

CHARLES HOMER HASKINS  
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2007

*A Life of Learning*

Linda Nochlin

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 64



The 2007 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture was presented at the ACLS Annual Meeting in Montreal, Quebec, Canada on May 11, 2007.

Published in the United States of America  
by American Council of Learned Societies

© 2008 by Linda Nochlin

## CONTENTS

---

On Charles Homer Haskins	<i>iv</i>
Haskins Prize Lecturers	<i>v</i>
Brief Biography of Linda Nochlin	<i>vi</i>
Introduction <i>by Pauline Yu</i>	<i>ix</i>
A Life of Learning <i>by Linda Nochlin</i>	1
Figures	23

## ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

---

Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, was the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies, from 1920 to 1926. He began his teaching career at the Johns Hopkins University, where he received the B.A. degree in 1887, and the Ph.D. in 1890. He later taught at the University of Wisconsin and at Harvard, where he was Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History at the time of his retirement in 1931, and dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America (1926).

A great American teacher, Charles Homer Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized in honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.



## HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

---

2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LINDA NOCHLIN

Linda Nochlin is currently the Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts/New York University, where she earned her doctorate in Art History in 1963. Prior to assuming this position, she served as Professor of Art History and Humanities at Yale University, as Distinguished Professor of Art History at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York and as the Mary Conover Mellon Professor of Art History at Vassar College, her undergraduate alma mater. She is known widely for her work on Gustave Courbet—a painter of interest to her since embarking on her doctoral dissertation—as well as for her seminal publications on Realism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, and, of course, for her ground-breaking work to advance the cause of women artists, beginning as early as 1971 with her article, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Sparking a major development in art history and criticism, that early work led to the 1976 exhibition, *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, which she curated with Anne Sutherland Harris for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the show was accompanied by the catalogue of the same title co-authored by both scholars.

Linda Nochlin has written numerous books and articles focusing attention on social and political issues revealed in the work of artists, both male and female, from the modernist period to the present day. Her books *Representing Women*; *The Body in Pieces*; *Women, Art, and Power*; and *The Politics of Vision* have directed and expanded the dialogue among art historians on the nature of viewing and have broadened the scope of our interpretation of the role of art and artists in society. Throughout her distinguished career, Nochlin has been the recipient of numerous honors, including the Frank Jewett Mather Prize for Critical Writing, given by the College Art Association (1977). In 1984-85, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. She has also re-

ceived a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship and was named Scholar of the Year by the New York State Council on the Humanities (1997). Nochlin has received honorary doctorates from Colgate University, the Massachusetts College of Art, the Parsons School of Design and Harvard University. In 1999, she was granted a Resident Fellowship at the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy. That year, she delivered the Oxford Lectures at Wellesley College on modern portraiture. In 2006, she received one of the three Clark Prizes for Excellence in Art Writing.

Thirty years after raising the question, Nochlin returned to the issue of women artists when she presented her paper, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? Thirty Years Later,” as part of a conference at Princeton University entitled “Women Artists at the Millennium.” In 2002, she conducted a seminar on “Realism, Then and Now” at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin.

In the spring of 2004, Nochlin delivered the Norton Lectures at Harvard University and gave the keynote address, “Speaking of Pictures,” at the American Academy of Arts and Letters Annual Induction and Award Ceremony.

Linda Nochlin’s renown within the intellectual, art historical community is international in scope. She has been invited to address scholarly audiences in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Berlin, Ottawa and Hong Kong; her writings have been published in numerous languages; she has presented lectures at universities and museums throughout the country and the world on a wide range of artists and subjects. Nochlin has engaged and collaborated with students, as well as her fellow scholars in the field. “Self and History: A Symposium in Honor of Linda Nochlin” was presented at New York University in April of 1999 to acknowledge her contributions to her students and to the scholarship on modern art history.

Linda Nochlin is a contributing editor of *Art in America*. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences and of New York University’s Institute for the Humanities as well as the American Philosophical Society.

At the time of the Haskins Prize Lecture, Nochlin was curating, with Maura Reilly, an exhibition for the Brooklyn Museum entitled “NeoFeminism,” consisting of work by contemporary women artists from around the world.

## INTRODUCTION

---

In the introduction to *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, a volume collecting only a selection of her work, Professor Linda Nochlin writes: “History, including the history of one’s own production, remains inert without the revivifying touch of the contingent and the circumstantial.”

Her observation resonates with the purpose of the Haskins Prize Lecture. When John William Ward became President of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1982, he sought to commemorate the ACLS tradition of active engagement in scholarship and teaching of the highest quality with an annual lecture. Each year since, we have asked the lecturer:

“. . . to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar, on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning, to explore through one’s own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship. We do not wish the speaker to present the products of one’s own scholarly research, but rather to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning.”

This lecture is the twenty-fifth in this series, which is named for Charles Homer Haskins, the first chairman of ACLS. It is the responsibility of the Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS to nominate each year’s Haskins lecturer. After searching deliberations, the delegates fixed firmly and enthusiastically on Professor Nochlin as a scholar whose many accomplishments over a distinguished career tangibly express the values that we share. The active participle in the title of this lecture series, “A Life of Learning,” is a splendid reminder that the excitement and pleasures of scholarship lie in the process of ongoing investigation and discovery.

Professor Nochlin's *learning* changed our *knowing*. By posing the deceptively simple question "Why are there no great women artists?" she effected a critical turn in the long arc of her discipline, opening up the social history of art.

She is renowned as a welcoming, generous, and supportive mentor. Not surprisingly, her honors include numerous teaching awards, such as that of the College Art Association. She also has given dedicated service to the public humanities and to civic art as a member of the New York State Council for the Humanities and as a member of public art commissions. Her work has been published not only in scholarly journals, but in publications with a wider social reach, such as *House and Garden*.

In the *Politics of Vision*, Professor Nochlin also writes: "[E]very art-historical bildungsroman is, in microcosm, a social history of art history, and deserves examination, however cursory, in terms of the paradigms within which, or—more rarely—against which, new art-historical writing is inevitably formulated."

