



HANS BELTING

# LIKENESS AND PRESENCE

*A History of the Image before the Era of Art*

*Translated by Edmund Jephcott*

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Frontispiece: Rome, Pantheon; icon of the Madonna and Child, A.D. 609.  
Repeated in color at front of color gallery, following page 264 (see also fig. 8).

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## Foreword

The aims of the present book require some explanation, as it is not intended to follow the usual directions taken by a history of art but to focus on the history of the image. But what is an image? The term means as much and as little as the term *art*. I therefore would like to clarify that, in the framework of this book, the image I am considering is that of a person, which means that I have chosen one of several possibilities. The image, understood in this manner, not only represented a person but also was treated like a person, being worshiped, despised, or carried from place to place in ritual processions: in short, it served in the symbolic exchange of power and, finally, embodied the public claims of a community. The reader, by now, will have realized that I am speaking of the 'Holy Image.' The latter was rooted in religion—but I would be making a tautological statement if I were to stress this obvious fact. In the era under consideration, most images were religious even if they served political or economic purposes.

My choice of the Holy Image as the subject of this book necessitated the omission of the other major image which came down to us from the Middle Ages: the narrative image, which presented sacred history and was usually perceived in a way that was more like an act of reading than that of simple viewing. I have treated this other type of image, at least in part, in a book which I edited together with Dieter Blume on late medieval painting and culture, *Stadtkultur und Malerei der Dantezeit*. In that work, the narrative image, both in its public and private, or its religious and profane, variety, is discussed under the heading "The Image as Text."

The subtitle of this book, which speaks of "a history of the image before the era of art," is still in need of explanation, as the reader may be puzzled by the uncommon notion of an "era of art." Art, as it is studied by the discipline of Art History today, existed in the Middle Ages no less than it did afterwards. After the Middle Ages, however, art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake—art as invented by a famous artist and defined by a proper theory. While the images from olden times were destroyed by iconoclasts in the Reformation period, images of a new kind began to fill the art collections which were just then being formed. The era of art, which is rooted in these events, lasts until this present day. From the very beginning, it has been characterized by a particular kind of historiography which, although called the history of art, in fact deals with the history of artists.

But what about a history of the image? When we leave the common ground of a history of styles, we have as yet no suitable framework for structuring the events which shaped the image in the era before the Renaissance. If one consults David Freedberg's book on *The Power of Images*, one even finds a warning against attempting to devise a history of the image at all, as the author considers the image to be an ever-present reality to which mankind has responded in ever the same way. I nevertheless have opted for some kind of history, as before the era of art, the image

had a social and cultural significance of an altogether different kind, which thus requires a different type of argument. I do not, however, aim at "the" history of the image, but consider this narrative as a means of introducing my topic in a deliberately "open" way.

The story of the iconic portrait opens in late antiquity when Christianity adopted the cult images of the "pagans," in a complete reversal of its original attitude, and developed an image practice of its own. The center of the story is in the Middle Ages, both East and West, when images of God and the saints underwent many significant changes either as icons or as statues. The third part of my narrative concerns the period of transition between the Middle Ages and the era of the Reformation and Renaissance, when the images reemerge with a new face as works of art.

In my confidence in the practical use of such a narrative I may be accused of naivete and the lack of a proper "method." I am well aware of advances in current research on images, both in anthropology and in psychology. But the results are not yet such as to offer a safe guide through the sequence of history. I therefore still believe in the usefulness of historical narrative, which makes available the materials and the respective stories and other sources for further use by a wide range of methods and disciplines. This book is meant to offer a service to forthcoming research on images by bringing together as much information as there is. As a result, it aims at overcoming the narrow treatment of the topic that is prevalent today: a research restricted to a few examples which are to illustrate a fashionable "theory" for theory's sake.

My book does not "explain" images nor does it pretend that images explain themselves. Rather, it is based on the conviction that they reveal their meaning best by their use. I therefore deal with people and with their beliefs, superstitions, hopes, and fears in handling images. This context, whether social, religious, or political, in the German title of the book is summarized by the term *Kult*. The individual cultures in which images played their role are given more importance than an overall view on the permanent features of the image. It was, however, not possible to examine them in full detail, as it seemed more important to connect them with one another and to mark changes as well as continuities. This history of the image, as a result, cannot be confused with simple storytelling, but takes a conceptual attitude toward history. The image, in the end, appears as paradoxical as does the human being him- or herself who made use of it: along with the sequence of societies and cultures, it changes all the time, but on another level, it remains always the same—an observation which allows for both distinctions and comparisons.

The era of the image which is discussed in this book is in fact only one chapter in the long history of images which, on the one hand, reaches back into prehistorical times and, on the other hand, goes on until the present day and will last as long as mankind survives. The images may never have had more importance than they had in prehistorical practice, of which we know so little: practice in the midst of preverbal cultures when the religious and the social were one and the same. Anthropology will hopefully provide answers to the most interesting question of all: why images?

The present book is only concerned with European culture, both East and West, and only with the era ranging from Antiquity to the Renaissance (at the time of the

Renaissance, two kinds of images, the one with the notion of the work of art and the other free of that notion, existed side by side). The period "in between," the limited scope of my project, was nevertheless a topic which almost exceeded the powers of a single author who wanted to address his colleagues as well as a general audience. The latter received the book favorably in Germany, where the book soon became an issue within a lively debate on the role of images, as opposed to art, in our present culture, and where it even was commented on by many artists. Against the idealism of art appreciation for its own sake, represented by George Steiner's book on "Real Presence," it was used as a source of information on the historical usage of images. In France, Laurence Kahn introduced a reading of the book under the heading "Adorer les images" into the topics of the "Nouvelle Revue de Psychoanalyse" (no. 44, Paris, 1991). It is hoped that the book will continue to offer its services to a widening range of people and disciplines in search of a general view on the role of images in human culture.

It is a pleasant duty to acknowledge the manifold assistance which I received while writing this book. First of all, I have to mention the Dumbarton Oaks Center of Byzantine Studies (Harvard University) where Giles Constable, the former director, accepted the topic as a research project and thus offered me a long series of unforgettable visits at this wonderful refuge of research. As a token of gratitude, in 1990, I co-directed a symposium there, on a topic related to the book, together with Herbert S. Kessler, from Johns Hopkins University. I also have to single out the Bibliotheca Hertziana of the German Max Planck-Institute, where I actually started the writing of the book during an undisturbed year of leisure in the midst of the resources, both of monuments and books, at Rome. The two directors, Christoph L. Frommel and Matthias Winner, were my hosts, to whom I owe the granting of a fellowship.

I profited in many ways from the encouragement and help of friends and colleagues with whom I could discuss my findings and my open questions. Christa Belting-Ihm, who has herself engaged in related research on the role of images especially from early Christian times, accompanied the progress of the text with unflinching assistance. Victor Stoichita, at Fribourg University, the author of a companion volume to my own, called *L'instauration du tableau*, offered me long and fruitful hours of talk while he still was at Munich. I owe inspiration of the same importance to David Freedberg with whom I taught side by side for a while at Columbia University in New York. Georges Didi-Huberman, whom I first met in the gardens of Villa Medici in Rome, opened for me doors to my topic whose existence I had not even noticed before. Herbert S. Kessler, himself an authority in the field, took a vivid interest even in the English translation of my text and proved to be a rare friend when he read the first draft of the English version. Anna Kartsonis and Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, each in her own special way, introduced me into the true secrets of Byzantine sources. My friend Henk van Os, now director of the Rijks-Museum at Amsterdam, shared my experience with images at Siena, on which he is the living authority. Richard Krautheimer, who generously received me in his beautiful office facing the Ss. Trinità dei Monti, had a watchful eye on the progress of my work at Rome. Ernst Kitzinger, Oxford, my former supervisor in America proved to be a faithful adviser

in all matters of images. Peter Brown, Princeton, whom I would have liked to meet more often, shared with me the authority and enthusiasm which are his own. Finally, my special gratitude goes to Renate Prochno who contributed so much to the completion of the book.

