Response:  

Nihil sub Sole Novum  

Michael Cole  

In the field of Renaissance art history, we can usually assign makers’ names to works, and so we do: we avail ourselves of biographical information of a sort that would, for earlier periods, be unimaginable, and we insert the objects we study into stories of their makers’ lives. Our field also provides an unusually rich documentation about how things were made; its wealth of writings about everything from the techniques and technologies of the workshop to the principles of design and composition tempt us to think back from works to their production, to see the object as the result of a vividly knowable operation. We can even aspire to drawing the very words we bring to art from a vintage language of making, one devoted already in the period to the manners and modes of visual expression: the Renaissance was the first moment to see concepts like “hand” and “school,” even “style,” applied to visual works, the first period to fashion artists themselves by mythologizing their real or imagined activities. For these reasons and others, it can seem almost natural to approach Renaissance artifacts with what Nagel and Wood call a “performative” theory of origin. And precisely because the material itself seems to invite this, we too seldom reflect on the art historical habits that Nagel and Wood acutely characterize.

The fact that Nagel and Wood must resurrect Erwin Panofsky to find a worthy interlocutor suggests that what they present is not just a new theory but an almost forgotten question. If we agree, moreover, that historians of Renaissance art, despite Panofsky’s example, seldom question the basis of the periodization that defines their field, it will come as little surprise that in seeking comparanda for their own model, Nagel and Wood look especially to areas of study that, in part out of necessity, cast their own objects in a different light. More specifically, what Nagel and Wood at least sometimes seem to advocate is that we look at our materials as a medievalist might. This comes through in their recommendations for further reading (Richard Krautheimer, Mary Carruthers, Cyril Mango). It also echoes in a number of their sharpest formulations. Reading that “the dominant metaphor” in the substitution model “is that of the im-

press or the cast,” for example, I could not help but think of Gerhard Wolf’s recent book, Schleier und Spiegel, which explores the way that Renaissance conceptions of the picture depended on but also departed from medieval ideas about the image of Christ—especially the vera icon, or “true image,” the face left on the veil that Saint Veronica laid against it. One of the things that intrigues Wolf is how in the years leading up to the Renaissance, the notion of the “original” that the vera icon exemplified began to change: continued reverence for and copying of the sudarium notwithstanding, artists gradually began to move their own work, composed in the head or in the heart, into the position of the Urbild, or prototype.¹ Wolf’s book, in turn, is most pointedly in dialogue with Hans Belting’s Bild und Kult (translated into English as Likeness and Presence), a survey that describes itself as “a history of the image before the era of art.” The scope of Belting’s study is somewhat broader than Wolf’s, but here, too, the manufactured object is frequently counterposed to the replica—the idea, as Nagel and Wood elegantly put it, of “types associated with mythical, dimly perceived origin and enforcing general structural or categorical continuity across sequences of tokens.” Consider how Belting taxonomizes the earliest prints: on the one hand, there was the mass-produced devotional image, “a substitute or derivative that spoke not with its own voice but with the voice of its model”; on the other, the sheet that explored new compositions, above all, the engraving, which “soon became an opportunity to demonstrate technical virtuosity and thematic inventiveness.”² Or again, here in more dialectical fashion, witness the way Belting thinks about Netherlandish panel painting: “It is not an invention,” he writes of a Madonna and Child in Kansas City often attributed to Hayne of Brussels, “but repeats the very type on which its cult value depended. At the same time, however, it is a product by the hand of an eminent painter, whose technique and style determined its artistic value.”³ One gets the impression that for Belting, what defines the waning of the Middle Ages is the coexistence, even within the same work, of “the image” and “art.”

Comparing what Nagel and Wood refer to as the “principle of substitution” with Belting’s idea of the Bild or with Wolf’s em-
problem of the “veil,” accordingly, brings some of what is new in Nagel and Wood’s model of anachronism into sharper focus. Notable, to begin with, is their insistence that the topic that concerns them is specifically that of Renaissance anachronism. Nagel and Wood reject what “all parties”—not just Panofsky, they remark, but also Krautheimer and Georges Didi-Huberman—agree on, “that the Italian Renaissance imposed the contrivance of cognitive distance on the fluid, memory-based models of historical time that prevailed in the Middle Ages.” The polemic of the essay, in other words, is directed not only against the way Renaissance scholars approach their field but also against the way medievalists frame theirs. With Belting and Wolf, too, we might observe, it is in contrast to the medieval tradition of the iconic image, the divine picture that authenticates even its copies as “true,” that the period we think of as the Renaissance gains definition. Though the idea of a picture that is, as it were, guaranteed by an earlier one survives into the sixteenth century, that survival is shadowed by a broader paradigm shift. For Belting, the forces that began working against the old idea include the rise of art collecting and, eventually, the Reformation; for Wolf, they include the recovery of classical etiologies of the image and the invention of new ones. In both books, nothing is more transformative than the growing internalization of images, the sense, increasingly common in the later Middle Ages, that the image might both press on and flow from the imagination.

