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## The Mirror in Art: Vanitas, Veritas, and Vision

### Abstract

Humankind's venerable obsession with the mirror, traceable to the ancient myths of Medusa and Narcissus, is copiously attested in Western art, which historically relied on the mirror as both practical tool and polysemous trope. While the mirror's reflective capacities encouraged its identification with the vaunted mimetic function of literature and film, its refractive quality enabled artists to explore and comment on perspective, in the process challenging the concept of art's faithful representation of phenomena. My radically compressed and selective overview of the mirror's significance in Western iconography focuses primarily on visibility, gaze, and gender, dwelling on key moments and genres that most vividly illustrate the paradoxes of the mirror as both symbol and utilitarian object. Comparing Russian art with its Western counterpart, I argue that Russia's distinctive iconographic traditions account for Russian divergences from major aspects of the inherited and evolving mirror rhetoric that prevailed in Western Europe.

### Keywords

Medusa, Narcissus, mirror, Western art, reflection, refraction, perspective, visibility, gaze, gender, Russian Art, Literature, Film

## Vision, Vanitas, and Veritas: The Mirror in Art

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The mind of the painter must resemble a mirror.  
Leonardo da Vinci, "On Painting"

Though the clear-glass mirror as we know it today was a relatively late refinement, perfected in the sixteenth century by the renowned craftsmen of Murano, Italy, ancient cultures had at hand two readily available substances endowed, however imperfectly, with the specular capacity to reflect phenomena: polished metal and water. Indeed, the myths of Medusa and Narcissus, two of the most popular and influential Greek narratives focused on the dangers of vision and perceived self-image, hinge on the reflective properties of both metal and water while instancing the paradoxes and ambiguities of bona fide and surrogate mirrors, their uses, and their users.

### Mythological Mirrors

Medusa means seduction ... a dangerous attraction.  
Gianni Versace, Interview with Mark Seal (1996)

[T]he inventor of painting, according to the poets,  
was Narcissus. What is painting, after all, but the  
act of embracing by means of art the surface of the  
pool?

Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (1436)

From a viewpoint glorifying the exploits of ancient male heroes, the myth of Medusa—the sole mortal among the three Gorgons (Greek

*gorgōs* = terrible or dreadful), who combine fabled beauty and unspeakable hideousness—conceives of the mirror benignly, as a prophylactic against a grim, inglorious mode of death. According to the most popular version of the myth, the intrepid Perseus uniquely eludes the inevitable petrification of anyone directly encountering the snake-haired Gorgon's fatal gaze. He succeeds by recourse to the mirror-like shield provided by his patroness Athena, the vengeful war deity responsible for transforming Medusa's magnificent locks into coiled snakes (Graves 239).<sup>1</sup> Rendered invisible through the cap acquired in Hades and enabled to pinpoint Medusa's exact location by her reflection in the shield's surface, Perseus decapitates her (237-42)<sup>2</sup>—a stratagem exploiting the mirror's ability not only to mediate, but also to provide visual access to that which cannot or, as in this case, should not be seen with one's own eyes. Seeing and not seeing, visibility and invisibility lie at the heart of the narrative, as of countless subsequent mirror-oriented works, both verbal and visual.<sup>3</sup>

Transfixing in its primordial drama, the Medusa myth proved inspirational for later generations of male artists, especially those of the *fin de siècle* who focused less on reflectivity than on the phallic, devastating woman purportedly embodied in Medusa.<sup>4</sup> To a large extent, four decades of feminist scholarship have undermined the misogynistic cliché of the lethal female gaze and discredited the long-standing equation of the Gorgon with the deadly principle of arbitrary evil, in the process exposing the psychological and political advantages within patriarchy of such a demonizing perspective.<sup>5</sup> Originally cast as a malevolent force in the plot of Perseus's masculine derring-do, Medusa increasingly has become recognized as a highly ambiguous and ambivalent figure. Camille Dumoulié's contention that the Gorgon denotes death, which defies representation and "is impossible to see and look at, like Hades itself," is corroborated by the Gorgon's role in the *Odyssey* (XI, 633-35) as the Underworld's guardian-monster (Μέδουσα/Médousa = guardian, protectress, and queen) and as a chthonic presence in Dante's *Inferno* (Canto 9) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (II, 611-12).<sup>6</sup> In escaping the fate of his predecessors, Perseus conquers death, and in that sense emerges a hero. Yet according to the terms of René Gerard's *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972), the reported use of Medusa's severed head as an apotropaic mask that both dooms and redeems suggests

that she instantiated the ambiguity of the sacred, her mesmerizing stare concealing its secrets, while her terrifying difference symbolized alterity (Dumoulié).<sup>7</sup>

Inasmuch as one of the two drops of Medusa's blood appropriated by Athena had the power to heal and resurrect, while the other was deadly poison, the Gorgon represented the duality of the *pharmakos*, a figure that revealed the dual nature of the sacred (Dumoulié). Like the shield that served as both weapon (in Perseus's usage) and protection (when the head was mounted on Athena's aegis to create the talismanic Gorgoneion), Medusa's blood and mask fulfilled polarized functions. The superimposed mask of the involuntary, inhuman victor/killer hid the living victim's face—a victim twice over, for the virgin Athena substituted the mane of writhing snakes for Medusa's luxurious tresses when Poseidon raped her as she was worshipping in the temple consecrated to the goddess.<sup>8</sup> As Hesiod's *Theogony* aptly phrases it, Medusa's was "a woeful fate" (II, 278), one fraught with fertile contradictions that generally parallel those inhering in the nature of the mirror as a means of verification and insight into the inner self, on the one hand, yet distortion and surface imaging, on the other. Medusa's reversal of roles—from slayer to slain—additionally evokes the mirror's inherent attribute of reversing along the horizontal axis the object reflected in it.

Paradoxes similarly structure what is undoubtedly the most famous painting of *Medusa*, executed by Caravaggio (1571-1610), summarily diagnosed as "saturnine, coarse, and queer" (Hughes 34). A pioneer of tenebrism renowned for his meticulous naturalistic detail, Caravaggio allegedly produced two versions of *Medusa*, one in 1596 (now lost), the other probably a year or two later (fig. 1). The latter features her severed head, crowned with writhing snakes and spewing blood, mouth agape in a silent, teeth-exposing scream, her horrified eyes misaligned. Suspended for a moment between life and death, she perceives her own ghastly image in the shield and inevitably mirrors her victims' reactions while in the process of being turned into



Fig. 1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Medusa* (late 1590s). The fatal encounter between the eye and the petrifying "I," a supremely theatrical, melodramatic moment of the sort that particularly appealed to Caravaggio.

stone. Hers is the ultimate and final self-confrontation, though her dismembered head subsequently would endure an afterlife: wielded by her antagonists, Perseus and Athena, to both slay and save, over the centuries it also attracted various artists acquainted with the myth, as instanced by Edward Burne-Jones's idiosyncratic *Baleful Head* (1886-87).

The fourth and final image in his *Perseus Series*, Burne-Jones's photogravure on paper has an enamored Perseus exhibiting to Andromeda the slain Medusa's head, which he had deployed against his rivals after rescuing her from the sea monster who held her captive (fig. 2). Compositionally joined through their entwined hands, their symmetrical positions on either side of a structure with a glass top, and the severed head raised between them, the two lovers-to-be at first glance seem to be looking at the head in the mirror of the glass top, which shows all three faces. On closer inspection, however, the prophylactic mediation of the mirror fundamental to the Medusa myth proves superfluous here, for Perseus gazes directly at Andromeda, while she watches not the Gorgon's but his reflection, and Medusa's eyes are closed. Consequently, Medusa's head somewhat perversely plays the role of a matchmaker literally and figuratively overseeing (without seeing) a romance that, according to myth, culminated in marriage and yielded a son. Such an impression is buttressed by the fact that, despite the painting's title, the artist has rendered Medusa's snake-hair unusually orderly and her face no less beautiful than Andromeda's. In its serene loveliness, the purportedly baleful head aesthetically fits into the idealized depiction of the couple's bond of mutual desire.

Burne-Jones's paramount concern, unlike Caravaggio's, was the creation of a fluid, unified image of beauty, so prized by the Pre-

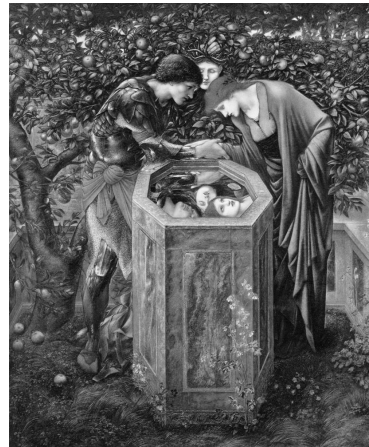


Fig. 2. Edward Burne-Jones. *The Baleful Head* (1886-87). Restored to her original beauty and her dreaded gaze eliminated, Medusa here seems pictorially reduced to an unwitting romantic intermediary.

