Developing Visual Literacy


Visual art can be powerfully persuasive, and one of the purposes of this book is to help you to recognize how this is so. Yet it is important for you to understand from the outset that you can neither recognize nor understand—let alone communicate—how visual art affects you without using language. In other words, one of the primary purposes of any art appreciation text is to provide you with a descriptive vocabulary, a set of terms, phrases, concepts, and approaches that will allow you to think critically about visual images. It is not sufficient to say, “I like this or that painting.” You need to be able to recognize why you like it, how it communicates to you. This ability is given the name visual literacy.

The fact is, most of us take the visual world for granted. We assume that we understand what we see. Those of us born and raised in the television era are often accused of being nonverbal, passive receivers, like TV monitors themselves. If television, the Internet, movies, and magazines have made us virtually dependent upon visual information, we have not necessarily become visually literate in the process. This chapter will introduce you to some essential concepts in visual literacy—the relationships among words, images, and objects in the real world; the idea of representation; and the distinctions among form and content in art, conventions in art, and iconography.
WORDS AND IMAGES

The Belgian artist René Magritte offered a lesson in visual literacy in his painting The Treason of Images (Fig. 23). Magritte reproduced an image of a pipe similar to that found in tobacco store signs and ads of his time. The caption under the pipe translates into English as “This is not a pipe,” which at first seems contradictory. We tend to look at the image of a pipe as if it were really a pipe, but of course it isn’t. It is the representation of a pipe. Both images and words can refer to things that we see, but they are not the things themselves. Magritte’s painting invites us to think critically about the representations that bombard us in daily life.

The work of photographer Lorna Simpson consistently challenges the relations between words and images (see Works in Progress, pp. 22–23). Consider her photographs of a black female sitting in a chair, entitled She (Fig. 24). She is dressed in a brown suit, as if at an interview. Without the title and the italic script label at the top—“female”—the sitter’s gender would be in doubt. If the work were called, say, Interviewee, the sitter’s head cut off at the chin, there would be no way to know the gender of the sitter. In fact, Simpson has said that black women in the United States are treated by society as if they are faceless—without identity, personality, or individuality. Here, She challenges gender stereotypes, seemingly usurping man’s place. It is as if, in the old phrase, She is wearing the pants in the family. And even if the words do somewhat diminish the ambiguity of the piece, it remains as open to interpretation as the sitter’s hand gestures, which are expressive even if we don’t know what precisely they express. The subject matter of the work—what the image literally depicts—barely hints at the complexity of its content—what the image means.

In a series of photographs focused on the role of women in her native Iran and entitled Women of Allah, Shirin Neshat combines words and images in startling ways. In Rebellious Silence (Fig. 25), Neshat portrays herself as a Muslim woman, dressed in a black chador, the traditional covering that extends from head to toe revealing only hands and face. A rifle divides her face, upon which Neshat has inscribed in ink a Farsi poem by the devout Iranian woman poet Taberheh Saffarzadeh. Saffarzadeh’s verses express the deep belief of many Iranian women in Islam. Only within the context of Islam, they believe, are women truly equal to men, and they claim that the chador, by concealing a woman’s sexuality, prevents her from becoming a sexual object. The chador, in this sense, is liberating. It also expresses women’s solidarity with men in the rejection of Western culture, symbolized by Western dress. But to a Western audience, the values embodied in the poem are indecipherable, a fact that Neshat fully understands. Thus, because we cannot understand the image, it is open to stereotyping, misreading, misunderstanding—the very conditions of the division between Islam and the West, imaged in the division of Neshat’s body and face by the gun.

