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RIVERSIDE

Dictator Kitsch and the Iraq War

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History

by

Steven Michael Hampton

December 2024

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2024

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University of California, Riverside

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Dictator Kitsch and the Iraq War

by

Steven Michael Hampton

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Art History
University of California, Riverside, December 2024
Dr. Patricia Morton, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Jason Weems, Co-Chairperson

In 2002, during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, American and allied soldiers discovered a split-level townhome in Baghdad belonging to Saddam Hussein. Examination of its contents revealed 1970s style décor with prominently displayed fantasy illustrations by American illustrator, Rowena Morrill. In the Western press, objects like those found in the townhouse, including Hussein’s artwork, personal and private spaces, architecture, and dress, were as proxy evidence for the never-discovered weapons of mass destruction that had been a central justification for the war. I study this alignment of personal tastes in terms of political motives as a manifestation of dictator kitsch, a category of kitsch whose origins I trace in the writings of American critic, Clement Greenberg. By revisiting Greenberg’s seminal essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch,” my dissertation looks at the way dictator kitsch, born amidst political tensions of the 1930s, substitutes cultural battles for political engagement. Beginning with the Western press’s judgements of Hussein’s taste as dictator kitsch, I research the ways this variant of kitsch has been

pivotal to the narration of the U.S.-Iraq war and to American political identity generally. My dissertation poses the question: How does kitsch shape our understanding of political aesthetics? More specifically, what does a full accounting of dictator kitsch and taste reveal about American political identity during the invasion of Iraq and other periods of geopolitical discord?

This dissertation is based on research conducted across multiple archives including government repositories, libraries, and online resources. To study instances of dictator kitsch, represented by non-linear and wide-ranging imagery, I have emphasized understanding the histories in which works are labeled kitsch, placing as much weight on the context of their reception as the objects themselves. Through seeing images as “texts,” my method explores how these representations derive their form and meaning from earlier images, as well as the social and historical conditions that have produced them. My dissertation approaches the Iraq War through the lens of American media, focusing on instances of dictator kitsch. Rather than being tied to a specific dictator, I argue that dictator kitsch functions to recognize excesses and distinction through expressions of taste.

Introduction.....	1
Kitsch.....	5
Methodological Questions	13
Chapter 1 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and the Dictator in the 1930s 24	
The History of the Dictator in America	26
The Popular Front and <i>Partisan Review</i>	36
Trotskyism	42
Avant-Garde and Kitsch	46
Kitsch.....	51
Chapter 2 Dictator Kitsch and Saddam Hussein’s Taste.....	57
Embedded Reporting	59
Love Shack Photos.....	68
Historic and Cultural Context	77
Rowena	85
Leda and the Swan.....	91
Chapter 3 Palaces and Private Spaces	104
British Colonial Architecture in Iraq and the Role of Historical Memory	105
The Republican Palace and Western architectural influence.....	111
Architecture under Saddam Hussein.....	116
Saddam’s Palaces.....	123
Interiors – The Grand Dining Room.....	126
Reception of Hussein’s Palaces	129
Mega Yachts and the Villain’s Lair	132
Restaging Saddam’s Palaces.....	135
Bunker.....	139
Chapter 4 Statues, Monuments, and Relics: Dictator Kitsch and the Dictator’s Persona..	143
Portraiture and Stamps.....	145
Persona as Monument: The Arc of Triumph and Saddam Collectibles.....	150
Persona and Props: Saddam’s Souvenirs	158
Firdos Square Statue	164
The Godfather of the Middle East: Saddam’s Wardrobe as Portrait	170

Chapter 5 – George W. Bush and American Political Kitsch	178
History of the Interior	180
The Oval Office Throughout History.....	191
George W. Bush, the Cowboy, and the Oval Office.....	201
Oval Office Artwork	210
“A Charge to Keep”	211
Reception of the Oval Office Artworks	214
The Paintings of George W. Bush	221
Reception of Bush’s Paintings	225
Conclusion	229
Bibliography	234

Table of Figures

Chapter 1 – Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and the Dictator in the 1930s	251
Figure 1.1 – “Studebaker Dictator,” <i>First Series Sedan Showroom Poster</i>, 1928	251
Figure 1.2 - <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i>, May 5, 1928	252
Figure 1.3 – “Long Products”, <i>The Commercial Car Journal</i>, June 20, 1928	253
Figure 1.4 – “Mussolini Speaks,” Columbia, 1933, Lobby Card, 11” x 14	254
Figure 1.5 - <i>Time</i>, July 12, 1926	255
Figure 1.6 - <i>Time</i>, January 30, 1933. Cover illustration by Jerry Farnsworth.	256
Figure 1.7 - <i>The Hitler Nobody Knows</i>, 1932, photo by Heinrich Hoffmann	257
Chapter 2 – Dictator Kitsch, John Moore, and Rowena	258
Figure 2.1 - John Moore, “Soldiers discover Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome,” April, 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017)	258
Figure 2.2 - John Moore, “Capt. Carter’s War,” March 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017)	259
Figure 2.3 - John Moore, “Capt. Carter’s War,” April 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017)	260
Figure 2.4 – John Moore, “Iraq Saddam Safe House Art,” April 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017)	261
Figure 2.5 – John Moore, “Iraq Saddam Safe House Art,” April 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017)	262

Figure 2.6 - John Moore, “Soldiers discover Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome,” April 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017).....	263
Figure 2.7 – John Moore, “U.S. Army 1st Lt. Eric Hooper looks at the painting titled <i>Shadows Out of Hell</i> ,” April 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017).	264
Figure 2.8 – John Moore, “American soldiers take a break in Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome.” April, 2003. <i>Associated Press</i> (accessed March 20, 2017).....	265
Figure 2.9- “The 7th Infantry Regiment attached to the 3rd Infantry Division drink Hitler’s wine on the patio of the Berghof,” <i>Yank Magazine</i> , 1945.	266
Figure 2.10 – “Mussolini Love Nest,” <i>Life</i> , July 1945.....	267
Figure 2.11 – “Mussolini Love Nest,” <i>Life</i> , July 1945.....	268
Figure 2.12 – Bill Gentle, “American soldier contemplates a Christmas tree in the former home of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega,” <i>Corbis</i> , 1989	269
Figure 2.13 – Sergey Ponomarev, <i>Associated Press</i> , 2011	270
Figure 2.14 – <i>Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery</i> , 1997	271
Figure 2.15 - Rowena Morrill, <i>King Dragon</i> , circa 1980, private collection	272
Figure 2.16 - Virgil Finlay, “The Time Machine,” <i>Fantastic Mysteries</i> , August 1950	273
Figure 2.17 - Frank Frazetta, <i>At the Earth’s Core</i> , 18” x 24”, oil on masonite, 1974.....	274
Figure 2.18 - Titian, <i>Danäe</i> , 1544-46, National Museum of Capodimonte	275
Figure 2.19 - Rebecca Morrill, <i>Cover illustration for Shadows Out of Hell</i> , c.1980.	276
Figure 2.20 - Paul Mathias Padua, <i>Leda and the Swan</i> , 1937.....	277

Figure 2.21 - Paris Bordone, <i>Venus and Amor</i> , 1545-1550, Oil on Canvas, National Museum in Warsaw	278
Figure 2.22 – Hubert Lanzinger, <i>The Standard Bearer</i> , 1934-36, oil on wood.....	279
Figure 2.23 – DeAgonstini, “Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar,” Iraq. <i>Getty Images</i> , December 17, 2008.	280
Chapter 3 – Palaces and Private Spaces	281
Figure 3.1 - Jim Gordon, <i>Republican Palace View from the air</i> , Dec. 6, 2007 (Originally posted to Flickr as Republican Palace, Baghdad, Iraq).	281
Figure 3.2 - Sir Edwin Lutyens, “Viceroy’s House in New Delhi,” <i>Getty Images</i> c. 1912-1930	282
Figure 3.3 – J.M. Wilson, <i>Perspective drawing of Proposed Palace for King Faisal</i> , Wilson Mason LLP, 1926.	283
Figure 3.4– J.M. Wilson, <i>Perspective drawing of the Interior of Port Offices</i> , Basra, Wilson Mason LLP, 1930.	284
Figure 3.5 – Frank Lloyd Wright, <i>Baghdad Opera House</i> , 1955-57.	285
Figure 3.6 – Frank Lloyd Wright, <i>Plan for Greater Baghdad</i> , 1955-57.....	286
Figure 3.7 – “Still image from A Palace in Baghdad,” British Movietone, 1958. <i>Associated Press</i>	287
Figure 3.8 – J.M. Wilson, <i>Aerial perspective presentation drawing/original design for the Railway Station Terminus</i> , Baghdad, Wilson Mason LLP, 1947-1951.....	288
Figure 3.9 – Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, <i>Competition entry for Baghdad State Mosque</i> , 1983.	289

Figure 3.10 – Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, <i>Perspective of prayer hall</i> , Competition entry for Baghdad State Mosque, 1983.....	290
Figure 3.11 - Jim Gordon, <i>View of the front of the Iraq Republican Palace prior to the removal of the “Saddam the Warrior” bronze heads from the roof top</i> , Feb 22, 2010. (Originally posted to Flickr)	291
Figure 3.12 - Brian1975, <i>Republican Palace Pool Baghdad</i> , August 2003.....	292
Figure 3.13 - Joe Gattuso, <i>Republican Palace, Green Zone</i> , Baghdad, June 20, 2007. http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2853050# (accessed Feb. 12, 2017).	293
Figure 3.14 - Joe Gattuso, <i>Palace Pool Nice Day</i> , Nov. 29, 2007. http://www.panoramio.com/photo/6211134 (accessed Feb. 12, 2017).	294
Figure 3.15 - Brian1975, <i>View of the Grand Dining Hall inside the Republican Palace</i> , July 14, 2005. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_Palace#/media/File:Republican_palace_dining_room_baghdad_iraq.jpg (accessed Feb. 11, 2017).	295
Figure 3.16 - Don Gomez, “The author (center) sitting in one of Saddam’s thrones,” Baghdad, <i>Vice News</i> , July 15, 2003. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).....	296
Figure 3.17 - Sgt. Igor Paustovski. <i>Umm al-Qura mosque showing the inner, rifle-barrel-shaped group of minarets</i> , Northwestern Baghdad, April 13, 2003 (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).	297
Figure 3.18 – “A Dictator At Sea,” <i>The Daily Mail</i> , March 30, 2013. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2300605/The-incredible-story-Saddam-Husseins-25million-private-yacht-blown-F-14-Tomcat-pilots.html (accessed Nov. 11, 2017).....	298

Figure 3.19 - Ken Adam, <i>Dr. Strangelove (set design)</i> , 1964.....	299
Figure 3.20 – Ken Adam, <i>Goldfinger (set design)</i> , 1964.	300
Figure 3.21 – Ken Adam, <i>Disco Valante design (cutaway)</i> , 1965.....	301
Figure 3.22 - David E. Scherman, “Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub,” <i>Time</i> , 1945	302
Figure 3.23 -Don Gomez, “The author getting his nails done at the manicurist in Saddam’s palace,” Baghdad, <i>Vice News</i> , July 15, 2003. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).	303
Figure 3.24 - Don Gomez, “The author (center) with some more soldiers at Saddam’s pool,” Baghdad, <i>Vice News</i> , July 15, 2003. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).	304
Figure 3.25 - Sabah Arar, <i>Associated Press</i> , 2003	305
Figure 3.26 - <i>BBC News</i> , 2003.	306
Chapter 4 – Statues, Monuments, and Relics: Dictator Kitsch and Persona	307
Figure 4.1 – DeAgostini, “Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar, mural,” Iraq, 20th century, <i>Getty Images</i>	307
Figure 4.2 – Antonio Riberio, “Saddam’s Artists in Baghdad,” Iraq, <i>Getty Images</i> , July, 1994.	308
Figure 4.3 - <i>Saddam Hussein Prays in Front of the Mosque in Fao</i> , 2001.	309
Figure 4.4 - <i>Saddam Hussein 58th Birthday</i> , 1995	310
Figure 4.5 - <i>Victory Day</i> , 2002	311

Figure 4.6 - <i>Saddam's Battle of Qadisiya</i> , 1980	312
Figure 4.7 -- <i>The Arc of Triumph</i> , central Baghdad, Iraq, 1989	313
Figure 4.8 - <i>The Arc of Triumph</i> , central Baghdad, Iraq, 1989.....	314
Figure 4.9 - <i>Walter Gropius standing in front of the new gate of Baghdad University</i> , 1960s	315
Figure 4.10 – Boris Vallejo, <i>The Empire Strikes Back</i> , 1980.....	316
Figure 4.11 – <i>Iraqi Fedayeen helmet</i> , Produced from 1995-2003.....	317
Figure 4.12 – Ralph McQuarrie, <i>Darth concept art</i> , 1974.....	318
Figure 4.13 – “Fedayeen Saddam men in white uniform marching and chanting in Baghdad,” <i>Getty Images Editorial Footage</i> , March 2003.....	319
Figure 4.14 –“U.S. military personnel “hold” the Baghdad Victory Arch sabers,” <i>Pinterest</i> , 2003.....	320
Figure 4.15 - Ji Scrofani, <i>Crossed Swords Monument</i> , November 27, 2007.....	321
Figure 4.16 – <i>Saddam Hussein dog toy sold in Britain soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait</i> , 1990.....	322
Figure 4.17 – “Saddam Hussein brandishes a Russian-made AK-47,” March 1998. <i>Associated Press</i>	323
Figure 4.18 - Sgt. Igor Paustovski, <i>Umm al-Qura mosque</i> , Northwestern Baghdad. April 13, 2003 (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).....	324
Figure 4.19 - Cliff Owen, “Inside the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, District of Columbia, a gold AK-47 assault rifle and sniper rifle that once belonged to former Iraq	

President Saddam Hussein sit in a display case,” <i>Associated Press</i> , September 29, 2011.	325
Figure 4.20 - George W. Bush Presidential Library, <i>Associated Press</i>	326
Figure 4.21 – “'Iraqi Most Wanted' playing cards is shown in an Operation Iraqi Freedom display,” The Soldiers & Sailors National Military Museum & Memorial in Pittsburgh, <i>Associated Press/Getty Images</i>	327
Figure 4.22 - Alexandra Boulat, “As viewers watched on television, Marine Gunery Sergeant Leon Lambert and Corporal Edward Chin prepared to bring down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square,” 2003.	328
Figure 4.23 – Goran Tomasevic, “Corporal Edward Chin, scaling a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and draping the Stars and Stripes and a noose over the black metal visage of the ousted despot,” <i>Reuters</i> . 2003.....	329
Figure 4.24 - Gilles Bassignac, “The toppling of a Saddam statue in the heart of Baghdad,” <i>Getty Images</i> , April 9, 2003.	330
Figure 4.25 - Carol Guzy, <i>Getty Images</i> , 1989	331
Figure 4.26 - <i>Time</i> , April 21, 2003.	332
Figure 4.27 - <i>Time</i> , May 2, 1945.....	333
Figure 4.28 - <i>The Godfather</i> , Paramount Pictures, 1972	334
Figure 4.29 – Saddam Hussein, Iraqi President (pinterest)	335
Figure 4.30 – <i>The Sun</i> , “The Tyrant in His Pants,” 2005.....	336
Figure 4.31 – Stefan Zaklin, “Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein addresses the court Tuesday,” <i>Getty Images</i> , 2006.	337

Chapter 5 – George W. Bush and American Political Kitsch	338
Figure 5.1 – Renovations: Empty Oval Office, Floor Refinishing, August 14, 2002. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.....	338
Figure 5.2 – Christine Frederick, kitchen efficiency studies, 1913	339
Figure 5.3 – Eric Limon, Drawing Room at The Mount (Edith Wharton’s Home), February 2, 2021	340
Figure 5.4 – R. Donald Jaye, “The Playboy Town House Production Recommendations,” The Playboy Company, Playboy, May 1962	341
Figure 5.5 - Tade Styka, Rough Rider, 1909, White House Museum, Washington DC., 39” x 54”, oil on canvas	342
Figure 5.6 – Oberto Gili, “Inside the Clinton Whitehouse,” House Beautiful, 1994	343
Figure 5.7 – Oval Office Detail, November 8, 2007. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library	344
Figure 5.8 – “President Reagan with saddle sculptures,” The Reagan Library Education Blog, 1982	345
Figure 5.9 – “Life on the Crawford Ranch,” The Bush Presidential Library, 2007	346
Figure 5.10 – Pablo Martinez Monsivais, “President George W. Bush, showing off boots with the presidential seal at his inauguration,” Associated Press, January 2001	347
Figure 5.11 – Oval Office Detail. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library, November 8, 2007	348
Figure 5.12 – Kevork Djansezian, “Saddam Hussein’s pistol,” Associated Press, 2003 ...	349

Figure 5.13 – Tom Lea, <i>Rio Grande</i> , 1954. Oil on canvas. Collection of the El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.....	350
Figure 5.14 – W. H. D. Koerner, <i>A Charge to Keep</i> , 1916, collection of George W. Bush, Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.....	351
Figure 5.15 – George W. Bush Oval Office Tour	352
Figure 5.16 – John Howard Sanden, <i>George W. Bush</i> , 2012, The White House Museum, Washington, D.C., Oil on canvas	353
Figure 5.17 – George W. Bush, <i>Self Portrait in the Shower</i> , oil on panel, 2013	354
Figure 5.18 – George W. Bush, <i>Self Portrait in the Bathtub</i> , oil on panel, 2013.....	355
Figure 5.19 – Dwight D. Eisenhower, <i>Snow Capped Mountains</i> , oil on canvas, 1955.....	356
Figure 5.20 – George W. Bush, <i>The Art of Leadership Exhibition</i> , 2014	357
Figure 5.21 – George W. Bush, <i>Putin</i> , oil on board, 2014.....	358

Introduction

If we hope to finally move past modernist preconceptions concerning historic significance, we must attempt to distinguish the historic practice of art history from that of evaluation and gatekeeping. Historicizing and ultimately letting go of the concept of kitsch is a critical step in that direction.

Anna Bryznski¹

Following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks the George W. Bush administration marshaled support for the use of military force in Iraq, highlighting the dangers it claimed Iraq posed to the United States. The most persuasive argument put forward, in the context of public shock and grief of the time, was that Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction” (WMD) and had close ties to terrorist groups, including al-Qaida, which had attacked the U.S. on 9/11. Despite there being no factual basis to either of these claims a sizable majority of Americans believed that Iraq either possessed WMD, was close to obtaining them, or that Iraq was closely tied to terrorism. Some even believed Hussein himself played a role in the 9/11 attacks.²

President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, given four months after the attack, justified an invasion by defining Iraq as part of an “axis of evil” followed by the vague and unspecified allegation that the Iraqi regime “has something to hide from the

¹ Anna Brzyski, “Art, Kitsch, and Art History,” in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. Monica Kjellman-Chapin (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15

² Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, “A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq,” *Pew Research Center*, March 14, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/> (assessed Sept. 27, 2024).

civilized world.”³ Despite any definitive proof of the Iraq’s possession of WMD, the Bush administration emphasized the danger of not acting against Hussein. In October 2002, Congress authorized the Bush administration to use U.S. armed forces “as he determines to be necessary and appropriate” to defend the security of the United States.⁴ The suspicion of “something hidden” became a threat to the security of the United States and justification for Congress’s authorization to act. The absence of evidence, interpreted as proof itself, permeated press coverage throughout the early years of the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq.

During the American invasion of Iraq in April 2003, dozens of articles in the American and European press reacted to photographs that American soldiers and embedded Western journalists took of Saddam Hussein’s elaborate palaces, private homes, and art collection.⁵ Multiple articles pronounced judgment on Hussein’s taste, equating it with a diminished moral sensibility and calling it a “smoking gun” that supported George W. Bush’s assertion that Iraq had hidden weapons of mass

³ Bush further added that “Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror,” and that the “Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons, for over a decade.” George W. Bush, The President’s State of the Union Address, *White House Archives*, Jan. 29, 2002, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (accessed Sept. 27, 2024).

⁴ H.J. Res. 114 – Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002, 107th Congress (2001-2002), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-joint-resolution/114#:~:text=Shown%20Here:&text=Authorizes%20the%20President%20to%20use,matters%20relevant%20to%20this%20resolution> (accessed Sept. 27, 2024).

⁵ These accounts mirror Allied troops discovery of Adolf Hitler’s Mountain home in Bavaria in 1945 as reported in David Kenyon Webster’s 1952 memoir essay, “We Drank Hitler’s Champagne,” in *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 3, 1952, 25.

destruction.⁶ This reception of the photographs focused on the architectural excesses of Hussein's palaces, their interior decorating, and the sci-fi/fantasy paintings found in his private collection. The sci-fi paintings, including "King Dragon" (circa 1980) and "Shadows Out of Hell" (circa 1980), were created by American illustrator Rowena Morrill and used as pulp book covers in the 1980s.⁷ The dramatic shift in context from the paintings' relatively banal roots, their acquisition and display by Hussein, and their subsequent political mobilization by the Western press provides an opportunity for me to examine them as manifestations of dictator kitsch, among other examples. Building from numerous instances of this type during the 2002-3 invasion of Iraq, my dissertation investigates dictator kitsch by closely analyzing Saddam Hussein's art collections, palaces, and constructed persona, and the contemporaneous reception of George W. Bush's art collections and Oval Office interior design. By examining closely the American media during this period, my objective is to explore how dictator kitsch contributes to the formation of American identity during periods of conflict. I use the art of Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush to more fully describe, define, and situate the concept of dictator kitsch within the US context.

I define dictator kitsch as the alignment of personal tastes and political motives, the conscious staging of "personality," or the conflation of taste and morality. I understand the dyad kitsch/dictator not as a definitive set of aesthetic qualities or specific

⁶ For example, Jonathan Jones, "Look at the Size of those Missiles," *The Guardian*, April 15, 2003.

⁷ Andrew J. Offutt, *King Dragon* (Ace Books, 1980). Andrew J. Offutt, *Shadows Out of Hell* (Berkley Publishing Group, 1983).

objects, but rather a process of evaluation or judgment on the part of the viewer. I seek to study dictator kitsch as a symbolic evaluation motivated by taste judgments that depict the dictator as eccentric, barbaric, and out of touch with the rest of the world. The consequence of this dynamic, particularly during periods of war or political instability, is that a foundational understanding of democracy is confirmed consistent with how the American public negotiates ideas of conflict and the justification for the use of force. Historian Benjamin Alpers suggests that Americans have relied on the dictator to define their own contrary political positions and identity.⁸

My intention is to provide a reading of the Iraq invasion as staged by the American press, with a focus on dictator kitsch, while deliberately avoiding the conflation of ethics and aesthetics. Instead, I place an emphasis on understanding the histories of works labeled dictator kitsch and how they contribute to the narration of conflict. In doing so my case studies present the history of objects central to judgements of dictator kitsch alongside their reception by the Western press. This analysis reveals that ideas about dictator kitsch are motivated by something in excess of the object itself. From this insight, the goal of each chapter is to isolate and understand the mechanics of how and why kitsch is implemented in service of attaining American strategic goals.

Thus, my dissertation explores the question: what does a full accounting of dictator kitsch and taste allow us to understand in terms of American political identity during the Invasion of Iraq and other periods of geopolitical discord? In decoding a time

⁸ Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, & American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920's – 1950's* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 1.

when concepts of high and low, good and bad taste, were used to define and describe the political aesthetics of conflict, it is necessary to interrogate the processes that structured these boundaries and the conventions through which these judgments were interpreted. In this introduction, I will ground my interpretation of dictator kitsch historically. I begin with a general framework to describe what is core to dictator kitsch as conceived by early theorists. As kitsch is an ever shifting and ambiguous concept my focus is less on its external properties and instead on the motivations for its use. Past uses of dictator kitsch connect taste to politics, allegedly revealing a direct window into a subject's character and ethics. I analyze instances of this formula and focus on the implications of the judgment itself. After I introduce the historical roots of dictator kitsch, I move to key theorists and historians who influenced my work on an alternative interpretation of "dictator kitsch."

Kitsch

The term "kitsch" has no verified origin, but many theorists and historians have speculated on its possible source. Matei Calinescu gives three main etymological hypotheses for the early beginnings of its use. The first is specific to a group of artists in southern Germany in the 1860s and 1870s who began creating formulaic paintings to make quick money off unsuspecting tourists. These paintings were made quickly and cheaply, and with recourse to sentiment for easy salability; the name given to this form of rapid production was *verkitschen*, meaning "to make cheap." A second comes from a mispronunciation of the English word "sketch;" the final, refers to the German word

kitschen, meaning “rubbish collected from the street.” In each case, kitsch is understood as a derogatory term with a hidden kernel of deception.⁹ Winfried Menninghaus links kitsch to other monosyllabic German words that end in ‘tsch’ – such as *Quatsch* (nonsense, rubbish), *Klatsch* (splash; smack; gossip), *pitsch*, *patsch*, to point out that kitsch shares two basic features with these words: a tendency to describe low objects and a suggestion of blurred distinctions that imply debasement.¹⁰ In each definition, kitsch is rooted in a mode of production and set of aesthetic values connected to mass culture and minus pretension to quality. The term kitsch, as we understand it today, first appeared in Franz Karpfen’s, 1925 *A Study of the Degeneration of Art*.¹¹ Karpfen established a link between modernity and kitsch (particularly mass production and inferior culture) and defined kitsch as oppositional to high art. While the term kitsch rapidly became used internationally, most of the research on the concept remained a German specialty until the 1970’s. Early associations of kitsch as establishing a high/low dichotomy persist throughout modernist theory, with many critics defining art, by contrast with kitsch, as authentic and requiring a serious engagement on the part of the audience, with little room for pleasure, excess, distraction, or easy entertainment. These artistic theories and criticisms of kitsch established boundaries for what authentic art can or cannot be.¹² In

⁹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 234.

¹⁰ Winifried Menninghaus, “On the ‘Vital Significance’ of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of ‘Bad Taste’” in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Melbourne, re.press, 2009), 39-41.

¹¹ Franz Karpfen, *A Study of the Degeneration of Art* (Hamburg: Weltbound-Verlag, 1925).

¹² Early definitions of kitsch included works by Clement Greenberg and Hermann Broch. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 6, No. 5, Fall

this way kitsch was pivotal in maintaining an ethical boundary across which modernist artists could not trespass.

I see the roots of dictator kitsch in this first wave of thinking on kitsch.¹³ In this initial wave kitsch is vilified, deprecated, viewed as inauthentic ripe with stereotype, and unethical. For example, Austrian writer and early theorist of kitsch, Hermann Broch states, “There is probably no place where the restructuring of value-standards, where the effective reach of evil in the world is so pronounced as in the existence of kitsch.”¹⁴ For Broch kitsch is the antithesis of truth (or absolute category of value), and hence, evil. In this scenario, he defines value by non-value, or by that which it must overcome.¹⁵ Broch further states, “Here the oppositional system must be accorded literally a satanic power, a power that automatically raises it to the level of being the vent of evil itself.”¹⁶ Later, Broch embodied this extreme depiction of kitsch in the figure of the dictator: “I find the idea of the relationship between neurosis and kitsch rather significant, not least because it is based on the evil inherent in kitsch ... It is not mere chance that Hitler was an enthusiastic disciple of kitsch.”¹⁷ Other first wave authors followed this formula in which

1939, 34-49. Hermann Broch, *Geist and Zeitgeist: The Spiritual in an Unspiritual Age*, ed. and trans. John Hargraves (New York: Counterpoint, 2002), 7.

¹³ According to Max Ryynanen and Paco Barragan first wave kitsch is more than an intuition, reaction, or mark of bad taste, but a phenomenon of its own. First wave thinking produces only negative views of kitsch. Max Ryynanen and Paco Barragan, ed. *The Changing Meaning of Kitsch: From Rejection to Acceptance* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023), 12.

¹⁴ Broch, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid. 23.

¹⁶ Ibid. 27.

¹⁷ Hermann Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* ed. Gillo Dorfles, [New York: Bell Publishing, 1969], 65.

kitsch is defined as the opposite of truth, but constitutive of a binary system of values. Italian philosopher, Gillo Dorfles elaborated on this theme: “‘bad politics’ is kitsch, or at least dictatorships are...Bad taste in politics begins therefore with modern dictatorships...”¹⁸ American critic and early theorist of kitsch, Clement Greenberg used the dangers of kitsch to advocate for an authentic and pure abstract art. The extreme evil of kitsch as defined by Greenberg is also transferred to a dictator and made evident through the dictator’s taste. Greenberg, like Broch, reads taste as symptomatic of character and politics: “the personal philistinism of Hitler and Stalin is not accidental to the political roles they play ...”.¹⁹ Dictator kitsch fuses the personal and political into digestible narratives in which the morality of the dictator is equated with deviant tastes. This concept of kitsch as evil, posing an existential threat, and simultaneously necessary to the definition of authentic values is foundational to my understanding of dictator kitsch.

The recent scholarship that has been most impactful to my project focuses on kitsch as a symptom illuminating larger social and aesthetic phenomena, rather than as a category of exclusion or dismissal. Philosopher C.E. Emmer provides a model for this approach when he states that, “the most fruitful way to approach “‘kitsch’” is the first: to examine the very cultural battles from which the term arises to see why and how the term is applied, and what cultural fault lines its application reveals.”²⁰ In the context of current

¹⁸ Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1969), 113.

¹⁹ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 34-49

²⁰ C.E. Emmer, “Kitsch Against Modernity,” *Art Criticism* Vol. 13, No. 1 (1998), 53-80.

political discourse, however, it is common to see Broch's and Greenberg's model of kitsch repeated. For example, in *Dictator Style: Lifestyles of the World's Most Colorful Despots*, author, journalist, and style guru Peter York highlights the home decorating tastes of "despots" by focusing on the personal and private spaces of dictators.²¹ York's analysis repeats the dictator kitsch formula to argue that "we all know better." Pointing to what is not allowed in "good" art, using the excentric tastes of dictators, York's work reinforces the reader's own position by revealing the mistakes made by despotic others. My research is aimed at this underdeveloped but growing study of how kitsch operates in political aesthetics. By analyzing the rhetoric of kitsch deployed during the early years of the Iraq war, I define and expand our comprehension of dictator kitsch and contribute to greater visual literacy.

My approach to dictator kitsch has been influenced by the work of critics and cultural theorists Tracey Potts and Ruth Holliday whose approach contrasts with some recent scholarship that sees kitsch entirely liberated from past biases, binaries, and conspicuous usages.²² Holliday and Potts, understand kitsch as being caught up in the

²¹ Peter York, *Dictator Style: Lifestyles of the World's Most Colorful Despots* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).

²² Sam Binkley sees kitsch as an aesthetic expression rooted in convention and familiarity. Binkley sees the value in this aesthetic expression as one connecting to pre-modern societies and habits which surrounded individuals at that time. Binkley defines this as "embeddedness," which stands in opposition to the "disembedding institutions" of Modern societies. Sam Binkley, "Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy," *Journal of Material Culture* 5, No. 2 [2000]: 133. Odd Nerdrum argues that the task of kitsch "is to create a seriousness in life, at its best so sublime it will bring laughter to a quiet. Kitsch serves life and therefore seeks the individual, in contradistinction to art's irony and dispassion." Odd Nerdrum, et. al. *On Kitsch* [Oslo: KageForlag, 2001], 11.

ideological work of social reproduction, where judgments of taste engineer cultural “otherness.” Writing about Saddam Hussein’s interior spaces, Tracey Potts describes dictator kitsch as an element of “subject –manufactories,” stating that “discussions of a dictator’s interiors function foremost to secure the identity of a self-assured cosmopolitan subject who can delight in the apparent vulgarity of the most savage taste.”²³ Potts’ shifts the emphasis from kitsch as a label to kitsch as an operation. In this more reflexive use, Potts understands the person who makes judgments about kitsch to be exercising “stealth-wealth,” which she describes as the foundation for “civilized” operations of capital and exchange.²⁴ Those who do not understand the intricacies of stealth-wealth value “showy wealth,” which Potts defines as “a basic illiteracy in the ABC’s of capital power: seeing value in things themselves rather than in their relations in a dynamic field of supply and demand is to parade a primitive relation to property.”²⁵ Potts describes a Western system of value constituted by “stealth wealth,” the peak of knowingness around property. What demonstrates high status and, hence, belonging to “civilized” operations of capital is an ability to demonstrate a comprehension of relational value. The antithesis of this system is a primitive relationship to property, seeing value in the object itself, a relationship to property typical of dictators. In this schema, the error of the dictator is to value the open flaunting of power and wealth.²⁶

²³ Tracey Potts. “‘Walking the Line’: Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value,” (Nottingham: Nottingham Modern Language Press, 2007), 168-70.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Holliday and Potts describe this “error” as the misrecognition of exchange value, “the foundation of cultured relations to things.” Exchange value is central to “the colonial project and hence to the cultivation of a civilized personhood.” Ruth Holliday and Tracey

In *Kitsch: Cultural Politics and Taste*, Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts reject the concept of ready-made kitsch, or kitsch that conveys a default aesthetic, and introduce the phrase, *doing-kitsch*.²⁷ *Doing-kitsch* prioritizes a more active approach to kitsch and the moment of aesthetic judgement, constituted by struggle, conflict, and politics, which opens thinking about kitsch to the generation of community.²⁸ Holliday and Potts question whether kitsch might possess disruptive political possibilities.²⁹ Prompted by their theory, a central question of my own study is whether kitsch might act as a common basis of sociability, with the ability to mobilize affect in the direction of political potential.

While kitsch is one of the most difficult concepts to define with any reliability, my intention is to identify authors who created the original model of dictator kitsch and contemporary scholars who identify potential problems in these early definitions. Early theorists, such as Clement Greenberg recognize kitsch as a cultural cancer created by mass production. He used kitsch to define true art practices (represented through the avant-garde) which serve a clear moral or cultural imperative. In this sense, kitsch

Potts. *Kitsch: Cultural Politics and Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 170.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

²⁸ Ibid., 31.

²⁹ Holliday and Potts follow the work of Jacques Rancière in which the formation of a community or “we” is central: “Determining how the contemporary aesthetic stage is set, together with its particular scripts, dramatis personae (its protagonists and its fools), is, then, revealing of other situations. The formation of any “we” – and equally a “they” – constitutes a configuration of sense, which in turn, ‘establishes effective form[s] of linkage between perceptions, discourses and decisions.’” Jacques Rancière, “A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,” *Parallax*, 15:3 (2009), 120.

becomes a subordinate term from which historical and philosophical arguments develop. Writers such as Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts flip this argument, seeing the discourse of kitsch as a site where class and cultural competitions play out. These authors respond to the cultural hierarchies that Greenberg helped establish and make them their primary target of critique.

To situate dictator kitsch in the broader history of bad taste, I have found it useful to separate kitsch into types or categories. A generic category of kitsch appeals to sentimentality, false emotions, and a pre-packaged or formulaic aesthetic.³⁰ Totalitarian kitsch, while maintaining these same qualities, is directly intertwined with politics and service of the state, often for use in propaganda. Milan Kundera describes totalitarian kitsch as a “pervasive evil” in service of the state where “everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life.” This includes individualism, doubt, and irony.³¹ Totalitarian kitsch triggers an emotional relationship to the object through appeals to memory or nostalgia making it an attractive vehicle for appropriation by a regime to create a forged memory or collective past through which nationalism, political consensus, or submission is fostered. Lastly, dictator kitsch, varies from the first two categories as it centers on the alignment of personal tastes and political motives, the conscious staging of “personality,” or a conflation of taste and morality.³² My approach analyzes instances of

³⁰ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 34-49

³¹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. By Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), 251-252.

³² For Peter York, “dictator style” shows a clash of needs, stating “Yes, I’m your dictator who loves and cares for you, the people, but I’m also studmaster of the galaxy, a man of taste and education – not a spendthrift, but, rather, a clever and tasteful manipulator of symbolic imagery in a way that benefits someone of my massiveness.” York, viii.

dictator kitsch consistent with Tracey Potts' definition of dictator kitsch as reflexive in its ability to secure the identity of the critic/subject who assigns the label.

Looking at the artwork owned by Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush, alongside the press's reception of the works, I evaluate instances of dictator kitsch as opportunities to expand the concept. I approach objects of visual art, literature, and architecture without the assumption that they inherently possess kitsch qualities. My work instead uses those objects as a departure point to shift the emphasis to thinking about kitsch as a process, action, or set of behaviors (*doing-kitsch*).³³

Methodological Questions

Through a study of the immediate social and historical context surrounding judgments of dictator kitsch during the 2002-03 invasion of Iraq, the context of its reception, and physical environment in which objects are displayed, my dissertation explores alternative models for understanding kitsch and its relationship to politics. My study begins from the ways observers have applied dictator kitsch. I believe it is important with any study of kitsch to avoid applying the term myself. Much writing on kitsch and politics sees it as alienating individuals from legitimate culture and as a trojan horse for propaganda, making it an effective agent for totalitarian regimes. This complicates the study of kitsch by leveraging it to support a value system or argument outside the concept itself. I strive to avoid this pitfall and so define kitsch as much by

³³ Holliday and Potts, 31.

context as by objects; therefore, my study questions why these earlier interpretive models remain the lens through which we understand kitsch.

Applying the term dictator kitsch is motivated by a desire to define positions, and I see its use as consistent whether delivered from the perspective of an embedded journalist, US military, style reporter, left leaning reporter, right leaning reporter or other observers. C.E. Emmer posits that, dictator kitsch opens a fault line from which we can see an expression of value systems, bids for power, or cultural legitimacy.³⁴ My method seeks to unravel occasions when the label “dictator kitsch” has been used, to see it as an operation that, through taste, promotes a value system, belief, or specific ideology.

During the invasion of Iraq references to dictator kitsch were prevalent in the western press as they characterized both Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush. These characterizations often present references and imagery that are non-linear and wide ranging in their associations. My approach is to follow these claims and test their validity. This is where a study of kitsch poses significant challenges. I have been influenced by the work of historian David Lubin and his interest in the role of mass produced and popular imagery. His postmodern method, typified by *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, sees works of art as “texts” an approach that informs my own work on kitsch.³⁵ In *Shooting Kennedy*, Lubin identifies images of Kennedy as significant for their ability to “activate latent memories of other powerful images in the histories of art and popular

³⁴ Emmer, 53-80

³⁵ David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xii.

culture.”³⁶ Lubin explores how these images derive their forms and meaning from earlier images, as well as the social and historical conditions that produced them. Lubin’s method focuses on the “impact of images on images,” an approach to art history invaluable to my study.

I drew upon several archives to understand characterizations of dictator kitsch. The Eaton Collection of Science Fiction & Fantasy at the University of California, Riverside provided guidance in understanding the Pulp and Science Fiction/ Fantasy genre. Through their expertise and access to extensive Science Fiction/Fantasy databases, journals, and archives, the Eaton collection archivists significantly contributed to the development of my analysis of Rowena Morrill’s fantasy illustrations. The archives of architectural firm Wilson Mason LLP, responsible for designing the Palace of King Faisal I, were instrumental in contextualizing the palace’s historical significance, a focal point in Chapter 3. Similarly, the Royal Academy archives facilitated the identification of architectural renderings made by James Mollison Wilson of the Royal Palace in Baghdad and provided supporting exhibition materials. The Center for Architecture in New York provided archival access to their “City of Mirages: Baghdad 1952-1982” exhibition, including wall mounts, imagery, and historical context, which enriched the research in Chapter 3. The George W. Bush Presidential Archives provided essential visual resources, such as imagery of the Oval Office and its contents before and during George W. Bush’s presidency, as well as materials on its staging and design. Additional sources were pivotal in tracing the historical and cultural threads central to my exploration of

³⁶ Ibid.

kitsch. The Brookings Institution, the U.S. Department of Defense, The White House Museum, and the Associated Press archives provided access to materials that helped follow critical themes such as the history of embedded reporting, reality television and home makeover programs, architectural projects of the British Mandate in Iraq, visual development for film, totalitarian portraiture, and history of the Oval Office interior design, among other referents.

My use of digital and online research methods became necessary due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, while teaching at California State University, Northridge, I received a research grant to travel to the George W. Bush Presidential Library in Dallas, Texas. However, a state-mandated prohibition on funding travel to Texas—stemming from policies implemented during the early Trump presidency—along with subsequent COVID-19 restrictions, prevented me from using the grant for travel and necessitated adjustments to my research methods. As a result, I conducted FOIA requests and gained access to archival materials from the Bush Presidential Library through email correspondence and online platforms.

Many objects of “dictator kitsch” belonging to Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush are located in private or unofficial settings. In interpreting these objects, I am indebted to the work of Despina Stratigakos and her historical approach to the domestic spaces and architecture of Adolf Hitler in her book, *Hitler at Home*.³⁷ By looking at the interior design, architecture, and tastes of Hitler (as well as his interior designer Gerdy

³⁷ Despina Stratigakos, *Hitler at Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

Troost), Stratigakos elevates the place of domestic spaces in their connection to political motives and representation, providing a template for my own work.

In addition to Lubin's use of popular imagery as text and Stratigakos' work on private spaces read as political, my approach to kitsch is influenced by the theories of cultural critics Anna Brzynski and Monica Kjellman-Chapman. Anna Brzynski uses kitsch to look at the discipline of art history, seeing it as "our term for their lack of taste and as such a value judgment made from a position of absolute cultural superiority."³⁸ Instead of wrestling with the definition of kitsch, Brzynski focuses rather on what is meant when the label is applied: "If we hope to finally move past modernist preconceptions concerning historic significance, we must attempt to distinguish the historic practice of art history from that of evaluation and gatekeeping. Historicizing and ultimately letting go of the concept of kitsch is a critical step in that direction."³⁹ Though it is not my intention to challenge the discipline of art history, my study of kitsch does raise the issue of categorization. In this aspect I am indebted to Brzynski's focus on the ways labeling art as kitsch is its meaning. With a focus on the process of labeling, I borrow from Monica Kjellman-Chapman's idea of kitsch operating as a "powerful policing mechanism."⁴⁰ Kjellman-Chapin sees the question of kitsch for art historians as posing larger questions of conceptual categorization. For art history specifically, kitsch can be a complex and nuanced tool to understand the larger discursive operations allowed

³⁸ Anna Brzynski, "Art, Kitsch, and Art History," in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. Monica Kjellman-Chapin (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-15.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 15

⁴⁰ Monica Kjellman-Chapin ed., *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 38.

by the label. In this spirit, Kjellman-Chapin writes on the work of Thomas Kinkade and the ways his work “disrupts the artificial divisions between ‘commercial’ and ‘fine’ art through key discursive strategies.”⁴¹ Kjellman-Chapin describes Kinkade’s kitsch as a meta-critique of the “mechanics by which the artworld sifts through the visual, labeling, categorizing, valuating, and sorting images, objects, and practitioners into high and low ...”⁴² Inspired by Brzynski and Kjellman-Chapin, I focus on reading kitsch and what the application of the term means. I also find in their challenge to historical categorization support for my interest in reading the image as text and unbound by stricter categories.

Borrowing from these authors, my method highlights kitsch as rooted in history but filled with references to discontinuous moments of the past. I situate images and environments that are received as dictator kitsch relative to the history of kitsch, ensuing judgments of taste, and the aestheticization of politics, particularly during periods of conflict or war. To this end, my aim is to offer a reading of the Iraqi invasion and images from that moment that does not default to value judgements (i.e., kitsch is evil). While taking seriously the claims made regarding kitsch, my emphasis shifts to understanding the histories of the works labeled kitsch, placing as much weight on the context of their reception as the objects themselves. Understood in this way, my method studies dictator kitsch not as inherently connected to a particular dictator but rather as a means of recognizing distinction through taste. As such dictator kitsch can be applied

⁴¹ Ibid. 157.

⁴² Ibid. 157-177.

symmetrically to both sides of the conflict, in this case Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush.

My first chapter will contextualize Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" in the politics of the 1930s. To understand the roots of kitsch in the American context this chapter takes as a starting point Greenberg's statement, "...some day it will have to be told how 'anti-Stalinism,' which started out more or less as "Trotskyism," turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically for what was to come."⁴³ With this statement Greenberg points to the importance of the politics of the 1930s, attitudes towards the dictator (Stalin specifically), and Marxist political movements of that time. Greenberg's usage of kitsch was shaped by Stalinist-Trotskyite ideological battles and the de-Marxification of the New York intelligentsia. As I will demonstrate, these tensions, represented by the New York groups' embrace of Marxism in the 1930s, abandonment of Marxism after the war, and subsequent adoption of pluralistic liberalism, were positions developed within the pages of the *Partisan Review*.⁴⁴

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg's first essay for the *Partisan Review*, addresses two issues: the meaning of abstraction and the question of art's autonomy.⁴⁵

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch" is an orthodox Marxist reading minus an important twist.

⁴³ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 230.

⁴⁴ Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

⁴⁵ This latter issue is largely political and a reaction to Stalin's efforts to compel artists to serve the interest of the state through propaganda, a position based on seeing evil in the aestheticization of politics.

Whereas traditional Marxist analysis would generally condemn both the avant-garde and kitsch, Greenberg justified and defended avant-garde art as what genuine culture had to become: “[B]y no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order.”⁴⁶ As a result, Greenberg translated the antithesis between the revolutionary individual and the regressive mass from the world of politics to that of culture, turning the cultural conflict between avant-garde and kitsch into the ultimate battle for the continuation of social progress. In this sense, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” replaced Trotsky’s emphasis on political action as a means for rescuing bourgeoisie culture. Greenberg’s position represents a more conservative commitment to high culture as an exclusive focus. Greenberg’s stress on art without social or “party” baggage meant a return to the idea of “art for art’s sake.”

Chapter 2 begins with the work of embedded Associated Press photographer, John Moore, during the Invasion of Iraq. Moore documented Saddam Hussein’s townhome when it was discovered by U.S soldiers in April 2003. His photographs of Saddam Hussein’s belongings, specifically his collection of sci-fi fantasy paintings, were used by the Western media as evidence of Hussein’s taste and political motives. The reception of Hussein’s taste as dictator kitsch became the evidence, in lieu of weapons of mass destruction, of the dictator’s ill intent, which was central to the narration of the Iraq invasion. This chapter looks at the history of embedded reporting and military press relations to understand the broader historical context behind Moore’s photographs and their reception including a media environment saturated by home improvement and

⁴⁶ Greenberg, 38.

reality television home makeover shows. I will situate this context within the history of reading the interior spaces and possessions of dictators.

Moore's photographs depict two paintings central to framing Hussein's taste as dictator kitsch. For this reason, I will analyze the paintings "King Dragon," and "Shadows Out of Hell" by Rowena Morrill. To contextualize their American reception, I will situate these works within the history and conventions of science fiction and fantasy and compare their motifs to past pulp covers such as "At the Earth's Core" (1922), the history of reclining female nudes in high art and popular culture, as well as against historical works of dictator kitsch including Paul Mathias Padua's "Leda and the Swan" (1937) and "The Standard Bearer" by Hubert Lanzinger (1938).

My third chapter takes as its primary focus Saddam Hussein's Republican palace, official spaces such as the "Missile Throne Room," his mega yacht, and his bunker. My aim is to recognize how Saddam Hussein's public, official, and domestic spaces were received as dictator kitsch as a means to demonstrate the problematic nature of his character and support the larger political narrative of the invasion. I begin this chapter with a historical survey of architectural projects in Iraq during the British mandate through the works of British architects J.M. Wilson, Harold Mason, and J. Brian Cooper who worked with the Public Works Department in Iraq. Architectural projects developed during this time were used by the British to shape Iraqi identity through cultural interventions. The chapter will next turn to an examination of the Republican Palace, its initial design, the later remodel by Saddam Hussein, and Hussein's larger interest in defining Iraq's cultural production. Hussein constructed 80-100 palaces following the

Gulf War in 1991, some of these palaces housed the dictator's family, party officials, and friends, while others operated as resorts for VIPs and government officials. I will demonstrate how the palaces' labeling as dictator kitsch is intertwined with Saddam Hussein's taste and was used as evidence of war crimes. I will examine the degree to which this reception is a projection of the Western imagination referencing the work of Ken Adams, a set designer for James Bond films in the 60s and 70s, including illustrations in *Dr. Strangelove* and *Goldfinger* that channeled Cold War anxieties into pop culture depictions of the villain's lair.

Chapter 4 studies the relationship between portraiture and persona in both images of Saddam Hussein and in monuments that he built. Portraiture of Saddam Hussein saturated the landscape of Iraq, in both public and private spaces. These portraits drew on an eclectic mix of ancient and modern influences including Soviet Realism, British traditions from the Mandate, national iconography, folklore, and popular Western fiction to project a mythic persona. This chapter begins by looking at Hussein's use of stamps which mixed British and Iraqi portraiture traditions in support of a cult of personality and the construction of his "Arc of Triumph" (1990). The Arc of Triumph was commissioned in 1985 during the climax of the Iran-Iraq war and alluded to the Roman triumphal arch. Hussein's use of the arc has strong historical ties to narratives of the west using historical elements relating to Islamic architectural traditions.

My final chapter studies contemporary American political culture by looking at the official and private tastes of George W. Bush and their association with kitsch. Using works by Milan Kundera and Catherine Lugg on kitsch and politics, I will look at the

aesthetics of the George W. Bush administration and the ways in which his Oval Office, artwork, décor, and political messaging can be read through the lens of taste to identify a political persona. The George W. Bush Oval Office interior embraced a myriad of references tied to the American west while also distancing itself from the scandals of the outgoing Clinton administration. This use of American history and the adoption of a cowboy persona was read as dictator kitsch by the American press in a very similar rhetorical fashion as the same criticisms levied against Hussein. Using the cowboy image blended with frontier rhetoric, Bush projected an image of courage, strength, and decisiveness. I will look at how critics used Bush's taste as clear signs of his lack of intelligence and severely compromised moral character in parallel to the ways Saddam Hussein's taste revealed his own shortcomings.

My conclusion suggests that Saddam Hussein's works are not permanently objects of kitsch, nor are they symptomatic of a toxic character and are instead implicated with American culture and taste. Instead, dictator kitsch is a response to American culture or objects "misused" by an individual in a non-American (or non-allied) environment. During the Iraq invasion, US media depicted Saddam Hussein as eccentric, barbaric, and out of touch with the rest of the world. This narrative gives insights into American political identity and the ways the public negotiates conflict and the justification of the use of military force. My conclusion asserts that dictator kitsch is a crucial lens for understanding political aesthetics especially for the ways in which American identity is defined and reinforced.

Chapter 1

Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and the Dictator in the 1930s

Clement Greenberg, influential member of the first generation of New York intellectuals and later editor at the *Partisan Review*, gave shape to a distinctly American definition of art in his essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” In building his argument, Greenberg gave the European dictator a prominent position in his definition of kitsch, basing his definition on a condemnation of Hitler’s, Mussolini’s, and Stalin’s personal tastes. Kitsch, a concept mired in ambiguity and affect, is defined by Greenberg through connecting “dangerous” tastes to reactionary or conservative politics, primarily read through the manipulation of the masses. Greenberg identifies the source of the dictator’s desire for kitsch in a lack of taste and virtue. Citing the cultural politics of the Stalinist Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy, Greenberg states: “[k]itsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.”⁴⁷ He further collapses the personal and political by asserting that “the personal philistinism of Hitler and Stalin is not accidental to the political roles they play...”⁴⁸ Greenberg’s definition of kitsch assumes a relationship between taste and character that is innate.⁴⁹ Further, when Greenberg referred to the “personal philistinism” of Hitler and Stalin as a quality which permeates all cultural policies, he actively reduced the politics of a nation to the

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 49.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 48.

⁴⁹ In a review of Marc Chagall’s retrospective, Greenberg wrote that the artist “went too far in emphasizing the uniqueness of his personality and did not know at what point to humble himself.” John O’Brian ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism: Vol. 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 84.

preferences of an individual.⁵⁰ While Greenberg saw kitsch as symptomatic of the dangerous integration of politics and aesthetics and its effects on a polity, his definition is also undoubtedly political. As a result, Greenberg solidified a tradition of equating political difference with aesthetic deviancy, embodied in the figure of a corrupt and tasteless dictator. Understood in this sense, kitsch is defined by a pervasive ambiguity and the assumption that a lack of character is equivalent to non-popular politics.

Greenberg's biographer, Florence Rubinfeld, cautions against reading his work as having "emerged full-blown from the head of Zeus."⁵¹ Rather, it should be understood within the political context of the 1930s and prevalent American attitudes towards the dictator. According to historians Serge Guilbaut and Thomas Repensek, Greenberg's theoretical positions and definition of kitsch were shaped by Stalinist-Trotskyite ideological battles and the de-Marxification of the New York intelligentsia.⁵² Greenberg himself asserts the importance of this influence when stating, "...some day it will have to be told how 'anti-Stalinism,' which started out more or less as 'Trotskyism,' turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come."⁵³ This chapter looks to understand Greenberg's statement through a study of the political and

⁵⁰ Crispin Sartwell sees the effect of Greenberg's argument as deliberately political. "Greenberg understood that calling Hitler an idiot or maniac would have left him merely sneering. But saying that the art that Hitler loved and produced was kitsch would insult him where he lived." Sartwell, 20.

⁵¹ Florence Rubinfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 47.

⁵² Serge Guilbaut and Thomas Repensek, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America: Greenberg, Pollock, or from Trotskyism to the New Liberalism of the 'Vital Center,'" in *October*, The MIT Press, Vol.15 (Winter, 1980), 61-78.

⁵³ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 230.

ideological tensions of the decade formative to his 1939 article, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” particularly American attitudes toward the dictator.