Raphaelites; hence the androgynous nature of the young lovers and Medusa's physical similarity to them. Iterated in the facial reflections and emphasized by the feminine rose-colored sash (just a shade paler than Andromeda's robe) around Perseus's hips, gender indeterminacy links *The Baleful Head* to a related aspect of Caravaggio's *Medusa* that is striking in its mirror-revelations. Caravaggio, who painted Medusa onto a canvas-covered wooden shield, captures her gruesome visage as reflected in the shield of polished bronze (presumably Athena's), thereby reproducing a reproduction—a doubled mirroring typically associated with the genre of self-portraits. Furthermore, specialists believe that Caravaggio himself served as the model for Medusa, who appears as at best gender-ambiguous. Or, as one commentator phrased it, we see Caravaggio's self-portrait in drag—a formulation doubtless influenced by the artist's unconventional conduct (“a poster boy for bad behavior”) and long-standing speculations about his homosexuality.<sup>9</sup> The lesser-known Baroque Italian painter Giacinto Calandrucci (1646-1707) followed suit in his self-portrait as Medusa, now housed at the Louvre. Mirroring Medusa and destabilizing gender in a perhaps more startling gesture, Benvenuto Cellini's (1500-1571) statue of *Perseus* (1545-54) duplicates Perseus's face and hair in those of the Medusa, whose head he holds aloft (fig. 3)—a twinning not unwarranted by the hero's repeated reliance on that head as a lethal weapon before he entrusted it to Athena. In short, the double image of the Medusa undergoes further doubling through gender-crossing in art works of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods.



Fig. 3. Benvenuto Cellini, *Medusa* (1545-54). Mounted on an ornamented pedestal, Perseus the bronze Body Beautiful serenely tramples Medusa's headless body underfoot while triumphantly displaying her blood-gushing head. Cellini's Perseus manifestly competes with Michelangelo's *David*.

Such transgenering is remarkable in light of three contrasting hermeneutical tendencies united by their equation of Medusa with womanhood: anthropological/classicist scholarship, psychoanalytic theory, and feminism. The writer Robert Graves in *Greek Myths* (1958) ascribes the drama of Medusa's beheading by Perseus to the

conflict accompanying the comprehensive transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society, whereby men became “the masters of the divine, which Medusa’s head had concealed from them” (Dumoulié). Medusa was one of the names of the Moon-goddess, whose face the Orphics called the Gorgon head, a prophylactic mask worn by her priestesses to deter “the uninitiated,” but “stripped from them” by the male Hellenes who usurped the power of the Moon-goddess (Graves 129, ft. 3; 244, ft. 5). Whereas Graves and others approach the myth historically, Freud, predictably, abstracts and universalizes it. In an orgy of displacement, his essay “Medusa’s Head” (1922) explicates the myth as a symbolic account of castration translated into decapitation (lower head as upper head), revisiting his fanciful concept of women’s problematic lack and positing the reassurance of male erection in the horror-stiffness induced by the sight of the Gorgon. Such a perspective automatically reduces Medusa to an ineffectual object within a scenario of threatened but successfully preserved male subjectivity, prompting the feminist Hélène Cixous’s rejoinders, pointedly titled “Laugh of Medusa” (1975) and later “Castration or Decapitation?” (trans. 1981). Polemicalizing with Freud’s overly ingenious exegesis and, *en passant*, Jacques Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage, Cixous lambastes their blinkered male-based paradigms of identity and sexuality for erasing female subjectivity through metaphorical decapitation. She ironically ventriloquizes their position in the following pictorial terms: “We’re going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away” (“Laugh” 891). Feminists today conceptually embrace Medusa, taking their cue from the fifteenth-century Venetian writer Christine de Pizan (1365-1434), whose tropological account of Medusa rescued the latter from negative male projection: “... Medusa (or Gorgon) was celebrated for her outstanding beauty ... such striking beauty that ... she attracted to herself every mortal creature upon whom she looked, so that she seemed to make people immovable. For this reason the fable claimed that they had turned to stone.”<sup>10</sup> The French *méduser* ‘to stupefy or paralyze’ accommodates such a reading. For my purposes here, the central issue in the debate is that of gender’s role in vision, mirror-gazing, and reflecting, as well as the question of beauty’s power, which would undergo fascinating permutations in art through the ages, depending on the given era’s prevailing gen-



der politics and the symbolic connotations of the mirror in diverse contexts.<sup>11</sup>

Vision likewise is the linchpin in the related, obverse myth of Narcissus (from the Greek *narke*/νάρκη ‘numbness’), in which a narrative of vision spotlights not paralyzing ugliness, but riveting, ill-fated beauty. In its several variants by Ovid, Conon, Pausanias, and others, the myth treats the fate of the irresistibly handsome youth who, punished by Nemesis for his callous indifference to languishing admirers—both male (Ameinias) and female (Echo)—becomes hypnotically enamored of his own face in the water. Unable either to reach or to tear himself away from the adored image, he wastes away and dies beside the water (Ovid’s version) or (according to Conon) fatally stabs himself from anguish at his failure to unite with his beloved (Graves 286-88; Ovid 83-87), thereby duplicating the fate of the infatuated pursuers he habitually scorned.<sup>12</sup> Sources vary as to the specifics of his association with the flower named after him. According to some accounts, the flower sprang up on the spot of Narcissus’s arrested self-contemplation, while others describe his bodily transformation into the flower—a moment captured by Salvador Dalí’s famous *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937). This transformation into a part of ever-regenerating nature evokes Pythagoras’s and Plato’s theories of metempsychosis and the Christian concept of eternal life symbolized in the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist (transubstantiation).

The anthropologist James Frazer speculates that the origins of the Narcissus myth spring from the ancient belief that people’s reflections in water or a mirror are their souls, which clarifies why Greeks regarded seeing oneself so reflected as an omen of death (Frazer 203).<sup>13</sup> Freud’s appropriation of the myth (“On Narcissism” 1914) counters this historical, culture-specific explanation, positing instead what would become the popular understanding of narcissism: terminal self-absorption, the investment of libidinal energy in the ego that exceeds a healthy self-affirmation (the ego-ideal) and, failing to transfer itself to a love-object, leads to incurable solipsism.<sup>14</sup> Lacan similarly pinpoints primary narcissism as starting in the mirror phase of the three stages of psychosexual development, where the subject becomes erotically attracted to the mis-recognized perfect image. Narcissism becomes problematic if this

stage is not fully navigated and the image is not realized as such (Freud's secondary narcissism). Seeking after this impossible perfection becomes an obsessive and perpetual goal, sometimes leading to suicide—a scenario that on the surface Narcissus seems to enact (“Narcissism”). In addition to being illustrated in many Roman frescoes and the medieval illuminated manuscript of *Roman de la Rose* (1380), the myth generated not only a host of literary works but also countless sculptures (by Benvenuto Cellini [1548], Antonio Canova [1804-6], William Theed [1848]) and paintings (by Rubens [c. 1618], Poussin [1630], Moreau [1890s], Turner [1804], Waterhouse [1903], and dozens of lesser-known artists).<sup>15</sup> Visually, the solipsism typically associated with narcissism is conveyed most eloquently in Caravaggio's painting of 1597-99, remarkable for its complete decontextualization of Narcissus (fig. 4). The absence of the landscape that normally provides the myth's visual setting, as well as the unexceptional appearance of the youth, universalizes him. Against a background of abstract, exclusively brown tones, he kneels, bending over dark brown water, his arms and their reflection forming a circle, at the center of which the knee of his radically foreshortened bare leg approximates a disproportionately large phallus or cudgel. Caravaggio's Narcissus, in other words, constitutes his own enclosed world, visually corresponding to the self-incarcerating narcissistic personality explicated by both Freud and Lacan.

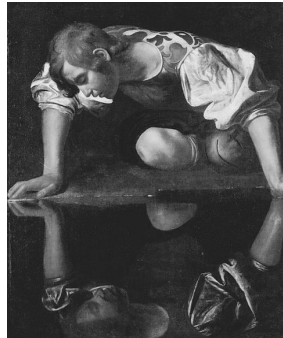


Fig. 4. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Narcissus* (1597-99). Trapped in the amphitheater of the self, Caravaggio's average-looking Narcissus is not connected to any identifiable surroundings apart from the mirroring water.

