Chapter 5
Reading art

We have already seen throughout this book that there are many questions we need to ask when we look at a painting or sculpture. Here I want to think about how we answer the question 'what is the meaning of this picture?', in other words to explore the levels of meaning we can find in an artwork and the ways in which we can begin to understand it. Throughout this chapter I use the term 'read' as the interplay between the verbal and the visual. It is important to remember that art – a visual phenomenon – is described, historicized, and appreciated using words. The visual translates into the verbal and the meanings revealed become part of art history. In bringing the discussion back to the artworks themselves, the emphasis shifts to what we can read from the objects rather than what we can read around or into them. These latter ideas have informed the discussion in the previous chapters in this volume and they are helpful here as they provide intellectual contexts for art history. In this way we come back to the objects themselves to see how subject matter, materials, and methods combine in the process of reading art.

Artworks can be read on a range of levels that can be derived from the objects themselves, and it is helpful to outline these. Perhaps the most obvious starting point is the notion of the representational meaning of art. The idea of representation in relation to art is often connected with the perception of an image of the world we think we see. Mindful of this, this chapter focuses on figurative art – that is to say work that represents something we think we see rather than an abstract image. There is no doubt that abstract or conceptual art has the same kind of representative qualities discussed here and that it can be read in a variety of ways. But in order to introduce these ideas, I am limiting my discussion to one kind of figurative representation – the human form. And it is true that certain periods appear more preoccupied with the representation of reality or nature of the human form than others. For instance, 17th-century Dutch art as seen in the paintings of Vermeer is considered to be realistic in its use of perspective and close attention to detail. Similarly, the interest in naturalism of Italian Renaissance

art is evident in the treatment of the human body as well as of landscape – both of which were drawn from life.

But art is an illusion – paint on canvas, carved marble, or chalk on paper – it is what the viewer brings to it that makes it 'represent'. Clearly this act of reading is culturally determined – the reader or viewer's own cultural and social circumstances are inextricable from this process. We have already seen how this affects the presentation and interpretation of art objects in a global context in the opening chapters of this book. Here, I want to give some select examples to show that reading art is a necessary practice across all time periods. In other words it is our ability to read art that gives it its meaning, and this becomes an essential part of art history.

First there is the representational function of art where what we see can be connected with a larger narrative. This is exemplified, for instance, by the *Apollo Belvedere* (Fig. 7). At first glance this sculpture represents an athletic male nude, but we can connect this with Apollo as we understand the representational conventions being used – especially the laurel crown, which is associated with the god. In this way the representational meaning of a work will always remain general at some level as the sculpture gives the all-purpose idea of the idealized male nude which can be narrowed down to a more specific reference to Apollo. Sculpture is a useful starting point to think about this because the physicality of the object delimits its representational meaning in several obvious ways.

Firstly, sculpture cannot signify any size beyond its own. By this I mean that the *Apollo Belvedere* is larger than human life-size, but we do not know if the artist intended to represent a giant – he is, after all, a god. The large scale could just as well be due to the original purpose of the work – perhaps to fill a large niche or stand up high. Secondly, the work does not represent space and has no 'setting' other than its immediate surroundings, whatever they may be. There is also an absence of colour and commensurate with this modelling of flesh and drapery. Clearly these limitations do not apply to all sculpture. Space can be represented in sculpture as seen, for instance, in the 'hole' that appears in many of the works by Henry Moore or in the spaces of the installation works of Mona Hartoum or, as we have seen, Judy Chicago (Fig. 8). Moreover, the use of a diverse range of materials by artists, particularly in the 20th century, both simplifies the question of representation, as the actual material can be used to represent itself, for example fabric, and makes the issue more complex as a range of materials can be used to represent an image as well as ideas about space and vision, as we have seen in Cubist collage for instance. My point here is to show that the problem of representation is a common one in art and not confined to specific periods such as the

Renaissance or 17th-century Dutch painting where the apparent preoccupation with 'naturalism' or 'realism' can be misleading in this regard. The relationship between form and content is far more complicated than simply being able to recognize the world we think we see.

