

Critical Terms  
for  
Art History

*Edited by*  
Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff

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*Representation*

David Summers

Good title  
of title  
from John...  
-

This essay is a schematic history of the problem of representation, written with an eye toward explaining how it came to be possible to use this term in some of the ways we now do. At the end of the essay, I will suggest how I think the issues I have raised bear on the present history of art.

Representation is often linked to resemblance and to the more general question of imitation; but, even more importantly, the question of pictorial representation has also always been entangled with philosophical representationalism—according to Webster “the doctrine that the immediate object of knowledge is an idea in the mind distinct from the external object which is the occasion of perception.” In the long Western discussion of artistic representation there are typically three factors: a thing, its actual image, and a *mental* image. This third term, in being called an “image” at all, is likened to a work of art made by the mind, and has a special status; it is itself a representation that is always interposed between anything and its actual image; and it is, moreover, spoken of as if providing the model or “intention” for the actual image. So we say that paintings correspond not so much to things as to sensations, perceptions, and conceptions; or that they are, in equally mental terms, “fantastic” or “ideal.” Critical judgment has often consisted of identification and praise or blame in terms of one or another kind of mental image. We say that art is, or should be, or should not be, “perceptual,” “fantastic,” “conceptual,” or “ideal.”

The words “representation” and “representationalism” obviously and literally contain the term “present”; and they thus also presuppose the presence of something as well as the presence of someone by whom and to whom representation is made. A painter represents a horse to me and to others; my senses “represent” the world to me. These familiar examples immediately give rise to equally familiar problems. How do we know that the world is *truly* represented to us? For mental images these problems are even greater. If perceptions and dreams are both representations, how do we tell them apart? How do we know the world is represented in the same way for everyone? Are concepts truer than sensations, or vice versa? Representation immediately involves us in fundamental psychological and epistemological questions that have been inseparable from the discussion of art.

The coupling of images made by art—especially painting—and thinking began early. In Plato’s *Philebus* (39 A–B), Socrates imagines someone seen indistinctly at a distance beneath a tree. At such times, he says it is as if we ask

ourselves a question: "What is that?" And it is as if we reply to ourselves with a statement that might be true or false. "That is a man." These statements, linked with feelings, are like writing in the book of the soul; at this same book a painter also works, illustrating the text. These paintings may also be true or false, are also linked with feeling, and are integral with perception, memory, and our hopes or expectations for the future. They are, in short, integral with our *representations* of the world to ourselves for our purposes.

In the *Theaetetus* (184 ff.), Plato used another craftsmanly metaphor, referring to the senses as *organs*, that is, as tools or instruments. Our senses are not simply inside us, he wrote, like soldiers in the Trojan horse; rather, they are the various implements, the means by which work is accomplished by a higher, unitary principle, which he called *psyche*, breath, the sign of individual life, individual life itself. Sensation, *aisthesis*, rather than simply reporting the world, analyzes it into the modes of the several senses in the very act of apprehending it, and this analysis, this unbinding, is bound up again in the unity of the *psyche*. The *psyche*, this metaphor suggests, uses the tools of the senses to negotiate the world, but also refashions the world for itself adequately for this negotiation, and also, at a higher level, adequately for true understanding and knowledge. We know things mediately, through the senses, not immediately. Again, the soul in some way *represents* them to us.

Aristotle went over the same ground with characteristically different results, once again foundational for the tradition to follow. Plato's *psyche* became a central *koine aisthesis*, a "common sense," unifying sensations insofar as they *are* sensations, and insofar as such qualities as size and movement are shared by data from the different senses. This common sense was closely akin to *phantasia*, or imagination; that is, it is once again a maker of unified images presented to the mind's eye, and at the same time it "sees that we see." It is the first faculty that in some way grasps things in the world as a whole, forming the phantasms—the images—from which, Aristotle argued, all higher thought must proceed.

The words used by Plato and Aristotle and the innumerable writers who have followed them to describe perception (as opposed to sensation) are heavily visual; terms such as *idea* and *phantasia* (the first from *idein*, to see, the second from *phos*, light) are part of a dense network of metaphor much older than philosophy. The notion of the soul as a maker of images, an "imagination," the metaphorical painter in the soul, is obviously part of this network.