Yet, while Freud may have overdetermined the common understanding of the Narcissus myth, just as in the case of Medusa, recent scholarship to an extent has rehabilitated its protagonist by linking the myth's stages to the inextricability of vision, desire, and knowledge. Extending and reorienting Lacanian theory, Hérica Valladares contends that “[t]he painted interiors of Pompeian houses, where images of Narcissus abound, can be seen as interactive theatrical settings designed to engage viewers in a performance of the process

of individuation and of the drama of the gaze.” Such an interpretation overlaps with readings by classicists grounded in a thorough knowledge of both philosophical and classical debates pertinent to those issues. They propose that in light of the Greek injunction to know thyself, the Narcissus myth implies an irreconcilable split in a subject’s confrontation with itself as an object, which proves fatal, for subject and object cannot be united—a dilemma also central to Medusa. In her analysis of the relationship between Narcissus and Greek and Roman philosophy, Shadi Bartsch contends that “[w]hen the subject of the gaze takes himself as its object as well, the ensuing confusion is not necessarily salutary,” and credits Ovid with countering earlier and contemporary trends in philosophy by positing “the traditions of the mirror as something that represented deceit, illusion, and vanity and as a tool for self-knowledge, for Narcissus is *both* deceived *and* comes to know himself,” whereas “the philosophical tradition [especially in those ideas of Socrates that promoted self-knowledge] strove to keep the two mirrors apart” (82; emphasis in the original). Narcissus’s example, in short, demonstrates how the erotic pleasure of gazing at one’s reflection compromises philosophical self-transformation as “regulatory action” (Bartsch 86). Max Nelson goes a step further by asserting that though on one level the story of Narcissus dramatizes “self-love and just retribution” (383), it also shares elements with narratives of ritualistic divination known as scrying—a widespread means of invoking the supernatural with the aid of water, mirrors, crystal balls, and the like to penetrate into the past, present, and future or to summon an apparition of someone dead.<sup>16</sup> Both the myth’s prelude, in which Teiresias predicts that self-knowledge will precipitate Narcissus’s death, and Narcissus’s ambiguously phrased realization that the image in the water casts back his own self, intimate desire for, or insight into, something impalpable, mysterious, even esoteric: “My own reflection does not deceive me. I am on fire with love for my own self. . . . What I desire, I have. My very plenty makes me poor. *How I wish I could separate myself from my body!*” (Ovid 86, emphasis added). Though Freudians may identify the narrative as inscribing solipsistic self-preoccupation, more subtle readings of the myth engage the concepts of reflexivity and access to knowledge of the self and possibly the beyond. As a study of mirrors notes, “Physical self-re-

flection ... encourages philosophical self-reflection" (Angier), amply attested by artists' self-portraits and an orientation in which the case of Narcissus constitutes an Ur-text—that of Vanitas art, which pointedly contrasts the nugatory nature of youth, beauty, and earthly pleasures with the interior world of spiritual activity.

Fascinatingly, in the third century AD, Philostratus the Elder, who in his *Imagines* or *Images* (*Eikonas*; *Eikόνες*) describes and analyzes myth-based artworks, implicitly ascribes a meta-dimension to the image of Narcissus that he reportedly saw in a Pompeian wall-painting. Centuries before Alberti's *On Painting* and René Magritte's *La Trahison des images: Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (1929), Philostratus underscores the difference between corporeal presence and representation—the art that deceptively but convincingly mirrors material phenomena: "The pool paints Narcissus, and the painting represents both the pool and the whole story of Narcissus" (Philostratus). In other words, one may interpret the myth of Narcissus as an allegorical "tribute to the illusionistic power of the artist to create a duplicate world" ("Caravaggio"). Unsurprisingly, commentators have also attributed such a self-reflexive dimension to Caravaggio's painting of Medusa, affixed to a shield in what may be viewed as the painter's gesture of proclaiming the divine power of art by analogy with Athena's uncanny shield and, literally, superhuman power.

In light of the numerous conflicting interpretations, Jeffrey Berman contends that "the richness of the [Narcissus] myth is inexhaustible. Narcissus dramatizes not only the cold, self-centered love that proves fatally imprisoning, but [also] fundamental oppositions of human existence: reality/illusion, presence/absence, subject/object, unity/disunity, involvement/detachment" (1). These binarisms, which recall the diachronic paradigms in M.H. Abrams's *Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), correspond to those marking the paradoxical mirror, with its antinomous symbolism of frivolous superficiality and metaphysical depth, of surface and soul, of illusion and verification. A requisite component in depictions of obsession with physical appearance and beauty (Vanitas), the mirror also is credited with magical predictive abilities (scrying), access to Truth (Veritas), the projection of spiritual immaculacy, and the capacity to confer moral enlightenment. In literature, mirrors during the medieval era were frequently associated with moral education, for by revealing im-

perfections of dress and grooming and by helping “to bare moral imperfections and narcissistic excesses,” they were deemed instruments of edification (Régnier-Bohler 391-92). In short, the mirror afforded the necessary conditions to inspect not only cosmetics but also conscience, and to penetrate into the interior self through the external image.

### Gendered Vanitas: Venus and Her Heritage

Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
Who’s the fairest one of all?

Walt Disney, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1939)

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1: 2

Narcissus notwithstanding, the mirror’s identification with women occurred early on in art, as in literature. That hardy convention may be traced to Venus, the goddess of beauty and sexual love, whom artists throughout the Renaissance and the Baroque (Titian [1555], Rubens [1608, 1615], Vouet [1628-39, 1640], Velázquez [1649-51]) repeatedly cast as a nude mirror-gazer at her toilette, usually attended by the devil, *putti*, or her wayward offspring, Cupid/Eros.<sup>17</sup> Conflating beauty, vanity, and sexuality, Venus symbolized the seductively illicit and, in a Christian framework, the sinful.<sup>18</sup> As in his treatment of the Medusa myth, Burne-Jones opted for a somewhat less predictable representation in his *Mirror of Venus* (1894), which blends the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelite and Italian Renaissance art—particularly Botticelli, whom he fervently admired<sup>19</sup> (fig. 5). An atmosphere of wistful nostalgia per-



Fig. 5. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Mirror of Venus* (1894). In this gendered mirror-gazing *en masse*, Burne-Jones adheres to the obdurate tradition of casting womanhood as corrupted by the lovely but terminally self-loving Venus.

meates his unexpected display of ten undifferentiated female beauties draped in pseudo-classical clinging robes and projected against an arid rocky landscape. Like Narcissus, eight of them are transfixed by their reflections in a pool, while the ninth raises her eyes to the goddess, standing upright among them and likewise engrossed in the images mirrored in the still water.<sup>20</sup> The configuration of the homologous female forms as a Venus-collective unites them in a concept of Woman as “impersonal, self-contained self-identity” (Dijkstra 132), confirmed by the mirror of the water—precisely the element from which Venus emerged. Thus Burne-Jones’s originality ultimately collapses into the convention of gendered separatism that fundamentally relegates women to hollowness imperfectly disguised as alluring surface.

Eventually, anonymous women displaced Venus in pictorial allegories of vanity that invariably positioned them in complacent or anxious self-contemplation in mirrors. According to late-medieval religious belief, vanity as a mode of *superbia* ‘pride’ constituted one of the Deadly Sins, included in Hieronymus Bosch’s renowned map of transgressions, as codified by the elaborate Christian model of sin that informed medieval and Renaissance moral precepts and proscriptions<sup>21</sup> (fig. 6). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,

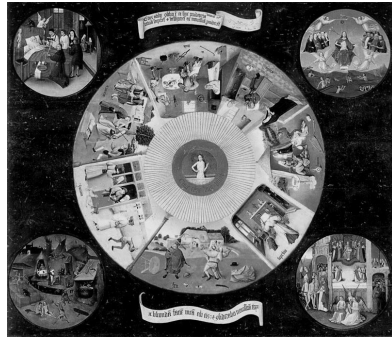


Fig. 6. Hieronymus Bosch, *Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (1485). Deadly *Superbia* in one of countless religiously inspired allegories by the painter of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and related works that illustrate the consequences of indulging sinful pleasures, including vanity/pride.

symbolic still lifes, particularly popular in Northern Europe, anathematized and mourned Vanitas (Latin for emptiness) as a *memento mori*—a reminder of life’s transience, as inscribed in the Biblical “all is vanity”—pointing to the futility of earthly gratification and material acquisition. For instance, the Flemish Clara Peeters’s *Vanitas Self-Portrait* (c.1610) portrays the artist’s youth and beauty as nugatory, the objects beside her arranged to illustrate the ephemeral nature of life’s pleasures and treasures (fig. 7). The bubble in the painting cleverly alludes to her rounded breasts, and echoes other

circular objects, while simultaneously symbolizing the “fragility of life, youth, pleasures, and beauty” (Borzello 62). Bernardo Strozzi’s *Old Woman at the Mirror* (1615) captures this somber emphasis on mortality not via the usual symbols of skulls, clocks, bubbles, and musical instruments so prevalent during this era, but through the unusual pairing of mirror and old woman, her two servants adopting the familiar roles of *putti* in paintings of Venus (fig. 8). And an illustration from the *Book of Hours* (1480) renders such a coupling more ghoulish in the explicitness of its *memento-mori* warning as a female skeleton regards herself in a hand-held mirror. Less ominous allegories of vanity also existed throughout the centuries, frequently fusing it with carnality—clearly, the influence of Venus.

Yet, in art of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, mirror-gazing that conveyed the vices of pride, vanity, and lust co-existed with allegories in which mirrors symbolized diametrically opposite qualities—truth, justice, and prudence (one of the cardinal virtues), as in the *Prudence* of Giotto (1306), Grien (1529), and Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1559), as well as Veronese’s *Prudence & Manly Virtue* (1560–61). Giovanni Bellini’s painting (c.1490) of a nude holding a convex mirror that faces the viewer displays the contrariness of the mirror’s symbolism through its ascribed bipartite title of *Prudence (or Vanity)* (fig. 9). Subsequent generations also explored the diverse, contrary concepts and qualities associated with the mirror. For instance, Berthe Morisot (1841–



Fig. 7. Clara Peeters, *Vanitas Self-portrait* (c.1610). The vacuity of material existence. The repeated spherical shapes symbolize the dead-end of Vanitas while simultaneously showcasing the artist’s inventiveness.



