Too Close to Nature: On the Representational Problems of Death Masks and Life Casts

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ABSTRACT

While historians of art have found death masks and life casts conceptually problematic, it is also noteworthy that these objects have received scant attention from philosophers of art. In this paper, I begin to redress this omission by offering examples of how the philosophy of art can help us understand these images. Two problems stand out: the problem of representation, for example, what type of representation a death mask is; and the problem of style and historicity, for example, whether images imprinted from nature can indicate styles, and whether these images can evolve and transform along art-historical lines. After considering these problems, I conclude that these images are constrained in what they can and cannot represent. While there is a long tradition of imprinting from nature, this practice shows little discernible change over time. An unchanging tradition cannot claim to exhibit a history, a least in a narrative sense familiar to art history. The following investigation opens a dialog between Arthur Danto's philosophy of art and practitioners of theoretical art history, including Ernst Gombrich and Georges Didi-Huberman, both of whom offer differing views on how these images can be treated.

I. INTRODUCTION

A death mask is an indexical mode of representation that is literally cast from nature, from the face of a person. Transferring an image of a person to a durable medium like plaster or wax is an ancient technique. H.W. Janson locates the origins of this practice in ancient Egypt, at least as far as the time of Akhenaten in the fourteenth century BCE (1982, 294). These casts, he surmises, were not final products but models from which a portrait would be carved. According to Pliny, the Greek sculptor Lysistratus, the brother of Lysippus, was the first to make use of life casts. We also know from Pliny that the death masks of ancestors were displayed in the homes of patrician Roman families. Later, Vasari would falsely credit the sculptor Verrocchio with having invented the practice of casting from life, but as Aby Warburg (1999) has shown, the Renaissance method of wax and stucco casting was a continuation of a much older tradition.

Warburg reminds us how the casting of votive wax effigies (*voti*) "was a highly developed and highly regarded branch of art" in the age of Lorenzo de' Medici (1999, 190). Thereafter, this highly regarded 'art' fell out of favor with the custodians of aesthetic norms, the academies. The wax figure, "by reason of its intention to deceive, lacks the essence of the work of art," wrote Julius von Schlosser in 1910 (2008, 330), in his pioneering study *History of Portraiture in Wax*. Besides Warburg and von Schlosser, few scholars of art have shown much interest in this perennial practice. Indeed, as art historian Marcia Pointon (2014) has noted, death masks and life casts are more likely to attract the attention of anthropologists and historians of science, as artifacts associated with the rituals of death or the history of medicine. Owing to its methods of production and the materials of its making, 'the molding image', as Georges Didi-Huberman (1999) describes this technique, fits awkwardly with the history of portraiture and sculpture.

Of the challenges these images present, the most pressing problem concerns their representational characteristics. It is on account of a death mask's immediacy and proximity to its subject that it can be considered causal and trace-like. As Hans Belting has observed, "death masks or life masks are in a sense mechanical technologies for the reproduction of the body; like footprints or shadows on a wall they recall the presence (and thus the reality) of a body" (2011, 27). For this reason, there has been a tendency to view these images as the natural antecedents of the photograph (Crowley 2016; Kaplan 2010). On photographs as a type of indexical record, Susan Sontag makes the following comparison: "such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask" (1979, 154).

While historians of art have found death masks and wax figures conceptually problematic, it is also noteworthy that these objects have received scant attention from philosophers of art. This oversight is difficult to reconcile with the theoretical interest that the photograph—a comparable 'natural image'—has elicited (Walden 2010). In this paper, I begin to redress this omission by offering examples of how the philosophy of art can help us understand these images. Two problems stand out: the problem of representation, for example, what type of representation a death mask is; and the problem of style and historicity, for example, whether images imprinted from nature can indicate styles, and whether these images can evolve and transform along art-historical lines. After considering these problems, I conclude that these images are constrained in what they can and cannot represent. While there is a long tradition of imprinting from nature, this practice shows little discernible change over time. An unchanging tradition cannot claim to exhibit a history, a least in a narrative sense familiar to art history.