Secondly, it is important to think about how artworks can be the illustration of ideas or narratives, which are often based on textual sources. These sources can be illustrated in a variety of ways as verbal descriptions are usually much looser than a visual image. Illustrations of textual sources are far more specific or particular. The verbal descriptions of Apollo, or any other mythical figure from the literature of antiquity, have been illustrated in a great variety of ways – the holdings of most major galleries and museums contain innumerable examples of this. We are able to identify these literary figures through certain attributes that provide a link between text and image – in this case Apollo's laurel crown. If the viewer had never heard of Apollo, or did not know how to identify him, the statue would remain only partially read – and some of its meaning would remain undiscovered.

Two things emerge from the relationship between verbal and visual descriptions. The first is that the diversity of ways of illustrating textual sources means that the text cannot be wholly reconstructed from the images of it. So although illustrations are more particular in terms of the image they present, they do not stand independent of their textual sources. In other words we need to know the text to read the image. Secondly, this impacts on the meaning of these illustrations as surely this cannot be fixed, but rather is influenced by the viewer and the knowledge they have (or not) of the textual sources. And we must not forget that the particularity of the image comes from the artist's own imagination. All of this establishes the artwork as a document or archive that has a complex relationship with text, history, and the culturally conditioned viewer.

I have not discussed the artist's intentions here as psychoanalytic models, as discussed in Chapter 4, have shown us that the meaning of a work can extend beyond its maker's intentions – if indeed these are known. The volatility of the meaning of images is a fascinating element of art history. But if we accept that art is a vehicle through which ideas can be communicated, there has to be some stability. And there is a common language or set of symbolic conventions that can be used by artists to fix the meaning of artworks on one level or another. This introduces us to iconography – the study of subjects in art, and their deeper meaning – an important focal point for my discussion of reading art.

In the age of computers we are all familiar with the term icon. But the word has a complex history and this leads me right to the beginning of my consideration of iconography. I want to begin with the juxtaposition of three very different icons: a Byzantine image of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 20); Andy Warhol's portrait of the actress *Marilyn Monroe* (1962; Fig. 21); and Mario from *The Super Mario Brothers* game (Fig. 3). In the Byzantine image of the *Virgin and Child* the relationship between text and image is strong. We need to know of the Christian Bible before we see the image of a woman and child as having religious significance. We might identify certain attributes – for instance the Virgin's blue cape or mantel or the fact that the Christ child is holding a scroll, which is a symbol or prefiguration of his death. But how do we know that this image is not just a representation of motherhood or a female figure and child from mythology? In Warhol's *Marilyn Monroe* we see a repeated image of one of Hollywood's best-known stars. This representation of Marilyn Monroe has become so familiar to us, and is so frequently quoted in other artworks, that it has gained an 'iconic' status that is commensurate with the actress herself. Mario, from *The Super Mario Brothers*, speaks to the temporal nature of icons – I am assured that he is more easily recognizable than the *Mona Lisa* to the generations whose interests centre on computer games and virtual reality.

Icon comes from the Greek 'eikon', which means image. In terms of Western art history it is used most commonly to refer to a single image created as a focal point of religious veneration or aid to prayer. The Icon (sometimes spelled Ikon) as a distinct art form grew out of the mosaic and fresco tradition of the early Byzantine period, and the art form has remained largely constant in its appearance throughout its history. An Icon is usually a painted or carved portable object that commonly represents Christ, or the Virgin and Child, in a stiff and somewhat formulaic way, or so it can appear to Western viewers. The anonymous artists who produced these images and those who used them as an aid to devotion or prayer were concerned only with the portrayal of the symbolic or mystical aspects of the divine being. As such they stand distinct from Western preoccupations with the representation of space and movement as seen in the development of painting from the Renaissance onwards. Although the Icon was in common use by the end of the 5th century CE, the iconoclastic controversy – a debate in the Christian Church about the appropriateness of illustrating the Bible – led to the destruction of many works by those iconoclasts who objected to the practice. But Byzantine Icons continued to be produced in great numbers until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire. The art form moved further east to Russia, where Icons were made until the Revolution, and the tradition continues to the present day in Greek Orthodox art.

However, the term icon came to mean ‘subject matter’ in the 19th-century German school of art history. Icon was initially used by these writers to connote ‘image’ and this was transposed into ‘iconography’ – literally the act of writing about images – and ‘iconology’, the study of images. These fields of art historical enquiry were concerned with the analysis of the visual. As the methods of each approach developed, greater emphasis was placed on the understanding and interpretation of subject matter rather than form.