Linda Nochlin transcended and transformed the received paradigms of her field. We are fortunate that she has sketched for us her own bildungsroman.

—Pauline Yu, President  
American Council of Learned Societies

LINDA NOCHLIN

*Not Too Far from Brooklyn:  
Growing Up,  
Growing Old with Art*

My first memories are sounds: the clip-clopping of the milkman's horse on pavement early in the morning, delivering the Walker Gordon certified milk to our apartment doorstep, and the reiterated clanging of the trolley cars that framed our block of Crown Street between Nostrand and Rogers Avenues. Then there were the street cries: the "I cash, buy old cloes" of the I Cash Clothes Man and the ringing of the perambulating knife sharpener. Sometimes, to my delight, there was the hurdy-gurdy music of the traveling merry-go-round beneath my windows—not as exciting as the full-scale version in Coney Island but pleasurable nevertheless. These noise memories are not just there for picturesque effect but to indicate that I was born much closer to the nineteenth century than to the twenty-first. Although I do not live in the house in which I was born, as does the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, I have never lived more than 75 miles away from where I was born and grew up. Of course I have traveled—Paris is a second home, London not far behind. But the furthest away I have lived in the United States, outside of a brief childhood stay in Tucson and some winters in Miami Beach (surely a Brooklyn outpost back then), is Poughkeepsie, New York, where I attended and then taught for many years at Vassar College. I received my M.A. in seventeenth-century English literature from Columbia, and my doctorate from the NYU Institute of Fine Arts, where I now teach. None of these institutions is very far from Brooklyn.

I grew up in a secular, leftist, intellectual Jewish family, like so many in the neighborhood. Intellectual achievement, creation or appreciation of the arts—literature, music, painting, dance—were considered the highest goals, along with social justice. I understood that before I understood anything else. Making money as a goal in life was not looked on with favor, although it was convenient. Certainly no one ever talked about money in my presence. That may have been because we had it, even during the Depression. One grandfather, the literary one, was an obstetrician/gynecologist; the other, an opera-lover and inveterate letter-writer to the *Times* and the *Miami Herald*, was the founder and owner of Weinberg News, which delivered all the newspapers in Brooklyn and some in Manhattan. There was a house at the beach with two boats, the Linda I and the Linda II. There were maids, laundresses, and, for my grandparents, a “couple” to do the housework. One uncle went to Harvard, the other to Dartmouth, and both my father and my uncle attended the Peddie School, where they were definitely a tiny Jewish minority, and from which my father was bounced, probably for drinking.

Far from being a source of alienation, Jewishness was a universal identity in our part of Crown Heights. Everyone we knew was Jewish, mostly secular and assimilated, though some were “old-fashioned” (kosher and religious), black-hatted men whom my elegant, modernist grandfather clearly looked down on. I never entered a Jewish temple before attending, at the age of 13, a cousin’s very reformed bar mitzvah in Forest Hills, which I found boring and slightly embarrassing. I still find the sight of people, of whatever denomination, praying in public—on their knees, especially—vaguely disturbing. Yet the old country, oppression, the shtetl, Yiddish—the language, the theater, the jokes—and the tragic fate of the Jews in Europe were always in the background, and ultimately, during the war, in the foreground, if one looked for them. I didn’t know that Jews were different or what it meant to be a Jew until I went to Vassar; I experienced this more deeply on my first trip abroad at 17, when I wrote “At Merton College, Oxford,”<sup>1</sup> a poem exploring my discovery of Jewish identity, which was published in *Commentary* in winter 1950.



Reading was the drug of choice in my childhood circle and I must emphasize the overwhelming importance of the book, mainly the novel, in my intellectual and emotional formation. A “play date” consisted of two little girls curled up in adjacent armchairs, reading. I often stayed up all night reading a book: *Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* or *Kristin Lavransdatter* or *Buddenbrooks* or *Dombey and Son*. I read with fascination *Dr. Faustus*, which explained artistic genius as a rare disease afflicting the normal human herd. This seemed a rational explanation to me, perhaps because, whether consciously or not, I somehow knew that my unquenchable thirst for the products of this genius had some of the same excessive, but by no means completely inimical, disease-like qualities and marked me as chosen. My reading, then, was out of control, something I had to do whenever possible and sometimes when it really wasn’t. I ate dinner with Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* in my lap, unconvincingly veiled by my grandmother’s vast white linen napkin. I listened to Jack Benny or Fred Allen on the radio—a family requirement—to “rest my eyes” with the book on my lap still, feverishly discovering why, in a dream, of course, prostitutes had to wear blue stones in their ears.

Did my friend Alice really call me at 2 a.m. so that I could translate the French sentences exchanged by Clavdia Chauchat and Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*, which we were reading simultaneously with flashlights in our own bedrooms? I had already started French and she was taking Latin. Thus we “did” *The Magic Mountain* at the age of 12 in about a day of continuous reading. The book, like many others I read before there was too much to interfere with its total absorption, is seared into my brain. I still imagine that I remember parts of it perfectly.

But how could you understand *The Magic Mountain* at 12, one might reasonably ask? I understood everything; I skipped nothing. Everything in the book was of equal, passionate, un-deviating interest. Yes, I understood everything, and better than I would if I read it today for the first time, because back then I knew nothing of life that would interfere with the pure literary matter, the transparent narrative provided by the text. In the

absence of worldly experience—of love, of illness, of European history, of philosophy—the text and the act of reading the text were all there were. Thus I understood, or rather, participated in Clavdia and Hans’s love affair and its ironies far better than I would have if I had ever had any love affairs of my own. I would have projected my own experience of love on to the text if I had ever loved; this way I understood it purely, without the corruption offered by a “personal” view.

The same was true of the great Naphta-Settembrini debate at the end of the book, which I drank in with feverish intensity. I knew what they were arguing about: it seemed perfectly clear, a perfect opposition. Unburdened by the discourses of either nineteenth-century liberalism or Nietzschean conservatism, I could nevertheless tell that the stakes in this game were high, the intellectual duel world-class.

