or computer screens). As we do so, we can begin to learn the vocabulary or “styles” of various locations and historic periods and why it was important to make images about one part of human experience at a certain time in
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history, and about another aspect of human life in a different time. As Frederic Jameson has said, “[T]he only way to think the visual, to get a handle on increasing, tendential, all-pervasive visuality as such, is to grasp its historical coming into being.”

A Selective Historical View

This book presents a selective history, rather than a comprehensive or all-encompassing view. We start with prehistoric caves paintings (1.2), some of the first evidence of human beings using art to change and manipulate their environment. Then we move to visual images from Sumer in Ancient Iraq (1.3), the site that marks the transition from an oral tradition to a pictographic writing tradition. We jump to Ancient Greece (1.4), where the oral tradition is eclipsed by the alphabetic, and then to the Gothic Middle Ages with its use of manuscripts (1.5). Most of the book focuses on the Western cultural tradition of the last five hundred years, during which there was

1.2 Cave painting at Grotte Chauvet, France.
1.3 Sumer votive figures.
1.4 Apollo of Olympia.
1.5 God as geometer.
accelerated development of media with which to convey visual information, from printmaking, to the camera obscura, to photography, film, television and the computer (1.6).


The historical material presented here does not cohere into a linear narrative. Instead, it is a diversified field, with disruptions and challenges and changes. Nor does it present an isolated development. The art and mass media produced by Western culture (like Western culture in general) reveal an ongoing process of incorporation of material from other cultures: woodblock technology from China in the Middle Ages, new compositions and subjects from Japan in Impressionism, new visions from Africa in Cubism, concepts and ritual processes from Native America in Abstract Expressionism, etc. Cultural development is very complex and Western cultural products do not embody an autonomous, self-motivated trajectory or a unified whole.
The Ongoing Relationship Between Art & Technology

In addition to their influences from other cultures, Western art and mass media have always been dependent on and involved in advances in technology. To separate the images of art (or of the mass media) from the histories of technological apparatuses is to see only part of intricately interwoven developments. As media theorist Barbara Maria Strafford asserts, “We need an analogical concept of technology, one that restores awareness of the long and tangled lineage of apparatuses. As tools for transformation and revelation, visual technologies expand human consciousness, allowing people to see their material connections to larger ideas, forces, and movements. Instead of an apotheosis paradigm—in which the disembodied user is abruptly joined to the superior intelligence of a machine—the substance-filled gap implicit in the word media (from medius, ‘middle’) has to be recaptured. This is the lesson of legacy instruments for futuristic devices.”

The images themselves and the instruments that deliver them, from paintings to computer screens, determine what we see and how we see it, in both the world of representations, and the world of nature.

Looking is Learned: How We Learn to See P-I-G

Human vision is intelligent; we think about what we see. As French painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger wrote in 1912: “The visible world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought.”

Most of us consider seeing an essentially biological and “natural” process. We assume that we open our eyes and automatically see whatever is in front of them. In fact, looking is learned. We “see” as our culture teaches us to see. Let’s take for example how we learn to see a pig.
In the first half of the twentieth century, many US children who did not live on farms learned about pigs from children’s books read to them by their parents (1.7). On one page of the book, they saw the illustration of a chubby pink creature with pointed ears and corkscrew tail. On the opposite page they saw the word P-I-G. As their parents repeatedly said “pig” and pointed to the image, the children learned to associate the word with the drawn depiction.

From the middle of the century on, television introduced pigs to most urban children. They may have learned about pigs from watching children’s cartoons that featured Porky Pig (1.8), who was all pink and chubby, wore a short jacket and silly hat, and spoke in a high falsetto. Or they may have seen their first pig on “Sesame Street” where Miss Piggy (also chubby and pink, also dressed in remarkably silly attire) epitomized the bossy female and tirelessly pursued her love interest, Kermit the Frog.

Years before these children saw an actual pig, they formed a mental image associated with the word: a pink chubby creature that either said “Oink, oink” (if their parents were reading
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to them) or spoke in perfect English, albeit in a high squeaky voice (if their first porcine character was Porky Pig). Whether from children’s book illustrations or mass media icons, the mental concept of P-I-G that these young people developed was based on word and image, not on direct experience. Indeed, there is very little visual or behavioral correlation between Porky or Miss Piggy and their farmyard counterparts. The word and image point to a mental image developed in a culturally determined process—a mental image that has been learned—not to an actual pig. There is no natural relationship between the word PIG, the drawing of the cute well-dressed pink creature who stands on two feet, and an actual pig.

The relationship between words, which may be called signifiers, and the ideas or objects they refer to, which may be called the signified, is never “natural.” It is always arbitrary and always culturally determined. Images also function as signifiers; images frequently have culturally-determined but not “universal” or “natural” relationships to what they ostensibly portray. People outside the reach of “Sesame Street” programs may very well NOT recognize that the cute, well-dressed figure we can all identify as Miss Piggy is supposed to represent the dirty four-legged creature that ruts in farmyard refuse and ends up in a sandwich.

Furthermore, neither the mental concept (what is signified) nor its links to words and pictures (the signifiers) is ever fixed or static. The relationship between the concept and what it refers to shifts constantly. Toes represented pigs for children who learned a game played with their feet called “This Little Piggy Went to Market.” And the associations shifted and multiplied as the children aged.

Over time, the word pig took on additional meanings. Eventually, the children learned that the crisp, fatty meat they ate with their breakfast eggs came from pigs. These same children played football with a ball called a “pigskin.” They heard people calling police officers “pigs.”
And, as they grew, they learned that particularly chauvinistic men referred to as “pigs.”

Let’s get back to that drawing of the pig, often the first representation of “pigness.” The children learned to equate the drawing with a mental concept. They learned to see that chubby pink creature as PIG, however much or little it resembled an actual pig. Their parents, their televisions, their cultures taught them how to see and understand “pigness.”