In the classical scheme I have outlined, the data of sight, likened to the images of painting, are most nearly synthetic in that they are most comprehensive and indicative relative to the data of the other senses. Whereas we may infer or anticipate with probability the smell or sound or texture of things from the sight of them, the reverse is not so obviously true. In this scheme, therefore, sight was the highest, that is, the most mindlike of the senses, closest to the faculties of judgment and reason, which in their turn deal with "forms" and

"ideas" and their relations. In these terms, sight (and memory) provided the images completed by the data of the other senses in the mind's painter's representation of the world to itself. (Words, by the same argument, might be said to suggest even the shapes and forms of things, and thus to prompt pure imagination, and poetry, language in the absence of an actual ostensible referent, might be defined as language that was allowed to do that.)

Plato's comparison of the first activity of the soul to painting should not be regarded as positive, or even as neutral. The painter formed opinions, not truth. For Plato, imitations—and therefore images—were dissimulations, inherently culpable because they represent themselves as something they are not. At the same time, they have the power to make us other than we are; we in our turn may be swayed by an apparent reality, the mask and not the actor, neither of whom is subject to reason. This unease about images, this sense of their inevitable duplicity, has persisted in critical language at all levels to modern times.

In Plato's *Cratylus* (432 A–D), the first consideration in Western literature of the origin of language, Socrates rejects the argument that words are imitations of things; in order to be images at all, images must not reproduce most of the qualities of what they show, and this must be even truer of words. To illustrate his argument, Socrates considers the example of an image of Cratylus himself made by some god, which not only shows his outward form and color, as painters do, but also re-creates his physical and mental inwardness. Cratylus is forced to admit that there would not then be himself and an image, but rather two of himself, an absurdity. Precisely because they are images, then, mental images are also not substitutes or doubles.

In his treatise on the soul, also the first in Western literature, Aristotle (*De anima* 424a) extended and adapted such arguments by defining sensation as a sign (*semeion*) of an affection of sense, like the impression left by a seal ring in wax. Again the analogy is to sight, since shape is involved, but also to touch, to real contact. This sign implies a cause (like all signs; Aristotle understood *semeion* to mean what we would call an *index* [*Posterior Analytics* 70a]). As the visual sign became more clearly indexical (rather than iconic) *phantasia* was more explicitly identified with the postsensory faculties of imagination and memory. In *De memoria* (450a) Aristotle called immediate sensation a "trace" or "mark"—*typos* or *graphe*—and called its likeness in the mind a "picture" (*zoographema*, a drawing from life). The difference between sensation and mental image is developed to make the important point that when we remember we do not remember our first sensation but rather its image *as* an image; otherwise we would not be able to distinguish between reality and memory. It is through *phantasia* or imagination that we have the capacity to recollect or imagine what is not present. *Phantasia* is now more than the capacity to "form opinion"; it is the capacity to represent absent or even impossible things to ourselves in the soul's own light, to remember, imagine, and dream.

Aristotle literalized his metaphor and gave it another dimension in the *Politics* (1340a 30 ff.), arguing that painted figures are not likenesses of character but rather *signs* of it. The painted figure is a resemblant sign, like that given to the sense of sight, as if it were contiguous with the cause of its appearance, which implies completion by the otherwise experienceable qualities of real things; but this same sign also indicates the inwardness defining and animating what can be directly sensed. We might suppose that the birds fooled by the painted grapes of Zeuxis flew down to them because, seeing their shapes and modeled colors, they could anticipate their cool, moist sweetness; and that Zeuxis worried that the birds had not been frightened by the painted boy who carried the grapes because it meant he had failed to make the birds believe what they could not see—the character of the boy—in what they could see.

The definition of visual images—both those actually painted and those “painted” in the soul—as resemblant signs, and as the occasions for sensory and imaginative completion, leads us around to the origin of the word “representation” itself, which to this point I have been using generally and ahistorically, as we are in the habit of doing. *Repraesentatio* is a construction around the verb “to be.” *Praesens* is a participial form of *praesere*, “to be before,” which it means in two senses: the first is simple spatial, prepositional location; the second involves precedence or command, being higher in rank, more important than. Perhaps then “presence” implies that which is not simply before us but which “stands out” and concerns us, that to which we are in a sense subject. Then by extension the temporal “present” might also be what is at hand, what can and usually does actually occupy our attention, as opposed to the past and the future, which are “out of reach.”