I went on to read all of Mann but the Joseph series, picking the books one by one off the shelves of the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza: *Lotte in Weimar*, *Buddenbrooks* (twice), *Tonio Kröger* (which I desired to be part of so much that I drew Tonio, lying on a chaise longue in a shadowy Biedermeier setting, surrounded by books, holding a drooping rose in his ascetic fingers). Mann’s short stories were particular favorites of my mothers, especially “Disorder and Early Sorrow,” with its special view of disrupted childhood. My mother liked any fiction that claimed the child’s point of view: when I had the flu at eight years old, she read to me the opening passages of *Portrait of the Artist*, in which Joyce’s hero listens to animal noises. She also introduced me to the two Katherines: Katherine Ann Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and Katherine Mansfield’s “At the Bay,” both of which were child-centered. Mann’s “The Blood of the Walsungs” was my own particular favorite; it was so dark and seductive, velvety in its literary texture: I certainly knew of Siegmund and Sieglinde as a pair of infinitely sophisticated, sleek, dark-haired Jewish twins in Weimar Germany before I knew them as Wagnerian characters. I don’t think I read *Death in Venice* until a little later: it is a pity for the book is a climax, a kind of allegory of ideas of childhood and authorship, and the terrible and immense

yearning to possess the unpossessable world of the text that filled me in those days. I am sure I would have made a drawing of Tadzio if I had read *Death in Venice* early enough.

My grandfather steered me towards the Russians: Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky of course, but also Ivan Bunin, Chekov, Turgenieff—*Spring Floods* and *Fathers and Sons*. But he was eclectic in his tastes, ranging from Lord Dunsany to James Farrell to Stefan Zweig to dramatists like O'Neill and Ibsen. Knut Hamson was a particular favorite of both my grandfather and his bohemian Yiddish writer friend, Nahum Yeud, who later turned up, much to my surprise, as a character in Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. At 13 and 14, I discussed books with them on an equal basis; I had read them, after all, and had my opinions on plots and characters, so why not?

I somehow thought of literature as foreign, not part of my Brooklyn daily life. Being English or French seemed an unfair advantage of those literary peers: Jules Romain's Parisian *lyciens* in their closed secret world of intellect, politics and intrigue filled me with jealousy, as did Elizabeth Bowen's *Death of the Heart*, which featured a kid like me in such interesting, grown-up circumstances. How could she be so lucky—and English to boot? (To be English was the height of unattainable desirability.) Gide's *Counterfeiters* was a paradigm of everything of which I felt myself deprived: evil, refinement, self-consciousness, and self-confidence.

So Delmore Schwartz came as a revelation: as I read *Genesis*, his long 1942 bildungsroman in prose and verse, a sense of my own identity came into being along with that of the young hero (and surrogate for the author) Hershey Green, who was a Jewish kid like myself with a mind nourished by poetry and fiction like my own. Schwartz's style, deliberately shifting back and forth between formal diction and colloquial speech, became a characteristic of my own verse style. Even the incongruity of the names in his work struck a sympathetic chord—above all, Shenandoah Fish, hero of the verse play, *Shenandoah*. How like it was to Delmore Schwartz's own name—half Anglo, half *echt*

Jewish—and my name, Linda Weinberg. Suddenly, I could talk of the *matière de Brooklyn*, my home, as though it were the stuff of enchanted London or Paris or Moscow—it too could be the material of high imagination, of literature.

I did do other things besides read: I roller-skated, jumped rope, took ballet lessons and modern dance, went to camp (where I was something of an athlete) in the summer, learned to ice-skate, and of course took piano lessons, which were *de rigueur* for Brooklyn youth at the time. My piano teacher, who had been my mother's piano teacher, said: "All my pupils are successful, but none of them as pianists." Bach was all I wanted to play. I went down to Florida clutching my beloved—breakable—Bach-Stokowski records in my arms in the upper berth. I am still devoted to Bach; I listen to his music at least an hour a day and take piano lessons so I can play the Inventions—that's about as far as I can get now, but they still seem as fresh and surprising as ever. And I liked folk music, too, getting Alan Lomax records from the Library of Congress, tracing Child Ballads—the old English versions—and comparing them with the Cecil Sharp versions from the Appalachians. I learned a lot of folk songs, in several languages, from listening to the records over and over again—and I still sing them in the shower or on long rides or when I've had too much to drink. I learned how to write sonnets in Miami Beach when I was 13 or 14, from my grandparents' *Complete Book of English Verse*. The first I came across were Spenserian, so that was the model I used for my early efforts, like "Bach, there are those who think that passion springs . . ." a scathing iambic pentameter denunciation of anyone who dared like romantic music, and a sonnet-like poem Juvenalesque in tone, about the inevitable fall of Miami Beach. It began with description:

I've set a frame against the sky  
To see what it will hold,  
And in the right hand corner  
Is a burning ball of gold.  
Down near the bottom of the frame  
Pale stucco houses stand

With gay vermilion awnings  
Like stage sets on the sand

And ends with rhetorical prophecy:

Oh fair, fantastic city!  
When will your time be past?  
Yes, Rome endured for centuries  
But Rome was built to last.  
How soon the cardboard castles,  
the fairy city must  
fade into misty twilight  
And lie fallen in the dust.

Not too bad for a 14-year-old, but how wrong I was! No fading into twilight, or falling into dust, either. More than half a century later, the city flourishes, more artificial than ever, its level of chic and cool and over-the-top extravagance far beyond anything dreamed of by the builder Morris Lapidus in the 1940s, and its Jewish presence, so dominant in the '40s and '50s, now fallen in relation to the Latino presence and that of models, artists, gay and straight hunks, and other assorted jet-setters.