Greenberg’s early definition of dictator kitsch is the first to support and reflexively define American identity in a political context. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” made kitsch the target of criticism and, because it was tied to totalitarian powers, a symbol of evil. By linking kitsch to the figure of the dictator the political became a cultural battle defined through kitsch. In this schema American identity and authentic culture are defined in opposition to the dictators’ taste.

Though “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” was written nearly 65 years prior to the Iraq War, Greenberg’s definition of kitsch established a formula that remains prevalent in the reception of political imagery in the present. The following chapter looks to fully appreciate this origin and to set the stage for how Greenberg’s conception of dictator kitsch remains influential on American political identity in the present.

The History of the Dictator in America

Historian Benjamin Alpers suggests that the dictator has long been a factor in defining political positions in America.⁵⁴ The notion of the dictator was invoked in the United States to justify the policies of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and again by Woodrow Wilson during World War I.⁵⁵ In the 1920s the American press praised

⁵⁴ Alpers sees evidence for this in the vast number of political struggles couched in the language of opposition to dictatorship. Alpers, 1.

⁵⁵ “Lincoln’s effectiveness as a kind of dictator who could suspend constitutional rights at will, based on a claim of necessity, served as a model for the process that led him to abolish slavery by executive command.” Noah Feldman, “Lincoln’s Dictatorship: How

Mussolini for bringing order to Italy and Stalin's Five Year Plan as providing an optimistic model for American business practices.⁵⁶ This attitude, resulting from the Great Depression, embraced dictatorship as necessary to solve socio-economic crises and put democracy back on track.

According to Alpers, for much of the twentieth century Americans have understood democracy and their own political identity largely in opposition to dictators. For Alpers this is a result of a "conventional wisdom" passed down from a small, heterogeneous group of cultural elites.⁵⁷ Alpers places academics, policymakers, business leaders, and the press (among others) into this group of "cultural producers" because of their ability to shape American political culture. As a result of their influence, this group instructs the broader public, defining what is mainstream or outside of acceptable norms.

Alpers points to an example from the 1920s when Mussolini was widely admired in the United States. In 1927, the Studebaker Corporation of South Bend, Indiana, renamed its Studebaker Standard Six the "Studebaker Dictator." [Figure 1.1] While the name was meant to imply that this Studebaker model would "dictate the standard," the names of other models in the series, such as the "Commander" and the "President," suggest that the name was intended to evoke political allusions through the invocation of

the President Broke the Constitutional Compact in Order to Save It," *Literary Hub*, Nov. 15, 2021.

⁵⁶ *The New York Times*, July 6, 1931, 2.

⁵⁷ "A comparatively small group of men and women has been in a position to interpret events abroad to American mass audiences and suggest an answer to the question of dictatorship." Alpers, 2.

figures of “authority.”⁵⁸ Alpers suggests that the name was an intentional reference, and that Studebaker hoped that the positive image of Mussolini would benefit sales.⁵⁹

During this time Mussolini was acclaimed by the American press, appearing in nearly 150 articles from 1925-1932.⁶⁰ In 1928 *The Saturday Evening Post* serialized Mussolini’s “My Autobiography” [Figure 1.2] which recounted his experiences as a young man, including his time in World War I, the formation of the Fascist party, and the October 1922 March on Rome. The story was presented on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* accompanied by a photograph of Mussolini in silhouette, powerfully striding along a beach with waves breaking behind him.

Studebaker’s advertisements also evoke this image of Mussolini. For example, an advertisement from 1928 heralds the arrival of the Studebaker Dictator and its “Long” clutch with a bold graphic headline reading “Stamina.” [Figure 1.3] The ad supports Alpers’ theory, associating Mussolini’s graphic silhouette with the dynamic and powerful design of the automobile and promising mechanical and social potency.

Historian John P. Diggins describes liberal and right-wing American’s attraction to Mussolini’s economic policies and public personae as founded on the belief that Mussolini was “doing for Italy what Henry Ford did for the United States.”⁶¹ English journalist George Slocombe’s 1932 novel, *The Romance of a Dictator*, praised dictators

⁵⁸ Western Antique Aeroplane & Automobile Museum. *waaamuseum.org*
<https://www.waaamuseum.org/collections/automobiles/530-1928-studebaker-dictator-coupe> (accessed Sept. 9, 2024)

⁵⁹ Alpers, 15-17.

⁶⁰ John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 66.

⁶¹ *Ibid*

as self-made men of power and will whose relationships with their people were built on personal and emotional connections.⁶² This valorization of individual personality strongly influenced American politics. The emotional connection between the crowd and the dictator is evident in Columbia Pictures' 1933 documentary *Mussolini Speaks*. Narrated by radio broadcaster Lowell Thomas, *Mussolini Speaks* celebrated the dictator as the ultimate “Doer” for his tremendous control over Italian crowds. *Mussolini Speaks* grossed over \$1 million in theatres, just falling short of the top 10 highest grossing films of 1933. In a *New York Times* review, Mordaunt Hall effused, “Mr. Thomas translates the fiery words of Mussolini, recorded as he addresses fervid crowds on various occasions, and interprets the meaning of his tireless industrial campaigns so that even those in the audience who are not Italians cannot resist a surge of patriotic feeling.”⁶³

The *Mussolini Speaks* lobby card communicated this connection, showing Mussolini walking in harmony with a massive crowd, uniformly moving behind him. [Figure 1.4] The image depicts Mussolini as a natural, pastoral, or benign force, implying the effectiveness of the dictator and mass politics. Mussolini spoke to the relationship of fascism and the masses: “the task of fascism is to make [the masses] an organic whole with the Nation, much as the artist needs raw material to forge his masterpieces.”⁶⁴

⁶² George Slocombe, *The Romance of a Dictator* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932).

⁶³ Mordaunt Hall, “Movie Review,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1933. (<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CE0DB173BEF3ABC4B52DFB5668388629EDE>)

⁶⁴ Quoted in Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 21.

Alpers suggests that this positive view of the dictator resulted from Depression-era discontent and reinforced the idea that a dictator might solve the problem of “the crowd,” social unrest and disorder.⁶⁵ Mussolini’s image as the social “redeemer” overlaps with the archetype of the rugged individualist, a figure sympathetic to American civic virtues. Irving Cobb called Mussolini “the Italian Roosevelt” in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*.⁶⁶ Praise for Mussolini came from big business, particularly from those business leaders dismayed by Franklin Roosevelt’s aggressive New Deal regulations, relief spending, and empowerment of government authority.⁶⁷ Publishing giant William Randolph Hearst, an ardent critic of FDR, visited Mussolini in 1931, and stated, “He is a man I have always greatly admired, not only because of his astonishing ability, but because of his public service.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ The distrust of systems of governance, banks, and financial leaders arising from the economic collapse of the Depression, a growing sense of disillusionment stemming from the rapid progress of the industrial revolution, the shift of populations from rural living to Urban life, a dependency on an increasingly complex economy, a less secure labor force (on average, twelve and a half million people were unemployed in 1932), a loss of trust in institutions, and concern about a massive population increase all contributed to discontent. National Industrial Conference Board, 1932. “According to Henry Pratt Fairchild, if the population of the world had continued to grow at the rate at which it was growing ... at the end of 10,000 years it would have reached a figure beginning with 221,848 and followed by *no less than 45 zeros*.” Frederick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America, September 3, 1929 – September 3, 1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939), 41-45.

⁶⁶ Irving S. Cobb, “A Big Little Man,” *Cosmopolitan*, LXXXII, (Jan. 1927), 145-146.

⁶⁷ In an example of the extreme ambiguity to which the term “dictator” has been employed it is worth noting that conservatives in the early years of the New Deal saw Roosevelt’s policies as “economic dictatorship” and believed that if any “fascist menace” would threaten America it would be led by Roosevelt. Allen, 323.

⁶⁸ Diggins, 48.

However, some depictions of the dictator as the “everyman” did not meet with as much success as *Mussolini Speaks*. For example, *Time Magazine* featured Mussolini on its cover eight times between 1923 and 1943, often in unflattering photos.⁶⁹ The July 12, 1926 *Time* cover photograph shows an awkwardly crouched leader holding hands with a tiger cub kept safely behind bars, while the article within the magazine mocks Mussolini’s tastes as awkward and buffoonish, seeing in his theatre of masculinity the absence of real power.⁷⁰ [Figure 1.5]

I interpret *Time*’s depiction of Mussolini as congruent with an American ambivalence toward its leaders that dates to earlier periods. Writing about America in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that as democratic citizens evaluate leaders, they “impute his success mainly to some of his vices; and an odious connection is thus formed between the ideas of turpitude and power, unworthiness and success, utility and dishonor.”⁷¹ De Tocqueville described how American leaders are understood as the embodiment of conflicting meanings, in which citizens tolerate “an odious connection” between political aims and the methods used to achieve them. Both the strength of the dictator and his relatable flaws represent the dictator’s “everyman” quality.

⁶⁹ In this story Mussolini is quoted as saying “I am like the animals. I can feel the future as it approaches. Some instinct guides and warns me. My blood speaks! I listen to my blood.” “Italy: Sanguinary Omens.” *Time*, July 12, 1926.

⁷⁰ In addition to featuring Mussolini on 8 covers, *Time Magazine* also named Hitler “Man of the Year” once and Stalin twice.

⁷¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, 1943), 235.

Judgements of taste, such as found in the *Time* article on Mussolini, are connected to a dynamic between those who are judged and those who judge.⁷² *Time* classified Mussolini as “awkward and buffoonish” for making aesthetic choices that too nakedly parade his desire to convey masculinity (holding hands with a tiger that is safely caged). The *Time* writer implied that Mussolini’s image of power is illegitimate for its lack of a relatable, universal, or “everyman” quality.

Using taste judgements to discover normalized or virtuous individualism was also central to American interpretations of Adolf Hitler. Often described as “the German Mussolini,” Hitler’s positive reception in the 1930s was normalized within previous press coverage of Mussolini. While the American press condemned Hitler’s anti-Semitism, many newspapers downplayed or avoided overt criticism of him.⁷³ As it did with Mussolini, the American press focused on Hitler’s taste as a key to understanding his character and political motivations. A 1933 issue of *Time* chronicled Hitler’s rise to power by describing a pudgy little vegetarian with a Charlie Chaplin mustache, “who dotes on Wagnerian music and surrounds himself with portraits and busts of Bismark and

⁷² According to Pierre Bourdieu, “taste is the basis of all that one has – people and things – and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others.” In the act of consumption, individuals both express an individual aesthetic preference and share a collective taste with others. In Bourdieu’s theory, the individuality of individual taste is expressed in the relative weight that objects of different styles have in a compilation. This bricolage of self-presentation can communicate an infinite array of varying messages. If one element is repositioned, or transferred to a new ensemble, a completely different meaning may result. This process is the basis by which we self-classify and are classified by others. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56

⁷³ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and The Coming of the Holocaust, 1933-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 3, 16, 186.

Frederick the Great.”⁷⁴ This article describes an inauthentic adoption of culture as pivotal to Hitler’s character and personality, divorcing him from an “everyman” image. The 1933 issue contains *Time’s* first color cover: a portrait of Hitler by artist Jerry Farnsworth. [Figure 1.6] Farnsworth, a student of Charles Hawthorne, painted Hitler in a lounge chair next to his German shepherd, “Muck.”

Farnsworth did not have direct access to Hitler; therefore, he worked from a photograph taken by Heinrich Hoffmann in 1932 and published in the photo album, *The Hitler Nobody Knows*. [Figure 1.7] This book attempted to shift Hitler’s image by focusing on his “private life,” and included images of Hitler in nature, with animals, and playing with children. According to architectural historian Despina Stratigakos, Hoffmann took the photographs to emphasize Hitler’s moral character, with the hopes of winning over female and bourgeois German voters.⁷⁵

Farnsworth’s painting made minor but telling changes to the photographic image, such as cropping the image to create a more claustrophobic and hence confrontational moment and changing Hitler’s leisure attire to a Nazi uniform, complete with swastika arm band. The arm band is a saturated red repeated in the German shepherd’s mouth, emphasizing the potentially dangerous quality of both man and dog. The cumulative effect of Farnsworth’s changes erased the photograph’s theatrical veneer and depersonalized the image of Hitler’s private life and innate character.

⁷⁴ *Time*, “Germany: National Revolution!” March 13, 1933.

<https://time.com/archive/6750852/germany-national-revolution/> (accessed Oct. 29, 2024).

⁷⁵ Stratigakos, 150.

The normalization of the European dictator in America at this time can be attributed to several other factors, including the historical importance placed on Europe as the crucible of modern political ideologies, the outsized role Europe played in the self-understanding of American elites, and the way these “cultural producers” used European standards to shape American political culture. The Depression, rapid industrialization and urbanization, and long-term tendencies to distrust government and institutions combined to unmoor American attitudes from past social orders and norms and contributed to a feeling of instability that permeated the early to mid-1930s.⁷⁶ Frederick Allen Lewis describes waning or anemic attendance numbers amongst churches in the early 1930s as a symptom of an increasing turn to more secular devotions, such as movie theatre attendance, and systems of thought that emphasized social mindedness.⁷⁷ These changes led to a rising interest in alternative systems such as Communism, the Liberty League, and new models of economic thought, such as Howard Scott’s Technocracy.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, a positive image of the dictator emerged as a fearful response to Depression era crowds and concern that irrational mass thinking might shatter American democracy and its necessary social cohesion.⁷⁹ According to Jan Plamper, as the population grew, the individual personality became more valued, and elevation above the

⁷⁶ Allen, 41-45.

⁷⁷ Allen, 158.

⁷⁸ Scott proposed a change to political representation that would erase partisan politics and correct the economic crises of the Depression by placing scientists and engineers into government who had the technical expertise to correct the economy. Howard Scott, *Introduction to Technocracy* (New York: The John Day Company, 1933), 29-30.

⁷⁹ Alpers, 19.

anonymous masses became a coveted position.⁸⁰ For these reasons, dictatorship was an important political fantasy for a heterogeneous group of Americans. Although most Americans were not attracted to dictatorship, for some it seemed necessary considering the socio-economic crises, either as a permanent, more efficient solution to the problems of modern life, or in the classical sense, as a temporary measure to put democracy back on course.⁸¹

While in the late 1920s and early 1930s the dictator was a benign or even positive presence, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia (1935), a re-armed Nazi Germany's march into the Rhineland (1936), the Moscow Trials (1936), and Civil War (1936-1939) in Spain shifted Americans' perceptions. By the mid-1930s, American cultural producers took note of a European order crumbling under the German-Italian Axis and European dictators were depicted in less personal terms. In the U.S., the figure of the dictator began to function as a rhetorical means of expressing domestic fears. The unruly crowd of the Depression became a fearful image of a regimented or mechanized group molded by the dictator. By the second half of the 1930s, dictatorship had become an object of political struggle rather than an acceptable strategy.

The Popular Front strategy represents one example of this struggle. This strategy was adopted by many liberals, radicals, and the Communist Party to organize all political efforts around the struggle between democracy and fascism. The Popular Front encompassed a diverse set of groups and individuals, drawn together by antifascist,

⁸⁰ Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 10.

⁸¹ Alpers, 3.

antiracist, and pro-labor politics with the belief that the Soviet Union stood at the forefront of such efforts around the world.⁸² Their opponents, represented by the anti-Stalinist left and liberal anticommunists, argued that the USSR was a dictatorship as brutal as Nazi Germany. Anti-Stalinist leftists were intellectually foundational in the development of the American critique of dictatorship, including a group who developed their critique of dictatorship from the pages of the *Partisan Review*. Clement Greenberg belonged to this group and, in the pages of *Review*, he developed his definition of kitsch.

The Popular Front and *Partisan Review*

In July of 1935, the Seventh World Congress of the Third Communist International defined the new Soviet policy of the Popular Front, an attempt to unite a broad spectrum of intellectuals in a common campaign against fascism, while favorably disposing non-aligned Marxists and liberals towards the Soviet Union.⁸³ Guided by tactics set forth by Georgy Dimitrov, the Popular Front depended on class collaboration, an international alliance of intellectuals, and the integration of liberals into the ranks of revolutionaries.⁸⁴ The Popular Front represented a shift in Comintern Policy that replaced many key and familiar party notions: the “people” replaced the “workers”;

⁸² E. H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon, 1982). The Soviet Union’s Constitution of 1936 formally recognized political and civil liberties and thus enabled Communists and the much larger group of those generally sympathetic to Russia to argue that the Soviet Union itself was well on its way to embracing democracy.

⁸³ Serge Guilbaut, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 16-18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

“nationalism” replaced “international socialism”; “reformism” replaced “revolution”; “cooperation” replaced “class conflict”; “defense of democracy” replaced “assault on capitalism.”⁸⁵

In 1935, the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), in line with the Third International’s response to fascist threats to the Soviet Union, called for a ‘united front,’ – a broad alliance of the Communist Party with other democratic groups to fight fascism. In the cultural field, this meant that Party members and allies would phase out sectarian, proletarian cultural organizations, such as the John Reed Clubs, and develop broad based organizations of artists where leadership would be shared with non-Communists.

The John Reed Clubs, founded in 1929 in memory of the American literary Bolshevik John Reed, were one of the first casualties of this redefinition of Soviet policy and its move away from revolutionary class struggle. They were disbanded and replaced by the League of American Writers, an organization that was formed to provide the necessary framework to accommodate more sympathetic individuals.⁸⁶ The CPUSA wooed non-Communist writers and artists considered progressive without overtly recruiting them or making political demands of them.

The Popular Front aimed to appeal to progressive intellectuals to work in a communal, classless spirit, effectively naturalizing Communism as Americanism.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 21.

⁸⁶ J.B Gilbert, *Writers and Partisan: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 91-92.

⁸⁷ The Popular Front’s goal was the elimination of differences of opinion and sources of conflict among antifascist groups. To accomplish this, the Communist strategy was to seduce bourgeois personalities, reaffirming the value of culture. Ibid.

According to Andrew Ross, the effect was to integrate the Popular Front into mainstream American culture so completely that the question, “What is a Communist – was less easy to answer.”⁸⁸ Due to the Popular Front’s wide reach and attempts to integrate culture, anti-Stalinists who opposed the programs of the Popular Front associated it with the lower middle-class and middlebrow art/culture. The Popular Front was viewed by anti-Stalinists as an organization that represented sub-intellectual tastes and rejected “serious” art.

Many of the New York intellectuals who had supported Soviet socialism until the mid-1930s became anti-Stalinist socialists (or Trotskyists) following the undemocratic anti-intellectualism of Stalinism during the 1936 Moscow Trials. These four trials charged virtually all the living leaders of the Russian Revolution with treachery, sabotage, and espionage against the Soviet state. Stalin, the behind-the-scenes organizer of the trials, was not charged.⁸⁹ As a result, anti-Stalinist intellectual attacks from the late thirties on found refuge in Trotskyism.⁹⁰ Trotskyism became the home of intellectual

⁸⁸ Ross, 23.

⁸⁹ The trials were accompanied by a mass purge that affected all of Soviet society. It is estimated that millions of workers, peasants, party members, intellectuals, military officers, and government officials were arrested and executed. The trials in America simultaneously consolidated the anti-Stalinist left while setting the stage for its disintegration. Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left, From the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 128.

⁹⁰ In addition to offering an alternative to Stalinism, Trotskyism emphasized an autonomy of art from politics, a belief in artistic freedom (in both form and content), and a pivotal role to the artist as an agent of revolution central to the future of socialism. Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism: 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25-30.

independence on the left, privileging artistic freedom over and against political allegiance to the Popular Front's political discipline.

In the 1920s and 1930s, New York intellectuals pursued an increasingly political line of cultural inquiry. In response to the uneasy postwar period, the New York group redefined and reshaped the meaning of the term intellectual to exclude, undermine, and discredit those they found to be responsible for the Depression. Criticism became “the representative or Archetypal act of the intellectual.”⁹¹ Many of their debates developed within the pages of the *Partisan Review*. Founded by Philip Rahv and William Phillips, the *Partisan Review* emerged in 1934 as the literary organ of the John Reed Club, the writers' arm of the American Communist Party.

Against this cultural backdrop, the *Partisan Review* became one of the most influential magazines of its time, in which intellectuals debated the role of the arts in culture. Initially, the magazine's editors intended to publish the best writing of the New York John Reed Clubs, as well as creative and critical literature from the viewpoint of the revolutionary working class. The *Partisan Review* focused on how to define the role of the artist in a time of cultural crises, specifically, how American artists should continue modernist formal experiments while still taking a radical political stance.⁹²

The appeal of Marxism to the *Partisan* group hinged on three fundamental beliefs about its meaning: that Marxism could provide a unifying philosophy to end longstanding

⁹¹ Randall Jarrell, “The Age of Criticism,” *Partisan Review* 12(2):185-201, March – April 1952.

⁹² The crises here defined as the position of the artist stuck between continuing in an American tradition as well as a Marxists revolutionary position. *Ibid.*

divisions in American culture; that Marxism embodied and would advance cosmopolitan values; and that Marxism supported respect for the past within an appreciation of constant change.⁹³ As far as William Philips and Philip Rahv, the *Partisan Review*'s founders, were concerned, a literary theory derived from Marxism could be used to understand and preserve the best literature of the past while creating a basis for a new culture.

Their disillusionment with Marxism began in 1936, a result of Stalin's Moscow Trials (1936-38), and the Russo-German pact (signed in 1936). Though many intellectuals sided with the USSR, as they had launched the Popular Front, the trials of Trotsky led them to realize that communism could lead to the same kind of injustice as fascism. The disappointment intellectuals felt with the liberal wing of the Stalin aligned Popular Front led to intensifying criticism, widening the gulf between Trotskyists and Stalinists.⁹⁴

The *Partisan Review* abruptly halted publication in the fall of 1936 and resumed publication with a new political position in 1937. The editor's note to their December 1937 volume states:

Any magazine, we believe, that aspires to a place in the vanguard of literature today, will be revolutionary in tendency; but we are also convinced that any such magazine will be unequivocally independent. PARTISAN REVIEW is aware of its responsibility to the revolutionary movement in general, but we disclaim obligation to any of its organized political expressions. Indeed we think that the cause of revolutionary

⁹³ Jachec, 25-30.

⁹⁴ Neil Jumonville, *Critical Crossings: The New York Intellectuals in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 9.

literature is best served by a policy of no commitments to any political party.⁹⁵

Partisan Review was reconceived as a kind of “international” of intellectuals who were devoted to redefining and preserving the avant-garde untethered to factional politics. Essential to the *Partisan Review*’s interpretation of Marxism was the imperative to recognize and resist the degeneration of the Communist movement, which had been responsible for the misdirection of revolutionary culture towards the policy of the Popular Front.⁹⁶ The magazine began to disengage from proletarian literature and instead turn towards an intellectual community that had been alienated from leftist politics. Phillips and Rahv were concerned that “leftism” and Popular Front Americanism had undermined the advance of literature to the point that the gains of modernism were threatened. This reflected their belief that the Popular Front only appealed to low/middle class culture. They argued that avant-garde literature had the potential to change the literary consciousness of America, in contrast to Communist literary efforts, which relied on static, predictable patterns. Instead, the *Partisan Review* championed literature that was cosmopolitan in its ideas but national in its content.⁹⁷ Ultimately, the *Partisan Review*

⁹⁵ *Partisan Review*, December 1937, Vol. 4, No. 1, 4.

⁹⁶ This position is most evident in the magazine’s reassertion of the theoretical purity of Marxism by a temporary identification with Trotskyism – a form of Marxism which appealed to the editors’ highly intellectualized radicalism as well as a notion of artistic practice distinct from politics. *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Phillips spoke to this break thirty years later, stating “we felt that the Communist party was a bad influence organizationally and ideologically”; but on the other hand, “it seemed to us the only party capable of doing anything, the only party capable of providing some kind of central force around which to organize.” Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1935-1945* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 95.

would condemn the Communist literary program and the Popular Front as anti-urban, anti-intellectual, utilitarian, and dictatorial, taking the position that only a “Europeanization of culture,” and abandonment of proletarian literature could revitalize and save American art.⁹⁸

By 1937, many of the *Partisan Review* contributors disliked Stalin as much as Hitler and did not trust Franklin Roosevelt.⁹⁹ The *Partisan Review* editors argued that capitalism, not Hitler, was the real enemy and urged its readers to support U.S. neutrality in the European war.¹⁰⁰ Against this background, the *Partisan Review* developed a critique that linked “totalitarianism” and “dictatorship” in a way that broadly referred to restrictions on cultural freedom: “*Partisan Review* strove from the first against its drive to equate the interest of literature with those of factional politics. Our reappearance on an independent basis signifies our conviction that the totalitarian trend is inherent in that movement and that it can no longer be combated from within.”¹⁰¹ The “totalitarian state” came to be associated with foreign political ideas, the expansion of state authority, the degeneration of political liberties and of American political self-understanding.

Trotskyism

⁹⁸William Phillips and Philip Rahv, “Literature in a Political Decade,” in *New Letters in America*, ed. Horace Gregory (New York: Norton, 1937), 178.

⁹⁹ In this period American radicals were nearly all anti-war and did not fear that the dictators in Europe might harm the United States from the outside. When radicals referenced “the Fascist menace” they meant an American fascist threat led by Roosevelt or an army supported by big business. Edelman, 322.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰¹ *Partisan Review*, December 1937, Vol. 4, No. 1, 4.

After breaking with the Communist Party and relaunching in December of 1937, the *Partisan Review* embraced Leon Trotsky's literary and political ideals. A Russian-Ukrainian Marxist, Trotsky had been central to the revolutions leading to the establishment of the Soviet Union and its early government, but his criticisms of Stalin caused him to lose his positions and forced him into exile, becoming an indispensable figure to the anti-Stalinist left. Trotsky developed a set of distinctive ideas about literature and culture. For example, his collected essays, *Problems of Everyday Life* (1924), argues that the mastery and critical assimilation of culture is central to the proletarian revolution.¹⁰² *Literature and Revolution* (1924) demonstrates Trotsky's impatience with critics who claimed that a political ideology might enhance an aesthetic work or guarantee a more profound exploration of life than through imagination.¹⁰³ According to William Phillips, Trotsky was a brilliant thinker as he "not only saw in literature a mirror of society but was acutely conscious of those qualities which, taken together, make up the social vision of a work of art." Phillips was taken with Trotsky's "polemic against those critics who were impatient with history and wanted to establish by decree a proletarian art."¹⁰⁴

In December of 1937 Leon Trotsky published a letter in the *Partisan Review* in which he analyzed the dire position of the American artist, for whom he believed the crises of capitalism and the immanence of war were pressing realities. Trotsky blamed

¹⁰² Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life: Creating the Foundations for a New Society in Revolutionary Russia* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 144.

¹⁰³ Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 127.

¹⁰⁴ *Partisan Review* 4, March 1938, 17-19.

the cultural crisis on the decadence of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie while also attacking Stalinism's totalitarian conception of art.¹⁰⁵

The decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed, inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art. Furthermore, a declining capitalism already finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however, little, to our epoch ... Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decay and decline of bourgeois society.¹⁰⁶

Trotsky was optimistic, however, that the solution lay in the hands of independent artists who had the decisive role of combining free art with revolutionary effort. Offering ideas on the revolutionary role artists and their art could play, Trotsky states, "generally speaking, art is the expression of man's need for those major benefits of which a society of classes has deprived him. That is why a protest against reality, either conscious or unconscious, active or passive, optimistic or pessimistic, always forms part of a really creative work."¹⁰⁷

In 1938, Trotsky published another article in the *Partisan Review* titled, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," cowritten with Surrealist Andre Breton. The article was a polemic against the governmental control of art and of Soviet control specifically. According to Trotsky, many leftists made the mistake of supporting the victorious Soviet revolution, giving fealty to the new privileged stratum of the Stalinist

¹⁰⁵ Trotsky saw the artist as free of partisanship but not of politics. Leon Trotsky, "Art and Politics," *Partisan Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3, August/September 1938, 3-11.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

bureaucracy instead of declaring allegiance to the international working class.

Furthermore, they failed to perceive how the fate of Soviet art testified to the character of art's relation to revolution. To combat this control, Trotsky argued that the artist, by insisting on total freedom of artistic expression, advanced a revolutionary spirit aimed at the emancipation of all people.¹⁰⁸

We believe that the supreme task of our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art.¹⁰⁹

For Trotsky, art, culture, and politics needed a new perspective without which humanity would not develop. Trotsky's urgent demand for artistic freedom was a response to what he saw as Stalinist corruption but, he maintained that this perspective should not be addressed initially to the masses, as progressive ideas only find the masses in their final stages.

Clement Greenberg wrote "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" on the heels of two publications by Trotsky, "Art and Revolution" and "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art."¹¹⁰ Both essays by Trotsky develop the idea of the creative act as driving force behind radical agency and art's political importance to destabilize bourgeois

¹⁰⁸ Andre Breton and Diego Rivera (Breton and Leon Trotsky), "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," translated by Dwight MacDonald, *Partisan Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 1938, 51.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "Art and Revolution" was written in June 1938 and "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art," was written in July 1938.

society in decline.¹¹¹ Trotsky's intellectual framework allowed Greenberg to disconnect from earlier Marxist (Popular Front) aspirations of uniting artist and worker. Greenberg borrowed from Trotsky the artist as revolutionary agent and revolutionary potential of art; however, he differed on seeing the artist as socialist agent. Instead "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," eschews a strategy of political action by the artist for an emphasis on recuperating culture. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" gives art a passive role in the struggle for socialism to sustain an indeterminate period in which art is dependent on the bourgeoisie.¹¹² As capitalism is already in decline, Greenberg instead advances a politically disengaged role for art to preserve culture for the inevitable rise of socialism, with its primary role being to protect art from kitsch.

Avant-Garde and Kitsch

Written with concern for the fate of progressive political movements, Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) aimed to create a haven for radical progress within the realm of individualistic culture. A meditation on culture and the culmination of Greenberg's contributions to the *Partisan Review* between 1936 and 1940, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" contributed to the developing discourse on art, revolution, and cultural change. The essay is his attempt as a young writer to situate himself within the Marxist

¹¹¹ Trotsky renounced the *Partisan Review* in 1939 for having "nothing to say" as it swapped practical political concerns for what he described as a vague interest in cultural freedom. Leon Trotsky, "The Future of Partisan Review," in *Art and Revolution*. Leon Trotsky, *Art and Revolution* "Writings on Literature, Politics, and Culture" (Pathfinder Press, 1971), 101.

¹¹² Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 38.

intelligentsia of New York. Greenberg's essay addresses two issues: the meaning of abstraction and the question of art's autonomy.

Born in 1909, Clement Greenberg was a member of the first generation of New York intellectuals. He began writing seriously in 1937 while simultaneously working for the U.S. Customs Service in New York.¹¹³ In 1939, Greenberg was introduced to writer and critic, Dwight MacDonald who was one of the first critics to question his relationship to the Communist Party during the Moscow Trials. Subsequently MacDonald was introduced to William Phillips and Philip Rahv, who induced him to break with the party and join the editorial board of the newly formed *Partisan Review*.¹¹⁴ MacDonald was introduced to Greenberg by two contributors to the *Partisan Review*, Harold Rosenberg and Lionel Abel.¹¹⁵ In a formative exchange with Greenberg, MacDonald considered the Russian peasantry, who seemed to like whatever Stalin endorsed and attributed their docility to their lack of previous cultural exposure.¹¹⁶

Greenberg responded:

It must be pointed out that in the West, if not everywhere else as well, the ruling class has always to some extent imposed a crude version of its own cultural bias upon those it ruled, if only in the matter of seeking diversions

¹¹³ Greenberg worked at the Department of Wine and Liquors. Adam Gopnik, "The Power Critic," *The New Yorker*, March 16, 1998.

¹¹⁴ MacDonald agreed to house the magazine's editorial office in his apartment and his wife, Nancy Macdonald, served as its business manager. Louis Menand, "Browbeaten: Dwight MacDonald's War on Midcult," *The New Yorker*, August 29, 2011.

¹¹⁵ MacDonald later claimed he "invented" Clement Greenberg. Ibid.

¹¹⁶ MacDonald would later go on to state that the United States was becoming a "mass society which implies authoritarian controls and the kind of irrational – subrational, rather – nationalist ideology we have seen developed to its highest pitch in Germany and Russia." Rubinfeld, 51.

such as popular magazines or fiction. There is a constant seepage from top to bottom and Kitsch is the common sewer.”¹¹⁷

Taken with this assertion, MacDonald encouraged Greenberg to expand this idea into an essay for the *Partisan Review*. The result, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” analyzed modern art as a reaction to changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution.¹¹⁸ In Greenberg’s analysis, the Industrial Revolution made universal literacy and cheaply manufactured culture – i.e. Kitsch – possible, in turn providing entertainment and cheap diversion. This manufactured culture killed off folk art, the only genuine popular culture. For art to be avant-garde, and hence serious, the artist needed to turn inward, away from exterior distraction and alienation. Greenberg, in agreement with Trotsky’s “Art and Politics,” saw capitalism and the decline of the ruling class as the cause of crises in Western culture.

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” argued that individualistic art has the revolutionary responsibility to oppose mass thinking and bring about the socialist revolution. Greenberg diverged from Trotsky’s belief that the revolutionary power of the artist lay in his political consciousness. Lacking Trotsky’s optimism, Greenberg’s solution lay instead in the modernist avant-garde, believing that only the avant-garde could preserve the quality of culture against the influence of kitsch.¹¹⁹

In seeking to go beyond what he called Alexandrianism or highly elaborated styles, Western bourgeois society had produced avant-garde culture. A superior

¹¹⁷ John O’Brian ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism: Vol. 2, Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986., xxi.

¹¹⁸ Rubinfeld, 111.

¹¹⁹ Greenberg, 34-49.

consciousness of history – more precisely, the appearance of historical criticism of society – made this possible.¹²⁰

Greenberg's avant-garde is historically specific, both a product of its moment and conditioned by it.¹²¹ In this view, the avant-garde signifies a range of social postures and strategies for artists through which they can differentiate themselves from social and cultural structures while simultaneously intervening in them. According to Greenberg, the avant-garde insists upon the continuation of progress in the realm of culture as a politically revolutionary force and stimulates individual consciousness, just as kitsch corresponds to and erodes mass consciousness. Greenberg envisions the virtuous artist with a heightened consciousness as one who strives to connect with a “wild,” and hence genuine, sensibility. According to Rubinfeld, “Clem sketched a portrait of these hot-blooded, independent Americans, heir to the romantic individualism of the cowboy and the lonely frontier but carrying, deep within, the genes of their aristocratic forebears, the artists who gave birth to the European tradition.”¹²²

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch” describes a scenario in which artists, who experience the extreme isolation of Modernity, overcome its alienation in a transformation. We can see echoes of this in Trotsky's “Towards a Free Revolutionary Art,” in which he

¹²⁰ Greenberg, 35.

¹²¹ “The defining parameters of art recognized as modern were adumbrated in the practices and procedures of artmaking in Paris in the 1850s-1870s. Art, it was claimed, should have no aim but itself: art should use its own techniques to bring itself into question. This set of artistic practices and aesthetic ideology can be rightly characterized as avant-garde.” Fred Orton & Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 142.

¹²² Rubinfeld, 101

describes the importance of the artist's insistence on total freedom of expression. For Trotsky and Greenberg, this freedom advances a revolutionary spirit emancipating all people. Greenberg borrowed from Trotsky the idea that embodying an individualistic consciousness is itself a revolutionary act, and that revolutionary ideas in art cannot be imposed from the outside. He stated "...it is true that once the avant-garde had succeeded in "detaching" itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeoisie. The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological struggle ..."¹²³ In other words, avant-garde artists were not revolutionary because they enacted direct political interventions, but because they expressed themselves freely. To accept an outside authority would be to reduce the avant-garde to an art practice that channeled, rather than reflected, a message from source to audience. As the survival of the avant-garde depended on content, and since artists could not turn to the forms of society to find content, their search turned inward.¹²⁴

"Avant-Garde and Kitsch," only Greenberg's second piece of criticism, is an orthodox Marxist reading with an important twist. Whereas traditional Marxist analysis would generally condemn both the avant-garde and kitsch, Greenberg justified and defended the avant-garde as genuine culture, stating "[B]y no other means is it possible today to create art and literature of a high order."¹²⁵ Greenberg translated the antithesis between the revolutionary individual and the regressive mass from the world of politics

¹²³ Greenberg, 36.

¹²⁴ This inward turning meant that art could not depict anything outside the medium of painting.

¹²⁵ Greenberg, 38.

to that of culture, turning the cultural conflict between avant-garde and kitsch into the ultimate battle for the continuation of social progress. In this sense, “Avant-Garde” and kitsch reconciles the *Partisan Reviews* allegiance to Marxism via Trotsky and modernism. Greenberg’s stress on art without social or “party” baggage meant a return to the idea of “art for art’s sake.” In this essay, anti-Stalinism/Trotskyism gave way to a separation of art from mass culture. An emphasis on cultural battles at the expense of politically engaged art, is a defining element of Greenberg’s use of kitsch.

Kitsch

The historical reality of the 1930s caused Greenberg to conclude that the bourgeoisie were no longer the social, economic, or political basis for the avant-garde. Once a ruling class, the bourgeoisie were weakened by the rising power of the masses, and they began to sacrifice “genuine” art or culture.¹²⁶ With culture in decline, the ruling elites attempted to keep economic and political power by erasing distinctions of taste. The ruling elites abandoned a distinctive or “high” taste, created the illusion of solidarity with the masses. Kitsch emerged from the absence of a genuine elite culture.

Greenberg’s attention to kitsch and mass culture in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” came out of concerns with the quality of past cultures and whether ordinary individuals had the potential to evolve to a higher cultural level. Greenberg transformed the earlier Marxist economic critique of capitalism into moral and cultural criticism. His work no longer contained a critique of the ruling classes who exploited the proletariat for their

¹²⁶ Ibid., 39-40.

surplus value via property or religion. Instead, he criticized kitsch for its exploitation of the emotional needs of the masses, who are themselves produced by industrial society. Put differently, he criticized capitalism not for the harsh life it imposes on the masses but for the uninteresting and vulgar culture it provides.

“Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” while not the first work to discuss kitsch, defined its American associations, placing the word into circulation in the arts. Greenberg conflated the origins of kitsch degeneration with the English Romantic poets: “the Romantics can be considered the original sinners whose guilt kitsch inherited. They showed kitsch how.”¹²⁷ With this historical origin in mind, Greenberg defined kitsch as a category of art that appeals to sentimentality and false emotions, while providing a pre-packaged and formulaic aesthetic.¹²⁸ In his view, kitsch developed to satisfy the “new urban masses,” which possessed a capacity for “boredom” and insensitivity to the values of genuine culture.¹²⁹ Kitsch represented a way of thinking without questioning, a form of consciousness appropriate to the urban masses who lacked the ability for reflection.

Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no “natural” urgency within himself that will drive him toward Picasso despite all difficulties. In the end the peasant will gravitate to kitsch when he feels like looking at art, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort.¹³⁰ Rather than elevating the masses to a new awareness through taste, as socialist doctrine led its adherents to expect,

¹²⁷ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 9-10.

¹²⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 40.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

Greenberg saw the masses impoverish their existence through distractions offered by cheap mass culture, effectively suppressing their own individuality.¹³¹ For Greenberg, this alienated state caused the masses to accept National Socialism or other forms of totalitarianism. He expected that mass culture, produced to meet the needs of an alienated mass, would inevitably lead to fascism.¹³² He perceived an imminent danger that without a development of mass consciousness, kitsch would become a tool to control the actions of entire populations. In this respect, Greenberg (and the *Partisan Review*) shared Tocqueville's fear that an undifferentiated mass of individuals, fueled by an overly enthusiastic democratic or egalitarian impulse, would create a suffocating totalitarianism.¹³³

In its most sinister examples, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" pictured kitsch as a tool used by dictators, such as Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini.¹³⁴ Milan Kundera termed it

¹³¹ The intellectual history behind Greenberg's critique can be traced back to the early writings of Marx and German sociological romanticism. The transformation of Hegel's philosophy of the spirit into a doctrine of criticism, directed against the existing institutions of civil society laid special stress on the phenomenon of alienation, on the condition of man when he is not permeated by the "spirit." Jumonville, 154.

¹³² The fact that Fascism triumphed in Germany Italy, and Spain before the "masses" in these and other countries began to enjoy the benefits of mass culture, raises no issue for Greenberg. Ibid.

¹³³ Jumonville, 164.

¹³⁴ Identifying what exactly kitsch is in this scenario is difficult as the Nazis also espoused the dangers of kitsch going as far as to have "Anti-Kitsch Laws" that attempted to control "the dangerous emptiness of kitsch whenever there is a misplaced application of national symbols, and whenever there is no correspondence between the object and symbol. "What is interesting here is the way in which kitsch operates similarly – but for entirely different reasons – in support of completely different value systems. Natalia Skradol, "Fascism and Kitsch: The Nazi Campaign Against Kitsch," *German Studies Review* 34, no 3 (2011): 598.

“totalitarian kitsch,” characterized by the arts mixing with politics, integration of art into the service of the state, and propaganda.¹³⁵ Bernard Rosenberg shared this conception of culture: “mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste and to brutalize our sense,” it paves “the way to totalitarianism.”¹³⁶ While totalitarian kitsch centers on the state’s relationship with the masses, Greenberg alludes to a further category, what I refer to as “dictator kitsch.” Dictator kitsch differs from kitsch, which centers on sentimentality and a misrecognition of an object’s “true” artistic value, and totalitarian kitsch, in which the state consciously manipulates its citizens via sentimental art or messaging. The extra step in dictator kitsch is to assume a direct path of entry into the dictator’s mind.¹³⁷ The inner nature of the dictator who reads, sees, or hears, works of popular culture is inferred from the content of the work, on the assumption that every image, every event corresponds to some deep and central need in their personality. Greenberg identified this inner nature that is reflected in the dictator’s desire for kitsch as a lack of virtue. Greenberg’s definition of kitsch connects taste and virtue built on the model of the dictator. In this line of thinking, Greenberg borrows from the theories of Hermann Broch, who condemned kitsch extensively, beginning with his work on the subject in 1933. In

¹³⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. By Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial, 1984), 251-252.

¹³⁶ Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, ed. *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), 3-13.

¹³⁷ “the personal philistinism of Hitler and Stalin is not accidental to the political roles they play... Their personal philistinism simply adds brutality and double-darkness to policies they would be forced to support anyhow ...” Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 48.

“Notes on the Problem of Kitsch”¹³⁸ a talk from 1950 that revisited over two decades of reflections on kitsch, Broch described kitsch as unethical and evil, and linked it to Hitler and Nero. Broch states, “It is not mere chance that Hitler ... was an enthusiastic disciple of kitsch. He liked the full-bodied type of kitsch and the saccharine type. He found both ‘beautiful.’ Nero, too, was an ardent supporter of beauty, and possibly even more artistically gifted than Hitler.”¹³⁹ In his condemnation of kitsch, Broch linked the dictator’s immorality to taste. Greenberg accepted this connection between taste and character. While Greenberg saw kitsch as symptomatic of the dangerous integration of politics and aesthetics and its effects on a polity, he also wielded it politically. With kitsch, Greenberg solidified a tradition of equating political difference to aesthetic deviancy, embodied in the figure of a tasteless dictator.

At its core, Greenberg’s argument relies on the conflation of taste and morality. Through linking kitsch to the dictator this concept can easily be extended to the political or cultural “other,” or uneducated masses. By making kitsch the enemy Greenberg substitutes the aesthetic aims of Trotsky’s revolutionary engagement. Pessimistic from the standpoint of a revolutionary resolution to Western crises, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” restored hope to artists by making kitsch the target of criticism and, because it was tied to totalitarian powers, a symbol of evil. By fighting with art against mass culture, artists could enjoy the illusion of fighting against repugnant regimes, using weapons of the elite. Though initially rooted in Trotsky’s views, Greenberg’s position led to a break with the

¹³⁸ Hermann Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” 49-76.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65

political aims of Trotskyism by emphasizing the importance of conservative values to carry on artistic tradition.

Greenberg's definition of kitsch has persisted into the present and continues to be prevalent in the reception of political imagery in the American context, particularly in regards of dictators, political rivals, and taste. Greenberg's break with Trotsky and conservative turn from politics to cultural battles via kitsch, is crucial for the ways I will decode instances of dictator kitsch during the U.S.-Iraq war. Despite varied uses and the growing acceptance of kitsch as an aesthetic category, dictator kitsch still follows Greenberg's formula without deviation. As such, the following chapters continue the thread initiated here by looking at examples of dictator kitsch historically as well as those used during the U.S.-Iraq invasion. My aim is to understand the ways in which Greenberg's conception of political aesthetics as kitsch (or dictator kitsch) might inform a greater understanding of political narratives in the present.

Chapter 2

Dictator Kitsch and Saddam Hussein's Taste

On April 12, 2003, John Moore, working as an embedded photographer for the Associated Press, documented U.S. soldiers as they discovered a split-level, one bedroom town home in an upscale, central Baghdad neighborhood known as a Baath party enclave and home to generals and senior party officials.¹⁴⁰ [Figure 2.1] The townhome was entered during a search for weapons and looters. In nearby residences, soldiers discovered 6,000 Beretta pistols, 650 Sig Sauer pistols, 12 cases of Sterling submachine guns, four cases of anti-tank missiles, and thousands of rounds of ammunition.¹⁴¹ In this residence, however, U.S. soldiers found something unique: Saddam Hussein's "love shack," used by Hussein and his onetime mistress, Parisoula Lampsos. American press coverage depicted the residence as resembling "a playboy's fantasy straight from the 1960s."¹⁴²

The media coverage that accompanied the early days of the invasion of Iraq in April 2003, placed an emphasis on Saddam Hussein's personal tastes. His "love shack" and its contents were used to describe his character and his tastes, allegedly reinforcing justifications for the war. Moore's photographs and their reception invoke dictator kitsch, the unique alignment of personal tastes and political motives. Put differently, dictator kitsch defines taste as revealing a conscious staging of "personality" or conflation of taste

¹⁴⁰ Chris Tomlinson, Associated Press writer, posted Apr. 13 at 12:01 am. <http://christomlinson.net/safe-house-in-1960s-style-troops-discover-what-they-call-a-saddam-hideaway/> (accessed July 18, 2016).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sky-News, "Saddam's 'Love Shack,'" April 13, 2003.

and morality. Dictator kitsch is built on the fantasy of access to another's mind and behaviors driven by their attachment to and collection of objects. In this specific instance, artworks found within Hussein's suburban style, 1970's townhome have been read as a symptom of his taste due to their explicit suggestion of male sexual desire. Hussein's "love shack" and his taste for sci-fi/fantasy art have been received as dictator kitsch for the way they expose "the system by not understanding the rules." Understood through Lacanian theory, the voyeurism of dictator kitsch establishes a dynamic in which those looking see a perversion of the symbolic order represented in the compensatory objects of dictators, in turn revealing their non-mastery or lack.¹⁴³ Historically, this is consistent with the evaluation of dictators' belongings and tastes as a routine form of debasement, exhibition of non-mastery, or in finalized defeat.

This American press's reading of Hussein's private home is extraordinary from the standpoint of representation, both in the ways the war in Iraq was aestheticized, and in the extent to which aesthetics drove political understanding. In this instance, kitsch was used to understand Hussein as a non-rational actor, someone to not take seriously. Labeling Hussein's taste as kitsch manufactured a wartime narrative consistent with American propaganda, in which the antagonist is shown as uncultured and hence a threat to Western civilization.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis Book XVII* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 29-39.

¹⁴⁴ Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 24-25.

This chapter seeks to understand the American reception of Saddam Hussein's taste as dictator kitsch through the embedded reporting of John Moore and the spaces he documented. It will focus on the sci-fi/fantasy paintings that Hussein collected alongside a history of dictators' tastes and interior spaces, and their reception by the media.

Embedded Reporting

From the beginning of the Vietnam War, the press enjoyed unprecedented access to the front lines due in part to the growth of television as a popular medium for prime-time news. As the first "television war," Vietnam exposed significant differences between the interests of the reporters covering it and the military. Specifically, the military sought optimism to build public support while the press reported the "whole story," which included images and reporting that undercut "official" accounts.¹⁴⁵ For this reason, Vietnam represents a shift in the relationship between the military and the media, one that caused the government to make a greater effort to control information made available to the American public. The press-military relations became especially strained following the Tet offensive in January 1968, which exposed administration falsehoods and sealed reporters' mistrust of the military. As the press became more skeptical, the

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Paul and James Kim, *Reporters on the Battlefield: The Embedded Press System in Historical Context* (Virginia: Rand, National Security Research Division, 2004), 37.

military turned on the press for pushing coverage that appeared subversive and unpatriotic.¹⁴⁶

As a result, the legacy of Vietnam is one of longstanding and mutual mistrust between the military and press. This legacy in turn fostered a common belief among military leaders and the political right that a liberal-leaning press “lost” the war by demoralizing the public with horrific images. According to Barbara Tischler, this played out as the press “broke stories of American atrocities, fragging in the military and inflated body counts” as well as labeling “the daily Saigon briefings the “Five O’clock Follies.”¹⁴⁷ This handling of the war resulted in changes to the way the military dealt with a press they now viewed as subversive and unpatriotic. This shift in attitude led to an ongoing struggle between the American media and military over access that continued to play itself out in a series of conflicts leading up to the second war in Iraq.

The Falklands conflict in 1982 was the first major campaign in which the United States and the United Kingdom had been publicly involved since Vietnam. Decisions as to how reporters would be accommodated were left to the last-minute, leaving journalists ill-prepared, badly treated, and heavily restricted. Despite this chaotic beginning, many of the practices initiated in this campaign underpin the current model of American military

¹⁴⁶ Lloyd Gardner, “America’s War in Vietnam: The End of Exceptionalism?” in D. Michael Shafer, ed. *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 1990), 21.

¹⁴⁷ Barbara Tischler, “Promise and Paradox: The 1960’s and American Optimism” in D. Michael Shafer, ed., *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 47.

news management.¹⁴⁸ During Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada on October 25, 1983, military advisers, who had once been junior officers during Vietnam, declined to take press coverage into consideration when planning the operation. News chiefs and journalists representing most of the major news organizations made strident complaints about the exclusion and censorship of journalists. As a result, a commission was set up under Major General Winant Sidle which would make recommendations regarding the handling of the media in future operations. The ensuing Sidle report asserts the media's responsibility to inform the American public on the progress of wars involving U.S. forces and the military's responsibility to support the media in this task through eight recommendations. These recommendations include public-affairs (planning in advance of a campaign should be coordinated with military); that an ongoing pool should be implemented in unforeseen crises; that membership in pools requires journalists' compliance with guidelines, and that escorts should be provided to assist journalists (among others).¹⁴⁹ This point in press-military relations led to the creation of the first National Media Pool in 1985, establishing a preselected group of reporters who could be activated to cover operations planned in secret.¹⁵⁰

Despite the Sidle report recommendations, the same history of exclusion repeated itself when U.S. troops invaded Panama City in December of 1989. From the first day,

¹⁴⁸ Justin Lewis, Rod Brookes, Nick Mosdell, and Terry Threadgold, *Shoot First And Ask Questions Later: Media Coverage of the 2003 Iraq War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 4.

¹⁴⁹ Assistant Secretary of Defense, "CJCS Media-Military Relations Panel," (National Technical Reports Library, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1984). Fred Hiatt, "Report to Joint Chiefs," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1984.

¹⁵⁰ Paul and Kim, 40.

both the established pool and three hundred independent journalists were either stranded or grounded at Howard Air Force Base. The First Gulf War in 1991 saw some improvements to press access, although Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney and Commanding General Norman Schwarzkopf felt that the press was irresponsible and in need of control.¹⁵¹ After negotiations, media executives and the Pentagon agreed to a system of press pools and military escorts, with the military having the right to review and potentially censor all printed reports before sent to news agencies in the U.S. which severely restrained the media's ability to report.¹⁵²

During the first Gulf War, nearly 1,600 reporters were in Saudi Arabia, with 186 accredited to travel in escorted pools. The military exerted extensive controls on press movement and instead provided dramatic footage which satisfied the public's desire to "see" the war. In this regard, the military took a more proactive role in using news coverage for its own benefit. The result was a sanitized picture of events that often personified the war as a contest between George H. W. Bush and Saddam Hussein (who was portrayed as a "new Hitler," "moral pygmy," and "lord of death") or Pentagon-supplied coverage of "smart bombs" in which impressive videogame-type imagery pitted the high tech Patriot missile, a spinoff of the "Star Wars" program, against the brutal cold war Scud missile, with the contrast between these two weapons effectively becoming a

¹⁵¹ Michael D. Steger, "Slicing the Gordian Knot: A Proposal to Reform Military Regulation of Media Coverage of Combat Operations," *University of San Francisco Law Review*, Vol. 287, Sumer 1994, 974.