Indeed, looking is learned. We learn how to see the three letters P-I-G as pointing to a mental concept and the drawing as pointing to some aspect of the same mental concept, through complex social processes. In the same way, we learn to see dog, cat, mother, father, self and other.

Art participates in this social process. Art images help us initiate the construction of mental concepts (as when our mother points to a drawing in a book and says “Pig: oink, oink!”) They also confirm what we have already learned, as when our grade school teacher holds up an illustration of farm yard animals while he teaches us to sing “Old MacDonald had a Farm” and we memorize the verse “And on his farm there was a pig...with an oink, oink here and an oink, oink there...” Art images, in other words, embody the social processes inherent in learning to look. In doing so, they both construct and reflect their respective culture’s values. An easy way to see the relationship between images and cultural values is by examining historic advertisements.

Advertising Images: What We Desire to See, How We Desire to Be

Advertising images often tell us how things “ought” to look. Advertisers for Kodak cameras have understood this since the early years of the twentieth century when snapshot photographs of families, family gatherings, and family vacations became the basis for Kodak advertising (1.9). Historians like Ellen Gartell have observed that this form of advertising
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imagery virtually taught America how to become photographers. William F. O’Barr adds, “Once

people owned a camera, they needed to be told what their pictures ought to look like. This type of instruction became the predominant subject matter of camera advertisements during the first half of the twentieth century…”

The early Kodak images not only instructed on how snapshots “ought” to look: they also informed viewers about how families and family events “ought” to appear. They presented the ideal world to which Americans were “supposed” to aspire.

“Reading” Images

We can analyze art images from our contemporary culture, as well as from other cultures and other times, in order to explore how the process of depicting values in images works. In this
book, we study art to examine the process of looking, to examine the visual components of learning to be ourselves, to think about ourselves and others. Our goal here might be called “visual literacy.” Most students learn to read written texts in early childhood. By their teen years, they can read, analyze, and respond critically to written texts, like articles in newspapers or magazines. But very few can “read” and think critically about the photographic images that accompany them. Most of the information we receive today, from printed media to television to the Internet, is at least partially visual. Such visuals, such pictorial “texts,” are powerful communicators. We need to learn to read and think critically about what they are “saying.” The tools of art history can be deployed to initiate the visual literacy process. They can teach us to “read” the images that surround us in our mass media society.

Images, Representation & Content

Images are never merely “natural” or neutral. They are always constructed representations. And they always convey the values and beliefs of the people who constructed them. The Kodak ads discussed above presented American families in a singular way, as white middle-class groups including mother, father, and a few children. They did not represent racial diversity. They did not represent any alternative family structures. Repeated again and again such images “told” viewers what a “normal” family was supposed to be. Whether conscious or not, viewers who lived in different family groups were alienated and discomforted by such images.

In a similar way, women are almost always portrayed in today’s advertisements as young, slender and able-bodied. Many studies have confirmed that such images make older women, women with disabilities, and overweight women feel inadequate, unattractive, and unfeminine. Like the historic Kodak images of families, many of today’s fashion and cosmetic ads tell
women what they “should” look like (1.10). They tell women what kinds of females are valued in our culture.
1.10 Advertisement directed at young women.
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Art as Icon: Images that Reflect Basic Cultural Values

The term icon traditionally has referred specifically to a culture’s religious images. But since our culture today is not primarily represented by such religious images, popular art and fine art images can be considered as icons insofar as their appearance in the mass media shapes and reflect our culture’s basic values.

As icons, for instance, there is a direct connection between Hans Memling’s marvelous oil portrait done over four hundred years ago (Diptych of Martin van Nieuwenhove, 1487, 1.11) and the photograph of President George W. Bush printed on the cover of Newsweek (1.12).

The oil painting strongly expresses two enduring values of Western culture: a love of technology and a love of individualism. Technology as a value is expressed by the printed book below the man’s prayerfully folded hands and by the Memling’s use of the newly discovered technique of linear perspective (the technique of creating the illusion of three-dimensional spatial recession on a two-dimensional surface). The value of individualism is expressed by the historic focus on realistic portraits of ordinary people.

The image of President Bush on the Newsweek cover shows a continuing stress on the same two values: Technological advances have mechanized perspective into photography. The
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love of individualism has increased to the point that the president—unlike the kings and rulers of Memling’s day—must look as much as possible like the ordinary citizen pictured in the Memling portrait. It is now an essential part of any American president’s image.

Art as Icon: Creating, Affirming & Sustaining Culture

Culture can be defined as the shared pattern of customs, ideas, beliefs, images, and languages that unite a group. Every culture can be seen as a kind of giant model of what it means to be a human being. Every human being within a given culture conforms in varying degrees to this model. Thus, even though culture is made by human beings, it also makes each individual—to some extent—in its own image. This is just as true of so-called advanced cultures as it is of native cultures like the Aztecs.

In our everyday usage the word myth tends to mean a lie or a fable—something that is not true, something unscientific. In relation to culture, however, myth does not mean a lie. A culture’s myths inevitably give explanations of how the cosmos (sun, stars, earth) was born. They also tell who men and women are—in their own relationships and in their relationships with the gods, with the spirits of the ancestors, with nature, and with death. Just as every culture embodies a particular model of human nature, so every culture—including our own—has its own myths, its own stories of origin and destiny. Every person within a culture lives out a personal version and variation of the culture’s myths.

The direct connection between culture and myth means that an icon is more than an image that reflects a culture’s basic values. The meaning of the term icon must include the crucial role art plays in forming the culture’s basic picture of what matters. More specifically, art has an icon function insofar as it helps people within a culture experience their basic myth system in a meaningful way. Without this experience of myth, a culture can literally lose its
meaning. It then either dies or undergoes radical change based on some new basic myth.

