INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING ICONOGRAPHY

Few subjects are as fraught with significance as the creation. In Genesis, heaven and earth are created in accordance with divine will. It is the special province of theologians to explain what this reveals about God, but a wider interpretative program set by Augustine (354– 430) in the *Literal meaning of Genesis* has reverberated through centuries. Christians, he wrote, "should show that whatever they have been able to demonstrate from reliable sources about the world of nature is not contrary to our literature, while whatever they may have produced from any of their volumes that is contrary to this literature of ours, that is, to the Catholic faith, we must either show with some ease, or else believe without any hesitation, to be entirely false."[1] To this day, the Genesis stories are read and misread by the faithful as confirming the positions of their church about nature, personal behavior, and social order. Little surprise, then, that historians study creation exegesis for evidence of the fundamental attitudes and ideologies of past societies.

As members of their church and society, Renaissance artists shared the attitudes and beliefs of their contemporaries. Yet, these "professional visualizer[s] of the holy stories" also had artistic commitments which other interpreters of the Bible did not share.[2] Their commitments conditioned not only the style in which they worked, but also the way that they read the Biblical text, interpreted earlier images, and understood the world that they depicted.

Naturalistically rendered human figures were the primary expressive vehicles of Italian Renaissance art. In addition to the sensuous appeal of corporeal beauty, they gave art much of its meaning. Artists fashioned their figures out of visible surfaces that articulated the underlying form of the bodies beneath.[3] Narrative paintings and reliefs, called *istorie*, were composed by arranging these bodies to enact a subject and display what the figures felt or thought about it. In sculpture, the *virtù*, or strength of character, of notable and holy personages was embodied in statues with upright, *contrapposto* stances, which made visible the work of the muscles holding the body erect, even when the figure was cloaked with drapery. This conception of the human figure as a vehicle for showing more than met the eye was summarized in the most common tenet of Renaissance art: the movements of the body express the movements of the soul.

An illusion of bodily weight played a special role within this representational system. The Renaissance understanding of the expressiveness of the human figure was based on the Aristotelian theory that the soul was the "form" and "act" of a living body, manifested by movement, sensation, and thought.[4] Some movements of the body are visible, but sensation and thought are internal functions, not perceived by sight alone. *Contrapposto* was widely employed in Renaissance art, because the display of a body supporting its weight made the visible surfaces indices for what was going on within.

For Renaissance artists committed to this ideal of the human figure, the creation of Eve presented a special challenge. Theologians agreed that creation *ex nihilo* was a supernatural act that only God could perform, which was described in Genesis in terms of human actions and experience as an accommodation to human understanding.[5] Perhaps more than for any other act of creation, the standard medieval iconography of God making woman tested the limits of the naturalistic representation of a supernatural act. In medieval and Renaissance art, woman was the only creature made by God commonly depicted in a partly-formed state.[6] Rising supernaturally from Adam's side, visibly incomplete but moving and gesturing as if fully alive, her half-made figure was hardly compatible with the artistic conception of the human body as an organic, weight-laden whole. Yet, the Biblical story of God constructing Eve from an extracted rib, which this iconography suppressed, did not offer the kind of affective *istoria* that Renaissance artists and viewers prized. For, as John Calvin conceded, without providential interpretation, "this method of forming woman may seem ridiculous, and . . . that Moses is dealing in fables."[7]

Most Renaissance artists dealt with this situation simply by repeating the medieval formula while rendering the customary figures in a more naturalistic style. Although Eve was still shown rising weightlessly from him, the reclining Adam was invested with both volume and weight. The volumetric treatment of his body led artists to consider where to locate the emerging Eve in space.

In medieval art, she is depicted issuing through an opening in Adam's chest only in one image out of five, and the motif was even less common in Renaissance Italy.[8] Instead, she is usually set at Adam's outline, somewhere between his shoulder and hip, where her body does not interrupt the depiction of his chest. When Adam sleeps with his arm resting on his raised flank, her half-figure might appear above or behind the arm (Color plate I, Color plate II, Figure 21), and if it is brought forward so that she seems to rise from his chest, the modeling of her body might be so diffused that it does not obscure any part of his torso (Figures 1, 8). When Adam sleeps with his arm slung across his chest or bent under his head, Eve is often set at the outline of his raised flank, as if she were emerging from an unseen surface of the far side of his body (Color plates IX, XI). When a strongly modeled Eve is brought forward over Adam's chest and her girth is clearly delineated, her half figure covers several of his ribs (Color plates VIII, X). In a remarkable relief for the tomb of Pope Paul II, Giovanni Dalmata attempted to reconcile this pictorial formula with the Biblical account by rendering Eve inflating from the locus of a single rib (Figure 47). However, the results are not convincing to eyes accustomed to naturalistic depiction, and his treatment was not taken up by other artists.