¹⁵² John R. MacArthur and Ben H. Bagdikian, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 15.

microcosm for the war at large.¹⁵³ The impact of Vietnam's lessons were clear in Bush's statement following the conclusion to the Gulf War: "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all."¹⁵⁴ In a Gallup poll dated from January 17-20, 1991 which measured the public's perception of the media coverage, approximately 63 percent of the public believed the media provided "excellent" coverage.¹⁵⁵

Following the first Gulf war, in part as a response to a petition to the DoD from executives from major news organizations, the press and military came to a new agreement. These executives' demands included limiting press pools, access to military units, no prior review of stories, and no military escorts.¹⁵⁶ This agreement was formalized in the DoD *Principles for News Media Coverage of DoD Operations* which set down guiding principles for future press coverage of military operations.¹⁵⁷ The process of "embedding," in which a reporter deployed and lived with a military unit for a lengthy period or operation, first took place in Bosnia in 1995. However, a critical change took place at the beginning of the second War in Iraq, primarily due to the size of the campaign, which precluded the military simply ignoring the press. As a result, the DoD considered a massive deployment of reporters with troops, one larger than it had in any previous operation while instituting few constraints.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵³ On Jan. 25-27, 1991, Hussein's morality was famously caricatured when oil was released into the Persian Gulf creating an environmental disaster killing cormorants and other migrating bird life. BBC, January 27, 1991.

¹⁵⁴ *The Independent*, February 3, 1991.

¹⁵⁵ Gallup poll conducted January 19-20, 1991.

¹⁵⁶ *Nation magazine v. US Dept. of Defense*, 762 F. Supp. 1558 (S.D.N.Y. 1991)

¹⁵⁷ Major Barry E. Venable, "The Army and the Media," *Military Review*, January-February 2002, 66-71.

¹⁵⁸ Paul and Kim, 50.

As the United States readied for a second war in Iraq in late fall of 2001, American public opinion was targeted through public relations techniques including the use of focus groups, market research, PR organizations, and media analysis.¹⁵⁹ Many of the media strategies employed by the George W. Bush administration were a continuation of those used during the first Gulf war conflict, specifically, the role of embedded journalists. The shaping of media during the second war in Iraq is largely indebted to the George H. W. Bush's administration's response to the "Vietnam Syndrome" and failure of the American government to fight a war on the information front as successfully as on the field of battle.¹⁶⁰ On February of 2003, the Department of Defense published a document containing "public affairs guidance on embedding media."¹⁶¹ This document provided an outline of principles for strategic media management, the importance of the media in shaping public opinion, and the degree to which embedded journalists would live, work, and travel as part of combat units.¹⁶² Shortly after the publication of this document, and aware that Iraq had a large information campaign underway, Victoria Clarke, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, pushed Donald Rumsfeld to "embed" reporters with troops.¹⁶³ In 2003, the US Department of Defense announced that roughly eight hundred journalists would remain "embedded" alongside specific units and allowed

¹⁵⁹ Gary S. Messinger, *The Battle for the Mind: War and Peace in the Era of Mass Communication* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 218.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁶¹ Department of Defense, *Public affairs guidance on embedding media during possible future operations/deployments in the U.S. central commands area of responsibility*, 2003 <https://fas.org/sgp/othergov/dod/embed.html> (accessed June 11, 2018).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ Peter Johnson, "Who won, and who lost, in the media battle," *USA Today*, April 13, 2003.

“minimally restrictive” access for as long as they wished.¹⁶⁴ On October 30, Donald Rumsfeld signed the “Information Operations Roadmap,” a seventy-three-page directive to the U.S. military to use the news media, public opinion, and internet as weapons of war.¹⁶⁵ This document established the importance of Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) during wartime, stating:

Effectively communicating U.S. Government capabilities and intentions is an important means of combating the plans of our adversaries. The ability to rapidly disseminate persuasive information to diverse audiences in order to directly influence their decision-making is an increasingly powerful means of deterring aggression.¹⁶⁶

While the document mentions the military’s need to “Clarify Lanes in the Road for PSYOP, Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy,” it fails to provide any limits while enhancing PSYOPS capabilities, stating only: The likelihood that PSYOP messages will be replayed to a much broader audience, including the American public, requires that specific boundaries be established for PSYOP.¹⁶⁷

The “Information Operations Roadmap” foregrounds the potential for blurring Information Operations and Media/Public Affairs. This tension, between the way information/images are used to document and wage war, is seen in the hi-tech bombardment, or the “Shock and Awe” campaign which opened the Iraq War. This

¹⁶⁴ Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, *Image Broker: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 79.

¹⁶⁵ Stephen J. Hedges, “Media Use Backfires on U.S.,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 2005.

¹⁶⁶ Department of Defense, “Information Operations Roadmap,” October 30, 2003. 3-4

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

tension is also inherent in the system of ‘embedding journalists,’ a practice conducive to generating images the military wants to be seen.¹⁶⁸

As a result of the Information Operations Roadmap, the March 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq coincided with the first broad implementation of an “embedded press.” Over 600 reporters from American and international news organizations traveled with soldiers, enduring all same conditions to bring live coverage to homes throughout the world.¹⁶⁹ The embedding program was essential to the Bush administration’s efforts to build popular support for the war in Iraq while also preventing journalists from covering the darker aspects of combat, such as the death of Iraqi civilians or destruction of property. Further, the embedding program emphasized military success, with upwards of 90 percent of articles using soldiers as a source, skewing reporting towards the soldier’s point of view, experience, and heroics.¹⁷⁰ Though done with the intention of combating Iraqi misinformation, embedding reporters became an ideal tool to exercise control without openly having to contain individual journalists. Victoria Clarke confirmed the value of controlling embedded reporting to support operational objectives when stating “It is in our interest to let people see for themselves through the news media, the lies and deceptive tactics Saddam Hussein will use. He will put military assets next to civilians

¹⁶⁸ The Pentagon referred to these types of images as ‘force multipliers’ for their efficacy in persuading the enemy that resistance was useless. Julian Stallabrass, *Killing for Show: Photography, War, and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020) x.

¹⁶⁹ Near 400 journalists were embedded in the army, 18 in the Air Force, 150 in the Marines, and 141 in the Navy. Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Andrew M. Linder, “Controlling the Media in Iraq,” *Contexts*, Spring 2008, Vol. 7, No. 2, 32-38.

and blame any casualties on us. It's better if the Washington Posts of the world are telling people than us.”¹⁷¹

The evolution of military-press relations led to an unprecedented number of embedded press during the initial phase of the second war in Iraq. This continuing response to the “Vietnam Syndrome” heightened the level of dissolve between reporter and soldier, conflict, and entertainment, and public and private. The shunning of the media in Vietnam was radically reversed in favor of its exploitation.

In the Iraq war, the media served two roles for two different audiences. For a largely domestic audience, it lauded military prowess, heroism, and humanity. Through the embedding system, the flow of cliched combat, maneuver, and community-relations pictures were restored. The second role, using live and rapidly transmitted media accessible to Iraqis, was to impart an impression of such enormous military and technological might that the resistance would appear futile.

The “love shack” photographs of John Moore, embedded with the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, demonstrates this personalization of the war and the power of imagery to function as both a document of war and a PSYOPS tool in waging it. The reception of Moore’s photographs came to embody the excesses of Saddam Hussein to both the Iraqi citizenry as well as the American public, casting him as an uncivilized threat to Western culture through the modality of dictator kitsch. In the following section I will place Moore’s photographs in historical context with past reveals of dictators’

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Howard Kurtz, “Media Notes: A Battle Plan for the '03 Campaign,” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2003.

homes, before turning to their reception by the Western media and the hegemonic view they promote of Hussein's taste.

Love Shack Photos

The use of digital photography by embedded journalists (as well as troops) contributed to a massive number of images documenting the events of the Iraq war. By the time of the Iraq invasion, data manipulation, including media management, had come to occupy a central place in Pentagon strategy. These operations were declared a new 'core competency,' and formed no less than a fifth arm of the military alongside the army, navy, air force, and special forces.¹⁷² Under the umbrella term the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA), there was a thorough integration of military operations with the gathering, transmission, and analysis of data. The George W. Bush administration spent \$1.6 billion on PR between 2002 and 2005, half of which was spent by the Pentagon.¹⁷³

John Moore joined the Associated Press after graduating from the University of Texas at Austin in 1990. First based in Nicaragua, India, South Africa, Mexico, and Egypt, Moore's first experience with conflict photography was in Somalia covering the famine in late 1992.¹⁷⁴ Moore entered Baghdad as an embedded photojournalist inside

¹⁷² John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1997).

¹⁷³ The RMA coincided with the rise of a neoconservative politics which saw war as central to the projection of power abroad and the healthy reform of society at home. Daniel Schulman, "Mind Games: How the Information War Distorts Reality and Pollutes the News," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May-June 2006, 39-49.

¹⁷⁴ Shooting with a Canon Mark III, Moore's photojournalism is often characterized by blur, movement, and odd angles, a consequence of the chaotic environment he shoots. Zach Honig, "Behind the Lens with John Moore," *Popular Photography*, Dec. 19, 2008.

the hull of a Bradley fighting vehicle in March of 2003. That same month Moore was embedded with Capt. Chris Carter and A Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment.

[Figure 2.2]

When traveling in Iraq, embedded with U.S. forces, Moore gained access to frontline fighting.¹⁷⁵ Moore's compositions, while casual in appearance, are a mixture of photographic competence and the surrounding circumstances (both structural and environmental) of being embedded. For example, photojournalism is heavily influenced by the capacity of transmission services, efficiency of data compression, and near-zero cost of taking photographs. In contrast to past conflicts, photojournalism during the Iraq war led to a vast increase in the number of images sent to the desks of photo editors, as there was little technical limit on how many images photographers could send. This resulted in a scenario in which carefully composed and arranged images were replaced by a tremendous pressure to feed the flow of data.¹⁷⁶

Moore's photo, *Capt. Carter's War*, showing Capt. Chris Carter kneeling as he explains the brigade's invasion route to A Company platoon leaders, is characteristic of this impressionistic intimacy. Moore's cropping forces an identification with the individual soldiers set against a barren landscape and unpictured mass of the Iraqi population. Another photograph of the same title, *Capt. Carter's War* [Figure 2.3], is a

¹⁷⁵ A strong supporter of the military embed program, Moore benefited from the protection of the military despite occasional frustration posed by the difficulty of moving from one unit to another. Being embedded also prevented Moore from being able to cover the Iraqi civilian experience and story due to the threat of kidnapping. Beverly Spencer, "John Moore," *The Digital Journalist*, July 2008.

¹⁷⁶ Stallabrass, 68.

character study with the soldier's perspective highlighted as authentic and credible, effectively humanizing the activity of the United States.¹⁷⁷

In April of 2003 Moore was embedded with A Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment during a house-by-house search in an upscale neighborhood in central Baghdad. This area, a Baath party enclave home to senior party officials, had been the site of searches for looters and weapons since U.S. officials set up command posts there. In a neighboring home with iron sheets welded over all the windows, U.S. forces had discovered more than 6,000 Beretta pistols, 650 Sig Sauer pistols, 248 Colt Revolvers, 160 Belgian 7.65 mm pistols, 12 cases of Sterling submachineguns, and four cases of anti-tank missiles.¹⁷⁸ Yet, what soldiers discovered in an adjacent townhome proved entirely unexpected. John Moore's *Soldiers discover Saddam Hussein's central Baghdad townhome* [Figure 2.1] depicts an elevated view showing the townhome's living room and the U.S. soldiers' reaction to it. According to Associated Press writer Chris Tomlinson, Capt. Carter was first to speculate that this residence was one of Hussein's safe houses, while Sgt. Spencer Willardson more colorfully described the residence as "Saddam's love shack."¹⁷⁹ Capt. Carter further concluded that the home appeared to be one of Hussein's safe houses used by his mistress, Parisoula Lampsos.

In palette and furnishing, Hussein's room is strikingly reminiscent of the 60s/70s American interior design in which a rich individuality is realized through decorative

¹⁷⁷ Liam Kennedy, "Soldier photography: visualizing the war in Iraq," *Review of International Studies*, 35, 831.

¹⁷⁸ The Associated Press, "Troops uncover Saddam's love shack," Sunday, April 13, 2003.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

tensions.¹⁸⁰ These qualities are reflected in a flamboyant excess characterized by visual antagonisms resulting in a “triumph of livability” through which “wicker and fur, opulence and bareness, unmatched area rugs in the same room, painted chairs around a dark wood table,” pit the old against the new in pursuit of an “uninhibited harmony.”¹⁸¹ Hussein’s interior reflects this in its bright yellow and orange bean bag chairs, blue throw pillows, plastic plants, dining table covered in lace set with the official fine china of the Kuwaiti royal family [Figure 2.4], a sunken wet bar stocked with 20-year old Italian wines, expensive cognacs, floral patterned sofas, navy blue shag carpeting, and three pieces of sci-fi/fantasy art hung on ocher brick walls.¹⁸²

The townhome was further reported to contain lamps shaped like women, air-brushed paintings of topless blonde women with a mustached hero battling a crocodile, photos of Hussein’s wife [Figure 2.5], and a 16-by-20-inch plaque of the Iraq eagle and flag seal. Upstairs in the split-level home was a television, a bathroom including a whirlpool bath, and a king size bed fitted into an alcove with mirrors on two sides. The closets were empty, except for a man’s night shirt, two pairs of boxer shorts, and a bath

¹⁸⁰ The cultural backdrop to the 60s and 70s in America was a rebelliousness which saw issues of sexism and racism debated and brought to the forefront, tensions heightened resulting from the Cold War, and a flourishing of imagination due to the Space Race. Interior design of this period is characterized by visual antagonisms. Examples include dominant paintings hung above deep-set conversation pits, excessive patterns concentrating for deliberate overstatement, and arranged objects displaying abundance while expressing historical incommensurability. Harriet Burket, ed. *House & Garden’s Complete Guide to Interior Decoration, Seventh Edition* (New York, Weathervane Books, 1970).

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² “Saddam’s ‘Love Shack.’”

robe. All items were individually wrapped in plastic like other items of clothing found in Hussein's palaces.

A second and third photograph by Moore shifts the camera down to eye level, placing it behind the shoulders of two soldiers. These two compositions focus our attention on the soldiers' reception to a fantasy style painting hung beneath the staircase of the townhome connecting both levels. The first image depicts U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Cedric Burns lighting a cigar while studying the fantasy painting beneath the stairs. [Figure 2.6] The second shows U.S. Army 1st Lt. Eric Hooper viewing the same painting. [Figure 2.7] In this photograph the frame of the painting is close enough to that of the actual photograph to give the impression that 1st Lt. Eric Hooper is viewing the scene of a topless sorceress battling a blonde warrior in person. Moore's compositions continue to place an emphasis on identifying with the military point of view, amplifying a feeling of intimacy through vivid detail, and intensely cropped close quarters.¹⁸³ In both compositions the eye navigates from the foreground image of the soldier to the darkly framed painting hung feet away. Moore's compositions focus on a personalized view of the invading troops, highlighting their emotions, reactions, and performance for the camera. This is common to imagery of embedded reporters more broadly and one which comes at the expense of an analysis of the wider scenario of war yet suited to the general and long-term turn in the news industry.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ The rapidity and number of shots taken paired with the proximity to Moore's military escort results in tight crops and an emphasis on the soldiers' experience.

¹⁸⁴ This turn is characterized by a move away from detailed reporting and towards human-interest and lifestyle stories. Stallabrass, 30.

A continued emphasis on personality and the individual is evident in a final photograph taken by Moore, titled *American soldiers take a break in Saddam Hussein's central Baghdad townhome*. [Figure 2.8]

In this image, Moore shifts to a low vantage point while conveying a jovial shift in mood as U.S. Army Captains' Steve Barry, (right) and Chris Carter (left), relax in Hussein's conversation pit. Taken from behind a couch and up towards the townhome ceiling, Moore once again positions the viewer directly behind a reclining soldier, forcing our identification. In the distance, Steve Barry is shown sunk into Hussein's sofa, grinning beneath three additional sci-fi paintings. Though only one sci-fi painting is clear and unobstructed, it is painted in the same style as that shown beneath the staircase. [Figure 2.6, 2.7] The soldiers' visible signs of laughter and relaxed poses, paired with Moore's informal cropping and consistent use of diagonals convey a space incommensurate with a war zone, let alone a dictator's personal interior. Through his subjects and compositional shifts Moore's photograph suggests that the ridiculous décor of Hussein's private residence has disarmed the soldiers, who now rest comfortably, without weapons or helmets.

Moore's photographs of Hussein's private residence are about looking. Viewers become sympathetic to the soldiers' physical and emotional viewpoints, and in the process are directed to feel a certain way. Like surveillance images, these photographs evoke what Foucault termed "governmentality," in which the work of governing subjects

moves from state apparatuses to the subjects themselves.¹⁸⁵ Moore's work heighten this displacement with a compositional framing that carries a casualness or "authenticity" reminiscent of the candid, unpolished nature of reality television. Nicholas Mizoeff has pointed out that the Iraq invasion unfolded against the global craze for reality television, a genre in which people "voluntarily subjected themselves to surveillance for the entertainment of others."¹⁸⁶ Reality television, popularized by shows like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, presents an audience with the "actual" thoughts of screened participants in carefully staged, select locations. These participants are then subjected to relentless surveillance using the viewpoint of CCTV.

However, perhaps a more accurate comparison to make with Moore's photos is the subgenre of reality home make-over shows, in which "experts" enter with disapproving reactions to outdated décor or clutter.¹⁸⁷ Participants in reality makeover programs are either chastised for a lack of style or enticed to maintain the appearance of middle-class prosperity by advertising the "right" aesthetic in the form of designer lines pushed by corporate sponsors and celebrity designers. These corporate brands encouraged a standard of living, such as Sears' Extreme Makeover: Home Edition brand

¹⁸⁵ Michel Foucault "Governmentality," trans. Rosi Braidotti and revised by Colin Gordon, in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

¹⁸⁶ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 163-165.

¹⁸⁷ Sponsored by private corporations (Sears, Disney, etc.), more than 30 television series dedicated to real-life makeovers pushed "cause related marketing" in an attempt to link brand identities to social causes. John McMurria, "Desperate Citizens and Good Samaritans: Neoliberalism and Makeover Reality TV," *Television & New Media*, Vol. 9, No. 4, Sage Publications, 2008.

campaign “The Good Life,” which carried the double meaning of living well and doing good.¹⁸⁸ These DIY home renovation/makeover shows spiked in popularity post 9/11,¹⁸⁹ as corporate sponsors directly mirrored the Bush administration’s neoliberal policies privileging privatization, personal responsibility, and private homeownership.¹⁹⁰

In 2003, TLC’s *Trading Spaces* drew 9 million viewers each Saturday night (making it the highest rated basic cable program). *Trading Spaces* followed families as they renovated rooms in their neighbor’s homes.¹⁹¹ Participants are shadowed in this remodeling by design experts, and the show builds towards a climactic “reveal.” This reveal generally involves an individual, usually in poverty or battling with hardship, winning a room transformation and with it a return to a legitimate taste hierarchy.¹⁹² In this way, the show taught its viewers that “better” taste is the result of personal responsibility and self-control.

Capitalizing on the popularity of reality television, Victoria Clarke and the Pentagon developed two reality television shows specific to the Iraq war. One, “Profiles

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 311

¹⁸⁹ The emergence of do-it-yourself home improvement shows in which a needy, yet hardworking and deserving family is surprised with a renovation spoke to Americans who post 9/11 chose to travel less and put money and leisure time into decorating. Early do-it-yourself shows, such as *This Old House* with Bob Vila, appealed to its early viewers from a deeply held conservative center: restoration. William O’Rourke, *Confessions of a Guilty Freelancer* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012), 80.

¹⁹⁰ These policies were all at the expense of financial support for public subsidies or housing and often invoked racial inequalities through moving funds away from public subsidies and rental assistance. Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Kate Dries, “The Rise and Fall of *Trading Spaces*, the Home Design Show That Rules the World,” *Pictorial*, October 13, 2015.

¹⁹² Julie Salamon, “Behind the Scenes of a Home Makeover,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 2002.

From the Front Lines,” was a one-hour series co-executively produced by Jerry Bruckheimer and Reality TV producer Bertram van Munster.¹⁹³ The other, “Combat Camera,” placed combatant journalists with a film crew in an effort to influence public opinion and make hundreds of images available from the front lines daily.¹⁹⁴ “Profiles From the Front Lines” and “Combat Camera” mimicked compositional conventions popularized by DIY home renovation/makeover shows while creating a positive image of war in which Americans were greeted as welcome liberators (an experience specific to that of embedded media and not that of unilateral journalists during the time).¹⁹⁵

John Moore’s photographs of Saddam Hussein’s townhome, like in *Extreme Makeover*, mirrors the “objective” camera, capturing the expert reaction to misguided designs of the family who soon will receive hope in the form of a home renovation. Understood against the influential backdrop of reality television, *American soldiers take a break in Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome* can also be read as the “reveal” (in the language of *Trading Spaces* or *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*). The effect is a personalized view of the Iraqi invasion narrated through Western taste. Hussein’s living

¹⁹³ The show documented the fall of Baghdad through citizen interviews. Susan Crabtree, “Pentagon Enlists Reality TV Producer,” *Variety*, April 24, 2003.

¹⁹⁴ This included the most famous exclusive scoop, the dramatic rescue of POW Jessica Lynch. Ariel Sabar, “Military Crews Capture Images from the Front Line,” *Baltimore Sun*, April 18, 2003. Gioia Woods, “Cowboys, Indians, and Iraq: Jessica Lynch, Lori Piestewa, and the Great American Makeover,” *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 29, No.1 (October 2006) 17-39.

¹⁹⁵ “What I learned as a result of being a unilateral reporter is that ... the kind of war I saw, was entirely different from what the embeds were seeing. [t]he first day I snuck into the war, the first town I ended up in was the town of Safwan, and people were not happy. They were not happy with us, the Americans.” Council on Foreign Relations, “Embedded Journalists in Iraq: Reality TV or Desert Mirage?” July 29, 2003.

space, presented as a “lifestyle choice,” frames the invasion through an appeal to American ethics of home ownership and maintenance, while providing the viewer with a window into Hussein’s true character. Extending the idea of home ownership to that of invasion, this viewpoint has been described by Nicholas Mirzoeff as “the disinterested surveillance of empire.”¹⁹⁶

The reveal of the dictator’s interior has a specific and repeated narrative in US conflicts. Once developing this context, I will move to the objects discovered within the townhome, specifically looking at how their reception effected and promoted a discourse on Hussein’s taste.

Historic and Cultural Context

During wartime, the documentation of interior spaces has been used to assign motivations to leaders through discussions of their taste. In this sense, the use of Saddam Hussein’s interior as a narrative tool in the Iraqi invasion is not unique. An early example of rationalizing the character and motivation of dictators through taste can be seen in the August 1936 issue of *Vogue*, in a two-page article titled “Mussolini, Hitler, and Eden – In Retreat.” This article states “all of these rooms are obviously characteristic of man and country,”¹⁹⁷ making clear the degree to which American analyses of these regimes focused exclusively on their leaders. *Vogue* describes the spaces of Hitler, Mussolini, and Eden and their domestic décor as providing access to the psychology of a nation, while

¹⁹⁶ Mirzoeff, 163-165.

¹⁹⁷ *Vogue*, 1936

reducing ideological differences to matters of taste. In another example, published in 1940 and 1941, the Washington Post presented “an intimate first-hand picture of opposing leaders” Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. Through describing “a day in the life,” the Post pits its Churchill article, titled “Churchill Devotes 17 Hours a Day to His Only Hobby – War”¹⁹⁸ and highlighting Churchill’s family-oriented, bulldogish, cigar-smoking masculinity against an article titled “Warlord Hitler Designs Table Silver in Spare Time,”¹⁹⁹ which describes an effeminate, décor-obsessed bachelor. Articles like these do more than catalogue the possessions of leaders; instead, they suggest what it is to be Hitler, Mussolini, or Churchill, with their collections, interior décor, and objects acting as vehicles through which their perspectives are assumed.²⁰⁰

In 1938, *Homes and Gardens*, *Country Life*, *Current History*, and *National Home Monthly* (among other publications) highlighted the domestic tastes and practices of Hitler via the interior design of Gerdy Troost.²⁰¹ These articles, written by George Fitzgerald under the pseudonym Ignatius Phayre, presented a softer image of Hitler, which nevertheless, according to Despina Stratigakos, strongly associated domestic architecture with masculinity. While these images served to establish an identity for Hitler prior to the war, the destruction or humiliation of them served to mark its conclusion.

¹⁹⁸ Hugh Wagon, “Churchill Devotes 17 Hours A Day to His Only Hobby – War,” *The Washington Post*, Dec. 30, 1940.

¹⁹⁹ Preston Grover, “Warlord Hitler Designs Table Silver in Spare Time,” *The Washington Post*, Jan. 2, 1941.

²⁰⁰ Stratigakos, 229.

²⁰¹ Stratigakos, 194.

In June of 1945 *Yank Magazine* documented the 3rd Infantry Division as they investigated the ruins of Hitler's *Berghof* (the very same residence highlighted in 1938). According to *Yank* staff correspondent, Sgt. Harry Sions, "GIs who captured Hitler's Mountain hideaway found rubble and magnificence. Amid the ruins there was still evidence of the high style in which the Nazi Fuehrer used to live."²⁰² Sions' story describes soldiers indulging in Hitler's Burgundy, Moselle, champagnes, and other wines, and taking countless souvenirs including portraits and silverware. [Figure 2.9]

While soldiers expected to find a fortress containing weapons, mines, and booby traps, one infantry colonel stated "[I]t looks to me like they were expecting to defend the place with wine bottles."²⁰³ Sions' story documents the inventory of Hitler's burned and looted home with great detail, including the contents of Hitler and Eva Braun's bathrooms, stating "Braun's bathroom was simple and nothing like the Hollywood conception of a dictator's mistress."²⁰⁴ After touring Hitler's movie theatre, taste in American movies, wine cellars, and interviewing his servants, T-5 George Liekhues, 3rd Division medic states, "Can't think of a better place to wind up the war," capping the article and narrative of the war with an extensive autopsy of Hitler's personal interior and tastes.

The use of the personal excesses of dictators in marking an end or narrative culmination can also be seen in "Mussolini's Love Nest."²⁰⁵ A \$3,000,000 Italian

²⁰² *Yank*: The Army Weekly, June 22, 1945.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Life*, "Mussolini Love Nest: Villa he built for Clara Petacci is now home for Roman Orphans," July 9, 1945, 35-38.

modernistic villa built near Rome in the suburb of Camilluccia for his mistress Clara Petacci [Figure 2.10], Mussolini's "Love Nest" included a sunken bathtub, terrace with a punching bag, and mirrored bedroom.²⁰⁶

Following Mussolini's and Claretta's death, the hyper-masculine dictator's villa was turned into a home for Roman orphans operated by the Opera Nazionale Maternita Infanzia. The restaging of this space includes photos of the orphans wading in Claretta's sunken bath, while the mirrored bedroom is shown converted to a dormitory for undernourished orphans with tuberculosis. [Figure 2.11]

In yet another example, Stalin's summer home, though not a show house and devoid of the theatricalities of Hitler's tastes, is remembered as a tool to understand the mentality of a tyrant, specifically, a "monument to short man syndrome."²⁰⁷ Built in 1937, the home is understood as providing clues to Stalin's paranoia, specifically its absence of carpet (to allow Stalin to hear the footsteps of those approaching), minimal decoration, high ceilings, and pea green exterior (in order to blend into the surrounding forest).²⁰⁸

In more recent years, the private spaces of dictators have continued to figure prominently as political tools to represent their interior states. This is the case with the "palace in the sky," an unfinished palace built atop a 2,500-foot-peak in Tagaytay by

²⁰⁶ Mussolini hyper-masculine persona was widely publicized with his man serving stating that Mussolini had sex with a different woman every single day from September 1929 until the collapse of the Fascist regime in July 1943. York, 17.

²⁰⁷ Dan Wolken, "Stalin's Summer Home in Sochi tells a lot about the man," *USA Today*, February 20, 2014.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. Described as “one of the best monuments yet to a lifestyle built on greed, excess and arrogance,” the unfinished palace, including three massive floors with a disco and revolving parquet floor at the top, reportedly costing \$10 million.²⁰⁹ With the removal of the Marcoses in 1986 2,700 pairs of shoes (size 8.5), 500 black brassieres, 1,500 handbags, and 1,200 designer gowns were discovered within their Malacanang Palace.²¹⁰ A later interview of Imelda Marcos by Christopher Gunness of the BBC couldn’t help but address her décor and how it spoke to her hyper-dramatic, extravagant, and delusional nature. Gunness states

As I entered the room, I was instantly greeted by what appeared to be a Michelangelo painting. Around it were a Gauguin and a Pissaro – all originals. What amazed me was the juxtaposition of top quality art ... and tat. On her exquisite Louis XV furniture, for example, was a jug of plastic roses.²¹¹

In 1989, when American troops discovered the inner sanctum of Manuel Noriega, they discovered “Vats of blood. A picture of Adolf Hitler. Spiked-heeled shoes ... and two decorated Christmas trees.”²¹² An image of a US soldier discovering Noriega’s lair shows the same bemused reaction that soldiers in Iraq had to Hussein’s “love shack.” [Figure 2.12] Noriega’s décor solidifies his character in an interpretation given by Adm. Edward

²⁰⁹ Janet Cawley, “Marcos’ Mountain Palace is the House that Arrogance Built,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 1986.

²¹⁰ Roger Wolmuth, “The Imelda Marcos Shopping Guide: A Cache ’n’ Carry Way to Spend the Fortune of a Nation,” *People*, April 7, 1986.

²¹¹ Christopher Gunness, “The day I met Imelda Marcos,” *BBC News*, October 31, 2000.

²¹² Douglas Jehl and Bob Sexter, “Noriega’s Inner Sanctum: Lair of ‘Debauched Thug,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1989.

Scheafer, who stated that these are the personal belongings of a “deranged, drug-selling worshiper of the occult.”²¹³

Finally, in 2011 Muammar Gaddafi’s house in southeast Tripoli was discovered to contain a 70’s style one-story structure built around a large pool with a hot tub, a five foot bust of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, a flashy gym, a fortified bunker, English magazines including *Playboy*, *Vogue*, and *National Geographic*, and an empty box of Corona beer.²¹⁴ The image of the discovery is almost identical to that of Noriega’s home and Hussein’s, complete with photos of a soldier reacting to the décor. [Figure 2.13] The *Daily Beast* interpreted Gaddafi’s residence as a sign of an egomaniacal paranoiac who “seemed to outdo his peers, like Saddam Hussein in Iraq.”²¹⁵

The reception to Hussein’s townhome interior mirrors the past reaction to dictators’ homes as an inventory of unexpected objects which elicit a mixture of shock, amusement, and disgust. Upon discovery of Hussein’s living space, the soldiers of A Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment compared Hussein’s residence to the 1960’s look of an “Austin Powers” comedy.²¹⁶ This comparison then inspired a chorus of Mike Myers imitations including shouts of “Yeah, baaabee,” and “Shagadelic.”²¹⁷

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Barak Dehghanpisheh, “Gaddafi’s House in Tripoli: Playboy, Corona, Hot tub,” *The Daily Beast*, August 25, 2011.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Chris Tomlinson, Associated Press writer, posted Apr. 13 at 12:01 am. <http://christomlinson.net/safe-house-in-1960s-style-troops-discover-what-they-call-a-saddam-hideaway/> (accessed July 18, 2016).

²¹⁷ Austin Powers, a retro comedy largely based on the James Bond story, sets Powers, a spy from the 60s and displaced in the present, attempting to recover his mojo while battling his antagonist Dr. Evil.

[Figure 2.14] Understood through the soldiers' comparison to Austin Powers, Hussein is represented as a caricature of uninhibited individuality, one that is culturally and temporally out of place.

Further media outlets reporting on the AP story, accompanied by Moore's photographs, echo a narrative consistent with the articles above.²¹⁸ For example, *The Times* describes Hussein's safe house as one that "would benefit from a bit of mindless destruction" as a consequence of regrettable décor decisions.²¹⁹ "From the detritus, clues to character of Hussein regime," an article by David Zucchino in *The Baltimore Sun* describes the reveal of Hussein's interiors as exposing an illusion, stating "[F]or all its claims to Islamic piety, the regime's elite was Western to its core."²²⁰ Zucchino's analysis focuses on Hussein's ownership of "The Bee Gees Greatest Hits Vol. II," hot pink plastic shower slippers, fake plastic ferns, and the "fantasy paintings of full-busted women and muscular men in mullet haircuts slaying dragons and snakes with swords."²²¹ Perhaps the most vehement condemnation comes from Jonathan Jones. Writing in *The Guardian*, Jones reacts to the fantasy paintings, stating

It is all satisfyingly horrendous – almost the smoking gun. The paintings of naked blonde maidens menaced by dragons and trolls, warriors wrestling serpents ... feel like proof of something. They appear to reflect the man's

²¹⁸Anthony DiMaggio in his analysis of the variations in global media accounts of the invasion of Iraq finds that Western media generally framed the war as a noble if failed effort. This included all the media organizations that largely relied on AP and Reuters feeds to construct their news. Anthony DiMaggio, *When Media Goes to War: Hegemonic Discourse, Public Opinion, and the Limits of Dissent* (Monthly Review Press, 2010).

²¹⁹ Sara Vine, *The Times*, "The fantasy world of Saddam's 'love shack,'" Friday April 18, 2003.

²²⁰ David Zucchino, "From the detritus, clues to character of Hussein regime," *The Baltimore Sun*, April 21, 2003.

²²¹ Ibid.

authentic pleasures and interests, or at the very least the culture of Saddam's court, the values of his inner circle. *That's certainly how the photographs make it seem (my emphasis).*²²²

Jones refers to Hussein's fantasy paintings as the "smoking gun," or proof of his ill intent and inner character. Like Zucchini, Jones also sees this taste as culturally non-authentic stating:

They're certainly not Islamic – in medieval Iraq the brilliant art of the Abbasids included splendid palaces with figurative decorations celebrating the pleasures of the ruler: hunting, food, music. The numerousness of Saddam's palaces follows a tradition in which Islamic rulers had palaces like desert caravans. But there's not much that is culturally embedded about his taste in paintings. They are from the universal cultural gutter – pure dreck.²²³

Having established a link between taste and character and a further separation of taste from his own "authentic" culture, Jones sees Hussein's taste as consistent with dictators' taste in painting more broadly.

The erotic art is particularly recognizable as the sort of thing you'd see in Hitler's private collection – right down to the Aryan types. One of Hitler's favorite paintings was Paul Mathias Padua's *Leda and the Swan*, with a German Maiden about to be penetrated by a Wagnerian swan [Figure 2.20]. But Saddam is less elevated in his taste than Hitler. The Fuhrer was more pretentious: *Leda and the Swan* is a classical myth. By contrast, there are no high cultural allusions whatsoever in the Saddamite paintings. They have the iconography of psychotic porn.²²⁴

Jones' premise is that Hitler's monstrous character was clear in his preference for Padua's rape fantasy. In contrast, Hussein's "less elevated" taste is revealed as exponentially worse.

²²² Jones.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Jones, Zuchinno, and Vine's reactions to the photographs of John Moore are the clearest example of social distinctions established via an ironic appreciation or send up as kitsch.²²⁵ Kitsch cannot be recognized outside of a critically conscious context with something to say through taste, and Moore's photographs establish that context through the individual reactions of soldiers to Hussein's "naïve" décor choices. This framing is seized on by articles all pulling from the AP story by Tomlinson and Moore, with the science fiction paintings garnering the most attention. As these paintings figured so prominently in their criticisms, my concluding section will look to understand what makes them so revealing of Hussein's kitsch tastes and dictatorial leanings.

Rowena

John Moore's photographs of Hussein's townhome document a total of four paintings, only two of which can be identified. These paintings, each with their own symbolic and narrative structures, were seized on by journalists as an entry point to move deeper into Hussein's private mind and motivations. While most journalistic descriptions of Hussein's paintings gave no author, two of the more prominently featured paintings were later identified as the work of American artist Rowena Morrill.²²⁶ Born in 1944,

²²⁵ Judy Attfield describes kitsch working well "as a stylistic medium for expressing irony and often used knowingly in this way to refer to art and taste, often inflating the importance of a trivial object for its symbolic potency." Judy Attfield, "Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design," *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design, and Domestic Space*, 3:3, 201-212, 2006.

²²⁶ Rowena was first alerted to her paintings being in the possession of Saddam Hussein when her sister saw images of them broadcast on CNN and called to let her know. Asked what she thought of her paintings being found in the dictator's home, Rowena stated, "I would give anything to give them back. I am so upset that they are there. I utterly hate

Rowena (who prefers using her first name only) is known for her work in the genre of science fiction and fantasy illustration. Classically trained in Italy, Rowena took up the fantasy genre to support herself after moving to New York in the late '70s. While it is not known for certain how Hussein acquired Rowena's paintings, it was reported that they had been sold to a Japanese collector for \$20,000 and from there had made their way to Saddam Hussein.²²⁷ The two paintings discovered in Hussein's "love shack," titled *King Dragon*, and *Shadows Out of Hell*, were both painted for book covers with identical titles circa 1980.²²⁸ *King Dragon* is visible in each of Moore's photographs of soldiers entering Hussein's residence and is a clear focal point of the compositions [Figure 2.15] The image depicts a high chromatic fantasy scene of a massive green dragon, wings expanded, approaching a highly sexualized and barely dressed female character.²²⁹ *King Dragon's* overt sexualization of the female character is a common thematic feature of the sci-fi/fantasy genre.

Saddam Hussein. I loathe everything he is and stands for." Dave Goldiner, "Shag-dad art is mine!" *New York Daily News*, April 15, 2003.

<http://www.erbzine.com/mag8/0869.html> (accessed May 25, 2015)

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Questions of provenance remain as Heritage auctions reports that it sold the original "King Dragon" painting in 2006. Though it is difficult to confirm as it appears Hussein's image is a reproduction and not a print or original as key elements from Rowena's painting are missing, most notably her signature from the lower left corner. It also appears much larger than the original 15"x25" painting on illustration board. Heritage Auctions, Sept. 9, 2006. <https://comics.ha.com/itm/original-comic-art/covers/rowena-morrill-king-dragon-paperback-cover-painting-original-art-ace-books-1980-this-is-one-of-rowena-s-most-famous/a/752-51605.s#auction-info> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024)

²²⁹ "King Dragon" was originally commissioned in 1980s to serve as a book cover for a novel of the same title and based off of a fantasy illustration drawn by Esteban Maroto for a proposed illustrated edition of Edgar Rice Burrough's, "At the Earth's Core." Ibid.

The sci-fi/fantasy genre is one which has historically used sexual assumptions or “norms” in society as prominent themes. However, as literature predominantly written for men, book cover illustrations like Rowena’s tend towards masculine prejudices and largely manifest male sexual assumptions. Recurring sexual themes in sci-fi/fantasy more broadly include bestiality or sex as beastliness, women as threatening or foreign, and/or miscegenation.

As a point of comparison, H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) provides an early example of misogynistic and exploitative themes in the fantasy/science fiction genre.²³⁰ In Wells’ story, the time traveler discovers a future race of humanoids called Morlocks who keep the beautiful and effeminate Eloi as cattle.²³¹ A later illustration for *The Time Machine* by Virgil Finlay, an early pioneer in the sci-fi/fantasy genre and precursor to Rowena, shows a composition of bestial abduction. [Figure 2.16]

Finlay’s composition is similar to *King Dragon* with its suggestions of bestial sexuality, passive submission, and racial mixing. Rowena’s composition is loosely based off Edgar Rice Burrough’s *At the Earth’s Core* (1914) which explored similar themes regarding women, race, and was also reflective of a masculine narrative.²³² While, there

²³⁰ Robin Anne Reid, ed. *Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy, Volume 1 and 2* (London: Greenwood Press, 2009), 170.

²³¹ Well’s *Time Machine* is commonly read as an allegory of nineteenth-century sexual and class distinctions simultaneously. The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, <http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/sex> (accessed June 3, 2018).

²³² Rowena’s composition is based off a fantasy illustration drawn by Esteban Maroto for an illustrated edition of Edgar Rice Burrough’s *At the Earth’s Core*. Maroto’s illustration shows a woman being sacrificed to a Mahar. A range of sentient winged, telepathic reptiles who enslave human beings, Burroughs based the Mahar on Philippine rebels who fought against American governance in the aftermath of the Spanish war. Ibid.

are some obvious formal differences (color vs. black and white, dragon vs. Morlock), both images are meant to grab attention through salacious subject matter. Further, both female characters share an almost identical reclining pose consisting of exaggerated curves set in stark contrast to the rigid angles of the aggressor. What remains alarming in both however is the degree to which the women are depicted as willing victims of the seducer, who receives no admonishment.

Various artists and works of sci-fi/fantasy take what is considered “normal” or “perverse” sexual behavior as topics to be questioned or exploited as plot devices. However, the images found in Hussein’s residence--examples of the Heroic Fantasy sub-genre, Heroic Fantasy--are often the crudest or most morally ambiguous.²³³ These stories further contain a modernist, or cynical approach to traditional societal values and institutions.²³⁴ The Heroic Fantasy genre often highlight a male desire to exert dominance over women in a way which is intended to be sexually arousing, themes which are especially evident in the writing of John Norman Gor and illustrations of Frank Frazetta.²³⁵ [Figure 2.17] This theme is clearly at work in the paintings of Frazetta

²³³ The Heroic Fantasy sub-genre is known for containing linear stories set in a preindustrial or pretechnological world in which a protagonist is set in opposition to supernatural forces. Gary Hoppenstand, ed. *Critical Insights: Pulp Fiction of the '20s and '30* (Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013), 3-4.

²³⁴ Heroic Fantasy is largely indebted to the early writing of Robert E. Howard and his most famous character, Conan the Barbarian, in which he mixed the genre of horror and adventure tales set in exotic locales. Several authors continued in this vein including Andrew Offutt, the author of both “King Dragon” and “Shadows Out of Hell.” *Ibid.*, 4-14.

²³⁵ By the 1980s, paperback publishing still required a great deal of realistic/traditional artwork but was dominated by fantasy titles. While this genre offered a steady and reliable source of income to illustrators, it was also losing its allure. Walter Reed stated, “[t]he field was losing its cutting edge though, and became almost a backwater,

(whose work Rowena largely draws on) where phallic creatures threaten submissive and/or terrified female characters.²³⁶

Another early point of comparison is that of reclining nudes, specifically Titian's *Danäe*. [Figure 2.18] Titian's image presents the viewer with a candid look into the bedroom of Danäe, not unlike the constructed voyeurism of reality television and Moore's photographs of Hussein's townhome.²³⁷ In looking at these qualities, David Lubin has described Titian's *Danäe* as "a work of explicit carnal sexuality, whatever its mythological pretext."²³⁸ In this sense, *King Dragon* is thematically congruent to *Danäe* in the way in which it placates male desire and fantasies.

King Dragon uses identical compositional tropes to *Danäe* to push these themes.

For example, unlike the positioning or subtle posturing of Danäe, Rowena's figure seems

increasingly reliant on safe clichés, photographically rendered, with the most popular author's names buttressed by die cutouts and embossed lettering that crowded out the art." Reid, 405

²³⁶ This troubling trope of bestial abduction, or abduction as romance, is a plot device common to classic Hollywood, especially prominent in sci-fi, adventure, and fantasy films made during the period in which Rowena was working. Films such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Commando* (1985), *The Running Man* (1987), and *True Lies* (1994) all highlight men of action who violate the rights and autonomy of a female character and are rewarded for it by finding love. In these films, and the many like them, the domination and disempowerment of women is intertwined with seduction, control, and violence. Hoppenstand, 3-4.

²³⁷ Danäe, locked away by her father Acrisius for fear that she would bear a son that would kill him, is shown awakened and captivated by Jupiter, who appears as a shower of gold coins. Danäe, reclining with one leg bent and the other partially opened, allows herself to be seduced and impregnated by Jupiter. That Jupiter appears as a shower of gold has clear allusions to prostitution. Themes of sex and money become more exaggerated in later versions by Titian which replace the cupid on the far right with an older maid, who Jupiter is able to distract (as money) in order to prey on Danäe. David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 13.

²³⁸ Ibid.

to reference *Playboy* while pushing the anatomy of the woman towards a strained rigidity, a stark contrast to the passive relaxation of reclining nudes who welcome their seduction. This posture reflects her role as the captive victim of the approaching beast. In this context, *King Dragon* can be understood as a vulgarization of an already exploitative theme in painting, one that foregrounds the sexual and hyper-masculine role of the viewer.

The second painting found within Hussein's "love nest," *Shadows out of Hell* (circa 1980), depicts a triangular composition in which two main actors battle: one male, one female. [Figure 2.19] The female character is overtly sexualized, the male, hyper-muscular; both characters are blonde-haired and blue-eyed, and reflective of the Nazi idea of the Aryan. The female character is sitting on an altar, casting a spell which manifests as a menacing serpent. This line of the spell/serpent creates a dramatic diagonal, following a path through and into the angle of the protagonist's sword. At the bottom of the image, the serpent is constricting the torso of the male hero while he attempts to fight it off. Behind the altar on which the woman/sorceress is seated stands an ominous looking demonic figure set within a dimly lit arched frame.

Though not an image of bestial lust, or abduction as romance, *Shadows Out of Hell* swings towards another extreme trope found in Heroic fantasy: that of women as dominant, completely independent, ruling over, and dispensing with men. This theme is established in the fictional race of the Amazons and is also present in the works of early sci-fi writers such as H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and H. Rider Haggard, whose male adventure stories depict women as "other." In these stories, women

are mysterious, unnatural, dominant, or in need of a male hero to establish “natural” roles of submission or sexuality.²³⁹ The driving anxiety in these characterizations is the loss of “traditional” values, the disintegration of family, and the male fear of equality in the social, political, or domestic spheres.²⁴⁰ A loss of traditional values, disintegration of the family, and male fears of equity can also be seen as manifest in Rowena’s painting through the hyperbolic rendering and design of the male physique. Both the physicality and composition, thematically reminiscent of woman as “other,” suggest a reading centered on male anxiety.

Leda and the Swan

One reading of *King Dragon* or *Shadows Out of Hell* in Hussein’s possession is to see Hussein as having poor taste or distorted perceptions of woman. Another reading is to see these images, though a product of Western culture, as evidence of Hussein’s innate tastes for “psychotic porn” in excess of the behaviors and practices of past dictators. Jonathan Jones makes a direct comparison between Hitler’s favorite *Leda and the Swan* and Hussein’s collection of Rowena’s work. [Figure 2.20] Specifically, Jones finds Hitler’s taste to be more “elevated” while Hussein’s taste is an extreme departure into sexual deviance.

²³⁹ Though much subsequent science fiction beginning in the 1960s challenge and bring more depth to gender and sexual practices, and alternative sexual practices, Rowena’s illustrations evoke earlier sci-fi/fantasy traditions. Reid, 171.

²⁴⁰ Sam Moskowitz, *Strange Horizons* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), 71.

On the surface, comparing King Dragon to Leda and the Swan constructs a shared taste between Hitler and Hussein. For example, both paintings show similar compositions in their weighted top left quadrants, as well as the depiction of a mythological animal paired with a submissive female. Yet, to compare these two works is to equate American illustration practices in the 1980s to works produced for National Socialist Party or Hitler directly. Paul Mathias Padua, a favorite of the Nazi elite, worked in the manner of the French realist school. Known for his paintings of Bavarian peasants, Padua's works, in style and subject are similar to works exhibited in Hitler's "Great German Art Exhibitions."²⁴¹ Second, the female nude carried moral, sociological, and religious values expressive of the Third Reich. Nazi visual culture rarely presented images of active females, preferring to relegate women to passive roles or into erotic nudes in domestic or mythological settings.²⁴² Women were stereotyped in their depictions always having smooth skin, no wrinkles, and described with soft lines and contours.²⁴³ The role of painting was to depict the origin of Aryan purity and for this reason women were shown as tall, blue-eyed, blonde representatives of the Aryan race.²⁴⁴ Most depictions presented women as a subservient objects to be looked at, while denying their sexuality. These paintings provided models of sexual behavior to attract the race's masculine elite; art was

²⁴¹ *Leda and the Swan* hung in the first GDK in 1937 on the specific order of Hitler and was later bought by Martin Bormann. Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 238.

²⁴² Jacob Wamberg, "Wounded Working Heros," in *Totalitarian Art and Modernity* (Copenhagen: Aarhus University Press, 2010), 52.

²⁴³ Adams, 150.

²⁴⁴ Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 119.

created by men, for men, and painted images of women degraded them into permanent positions of servitude.²⁴⁵ The body language repeated time and again in paintings and sculpture owed little to the iconographic traditions of the past and more so to images found in fashion magazines and advertisements.²⁴⁶

According to Berthold Hinz, these images led men who were unable to act out their desires to “adopt Zeus’s tactics and, disguised in the form of a bull, a swan, etc. pursue their victims. Particularly popular themes of this kind were *Europa* and *Leda*.”²⁴⁷ As such, Hitler’s tastes were in concert with broader ideas of visual politics and the promotion of a synthetic convergence of the arts to create a totalizing world view.²⁴⁸ In this way, Hitler’s use of aesthetics pulls from a long tradition of German political culture and role models such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Richard Wagner.²⁴⁹ *Leda and the Swan* is representative of lascivious nudes exhibited and bought by National Socialist leadership, and reflective of an increasing decadence at the center of Nazi culture, the depiction of the nudity is largely driven by Nazi ideology.²⁵⁰ Understood as a symptom

²⁴⁵ Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 150.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 151

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 152

²⁴⁸ The nude figure in National Socialist art had an esteemed role and was used in allegories, mythological compositions, and studies. Most of these works advertised the role of the family, social role, and image women should have. Ideal beauty had to correspond to the politically desirable human being and only through artistic images could a selection of racially pure German human beings be created. Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 148-149.

²⁴⁹ Wolfram Pyta, “Adolf Hitler’s (Self-) Fashioning as Genius: The Visual Politics of National Socialism’s Cult of Genius,” in Udo J. Hebel, Christoph Wagner (eds.) *Pictorial Cultures and Political Iconographies: Approaches, Perspectives, Case Studies from Europe and America* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co, 2011), 171-172.

²⁵⁰ Adams, 153

of National Socialism and the terror it created in relationships between men and women, *Leda and the Swan* is a classical example of totalitarian kitsch, defined as “the official art of authoritarian governments, aimed at extending state control through propaganda. Totalitarian kitsch exists to glorify the state, foster a personality cult surrounding the dictator and celebrate ceaseless and irrevocable social and economic progress ...”²⁵¹ However, this was not the case with *King Dragon*.

A more apt comparison between the tastes of Hussein and Hitler would need to include works in the private collection of both. In his personal life, Hitler was not a lover of pornography, and instead highly valued the nudes of painter Adolf Ziegler.²⁵² Despina Stratigakos documents Hitler’s taste for nudes of this type as an effort to present a specific image for political gain. Specifically, Stratigakos notes that Paris Bardone’s *Venus and Cupid* was used to reinforce Hitler’s heterosexual bachelor domesticity and cultural sophistication in the apparent absence of a female companion.²⁵³ [Figure 2.21] Sharing every aspect of Hitler’s personality through media perverted intimacy for political aims. In this sense alone, Hitler’s tastes and their calculated deployment in his home function very differently from the accidental exposure of Rowena’s paintings in Hussein’s “love nest.”

²⁵¹ Eric Gibson, “Why Dictators Love Kitsch,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 10, 2009. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204908604574336383324209824> (accessed June 1, 2015)

²⁵² Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, The Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and the People’s Republic of China* (New York: Overlook Duckworth: 1990), 264.

²⁵³ Stratigakos, 94.

Author Raka Shome addresses the critique of Hussein's taste (in comparison to other dictators) as "psychotic" and from the "cultural gutter." This is done by addressing the Islamic context and the idea Rowena paintings come to signify that culture.²⁵⁴ Shome goes on to note that "[I]n contrast, paintings of white women with naked breasts and erotic poses in a place like the Louvre can only signify the high art of Western civilization and the refinement of the European mind."²⁵⁵

Shome additionally address the way which Muslim men in Western popular culture are mediated through the figure of white women; how such framings keep alive particular logics of a "Muslim man" that (Western) nations need in order to assert their own national selves; and how such representations tell us as much about "Muslim masculinity" as they do about Anglo patriarchy.²⁵⁶ Some see that Anglo Christian patriarchy has always defined itself by constructing Muslim men in particular ways. Central to this construction have been imaginations of white women in relation to the Muslim male as a national enemy – potential or established. Thus, the rape fantasy, the sexual fantasy, the narrative of capture, or the image of the sexually perverted Muslim male, which have been frozen on Hollywood screens, tell us as much about Western popular culture's views of white Muslim/Arab men as they do about white patriarchal desires themselves. In this sense, Moore's images of soldiers looking at Rowena's

²⁵⁴ Raka Shome, *Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 171.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ "Edward Said's work has shown how the Westerner has always been obsessed with the "Muslim mind." Indeed, rarely have Muslim kings or presidents – especially ones who have dared to show independence from the West – come to our screens as sane people with whom dialogue is possible." Ibid.

paintings takes on a new context, in which Western audiences construct a view of Hussein through his possession of white female bodies. This is different from the effect that displaying Bardone's Venus had on notions of Hitler's masculinity.

Unlike the works shown and used by Hitler, *King Dragon* does not depict a racially typed body consistent with Iraqi governing ideologies and views of women. Even though Saddam Hussein admired Nazi ideologies and modeled himself after Stalin, he did not mimic their personal tastes.²⁵⁷ Hussein did not direct that *King of Dragon* be hung in a public space for viewing, but rather kept it for his own private enjoyment. Lastly, and perhaps most important, *King Dragon* did not originate as an image created by an Iraq citizen or propagandist, but rather by an American illustrator for an American public. Barring *King Dragon*, there are more apt comparisons to be made of Hussein's propaganda program which provide a much clearer overlap with Hitler or Stalin. For example, *The Standard Bearer*, by Hubert Lanzinger, is very similar to the many public murals which compared Saddam Hussein to Nebuchadnezzar. [Figure 2.22, 2.23]

Both images are examples of totalitarian kitsch, and show the leaders absent of most personal characteristics as they transform into an historical figure, or deity.²⁵⁸ These

²⁵⁷ Con Coughlin, *Saddam: His Rise and Fall* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 6, 48.

