Introduction: The Testimony of Images

Ein Bild sagt mehr als 1000 Worte [A picture says more than a thousand words].

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This book is primarily concerned with the use of images as historical evidence. It is written both to encourage the use of such evidence and to warn potential users of some of the possible pitfalls. In the last generation or so, historians have widened their interests considerably to include not only political events, economic trends and social structures but also the history of mentalities, the history of everyday life, the history of material culture, the history of the body and so on. It would not have been possible for them to carry out research in these relatively new fields if they had limited themselves to traditional sources such as official documents, produced by administrations and preserved in their archives.

For this reason, increasing use is being made of a broader range of evidence, in which images have their place alongside literary texts and oral testimonies. Take the history of the body, for example. Pictures are a guide to changing ideas of sickness and health, and they are even more important as evidence of changing standards of beauty, or the history of the preoccupation with personal appearance on the part of men and women alike. Again, the history of material culture, discussed in Chapter 5 below, would be virtually impossible without the testimony of images. Their testimony also makes an important contribution to the history of mentalities, as Chapters 6 and 7 will try to demonstrate.

*The Invisibility of the Visual?*

It may well be the case that historians still do not take the evidence of images seriously enough, so that a recent discussion speaks of 'the
invisibility of the visual. As one art historian puts it, ‘historians … prefer to deal with texts and political or economic facts, not the deeper levels of experience that images probe’, while another refers to the ‘condescension towards images’ which this implies.1

Relatively few historians work in photographic archives, compared to the numbers who work in repositories of written and typewritten documents. Relatively few historical journals carry illustrations, and when they do, relatively few contributors take advantage of this opportunity. When they do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in the text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions.

Why should this be the case? In an essay describing his discovery of Victorian photographs, the late Raphael Samuel described himself and other social historians of his generation as ‘visually illiterate’. A child in the 1940s, he was and remained, in his own phrase, ‘completely pre-relevisual’. His education, in school and university alike, was a training in reading texts.2

All the same, a significant minority of historians were already using the evidence of images at this time, especially the specialists in periods where written documents are sparse or non-existent. It would be difficult indeed to write about European prehistory, for instance, without the evidence of the cave paintings of Altamira and Lascaux, while the history of ancient Egypt would be immeasurably poorer without the testimony of tomb paintings. In both cases, images offer virtually the only evidence of social practices such as hunting. Some scholars working on later periods also took images seriously. For example, historians of political attitudes, ‘public opinion’ or propaganda have long been using the evidence of prints. Again, a distinguished medievalist, David Douglas, declared nearly half a century ago that the Bayeux Tapestry was ‘a primary source for the history of England’ which ‘deserves to be studied alongside the accounts in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and in William of Poitiers’.3

The employment of images by a few historians goes back much further. As Francis Haskell (1928–2000) pointed out in History and its Images, the paintings in the Roman catacombs were studied in the seventeenth century as evidence of the early history of Christianity (and in the nineteenth century, as evidence for social history).2 The Bayeux Tapestry (illus. 78) was already taken seriously as a historical source by scholars in the early eighteenth century. In the middle of the century, a series of paintings of French seaports by Joseph Vernet (to be discussed below, Chapter 5), was praised by a critic who remarked that if more painters followed Vernet’s example, their works would be useful to posterity because ‘in their paintings it would be possible to read the history of manners, of arts and of nations’.4

The cultural historians Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897) and Johan Huizinga (1872–1945), amateur artists themselves, writing respectively about the Renaissance and the ‘autumn’ of the Middle Ages, based their descriptions and interpretations of the culture of Italy and the Netherlands on paintings by artists such as Raphael and van Eyck as well as on texts from the period. Burckhardt, who wrote about Italian art before turning to the general culture of the Renaissance, described images and monuments as ‘witnesses of past stages of the development of the human spirit’, objects ‘through which it is possible to read the structures of thought and representation of a given time’.5

As for Huizinga, he gave his inaugural lecture at Groningen University in 1905 on ‘The Aesthetic Element in Historical Thought’, comparing historical understanding to ‘vision’ or ‘sensation’ (including the sense of direct contact with the past), and declaring that ‘What the study of history and artistic creation have in common is a mode of forming images’. Later on, he described the method of cultural history in visual terms as ‘the mosaic method’. Huizinga confessed in his autobiography that his interest in history was stimulated by collecting coins in his boyhood, that he was drawn to the Middle Ages because he visualized that period as ‘full of chivalrous knights in plumed helmets’, and that his turn away from oriental studies towards the history of the Netherlands was stimulated by an exhibition of Flemish paintings in Bruges in 1902. Huizinga was also a vigorous campaigner on behalf of historical museums.6

Another scholar of Huizinga’s generation, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), who began as an art historian in the style of Burckhardt, ended his career attempting to produce a cultural history based on images as well as texts. The Warburg Institute, which developed out of Warburg’s library, and was brought from Hamburg to London after Hitler’s rise to power, has continued to encourage this approach. Thus the Renaissance historian Frances Yates (1899–1981), who began to frequent the Institute in the late 1930s, described herself as being ‘initiated into the Warburgian technique of using visual evidence as historical evidence’.7

The evidence of pictures and photographs was also employed in the 1930s by the Brazilian sociologist-historian Gilberto Freyre
(1900–1687), who described himself as a historical painter in the style of Titian and his approach to social history as a form of ‘impressionism’, in the sense of an ‘attempt to surprise life in movement’. Following in Freyre’s tracks, an American historian of Brazil, Robert Levine, has published a series of photographs of life in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a commentary that not only locates the photographs in context but discusses the major problems raised by the use of this kind of evidence.7