Fig. 8. Bernardo Strozzi, *Old Woman at the Mirror* (1615). The mirror image as a white-haired reminder of mortality.

95) painted a fairly conventional *Lady at her Toilette* in 1875 that joins countless images of women drawn to their reflections in dressing-table mirrors. A year later, however, she distanced herself from the automatic gender bias that implied the self-mesmerized superficiality of womanhood addicted to their reflections. Her revisionist allegorical *Psyche* (1876) revisited the less popular tradition that gendered the mirror but implicated it in spiritual ideals—familiar from the iconography of prudence and the Virgin Mary as exemplum.

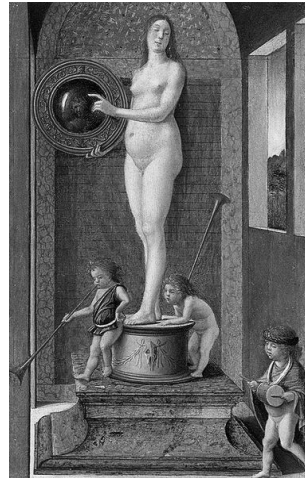


Fig. 9. Giovanni Bellini, *Prudence (or Vanity)* (1490). The mirror's ambidextrous symbolism.

### Veritas as Immaculacy

There are two ways of spreading one's light: to be  
the candle or the mirror that reflects it.

Edith Wharton, "Vesalius in Zante"

Even while Vanitas art flourished, the flawless mirror as religious metaphor and symbol in Christian art from the sixteenth century onward was an attribute of the Virgin Mary, traditionally revered for her Immaculate Conception, rooted in her relationship to God; hence the term *speculum sine macula* (mirror without stain), widely invoked in devotional writings and art (Jaeck-Woodgate). The trope originated in the Old Testament deuterocanonical Book of Wisdom 7.26, which says of Wisdom: "She is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Jaeck-Woodgate).<sup>22</sup> Significantly, paintings never show the Madonna actually using the mirror. Normally others hold it beside or below her, for she is the mirror, its unblemished surface and capacity to absorb and cast back light symbolizing not only virginal immaculacy, but also and more importantly her function as a re-



flector of God's glory. Raphael's *Madonna of Foligno* (1511-12), Murillo's *Immaculate Conception* (c.1670's), and Tiepolo's *Immaculate Conception* (1767-69) unambiguously illustrate that role (fig. 10). Thus in religious iconography, the Marian mirror tropes the perfection of God through His Son's mother as divine exemplar. Yet it is also a mirror of human conscience, for in gazing at the ideal to which all should aspire, viewers can appraise their own conduct, engage in self-judgment, and recognize their distance from perfection. Insofar as it enjoins an introspection that can lead to self-improvement, the mirror possesses a moral function (Jaeck-Woodgate). In that sense, far from catering to vanity, it presumably catalyzes laudable aspirations.

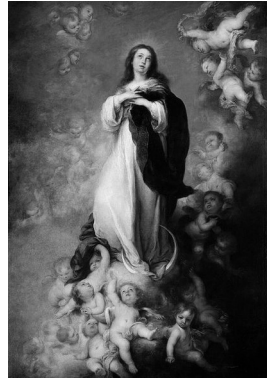


Fig. 10. Bartolomé Murillo, *Immaculate Conception* (c.1670). She who could cast the first stone ... but, as the reflection of God's light, never would.

The Gaze Without and Within: Self-Portrait as Discovery, Disclosure, and Bravura Metacommentary

She felt herself reflected in their watchful mirror-eyes,  
and was forced to see herself as they saw her.  
Arthur Koestler, *Age of Longing* (1951)

Self-portraits in Europe date from the late fifteenth century, enabled by several factors: technical improvements in glassmaking, which made flat mirrors of a reasonable size widely available; the revolution in oil painting, which allowed artists to paint in studios rather than on the walls of churches and palaces; and the transformation of the artist's status, from artisan to member of the social and intellectual elite. Painters of self-portraits adopted the mirror as an indispensable tool for self-representation, as confirmation of authorship, and as a forum for commentary on perspective. In fact, mirrors became a staple of artists' studios. Like Alberti, Leonardo da Vinci, whose famous mirror writing (right to left, as in Lewis Carroll's antic "Jabberwocky" in the "Looking-Glass House" book)<sup>23</sup> continues to generate polemics about its motivation, championed the mirror

as the equivalent of the painter's mind, the verifier of resemblances, and the eye's educator, while also acknowledging its implication in illusion by manipulating those resemblances (Melchior-Bonnet 128-29). Chapter 350 of his *Notebooks* recommends reliance on the mirror as "the true master of painting" for one's guide, "because on its surface the objects appear in many respects as in a painting"; therefore "when you paint you should have a flat mirror and often look at your work as reflected in it" (da Vinci 207-8). Acting upon his own counsel, da Vinci reportedly availed himself of the mirror to correct defects in his canvasses (Drury 10),<sup>24</sup> just as Rembrandt consulted it for his forty-odd self-portraits, as well as etchings and drawings of his own likeness.

With such notable (late) exceptions as Eugène Delacroix and Gustave Courbet, who worked from photographs, most self-portraitists copied their faces as seen in a mirror (Drury 23, 9). Albrecht Dürer at the age of thirteen or fourteen (1484) made a silverpoint drawing of himself, inscribing the words "I drew this using a mirror" (Drury 11). Artists such as Francesco Parmigiano (1524) seemed fascinated by the mirror as painters' sole means at the time of capturing their own likeness, though the distortion typical of convexity enlarged whatever was foregrounded (fig. 11). Others visually signed their works devoted to other subjects by incorporating their own miniature self-portraits in mirrors. The most renowned examples remain Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* (1434), which creates the illusion that the artist is both "in and outside the picture" (Drury 10) (fig. 12), and Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656-57). Such devices not only flaunted artists' ingenuity, but also testified to their enduring experimentation with perspective and art's fabled capacity for faithful representation, extended through the mirror.

Clara Peeters, one of the cleverest practitioners of still lifes (a



Fig. 11. Francesco Parmigiano, *Self-portrait* (1524). Demonstration of a shortcoming of the convex mirror, which was widely and productively used in Renaissance art and particularly self-portraits.



Fig. 12. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Marriage* (1434). The wedding made world-famous by the artist, who is reflected as a registered witness.

thriving genre during the seventeenth century), experimented with an intriguing mode of multiple self-representation, which reprised the ancient dependence on polished metal surfaces for reflection and showcased various objects' manifold mirroring features. Her virtuoso works include paintings in which several polished surfaces reflect her visage, as, for example, *Still Life with Flowers and Gilt Cup* (1612), where her distorted reflection (holding brush and palette) appears repeatedly in a cup. More complex in its treatment of proliferation and perspective is the Austrian Johannes Gumpff's self-portrait of 1646 (fig. 13). It offers the artist in triplicate, as the active figure with his back to us, the image reflected in the mirror, and the image of that image on canvas.



Fig. 13. Johann Gumpff, *Self-portrait* (1646). Tripling the image to emphasize the complexities of perspective in art's claims to faithful representation.

Accessible only indirectly via the mirror, where it is reflected, and the portrait, where it is reproduced, in the foreground the artist's face is replaced with the back of his head. Gumpff's manipulation of perspectives "exposes the portrait's claim to documentary truth as a clever deceit, and dramatizes the part played in acquiring self-knowledge by seeing oneself and being seen, knowing oneself and being known" (Art Gallery NSW). Though apparently indifferent to repetition, Magritte shared Gumpff's preoccupation with the illusory aspect of self-portraits and other painterly genres. Ever insistent on the distinction between phenomena and their artistic representation, Magritte materialized his philosophy of art in paintings that dramatize the gulf between life and its ostensible facsimile on canvas, where, as Robert Hughes puts it, "vignettes of language and reality lock[ed] in mutual cancellation" (155). Magritte's skeptical pseudo-self-portrait (1937)—actually a portrait of his friend Edward James—in the series titled *Reproduction Prohibited* characteristically contests the predetermined notion of art as a veracious replication of physical reality, in this instance, one's own person. The portrait overturns conventions by presenting the back of the head, impossibly iterated in the mirror.

The "new climate of introspection" (Borzello 140) ushered in by the twentieth century inclined artists increasingly to trope the

mirror in their self-portraits as self-exploration and inducement to profound thought, such as Marie-Louise von Motesicky in *Self-Portrait with Pears* (1965). External reflection here stimulates inner reflection in a philosophical vein. At the same time, specifically women's self-portraits toward the end of the century recuperated and modernized the Renaissance Vanitas theme, as in Helen Chadwick's (1953-96) *Vanity II* in her *Mutability* series (1986), where, near-naked and surrounded by pastel curtains and white feathers, she stares intently at herself in a huge round mirror, as if attempting to locate an individual self amidst culturally coded, stereotypically feminine trappings. Feminism indisputably influenced this trend, also prevalent in photography as the more modern mirror (e.g., Cindy Sherman), which investigates and disavows socially imposed feminine identities rendered orthodox through masterpieces by some of the world's most adulated male painters—a topic pioneered by John Berger in his milestone study *Ways of Seeing* (1972).