Both iconography and iconology are important parts of art history. Iconography encompasses the study and interpretation of figural representations, either individual or symbolic, religious or secular; more broadly, the art of representation by pictures or images, which may or may not have a symbolic as well as an apparent or superficial meaning. The term first appeared in the 18th century but was used specifically for the study of engravings, the most common form of book illustration. It soon came to be used to refer more specifically to the history and classification of Christian images and symbols of all sorts, in all media. As we have seen, by the 19th century a far more systematic investigation of art from prehistoric ages to modern times had been established. Through closer inspection and ordering of the visual archive, it became apparent that representational images from different periods and cultures had iconographic traditions of their own. It is not unusual today therefore to find the term qualified to indicate the field under discussion – for example, the iconography of Egyptian deities, the iconography of Roman imperial portraits, Christian iconography, Buddhist or Hindu iconography, and so on.

20. Byzantine image of the *Virgin and Child*, School of Venice, 14th century.

21. Andy Warhol's repeated image of the Hollywood actress, *Marilyn Monroe*, 1962, has gained an iconic status to match that of the actress.

Iconography is an important method of scholarly investigation as it also enables us to explore the thought from which a given convention of representation has arisen, particularly when the convention has assumed the value of a symbol. In this regard the importance of identifying motifs is an essential part of iconographical interpretation.

Christian iconography is extremely rich and varied and is the kind we encounter most often in Western galleries and museums. Its principal concern is the perils faced by the human soul on earth in its journey towards eternal salvation, and figures from the Old and New Testaments are used to inculcate in every mind the moral aims and fundamental dogmas of the Christian religion. By the time of the Middle Ages, the

representation of the stories and characters from the Bible had gone through many transformations and refinements. So in a way we can think of religious art at this time as a kind of sacred 'writing' whose system of characters, I mean here the iconography, had to be learned by every artist – and, indeed, viewer. It was governed also by a kind of sacred mathematics, in which position, grouping, symmetry, and number were of extraordinary importance and were themselves an integral part of the iconographic system.

From earliest times, Christian iconography also operated as a kind of symbolic code, where, for instance, the dove represents the Holy Spirit or a vase of lilies signify the Virgin's purity in the representations of the Annunciation. Saints also have attributes that help us to recognize them. For instance, St Catherine of Alexandria is traditionally portrayed in the presence of a wheel. This wheel, as her attribute, serves to identify her and at the same time signifies a miracle connected with her martyrdom. It must be said, however, that the conventions and symbols, as well as their meanings, change with the passage of time and the growth of ideas; many disappear, while others become almost unintelligible to subsequent generations and can be recovered only by intensive study. Leading on from this iconology is the study of the meaning contained within the symbols in a particular work of art. For example, in Christian art the figure crucified upside-down is a reference to St Peter, as he considered himself unworthy to die in the same manner as Christ. In this way the image represents the Christian faith, and St Peter's own faith and humility.

Iconography and iconology are, then, two modes of visual analysis or reading pictures that derive from the word icon. Traditionally, these symbols derive from a readily recognizable, common currency of cultural or religious experience. Among the foremost scholars in this field of art history are Émile Mâle, Aby Warburg, and Erwin Panofsky, all of whom have written extensively on the ways in which we can read art. But reading images in this way is not confined to Christian art, or indeed the art of the past.

The 17th-century Dutch artist Vermeer used many symbols, attributes, personifications, and allegories to give his secular paintings iconographical meaning. His *Maid with a Milk Jug* (Fig. 16), painted around 1658–60, is a useful example not only for reading meaning but also to show how technical analysis into the physicality of the object can reveal important changes that were made by the artists in the evolution of the composition of the painting. Technical investigations, including X-ray and close examination of the paint surface, into this small oil painting (it measures 45.5 × 41 cm) have shown that Vermeer removed several details to create a starker contrast between the subject and the background of this work. For instance, pentimenti show us that there

was a map or a painting on the wall behind the milkmaid and a laundry basket where we now see a foot stove. There are compositional reasons why these changes were made. But closer investigation of the iconography of the picture perhaps tells us a little more.