This book shows that when the body of Eve was also invested with weight, the emergence iconography took on new significance. As Roland Barthes explained in a series of brilliant studies, narrative meaning is produced by readers connecting a text (which in this context includes images) with what is known or remembered from other texts (including images) and social experience.[9] Plots are formed by sequences of familiar, sometimes mundane, acts, what Barthes called the "already-done" and "already-read" to which we might add the "already seen" and "already viewed."[10] Character is the combination of attributes attached to proper names and the nominative subjects of these acts.[11] What makes these familiar acts and attributes significant in a narrative is their embeddedness in a network of five kinds of codes – previously established conventions for empirical sequences, that is, plots, sub-plots, acts and gestures (the proairetic code), enigmas in need of resolution (the hermeneutic code), personal and social types and stereotypes (the semic code), scientific and cultural knowledge (the referential code), and symbolic figuration (the symbolic code) – whose weave and play induce readers to construct imaginary worlds in which characters live, feel, think, dream, and interact.

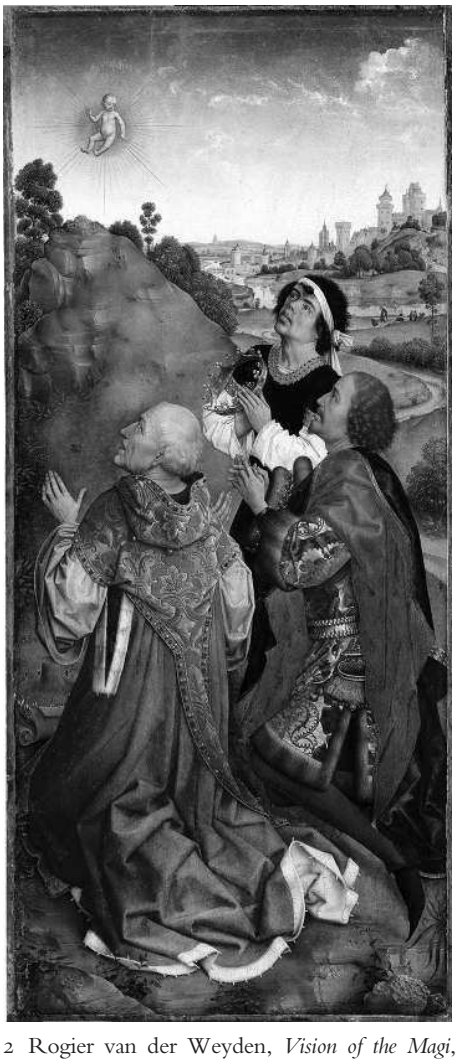
Although these codes are disseminated through visual as well as verbal culture, there is no question that scenes of creation displayed on churches and public monuments, or in books and manuscripts of the Bible or other religious tracts, were based on authoritative readings of the Genesis text. These readings mandated that woman was made from man in accordance with divine will, so it is not surprising that the actions and actors for the creation of Eve did not greatly change from medieval to Renaissance art. However, the traditional

1 Master of Farneto?, *Creation of Eve*, fresco, 1298–1300, restored 1880–85 by Matteo Tassi, Sala dei Notari, Palazzo dei Priori, Perugia.

plot took on different meanings when Eve was invested with new attributes. Since rising weightlessly signified creation by divine command, the illusion of weight marked her half-made body as already part of the natural world. This marking connected the narrative of her creation with natural philosophy in a new way, the departure from the convention of her weightless rise signaled an enigma needing to be resolved, and the illusion of weight made her materiality

an attribute of woman's character from the very first. In a scene considered a symbol for how God wished woman to be, the consequences of opening the subject to these new areas of meaning were profound.

