

Prologue

The epigraph to the first chapter of E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion* is a quotation from the eighteenth-century Swiss artist Jean-Étienne Liotard: "Painting is the most astounding sorceress. She can persuade us through the most evident falsehoods that she is pure Truth."¹ Gombrich argues that painters persuade viewers through their mastery of the techniques of illusion. This book explores another aspect of painting's magic: not its ability to simulate truth, but its capacity to change our perception of what truth is.

According to the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, the formative distinction in European civilization is the Mosaic one between religions that are true and those that are false. The crucial innovation that history attributes to Moses is not the categorization of particular religions as true or false but rather "the concept of a truth that does not supplement or augment other truths, but places everything else in a relation to untruth itself."² Before the Mosaic distinction, there were no false religions; thereafter, if one god was true, the others were false.

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The Mosaic distinction was inherited by Christianity. Because Christianity was true, pagan religion was false, and in the course of a few centuries, the religions of the Greco-Roman world were eradicated. This meant that pagan idols were false too, and so they were destroyed as well. The position of nonpagan images was more ambiguous, but they were always suspect. As the eighth-century *Libri carolini* put it:

Truth persevering always pure and undefiled is one. Images, however, by the will of the artist seem to do many things, while they do nothing . . . it is clear that they are artist's fictions and not the truth of which it is said: "And the truth will make you free."³

With varying degrees of theological urgency, images, idols, and false gods all posed the same philosophical problem: they represented things that did not exist. In this context, the increase in the number of images in the Renaissance, and the revival and diffusion of themes from classical mythology, embodied a complex challenge to Christian conceptions of truth. Painting was false because it was a representation rather than the reality, and mythological painting was doubly false because the things it represented—the gods and monsters of the ancient world—were themselves unreal.⁴

The presence within early modern Europe of an entire strand of cultural production that no one believed to be true put the Mosaic distinction under a degree of pressure. There were a variety of responses, ranging from iconoclasm to outright skepticism. But for one thinker, this explosion of images did not pose a problem; it suggested a solution. According to Giambattista Vico, writing in 1710, human truth is actually "like a painting." It is an astonishing claim if you set it alongside Daniello Bartoli's account of why his contemporaries prized paintings:

We say this one is by the great Michelangelo, this one by Titian, and this other one by the divine Raphael and that they please all the more at the discovery that they deceive us imitating the true with the false, and telling the eyes as many lies, as the painter gives dabs of the brush to the canvas.⁵

That is just what Liotard was referring to when he said that “painting . . . can persuade us through the most evident falsehoods that she is pure Truth.” But could painting ever be so persuasive as to persuade us that truth itself functions the same way?⁶