

# English 201: Images, Idolatry and Iconoclasm: Late Medieval to Early Modern

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# Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, Nimrud (9c BCE)





# Broken and then bulldozed, March 2015



# Temple of Baal, Palmyra (Syria) (32 CE)



# Destroyed by ISIS September 1 2015





# Dair Mar Lia Monastery, Iraq (late 6c CE)



# Destroyed August-September 2014



# Prophet Jonah Mosque, Mosul (14c)





# Destroyed by ISIS in July 2014



Victor Mikhail Arnautoff,  
*Life of Washington*, George Washington High School, San Francisco (1936)



# Section I

Cultural etymology: we've been here before



## 2 Kings 10:25, re 9c BCE

<sup>25</sup> And it came to pass, when the burnt offering was ended, that Jehu commanded his soldiers and captains, saying: Go in, and kill them, let none escape. And the soldiers and captains slew them with the edge of the sword, and cast them out: and they went into the city of the temple of Baal,

<sup>26</sup> And brought the statue out of Baal's temple, and burnt it,

<sup>27</sup> And broke it in pieces. They destroyed also the temple of Baal, and made a jakes in its place unto this day.

# Henry Ainsworth (d. 1622), *An arrow against idolatrie* (1611)

- *Manasses* [2Kings 21] his son, repeated all the former evils, and added more unto them, if ought mought be. For he went back, and built the high places which his father had broke down; and set up altars for Baalim, and made groues, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served them, and built altars to them in the Lords house; & made strange Gods, and caused his sonnes to passe through the fire; and gaue himselfe to witchcraft, and charming, and sorcerie, and used them that had familiar spirits.

# Henry Ainsworth (d. 1622), *An arrow against idolatrie* (1611)

- ‘repeated all the former evils, and added more unto them, if ought mought be’
- ‘a bewitching sin... which as a harlot stealeth away the heart of man’
- ‘written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond graven upon the table of their heart; shewing that the inmost affections are most deeply and continually infected with this vice, and addicted unto it’



# Section 2

# The Kinesis of Iconoclasm: Six Classic Phases

1. unlicensed iconoclasm
2. licensed iconoclasm
3. resurgence of images, both material and mental
4. resurgence of licensed iconoclasm
5. museum culture; aesthetics and the cultivation of taste
6. safe “iconoclasm” within the sacred space of the museum

# Phase 1.1: Unlicensed iconoclasm (Zurich 1524)





# Phase 1.2: Unlicensed iconoclasm (Low Countries 1566)



## Phase 2.1: Licensed iconoclasm

### Iconoclastic Legislation, England 1538-50

- 1538: all visible cult of the saints before their images was forbidden, and all images that are 'abused with pilgrimages or offerings...ye shall, for avoiding that most detestable sin of idolatry, forthwith take down and delay [destroy]'. (*Visitation Articles and Injunctions*, ed. Frere and Kennedy, p. 38)
- 1547: 'in almost every place is contention for images, whether they have been abused or not' so 'all the images remaining in any church or chapel...[shall] be removed and taken away.'  
Thomas Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. John E. Cox, Parker Society (Cambridge University Press, 1846), pp. 509-11.
- 1550 (statute) that parsons having 'anye images of stone tymbre allebaster or earthe graven carved or paynted', shall 'deface and destroye or cause to be defaced and destroyed the same images and everie of them'. *SR*, 3 and 4 Edward VI, c. 10, 4: 110-111

