

**A NEW WAY
OF SEEING**

**THE HISTORY
OF ART IN 57
WORKS**

KELLY GROVIER



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A New Way of Seeing

The History of Art in 57 Works

Kelly Grovier

A new way of appreciating art that puts the artwork front and centre, brought to us by one of the freshest and most exciting new voices in cultural criticism.

Marketing points

- **An impassioned exploration** of what it is that constitutes great art, through an illuminating analysis of the world's outstanding masterpieces – works whose power to move transcends the sum of their parts.
- **Casts fresh new light on some of the most famous works in the history of art** by daring to isolate in each a single (and often overlooked) detail responsible for its greatness.
- **Grovier's *100 Works of Art That Will Define Our Age***, 'a daring and convincing analysis of seminal artworks of our age' (*Telegraph*), received exceptional reviews.

Description

From a carved mammoth tusk (c. 40,000 BCE) to Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), and Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1505–10) to Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* (1999), a remarkable lexicon of astonishing imagery has imprinted itself onto cultural consciousness over the past 40,000 years – a resilient visual vocabulary whose meaning has proved elastic and endlessly renewable from era to era.

It is to these works that Kelly Grovier devotes himself in this radical new art history. Stepping away from biography, style and the chronology of 'isms' that preoccupies most art history to focus on the artworks themselves, Grovier tells a new story in which we learn *from* the artworks, not just about them. Looking closely at each work, he identifies an 'eye-hook' – the part of the artwork that 'bridges the divide between art and life, giving it palpable purpose and elevating its value beyond the visual to the vital' – and encourages us to squint through this narrow aperture to perceive the work's truest meanings. This book is unique in emphasizing the durability of what is made over the ephemerality of its making and serves as a rejoinder to a growing sensibility that conceives of artists as brands and the works they create as nothing more than material commodities to hoard, hide, and flip for profit.

Lavishly illustrated with many of the most breathtaking and enduring artworks ever created, as well as many that inspired or took inspiration from them, this refreshing book will spark a debate about how it is that artworks articulate who we are and what it means to be alive in the world.

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A New Way of Seeing
The History of Art
in 57 Works

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Introduction

A Touch of Strangeness

What elevates a work of art to the level of masterpiece? What keeps it suspended in popular imagination, generation after generation, century after century? What makes great art great? The answer to each of these questions, invariably, is strangeness. 'It is a characteristic of great painting,' the art critic Robert Hughes concluded after encountering Vincent Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* at an exhibition in New York in 1984, 'that no matter how many times it has been cloned, reproduced and postcarded, it can restore itself as an immediate utterance with the force of strangeness when seen in the original.' But what exactly accounts for this 'force of strangeness' that never weakens, however many times it is confronted? Can such power be isolated or quantified; tracked down to a single detail, quality or feature – a shadow, a shimmer, a flick of the wrist?

Van Gogh himself believed it could be. The year before he painted *The Starry Night*, 'with its oceanic rush of whorling energy through the dark sky', as Hughes described it, the artist pinpointed precisely what it is about the Romantic artist Eugène Delacroix's soulfully somnambulant painting *Christ*

Asleep During the Tempest (1853) that nudges it into a work of the very highest order. 'Delacroix paints a Christ,' Van Gogh observed of the turbulent seascape in a letter to fellow Post-Impressionist Emile Bernard in July 1888, 'using an unexpected light lemon note, this colourful and luminous note in the painting being what the ineffable strangeness and charm of a star is in a corner of the firmament.' The 'light lemon note' to which Van Gogh refers invigorates the slender serrated halo that cradles Christ's sleeping head. Remove the slight citrine halo that coronates Christ – however relatively minor that ethereal detail might measurably seem in the work – and suddenly the light, the magic, goes out of Delacroix's painting.

Bereft of this modest element, Delacroix's canvas would be aesthetically marooned – moored along that infinite berth of commendable, but not outstanding, visual statements. Stripped of its halo, the painting would lose that levitating dimension that enables a work to float forever on the surface of cultural consciousness, and keeps it from acclimatizing or sinking into familiarity. Key to that buoyancy, in both Van Gogh's and Hughes's estimation, is the ineffable force



Vincent Van Gogh,
The Starry Night, 1889,
oil on canvas,
73.7 x 92.1 cm (29 x 36 ¼ in.)

Eugène Delacroix,
Christ Asleep During the Tempest,
 1853, oil on canvas,
 50.8 x 61 cm (20 x 24 in.)



of 'strangeness'. Van Gogh's insight into Delacroix's painting is pithy, penetrating and unforgettable. Once identified, the singular aspect of that 'luminous note' becomes the 'unexpected' detail around which the entire painting scrambles to organize itself. Suddenly, the 'ineffable strangeness' of Delacroix's work, detected by Van Gogh, which vibrates like 'a star ... in the corner of the firmament', anticipates the 'force of strangeness', detected by Hughes, that will echo forever from Van Gogh's own subsequent achievement of *The Starry Night*, created in June of the following year.

Strangeness invisibly binds Delacroix's and Van Gogh's works, and strangeness pulsates forwards and backwards in time to establish a glittering genealogy of greatness in art history. 'Beauty,' Charles Baudelaire wrote in 1859, a generation before Van Gogh painted his swirling work, 'always contains a touch of strangeness, of simple, unpremeditated and unconscious strangeness.' 'It is this touch of strangeness,' the French poet goes on to explain, 'that gives it its peculiar quality of beauty.' 'This dash of strangeness,' Baudelaire insists, 'constitutes and defines individuality (without which there

can be no beauty).'
 Observation by observation, a consensus of sentiment begins to ricochet across centuries: greatness is strangeness.

Every great work invariably possesses an element, detail or quality to which its inexhaustible strangeness can be traced and without which it would cease to reverberate, age after age in perpetuity. A relatively recent archaeological discovery has proved that such a propensity is fundamental to the very urge to create art, and is evident from the earliest examples of image-making. In September 2008, the history of art was turned on its head. Or, to put it more accurately, the head was lopped off entirely. A team of scientists from the University of Tübingen brought to light six fragments of whittled tusk from 2.75 metres (9 ft) below the floor of a cave in southwestern Germany's Swabian forest. Puzzled together, the timeworn chunks of jagged ivory comprise not merely a headless statuette of a voluptuous woman, but the oldest example of figurative sculpture ever discovered.

Fashioned 35–40,000 years ago from a woolly mammoth tusk, the 6 cm tall (2 ½ in.) carving caricatures the female form

into a tight clump of bulging breasts, buttocks and inflamed genitalia. That the sculpture's physical exaggerations, which anticipate subsequent depictions of women 10,000 years later in France, were intended to constitute a totem of fertility and abundance is the leading supposition of anthropologists who have studied the object. Given the primitivity of the stone tools likely available to the artist who created the statuette, it has been estimated that hundreds of hours may have been spent scraping the dense dentine into shape.

However long one spends contemplating the curious grooves that run rib-like across the figurine's abdomen, or ponders the truncated Tyrannosaurus-like arms that enfeeble the imagined reach of the depicted woman, or marvels at the gravity-defying buoyancy of the overinflated breasts, what ultimately exercises the imagination most is the utter strangeness of the piece, epitomized in what is not there: the head. The prehistoric craftsman responsible for this little sculpture has nothing to learn from the ensuing millennia of artists who will seize on the presence of absence as the centre of interest in their works. By inserting an eye-hook where the subject's neck and face and cranium should be (thereby allowing the statuette to be worn as a pendant around the neck), the artist has suggestively ground the strange lens through which every subsequent work of art must be assessed.