I am indebted to many colleagues for offering me access either to usually inaccessible images or to photographic materials difficult to obtain. First of all, Kurt Weitzmann opened the rich resources of the photographs from Mount Sinai to me with a rare generosity. G. Mancinelli accompanied me to the private quarters of the pope, where I could inspect what I regard the oldest Christ icon in existence. M. Andarolo made the Marian icon at Spoleto descend from the huge baroque altarpiece for me. Valentino Pace opened many doors for me which otherwise would have remained closed. The memories related to all the unusual events which happened before and during the encounter of famous images would fill several pages. I wish to thank all the people who participated in such events, and beg their pardon for not naming everybody at this place with due attention.

At Munich, precious assistance came from members of my department at the university, particularly from Gabriele Kopp-Schmidt, Gabor Ferencz, and Sonya Nausch, but also from the publishing house C. H. Beck and its member Karin Beth. At the University of Chicago Press, I would like to thank Karen Wilson for her true devotion in making this book possible despite the countless obstacles. Craig Noll, the final copyeditor, offered real support in a difficult time.

## 1. Introduction

### *a. The Power of Images and the Limitations of Theologians*

Whenever images threatened to gain undue influence within the church, theologians have sought to strip them of their power.<sup>1</sup> As soon as images became more popular than the church's institutions and began to act directly in God's name, they became undesirable. It was never easy to control images with words because, like saints, they engaged deeper levels of experience and fulfilled desires other than the ones living church authorities were able to address. Therefore when theologians commented on some issue involving images, they invariably confirmed an already-existing practice. Rather than introducing images, theologians were all too ready to ban them. Only after the faithful had resisted all such efforts against their favorite images did theologians settle for issuing conditions and limitations governing access to them. Theologians were satisfied only when they could "explain" the images.

From the earliest times, the role of images has been apparent from the symbolic actions performed for them by their advocates, as well as against them by their opponents. Images lend themselves equally to being displayed and venerated and to being desecrated and destroyed. As surrogates for what they represent, images function specifically to elicit public displays of loyalty or disloyalty. Public professions of faith are part of the discipline that every religion requires of its faithful. Christians frequently harassed Jews, heretics, and unbelievers by accusing them of secretly desecrating sacred images. To such desecration the "injured" images, as Leopold Kretzenbacher has called them, reacted like living people by weeping or bleeding. Whenever miscreants laid hands on such material symbols of faith as image, relic, or Eucharist, they proved themselves to be saboteurs of the unity of faith, which in principle tolerates no infringement. Thus as soon as a cult of images began to flourish, minorities had to live in fear of being denounced as its assailants. Examples extend well beyond the Reformation; Joseph Roth recently described such events in Galicia.

Images aroused a different kind of controversy when the parties were arguing about the "correct" or "incorrect" presentation of the images they had in common. Here the issue was the purity of the faith. The Eastern and Western churches were sometimes as much at odds over the iconography of images as they were linguistically in the *filioque* dispute. When he proclaimed the schism of the church in Constantinople in 1054, the papal legate criticized the Greeks for presenting the image of a mortal man on the cross, thereby depicting Jesus as dead. Equally, when the Greeks came to Italy for the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438, they were unable to pray before Western sacred images, whose form was unfamiliar to them. Thus Patriarch Gregory Melissenos argued against the proposed church union: "When I enter a Latin church, I can pray to none of the saints depicted there because I recognize none of them. Although I do recognize Christ, I cannot even pray to him because I do not recognize the manner in which he is being depicted."<sup>2</sup> Reservations about associat-

ing with the central images of a religious sect other than one's own reveal a fear of contamination.

Reformation-period theology had difficult issues to contend with when the Calvinists abolished images and the Lutherans modified them (chap. 20). What was fundamentally at stake was church tradition, but as also happened in a different context at Nicaea in 787, the tradition did not speak with one voice on the issue of sacred images. Part of the church saw itself in its visible images, and part saw itself as needing to reject these same images. In the eighth century as in the sixteenth, both sides laid claim to unspoiled tradition, which is generally seen to encompass the identity of a religion. Since no attitude toward images could be established for earliest Christianity, it became necessary to define the tradition itself before proceeding. The debate about images likewise provoked a controversy concerning the true nature of spirituality, which seemed threatened by the "materialism" of the image cults. Later, when the point at issue was whether justification was by faith or by works, the cult and donation of images were included among works.

From the point of view of Catholicism, Protestants no less than Turks were adversaries on the issue of images, as both groups dishonored the images with which Catholicism was identified. Fear of losing the institutional power that the images represented also was apparent. The Albigenses and the Hussites both opposed images, although their real target was the institution behind the images. Conversely, the Counter-Reformation's cult of images was an act of atonement toward them, each new image being intended symbolically to fill the place from which another had been expelled. This polemical use of images culminated in the figure of Mary, because Mary made it possible to present in visible terms the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants. Older icons of the Virgin, now newly revered, served in their fashion to validate a tradition on the strength of their age. Publicly erected Marian columns, like paintings in other times, also were monuments to the church as an institution and to its triumph. The state, as the defender of the church, likewise associated itself with images and their cult. Thus, when revolutionaries in 1918 toppled the Marian column in Prague, they were acting more against the Hapsburg power they identified with it than against the religion it represented.

In the foregoing we have isolated a few aspects of the historical roles of images, since theology alone cannot encompass the image. The question facing us, therefore, is how to discuss images, and which aspects of them to stress. As usual, the answer depends on the interests of the person discussing the subject. Within the specialized field of the art historian, sacred images are of interest only because they have been collected as paintings and used to formulate or illustrate rules governing art. When battles of faith were waged over images, however, the views of art critics were not sought. Only in modern times has it been argued that images should be exempt from contention on the grounds that they are works of art. Art historians, however, would fail to do justice to the subject if they confined their expertise to the analysis of painters and styles. Nor are theologians as well qualified as they might seem. They discuss past theologians' *treatment* of images, not the images themselves. What interests them, when they enter the debate, is the study of their own discipline. Historians,

finally, prefer to deal with texts and political or economic facts, not the deeper levels of experience that images probe.

The mantle of competence displayed by each academic discipline is thus insufficient to cover this field. Images belong to all of them, and to none exclusively. Religious history, as embedded in general history, does not coincide with the discipline of theology, which deals only in the concepts with which theologians have responded to religious practices. Holy images were never the affair of religion alone, but also always of society, which expressed itself in and through religion. Religion was far too central a reality to be, as in our day, merely a personal matter or an affair of the churches. The real role of religious images (for a long time, there were no other kinds of images) thus cannot be understood solely in terms of theological content.

This view is supported by the way theologians have discussed images and continue to discuss them. Their concept of visual images is so general as to exist only on the level of abstraction. They treat the image as a universal, since only this approach can yield a conclusive definition having theological significance. Images that fulfilled very different roles in practice have been reduced for the sake of theory to a single common denominator, shorn of all traces of their actual use. Every *theology* of images possesses a certain conceptual beauty, surpassed only by its claim to being a repository of faith. This claim distinguishes it from the *philosophy* of images, which since Plato has concerned itself with the phenomena of the visible world and the truth of ideas; in this perspective, each material image is the possible object of a linguistic or mental abstraction. The theology of images, however, even if it engaged extensively in this discussion, always had a practical end in view. It supplied the unifying formulas for an otherwise heterogenous, undisciplined use of images. When it achieved its aim and defined a tradition, the polemical dust settled to leave a compromise masquerading as pure doctrine, in which everything appeared, retrospectively, clear and simple.

Only occasionally, when the polemics were in process, did the contending parties admit that they were arguing over a special kind of image, and a special use of images that they identified as "veneration" to distinguish it from the creature's "adoration" of God himself. Reference here was not to the commemorative paintings on church walls but to the images of persons that were used in processions and pilgrimages and for whom incense was burned and candles were lighted. These were deemed to be of very ancient or even celestial origin and to work miracles, make oracular utterances, and win victories. Although they were bones of contention or touchstones of belief, they had no special status in any theological doctrine of images. Only cult legends granted them their respective status. Even their opponents could attack them and refute them theologically only in general terms; they could not attack the specific images themselves.