*Repraesentatio* had meanings very significant for our purposes. In ancient rhetoric, which developed alongside philosophy, the orator is a painter in the soul who uses the “figures,” “turns” (tropes), and “colors” of eloquence to shape assent by persuasion (that is, through sweetness), by the artful joining of words in such ways as to unite imagination and feeling, thus to instigate decision and action. It is not enough, Quintilian wrote (*Institutio oratoria*, IV, ii, 63; VIII, iii, 62–63) to please the ears or merely to give an account of the facts (*narratio*) to the judge. Rather things must be set forth and shown to “the eyes of the mind.” The artifice of language should afford *evidentia*, going beyond the perspicuous and probable, making the matter “brighter” and “cultivated.” The whole problem of the power of eloquence to make the true more than true, or even to make the untrue seem true, is concentrated in this lawyerly advice. *Evidentia*—from the verb “to see”—is what the Greeks called *enargeia*, brilliance; what, Quintilian wrote, some call *repraesentatio*. This is a variation of the pattern just discussed; the induced, inward visual sign provokes the apparent experience of other qualities. The sweetness of sounds—the taste and sight of the audible—leads the imagination to a sense of actual presence.

*Repraesentatio* could also mean a payment in cash. The implicit third term

that unites the disparate uses of *repraesentatio* might be said to be “fullest equivalent”; a *repraesentatio* is something of equal present force or value. In these terms to make an image means not to make an impossible double, but to fashion a fullest equivalent presence. Words cannot re-create, but they may be fused to memory and feeling and may have an equivalent force in the imagination, much as cash is most immediately equivalent to goods exchanged. (“Representation” is thus at least in part descended from commercial analogy, like the word “interpretation” itself, which is related to “price.” To interpret is to negotiate, to have no leisure, to do business, to trade, bargain, haggle, but also to find an equivalent in other terms.) *Equivalence* has definitively replaced substitution or resemblance in our argument.

To move ahead quickly, the medieval Scholastics defined a sign as “that which *represents* other than itself to the operations of the mind,” joining representation still more closely to signification and separating it more clearly both from substitution and resemblance. Responding to the generally Platonic argument that the cult of God should be “honest,” and that poetry and theater, which *represent* something they are not, are therefore inappropriate to Christian ritual, Thomas Aquinas replied that in the state of our present life we cannot directly intuit divine truth and that it is necessary for ritual to be accommodated to our way of knowing, which is through sense. “It is clearly more useful that the divine mysteries be conveyed to the unlettered people under the cover of certain figures.” Poetry and theater cannot be grasped by human reason because they are in themselves prerational, like sense itself; and the mysteries of the faith cannot be grasped because they surpass the powers of reason. Both therefore appropriately make use of figures; that is, they *represent*. They are the means by which we may at least “implicitly” grasp the truths of the faith. The “lower” visible forms cannot in principle be like the “higher” meanings they manifest; at the same time, however, the need to make the “higher” manifest in sense justifies these lower forms. Always close to such arguments was the theological reply to the iconoclasts—that the sacred image is like its prototype in having a form and in being able to be called by the same name, but not in its matter or substance. The higher could be addressed through the lower, to which it was, however, not equivalent. Behind this lay the theology of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

There is an important difference between this example and the others we have considered. Representation now has a vertical dimension. The fruit in a Roman still life stands before us on its stage and might be seen to suggest the sensory qualities of some real fruit in real light; on the other hand, the orange in the window of Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding* invites us precisely through its apparent brilliance to other meanings entirely, to considerations not just of the prosperity of patrons, but beyond that to prosperity itself, to fecundity, perhaps to the fall and the mystery of the beginning of human generations. Of course Platonism had always had a vertical dimension, but there is again an

important difference. Plato's "ideas" and "forms," despite their being "higher," were still, if invisible, metaphorically visual, still in an image relation to actual things comparable to the relation of sight and its objects. Aquinas aligned representation on a vertical armature, but the relation between higher and lower is no longer one of similitude. The sign is now truly an allegory, representing *to the mind in other terms something it does not resemble*. The resemblant sign—what we recognize as something, an orange, for example—is not, *insofar as it is a representation*, defined by resemblance. Such disrelation has a clear counterpart in the allegory and personification so pervasive in medieval and Renaissance art and literature. On a thoroughly practical level, but still within the same broad tradition of visual meaning, Cosimo I de' Medici could tell Giorgio Vasari not to show him surrounded by counselors as he decided to wage war against Siena. Instead there should be a figure of Silence and some other Virtue. "That," he said, "would *represent* the same thing as the counselors."

