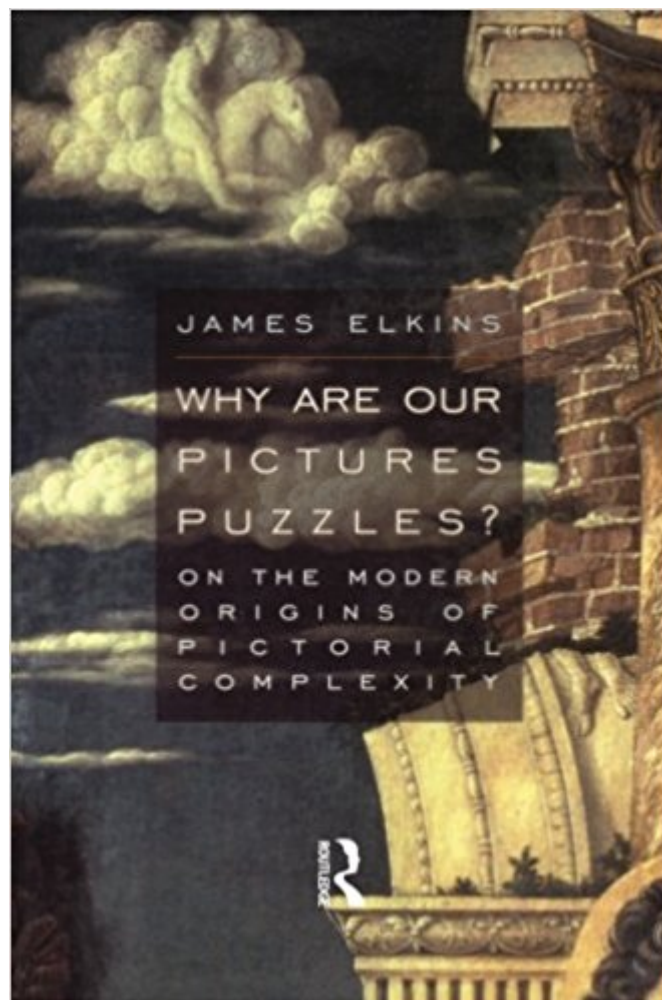




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# Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: On The Modern Origins Of Pictorial Complexity



## Synopsis

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*.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Plato shrewdly noticed that a painting loses its liveliness the moment the viewer confronts its "most majestic silence." In this book, Elkins shows how "dire anxiety in the face of pictures" has induced a crisis in recent art criticism. Specialists, compelled to interpret and reinterpret paintings in search of puzzles, ambiguities and hidden meanings, have generated reams of excessive and esoteric scholarship: "Their theories are the inflammation that results from irritating the wound instead of letting it alone so it can heal." Some of his claims that art historians, who "are attracted by oddities, mistakes [and] idiosyncrasies" seek out, and themselves enact, "thematized self-awareness" have intuitive appeal, holding a mirror up to a culture unaware of its own fascinations. Less convincing is

the insistence that critical energy itself expended on "hypericons" such as the Mona Lisa, School of Athens and the Sistine Ceiling is a symptom of illness, hopelessly engulfed in a bottomless well of bibliographies and indexes. When Elkins turns to praise fellow workers in his field from Leo Steinberg and Michael Fried to Jacques Derrida and Salvador Dali, however, he lends optimism ("An engaged imagination is finally what compels conviction") to an account otherwise bordering on the cynical. Cogent, conversational and lucid, this book provides a useful, nuanced understanding of what ordinary viewers today share with "the discipline [that] thrives on the pleasure of problems well solved." 76 plates. - thrives on the pleasure of problems well solved." 76 plates. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The way writers write about art has changed remarkably over the centuries, observes James Elkins. Why is it, he asks, that classical and Renaissance writers rarely took more than a single page to describe a painting, whereas modern art historians seem to need to write entire books? To answer this conundrum, Elkins, a most astute art historian and a prolific writer, has produced his own 292-page tome. He discusses three kinds of responses that art historians display when faced with "pictorial complexity." The simplest is to see pictures as puzzles for the art historians to "solve." The second assumes pictures to be inherently ambiguous, possessing multiple levels of meaning that cannot easily be reconciled. The third is a wild, uncontrolled response that gives insight into the meaning of pictures through hallucinations. Elkins examines a broad array of paintings, from Renaissance paintings that hide figures to Salvador Dali's paranoiac meditations on Millet's *The Angelus*, and includes detailed accounts of some of the most vexed works in art history, including Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling and da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Veronica Scrol

Thank you!

This is curious book. The main part has some value as a discussion of paintings that have proven difficult to interpret iconographically, including such famous specimens as Botticelli's *Primavera*, Giorgione's *Tempesta*, and Leonardo's *Last Supper*. This would be useful, except that the author holds that such investigations are needlessly complicated. Yet the complexity arises because the problems are knotty, and cannot be waved away with the excuse that earlier generations thought the works less problematic. He does not mention that some Victorian artists deliberately created paintings called Problem Pictures in which viewers were invited to give their own subjective interpretations. Instead, he starts with the bizarre theories of a Scandinavian scholar, who finds all

sorts of "hidden" images in impressionist paintings. These projective absurdities are clearly examples of the Rorschach principle, now discredited as a diagnostic tool. Even though Elkins concedes that the supposed findings of the Scandinavian scholar are extreme and improbable, he somehow wishes to use them as paradigmatic of art history as currently practiced. In his presentation of "hidden images" Elkins seems unaware of the research on pareidolia, research which would answer many of his questions.

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