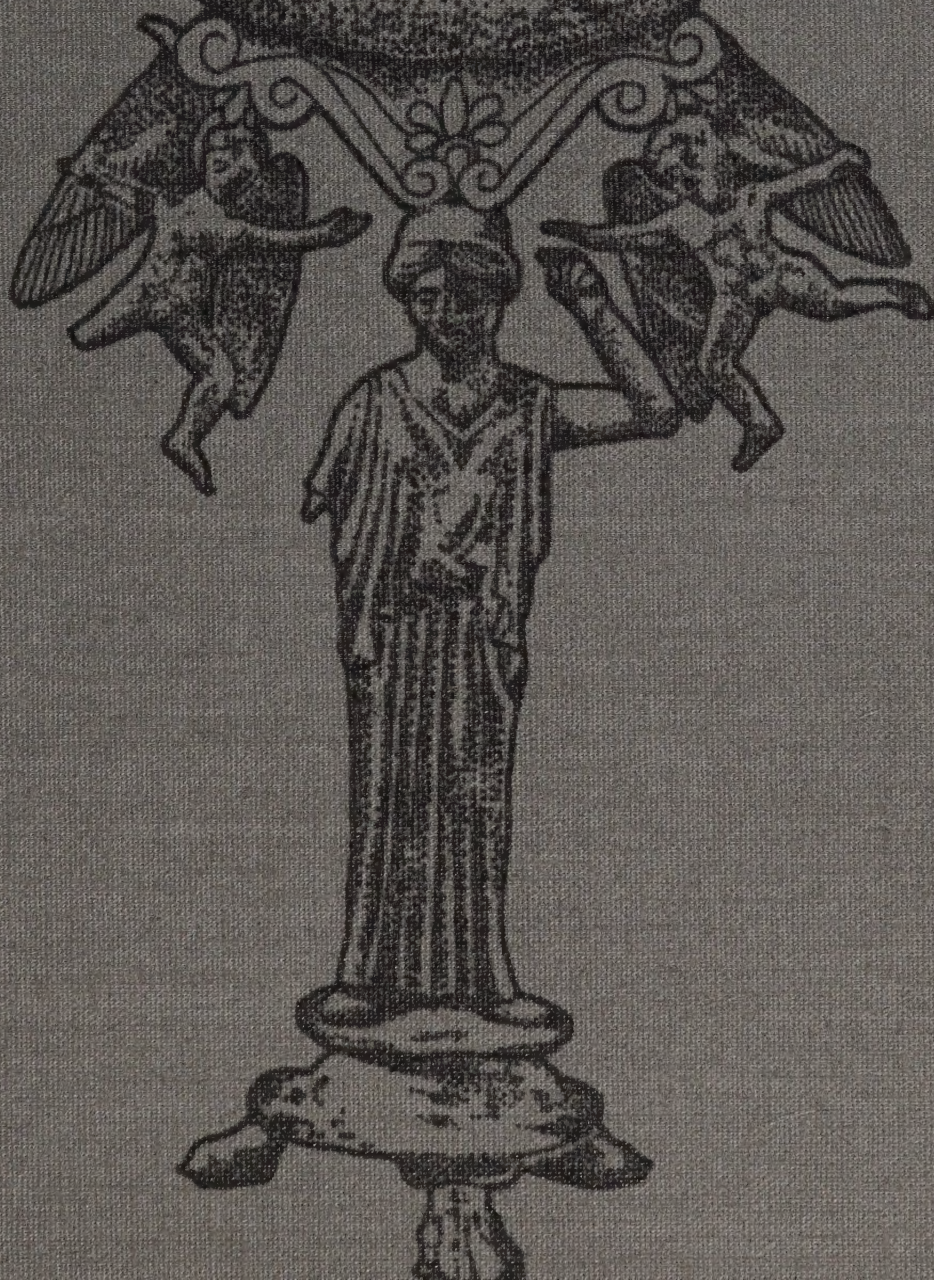
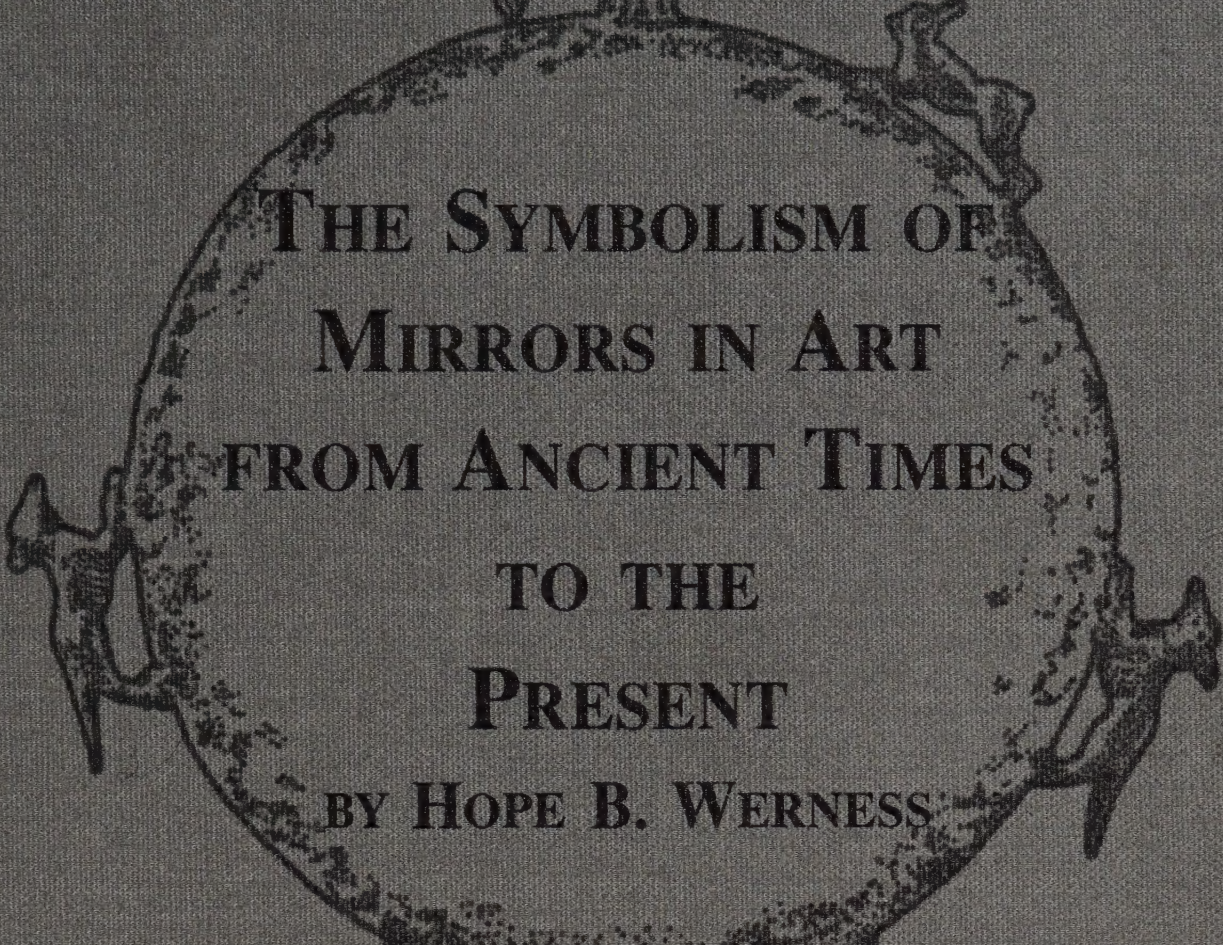


THE SYMBOLISM OF  
MIRRORS IN ART  
FROM ANCIENT TIMES  
TO THE  
PRESENT  
BY HOPE B. WERNESS













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Hope B. Werness

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## DEDICATION

“There are two ways of spreading light: to be  
The candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

-Edith Wharton, *Vesalius in Zante*.

This volume is gratefully dedicated to the sources of light in my life:

To Joanne Benedict, my mother;

To Julie Odette, my sister;

To Maline and George, my daughter and husband;

And to my mentors Henri Dorra and Alfred Moir.



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## FOREWORD by JOHN E. CARROLL

Humans have always been fascinated by images reflected in polished surfaces. This preoccupation with mirrors is underscored by Jacques Lacan, the eminent French psychoanalyst who has developed an elaborate theory based on the “mirror stage” of human development; Lacan has observed that when a chimpanzee sees itself reflected in a mirror, it is momentarily curious and then goes around to investigate the mirror’s back, whereas a human baby will be totally absorbed by its own reflection.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting this intensely human fascination, Professor Werness’ study is an impressive compendium of ideas, commentaries, and visual reproductions of mirrors as functional objects, anthropological artifacts, art forms, and poetic/philosophical ideas from various eras and cultures. Her study thus fills an important need. One can find references to the looking glass and its significance scattered in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and a few full length studies devoted to some aspect of mirrors—their manufacture, uses, artistic designs, and symbolic meanings. Some previous studies of mirrors (Child’s *World Mirrors*, for example) have focused on their importance in general; others, such as De Grummond’s study of Etruscan mirrors, examine them in a specific culture. Until now, none of these studies has brought together the various uses and meanings of mirrors found in widely diverse eras and cultures.

Unless perhaps we break one, most of us take the mirror for granted, whether as an ordinary object that helps us prepare our faces to meet the world or as a safety device that enables us to maneuver in traffic as we drive to work. The “art of the mirror” is far more important in some cultures, as Werness’ text makes clear. Included in her study are reproductions and discussions of mirrors from a number of cultures—Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Celtic, East Indian, Asian, African, Mesoamerican, and Native American, to cite a few. Among the nearly ninety illustrations are mirrors of all types, shapes, and designs: many exquisitely crafted hand mirrors; several circular mirrors; Leonardo da Vinci’s elaborately decorated pocket mirror; a delicate pendant mirror from seventeenth century India; concave and convex mirrors; an octagonal mirror from New Castile; a Peruvian mosaic mirror; Mesoamerican “smoking mirrors”; a diamond-shaped mirror from a Native American Plains culture; and two-way rectangular mirrors incorporated into a modern art work. The study also discusses physical mirrors that adorn costumes, headdresses, ceremonial hangings, drums, statues, and sarcophagi.

As an artist and art historian, Werness is very much concerned with the often intricate decorations and images on mirror frames, backs, and cases; her close attention to these aspects of mirror design is an important and interesting paragon to her study. Like the polished mirror surfaces, the frames and backs are made from a variety of materials. In addition to reflecting the areas and cultures from which the mirrors originate, the materials also reflect varying degrees of nature/artifice. In this regard, and without implying that one is artistically superior to the other, it is interesting to compare the copper mirror with carved wooden handle from dynastic Egypt (p. 16) with, say, the one in silver by Vever, from late nineteenth century France (p. 142). Clearly the primitive and modern reflect each other in revealing ways.



Professor Werness' interest in mirrors is not mere fascination with the reflecting glass. Perhaps just as important as the physical qualities of mirrors, at least with respect to her study, are their non-material implications and associations. In speculating in her overview on modern humankind's loss of the "numinousness of experience" to the gods of technology, she mirrors some of the views expressed by famous Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Jung, who, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, bemoans the spiritual problem of the (post)modern age. Jung believes that "man" has lost his soul because he has forfeited his mythic roots, his origins. (Post)modern man has thus become like Balduin, the protagonist in Hanns Ewer's film-drama, *The Student of Prague* (inspired by E.T.A. Hoffman's tale, "The Story of the Lost Reflection"), whose soul is captured in a mirror due to his narcissistic lust for material goods. We perhaps should heed Jung's (and Werness') admonition that we cannot live without meaning (as soulless creatures) and without spiritual values. Werness suggests that we can perhaps recapture part of our lost heritage by studying the complex of ideas and meanings associated with mirrors and their uses in religion, mythology, folklore, magic, and art.

For many of us, a broken mirror means bad luck; others associate the mirror with narcissism; some link a covered mirror with death; a few others associate a dusty or tarnished mirror with the ephemerality of life and the vanity of human wishes. Occasionally when we look in a mirror we see an "other"—a reversed double of ourselves that creates a sense of the uncanny. Ancient and primitive peoples understood the origin and significance of this double/other and the feelings it evokes; they saw in the looking glass (as do some attuned moderns) something altogether more profound and reflective of the mystery of life, an other reality. The ancients found evidence in it of their deities, a spirit world, and their center. Professor Werness' study is a comprehensive presentation of the

intriguing uses and symbolic meanings of mirrors in both ancient and modern cultures. These uses and meanings essentially are associated with the cycles of human life, and there are mirrors linked to birth, the rites of passage, marriage, death, and beyond to the afterlife. As Werness unfolds her subject in chronological order (from 1862 BCE to the twentieth century), patterns and universal themes emerge. Recognizing that the various utilitarian and symbolic values often overlap, we might divide them roughly into several categories, as suggested by Werness' overview, the visuals she has assembled, and by the commentaries accompanying these visuals.

One of the more pervasive categories involves mirrors associated with the deity and the spirit world, as well as with the shamans and goddesses who serve as intermediaries to this realm. Besides representing the supreme deity (or ultimate principle) in many cultures, the mirror signifies the world of spirits, as well as an entranceway to this realm. In addition to these general meanings, mirrors among the Maya were also used for divination and for attaining visionary states. In the East mirrors traditionally have been associated with expanded consciousness; in Japan, mirrors are used for meditation and emptying the mind, as reflected by this Zen *koan*: “No more water in the pail; no more moon in the water.”

Equally protean are the social/political implications of the mirror. While these often overlap with the religious/spiritual category, there are some distinguishing points, as, for example, the mirror representing high social status in ancient world cultures. In some cultures the mirror was also a badge of office or a signifier of political power. In Egypt, Asia, and elsewhere, mirrors buried with the dead had both spiritual and social/political significance—to ward off darkness/evil and to insure continuity of the family lineage. This duality of sacred and profane meaning is reflected, as if by a two-way mirror, in the Egyptian word

*ankh*, which means both “mirror” and “eternal life.” A similar overlapping can be seen among the Mayans, where the mirror symbolized a ruler’s earthly power, his ties to the spiritual world, and his divine authority. Werness provides ample evidence of how the mirror’s various functions and symbolic meanings overlap, as in ancient Mesoamerica where the mirror served social, spiritual, and functional purposes: as a sign of royalty, as the spirit double, and, like those worn as part of priestly regalia at Teotihuacan (p. 59), as a means of “magically” starting fires during rituals. Acknowledging probable differences in composition, function, and meaning, one is still tempted to draw a parallel between the omniscient “mirror-eye” mounted on the costume of an eighteenth century Siberian shaman (p. 122) and mirrors worn by the Teotihuacan priests, as well as those adorning the headdresses of Igbo goddesses (p. 164).

If mirrors used in shamanistic practice join the spiritual and social realms, those of the goddess have broader implications. Indeed a complex of ideas associated with the goddess forms a wholly separate category; at the same time, it overlaps with all the other categories under discussion.

Like the shaman and male deities, the “Great Goddess” has significant relationships to the mirror—relationships Werness elucidates throughout her study. Indeed, the mirror in many cultures represents the goddess. In turn, the goddess in her various avatars—Athena, Venus, Demeter, Mary, Turan—is the mirror of the earth; mirror and goddess thus have numerous associations, including fertility and the continuity of life. Interesting and revealing patterns emerge as Werness connects the feminine and the mirror to ceremonies reflecting the cycles of life in the Mediterranean region, medieval Europe, and modern day India and Pakistan. To illustrate the connections between goddess and mirror, Werness has included a splendid series of dramatic paintings of Venus by Rubens, Velazquez,

and Edward Burne-Jones. Paintings by Manet, Hunt, and Picasso further reveal the ubiquity of the feminine and the mirror.

The strong association between what Werness terms the “eternal feminine” and the mirror is to be seen in part as a reflection of women’s concerns with appearances: the “mirror-mirror-on-the-wall” syndrome. Werness quickly adds that there is far more to the picture than vanity and concern for beauty. Whether as a hand mirror, a pocket mirror, or pendant mirror, the looking glass is an invaluable resource for the woman concerned with her appearance. Yet even as she uses the mirror to prepare herself to meet the world, as Werness notes, a woman renews her age-old connection with the goddess. The material thus becomes spiritual!—especially when the mirror’s handle is formed as a figure of the goddess (see pp. 18, 22, 30, and 34). As an attribute of the goddess, the looking glass is a silent, but powerful reflector of feminine consciousness, like the archetype of “the silent woman.” Werness’ study effectively demonstrates that the looking glass has reflected the power of the goddess and the feminine for thousands of years. Although the mirror has strong connections to the goddess, social mirroring is a male-dominated phenomenon, women having traditionally formed their concepts of self, for better or worse, partly as a consequence of the gaze of the (male) other. Realizing that the looking glass is not reliable as a presenter of the self, some women, as Jenijoy La Belle has noted in her recent book *Herself Beheld*, are seeking to deconstruct the mirror as a “male-directed instrument” that fetishizes women as objects. The psychology of mirroring has become increasingly important to women, and more are adopting Luce Irigaray’s call (in *Speculum of the Other Woman*) for women to free their bodies from “male/mirror tyranny” and form a self “outside the mirror,” through writing and art.<sup>2</sup>

In considering the relation between mirrors and the feminine, we saw that the mirror has important implications for art. Its “artistic” uses are multi-dimensional in that the mirror can be seen as 1) an art object itself (as any mirror in Werness’ assemblage suggests); 2) a material part of an art work (Graham’s *Two Adjacent Pavilions*, p. 170); 3) a symbolic motif in a painting (Greuze’s *Broken Mirror*, p. 120, is but one among many in the study); or 4) a technique, as in the example of how mirroring influences and reflects perspective in Velazquez’s *Las Meninas* (p. 114, which also illustrates how mirroring serves as an artistic motif). Werness includes several paintings from fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe that make inventive use of the convex mirror as both motif and technique—for example, Van Eyck’s rendering of the marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami (p. 84), which inspired the convex mirror in Hunt’s nineteenth century painting, *The Lady of Shalott* (p. 144). For obvious reasons, artists (especially Surrealists) are particularly fascinated by the mirror, as Werness’ presentation bears out. Offering a special case, Magritte’s painting, *Not to be Reproduced* (p. 162), with its unusual perspective (a subject with his back to the viewer faces a mirror; it is not his front, as a viewer might expect, but his back that is reflected) opens up intriguing possibilities and deconstructs our notion of mirror image. In defying the mirror, Magritte seems to create an “anti-mirror” effect and provides one answer to the question, “What might a postmodern mirror look like?” The reproductions of paintings in Werness’ study reflect the “mirror of art” and “the art of the mirror”—the artists’ manipulation of illusion and reality. In passing, it might be noted that Werness gives attention to mirrors in architecture, represented by one sixteenth century mirror with architectural design (p. 92), by several illustrations and informative discussions of halls and chambers of mirrors such as the one at Versailles (p. 117), which Werness terms

“spectacular,” and by Graham’s modern architectural simulacrum, *Two Adjacent Pavilions* (p. 170).

Artists and writers use the mirror, like the sages and philosophers of ancient cultures, as a metaphor of self-reflection—some of them to the extent that it becomes, as in Graham’s work in which two two-way mirrors reflect each other, a phenomenological device to reflect consciousness onto itself—or (a viewer being positioned between the mirrors), the illusion of consciousness “seeing itself seeing itself.”<sup>3</sup> Used as poetic, philosophical (and psychological) symbols, the mirror as metaphor can reflect different states of consciousness. In presenting the world as mirrored illusion, the artist demonstrates via technique that which thinkers philosophize about, or as Graham has it: “My work always had a little of the idea of philosophical models that were material at the same time” (p. 171). The epigraphs to Werness’ study are pithy illustrations of how the mirror serves as a metaphor or a poetic/philosophical idea, as a means to discover truth (?) and achieve self-knowledge.

Another of the delightful strengths of this study is the mirroring effect created by the intertext between mirror images and words that complement them. Werness’ citing of poems by Sylvia Plath, or Shakespeare, or Japanese poet Setcho to complement a painting or reproduction of an artifact adds another rich dimension to her study. This juxtaposition between text and mirror reveals some startling motifs and suggests the close relationship between language and mirror. One of the issues that concern semioticians and other theorists is whether the mirror should be accorded semiotic (signifying) status. Semiotician Umberto Eco asserts that the mirror does not “truly” signify, that it is merely “a catoptric prosthesis.”<sup>4</sup> Eco’s view of mirroring conflicts with Lacan’s theory that language develops out of pre-linguistic semiosis that begins with the “mirror stage.” Not necessarily taking a side in this debate, Jenijoy La Belle argues that mirroring has

for some time constituted for women a kind of semiotic activity. La Belle, like some other female writers, sees a tie between the mirror and written texts; she states that inevitably “complex transactions between mirroring and writing [occur] when the experience of mirroring is communicated to us through a text.”<sup>5</sup> We might go further and state that the mirror is a kind of text.<sup>6</sup> Werness herself creates mirrors as functional art; and although she is too modest to include illustrations of any of them in this study, I have seen many of her creations. She has written on the frames of some and, more to the point, has inscribed a poem in a spiraling pattern on the face of at least one mirror, by engraving letters (in reversed form) on the silvered backing. Werness’ (inter)texts (both in this volume and the physical mirrors she has created) thus become more instances of the “countless times,” according to La Belle, that women have treated the mirror as semiotic. In significant ways, Werness’ study makes us aware that, contra Eco, the mirror does take on “true” semiotic qualities. Moreover, as a result of its use as a signaling device (a type of semaphore) by Native Americans of the Plains (and by military units, p. 132), the mirror participates in a semiotic system.

In studying the mirror as functional object and as signifier of meaning, Dr. Werness’ method is inductive, comparative, and interdisciplinary. She has assembled a remarkable collection of visual reproductions that allow us to see the similarities and differences in the uses and implications of mirrors from different cultures and eras. She examines her topic from a variety of perspectives: religious-philosophical, social, mythological, anthropological/ritual, artistic, and poetic (metaphoric). Indeed, her comparative, multi-cultural, and interdisciplinary perspective constitutes one of the most important contributions of the work. Werness’ education and extensive training in art, art history, mythology and folklore, coupled with her many years of teaching, have served her well in this undertaking. Moreover, her artistic temperament and experience as a practicing

artist have contributed in significant ways to the selection and arrangement of materials for this study.

This book is full of mirror lore; moreover, Werness' text is rich and at times subtle in its mirrored structures. Careful reading of her text and viewing of the illustrations are repaid with surprising and edifying results. Recurring images and motifs reflect each other—sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly—in a kind of play: the primitive becomes modern and the modern becomes primitive; the art of the mirror becomes the mirror or art; the text becomes a mirror as the mirror becomes a text; the material becomes spiritual; and so on. The eye of God is mirrored again and again, whether in a ceremonial mirror, or in the beautiful Peacock mirror formerly attributed to Tiffany, or in Magritte's *False Mirror*. Motifs of astrological animals on mirrors from diverse cultures reflect one another. The image of the goddess in her positive aspect as Venus is obversely reflected by her negative image in Medusa, who is destroyed by her own mirrored image. This mirroring continues, from the sublime to the whimsical and parodic. Werness occasionally winks at the reader/viewer as if through a one-way mirror—as in the comparison of humans and simians (pp. 99, 103) or in the quick movement from Chinese wisdom to Woody Allen. Werness teases us to look more closely at ourselves, reminding us of Jonathan Swift's definition of satire in his preface to *The Battle of the Books*: "Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own." Beholding ourselves in a mirror, we may reflect that with time the mirror of vanity grows dusty. A tarnished and or dusty mirror suggests the end result of "the vanity of human wishes" and is mirrored subtly by the ornate Tuscan mirror (p. 86) which has the same shape as the Korean mirror of judgment (p. 168). The mirror of vanity/temporality becomes the tarnished mirror of karmic deeds. The two set up a kind of play of mirrors and reflect Werness' pattern of illustrating the chronology of the mirror



from birth to the afterlife and judgment. Between those two markers of human destiny, life is a hall of mirrors that, like Werness' study, creates an incessant play of reflections. Perhaps W.B. Yeats says it best in his poem, "Statues": "Mirror on mirror: mirrored is all the show." Let the play begin!

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," delivered at the 16<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, July 17, 1949. Reprinted in *Ecrits: A Selection*, by Jacques Lacan. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 179-180. See Luce Irigaray, *The Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 143.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), p. 82. Although Lacan is specifically talking about the "gaze," his comments seem nonetheless applicable to the mirror (which he terms a "virtual space," p. 86), particularly when viewed from the midpoint between what Lacan terms the Imaginary and the Symbolic registers, between perception and linguistic consciousness. The situation of the subject positioned between Graham's mirrors would set up an "infinite regress" in a "virtual" hall of mirrors.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 210.

<sup>5</sup> La Belle, pp. 153, 154.

<sup>6</sup> There are many examples in literature of the mirror as a kind of text, which probably dates back at least to the middle ages when encyclopedists conceived of the universe as a vast text that mirrored the creator. Vincent of Beauvais' great *Mirror*, the *Speculum majus* (with its subdivision into four mirrors) is a splendid example.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my colleagues for their insightful contributions. Dr. C. Roxanne Robbin read and thoughtfully commented on my overview. I owe a particular debt to Dr. John E. Carroll. In his foreword Professor Carroll reflects on the mirrors presented here, and his insights, particularly those stemming from his interest in postmodernism, wonderfully illuminate the topic. Finally, I greatly appreciate the beauty that Scott Thomas' line drawings have added to this volume.



## MIRRORS, AN OVERVIEW

Much of the magic of life, of the old ways, is lost in our pragmatic Western, technological society. We may have made grand advances in human rights, but we have sacrificed an understanding of the numinousness of experience. By studying mirrors and the old ideas and symbols connected with them, we can retrieve some of that lost heritage.

