Response:  
*Historia* and Anachronism in Renaissance Art  

Charles Dempsey

Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood have presented what is clearly the prolegomenon to a much larger study in which they attempt to re theorize phenomena that have, in fact, in one way or another, received a great deal of attention from art historians at least since Aby Warburg pointed out that in the fifteenth century “the antique as a source of poised and measured beauty—the hallmark of its influence as we have known it since Winckelmann—still counted for comparatively little” and asked his famous question of what then was it about antiquity that “interested” artists of the period.1 The question of itself acknowledges historical self-awareness by Renaissance artists vis-à-vis antiquity. Many historians (well before Erwin Panofsky) had agreed that a sense of historical distance from the classical past seems first to have appeared with Petrarch, who in 1341 wrote in his celebrated letter to Fra Giovanni Colonna (quoted by Patricia Fortini Brown as the prologue to her book *Venice and Antiquity*, significantly subtitled *The Venetian Sense of the Past*),

> Our conversation was concerned largely with history, which we seem to have divided among us, I being more expert, it seemed, in the ancient, by which we meant the time before the Roman rulers celebrated and venerated the name of Christ, and you in recent times, by which we mean the time from then to the present.2

Petrarch’s notion of historical periods is broadly defined, to be sure, and he formulated it when the new age of the recovery of ancient texts was just beginning, which necessitated the humanist invention of the techniques of philology, or the study of language founded in historical principles. Absent such consciousness of history, Giorgio Vasari’s conceptualization and periodization of the development of the arts in early modern Italy into three distinct periods succeeding a fourth, the *maniera greca*, would not have been possible. Like Lorenzo Ghiberti’s before him, Vasari’s ultimate point of departure was Pliny’s account of the historical development, or progress, of ancient art. In this respect Nagel and Wood’s polemic with Panofsky, the theme of the second half of their essay, seems too narrowly focused. So far as the arts are concerned, the roots of their complaint lie with Ghiberti, who had proudly made the setting for the ancient gemstone he thought to be the *sigillum Neronis*, and who in his *Commentarii* distinguished ancient achievement in the arts from the *maniera greca* that succeeded it, and further distinguished this from the modern era that commenced with Giotto and his followers. Above all, their quarell is with Vasari.

What did the humanists actually see in their minds’ eyes when reading the ancient authors? And what did artists look for when studying the ancient models? The classical prototype for Antonio Pisanello’s famous drawing of dancing maenads is all but unrecognizable in the ill-proportioned and ungaily women he drew; the style of Bertoldo di Giovanni’s bronze battle relief is far closer to Ghiberti’s than to the marble sarcophagus on which it is actually modeled; and the young man in Benozzo Gozzoli’s drawing of one of the Qurinal horse tamers evokes not Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s noble simplicity and quiet grandeur so much as a teenage shop assistant, neither unhandsome nor out of the ordinary, who has shed his clothes in order to pose. For Warburg the answer to such questions was to be sought not only in art but also in contemporary art theory (Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo), literature (Petrarch and Luigi Pulci), and such vernacular expressions of popular culture as the celebration of civic rituals (the Festa di San Giovanni and Calendimaggio). In such contexts the figures of the past appeared “not as plaster casts but in person, as figures full of life and color, . . . the embodiment of antiquity as the early Renaissance saw it.”3 He offered as a prime example Baccio Baldini’s engraving of Bacchus and Ariadne, in which the deities appear just as Florentines had actually witnessed them being enacted in the carnival festivities of 1490, for which Lorenzo de’ Medici himself composed the immortal canto di carvo, entitled the *Canzona di Baco*, “Quant’ è bella giovinetta.”4

Warburg’s argument has been often taken up, resisted by some and adapted by others, and in the past twenty years has been the subject of vividly renewed interest in Europe, resulting in a rapidly burgeoning bibliography by German, French, and Italian scholars.5 I have myself tried to develop certain of his perceptions in case studies devoted to Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* and *Mars and Venus*, among others, advancing the argument that in the Renaissance a literal “rebirth” of antiquity (and certainly not in the Winckelmannian sense) was the central issue.6 Save for a few humanist die-hards who insisted that vernacular expression was unworthy of comparison to the ancients, the far more complex ambition entailed a *renovatio*, a remaking of living culture by assimilating it into the more perfect forms of Greek and Roman civilizations, in art as well as in literature. In this way the living forms of the vernacular (which are the expressions of actual experience) might come to equal the achievements of the Greeks and Romans (which were, among other things, the expressions of history), or even to surpass them, as Vasari in fact believed Michelangelo had done.

