

# Rutgers Art Review

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# Rutgers Art Review

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**Cover Image:** Udechukwu, Obiora, *Exile Train*, 1981?, brush and ink, sketchbook page.

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# Cast Not to the Beasts the Souls That Confess You

Images of Mouths at the Cathedral of St. Lazare at Autun

RACHEL DANFORD

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The cathedral of St. Lazare at Autun is one of the oldest French cathedrals to feature a full Last Judgment on the central tympanum of its northwest façade (**Fig. 1**).<sup>2</sup> The scenes of judgment and hell on the right side of the tympanum are particularly vivid (**Fig. 2**). At the center of this vision, a large scale is being used to weigh souls. An angel collects the saved from one side of the scale while a group of emaciated,

taloned demons claims the damned from the other, delivering them up to the torments of hell behind them. Several elements at the far right edge of the tympanum help describe these torments. Near the corner, a cluster of small human figures cower together in a group, trying to resist the pull of a wild-haired devil, who has hooked them by the neck with a fork and a noose. This demon is shown bursting out of the mouth of a disembodied, bestial head, which in turn emerges from a the side of a long, narrow box with three arched recesses on the front and four, dog-bone shaped clasps on top. Open flames rise above this infernal structure to heat a forge into which another demon is shoving several human beings, headfirst.

These scenes were clearly intended to instill a sense of horror in those who saw them. This intent is evinced verbally in a couplet inscribed on the lintel below hell that reads

*Terreat hic terror quos terreus alligat error,  
Nam fore sic verum notat hic horror specierum.  
May this terror terrify those whom earthly error*



**Fig. 1** *Last Judgment Tympanum*, ca. 1120–1146, limestone, Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun, France. Credit: Dr. James B. Kiracofe, reproduced with permission.



**Fig. 2** *Last Judgment Tympanum*, detail of hell, ca. 1120–1146, limestone, Cathedral of St. Lazare, Autun, France. Credit: Dr. James B. Kiracofe, reproduced with permission.

binds, for the horror of these images here in this manner truly depicts what will be.<sup>3</sup>

In his work on Romanesque portal inscriptions, Calvin Kendall argued for a sonorous reading of these lines.<sup>4</sup> Kendall pointed to the shared “er” and “or” sounds in *terreus*, *terreat*, *terror*, *error*, and *horror*, that form a resonant link between moral “error” and the consequent “terror” and “horror” visualized on the tympanum. Autun’s medieval audience would have recognized a real, cause-and-effect relationship between error and horror and reveled in the sonorous wordplay when speaking the inscription aloud. Moreover, audibly pronouncing the sounds and rhythms of the words intensified the eschatological warning of the images. The repetition of abrasive, almost growling, “er” and “or” sounds glossed a scene filled with bestial monsters. In this way, the sounds directed the visitors’ attention back to

the horror of the images. Therefore, a viewer’s experience of the tympanum at Autun was not merely visual but also oral and aural, performed by voicing the inscriptions out loud. Romanesque churches were meant to be experienced and interpreted visually, spatially, orally, and aurally. Meaning was generated through lived experience, the manner in which visitors engaged with the site, the words spoken, and the types of performances enacted there.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I focus on the relationship between spoken acts and visual images at Autun by arguing that there was a connection between activities that engaged the mouths of medieval visitors to the site and images of mouths in the sculptural program itself. I base this connection on an etymological argument, present in contemporary twelfth-century theological discourse. In this discourse, the Latin words for death (*mors*), bite (*morsus*), and gnawing remorse (*remordere*) formed an etymological loop in which medieval viewers could have recognized a powerful model for understanding the reciprocal nature of the religious world they inhabited, a world where salvation and damnation could both be graphically envisioned by activities that engaged the mouth. Damnation meant being consumed, dismembered, and swallowed by the mouth of hell, while salvation was the reverse, a regurgitation and release from the beast, triggered by means of the Christian’s own mouth in prayer and confession. Though death is pictured as a ravenous mouth on the Last Judgment tympanum at Autun, rescue was enacted verbally in public confession, a ritual that was performed annually before the northeast portal of the cathedral.

### **Etymology as an Art-Historical Device**

Before turning to the images at Autun, it is important to say a few words about my use of etymology as an art-historical device.<sup>6</sup>



In a way, it is highly appropriate to use etymology to explicate the images at Autun because in the Middle Ages there was understood to be a basic connection between words and the visible world. Etymology provided Christian thinkers with a way to make sense of their material environment, since the name of a thing was thought to express its essential nature. The *nomen* revealed the *numen* and was thus an *omen* of a larger truth.<sup>7</sup> In the seventh century, Isidore of Seville argued that when one understood the origin of a word one also understood its power, “for when you can perceive whence the germ of a name comes, you will more quickly grasp its energy. The examination of the whole substance is more plainly known by etymology.”<sup>8</sup> God had spoken the world into existence using nothing but his Word, and if one understood the relationships between words, it was possible to uncover the divine patterns that had guided Creation.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, medieval rhetoricians regarded sonorous relationships between words as evidence for actual relationships in the real, visible world.

Using etymology as an epistemological tool requires a certain amount of free association, and indeed, many medieval readers were trained to cultivate associative patterns of thinking when meditating on texts. The monastic imagination habitually brought together words that shared only a coincidental sonorous resemblance. Nonetheless, these tangential connections inspired monks to construct direct links between disparate theological concepts and to discover multiple levels of meaning within Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The power of one word to evoke the memory of another, reminding the reader of a nuanced, perhaps previously unrecognized connection, opened up worlds of meaning for medieval writers and thinkers.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this tendency to think associatively is apparent not only in monastic literature but also in the visual arts. In the twelfth century, especially, there was a move toward more allegorical and typological image

programs in churches.<sup>12</sup> By emphasizing thematic ties between disparate subjects, Romanesque sculptural programs, like that at Autun, were organized more by patterns of association than by linear, chronological narratives.<sup>13</sup>

The etymological argument I will apply to the images at Autun is introduced in Book 11 of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*.

Death (*mors*) is so called, because it is bitter (*amarus*), or by derivation from Mars, who is the author of death; [or else, death is derived from the bite (*morsus*) of the first human, because when he bit the fruit of the forbidden tree, he incurred death].<sup>14</sup>

The second half of this explanation emphasizes the sonorous similarity between death, *mors*, and bite, *morsus*. Isidore’s assertion that *mors* may be named from *morsus* demonstrates a real relationship between bite and death that could extend beyond the initial significance that death entered the world through the act of biting the forbidden fruit. To go further and imagine that death itself had a bite would have been a natural association to make, given the sonorous similarities between the words.<sup>15</sup>

Isidore’s etymology of *mors* was known in the twelfth century, as it was repeated in the *Elucidarium* by Honorius Augustodunensis (d. 1156).<sup>16</sup> The *Elucidarium* is a summary of the main tenets of Christianity, written in the form of a dialogue between a student and teacher. Regarding death, the student in this dialogue inquires: “Unde dicitur mors?” *Whence is it called death?* The teacher responds: “Ab amaritudine vel a morsu pomi vetiti, unde mors est orta.” *From the bitterness or the bite of the forbidden fruit, is from where death arises.*<sup>17</sup>

While the origins of *mors* lay with *morsus*, other twelfth-century authors frequently used the same terms — bitter and gnawing — to describe the effects of the conscience. For example, in his

*Verbum adbreuiatum*, Peter Cantor (d. 1197) wrote, “Confession proceeds, then, from a humble, simple, truthful, pure, and faithful heart, and that which bites (*remordet*) the conscience [you must] confess humbly, purely, and constantly.”<sup>18</sup> In a letter from Bernard of Clairvaux to the monk, Adam, written around 1126, Bernard admonished Adam and his late superior, Abbot Arnold, for acquiring an Apostolic license from the pope, which allowed them to break their monastic vows and travel outside their monastery. Bernard asserted that their “gnawed over and still gnawing consciences (*remorsas ac remordentes conscientias*)” compelled them to seek out such a license because they knew they were in the wrong. Bernard went on to condemn the license as “a futile remedy,” one that — like the leaves sewn together by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to conceal their nakedness — merely served to cover up the sin, not to cure it.<sup>19</sup> While the comparison between the monk Adam and the first man Adam is a play on their names, Bernard’s reference to the Genesis story in this passage could also be interpreted as call to confession. The story of Adam and Eve hiding from God in the Garden of Eden was frequently invoked in medieval texts as an allegory for un-confessed sinners everywhere.<sup>20</sup> Bernard’s implication was that though Adam’s gnawing conscience led him to try to hide his fault, it really should have led him to confess. Etymologically, then, the *remorsus* of conscience may have been one of the most effective antidotes against the *morsus* of death, insofar as it functioned as an impetus for penitence and confession.

The etymological loop formed by *mors-morsus-remordere* is representative of a larger medieval habit of thinking in terms of complementary pairs of poisons and antidotes produced from the same, basic substances.<sup>21</sup> This habit of thinking has a Scriptural basis in the Old Testament account of the brazen serpent, where the image of a snake (a bronze statue) cured those who looked at it from

poisonous snakebites.<sup>22</sup> It was also a recurring trope to point to the fact that death entered the world by means of a tree in the Garden of Eden, but triumph over death was achieved on the tree of the cross. The second-century theologian, Irenaeus, wrote that Christ “by his obedience on the tree renewed [and reversed] what was done by disobedience in [connection with] a tree.”<sup>23</sup> Equally, Isidore of Seville referred to this general phenomenon when discussing different kinds of medical remedies in his *Etymologiae*.

There is treatment by similarity, as indicated by the term *πίκρα* (i.e. “remedy, bitter thing”), which is translated as ‘bitterness’ (*amara*). *Amara* got its name appropriately, because the bitterness (*amaritudo*) of disease is usually resolved by bitterness.<sup>24</sup>

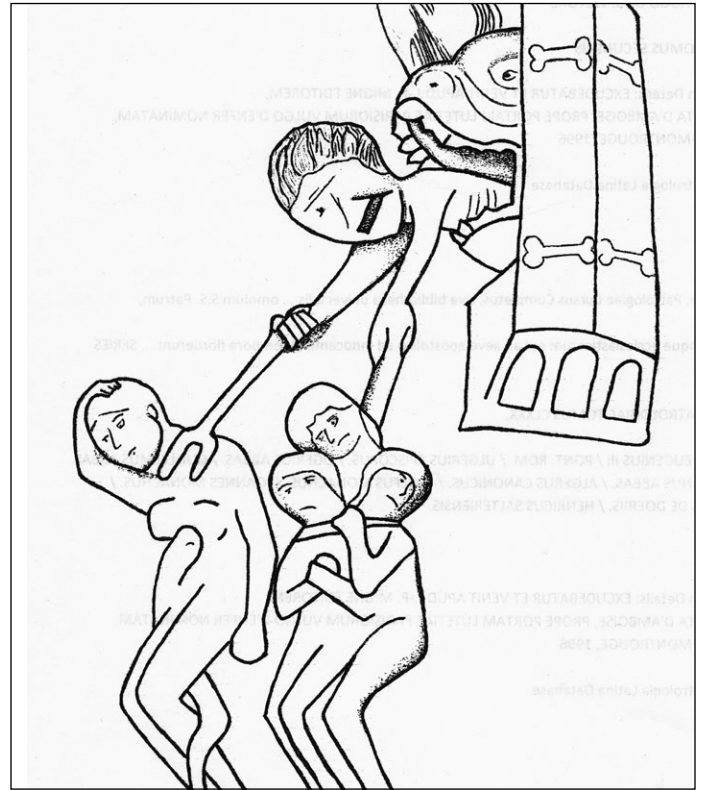
In all this, there is a strong sense of reciprocity, the idea that like can undo or reverse like. Inherent in the etymological relationship between *mors*, *morsus*, and *remordere* is the notion that the same thing — a mouth — is both the source of a problem and its solution. The bite of the conscience could save believers from the bite of death, provided it inspired them to move their own mouths in prayer and confession. In applying this etymological argument to the sculptural program at Autun, I am not arguing that the *concepteurs* of the program were themselves etymologists. Rather, I use the etymological model as a means of opening up the broader question of reciprocity in medieval art and thought, and how this concept plays itself out in images and acts involving mouths at the cathedral of St. Lazare.

## The Mouth of Hell at Autun

At St. Lazare, biting death appears on the far right edge of the Last Judgment tympanum (**Fig. 3**). Visually, this representation of the mouth of hell can be read on multiple levels. The image’s multivalent nature is best illustrated by a close analysis of its most ambiguous element,



the long, rectangular box from which the mouth emerges. On one level, this structure resembles a simple doorway. The vertical line that runs down its center represents the seam where the two doors meet, and the four, dog-bone shaped clasps evoke metal bindings common on other medieval representations of doorways, such as those pictured on the tympanum at Conques (**Fig. 4**). However, if this is a door, what is the function of the three arched recesses beneath the threshold? An alternative reading interprets this structure as not just a doorway, but an entire building, flipped upright and viewed slightly from above. The twin panels with the metalwork become the roof, and the recessed niches represent three “doors” in an architectural façade. As a building in miniature, this structure echoes the represented architecture on the opposite side of the tympanum, the heavenly city. By portraying these two rival, architectural edifices — one celestial and the other infernal — on opposite sides of



**Fig. 3** Pen and ink rendering of the mouth of hell at Autun.



**Fig. 4** *Last Judgment Tympanum*, detail of the doors into heaven and hell, ca. 1050–1120, stone, Abbey Church of Ste. Foy, Conques, France. Credit: Dr. James B. Kiracofe, reproduced with permission.

the tympanum, a clear dialectic arises between them. Finally, interpreted on yet another level, the structure might not represent a door or a building at all. Rather, it may be a coffin, standing vertically on one end. Interpreted in this way, the image gives new significance to the word “sarcophagus,” which literally means “flesh eater” in ancient Greek.

From some of the earliest moments in Christianity’s history sin and death have been imagined in terms of consumption and ingestion. In the fifth century, Peter Chrysologus envisioned death as a kind of three-headed monster that devoured “all the highly precious sprouts of the human family.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the sixth century, hell had “jaws” in Caesarius of Arles’s sermons,<sup>26</sup> and in the eighth century, Hrabanus Maurus described hell as a place where the bodies of the damned waste away like cloth eaten by worms and moths.<sup>27</sup>

There are various Scriptural sources behind the iconography of the mouth of hell. Many of these are alluded to in a late twelfth-century treatise on monastic life, *De disciplina claustrali*, written by Peter of Celle in 1179.<sup>28</sup> The treatise includes three meditations on death and provides a classic description of death as a devouring beast. Peter directed his readers to

Depict death before your eyes: how horrible its face, how dark and grim its countenance, what tasks each of its members will fulfill in each of a person’s members. Whatever strength and vigor there is in the souls and bodies of the damned, they will devour and feed on, as though they were tender sprouts. Thus the psalm declares: “Death will feed on them” [Ps 48:15].<sup>29</sup>

As this passage suggests, the Psalms were a rich source of inspiration for medieval authors in their development of the image of death as a devourer. Elsewhere psalmists describe their enemies as violent, predatory animals like lions, foxes, and serpents, and all these creatures came to

symbolize death and the devil in medieval visions of hell.<sup>30</sup> The practice of envisioning death and the devil as wild beasts also found inspiration in New Testament verses like 1 Peter 5:8, which reads: “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour.”<sup>31</sup>

Peter of Celle continued his graphic visualization of death by imploring his readers to turn away from the hideous face of death to face God, the only one with power to overcome it.

That the Lord may take us out of the belly of this whale, let us present ourselves before his face in confession, so that he who pierced its jaw with a ring may free us from eternal death. The divinity which lay hidden in Jesus’ flesh shattered the molars in death’s mouth, when it rashly bit at the flesh of the Word. Even if it bites us like a snake or horned serpent, if we have the horns of the cross in our hands, if we carry the blood of the lamb over both posts and the lintels, then all that horrible armor described in Job will be destroyed, and its innards bored through with this spear, will lie open.<sup>32</sup>

This whale with the “horrible armor” refers to the Leviathan, a beast that was frequently conflated with the mouth of hell in medieval images and texts. Many medieval readers would have been familiar with the Leviathan from its vivid description in the book of Job.

Who can open the doors of its [the Leviathan’s] face? There is terror all around its teeth [...] From its mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap out. Out of its nostrils comes smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. Its breath kindles coals, and a flame comes out of its mouth.<sup>33</sup>

As Pamela Sheingorn has observed, this image of the Leviathan’s flame-filled mouth that also operates as an unassailable door played a significant role in the development of the image of a bestial mouth that was the door to hell in the



visual arts.<sup>34</sup> Job’s description may explain why the mouth of hell at Autun appears as a truncated animal head fused to a structure that — when interpreted in a certain way — resembles a door.

Thus, there is literary evidence directly supporting the interpretation of the structure beside the mouth of hell at Autun as a doorway, but this does not immediately negate the other two possibilities that it may also be read as a building in miniature or a sarcophagus. In fact, I would argue that the representation of hell at Autun was left purposefully ambiguous so that it would visually evoke all three — a door, a building, and a tomb — simultaneously.

### **The Cult of Relics at Autun**

Another genre of medieval object frequently combines an architectural form with the function of a tomb, namely architectural reliquaries like the early thirteenth-century shrine of St. Amandus (**Fig. 5**).<sup>35</sup> The visual similarities between architectural reliquaries and the representation of the mouth of hell emerging from a structure that blurs the distinction between a building and a tomb are not coincidental. Caroline Bynum has addressed the relationship between relics and representations of hell as a devouring beast in her work on medieval theories of the Resurrection.<sup>36</sup> Bynum points to numerous twelfth-century authors who express concern over threats to one’s bodily integrity after death, including the threat of having one’s body torn apart by wild animals.<sup>37</sup> These concerns inspired medieval writers to reaffirm constantly God’s ability to reconstruct human bodies at the Resurrection. As Honorius Augustodunensis put it: “even if devoured by beasts or fishes or birds, member by member, all are reformed by resurrection in such a way that not a hair perishes.”<sup>38</sup>

The counterpoint to such anxieties over bodily disintegration was the medieval cult of relics,

a form of religious devotion centered entirely on bodily fragments that were believed to be impervious to rot and decay.<sup>39</sup> Much of this belief in the incorruptibility of saintly bodies stems from Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable [...] It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”<sup>40</sup> In an extensive treatise defending the cult of relics, Thiofrid of Echternach (d. 1110) wrote that the body of a saint “is one thing from nature and another from grace and merit. From nature it is putrid and corruptible, but from grace and merits it remains for a long time without rot even contrary to nature, and it repels greedy worms.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the connection between a saint’s body and soul was not entirely severed at death. The virtues of the saint’s soul, which was in heaven, still seeped into her or his body, which remained on earth; and as a result, the body was imbued with a miraculous resistance to decay.<sup>42</sup> More than just housing bare bones or the dry,



**Fig. 5** *Reliquary Shrine of St. Amandus*, early 13<sup>th</sup> century, oak, gilded copper, silver, brass, enamel, rock crystal and semiprecious stones, H: 19 1/4 x W: 25 1/4 x D: 11 15/16 in. (48.9 x 64.14 x 30.32 cm), The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD. Credit: in the public domain, photo courtesy of The Walters Art Museum.



empty mummies of saints, medieval churches believed they held the saints' real presence through their relics, which were perceived as being alive, the saints themselves continuing to dwell among men.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, reliquaries were often made of gold and precious gems to evoke anagogically the Heavenly Jerusalem where the saint's soul resided. Reliquaries also served to hide evidence of decay by masking the fact that a relic had suffered any sort of fragmentation or rot under a perfect gold exterior.<sup>44</sup> Again, Thiofrid of Echternach explained that reliquaries “shelter the relics of the saint's happy flesh in gold and in the most precious of natural materials so that they [Christians] will not be horrified by looking at a cruel and bloody thing.”<sup>45</sup>

There is an odd kind of resonance between the representation of the mouth of hell at Autun and architectural reliquaries that evoked thoughts of the Heavenly Jerusalem through their forms and materiality. The first container was a flesh-eater that threatened never to release the bodies it swallowed and to destroy its victims totally in both body and soul.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the second container held the preserved bodies of saints in safekeeping until they could be released at the End of Time. It is significant, then, that the cathedral of St. Lazare at Autun claimed one of the most important whole, saintly bodies in the Latin West, the relics of St. Lazarus. Lazarus's remains were housed in a large architectural reliquary, which is no longer extant, but which originally stood in the main apse of the cathedral. This reliquary took the form of a colored-marble mausoleum that visually emulated the shrine at the site of Lazarus's first resurrection in the Holy Land.<sup>47</sup>

As Lazarus's resting place, the cathedral at Autun was deeply involved in the medieval ethos that treasured bodily preservation and reviled decay, especially given the fact that the biblical story of Lazarus is very much a tale of victory over death.

The brother of Mary and Martha and a personal friend of Jesus, Lazarus reportedly became sick while Jesus was away from the town of Bethany where Lazarus lived. By the time Jesus arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days and was already buried. The details of his resurrection are recorded in John 11.

Jesus said, “Take away the stone [from the entrance to Lazarus's tomb].” Martha, the sister of the dead man said to him, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. [...] He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go free.”<sup>48</sup>

Lazarus's resurrection is not just about bringing a man back to life; it also involves the preservation of his physical body. This imperishability is expressed in Christ's dismissal of Martha's concern that “there is a stench” in the tomb. When Christ dismisses the smell, he also dismisses the possibility that Lazarus's body has been affected by decay. Juxtaposing the incorruptible body of Lazarus on the interior of the cathedral with the vision of bodily partition on the exterior would have dramatically exaggerated the horror of losing one's own body in the belly of hell for many visitors to Autun when they saw the image on the tympanum.

The motif of a devouring hell mouth was effective as a vision of horror because it resonated with deep-seated fears and anxieties over sin, decay, and the body that would have been present in the minds of many who visited St. Lazare in the twelfth century. Yet, at Autun the image's connotations extended beyond its primary purpose as a symbol for damnation. It pointed ahead visually to the architectural reliquary that visitors would encounter inside the cathedral and thus implicitly contained and communicated

a message about resurrection and rebirth. Given the specific identity of the saint whose relics were kept at Autun, it is no surprise that resurrection is a central theme of the sculptural program. Indeed, it is impossible to look at the representation of the mouth of hell at Autun without also seeing a series of graves giving up their dead on the lintel directly beneath the tympanum [see **Fig. 1**].

In 1982, Otto-Karl Werckmeister hypothesized that the Resurrection of the Dead lintel at St. Lazare was the visual equivalent of a liturgical prayer for the dead and that the Last Judgment porch at Autun functioned as a site for the chanting of such prayers.<sup>49</sup> The joyous expressions and gestures of the Resurrected on the left half of the lintel contrast sharply with the misery of those on the right. The disparity between the two halves of the lintel parallels the call and response format of the Office of the Dead, which also thematized the contrast between joy and terror at the End of Time.<sup>50</sup> Because St. Lazare’s northwest porch led directly to the canons’ cemetery, the northwest door would have been a highly appropriate setting to hold services for the dead.<sup>51</sup>

If ceremonial remembrances for the dead were held on St. Lazare’s northwest porch, then some of the prayers and chants performed during these rituals may be mirrored in the tympanum’s subject matter. In particular, psalms like “Cast not to the beasts the souls that confess you,” chanted as part of the canonical Office of the Dead, would have resonated with the image of the damned being delivered up to the mouth of hell on the tympanum.<sup>52</sup> However, in light of the larger medieval habit of thinking in terms of pairs of complementary poisons and antidotes, it is the last descriptive clause “that confess you,” that interests me most. In making the plea “cast not to the beasts” contingent on whether or not the souls being rescued have confessed their faith in God, those chanting the liturgy would reaffirm the belief that verbal acts had the power to counter

the threat of death. Using their mouths to confess and to chant the Office of the Dead could save souls from being swallowed up by the mouth of hell.

## **The Resurrection of Lazarus Portal**

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A belief in the saving power of verbal acts over the bite of death was also translated into images and spoken acts around the northeast portal into St. Lazare. Though most of the northeast portal at Autun has been lost, a description of the portal written in the fifteenth century describes how it once looked. In its original state, the portal featured the story of the resurrection of Lazarus on its tympanum, images of Adam and Eve on the lintel, and a representation of Lazarus as a bishop in the trumeau.<sup>53</sup> The Eve fragment from the lintel is one of the few pieces of the portal that survives, having been recovered in the mid-nineteenth century from inside the masonry of a demolished house (**Fig. 6**).<sup>54</sup> On this fragment, Eve appears partially concealed behind the leaves of a tree, holding her hand to her cheek, and reaching for the forbidden fruit. The trace of a painted tear at the corner of her eye suggests that the sin has already been as good as committed because she already recognizes her guilt.<sup>55</sup>

Ten years before his article on the Last Judgment portal at Autun, Werckmeister applied a similar methodology to St. Lazare’s northeast portal by using liturgical evidence to explain the sculpture. Werckmeister demonstrated that the imagery around the doorway echoed the rites of public penitence performed at Autun in the twelfth century.<sup>56</sup> The image of Eve, hiding behind the leaves of a tree, holding her hand to her cheek in remorse, and yet still reaching for the forbidden fruit represented the un-confessed sinner. In contrast, Lazarus was pictured not hiding, but coming out, emerging from his tomb, an act that was understood as an allegory for confession.





**Fig. 6** Lintel fragment depicting Eve, ca. 1120–1146, limestone, Musée Rolin, Autun, France. Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

To support this argument, Werckmeister cited Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*, which includes an allegorical exegesis of the Raising of Lazarus that draws a parallel between confession and resurrection.<sup>57</sup> The *Moralia* compared Adam and Eve hiding behind leaves in the Garden of Eden to a sinner who attempts to hide his wrongdoing behind excuses. Gregory further suggested that a sinner's excuses were like the gravestone before Lazarus's tomb, which held him dead in his sins.