In our daily rush to get on about our business, we rarely are struck by the strangeness of the mirror that we look in as we brush our teeth.<sup>1</sup> When we do, a mystery opens up before our very eyes, a reminder that there is more to life than surface appearance. In fact, the many uses and meanings of mirrors, like a veritable hall of mirrors, reflect and reverberate back and forth. A cluster of similar ideas can be found in encyclopedias and dictionaries on symbolism, where we read that mirrors symbolize intellect, imagination, vision and truth. Furthermore, the intangibility of mirror reflections serves to remind us that the material world is only a dim reflection of an unseen, ineffable spiritual reality, of powerful divine forces beyond our comprehension. Mirrors give us a glimmer of this other reality:

ISLAM: The universe is the mirror of God.  
-ibn al-Nasafi<sup>2</sup>

MEISTER ECKHART: The soul contemplates itself in the mirror

of Divinity. God Himself is the mirror, which He conceals from whom He will, and uncovers to whom He will....The more the soul is able to transcend all words, the more it approaches the mirror. In this mirror union occurs as pure undivided like-ness.<sup>3</sup>

CHINA: Just as it is in the nature of a mirror to shine, so all beings at their origin possess spiritual illumination. When, however, passions obscure the mirror, it becomes covered over, as if with dust. When false thoughts, under the direction of the master, are overcome and destroyed, they cease to proclaim themselves. Then is the Intellect illumined, in accordance with its nature, and nothing remains unknown. It is like the polishing of a mirror....

-Tsong-mi.<sup>4</sup>

JAPAN: Penetrating the puzzle of a Zen *koan* [tests, mind knots, designed to break attachment to materialism, dualism and the notion of fixed precepts] "...is like two mirrors mutually reflecting one another without even the shadow of an image between. Mind and the objects of mind are one and the same; things and oneself are not two. 'A white horse enters the reed flowers'; 'snow is piled up in a silver bowl'."<sup>5</sup>

Through the transformative power of images and language, human beings even become mirrors themselves, mirroring the divine:

CHINA: The mind of the Sage, being in repose, becomes the mirror of the universe.

-Chuang Tzu<sup>6</sup>

ISLAM: Because of His innumerable perfections, God wanted to contemplate His own Essence in an object comprising all reality, so as to manifest His own mystery to Himself...For a being's knowledge of himself in himself is not the same as knowledge of himself by means of something other that acts for him like a mirror. Such a mirror shows him to himself in the form corresponding to the "plane of reflection" and the reflection resulting from it....

-Muhyi 'd-Din ibn 'Arabi<sup>7</sup>

These complex ideas, which are part of the history of religion and philosophy, filter down and appear in another form at the level of folk beliefs. Even in the twentieth century the belief that breaking a mirror brings bad luck is widespread. Mirrors are thought to be capable of catching and holding the human soul as well as the scenes that have passed before them or are yet to come. By breaking a mirror, thus, one risks losing one's soul, the past and the future.<sup>8</sup> In many cultures, mirrors are used to "see" into the past and the future as, for instance, in Ancient Mexico (e.g. pp. 28, 59, 91). In the British Isles, it was common well into the twentieth century to cover all the mirrors in the house when someone died, for fear of the soul being caught there.<sup>9</sup> The belief that mirrors can act as receptacles for the soul is doubtless one of the reasons mirrors were buried with the dead (see pp. 45, 49, 51, 57). But there is a metaphorical connection as well. In antiquity, grave goods were arranged in reverse (mirror image) fashion, in keeping with the idea that the "other world" of death is a mirror image of earthly life.<sup>10</sup>

If the mirror reflects souls, the past and the future, it may be perceived as a kind of bridge between levels or states of reality. And, then too, the mirror's property of reversing that which it reflects suggests that there may be a parallel universe on its other side—that what we see "in" it is in some sense alive and independent of us. There are numerous instances of this phenomenon in literature, such as Lewis Carroll's Alice who passed through the looking-glass into another world. A more modern rendering is found in Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Beyond these general ideas, there are some rather more specific similarities between the images depicted on mirrors backs and frames and their implications in world cultures. The ways in which mirrors are used also recur throughout the world. These similar uses and complex, overlapping meanings occur because

mirrors are linked to a number of universal themes. Mirrors symbolize the power, the primacy, of sight/seeing and thereby become metaphors for the spirit/soul. Because of their rarity in the ancient world, mirrors were emblems of status, power and continuity. The mirror's connection with continuity in earthly families is paralleled on a broader scale in its tie with the eternal feminine. Linked with mortal women and with many goddesses, the mirror was a powerful symbol of the ancient Great Goddess, herself a mirror of the earth. Finally, mirrors are symbols and containers of the eternal light sources, the sun and the moon. When placed in tombs, they continue to reflect those eternal lights and thus allay the darkness of death. Thus, not only because they are believed to hold and protect the soul, but also because they are associated with human and cosmic continuity, with light and immortality, they supplant death itself.

#### The Eyes as the Mirror of the Soul

Sight takes precedence over the other senses in most world cultures. It is not surprising, thus, that we say the eyes are the mirror of the soul—this idea is so old and so persistent, we do not even really consider what it means. Taken at face value, we look into the eyes of others to see what they are feeling, whether they are being truthful or false; we see the soft look of love or hatred's glare in the eyes of others. Less literally, in the eyes of another, we believe we can see something of their spiritual presence. The ancient Egyptians engraved eyes on mirrors which they buried with the dead (p. 20). The mirror functioned like an eye, providing light and sight in the darkness of the tomb. More importantly, though, the mirror could "contain" the soul. The mysterious properties of mirrors, especially their passive doubling of reality, serve as a fitting metaphor for the soul, which lighter than a feather, like a breath, inhabited the physical bodies of living individuals. The Egyptians believed that this ineffable thing transcended death, but still needed a place to reside. Elaborate embalming practices preserved



the body; stone “reserve” heads and mirrors were all placed in tombs to provide an eternal resting place for the soul. The obsessive way that the Egyptians multiplied objects, a kind of mirroring, which served the same function suggests that they were uncertain about the objects’ efficacy. On the other hand, it is also possible that they hoped, in this way, to foil the ubiquitous robbers who often looted tombs immediately after they were sealed. In any event, Egyptian souls had plenty of choices of residence and enticements to hang around.

Maya nobles wore mirrors in their elaborate headdresses, like a third eye. A tendril of smoke arises from these mirrors, originating in the earthly and passing into the spiritual realm (pp. 64, 82).<sup>11</sup> On the lid of a sarcophagus, one of the most spectacular of all Maya monuments, the great lord Pacal of Palenque (p. 64) is shown at the moment of his death. Pacal lies like an infant on his back, arms raised upward in a pose reminiscent of the earliest of all instinctive gestures. Immediately above his left eye is the mirror with its wisp of smoke, his soul set free to enter the realm of the gods.

Although the polished metal disks and mirrors on shaman’s costumes (p. 122) do not have eyes rendered on them, they nonetheless work like eyes, providing the shaman with a penetrating vision that can assist him as he enters the spiritual realm to search for the souls of those lost and wandering in illness or death.

In our modern world, we question the reliability of knowledge and “insight,” and mirrors provide metaphors to display such doubts. Francis Bacon used the mirror metaphor to express his thoughts on the matter: “The human understanding is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it.”<sup>12</sup> Magritte’s *False Mirror* (p. 156) terrifyingly reflects the same idea—the lens is replaced by a black hole which swallows the light and gives nothing back.

### Mirrors, Status, Power, and Continuity

Although mirrors are intimately linked with women, they are often emblems of social status, used to symbolize the power of masculine rulers and to dramatize the continuity of a family dynasty. The burial of mirrors with the Egyptian pharaohs and the making of spectacular mirrors for individuals such as Tutankhamen (p. 21) indicate their significance in that culture. And certainly in Classical times, the owners of mirrors were amongst the upper classes of Greece, Etruria and Rome.

The life of the royal courts is pictured on mirrors owned by thirteenth century Seljuk courtiers (p. 70), along with symbols of power, such as mighty birds of prey with outstretched wings. Mirrors were family heirlooms in Japan. Often numbering as many as thirty or more, mirrors were buried with the dead, representing a considerable fortune. Some have inscriptions emphasizing the continuity of the family and filial duty such as, “may you forever have dutiful sons and grandsons”<sup>13</sup> The importance of mirrors is reflected also in the sacred insignia of the emperor—a mirror, a sword and a jewel. The mirror is a sign of office handed to a new emperor upon accession to power, symbolizing both spiritual power and responsibility.

In the Renaissance, mirror backs (p. 86) were sculpted with family coats of arms and placed, as part of aristocratic brides’ dowries, in the carved and painted *cassoni* as a symbol of status and the continuity of family lines through marriage. This same significance is doubtless part of the complex “hidden symbolism” of Jan van Eyck’s *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami (?)* (p. 84) as well as in Furtenagel’s portrait of Burgkmair and his wife (p. 97) who holds a mirror handle which reads “hope of the world.”

The spectacular *Galerie des glaces* at Versailles (p. 117) is a reminder of the power of Louis XIV, the Sun King. The mirrors made a statement not only

because of their sheer extravagance, but because they, like Louis, transform the space in their immediate environment. They reflect the king's divine authority. At the same time, they line the walls of the corridor through which courtiers approached the king, and thus overwhelm and intimidate by reflecting the imperfections of those of lesser status.<sup>14</sup>

The same concern with continuity and with divine authority can be seen in the ancient cultures of the Americas. Particularly powerful use of mirror imagery occurs among the Maya (pp. 64, 69). Royal regalia included mirrors worn in headdresses and on breast, back and shoulder. These mirrors were, ultimately, symbols of the spirit world and of the gods. The mirror symbolized both the ability of the ruler to enter the realm of the gods as well as his social responsibility and role as intermediary, since he (like the Japanese emperor) was "the mirror of the community."<sup>15</sup> Perhaps mirrors, in this context, are a reminder of the illusory nature of power, which, as the Maya say of human perception, is "like breath on a mirror."<sup>16</sup>

### Mirrors and the Feminine

Due to the idea that women have been traditionally concerned with their appearance, mirrors are intimately linked with the feminine. The reasons for the link are not at all trivial—originally, mirrors were attributes of the ancient Great Goddess, whose very being mirrored and was symbolic of the earth itself, its fullness, fecundity and endlessness.<sup>17</sup>

The earliest objects believed to be mirrors, dating around c. 6000-5900 BCE, come from the matriarchal culture of Catal Huyuk.<sup>18</sup> The Egyptian word for mirror, *ankh* (meaning both mirror and eternal life), derived from Libyan and Phoenician images of the goddess.<sup>19</sup> In Egypt, the handles of mirrors were often formed as graceful female bodies and the mirror itself was linked with Hathor, the cow-headed goddess of love (pp. 16, 18). These mirrors were buried with the

dead, often under the head of the mummy, wrapped inside the bundle.

Representations of beautiful sleeping women lie curled up in trees on Mycenaean mirrors from the so-called tomb of Clytemnestra.<sup>20</sup> The imagery on Greek mirrors covers an astonishing range of mythological subjects (pp. 43, 47), and representations of mirrors appear in scenes on Greek vases. A number of Classical goddesses are connected with mirrors—at the Sanctuary of Demeter, mirrors foretold whether the sick would survive or die.<sup>21</sup> Athena's aegis was used as a mirror by Theseus to slay the Gorgon Medusa. Artemis, sirens and nymphs also appear, etched in fine lines, on mirror backs. Aphrodite, whose attribute is the mirror, is seen in all her voluptuousness, attended by Eros (p. 42). By the fifth century BCE she appears in earthly scenes showing the preparation of the bride for marriage. This goddess inspires love in all its variety—earthly, sensual, erotic, conjugal and ideal. By the Hellenistic period, the increasing popularity of the cult of Dionysos (God of wine, the senses and, as a dying/rising deity, of immortality) had an impact on the iconography found on mirror backs. Such mirrors depict nuptial preparations; however, these weddings are part of Dionysian initiation scenes which conflate funereal and marriage symbolism.<sup>22</sup> Turan, the equivalent of Aphrodite/Venus, was a favorite subject emblazoned on the Etruscan mirrors (p. 44) buried with men and women. The beautiful and elegant depictions of Turan emphasize ideal rather than erotic love, since she is depicted fully clothed.<sup>23</sup> In Classical times, the living women who used these mirrors were daily reminded of the goddess, reminded that they themselves embodied the variety of ways that love and beauty are made manifest. The stages of their lives were reflected in the mirrors—child, bride, wife, mother, elder. And as they faced death, they could draw reassurance from the images of the goddess which they took into their tombs, of her eternal, life-giving, nurturing love that goes beyond death.

A very ancient link between the feminine and mirrors is the basis of the Kabbalist concept of the *Shekhinah*, “the female indwelling presence of God in the world”.<sup>24</sup> Although she herself is never depicted visually, the *Shekhinah* is linked directly with the *sefirot* which is rendered as a symmetrical “tree” shape, the branches of which serve as metonymies for the nature of God. As the “mirror that does not shine,” she actively reflects all that the *sefirot* signifies.

The importance of the goddess survives in the Medieval period in Marian symbolism. The Virgin Mary is the mirror herself—the *speculum sine macula*—the spotless mirror. She mirrors most perfectly God’s being, as the divine is made manifest in her son, Jesus. As a sign of vanity in Medieval iconography, Venus is often depicted holding a mirror. This symbolism continued throughout the Renaissance, where the Neo-Platonists linked the Virgin with Venus as the embodiment of spiritual love. At the same time, however, Venus’ self-absorption had become not only a symbol of truth, but also of pride, vanity and lust.<sup>25</sup> Male viewers had the edifying, yet voyeuristic pleasure of looking at a beautiful female body; Venus’ s mirror attribute served as a reminder of the danger in female power, in sensuality and self-absorption, as well as being a *memento mori*. Images of Venus as the focus of the male gaze seem to reach a high point in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, where her eroticized, fleshy body seems to have little in common with the ancient life-giving goddess. Even so, mirror motifs appear in the work of male artists who record feminine beauty and sensuality in ways that recall the older traditions. Velazquez (p. 112), Manet (p. 140), and Picasso (p. 158) all focus their intent male gazes on female bodies, but they also build in mystery which implies more than the merely material. Velazquez, for instance, paints the long sensual line of Venus’ s back, suggesting the beauty of her face as an ephemeral mirror reflection, neatly balancing corporeal and spiritual, body and soul.

Goddess worship and the traditional connection between brides and mirrors can also be seen in India. In ancient times, the bridegroom placed a mirror in the left hand of his betrothed, making their earthly wedding a reflection of a heavenly one.<sup>26</sup> In modern India, bride and groom look at their reflections in a mirror or series of mirrors. In some areas, brides wear heavily embroidered dresses, spangled with mirrors (p. 150), while elsewhere, special mirror cloths (p. 151) are hung above doorways when weddings are celebrated.<sup>27</sup> These doubtless are protective; the shining eyes of the mirrors drive away evil spirits, but the mirrors also symbolize the double life of two people joined in marriage and recall the bride's connection with the goddess, another link in the chain of life-giving mothers.

#### Sun/Moon

The Egyptians linked mirrors with both the sun and the moon. Tutankhamen's mirror case, for example, is decorated with the solar scarab and sun disks (p. 21). Although it does not appear on Tut's mirror, the left eye frequently is depicted on mirrors. Both eyes are symbols of light, the right linked with the sun and left with the moon. The Egyptians understood that the moon was not itself a light source, but instead reflected the light of the sun—it thus became a symbol of divine light imprisoned in matter and (like a mirror) a receptacle of the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, in Asia the mirror is associated with the two great heavenly lights. Chinese mirrors are believed to catch and hold the rays of the sun, providing light in the darkness of the tomb. In Japan, the mirror is the symbol of the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu. Shamans' costumes include mirrors and solar and lunar disks. Korean mirrors of judgment are surrounded by tongues of solar flames (p. 168).

Both solar and lunar symbolism are incorporated in Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (p. 158). The girl's figure is delineated with warm, sunny colors, fragmented like a stained glass window, while her reflection is made up of shadowy cool, lunar colors. The faces of both figures contain frontal and profile images which are formed like the solar disk and lunar crescent, melding into and eclipsing one another.

The lunar symbolism of mirrors is linked, once again, with the feminine. Beyond the notion that the moon is feminine, as it reflects the light of the masculine sun, the moon has phases which since the beginning of time have been compared with menstrual cycles. The moon dies and is reborn eternally, a constant reminder of immortality. The goddess is eternally fertile through thirteen cycles each year. Mortal women, likewise, come of age; some become pregnant and give birth; all grow old and die. The moon's example suggests that there is life beyond death. And the life-giving body of the goddess, the earth herself, whose shadow creates the moon's waxing and waning, is immortal.

In the same way that mirrors gather light and reflect it, they gather meanings and reflect them. In looking at mirrors we can see the kaleidoscope of human beliefs about the cosmos, about men and women, about life and death, and beyond.

## NOTES

1. For technical information on the history of mirrors see Graham Child's *World Mirrors*, Serge Roche, *et al. Mirrors*, and *The Dictionary of Art*. The earliest glass mirrors were made by the Romans (Albenda in *The Dictionary of Art* 1996: 713; Litvinskii in Eliade 1987: 556). Although blown glass mirrors (as well as rock crystal and polished metal) existed in the Medieval period, mirrors didn't come into widespread use until the mid fifteenth century. Around 1500, Venetian glassmakers discovered the art of making flat mirrors by the "broad" process—they blew glass into cylindrical forms, then cut the cylinders and flattened them under heat and backed them with an amalgam of mercury and tin. Glass mirrors were in demand all over Europe by the mid-sixteenth century. The Venetians held a monopoly until 1665 when, on his minister Colbert's advice, Louis XIV granted privileges to Nicolas du Noyer. By 1670 Noyer faced competition from Richard Lucas who adopted the process invented by Bernard Perrot (originally Bernardo Perrotto) of pouring molten glass onto iron tables covered with sand (Child 1990: 23f; Fleming and Honour 1977: 480f; Roche 1985: 20). Just as this volume was going to press I discovered Elaine Shefer's excellent article entitled "Mirror/Reflection" in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography* (Roberts 1998: Vol. 2, 597-608). The discovery came too late, unfortunately, to incorporate Shefer's discussion into my text.
2. Cooper 1992: 106.
3. Burckhardt 1987: 122.
4. Burckhardt 1987: 118.
5. Miura and Sasaki 1966: 69.
6. Cirlot 1962: 201f.; Cooper 1992: 106.
7. Burckhardt 1987: 121.
8. The traditional number of years of bad luck is seven. This belief is likely a survival from magico-mystical traditions such as alchemy, the Kabbala and Pythagorean number symbolism. Alchemists and Kabbalists made mirrors in sets of seven. Each mirror was made of a different metal, and was linked with one of the seven planetary powers and the days of the week. Such mirrors gave the mystic/magician power over time, space and the material world.
9. Linked to this belief is the notion that the evil forces, which are particularly active at the time of death, may carry off the soul imprinted in the mirror. Other beliefs about mirrors and death are reported by Litvinskii in Eliade 1987: 557. From the Renaissance onward, the mirror was used to determine the point when a person died—i.e., if no breath condenses on a mirror held to the dying person's face, s/he is declared dead.
10. G.F. Hartlaub, *Zauber des Spiegels; Geschichte und Bedeutung des Spiegels in*



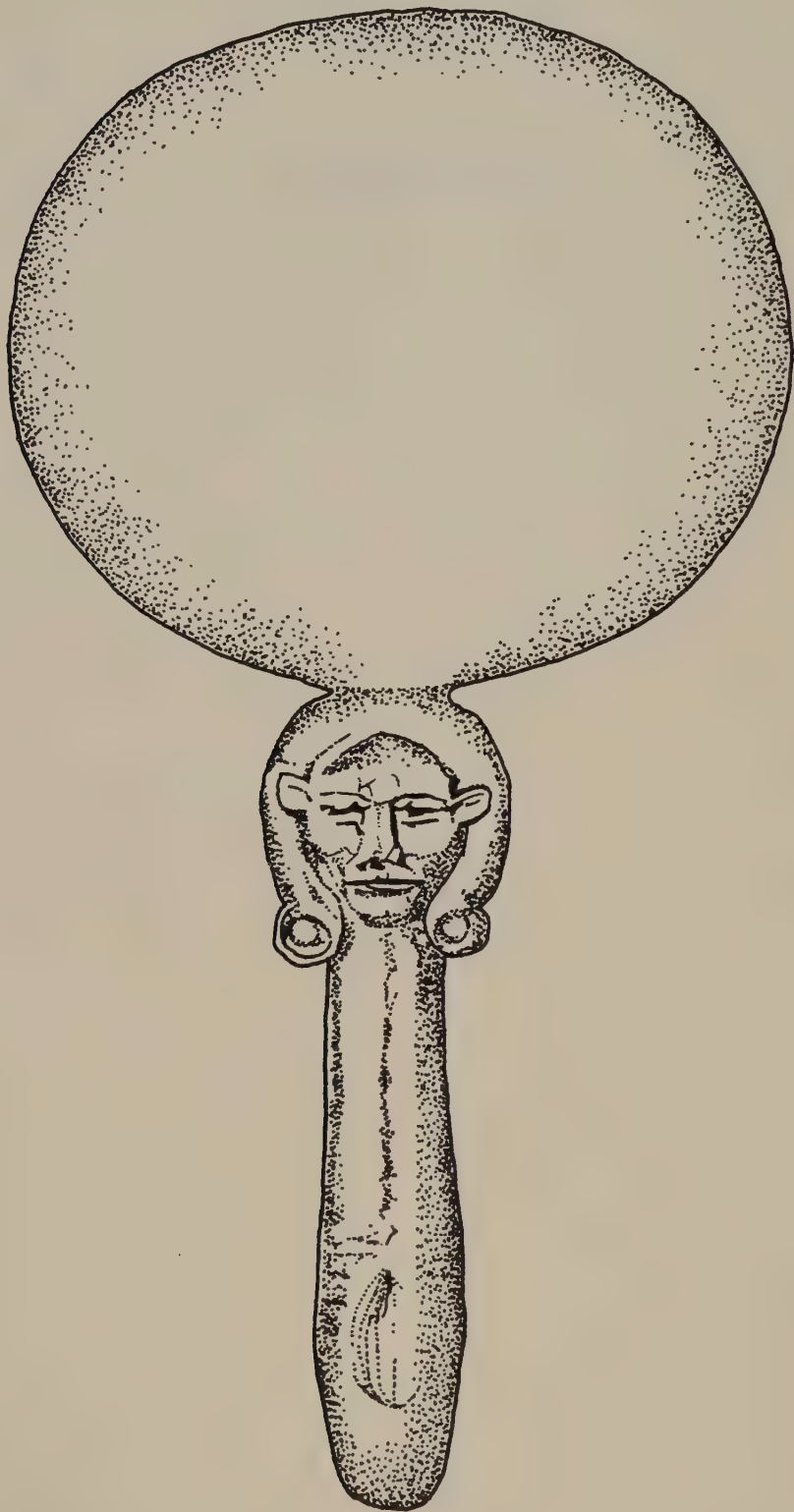
*der Kunst*, Munich, 1951 quoted in Schiffer 1983: 7. It is likely that the belief that mirrors contain and reflect the human soul gives rise to the idea that soulless creatures, like vampires, have no reflections.

11. In folktales, mirrors often smoke before they reveal what is hidden, be it the past, present or future (de Vries 1984: 323).
12. "Aphorism", I.41, *Novum Organum*.
13. Rosenfield and Shimada 1970: 375.
14. Although the French were perfecting mirror making and eventually broke the Venetian monopoly, the *Galerie des glaces* is lined with Italian mirrors, installed between 1678 and 1684, some four years before the founding of the Manufacture Royale in 1688 (Child 1990: 24, also see n. 1, above).
15. Coe in Benson and Griffin 1988: 227.
16. Tedlock 1993: 3ff.
17. Mirrors are associated with both virginity and fertility. For the former, see de Vries 1984: 323, and discussion of Virgin Mary (above p. 9). As for fertility, the link stems from the connection of mirrors with the Goddess and with water (Litvinskii in Eliade 1987: 558). Another association between women and mirrors grows up after patriarchal cultures destroyed the matriarchy. The ancient concept of individual women as mirrors of the Goddess was transformed by these cultures which, in suppressing women, treated them as passive, as incomplete and inferior reflections of men (see Virginia Woolf, p. 39). Also see Claire Douglas' 1990 (Jungian) study, *The Woman in the Mirror*.
18. Albenda in *The Dictionary of Art* 1996: 711. The abbreviation BCE (before the common era) is used throughout. CE (common era) is used only where clarification is needed, otherwise dates are understood to have occurred after the beginning of the common era.
19. Walker 1988: 82.
20. Unfortunately, archeological records do not always record the gender of individuals in burials, so it is not possible to make any general conclusions about the mirrors and male vs. female interments.
21. Pausanius in Flaceliere 1965: 14.
22. Kerenyi 1976: 365ff
23. De Grummond 1982: 186.
24. Bloom 1996: 120.
25. Hall 1974: 210f.
26. Litvinskii in Eliade 1974: 558.
27. Glassie 1989: 123.
28. Lamy 1981: 16.