An illusion of gravity, or more properly, its deliberate suspension, figures prominently in Erwin Panofsky's classic essay "Iconography and iconology."[12] The essay, published in 1939, was written for a lecture series at Bryn Mawr College to introduce an American audience to a method of analysis worked out in a highly professionalized, insular German academic system where "art historical writing became more elaborate and complex than anywhere else ... and finally developed into a technical language which – even before the Nazis made German literature unintelligible to uncontaminated Germans – was hard to penetrate."[13] Panofsky began his account of meaning in Renaissance art with an analogy from everyday life: a man politely tipping his hat to a passerby. Comprehending this commonplace occurrence, he explained, involved three strata of interpretation: the conventional meaning of the greeting, a residue of medieval chivalry, was superimposed on a "natural" action or gesture recognized on the basis of practical experience and might itself serve as "particularized evidence" of the hat-tipper's personality or of "the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality."[14] When this method of analysis was applied to images, "controlling principles" were introduced for each of the three strata. An illusion of gravity was used to illustrate the role of the "history of style" for "the pre-iconographical description" of "pure forms" – the lines, colors, and configurations of the work of art – as "natural objects and events ... constituting the world of artistic motifs."[15] In his view, a proper "pre-iconographical description" of Roger Van der Weyden's *Vision of the Magi* in Berlin (Figure 2) would have to avoid such terms as "Jesus" and "the Magi," because they were familiar from literary tradition, rather than practical experience. Nonetheless, from "the fact that he is depicted in space with no visible



2 Rogier van der Weyden, *Vision of the Magi*, right wing of the Bladelin Altarpiece, ca. 1445, Staatliche Museen, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

means of support," it could be deduced that the small child hovering above the heads of the Magi was "meant to be an apparition." In medieval art, Panofsky explained, there were "hundreds of representations in which human beings, animals and inanimate objects seem to hang loose in space in violation of the law of gravity, without thereby pretending to be apparitions."[16] Yet, the infant child in the air was clearly meant to be a miraculous apparition, because "we grasp ... in a fraction of a second and almost automatically" that Renaissance paintings are 'realistic' in a way that the medieval images are not, so that "while we believe ourselves to identify the motifs on the basis of practical experience pure and simple, we really read 'what we see' according to the manner in which *objects* and *events* were expressed by forms under *varying historical conditions*."[17]

In Panofsky's method, interpretation was directed upward and inward from the visual world of natural motifs through illustrations of literary sources to an "intrinsic content" symbolic or symptomatic of culture as a whole.[18] The conventions for the analysis of iconography, the middle stratum, might seem roughly equivalent to what Barthes later called codes, since they included not only themes and concepts transmitted by literature, but also conventions of depiction, customary social behaviors, and, in the famous case of identifying a woman holding a sword and a charger with a severed male head as Judith rather than Salome, the tradition of images and image-types.[19] This similarity, however, is only superficial. For Panofsky considered the primary subject-matter comprehended on the basis of practical experience to be "natural," rather than social, and, as the reference to "one personality" indicates, his model for the totality of culture at a given time and place was the knowledge of an ideal, learned individual, rather the codes constituted by social groups. As a result, Panofskian analyses of pictorial meaning often devolved on a single text or small group of sources connecting all or most of the so-called "natural" motifs to the same literary theme and subject. Since aesthetic objects are highly differentiated, the sources brought forth as analogous to the most important and impressive works of art were usually particularized and complex, and the resulting interpretations elaborate and hidden, if not labored and obscure, and seemingly accessible only to a learned elite.

For Barthes, on the other hand, meaning is produced by the interweaving and dissemination of codes. "The real" and "the natural" are not prior to these codes, but are effects produced by them.[20] As the common property of broad social groups, the codes of art and literature permeate cultural products in a wide variety of media and forms – writing and speech, images and objects, actions and institutions, social structures and even the world itself as comprehended by humans. With such a view, it does not make sense to ask, as skeptics often did in response to Panofskian interpretations, whether a certain artist "knew" a particular "text," for every text is a weave of codes disseminated

through many texts. In the context of Barthes's semiotics, it is not the artist who makes the meaning, but the readers or viewers for whom the artist's work is connected through its codes with other texts of various sorts.

