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Anachronic Renaissance

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and
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Plural Temporality of the Work of Art

“The Imperial Palace does not have a restored look, nor has it an ancient one: this hesitation makes it appear not eternal but precarious and like an imitation of itself.” This is Simone de Beauvoir describing the Forbidden City in Beijing in her travel memoir *The Long March* (1957). “There is nothing accidental about the impermanence of the materials; it is simultaneously the cause, the effect, the expression of a troubling fact; the traces left upon this palace by the past are so few that, paradoxically, I would hesitate to call it a historical monument.”¹ These were buildings, Beauvoir recognized, that disguised their own histories of fabrication and subsequent restorations. The Forbidden City transcended the merely human circumstances of its life in time. In the European tradition of building and making to which Beauvoir was implicitly comparing the Chinese palace, an artifact’s historicity is both the source of its authority and the basis for an eventual demystification of that authority. In the modern West, the very old building or painting is venerated for having survived and for testifying with its body to the corrosive effects of the passage of time, a passage that can sometimes be measured precisely, to the year. But by virtue of its anchorage in history, the European building is also a mere product of its time. It is all too obviously contrived by real agents—human beings, not giants, not gods. The Imperial Palace in Beijing seemed to evade all these conditions. Beauvoir did not feel invited either to contemplate the structure’s great antiquity or to read it as the index of its times, and so she saw the palace as inauthentic, as an “imitation of itself.” The palace’s true self, for Beauvoir, was its historical self.

The premise of the present book is that the Forbidden City is no anomaly. Most cultures have created buildings and artifacts that “hesitate” in just the way Beauvoir describes. They resist anchoring in time. Societies tend to coalesce around artifacts that embody institutions, but often on the condition that the historicity of those artifacts—as much as that of the institutions—is masked. Like the buildings of the Forbidden City, such artifacts are not meant to look old, nor are they meant to look as if

someone has tried to recover their original look. There is no premium placed on their historical moment of origin because they are supposed to deliver still older truths, or even timeless truths. For anyone can see that the possible gain in legitimacy conferred by the marks of time is easily offset by the risk of loss of aura through fixing in time. To fix an image or temple in time is to reduce it to human proportions.

Most societies also recognize, alongside the timeless object, a completely different kind of object whose historicity, its link to a point in time, is the entire basis of its value. Such an object is called a *relic*. The relic is irreplaceable. But even here societies have tended to provide for loopholes, for the consequences of loss or destruction of the relic are too great. The ancient Roman historian Suetonius, for example, reported that the emperor Nero in his megalomania and want of money “stripped many temples of their gifts and melted down the images of gold and silver, including those of the Penates,” the household gods of the Romans. This outrage proved easy to correct, however. The next emperor, Galba, simply had the statues recast.²

The work that manages to retain its identity despite alteration, repair, renovation, and even outright replacement was a sustaining myth of art in premodern Europe. Ontological stability across time was figured by the Ship of Theseus, a relic of the Athenian state. In this ship the hero-king Theseus had returned from Crete together with the Athenian youths, destined for sacrifice, whom he had rescued from the Minotaur. According to Plutarch, the ship “was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus [that is, late fourth century BCE], for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.”³ The Ship of Theseus is a paradigm of the object defined by its structure rather than by its material make-up. The age of the planks is accidental; essential is the form. To grasp an object’s structure is to abstract from the mere object as given to the senses. The identity of such an object is sustained across time by the stability of its name and by the tacit substitution of its parts. The “structural object,” in the phrase of Rosalind Krauss, here following Roland Barthes, has “no other causes than its name, and no other identity than its form.”⁴ The Ship of Theseus “hesitated” between its possible historical identities, not settling on any of them, and in this way managed to function both as a marker of a great span of time (the history of Athens) and as a usable instrument in a living ritual (the annual votive mission to Delos).⁵ To think “structurally,” then and

now, is to reject linear chronology as the inevitable matrix of experience and cognition.

Chronological time, flowing steadily from before to after, is an effect of its figurations: annals, chronicles, calendars, clocks. The diagrammatization of time as a series of points strung along a line allows one to speak of diverse events happening in different places as happening at the same time. This is not an obvious concept. The ancient Romans, Denis Feeney has argued, had no notion of linear time and therefore no notion of the date. Instead they saw the myriad interconnections among events and people.⁶ Many societies have figured to themselves the ramification, the doubling, the immobilization of time: in the naming of planets and seasons; in the promise of reincarnation; in narratives of the rise and fall of worldly empires understood in cyclical terms; in the time travel of dreams and prophecies; in religious ritual; and, within the Christian tradition, in the mystical parallel between Old and New Dispensations, read between the lines of holy scripture. Such contrivances mirror the sensation, familiar to everyone, of time folding over on itself, the doubling of the fabric of experience that creates continuity and flow; creates meaning where there was none; creates and encourages the desire to start over, to renew, to reform, to recover.

No device more effectively generates the effect of a doubling or bending of time than the work of art, a strange kind of event whose relation to time is plural. The artwork is made or designed by an individual or by a group of individuals at some moment, but it also points away from that moment, backward to a remote ancestral origin, perhaps, or to a prior artifact, or to an origin outside of time, in divinity. At the same time it points forward to all its future recipients who will activate and reactivate it as a meaningful event. The work of art is a message whose sender and destination are constantly shifting. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it became increasingly common, in the West, to attend closely, perhaps more closely than ever before, to what it is that artworks do. Christians wondered whether the temporal instability of images made them more suitable for religious devotion, or less suitable. On the one hand, art with its multiple temporalities offered a picture of a meaningful cosmos woven together by invisible threads, of an order hidden behind the mere illusory sequence of lived moments. On the other hand, the references back to the meaning-conferring origin points that art seemed to offer—the god, the temple, the founding legend—threatened to collapse into their own historicity. The link back to the origin might turn out to be nothing more than a historical link, crafted by human hands, and therefore unreliable.

The art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929), trying to explain the peculiar hold of ancient Greece and Rome on the European imagination right

up to his day, spoke of the *Nachleben der Antike*, the “afterlife” or “survival” of antiquity. For Warburg, a painting or a court masque was a dense archive of cultural energies, a *dynamogram* that concretized and transmitted traumatic, primordial experiences.⁷ Archaic stimuli were directly imprinted in matter and gesture, Warburg believed, giving figuration the power to disrupt an historical present tense. Warburg’s cultural symbol was a token (*sumbolon*) that literally “throws together” past and present. For Warburg, the painter Sandro Botticelli was not only “assimilating” ancient art. Rather, his paintings *became* instantiations of ancient gestures. When Warburg described the mysterious continuity of life forces across far-flung chains of symbols, whereby pictorial form delivered, centuries later, the pitch and pulse of primordial emotions, he was describing nothing other than a real virtue of artworks.

With its power to compel but not explain a folding of time over onto itself, the work of art in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was able to lay a trail back to Europe’s multiple pasts, to the Holy Land, to Rome—monarchical, Republican, Imperial, or Christian—and sometimes to Rome’s Byzantine legacy. Historical treatises, philological glosses, sketch-books, paintings, monuments, and anthologies of inscriptions notated the relics and events of disappeared worlds. Forms of life, ways of picturing or building, customs and costumes came to seem obsolete and yet retrievable, retrievable perhaps because they were obsolete. The differentness of the past made repetition an option. The figuring of succession in turn made reckoning possible, enabling a comparison of the present to the past, and bringing forth new worries about the inferiority or superiority of the present.⁸ New systems for storing and recovering information, above all the printed text and the printed image, allowed for direct comparison of historical life-worlds. The commercial and colonial networks that were closing the globe, meanwhile, offered evidence of otherness across gaps of space rather than time. The two remotenesses, temporal and spatial, were confused, and from that moment onwards non-Europeans were condemned as non-synchronic, out of sync, trapped in states of incomplete development.⁹ The hypothesis of cultural anachronism made it possible for Europeans to deny the synchronicity of other people they shared the world with, and so to refuse to engage with them in political terms.¹⁰

Artifacts played an indispensable role in the overall cultural project of time management, not simply as beneficiaries or participants, but as the very models of the time-bending operation. Non-artists aspired to imitate the artist’s ability to conjure with time. Theologians, for example, read sacred texts as indications of a suprahistorical divine plan that suspended earthly time. The theology of typology identified formal rhymes between

historical events that revealed the pattern imposed on reality by divinity.¹¹ One event was the shadow, the image, the figure of another. For the theologian, therefore, merely secular time was overcome through metaphors of figuration that invoked the powers of imagination and intuition.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, different models of the image's temporality came into conceptual focus, and nowhere more clearly than in works of art themselves. One powerful model proposed the perfect interchangeability of one image or work for another. Under this model, the work did not merely repeat the prior work, for repetition proposes difference, an altering interval. Rather, the work simply *is* its own predecessor, such that the prior is no longer prior but present. This model of perfect commutativity among works across time and space flies in the face of the empirical fact that works of art are created by specific people at specific times and then replaced for various reasons. Communities may well ask a mere artifact, image, or statue to stand in for an absent authority. They may well propose the work's perfect exchangeability, involving no loss of reference, with other works referring to the same source. This capacity to stand in for absent authority, however, comes to be doubted when too much is learned about how works are actually fabricated. The idea of the artwork as an effective substitute for another, absent work, which itself stands in for yet another work, is reasserted in the face of such doubt. The hypothesis of substitutability, conceived in this manner, is a mode of magical reasoning because it asserts the identity of like to like. "Magic" is nothing more than the name given to the attempt to manipulate the hidden paths and conduits that connect like to like, behind the deceptive screen of experience. Art, too, is a manipulation of the similarities and identities proposed by the substitutional model of production. Art, therefore, cannot be understood as an enlightened successor to magic.