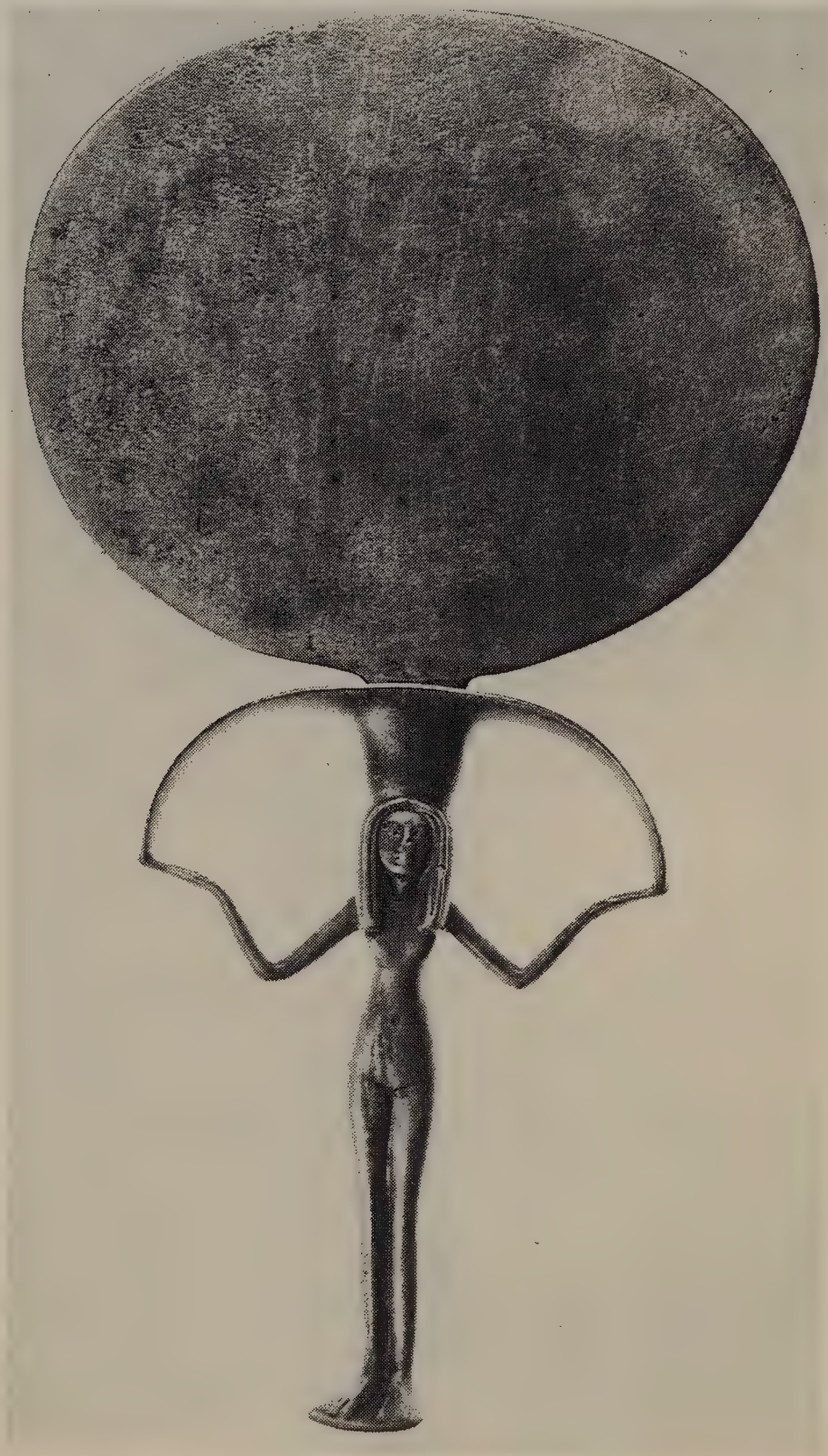
## ILLUSTRATIONS

Mirror with Hathor Head Handle from Kahun, XII-XIII Dynasties, c. 1862-1650 BCE. Copper disk with carved wooden handle, 11.8 cm. high. The Manchester Museum, University of Manchester. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



In Egyptian, the hand mirror was known by two names, *maw her*, “that which sees the face” and *ankh*, “mirror” and “eternal life.” The hieroglyphic for the word *ankh* is said to have derived from primitive Libyan and Phoenician images of the goddess. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the mirror is an attribute of Hathor, goddess of love and beauty. As the sacred cow, Hathor balances the solar disk, highly polished like a mirror, between her horns. The handle of this mirror takes the form of a thick papyrus stalk which terminates in the head of Hathor. The combination of plant and the goddess of love is appropriate, as the papyrus was the symbol of the widening of the heart. Bourriau 1988: 160f; Evans 1996: 141; Fazzini 1989: 45; Walker 1988: 82.

Egyptian Hand Mirror, XVIIIth Dynasty, c. 1552-1314 BCE. Bronze, 9 3/4" high, disk 4 7/8 x 5 5/8". Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum.



Mirrors, owned by both men and women, were a mark of social rank. A scribe, writing of the period of disruption between the Old and Middle Kingdoms, described the upheaval and changes in social status: “She who had [formerly] to look at her face in water is now the owner of a mirror [*ankh*].” Mirrors were frequently buried with the dead, sometimes placed under the head of the mummy inside the wrappings. Egyptian mirrors such as this one were undoubtedly placed in tombs both for use in the afterlife and as symbols of eternal life. The mirrors likely were believed to be receptacles for the soul, which they reflected even after death, in the same way that the statues, reserve heads and names of the deceased kept memory and image alive. The graceful supporting female figure may be a servant girl holding the mirror for her noble lord/lady. Alternatively, the figure could be an image of ideal female beauty or a depiction of the Goddess Hathor. Edwards 1977: 141; Fazzini 1989: 45.

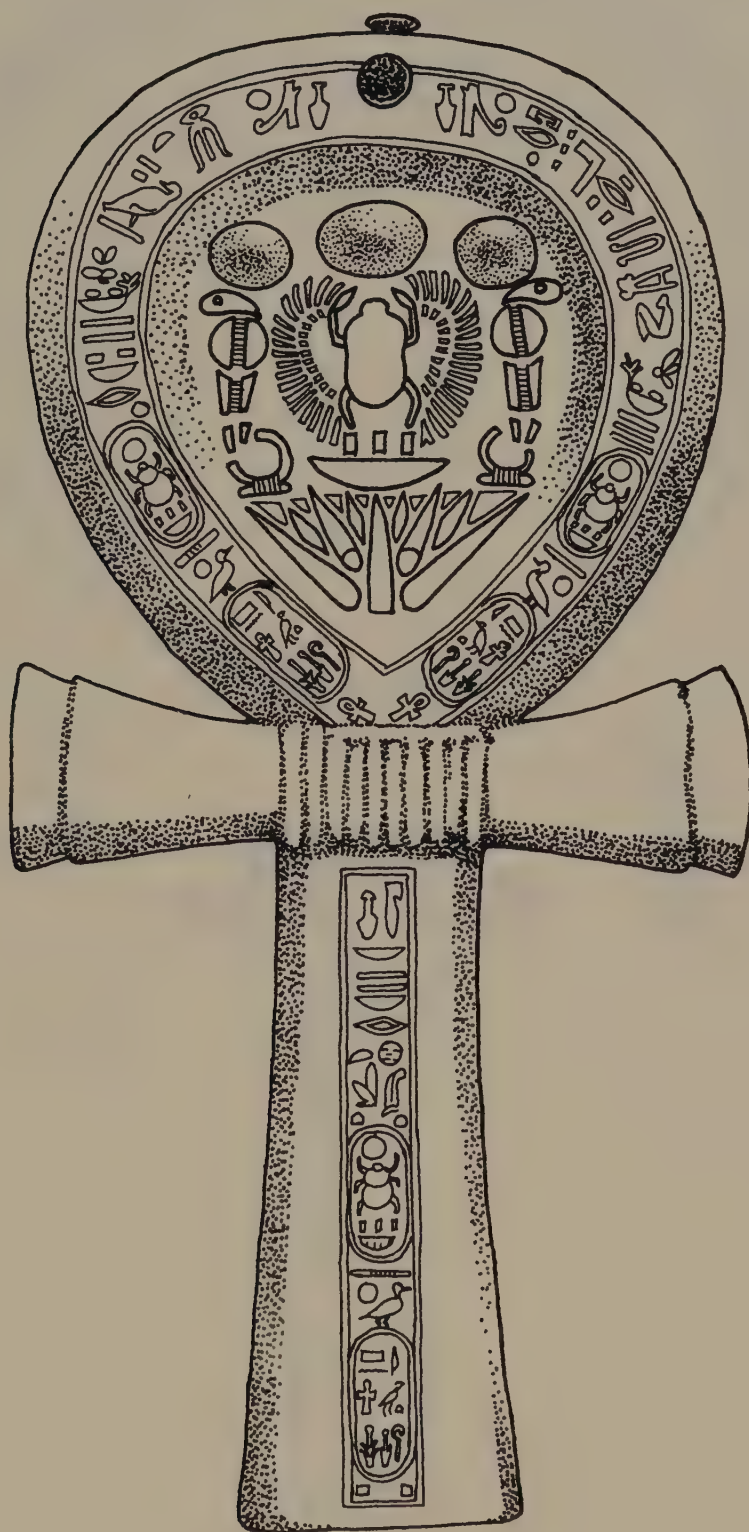
Two mirror cases were found in Tutankhamen's tomb. Both were empty, the solid metal mirrors likely stolen by early grave robbers. Mirrors were often placed in tombs in pairs, perhaps representing the two primary light sources, sun and moon. The two protective wooden cases in King Tut's tomb were lined with solar gold and lunar silver foil.

The case pictured here is unique not only for its *ankh* shape but also for its elaborate designs. The Pharaoh's name and titles appear, as well as the sacred lotus, scarab, serpent, sun disks and infinity (*shen*) signs. The design seems to suggest the emergence of the sun from the lotus at the creation of the universe. This multiplicity of symbols was supposed to guarantee the young pharaoh's immortality, as was the life-giving solar disc-shaped mirror within the box.

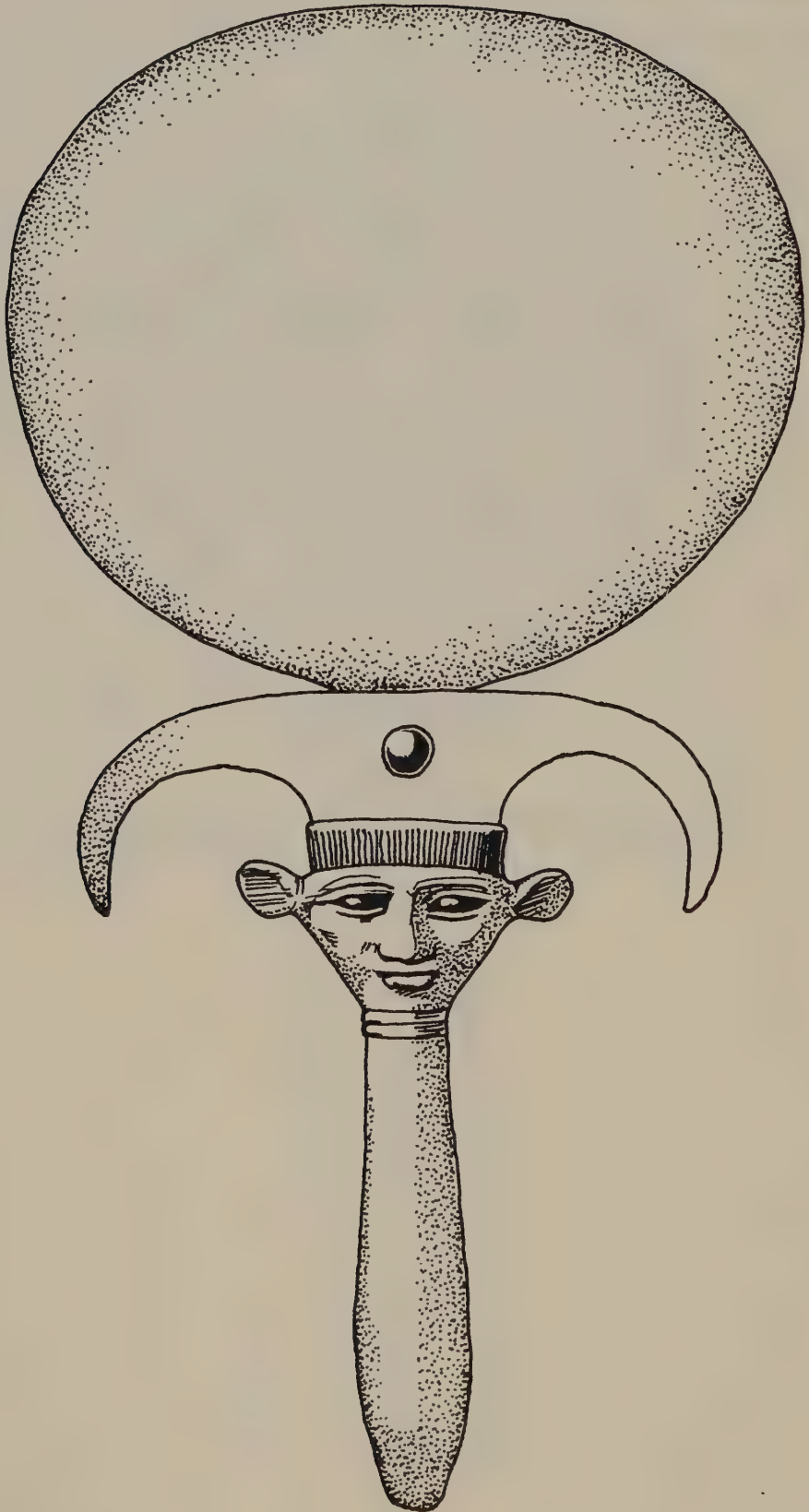
The other mirror with its silver lining likely symbolized the moon. Elliptical shaped mirrors often carried the image of an eye in the center. These mirrors were associated with the full moon, "the light of the night, the left Eye...which rises in the East, while the globe of the sun is in the West." Clearly, the Egyptians were well aware that the moon reflects the light of the sun. Evans 1977: 141; Fazzini 1989: 45; Lamy 1981: 16; Walker 1988: 82.



Tutankhamen's Mirror Case, XVIIIth Dynasty, c. 1552-1314 BCE. Wood, gold, silver, glass inlay; 10 5/8 x 5 3/16 x 1 9/16". The Cairo Museum. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



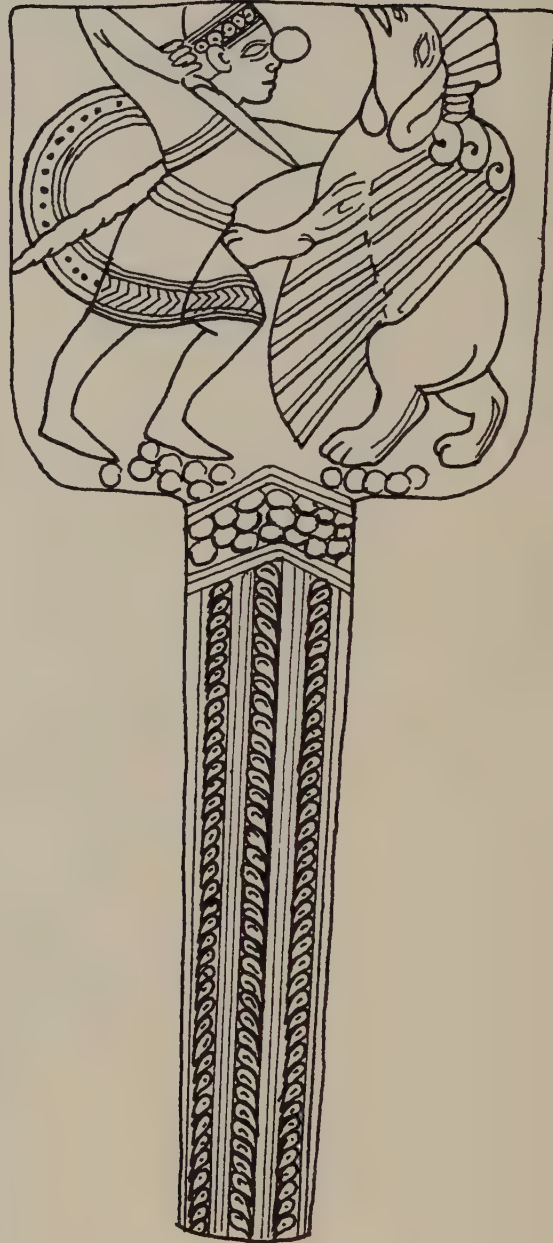
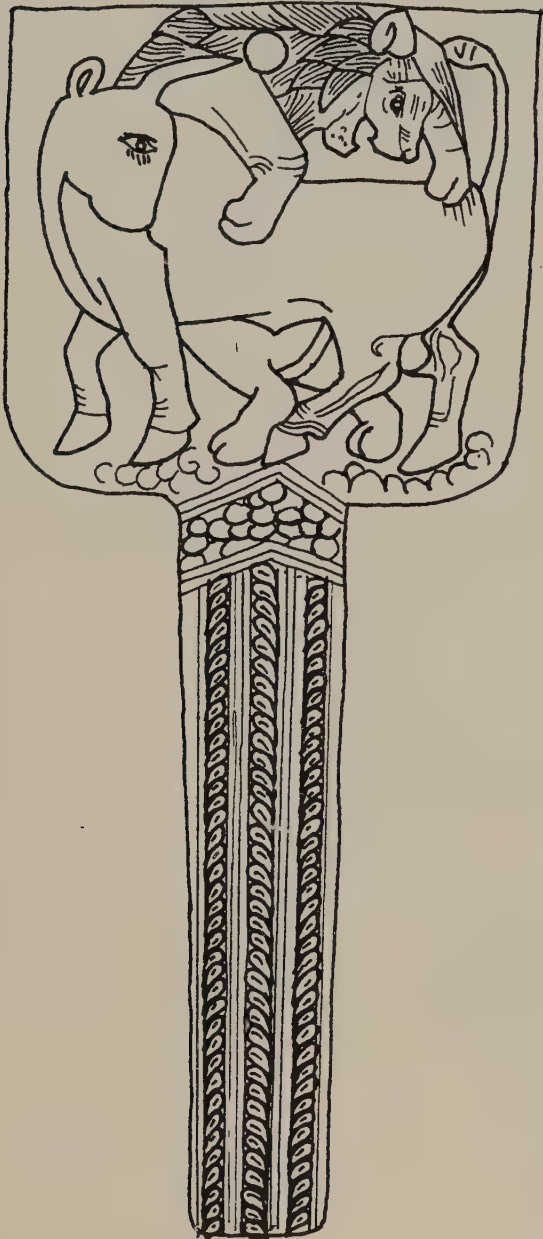
Mirror with Head of Hathor, c. 1500 BCE. Bronze. Marburg, Bildarchiv. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“You, my Lady, certainly don’t dye your hair to deceive the others, nor even yourself, but only to cheat your own image a little before the looking-glass.”

-Luigi Pirandello, *Henry IV*.

Mycenaean Mirror Handles from Enkomi, Cyprus, 12<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Ivory. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



Carved on both sides, this handle shows a lion attacking a bull and a warrior killing a griffin. The craftsman was likely Mycenaean, judging from the style. Two ivory handles from the so-called Tomb of Clytemnestra, outside the citadel at Mycenae, are more gentle in their subject matter. Dating from after 1500 BCE, the ivory handles show slumbering young women seated on palm leaves, attended by birds. Higgins 1981: 135; Marinatos 1960: 175.

Mirror, Siberia, end of Bronze Age, or early Iron Age, c. 1000 BCE. Bronze, approx. 6" diameter. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.

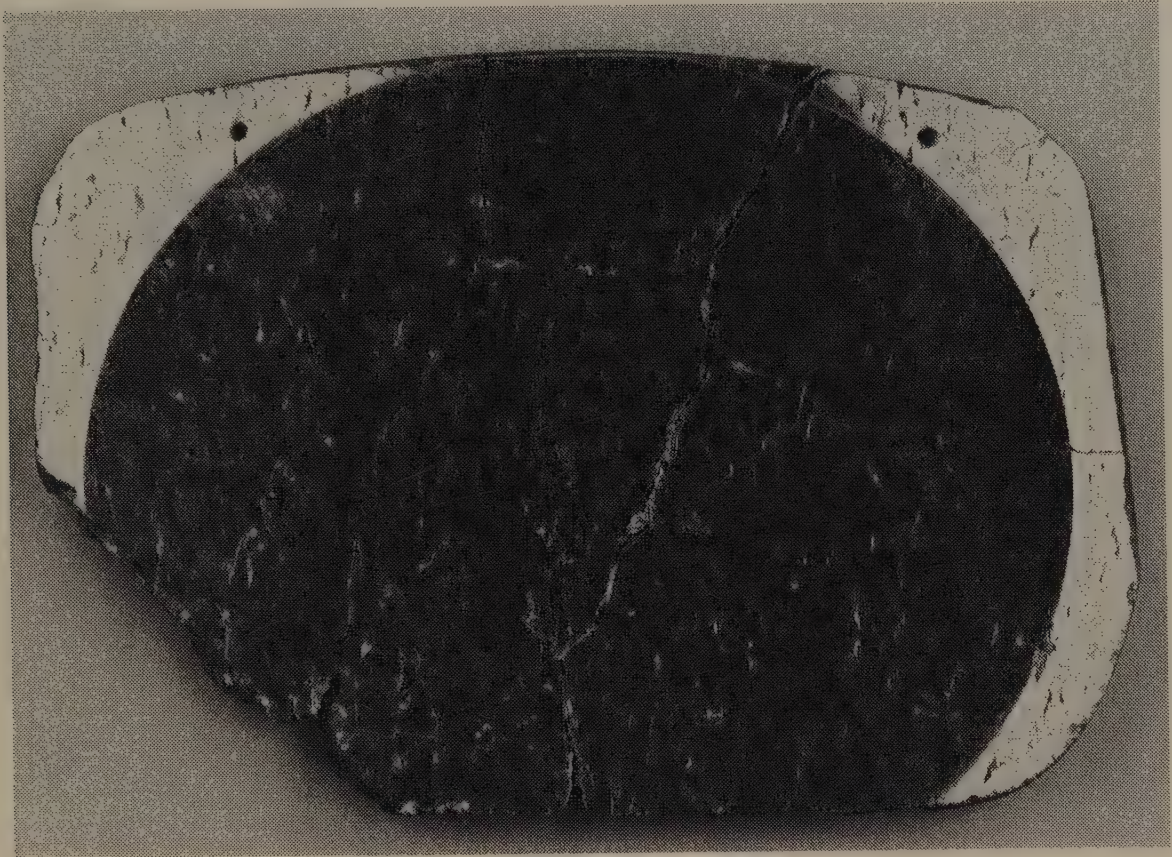


The six reindeer which orbit the central boss are common spirit helpers of the Siberian shaman. This mirror was likely part of the costume of a shaman, but it is also strongly reminiscent of Chinese mirrors which show zodiacal animals moving counterclockwise around the center. Borovka 1960: 101.

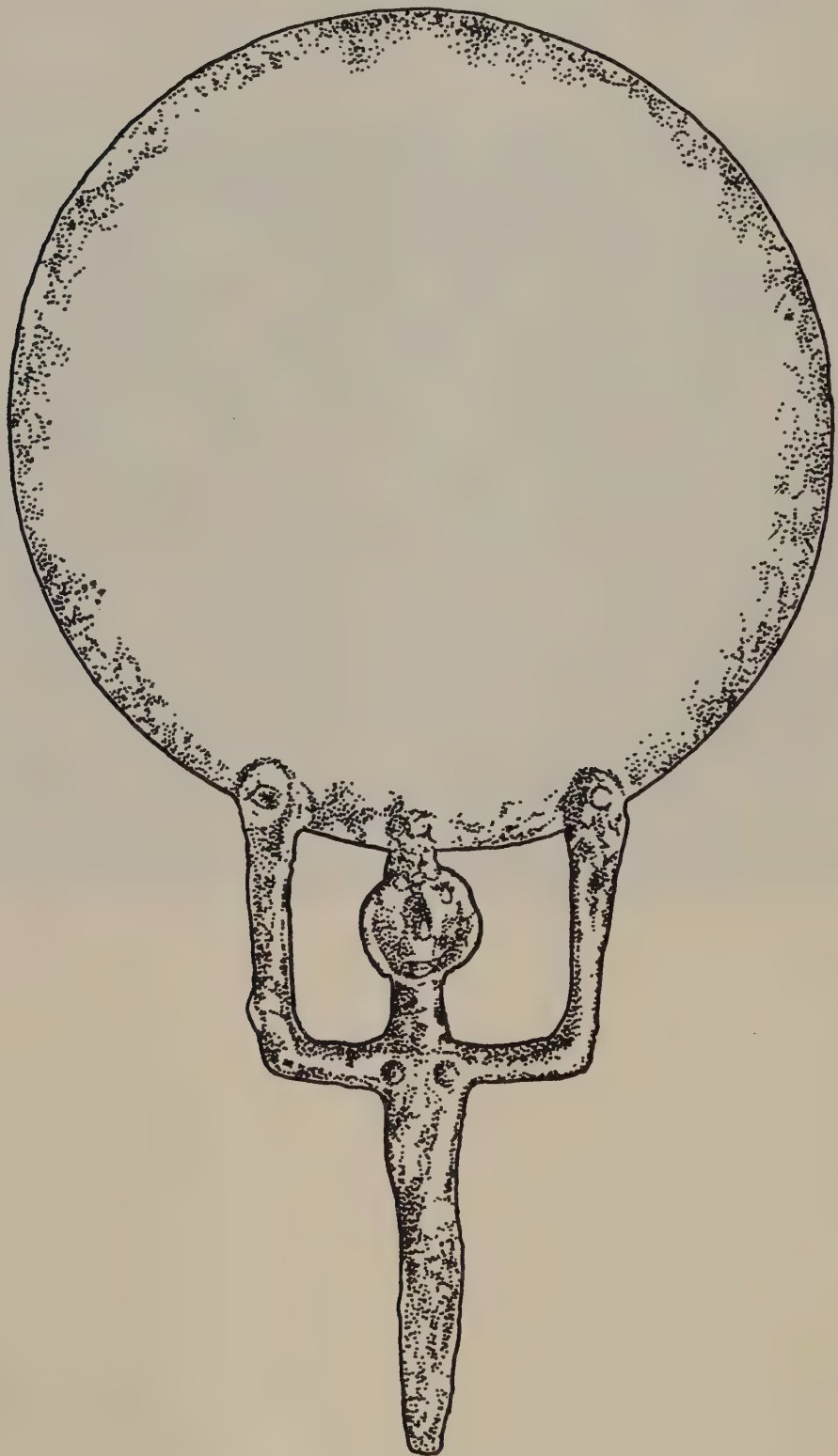
This is one of the largest known concave iron-ore mirrors. Similar mirrors were found buried with the dead at La Venta, San Lorenzo and Chalcatzingo and at later Veracruz sites, Kaminaljuyu and Costa Rica. The circular objects depicted as pectorals on Olmec statuettes and ball players are also assumed to be mirrors. The optical properties of such concave mirrors produce both a reflection and inversion reversal, so the mirrors were likely both functional—used to set fires and to divine the future—and metaphorical. The concept of the spirit double—an animal spirit born simultaneously with a human being, their well-being inextricably linked—likely originated with the Olmec. The idea of the other/the double is expressed by the mysterious nature of mirror images. Furthermore, the association between the royal lineage and mirrors may have its roots in the Formative period. (See Bird Jaguar, Lintel 1, Yaxchilan, p. 64). More broadly speaking, the plane of material existence may have been thought of as a dim reflection of the more vital and vivid spirit world. Coe 1980: 243; Coe, *et al.* 1995:112, 233, 254, 261; Grove 1984: 70f, fig. 26; Parsons in Pasztory 1978: 32f.



