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978-0-521-88242-2 - The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice

Ludmilla Jordanova

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## THE LOOK OF THE PAST

How can we use visual and material culture to shed light on the past? Ludmilla Jordanova offers a fascinating and thoughtful introduction to the role of images, objects and buildings in the study of past times. Through a combination of thematic chapters and essays on specific artefacts – a building, a piece of sculpture, a photographic exhibition and a painted portrait – she shows how to analyse the agency and visual intelligence of artists, makers and craftsmen and make sense of changes in visual experience over time. Generously illustrated and drawing on numerous examples of images and objects from 1600 to the present, this is an essential guide to the skills that students need in order to describe, analyse and contextualise visual evidence. *The Look of the Past* will encourage readers to think afresh about how they, like people in the past, see and interpret the world around them.

**Ludmilla Jordanova** is Professor of Modern History at King's College London. Her publications include *History in Practice*, (third edition 2013).

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LUDMILLA JORDANOVA



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For my granddaughter, Elsa Kay,  
born 20 September 2009

*and*

In memory of my uncle, Richard,  
died 5 May 2009

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The Look of the Past* examines the ways in which historians can use images and objects in their arguments; it seeks to evaluate such uses, and to see how they might be extended. Put in its broadest terms, it considers how thinking with the eyes about the past actually works, and probes the claims that result. This is a huge field, and I have had to impose limits in terms of time, place and medium on the scope of the volume to make it manageable. I focus on examples from the seventeenth century onwards, take most of my examples from Europe and North America, and exclude, with regret, the important fields of film studies and media studies, but pay attention to the insights art history can bring to history.

I am building here on the approach I took in *History in Practice* in seeking to bring to the surface assumptions, attitudes and modes of address so that they can be held up for critical inspection. One distinctive feature of *The Look of the Past* is the four short essays on specific objects. The subject of each one has been chosen with a number of criteria in mind. Naturally I wanted items that I felt enthusiastic about. The idea was also to include diverse genres, media, geographical areas and periods – I chose architecture (late seventeenth-century England), sculpture (mid-seventeenth-century Italy), photography (twentieth-century United States) and painting (early twentieth-century France). I could just as well have chosen metalware, porcelain, costume, furniture, industrial tools, tapestries, stained glass, scientific instruments or medals, and other times and places. The essays are designed to illustrate a range of historiographical issues and to ground points that are made at a more general level in the chapters with which they alternate.

I hope that undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as their teachers and general readers, will find the book helpful. It cannot, however, provide background or basic information on the many topics it

mentions. A brief note on how to use the book may be found on pages xviii–xix. It is not feasible to illustrate every object I refer to – apart from anything else, the costs would be prohibitive. It should be remembered that any reproduction is a poor substitute for seeing the real thing. If this book encourages more historians to treat museums and art galleries, churches and houses, public art and the built environment as an integral part of their professional experience and as potentially rich evidence for their thinking, teaching and writing, I would be delighted. I am deeply indebted to the many who already do so.

*The Look of the Past* touches on the ethics of using items of visual and material culture in historical work. We are thoroughly familiar with ideas about footnotes and plagiarism, which are about the moral obligations incurred by anyone doing academic work. A concern with fairness, accuracy and acknowledging the roles of those who made things in the past are present throughout the book. My comments are as relevant to publishers as they are to authors. Those who write and publish history are only one part of a bigger picture that includes owners and sellers of reproduction rights, internet providers, professional picture researchers, and the makers. Because it is now so easy to steal, change, distort, chop up and trivialise images in digital form, this is a good time to think about the distinctive responsibilities that scholars at all stages of their careers incur when using them.