If we accept the implication of the statuette's strange and estranging eye-hook, the artwork is only conceptually

completed when the object is worn, when the head of the amulet's wearer is positioned above it: when art and life merge. The figurine's eye-hook is what bridges the divide between the aesthetic and the real. The presence of the eye-hook makes clear that this, the earliest known example of figurative art, was not merely a bauble to behold but a talisman to become. It is the eye-hook that invests an artwork with palpable strangeness, elevating its value beyond the visual to the vital. Only through the narrow aperture of an artwork's eye-hook can we perceive its truest meanings.

This book offers a new genealogy of art history and introduces an innovative way of perceiving artistic greatness. By locating an 'eye-hook' within each of the definitive masterpieces featured here, the book endeavours to demonstrate the abiding strangeness of those aesthetic objects that have managed to propel themselves beyond the historical moment of their creation. These eye-hooks are what enable viewers to connect with a work – to bring it into their lives. They also serve as crucial keys to understanding how the power of great works is handed down, undiminished, from age to age. Spanning nearly 50,000 years of artistic imagination, the works collected here have been chosen for their ability to demonstrate the evolution of the eye-hook as a tool that sculpts our seeing and shapes our understanding of who we are and what it means to be alive in the world.

Venus of Hohle Fels,
 38,000–33,000 BC,
 mammoth tusk ivory,
 height 6 cm (2 ½ in.)



57

Works

Described by Pliny as
‘a work to be preferred to all others’,
this ancient sculpture implicates
our gaze in the torture it portrays.

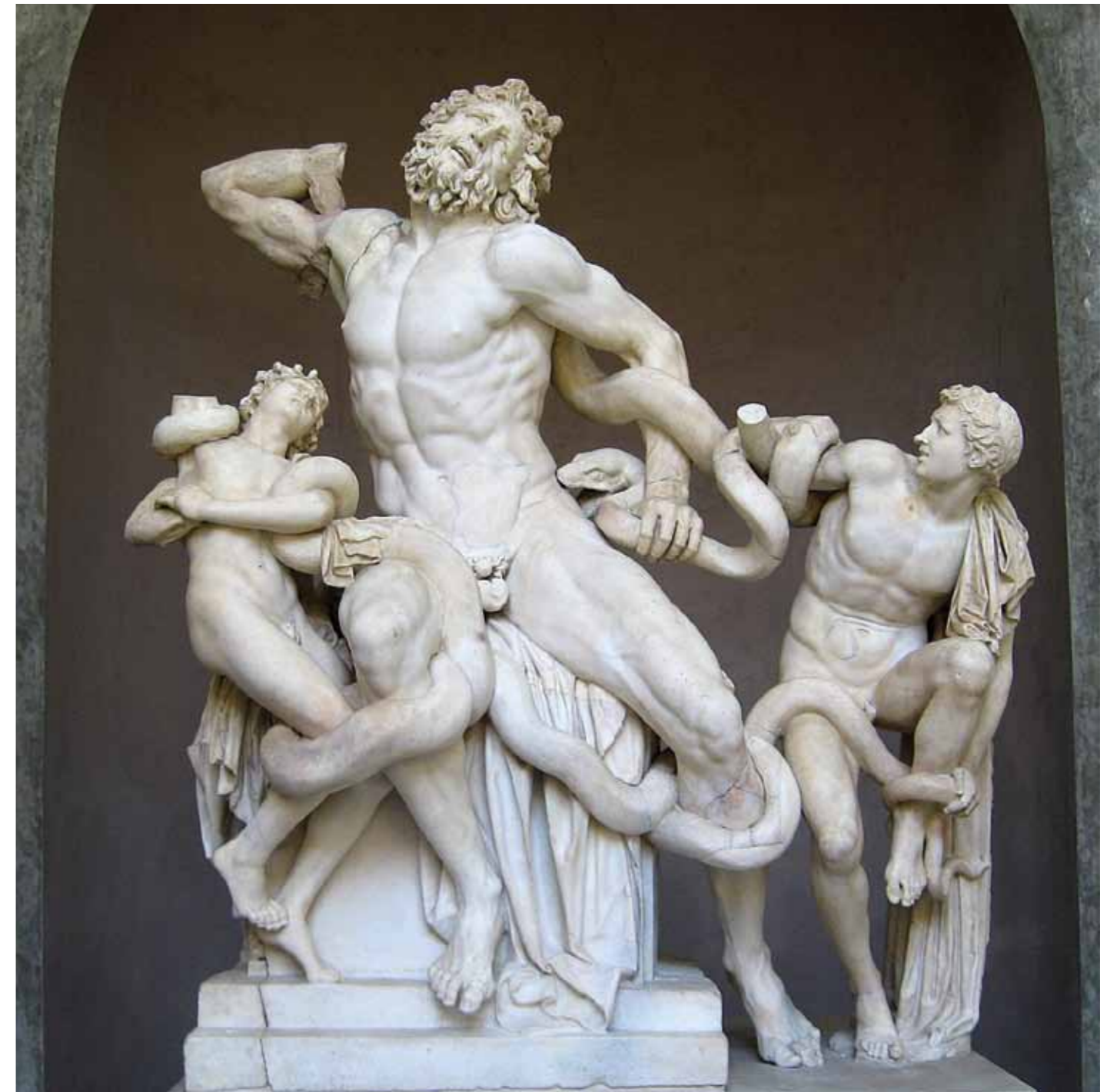
What grabs the eye is what crushes the subject: the serpents wrapping their lethal scales around *Laocoön and his Sons*. The ancient sculpture was unearthed in Rome in the spring of 1506. Michelangelo, who had just arrived in the city to begin work on Pope Julius II’s tomb, was suddenly summoned to a hole in the ground near the Colosseum, where a twisting slither of marble had been discovered. Helping oversee the excavation, Michelangelo quickly realized what was slowly writhing from the earth: the single most legendary artwork of all antiquity, praised by the 1st-century Roman writer Pliny the Elder as ‘a work to be preferred to all others, either in painting or sculpture’.

Though the precise date of the creation of *Laocoön and his Sons* has been debated since Michelangelo supervised its excavation (the Romantic poet William Blake insisted it was a crude forgery of a lost Hebraic work representing Jehovah and his sons), historians now believe the sculpture was likely made during Pliny’s lifetime, in the century that spans 30 BC to AD 70, and displayed in the palace of the Roman emperor Titus. The statue, which Pliny says was the collaborative work of ‘three most eminent artists, Agesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus’, depicts the intense physical suffering