Mirror from Rio Pesquero, Veracruz, Olmec, 900-600 BCE. Ilmenite, height 10.9 cm., width 15.5 cm., depth 1.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, anonymous loan. Photograph by Bruce M. White. ©1998 Trustees of Princeton University.

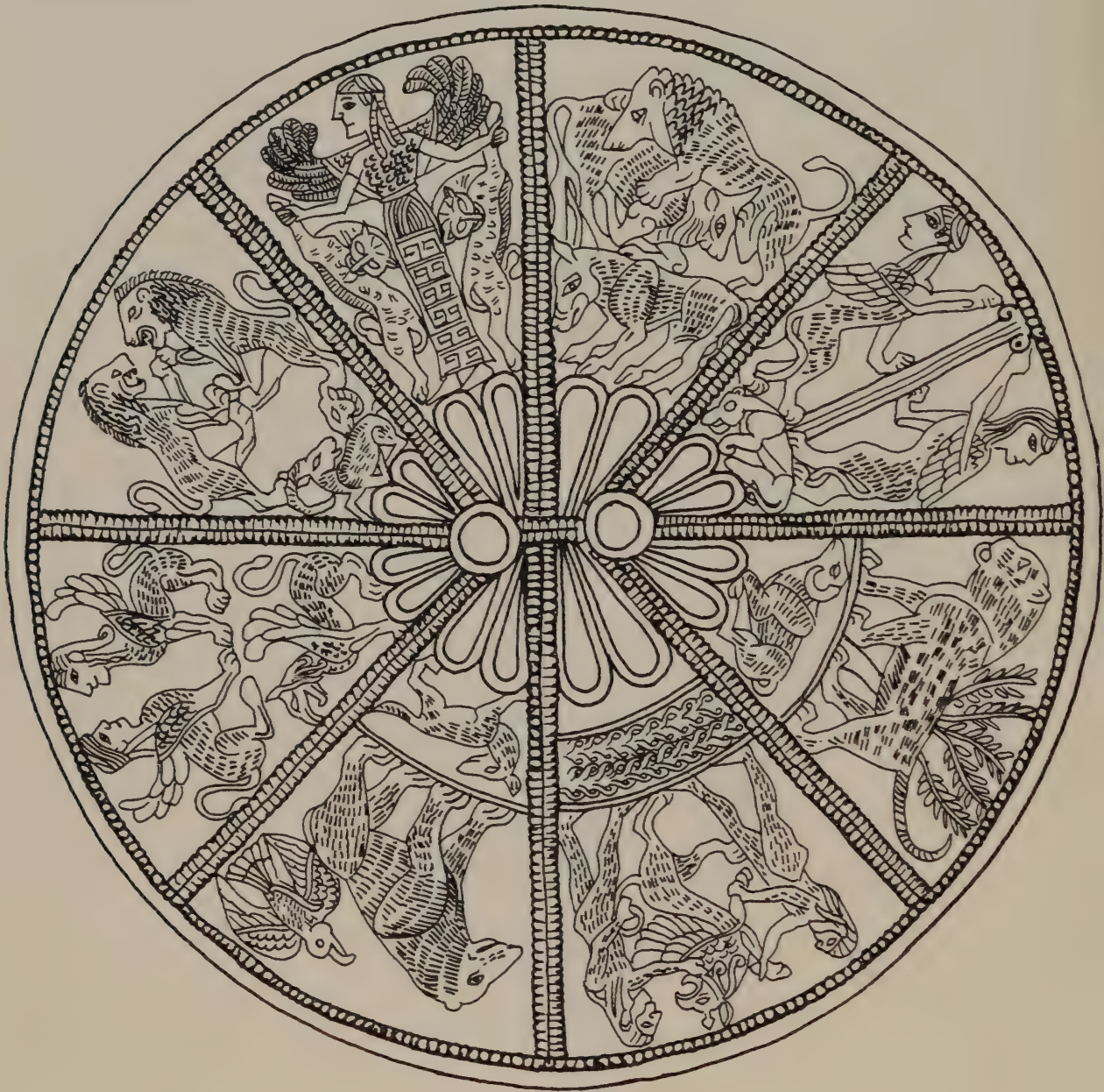


Mirror with Caryatid Handle, Khurvin. 9<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Bronze, 5 7/8" diameter.  
Private Collection, Teheran. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



This elegant caryatid figure, like those from Egypt, may be among the earliest occurrences of the use of the human figure as an architectural element.

Scythian [Graeco-Ionian] Mirror from Kelermes, north Caucasus, late 7<sup>th</sup> - early 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Silver and gold leaf, 6 13/16" diameter. Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



Found by treasure hunters in the burial mounds at Kelermes, the back of the mirror is made of a thin sheet of gold set within a high rim. Two stumps protrude from the center to which the handle was once attached. The mirror on the reverse is silver. Divided into eight sections by double lines, this exquisite mirror back contains mythological and zoomorphic scenes which show Greek (Ionian) influence. A large rosette is formed at the center by the allotment of two petals to each of the eight sections. In the eight scenes are winged sphinxes, battling animals, winged genii and two hairy men confronting a griffin. Most dramatic of all is the winged Cybele, the Mistress of Animals, shown in her form-fitting dress, flanked by two lions whom she holds by the paws. Artamonov 1969: 22ff.

Mirror with Pedestal, Greek, 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Bronze, .30 m. high. Louvre, Paris.

Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“Bronze is the mirror of the form; wine, of the heart.”

-Aeschylus, *Fragments*, no. 384.

“Contact with [menstrual blood] turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees fall off, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized with rust.”

-Pliny, *Natural History*, VII, xv, 64, ii.

“Another marvel I saw in this place (on the moon). There is a large mirror suspended over a well of no great depth, anyone going down the well can hear every word spoken on our earth, and if he looks at the mirror, he sees every city and nation as plainly as if he were standing close above them. The time I was there, I surveyed my own people, and the whole of my native country, whether or not they saw me, I cannot say for certain.”

-Lucian, *True History*, 26.

Etruscan Mirror, Eros as the God of Fertility, 5<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. Bronze. British Museum, London. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.





Eros was depicted by the Etruscans as a youthful, athletic figure with wings. According to Hesiod, the god was born at the beginning of time out of Chaos (the void). He brought about the union of Uranus and Gaia (sky and earth), and as such is a personification of generative power. Later, Eros is depicted as the child of Aphrodite and Ares, finally being transformed into Cupid, the cute little winged infant whose arrows inflame people with love. Grant 1962: 164f.

Etruscan Mirror, Eos, Goddess of Dawn, Abducting Cephalus, 5<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE  
Bronze. Vatican Museums, Rome. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“The stars glittered on the snow and nothing answered.  
Then the Swan spread her wings, cross of the cold north,  
The pattern and mirror of the acts of earth.”

-Galway Kinnell, *To Christ Our Lord*, 1 28-30.

Etruscan Red-Figured Cup, The Three Graces, 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. The British Museum, London. Photograph ©The British Museum.



Etruscan mirrors were depicted as being held by the deceased on vase paintings and on sarcophagi. The mirrors themselves were buried with the dead. Made of bronze, such mirrors were decorated with images of prosperity and status, various entertainments such as sporting and theatrical events, idyllic love scenes and various mythological events.

“I change, and so do women too; but I reflect, which women never do.”

-Anonymous, written on a looking-glass.

“Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at least at twice its natural size.”

-Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

Greek Mirror Back from Corinth, with Aphrodite, Eros and Pan, c. 350 BCE.  
Bronze, 7 1/4" high. The British Museum, London. Line drawing by the author.



Greek mirrors of the Classical period were bronze discs, usually silvered to increase their reflective properties. Some had hinged lids, like modern powder compacts, while others had handle-like stands in the form of columns or female figures. Although mirrors play important parts in Greek myths—e.g. Narcissus and Dionysos—the mirror is uniquely associated with Aphrodite/Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. In fact, it is her attribute. By the fifth century, Aphrodite appeared in earthly scenes such as wedding preparations. On this mirror, a particularly voluptuous goddess plays a game with Pan who seems to be admonishing her. Eros leans against her hip and offers advice. The designs were delicately incised into the bronze, then filled with chalk to highlight them. Beautiful mirrors like this one, depicting the goddess of beauty, could only reflect well on the woman who was fortunate to own such an object. But then, mirrors are always associated with the goddess. Boardman 1993: 131; Walker 1988: 145f.

Mirror with Adornment of Turan, Etruscan, c. 300 BCE. Bronze, 17.8 cm. diameter. Indiana University Museum of Art, Bloomington. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.





For the Etruscans, the Latin word for adornment—*mundus*—meant considerably more than the mere “getting dressed up” implication our English word carries. *Mundus* signified not only the concrete “objects of the toilette,” it meant also “world,” or “universe.” A woman’s garb was seen as a direct reflection of reality—rites of passage were marked by the donning of particular costumes and adornments. Marriage, birth and death all had their particular apparel which was not only socially appropriate, but symbolic. A third use of the word comes from a Roman ritual (inherited from the Etruscans). At the founding of a town, a pit called a *mundus* was dug, and offerings of fruit were cast into it then and subsequently on ritual occasions. The pit was associated with Ceres and came to be regarded as an opening into the underworld. Thus the word *mundus* was associated with fertility, the afterlife and immortality.

The symmetry of images on Etruscan mirrors is metaphorical as well. In fact, a most popular image on mirror backs was that of the Dioskouroi. The divine and immortal twins suggest the duality of image and reflection, body and soul, life and the hope of transcending death.

This mirror back shows Turan, the Etruscan equivalent of Aphrodite/Venus. The goddess of love appears frequently on Etruscan mirrors, usually as an elegant fully-clothed woman. The Etruscans emphasized the goddess’ connection with ideal love and beauty more than her erotic side. Many mirrors show her donning her “battle dress,” a proper subject for the live owner of the mirror to admire and emulate; and as the goddess was herself immortal, it was a suitable object to take into the tomb. De Grummond 1982: 94, 181f, 186.

Bride with a Mirror, Preparing to Go with Hermes. Italic krater. Museo Provinciale, Lecce. Line drawing by the author.



Greek mirrors frequently appear on ceramics in conjunction with scenes depicting Dionysiac rites. According to Orphic legend (possibly the oldest stories of the god), Dionysos was born twice—no sooner was he born, than he was enthroned in his birth cave as ruler of the world. A nurse held a mirror up to the infant which captured his soul. His first parents were Zeus and Demeter, sky and earth. In a jealous rage, Hera convinced the Titans to kill the infant and they tore him to pieces and devoured him, all except his heart. Athena rescued the heart, and gave it to Zeus who, in turn, gave it to Semele to eat, causing her to conceive. His soul safe in the mirror, his heart ingested by his second mother, the god was born again. In the krater pictured here, Hermes, the messenger god acts in his role as psychopomp, guide of the dead. The vase involves the tradition of picturing initiations and funeral rituals as Dionysiac weddings—“marriage” to the god was a guarantee of immortality. Initiation, of course, was a form of rebirth. The mirror, then, functions in a complex symbolic way—it is a soul carrier, as well as the attribute of both the god and his bride. Other objects depicted on such vases conflate nuptial and funereal symbolism—festive garments and ribbons (*tainia*), ritual bathing and perfume, sheets and banquets. Dionysos, who seems to have ancient non-Greek origins, was uniquely associated with women. He may be a survival of the animal god of the matriarchal cultures, as he is associated with the bull. He is a shape-shifter, a dying-rising god linked with vegetation and he has a profoundly irrational side. The Greeks of the Classical age were ambivalent worshippers of this god. His foreignness, and his connection with women and ecstatic states created a tension which was largely alleviated by the Hellenistic age, when the god was highly honored. Grant 1962: 151; Kerényi 1976: 366ff; Walker 1988: 145f.

Chinese TLV Mirror. Han Dynasty 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE – 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE. Bronze. The British Museum, London. Photograph ©The British Museum.



The earliest Chinese mirrors are from the Shang Dynasty; thus the history of mirrors endures 3,200 years. Mirrors were thought not just to reflect the face, the physical being of a person, but also the very heart and soul. For Chinese Buddhists, mirrors, linked with the Eightfold Path, were one of the Eight Precious Things, the other seven being the book, coin, pearl, artemisia leaf, jade gong, musical lozenge and rhinoceros horn. Mirrors confront one with the truth and reflect knowledge. The *Tso-chuan* (658 BCE) says “Heaven has robbed him of his mirror,” i.e., made him blind to his own faults. Additionally, mirrors served as aids to conjugal happiness.

Taoist mirrors are metaphors for self-knowledge and provide a way to banish evil. On looking into one's nature, evil is destroyed by its horrendous reflection: "When evil recognizes itself, it destroys itself."

In Chinese tombs, mirrors catch and hold the rays of the sun, repelling evil and providing light against the eternal darkness of death. Hung horizontally from the central boss, they established an "axis of light," and provided a way of ascent for the soul.

During the Warring States period, the craftsmanship improved considerably and designs were influenced by lacquerware and textiles. Eventually the potent symbolism and powerful designs of the most beautiful of all, the TLV mirrors, developed during the Han Dynasty. Appearing as early as the second century BCE, the finest TLV mirrors date from the beginning of the common era. The complex designs combine earthly and heavenly symbols to create a cosmic diagram. Incorporated in the designs are the seasons, the five directions, the elements with their associated colors and creatures. The central circle within a square symbolizes the balance point/the *axis mundi*. In this dynamic diagram, the circle is the heavens, while the square symbolizes the earth (*tsung*). According to the system of cosmology developed by Tsou Yen (c. 350-270 BCE), the great ultimate (*t'ai-chi*) is the source of the dualism of *yang/yin*, the forces which interact to produce the five elements (*wu-hsing*) which, in turn, are the foundation of all that exists. These complex symbols appear on the back of the mirror which hung, reflective side downward, facing and mirroring the earth itself. The designs, the mirror itself, then, is a microcosmic conundrum—image of earth/cosmos, reflection of earth/cosmos—now you see it, now you don't. Cirlot 1962: 202; Cooper 1992: 106; Deydier 1980: 96f; Sullivan 1984: 52, 74ff; Walker 1988: 68.

Celtic Mirror with Cast Handle; known as the Desborough Mirror. 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE.  
Bronze, 35 cm. long. The British Museum, London. Photograph ©The British  
Museum.



Celtic mirrors were made for women who used these incredibly beautiful objects while living, finally taking them into the grave. It is likely that the techniques used in making mirrors were influenced by the Romans. The powerful, yet elegant muscularity of Celtic designs shows the adaptation of vegetal motifs found in Augustan art. Although mirrors like the Desborough Mirror at first appear to be symmetrical, a closer look reveals a dynamism and liveliness which makes the designs vital—some scholars have suggested that the aversion to absolute symmetry amounts to a taboo similar to those binding the actions of Celtic heroes in sagas. It may be also that the subtle asymmetry of the designs is a trope for the mysterious property of the mirror's reflective side—the tension between image and reflection, between reality and its mirror. Finlay 1973: 86ff; Walker 1988: 145f.

The Great Frieze, east wall, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, Second Style fresco, c. 50 BCE. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.





This figure group is the focal point of the entire frieze. Dionysos reclines on the lap of Ariadne, while to the left, Silenus holds a vessel into which a young satyr raptly gazes. Another satyr holds a mask aloft—the mask was recently identified as that of Akratos, the *daimon* of unmixed wine. Doubtless the *daimon*'s visage is reflected in the liquid contained in the vessel. The scene, thus, recalls the use of reflections and mirrors for the purposes of divination which the Romans inherited from the Greeks and Etruscans. Generally, though, the entire scene evades explanation, although it seems to have to do with the lives and rites of women, as the only human male is a youth, whose presence is connected with some ritual. Kraus 1975: 96, 100.

Tapestry, Panel with Two Nereids, det. right figure. Egypt, 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Wool and linen, .82 x 1.44 m. Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC. Photograph

©Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.



In this beautiful Coptic tapestry, a mermaid looks in a curved mirror which reflects a woman's face, framed by a hairstyle which differs from the mermaid's.

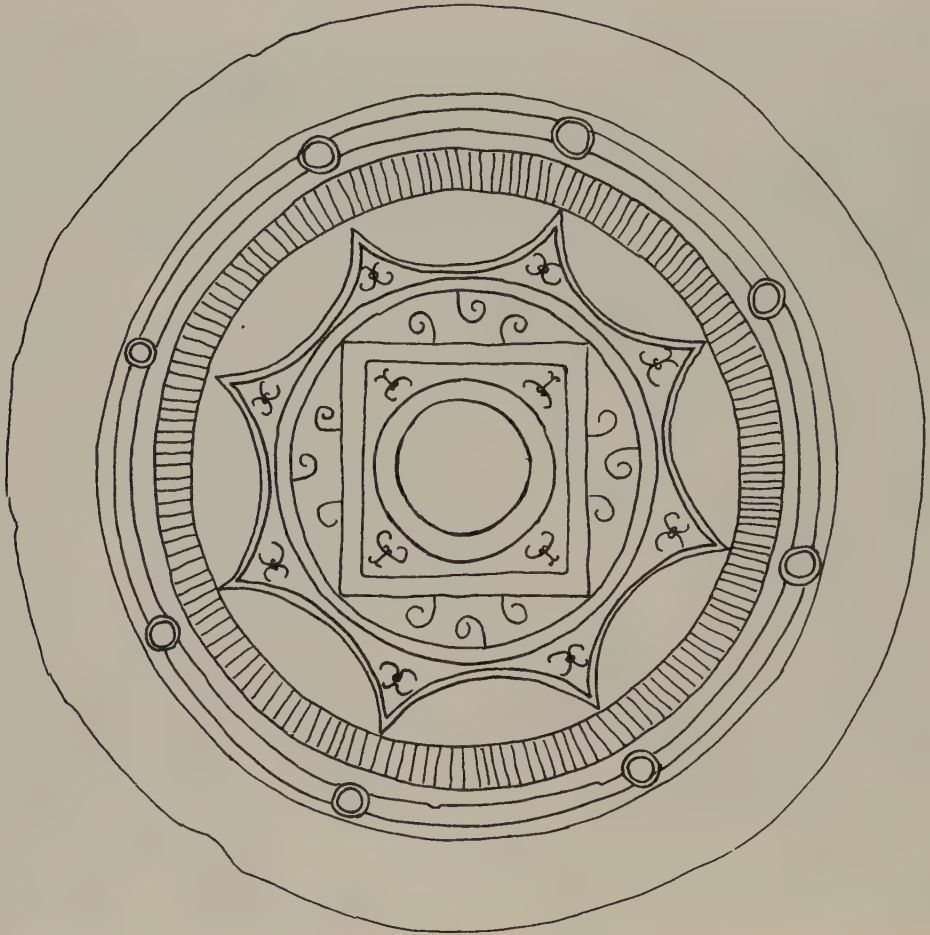
“In a solitude of the sea  
Deep from human vanity,  
And the Pride of Life that planned her, still couches she.

Steel chambers, late the pyres  
Of her salamandrine fires,  
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

Over the mirrors meant  
To glass the opulent  
The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.”

-Thomas Hardy, “Convergence of the Twain.”

Japanese Mirror. Kofun Period. 4<sup>th</sup> c. Bronze, 6 15/16". Kimiko and John Powers Collection, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA. Line drawing by the author.



“Hearing, seeing, understanding, knowing—

Each of these is not separable.

For him, mountains and rivers

Do not appear in the mirror.

When the frosty heaven’s moon has set

And midnight nears,

Whose shadow with mind

Will the clear pool reflect, cold?”

-Setcho

Mirrors—as many as thirty—were buried in the tombs of nobles from the Kofun Period onward. Family heirlooms, the mirrors were placed in containers next to the dead, along with weapons and jewelry. Many Japanese mirrors reflect Chinese influence, probably stemming from the appreciation for gift mirrors brought back by diplomatic missions. Although the astronomical significance of the designs was probably not understood, the Japanese adapted them for their own purposes, formalizing the patterns. They attached the highest value to them, as is clear from the fact that a bronze mirror is one of the three sacred insignia of the emperor, inherited from Ninigi. Kept, with the sword and the jewel in the Inner Shrine at Ise, the mirror is a symbol of wisdom and of the Shinto Sun Goddess Amaterasu-o-mikami.

Amaterasu, angered by her younger brother Susa-No-O, hid in a cave thus causing darkness to cover the earth. Light is restored when she is lured forth by the laughter of the gods watching a suggestive dance and by her own reflection in the sacred mirror.

Called *Yatano-kagami*, the “mirror of accusation,” the mirror is used to divine the truth and reveal evil. Handed to a new emperor as a symbol of office, the mirror is said to take the form of an eight-petalled lotus blossom. It is believed, on ritual occasions, that the deity enters the mirror in order to manifest itself. Barrie 1996: 84; Biedermann 1992: 222; Cooper 1992: 106; Jobes 1961: 1109; Rosenfield and Shimada 1970: 375.

Mirror Back with a Frontal Figure, probably Xolalpan-Metepec, Valley of Mexico, 400-750. Slate, originally inlaid with pyrite on its back, 8" diameter. Cleveland Museum. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.

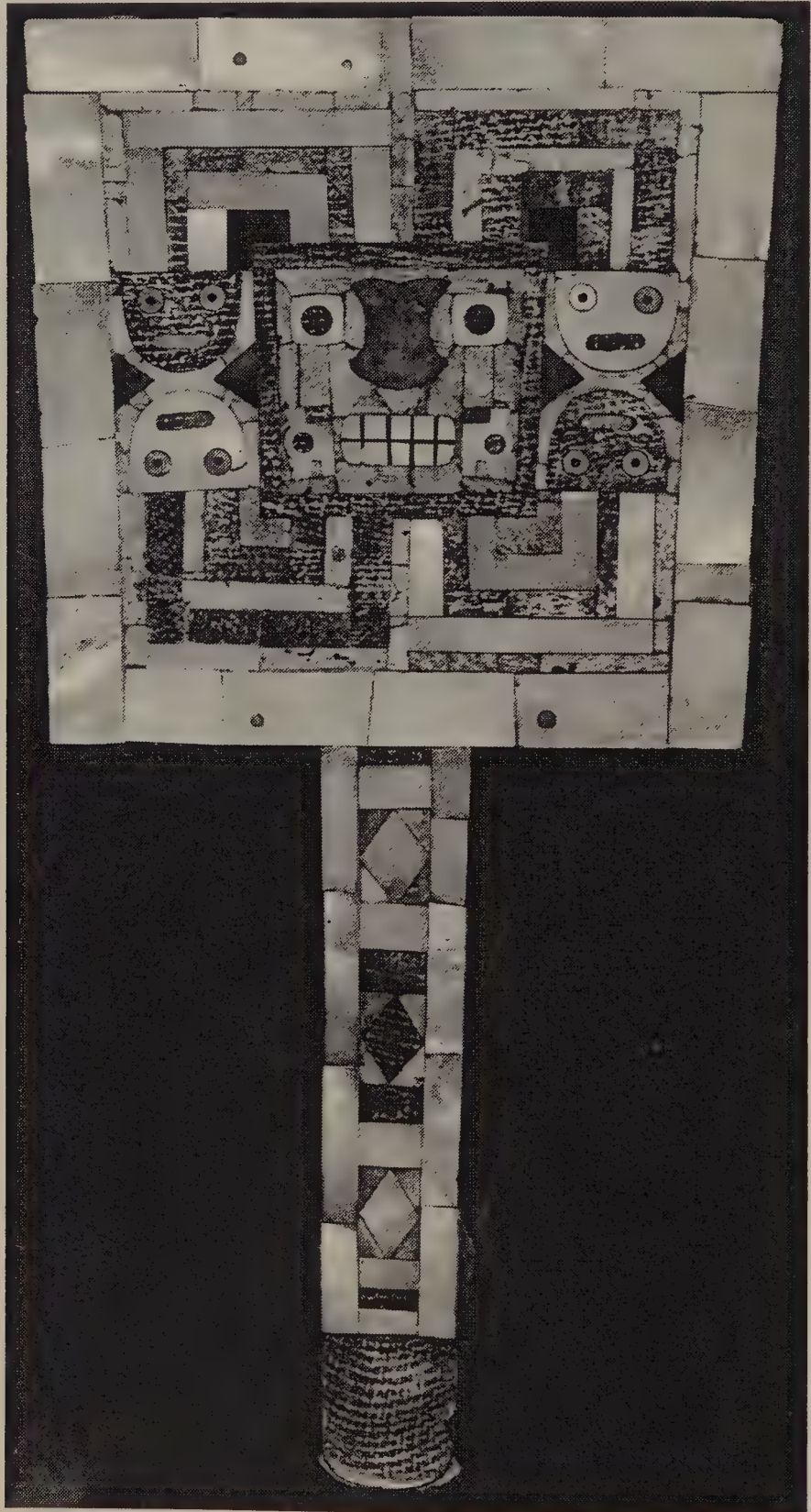


Mesoamerican mirrors were used to see into the future. The most famous instance of this is the Aztec legend that Moctezuma foresaw the arrival of Cortes in a mirror. Made of obsidian and inlaid with pyrite, these magical mirrors were also used to start fires in a dramatic and mysterious manner.