We can therefore consider these cult images, or "holy images," as Edwyn Bevan has called them in his book of that title, only if we adopt a historical mode of argumentation that traces them back to the context in which they historically played their part. These images represented a local cult or the authority of a local institution, not the general beliefs of a universal church. When the Virgin's statue in the Auvergne, or

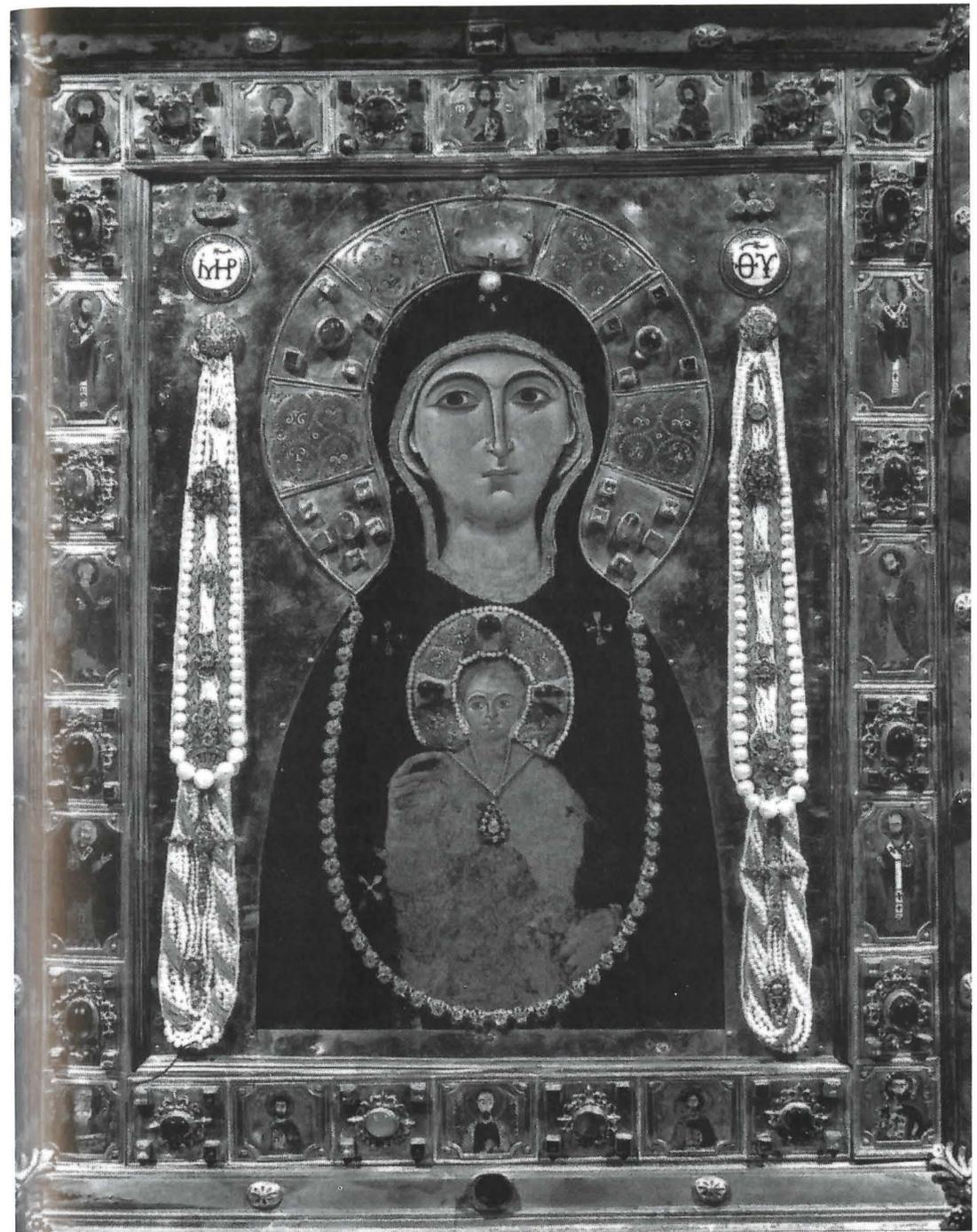
her icon on Mount Athos, was greeted and accompanied like a sovereign, it was acting as a local saint and the advocate of an institution whose rights it upheld and whose property it administered. Even in modern times, symbols of the local community have lost little of their psychological power. A few years ago the Venetians celebrated the return of the Virgin *Nicopeia* to S. Marco, from which it had been forcibly removed. In the old republic the icon had been publicly honored as the true sovereign of the state. The prehistory of its cult in Venice leads back to Byzantium, where in 1203 the icon was seized from the chariot of the opposing general. For the Byzantines it was the embodiment of their celestial commander, to whom the emperors gave precedence at victory celebrations. The Venetians took home this palladium, which they gained as a fruit of victory and which in turn brought them victory, as a part of the "transfer of cults." They placed their community under the icon's protection just as the ancient Greeks had once done with the image of Athena from Troy.

The icon was soon known in Venice as St. Luke's Madonna. It was seen as an original from the days of the apostles, and Mary herself was believed to have posed for it. This "authentic" portrait was naturally preferred by the Virgin, as it showed her "correctly" and had been made with her cooperation; special grace thus accrued to this one painting. It led a unique existence, even a life of its own. At state ceremonies, it was received as if it were an actual person. The image, as object, demanded protection, just as it in turn granted protection as an agent of the one whom it depicted. The intervention of a painter in such a case was deemed something of an intrusion; a painter could not be expected to reproduce the model authentically. Only if one was sure that the painter had recorded the actual living model with the accuracy we today tend to attribute to a photograph, as in the case of St. Luke or the painter whom the Three Kings brought with them to Bethlehem to portray the Mother and Child, could one verify the authenticity of the results.

This concept of veracity makes use of a testimony by tradition, otherwise invoked by Christianity only to prove the authenticity of *texts* of revelation. As applied to images of Christ, the legends of veracity either asserted that a given image had a supernatural origin—in effect, that it had fallen from heaven, or affirmed that Jesus' living body had left an enduring physical impression. Sometimes both legends were used alternately for the same image. The cloth with an impression of Christ's face, which made the Syrian city of Edessa impregnable, and the sudarium of St. Veronica in St. Peter's in Rome, to which the Western world made pilgrimages in anticipation of a future vision of God, are important examples of images that such legends have authenticated.

Besides the legends about origins, there were legends about visions, when a beholder recognized in an image people who had appeared to him or her in a dream, as according to the legend of St. Sylvester, Emperor Constantine identified the images of the apostles Peter and Paul. At the same time Constantine acknowledged the pope, who owned these painted images and who also knew their names as these apostles' rightful earthly representative. In this case the proof of authenticity lay in the correspondence between dream vision and painted image.

A third kind of cult legend, that of miracles, stressed the supratemporal presence



1. Venice, S. Marco; icon of the Nicopeia, 11th century

of saints, who worked miracles through their images after their death, thus demonstrating that they were really still alive. These legends also reinforced the double value that any religion emphasizes, that of age and permanence, history and timelessness.

Authentic images seemed capable of action, seemed to possess *dynamis*, or supernatural power. God and the saints also took up their abode in them, as was expected, and spoke through them. People looked to such images with an expectation of beneficence, which was often more important to the believer than were abstract notions of God or an afterlife. Worshipers lost many advocates for their times of need when the Christian state closed the temples and rural shrines of Asclepius and Isis. Although theologians may view religion primarily as a set of ideas, ordinary worshipers are more concerned with receiving aid in their personal affairs. The new, universal mother figure of the Virgin easily fit into this context. When the Pantheon was consecrated as the church of Mary and all martyrs in 609, it was given a "temple image" of its new patron, whose gilded hand conjured up the aura of the healing hand of Asclepius. The right of asylum, we also learn, was similarly transferred to this icon.

Such images possessed charismatic powers that could turn against church institutions as long as they were excluded from such institutions. They protected minorities and became advocates of the people, since by their nature they stood outside the hierarchy. They spoke without the church's mediation, with a voice directly from heaven, against which any official authority was powerless. Another icon of the Virgin, which later was transferred to S. Sisto, forced the pope to do public penance because he had inappropriately attempted to move it to his residence in the Lateran. It returned in the dead of night to some poor nuns, whose only possession it had been. This Virgin's hands, held up in the supplicant posture of an advocate, also are covered with gold to signify their function as expectant carriers of supplication. The making of many replicas of icons in the Middle Ages reflects the belief that duplicating an original image would extend its power.