And what about art, you may wonder? Here I am, an aged art historian, and I haven't yet said anything about the place of art in my youthful formation. Certainly I never, in my early days, even dreamt of being an art historian or even knew such a thing existed, except perhaps vaguely from my uncle who had gone to the Fogg. I became an art historian more or less by accident. After getting my M.A. in seventeenth-century English literature at Columbia, I received a call from the head of the Vassar Art Department, Agnes Claflin, asking me whether I would replace the youngest member who was leaving to get married. I had nothing better to do, and I had greatly enjoyed my four undergraduate courses in the subject, so I said yes. After a year, I could see that art history suited me, so I decided to get my doctorate at the Institute of Fine Arts, a long commute that ended with a Ph.D. in 1963, a professorship, and eventually an endowed chair at my alma mater, which I finally left for the CUNY Graduate Center, in 1980.

But from an early age, I did draw and paint avidly and was said to be “talented,” not an unusual label in Brooklyn in those days. I enrolled myself in the Class for Talented Children at the Brooklyn Museum, where I also visited on school field trips and with my mother or grandfather, and which certainly played a major role in my artistic formation, although not necessarily in an aesthetic way. I was, first of all, fascinated by the objects in the museum: their age, their reminders of distant or vanished civilizations. This aspect of the museum experience inspired my first ambitious attempt at epic verse, in 1944, when I was 13. The poem in question was called “The Ghosts of the Museum,” and began portentously: “We are the ghosts of the past, the dead reincarnate.” It spoke from the position of the objects in the museum:

We are the snuff-boxes, the fans, the lace shawls,  
the mummy cases  
costumes once the height of fashion,  
We are the jewel hilted daggers  
the yellow-leafed hour books . . .  
I am an onyx jar that held the eye-black of a princess . . .

The Egyptian princess especially inspired me to flights of free verse. I really believed that in sneaking a feel of her mummy case I was somehow directly, mystically, in touch with the distant past—but a distant past that included someone like me—a young girl, after all—and the experience was a decisive one. I ended on a darker hortatory note:

Know this, you yawning, shuffling scornful moppets  
That in one short minute of eternity  
Your compacts and cigarette cases,  
Your bracelets and silk stockings,  
Razors and can-openers,  
Will be here with us  
Passing living death in glass cases . . .  
While the men of another era  
Yawn and shuffle  
Through the damp, musty halls of the museum.

An *effet pervers*, this: the museum and the museum experience itself made me realize that I too was a part of history. I had unwittingly become a self-conscious subject of the historical experience. Perhaps it is not an accident, then, that my kind of art history is explicitly object-oriented. Certainly, the aesthetics and the formal language of art are important to me, but it is the history and theory of things that I am engaged with: they remain the primary objects of my attention.

My first memory concerning myself and visual imagery, however, was one of iconoclasm, or one might say, unconscious profeminist critique. I must have been about six years old when I performed this act of desecration. Slowly and deliberately, I poked out the eyes of Tinkerbell in an expensively illustrated edition of Peter Pan with a compass. I still remember my feeling of excitement as the sharp point pierced through those blue, long-lashed orbs. I hoped it hurt, and I was both frightened and triumphant looking at the black holes in the expensive paper. I hated Tinkerbell—her weakness, her sickening sweetness, her helplessness, her pale hair, her plea for the audience’s approval, and her wispy, evanescent body, so different from my sturdy plump one. I was glad I had destroyed her baby blues. (I now realize that I had, in effect, repeated the act of Mary “Slasher” Richardson, the militant suffragette who had attacked Velasquez’s Rokeby Venus in the National Gallery with a meat cleaver to protest the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst.)

I continued my campaign of iconoclasm with my first grade reader: Linda and Larry it was called, and Larry was always the leader in whatever banal activity the two were called on to perform. “See Larry run. See Linda run. Run, Larry, run. Run, Linda, run. . . .” etc. Larry was always at least three paces ahead of Linda, as well as being a head taller. I successfully amputated Larry’s head with a blunt scissors on one page of the reader and cut off his legs in another; now they were equal, and I was satisfied. (Freudians can make of this what they will.) These very deliberate acts of desecration were propelled not so much by rage as by a fierce sense of injustice. Why were girls and women

depicted as poofy, pretty, helpless weaklings, and men as doughty leaders and doers?

Do not imagine that I was a precocious man-hater, far from it. Among my favorite books were Booth Tarkington's marvelous Penrod series, and the wonderful *Otto of the Silver Hand*, written by Howard Pyle and illustrated by him with shady, Dureresque engravings. I read Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, with its strictly male cast of characters, three times in a row. What I hated was not men—my beloved grandfather was the one who most encouraged me in my intellectual and artistic pursuits—but rather the visual putting down of girls and women vis à vis a power situation existing in both high and popular culture, and I resorted to extreme measures when confronted by it.

Yet my career as an early feminist art critic was sadly or happily flawed by contradictions. (My life, like most people's, is rife with contradiction and I approve of this condition, or at least accept it with good grace.) At eight or nine, I pored over my uncle's *Esquire* magazines (not the Harvard uncle!), gazing enraptured at the smooth, airbrushed contours of the scantily dressed, salaciously posed Petty and Varga girls, curvy pin-ups with large conical breasts and exaggerated bottoms, always wearing the highest of heels and the lowest of décolletés. I knew there was something forbidden about them, though I didn't know exactly what sex as an entity was. But it wasn't their breasts or their backsides that really got to me, but rather their feet—those preternaturally high arches, smooth, round, perfect semi-circles uplifted on towering heels. I drew them again and again, as though I could capture some of their manna by the act of drawing them, just as I drew the *Vogue* models in my grandmother's fashion magazines.

At exactly the same time, and for not such different reasons, I was seduced by the reproduction of Jean Fouquet's *Virgin of Melun* (Agnes Sorel as the Virgin) (fig. 1) in our *Treasury of Art Masterpieces* (one of the first luxe books of reproductions in serious color). The painting is a fetish-image if ever there was one, with the worldly and fashionable Queen of Heaven's bulging



white breast protruding over her tightly-laced bodice, her rounded, bare forehead (like the Petty girls' insteps?) domed under an elegant, spiky golden crown, and her entourage of bright, scarlet angels splitting out of their skin-tight breeches like little gods of erection. Here, too, I knew there was something forbidden—I couldn't take my eyes off that white breast, those red thighs. And this too was part of the education of an incipient feminist, this sexualized rotundity and expansion that I couldn't quite get a grip on but that fascinated me in its visual expression, and which nobody seemed to want to talk about or explain. In these images, women were depicted as powerful by male artists, but more because of what they were than because of what they did—or rather, more because of how they looked than what they did.