In this paper, I abstain from formulating a position on whether such casts can (or cannot) qualify as works of art. Rather, for reasons alluded to already, I attempt to understand why this image-making practice does not chime with developmental narratives of representational art. In the discussion that follows, I explain how this practice has been used by Georges Didi-Huberman to critique post-Vasarian theories of pictorial representation, including those of Ernst Gombrich. Gombrich, (2002) viewed this material unfavorably because it prioritized 'matching over making' and left no room for artistic intervention. The wax figure, he concluded, was a 'harmful illusion' because it deliberately aimed to deceive. As I see it, Arthur Danto's philosophy of art lends support to Gombrich's argument. Danto's framework is relevant to this material because it can help us understand its representational limitations. Death masks and life casts are 'mere representations' that only *re*-present their subjects. As such, a cast represents but it offers nothing in addition to what it represents; it projects no character (that is, *style*) of its own and expresses no attitude *about* its subject.

Before continuing, some technical clarification might be warranted. In this paper, 'death mask' is used to describe a cast made from a face. A 'death mask,' however, is more accurately a cast of a mold. In the procedure of making a death mask, a mold of the face is made first. Plaster or wax is poured into the negative mold to produce a positive cast. As with cast bronze sculpture, multiple impressions can be taken from a mold. The same technique is used to make casts of living faces, or life masks, and casts of body parts; in addition to faces, casts of torsos, hands, and limbs are common. 'Life cast' is a general term used to encompass any cast derived from the body of a living or dead model. The terms 'cast', 'imprint', and 'impression' are used interchangeably to describe any image derived from a mold.

II. PROBLEMS OF LIKENESS AND MEDIA

This opening section will establish some context for the theoretically informed sections that follow. In *History of Portraiture in Wax*, von Schlosser explores a method of image-making that was practiced continuously from classical antiquity to modern times. While its basic mode of production changed little during this period, the social role of the wax image underwent considerable change. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, most wax effigies represented royal and aristocratic personages. These lifelike figures were expected to fulfil funerary and votive functions, but when the wax effigy lost its traditional association with courtly society, it also lost its ritual significance. In modern times, wax figures continued to exist by performing secular tasks. They served the needs of science (as moulages)

and the interests of entertainment (as curiosities). Portraiture in wax, however, was rejected by the arbiters of art. It had no claim, says von Schlosser, to be regarded as sculpture:

> It marked the decline of a skill that had succeeded in retaining court patronage right up to the threshold of the nineteenth century; today, its proletarization is complete: it is an art for fairground booths and arranged displays, an art of doll making, held in low esteem socially and anathema artistically; only as the handmaiden of the institutes of anatomy does it gain recognition at a somewhat higher level, though even here still lying outside the ambit of art in the modern sense. Then, finally, there came its philosophical excommunication, proclaimed by the aesthetics of German classicism: its ceremonial erasure from the golden book of art. (2008, 287–88)

Like von Schlosser, the deceptiveness of the wax image would trouble José Ortega y Gasset. Ortega describes an "awkward perplexity" experienced in the presence of wax figures. The apprehension felt by a sensitive spectator at a popular waxwork museum, he contends, is not simply an expression of snobbery. What lies behind this feeling is a sense of experiential ambiguity. In this case, the uneasiness of seeing art confused with life:

> The origin of this uneasiness lies in the provoking ambiguity with which wax figures defeat any attempt at adopting a clear and consistent attitude towards them. Treat them as living beings, and they will sniggeringly reveal their waxen secret. Take them for dolls, and they seem to breath in irritated protest. They will not be reduced to mere objects. (1969, 28–9)

Duane Hanson's figurative casts deliberately exploit this uneasy ambiguity. Hanson might use polyvinyl and fiberglass instead of beeswax, but the effects are the same. Like a waxwork figure, Hanson's 'sculptures' are life-size, have skin-color pigmentation, wear clothes, and have hair. What differentiates these works from their counterparts in wax museums like Madame Tussaud's is the anonymity of their subjects; the "shock-of-recognition" rests on seeing a type of everyday person rather than a famous individual (Janson 1982, 292). Anecdotes abound of art lovers mistaking a Hanson sculpture for an actual museum guard or tourist. It is the incongruity of the figure and its setting that gives the trick away, for example, the sight of a crashed motorcyclist sprawled on an art gallery floor. The most realistic bronze or marble sculpture can never attain the same lifelike plausibility as a wax figure. Gilbert & George covered their faces with metallic paint, yet no one seriously mistook them for *living sculptures*.