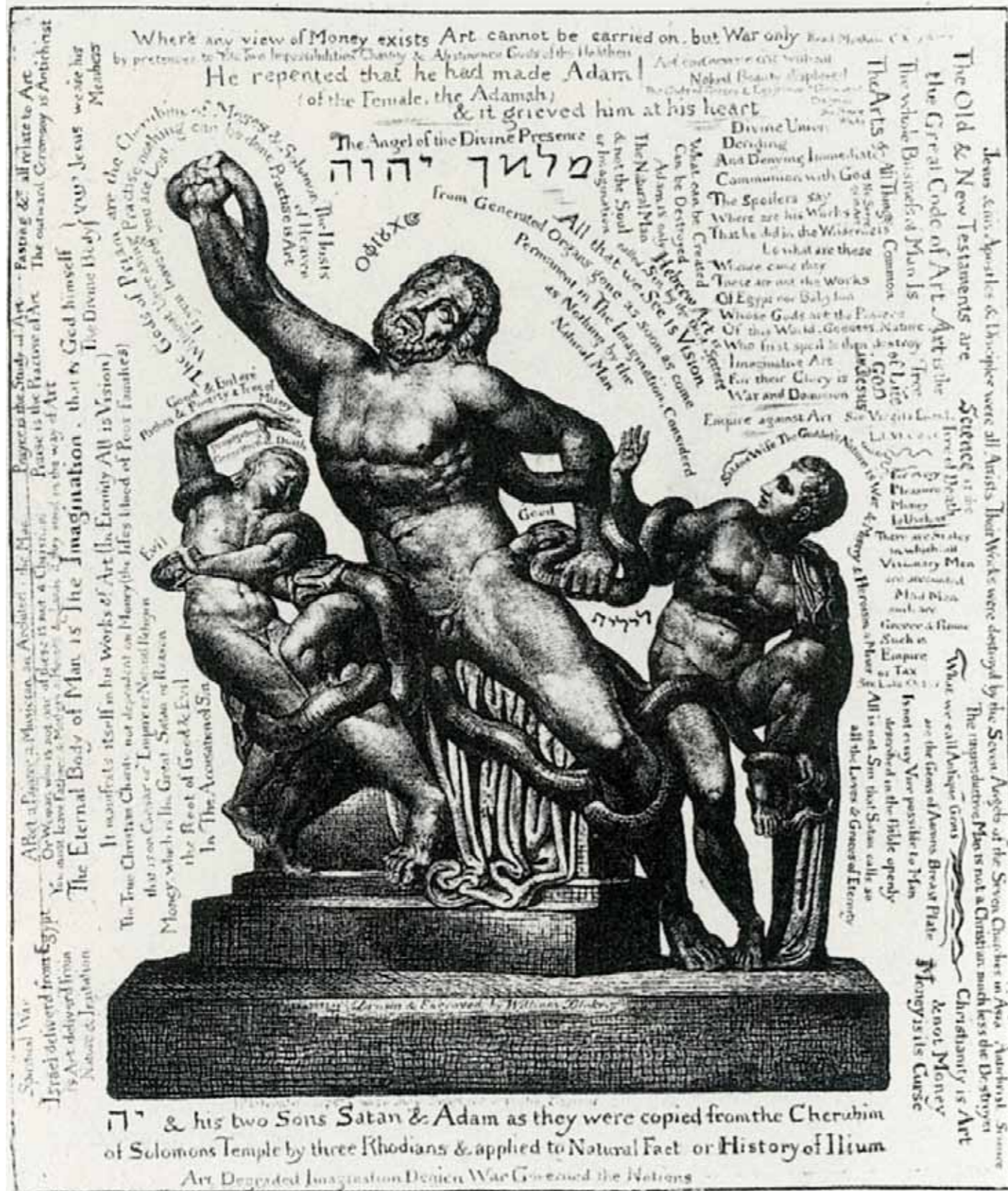
of a tormented trio from Greek mythology – the Trojan seer, Laocoön, and his two sons – who struggle to free themselves from the lethal squeeze of muscular sea serpents.

According to Virgil, Laocoön became suspicious that a gift of an enormous wooden horse offered by Ulysses might stealthily be inhabited by Greek soldiers in a ruse to infiltrate Troy. To punish Laocoön for his ingratitude (on its surface, the Trojan Horse was an offering to the goddess Athena), Poseidon and Athena coax a pair of vicious sea monsters to torture and kill the priest and his sons. The ancient sculpture captures the slithery assault in mid-clench, suspending the triple execution at the moment when one of the venomous serpents is about to tighten its fangs on Laocoön’s side.

Few sculptures have agitated the imaginations of cultural critics more than *Laocoön and his Sons*. Crucial to the work’s perpetual fascination has been the conundrum it presents to writers desperate to distill from its static pulse of stone a single abiding emotion. For some, such as the 18th-century archaeologist and historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the sculpture is an emblem of stoic heroism, as Laocoön, in Winckelmann’s view, philosophically endures the serpents’



Laocoön and his Sons,
c. 27 BC–AD 68,
marble,
208 × 163 × 112 cm
(6 ft 10 in. × 5 ft 4 in. × 3 ft 8 in.)



OPPOSITE
 William Blake, *Laocoön*, c. 1815,
 intaglio etching/engraving with hand colouring,
 26.6 × 21.6 cm (10 ½ × 8 ½ in.).

This eccentrically annotated print of the sculpture by the Romantic artist and poet William Blake, which he scrawled across in many languages, illustrates how Laocoön's right arm was long thought to have stretched outwards before the discovery in 1906 of a missing bent-arm fragment, restored to the work in 1957.

RIGHT
 Detail of the head of Laocoön,
Laocoön and his Sons,
 c. 27 BC-AD 68

assault without a whimper. For others, such as the 18th-century polymath Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the work embodies instead a latent rage building silently between the clenched teeth of its tortured subject. The discrepancy in response, even among learned contemporaries such as Winckelmann and Lessing, is evidence of an abiding ambiguity in the work's portrayal.

Key to the work's enduring indeterminacy of emotion is the rendering of the lines that furrow Laocoön's brow. In 1862, the French scientist Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne published an influential treatise, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, that took issue with the neurological verisimilitude of Laocoön's portrayal, noting, in particular, a confusion between the handling of the Trojan's eyebrows and that of the muscles above them, which rumple the forehead. Rather than constituting a defect, however, as Duchenne regarded the inconsistency of emotion (as did Charles Darwin after him), the clash of emotion between agony and endurance twitching between the tilt of Laocoön's eyebrows and the furrows of his forehead may be precisely that to which millennia of observers have subliminally

responded. The impossible simultaneity of muscular flex captured by the sculpture creates a ceaseless tension in the stony work that troubles our attention, rendering the work as animate and inscrutable as ourselves.

In my own mind, the unpredictable writhe and snap of the snakes and the indeterminate rumple of Laocoön's brow mirror one another's movements like parallel undulations of inner and outer torment. It is impossible to disentangle our fascination with the emotional tensions experienced by Laocoön's psyche from our fixation on the physical distress suffered by his body. The work's inexhaustible intensity relies no less on the ceaseless slip-and-slide of the viewer's eye along the swirling length of serpentine body than on the horrified flex of the Trojan's muscles. Ineluctably, our gaze swivels between his afflicted countenance and the determination of the serpent swerving insidiously between the victims' legs, around their powerless biceps, until it reaches Laocoön's effete fingers, inches from the reptile's still unsnapped jaw. The sinuous movement of our eyes, which further ensnares the imperilled forms, makes us complicit in the eternal torture we're witnessing.

(c. 1077 or after)

Chronicling the Anglo-Saxon world in rich and compelling detail, this enchanting tapestry, woven by forgotten female hands, shows how the needle is mightier than the sword.

Just as every needle has an eye, so too does every great work of art. The eye is what pulls the thread forward towards meaning. Without the eye, the exercise of creation would be a pointless drag, knitting nothing. Occasionally, the eyes of the seamstress and those of a great artist merge into a single stupefying weave. Such is the case of our next work: the enchanting medieval textile known as the Bayeux Tapestry.

Likely created in the decade following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, in which Duke William II of Normandy defeated the forces of the Anglo-Saxon King Harold Godwinson, the 70-metre-long (300 ft) embroidered cloth unfolds in dizzying detail the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England. Fashioned from woollen yarn (or 'crewel') on tabby-woven linen, the work features over thirty scenes with Latin labels (or *tituli*) and takes observers on a journey from the royal palace of Westminster in 1064, when Harold is dispatched to Normandy by Edward the Confessor, to the retreat of Harold's forces from the battlefield following his death. It is assumed that a now-missing final scene

originally concluded the work's visual narrative, and that the last words that now appear on the embroidery '*Et fuga verterunt Angli*' ('And the English left fleeing') are an early 19th-century intervention in the work.