Hans Belting’s *Likeness and Presence* is a powerful recent contribution to the problems addressed by Nagel and Wood, and it is especially pertinent in that the material discussed is for the most part religious. Belting’s point of departure is Walter Benjamin’s celebrated formulation that two polarities in particular determine the reception of a work of art: its cult value, on the one hand (a notion adumbrated by Warburg’s pioneering interest in art and ritual), and its value as an object for exhibition, on the other.7 Belting posits a medieval concept of the image (*Bild*), which has its own history that develops and changes over time but which on another level paradoxically remains always
the same. He suggests that the age of the cult image, or icon, was gradually superseded by the era of art (Kunst), originating in the Renaissance and lasting down to the present day, when "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." Belting's concept of Kunst encompasses what Nagel and Wood call the performative principle, not really by analogy with J. L. Austin's notion of a speech act, but according to which each work of art is understood to be the creation of an auctor, and what they call "the product of a singular historical performance." Equally, Belting's concept of Bild, by which he means a holy image (or icon), embraces what our authors call the principle of substitution, defined by them as sequential "reinstatation, or the making of "modern copies of painted icons...understood as effective surrogates for lost originals."

Nagel and Wood's substitution principle would seem to me better exemplified by tracing the historical fortunes of two images in particular, the vera icon and the Man of Sorrows. Both were extremely popular, often repeated in art over a long period of time. Belting (followed in this respect by Joseph Koerner in his absorbing discussion of Albrecht Dürer's Self-Portrait in Munich) took them as prime exemplars of an evolving theory, preceding and continuing into the era of art, of an image that could simultaneously be understood as a cult object and as embodying an aesthetic of its own. Each takes its origin from a heavily indulged icon preserved in one of the pilgrimage churches in Rome, the former the sudarium of Veronica in St. Peter's and the latter a Byzantine icon in S. Croce in Gerusalemme that was said to record a vision of Christ granted to Saint Gregory the Great. All later depictions of the two themes explicitly refer to these two cult prototypes, for which they effectively stand as substitutes, even as it can be said (as per Nagel and Wood's argument) that most also exemplify the "performative principle." Dürer's Sudarium Held by Two Angels and Domenico Fetti's Sudarium of Veronica in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, are both exquisite singular performances by an auctor.

So, too, are depictions of the Man of Sorrows by artists as diverse as Lorenzo Monaco and Meister Francke. Even Israel van Meckenem's liturgical copy of the S. Croce icon unmistakably reveals his own distinctive manner and is proudly grazed by the artist's signature. None of these examples, including van Meckenem's engraving, attempts an exact reproduction of a relic-prototype, to which reference is made iconographically but not stylistically. This is because the prototype to which they truly refer is neither a work of art nor a relic, in the same sense, it must be added, that Theodore of Studion's comparison, cited by Nagel and Wood, of the relation of image and prototype to the impress of a seal on various materials at different times does not refer back to an artistic prototype. The prototype is Christ. (This is also clear from the complaint made in 1439 by the Byzantine prelates at the Council of Florence that they could not recognize Christ or his saints in the works of art they saw in Italy.)