In Islamic culture, in fact, words take precedence over images, and calligraphy—that is, the fine art of handwriting—is the chief form of Islamic art. The Muslim calligrapher does not so much express himself as act as a medium through which Allah (God) can express himself in the most beautiful manner possible.
Fig. 25 Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, from the series *Women of Allah*, 1994.
Gelatin silver print and ink, 11 × 14 in.
Photo: Cynthia Preston. © Shirin Neshat, courtesy Gladstone Gallery, NY.
As a photographer, Lorna Simpson is preoccupied with the question of representation and its limitations. All of her works, of which the multi-panel *Necklines* (Fig. 26) is a good example, deal with the ways in which words and images function together to make meaning. Simpson presents us with three different photographs of the same woman’s neck and the neckline of her dress. Below these images are two panels with four words on each, each word in turn playing on the idea of the neck itself. The sensuality of the photographs is affirmed by words such as “necking” and “neck-ed” (that is, “naked”), while the phrases “neck & neck” and “breakneck” introduce the idea of speed or running. The question is, what do these two sets of terms have to do with one another? Necklaces and neckties go around the neck. So do nooses at hangings. In fact, “necktie parties” conduct hangings, hangings break necks, and a person runs from a “necktie party” precisely because, instead of wearing a necklace, in being hanged one becomes “neckless.”

If this set of verbal associations runs contrary to the sensuality and seeming passivity of Simpson’s photographs, it does not run contrary to the social reality faced, throughout American history, by black people in general. The anonymity of Simpson’s model serves not only to universalize the situation that her words begin to explore, but also depersonalizes the subject in a way that suggests how such situations become possible. Simpson seeks to articulate this tension—the violence that always lies beneath the surface of the black person’s world—by bringing words and images together.

A group of large-scale black-and-white serigraphs, or silkscreen prints, on felt, takes up different subject matter but remains committed to investigating the relationship between words and images. Created for the opening of the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York City in October 1995, all of the works but one are multi-panel photographs of landscapes (the one exception is a view of two almost identical hotel rooms). They employ a unique process. Simpson first photographed the scenes. Then she arranged with Jean Noblet, one of the premier serigraph printers in the world, to print them, blown up into several large panels, on felt, a material never before used in the silkscreen printing process. The felt absorbed vast quantities of ink, and each panel had to be printed several times to achieve the correct density of black. Furthermore, each panel had to match the others in the image. In less than two weeks, the entire suite of seven images, consisting of more than 50 panels, was miraculously printed, just in time for the show.

Each of the images is accompanied by a wall text that, when read, transforms the image. On one side of *The Park* (Fig. 27), for instance, the viewer reads:

> Just unpacked a new shiny silver telescope. And we are up high enough for a really good view of all the buildings and the park. The living room window seems to be the best spot for it. On the sidewalk below a man watches figures from across the path.

On the other side of the image, a second wall text reads:

> It is early evening, the lone sociologist walks through the park, to observe private acts in the men’s public bathrooms. . . . He decides to adopt the role of voyeur and look out in order to go unnoticed and noticed at the same time. His research takes several years. . . .
These texts effectively involve Simpson’s audience in a complex network of voyeurism. The photographer’s position is the same as that of the person who has purchased the telescope, and our viewpoint is the same. Equipped with a telescope (or the telescopic lens of a camera) apparently purchased for viewing the very kind of scene described in the second text, we want to zoom in to see what’s going on below.

There is, in fact, a kind of telescopic feel to the work. The image itself is more than 5½ feet square and can be readily taken in from across the room. But to understand it, we need to come in close to read the texts. Close up, the image is too large to see as a whole, and the crisp contrasts of the print as seen from across the room are lost in the soft texture of the felt. The felt even seems to absorb light rather than reflect it as most photographic prints do, blurring our vision in the process. As an audience, we zoom in and out, viewing the scene as a whole, and then coming in to read the texts. As we move from the general to the particular, from the panoramic view to the close-up text, the innocuous scene becomes charged with meaning. The reality beneath surface appearances is once again Simpson’s theme—the photographer challenging the camera view.
Fig. 28 *Triumphal Entry* [page from a manuscript of the *Shahnamah of Firdawsi*], Persian, Safavid culture, 1562–1583.
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Thus, all properly pious writing, especially poetry, is sacred. This is the case with the page from the poet Firdawsi’s *Shahnamah* (Fig. 28).

Sacred texts are almost always decorated with designs that aim to be visually compelling but not representational. Until recent times, in the Muslim world, every book, indeed almost every sustained statement, began with the phrase “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, Ever-Merciful”—the *bismillah*, as it is called—the same phrase that opens the Qur’an. On this folio page from the *Shahnamah*, the *bismillah* is in the top right-hand corner (Arabic texts read from right to left). To write the *bismillah* in as beautiful a form as possible is believed to bring the scribe forgiveness for his sins.

