

Slashing Signs: Mary Richardson's Attack on "The Rokeby Venus" as Semioclasm

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Figure 1

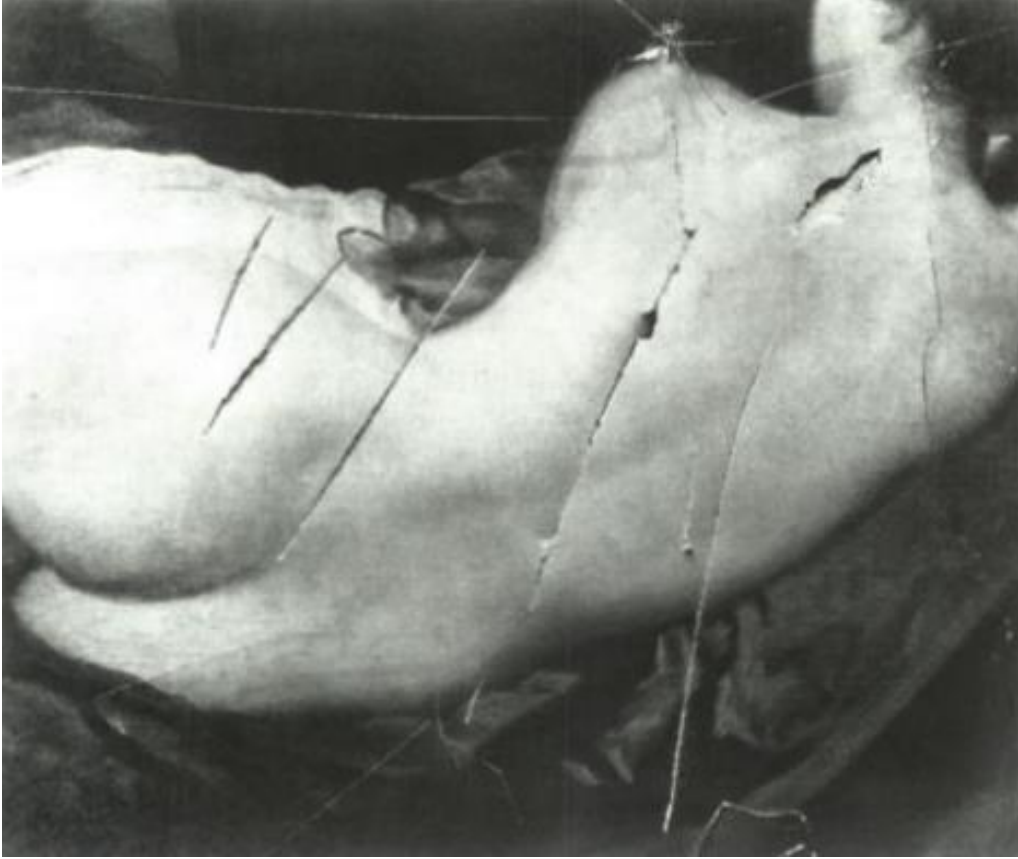


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

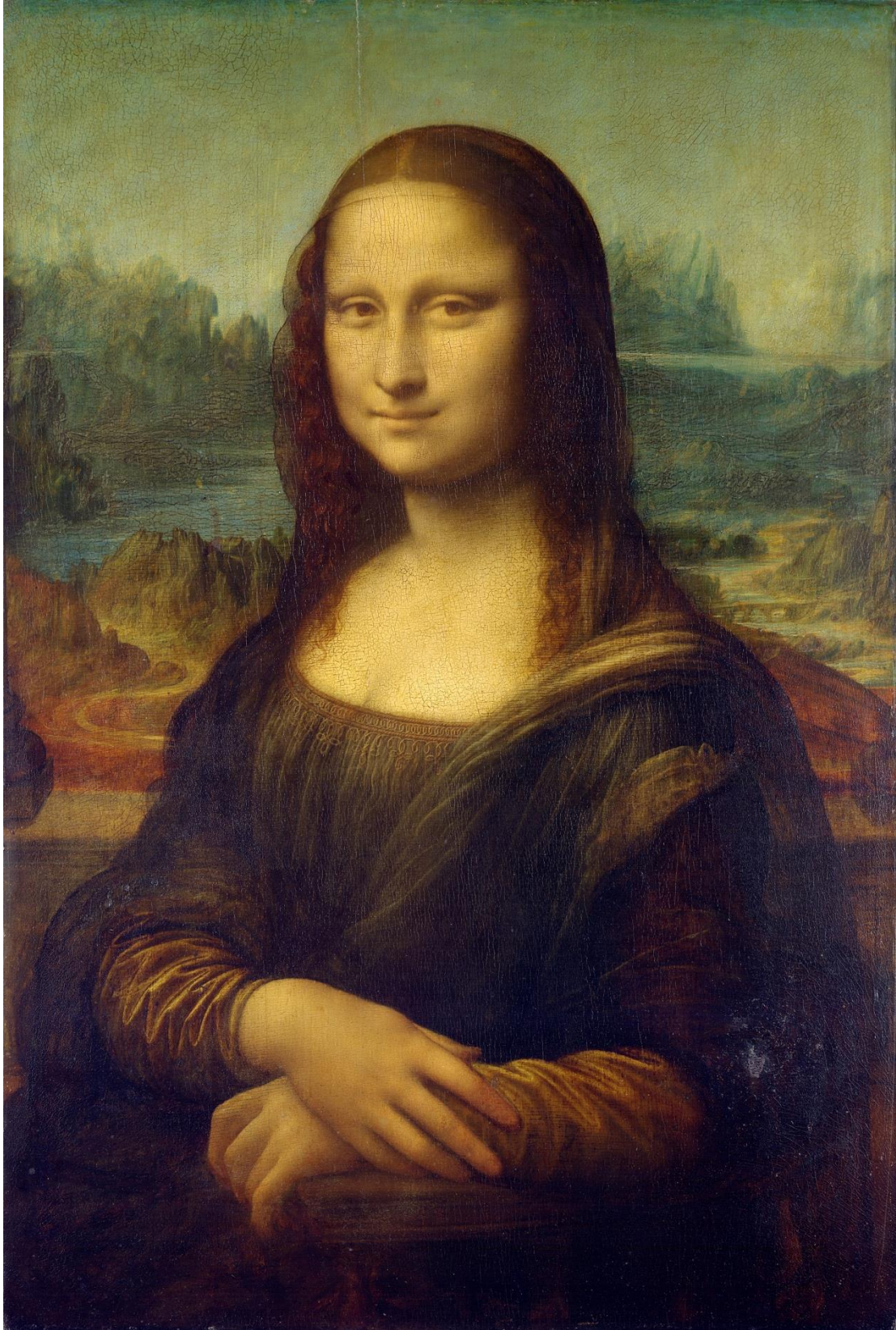


Figure 5

List of Figures

1. Diego Velàzquez, *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, 1647-51, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 177 cm, The National Gallery
2. (Detail after the attack by Mary Richardson in 1914), Diego Velàzquez, *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, 1647-51, oil on canvas, The National Gallery
3. Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, 1538, oil on canvas, 119.2 x 165.5 cm, Uffizi Gallery
4. Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus in Front of the Mirror*, 1614-15, 123 x 98 cm, Lichtenstein Museum, the Princely Collections
5. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503-06, oil on wood panel, 77 x 53 cm, The Louvre Museum

On March 10, 1914, a suffragette named Mary Richardson attacked the painting *The Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) [Fig. 1] by Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) in the National Gallery in London with a meat cleaver. She was able to deliver several slashes on the painting before she was pulled away by security and subsequently arrested [Fig. 2]. Violence against art comes in different forms, from Byzantine iconoclasm to ISIS destruction of cultural property. Instances labeled as vandalism are often regarded as senseless, barbaric, and lacking clear motive. On the other hand, iconoclasm can historically be seen as a justified act of violence against art because rather than primarily being about the destruction of property it is centered around the practice of idolatry. I see acts of violence against art as a two-step process: an attack on the physical art object and an attack on the icon, symbol, or sign it represents. Using Mary Richardson's attack on Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* as a case study, I argue that the event is semioclastic, meaning that it is an attack on the painting as a sign and is reliant on the relationship between object and viewer. I will also address the systemic erasure of violent attacks on art and underscore the significance of events like Richardson's slashing.

Iconoclasm and vandalism are not static things; they are actively shaped by who is using them, the context in which they are used, and how that usage has been subtly altered over time and space. In order to properly analyze violence against art, such as iconoclasm and vandalism, it is necessary to provide definitions for these terms; however, I do not believe there to be one, singular definition for them. Further, these definitions become even more complicated when considered in conjunction with *The Rokeby Venus*. Whether or not they meant to, scholars have labeled the event in very specific ways; they have attributed the attack on the painting to one specific term that has specific connotations whether they justify that usage or not. Before going into these unique usages, it is important to first look at the terms more broadly.