To question the contours of these accounts is to open up new horizons for historians of Renaissance art: when we’re looking for what is different, or original, in our period, we invariably find it; what Nagel and Wood’s powerful thesis offers is a way to break the circle. Their arguments, it seems to me, give us new terms for thinking, for example, about the centrality of copying in most of Renaissance Europe’s artistic pedagogies, about the willingness, especially among the historically minded to destroy older works that had found better modern doubles, and about what it might mean for the works of a modern painter or architect to become “iconic.” At the same time, the objects that served as watershed for the authors mentioned above—frequently those that most insistently draw our attention to performance—are likely to present Nagel and Wood with some of their most challenging territory. When Jan van Eyck makes a panel that, in its way, repeats the portrait of Christ that a series of predecessors had left him, then signs and dates the work, declaring it to be a painting of his own creation and of his own moment, this looks indeed like “the emergence of authorial self-consciousness against the model of the Byzantine icon.” Less easy to see is how that same picture, or any following its example, can still also allow a point of view according to which “no human subject is involved.” Wolf underscores the fact that van Eyck’s copists, in turn, repeated not only the date they found on his picture but also the signature; we can continue to maintain, in view of a work like this, that “[t]he literal circumstances and the historical moment of an artifact’s material execution were not routinely taken as components of its meaning or function”? And if this is true of van Eyck’s work—and not just of the copy done after it—why should we take it as an example of Renaissance anachronism, rather than as an indication that artists and viewers alike remained conceptual denizens of the long Middle Ages? At the end of the essay, the authors write: “We are not proposing simply that substitution was a medieval way of thinking about artifacts that persisted but was finally vanquished in the Renaissance.” They do seem to be proposing, though, that it was a medieval way of thinking, and that it persisted: Is the resistance, then, just to the idea that the medieval principle of substitution eventually succumbed to the logic of performance? Does the principle of substitution, as they see it, continue to hold into the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth centuries?

Another area in which Nagel and Wood’s model stands apart from other characterizations of the substitutionary image is in the way that it handles (or declines to handle) categoric subject matter. Wolf and Belting alike, with varying degrees of explicitness, circumscribe the kinds of things to which they mean their arguments to apply. Though Belting’s subtitle promises nothing less than a history of the image, he identifies this largely with the icon tradition, and Wolf’s core material primarily consists of representations of Christ. What Nagel and Wood describe, by contrast, is a single model that applies universally: “images and buildings were understood as tokens of types”; “all artifacts—not just statues but also chairs, panel paintings, even churches—were understood in the premodern period to have a double historicity”; “the pattern of dialectical interference between the two theories so clearly diagrammed by Carpaccio’s painting was constitutive of all European art in this period.” Where the temporality of the artwork was concerned, in other words, there was, for Renaissance artists and viewers, no difference in principle between icons and other manufactured objects.

Such an approach would elide or minimize the relevance of a whole series of antitheses that early texts might seem to encourage. Klaus Krüger has recently stressed, for example, that when the Oratorians at the Chiesa Nuova in Rome commissioned an altarpiece from Peter Paul Rubens, the documents (including a letter by the artist himself) distinguished between the quadro, the painting Rubens was to deliver, and the immagine, the miraculous icon it was to ornament.6 The idea that those two kinds of picture would require two different terms seems consistent with the contrasts that Belting has drawn, and even with his reference to the crucial premodern category as that of the “image.” Other writings—especially those concerned with issues of pictorial decorum—confront the issue of the models to which works of either sort might be related. The Mantuan cleric Gregorio Comanini, for example, borrowing his terms from Plato, distinguished between iconastic imitations, pictures made after things in nature, and fantastic imitations, inventions generated from the painter’s own fantasia and having their basis primarily in the imagination. The distinction bore directly on the kind of seriality that Nagel and Wood describe. The fact that the fantastic subject, as Comanini saw it, was one “never before drawn by anyone else,”6 “never before created,” made it suspect in certain religious contexts; the speakers in Comanini’s dialogue admire Arcimboldo for his hybrids, but when they come to consider a representation of God the Father as an old man, they are satisfied only after they establish that the image was not a result of caprice but a derivation from the biblical vision of Daniel, and therefore, effectively, an authorized image in the tradition of the icon.8 Comanini’s generic categories are premised, that is, on the belief that there were in the Renaissance works without precedent, and in this he
was not alone. One decade earlier, Gabriele Paleotti had compiled a list of painted religious subjects he considered “new” or “lacking in certain authority.” And Paleotti’s attention to the matter, in turn, was undoubtedly prompted by the 1563 decrees of the Council of Trent, which had proscribed the display of anything that might be regarded as an “unwonted image.” What is important here is not the dogma that Tridentine writers attempted to explain but the fact that sixteenth-century thinkers understood a broad group of pictures, including sacred pictures, to have veered from the principle of the prototype. These consisted not merely of images that could be claimed not to have been based on other images—paintings inspired directly by texts, for example—but also of images that seemed to have come essentially from nowhere. When Catholic writers and artists, in the same period, insisted that modern painting, sculpture, and architecture be reconnected to Early Christian images and practices, it was in part against such “unwonted” pictures (or what they took to be such pictures) that they were reacting.