Lazarus, who lay oppressed by a heavy weight, was not at all told “Come to life again,” but “Come out!”. This means [...] that man, dead in his sin, and already buried under the weight of his bad habits, because he lies hidden within his conscience through recklessness, should come out of himself through confession. For the dead man is told, “Come out!”, so that he be called upon to proceed from excuse and concealment of his sin to self-accusation by his own mouth.<sup>58</sup>

Therefore, the resurrected Lazarus represented sinners who had once been dead in their transgressions, but who had since come out of hiding through confession, and consequently received new life. In this way, the story of Lazarus's resurrection on Autun's northeast portal worked as an allegory of confession, while the story of Adam and Eve attempting to hide from God in the Garden of Eden functioned as its antithesis.<sup>59</sup>

Werckmeister also identified a twelfth-century manuscript at Autun that records the formula for public penitence practiced there according to Roman Pontifical law.<sup>60</sup> On Ash Wednesday, penitents came to the church, barefoot and in sackcloth, and prostrated themselves on their elbows and knees before the bishop to confess their sin, a performance that is echoed in Eve's prostrate position on the lintel and perhaps also



in the representation of Lazarus as bishop on the trumeau. Because of the strong resonances between this rite and the imagery on Autun's northeast portal, Werckmeister argued that penitents would publicly confess their sins and be ritually expelled from the church through the northeast portal at the beginning of Lent, before being readmitted to Communion on Maundy Thursday.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to the main lintel and tympanum, themes of confession and resurrection are also expressed in the subject matter of the column capitals that flank either side of the northeast portal. These subjects include: the Resurrection of the Widow of Nain's Son, the Rich Man (Dives) and poor leper Lazarus, and the Prodigal Son. Werckmeister noted that like the Resurrection of Lazarus on the tympanum, the Resurrection the Widow of Nain's son and the parable of the Prodigal Son were often cited in twelfth-century penitential exegesis, while the parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus was a “well-known allegory of humility and sin.”<sup>62</sup> The parable of the Prodigal Son, in particular, is a clear example of how confession can lead to new life, because after the son returns, humbled and repentant to his father's house, the father rejoices as if his son had been “dead, and is alive again.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, when it was whole, the northeast portal at Autun was a dense visual statement of Christian theories of both salvation and damnation that centered on the mouth, stressing that death (*mors*) entered the world through the act of biting (*morsus*) the forbidden fruit, but rescue could be found in verbal confession (*remordere*).

## Conclusion

Images of eating and the mouth permeated medieval Christian spirituality.<sup>64</sup> After all, sin and death entered the world through the act of eating the forbidden fruit, which could be considered a form of gluttony; and in the parable

of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus depicted on St. Lazare's northeast portal, the sinner is the one who indulges in a feast, while pious Lazarus goes hungry. In an entirely different feast, however, forgiveness of sins could be found when a Christian consumed Christ's flesh and blood in the rite of the Eucharist. Moreover, the act of sacred learning was also conceived of in terms of mastication, rumination, and spiritual nutrition. To meditate was to metaphorically masticate a text until it released its flavor and one could taste the words with the *palatum cordis* or *in ore cordis*.<sup>65</sup>

By way of a conclusion, I would like to return briefly to Peter of Celle's first meditation on death in *De disciplina claustrali*. As in the etymological loop between *mors*, *morsus*, and *remordere*, there is a strong sense of reciprocity in Peter of Celle's text, the idea that verbal and alimentary acts will break open death's jaws. In the passage I quoted earlier, Peter exhorted his readers, “That the Lord may take us out of the belly of this whale, let us present ourselves before his face in confession.” A few lines later, Peter continued by further proclaiming “there are remedies which alleviate death,”<sup>66</sup> and these included — among other things — Christ's body and blood in the viaticum, penitence and confession, and the prayers of monastic communities.<sup>67</sup> Peter asserted that death “is not aware that the traveler who crosses over with viaticum cannot run short.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, “true confession and penitence have forcefully extricated countless souls from [death's] womb and hellish belly,” and death flees fraternal prayers like arrows.<sup>69</sup> In a particularly memorable literary image, Peter described how monks should ball up their prayers into lumps and hurl them into the mouth of the dragon, because such verbal bombs had the power to “burst the innards of the devil, of death, and of hell” when fed to them.<sup>70</sup> Most important, all these antidotes against death — the viaticum, confession, and prayer — are in one way or another enacted orally. Prayer and confession are

spoken, while the viaticum is eaten. In this way, the Christian escapes the devouring mouth of hell by means of her or his own mouth.

Much of the modern scholarship on Romanesque sculpture tends to speak in terms of strict, un-intersecting binaries. Tympana are divided into *dextra* and *sinistra*, Heaven and Hell, and scenes of salvation and damnation. However, my reading of the northwest and northeast portals at Autun suggests that such dichotomies might not always be as clean as they first appear. Even diametrically opposed concepts may intersect over shared imagery. As a pair, St. Lazare’s northwest and northeast portals formed a visual statement on Christian theories of salvation and damnation that intersected over the image of the mouth. The Last Judgment tympanum on the northwest façade blurs the distinction between death and resurrection in the visual ambiguity of the representation of the mouth of hell, which is visually related to architectural reliquaries, objects that would regurgitate the bodies of the saints at the final Resurrection at the End of Time. Equally, the northeast portal at Autun stressed that *mors* entered the world through the *morsus* of the forbidden fruit, but rescue could be achieved through remorse and verbal confession. In this way, one concept is embedded and evoked in the image of its opposite. In this sense, thesis and antithesis — or poison and antidote — were represented as reciprocal and interconnected phenomena at Autun.

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## (Endnotes)

1. I am grateful to Bissera Pentcheva, Hester Gelber, and Herbert Kessler for reading early versions of this article.
2. Jochen Zink, “Zur Ikonographie der Portalskulptur der Kathedrale Saint-Lazare in Autun,” *Jahrbuch des Zentralinstituts für Kunstgeschichte* 5/6 (1989/90): 11–12. Zink argues that the construction of St. Lazare may have begun as early as the first decade of the twelfth century and been finished by 1140, though neither the start nor end date for the construction is certain. The actual translation of the relics into the church occurred in 1146.
3. Kendall 12.c; trans. Calvin Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church: Romanesque Portals and their Verse Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 207.
4. Ibid., 90–91.
5. The seminal article on embodied experience as a generator of meaning in Romanesque sculpture is: Michael Camille, “Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art,” in *Iconography at the Crossroads*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton, NJ: The Index of Christian Art, 1993), 43–54.
6. On the incorporation of wordplay into images in Romanesque sculptural programs see: William Travis, “The Iconography of the Choir Capitals at Saint-Lazare of Autun and the Anagogical Way in Romanesque Sculpture,” *Konsthistorisk tidskrift/Journal of Art History* 68, no. 4 (1999): 220–249; Kirk Ambrose, *The Nave Sculpture of Vézelay: the Art of Monastic Viewing* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2006), 21–2.
7. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: a Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 105. See also Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 497–8.
8. “Nam dum videris unde ortum est nomen, citius vim eius intelligis. Omnis enim rei inspectio etymologia cognita planior est.” Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, I.xxix.2; W.M. Lindsay, *Etymologiarvm sive originvm liber XX* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), Vol. 1; trans. Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images, 400–1200* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 156.
9. Nancy Streuver, “Fables of Power,” *Representations* 4 (1983): 109. Streuver asserts that for medieval etymologists “to understand and manipulate names is to know and use reality.”
10. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, 74.
11. Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 155–161.
12. Jean Wirth, *L’image à l’époque romane* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1999), 239–41.
13. In applying this monastic habit of thinking to the decorative program at Autun, it is important to note that St. Lazare was not a monastic institution, but one patronized by a bishop. However, many of the more unusual iconographic motifs at St. Lazare were adapted from earlier Benedictine churches. It would be incorrect to ignore the connection to monasticism at St. Lazare simply because it was a civic monument rather than a monastic one. Linda Seidel, *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Giselbertus, and the Cathedral of Autun* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 122; Kirk Ambrose, “Appropriation,” *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 2 (2012): 170.
14. Mors dicta, quod sit amara, vel a Marte, qui est effector mortium [sive mors a morsu hominis primi, quod vetitae arboris pomum mordens mortem incurrit]. Isidore of Seville, *Etymol.* XI.ii.31; Lindsay, *Etymologiarvm*, Vol. 2; trans. Stephen Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 243.
15. Caroline Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 148–9.

16. Even though the designation “Augustodunensis” is often translated “of Autun,” Honorius Augustodunensis probably had no real connection to Burgundy or France, being Irish by birth and spending most of his religious career at Regensburg in southern Germany. The mistranslation of “Augustodunensis” led Victor Terret to argue early on that Honorius’s *Speculum Ecclesiae* served as the direct, literary model for the images at St. Lazare. Victor Terret, *La sculpture bourguignonne aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles: ses origines et ses sources d’inspiration: Autun* (Autun: L. Taverne & Ch. Chandiooux, 1925).
17. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium*, II.96; Yves Lefevre, *L’Elucidarium et les Lucidaires* (Paris: E. De Boccard, 1954), 440; cited in Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 148.
18. De corde igitur humili, simplici, ueraci, puro fideli que procedat confessio, et quod remordet conscientiam confitere humiliter, pure et fideliter. Petrus Cantor, *Summa quae dicitur Verbum adbreuiatum (textus conflates)* II.iii.106; M. Boutry, *CCCM* 196 (Turnhout, 2004).
19. Quod et vos quoque non immerito timentes, nec satis de propria causa confidentes, remorsas ac remordentes conscientias apostolica conati estis delinire licentia. O frivolum satis remedium, quod non est aliud, nisi, more Protoplastorum, cauteriatis conscientiiis texere perizomata, videlicet ad velamentum, non ad medicamentum! Bernardus Claraeuallensis, *Epistulae*, epist. 7; J. Leclercq and H.M. Rochais, *Bernardi opera*, VII.xxxvii.13 (Rome, 1974).
20. O.K. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment Representing Eve from Saint-Lazare, Autun,” *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): 12.
21. Herbert Kessler, “Evil Eye(ing): Romanesque Art as a Shield of Faith,” in *Romanesque Art and Thought in the Twelfth Century: Essays in Honor of Walter Cahn*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2008), 125–6.
22. Ibid.; Num. 21:4–9. See also the ninth- or tenth-century saint’s *vita*, the *Life of Barbatius*, in which Barbatius, the first bishop of Benevento under Lombard rule, took an idol of a golden viper that was being worshiped by the local Lombard prince, melted it down, and transformed the metal into liturgical vessels. In this way, a source of damnation (the idol) was transformed into a source of salvation (the vessels for the Eucharist). *Vita Barbati episcopi Beneventiani*; Georg Waitt, *MGH SS rer. Langobardicarum* (Hannover 1878), 555–563. On this story and other similar conversions see Philippe Buc, “Conversion of Objects,” *Viator* 28 (1997): 138.
23. et recapitulationem ejus quae in ligno fuit inobaudientiae per eam quae in ligno est obaudientiam faciente. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses seu Detectio et euersio falso cognominatae Gnoseos*, V.xix.1; A. Rousseau, L. Doutreleau and C. Mercier, *SC* 153 (Paris, 1969); trans. Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 389.
24. At contra ex simili, ut πικρα, quae interpretatur amara, quia amaritudo morbi amaritudine solvi solet. Isidore of Seville, *Etymol.* IV.ix.7; Lindsay, *Etymologiae* Vol. 1; trans. Barney, *The Etymologies*, 114.
25. quam uidemus trino ore tota humani stirpis germina tam pretiosa deuorantem. Trino ore, fratres, peccatum capit, mors deuorat, deglutit infernos. Peter Chrysologus, *Collectio sermonum*, CXI.37; A. Olivar, *CC SL* 24 (Turnhout, 1975); trans. George E Ganss, *Saint Peter Chrysologus, Selected Sermons, and Saint Valerian Homilies* (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1953), 176–77; cited in Gary Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell: Eighth-Century Britain to the Fifteenth Century* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1995), 34.
26. percussus est, ut vulnera nostra sanaret; mortuus est, ut nos de morte perpetua liberaret; in inferna descendit, ut praedam, quam diabolus rapuerat, disruptis eius faucibus et exulceratis inferni visceribus ad superna revocaret. Caesarius Arelatensis, *Sermones Caesarii uel ex aliis fontibus hausti*, XVI.iii.5; G. Morin, *CC SL* 103 (Turnhout, 1953); cited in Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 35.
27. Sicut et vestimentum sic comedet eos vermis et sicut lanam, sive devorabit eos tinea. Hrabanus Maurus. *Expositio in librum Judith*; Migne PL 109:587; cited in Nurith Kenaan, “The Devouring Monster: A Source for the Depiction of Hell in Romanesque Last Judgments,” in *Assaph. Studies in Art History Tel-Aviv*, ed. Nurith Kenaan and Gustav Kuhnel, (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1980), 74.
28. Hugh Feiss, “Introduction,” in *Peter of Celle: Selected Works* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 14ff.
29. Depinge mortem ante oculos tuos, quam horrida facies eius, vultus quam obscurus et torvus, singula

singulorum membrorum eius officia quid operentur in singulis hominis membris. Devorant namque et depascunt tanquam teneram herbam quicquid in homine est roboris et virtutis, tam in anima quam in corpore damnatorum. Unde in psalmo: Mors depascet eos.” Peter of Celle, *Tractatus de disciplina claustrali*, xxiv. 54–60; G. de Martel, SC 240 (Paris, 1977); trans. Feiss, *Peter of Celle*, 113; cited in Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 148.

30. Schmidt, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell*, 34–5.

31. Ibid., 37–8.

32. Ut ergo de ventre ceti huius Dominus nos extrahat, praeoccupemus faciem eius in confessione, ut qui perforavit maxillam eius armilla liberet nos a morte aeterna. Latens in carne Iesu divinitas molares mortis dentes in ore ipsius confregit, cum carnem Verbi morsu temerario momordit. Et si itaque nos mordeat ut coluber et ut cerastes, si crucis cornua prae manibus habemus, si sanguinem agni super utrumque postem et in superliminaribus gestamus, tota illa Leviathan horribilis armatura quae in Iob describitur destruetur, et intestina eius hoc iaculo terebrata rimabuntur. Peter of Celle, *De disciplina claustrali*, xxiv.61–71; Martel, SC 240; trans. Feiss, *Peter of Celle*, 113.

33. Job 41:14, 19–21

34. Pamela Sheingorn, “Who can open the doors of his face? – The Iconography of the Hell Mouth,” in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 1.

35. See also the examples given in Marie-Madeleine Gauthier, *Highways of Faith: Relics and Reliquaries from Jerusalem to Compostela*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Wellfleet Press, 1986), 12–13.

36. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 117–155. Bynum argues that for many medieval theologians, the self was a psychosomatic entity, of which both body and soul were essential parts. Accordingly, unease with death had just as much to do with the survival of the physical body as with the spiritual deliverance of the soul. The ideal medieval body was incorruptible while the fragmentation or decomposition of a normal body at death signaled a loss of personal identity. To be eaten or digested by wild beasts or in the mouth of hell was an extreme form of fragmentation during which a person actually became incorporated into a foreign body, and

it meant an almost irretrievable loss of the self. See also Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

37. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 148.

38. Sive ergo membratim a bestiis sive a piscibus sive a volucris (1) devorentur (2), omnes in resurrectione reformabuntur in tantum ut nec capillus de eis pereat. Honorius Augustodunensis, *Elucidarium*, III.45; Lefevre, *L’Elucidarium*, 456; trans. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 149.

39. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 183. See also Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

40. 1 Cor. 15:42, 44.

41. et eidentissime agnoscitur aliud esse ex natura aliud ex meritis et gratia. Ex natura est putribilis, ex meritis et gratia longissimo tempore contra naturam durat inputribilis, ac ab ea esuriens repellitur uermis. Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum* I.iii.8; M.C. Ferrari, CCCM 133 (Turnhout, 1996); trans. Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 210. On Thiofrid of Echternach and his treatise see Ferrari’s introduction to the CCCM volume.

42. Arnold Angenendt, “Relics and their Veneration,” in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 21–22.

43. Ellert Dahl, “Heavenly Images: the Statue of St. Foy of Conques and the Signification of the Medieval ‘Cult-Image’ in the West,” *Acta As Archaeologiam et Artivm Historiam Pertinentia* 7 (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1978), 180.

44. Brigitte Buettnner, “From Bones to Stones – Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries,” in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, ed. Bruno Reudenbach and Gia Toussaint (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005), 43; Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body*, 202.

45. sicut sacrosanctum corpus suum et sanguinem ne percipientes cruda et cruenta exhorrent uelaut consueto et usitato hominibus panis et uini uelamine sic persuasit mentibus filiorum ecclesie ut auro et quibusque rerum utensilium preciosissimis obuoluerent



- et includerent pignera carnis beatę quia in Domino mortuę. Thiofrid of Echternach. *Flores*. II.iii.84–89; Ferrari, *CCCM* 133; trans. Martina Bagnoli, “The Stuff of Heaven: Materials and Craftsmanship in Medieval Reliquaries,” in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 137.
46. On the relationship between body and soul in Romanesque portal depictions of hell see Kirk Ambrose, “Attunement to the Damned of the Conques Tympanum,” *Gesta* 50, no. 1 (2011): 1.
  47. Seidel, *Legends in Limestone*, 41. The mausoleum described by Seidel is not contemporary with Autun’s portals, as it dates to around 1170, and the portals may have been finished as early as the 1130s. Nonetheless, the translation of the relics to St. Lazare occurred in 1146, and so there must have been another reliquary before the mausoleum. It is likely that this original reliquary was also architectural in form.
  48. Jn. 11:39–40, 43–44.
  49. Otto-Karl Werckmeister, “Die Auferstehung der Toten am Westportal von St. Lazare in Autun,” *Frühmittelalterlichen Studien* 16 (1982), 218; cf. Seidel, *Legends in Limestone*, 40. Seidel considers this liturgical interpretation as an argument made after the fact. She insists that because a pre-existing, fully functioning cathedral (St. Nazaire) stood immediately to the east, St. Lazare was not initially built to meet these types of liturgical needs. Instead, St. Lazare functioned as an annex to the pre-existing cathedral and as a funerary shrine to facilitate “viewings of the relics and... related rituals.” According to Seidel, the building only acquired the ceremonial and liturgical functions of a cathedral later in its history.
  50. Werckmeister, “Die Auferstehung,” 234.
  51. *Ibid.*, 221.
  52. Ps. 73:19; O.K. Werckmeister, “Book Review,” *Art Quarterly* 2 (1979): 214; Jean Deschusses (ed.), *Le sacramentaire grégorien, ses principales formes d’après les plus anciens manuscrits* (Fribourg: Editions universitaires, 1971–1988), 459, no. 1406.
  53. Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun* (New York: Orion Press, 1961), 149.
  54. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment,” 1.
  55. *Ibid.*, 7–8.
  56. *Ibid.*, 16.
  57. *Ibid.*, 12.
  58. Unde et mortuo Lazaro, qui mole magna premebatur, nequaquam dicitur: Revivisce, sed: “Veni foras” (Jn. 11:43). . . . ut nimirum homo in peccato suo mortuus, et per molem malae consuetudinis iam sepultus, quia intra conscientiam suam absconsus iacet per nequitiam, a semetipso foras exeat per confessionem. Mortuo enim “Veni foras” dicitur, ut ab excusatione atque occultatione peccati ad accusationem suam ore proprio exire provocetur. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, XXII. xv.31; Migne *PL* 76:231; trans. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment,” 13.
  59. *Ibid.*, 14.
  60. Autun, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 40 (S.43), *Collectarium cum canone missae*, fols. 73r to 74v.
  61. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment,” 17–18.; Since Werckmeister’s article on Autun, other scholars have identified other portals similarly marked for penitential rites, such as the west tympanum of the cathedral of Jaca in Spain. The tympanum at Jaca represents a prostrate man, barefoot, and wearing what might be a hairshirt, crawling beneath the legs of a lion. His posture refers to his expulsion from the church and penance. See Susan Havens Caldwell, “Penance, Baptism, Apocalypse: The Easter Context of Jaca Cathedral’s West Tympanum,” *Art History* 3, no. 1 (1980): 25–40.
  62. Werckmeister, “The Lintel Fragment,” 17.
  63. Lk. 15:22; Grivot and Zarnecki, *Gislebertus* 147.
  64. Camille, “Mouths and Meanings,” 47–50. See also Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2–5.
  65. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, 73. See also Carmela Virillo Franklin, “Words as Food: Signifying the Bible in the Early Middle Ages,” *Settimane di studio della Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull’alto Medioevo* 52 (Spoleto, 2005): 733–762. Franklin argues that metaphors conflating the rumination on Scripture with consuming the Eucharist became more popular in twelfth-century literature in response in part to the late eleventh-century Eucharistic debates inspired by the theories of Berengar of Tours (d. 1088).

- 66.** Sunt autem mortis mitigatoria remedia. Peter of Celle, *De disciplina claustrali*, xxiv.80; Martel, SC 240; trans. Feiss, *Peter of Celle*, 112.
- 67.** confessio peccatorum, et poenitentia... viaticum corporis et sanguinis Domini ad solatium tanti et tam ignoti tineris... auxilium omnium sanctorum et oratio fratrum. Ibid., 112.
- 68.** viatorem transeuntem cum viatico nequaquam posse deficere non ignorat Ibid., 112.
- 69.** veram poenitentiam et confessionem de utero suo et ventre infernali animas infinitas fortiter extraxisse meminit; Orationes fratrum tanquam sagittas igneas fugit. Ibid., 113.
- 70.** Ex his omnibus offas dirumpentes interiora diaboli, mortis et inferni conficiamus, et in ore draconis cum Daniele projiciamus. Ibid., 113.

# A Touching Image

## Andrea Mantegna's Engraving of the Virgin and Child<sup>1</sup>

SUSANNAH FISHER

Andrea Mantegna's engraving of the Virgin and Child (**Fig. 1**), a tangible record of a momentary contact between an ink-filled copper plate and a sheet of paper, holds the viewer with its remarkable combination of tenderness and monumentality. This strikingly human Mary, seated on the ground, lovingly presses the infant Christ to her heart and seems to envelop the child with her entire body. Unlike the six other prints traditionally attributed to Mantegna, there is nothing in this composition — neither background elements nor additional gesticulating figures — to distract the viewer from the Virgin's protective embrace. Numerous art historians have acknowledged in brief the efficacy of this image. David Landau designates the engraving as "arguably the most beautiful print of the Italian Renaissance, and one of the most touching depictions of the Virgin and Child in the history of art."<sup>2</sup> Presumably, period viewers found this engraving equally engaging, as it was soon reproduced in miniatures and enamel work.<sup>3</sup> Over a century later, Rembrandt imitated Mary's distinctive pose for his own etching of the *Virgin and Child with a Cat*.<sup>4</sup>

This paper explores what contributes to the print's effectiveness and affectiveness, which has resulted in such consistent praise over the past 500 years. An immediate answer is the Virgin's fervent embrace of her son's body. Following the advice of Leon Battista Alberti, Mantegna conveys

Mary's feelings through the movements of her body.<sup>5</sup> In turn, her touching gesture was intended to move the audience. However, I suggest that it is not only this gesture but the entire composition and even the chosen medium — which emphasizes simultaneously the human body and the sense most associated with the body, touch — that gives the print its emotional intensity. In the following essay I examine first how the simulated three-dimensionality and textures of the engraving entice the viewer to touch while simultaneously denying the possibility of such contact. I then explore how the depicted instances of touch imbue the print with emotion while celebrating the miracle of the Incarnation, and finally, how the omnipresence of the artist's touch conveys the greatness of his *invenzione* to the viewer holding the print. Understanding this print as both object and image, I address larger issues of viewer reception and the key role played by touch, both real and imagined.