Firstly, I would like to point out one clear distinction between the terms iconoclasm and vandalism: etymology. Iconoclasm has its roots in Greek while vandalism only dates back to late eighteenth-century France. Iconoclasm, or iconoclast, comes from the Greek words *eikon*, meaning image, and *klan*, meaning to break.¹ It became *eikonoklastes* in Middle Greek, *iconoclastes* in Medieval Latin and *iconoclaste* in French. Iconoclasm comes from the word iconoclast and was developed in the late eighteenth century.² The term iconoclasm has endured history, but that doesn't mean that the meaning of the term has remained just because the word itself has. It is normal for the definition of words to evolve as their context evolves. The iconoclasm of the Roman Republic is different than the iconoclasm of the Byzantines which is different than the iconoclasm of today.

The term vandalism comes from the French *vandalisme*, first used in 1794, specifically by the Abbé Henri Grégoire in his *Rapport sur les destructions opérées par le vandalisme, et sur les moyens de le réprimer* in reference to damage from rioting and destruction during the French Revolution.³ Within a few years the word “was included in the fifth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'academie française*.”⁴ The root of the word comes from the historical group known as Vandals. It is unclear whether the reputation of the tribe influenced the term or whether the term propagated the narrative of the Vandals as destroyers of cultural property. Historically, the Vandals were not the most destructive group, but nevertheless they are remembered as such due to Abbé Grégoire's neologism.⁵ The term is now used widely to describe instances of destruction and/or damage to property or objects.

Coming at vandalism through the lens of the law, criminologist Thomas D. Bazley examines the phenomenon of art vandalism through modern contexts and examples. He defines vandalism as:

deliberate acts that result in physical harm to works of art where the motivations are less profound (if understood at all) than those associated with cultural-heritage looting, war, and civil/religious unrest, and more clearly associated with conventional criminal conduct, that is, destructive/malicious behavior (sometimes in the name of personal protest or social statement) and ad hoc financial gain.⁶

Bazley covers a selection of recent incidents of vandalism and categorizes them into three groups: destructive/malicious behavior (events in which the reasons for the vandalism are not profit or protest, often being unexplainable), art vandalism/destruction as a form of protest or social statement, and destroying art for profit (events where the raw materials of the object are often valuable, so the work of art is destroyed in order for the materials to be sold off separately).⁷ Bazley broaches the nature of vandalism as illegal destruction of property which, to him, is never justified.