Firstly, it is important to ask why Vermeer replaced the laundry basket – it clearly refers to the duties of a kitchen maid. Yet, Vermeer chose to replace the laundry basket with a foot stove, which does not seem to relate so closely to the domestic role of a kitchen maid. If we want to look beyond the 'face value' of these images, other evidence of the culture and society of the time may be useful. In the case of Vermeer, we can turn to Emblem books, known as *Embleemboek* in 17th-century Holland. These illustrated volumes tell us the meaning of these apparently everyday objects, which is often derived from or related to their function. Hot coals were put inside a foot stove to provide much-needed heating in the cold winter months. As an emblem the foot stove can then be seen as a symbol for warmth, love, and loyalty. This symbolic meaning becomes even clearer when we look at the background of the picture. There are some tiles decorated with small Cupids which also refer to love and warmth. It is unclear whether this refers to the fact the milkmaid is in love herself, but by looking at the iconographic images in this picture we can begin to see it as more than just a genre scene.

Iconology is not just a means of reading the art of the distant past – it can also help us to understand the symbolic meaning of recent art. For instance, the Washington Monument is a symbol of the American state. Its obelisk form refers to the authority of ancient Egypt and Rome and is a potent symbol of a newly formed country, government, and capital city. This image was subverted, as a protest against the Vietnam War, by the artist Claes Oldenburg in his sculpture *Lipstick*. Here Oldenburg transformed the obelisk into a deflatable, brutally absurd instrument of war. Oldenburg was part of the Pop Art movement, which was mainly concerned with the use of popular imagery and symbols from everyday life, and gives us another way of reading art.

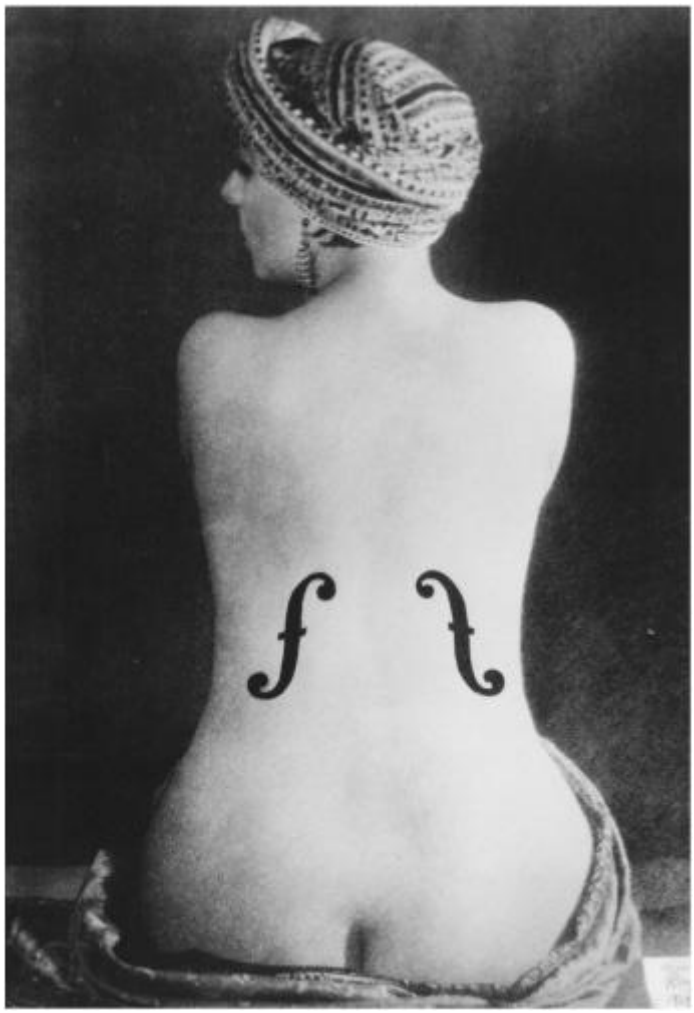
Pop Art first appeared in the late 1950s and flourished in the 1960s and early 1970s and uses the imagery and techniques of consumerism and popular culture. It developed primarily in Britain and the United States as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, where it was linked to the wealth and prosperity of the post-World War II era and the American consumer society. The movement eliminated distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' taste and between fine art and commercial art techniques. Pop artists employed a common figurative imagery found in comic strips, soup cans, and Coke bottles to express formal abstract relationships. By this means they provided a meeting ground where artist and layman could come to terms with art. Incorporating techniques of sign

painting and commercial art into their work, as well as commercial literary imagery, pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol attempted to fuse elements of popular and high culture to erase the boundaries between the two. If here we think back to Vermeer's use of everyday objects as 'signs', it becomes clear that our ability to 'read' images is culturally and temporally determined. The everyday objects of the middle-class merchants of 17th-century Holland are less familiar to us than those of the 1950s and 1960s. But this does not mean that Vermeer is any less evocative or effective in representing ideas than his 20th-century counterparts.