Such images, whose fame derived from their history and the miracles they performed, have no proper place in a theology of images. They represent the typical images that were kissed and venerated with bended knee; that is, they were treated like personages who were being approached with personal supplications. In Byzantium it was understood how to honor them so as to distinguish them from other images. In 824 the emperors wrote to tell the Carolingians that they had "removed the images from the low sites" at eye level, where their devotees would "set up lamps and light incense." During the second iconoclastic controversy, therefore, the believers were deprived of every opportunity to practice a cult of images. Left intact, however, were "those images placed in higher locations in churches, where painting, like Holy Scripture, narrates [the history of salvation]." At that time the Frankish theologians understood neither the subtleties of the one party nor the aggression of the other, both of which were fixated in their different ways on the veneration of images. Therefore, the Franks condemned both the "superstitious cult" and the removal of images from the access of the faithful. By the late Middle Ages, however, Western European iconoclasts, even the theologians among them, had long since been confronted with the same problems as their Byzantine precursors and respected the dis-

tinguishing traits that removed particular images from the abstract doctrine of images as such.

Only images that were lifted by an aura of the sacred out of the material world to which they otherwise belonged could take on real power. But what enabled an image to distinguish itself from the ordinary world and be as "holy" as a totally supernatural sign or agent of salvation was? It was, after all, precisely such a quality of "holiness" that originally was denied to images when they still bore the stigma of being dead, pagan idols and that was reserved for the sacraments. But the sacraments too consist of *things* (bread, wine, oil) transformed by priestly consecration. In principle, anything could be consecrated, a fact that would deny any higher status to images; if they depended on being consecrated, they relinquished their power to the consecrating institution. The priests would then not only be more important than the painters but also be the true authors of the holiness of the images. Unlike the hierarchy of the church, however, the miracle-working saints had not been consecrated either. They were the voice of God, either on their own account or by a spontaneous act of grace. Their merit lay in their virtue. Wherein did the merit of images lie? This is where the cult legends, which explained everything by the will of God, came in. If God created images himself, he did not make use of the established hierarchy. But to argue thus was clearly to touch upon a delicate issue.

The theologians, unable to achieve their demand for consecration, pointed to the "archetype" that was venerated in the copy, thus making use of a philosophical argument. It was protested that, while it was one thing to represent a saint, who had had a visible body, in an image, it was quite another to try to present the invisible God in a visible image. This objection was answered by the formulation of the dual, divine-human nature of Jesus, of which, however, only his human nature could be depicted. An indirect image of God was conveyed by depicting a historical human being who implied the presence of God. The task now remained only to postulate the indivisible unity of the invisible God and the visible human being seen in a single person. Once God was visible as a human being, it was possible to make an image of him as well, and indeed to use the image as a theological weapon. In the seventh century Anastasius thus posed the trick question as to who or what was to be seen in a painting of Christ being crucified. The death that the image was supposed to attest could be neither that of God nor, if one was to believe in the death's redemptive power, that of the human being called Jesus (cf. chap. 7f).

In this way the Christians picked their way between the graven images of polytheism and the ban on images imposed by the Jews. For the Jews, Yahweh was visibly present only in the written word. No image resembling a human being was to be made of him, since it would then resemble the idols of the neighboring tribes. In monotheism, the only way for the universal God to distinguish himself was by invisibility. His icon was the Holy Scripture, which is why Torah scrolls are venerated like cult images by the Jews. But the regional conditions in Palestine could not be extended to the Roman world empire. The conflict with the Jewish Christians was decided in favor of the "heathen church." With the adoption of images, Christendom, once an Oriental church, asserted its claims to universality in the context of Greco-Roman culture.

In so doing, however, it came up against a rival in the form of the emperor, who symbolized a unity that transcended the multiplicity of religions and cults. It is not without reason that war was declared on the Christians only when they refused to make the state image of the emperor an object of cult worship. Before Christianity became the state religion, the emperor was the living image of the one god, the sun god. In his dream vision Constantine saw the sign of the God in whose name he would triumph, and he heard, "In this sign [*signum*] shalt thou conquer." The emperor himself wished to be victorious, not through the aid of an image of a god, but under the sign of the invisible God. He would therefore remain the living image of God, while putting to military use the cross, which served as a sign of the sovereignty of the Christian God. This separation of image and sign is reflected in imperial coinage. From the sixth century the image of the emperor continued to be shown on the face of coins, while the reverse showed the triumphal sign of the cross, which had now become the banner and weapon of the emperor. For a long time the only public image cult that was tolerated in the Christian Roman empire was that of the emperor's image.

81 It was therefore a turning point of major significance when the image of Christ displaced that of the emperor from the face of coins at the end of the seventh century. The emperor, now titled the "servant of Christ," takes in his hand the cross, which had previously adorned the reverse. A few decades earlier, the emperor had made his troops swear their oath of allegiance on the battlefield not to his person but to a painted image of Christ. Such an event makes it apparent that, at the end of antiquity, the unity of the Roman state and its people was clearly no longer sought in the person of the emperor, but in the authority of religion. From then on, the emperor exercised his rule in the name of a painted God.

56 By the same process the cross became the support for an *image*, not of the crucified Christ, but of the Christian God placed in a tondo above it. Whereas in Constantine's day images of the emperor had been fixed to the imperial cross-standard, now the cross was crowned with the image of Christ. During the iconoclastic controversy, the emperors reversed this tendency. The same emperors, not the theologians, then banned Christian images in the name of religion, even if they did so for their own purposes. If the unity of the state resided in the unity of faith, one had to decide for or against the images, which (depending on the time) promoted or endangered such unity.

90 The ensuing dispute was played out between the image of Christ and the imageless sign of the cross. With each political change, one replaced the other over the entrance to the imperial palace, accompanied by polemical inscriptions. Although we might see in this controversy a mere substitution of labels, in this dispute on the threshold of the Middle Ages a conflict was coming to the surface that had its roots far back in the use of images during antiquity. The Christian cult image had forced its way into the preserve of court and state, where the ancient image cult still survived, and it had adopted the latter's rights. The *one* God suddenly became no less a subject for images than the *one* emperor had been up to then. But the understanding of the nature of images in general was also involved. In an image a person is made visible. It

is a different matter with a sign. One can make one's appearance with a sign but not with the help of an image, which implies both appearance and presence. Where God is present, the emperor cannot represent him. It is "the ancient antithesis between representing and being present, between holding the place of someone and being that someone" (Erhart Kästner). It is therefore no accident that the battle between image and sign was fought above the palace gate, through which the emperor presented himself to his people.

It is difficult to encapsulate the conflict over the image in a simple phrase. The theological disputation at the Council of Nicaea, however, was undoubtedly of secondary significance. Like any committee of experts, the theologians could communicate only in their specialized language, but essentially they used the language of theology to ratify decisions that had already been made at a different level. At that level, religion and its images mirror the role of the state, as well as the identity of a society that would either remain a part of antiquity or break with it.

#### b. *Portrait and Memory*

It is difficult to evaluate the significance of the image in European culture. If we remain within the millennium with which this book is concerned, we are everywhere obstructed by written texts, for Christianity is a religion of the word. If we step outside this millennium into the modern period, we find art in our way, a new function that fundamentally transformed the old image. We are so deeply influenced by the "era of art" that we find it hard to imagine the "era of images." Art history therefore simply declared everything to be art in order to bring everything within its domain, thereby effacing the very difference that might have thrown light on our subject.

To avoid being unhistorical despite these obstructions, one might quote documentary sources that refer to images. But the authors of these were theologians, whose interest in images was confined to the question of whether images had any right to exist in the church at all. They frequently quoted each other, making it easy for us today to pick out the main strands of what is called the doctrine of images. Modern criticism in the field of the arts is repetitive, whether from presumptuousness or its opposite; it believes it can provide the necessary explanations merely by repeating the old arguments. If we leave the old explanations behind, we lack firm ground to stand on; if we hold on to them, however, we lose the chance of seeing things in their true light. We might escape into anthropology, studying the basic features of human response to an image. But we have such a firmly established perception of our own culture's history that anthropological discoveries continue to be treated like arbitrary intrusions into an already-cohesive system. This book therefore follows the well-tried course of narrative, gathering material sequentially for an analysis of the historical perception. I would like to preface the narrative with a few observations on the problems that threaten such a framework.