In a similar vein, Christopher Cordess and Maja Turcan examine vandalism from a legal perspective, primarily through a study they conducted on incidents of art vandalism.⁸ They define vandalism in “legal terminology as criminal damage” that “encompasses an act which ‘destroys or damages’ a material object in contrast to an act of violence against the person.”⁹ They then specify the definition of art vandalism “as an intermediate form between an attack on a thing and an attack on a person in so far as it entails an attack on a particular image...or on an idea or concept depicted by an image.”¹⁰ This unique way of looking at art vandalism allows for it to be differentiated between other types of vandalism.

These specific scholars, looking at the attack on *The Rokeby Venus* through the lens of criminology, define the event as an act of vandalism. While they do not discuss Mary Richardson’s assault on painting specifically, they do include it on a list of well-known cases of vandalism of art along with other major incidents of art vandalism that have occurred mostly in museums.¹¹ Is it circumstance that dictates the word choice? Is a criminologist more likely to use

the term vandalism rather than the term iconoclasm because it is the one with which they are more familiar? Is it because they see things in terms of the law? Whatever the reasoning may be, I see word choice in this specific example as being closely tied to each individual scholar and their respective fields of study. Continuing that thought, it makes sense then that art historians have largely chosen to define Mary Richardson's attack as an instance of iconoclasm.

Dario Gamboni, in his book *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution*, spends a fair amount of time on terminology. He writes that iconoclasm “grew from the destruction of religious images and opposition to the religious use of images to, literally, the destruction of, and opposition to, any images or works of art and, metaphorically, the ‘attacking or overthrow of venerated institutions and cherished beliefs, regarded as fallacious or superstitious.’”¹² Here, he lays out the changing definition of iconoclasm and how its meaning has expanded and widened over time. The same thing goes for vandalism, which “went from meaning the destruction of works of art and monuments to that of any objects whatever, insofar as the effect could be denounced as a ‘barbarous, ignorant, or inartistic treatment’ devoid of meaning.”¹³ Gamboni concludes that the main distinction between the choice of one term over the other is motive or lack thereof.¹⁴ This is the criteria he uses to categorize the attack on *The Rokeby Venus* as iconoclastic.

In discussing the specific event, he refers more generally to the iconoclasm executed by suffragettes of the time and explains why art (specifically representational, figural art) became a mode of protest for these women: “[p]ictures, thanks to their uniqueness, the fact they portrayed persons, and the emotional charge they engendered, enabled Suffragettes to come as near as possible to ‘blood-shedding’ without actually endangering human beings.”¹⁵ Having already established the specific definitions of iconoclasm and vandalism that Gamboni employs, it is

easy to see how his interpretation of the event is an example of iconoclasm, especially if their intention was to challenge the patriarchal system that was refusing suffragettes their right to vote and imprisoning their friends and leaders.

David Freedberg offers a different way of looking at iconoclastic movements. According to him, iconoclasm sometimes stems from unease about the nature of images, their ontology, and how they function; however, he adds that “[o]n other occasions...there seems to be less concern about ontology...as in the French and Russian revolutions. In other words, the motivation seems much more clearly political.”¹⁶ The iconoclasm ends up being about removing symbols and presence of the old in order to usher in the new, “[t]o pull down the images of a rejected order or an authoritarian and hated one is to wipe the slate clean and inaugurate the promise of utopia.”¹⁷ Beyond political revolutions, this ideology was also employed in antiquity with the Roman practice of *damnatio memoriae* where, following the fall of an emperor, images of them would be removed and replaced by images of the new emperor.¹⁸

Like Gamboni, Freedberg also categorizes Richardson’s attack as iconoclastic. He includes his analysis of the event in a larger chapter on idolatry and iconoclasm as an example “of individual iconoclasm in the twentieth century.”¹⁹ Citing political motivations, Freedberg emphasizes the significance of the subsequent publicity of the event which in fact made headlines in major newspapers.²⁰ Nonetheless, he does remark on the subject matter of *The Rokeby Venus* as a motivator for Mary Richardson. He argues that “the subject of the picture assailed by [Richardson] seems peculiarly fitting. It is not entirely surprising that when [she] reflected on her youthful deed some forty years later, she added, ‘I didn’t like the way men visitors gaped at it all day long.’ Indeed not; and indeed they may have. Moralizing disapproval is thus joined to political motivation...”²¹ Freedberg’s assessment of the event fits in with his

definition of iconoclasm as a kind of disapproval or opposition as Richardson herself later admitted to feelings of discontent and dislike surrounding the ways in which the painting was viewed.

Following these categorizations, Lena Mohamed discusses the political iconoclasm of suffragettes in Britain and uses the slashed Velázquez as a main example. She defines the incident as iconoclasm and a particularly powerful, public event. Mohamed emphasizes the “common ownership” of the painting as it had been acquired by the National Gallery through the National Art-Collections Fund for the public.²² She writes: “[t]o have [*The Rokeby Venus*] slashed by a suffragette was...perceived almost as a personal affront – an iconoclastic act against personal property and sensibilities.”²³ She also argues that in this specific case, “the act of violence...is not simply against a prized artwork, but also against the construction by society of the imagined female form.”²⁴ This attack as a form of political protest fits the established definition of iconoclasm as a metaphorical attempt to try and overthrow the institution which, in this case, is the accepted ideal female figure.