### Controversial Touch

Mantegna's *Virgin and Child*, as well as several of his other works and those of his contemporaries, provide sources that suggest the powerful desire to touch was intuitively recognized and exploited in Renaissance art. This concept until recently has gone largely unexamined, despite Bernard Berenson's thesis, made more than a century ago, that the greatness of an artist such as Giotto lay in his ability to appeal to the viewer's "tactile imagination."<sup>6</sup> Although the nexus of touch, embodied sight, and devotional practices in the Late Middle Ages has begun to be explored in the last couple of years, such connections have received less attention in Renaissance studies.<sup>7</sup> Instead, scholars have explored the relationships between touch (actual or visualized), the sensual or erotic, and the artist's skill in Renaissance art.<sup>8</sup> An investigation into the role touch plays in the reception of Mantegna's engraving of the Virgin and Child, therefore, offers a new lens through which to view audience response, as most studies





**Fig. 1** Mantegna, Andrea, *Virgin and Child*, ca. 1480-85, engraving, 210 x 222 mm, Albertina, Vienna, Austria. Photo: the Graphische Sammlung, Albertina.

about the reception of prints scrutinize collecting practices, later modifications by owners, or copies by other artists.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly any discussion of viewer reception depends on a reconstruction of the original audience and environment, which is often hindered by what information survives or was considered important enough to record.<sup>10</sup> Despite these difficulties it is still possible to form a number of informative conclusions, thanks to the large body of writings from Antiquity to the Renaissance on the senses as well as contemporary evidence on the viewing and appreciation of works on paper.<sup>11</sup>

The sense of touch occupied an uneasy place in Western culture from Antiquity until the eighteenth century, and it is this uncertain status that is particularly informative for the present study. Although at times it was seen as the “king of the senses,” it was more common for touch to be ranked among the baser senses.<sup>12</sup> Intimately associated with the body, touch was considered somewhat animalistic, while sight was linked to the more refined elements of human nature such as rational thought and the contemplations of nature and the divine that separated man from the beasts.<sup>13</sup> Yet for Christians touch could never be wholly bad, since it was through touch that Christ healed the sick and raised the dead,<sup>14</sup> and it was through touch that Thomas confirmed Christ’s resurrection. This ambivalence is seen at least as early as the fourth century, when theologians such as Augustine first struggled with the implications of Christ’s offer for Thomas to touch his resurrected body when the apostle could not believe his eyes.<sup>15</sup> Outside the realm of the miraculous, the possibility of transference during the act of touching still appeared to be at the root of touch’s power and constituted its threat. Both the thirteenth-century scholastic philosopher Thomas Aquinas and Leonardo da Vinci, who considered touch inferior to sight, stressed the ability of the touched object to change that which touches it. As Aquinas explains,

“touch and taste involve physical change in the organ itself; the hand touching something hot gets hot.”<sup>16</sup> Such struggles with and condemnations of the sense of touch, continuing until and beyond Mantegna’s day, indicate important aspects of the early modern period’s understandings of this sense. Most revealing is the work of those who considered touch to be dangerous or overly connected with the material world, as their writings clearly recognized the inherently seductive and emotional power of this sense.<sup>17</sup> Touch in relation to the arts was equally problematic. Devotional practices that involved touching images, although common, were not universally accepted. And while advocates of sculpture’s superiority over painting used the fact that sculpture could be appreciated haptically to support their position, this argument was easily turned upon itself to highlight painting’s supremacy, as touching a painting would reveal the artist’s mastery to mimic nature well enough to fool the viewer.<sup>18</sup> As James Hall writes with regard to Renaissance art collectors, “touch never became a respectable sense, and more often than not it was better not to talk about touch in relation to sculpture.”<sup>19</sup> And yet the fact that artists and intellectuals minimized touch’s role in the appreciation of artworks, especially during the *paragone* debates of the sixteenth century, does not necessarily mean touch played no part in contemporary viewer reception.<sup>20</sup>

Examining Mantegna’s *Virgin and Child* with regard to touch engages with an additional controversy: that of the artist’s touch, and specifically Mantegna’s touch. The vast majority of previous scholarship regarding this engraving, and indeed all of the prints attributed to Mantegna, wrestles with whether or not he engraved his own plates. Lacking the artist’s signature or any document that would support the case for Mantegna as a printmaker, scholars have relied primarily on connoisseurship. In 1901 Paul Kristeller assigned seven prints to



Mantegna — *The Risen Christ*, *The Entombment* (horizontal), the two Bacchanals, the two plates of the *Battle of the Sea Gods*, and the *Virgin and Child* — and these have remained generally accepted by those who believe Mantegna executed the engravings himself.<sup>21</sup> Shelley Fletcher, with the aid of a close-up photography system, provided support for Kristeller's attributions through her discovery of what she terms "guidelines." These demonstrate that the engraver was laying out a rough sketch of his idea directly on the plate. These lines disappear in what most consider to be his later engravings such as the *Virgin and Child*.<sup>22</sup> Opponents to Mantegna as the engraver argued that he had lacked the requisite training that other engravers, who were often goldsmiths, possessed.<sup>23</sup> They received further ammunition with Andrea Canova's publication of a contract from April 1475 between Mantegna and the goldsmith Gian Marco Cavalli. This document recorded Mantegna's demand that Cavalli not show the drawings Mantegna provided or the plates he was to produce without Mantegna's approval.<sup>24</sup> Since the contract does not mention which drawings were to be made into prints, however, it only establishes that Mantegna employed an engraver at one point, but does not negate the possibility that he engraved some plates himself.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, this contract demonstrates that even if Mantegna never picked up a burin, the engravings were based upon his designs. Even Susan Boorsch, who doubts Mantegna was the engraver, acknowledges that the prints translate "Mantegna's incisive drawing style into the intractable medium of the copper plate."<sup>26</sup>

Barring the future discovery of another document, art historians may never resolve this debate. Therefore an examination of the image in its own right, regardless of attribution, is necessary. Art historians have variously described Mantegna's *Virgin and Child* as unforgettable, intimate, human, and touching. It is revealing to

move beyond description in order to interrogate how such an image/object prompts these reactions. Utilizing recent findings from cognitive psychology and neuroscience in tandem with the art historical approaches of reception theory and socio-cultural contextualization, this paper reconstructs and analyzes viewer response.

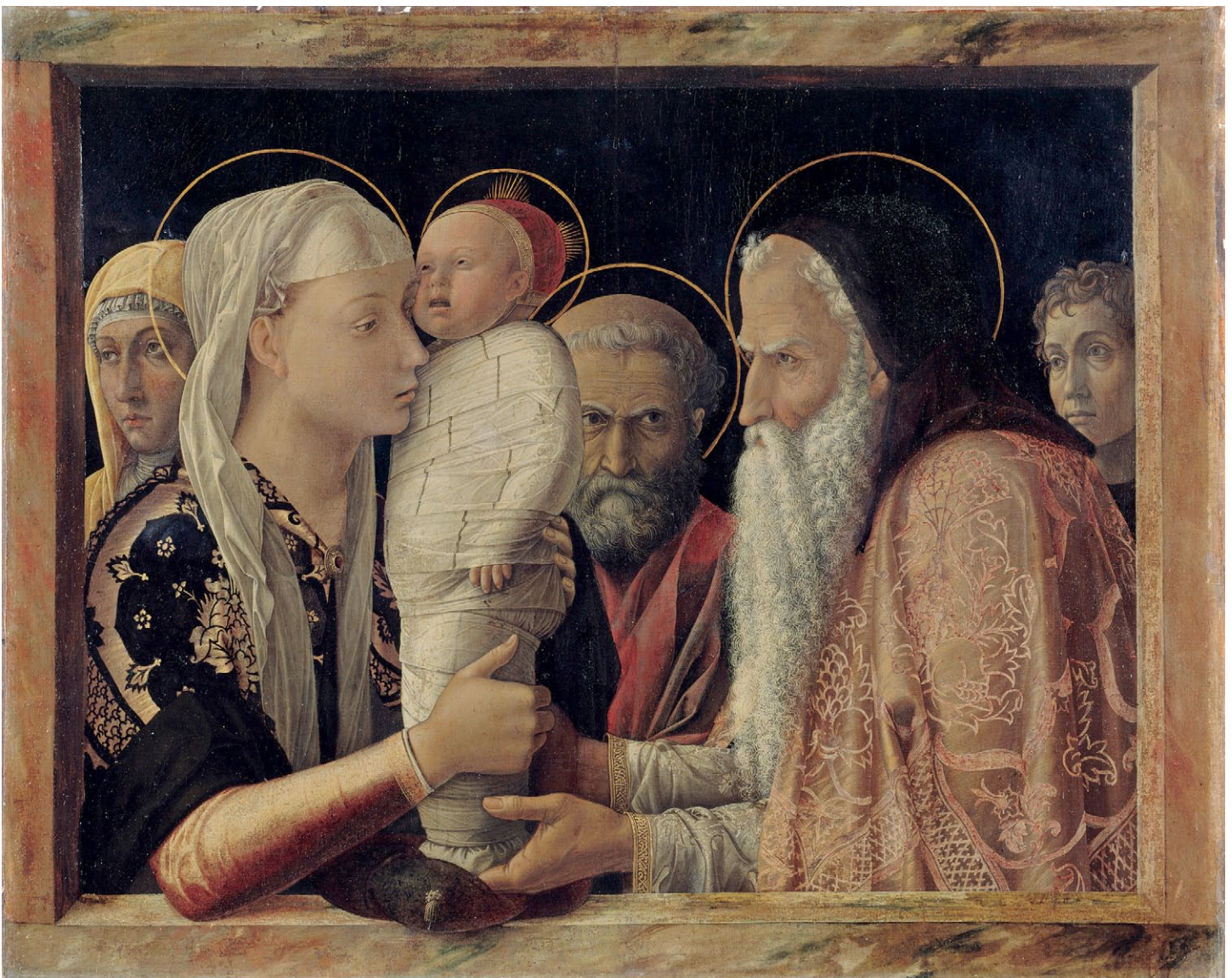
## The Viewer's Touch

Although most existing prints of Mantegna's *Virgin and Child* have been cropped dramatically, its original size was probably not much bigger than a sheet of notebook paper.<sup>27</sup> The small scale of the work suggests an individual rather than a group viewing experience. And while the manner in which Mantegna intended his prints to be displayed is unknown, several possibilities are likely. Prints and drawings could be framed, bound into albums, pasted into books, or kept in cabinet drawers. The last two practices seem to have been the most common in the early sixteenth century for engravings such as Mantegna's.<sup>28</sup> His prints were presumably treated similarly to the portrait medals made by Pisanello in the first half of the fifteenth century, as both were limited edition works of art intended for a select audience.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, both medals and prints could be held and examined. In humanist court culture medals and engravings also flattered the viewer by assuming a certain level of erudition and sensitivity.<sup>30</sup> As Geraldine A. Johnson has pointed out in her study of the bronze statuette of Hercules and Antaeus in Isabella d'Este's Mantuan *studiolo*, the contexts in which such works were seen were multisensory engaging viewers' sight, hearing, taste, and touch.<sup>31</sup> Illuminated manuscripts and incunabula, many influenced by Mantegna's distinctive style, offer further parallel to the artist's engravings. The scale of many of these manuscripts and printed books also necessitated an individual, intimate, hands-on experience. Their illusionistic illustration demonstrates the artist's conscious engagement



with the viewer who holds the book.<sup>32</sup> These trompe l'oeil devices disrupt the surface of the printed page and, as is often noted for such illustrations, prompt the viewer to touch. The remarkably sculptural quality of Mantegna's *Virgin and Child* incites a similar desire to touch. Through a virtuosic display of chiaroscuro, the marks of the engraver's burin describe a variety of forms and textures. The crinkly fabric of the Virgin's sleeve contrasts with the soft flesh of Christ's feet. The light catches the child's chin and

finely delineated curls, thus emphasizing the three-dimensionality of these elements. The Virgin's solidly defined form appears to be carved out from the fingerprint-like background of parallel hatching, while the crumpled, voluminous drapery at her feet creates depth. This fascinatingly tactile print, more sculptural than some sculpture, realizes Alberti's desire that figures portrayed in two-dimensions appear convincingly three-dimensional.<sup>33</sup>



**Fig. 2** Mantegna, Andrea, *Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, ca. 1465-1466, oil on poplar, 68 x 86.3 cm, Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

It is perhaps not surprising to find such an emphasis on physicality in this print. Throughout his oeuvre, Mantegna excelled in reproducing a variety of textures and materials, from marble to brocade. The rich details in his frescos, panel paintings, and engravings capture viewers' attention and in part serve to draw beholders into these fictive worlds. In much of his work Mantegna employed a variety of techniques to blur the line between the painted environment and that of the viewer, most notably the use of illusionistic window frames and architectural elements (Fig. 2).<sup>34</sup> Equally important in this visual play, which is evident in the engraving of the Virgin and Child, was his use of foreshortening and modeling to create the sense of a three-dimensional space. These effects work because of the way in which the human brain processes information received from the eyes. Everything, whether two or three-dimensional, is reflected onto the retina in two dimensions. Although human brains can usually differentiate between objects and flat representations of objects, when faced with a highly illusionistic work of art more sensory information is needed.<sup>35</sup> Touch often provides the required information when sight alone is not enough.

But were viewers ever really fooled by such devices and does the need for further information explain the desire to touch? As Michael Leja argues with regard to nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil paintings, the answer is no. Nevertheless, reviewers of the time as well as modern day visitors to museums feel the need to touch such works. Some other process seems to be happening in these cases. Leja proposes that it is a "synaesthetic response to a strong visual evocation of tactility."<sup>36</sup> Although labeling this response as synaesthetic is perhaps overstating the case, such works do exploit the close connections between the senses that all human beings share. Many illusions, not just those limited to trompe l'oeil painting, are successful

because they take advantage of the way two or more senses work together to construct our perceptions.<sup>37</sup> For example, when we see something within our reach, our motor systems immediately prepare us to grasp the object, anticipating the movements and adjustments the hand must make for the successful acquisition of the item. This response occurs even if we decide not to take hold of the object. Simultaneously, we keenly imagine what it would feel like to hold the perceived object, its weight and texture and tactile qualities.<sup>38</sup> A work of art that can evoke texture and three-dimensionality presumably sparks such processes, even if other elements that would have added to the illusion — such as color — are lacking. Thus, as the viewer of Mantegna's print, we envision the heaviness of Mary's gown, indicated by the multitude of folded drapery; we imagine the baby softness of the Christ child's legs or cheeks, and we recall the downy feel of his curled tufts of hair.<sup>39</sup>

In this way Mantegna's engraving parallels two popular expressions of late Medieval and Renaissance piety: devotional literature which vividly described scenes from Christ's life in order to activate the reader's imagination and dolls of the Christ Child intended to be held, touched, and even played with. *The Meditations on the Life of Christ*, perhaps the most popular of the devotional texts, continuously appealed to the reader's senses.<sup>40</sup> The author enjoined the reader to "kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus who lies in the manger and beg His mother to offer to let you hold Him for a while. Pick Him up and hold Him in your arms."<sup>41</sup> Quattrocento devotional practices involving holy dolls make evident believers' desire to touch Christ.<sup>42</sup> These devotional aids, often given to young women before marriage or claustration, were also used in the processions of Dominican friars where the effigy of the Christ child would be kissed on the hands, feet, and mouth by the participants. The existence of a fifteenth-century Christ child



whose right foot has been worn away by kisses attests to the wish to touch the infant Christ.<sup>43</sup> Both the devotional texts and Mantegna's engraving, however, differ from these effigies, for in texts and printed imagery the desired touch must be imagined. Instead of functioning on a purely sensory level, the print frustrates one's tactile access to the depicted figures and quickly becomes an exercise of the mind.

Two effects do however result from touching the engraving: first, the beholder comes to appreciate the artist's skills (a phenomenon which will be discussed below), and second, the viewer is made aware of his own body. In the case of the latter experience, the viewer is reminded of his own hand as he holds the paper. This is a result of touch producing a double experience: that of the object being touched and an awareness of the body part which is touching it.<sup>44</sup> This differs from the other senses. You do not *see* your eyes when you view something or *hear* your ears when you listen to something, and in this way touch is unique among the senses.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, through touch the beholder becomes sensitive to the small scale of the print in relation to his body and his body's comparatively greater size. This awareness in turn gives the work a sense of delicacy and preciousness, no doubt heightened by the fragile nature of works on paper.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, as the viewer holds a representation of the divine incarnate he is reminded of his own body and thus his own humanity and corporality. This inflects the viewer's appreciation of the work, as he contemplates this humble Virgin's contact with the Christ child, a contact that is denied to the beholder.

### The Virgin's Touch

Mantegna's seemingly simple devotional image functions on a variety of levels. The very fact that this is an engraving — rather than a sculpture whose tactility better satisfies the desire to touch

— transfers the site of the viewer's experience from the senses to the intellect.

At a very basic level, the image of the weary Virgin cradling her child engages the emotions of the print's audience. Nowhere in this engraving is the emotional force of touch more apparent than in the gentle contact between the Virgin's cheek and that of the Christ child. This pose and the desire it stimulates for the worshiper to experience the same sensation were not new creations of Mantegna's, or even of contemporary devotional works. The iconography of the Virgin and Child embracing cheek to cheek was adapted from Byzantine models, which were often worn down by the kisses and handling of the faithful. In the Quattrocento, sculptors including Desiderio da Settignano and Donatello, whose work directly influenced Mantegna's, pioneered isolated relief depictions of the tender Madonna and Child, making it a standard part of the workshop



**Fig. 3** Donatello, *The Pazzi Madonna*, ca. 1420, marble relief, 74.5 x 69.5 cm, Skulpturensammlung und Museum fuer Byzantinische Kunst, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.



repertoire.<sup>47</sup> The fierceness of Mary's embrace in this engraving, however, surpasses that of many earlier depictions and heightens what one scholar calls "the emotional charge" of this formula.<sup>48</sup> Scholars have forwarded several hypotheses to explain the increase in popularity of this type of devotional image in Italy from the thirteenth century onwards, by examining the socio-cultural context in which they were made. For instance, Pope-Hennessy reads works like Donatello's *Pazzi Madonna* (Fig. 3) as a metaphor for contemporary life, in which child mortality was high and children were prized possessions that parents might lose at anytime.<sup>49</sup> Shelley Zuraw argues that unlike Roman patrons, who favorite more archaizing depictions of the Virgin and Child, the Florentines preferred more naturalistic versions. This was in part because Florence, with an economically powerful bourgeois government, was united around its family groups. Fra Giovanni Dominici, a late thirteenth century writer, and others promoted a loving relationship between the parent and child, like that exhibited by the Virgin and Child in these devotional images, and encouraged families to decorate their homes with suitable devotional images.<sup>50</sup> Although both explanations are problematic — child mortality rates were high throughout history, not just in fifteenth-century Florence, and advice like that of Fra Dominici post-dates the appearance and rise of such works — they do highlight their emotional impact. Regardless of the motivation, it seems clear that the popularity of these images and the market for them responded to buyers' increasing interest in a more naturalistic and loving depiction of the Virgin and Child. But how do these images trigger the emotions of viewers? I propose that Renaissance artists intuitively understood what scientists have recently hypothesized: one can experience the emotions of others through the observation of their actions. This empathetic response seems to be due to the brain's so-called mirror neurons. Discovered first in the early 1990s through experiments

with macaque monkeys, these neurons in the premotor cortex seem to respond to the sight of others performing actions and re-enact them in the observer's own mind.<sup>51</sup> What some neuroscientists have theorized is that when we observe another person performing an action, our mirror neurons cause us to prepare to imitate their behavior.<sup>52</sup> More importantly, when that movement is associated with a particular emotion, we experience the emotion as well.<sup>53</sup> Although scientists are just beginning to understand the workings of such cells, this discovery has received much attention in part because it appears to give insight into how humans experience empathy. Furthermore it has implications in the field of art history, specifically for our understanding of how images communicate emotions.<sup>54</sup> Mantegna's nuanced, naturalistic rendering of a mother tightly embracing her son might therefore prompt viewers to experience both the action as well as the associated emotions.

What makes the action and the corresponding feelings more emotionally potent is the pose's emphasis on the Virgin's touch. The impact of represented touch to communicate inner states and thus aid devotion is apparent when Mantegna's print is compared to another image that privileges the sense of sight of the figures, such as the Louvre's Terracotta *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 4). Although the Christ child remains close to his mother, the distance between them, bridged only through their eye contact, lessens the emotional charge. One further example, Donatello's *Pazzi Madonna*, with its equal stress on touch and vision, illustrates this point. The intensity of the figures' gazes has been multiplied by the complete elimination of the distance between the mother and child. Where Mantegna's print — as well as his paintings of this same scene found in the Uffizi and Berlin's Gemäldegalerie (Fig. 5) — differ from a work like the *Pazzi Madonna* is that here touch is not limited to the face and hands. As mentioned



**Fig. 4** Donatello, *Madonna and Child*, Tondo terracotta relief with traces of priming for pigmentation, Louvre, Paris, France. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

above, Mantegna's Madonna uses her entire body to envelop the Christ child, pulling him into herself and embracing his comforting presence. Her action thus draws attention to one of the distinctive characteristics of touch, which is its inextricable link to corporeality, because the organ of touch, the skin, covers the entire body.<sup>55</sup> The gesture of the Virgin underlines both her and her son's physical bodily presence and furthers the central truth of Christianity, the Incarnation. Mary's enviably intimate and unhindered contact with her son and Lord was only possible because of this miracle. In essence the miracle of Christ's presence was that God was able to touch and be touched, the possibility of which is almost indescribably powerful. Unlike the other senses, touch is concerned with proximity.<sup>56</sup> For example, one can see a distant object or hear a far off sound, but one can feel only what is within arm's reach. The engraving, with its action limited to the simple embrace of the Christ child, stresses the nearness of God. This proximity is echoed in the viewer's intimate experience of the print,

which begs to be held closely. The fact that touch alone cannot recreate the Virgin's physical contact with Christ, no matter how closely the print is held, sublimates this desire and thus forces the beholder to appreciate the Incarnation intellectually.

To aid the viewer, Mary's hands — tightly holding the infant Christ — serve in the beholder's mind as surrogates for his own hands. However, the Virgin's overlapping hands — so gracefully executed they appear completely natural — actually assume a rather awkward position. Her two thumbs, which rest just above the center of the composition, lightly touch at their very tips, while her pinkies are noticeably separate from the rest of her fingers. This is not a natural way in



**Fig. 5** Mantegna, Andrea *Madonna and Sleeping Child*, distemper on canvas, 43 x 32 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

which to hold a child. Rather it appears that Mary is in effect signing the letters Alpha and Omega. In the Book of Revelation the first and last letters of the Greek Alphabet connote both God and Jesus Christ and symbolize the beginning and the end of human time. Traditionally, when the Alpha was placed to the right of the Omega the intended implication was that in Christ the beginning and the end are joined as one.<sup>57</sup> That Mary's hands form this symbol directly on top of the body of the Word-made-flesh underscores Christ's cosmological significance, even as he is presented as no more than a child.

The Virgin's oddly positioned hands also direct the viewer to the swaddling wrapped tightly around Christ's body. The lines on her hand, rather than purely reproducing naturalistic wrinkles in her flesh, connect her body to her child's swaddling, making the wrapping an extension of the Virgin's embrace. Briefly described in the Gospel of Luke, the scene of the Virgin swaddling her newborn was expanded in devotional literature in order to illustrate Mary's nurturing care and to evoke similar maternal feelings in the reader. For example, the aforementioned *Meditations on the Life of Christ* relates how the Virgin, overcome by her love, is unable to refrain from touching her son.<sup>58</sup> This Madonna is able to release her hold only after she bathed and wrapped her son to protect him from the elements. In the print, the swaddling is the visible record of the Virgin's loving touch just after his birth. Practiced at least since antiquity and throughout the Renaissance, swaddling was understood to replace the mother's hands, which were required to mold the infant's body.<sup>59</sup> That the Madonna represented in the print has not released her hold of the child, even after swaddling him, signifies her continued need to touch and guard her son. At the same time, the necessity of swaddling highlights the Christ child's *human* fragility. The print's emphasis on Christ's humanity, rather than being unusual, is

congruous with contemporary religious practice. Sermons in Quattrocento Italy increasingly revived an earlier emphasis on the Incarnation as the instant when humanity was saved, rather than the moment of his death on the cross. Fifteenth-century preachers were advised to rouse men to be grateful to God for taking on human flesh and dwelling amongst them.<sup>60</sup> This renewed emphasis on the Incarnation, which occurred at the Annunciation and was revealed to mankind at the Nativity, correlated with older and independent traditions. These traditions had their roots in the twelfth-century writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, who wanted God to come off his throne so that he could be embraced.<sup>61</sup> In later centuries these beliefs were continued by the Franciscans, and both traditions encouraged believers to meditate on the humanity of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Mantegna's print could prompt such meditations because he represented his Virgin directly touching the ground. The Virgin's body, and consequently her son's body, seems to rise from the very earth from which God had created humankind. Additionally, this lowly position allows the viewer unimpeded access to the Madonna and Child; the figures have come down from their throne. In a way, the engraving has fulfilled St Bernard's earlier desire to be near to Christ, in essence to hold God, by allowing the viewer to hold and contemplate a representation of God. Mantegna derived this posture from the devotional type called the Madonna of Humility, which is thought to have been a creation of artists working in the Martini-Lorenzetti circles in the fourteenth century.<sup>63</sup> The Madonna of Humility became popular throughout Europe because of the intimate and approachable nature of the pose and setting. The basic element of the Madonna of Humility type was the haloed Virgin, who was often nursing Christ and seated on a cushion upon the ground. One or both of the holy figures usually made eye contact with the viewer (**Fig. 6**). The purpose of such images was to draw attention





**Fig. 4** di Nicola da Pisa, *Giovanni Madonna of Humility Feeding Christ Child*, Ca' d'Oro, Venice, Italy.  
Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY

to the lowly nature the divine assumed when he took on human flesh.<sup>64</sup> Initially the compositions were exceedingly stark, but by the Quattrocento other figures were often included and there was an attempt to ennoble the representation.<sup>65</sup> Donatello's *Madonna of the Clouds* is one such example of how a fifteenth-century artist reinterpreted the Madonna of Humility. In a work like this, the original meaning symbolized by the seated, earthly Madonna, is lost and the emphasis is instead on the figures' divinity.

In contrast, Mantegna has returned the Virgin to her humble seat on the ground, bringing her and the Christ child back to the earthly realm. The

figures' haloes have been removed, and even the cushion or ornamental fabrics that separate the Virgin from the earth in the earliest examples of this image are longer present. In fact, the Virgin and Child seem so earthly that Kristeller believed Mantegna meant the work to represent merely an average mother and child, in what would have been a remarkably avant-garde genre scene.<sup>66</sup> Presumably someone early in the print's history also felt the Madonna and Child were too human, and in the second state of the engraving halos were added. Without such signifiers, the print celebrates the Virgin's humility rather than her divinity. She functions as a symbol of the humanity with which the viewer — keenly aware of his own humanity as he holds and contemplates the print — can identify.

Additionally, Mary's position on the ground cradling her infant son prefigures the moment when she will hold his lifeless body after the crucifixion. This in itself is not new, but the way in which the scene is depicted is extremely affective. The Virgin hugs her son so tightly she cannot see him with her eyes, yet she is made aware of him and his body through her sense of touch. Her sorrowful eyes are thus lost in contemplation on her son's future suffering, a suffering made possible only because he took on human flesh, the very flesh which she gave him and which she now holds. As it was understood by ancient philosophers and medieval theologians, the ability of flesh and skin to feel pleasure and pain was the primary reason the sense of touch was so linked to emotions; it was through the pleasure or pain of touch that humans came to know feelings of attraction or avoidance, as well as joy and sorrow.<sup>67</sup> Thus it is through touch that the Virgin imagines the pain and feels the subsequent emotions that her son will suffer and experience during the Passion, and it is through touch and the contemplation of touch that viewer is invited to do the same.

## The Artist's Touch

Mantegna has not created a simple devotional image with his *Virgin and Child*. Seemingly naturalistic elements have layers of theological significance. Although the plate is not signed, Mantegna's presence is manifested throughout the print.<sup>68</sup> Engraving records every thought of the artist carried out by his hand. Lines alone create the contours and volume of every form. Mantegna relies exclusively on the different widths and shapes of line that are completely defined by the pressure the engraver physically applied to the plate.<sup>69</sup> He uses no other color than black, depending on the viewer's eye to merge the lines into different shades of grey that suggest shadow and three-dimensional form. Where the artist chose not to cut into the plate, highlights appear or empty space is implied on the blank areas of the inked paper. And yet when one brings the print closer, the folds of the Virgin's clothes and the curls on Christ's head dissolve into an abstraction of fine lines of varying thickness. Thus, the illusion of the figures' materiality is replaced by an awareness of the artist's presence, evidenced by his marks on the page.