The methods of representation used by Warhol and Lichtenstein vary considerably but are both based on the techniques of mass reproduction used by the consumerist society they set out to critique. Andy Warhol is known for his silkscreens of both famous people and everyday objects, while Roy Lichtenstein employed a comic strip style in his paintings and manipulated those illustrative techniques to great aesthetic effect. As a visionary, Andy Warhol's work anticipated a world where a consumer-driven culture came to value the brand name and iconic item above individuality. Warhol chose his imagery from the world of commonplace objects such as dollar bills, soup cans, soft-drink bottles, and soap-pad boxes. He is variously credited with attempting to ridicule and to celebrate American middle-class values by erasing the distinction between popular and high culture. Monotony and repetition became the hallmark of his multi-image, mass-produced silkscreen paintings. Many of these, such as the portrait of Marilyn Monroe, were based on newspaper photographs. Marilyn Monroe became a world-famous sex symbol and a Hollywood legend after her suicide at the age of 36 in 1962 – the same year as Warhol's portrait. Through his technique and method of representation, Warhol comments on the commodification of the actress and the potency of mass-produced images.

The reality of the representation of Marilyn Monroe exists partly in the use of a photograph as the basis of the image. But the truth or objectivity of the mechanically reproduced image is as vulnerable to the particularity of the artist's imagination as any illustration of textual material and we must not forget it is an artwork in its own right. For instance, the early photographer Man Ray comments on the 'verisimilitude' of the image in his *Le Violon d'Ingres* (Fig. 22). Here we are presented with a female nude seen from behind. The pose and headdress make reference to Ingres's nudes, especially his voluptuous bathers. Ingres's realistic handling of paint is echoed in the realism of the photographic print. But Man Ray plays with our readiness to accept that which we see as real, as the shape of the woman's back also represents a violin. Who is playing or can play with whom?

The ambivalent relationship between art, artist, and viewer is true of virtual reality – a computer-generated environment with and within which people can interact. *The Super Mario Brothers* uses virtual reality as part of an electronic game where a computer programme synchronizes a variety of sounds with the movie-like animated action portrayed on a graphic display. Whatever the technical wizardry of the game, just like other forms of representation it is created by humans for other human viewers. In other words, whether we are looking at a Byzantine Icon; a 17th-century Dutch genre picture; Pop Art; a photograph or computer animation, it is the interaction between viewer and object that gives art its meaning and decides the way in which the visual is read.



22. Man Ray's gelatin silver print of a woman, *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924), makes references to Ingres's nudes in the model's pose and headdress, as well as to the form of a violin.

Chapter 6
Looking at art

The physical properties of artworks have an important influence on how we understand them as objects. I want here to outline some examples of the different media and techniques of producing art, to show how an awareness of these factors can help our understanding of art history. Each example acts as a kind of vignette to show how the physical properties of an artwork can add another layer of meaning to its history. The discussion of the technical aspects of each technique is backed up by the glossary of terms at the end of the book. This should also be a useful guide for looking at works in galleries or museums.

Sketches and drawings

We often find the preparatory processes behind a work of art as enigmatic as the work itself. One such example is Leonardo da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with St Anne and St John the Baptist* (Fig. 15), which dates from around 1500. This large drawing or cartoon executed in charcoal and black and white chalk on tinted paper is a full-size preparatory study for a painting. It has, however, never been used to transfer a design onto a panel and this is why it survives. In order to transfer the composition onto the picture surface, the outlines would either have been pricked with a pin and then the drawing covered in soot to leave a dotted outline, or the outlines would be scored through, leaving incisions on the surface to be painted as a guide to the artist. Both these techniques entailed the destruction of the preparatory drawing. It is possible that Leonardo's cartoon was preserved as a work of art in its own right, although some areas are deliberately left inconclusive or in rough outline. The pretext for the drawing is likely to have been a commission for a painting given to Leonardo by King Louis XII of France. Leonardo started work on this painting in about 1508. It was unfinished at his