The publications of the cleric and Farnese courtier Giovanni Andrea Gilio da Fabriano raise still more pointed questions. To a degree, Gilio’s concerns resemble those that later exercised Comanini: to demarcate art and truth and to establish guidelines for knowing and respecting the difference. Where Comanini framed the problem in terms of portrayal and ideation, however, Gilio was more interested in literary form. He divided painting into “historical” subjects, essentially depictions of true events (including future events that the Bible foretold), and “poetic” ones, those that showed fabricated stories, adding a third, mixed mode that combined elements of both. In the course of discussing this last category, he directly engaged the topic of anachronism. Recalling that critics had faulted Virgil for employing “Catastropepsim, that is, anticipation in time, or in history, which is nothing other than saying later that which should have been said first, which is nothing other than a change in order,” the speakers in his dialogue go on to consider a motif Michelangelo placed at the center of his depiction of the Flood in the Sistine ceiling, a kind of boat that the speakers ultimately agree to be one that Noah’s contemporaries could not have built. Comparing this instance of anticipations to other representational curiosities (the depiction of the Greek poet Orpheus in Roman garb, the posing of the Quirinal horse tamers in such a way that they act as though they hold bridles when in fact they do not), what emerges is that Gilio considers at least Michelangelo’s version of anachronism to be a fintaione, a fiction. For Gilio, prolepsis was a “figure,” a rhetorical device employed to augment the beauty of the work. Because it compromised the unity of the scene, he maintained, it should be employed only sparingly.

As Nagel and Wood remind us, terming anachronism a “figure” evokes premodern conceptions of time, especially Christian time; theologically informed artists and writers, as Didi-Huberman has also argued, would have been familiar with a system of thinking in which, “as a result of the figural relation, every individual story drawn from Holy Scripture becomes a commemorated past, a prefigured future, and a mysterious present.” Gilio himself, a Dominican priest, must have been well versed in such ideas. Yet this only makes it all the more remarkable that he brings the problem of anachronism into the competition between history and invention in the way that he does, treating it as a signal that the work it shapes is not quite a “historical” subject. Gilio’s terms, to be sure, date to the very late end of the period that interests Nagel and Wood. The broader question his text raises, however, pertains to the earlier decades, too: Where the performative and the substitutive, the poetic and the historical, can be distinguished, does the distinction produce two ways of looking at the same object, or two kinds of object altogether (noting, in either case, that the overlap between the two sides may generate a category in itself)? Is a single model of “Renaissance” anachronism sufficient for Leonardo’s historia and Titian’s poesie, as well as for icons, buildings, and chairs?

It makes sense that the statue on the altar of Carpaccio’s painting should so crystallize the issues Nagel and Wood raise: readers of Wolf will expect the image of Christ to be a substitute, and in the “era of art,” to run up against the implication of the conspicuously and self-consciously artificed work. It is no accident that Didi-Huberman, too, uses the representation of Christ as a primary reference point, and that Belting, like Nagel and Wood, draws attention to Eusebius’s account of the bronze statue at Paneas. One does not, however, expect the same of, say, Mantegna’s Camera degli Sposi, or even, to take one of their examples, of Botticelli’s Primavera. This is, perhaps, the most counterintuitive claim Nagel and Wood make: that the works we admire precisely because they have no precedents would, to Renaissance viewers, have seemed “an ersatz for some earlier, now absent artifact.” If we think of the Primavera, following Charles Dempsey, as a work that could not be but for the coming together of Botticelli and Politian and for the festival culture that marked Lorenzo the Magnificent’s new golden age, how are we to understand that it would have been appreciated for “the referential authority of the work, its transmission of authoritative content, rather than those context-reflexive elements that advertise the moment of the artifact’s production?”