Evelyn Lincoln has convincingly argued that Mantegna's engravings seem to be his attempt to create an ideal drawing style.<sup>70</sup> Works like the *Virgin and Child* crystallize the characteristics of Mantegna's *disegno* — meaning both drawing as well as overall design of a work. Mantegna selected the medium of engraving, with its inherent absolute restriction on artistic means to demonstrate in the boldest terms possible, his artistic creativity. The choice to employ this medium was a manifesto of Mantegna's art just as Christiansen has suggested.<sup>71</sup> This print and the six other core engravings traditionally attributed to Mantegna — which include *historia*, with both religious and classical subject matter, and this premeditated, highly intellectual devotional image — demonstrated his range and talent in these

genres. Instead of momentary sketches, these are finished works that record Mantegna's famous quality of line and his expertise at *disegno*. That Mantegna's hand could be recognized even in his own day is made evident by the testimony given by the Paduan artist Pietro da Milano during the lawsuit concerning how much Mantegna was owed for his work in the Ovetari chapel. When questioned about which parts of the chapel were the works of Mantegna, Pietro answered that although he did not see Mantegna paint certain portions of the fresco, he knew that these were the results of his labors because he could recognize Mantegna's distinctive hand.<sup>72</sup>

Mantegna's line certainly outlived the artist, as it continued to be recognizable and admired even after his death. The musical instrument maker Lorenzo da Pavia wrote to his employer Isabella d'Este that he believed that God would make use of Mantegna to make "qualche bela opera" in heaven, and that he doubted ever to see a finer draftsman and more ingenious mind on earth.<sup>73</sup> Engravings such as the *Virgin and Child* fixed for posterity Mantegna's ingenuity and artistic abilities. Moreover, the medium of engraving allowed him to reproduce his drawing skills for an extended audience.<sup>74</sup> Mantegna's bold experiments to make his mark in this relatively new world of printmaking were indeed successful. A mere fifty years after the artist's death, the famous biographer of Italian artists Giorgio Vasari credited Mantegna with the very invention of engraving.<sup>75</sup>

As a final note, the engraving of the *Virgin and Child* speaks to the role of the artist as much as it does to the mystery of the Incarnation. As an artist who created with his hands, Mantegna was aware of the power of the hand.<sup>76</sup> This power could be symbolized through the hands of the figures he depicted. While the Virgin's hands serve as surrogates for those of the viewer, they also are the extensions of Mantegna's hands.

For like the Virgin's hands, which form and give shape to the infant Christ, Mantegna's gave shape to his ideas and formed the works of art that would become his legacy.

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## Endnotes

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2. Catalogue entry written by David Landau, in *Andrea Mantegna*, ed. Jane Martineau (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 219.
3. For copies in panel paintings and miniatures, see Lionello Puppi, ed. *Un Mantegna da scoprire: la Madonna della Tenerezza* (Milan: Skira, 2006). For the glass flask, see Keith Christiansen, "The Case for Mantegna as Printmaker," *Burlington Magazine* 134, no. 1086 (Sept. 1993): 606.
4. Keith Christiansen, "The Art of Andrea Mantegna," in Martineau, *Andrea Mantegna*, 40.
5. Leon Battista Alberti, "De Pictura" in *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, trans. and ed. C. Grayson, (London: Phaidon, 1972), 81–83. "A 'historia' will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible," (Alberti, "De Pictura," 81).
6. *The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance with an Index to their Works*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 3–13. For a discussion of Berenson's notion of tactile values, see Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 59–63. I would like to thank Sarah Wilkins for bringing this reference to my attention. Jodi Cranston also begins her essay on vividness in Renaissance painting with a discussion of Berenson's tactile values. Although this is an excellent discussion of touch in this period, it is by its nature as a contribution to a multidisciplinary study of touch in the early modern period somewhat general and divorced from actual works. "Touch and the Blind Man: The Phenomenology of Vividness in Italian Renaissance Art," in *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Harvey (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 224–242.
7. See, for example, Jacqueline E. Jung, "The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination," in *Looking Beyond: Visions, Dreams, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Dept. of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 2010), 203–240.
8. Mary Pardo, "Artifice as Seduction in Titian," in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55–89; Stephen J. Campbell, "Eros in the Flesh: Petrarchan Desire, the Embodied Eros, and Male Beauty in Italian Art, 1500–1540," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35, no. 3 (2005): 629–662; and Geraldine A. Johnson, "Isabella d'Este and the Sensual Allure of Sculpture," in *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice*, eds. Alice E. Sanger and Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 183–197.
9. For example, C. Baker, Caroline Elam and Genevieve Warwick, eds., *Collecting Prints and Drawings in Europe, c. 1500 – 1750* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) and David S. Areford, "The Image in the Viewer's Hands: The Reception of Early Prints in Europe," *Studies in Iconography* 24 (2003): 5–42.
10. Due to these limitations a true history of reception for this work is not possible. Instead my approach is closer to reception aesthetics as described by Wolfgang Kemp, which holds that elements in the work itself suggest how the viewer would have interacted with this image. Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180–196.
11. These include, among others, philosophical works by Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists, theological works from

- Augustine and Jerome to Thomas Aquinas, devotional writings such as the *Meditations of the Life of Christ* (discussed below), treatises by Renaissance Humanists, and notes from artists and collectors.
12. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh*, 1.
  13. Majorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch: Human Dignity and Deformity from Michelangelo to Calvin*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought, Vol. LXXI (Leiden, Bost, Köln: Brill, 1998), 3–5.
  14. For example, "And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all," Luke 6:19. See also, Luke 8:45–56.
  15. Glenn Most, *Doubting Thomas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). Most points out that in a strict reading of the biblical text Thomas never actually touches Christ, (Most 53–55).
  16. Cited and discussed in O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch*, 7–8.
  17. For example, from Aristotle's *Ethics* dating to the fourth century BC to the fifteenth-century works of Renaissance Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, touch was debased because of its associations with carnal rather than spiritual love. Although man was to rise above such 'bestial' pleasures, there was no denying that these were powerful. These authors, among others, are cited and briefly discussed in Mark Paterson's *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects and Technologies* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2007), 1–2.
  18. For example, see the painter Bronzino's answer Benedetto Varchi's inquiries to artists about the *paragone* translated and cited in *Italian Art: 1500–1600: Sources and Documents*, ed. Robert Klein and Henri Zerner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 10–13. For Varchi's own theories on sculpture and touch, see Cranston, "Touch and the Blind Man," 237–241.
  19. James Hall, "Desire and Disgust: Touching Artworks from 1500 to 1800," in *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects*, ed. Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 146–147.
  20. Pardo, "Artifice as Seduction," 65–68.
  21. Paul Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna* (London, New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 376–408.
  22. Shelley Fletcher, "A Closer Look at Mantegna's Prints," *Print Quarterly* 18, no.1 (March 2001): 3–41. For an explanation of her method, see "A Re-evaluation of two Mantegna Prints," *Print Quarterly* 14, no.1 (March 1997): 67–77.
  23. Suzanne Boorsch, "Mantegna and his Printmakers," in Martineau, *Andrea Mantegna*, 56–66.
  24. Andrea Canova, "Mantegna ha davvero inciso?: nuovi documenti," *Grafica d'arte* 12, no. 47 (July–Sept): 3–11.
  25. Fletcher, *A Closer Look*, 5. See also David Landau, "Mantegna," *Print Quarterly* 23 no. 4 (2006): 449–451.
  26. Boorsch, "Mantegna and his Printmakers," 64.
  27. For example, the Albertina sheet (fig.1) is roughly an 8.5 inch square. The original plate's dimensions are approximately 13.5 by 10 inches. Martineau, *Andrea Mantegna*, 219.
  28. David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print: 1470–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 289–292.
  29. Evelyn Lincoln, *The Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000), 30.
  30. *Ibid.*, 39.
  31. Johnson, "In the Hand of the Beholder," 186–189.
  32. These include; fictive pieces of paper seemingly attached to the page, torn pages, and shading to make the illustrations project off of the surface. For a discussion of who owned incunables, see Lilian Armstrong, "The Hand-Illumination of Printed Books in Italy 1465–1515," in *Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination: 1450–1550*, ed. Jonathan J. G. Alexander (Munich, New York: Prestel, 1994), 42–46.
  33. Alberti, "De Pictura," 89.
  34. Similar to Mantegna's engraving of the Virgin and Child, this painting also delights the senses with its juxtaposition of rich and varied textures. Here too Christ's swaddled body is on display as is the Virgin's tender touch.
  35. Wolf Singer, "The Misperception of Reality," in *Deceptions and Illusions: Five Centuries of Trompe l'Oeil Painting*, ed. Sybille Ebert-Schifferer (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 41–43.



36. M. Leja, "'Trompe l'oeil' Painting and the Deceived Viewer," in Maniura and Sheperd, *Presence*, 178.
37. For a good introduction to synesthesia and the interconnectedness of the senses geared towards nonspecialists, see J. Ward, *The Frog who Croaked Blue: Synesthesia and the Mixing of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2008).
38. Singer, "Misperception of Reality," 45–46. Berenson noted this affect in his seminal work on Florentine painters. "The painter must, therefore, do consciously what we all do unconsciously, — construct his third dimension. And he can accomplish his task only as we accomplish ours, by giving tactile values to retinal impressions. His first business, therefore, is to rouse the tactile sense, for I must have the illusion of being able to touch a figure, I must have the illusion of varying muscular sensations inside my palm and fingers corresponding to the various projections of this figure, before I shall take it for granted as real, and let it affect me lastingly," (Berenson, *Florentine Painters*, 4–5).
39. As Mary Pardo writes with regard to Titian's *Urbino Venus* and Giorgione's *Dresden Venus*, "both artists rely on the evocative properties of their surface-description to fill the viewer's imagination with sensory stimuli that bring together many kinds of touching. Flesh is made more palpable by its juxtaposition with satin, brocade, foliage, linen, metal, velvet, and fur." Pardo, "Artifice as Seduction," 68.
40. Bonaventure (pseudo), *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century*. Paris, *Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. Ital., 115.*, trans. and ed. Isa Ragusa (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
41. The passage continues, "You may freely do this, because He came to sinners to deliver them, and for their salvation humbly conversed with them and even left Himself as food for them. His benignity will patiently let Himself be touched by you as you wish and will not attribute it to presumption but to great love," (Pseudo-Bonaventure, 38–39). This text and, as will become apparent, in Mantegna's image, authorizes the devotee to touch, based on the fact of the Incarnation, in which Christ took on human flesh for the salvation of humankind.
42. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, "Holy Dolls: Play and Piety in Florence in the Quattrocento," in *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, ed. Sarah Blake McHam (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 111–127. See also, Jung, "Tactile and Visionary," 235–237.
43. *Ibid.*, 119–120.
44. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation." *Representations* no. 73 (2001): 57. In this article Lajer-Burcharth introduces an exploration of the trope of touch as a new methodological approach for art history. The double nature of the sense of touch has been long recognized. For how the sense of touch interacts with the mental body images in the brain, see Andrea Serino and Patrick Haggard, "Touch and the Body," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 34 (2010): 224–236.
45. Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 162.
46. For a discussion of scale and the body, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 132 and passim.
47. Shelley Zuraw, "The Efficacious Madonna in Quattrocento Rome: Spirituality in the Service of Papal Power," in *Visions of Holiness: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Andrew Ladis and Shelley Zuraw (Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, 2001), 107. See also Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-up Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (The Netherlands: DAVACO Publishers, 1984), 32–33.
48. Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative*, 59.
49. John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello, sculptor* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), 256.
50. Zuraw, "Efficacious Madonna in Quattrocento Rome," 103.
51. For example, see Christian Keysers et al., "A Touching Sight: SII/PV Activation during the Observation and Experience of Touch," *Neuron* 42 (April 2004): 335–346. The exact function of these mirror neurons is still controversial. For an overview of the debates about mirror neurons, see Vittorio Gallese, Morton Ann Gernsbacher, Cecilia Heyes, Gregory Hickok and Marco Iacoboni, "Mirror Neuron Forum," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 4 (2011): 369–407.

52. John Onians, *Neuroarthistory from Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 25–26.
53. For a good introduction and bibliography to recent discoveries and proposals about mirror neurons, see Christian Keysers and L. Fadiga, "The Mirror Neuron System: New Frontiers," *Social Neuroscience* 3 (2008): 193–198.
54. After presenting a version of this paper, David Freedberg's essay on empathy was brought to my attention. In it he makes an eloquent argument for the usefulness of the findings from neuroscience to understand empathy. "Empathy, Motion and Emotion," in *Wie sich Gefühle Ausdruck verschaffen: Emotionen in Nahsicht*, ed. K. Herding and A. Krause-Wahl (Taunusstein: Dr. H.H. Driesen GmbH, 2007), 17–51. Although the question of whether or not mirror neurons contribute to action understanding or language comprehension is still debated, important figures in the field believe that mirror neurons do contribute to human empathy. Arthur M. Glenberg, "Positions in the Mirror are Closer than They Appear," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 4 (2011): 408–410.
55. Harvey, *Sensible Flesh*, 1.
56. Stewart, *Fate of the Senses*, 157–158.
57. Peter Murray and Linda Murray, *The Oxford Companion to Christian Art and Architecture* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.
58. Bonaventure (Pseudo), *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, 33.
59. O'Rourke Boyle, *Senses of Touch*, 45–47.
60. John W. O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979), 76.
61. Henk van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300–1500* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 32. He also adds, "Works of art played a major role in this form of spirituality. Not only did medieval artists produce pictures for those who could not read, they also created images for those who wanted *above all to touch*, who wanted to have the scenes of their salvation *tangibly present* before them." (van Os, 54; italics added).
62. John W. O'Malley, "Postscript," in L. Steinberg, *Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 201.
63. For a discussion of the origins of the Madonna of Humility type, see Millard Meiss, "The Madonna of Humility," *Art Bulletin* 18 (1936): 434–464.
64. Carol J. Purtle, "The Iconography of Campin's Madonnas in Interiors: A Search for Common Ground," in *Robert Campin: New Directions in Scholarship*, ed. Susan Foister and S. Nash (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 174.
65. For a discussion of a Madonna of Humility image and its association with the sense of hearing and music, see Andrew Ladis, "The Music of Devotion: Image, Voice, and the Imagination in a *Madonna of Humility* by Domenico di Bartolo's," in A. Ladis and S. Zuraw, *Visions of Holiness*, 163–177.
66. Kristeller, *Andrea Mantegna*, 392–393.
67. Rebekah Smick, "Touch in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: The Sensual Ethics of Architecture," in *Sensible Flesh*, 211–212.
68. For a discussion of line as signature, see David Rosand, *The Meaning of the Mark: Leonardo and Titian, The Franklin D. Murphy Lectures VIII* (Kansas: Spencer Museum of Art University of Kansas, 1988), 11–17.
69. Landau and Parshall claim that for the *Virgin and Child* Mantegna used two burins for most of the descriptive lines and used drypoint to achieve the more subtle modeling of forms, (*Renaissance Print*, 71).
70. Lincoln, *Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker*, 37.
71. Christiansen, "Case for Mantegna as Printmaker," 604.
72. Cited in C. E. Gilbert, *Italian Art: 1400–1500: Sources and Documents* (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), 31–32.
73. David Chambers, Jane Martineau, and Rodolfo Signorini, "Mantegna and the Men of Letters," in Martineau, *Andrea Mantegna*, 27.
74. Alison Wright, "Mantegna and Pollaiuolo: Artistic Personality and the Marketing of Invention," *Drawing, 1400–1600: Invention and Innovation*, ed. Stuart Currie (Aldershot, Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 72–90.

75. In the second edition of his *Lives* he would retract this claim. For both editions, see G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni affrontate del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Betterton and Paolo Barocchi, vol. 3 (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1966), 547–556. Lincoln rightly points out, “there was an element of truth in his first claim: Mantegna’s engravings were very different from the playing cards and serial images of planets and prophets that seem to have characterized the first years of Italian engraving in the last quarter of the fifteenth century,” (*Invention of the Italian Renaissance Printmaker*, 17).
76. Paul Barolsky, “The Artist’s Hand,” *Craft of Art: Originality and Industry in the Italian Renaissance and Baroque Workshop* (Athens, London: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 21. Barolsky argues that Michelangelo understood the power of the hand and this can be seen in the Sistine ceiling.



## “As Seen On TV”

*Publicity, Violence and Self-Promotion in Chris Burden's Television Works, 1972-1976*

CHELSEA BEHLE FRALICK

The atmosphere of the early 1970s in America was rife with friction, disillusionment, and anger. Vietnam, the first war to be broadcast 24 hours a day, 7 days a week into America's living rooms, gave new meaning to violence and its projection into public consciousness. “If the 60s were synonymous with turbulent social change and open-ended invention” in the art world, “then the 70s were a time of consolidation, contraction and introspection.” Those artists who had begun working with the television set as a sculptural object in the 1960s began to slowly expand their boundaries towards the content of television itself through the decade. It was the 1970s, however, that ushered in a new generation of artists working in the medium of television, and it was the artist Chris Burden who stood at the forefront of this aesthetic manipulation.

From April 26 to 30, 1971, Chris Burden, a Masters of Fine Arts graduate student in the Department of Art at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), completed his MFA final performance artwork with *Five Day Locker Piece*. In an extreme act, Burden locked himself inside Locker Number 5 at UCI, placing a full 5-gallon jug of water above him and an empty 5-gallon jug below him, remaining inside for 5 days. The controversy created over this work, which granted him his MFA, propelled him into the still-budding performance art scene in and around Los Angeles,

California. Burden quickly became known for his intense and startling body performances. *Shout Piece* (August 1971), *Shoot* (November 1971), *Prelude to 220, or 110* (September 1971) and *220* (October 1971) were among his works within his first year out of UCI.

Chris Burden's wide array of radical performance works of the early and mid-1970s, particularly those involving the greatest danger or pain — *Shoot, Deadman* (November 1972), *Icarus* (April 1973), *Doorway to Heaven* (November 1973), and *Trans-Fixed* (April 1974) — are well documented and analyzed in the art world. Less discussed though are his works beginning in February 1972, which extended his body into a new territory of self-manipulation: the medium of television.

Through this essay, I will argue that Burden's use of the television medium operates as a mechanism of control over his own public perception. The rise of his public and art world fame in response to *Shoot* propelled his artistic career and his minimalistic performances to embody and perpetuate a public identity of grand violence. In disowning this perceived public identity, however, Burden paradoxically went straight to the modern-day medium of violence — television broadcasting — to gain back control of his artistic self-image. These broadcasts, in commercial, interview and short-narrative form transform from video performances into controlled displays of self-promotion, utilizing and challenging notions of publicity, violence and power in 1970s media theory.

Within the course of my research, I have come to identify 4 major trends among Burden's work within television: 1) television used as a sculptural performance prop (*Fire Roll, Working Artist*, 1973–1975), 2) television as a primary viewing device in a performance setting (*Velvet Water, The Confession, Back to You, Do You Believe in Television?*, 1974–76), 3) television as a historical projection/viewing device (*C.B.T.V.*,

1977), and 4) television as a performative medium dealing with modes of public reception (*TV Hijack*, *TV Ad*, *Poem for L.A.*, *Chris Burden Promo*, *Full Financial Disclosure*, *Big Wrench*, 1972–80). I will be focusing in greater detail on this last category, and most particularly on one television ad therein: *Chris Burden Promo* (1976). *Promo*, I argue, represents the most radical shift in the rise and development of his television works, and subsequently in control and manipulation of his public persona.

Additionally, I will explore a range of questions along the lines of promotion and the self in the medium of television. How do Chris Burden's television works, particularly his commercials, fit into the legacy of 1970s video art? What impact, if any, did they make on public perception of his work at the time of their broadcast? What is the viewer-artist relationship in the production of self-image in art works for TV? And how are the mediums of video and television involved in the construction of self-promotion?

This essay will not explore the underlying sources of the violence perceived in Burden's work, nor will it seek to concretely determine whether Burden's work is inherently “narcissistic” or “masochistic,” both arguments made repeatedly in historical and critical reactions to Burden's performance pieces. Rather, my intention is to bring to light the trend of these interpretations of violence, in order to draw a timeline by means of a deeper discussion of how the medium of television destabilizes and perverts Burden's commodification and image of self.

## Self-Promotion: A Definition

The concept of self-promotion in the arts, it could be argued, has existed for centuries. In the way that the term “self-promotion” is currently employed, a sense of “self” must first be presumed to exist. What must take place, then,

for the “self” to be “promoted” is what Stephen Greenblatt called “self-fashioning,” and further, what Amelia Jones later calls “self-imaging.”

The verb “[to] fashion,” according to Greenblatt, is taken in the sixteenth century to designate the formation of the self, suggesting an outside act upon a physical body. This is preeminently figured in God's “fashioning” of Christ, but a wider range of interpretations opened in sixteenth century language. “Self-fashioning,” Greenblatt states, “is in effect the English Renaissance version of [behavioral] control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historic embodiment.” In a sense, “self-fashioning” in sixteenth century Europe was a strict affair on the part of the individual. A person was transformed from an ethereal notion of “I” or “self” to an outward expression of being that is shaped in part by the individual, and in part by societal constructs imposed on the frame of the individual. In other words, to be “self-fashioned” is, in Greenblatt's estimation, to create a sense of self that in part arises from within oneself, but which in turn becomes acted upon by social strictures.

In contrast, Amelia Jones's “self-imaging” brings the molding of the self to a more contemporary construction. “Self-imaging” is seen through the “technologies of representation” that involve the visual and performance arts, particularly new media such as “film, video and digital media.” Jones explores “artist's interventions into the signifying process, and thus the formations of the self” using these technologies, drawing upon Kantian philosophy, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and feminist theory to formulate a structure of “self” as always once removed through the medium of representational technologies.

I use the term “self-promotion” as analogous to “self-fashioning,” but within the representational system of technology that “self-imaging” explores. The individual engages deliberately in fashioning self-image, even within the fracturing modes of representational technologies, but social control also plays a role in this activity. A socially constructed identity, therefore, is created apart from the individual’s control, an identity that carries itself into publicity. Artistic self-promoters (for example, Andy Warhol) have indeed understood that whatever the difference between private and public selves, the social construction of the self — for better or worse — drives the artist’s “identity” into the public sphere. The artist, at times, may also think that he/she is always in control of this machination. But in moving from live performance to the moving-image medium of television, Chris Burden’s public identity — his self-promotion — was amplified and transformed in new and unexpected ways.

### Publicity and Self-Promotion: Documentation

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The self-promoting artist of the 1960s and 70s relied heavily on documentation to sell both art and themselves to the public. One need only to look at the documentary uses of Conceptualism to understand Chris Burden’s self-promotion in the form of photographic documentation. In the book *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, Alexander Alberro describes how artists like Joseph Kosuth understood their ephemeral works as profitable *only through* documentation. The materials in the gallery were seen as objects used “simply to communicate the underlying, essentially abstract idea,” providing the “experience of ownership” that buyers sought in the commercial economy of the 1960s. Seth Siegelaub, the art dealer-publicist of the Conceptualist group consisting of Kosuth, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler and Lawrence Weiner, increased publicity of this seemingly

intangible art through what he called “outside information” — “expository articles, laudatory reviews, interviews and public discussions by the artists.” As one critic noted about Huebler’s work, “he does not interpret — he documents.” The documentation of an artwork — of a performance, text, or other medium — becomes, through this process, the work of the artist, a process that is laid bare in photographs, texts and other materials for purchase by the art collector and for manipulation by the artist and dealer.

Conceptual art of the 1970s operated largely within these documentary means of production, and Chris Burden’s conceptual performances were no different. While Conceptualism in California “yearned towards something more restless, more vague and ineluctable” than East Coast manifestations, an attraction towards profit and self-promotion still drove Chris Burden’s art, and was reflected in his use of supporting documents. Each of Burden’s performance pieces were documented in some way, either through photographs or film accompanying an artist description, or, on rare occasion, a lone descriptive text panel. Ingrid Schaffner writes, “although the number of people who actually saw Burden’s performances was small in comparison to the number who heard about them, the artist’s documentation of his work — and the care he took in selecting iconic images to represent each event — emphasized...the artifacts and evidence that preserve such moments.” An article from *The New York Times* from August 11, 1974, entitled “Question: How Do You Buy A Work of Art Like This? Answer: With a Check,” displayed photographs of Burden’s *Shoot* piece of 1971 and a picture of a check from Ronald Feldman of the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York, explaining that, through its purchase, the artwork becomes “authenticated.” Further, the article contends that Conceptual artists “need something to sell to make a living,” and in the case of Chris Burden’s art, it is documentation that collectors and



galleries sought to purchase, including artistic descriptions, photographs, relics and, eventually, videotapes.

An early variation of Burden's video document *Documentation of Selected Works, 1971-75*, featuring filmed portions of an array of performance pieces, was displayed as a gallery show at Ronald Feldman Gallery in 1975. Additionally, Burden's self-distributed artistic catalogues, 71-73 (1973) and 74-77 (1978), were each advertised as “Order By Mail!”, for \$10.50 each, in magazines like *High Performance*. Each of these items aid in producing a highly distributable system of documentation, through which Burden sought to dictate his “self-fashioning” to a public audience.

Philip Auslander defines the traditional documentation of a performance as “both a record of it through which can be reconstructed... and evidence that it actually occurred.” This sense of a “record,” I argue, is exactly what Chris Burden sought to obtain — along with control — in his carefully chosen photographs and “laconic” texts, as they influence the physical representations of his work, and ultimately how each work was viewed by the public.

### **Masochism, Narcissism and Violence: The Fashioning of Chris Burden's Public Persona**

It is with documentation, media coverage and interviews that the outward persona of Chris Burden's self-promotion is enacted, but it is through the medium of television that Burden attempts to take back control of this persona. Unfortunately, the image of self that is projected onto the artist — particularly when outward acts of violence are involved — is not so easily reversed in the public eye. As the Lacanian subject “cannot be distinguished from signification,” so too is Burden's public image an indelible part of

his formed identity of self-promotion. Burden's public image, then, can be seen as both a product of and reaction against his own self-fashioning, particularly through documentation and interview formats.