While the aforementioned scholars focus on the motivation behind the attack as the key iconoclastic element, there are others who focus instead on the aspect of presence. It was once widely believed that an image of something contained its prototype, begging the question of whether an image is a representation of the absence of the thing or whether it is a representation of the presence of the thing. Jas Elsner discusses this as “the problem of representation,” which is “the question of whether an image, as an imitation of its referent in a pictorial medium, is *not* the same as its referent and thereby expresses the *absence* of that referent even as it refers to it, or whether it is a site for the *real presence* of its prototype, embodied in an image.”²⁵ This is what Elsner sees as the dilemma at the root of iconoclasm and the struggle between iconophiles and

iconophobes. He adds that “[i]conoclasm in all premodern contexts from antiquity to the Byzantine iconoclasm controversy was about ‘real presence.’ The damage done to the image is an attack on its prototype, at least until Byzantine iconoclasm, and it presupposes some kind of assault on real presence as contained in the image.”²⁶ By this thinking, we can understand the process of iconoclasm as first requiring the belief of presence within an image. While other scholars see iconoclasm as a more general term regarding attacks on images in the name of something, whether that be religion, politics, etc., traditionally, iconoclasm is nonetheless centered around this idea of presence. According to Elsner, one main component of presence in images is the ritual practices surrounding that image. He writes:

In all periods characterized by the hegemonic religious dominance of pagan polytheism and Christianity, the main marker of real presence is the *cultivation* of images: that is, a matter of particular practices – the use of images as items in ritual, their place as recipients of ritual, even of worship, their ability to embody a kind of charisma as a result of or in response to such cultivation.²⁷

Using images and icons in a ritual manner was common practice, and Elsner cites it as a reason for the widespread iconoclasm during the Byzantine Empire. The interaction with images in ritual not only confirms presence but creates presence and thereby aids in the creation of icons; if the ritual practice wasn’t present would the image in question still be an icon?

The ritual aspect of images and icons resurfaces in Finbarr Barry Flood’s article “Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum.” However, rooted in contemporary society, he talks about it in the context of iconoclastic behavior in museums. Flood argues that the museum has become a locus of ritual behavior. He notes that the inception of the museum is itself representative of a “shift of cult to culture,” with the museum supposedly being a space where cult icons are transformed into art objects.²⁸ Flood writes: “As its etymology (and often its architecture) implies the museum is a type of secular temple, a ‘temple of

resonance,' within which modernity is equated with the desacralization and even 'silencing' of inanimate objects by their transmutation into museological artifacts."²⁹ One key aspect of this argument is that museums are a space that change the identity of things, turning cult icons into art objects. By this classification, museums should therefore be a space where iconoclasm doesn't happen because there are no cult icons. In spite of this, the museum ends up becoming a space where ritual occurs which creates icons anyway. "Given the ways in which the aesthetic, economic, and institutional aspects of modernity are articulated around the transmutation of the cult image into cultural icon, it is hardly surprising that in the modern nation-state, the museum rather the church is the primary target of 'traditional' iconoclastic behavior."³⁰ Flood goes on to argue that art objects that have been attacked, such as *The Rokeby Venus* and the Bamiyan Buddhas, were targeted due to their fetishization by Western modernity.³¹ Flood follows Elsner's argument that ritual is a key aspect of icons and therefore iconoclasm.

Flood categorizes the attack on *The Rokeby Venus* as iconoclasm and even goes so far as to call it "one of the most (in)famous acts of modern European iconoclasm."³² He argues that Mary Richardson's attack "was specifically intended to draw attention to the treatment of the imprisoned Emmeline Pankhurst," meaning that it was her goal for the event to generate publicity, particularly sympathy, to the cause.³³ Flood is clear in his categorization of Mary Richardson's actions as iconoclastic. Following the definition of iconoclasm requiring presence, he discusses the irony of iconoclastic actions as "the central paradox of iconoclasm," an idea originally formed by Freedberg who explains that when attacking an icon, "iconoclasts no less than iconophiles engage with the power (if not the animateness) of the image."³⁴ In this sense, iconoclasts are partaking in the very practice they so strongly oppose: engaging with the presence in an image.

Using this paradox of iconoclasm, Daniel Cottom examines the attack on *The Rokeby Venus*. He assesses the very definition of iconoclasm, writing that “confounding the distinction between image and person...iconoclasm confronts us with the issue of how persons are defined in and through images.”³⁵ He argues that “humanity is at stake in iconoclasm” and, specifically in this case, that Richardson’s meat cleaver attacked an image rather than a person yet is still able to raise “questions about how we limn the human icon.”³⁶ Cottom continues to complicate the traditional definition of iconoclasm due to this aspect of humanity, stating that while iconoclasm “is conventionally understood as the breaking of images or, by extension, as the insulting of any treasured thing, whether by symbolic or physical assault,” it is because the “image, definition, and boundaries of humanity are as stake in the concept of iconoclasm” that renders this conventional definition “insufficient,” “incoherent and, in fact, extremely dangerous.”³⁷ While Cottom’s definition and understanding of iconoclasm differs from others I have looked at, his overall argument is still that the event in question is an iconoclastic one in which Richardson is seen as something more than a “simple criminal.”³⁸ This point of view is almost in direct opposition to that of criminologists who first look at the event as criminal and categorize it based off of that particular understanding.

Thinking about how background affects interpretation, are the preexisting biases of these scholars preventing them from examining and critiquing the categories that are currently in place, and does that categorization then affect the way we understand these events? By labeling events as either iconoclasm or vandalism, are all of the inherent characteristics those terms carry then assumed of the event? Is this a consequence of word choice? Can it potentially pigeonhole thought? Rather than limiting myself to just these two categorizations, I think it is important to question and challenge others’ choice of words as well my own.