For a Barthesian critic, the primary meaning or subject-matter of a work of art is the product of the conventional meanings of interwoven codes. In the case of a Biblical theme, like the creation of Eve, especially when rendered by works of art, such as are treated here, that were commissioned to decorate prominent ecclesiastical buildings, the codes cannot but be closely tied to the written traditions of Biblical interpretation constituting its official theology. But the primary meaning of the works is no more "literary" than the meaning of these texts, whose subject, churchmen would say, are God, revelation, redemption, and the created world, rather than their verbal form. Moreover, the interwoven codes producing the subject are also the basis for the broader connotations and reality effects produced by the work, including the illusion of gravity and of bodies that are natural. Indeed, what Panofsky saw as the "controlling principles" for interpreting "natural objects and events . . . constituting the world of artistic motifs" are effects of such codes. In the case of the hat-tipper, it is the viewer's familiarity with the conventional meaning of the gesture that organizes the changing forms and appearances of his continuing movements into something recognizable as a communicative action or event. And in the Rogier van der Weyden, it is the consistent employment of pictorial conventions for bodily weight that produces an illusion of gravity, whose suspension marks the airborne child as a somehow supernatural, that is, an "apparition," a concept no less a product of cultural or literary convention than, say, "Jesus" and "the Magi." Indeed, as Panofsky himself explained in his magisterial study on *Early Netherlandish painting*, the three Magi kneeling "'on a hill'" are looking up, not at "a star pure and simple [as in the Bible] but – in strict accordance with the text [of the *Golden legend*] – before a 'star which had the form of a beautiful infant.'"[21]

Nor is gravity an experiential constant throughout history as Panofsky seemed to assume. Although the laws of physics are immutable, their discovery and the comprehension of the phenomena which they explain are part of human culture. In the period with which this book is concerned, gravity was still discussed in terms of Aristotle's theory of elemental motion.[22] Each of the four sublunary elements was thought to have a natural tendency or inclination to be moved to its proper place: earth and water to settle or flow to the center of the universe, fire and air to rise toward the periphery. With this view, the weight of an object was based on both its gravity and its levity – the tendency of the elements composing its matter to sink or rise. Since the human body was made predominately from earth (Genesis 2:7), "if it is moved downwards," Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) explained in his *Commentary on Aristotle's 'Physics'*, "this motion will be natural to the body."[23] The theory of elemental weight

even influenced the anatomical investigations of the Bolognese Professor of Medicine Mondino dei Luzzi (ca. 1265–1326), author of the first textbook on human anatomy organized by the procedure of dissection. Before opening up the corpse, Mondino observed that man is the only animal with a body formed and disposed for an upright stature. Then, without adducing evidence from dissection or experimental ponderation, he proposed that the matter of the human body was also fitted for standing erect: "the human body is wrought of matter which is etherial and airy and is the lightest of all the animals; wherefore it doth ever upward strive."[24] When artists produced an illusion of gravity in their works, they were evoking cultural codes about matter and weight, not representing immutable scientific facts.

Panofsky's method is still more problematic for the illusion of gravity in the *Creation of Eve*. Long after an illusion of gravity had become a standard feature of Italian Renaissance art, Eve was most often represented rising weightlessly from Adam at her creation. Her body, however, was invested with weight by a few famous artists working on important public commissions in three Italian cities over the course of a century, and one of their treatments became a standard iconographical option for a later generation, even before it was adopted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. None of these works has previously been subject to detailed iconographical analysis, probably because their structure of significance is so resistant to the Panofskian methods that have long dominated the field. Nor, to my knowledge, was the weight of Eve, or lack thereof, an issue in medieval or Renaissance literature on the creation or on art. But such literature does not encompass all of culture, and at certain moments some things can be shown that cannot be said. Although the illusion of weight is a pictorial effect, not a figure, object, or event, it is no less part of iconography and no less meaningful than the other conventional motifs.[25] Rather, the way that Eve's body was depicted suggests that for artists, and for their viewers as well, the primary subject matter of these works was not "natural objects and events" as Panofsky thought, but the conventional, coded significance of iconography.

Doing away with the stratification of meaning in Panofsky's method, this study adopts a position, like that of Barthes, that significance is generated by the interwoven codes, which connect the narrative subject with established fields of knowledge, commonly held views, social practices, and other works of art and literature. The discourses and traditions linked with the subject differed from work to work, since Eve's weight-laden body was accommodated to the medieval pictorial formula in different ways. But in each case, investing the emergent Eve with weight opened the creation of woman to a plurality of themes and concepts circulating in Renaissance culture. As weaves of codes, the images are part of culture, rather than symbols or symptoms of something else.