In reflecting upon these broad issues I have incurred innumerable debts, many of which are indicated by the works cited. In addition, it is a pleasure to acknowledge some special kindnesses. I thank Richard Fisher and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press; the Master and Fellows of Downing College, Cambridge; Martha Macintyre; and my colleagues and students in the Department of History at King's College, London, and at the University of East Anglia in the School of World Art Studies and Museology. I have had the privilege of supervising a number of doctorates that have helped to shape my ideas in this area and I trust their authors know how much I learned from them. The experience of being a Trustee of the National Portrait Gallery in London between 2001 and 2009 has been crucial for this book; in particular, contact with artists and with those who commission and display portraits helped me think about the processes and relationships through which objects are made and used. Members of staff at the Portrait Gallery have been marvellously helpful, patient, supportive and inspiring.

I have drawn upon the resources of a number of institutions: Cambridge University Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Heinz Archive at the National Portrait Gallery, London, the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, the Scottish National Portrait Gallery,

**Preface and acknowledgements**

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the Churchill Archives, Cambridge, the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the Courtauld Gallery, London – I thank the staff of those institutions most warmly. I am indebted to all the providers of images, some of whom were extraordinarily generous in their help. At Cambridge University Press, Raihanah Begum was tireless in sorting out the rights for images, in tracking pictures down and in making suggestions. Her input has been indispensable.

It is customary to thank ‘friends and relations’, and I am delighted to do so, although it is not possible to mention everyone by name. I have greatly valued the feedback from the seminars and conferences where some of these ideas have been presented. Conversations with many people have helped me clarify my thoughts and given me useful suggestions – my warm appreciation goes to them all. A number of people read drafts of all or part of the book: Raihanah Begum, Lizzy Cowling, Nathan Crilly, Simon Ditchfield, Florence Grant, Lauren Kassell, Paul Kerry, Lucy Kostyanovsky, Howard Nelson, Steve Smith, Stephen Taylor, Michael Watson, Koji Yamamoto and anonymous readers. I deeply appreciate their assistance. The first essay benefited from the kindness and the scholarship of David McKitterick of Trinity College, Cambridge. Viccy Coltman helped and encouraged me with the second essay. I am also particularly grateful to Karen Amies, Stephen Brogan, Michael Bury, Melissa Calaresu, Caroline Campbell, Becky Conekin, Lars Fischer, Francesco Filangeri, Ralph Hawtrey, Phillip Kelleway, Vanessa Lacey, Angela McShane, Alison Morrison-Low, Vita Peacock, Marcia Pointon, Andrew Riley, Michael Rowe, Alison Rowlands, Sara Selwood, Michal Sofer, Tatyana Stoicheva, John Styles, Martha Vandrei, Rachel Worth and many others, for their assistance in the preparation of this volume. Howard Nelson helped with photography and provided invaluable support during the final stages of completing the book. Heartfelt thanks goes, as always, to close friends and family.

Thomas Puttfarken died, totally unexpectedly, just as I was beginning to write *The Look of the Past*. I think of him as my principal art-historical mentor: when I took an MA in his department at Essex in the 1980s, I benefited hugely not only from his kindness and his scholarship, but from his incisive questions, his rigorous approach to looking, and his concern with art-historical reasoning. I am unsure what he would have made of my arguments, only certain I would have been immeasurably enhanced by the opportunity to discuss them with him – he is deeply missed.

Ludmilla Jordanova  
Cambridge, 10 October 2011

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## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Like every author, I hope my book will be read cover to cover! If so, three points should be borne in mind. First, it contains two types of chapter and these are signalled clearly to the reader. Five numbered chapters address large themes and big issues. The interspersed essays examine specific items and suggest some of the ways in which historians might engage with pieces of visual and material culture. By design they address four distinct media and historical contexts. The thematic chapters also contain examples, if briefer ones, in the form of words and images. Second, endnotes following chapters and essays provide details of quotations and essential supporting material. Third, there is a discussion of 'Further Reading' following the endnotes. The Index should help readers track down where a particular work, author or maker is mentioned. The captions are also indexed.

Readers should be aware, however, that *The Look of the Past* is not a guide to existing historical work that uses visual and material evidence. Furthermore, it only cites materials in English unless an essential work is only available in another language. It gives examples, samples what has been done already, and suggests possibilities, but makes no further claims than that. Secondary materials from a number of contexts and periods are deliberately used to convey the range of approaches and subject matter that are relevant to the book. A brief bibliography of reference works at the end should help readers to pursue matters further. Every major collection and visitor attraction now has a website, and although these vary greatly in the quality of the images and supporting information provided, they are worth using. Because they are so easy to locate using search engines, they have not been listed.

