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# A New Way of Seeing

## The History of Art in 57 Works

Kelly Grovier

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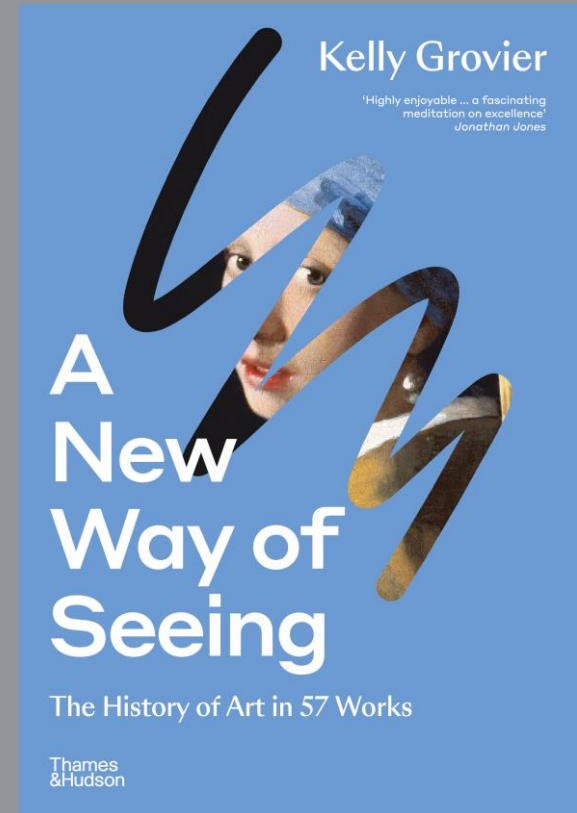
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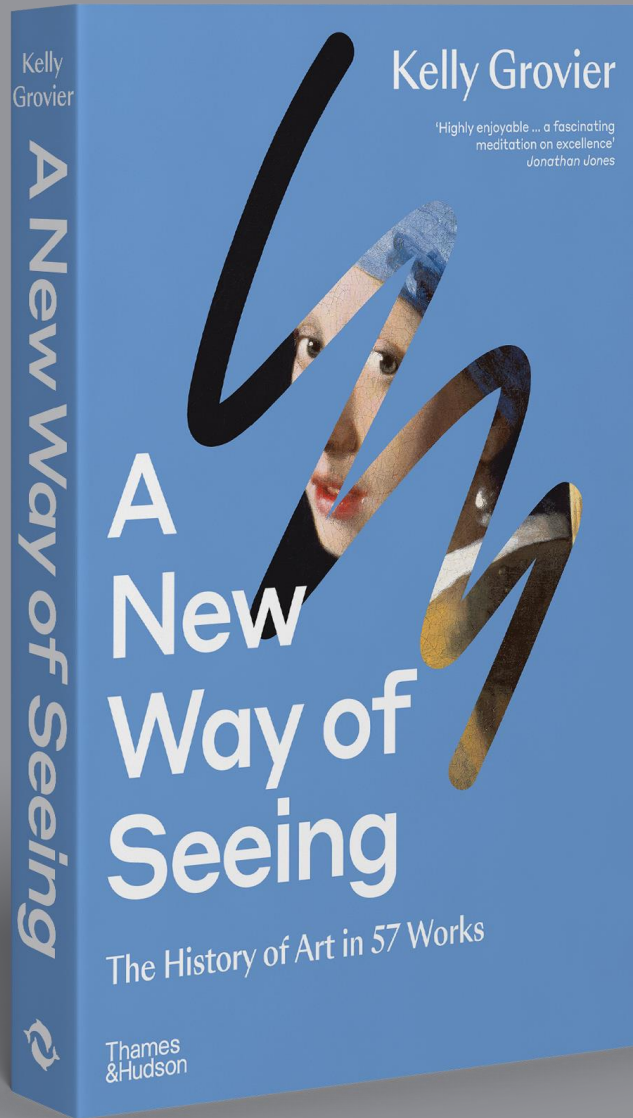
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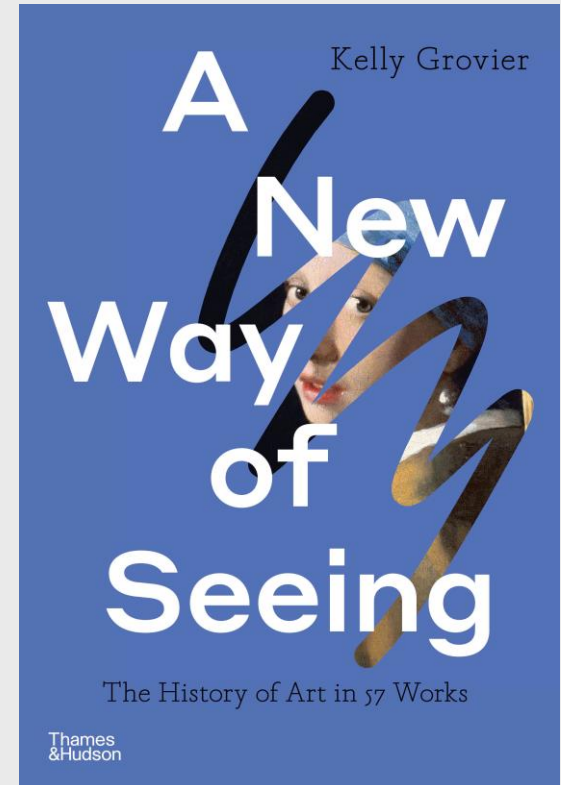