Hanson's figures draw attention to a tradition of image-making that has been largely excluded from the canon of Western art history. Hanson, in effect, appropriates an age-old technique of rendering a figure so lifelike it will deceive the viewer into believing that it really can speak and move. If Hanson's figures expose an art-historical prejudice against the verisimilitude of wax figures, they also draw attention to the power of casts to deceive the eye, an ability that art history has regarded with deep suspicion. H.W. Janson notes that the use of casts was not denounced as "cheating" until the age of neoclassicism, and thereafter it became a "standard attack for any work of sculpture that was more realistic than the academic tradition was willing to tolerate" (1982, 295). This calls to mind the case of Rodin's sculpture, *The Age of Bronze* (1877). Rodin had rendered the body of his model with such painstaking exactitude that the sculptor was accused of casting from life. Leo Steinberg viewed this controversy as pivotal in the history of mimetic sculpture, a point I will touch on later. As Steinberg saw it, Rodin had simply taken the academic notion of sculpture, as an analog representation, to its logical conclusion: "*The Age of Bronze* was a paradigm of the aesthetics of analogues, and the scandalous charge that the sculptor had merely taken a cast from the live model, though unjust in fact, was aesthetically justified" (2007, 361).

And yet, as Warburg reveals, casting from life was once considered a legitimate mode of image-making. We are told that the church of Santissima Annunziata in Florence had so many wax effigies of donors, "these figures had to be suspended from the entablature on cords, and the walls had to be reinforced with chains" (Warburg 1999, 190). In Florence, the making of effigies was the work of the *fallimagini* ('image makers'), specialized craftspeople who "for generations ran an extensive manufacturing business on behalf of the church" (190). The sculptor Verrocchio used the techniques of the *fallimagini* in his art-making practice, and probably belonged to this craft. In *Lives*, Vasari

reimagines Verrocchio as having invented the technique of making death masks and body casts. Vasari claims it was Verrocchio who taught Orsino, the wax worker, how to execute "features done so naturally and well that they seemed to be living men rather than wax figures" (Vasari 1991, 240). The line between molding and modeling, however, is not always clear-cut. Composite examples exist. A type of hybrid portrait bust, common in fifteenth-century Florence, featured a life mask or death mask attached to a sculptured head and shoulders (Keizer 2015). These busts were often made from terracotta and were sometimes painted to enhance the verisimilitude of the image. A smaller number were cast in bronze.

Why has art history distrusted images derived from life casts? In his critique of the discipline and its conceptual foundations, Georges Didi-Huberman argued that a neo-Vasarian prejudice in art history has intellectualized mimesis. According to this view, the imitation of nature is essentially a theoretical exercise, in which the artist gives visible form to an *idea*. This prevailing philosophical tradition is contrasted with one based on the *imprint*—that is, an image taken directly from nature. An invention of Renaissance Neoplatonism, "Vasari inaugurated a closed epistemic regime to govern the discourse on art (a regime according to which the history of art constituted itself as a 'specific' and 'autonomous' knowledge of figurative objects)" (Didi-Huberman 1999, 72–3).

To demonstrate what is meant by this, Didi-Huberman contrasts the Vasarian concept of *disegno* with that of *imago*. *Disegno*, apart from meaning drawing, concerns the ability to represent ideal forms. Along with *invenzione* (invention) and *maniera* (style), *disegno* is a special attribute of the artist. *Imago* is a term Didi-Huberman borrows from Pliny, which roughly equates to an imprinted or molded image. In its ancient Roman meaning, the *imago* is a 'trait-for-trait' resemblance of a real thing. Whereas *disegno* relates to a pictorial practice like painting, *imago* supposes a duplication by means of an indexical technique, like casting.

Didi-Huberman's critique of the neo-Vasarian narrative sheds light on von Schlosser's account of the wax figure in art history, quoted at the beginning of this section. That is, as an image banished from the domain of art, and erased from the 'golden book of art' as proclaimed by the aesthetics of German classicism. The academic bias against "the slavish copying of Nature" and the principle that "reality is reworked by the artist" (von Schlosser 2008, 291), was accompanied by a "supercilious belittling of crafts" (289). As von Schlosser notes, "the intellectualist and Platonizing tendency" drew "a sharp dividing line between art and craft" (288). With this in mind, we are reminded again of the mythologizing treatment of the sculptor Verrocchio in *Lives*. If Vasari is to be believed, it is the sculptor who teaches the wax-worker Orsino how to perfect likeness.