When Spanish conquerors effectively eradicated the Aztec religious system in the sixteenth century, the Aztecs were emotionally and physically disempowered. In order to compel the Aztecs to conform to European cultural conventions, the Spaniards destroyed Aztec sculptures, books, and buildings. They forbade the indigenous ritual practices that gave structure and meaning to the Aztecs’ lives, and forcibly converted them to Christianity. Only by undermining the Aztec mythic system could the Spaniards begin to incorporate the conquered people into their colonial empire. The Spaniards’ actions reflected their Eurocentric beliefs: their culture was to be valued, the Aztec culture devalued.

The European domination of the “primitive” Other exemplified in the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs was based on bipolar opposition thinking. As discussed in the Preface, the term bipolar opposition is used to refer to two concepts that have been traditionally linked. They have been conceived as absolutes, like black and white, with no “gray” territory between them. One member of the pair has been valued over the other. And they have been seen as in conflict.

Sometimes bipolar oppositions have been related. The male/female pairing has been linked to other oppositions. Nature has been linked with the female: we say “Mother Nature.” Culture has been linked with the male: historically, the cultural productions of men have been valued over those of women.

**Deconstructing Bipolar Oppositions**

Examination of the male/female bipolar opposition in Western culture illuminates how the structure has functioned historically. In general, men have been characterized as big, strong, aggressive, virile, intelligent, brave, outspoken, and stoical. They have been raised to seek power in competing public ventures. Women have been valued for being the opposite: smaller, less
muscular, chaste, obedient, agreeable, nurturing and intensely emotional. They have been taught to develop their relational, specifically nurturing skills, usually exercised in the domestic setting.

In other words, human characteristics, characteristics we all share, have been divided in two. One half of them has historically been coded as male. The other half has been coded as female. And the male characteristics have often been valued over the female ones.

Intent on keeping men as “real men” and women as “real women,” society uses hurtful language to penalize those who violate cultural expectations. If a woman steps outside her designated gender category by competing with men in the public sphere and by taking on the supposedly male characteristics of aggression and strength, if she also becomes competitive and outspoken, she may be demonized as a “bitch.” Calling an “unwomanly” woman a bitch or female dog is like using a psychic tazer to compel her to behave as she “should.” Bitch capitalizes on the culture/nature bipolar opposition by moving a woman out of the human-culture category and demoting her to the nature-animal category. Similarly, a man who steps outside his gender category by embracing what are considered female characteristics and activities, may be called a “girly man” or other demeaning labels, again in attempt to force him to conform.

[SIDEBAR: The ongoing power of the term bitch is pictorialized in the logo for “Bitch” skateboards. A small image of a woman, stylized in the manner of public signage, stands on the left side of the logo. To her right is a larger male image. He points a gun at her head. A puff of smoke coming out of the gun’s barrel indicates that he has just shot her, presumably because she is a ‘bitch.” See www.bitchskateboards.com]

Especially since the 1960s, during what is called the Postmodern period, bipolar oppositions have been increasingly exposed and challenged. By now, many adults realize bipolar thinking is limited and stereotyping. But children may not have such a critical perspective. They
may not be able to resist the strong social programming into oppositional gender roles.

Socializing Bipolar Opposition

Children are often taught to conform to the bipolar oppositions of gender. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes reinforce what little boys and little girls should be. Active, handsome princes rescue passive Sleeping Beautys and Snow Whites. The childhood chant reiterates: “Snips and snails and puppy dog tails, that’s what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and everything nice, that’s what little girls are made of.”

Examination of children’s television commercials from the early 1990s indicates that young people were still being socialized into bipolar oppositions of gender. The commercials aimed at selling toys to little boys were active, if not violent. There was a preponderance of war toys. With “play” weapons, vehicles, and robots, little boys were taught to value aggressive competition and control through force. The boy games led them to strive to win over others, usually in outdoor settings, where they developed athletic skills so they could become strong and quick. Little boy toys involved technology and conflictual strategies. Visually, there was emphasis on black, military camouflage and primary colors. Most of the music was loud “hard rock.” Popular boy toys in the late twentieth century include G.I. Joe “action figures,” Nerf foam rockets, and Z-bot plastic robots, all well equipped with guns.

In marked contrast, commercials designed to sell toys to little girls were often pastel in tonality (most often pink) and used softer music and more soothing voices. Girl toys encouraged the domestic skills needed for motherhood: nurturing baby dolls, cleaning the house, and cooking. One little girl game involved several preteens trying to guess which boy liked them. In the end, the winner listened to a clue on a mock telephone, then giggled, “Dan! Dan! You’re my man!” It is unthinkable that little boys would sit around playing a board game aimed at guessing
which imaginary girl “liked” them. They would find it a total bore.

Television stereotypes of the 1990s were reinforced architecturally in the layouts of Toy’R’Us, the largest toy chain in California. Many of the stores were laid out in a bifurcated manner. Customers entered through one door, were led through sale items, then entered the boy’s side of the store. Like the boys’ commercials, the boys’ side of the store was dominated by red, blue, yellow, black and camouflage coloring. All of the computer and video games were on the boy side. There were numerous weapons and war toys, as well as male dolls called “action figures.” The other side of the store, the girls’ side, was pink and pretty. The stuffed animals, baby dolls and kitchen toys were all in the girls’ section. Barbie Dolls were, of course, on the girls’ side of the store.

**Deconstructing Bipolar Oppositions in Western Cultural Icons: David’s Oath of the Horatii**

Bipolar oppositions are also evident in examples from the fine arts tradition of Western culture. French academic painter Jacques Louis David painted his large historical canvas, *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784, 1.13), in Rome, soon after archaeologists discovered the ancient Roman cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The two cities had been covered by volcanic ash so rapidly after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that people were instantly preserved while walking down the street. Not only were human remains preserved; so were the buildings and many of the material goods in those buildings. Europeans suddenly saw what people actually wore and did during Roman times; it instantly became fashionable to dress like Ancient Romans.