The example Nagel and Wood chose to illustrate "a clash between two different versions of the time-artifact relation" (performative and substitutional modes simultaneously at work), Vittore Carpaccio's Saint Augustine in His Study (The Vision of Saint Augustine), is perhaps not entirely appropriate for the purpose. They call it a historical picture. But what does this mean? Although Augustine is no doubt a historical figure, Carpaccio made no attempt to show him in a fifth-century setting, which is why the painting is often claimed to be a very accurate depiction of the characteristic studiolo of a Venetian humanist cleric. Far from having an "all'antica flavor" that conjures up Augustine's historical world, this studiolo has not a single object in it that can be securely identified as ancient. Indeed, the room seems insistently up-to-date in its furnishings, books, astronomical equipment, and even objects d'art. The bell on the saint's desk and bronze horse on his shelf both appear to be characteristic Paduan productions of the later quattrocento, as do the statuette of Venus Felix by Antico and the bronze Resurrected Christ on the altar, deriving from the bronze Redentore made in the 1490s for the altar of S. Maria della Carità. The reasons for attributing this statue to Severo da Ravenna (of which our authors are justifiably skeptical) are that its round base, the pose of the feet, and the fatal detail of the long drapery falling all the way to the ground recall not a statue of Christ, but Severo's marble Saint John the Baptist in the Cappella del Santo at Padua. This being so, perhaps the detail of the extended fall of drapery should be considered a style without iconicographic significance. And perhaps the symmetrical low-relief foliage adorning the base of the bronze Redentore should be seen simply as the familiar, highly conventional decorative pattern it appears to be.

If this is the case, it would follow that the bronze for S. Maria della Carità does not substitute for the prototype described by Eusebius of a miracle-working statue of Christ (which is not specified as the resurrected Christ) and the hemorrhaging woman. Moreover, it would follow that the bronze shown by Carpaccio on the altar in Augustine's study does not substitute for Eusebius's prototype either, especially since the statue he showed differs from its specific model of the Redentore in two iconographically crucial details: the base of the statue has been altered, omitting any depiction of foliage (whether iconographically significant or simply decorative), and the drapery falling from Christ's arm all the way to the ground is also deleted. Although the statue depicted on Saint Augustine's private altar has a ritual function, like everything else in the room (including the mosaic with the seraph) it is wholly consistent with the Venetian furnishings and contents of his study, which include his ecclesiastical paraphernalia, his beautifully bound books, finely crafted astrolabes and armillary spheres, and exquisite bronzes crafted by the finest artists of Carpaccio's generation. All are uniquely appropriate to the apartments of a humanist prelate living about the year 1500.

The concept of a history painting is a surprising latecomer to the history of Renaissance art, and even paintings that we are accustomed to thinking of as "histories," such as Giulio Romano's in the Sala di Costantino or Francesco Salviati's in the Sala dei Fanti Farnesiani, are discussed by contemporaries in terms of such literary genres as epic poetry. For a painter of Carpaccio's generation the point of reference for painting an historia would of course be Alberti, whose writings were well known in the courts of north Italy. In classical Latin, as Anthony Grafton has pointed out, historia carries two related but distinct meanings, referring both to res gestae and to narrative accounts of them (narraiones). Alberti's particular use of the term, however, is notoriously so difficult as to be the only word Cecil Grayson declined to translate into English in his exemplary edition of De pictura. Alberti's "historia" does not really carry the meaning...
Apelles’ Venetian pictura, used by the Byzantine rhetoricians (to whom humanist scholars were greatly indebted), who were the first to apply it to painting, meaning by it simply “a representation,” or “a painting,” and, indeed, the use of historia in the sense of figura or imago also appears in other late medieval and Renaissance sources. The closest surviving English parallel is “historiated” (from the medieval historiatius), as applied to manuscript illumination, where it refers to the image itself, whether of men, animals, grotesques, foliate decorations, or even capital initials, and not necessarily to a narrative subject. However, Alberti employs another word to refer to painting, pictura, which encompasses the total phenomenon and all its properties (such as points, lines, light, color, spatial construction, and composition). Historia he calls the supreme part of the painter’s work (“summum pictoris opus historia”), and it refers to the things represented (we might say “historiated”) or set forth in painting, among which he mentions human figures, horses, animals, and “every other object worthy to be seen,” including inanimate objects such as ships. The sense of “historiation” as a representation, or “setting forth,” also has a more abstract, but nonetheless clear, application. When in 1516 the Venetian publisher Nicolò Zopino issued the Facetiae, fabule e moti del Padovano Arloto prete fiorentino (reproducing the Florentine edition published a year earlier by Giovanni Stefano), he added for the edification of his Venetian audience that this was an “opera dilettavole vulgare in lingua toscha hystoriata,” thereby alerting them that what they were about to read was set forth, or narrated, in the Tuscan vernacular, and not in Latin or in the Venetian dialect.