## Phase 2.3: Licensed iconoclasm England 1547 (John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1563))





## Phase 3.1: Resurgence of Images, both material and mental

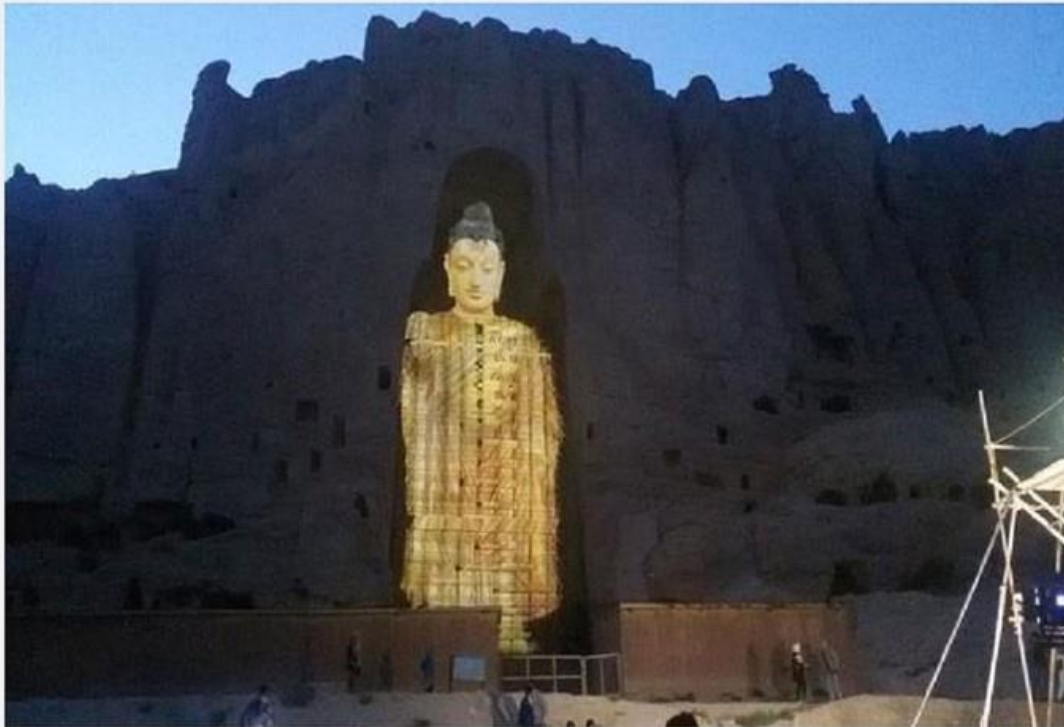
If the idols are removed from the churches but steal into the mind and statues are erected in the heart, that is deformation not reformation; a change of place, not a driving away of the thing, and so much the more dangerous because it is interior and personal.

Lawrence Humphrey, *De religionis Conservatione et Reformatione Vera* (Basel, 1559)

