For art historians a seemingly incongruous incident can sometimes trigger fresh thinking about what had seemed a familiar historical landscape. Such was the impetus for this study by Christopher Wood: a curious, late fifteenth-century case of apparently bungled connoisseurship. When Conrad Celtis, the celebrated German poet laureate, historian, and antiquarian, discovered a group of over-life-sized sculptures of draped, bearded men at a monastery in the wilderness near Regensburg, he published his find as representations of ancient Druid priests. Druids, however, were never a presence in Germany, and Celtis must have known that these sculptures actually represented medieval Christian apostles and Old Testament prophets. According to Wood, such creative re-labeling, bizarre to scholars today, was common among pre-modern people; they did not yet have access to a framework of established chronologies that allows comparison and analysis of objects understood as singular artifacts within a sequence originating from a known source produced at a particular historical moment.

Indeed, he argues that Celtis and his contemporaries did not conceive of time in such an orderly and linear way. Rather, they were in the habit (in thought or in deed) of freely replacing one type of artifact or model with another in associations that formed chains of referential links to a past—often dimly perceived, ill-understood, or utterly ignored—that could be freely drawn upon in support of rituals, beliefs, or aspirations to establish lineage or collective memory. Hence, Celtis’s report of ancient Druids would have been a rejoinder by provincial northern Europe to Italy’s proud display of impressive antiquities from its classical past. Similarly, Wood goes on to discuss other cases of misidentified, copied, or even forged German monuments, often with bogus inscriptions or anachronistic lettering meant to enhance the importance of individuals represented in painted portraits or on tombs or coins.

Wood’s study attempts in part to redress limitations in traditional formulations of the Renaissance (familiarly defined in relationship to Italy) as a myth of rebirth, repetition, and revival of classical antiquity in art following a dark period of disintegration. Focusing on German Renaissance art, he rightly points out that there has long been an unresolved scholarly discrepancy between the consideration of Italy and the rest of Europe, which his book seeks to correct, even as it expands the storehouse of visual evidence to encompass coins, maps, tombs, alphabets, epitaphs and inscriptions, relics, documents, and indeed an entire range of didactic or
archival material beyond the boundaries of what is normally considered “art.” He argues that Germans did not conceive of Antiquity as distantly separated from their own present by a dark Middle Age, since they saw themselves as the direct imperial continuation, through the Holy Roman Empire, of both the grandeur and technical ingenuity of Rome, the latter most notably demonstrated in the German invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

Beyond a consideration of what the Renaissance meant in and to Germany itself, Wood’s larger project continues and expands his hypothesis concerning how medieval and Renaissance artifacts relate to time. Several years ago in an article co-authored with Alexander Nagel (“Interventions: Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism,” *Art Bulletin* 87, no. 3 [September 2005]: 403–32), Wood proposed the “principle of substitution.” According to this theory, pre-modern productions of all kinds of artifacts, including architecture, were not considered in terms of individual authorship, or the circumstances or historical moment of their actual production, but rather as they related typologically to—and could substitute for—links in a chain of earlier artifacts of a similar sort. As a result, the multitude of copies, forgeries, and varied kinds of replications introduced by Wood into his discussion (from later copies of early icons to central plan churches) provides evidence that they had the same value to their contemporary viewers as what we prize today as original works, because they were accepted as effective surrogates or substitutions for lost or absent originals.

His hypothesis is intended to counteract what Wood sees as the danger of applying “anachronistic representationalism” (83) onto the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He seeks to readjust the discourse about how a modern notion of art evolved into a rational, representational, secularized form of expression, individually authored, from the magical anonymous cult images of the pre-modern era. The Renaissance in Wood’s study does not emerge as simply the threshold between medieval and modern, for while Germany (and later, German art historians) contributed strongly to the secularization of art through the Reformation’s discrediting of traditional cult images, he argues that this substitutional paradigm continued, although it could overlap with newer attitudes.

In his involvement with the constitution and meaning of images and their shifting relationships to the beholder, Wood joins a growing group of scholars (among them, Hans Belting, David Freedberg, and Joseph Koerner) who have been drawn repeatedly to the transformative period between the late Middle Ages and the Reformation. As has frequently been discussed, the new technology of printmaking profoundly changed pre-modern notions of history, time, and memory, for prints created an accessible storehouse of categories of standardized texts and images. They could also erase temporal and spatial distance by existing simultaneously in identical multiples, viewable by people in different locations and at different times. Wood’s discussion emphasizes how printing allowed all images, including depictions or plans of buildings, to be seen not only in relation to typological chains but also individually, as a whole and in reliable detail that was less likely to drift away from the appearance of earlier models. As a result, he argues, printed images (paradoxically) did not strengthen, but rather interrupted and undermined, the old substitutional chains of relationship. They displayed their own technological process openly, while emphasizing the uniqueness of their artistic authorship, encouraging viewers to compare and contrast styles of images that often included monograms, signatures, and texts.
Wood’s study ranges widely over sculpture, architecture, prints, paintings, and various other forms of visual expression, both documentary and aesthetic. His erudition is extraordinary, as is his command of language, though it must be said that he regularly casts the reader into some heavy seas of abstruse and convoluted terminology. (“The possibility of escape from the secularization model is the hypothesis that images and artifacts, to the extent that they made referential claims, worked not by semiosis but by the mechanisms of labeling and through the myth of a replica chain structured on type-token ratios” (83).) This is a study that requires as much re-rereading as reading, but the rewards are many, for Wood covers Renaissance ground that is often less than familiar while taking the reader into corners of art history that reveal the complexities of a transitional period between one way of thinking and imaging and another. Emperor Maximilian’s partly realized plans for his own extravagant tomb, for example, featured forty virtual-reality ancestor effigies, made in the replicative technique of bronze yet supplied with metal chains and weapons and even actual votive candles. The author discusses how these effigies (which can be understood in one sense as links in a substitutional chain, connected by genealogy and medium) were simultaneously made into “fictions of animation” (319), expressing all the specificity and temporality of a particular time and maker. As a result, Maximilian’s tomb project remained suspended between the magic that could be created by archaic effigies and the more grounded reality of the modern political spectacles to come.

Wood’s selections of examples often act as springboards for consideration of larger categories of images or artifacts, giving his text application well beyond its focus on a particular place and period. His extensive discussion of the evolution of alphabets and the complex, shifting relationships between the new print typography and earlier calligraphy is in itself worth the price of the book. Interspersed throughout this long, densely written study are startling shafts of verbal elegance and wit that light up the page and carry the reader on, such as: “This sense of woundedness was the precondition for the Italian sense of historical distance from antiquity” (63), or Wood’s memorable definition of substitution as “forgery without criminality” (107).

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