Analogously, it seems to me more satisfactory to consider Carpaccio’s Saint Augustine in His Study not as a history painting but as the narratio of an incident from the saint’s life represented in a contemporary visual vernacular, the event placed in a setting consonant with the actual, lived experiences of all Venetian viewers. As such it is also an interpretation (narratio), an exposition in Augustine’s sense of the word when he interpreted the Psalms for the needs of a contemporary audience, giving them new life and meaning pertinent to the present. Saints Augustine and Jerome are presented not only as historical figures but also as exempla of praecepta, humanist learning and training in virtue, just as they were invoked in 1471 by the Venetian legate Bernardo Giustiniani in his speech officially congratulating Sixtus IV on his elevation to the papacy. Carpaccio did not attempt to reconstruct a remote, historically Roman past, as Nicolas Poussin might have done, and as Andrea Mantegna did do for the Introduction of the Cult of Cybele to Rome or the Triumph of Caesar. For him the meaning of Augustine’s vision was alive in the religious and civic culture of the present, and he imagined the saints, in Warburg’s words, “not as plaster casts but in person, as figures full of life and color.” In this his painting is typical of its time, an obvious parallel being Botticelli’s fresco Saint Augustine in His Study in the church of the Ognissanti, as well as its companion, Domenico Ghirlandaio’s Saint Jerome in His Study, which together depict the very same episode shown by Carpaccio. The only difference is that the Florentines set the miraculous event in humanist studies that are not Venetian but of their own city, just as in the Saint Jerome in His Study putatively ascribed to Jan van Eyck (which was owned by the Medici and was a precedent for Botticelli and Ghirlandaio) the saint appears serenely at work in a study in Bruges. None should be considered anachronistic but instead as an affirmation of contemporary culture and its foundation in the cultures of religious and humanistic learning of the past. In a similar way, Carpaccio’s Saint George Slaying the Dragon, like Saint Augustine in His Study part of the series of paintings he undertook for the Scuola di S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni, depicts the saint as the very model of contemporary chivalric culture, he and his horse outfitted in completely up-to-date armor and harnessing. The painting is characteristic of Renaissance depictions of the popular subject of Saint George, including Raphael’s for the duke of Urbino. In that painting Saint George appears as the preux chevalier par excellence, and Raphael, with no sense of anachronism, honored his patron by showing Saint George displaying the English order of the garter, which only recently had been bestowed on Federico da Montefeltro.

About the second half of Nagel and Wood’s paper I have little to add. It is devoted to an extended critique of the “powerful model” argued by Panofsky in Renaissance and Renascences, which they claim has never since been challenged. Panofsky’s book has certainly had its influence, as it should, especially on medievalists, who have responded to his notion of “renascence,” in particular as it modifies Charles Homer Haskins’s classic discussion of the twelfth-century “Renaissance.” So far as Renaissance scholars are concerned, however, I am not sure that in actual practice Panofsky’s theoretical claim has even been noticed, posing as it does that the Renaissance only began with Botticelli and Mantegna. It was they, according to Panofsky’s “principle of disjunction,” who for the first time attempted to unite classical form (pathos) with its own subject matter (ethos), in an effort not fully realized until the time of Raphael and what we normally call the High Renaissance. To be frank, this was an extreme, even eccentric, reconceptualization of the Renaissance, which historically (and I think rightly) had been understood to originate nearly two hundred years before with the beginnings of the recovery of ancient letters, with Petrarch, and with Giotto. It has had little effect on scholars of trecento and quattrocento art, who continue to think of themselves as students of the Renaissance, though it has perhaps encouraged some medievalists (though I doubt encouragement was needed) to extend their own researches later in time, emphasizing continuities rather than positing a decisive break with the Middle Ages. Some of the best work in this respect has again been done by Belting, himself a medievalist, who, however, has been especially sensitive to the fundamentally new social structures of reality, based in lived experience, that inform the narrative and allegorical paintings of the trecento, which he terms vernacular (“völkisch Gebildeten”) and which indeed often include lengthy inscriptions in the vernacular. I might add that it is surely significant that while earlier iconic paintings of the Virgin in the maniera greca completely hide the Madonna’s hair beneath her mantle, we find that in the trecento instead, as in Simone Martini’s Annunciation for the cathedral of Siena, tresses of golden hair the color of Laura’s begin to slip out from beneath their cover and can be seen framing her face. A more radical recasting of the associations inherent in the traditional
icon, endowing the Queen of Heaven with the normative attributes of the beauty of the Petrarchan beloved, could scarcely be imagined. 25