Unlike Joseph Kosuth, who willfully manipulated the “media reputation, name recognition, public persona — that framed the work of art” (à la Andy Warhol), Burden understood the mechanisms of his self-promotion but fought against its translations in the public domain. After Burden performed his piece *Shoot* in August 1971, he became inundated with publicity, and by 1973 the performance had been covered in an *Avalanche* interview, as well as reviewed in *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time Magazine*, *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, *High Times* and *Penthouse*. In the *Esquire* article, titled “Proof That the Seventies Have Finally Begun,” Burden was declared a “Man of the Year,” recognized by employees at his local photo store as a famous artist. These initial press reviews were followed by dozens of scathing criticisms about Burden's work in the 1970s and beyond, with comments ranging from “The aesthetics of Roman circuses express themselves in a book documenting the self-lacerating performances of Chris Burden,” to his performance relics as representing “some idiotic episode in his idiotic career,” to accusations of being “repugnant,” “self-serving,” and “desperate.” Even in March of 1972, a year before *Esquire's* famous article, Burden was reviewed in *The Los Angeles Times* with a picture of his 1972 work *Bed Piece* with the sarcastic headline “This Is Art — These People Are Artists.” The question of the legitimacy of documentation as art, in the vein of Conceptualism, was clearly on the minds of some critics when viewing Burden's performance work, as a source of confusion in the act of being shot, in the case of Burden's *Shoot*, or in lying in bed for 22 days (*Bed Piece*). As Frazer Ward states in his essay for *October*, “Grey Zone: Watching *Shoot*,” Burden, being “exposed to tabloid publicity that most artists never have to

deal with,” became “saddled with a public identity as ‘the artist who shot himself.’”

Many of the labels imposed upon Burden's work, particularly “masochistic” and “narcissistic,” were largely contested by the artist, but the media attention he received for his perceived violence and ego was, interestingly, not taken up with great issue by Burden. Burden recounts in 1978 how *Shoot* was quite simple, “but in terms of the media — and that includes word of mouth — it worked.” In a world where artworks “were experienced largely as rumor,” Burden “strummed the network [of media information] like a lyre.” Evidence of such forethought, however, can be challenged by Burden's own statements of curiosity of “how it feels” in the actions of his art, as well as by the reactions in the art world, including those in television, that he expressed in the years to come. The violence perceived in the public identity of his self-promotion was likely, in some ways, in conflict with the private individual.

Though Burden and others suggest that the real dangers in his art forms were relatively small (“After all, I'm not suicidal”), and although other artists like Vito Acconci were pegged with similar violent terms, the press, past and present, have described Burden as “one of America's few really scary artists.” In an interview in the 1980s, Burden retreats into defensiveness, asking the seemingly naïve question “Who says that I can't be shot at and let it be alright?” Burden sought for his audience to move beyond the violence, but in performing a violent act, he also inadvertently reinforced the “crazy” and “violent” socially constructed component of his self-promotion. As Amelia Jones points out, interpretation of Burden's work is based on “whether or not one believes Burden to be ironic,” an act that assumes the viewer is conscious of Burden's intentions, a virtual “impossibility” in task.

Burden's tacit and defensive responses in interviews, as such, did not always bode well for interpretation. As Allan Kaprow, the forerunner of Happenings, suggested in his 1964 polemic “The Artist as a Man of the World” that “[the artist's] job is to place at the disposal of the receptive audience those new thoughts, new words, new stances even, that will enable their work to be better understood. If they do not, the public's alternative is its old thoughts and attitudes, loaded with stereotyped hostilities and misunderstandings.” If the artist is not clear about his or her image, then he or she will be misinterpreted, and likely in a negative light. This was especially true with performance art that expressed themes and actions in daily life, exemplified earliest in the Happenings of Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine in the late 1950s and early 60s, where performances were misconstrued as humorous and in-vogue. Chris Burden's public ambiguity about his image, particularly through documentation and interviews, contributed directly to the public's negative (aka “violent,” “narcissistic” or “masochistic”) interpretation of his art.

Erving Goffman's notion of the performance of self is important to note here, particularly in terms of incorporating “self-fashioning” and “self-imaging” into a base understanding of “self-promotion.” In *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman understands an individual in performance as either fully immersed in his own self-creating actions, or as cynical in presenting his actions to his audience, for purposes of “self-interest.” Burden did immerse himself in actions, but he also sought the detached perspective of a performer, naively without “self-interest,” impermeable to criticism and to the repercussions of his artwork. The danger in seeking this detachment, however, is that an artist may be mistaken as solely his or her violent public image. “Functioning simultaneously as a human being and as an object, [Burden's]

performances came perilously close to having their reason for being based on the hyperbole of a manufactured hero.” He did, in fact, reach this state of imaging, as Burden’s external image of the violent, sacrificial “hero” in the press took hold of the public perception of his art.

### ***The Commentaries* (1975): Burden Critiques His Critics**

By 1974, Burden was grappling with how “people [the media and critics] were starting to expect certain things, and I didn’t want to get boxed in by that. The press was getting kind of hysterical, and I knew if I kept doing that work I was going to be turned into the Alice Cooper of art.” According to the press and the public of his art, however, he had already become that image. An angry letter to the editor published in *The New York Times* in September 1973 emphasizes Burden’s conception of his sensational acts as “egomania,” while articles like “He Got Shot — For His Art” emphasized his “sinister” personality. The media that he sought to play so well with his art was indeed playing him, projecting a violent public image onto Burden in a tug-of-war of “self-fashioning.”

In mid-April of 1975, Burden created an exhibition titled *The Commentaries* at the Mizuno Gallery in Los Angeles. In this show, Burden displayed 15 handmade “information-style” collages with individual clippings of critical articles pasted together, on which he wrote annotations and commentary to the displayed criticism. Many of the annotations point to “inaccuracies, discrepancies and misunderstandings in text,” with everything from “correct[ing] misquotations...faulty conclusions...plagiarism,” to “question[ing] the veracity and motivation of the individual newspapers and magazines and the entire journalistic profession.” Along with this “commentary,” Burden dissected text and headlines from the popular press with alternate titles.

*The Commentaries* was the artist’s greatest rejection of his public persona since *Shoot*. However, as Kaprow earlier warned, misinterpretations of public personae are inevitable in art with ambiguous intentions. William Wilson, in reviewing the Mizuno Gallery show, expressed how “Burden probably has been misunderstood and misinterpreted from his own point of view. Everybody is.” This statement accurately points to the ultimate futility of Burden’s critical “unpacking” in *The Commentaries*. Burden’s angst over misinterpretation of his outer “self-fashioning” points to the inevitable misunderstanding that the artist faces — particularly in “violent” acts with little explanation.

The defiant artist, seeking to change the sensationally violent side of his “self-promotional” machine, rebels against the established critical system of art with *The Commentaries*. Burden corrects artist-critic Peter Plagens’s article, which claims that Burden is “no freer than a Novitiate Franciscan in conceding admittance into [the establishment’s] order,” by stating “You’ve got it backwards. I dictate to *Avalanche*, *Flash Art* and *Artforum* what art is.” Burden demands a new revision of his “self-fashioning” through self-promotion, and it is in his television commercials, particularly *Chris Burden Promo* of 1976, that he most thoroughly undermined the confines of his violent public image. It is through the moving image of the medium of television that Burden sought to take back control of his image, in the most assertive way possible — through blatant self-promotion.

## **Publicity and Self-Promotion: The Medium of Television**

### **I. Television as Art — 1960s and 70s TV/Video Art**

In 1964, as Marshall McLuhan declared TV a “cool medium” that leaves America “unacquainted with



itself,” artists like Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell were deep in the practice of manipulating the television set as an active artistic medium. Paik and Vostell were working at a time when only basic resources were possible, as artists tinkered in their studios with the physical object of the television set and manipulated it and its images in sculptural form. Paik's *Exposition of Music* — *Electronic Television* and Vostell's *Television Decollage*, both of 1963, are seen to be the founding manifestations of TV as an art form and video art.

On May 17, 1969, the exhibition “TV as a Creative Medium” opened to the public at Howard Wise Gallery in New York City, the first group collaborative exhibition (followed by “Vision and Television” less than a year later in 1970) to use television as their sole medium of display. Acknowledging the McLuhan position readily in its exhibition brochure, “TV as a Creative Medium” verified publically the artistic use of television in America.

By 1973, when Chris Burden created his first TV commercial, *TV Ad*, the use of television amongst artists was thoroughly evident, but still only involved in formal broadcasts on different programs, not in advertisement space. The first artist known to have produced a work for television, Nicolas Schoffer, created a work in the mid-1950s on film for telecast to be broadcast in France. Organizations in America in the late 60s, like the National Center for Experiments in Television at KQED in the San Francisco Bay Area, were creating artist-compiled broadcasts, but as far as this history is known, no artists had bought television advertisement space before Chris Burden. The operational mechanisms of the TV advertisement medium, and the TV commercial's integral role in the realm of promotion, unfold within Burden's television works.

## II. TV Commercials as Promotional Devices

The history of television commercials is almost as old as television itself. In 1941, television commercials began to broadcast on television stations, with WNBT in New York as the first to do so. By 1957, there were approximately 75 million adult viewers in the US, and by 1959, over 85 percent of American homes had one or more television sets, largely spurred by the advent of mechanical color television in 1950. In the 1959 McGraw-Hill Series for Marketing and Advertising book, *Successful Television and Radio Advertising*, some of the advantages of television advertisements include the simulation of “face-to-face salesmanship,” its “unlimited variety in presentation” and its “habit-forming” effects as a medium. In *Television Commercials: How To Create Successful TV Advertising*, Charles Anthony Wainwright outlines the “ground rules” for a successful TV commercial advertisement: “tell a complete story, with a beginning, middle and end; register the name, tell what the product or service does, point out how it is different or better; create a desire for it; show what it looks like; where it is valuable, do it interestingly enough to hold your audience — all in just 60 seconds.”

Though the television commercial was seen as the most effective marketing tool in the 50s and 60s, there were also problems particular to the format. Two pointed disadvantages: “television is a large-investment medium” and “the advertising message is *perishable*.” In other words, television advertising was expensive, and the message embedded within was fleeting in the mind of the consumer.

Though television was greatly controlled by large stations in the 1950s and 60s, Sony launched the first portable video camera, called the Portapak, into the marketplace in 1965, creating a wave that rose from the influence of Paik and Vostell's work to overtake the broadcasting airwaves.

This is most evident in the WGBH-produced broadcast of “The Medium is the Medium” (1969), where artists like Paik, Allan Kaprow and others experimented with the new personal video technology to produce short works for live television.

Rebellion against the medium by artists and other figures, in the vein of and in reaction to McLuhan’s “the medium is the message,” began to taking place in the late 60s and early 70s. Abbie Hoffman (a.k.a. “Free”) writes about TV commercials in 1968 as “rumors,” urging people to declare themselves “living ads” and become Yippies in his anti-media group. By 1971, Michael Shamberg’s book *Guerrilla Television* further declared the power of undermining corporate “Media-America” through cable-access television (CATV) community networks.

It is not surprising, then, that by the 1970s artists armed with Portapak technology sought to take back the medium for themselves, to attempt to make what was “perishable” impermeable. In the premonitory words of Allan Kaprow in 1964, “the spirit and body of our work is on our TV screens and in our vitamin pills.”

### III. The Breakthrough: Buying Time for Artistic Self-Promotion

The breakthrough of art into commercial television promotion came at a particularly innovative time for artists. Although numerous artists experimented with television in the late 60s, each collaborated with organizations to create art for broadcast time. By the 1970s, a drive to move beyond those limits — into the realms of medium control — began to push at the established boundaries of artistic practice in television.

Chris Burden is commonly known to be the first artist who went straight to television stations to buy commercial time for artistic use. So what

was it that attracted Burden to the television commercial as an artistic tool? Burden has stated that he had always been interested in getting on television, and then one day, in a discussion with a friend, “I thought ‘Oh, I know how to get on TV. You buy it. You pay for it, and then those minutes are yours. You put a crack in that monolithic wall and they’ll be none the wiser.’” And with this realization — and his subsequent actions to approach and buy television advertisement time for his own benefit — Burden went straight to self-promotional heaven.

### Television as a Performative Medium — *TV Ad* and the Rise of Television Self-Promotion, 1973–75

*TV Hijack* (February 1972) is Burden’s first documented work for television, and its content and context is significant for Burden’s shifting career move into the space of television. In this piece, now only known through descriptions and photographs, Burden performs a mock hijacking of a supposedly live TV interview, where he holds a knife to an interviewer’s throat. Taking place less than 6 months after *Shoot*, and proceeding only one other work a month before, *Disappearing* (December 1971), this timing is unique and speaks directly to publicity Chris Burden received before and after *TV Hijack* in relation to his performance works. In some ways, the building angst towards the press displayed in this work is premonitory to Burden’s critical dissections of interviewers/critics in *The Commentaries* a few years later, and it signals symbolically a direct message in shifting towards a new medium: “I’m the one in charge here — in the space of the television screen — not you, the interviewer, nor you, the audience.”

One year after *TV Hijack*, Burden’s sense of control over his public image was beginning to be rekindled once again with television, in his newfound medium of commercial advertising. In November 1973, Burden approached Channel 9 station in Los Angeles to buy 10 seconds of

commercial airtime for 4 weeks, in order to run what became his first self-advertisement, the aptly titled *TV Ad*. This piece consisted of a 10-second ad using 7 seconds of footage from his performance *Through the Night Softly*, originally performed on Main Street outside of the Mizuno Gallery in Los Angeles two months earlier, on September 12. This television footage ran for 4 weeks and was located in a spot right after the 11 o'clock news, being seen by approximately 250,000 people nightly.

*TV Ad* (1973) was a recorded performance that aimed to be unique in the regular stream of television, speaking to both performance as concept and the performativity of subversion. In the words of Suzanne Lacy, “the demands on performance made by the use of television are few (mostly constraints posed by brevity). Hence innovations in these performance are limited to the novelty of doing them and the shock or excitement generated by content antagonistic to the typical commercial message.” Burden iterates the “shock” of *TV Ad* in an interview, detailing how the station manager pulled the ad after seeing it, but was forced to place it back on the air after Burden threatened a breach of contract. But Burden’s assertion of “antagonistic” content over his audience — and over the station’s manager, despite his protests — exerts a powerful effect within a subtle act. In Burden’s early television commercials, particularly *TV Ad*, the “brevity” and “perishability” of Chris Burden’s messages, and the ultimate regeneration of the artist’s control of self-promotion, are what is tested in the dissolving medium of television.

The underlying aim of *TV Ad* sought to undermine the power of the medium of television and its control over commercial advertisement space on television, but it was also a strategically self-promotional move for Burden. *TV Ad* placed Burden’s name (displayed for 1–2 seconds at the end of the ad) and his art front and center

in the frame of the television, in a disorienting endeavor celebrating the enigmatic, fleeting image, as it confronts a much wider audience than performance could ever achieve alone.

## Chris Burden Promo (1976)

### I. *Promo* and Burden’s Assertion of (Televised) Power

*Chris Burden Promo* of 1976 is perhaps the most widely discussed, debated and distributed commercial produced by Chris Burden. A *Newsweek* article from June 1976 suggests that Burden’s *Promo* sought to advertise his recent show at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, but with airtime it did much more than that. Although Burden’s ad “enraged his more conservative peers,” the ad ultimately “won him enough instant celebrity to make it all worthwhile.”

*Chris Burden Promo* is simple in form but provocative in its implications. A description of the ad in typical Chris Burden “laconic” form reads:

I purchased 24 thirty second commercial spots on two New York television station channels, Channel 4 and Channel 9 and 21 spots on three Los Angeles channels, Channel 5, Channel 11, and Channel 13. My “ad” consisted of a series of names: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Chris Burden. The series was repeated twice and followed by the disclaimer “paid for by Chris Burden — artist.” The names were written in bold graphics — yellow letters on a blue ground. The individual names zoomed forward, starting very small and increasing in size until they filled the entire screen. As the names became readable, I spoke them aloud. The first five names were chosen from the results of a nationwide survey which showed them to be the most well known artists to the general public.

Burden, much like for his first commercial *TV Ad*, approached the stations directly with his own material and money, paying between \$250 to



\$600 per commercial spot. The commercial was said to have reached a broad, though short-lived, audience, even aired during *Saturday Night Live* in New York broadcasts. Since individuals could not buy ad time on their own, Burden convinced television executives that “Chris Burden” was a corporation, and with this deliberate manipulation, Burden declared his agency as the artist in charge of his own “self-fashioning.” In inserting his own name alongside the names of the most recognizable Western artists in the world, Burden aimed to not only gain back the reigns on his popular image, but to also instantly corporatize “Chris Burden” in the annals of art (and television) history. He sought not only utmost control over an identity taken over by critics and the popular press, but also complete editorial license to a revised image — a “Chris Burden” manufactured especially for television audiences.

Burden's self-promotional machinations are laid bare in *Chris Burden Promo*, yet the ad's ultimate intentions remain a mystery to the casual viewer, in the same way that *TV Ad's* 10 seconds may appear visually enigmatic. Is he being ironic in *Promo*, parodying political advertisements and popular culture's perception of art? Or is he serious, aligning himself assertively with Vincent Van Gogh and Pablo Picasso, in an effort to control his own complicated public reception?

The “staged megalomania” of this work is readily apparent, but its effectiveness as an “intervention” is more difficult to determine. While Burden himself claims to have intended *Promo* to be “tongue-in-cheek,” he is, most importantly, not shy to admit his self-indulgence in listing himself with the best-known artists of the American public. The Southland Video Anthology exhibition, a show of Southern California video art in the mid-70s at the Long Beach Museum of Art, states in its catalogue that Burden's *Chris Burden Promo* “makes a statement of far-reaching implications:

the artist, inserted into a fundamentally hostile context, establishes his presence as first person singular.” Burden could not fully control the iterations of his “violent” public image as a performance artist, but in attempting to become a “first person singular” in *Promo* — to embody full linguistic supremacy — he would seek to assure that that interference would never happen again.

Henry M. Sayre, however, emphasizes that while *Promo* pointed to, in part, the exploding commercialism of the art world, it also “became difficult to say whether Burden's presence in the list elevated him to the stature of [the] others or diminished the group to the level of Burden.” Though an admittedly postmodernist view, Sayre's comment points to an interesting critical phenomenon in the perception of the advertisement: its ambiguity of message forces its own interpretive power onto its audience, irking some critics who viewed the ad while intriguing others. The abstruse character of Chris Burden's artistic message persists from performance art to television, but the effect of this in *Chris Burden Promo* draws upon the position of the viewer — separated in physical space from the artist with a television screen — and the subliminal visual marketing techniques of corporate commercial advertisements, to enact a promotional scheme that situates himself within great names of art history, to the amusement or chagrin of critics and viewers.

In the end, the last image on the screen, and the last name on the list, undoubtedly stands out to the viewer. One could imagine watching *Saturday Night Live* and seeing this ad, thinking, “Ok, I recognize all of these to be artists, but who is Chris Burden?” The intrigue of obscurity amidst a sea of familiar names becomes the power-tool of Burden's act. Television advertising is used to establish a “power relationship,” in which social roles are “maintained” while “character” is “constructed” through the projection of the artist.

Chris Burden's self-production, then, reaches its pinnacle in *Chris Burden Promo*, playing on the sales system of “shameless self-promotion” as it seeks to affirm his legacy amongst the greatest artistic contributors in (popular) history. When responding to a comment that artists were jealous because they wish they had thought of his idea, Burden replied “[*Promo* is] a statement about the power of television. If I were rich enough to run that ad every day for years, then it would, in fact, become true. You'd ask the man on the street, and they'd check off my name. They wouldn't know what I did, but they would know my name.” Burden's intention, indeed, was “selling [people] a concept,” and when that concept is one's own self-aggrandizement amongst a survey list of famous artists, the concept becomes the self, and “self-fashioning” the product.

## II. *Promo* and The (Subliminal)

### Assault of Language

Overt visual violence is in *Chris Burden Promo* now completely erased from Burden's expressions, but a whole new violence takes over: an assault through language. “Oh, man. All these people are getting it, whether they like it or not.” In a discussion of liminal performance, Susan Broadhurst discusses Jacques Derrida's “wide, jarring metaphors” as words or statements that “unsettle the audience by frustrating their expectations of any simple interpretation.” Additionally, Umberto Eco identifies a component of the message in television called “aberrant decoding,” in which “the viewer does not necessarily interpret the message in the way its sender (the TV company) intends it to be decoded, or assumes it will be.” The attempted control of the viewer through language — through names in *Chris Burden Promo* flashed onscreen, at the edge of the subliminal — is played out in Burden's television commercial forms.

In stark contrast to the textual presentation of Burden's piece is Richard Serra's *Television*

*Delivers People* of 1973, three years prior to *Chris Burden Promo*. The presentation of the screen, blue background with yellow text, resembles Burden's later *Promo*, but the message is very different. *Television Delivers People* is a videotape work in which Serra declares the complicity of the viewer to the viewer, through such messages as “You are the product of t.v. [sic]. You are delivered to the advertiser who is the customer.” Serra indicates in an interview with *October* magazine that he “decided that there was something worthwhile to say directly to people, and I just chose devices for presenting the material that I thought could reach a large audience. I thought that the easiest way to do that was the most direct way.” Aired as a broadcast on a local television station in Amarillo, Texas, Serra follows similar notions of textual criticism of the television medium, but the lack of Serra's direct presence in the generic language and the lulling Muzak behind the work speaks to a broader social critique that Burden's *Promo* does not address.

Although Serra's *Television Delivers People* offers no blatant declaration of the artist, his piece nonetheless undermines the position of the viewer in understanding the artist's intentions. Both Burden and Serra's works distort the perception of the role of artist to the audience, and both challenge Marshall McLuhan's famous mantra “the medium is the message” by declaring that “the medium is the message-producer.” In other words, the television medium is *not equal* to the message, as McLuhan had proclaimed, but *produces* its constructs through the messages (as products) broadcast across its screens. This act of self-reflexivity, a Lacanian “mirroring” of message to message through the television medium, is also evident in works like the collaborative artistic group Ant Farm's *Media Burn* (1975), created one year before Burden's *Promo*. In this performance work, the collective of artists named Ant Farm gathered a crowd, including network media outlets, to expose the

“control of information” that “control people” through the television set, whereby a 1959 Cadillac Biarritz was driven into a flaming wall of 50 television sets. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Anyone who still believes that you can organize a political demonstration without paying attention to television risks being left behind,” and it is certainly this influence of the power of media that Ant Farm, and Chris Burden, aptly played upon in their respective television works.

## Conclusion — Burden's Influence on TV/Video Art

Chris Burden's violent live performances contributed to his rise in the art world, but what is the ultimate legacy of his commercials and TV works? It is undeniable that *Shoot* remains the most highly discussed and well known of his entire oeuvre of performance, but discussion of his work in the realm of video art has been unusually rare, with only a few analyses appearing in recent years. The *California Video: Artists and Histories* catalogue of video art from the Getty Research Institute, the *Southland Video Anthology* exhibition at the Long Beach Museum of Art, and *Broadcast Yourself* at the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle, UK, are among the few but growing exhibitions that are adding Burden into their collections of video artists. This shift towards including these commercials as TV/video art is indicative of the kind of influence Burden has made in the art world as a whole, and in specific contexts with these works.

Did Burden's TV pieces, especially *Chris Burden Promo*, make any major impact on the medium and on TV art to come? Burden's *Chris Burden Promo* is said to have influenced individuals like the filmmaker Mitchell Syrop, who bought commercial time in 1978 on KCOP Channel 13 and produced a thirty-second TV spot called *Watch It, Think It*. Johannes Lothar Schröder contends, however, that Burden's act of “designing television

commercials and purchasing advertising time for them at his own expense was an attempt to take the initiative [of disseminating information], but since he could not afford to follow through, the effect was negligible” on the public. A way in which Burden could more fully “follow through” is not made clear by Schröder — perhaps with more prolific purchases of commercial air time — but the influence of Burden's act of defiance to the media set the bar for paid advertisement-style artist works.

The visual deception and separation enacted in the medium of television — along with Burden's intentional display of fleeting visual “shock,” “laconic” language and graphic parallels to television marketing techniques — perpetuates the ambiguity of perception often felt in Burden's television works. Yet Burden's *Chris Burden Promo*, in defining itself as a self-promotional tool through the corporate presentation of “Chris Burden,” also plays upon the “mirroring” of the medium, and further reorganizes a power relationship of the individual artist over his public image.

In an art historical context, Burden's television works, as well as his critical work in *The Commentaries*, point to a larger scope of artistic interpretation. “Whether through television commercials or ‘corrected’ analyses of his work, Burden's art prodded the viewer to rethink art history and criticism, and how and by whom such a critical history is constructed.” These TV works are an intriguing part of Burden's career in the 1970s, and their impact, only briefly discussed in focused critical pieces, deserves a larger and more comprehensive discussion in contemporary artistic discourse.

The influence of Burden and his work is readily palpable in contemporary performance art, and his operations of “self-promotion” — arising out of his “self-fashioning” and “self-imaging” that



defined his public image in “violent” performance art — became more organized, subversive and emphatically in-control in his television commercials of the 1970s. As Tom Marioni writes, “At the end of the 1970s, critics said that no artists emerged in the seventies. Chris Burden emerged in the seventies.” However, as Jean-Louis Baudry also speculated in 1970, “Reality will never appear except as relative to the images which reflect it, in some way inaugurated by a reflection anterior to itself.” Chris Burden “as seen on TV,” then, is a self-promotional product at the viewer’s disposal, as much as the viewer is at his.

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William Wilson, ‘This Is Art – These People Are Artists’ in *The Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles: The Los Angeles Times, Section ‘View,’ Part IV, March 24, 1972: G1.

Howard Wise, ‘TV as a Creative Medium,’ (1969) in *TV as a Creative Medium*, New York: Howard Wise Gallery, exhibition brochure, May 17–June 14, 1969: 1.