At Teotihuacan, mirrors were found buried with the 120 warriors sacrificed at the dedication of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. Apparently part of military and priestly regalia, the pyrite disks were placed on the back lumbar region, or used as clasps or medallions. On the facade of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the projecting serpent heads are depicted as emerging from a background of feathered mirrors. Frescos in the residential complexes at Teotihuacan show figures wearing mirror-like objects on their backs. And at other archeological sites, Teotihuacano priests and warriors are depicted wearing mirrors decorated with coyote tails. Although it is hard to say what the mirrors signify, it is likely that, in addition to their magical properties, they were linked with Venus since that planet is closely tied with the Feathered Serpent. The cycles of Venus were very important to this civilization, as well as among the Maya, apparently governing ritual and military activities. The mysterious light from the mirror may have been thought of as a reflection of the bright star of morning and evening.

This mirror depicts a deity wearing a butterfly headdress, double earspools and a nosebar and flanked by two attendants. On its chest is a stylized cave symbol. The attendants carry flowers and incense bags, and speech scrolls emerge from their mouths. All three stand atop a wavy, watery band filled with shells. The entire grouping is surrounded by a circular band containing star—Venus—symbols within a band of spirals. The image is carved in slate; the other side was originally inlaid with reflective pyrite. Berrin and Pasztory 1993: 25, 57, 103, 150, 274.

Mirror from the Huari Culture, probably from the North or Central Coast, Peru, 650-800. Wood, plant resin, stone and shell, height 23.9 cm., width 12 cm., depth 2 cm. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington, D.C.





The serpent-eye motif can be traced back to the earliest Andean culture at Chavin. This mirror is of particular interest not only for its intricate and precise mosaic, but also for the mirrored images—the small “U” shaped faces, one dark/one light, one up/one down, which are also mirrored side to side and inverted.

Chinese Mirror, T'ang Period, 618-905. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



The empty center of this mirror represents the Great Ultimate Principle. In expanding circles are represented the animals of the four directions, dragon, phoenix, tiger and tortoise; the eight diagrams; the twelve animals of the terrestrial branches, dragon, hare, tiger, fox, rat, pig, dog, cock, monkey, goat, horse and snake; and finally twenty-eight animals corresponding to the ancient constellations. Williams 1960: 275.

“The Emperor Ho Sin had a dream in which he beheld a palace greater than his for half the rent. Stepping through the portals of the edifice, Ho Sin suddenly found that his body became young again, although his head remained somewhere between sixty-five and seventy. Opening a door, he found another door, which led to another; soon he realized he had entered a hundred doors and was now out in the backyard.

Just when Ho Sin was on the verge of despair, a nightingale perched on his shoulder and sang the most beautiful song he'd ever heard and then bit him on the nose.

Chastened, Ho Sin looked into a mirror and instead of seeing his own reflection, he saw a man named Mendel Goldblatt, who worked for the Wasserman Plumbing Company and who accused him of taking his overcoat. From this Ho Sin learned the secret of life, and it was 'Never to yodel.' When the emperor awoke, he was in a cold sweat and couldn't recall if he dreamed the dream or was now in a dream being dreamt by his bail bondsman.”

-Woody Allen

Above right: Bird Jaguar, Lintel 1, Yaxchilan, Chiapas, c. 750. Line drawing reproduced by permission of Ian Graham.

Below right: Sarcophagus Cover of Pacal, Temple of Inscriptions, Palenque, Chiapas, 7<sup>th</sup> c. Line drawing by the author.

Maya nobles wore mirrors in their elaborate headdresses and elsewhere—primarily on the shoulder or back—as part of their regalia. Mirrors were buried with the dead as well. Mesoamerican mirrors were made of the iron ores magnetite and ilmenite as well as of the volcanic glass, obsidian. The Maya made mirrors of pyrite plates cut into polygonal shapes which were affixed to slate disks. Mirrors were one of the most important aspects of costume as they identified the ruler as *u nen cab*, “the mirror of the community.” Furthermore, they symbolized the divine nature of kingship, as the mirror is the attribute of God K, Tezcatlipoca, “Smoking Mirror.” Bird Jaguar wears a mirror in his headdress on state occasions, as is clear on the lintels of Yaxchilan. Pacal, the greatest ruler of Palenque, has a smoking mirror on his forehead as he is suspended in death—simultaneously falling into the jaws of the earth monster, and drawn into the heavens by the great cosmic ceiba tree which rockets upward. Coe in Benson 1988: 227f; Tate 1992: 220.



Carved Mirror Back, Classic Veracruz Style, 600-900. Slate, with a hematite reflecting surface, 4 7/8" diameter. Robert Woods Bliss Collection, Washington, D.C. Line drawing by the author.



The Maya *Popol Vuh* tells of several abortive attempts to create man. Finally, the gods succeeded, but the results were too perfect, rivaling the abilities of the gods themselves, and so they interceded again:

“[Human] vision came all at once. Perfectly they saw, perfectly they knew everything under the sky, whenever they looked. The moment they turned around and looked in the sky, on the earth, everything was seen without any obstruction. They didn’t have to walk around before they could see what was under the sky; they just stayed where they were.

Their sight passed through trees, through rocks, through lakes, through seas, through mountains, through plains.

They sighted the four sides, the four corners in the sky, on the earth.

What should we do with them now? [the gods asked themselves]. Their vision should at least reach nearby, they should at least see a small part of the face of the earth, but what they’re saying isn’t good. Aren’t they merely ‘works’ and ‘designs’ in their very names? Yet they’ll become as great as gods, unless they procreate, proliferate at the sowing, the dawning, unless they increase.

We’ll take them apart just a little, that’s what we need.

They were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon. Their vision flickered. Now it was only when they looked nearby that things were clear.”

-Translation by Dennis Tedlock

Cylindrical Vase, Maya Lowlands, c. 672-830. Painted ceramic, 4 1/2 x 4 3/4".

Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington D.C.





The Maya used mirrors to attain visionary states—called the vision quest by Mayanists. Soporifics, ritual blood-letting and hallucinogens likely were used to enter alternate states. On this vase, a lord is seated in front of a large pillow or throne, attended by two other figures. In front of the lord is a cylindrical drinking vessel with a pseudoglyphic text (all of the glyphs on this vase are unreadable). The lord stares into a dark mirror, framed with wood, held by the kneeling central figure. Reents-Budet 1994: 91, cat. #14.

Mirror with a Hunter on Horseback, Anatolian, first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Steel, with gold inlay, 16 1/8" high, 7 7/8" diameter. Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi, Istanbul. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



The only cast steel, metal gold inlaid object surviving from 13<sup>th</sup> c. Anatolia, this mirror back bears a depiction of a mounted horseman. A reflection of courtly life, the mirror is said to combine the hunter and dragon slayer themes. The central medallion shows a rider holding the reins of his horse in one hand, and a falcon with the other. His trusty dog runs, at some peril, between the horse's legs. Filling the other spaces are a fox, a duck on the wing and a coiled serpent. The central scene is encircled by ten mythical creatures, some of which bear a similarity to signs of the zodiac. The decoration may reflect the Anatolian belief in the hero's power to offer protection apotropaic against the evil eye. Evans 1997: 424.

Mirror from Egypt or Syria, c. 1300. Steel inlaid with gold and silver inlay, 240 mm. diameter. Topkapi Sarayi Muzesi, Istanbul. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



This mirror was made for a Mamluk vizier by the master Muhammad (possibly Muhammad ibn al-Zayn) and is decorated with a central sunburst, surrounded by the signs of the zodiac.

“The specious panorama of a year  
But multiplies the image of a day,—  
A belt of mirrors round a taper’s flame;  
And universal Nature, through her vast  
And crowded whole, an infinite parquet,  
Repeats one note.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Xenophanes*.

Mirror case representing amorous scenes, French(?), first half of 14<sup>th</sup> c. Ivory, 12 m. diameter. Louvre, Paris. Line drawing by the author.



“A happy rural seat of various view:

Groves whose rich trees wept odorous gums and balm;

Others whose fruit, burnished with golden rind,

Hung amiable—Hesperian fables true.

If true, here only—and of delicious taste.

Betwixt them lawns, or level downs, and flocks

Gracing the tender herb were interposed.

Or palmy hillock; or the flowery lap

Of some irriguous valley spread her store,

Flowers of all hue, and without thorn the rose.

Another side, umbrageous grots and caves

Of cool recess, o'er which the mantling vine

Lays forth her purple grape and gently creeps

Luxuriant: meanwhile murmuring waters fall

Down the slope hills, dispersed, or in a lake,

That to the fringed bank with myrtle crowned

Her crystal mirror holds, unite their streams.”

-John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. IV, 247-263.

French Mirror Depicting a Jousting Scene, 14<sup>th</sup> c. Carved ivory case, 100 mm. diameter. Musee de Cluny. Line drawing by the author.





“Whence come I am, the dreary destiny  
And luckless lot for to bemoan of these  
Whom Fortune, in this maze of misery,  
Of wretched chance most woeful mirrors chose;  
That when thou seest how lightly they did lose  
Their pomp, their power, and that they thought most sure,  
Thou mayst soon deem no earthly joy may dure.”

-Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset, *The Mirror for Magistrates*.

Aztec Mirror, c. 1350-1521. Obsidian, carved and gilded wooden frame, 260 mm. diameter. American Museum of Natural History, New York. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“What does a mirror do? ‘It reflects,’ like a human mind; but the ordinary run of mirrors obey a simple and inexorable physical law; they reflect as would a rigid, obsessed mind that claims to gather in itself *the* reality of the world—as though there were only one! Timoteo’s secret mirrors were more versatile.... He had a more ambitious project in mind...to develop metaphysical mirrors. A Metamir, that is a metaphysical mirror, does not obey the laws of optics but reproduces your image as it is seen by the person who stands before you: the idea was old, Aesop had already had it and who knows how many before and after him, but Timoteo had been the first to realize it.”

-Primo Levi, *The Magic Mirror*.

Artist Painting a Self-Portrait, from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Livre des cleres et nobles femmes*. French, 15<sup>th</sup> c. MS Fr. 12420.f.101v. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.

Christine de Pizan wrote that the legendary ancient artist Marcia created a self-portrait “by looking at herself in a mirror in order that her memory survive her.” Seidel 1993: 145.



Medieval: The Lady and the Unicorn, French Tapestry, 15<sup>th</sup> c. Musee de Cluny.

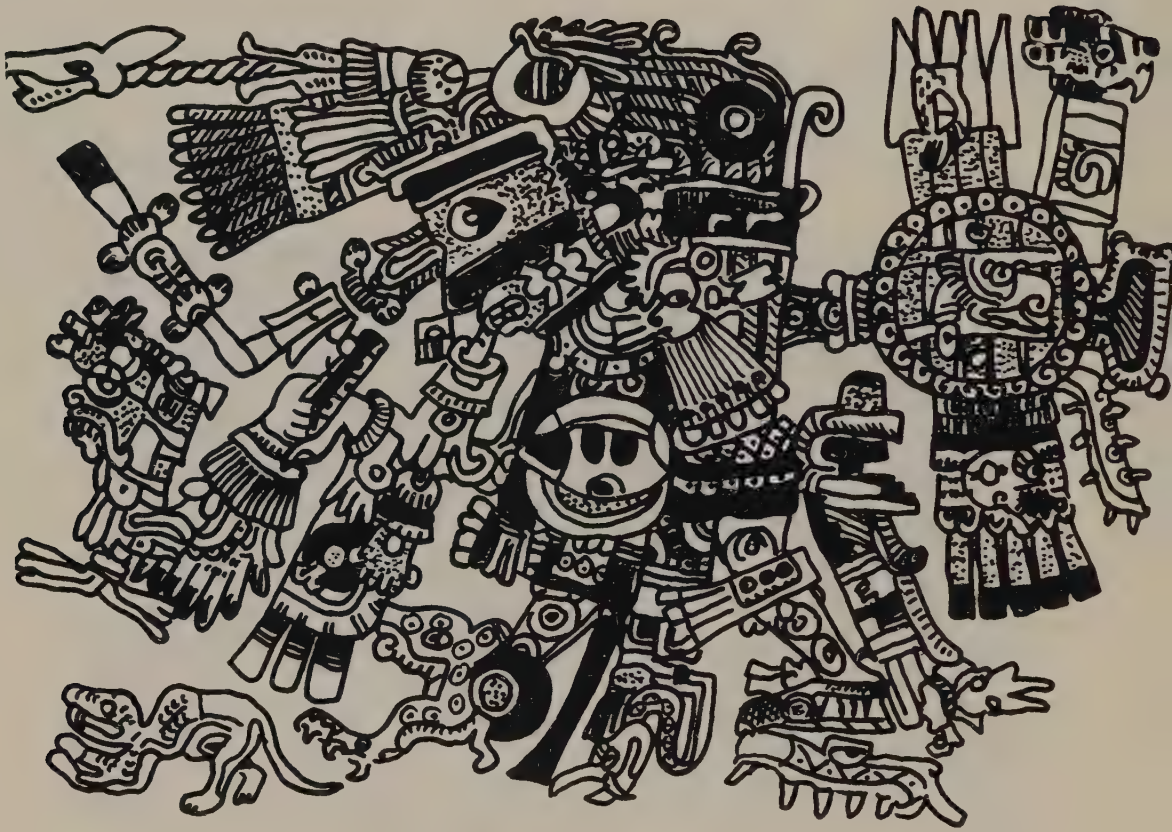
Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.

“She is mirour of alle curteisye.”

-Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, “The Man of Law’s Tale.”



Tezcatlipoca as Lord of Days, from *Codex Borgia*, Mixtec, 15<sup>th</sup> c.(?). Line drawing by the author.



One of the most powerful and mysterious Mesoamerican deities, Tezcatlipoca is also called "Smoking Mirror." In Pre-Hispanic beliefs, he was a powerful culture god who taught writing and divination. Later, the Spanish found the bloody cardiac sacrifices made to the god by the Aztecs particularly abhorrent and cast him as dichotomous with Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent. The origin of Tezcatlipoca is obscure, but the jaguar skin costume he wears may link him with the feline nature deity worshipped by the Olmecs. As time passed, his attributes and associations became protean—he is linked with the four directions, the night sky, with Venus as both morning and evening star and with magic. His appellation "Smoking Mirror" stems from his having lost a foot when dragging the earth, an alligator-like monster, from out of the primordial waters. His torn foot was replaced by a mirror from which a tendril of smoke emerges. The mirror acts as an eye, a way of seeing into the spirit realm, and the smoke carries the message from the "real" into the spiritual world. This tendril of smoke can be seen on Pacal's forehead and it is likely that the smoke which arose from burning the blood-soaked papers of the Maya autosacrifice had the same significance. God K/Tezcatlipoca provides spiritual eyes and the smoke from his mirror carries messages (see also the Maya creation myth, p 67).

There are a number of points of comparison between Tezcatlipoca and the Greek god Hermes. Both were messengers, both were connected with death; Hermes was god of the crossroads/Tezcatlipoca of the four directions. Both were patrons of magicians and were given to inflicting tricks on others which ranged from the playful to the unpleasant and disastrous. Robiscek 1978: 104f; Tedlock 1993: 9; Vaillant 1972: 181.

Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami (?)*, 1434.  
Oil/panel, 33 x 22 1/2". National Gallery, London.

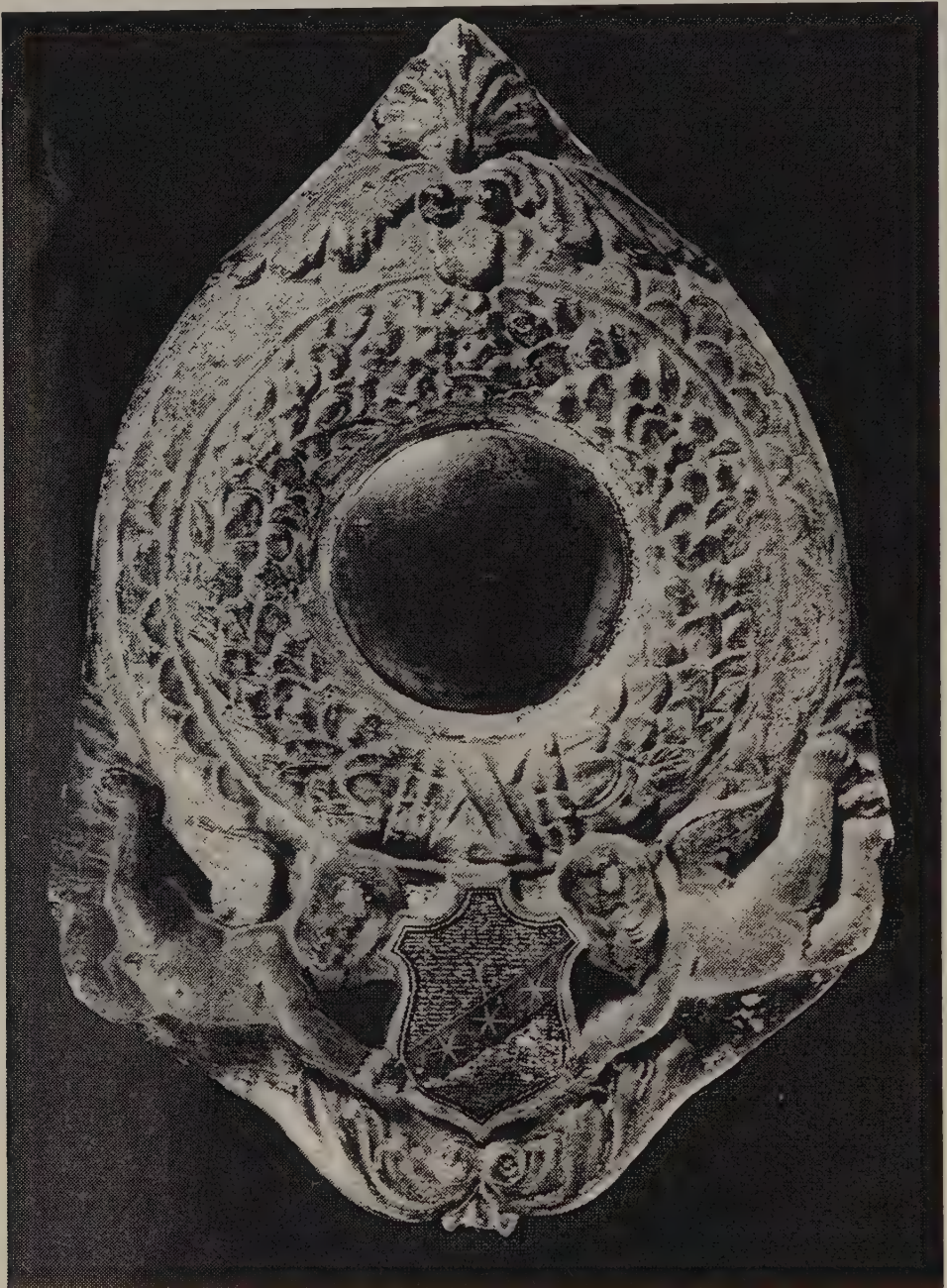




Erwin Panofsky interpreted this painting as a visual document serving as a witness to the marriage of Giovanni and Giovanna. Panofsky linked the mirror to the Netherlandish tradition of “hidden symbolism,” according to which the humble objects in the room have significance beyond the mundane. The mirror, in this context, is a symbol of the purity of the Virgin, the *speculum sine macula*, the spotless mirror. Giovanna, by association, is certified as virginal. Later scholars suggest that the mirror functions as the eye of God, the ultimate witness, and on a human plane, as a notorial seal, accompanied by Jan’s elaborate signature on the wall above. Van Eyck paints himself reflected in the mirror, thus implying the artist’s nearly magical ability to “reflect” reality. Furthermore, the mirror lures the viewer into the mysterious realm of vision and illusion.

Dillenberger suggests that van Eyck’s is the first use of the mirror in art, arguing that the artist was the first to paint things as he observed them to be in reality, rather than working, in a diagrammatic way, from models. Dillenberger 1990: 51ff; d’Otrange Mastai 1975: 83; Seidel 1993: 127ff, 143, 185ff.

Tuscan Mirror, c. 1480. Gilt and polychrome stucco frame, 21 1/4 x 14"; convex mirror, diameter 5 1/4". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection. All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Mirrors were listed, along with *cassoni* (wedding chests) and the marriage bed, as part of brides' dowries. The shield surrounding this mirror suggests the unique connection mirrors have with family lineage and continuity. Seidel 1993: 143.

“She adorned  
Amplly, that in her husband's eye looked  
Lovely,--  
The truest mirror that an honest wife  
can see her beauty in.”

-John Tobin, *The Honeymoon*, act iii, sc. 4.

Flemish miniature of a woman looking in a convex mirror, from *The Roman de la Rose*, c. 1480. The British Library, London. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,  
With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.  
A heavenly image in the glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;  
The inferior priestess, at her altar’s side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.”

-Alexander Pope, “The Rape of the Lock,” 123-128.

The Seventh Omen, after Paso y Troncoso, from Bernardino de Sahagun's *Florentine Codex*, 16<sup>th</sup> c. (*Book 12*, Chapter 1, ill. 9). Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Florence. Line drawing by the author.

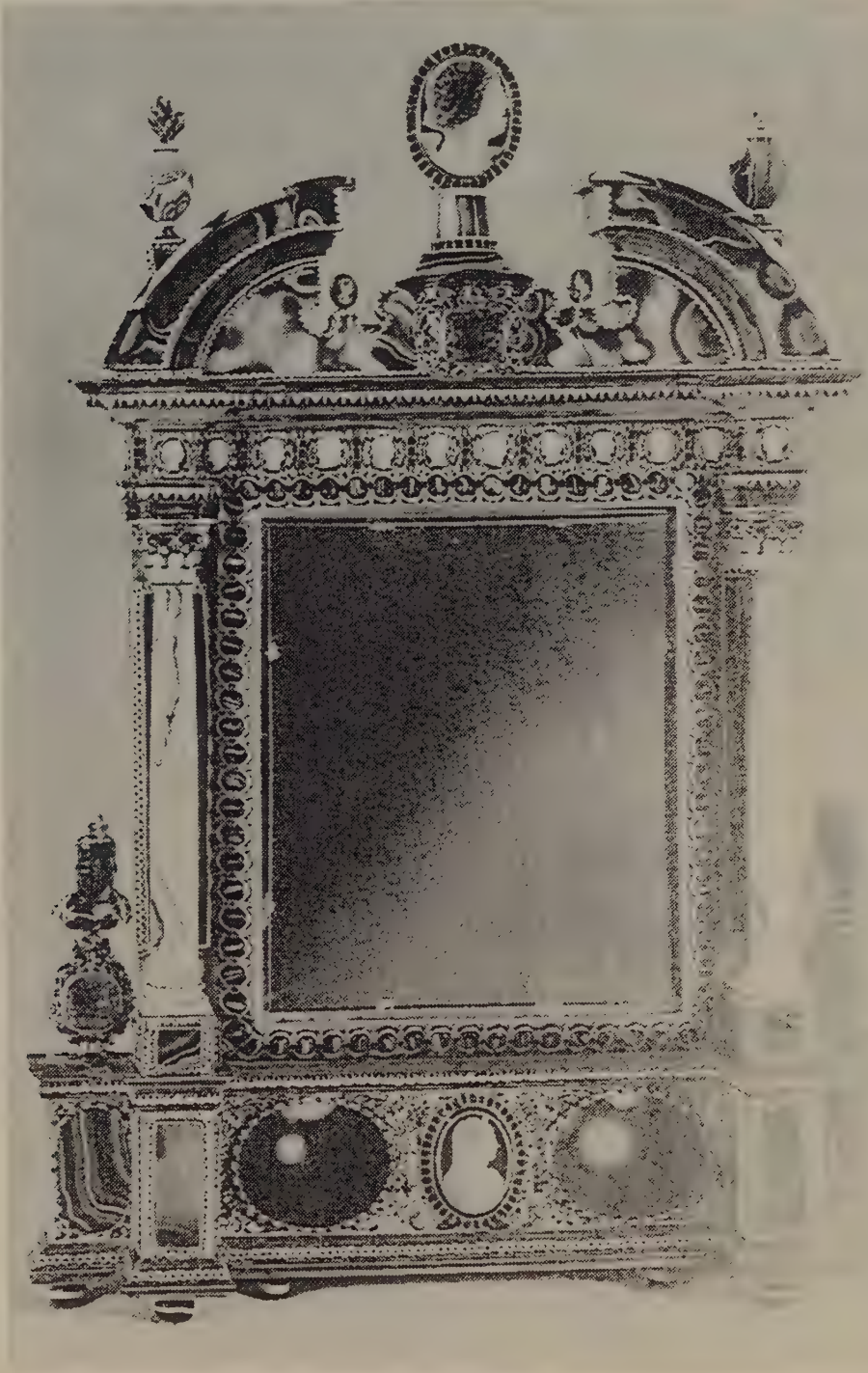


Mirrors played an important part in Aztec society. Not only did they figure in the evil omens which heralded the arrival of Cortes, they were among the gifts given to the Spaniards:

“First Chapter, in which it is told how there appeared, how there were seen the signs, the omens of evil, before the Spaniards had come here to this land, before they were known to the natives here.... [Six omens transpired: a tongue of flame in the sky, mysterious fires, thunderbolts, comets, foaming lakes and weeping women.]

A seventh evil omen: once [when] the water folk were hunting or snaring game they caught an ashen bird like a brown crane. They went to the Tlillan calmecatl to show it to Moctezuma. It was past noon, still early. On its head was as it were a mirror, round, circular, as if pierced in the middle. There appeared in the heavens, the stars—the Fire Drill [constellation]. And Moctezuma took it as an omen of great evil when he saw the stars and the Fire Drill. And when he looked at the bird’s head a second time, he saw, a little beyond, what was like people coming massed, coming as conquerors, coming girt in war array.” Sahagun, *Book 12*, 1953: 1, 3.

