MONA LISA TO MARGE
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How the World’s Greatest Artworks Entered Popular Culture

Francesca Bonazzoli
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Preface by Maurizio Cattelan

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I have a confession to make: I would like to write this preface using images; words are not for me. To give meaning to what I have in my head, using a string of words, one after another, never satisfies me. What is always missing is the Word that sums up everything. Images, on the other hand, are concise—they can be simultaneously comic and tragic, for example. Everything there is to know is there; one glance is enough to understand.

It’s funny, because a few decades ago they said the future would be synesthetic—the supremacy of the eye would be over. Things didn’t exactly turn out that way. We spend most of our time looking at a screen and convince ourselves that we know the world through it. Images have a persuasive power that exceeds any word. Whoever wants to hold sway over the masses has always produced and controlled images: once it was popes and kings, today it’s advertising agencies. We can’t stop looking at images; they appeal to us irresistibly. We end up obsessed with them. Trying to determine why risks stripping them of their magic, diminishing their fascination, destroying their myth. It is a bit like vivisection: interesting, even fundamental, discoveries can be made, but the patient tends to expire during the operation.

Personally, I don’t believe in the sacredness of images. Perhaps not all of the artists in this book would be proud to see their work reproduced on mugs and slippers, but this is basically how they achieved immortality. Mass society has adopted these masterpieces and transformed them into advertising campaigns and merchandise. This is how they have become familiar, a public and everyday legacy. It’s like taking a phrase overheard in conversation and repeating it in a different context. It’s a question of language, a journey in which ongoing exchanges of information enrich every stage. Just as ideas are in continual circulation, images can be as well—they belong simultaneously to everyone and to no one. It’s good to consider, as this book does, the innumerable lives of these artworks. Let us not forget that people stopped liking Monet’s Water Lilies precisely when they were given a museum all to themselves; that Botticelli’s Birth of Venus had to wait for supermodel Claudia Schiffer in order to become truly popular; and that even Leonardo’s Mona Lisa inspired crowds to line up in front of the Louvre only after it was stolen in 1911. Each had the occasion to become an icon, and each, in turn, has been transformed from icon into myth. And if myths emerge in order to explain a society’s culture and customs, I can think of nothing more representative of our time than Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam, materializing on-screen every time someone turns on a Nokia cell phone.
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How, who, and what has the power to transform a work of art into a secular icon, an image that is universally recognized and even worshipped as an object of pilgrimage and long lines at museums? Why, of all of Auguste Rodin’s sculptures, is it *The Thinker* that has become the most famous? How is it that two works by Leonardo da Vinci, the *Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa*, are among the most popular in the world, yet most people who know Caravaggio’s name would find it difficult to name just one of his paintings or call them up accurately from memory? And why did Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, after being ignored for centuries, unexpectedly become a star?

To put it simply, one might say that there are four factors that are fundamental for a work of art to become famous: what is said, who says it, how it is said, and where it is said.

Yet the answers to these four questions can’t tell the full story, for the “mystery of icons,” which is anything but schematic and unambiguous, involves history, sociology, and psychology as well as religion.

We might begin with the studies of André Grabar, who traced the origin of the veneration of Christian images to the worship of relics. Beginning in the sixth century, priests began consecrating relics and investing them with divinity through the words of a ritual formula or the sprinkling of holy water or incense. But the image as a simulacrum of divinity, endowed with autonomous power, was a concept that was also present among the ancient Greeks. Aristophanes relates how sculptures by Daedalus—the first artist to depict figures with open eyes, separated legs, and arms distinct from the body—were bound to keep them from running away. The statue of Artemis Orthia, in Sparta, known as Lygodesma (“bound with willow”), was considered extremely dangerous; Pausanias describes how the two men who found it were struck by madness after merely looking the goddess in the eye, leading to the belief that she needed to be constrained and bound. Similarly, when Emperor Constantine built his new city on the Bosporus, he commanded that the statue of Fortune be kept under lock and key so she would not abandon Constantinople. In the Bible, too, everything begins with a statue of man molded from earth and brought to life by the breath of God.
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But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use.

Ludwig Wittgenstein
The Blue Book

How to become an icon

Introduction by Francesca Bonazzoli
In *The Power of Images*, art historian David Freedberg explains that the phenomenon of consecration demonstrates how all images potentially function before being sanctified. There is an extremely vast repertory from which the priest and the faithful can extrapolate an image to be the object of worship. Once the image is selected, a temple or sanctuary is always constructed around it, which not only protects it from inclement weather but can also become a destination of pilgrimage.

And yet in our contemporary “religion of consumption,” as George Ritzer has called it, museums are the temples of art history’s icons. People arrive at their doors from all over the world and wait in line to adore Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* or Vincent van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*.

Which brings us to another condition that is requisite for the consecration of an artwork as an icon: the place where it is kept. Museums, wrote André Malraux, not only display masterpieces, they also create them. He wondered if the *Mona Lisa* would enjoy the level of fame it does today if it were in a museum in Birmingham. Probably she would, for—as we will see in the section devoted to her in this book—the uproar over its theft in 1911 (it had hitherto been known only to the most cultured of audiences, mostly for its prestigious backstory of swapping from one royal collection to another). Yet it is certainly the strategic position of the *Nike of Samothrace* on the Musée du Louvre’s staircase that has been fundamental for the fame of this classical sculpture. If the statue had been in Birmingham, to borrow Malraux’s paradox, it would likely not have become the pop icon it is today, so famous that it is quoted subliminally in both the crucial scene and the poster for the blockbuster film *Titanic*—Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet on the prow of the ocean liner, leaning into the wind in triumphant celebration of their love, arms open like wings.

And yet the importance of *where* a work is seen is not a modern peculiarity. For centuries the Vatican’s Belvedere Courtyard has conferred a stamp of nobility on the ancient sculpture displayed there, including the *Apollo Belvedere*. Among the thousands of statues that were excavated during the Renaissance, especially in Italy, only some ascended to a special rank, and these were precisely the ones that were privileged with an authoritative site—not just the Belvedere, but also the Tribuna of the Uffizi in Florence, the royal palace of Fontainebleau, or, later, the Musée Napoléon in Paris. Works located in such places became the canon of international taste; copies of them could be found at the palace of Versailles or the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, in the gardens of English aristocrats, and, at a reduced scale, on tabletops in upper-middle-class homes. As their fame was propagated from exclusive temples of taste, they came to constitute a shared visual panorama throughout Europe. As Montesquieu wrote in *Voyage d’Italie* (1728), “There exist certain statues that connoisseurs have determined to be a norm and example, each in its own way: . . . the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Farnese Hercules*, the *Laocoon*. And one will never observe these statues sufficiently, for it is based upon them that the moderns have built their system of proportions, and it is they that have virtually given us the arts.”

Beyond the site of exhibition, there is another detail that is decisive in the transformation of a work of art into an icon: the identity of its author and the mythography associated with that individual. The crucial nature of this name can be confirmed in any museum when one sees visitors reading the label beside a painting—watch one stop suddenly upon noticing, for example, that the work is by Caravaggio, an artist who has gained a place of primary importance in the modern collective imagination due to his rebellious and profligate life.

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