Images were the starting-point for two important studies by the self-styled ‘Sunday historian’ Philippe Ariès (1914–1982), a history of childhood and a history of death, in both of which visual sources were treated as ‘evidence of sensibility and life’, on the same basis as ‘literature and documents in archives’. The work of Ariès will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. His approach was emulated by some leading French historians in the 1970s, among them Michel Vovelle, who has worked both on the French Revolution and the old regime which preceded it, and Maurice Agulhon, who is especially concerned with nineteenth-century France.8

This ‘pictorial turn’, as the American critic William Mitchell has called it, is also visible in the English-speaking world.9 It was in the middle of the 1960s, as he confesses, that Raphael Samuel and some of his contemporaries became aware of the value of photographs as evidence for nineteenth-century social history, helping them construct a ‘history from below’ focusing on the everyday life and experiences of ordinary people. However, taking the influential journal Past and Present as representative of new trends in historical writing in the English-speaking world, it comes as something of a shock to discover that from 1952 to 1975, none of the articles published there included images. In the 1970s, two illustrated articles were published in the journal. In the 1980s, on the other hand, the number increased to fourteen.

That the 1980s were a turning-point in this respect is also suggested by the proceedings of a conference of American historians held in 1985 and concerned with ‘the evidence of art’. Published in a special issue of the Journal of Interdisciplinary History, the symposium attracted so much interest that it was quickly republished in book form.10 Since then, one of the contributors, Simon Schama, has become well known for his use of visual evidence in studies ranging from an exploration of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, The Embarrassment of Riches (1987), to a survey of western attitudes to landscape over the centuries, Landscape and Memory (1995).

The ‘Picturing History’ series itself, which was launched in 1995, and includes the volume you are now reading, is further evidence of the new trend. In the next few years it will be interesting to see how historians from a generation which has been exposed to computers, as well as television, virtually from birth and has always lived in a world saturated with images will approach the visual evidence for the past.

Sources and Traces

Traditionally, historians have referred to their documents as ‘sources’, as if they were filling their buckets from the stream of Truth, their stories becoming increasingly pure as they move closer to the origins. The metaphor is a vivid one but it is also misleading, in the sense of implying the possibility of an account of the past which is uncontaminated by intermediaries. It is of course impossible to study the past without the assistance of a whole chain of intermediaries, including not only earlier historians but also the archivists who arranged the documents, the scribes who wrote them and the witnesses whose words were recorded. As the Dutch historian Gustaaf Renier (1802–1662) suggested half a century ago, it might be useful to replace the idea of sources with that of ‘traces’ of the past in the present.11 The term ‘traces’ refers to manuscripts, printed books, buildings, furniture, the landscape (as modified by human exploitation), as well as to many different kinds of image: paintings, statues, engravings, photographs.

The uses of images by historians cannot and should not be limited to ‘evidence’ in the strict sense of the term (as discussed in particular detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Room should also be left for what Francis Haskel has called ‘the impact of the image on the historical imagination’. Paintings, statues, prints and so on allow us, posterity, to share the non-verbal experiences or knowledge of past cultures (religious experiences, for example, discussed in Chapter 3 below). They bring home to us what we may have known but did not take so seriously before. In short, images allow us to ‘imagine’ the past more vividly. As the critic Stephen Bann puts it, our position face-to-face with an image brings us ‘face-to-face with history’. The uses of images in different periods as objects of devotion or means of persuasion, of conveying information or giving pleasure, allows them to bear witness to past forms of religion, knowledge, belief, delight and so on. Although texts also offer valuable clues, images themselves are the best guide to the power of visual representations in the religious and political life of past cultures.12

This book will therefore investigate the uses of different kinds of
image as what the lawyers call ‘admissible evidence’ for different kinds of history. The legal analogy has a point. After all, in the last few years, bank robbers, football hooligans and violent policemen have all been convicted on the evidence of video. Police photographs of crime scenes are regularly used as evidence. By the 1850s, the New York Police Department had created a ‘Rogue’s Gallery’ allowing thieves to be recognized. Indeed, before 1890, French police records already included portraits in their personal files on major suspects.

The essential proposition this book seeks to support and illustrate is that images, like texts and oral testimonies, are an important form of historical evidence. They record acts of eyewitnessing. There is nothing new about this idea, as a famous image demonstrates, the so-called ‘Arnolfini portrait’ of a husband and wife in the National Gallery in London. The portrait is inscribed Joan van Eyck fuit hic (Jan van Eyck was here), as if the painter had acted as a witness to the couple’s marriage. Ernst Gombrich has written about ‘the eyewitness principle’, in other words the rule which artists in some cultures have followed, from the ancient Greeks onwards, to represent what – and only what – an eyewitness could have seen from a particular point at a particular moment.

In similar fashion, the phrase ‘the eyewitness style’ was introduced into a study of the paintings of Vittore Carpaccio (c. 1465–c. 1525), and some of his Venetian contemporaries, in order to refer to the love of detail these paintings display and the desire of artists and patrons for a painting that looked as truthful as possible, according to prevailing standards of evidence and proof. Texts sometimes reinforce our impression that an artist was concerned to give accurate testimony. For example, in an inscription on the back of his Ride for Liberty (1862), showing three slaves on horseback, man, woman and child, the American painter Eastman Johnson (1824–1906) described his painting as the record of ‘a veritable incident in the Civil War, seen by myself’. Terms such as a ‘documentary’ or ‘ethnographic’ style have also been used to characterize equivalent images from later periods (below pp 19, 130, 138).