As I suggested at the beginning, it seems to me that Nagel and Wood’s specific focus on Panofsky distorts the historiography of twentieth-century criticism of Renaissance art, especially as regards the universally high evaluation accorded the classical solution (which I think they are right to call Renaissance “neoclassicism,” a style identifiable in particular—as the polemic between Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Carlo Cesare Malvasia makes clear—with the local school of Rome in the sixteenth century). The most extreme affirmation of the primacy of the classical solution was made by E. H. Gombrich, who claimed that “relativism in these matters can easily be exaggerated,” that the norms achieved by Raphael in lucid narrative and presenting physical beauty “have a permanent meaning,” and who concluded that “I know quite well that ideals of beauty vary from country to country and age to age, but I still think we know what we mean when we call Raphael’s Madonnas more beautiful than Rembrandt’s, even though we may like Rembrandt’s better.” 26

Whatever one may think of this statement, there are those nowadays who might opt for Rembrandt, who would question the exclusive permanence of one set of expressive values—the classic as opposed to the contingency of all other alternatives—especially in forms that have been so easily adapted to the requirements of various strains of authoritarianism, whether ecclesiastical or of the state, whether fascist or Stalinist, or whether put to the service of an elite ruling class or a triumphantal capitalism. It is this that (only) partly accounts for sharply renewed recent interest in Warburg’s preoccupation with the irrational, the darker, the Dionysian in Friedrich Nietzsche’s sense, aspects of the afterlife (Nachleben) of antiquity in the Renaissance (a sample of which, as the authors observe, may be found in Georges Didi-Huberman’s above-cited study of Warburg, L’image savoyant). It is most emphatically true, nevertheless, that the classical solution of the High Renaissance in Rome, of Raphael above all, still retains its force undiminished, and it is a model not created by Panofsky or Gombrich. Faith in that solution underpins virtually all scholarship of the past two centuries, from the moment in 1797 when Friedrich Schlegel first defined “classicism” in relation to the arts. 25 It was especially powerful among the entire generation of scholars who lived through the darkest days of twentieth-century irrationality, despotism, and brutality and who found historical warrant for the humane values of Renaissance arts and literature (also the products of turbulent times) in Renaissance Neoplatonism and in the revival of the Greek notion of ἀρετή, translated by Battista Guarino in the mid-fifteenth century as the studia humanitatis. 26

Knowledge does increase, and it is certainly true that the achievements of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history and philology greatly surpass those of the Renaissance. But it increases incrementally, and Isaac Casaubon’s demonstration that the corpus of Hermetic writings had been dated far too early by Renaissance scholars and theologians (who had been drawn to them precisely because of their presumed antiquity, their distance from the present) did not bring to a halt the search for the prsca theologia, any more than did an inability to read the Egyptian hieroglyphs correctly. Similarly, even as sophisticated quantitative mensuration came gradually to supersede the qualitative analyses of medieval science, alchemists and astrologers serenely continued their work. Galen’s pneumatomatological physiology continued to influence medical practice long after William Harvey proved the circulation of blood, and Sir Isaac Newton is as famous for his superstitions as for his calculus and his science. For these reasons it seems to me that Nagel and Wood’s understanding of Renaissance conceptions of history is skewed and would indeed be more apt (as their citation of Richard Krautheimer acknowledges) as a description of a medieval perspective. To suggest that in the Renaissance chronological particularity was less developed than in later centuries is a truium, but this does not mean that an awareness of distance from the past did not exist. Manuel Chrysoloras’s remark that only in images is it possible to see things as they actually appeared in the time they were made strikes me as an extraordinarily precocious affirmation of the evidentiary value of artifacts (whether statues, coins, or other objects) for the study of history. It certainly does not seem to be, as our authors claim, evidence for a continuing “anachronistic force of images” or for the dominance of typological over chronological forms of thinking by humanist historians.