I had always considered Mary Richardson's attack on *The Rokeby Venus* to be vandalism: a criminal action. However, I still considered it to be a valid form of political protest and to have individual and larger meaning. All of the arguments I have laid out have me questioning the effectiveness of the terms iconoclasm and vandalism in the case of *The Rokeby Venus*. But then I question whether there is any term that is adequate to describe the event. If a major qualifier for an icon (and therefore iconoclasm) is presence in an image and the objection to that presence, then I do not believe this qualifies. Mary Richardson didn't attack the painting because she was convinced that the image of Venus was actually Venus and opposed that presence; that is not what she was in opposition to. I understand that this isn't the only qualifier used for icons and iconoclasm, but it is the approach I am choosing to use because it is the most clear-cut and concrete prerequisite.

I have considered other qualifying characteristics of iconoclasm such as motive and ritualistic behavior that then gives way to presence. For me to contemplate an attacker's motive(s) would be much less substantiated than simply focusing on presence, and while I do believe this painting can be considered an example of ritual (such as ritual surrounding looking at works of art in a museum) I don't think it is enough to definitively call the attack iconoclasm. If ritual both creates and confirms presence, then the refusal to participate in the ritual both destroys and denies presence. In this situation, the attacker (i.e. Mary Richardson) isn't participating in said ritual and therefore is not creating an icon. This would then mean that her attack is not iconoclastic. So if I'm not calling it vandalism anymore, but I'm also not calling it iconoclasm, then what do I call it? While I don't interpret *The Rokeby Venus* as an icon, I do see it as a sign and therefore involving semiotic systems and supplying me with another choice of terminology: semioclasm.³⁹ But before I get into that, I want to establish some semiotic theory

that I will use.

Saussure's basic model of semiotics is that the relationship between concept and image (signified and signifier) create signs. "With Saussure, the sign is defined in terms of a physical entity, or signifier and a nonmaterial meaning, or signified while reference to anything outside the system of signs is deliberately left out of the account."⁴⁰ In contrast to this binary method in which sign points to meaning, Charles Sanders Peirce proposes a three-part method. "The tripartite definition of the sign proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, in which the *sign* as material entity points to its *object* by virtue of an *interpretant*, an interpretative response which picks up on the reference to its object made by the sign."⁴¹ Peirce's model is a triangle connecting sign, interpretant, and object where "we are unable to envisage a sign's evoking something, namely its interpretant, without thinking of it as referring to an object outside itself; nor can we conceive of a sign as referring to an object unless it prompts an appropriate interpretative response."⁴² In this sense, the interpretant acts as the signified and the object as signifier. Different from Saussure, Peirce theorizes a cyclical system of signs in which an interpretant identifies the reference to an object created by the sign and then in turn "makes its own reference to the object evoked by the original sign" thereby creating a never-ending cycle of signs generating more signs.⁴³ When the interpretant recognizes the reference to an outside object (created by the sign) it then refers to the object invoked by the original sign. By this process, it becomes another sign and creates another triangular relationship between sign (itself), object, and interpretant; "[s]igns, as soon as they are interpreted as signs, generate other signs, and there are no inherent limits as to how long this process can go on."⁴⁴

Peirce defines a sign as "an object which stands for another to some mind" and as "[a]nything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which

itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*.”⁴⁵ He also denotes that a sign is also only a sign “to that mind which so considers and if it is not a sign to any mind it is not a sign at all... That mind must conceive it to be connected with its object so that it is possible to reason from the sign to the thing.”⁴⁶ Peirce writes that a sign generates an idea “which is the idea that it is a sign of the thing it signifies” and that that idea “is itself a sign, for an idea is an object and it represents an object” because the idea has the “material quality” of the feeling experienced while thinking.⁴⁷

He then categorizes signs into three groups: index, symbol, and icon. He writes that “an *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant.”⁴⁸ Peirce uses the example of a mold “with a bullet-hole in it as sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not.”⁴⁹ That being said, the index would remain a sign if there was no signified but would not remain so if there was no signifier. He then defines “a symbol as a sign which would lose the character which renders it is sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification.”⁵⁰ The inverse of an index, a symbol is no longer a sign when there is no signified.

To Peirce, an icon “is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line.”⁵¹ This is a different take on the term icon than has been previously established, but it is talking specifically about icons as signs. Peirce maintains the aspect of possession or presence in his definition which connects it to the aforementioned definitions of icons. However, what distinguishes Peirce’s definition is his underlying categorization of icon as sign. Using this

designation in the context of iconoclasm means that iconoclastic attacks can be interpreted as semioclastic attacks. Using this theory specifically, *The Rokeby Venus* can be understood, first and foremost, as a sign and its slashing as semioclastism.

Gamboni interprets the attack on the painting as transformative where, through her violent actions, Mary Richardson was able to transform *The Rokeby Venus*:

Mary Richardson turned a Venus, a symbol of (physical) beauty, an ideal of (passive) womanhood and a voluptuous object of (male) contemplation, into an inverted figure of Emmeline Pankhurst, a model of moral beauty, emancipated womanhood and political militancy. Attacking and mutilating the counter-model allowed her to depreciate it in every respect, as well as to assert symmetrically the superiority of her positive model. The 'outcry' that would inevitably result from her action was supposed to further expose the 'hypocrisy' of authorities and of a society that valued a picture more than human life. The deed exploited the double nature of the sign: as signified, it could receive 'wounds' meant to expose and maybe to avenge the pains inflicted on the imprisoned feminists, while as signifier it enabled the dismissal of moral judgments passed on the destruction of what was 'only a picture.'⁵²

To some extent, Gamboni recognizes the painting as a sign that specifically operates through the viewer-object relationship. His argument is that as signified the painting can be wounded as a way to highlight the treatment of imprisoned suffragettes and that as signifier it makes it more difficult to pass moral judgment on Richardson's actions. This only works if there is a viewer.