More than merely an animated military chronicle, the three parallel furrows ploughed horizontally by the tapestry (the main central avenue of narrative is flanked, above and below, by narrower margins of imagery and comment) teem with vibrant snapshots of the Anglo-Saxon world. Stitched vividly into the fabric are glimpses of contemporary weaponry (swords, spears, bows and axes) as well as a suspended catwalk of battle-garb such as the leather kirtle known as a hauberk - a protective full-body tunic comprised of metal plates riveted together like oversized fish scales. Also on parade is a frozen flotilla of ancient ships that has proved indispensable to historians eager to distinguish their *drekar*s from their *langskips* (their 'dragons' from their 'longships'). Amid the knotted flow of soldiery is woven, too, chiefly in the bordering friezes, a mingled menagerie of real and mythical



beasts – camels and centaurs, deer and dragons, birds and griffins – integrated fantastically into a composite vision of perceived and imaginary existence.

The tapestry's digressive narrative, where a central story is braided with iconography cluttering contemporary consciousness, would prove extraordinarily influential to the imaginations of artists in the ensuing millennium. In 2009, the British ceramicist and textile designer Grayson Perry created an ambitious work that arguably updates the 11th-century masterpiece. Perry's *Walthamstow Tapestry* (named after a northeastern borough of London) reinvents the clamour of signs on the contemporary psyche. In Perry's vision, however, the allure of fables (allusions to Aesop and the Roman poet Phaedrus have been located in the Bayeux Tapestry) is updated to an obsession with consumerism and retail brands. Gone is the legendary tale of conquest, replaced by a squandering of life spent in retail pursuits, while the lyrical imagery of mythical creatures has been supplanted by a crass cacophony of local and multinational logos, from IKEA to Louis Vuitton.

Since the rediscovery in 1729 of the Bayeux Tapestry, hanging in the Norman-Romanesque cathedral in Bayeux, northwestern France, the precise circumstances surrounding

its creation have been the source of much debate. At present, academic consensus favours the belief that the work was commissioned by William's half-brother, Bishop Odo (who built the Bayeux cathedral where it was discovered) and that the arduous needlework itself was likely carried out by female artisans. The identity of the work's designer or designers remains a mystery.

What is clear, however, is the aim of the artist's eye, which pulls ours across the fabric of time. Caught in the artist's weave, we're drawn into her battle. If there were any doubt that the seamstresses responsible for creating this extraordinary history sought to stitch themselves and those they've seduced by their mastery into the fold of their creation, one needs merely follow the bias of their weave to its crewel end: the eye of King Harold, pierced by an arrow in the penultimate scene of this remarkable narrative. Here, the artist's needle becomes, imaginatively, the very weapon that kills the English king and draws the story to its lethal conclusion. By clutching the arrow that pierces his eye, Harold merges at once into the figure of the artist, holding the needle, as well as the observer, whose eye too has been pulled forward by the slowly unfurling vision. With the tug of a single stitch, the eyes of the see-er, the seeing, and the seen are hooked.



PREVIOUS PAGES
Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry,
c. 1077 or after,
crewel embroidery on linen,
total 50 cm × 70 m
(19 5/8 in. × 229 ft 6 in.)

LEFT
Detail of King Harold
clutching the arrow in his eye,
Bayeux Tapestry,
c. 1077 or after

BELOW
Grayson Perry,
The Walthamstow Tapestry, 2009,
jacquard tapestry,
3 × 15 m
(9 ft 8 in. × 49 ft 2 in.)





Anticipating one of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous drawings by several centuries, this mesmerizing vision of cosmological harmony and wholeness is music for the eyes.

Eye is in the art of the beholder. If that sentence seems a little inside-out, so too are the inverted optics of our next work: a hypnotizing manuscript illumination by the 12th-century German mystic and polymath Hildegard of Bingen. To lean in close and scrutinize the work – to look for an ‘eye-hook’ within the rippling concentricity of her illustration *The Universal Man* (sometimes referred to as ‘Man as Microcosm’) – is to lose sight of the work’s all-enveloping vision of cosmological wholeness. It is only when we zoom out from the image that we realize it is, itself, a large, stylized eye symbolizing the profound penetrations of mystical sight: a spiritual lens that simultaneously brings into focus the inner and outer universes of our being.

The illumination belongs to a series of ten intense visions that Hildegard experienced and subsequently illustrated for her third volume of theological writings, *Liber divinorum operum* (or ‘Book of Divine Works’) (c. 1165), to which she devoted a decade of her life. In the corner of each image (here, in the lower left), the Benedictine abbess installed a self-portrait depicting the instant when the divine vision occurred. A gifted dramatist (author of the earliest known morality play) and innovative linguist (creator of the first independently invented

language), Hildegard was also blessed with a mathematician’s eye and a composer’s ear for symmetry and proportion. Those intuitions blend symphonically in the eye-music of Hildegard’s *Universal Man*.

The image represents, on one level, the mystic’s conviction in the harmonic structure of the Trinity: ‘the bearded Creator emerges’, according to one scholar’s interpretation of the work, ‘from the head of the fiery Holy Spirit who embraces, in turn, the circular firmament surrounding the world’. On another level, the image demonstrates the melodic proportions of the human body in relation to those of the universe that surrounds it, cosmologically, and the material that comprises it, microscopically. Millennia before modern-day nuclear physicists would successfully model the orbit of subatomic particles, Hildegard traces a dizzying ricochet of mystical energy trapped within her dimension-defying orb. Amplifying the sense of competing rotations, or spins-within-spins, that invigorate the work is the rivalrous movement of coaxial bands of different elements.

Moving inward from its outermost crust, the work appears to be comprised of distinct layers held in mysterious equilibrium, as an exterior skin of fire envelopes a galactic

PAGE 56
Hildegard of Bingen,
The Universal Man, c. 1165,
illumination from
Liber divinorum operum

RIGHT
Detail of an illumination from
Liber divinorum operum, c. 1165

OPPOSITE
Leonardo da Vinci,
The Vitruvian Man, 1490,
pen and ink with wash over
metalpoint on paper,
34.6 × 25.5 cm
(13⁵/₈ × 10 in.)