Didi-Huberman takes exception to Vasari's version of the story and claims the opposite is true. Using their imprinting techniques and materials, the *fallimagini* ('image makers') were the first to attain the "height of realism." While Vasari invented the fable of Verrocchio to exalt the genius of the artist over the skills of the craftsperson, there was more at stake than professional rivalry and pride. More importantly, it was necessary for Vasari to claim the perfection of mimesis as the prerogative of painting and sculpture. It was therefore a question, says Didi-Huberman, "of *saving resemblance*: of making it into an artists' project, a conquest of the 'natural,' of life, and of constituting it as an authentically 'humanist' category" (2005, 224, emphasis in original).

III. ON LIFE CASTS AS TRACES AND MERE REPRESENTATIONS

In this section, I consider death masks and life casts as traces. When we look at a death mask, what we see is the positive cast of a negative mold. The image is made by an act of imprinting, by taking a direct impression of the contours of the face. A death mask, including other imprints such as fossils and footprints, is therefore indexical. Following Sontag, Gregory Currie has also classified death masks and photographs as types of "visible traces":

> As with photographs, so with footprints and death masks. These are traces left by things on the world. Anything about the person's appearance that the footprint or death mask manages to record is belief independent in the way that the photograph is: what is recorded depends on the morphology of the foot or face; not on what someone thinks the morphology of the foot or face is. (1999, 287)

Whether or not a photograph is a trace, and the extent to which photography is or is not mediated by a producer's intention, does not concern me here. Much has already been said about photography's representational characteristics (Atencia-Linares 2012; Walden 2005). While life casts and photographs are ontologically similar, a detailed comparison exceeds the scope of this paper. A future discussion of this topic, however, could be enriched by insights from the philosophy of photography. That said, it is highly likely that death masks and life casts do qualify as visual traces, at least according to Currie's criteria. Indeed, it is the death mask that Currie invokes as a paragon of this type of representation, an exemplar against which the photograph's trace-like attributes are measured. A trace is therefore a type of disintermediated image. In other words, an image unaffected by authorial intervention.

When we look at a death mask, our focus of attention is directed at the mask, not its maker. The authenticity of the subject (the castee) takes precedent. As Marcia Pointon reveals, the production of death masks was by and large the work of nameless *formatori*, an occupation of professional casters regarded as artisans rather than artists: "as the technician responsible for the production of the death mask, the *formatore* guarantees the authenticity of the mask even if he does not sign it" (2014, 177). When encountering a bust in a museum, we are directed to see a portrait *by* an artist of their subject. When we encounter a death mask, however, we see the image *of* a subject. The name of the caster, if known at all, is largely incidental. The connection between the cast and its subject, and the attainment of an authentic and literal likeness, is what matters. The subject is salient.

To objectively reveal its subject, or at least its visual particulars, a death mask cannot express an attitude towards it. As art historian Joost Keizer explains, "to make an image that claims to be replicating nature comes with a necessary avoidance of personal style and intervention" (2015, 34). The philosophy of art can help us elucidate what Keizer means by this. One of the most insightful explanations of this problem is that devised by Arthur Danto. To apply Danto's theory to this material, we can argue that a death mask is different from a sculptured portrait because, as a medium of representation, it is transparent to its content. In other words, we can assume that a death mask merely functions as a vehicle of representation, and as such, there is no need for artistic expression or style to affect what is seen. When a *formatore* (a death mask caster) makes a mask, they are not charged with the responsibility of expressing something about its content. Rather, they are assigned the task of transferring a likeness from the face of the deceased to a plaster mold.