These arguments have important general consequences. Representation has now become *symbolic*; the resemblant sign does not merely convey that which it resembles to the mind, as in our earlier examples; rather it is that through which a meaning not defined by image relation may be apprehended. In that sense, the resemblant sign itself has become wordlike. It is not merely "arbitrary," however; rather the thing itself is now a sign, written in the late medieval "Book of Nature," and the specificity of the image, the sign of the sign, is guaranteed by a higher order of meaning, to which access may be had through that specificity.

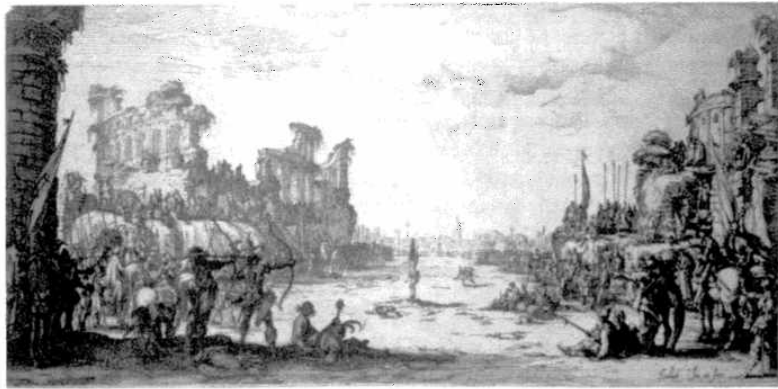
The Book of Nature was written by God, which did not, however, put an end to the matter. Galileo, laying down the foundations of modern science, returned to the Pythagorean and Platonic roots of the Western philosophical tradition to argue that the Book of Nature could not be understood except mathematically. Aristotle's common sensibles (which Galileo called primary qualities) could be described quantitatively and provided the basis for the general description of the physical world *as quantitative*. This mathematical world, appropriate in its economy and clarity to divine writing, was metaoptical, the framework against which the actual data of sense were merely "subjective" affections of an individual. Representation is now not so much of things as of *relations*, and in these broad terms an equation or the height of mercury in a thermometer may be regarded as representations. Physical forms themselves might be described in terms of the spatial relations they bound, and relations *among* forms might be defined in the same terms. Perspective began the representation of relations "in" virtual spaces in specifically quantitative terms at the same time that it explicitly unified virtual space *for a subject*. (Subjectivity would prove to be the deeper principle; the quantitative was simply the means by which the unity of representation was first articulated, and "perspective" would enter the language of modernity as a metaphor not so much for "objective" spatial order as for "subjective" point of view.)

At the beginning of the tradition of modern empiricism, Francis Bacon distinguished between the *interpretation of nature* (the inference from "facts," that is, from what nature "has done") and the *anticipations of nature*, which are subjective, and, like a false rhetoric, "straightaway touch the understanding and fill the imagination," leading us into error. These "anticipations" Bacon rejected with iconoclastic zeal as "idols." Bacon's iconoclasm extended beyond the illusory forms of prejudicial error to the metaphorical mental "forms," the final causes, that were the cornerstone of Aristotelian science, the highest consonance between reason and the system of the world. At all levels, the human mind creates fictions; it is, Bacon wrote, "like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it." In crowning iconoclastic terms, Bacon wrote of philosophical and religious systems as "Idols of the Theater; because in my judgement all the received systems are but so many stage plays, representing worlds of their own creation after an unreal and scenic fashion."

This characterization of representation is truly and simply revolutionary and it is deeply and prophetically modern. At the same time that "nature" may be understood, everything not arising from this understanding becomes a *misrepresentation* in the distorting mirror of the mind. The scientific understanding of the world thus implies another science, a new anthropology: it needs to be explained why we have represented the world to ourselves in ways that have no warrant in external nature. This can partly be explained by the prevalence of the "empty dogma" of religion and philosophy, but beyond that human understanding itself "receives an infusion from the will and the affections"; it is "unquiet; it cannot stop or rest"; it is of its own nature prone to suppose the existence of more order and regularity in the world than it finds. We are by constitution inclined to see the world as if it were a work of our own art, to see it "as one would."