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## Key Sales Points

- New illustrated and reformatted paperback edition of this popular reading title and invaluable reference.
- An impassioned exploration of what it is that constitutes great art, through an illuminating analysis of the world's outstanding masterpieces – works whose power to move transcends the sum of their parts.
- Casts fresh new light on some of the most famous works in the history of art by daring to isolate in each a single (and often overlooked) detail responsible for its greatness.



# A Touch of Strangeness

What elevates a work of art to the level of masterpiece? What keeps it suspended in popular imagination, generation after generation, century after century? What makes great art great? The answer to each of these questions, invariably, is strangeness. 'It is a characteristic of great painting,' the art critic Robert Hughes concluded after encountering Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* at an exhibition in New York in 1984, 'that no matter how many times it has been cloned, reproduced and postcarded, it can restore itself as an immediate utterance with the force of strangeness when seen in the original.' But what exactly accounts for this 'force of strangeness' that never weakens, however many times it is confronted? Can such power be isolated or quantified – tracked down to a single detail, quality, or feature: a shadow, a shimmer, a flick of the wrist?

Van Gogh himself believed it could be. The year before he painted *The Starry Night*, 'with its oceanic rush of whorling energy through the dark sky', as Hughes described it, Van Gogh pinpointed precisely what it is about the Romantic artist Eugène Delacroix's soulfully somnambulant painting *Christ Asleep During the Tempest* (c. 1853) that nudges it into a work of the very highest order. 'Delacroix paints a Christ', Van Gogh observed of the turbulent seascape in a letter to fellow Post-Impressionist Émile Bernard in July 1888, 'using an unexpected light lemon note, this colourful and luminous note in the painting being what the ineffable strangeness and charm of a star is in a corner of the firmament.' The 'light lemon note' to which Van Gogh refers invigorates

Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889, oil on canvas, 73.7 × 92.1 cm (29 × 36¼ in.)






Winckelmann's view, philosophically endures the serpents' assault without a whimper. For others, such as the eighteenth-century polymath Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the work embodies instead a latent rage building silently between the clenched teeth of its tortured subject. The discrepancy in response, even among learned contemporaries such as Winckelmann and Lessing, is evidence of an abiding ambiguity in the work's portrayal.