A death mask is a literal representation. And unlike an artwork representation, it simply represents. It does so without expressing a thought or attitude about what it portrays, or about the manner in which it is portrayed. Danto posits *style* as a criterion for distinguishing a representation qua artwork from that of a non-artwork representation. As Danto sees it, "in addition to representing whatever it does represent, the instrument of representation imparts and impresses something of its own character in the act of representing it, so that in addition to knowing what it is of, the practiced eye will know how it is done" (1981, 197). Here, the emphasis is on *how* something is represented, rather than on what is represented. By imparting and impressing something of itself upon its subject matter, a representation qua artwork reaches beyond the act of merely representing. On the question of how something is represented, Danto adds: "we may thus reserve the term style for this *how*, as what remains of a representation when we subtract its content" (1981, 197, emphasis original). Stephen Davies has aptly summarized Danto's take on representation: "mere representations *re*-present their subjects, whereas artworks are *about* their subjects; when artworks are understood as such, they are understood not only as indicating what is seen but also as revealing a way of seeing" (1991, 69, emphasis in original).

It is not my intention to defend or challenge Danto's claims about the necessity of style. Or, for that matter, to claim that a cast cannot be a work of art because it does not exhibit a style. Rather, I have focused on Danto's account because it tallies with how art history has generally perceived these images. We can therefore use Danto's framework to understand how post-Vasarian theories of pictorial representation have regarded life casts. That is, as non-artwork representations. Using Danto's terms, this viewpoint can be summarized as follows: a death mask represents, but it offers nothing in addition to what it represents; in the act of representing, it imparts and impresses nothing of its own character upon its subject. Because its mode of representation is essentially indexical and achieved by means of a mechanical process of imprinting directly from nature, a death mask is held to possess no style of

its own. The absence of style can therefore distinguish a portrait qua death mask from a portrait qua work of art.

For much of art history, style has been used as a means of promoting the creative agency of the artist. Danto's position on style accords with this view. For, "with those qualities referred to as style, the artist, in addition to representing the world, expresses himself [sic], himself in relation to the content of the representation" (Danto 1981, 198). For this reason, the *formatori* and their Renaissance antecedents, the *fallimagini*, were excluded from the privileged category of artist. Although skilled in the techniques of verisimilitude, they expressed nothing of themselves in relation to the content of their subject. In other words, the casters of plaster and wax images merely *re*-presented nature.

In the next section, I follow this line of inquiry and consider the representational limitations of these images. I broach the following question: if life casts are traces, and traces impart no stylistic or expressive characteristics of their own, how is it possible to historicize the accumulated visual effects of this image-making tradition?

IV. THE ATTAINMENT OF VERISIMILITUDE AND THE 'CONQUEST OF VISUAL APPEARANCES'

Previously, I identified death masks and life casts as types of visible *traces*. Because these images are derived from a causal process of imprinting from life and are independent of creative or inventive input, they do not exhibit a *style*. In this section, I consider the implications of this proposition from the perspective of narrative art history, where transformations in art's external features (that is, styles) point to evolution and historicity in art. Von Schlosser reveals that wax figures belong to a long and continuous tradition of image-making, one spanning from ancient to modern times. And yet, throughout this entire period, the wax image shows little evidence of technical or perceptual transformation. As Didi-Huberman has also observed: "A contemporary ex-voto possesses exactly the same formal, material, and processual characteristics, the same scale, the same functions as an ex-voto made two thousand years ago" (2008, 160). This is therefore a tradition without formal variation, or so it seems. And yet, it is not that the makers of these images were resistant to change. Rather, it is a case of not needing to change, for they had already attained verisimilitude with their techniques. With death masks and wax portraits, a near perfect imitation of nature was readily available.

Danto understood the history of mimesis in Western art as a "conquest of visual appearances." By Danto's reasoning, the imprinted image could not partake in this conquest. Because a life cast is simply a means of reproducing a likeness, it expresses nothing *about* the problems of representation. A death mask merely represents. If the conquest of visual appearances is a progressive campaign to overcome the obstacles to mimesis, then an artwork's achievements must be measured in relation to its aims and solutions. Danto was keen to acknowledge the profound influence and legacy of Vasari, as inaugurating a "master narrative" of art. For it was Vasari who first conceived the history of art as a history of mimesis. The attainment of "perfect" mimesis was the goal of successive generations of artists, each mastering and surpassing the accomplishments of their predecessors. Progress towards this realization was the basis of the "Vasarian narrative," which according to Danto, shaped the course of Western art from the Renaissance to the advent of modernism. The Vasarian narrative was the first truly *historical* theory of art.