David had traveled from Paris to Rome to study art. He was inspired by the archaeological discoveries to use a Roman story and archaeologically correct details of architecture and attire in his monumental painting.
David’s canvas depicts the moment when three brothers (the male figures on the left) swear to their father (the central patriarchal figure) that they will fight to the death for their rights. On the right side of the painting are wives, sisters, and children responding tearfully to the imminent departure of their sons, brothers, and husbands.

The painting, when exhibited in Paris, was embraced as a call to fight for one’s liberty. It has often been interpreted as an incitement to revolution, inspiring the French people to rise up against monarchical abuse and establish a nation of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity,” the clarion call of the French Revolution. Today, we can “read” David’s painting from many viewpoints.

A feminist perspective allows us to see that the image reinforces traditional gender roles.
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David’s monumental painting pictorializes what men should be like and what women should be like. Men are active, women passive. Men are depicted as physically strong warriors. Fierce but controlled, they are going out into the world to compete and conquer. In contrast, the weak and emotional women are staying at home to care for the children.

The visual elements employed in the depiction of the two genders contribute to the binary messages as well. All of the human actors appear on a shallow stage of action, which is situated parallel to picture plane. The men are larger, and positioned to be the focus of attention. Indeed, the entire composition rotates around the central patriarchal figure of the father. The women are smaller and secondary.

We learn to “read” flat images much as we learn to read pages of text: from left to right, top to bottom. In David’s Oath of the Horatii, light enters the composition from the upper left and moves to the lower right. Our gaze is directed to the three brothers first, then to the patriarch whose central position is reinforced by the three windows in the architectural backdrop. Men are in bright colors--red and blue. Women are in pale pastels. Men are all drawn with straight lines and sharp angles. Women are depicted with soft, curving lines.

As we have said, images carry cultural values. From an image like Jacques Louis David’s Oath of the Horatii, viewers “learn” that what matters are the heroic actions of men, and that women are to serve a secondary, support function.

The visual messages in David’s painting can be compared to Hollywood film images. In the 1990s, many Academy Awards for best film went to movies that focused on the heroic actions of men, especially Dances with Wolves (1990), Unforgiven (1992), Braveheart (1995), and Gladiator (1999). Australian-born actor Russell Crowe won the Academy Award for best actor for his role as the noble Roman rebel in Gladiator, and went on to star as a heroic British
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captain in Academy Award-nominated *Master and Commander* (2003).

There has been a long tradition of film images of powerful men and comparatively passive women. Superman always had to rescue Lois Lane, just as John Wayne protected innumerable frail women in the mythic Wild West. Bruce Willis had to save his wife in the first two *Die Hard* movies (1988 & 1990, US, John McTiernan and Renny Harlin.)

Contrasting Cultural Icons

One of the goals of this book is to examine the visual language of our mass media. Because that language was historically developed in Western culture, the primary focus of this book is the visual language of Western Europe and North America. This language is not universal, any more than Spanish or English is universal. Nor is it the “best” or “highest” visual language, again, any more than Spanish or English is the best or highest language.

In order to demonstrate that the visual language of the West is specific to one cultural tradition, and not necessarily shared by other cultures and other times, we will start with two art historical exercises. First, we will compare an important image--an icon--from Western culture with an icon produced outside the West. Then, in Chapter 2, we will survey icons from the ancient history of Western culture to demonstrate that even within that specific tradition, the visual languages--and hence, the values that they celebrate--have changed over time.

Michelangelo's David

The Western cultural icon we will focus on is *Michelangelo’s David* (1.14). Perhaps the best way to enter into art historical engagement with such an icon is to examine it through the six questions of journalistic inquiry: Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?
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“Who” asks about the artist. Michelangelo was one of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. He is considered such an important cultural hero that one of the four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles--cartoon characters created for an early childhood viewing audience--was named Michelangelo. The other three were Leonardo, Raphael, and Donatello (1.15).

(We’ll talk about Leonardo later in this book, but not about the other two Turtles.)

“What” asks about the subject of the artwork. David was a great biblical hero. As a youth, he slayed the giant Goliath (1.16). Later, he became king of the Jews. He wrote poetry (several

1.15 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

1.16 Peter Paul Rubens, David Slaying Goliath, c. 1630.

songs or hymns from the Book of Psalms are attributed to him) and codified a legal system that is still influential today.

Christians consider David, the greatest king of Israel, an early ancestor of Jesus.

The story of David and Goliath has resonance in the mass media. David was a
young shepherd boy, who protected his flocks from predators with a slingshot. He became so skilled in this rather low-tech weapon (a slingshot) that he was able to strike and kill Goliath, the leader of the army threatening David’s people, by aiming his slingshot at Goliath’s only point of vulnerability: the center of his forehead. Centuries later, George Lucas re-worked the David and Goliath story in the first-released Star Wars film (US, 1977). Luke Skywalker was a young boy who protected his flocks by flying small and rather unsophisticated spaceships through narrow canyons and shooting at predators with remarkable precision. When his people were threatened by a technological giant--the Death Star--Luke used his pastorally derived skills to bring down the planet-sized ship. Part of the reason for the astounding success of Star Wars is that Lucas took the David and Goliath tale--a story so familiar that it was almost archetypal--and reinterpreted it in futuristic terms.

“Where” refers to the locale of creation and/or exhibition. Michelangelo sculpted David in Florence, the northern Italian city often considered the birthplace of the Renaissance. Although David was originally intended for outdoor viewing on a cathedral facade, it is now housed in the Art Academy of Florence, where it is protected from pollution and possible vandals. An important banking and trade city, as well as a major textile producer, Florence was rising in wealth and political importance at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The original placement of the sculpture on public building would have alerted anyone who came into town that they were entering a realm dominated by powerful men of taste and distinction.