For Bacon, the reformation of the human mind, necessary at once for the empirical exploration of the world and for the creation of a new human world, implied a critique of all previous human institutions and their justifications, all of which must be regarded as without substance until they "stand to reason." His arguments provided the foundation for the Enlightenment project of *ideology*, an at least implicitly iconoclastic "science of ideas" that in turn provided the basis for the Marxist notion of ideology.

As the centuries passed, the conception of the human mind individually and collectively spinning baseless fictions from its own resources would shape the new human sciences and come to involve the reduction of the human mind to a single motive and explanatory principle, on analogy to the physical principles of inertia and gravity. The "restlessness" of the mind might be reduced to association, then to the operations of the unconscious, driven by sex or will. On the new model, human institutions might be reduced to collective psychologies, to economic "forces," or to the "force" of history itself; or these factors



1.1 Jacques Callot, *The Ordeal by Arrows*, ca. 1632–33. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Baumfield Collection.

might combine in still more embracing reductions, in which, for example, the will that drives human action is concentric with the “will” of the natural world as a whole.

The new scientific world progressively demarcated the old, which came to be grouped with the “aesthetic” and imaginative worlds of art, ranged on the side of subjectivity, whether individual, collective, or transcendental. It would become possible to view art as the expression of the world “as one would,” in Nietzsche’s phrase, as the world that makes life possible, or as a neurotic projection. Representation is now the imagination of some order, some “world,” arising from needs of our own for order. Both representation and imagination have assumed new, modern proportions.

To better understand these changes, we must return to another of the founders of modern science and philosophy. At the beginning of his *Meditations*, Descartes defined “ideas” as thoughts that “are like images of things.” The “image” relation he meant was more that of generation than of resemblance. Descartes, like all the originators of modern natural science, was keenly interested in optics, a mature tradition at the time he wrote, based upon Alhazen’s *Book of Optics*, translated from Arabic to Latin in the early thirteenth century. Alhazen’s optics made it possible to describe how surfaces in light are transferred point for point to facing surfaces. At first this might seem simply to certify the data of sight, but Descartes saw very different implications, implications that were again revolutionary. Earlier nominalists had been quick to see that if the surfaces of things are translated to the eye, then it is unnecessary to suppose that “forms” or *species* are also somehow transferred. In his own *Optics* Descartes ridiculed the Scholastic philosophers’ “intentional [or thinkable] spe-

cies,” “all those small images floating through the air,” and considered sight instead as the response of the eye to physical pressures exerted by objects through the medium of space by light. When we see, we are, he argued, like a blind man who feels his way with sticks. Just as the objects he encounters are “nothing like the ideas he forms of them,” so in general it is not necessary to suppose—and not legitimate to assume—“that there is anything in objects which is similar to the *ideas* of sensations that we have of them.”

Having separated the representation of things in the mind from form, Descartes used the economy of light and the physiology of the eye to show how protean vision really is. His paradigm for vision is not some “Cartesian” grid but rather *anamorphosis*, the infinitely possible manipulation of the grid. To be sure, the surfaces of facing objects are registered on the back of the eye, but they vary with light, distance, and the shape of the eye itself. The image in the eye is inverted and reversed; focus is partial, straight lines are curved, forms are foreshortened. The sense of sight is a “bad painter,” not a painter without skill but rather a too sophisticated and deceitful one, whose illusions must be clarified by the “sight” of higher judgment.

Descartes insisted that it is the mind that sees, not the eye, and from the “defects” of vision shown by optics and anatomy he drew the conclusion that there are other things than “little pictures” of the objects that “touch our senses,” and that may also stimulate our thought, “such as signs and words, which do not in any way resemble what they signify.” When we see engravings, no more than a little ink here and there on pieces of paper, they *represent* to us a great world of forests, towns, men, even battles and storms. They make us conceive an infinity of qualities in objects that resemble only through shape. Even this resemblance is slight; “in order to be more perfect as images and better to *represent* an object,” Descartes concludes, “they ought not to resemble it.” We may react only as subjects to the myriad representations in sensation of active physical force. The “signs,” the representations of the world in sense, although based on contact, are cut off from necessary relation to visual form.