## Endnotes

1. Lisa Lyons, ‘Introduction – The Anxious Edge’ in *The Anxious Edge*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1982, p. 4
2. Burden, 1974, p. 4
3. For purposes of clarity in defining the term “performance,” I employ the broad yet useful explanation by Marvin Carlson: “It is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences, both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in – emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically.” Carlson, 2004, p. 216.
4. Burden, 1974, p. 3.
5. See Krauss, 1976, p. 50–64.
6. “Self” is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as “a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others,” and “promotion” as “the action of raising someone to a higher position or rank,” thereby suggesting an act of being raised in position. Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online.
7. Greenblatt, 1980, p. 2 and Jones, 2006, p. xvii.
8. Greenblatt, 1980, p. 2.
9. Greenblatt, 1980, p. 2–3.
10. Greenblatt, 1980, p. 3–4.
11. Jones, 2006, p. xvii.
12. Jones, 2006, p. vxii; “...representation can only deliver what we think we (want to) know about the other, who is never real with always (somewhere) Real...” [248].
13. “If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There’s nothing behind it.” Andy Warhol, “Warhol in His Own Words, Untitled Statements 1963–87” from Stiles and Selz, 1996, p. 340.
14. “Interviews” was also originally included in this section, but due to the inclusion of interview material in other sections, this isolated section has been omitted and combined with other sections. The artist interview, however, is an important mode of self-promotion that deserves greater focus in further analyses. See Allen, 2005 for a detailed analysis of artist’s interviews.
15. “To be sure, artists and dealers had to grapple with the problem of how a collector would be able to purchase and possess a work during the early history of conceptualism, but there was never a moment when they did not seek to market the art.” Alberro, 2003, p. 4.
16. Alberro, 2003, p. 39, 169.
17. Alberro, 2003, p. 57.
18. Alberro, 2003, p. 66.
19. Barron, Bernstein and Ford, 2000, p. 290. Artists of interest in this context in California include Eleanor Antin, John Baldessari, Judy Chicago, Bruce Nauman and Dennis Oppenheim [276].
20. The exception to the rule is his work *Disappearing* (December 1971), where a description — “I disappeared for three days without prior notice to anyone. On these three days my whereabouts were unknown” — is accompanied by a blank white page. The description, then, is the artwork. Burden, 1974, p. 34.
21. Schaffner, 2003, p. 203.
22. Bongartz, 1971, p. 97.
23. Bongartz, 1971, p. 97.
24. Chris Burden, *Documentation of Selected Works 1971–1975* (VHS) (New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, edited 2001). Also accessed on Ubuweb.com.
25. Unknown, 1975, p. 27, 28, 23.
26. Advertisement, 1979, p. 11.
27. Auslander, 2000, p. 1.
28. Unknown, 1976, p. 6.

29. Silverman, 1983, p. 199. Judith Williamson also discusses the Lacanian subject and "mirror stage" in reference to advertising: "I do not believe that the mirror image is itself crucial: there are many ways of learning to see oneself besides through the looking glass. I prefer to use the idea of the 'mirror phase' as a *metaphor*, a shorthand for all social and external reflection of the self." Williamson, 1978, p. 63.
30. Alberro, 2003, p. 41.
31. There is no clear evidence as to the gap of 2 years in widespread media coverage, which ultimately created "sensational journalism," in the words of Frazer Ward, out of *Shoot*. Burden's coverage in art columns and advertising sections for art, particularly in *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, seem to suggest that there was a slow build-up in popular coverage in the press of his works, where pieces like *Shoot, Bed Piece* (February–March 1972) and *Deadman* (November 1972) became his most thoroughly discussed or mentioned pieces up until 1973. It is in September 1973, however, that Burden performs *Through The Night Softly*, and in November and December of that same year that his first TV commercial *TV Ad* is produced and run on television, an act which may have spurred more active coverage of his work. In contrast, coverage of Burden's work amongst art publications was even more delayed, with most interviews of Burden surfacing in publications like *High Performance*, *Performing Arts Journal* and *Art in America* from 1979 or 1980, and with most criticism appearing in the 1980s and early 2000s (the earliest discussion of Burden's television works in an art publication was in *High Performance* in 1979). An interview with Burden by *View* was conducted in 1978, but was not published until 1981. These earlier art publication writings were largely in the form of interviews of Burden or short blurbs, ranging widely from dismissive to laudatory to purely informational descriptions of his work.
32. In a pivotal interview in *Avalanche* magazine by Willoughby Sharp and Liza Béar in 1973, Burden is asked by Sharp why he did his piece *Shoot*, to which he famously replied "Well, it's something to experience. How can you know what it feels like to be shot if you don't get shot? It seems interesting enough to be worth doing it." Allen, 2005, p. 57.
33. Lacy, 1982, p. 54 and Tumlir, 2001, p. 23.
34. Tumlir, 2001, p. 23.
35. Seldis and Wilson, 1974, p. E6. Presumably the book described is Chris Burden's self-produced catalogue 71–73, which is copyrighted in 1974 and began to be distributed in that year.
36. Kramer, 1977, p. 77.
37. Wilson, 1978, p. B7.
38. Wilson, 1972, p. G1.
39. Ward, 2001, p. 116.
40. Interestingly, much of the discussion of Chris Burden's masochism and narcissism arises from discussion of his work after the 1970s. Although some attribution in the 70s does exist in print, books like Kathy O'Dell's *Contract With the Skin* (which involves a very interesting debate on the nature of masochism, and its contractual meanings, in 1970s performance art), and Amelia Jones's *Body Art/Performing The Subject*, as well as Thomas McEvelley's Artforum article "Art In The Dark," have good discussions of the topic. For discussions on narcissism in video performance, see Krauss, 1976, p. 50–64. In addition, the argument of Burden's Christianity references and embodiments in such works as *Doorway To Heaven* (November 1973), *Trans-Fixed* (April 1974), *The Confession* (December 1974), and *White Light/White Heat* (February–March 1975), can be found in Kaye, 2003, p. 27; McKenna, 1992, p. 1; Banes, 1998, p. 118; and Kuspit, 1996, p. 73.
41. Rubinfien, 1978, p. 80.
42. McKenna, 1992, p. 1.
43. Schjeldahl, 2007, p.152.
44. Lyons, 1982, p. 11.
45. Jones, 1998, p. 125. Jones discusses masochism in body art with Acconci labeled as "sado-masochistic."
46. Ebert, 1975, p. 2.
47. Carter, 1992, p. 102, cited in Cottom, 2002, p. 120.
48. Montano, 2000, p. 347.
49. Jones, 1998, footnote 100.
50. Kaprow's essay is important also in its declaration of individuality on the part of the artist, whose relative freedom and "financially comfortable" existence was expanded alongside greater institutional support in the

- 1960s [51, 52]. The identities of lone artists emerge beyond group collaborations (the Surrealists) and from the shadows of their critics (Jackson Pollock) to establish a new self-fashioning for themselves in the 1960s, the “creators-as-authority” of a new generation [55–56]. Kaprow, 1964 in Kaprow and Kelley, 1993, p. 55.
51. “Everybody I ever talked to was completely misinterpreting [the Happenings]. I stopped doing Happenings because I felt anyone could do anything and be liked. It was becoming so chic. The audiences were laughing at everything.” Jim Dine, “A Statement” (1965) in Kirby, *Happenings*: 1966, p. 188.
52. Goffman, 1959, p.18.
53. Enstice, 1984. Acquired through Ubuweb.com (/ubuweb editions, 2010): 82.
54. McKenna, 1992, p. 3.
55. Schorr, 1973, p. 150.
56. Plagens, 1973, p. 87.
57. Seldis and Wilson, 1975, p. H11 and G6.
58. Seldis and Wilson, 1975, p. H11. A discrepancy between the number of works is evident in Hoffman, 2007, which details “at least 16 works” [371], not the 15 noted by William Wilson.
59. Seldis and Wilson, 1975, p. H11.
60. Hoffman, 2007, 371.
61. Some of the collages titles include *King of the Avant-Garde*, *Sane American with a Dream*, *Serious Businessman*, and *The Commentaries – Novitiate Franciscan*, all from 1975. Hoffman, 2007, p. 371.
62. Seldis and Wilson, 1975, p. H11.
63. Plagens, 1973, p. 87, cited in Hoffman, 2007, p. 371–372.
64. A distinction between video art and TV art is difficult to make. In 1976, however, Lynn Hershman asserted, “Video art is a manifestation of contemporary art. While there has been a great deal of video activity, video art still exists in relation to television.” Lynn Hershman, 1976 in Battcock, 1978, p. 38.
65. McLuhan, 1964, p. 40
66. Daniels, 2004, p.1.
67. Daniels, 2004, p. 1.
68. Daniels, 2004, p. 1.
69. Davis and Simmons, 1977, p. 11.
70. “Ever since Marshall McLuhan has become a household name, people have become aware of the tremendous force, both actual and potential, that TV is having and will have on their lives...TV is at the cause, or at least at the root of the cause, of all these changes that are transforming our civilization.” Wise, 1969, p. 1.
71. Davis and Simmons, 1977, p. 9 and 12.
72. The telecast of the opening ceremonies of the New York World’s Fair in 1939 is seen as “signaling the opening of regular electronic television,” and by 1941, the FCC re-issued (second attempt) its authorization of commercial TV operations. Seehafer and Laemmar, 1959, p. 10.
73. Seehafer and Laemmar, 1959, p. 10.
74. Meyersohn, 1957 in Rosenberg and White, 1957, p. 345; also Seehafer and Laemmar, 1959, p. 11–12.
75. Seehafer and Laemmar, 1959, p.18.
76. Wainwright, 1970, p. 36.
77. Seehafer and Laemmar, 1959, p. 20. Emphasis mine.
78. Ross, 1976 in Battcock, 1978, p. 142. Interestingly, Ross also notes that Paik received the very first Portapak from Sony, which was distributed in the same year (late 1965) that Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* was published (This does, however, conflict with the publication date of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, whose first listed publication year is 1964, as noted in footnote 43, above).
79. Davis and Simmons, 1977, p. 11.
80. Hoffman, 1968, p. 79, 80; and Joselit, 2007, p. 112.
81. Joselit, 2007, p. 87.
82. Kaprow, 1964 in Kaprow and Kelley, 1993, p. 57.
83. Phillips, 2008, p. 62.
84. Phillips, 2008, p. 64.
85. In using the word “performative” (as many references have employed thus far), I would like to follow J.L. Austin’s understanding of the performative text, as



a semiotic indicator of intention to act, while also considering Jacques Derrida's notion that any citation or sign "can break with any context, engendering an infinity of new contexts." In other words, the performative text has its own linguistic performance that, in the context of television, plays a vital role of interaction, yet this interaction is infinitely malleable and translatable by the viewer of the television. The medium projects the message, but the message is never the same for any one person or circumstance of viewing. Austin, 1962, p. 11; and Derrida, 1971, quoted in Carlson, 1996, p. 76.

86. *Poem for L.A.* (June 1975) and *Full Financial Disclosure* (September 1977), although important in Burden's television commercial production, are omitted in this paper for brevity, as well as for their more overt political commentary, which are deserving of their own careful analysis in conjunction with each other and Burden's oeuvre. A good discussion of *Poem for L.A.* can be found in Johannes Lothar Schröder, "Science, Heat and Life" in Noever, 1996, p. 203.
87. Burden, 1974, p. 36.
88. This work in commercial form is also called *Crawling Through Glass*, as in Gould and Smith, 1998, p. 173.
89. Burden, 1974, p. 74-79 and 36.
90. Sayre, 1989, p. 102.
91. Lacy, 1982, p. 54.
92. Phillips, 2008, p. 64 and Aitken, 2006, p. 74.
93. Waters, 1976, p. 48.
94. Waters, 48.
95. Burden, 1974, p. 76-77.
96. Funding with these works is indeed an interesting issue. Burden indicates in his work *Full Financial Disclosure* that in the fiscal year of 1976, the year *Chris Burden Promo* was made, he received \$5,000 in grants and \$12,210 on art sales and lecture fees, and spent \$6,106 on television advertising (Burden, 1978, p. 103.). Burden claims it was his own money going into the commercials, but other information seems to indicate otherwise. He paid for airtime with *TVAd* using an award that he received from the Los Angeles County Museum (Bongartz, 1971, p. 97.), and between 1974 and 1983 received four National Endowment for the Arts grants, one of which helped pay for the ad space needed for *Chris Burden Promo* (Schjeldahl, 2007, p. 152; and Ross, 1988, p. 33.
97. Glueck, 1976, p. 64. Along with the amount paid for each ad, Glueck's review lists all of the time spots down to the minute that Burden's *Promo* can be viewed on each channel. This progression suggests a whole new level of Burden's manipulation of self-promotion — the media that once criticized him becomes the media that transmits his exact times of his "message" transmission.
98. Chris Burden. *The TV Commercials 1973-77* (DVD) (New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, edited 2000).
99. Daniels, 2004, p. 1.
100. Silk, 1995, p. 10.
101. Ross, 1977, p. 37.
102. Ross, 1977, p. 37.
103. Sayre, 1989, p. 101.
104. Accounts of seeing the ad on television can be found in Silk, 1995, p. 10; Ross, 1977, p. 33; and White, 1978, p. 17.
105. Mander, 1978, p. 17.
106. Joselit, 2007, p. 149.
107. Phillips, 2008, p. 65.
108. Robin White, 1978, p. 16.
109. Phillips, 2008, p. 65.
110. Broadhurst, 1999, p. 175 in Machon, 2009, p. 50.
111. Eco, 1972, quoted in Caesar, 1999, p. 44.
112. Joselit, 2007, p. 105.
113. Michelson, Serra and Weyergraf, 1979, p. 82.
114. Siegelbaum, 2010, p. 1.
115. Schaffer in Davis & Simmons, 1977, p. 231.
116. Lacy, 1982, p. 54.
117. Bourdieu, 1998, p. 22.
118. Usherwood, 2008, p. Reviews 1. Chris Burden's TV commercials, and a few of their associated materials, were also more recently displayed in a gallery space at the Getty Research Institute in late 2011 to early 2012,

in conjunction with the Institute's massive Los Angeles retrospective *Pacific Standard Time*.

**119.** Huffman, 2008, p. 281.

**120.** Schröder, 1996, p. 207.

**121.** Silk, 1995, pg. 10.

**122.** Ayres and Schimmel, 1988, p. 36.

**123.** Baudry, 1974 in Rosen, 1986, p. 297, footnote 22.

# A Nigerian Song Literatus

*Chinese Literati Painting Concepts From The Song Dynasty In The Contemporary Art Of Obiora Udechukwu \**

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KRISTEN WINDMULLER-LUNA

Obiora Udechukwu is a member of the Nsukka group, an artistic network from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he studied after anti-Igbo pogroms forced him to leave the Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. An accomplished artist and poet, his work was shaped by his experiences during the 1967 to 1970 Biafra war. During the war, his focus shifted from a singular concern for aesthetic forms and qualities to a blend of social concerns, aesthetic interests and experimentation that continued even after the war's end.<sup>1</sup> He is best known for his integration of *uli*, an Igbo artistic practice, into politically charged pen and ink and brush and ink drawings created during the 1970s and 1980s. In a 1981 article for *Nigeria Magazine*, he outlined the similarities between *uli* and *li* (Chinese painting), citing painting theories and practices common to the artistic practice of Song literati (*wen-jen hua*), which he intentionally incorporated into his own artistic practice.<sup>2</sup> Though not stated in his article, Udechukwu also adapted other aspects of Song literati practice to his own art, thereby creating art in the mode of a Song literatus. This paper addresses Udechukwu's appropriation of Song literati artistic practices while situating his art in a greater global context.

Obiora Udechukwu was born in 1946 in the southern market city of Onitsha. He lived and studied in this urban setting throughout his youth, but also maintained ties with family

in rural Agulu to the east, where he first encountered *uli* murals at family compounds and shrines.<sup>3</sup> He received his early education in colonially administrated Anglophone schools; unlike most Nigerian artists of his generation, he had art training in both primary and secondary school.<sup>4</sup> Udechukwu enrolled at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria in northern Nigeria in 1965, where pogroms perpetrated by the northern Hausa and Fulani against southern Nigerian immigrants interrupted his studies. Many deaths occurred in reaction to a federal-level coup that involved Igbo military officers, among other reasons.<sup>5</sup> In 1966, Udechukwu fled to Igboland in the south, where he and other Igbo received little support or sympathy from the Nigerian government.<sup>6</sup> There, he enrolled at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, spending his first summer break in rural Agulu, where he encountered Igbo village culture, including ephemeral *uli* body art, the form that became central to his later artistic practice.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, civil war broke out in Nigeria as the south seceded as the independent Republic of Biafra in 1967. Characterized by blockades, destruction, human misery and ruined land, the war was mostly fought in southern Igboland until Biafra surrendered and the two countries reunited into a single Nigeria in 1970.<sup>8</sup>

Early in 1968, Udechukwu was employed as a civil servant by the Audio Visual Unit of the Directorate of Propaganda, part of the Biafran Ministry of Information. Alongside fellow Nsukka students, he designed posters, magazine layouts, cartoons, and other art for wartime propaganda campaigns.<sup>9</sup> While working for the government, he created his own art and joined a poetry group composed of artists from the Odunke Community. According to Udechukwu, "Poetry provided a survival tonic for some of us during the Nigerian Civil War."<sup>10</sup> He focused on *uli* wall painting for his required undergraduate field research at Nsukka, first writing a 1966 term paper and then his BA thesis on the subject.<sup>11</sup> Despite his war-interrupted studies, Udechukwu received a



BA (1972) and an MFA (1977) in painting from Nsukka; his MFA thesis was also on *uli*.<sup>12</sup> Nsukka was also where he met the artist Uche Okeke, whose paintings and drawings Udechukwu encountered before the war but had not linked to *uli*.<sup>13</sup> From Uche Okeke, who came to Nsukka from Zaria in 1970, he learned about Natural Synthesis, a theory of merging indigenous art traditions with western traditions to create a new, modern art form.<sup>14</sup> Most scholars credit the modernist paradigm of Natural Synthesis to the Zaria Art Society, a group of students from the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria who questioned the supremacy of their Anglo-centric art training during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Notably, Sylvester Ogbechie has argued that this modernist paradigm did not originate in the postcolonial era with the Zaria Art Society, but decades earlier in the works of Ben Enwonwu. Enwonwu may have used *uli* up to four decades before the members of the Zaria Art Society incorporated its aesthetics into their own theories. His combination of the best of Igbo culture and European representational conventions was likely influenced by his instructor K.C. Murray, who placed extensive value on the ethnographic study of Nigerian art, which he believed allowed his students to retain their cultural identity in the face of outside forces and educational curricula.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the current debates centered around the pre- or post-colonial origins of its theories and aesthetics, Natural Synthesis appealed to Udechukwu's interests in indigenous art and stimulated his explorations of Igbo *uli* as he participated in Nsukka's Uli Revivalist Movement.

Some Igbo peoples in south-central Nigeria practice *uli*, which refers to mural painting, drawing done on the human body with a *mmanwuli* (painting knife), and the plant-derived liquid used to make the drawing on skin.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Willis' research points to the antiquity of *uli*'s linear forms, such as the

*agwologwo* (concentric coil), visible on *Igbo-Ukwu* bronzes and poetry dating to the ninth and tenth centuries CE, while Sarah Margaret Adam's 2002 dissertation recounts both historical and recent practice.<sup>17</sup> While *uli* painting's exact origins are unknown, the first references to *uli* body painting appeared in the literature in the eighteenth century; the lack of long-term scholarly research means that it is still unclear if *uli* body and wall painting evolved simultaneously.<sup>18</sup> Women are considered the appropriate *uli* artists because of their relationship with *Ala*, the pan-Igbo earth goddess who governs creation, creativity and beauty, all traits that women are specially endowed with.<sup>19</sup> Only Igbo girls and women practice *uli*, painting their skin with intricate semi-permanent drawings for both social events and rites of passages; rare accounts of men wearing *uli* record the painting of vertical *uli* stripes on young men, including village wrestlers (Fig. 1).<sup>20</sup> Earth pigments are used to create identical or stylistically similar designs on public shrine and housing compound walls, which are distinguished from *uli* painted on the human body by the incorporation of animal and human figurative motifs painted on architectural surfaces.<sup>21</sup> Igbo *uli* paintings are composed of separate but unified areas of action that form a coherent unit on the surface of a long wall. Unlike Chinese handscrolls created in intimate settings for mostly private consumption, *uli* wall paintings are visible to the public, frequently commented on or judged aesthetically by passerby.<sup>22</sup> Both skin and wall paintings are semi-permanent artistic works executed by women, though men can commission wall paintings, as Udechukwu did to obtain a detailed specimen to study for his BA thesis.<sup>23</sup>

At first glance, *uli* painting appears decoratively abstract—while its decorative factor is highly valued, especially by the artists themselves, *uli* is also valued for its power to express moral values and a multi-leveled reality.<sup>24</sup> *Uli* paintings are

stylized representations of ritual or everyday objects, but are themselves imbued with symbolic meaning; for example, an image of a kola nut both depicts an object used in divination rites and functions as a symbol of luck.<sup>25</sup> Udechukwu also studied *nsibidi*, which he incorporated into his

some of his drawings along with *uli*. *Nsibidi* is the pictographic script linked to the Ekpe institution of the Efik and the Northeastern Igbo, which appears as decorative patterns to the uninitiated and as patterned layers of proverbial meanings to the initiated. Combining *nsibidi* and *uli*—both ideogrammatic, calligraphic scripts—in his work, Udechukwu created a visual language that not only imbued his art with historical significance, but also allowed it to function as a vehicle for social criticism and satire through the embedded symbolism of the traditional forms.<sup>26</sup>

Udechukwu's post-war production was characterized by a nearly two-decade period of black and white ink drawings that utilized three underlying principles of *uli*: designs placed strategically to obtain a balance of positive and negative space; a reduced number of elements and shapes; and spontaneity and directness of lines.<sup>27</sup> Unlike other African artists who primarily explored relationships between indigenous African and Western artistic traditions, Udechukwu extended Natural Synthesis by incorporating Chinese influences into his work. In 1976, he traveled abroad, viewing Chinese art at the British Museum in London, the Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis and the Art Institute in Chicago.<sup>28</sup> During this trip he noted the shared characteristics of Nigerian *uli* and Chinese *li*: balancing of positive and negative space; drawing from nature; spontaneity; and artists who were also poets.<sup>29</sup> Inspired by this visit and his studies of Chinese art at Nsukka, Udechukwu wrote the article "'Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting" in a 1981 issue of *Nigeria Magazine*, analyzing the connections he found.

In his article, Udechukwu directly addressed aspects of Chinese painting that he admired and integrated into his own artistic practice. Drawing from his overseas experiences viewing Chinese art, the catalogue for the 1961 UNESCO exhibition *Two Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, and



**Fig. 1** Cole, Herbert. *Young Igbo Woman Being Painted with Uli*, ca. 1986. University of California, Santa Barbara  
Photo: Courtesy of Herbert Cole.

Mai-Mai Sze's 1963 edition of *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting (With a translation of the Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan or Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting 1679–1701)*, he defined his interest in Chinese painting, and its relationship to Nigerian *uli*, in terms of several ideas: *Tao*; *li*; *ch'i*; painting as a reflection of the inner character of the painter; the association of poetry and calligraphy with painting; linearity; use of positive and negative space; and the literati's role as artist.<sup>30</sup> While he did not explicitly state that his interest lay exclusively in Song dynasty literati art, nor did he exclusively illustrate his article with literati paintings, the list of terms he considered are characteristic of Song literati painting.

Udechukwu defined terms and analyzed how they related to indigenous *uli* practices using Sze's text as his primary guide. He defined the *tao* of painting as understanding painting not only as a manual or intellectual activity, but also as a way of finding harmony and peace in life.<sup>31</sup> *Tao* roughly translates to "the way," alluding to a pathway through the natural processes of creation and depletion, a generative process that can be related to the creative act of art making, much like the related Confucian concept of *li*.<sup>32</sup> According to Udechukwu, the Chinese speak about the *li* of things in painting, which can be accomplished in poetry by using few words to conjure vivid imagery.<sup>33</sup> For him, *li* is the essence of things, or, to use David Hinton's translation, the "inner pattern" of things that "... is something akin to what we call natural law. ... *Li* therefore weaves absence and presence into a single boundless tissue."<sup>34</sup> Like painting, *li* is a transformative creative act akin to natural creation, which, according to Fung Yu-lan, follows the "principle" or "natural order" that is *li*.<sup>35</sup> The Song literati considered *li* an elemental pattern that could be made evident in paintings, allowing them to express their inner character; works in ink monochrome (*pai-miao*, plain-ink style) became

wildly popular for their perceived ability to express *li* through reduced, essentialized forms.<sup>36</sup> The incorporation of character in art—especially nobility of character—was first connected to painting as early as the late eighth century CE by Chang Yen-yüan and later adopted by Song literati theorists who insisted upon a direct relationship between the character of a painting and that of its maker.<sup>37</sup> While this connection is direct, it is not always explicit; in fact, the implicit is more profound than the explicit, since according to James Cahill, "The expression of what is either too subtle or too strong for direct verbal statement is one of the functions of art within the Confucian system."<sup>38</sup> Udechukwu also cites the influence of *ch'i*, as discussed in the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual's* preface: "There is an old saying that those who are skilled in painting will live long because life created through the sweep of the brush can strengthen life itself, both being of the Ch'I."<sup>39</sup> *Ch'i*, a vital cosmic life force or energy would have appealed to Udechukwu because of its similarity to the qualities of the goddess Ala, a cosmic force of creativity that female *uli* painters possessed.<sup>40</sup> Chinese *ch'i* also holds much in common with the Igbo *chi*, a concept with both impersonal and personal aspects that roughly translates to a life-animating essence, or to the god, spirit, or spiritual essence that each human is endowed with.<sup>41</sup> Like its Chinese relative, Igbo *chi* is linked to both humans and to objects, most commonly the *chi*-related wooden figural shrines called *ikenga*, which serve as a visual manifestation of an individual's accomplishment and ambition. As in Chinese painting, there is an implicit connection between character and object in the *ikenga*, though it is the character of the owner and not its maker that is reflected in the iconography as well as the amount of time, size, detail, and skill evident in the sculpture's form.<sup>42</sup> While Chinese philosophical theories like *li* and *ch'i* fascinated Udechukwu, and show certain parallels with Igbo aesthetics, art and calligraphic theories also interested him.