²⁵⁸ Saddam Hussein commonly modeled himself after Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the second ruler of the short-lived Neo-Babylonian Empire, which ended with the Persian conquest of it in 539 BC. Babylon was a culturally and intellectually vibrant civilization and had a profound influence on Near Eastern contemporaries. Nebuchadnezzar was devoted to building and restoration projects as well as protection for all his subjects. Under Nebuchadnezzar Babylon became one of the most influential and sophisticated cities of the ancient world. Trevor Bryce, "Nebuchadnezzar to Saddam Hussein: The History of the Myth of Babylon," *Oxford University's Academic Insight for the Thinking World*. Sept. 23, 2016

depictions are also similar to Soviet Realist paintings of Stalin in which Stalin becomes the embodiment of a materialist history to come.²⁵⁹ Unlike *King Dragon*, both of these works were widely available to the public: *The Standard Bearer* was disseminated as a poster, and the other as a public mural.

Though both Hitler, and Hussein are clearly monstrous, it is unlikely one could know precisely how and to what extent their personal tastes reveal innate character aspects. Many formal similarities do exist between *King Dragon* and *Leda and the Swan*, including extremely uncomfortable depictions of women that are reflective of deeper cultural or ideological biases, or the figures of the Dragon and Swan as representations of a male sexual actor, or a violent or hyper-masculine world view. However, these images are objectively not the same in making, intent, or the culture in which they were produced.

This context is blurred in Jones' criticisms of the photographs of John Moore. Not only was this context challenged by Raka Shome, but there were additional challenges through letters to *The Guardian* in response to Jones' article.²⁶⁰ Jones' reaction to

²⁵⁹ Jan Plamper's study of the Soviet Union from 1929-1953 argues that most of the aesthetic production under Stalin was aimed at developing a "personality cult," or "the symbolic evaluation of one person much above others." Plamper.10.

²⁶⁰ A reaction from Edward Lucie-Smith stated, "Jonathan Jones denounces painting found in Saddam's private quarters as 'art for the barely literate, or barely sentient.' This may be the case, but it is also the case that the ones showing nude figures clearly derive from the work of the comic-book artist and science fiction illustrator Frank Frazetta, who is honored with a museum in East Stroudsburg Pennsylvania." Edward Lucie-Smith "Saddam's comic fantasies," *Guardian Letters*, April 18, 2003. Yet another response to Jones' framing asks "Would you still be excoriating Saddam's 'gutter' taste if the same paintings appeared in the new Saatchi gallery you have been so assiduously promoting?"

Hussein's taste is an example of dictator kitsch because it collapses the personal and the political. According to Stuart Greenstreet, the effect of this judgment is "to imply that our taste would be as bad as Saddam's if we fail to see what is patently true."²⁶¹

John Moore's photographs and Jonathan Jones' criticism of their contents establishes a narrative linking Hussein's domestic and psychological interior. The history of embedded reporting, the reclining nude, the homes of dictators, and reality television all provide points of access; however, Rowena's paintings are the smoking gun in narrating Hussein's psychological interior. In this fantasy Hussein's dwelling is revealed to be "a playboy's fantasy from the 1960s" implying that he is culturally regressed, out of touch, and an especially toxic man.²⁶² The discovery and reveal of dictators' tastes has served throughout history as a symbolic representation of their inner characters, morality, and crimes. In some cases, this serves as a public humiliation in which western goods and excesses divorce the dictator from their ideological opposition to the west. In other occasions it imagines dictators with questionable masculinities in which silverware, lairs, love nests, and/or love shacks, show one as either too feminine or sadistically hyper-masculine.

Personally, I like the one with missiles, it's still more subtle than the war porn of the news coverage." Heather Merrin "Saddam's comic fantasies," *Guardian Letters*, April 18, 2003

²⁶¹ Stuart Greenstreet, "Judging Saddam's Pictures," *Philosophy Now – Issue 42*, 2003. https://philosophynow.org/issues/42/Judging_Saddams_Pictures (accessed Sept. 18, 2024)

²⁶² The Associated Press, "Troop's uncover playboy Saddam's love shack," Sunday, April 13, 2003.

Associating a debased sense of taste with a depraved morality is a common objection to works considered dictator kitsch. This merging of the personal and the political is evident in the photographs of John Moore, especially when paired with the reception by Jonathan Jones. This emergent view was echoed in the *Toronto Globe & Mail* which found that “the appeal of patriarchy is the same the whole world over,” and described Hussein’s paintings as “the kind of pumped up, side-of-a-van type art that goes best with a bong and some black lights.”²⁶³ This observation concludes that “[t]he cache probably won’t make its way to the Louvre, but they do say a lot about the man.”²⁶⁴

Peter York reacts to Hussein’s pictures, stating

Were these pictures made to order – or did Saddam somehow find them in some kind of New Jersey pervy painter’s store? Either way, the profound sadism is obvious, along with some really disturbing ideals about race, sex and religion. It’s the sort of stuff you can imagine in the houses of some of Jerry Springer’s guests – Mr. Heavy Metal or Miss Part-time Hooker.²⁶⁵

Excluding the possibility that dictator kitsch is an objective phenomenon, and that the works of Rowena are not evidence for that phenomenon, what might be an alternative explanation? Referring to the discovery of Saddam Hussein’s palaces and interiors during the Iraq invasion of 2002-2003 and the ensuing reactions in the Western press, Tracey Potts describes the function of dictator kitsch as one of “subject –manufactories,” stating, “[D]iscussions of dictator’s interiors function foremost to secure the identity of a

²⁶³ Sarah Milroy, “He may be a tyrant, but he loves his art,” *Toronto Globe & Mail*, April 19, 2003.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ York, 98.

self-assured cosmopolitan subject who can delight in the apparent vulgarity of the most savage taste.”²⁶⁶

Beneath the scorn of dictator kitsch, Potts instead sees a lesson in “stealth-wealth,” the foundation for “civilized” operations of capital and exchange. To miss out on the intricacies of stealth-wealth is to participate in showy wealth, which Potts defines as “a basic illiteracy in the ABC’s of capital power: seeing value in things themselves rather than in their relations in a dynamic field of supply and demand is to parade a primitive relation to property.”²⁶⁷ Potts’ point calls attention to what kitsch actually seems to identify: the individual(s) using the term. In this sense, kitsch or dictator kitsch functions weakly as an aesthetic description of Hussein’s or Hitler’s tastes but is an extremely powerful tool in simplifying and excluding worldviews, politics, class positions, and notions of subjectivity via “unconventional” consumption habits.

Clive Hamilton calls attention to this point when writing: “The art of the successful modern consumer is to consume in a way that says ‘this is who I am’ without it being apparent that the statement is being made. So we snigger at those who declare themselves too blatantly, the innocent consumers who expose the system by not understanding the rules.”²⁶⁸

This ironic nod to those “in the know” alluded to by Hamilton is best demonstrated in the work of Peter York. In *Dictator Style: Lifestyles of the World’s Most Colorful Despots*, York highlights the home decorating tastes of popularly despised

²⁶⁶ Potts, 169.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 169-171.

²⁶⁸ Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 82.

figures by focusing not on kitsch as a mass cultural opiate, but as a staple in the personal spaces and private tastes of reviled leaders (including Saddam Hussein).²⁶⁹ York's text is a guarantee to the reader of their own position by revealing the mistake of the "primitive:" to think that "power and wealth can be openly and quantitatively displayed."²⁷⁰

Dictator kitsch, if nothing else, points to a violation. To use C.E. Emmer's term, it exposes a "fault line" in culture. However, this violation is not one of aesthetic excess, gaudy coloration, sci-fi/fantasy paintings, cheap Christmas trees, or Corona beer, but rather of a relation to property which breaks "the rules;" specifically, not seeing value as a consequence of "relations in a dynamic field." In this sense, dictator kitsch shares qualities with early definitions of the fetish and its history as a concept that demonized arbitrary attachments of West Africans to material objects. This early explanation of the fetish was set in contrast to the European subject, constituted through a disavowal of the object.²⁷¹ Peter Stallybrass describes this founding of the European subject as

... a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who, having recognized the true (i.e. market) value of the object-as-commodity, fixated instead upon transcendental values that transformed gold into ships, ships into guns, guns, into tobacco ... What was demonized in the concept of the fetish was the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects that are touched and loved and worn.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ York, xi.

²⁷⁰ Potts, 169-171.

²⁷¹ Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat" in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (New York: Routledge, 1998), 183-207.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 187.

Modern consumption expresses a set of values, projecting who you see yourself to be (this is the point of TLC's *Trading Spaces*). A key feature in doing so is to recognize the transformative or "transcendental" aspect of value and exchange. To miss this is to overindulge in sentiment or nostalgia for an object (which is also a classic definition of kitsch). Because identity is connected to the subtlety of display and consumption in Western society, Hussein's character is revealed to be an imposture for making the mistake of "the primitive." Saddam Hussein's "love shack" and taste in sci-fi/fantasy is received as dictator kitsch for the way it exposes "the system by not understanding the rules." In Lacanian terms, dictator kitsch mirrors the discourse of the master. For Lacan, the master is by definition an imposter. Slavoj Žižek describes this scenario, stating

[T]he Master is somebody who, upon finding himself at the place of constitutive lack in the structure, acts as if he holds the reins of that surplus, of the mysterious X which eludes the grasp of the structure ... The unmasking of the Master's imposture does not abolish the place he occupies, it just renders it visible in its original emptiness, i.e., as preceding the element which fills it out.²⁷³

In this sense, dictator kitsch is a specific type of voyeurism in which those looking in see a perversion of the symbolic order represented by the compensatory objects of dictators, in turn revealing their non-mastery or lack.²⁷⁴ Historically, this is consistent with the evaluation of dictators' belongings and tastes as a routine form of debasement or in finalizing defeat.

²⁷³Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 103-4.

²⁷⁴Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis Book XVII* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 29-39.

The reception of Rowena's paintings as dictator kitsch allows the viewer to engage in a specific voyeurism in which a non-mastery or otherness is read onto the figure of Hussein. However, dictator kitsch or dictator's tastes in painting are not innate or intuitive. Rather, they represent a contextual framing consistent with a history of how Western audiences have fantasized the way men in power present themselves. The discourse is largely disconnected from the history of Rowena's paintings, which while crude in their subject matter, are not objective indications of depravity. Rather the works of Rowena in this context become objects which "renders visible the distance that separates the Master from the place it occupies."²⁷⁵

Building from the historical foundations of kitsch in the American context via Greenberg, it is evident that in the context of the Iraq war, accusations of dictator kitsch continue to be used as a proxy for political battles in the realm of culture. Saddam Hussein's possession of Rowena's illustrations moves the public discussion away from the war or its consequences to the issue of taste and the assurance of Western superiority in interior design. My next chapter will continue this inquiry into dictator kitsch and connections to taste by turning to the palaces and private spaces of Saddam Hussein, their histories, and reception during the Iraq war.

²⁷⁵ Žižek, 103.

Chapter 3

Palaces and Private Spaces

During the US-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace and its interior spaces were used to demonstrate his character and, by extension, narrate the larger Iraqi invasion. [Figure 3.1] Under the banner of dictator kitsch, these interpretations separated Hussein's structures into two groups: official spaces and informal/domestic spaces. Further, these spaces were presented in a narrative sequence: first, the untouched official spaces, then the liberated, secret interior spaces, followed by the official and domestic spaces reclaimed and restaged by the Allied forces, and finally, the squalor of Hussein's "real home" or "spider hole," accompanied by didactic infographics.

Interpreting the Republican Palace as dictator kitsch ignores its specific history and instead relies on notions of commodity fetishism that supposedly reveal Hussein's inner motivations. Hussein's taste, as framed by the press, shows a radically alienated sense of desire in his embrace of cultural products derived from sources associated with the West. This narrative reduces the politics of the Iraqi invasion to the belief that objects, interiors, and architecture are endowed with a metaphysical power through which all social relations can be explained. This narrative further ignores a more nuanced history of British colonialist architecture and its expression of infrastructural power, work by Modernist architects in Baghdad, and Hussein's cultural manipulations aimed at unifying a collective Arabic identity.

This chapter aims to expand the reading of Hussein's Republican Palace as kitsch by examining spaces highlighted by the western press during the Iraqi invasion. My

contention throughout is that dictator kitsch reveals a specifically American/European reading of taste which naturalizes conflict and at times even suggests its necessity. This reading is clearest in the multiple fantasies surrounding Hussein's Republican palace (and palaces more generally), a structure with roots in the British Mandate.²⁷⁶ Britain seized Iraq from Ottoman Turkey during World War I and was granted a mandate by the League of Nations to govern the nation in 1920. Britain's intervention in Iraq lasted 18 years and was defined by major challenges, including an attempt to pacify a hostile Iraqi people and diffusing resentment at home fueled by the costs of state building. The British government ultimately failed to fulfil the terms of the League of Nations' Mandate; to construct a stable state in Iraq leading to Iraq being granted independence in October of 1932.

British Colonial Architecture in Iraq and the Role of Historical Memory

In 1922, R.H.A Jones, writing in *The Architect*, gave a detailed review of Baghdad's major mosques and tombs:

One's first impression of Mesopotamia is not a favorable one. This is partly accounted for by the signs of neglects and decay which meet the eye at every turn and by the fact that to enter almost any town it is necessary to pick one's way through innumerable graveyards and refuse-heaps. Once in the narrow street, however, there is much of interest to be seen.²⁷⁷

Jones' reaction of shock, balanced with intrigue, provides a window into how taste frames views of another culture. Jones account of Baghdad's monuments was not only an

²⁷⁶ Toby Dodge, "The British Mandate in Iraq, 1920-1932," *The Middle East Online Series 2: Iraq 1914-1974* (Reading: Cengage Learning EMEA Ltd, 2006).

²⁷⁷ R.H.A Jones, "Mesopotamia Architecture," *The Architect*, June 23, 1922.

aesthetic exercise, but was intended to focus the readers' attention on the trope of "neglect" to sell the British public on the necessity of the occupying Iraq.²⁷⁸ In such accounts, architectural heritage specific to the Middle East was discounted as "decayed" in contrast to the modernity of buildings created by a progressive West.²⁷⁹ Jones' article used colonialist prejudice to direct the public gaze away from the brutal implications of the British occupation and its material costs. His essay aligns with Edward Said's definition of orientalism in the way a constructed image of the Middle East becomes the self-constituting "other" for European identity. Building on the work of Foucault, Said focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge. He argues that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot picture the systematic way in which Europe constructed the Orient during the post-Enlightenment period.²⁸⁰ Through the imposition of taste, Jones created a picture of the Middle East as backwards, in disarray, and unable to define itself which rationalized Baghdad's/the "Orient's" exploitation, justifying British control.

To understand how labeling Hussein's taste as kitsch reinforces Orientalism, this chapter will study early architectural plans in Iraq by British architects, specifically the work of J.M. Wilson, Harold Mason, and J. Brian Cooper, during their time with the British Public Works Department. Western architecture, planning, and infrastructure in

²⁷⁸ Jones went on to describe in detail how dampened coconut fibre was used to cool interiors. 460.

²⁷⁹ Evan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya, "Modern Architecture in the Middle East: Beyond Tradition and Development," *Docomomo*, September 2006, No. 35, 25.

²⁸⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

Iraq were crucial to Britain's attempts at forming a nation-state and strategically central to codifying its position in Iraq under the Mandate.²⁸¹

What is called the "Middle East" formed after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, whose southern territories were divided among the U.K. and France after World War I. The British combined the three former Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra into the new state known as Iraq. Although commonalities existed between the three provinces that formed this modern nation-state, there were significant cleavages in economic, political, religious and cultural trajectories.²⁸² The result was a fractured political identity in which conflicting ethnic groups, tribal loyalties, and illiteracy troubled the state from its founding. From this beginning, the political situation wavered between two competing visions: Iraqi nationalism and a Pan-Arab view.²⁸³

The British established Iraq's borders and the role of its government, and buttressed its rule with architecture, engineering, and infrastructure projects. Architectural projects created during the British Mandate were intended to legitimize the colonial occupation and were concentrated in Iraq's main cities of Baghdad, Basra, and the main port on the Gulf.²⁸⁴ Through these projects, the British attempted to shape Iraqi identity, bringing the civilized language of architecture to the unshaped savagery of

²⁸¹ Ian Jackson, "The Architecture of the British Mandate in Iraq: Nation-Building and State Creation," *The Journal of Architecture*, 21:3, 375-417.

²⁸² These groups include Kurds, Shi'a, and Sunni Arabs. Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 20.

²⁸³ Davis, 14.

²⁸⁴ Shatha Abbass, "Effect of Colonial British Architecture in the Iraqi Modern Architecture," conference paper, 3rd international conference of preservation, maintenance, and rehabilitation of historical buildings and structure, Feb. 2018.

Iraq.²⁸⁵ The majority of these projects were executed by the Public Works Department (PWD), an important part of the Mandate government aimed at expressing this collective Arab-centered identity built on British notions of a nation state. Founded in 1855 the PWD provided essential building types for the government including post offices, police stations, and hospitals. Through these projects the British hoped to instigate a meaningful presence in the Iraqi peoples' lives and develop a platform to enable the longer-term goal of nation building.²⁸⁶

From 1921 to 1936 British architects James Mollison Wilson (1921-26), Harold Clayforth Mason (1926-32), and John Brian Cooper (1932-36) oversaw all sectors of development for the PWD.²⁸⁷ J.M. Wilson studied under renowned British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. From 1913 to 1916, Wilson served as Lutyens' assistant in India in the new capital of New Delhi, an experience that would influence his later approach to town planning and architecture.²⁸⁸ [Figure 3.2]

²⁸⁵ This results in what historian Patricia Morton has identified, in her study of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris as "...a contradiction at the heart of colonialism: colonized people had to be proved barbarous to justify their colonization, but the *mission civilisatrice* required that they be raised above savagery. If they acquired too much civilization and became truly assimilated to France, colonization could no longer be defended, having fulfilled its mission." Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), 179.

²⁸⁶ Jackson, 387.

²⁸⁷ These three architects had experience building in brick. The first two were military engineers in the Indian army and understood the use of brick in architecture designed for hot climates. Caecilia Pieri, "Baghdad Arts Deco: Architectural Brickwork, 1920-1950," (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 32.

²⁸⁸ Reem IR Alissa. "Building for Oil: Corporate Colonialism, Nationalism and Urban Modernity in Ahmadi, 1946-1992," Doctoral Dissertation, UC Berkeley, Fall 2002, 44.

When the separate state of Iraq was created in 1918, Wilson was charged with directing the Public Works Department in Baghdad, a position he held until 1926.²⁸⁹ Wilson's projects included the Maude Memorial Hospital, Al Il Beit University, the Baghdad Museum, and plans for King Faisal's Palace. [Figure 3.3]

Until his death in 1933, King Faisal was the leader of a small Sunni Arab governing elite which dominated Iraq politics. He was chosen as king by the British in 1921 and was their key figure of influence in the country.²⁹⁰ Wilson's designs for the King's palace were a means to legitimize Faisal, chosen for his broad appeal to the public and for his dependence on the British.²⁹¹ Faisal's palace is exemplary of British colonial architecture in Iraq for the ways in which it presents a mirage of power, solidity, and ideals of the state. Mark Crinson has described the plans for the palace as "self-effacing classicism and a neo-Islamic style, neither carried out with particular conviction."²⁹² In the design for Faisal's palace, Wilson incorporated local materials combined with decorative historical references to evoke a collective Arab-centered identity.²⁹³ Wilson referred to this mixing of cultural references and aesthetic codes as an "Arab renaissance in the Arts."²⁹⁴

²⁸⁹ Directory of Scottish Architects, Biography report, October 14, 2018. http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=203573 (accessed Sept. 18, 2024)

²⁹⁰ Faisal was the son of the Sharif of Mecca who in 1916, during the First World War, triggered the Arab revolt in favor of the British. Dodge

²⁹¹ Mark Crinson, *Modern Architecture and the End of Empire* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 29.

²⁹² Crinson, 29.

²⁹³ Jackson, 375-417.

²⁹⁴ Wilson's goal wasn't solely colonial in the sense of imposing aesthetic assimilation but rather promoted modernity in the service of the state of Iraq. Pieri, 33 – 35.

Planned for the banks of the Tigris River in Baghdad, the outside of the palace showed little Arab influence in its strong symmetry and exaggerated entrance.²⁹⁵

Wilson's style is located between the grandeur and monumentality of Lutyens with measured sympathy for Islamic materials and motifs such as the use of arches, domes, and local brickwork.²⁹⁶ Wilson's architectural and interior renderings demonstrate taste which is in line with British conventions of power, prestige, and royalty. Though unbuilt, Wilson's design for Faisal's palace is an example of a "prestige" project in British nation-building envisioned as a foundation on which an Iraqi identity might grow.²⁹⁷ The palace, as a ceremonial and symbolic site of power, represented the British presence and was meant to instill a sense of collective pride in the Iraqi public.

Another example of this aesthetic is Wilson's interior rendering for the Port Offices in Basra, which include a grandiose staircase set against arches, patterned walls, and checkered floors.²⁹⁸ [Figure 3.4] Wilson's aesthetic, influenced by his time with Lutyens and the tradition of British colonial architecture, sought to balance the modern with the regional. Through its predominantly classical language, with aspirations to a universal authority and subtle use of regional character, Wilson's "prestige project" is a

²⁹⁵ Jackson

²⁹⁶ Alissa, 45.

²⁹⁷ Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "The Two Faces of Nation-Building: Developing Function and Identity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, 2004, 3.

²⁹⁸ Wilson was later hired in 1927 by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and later recognized as the company architect in 1944. Wilson and Harold Clayforth Mason partnered in 1935 and worked on the majority of projects in Iraq for close to two decades including the civil airports in Baghdad and Basra. Ahmadreza Hakiminejad, "The Oil and the Brick: Tales of a Scotsman in Persia," *Round City*, Jan. 29, 2021. <https://round-city.com/the-oil-and-the-brick-tales-of-a-scotsman-in-persia/> (accessed Oct. 2, 2024).

cultural statement through which Britain might project influence while naturalizing the violence by which it ruled.

Under the Iraqi monarchy and the British Mandate, architects continued to import British Colonial building types, architectural details, and organizational systems through WWI and into the 1920s and 30s. In the 1930s, the popularity of Modernist vocabularies increased as their technologically inspired forms and associations with progress appealed to an Iraq working to achieve political independence. This style of architecture corresponds politically to a Pan-Arab vision of Iraqi society. This vision of Iraqi society arose following the 1914-1918 Arab revolt and the Ottoman Empire's collapse. This view of politically community draws on a historical memory rooted in Iraq's Semitic past and the 'Abbasid Empire.

The Republican Palace and Western architectural influence

In the 1940s, as British influence waned, the Baghdad School of Fine Arts (1939) and Society of the Friends of Art (1941) were established, both of which lead to a radical turn in architecture and aesthetics. The dominance of British taste began to give way to other references, including Bauhaus modernism, functionalism, and rationalism.²⁹⁹

Post-World War II Iraq stood out for its ambitious and intense modernization program. The British Mandate ended during the postwar period, and Iraq became sovereign, with the US developing a dominant interest in the region during the Cold War.

²⁹⁹ Caecilia Pieri. *Baghdad Arts Deco: Architectural Brickwork, 1920-1950*. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010, 48.

These influences included technological, formal, and spatial changes in architectural production. Specific materials and technologies imported from Europe, or the US included reinforced concrete and glass, which were used in conjunction with local materials such as stone and cladding.³⁰⁰

To the western powers, Iraq provided an ideal place for modernization due to its low population, abundant water, large tracts of land, and oil reserves.³⁰¹ During the postwar period, Iraq experienced unparalleled economic and social development due to vast oil reserves and a skilled labor force that received training in Western universities. Crucial support came from personnel abroad, including from the United States through its Point Four Program, United Nations agencies, and Western business, which aimed at training Iraqis.³⁰²

During the 1950s and 1960s a simplified version of modern architecture was practiced in Arab countries with great enthusiasm, for giving them a fresh visual start after their independence from the nineteenth-century colonial powers.³⁰³ In the 1950s the “Iraq Development Board,” a quasi-governmental body established by King Faisal II, sought to advance modernizing agendas. The Board was comprised of both State experts (including on finance, economics, and irrigation) and foreign advisors (including two

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Panayiota Piya, “Rebuilding Iraq 1955-58: Modernist Housing, National Aspirations, and Global Ambitions,” *Docomomo*, September 2006, No. 35, 71.

³⁰² Fahim I Qubain, *The Reconstruction of Iraq: 1950-1957* (New York: The Foreign Policy Research Institute, University of Pennsylvania, 1958), 32.

³⁰³ Peter Herrle and Stephanus Schmitz, ed. *Constructing Identity in Contemporary Architecture: Case Studies from the South* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 155.

Americans and two British).³⁰⁴ The Development Board's goal was to "present a general economic and financial plan for the development of the resources of Iraq and the raising of the standard of living of her people." The board, chaired by Iraq's premier and supported by American and British consultants, used Iraq's oil revenues to focus on agricultural and industrial growth until the mid-1950s, when attention turned to shaping the physical environment.³⁰⁵

Western architectural practices continued to influence Iraqi architecture throughout the 1950s, when the Iraq Development Board invited many influential architects to create projects in Baghdad including Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Alvar Alto.³⁰⁶ These architects were tasked with turning the Iraqi capital into a symbol of modernist experimentation. Despite all being "Modernists," these architects had very little experience with Baghdad prior to their invitation and produced architectural designs with little in common. These projects (built and unbuilt) were stylistic attempts to create a Modern architecture in line with an Iraqi nationalism.³⁰⁷ One example of this hybrid architectural production is Frank Lloyd Wright's unbuilt design for the Baghdad Opera House. [Figure 3.5] Wright's enthusiasm for Sumerian art and the

³⁰⁴ Qubain, 35.

³⁰⁵ The Development Board was in response to pre-war development programs, which suffered from partisan politics and frequent cabinet changes. The Board was to be an autonomous agency, separate from the government and run by experts, not political appointees. *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

Thousand and One Nights story influenced his plans for the Opera House, which was to be built on an island in the Tigris.³⁰⁸

The Opera House was a part of his larger *Plan for Greater Baghdad* a project intended “to combine the Orient and the West, the past and the present, tradition and innovation.”³⁰⁹ [Figure 3.6] Wright’s design for the Opera House sits on a mound inspired by *tels*. *Tels*, which are raised mounds marking the site of an ancient city, built, and rebuilt in the same location for hundreds or thousands of years. Wright further alluded to local culture including spheres atop the structure inspired by Aladdin’s lamp.³¹⁰ Wright’s plans show a formal approach to design with contradictory aesthetic features stimulated by fantasies of the Orient. Like Wilson’s and Cooper’s, Wright’s designs are a Western projection of Arabic culture.

An additional example of this hybrid architecture is the Royal Palace constructed in 1958 for King Faisal II. The Royal Palace was intended to be the official royal residence and was designed by British Modernist architect J. Brian Cooper.³¹¹ [Figure 3.7] Cooper’s design for the Royal Palace included three linked rectangular structures

³⁰⁸ AIA New York Chapter and the Center for Architecture Foundation, *City of Mirages: Baghdad, 1952-1982* exhibition, October 2022 – February 2023.

³⁰⁹The use of the term “Orient” by Wright is inaccurate since his design mixes references from Buddhism, Islam, Persia, Sumner, and the *Thousand and One Nights*. *City of Mirages: Baghdad, 1952-1982*, curated by Pedro Azara, New York’s Center for Architecture, 2012.

³¹⁰ Mehdi, 85.

³¹¹ Cooper was one of a group of architects in the British forces who occupied the country in 1915. He became Iraq’s government architect in 1934 after designing the Islamic-styled Mausoleum for King Faisal I, a project that combined grandiose Islamic funerary traditions with geometric art deco stylizations. Neil Levine, *The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 421.

surrounding two courtyards. The center structure was capped by a large dome while the two flanking structures had flat roofs absent of any ornament. As was the case with Wilson's design for Faisal I's palace, Cooper's goal was to strike a synthesis between the regional and the classical.³¹² Cooper's focus on rectilinear lines and a mechanistic distribution of space are characteristic of an Imperial aesthetic practiced in the Arab world. The use and distribution of space is ordered according to a repeated module with the integration of regional character accomplished through the dome on the central structure.

Cooper had worked with J.M. Wilson on several designs, including the 1931 Basra Airport and Baghdad International Railway Station (1947-1951).³¹³ [Figure 3.8] The Baghdad Railway Station shows a similar solution to the question of how to integrate European forms and Iraqi sources.³¹⁴ Shared aesthetic features include a 21-meter diameter dome and a central range of columns capped with Islamic inspired ornament. These hybrid aspects echo elements of Wilson's renderings for Faisal I's palace and interior, Cooper's design for Faisal II's palace, and later work by Cooper on the Parliament Building and Arab Bank.³¹⁵

These prestige projects, foundational to Ottoman and British colonization, were inherited by Saddam Hussein when his dictatorship began in 1979. Saddam's cultural

³¹² Suad Mehdi, *Modernism in Baghdad* (Jordan: College of the Arts, Amman University, 2008), 82.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ This imperial aesthetic is explained by the training at the Liverpool School of Architecture where Mason attended from 1909-1911. Ibid.

³¹⁵ Mehdi, 72.

interventions continued in the same spirit and repeated the same process of “cutting and pasting,” in which ideas from an original culture are inserted into a new field to unify a cultural identity and to create images appealing to a disparate population.³¹⁶

Architecture under Saddam Hussein

The Baath, a Pan-Arabist political party advocating the formation of a single Arab socialist nation, has multiple branches in Middle Eastern countries. It was the ruling party in Syria from 1963 and in Iraq from 1968-2003. The Baath espoused nonalignment and opposition to imperialism and colonialism, took inspiration from what it considered the positive values of Islam, and attempted to ignore or transcend class divisions. Its structure was highly centralized and authoritarian.³¹⁷ Recruits to Baathism in Iraq were drawn to the movement out of a dislike of foreign influence, a desire to break the grip of an oppressive ruling elite, and a belief in pan-Arab nationalism.³¹⁸

On July 17 and 31, 1968, the Baath party seized power from the military faction then ruling Iraq. Once the Baathists seized power, Ahmad Hasan Bakr and Saddam Hussein worked together for over a decade to assure the Baath’s permanent control over Iraq.³¹⁹ In 1973 Bakr and Saddam forced influential military officers out of office, and three years later Bakr arranged for Saddam to be commissioned as a lieutenant-general;

³¹⁶ Herrle, 152.

³¹⁷ Baathism was originally brought to Iraq by Shi’i students in the 1950s. John F. Devlin, “The Baath Party: Rise and Metamorphosis,” *The American Historical Review*, Dec. 1991, Vol. 96, 1396-1407.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Bakr, born in 1914, had credentials as one of the Free Officers who overthrew the monarchy in 1958. Ibid.

in 1979 Saddam made himself field marshal.³²⁰ Once Saddam took sole power, he exerted his power through dozens of public works and monuments that he erected throughout the country.³²¹

Saddam Hussein took a special interest in defining Iraq's cultural production; he understood the role that historical narratives play in the creation of a unified nation. Hussein's regime attempted to form a new public sphere, political identity, and national heritage through the state's manipulation of high and popular culture, an undertaking exemplified in the Project for the Rewriting of History, which began shortly after the Baath took power in 1968. Redefining history was intimately tied to the idea of cultural authenticity, a key idea that the Baath used to police cultural boundaries.³²² Under Hussein, the nation's culture symbolically incorporated all elements of Iraqi culture, a strategy to eliminate political dissent by the different groups united in the nation-state of "Iraq." The result was a synthesis of Pan-Arabism, "Mesopotamianism," and folk culture

³²⁰ Saddam's dictatorship, from 1979, was largely the result of his attracting favorable notice at a Baath party congress held in Damascus in 1963. Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Saddam Hussein: An American Obsession* (London: Verso, 2000), 5.

³²¹ "Saddam's creation of a system in which citizens come to believe they share responsibility for actions over which they have no say derives from Baathist ideology ... The Baath organization serves as both rubber stamp and propaganda channel. The primary function of the party member has become one of support for Saddam's compulsion to retain and exercise power." Devlin, 1407.

³²² The Project for the Rewriting of History was the Baath's party attempt at restructuring historical memory, "the project represented an attempt to construct a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationship of the citizen to the state, and public understanding of national heritage. Simultaneously, it sought to negate Iraqist nationalism's inclusive legacy precisely while trying to appropriate it to build a "new Iraq man and society." Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Los Angeles: University of California Press 2005, 148-149.

that was intended to inspire all Iraqis.³²³ Like the colonial architecture of the British period, Saddam's efforts aimed to create a new vernacular for an otherwise disparate grouping of populations, an effort that came with overt attempts to diminish any sense of tribal difference or identity.³²⁴ A unified culture and strong state reflected the need to reconstruct Iraqi culture and was a necessary counter to British imperialist efforts to destroy its cultural heritage.³²⁵

Under Saddam, the Baath appropriated cultural production by foregrounding Iraq's unique civilization, heritage, and superior standing relative to other Arab countries.³²⁶ The Baath party sponsored architectural competitions, poetry conferences, arts publications, a roaming Biennial of Arab art, and the construction or reconstruction of monuments, museums, and historical palaces. At least nine new museums were erected under Saddam from 1968 to 1977 most of which told the story of the Baath against the monarchy and celebrated the party's populist character.³²⁷ Due to a rise in Muslim

³²³ "Pan-Arabism, the core of Ba'thist ideology depends on a particular form of historical memory rooted in the Arab Golden Age tied to the Baghdad-based 'Abbasid Empire. Ideologically, Pan-Arabism offers the Sunni Arab minority the possibility of majority status in a unitary Pan-Arab nation (*al-watan al-'Arabi*), which is especially attractive to those who still adhere to tribal identities and who have dominated the state apparatus." Ibid., 7. "...the Ba'th's emphasis on Mesopotamian heritage, reflected, for example, in efforts to resurrect ancient Babylon and in its naming an elite Special Republican Guard armored unit the Hammurabi Brigade, complemented rather than countered its Pan-Arab emphasis..." Ibid., 9

³²⁴ Ibid. 96

³²⁵ A concern with a past that outside forces have attempted to distort is central to the civilizational struggle in which Iraq was engaged. Ibid., 172

³²⁶ Ibid., 168

³²⁷ Negar Azimi, "Saddam Hussein and the State as Sculpture," in *On Democracy*, ed. Paul Chan (Athens: Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, 2006), 93.

religious sentiment during the 1970s and a reaction to the perceived ahistoricism of Modernism, many Iraqi architects used historical elements relating to an Islamic heritage.³²⁸ The Baath specifically focused on creating links to a glorious past that had been interrupted by British colonialism. As a result, State-sponsored art in Iraq had two uses: validating historical narratives beneficial to the Baath and marginalizing minorities found to be threatening to their power. Through his cultural projects, Saddam manipulated the past consistent with what British historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the “invention of tradition,” a set of cultural practices “which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior” through implied continuity with a suitable historic past.³²⁹

The early 1980s saw widespread construction in Baghdad. In preparation for the non-aligned nations conferences held in Baghdad in 1982, Saddam built boulevards, shopping centers, hotels, tourist parks, and monuments to house and entertain the visiting leaders.³³⁰ By employing Western firms on large infrastructure projects, the Baath created incentives for western powers to support the party. This Western investment created a wealthy new state bourgeoisie and coincided with a partial privatization of the Iraqi economy in the 1980s. Economic change created a new class of Iraqis who benefitted from the heightened economic prosperity, ensuring their loyalty to Saddam.³³¹ This period of development also coincided with US support for Baghdad during the Iran-

³²⁸ Kanan Makiya, *The Monument: Art and Vulgarities in Saddam Hussein's Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

³²⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

³³⁰ Elizabeth Rubin, “The Battle Within,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2003.

³³¹ Davis, 179.

Iraq war (1980-1988), during which the Reagan administration sent Donald Rumsfeld as a special Middle East envoy to do “whatever was necessary and legal” to prevent Iraq from losing the war.³³² Rumsfeld met with Saddam in Baghdad and explained that it was the US’ goal to restore full diplomatic relations and help his regime.³³³

In 1982, under the supervision of Saddam himself, an international call was issued to twenty-two consultant firms for the building of a Grand State Mosque. The Mosque was to represent a leap forward in the art of Iraqi architecture and “revive the pioneering, historical, spiritual, and intellectual role of Baghdad.”³³⁴ More practically, the competition reflected Saddam’s desire to curry favor with the conservative sectors of the Iraqi population. Among the twenty-two participating firms were renowned Post-Modernists Venturi, Rauch, and Scott Brown (VRSB).³³⁵ A three-day televised event was held to broadcast the architects’ presentations, debate the entries, and announce the winners.

Though not the winning submission, the proposal by VRSB stressed an “egalitarian” design through the creation of a large dome over the *sahan* rather than the prayer hall as is common in mosques. [Figure 3.9] The projected effect was to secularize the dome, to welcome the masses, and to “be a national symbol whose contemporary

³³² In 1988 Dow Chemical sold \$1.5 million worth of pesticides to Iraq despite knowledge that they could be used for chemical warfare. Julian Borger, “Rumsfeld ‘offered help to Saddam,’” *The Guardian*, Dec. 31, 2002.

³³³ Joyce Battle, ed. “Shaking Hands with Saddam Hussein: The U.S. Tilts towards Iraq, 1980-1984,” *The National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 82*, February 25, 2003. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB82/> (accessed October 5, 2024).

³³⁴ Amant Al Asima, *State Mosque Competition: Baghdad, Iraq* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Printers, 1983).

³³⁵ Makiya, 62-63.

architecture integrates the formal and ornamental characteristics of the Islamic and Iraqi cultures.”³³⁶ The firm’s principle guiding ideas for the design were to “... develop a building in which the scale and elements express monumentality as well as human scale; in which the spatial layout is unequivocally egalitarian; and finally, where symbolic elements such as the arcades, ornament, dome, *murqarnass* crenellations and minaret have clear acceptable referents.”³³⁷

To accomplish this objective VRSB chose a hypostyle plan consisting of rows of closely spaced columns supporting a series of deep trusses. The spatial quality relating to an Islamic style provides monumentality to the space while the more repetitive architectural elements allow an individual worshiper to experience a sense of familiarity. The interior design is oriented towards the mihrab and minbar and consists of a series of arches containing decorative screens. [Figure 3.10] VRSB further played with scale by taking traditionally large formal and decorative elements and familiarizing them, placing the individual in a comfortable relationship with the monumental, according to the magazine *Architectural Record*.³³⁸

Despite their intentions to the contrary, VRSB repeat formulas established under British colonial rule. With Saddam as the benefactor, their design effectively reproduces a colonial aesthetic by allowing the regional to become the monumental. Kanan Makiya criticizes the form of the dome as a Claes Oldenburg inspired enlargement of a *murqarnass* (a small-scale Islamic decorative device generally reserved for areas of

³³⁶ *Architectural Record*, June 1984, p. 108.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ *Ibid.* 115

transition).³³⁹ The massive dome, based on a small piece of traditional decoration, embraces Saddam's party values. Makiya states "... the architecture can also be taken as a celebration of the fact that although the people are not free in Iraq, at least they are all equal in the degree of their monumental unfreedom."³⁴⁰

Makiya is equally critical of the interior design, describing it as something out of Disneyland "crossed with Errol Flynn's film, *The Thief of Baghdad*."³⁴¹ The dynamics of a foreign architect importing an imperial aesthetic to Iraq with the effect of conditioning social and political identity makes VRSB's work similar to past colonial architectural interventions. In Makiya's view, VRSB's emphasis on equality, in the style of Disneyland, aesthetically embodies Saddam's tyranny.³⁴²

Western architectural projects in Iraq slowed to a halt during the Gulf War in the 1990s and the accompanying sanctions, that ended an extended period of Western influence. Prior to the Gulf War, Western architectural projects employed a hybrid approach that mixed fantasy and modern influences to appropriate historical memory.³⁴³ The effect of these projects was the formation of cultural and political identities in support of totalitarian power. The degree to which American/European involvement shaped architecture in Iraq is evident in Hussein's own palaces and architectural projects.

³³⁹ Makiya, 62

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid., 64.

³⁴³ Dr. Patricia Morton suggests that the hybrid, "an entity created out of crossing two different entities" is integral to colonial contact, institutions, and systems. Hybrids were further necessary for the functioning of colonial power, as a mediator between colonizer and colonized ... signs of a mutually productive contact rather than one way domination. Morton, 200.

Saddam, who saw his new model for society as tantamount to creating an image, compared his work to that of an artist, stating, “Our task is very hard and complicated, and the brush of a competent artist is needed to give the intended image its proper colors ... because the whole work sometimes lies in the artist’s brush, to ensure the precise image we want to achieve and present as a new model for building up society.”³⁴⁴

Hussein’s approach to tradition and history borrowed heavily from the use of pastiche in service of fabricating a national memory comprised of Mesopotamian eclecticism.³⁴⁵

Saddam’s Palaces

Following the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam Hussein built between 80-100 palaces at a cost of nearly \$2 billion.³⁴⁶ Despite sanctions imposed by the international community following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and the deep poverty of an Iraqi population, he built palaces in most major cities. According to Mowfaq al-Taey, an architect who worked in Saddam’s presidential engineering office from 1986 until the U.S. invasion in 2003, Hussein’s obsession with architecture stemmed from his desire to consolidate influence and authority to ensure a historical legacy. Al-Taey states “[n]one of us were architects ... Saddam was the architect” and describes a working process in which Hussein would draw ideas and then choose from a group of 45 architects and 700 engineers to execute

³⁴⁴ Saddam Hussein, “Democracy: A Source of Strength for the Individual and Society,” speech given before the Council of Planning, July 10, 1977.

³⁴⁵ Azimi, 104

³⁴⁶ “Saddam Hussein’s Iraq,” prepared by the U.S. Department of State, released Sept. 13, 1999. <http://www.iraqwatch.org/government/US/State/state-iraqiaffairs-3-24-00.html> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

them. If the work wasn't up to his expectations, he'd have new marble flown in and the work redone.³⁴⁷

Some palaces housed the dictator and his family, party officials, and friends, while others, such as Saddamait al Tharthar, located 85 miles west of Baghdad, were built as lakeside resorts for regime VIPs and government officials. These "VIP palaces" included elaborate gardens, man-made lakes requiring large amounts of water (often in drought-stricken areas), sophisticated waterfalls, and extensive security facilities to protect the regime from its own people. United Nations documents list eight main palace compounds containing more than 1,000 buildings including luxury mansions, smaller guest villas, office complexes, warehouses and garages, covering nearly 32 square kilometers (12 square miles).³⁴⁸ In 1999, Forbes Magazine estimated Saddam's personal wealth at \$6 billion, which was manifest in the numerous palaces and interiors fit with "golden plumbing and the finest European marble and crystal chandeliers."³⁴⁹

The Republican Palace is one of eight main palaces Americans long suspected of concealing weapons of mass destruction. [Figures 3.1, 3.7, 3.11] This suspicion stems from 1998 when the U.N. conducted inspections in Iraq following the end of the Gulf War. Iraq designated such sites as "presidential" or "sovereign" and therefore barred U.N. inspectors from entering.³⁵⁰ An object of fixation by the press, Saddam's

³⁴⁷ Rubin.

³⁴⁸ Glen Segell, *Disarming Iraq*, (London: G. Segell, 2004), 74.

³⁴⁹ "Saddam Hussein's Iraq"

³⁵⁰ Nic Robertson, "*Presidential Palaces Pose Riddle*, CNN.com/World, Dec. 3, 2002. <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/12/03/sproject.irq.palaces/> (accessed January 17, 2017)

Republican Palace, or “Saddam’s Palace” is located in the Khardah Mariam district of Baghdad, a wealthy district in the western half of the Iraq capital. The turquoise domed “Moorish-style fantasy palace,” originally constructed by the Development Board and British architect J. Brian Cooper in 1958, overlooks the Tigris River and measures some 1.7 square miles.³⁵¹

Saddam renovated the existing palace in the late 1990s, tripling the size of the complex and adding three sections to the central dome as well as large bronze portraits of himself wearing the helmet of Saladin on the roof. [Figure 3.11] Saddam’s invocation of Saladin dates to the Iran-Iraq war. During this period historical symbolism associated with the Baath party was used to refer to its tribal base and represent the conflict as one of enmity between Arabs and Persians. Saladin was born in the central Iraqi city of Tikrit in 1137 or 1138. As sultan of Egypt Saladin’s goal was to unite the Muslim territories of Syria, northern Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt. Under his rule, Saladin achieved this goal in 1186 through a mix of diplomacy and military force.³⁵² Saddam’s attempt to tie himself to Saladin reflects the degree to which he repurposed in the development of his cult of personality.

Among the largest of the palaces commissioned by Saddam, the Republican Palace was a preferred place for hosting visiting heads of state. The back of the palace opens onto a kidney-shaped swimming pool, included in the original plan by Cooper,

³⁵¹ Andrew Mueller, “The tyranny of design,” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/oct/08/houseandgarden> (accessed January 6, 2017).

³⁵² Cockburn, 69.

surrounded by lush greenery, a multi-level diving platform, and a stone pool house.

[Figures 3.12, 3.13, 3.14] Water, a symbol of wealth and power in Iraq, is a thematic element in all of Saddam's palaces which include fountains, indoor streams, and pools.³⁵³

The palace grounds contain dry gardens of grass and palm trees, camps for the Republican guard, apartments for Hussein's supporters, a Spanish hacienda house for dignitaries, a receiving palace, and a nursery school painted with images of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny.³⁵⁴

Interiors – The Grand Dining Room

According to Saddam's architect and chief interior designer, Hussam Khador, Saddam was devoted to modern architecture and remained involved in the design process, often selecting architectural models, and giving feedback. Khador stated that "The president likes traditional buildings that are related or somehow mixed with modern architecture. He always insists that we cannot build a building without putting inside the building, the spirit of the building, the history, the big history of Iraq architecture. This is the main statement..."³⁵⁵

This design philosophy produced interiors filled with miles of marble mosaic covered in purple carpet, shaped stone, black columns, mirrored and gilt ceilings, chandeliers, gold-colored elevator doors, thrones made with rare wood and gold leaf, and

³⁵³ Saddam's pools were constantly monitored to guarantee the temperature, chlorine, and pH levels were comfortable. Mark Bowden, "Tales of the Tyrant," *The Atlantic*, May 2002.

³⁵⁴ Mueller, *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Joel Soler, *Uncle Saddam* (Santa Monica: Xenon Pictures, 2003).

marble fountains.³⁵⁶ The Grand Dining Room in the Republican Palace adheres to this aesthetic. [Figure 3.15]

The Republican Palace's Grand Dining Room, "Jerusalem Room," or "Missile Throne Room," as it was known to U.S. soldiers, employs compositional devices giving a theatrical staging of power. The Dining Room is a massive rectangular room lined with geometric insets, dark columns, recessed arches centered on each of the four walls, and a painted ceiling. The room exhibits no formal subtleties but rather a concerted effort to maximize the richness of materials inside a cathedral-like space which elicited hushed voices from the soldiers who toured it after the fall of Baghdad.³⁵⁷ The focal point of the room is an elaborate gold encrusted throne set symmetrically between two short black columns that extend halfway up the wall behind it. [Figure 3.16]

The columns stand in front of a marble and tile surfacing extending floor to ceiling, except for two walls containing massive murals. One mural depicts Scud missiles in the process of firing into a picturesque background of clouds. The scene, like the rest of the room, communicates a sense of hyperbolic majesty as the missiles fire into a sky rimmed with the light of the rising sun. The missiles shown in the foreground are diagonal and depict an active potential to destroy, while missiles in the distance begin their ascent. The Scud missile is a recurring motif in Saddam's palaces and was also used

³⁵⁶ Mueller, *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Mark Wampler, "Saddam's Presidential Palace (Part 1)," March 5, 2007. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFARSskhHWw> (accessed Feb. 2, 2017).

in the minarets of Umm al-Quara Mosque.³⁵⁸ [Figure 3.17] In front of the Palace mural is a large chandelier set directly above the throne, providing the only source of light within the austere space. In front of the mural and under the chandelier is Saddam's throne, gold, opulent in material, with a cushioned seat and back.³⁵⁹

When US troops captured the Republican Palace, the golden throne and Scud missile mural became a famous photo op for soldiers, contractors, and Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) employees. According to Kevin Boyce, who was in Iraq as part of the GM Iraq Re-Entry project, a sheet inside the room described its story and the subject matter of the three paintings it contained.³⁶⁰ First, the painting of the Scud missiles behind the "golden throne." Second, directly across from the throne, is another mural of equal height that depicts the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the sacred rock on which Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, and from which Mohammed began his Night Journey. The third painting, on the ceiling in the center of the room, above ornate couches and tables on a patterned mosaic floor, shows heaven as horses and clouds ascend in a circular motion.³⁶¹ According to Boyce, the paintings aid in the narration of

³⁵⁸ Also called the "Mother of All Cities," this mosque in Baghdad, originally designed to commemorate Hussein's victory in the 1991 Gulf War, shows four Scud-missile-shaped minarets.

³⁵⁹ Several articles have appeared recently comparing the similarities of President Donald Trump's chair (used at his home during his post-election 60 Minutes interview) to that of Saddam Hussein's and other tyrants. Jack Moore, "Donald Trump's Gold 60 Minutes Chair Looks Familiar," *GQ*, July 18, 2006 (accessed September 18, 2024, <http://www.gq.com/story/donald-trump-mike-pence-gold-chairs-60-minutes>).

³⁶⁰ Kevin Boyce, "Iraq Reentry: I was there," September 2003 https://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/Iraq_-_Reentry (accessed Feb. 27, 2017).

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the room's total narrative: Saddam's Fourth Exodus and his relationship to past leaders such as Moses, King Nebuchadnezzar, and John the Baptist.

Saddam saw himself as a 'New Nebuchadnezzar.' It was his intention to do what Nebuchadnezzar had accomplished in 586 B.C. Namely, he would conquer Israel and recapture the city of Jerusalem. It is probably for this reason that the Scuds are painted on the wall in the "Jerusalem Room." The "Jerusalem Room" depicts the Dome of the Rock from which the Koran tells us that Mohammed was taken by Horse back up to Heaven and returned.³⁶²

The missile throne room represents the ways that Saddam distorted historical memory and twisted folklore and regional history to validate his dictatorship. This historical appropriation ultimately led him to construct a genealogy that tied him to the Prophet Muhammad and ascribed godlike qualities to him.³⁶³ Beginning in the 1990s, this hybrid relationship to cultural identity and history led to a mishmash of Pan-Arab and Mesopotamian symbols mixed so indiscriminately as to confuse their meanings.³⁶⁴

Reception of Hussein's Palaces

Since the first Gulf War in 1991, Saddam's palaces have occupied the American and European imagination, often drawing comparisons to Sinbad and the Arabian Nights or the palace at Versailles.³⁶⁵ In 2002-2003, the Western press reacted to images of the palaces as evidence of criminal wrongdoing or the still-undiscovered weapons of mass

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Davis, 197.

³⁶⁴ The hybrid does not stay in its place because it belongs to no strictly defined category of phenomena. It cannot be identified easily by surface characteristics and therefore it's the physiognomy of differences with the camouflage of sameness. Morton, 319.

³⁶⁵ Adel Darwish, "Saddam Hussein builds palaces to rival Versailles," *The Independent*, March 19, 1995.

destruction. A consistent reaction to Hussein's palace interiors equated excess with an absence of morality. In the *Los Angeles Times* on October 5, 2002, Bob Drogin begins with an imaginative description of Saddam Hussein's palace interiors: "[t]hose who have seen the inside of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's many palaces describe a world of *opulent kitsch* and lavish excess, rooms adorned with busts, statues and portraits of Hussein protected by bullet-proof windows" He continues "[b]ut U.S. officials say that eight palace compounds also might contain evidence of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons development"³⁶⁶ Drogin subtly aligns crimes of taste with those of war. Drogin was not alone in describing Hussein's taste as kitsch; Elizabeth Rubin also described the palaces and their architecture as "Stalinist imperial kitsch."³⁶⁷

Niles Latham's October 2002 article titled "Saddam's Evil Luxury Lairs – Inside the Secret Palaces of Doom" describes the palaces as a "cross between a Caribbean resort and a concentration camp."³⁶⁸ A FOX News/AP article from 2003, makes the same connection between poor taste and immorality, stating "[t]he scene is more out of Beverly Hills than a war ravaged Middle Eastern state, with enough bad taste to make the tackiest designer proud."³⁶⁹ In another article from FOX News, Catherine Donaldson-Evans surveys experts in Islamic and Middle Eastern architecture from the Massachusetts

³⁶⁶ Bob Drogin, "Hussein's Palaces Brimming with Excess and Intrigue," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 2002.

³⁶⁷ Rubin.

³⁶⁸ Niles Latham, "Saddam's Evil Luxury Lairs – Inside The Secret Palaces of Doom," *New York Post*, October 7, 2002. <http://nypost.com/2002/10/07/saddams-evil-luxury-lairs-inside-the-secret-palaces-of-doom/> (accessed Jan. 17, 2017).

