Nearly twenty years have passed since this journal sponsored a conference on the interactions between historians and art historians. The papers that were given at that time appeared in a special issue in 1986, and two years later were published as *Art and History: Images and Their Meaning*. If this interdisciplinary effort then seemed in its infancy, despite such notable forebears as Jacob Burckhardt and Erwin Panofsky, it has in the intervening decades grown in range, sophistication, and achievement, and may now be said to be approaching maturity.

One measure of that advance is Burke’s new book. Only a field that has accumulated a broad variety of results could prompt a historian to consider its operating mechanisms. Burke’s basic set of questions—how does the use of images for historical analysis work, and when (from the perspective of the historian) is it likely to be successful and/or effective?—could not have been explored in such richness or detail if a proliferating enterprise had not supplied him with so many instances, both cautionary and exemplary. It is suggestive that his bibliography of about 300 items is dominated by publications from the 1980s onward.

Burke investigates both the types and the contexts of the images that historians use. He embraces just about every kind of evidence that has been available, mainly since the Renaissance in the West, though he does venture into other periods and cultures. He has a special fondness for his own early modern period in Europe, but he also has much to say about other times and places. In so doing, he touches upon a huge range of artefacts: crucifixes, sculptures, the Bayeux tapestry, mosaics, buildings, furniture, paintings, drawings, films, and photography. To everything he brings a keen

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eye and a cautious stance. A photograph of Rio in the 1860s, for instance, he finds suggestive because a tiny detail shows a man wearing a hat but no shoes—an indication of dress code that Burke accepts only because it is so unimportant a part of the picture, and therefore unlikely to have been posed.

As this example demonstrates, Burke is constantly on the lookout for the danger of over-interpretation. Who is showing what, and why? And, more difficult, how can it be understood? By repeatedly asking these questions, he tries to construct a set of defenses that will protect the historian from easy conclusions or superficial observation. Indeed, he comes to the subject with the assumption that images are now so easily available, and scholars are so readily tempted to use them to make connections otherwise unavailable, that the most important immediate task is to temper enthusiasm and ensure that pitfalls are avoided. This admirable stance is especially timely, in that it offers an astute and instructive counter to the enthusiastic relaxing of standards of evidence that images, so vivid and direct, can inspire.

Early in the book, after having acknowledged the power of images, Burke emphasizes that their “testimony . . . raises many awkward problems” (14). He then surveys various genres that illustrate his themes: portraits, the use of iconography, depictions of the sacred, expressions of power and protest, revelations of social forms, the treatment of the “other,” and narratives. Throughout, he keeps our attention on context, on the identity of the creator of the image, and on hidden purpose.

Warning against taking portraits too literally, for instance, he suggests that they be regarded “as a record of what the sociologist Erving Goffman has described as ‘the presentation of self,’ a process in which artist and sitter generally colluded” (26). To de-emphasize the specificity of such images, Burke points out the strength of convention; thus, depictions of the kings of France echoed the classic pose of Hyacinthe Rigaud’s 1701 painting of Louis XIV even as late as Louis Hersent’s presentation of Louis Philippe in 1831. The key here is the position of the legs in the portrait of the Sun King, which is still visible in the 1830s, implying that the convention had a power that transcended the physiognomy and costume of the monarch himself. What Burke does not note is that his point could be extended yet further back. The position of Louis XIV’s legs derived, in turn, from one of the most
famous royal portraits of the 1630s: Anthony van Dyck’s *Charles à la chasse*, a painting that was itself a revolution in imagemaking, showing a king without regalia, robes, or armor (see figures 1 and 2). Not even astride his horse, Charles is stripped of the classic indicators of rank; to Rigaud, however, he remains the model of royalty. The need to disentangle these strands, even in so well-documented a form of image making as royal portraiture, indicates the subtleties and complexities that have to be mastered before such evidence is put to historians’ use.

Where messages are more ambiguous, as Burke notes, yet greater care is required. We need to know what people saw in iconographical details, in religious polemic, or in evocations of power or protest. Even scenes that seem self-evidently useful for social historians, such as the familiar rooms or courtyards in Dutch art, may show more than meets the eye. To the extent that details and incidents may have been meant to serve moral purposes, as has been argued by a number of scholars, their usefulness for documenting daily life may be limited. Even a group of Louis Le Nain peasants may say more about the appearance of Christ at the Supper at Emmaus than it does about French rural life in the 1640s.

Intent is repeatedly crucial in Burke’s account. If Pieter Brueghel the Elder’s *Peasant Wedding* is a work of satire rather than description, he asks, does it still speak straightforwardly about customs and behavior? About costume, maybe, but about peasant manners? And the bizarre “third leg” of the tray-carrier in the picture (an oddity not on Burke’s list) merely adds to the confusion. On the other hand, although the self-consciously “eyewitness style” of Gerard Ter Borch’s painting of the moment when the Peace of Münster was ratified in 1648—whose purpose Ter Borch underlined by inserting a self-portrait (an unmentioned detail that strengthens Burke’s claim for the picture)—removed ambiguity of intent, it also brought into play the conventions of what Burke calls “eyewitness rhetoric,” which has its own way of coloring the evidence that it provides.