## Phase 3.2: Resurgence of Images, both material and mental

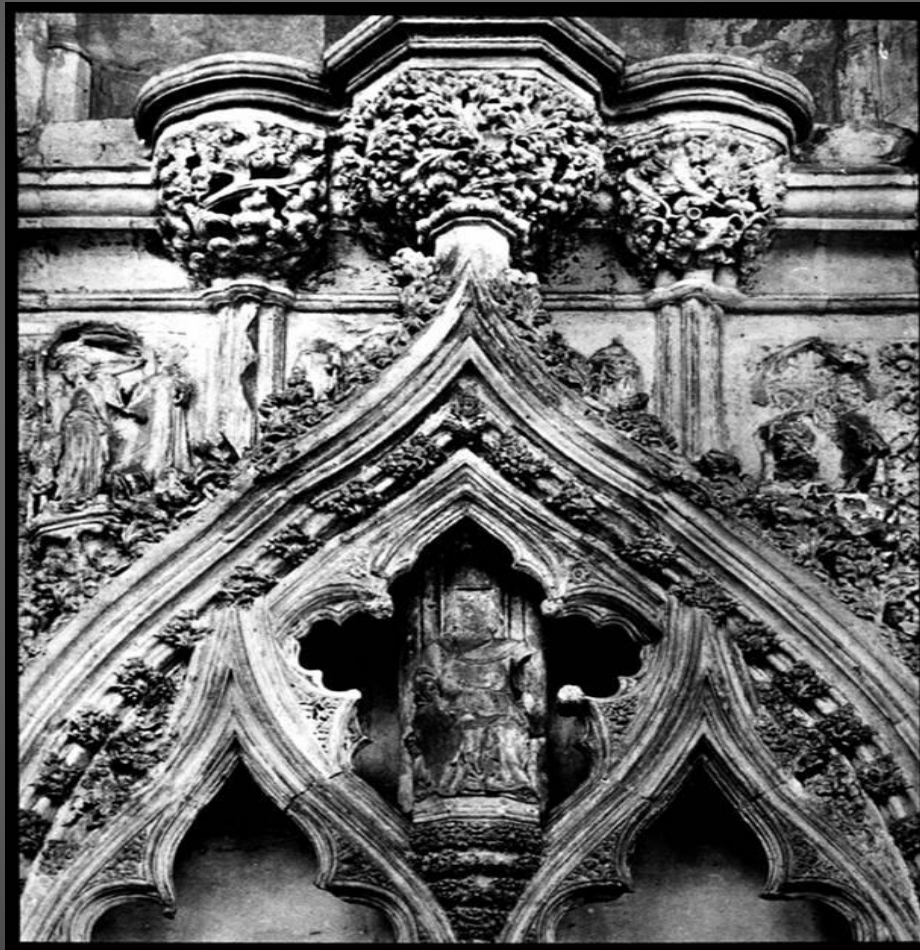


### Phase 3.3: Bamiyan Buddha by Light technology, 2015





# Phase 4.1: Resurgence of Licensed Iconoclasm 1643



## Phase 4.2: Resurgence of Licensed Iconoclasm 1643

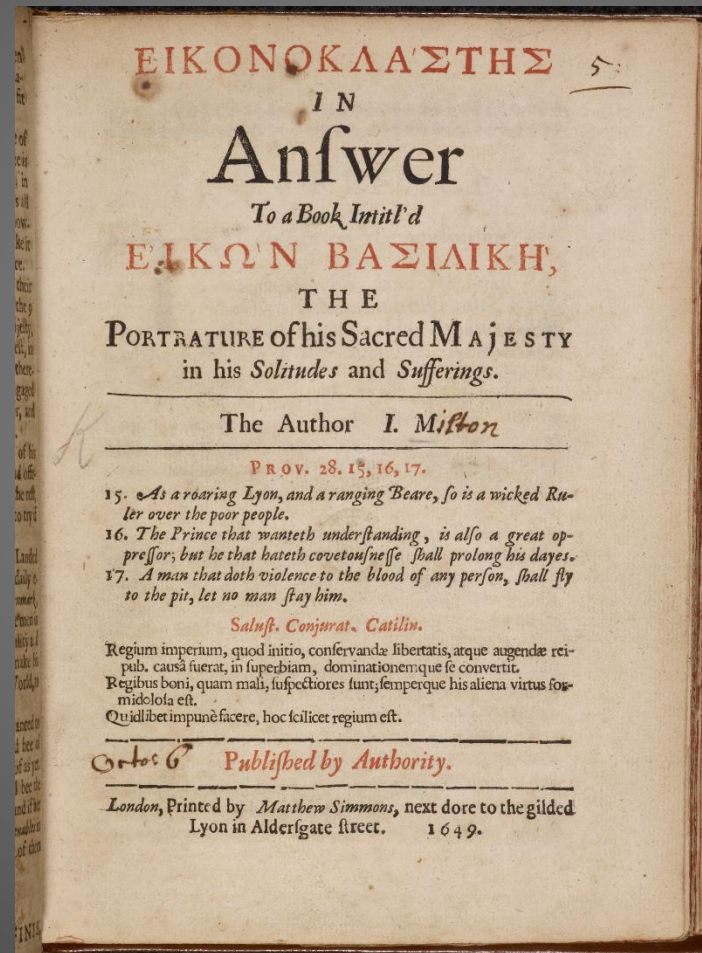
- Lord, what a work was here, what clattering of Glasses, what beating down of Walls, what tearing up of manuscripts, what pulling down of seats, what resting out of irons and Brass from the Windows and Graves, what defacing of Arms, what demolishing of curious Stonework...what Tooting and Piping upon the destroyed Organ Pipes, and what hideous Triumph on the Market-day before all the Country, when in a kind of Sacrilegious and prophane procession, all the Organ Pipes, Vestments... together with the Leaden Cross...were carried to the Fire in the publick Market-Place.”  
(Joseph Hall, *The shaking of the Olive-tree... Together with his Hard Measure* (London, 1660), image 40)

Phase 4.3: William Dowsing, responsible for destruction of c. 90% of religious imagery in East Anglia 1643-44