³⁶⁹ Fox News, "Saddam's Son's Palace an Orgy of Excess," April 16, 2003. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2003/04/16/saddam-son-palace-orgy-excess.html> (accessed May 25, 2015).

College of Art.³⁷⁰ Her experts conclude that the palaces “seem like the Marriott gone crazy,” are “not much more than displays of tawdry ostentation,” and exhibit “the same general standard of taste as Las Vegas casinos,” reminiscent of “Sylvester Stallone’s house in Florida.”³⁷¹ This aesthetic condemnation continued with Jonathan Jones’ *Guardian* article: “In lieu of American soldiers posed next to chemical warheads, we have an American soldier contemplating a mural of massed rockets framed in an arched recess between purple marble columns.”³⁷²

Andrew Mueller of *The Guardian* asks why it is that “when money is no object, and power unhindered, that the palaces and interior designs of dictators are so ghastly?” Mueller further states that “[i]t would indeed be possible to edit the footage of Saddam’s palaces into a hip-hop related edition of *Cribs*.”³⁷³ Mueller makes a comparison of Saddam’s palaces to the ostentatious display of wealth, jewelry, accessories, or tooth caps (grills) showcased by MTV’s “*Cribs*,” a show dedicated to the consumption habits of newly wealthy rappers, pop singers, and young celebrities.

Mueller’s article draws on the testimony of two American soldiers who discovered the palaces. One, Sergeant Steve Walden, described the palace interiors as feeling “cheap,” while Sergeant Miguel Deugarte described them as “cheesy.”³⁷⁴ In an interview, architect Jeffrey Inaba suggests that while Saddam’s palaces are supposedly

³⁷⁰ Catherine Donaldson-Evans, “Saddam’s Palaces are Tasteless and Tacky,” *FOX News*, April 16, 2003.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ Mueller, “The tyranny of design.”

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

reflective of Saddam's power, they instead look like homes in New Jersey, suggesting that the dictatorial vernacular is not far from the American suburban vernacular. Inaba refers to Saddam's palaces as McMansions in the desert "that could easily be used in Arizona as by a Baathist regime."³⁷⁵ These articles share the common feature of projecting an American standard of taste onto Saddam's palaces while simultaneously treating them as evidence of bad character, immorality, and war crimes. Many critical rejections of Saddam's palaces find his taste distinctly American and reflective of lower-class tastes. This characterization wavers between two extremes; the first establishes Saddam as a fully intentioned evil dictator while the other presents Hussein as politically impotent.

Mega Yachts and the Villain's Lair

The Iraq war differed from the previous Gulf War in its use of embedded reporters, which had the effect of adding human reporting, reducing the public's reliance on the abstract graphics and distance that characterized the Gulf War.³⁷⁶ The resulting interpretations were fueled by a distinctly American imagination. When distinctly American examples of low taste are evoked, they can be understood as a projection of the author's taste regime onto the image. According to Slavoj Žižek, a projection of

³⁷⁵ Geoff Manaugh, "Of Cars, Dogs, Golf, and Bad Feng Shui: An Interview with Jeffrey Inaba," *BLDG Blog Interview with Jeffrey Inaba*, April 19, 2007. http://www.bldgblog.com/2007/04/of-cars-dogs-golf-and-bad-feng-shui-an-interview-with-jeffrey-inaba/?_ga=1.23303354.1435019772.1464885398 (accessed March 3, 2017).

³⁷⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004), 2-3.

American politics, culture, and hegemony are present in the image as its blind spot, or what has been erased from it.³⁷⁷

For example, Mark Duell, describes the story of U.S. Navy F-14 Tomcat Units bombing the largest vessel in the Iraqi Navy, Saddam Hussein’s private yacht. The yacht, Al Mansar (“The Victor”), was named after an 8th century caliph was 350 feet long, and weighed 7,359 tons.³⁷⁸ The amenities on the Al Mansar included a central glass atrium that seated 200 guests, bathrooms with whirlpool baths and mother-of-pearl toilet holders, five cabins (including Saddam’s bedroom, which included a secret escape route to his guard quarters), a dining room, and helipad, which were covered in marble, exotic woods, silver, and gold fittings.³⁷⁹ Saddam’s taste in yachts was detailed by *The Guardian*’s Tim Dowling, who critiqued the yacht’s period décor, which borrowed too heavily from the 1970s, and its “idiotic excess” before ironically commenting that the “curtains are absolutely priceless.”³⁸⁰ Dowling described the yacht as “a testament to all that power, vanity, greed and cash could get you.”³⁸¹

Philip Argent reinforced Duell’s argument by illustrating Hussein’s villainy in didactic infographics pinpointing the yacht’s areas of poorest taste. [Figure 3.18]

³⁷⁷ Žižek, 65.

³⁷⁸ Mark Duell, “The Top Gun-style raid to destroy Saddam Hussein’s private yacht: Incredible story of how despot’s \$25m ship was blown up by F-14 Tomcat pilots,” *Daily Mail*, March 30, 2013.

³⁷⁹ Superyacht Content: Social News for Superyacht Crew, “The Total Destruction of Saddam Hussein’s Yacht,” August 10, 2017. <https://www.superyachtcontent.com/saddam-husseins-yacht/> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Tim Dowling, “Yacht for sale, one careful owner,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 4, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2008/nov/04/saddam-hussein-yacht> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

Cutaways and cross sections into a mock Al Mansar reveal and enlarge the details of whirlpool bathtubs, mother-of-pearl toilet roll covers, and the layout of different cabins. Saddam's palaces, interiors, and yachts yield an impression of a cinematic villain. I believe Argent's illustration shares close affinity with Ken Adams's concept art for James Bond and *Dr. Strangelove*.

Adam's conceptual art for the film *Dr. Strangelove*'s "War Room" embodies Cold War tensions and neuroses in cinematic set design. [Figure 3.19] Adam's sets draw inspiration from his experiences in World War II, including time spent designing bunkers, and his interest in Expressionism, and exotic locations. His approach is evident in Goldfinger's Rumpus Room, complete with revolving pool table, control console, security shutters, and secret gas sprays, and the two-piece yacht/gunboat catamaran, called the Disco Valante, owned by Bond villain Emile Largo in *Thunderball*. [Figures 3.20. 3.21] In his drawing for the Disco Valante design, complete with cutaways and didactic reveals of the interiors, Adams provides a vocabulary for describing the excesses of villainy.

Saddam was a fan of James Bond films, making an indirect connection between the Al Mansar and the Disco Valante. In 1979 he approached the director of the first four James Bond films, Terence Young, to edit a film about his life.³⁸² "The Long Days," a 6-

³⁸² As a young man, Terrence Young worked in British Intelligence during the Second World War and is credited with being the main influence on Sean Connery's behavior and affectations in developing the James Bond character for screen. Steve Powell, "Terrence Young – The Man Who Would Be Bond," *The Venetian Vase*, Jan. 8, 2012. <https://venetianvase.co.uk/2012/01/08/terence-young-the-man-who-would-be-bond/> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

hour biopic on the life of Saddam, was a part of his effort to construct a personal mythology surrounding his early life. This film, which was mandatory viewing for everyone in Saddam's regime, bears a resemblance to "Thunderball." In a microcosm of the themes developed in this chapter, the influence of Western culture on politics and aesthetics in Iraq was followed by an uncanny moment when Western observers rejected those influences as reflected through Saddam's taste. The Al Mansar ultimately stands as an aesthetic symbol of the corruption of Saddam Hussein's rule, however, the conclusion to this narrative involves the restaging of Saddam's tastes by US forces.

Restaging Saddam's Palaces

In April of 1945, Lee Miller and David E. Scherman discovered Hitler's Munich apartment. Once inside, Scherman captured a now famous image of Miller taking a bath in Hitler's tub. [Figure 3.22] According to her son, Miller was "sticking two fingers up at Hitler. On the floor are her boots, covered with the filth of Dachau, which she has trodden all over Hitler's bathroom floor. She is saying she is the victor."³⁸³ The co-optation and restaging of Hitler's spaces anticipate the ways American troops interacted with the palaces of Saddam. Much like Miller's bath, American soldiers during the Iraq war reacted to these confiscated places and removed the stain of kitsch through a restaging of taste.

³⁸³ Fiona MacDonald, "Lee Miller: In Hitler's Bathtub," *BBC.com*, Oct. 21, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140903-in-hitlers-bathtub> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

In 2004, U.S. military communicators centralized their information control as the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The CPA controlled information and privileged “chest-beating, feel-good events designed to evoke feelings of U.S. accomplishment and progress in Iraq.”³⁸⁴ The messaging philosophy of the CPA was mirrored in its base of operations, the ‘Green Zone,’ a seven square-mile American enclave in central Baghdad built in and around key landmarks, most notably, Saddam’s Republican Palace. When in power, Saddam surrounded the area with a tall brick wall, leaving only three points of entry. American and allied coalition forces further fortified the wall with seventeen-foot-high, foot-thick concrete blast walls topped with razor wire³⁸⁵. Inside the blast walls of the Green Zone, the CPA remade the area into an Americanized fantasyland, which many CPA officials referred to as the “Emerald City.”³⁸⁶ The Green Zone included Hussein’s luxury swimming pool at the Republican Palace, a cafeteria which only served high-fat, high-calorie, American-style comfort foods, including “freedom fries,” Fruit Loops, and Frosted Flakes flown in from the United States, the al-Rasheed hotel, a Chinese restaurant, a café, and various bars and pubs. Further amenities for soldiers included laundry services, a bazaar for souvenirs and trinkets (including banknotes with Saddam’s face, bootlegged DVDs, and a photo booth for Westerners to take pictures in Arab robe and headdress), and a “morale officer” responsible for organizing salsa lessons, yoga

³⁸⁴ Headed by Lewis Paul Bremmer III, The Coalition Provisional Authority functioned as the American occupation administration and ran the Iraq government from April 2003 to June 2004. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq’s Green Zone* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), xi.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

classes, and movie screenings in the palace theatre.³⁸⁷ Don Gomez describes his experience arriving at the Green Zone: “I got the sense that everyone there felt how strange the whole experience was. There we were – the Americans and her allies in Saddam’s captured palace, which we’d turned into our war resort.”³⁸⁸

Photos from the “Emerald City” show soldiers enjoying Saddam’s luxuries, including photo-ops in the golden throne of the “Grand Dining Room,” soldiers having their nails done by Saddam’s personal manicurists, and soldiers relaxing poolside. [Figures 3.23, 3.24] These photos from the Green Zone picture Saddam’s fall just as Scherman’s photo of Lee Miller from 1945 did for Hitler. These scenes insert what was always present but missing overtly: an American presence.

The photos of CPA employees, contractors, and soldiers enjoying the walled off amenities of the Republican Palace were not received or discussed by the Western press as kitsch. Images of Don Gomez having his nails done loses its kitsch effect through what Gillo Dorfles describes as a process of transposition, “the fantastic transformation which can be undergone by a single element (apparently or even authentically kitsch) when it belongs to a whole, a totality which is aesthetically acceptable and effective.”³⁸⁹ [Figure 2.23]

The transformative element here is the injection of irony. In any other circumstance, the image of Gomez and his fellow soldiers having their nails done against

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸⁸ Don Gomez, “High Dives and Manicures at Saddam’s Presidential Palace,” *Vice News*, July 19, 2013. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).

³⁸⁹ Dorfles, 22.

salmon tiles and a sentimental painting of a young girl would be kitsch. What changes in this context is the way the soldier seated to the right breaks the fourth wall. Much the way Miller's boots dirty Hitler's bathroom rug, the soldier's look of amusement invites the viewer to know that 'we all know better.' This distancing mechanism of irony is the "snigger" Clive Hamilton describes as directed at those who "declare themselves too blatantly."³⁹⁰ This simple expression reorders what was once dictator kitsch into the aesthetically acceptable. The same operation is at work in the photo of Gomez poolside, with fellow soldiers pumping out their chests in poses of hyperbolic masculinity. What is perhaps most poignant however, is the implication that the American and European allies are only taking back something they built.

Photos like this function largely the same way that Peter York's critique in "Dictator Style" does. York ironically comments on the tastes of dictators in light of the connection between the performance of identity and consumption. York explains this phenomenon among dictators as a clash of needs: "Yes, I'm your dictator who loves and cares for you, the people, but I'm also studmaster of the galaxy, a man of taste and education – not a spendthrift, but, rather, a clever and tasteful manipulator of symbolic imagery in a way that benefits someone of my massiveness."³⁹¹ Both York's text and Gomez's photographs deflect a kitsch reading of the dictators' taste by providing a necessary distance through humor and irony, which confirms existing behaviors, lessons, and rules. Though the reader is confronted by terrifying images, this transformation

³⁹⁰ Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, 82.

³⁹¹ York, viii.

reassures them with a knowing wink and a nod, providing some solace in the unchallenged superiority of their taste.

Bunker

The narration of the Iraq war, presented through a chronicling of Saddam's tastes, concludes with his capture and humiliation, complete with a final medical examination. Images of doctors poking and prodding him in his mouth and inspecting his unkempt hair rendered him pathetic. [Figure 3.25] This humiliated Saddam is the antithesis of the demonic, larger than life figure of evil who collected sci-fi/fantasy art and decorated his toilets with gold fixtures. However, even more damning than the medical examination and pictures of Saddam in his underwear are the photographs taken of his "makeshift hideout."³⁹² His refuge, described as "Saddam's real home," is a dirty, unkempt underground dwelling.³⁹³ [Figure 3.26]

Dank, with unfinished walls composed of rough concrete, dirt, and exposed framing, the bunker has no pretense to taste or staged persona. Dishes are left dirty on a makeshift counter, cupboards are opened with their contents out and in disarray, pots are visible on the stove (suggesting that Saddam had to cook for himself), and a mirror is seen leaning against the far-left wall. Most shocking, however, are the rolls of toilet paper in a blue plastic bag that have spilled out of the open cupboard at the bottom left. Gone is

³⁹² Susan Sachs, "The Capture of Hussein: Ex-Dictator," *The New York Times*, Dec. 15, 2003. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/15/world/capture-hussein-ex-dictator-hussein-caught-makeshift-hide-bush-says-dark-era-for.html> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

³⁹³ York, 99.

the majesty and ostentatiousness of his palaces; what we are shown here instead is the absence of taste. This point is made clear in a *CNN* article, which describes Saddam being caught like a “rat in a hole,” found beneath “a two-room mud shack on a sheep farm.”³⁹⁴ *Time* included Saddam’s “Spider Hole” on its list of “Top 10 Evil Lairs,” describing him as “the palace monster of monuments and torture chambers ... reduced to the life of the bug.”³⁹⁵

This final photograph depicts visible evidence of menial, domestic labor. Thorstein Veblen, in his writings on taste and the leisure class, describes any evidence of labor to be shameful. Instead, a man of “honor” should be free of any such signs, precisely because demonstrations of taste value the exploitation of the laborer. For Veblen, taste is the sign for an absence of productive labor. Leisure (abstention from work or conspicuous waste) is Veblen’s central example of this absence, as it is essentially a sign of exploitation. “Tasteful objects” are valued not for their utility or function, but for demonstrating conspicuously waste. In other words, the more ill-adapted, the more beautiful an item is.³⁹⁶ The images of his “safe house” are the ultimate condemnation of Saddam, as they strip away all codes and pretenses. Slavoj Žižek alludes to the site of labor as crime, stating:

... work itself ... becomes the site of obscene indecency to be concealed from the public eye. This tradition which goes back to Wagner’s *Rheingold*

³⁹⁴ CNN.com. “Saddam ‘caught like a rat’ in a hole,” Monday, December 15, 2003. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/12/14/sprj.iqr.saddam.operation/> (accessed September 13, 2024).

³⁹⁵ Nancy Gibbs, “Saddam’s Capture,” Dec. 22, 2003. <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,561468,00.html> (accessed September 13, 2024).

³⁹⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), 60.

and Lang's *Metropolis*, the tradition in which the working process takes place underground, in dark caves, culminates today in the 'invisibility' of the millions of anonymous workers ... what is crucial in this tradition is the equation of labour with *crime* ... The only point in Hollywood films where we see the production process in all its intensity are when the action hero penetrates the master-criminal's secret domain and locates there the site of intense labour (distilling and packaging drugs, constructing a rocket that will destroy New York). When, in a James Bond film, the master-criminal, after capturing Bond, usually takes him on a tour of his illegal factory ...³⁹⁷

Put differently, Saddam Hussein is stripped of class when he is no longer capable of its performance. Peter York reacts to this in a pointed and striking way by referring to Saddam's "safe house" as his "real home," meaning a home which was finally reflective of his authentic character.³⁹⁸

Kitsch and dictator kitsch represent a complex network of cultural and historical tensions. In these examples, the narrative of war is buttressed and made palatable through an American/European depiction of taste. Views of Saddam's palaces simplify complex realities of the Iraqi conflict into a dichotomy of a "primitive" Middle Eastern culture against a "progressive" Western modernity. This ideal in turn is culturally weaponized to malign and frame an "other." Concealed behind judgments of taste and kitsch lie latent histories of colonialist practices, formations of cultural identity, and labor.

Kitsch is a valuable entry point for deconstructing assumptions about narratives of taste and judgment. In this chapter, Saddam's palaces are not enduringly kitsch but rather reflect judgments resulting from symbolic evaluations motivated by taste. The real question is what motivates taste? In this case, the hidden motivation is clearly the

³⁹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (New York: Verso, 2002), 133-134.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

depiction of the dictator as eccentric, barbaric, and out of touch with the rest of the world. With this dynamic in place, a symptomal understanding of democracy is consistent with how the American public negotiates moments of conflict and its justification. Yet, reducing Saddam's taste to kitsch flattens any historical perspective including the construction of architecture in Iraq and the history of British colonialism.

I do not intend to create a moral equivalency but rather to point towards the real function of kitsch in this exchange: a judgement almost entirely disconnected from aesthetics and tied instead to a process of subject manufacturing. Kitsch is a quilting point that promises to establish the true narrative and resolve all inconsistencies.³⁹⁹ However, once we realize our place in the image through a history of colonialism, politics of support for Iraq, and the exportation of taste and culture as an arm of American imperialism, our own narrative security is radically undermined. The next chapter will continue these themes by examining the persona developed by Saddam Hussein.

³⁹⁹ Lacan's "quilting point," *capitonnage*, or "button tie," discussed in Seminar III, refers to a stitch used by an upholsterer to secure a button to fabric. The "quilting point" is essential to Lacan's model for the creation of meaning as it similarly stitches, though without any true anchor, a particular meaning to a particular statement or word, thereby halting an endless series of meanings someone may attribute to a statement or event. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956* ed, Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), 258-70.

Chapter 4

Statues, Monuments, and Relics: Dictator Kitsch and the Dictator's Persona

Portraiture of rulers has often embraced artifice to project persona or status. To the ruling elite, portraiture plays an important role in reconciling the frail, fallible human body with the powerful nature of the office held. Historian Ernst Kantorowicz has termed this “the king’s two bodies,” a dilemma portraitists throughout history reconciled by balancing the co-existence of the physical and ideal.⁴⁰⁰ Depictions which balance the co-existence of the physical and ideal, or “state portraits,” serve a largely political function by emphasizing the “effigy,” or social role of the individual over likeness.⁴⁰¹ Minimizing the individual in this way allows the image to evoke abstract principles which the subject stands to represent.⁴⁰² In pictorial terms, an idealized persona or status is established through position, posture, or a symbolic reading of supporting objects. The posing of powerful subjects is unusually consistent: ruling figures are primarily shown in partial profile (breaking up a symmetrical placement and gaze), seated, full-length, or on horseback.⁴⁰³ In each case, poses are iconically linked with expressions of authority and the majesty of the leader in office. [Figure 4.1]

Symbolic context, including objects or allusions to history, also elevate a sitter, and might include spacious surroundings, silken clothing, or antique sculptures and

⁴⁰⁰ Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 9.

⁴⁰¹ Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 72.

⁴⁰² Marianna Jenkins, *The State Portrait: Its Origin and Evolution* (New York: College Art Association of America, 1947), 1.

⁴⁰³ West, 73.

master paintings which ennoble the sitter with past cultural traditions through the dignity of high art. As such, the “naturalism” inherent in state portraiture communicates an ideal through carefully manufactured fiction, be it a mythology of power, desire for permanency, or illusion of continuity.⁴⁰⁴

Saddam Hussein’s portrait saturated both public and private spaces throughout Iraq during his time in office. Placed in service to the state, Saddam’s portraiture was a vehicle in the maintenance of political power. His images blended fantasy and fiction, history and myth, Western and Arab traditions, in the creation of a mythic persona.⁴⁰⁵ Saddam’s approach to portraiture took traditional approaches, using paintings, sculptures, and murals as well as more symbolic and subtle avenues such as his wardrobe, personal military detail, and weaponry. Saddam’s portraiture also played a large role in American culture as images from government contractors, soldiers, and media organizations found their way to an American audience through personal blogs, websites, and television during the war. Souvenirs from Iraq and Saddam’s government even found their way to eBay, satiating an American impulse to exhibit patriotism through collecting.

⁴⁰⁴ European conventions underpinning state portraiture might seem like an inappropriate lens to view an Islamic leader. Saddam Hussein was an Orthodox Sunni who prayed five times a day yet chose to ignore the ban on representational art imposed by the Koran.

⁴⁰⁵This is in part a lesson taken from Stalin, a leader Saddam admired and expressed affinity for. Saddam’s admiration of Stalin began in his youth. He collected literature on Stalin and was proud of the similarities in their life stories; both he and Stalin came from a very poor background. Golomstock, 307.

According to Abu Said Aburish, “the hidden influence of Stalin can be sensed in every act of Saddam.” Saddam believed feudalism and Western influence were the main evils in his country’s past and like many totalitarian leaders, Saddam’s central project to combat these evils involved the construction of a new – Arab – man. A project which necessitated education (primarily of children) through art.” Abu Said Aburish, “Stalin’s Student,” *Novosti v. Novosibirsk*, April 1, 2003.

Saddam's portraiture drew on an eclectic mix of ancient and modern influences including Soviet Realism, British traditions from the Mandate, national iconography, folklore, and popular Western fiction. Through case studies of Saddam's stamps, the Arc of Triumph (commissioned in 1985), and the fall of his Firdos Square statue, this chapter studies an interplay of influences to understand receptions of kitsch and dictator kitsch in the American audience.

Portraiture and Stamps

Prior to the American invasion of Iraq in 2002-3 Saddam Hussein styled a persona in service of a cult of personality. The dissemination of Saddam's image relied heavily on portraiture, evidenced by the collection at the Saddam Art Center and the works of numerous, dedicated portrait artists located around Iraq.⁴⁰⁶ [Figure 4.2] According to respected Iraqi sculptor Khalid Ezzad, in the early years of Saddam's regime, a commission to create a statue of the leader was both an honor and a well-paid job. Further, Iraqi art schools made the study of Saddam's likeness an obligatory part of the curriculum, with graduates in sculpture and painting completing works and entire exhibitions dedicated to the different roles of the leader.⁴⁰⁷ Bahaa Omani, Saddam's portraitist in the city of Basra, painted over 1,000 images of Saddam which, "required

⁴⁰⁶ "When I went there, it was only portraits of Saddam everywhere," Soler said. "The people there, especially at the museum, they believe they are creating the new Mona Lisa." "Documentary Shows Saddam's Weird Behavior," *ABC News*, January 6, 2006.

⁴⁰⁷ Susan Taylor Martin, "As Hussein Icon Fell, Sculptor Shrugged," *St. Petersburg Times*, April 9, 2004.

great tact and care.”⁴⁰⁸ Specifically, Omani never painted Saddam’s crow’s feet and, instead, put effort into his expression and eyes (while never veering too far from reference photographs). Another portrait artist, Yehia Abbas al-Dureji, created five paintings highlighting the connection between Saddam and the ancient city of Babylon.⁴⁰⁹ Other sides of Saddam shown through his portraits include in “military uniform, wielding a gun; Saddam the father patting the head of a child; Saddam looking dapper in a three-piece suit; Saddam in traditional attire, defending Palestinians.”⁴¹⁰ Abbas al-Dureji explains this multi-faceted portrayal by stating, “He is all things, and his image is everywhere.”⁴¹¹ Speaking to this ubiquity, Samir Khurshid states that the rule in Iraq under Saddam was that in “every house, there must be one of Saddam’s paintings. In restaurants. Basically everywhere in Iraq. The first page of each book. In books, in homes, at restaurants, in government buildings, on money. He tried to remind us all the time that he was there.”⁴¹²

One example of Saddam’s representational omnipresence is found on Iraq’s postage stamps, a medium used around the world by governments to project an image

⁴⁰⁸ Even Omani’s signature was subject to scrutiny, as to sign it too small was to be accused of having shame to paint a portrait of the leader. Robyn Dixon, “Saddam Artist Painted into a Corner,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2003.

⁴⁰⁹ Hamza Hendawi, “Painter of Saddam Portraits Says He Does it For Love,” *Associated Press*, September 20, 1996.

⁴¹⁰ Bob Edwards, “Saddam’s Image and Presence is Omnipresent in Iraq,” *Morning Edition*, February 5, 2003.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹² Matt Stangel, “The Beauty of Fear: Profiling Saddam’s Former Portrait Artist,” *Portland Mercury*, July 10, 2013.

(often through portraiture).⁴¹³ Saddam's stamps draw on a tradition established by the British; specifically, Iraq's kings who followed the precedent set by Queen Victoria, under the British-dominated monarchy from 1921 to 1958.⁴¹⁴ The first stamps designed specifically for Iraq reflected British officials' need to construct an identity for the mandate, whose borders had been defined by British conquest. In early Iraqi stamps, the British used a "colonial picturesque" style, a genre that depicted three types of colonial images: mosques to symbolize Islam, colorful natural and human scenery, and pre-Islamic, "Mesopotamian" antiquities.⁴¹⁵

Saddam's stamps retain many of the motifs selected by the British in the 1920s, yet their symbolism was transformed: colonial picturesque has been transmuted into totalitarian kitsch.⁴¹⁶ Building on a tradition set under the mandate, Saddam's stamps contributed to a cult of personality, depicting him in uniform (despite never serving in the military), as a father figure, pious Muslim, master builder, civilian, president in coat and tie, or traditional Arab leader wearing a *kufiyya*. [Figures 4.3, 4.4]

⁴¹³ The earliest stamps from Iraq in the 1920s reflect British domination and efforts to install the Hashimite monarchy. Following the 1958 revolution stamps reflected the rise to prominence of the Baath party. Donald Malcolm Reid, "The Postage Stamp: A Window onto Saddam Hussein's Iraq," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Winter 1993), pp. 77-89.

⁴¹⁴ Placing rulers on postage stamps was a natural extension of a practice dating to ancient Greece of showing the ruler's portrait on coins as a symbol of sovereignty. *Scott 1993 Standard Postage Stamp Catalogue*, 4 vols. (Sidney, OH: Scot Publishing Co.), 1.

⁴¹⁵ Scott, 1-13.

⁴¹⁶ Beginning in 1958 and continuing through Hussein's time as president, images of "the great leader," in uniform or towering above soldiers, communicated the idea of a leader who embodied the popular will. Though founded on a Western tradition this cult of the great leader is qualitatively different from the staid royal portraits based on earlier Iraqi, British, and other European stamps, and more closely aligned with the Soviet school of socialist realism. Reid, 79.

Stamps with folklore themes were how Hussein appealed to Kurds, Shi'a, and other smaller minority groups to bring them into a larger Iraqi national unity. These stamps promoted the regional spring festivals in areas that celebrated dress, dance, music, crafts, and poetry. In some stamps, folklore gave way to mythology as Hussein's stamps employed references to Babylon, parallels drawn to Nebuchadnezzar, and the creation of new holidays such as "Victory Day." [Figure 4.5]

Kanan Makiya has shown that the debate on modern art in Iraq under Saddam centered on the concept of *turath* – imperfectly translated as *heritage* – and that Hussein vulgarized legitimate efforts to find an authentic visual language for it, ultimately turning *turath* into kitsch.⁴¹⁷ Saddam's manipulation of Iraqi heritage or *turath* is most evident in his reinterpretation of Qadisiyyah, the battle of al-Qadisiyyah in 636, in which Arab armies under the command of Saad defeated the Persians, making possible the conquest of Persia.⁴¹⁸ In numerous speeches, Saddam repeatedly mixed the tenses of past and future when discussing al-Qadisiyyah, typifying the Ba'ath's quixotic struggle to recover the past or restage it in the present.⁴¹⁹

By repeatedly making connections between his regime and Qadisiyyah, Saddam fashioned this reference into an extension of his cult of personality. State propaganda linked him personally not only to the Arab-Muslim conquerors of early Islam, but also to a wide array of noted rulers in Mesopotamia or Iraq, such as Nebuchadnezzar and Salah

⁴¹⁷ Makiya, 69-70.

⁴¹⁸ D. Gershon Lewental, "'Saddam's Qadisiyyah': Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba'thi Iraq," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50., No. 6, 891-910, 2014.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

ad-Din. Hussein used the power of the state to inject references to al-Qadisiyyah into every aspect of life, quickly reviving and redefining its meaning.⁴²⁰ The use of Qadisiyyah nomenclature occurred throughout the Arab world, appearing in the name of geographic localities, educational institutions, government complexes, roads, bridges, medical facilities, publishing houses, and postage stamps.⁴²¹ The Ba'th regime issued dozens of stamps commemorating both al-Qadisiyyahs, which combined elements of the ancient and modern, such as a fighter jet soaring above seventh-century Bedouin warriors on horseback. [Figure 4.6]

Hussein's use of this imagery, both in portraiture and stamps, closely resembles totalitarian kitsch, a genre defined by a political regime inserting propaganda into mass or popular arts to manipulate a population.⁴²² By using portraiture and stamps to insert himself into the nation's history or mythology, Hussein coopts the image of Qadisiyyah as totalitarian kitsch.⁴²³

⁴²⁰ Thorsten Botz-Bornstein describes the attraction for kitsch as intertwined with “deculturation,” a phenomenon in which a particular group is deprived of one or more aspects of its identity.” Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Neoliberalism, Fundamentalism and Kitsch* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 2-3.

⁴²¹ Reinterpreting the historic battle of al-Qadisiyyah transformed its memory – Iraqi schoolbooks ignored entirely traditional narratives that focused on the piety of the Muslim warriors and instead placed emphasis on the “Arabness” of the fighters and on “Arab courage.” Lewenthal, 891-910.

⁴²² Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, 9. Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 49-76. Saul Friedlander, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch & Death* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1993), 18. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 251.

⁴²³ Examples of totalitarian kitsch given so far include Hubert Lanzinger, *The Standard Bearer* (1934-36) and the mural of Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar (2008).

Portraiture, within the genre of totalitarian kitsch, is a specific canon with strict compositional schemes. For example, Lenin/Stalin/Hitler/Mao are depicted as The Leader in different capacities to elicit a focused emotional response. Compositional schemas of this type include The Leader as inspirer or organizer of victories, the wise teacher, or friend of children.⁴²⁴ For Hussein, however, the connection between tradition, memory, and the elevation of persona found its greatest expression in the construction of the Arc of Triumph.

Persona as Monument: The Arc of Triumph and Saddam Collectibles

As described by historian of Roman art Fred Kleiner, the triumphal arch is a “freestanding arch or gateway erected to commemorate an event or to honor a person or family, often, but not always, in the occasion of a military victory.”⁴²⁵ Roman triumphal arches were not connected to the defense of a city; rather, they were monumental symbols for the variegated Roman practice of triumphal celebrations in which an individual’s contributions to the state were recognized. This changed in the Imperial period when the ceremony was appropriated by the emperor for self-propagandizing celebrations of himself or his family. Located in prime positions, triumphal arches underlined Roman power in a public and physical form.

The Arc of Triumph was commissioned at a critical time for Saddam’s government: 1985, the climax of the devastating Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), when the

⁴²⁴ Golomstock, 230.

⁴²⁵ F.S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* (Global New Media, 2017), 313.

legitimacy of Saddam's leadership was being questioned not only by his own population but also by the international community.⁴²⁶ Built in anticipation of Iraq's impending triumph over Iran – a triumph that never came – the Arc consists of a pair of identical archways marking the entrances to a vast parade ground constructed in the geographical and political center of Baghdad, between the Republican and As-Salam palaces.⁴²⁷ Measuring 50 meters wide and 650 meters in length, the parade route is not connected to surrounding highways and more closely resembles a Hollywood set displaying military pageantry. [Figure 4.7] The Arc of Triumph is comprised of four massive forearms and fists, cast directly from the body of Saddam, and personalized with his thumbprint, each weighing 20 tons and fixed with a reinforced frame weighing the same. The forearms emerge from an exploding base of reinforced concrete. [Figure 4.8]

Hung from the concrete are bronze nets holding 5,000 captured Iranian helmets. The massive forearms, made by H+H Metalform and British company Morris Singer Founders, hold 24-ton swords made from the melted and recast guns of deceased Iraqi soldiers. A 23-foot pole with the Iraq flag emerges from the swords' apex, putting the flag at a height equal to a 13-story building.⁴²⁸ Though the arms were taken directly from

⁴²⁶ Annelies Van de Ven, "Triumph (re-)Imagined: Saddam's Monument to Victory," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Sept. 20, 2018.

⁴²⁷ Christopher Knight, "The Man, The Myth, The Monument: The Monument; Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 1991.

⁴²⁸ GlobalSecurity.org, "Hands of Victory, Baghdad, Iraq." <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/hands-of-victory.htm> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

Hussein's physical body, the symbolic has largely replaced the representational in this monument, merging the physical and the ideal.

Saddam's Arc was designed by the sculptors Khalid al-Rahal and Mohammed Ghani, with a great deal of input from Saddam himself. Al-Rahal described the Arc as a pair of swords with one pointing to Iran and the other to Israel, the two great enemies of Arab Islam. The swords were designed to be the highest triumphal arches in the world, two and a half times the height of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

Ba'th propaganda refers to the symbolism of Saddam's arms holding the massive blades the swords of Qadisiyya, as "Qadisiyyat Saddam," affiliating the Arc with Saddam's divinely protected battle against "the liar Khomeini" and the evil forces of Iranian corruption.⁴²⁹ In this way, Saddam connected the historic battle of al-Qadisiyyah to Iraq's conflict with the Republic of Iran. In his view, Iranian leaders exhibited hostility towards Iraq out of a deep-rooted hatred stemming from their ancestors' defeat on the Qadisiyyah battlefield. Saddam chose the engagement to represent a long-standing ethnic clash between Arabs and Iranians, which he sought to promulgate in advance of the Iran-Iraq war. This Qadisiyyah rhetoric recast the battle in stark nationalistic terms that remain central to the understanding of Qadisiyyah in the Iraqi public sphere today. Saddam further used this rhetoric to "sell" the war to the West, to the Iraqi population, and to Arabs outside Iraq. His Qadisiyyah rhetoric depicted Iraq as defending the Arab

⁴²⁹ The origins of the Qadisiyya propaganda campaign can be traced back to a speech given by Saddam on April 2, 1980, before students at al-Mustansiriyah University in Baghdad. D Gershon Lewental, "'Saddam's Qadisiyyah': Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba'thi Iraq," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50., No. 6, 891-910, 2014.

world from Persian aggression. The themes of Qadisiyyah present in the Arc of Triumph demonstrate its importance in the formation of collective memory: the theme of (Arabs) remembering and (Iranians) forgetting the battle of al-Qadisiyyah appeared frequently in Hussein's speeches.

According to A. Van de Ven, Saddam's structure, from its conception to its opening, was conceived as a response to modern triumphal arches.⁴³⁰ Unique to Hussein's Arc of Triumph is a strong tie to historical and imperial narratives of the West while using historical elements relating to Islamic architectural traditions, such as the pointed arch and swords. Walter Gropius used a similar blend of eastern and western elements in the Open Mind Gate at the University of Baghdad, which predates Hussein. [Figure 4.9] Saddam Hussein inaugurated his Arc of Triumph in monarchical ceremonial attire riding a white horse – a choice with multiple allusions. The white horse symbolizes the steed of Hussein, the Shi'ite Muslim hero and the steed ridden by the victorious Arab general at the Battle of Qadisiya.⁴³¹ During the inauguration Saddam wore the same ceremonial attire that King Faisal I wore during official state ceremonies. According to Michael North, Saddam's styling of persona and performance created a "collective emotional event."⁴³² The effect of this inauguration or "event" is one of both inclusion

⁴³⁰ Annelies Van de Ven, "Triumph (re-)Imagined: Saddam's Monument to Victory," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Sept. 20, 2018.

⁴³¹ The Battle of Karbala (October 10, 680) was a brief military engagement in which a small party led by Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was defeated and massacred by an army sent by the Umayyad caliph, Yazid I. Among Shi'I Muslims, the death of Hussein became an annual holy day of public mourning. Ibid.

⁴³² Michael North, "Public as Sculpture: From Heavenly City to Mas Ornament," in *Art and the Public Sphere*, ed. W. J. Thomas Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 16.

and exclusion. On the one hand, the Arc's massive forearms embody the new Iraqi narrative of identity, one focused on the persona of its charismatic leader. On the other hand, the structure expresses a message of exclusion and violence towards any who might oppose the regime. For them, the swords are a warning sign, highlighting the sacredness of the grounds where the cult of the nation and leader is celebrated.

During the opening celebration for the Arc, television showed Iraqi soldiers marching beneath the crossed swords to the theme music from 'Star Wars' As a show of defiance against the United States, which would soon start bombing the country.⁴³³ The patriotic procession, broadcast live to millions, can also be connected to an overlooked detail of military imagery in Iraq: an obsession with science fiction.⁴³⁴ In his 2009 exhibition, *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own*, Michael Rakowitz traces links between science fiction and military-industrial activities in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's presidency. Rakowitz draws visual connections between the Arc of Triumph and science fiction artist Boris Vallejo's poster for *The Empire Strikes Back*.⁴³⁵ [Figure 4.10] A close friend and contemporary science fiction illustrator Rowena

⁴³³ In 2000 Saddam Hussein published *Zabiba and the King*, an allegorical love story between a king and a beautiful commoner, named Zabiba. Zabiba's cruel husband regularly forces himself upon her against her will. Saddam's story is an allegory for the US invasion (the unloving husband) and Saddam's (the King) loving relationship with the Iraqi people (Zabiba). Saddam Hussein, *Zabiba and the King* (College Station: Texas, 2004).

⁴³⁴ Farah Halime, "How Saddam Hussein Modeled a Paramilitary Unity After Darth Vader," *Ozy*, May 19, 2006.

⁴³⁵ Michael Rakowitz, "Michael Rakowitz on Star Wars and Saddam Hussein," (London: Tate Gallery, 2010), video interview.

Morrill and known for his work on *Conan* and *Tarzan*, Vallejo created the *Empire Strikes Back* poster in 1980 for Coca Cola.⁴³⁶

Vallejo's poster is dominated by the central figure of Darth Vader. An obvious and striking similarity exists between the position of the forearms and tilted sabers in the Arc of Triumph and Vallejo's poster. Vader's arms, raised above his head with two tilted light sabers, are a near perfect match for Saddam's Arc. While there is no concrete evidence to suggest that Vallejo's image inspired the Arc, it is also far from coincidental. The best evidence for a visual connection between Vallejo and the Arc is the continued interest and embrace of *Star Wars* by Hussein and his family. The first screening of *Star Wars* in Iraq took place in March 1980, three years after its release in the US. It was screened at a private event attended by Saddam Hussein and his eldest son, Uday, then fifteen years. The film was screened in an auditorium at the Ba'ath party headquarters in Baghdad, six months before the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war.⁴³⁷ In spite of Saddam's penchant for fantasy, it was Uday who initially brought this fixation with science fiction to the military. Uday's appreciation for *Star Wars* is especially evident in his formation of the Fedayeen Saddam, an Iraqi Paramilitary organization numbering forty thousand troops at its height.⁴³⁸ Members of the Fedayeen were recruited as young as 16 and

⁴³⁶ Vallejo wrote the introduction to "The Fantastic Art of Rowena." The *Star Wars* work was a promotional poster, sold with the purchase of Coca Cola bought in theaters at the film's screening.

⁴³⁷ Michael Rakowitz, *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own* (London: Tate Modern, 2011).

⁴³⁸ The Fedayeen Saddam, meaning one who sacrifices himself, participated in smuggling and other illegal activities along the Iraqi borders, which eventually led Saddam to transfer command to his younger son, Qusay. Halime.

received no specialty training or heavy weapons, and were not regular members of the Iraqi military.⁴³⁹ According to Kevin Woods, deputy director of the Joint Advanced Warfighting Division at the Institute for Defense Analyses, Uday was an “extreme playboy,” who believed image was everything for the young guerrilla fighters.⁴⁴⁰ Accordingly, the Fedayeen cultivated a macho image that employed forms drawn from Star Wars, among other sources, such as using the back-shell portion of Darth Vader’s helmet as inspiration for the Fedayeen field helmet. [Figure 4.11] Constructed of 6 millimeters of Kevlar material; these helmets offered little ballistic protection. Further, the sharp back slope made it hard for users to move or position themselves. The Fedayeen helmet was accompanied by a black shirt, trousers, and ski mask, to conceal the soldier’s faces. On the right side of the helmet, a rubber insignia featured a portrait of Saddam’s face in profile, and text which translates as: “The Lord, The Homeland, The Leader.”

Under direction from George Lucas, Ralph McQuarrie sketched the earliest designs for Darth Vader as a “dark lord riding on the winds, with an evil essence about him.”⁴⁴¹ Lucas further asked for black flowing robes, a large helmet like that of a Japanese samurai, and a silk mask covering his face. [Figure 4.12] Lucas’ description resembles a feudal Japanese *kabuto*, a helmet worn by the samurai warriors. McQuarrie added a faceplate that was derivative of a Japanese *mempo*, a protective mask for the

⁴³⁹ Blake Stilwell, “This is why Saddam Hussein’s fedayeen troops wore Darth Vader helmets,” *We Are The Mighty*, Oct. 23, 2017.

⁴⁴⁰ Halime

⁴⁴¹ *Rebel, Jedi, Princess, Queen: Star Wars and the Power of Costume*. The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition services in partnership with the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art, 2017.

samurai. In 1976 costume designers John Mollo and John Barry took the McQuarrie concept and added various real-life uniforms associated with war and evil.⁴⁴² Mollo and Barry added headgear Nazis wore during WWII to Vader's helmet, as well as a gas mask, motorcycle suit, black leather boots, and a monk's cloak. The helmet was not the only Nazi reference in the Fedayeen garb. While the black helmets and uniforms were reserved for battlefield operations, the paramilitary unit often would dress in all white, in a manner that was reminiscent of Middle East death shrouds, likening themselves to martyrs, or stormtroopers (named after the specialist German soldiers in WWI). [Figure 4.13] According to Michael Rakowitz, the Fedayeen's display was a "moment of dress-up," as if to say, "This is what you think of us, suddenly we're the villains? Ok, we'll wear the uniform." Uday and his fanatical troops, according to Rakowitz, were "painting the lines of good and evil as thickly as people were talking about it."⁴⁴³

Saddam's motivation for creating these provocative images was consistent with his conspiratorial and paranoid view of America's intentions towards the Middle East and Iraq.⁴⁴⁴ However, these Star Wars/Nazi-inspired visuals, which were not lost on the military contractors and officers who occupied Baghdad after Hussein's fall, produced a quite different reaction than what Saddam or Uday may have expected. According to the *Visitor's Guide to Baghdad*, published in 2006, the crossed swords became a routine

⁴⁴² Mollo and Barry added the German military helmet and gas mask. Ibid.

⁴⁴³ Rakowitz

⁴⁴⁴ Following Irangate Saddam's perception of world affairs and America's role led him to see American influence in whatever misfortune befell his regime. Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Conspiring Bastards": Saddam Hussein's Strategic View of the United States," *Diplomatic History*, June 2012, Vol. 36, No. 3, 625-659.

backdrop for a “Look Ma, I’m in Baghdad” photo op. in which U.S. personal pretend to hold the swords of Qadisiyyah.⁴⁴⁵ [Figure 4.14]

Souvenir photographs taken with Saddam’s monuments are private snapshots, though ultimately enter the public domain through circulation on the internet. As such, these photographs document the maker’s presence in Iraq, becoming a personal souvenir of the experience to be shared with family and friends. [Figure 4.15] Seen this way, the monument is drained of its original symbolic intent and reduced to a theme park attraction. While these souvenir photographs allowed soldiers and personnel to take back a piece of their experience in Iraq, the public understanding of this doubled portraiture solidifies the conflict as kitsch, flattening any complex interpretation of Saddam’s political aesthetics. This souvenir self-portraiture mirrored a similar concurrent phenomenon in United States; specifically, the heightened impulse to collect as a form of participation in the war. It is to this desire to collect objects related to the Iraq war that I will now turn.

Persona and Props: Saddam’s Souvenirs

During April of 2003 souvenirs from Saddam Hussein’s rule became highly profitable memorabilia on online auction sites. On April 19, 2003, the *Los Angeles Times*

⁴⁴⁵ Richard H. Houghton and Patrick J. McDonald, *A Visitor’s Guide to Baghdad’s International Zone: A Comprehensive Guide to Local Landmarks and History of the International Zone*, 2006.

published an article titled “Phase 2 of war: shock and kitsch.”⁴⁴⁶ Within, Roy Rivenburg describes the internet being flooded by novelty items, both anti-Hussein objects and Hussein-era Iraqi items, related to the war in Iraq. These items included souvenirs from past conflicts, such as a Saddam Hussein dog toy shown holding a rifle and petrol hose, fragments of broken statues, currency, cutlery from Hussein’s palaces, Bomb Saddam hot sauce, Iraqi Road ice cream, “Shock and Awe” underwear, soap on a rope, talking dolls, and Iraqi most-wanted playing cards. [Figure 4.16]

Rivenburg describes the existence of these items found on eBay, roughly 3,000 in total, as a civilian attempt to “join in the war.”⁴⁴⁷ This civilian effort is effective, according to psychiatrist Mark Goulston, because the items ridicule Saddam and people “intuitively understand that the one thing that psychopaths and narcissists like Hussein can’t stand is to be humiliated.”⁴⁴⁸ In Rivenburg’s account the existence of materials on eBay is a conscious stab back at the dictator by a supportive and patriotic American populace.

Among the most coveted objects created by Saddam Hussein and his government are his elaborate and largely ceremonial weaponry. Weaponry, especially the Kalishnikov (AK-47), held special significance for the symbolic value of Saddam’s visual culture.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Roy Rivenburg, “Phase 2 of war: shock and kitsch,” *The Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2003. <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/19/news/war-rivenburg19> (accessed Aug. 8, 2019).

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ There is a further history of elaborately decorated weapons of dictators being sought out for collecting or display. Most famously is the gold-plated pistol that Adolf Hitler reportedly used to commit suicide. The pistol was a gift to Hitler from the Walther family on the occasion of his 50th birthday (1939). Though, Andrew Wright, a Sask man,

[Figure 4.17] As chairman of Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, Saddam saw himself as a revolutionary and carried a weapon reflective of that status, the AK-47.⁴⁵⁰ Once a weapon with a narrow purpose, the Kalishnikov was appropriated to become the symbolic firearm of the proletariat.⁴⁵¹ Conceptually, the rifle is a copy of the Sturmgewehr, a medium-powered automatic rifle designed in Hitler's Wehrmacht. The Ak-47's format was worked out in a secret design contest held from late 1945 to early 1948 in Stalin's Soviet Union. After Stalin died in 1953, the Kremlin shipped the rifles and the technology to produce them around the Socialist world and other states it hoped to curry favor with. It was promptly copied elsewhere including Finland, Yugoslavia, Israel, South Africa, India, Iran, and Bathist Iraq.⁴⁵² The AK-47 became a symbol of revolution against the West but drew first blood as an instrument of repression – stifling anti-Soviet uprisings in Eastern Europe.

The Kalashnikov and other firearms served an important role in the aesthetics of Saddam's Iraq. Government commissioned murals and statues depicted Saddam gripping the iconic firearm overhead and mosques were erected with minarets modeled after the

thought he had purchased the pistol in 1968, it had been stolen in 1945 by a U.S. soldier, Ira "Teen" Palm. Maurice Possley, "The bloody mystery of Hitler's golden gun," *The Star*, July 11, 2011.

⁴⁵⁰ Saddam Hussein seized power and held it with violence, echoing Mao's statement "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Mao Zedong, *Problems of War and Strategy* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1966).

⁴⁵¹ The AK-47 was inaccurate but reliable and effective at middle distances (two to three football fields). It was preferred as the untrained could wield it with little difficult or instruction. C.J. Chivers, "Saddam's Guns: The History of the AK-47," *Daily Beast*, October 28, 2010. https://www.thedailybeast.com/saddams-guns-the-history-of-the-ak-47?ref=scroll_ (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

⁴⁵² Ibid.

famous assault rifle.⁴⁵³ [Figure 4.18] For example, the enormous Mother of All Battles (Umm al-Qura) mosque, built to commemorate the Persian Gulf War, represents a fusion of historical elements relating to Islamic architecture, the Kalashnikov, and Scud missiles.”⁴⁵⁴ The Mosque has four minarets shaped like the barrels of Kalashnikov rifles (43 meters high, one meter for each day of the war) and four others resembling Scud missiles (37 meters high, for Saddam’s year of birth, 1937) surrounding a hexagonal domed building set in the middle of an artificial lake in the shape of the Arab world. The complex also featured a 7.5-meter-wide mosaic of Saddam’s thumbprints, a gold stylization of his initials, and a lavish 605-page Qur’an written in Saddam’s own blood. In this symbolic *mélange*, Saddam assembled a hodgepodge of themes: imperialism, the Persian Gulf War, pan-Arabism, leader-worship, and Islam.

In April 2003, following the U.S. military invasion into Baghdad, an unidentified U.S. serviceman tried to ship a gold-plated AK – 47 pistol and rifle to Fort Stewart, Georgia, which were intercepted at London’s Heathrow Airport.⁴⁵⁵ In September of 2010, another looted rifle plated in chrome and with a decorative pearl handgrip that had made its way to Texas was returned to the Iraqi government by the U.S. Army. One of Saddam’s most famous weapons, the golden Tabuk, an Iraqi variant on the AK – 47, was discovered by soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division near Kirkuk in northern Iraq.⁴⁵⁶ This weapon was given as a “thank you” by the US government to Australian troops. It

⁴⁵³ Chivers

⁴⁵⁴ Edwards.

⁴⁵⁵ Kyle Mizokami, “The Men With the Golden Guns,” *Medium*, Sept. 11, 2013.

⁴⁵⁶ Staff, “Saddam’s golden gun goes on display,” *Reuters*, June 18, 2007.

was eventually accepted by Australia's Deputy Chief of the Army, Major General John Cantwell, and placed in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra in 2007.⁴⁵⁷ Another AK-47 is displayed at Boling Air force based next to a matching sniper rifle with the inscription identifying the weapons as gifts from Uday to his father, Saddam Hussein.⁴⁵⁸ [Figure 4.19] Though it is unclear exactly how many weapons Saddam collected, the ones that were recovered have found their way to museums and presidential libraries around the world.⁴⁵⁹

However, the most famous collectible taken from Saddam's regime was also one of George W. Bush's most prized possessions, a 9mm Glock 18C. [Figure 4.20] Presented to the President mounted in a glass case by Delta Force soldiers, the Glock 18C was the pistol Saddam had been captured with when he emerged out of his fox hold outside Tikrit on December 13, 2003.⁴⁶⁰ It was a staple in the Oval Office, and Bush often showed off the pistol to military dignitaries boasting, "The Delta guys pulled it off of Saddam."⁴⁶¹

Property of the National Archive, Saddam's pistol is one of 25 items the George W. Bush Foundation displays at the Bush Presidential library to highlight the most

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Sharon Weinberger, "Ultimate War Trophy: Saddam's Gold-Plated AK-47," *Wired*, October 31, 2007.

⁴⁵⁹ Only two of Saddam's weapons have been known to make their way to auction legally. The M77 rifle Saddam held during a 2000 military parade was gifted to an anonymous agent after 29 years of service in the CIA and sold at auction for \$48,875.

⁴⁶⁰ Ed Pilkington, "Saddam Hussein's gun to go on display at the Bush library," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2009.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

pivotal decisions of George W. Bush's presidency.⁴⁶² Saddam's pistol sits in the "Capturing Key Moments" display case to complete a retrospective portrait of the Bush presidency.⁴⁶³ War booty always has two functions: providing visible sign of the victory and remuneration for the winning party. Collectibles, either purchased on eBay or brought home by US personnel, share in these common functions. All the objects collected, regardless of being trivial or personal items, are symbolic of Saddam's dictatorship. As surrogates for this, these collectibles allow the consumer a sense of participation. Further, if you can honor a person with a monument, portrait, or statue, you can likewise dishonor and insult him with one. For example, the "most-wanted playing cards," first issued by the Defense Intelligence Agency and U.S. Central Command in Iraq in April 2003 serve this function. [Figure 4.21] The pack includes 52 wanted Iraqi personalities plus two jokers with Arab titles and Iraq military ranks. These cards caricature Saddam's portrait and government while functionally transforming his portrait into a mugshot. The symbolic punishments these collectibles enact, however, are not directed towards the physical body but rather towards the social body of the person – his honor, status or legal standing. Collecting allows for a patriotic punishment to be carried out by the American public in the privacy of their homes. While Americans at home were privately "stabbing back" at Saddam on eBay, the demolition of Saddam's statues in Iraq

⁴⁶² Don Van Natta Jr., "Hussein's Gun May Go on Display at Bush Library," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2009.

