IT IS A TRIBUTE to the multivalent character of images that a single work of art can be read in different ways and that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. This, in turn, is another explanation of the power that imagery can exert over us. Such readings are influenced by the viewer's notion of context, which is related to interpretative preference. Just as beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, so one's view of artistic significance can vary according to a theoretical bias. Depending on one's approach to the subject of creativity, one can read works from the point of view of their social, political, gender, economic, intellectual, or aesthetic context.

The different ways of approaching art are known as the methodologies of art-historical analysis, and they generally include formalism, iconography, Marxism, feminism, semiotics, biography and autobiography, and psychoanalysis. In this chapter, a still-life painting, dated March 1888, of wooden clogs (fig. 7.1) by van Gogh—along with a few other images of shoes—is considered from different methodological viewpoints.

FORMALISM
In Chapter 3, we discussed works of art in formal terms, according to the elements of the artist's visual language. The formalist approach considers images from the point of view of line, shape, color, and so forth, and of the aesthetic effect of their arrangement. Applying this method to van Gogh's
painting of a pair of clogs, we notice that the surface on which the shoes rest tilts upward, forming a prominent diagonal plane. The surface is a rich yellow-orange, and the background is a light yellow-green. The shoes themselves are depicted in varying tones of gray and cast shadows ranging from gray to black to green. The unifying color is yellow, a component of green and orange. Blacks, whites, and grays, which are not part of the spectrum (see Chapter 3), accentuate the areas of color by contrast.

Each shoe is roughly oval, and the pair is enclosed by a surface in the shape of an irregular pentagon. The light green background is triangular and echoes the tilt of the shoes. The strong outline around the sections of the shoes and along the edge of the surface on which they rest provides a contained framework for exuberant color. What is particularly characteristic of van Gogh’s visual language in this painting is the use of individual, intensely chromatic, thick, prominent brushstrokes animating the painted surface of the canvas. The forceful brushstrokes and the sense of order and control in their structure convey the artist’s determined commitment to his work. One might also say that the force of van Gogh’s line is consistent with the notion of hard peasant labor implied by the clogs. Likewise, his bright color can be associated with the effects of outdoor light, which interested the nineteenth-century Post-Impressionists.

**ICONOGRAPHY**

The power of an image resides in its ability to communicate in an aesthetic as well as a meaningful way. If the image is an effective one—and van Gogh’s images are effective—form and meaning reinforce each other. Iconography refers to the meaning of content and subject matter; as such, it is a method more often used in reading figurative than nonfigurative works. The traditional iconographic reader assumes that there is a text, generally a written text, on which an image is based. In the case of van Gogh’s paintings of shoes, of which he made several, there is no known written text other than what van Gogh himself said about the subject. And what he said would be read according to a biographical/autobiographical approach, which is discussed below.

One could, however, remove van Gogh’s shoes from the personal context to the broader thematic context of what shoes have meant in cultural and artistic history. In other words, one might engage in an iconographic study of shoes. This would be a lengthy task since shoes are imbued with multiple meanings and there are enormous numbers of shoe images throughout the world. So in what follows, we engage in a mini-discussion of shoe iconography.

**An Iconographic Excursion into Shoes and Feet**

We know that Muslims remove their shoes when they enter a mosque. The antiquity of the notion that shoes must be removed when one stands on holy ground is clear from the predynastic Egyptian **Palette of Narmer** (fig. 7.2), which dates to around 3100 B.C. This was a ritual object found in a temple but is of a type used by Egyptian women to hold cosmetics. Carved in low, flat relief, the pharaoh Narmer (also known as Menes), who united Upper and Lower Egypt, is shown protected by the gods as he sub-
dues his enemies. Standing behind him is the small figure of his servant, who holds his sandals. Narmer himself is barefoot, indicating that he is in a sacred space. The vulture god, Horus, protects the head of the king, and two Hathor heads (the horned cows) at the top of the palette guard the sign of the palace and the name of the king.

Shoes are related to feet, which in most cultures are endowed with symbolic meaning. In Christianity, feet and shoes can be associated with pilgrimage, a religious journey undertaken on foot. In Buddhist art, a pair of footprints refers to the first steps of the baby Buddha, related to an earlier belief in a god-king who encompassed the entire world in a few steps. In nineteenth-century European painting, reflecting various cultural constructions of childhood, the subject of a child’s “first steps” became a popular iconographic theme (one example of which was painted by van Gogh).