As Lorenzo de’ Medici wrote in his preface to the Raccolta aragonese, it was necessary to study both ancient and earlier Tuscan letters in order to water the gardens of present-day literature, that they might produce even more beautiful flowers. Donatello’s bronze David was conceived in emulation of an ancient bronze Mercury, now lost, then in the possession of the humanist Niccolò Niccoli. Botticelli’s Birth of Venus (Warburg’s bewegte Bezauber und all) consciously places the artist, beyond any doubt aided by the philological knowledge of Politian, in a historic rivalry with Apelles and with the Roman sculptor of the Medici Venus. 27 We began with Petrarch’s broad distinction between an ancient past and the Christian era succeeding it, which certainly does not give evidence of fine chronological distinctions. Ghiberti’s distinction between antiquity, a period of decline after Constantine and Pope Sylvester, and the modern era is scarcely more finely tuned. However, Lorenzo Valla was contemporaneously applying a far more discriminating, critically sensible, and erudite historical judgment in his proof that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery. And in 1516, just about a decade after Carpaccio’s Saint Augustine in His Study, Desiderius Erasmus in his magisterial Divi Eusebii Hieronymi Stridonensis opera omnia rejected as pious forgeries the very letters, attributed to Augustine and Cyril of Jerusalem, that relate the miracle of Saint Jerome’s posthumous appearance to the bishop of Hippo, hence striking from the canon the very texts on which Carpaccio’s imagery depended. The letters were filled, he said, with glaring anachronisms and were written in a Latin so bad that “balbutiaret ipse Tuilius.” Even Cicero, if forced to speak it, would have stuttered. 28

Charles Dempsey is the author of numerous articles and edited volumes on Italian Renaissance and Baroque art. His books include Annibale Carracci and the Beginnings of Baroque Style (1977, 2000); The Portrayal of Love (1992); The Farnese Gallery (1995); Nicolas Poussin (with Elizabeth Cropper, 1996); and Inventing the Renaissance Putto (2001) [Department of the History of Art, Zarvyn Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md. 21218-2685, charles.dempsey@jhu.edu].
Notes


11. Brown, *Venice and Antiquity*, 248. The contemporaneity of Carpaccio’s setting itself explains the tendency among scholars, including Brown, to hypothesize that Antiquity is portrayed in the features of Cardinal Bessarion, a notion that has received formidable support from Vittorio Branca. The identification has been exploded by Augusto Gentili, *Le storie di Carpaccio: Venezia, i Turchi, e gli Ebrei* (Venice: Alfieri, 1996), 85–90, who is the only scholar I know to have examined the question closely. Gentili compares Carpaccio’s saint with Gentile Bellini’s portrait of an outlander with gray hair and a white beard, in the upper left of Carpaccio’s *Exequies al Saint George* of the companion pictures to *Saint Augustine in His Study* (which, properly considered, takes as its subject a miracle of Saint Jerome, one of the dedications of the Scuola).

12. Nagel and Wood rightly follow Zygmunt Waizbinski in identifying the statue of Venus as a copy of Antico’s Venus Felix, though not the original version in the Antistrian household. Bessarion’s statue of Venus at the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, as Augustine, and he moreover proposes that Bessarion may appear as the old, white-bearded, bulbous-nosed mon- ster shown at the left of Carpaccio’s *Exequies al Saint George* in his study of the problem of the specialist in the northern Renaissance.

13. In a way that this painting is disputed between Jan van Eyck and Petrus Christus and have here followed the attribution argued by James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, and the Graphic Arts* from 1370 to 1573 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), 116–17, 150–51. I leave final resolution of the problem to specialists in the northern Renaissance.

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 mediavalist 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 image,” 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 intrigued 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. 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.” 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.” 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-