The Islamic emphasis on calligraphic art derives, to a large degree, from the fact that at the heart of Islamic culture lies the word, in the form of the recitations that make up the Qur’an, the messages the faithful believe that God delivered to the prophet Muhammed through the agency of the angel Gabriel. The word could be trusted in a way that images could not. In the *hadith*, the collections of sayings and anecdotes about Muhammed’s life, Muhammed is quoted as having warned, “An angel will not enter a house where there is a dog or a painting.” Thus, images are notably absent in almost all Islamic religious architecture. And because Muhammed also claimed that “those who make pictures will be punished on the Day of Judgment by being told: make alive what you have created,” the representation of “living things,” human beings especially, is frowned upon. Such thinking would lead the Muslim owner of a Persian miniature representing a prince feasting in the countryside to erase the heads of all those depicted (Fig. 29). No one could mistake these headless figures for “living things.”

The distrust of images is not unique to Islam; at various periods in history Christians have also debated whether it was sinful to depict God and his creatures in paintings and sculpture. In the summer of 1566, for instance, Protestant *iconoclasts* (literally “image breakers,” those who wished to destroy images in religious settings) threatened to destroy van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (see Fig. 17), but just three days before all Ghent’s churches were sacked, the altarpiece was dismantled and hidden in the tower by local authorities. In Nuremberg, Germany, a large sculpture of Mary and Gabriel hanging over the high altar of the Church of San Lorenz was spared destruction, but only after the town council voted to cover it with a cloth that was not permanently removed until the nineteenth century. The rationale for this wave of destruction, which swept across northern Europe, was a strict reading of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not make any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them nor serve them” (Exodus 20:4–5). But whatever the religious justification, it should be equally clear that the distrust of visual imagery is, at least in part, a result of the visual’s power. If the worship of “graven images,” that is, idols, is forbidden in the Bible, the assumption is that such images are powerfully attractive, even dangerously seductive.
DESCRIBING THE WORLD

In the last section, we explored the topic of visual literacy by considering the relationship between words and images. Words and images are two different systems of describing the world. Words refer to the world in the abstract. Images represent the world, or reproduce its appearance. Traditionally, one of the primary goals of the visual arts has been to capture and portray the way the natural world looks. But, as we all know, some works of art look more like the natural world than others, and some artists are less interested than others in representing the world as it actually appears. As a result, a vocabulary has developed that describes how closely, or not, the image resembles visual reality itself. This basic set of terms is where we need to begin in order to talk or write intelligently about works of art.

Representational, Abstract, and Nonrepresentational Art

Generally, we refer to works of art as either representational, abstract, or nonrepresentational (or nonobjective). A representational work of art portrays natural objects in recognizable form. The more the representation resembles what the eye sees, the more it is said to be an example of realism. The less a work resembles real things in the real world, the more it is said to be an example of abstraction. When a work does not refer to the natural or objective world at all, it is said to be nonrepresentational or nonobjective.

Albert Bierstadt’s painting The Rocky Mountains (Fig. 30) is representational and, from all appearances, highly realistic. Painted in 1863, it was one of the most popular paintings of its time, seeming to capture, for the American imagination, the vastness and majesty of the then still largely unexplored West. Writing about the painting in his 1867 Book of the Artists, the critic H. T. Tuckerman described it in glowing terms: “Representing the sublime range which guards the remote West, its subject is eminently national; and the spirit in which it is executed is at once patient and comprehensive—patient in the careful reproduction of the tints and traits which make up and identify its local character, and comprehensive in the breadth, elevation, and grandeur of the composition.” In its breadth and grandeur, the painting seemed to Tuckerman an image of the nation itself. If it was sublime—that is, if it captured an immensity so large that it could hardly be comprehended by the

Fig. 30 Albert Bierstadt, The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak, 1863.
Oil on canvas, 73 1/2 \( \times \) 120 1/2 in. Signed and dated lower right. A. Bierstadt/1863. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.123).
Photo © 1979 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
imagination—the same was true of the United States as a whole. *The Rocky Mountains* was a truly democratic painting, vast enough to accommodate the aspirations of the nation.