> It was Vasari's immense insight that mimesis has a history, and that if we examine the sequence of mimesis from Cimabue to Michelangelo, we have to admit that artists got better at it, so that there was an unmistakable progress in the conquest of visual appearances. Though he does not engage in counterfactual speculations, Vasari might have inferred that 'education and environment' produce immense effects, since no one who painted at the beginning of the period would have painted as he did were he instead to have been born toward the end, even with the same innate endowment. (Danto 1986, 198)

The "conquest of visual appearances," however, would end in a pre-determined fashion. Danto was not alone in theorizing the implications of the Vasarian narrative from the point of view of modernism. Art historian Hans Belting had reached a similar conclusion: "the idea of evaluating art according to

its success in mirroring nature became obsolete at the very latest with the crisis of representational art" (1987, 74). For Danto and Belting, this crisis was triggered by the superior mimetic achievements of photography in the nineteenth century. Leo Steinberg, it should be remembered, had a slightly different take on the crisis of representation. The tradition of analog art, "analogous to some actual or imaginable body in nature," ended when Rodin's life-size sculpture, *The Age of Bronze*, was mistaken for a body cast. In this case, the quest to imitate nature was finally perfected when art achieved mimetic parity with imprinting: "The result is a frustration, almost aggressively boring. But it took the earnestness of a genius to pursue the reigning cant about objectivity to this end" (Steinberg 2007, 358–61).

After centuries of gains and advancements in representation, painters and sculptors were forced to cede ground to photographers and to construct a new master narrative of art. Led by painting, modern art began to "probe its own identity" (Danto 1997, 125). This undertaking came to an end, in Danto's Hegelian account of art history, "when the philosophical nature of art attained a certain degree of consciousness" (1997, 140). The "end of art" theses advanced by Danto and Belting in the mid-1980s are remarkably similar. Vasari plays an equally important role in Belting's account, for it was Vasari's narration of representation that first articulates the history of art as a developmental process. "The process," says Belting, "was inexorable in its movement toward the fulfilment of the norm; it achieved itself autonomously, almost beyond the control of the individual participants" (1987, 76).

The "conquest of visual appearances" was a goal that fell exclusively within the jurisdiction of art. The pursuit of this goal, however, was to be distinguished from the task of attaining a mere resemblance. Static and unchanging, casting from life added nothing to the Vasarian program. The imprinted image was an art-historical dead end. As noted earlier, Didi-Huberman sought to explain this distinction in terms of *disegno* and *imago*. *Imago*, he contends, is "far removed from the Vasarian tradition, in which the portrait was defined as an optical imitation (at a distance) of the individual portrayed, or better, as an illusory simulation of his [sic] visible presence" (1999, 79). Within the ancient Roman tradition that Didi-Huberman invokes, *imago*, quite literally, was a molded image, a duplication achieved by means of contact with the face. *Imago* is not, therefore, "an imitation in the classical sense of the term; it is not a pretence and it does not require any idea, any talent, any artistic magic" (79). When Didi-Huberman contrasts *imago* with *disegno*, he does so with the understanding that *disegno* means more than the art of drawing. Vasari, says Belting, had succeeded in making "disegno the *vehicle of creative forces*" (1987, 79, emphasis added). As James Ackerman explains, this concept was revealed in Renaissance idealism, as the quest for perfection: "Though Vasari often implies that artistic progress is equivalent to the increasing capacity to reproduce nature, it is clear that it is *disegno* that progresses – the capacity to form beautiful elements for the work of art in the mind, and to execute them" (2002, 17).

The Vasarian program has had an enduring influence on notions of pictorial representation in Western art history. Danto characterized this developmental narrative as the "conquest of visual appearances," where artists get progressively better at imitating nature. Danto, in fact, had borrowed this phrase from Ernst Gombrich, which will become more evident in the next section.

V. MAKING, MATCHING, AND THE LIMITATATIONS OF THE 'MOLDED IMAGE'

The Vasarian notion of creativity rests on the concept *disegno*, an idea or mental image. This implies that representation is a theory-laden process that relies, in turn, on knowledge held by the artist. In this final section, I examine Gombrich's framework of "making and matching," primarily as a means of explaining the representational limitations of life casts. However, where Gombrich viewed these limitations in a negative light, Didi-Huberman saw them as virtues of the "molded image." When it comes to the "conquest of visual appearances," as a metaphor for the triumph of mimesis, perhaps the most systematic attempt to explain this process was that presented by Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*.