Traditional Chinese culture considered women with large feet unattractive—hence the custom of foot-binding. Dainty feet are also considered an asset for Western women, reflected in the irony of the old song “My Darling Clementine,” about a lost love whose shoes were “number nine.” The erotic associations of shoes and feet, which are at the root of such preferences, have been alluded to by many artists. For example, a Hellenistic statue, the so-called Slipper-Slapper (fig. 7.3) of around 100 B.C., shows Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty, warding off the unwanted advances of a lusty satyr (part goat and part man) with her sandal. The work was found on the island of Delos in a private context—a house where merchants regularly gathered—and has been interpreted in various ways. Some scholars believe that Aphrodite is protecting her virtue, others that she is using the sandal for erotic foreplay. The small figure of Cupid (Eros, in Greek) has been variously read as assisting his mother in her resistance, as encouraging the satyr’s advances, and, purely formally, as a link between the two larger figures. So the question remains, is the slipper a weapon or an erotic enticement? In either case, the iconography is sexual, and the shoe plays a prominent role in its sexuality.

To the degree that Aphrodite’s sandal is a weapon used to repel an attack, it has phallic quality, and to the degree that

it is an enticement, it is a vaginal symbol and has a receptive, seductive quality. This ambivalence is generally characteristic of the different meanings assigned to shoes. In Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s (1732–1806) *The Swing* (fig. 7.4), painted in the eighteenth-century Rococo style, the shoe is depicted as an erotic enticement in a garden of illicit romance. A pink shoe has
diagonal plane draws the viewer’s gaze into the picture space and directs it toward the woman. Another shoe points to the opium pipe.

The underlying text of Titian’s Rape of Lucretia (fig. 7.6) is derived from Roman tradition. Lucretia was the wife of Collatinus, who described her virtues and incited the passion of Tarquin, son of the Etruscan king. Tarquin raped Lucretia, who killed herself rather than live in dishonor. In Titian’s picture, Tarquin brandishes a knife as he threatens Lucretia; a servant

been casually kicked into the air by the woman on the swing, the mistress of Baron de Saint-Julien, who commissioned the picture. The old man pushing the swing is a cleric, and the youth gazing under the dress of the woman is her young suitor. Three stone Cupids are present, one placing his finger to his lips and two clinging to a dolphin. As in the Slipper-Slapper, the Cupids signify romance.

In Eugène Delacroix’s (1798–1863) Women of Algiers (fig. 7.5) of 1834, the setting is a North African apartment decorated with Moorish patterns. Three seductive women, one of whom is smoking opium, seem to be awaiting male company, while a black African turns in a dance-like motion. The reclining figure at the left occupies a pose intended to be enticing—an invitation issued to a male visitor. Reinforcing the invitation is the empty shoe with a deep red interior that is placed at the edge of the carpet. Its
looks on from behind the curtain. In contrast to the overpowering violence of the attack, Lucretia’s empty shoes stand quietly at the lower right corner of the picture. Their significance is confirmed by the fact that one bears Titian’s signature, which is the same rich red as Tarquin’s costume. The predominance of reds, not only here, but also in The Swing and The Women of Algiers, has a sexual meaning and thus merges color with iconography.

Another cultural aspect of the shoe is its relationship to male power. In parts of Africa, shoes were a royal prerogative. In Dahomey, the king’s sandals were made from the skins of leopards and lions, whose dangerous power was transferred to the king when he wore them. Among the Asante of Ghana, the king’s elaborate sandals were decorated with gold; his feet were not allowed to touch the ground lest they pollute it. His subjects, on the other hand, went barefoot.

In the case of the seventeenth-century French king Louis XIV, shoes served another purpose. They elevated him, literally and figuratively. For a king of France who had declared himself the personification of the state (“L’état, c’est moi!”), it would not have been seemly to be short—which he was. So, as is evident in Hyacinthe Rigaud’s (1659–1743) portrait of the king (fig. 7.7), Louis designed platform shoes with thick red heels and a red strap, which he wore on state occasions. He also donned them when he posed for his portrait, in this case wearing white silk stockings and displaying his legs as well as his shoes. The artist has carefully arranged the voluminous ermine and velvet robe so that it flows around, indeed frames, the king’s elegant legs. Echoing the red of the shoes is the red curtain that has been pulled aside to reveal the king in all his splendor.

Shoes, as we have seen, can have both male and female significance and they embody various meanings attached to gender and rank in different societies. The combination of a shoe and a foot has an erotic meaning, evident in foot fetishism, that is reflected in the story of Cinderella. When Prince Charming finds Cinderella’s glass slipper, he decides to marry its owner. That is, he recognizes it as a metonymy (part for the whole) and, as such, it stood for his perfect mate. Cinderella’s sisters had feet that were too big—that is, not sufficiently feminine. So when Cinderella finally tries on the slipper and “the shoe fits,” she is symbolically prepared for her wedding night with the prince.