Key to the work's enduring indeterminacy of emotion is the rendering of the lines that furrow Laocoön's brow. In 1862, the French scientist Guillaume-Benjamin Duchenne published an influential treatise, *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression*, that took issue with the neurological verisimilitude of Laocoön's portrayal, noting, in particular, a confusion between the handling of the Trojan's eyebrows and that of the

← Richard Deacon, *Laocoön*, 1996, steamed beechwood, aluminium and steel bolts, 430 × 364 × 357 cm (169¼ × 143¾ × 140½ in.)

Two millennia since its creation, *Laocoön* continues to wriggle in cultural imagination. British artist Richard Deacon's abstract sculpture, inspired by the classical masterpiece, captures the mirroring writhe of inner turmoil and outward form.

→  Detail of the head of Laocoön, *Laocoön and his Sons*, c. 27 BC-AD 68



muscles above them, which rumple the forehead. Rather than constituting a defect, however, as Duchenne regarded the inconsistency of emotion (and Charles Darwin after him), the clash of emotion between agony and endurance twitching between the tilt of Laocoön's eyebrows and the furrows of his forehead may be precisely that to which millennia of observers have subliminally responded. The impossible simultaneity of expression captured by *Laocoön and his Sons* – as if he were two figures fused into one – creates a ceaseless tension in the stony sculpture that troubles our attention, rendering the work as animate and inscrutable as ourselves.

After all, the text on which the sculpture is based, Book II of the *Aeneid*, is preoccupied with duality – from Laocoön's twin sons to the unleashing of twin snakes who coil not once but 'twice round the waist; and twice in scaly grasp / around his neck'. The tortuous squeeze of the 'dragon-pair' elicits from Laocoön a duelling response as he oscillates between hope and anguish: now focusing on freedom ('he ... tore at his fetters'), now howling in hopelessness (with an 'agonizing voice'). Were the sculptor to prioritize one frame of mind over another, the story and the subject would be disfigured. By merging the two emotions in the furrows of Laocoön's brow, the sculptor creates instead a remarkably elastic work, one ceaselessly in flux between physical and psychological throes – like a marble hologram, a liquid stone.



Hildegard of Bingen,  
*The Universal Man*, c. 1165,  
 illumination from *Liber  
 divinorum operum*

## 10 The Universal Man

Hildegard of Bingen · (c. 1165)

Anticipating one of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous drawings by several centuries, this mesmerizing vision of cosmological harmony and wholeness is music for the eyes.

Eye is in the art of the beholder. If that sentence seems a little inside out, so too are the inverted optics of our next work: a hypnotizing image from a thirteenth-century manuscript devoted to the visions of the German mystic and polymath Hildegard of Bingen. To lean in close and scrutinize the image for an eye-hook within the rippling concentricity of the work, widely known as *The Universal Man* (or 'Man as Microcosm'), is to lose sight of the all-enveloping vision of cosmological wholeness it represents. It is only when we zoom out that we realize the image is, itself, a large, stylized eye symbolizing the profound penetrations of mystical sight: a spiritual lens that simultaneously brings into focus the inner and outer universes of our being.

The image is attached to an intense vision that Hildegard describes in her third volume of theological writings, *Liber divinorum operum* (or 'Book of Divine Works') (c. 1165), to which she devoted a decade of her life. Whether it is based on any actual drawing by Hildegard, now lost to time, the posthumously published image conforms closely to Hildegard's words. The image, in other words, is appropriately attributed to her, if not to her hand. In the lower-left corner of the illumination, a portrait of the Benedictine abbess – portraying the instant when the divine vision occurred – has been inserted. A gifted dramatist (author of the earliest known morality play) and innovative linguist (creator of the first independently invented language), Hildegard was also blessed with a mathematician's eye and a composer's ear for symmetry and proportion. Those intuitions blend symphonically in the eye-music of *The Universal Man*.