Needless to say, the use of the testimony of images raises many awkward problems. Images are mute witnesses and it is difficult to translate their testimony into words. They may have been intended to communicate a message of their own, but historians not infrequently ignore it in order to read pictures ‘between the lines’, and learn something that the artists did not know they were teaching. There are obvious dangers in this procedure. To use the evidence of images safely, let alone effectively, it is necessary – as in the case of other kinds of source – to be aware of its weaknesses. The ‘source criticism’ of written documents has long formed an essential part of the training of historians. By comparison, the criticism of visual evidence remains undeveloped, although the testimony of images, like that of texts, raises problems of context, function, rhetoric, recollection (whether soon or long after the event), secondhand witnessing and so on. Hence some images offer more reliable evidence than others. Sketches, for example, drawn directly from life (illus. 1, 2), and freed

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2. Constantin Guys, Watercolour sketch of the Sultan going to the Mosque, 1834.

Private collection.
from the constraints of the ‘grand style’ (discussed in Chapter 8 below), are more trustworthy as testimonies than are paintings worked up later in the artist’s studio. In the case of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), this point may be illustrated by the contrast between his sketch, Two Seated Women, and his painting, The Women of Algiers (1834), which looks more theatrical and, unlike the original sketch, makes references to other images.

To what extent, and in what ways, do images offer reliable evidence of the past? It would obviously be foolish to attempt a simple general answer to such a question. A sixteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary and a twentieth-century poster of Stalin both tell historians something about Russian culture, but – despite certain intriguing similarities – there are obviously enormous differences both in what these two images tell us and in what they omit. We ignore at our peril the variety of images, artists, uses of images and attitudes to images in different periods of history.

Varieties of Image

This essay is concerned with ‘images’ rather than with ‘art’, a term which only began to be used in the West in the course of the Renaissance, and especially from the eighteenth century onwards, as the aesthetic function of images, at least in elite circles, began to dominate the many other uses of these objects. Irrespective of its aesthetic quality, any image may serve as historical evidence. Maps, decorated plates, ex-votos (illus. 16), fashion dolls and the pottery soldiers buried in the tombs of early Chinese emperors all have something to say to students of history.

To complicate the situation, it is necessary to take into account changes in the kind of image available in particular places and times, and especially two revolutions in image production, the rise of the printed image (woodcut, engraving, etching and so on) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the rise of the photographic image (including film and television) in the nineteenth and twentieth. It would take a large book to analyse the consequences of these two revolutions in detail they deserve, but a few general observations may be useful all the same.

For example, the appearance of images changed. In the early stages of the woodcut and the photograph alike, black and white images replaced coloured paintings. To speculate for a moment, it might be suggested, as has been suggested in the case of the transition from oral to printed messages, that the black and white image is, in

Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, a ‘cooler’ form of communication than the more illusionistic coloured one, encouraging greater detachment on the part of the viewer. Again, printed images, like later photographs, could be made and transported much more rapidly than paintings, so that images of current events could reach viewers while the events were still fresh in the memory, a point which will be developed in Chapter 8 below.

Another important point to bear in mind in the case of both revolutions is that they made possible a quantum leap in the number of images available to ordinary people. Indeed, it has become difficult even to imagine how few images were in general circulation during the Middle Ages, since the illuminated manuscripts now familiar to us in museums or in reproductions were usually in private hands, leaving only altarpieces and frescoes in churches visible to the general public. What were the cultural consequences of these two leaps?

The consequences of printing have commonly been discussed in terms of the standardization and the fixing of texts in permanent form, and similar points might be made about printed images. William M. Ivins, Jr (1881–1969), a curator of prints in New York, made a case for the importance of sixteenth-century prints as ‘exactly repetitive pictorial statements’. Ivins pointed out that the ancient Greeks, for instance, had abandoned the practice of illustrating botanical treatises because of the impossibility of producing identical images of the same plant in different manuscript copies of the same work. From the late fifteenth century, on the other hand, herbarists were regularly illustrated with woodcuts. Maps, which began to be printed in 1472, offer another example of the way in which the communication of information by images was facilitated by the repeatability associated with the press.

In the age of photography, according to the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) in a famous essay of the 1930s, the work of art changed its character. The machine ‘substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence’ and produces a shift from the ‘cult value’ of the image to its ‘exhibition value’. ‘That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.’ Doubts may be and have been raised about this thesis. The owner of a woodcut, for example, may treat it with respect as an individual image, rather than thinking of it as one copy among many. There is visual evidence, from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of houses and inns, for example, showing that woodcuts and engravings were displayed on walls just as paintings were. More recently, in the age of the photograph, as Michael Camille has argued, reproduction of an
image may actually increase its aura — just as repeated photographs
add to the glamour of a film star rather than subtracting from it. If we
take individual images less seriously than our ancestors did, a point
that still remains to be proved, this may be the result not of reproduc-
tion in itself, but of the saturation of our world of experience by more
and more images.\footnote{17}

'Study the historian before you begin to study the facts,' the author of
the well-known textbook, What is History?, told his readers.\footnote{18}
In similar fashion, one might advise anyone planning to utilize the testimony
of images to begin by studying the different purposes of their makers.
Relatively reliable, for example, are works that were made primarily as
records, documenting the remains of ancient Rome, for instance, or the
appearance or customs of exotic cultures. The images of the Indians
of Virginia by the Elizabethan artist John White (fl. 1584–93), for example
(illus. 3), were made on the spot, like the images of Hawaiians and Tahiti-
ans by the draughtsmen who accompanied Captain Cook and other
explorers, precisely in order to record what had been discovered. 'War
artists', sent to the field to portray battles and the life of soldiers on
campaign (Chapter 8) and, active from the emperor Charles V's expedi-
tion to Tunis to the American intervention in Vietnam, if not later,
are usually more reliable witnesses, especially in details, than their
colleagues who work exclusively at home. We might describe works of
the kind listed in this paragraph as 'documentary art'.