However, it is possible to use *The Look of the Past* somewhat differently, for example, by taking the essays as self-contained mini case

**How to use this book**

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studies. Although there are a number of threads that run through the entire volume, I hope the thematic chapters, too, can be read as distinct and accessible arguments on issues that are, it seems to me, of importance for the practice of many kinds of history.

The illustrations are designed to be integral to the arguments in the book, and the captions can be used to think about what historians need to tell their readers when including images in their writings. Basic information on each item depicted, such as size and medium, date and current location, is, if possible and relevant, given there. In addition to providing such data when available, most captions also discuss the works in question, if briefly. Being as precise as possible on such matters helps historians deploy visual and material evidence effectively, and hence the captions should be seen as central to the book's purpose. Black and white pictures and cues to them may be found in the text, numbered in bold thus **1**, **2** and so on. Coloured plates are inserted in two places, and are indicated by roman numerals **I**, **II** and so on. Lists at the front of the book give brief details for both series. Photography credits, which acknowledge the providers of illustrations as opposed to indicating their content, are given at the end. Readers will notice images of the cantilever railway bridge over the Firth of Forth in Scotland in the book. Inspired by Michael Baxandall's brilliant essay on it in *Patterns of Intention*, published in 1985, and by my own love of Scotland, they act as visual cues for bridging passages.

Assembling illustrations for publication is expensive and time-consuming, hence their selection has necessarily been shaped by practical considerations, such as cost, availability and the length of time it is necessary to wait for images to be delivered. Such constraints are a major consideration for scholars working with images and objects. The author and publishers would be delighted to be informed of any corrections required, and express once again their appreciation of the many people and institutions that enabled these illustrations to be included in *The Look of the Past*.

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## A HANDBAG?

The Archive at Churchill College, Cambridge houses important collections of twentieth-century political and scientific papers, including those of Margaret Thatcher, the only female British Prime Minister to date. Photographs, objects that she was given or owned, press clippings, letters, papers generated during her career and much more may be found there. Gift exchange is central to political life. For instance, it is possible to trace her increasing closeness with Ronald Reagan through the ever more affectionate inscriptions upon photographs he gave her. There are medallions and medals, Christmas cards, her clothes diary, coins, certificates and plaques, keys, pens and postcards. All are deposits of political ideas, aspirations, events and relationships.

The Archive also contains one of her handbags. Housed in a special box, it is popular with visitors. We might consider it a relic. Yet when it was first offered to them, the then archivist was quoted as vehemently refusing it: 'This is a storm in a handbag. It is ridicule and reticule. We haven't got any handbags, and as far as I know, we are not going to get any handbags. We are in the business of conserving documents.'<sup>1</sup> When he made this declaration in the early 1990s, the archive already contained items that were not conventional 'documents' – in fact, most archives are rich in visual and material culture. His words are an implicit challenge to historians to articulate the precise nature of their interest in handbags and the like. *The Look of the Past* seeks to meet that challenge.

What can be learned from this very dark navy, crocodile-skin bag, which still smells of its owner's perfume, the role of handbags in Thatcher's life and reactions to them? Handbags are mainly women's wear, and assumptions are made, for example about their contents, that reveal gendered stereotypes. Discussing Thatcher's feminine aspects

was part of the attempt, arguably unsuccessful, to come to terms with the exceptional coalition of femininity and power that she manifested. The new verb ‘to handbag’ derives from her time in office and it expresses precisely that troubling combination of femininity and power – the sense that this domineering politician was profoundly problematic. Some were strongly drawn to her; nonetheless, they had to manage the unusual situation that had brought a woman, intensely aware of herself as such, to great political heights.