It is important to note that Descartes formulated the horizontal asymmetry of cause and form in the mind (as opposed to the vertical asymmetry of medieval allegory) explicitly in terms of the sense of sight. This asymmetry, firmly rooted in the first principles of modern science, was to be fundamental for Nietzsche and for Freud, who defined memory as the differential capacity for the retention of stimuli. Such arguments are continued in Derrida’s poststructuralist version of the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign. The representation cannot represent, and the illusion that it does, or should, can only be explained endogenously.

The simply and truly revolutionary importance of the modern separation of cause and image in the mind cannot be exaggerated, and, as the last examples suggest, we are still drawing its implications not only for the problem of representation but for our understanding of human culture taken altogether. The

systematic implications of arguments like those of Descartes were drawn by Immanuel Kant. In his *Inaugural Dissertation*, Kant wrote that “objects do not act upon the senses through their form or species, and in order that the various objects affecting our senses might coalesce in some whole representation, some work of an internal principle of the mind is necessary, by which those various things are clothed with a certain species according to stable and innate laws.” In the preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant generalized this principle to say that “our representation of things, as they are given to us, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves . . . these objects as appearances conform to our mode of representation.”

It would take much more than this space to review the idealist notion of representation, which must, however, be characterized in general for the sake of the rest of this discussion.

Idealist representation, rather than defining individual forms, like Plato’s painter in the soul, extends the powers of imagination to the unified projection of a whole field, like Descartes’s landscape. There is no reason to suppose that Kant imagined actual representation as Plato had, and imagination is now “pictorial” in the deep but specific sense of post-Renaissance painting. The imagination—the *Einbildung*—that constitutes the world for a subject shows a spatiotemporal horizon, unified as it is not so much because of the unity of the world as because of the unity of the subject. Within this unity, representation is *schematic*, defined by potential relations prior to any experience. Imagination makes a distinctly human reality, through a subject, and does not replicate a world “outside.”

In Kant’s idealism, consciousness represents the same Newtonian spatiotemporal world, and Kant was therefore not concerned with the problems of a *history* of representation. For Hegel, however, the initial representation of the spatiotemporal world is only the beginning; in representing the natural world we also become aware that this world is not like ourselves. Progressively, Hegel believed, the world *is* made like ourselves, and this is the realization of the human spirit in history. This progress of the spirit is evident in the manifold human transformations of the world, in culture. The recasting of the world in the forms of culture implied a *higher* representation. (The forms of culture, as expressions of spirit, are like us and unlike us, themselves objects of continual transformation; they demand interpretation, which itself became involved in the problem of its own status as representation, hence the rise to prominence of hermeneutics in its modern form. In such circumstances the study of history and culture had a new urgency. Not incidentally, the history of art in all the variants of its modern “critical” form has largely been a history of “representations” in this higher sense, from embracing historicist theories of formal period style to E. H. Gombrich’s antihistoricist rejection of the “innocent eye” in favor of already existing cultural formulae.)

As we have seen, idealist representation is *pictorial*, with the unity for a

viewer of a cogent virtual space. According to the first principles of idealism, the world is represented by us at the same time that it is manifest to us, and *weltanschauung* is perhaps best translated as “world intuition.” (“Intuition” is at base another visual metaphor, as in the more popular “worldview.”) Both idealist *weltanschauung* and its materialist counterpart, *ideology*, for all the differences between them, retained this pictorial character. (The word “ideology,” it should be noted, like “idealism,” is still from the Greek word meaning “to see.”)

Idealist representation was inextricably linked to the newly emerged realm of the *aesthetic*, which was described at the level of intuition. Kant defined aesthetic judgment as integral with primary imaginative representation, and the aesthetic also became in important respects historical and cultural. We may speak, to take a familiar example, of the “aesthetics” of a period much as we speak of its “worldview.”

Both *weltanschauung* and ideology presuppose synthesizing imaginations, and both demand interpretation of syntheses and schemata in themselves. From either standpoint, representations are primarily significant not only in terms of *what* is represented, but also in terms of *how* it is represented. The *what* of representation—subject matter—is most significant for what it reveals in having been chosen, and the *how*, the manner of treatment, reveals the syntheses and schemata. What is presumed to express the structure of a more or less historical subjectivity becomes the primary object of study. But subjectivity occurs in individuals, and, in order to account for the uniformity and continuity of cultures, it was expanded to become more or less embracing *collective* subjectivity. On this view (which is at least implicit in much art-historical practice) a work of art “expresses” both personal and collective “points of view.”