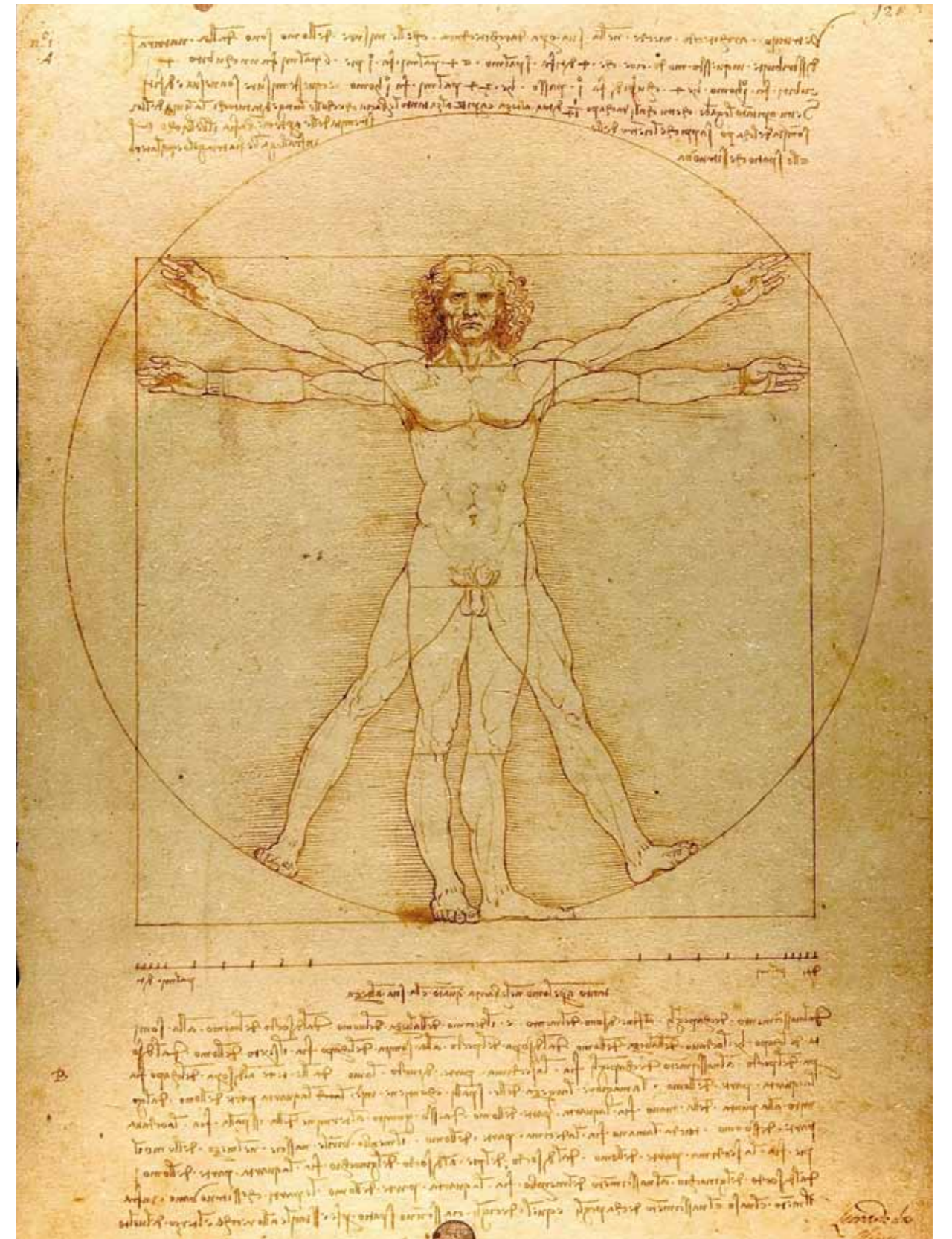


stratum of stars just beneath it, which in turn enshrouds a band of flowing water, followed by an atmosphere of implosive winds, and finally a clay-like crux at the very core. Further complicating the orb's inimitable anatomy is a mesh of light that webs its surface like blood vessels pulsing in the white sclera of an eye, thereby turning the image's unflinching stare back at the observer into something vital and urgent. The result is an image that doesn't merely mirror the cosmic structure of the universe it beholds but is itself a mystical merging of the seeing and the seen, the beholder and the beheld. In the spiritual language of Hildegard's vision, being and seeing – the macro- and microscopic designs of the universe and the design of the eye – are one and the same.

Three centuries before Leonardo da Vinci would square the circle of his awe at the body's geometry in his pen-and-ink drawing from 1490, *The Vitruvian Man*, Hildegard plucked from the mute chords of the universe a symbol of the inward and outward perfection of the human physique. Da Vinci's

later work, which corresponds to ideas propounded by the Roman architect Vitruvius in his 1st-century BC treatise *De architectura*, illustrates the classical notion that the human form establishes the ideal proportions for all man-made structures. But Hildegard's earlier vision hypothesizes something galactically grander: the human body is the indispensable unit against which, and through which, all of creation must be measured. Whether one's scrutiny of her illumination moves from the margins to the core or vice versa, a concentricity of consciousness – from human perception at the work's centre to divine omniscience overseeing all from the outermost edge – dominates the image.

The centripetal force of Hildegard's illustration generates a diffusive glare from the central human frame, as if the combined mechanism of body and soul were that of a vibrating lute orchestrating into existence the unheard music of the spheres that harmonizes all around it. What ultimately stares back at us is an all-perceiving work of inward and outward depth that, by seeing, helps us see.



Though Bosch's iconic vision of heaven, hell and everything in between is best known for its rampant grotesqueries, the medieval triptych's meaning hinges on the most commonplace of objects placed boldly at its very centre.

If trying to crack the code of a great work of art has left you scrambling, look for the egg. No painting in the history of art is more teasing or offers a more rewarding landscape for embarking on an egg hunt than Hieronymus Bosch's complex triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Hinged like a window fitted with shutters, the wood-panelled work, when open, is comprised of three spectacles, representing, in turn, the blisses of Eden (left), a realm of fleshly temptation (centre) and the torments of Hell (right).

When closed, the left and right panels creak into the centre of the triptych to reveal, painted in shades of grey (or 'grisaille') on the back, an image of the universe suspended in the process of creation. The result is a restlessly kinetic work – forever hatching and unhatching itself – implying the endless birth and rebirth of being. The nascent world portrayed when the triptych is shut is ghostly in its monochromatic rendering, like an ultrasound of a cosmic womb. The planetary orb it imagines is that of a translucent ovum whose inner life is still taking shape. To unlatch the triptych's wings and swing them against their hinges is to crack the work and the world wide open.

Once unfastened, the triptych reveals to us the physical and spiritual trajectories of untempered decadence, as observers are left to meander from the innocence of paradise, through a dimension of carnal diversions, to a plane of eternal comeuppance. With so much dizzying detail to range over – from mythic flora and fauna to grotesque gymnastics – the eye struggles to gain narrative traction. Sensing that our gaze needs a way into (and out of) the intensity of his all-enveloping vision, Bosch has secreted an 'eye-hook' amid the relentless romp of fleshly shenanigans.

To find the secret cipher, one needs merely draw an imaginary cross from the four corners of the triptych (or even from just those of the central panel itself). Voilà: 'egg' marks the spot, in the dead centre of Bosch's work, providing a focal point of unsullied purity at the triptych's core. A safe haven into which our eyes can quickly retreat, the unhatched egg offers the continual promise of redemption – as if the carnal chaos that whirls centripetally all around it, at any instant, might implode back into the sinlessness of pre-existence: the soul before sin. Almost eye-shaped, the egg is a wink in our direction that hooks us with its pupil-less stare.



Hieronymus Bosch,
The Garden of Earthly Delights,
c. 1505–10,
oil on panel, 220 × 390 cm
(86 ½ × 153 ½ in.)



Once spotted, the pivot-point of the egg in Bosch's garden becomes the epicentre around which his entire vision spins, flinging us on a hunt for the many cracked shells that litter the landscape and from which much monstrosity has crawled.

If there is any doubting how crucially the egg figured in Bosch's imagination when formulating the design of his enthralling universe, consider the strange shape crouched awkwardly in the middle of the Hell panel, to the right. Christened the 'Tree Man' by art historians, the figure is widely considered a gnarled composite of the Tree of Life (from the paradise panel) and a self-portrait of the artist, looking back at us over his shoulder. Bizarrely, Bosch's body in this surreal depiction is neither born nor unborn, but constructed instead out of a discarded egg shell - that fragile membrane that separates becoming from being - suggesting that, even in the oblivion of damnation, we carry with us the very vehicle of redemption.