“When” refers to the time the artwork was created. Michelangelo worked on David from 1501 through 1504. That was the height of the historical period known as the Renaissance. Renaissance is a French term meaning rebirth and it refers to the rebirth of the classical past, of the ideals of Ancient Greece and Rome that were embraced at the time. The Renaissance was a
period of exploration, conquest, and imperial extension. It was also the time of the greatest 
holocaust in world history: the European destruction of Native American populations through 
disease and warfare.

One reason *David* is a key Renaissance monument is that it embodies Michelangelo’s 
reappraisal of Ancient Greek and Roman artistic ideals. Specifically, he used an ancient statue of 
a Greek god--the *Apollo Belvedere*--as inspiration for the figure’s pose and physique. 
Michelangelo was not the only artist to be inspired by the *Apollo Belvedere* (1.17). Throughout 
history, it has functioned as an image of “almost magical efficacy.” German art historian Johann 
Joachim Winckelmann spoke of it as “the 
highest ideal of art among all the works of antiquity…[and] beauty incarnate…”

Michelangelo portrayed *David* nude, 
with classic Greek proportions and a Greek 
hairstyle. And although the sculpture is 
supposed to represent one of the most 
important figures of Jewish history, he is not 
circumcised. The merging of ancient ideals 
with current cultural concepts (in this case, 
Christian ones) is complete.

Just as Hollywood moviemakers remake earlier films, Michelangelo created *David* as an 
updated and transformed Greek god, merging Christian and pagan symbols in a key Renaissance 
strategy. And just as Hollywood filmmakers idealize the characters in their historical dramas 
(using the beautiful Julia Roberts to portray *Erin Brockovich* [US, 2000]), so Michelangelo
idealized *David* according to current standards of the beautiful body in Greek mode. It is probable that the real David did not have an ideal athletic body in the Greek mode. It is certain he did not guard his sheep or confront Goliath in the nude!

“How” asks about the process of creating the artwork. Michelangelo used what we call “subtractive” sculpture for *David*. He began with a 14’ tall block of white marble and carved away whatever part of the stone he did not want to remain. Michelangelo wrote that he saw the figures inside the marble and carved away what surrounded them there. He used hammers and chisels as his primary tools. Sculpting marble was arduous labor, requiring physical strength as well as finesse. Contemporary portraits of Michelangelo show him to have been a large, muscular man.

“Why” is often the most complex and contended question in reference to artworks. We know that Michelangelo was commissioned to create *David*. He worked much like what we call a commercial artist today: people came to him, hired him to create a work that would meet their needs and desires, and paid him according to a contract. Powerful civic leaders of Florence hired him to create *David*. Because Florence was, at the time, vying with the “giant” city of Rome for dominance of the Italian peninsula, some art historians “read” *David* as a symbol of the smaller upstart city in which it still stands. If that is true, then Michelangelo’s sculpture represented the city of Florence much as the Statue of Liberty represents the United States.

*David*’s iconic power is not limited to the status of a sixteenth century urban symbol. *David* can also be interpreted as a key monument of Western culture, since it was created in the Renaissance, at a time when many Western cultural values were developed and artistically reified. The style in which *David* was created might be loosely termed “realism.” In spite of the fact that Michelangelo portrayed the Jewish shepherd boy nude on the battlefield (which he
certainly was not) and proportioned and coifed him like an Ancient Greek god (also quite unlikely), the figure is recognizably human and posed in a fairly naturalistic manner. Michelangelo’s goal was to reproduce the external appearance of an idealized human form. We “read” *David* as a “real” man, even as we recognize the idealized nature of his portrayal. Such idealized realism in art that focuses on the perfected human individual continues in the mass media today, in images from film to television to advertising. We “read” the images in a Calvin Klein ad (1.18) as “real” people, even as we realize they are computer manipulated to achieve an unattainable level of perfection.

The stylistic preference for idealized realism is not the only aspect of the Renaissance that persists today. The Renaissance was characterized by extensive European discovery, exploration,

1.18 Calvin Klein advertisement.

conquest and imperial annexation of territories in the Americas, Africa and Asia.

A keystone date of the Renaissance is 1492, the year Christopher Columbus sailed from Spain in what he hoped would be a trade excursion to India. As we all know, he instead “discovered” the “Indians” in what Europeans soon called America or the New World. Let’s look at an icon of the New World to examine how the visual language it speaks differs from that spoken in
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Michelangelo’s *David*.

*Coatlicue*

*Coatlicue* (pronounced Koe-aht-LEE-kway; 1.19) is an icon of Aztec culture. Let’s examine her with the same journalistic structure we used for David.

Who? Although we do know the names of some Pre-Columbian artists, like the Maya ceramic painters who signed their vessels with hieroglyphic inscriptions of their names and honorific titles, we don’t know the names of the artists who created *Coatlicue*. So we will have to settle for attributing her to anonymous Aztec artists.
Many Americans know very little about the Aztecs. Most probably don’t realize that what we call Mexican food is largely Aztec food: the words avocado, chile, chocolate, tamale, and tomato are all derived from Aztec language originals. We also can thank Native American cultures for corn, beans, squash, and potatoes. Native Americans like the Aztecs first domesticated the foods that now feeds over a third of the world’s population.

Most Americans know even less about the rest of Aztec culture. The Aztecs had complex mathematical, calendrical, and astronomical systems. Their cyclical concept of time and history
is represented in the immense sculpture known as the *Aztec Calendar Stone* (1.20). They expanded into far-flung trade routes, ruled a complex imperial bureaucratic structure, and built immense, sophisticated pyramids and temples. They also wrote exquisite poetry, cast delicate gold jewelry, and crafted impressive headdresses from iridescent parrot feathers.