According to Paul Valéry, in his essay on the "method" of Leonardo da Vinci, creativity is the perception of relations, or a "law of continuity," between things where others see none.¹² This formulation permits us to understand the chain of substitutions, one work standing in for the next, not as a historical reality but as a fiction that the artist and a viewing public create backward from present to past. The new work, the innovation, is legitimated by the chain of works leading back to an authoritative type. But the chain also needs the new work. It is the new work that selects the chain out of the debris of the past.¹³ Valéry's phrase gives the model of a perfect substitutability among artifacts a new reality that poses a challenge to the materialist and literalist—one might almost say counterintuitive—model of an artwork securely moored in historical time, the model that dominates the modern scholarly study of art.¹⁴

With their temporal flexibility, artworks and other “structural objects” were the perfect instruments of the myths and rituals that knit present to past. The reforming humanist Erasmus homed in on the fiction of irreplaceability when he set out to discredit the custom of pilgrimage, the journey undertaken by hundreds of thousands in the late Middle Ages in hopes of a glimpse of or even contact with a relic. In a letter of 1512 Erasmus announced his intention to visit Walsingham, the pilgrimage target in Norfolk, England, and hang up a Greek poem in honor of the Virgin; a humanist scholar’s wry parody of a votive offering.¹⁵ Erasmus transformed his experiences at Walsingham into a dialogue, “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake,” one of the *Colloquies* published in 1526. In that dialogue, the character Ogygius recounts his visit to a popular pilgrimage site. He is shown a shrine, a simple rustic hut, by a local guide. By legend the shrine at Walsingham was a building constructed by angels in the late eleventh century, a scale model of the Virgin’s house in Nazareth.¹⁶

Ogygius: Inspecting everything carefully I inquired how many years it was since the little house had been brought there. “Some ages,” he replied. “In any event,” I said, “the walls don’t look very old.” He didn’t deny they had been placed there recently, and the fact was self-evident. “Then,” I said, “the roof and thatch of the house seem rather recent.” He agreed. “Not even these cross-beams, nor the very rafters supporting the roof, appear to have been placed here many years ago.” He nodded. “But since no part of the building has survived, how is it known for certain,” I asked, “that this is the cottage brought here from so far away?”

Menedemus: How did the attendant get out of that tangle, if you please?

Ogygius: Why, he hurriedly showed us an old, worn-out bearskin fastened to posts and almost laughed at us for our dullness in being slow to see such a clear proof. So, being persuaded, and excusing our stupidity, we turned to the heavenly milk of the Blessed Virgin.¹⁷

Erasmus’s skeptical prolocutor does not accept the principle of continuity that holds together the shrine’s identity across four centuries of rethatchings and replaced rafters. To Ogygius’s jaundiced eyes the shrine has become, like Simone de Beauvoir’s Imperial Palace, a mere “imitation of itself.”

Erasmus derided the credulous Walsingham pilgrim. And yet that pilgrim was as justified in his or her attentiveness to the relic as any Athenian in the presence of the reconstructed Ship of Theseus, or any Roman in the presence of the statuettes that Galba made to replace the Penates destroyed by Nero. For the pilgrim, the identity of the shrine at Walsingham with an original eleventh-century structure, which was in turn homologous with the Virgin’s house in Nazareth (which in the meantime had been

transported by angels to Loreto, on the east coast of Italy; see section 18) was protected as such by the building's label.

This book is about European buildings, paintings, prints, drawings, sculptures, medals, pavements, and mosaics, mostly of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, that moved between the two conditions marked out by Erasmus's satire: on the one hand, the shrine at Walsingham as understood by the devout pilgrim, on the other, the shrine as understood by Erasmus. For the pilgrim, the shrine is linked, no matter how often its timbers are replaced, to a primordial, meaning-conferring past through labeling and ritual. The shrine's reference to the dwelling of the Virgin Mary, ultimately to her body, is effective. For Erasmus, the shrine was drained of its meaning once it turned out not to be a literal, physical relic of the eleventh century (of course, it is not clear that Erasmus would be impressed even if the shrine really were old). Erasmus did not permit the shack to "deliver" the founding legend of the cult site. For him, the reference to the past is ineffective. The shrine on the site is evidence of nothing more interesting, in his view, than the capacities of its contemporary restorers.

The power of the image, or the work of art, to fold time was neither discovered nor invented in the Renaissance. What *was* distinctive about the European Renaissance, so called, was its apprehensiveness about the temporal instability of the artwork, and its re-creation of the artwork as an occasion for reflection on that instability. The work of art "anachronizes," from the Greek *anachronizein*, built from *ana-*, "again," and the verb *chronizein*, "to be late or belated." To anachronize is to be belated again, to linger. The work is late, first because it succeeds some reality that it re-presents, and then late again when that re-presentation is repeated for successive recipients. To many that double postponement came to seem troublesome, calling for correction, compensation, or, at the very least, explanation.

The work of art when it is late, when it repeats, when it hesitates, when it remembers, but also when it projects a future or an ideal, is "anachronic." We introduce this term as an alternative to "anachronistic," a judgmental term that carries with it the historicist assumption that every event and every object has its proper location within objective and linear time. From a historicist point of view, an artifact that has been unmoored from its secure anchorage in linear time and has drifted into an alien historical context is an "anachronism." Such an artifact can appear inside a representation: the Elizabethan clock that strikes the hour in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example, or the "doublet" Caesar wears. The embedded anachronism creates a temporal tension between container and contained. An anachronism can also appear on the stage of life itself—but only when sensitivity to the historicity of form is so far developed that the entire

visual environment is seen to comply with a stylistic “program.” The anachronistic artifact then appears to be out of step with that program. Such an artifact is the sixteenth-century painting with a gold ground, for example the *Crucifixion* by Albrecht Altdorfer in Budapest (ca. 1520), a picture that reprises an iconographic type (the “Crucifixion with Crowd”) and a non-naturalistic approach to space long out of fashion. Historical anachronism of this sort may be the product of naiveté or ignorance—with the possibility of historical accuracy comes the possibility of error—or it may contribute to a deliberately anachronistic cultural project such as neoclassicism or archaism. The anachronistic artifact also moves freely in time, but unlike the anachronistic artifact, it does not depend for its effect on a stable conception of the historicity of form. The anachronistic artifact is quite generally an artifact that resembles an artwork. It is the more global category: the anachronistic artifact is just a special case of the anachronistic artifact.¹⁸

To describe a work of art as an “anachronism” is to say that the work is best grasped not as art, but rather as a witness to its times, or as an inalienable trace of history; it tries to tell us what the artwork *really is*. To describe the work of art as “anachronistic,” by contrast, is to say what the artwork *does*, *qua art*.¹⁹

Some images in the fifteenth century delivered remote realities and permanent truths, with the expectation that the accidents of time would not interfere with that delivery. Other works bore direct witness to the life-world that generated them. Some works refused to be pinned down in time, others derived all their meaning from their anchorage in time. Works credited to an author, an individual who “originates” or “founds” (Latin *auctor*, from *augere*, “to increase”), were most tightly tethered to a point in time. Such works testified to their own authors. The principle of continuity of identity across a succession of substitutions is in tension with a principle of authorship.

For Leonardo da Vinci, the basis for the principle of authorship was the mystery of the artist’s talent, a gift that leaves its inimitable traces especially in the art of painting. The singularity of the person, the artist, underwrites the singularity of the work:

[The painting] cannot be copied, as happens with letters, where the copy is worth as much as the original. It cannot be cast, as happens with sculpture where the impression is like the original as far as the virtue of the work is concerned. It does not produce infinite children, as do printed books. Painting alone remains noble, it alone honors its author (*onora il suo Autore*) and remains precious and unique and never bears children equal to itself. This

singularity makes painting more excellent than those [sciences] which are widely published.²⁰

The painting, like its talented author, has one body that can never be duplicated. The painting's resistance to duplication allows it to dominate time. The author intervenes in time by performing a work. Leonardo's praise of painting, a medium that registers the traces of the hand and cannot be replicated by mechanical means, privileges manual execution. But under this model it is the entire process of creation, not only execution but also invention, that alters the given, that makes a difference. The author does not simply deliver a preexisting packet of information but generates something that did not exist before. The element of agency gives the work its punctual quality. The authorial performance cuts time into before and after. The artist who replaces the Marian icon or keeps the Imperial Palace in good repair, by contrast, makes no caesura in time.