In other words, caution is the watchword, even when context and purpose are well documented. The one area in which the caution seems slightly overplayed is in the chapter on visual narratives—subjects that often put the values of the artist deliberately on display. The brief paragraph on Ter Borch could have been expanded, and the evidence of painters expressing anti-war views is both earlier and broader than Burke acknowledges. Battles with-
Fig. 1  Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Portrait of Louis XIV* (Louvre)
Fig. 2  Anthony van Dyck, *Charles à la chasse* (Louvre)
out heroes and unheroic scenes of soldiers’ lives were genres before the mid-seventeenth century, and attacks on the horrors of combat had produced masterpieces long before Goya or the Crimean War.

Still, to err on the side of modesty is to achieve an unusual quality in a field that too often has succumbed to excessive enthusiasms for a newfound toy. Burke eschews direct criticism of such failings, though he makes a thoughtful and cogent case for believing that the structuralists and postmodernists have been unable to undermine the fundamental value of Panofskyan iconography. Indeed, going somewhat against the grain, he gives Panofsky higher marks as a guide to pictorial meaning than has been fashionable in recent years. He suggests more emphasis on social context than iconography usually allows, but in this respect, too, Burke seems to strike exactly the right balance.2

As one might expect, the book is informatively illustrated, and marred by only a few typos. There are a couple of slips: Frankenstein was the doctor, not the monster, and the Callot siege prints were segments of a huge scene rather than a real series. One could also have wished for a more elaborate section on films, increasingly the visual evidence of choice in classrooms.

The differences among commercial films, documentaries, and docudramas require more elucidation than Burke provides, and the range of reference needs to be broadened to such neglected masterpieces as the 1963 I Compagni (“The Organizer”), with its extraordinary performance by Marcello Mastroianni as a nineteenth-century Italian union organizer. Even a blockbuster like James Clavell’s The Last Valley (1970), an epic starring Michael Caine and Omar Sharif that may now be deservedly forgotten, has

2 The salutary contrast between Burke’s vigilance and less stringent approaches to visual materials is unmistakable. Thus, Alberto Manguel, in his recent Reading Pictures: A History of Love and Hate (London, 2001), posits that viewers construct narratives when they encounter images: With respect to “images of any kind, whether painted, sculpted, photographed, built, or performed—we bring to them the temporal quality of narrative” (cited in the Times Literary Supplement [November 2, 2001], 8). Against such generalizations Burke’s caveats ring loud and clear. The distinguished lineage of iconographical studies that Burke outlines, however, should have included the mentor whom Panofsky always credited as the ultimate pioneer, Julius von Schlosser. Interestingly enough, Ernst Hans Gombrich, whose skepticism about iconography stands at the head of a tradition of art history less useful to the historian, was also a pupil of Schlosser. Representative of the work of these scholars are three collections of essays: Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History (Garden City, 1955); von Schlosser, Präludien, Vorträge, und Aufsätze (Berlin, 1927); and Gombrich (ed. Richard Woodfield), The Essential Gombrich: Selected Writings on Art and Culture (London, 1996).
its uses for the historian of the Thirty Years’ War and of German witchcraft. It certainly would yield more useful information, keeping Burke’s recommendations in mind, than the still-visible Greta Garbo vehicle set in this era, Queen Christina (1933). Moreover, the passing mention of Andrzej Wajda’s Ashes and Diamonds (1958) merely whets the appetite for a nuanced assessment of the rapidly growing filmography on the Holocaust. What Burke’s brief comments on film stimulate, in other words, is a wish for the kind of extended analysis and commentary that his book lavishes on nonmoving images.

That one can ask for more is a testament to the sanity and analytical insight that Burke has brought to the subject. The care and concern for evidence that he advocates is an admirable corrective to some recent flights of “reception theory” and similar attempts to attribute an innate (but unproven) power to images. Much of the current discussion of princely propaganda in early modern Europe, for example, blithely ignores the need to demonstrate (preferably through firsthand testimony) the impact of a particular creation or representation on the body of people who saw it. Even more inconclusive has been the discussion of how these viewers responded, especially in an age when iconography could be complicated enough to defy the comprehension of learned humanists. The request for documentation of the effects that works of art had on their audiences, or the meanings that such works actually conveyed, can be too lightly ignored, and, in some cases, has been dismissed in ad hominem fashion.³

To remind us so cogently, by contrast, that evidence is central to the enterprise, and that the historian’s own standards of proof must always be brought to bear, is a notable accomplishment. Although Burke resists calling this work a handbook, Eyewitnessing deserves to become essential reading for the next generation of interdisciplinary historians who turn to visual images for both teaching and research.