



Why are Our Pictures Puzzles?: On the Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity

James Elkins

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With bracing clarity, James Elkins explores why images are taken to be more intricate and hard to describe in the twentieth century than they had been in any previous century. *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?* uses three models to understand the kinds of complex meaning that pictures are thought to possess: the affinity between the meanings of paintings and jigsaw-puzzles; the contemporary interest in ambiguity and 'levels of meaning'; and the penchant many have to interpret pictures by finding images hidden within them. Elkins explores a wide variety of examples, from the figures hidden in Renaissance paintings to Salvador Dali's paranoiac meditations on Millet's *Angelus*, from Persian miniature paintings to jigsaw-puzzles. He also examines some of the most vexed works in history, including Watteau's "meaningless" paintings, Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, and Leonardo's *Last Supper*.

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