Authorial agency is a performance in the sense that it is behavior carried out according to rules. The authorial innovation presents itself as a surplus added to reality, an increase. But the new is never truly new. The absolutely new would be incomprehensible. Rather, the work restages the given and creates an impression of novelty. The authored work must comply with conventions in order to be understood at all. Those conventions anchor the individual innovation in custom and fashion, that is, to supraindividual, collective norms. The performance is the adjustment of the conventions to the private project, to which the finished work of art will provide, for the rest of the world, the only access. To describe the authored work as a performance is to emphasize its punctual, time-sensitive quality. But performance involves an interaction between the individual and custom. Custom is the field that confers signification on the difference-making act that Leonardo valued. In the performative work, the past is therefore doubly present: first in the conventions that the artist must conform to, and second in the idea of the past, perhaps even of the meaning-conferring origin itself, formed in the artist's own imagination. It is that second processing of the past that has traditionally raised suspicions, simply because it happens, as it were, behind closed doors. In a traditional society, to admit an ideated object into the process of artifact creation is to hand over the crucial business of collective memory to an individual memory. For buildings and paintings and poetic texts, as much as rituals, are cables that hold a society together through time. The individual memory is unreliable and cannot be trusted with the past. The artist makes a double of a chosen model, but the double is imperfect, or simply idiosyncratic, and so falls away from its origin. This falling away was the basis for Plato's dissatisfaction with the image.²¹

Why should one trust what an artwork says? What sort of authority did an artist have? Plenty was at stake in this question, not only for society but also for art, because the artwork's relation to real power, to institutions such as church or state, depended on the persuasiveness of its referential claims. When the ties between the work and its referent, for example a divine personage, begin to fray, the model of mutual substitutability among works can compensate. So too can the myth of the *acheiropoietic* image, or the image not made by human hands: a direct impression of Christ's features on cloth, for example. The miraculously generated portrait and the chain of effective substitutions together function as an artificial memory, a system that archives a past and generates a future without recourse to the poor mechanisms of the human imagination.

We are not proposing simply that a substitutional model of production gave way, over the course of the fifteenth century, to an authorial model. Such an argument would reproduce a traditional account of Renaissance art as an emancipation of the artist from mindless submission to custom, an account sketched out already by the sixteenth-century historian Giorgio Vasari, who asserted that in the Middle Ages artists were content to copy one another and only with Giotto did they stop copying and begin attending to nature.²² The substitutional model was not a primitive or superstitious creed, but a model of production that grasps, in many ways more successfully than the authorial model, the strange and multiple temporality of the artwork. Substitution and performance are not phases succeeding one another, but rather are two competitive models of creativity that are always in play. One defines and responds to the other. The authorial performance asserts punctual difference against repetition and continuity; substitution proposes sameness across difference. The idea that an artist might also be an author, a founder, was not invented in the Renaissance. Greek and Roman antiquity and the Western Middle Ages held strong conceptions of the singularity of the creative artist, evinced in the praise and honors meted out to artists and in conventions of signing and dating works of art, already highly developed by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe.²³ In the Renaissance, however, the artistic author was for the first time institutionalized, in the sense that he was enshrined as a protagonist in histories of art and theories of art. The idea that works of art merely substitute for one another then stood out in relief, with more clarity than ever, against the precarious model of authorship, which left the referential capacities of artifacts in so much doubt. The two models were coevolutionary.

Paintings, sculptures, and even buildings figured their own origins, although often in disguised fashion. The artwork emerged in the European

Renaissance as a place where two competitive models of the origins of art could be held in suspension. In addition to doing everything else it did—indicating real things like people or gods, proposing fictional worlds, gathering the scattered and the dissimilar under one roof—the artwork reflected on its own origins by comparing one origin myth to another. The work can represent itself either as a “structural object” or as a relic. It can represent itself either as a magical conduit to other times and places or as an index pointing to its own efficient causes, to the immediate agencies that created it and no more. It is finally the tension between the two models of the work’s temporality that becomes the content of the work of art. The mark of the artwork was its capacity to test the models and at the same time to continue to function as a work underwritten by one or another of these models. This recursive or self-sustaining property of the work of art—its ability to question the conditions of its own possibility—distinguishes it from many other things.

The conception developed here of the artwork as a recursive structure stands in some contrast to the conception of art, developed especially in Anglo-American scholarship of the last two or three decades, as a form of material and symbolic wealth, even as a modality of luxury consumption.²⁴ Renaissance paintings or sculptures, in these accounts, functioned as adornments of person, home, and life; as investments in rare materials and rarefied craft and skill; as tokens of a capacity for discrimination as well as of social distinction. That is, they functioned not so differently from furniture, costume, jewelry, and other finery. No one would deny that paintings fulfilled such functions, and still do. But the painting, in addition to exploiting the straightforward appeal of materials and craft, also *comments* on that appeal. Rarity, talent, expense, and consumption become aspects of the work’s content. The conflict between matter and reflection is factored into the work’s value. The very ability of the artist to transform apparently intractable materials like marble, bronze, or pigments, to make them speak, is narrativized, symbolized. The muteness and mindlessness as much as the intrinsic agency, even the charisma, of the raw materials can be figured by a painting or a sculpture.²⁵ The capacities of jewelry and furniture to narrate, comment, reflect, and ironize are comparatively limited.

The historian who interprets the work of art as a token within a system of symbolic exchanges opens up a window onto the hidden mechanisms of social power in a remote, vanished society. But such an interpretation tends not to want to take up the possibility of the work’s symbolic reach *beyond* the historical life-world that created it—its ability to symbolize realities unknown to its own makers. Only the idea of art can open up

this possibility. “Art” is the name of the possibility of a conversation across time, a conversation more meaningful than the present’s merely forensic reconstruction of the past. A materialist approach to historical art leaves the art trapped within its original symbolic circuits. It tends not even to notice that the artwork functioned as a token of power, in its time, precisely by complicating time, by reactivating prestigious forebears, by comparing events across time, by fabricating memories. The only time-bending agency made available to the historical work by a materialist approach is one that reproduces its token-like existence in the symbolic economy of luxury and taste: namely, as an absurdly overvalued heirloom of a modern, consumption-based society; a collector’s item or museum piece, in other words. Such an approach will not help us interpret the messages about time or memory, about the gods or the creation, about first things or last things, phrased in the wordless plastic language or embedded in the material makeup of paintings, sculpture, prints, drawings, and buildings.

The ability of the work of art to hold incompatible models in suspension without deciding is the key to art’s anachronic quality, its ability really to “fetch” a past, create a past, perhaps even fetch the future. These anachronic powers are not entirely accounted for either by the substitution model or by the authorship model. The artwork is more than the sum of its own origin myths. When the artwork holds substitutional and authorial myths of origin in suspension, it does not hesitate, like Simone de Beauvoir’s Imperial Palace, between the state of the unaltered relic and the state of the reprinted relic. Rather, it hesitates between hesitation itself (the substitutional system’s unwillingness to commit itself to linear time) and anchoring in time (the punctual quality of the authorial act). Art, a recursive system, is a hesitation about hesitation.²⁶

This book is not meant to be an eccentric history of Renaissance art, but rather a road map to an obscured landscape. It maps a web of paths traveled by works and artists, mostly in the fifteenth century, that are difficult for us to perceive today, peering back as we do through the screen of the artwork as it was institutionalized between the late sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries by treatises on art and art histories, catalogues of collections, the emergence of professional art dealers, the establishment of art markets and art academies. The road map is presented in the form of a story, a sequence of interrelated episodes. The book is heavily dependent on recent research on the topic of the evidentiary or referential image, especially on the reception in western Europe of Byzantine images with special claims to authenticity.²⁷ It relies on recent work on the beginnings of an archeological scholarship in fifteenth-century Europe: the turn to the testimony of material artifacts as a supplement to the testimony of

texts.²⁸ Our proposals were also inspired by research into the typological basis of medieval architecture,²⁹ and on ancient and medieval spoliation, that is, the recycling of building materials and other artifacts.³⁰ The twenty-eight sections of this book trace a conceptual model of some flexibility, bearing potentially on anything built or pictured between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. This book is not *the* story of the Renaissance, but nor is it just *a* story. It imagines the infrastructure of many possible stories.



2.1 A celebrated cult image, recorded and amplified by print. *Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears*, hand-colored woodcut, 75.6 x 41.5 cm (south Germany, 1470s?). Copenhagen, National Museum. This print survives in only one impression, found pasted inside a cabinet in a church in Denmark a century ago. It depicts the Virgin Mary as a worshipper in the Temple of Jerusalem, just as she appeared in a venerable painting once preserved in the Cathedral of Milan, and now lost. The Virgin prays before an altarpiece depicting Moses, or perhaps God himself, displaying the tablets of the law. Behind her on the wall hangs a portrait of her son Jesus Christ, not yet born.

“The Image of the Image of Our Lady”

The figuring of the difference between models of origins comes into sharpest focus in differences between media. Medial switchings—transpositions of form and content from one system of communication to another—are an opportunity to glimpse the artwork at the moment of its resurfacing in another work.

This woodcut is one of the largest of all fifteenth-century prints (figure 2.1).¹ It was printed with black ink on three sheets of paper and then colored by hand. The only surviving impression is preserved in the National Museum in Copenhagen.² The print represents *Maria im Ährenkleid*, or Mary in the Robe of Wheat Ears, an iconographic type popular in southern Germany and linked to a no-longer-extant image—perhaps a statue, perhaps a painting—in a chapel in the Cathedral of Milan where the Virgin Mary had in the late fourteenth century performed certain miracles.

The sheet was found about a century ago pasted on the inside back wall of a sacristy cabinet in the so-called Cathedral of Dräby near the village of Mols, on the east coast of Jutland. The sacristy cabinet still survives, also in the National Museum in Copenhagen, and it is dated 1510–1520. The Copenhagen woodcut belongs to a family of woodcuts of this subject which betray some familiarity with Netherlandish panel painting of the mid-fifteenth century.³ We do not know when and where this woodcut was designed and printed. The paper bears a watermark associated with French papers. But paper with that watermark was also used by a book publisher in Lübeck, in north Germany, in 1492. Stylistic comparison suggests that the block from which the Copenhagen woodcut was printed was designed and carved in the 1470s. The woodcut may have been printed only some years later, probably in the north of Germany, and still later pasted into the back of the cabinet in Jutland.