The image represents, on one level, the mystic's conviction in the harmonic structure of the Trinity: 'the bearded Creator emerges', according to one scholar's interpretation of the work, 'from the head of the fiery Holy Spirit who embraces, in turn, the circular firmament surrounding the world'. On another level, the image demonstrates the melodic proportions of the human body in relation to those of the universe that surrounds it, cosmologically, and the material that comprises it, microscopically. Millennia before modern-day nuclear physicists would successfully model the orbit of subatomic particles, Hildegard traces a dizzying ricochet of mystical energy trapped within her dimension-defying orb. Amplifying the sense of competing rotations,

Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece  
(open), 1430–32, oil on panel,  
350 × 460 cm (137¾ × 181¼ in.)



right corner of the work. By balancing in her gentle grip not a waxen-skinned apple (as most artists portraying the forbidden fruit previously had) but instead a now rarely encountered cousin of the lemon known as a ‘citron’, Van Eyck stitches into the fabric of his painting a curious cipher that unlocks much of the visual energy that ties his complex work together.

Knobbly and sullen in colour, the citron (which was known to Van Eyck’s contemporaries by the suggestive nickname the ‘Adam’s Apple’) is rich in secret symbolism and teeters on Eve’s lips as a subtle rebuke to the egregious extravagance glittering all around. Rarely enjoyed as a food, due to the bitterness of its flesh, the citron has been prized since antiquity for the alleged healing power of its sweet scent. So treasured was citron oil in Roman times that it was thought its fragrance could open up one’s senses to spiritual enlightenment. Jewish tradition added a deeper layer of religious significance still. Embellishing Roman attitudes towards the fruit, Jews began regarding the citron (or what they call the *etrog*) as a symbol of their own endurance in the face of persecution and went to great lengths to procure for ceremonial adoration pristine

→ Detail of the citron  
in the Ghent Altarpiece,  
1430–32

↓ Detail of the sun  
in the Ghent Altarpiece,  
1430–32




pieces of the fruit from distant tropical climates. Once acquired, the gnarled *etrog* was placed on a small flax pillow in an ornately engineered cradle, like a swaddling child.

A well-travelled diplomat, Van Eyck would have had many opportunities to learn of the citron’s spiritually rich history on his journeys throughout the Mediterranean. By intertwining contradictory connotations of both innocence (a swaddled infant) and experience (the fruit of original sin), the citron enshrines within its fragrant rind paradoxical allusions to the Fall of Mankind and to its eventual salvation with the arrival of the Christ Child. Everything depicted in Van Eyck’s altarpiece, in other words, is symbolically contained in and flows from the strange fruit that Eve holds. To amplify the point, Van Eyck appears to cut the citron open and squeeze spiritual light on those who have come to witness the sacrifice of the Lamb in the altarpiece’s central panel. The concentric rings of the orb that vibrates at the apex of that panel bear a remarkable resemblance to the cross-section of a citron, which is characterized by a bumpy rind and thick albedo. To stand before the Ghent Altarpiece is to souse one’s soul in the secret citron light of a fragrant masterpiece.





←  Detail of hands in  
*The Third of May 1808*, 1814

→ Édouard Manet, *The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico*, c. 1867–68, oil on canvas, 193 × 284 cm (76 × 111<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)

The unflinching brutality of Goya's *The Third of May 1808* would change forever the way artists portrayed the barbarity of faceless power. Half a century after Goya undertook his painting, Édouard Manet recreated a similarly compressed stage for his depiction of the execution by firing squad in June 1867 of the Austrian-born Emperor of Mexico. What remains of Manet's work – cut into pieces after the artist's death in 1883 – is a jumble of fragments rescued and reassembled by the artist's contemporary, Edgar Degas.



abject despair. Compare those with the single fist of a French soldier at the dead-centre of the painting – one hand standing synecdochally for the entire rigid regiment, more like an extension of the firearm it grips than of a human arm.