All the same, it would be unwise to attribute to these artist-
reporters an 'innocent eye' in the sense of a gaze which is totally
objective, free from expectations or prejudices of any kind. Both liter-
ally and metaphorically, these sketches and paintings record a 'point
of view'. In the case of White, for instance, we need to bear in mind
that he was personally involved in the colonization of Virginia and
may have tried to give a good impression of the place by omitting
scenes of nakedness, human sacrifice and whatever might have
shocked potential settlers. Historians using documents of this kind
cannot afford to ignore the possibility of propaganda (Chapter 4), or
that of stereotyped views of the 'Other' (Chapter 7), or to forget the
importance of the visual conventions accepted as natural in a particu-
lar culture or in a particular genre such as the battle-piece (Chapter 8).

In order to support this critique of the innocent eye, it may be
useful to take some examples where the historical testimony of images
is, or at any rate appears to be, relatively clear and direct: photographs
and portraits.

half of the twentieth century. The popularity of these caricatures when they were first published suggests that they struck a chord. For this reason they can be used with some confidence to reconstruct vanished political attitudes or mentalities.

5 Material Culture through Images

'I can never bring you to realise the importance of sleeves ... or the great issues that may hang from a bodice.'

HOLMES TO WATSON IN ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S
A CASE OF IDENTITY

The last two chapters concentrated on what images reveal or imply about ideas, attitudes and mentalities in different periods. Here, in contrast, the emphasis will fall on evidence in a more literal sense of that term, in other words on the uses of images in the process of the reconstruction of the material culture of the past, in museums as well as in history books. Images are particularly valuable in the reconstruction of the everyday culture of ordinary people - their housing for example, sometimes built of materials which were not intended to last. For this purpose John White's painting of an Indian village in Virginia in the 1580s (illus. 3), for example, is indispensable.

The value of images as evidence for the history of clothes is obvious enough. Some items of clothing have survived for millennia, but to move from the isolated item to the ensemble, to see what went with what, it is necessary to turn to paintings and prints, together with some surviving fashion dolls, mainly from the eighteenth century or later. So the French historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985) drew on paintings as evidence for the spread of Spanish and French fashions in England, Italy and Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Another French historian, Daniel Roche, has used not only inventories but also paintings such as the famous Peasant Supper of 1642 (illus. 61) for the history of clothes in France. The rich series of surviving ex-votos from Provence, discussed in an earlier chapter (3), which represent scenes from everyday life, allow the historian to study continuity and change in the clothes of different social groups in that region. One from Hyères in 1853, for instance, shows how butchers dressed for work (illus. 16).
Again, the history of technology would be much impoverished if historians were obliged to rely on texts alone. For example, the chariots used thousands of years before Christ in China, Egypt and Greece can be reconstructed from surviving models and tomb-paintings. The apparatus for viewing the stars constructed for the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546–1601) in his observatory of Uraniborg was captured in an engraving that has been reproduced many times in histories of science precisely because other sources are lacking. The apparatus used to squeeze juice from a sugar cane on the plantations of Brazil, on the same principle as the mangles which used to be found in sculleries, is clearly illustrated in an aquatint by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret, in which two seated men feed the machine while two more supply the energy which keeps the ‘engine’ turning (illus. 33).

Historians of agriculture, weaving, printing, warfare, mining, sailing and other practical activities—the list is virtually infinite—have long drawn heavily on the testimony of images to reconstruct the ways in which ploughs, looms, presses, bows, guns and so on were used, as well as to chart the gradual or sudden changes in their design. Thus a small detail in the painting of The Battle of San Romano by Paolo Uccello (1397–1475) is one testimony among others to the way in which a crossbowman held his instrument while he was reloading it. Eighteenth-century Japanese scroll paintings not only provide the

precise measurements of different kinds of Chinese junk but allow historians to observe their equipment in detail, from anchors to cannon and from lanterns to cooking-stoves. When the National Photographic Record Association was founded in Britain in 1867, to make photographs and lodge them in the British Museum, it was especially of records of buildings and other forms of traditional material culture that the founders were thinking.

A particular advantage of the testimony of images is that they communicate quickly and clearly the details of a complex process, printing for example, which a text takes much longer to describe more vaguely. Hence the many volumes of plates in the famous French Encyclopédie (1751–65), a reference book which deliberately placed the knowledge of artisans on a par with that of scholars. One of these plates showed readers how books were printed by picturing a printer’s workshop during four different stages of the process (illus. 34).

It is of course dangerous to treat illustrations of this kind as an unproblematic reflection of the state of technology in a particular place and time without engaging in source criticism, identifying the artist (in this case L.-J. Goussier) and, still more important, the artist’s sources. In this case it turns out that a number of plates in the Encyclopédie were not based on direct observation. They are revised versions of earlier illustrations, from Chambers’ Cyclopaedia, for instance, or from the illustrated Description des Arts published by the French Academy of Sciences. As always, source criticism is necessary, but the juxtaposition and comparison of engravings of print-
shops between 1590 and 1800 gives the viewer a vivid impression of technological change.

Two kinds of image, townscapes and views of interiors, will illustrate these points in more detail.