The relation of this work to prior works is spelled out in plain words on other woodcuts from the same family. A woodcut now in Munich bears a xylographic inscription around its outer edge that reads, “Das bild ist unser lieben frauen bild als sie in dem tempel war, ehe das sie Sankt Joseph

vermahlet ward; also dyntten ihr die engel in dem tempel und also ist sie gemelt in dem tum zu maylandt” (The image is the image of Our Lady when she was in the Temple, before she was betrothed to St. Joseph; in this way the angels waited on her in the Temple; and in this way she is depicted in the Cathedral of Milan).⁴ This print, like the one in Copenhagen, depicts the devout maiden described in apocryphal gospels and in medieval hagiographies, in a robe bedecked with ears of wheat and against an ornamental background. A woodcut in Zurich bears a similar but even longer inscription, describing miracles associated with the mentioned representation of the Virgin in Milan (figure 2.2).⁵ In the Zurich print, the Virgin stands before an altar, and at the same time is standing out of doors: here the altar is as much her attribute as it is a real place. The Copenhagen woodcut evokes more vividly the historical setting, the Temple, by placing the Virgin in a built environment, a niche-like space with an altar backed by a painted retable.

The Copenhagen print bears no inscription, though it cannot be ruled out that there once was one since the bottom few inches are missing. The inscription on the Munich and Zurich versions explains the basis of the image’s authority. Yet there is a hesitation in the statement that reveals a lack of certainty about the prehistory of the iconographic formula. According to the first part of the inscription, “the image is the image of Our Lady when she was in the Temple,” the woodcut delivers the real aspect of the Virgin Mary as she looked when standing in the Temple. But in its second part the inscription undermines itself by admitting that the woodcut also notates another image: “in this way she is depicted in the Cathedral of Milan.” The inscription is saying that the woodcut (*Bild*) is both the image (*Bild*) of the Virgin and a reliable notation of another picture, perhaps a painting, that in turn shows how she really looked in the Temple. With such a phrase, the print concedes its own mediality; that is, it concedes that it has fetched its information from elsewhere. When the second part of the inscription says, in effect, that we know this is how she looked because the picture in Milan tells us, it displaces the responsibility for authenticity to another picture. The second part of the inscription does not go so far as to claim that the woodcut is a direct copy of the image in Milan. Instead, it implies that it copies a picture that itself copied a picture, which copied yet another picture, and so forth, opening onto a sequence of pictures of unspecified medium all capable of standing in for each other and leading back to the ur-picture in Milan that preserves the true image of the Virgin. The beginning of the inscription, by contrast, did not mention any such notation, instead evading the medial problem altogether by using the same word, *Bild*, to cover two different meanings, “picture” and “aspect”: *Das*



2.2 The print explains its own relation to the prior image. *Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears*, hand-colored woodcut, 39.7 x 26 cm, signed by the carver Ulrich Firabet (Switzerland, 1470s?). Zurich, Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule, Graphische Sammlung. The inscription refers to this woodcut as an image of the Virgin as she appeared in the Temple, but also mentions the cult image in Milan (see previous caption). It goes on to recount miracles credited to the Virgin, for example a wreath hanging near the cult image in Milan that instantaneously replenished itself with flowers. The identity of the altar in the upper right is ambiguous: is it located in the Temple in Jerusalem, or in Milan?

bild ist unser lieben frauen bild als sie in dem tempel war. The picture simply “is” the way she looked.

The ur-image in the Cathedral of Milan that the woodcut supposedly notates no longer exists and may never have existed. It is glimpsed, perhaps, in the several dozen surviving versions of Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears in paint, print, and sculpture.⁶ The chapel in Milan was the home site, the site of efficacy, of an avatar of the Virgin known as the Madonna del Coazzone, or Madonna of Long Hair. The origins of the Milan cult are murky. The cult of the Madonna del Coazzone was held dear by the German community of Milan and by extension the devout of southern Germany. The Germans of Milan commissioned a silver statue of her in the later fourteenth century. It is not known when the Virgin’s dress acquired its wheat-ear ornament, nor is the meaning of the motif agreed upon. There is no record of an early painting at all. According to a document, a painted panel was commissioned from an Italian painter, Cristoforo de Motis, in 1465, but that panel has not survived. By 1485 a marble statue by Pietro Antonio Solari was in place on its own altar in the cathedral; that figure is found today in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. This skeletal sequence of cult images suggests that within the Milan cult, as far as one can tell, mediality was simply not an issue. The silver, painted, and marble images substituted for one another with no apparent diminution of meaning.

The woodcuts, by contrast, which all date from the 1470s or later, seem to feel compelled to explain their relation to prior images either through inscriptions or pictorially. Whereas in Milan the basic form of the Virgin was the crucial issue, the woodcuts, mobile images far removed from their notional origin points, thematize their own mediality. The woodcuts concede the possibility of a gradient between original and replicas, a stepped slope, a hierarchy measured in degrees. The most likely scenario is the one not mentioned by the inscriptions, namely that the print replicates not a painting but another print. That is, the woodcut replicates another woodcut equally alienated from the miracle site in Milan. The inscription admits nothing of the kind. The inscription skips over the chain of replications that got us from Milan, over the Alps, to southern Germany or to Switzerland, and finally, in the case of the woodcut in Denmark, to Lübeck and Jutland, and all by way of the Netherlands. In trying to downplay the possible loss of authenticity entailed by such a gradient, the woodcuts with their inscriptions actually create the gradient where none had existed before. By insisting on their own good relations with the past, the woodcuts raise the possibility that transmission might have been a problem. What if reference had broken down somewhere along the way? The broadcasting of the image through multiple painted copies and now

woodcuts generated the desire for a single, original image with unimpeachable authority.

In the third and fourth quarters of the fifteenth century, the woodcut came to contain other media, and in this way the woodcut first became a medium. According to Marshall McLuhan, a medium acquires a "message" by delivering some content that had already been made available by another medium.⁷ The "message" of any medium is the change of pace, scale, or pattern that it introduces to society by virtue of its re-mediation of an old content. In the first half of the century, the woodcut was not yet a medium. The very earliest woodcuts, from the beginning of the fifteenth century, never made self-justifying claims because they were not notating other images.⁸ They never bore inscriptions that would link them to a place or to a particular cult image. The early woodcuts just delivered the real: the Virgin, Christ, the coronation of the Virgin, St. Sebastian, whatever it might be. They were images of holy personages, untroubled by their own mediality. Such pictures did not apologize for their fragility or modest cost, nor for switching from one material to another, stone to paper, wood to paper, glass to paper. A woodcut representing St. Sebastian did not say, for example, "This image is the image of St. Sebastian." Instead, it said, in effect, "This is St. Sebastian." The link it proposed to the real was copulative, in the sense that the image connected directly to St. Sebastian. The picture stood in for St. Sebastian. Such an image was in fact all one had of the divine personage, short of a corporeal relic. The images do not seem to imagine yet that anyone would judge them to be any less effective as substitutes for being printed with ink and colored with washes on paper.⁹

The woodcuts of the Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears, by contrast, do apologize for being prints. They hesitate between different possible theories or models of their own origins. According to the inscriptions on the Munich and Zurich versions, the woodcuts are still the direct, unmediated images of the Virgin, but they are also the notations of a picture in Milan that reliably archives the true image of the Virgin. The second claim diminishes the force of the first. The hesitation suggests that the ideal of a direct substitutional relationship is a phantom. The result of the substitutional ideal is stated in the first part of the inscription; the mechanism is explained in the second part. But the need to explain the mechanism signals a doubt. The model of a perfect substitution of one picture for another comes into view only in the moment of its dissipation. There was no "original," in other words, until someone tried but failed to replicate it. The original was the creature of the replica.

Although the inscriptions assert both the priority and reliability of the Milan painting, the woodcuts let that painting slip out of focus. For

what exactly had the lost painting in Milan represented? According to the inscription, the painting preserved an image of the nubile Virgin as she was when she visited the Temple before, perhaps on the very eve of, her betrothal. Yet the wreath over the archaic altars in both the Copenhagen and Zurich woodcuts does not belong to the scene in the Temple but rather to the legend of the Madonna del Coazzone in Milan. According to this legend, which is recounted in the longer inscription on the Zurich woodcut, a wreath hanging near the image of the Virgin in Milan sprouted white flowers and grass which miraculously grew back one day after the Duchess of Milan had plucked it. What then does the woodcut reproduce? Does it represent the whole scenario in Milan: chapel, image, wreath? Or does it simply replicate a cult image in Milan, a painting that has already absorbed the wreath, the mere accessory to an earlier instantiation of the cult image, into its fictional space? The wreath has been imported from the modern devotional scenario in Milan into the supposedly historical image of the Virgin in the Temple. But which picture first collapsed the two events—the painting in Milan, the Copenhagen woodcut, or one of the predecessor woodcuts? And which picture first took the step of juxtaposing the Virgin with the small image, hanging on the rear wall, of her own son (the Holy Face or Vera icon), presumably a small, painted panel or even a hand-colored woodcut in a little, gabled frame? The collapse of the two events allows the devotions of the Virgin in the Temple to overlap mysteriously with the devotions in Milan (by the Duchess of Milan or others) to the Virgin, in such a way that the Virgin is both subject and object in the woodcut.

The print holds multiple temporalities in suspension, some punctual, some durational: the historical, prenuptial Virgin; the precise moment of her devotions on the eve of her betrothal; the time frame of the chapel in Milan and its accession to special status through the miraculous growth of flowers, whereby it is not clear whether the wreath is the wreath that flowered for the Duchess of Milan or just a symbolic wreath that always hangs there in memory of that event; the time of the lost painting in Milan, which presumably postdated the chapel and had, for all the artist of the woodcut knew, multiple identities (we know today it probably did have).