⁴⁶³ Ann Compton, "Saddam Hussein's Pistol Featured by President George W. Bush Library," *ABC News*, January 7, 2011.

became a priority for the same reasons, although they were carried out in highly public settings rather than private ones.

Firdos Square Statue

On April 9, 2003, just days after U.S. forces arrived in Baghdad, 35-year-old gunnery sergeant Leon Lambert, driving a M-88 Hercules (a tow truck, equipped with a crane, used to assist tanks), noticed a statue of Saddam Hussein that had been installed a year earlier to commemorate the leader's 65th birthday.⁴⁶⁴ The Firdos Square statue depicts Saddam wearing a suit in his favorite pose: his right hand outstretched forward in a regal gesture, as if greeting his people and graciously accepting their praise. [Figure 4.22]

Statues are uncommon in Arab countries due to the prohibition on figural representations in Islamic dogma, but these images were very readable for a Western audience and the sort of totems that American and British troops had been erasing across Iraq with regularity since the beginning of the invasion.⁴⁶⁵ With permission from battalion leader Bryan McCoy, Lambert gave nearby Iraqis a sledgehammer and a rope. After watching their attempts to demolish the statue, Lambert could see that the tools would not be enough to remove it. McCoy gave Lambert the order to use the M-88 crane

⁴⁶⁴ Peter Maass, "The Toppling: How the Media Inflated the Fall of Saddam's Statue in Firdos Square," *Propublica*, January 3, 2011.

⁴⁶⁵ British Army spokesperson Colonel Chris Vernon commented on the reasoning behind targeting Saddam's statues stating, "The purpose is psychological," and that the ability for troops to target "representative tokens" of the regime "is now the critical effect we need to achieve and the British military's main effort." BBC News, "UK forces 'destroy Saddam statues,'" March 29, 2003.

to finish the job of pulling the statue down with the instruction to not kill anyone in the process.

While Corporal Edward Chin, atop the M-88's crane, was hooking a chain around the statue's head to pull it down, he was handed an American flag. Corporal Chin draped the flag on the statue of Saddam's head and left it there for a minute and a half before receiving directions to remove it. [Figure 4.23] This act of erasing Saddam's image by covering it with American flag was widely criticized by the global community as a sign of America's imperialistic intentions in Iraq.⁴⁶⁶ Further, though the flag was only in place for a few minutes, this incident jeopardized the image and credibility of the United States by casting doubt on its motives for the war. A highly televised moment of the American intervention, the image of toppling Saddam's statue eliminates any of the complexities inherent in the invasion.⁴⁶⁷ The removal of Hussein's visage created a dramatic moment highlighting Baghdad's fall to American control. The symbolism of marines draping an American flag over Saddam's face, only to quickly substitute an Iraqi flag, is also a symbolic exercise in the semiotics of portraiture. This symbolism took on further potency as the M-88 crane pulled the statue down, signifying Saddam's final bow while simultaneously revealing the statue (and Saddam's persona) itself to be hollow. [Figure 4.24]

It took more than two hours for the statue of Saddam to fall. During this time, CNN and FNC, both of whom had reporters and crews based across the street in the

⁴⁶⁶ *CNN Live Today*, "Iraqis, U.S. Troops Raise Pre-Gulf War Iraqis Flag," April 9, 2003.

⁴⁶⁷ Matthew Gilbert, *The Boston Globe*, "Did Iconic images from Baghdad reveal more about the media than Iraq," April 10, 2003.

Palestine Hotel, ran nearly constant live images of a crowd of Iraqis milling about the statue, throwing debris at it, and for a while taking turns trying to knock it down with a sledgehammer. At 9:45 am CNN's Bill Hemmer stated, "You think about seminal moments in a nation's history ... indelible moments like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that's what we're seeing right now: Regular Iraqis with their opportunity and their chance to take their own axe to down Saddam Hussein."⁴⁶⁸ This iconic historical reference point, the image of East Germans tearing down the Berlin Wall in 1989, helped feed a victory narrative suggesting the war was over. [Figure 4.25]

U.S officials were quick to appropriate the imagery from Firdos. A few minutes following the statue's toppling, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld told reporters, "The scenes of free Iraqis celebrating in the streets, riding American tanks, tearing down the statues of Saddam Hussein in the center of Baghdad are breathtaking. Watching them, one cannot but help think of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain."⁴⁶⁹ The statue's fall did not represent the war's finale but was emblematic of the US occupation of the center of Baghdad.⁴⁷⁰ Many argue that the events at Firdos Square were staged to symbolically demonstrate America's triumph and the Iraqi people's joy.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁸ Alex Pasternack, "From a Study on the Televised Fall of Saddam Hussein's Statue," *Vice*, January 6, 2011.

⁴⁶⁹ Peter Maas, "The Toppling: How Media Inflated the Fall of Saddam's Statue in Firdos Square," *ProPublica*, January 3, 2011.

⁴⁷⁰ Following the capture and occupation of the Republican palace the military divided central Baghdad into 27 zones, with each battalion responsible for four or five. One of the key targets in the central zone was the Palestine hotel. *Ibid*.

⁴⁷¹ Many accuse the media for the victory myth created at Firdos Square. Because the world's media was based at the Palestine hotel (across from the statue) television had the equipment to go live with the event as it unfolded. *Ibid*.

The 2004 documentary *Control Room* argues that the toppling of Saddam's statue was merely "a show ... a very clever idea," and that Iraqis had been brought to the square like actors delivered to the stage.⁴⁷²

The scene of the statue's fall quickly became the dominant news story in the US media, with Fox replaying it an average of 6.83 times every half hour between 11:00 and 8:00pm (once every 4.4 minutes), and CNN an average of 4 times every half hour (once every 7.5 minutes).⁴⁷³ This saturation of coverage crowded out all other potential stories, specifically the fact that fighting continued throughout Baghdad. According to this narrative, the war ended with the collapse of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square. Approval of President Bush's handling of the war in Iraq went from 69% on April 3rd (*CBS/New York Times*, 2003) to 76% the week after the statue fell (Marist, 2003). Following the statue's fall there was a dramatic decline in the quantity of coverage. On FNC the coverage decreased by 70%, by 26% on CNN, 66% on ABC, 58% on NBC, and 39% at CBS.⁴⁷⁴

Following the First World War, reporter, and political commentator Walter Lippman identified the components of wartime mythmaking as "the casual fact, the creative imagination, the will to believe, and out of these three elements, a counterfeit of reality." Lippman further stated, "men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities [and] in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they

⁴⁷² Jehane Noujaim, *Control Room*, Magnolia Pictures, January 22, 2004.

⁴⁷³ Sean Aday, John Cluverius, and Steven Livingston, "As Goes the Statue, So Goes the War: The Emergence of the Victory Frame In Television Coverage of the Iraq War," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 49:3, 314-331, June 7, 2010.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 326.

respond.”⁴⁷⁵ In the 1960s, Daniel Boorstin identified a new category of media spectacle he called “pseudo-events,” which were created to be reported on. These “pseudo-events” fulfilled the American public’s expectation for entertainment and often led political spectacle to be taken for actual news.⁴⁷⁶ Following the removal of the Firdos Square statue, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns commented on the repetition of footage and the power of images to show us what we want to see, stating, “When we repeat an image over and over again we’re forgetting all the other places we could be looking at that moment. These images become justification, proof of what we want them to become. That’s the nature of iconic image.”⁴⁷⁷

Iconic images of this type are associated with most modern wars. Susan Sontag has called these “canonical images.”⁴⁷⁸ A common feature of canonical images is their synthetic mixture of actual events and theater. In brief, canonical images often arise from a confluence of circumstances and, at times, various degrees of manipulation. In the instance of Hussein’s fallen statue, its canonical features include U.S. troops aiding in what was depicted as an organic uprising of Iraqi citizens. With iconic links to the fall of the Berlin wall, the statue reinforces a framing of the U.S as liberator and victor in the Iraq war.

⁴⁷⁵ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1922), 14.

⁴⁷⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 33.

⁴⁷⁷ Matthew Gilbert, “Did Iconic Images from Baghdad reveal more about the media than Iraq,” *The Boston Globe*, April 10, 2003.

⁴⁷⁸ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 53.

I define this ‘victory frame’ as one that selects and makes salient information – narrative and visual – to suggest the United States won the war, instead of information that would comprise alternative frames, such as battle imagery that shows that the war was continuing. This victory frame was enacted through analogies to historically significant culminating moments of past wars (especially iconographic images). In the eyes of American audiences, the fall of Hussein’s statue fit with images of the collapse of regimes past, leaving the viewing public with a sentiment consistent with America’s victories. Statues, such as the one at Firdos Square, made easy targets for the invading troops and provided quick and bloodless – although mainly symbolic – victories.

A mostly spontaneous destruction of statues later became a systematic cleansing of public images of Saddam. Within the same week, statues in Karbala, Basra, Baghdad, and Kirkuk were toppled and symbolically humiliated by dressing them up, urinating on them, hitting them with shoes, and other acts of defacement.⁴⁷⁹ Photographs of these broken statues were published in the West as symbols of the end of the regime or the destruction of the old symbolic order. During the same week Saddam’s statue fell, *Time* magazine printed a cover like one it had printed 60 years prior. On April 21, 2003, *Time* featured a portrait of Saddam Hussein crossed out with red dripping paint, indicating the end of his regime.⁴⁸⁰ [Figure 4.26] By referencing a cover printed in May 1945, which had a crossed-out portrait of Adolf Hitler, a similar importance was ascribed to Hussein’s defeat. [Figure 4.27] The cover is a direct visual argument of an iconoclastic act – the

⁴⁷⁹ CNN, “Symbols of Saddam’s power coming down,” Tuesday, April 8, 2003.

⁴⁸⁰ Ray Gustini, “A Brief History of Time Magazine’s ‘X’ Covers,” *The Atlantic*, May 2, 2011.

defacing of the portrait. The red cross depicts the paint used to deface the portrait as well as the blood that was actually or symbolically spilled in the war.

The iconoclastic acts performed on Saddam Hussein's statues or image – beating, toppling, destruction, and later their collection as souvenirs – did not invalidate the power of the statues and images. Their fragments became objects of hate and desire: they were fought over, conquered, and remain highly valuable. They retained great symbolic value as objects embodying the defeated enemy and as emblems of war, supporting the narrative of victory.⁴⁸¹ The statues, transformed into aesthetic and entertaining objects, were rendered harmless curiosities which vaguely remind people of the absurdities of a not-so-distant past.⁴⁸²

The Godfather of the Middle East: Saddam's Wardrobe as Portrait

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is a meditation on family, power, and tradition. [Figure 4.28] Released during the time of Watergate, *The Godfather* speaks to a culture newly aware of its own corruption and mirrors this corruption in its characters' inability to distinguish ethical boundaries. This tension is most prominently located in Michael Corleone, a returning war hero who abandons his principles to protect his father and family. Anna Hill Johnstone, the costume designer for *The Godfather*, created the iconic look of the antihero Corleone, whose fashion evolves throughout the

⁴⁸¹ Anita Ramasastry, "Toppling Saddam, Not his Statues: Why it is Important to Stop the Looting of Medical Supplies, the Theft of Cultural Artifacts, and Other Economic War Crimes," *FindLaw*, April 22, 2003.

⁴⁸² Catherine Donaldson-Evans, "Saddam Statues, Souvenirs Await Their Fate," *Fox News*, April 14, 2003.

film to reflect his personal transformation.⁴⁸³ Michael's introduction as a privileged, university-educated innocent is symbolized by a plain military style uniform, which shows a disconnect from his father and the Corleone crime family. The charting of Michael's character transformation through clothing concludes with a dark three-piece suit and tilted homburg hat, a symbolic transition that reflects his complicity in his family's business and personal corruption.⁴⁸⁴ His final outward appearance conveys a sense of care and attention, while the felt homburg hat (known now as "*The Godfather* hat"), with its center dent or "gutter crown," signifies the negative reputation of mobsters and their personal corruption. Johnson's costume designs became synonymous with expressions of power and forms of masculinity associated with *The Godfather* films.⁴⁸⁵ This definition of masculinity binds the family man to honor and tradition yet leaves him unable to rely on the police or courts for justice. In the *Godfather* justice is ruthless, expedient, and founded on a version of masculinity, exemplified by Vito Corleone and

⁴⁸³ Harlan Lebo, *The Godfather Legacy: The Untold Story of the Making of the Classic Godfather Trilogy Featuring Never-Before-Published Production Stills* (New York, Touchstone Publishing, 2005), 69-70.

⁴⁸⁴ Emma Hager, "Hemmed In: Kay Adams and Her Changing Fashions," <https://theseventies.berkeley.edu/godfather/tag/costume-design/> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

⁴⁸⁵ *The Godfather* is a study in the mechanics of masculinity and dominance outside of the battlefield with each major character (Vito, Michael, and Sonny Corelone) representing a unique expression of archetypal masculine behavior. Janani Hariharan, "Men of the House: Modes of Masculinity in the Godfather," <https://theseventies.berkeley.edu/godfather/2018/06/06/men-of-the-house-modes-of-masculinity-in-the-godfather/> (accessed Sept 14, 2024).

established through the deference and obedience of other men.⁴⁸⁶ The Godfather doesn't need to directly exert power because the institutions he constructed do it for him.

Saddam Hussein's wardrobe, catalogued at the time that his palaces were liberated by US forces, included double breasted Italian suits by Canali and Luca's, dress shirts with French cuffs, silk ties in solid and subtle patterns, and a black fedora.⁴⁸⁷ Custom dark, conservative suits, made with high-quality pure Turkish wool and white pinstripes on intense navy were designed and reserved exclusively for Saddam by his tailor, Recep Cesur.⁴⁸⁸ Cesur's suits became iconic to Saddam and important for Baathist loyalists who associated Saddam's power with his sense of style.⁴⁸⁹ [Figure 4.29]

Reminiscent of Anna Johnstone's designs in the Godfather films, Saddam's suit is a surprising choice with its associations to capitalism, international diplomacy, and civility, concepts at odds with what is known of Saddam's persona. According to Robin Givhan,

The suit is symbolic of a specific event or function, a kind of sartorial diplomacy in matter of state. In business, a suit is part of an international language of profit margins and exchange rates. It is a silent way of

⁴⁸⁶ In a symbolic sense, women serve as conduits for the story of men's feuds and business in the *Godfather*. *The Godfather* highlights varying models of masculinity represented in the three leads of the Corleone family (one brash, one patient, and one a synthesis) while women act as magnets of male ambition and desire. Ibid

⁴⁸⁷ David Zucchino, "Vast complex shows Saddam's excessive tastes and foibles: GIs find palace a den of inequity," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 2003.

⁴⁸⁸ Cesur commented on the ideal proportions of Saddam as a client stating that his "height is very beautiful ... he wears a suit very well." Additionally, following the free advertising of Saddam's trial, the Cesur brand became a status symbol, signaling coolness and a little bit of defiance. Among his clients this resulted in the Cesur label purposely being left on the cuff. Ian Traynor, "I am Saddam's tailor" *The Guardian*, December 16, 2005.

⁴⁸⁹ Thomas Meaney, "The Saddam Hussein Guide to Courtroom Fashion," *Slate.com*, February 15, 2006.

announcing: All of us at the table are here to make money. Religion, culture, emotions have been left at the door.

In the complicated relationship between the Middle East and the West, politics, culture, and religion are woven into the fabric of traditional dishdashas and suits. The robe, in the eyes of outsiders, functions as religious reassurance and cultural defiance. Its presence identifies a situation as personal and, perhaps, emotional. The suit signifies dispassion and emotional neutrality.⁴⁹⁰

Added to his suit is a crucial, yet controversial, accessory: the necktie. Some Islamists believe the crisscross shape of the tie resembles a crucifix, while for other the tie is a symbol of encroaching Westernization.⁴⁹¹ For example, in Iran the tie became a controversial symbol of Westernization when the CIA helped Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi take power in the early 1950's. The shah's necktie symbolically linked him to his U.S. backing and corporate oil interests. As a result, the tie came to be associated with subservience and decadence, hence the shah's rule was referred to as the "regime of the Crown and Necktie."⁴⁹² Following the shah's removal, the tie came under attack from Ayatollah Khomeini, who sought a return to Islamist, anti-Western, attire. Since the revolution, Iranian officials adhered to an unspoken dress code of dark suits, unkempt beards, and bare collars; neckties represent dissidence among pro-Western Iranian students. In this context, the necktie has a loaded history in the Middle East and acts as both a symbol of pro-Westernization and of protest.

⁴⁹⁰ Robin Givhan, "The Dictator, Dressing Down the West," *The Washing Post*, December 2, 2005.

⁴⁹¹ In the 1920s Mustafa Kemal encouraged his countrymen to abandon traditional Muslim dress in favor of suits and neckties when he rose to power in Turkey. In neighboring Arab countries this was viewed with suspicion as a compromise of traditional Islamic society by the West. Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

Saddam Hussein's appreciation and emulation of the style depicted in *The Godfather* extended to a fascination with the film's story and characters. In 1975, Saddam Hussein charmed three Western journalists while delivering a chilling account of his campaign in Kurdistan. According to the journalists, Saddam gave an analysis of *The Godfather* over whiskey and demonstrated an obsession with its central character and storyline, which he described as key to his own tactics and maneuvers.⁴⁹³ As early as 1991 the Western press described Hussein's ruthless tactics and bargaining style as connected to *The Godfather*.⁴⁹⁴ Using his interest in the film as a tool to predict and explain his behaviors. William Neikirk writing for the *Chicago Tribune* states, "[to] those who know Hussein and have studied his past, the Godfather image gives some clues to how he might react during the duration of the war under the U.S.-led coalition's relentless bombing."⁴⁹⁵

This habit of reading Saddam through his tastes and identification with the *Godfather* continued in the build up to the Iraq War. According to Mark Bowden, the films are "obvious movies for him to like,"⁴⁹⁶ while Judith Miller's and Laurie Mylorie's

⁴⁹³ Adel Darwish, "Saddam may play the Godfather to outfox the UN," *Independent*, November 20, 2002.

⁴⁹⁴ "The Godfather and the Kurds," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1991.

⁴⁹⁵ William Neikirk, "Godfather of the Middle East," *Chicago Tribune*, January 22, 1991.

⁴⁹⁶ "Saddam is, of course, not alone in admiring *The Godfather* series. They are obvious movies for him to like. On the surface it is a classical patriarchal tale. Don Vito Corleone builds his criminal empire from nothing, motivated in the main by love for his family. He sees that the world around him is viscous and corrupt, so he outdoes the world at its own cruelty and preys upon its vices, creating an apparent refuge of wealth and safety for himself and his own. We are drawn to his single-mindedness, subtle intelligence, and steadfast loyalty to an ancient code of honor in a changing world – no matter how unforgiving that code seems by modern standards." Bowden.

biography “The Rise of Saddam Hussein,” begins by recounting how much Saddam’s love of the *Godfather* and his identification with Vito Corleone shaped his own outlook.⁴⁹⁷ Adel Darwish, British journalist and author of several books on Saddam Hussein, describes in meetings that “Saddam was very impressed with the film,” and would often sit to discuss it at length.⁴⁹⁸ In a *New York Post* article from 2002, Saddam’s ex-lover describes him as a “viagra popping butcher” who loves “The Godfather,” dances to Frank Sinatra’s rendition of “Strangers in the Night” and “enjoys videos of the torture of his enemies – while smoking a cigar, having a drink and wearing a cowboy hat.”⁴⁹⁹ In this example, cherished American tastes and iconic cultural staples such as Sinatra and the cowboy hat are evoked as evidence of sadism.

Ultimately, Saddam’s adoption of *The Godfather* style was read by the American press as a symptom of his distorted views on strength, family, justice, and military strategy, as dictator kitsch. This equivalence of his style with dictator kitsch neglects alternative interpretations, including the possibility that the Godfather style suit functions as a subversive, anti-capitalist image. Saddam Hussein’s persona may also be a conscious

⁴⁹⁷ Judith Miller and Laurie Mylroie, “The Rise of Saddam Hussein,” in *The Iraq War Reader: History, Documents, Opinions*, ed. Michael L. Sifry and Christopher Cerf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 18.

⁴⁹⁸ “Saddam Hussein believed he rules with the hand of a family man. ‘He thought he was providing the nation with justice undeliverable under international law,’ ... In years later ‘Saddam Hussein came to see all of Iraq as his family,’ says Darwish. ‘And if anyone went against the family, he would be a traitor to the family.’” Adel Darwish, “Saddam, The Godfather,” *National Geographic* <https://www.nationalgeographic.com.au/videos/facing-saddam/saddam-the-godfather-4849.aspx> (accessed Sept. 18, 2024).

⁴⁹⁹ Andy Geller, “Saddam’s Ex-Lover; She Tells of Viagra Popping Butcher,” *The New York Post*, September 8, 2002.

portrait which mocks the symbolism of the suit by hiding behind it, communicating his disdain for the West and capitalism in a language that is to be universally understood.

In 2005, *The Sun* and *The New York Post* published photos of Saddam Hussein in his jail cell wearing nothing but underwear. [Figure 4.30] U.S. Military officials believe the photos were taken at Camp Cropper (a prison near Baghdad) between January and April 2004, months prior to Hussein's trial for crimes against humanity. Despite investigations into the legality of purchasing and publishing these photos, Graham Dudman, the managing editor of *The Sun*, stated that the US military handed over the photo to deal "a body blow to the resistance in Iraq."⁵⁰⁰

Following this public humiliation, Saddam's attire took center stage at his trial in 2005. In contrast to his co-defendants who wore Arab robes and head coverings, Saddam Hussein dressed in a black pinstriped suit during his first days in court. [Figure 4.31] His appearance prompted Robin Givhan, writing in the *Washington Post*, to observe

The pocket square was a particularly distracting flourish. Paired with a tie, a pocket square tends to make a man look more formally attired. But without that accompaniment, it can look almost jaunty and rakish – like Sinatra or Dino in Vegas. Here was a man accused of ordering the execution of 148 people, accessorizing in the manner of a lounge act. (In October, he skipped the pocket square but unbuttoned his shirt in a manner eerily reminiscent of the Tom Ford style).⁵⁰¹

Givhan further states "Hussein's style choice throws the viewer off balance. Is this modest paean to the Flamingo a simple reflection of his hair-dyeing, gold-leaf loving,

⁵⁰⁰ *Daily Mail Reporter*, "Rupert Murdoch's papers face accusations that he paid off American soldiers for "underwear" photos of Saddam Hussein," December 3, 2012.

⁵⁰¹ Robin Givhan, "The Dictator, Dressing Down the West," *The Washington Post*, December 2, 2005.

frightful vanity? Or has he decided to beat the “occupiers” from within their own system? Take it over, or mock it?”⁵⁰² Givhan’s statement accidentally touches on the hidden complexity of Saddam’s persona. Though seen as kitsch from the American perspective, the conventions and symbolic trappings of Saddam Hussein’s portraiture are indebted to European traditions and American culture.

Saddam embraced portraiture, including elements of American culture, as a tool to construct effective and opportunistic fictions in support of his governing ideologies. However, Saddam’s vision for Iraq follows patterns consistent with past totalitarian art and culture: a socialist paradise where happy nations guided by wise leaders who build a new life and new men, and who always wreak vengeance on their enemies. The American reception of Hussein criticizes this appropriation as comical and/or a clear indication of moral deviance, in other words, dictator kitsch. Associations with dictator kitsch obscures complex interpretations in favor of recognizing one man’s aberrant psychology. Beginning with the statue’s fall, American culture has framed images of Saddam consistently with those of past dictators, employing a fiction not unlike that which Saddam himself used in his own self styling.

⁵⁰² Givhan

Chapter 5 – George W. Bush and American Political Kitsch

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera tells the story of Sabina, an artist haunted by kitsch. Seeking to escape her home in Czechoslovakia, Sabina leaves for the West, expecting to find a society free of kitsch. Yet, when attending a Communist march in Paris, Sabina is surprised to find more of the same: “She wanted to tell them that behind Communism and Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions, lurks a more fundamental, pervasive evil – the image of that evil is a parade of people marching side by side with raised fists, shouting identical syllables in unison”⁵⁰³ Sabina’s conclusion is that kitsch is much more pervasive than she had anticipated, and not a specific quality of her home in Czechoslovakia. Instead, Sabina finds that kitsch “is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.”⁵⁰⁴

Milan Kundera identifies two “tears” in his famous diagnosis of political kitsch. The first is the tear which appears at the sight of something beautiful and pure, such as children running on the grass. “The second tear says, ‘how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass.’ It is the second tear that makes kitsch, kitsch.”⁵⁰⁵ What underpins Kundera’s description of kitsch is its ability to unite political communities together. In elaborating, Kundera states that in holding this community together, the true purpose of kitsch “is a folding screen set up to curtain off death.”⁵⁰⁶ This purpose, served through the veneer kitsch creates, tethers political

⁵⁰³ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 50-51

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 132

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

communities together while concealing a world of painful tradeoffs, political lies, etc. This is why, despite Sabina's attempts to escape or transcend kitsch, all she ultimately can hope for is a glimpse of what it obscures.

Catherine Lugg, writing on political kitsch and public policy, largely shares Kundera's diagnosis, stating that kitsch "is a form of cultural anesthesia. It is this ability to build and exploit cultural myths and to easily manipulate conflicted history – that makes kitsch a powerful political construction."⁵⁰⁷ Both Kundera and Lugg propose kitsch as ubiquitous to the realm of politics. The major difference between totalitarian and democratic types and societies is simply variety. In democratic societies political kitsch is abundant, comprised of many varied types, while totalitarian governments exist as the result of one-party holding power via a singular kitsch.⁵⁰⁸ It is with this description in mind that I will look at the design and construction of the George W. Bush Oval Office as a vehicle which binds together political communities through cultural and personal narratives. As such, it is a necessary bookend to a discussion of Saddam Hussein's dictator kitsch.

The Oval Office is a palette on which Presidents, via choices in décor, paint a persona central to each administrations branding. [Figure 5.1] In the Oval Office, presidential administrations coordinate a dialogue with the past while carefully and deliberately adding personalized touches to amplify the weight of history or silently comment on the moment. Décor changes, including the arrangement of furniture or

⁵⁰⁷ Catherine Lugg, *Kitsch: From Education to Public Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

⁵⁰⁸ This also follows Kundera's description of totalitarian kitsch. Kundera, 133.

mementos, should be understood in contrast to the choices of past administrations, as clues to policy and character transformations, or more intimate revelations of personal domesticity.⁵⁰⁹

A complete understanding of the blank slate that is the Oval Office prior to a president's arrival demands a brief history of the interior and the ways interior environments shape perceptions of an individual. From this context, I will turn to the specific history of how interior design has been used in the Oval Office and to décor choices made by the George W. Bush administration.

History of the Interior

In the modern era, decoration moved from being a communally understood symbol of shared values – familial, religious, political, national, and civic among them – to a way of expressing individuality.⁵¹⁰ Decoration can also act as a representation of power and wealth, and in this context, decorative languages acted as forms of control, marking, and sustaining fixed social structures.⁵¹¹ However, with the high level of social

⁵⁰⁹ For example, JFK's sailfish (caught on his honeymoon) hung in the Roosevelt room represents the virility of a young president, his love of the ocean, and creates contrast with the Eisenhower administration.

⁵¹⁰ Walter Benjamin suggested that the advent of modernity coincided with the emergence of the private individual. By extension the emergence of the private interior, and its capacity to facilitate self-reflection, or interiority, was part of that same historic moment. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 220.

⁵¹¹ Beginning in the eighteenth century, the practice of designing interiors depended on the replication and display of highly coded aesthetic elements to signify intimate knowledge of the distinctions between social strata. Kent Kleinman, Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, and Lois Weinthal eds. *After Taste: Expanded Practice in Interior Design* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 9.

mobility that accompanied industrialization, interior decoration gradually moved away from merely confirming stable social structures to actively seeking to renew or transform them. As such, early interior decoration (later interior design) operated almost completely outside the limits of modernism.⁵¹²

The modern interior can be understood as the inside location of people's experiences of, and negotiations with, modern life. As such, modern spaces not only mirrored modern experience, but also played a role in constructing them.⁵¹³ For example, the Victorian Parlor offered comfort and refuge, however temporary, from the world of work and commerce – a chance for occupants to see themselves as individuals in an environment otherwise dedicated to the anonymity of the crowd. As such, typical Victorian spaces were filled with clutter, densely decorated with belongings, upholstered furniture, textiles, potted plants, etc. which exhibited an overall lack of aesthetic control, absent visual unity.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹² Since interior design was rooted in historicism, comfortable with the idea of domesticity, and aimed at an elite and aspirational audience Modernists saw a “threat located in the domestic interior and, more specifically, in the hands of the housewife-decorator and the (often female) professional interior decorator. Seeking to build a world of absolute values, the modernists turned away from the commercial arena and the context of pragmatism ... therefor, they looked to the public sphere, production-oriented, process-focused new spaces of the factory and office ...” Ibid., 23.

⁵¹³ “The modern interior coincided with the invention or the development of the self-conscious individual modern subject – the subject that has personal interiority. So it is that we have no interior in the modern sense, until we have an interior subjectivity in the modern sense – that is with the philosophical enquiries of Kant and Rousseau.” Ibid. 67.

⁵¹⁴ The shift away from the mid-Victorian domestic interior was significant. It demonstrated an understanding that the interior's aesthetic had become a significant marker of taste and social status for an increasingly wide sector of society. The emergence of the self-consciously aesthetic domestic interior brought with it a new emphasis on visuality over materiality and spatiality. By the turn of the century the

As a result, modern spaces facilitated both private interiority and public mass behavior, yet these boundaries between public and private were fundamentally unstable. According to historian Penny Sparke, it was this instability that defined modernity.⁵¹⁵ For example, while the domestic interior was drawing into the public sphere through the second half of the nineteenth century, by the early years of the twentieth a pull in the opposite direction had also begun, which drew modern public interiors into the home. This movement was initiated by a group of architects and designers committed to eroding the boundaries between the spheres.⁵¹⁶ Their efforts were partly driven by a shared distaste for bourgeois domesticity and a desire to create a classless architecture which, they believed, would replace the values of middle-class Victorian domesticity with the more democratic ones of efficiency and utility. They found those latter values in the modern, public interior dedicated to commerce, industrial production, and work.

One example of this is Christine Frederick's kitchen efficiency studies from 1913. [Figure 5.2] Borrowing from their use in factories, the introduction of machines into the kitchen introduced the expectation of a more efficient/professionalized domestic practice. Frederick's proposal outlines the ways in which tasks might be simplified for a reorganization of the kitchen to reduce the number of steps needed to prepare and clear up following a meal. The effect of the proposal was to professionalize the role of the

parlors had been replaced by the living room, the 'character' could be expressed. Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 35.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ "In their attempts to distance themselves, and the modern interior, from what they perceived to be the superficial world of fashion and fashionable dress, those architects had aligned themselves with the dress reform movement, thereby embracing the idea of 'rational dress,' and rejecting the notion of fashion entirely." Ibid. 77.

housewife while encouraging manufactures to approach consumers as hyper-rational. The collision of the efficient public workspace and the domestic space of the kitchen shifted the way occupants lived, thought, and worked.

The middle-class interior, its links with feminine culture and modernity, and its role as an expression of newly acquired social status and identity were fully in place by the end of the nineteenth century. This was largely the result of professional female interior decorators who emerged in the US in the first decades of the twentieth century. Led by Elsie de Wolfe, they saw themselves operating within the system of fashion, predicated on the idea that modern women were in search of luxurious, material means of expressing their modern identities.⁵¹⁷ De Wolfe's preferred style was eighteenth-century French, an era representative of aristocracy, material luxury, and taste, attributes De Wolfe used to suggest an elevated social status for her clients. One of De Wolfe's most memorable proclamations made in 1913 was "You will express yourself in your home whether you want to or not."⁵¹⁸

The close alliance between dress and interior that developed through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was sustained through their common cultural meanings, the shared commercial strategies of their creators, and the commonality of the commercial sites that framed them. Dress led the way, defining the nature of the fashion system, but interior decoration followed swiftly after it. Their relationship served to

⁵¹⁷ Middle-class women went as far as 'dressing' furniture items with ruffles and fringes, transforming them, in the process, into extensions of themselves. The concept of 'interiority' assumes a blurring of the inner, mental activities of the occupant and the material and spatial environments they occupy. *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

emphasize the psychological function of the interior and its close links with feminine subjectivity, identity, and modernity. De Wolfe understood the importance of dress and interior design to modern women's search for self-identity in a world in which flux was the only constant.⁵¹⁹ This was largely because De Wolfe had moved into interior decoration as an amateur from an early career in theater. According to Sparke, this familiarity with theater or "the stage-set encouraged an understanding of the modern interior as a 'psychic backcloth' for which the architectural frame was unimportant but for which the identity and self-expression of the character being enacted was paramount."⁵²⁰ Consistent with fashion, De Wolfe presented herself as a brand, apparent in her widely read advice book, *The House in Good Taste* (1913), the first page of which features an elegant portrait of herself accompanied by her signature.⁵²¹

De Wolfe and her followers set out to persuade wealthy clients that the association of their names with interiors had the potential to make their occupants appear more fashionable. In this sense, De Wolfe's understanding of fashion allowed for a form of "conspicuous consumption."⁵²² Interior design used taste as code to serve a stratifying function. According to Penny Sparke "historic links between interior design and taste are probably impossible to erase: the creation and design of private space is essential to the construction of the modern social world and its manners ... the very purpose of interior

⁵¹⁹ De Wolfe's decorating firm created several home interiors for movie stars, including one for Hope Hampton in New York and another for Gary Cooper in California. Ibid.

⁵²⁰ Sparke, 88.

⁵²¹ Elsie De Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1916).

⁵²² Veblen, 168.

design has been to “demonstrate the prevailing taste.”⁵²³ This is further reason why the modern interior was established in parallel with the invention of the modern subject, a subject who occupies separate and private spatial and psychological realms apart from their public persona.⁵²⁴

Another crucial figure in the development of interior design was Edith Wharton. Wharton’s *The Decoration of Houses*, written with Ogden Codman Jr. and published in 1897, became a foundational text for future design practices. In the book, Wharton advocated for classical simplicity and balance, in contrast to the excesses of the Gilded Age and Victorian interiors.⁵²⁵ In her work, Wharton shifted from an initial commitment to taste reform to a promotion of the house as a site for fashionable statements, towards a plea for the respect of architectural context.⁵²⁶ As such, *The Decoration of Houses* led the way with depictions of decorative interiors from the eighteenth century, French, English, and Italian.⁵²⁷ Wharton argues that the home can aid in understanding its inhabitants, specifically women, when stating:

A woman’s nature is like a house full of rooms: there is the hall, through which everyone passes in going in and coming out; the drawing room, where one receives formal visits; the sitting room where the members of the family come and go as they list; but beyond that, are other rooms, the

⁵²³ Sparke, 10.

⁵²⁴ “...the decoration of the interior, can through the application of taste, play a role in status and identity formation and dissemination ...” Ibid.18

⁵²⁵ Prior to the publication of Wharton’s text no book had been devoted entirely to decoration. Edith Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses* (New York: B.T. Batsford, 1898).

⁵²⁶ According to Vanessa Chase, the decoration of houses became a metaphor for the woman who creates and inhabits it, a symbol of her power and self-expression. Vanessa Chase, “Edith Wharton, *The Decoration of Houses*, and Gender,” in *Architecture and Feminism*, ed. Debra Coleman, and Danze, Elizabeth (New York: Princeton, 1996), 130-160.

⁵²⁷ Wharton.

handles of whose doors are perhaps never turned; no one knows the way to them, no one knows whither they lead; and in the innermost room, holy of holies, the soul sits alone and waits for a footstep that never comes.⁵²⁸

For Wharton, architecture and its decoration both define and are defined by the inhabitants; the house one builds or the room one decorates is an expression of one's character, and the house or room in which one is obliged to live creates that character. The house describes more than social level and taste; it describes mental states, moral associations, and tradition. This is especially the case for women, uprooted objects in a world of commercial exchange, for whom the house is their center.⁵²⁹ Further, specific rooms of the house functioned as spaces of empowerment for women. Specifically, the drawing room assumes a singular importance for Wharton as both an indicator of character and as a site for the decisive action of women. [Figure 5.3]

In turn-of-the-century America, the drawing room was where guests were entertained on social visits and where pre- and post-dinner conversations took place. It was the prime space of social interaction between the sexes but primarily affiliated with the woman who entertained it. According to Vanessa Chase, the decoration of the drawing room was a woman's weapon. To decorate a room, especially the drawing room, is to announce and flex power in architectural and social space.⁵³⁰ The drawing room not only expressed a woman's character; it was also the seat of her power in society.

⁵²⁸ Edith Wharton, "The Fullness of Life," *Scribner's Magazine* XIV (December 1893).

⁵²⁹ Wharton understood women to be merely signifiers of men's hard-earned wealth and only able to flex power through the signs of this affluence: fashion and the decoration of houses. Thus, even though the house was seen as expressive of a woman, she only inhabited it as an inscribed figure: the real body displayed through the house, and woman, was the man. Chase, 146-147.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, 155-156.

In *The Decoration of Houses*, the den (or smoking room) is the only room that is presented as a male space. This “male lounging room” is to have “common sense, comfortable, office-like furniture”; freed from the superfluous, it is often the most comfortable in the house. While Wharton advocated women having power within their homes and supported the identification of the drawing room and decoration as signs of that power; she also tends to depreciate the role of male spaces within the home.⁵³¹ However much the house is equated with its woman, it is always actually the sign of the man who “owns” both wife and home. The power of the woman within the house is thus a power inscribed within and restricted by an overarching system of male spatial and social control.

The modern domestic interior developed throughout the 1920’s and continued to borrow from the public sphere to minimize the relationship of the home with trade, consumption, and bourgeoisie domesticity. The early twenty-first-century interior was largely formed by its presence in the mass media, where it was frequently represented as a highly desirable, uncluttered backcloth to an increasingly complex existence.⁵³² In this sense, the interior became an accomplice in the construction of irrational desires which

⁵³¹ According to Chase, decoration is a doomed strategy for women. However, the elevation of decoration (the feminine strategy for placing) to the status of architecture (the masculine strategy for placing) in *The Decoration of Houses* provides a theoretical program for equality in gendering interaction and space. Ibid.

⁵³² The idealized interior still figures prominently in today’s mass media. ‘How to’ and ‘make-over’ shows offer voyeuristic glimpses into the homes of the rich and famous. One of the most popular interior focused programs broadcast from 1996 to 2004 was *Changing Rooms*, which worked on the assumption that everyone’s taste is equally valid as long as it is adequately expressed. Penny Sparke, *The Modern Interior* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 15-16.

underpinned the mass consumption of goods. Model domestic interiors were presented as static images and space. Real lives, in that context, were replaced by modern, mass media-dependent notions of ‘lifestyles,’ or the idealized versions of the lives people lead.⁵³³ Magazines, an early form of mass media which were read in the home, focused women’s attention on idealized versions of the very interiors in which they were sitting while they read.⁵³⁴ Further blurring their promotional and editorial content, magazines played a role in reinforcing their readers’ ambiguous identities as readers/homemakers/consumers.⁵³⁵

While the early use of magazines appealed to female consumers, later magazines such as *Playboy* would do the same for men. In “the Lair of the Bachelor,” George Wagner reads *Playboy*-commissioned designs for a series of “masculine” domestic interiors, stating that *Playboy* was “dependent on the spatialization of the lifestyle imagined in its pages.” In Wagner’s view the goal of this spatialization consisted of imagining varying sites for the lifestyle advocated for within the magazine, specifically

⁵³³ An abstract concept created by the sum of consumers’ possessions, activities, aspirations and desires; the concept of ‘lifestyle’ emerged largely because of the media’s engagement with the modern interior. Ibid., 15-17.

⁵³⁴ The idealization of the modern interior, through its proximity to consumers’ everyday lives and its role in helping to form the concept of ‘lifestyle’ was able to perform a powerful communicative function. Providing a level of familiarity for consumers outside the home, it tapped into their desires and succeeded in stimulating their dreams and aspirations. Arguably, as a result, in its idealized and mediated forms, the modern interior was one of the key drivers of mass consumption in the twentieth century. Sparke, 15.

⁵³⁵ Mail order catalogues provided another means of consuming interiors at home. In the US, greater distances made them more necessary than in Europe, Sears Roebuck and Co. and Montgomery Ward catalogues dominated the field. Popular films also provided another important means through which the interior was mediated and a desire to consume stimulated on a mass scale. Ibid.

that of the ‘bachelor’, who lived “completely within the world of commodities and the market.” [Figure 5.4] To Wagner, the entire motivation of the bachelor is to consume and outfit his home with up-to-date technology and gadgets to seduce women. As such, *Playboy’s* imagined interiors operate as elaborate traps for women.⁵³⁶ Technology, as an extension of sexual desire, served a dual role in the home of the bachelor. It facilitated not only the gratification of the bachelor’s sexual desire, but also his disconnection from others, especially women.⁵³⁷ Wagner defines a bachelor as “a single man, but some delicacy has always been required in the discussion of why the bachelor is single ... [W]e know that in the shadows of the cocktail party, the speculation is that the bachelor is a loser, or even worse – he’s a queer. And as a result, the décor of the bachelor must carefully calibrate not to send off the wrong signals.”⁵³⁸ Wagner sees the bachelor’s heterosexuality as repeatedly overshooting the mark. He caricatures masculine heterosexuality by performing it to excess, too virile to be successfully partnered in a reproductively heterosexual pair. According to Joel Sanders, this performance is visible in the bachelor’s reliance on technology seeing mechanical objects as a disguise for deeper anxieties stemming from the emasculating effects of post-war consumer culture

⁵³⁶ Commentaries accompanying artists renderings state that these interiors function as an engine designed to aid the bachelor in the pursuit, capture, and seduction of women. Wagner further indicates the need for these fantasies come because of compensating for fears surrounding cultural constructions of domestic space, described as “spatial and architectural emasculation.” George Wagner, “The Lair of the Bachelor,” in *Architecture and Feminism*, eds. Debra Coleman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carole Henderson (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 183-220.

⁵³⁷ This disconnection is especially important as the existence of the free-agent bachelor only remains so if he can avoid sustained connection with women. *Ibid.*

⁵³⁸ Wagner, 196.

and the corporate workplace.⁵³⁹ Although Wagner's "The Bachelor's Evolution" describes the formation of an idealized male identity and space, it nevertheless maintains the same features of interior design discussed by Wharton and De Wolfe.

This survey of interiors shows a consistent tension between public/private, domestic/social, and male/female as formative in understanding the relationship between an occupant and their interior space. A further ambiguity is that an interior space, through which we might read the psychology of an occupant, may not even be designed, or decorated by them at all. Rather, spaces are decorated by others or in collaboration, making the reading of identity more problematic. Situated somewhere in between the Drawing Room, Office, and Den, the Oval Office is an ambiguous space identified with the President, yet not designed by him. The space is both private and public, for work and leisure, and a scene of domestic/political power. Seen in this light, the Oval Office's "masculinity" is largely a performative one designed by the First Lady, a chosen interior decorator, the White House historical society, with a budget from Congress. As such, the space cannot really be seen as purely representative of a sole occupant.⁵⁴⁰ Under these communal conditions, objects/decor are most useful as points of entry into the underlying

⁵³⁹ Joel Sanders, ed. *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19.

⁵⁴⁰ Joel Sanders discusses an ambiguity central to masculinity as dependent on props. Sanders describes an obsessive, even hysterical way men relate to the objects that surround and define them as pointing to the vulnerability at the very heart of the masculine identity. Historians attribute the crises in masculinity to specific historical events – the industrial revolution, World War II – that transformed traditional roles both in the workplace and in the home. Psychoanalysts attribute the rents in male subjectivity to the formation of sexual identity itself, where the biological penis can never live up to the mystique of the cultural phallus. *Ibid.*

tensions which develop and support a theater of representation and not static points of reference from which a psychology or portrait might reliably emanate.⁵⁴¹ It is with this in mind that I will look more closely at the patterns central to the history of Oval Office décor and, later, the objects and interior decoration of the George W. Bush Oval Office.

The Oval Office Throughout History

The White House was not always treated as a living museum. Until the beginning of the 20th century, First Families redecorated in whatever style was fashionable. The simple furniture of the early 19th century was replaced by curlicues, frescoes, Turkish curtains, and even fringe hanging from one of the fireplaces.⁵⁴² In 1902 President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned the firm of McKim, Mead, and White to redecorate the White House, removing all Victorian excess and replacing it with draperies of heavy yellow silk damask.⁵⁴³ Roosevelt's shift to a political image of rugged individualism, expressed through interior furnishings, speaks to the early use of the Oval Office to

⁵⁴¹ As Penny Sparke has stated "...we inhabit a postmodern world in which taste has become a relative concept: increased globalization and multiculturalism have produced discreet taste cultures that may not share a common language and are judged to be good or bad dependent upon the perspective from which they are being viewed. In that complex landscape of diverse taste values, the countless popular television programs that focus on revamping interiors come into their own and we return to the idea of the interior as a theatre set with which de Wolfe was so comfortable." Sparke, *After Taste*, 26

⁵⁴² Efforts to give a period look to the house, first occupied by John and Abigail Adams in the 1800s, began in the early 1900s, using reproduction furniture. Marian Burros, "A Visit to the White House," *House Beautiful*, 136, no. 3, 108-114, 1994.

⁵⁴³ Linda Hales, "For This Old House and Senate, It's Makeover Time," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 13, 2006.

project a brand, one consistent with a symbolic mythos of the American cowboy and New Frontier.⁵⁴⁴ [Figure 5.5]

President William Howard Taft was the first to relocate the executive's office to the room we know today.⁵⁴⁵ For Taft, moving the Oval Office to the center of the West Wing symbolized the modern-day president, as it involved him in day-to-day operations.⁵⁴⁶ In 1909, Taft furnished the room with silk velvet curtains, a checkerboard floor made of mahajua wood from the Philippines, and chairs covered in caribou hide tacked with brass studs.

Since 1934, the Oval Office has maintained certain consistent decorative features including triangular pediments above the doors, a large cornice, French windows, and the presidential seal in relief on the ceiling. The Oval Office features a fireplace on one end of the room and the presidential desk, set in front of curved windows, on the other. In contrast with these permanent features, Presidents commission new rugs and drapes, change the style and placement of furniture, or choose new artwork to adorn walls and surfaces.

Though driven by the President and first spouse, the process of designing the Oval Office includes the assistance of a decorator, architect, and/or curator. John Meacham

⁵⁴⁴ The 1890s began the era of that first codified the “frontier thesis” of American history when it argued that Americans had evolved a unique and superior civilization due to the impact of the frontier experience. David A. Smith, *Cowboy Presidents: The Frontier Myth and U.S. Politics Since 1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 1.

⁵⁴⁵ This room had previously been occupied by the President's Secretary, or today's Chief of Staff. The White House Museum, <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/west-wing/oval-office-history.htm> (accessed July 13, 2021).

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

spoke to this process and its importance when stating “[P]residents have a unique place, not only as an object of the historical imagination, but as an architect of it. And so to catalog and take a look around the virtual attic of the Oval Office through the years tells you a lot about what presidents value – not only the stories they are interested in, but the stories they are writing themselves.”⁵⁴⁷

When redecorating the Oval Office, incoming presidents recycle from a vast storehouse of antiques, props, and furnishings, using a small budget provided for refurbishments as well as a fee set aside by Congress (and added to by private donors).⁵⁴⁸ While the exact location is undisclosed, thousands of pieces are located in a secret, 40,000 square-foot warehouse in Maryland.⁵⁴⁹ Although the role of overseeing and changing the décor is often cast as preserving history, the White House rooms and Oval Office are usually redecorated to communicate a specific message. In most cases, the choice of color, rugs, drapery, furniture, artwork, and their placement create a backdrop for the presidency.⁵⁵⁰ This use of décor as theater was taken farthest by former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy, who used theories of decorating to reinforce the power and grandeur

⁵⁴⁷ Larry Buchanan, “The Art in the Oval Office Tells a Story. Here’s How to See It,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 2021.

⁵⁴⁸ House committee members are also allowed a budget to redecorate and furnish their offices. Member’s Congressional Handbook, House Committee on Administration, “Guide to Outfitting an Office” <https://cha.house.gov/handbooks/members-congressional-handbook> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2017). In 1989, George Bush spent \$62,000 on the Oval Office renovation alone. Julie V. Iovine, “The Nation; Oval Office: Room with a Hue,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2001 <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/28/weekinreview/the-nation-oval-office-room-with-a-hue.html> (accessed Dec. 12, 2017).

⁵⁴⁹ Jillian Badanes, “Secret warehouse furnishes White House,” *The Washington Times*, January 19, 2009.

⁵⁵⁰ Brooks.

of the presidency, setting the stage for the management of state affairs.⁵⁵¹ Among numerous changes which facilitated this statecraft, most important was her effort to classify the White House as an accredited museum in 1961. After its designation, museum-quality pieces became the focal point of White House public rooms, the White House Historical Association was formed, and a permanent Curator's Office and Residence Staff were established.⁵⁵² Beyond these institutional changes, historian Anna Therese Kryczka suggests that the televised tour of the White House given by Mrs. Kennedy in on February 14, 1962 initiated a new formulation of citizenship as a function of enlightened domestic taste, inspiring middlebrow imagination to aspire towards a cosmopolitan aesthetic.⁵⁵³

Mrs. Kennedy's tour had the effect of blurring the historical and aesthetic, public and private, as well as domestic and governmental concerns, all while promoting elite taste. Mrs. Kennedy's tastes projected "a particularly patrician and east coast form of enlightenment" that establishes the "average home, as a site in need of education or reform." The antithesis of the tasteful interior, the suburban home, represented a bland and unexceptional representation of personal distinction.⁵⁵⁴ The tour formalized a tradition of the White House as a site of national connection through which the viewer

⁵⁵¹ Barbara Leaming, *Mrs. Kennedy: The Missing History of the Kennedy Years* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

⁵⁵² The White House curator is responsible for over 50,000 objects that are part of the White House's permanent collection. Brooks.

⁵⁵³ Anna Therese Kryczka, "On Taste and Nation," Dissertation (University of California, Irvine, 2016), vi.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

participated in a larger experience of national belonging.⁵⁵⁵ With this, taste in the Oval Office came to represent a national history told through the collection and transformation of material objects and spaces. Jacqueline Kennedy's work established the Oval Office as one of the most important tools in visually branding a presidency.

Some presidential administrations have used the décor of the Oval Office as an opportunity to rebrand themselves in contrast to the aesthetic of the outgoing, while others have used décor to reinforce an individual identity. Darrin Brooks identifies four distinct types of visual branding used in the Oval Office: symbolic, static, personal, and expunged. In each category, identity is established through association with American symbolism.⁵⁵⁶ Examples of symbolic branding, the most common of the four strategies, begin with Franklin D. Roosevelt, the first to occupy the Oval Office in its current location. Designed by architect Eric Gugler, Roosevelt's Oval Office drew heavily on his love of Georgian architecture and included dark green window treatments, decorative gold emblems of eagles, gilded wood, and a rug of brown chenille with a border of oak leaves. The symbolic associations with power and tradition were intended to solidify the president as the leader who would deliver the country out of the Great Depression.⁵⁵⁷ Harry S. Truman also aimed for a symbolic branding and kept a monochromatic color palette but replaced Roosevelt's dark green with a lighter green color scheme. To project an image of the modern leader, Truman installed televisions and new lighting to communicate a state-of-the-art presidency. John F. Kennedy made himself most at home

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

through the use of personal branding in the Oval Office, bringing in a rocking chair to ease back pain, a collection of model ships, maritime paintings, a watercolor of the White House painted by his wife, and a coconut shell associated with his rescue after PT-109 was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer in the Solomon Islands while he was onboard.⁵⁵⁸ Lyndon Johnson, obsessed with breaking news, kept a ticker tape and three televisions in his Oval Office.⁵⁵⁹ Richard Nixon, using symbolic branding, increased the visual contrasts through use of the presidential emblem designed with vibrant gold set against the navy of the Oval Office rug and bold yellow draperies, an aesthetic of exaggerated importance intended to intimidate.⁵⁶⁰ Gerald Ford followed the trauma of Watergate by using design to expunge Nixon's memory. Ford changed the Oval Office by removing the imperial imagery and replacing portraits of Calvin Coolidge and Woodrow Wilson with unpretentious paintings of Truman and Lincoln. Ronald Reagan brought an aesthetic formality and symbolic branding to the Oval Office, coupled with an Imperial style. Using Hollywood decorator Ted Garber, the Reagans revamped the lighting to be more suitable to television symbolic branding, the most common of the four strategies, begin with Franklin D. Roosevelt, the first to occupy the Oval Office in its current location. Designed by architect Eric Gugler, Roosevelt's Oval Office drew heavily on his love of Georgian architecture and included dark green window treatments, decorative gold

⁵⁵⁸ Stephen Hess, *What do we do Now: A Workbook for the President-Elect* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2008), 144.

⁵⁵⁹ Lyndon Johnson used the frontier myth to move American politics to the left on domestic issues while viewing engagement with enemies overseas as the logical and necessary extension of the continental westerning experience. Smith, 12.