MARXISM

The Marxist approach to works of art considers them in the light of economic factors affecting their production and iconography. Marxist art historians follow Karl Marx’s view that society is divided into a working class (the proletariat) and a ruling class (the bourgeoisie). In the case of van Gogh’s Pair of Wooden Clogs, we might note that they are peasant shoes and, therefore, tied to the proletariat. Van Gogh, in fact, painted many pictures of working-class figures and associated clogs with them. (So did the eighteenth-century English author Oliver Goldsmith, who wrote in Distresses of a Common Soldier, “I hate the French because they are all slaves, and they wear wooden shoes.”) Van Gogh was himself financially dependent his entire life, often lacking the money to buy paint and canvas. As a result, he was unable to pay for models, and shoes don’t charge for posing.

If we consider the other “shoe” pictures in this chapter from a Marxist point of view, it is clear that economic factors can be brought to bear on them. Tarquin was the king’s son and, therefore, of higher social status than Lucretia. Both Rigaud’s Louis XIV and Titian’s Rape were commissioned by kings, the latter by Philip II of Spain. Fragonard’s The Swing was commissioned by a French baron, and the Palette of Narmer shows the might of the Egyptian pharaoh. In each case, economic power lies with a royal or aristocratic patron. But van Gogh had no patrons; no one bought his work during his lifetime, and his resulting poverty exemplifies the economic hardships suffered by nineteenth-century artists lacking financial resources.

FEMINISM

Feminist readings of art share with Marxism an interest in social and economic factors, particularly the way in which such factors relate to women
as both subjects and viewers of art. Van Gogh's clogs could belong to a man or a woman, which would be less true of upper-class shoes. Gender, in this case, is thus related to class, which merges a feminist reading of *A Pair of Wooden Clogs* with a Marxist one. One might argue that in van Gogh's painting, class takes precedence over gender.

Van Gogh's shoes do not appear to have erotic meaning unless one reads them as inviting because they are open to the viewer's gaze. But this seems far-fetched. Not so, however, with the other shoe images illustrated here. Feminist readings of those works might focus on the notion of the male gaze and of the woman as its passive object. In *The Sower*, the woman is actively enjoying herself, but she is the man's "object" from four different viewpoints of Fragonard (the painter), of Baron de Saint-Julien (who wanted the picture for his private pleasure), of the old cleric (pushing the swing), and of the suitor (looking up her dress). Her power, on the other hand, resides in her seductiveness, which is displaced onto her shoe and thus is not as permanent as the man's power. For having been kicked into the air, the shoe must fall. And in so doing, it becomes a metaphor for the proverbial "fallen woman."

Lucretia, in contrast to Fragonard's "swinger," preferred death to "falling" and thus killed herself but remained morally upright. Titian's Lucretia is shown as the victim in several ways: she is nude; she is falling helplessly before an overpowering force; she is unarmed (Tarquin wields a knife); and she is being pushed backward, prefiguring her "fall." In the *Women of Algiers*, the three seated women are shown as passive. In the absence of men, they have nothing to do but wait, pacifying themselves—and making themselves passive—with opium. The space of the room and the women are in one respect identified with each other: both, like the red shoe, are receptacles.

Where, one might ask, are the women in the two images of kings discussed above? Clearly, they are marked absent, except in mythological or allegorical form. In the *Palette of Narmer*, the dominant female image is the pair of frontal Hathor heads flanking the sign of the king's name and palace. Hathor is a cow goddess and, therefore, female, but much of her power comes from her male attributes—the horns. The sphinx may be female, but this is not explicit; and even if it were, it would not be a real female but an imaginary one whose power is largely derived from her divine component.

In Rigaud's *Louis XIV*, there is no queen, but a seated woman is shown in relief on the base of the large column behind the king. Like the females in Narmer's palette, she is not a real woman, but an allegory—in this case, of France. As such, she is removed in time and space from Louis' present, which in this painting is all about himself—and his shoes.

**SEMIOTICS**

First introduced as a system of structural linguistics, semiotic readings have been applied to works of art. The basic unit of semiotics is the sign, which is composed of a signifier and a signified. The former is the material substance of the sign, either the letters comprising a word or the medium of an image. The latter is the mental concept attached to the signifier. So in the word shoe, the letters s-h-o-e comprise the signifier and our mental image of a shoe is the signified. According to structural linguistics, the connection between signifier and signified is purely arbitrary.