The Brooklyn Museum was a source of constant instruction—for the usual reasons of course, but also because its art works provided access to the naked human body in all its varieties in ways that no other source of the period did. The *National Geographic* provided “Native” breasts, but they were usually flaccid and uninteresting, and my grandfather's *Medical Journal* showed naked bodies—the eyes blacked out by a little strip of censorship—with quite wonderful sores and scabs and stitches, but not quite what one was after. Instead, the park, the bus, the movie theater, and sometimes the apartment-house roof were places where little Brooklyn girls found out about bodies—or at least the forbidden parts of the male body. Masturbaters and expositors abounded in those days now nostalgically denominated as “good old days” or “safer times.” We girls called these mild-mannered deviants “fiends” and divided them up quite systematically by habitat. “Subway fiends” lingered, rubbed, and unzipped in the secluded corridors at the ends of subway cars. Bus fiends were more devious, though often merely eccentric and smelly, like the mumbling, bulbous-nosed old boy, hung with onions and mysterious small bundles, feet wrapped in rags, who sometimes boarded the Nostrand Avenue trolley on the way home from high school. Movie fiends were a dime a dozen, sometimes going so far as to attempt a stealthy touch under cover of darkness, but usually content to massage themselves and breathe heavily in

solitude. Roof fiends were a more mythic breed: voyeurs who stationed themselves on the building next door at undressing time. One was reputed to have put his hand straight through the open window to pull up the shade, revealing the girl in question stark naked—but I never knew the girl this happened to.

Park fiends in Prospect Park or the Botanic Gardens were more variable: timid and middle-aged on the whole, they could turn aggressive and nasty and follow their victims to lonely places. My best friend and I, contrary to a fault, decided that we should turn the tables, stalk our chosen park fiend, and give him a good scare. We actually did this one lovely spring afternoon: we followed our persecutor through the Gardens and “cornered” him at the end of an open field just when the Gardens were about to close at sunset. Then, according to plan, we flung roses (illegally picked) at him, turned, and ran for our lives. This gave us immense satisfaction and we built up the incident into a proto-feminist triumph, telling our audience and ourselves how scared he had been, how surprised: the look on his face when we hurled the roses! Actually, we never had a chance to see the look on his face—we were running away too fast! Yet the museums—in my case, the Brooklyn and the Metropolitan, as well as the Frick, and later the Museum of Modern Art—also gave us bodies in quantity and quality: breasts, penises, backsides, and everything in between.

The museum was also a theater of cruelty, and children are both repelled by and fatally attracted to violence and cruelty—everything from Grimm’s fairy tales to today’s violent television speaks to this fact. In the museum, you could contemplate an African statue (fig. 2) with glass in his belly and nails profusely stuck into his skin (it was one of my favorites); or, in reproduction, Saint Erasmus’ bowels torn out by an ingenious machine (fig. 3); or Saint Agatha’s breasts cut off and served up on a silver tray (fig. 4)—without a guilty conscience. They were art, after all, not low-class horror films. Then, of course, there was “The Museum Without Walls,” just coming into full-colored splendor in Thomas Craven’s *History of Art Masterpieces*. It was there I first saw Grunewald’s Isenheim Altar *Crucifixion* (fig. 5), an image so

horrific I hardly dared look at it, the thrilling effect of the greenish, bruised, tortured body of Christ on the cross doubly verboten to a Jewish child of the Enlightenment like me. That image stayed with me over the years and was the subject of my first published book, *Mathis at Colmar: A Visual Confrontation* (Red Dust Press, 1963). This essay was the result of sitting in front of the Isenheim Altarpiece for five days and writing about what I saw and felt, without scholarly constraint or rational limitation.

Later, in high school, a favorite hangout was the old Guggenheim, where the non-objective paintings were hung at floor level, and one could settle in to do homework to the strains of Bach or late Beethoven quartets. We learned early to discriminate between the Bauers—not good, despite the glowing encomiums provided on request by Hilla Rebay, the director—and the Kandinskys—good, a high point of modernism. The old Whitney was famed in my set for the excellence of its bathrooms as well as its art, and the Frick was where I fell in love with Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (fig. 6) and its combination of vast, layered spaciousness and obsessive detail—the sandals, the rock formation, the book stand, and the adorable donkey in the middle ground representing, I thought, St. Francis's admirable love of animals. I pretended that the enclosed conservatory was my very own—easy to do on weekdays when attendance was very low and one might indeed be the only person in residence. At the height of our medieval period, my friend Paula and I would make the long subway pilgrimage from the President Street station in Brooklyn to the Cloisters on Sunday mornings for the medieval music concerts in the garden, or “hortus conclusus” as we liked to think of it. This was during and right after the War, and Washington Heights was the only point of reference offered to two girls fixated on the glory of the Middle Ages.

High school was also when we became regulars at the Museum of Modern Art (reputed in some circles as a place to pick up boys, although I never had any luck in that direction). There was of course the film program: it was one of the few places one could see foreign or vanguard movies: Cocteau's “Blood of a Poet” and Maya Deren's “Meshes of the Afternoon” were standard

repertory; I learned to speak scornfully of Hollywood, although I lapped up its products all the same. I remember being transfixed, like all others of my age, by Pavel Tchelitchew's *Hide and Seek* (fig. 7), strategically set at the top of the stairs, a large and striking canvas, with lots of hidden imagery to search out, and, for very different reasons, being enchanted by Morris Graves, an almost forgotten but then very popular Northwest coast mystic, whose birds of the inner eye (fig. 8) were small and modest in scale, but lyrical and mysterious. And I, like all my friends, was awed and moved by Picasso's *Guernica* (fig. 9). It was a kind of shrine, a religious experience for a leftist kid like me, who as a small child had attended rallies for the Loyalists, had read *Man's Hope* and seen "The Spanish Earth," and could sing all the words of "Viva la Quince Brigada" and "Los Quatros Generales." I remember also being swept away by other Picassos—*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig. 11), in particular. Quite honestly, I don't remember that there was ever a time when I was disturbed, put off by, or even questioned, the so-called "distortions" or "ugliness" of modern art, or its abstracted, unrecognizable subjects. That was simply what art was for me: it was something I was trying out in my own art classes. The notion that art was a formal language and that its shapes, colors and structures were as important to its meaning as its content seemed obvious, natural as it were, by the time I was in high school. Modernism seemed to me to be the art of our times and I responded to it as such: when I painted a portrait of my mother, it was Matisse who inspired the flattened forms and the decorative background; resemblance seemed secondary and even trivial.