Townscapes

Urban historians have long been concerned with what they sometimes call ‘the city as artifact’. Visual evidence is particularly important for this approach to urban history. For example, there are valuable clues to the appearance of Venice in the fifteenth century in the background of paintings in the ‘eyewitness style’ (see Introduction) such as the Miracle at the Rialto by Carpaccio (illus. 35), which shows not only the wooden bridge which preceded the present stone one (erected at the end of the sixteenth century) but also details, such as an unusual form of funnel-shaped chimney, which has disappeared even from surviving palaces of the period but once dominated the Venetian skyline.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, townscapes, like landscapes, became an independent pictorial genre, beginning in the Netherlands with views of Amsterdam, Delft and Haarlem and spreading widely in the eighteenth century. Giovanni Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768), one of the best-known exponents of this genre, known in Italian as ‘views’ (vedute), worked in Venice and for a few years in London. His nephew Bernardo Bellotto (1721–1780) worked in Venice, Dresden, Vienna and Warsaw. Prints of city life were also popular at this time, and so were engravings or aquatints of particular buildings or kinds of building, like the views of Oxford and Cambridge colleges published by the artist David Loggan in 1675 and 1690 and by Rudolph Ackermann (like Loggan, an immigrant from central Europe), in 1816. The rise of these genres at this particular time has itself something to tell us about urban attitudes, civic pride for example.

The fact that the painters of the Dutch Republic were among the first to paint townscapes and domestic interiors—not to mention the still-life—is a valuable clue to the nature of Dutch culture at this period. This culture, dominated by cities and merchants, was one in which the observation of ‘microscopic’ detail was highly valued. Indeed, it was a Dutchman, Cornelis Drebbel (c. 1572–1633), who invented the microscope and another Dutchman, Jan Swammerdam (1637–1680), who first used it to discover and describe a new world of insects. As the American art historian Svetlana Alpers has suggested, seventeenth-century Dutch culture was one which encouraged an ‘art of describing’.7

In the case of townscapes, the details of particular images sometimes have particular value as evidence. The Old Town of Warsaw, virtually levelled to the ground in 1944, was physically reconstructed after the Second World War on the basis of the testimony of prints and also of the paintings of Bernardo Bellotto. Architectural historians make regular use of images in order to reconstruct the appearance of buildings before their demolition, enlargement or restoration: old St Paul’s Cathedral in London (before 1665), the old town hall in Amsterdam (before 1648) and so on.

For their part, urban historians not infrequently use paintings, prints and photographs so as to imagine and to enable their readers to imagine the former appearance of cities—not only the buildings but also the pigs, dogs, and horses in the streets, or the trees which lined one side of one of the grandest canals in seventeenth-century Amsterdam (illus. 36), the Herengracht, as drawn by Gerrit Berckheyde (1638–1698). Old photographs are particularly valuable for the historical reconstruction of slums that have been swept away, revealing the importance of alley life in a city such as Washington as well as specific details such as the location of kitchens.8

As one might have expected, the employment of images as evidence in this way is not without its dangers. Painters and printmakers were not working with future historians in mind and what interested them, or their clients, may not have been an exact representation of a city street. Artists such as Canaletto sometimes painted architectural
fantasies or caprices, magnificent constructions that never went beyond the drawing-board; or they allowed themselves to rearrange a particular city in their imagination, as in the case of a number of composite images bringing together the main sights of Venice.

Even if the buildings are presented with apparent realism, as in the works of Berckheyde, for instance, the cities may have been cleaned up by the artists, the equivalent of the portrait painters who tried to show their sitters at their best. These problems of interpreting the evidence extend to photography. Early photographs of cities often show implausibly deserted streets, to avoid the blurring of the images caused by rapid movement, or they represent people in stock poses, as if the photographers had been inspired by earlier paintings (Chapter 1). According to their political attitudes, the photographers chose to represent the most run-down houses, in order to support the argument for slum clearance, or the best-looking ones, in order to oppose it.

For a vivid example of the importance of replacing images in their original contexts in order not to misinterpret their messages, we may turn to the painting of the port of La Rochelle (illus. 37) by Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714–1789), part of a series of fifteen works devoted to the ports of France, a series which attracted considerable interest, as the high sales of the engraved reproductions testify. This harbour scene with its forest of masts across the river and the men working in the foreground has something of the immediacy of a snapshot. However, the artist has shown the harbour as busy at a time, the mid-eighteenth century, when other sources suggest that La Rochelle's trade was actually in decline. What is going on?

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The question can be answered by replacing the painting in its political context. Like other works in the series, it was painted by Vernet on commission from the marquis de Marigny on behalf of King Louis XV. Even the painter's itinerary was officially planned. Marigny wrote to Vernet criticizing one of the views, that of the port of Cette, because it had achieved beauty at the expense of 'verisimilitude' (ressemblance), and reminding the painter that the king's intention was 'to see the ports of the kingdom represented in a realistic manner (au naturel). On the other hand, Vernet could not afford to be too realistic. His paintings were to be exhibited as a form of propaganda for French seapower. If the letters and other documents which illuminate the situation had not survived, economic historians might well have used this painting as a basis for over-optimistic conclusions about the state of French trade.

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Interiors and Their Furnishings

In the case of images of the interiors of houses, the 'reality effect' is even stronger than in that of townscape. I vividly remember my own reaction, as a small boy visiting the National Gallery in London, to paintings by Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684), who specialized in interiors of Dutch houses and courtyards, complete with mothers, servants, children, men drinking and smoking pipes, buckets, barrels, linen chests and so on (illus. 38). In the presence of such paintings the three centuries separat-
ing the viewer from the painter seemed to evaporate for a moment, and
the past could almost be felt and touched as well as seen.

The doorway, the frontier between public and private zones, is the
centre of interest in a number of seventeenth-century Dutch paint-
ings. One artist, Jacob Ochtervelt (1624–1682), specialized in such
scenes: street musicians at the door, or people selling cherries, grapes,
fish or poultry (illus. 81). Looking at pictures such as these, it is once
again difficult to repress the sense of viewing a snapshot, of even of
entering a seventeenth-century house. In similar fashion, well-
preserved houses, such as Ham House in Surrey, or the cottages
preserved and displayed in open-air museums such as Skansen near
Stockholm, filled with furniture from the period in which they were
built, give the visitor a sense of direct contact with life in the past.