I see the relationship between viewer and object as an integral part of the semiotic system with a major part of the viewer-object relationship being response. How do people react to art and what does that mean to them personally and what does it mean in terms of the work of art?

As David Freedberg writes:

People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys with them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them and, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do.⁵³

Attacking works of art is interestingly a very well documented and not-uncommon phenomenon.

Freedberg spends a chapter discussing idolatry and iconoclasm in which he not only discusses traditional forms of religious iconoclasm but individual instances of violence against a work of art. He cites cases like Mary Richardson's attack of *The Rokeby Venus* as well as other well-known events, chooses specific incidents where motive is found (whether that be political, social, personal, etc.), and talks about them just as he did with iconoclasm of the sixteenth century.

Freedberg, like Elsner, touches on the question of presence in an image. He states that it is "clear that any number of assaults of images – if not the large majority of them – are predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented, or on the related assumption that the sign is in fact the signified, that image is prototype, that the dishonor paid to the image...does not simply pass to its prototype, but actually damages the prototype."⁵⁴ Relating back to Cordess and Turcan's definition of art vandalism as somewhere between an attack on a person and an attack on a thing, Freedberg recognizes that attacking an image of someone doesn't cause direct physical harm to that prototype but argues that it does damage them in some way whether that be dishonor or disrespect to the figure represented.⁵⁵ Freedberg's assessment of image as prototype, or of sign as signified, means that one cannot be separated from the other. For icons that means that the prototype is inherently present in the image and for signs it means that its meaning cannot be separated from the sign itself.

If we believe that to be true, that the sign is signified, then in terms of *The Rokeby Venus* we can interpret the attack on the sign as an attack on the signified. Like with iconoclasm, where the attack on the icon is really an attack on the prototype, an attack on signs is really an attack on the signified or its larger meaning. This holds true for *The Rokeby Venus*. Mary Richardson wasn't just attacking a painting; she was attacking a specific work of art that embodied what she really wanted to attack: the ideal of female beauty. As an act of political protest, Mary

Richardson opposed the admiration and fetishization of the Venus figure as the ideal of female beauty because to her Emmeline Pankhurst was the true beauty. However, in order for other people to see that she felt the need to attack *The Rokeby Venus*. Her interpretation of the figure as sign and signified lead to her violent response.

Interestingly, this specific painting inherently creates a unique viewer-object relationship. In juxtaposition with other comparable portrayals of Venus, Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus* takes the voyeuristic quality of the genre further than previous paintings had. Examples such as *Venus of Urbino* (1538) [Fig. 3] by Titian (1485/90-1567) and *Venus in Front of the Mirror* (1614-15) [Fig. 4] by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) are helpful points of comparison. Venus, while representative of the ideal female beauty, is also seen as a sexual object. All of the aforementioned examples of a nude Venus place the titular figure in an intimate setting that creates a sense of voyeurism. When that is combined with a rear-facing figure and a front-facing mirror that voyeuristic quality is only emphasized. The *Venus of Urbino*, a front facing figure, engages the viewer head on as she looks directly out at the viewer. This engagement shifts when the central figure is not facing the viewer but due to the presence of the mirror doesn't disappear. This can be seen in Rubens' *Venus in Front of the Mirror* and Velázquez's *The Rokeby Venus*. Paul Barolsky, discussing the Venus figure and eroticism, writes:

When Velázquez joined the tradition of Titian, he pictured the reclining Venus from behind. She is now not absorbed in the gaze of the viewer but engaged by her reflection in the mirror held by Cupid...Rubens would also portray Venus from behind in the same period as she gazes at her reflection in a mirror...Part of the charm of the viewer's intrusion upon the goddess's toilette is found in the reflection of the face of Venus, who both coyly and ambiguously seems not just to be admiring her own physical beauty but to be looking directly at the beholder – engaging the viewer as had the *Venus of Urbino*.⁵⁶

When Venus is pictured facing away from the viewer the voyeuristic quality is more intrusive than when she is facing the viewer directly because she is unknowingly being watched.

However, in these two depictions the presence of the mirror can add another element of voyeurism because she can see the viewer watching her and is watching them in return.

When one looks at either Rubens' *Venus in Front of the Mirror* or Velàzquez's *The Rokeby Venus* they see the face of Venus through a reflection. Barolsky assumed that each Venus was also admiring herself through her reflection while simultaneously looking directly at the viewer. This doesn't make sense. How can the viewer and the Venus be seeing the same image in the mirror? The term "Venus effect" was proposed by a group of psychologists to examine and explain this phenomenon:

[The Venus effect] occurs when a picture shows an actor and a mirror that are not placed along the observer's line of sight, for instance a Venus admiring herself in a small mirror, and when the actor's reflection in the mirror is visible to the observer. In this situation, observers tend to report, incorrectly, that Venus is also seeing herself in the mirror in the same location as the observer.⁵⁷

The researchers recognize "two different types of mistakes: optical and psychological."⁵⁸ The former can occur when an artist doesn't understand the laws of optics or purposely bend them for an artistic purpose; the latter can occur when "the mirror itself is used (deliberately or not) to lead us down the wrong path."⁵⁹ It is this latter mistake that creates the psychological illusion. Based on the laws of optics, we know that the viewer isn't seeing the same image reflected in the mirror as the figure would.⁶⁰

Applying this theory to *The Rokeby Venus*, it can be gathered that the titular figure is not seeing herself in the mirror; she is seeing the viewer reflected in the mirror while the viewer sees her. If that is the case, then the voyeurism in this situation is indirectly reciprocal, and the viewer is completely unaware that they are being observed in return. The psychological illusion created through the Venus effect allows for the viewer to believe that Venus is seeing what the viewer sees, but because the laws of optics shows this to be untrue the viewer doesn't realize that Venus

is actually seeing them in the mirror. In this scenario, both Venus and viewer are watching each other which makes the process of looking reciprocal. The difference is that Venus knows she is being watched while the viewer does not. The painting reinforces voyeuristic practices and the act of looking at the nude female figure which invites objectification and fetishization. With the content of this work of art deeply rooted in the viewer-object relationship, it is only fitting then that it sparked a violent response.