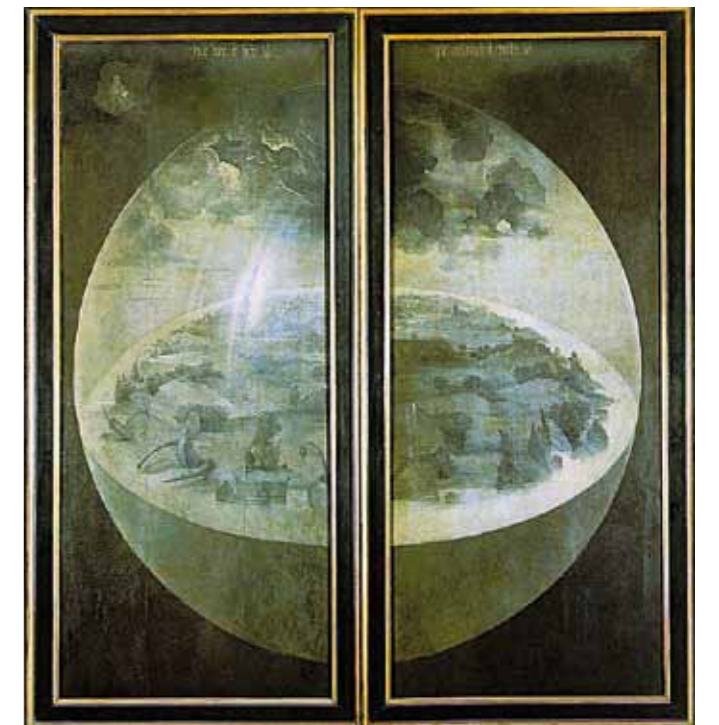
The aesthetic rewards awaiting artists capable of spotting Bosch's egg and cracking its symbolic code were recognized by many subsequent painters who proceeded to tuck into their works hidden allusions to the fragile cipher. Half a century after *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was completed, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's depiction of Mad Meg (a peasant woman

from Flemish folklore who commanded a mob of female marauders through Hell) owes much to the outlandishness of Bosch's vision, and in particular to the strange scattering of egg-like capsules across its turbid surface. Yolking itself visually to the right-most panel of Bosch's triptych, Bruegel's *Dull Gret* (c. 1562) foregoes any hint of salvation offered by Bosch by providing instead only the damaged goods of broken shells out of which fresh grotesqueries endlessly spawn.

Passed down from one generation to the next, Bosch's enigmatic egg would eventually find itself incubating in the mischievous palm of the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí, who magnified its inscrutable significance in his 1937 painting, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. Admired by Surrealists such as André Breton, Joan Miró and Max Ernst for its anxious penetration of the subconscious mind, Bosch's *Garden* proved fertile ground for the imaginations of artists seeking to prune the hedge that separated the realms of reality from myth, allegory from dream. In Dalí's strange, moustache-twiddling hands, the egg at the centre of his painting (which mirrors the downcast head of the Greek youth who perished admiring his own reflection in a pool) appears to crack the mysterious barrier between conscious awareness of who we are and a deeper knowledge that wriggles just beneath the surface.

OPPOSITE
Detail of the central unhatched egg in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1505-10

RIGHT
Closed grisaille panels revealing the universe suspended in the process of creation, c. 1505-10





In this, one of the greatest self-portraits ever made, an artist with nothing left to prove calibrates the diminishing angles of time.

The miracle of a successful self-portrait, let alone a masterpiece of the genre, lies in its ability to ensnare in its closed circuitry of staring, observers who should, by all logic, find little with which they can personally relate in the endless ricochet of the artist gazing at the artist gazing. Yet the Dutch master Rembrandt Van Rijn's late *Self-Portrait with Two Circles*, created sometime within the last few years of the artist's life, does precisely that – magnetically drawing the viewer into its hypnotizing orbit. Among some eighty self-likenesses that Rembrandt made over the course of his career (more than any other artist before him, and most artists since), this particular portrait possesses an elusive allure that historians struggle adequately to quantify.

The canvas belongs to a final phase of some dozen portraits that Rembrandt made in maturity – a chapter of late creative candour and freer gestures that followed formative stages of aesthetic development in which the artist gradually honed his skills. Though self-portraiture fascinated Rembrandt from the very outset of his career, initial experiments with the form show the artist using his own countenance not as a standalone statement but as a means to an end – a kind of prop with which he could demonstrate his precocious

skills. These early efforts were followed by a period of self-assuredness in which the esteemed artist treated his likeness as a kind of shop-window mannequin on which he could drape the outward trappings of professional regard.

Considered by many critics and observers to comprise the most moving chapter in Rembrandt's self-portraiture, those dozen created in the artist's last years portray a figure whose concerns have transcended the fleetingness of reputation. His spirit gradually ground down by the relentlessness of life's setbacks – the loss of his wife and three of their children in the 1640s, brushes with bankruptcies in the 1650s, and the deaths of his lover and of his only surviving son in the 1660s – these works stare out from the murkiness of a soul's solitude with an air of nothing-to-prove defiance. Slowly whittled away is any trace of the artist's former compulsion to ingratiate himself into the patronage of those who could promote him financially or reputationally, as exemplified by the flattering portrayal of a company of civic guardsmen in his painting *The Night Watch* (1642), among Rembrandt's most famous works.

But what distinguishes *Self-Portrait with Two Circles* within this superlative group – what element in it hooks the



PAGE 132
Rembrandt Van Rijn,
Self-Portrait with Two Circles,
c. 1665-69,
oil on canvas,
114.3 x 94 cm (45 x 37 in.)

LEFT
Rembrandt Van Rijn,
*Self-Portrait with
Dishevelled Hair*, c. 1628,
oil on canvas,
127 x 94 cm (50 x 37 in.)

BELOW
Rembrandt Van Rijn,
The Night Watch, 1642,
oil on canvas, 363 x 437 cm
(143 x 172 in.)



RIGHT
Detail of the leather-
tipped maulstick in
Self-Portrait with Two Circles,
c. 1665-69



eye and keeps the mind spinning in its irresistible orbit? Critics scrutinizing the canvas have tended to focus on the juxtaposition of the emotive complexity of the artist's face with the spare geometry of the two circles on the pale wall behind him. Some historians have speculated that the shapes are an allusion to the maps and hemispheres visible behind figures in paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt's illustrious Dutch forebear, thereby inviting comparisons between the two artists' achievements. Others have proposed that the fragmentary arcs are an echo of a legend involving the Italian master Giotto that the Renaissance historian Vasari tells. According to Vasari, Giotto impressed the Pope by being able to draw, freehand and without the aid of any instrument, a perfect circle - a feat thought to be impossible. By placing himself outside their gravitational pull, Rembrandt - such a hypothesis implies - is the calibrator of even greater marvels.

Though intriguing, the partial circles are not, to my eye, the element that elevates the painting from marvellous to masterful. Far more compelling is a related, if neglected, detail that the artist keeps closer to his chest: the leather-tipped maulstick that he clutches in his hand along with a quiver-full of brushes. Used by artists since the Middle Ages as a stabilizing crutch on which the painter's brush-gripped fist

can rest while painting, the maulstick is part of the invisible scaffolding on which the finished look of a painting depends, but which disappears from view entirely when the painting is displayed. The maulstick is responsible for maintaining an artist's balance and as such is an extension of the physical laws of equilibrium to which the painter, however skilled, is bound. Like a conduit between two realms, the maulstick is the imagined tightrope that connects the will of the artist to the final accomplishment of his or her work.