It takes an effort to remind ourselves that this immediacy is an illu-
sion. We cannot enter a seventeenth-century house. What we see
when we visit such a building, whether it is a peasant's cottage or the
palace of Versailles, is inevitably a reconstruction in which a team of
museum workers have acted like historians. They draw on the
evidence of inventories, paintings and prints in order to discover what
kind of furnishings might have been appropriate in a house of this
kind and how they would have been arranged. When the building was
modified in later centuries, as in the case of Versailles, the restorers
have to decide whether to sacrifice the seventeenth century to the
eighteenth or vice versa. In any case, what we see today is largely a
reconstruction. The difference between a fake and an 'authentic'
seventeenth-century building in which a substantial part of the wood
and stone has been replaced by modern carpenters and masons is
surely a difference in degree rather than a difference in kind.

As for paintings of domestic interiors, they should be approached
as an artistic genre with its own rules for what should or should not be
shown. In fifteenth-century Italy, such interiors appear in the back-
ground of religious scenes, as in the case of townscapes. Thus Carlo
Crivelli's Annunciation (1486), still to be seen in the National Gallery
in London, shows the Virgin Mary sitting at a wooden desk, with
books, candlesticks and bottles on a shelf behind her, while in an
upper story we see an oriental rug hung over a parapet.

In the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, images of the interi-
ors of houses turned into a distinct genre with its own conventions.
Often taken to be simple celebrations of everyday life, a number of
these interiors have been interpreted by a leading Dutch art historian,
Eddy de Jongh (Chapter 2) as moral allegories in which what was
being celebrated was the virtue of cleanliness or that of hard work.
The Disorderly Household by Jan Steen (1626–1679) (illus. 39), for
example, with playing cards, oyster-shells, leaves and even a hat
artfully scattered on the floor, clearly carries a message about the links
between order and virtue, disorder and sin. The painting may also
serve to warn twenty-first-century viewers that an artist is not a
camera but a communicator with his or her own agenda. Even in the
culture of description, people – or at any rate some people – continued
to be concerned with what lay beneath the surface, both the surface of
images and that of the material world which they represented. 14

Bearing these problems in mind, however, much can still be learned
from the careful study of small details in images of interiors – houses,
taverns, cafés, classrooms, shops, churches, libraries, theatres and so
on. The rapid sketch of the interior spaces of The Swan Theatre in
Southwark during the performance of a play, made by a foreign visi-
tor to London around 1596 (illus. 40), showing a two-storey house set
at the back of an open stage and the audience surrounding the
performers, is a precious piece of evidence on which historians of the
drama in the age of Shakespeare have drawn again and again. They

are surely right to do so, since a knowledge of the layout of the theatre
is essential to the reconstruction of early performances, which is
necessary in turn to an understanding of the text. To view the arrange-
ment of objects, scientists and assistants in a laboratory (illus. 41) is to
learn something about the organization of science about which texts
are silent. Representing gentlemen as wearing top hats in the labora-
tory challenges assumptions of a ‘hands-on’ attitude to research.

Again, the Bayeux Tapestry has been described as ‘a splendid
source for an understanding of the material culture of the eleventh

39 Jan Steen, The Disorderly Household, 1668, oil on canvas. Apsley House (The Wellington
Museum), London.

40 Johannes De Witt, Sketch of the interior of The Swan Theatre, London, c. 1596. Utrecht
University Library.

41 L. P. Hofmann, Engraving showing Justus von Liebig’s chemistry laboratory at Giessen,
from Die Chemische Laboratorien der Ludwig’s Universität zu Giessen (Heidelberg, 1842).
century'. The bed with hangings shown in the scene of the death of King Edward the Confessor offers testimony that cannot be matched in any other contemporary document. Even in the case of the better-documented nineteenth century, images capture aspects of material culture which would otherwise be extremely difficult to reconstruct. The heaps of straw and the turf-beds on which some of the inhabitants of Irish cottages slept at this time have long disappeared but they may still be visualised thanks to the watercolours painted by artists of the period, mainly foreign visitors who were impressed — unfavourably for the most part — by conditions which local artists probably took for granted.

Renaissance paintings, sketches and woodcuts of scholars in their studies, especially the scholarly saints or saintly scholars, Jerome and Augustine, have been used as evidence for the equipment of the studies of the humanists, their desks, bookshelves and lecterns. In the case of Carpaccio's St Augustine in his Study (illus. 42), for instance, the so-called 'revolving chair' has attracted particular attention, though the presence of statuettes, a shell, an astrolabe and a bell (to summon servants) deserve to be noted, as well as the books and writing equipment. Other Italian representations of studies, from Antonello da Messina's St Jerome to Lorenzo Lotto's sketch of a young cardinal, confirm the accuracy of some of Carpaccio's details as well as adding new ones.

It might also be revealing to compare Carpaccio's Augustine with images of studies in other cultures or periods. For a distant comparison and contrast we might turn to the studies of Chinese scholars, for example, which are often represented in paintings and woodcuts in a standardized form which presumably represents the cultural ideal. The typical study looked out on a garden. The furnishings included a couch, bookshelves, a desk on which stood the scholar's 'four friends' (his writing brush, brush stand, inks and water dropper), and perhaps some ancient bronzes or examples of fine calligraphy as well. The study was more of a status symbol in China than it was in Europe, since it was from the ranks of the so-called 'scholar-gentry' that the rulers of the country were recruited.