Applying Peirce's tripartite system of semiotics to the viewer-object relationship of *The Rokeby Venus* can reflect his theory of sign, object, and interpretant and of the cyclical nature of the sign system. Alex Potts uses *Mona Lisa* (1503-1506) [Fig. 5] by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) to illustrate Peirce's theory:

By envisaging it as a painting of something and not just paint on canvas, we are already interpreting it as a sign. If we combine this basic recognition with a general knowledge of how images function, we could be more specific. We should recognize the painting as a particular type of visual image designed to evoke an object in the real world, and see it as a figure set in a landscape, rather than an abstract form...we could go on to define the figure more closely by interpreting it as a portrait as distinct from a religious or symbolic image. This apparently simple designation opens up a number of divergent chains of interpretation, depending on the meaning we assign to the idea of a portrait.⁶¹

Potts' analysis can be used as a guide as to how Peirce's system functions with works of art.

Through Potts' analysis, *Mona Lisa* operates as the sign that refers to an outside object which is the figure in a non-abstract space. That figure is then interpreted in different ways depending on the significance applied to portraits. Then, that interpretation affects the way the object is understood, creates another reference to the object, and thereby becomes a sign and furthering the cycle.

Applying this methodology to *The Rokeby Venus*, by recognizing that the painting (as a whole) is the sign we can establish its reference to an object which, in this case, is the figure of Venus. The interpretant recognizes that reference to Venus and in turn makes its own reference

to it by assigning a meaning. The interpretant is formed by “interpretative response,” implying the presence of an interpreter.⁶² By doing so, another sign is created and sets up a subsequent triangular relationship between sign, object, and interpretant. Potts writes that “[i]n any reasonably coherent interpretation, the internal logic of a pursuit of meaning from sign to sign, with each successive sign redefining and adding to the previous sign’s evocation of the object, determines to a large extent the choice of features of the painting singled out as significant, as well as the meaning attributed to these.”⁶³ With the sign system working and shifting constantly, Potts is arguing that there will end up being a majority viewpoint that dictates what is important and what it means. In terms of *The Rokeby Venus*, that ends up being the understanding and treatment of Venus as the ideal of female beauty.

With the painting as sign, Venus as object, and the ideal female beauty as an accepted interpretant, it is unsurprising that Mary Richardson responded to the sign violently. For Richardson, I’d imagine that her interpretant was not the Venus as the ideal of female beauty, rather it would be the objectification of the physical female form, the fetishization of art object, and the false representation of the ideal female beauty. Her unique interpretant went against the meaning most often attributed to the painting. When faced with such strong opposition, Richardson’s response was violent as she felt the need to break that majority sign system so that others could see and understand her interpretant, her signified, her sign system. Her slashes enabled other viewers to interpret the painting the way she did. Her slashes became a sign within the semiotic cycle.

Richardson’s actions can be seen as semioclastic, meaning that they targeted and attacked the sign (and semiotic cycle) present in *The Rokeby Venus*. Semioclastism, through this understanding and definition, provides the most clarity to the violent event. I was not completely

satisfied with the categorization of the event as iconoclasm or vandalism as I do not believe it can be concretely labeled as either and sought a new and different way to understand Richardson's actions. Through the lens of semioclasm, we can recognize and acknowledge Richardson's motivations while still understanding that her attack was on something more than just oil on canvas without unnecessarily tying it to all of the connotations associated with the terms iconoclasm and vandalism.

So where are those slashes now? If I went to the National Gallery in London today, I'd be hard pressed to find evidence of Mary Richardson's assault. I wouldn't be allowed to step close enough to the canvas to see the minute remnants of the slashes left after intense restoration efforts (and I only know that those remnants exist because the zoom feature on the National Gallery website allows for extreme magnification).⁶⁴ This is part of a systemic erasure of violence against works of art, especially those in museums. Freedberg touches on this practice:

The restorers work magic in returning the picture to its former beauty and therefore to its former value, or something like its former value. The museum conservators hide the details from posterity or refuse to talk about them – because they do not wish to put ideas in other peoples' heads. They claim that the actions of deranged people are of no interest to normal people like ourselves.⁶⁵

Incidents like this are reported in the newspaper (which is part of the reason why museums are targeted, simply because gaining attention is a motive) but after that the legacy of the event is mainly left up to the museum which almost always chooses to restore to the best of their abilities. By doing so, they are trying to erase the event from history: if there is no physical evidence of the event then the narrative is more likely to fade over time. Beyond the restoration of the physical art object, they are trying to restore the accepted sign system in order to return to a time before Richardson slashed the painting and created an alternative one. And the truth is that they cannot go back in time to before the violent event, and in my opinion, they are wasting their time

trying to restore the past.