In Rembrandt's painting, the maulstick can be seen establishing the trajectory of a tangent that, if followed, would barely intersect the large circle behind the artist. By shaving off only a slender piece of the larger circle, the tangent posited by Rembrandt's maulstick suggests that, of the totality of life, only a slender sliver remains. The position in which the instrument is held by Rembrandt creates, moreover, an acute angle with the brushes he is also holding. The shape created by the angle of the maulstick and brushes is that of a draughtsman's compass - the very device necessary for drawing the circles that whirl behind the artist. But in Rembrandt's hands, the angle at which the imagined compass is set appears to be gradually decreasing, one brush at a time - as the hands of life's invisible clock slowly pinch him in.

A brutal puzzle of intimate and enigmatic symbols, Picasso's immortal apotheosis of war altered forever how violence is chronicled by art.

Living in Paris during the Second World War, Pablo Picasso was frequently the target of harassment by Nazi soldiers, who occupied the French capital at the time. During one of the many inspections of the artist's studio, a Gestapo agent discovered a postcard reproduction of the painting *Guernica*, which Picasso had created for the Spanish Pavilion of the 1937 Paris International Exposition. Though only a few years old, the mural-size painting was already famous the world over as a symbol of protest against Nazism, and in particular Hitler's bombardment of a civilian Basque village which had killed over 1,600 people, injured thousands, and destroyed over seventy percent of the homes and buildings. The officer waved the image in the painter's face and demanded of him: 'Did you do this?' 'No,' Picasso is said to have replied. 'You did.'

By turning the tables on his interrogator, Picasso left us with more than a defiant rejoinder. He offered a clue to understanding how to read his complicated work - how, in particular, the act of seeing operates in his enigmatic masterpiece. In Picasso's mind, perception of the painting and perception of the horror it evokes are inseparable. Looking, in other words, is not a one-way activity when it

comes to *Guernica*. The painting stares back. However intently we may scrutinize its surface in an effort to decode its complex symbols, the work returns our gaze with a penetrating power all its own.

The literal locus of this incessant staring is the large unblinking eye at the top of the work, just left of the canvas's centre. In the middle of the oversized eye, occupying the place of the pupil, is the only sign of technology in the work: a bare light bulb. The fact that the Spanish word for light bulb, *bombilla*, resembles *bomba* (the word for bomb) introduces the notion that the very act of looking unavoidably involves a level of violence. It is as though every time we engage with the canvas we unwittingly re-ignite its horrors by triggering, all over again, the violence visited on Guernica when the bombs fell from Nazi planes in April 1937. Simply by looking at the work, we're implicated in the devastation it depicts.

Radiating out from the eye-bomb, like vectors of exploding shrapnel, are a set of jagged lashes ('lash' in Spanish is *latigazo*) - another cleverly chosen visual pun that carries with it meanings of 'shock' and 'whipping'. Comprised of a jumble of small triangles, these angular lashes flare out from the exploding eye and point our attention to the insistence of that

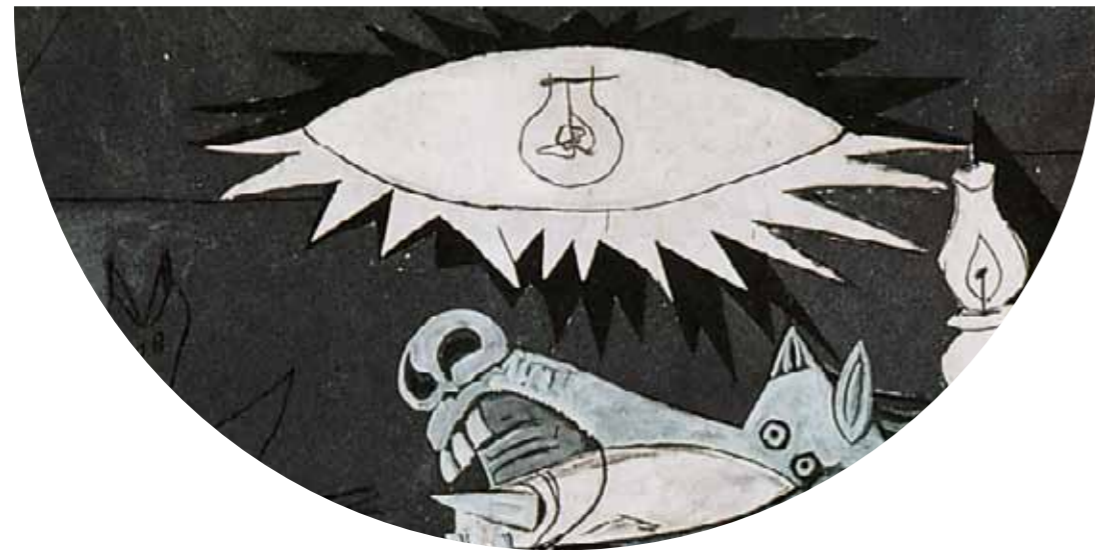


Pablo Picasso,
Guernica, 1937,
oil on canvas, 349 × 776 cm
(137³/₈ × 305¹/₂ in.)

geometric shape in the work – a shape that at once holds the work together and blows it apart.

Hooked by the work's electric stare and the strobing shocks of its reverberating lashes, our eyes are hurled in a scatter of directions across the painting's surface. Not only are the eye's lashes echoed in the painting's shattered tongues and ears; their triangularity is also amplified in the three pyramidal groupings that dominate the work's structure. On the left, there's the pyramid comprised of the bull at the top, the wailing mother and lifeless child in the middle, and the dismembered soldier at the base. From there our eyes trace, in the centre of the painting, the tortured triangle that consists of the horse's wrenched body and the excruciating physique of the distended woman who strains towards the animal, dragging her crippled leg from the bottom right corner of the canvas. Lastly, our eyes follow the intersecting sides of an upside-down triangle on the right of the canvas, as they slip down the uplifted arms of a woman screaming beneath the flames of a burning house.

Though historians have busied themselves attempting to attach fixed meanings to the individual figures in the work, the painting has resisted decisive decoding. Whether, as some contend, the bull is intended as a stand-in for Picasso himself (he occasionally experimented with the mythological image of the half-man/half-bull Minotaur as a self-portrait), or whether it is intended to symbolize Spain – stoic in the face of fascist destruction – is a mystery unlikely ever to be solved. Likewise, to what extent the turmoil experienced by Picasso in his personal life during the period in which he created the picture (he was juggling three lovers at the time) invests the canvas with intimate agitations is impossible to measure. What is clear is that, as an anti-war icon, no picture in the history of art has ever waved itself more defiantly in the public's face and demanded from everyone who has ever stared into its anguished shatter of triangles and tear-shaped eyes: 'did you do this?'



OPPOSITE
Detail of the eye with
light bulb in *Guernica*, 1937

ABOVE
Pablo Picasso wearing
a minotaur mask on the beach
at Golfe Juan, near Vallauris,
France, 1949. Photo Gjon Mili.

RIGHT
Pablo Picasso,
Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R.),
1907, oil on canvas,
243.9 × 233.7 cm (96 × 92 in.)



At once terrifying and intimate, Louise Bourgeois's towering tribute to her dead mother relies for its power on the artist's willingness to risk self-annihilation.