But if it was truly democratic, it was not true to life. Despite Tuckerman’s assertion that Bierstadt has captured the “tints and traits” of the scene, no landscape quite like this exists in the American West. Rather, Bierstadt has painted the Alps, widely considered in the nineteenth century to be the most sublime mountains in the world, and the painting’s central peak is, in fact, a barely disguised version of the Matterhorn, a peak in the Swiss Alps that he often painted. In fact, Bierstadt’s painting is *naturalistic* rather than *realistic*. *Naturalism* is a brand of representation in which the artist retains apparently realistic elements—in Bierstadt’s case, accurate representations of Western flora and fauna, as well as Native American dress and costume—but presents the visual world from a distinctly personal or subjective point of view. The Rockies, for Bierstadt, are at least as sublime as the Alps. He wants us to share in his feeling.

While still a recognizable image of a landscape, Sesshu Toyo’s *Haboku Landscape for Soen* (Fig. 31) is far more abstract than Bierstadt’s *Rocky Mountains*. Sesshu was a Japanese Zen Buddhist priest who traveled to China in 1468–69 in order to learn to paint like the Chinese masters. As a Zen Buddhist, he relied on understanding the world through his intuitive personal feeling, unmediated by intellectual reasoning. *Haboku* means “broken ink,” which refers to Sesshu’s intuitive technique, which lends the ink the appearance of having been casually splashed onto the surface of the paper. No individual mark on this paper could be thought of as representational, but taken as a whole, the denser ink suggests trees and rocks, while the softer washes evoke tall mountains, water, and mist. Sesshu executed this work as a farewell gift for his pupil, Josui Soen. Perhaps a phrase from Sesshu’s inscription on the painting (not visible in this detail) most fully captures the spirit of the piece: “My eyes are misty,” Sesshu writes, “and my spirit exhausted”—the very essence of a heartfelt farewell. In fact, it is possible to say of this landscape that it more fully represents Sesshu’s feelings for Soen than an actual scene.

**Fig. 31** Sesshu Toyo, *Haboku Landscape for Soen* (detail), Japan, Muromachi period, 1495. Section of hanging scroll, ink on two joined sheets of paper, total height 58\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. Tokyo National Museum.
Although Australian Aboriginal artist Erna Motna’s *Bushfire and Corroboree Dreaming* (Fig. 32) is, in fact, a landscape, it is not recognizably one and it is fully abstract. The organizing logic of most Aboriginal art is the so-called Dreaming, a system of belief unlike that of most other religions in the world. The Dreaming is not literally dreaming as we think of it. For the Aborigine, the Dreaming is the presence, or mark, of an Ancestral Being in the world. Images of these Beings—representations of the myths about them, maps of their travels, depictions of the places and landscapes they inhabited—make up the great bulk of Aboriginal art. To the Aboriginal people, the entire landscape is thought of as a series of marks made upon the earth by the Dreaming. Thus, the landscape itself is a record of the Ancestral Being’s passing, and geography is full of meaning and history. Painting is understood as a concise vocabulary of abstract marks conceived to reveal the ancestor’s being, both present and past, in the Australian landscape.

Ceremonial paintings on rocks, on the ground, and on people’s bodies were made for centuries by the Aboriginal peoples of Central Australia’s Western Desert region. Acrylic paintings, similar in form and content to these traditional works, began to be produced in the region in 1971. In that year, a young art teacher named Geoff Bardon arrived in Papunya, a settlement on the edge of the Western Desert organized by the government to provide health care, education, and housing for the Aboriginal peoples. Several of the older Aboriginal men became interested in Bardon’s classes, and he encouraged them to paint in acrylic, using traditional motifs. By 1987, prices for works executed by well-known painters ranged from $2,000 to $15,000, though Western buyers clearly valued the works for their aesthetic appeal and not for their traditional meanings.