The feat of restoring the sign system is more challenging than the physical restoration. The best restorers and conservators can make a work of art look near-perfect, but they cannot change what is in the mind of a viewer. Memory is a strong tool, as is response, and no matter how hard museums try to control it there will always be people who remember and react in ways the institution wishes they didn't. Restoring thought processes and interpretative responses is almost always going to be a goal of restoration but by doing so they are silencing a political protest and calling a woman crazy for fighting for equality. I understand that this was in 1914 and for many the thought of equality for women was radical (some could argue that this hasn't changed much with the fight for equality still very present and relevant in today's society); however, I find it hard to condemn Mary Richardson for her actions. As an art historian and art lover, this is hard for me to admit. I never want to advocate for violent attacks on works of art and I want to be clear that I am not advocating for it now. However, I do support Richardson's protest and cause which makes this a complicated issue.

Instead of focusing on the event, in the future I want to shift focus to what happens after the event. Erasure is only going to reiterate antiquated (and often problematic) narratives. Richardson's attack altered the narrative and while some people can't or don't see it anymore, (or never saw it at all), I do see it. For me, *The Rokeby Venus* is not a sign for Venus as the ideal of female beauty; rather, through Richardson's slashes, it is a sign for female power and equality. But that is because I know the slashes are still there somewhere but are just very well hidden. Imagine the potential changes to the sign system of the painting if every single visitor to the National Gallery was aware of the slashes too.

Endnotes

- ¹ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “iconoclast (n.),” accessed October 24, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/iconoclast>.
- ² Merriam-Webster, s.v. “iconoclast (n.).”
- ³ A.H. Merrills, “The Origins of ‘Vandalism,’” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16, no. 2 (June 2009): 155-56.
- ⁴ Merrills, “The Origins,” 156.
- ⁵ Merrills, “The Origins,” 157.
- ⁶ Thomas D. Bazley, *Crimes of the Art World* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 142.
- ⁷ Bazley, *Crimes*, 145, 149-51.
- ⁸ Christopher Cordess and Maja Turcan, “Art Vandalism,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 95.
- ⁹ Cordess and Turcan, “Art Vandalism,” 95.
- ¹⁰ Cordess and Turcan, “Art Vandalism,” 95.
- ¹¹ List in Cordess and Turcan, “Art Vandalism,” 101-2 and chart in Bazley, *Crimes*, 144-45; chart in Bazley features selected items from the list provided by Cordess and Turcan.
- ¹² Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 1997), 18.
- ¹³ Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 18.
- ¹⁴ Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 18.
- ¹⁵ Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 96.
- ¹⁶ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 390.
- ¹⁷ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 390.
- ¹⁸ Jas Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium,” *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (September 2012): 370.
- ¹⁹ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 407.
- ²⁰ “Suffragette Outrage. Rokeby Venus Slashed with a Chopper. Sequel to Mrs. Pankhurst’s Rearrest,” *The Manchester Guardian*, March 11, 1914.
- ²¹ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 410.
- ²² Lena Mohamed, “Suffragettes: The Political Value of Iconoclastic Acts,” in *Art Under Attack: Histories of British Iconoclasm*, ed. Tabitha Barber and Stacy Boldrick (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 124.
- ²³ Mohamed, “Suffragettes,” 124.
- ²⁴ Mohamed, “Suffragettes,” 124.
- ²⁵ Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse,” 369-370.
- ²⁶ Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse,” 369.
- ²⁷ Elsner, “Iconoclasm as Discourse,” 370.
- ²⁸ Finbarr Barry Flood, “Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum,” *The Art Bulletin* 84, no.4 (December 2002): 652.
- ²⁹ Flood, “Between Cult and Culture,” 652.
- ³⁰ Flood, “Between Cult and Culture,” 652.
- ³¹ Flood, “Between Cult and Culture,” 654.
- ³² Flood, “Between Cult and Culture,” 653.

- ³³ Flood, "Between Cult and Culture," 653.
- ³⁴ Flood, "Between Cult and Culture," 654.
- ³⁵ Daniel Cottom, "The Injustice of Velàzquez," in *Unhuman Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 74.
- ³⁶ Cottom, "Injustice," 74.
- ³⁷ Cottom, "Injustice," 75.
- ³⁸ Cottom, "Injustice," 74.
- ³⁹ Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012); I found the term "semiocasm" used extensively in this book, but they reference Roland Barthes as the originator of it and I could not find that exact reference. The only citation they provide is the year and the page number.
- ⁴⁰ Alex Potts, "Sign," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 22.
- ⁴¹ Potts, "Sign," 21-2.
- ⁴² Potts, "Sign," 22.
- ⁴³ Potts, "Sign," 22.
- ⁴⁴ Potts, "Sign," 22.
- ⁴⁵ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 141, 239.
- ⁴⁶ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 142.
- ⁴⁷ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 142.
- ⁴⁸ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 239.
- ⁴⁹ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 239.
- ⁵⁰ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 239-40.
- ⁵¹ Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, 239.
- ⁵² Gamboni, *Destruction of Art*, 97.
- ⁵³ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 1.
- ⁵⁴ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 415.
- ⁵⁵ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 414.
- ⁵⁶ Paul Barolsky, "Looking at Venus: A Brief History of Erotic Art," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 105.
- ⁵⁷ Marco Bertamini, Richard Latto, and Alice Spooner, "The Venus effect: people's understanding of mirror reflections in paintings," *Perception* 32 (2003): 593.
- ⁵⁸ Bertamini, Latto, and Spooner, "The Venus effect," 593.
- ⁵⁹ Bertamini, Latto, and Spooner, "The Venus effect," 593.
- ⁶⁰ Bertamini, Latto, and Spooner, "The Venus effect," 593.
- ⁶¹ Potts, "Sign," 23.
- ⁶² Potts, "Sign," 22.
- ⁶³ Potts, "Sign," 23.
- ⁶⁴ "The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)," The National Gallery, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-the-toilet-of-venus-the-rokeby-venus>.
- ⁶⁵ Freedberg, *Power of Images*, 423.

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