The Copenhagen woodcut registers its awareness of the multiplicity of time frames by constructing a complex internal skeleton that duplicates the frame, the exoskeleton. The edicule surrounds the Virgin like body armor. Inside, the woodcut weaves a rigid web of frames. The multiple, nested frames urge the viewer to take the external frame of this woodcut seriously, that is, as the boundary between sacred and profane realms. The woodcut replicates the multiple framing system that enveloped the

Madonna in Milan—the frame of the unknown image, the frame of the retable, the edicule she inhabited, the chapel, the Cathedral itself—all real frontiers between sacred and profane.

Everything in the Copenhagen image is touching everything else. There was a practical incentive to organize the picture this way, because it is easier to cut a block when line groups are contiguous. The paper was better supported by a dense web of ridges. But there is also a semantic dimension to the crowded, montage effect. The framed image of the Holy Face touches Mary's silhouette. The upper and lower angels also make contact with Mary. The wreath is overlapped by the arch and touches the retable below. The multiplication of internal frames keeps pace with the multiplication of potential origin points. In such a print, even the individual artist, the artist as author of the work, is on the horizon. That artist looms as a powerful rival to all the work's other possible origin points. Neither the designer, nor the cutter, nor the printer of the Copenhagen woodcut is identified. Fifteenth-century woodcuts were almost never signed. The signature of the woodcutter in the upper left corner of the print in Zurich, the single word "Firabet," is a rare exception.¹⁰ Both woodcuts identify themselves closely with Netherlandish paintings whose authorship, or link to celebrated author-artists such as Rogier van der Weyden, was often a major component of their significance.

The Copenhagen woodcut, a picture which no longer delivers the real but mediates it, registers the presence of its viewer, the recipient of its message, in a new way. If this were a real glimpse into a chapel, all the overlappings and tangencies would shift the moment the point of view shifts, thus suggesting the contingency and momentariness of seeing.

By framing and reframing to excess, the work expresses a sense of its own distance from prior modes of art making that simply presented the real without explanation. But those earlier media and formats are present in the scene: the archaic altar with its image of Moses, or perhaps God himself, pointing to the tablets of the Law; the simple image of Christ's face, perhaps itself a woodcut pasted to a panel; the Temple in Jerusalem, the model for all Christian temples; the cult image in Milan, painting or statue, associated with a miracle. The Copenhagen woodcut is no longer simply a devotional target. It is also an antiquarian image, the notation of archeological data. It belongs alongside other contemporary prints that reproduced ancient artifacts and customs, such as the engravings after Andrea Mantegna's *Triumphs of Caesar* or Israhel van Meckenem's engraving of the mosaic icon of the Man of Sorrows in Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, Rome (see figure 26.5).¹¹ The Cathedral of Milan was, after all, an extremely old institution, housing mosaics that date to the fifth century. For all one knew in

the late fifteenth century, the Madonna del Coazzone was a cult with roots in antiquity.

The simple and straightforward image that delivered the real never actually existed. It was only ever visible from a vantage point inside a later image, which worried about its own crafted and mediated nature. The later work is inhabited by imagined earlier modes of art making that were imagined precisely to be uninhabited, independent; imagined to be not yet art but simply images. Just as the artwork produced the phantom of its own superior opposite, the image, so too was “Renaissance art” a machine for the production of “medieval art.”

What Is Substitution?

The Copenhagen woodcut with its embedded virtuous versions of itself—temple, Holy Face, altar with altarpiece representing Moses or God, angel—registered a desire for authentic, legitimate targets for devotion, the sort of targets that no one would think to interrogate with impertinent questions about production history. Whenever possible, people declined to ask such questions of the artifacts around them, not only paintings and statues but also buildings. Such artifacts were understood whenever possible to have a double historicity: that is, one might know that they were fabricated in the present or in the recent past, but at the same time value them and use them as if they were very old things. This was not a matter of collective naïveté or indolence, but rather a systematic self-delusion, a semidelusion, designed to extract from the artifact the maximum possible referential reach. The half lie of double historicity was abetted by relative ignorance about real production histories but was not simply a way of masking that ignorance. Rather, the hypothesis that an artifact “might as well be” very old was a way of exploiting ignorance. It was moreover a hypothesis true to the nature of artworks, which were adepts of time.

The image or building took up its multiple residencies in time by presenting itself as a token of a type, a type associated with an origin, perhaps mythical or only dimly perceived, an origin enforcing a general categorical continuity across a sequence of tokens. Under such a model of the temporal life of artifacts, one token or replica effectively substituted for another; classes of artifacts were grasped as chains of substitutable replicas stretching out across time and space. Modern copies of painted icons were understood as effective surrogates for lost originals, for example, and new buildings were understood as reinstantiations, through typological association, of prior structures. The literal circumstances and the historical moment of an artifact’s material execution were not routinely taken as components of its meaning or function. Instead, such facts about an artifact were seen as accidental rather than as constitutive features. The artifact thus functioned by aligning itself with a diachronic chain of

replications. It substituted for the absent artifacts that preceded it within the chain.

Tacitus described the restoration of the Capitoline temple in Rome under Vespasian as a triage between the essential features of the predecessor building, which had to be preserved, and the merely accidental, which could be altered.¹ The *haruspices*, the diviners, instructed the builders to remove the ruins of the old temple and erect the new one on the traces of the old (*templum isdem vestigiis sisteretur*). The gods were unwilling to see the old plan or “form” altered (*nolle deos mutari veterem formam*). In this way the identity of the old temple was transferred to the new. But the old temple was unimpressively low-slung, and so the builders were allowed to raise the new one higher—the only change that religious scruple permitted (*altitudo aedibus adiecta: id solum religio adnuere et prioris templi magnificentiae defuisse credebatur*).

Richard Krautheimer, in a seminal article of 1942 on the “iconography” of medieval architecture, made a similar point about medieval buildings.² He argued that the ground plans of many churches complied with a set of simple design principles embodied in a few prestigious and symbolically weighty early models. But Krautheimer carefully declined to push his thesis beyond a limited group of centrally planned churches dating from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. And yet it may be possible to extend the Krautheimer thesis beyond its original brief, to the paintings and the sculptures of the Renaissance.

To perceive an artifact in substitutional terms was to understand it as belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously. The artifact was connected to its unknowable point of origin by an unreconstructible chain of replicas. That chain could not be perceived; its links did not diminish in stature as they receded into the depths of time. Rather, the chain created an instant and ideally effective link to an authoritative source and an instant identity for the artifact. The chains were not necessarily real. Hans Belting has pointed out that the earliest portraits of Christ made no claim to offer a true likeness. The chain of icons that ran backward to an authentic image of Christ was constructed only much later.³

Whereas under the performative or authorial theory of origins a given sequence of works is viewed perspectively, each one with a different appearance, under the substitutional theory different objects stack up one on top of another without recession and without alteration. The dominant metaphor is that of the impress or the cast, allowing for repetition without difference, even across heterogeneous objects and materials. The idea that imprinting preserves identity was affirmed already in Byzantium in the wake of the iconoclastic controversy. The ninth-century theologian St.

Theodore the Studite compared the relation of image to prototype to the impress of a seal or engraved ring on different materials at different times:

The impression is one and the same in the several materials which, however, are different with respect to each other; yet it would not have remained identical unless it were entirely unconnected with the materials. . . . The same applies to the likeness of Christ irrespective of the material upon which it is represented.⁴

This book argues that the apprehension of historical artifacts in the late medieval and early modern period, as well as the production of new images and buildings, was built on the following paradox: the possibility that a material sample of the past could somehow be *both* an especially powerful testimony to a distant world *and* at the same time an ersatz for another, now absent artifact. The interpretation of artifacts rested on two logically incompatible convictions, neither of which could be easily abandoned: on the one hand, that material evidence was the best sort of evidence; on the other hand, that it was very likely that at some point material artifacts had been replaced. Instead of allowing one conviction to prevail, people thought “doubly” about artifacts. Yet they did not think doubly about holy relics. A pig’s bone was not an acceptable substitute for the bone of a saint. The falsification of relics was plainly seen to be wrong. Nor did they think doubly about nondocumentary verbal texts, which were obviously substitutable, handed down through time from one material vehicle to another without loss of authenticity. The force of an old poem did not depend on the literal antiquity of the page it was written on.

A political document, like a charter or a deed, or a material artifact, like an image, moved between these two poles, between the nonsubstitutability of the bone and the perfect substitutability of the linguistic text. The forgeries of documents so common in the Middle Ages can be understood, under a substitutional theory of artifact production, as the legitimate reproduction of accidentally misplaced facts.⁵ Thousands of documents were fabricated and planted in archives by later scholars, both monastic and courtly, between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries. Such documents were used to shore up the claims to antiquity or legitimacy of a monastic foundation or a bishopric or a ducal house. They attested to origins. If the crucial document did not exist, it was invented. Document and sacred image alike were grasped as something like relics and, at the same time, as something like poems.