In semiotics applied to the visual arts, there has been some softening of the insistence on arbitrariness. One would have to agree that van Gogh's painted clogs resemble our mental image, or idea, of clogs more closely than the letters c-l-o-g-s. Nevertheless, it is also true that the components of van Gogh's picture—namely, the individual brushstrokes—bear no resemblance to clogs. It is rather their arrangement that creates an illusion of clogs.

In Structuralist analysis, which is a category of semiotics, attempts are made to demonstrate cultural, literary, or artistic patterns (or structures). This approach has been applied to myths, patterns, advertisements, menus, fashion, and other cultural expressions. Thus, van Gogh's shoes could be read semiotically as images intended to impart a message—for example, of poverty, of hard work, of durability, and so forth. The shoes depicted in the *Sliper-Slapper, The Swing, The Rape of Lucretia, and the Women of Algiers*, on the other hand, are erotic signs. Louis XIV's shoes are signs of his vanity—and also of his ingenuity.

Some semiologists read artistic signs in terms of developing genres and styles. In that case, *A Pair of Wooden Clogs* could signify nineteenth-century developments in still life. The tilting surface on which they rest might be a sign of the progressive flattening of space in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Likewise, the prominence of the brushstrokes signifies an artistic trend in which the artist's medium and process were becoming subjects of art and of art criticism. In Structuralism, therefore, meaning is conferred not so much by the artist (or author) as by the cultural system enclosing the work.

In contrast to the closed systems of Structuralism, Post-Structuralism—especially as practiced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida—becomes a deconstructive system—that is, it opens up structures. Derrida's method of
Deconstruction asks questions and pursues associative links among words, ideas, and images. Derrida, addressing another painting by van Gogh of leather shoes with laces (fig. 7.8), gets into a scholarly quarrel with the American art historian Meyer Schapiro and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Without going into the extensive political ramifications of the argument, suffice it to say that much of the discussion revolved around the nature of the shoes. Were they city shoes or peasant shoes? And were they, in fact, a pair of shoes, as both Schapiro and Heidegger had asserted? Van Gogh didn’t say, so he entitled the picture Two Shoes.

**BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

The biographical method of reading art, as opposed to semiotics, insists that the author/artist confer meaning on their works. Among the earliest examples of this method in Western art writing is Pliny’s *Natural History*, discussed in Chapter 5 in connection with Rembrandt’s *Self-Portrait As Zeuxis*. Pliny recorded many anecdotes about ancient Greek artists, such as Zeuxis, that revealed aspects of their personalities. The systematic and comprehensive biographies of artists in Vasari’s *Lives* were written to preserve the lives, as well as the works, of Italian Renaissance artists. Earlier, in fifteenth-century Italy, artists had begun writing the first-known Western autobiographies of artists, which also became a genre of art writing.

When works of art are interpreted from a biographical viewpoint, their imagery and technique are read in light of the artist’s life. Delacroix, for example, traveled to North Africa, where the rich Moorish colors, Arab horsemen, and perfumed harems captured his imagination. Rigaud was Louis XIV’s portrait painter and thus was bound by his patron’s wishes. In that case, the picture reveals more of Louis’ personality than that of the artist. In the case of Narmer’s palette and the *Slipper-Slapper*, nothing is known of the artists, and early Egyptian art was so tightly controlled by royal convention that it is usually impossible to elicit the personality of either an artist or a patron.

A great deal is known about van Gogh’s life not only because he is a fairly recent artist, but also because he regularly wrote letters to his brother Theo, describing his life and art. Those letters, like the pictures themselves, reflect van Gogh’s interest in, and identification with, peasants and workers. In one letter, paraphrasing Millet, who also painted peasants, van Gogh wrote: “I’ll get by alright since I am wearing clogs.” This identification on van Gogh’s part is an example of a myth-making convention of artists’ biographies and autobiographies exemplified by Vasari. In his *Lives*, he described the humble origins of many Renaissance artists, their subsequent discovery by a wealthy or noble patron, and their consequent rise to fame.

According to Vasari, Giotto was a shepherd boy drawing a sheep on a rock when Cimabue happened by. The older artist, at that time the most famous living Byzantine painter in Italy, immediately recognized Giotto’s genius. Cimabue then obtained the permission of Giotto’s father to take on the boy as an apprentice. Similarly, in Vasari’s life of Castagno, the artist is described as a shepherd who scratches out images on rocks and walls in the countryside. A member of the powerful Medici family hears of Castagno and searches him out. He is duly impressed and brings Castagno to Florence for formal training as a painter. Van Gogh did not become famous during his lifetime and was never recognized or encouraged by any patron, let alone a wealthy one. Nevertheless, when he called himself a “peasant painter,” having the double meaning of being a peasant himself and of painting peasants, he was engaging in a tradition of artistic myth-making.