In all the medieval sources the watchword *memoria* occurs over and over again. What kind of memory or recollection does it imply? According to Gregory the Great, painting, "like writing," induces remembrance. "To call back to memory" is, first of all, the task of the Scriptures, with the image able to play only a supporting role.

Image and Scripture together recall what happened in the story of salvation, which is more than a historical fact. The same Gregory states concisely in his famous Ninth Letter that one should venerate him "whom the image recalls to memory as a newborn child or in death, and finally in his heavenly glory [*aut natum aut passum sed et in throno sedentem*]."

This statement gives a foretaste of the problems our subject will present. People are disposed to venerate what is visibly before their eyes, which can be only a person, not a narrative. Images contain moments from a narrative, although they themselves are not narratives. The child on its mother's lap and the dead man on the cross recall the two focal points of a historical life. The differences between them are the outcome of historical factors and consequently make possible remembrance *within* or *through* the image. The image, however, is comprehensible only through being recognized from the Scriptures. It reminds us of what the Scriptures narrate and secondarily makes possible a cult of the person and of memory.

Besides images of God, however, there are images of the saints, a simpler subject for recollection. The exempla of their virtuous lives are what is really remembered, but that is only part of the truth. Saints were remembered not only through their legends but also through their portraits. Only the portrait, or image, has the presence necessary for veneration, whereas the narrative exists only in the past. Moreover, the saint is not only an ethical model but also a heavenly authority whose aid is sought in current earthly need.

In the pictorial history of Christ and the saints, the portrait, or *imago*, always ranked higher than the narrative image, or *historia*. More so than with the biblical or hagiographic history, the portrait makes it hard to understand the function of memory and everything connected with it. It is not enough to see the cult portrait as a symbol of *presence* and the narrative picture as a symbol of *history*. The portrait, too, derives power from its claim to historicity, from the existence of a historical person. Remembrance, we may say, had different meanings that we must bring together, since they are not self-evident.

The mnemonic techniques of antiquity, which were further extended in the Middle Ages, are of little help. The "art of memory" (*ars memoriae*) was developed in rhetoric but was extended in the Middle Ages to the practice of virtue. To assure a functioning technique of recollection, this method used inner, or invisible, images that were memorized in order to retain the thread of memory. They were supplemented by visible memory aids, however, which in turn served only as means to the end of memory training.

The cultic sphere is concerned not with the *art* of memory in this sense but with the *content* of memory. The present lies between two realities of far higher significance: the past and future self-revelation of God in history. People were always aware of time as moving between these two poles. Memory thus had a retrospective and, curious as it sounds, a prospective character. Its object was not only what had happened but what was promised. Outside of religion, this kind of consciousness of time has become remote to us.

In the medieval context the image was the representative or symbol of something

that could be experienced only indirectly in the present, namely, the former and future presence of God in the life of humankind. An image shared with its beholder a present in which only a little of the divine activity was visible. At the same time, the image reached into the immediate experience of God in past history and likewise ahead to a promised time to come. Thus a prayer quoted by Matthew Paris refers to the icon of Christ in Rome as a memento (*memoriale*) left behind by Jesus as a promise of the vision of God in eternity (see text 37E in the Appendix).

The theme of portrait and remembrance can be encompassed neither by Aby Warburg's concept of "mnemosyne" nor by C. G. Jung's "archetypes." The kind of cultural recollection that includes artworks and artists has a different profile. Ancient images and symbols in our cultural repertoire were, for Warburg, evidence of the survival of antiquity. However, the continuity of symbols within a discontinuity in their use is a theme that transcends his field of study, the Renaissance. In our context, the use of pictorial motifs from antiquity that could not claim any religious significance during the Renaissance actually may have been a means of emancipation from the icon images that concern us. As for C. G. Jung's archetypes, they are located in the collective unconscious and are thus exempt from the claims made by the images of our study. It is quite possible that stereotypes from our natural stock of images could also be discovered in the official icons of the church (e.g., Mary as mother), but here we cannot pursue such an argument.

The attraction of our subject lies in the fact that as a theme of religious history it is as present as it is absent: present because the Christian religion extends into the present, and absent because it now has a different position in our culture. Only occasionally, in the Mediterranean Catholic area, do we now come across popular practices that had ceased to be universal customs by the end of the Middle Ages. One such occasion was the proclamation in November 1987 of a new saint who lived in Naples and is venerated in the church of Gesù Nuovo in that city. The canonization of the doctor Giuseppe Moscati (d. 1927) was celebrated in Naples with liturgical pomp and with a monumental ceremonial image, a modern icon, displayed on the altar above the tomb.

The larger than life-size photograph fills a Baroque altar-tabernacle that had previously held a painted image. The suit worn in the photo shows that the saint was a layman; in other pictures distributed at the time, he was wearing a doctor's smock. The location of the image makes clear its cultic claims. The authenticity inherent in a photo supports the claims of authentic appearance always raised by icons; the image was to give an impression of the person and to provide the experience of a personal encounter. In this case, the enlargement of the Moscati photo was dictated by expediency. It had to fit the altar format and thus be different from ordinary photos. By contrast, an icon in the Middle Ages was typically life-size. Its origins were often surrounded by legend, so that it could not be unequivocally identified as a man-made object: Seen in this light, the photo in Naples, particularly with its special aura, was a practical solution. The portrait keeps the saint present in the general memory at the site of his grave and is easily seen by those visiting the tomb in order to pray to the saint. (There is no need to pray *for* him, as for an ordinary mortal.)



2. Naples, Il Gesù Nuovo; photograph-altarpiece of St. Giuseppe Moscati, 1987

In this case the pictorial propaganda was supplemented by verbal propaganda having two themes that also followed the old practice of the cult of saints. Printed leaflets contained the remarkable biography, always regarded as a guarantee of sanctity, and a prayer asking for the grace to imitate the life portrayed. The saint thus as model for imitation is one theme. The other theme—of the saint as helper in times of need—was only implied. Moscati had treated the sick without charge even during his lifetime. Finally, visitors took souvenir pictures away with them, thereby multiplying the locations of the official photo.

Usually the historical person fulfills a preexisting ideal of the saint. The Neapolitan doctor is an example of this pattern. But sometimes the relationship was reversed. If the person of the saint did not fit the traditional patterns, there was a need to formulate the ideal that the person did embody. This could be a laborious process, which can be illustrated by a famous example. After his death St. Francis of Assisi received one new look after another because he had to represent *in effigie* the latest version of his order's ideal. His image was used in conjunction with his biography (chap. 18a). New biographies corrected previous ones to such an extent that the older versions had to be destroyed to hide the discrepancies. Ceremonial images were likewise replaced by new ones because the official ideal had to be without error. The images, after all, had to be not only looked at but, more, believed in. Thus the "corrected image" was a consequence of the "correct" perception one was supposed to have of the saint.

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The relationship between the painted image of St. Francis and the normative idea that one had of his person leads us to problems of analysis that we would not necessarily expect with portraits. Our modern concept of portraiture gets in the way. With the repeated changing of the appearance of St. Francis (his beard or lack of it, the stigmata, his posture, attributes, and associations with the appearance of Christ), the "image" that people had of his person was successively corrected. The function of the portrait in the propagation of a *person-ideal* is thus made apparent to us.

The icon of St. Francis was enlarged, as had been done previously in Byzantium, by pictorial citations from his biography, which surround the portrait like a frame or a painted commentary. They supplement the *physical* portrait of the likeness with the *ethical* portrait of the biography, and with the miracles attesting to the saint's divine approbation. Finally, an important experiential aspect of the icon was its ceremonial display. It was exhibited on Francis's feast days, when readings from his biography were also part of the ceremony. The memorial feast provided the congregation with the memory exercises of the texts and had its focus and culmination in the memorial image. When the image was venerated, a ritual memory exercise was thus performed. Often, access to an image was permitted only when there was an official occasion to honor it. It could not be contemplated at will but was acclaimed only in an act of solidarity with the community according to a prescribed program on an appointed day. This practice we identify as a *cult*.