Each design still carries with it, however, its traditional ceremonial power and is actual proof of the identity of those involved in making it. Erna Motna’s *Bushfire and Corroboree Dreaming* depicts the preparations for a *corroboree*, or celebration ceremony. The circular features at the top and bottom of the painting represent small bush fires that have been started by women. As small animals run from the fire (symbolized by the small red dots at the edge of each circle), they are caught by the women and hit with digging sticks, also visible around each fire, and then carried with fruit and vegetables to the central fire, the site of the *corroboree* itself. Other implements that will be used by the men to kill larger animals driven out of the bush by the fires are depicted as well—boomerangs, spears, clubs, and spear throwers.

Unlike most other forms of Aboriginal art, acrylic paintings are permanent and are not destroyed after serving the ceremonial purposes for which they were produced. In this sense, the paintings have tended to turn dynamic religious practice into static representations, and, even worse, into commodities. Conflicts have arisen over the potential revelation of secret ritual information contained in the paintings, and the star status bestowed upon certain painters, particularly younger ones, has had destructive effects on traditional hierarchies within the community. On the other hand, these paintings have tended to revitalize and strengthen traditions that were, as late as the 1960s, thought doomed to extinction.

Meaning in Nonrepresentational Art

Nonobjective or nonrepresentational works of art do not refer to the natural or objective world at all. Kasimir Malevich’s *Suprematist Painting* (Fig. 33) is concerned primarily with questions of form. When we speak of a work’s form, we mean everything from the materials used to make it, to the way it employs the various formal elements (discussed in Part 2), to the ways in which those elements are organized into a composition. Form is the overall structure of a work of art. Somewhat misleadingly, it is generally opposed to content, which is what the work of art expresses or means. Obviously, the content of nonobjective art is its form. Malevich’s painting is really about the relation between the black rectangle, the blue triangle, and the white ground behind them. Though it is a uniform blue, notice that the blue triangle’s color seems to be lighter where it is backed by the black rectangle, and darker when seen against the white ground. This phenomenon results from the fact that our perception of the relative lightness or darkness of a color depends upon the context in which we see it, even though the color never actually changes. If you stare for a moment at the line where the triangle crosses from white to
black, you will begin to see a vibration. The two parts of the triangle will seem, in fact, to be at different visual depths. Malevich’s painting demonstrates how purely formal relationships can transform otherwise static forms into a visually dynamic composition.

The work of contemporary Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes is likewise founded upon formal relationships. *Carambola* (Fig. 34), like all of her work, is based on the square, and, not coincidentally, she counts Malevich among those whose work has most influenced her own. She begins each work with a square, and then, she says, “I build things on top of it. The squares may disappear, but they are still a reference for me to think about composition.” In fact, she thinks of the circles that domi-

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nate paintings like *Carambola* as containing squares. In essence, she pulls together into a geometrical composition the shapes and forms of Brazilian culture—ornate church facades, the ruffled blouses of Brazilian Mardi Gras costumes, the design of the serpentine walkway that stretches along her native Rio de Janeiro’s beachfront, the exotic plants in the botanical garden neighboring her studio in Rio (where, in fact, the carambola tree, from which this painting takes its name, grows). Her color, too, captures the dizzying kaleidoscope of Brazilian Carnival. “I am interested in conflict,” she says, “and the moment you add one more color, you start the conflict, which is endless. So there is a constant movement to your eyes, to your self, to your body, and I like it.”

**Meaning and Culture**

Our understanding of Milhazes’s work is highly dependent on understanding its cultural context. Consider another set of examples: an ancient sculpture of the Greek god Apollo and a carved mask from the Sang tribe of Gabon in West Africa (Figs. 35 and 36). In the late 1960s, art historian Kenneth Clark compared the two images through an ethnocentric lens and concluded that the image of the messenger god Apollo demonstrated the superiority of classical Greek civilization. Clark understood the conventions of Greek sculpture and recognized the meaning of the idealized sculptural form: “To the Hellenistic imagination it is a world of light and confidence, in which the gods are like ourselves, only more beautiful, and descend to earth in order to teach men reason and the laws of harmony.” His interpretation of the African mask, however, reveals his ignorance of the conventions of the West African tribe that created it: “To the Negro imagination it is a world of fear and darkness, ready to inflict horrible punishment for the smallest infringement of a taboo.” However, the features of the African mask are exaggerated at least in part to separate it from the “real.” Clark’s ethnocentric reading of it neglects its ritual, celebratory social function in African society. Worn in ceremonies, masks are seen as vehicles through which the spirit world is made available to humankind.
Iconography