Mirror of Maria de Medici, Italian, 16<sup>th</sup> c. Wood, semi-precious gems and other media, .38 x .25 m. Apollo Gallery, Louvre, Paris. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.





“A mirror of architectural design, with frontispiece in sardonyx, in the centre of which is a head of Diana in a similar agate, surrounded with emeralds; on each side a small vase in sardonyx; the cornice resting on two columns of grey jasper, supported by two pilasters. In the cornice-frieze are twelve heads on mounted emeralds separated from one another by three small emeralds; beside the columns, two heads of garnet with gold enamel embellishment on two large emeralds also with gold enamel embellishment; in the centre of the pedestal, a woman's head surrounded with emeralds; all on gilded copper and standing upon six small round balls of sardonyx, the size being about fifteen inches tall down the middle by ten inches wide.”

-Inventory of Crown furniture; gift to the queen in 1600 from the Republic of Venice.

Pocket Mirror with Fastening Ring, Flemish, late 16<sup>th</sup> c. Wood. Musee de Cluny.  
Line drawing by the author.

The wood frame is decorated with carved leaves in which are entwined life and death masks, an open book, a representation of a mirror, and hands bearing weapons, and ears of corn.

“I look into my glass  
And viewing wasting skin,  
And say, “would God it came to pass  
My heart had shrunk as thin!”

-Thomas Hardy, “I Look into my Glass.”



Leonardo's Pocket-Mirror, 1500. Ivory and silver. Michel de Bry, formerly Jubinal de Saint-Albin. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.

The inscription translated, reads "complain not of me, O Woman, for I render to you only what you give me." The Latin anagram of this sentence is "*Et Leonardo da Vinci geminet Leonardo da Vinci habent q mihi, M.D.*" ("Let Leonardo da Vinci duplicate Leonardo da Vinci, and both are dumbfounded, 1500"). Roche 1985: 57. It is tantalizing to think of this mirror in conjunction with Leonardo's famous "mirror writing."



Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, 1524. Oil/panel, 9 5/8" diameter. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



“When you want to see if your picture corresponds throughout with the objects you have drawn from nature, take a mirror and look in that at the reflection of the real things, and compare the reflected image with your picture, and consider whether the subject of the two images duly corresponds in both, particularly studying the mirror. You should take the mirror for your guide—that is to say a flat mirror—because on its surface the objects appear in many respects as in a painting. Thus you see, a painting done on a flat surface displays objects which appear in relief, and the mirror—on its flat surface—does the same. The picture has one plane surface and the same with the mirror. The picture is intangible, in so far as that which appears round and prominent cannot be grasped with the hands; and it is the same with the mirror. And since you can see that the mirror, by means of outlines, shadows, and lights, makes objects appear in relief, you, who have in your colours far stronger lights and shades than those in the mirror, can certainly, if you understand how to put them together well, make also your picture look like a natural scene reflected in a large mirror.”

Leonardo da Vinci, *The Practice of Painting*.

Parmigianino takes Leonardo’s lesson a step further by painting himself in a convex mirror on a specially prepared convex panel. With characteristic Mannerist virtuosity, the mirror and the mirror image are conflated, suggesting that art is more than a mirror of nature, and perhaps that illusion is more real than “reality.”

Lucas Furtenagel, *Hans Burgkmair and his Wife*, 152(9?). Oil/limewood, 60 x 52 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



The mirror reflects the faces of Hans Burgkmair and his wife Anna Allerlay as skulls of a rather simian appearance. The mirror frame is inscribed in Latin "O Death," and in German "Know thyself"; on the handle "Hope of the world" is written in German. Campbell 1990: 194.

"Well, I will scourge those apes,  
And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror,  
As large as the stage whereon we act;  
Where they shall see the time's deformity  
Anatomised in every nerve, and sinew,  
With constant courage, and contempt of fear."

-Ben Jonson, *Every Man out of His Humour*.

The tiger was used in English heraldry from the fifteenth century, possibly due to its association with bravery, perseverance, coupled with tender care and absolute devotion to its young. The presence of the mirror is accounted for in the following text from Bartholomew the Englishman who described the Tiger as dreadfully swift, so swift that the only ruse to escape was to throw down mirrors behind one, “and the moder foloweth and fyndeth the mirrours in the waye, and loketh on theym and seeth her owne shadoe and ymage therin, and weneth that she seeth her children therin; and is longe occupied therefore to delyver her chyldren oute of the glasse; and so the hunter hath tyme and space for to scape.” Although this seems rather unfair to the fiercely virtuous Tiger mother, one might wish that other enemies could be so neatly and easily evaded. Denny 1975: 144.



Arms and Crest of Thomas Sybell of Aynsford, Kent, 1531. British Library, London. Line drawing by the author.



“Vitzliputzli” Mirror, Aztec-Mixtec, 1550-1600. Cast gold, pearl and pyrite, 3” high. Stadtbibliothek, Nuremberg, on loan to the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. Line drawing by the author.



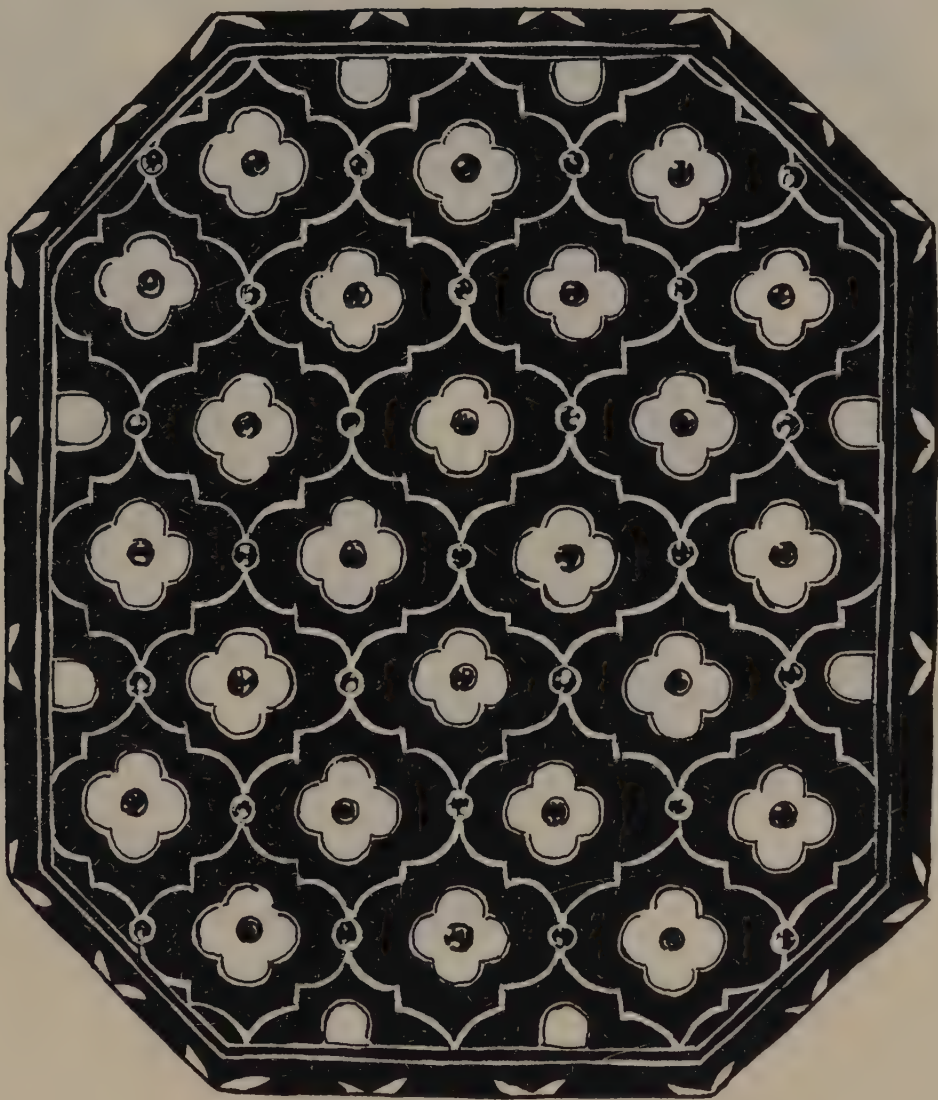
The name “Vitzliputzli” is a corruption of the name of the Aztec war god, Huitzilopochtli. It seems likely that the sixteenth-century spice merchant who brought this mirror to Nuremberg mixed up the name of the Aztec god with a character from German folklore, Mephistopheles’ devilish assistant in the puppet play of Dr. Faustus, which later inspired Goethe. Among the Aztecs, the spider monkey served as the symbol of the eleventh day, *Ozomatli*. Those born on that day were thought to be lucky and happy persons. In codices, the monkey is often shown wearing a grass suit, similar to the raised surface of this mirror. The conjunction of monkeys and mirrors recurs in Goya’s sardonic view of humankind and makes one wonder if the Aztecs might also have thought of monkeys as aping humans, with the reminder that it is only the veneer of culture that separates us. Easby 1970: 315; Miller and Taube 1993: 117.

Archimedes was said to have set fire to the Roman fleet attacking Syracuse by using “burning-mirrors.” From Vitellio’s Book V on Optics (1270), published by Risner in 1572. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.



India, Mirror, Mughal period, mid 17th c. Rock crystal set in a frame of dark green jade inlaid with gold, white jade and rubies, 131 x 112 mm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.

Created by the master Ghani for the Ottoman sultan Suleyman, this mirror is made in the shape of a decorative pendant. Denny in *Dictionary of Art* 1996: 718.



Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 1600-01. Oil/canvas, mounted on a convex poplar-wood shield, 23 5/8 x 21 5/8". Uffizi, Florence. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



Caravaggio's Medusa has the face of a young boy, not that of the horrendous creature of legend. The artist probably made this parade shield for the Cardinal del Monte, as a gift for Ferdinand I, grand duke of Tuscany. The choice of subject matter stems from the use of Medusa as an emblem of the triumph of reason over the senses—and, by extension, of the duke over his enemies. Caravaggio counters the real horrifying force of the Medusa head not only by transforming it into the visage of a real Roman boy, but also by rendering it melodramatic and a little silly. Medusa thus loses her force, her ability to turn men to stone.

Gorgo (Gorgon) was a title of Athena's older, destructive aspect. The Perseus myth claims that he gave Athena the severed head for her aegis. Actually, the head was always an attribute of Athena in her role as guardian of female secrets of birth and death, especially lunar blood. Medusa's serpent locks symbolize menstrual secrets. The combination of blood and serpents and women's secret rituals was particularly fearful to men—Pliny's discourse on the effects of contact with menstrual blood are an indication of the intense anxiety (see quotation, p. 136). It was perhaps this deeper meaning of the Gorgon image that caused Caravaggio to devalorize it further. Flint 1991: 28; Moir 1982: 98; Walker 1988: 255.

Peter Paul Rubens, *The Toilet of Venus*, after 1629. Oil/canvas, 1.37 x 1.11 cm.

©Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

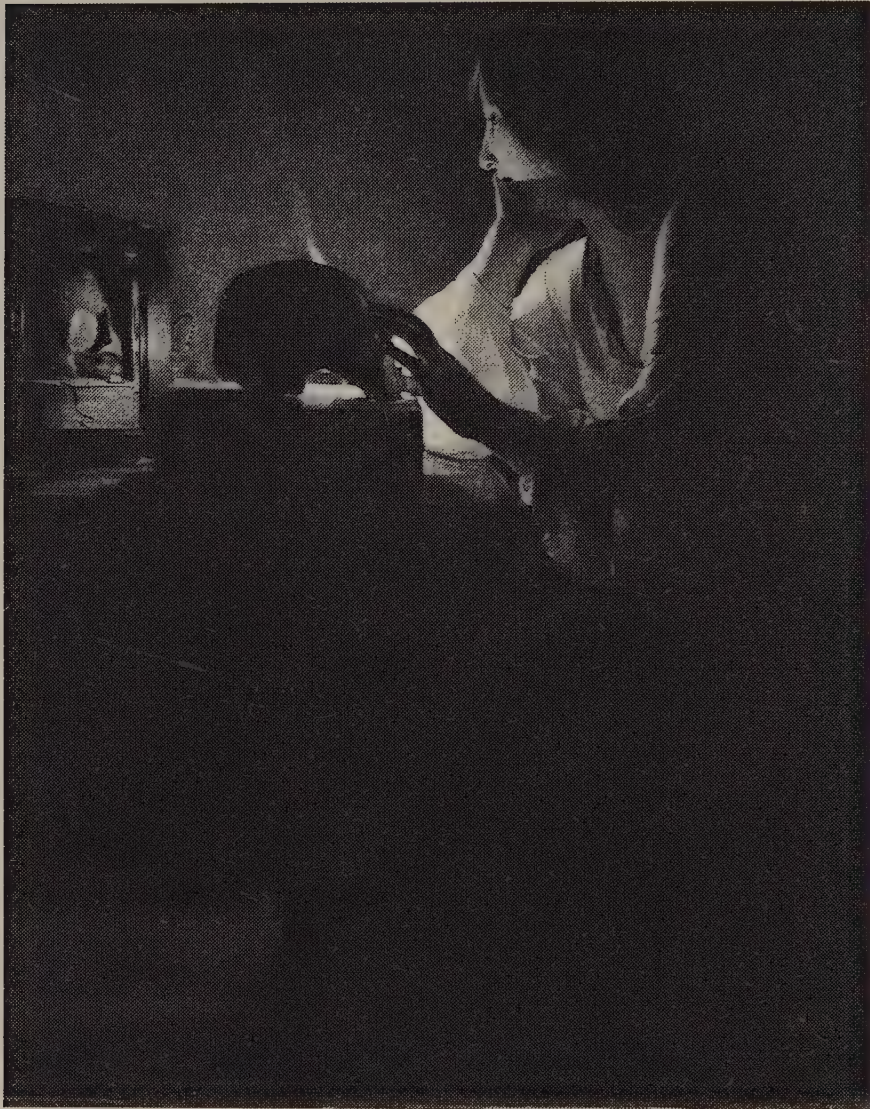




“It is no use to blame the looking glass if your face is awry.”

-Nicolai Gogol.

Georges de la Tour, *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1640. Oil/canvas, 44 1/2 x 36 1/2". National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund.



In this dark night scene, the penitent Magdalene looks into the shadows beyond a mirror which reflects the skull next to it on the table. The sole, dramatic light source in the painting, the candle flame, the girl's melancholy yet absorbed gaze, and the reflection all create a feeling of mystery. The things of this life—love, sexuality, sin and redemption—seem intangibles beside the *memento mori*, itself a mere reflection in a dark mirror. Walker 1984: 308.

Diego Velazquez, *The Toilette of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, c. 1649-50.  
Oil/canvas, 48 1/4 x 69 3/4". National Gallery, London.



Although some scholars have suggested that the artist painted the nude from behind to avoid problems with the church, it seems clear (given his later use of the mirror in *Las Meninas*) that it was his fascination with illusion that resulted in this subtle and graceful depiction of the goddess of love and beauty. Using the device of the mirror Velazquez is able to suggest simultaneously the timelessness and fragility of beauty. The blurred mirror image enables him to avoid the specificity of any particular beauty, giving the reflection a haunting, dreamlike, ephemeral quality which balances the solidity and particularity of the corporeal body. Serullaz 1981: 142.

Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil/canvas, 10' 5 1/2" x 9'1". Museo del Prado, Madrid.



The mirror image in Velazquez's masterpiece has generally been interpreted as a reflection of the King and Queen who are fellow spectators, along with us. Fiel's diagram suggests another possibility, that the reflection is of the painter's image on the canvas, which is in keeping with the multiple ambiguities in this work. The palpability of the moment the painter fixes for us is undermined by the mysterious, shifting space, the feeling that our senses are unreliable, that there is more (or less) to life than we can perceive. Velazquez's fascination with mirrors is evident in the beautiful *Rokeby Venus*. Gudiol 1974: 289; Seidel 1993: 185ff, 194; Serullaz 1981: 10f.



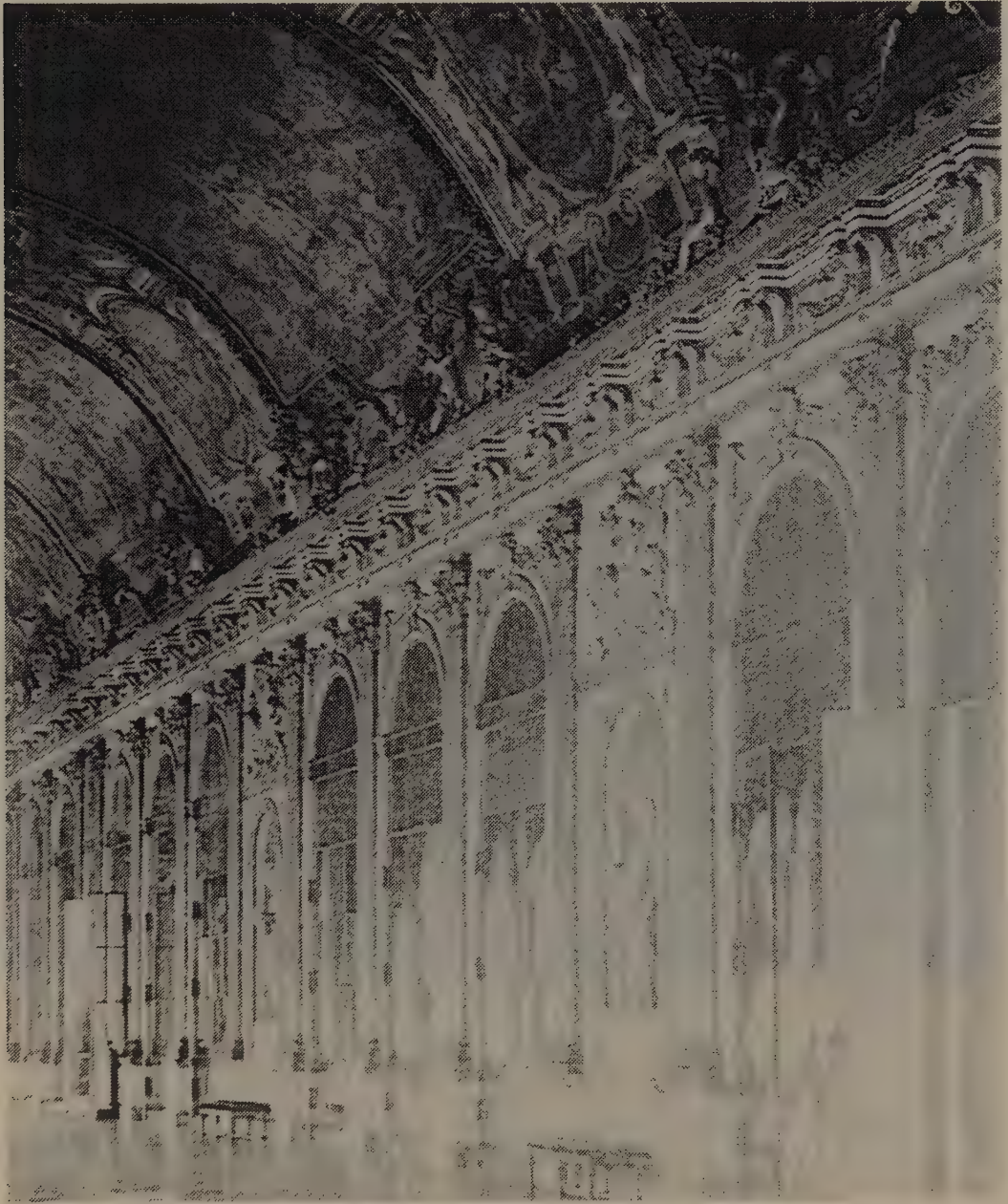
Line drawing by the author of perspective in *Las Meninas* after Bartolome Mestre

“A man’s manners are a mirror in which he shows his portrait.”

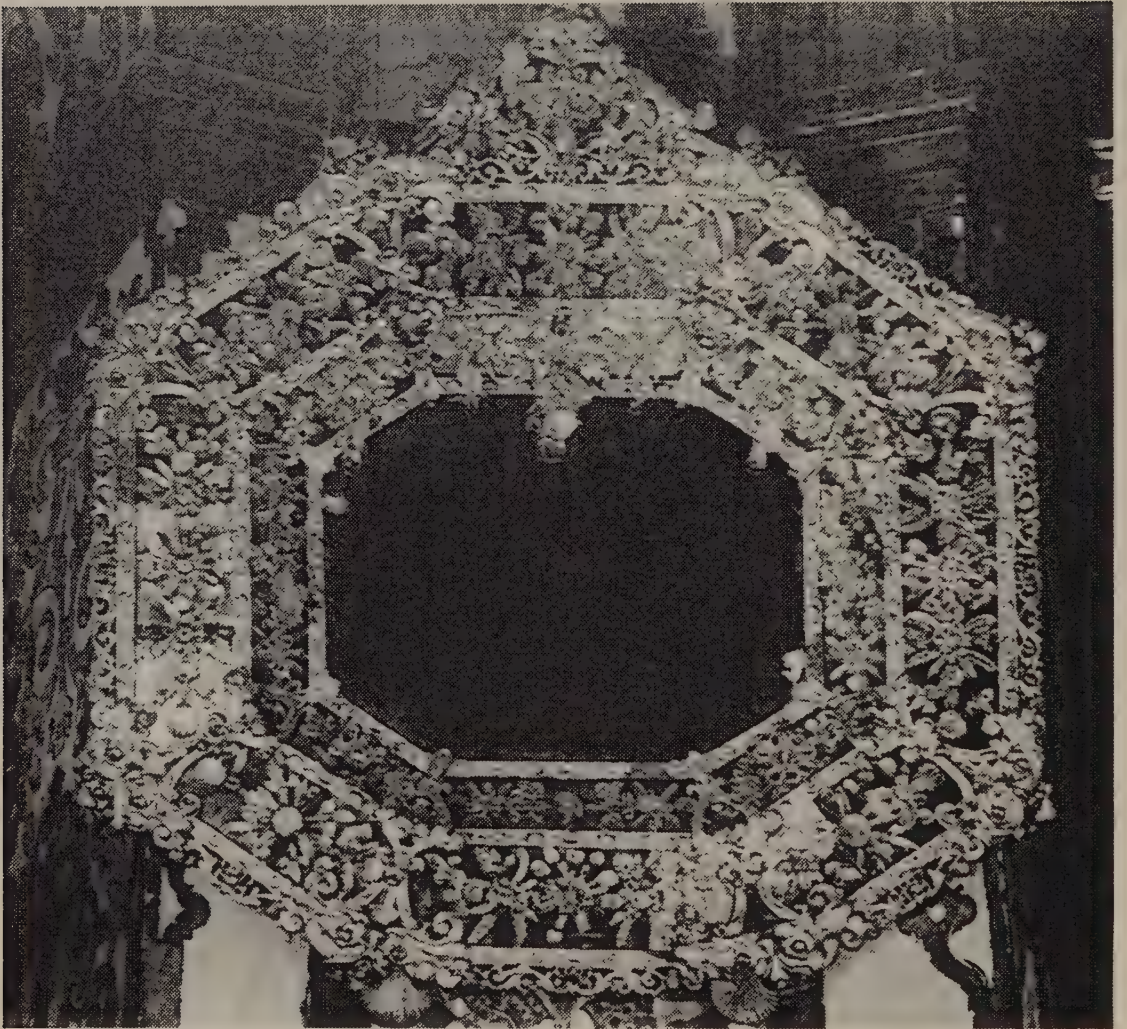
-Goethe, *Proverbs in Prose*.



J.H. Mansart and C. Lebrun, *Hall of Mirrors*, Palace of Versailles, 1669-1685. Beveled glass, set in bronze gilt molding. Seventeen arched windows are mirrored by corresponding arches each filled with eighteen mirrors (306 in all). Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.



Octagonal Mirror from Guadalupe Convent, New Castile, early 18<sup>th</sup> c. Bronze gilt, glass and rock-crystal, 1.30 x 1.55m. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.



“Has anyone ever seen  
a stranger moral fervor?  
you who dirty the mirror  
cry that it isn’t clean.”

-Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, *Hombres Necios*.

“It was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forevermore, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.”

-Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Broken Mirror*, mid-18<sup>th</sup> c. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.



“I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.  
Whatever I see I swallow immediately  
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.  
I am not cruel, only truthful—  
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.  
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.  
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long  
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.  
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,  
Searching my reaches for what she really is.  
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.  
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.  
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.  
I am important to her. She comes and goes.  
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.  
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman  
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.”

-Sylvia Plath, “Mirror.”

Shaman's Costume, Tungus, Siberia, late 18<sup>th</sup> c. Line drawing by the author.