As an instance of this gendered dialogue with predecessors, the feminist photorealist painter and sculptor Audrey Flack's (b. 1931) vivid *Wheel of Fortune* (1977-78), teeming with bright colors, pointedly returns to female painters of seventeenth-century still lifes such as Peeters to portray the cycle of her own life as chance, time, and worldly pleasures—a symbolically displaced life of items identified with a photograph of her smiling young face. Shown only in a round mirror at the upper left corner, the snapshot in its positioning trumps the reflection of a skull visible in a partial mirror below (Borzello 197). Flack distances herself from the culturally entrenched constellation of mortality symbols that she reproduces—Vanitas mirror, candle, skull, fruit, and hourglass—by recasting the burning candle as a source of light and incorporating not only a calendar, which measures time by months, not hours, but also a tarot card to convey the human urge to glimpse the future.<sup>25</sup> Partly through a transvaluation of objects, brilliant hues, and an overall cheerful kitschiness, Flack interrogates the gloom of Vanitas works as dire reminders of mortality.

The interplay of mirrors and space also has innovated specular gendering strategies in a somewhat different key. For instance, repetition, facilitated by mirrored ceilings and walls, holds center stage in the installations of the contemporary Japanese artist Yayoi

Kusama (b. 1929), who strives to merge realia with her psychologically fraught artistic vision and conceives of mirrors as an endless extension into infinity. She calls the proliferation of rhythmic polka dots, which are her trademark, infinity nets. And the mirrored multiplication that she relentlessly pursues psychosomatically parallels her bodily self with objects and patterns in a boundless iteration. Such a concept of reflection recalls the unblemished mirror of the Virgin Mary, though in secular and therefore potentially chilling mode, for Kusama's somewhat unsettling infinity is not that of a timeless paradise.

### The Russian Case

Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind  
which sees in pictures little corners of nature,  
Madonnas, and shameless Venuses, *shall we*  
*witness a work of pure, living art.*

Kazimir Malevich, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* (1915).<sup>26</sup>

Anyone conversant with the extraordinarily rich West European tradition roughly outlined above cannot help but be struck by the comparative dearth of mirrors in Russian art. Crucially, that art lacks the medieval and Renaissance synonymy of mirror-gazing and female Vanitas for the simple reason that Russian art during the Middle Ages was confined to icon-painting, while the Renaissance entirely bypassed the Russian empire and its cultural production. As two-dimensional windows into heaven and manifestations of celestial archetypes, icons depict saints, angels, Christ, and the Mother of God (*Bogoroditsa*)—the Russian Orthodox counterpart of the Catholic Virgin Mary—on a flat mirror surface, usually wooden. Neither three-dimensionality nor individual creativity was permitted to obscure what the Orthodox Church regarded essentially as epiphanies, recorded primarily by religious craftsmen and venerated as sacred objects. The tradition of icons as a link to *realoria* 'a higher sphere' subsequently would inform art during periods of spiritual and philosophical revival, notably the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Until then, however, secular canvas art in Russia, which fully emerged only in the eighteenth century, evinced scant interest in mirrors or their time-honored surrogates.

Unlike writers, artists seemed uninterested in Narcissus, Medusa, and reflections in the surrogates of water and shield.<sup>27</sup> A rare exception is Karl Briullov's *Narcissus* (1819), which adopts the West European classicist convention of framing the lovelorn youth in a landscape, with the kitschy addition of a Cupid hovering overhead—



Fig. 14. Karl Briullov, *Narcissus* (1819). West European traditions transferred to Russia, with Cupid as a superfluous bonus, at least for the educated.

presumably intended for those unfamiliar with the myth's narrative of self-entanglement (fig. 14). Medusa attracted not painters, but architects, sculptors, and designers, her image cast in reliefs of doors and the copious ironwork on the canals in St. Petersburg. One of her best-known instantiations, modeled on Cellini's original in Florence, is the gilded bronze statue at the Grand Cascade in Peterhof/Petrodvorets, where Perseus's right hand brandishes a sword, while his left holds up the head of the slain Gorgon (fig. 15). Given Russian art's indifference to Medusa throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is somewhat unexpected to encounter Medusa as a prominent figure in the laser-based installations of Anton Ginzburg. A contemporary Conceptualist artist and designer born in St. Petersburg and currently based in New York, he featured his recent Medusa installation, *No Echo, No Shadow*, at the 2009 Moscow Biennale. Explaining in an interview the recurrence of Medusa in his works, Ginzburg called her "a metaphor for sculpture, ... a way of stopping time and being able to encapsulate the moment," while simultaneously providing "an interesting view on



Fig. 15. Statue of Perseus with Medusa's head at Peterhof/Petrodvorets, Russia. Conceived by Peter the Great in connection with his ambitious program for advertising Russia as a great European empire, the summer residence of the imperial family and current tourist attraction boasts resplendent interiors, grounds, fountains, and statues. Though an advocate of modernization, Peter could hardly resist the allure of classical architecture and statuary, also imitated in eighteenth-century France.

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identity” and a means of reversing perspective, insofar as her role in exhibitions is to be seen, and that of the spectator, to see her (Ginzburg). Such a notion perpetuates the robust tradition of associating Medusa primarily with the gaze—both hers and that of her victims, here replaced by visitors to the exhibition.

The Mirror as Passport to the Esoteric: *Zazerkal'e* or Alice's Looking-Glass World

You use a glass mirror to see your face;  
you use works of art to see your soul.

George Bernard Shaw

Reverse perspective in another, technical sense, of course, is characteristic of icons, which open up the world of the everyday to the invisible sphere of the celestial. Accordingly, the icon as a symbolic passage to the transcendent proliferated in Russian art, while the mirror recurred in literature during the Silver Age (1890s-1910s)—decades that witnessed an upsurge of Neo-Platonism and a wholesale embrace of paranormal phenomena as *Kulturarbeiter* moved away from or, in some instances, categorically repudiated, positivism.<sup>28</sup> The vertical axis of hierophany dominated the era's efforts to reclaim non-materialist philosophy. Whether to escape from the banality of the mundane or to fulfill an impassioned yearning for ascent to the empyrean, philosophers, writers, and poets (Vladimir Solov'ev, Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florenskii, Andrei Belyi, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Viacheslav Ivanov, Aleksandr Blok, and their acolytes) adopted the envisioned higher beyond of spiritual immaculacy as an inspirational ideal amid the apocalyptic mood of the fin de siècle. Intimations of that sacred domain entered art through various symbols, including the mirror, with its centuries-old mystic associations and its ability to refract and diffuse light. Verisimilitude fell by the wayside in the drive to attain a realm that by definition resisted representation.

Concisely summarizing the spiritual dreams of the Silver Age, Marc Chagall's *Mirror* (1915) projects an unearthly, mysterious dimension in its discordant juxtaposition of the huge, ornately framed mirror propped up at an angle on a table and, in the lower

left corner, a human of grotesquely incommensurate size, with his tiny head resting on the table, face buried in his arms. Instead of reflecting its visible surroundings, the mirror contains a discrete world of its own, comprising an oil lamp and the concentric circles of its illumination, which evoke the moon or, as John Bowlt hypothesizes, “some remote, cosmic limbo” (95). Color underscores the painful contrast between diminished humanity in the humdrum here (painted brilliant green and yellow) and the remote, unfathomable there, rendered in Mikhail Vrubel’s favorite hues of lilac, purple, and blue. Chagall’s mirror functions not as a reflector, but as a window into the luminous, transcendent unknown. Comparably unconventional, Natal’ia Goncharova’s hexagonal *Looking Glass* (1912) appears enthroned atop a chest of drawers, the low angle of its depiction creating the impression that the mirror is reaching toward the heavens, looking down on its concrete surroundings. In a bold reversal, it reflects what logically should be the floor—but in a light blue that sooner suggests the sky—and part of one wall, rendered in a paler shade of the brown-bronze that is the color of the chest and a wall not shown in the mirror. Neither a reliable means of empirical verification nor a medium of obvious duplication, the mirror directs the beholder’s gaze upward, where color transforms the ostensible ground under one’s feet into the firmament.<sup>29</sup> And Kazimir Malevich’s manifesto, “The Suprematist Mirror” (1923) leaves behind all connections to objects and their delineation so as to create pure form, his abstract works distinctively condensing the nothing to be contemplated in the modernist quasi-icon of a suprematist painting.