A great work of art draws us, as if by invisible filaments, into its web of meaning. As a metaphor for the maker, the making and the made, the spider is as rich and resplendent as the silken weave it spins. Seized upon by artists and writers since ancient times as an irresistible symbol of frightful beauty, the arachnid was blown out of all proportion in 1999 by the French artist Louise Bourgeois in a monumental steel and marble work titled *Maman* (or 'Mummy'). Mincing gingerly as if on tip-toes, the giant spindly legs of Bourgeois's enormous spider sculpture, which towers 9 metres (30 ft) in the air, throws into dizzying disarray an observer's sense of scale. Installed in 2000 at London's Tate Modern as part of the artist's exhibition of works in the museum's Turbine Hall (Bourgeois was the first artist invited to show in the large-scale venue in a legendary series sponsored by Unilever), the sculpture's contradictory size and elegance, fragility and dominion, frightfulness and allure, defied fathoming.

Bourgeois, who was 88 years old at the time the work was erected, had been fascinated since childhood with the symbolism of spiders. Aware of the intimidating nature of her overwhelming sculpture, she embedded within its awesome armature a seductive detail capable of luring the

eye and stride of visitors into its perilous ambit. Under the gnarled abdomen of the spider, hoisted high into the air like a medieval mosaic under a church's dome, seventeen grey and white marbles have been suspended behind a metal mesh. Symbolizing unhatched eggs, the natal sac is anything but an incidental decoration. Indeed, it is the very key to understanding the sculpture's unexpectedly intimate meaning – the eye-hook that entangles us.

Bourgeois's career-long obsession with spiders, which motivated countless drawings and sculptures from the 1940s onwards, is tightly bound up with the memory of the artist's mother – a tapestry weaver who died when the artist was in her early twenties. 'The Spider,' Bourgeois has explained, 'is an ode to my mother.'

She was my best friend. Like a spider, my mother was a weaver. My family was in the business of tapestry restoration, and my mother was in charge of the workshop. Like spiders, my mother was very clever. Spiders are friendly presences that eat mosquitoes. We know that mosquitoes spread diseases and are therefore unwanted. So, spiders are helpful and protective, just like my mother.



By envisioning the spider as suspended in pregnancy – her eggs forever frozen in their pre-hatched state, wrapped in an eternally protective embrace – Bourgeois has spun back time to a moment before the painful losses of motherhood and daughterhood. Bourgeois’s decision to display the suspended eggs behind a metal mesh accentuates their meaning when understood within the broader context of her art. An ongoing series of sculptures begun in the late 1980s and collectively entitled ‘Cells’ emerged concurrently with Bourgeois’s fascination with the spider in the last decades of her life. Consisting, typically, of wire enclosures of varying sizes that are filled with an array of both very personal as well as found objects, the artist’s ‘Cells’ at once exclude observers as well as entice intrusive gazing at their uncanny inventory. In one such work, *Cell (Choisy)* (1993), the slanted blade of a rusty guillotine hovers ominously over an engaged model of the artist’s childhood home in the Parisian suburb of Choisy-Le-Roi – the home where she recuperated after her father rescued her from

a river where she had tried to drown herself after learning of her mother’s death.

Among the earliest works in the series, *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*, created between 1989 and 1993, is comprised of a large woven-iron-mesh cube, reinforced by iron bars, into which the artist has installed a pair of black marble spheres resembling enormous pupils. Over the enmeshed marbles an ovoid mirror, which juts out through a kind of sun-roof in the ceiling of the cube, swivels on hinges. Alongside the marbles, an assortment of additional mirrors has been positioned, enhancing the implication that to reflect is to be imprisoned. Seen alongside such earlier works, *Maman*’s engaged eggs suddenly begin to feel loaded with intense, if inchoate, meaning. Implicit in the levitating marbles is the artist’s own imagined erasure from existence: a selfless sacrifice she’s prepared to contemplate in order to weave into being the mother, and friend, she so profoundly misses. Never before in art has the entwined vision of self-negation and love loomed so enchantingly or so large.



LEFT
Detail of unhatched eggs,
Maman, 1999



PAGE 241
Louise Bourgeois,
Maman, 1999,
steel and marble,
9.271 × 8.915 × 10.236 m
(30 ft 4 in. × 29 ft 2 in. × 33 ft 5 in.)

ABOVE
Louise Bourgeois,
Araignée, c. 1948,
soft ground etching
and engraving on paper,
25 × 16.6 cm (10 × 6 ½ in.)

RIGHT
Louise Bourgeois with
Spider IV in 1996.
Photo Peter Bellamy.



List of 57 Works

Ashurbanipal Hunting Lions (c. 645-635 BCE)
Ishtar Gate (c. 575 BC)
Parthenon Sculptures (c. 444 BC)
Terracotta Army of the First Qin Emperor (c. 210 BC)
Murals, Villa of the Mysteries (c60-50 BC)
Laocoön and His Sons (c.27 BC and 68 AD)
Apollodorus of Damascus (?): Trajan's Column (113 CE)
The Book of Kells (c. AD 800)
Travellers among Mountains and Streams (c1000), Fan Kuan
Bayeux Tapestry (c. 1077 or after), likely the work of women embroiderers
Universal Man (1165), Hildegard of Bingen
The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise (c. 1427), Masaccio
Ghent Altarpiece (1430-32), Jan van Eyck
The Descent from the Cross (1436), Rogier Van der Weyden
The Annunciation (c. 1438-47), Fra Angelico
The Lamentation over the Dead Christ (c.1480), Andrea Mantegna
The Birth of Venus (c.1480s), Sandro Botticelli
The Mona Lisa (c.1503-6), Leonardo da Vinci
The Garden of Earthly Delights (1505-1510), Hieronymous Bosch
Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes (1508-1512), Michelangelo
The School of Athens (1510-1511), Raphael
The Isenheim Altarpiece (1509-1515), Matthias Grünewald
Bacchus and Ariadne (c.1525), Titian
Self-portrait (1548), Catharina van Hemessen
Crucifixion (1565-87), Tintoretto
The Supper at Emmaus (1601), Caravaggio
The Ecstasy of St Teresa, Cornaro Chapel (1647-52), Gian Lorenzo Bernini
Las Meninas (1656), Diego Velázquez
Girl with a Pearl Earring (c. 1665), Johannes Vermeer
Self-Portrait with Two Circles (c 1665-9), Rembrandt Van Rijn
Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump (1768), Joseph Wright of Derby
The Nightmare (1781), Henry Fuseli
The Third of May 1808 (1814), Francisco Goya
The Hay Wain (1821), John Constable
Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway (exhibited 1844), JMW Turner
Whistler's Mother (1871), James Abbott McNeill Whistler
The Thinker (1880-1904), Auguste Rodin
A Bar at The Folies-Bergère (1882), Edouard Manet
Bathers at Asnières (1884), Georges Seurat
The Scream (1893), Edvard Munch
Mont Sainte-Victoire from Les Lauves (1904-1906), Paul Cézanne
Primordial Chaos (1906), Hilma af Klint
The Kiss (1907), Gustav Klimt
The Dance (1909), Henri Matisse
Nymphéas (1914-1926), Claude Monet
Fountain (1917), Marcel Duchamp
American Gothic (1930), Grant Wood
The Persistence of Memory (1931), Salvador Dalí
Guernica (1937), Pablo Picasso
Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Humming-bird (1940), Frida Khalo
One: Number 31 (1950), Jackson Pollock
Study after Velasquez's portrait of Pope Innocent X (1953), Francis Bacon
Brillo Boxes (1964), Andy Warhol
The Rothko Chapel (paintings 1965-66; chapel opened 1971), Mark Rothko
Betty (1977), Gerhard Richter
Backs and Fronts (1981), Sean Scully
Maman (1999), Louise Bourgeois