These may be the exceptions that prove the rule. For one. Could always make the case that the Renaissance, with its inerminable sequences of Madonnas, was on the whole distinctly lacking in invention. Nagel and Wood suggest that art historical discourses, built around ideas of authorship and style, are “structurally compelled to misrecognize” the dialectic of the performative and the substitutive, yet do we not teach our students, in their very first encounters with the field, to rely on the inherent repetitiveness of the Western tradition, identifying what they have not seen by assuming its likeness to what they have (or, in a pinch, consulting that great rebuttal to all fantasies of innovation, James Hall’s Subjects and Symbols in Art)? And do we not ourselves, whenever we go source hunting, assuming that the meaning of the work will disclose itself in the knowledge of whence it derives, do the same? Let us hope that Nagel and Wood, turning their lights on the way things relate to their prototypes, provoke all their readers to seriously reexamine the repetitious. We may long have needed Nagel and Wood’s thesis to be true, even if we didn’t know it.

Michael Cole, associate professor of southern European Renaissance and Baroque art at the University of Pennsylvania, is the author of
Cellini and the Principles of Sculpture and co-editor of Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism. He is co-curator of an exhibition, to open in 2006, on the early modern painter-etcher [Department of the History of Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104, mwcole@sas.upenn.edu].

Notes
1. Gerhard Wolf, Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002); see, for example, the discussion of Schongauer on 174.
7. Ibid., 28.
8. Ibid., 74.
12. Ibid., 110–13, esp. 112v: “with anticipationi the work is sometimes made beautiful, and delightful.”

Response:
Time Out of Joint

Claire Farago

And—to pose a question that sums up all of the others—what do we mean by “anachronism”?—Hubert Damisch, “The Theme of Choosing,” 1992

What Erich Auerbach understood as an “omnitemporal” scheme of history that attempts to adopt God’s point of view through figural thinking, grasping history all at once, Wood and Nagel develop into a brilliant reading of material works of art as “the capacity of the figure to embody materially its own signified.” But is it surprising that Wood and Nagel do not acknowledge that their art historical ruminations perform (at a metacritical level) the same operations that occupy the depicted humanist saint in his studio, surrounded by works of art? The most obvious typological structure in Car- paccio’s painting is (the presumed) Cardinal Bessarion’s im- itation of Saint Augustine. A memorializing portrait that captures its sitter receiving a lesson in humility offers many parallels to their stratified acts of interpretation, not the least of which are the multiple ways in which they tease out of the picture a series of distinctions between the discursive manner in which humans come to knowledge over time and the timeless presence of divine knowledge.

The topic of “anachronism” was discussed at length by histo- rians of what came to be known as the French Annales school to express philosophical doubts about the practice of history as an exact science. Reconsiderations of the historian’s “sin of sins,” as Lucien Febvre referred to “anachronism” in 1942, were ini- tially framed by Marc Bloch and Febvre, who worried about historians projecting their mental “equipment [outillage]” onto other eras. The influential concepts of mentalité and longue durée emerged in response to the question of how, if ever, the past is objectively portrayed, given that historians necessarily approach the past from the present, anachronistically, “like a movie reel that is unwound in the opposite direction from which it is viewed.” In other parts of Europe, most famously in Frankfurt, where another “school” was simultaneously forming, similar discussions of the contingency of historical truth developed on the same Marxist foundation. The most sophisticated theoretical model of “anachronism” conceived as a term operating in opposition to “chronism” is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “dialiectal image.”

Any methodological consideration of “anachronism” for the practice of art history deserves to be situated in the context of these conundrums and unfolding critiques of existing models of historical time in relation to the historian’s subjectivity. The artwork’s complex relation to time has al- ways been central to the debates, though they took shape outside the discipline of art history. Karl Marx’s contribution was considerable: the artwork’s temporality was integral to his analysis of the commodity, laying the foundation for all fu- ture discussion on the understanding that what it means to do history must address what history does to members of society. After the revolutions of 1848–50 were crushed throughout Continental Europe, Marx and Friedrich Engels retreated to England, where they revised their short-term plans for attaining social justice through revolution into a long-range educational program intended to prepare the working class for leadership. For the next decade, the British Museum library served as Marx’s humanist study. Not since his shattering critique of the political economy in terms of