Among contemporary painters, no one has mined the topological aspects of the mirror more originally than Olg’a Bulgakova (1951), an admirer of Salvador Dalí. Her figurative early works synthesize elements popular with the avant-garde (theater, circus, playing cards) and Surrealism, whereby startling, enigmatic juxtapositions evoke the stuff of dreams and nightmares. Many of her paintings install concepts of spectatorship and vision/perspective—the latter conveyed by not only the mirror but also the eye, so memorably opened with a razor during a full moon in Buñuel and Dalí’s Surrealist manifesto, *Un chien andalou* (1929). Vision in all senses is crucial to Bulgakova’s concept of creativity as divinely inspired, its



source signaled by the cosmic symbol of the moon, for the enigmatic creative impulse derives its power from a transcendent source, just as the moon draws its light from the sun, of which it is but a pale reflection—a relationship paralleling that of the icon to the divine. Thus amidst the the-



Fig. 16. Olga Bulgakova, *Pushkin* (1983). The mirror-phantom of earthly power contrasted to the transcendent aspirations of the artist, here incarnated in Russia's premier national poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837).

atrical setting of her 1983 *Pushkin*, the dreamy poet gazes out of the window into the dark night, with its full moon, oblivious to the reflection of Emperor Paul I (1754-1801), renowned for his eccentricities and military fervor, in the full-length looking glass behind him (fig. 16). That the poet and the state inhabit separate, incompatible spheres is intimated through a series of polarities: Pushkin's actual presence versus Paul's physical absence (he is mere phantom reflection); the poetic eye directed outward versus the regal stare constricted by the mirror's border; the poet's universal simple attire versus the ruler's Russian uniform. Moreover, Bulgakova's palette underscores the contrasts, rendering Pushkin monochromatically, in shades of grey, whereas rich reds and deep blue predominate in the image of Paul. Relegated here to the ephemera of the mundane, the mirror reflects earthly power, whereas the eternal moon tropes art's immortal inspiration. For Bulgakova, the human world of *realia* derives its meaning from the higher realm of *realoria*, to which the artist is privy—a conviction she shares with several of her favorite writers: E.T.A. Hoffmann, Nikolai Gogol, Fedor Dostoevskii, and Franz Kafka.<sup>30</sup> The role assigned the mirror in Bulgakova's *Pushkin* differs from that in her disturbing 1980 *Gogol*, where a thin, sickly-looking Gogol, eerily encased in a shroud-like white robe, lowers himself into a chair with strangely sloping arms, a disproportionately large, menacing male figure hovering beside him (fig. 17). Parallel to the window, which shows a moon in the nocturnal sky, hangs a mirror in which a pig stands upright, its head on the same level as

the anonymous male's. Both image the evil that Gogol deemed omnipresent among humanity, and the extinguished candle still emitting smoke intimates the improbability of its spiritual illumination. Bulgakova depicts Gogol's self-conception here, placing him precisely between the window and the mirror (almost identical curtains pulled aside from both), as the artist fulfilling the sacred mission of translating the heavenly to the earthly by exposing the latter's transgressions against supernal values. Indeed, the concrete mirror here literalizes Gogol's metaphor for art's mimetic function (which recurs throughout his essays on art and literature), formulated

in the epigraph to his comedy *The Inspector General* [Revizor, 1836]: "Don't blame the mirror if your mug is crooked."<sup>31</sup> Reminiscent of Bosch's grotesque moral allegories, the painting approximates Bulgakova's earlier *Gogol* (1978), with a normal-sized Gogol between the mirrored pig and brutal-visaged male now following a spectral figure in white compositionally linked to the moon—presumably the artist's sacred muse, since the body, which floats in air, is clothed in the same material as that covering an easel in the right rear of the room (fig. 18).

Whereas historically the Russian icon belonged exclusively to the Christian realm of the sacred, the equivocal mirror straddled Christian and pagan beliefs and practic-

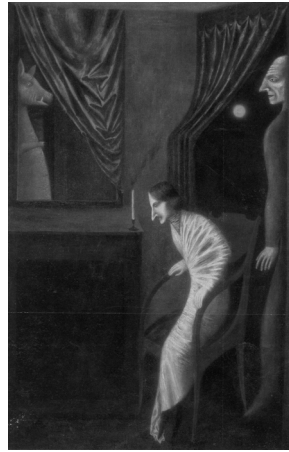


Fig. 17. Olga Bulgakova, *Gogol'* (1980). A symbol of literature's capacity to reveal inner truths, the mirror exposes humanity's swinish sinfulness, fulfilling the moral destiny that Gogol famously perceived as his.

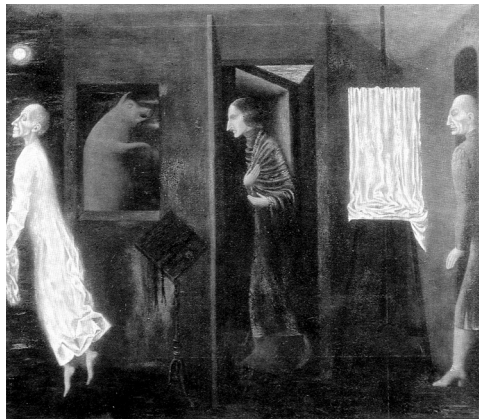


Fig. 18. Olga Bulgakova, *Gogol'* (1978). The writer/artist as mediator between the two antithetical worlds of everyday banality and grossness, on the one hand, and the sublime spirituality of God's grace, on the other.

es that defied rationalism and positivism. The ambivalence of its symbolic status corresponded conceptually to the polar categories of heaven and hell. As such, it partly belonged to the pagan world of folklore, deployed in esoteric rituals especially popular among peasants and occasionally enacted by the upper classes. Such a two-way mirror, which generates images from *zazerkal'e* 'beyond/behind the mirror', figures in the colorful, two-dimensional Palekh illustrations of the fairy tale *The Magic Mirror* (Russia's version of *Snow White*) created by modern craftsmen in the village of Palekh, originally a site of icon-production dating from the sixteenth century. As an intermediary between two worlds, it also populates paintings depicting scenes from various literary works, including Karl Briullov's famous image of *Gadaiushchaia Svetlana* 'Svetlana Telling Her Fortune' (1836). Based on Vasilii Zhukovskii's lighthearted narrative poem *Svetlana*, it captures the eponymous heroine's attempt to divine her conjugal fate through a widespread folk ritual performed by young women: facing the mirror and flanked by candles and water, they endeavored to conjure up the image of their future bridegrooms (fig. 19). Such divinations are the Russian equivalents of scrying, which can assume a considerably more sinister form: two similar works (1902 and 1915) by Konstantin Somov—a *fin-de-siècle* admirer of the French rococo—drama-



Fig. 19. Karl Briullov, *Svetlana Telling Her Fortune* [Gadaiushchaia Svetlana] (1836). Conjuring the image of Mr. Right, which optimally would appear in the mirror.



Fig. 20. Konstantin Somov, *The Sorceress* [Volshebniitsa] (1915). In a relatively rare depiction of necromancy, the mirror magically offers a glimpse of the damned in hell, with the sorceress as enticing medium in a maximally theatrical setting.

tize the practice of sorcery, whereby the mirror affords a glimpse of the infernal. Both depict a formally dressed young woman with an enigmatic expression holding up a framed mirror to the spectator that shows a naked couple, bodies intertwined, in the fires of hell. Somov's 1915 version (*Sorceress*) is more complex, for the mirrored duo (seemingly lesbians) is echoed in the two embracing Cupid-like figures with horns that constitute the pedestal of a small table to the left (fig. 20). On it, a goblet containing a liquid and a toad or frog (in medieval Europe, a symbol of death) emits sulfurous flames—a traditional element of Satan and damnation. Thus, when credited with supernatural powers, the mirror troped mystical aspirations, on the one hand, and, on the other, was an indispensable tool in set procedures determined by credence not only in the paranormal—seances, hypnosis, voodoo—but also in the possibility of summoning recondite evil forces, such as Satan and his minions.

#### Russian Portraits and Self-Portraits

Diversity characterized the relatively few Russian art works that incorporated mirrors in genres other than folklore or self-portraits. The prolific French Neoclassical painter Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842), claimed by Russians as one of their own owing to her residence in St. Petersburg after the French Revolution, produced a portrait (1787) of Julie, her then seven-year-old daughter. Captured in profile, Julie focuses on her own reflection in a mirror that by virtue of being held at an angle makes the absorbed little girl's soft, beguiling face fully visible to the viewer. More characteristic of self-portraits, the versatile conception of differentiated iteration is not compromised by the inaccuracy of the mirror's tilt, which could not possibly correspond to the reflection Lebrun captures on canvas. The child's expression reveals not narcissism but innocent curiosity and wonder. Such is not the case, however, in Boris Kustodiev's image of a woman admiring herself in the mirror, which follows earlier West European Vanitas trends. Targeting class instead of gender, Kustodiev's *Merchant's Wife with Mirror* (1920) ascribes vanity not to womankind, but to a female member of the nouveau riche—the socially mobile class that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century did, indeed, self-consciously pa-

rade affluence on the body as it sought to consolidate its niche in the social hierarchy. Elsewhere the mirror appeared as merely a part of an elegantly appointed interior, as in Valentin Serov's portrait of the art patroness Genrietta Girshman (1907), her back turned to the dressing-table mirror as she faces the viewer.