As a principle of historical explanation, *weltanschauung*, like “culture,” recognized the local commonality of the forms of human imagination, explaining evident differences among groups in terms of the “spirits” of peoples, places, and times, which might arise separately, “influence” one another, or undergo internal “development.” “Worldviews” might be postulated to account for any number of differences, and made to accommodate any individual or collective “perspective.” As I have already suggested, the art-historical idea of style embraced many of the features of *weltanschauung*.

If idealist *weltanschauung* implied unity and internal transformation, materialist ideology implied antagonism and conflict. Marx’s notion of ideology, as I have remarked, descends from the “idols” of Francis Bacon. Like Bacon, Marx argued for an empirical reality, subject not only to physical laws, but, in its deepest historical dimension, to economic laws. It was the aim of his *Capital*, he wrote in the preface, to “lay bare the economic law of motion of modern society.” To read the book of history, as Galileo might have said, we must know economics (and Hegelian dialectics, suitably modified). As natural phenomena may be reduced to physical principles, so cultural-historical “phenom-



ena” may be reduced to economic-historical principles. Continuing the analogy, it is the real economic and historical world that is represented—or misrepresented—by ideology, which is a Baconian “distorting mirror,” or, as Marx called it, a *camera obscura*, in which the world is focused upside down. Ideology has no independent history, and it is always necessary to interpret any history as secondary and derivative (if not nugatory). Furthermore, all representation, as ideology, cannot be taken at face value, but must be regarded and interpreted with systematic “suspicion.”

Although ideology in itself is void of real content in comparison with economic history, it is not unrelated to the dialectic of history. If for Marx ideology was “false consciousness” arising from the “distorted mirror” of the human mind, it also constituted major and pervasive modes of oppression, to be countered by awareness of the real history concealed by ideology. Cultures thus do not simply express the “spirit of the age”; rather “culture” itself is in question. There is not one representation, and, if one ideology may be dominant, there are also contending positions.

Whatever the distinctions and alternatives originally intended among them, the categories branching from the great stalk of idealist representation readily collapse into one another. Styles, cultures, ideologies, worldviews, symbolic forms, paradigms, and epistemes tend to be highly interchangeable in critical use. The unity of a metaphorical *psyche*, upon which the whole system I have described is ultimately based, magnified by the reduction of the physical and historical worlds to a single principle, underlies these overlappings and transformations, which have become very familiar. So, for example, the general coincidence of the rise of the middle class and the appearance in painting of one-point perspective might result in perspective’s being regarded as essential to middle class representation, to the “bourgeois worldview” or “bourgeois ideology”; and, if we follow Freud in linking Leonardo da Vinci’s Faustian thirst for knowledge to the scopophilic drive of male infant sexual research, we might diagnose and evaluate modern bourgeois culture in similar psychoanalytic terms without having to give much attention to questions of how and why either the middle class had arisen or perspective been formulated.

What would be left if the representationalist component—which has been a constant thread through the ancient and modern traditions I have traced—were removed from the current ideas of representation descending from idealism? The answer is: nothing. But what if the assumption of representationalism itself is questioned? What if it were assumed instead that people always found themselves *in* a world with other people and things, a world the practical existence of which did not have to be demonstrated, but which, precisely because of locally different practices, was locally specific. Cultural differences would then exist not because the world was differently “represented” and these representations in some way imposed upon it, but because accommodation simply had been made to the world at hand in the first instance in any number of ways and for any number of purposes.

To put this in another way, if the assumption of the necessity and priority of the second idealist level of representation is called into question, then it may further be asked if the history of art, both in its idealist and materialist versions, must be considered first of all as the history of representation it has been considered to be. An alternative may be offered by pushing idealist (and materialist) representation beyond imaginative formation to the *construction* of the actually formed and shaped implicit in the idea of formation. The world is not simply projected from the mind, it is made, and even the simplest artifacts involve techniques of gathering and working as well as the teaching and transmission of these techniques. They are thus irreducibly integral with human action and purpose, both individual and social. To return to the subject of this essay, I would argue that actual representation—something’s being put under one set of conditions or another in place of something else—is primarily *communication*, not the *expression* of private images or meanings (which we especially associate with art) but rather that which is effected *through the common*. In these terms the history of art embraces any number of artifactual histories in which the world at hand has been treated as if real for any number of local purposes. The commonalities cutting across these histories point to the common orientations and exigencies of human physical existence in the world of social spaces in which we all find ourselves.