Cultural conventions are often carried forward from one generation to the next by means of iconography, a system of visual images the meaning of which is widely understood by a given culture or cultural group. These visual images are symbols—that is, they represent something more than their literal meaning. The subject matter of iconographic images is not obvious to any viewer unfamiliar with the symbolic system in use. Furthermore, every culture has its specific iconographic practices, its own system of images that are understood by the culture at large to mean specific things. Christian audiences, for instance, can easily read incidents from the story of Christ, such as those represented in the lower nine panels of the center window in the west front of Chartres Cathedral in France (Fig. 37). This window was made about 1150 and is one of the oldest and finest surviving stained-glass windows in the world. The story can be read like a cartoon strip, beginning at the bottom left and moving right and up, from the Annunciation (the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will bear the Christ Child) through the Nativity, the Annunciation to the Shepherds, and the Adoration of the Magi. The window is usually considered the work of the same artist who was commissioned by the Abbot Suger to make the windows of the relic

Fig. 37 Lower nine panels of the center lancet window in the west front of Chartres Cathedral, showing the Nativity, Annunciation of the Shepherds, and the Adoration of the Magi, c. 1150. Chartres Cathedral, France.

Giraudon / Art Resource, NY.
chapels at Saint-Denis, which portray many of the same incidents. “The pictures in the windows are there,” the Abbot explains in his writings, “for the sole purpose of showing simple people, who cannot read the Holy Scriptures, what they must believe.” But he understood as well the expressive power of this beautiful glass. It transforms, he said, “that which is material into that which is immaterial.” Suger understood that whatever story the pictures in the window tell, whatever iconographic significance they contain, and whatever words they generate, it is, above all, their art that lends them power.

Similarly, most of us in the West probably recognize a Buddha when we see one, but most of us do not know that the position of the Buddha’s hands carries iconographic significance. Buddhism, which originated in India in the fourth century BCE., is traditionally associated with the worldly existence of Sakyamuni, or Gautama, the Sage of the Sakya clan, who lived and taught around 500 BCE. In his 35th year, Sakyamuni experienced enlightenment under a tree at Gaya (near modern Patna), and he became Buddha or the Enlightened One.

Buddhism spread to China in the third century BCE, and from there into Southeast Asia during the first century CE. Long before it reached Japan by way of Korea in the middle of the fifth century CE, it had developed a more or less consistent iconography, especially related to the representation of Buddha himself. The symbolic hand gestures, or mudra, refer both to general states of mind and to specific events in the life of Buddha. The mudra best known to Westerners, the hands folded in the seated Buddha’s lap, symbolizes meditation. The small bronze sculpture of Buddha illustrated here (Fig. 38) was created for private worship. The gesture of the raised right hand symbolizes Buddha’s fearlessness and the lowered left the granting of protection. The Buddha of Infinite Light, whom the Japanese call Amida, was believed to rule the Pure Land, or the Paradise in the West into which the faithful might find themselves reborn, thus gaining release from the endless cycle of birth, rebirth, and suffering.

**Fig. 38** Amitabha Buddha (Amida), the Buddha of Infinite Light, Kamakura period, Japan, 13th century.
Fig. 39 Jan van Eyck, *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife Giovanna Cenami*, c.1434.
Oil on wood, $32\frac{1}{4} \times 23\frac{1}{2}$ in.
© National Gallery, London.
Even within a culture, the meaning of an image may change or be lost over time. When Jan van Eyck painted his portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Wife Giovanna Cenami in 1434 (Fig. 39), its repertoire of visual images was well-understood, but today, much of its meaning is lost to the average viewer. For example, the bride's green dress, a traditional color for weddings, was meant to suggest her natural fertility. She is not pregnant—her swelling stomach was a convention of female beauty at the time, and her dress is structured in a way to accentuate it. The groom's removal of his shoes is a reference to God's commandment to Moses to take off his shoes when standing on holy ground. A single candle burns in the chandelier above the couple, symbolizing the presence of Christ at the scene. And the dog, as most of us recognize even today, is associated with faithfulness and, in this context, particularly, with marital fidelity.