The sizable corpus of Russian male self-portraits, unlike their West European predecessors, rarely includes mirrors. Two of Somov's several forays into the genre—dated 1928 and 1934—are notable exceptions, and, moreover, depart from tradition by assigning a crucial, *sui generis* role to the mirror and transferring the setting from the artist's studio to a non-professional location. Though the self-portraits are frontal, they modify the genre's conventions by showing only a fraction of the mirror or only a part of the subject's face.<sup>32</sup> In the first, a portion of an oval mirror that nonetheless almost fills the canvas reflects the formally dressed Somov's entire somber visage, while the mirror's beveled frame simultaneously shows a section of his face in slightly enlarged but distorted form (fig. 21). The latter is located on the margin of the mirror, revealing an other Somov. By virtue of not being identical—a discrepancy emphasized by difference in size—the two images suggest a split self. In a letter to his sister, Anna (Mikhailova), dated 31 December 1928, Somov shared his conviction that this portrait most accurately reproduced his likeness and, moreover, was quite unusual and “not banal” (Somov 349). In the later *Self-portrait in Mirror*,<sup>33</sup> Somov appears with only half of his face visible in the traditionally feminine act of self-contemplation in a mirror atop a dressing table laden with colognes, toilet-



Fig. 21. Konstantin Somov, *Self-portrait in the Mirror* [Avtoportret v zerkale] (1928). Juxtaposition of Somov's contingent selves, inseparable from Russian intellectuals' *fin-de-siècle* attempts to unravel what they labeled the mystery of sex.



Fig. 22. Konstantin Somov, *Self-portrait in the Mirror* [Avtoportret v zerkale] (1934). The painter ambiguously occupies a locus feminized by obdurate Vanitas conventions.

ries, candles, a decorative box, flowers (and in this instance, a hand mirror)—accoutrements recalling such self-portraits as the young Zinaida Serebriakova's of 1909 (fig. 22). Yet Somov's unraveled bow-tie, his casual demeanor, and the cigarette dangling from his mouth partly offset this gender association. Entries in his diary (23 August and 5 September 1934) refer to this self-portrait solely as a still life, perhaps his best "study from nature" (422). Feminizing his male subjects, Somov lamented, constituted his perennial weakness (435), but the gender destabilization skillfully implied in these two self-portraits is of a different order, for it reflects a division within the homosexual Somov, which he communicates through fragmentation and ambiguity. Moreover, the use of light and choice of color in the 1934 self-portrait bolsters this split: the sunlit dressing table, rendered in predominantly bright colors, contrasts with the dullish brown against which Somov's face is projected.

Bifurcation marked Somov's personal and professional life in other ways: for instance, his depictions of sophisticated eighteenth-century socialites and his illustrations to three different versions (one German, two French) of *Le Livre de Marquise*—a collection of erotic French poems, stories, and epigrams—comprise widely disseminated images of heterosexual couples in the throes of acceptable intimacy, with the woman's breasts (semi-)exposed.<sup>34</sup> These are some of the most widely reproduced works of Somov's visual legacy, to a considerable extent serving as the basis of his reputation. The hidden, lesser-known Somov, however, produced an uncensored, unabashedly explicit edition of these illustrations, which leave little doubt regarding what probably interested Somov more than the female bosom: the male penis either at full attention or half-mast, often pointed toward the woman's body, fondled by her, or emitting an unmistakable bodily fluid.<sup>35</sup> In one vignette, a woman wielding a whip, naked except for a coat and hat, rides on testicles (as on a sleigh) harnessed to a giant phallus. When juxtaposed, the censored and uncensored sets of visuals raise the issue of the problematic relationship between erotic and pornographic art. Another division in Somov's life, geographical and cultural in nature, separates his years in Russia from those in emigration: leaving Russia at end of 1923, he stayed briefly in the US before heading for Paris, where he resided for the remainder of his life. What the entire span of Somov's career

makes clear is that both in Russia and abroad he, more than any of his contemporaries, exploited the rich potential of the mirror in diverse genres and contexts.

Curiously, while the conventional equation of mirror-gazing and female vanity was largely alien to Russian art, twentieth-century Russian self-portraits with mirrors were painted chiefly by women, and not always in the deconstructionist, polemical, or ironic mode of their Western counterparts. Two of Serebriakova's best-known self-portraits, separated by thirteen years, offer a striking contrast: the young Serebriakova (1909), vivid, ebullient, sensuous (the shift slipping off one shoulder, abundant long hair, perfumes, pearls,), enjoys her Lorelei self-image, and her sheer exuberance makes it difficult to view the candles on the dressing table as a symbol of life's transience and her smile as rooted in Vanitas<sup>36</sup> (fig. 23). Moreover, Serebriakova's adroit placement of the viewer in the position of the mirror breaks with tradition, for instead of gazing at a self-involved sitter we are invited to share in the joy of the lively and lovely young woman as beneficiaries of the smile she directs at us. A dramatically different Serebriakova emerges in the later self-portrait (1922), not a buoyant young woman but a thoughtful, rather melancholy artist, the doubled self-image—both frontal and rear—spotlighting not her gender, but her professional role. Nothing remotely sensuous emanates from her prissy clothes, contained hair, and shuttered facial expression.<sup>37</sup> A gender-neutral aura likewise emanates from the puppet-pioneering Nina Semenovich-Efimova's (1877-1948) self-portrait in her studio (1916-17), which frames the remote artist in a full-length mirror, but also in the classic artist's setting, the walls hung with what are presumably the fruits of her professional labor.

On first glance, two of Bulgakova's self-portraits with her husband, the painter Aleksandr Sitnikov, dated 1976 and 1980, probably strike the Western viewer as code-affirming in their disposition of gender roles, pairing woman and mirror. In the 1970s work,

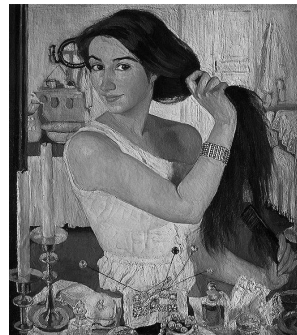


Fig. 23. Zinaida Serebriakova, *Self-portrait (At the Dressing Table)* [Avtoportret (za tualetom)] (1909). The viewer is positioned as the appreciative mirror in a genre much favored by Serebriakova, a member of the renowned artistic Benois family.

while he holds a brush and a piece of paper or canvas, she concentrates on the hand-held mirror that West European art long equated with Vanitas (fig. 24). Bulgakova, however, is not actually checking her face in the mirror, which, given its angle, impossibly reflects part of both her face and a painting on the opposite (unseen) wall, for the mirror here is not a personal accessory, but an essential tool of the artist's profession, in keeping with the items on the table metonymizing other creative callings—literature, music, and applied arts. Signally, Bulgakova called the painting not *The Young Couple* or *Husband and Wife*, but *Molodye khudozhniki* 'Young Artists.' In a kindred vein, the 1980 self-portrait with spouse, titled *Khudozhniki* 'Artists,' revives the Renaissance topos of the mirror as a *sine qua non* of the genre, for without the mirror to guide her—and here again it reflects but half of her face—only her back would be visible (fig. 25).

By contrast, Tat'iana Fedorova's (1952) self-portrait with her daughter (1987) suggests the competing claims of personal and professional experience in her life through a plethora of objects and the two figures' placement within the space of the painting. As markers of the artist's craft, rolled-up canvasses reflected in the rear of the full-length looking glass and reproductions of artworks on the wall to its left seem at odds with the typical signs of femininity scattered throughout the room—dresses thrown on a chair to the right, with a red rose above them, a long pink scarf draped over the mirror, a pair of high-heel shoes on the floor, alongside an apple (Eve?) and miniature teapot or creamer (domesticity). As in *Vanitas* scenarios, the woman gazes intently at her reflection in the mirror, which faces us. While she is riveted to her self-image, the eyes of the little girl, who stands beside the mirror, are fixed on the mother, visible to us only as mediated by the looking glass. Rhythmically interspersed shades

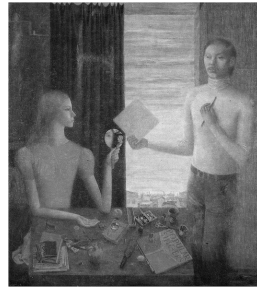


Fig. 24. Ol'ga Bulgakova, *Young Artists* [*Molodye khudozhniki*] (1976). The professionally useful mirror that also tropes art's vaunted mimetic function.



Fig. 25. Ol'ga Bulgakova, *Artists* [*Khudozhniki*] (1980). The mirror facilitating multi-sided self-representation serves the purposes of both artist and viewer.



of pink (one of the dresses tossed on the chair, the scarf in the latter's hair and on the mirror), link mother, daughter (her dress), and the daughter's child (the little pink doll on the floor in front of the mirror), implying that femininity is a legacy passed down through generations. From a feminist standpoint, the painting enlists a mirror principally to articulate a retrograde concept of womanhood traceable to the Renaissance and the Middle Ages.

### Coda

In his BBC television series, converted into the volume *Ways of Seeing*, the British Marxist-feminist John Berger maintained apropos of naked women with mirrors in pre-modern art:

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight. (51)

Manifestly accurate as regards mirrored female nudity, such an assessment tells only part of the mirror's story, as other sections of Berger's study confirm. In art, just as in everyday life, mirrors have fulfilled multiple, often paradoxical, functions throughout the centuries. They revolutionized art, forever altered our perspective on the world and ourselves, and opened up entirely new fields of signification. In our technologically dominated contemporary world, medical science and relentless innovations in modes of mediation, simulation, and communication have endlessly complicated notions of identity, verification, and the relationship of reality or essence to appearance. Yet the mirror's mysteries persist, for, as Sabine Melchior-Bonnet in her survey of the mirror's history remarks, "The mirror will always remain haunted by what is not found within it" (273). But, then, the same may be said of life.