Plato already understood at the beginning of the long discussion I have been outlining that in order to serve their purposes images cannot be doubles. Images are also *substitutes*, which means that they are always placed and located in spaces of human use. Substitution, moreover, is specific, putting *these* materials to *these* uses, and substitution therefore always has many additional real connections as well as meanings and values. Meanings and values are thus evident in the nonmimetic conditions of images, which must consequently be regarded as positive and even primary. Our inclination has been to regard the nonmimetic conditions of images as neutral or negative, certainly partly because the ancient metaphor of mental images still leads us to believe that mental images are somehow prior and most real. It is not necessary to deny the existence of mental images, of dreams and daydreams, to ask whether it might not be better to say that knowing how to make an image—even an image of a dream or daydream—means knowing how to perform a number of culturally specific actions in and for equally specific spaces and purposes before it means always having a prior image in one’s mind that is then executed in some material. If so, then the historical understanding of images involves the reconstruction of these conditions, of the specific real spatial contexts of their making and use, not just the analytic isolation and interpretation of the “world” “represented.”

If we remove the mental image, what I spoke of at the beginning as the third term, from our consideration of representation, then the necessity vanishes to further consider the deeply and complexly value-laden question of the relative status of kinds, levels, and hierarchies of mental representation (impressions, fantasies, concepts, ideal forms, etc.) which should be regarded as formulations

peculiar to the tradition to which they belong. In these terms, too, the question of simple representation—whether something may resemble something else—may be simply answered in the affirmative without raising the further, more anxious question of whether an image corresponds to the adequate representation of the same thing to the mind or to the mind's eye.

I have raised the question concerning the priority of mental images historically, which suggests that these ideas and attitudes are culturally specific. If that is so, then the history of art, everywhere interlaced as it is with the problems of representationalism, is in large part a commentary of the Western tradition upon itself, even if examples may be chosen from beyond its borders. Representationalism and its attendant problems are integral to the history of Western art, but not to the history of all art. In fact, it should be assumed on principle that other assumptions are at work unless there are historical grounds to think otherwise. That very general clarification having been made, we may begin to inquire why and how some resemblance or another was part of the whole representation of an image and how the conditions of that presentation related to the specific cultural world of which the image was part. The focus of such art-historical interpretation shifts away from “realism” and “worldview” and “ideology” to constructions of common human corporeality and of personal, social, and political spaces, both our own and those alternative to our own.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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## Sign

Alex Potts

While in everyday language we often talk as if the significance of a work of art is inherent in its identity as object, this is somewhat at odds with our theoretical understanding of how objects convey meaning. We all know that we do not literally see meaning in a work of art. Rather something compels us to view it as having significance which is not simply to be found there in it as thing, and this compulsion clearly has a lot to do with the habits of our culture. The meaning we attribute to a work is not only mediated but in large part activated by cultural convention. Another way of putting this would be to say that a work of art operates like a sign. It points to or evokes a significance quite other than what it literally is as object through conventions of which we may or may not be consciously aware. The viewer who assigns significance to a work of visual art is like the user of a language who envisages a word or a text as having meaning because she or he has internalized the rules of the language concerned. But while we know that meanings do not arise spontaneously out of physical objects, that they only seem to do so because of codes to which we are so attuned that we do not notice their operations, the compulsion to talk as if this were the case never goes away.

Here we shall be trying to make sense of this apparent paradox, not in order to suggest that works of visual art can at some level bypass the mediations inherent in their quality as signs, but rather to problematize the way in which we understand these mediations. To this end we shall be turning to the realist understanding of how signs operate developed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, rather than the familiar structuralist theories deriving from the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Of the two founding models of the modern theory of signs, Peirce's is particularly illuminating about the discrepancies in our present-day understandings of how works of visual art come to mean something, largely because it goes against the grain of the often easy conventionalism and antirealism that pervade much modern understanding of the sign. Peirce's analysis is designed to focus attention on the reference a sign makes to an object other than itself, whether this be a material thing or substantive concept—something assumed in everyday usage, but often strategically bracketed out in modern theories that focus on the internal operations of sign systems.

Why has semiotic theory—the theory of how signs operate—had such a major impact on the study of visual images over recent years? A cynic might argue that it has been appropriated to expand the repertoire of art-historical