Then of course, I left Brooklyn for Vassar. Vassar is an institution with a serious feminist past and a history of brilliant, creative, and often politically activist students like Elizabeth Bishop, Muriel Rukeyser, and Mary McCarthy. But in the late '40s it succumbed, in part, to the general postwar demand that women return to *kinder, kirche, kuche*. A well publicized survey team of sociologists, psychologists, and educational authorities, known as the Mellon Committee, diminished the women students' ambition and potential for achievement by declaring the college a

“homosexual matriarchy” and women who dared to use their minds in competition with men as “overachievers.”

Yet here again, contradiction—fortunately—abided. In the classroom, our teachers—the better ones, male and female—encouraged us to strive, to explore, to excel, even if nothing much awaited most of us after graduation but marriage, parenthood, and membership in the Junior League of St. Louis or Scranton. For a term paper in my junior-year social psych course, I decided to do a so-called “content analysis” of the women’s magazines of the period—*Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *The Woman’s Home Companion*—thereby enabling myself to read in good conscience what I usually felt guilty about as time-wasting. (I must admit that now, as then, this feminist intellectual enjoys the occasional wallow in the sluttish pleasures of popular culture.) My analysis uncovered the double message women’s magazines of the late ’40s sent to their readers: on the one hand, there were the serious articles about major women activists and achievers like Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Thompson, and Amelia Earhart, presumably calculated to encourage their readership to do likewise. But the fiction they offered for female consumption told a different story: without exception, women who pursued careers, who didn’t pay full attention to husbands and children and domestic affairs, were doomed and punished. Career girls who wanted to keep on working and women artists or writers who dared to compete with male partners were cast into outer darkness—either they remained “Old Maids” or lost their mates to properly domesticated women. The message was clear, and cast in the guise of fiction, it appealed to the emotions and even the unconscious fears and doubts of the female audience.

Such fiction, like similar women’s films, reinforced the doxa of the day, and no doubt helped sell more houses, more washing machines, and more table linen to the readership of would-be model housewives and helpmeets. It also opened my eyes to my still hypothetical future. Although by no means a card-carrying feminist—and who was in those days, besides some shapeless, tweedy, old left-over suffragettes among the emeritae?—I knew from that time onward that I was not going to be one of those

model domestic women. I despised them or pitied them, and vowed inwardly that I would be different. Of course there were other models for heterosexual women on view at the college—bohemian wives and mothers, or, in rare cases, married female instructors—but their fate was almost too awful to contemplate: women trying to finish their dissertations, write their poetry, or paint their pictures amid a shambles of urine-soaked diapers, unwashed dishes, and uncontrollable children. No indeed.

Instead, I commuted to the Institute of Fine Arts (where I now teach) to pursue my doctorate, taught at Vassar, married, had a daughter, and spent a crucial Fulbright Year in Paris in 1958-59. I was still not totally convinced about being an art historian when I went to Paris. I worked in the morning on Courbet, my dissertation topic. Courbet, with his unique combination of stylistic innovation and political engagement, is still a major interest, and a volume of my essays devoted him was just published (*Courbet*, Thames & Hudson, 2007). But in the afternoon, I worked on an experimental novel tentatively called *Art and Life*. I diligently kept a notebook on the order of Gide's in the *Fauxmonnayeurs*, a book I had read before but which came to life for me in Paris. I used it in my own novel, which lies, still a handwritten manuscript, in a box in my bedroom. The central part of the novel, later published as *Mathis at Colmar*, was my trip to Colmar to see the Isenheim Altarpiece. How I envied those students on the rue d'Ulm! I remember thinking that I wanted "my footsteps to ring out on the pavements of Paris." What I envied was the free life of those young male students—free personally and intellectually. I was a young mother with a dissertation to write, but I was trying to forge my own freedom on my own terms. That year in Paris was essential not only to my cultural development—the museums, going to the *Comédie*, the *Cinamatèque*, reading the *nouveau roman* (which was brand new at the time), adoring Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet—but to my sense of how I wanted to live, who I wanted to be.

Still, my friends and I were isolated, and confused in attempting to stake out a meaningful future. It was not until 1969 and the mass impulsion of the Women's Liberation Movement,

with its sub-organization, the Women's Art Movement, that my feminist impulses assumed a coherent, conscious, coordinated, and, eventually, an institutional formulation both activist and theoretical. To those of you who have not read my piece "Starting from Scratch" in the excellent anthology *The Power of Feminist Art*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, I recommend that you do so, because it is hard to believe, in 2007, either the situation of ambitious women like myself or the institutional, theoretical, or self-imposed obstacles that stood in our way. In that essay, I describe my reading of the early texts of the Woman's Liberation movement—*Off Our Backs*, *Red Stockings Newsletter*, etc.—as a kind of epiphany that I experienced like Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus, waking me up to a new light of personal and social awareness and the power of communal action.