But what draws us into the terror of Goya's scene are the upraised arms and expressive palms of the figure on whom the guns are pitilessly trained. Light blaring coldly from the angular grenade of a cubical lamp – amplifying the machine-like harshness of the soldier's side – has picked out not only every rumple of the Madrileño's spiritually unstainable overlit shirt, but also every crease and callus of his hardworking hands. It has long been noted by critics that a strategically positioned shadow falling across his right palm seems to describe a deep dimple, or bloodless stigmata, echoing the perforation of Christ's hand while on the cross. Such an allusion enhances the sense of crucifixion boldly suggested by the elevated arms as though hoisted in place by an invisible crossbeam.

What has not been explored, however, is any possible meaning decodable from the body language of the fingers themselves. A dab hand at signing since losing his hearing twenty-one years earlier, Goya had become obsessed with the secret grammar of knuckles, pinkies and thumbs. Two years before painting *The Third of May 1808*, Goya created a detailed drawing of gestural language that captured the choreography of hands in a variety of different poses. The twenty attitudes he depicts in his chart are

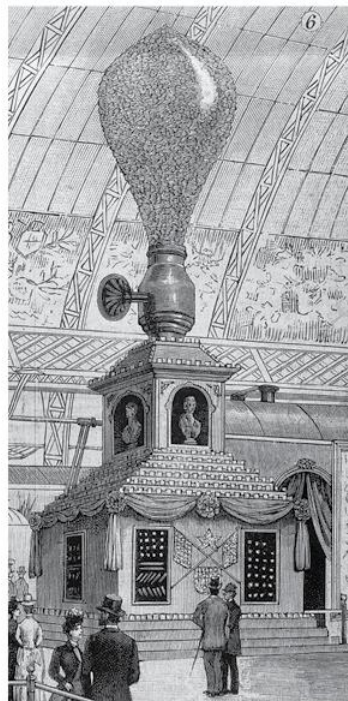
reminiscent of a similar chart produced in 1644 by the English physician John Bulwer for his eccentric tome *Chirologia: Or the Naturall Language of the Hand, Composed of the Speaking Motions, and Discoursing Gestures Thereof*. Accepting a challenge posed by the philosopher Francis Bacon some four decades earlier, Bulwer set about decoding the mysterious language of the fingers and single-handedly invented the science of 'chirology', or hand reading. Bulwer's chart – what he called his 'chyrogram' – provided a handy glossary on the unspoken significance of typical gestures by attaching to each a simple deciphering phrase.

Bulwer's book and chyrogram remained influential across Europe well into the nineteenth century and would likely have been known to an artist 'unable', as Goya said he was, 'to understand anything without the use of sign language'. Placed alongside Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, Bulwer's chart reveals that the eye-hook hands of the Christ-like figure who is about to be executed may be less defeated than defiant in their expressiveness. Both hands are open, but they differ ever so slightly in the degree to which their fingers are spread. The less widely fanned digits of his left hand correspond nicely to Bulwer's classification 'O', or 'Protego', meaning 'protection', whereas the more broadly stretched fingers of his right hand align perfectly with the chyrogram's 'P', or 'Triumpho', meaning 'victory'. Like all great works of art, the mute message of Goya's painting is anything but cowering or conquered.



↑ Detail of the head in  
*The Scream*, 1893

→ Engraving of Thomas Edison's  
incandescent giant lamp (model of  
the Edison-type bulb), Exposition  
Universelle, Paris, 1889



curiosity that rose upon a pedestal in the pavilion, a breathtaking spectacle consisting of 20,000 incandescent lamps arranged into the luminous shape of a single gigantic light bulb. Like a bulging glass skull whose bulbous cranium tapers to an elongated slender jaw, the apotheosized lamp rose above the pavilion's visitors as if it heralded a new idolatry – the crystalline countenance of a futuristic god.

As a venerated shape, the Edison bulb had gradually emerged in cultural consciousness as the very emblem of the electric age. In time, its archetypal form would serve as universal shorthand for the very idea of an idea, as cartoon light bulbs popped up above caricatures of anyone thinking. In the meantime, the shape, as a symbol, appears to have seeped deep into the imagination of Munch, whose own invention of an iconic form a few years later (the yowling eye-hook head that glows at the centre of *The Scream*) would echo with uncanny precision the proportions of Edison's exalted lamp.