The image had several functions. Besides defining the saint and honoring him or her in the cult, the image also had a function relating to the place where it resided. The presence of the local saint was, as it were, condensed in a corporeal image that

13 had a physical existence as a panel or statue and a special appearance as an image type, an appearance that distinguished it from images of the same saint in different places. Images of Mary, for example, always distinguished themselves visibly from each other according to the features attributed to local copies. Likewise, the old image titles have a toponymous character: they name the place of a cult. The connection between image and cult therefore has, as we see, many aspects. The memory an image evoked referred both to its own history and to that of its place. Copies were made in order to spread the veneration of the image beyond the local place, even as they reinforced the connection between the original and its own locality. The memory tied to the original therefore remained undivided. The copies recalled the original of a famous local image, which in its turn recalled the privileges that it had acquired in (and for) its own place during its history. In this sense, image and memory become an aspect of legal history.

The legends surrounding the origins of famous images helped to clarify the memory value they ultimately acquired through their history. These legends concerned more than the historical circumstances that guaranteed the authentic appearance of the person depicted. The myth of origin also vouched for the rank of a particular image, which was inferred from its age (or its supernatural origin). Age was a quality to be read in the image's general appearance. Its form therefore also had a (real or fictitious) memory value. Archaism as a fiction of age is one of the marks of identity that new cult images simulated (chap. 19d).

*c. The Images' Loss of Power and Their New Role as Art*

The account of the power of images given so far in this Introduction remains incomplete as long as the other half of their history has not been told. It concerns the images' loss of power in the Reformation. As this is to be discussed in detail later (chap. 20), a few general reflections will suffice here. The successful opposition to images in the Reformation might be taken as evidence that the images in fact lacked power, at least relative to the written word and the interpretations of the preachers. In reality the late seizure of power by the theologians confirms the latter's earlier impotence. The toleration of images, whose function formal theology had repeatedly rationalized, now ended.

Many factors played a part before this revolt of the theologians against images occurred. A simple explanation is not possible. In what they say, the theologians merely repeat the principles of a purified doctrine, leaving out whatever does not fit neatly into their theology. But in what they do, the theologians give us an idea of the privileges enjoyed by images that stood in their way. From the criticism of images in the Reformation, therefore, we are able to draw conclusions about the prior use of images. What is now condemned as abuse was accepted custom earlier.

Emancipation from the old institutions was one of the most important motives behind the leaders of the Reformation becoming iconoclasts. Their program envisaged a new church made up of the preacher and his congregation. Luther's liberal attitude still left room for images, but they were images used for didactic purposes, to reinforce the revelation of the word (text 40). This limitation divested the images of

the very aura that was a precondition of their cult. It followed that they could and should no longer represent any institution. They were, in any case, discredited in conjunction with the previous doctrine of the justification of Christians by means of their works. The new doctrine of justification by faith alone made pious donations of or for images superfluous. The whole concept of the votive image collapsed, and with it the Roman church's claim to be an institution that dispensed grace and privileges visibly embodied in its relics and images. What the new doctrine left in place was theologians without institutional power, preachers of the word legitimated only by their superior theology. Where everything was based on truth and unambiguity, no room was left for the image with its equivocality.

The idea of tradition, on which the Roman church had always prided itself, now became the church's handicap. Tradition no longer consisted of the great age of church institutions and the long history of textual interpretation; instead, it was seen to reside in the original condition of the founders' church, which was to be restored by purifying it of later accretions. The rebirth of the early church in the Renaissance period, after many unsuccessful attempts in the Middle Ages, provided the necessary retrospective justification for modern reformed religious practices. Thereby, an imageless church was defined that, in the person of Paul, had opposed the image worship of the heathens.

The link to the early church is evident in the fixation on the authentic word of God. The preacher interprets the biblical text solely on the basis of faith, without needing to refer to prior church exegesis. In the Gutenberg era the divine word was in theory made available to everyone by means of Bibles printed in the vernacular. God's word was thus constantly accessible, which permitted a check on interpretations. The direct presence of the biblical word, however, also allowed the preacher to exert control over the people of his congregation, who were expected to live according to its pure doctrine. The purity of doctrine was determined by the letter of the text, as understood through the guidance of the Spirit of God. Against such an authoritative text, the image lacked force; when substituted for the word, it always posed a threat because of its imprecision and the possibility of misunderstanding.

The word is assimilated by hearing and reading, not by seeing. The unity of outer and inner experience that guided persons in the Middle Ages breaks down into a rigorous dualism of spirit and matter, but also of subject and world, as expressed in the teachings of Calvin (text 41). The eye no longer discovers evidence for the presence of God in images or in the physical world; God reveals himself only through his word. The word as bearer of the spirit is just as abstract as is the new concept of God; religion has become an ethical code of living. The word does not depict or show anything but is a sign of the covenant. God's distance prohibits his presence in a painted representation, sensually comprehended. The modern subject, estranged from the world, sees the world as severed into the purely factual and the hidden signification of metaphor. But the old image rejected reduction into metaphor; rather, it laid claim to being immediate evidence of God's presence revealed to the eyes and senses.

In the meanwhile, the same image suddenly appears as the symbol of an archaic

mentality that still promised a harmony between world and subject. Into its place steps *art*, which inserts a new level of meaning between the visual appearance of the image and the understanding of the beholder. Art becomes the sphere of the artist, who assumes control of the image as proof of his or her art. The crisis of the old image and the emergence of the new concept of art are interdependent. Aesthetic mediation allows a different use of images, about which artist and beholder can agree between themselves. Subjects seize power over the image and seek through art to apply their metaphoric concept of the world. The image, henceforth produced according to the rules of art and deciphered in terms of them, presents itself to the beholder as an object of reflection. Form and content renounce their unmediated meaning in favor of the mediated meaning of aesthetic experience and concealed argumentation.

The surrender of the image to the beholder is tangibly expressed at this time in the emergence of art collections, in which pictures represent humanistic themes and the beauty of art. Even Calvin accepted the use of images for these purposes. Although he believed that they could represent only the visible, this did not preclude a reappraisal of the visible world by the meditative subject. The Protestant Reformers did not create this change of consciousness vis-à-vis the image; indeed, in this respect they were themselves the children of their time. What they rejected in the name of religion had long since lost the old substance of unmediated pictorial revelation. I do not say this with any nostalgic intent, but only to describe the fascinating process whereby the medieval cult image became the artwork of the modern era.

This process also took place in the Catholic world, and not only as a reaction to Reformation criticism. In the Netherlands the Reformation was not officially introduced until 1568. By then, however, the transformation of the image that we have described had long since been completed. To uphold the claims of the cult image in an era of art, the Roman church needed to establish new attitudes toward images. The old claims now tended to be reserved for ancient images that appeared as relics of a bygone age. They were always thought of as images from the earliest stage of Christianity, and thus intended as a visible refutation of the Reformation's concept of tradition. In these cases contemporary art was given the task of providing the effective presentation of the old image. This was an important program during the Counter-Reformation.

As is to be expected, all such presentations of history contain an element of exaggeration. Humankind has never freed itself from the power of images, but this power has been exerted by different images in different ways at different times. There is no such thing as a historical caesura at which humanity changes out of all recognition. But the history of religion or the history of the human subject, both of which are inseparable from the history of the image, cannot be narrated without a schema of history. Certainly, it is impossible to deny that the Reformation and the formation of art collections changed the situation. The aesthetic sphere provided, so to speak, a kind of reconciliation between the lost way of experiencing images and the one that remained. The interplay of perception and interpretation that is pursued in the visual arts, as in literature, demands the expert or connoisseur, someone who knows the rules of the game.