Notes

1 Hesiod's *Theogony* (eighth-seventh century BC) provides basic information about Medusa, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (AD 8) offers the fullest account of the Perseus episode, which Homer's *Odyssey* (800 BC) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC) reference in passing. The myth of Medusa survives in numerous images of her throughout Greece and elsewhere, on vases, amulets, jars, vessels of all sorts, coins, mosaics, shields, temple pediments and decorative panels. For a thorough inventory, see Wilk 31-54. The couturier Gianni Versace appropriated Medusa's image for his ads and as the symbol of the House of Versace.

2 Conflicting versions of the myth describe Medusa as "beautiful," on the one hand, and terrifyingly hideous, on the other, with "serpents for hair, huge teeth, protruding tongue, and altogether so ugly a face that all who gazed at it were petrified with fright" (Graves 242, 238-39). Variants are unanimous, however, in casting Athena as Medusa's vengeful, implacable enemy.

3 Tellingly, Perseus appropriates the eye shared by the three Gracae to obtain information about the items needed to defeat Medusa (Graves 239).

4 See the by now classic study of iconographic misogyny by Bram Dijkstra, especially 132-49.

5 On the female gaze, see Bowers.

6 Since Medusa's disembodied head retains its deathly power, Virgil in Canto IX of Dante's *Inferno* covers Dante's eyes to shield him from seeing it. Notably, Medusa here is associated with the three Furies—creatures that are half-woman, half-serpent—who summon Medusa to transform Dante into stone (IX, 55-57). Along with the other monsters in the inferno, Medusa functions as an instrument of divine punishment. I thank Fritz Graf for help with the original Greek and its meanings here.

7 Roger Caillois's *Man and the Sacred* (2001) makes the same point, particularly in the second chapter, titled "Ambiguity of the Sacred."

8 Another version of the myth has Medusa consent to the coupling.

9 John Varriano's Introduction to Hunt ix. See Lucie-Smith 234-35; and Gill ("A homosexual infatuated with delving in the dregs...") 271. More circumspectly, Patrick Hunt refers to Caravaggio's "possibly ambiguous sexual preferences" (61). Caravaggio regularly substituted his face for that of his subjects, such as Bacchus, David, and the beheaded Goliath.

10 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), cited in Garber and Vickers 57. The French *méduser* (to stupefy or paralyze) does not negate the possibility of stupefaction by something or someone extraordinarily beautiful, which in English might be rendered as "thunderstruck."

11 For the numerous interpretations of Medusa in various disciplines, see the Introduction to the compilation by Garber and Vickers 1-7, especially 3.

12 Ovid's account, according to Max Nelson, is the longest extant version of the myth, and besides that of Conon, the Augustan Greek mythographer, the earliest one to survive (369).

13 Frazer and others elucidate the widespread custom of covering up mirrors or turning them to the wall after a death occurs in a house as a corollary of the equation between soul and reflection. The fear is that the soul, "projected out of the person in the shape of his reflection in the mirror, may be carried off by the ghost of the departed, which is commonly supposed to linger about the house till the burial" (203).

14 The myth in male mode anticipates what subsequently would dominate various painterly allegories of Venus and Vanitas: women hypnotized by their reflections in mirrors.

15 John Milton, John Keats, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, Ted Hughes, Hermann Hesse, and various Russian Romantic and Symbolist poets number among the numerous writers who mined the myth.

16 The parallels between Narcissus and the youth at scrying rituals adduced in Nelson's copiously documented analysis include "a young, beautiful, naïve, eloquent, virginal, fasting boy" transfixed by his own image in calm, clear water, at "a pure and isolated location protected by the sun" (383). In Ovid's version, the motif of divination precedes the plot, for the blind seer Teiresias predicts a long life for Narcissus so long as he "does not come to know himself" (83).

17 On the revolution in science, art, and psychology wrought by the clear-glass mirror, see the University of Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane's YouTube summary of the topic during his lectures on social anthropology. Web. 20 August 2009.

18 Note that adulteresses such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina are mirror-addicted. Though the etymology of venial (pardonable) is Venus, Christianity condemns vanity/pride as a deadly or capital sin, capable of stunting moral development, hence weightier than venial sin.

19 Sources vary in dating the work, some listing 1673-77, when Burne-Jones reportedly kept returning to it, but I have opted for the later date on the basis of its advocates' professional reputation.

20 For Burne-Jones's statement of his alleged intentions here and a brief commentary on the painting, see Wood 119.

21 Based on passages in the Bible, the Seven Deadly Sins subdivided into Three Spiritual Sins (pride, envy, wrath) and Four Corporeal (accidia/sloth, avaricia/

cupiditas/greed, gluttony, lust). The Seven Holy Virtues similarly comprised the Three Spiritual (Theological) Virtues of fides/faith, spes/hope, caritas/charity, and the Four Cardinal (or Pagan) Virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice.

22 Jaeck-Woodgate cites a different translation: “She is the brilliance of everlasting light, an unspotted mirror of the majesty of God, and the image of his goodness.” For an analysis of the image and its debt to Jacopo da Varagine’s *Mariale* in his *Sermones* (late fifteenth century), see Jaeck-Woodgate.

23 The opening chapter of Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* followed the original *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Both volumes confront, in playful ways, phenomena crucial to the mirror (self-perception, reversal, distortion) and concepts associated with it (transformation, access to another, non-rational world, the abyss yawning between the genuinely experienced or physically present and the imagined or intuited).

24 Enlisting the mirror for corrective procedures in the interests of accuracy, Leonardo, as the supreme Renaissance man, investigated proportions and perspective in ways that allied him with such dissimilar artists as Hans Holbein the Younger, whose *Ambassadors* (1533) is a prime example of anamorphosis—painting presenting a distorted image that appears in natural form under certain conditions, as when reflected from a mirror.

25 Flack adds a calendar, lipstick, necklace, and other items in a playful spirit of gaudy excess.

26 Emphasis in original. Malevich’s manifesto is subtitled *The New Realism in Painting*. Web. 22 July 2010.

27 For a volume of criticism devoted to Narcissus in Russian literature, see Peter J. Barta, ed. *Metamorphosis in Russian Modernism*.

28 The volume *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, edited by Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman, insists that “modernism, ostensibly reacting against positivism and realism, actually assimilated some of the fundamental principles of its archenemy” (Paperno 11). Such a viewpoint ignores the inescapable fact that any movement reacting against its predecessor absorbs some of the latter’s “principles,” though usually in a form modified by a comprehensively altered context.

29 In the 1905 self-portrait of Mikhail Vrubel’, whose spiritual bent and obsession with his alter-ego, the Demon, as a being cast down from heaven yet alienated on earth, situates him in a religious context, the interplay of light, shadows, and mirror urges a reading of the work as his mystical tie to the beyond. On this, see Bowlt 93-94.

30 Gogol appears in two other Bulgakova works (1978, 1984), while a third, titled *Strashnaia noch* 'Terrible Night' (Pamiati Gogolia 1981), references his horror story *Strashnaia mest* 'A Terrible Vengeance' (1832), and pays homage to the ghoulish, fantastic atmosphere of his fictional world. All four paintings depict the moon, seen through a window.

31 On the function of mirrors in Gogol's *oeuvre*, see Manukyan.

32 A mirrorless, decentered self-portrait executed in 1998, of a young Somov reclining on a couch, with the right border cutting him off above the knees, attests Somov's proclivity to portray himself as fragmented. It contrasts with the fairly conventional portrait of his father, Andrei Somov (art historian and senior curator at the Hermitage), painted a year earlier, which incorporates a mirror in standard fashion, to show the back of the subject's head.

33 Also known as *Self-Portrait with Still Life* (Avtoportret s natuirmortom).

34 Bared breasts and female (near-)nudity, an enduring staple of West European art, overrun Somov's paintings, and not only those in a retrospective vein. For instance, his *Summer Morning* (1915, revised in 1932) shows a naked red-head in her bedroom, observing herself in a dressing-table mirror and watched, in turn, by her little white dog on an ottoman located between her and the mirror. Her feminine hat and gloves on the dressing table are replaced in Somov's *Intimate Reflection in the Looking-Glass on a Dressing Table* (1934) by a male version of those accessories as a metonymy for the visitor of the brunette *au naturel* lolling in bed and glancing into the mirror across the room.

35 A generous sampling of these images is provided in Kasinec and David.

36 The prevailing mood of youthful exuberance here disqualifies it, in my view, as a work instancing "admiration of the self" (Bowl 92).

37 Serebriakova's later painting, *Tata and Katia* (1917), experiments with spatial augmentation via a hallway of receding mirrors. We see the artist at her easel in the middle ground only as reflected in the dressing-table mirror beside which the two children are located, and that mirror shows a doorway in the background framing a boy (or a mirror casting back his image), with another doorway/mirror behind him. This series of reflections creates the illusion of extraordinary distance, capable of stretching into infinity, whereas the space of the actual room in the foreground is claustrophobically constricted.

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