According to the "making and matching" model devised by Gombrich, a work of art does not begin with a visual impression of reality but with an idea or concept. The artist must "know and construct a schema before he [sic] can adjust it to the needs of portrayal" (Gombrich 2002, 99). Thus, the *making* of an artwork begins with a conceptual model (a 'schema') that is gradually corrected to *match* what is seen. This process of making and matching and remaking becomes embodied in the finished image.

Because the matching process proceeds through the stages of schema and correction, of incrementally correcting, adjusting and adapting the schema to match actuality, it is tempting to view Gombrich's account of representation as another history of mimesis. Gombrich, however, uses the visual discoveries of art to illustrate the history of the schema. In other words, it is the schemata—the conventional formulas of art-making—that evolve and transform. Gombrich's indebtedness to Karl Popper's philosophy of science is well known. Just like the scientist who begins with a theory or hypothesis, the artist begins with what is known and matches this with what is seen: "We mistake the character of this skill if we speak of the imitation of nature. Nature cannot be imitated or 'transcribed' without first being taken apart and put together again. This is not the work of observation alone but rather of ceaseless experimentation" (Gombrich 2002, 121).

Gombrich contends that there is no rigid distinction between perception and illusion. Indeed, perception is a cognitive process that is easily tricked by optical illusion. Each act of perception is therefore a 'hypothesis' that must be tested and confirmed with some further experience. Perception, Gombrich argues, "employs all its resources to weed out harmful illusions, but it may sometimes fail to 'disprove' a false hypothesis – for instance, when it has to deal with illusionist works of art" (2002, 24). In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich invites us to compare a portrait bust and a wax image. The bust belongs to a convention of portrait sculpture, the wax image does not. Like the making of a work of art, the activity of perceiving an artwork is similarly influenced by the intervention of schema. A portrait bust, no matter how original, must yield to certain pictorial rules consistent with the conventions of the genre. For, conventional schemata cannot be modified beyond certain limits without becoming unintelligible to artist and interlocutor alike. As Gombrich explains,

> When we step in front of a bust we understand what we are expected to look for. We do not, as rule, take it to be a representation of a cut-off head; we take in the situation and know that this belongs to the institution or convention called 'busts' with which we have been familiar even before we grew up. For the same reason, perhaps, we do not miss the absence of colour in the marble any more than we miss its absence in black-and-white photographs. (2002, 53)

Gombrich viewed the wax image as a "harmful illusion" because it deliberately aimed to deceive. As an image imprinted from nature, it prioritized matching over making. Like his teacher and mentor von Schlosser, who likened wax portraits to "a counterfeit of nature" (2008, 301), Gombrich distrusted these images for precisely the same reason. Von Schlosser wrote of the "spooky" and "corpselike" appearance of the wax portrait, a feature he attributed to the color and texture of the material as much as the verisimilitude of the image. It is not that Gombrich regarded polychromy as simply distasteful or garish; rather, its effects could render a bust too realistic, and therefore, too experientially ambiguous. With the addition of color or tinting, illusion could easily turn to outright deception. "Such a bust," Gombrich warns, "may even look […] unpleasantly lifelike, transcending, as it were, the symbolic sphere in which it was expected to dwell" (2002, 53). Gombrich accuses "the proverbial wax image" of transgressing these limits, of "[causing] us uneasiness because it oversteps the boundary of symbolism" (53).

For Gombrich, this "boundary of symbolism" marked the frontier between art and nature, and artworks and casts. The *making* of an artwork entails a knowledge of pictorial techniques, where *matching* proceeds through a process of 'schema and correction.' Though there is a technical process for capturing an image in plaster or wax, this procedure does not begin with the caster conceiving a pictorial schema or summoning an ideal prototype. In this case, matching wins over making. Life casts were excluded from the Vasarian enterprise, according to Didi-Huberman, because "a molded image is produced by adhesion, by direct contact of face with plaster, matter with matter" (1999, 79). A like-for-like resemblance can therefore be attained without a theoretical construct like *disegno* or schema.