Thatcher’s speeches were on a size of paper designed to fit into her handbag. She herself saw it as a special item: ‘anything I want to keep quiet is normally in my handbag so it is not left lying around. Things do not leak from my handbag.’<sup>2</sup> That others saw it similarly is revealed by Julian Critchley’s remark, ‘she cannot see an institution without hitting it with her handbag’, and by George Schultz’s 1992 quip, ‘you are the only person so far to whom has been awarded the Order of the Handbag’.<sup>3</sup> Photographs and cartoons showed her with handbag in hand. So when she was described as ‘a rather bossy, hand-baggy sort of lady’, a phrasing with no male equivalent, further reflection is warranted.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulties faced by women with exceptional and seemingly unprecedented amounts of public power, and by those who work with them, merit consideration. Historians are familiar with this situation from, for example, the reign of Elizabeth I, whose artful control of her own image reveals the centrality of visual and material culture, a point monarchs and political leaders eagerly grasp. Remarks about Thatcher’s manner, appearance and accoutrements helped manage a situation for which many were psychologically unprepared. To focus this onto a quintessentially feminine object brought relief, sometimes comic relief. Her handbag became convenient shorthand, a gender-saturated tag, a condensed symbol, like Churchill’s cigar or Wilson’s pipe. II Note how neatly cigars and pipes fit with masculine imagery. Commentators struggled with Thatcher’s forceful policies, practices and personality, partly because she was also capable of exercising erotic allure. Her handbag – for her a genuine symbol of womanliness – was turned into a weapon when it suited her. Equally, it was used by those who resisted her forcefulness and deployed the idea of a handbag to put her down. An apparently trivial aspect of the look of the past offers rich insights into responses to Britain’s first female Prime Minister.



1 Margaret Thatcher’s handbag, dark blue leather and other materials, 29.3 cm wide × 21.5 cm high × 13.3 cm deep, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge. It is evident from photographs that Thatcher owned a number of handbags and we may reasonably assume that her selection of these was as careful as her choice of clothes. The style of these bags, worn hanging from the forearm or held by the handles, is identifiable as traditional, and characteristic of upper-class British women of the period, including the royal family.

## NOTES

- 1 I am quoting from a newspaper clipping in the Churchill Archive.
- 2 Iain Dale, ed., *As I said to Denis...: the Margaret Thatcher Book of Quotations* (London, 1997), p. 27.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 99 and 180.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

## FURTHER READING

Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1899), available in many editions, is a good starting point for thinking about handbags and their resonances. Wilde was unusually perceptive about the roles images and objects played in people's lives; see also his short novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1891). Literary sources provide a rich fund for historians interested in the imaginative worlds that images and objects generate. See, for example, Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003).

Thatcher herself has been much written about: the abridged version of John Campbell's two-volume biography is useful, *Margaret Thatcher: Grocer's Daughter to Iron Lady* (London, 2009). For very different approaches, see Heather Nunn, *Thatcher, Politics and Fantasy: the Political Culture of Gender and Nation* (London, 2002); Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: the Politics and Social Upheaval of the Thatcher Era* (London, 2009); and Wendy Webster, *Not a Man to Match Her: the Marketing of a Prime Minister* (London, 1990). Webster is highly critical of Thatcher; she is perceptive on many points and discusses her hats.

On political imagery, classic works include Roy Strong, *The Cult of Elizabeth: Elizabethan Portraiture and Pageantry* (London, 1999; first published 1977), and *Gloriana: the Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I* (London, 2003; first published 1987); and Peter Burke, *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (New Haven, 1992).

Elizabeth Roberts, ed., *Margaret Thatcher: a Life in Pictures* (Lewes, 2009), contains a wealth of images, including plenty with handbags. On handbags more generally, see Caroline Cox, *Bags: an Illustrated History* (London, 2007), which discusses Thatcher, but as if she always used the same bag, which was not the case. See also Judith Miller, *Handbags* (New York, 2006), which is aimed at collectors and has little text, but many fine illustrations.

The website of the National Portrait Gallery in London can be used to explore images of Churchill and his cigar, Wilson and his pipe, depictions of Thatcher in a range of media and portraits of other British political leaders.