The previous literature on the Creation of Eve has remained squarely within the stratified interpretative parameters of Panofsky's method. Roberto Zapperi's brilliant iconological interpretation (published in 1981) is famous, if controversial, in France and Italy, but seldom cited in English-language art historical literature.[26] Having observed that the wide dissemination throughout Europe of the motif of Eve emerging from Adam more or less coincided with the rise of the city-state as a political unit in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, he interpreted the emergence iconography as symbol of political power. In medieval political theory, the family was considered a unit of governance homologous to the state, with a patriarch at its head, the sons analogous to ministers, and the women and children as the subjects. Zapperi argued that God, often represented in the *Creation of Eve* as a bearded elder, stood for the patriarch and ruler, Adam for the sons and ministers, and Eve for the wife and children. Eve, moreover, fulfilled this double role even though she was the same age as Adam and created to be his wife, because her emergence from his body was a symbolic birth of woman from man. Zapperi supported his iconological interpretation with an account of the development of the theme in Renaissance art. The placement of Eve behind Adam's outline, he maintained, was a "euphemistic device ... camouflag[ing] the crude representation of male parturition."[27] The euphemistic treatment was necessary in the Renaissance, but not before, he continued, because, as the style of art became more sensuous, the birth from a man of a woman designated by God to be his wife raised the specter of father–daughter incest in a grouping symbolizing the hierarchies of power in both family and state.

Twenty years after Zapperi published his study, Jerome Baschet presented a forceful rebuttal. From early Christian times, theologians had drawn a parallel between Eve's creation from the sleeping Adam and the emergence of the Ecclesia in the form of blood and water from the side of Christ on the cross, and the two scenes were commonly paired in medieval art. Yet, he pointed out, while the emergence of Ecclesia was often called a birth and discussed in explicitly parturitional terms, the creation of Eve never was.[28] Thomas Aquinas neatly summarized the orthodox position: "A certain affinity arises from natural generation, and this is an impediment to matrimony. Woman, however, was not produced from man by natural generation, but by the Divine Power alone. Wherefore Eve is not called the daughter of Adam; and so this argument [about her creation from Adam being an impediment to their marriage] does not prove."[29] Nor, Baschet continued, was Eve's emergence from Adam treated as a birth by artists. Only one medieval image in five showed Eve issuing from within Adam.[30] The others illustrated Adam's speech at Genesis 2: 23 that Eve is a woman because she was "taken from man." With very few exceptions, moreover, the emerging Eve was rendered as an

adult of the same age and the same size as Adam, too large to have been birthed from him and too old to be his daughter.[31] In the rare cases, where her figure was smaller than Adam's and issuing from his, the treatment resembled depictions of Caesarian section and not births of a "natural" kind.[32]

Both these learned studies were concerned with establishing a fixed meaning for an iconographical type. For Zapperi, the medieval emergence formula was a "symbolic form," whose intrinsic meaning, as Panofsky put it, "may [have] emphatically differ[ed] from what he [the artist] consciously intended to express."[33] Baschet responded with a properly iconographical analysis showing how images in illuminated manuscripts and Genesis cycles were conceived and presented as illustrations of the Biblical text as it was understood by authoritative readers. As is common in such surveys, there was little discussion of the style, program, site, or artistic context of the works. This book draws on these impressive studies but takes a different interpretative approach. Rather than surveying the images in a Panofskian manner "from a fixed, unalterable distance," it interprets them through a concrete problem in Renaissance art: how the medieval pictorial formula was revised to accommodate an Eve with weight.[34]

This interpretative approach gives priority to the power of art to shape the culture of which it was a part. Augustine encouraged readers to consider how the account of creation in Genesis was consistent with the knowledge of nature in pagan literature, and by the late Middle Ages, it was common for Christian interpreters to cite natural philosophers of different faiths – pagan, Moslem, and Jewish as well as Christian – in order to understand how the world was made, as long as their readings did not violate the tenets of faith, such as the Trinity or God Creator unequivocal.[35] This book shows that Renaissance artists were given similar license to use their expertise – in this case in naturalistic depiction – to make sense of the Biblical text.

One way to read this book, then, is as a case study on Renaissance art. Recent studies calling into question the "Renaissance" character of art in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries emphasize the forms and motifs carried over from the Middle Ages.[36] Such continuities, however, are to be expected in any practice based on systems of codes; since codes are the shared prior knowledge of social groups, communication by codes, whether the messages are 'new' or 'old' in character, depends on a consistency in conventions. What is new about the Renaissance was that refashioning iconography in accordance with artistic commitments became a central responsibility of ambitious artists. With this view, the rapid changes in the imagery, subjects, styles, and modalities of art in the modern and post-modern eras might be considered an inheritance of the Renaissance.

A generation ago, when it was common for art historians to treat "form" and "content" as distinct categories of analysis, it was often claimed that the works comprising the "canon" of Western art were the masterpieces of artistic