It has long been entertained by art historians that another exhibit at the Paris Exposition, a Peruvian mummy petrified into an aghast expression, its hands raised in horror to either side of its open-mouthed skull, likely influenced the facial expression

Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897, oil on canvas,  
141 × 376 cm (55½ × 148 in.)



around which Munch's painting rotates (as indeed that same mummy had influenced the imaginations of Munch's contemporaries, including Paul Gauguin). Given Munch's anxieties about modern culture, it is easy to see how the newly patented symbol of science, the light bulb, may have merged in the artist's mind with the mien of the evocative mummy, an unsettling relic of a civilization long since extinguished.

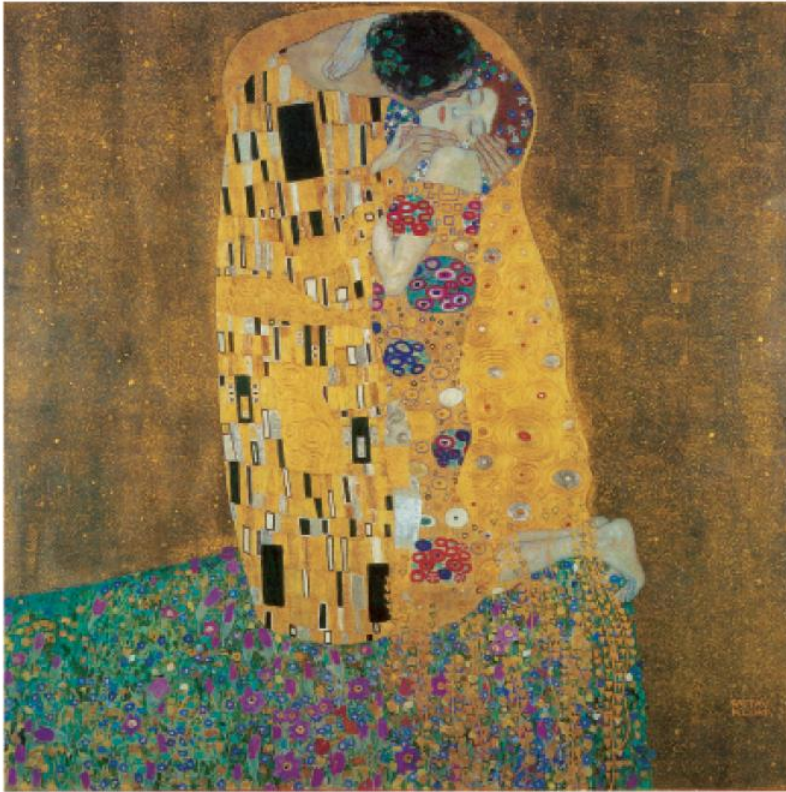
Placed side-by-side, Munch's screaming skull and Edison's monstrous lamp create an unexpected aesthetic logic of technology's threatening thrust. Suddenly, one senses, pulsing through Munch's own famous description of the inception of *The Scream*, another kind of energy:

I was walking along the road with two friends — the sun was setting — suddenly the sky turned blood red — I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence — there was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city — my friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety — and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.

Under an end-of-days sky whose fierce complexion may have been tinged by the memory of smoke drifting from the volcanic explosion of Krakatoa in Indonesia, Munch detected an excruciating wireless surge that, to use Tesla's language, composed the same year, 'disturb[ed] ... the electrostatic conditions of the earth'. When seen as a symbol of abject dread at the direction in which technology was shoving society, *The Scream* transcends the melodramatic articulation of one man's angst and is elevated into something incandescently universal. Munch's elastic skull, kindled by the ghost of electricity that howls in the bones of its face, is more than merely an emblem of an age. It is plugged into the very generator of the soul.

## 42 The Kiss

Gustav Klimt · (1907)



Gustav Klimt, *The Kiss*, 1907,  
oil and gold leaf on canvas,  
180 × 180 cm (70 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 70 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.)