## 2. The Icon from a Modern Perspective and in Light of Its History

This book is concerned not only with icons but with statues and relics—and indeed every kind of venerated image. Unlike medieval cult images in the West, the Eastern icon has always enjoyed a special place in modern thinking. The origin of its unique status is to be sought in the curious history of its rediscovery. Romantic utopias played a part in the mystique of icons but soon were dominated by issues of identity in Eastern Europe, for the East used the icon as a means of self-assertion against the established culture of the rest of Europe by placing the icon outside the realm of historical thought. Today, emigrants from an Eastern Orthodox background and religious souls yearning for a pure, “original” art vie with each other in their cult of the icon itself, a cult satisfied willy-nilly by any example. This book is not written for them.

The theme of the Christian cult image between antiquity and the Renaissance, overshadowed as it is by the Eastern icon, has no secure place in intellectual history and in fact gives rise to nothing but misunderstanding. The modern panel painting is seen as having emerged, as if from nowhere, in the form of the devotional image, which developed in the context of late medieval mysticism and simultaneously as the initial concern of Renaissance collectors. The medieval cult statue is included in the historical study of sculpture as such. The early panels in Rome are simplistically said to reflect Byzantine “influence,” and the Eastern icon, perceived in isolation from medieval panel painting, has always been of more interest to theologians and poets than to art historians, if only because it does not seem to fit into any pattern of a true historical development. We can clear a way for our study only by reconstructing the history of the modern perception of the icon, since it is the continuing influence of this perception that blocks a new approach to the subject.

### *a. The “Painter’s Manual of Mount Athos” and Romanticism*

In 1839 the Frenchman Adolphe Napoléon Didron was traveling on Mount Athos in Greece, just as the independent Kingdom of Greece was formed under a member of the House of Wittelsbach.<sup>1</sup> He was one of the first Westerners to take an interest in the religious art of the Eastern church. Discovering that Eastern images always turned out so similar to one another, he wondered how this dogmatically fixed iconography, which did not reveal any historical change, had come into being.

Didron’s excitement grew when he observed a number of painters on Mount Athos who were painting a fresco freehand, without preparatory drawings, and doing so with such precision that the issue of their training became a concern for him. The answer seemed to lie in a manual of religious painting that was presented to him, the now-famous *Painter’s Manual of Mount Athos*. Didron published the text in French, after having the original transcribed by a scholar of Greek. He also presented a copy to the Greek king, who deposited it in Munich, thus providing Godehard Schäfer with

workshop had already provided Duccio's atelier with models for the frame motifs, which help to organize the content of the Pisan retable. The icons in the main zone illustrate the local cult program, which is based on the liturgical plan of the Dominican order. The three other zones enlarge this core into an overview of the order, within the context of the story of salvation and the church. They include the prophets in the pediment fields, the apostles in the gallery zone, and the saints (including the doctors of the church as well as Thomas Aquinas, not yet canonized) in the predella.

243 This is not the place to analyze this highly sophisticated program.<sup>83</sup> But we may notice the change in the use of the altarpiece that, compared with Duccio's retable, displays the church's role in the plan of salvation by way of a picture wall like a pictorial sermon, as it had been in use on Gothic church facades. Within a well-balanced structure of ideas, the individual image loses its status as an icon and instead plays its part in the didactic promulgation of the faith, which the order subscribed to. This is the reason for the emphasis given to books, which all the saints are reading or writing. Vertical links connect the individual picture zones, in which the saints are characterized by their place in the plan of salvation rather than by personal qualities. Despite the brilliance of this contribution to the genre, one must also note the loss of the altarpiece's old function as an icon frieze. In the service of the theologians, the image here has become a means to an end.

In considering the early history of the altarpiece, one cannot fail to be surprised by the part that, after initial hesitation, the mendicant orders have played. First they displayed the images only at special feasts. Then they left the cult of images to the lay confraternities. Finally, they decided to use this medium for propaganda on their own behalf, as they had done earlier with the panel cross. In this effort they were dependent on donors, but more and more bishops emerged from their own ranks who used the income of their office to make contributions to their old monasteries. This relationship can be proved in detail in the case of Simone Martini's altarpiece for S. Domenico in Orvieto.<sup>84</sup> Gradually, the clergy at large responded to the competition, and in 1320 the bishop of Arezzo ordered a similarly expensive altarpiece from Pietro Lorenzetti. In the life of the towns, however, the advocates of the image up to then were the lay confraternities, in competition with the mendicant orders.

#### *d. Duccio's Synthesis in the Altarpiece for Siena Cathedral*

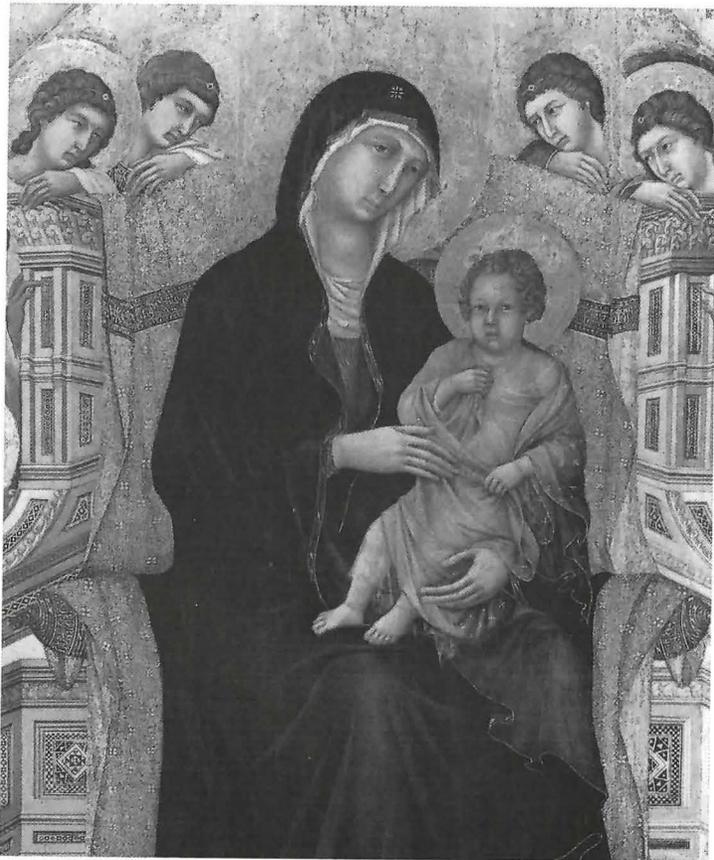
It has long been known that Duccio conflated two important traditions of the image for the high altar of Siena cathedral: the Marian panel and the altarpiece as polyptych.<sup>85</sup> But he worked on public commission and thus must have put into practice a program devised by the civic authorities. Such an image for the cathedral, sponsored by the town, was still unknown in Florence. At the time, cathedrals were under construction in other cities as well. In Florence, however, work on the facade did not advance very far. In Siena, too, the building of the facade gradually came to a halt. Soon the gigantic plan of using the central nave as the transept of a cathedral of unprecedented size had to be abandoned. In Lucca the cathedral was enlarged behind the new facade. In Pisa, where the existing cathedral could not be surpassed, the baptistery was completed and the Camposanto built. Giovanni Pisano created the chancel

and a new portal for the cathedral; above the portal an angel introduces a personification of Pisa and the emperor to the Madonna.<sup>86</sup> For the facade in Siena, the same Giovanni Pisano had produced the large cycle of prophets who had predicted the miracle of the Virgin Mother, depicting above the main portal the Patroness standing between the personified town and Buonaguida Lucari, who was credited with having consecrated the town to the Mother of God in the cathedral.<sup>87</sup>

Duccio's cathedral altarpiece enters this larger context but as a panel painting 245 remains a singular exception. Its format (498 × 468 cm) again far transcended the limits that had previously been set for panel painting. Also the synthesis of two genres was unprecedented among altarpieces. The city authorities of Massa Marittima attempted to have the work repeated, but the necessary expenses proved prohibitive.<sup>88</sup> Duccio's masterpiece caught the general attention in all of Italy, and Cardinal Stefaneschi commissioned an altarpiece that Giotto was to paint for St. Peter's in Rome, in order to deprive Siena of the renown of having the finest altarpiece in the world.<sup>89</sup>