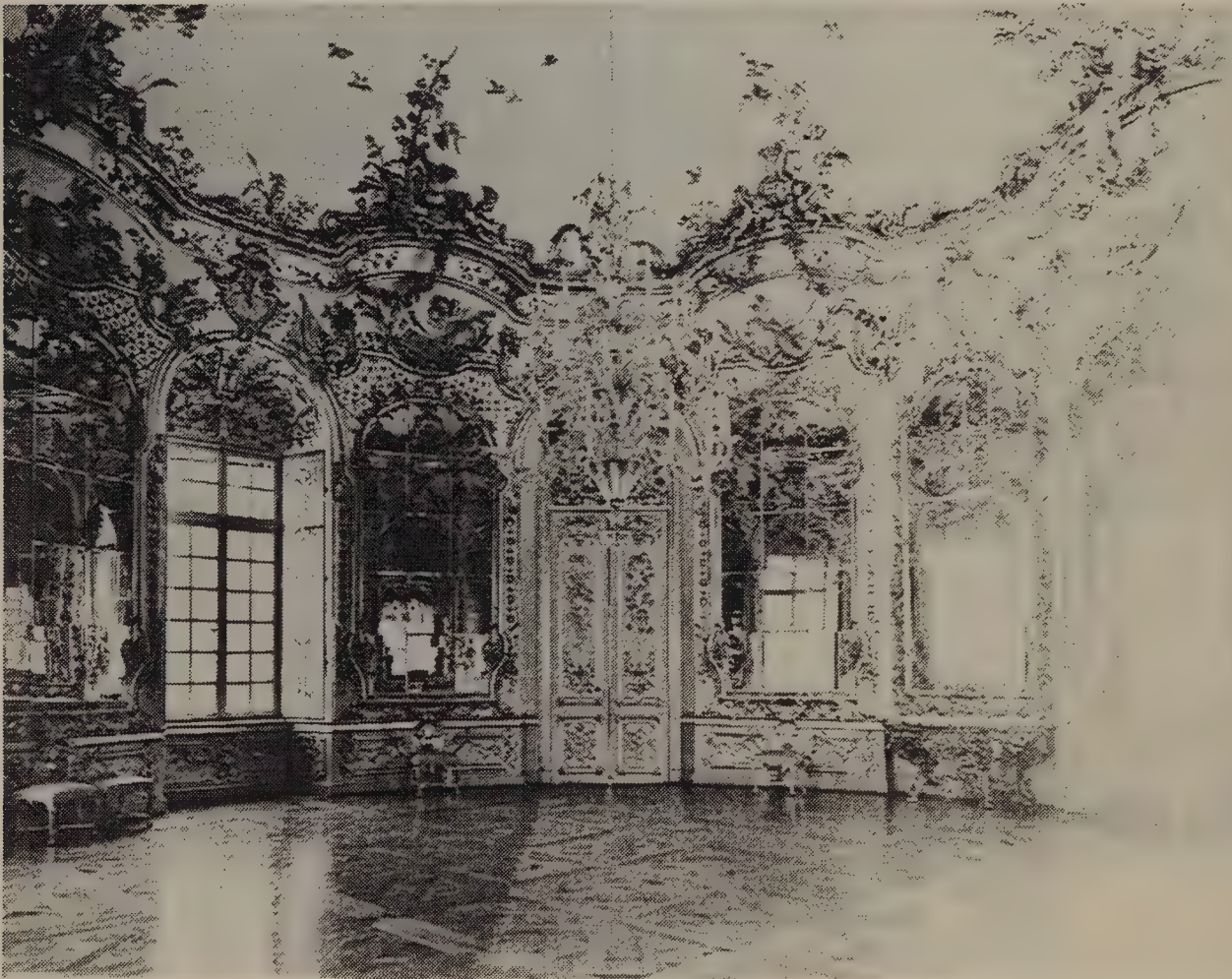


A shaman's costume usually includes a mirror, worn on shoulder, breast, or back. The mirror is apotropaic, an "all-seeing eye," which protects the shaman from evil influences. It is also used to enhance the shaman's "sight," and provides a point of contact with and entry into the spirit world. The shaman uses the mirror to find the wandering souls of those who are ill and dead—the former can thus be cured and the latter assisted in reaching their final rest. Such mirrors are part of a complex of archetypal objects and ideas—e.g. the cosmic tree, the Pre-Christian cross (four directions), animal guardians—which spread downward from the Arctic circle. It is not surprising, thus, that mirrors, as well as other aspects of shamanism, are found in all those areas into which the belief system diffused. Brodzky 1977: 98, 103; Halifax 1982: 64.

Francois Cuvillies, Mirror Room in the Amalienburg Residence, in the park of the Nymphenburg Palace, Bavaria, 1739. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.

“When her mother tends her, before the laughing mirror.”

-George Meredith, *Love in the Valley*.





“I have just returned from Murano, where I have been to see the glasshouse. The glass plates are not as large nor as white as ours, but they are more transparent and less faulty. They are not cast on copper tables like ours, but are blown like bottles. The work demands extremely large and robust workers, especially to swing in the air those great globes of crystal on the end of the blow-pipe. The worker takes from the crucible of the furnace a large quantity of molten matter, which is then of a gluey consistency, on the end of his pipe. By blowing he makes a hollow globe, then by swinging it in the air and putting it every now and then into the mouth of the furnace so as to maintain a certain degree of fusion, still turning it very quickly so that the matter does not run more on to one side than another, he succeeds in making a long oval of it. Then another worker with the point of a pair of scissors like sheep-shears (that is to say, they open when the hand is relaxed) pierces the end of the oval. The first worker holding the pipe turns it very quickly, whilst the second gradually opens the scissors. In this way the oval is completely opened up at one end. Then it is detached from the first iron pipe and sealed again at the open end, on to another specially made pipe. Then it is opened at the other end, using the same method I have just described. You have then a long cylinder of glass, of wide diameter. Still being turned, it is put once more into the mouth of the furnace to soften it a little again, and when it comes out, in a trice it has been cut lengthwise with shears and laid out on a copper table. After that, it only has to be heated again in another oven, polished, and silvered in the ordinary way.”

-Charles de Brosses, letter to M. de Blancey,  
29 August 1739.

“Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,  
And all my soul, and all my every part;  
And for this sin there is no remedy,  
It is so grounded inward in my heart.  
Me thinks no face so gracious is as mine,  
No shape so true, no truth of such account,  
And for myself mine own worth do define,  
As I all other in all worths surmount.  
But when my glass shows me myself indeed,  
Beated and chapped with tanned antiquity,  
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;  
Self so self-loving were iniquity.

‘Tis thee (my self) that for myself I praise,  
Painting my age with beauty of thy days.”

William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 62*.

English Gilt Mirror Reputed to Have Belonged to David Garrick, c. 1770. Gilded gesso and wood, marble plinth, 35" high, mirror 23 1/4" diameter. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



Francisco Goya, *A Choleric Man*, probably from 1797-98. Pen drawing. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



In his six drawings of the four temperaments, Goya depicts symbolic *alter egos* as mirror images, revealing the psychological character of each temperament. One drawing of the sanguine temperament depicts a youthful fop before a mirror which reflects the image of a screaming young woman chained to a wall, while the second shows an ape reflected in the mirror. The melancholic temperament is depicted as a fashionably dressed woman confronting a mirror image of a serpent wrapped around, in one drawing, a crutch and in the other, a scythe. The phlegmatic temperament pairs a clergyman and a frog. Finally, in the temperament pictured here, the choleric man—a constable—is reflected in the mirror as a large cat. The aggressive, fiery nature of this temperament is apparent in the upright and confrontational stance of both cat and constable. Nordstrom discusses the associations of human beings, animals and other symbols, tracing them to complex iconographic visual and literary traditions.

The large angled mirror closely resembles a stretched canvas, and serves to blur the distinction between painting (or here, drawing) and life. Furthermore, Goya also suggests that human beings are blind to their own nature, but that art discloses it to the viewer. Nordstrom 1962: 76ff.

Staircase to Throne Room, Golestan Palace, Teheran, Persia, early 19<sup>th</sup> c. decor.

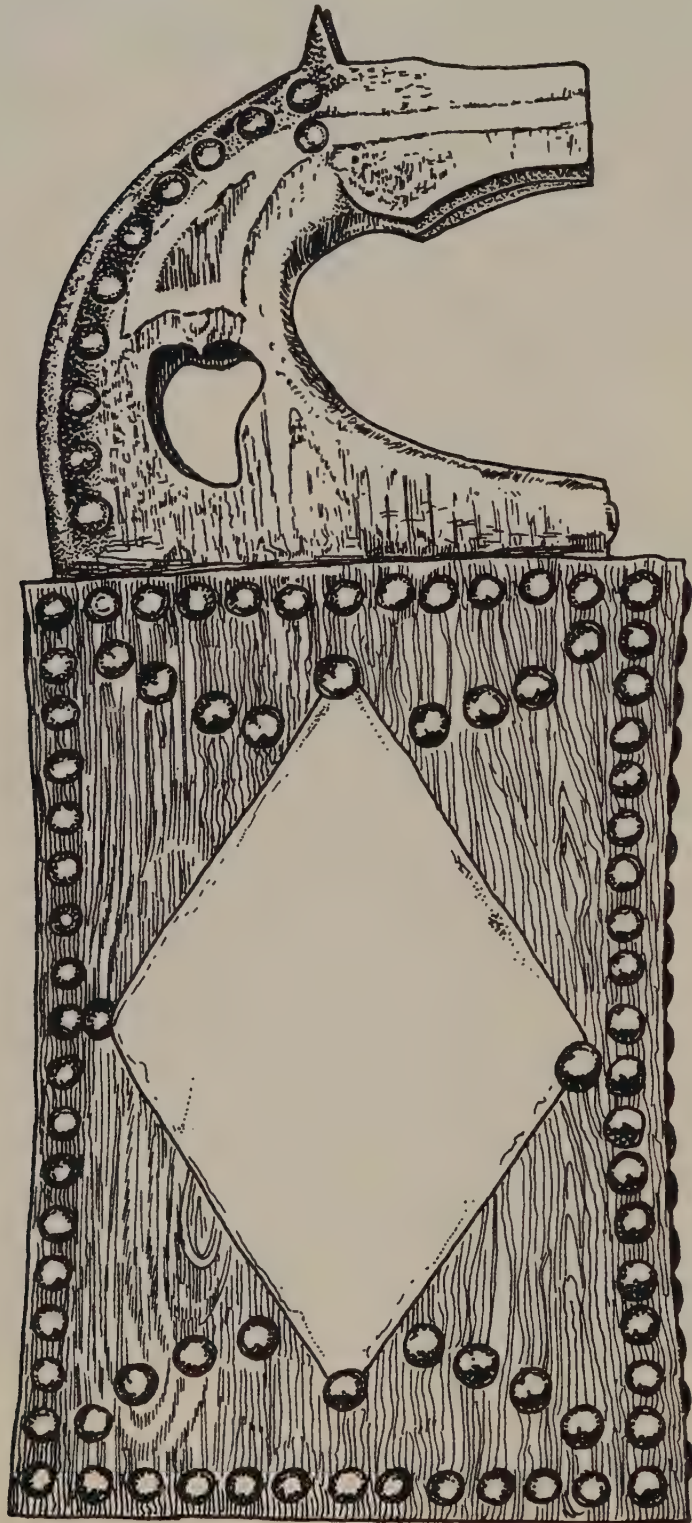
Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.



“The mirror chamber, full of mirrors, formed in the most diverse manners, such that one could see above on the ceiling and on the walls around the table, in the room or in the bed, in the chamber, everything, which comes and goes, in the courtyard, in the street, in the country, and on the Elbe river.”

-Description of the Mirror Chamber of Torgan Castle,  
12<sup>th</sup> c. (Hartlaub in Schiffer 1983: 7)

Decorated Mirror Frame, Iowa. 19<sup>th</sup> c.(?). Walnut, with lead inlay, brass tacks and mirror, 13 1/4 x 6" high. Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, New York. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.





Love and War: several Plains Indian tribes—the Sioux, Crow, Assiniboin, Mandan, Osage and Pawnee—used mirrors in dances. The mirrors were originally used to send messages by reflecting the sun’s rays, a practice later adopted by the army. A Sioux dance in which mirrors were used was the Elk Dance for making love medicine. The dancer flashed the mirror into the eyes of the object of his attention, blinding her to his faults and opening her heart. Such mirrors were called “lady killers.” More commonly, “fancy mirrors” were used in the Grass Dance. Also called the “War Dance,” it is one of the oldest surviving Plains Indian dances. Although it was a warrior’s dance, originally performed only by experienced men, it was not, strictly speaking, a war dance, since it incorporated elements of old animal and bird dances as well as victory dances. Feder 1971: ill. 50; Laubin 1977: 435, 464f; Paterek 1994: 123, 127, 130, 216f.

Drum, Yombe, Zaire, 19<sup>th</sup> c. (collected before 1885). Wood, hide and mirror, 77 cm. high. Museu Etnografico, Lisbon. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



Snakes, tiny human figures and strange hybrid animals support the mirror, covering and protecting the insignia of power. All serve to reiterate and dramatize the power of the Yombe chief.

Edward Burne-Jones, *The Mirror of Venus*, 1877. Oil/canvas, 47 1/4 x 78 3/4".

Courtesy of Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon.



“As fire is covered by smoke, as a mirror is covered by dust, or as the embryo is covered by the womb, similarly, the living entity is covered by different degrees of this lust.”

*-Bhagavad-gita, Text 38*

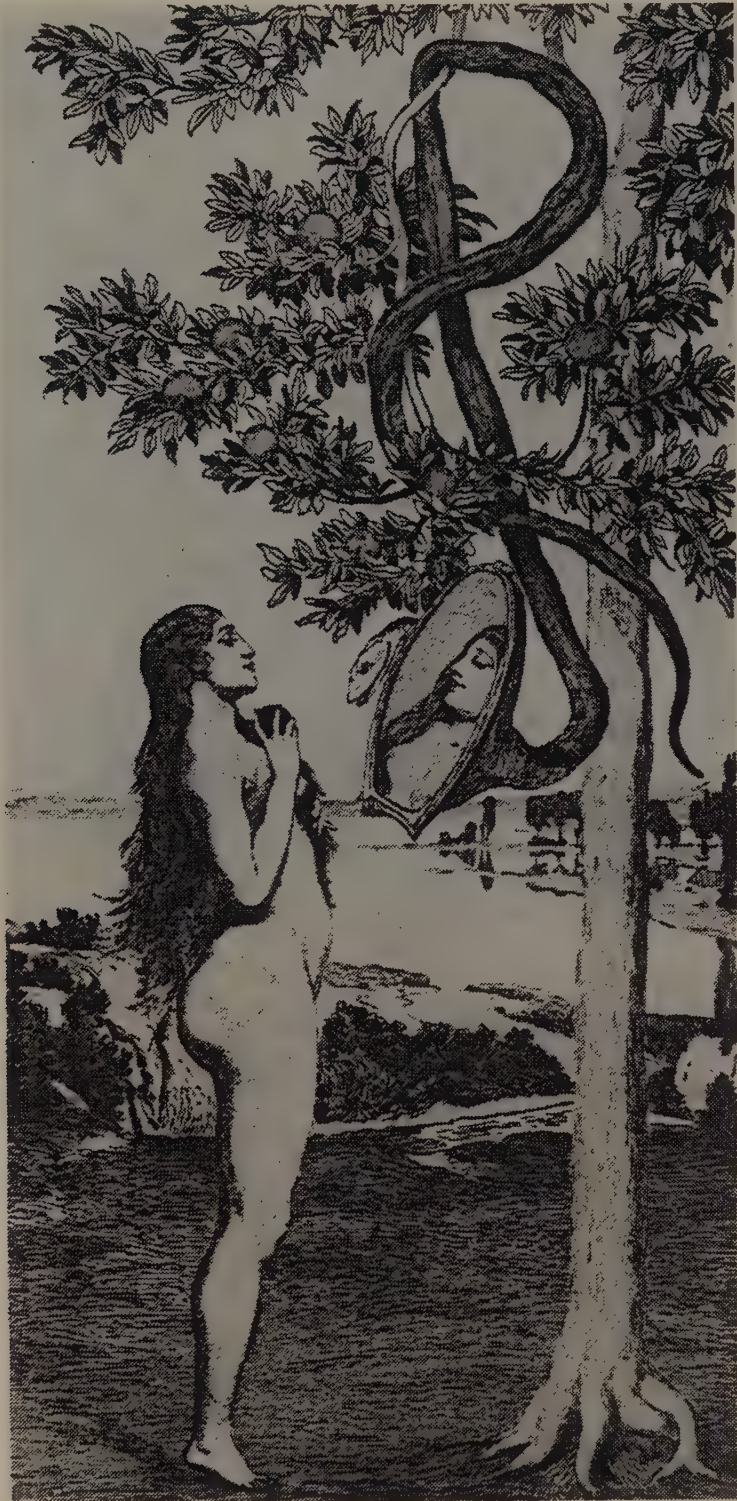
“There are three degrees of covering of the living entity by which his pure consciousness is obscured. This covering is but lust under different manifestations like smoke in the fire, dust on the mirror, and the womb about the embryo....The dust on the mirror refers to a cleansing process of the mirror of the mind by so many spiritual methods. The best process is to chant the holy names of the Lord....The covered mirror is compared to the birds and beasts, and the smoke covered fire is compared to the human being.... By careful handling of the smoke in the fire, the fire can be made to blaze. Therefore the human form of life is a chance for the living entity to escape the entanglement of material existence....”

-Commentary on Text 38 by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada

“With unexperience’t thought, and laid me downe  
On the green bank, to look into the cleer  
Smooth Lake, that to meeseemd another Skie.  
As I bent down to look, just opposite,  
A Shape within the watry gleam appeerd  
Bending to look on me, I started back,  
It started back, but pleasd I soon returnd,  
Pleas’d it returnd as soon with answering looks  
Of sympathie and love, there I had fixt  
Mine eyes till now, and pin’d with vain desire,  
Had not a voice thus warnd me, What thou seest,  
What there thou seest fair Creature is thy self,  
With thee it came and goes....”

-Eve’s reply, John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, 457-469.

Max Klinger, "The Snake," Pl. 3 from *Eve and the Future*, c. 1880. Etching, 16 1/4 x 11 5/8". Private Collection.



Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*, 1882. Oil/canvas, 37 1/2 x 51".

Photograph courtesy of The Courtauld Gallery, London.





Manet shifted the reflection to the right, as if the mirror itself is on a slant. The effect of this shift is to create “intentional internal complications, which call into question the nature of vision and reality.” One wonders if Manet’s sophisticated spatial manipulation might not be a pun relating to the title of Baudelaire’s collected essays on art criticism, *The Mirror of Art* published posthumously in 1867. Or if, more to the point, Manet submits in this painting (as he does in greater and lesser degrees in all his work) his contribution to the long visual and theoretical dialog concerning art and illusion. As T.J. Clark puts it: “The mirror must therefore be frontal and plain, and the things that appear in it be laid out in a measured rhythm. And yet it is clear that some of those things will not be allowed to appear too safely attached to the objects and persons whose likenesses they are. I think that this happens...as a result of Manet’s attitude towards the Folies-Bergere—towards modern life in Paris, if you like. It seems to me also that a degree of conflict exists between that attitude and the beliefs about painting and vision—the metaphysic of plainness and immediacy—just outlined. That Manet held both sets of beliefs is incontestable, and the tension between them was never more visible than in his last big painting.” Clark 1984: 253; Herbert 1988: 80.

Henri Vever, Hand Mirror with Narcissus and Echo on reverse; handle consists of an antique-inspired victory figure, 1889. Silver, height .26 m., diameter .13.m. Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Paris. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tubingen/Germany.



“All mirrors are magical mirrors, and we never see our faces in them.”

-Logan Pearsall Smith, *Afterthoughts*.

William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1890-1905. Oil/canvas, 74 1/8 x 57 5/8". Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund.

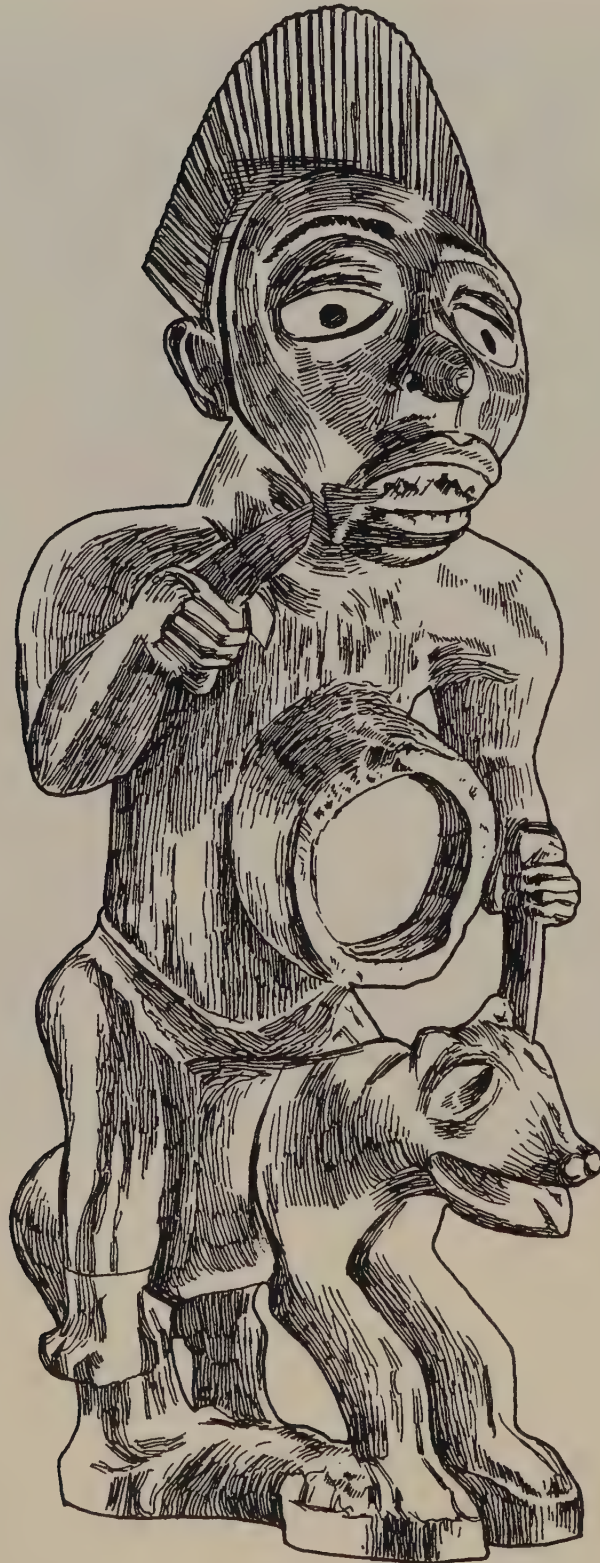


“She left the web, she left the loom,  
 She made three paces thro’ the room,  
 She saw the water lily bloom,  
 She saw the helmet and the plume,  
     She look’d down to Camelot.  
 Out flew the web and floated wide;  
 The mirror cracked from side to side.  
 ‘The curse has come upon me,’ cried  
     The Lady of Shallott.”

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *The Lady of Shalott*.

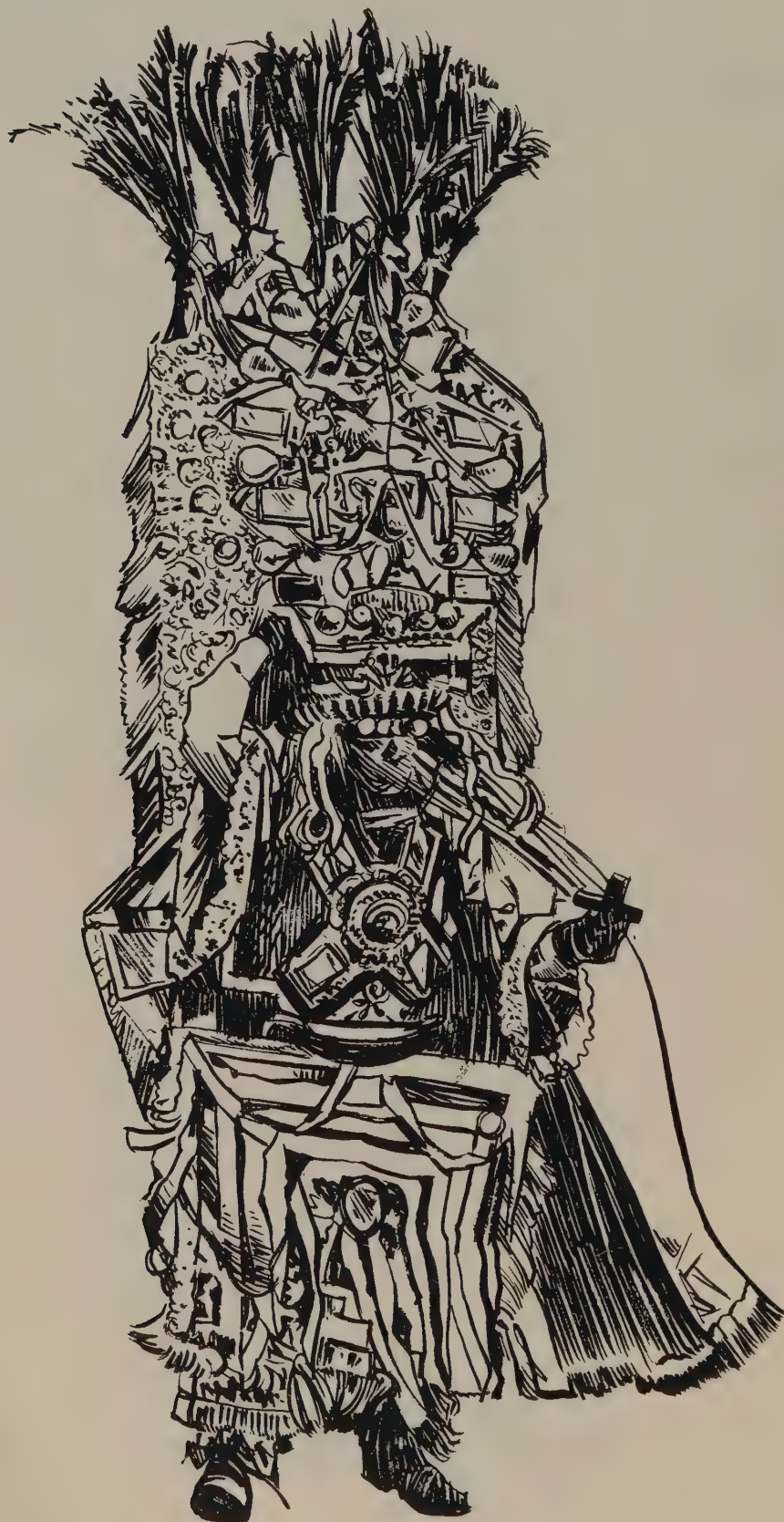
Hunt responded to Tennyson’s criticism that the artist had taken too great a license in depicting things not described in the poem—immeshing the lady in her loom and emphasizing her luxuriant hair—by saying that he wished “to convey the idea of the threatened fatality by reversing the ordinary peace of the room and of the lady herself....” The convex mirror, it has been pointed out, reflects Hunt’s appreciation for van Eyck’s, *Portrait of Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami*. Warner 1997: 97.