Women artists formed groups to show their work; women academics shared consciousness-raising sessions and changed the subjects of their classes to include feminist material. I taught the first "Woman and Art" class at Vassar in 1969 and wrote "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" shortly after. No matter how individual and unique we wanted to be, it seemed clear that power—and change of the status quo—lay in group action. Women—artists included—have historically won attention by being spectacular exceptions: women artists like Mme. Vigée-Lebrun in the eighteenth century for painting women's portraits; Rosa Bonheur in the nineteenth century for being an unusual woman "*animalière*"; Georgia O'Keeffe, without any doubt one of the best known artists in the United States, with a plethora of calendars and posters to prove it, for being a female modernist in the twentieth century. But not until the Women's Movement of the '70s was there an attempt—a mostly successful one—to reframe and recast the whole conception of artists—or doctors or lawyers—and to insist that women artists were an integral element of the art world, with all that it implies. Women artists are no longer "exceptions," brilliant or not, but part of the rule. That is the point of the feminist project, and a point which still needs to be made in parts of the world where the feminist struggle is still engaged with securing the most basic rights for women.

We live in contradiction: that is what becomes clearer and clearer to me as I get older. I am, on the one hand, the most aesthetic of creatures: my appetite for high art is unappeasable. When I saw the recent Velasquez show in London, I can assure you that I and my feminist friends did not, like “Slasher” Mary Richardson, think of taking an axe to the remarkable work on view; rather, looking at the miraculous squiggles of white-edged painted brocade close up, we thought of the resemblance to the work of Eva Hesse. When I had myself painted into Manet’s Bar at the Folies Bergere by feminist artist Kathleen Gilge, it was because I wanted to be there, at the heart of that painting, looking out of it and at the same time being in it, a fantasy come true. I try to practice Bach an hour a day, I write sonnets and odes for relaxation. The ballet and modern dance make life complete. But I also drown myself in TV detective shows, and love nice clothes, playing with my cats, having silly fun with family or friends at dinner parties. I have never—especially now that I am old—felt the compulsion to impose a spurious unity upon myself. Indeed, more and more, I feel myself to be many selves—a woman, a Jew, a scholar, a feminist, a mother and grandmother, a teacher, an athlete, a friend, a passionate devourer of printed matter—not necessarily connected. I am more and more convinced that “inner life” has no meaning for me: my life is exterior, lived on the surface of experience, devoted to the world and the things in it, for better or for worse. As I get older, I feel closer and closer to my early life, my Brooklyn youth and childhood, and that is why I have spent so much time recalling it, for I am still in many ways that child. Far from rejecting my cultural “heritage” or background, I am very much a product of my early environment, of the ideals I learned in my youth, of the beliefs—in art, culture democratically available to all, justice and fairness—that, almost without knowing it, I breathed in with my education, especially my elementary education at the Brooklyn Ethical Culture School. Not for me the casting off of bigotry, vulgarity, or emotional deadness that so many American bildungsromans have featured, or the hostility of the environment to the artist or intellectual in some European ones.



I can also affirm that as an effect of my early environment, I have not a religious bone in my body. Neither institutional religion nor more vaguely defined forms of spirituality have ever appealed to me: the furthest I have gone in that direction was a brief encounter with Simone Weil during my first year in college, but I admired her brilliance and human courage rather than her adopted Catholicism. Anything not human, not social, not part of the human will and imagination, simply does not exist, as far as I am concerned. “The Art of the Fugue,” Manet’s *Olympia*, or Shakespeare’s *Tempest* are as transcendent as experience can get, and they exist as products of human beings in the material world, created by and available to human intellect and emotion. I marvel that people—so many people—can believe in flying saucers, a benevolent god, miracles, devils, the redemptive power of suffering. I understand how religion can provide a social centering, community, an enabling sense of tradition. But the supernatural? Bah, humbug.

What does it mean to the future self to be, on the whole, so rooted, so protected, so cherished and supported as a child, so—seemingly, at any rate—at home in the world? The flip side of rootedness is complacency, a kind of existential smugness that denies to others—the exiled, the alienated, the uprooted, the disenfranchised, the majority of the human race—their right not merely to angst or estrangement, but to a place at the table alongside the more fortunate. As a Jew, especially, I call myself to order: only through luck, sheer chance, am I who I am and not another; am I alive at all. All my grandparents’ relatives who stayed in Europe instead of emigrating were, of course, wiped out during the World War II. Then too, it is well to be aware that life and the passage of time eventually tear up your roots even as you cling to them. The protective family dies off, one by one—grandparents, parents, relatives, husbands. On the other hand, travel and mutual interest has greatly expanded my range of friends, acquaintances and colleagues far beyond the close-knit little world I was born into. Children, grandchildren, students and former students, friends and colleagues, many of them artists, in increasing numbers have changed the focus from roots

to shoots—offshoots leading to the future rather than the past. And even though it is true that I have never lived for long more than 75 miles from New York, New York and Brooklyn itself have changed radically over the years. Who would have thought that Brooklyn, rather than the Village, would be the home of aspiring artists or writers today?

Being old gives me the impetus to concentrate on my passions more ferociously than ever. Being a feminist, although an abiding concern, is not a full time occupation. Still, my passion for justice for women is perhaps my strongest passion of all, and a lasting one: justice for all women, everywhere. I do not feel obliged to love all women, to like them, or to know them. I no more feel that all women are my sisters than I feel all men are my brothers. Justice is not the same as love or fellow feeling. But I do feel obligated, within a more restricted domain, to support or speak out for the women artists I like or who arouse my interest, and to teach and disseminate the work of feminist art historians and art critics, who believe, as I do, that art history and criticism are critical practices.

I do not feel that old age confers wisdom: on the contrary, one must be alert to intellectual hardening of the arteries, to closing down and shutting out, to clinging to worn out verities and outmoded clichés. I have always preferred youthful styles—discovery, invention, experimentation—to old-age ones with their blurry universality and softened generalization of form and content. Grand finales, unifying summaries are not my thing—give me fragmentation, recalcitrance, contradiction, the beneficent jolt of the unexpected and the antagonistic. That is what I ask of life—and that it continue, of course.

ENDNOTES

---

1.

At Merton College, Oxford  
(1948-1949)

By Merton's darkening walls I sat  
Brushed by the fall of summer's rain,  
Feeling the eternal Jew  
Homunculus, starting in my veins.

Now in the garden of the mind  
Blooms the dark vintage of my race;  
No memory binds me to its vine,  
Yet shattering time unlocks the gate.