Klimt's famous double portrait is more than a glitzy study of the superficialities of intimacy. It is a work that gets under the skin and infiltrates the blood.


If you want to understand what makes *The Kiss*, Gustav Klimt's famous double portrait of embracing lovers, so widely and wildly adored, you will need to get the measure of its blood. To appreciate the painting's pulsing brilliance, we must first place it, and the moment it was conceived in 1907, within a wider frame of intellectual and personal reference. Thirteen years earlier, in 1894, the Austrian symbolist had been hired to decorate the ceiling of the University of Vienna's Great Hall. Though Klimt's acceptance of that commission may seem, in retrospect, at odds with the anti-academic temperament of the art movement that he would soon help found (the Vienna Secession), the artist nevertheless agreed to design three large panels devoted to a range of scholarly disciplines: Philosophy, Medicine and Jurisprudence.

When Klimt, in 1900, unveiled the first instalment of these works, an image allegorizing Philosophy that featured a cosmic cascade of despairing figures forever suspended in forlornness, the image was sharply criticized for its depressing portrayal of intellectual thought. Nor was the ensuing submission in 1901 of a panel illustrating the spirit of Medicine any more enthusiastically received. Its ominous torrent of skeletons and sedated figures, caught in a waterfall of woe that calls to mind the plummet of souls in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, was lambasted for its failure to convey any promise of hope or healing.

It would be easy to surmise that Klimt's opulently obtuse panels betrayed an indifference to their subjects. Yet Klimt was, in fact, profoundly interested in the body. He merely doubted medical science's capacity to cure it. In Klimt's mind, the body is controlled by destiny – its fate subject to the ebb and flow of invisible forces. A black ink-and-brush work on paper that Klimt created around this time, entitled *Fish Blood*, portrays a stream of bodies carried along in a supernatural current of surging mystical blood. As a realm of intellectual interest in its own right, blood was becoming a subject of intense research and exciting biological discovery coincidentally at the very same institution where Klimt had been commissioned to create his controversial ceiling panels.

At the forefront of that research at the University of Vienna was Karl Landsteiner, a leading immunologist who, in 1900 (just as Klimt was working on his Medicine panel),



←  Detail of the unclasped hands in *Dance*, 1909–10

→ Henri Matisse, *Le bonheur de vivre*, c. 1905–6, oil on canvas, 176.5 × 240.7 cm (69½ × 94¾ in.)

→ William Blake, *Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing*, c. 1785, watercolour and pencil on paper, 47.5 × 67.5 cm (18¾ × 26½ in.)

defines the painting's form. Look again at the figure closest to us in the foreground of the work, the one whose head is nearest the centre of the canvas. Anything but gainly in her gambol, she appears to be frozen forever on the verge of a lunging stumble, as her right leg slips to the canvas's bottom right corner and her left knee bends to break an imminent fall. Her left foot is sliding outside the frame.

Once her instability has been noticed, the easily overlooked eye-hook of the work sharpens into focus: her perilous loss of grip with the dancer that she is following in clockwise rotation. A painting that, moments before, seemed to be a joyous freeze-frame of sprightly spin now appears to teeter on complete collapse. Suddenly, the work is less about the cadence and rhythm of life in fullest swing than it is about the precariousness of our existence – the fragility of human connection.

Our surprise at the vulnerability of the dancer (and the dance itself) is ultimately ironic, as the artist has ensured that our eyes are implicated in her disequilibrium. Intended, as Matisse explained, to be situated on the landing of a staircase (and therefore approached from the bottom right by anyone ascending to the first floor), the canvas would be deliberately susceptible to the shifting perspective of its viewer as he or she mounts the steps. The space created by the unclasping of the two dancers' hands would, as an observer approached the work, appear to grow in size as the canvas became less and less askance. The optical effect created by climbing the stairs would be an amplification of the sense of separateness between the two dancers – an exaggeration of the letting-go.