One of the most significant correlations between Chinese painting and Igbo *uli* is the association of Chinese drawing and painting with calligraphy. Both Chinese writers and painters used hair brushes from an early stage, leading to the development of calligraphy as a utilitarian mode of communication and as an art form that required immense technical training applicable to painting.<sup>43</sup> As John Hay indicates, calligraphy exists "...within a semiotic structure, a view that projects geometrical abstraction into conceptual relationships."<sup>44</sup> By the Six Dynasties period (220–586 CE), calligraphy communicated the ineffable by functioning in the same symbolic way that Wang Wei said painting did.<sup>45</sup> As the dynasty progressed, painting and calligraphy became essentially one, allowing literati amateur artists like Mi Fu and Mi Yu-jen to communicate their inner being through works created accorded to Confucian principles such as *li*.<sup>46</sup> According to Udechukwu,

... the Chinese calligrapher/painter, in addition to practising the difficult art of writing with the brush, spent several years studying nature and the ideal way of representing in symbolic form the oneness of man and nature as well as the overwhelming presence of vis-a-vis man. Art was very much a part of Chinese religio-ritual disposition.<sup>47</sup>

Both Chinese calligraphy structures and the forms in Igbo *uli* paintings function semiotically.<sup>48</sup> *Uli* designs incorporate calligraphic forms that may link them to a past writing form: the word *Ide* ("to write") is part of the term *ide uli* ("to draw with uli") as well as the term *ide ife* ("to write something") and the term *ide akwukwo* ("to write on paper"), a semantic relationship that may belie *uli*'s derivation from calligraphy, just as Song literati painting took its stylistic influences from the calligraphic form of writing.<sup>49</sup> Chinese painting and Nigerian *uli* utilize similar spatial theories, as well as similar lines and forms to fill spaces.

Chinese painter-calligraphers and Igbo muralists organize compositional structure around an equal valuation of positive and negative space.<sup>50</sup> *Uli* shows a concern for space through a sparing use of motifs placed in large unfilled spaces where the positive spaces are equally as important as the negative spaces.<sup>51</sup> Calligraphy requires ambient space, and is always associated with non-flat surfaces like the skin or walls on which *uli* is painted.<sup>52</sup> While areas of negative space in a Chinese painting may appear empty, the areas actively express the inner pattern (*li*) articulated in the relationship between the positive and negative.<sup>53</sup> In his *Nigeria Magazine* article, Udechukwu wrote that some of the best Chinese paintings use few elements, leaving blank spaces as areas of rest to create a serene, harmonious impression, including illustrations of Ma Yuan's 1195 *Angler on a Wintry Lake* (Fig. 2) and Ma Fen's early twelfth century *Hundred Geese* as examples.<sup>54</sup> Just as Chinese painters manipulated space to express *li*, Udechukwu explained that the essence of *uli* painters employ the "... manipulation of space through design to create a beautiful spectacle."<sup>55</sup> As Chike Aniakor notes, much of the beauty of these motifs and their placement relates to their origins in the environment, reflecting their reference to the Igbo village and cosmos in their entirety.<sup>56</sup> Brushwork is a related point of comparison between *uli* and Chinese painting and calligraphy, which Udechukwu indicates takes both a sense of confidence and spontaneity to create: "The brush "dance[s]" and the ink "sing[s]."<sup>57</sup> Both the Nigerian and Chinese arts require a deft, expert touch necessitating immense concentration and years of practice, as neither permit erasing or the cleaning of mistakes.<sup>58</sup> *Mo hsi* (ink play) was the term literati used to describe their spontaneous, impressionistic painting, emphasizing its amateurish and unstudied nature as seen in Wen T'ung's eleventh century





**Fig. 2** Attributed to Ma Yuan, *Angler on a Wintry Lake*, ca. 1195, painting, 26.7 x 50.6 in (67 x 128.5 cm), Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, TA140.



**Fig. 3** Udechukwu, Obiora, *A Great Battle is Raging*, 1998, Ink, wash and pencil on paper, dimensions unknown. Image: Courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 4** Udechukwu, Obiora, *Exile Train*, 1981?, brush and ink on sketchbook page. Image: Courtesy of the artist.

ink on silk painting of bamboo.<sup>59</sup> The modulated, spontaneous brushstrokes of *mo hsi* are also seen in Udechukwu's works *A Great Battle is Raging* (Fig. 3) and *Exile Train* (Fig. 4), where the artist used bold strokes to evoke not only the form of his subject, but an emotional rawness mimicked by the uninhibitedness of the lines. While *mo hsi*'s positive forms are important to the overall composition of both Udechukwu's and T'ung's pieces, each image's negative space is equally valuable.

Linearity constitutes the strongest bond between *uli*, Udechukwu's use of *Uliism* and Chinese painting.<sup>60</sup> The same artists who create *uli* drawings (calligraphy) create *uli* paintings, employing a rhythmic linearity reinforced in painting by *igba ona*, a "hemming" or outlining of design motifs.<sup>61</sup> *Uli*'s incorporation of rhythmic linear sensibility juxtaposed with swirls reflects a major aesthetic and conceptual dualism crucial to the understanding of Igbo art: time is conceived in both the linear, chronological sense as well as the cyclical, rhythmic sense.<sup>62</sup> According to Udechukwu, "This addiction to line is to be noticed also in Chinese art where in a painting, the outline drawing remains visible."<sup>63</sup> The "outline drawing" he admired is *pai-miao*, a style popular among the Song literati at least partly for its exploitation of their calligraphic training.<sup>64</sup> The *uli* line is a form of abstraction that requires the viewer to take an active role in understanding what is being portrayed.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, *pai-miao* functions heuristically, allowing the painting's calligraphy-like brushstrokes to evoke the creative process, forcing the viewer to slow down and reflect upon the piece's subtly encoded meanings.<sup>66</sup> Just as *pai-miao* evokes process, the sinuous, lively forms and cyclical renewal of *uli* patterns on skin or walls evoke the act of creation rather than a static final product, a valuation of motion that epitomizes Igbo aesthetic values.<sup>67</sup> For literati, *pai-miao*'s simplified brushstrokes appealed to their interest in *li*'s inner pattern

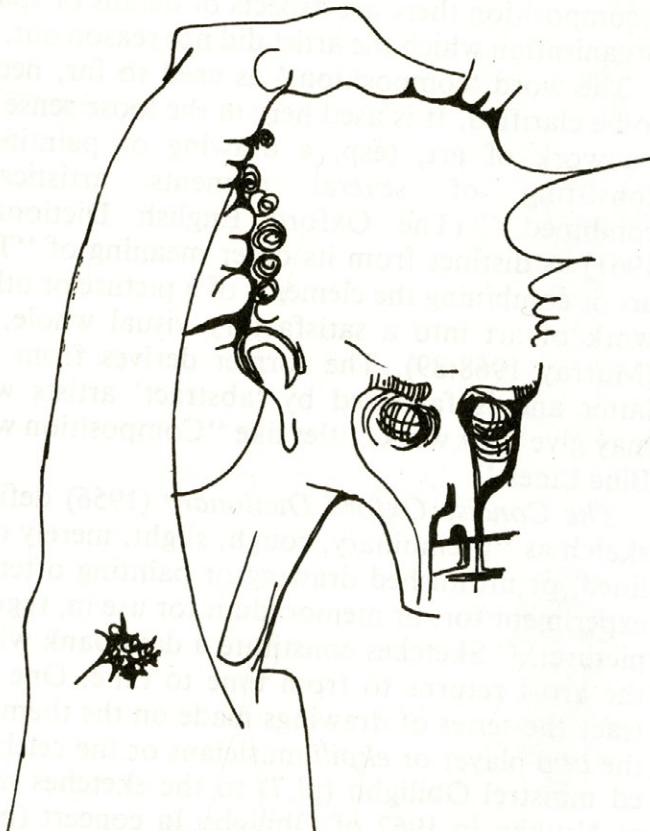
and the cultivation of the mind. As Richard Kent remarked, "Such painting not only allowed the subject's essential pattern to be revealed, it permitted the mind of the brush holder to mirror the very perception of that pattern, which in turn the viewer who possessed the requisite prepared mind was to receive."<sup>68</sup> Closely linked to calligraphy, *pai-miao* illustrated poetry, as seen in Qiao Zhongchang's *Illustration to the Second Prose Poem on the Red Cliff*, which illustrates Su Shih's poem "Latter Prose Poem on the Red Cliff." Without the benefit of color or ink washes, the handscroll illustrates Su Shih's poem in a way that creates a sense of narrative without exactly reproducing the poem's factual details, using *pai-miao* to dissolve the calligraphic form and distribute it across the page in a depiction that is faithful in spirit, its thick and thin linear forms carefully molding figures and landscape elements.<sup>69</sup> Udechukwu also employs a striking *pai-miao* style that uses deconstructed *uli* forms in the ca. 1970s ink sketch *Refugee*, where a woman's spiky hair contrasts with the minimal curvilinear lines that constitute her body and wrapper (Fig. 5). The bond between calligraphy and visual art is crucial for both Song literati painting and Igbo *uli* art because of calligraphy's ability to transmit messages beyond the structure of the calligraphic form itself.

As Simon Ottenberg wrote,

Language and language-like forms are crucial to Udechukwu's art and life. It is as if he is searching, through image and word, to relocate himself, his culture, and his country in creative ways by drawing together past skills from the visual and literary worlds.<sup>70</sup>

It is the literary world—specifically poetry—that Udechukwu cites as another link between the worlds of *uli* and 'li'.

Traditional criticism of Chinese painting historically enunciated the bond between poetry and painting, but it was not until the eleventh century that a significant joining between the two



**Fig. 5** Udechukwu, Obiora, *Refugee*, 1970, pen and ink on sketchbook paper. Image: Courtesy of the artist.

occurred in China.<sup>71</sup> The growing importance of the poetry-painting link paralleled thematic and stylistic shifts that occurred in the Song dynasty, including the rise of landscape painting and the idea the verisimilitude was not necessarily a facet only of painterly realism.<sup>72</sup> Emphasizing the convertibility of painting and poetry, Su Shih wrote that when “savoring Wang Wei’s poems, one finds paintings in them.”<sup>73</sup> With their synesthetic relationship, poetry and painting allowed literati to craft vehicles for expression in the Confucian sense of expressing *li* through creation, an emotional expression implicitly coded within the lines and brushstrokes of their works.<sup>74</sup>

Udechukwu acknowledged the connection between Chinese painting and poetry, noting in a 1980 interview that he liked those Chinese painters were also poets.<sup>75</sup> In his *Nigeria*

*Magazine* article, he cited Kuo Hi’s eleventh century *Lin ts’iuan Rao che* essay on painting, which says that poetry functions as a disembodied picture, and painting as embodied poetry.<sup>76</sup> To use Richard Edwards’s phrase, Udechukwu was enamored of the concept of the “idea-image of poetry,” which he related to the oral poetry he heard in Agulu.<sup>77</sup> The literary and visual elements of the spoken or sung poems of indigenous poets and minstrels such as Christopher Okigbo and Chief Akunwafor Ezigbo Obiligbo—oral histories, epics, dirges, and social satires—appealed to Udechukwu, who incorporated them in his *uli*-based works to convey political and social satire, an element absent from women’s *uli* paintings and body drawings.<sup>78</sup> While the *ulist* mentioned Liang K’ai’s painting of *The Poet* in his text to exemplify the Chinese use of positive and negative space, he missed the opportunity to acknowledge the aural component of Chinese poetry by using the correct title of the piece, *Li Po Walking and Chanting a Poem* (**Fig. 6**). The painting is an imagined portrait of Li Po rendered with an economy of variously sized brushstrokes; his chin lifted, the robed man appears to move forward, the free movements of the artist’s brush evoking a flowing cloth set into motion by the human body. The image of Li Po aurally engaging with poetry finds a partner in form and content in Udechukwu’s 1989 drawing *Song of Sorrow* (**Fig. 7**), a portrait of a bearded Hausa or Fulani minstrel or *malam* (cleric or priest) from northern Nigeria.<sup>79</sup> Like Li Po, the minstrel and his *goje* (a kind of single-stringed fiddle)—both evocative of Udechukwu’s global sampling of forms and concepts—are delineated with minimalistic strokes suggestive of a form rather than a fully naturalistic depiction. For Udechukwu, both the human body and poetry are containers for history and knowledge, here represented by undulating brushstrokes and *uli* symbols. Obiora Udechukwu appreciated the Chinese painters’ poetic sensibilities, which he saw reflected in his own poetic and painterly aesthetics. While he forthrightly acknowledged





**Fig. 6** Liang Kai, *Li Po (Li Bo) Walking and Chanting a Poem*, 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, painting, 12 x 31 in (30.5 x 78 cm), Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, TA-164. Image: The John C. and Susan L. Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, The Ohio State University.



**Fig. 7** Udechukwu, Obiora, *Song of Sorrow*, 1989, ink on paper. Image: Courtesy of the artist.

this bond, the content of both his poems and the poems of the literati—often expressions of dissent and exile—constituted a further, less explicitly acknowledged bond discussed at length later. For Song literati poets, poetry was a form of social involvement where they could express their thoughts about life, their government and their social milieu, much as Udechukwu did in his post-Biafran war poetry.<sup>80</sup>

Obiora Udechukwu's article "'Uli' and 'Li': Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Paintings" asserts his strong interest in Chinese painting, particularly that of the Song literati, whose works blended poetry, painting and calligraphy in order to express the inner nature of the artist. He confirms that despite the influence of *li* (Chinese painting) and the feelings of solidarity with foreign artists it endowed upon him, Igbo *uli* remains his main frame of artistic reference.<sup>81</sup> In conclusion,



he writes:

In spite of the brevity of this study, certain similarities between Igbo and Chinese drawing and painting should be quite clear. They are both derived from nature, though at different removes from it, and seek to capture the essence of things. Space for both traditions is a paramount element in picture making but above all, the rhythm and movement created by line seems to be the central quality that characterizes them. All told, the similarities in form and concept far outweigh the differences between these two exciting art cultures, one adequately documented, and the other transient and with no written history behind it.<sup>82</sup>

While his article directly addressed many aspects of Chinese painting's influence on his artistic theory, his work and artistic practice also reflected other less explicitly discussed technical and theoretical practices of Song literati.

Udechukwu's artwork is marked by the strong influence of *uli*, an antiquarian interest that belies another connection to the art of the Song literati, who also looked to their predecessors for artistic inspiration. During the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the study of ancient artifacts and inscriptions became an important part of intellectual life.<sup>83</sup> This rise in antiquarian studies is attributed to Confucian ritualists' desire to locate proper models for vessels for imperial court ceremonies, an interest group that expanded to include the literati, most of whom were either active or retired civil servants.<sup>84</sup> According to James Cahill, Song literati works are identifiable by the

Marked distortions of form appear in their pictures: sometimes in an archaistic spirit, referring by touches of naïveté and awkwardness to the styles of archaic periods, before certain problems of representation had been solved; sometimes according to the whim of the moment, making an impression of pure arbitrariness.<sup>85</sup>

Li Gonglin (ca. 1042–1106) gained his reputation

as painter, poet and antiquarian who owned an impressive collection of bronzes and jades; his opinions on antiquities influenced the study of early Chinese art.<sup>86</sup> Though none of his works remain, he was known to imitate the T'ang masters, an archaic element in his *pai-miao* style Song paintings supposedly based on Wu Tao-tzu's figure painting.<sup>87</sup> The literati antiquarian and collector Mi Fu (1052–1109) also took inspiration from the T'ang, in this case using a painting style like that of the T'ang period "ink-splashers," including Wang Mo and Tung Yüan.<sup>88</sup> In his article, Udechukwu quotes at length from Hsieh Ho's *Record of Classification of Painters of Ancient Times* (*Gu hua pin lu*) in an effort to explain how the Chinese classified their painters into a hierarchy.<sup>89</sup>

The Six Canons (Lu Fa) according to Hsieh Ho are:

1. Circulation of the Ch'i (Breath, Spirit, Vital force of Heaven) produces movement of life.
2. Brush creates structure.
3. According to the object drawn its forms.
4. According to the nature of the object apply colour.
5. Organize composition with the elements in their proper places.
6. In copying, seek to pass on the essence of the master's brush and methods.<sup>90</sup>

Surprisingly, Udechukwu does not mention the sixth element—copying—in terms of *Ulism*, a contemporary Nigerian antiquarianism. Udechukwu's initial interest in *uli* and his later academic research into the subject were born partly out of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka's policies. During the 1970s and 1980s, practitioners of Natural Synthesis theory encouraged the university's diverse body of students and faculty to conduct fieldwork studies on traditional art forms, allowing *uli* painting and other forms to be "rediscovered" by a new generation.<sup>91</sup> The preponderance of Igbo students and professors resulted in a focus on indigenous Igbo traditions, which took the form of a nationalist endeavor during the Biafran war,

and as a confirmation of ethnic identity following reunification.<sup>92</sup> *Uli* body and wall painting have not completely disappeared, but are dying out because of the modernization, secularization and westernization of rites of passage and festivals.<sup>93</sup> The appropriation of *uli*—a female art form—by both male and female *ulist* artists at Nsukka and other universities has reinvigorated interest and research into the topic, though the cult of personality around the male contemporary artists who adopted it has unintentionally reinforced the anonymity of traditional female *uli* artists.<sup>94</sup> As Udechukwu noted in his *Nigeria Magazine* article, scholars can trace the history of Chinese paintings through extant paintings and their copies, which are all physical materials, whereas ephemeral Igbo *uli* drawing and painting are repainted yearly on walls or on the skin after old designs have faded away. Despite major historical literature on *uli* and the lack of permanent examples, Udechukwu believes that even if a whole history cannot be recalled, a “coherent aesthetic system” can be determined and used to understand how contemporary works relate to tradition and antiquity.<sup>95</sup> The Igbo valuation of process over product—which allows each generation to interpret the visual culture of its predecessors—encourages Udechukwu in this research, which, while inspired by the past, pushes his artwork forward.<sup>96</sup>

During the mid-1970s, Udechukwu refined Uche Okeke’s strategies of modernizing *uli* by concentrating on linearity, pictorial rhythm and spatial organization, incorporating these aspects into his work until the early 1990s.<sup>97</sup> Augmenting *Ulist* with his knowledge of Song literati painting ideals and techniques, Udechukwu extended the definition of Natural Synthesis to include non-Western art as a resource for contemporary African artistic practices, referencing Song literati art while mimicking its makers’ artistic practice by looking at the pieces that inspired and influenced their works. In discussing Song

painting, the art historian Wai-kam Ho said that painting should be naturalist and “endowed with lofty concepts and archaic flavors” (*kao-i ku-wei*).<sup>98</sup> In pursuit of discovering these “archaic flavors,” Udechukwu looked at both the traditional practices of his own people and the pieces that inspired the Song artists he admired. *Admonitions of the Instructress to the Palace Ladies* is a Six Dynasties period painting by Gu Kaizhi that Udechukwu cited in his *Nigeria Magazine* article as an example of a painting that used few elements to accentuate negative space and create a sense of compositional harmony.<sup>99</sup> What Udechukwu did not note is that the Song literati admired this piece as an example of antiquarian subject matter and brushwork styles. Illustrating a political parody written by Zhang Hua, the handscroll first appears to be a general guide for feminine conduct for court ladies, but is actually a hidden moralizing tome directed at a specific empress known for her extravagance and moral transgressions. The painting’s linear style and concealed political message appealed to Song literati painters, who considered it an example of past painting on which to base their own. Emulating both the artistic output and antiquarian practices of the Song literati, Udechukwu too drew influence from the *Admonitions* scroll’s form and embedded content. As public collections of artwork were not existent during the Song dynasty, the ability to draw from antiquity was limited to those privileged and educated enough to read about or view art, a privileged circle that included the literati.

While Udechukwu noted that Chinese painters were intellectuals (i.e., literati), he did not correlate his own literati status to theirs.<sup>100</sup> Like the literati painters, Udechukwu was a civil servant and part of an elite circle of university-trained friends, peers and colleagues; unlike the literati, Udechukwu is not an amateur artist. Song literati painted as a pastime to present thoughts and character through the medium of

painting; though the literati gave paintings to friends, they refused to take money for them, unlike Udechukwu, who is a professional artist with gallery representation and a university professorship.<sup>101</sup> Though Udechukwu is a professional artist, he is still comparable to the Song literati because of his status as a member of the highly-trained university elite who were privy to both the Western modernist and Nigerian traditionalist messages that his work conveyed, ideas not always accessible to the main Nigerian populace. While the messages encoded in the symbolism of *uli* may be accessible to some of the general population, the information gained by in-depth study at universities including Nsukka allowed Udechukwu's circle of literati friends to interpret these images not only in terms of Igbo culture, but also within the idea of Natural Synthesis, where traditional African aesthetics met Western aesthetic ideas. *Uli* paintings are complex, often including images whose immediate connections to one another can't be understood. Elizabeth Willis argues that in *uli* paintings,

“... different levels of reality are being represented, and that the meanings of individual motifs are not designed to constitute a single theme. One should also explore the relationships, associations, and resonances that an image may evoke in the context of the whole composition.”<sup>102</sup>

Thusly, the meaning of *uli* painting—whether traditional or contemporary—depends on context, the viewer, and the wearer. The messages embedded in Udechukwu's art are not just available for immediate consumption, but are instead present in codes and ciphers accessible to verbally savvy Igbo spectators, just as the Song literati understood the significance of certain encoded ideas and symbols, particularly those alluding to dissent.<sup>103</sup> Igbo proverbs, numbering in the thousands, have both literal and figurative elements; to master them is to obtain an ideal command of speech.<sup>104</sup> Much like the painting of *uli* on walls invites public critique of the designs

and forms, the “performance” of proverbs is subjected to oral criticism of one's choice and employment of proverbs, with simple speech derided as that of children. The criticism is predicated upon the audience's knowledge of this complex indigenous system, which reflects their local education and knowledge of local values.<sup>105</sup>

During the Song Dynasty, literati employed metaphors and indirection to encode their poetry and paintings with messages that privileged sophisticated viewers, usually other literati, who could understand the messages of dissent only because of their own knowledge of related poetry and paintings.<sup>106</sup> Members used this circle of privilege advantageously to express dissenting political views that could not be directly aired in public.<sup>107</sup> Staring in the mid-1070s, criticizing the court could lead to banishment or charges of treason; by the late 1070s and early 1080s, prominent officials were frequently punished for resisting government reforms.<sup>108</sup> Harsh governmental reactions to public displays of dissent forced the literati to create poems and painted allusions to poetry to silently lodge their complaints. The literatus Su Shih expressed his objections to politician and reformer Wang Anshi's New Policies with informal poetry written in the 1070s. When his poetry became widely disseminated he was arrested on charges of “denouncing the imperial chariot” and demonstrating “great irreverence” (*da bujing*) toward the emperor, and later sentenced to exile.<sup>109</sup> While in exile, Su Shih often wrote on the theme of his fate in poems such as *Exiled, we move to overlook pavilion*. The poem describes heavenly liberation from society's burdens in a picturesque mountain setting, a coded allusion to his dismay at being sent with his family to a remote location where he is plagued by feelings of smallness and Sisyphean labor.<sup>110</sup>

While there are no extant paintings by Su Shih, other examples of Song literati painting



exemplify paintings encoding the dissent expressed in poetry. An exact correspondence between a poem and a painting is rare, but does sometimes occur.<sup>111</sup> The *Eight Views of XiaoXiang* is one of the foremost examples of a painted representation of a complaint poem theme.<sup>112</sup> During the Song Dynasty, the literatus Song Di (ca. 1067–1080) created the painting to evoke XiaoXiang, a disease-ridden and geographically treacherous region considered the worst place of exile. Depictions of XiaoXiang were not simply landscape paintings, but allusions to unjust exile and the despair felt by those who forced to live in that desolate region. Song Di's original painting no longer exists, but artists who also desired to express dissent through allusions to XiaoXiang's terrain made many copies of it. The section *Wild Geese Descending to Sandbar* (Fig. 8) in Wang Hong's Song Dynasty version alludes to Qu Yuan, a Chinese scholar-official from the Warring States period who drowned himself in the XiaoXiang's sandy rivers to protest the corruption he saw in the government, which had sentenced him to an exile he believed was unfair.<sup>113</sup>

Like the Chinese literati before him, Udechukwu sometimes illustrated his own poetry to express his thoughts of dissent, but more commonly,

expressed his thoughts by illustrating the verses of others, including those of Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, whose military service for Biafra proved divisive among Nigerian intellectuals.<sup>114</sup> Close associations between the form and content of poetry and painting, especially their lyricality and complexity, contribute to the synesthetic relationship between Udechukwu's poetry and art. During Udechukwu's 1968 to 1970 tenure in the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda, Igbos from all parts of Igboland entered Biafra, increasing his contact with the diversity of village culture while reinforcing his interest in traditional, everyday life. The majority of traditional Igbo material culture was destroyed or exported during the war, leaving Udechukwu and others to both revive and reinvent tradition in the new cosmopolitanism of a reunited Nigeria.<sup>115</sup> This increased contact and growing awareness of the government's flaws inspired the inclusion of social messages and themes in his art and poetry, which were marked by concerns about corruption, abuses by military leaders, lack of basic amenities, and the extreme poverty of the common people. As Simon Ottenberg commented, "Ironically, he did so while employing visually enjoyable traditional Igbo motifs and styles. The result was powerful



**Fig. 8** Hong, Wang, active ca. 1131–ca. 1161, *Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers* (section 1, *Wild Geese Descending to Sandbar*), ca. 1150, pair of handscrolls; ink and light colors on silk, painting, (each section, average): (9 3/16 x 35 11/16 in.) 23.4 x 90.7 cm.; Frontispiece (a): (9 5/16 x 34 7/16 in. (23.6 x 87.5 cm.); Mount: 9 13/16 in. (h. 25 cm.), Princeton University Art Museum, Edward L. Elliott Family Collection, Princeton, NJ, Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund. y1984-14 a-b. Image: Courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum. Photo: Bruce M. White.

social commentary on current Nigerian life.”<sup>116</sup> Udechukwu’s poetry is more influenced by the social and political issues of Nigeria, and less so by the English poetry he read during his youth, which he addresses in satiric or bitter terms.<sup>117</sup> His poetry was compiled in the illustrated volume *What the Madman Said*, where Udechukwu posited himself as a poet and as a madman who can speak out against problems in Nigerian society and politics in ways a normal person cannot.<sup>118</sup> The satirical illustrations relate loosely to the poems (with some made after the poems were written) utilizing Udechukwu’s signature *uli* and *nsibidi* motifs to create reduced, linear compositions about refugees, the unknown and exile.<sup>119</sup> The poem “We Were Once Poor But Wealthy” addresses the hypocrisy and corruption of the Oil Boom era.