Male Seated on an Animal, Kongo, Zaire, 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> c. Wood, glass, pigment, 13” high. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



The mirror covers a cavity filled with magical substances. It thus protects the spirit inhabiting the figure, and most particularly, the strong “medicine” that activates the sculpture. The medicine is embedded in the *kundu* gland, the invisible seat of evil. Visible only to healers, the medicine works figuratively at gut level, warding off sorcery. Newton 1978: 184; Thompson in Weber 1987: 185.

Dancer Wearing Costume for Corpus Christi dances, Pujili, Cotopaxi, Ecuador,  
20<sup>th</sup> c. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



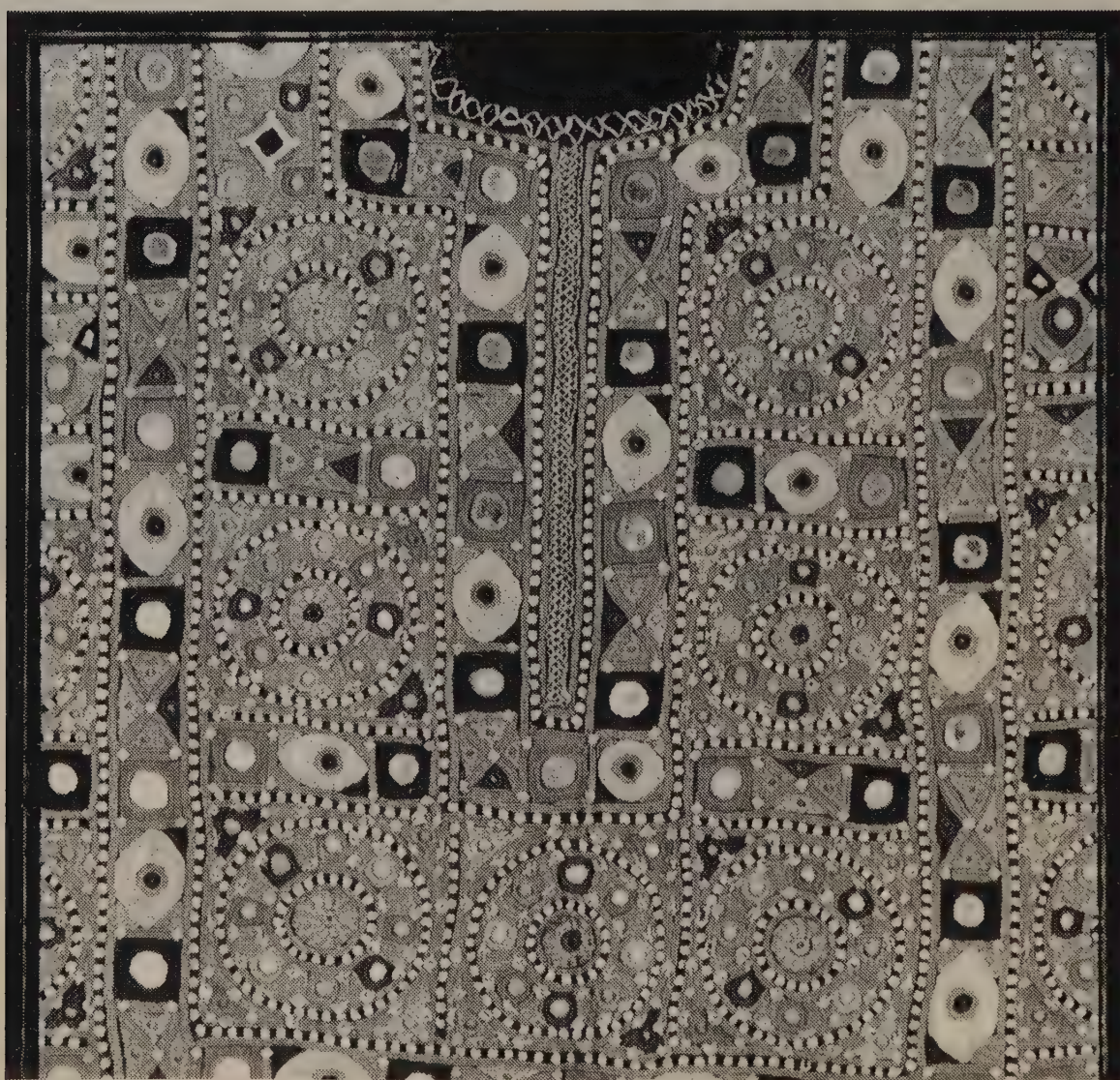


Reflected Image of the Bride at a Wedding in Pakistan, 20<sup>th</sup> c. Photograph ©Ernst Wasmuth Verlag, Tübingen/Germany.



Wedding Blouse/*gaj*, det., early 20<sup>th</sup> c.(?). Possibly the Lohana people, Thano Bula Khan area, Hyderabad district, Sind, Pakistan. Embroidered silk and cotton, sequins and mirrors, 20 1/2 x 42". Girard Foundation Collection in the Museum of International Folk Art, a unit of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Photo by Michel Monteaux.

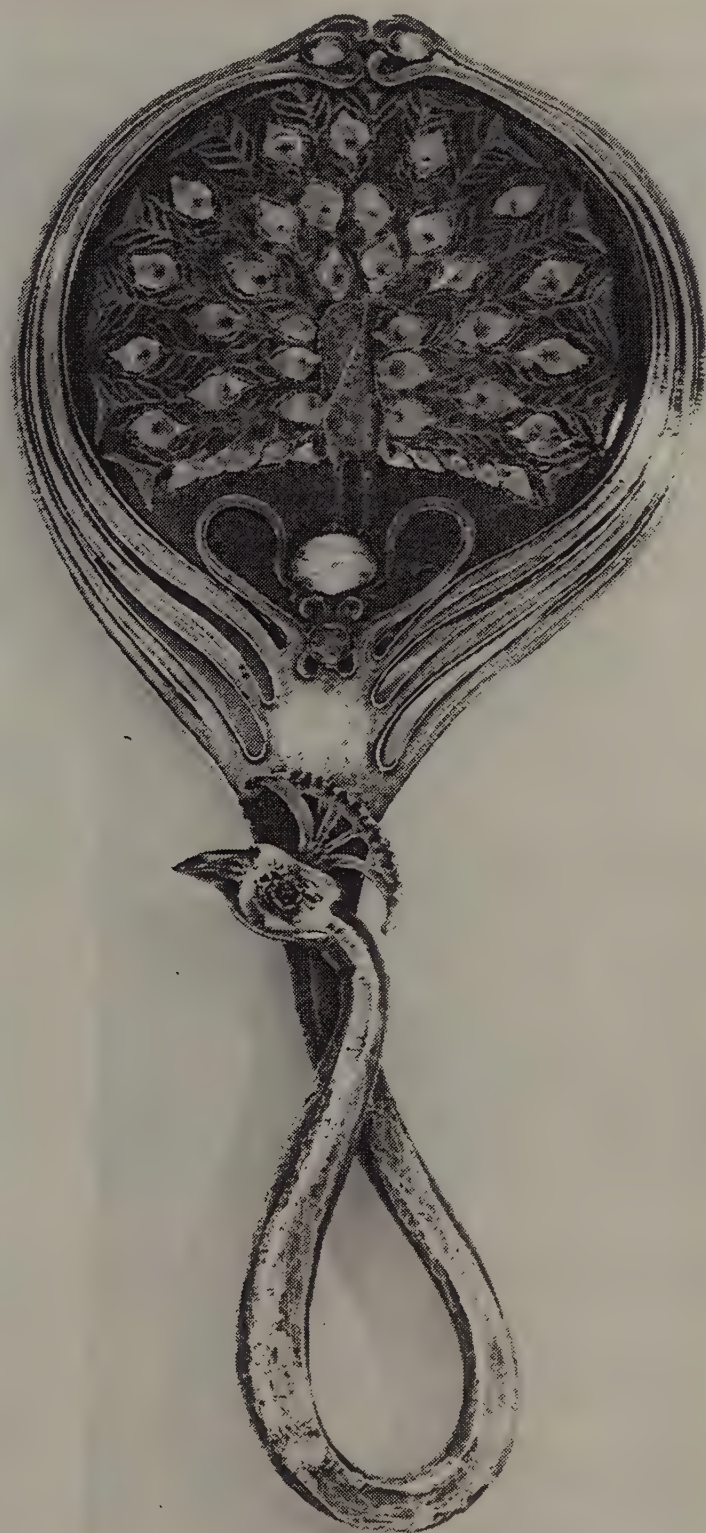
The mirrors are undoubtedly protective and celebratory in nature, but this beautiful blouse bears out again, the ubiquitous connection between mirrors and brides and the wedding ceremony.



*Sthapana*, A Ceremonial Hanging used at Weddings, 20<sup>th</sup> c. Ganesha, Saurashtra area, Gujarat, India. Embroidered silk and cotton, mirrorwork, 22 1/2 x 15". Girard Foundation Collection in the Museum of International Folk Art, a unit of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Photo by Michel Monteaux.

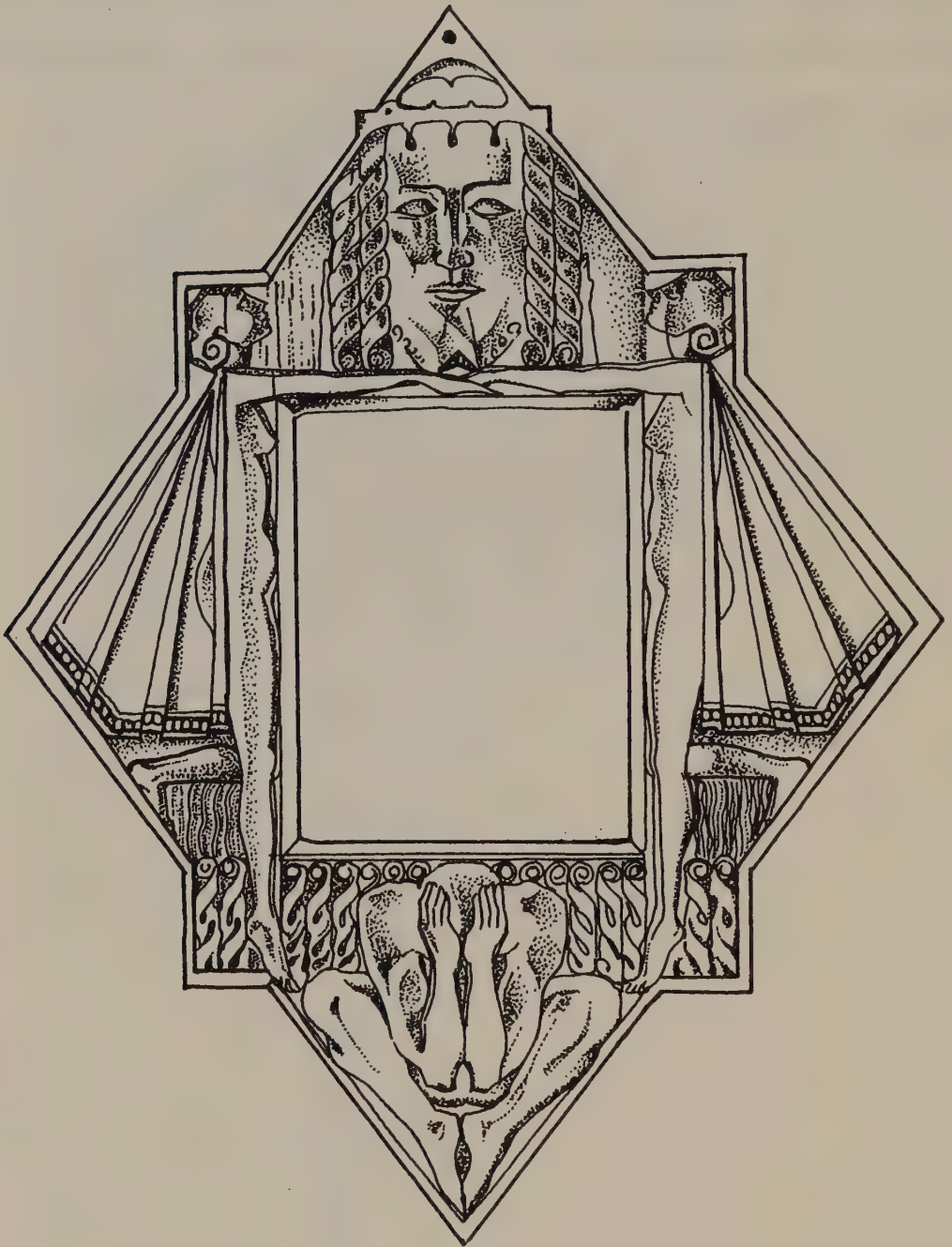


Peacock Mirror by an unknown designer (formerly attributed to Louis Comfort Tiffany), c. 1900. Silver, enamel and sapphires, 10 1/4 x 4 3/4". Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Joseph H. Heil. Photograph ©The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



*“Yin and Yang Mirrors: The nature of metal is unitary. If you cast the metal at high noon on the ping-wu day of the fifth month, you will get a yang mirror; if you cast it at midnight on the jen-tzu night of the eleventh month, you will get a yin-sui reflector. (That is to say, casting on the ping-wu day will produce a mirror which gathers fire; the mirror cast on the night of jen-tzu will gather water.)”*  
DeWoskin 1996: 159.

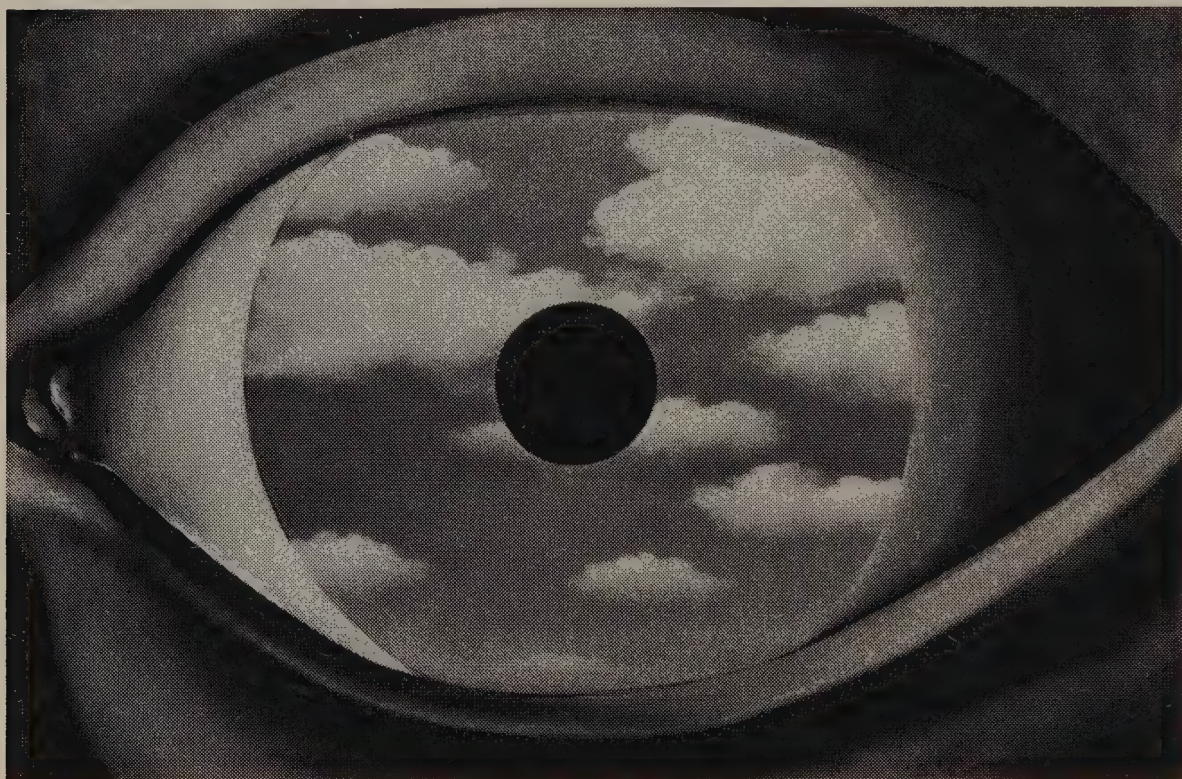
Barend Jordens, *The Vale of Tears*, carved wall mirror, 1918. Untreated wood, .90 m. high. Line drawing by Scott Thomas.



“We are the mirror  
as well as the face in it.  
we are tasting the taste this minute  
of eternity. We are the pain  
and what cures pain, both. We are  
the sweet, cold water and the jar that pours.”

-Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> c. Sufi poet.

Rene Magritte, *The False Mirror*, 1928. Oil/canvas, 21 1/4 x 31 7/8". Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©1998 C. Herscovici, Brussels/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photograph ©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.





“Do not conclude that there is no such thing as the world. Such thinking is imperfect and defective. Such a belief is impossible. One who tries to negate the whole world by the mere act of thought brings it into existence by that very act of negation. Just as a city reflected in a mirror is not a reality but exists as a reflection, so also this world is not a reality in itself but is consciousness all the same. This is self-evident. This is perfect knowledge.”

-Tantric text, the *Tripura Rahasya*.

Pablo Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror*, Boisgeloup, March, 1932. Oil/canvas, 64 x 51 1/4". Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. ©1998 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. ©1998 The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Picasso first used the mirror motif in 1906 in a Rose Period painting called *La Toilette*. He returned to the mirror numerous times throughout his career, especially emphasizing the mirrors in his late “copies” of Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger* and Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*. The tension between the real and the illusory, mirror and reflection, fascinated Picasso as did the duality expressed in this painting. The geometric background contrasts with the organic forms of girl and mirror frame; the brilliant, highly saturated colors of the girl are reflected in the mirror as dark, mysterious, cool colors; profile is played off against the frontal face; masculine against feminine; virginity and sensuality; and solar against lunar imagery. The painting captures the generative powers of woman in one of the most positive of all Picasso’s female images. The ovoid ripe volumes of breast and belly exude fecundity, but with the reminder of the darker side evident in the mirror reflection. Rosenblum in Schiff 1976: 84f.

Salvador Dali, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, 1936-37. Oil/canvas, 20 x 30". Tate Gallery, London. ©1998 Fundacion Gala-Salvador Dali/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Dali studied stereoscopy with the help of Robert Descharnes who invented a way of reflecting images on tightly stretched plastic film. The Surrealists generally, and Dali particularly, “played” with space, contracting it, creating hallucinatory clarity and impossibly expanding it—what better device to achieve this than a mirror? Descharnes 1985: 168.



"Beside the pleasant pool Narcissus lay;  
 And bending over, quenched his thirst, to find  
 Within his heart a thirst of different kind;  
 Loving a phantom, it was his to feel  
 Delusive hope, and think a vision real;  
 Self-hypnotized, he could not look away,  
 But like a statue, fixed in pose he lay  
 Face downward on the margin of the mere,  
 Seeing his eyes, twin stars, reflected clear;  
 His beardless cheek, his ivory neck, his hair,  
 As that of Bacchus or Apollo fair;  
 And features and complexion, fair to view,  
 Where blushing rose and lily blend their hue....

Now sank his weary head, and death shut fast  
 Eyes that admired their owner to the last;  
 Who now a ghost upon the Stygian shore  
 Gazed at his own reflection as before.  
 His sisters mourn, the nymphs of stream and spring,  
 And sorrow's tribute, severed locks, they bring;  
 His cousins too, the woodland nymphs, lament;  
 And answering Echo joins in sad concert.  
 But now, when pyre and catafalque and flare  
 Wait the last rite, they find no body there:  
 No body, but a flower, their eyes behold,  
 White rays in circle round a heart of gold."

-Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

Rene Magritte, *Not to be Reproduced/La reproduction interdite*, 1937. Oil/canvas, 81.3 x 65 cm. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. ©1998 C. Herscovici/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



“[Mirrors] are there when we are and yet they never give anything back to us but our own image. Never, never shall we know what they are when they are alone or what is behind them.”

-Erich Maria Remarque, *The Black Obelisk*.

Ugo, Eketa, Mbari House at Umueke Ihite, Nigeria, c. 1954. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Herbert M. Cole.





Mirrors shine in the headdress of the Goddesses who sit at the center of mud houses erected by the Igbo in Nigeria. Mbari houses embody and depict everything in Igbo culture—all that is good/bad, beautiful/ugly, human/divine. When the house is finished, it is dedicated with great ceremony and feasting and dancing, after which it is allowed to decay, returning naturally to the elements. It is the act of building and the concepts involved rather than the physical object that are important. The mirrors in the Great Goddess Ala's headdress undoubtedly reflect the association of mirrors and the goddess; they serve to protect her and her house from evil and indicate her spiritual power. The house itself is a mirror of life.

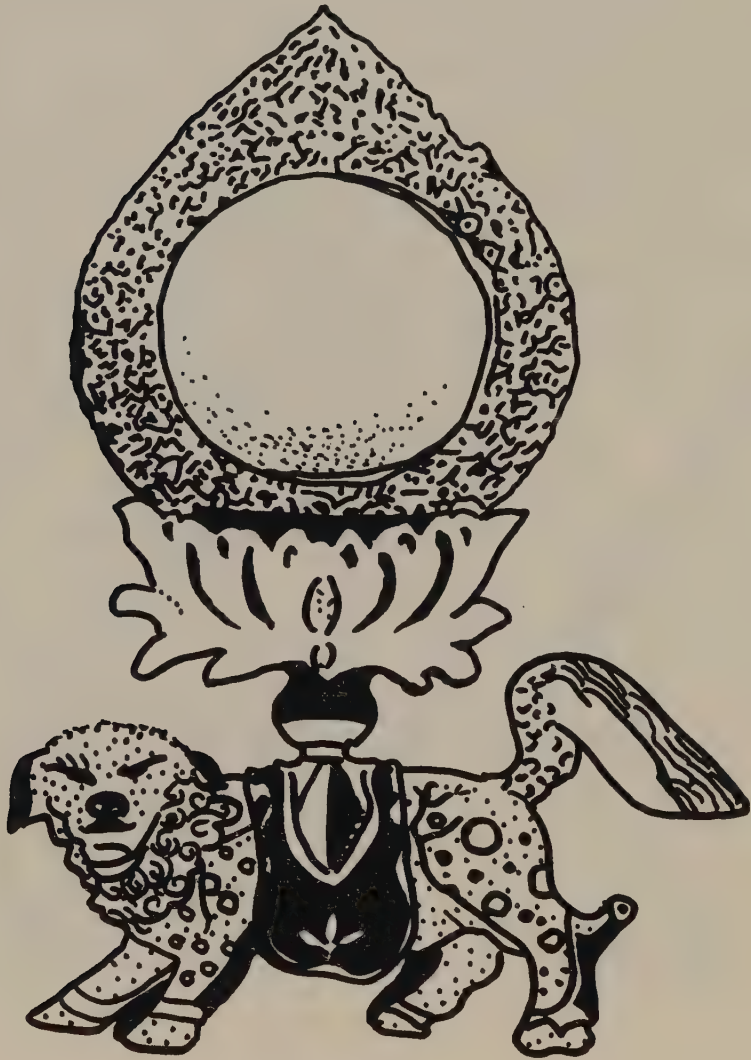
Mirrors are also found in Igbo shrines erected to Mami Wata, an imported goddess whose costume combines snake charmer/mermaid imagery. In her shrines mirrors are used to summon the goddess' spirit, but once she arrives they distract her (by appealing to her vanity), thus buffering her awesome power. Cole 1982: 56ff, 183ff; Drewal 1988: 44.

In Cuba and Brazil, people descended from Yoruba slaves incorporate elements of religious ideology and practice into their art and rituals. In Cuba, drums “wear” beaded aprons studded with mirrors which are said to be the eyes of the drums. The costume of Brazilian *Egun* dancers—ancestor spirits—are studded with mirrors. The loincloth part of the costume has the same name as the Cuban drum aprons and likely has the same significance. Elsewhere on the costume, three mirrors simulate the ancestor’s eyes and mouth. As the dancer moves about, light flashes from the mirrors, creating an electric sparkle of supernatural radiance. Thompson 1993: 170ff, 199.

*Egun* Masker (Egun Baba Erin), Lauro de Freitas, Brazil, summer 1982. Line drawing by the author.



The Mirror of Judgment, Korea. Line drawing after Covell by the author.



The judgment mirror shows the deeds of the soul. Surrounded by flame and vegetal decorations, the mirror rests on the back of a fabulous beast. For use on Buddhist altars, the use and significance of the mirror can be traced back to shamanistic roots. Covell 1983: 70, 81.

Dan Graham, *Two Adjacent Pavilions*, 1978. Glass, steel, two-way mirrors, two units, each 7 1/2 x 5 x 5'. Kroller-Muller Museum, Otterlo.



“Reflectiveness was in the structure even before I used mirrors because it was always about doubling. It usually represented the relation between subject and object, or between oneself and the other. Wanted to get away from the structuralists but still keeping the sense of the body and wanting to have something representational. I didn't use a mirror at first because it was too loaded. I then used it in video where the video was related to the Renaissance picture perspective that the mirror has. I always use a mirror with something else so there is interpenetration. Finally, the mirror probably represents the ego but not just a reflection. Two human scale two-way mirrors are like Sartre's idea of two egos interpenetrating each other. My work always had a little of the idea of philosophical models that were material at the same time. But they are also scaled up to look like real modern architecture.

Finally the mirror allows people to perceive themselves perceiving, so that the perception process was important. Mirror with glass is also a little like a show case window. Art as a commodity is always in a showcase. Here, instead, the art thing inside is the people. People usually disappear in a gallery—you don't see them. To show people perceiving themselves as they perceive themselves in place of the art object is maybe a Brechtian idea.”

-Dan Graham





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Hope Werness is an Art Historian specializing in Non-Western and Modern European Art. Educated at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Tulane University, she has taught over twenty years at California State University, Stanislaus. Also a practicing artist, she works in ceramics, creating bodies of work inspired by her research. Her most recent series consists of over six dozen mirrors.

*Edmond Mellen*



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