But what would Islamic culture make of the dog in the van Eyck painting, as in the Muslim world dogs are traditionally viewed as filthy and degraded? From the Muslim point of view, the painting verges on nonsense. Even to us, viewing van Eyck's work more than 500 years after it was painted, certain elements remain confusing. An argument has recently been made, for instance, that van Eyck is not representing a marriage so much as a betrothal, or engagement. We have assumed for generations that the couple stands in a bridal chamber where, after the ceremony, they will consummate their marriage. It turns out, however, that in the fifteenth century it was commonplace for Flemish homes to be decorated with hung beds with canopies. Called "furniture of estate," they were important status symbols commonly displayed in the principal room of the house as a sign of the owner's prestige and influence. It was also widely understood in van Eyck's time that a touching of the hands, the woman laying her hand in the palm of man, was the sign, especially in front of witnesses, of a mutual agreement to wed.

The painter himself stands in witness to the event. On the back wall, above the mirror, are the words Jan de Eyck fuit hic, 1434—"Jan van Eyck was here, 1434" (Fig. 40). We see the backs of Arnolfini and his wife reflected in the mirror, and beyond them, standing more or less in the same place as we do as viewers, two other figures, one a man in a red turban who is probably the artist himself.
Fig. 41 Jean-Michel Basquiat, Charles the First, 1982.
Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, three panels, 78 × 62\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. overall.
In his painting Charles the First (Fig. 41), Jean-Michel Basquiat employs iconographic systems both of his own and others’ making. The painting is an homage to the great jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, who died in 1955, one of a number of black cultural heroes celebrated by the graffiti-inspired Basquiat. Son of a middle-class Brooklyn family (his father was a Haitian-born accountant, his mother a black Puerto Rican), Basquiat left school in 1977 at age 17, living on the streets of New York for several years during which time he developed the “tag”—or graffiti pen-name—SAMO, a combination of “Sambo” and “same ol’ shit.” SAMO was most closely associated with a three-pointed crown (as self-anointed “king” of the graffiti artists) and the word “TAR,” evoking racism (as in “tar baby”), violence (“tar and feathers,” which he would entitle a painting in 1982), and, through the anagram, the “art” world as well. A number of his paintings exhibited in the 1981 New York/New Wave exhibit at an alternative art gallery across the 59th Street Bridge from Manhattan attracted the attention of several art dealers and his career exploded. (The impact of the art market on his career will be discussed in a section on the art market in the next chapter.)

Central to his personal iconography is the crown, which is a symbol not only of his personal success, but of the other African-American “heroes” that are the subject of many of his works—jazz artists, such as Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, and “famous Negro athletes,” as he calls them, such as boxer Sugar Ray Leonard and baseball’s Hank Aaron. Heroism is, in fact, a major theme in Basquiat’s work, and the large “S,” which appears three times in the first panel of Charles the First and twice in the second, is a symbol for the superhero Superman, as well as for SAMO.

Directly above the triangular Superman logo in the first panel are the letters “X-MN,” which refer to the X-Men comic book series, published by Marvel Comics, whose name appears crossed out at the bottom of the third panel. Marvel describes the X-Men as follows: “Born with strange powers, the mutants known as the X-Men use their awesome abilities to protect a world that hates and fears them.” Basquiat clearly means to draw an analogy between the X-Men and his African-American heroes. And, in fact, Basquiat refers to another Marvel Comics hero, the Norse god Thor, whose name appears below the crown in the top left of Basquiat’s painting.

The “X” has a special significance in Basquiat’s iconography. In the Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols, a book by American industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss first published in 1972, Basquiat discovered a section on “Hobo Signs,” marks left, graffiti-like, by hobos to inform their brethren about the lay of the local land. In this graphic language, an “X” means “O.K. All right.”