For a more neighbourly comparison, we might juxtapose the Carpaccio image to the equally famous woodcut of St Jerome in his Study (1514) by Albrecht Dürer (illus. 43), whether what is revealed is a difference between individual painters or a more general contrast between studies in Italy and Germany. Dürer shows a room that may seem rather empty to us but was in some ways luxurious for its period, with soft cushions on the chair and benches, despite Jerome's well-
known asceticism. On the other hand, as Panofsky pointed out, the table is bare and ‘holds nothing but an inkpot and a crucifix’, besides the sloping board on which the saint is writing. Books are few and in the case of a well-known scholar, this absence is surely eloquent. One wonders whether a painter who lived at a time when the printing press was a new and exciting invention was not making a historical point about the poverty of manuscript culture in the age of Jerome. By contrast, a woodcut of Erasmus and his secretary Gilbert Cousin at work together shows a bookcase full of books behind the secretary.

Advertising

The images used in advertising may help historians of the future to reconstruct lost elements of twentieth-century material culture, from motor cars to perfume bottles, but at present, at any rate, they are more useful as sources for the study of past attitudes to commodities. Japan was, appropriately enough, one of the pioneers in this respect, witness the references to branded products, such as sake, in some of the prints of Utamaro (1753–1806). In Europe, the later eighteenth century witnessed the rise of advertising through images such as the new kind of chaise longue illustrated in a German journal specifically devoted to innovations in the world of consumption, the *Journal des Luxus und des Moden* (ills. 44).

A second stage in the history of advertising was reached in the later nineteenth century with the rise of the poster, a large coloured lithograph displayed in the street. Jules Chéret (1836–1932) and Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), both working in Paris during the belle époque, produced a series of posters advertising plays, dance halls, bicycles, soap, perfume, toothpaste, beer, cigarettes, Singer sewing-machines, Moët et Chandon champagne, ‘Saxolene’ kerosene for lamps and so on. Beautiful women were shown together with all these products in order to seduce the viewers into buying.

It was in the twentieth century, however, that advertisers turned to ‘depth’ psychology in order to appeal to the unconscious minds of consumers, making use of so-called ‘subliminal’ techniques of persuasion by association. In the 1930s, for example, split-second flashes of advertisements for ice cream were shown during the screening of feature films in the USA. The audience did not know that they had seen these images, but the consumption of ice cream increased all the same.

It may be useful to employ the term ‘subliminal’ in a broader sense to refer to the way in which the mental image of a given product is built up by associating various objects with its visual image. The process is one of conscious manipulation on the part of the advertising agencies, their photographers and their ‘motivational analysts’, but it is largely unconscious to the viewers. In this manner the sports car, for instance, has long been associated with power, aggression and virility, its qualities symbolized by names such as ‘Jaguar’. Cigarette advertisements used to show images of cowboys in order to exploit a similar range of masculine associations. These images testify to the values that are projected on to inanimate objects in our culture of consumption, the equivalent, perhaps, of the values projected on to the landscape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Chapter 2).

Take the case of advertisements for perfume from the 1960s and 1970s respectively, decades that are perhaps sufficiently distant by now to be regarded with some degree of detachment. The Camay advertisement (ills. 45), for instance, represents the interior of a fashionable auction-room (the name ‘Sotheby’s’ is visible on the catalogue) in which a good-looking and well-dressed man is distracted from the works of art he is viewing by the vision – or is it the perfume? – of the girl who uses the product (Chapter 10). The Camay girl is beautiful but anonymous. In contrast, some advertisements of Chanel No. 5 juxtaposed the perfume to the actress Catherine Deneuve. Her glamour rubs off on the product, encouraging female viewers to identify with her and follow her example. Or perhaps, in a more ambitious formulation, ‘What Catherine Deneuve’s face means to us in the world of magazines and films, Chanel No. 5
seeks to mean and comes to mean in the world of consumer goods." As in the case of some advertisements analysed by Roland Barthes, the interpretation of the Camay image by Umberto Eco and of the Chanel image by Judith Williamson follows the lines of a structuralist or semi-otic approach (to be discussed in more detail below, Chapter 10), rather than an iconographical one, concentrating on the relation between different elements in the picture and viewing it in terms of binary oppositions.  

Problems and Solutions

The examples discussed in the previous two sections raise problems with which the reader will already be familiar, such as the problem of the visual formula. The representations of furniture in the Bayeux Tapestry, for instance, have been described as 'formulaic'. Again, there is the problem of the artist's intentions, whether to represent the visible world faithfully or to idealize or even to allegorize it. A third problem is that of the image which refers to or 'quotes' another image, the visual equivalent of intertextuality. David Wilkie's Penny Wedding (1818), for example, which is full of details of material culture, is doubtless based to some extent on the observation of his native Fife, but it also borrows from or alludes to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings or prints. So to what extent and in what ways can the painting be used by social historians of nineteenth-century Scotland? Yet another problem concerns possible distortion. As was noted earlier, artists may tidy up the rooms and sanitize the streets in their paintings. Other images diverge still further from the everyday. Using the evidence of advertisements, from posters to TV commercials, historians from the year 2000 might be tempted to assume that the standard of living for ordinary people in England in the year 2000 was considerably higher than it actually was. To use the evidence safely, they would need to be familiar with the current televisural convention of representing people in better houses and surrounded by more expensive items than they could in practice have afforded.

On other occasions, the disorder and squalor of rooms may be exaggerated by the artists, whether consciously, like Jan Steen, in order to make a particular rhetorical or moral point, or unconsciously, because they are representing a culture the rules of which they do not know from inside. Cottage interiors in Sweden in the nineteenth century, as in Ireland, were generally sketched by outsiders, who might be foreign and in any case were middle class. A drawing representing a Swedish farmhouse at the beginning of the day, five o'clock in the morning (illus. 46), vividly illustrates the farmers' lack of privacy, with cubicles in the wall instead of bedrooms. More exactly, what it shows is the lack of privacy as perceived by middle-class eyes, including those of the artist, Fritz von Dardel.  