Art historians have long sought to locate precursors of Matisse's iconic image, works with which he may have intended to slope arms in composing the complex music of his painting. William Blake's watercolour-and-graphite *Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing* and a detail of dancers in *The Golden Bough* by J. M. W. Turner, whose work Matisse studied closely, may have merged in the artist's imagination. In



the background of his own earlier Fauvist masterpiece *Le bonheur de vivre* (*The Joy of Life*) is a circle of six nudes that is undoubtedly a seed. With its desperate lunge for stabilizing touch that can close the circuit and keep the energy flowing, however, *Dance* is perhaps most compellingly aligned with that other work of almost-contact, Michelangelo's depiction of Adam and God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (see p. 95), and the paradoxically tiny yet yawning gap between being and not being that it portrays.



← Detail of the headdress in *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*, 1940

→ 'Strength', the eighth card in the Major Arcana Tarot deck

→ → Óscar Domínguez, *Freud, Mage de rêve - Étoile*, March 1941, sketch for the Marseille card deck published 1943, ink, pencil and gouache, 27.1 × 17 cm (10<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)

The same year that Frida Kahlo created her self-portrait with its echo of Tarot tropes, a group of Surrealists, including Óscar Domínguez, Max Ernst, André Masson and the movement's founder André Breton (who believed Kahlo's imagination was in sync with theirs), began designing their own pack of Tarot cards.

On its face, Kahlo's painting would appear to be an ever-tightening noose of inescapable misfortune — a bad moon rising. Look closer, however, and the artist unsettles the ominousness that threatens to overtake her work with a subtly insinuated symbol capable of transforming the canvas into an emblem of irrepressible fortitude and courage. In striking contrast to the discordant gaggle of cataclysmic auguries clamouring for regard all around her, a quietly composed token of restorative order presides over the scene in the form of a lemniscate (or infinity symbol) that weaves itself harmoniously above Kahlo's head like a geometric halo. Fashioned here from purple cloth (thereby echoing countless medieval representations of the Virgin Mary) and woven into the artist's hair so that she and it become one, the symbol interjects into the portrait an air of mathematical calm and indivisible order.

The very presence of the lemniscate counterbalances the chaos of competing superstitions that wrestle for the upper hand in Kahlo's work. But rather than dispelling the supernatural from her painting, the symbol doubles-down on its underlying mysticism, trumping the other omens that orbit the artist's countenance by coolly playing the ace the artist has kept up her sleeve: her own indomitable strength. By hiding in plain view the sinuous swerve of the lemniscate levitating on butterfly wings above her, Kahlo invites observers to blur into one her painting and the well-known depiction of 'Strength' in Tarot — the eighth card in the so-called 'Major Arcana' suit



of the esoteric deck. Originally entitled 'Fortitude' in fifteenth-century versions of Tarot, the 'Strength' card features a woman, draped with flowers, calmly controlling a lion while above her head floats an infinity symbol.

Tarot served as a significant inspiration to Kahlo's contemporaries, especially the French artist and founder of Surrealism, André Breton, whom Kahlo met in 1938, two years before she painted her *Self-Portrait*, and who admired Kahlo's work as being intrinsically in accord with his own imagination. In Kahlo's painting, the mark of strength that is denoted by the infinity symbol serves as a crucial slipknot that links the realms of reality with those of pure imagination and hermetic belief. Though Breton was keen to claim her as a disciple of his *-ism*, Kahlo steadfastly held to the conviction that her work played by its own rules. 'I really don't know', she once confided, 'if my paintings are surrealistic or not, but I do know they are the most honest expression of myself, never taking into consideration the judgments or prejudices of anyone.'

Neither a diversion from the struggles of this world nor a repudiation of spiritual mystery, Kahlo's work offers itself as a semi-permeable membrane between two dispositions, between two universes. By keeping its sympathies close to its chest, the painting knows that 'the cards are no good that you're holding', as Bob Dylan sings in 'Series of Dreams', 'unless they're from another world'.