The “X” is thus ambiguous, a symbol of both negation (crossed-out) and affirmation (all right). This is, of course, the condition in which all of Basquiat’s African-American heroes find themselves. Charlie Parker is also Charles the First, a reference to the King Charles I of England, beheaded by Protestants in the English Civil War in 1649—hence the phrase across the bottom of panels one and two, “Most kings get their [sic] head cut off.” Basquiat’s reference to Parker’s rendering of “Cherokee,” in the third panel, evokes not only the beauty of the love song itself, but also the Cherokee Indian Nation’s “Trail of Tears,” the forced removal of the tribe from Georgia to Oklahoma in 1838 that resulted in the deaths of some 4,000 of their people. Above “Cherokee” are four feathers, a reference at once to Indians, Parker himself, whose nickname was “Bird,” and, in the context of Basquiat’s work as a whole, the violent practice of tar and feathering. Finally, Basquiat’s sense that the price of heroism is high indeed is embedded in two other of his iconographic signs: The “S,” especially when lined or crossed out, also suggests dollars, $, and the copyright © sign, which is ubiquitous in his paintings, suggests not just ownership, but the exercise of property rights and control in American society, an exercise and control that Basquiat sees at the root cause of the institution of slavery (to say nothing of the removal of the Cherokee nation to Oklahoma).

In sum, Basquiat’s paintings are literally packed with a private, highly ambiguous iconography. But their subject is clear enough. When asked by Henry Geldzahler, curator of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, just what his subject matter was, Basquiat replied: “Royalty, heroism, and the streets.”
Very rarely can we find the same event documented from the point of view of two different cultures, but two images, one by John Taylor, a journalist hired by Leslie’s Illustrated Gazette (Fig. 42), and the other by the Native American artist Howling Wolf (Fig. 43), son of the Cheyenne chief Eagle Head, both depict the October 1867 signing of a peace treaty between the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Comanche peoples, and the United States government, at Medicine Lodge Creek, a tributary of the Arkansas River, in Kansas. Taylor’s illustration is based on sketches done at the scene, and it appeared soon after the events. Howling Wolf’s work, actually one of several depicting the events, was done nearly a decade later, after he was taken east and imprisoned at Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida, together with his father and 70 other “ringleaders” of the continuing Native American insurrection in the Southern Plains. While in prison, Howling Wolf made many drawings such as this one, called “ledger” drawings because they were executed on blank accountants’ ledgers.

Even before he was imprisoned, Howling Wolf had actively pursued ledger drawing. As Native Americans were introduced to crayons, ink, and pencils, the ledger drawings supplanted traditional buffalo hide art, but in both the hide paintings and the later ledger drawings, artists depicted the brave accomplishments of their owners. The conventions used by these Native American artists differ greatly from those employed by their Anglo-American counterparts.
Which, in your opinion, is the more representational? Which is the more abstract?

Both works possess the same overt content—that is, the peace treaty signing—but how do they differ in form? Both Taylor and Howling Wolf depict the landscape, but how do they differ? Can you determine why Howling Wolf might want to depict the confluence of Medicine Creek and the Arkansas in his drawing? It is as if Howling Wolf portrays the events from above, so that simultaneously we can see tipis, warriors, and women in formal attire, and the grove in which the United States soldiers meet with the Indians. Taylor’s view is limited to the grove itself. Does this difference in the way the two artists depict space suggest any greater cultural differences? Taylor’s work directs our eyes to the center of the image, while Howling Wolf’s does not. Does this suggest anything to you?

Perhaps the greatest difference between the two depictions of the event is the way in which the Native Americans are themselves portrayed. In Howling Wolf’s drawing, each figure is identifiable—that is, the tribal affiliations and even the specific identity of each individual are revealed through the iconography of the decorations of his or her dress and tipi. How, in comparison, are the Native Americans portrayed in Taylor’s work? In what ways is Taylor’s work ethnocentric?

One of the most interesting details in Howling Wolf’s version of the events is the inclusion of a large number of women. Almost all of the figures in Howling Wolf’s drawing are, in fact, women. They sit with their backs to the viewer, their attention focused on the signing ceremony before them. Their braided hair is decorated with customary red paint in the part. This convention is of special interest. When the Plains warrior committed himself to a woman, he ceremonially painted her hair to convey his affection for and commitment to her. Notice the absence of any women in Taylor’s depiction, as opposed to their prominence in Howling Wolf’s. What does this suggest to you about the role of women in the two societies?