![Aztec Calendar Stone](image)

**1.20 Aztec Calendar Stone.**

What? Like their descendants today, the ancient Aztecs spoke Nahuatl, which is an agglutinative language. That means that several concepts can be joined in one word. The name Coatlicue is usually translated to mean “She of the Serpent Skirts.” If you look at the sculpture closely, you can see her head is formed by two profile serpent heads coming together to form a single frontal face. She has a fairly naturalistic collarbone and, below that, pendulous breasts covered by a necklace of human hearts and human hands with a pendant skull. A serpent belt is tied at her waist. Her skirt is comprised of interwoven serpents; alternating snakeheads and rattle
tails are visible at the hem. Her legs, like her upraised arms, are represented by monstrous, alligator-like appendages.

The Aztec language was filled with significant puns. The word *cue*, which is often translated as skirt, can also mean hill or pyramid (in effect, a man-made hill). She of the Serpent Skirts, then, could be read as She of the Hills Covered with Serpents. This gets us close to her role in Aztec religion: Coatlicue was the Earth Goddess. Although the serpent has an evil connotation in Western culture (remember: in the Garden of Eden, Eve and Adam were tempted into sin by the devilish serpent), the Aztecs considered snakes powerful creatures symbolic of fertility and abundance. She of the Serpent Hills is the fertile earth from which we all come.

Soon after being conquered by the Spaniards, Aztec wise men related a wonderful story about the Earth Goddess to Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun. According to Sahagun’s account, Coatlicue was an old woman who had four hundred children. (The Aztec numerical system was based on twenty, unlike ours, which is based on ten. Twenty times twenty is four hundred. For an Aztec to say that Coatlicue had four hundred children was like one of us saying, “I have tons of homework.” We don’t mean it literally; we simply mean that we have a lot of studying to do.)

One day as Coatlicue was sweeping the floor of the temple, she came upon a ball of feathers. The Aztecs valued the brilliantly hued feathers of tropical birds as highly as they valued gold, silver and jade. They made feather jewelry, feather clothes and feather headdresses for the elite of their society.

So instead of sweeping the feather ball away, Coatlicue saved it by placing it in her
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1.21 Coyolxauhqui.

blouse. Sometime later, she realized she was pregnant. Her children were horrified at their mother’s news. Feeling dishonored and shamed, the eldest daughter Coyolxauhqui (Koe-yole-SHAW-kwee, 1.21) urged her siblings to threaten Coatlicue. But when they did, the fetus reassured his mother that he would take care of her no matter what happened. Sometime later, the children decided that they had to kill their pregnant mother rather than allow her to humiliate them by having the child. They armed themselves and approached their mother. As Coyolxauhqui lifted her weapon to strike Coatlicue, the child was born not only fully-grown but also fully armed with spear and shield. He killed his oldest sister, cutting her head off and throwing it into the sky; she became the Moon. Then he killed his other siblings and threw their bodies heavenward; they became the Stars. The miraculous child himself became Huitzilopochtli (Weet-zeel-ah-POACH-tlee, 1.22), the Aztec patron War God, a manifestation of the Sun God. Huitzilopochtli as the sun reenacted his parturition battle every dawn as he was reborn out of the earth, then fought with the Moon and Stars to achieve dominance in the daytime sky.

The Aztec emperors claimed divine descent from Huitzilopochtli. They felt it was their
sacred duty to ensure Huitzilopochtli’s daily victory over the night forces by offering him sacrificial victims, victims they obtained through warfare and conquest.

The Coatlicue story is important not only for Aztec cosmology (that is, the mythic stories told to explain the relationship between humans and the universe) but also as justification for the Aztec right to rule. The cosmological tale was an important ideological tool in explaining and fortifying Aztec imperial expansion.

When? The Aztecs were conquered by an army led by the Spaniard Hernan Cortes in 1521. Coatlicue was made some time before that date—probably close to the time Columbus began his fateful first trip (1492).

Where? Coatlicue was a major monument of the Aztec imperial capital, the city they called Mexico-Tenochtitlan (1.23) and we today call Mexico City. The Spaniards arrived in the Aztec capital city at the height of Aztec Empire, which had trade and communication routes extending out of Central Mexico as far north as the Ohio River Basin and as far south as Peru.

The city had been founded in circa 1350 A.D. on a cluster of swampy islands in the middle of an immense lake that covered the floor of the Valley of Mexico. Because many of the urban thoroughfares were canals, the conquering Spaniards were reminded of Venice, Italy. They were awed by the beauty and magnificence of the architecture, likening the Aztec capital to mythic cities described in medieval romances.
After the conquest, the Spaniards tore down the Aztec buildings, using the stones to erect their own houses and churches. They built the main cathedral of Mexico right on top of what had been the ceremonial center of the Aztec capital. In their attempt to erase all remnants of the native religion and thereby facilitate the forced conversion to Christianity, the Spaniards broke up much of the Aztec sculpture. They rolled some of the particularly large pieces into ditches and buried them under dirt and rubble. *Coatlicue* was not rediscovered until the late eighteenth century, when construction workers uncovered her near the *Aztec Calendar Stone*.

How? A monumental 102 inches tall, *Coatlicue* is, like Michelangelo’s *David*, an example of subtractive sculpture. The Aztec artists started with a large boulder of basalt stone and carved away whatever they did not want to remain. The figure was then covered with stucco and brightly painted. Although the earth in which she was buried destroyed most of the original pigment, there are remnants still left in some of the deep crevices, enough to indicate strong contrasts that would allow the complex features to be read from far distances.

Why? *Coatlicue* was originally located in the Aztec ceremonial center, very near the immense double pyramid on top of which stood the temples dedicated to the two main Aztec
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gods: Huitzilopochtli, the War God with solar attributes, and the Rain God Tlaloc. Anyone who entered the Aztec capital for commercial or political purposes would see her. They would be reminded of the Aztec rulers’ claim to descent from Coatlicue’s son, the War God, and of their justification of imperial extension based on their unique relationship with the goddess.

Comparing David & Coatlicue

It is important to remember that images are not transparent windows into cultural revelation; their meanings are neither “natural” nor fixed. Because the significance of an image—like the image itself—is a cultural construction, the significance shifts according to the perspective of the viewer.