IF THE RAIN catches you in Ikate  
If the rain catches you in Aguda  
I say  
If the rain catches you in Lagos  
Roll up your trousers  
Get ready to swim

*We were once poor but wealthy  
We are now rich but poor*

If thirst catches you in Uwani  
If thirst catches you in Ogui  
I say  
If thirst catches you in Enugu  
There are many gutters for free  
Police will not arrest you

*We were once poor but rich  
We are now rich but poor*

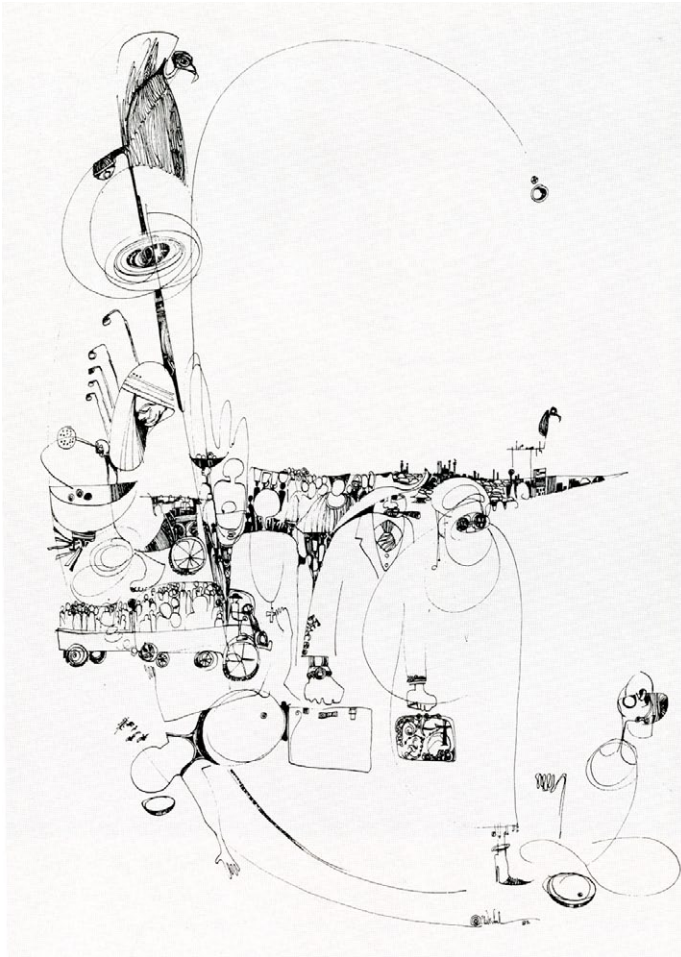
If hunger arrests you in GRA  
If hunger arrests you in Ugwu ndi Ocha  
I say  
If hunger grips you in Unibasity  
Dustbins overflow like the Niger  
And Sanitary will not arrest you

*We were once poor but rich  
We are now rich but poor*<sup>120</sup>

The poem addresses the hardships endured in Nigerian cities, themes he also explored in the drawing *No Water* drawing; as in many of his pieces, this apparently direct reference alludes to a greater issue. *No Water* (Fig. 9), from an eponymous 1981 exhibition held at Nsukka and Lagos, addresses the ironic lack of water in a country made wealthy by the oil boom. An informed reading reveals that the lack of water also functions as a metaphor for poverty, the uneven distribution of wealth, and the suffering of the poor.<sup>121</sup> A second illustration, *Road to Abuja* (Fig. 10), is initially an image of the poor and affluent alike moving towards Abuja, Nigeria’s new planned capital. A closer examination of the figures shows that the rich carry briefcases, an accessory that—if viewed by those “literati” who understood its symbolism—reveals Udechukwu’s criticism of the country’s rampant corruption and prevalent bribery, which often came in the form of money-stuffed briefcases.<sup>122</sup> This allusion to corruption is reminiscent of Su Shih’s quatrain about snails climbing up a wall:



**Fig. 9** Udechukwu, Obiora, *No Water*, 1980, pen and ink. Image: Courtesy of the artist.



**Fig. 10** Udechukwu, Obiora. *Road to Abuja*, 1982, pen and ink on paper, (38.7 x 28.5 cm), National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, bequest of Bernice M. Kelly, 98-20-7. Image: Courtesy of the artist.

Rancid saliva inadequate to fill a shell  
Barely enough to quench its own thirst,  
Climbing high, he knows not how to turn back,  
and ends up stuck on the wall—shriveled<sup>123</sup>

Su Shih intended the snail to wittily represent the greedy, overly ambitious official Wang Anshi and his much-hated New Policies; popular poems like this eventually led to Su Shih's exile. While it is unknown if Udechukwu knew of Su Shih's poem of snail as dissent, and of later illustrations that took up this anti-corruption theme disguised as nature illustrations (such as Jianbaixi's 1330 *Eight Insect Themes*, now at the Palace Museum), he certainly would have appreciated its couched anti-corruption sentiments. Like Su Shih and other Song literati who expressed their dissent

through poetry and painting, Obiora Udechukwu experienced repercussions from the government for his creations, despite his and other artists' use of symbolism and indirect reference to avoid government repression. In 1997, Udechukwu was falsely imprisoned for fourteen days in an Nsukka prison on ambiguous charges, a term followed by institutional victimization at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he was a professor.<sup>124</sup> He was forced into exile in the United States, where he is now an art professor at St. Lawrence University. As an exile—and an Igbo minority within Nigeria—Udechukwu expressed some of the same feelings of dissent and expatriation that many of the Chinese literati articulated through their allusion-filled paintings and poems.

Guided by Natural Synthesis' tenets, Obiora Udechukwu incorporated historical African and Chinese influences into his works, directly and indirectly molding his artistic practice to emulate that of the Song literati while creating socially aware contemporary African art. His work is part of the mid-twentieth century movements generated in the Nigerian university system, but its forms and content can also be understood within international contexts. During the post-WWII era, brush techniques and philosophic interests reflected the Asian cultures' pervasive influence on American art.<sup>125</sup> Unlike Udechukwu, the American artists who incorporated Asian influences were not forthright about the sources of their inspiration, and some—led by art critic Clement Greenberg—flatly denied Asia's influence on Abstract Expressionism. While Chinese aesthetic and theoretical practices enhanced modern art practices, they were incorporated haphazardly, and without the same level of research or understanding that Udechukwu undertook before incorporating Chinese influences into his work. Because of this shallow comprehension, artists such as Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell misinterpreted or even flatly ignored the nuances and semiotic meanings of



calligraphy and other “Asian sources.” Contrary to the Chinese understanding that a calligraphic form embodies meaning in its structure, the American art historian William Seitz declared that the calligraphic brushstroke represented “nothing beyond itself.”<sup>126</sup> While both Udechukwu and some American artists used Asian influences to innovate in their own progressive art practices, why did only Udechukwu fully delve into the study and understanding of his sources? The Abstract Expressionists fiercely defined their movement as American, radiating near-independently from New York City’s avant-garde milieu.<sup>127</sup> Unlike the Abstract Expressionists—who were dedicated to the idea of the individual artistic genius and their movement’s solidity—Udechukwu’s artistic training occurred in a university system that acknowledged links between tradition and contemporary artistic production. The Natural Synthesis theory encouraged art historical inquiry while emphasizing this research’s critical insight into contemporary art making. As a practitioner of Natural Synthesis, it would have been out of character for Udechukwu to deny his sources—Chinese, African or contemporary—a theoretical guiding force not followed by the Abstract Expressionists.

Udechukwu is part of a global network of artists who employ linear forms to convey satire or political commentary. Considering the hardships and atrocities of the war, and the rampant corruption and income disparities caused by the 1971 to 1977 Oil Boom, Udechukwu’s art resembles satirical political cartoons, terse in their message and sparing in their linear, lyrical forms. While some pieces critique overtly, his audience must frequently work to understand what is unrepresented in the image and what its maker intended to convey.<sup>128</sup> Udechukwu’s works are contemporary with those of Saul Steinberg, the American cartoonist best known for his work for *The New Yorker*, and the Iranian artist Ardeshir Mohassess. Employing a sparse, linear

style, Steinberg’s 1948 *Untitled* and 1976 *View of the World from 9th Avenue* engage the viewer in an exercise that forces them to mentally complete the missing details, much like Udechukwu’s works encourage viewers to imagine a composition’s missing parts. *View of the World...* also engages in embedded satire. At first it is a schematized view of a city, where the detail of a landscape lessens as the viewer looks into the distance; however, Steinberg’s work is actually a biting commentary on New Yorkers, whose egomania makes them believe there is little in the world beyond the island of Manhattan. Like Udechukwu, Ardeshir Mohassess was a university-trained artist whose illustrations were often used in publications and periodicals to address the abuses of government; exiled from Iran in 1976, he lived in New York until his death in 2008.<sup>129</sup> Dealing with the atrocities of war, religious strife, revolution and poverty, his works are characterized by a dark humor and layers of double-entendres and hidden meanings. In 1978’s *The king is always above the people*, Mohassess combines a title alluding to the loyalty of Iranian subjects with an image of the king limply hanging above a group of everyday people pose for the artist or an unseen photographer, unawares—or simply accepting—their hanged sovereign’s fate. Like Udechukwu, Mohassess draws from contemporary subject matter and artistic styles while hearkening back to the past via references to rulers’ corruption during the Qajar dynasty, and the compositional forms of traditional Persian art.<sup>130</sup>

By incorporating antiquarian elements of both Nigerian and Chinese culture to create his politically aware line drawings, Obiora Udechukwu created a new kind of contemporary African art. By directly and indirectly adopting modes of Song literati artistic creation, he enriched his understanding of Natural Synthesis, creating works of art that speak in global and local symbolisms, allowing for a multiplicity of meanings embedded within the lines of a single work.

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## Endnotes

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1. Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 119.
2. The vast majority of non-professional poets, calligraphers, and painters in the Chinese Song Dynasty (960–1276 CE) were Confucian scholars and civil servants; *wen-jen hua* ("literati painting") is the painting done by these scholar-amateurs. For an overview of this topic, see James F. Cahill, "Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960), 116.
3. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 111.; Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, eds., *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 155.
4. Udechukwu received his first formal art instruction at the Anglican Central School, a primary school in Onitsha where he was instructed by the Nigerian-trained art teacher Joseph Eze. From 1958 to 1964, Udechukwu attended the prestigious Dennis Memorial Grammar School where he studied under a second Nigerian art teacher, Rowland Ndefo, who had studied sculpture at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in England in 1956–48 and furniture design at Central School of



- Arts and Crafts, London in 1958–60. From 1962–64, Udechukwu was Ndefo's sole student, studying oil painting and graphic design, as well as acting in and creating sets for plays by European and Nigerian authors, and doing calligraphy for citations for distinguished visitors. For more on Udechukwu's early education, including his time at the Onitsha Mbari Centre, see Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 113.
5. For a detailed history of the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, see Michael Gould, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War 1966–1970* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).
6. Simon Ottenberg, "Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu," *African Arts* 35, no. 2 (2002): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3337897>.
7. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 115. Uli is an ephemeral form of personal decoration, unlike the *ichi* scarification linked closely to the Ozo titling system among the Igbo. There is a tradition of tattooing in China, but it is mostly regional and pre-dated the Song period. For more see Elizabeth Reed, *Early Chinese Tattoo* (Philadelphia: Dept. of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Pennsylvania, 2000).
8. Ottenberg, *Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu*, 35. See also Olu Oguibe, "Lessons from the Killing Fields," *Transition*, no. 77 (1998): 86–99, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2903202>.
9. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 115.
10. The Odunke Community included artists from the Biafran theater, music, literary and visual arts scene. Ibid., 115
11. Obiora Udechukwu, "'Finding My Roots' Obiora Udechukwu, Edited from a Conversation with Ulli Beier, Nsukka 1980" in *Neue Kunst Aus Afrika in Der Sammlung Heinz Und Gerlinde Greiffenberger* (Altenburg: Druckerei zu Altenburg, 2002), 27.
12. Ibid., 119
13. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 119.
14. Chika Okeke, "El Anatsui - Taming Wild Forces," in *Neue Kunst Aus Afrika in Der Sammlung Heinz Und Gerlinde Greiffenberger*, ed. Ulli Beier (Altenburg: Druckerei zu Altenburg, 2002), 52.; Olu Oguibe, "El Anatsui: The Early Work," in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, ed. Lisa Binder (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010), 25.; Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Mark-Making and El Anatsui's Reinvention of Sculpture," in *El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa*, ed. Lisa Binder (New York: Museum for African Art, 2010), 38.; Chika Okeke-Agulu, "The Quest for a Nigerian Art: Or a Story of Art from Zaria and Nsukka," in *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, eds. Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), 144, 156.; Oguibe and Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, 155.
15. Sylvester Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 44–46, 239, 255.; Sylvester Ogbechie, "Zaria Art Society and the Uli Movement, Nigeria," in *An Anthology of African Art: The Twentieth Century*, eds. N'Goné Fall and Jean Loup Pivin (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2002), 248.
16. Obiora Udechukwu, "Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting," *Nigeria Magazine* 134–135 (1981): 40. "Uli is the name of the indigo dye obtained from several species of plants with botanical names *Rothmania whitfieldii*, *Rothmania hispidiole*, *Rothmania cuspida* and *Rothmania urcelli*. The dye is extracted from the pods or berries of these plants known in Igbo as Uli Oba, Uli Nkilisi, Uli Ede Eji and Uli Okorobiam." Quoted from Obiora Udechukwu and Olu Oguibe, *Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria*, Second printing ed. (Lagos and Bayreuth, 1991), 8.
17. Ibid., 14; Sarah Margaret Adams, "Hand to Hand: Uli Body and Wall Painting and Artistic Identity in Southeastern Nigeria" (Doctor of Philosophy, Yale University).
18. Ibid. 12–13
19. Liz Willis, "'Uli' Painting and the Igbo World View," *African Arts* 23, no. 1 (1989): 63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3336801>.
20. Ibid., 62
21. Ibid., 62
22. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 41.

23. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 120.
24. Willis, "Uli" *Painting and the Igbo World View*, 67.
25. Ibid., 66
26. Oguibe and Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, 115.
27. Norbert Aas, "Obiora Udechukwu: Uli Art and Beyond," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 1 (Autumn 1994/Winter 1995): 61, <http://asrc.cornell.edu/nka/1.html>.
28. As Udechukwu read English poetry as part of his primary and secondary school education at Anglophone schools in Onitsha, it is possible that he may have encountered China in the works of the English Romantic poets.
29. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 121. In the Nigeria Magazine article, 'li' is sometimes used interchangeably to refer to both the Chinese concept of *li* and as the author's shorthand for Chinese painting.
30. Udechukwu cited Sze's book as the main reference for his article, but his endnotes also contain a reference to the exhibition catalogue for *Two Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*. This catalogue accompanied a travelling show put on by UNESCO in 1961; it is not clear if Udechukwu saw only the catalogue or the show as well. The catalogue includes an essay by Musée Cernuschi curator Vadime Elisseeff, which briefly presents a history of Chinese painting as categorized into the groups of ancient painting (Han), medieval painting (Song and T'ang) and modern painting (Ming and Ch'ing) as well as an overview of brush techniques and painting materials. The catalogue also includes an unillustrated checklist. The former was required reading for undergraduate drawing students, while the latter was a reference book; both were available at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka's Department of Fine and Applied Arts' library. The Enugu British Council library was another location where Udechukwu likely encountered these and other foreign publications.
31. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 46.
32. David Hinton, ed., *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, trans. David Hinton (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), 447.
33. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 48.
34. Hinton, *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, 449.
35. Cahill, *Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting*, 135–136.
36. Richard K. Kent, "Ch'iao Chung-Ch'ang's Illustration of Su Shih's "Latter Prose Poem on the Red Cliff": Pai-Miao (Plain Line Drawing) as Heuristic Device," *Kuo-Li Taiwan Ta-Hsueh Mei-Shu-Shih Yen-Chiu Chi-k'an (National Taiwan University Art History Journal)* 11 (2001): 116.
37. Cahill, *Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting*, 122.
38. Ibid., 124
39. Preface to the Shanghai 19th century edition, of *Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan or the Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, quoted in Mai-Mai Sze, *The Tao of Painting: A Study of the Ritual Disposition of Chinese Painting (with a Translation of the Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan Or Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting 1679–1701)*, Second (with corrections), in one volume ed. (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1963), 6. Footnoted in Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 50.
40. Hinton, *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, 449.
41. Herbert M. Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1984), 15.
42. Chike Aniakor, "Igbo Aesthetics (an Introduction)," *Nigeria Magazine*, 1982, 6.
43. Hans H. Frankel, "Poetry and Painting: Chinese and Western Views of their Convertibility," *Comparative Literature* 9, no. 4 (1957): 302, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1768547>. From Sze's *The Tao of Painting*, Udechukwu learned of weng fang sseu pao, the "Four Treasures of the Scholar's Studio;" the discussion of paper, brush, ink, and inkstone informed his own forays into pen and ink and brush and ink drawings. See Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 44.
44. John Hay, "Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface," *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1985): 100, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111155>.
45. Cahill, *Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting*, 126.

46. Ibid., 128; Hay, *Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface*, 111.
47. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 45.
48. Hay, *Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface*, 99.; Obiora Udechukwu, *Obiora Udechukwu: Selected Sketches 1965–83 and Recent Drawings and Watercolours* (Lagos: National Council for Arts and Culture Lagos, 1984), 1.
49. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 41.
50. Ibid., 48
51. Ibid., 42
52. Hay, *Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface*, 101.
53. Ibid., 102
54. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 48.
55. Udechukwu and Oguike, *Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria*, 37.
56. Aniakor, *Igbo Aesthetics (an Introduction)*, 5.
57. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 48.
58. Udechukwu and Oguike, *Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria*, 8.
59. Frankel, *Poetry and Painting: Chinese and Western Views of their Convertibility*, 304.
60. *Ulist* is the modern use of *uli* in works of art by contemporary artists, particularly those from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. *Ulist* is here used to refer to a contemporary artist who as inspired by *uli* or appropriated its forms, not by a contemporary practitioner of *uli*. Their work is variously referred to as *Ulist*, neo-*Uli*, revivalist *Uli*, or “modern *Uli* style.” Aas, *Obiora Udechukwu: Uli Art and Beyond*, 61.
61. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 43.; Udechukwu, “*Finding My Roots*” *Obiora Udechukwu, Edited from a Conversation with Ulli Beier, Nsukka 1980*, 28.
62. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, 18.
63. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 44.
64. Kent, *Ch'iao Chung-Ch'ang's Illustration of Su Shih's "Latter Prose Poem on the Red Cliff:" Pai-Miao (Plain Line Drawing) as Heuristic Device*, 97.
65. Udechukwu and Oguike, *Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria*, 9.
66. Kent, *Ch'iao Chung-Ch'ang's Illustration of Su Shih's "Latter Prose Poem on the Red Cliff:" Pai-Miao (Plain Line Drawing) as Heuristic Device*, 101, 109.
67. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, ix.
68. Kent, *Ch'iao Chung-Ch'ang's Illustration of Su Shih's "Latter Prose Poem on the Red Cliff:" Pai-Miao (Plain Line Drawing) as Heuristic Device*, 119.
69. Ibid., 101
70. Ottenberg, *Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu*, 43.
71. Hay, *Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface*, 96.; Richard Edwards, “Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung,” in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting*, eds. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1991), 405.
72. Ibid., 406
73. Hay, *Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface*, 108.; Edwards, *Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung*, 96.
74. James Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, Second ed. (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1977), 89.
75. Udechukwu, “*Finding My Roots*” *Obiora Udechukwu, Edited from a Conversation with Ulli Beier, Nsukka 1980*, 29.
76. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting*, 48.
77. Edwards, *Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung*, 418.
78. Udechukwu, “*Finding My Roots*” *Obiora Udechukwu, Edited from a Conversation with Ulli Beier, Nsukka 1980*, 28. ; Dominique Bediako, ““Intricate Fabric,” Visual Elements in the Poetry of some Nsukka Artists,” in



*African Cultures, Visual Arts, and the Museum: Sights/Sites of Creativity and Conflict*, ed. Tobias Döring (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 161–176.; Ambrose Adikamkwu Monye, *Proverbs in African Orature: The Aniocha-Igbo Experience* (New York: University Press of America, 1996), 37.

79. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 139.
80. Kōjirō Yoshikawa, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, trans. Burton Watson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), 19.
81. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 122.
82. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting'*, 48.
83. Robert E. Harrist Jr., "The Artist as Antiquarian: Li Gonglin and His Study of Early Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae* 55, no. 3/4 (1995): 237, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3249751>.
84. Ibid.: 241
85. Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, 91.
86. Harrist, *The Artist as Antiquarian: Li Gonglin and His Study of Early Chinese Art*, 237.
87. Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, 92.
88. Ibid., 91
89. This hierarchy consisted of the upper stratum/divine group [*shen*]; marvelous and profound [*miao*]; and able and accomplished class [*neng*]; and an occasional fourth class, the spontaneous [*i*]. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting'*, 48.
90. Ibid., 48. Udechukwu has referenced page 46 of Sze's *The Tao of Painting* for this translation. An alternate translation of the Hsieh Ho's Six Elements can be found in Victor H. Mair, *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 52., and is as follows: "Even though painting has its Six Elements, few are able to combine them thoroughly; and from ancient times until now each painter has excelled in one particular branch. What are these Six Elements? First, Spirit Resonance, which means vitality; second, Bone Method, which is a way of using the brush; third, Correspondence to the Object, which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type, which has to do with the laying on of

colors; fifth, Division and Planning, that is, placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is, the copying of models."

91. Udechukwu and Oguibe, *Uli: Traditional Wall Painting and Modern Art from Nigeria*, 4–5. Uche Okeke, who joined the faculty as head of the art department of the University of Nigeria at Nsukka in 1970, was a major proponent of Natural Synthesis and a key figure in initiating the requirement of traditional art fieldwork at Nsukka.
92. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, *Contemporary African Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 180–181.; Ogbechie, *Zaria Art Society and the Uli Movement, Nigeria*, 248.
93. Willis, "Uli" *Painting and the Igbo World View*, 62.
94. For more information on individual artists practicing traditional *uli*, as well as the ways in which these artists relate to contemporary *Ulistm* and *ulists*, see Sarah Margaret Adams' excellent 2002 doctoral thesis *Hand to Hand: Uli Body and Wall Painting and Artistic Identity in Southeastern Nigeria*.
95. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting'*, 40.
96. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, ix.
97. Chika Okeke, "Obiora Udechukwu," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 9 (Fall/Winter 1998): 47.
98. Edwards, *Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung*, 408.
99. Udechukwu, *Uli' and 'Li': Aspects of Igbo and Chinese Drawing and Painting'*, 48. It is possible Udechukwu saw this painting at the British Museum during his 1976 trip to London, but it is more likely that he encountered a discussion of it on page 34 of the 1963 version of Sze's *The Tao of Painting*. It is also listed in the catalogue for the UNESCO Two Thousand Years of Chinese Painting exhibition on page 15.
100. Ibid., 44
101. Cahill, *Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting*, 138.; Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, 91.
102. Willis, "Uli" *Painting and the Igbo World View*, 66.
103. Chika Okeke, "Obiora Udechukwu — Drawing as Poetry," in *Neue Kunst Aus Afrika in Der Sammlung Heinz Und Gerlinde Greiffenberger* (Altenburg: Druckerei zu Altenburg, 2002), 38.

104. Monye, *Proverbs in African Orature: The Aniocha-Igbo Experience*, 66.
105. See Chapter 4 “Oral Literary Criticism of Antiocha Proverbs” in *Ibid.*
106. Alfreda Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent* (Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 259.
107. *Ibid.*, 262; Yoshikawa, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, 20.
108. Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent*, 2.
109. *Ibid.*, 48–49
110. English translation available in Hinton, *Classical Chinese Poetry: An Anthology*, 374.
111. Edwards, *Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung*, 410.
112. Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent*, 45.
113. *Ibid.*, 74
114. Ottenberg, *Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu*, 38. Christopher Okigbo was an Igbo poet killed in 1967 during the Biafran War; his poetry, which blended Western and Igbo literary traditions, was one of Udechukwu’s major influences and first exposures to non-Western poetry. Some Nigerian literati felt that Okigbo should have stayed off the battlefield to write patriotic poems, while others believed he gave his life for Biafra. For more on Okigbo, see Donatus I. Nwoga, *Critical Perspectives on Christopher Okigbo* (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984).
115. Cole and Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, 13–14.; Ottenberg, *Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu*, 38.
116. *Ibid.*, 35
117. *Ibid.*, 35
118. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 140.
119. *Ibid.*, 139
120. Excerpted. Obiora Udechukwu, *What the Madman Said* (Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1990), 53.
121. Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, 131.
122. *Ibid.*, 132
123. English translation in Murck, *Poetry and Painting in Song China: The Subtle Art of Dissent*, 127–128.
124. Ottenberg, *Sources and Themes in the Work of Obiora Udechukwu*, 42–43.; Chika Okeke-Agulu, “Nka Roundtable II: Contemporary African Art History and the Scholarship,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 26 (Spring 2010): 132.
125. Bert Winter-Tamaki, “The Asian Dimensions of Postwar Abstract Art: Calligraphy and Metaphysics,” in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), 145.
126. *Ibid.*, 147
127. For a full history of the Abstract Expressionist movement in New York City, see Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Knopf, 2005).
128. Oguibe and Enwezor, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, 156.
129. Ardeshir Mohassess, Shirin Neshat and Nicky Nodjoumi, *Ardeshir Mohassess: Art and Satire in Iran* (New York: Asia Society, 2008), 6.
130. Asia Society, “Asia Society | Ardeshir Mohassess | Art and Satire in Iran,” Asia Society, <http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/mohassess/> (accessed 5/8, 2011).

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