⁵⁶⁰ Nixon loved the presidential seal and used it excessively outside of the Oval Office, including on his golf bags and windbreaker.

emblems of eagles, gilded wood, and a rug of brown chenille with a border of oak leaves. The symbolic associations with power and tradition were intended to solidify the president as the leader who would deliver the country out of the Great Depression.⁵⁶¹ Harry S. Truman also aimed for a symbolic branding and kept a monochromatic color palette but replaced Roosevelt's dark green with a lighter green color scheme. To project an image of the modern leader, Truman installed televisions and new lighting to communicate a state-of-the-art presidency. John F. Kennedy made himself most at home through the use of personal branding in the Oval Office, bringing in a rocking chair to ease back pain, a collection of model ships, maritime paintings, a watercolor of the White House painted by his wife, and a coconut shell associated with his rescue after PT-109 was cut in two by a Japanese destroyer in the Solomon Islands while he was onboard.⁵⁶² Lyndon Johnson, obsessed with breaking news, kept a ticker tape and three televisions in his Oval Office.⁵⁶³ Richard Nixon, using symbolic branding, increased the visual contrasts through use of the presidential emblem designed with vibrant gold set against the navy of the Oval Office rug and bold yellow draperies, an aesthetic of exaggerated importance intended to intimidate addresses and brought in Western themed art including a collection of bronze saddles, as well as a jar of jelly bellies for the Resolute desk.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Stephen Hess, *What do we do Now: A Workbook for the President-Elect* (Washington: Brookings Institute Press, 2008), 144.

⁵⁶³ Lyndon Johnson used the frontier myth to move American politics to the left on domestic issues while viewing engagement with enemies overseas as the logical and necessary extension of the continental westerning experience. Smith, 12.

⁵⁶⁴ Peter Baker, "Bush Weaves Rug Story into Many an Occasion," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2006.

Bill Clinton's aesthetic also used symbolic branding and was intended to reflect the youth and vigor of his administration, in contrast to the subdued feel of the outgoing George H.W. Bush administration. Clinton accomplished this by replacing Bush's color scheme of pale blue and cream with Prussian blue, crimson, and gold. [Figure 5.6]

Clinton further added several John F. Kennedy photos and mementos, most notably returning Kennedy's Resolute desk, which had been banished from the White House during the Johnson and Nixon administrations to the Oval Office. Clinton added a bust of Benjamin Franklin by Houdon, a bronze by Frederic Remington, and *The Avenue in the Rain* by Childe Hassam.⁵⁶⁵ *House Beautiful* described Clinton's refurbished White House aesthetic as "Victorian style at its most Baroque – intensely vibrant colors, swags and festoons, tassels and gilding."⁵⁶⁶ According to Kaki Hockersmith, Bill Clinton's interior designer, this reflected Clinton's wish for the Oval Office to be "stately, patriotic looking, even in color scheme, so that it would be reflective of the strength of the country ..."⁵⁶⁷

In 2001 the George W. Bush administration, seeking to distance itself from the scandals of the Clinton presidency, aspired to a "gentlemanly approach" with their color

⁵⁶⁵ According to Maureen Dowd, "the most striking difference from the Bush years was not the color scheme but the aura of tidiness. While President Bush's desk drawers were always overflowing with tennis balls, baseball mitts and other sporting paraphernalia, President Clinton's drawers were shut tight, and his desk was clean. While Mr. Bush's weapon of choice was a monogrammed black and silver Swiss Army knife, which he liked to play with as he talked, the table behind Mr. Clinton's desk featured large gold scissors left over from a ribbon cutting, a bit of red ribbon still clinched in the blade." Maureen Dowd, "The 'New' Oval Office: Slight Changes, but Tidier," *The New York Times*, Sept. 3, 1993.

⁵⁶⁶ Burros.

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid.

palette, selecting a minimalistic and muted scheme of platinum, cream, and grey blue.⁵⁶⁸

[Figure 5.7] A similar palette as that used by his father, George Bush Sr., this was a dramatic shift from Clinton's bright primary palette. Bush replaced the paintings hung on either side of the Oval Office desk with two oils titled "A Charge to Keep," and "Near San Antonio," both of which communicate the administration's symbolic embrace of the American West. For supporters, especially in the heartland, Bush's Oval Office image was enough to "stir the cowboy in all of us" creating sentimental attachment around the cultural myth of a global sheriff intent on defeating lawlessness and evil.⁵⁶⁹

With the archetype of the "cowboy" firmly lodged in the national and international consciousness as a means of delineating identities, the West and frontier myth, as embodied in Oval Office décor, became filters through which national and foreign media interpreted Bush's persona. Critics interpreted Bush as a reckless, trigger-happy loner, echoing a concern that the Iraq war reflected "a throwback to the Wild West where might made right."⁵⁷⁰ For example, *New York Times* reporter Julie V Iovine stated "[I]f presidential choices in décor were any measure of judgment, then the country would have good reason for alarm."⁵⁷¹ Author Eugene Halton described Bush's adoption of the cowboy image and the legacy of Ronald Reagan, as a sign that American politics had

⁵⁶⁸ Aspire.com "How the Last 7 US Presidents Have Decorated the Oval Office." January 24, 2021.

⁵⁶⁹ Ken Dodwell, "From the Center: The Cowboy Myth, George W. Bush and the War With Iraq," March, 2004
http://www.americanpopularculture.com/archive/politics/cowboy_myth.htm (accessed December, 28, 2017).

⁵⁷⁰ "High Noon for Cowboy Era," *Reuters*, March 19, 2003,
<http://www.arabnews.com/node/229401> (accessed Jan. 1, 2018).

⁵⁷¹ Iovine.

been dislocated to “the concept of the empty symbol,” effectively mirroring back to individuals whatever they wish to see.⁵⁷² Halton further described Bush’s adoption of Reagan’s legacy as “government of kitsch by kitsch for kitsch.”⁵⁷³ In each case both critics interpret décor as a symptom of the character and, by extension, the politics of its inhabitant.

Assessing the tastes of Saddam Hussein as kitsch (or dictator kitsch) in the context of the Iraq War situates tastefulness as its antithesis, reflecting Western social mores in which a clear sense of ethics is embodied in a non-kitsch aesthetic. For example, the elaborate Republican Palace, adorned with multiples of Saddam’s bust, can be contrasted to the Federal and Neoclassical styles typical of municipal buildings in Washington and their accompanying aesthetic associations of restraint and harmony.⁵⁷⁴ This aesthetic association is embodied by the White House, designed with classical architecture and motifs, symbolic of a nation based on democratic ideals. This symbolism, however, doesn’t prevent the rhetoric of dictator kitsch from being applied to American political leaders. While the assumption may be that this category of kitsch is reserved for the extravagances of Third World dictators, I see it in the response to George W. Bush’s Oval Office.

⁵⁷² Eugene Halton, *The Great Brain Suck: And Other American Epiphanies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 114.

⁵⁷³ Halton is referencing the fact that Reagan had enabled Osama bin Laden, funded mujahedeen fundamentalists in Afghanistan, and Saddam Hussein in Iraq Ibid. 115

⁵⁷⁴ Crispin Sartwell, *Political Aesthetics* (London: Cornell University Press, 2010) 34-36.

George W. Bush, the Cowboy, and the Oval Office

Upon taking office, George W. Bush quickly undid Hockersmith's work, replacing the Oval Office rug with one in the style of Ronald Reagan's and removing Clinton's striped satin sofas. [Figure 5.6] Bush's goal was to expunge the image and scandals of Clinton's presidency and establish, at least visually, a separation with that administration. In early 2001, George W. Bush delegated the design of the Oval Office interior to First Lady Laura Bush.⁵⁷⁵ The First Lady worked with Fort Worth designer Kenneth Blasingame and a team of nonpolitical experts including William Allman, the White House curator, and the 17 active members of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House.⁵⁷⁶ According to Blasingame,

“The president wanted his office to be fresh and we changed its color. The drapes are almost a bronzy color, and the walls are ecru. Ecru is the color of parchment, and it has a crisp quality.” This palette of gold, brown, green, and light terra cotta was chosen by the First Lady, who stated, “We knew he wanted it to be a sunny office that showed an optimist worked there.”⁵⁷⁷

Like the decorative schemes of Presidents before him, George W. Bush's Oval Office reinforced his political identity by building historical continuities with past presidential brands, such as Bush's sunbeam-themed rug. [Figure 5.7] Designed by the First Lady and Blasingame, the \$61,000 rug kept the presidential seal at center but added rays very much like the sunburst-pattern rug designed by Nancy Reagan.⁵⁷⁸ Bush's rug was finished by

⁵⁷⁵ Baker

⁵⁷⁶ Gerald Clarke, “At Home with President George W. Bush in the White House,” *Architectural Digest*, March 2008.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Candace A. Weldan, “Office Politics,” *The Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2001.

circling the outer edge with a garland of laurel leaves as a nod to Mrs. Bush's first name – Laura.⁵⁷⁹

In democracies, visual imagery is generally associated with emotional reactions, or the antithesis of rationality. Trevor Parry-Giles argues that images are more connected to public policy than often acknowledged, stating, "...Political images are public policy issues in the sense that they are important rhetoric of governance, making specific and concrete arguments about leadership that make a real difference in the deliberation about political decisions and the exercise of power."⁵⁸⁰ With this in mind, the Bush administration, while expunging the Clinton Oval Office aesthetic, added furnishing, décor, and artwork to reinforce its administration's ties to Reagan's legacy and the myth of the American West.⁵⁸¹

Like Theodore Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson before him, Ronald Reagan strategically utilized the frontier myth and imagery to distill complex symbols to the simplest possible emotional terms.⁵⁸² Reagan's use of the frontier myth marked a significant break from the forward-looking, progressive vision that dominated use of western symbolism for much of the twentieth century. A self-styled California cowboy, Reagan deployed frontier imagery as nostalgic and backwards looking, tapping into

⁵⁷⁹ Clarke

⁵⁸⁰ Trevor Parry-Giles, "Resisting a 'Traacherous Piety': Issues, Images, and Public Policy Deliberation in Presidential Campaigns." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, 37-64.

⁵⁸¹ Ronald Reagan, Remarks to Citizens in North Platte, Nebraska (National Archives: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum), August 13, 1987.

⁵⁸² The frontier or Old West myth is a formalized way of thinking, revealed through both language and imagery that carries power. It wasn't important that facts about the frontier thesis were accurate as the myth itself was more of a method of persuasion. Smith, 13.

myths and symbols that relied on so-called American traditions, an alternative lifestyle to what was said to be ailing the country, based on simple truths of the Old West: individualism, self-reliance, and know-how. Reagan had embraced the cowboy image stating, “I’ve never understood what’s so bad about being a cowboy. I’m proud of my spurs. I’ve often said there’s nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse.”⁵⁸³

In reality, historical cowboys were principally cattle-drivers who drove herds across the open range and described as “overworked, illiterate, inexperienced laborers who wore ill-fitting clothes and developed outlaw reputations.”⁵⁸⁴ However, as romanticized in print and film, the mythic cowboy became a hero who embodies values fundamental to American identity. In popular culture cowboys were portrayed as the brave men who challenge evil (often with violence) and save civil society.

This version of the frontier myth, characterized by a restorative nostalgia, sought to return to the good old days, national pride, and defeat enemies to restore the imagined homeland of old.⁵⁸⁵ In support of this myth, Reagan employed Western art and imagery that communicated these narratives. [Figure 5.8]

Speaking at the opening of “The American Cowboy exhibit at the Library of Congress,” Reagan stated:

⁵⁸³ Originally attributed to Winston Churchill, this quote was often used by Reagan. Robert Pear, “Reagan is Injured in Fall Off Horse,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 1989.

⁵⁸⁴ Ken Dodwell, “From the Center: The Cowboy Myth, George W. Bush, and the War in Iraq.” *The American Popular Culture Online Magazine*, June 18, 2010.

⁵⁸⁵ Specifically, Reagan dealt with economic stagflation and incidents associated with America’s Cold War rivals by looking backwards in time to an America that “should have been.” *Ibid.*

Some of you may be aware of my fondness for Western art. And in the last couple of years, we've tried to bring its influence to the White House – a natural home for a very American expression. Like the art, this exhibit can remind those of us who work or visit here what America is all about. If we understand this part of our history and our continuing fascination with it, we will better understand how our people see themselves and the hopes they have for America.⁵⁸⁶

Robert Ivie describes myths as powerful for being shared stories that are always relevant to all citizens, since they speak to the foundational values of a community.⁵⁸⁷ Americans revere the cowboy as an individual whose heroic achievements rely on ordinary, human traits – those possessed by all Americans. Further, since the mythic cowboy is associated with the very identity of the country, virtually all Americans can participate in reference to the myth. Recalling the myth of the cowboy allows for a connection with other Americans. This shared history and perspective on American exceptionalism comes through traits or modeled characteristics of the hero.

After the Reagan administration, the frontier myth remained dormant until George W. Bush reenergized it at the start of his presidential campaign through visual ties to Reagan's cowboy persona. Bush accomplished this, despite being from the urban East Coast, by purchasing his Crawford Ranch in Texas, in 1999 (just prior to his 2000 presidential campaign). The Ranch created an opportunity for Bush to be photographed

⁵⁸⁶ Remarks at the Opening of "The American Cowboy" Exhibit at the Library of Congress (National Archives: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum), March 24, 1983.

⁵⁸⁷ "Primary myths ... remain invisible to us, even as they determine our worldview, our ethics, and our sense of the rational." Robert Ivie, *Democracy and America's War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 89.

working, dressing down (in jeans, short sleeves, and cowboy hats), while clearing brush, and driving a pickup truck. [Figure 5.9]

Additionally, Bush wore cowboy attire both while in Texas and when conducting presidential business off the ranch. This generally included cowboy boots and a hat, always white, to associate himself with the mythical “good” guys. The cowboy hat and boots with a polished suit and tie emphasized the importance of the cowboy role in the presidency. The fact that his boots were custom-made with the presidential seal also visually joined the role of the president with the cowboy. [Figure 5.10]

Bush brought presidential work to the ranch, meeting foreign leaders there ranging from Vladimir Putin to Saudi Leader Abdullah. Commonly referred to as the “Western White House,” the Crawford Ranch was Bush’s home for 490 days of his presidency; this statistic is notable because it exceeded the number of days Reagan spent at his ranch in Santa Barbara (335).⁵⁸⁸ When Bush visually identified himself as a cowboy, he communicated a specific model of leadership that explained how he would respond to threats and problems. A cowboy leader would act quickly and decisively, would not negotiate with those perceived as evil, would not spend a great deal of time discussing proposed actions, and would always protect the United States, would fight for what was right.

With simple visual elements, such as a cowboy hat, boots, and a Texas ranch, Bush invoked a story familiar to all American, encouraging them to think about his

⁵⁸⁸ Brian Montopoli, “So Long, Crawford, Texas. It’s Been Nice Know You.” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2008.

policies and leadership in terms of said myth.⁵⁸⁹ While Bush's overall image as a cowboy was a melding of personal traits, behavior, and speech, the visual elements of the message were important in providing an easily accessible framework that tied it all together.⁵⁹⁰

The conservative frontier myth told Americans that the rural-state regions represented the "real" America, embodying values of individualism and freedom over those of community and mutual help.⁵⁹¹ Themes of the American West, frontier masculinity, and the cowboy were further reinforced in the décor of Bush's Oval Office by a pair of authentic spurs on a chest of drawers, Frederic Remington's "Bronco Buster" painting, and, later, Saddam Hussein's pistol.⁵⁹² [Figure 5.11, 5.12]

The terror attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon September 11, 2001, shocked the American people and created a global spectacle that captured the attention of the entire world. In response to this attack the Bush-Cheney administration fought back with its rhetoric of a "war on terror" and the media spectacles of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Following the events of 9/11, Bush's cowboy image and rhetoric informed the

⁵⁸⁹ Prior to his run, Bush purchased a ranch in the Texas midlands near Crawford where, despite his fear of horses, he was pictured performing other manly pursuits such as shooting doves, fishing, driving a pickup and cutting brush. Alex Spillius, "George Bush Texan Is 'Scared of Horses,'" *The Telegraph*, September 21, 2007.

⁵⁹⁰ Karen S. Hoffman, "Visual Persuasion in George W. Bush's Presidency: Cowboy Imagery in Public Discourse," *Congress & the Presidency: A Journal of Capital Studies*, 38:3, 2011, 322-343.

⁵⁹¹ Smith, 182.

⁵⁹² Matthew Cooper, "A Saddam Souvenir," *Time*, May 29, 2004.

<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,644112,00.html> (accessed December 23, 2021).

United States' sense of identity and purpose on the international stage.⁵⁹³ For example, in his first statement following the September 11 attacks, Bush evoked the “evil” of the terrorists, using the word 5 times while further declaring the attacks as an “act of war.”⁵⁹⁴

In his live address, President Bush stated

Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by the evil, despicable acts of terror ... Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature ... The search is under way for those who were behind these evil acts. I've directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and to bring them to justice. We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.⁵⁹⁵

President Bush also repeatedly evoked cowboy imagery, calling for bin Laden “dead or alive,” claiming he was going to “ride herd” over Middle Eastern governments, labeling Saddam Hussein’s government as an “outlaw regime.”⁵⁹⁶

A surprising consequence of Bush’s speech that reinforced his cowboy visual was a lack of polish in public speaking. Ironically, the message of Bush’s cowboy visuals helped to negate criticism of his verbal rhetoric. Cowboys were men of few words who

⁵⁹³ Smith, 179.

⁵⁹⁴ George W. Bush’s address to the nation after September 11, 2001, attacks, *PBS News Hour* (accessed May 5, 2023).

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶ Bush also described the campaign as a “crusade” until advised that this term carried offensive historical baggage of earlier wars between Christians and Muslims. The Pentagon initially named the war against terrorism “Operation Infinite Justice,” until they were advised that only God could dispense “infinite justice” and that Americans might be troubled by a war expanding to infinity. Douglas Kellner, “Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the “War on Terror,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Dec. 2007, Vol. 37, No. 4, 622-645.

preferred action to talking. Bush got things done, he didn't talk about getting things done.⁵⁹⁷

In his September 20 address to Congress, Bush drew a line between those who supported terrorism and those who were ready to fight it. Stating "You're either with us, or against us," Bush declared war on any states that supported terrorism and laid down a series of nonnegotiable demands to the Taliban, Afghanistan's ruling party, while Congress widely applauded.⁵⁹⁸ Bush's rhetoric extended Reagan's image and politics, and amplified them through highly dichotomous rhetoric in which "we" are the good, and the "Other" is wicked, an assertion Bush made in his constant assurance that the "evil-doers" of the "evil deeds" will be punished.⁵⁹⁹ According to media theorist Douglas Kellner, the discourse of "evil" is totalizing and absolutistic, allowing no ambiguities or contradictions. It assumes a binary logic where "we" are the forces of goodness, and "they" are the forces of darkness. Such discourse legitimates any action undertaken in the name of good, no matter how destructive, on the grounds that it is attacking "evil."⁶⁰⁰ Projecting evil onto the other constructs the opponent of evil as "good" and elevates the struggle to a cosmic battle between good and evil.

Bush's use of the frontier myth, visuals, and rhetoric accelerated post 9/11 to justify policies of preemption and unilateralism. Underlying the Bush-Cheney administration rhetoric were fundamental American political mythologies, including the

⁵⁹⁷ Hoffman, 327.

⁵⁹⁸ George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," *National Archives*, Sept. 20, 2001.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ Kellner, 41-64.

civilization discourse built on Ronald Reagan's favorite rhetoric of "the city on the hill," whereby the destiny of the United States was to establish a site of freedom and civilization in the wilderness.⁶⁰¹ However, in the speeches by President Bush, references to Old West imagery became especially vivid, placing emphasis on one aspect in particular: frontier ethics.⁶⁰² Bush evoked a frontier mentality in which the sheriff defends good citizens from evil outlaw and savages.⁶⁰³ As author John G. Cawelti explains, in this rhetoric villains are so repulsive that "the hero is both intellectually and emotionally justified in destroying them."⁶⁰⁴ This legitimization of violence, according to historians Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, is grounded in the political mythology they describe as the "American Monomyth." This is a dominant trope of the genres of popular culture in the United States, including Indian captivity narratives, Hollywood westerns, and superhero films. In the American Monomyth, a community is protected from the threat of barbaric beings through redemptive violence.⁶⁰⁵ In the post-9/11 context, the barbaric forces threatening the community were global terrorism, while Bush's policies were redemptive violence.

⁶⁰¹ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁶⁰² George W. Bush, "Remarks to the Community at Travis Air Force Base, California," October 17, 2001.

⁶⁰³ John Ritter, *Frontier Justice: Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Bushwacking of America* (Nottingham: Context Books, 2003).

⁶⁰⁴ John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, rev. ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1984), 15.

⁶⁰⁵ Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988).

Oval Office Artwork

The American landscape is one of the most important locales for establishing the frontier myth, imagining national purpose, and depicting the practice of religious piety. According to David Morgan, the imagery that dominated the American Protestant imagination from the antebellum period to the early twentieth century is unique in that it focused attention on the present. Beyond illustrating the biblical past, religious image makers produced an iconography aimed at situating believers in the present world, where they were tasked with evangelizing, living with moral purity, and encouraging moral reform among fellow citizens.⁶⁰⁶ Prints of frontier landscapes combine the mundane and dramatic in a single experience, and are among the most pervasive representations of national mythology. The combination of pious references and an aura of providential majesty communicates a religious mythos paired with the idea of a divinely sanctioned national purpose.⁶⁰⁷ The George W. Bush Oval office exhibits several landscapes which utilize the above qualities combined with the iconography of manifest destiny, including empty expanses of land populated with riders, settlers, or figures poised for a destined journey westward. These images both extend and relate to George W. Bush's cowboy aesthetic and rhetoric. Bush's Oval Office included frontier-style landscapes such as "Pointe Lobos, Monterey California" by Thomas Moran, "Pastoral Landscape" by Alvan Fisher, and "Rio Grande," by Tom Lea. [Figure 5.13]

⁶⁰⁶ David Morgan, "Thomas Kinkade and the History of Protestant Visual Culture in America," in *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall*, ed. Alexis Boylan (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 29-53.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

To Bush, the latter work, a scene of the rugged and serene grandeur of the Trans Pecos, was a “symbol of (Leas’s) hopeful outlook for each day” a sentiment that matched the optimistic design theme of the Oval and Bush’s own belief that “our own nation’s best days lie ahead.”⁶⁰⁸ Other works hung behind and flanked either side of the Oval Office desk, included “Near San Antonio,” by Julian Onderdonk and “A Charge to Keep” by William Henry David Koerner. [Figures 5.11, 5.14]

Koerner’s painting was deeply significant for Bush. “A Charge to Keep,” depicts a wooded landscape with three visible figures. The largest figure, set on a diagonal foreground, is on horseback and shown just left of center suggesting a hurried movement out of the frame. Huddled near the bottom right are two figures gasping at the departing figure on horseback. For Bush, “A Charge to Keep,” with its clear themes of the American West, served as an image of determination, representing a fusion of religious belief and the frontier myth. Bush’s interpretation of this painting became a catalyst for accusations of dictator kitsch.

“A Charge to Keep”

In an official video tour of his Oval Office, President Bush describes the significance of the art and artifacts displayed in the room. Bush begins with the windows, rug, and Resolute desk before turning to his collection of paintings: “Each President can put whatever paintings he wants on the wall. I’ve chosen some paintings that kind of

⁶⁰⁸ Susan Pitman, “Tom Lea: West Texas Regionalist,” *Cenizo Journal*, Fall 2013, <https://cenizojournal.com/tom-lea-west-texas-regionalist/> (accessed Jan. 15, 2022).

reflect my nature.”⁶⁰⁹ Bush expresses nostalgia as he stands in front of the Onderdonk work and begins to reminisce about the lack of time spent at his Crawford ranch in Texas. Lastly, Bush turns to “A Charge to Keep,” hung prominently to the left of his desk above a bust of Eisenhower: [Figure 5.15]

When you come into my office, please take a look at the beautiful painting of a horseman determinedly charging up what appears to be a steep and rough trail. This is us. What adds complete life to the painting for me is the message of Charles Wesley that we serve One greater than ourselves.⁶¹⁰

Bush’s identification with the painting is evidenced by its inclusion in his official portrait by John Howard Sanden as well as his use of the title for his autobiography.⁶¹¹ [Figure 5.16]

Bush was introduced to “A Charge to Keep” during his inauguration as Governor of Texas in January 1995. For the occasion Laura Bush picked out a Methodist hymn by Charles Wesley titled, “A Charge to Keep.” Childhood friend and oil tycoon Joseph I. O’Neil III., who was present at Bush’s inauguration, was inspired to give the painting to Bush after singing Wesley’s hymn. Bush explained his interpretation of the painting in his campaign autobiography:

[Hanging in my office is] a beautiful oil painting by W.H.D Koerner entitled a Charge to Keep. The painting, inspired by the hymn, [pictures] a horseman determinedly charging up what appears to be a steep and rough trail. This is us. [The painting and] hymn have been an inspiration for me and for members of my staff. “A Charge to Keep” calls to our highest and best. It speaks of purpose and direction. In many hymnals, it is associated with

⁶⁰⁹ President Bush Oval Office Tour, Whitehouse.gov (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpPQdcnC9iU>)

⁶¹⁰ Scott Horton, “The Illustrated President,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 24, 2008.

⁶¹¹ The painting is also reproduced on the back cover of Bush’s autobiography. George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep: My Journey to the White House* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

Bible verse, 1 Corinthians 4:2: “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”⁶¹²

In Bush’s interpretation of the painting, the main figure is a missionary spreading the word of Methodist Christianity, a conflation of the title of the painting and Charles Wesley’s hymn. Bush understands the painting to depict a missionary facing overwhelming challenges spreading the word of Christianity in the American West.

Bush interprets “A Charge to Keep” as symbol of the frontier myth with an added element of religion/manifest destiny via the Christian cowboy perched to fulfill his promise of Westward expansion. Bush finds inspiration in identifying as the lone cowboy, rushing headlong to carry out a God-given charge. None of the other Oval Office artworks held as much symbolic weight for Bush as Koerner’s painting, nor have any of their histories been given as much attention in analyzing the President’s psychology.⁶¹³ The image’s power lies in the fact that people identify with and with Bush’s interpretation of their mission as significant.

It’s possible to understand “A Charge to Keep” as an object of sentimental attachment for Bush. It’s also possible to see this painting, via the thinking of Kundera and Lugg above, as an object of political kitsch, in that it glues political communities together through the exploitation of cultural myth. In that sense, “A Charge to Keep” is in harmony with Bush’s rhetoric and personal styling/branding. However, to identify an object as dictator kitsch (as defined in prior chapters) is to conflate the political and

⁶¹² George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, x.

⁶¹³ The painting also serves to create an identification of “us” as Christians, presumably white and masculine.

personal on the belief that one has access to the contents of another's mind, motivations, or person. The inner nature of the "dictator" who reads, sees, or hears, works of popular culture is inferred from the content of the work, on the assumption that every image, every event corresponds to some deep and central need in their personality.

Yet, as I've also attempted to show, dictator kitsch is more a voyeuristic recognition of symbolic lack held by the supposed master. While it is a recognition of a cultural fault line, dictator kitsch remains largely voyeuristic unless addressing that which truly motivates assumptions of taste. As such, kitsch and dictator kitsch should be read as a complex network of cultural and historical tensions. Views of Bush as the cowboy simplify complex realities of the Iraqi conflict into a dichotomy of a "primitive" Middle Eastern "outlaws" against a progressive and "lawful" Western modernity. This ideal in turn is culturally weaponized to malign and frame an "other." Behind judgments of kitsch lie latent histories of colonialist practices, formations of cultural identity, and labor. Accusations of dictator kitsch gloss over the substitution of the target's imagined ethical deficit for a nuanced examination of the mechanics of taste. Examples of this will be discussed below.

Reception of the Oval Office Artworks

Critics, such as Timothy Noah, seized on Bush's interpretation of Koerner's painting, seeing evidence that he was unable to distinguish between reality and his imagination. Bush's failure to demonstrate a discerning taste led Noah to suggest that the president is "both deaf and blind" and propose "that we outfit the Oval Office with a

pinball machine.”⁶¹⁴ There is no real way to understand Noah’s critique other than to see it as a personal attack based on his judgment of Bush’s lack of taste. That judgment acts as its own evidence for Bush’s lack of moral/intellectual merit. To suggest the Oval Office needs a pinball machine is to intimate Bush is childish, uneducated, and uncultured.

Bush’s love of Koerner’s work even provoked accusations of dictator kitsch like those levelled against Saddam Hussein’s collection of Rowena’s paintings. In an article, “From Norman Rockwell to Abu Ghraib,” Sidney Blumenthal suggested that “To understand how Bush justifies a torture policy that is the bane of our nation, consider the sentimental cowboy art that decks his Oval Office walls.” Blumenthal continued:

The distance between the cowboy paintings Bush proudly displays in the Oval Office and the secret-agent torture porn that his administration officials not so secretly watch with envy reflects a yawning chasm in the sensibility of kitsch ... kitsch has been radically remade. No longer evoking nostalgic utopianism, kitsch releases the compulsions of fear. Under Bush, kitsch has been transformed from sentimentality into sadomasochism.⁶¹⁵

Blumenthal’s criticism mirrors previous condemnations of Saddam’s taste by equating graphic illustrations with an obsession for violent pornography and sadomasochistic urges. Blumenthal insinuates that someone with taste as unevolved as Bush would automatically participate in debased practices. In another article titled, “Fall of the House of Kitsch,” Blumenthal suggested that Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld mythologized

⁶¹⁴ Timothy Noah, “Dubya: Deaf and Blind!” *Slate*, January 15, 2008, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/chatterbox/2008/01/dubya_deaf_and_bli.html (accessed Dec. 17, 2017).

⁶¹⁵ Sidney Blumenthal, “From Norman Rockwell to Abu Ghraib,” *Salon*, April 26, 2007, https://www.salon.com/2007/04/26/torture_policy/ (accessed Dec. 12, 2017).

themselves as latter-day versions of leaders from World War II. According to Blumenthal, Bush's Oval décor and frontier imagery fabricates a historical context -- nostalgia for Reagan's small-town America, the moral certainties of WWII, or the American West-- into which they then project themselves.

David Gergen, a former advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton, believes that Bush's identification with Koerner's painting says something important about the qualities of his leadership.⁶¹⁶

“[Bush's] style of leadership encourages short-term thinking, and as we are now realizing, the flip side of boldness can be recklessness. Inevitably, as we step back and see Bush whole, our imaginations are drawn again to that painting by W.H.D. Koerner: should we celebrate the daring young rider as he scrambles up that tough terrain? Is he leading up a mountaintop ... or over a cliff? Bush may have been more provocative than he knew in hanging it in the Oval Office.”⁶¹⁷

According to Jonathan Houston, “This is the President's brand: the Christian cowboy is his logo and “A Charge to Keep” is his tagline. And the President's brand is built around a manufactured image – a lie – created to pander to his base for crass political gain. There is no truth, no authenticity to the Presidential brand. It is, in a word, horseshit.”⁶¹⁸

According to Lynne Segal, a gender studies scholar, “This is such an exhausted cliché of masculinity ... It is symptomatic of the fact that Bush lives in a fantasy world,

⁶¹⁶ Gergen states, “Bush's personal identification with the painting, which now hangs in the Oval Office, reveals a good deal about his sense of himself as a political leader – who he thinks he is, the role he plays, and the centrality of his religious faith. David Gergen, *Compass: A Journal on Leadership*, John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Fall, 2003.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Jonathan Huston, “Horseshit! Bush and the Christian Cowboy,” *Talk to Action: Reclaiming Citizenship, History, and Faith*. May 12, 2006, <http://www.talk2action.org/story/2006/5/12/7393/57216> (accessed July 22, 2017).

as many American men do, where you can invent a story and place yourself at the centre.”⁶¹⁹ Military historian Joanna Bourke finds, “For Bush, the foreign baddies are terrorists, both abroad and within. Of course, the irony is that, in the painting, the men on horseback are the bandits. Bush is interpreting this as a utopian scene, as bandits often do, when in fact what is depicted is simple masculine criminality.”⁶²⁰ Psychotherapist Derek Draper sees Bush’s love for the painting as

... evidence of his tendency to misread situations and confuse right with wrong. A more subtle insight might involve imagining Bush’s inner world: for so long inhabited by the demons of drink, drugs and failure. His mind might resist a too-close-to-home image of a troubled man fleeing for his life and have to see instead the strong, heroic adventurer he has convinced himself he has become.⁶²¹

Draper concludes that what is most revealing is the simple fact that a healthy mind would look at this image and not be certain what it depicted.⁶²²

These criticisms emphasize Bush’s reading of the painting as a misreading or deliberately fanciful interpretation, a symptom of moral confusion or repression. Another possible reading, however, is to see Bush as a student of Reagan, using the historically fact free and malleable narrative of the frontier myth in the same way. At the opening of “The American Cowboy” Exhibit at the Library of Congress in 1983, Reagan quoted from American historian Henry Steele Commager:

Americans, in making their Western myths, were not put off by discrepancies with reality. Americans believed about the West not so much

⁶¹⁹ Quoted in Jonathan Jones, “A painting fit for a president,” *The Guardian*, January 2008.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Ibid.

⁶²² As he told Senator Joe Biden, Bush doesn’t “do nuance.” Instead, he invariably replaces “not knowing” with prejudiced certainty. Ibid.

what was true, but what they thought ought to be true ... Lacking the common heritage that bound other nations together, they were forced to look elsewhere for the basis of their national existence. And they found it in the West.⁶²³

To borrow from Milan Kundera's quote above, the cowboy myth is the "folding screen" through which political community is built. What Reagan, via Commanger, points to is the much darker realization that the myth itself is largely fabricated and disconnected from any reality. Commanger's observations on the flexible and largely fantastical structure of the Western myth is the true area of lack at which criticisms of the Bush administration should be aimed.

Condemnations of Bush's taste are like the language I have analyzed in previous chapters. For example, one can locate the experience of kitsch in Bush's authentic appreciation of "A Charge to Keep." Bush, untroubled by irony, is authentically moved by Koerner's picture. His sentimental attachment to the picture provides the sincere framework for this experience. The infusion of Christianity is specific to Bush's experience. Religious kitsch, according to Karl Pawek "... is more than a purely stylistic deficiency. A kitsch flower vase does display a stylistic deficiency, but a kitsch statue of the Sacred Heart displays a theological deficiency ... [Christian kitsch] indicates a vast loss of theological substance, as it were."⁶²⁴

⁶²³ Remarks at the Opening of "The American Cowboy" Exhibit at the Library of Congress (National Archives: Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum), March 24, 1983.

⁶²⁴ Karl Pawek, "Christian kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1968), 143-149.

According to Pawek, the kitsch characteristic of these objects is not representational or stylistic, but theological. It presupposes a lack in the theological object, the substitution of something sweet and nice for something extremely powerful, of secondary for primary, of the psychic and moral Christian event for the objective, ontological event.⁶²⁵ Bush assigns religious significance to the trajectory of the fleeing bandit, seeing in it a lesson of perseverance and purpose driven by faith. This qualifies as Christian kitsch as Bush confuses frontier ethics (or the cowboy myth) for the moral/theological weight of Christianity.

On another level, we can see Bush's Christian cowboy persona, use of imagery of the American West, and identification with "A Charge to Keep" as totalitarian kitsch. Specifically, Bush's imagery co-opts themes foundational to American history in similar ways to Hitler's depictions of himself as a knight, and Saddam aligning himself with Nebuchadnezzar. The association with past historical figures, their accomplishments, and their mythic qualities, recalls Kundera's second tear in which "all of mankind is moved together by children running on the grass."⁶²⁶ In this experience, the individual dissolves via sentiment into a communal identification with the state's narrative. I argue that this quality is built into the formal language of the Oval Office with its formulaic narrative patterns altered only slightly to accommodate a cosmetic quality of individuality.⁶²⁷

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Kundera, 132.

⁶²⁷ Bush's use of imagery would always fall short of being totalitarian kitsch, however, because it exists in a society in which competing types exist and flourish.

While criticisms of Bush's taste reference the two types of kitsch described above, these commentaries become dictator kitsch when taste becomes evidence of a barbaric or deviant interior life. In this view, dictator kitsch reveals a process through which subjectivity is manufactured. The examples cited earlier in this chapter included accusations of sadomasochism, yearnings for violent pornography, aberrant masculinity, criminality, or moral confusion. Unexpectedly, however, dictator kitsch reinforces the rhetorical structure of Bush's frontier ethic. The separation of us vs. them, the savageness of outsiders/enemies, the division of the world into good and evil, and the framing of the enemy as so repulsive as to merit destruction are often referenced in Bush's post 9/11 speeches.⁶²⁸ Criticisms of Bush's taste are examples of dictator kitsch, as Bush's taste in art is seen as evidence of a secret desire for violent pornography, sadomasochism, hyper-masculinity, repression, moral confusion, and/or an unhealthy or diseased mind.

In conclusion, the interior decoration of the Oval Office embraces sentimental art, formulaic narratives, and the aesthetics of the frontier myth in service of structuring the emotive tether of political community. These practices date back to Theodore Roosevelt and are a common use of the Oval Office interior and the branding of the American President. The critique of dictator kitsch used against George W. Bush shows that this category of kitsch, however, isn't reserved for the excesses or condemnation of foreign leaders. George W. Bush's art and Oval Office show that the category 'dictator kitsch'

⁶²⁸ Peter Singer claims that Bush used the word "evil," nearly one thousand times in three hundred and nineteen speeches during the first year and a half of his presidency. Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush* (New York: Dutton, 2004), 2.

maintains the structure explored in earlier examples and establishes a subject of contempt through a weaponized understanding of taste, even when aimed at political figures within the United States.

The Paintings of George W. Bush

After leaving office, Bush retired to Dallas, where he lived a more reclusive life than most prior presidents. This withdrawal from public life ended in 2013, when the Romanian hacker Marcel Lehel Lazar, aka Guccifer, hacked the e-mail accounts of the Bush family. Among the sensitive information stolen were addresses, phone numbers, and an intimate family photo of George H.W. Bush recovering in the hospital. In addition, Guccifer's hack revealed private photos of paintings by George W. Bush, including self-portraits showering and in a bathtub.⁶²⁹ The photos and emails were uploaded to an online account hacked for the purposes of hosting the material.

Bush had emailed photographs of the two self-portraits to his sister Dorothy.⁶³⁰ In the first, the president's face is partially visible in a small round-shaving mirror. [Figure 5.17]

⁶²⁹ Six email accounts in total were compromised, including the AOL account of Dorothy Bush Koch, daughter of George H. W. Bush and sister of George W. Bush. Other breached accounts belonged to Willard Hemingway, an old friend of the 41st president; CBS sportscaster Jim Nantz, a longtime Bush family friend; former first lady Barbara Bush's brother; and George H. W. Bush's sister-in-law. "Audacious Hack Exposes Bush Family Pix, Email," *thesmokinggun.com*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/bush-family-hacked-589132> (accessed December 30, 2017).

⁶³⁰ Sam Byford, "George W. Bush's bizarre bathroom self-portraits laid bare by audacious hack," *The Verge*, Feb. 8, 2013,

His naked back and arm awkwardly cropped at the joint take up the bottom right of the picture plane. The handling and development of form is crude, especially the flattened and awkward treatment of the skeleton and anatomy of the back. The remainder of the scene, and majority of the image, depicts the grouted rectangular tile of the wall, shower head with running water, and stainless-steel valve and handle. In this self-portrait Bush views himself from outside and behind the shower, disconnected from his own point of view. In the second leaked photograph, Bush paints from his own perspective looking down at his legs, knees, and toes half surfacing through the water. [Figure 5.18]

Set in the limited and confined space of the tub, the perspective is handled through fragmented, flattened, and oblique planes comparable to paintings by Fairfield Porter.⁶³¹ There is an awkwardness to the perspectival solidity of the tub and corner of the bathroom. Lines that should have a crisp flight to a vanishing point out of frame wander and bow in ways which periodically warp the room and tub. This same quality carries over into Bush's rendering of the foreshortened body.

Bush's compositions have a connection to the historical depiction of bathers, particularly in painting. Linda Nochlin describes the tradition of bathers as anything but a natural "given" of art history, defining them instead as a highly artificial and self-conscious construction.⁶³² The two paintings by Bush allude to works by Bonnard,

<https://www.theverge.com/2013/2/8/3966678/hacker-reveals-george-w-bush-self-portraits> (accessed July 26, 2021).

⁶³¹ Asked how Bush compared to her other pupils, Dallas-based artist Gail Norfleet stated, "He wasn't her most gifted student, but he was the most persistent." Casey Lesser, "The Artist Who Taught George W. Bush to Paint," *Artsy*, April 4, 2017.

⁶³² Linda Nochlin, *Bathers, Bodies, Beauty: The Visceral Eye* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 15.

Cassat, and Degas, both Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793) and Frida Kahlo's *What I Saw in the Water or What the Water Gave Me* (1938).⁶³³

In an appearance on *The Tonight Show* on Nov. 12, 2013, Bush cited Winston Churchill's memoir *Painting as Pastime* as the catalyst for his gravitation to the easel.⁶³⁴ In *Painting as Pastime*, Churchill extols the virtues of the practice of painting as a companion on the journey of life that "makes no undue demands."⁶³⁵ In taking up Churchill's hobby, Bush follows in the footsteps of former president Dwight Eisenhower, who, writing to Churchill in 1950, stated, "I have a lot of fun since I took it up, in my somewhat miserable way, your hobby of painting."⁶³⁶ Eisenhower was drawn to paint peaceful scenes of the countryside, a symbol of the unspoiled America in which he had grown up. [Figure 5.19] He had a special affection for hills, tall trees, color, and other imagery of untouched nature. Eisenhower, however, did not paint to "express" his inner self; he curbed his imagination and resolutely imitated reproductions before him.⁶³⁷

⁶³³ Peter Schjeldahl, "George W. Bush: The Bathroom Paintings," *The New Yorker*, February 12, 2013.

⁶³⁴ Olivia B. Waxman, "George W. Bush's Paintings Are Getting Their Own Exhibit," *Time*, Feb. 25, 2014.

⁶³⁵ Painting is a companion with whom one may hope to walk a great part of life's journey ... who makes no undue demands, excites to no exhausting pursuits, keeps faithful pace even with feeble steps, and holds her canvas as a screen between us and the envious eyes of Time or the surly advance of Decrepitude." Sir Winston Churchill, *Painting as a Pastime* (New York: Cornerstone Library, 1950), 13.

⁶³⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower to Winston S. Churchill, September 21, 1950. Pre-presidential Files (16-52), Churchill, W (2), DDE to WC. Box 22, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kans.

⁶³⁷ Speaking on May Day, 1962, he grieved that "our very art forms [are] so changed that we seem to have forgotten the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci" and then went on to excoriate works like "a piece of canvas that looks like a broken-down Tin Lizzie, loaded with paint, has been driven over it." "What has happened to our concept of beauty and decency and morality?" Dwight D. Eisenhower, Eisenhower Library

In contrast to Eisenhower's practice and beliefs on the role and value of art, Bush stated that his intention with his bathers to render the body, or parts of the body, in situations intimately familiar to the viewer for the purpose of creating shock. He stated, "I found it very interesting the first painting that came out was the one I painted of myself in the bathtub ... I did so because I wanted to kind of shock my instructor."⁶³⁸

After his paintings were illegally hacked, George W. Bush held an exhibition at his presidential library titled "The Art of Leadership: A President's Personal Diplomacy."⁶³⁹ The exhibition featured more than two dozen portraits depicting foreign leaders Bush worked with while serving as president, a series he began in November of 2013. The exhibition included candid photographs and vitrines of official state gifts surrounding each portrait. [Figure 5.20, 5.21] In this staging Bush drew on Dwight D. Eisenhower's post-presidential painting exhibition, *The Memorable Eisenhower Years*, held in New York, 1967.⁶⁴⁰ When asked what reactions would be, Bush predicted he would surprise people: "I think they're going to be, 'wow, George Bush is a painter.'" Bush hoped the leaders depicted would take the paintings "in the spirit of friendship," saying he was "willing to give it a shot, in terms of getting people to see how I felt about them."⁶⁴¹

Dedication speech, May 1, 1962, Post-presidential Papers. 1961-69, Speech series, box 2, Eisenhower Library.

⁶³⁸ Lesser

⁶³⁹ In 2013, leading up to his "Art of Leadership" exhibition Bush told Jay Leno that he told his art teacher, "There's a Rembrandt trapped in this body ... your job is to find it."

⁶⁴⁰ Similarly, Eisenhower's exhibition included official state memorabilia alongside his own paintings. Vincent Canby, "Eisenhower Sees His Pictures And Says Some Are for Burning; Early Work on View," *The New York Times*, June 29, 1967.

⁶⁴¹ Lavender

In the exhibition and an accompanying video made by *The History Channel*, Bush's presidential character is depicted as charismatic and empathetic. He was depicted as a president who brought together disparate parties and world leaders by connecting with them on a personal level.⁶⁴² This represented a radical shift from the cowboy image Bush had cultivated throughout the duration of his presidency.

Reception of Bush's Paintings

Jack Fischer compared the interest in the Bush paintings to Adolf Hitler's work in art school, making it clear that he was only comparing the two artistically, not historically.⁶⁴³ "What immediately comes to mind is Hitler's paintings and the immediate brouhaha that that caused."⁶⁴⁴ "There's this peculiar sort of interest in a famous figure having painted." Jerry Saltz wrote "I love these two bather paintings, they are 'simple' and 'awkward,' but in a wonderful, unself-conscious, intense way. They show me someone doing the best he can with almost no natural gifts – except the desire to do this." Saltz additionally commented, "The seclusion and reclusiveness of the pictures evoke the quietude (though not the insight, quality, or genius) of certain Chardin still lifes." Peter Schjeldahl finds Bush's work worthy of a new genre, stating "It seems a

⁶⁴² As Laura Bush states regarding the Crawford Ranch, "One of the great things about personal diplomacy is inviting people to your own home and people love to come to our ranch." *The History Channel*, "The Art of Leadership: A President's Personal Diplomacy," April 4, 2004 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQJw-363WiQ> (accessed January 15, 2022).

⁶⁴³ Luke Johnson, "George Bush Self-Portraits Perplex Art World," *Huffpost*, February 8, 2013.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

stretch to call Bush an Outsider artist. We need a new term: Besider, maybe.”⁶⁴⁵ Other critics celebrated Bush’s technical competency, such as Brian Boucher, who states, “What is so striking is that they are not particularly illustrational but have an abstract sense of space and form that reminded me of Fairfield Porter and his milieu.”⁶⁴⁶ Or A.G. Price who sees in Bush’s work “... a muscular primitivism that seeks to wall-slam our ossified notions of artistic talent, technical skill, as well as good taste into a state of medically supervised unconsciousness.”⁶⁴⁷ Bruce Handy finds that “... whatever Bush cedes to Katz in terms of technique and composition, he gains in mystery and psychological complexity.”⁶⁴⁸ Michael Schaeffer questions the psychology revealed in the work: “Is the artist in some literal sense trying to “come clean” about his presidential shortcomings in these paintings? The Democrat in me would like to think so, but as Bush is a devout Christian I wonder if the showering and bathing are meant to evoke baptism.”⁶⁴⁹ In an Artforum review Matt Sauders suggests that “Bush’s works have but little of the bristling uptightness you often see in the anonymous amateur works unearthed from thrift stores ... these forthright portraits have little of the audacity of naïve art, nor the self-aware attitude of those who mine it. Yet if you saw these from a young artist in

⁶⁴⁵ Schjeldahl.

⁶⁴⁶ Senior Art in America editor Cathy Lebowitz quoted in Brian Boucher, “George W. Bush: Decider, Bather, Painter,” *Art in America*, February 8, 2013.

⁶⁴⁷ A.G. Price, “George W. Bush in his Bathroom” A Retrospective by A.G. Price,” *The Opiate*, March 13, 2017.

⁶⁴⁸ Bruce Handy, “The Recently Revealed, Nude Self-Portraits of George W. Bush: A Critique,” *Vanity Fair*, February 8, 2013.

⁶⁴⁹ Michael Schaffer, “The George W. Bush Paintings: Freudian Analysis,” *The New Republic*, February 8, 2013.

Chelsea you might take their roughness as confidence, their intention as hip.”⁶⁵⁰ Philip

Kennicott comes closest to accusations of dictator kitsch when asserting that

...there’s no way that we can’t look through the window they seem to offer us into the psychology of someone who was once the most powerful man in the world. Not to look is to deny ourselves important material in our assessment not just of Bush, but of the inner life of politicians ... If that argument seems morally specious to you ... then read no further.⁶⁵¹

Like Bush’s Oval Office and bathers, *The Art of Leadership* was seen teetering between skill and awkwardness that, at times, belied a false sense of humanity. According to Alison Gingeras, “Behind the amateur quality and opacity of his portraits lies something deeper: the unmasking of diplomacy as authentic falsification of human relations.”⁶⁵² In this assessment, Bush’s efforts are seen as an effort to humanize a controversial legacy by inviting the public into a manufactured narrative. Gingeras further states, “Repression is key to the emotional effectiveness of these paintings ... The show’s charm offensive is delivered by publicly unveiling Bush’s struggle with the unfamiliar terrain. It is hard not to be seduced by the ‘earnest’ efforts of a serious amateur. In Bush’s case, the question of talent is irrelevant. His desire to paint implies that he actually has an inner life. Bush craves a means of self-expression.”⁶⁵³

In sum, these reviews see Bush as hapless and not entirely self-aware. However, there is in response to the show a de-intensification of the criticisms levied against Bush’s

⁶⁵⁰ Matt Saunders, “The Paintings of George W. Bush,” *Artforum*, Summer, 2014.

⁶⁵¹ Philip Kennicott, “The Artistry of George W. Bush,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2013.

⁶⁵² Alison Gingeras, “The Art of (Leadership) George W. Bush,” *Mousse*, January 7, 2014.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*

taste since his time in Office. For one, there is no assumption that Bush has an appetite for sadomasochism or torture based on his painting. One component that might explain this is the absence of the frontier myth/cowboy persona. Without that component, his works lose a significant political framing and instead tend toward being read as a kind of redemptive therapy.

Conclusion

On May 2, 2011, SEAL Team Six, a special operations unit of the United States Navy, carried out a raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan killing the al Qaeda leader responsible for the attacks on 9/11 and collecting what was described as a "treasure trove" of bin Laden's personal belongings in the process.⁶⁵⁴ In the days following bin Laden's death the CIA made a large portion of these materials available to the public. Intended to paint a more complete picture of the man behind the 9/11 attacks, these materials included a diary, wedding videos, video games (*Half-Life*, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Final Fantasy VII*), Disney films (*Cars*, *Chicken Little*, *Ice Age*), documentaries on himself, books on conspiracy theories, and a "huge" pornography stash.⁶⁵⁵ The pornographic materials, found in a wooden box in bin Laden's bedroom, were used to portray the secretive and image conscious leader of al-Qaeda as a "vain, pathetic old man."⁶⁵⁶ As in the examples of dictator kitsch discussed prior, taste is revealed to be both private and universal at the same time, with the result that bin Laden's authentic character is finally revealed. The "true" bin Laden secretly desires Western culture and with so

⁶⁵⁴ Jessica Pearce Rotondi, "9 Unexpected Things Navy SEALs Discovered in Osama bin Laden's Compound," *History.com*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/bin-laden-compound-abbottabad-belongings> (accessed September 9, 2024).

⁶⁵⁵ Lee Ferran, "Porn Found in Osama Bin Laden Evidence Trove: 'Huge Stash' of pornographic videos found in terror leader's compound," *ABC News*, May 13, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/porn-found-osama-bin-laden-evidence-trove/story?id=13599025> (accessed September 2024).

⁶⁵⁶ "Osama Bin Laden Tapes Show 'Pathetic' Side of Al Qaeda Leader: Experts," *ABC News*, May 9, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/osama-bin-laden-tapes-show-pathetic-side-al/story?id=13559652> (accessed September 9, 2024).

deviant an interest in pornography that the full catalogue cannot be disclosed. This narrative of Osama bin Laden's degraded taste as demonstrated by his personal belongings accords with the reception of Saddam Hussein's personal possessions and public works as "dictator kitsch."

Beginning with the writings of Clement Greenberg, my dissertation has traced the concept of dictator kitsch and its intersection with politics, concentrating on its application in American coverage of the Iraq invasion. Through a focus on connections between character and taste, my research defined dictator kitsch, explicated its history, and examined its influence on narratives of the Iraq invasion. The aim of my study has been to offer a reading of the Iraqi invasion that does not default to value judgements. To avoid assigning the label "kitsch," my case studies present the history of objects designated as dictator kitsch and their reception by the Western press. My study depicts a parallel history of the object separate from its designation as kitsch.

Each chapter focused on a different genre important to Saddam Hussein's political aesthetics, thereby giving an account of the various forms of dictator kitsch. Inclusive of painting, architecture, portraiture, and monuments, objects labeled dictator kitsch consistently infer a degraded character. The result of my research asserts, however, that Saddam Hussein's works are not permanently objects of kitsch, nor are they symptomatic of a toxic character, but they are implicated with American culture and taste. In many examples, dictator kitsch is a response to American culture or objects "misused" by an individual in a non-American (or non-allied) environment. The label dictator kitsch appears on behalf of the Western press critiquing objects of its own

culture, often shocked by their use/misuse in a foreign environment. Each chapter finds that the label dictator kitsch is motivated by something in excess of the object itself. In this sense Anna Bryzyski's statement remains a guiding principle for my work and thinking.