# Phase 4.4: John Milton, *Eikonoklastes*, 1649



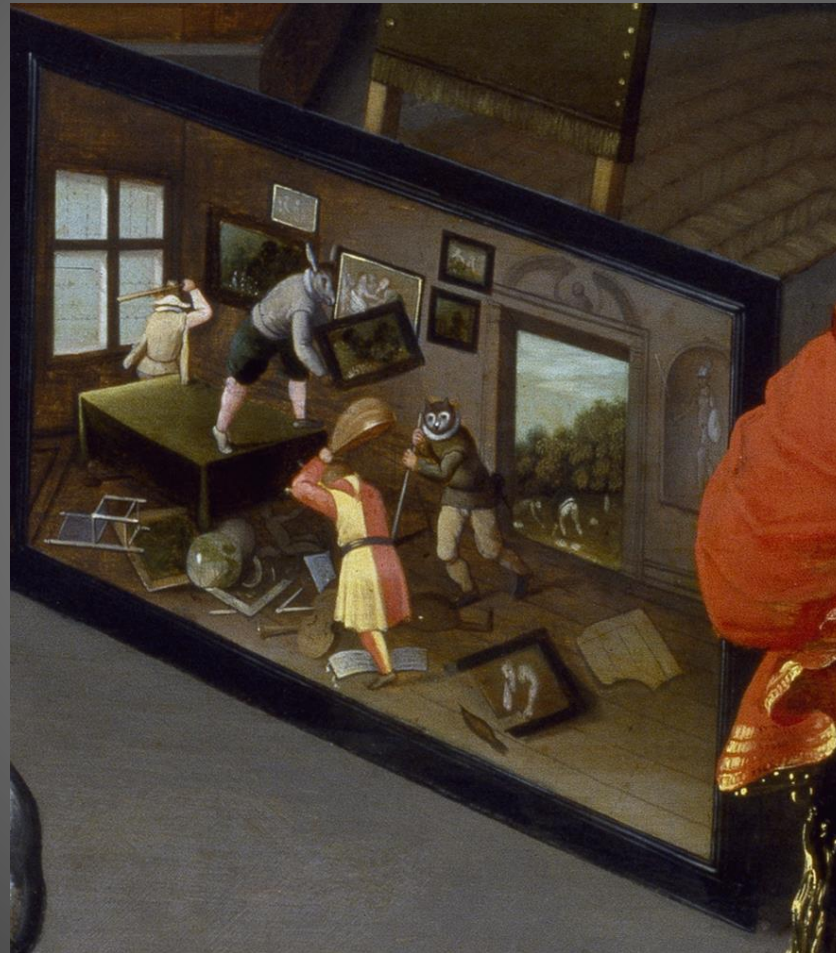
# Phase 5.1: Museum Culture, 1621-23

Hieronimus Francken II and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Archduke and Duchess Albert and Isabella Visiting a Collector's Cabinet* (1621-1623)





# Phase 5.1 Detail





# Phase 5.1 detail



# Phase 5.2: Museum Culture, 1757

(Giovanni Paolo Pannini, *Picture Gallery with Views of Modern Rome*)



Photography © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

# Phase 5.2 detail





Phase 5.3: Pierre Joseph Lafontaine, *Alexander Lenoir*  
*Defends the Royal Tombs at St Denis against Revolutionary*  
*Iconoclasts (1793)*



Phase 6: “Safe” Iconoclasm in the Sacred Temple of the Museum  
Barnett Newman, *Broken Obelisk* (1967), Museum of Modern Art,  
New York