The high altar in the Siena cathedral was the site of historical events that we know only through the elaboration of later chronicles, which turned them into a city myth. If we believe them, it was the main altar where, in 1260, Buonaguida had deposited the town keys, entrusting them to the protection of the Virgin. The five-part altarpiece with the Madonna del Voto and the town's four patrons, which had stood here ever since, by now looked rather antiquated.<sup>90</sup> This was an excuse for the town to replace it with a new altarpiece, which was to keep the five patrons of the old cathedral image but rephrased them with a full-figure Madonna enthroned between the kneeling male patrons of the town, thus differing from the chancel window of 1287, which also represents the same group.<sup>91</sup> Duccio's altarpiece also includes the theme of the Virgin as *Assunta*, as it concludes the front side with an eight-scene cycle on the death of Mary at the top. The predella at the bottom was adorned with a childhood cycle alternating with prophets, while the reverse showed an extended cycle from the life of Christ. As only the main image on the front enters our context, we can leave aside problems of reconstruction. 237

As is immediately apparent, the main image integrates two separate genres into one. At the center the former panel of the single figure of the Virgin has even kept its old pediment, which has the new function of staging the main figure as a borrowing 245 from other panels (chap. 18b). The broad format with its alignment of saints refers back to the "polyptych," though the latter, as a rule, was confined to half-length icons (sec. c above). The polyptych is quoted again in the frieze of apostles but now has been transformed into a subsidiary motif. The full-length figure of the Madonna required a choir of saints, also shown full-length, for which there was no model in panel painting, and inspired Duccio to risk an impromptu invention of his own. The saints are the same size as the angels who gather around the marble throne. In the foreground, the four male patron saints of the town shift the iconography from the universal church to the commune. The unique features of the cathedral altarpiece stand out when compared with a normal altarpiece, which the patrons of the *Maestà*, the Opera del duomo, also ordered from Duccio for the cathedral hospital.<sup>92</sup> The allusion



245. Siena, Opera del duomo; Duccio, altarpiece for the high altar, 1311

246. Siena, Opera del duomo; Duccio, altarpiece (detail of fig. 245)

to a norm that was at the same time transcended makes the new *Maestà* a complex phenomenon.

The old cathedral image provided the theme for the main figures but did not offer a model for the *Maestà* itself, which up to then had been a single image of the enthroned Madonna. One might wonder, therefore, whether Duccio was alluding to a second model, a *Maestà* now lost, which the city's "council of nine" had commissioned from Duccio in 1302 for "the altar of the palace where they hold office."<sup>93</sup> The cathedral *opera* operated as a civic office, and in 1310 the city government intervened directly to speed up the completion of the new painting for the cathedral.<sup>94</sup> As the cathedral image was repeated by Simone Martini's fresco in the town hall, it is indeed also possible to discern a civic note in the model. It was precisely the Marian panel that had been a means of competition between the confraternities, before it had been usurped in 1302 by the city government itself. The large marble throne so characteristic of many works from Duccio's immediate circle, from Città di Castello to Badia a Isola, clearly derives from Duccio's image in the town hall. The frontal pose of the Child in this model was meant to remind the signori of their civic duties. In the same sense the Child in Simone Martini's town-hall image holds a banderole with an inscription admonishing the beholder to respect justice. The official tone that the Child adopts in the cathedral image is self-explanatory in this context.

Duccio's *Maestà*, which is neither an altarpiece nor a cult image of common type but replaces such images, raises questions that we must consider further. When the city decided to have a new cathedral image, the altarpiece was ill suited to emphasize the Virgin as city patron but provided an opportunity for the city saints to appear in a panoramic image of the heavenly church. The Madonna was addressed as the main patroness of the city in the dedicatory inscription on the steps of the throne. The view of the altarpiece offered the impression that the heavenly court had assembled for the sole purpose of securing Siena's salvation.

Duccio had to swear "with his hand on the Gospel book" to comply with the contract he had concluded with the cathedral *opera* on 9 October 1308 to "paint certain panels intended for the high altar of the main church of S. Maria in Siena."<sup>95</sup> He promised to "paint it and make it as well as he [could] with the help of God." He committed himself not to take on any other commissions during its production, to work on it without interruption, and he was to receive sixteen soldi for each day "on which he [painted] it with his own hands." Two years later the government itself intervened to keep the cost in check and to speed up the completion of the "new and large panel."<sup>96</sup> In June 1311 the time had at last come to order the musicians who were to accompany the finished panel to the cathedral. This happened at midday on 9 July, in a festive procession in which the whole town joined, as Agnolo de Tura's chronicle reported some decades later.<sup>97</sup> It was unusual for an altarpiece, usually a part of the liturgical inventory, to be paraded at the center of a procession like a cult image, on the pattern of the celebrations of the confraternities. When it was finally installed, the *Maestà*, according to the written sources and views of the town from the fifteenth century, was usually concealed by curtains, as was the custom for a cult image.<sup>98</sup>

However, this poses the problem of how a cult image, as discussed in this book, is to be defined in this particular case. For an old "original" had been replaced by a new one whose very newness was emphasized, as well as the beauty created by the citizen Duccio. This new focus shifted the emphasis away from miraculous origins toward the cost of a gift, which the town offered in order to ask the Madonna for protection. A votive character distinguishes all Marian panels commissioned by the confraternities. The *Maestà* had an additional quality as an official gift from the city government, which reaffirmed the city's consecration to the Virgin by a votive image of a size and beauty unprecedented at the time. Thereby the twofold purpose of the early confraternity panels—both to enhance prestige and to affirm identity—was repeated on the level of the city and the state.

The inscription on the panel, one of the first of its kind, sums up its votive character with the inimitable succinctness of dedicatory inscriptions. It is not an artist's inscription but a prayer addressed by the town government to the Madonna, using the terms of the *laudi* and acclamations: "Holy Mother of God, be thou the upholder of peace in Siena and grant [long] life to Duccio, who has painted thee so [extraordinarily beautifully]." Thus the city itself points to the value of the gift it made to the Madonna.

## 19. The Dialogue with the Image: The Era of the Private Image at the End of the Middle Ages

Most of the subjects discussed in what follows have been studied in depth elsewhere, for example, the devotional image, on which this author has written a book.<sup>1</sup> The stream of image production broadened and split into a number of channels that are hardly recognizable as branches of the same river. This invites us to draw together the different developments in order to discover their links, which tend to be lost sight of in individual studies. The purpose here is not to deal exhaustively with, say, mysticism or the winged altar, but to carry on our argument and to pursue further the long history of images and their use.

Once the era of the private image is viewed as a sequence to the period of the public image, the quantitative increase and the qualitative change that take place become evident, provided that we avoid seeing events as taking place in a late period, in the spirit of Huizinga. Only in retrospect does the rise of panel painting and the statue corroborate the common view that the Middle Ages were ending. In the history of genres these two art forms often mark the beginning of a path that, to be sure, soon reaches a threshold (to be discussed in the last chapter) when the image was to undergo a crisis at the same time as it was to adopt the status of art.

Our narrative now will become more difficult. Where there is no unity, we cannot strive for a unified argument. Contradictions are inherent in the picture that the new era offers us. The privatization of the image was part of what was happening: everywhere it came to the fore, even when the new images were still performing their old functions. In court circles, even the use of jewels in sacred art felt the pull of privatization. The old reliquaries are hardly recognizable in the playful forms of the new arts de luxe.

On its part, the public image fought a rearguard action by resisting the urge for almost unlimited change or, in another variant, by assuming a larger and larger scale. Whereas the private images served up one modernism after another, the old became a preserve of traditions in need of protection. Whereas the former tended more and more toward a pocket format, the latter, particularly the winged altars, grew larger as they were used by public sponsors for competition—much like the giant panels of the confraternities of the Virgin in Italy, which we have discussed (chap. 18b). As soon as the portable image spread to all the property-owning classes of society, whether lay or clerical, the church authorities were driven to keep things under control. The old now took on the appearance of a deliberate archaism, which was meant to counterbalance the continuous disintegration of what previously had been the norm of images.

The pluralism of society at the end of the Middle Ages is reflected in the confusing spectrum of religious images that were used. They either were to represent new religious needs, or else they were to serve new social groups that wished to stand out from others. As a result, the images passed from hand to hand, changing as they did