By Toledo's walls I wept,  
(Drinking my tea and milk the while)  
Under the flame-pierced sky of Spain  
Bound to the burning stake, I smiled.

No cymbals clash, no sparrow falls,  
I sip, I talk, I choose a cake;  
Where is the writing on the wall?  
When shall the stone of silence break?

Through Vilna's icy lanes I fled,  
Safe in the dark shroud of dismay;  
But the bright star shining on my head  
No summer's rain shall wash away.

On Erudition's arm I walk  
Past the stern guardian of the right,  
Blazing with borrowed wit, I talk  
Of Plato, Augustine and Christ.

With lowered eyes I phrase the Greek,  
Sharpen the point in flawless French;  
What dark-voweled language did I speak  
Rocking with wisdom on my bench?

Once in a city's arms I dreamed  
But Oxford's towers have pierced my sleep;  
A midnight voyage on the sea—  
Now by Babylon's waters I weep.

Destruction's sheltering touch at last  
In passive union binds all men;  
Still the destructive tongue of brass;  
Jerusalem shall not rise again.

## FIGURES

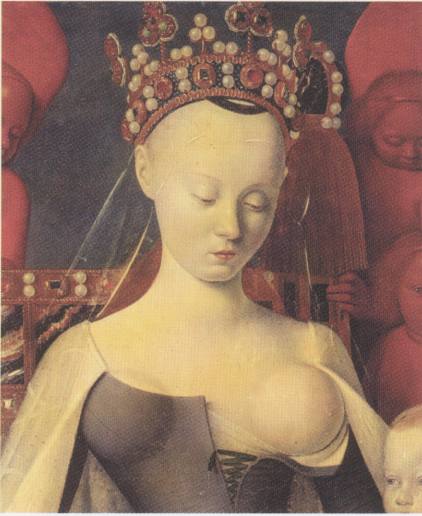


Fig. 1. Jean Fouquet. *Detail of the Virgin of Melun (bust of Virgin)*. Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium. Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

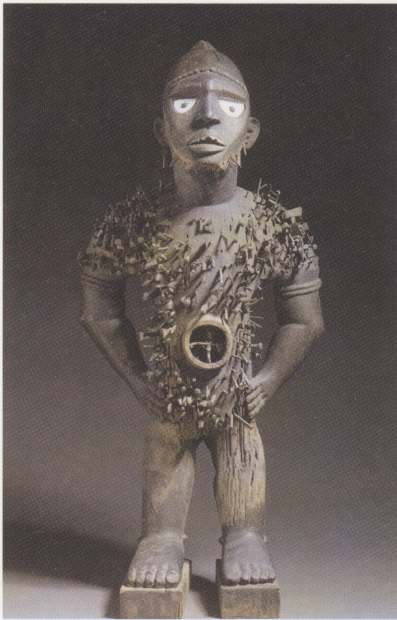


Fig. 2. *Nkondi tatu oath taking figure (fetish figure)*. 19th CE. Yombe People, Republic of Congo. Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.



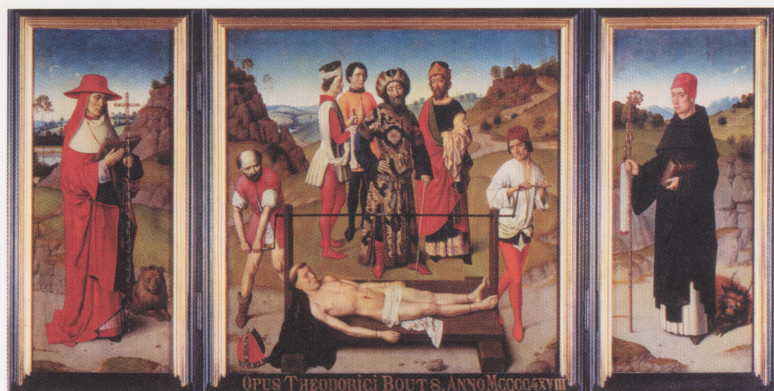


Fig. 3. Dieric the Elder Bouts. *Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus with Saints Jerome and Bernard of Clairvaux*. Ca. 1470.

St. Pierre, Louvain-Leuven, Belgium.

Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 4. Giambattista Tiepolo. *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*. Ca. 1745-1750.

Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

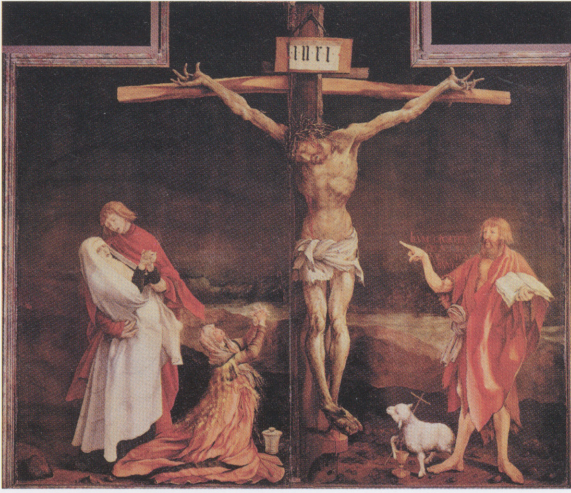


Fig. 5. Mathias Grunewald. *Crucifixion*. A panel from the Isenheim Altar. Musee d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France. Credit Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 6. Giovanni Bellini. *St. Francis in the Desert*. ca. 1480. The Frick Collection, New York, NY. Copyright The Frick Collection, New York.





Fig. 7. Pavel Tchelitchev. *Hide and Seek (Cache-cache)*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 8. Morris Graves. *Little-Known Bird of the Inner Eye*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. By permission of the Morris Graves Foundation.





Fig. 9. Pablo Picasso. *Guernica*. 1937. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Fig. 10. Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*. 1965. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES  
ISSN 1041-536X

**American Council of Learned Societies**  
633 Third Avenue, 8th Floor  
New York, NY 10017-6795

See [www.acls.org](http://www.acls.org) for other ACLS titles.