# Phase 2 (licensed iconoclasm) again: Bamiyan





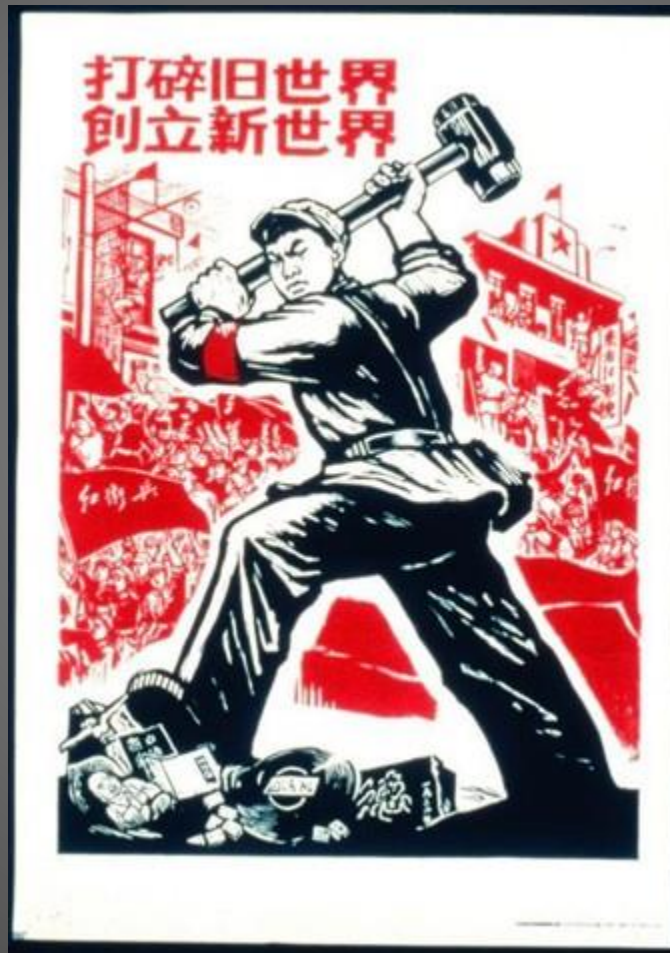
# Phase 2 again: Bamiyan 2001



# Taliban “Medieval”?

‘Medieval Taliban Lashed over Buddha Demolition’: Taliban militia was ‘internationally lashed...as “medieval” vandals of the world’s cultural treasures’. The Indian Foreign Minister condemned the Taliban action as ‘a regression into medieval barbarism’ (AFP, March 2, 2001)

# Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) poster





# Section 3

## Contemporary American Iconoclasm 1

Victor Mikhail Arnautoff,  
*Life of Washington*, George Washington High School, San Francisco (1936)



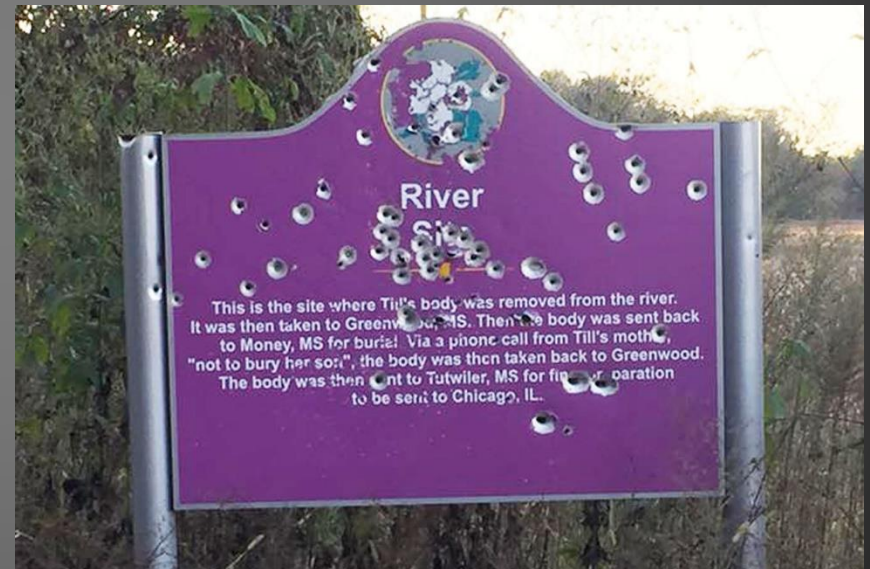
# Contemporary American iconoclasm

## 2

Confederate monument, Nashville, 2019 (erected 1901)



Second Emmet Till Memorial, first erected 2005 (image October 22 2016); now replaced by a fourth monument, after subsequent vandalisms.





Solution 1: Accept, memorialize and transform the iconoclasm through art (Pieter Saenredam, *Interior of St Bavo, Haarlem* (1628))



Solution 2: leave the monument in place, but mark it so as to register the conflicted nature of history (Pieter Saenredam, *Interior of choir, St Bavo, Haarlem* (1638))





Solution 3: Send the offending statue to the museum (Lenin head, detached, from 1970 statue in Leninplatz, Berlin, first buried in 1991, then excavated in 2015 for Spandau Citadel Permanent Museum)





# To break or not?: Some criteria

- might we feel that leaving the offensive monument in place, with added historical framing, will serve the cause of deep reform better than destruction?
- *we* might feel this way or that, but what about others in the present? What about others in the future?
- are we prepared permanently to reshape the past so that the cultural landscape conforms wholly with our present convictions?
- are we prepared to make a distinction between that which is demonstrably offensive and/or criminal, and that which signals historical tragedy?
- are we prepared to think about authorial intention, or is the mere presence of a sign of the old order sufficient warrant to trigger destruction?

Pieter Saenredam, *Interior of St Bavo, Haarlem* (1628)