Then there is the problem of the capriccio, discussed above. View-painters sometimes liked to create architectural fantasies, as Carpaccio did in his famous paintings of the life of St Ursula. In the case of his Augustine in his Study, attention has been drawn to the strange chair with the reading-stand and the scarcely less curious writing-desk, of which no analogues have survived. Was this a case of fantasy furniture, or can we assume that these objects once existed?

A more complex example of the problems involved in reading images of interiors comes from the series of church interiors painted by the seventeenth-century Dutch artist, Pieter Saenredam (1597–1665). One might have thought that there was no point in representing these churches other than as they were, but careful scrutiny has raised some awkward questions. At the time, these churches were being used for Calvinist worship. However some Catholic images are visible in the
paintings and even, on occasion, people engaged in what appears to be a Catholic ritual, such as the baptism represented as taking place in the south aisle of the church of St Bavo in Haarlem (illus. 47). A careful scrutiny of small details shows that the officiant is no Protestant pastor but a Catholic priest dressed in a surplice and stole. It is known that Saenredam was friendly with Catholics in Haarlem (there were many Catholics in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century). In the paintings, the artist 'restored' the churches to their earlier Catholic state. Saenredam's images offer better evidence of the persistence of Dutch Catholicism than of the contemporary appearance of Dutch churches. They are not simple views but 'laden with historical and religious overtones'.

On the positive side, images often show details of material culture that people at the time would have taken for granted and so failed to mention in texts. The dogs in Dutch churches or libraries or in Loggan prints of Oxford and Cambridge colleges would hardly have been represented if they were not commonly to be found in these places, and so they have been used to support an argument about the omnipresence of animals in everyday life at this time. The testimony of images is all the more valuable because they show not only past artefacts (which have sometimes survived and may be studied directly) but also their organization; the books on the shelves of libraries and bookshops (illus. 48), for instance, or the exotic objects


48. 'Interior View of John P. Jewett & Co.'s New and Spacious bookstore, No. 117 Washington Street, Boston', engraving from Gleason's Pictorial, 2 December 1844.
held a roll while reading it, an art which was lost after the invention of the codex. Seventeenth-century French engravings show men reading aloud at the fireside or to a group of men and women assembled for the veillée, turning evening work into a social activity. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images prefer to show reading in the family circle, and the reader is sometimes a woman.

A German historian of literature, Erich Schön, has made considerable use of paintings and prints, even silhouettes to support as well as to illustrate his argument about changes in reading habits in Germany around the year 1800. His point about a ‘reading revolution’ in the period, the rise of a more ‘sentimental’ or ‘empathetic’ form of reading, is supported by the rise of images of people reading in the open air or in more informal poses, reclining on a chaise longue, lying on the ground or — as in Tischbein’s sketch of Goethe — balancing on a chair with a book on his lap and his legs off the floor (illus. 59). Another famous image is that of Joseph Wright’s painting of Sir

arranged in museums, or ‘cabinets of curiosities’ as they were described in the seventeenth century (illus. 49), the stuffed animals and fish hanging from the ceiling, the ancient vases on the ground, a statuette on a plinth, smaller objects arranged on the shelves and still smaller ones in drawers.55

Images also reveal how objects were used, as in the case of the crossbow in The Battle of San Romano, mentioned above, or the lances and spears represented in the Bayeux Tapestry (illus. 78). In this last case, the female embroiderers may have lacked the necessary military expertise, but men would presumably have told them how these weapons were held. An analogous example nearly a thousand years later comes from films of the First World War, which draw the viewer’s attention to the technical limitations of early tanks by showing them in motion.56

For a case study in the uses of images as testimony for the uses of other objects, we may turn to the history of the book, or as it is now known, the history of reading. Ancient Roman images show us how to
Brooke Boothby, lying in a forest with a book labelled ‘Rousseau’, the ancestor of so many later images of readers sprawled on the ground (illus. 51). Boothby is implausibly well dressed for his rural surroundings, which suggests that the image (unlike many of its descendants) should be read symbolically rather than literally. It is a translation into vivid visual terms of Rousseau’s ideal of following nature.

So far as the history of material culture is concerned, the testimony of images seems to be most reliable in the small details. It is particularly valuable as evidence of the arrangement of objects and of the social uses of objects, not so much the spear or fork or book in itself but the way to hold it. In other words, images allow us to replace old artefacts in their original social context. This work of replacement also requires historians to study the people represented in these images, the main theme in the chapter that follows.

The ambition of the German photographer August Sander, whose collection ‘Mirror of the Germans’ (Deutschenspiegel), was published in 1929, was to portray society through photographs of typical individuals. In similar fashion the American photographer Roy Striker presented what he called ‘documentary’ photographs to historians as a means for them to ‘capture important but fugitive items in the social scene’. He invited them to examine ‘almost any social history, counting the adjectives and the descriptive passages’, describing these literary techniques as ‘an attempt … to evoke graphic images that photographs can supply directly and much more accurately’. For similar reasons, George Caleb Bingham, the nineteenth-century American painter of scenes from everyday life, has been described as a ‘social historian’ of his time.

The comparison can obviously be extended. Many painters might be described as social historians on the grounds that their images record forms of social behaviour, whether everyday or festive: cleaning the house; sitting down to a meal; walking in religious processions; visiting markets and fairs; hunting; skating; relaxing at the seaside; going to the theatre, the racecourse, the concert hall or the opera; taking part in elections, in balls or in games of cricket. Historians of the dance, historians of sport, historians of the theatre and other specialists have all studied the evidence of these images with care and attention to detail. Without them, the reconstruction of the practice of football in Renaissance Florence, for example, would be virtually impossible.

The Dutch artists of the seventeenth century were masters of this...