The model of linear and measurable time was hardly foreign to the Western historical imagination before modern times, as many medieval chronicles attest. But to tell a story from year to year, from event to event,

was simply one way of organizing time. Artifacts and monuments configured time differently. They stitched through time, pulling two points on the chronological timeline together until they met. Through artifacts the past participated in the present. A primary function of art under the substitutional system was precisely to effect a disruption of chronological time, to collapse temporal distance. Such temporalities had something in common, as we have noted, with the typological thinking of biblical exegetes, according to which sacred events, though embedded in history, also contained what theologians called a mystery, figure, or sacrament—a spiritual meaning that lifted the event out of the flow of history. The “omnitemporal” scheme of history presupposed by figural thinking was an effort to adopt God’s point of view, which grasps history all at once, topologically, rather than in a linear sequence. To think this way was not merely a privilege of the educated elite, for figural structures were embedded in every Mass ceremony and in virtually every sermon.⁶

Visual artifacts by their very nature were suited to the representation of the figural dimension of history. The juxtapositions, stackings, displacements, and cyclical configurations found in countless medieval church façades and altarpieces presupposed a competence for thinking through time in flexible and associative ways. The advantages of figural disposition were recognized in the medieval art of memory, which involved the construction of elaborate architectural configurations, as well as two-dimensional compositional arrays, as a means of assuring secure storage and facilitating random access to textual authorities. Texts themselves were not understood in strictly discursive and linear terms but were configured to facilitate the working of the mnemonic imagination. A well-honed memory saw the verses of the source text as a line with many hooks on it connecting it with other texts, so that in pulling on one of the hooks all the “fish” were drawn in.⁷ The figural approach to texts was reflected in the layout of the glossed books that developed during the twelfth century in France. There the comments were written all around the authored text, keyed into it through red underlinings, heuristic symbols, and other punctuation. To pull in one text was to pull in all the commentary, as well as other texts that accorded with it. The “original” text and its author remained temporally unfixed. As Mary Carruthers put it, “A work of literature was not taught in isolation, as an artifact produced by some person long dead whose intention we must now ‘recover,’ but as an ever-rolling stream accumulating and adapting over time as it is ‘collated’ with its multitude of readers.”⁸

But visual artifacts collapsed past and present with an ease and suddenness that no text could match. Images proposed an unmediated, present-tense, somatic encounter with the people and the things of the past.

They enacted a breaking through time and a raising from the dead. The difference between text and image as historical records was described in just such terms by Manuel Chrysoloras, a Greek scholar who emigrated to Florence in the fifteenth century:

Herodotus and the other historians did great things with their works; but only in images is it possible to see everything as if in the time at which it happened, and thus this [image-based] history is absolutely and simply exact: or better, if I may say so, it is not history, but direct and personal observation [*autopsía*] and living presence [*parousía*] of all the things that happened then.⁹

The anachronic force of images and other artifacts was grounded in hopeful assumptions about the straightforwardness and instant intelligibility of figural representation. The image bent the linear sequence of events back upon itself, as if exerting a pull on time. This was a psychological fact that followed from the capacity of the figure to embody materially its own signified.

Erich Auerbach insisted that the figural or typological relationship was not allegorical, but real. The Old Testament type did not merely stand for the New Testament antitype. Rather, both were equally real events in the flow of history. The connection between the two events, indeed the *identity* of the two events, was perceptible to an exegete who saw them not in historical perspective, foreshortened, as a modern observer might, but instead saw their symmetrical subordination to a higher, ultimate truth. There is a mystical dimension to substitutional logic, a conviction of the real, and not merely symbolic, link between event and event, and between artifact and artifact. Identity across time was sustained by the substitutional hypothesis, only to be disrupted by modern historicist scholarship.

The figural alternative to linear and causal temporality is a permanent lure, a rhetorical, poetical, and political occasion. Figurality played a principal role in twentieth-century efforts to adjust the relationship between history and memory: in Sigmund Freud's identification of the psychic operations of condensation and displacement; in the art historian Aby Warburg's paratactic memory atlas, diagramming the coils of transhistorical pictorial reference; or in Walter Benjamin's adaptation of the principle of montage to history writing. For Benjamin, the "constellation" or configuration of images held a critical power, the capacity to shatter the order of things.¹⁰ He saw in Surrealism the promise of the figural irruption or "illumination." Indeed, Louis Aragon had spoken of the critical productivity of stylistic clashes, violations of the historical logic of style, as "asynchronisms of desire" that would reveal the contradictions of modernity.¹¹

In two recent books, Georges Didi-Huberman has pointedly confronted

the modern discipline of art history with its own chronographic complacency. In *Devant le temps: Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images* (2000), he identifies two modern modes of dialectical and productively anachronistic thinking about images, montage and symptom, associated in multiple ways with Benjamin and Carl Einstein. In *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (2002), he takes Aby Warburg as his guide and unravels the obsolete evolutionary temporal schemas that have structured the historical study of Western art. As an alternative to a developmental, "biomorphic" conception of history, Warburg offered a discontinuous, folded history in which time appears in the form of "strata, hybrid blocs, rhizomes, specific complexities, unanticipated returns and goals always frustrated."¹² Didi-Huberman brings Warburg's model of the *Nachleben*, or survival, of antique pathos formulas into alignment with the psychoanalytic mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit*, or "deferred action." Our own project responds to Warburg's provocation, amplified in Didi-Huberman's exegesis, by attempting to draw a nonevolutionary metaphors of time from the historical works themselves, a temporality in structural misalignment with, and therefore systematically unrecognized by, art historical scholarship. The method will be a working from the artworks backwards, by a process of reverse engineering, to a lost chronotology of art making.

An Antique Statue of Christ

The only “modern” element in the woodcuts of the Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears (see figures 2.1 and 2.2) had been the medium itself, woodcut. Everything depicted was old. Yet the woodcuts were comparatively indifferent to, even oblivious of, the problem of historical style. They imagined an altar and, in one case, an altarpiece that looked much like the furnishings of a modern European chapel. The historicity of that altar and altarpiece—their belongingness to the distant world of Jerusalem at the end of the first century BCE—was marked only by the strange subject matter depicted on the altarpiece. But many other works in the fifteenth century pursued the possibility that style might be indexical to times and places, painting in particular discovering its own impressive capacity for citing style, that is, depicting style itself instead of just being “in” a style. Historical style, the “look” of a remote place or time, became one of the possible contents of painting. From this point on, any painting that stages past events in modern garb and surroundings has to be suspected of sophistication, that is, knowing exactly what it is doing, before it is accused of negligence or indifference.

Such a picture is the portrait of St. Augustine by the Venetian painter Vittore Carpaccio, where the saint is shown in the act of writing a letter to St. Jerome (figure 4.1).¹ Augustine is seated at a table in a roomy study, pausing, his pen raised from the paper. In his letter, Augustine will ask the older man for advice. But at that very moment, in distant Bethlehem, Jerome dies. Augustine looks up from his desk, as his room fills with light and an ineffable fragrance, and he hears the voice of Jerome. Carpaccio painted the picture around 1503 for the confraternity of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice, where it still hangs today. The picture recreates an incident narrated by Augustine himself in a spurious letter frequently published in late fifteenth-century Venice as a supplement to biographies of St. Jerome.² The fluttering pages of the open codices, the fall of the shadows, the alerted dog, the poised pen, all suggest the momentariness of that moment, the evening hour of compline, as the legend tells us. This is secular time, the time of lived



4.1 A clash of time-frames inside the scholar's study. Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint Augustine in His Study*, oil and tempera on canvas, 141 x 210 cm (ca. 1503). Venice, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. The fourth-century theologian is interrupted by the admonishing voice of the recently deceased St. Jerome. His study is populated by books, instruments, and furniture of modern design, as well as works of pagan art that the historical Augustine would never have owned. On the shelf to the left stands a bronze Venus based on a modern work by the sculptor Antico; or is it proposing Antico's ancient model, the *Venus Felix* in the Vatican?

experience, in which each moment repeats but differs from the previous moment. The modern and carefully described furnishings and objects enveloping Augustine vividly, paradoxically, convey the historicity of the moment. It was a *moment*: everything looked a certain way, and not another way.

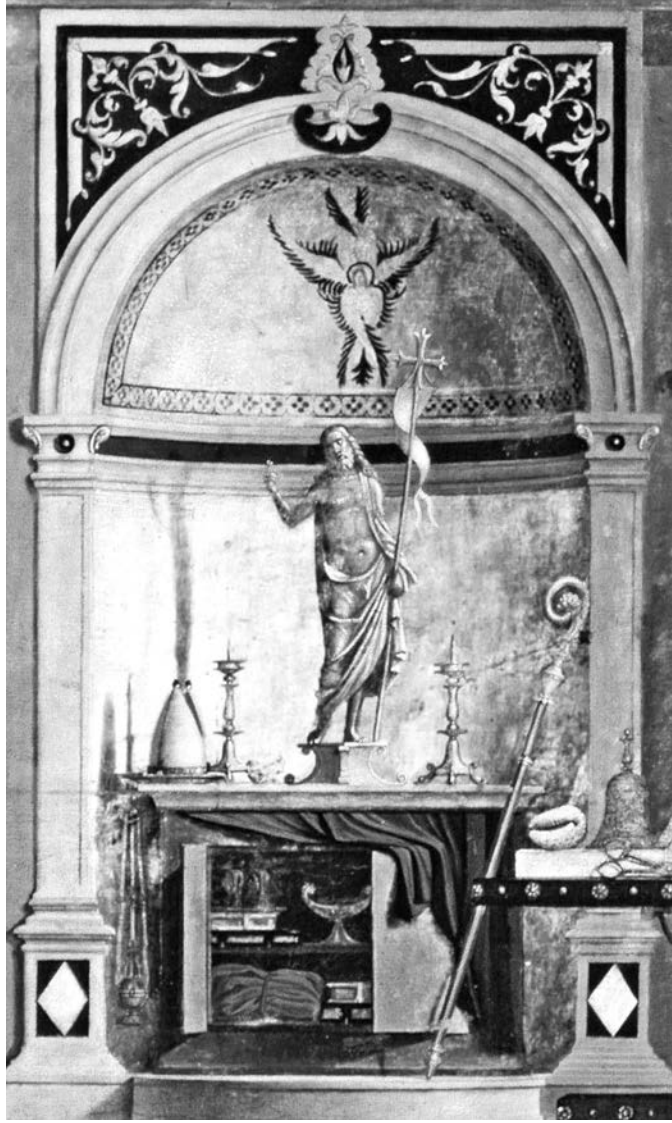
In fact everything looks much as it might have looked not in North Africa of the early fifth century but in an Italian scholar's well-appointed study around 1500. At the left there is an elegant red chair with cloth fringe and brass rivets and a tiny lectern. A door at the back opens onto a smaller room with a table supporting piles of books and a rotating book stand. Carpaccio describes writing implements, pen holders, scientific instruments, an hourglass, and, on a shelf running along the left wall, under another shelf of books, still more bric-a-brac of the sort that scholars like to collect: old pots, statuettes, even prehistoric flint artifacts, misunderstood by the painter and his contemporaries as geological or meteorological curiosities, perhaps as petrified lightning.³