A sixteenth century Spaniard who came to Mexico with Cortes might very well see Michelangelo’s David and the Aztec Coatlicue in terms of bipolar oppositions. He might see David as an ideal figure: male, good, beautiful, young, heroic, natural or “real” and highly valued. In contrast, he might see Coatlicue as female, evil, ugly, old, monstrous, demonic, unreal and devalued. Indeed, many of the Early Colonial Spanish writers called Aztec gods demonios or demons.

We can deconstruct such bipolar thinking to expose its problems. In fact, the two art works are not so different; indeed, they have many similarities. They were created at approximately the same time. Both are monumental stone sculptures, both portray figures of central importance in the religions of their creators, and both functioned as important symbols for the cities in which they stood.

Also at issue in understanding these two art works is the way Westerners have developed self identity by contrast with the Other of cultures such as the Aztecs. Historically, Westerners have identified who they are by establishing who they are not, as, they are not “savage” like the
Aztecs. They have exaggerated the differences between their culture and the other; they have also simplified the distinctive characteristics of members of other cultures into stereotypes.

Perhaps at this point, it is instructive to note that the Aztecs might very well have found *David* as objectionable as our imagined sixteenth century Spaniards would have found *Coatlicue*. For the Aztecs, appearing naked in public was extremely shameful. Captive warriors were stripped and paraded through the city center in order to humiliate them. Aztec viewers might have assumed *David* was a captive because of his nudity. They would have been appalled that such a demeaned figure was honored in such a large and celebratory portrayal.

The primary differences between *David* and *Coatlicue* lay in the visual languages their creators employed. The Western artist (Michelangelo) “spoke” the language of idealized realism that dominated his culture during the Renaissance. The Aztec artists sought to portray a spiritual entity not related to the external appearance of any actual being. The Western priority was idealized reproduction of the perceptual reality; the Aztec goal was connection with an otherworldly concept.

**Native Art: Art That Connects instead of Art That Describes**

It is not possible for most Westerners to appreciate native art like the Aztec *Coatlicue* by simply “looking” at it. Unlike the news photograph at the beginning of the chapter, a work of native art is not only made to be seen. Native art does not mirror or reflect life; it is seen by the people who make it as helping to create life. Native art is not based solely on observation; it tries to connect cultural processes. This simplest way to translate this vital aspect of native art into our terms would be to say that art means “power.”

Native art expresses the power of nature and the sacred by seeking to invoke, contact, and conform to visible and invisible forces. Aztec rituals honoring and incorporating *Coatlicue*
functioned to establish the connection with the spirit world. Rather than create an image that would look “real” in the way photographs today look “real,” the Aztec artists sought to make something that resembled a vision or a dream.

Because Aztec art is not part of our visual language, images of Aztec deities rarely appear in our mass media environment. When they do appear in Hollywood films, it’s as monsters or other exotic figures. The giant, man-eating worms in *Tremors* (1990) and *Tremors 2* (1995) resemble the Aztec feathered serpent deity Quetzalcoatl (Kate-zall-COE-aht). The Aztec goddess of childbirth (of questionable authenticity itself) is translated from greenstone to gold and transported from Central Mexico to the South American jungles in *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1981). The pyramids in *Alien vs. Predator* (2005) combined Aztec, Maya, and Egyptian characteristics. There are no mass media images of *Coatlicue*; it is too hard for many Western viewers to “read.”

**David: The Ideal Body in the Mass Media**

In contrast, Michelangelo’s *David* is a ubiquitous actor on the stage of mass media. He has appeared wearing everything from Gold Bond underwear to Levi jeans (1.24). His modern advertising attire was parodied in a 1990s refrigerator magnet set that included an image of the sculpture and numerous shirts and pants to put on him.

*David* also appears in the mass media totally nude. For years, the *Los Angeles Weekly* ran ads using the nude *David* to advertise penis enlargement products. As advertising copywriter
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Barry Hoffman asserts, “The David is the best known piece of statuary ever chiseled, and any advertiser who finds merit in fig-leaf-free full-frontal male nudity usually finds some way to exploit the shocking fact of that nakedness by invoking the timeless beauty of his nudity…If you have a sexual product, he’s your man.”

David’s role in advertising has changed his iconic meaning. He is no longer simply a magnificent monument one sees on a trip to Florence. He is now an image, reproduced in ever-changing contexts and for ever-changing purposes. The reproduction of artworks like David shifts our perceptions of them.

Modern Art & Mass Media: New Ways of Perceiving the Art Object

Roy Lichtenstein’s lithograph Cathedral #3 (1.25) suggests the pervasive way the mass media influence our perception of fine art. Cathedral #3 refers to a famous series of paintings of Rouen cathedral done in the 1890s by the great French Impressionist artist Claude Monet (1.26). The dots in Lichtenstein’s work are meant to resemble the tiny dots formerly used to print photographs in books, magazines, and newspapers.

Lichtenstein’s painting illustrates what he calls the industrialization of art. The original art object, once it is pumped into the mass media, becomes yet another stereotype or cliché among all others. If the viewer ever does see the original art object, it is seen through the masks and labels already provided by the media. Art reproductions in books and magazines make us all like tourists visiting famous places: if we eventually have the opportunity, we cannot help comparing the original to the photograph. The impact of Lichtenstein’s art is verified by anyone who has approached a famous painting like Leonardo’s Mona Lisa in the Louvre. One is forced to elbow through a bustling crowd armed with headsets and cameras only to find the art object
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cloistered in a vault protected by think glass. What the viewer really sees is not so much an art object as yet another celebrity.

Artists like Lichtenstein began to ask how the individual art object, which traditionally represented the individuality of the artist, could have any real meaning when multiplied indefinitely in the mass media. The dots in Cathedral #3 suggest that Monet’s painting will be easily recognized, not because so many people have seen Monet’s original paintings, but because so many people have seen printed photographs of them. Lichtenstein’s work acknowledges that this kind of contact with images instead of real objects is a vital part of our way of seeing art today.