Van Gogh was no peasant. His father was a minister, and he himself studied for the ministry. He was fluent in English, French, and German as well as Dutch; he read widely, was highly literate, and taught school in England. He also worked for a time at branches of his uncle’s art dealership in The Hague, Belgium, and Paris. In addition, van Gogh was a serious student of the history of art; he studied the old masters in the Louvre and Japanese woodblock artists, and made copies of their work. And although he had painted many pictures of peasants in his native Holland, he did not paint shoes until he moved to France. In order to pursue a biogra-
phical reading of van Gogh’s shoes further, we turn to the psychoanalytic method of analysis.

**PSYCHOANALYSIS**

Psychoanalysis takes the methods discussed so far to a deeper, unconscious level of interpretation. The first application of psychoanalysis to an artist was published by Freud in 1910. It dealt with the life and work of Leonardo da Vinci, proposed a reading of the Mona Lisa based on a childhood memory recorded by the artist, and has been the subject of methodological disputes ever since. There are several schools of psychoanalysis whose adherents have written on art, and psychoanalytic theory has infiltrated modern art-historical thinking.

More psychological studies have been published about van Gogh than about any other artist. His paintings of shoes have been read as reflecting his wish for twinship with Theo, who was an art dealer; it was not until van Gogh moved into Theo’s apartment in Paris that he painted his first still life of shoes. The subject of shoes preoccupied van Gogh over the course of his short life, and it surfaced again when he lived briefly with the French artist Paul Gauguin in Arles. On that occasion, as with his brother, van Gogh was attempting to bond by forming a kind of twinship with another man. At the same time, however, van Gogh also struggled to have a normal relationship with a woman—to make a pair. This he never achieved, for his choices were consistently unsuitable, either because his affections were unrequited or because he insisted on trying to reform prostitutes. A psychoanalytic would wonder about the deeper meanings of van Gogh’s personal choices, and here one is assisted by biographical information.

Van Gogh’s birth occurred exactly one year after the birth of his stillborn brother, also named Vincent. The second Vincent’s mother remained depressed by the death of the first Vincent and was emotionally remote. From his window, van Gogh could see the grave of his dead brother, which almost certainly evoked a sense of guilt for having survived. His younger brother, Theo, was born not until four years later, by which time Vincent had been traumatized by a depressive, alcoholic mother and a stern father who was a Dutch Reformed pastor. Van Gogh’s search for twinship with another man combined his wish to revive the dead Vincent, to continue the close childhood friendship he had had with Theo, and to bond with a loving and supportive father. After Theo married and began a family of his own, it was difficult for him to give Vincent the attention Vincent craved, although Theo continued to support his brother financially and emotionally throughout their lives.

Van Gogh’s shoes embody two themes in his lifelong efforts to make relationships. On the one hand, a pair of shoes is a double; as such, it makes visible the wish for another self, in the form of a dead brother, a living brother, a fellow artist, or a father with whom to identify. On the other hand, insofar as shoes form a pair, they reflect the artist’s repeated efforts to join with a woman.

Other shoes illustrated in this chapter also lend themselves to psychoanalytic analysis. Titian’s *Rape of Lucretia* is the most violent of the works that he produced for Philip II of Spain. It can be read as a child’s fantasy of a sadomasochistic primal scene, the act of procreation performed by adults. Signifying the child’s presence is the servant peering around the curtain, unseen by the protagonists but visible to the viewer. The viewer, like the servant, is in the position of the curious child, riveted by a violent sexual attack.

It would appear from the women Titian painted that he admired them greatly, although virtually nothing is known of his relations with women. In this painting, his identification with Tarquin’s passion is suggested by the red costume matching the red signature in the shoe. Titian has sublimated his aggression—not only in the act of painting, but also in the iconography of the painting. If we read Lucetta’s shoe as standing for her (it stands in the corner of the picture), then the paintbrush with which Titian signed the shoe may stand for Tarquin’s knife, which in turn stands for his aggressive phallicus. The other shoe lies on a horizontal, parallel to the bed, on which Tarquin pushes Lucetta.

Van Gogh’s shoes illustrated here are empty. They do not form part of a visible narrative, and no one is wearing them. Their very emptiness might reflect the artist’s loneliness and his feelings of absence in relation to other people. But shoes are also connected to people and may signify van Gogh’s wish for connections. Such multivalent readings of van Gogh’s shoes are characteristic of the psychoanalytic approach to imagery. Because there is no time in the unconscious, its expressions, like the elements of a dream, can surface out of temporal sequence. As a result, the psychoanalytic method focuses on thematic material as well as on historical narrative, recognizing that the interplay between them is always dynamic in nature.