One sophisticated reason for transposing biblical and historical scenes into modern form was to disguise a reference to contemporary people or events. Carpaccio's Augustine may have been a screen for a modern portrait, a papal official in one scholarly account, in another, Cardinal Bessarion.⁴ Such deliberate anachronisms, juxtapositions of historically distinct styles in a single picture and stagings of historical events in contemporary settings, fed back into the symbolic machinery of the pictures. Fifteenth-century Flemish painters, for instance, embedded samples of medieval architectural styles in their paintings as an iconographic device: the round-arched or "Romanesque" style as the signifier of the old covenant, "Gothic" pointed arches as the signifier of the new (for more on this topic, see section 14).⁵ Rogier van der Weyden attached an anachronistic crucifix to the central pier of a ruinous Nativity shed, site of maximum condensation and redundancy of epochal time.⁶ Botticelli dressed the characters of his *Primavera* in the costumes of contemporary festival pageantry, a blend of the still-fashionable and slightly out-of-date, creating a delicious tension with the literary premise of a primordial theophany, the invitation to the first spring of all time.⁷ The staged collision between the visually familiar and the unfamiliar was one of the ways that modern paintings, to borrow a phrase from Alfred Acres, "customized the terms of their own perception."⁸ Such works dared to make reference to a "here" and a "now" relative to a historical beholder, through perspective or modern costumes or hidden contemporary portraits. The "customized," contingent aspect of the work could then be folded back into the work's primary, usually non-local, aims. The internal dissonance between universal and contingent generated a whole new layer of meanings.

The condition of possibility for such complex feedback effects was the idea that form would be legible to the beholder as the trace of an epoch, a culture, a world—as a "style," in other words. Behind the idea of historical style stands a theory about the origins of formed artifacts. According to this theory, the circumstances of an artifact's fabrication, its originary context, are registered in its physical features. A clash of temporalities of the sort we find in Carpaccio comes about when patrons and artist and beholders all agree to see the artifacts "cited" in the painting, the buildings, statues, or costumes, as traces of historical moments. One can characterize this theory of the origin of the artifact—which is equally a theory of the origin of the artwork—as performative. The artifact or the work, according to this theory, was the product of a singular historical performance, the artist's performance. Any subsequent repetitions of that performance, for example, copies of the work, will be alienated from the original scene of making.

This theory of origins came into especially sharp focus over the course of the fifteenth century. An artist was now conceived for the first time as an author, an *auctor* or founder, a legitimate point of origin for a painting or sculpture, or even a building. The author, more generally the entire context of fabrication, leaves traces in the fabric of the work. By the third quarter of the fifteenth century, the image of the stylus or pen, the writing instrument that both in ancient rhetorical treatises and in modern Petrarch had come to stand symbolically for the individual author's peculiar, inalienable way of putting things into words, was carried over into the contemporary discourse on painting. The Florentine Filarete, in his *Treatise on Architecture* (1461–1464), wrote that “the painter is known by the manner of his figures, and in every discipline one is known by his style.”⁹ A character in Baldassare Castiglione's dialogue *The Courtier* (1528) says of Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea Mantegna, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Giorgione that “each is recognized to be perfect in his own style.”¹⁰ Since the late fifteenth century some version of this theory of origins is inscribed into every European painting.

There are thus several origin points visible in Carpaccio's painting, just as there were in the woodcuts of the Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears: the historical event, discerned, once the beholder is in possession of the right keys, as a narrative and as a psychological portrait; the painter's contemporary world, brought in through artifacts and furnishings to stand for worldliness in general, for temporal punctuality, for mundane or “fallen” time; Vittore Carpaccio the author, manipulator of styles, recognizable as an author through his distinctive style. The multiplicity of origin points is registered in the roster of objects and images vibrating anachronistically in the picture's background. One of the small statues on the shelf at the left is a representation of Venus, an object that a modern clergyman, a man of taste and liberal views capable of distinguishing a shelf from an altar mensa, might have prized, but that St. Augustine himself would not have owned.¹¹ St. Augustine was vehement in his condemnation of pagan statuary, as any of his Renaissance readers would have known.¹² On the rear wall there is a kind of private chapel, a wall niche framed by pilasters and faced with spandrels with inlaid vegetal ornament, and sheltering an altar (figure 4.2). The altar looks as if it is in use: the curtain is pushed aside and the doors on the front are open, revealing ecclesiastical equipment. Augustine has placed his bishop's mitre on the altar table and propped his crozier and a censer on either side. They are the costumes and the accoutrements that a modern bishop might have owned. The modern artifacts, even the modern chapel with its fashionable frame, had an *all'antica* flavor that connected them with the Roman past, with Augustine's historical world, more or less.¹³



4.2 An anachronism at the heart of the painting. Vittore Carpaccio, *Saint Augustine in His Study*, detail. Venice, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni. On the altar is a bronze statue of Christ resembling a modern work then in Venice (see figure 4.3). The mosaic in the apse above, representing a seraph, resembles those found in the thirteenth-century domes of the atrium of the basilica of San Marco in Venice.

The clash of temporalities grows more violent and mysterious deep inside the picture, inside the wall niche. On Augustine's private altar stands a statue of the resurrected Christ. Here Carpaccio has imagined an early Christian altar, adorned not by a carved and painted retable but by a

free-standing bronze. No such work would have stood on a fifth-century altar. In fact, Carpaccio was describing a modern work, a bronze statue today in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (figure 4.3). The work was made in the Veneto in the early 1490s and could be found, at the time Carpaccio painted his picture, on an altar in the Venetian church of Santa Maria della Carità.¹⁴ It was commissioned, together with an elaborate chapel, by the wealthy jeweler and antiquarian Domenico di Piero.¹⁵ It is significantly larger than a statuette, though less than life size.¹⁶

The Christ figure on the altar, a modern work, would appear to match the other anachronisms in the room, the modern furniture, the bound codices, the bibelots on the shelf. But it is not the same as these, for the bronze Christ stands on an altar; it is a cult image; in fact, it is a particular cult image attested in literary sources. Renaissance scholars had it on best authority that there had been ancient statues of Christ. One well-known account, preserved in the *Liber Pontificalis*, mentions silver statues of Christ made under the fourth-century emperor Constantine and donated to the Lateran.¹⁷ Before Constantine, early biographers of Alexander Severus mention that he kept a statue of Christ in his *lararium*, together with statues of Apollonius of Tyana, Abraham, and Orpheus.¹⁸ The idea of an ancient portrait statue of Christ or an apostle made perfect sense to Renaissance scholars and clerics: “The ancient founders of our illustrious Christian religion,” wrote the Bolognese Dominican Leandro Alberti in 1521, “were no less wise than [the ancient Romans], since they too erected superb statues and images and built magnificent temples to those captains and first founders of our unsullied faith.”¹⁹

The best-known legend of an antique statue of Christ originated in a report made by the early fourth-century church historian Eusebius, who described a bronze statue group in Paneas (present-day Banyas in the region of the Golan Heights) that showed a woman kneeling in supplication before a man with a cloak draped over his shoulder and with his arm outstretched to her.²⁰ Eusebius’s account was retold and embroidered throughout the Middle Ages. Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century, mentioned the special glow of the statue’s face.²¹ In the thirteenth century the story acceded to the pages of the *Golden Legend*, one of the most widely read devotional texts of the later Middle Ages. In the *Golden Legend*, the bronze was no longer a two-figure group but a single statue of Christ.²² The story was frequently invoked by iconophiles during the sixteenth-century image controversy as an example of the use of images in archaic Christian times.²³

The bronze Christ cited in the painting was not merely, for Carpaccio, a modern work functioning as an ingenious hypothesis of a lost ancient work. The bronze Christ did not just “stand for” or refer poetically to



4.3 A modern antiquity. *Blessing Christ*, bronze, height 138 cm (ca. 1493). Milan, Poldi Pezzoli Museum. At the time Carpaccio painted his imaginary portrait of St. Augustine, this statue stood on an altar in the church of Santa Maria della Carità in Venice. It corresponds in basic form and in some details to an ancient statue of Christ reported by the fourth-century Church historian Eusebius and many other writers down to Carpaccio's time. The work is to this day unattributed; was it perhaps designed by its author to appear "authorless," a work linked by an invisible chain of copies to ancient times?

antiquity. Rather, the statue was for him an antique work. As, very likely, was the small bronze Venus on the shelf. It too renders a modern work, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, by Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, called *Antico*.²⁴ This small bronze was itself a miniature copy of an antique marble Venus, the so-called *Venus Felix*, which had recently been discovered and set up in the Vatican. Thus Carpaccio quotes a modern work but not as a modern work.