This is as true for artists as it is for the public; in today’s art world even most professional painters, architects, sculptors, and others look at mass media images of art more than at unique
art objects. For the public, illustrated exhibition catalogues printed by galleries and museums extend the artist’s work in time and space far beyond the scope of the actual event. *Vogue, Time,* and other mass circulation magazines carry features articles on modern art to the public at large on a regular basis. Metropolitan newspapers regularly review exhibitions of contemporary art.

The mass media have made art icons both familiar and popular. (It bears repeating that Aztec and other native arts do not partake of this familiarity.) Attendance at American art museums exceeds that at professional sporting events. A single statistic summaries this popularity: over a million people saw the Picasso retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1981.

**Mass Media & Fine Art: What Happens to the Unique Art Object?**

The presence of fine art in the mass media has had its cost, however. This cost is also dramatized by the dots in Lichtenstein’s paintings: once in the mass media, the original work of art becomes something else—a mere image. The unique art object made by a unique individual drifts into an environment of swarming images spewed out from out society’s innumerable image-making and image-multiplying machines.

This presented an inevitable conflict for fine art. The modern tradition of fine art stressed three inherent values: the value of the unique art object; the value of the artist’s individual personality; and the value of innovative artistic form. (As we shall see, by the end of the twentieth century, artists were rejecting such modernist values.)

Unlike modern fine art, popular art for the mass media has always been intended to make as much money as possible. It is usually planned from the beginning as a commodity, the visual goal of which is to anticipate and meet the expectations of a large audience rather than to challenge that audience by either personal expression or artistic innovation. A high-quality
television show might be canceled or a good movie never made because of audience marketing criteria and the need to make a profit. In contrast, many artists of the modernist tradition were concerned that involvement with the mass media would lead fine art to a similar emphasis on packaging and marketing.

**Fine Art & Popular Art: Western Icons for the Global Gallery**

The icon effect of our fine art and popular art images is particularly clear in their impact abroad.

Abstract paintings and other forms of contemporary art have been especially associated with the United States since the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Jackson Pollock and other New York artists gained international attention with the movement known as Abstract Expressionism (1.27). This kind of painting and the styles of art that have succeeded it in America are seen abroad not only as art but—like our technology—as symbols of American progress and leadership.

![Image: Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1948.*](image)

It is America’s mass media popular arts, however, that provide America’s most powerful
icons abroad. American programming makes up as much as forty percent of television time shown in countries ranging from Europe to the Near East to Asia. American popular culture heroes, from Mickey Mouse (1.28) to the Marlboro Man to Rocky, consistently combine a sense of innocence, power, and individualism that has a seemingly universal appeal. The face of Mickey Mouse towers over Tokyo’s favorite amusement part—Disneyland. Moviemakers in India have made at least three different versions of Rocky. Rocky’s image of a common man dreaming of a better future he could reach through his own efforts became an icon with startling
social roles as defined by birth. The Marlboro Man is not just a cowboy who impact in a culture that traditionally views smokes; he is an icon of American independence and self-reliance recognized around the world. Television shows like “Law & Order” (1.29) and “Sex in the City,” despite their radically different contexts, each carry a peculiarly American sense of individualism. Shows like these present characters whose actions make a difference. The individual counts.

As icons, however, works of art often take on political connotations unintended by the original artist. Officials in Moscow once ordered an exhibit of Russian painters in a public park bulldozed because it featured abstract paintings like those favored in the West. Soviet authorities apparently feared such paintings would encourage a similar freedom of expression in areas other than art. Since the late 1970s, American’s have often seen Islamic women protesting against American presence in the Middle East. These women are not only expressing political outrage, they are also protesting the intrusion of Western cultural values into their fundamentalist Islamic culture. In this case, magazines such as Playboy, sold in the streets of Tehran, became a symbol of Western intrusions in a culture that directs women to veil even their faces in public.

These are a few examples of how people in other countries see our fine art and popular art images as icons, that is, as images that reveal how we live and who we are.

Our “Mass-Mediated” Culture

The range of connections between fine art and mass media popular art reveal that our society itself is, in Michael Real’s phrase, an increasingly “mass-mediated” culture. It is a
culture in which the average American watches over four hours of television each day. It is a
culture in which presidential candidates spend tens of millions of dollars on commercials using
the same packaging and marketing techniques as those used to sell cars.

In our “mass-mediated” culture, advertising and other popular culture images have strong
connections with fine art. Advertising images are made by artists who are trained at the same art
schools as aspiring painters. Courses in advertising teach that a good ad follows the same
principles of line, color, and shape as a good painting. Advertising artists study and apply the
entire fine art tradition of painting, photography, and film to create images calculated to
transform the viewer into a consumer.

A sense of visual literacy today requires a knowledge not only of fine art but also of how
our fine art tradition has influenced and helped to produce our entire mass media environment,
including advertising.

As art critic Douglas Crimp writes, “To an even greater extent our experience is governed
by pictures, pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these
pictures first hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial. While it once
seemed that pictures had the function of interpreting reality, it now seems that they have usurped
it. It therefore becomes imperative to understand the picture itself, not in order to recover a lost
reality, but to determine how a picture becomes a signifying structure of its own accord.”

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6 According to several Early Colonial accounts, the Aztecs made elite members of conquered cultures dress up and behave as deities. The impersonators were often sacrificed in huge public rituals. One interpretation is that the Coatlicue sculpture may represent not the goddess herself, but a human impersonation of the goddess. If this is so, Coatlicue may depict a decapitated impersonator. The two serpents may be Aztec stylization of spurts of blood into snakelike projections.


8 See Benjamin Keen’s *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971) on how Europeans have viewed the Aztecs. Keen’s analysis can be compared to Said’s analysis in *Orientalism* (discussed in the Preface of this text).