Didi-Huberman describes the molded image in ancient Roman society as a "juridical genre," a "legitimate grafting of resemblance" protected by natural law (1999, 85). This law of "legitimate resemblance institutes molded images, masks 'engendered' by the direct impression of the face in plaster, cast in wax and painted so as to honour all noble Roman families" (1999, 85). The fanciful manipulation of the image—for example, its grafting onto a sculpture of Heracles—would be viewed as

illegitimate, as a perversion of the juridical institution of the *imago* as an honest impression. However, putting aside decorum and Roman law, we may imagine, for argument's sake, a death mask affixed to a statue of Heracles. Such a scenario invites comparisons with Roger Scruton's photograph of Venus and the supposed "fictional incompetence" of photography (1981, 588).

In our case, the death mask should not be regarded as the image of Heracles, but rather, as the image of the subject of the mask performing the role of Heracles. To add a sense of authenticity to their representation of the mythical hero, a sculptor might have chosen to use a death mask for this purpose. But just like the composite portraits of fifteenth-century Florence, where a death mask is attached to a sculptured bust, the addition of fictive elements will not alter the provenance of the image on the mask. The causal process that binds the positive image of the mask to the negative mold of the face has not been broken. Yes, a *formatore* can be granted license to enliven their subject, by opening the eyes or smoothing the wrinkles. Yet a feat of creativity that strays too far from the honesty of the mold risks distorting (or spoiling) the integrity of the impression, as a truthful image. The contours of a death mask must therefore be shaped by the morphology of the face and not by what someone *thinks* the contours of the face look like. This recalls Gregory Currie's observation, that only real things can leave traces of themselves.

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this paper, I have refrained from formulating a position on whether a cast can (or cannot) qualify as a work of art. But to borrow one of Arthur Danto's phrases, we can say that these images fall outside the pale of art history. As Didi-Huberman, von Schlosser, and Warburg have documented, these effigies have a long and continuous past. But throughout millennia, this mode of representation has hardly changed or progressed, at least in a teleological sense familiar to formalist art history. When an imprint is made, writes Joost Keizer, it "[insists] on copying one singular thing, namely the exact likeness of the sitter at a singular moment in time." This process, Keizer continues, "comes out of an unwillingness to concede to the artist's imagination and fantasy" (2015, 33–4).

Thus, while we have ample evidence of a tradition of casting from life, there is little evidence of a convention. A tradition can remain largely static and unchanging. But if a convention is to adapt and transform, like a language, it must be able to accommodate new and original forms. Gombrich's account of representation is relevant to this material because it demonstrates how convention can act as a catalyst for creative intervention: "The more we become aware of the enormous pull in man [sic] to repeat what he has learned, the greater will be our admiration for those exceptional beings who could break this spell and make a significant advance on which others could build" (2002, 20). The cumulative effect of ongoing alterations to pictorial schema—that is, of 'making and matching'—provided Gombrich with a model of art history not dissimilar to Danto's philosophical account.

Finally, Danto's concept of *style* is a useful tool for analyzing this material. Admittedly, however, I have drawn disproportionately on his earlier theorizing, where an artwork's style exhibits an attitude about its subject. In his later writing, Danto referred more broadly, and somewhat more vaguely, to "the artist [finding] ways to *embody* the idea in a sensory medium" (Danto 2013, 123, emphasis original). A "sensory medium" is a far more encompassing category that could, presumably, include a cast. However, for the task at hand, style is a differentiating quality that allows the artist to express something *about* their subject, in addition to merely representing it.

Danto's historically reflexive philosophy of art accords with evolutionary models devised by art historians, including Gombrich, to explain the process of pictorial development. Because the act of adjusting and modifying allows the artist to widen the range of representational and expressive and possibilities, "schema and correction" can account for the growth and transformation of styles. For the same reason, Gombrich's framework can explain why the "molded image" is seemingly incapable of exhibiting change over time. An artist can alter a schema, to allow different ways of depicting a subject. But because an indexical image has no schema to correct, it cannot be altered in a way that a conventional artform can. An imprint, like other traces, is tied causally and permanently to its singular subject at a singular moment in time. For this reason, death masks and life casts are constrained by what they can and cannot represent.

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