In the literature on the ancient and medieval use of spolia some conceptual space has been cleared for artifacts like this. Patricia Fortini Brown, in her book *Venice and Antiquity*, identifies a "level of copying—the deliberate faking of an antiquity—in which the present virtually becomes the past."²⁵ Following a distinction drawn by Richard Brilliant, she describes such works as the thirteenth-century relief of *Hercules with the Cerynean Hind and the Lernean Hydra* on the façade of San Marco, or the thirteenth-century ducal tombs, as "conceptual spolia": artifacts filling gaps in the monumental record and made to look as if they might have been spolia.²⁶ One of the aims of the present book is simply to amplify and radicalize this argument. Not just a few but a vast range of works must be understood as

virtual spolia or fabricated antiquities, whether they seem to our eyes to resemble real antiquities, or not.

The bronze Christ once in Venice and now in Milan did not actually belong to a chain. It was a philologically sensitive replica of the historical statue described by Eusebius and the *Golden Legend* and several other sources.²⁷ The modern statue preserves a peculiar detail of the legend. According to the texts, exotic plants that grew beneath the statue and came into contact with the sculpted hem of Christ's cloak took on miraculous powers and were used to cure illnesses of all kinds.²⁸ On the bronze statue now in Milan, the very work Carpaccio took as his model, the pedestal carries a dense motif of foliage and the hem of Christ's toga drops down sharply below the level of his feet (figure 4.4). The motif is strange and emphatic: the cloth pools up to the side of the pedestal as if to insist on the idea that it has come into physical contact with the ground. The vegetal ornament and the overflowing hem show that the patron of the bronze statue, Domenico di Piero, deliberately understood it as a replica of the original ancient statue of Christ recorded by Eusebius. The hem is like a scholarly footnote to the statue.

Once this detail is noticed other coincidences emerge. Eusebius speaks of a "double cloak" on the figure identified as Christ. The double cloak is the *diplois*, the garment worn by ascetics and Cynic philosophers who wore only the pallium, doubled in length, without the underlying tunic or any other undergarment. According to some, it was invented by the Cynic Diogenes. In his *School of Athens* (see figure 28.1), Raphael seems to make a point of showing him, in contrast to the other philosophers, sprawling on the steps in disregard of the world, clad in the pallium and nothing else. When Eusebius says the figure of Christ was clothed "decently" (κοσμιός, which literally means decorously) in the *diplois*, he is perhaps making the point that although the garment is slight, this figure wore it without looking half-naked and indecent. In the Milan statue, Christ is shown wearing a *diplois* without an undergarment (in the specific form of an *exomis*, without a fibula, leaving the right shoulder free). His torso is exposed and yet the overall effect is dignified and decorous: he does not look underdressed.

The simple existence of an artifact such as the bronze Christ in Santa Maria della Carità carried enormous validating power. Reflexively placing it within a substitutional mode of production, contemporary viewers looked past the local circumstances of its fabrication and instead concentrated on the referential target. Even a prototype otherwise unknown was in effect "retroactivated" by such a work. In the presence of the actual statue—especially one in bronze, a rare sight in churches at this time—the legend of an antique original immediately gained compelling concreteness.

The facial features of the bronze Christ now in Milan are smooth and uninflected, and the lines on the torso are highly abstract, in fact quite like the torsos on Greek icons.²⁹ “Authorlessness” may have been built into this work from the start, as part of its claim to antiquity. This may explain why even today connoisseurs are frustrated in their efforts to assign an attribution to this work. And yet just this authorless authority may also explain why the statue made such a significant impact in Venice after its appearance in the 1490s. Today the figure is virtually unknown, but around 1500 it carried great authority, as if it were understood to be much more than an imaginative fiction. It was often copied. In the church of the Carità in Venice where the bronze originally stood, the Christ from the Resurrection relief in the Barbarigo tomb, finished by 1501, is closely based on the statue. There were numerous freer emulations of the statue: Alvise Vivarini’s *Resurrected Christ* of 1497 in San Giovanni in Bragora; Cima da Conegliano’s figure of Christ in his *Doubting of Saint Thomas* of 1504; possibly the statue of Christ in marble by Giambattista Bregno in the De Rossi chapel in the Duomo of Treviso of 1501–1503.³⁰ Fra Bartolommeo, who visited Venice in 1508, registered the work in his Florentine altarpiece of the *Salvator Mundi* of 1516 now in the Palazzo Pitti. Carpaccio, as we have seen, copied it closely.³¹ The reception history reveals that the Christ statue had come close to attaining the status of a true likeness.

Let us return to the Carpaccio painting by moving outward from the statue. The mosaic in the apse behind the statue renders an actual mosaic of a seraph from the Creation cupola found in the atrium of the basilica of San Marco in Venice.³² Made in the thirteenth century, the mosaic



4.4 A footnote to Eusebius’s Ecclesiastical History. *Blessing Christ*, detail. Milan, Poldi Pezzoli Museum. A piece of drapery falls to the side of the statue’s base and gathers on the ground next to it. The hem of Christ’s garment thus makes contact with the real ground beyond the confines of the work, a highly unusual feature in statuary of the period. Eusebius described the miraculous properties of herbs that had come into contact with the hem of the robe of a bronze statue of Christ known in his day. The falling hem links the Venetian statue to this legend.

is only two hundred and some years distant from Carpaccio's painting. Augustine in the fourth century never saw it, or anything like it. Perhaps Carpaccio simply did not know how to date the San Marco mosaic and in citing it meant to invoke the remote time of Christian antiquity, the time of the Church fathers. To put it in these terms, however, to speak of a "misdating," is to misunderstand the substitutional hypothesis. Carpaccio knew that San Marco and the mosaic were postantique, and yet at the same time he considered them substitutions for lost antiquities. Nothing was more reasonable than the hypothesis of a chain of replicas linking the mosaic in San Marco back to an origin. It has been shown that the mosaics from the San Marco atrium were, in fact, modeled especially carefully on illustrations like those of the fifth-century Cotton Genesis.³³ The principle of substitution was powerful enough to *make* the San Marco mosaic an antiquity.³⁴

It is not enough to see Carpaccio's painting as a virtuoso manipulation of historical styles. Nor can it be described as an incompletely performative picture, with its historical vision of the past not yet quite in focus. Its interlocking anachronisms cannot be explained away as fancies of the artist or the peculiar preoccupations of the Venetians. Within the substitutional mode, anachronism was neither an aberration nor a mere rhetorical device, but a structural condition of artifacts.

Carpaccio's painting stages the statue's reinstatement of substitution against a foil of performativity, and in so doing diagrams a clash between two different versions of the time-artifact relationship. From one point of view, the painted statue is the lost and absent original, the nonexistent original, that the modern Italian statue reinstantiates. From another point of view, the statue is simply an anachronism, that is, a citation of a modern work that makes a bad fit in an historical scene. By holding both points of view open, the painting becomes something like an anatomical model, revealing the inner workings of picture-making. The painting proposes as the resolution of the predicament a new, or at least newly institutionalized, function for pictures: staging itself. Pictures like Carpaccio's become places where competitive models of the historicity of form can be juxtaposed, places of impossibility, of critical reflection and nonresolution. This staging operation is itself not in competition with the substitutional and performative modes. That is, a picture like Carpaccio's can itself maintain a particular substitutional relationship to the past, or a performative relationship to the past, or a combination of the two, and at the same time function as a diagram of the conceptual interference between the two modes. That simultaneity of operations becomes a fundamental feature of the work of art in the modern period.

The Plebeian Pleasure of Anachronism

Today it is easy, almost too easy, to find “artistic” time—folded, misremembered—more interesting than merely linear historical time. The modern scholar willingly submits to what Jorge Luis Borges called the “plebeian pleasure of anachronism.”¹ (Borges’s fictional character Pierre Menard, too refined for the garden-variety anachronism of his day, deplored those facile modern novels that exploited the temporal freedom of art by situating Christ on a boulevard or Don Quixote on Wall Street. Instead, Menard elected to rewrite Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* in its entirety, line by line, word by word; an exact repetition at a distance of four hundred years that achieved a more subtle and profound novelty. Menard’s masterpiece is not so much anachronistic as anachronic.) The principle of substitution generates the effect of an artifact that doubles or crimps time over upon itself. The time of art, with its densities, irruptions, juxtapositions, and recoveries, comes to resemble the topology of memory itself, which emerged in the twentieth century in all its tangledness as a primordial model of historical understanding, a threat to the certainties of empirical historical science. In the substitutional mode, however, there is no human subject involved. The substitution of work for work produces a picture of history resembling a mnemonic topology without presupposing the workings of any actual memory. The commutativity of past and present is a memory effect generated by the substitutional machine.

It proves convenient to modern theorists of the strange folds of memory-based time to preserve the myth of a prosaically historicist Renaissance. That myth has its basis in Erwin Panofsky’s celebrated definition of the Italian Renaissance as the period first capable of seeing historical art in perspective.² Panofsky had in mind the range of Donatello’s interpretations of Roman sculpture, from impeccable pastiche to poetic *imitatio*;³ likewise, Mantegna’s fine-grained antiquarian reconstructions of Roman architecture or weaponry.⁴ Such achievements are incomprehensible unless we admit that Donatello and Mantegna had a strong sense of historical style. That is, they must have believed that the look of an artifact registered the