If we hope to finally move past modernist preconceptions concerning historic significance, we must attempt to distinguish the historic practice of art history from that of evaluation and gatekeeping. Historicizing and ultimately letting go of the concept of kitsch is a critical step in that direction.⁶⁵⁷

The label dictator kitsch is an evaluation by a viewer motivated by taste. During the Iraq invasion, U.S. media depicted Saddam Hussein as a dictator, as eccentric, barbaric, and out of touch with the rest of the world. This narrative gives insights into American political identity and the ways the public negotiates conflict and the justification of the use of military force. My finding supports historian Benjamin Alper's assertion that Americans rely on the dictator to define their own contrary political positions⁶⁵⁸ and Tracey Pott's assertion that the function of dictator kitsch is entirely disconnected from aesthetics and instead tied to a process of subject manufacturing.⁶⁵⁹ With this in mind, a key takeaway from my research is that dictator kitsch is essential to defining American political identity during periods of conflict.

⁶⁵⁷ Anna Brzyski, "Art, Kitsch, and Art History," in *Kitsch: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. Monica Kjellman-Chapin (Newcastle: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15

⁶⁵⁸ Alpers, 1.

⁶⁵⁹ Potts, 170.

Kitsch is more accepted and normalized as an aesthetic genre now more than at any point in the past.⁶⁶⁰ However, more work is necessary to develop an understanding of its effects and application. Despite its normalization kitsch still plays a role structuring difference, distinction between groups, and artistic categories. As such more can be done to develop the ways in which kitsch is utilized and understood. It is here that my research is aimed, the underdeveloped but growing study of how kitsch is used in political aesthetics.

Analyzing the art of Saddam Hussein and George W. Bush for the label dictator kitsch allows access to the reasons for its use and its contribution to larger wartime narratives. During periods of conflict dictator kitsch promises to establish the true narrative and resolve all inconsistencies. Yet if we pay attention to its usage, this same concept can simultaneously undermine our own narrative security. This is visible the moment we realize our own place in these images through a history of colonialism, politics of support for Iraq, and exportation of taste and culture as an arm of American imperialism.

Though kitsch has gone through several reappraisals since its introduction in the American context, dictator kitsch, originating in the politics of the 1930s, remains a

⁶⁶⁰ Scholarship over the last 10 years increasingly discusses kitsch (and its aesthetic offshoots) as a genre in and of itself, including: Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *The New Aesthetics of Deculturation: Neoliberalism, Fundamentalism, and Kitsch* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), Michael J. Pearce, *Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), Justyna Stepień, ed. *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), Max Ryynanen and Paco Barragan, ed. *The Changing Meaning of Kitsch From Rejection to Acceptance* (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

crucial lens for understanding political aesthetics especially for the ways in which American identity is defined and reinforced.

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Chapter 1 –
 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” and the Dictator in the
 1930s



Figure 1.1 – “Studebaker Dictator,” *First Series Sedan Showroom Poster*, 1928

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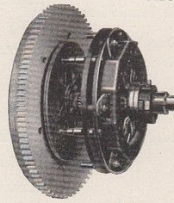
Figure 1.2 - *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 5, 1928

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Figure 1.3 – “Long Products”, *The Commercial Car Journal*, June 20, 1928



Figure 1.4 – “Mussolini Speaks,” Columbia, 1933, Lobby Card, 11” x 14

FIFTEEN CENTS

TIME

The Weekly News-Magazine



Vol. VIII, No. 2

BENITO AND ITALIA BELLA

*Rarely a week
(See Page 11)*

JULY 12, 1926

Figure 1.5 - *Time*, July 12, 1926

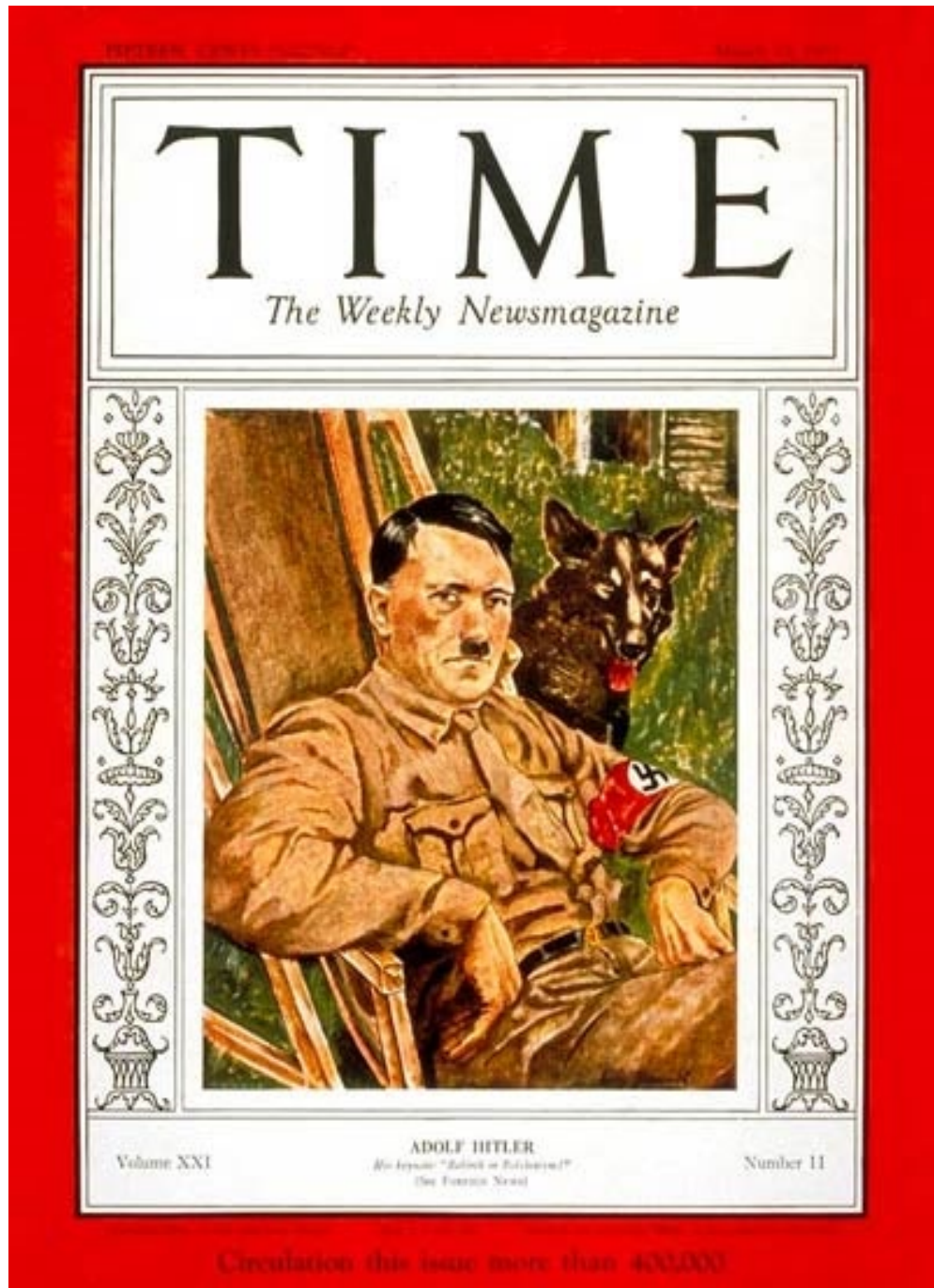


Figure 1.6 - *Time*, January 30, 1933. Cover illustration by Jerry Farnsworth.



Figure 1.7 - *The Hitler Nobody Knows*, 1932, photo by Heinrich Hoffmann

Chapter 2 –
Dictator Kitsch, John Moore, and Rowena



Figure 2.1 - John Moore, “Soldiers discover Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome,” April, 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.2 - John Moore, “Capt. Carter’s War,” March 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.3 - John Moore, “Capt. Carter’s War,” April 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.4 – John Moore, “Iraq Saddam Safe House Art,” April 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.5 – John Moore, “Iraq Saddam Safe House Art,” April 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017)



Figure 2.6 - John Moore, “Soldiers discover Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome,” April 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.7 – John Moore, “U.S. Army 1st Lt. Eric Hooper looks at the painting titled Shadows Out of Hell,” April 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.8 – John Moore, “American soldiers take a break in Saddam Hussein’s central Baghdad townhome.” April, 2003. *Associated Press* (accessed March 20, 2017).



Figure 2.9- “The 7th Infantry Regiment attached to the 3rd Infantry Division drink Hitler’s wine on the patio of the Berghof,” *Yank Magazine*, 1945.

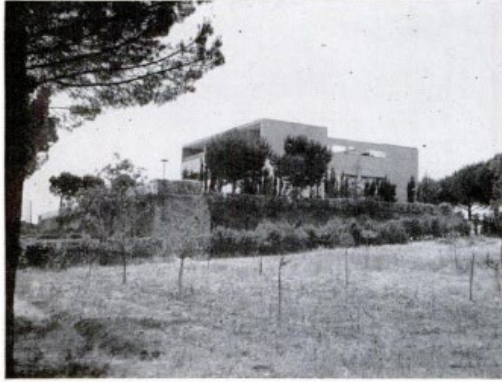
MUSSOLINI LOVE NEST

Villa he built for Clara Petacci
is now home for Roman orphans

Benito Mussolini met Claretta Petacci in 1938 either on a bridle path or at a beach in Ostia, Italy. He was 54 years old. Claretta, a divorcee and daughter of a Vatican physician, was 25. She soon became the Duce's mistress, last of many women in his life. For her he built a handsome, 83,000,000 modernistic villa near Rome—a place far more fitting for an autocrat's mistress than the middle-class home Hitler gave Eva Braun (*LIFE*, May 28). Last April Mussolini and Claretta met their death together and the

villa was turned to better use. It is now a home for Roman orphans cared for by the Opera Nazionale Maternita Infanzia, which is backed by UNNRA.

Claretta bore Mussolini one son, now 6 years old. Through her the Petacci family became important and often overbearing. Claretta's sister's face appeared on Italian 20-centesimi coins. Mussolini tried to make her father a senator but failed. Claretta also had an influence on state affairs. For first time in his life Mussolini took advice from a woman.



The house Benito built for Claretta sits atop an eminence in Rome's fashionable suburb of Camilluccia, looking down on rolling groves and Rome. It is in Italian modern style.



Claretta Petacci, here seen on the villa terrace, had a dark Roman beauty, big eyes, brilliantly white teeth, ringleted hair. Anti-Fascist press called her "second-rate Maintenon."

Figure 2.10 – “Mussolini Love Nest,” *Life*, July 1945.



Famous mirrored bedroom, its walls all looking glasses, is now dormitory for five little Roman orphans, all with a tendency toward tuberculosis, all undernourished.

Figure 2.11 – “Mussolini Love Nest,” *Life*, July 1945.



Figure 2.12 – Bill Gentle, “American soldier contemplates a Christmas tree in the former home of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega,” *Corbis*, 1989



Figure 2.13 – Sergey Ponomarev, *Associated Press*, 2011



Figure 2.14 – *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*, 1997



Figure 2.15 - Rowena Morrill, *King Dragon*, circa 1980, private collection



Figure 2.16 - Virgil Finlay, "The Time Machine," *Fantastic Mysteries*, August 1950



Figure 2.17 - Frank Frazetta, *At the Earth's Core*, 18" x 24", oil on masonite, 1974



Figure 2.18 - Titian, *Danäe*, 1544-46, National Museum of Capodimonte

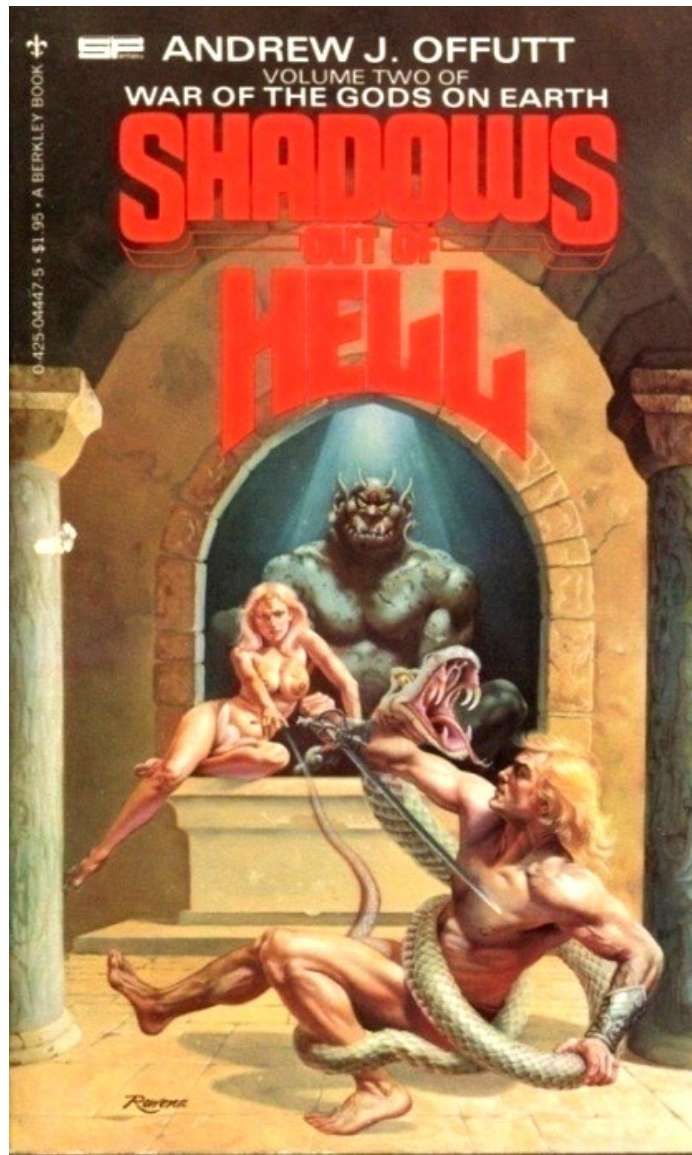


Figure 2.19 - Rebecca Morrill, *Cover illustration for Shadows Out of Hell*, c.1980.



Figure 2.20 - Paul Mathias Padua, *Leda and the Swan*, 1937



Figure 2.21 - Paris Bordone, *Venus and Amor*, 1545-1550, Oil on Canvas, National Museum in Warsaw



Figure 2.22 – Hubert Lanzinger, *The Standard Bearer*, 1934-36, oil on wood

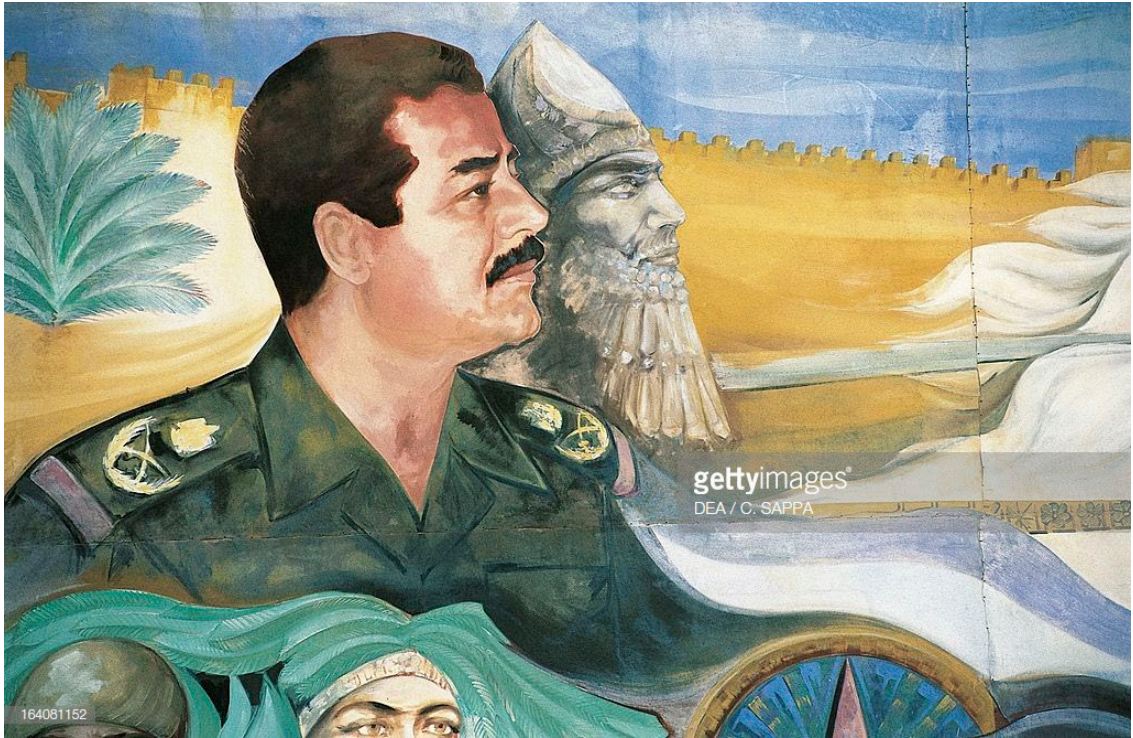


Figure 2.23 – DeAgonstini, “Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar,” Iraq. *Getty Images*, December 17, 2008.

**Chapter 3 –
Palaces and Private Spaces**



**Figure 3.1 - Jim Gordon, *Republican Palace View from the air*, Dec. 6, 2007
(Originally posted to Flickr as Republican Palace, Baghdad, Iraq).**



Figure 3.2 - Sir Edwin Lutyens, "Viceroy's House in New Delhi," *Getty Images* c. 1912-1930



Figure 3.3 – J.M. Wilson, *Perspective drawing of Proposed Palace for King Faisal*, Wilson Mason LLP, 1926.

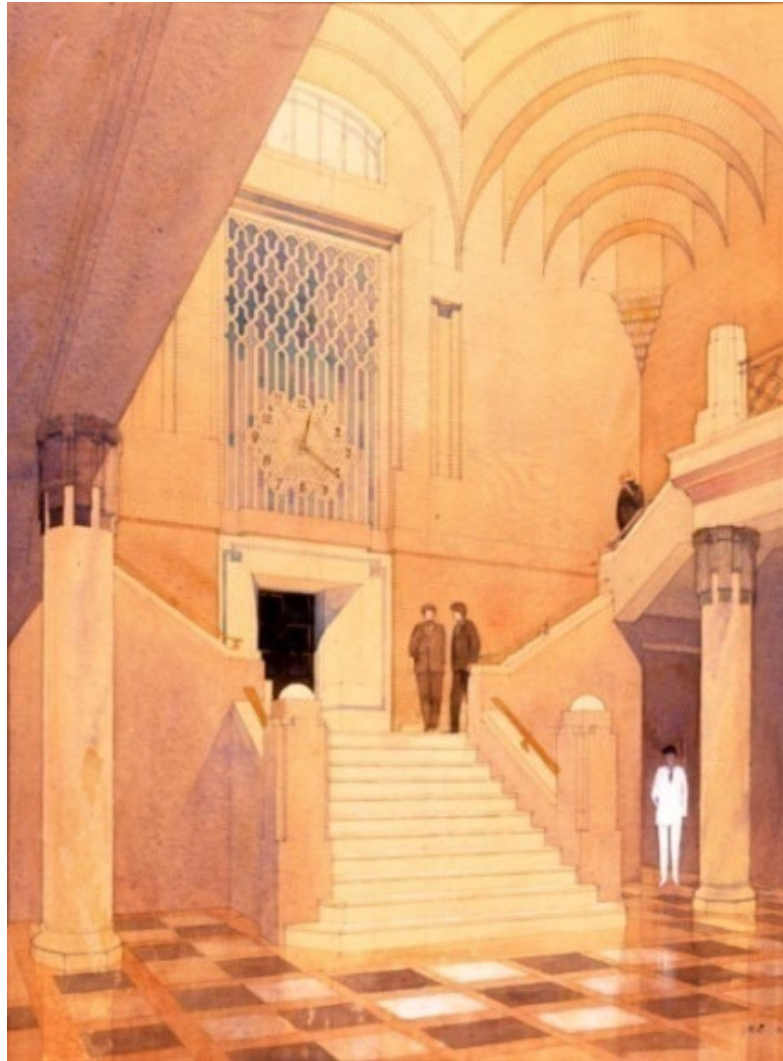


Figure 3.4– J.M. Wilson, *Perspective drawing of the Interior of Port Offices, Basra,* Wilson Mason LLP, 1930.

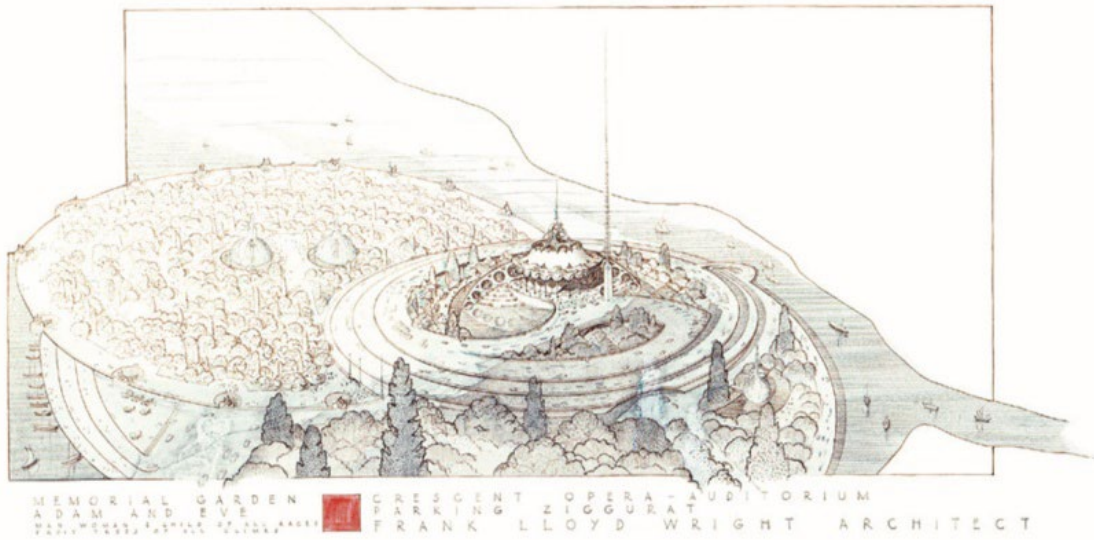


Figure 3.5 – Frank Lloyd Wright, *Baghdad Opera House*, 1955-57.

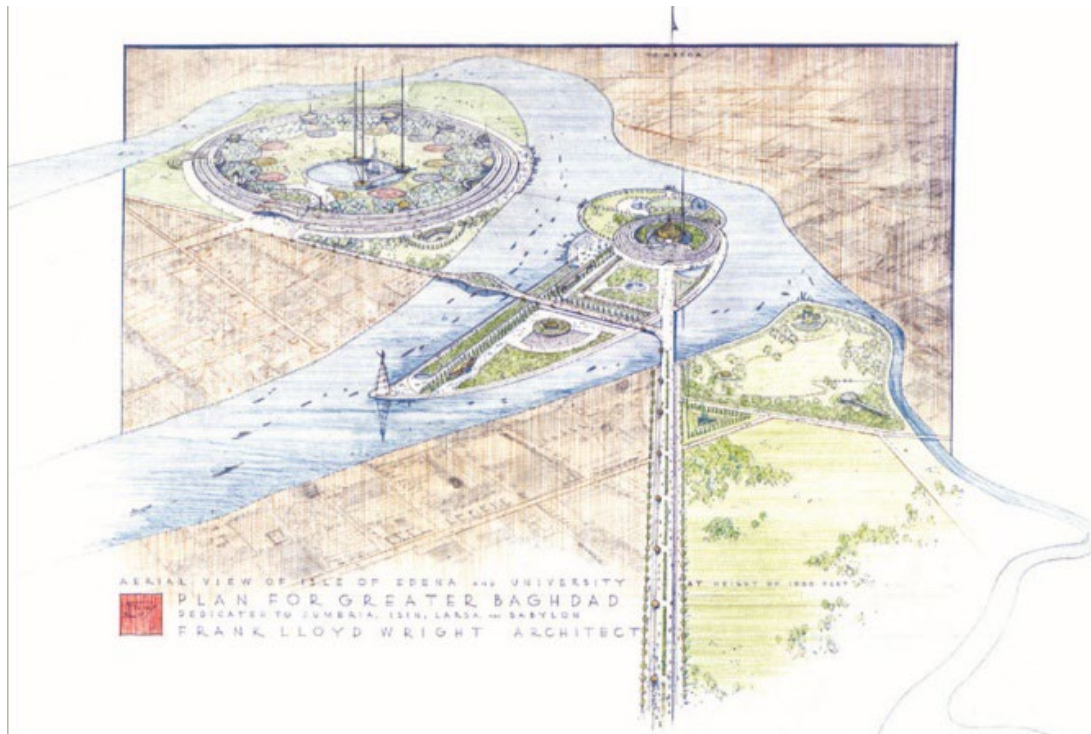


Figure 3.6 – Frank Lloyd Wright, *Plan for Greater Baghdad*, 1955-57.



Figure 3.7 – “Still image from A Palace in Baghdad,” British Movietone, 1958.
Associated Press.

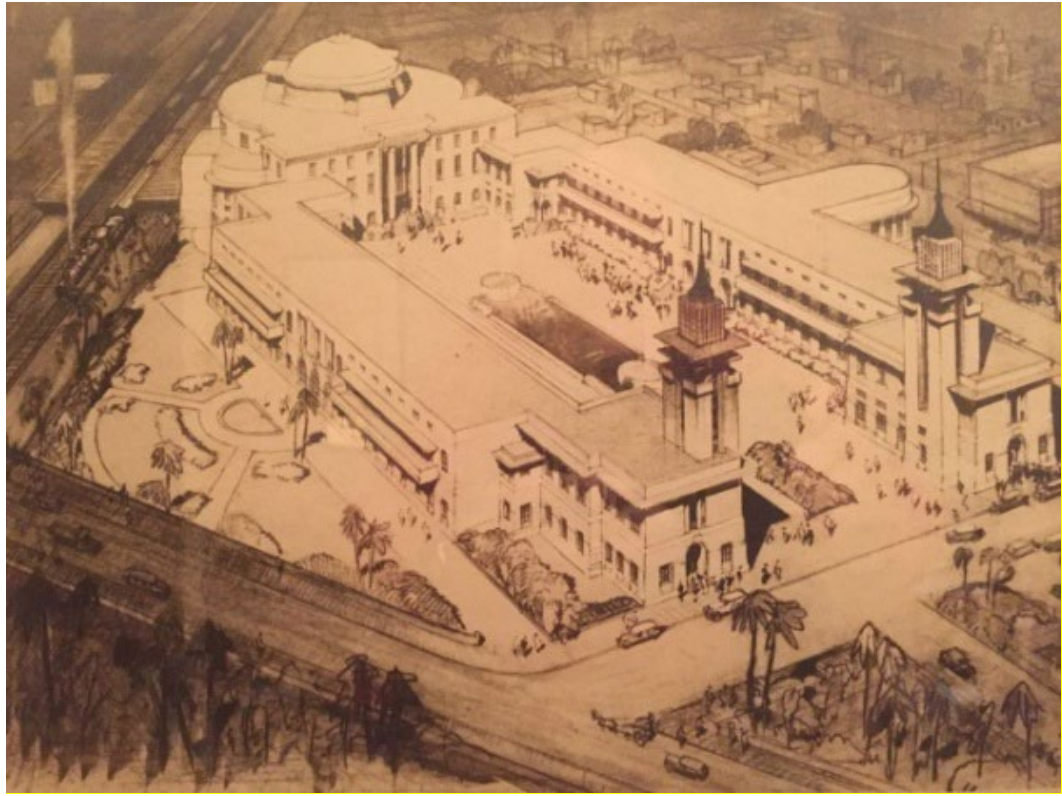
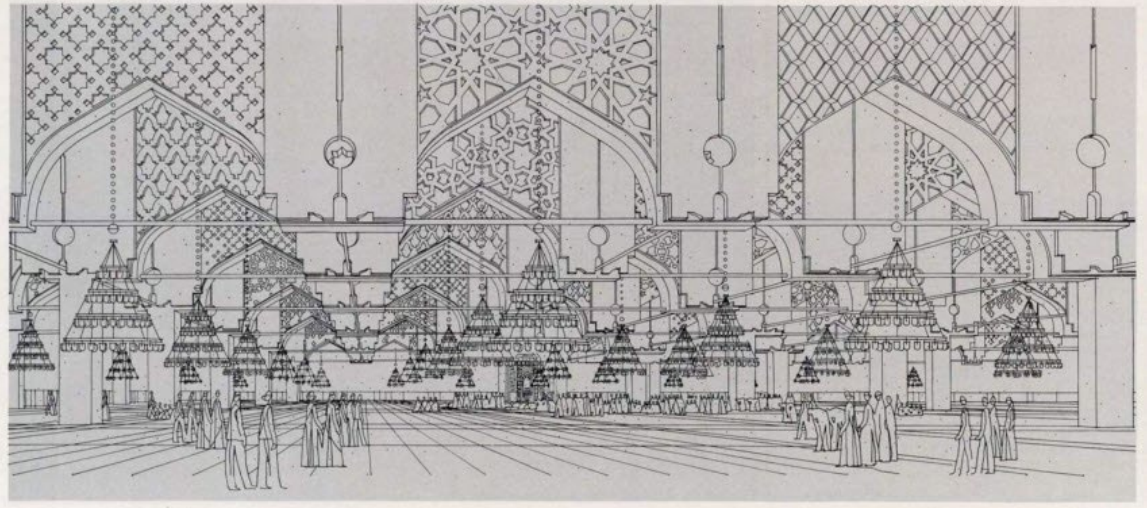


Figure 3.8 – J.M. Wilson, *Aerial perspective presentation drawing/original design for the Railway Station Terminus, Baghdad, Wilson Mason LLP, 1947-1951.*



Figure 3.9 – Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, *Competition entry for Baghdad State Mosque, 1983.*



**Figure 3.10 – Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, *Perspective of prayer hall*,
Competition entry for Baghdad State Mosque, 1983.**



Figure 3.11 - Jim Gordon, *View of the front of the Iraq Republican Palace prior to the removal of the “Saddam the Warrior” bronze heads from the roof top, Feb 22, 2010.*
(Originally posted to Flickr)



Figure 3.12 - Brian1975, *Republican Palace Pool Baghdad*, August 2003.



Figure 3.13 - Joe Gattuso, *Republican Palace, Green Zone, Baghdad, June 20, 2007.*
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/2853050#> (accessed Feb. 12, 2017).



**Figure 3.14 - Joe Gattuso, *Palace Pool Nice Day*, Nov. 29, 2007.
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/6211134> (accessed Feb. 12, 2017).**



Figure 3.15 - Brian1975, *View of the Grand Dining Hall inside the Republican Palace, July 14, 2005.*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republican_Palace#/media/File:Republican_palace_dining_room_baghdad_iraq.jpg (accessed Feb. 11, 2017).



Figure 3.16 - Don Gomez, “The author (center) sitting in one of Saddam’s thrones,” Baghdad, *Vice News*, July 15, 2003. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).



Figure 3.17 - Sgt. Igor Paustovski. *Umm al-Qura mosque showing the inner, rifle-barrel-shaped group of minarets*, Northwestern Baghdad, April 13, 2003 (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).

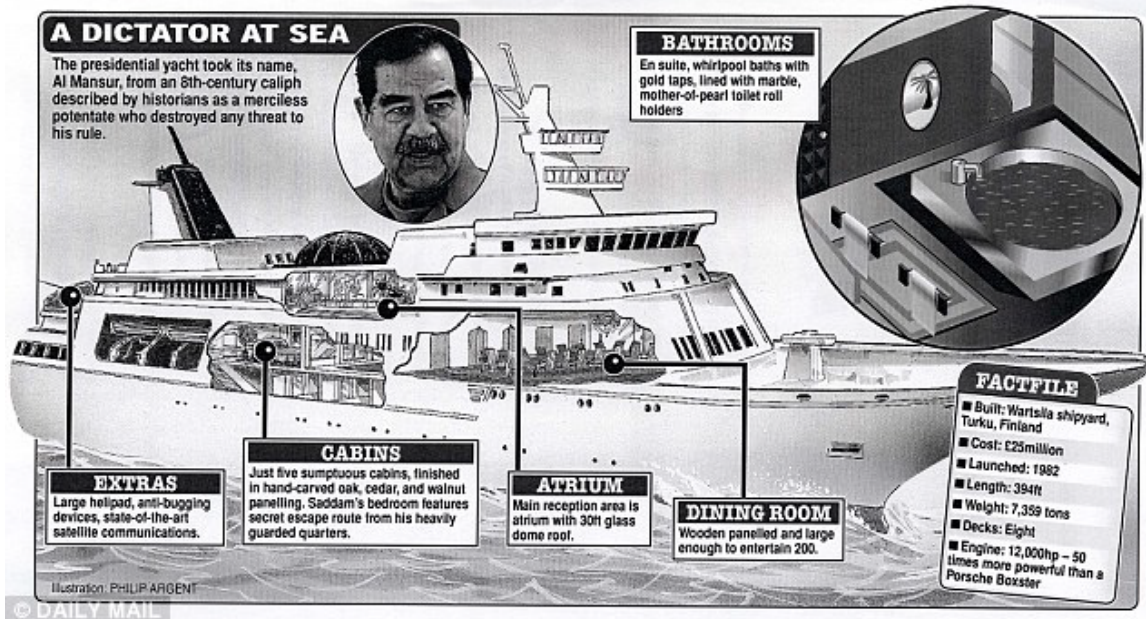


Figure 3.18 – “A Dictator At Sea,” *The Daily Mail*, March 30, 2013.
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2300605/The-incredible-story-Saddam-Husseins-25million-private-yacht-blown-F-14-Tomcat-pilots.html> (accessed Nov. 11, 2017).

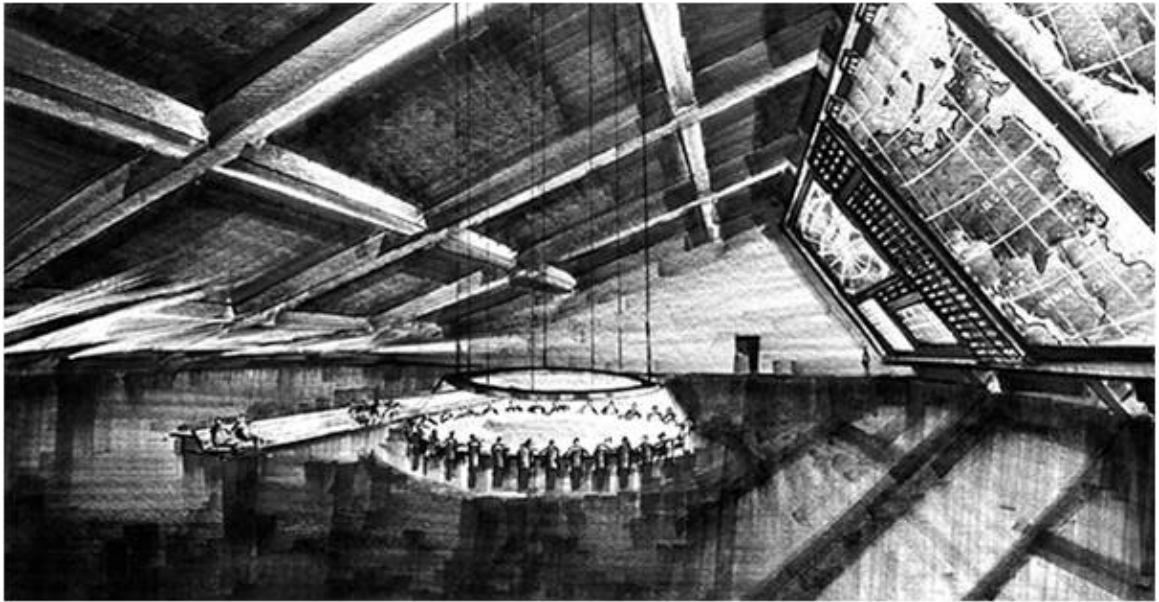


Figure 3.19 - Ken Adam, *Dr. Strangelove (set design)*, 1964.



Figure 3.20 – Ken Adam, *Goldfinger* (set design), 1964.

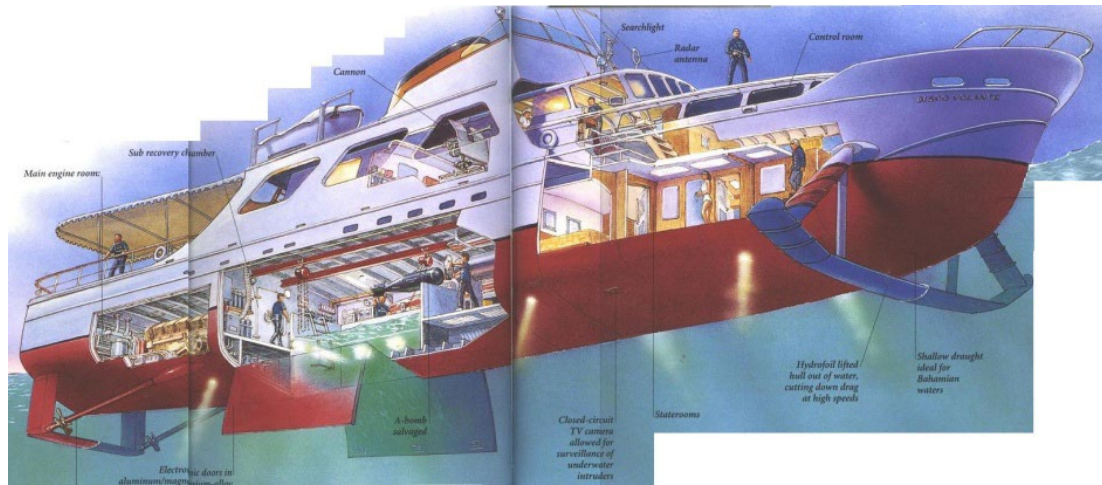


Figure 3.21 – Ken Adam, *Disco Valante* design (cutaway), 1965.



Figure 3.22 - David E. Scherman, "Lee Miller in Hitler's Bathtub," *Time*, 1945



**Figure 3.23 -Don Gomez, “The author getting his nails done at the manicurist in Saddam’s palace,” Baghdad, *Vice News*, July 15, 2003.
https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).**



Figure 3.24 - Don Gomez, “The author (center) with some more soldiers at Saddam’s pool,” Baghdad, *Vice News*, July 15, 2003. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/high-dives-and-manicures-at-saddams-presidential-palace (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).



Figure 3.25 - Sabah Arar, *Associated Press*, 2003



Figure 3.26 - *BBC News*, 2003.

Chapter 4 –
Statues, Monuments, and Relics: Dictator Kitsch and Persona



Figure 4.1 – DeAgostini, “Saddam Hussein and Nebuchadnezzar, mural,” Iraq, 20th century, *Getty Images*.



Figure 4.2 – Antonio Riberio, “Saddam’s Artists in Baghdad,” Iraq, *Getty Images*, July, 1994.

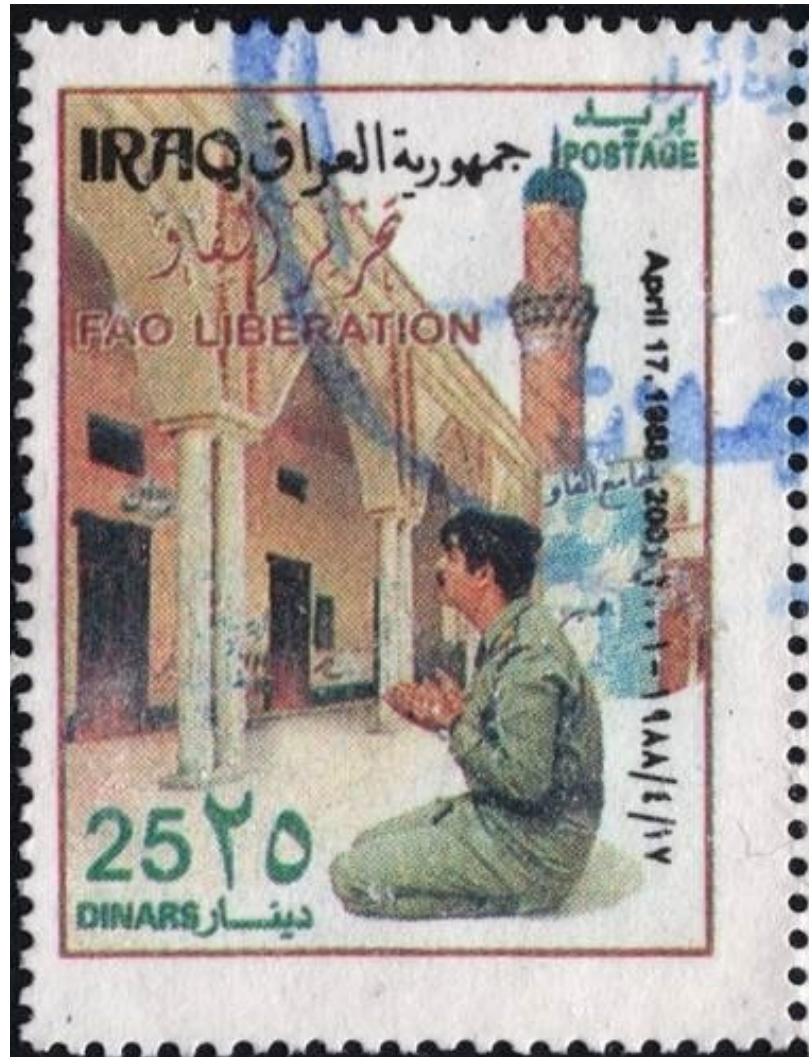


Figure 4.3 - *Saddam Hussein Prays in Front of the Mosque in Fao, 2001.*

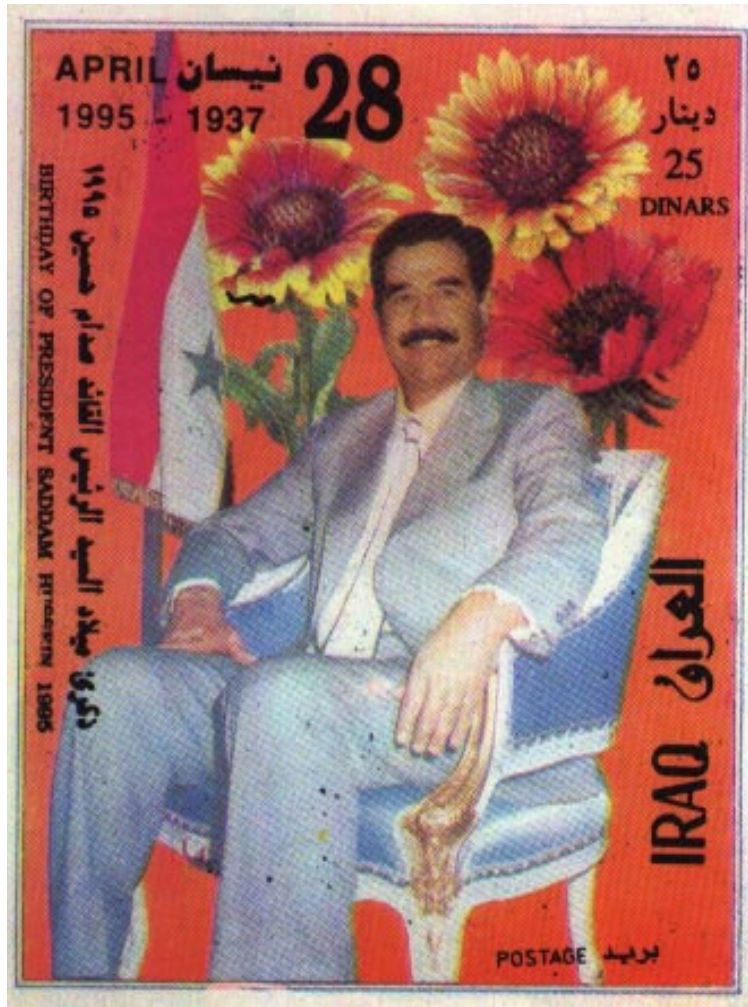


Figure 4.4 - *Saddam Hussein 58th Birthday, 1995*



Figure 4.5 - *Victory Day*, 2002



Figure 4.6 - *Saddam's Battle of Qadisiya, 1980*



Figure 4.7 -- *The Arc of Triumph*, central Baghdad, Iraq, 1989



Figure 4.8 - *The Arc of Triumph*, central Baghdad, Iraq, 1989



Figure 4.9 - *Walter Gropius standing in front of the new gate of Baghdad University, 1960s*



Figure 4.10 – Boris Vallejo, *The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980



Figure 4.11 – *Iraqi Fedayeen helmet*, Produced from 1995-2003.



Figure 4.12 – Ralph McQuarrie, *Darth concept art*, 1974



Figure 4.13 – “Fedayeen Saddam men in white uniform marching and chanting in Baghdad,” *Getty Images Editorial Footage*, March 2003.



Figure 4.14 –“U.S. military personnel “hold” the Baghdad Victory Arch sabers,”
Pinterest, 2003.



Figure 4.15 - Ji Scrofani, *Crossed Swords Monument*, November 27, 2007



Figure 4.16 – *Saddam Hussein dog toy sold in Britain soon after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, 1990*



Figure 4.17 – “Saddam Hussein brandishes a Russian-made AK-47,” March 1998.
Associated Press.



Figure 4.18 - Sgt. Igor Paustovski, *Umm al-Qura mosque*, Northwestern Baghdad. April 13, 2003 (accessed Feb. 16, 2017).



Figure 4.19 - Cliff Owen, “Inside the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, District of Columbia, a gold AK-47 assault rifle and sniper rifle that once belonged to former Iraq President Saddam Hussein sit in a display case,” *Associated Press*, September 29, 2011.



Figure 4.20 - George W. Bush Presidential Library, *Associated Press*



Figure 4.21 – “Iraqi Most Wanted’ playing cards is shown in an Operation Iraqi Freedom display,” The Soldiers & Sailors National Military Museum & Memorial in Pittsburgh, *Associated Press/Getty Images*.



Figure 4.22 - Alexandra Boulat, “As viewers watched on television, Marine Gunery Sergeant Leon Lambert and Corporal Edward Chin prepared to bring down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad’s Firdos Square,” 2003.



Figure 4.23 – Goran Tomasevic, “Corporal Edward Chin, scaling a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and draping the Stars and Stripes and a noose over the black metal visage of the ousted despot,” *Reuters*. 2003.



Figure 4.24 - Gilles Bassignac, “The toppling of a Saddam statue in the heart of Baghdad,” *Getty Images*, April 9, 2003.



Figure 4.25 - Carol Guzy, *Getty Images*, 1989



Figure 4.26 - *Time*, April 21, 2003.

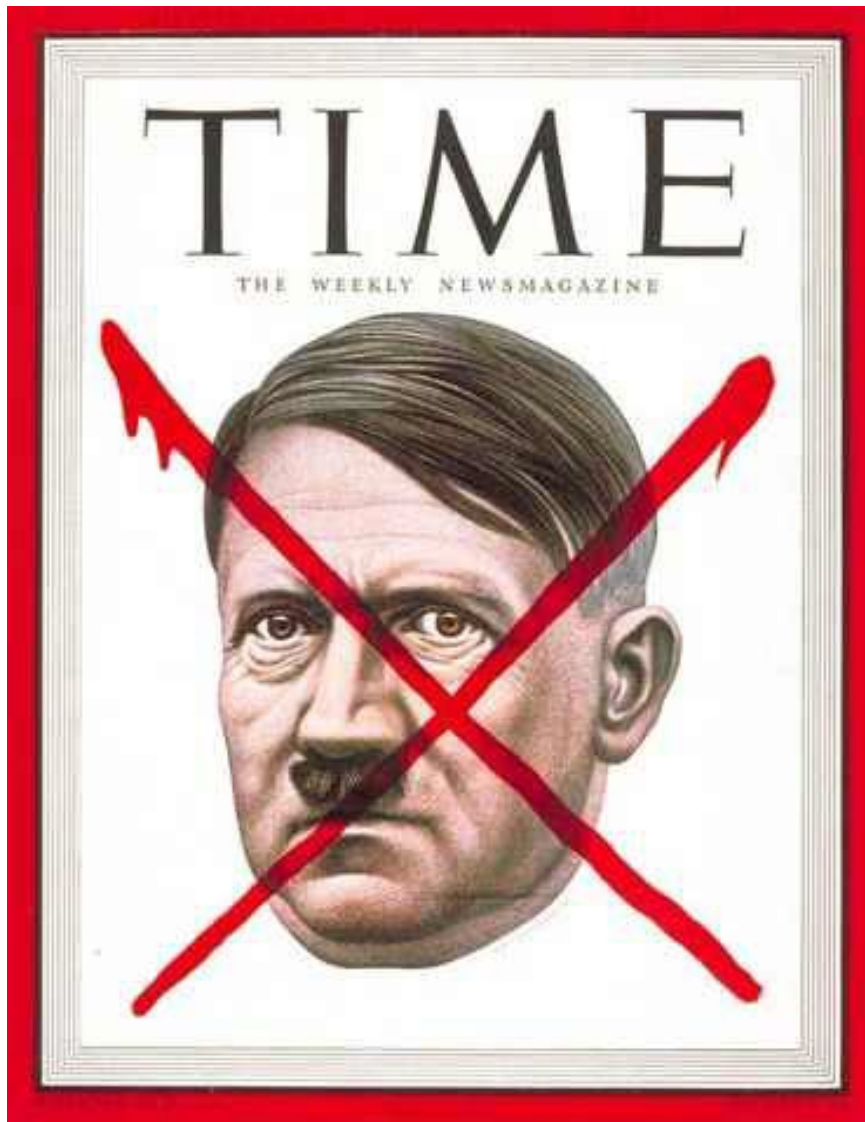


Figure 4.27 - *Time*, May 2, 1945



Figure 4.28 - *The Godfather*, Paramount Pictures, 1972



Figure 4.29 – Saddam Hussein, Iraqi President (pinterest)

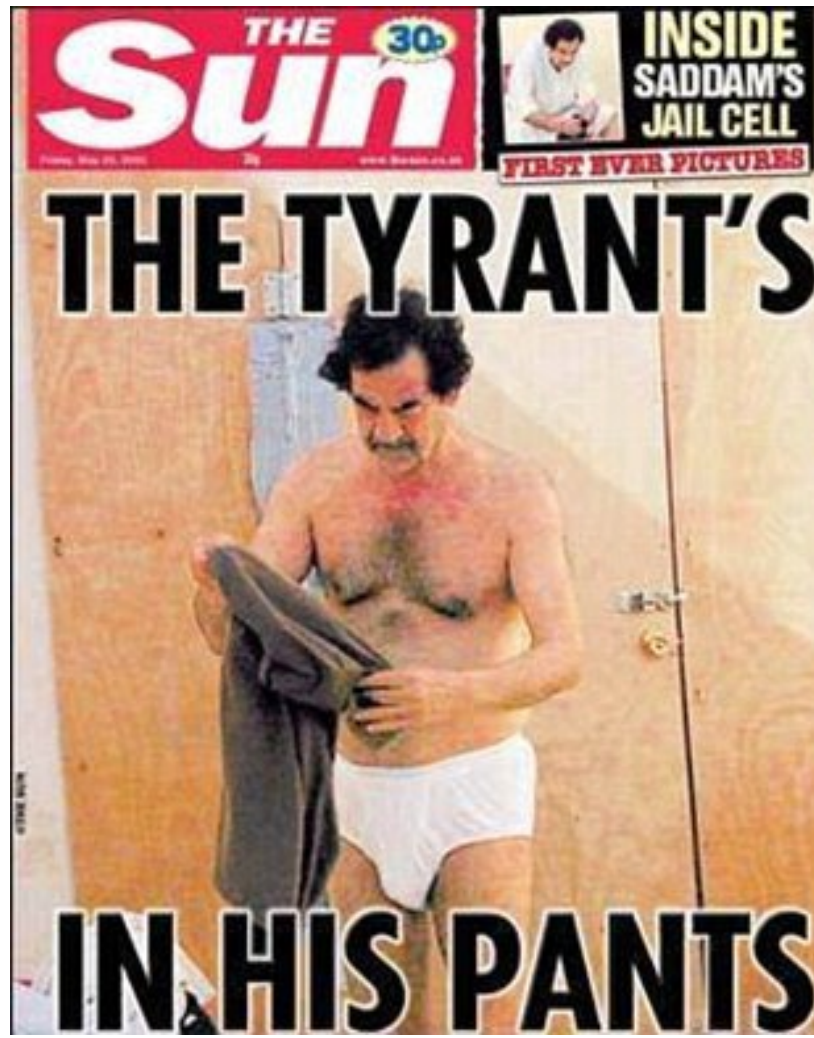


Figure 4.30 – *The Sun*, “The Tyrant in His Pants,” 2005



Figure 4.31 – Stefan Zaklin, “Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein addresses the court Tuesday,” *Getty Images*, 2006.

**Chapter 5 –
George W. Bush and American Political Kitsch**



Figure 5.1 – *Renovations: Empty Oval Office, Floor Refinishing, August 14, 2002.*
Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.

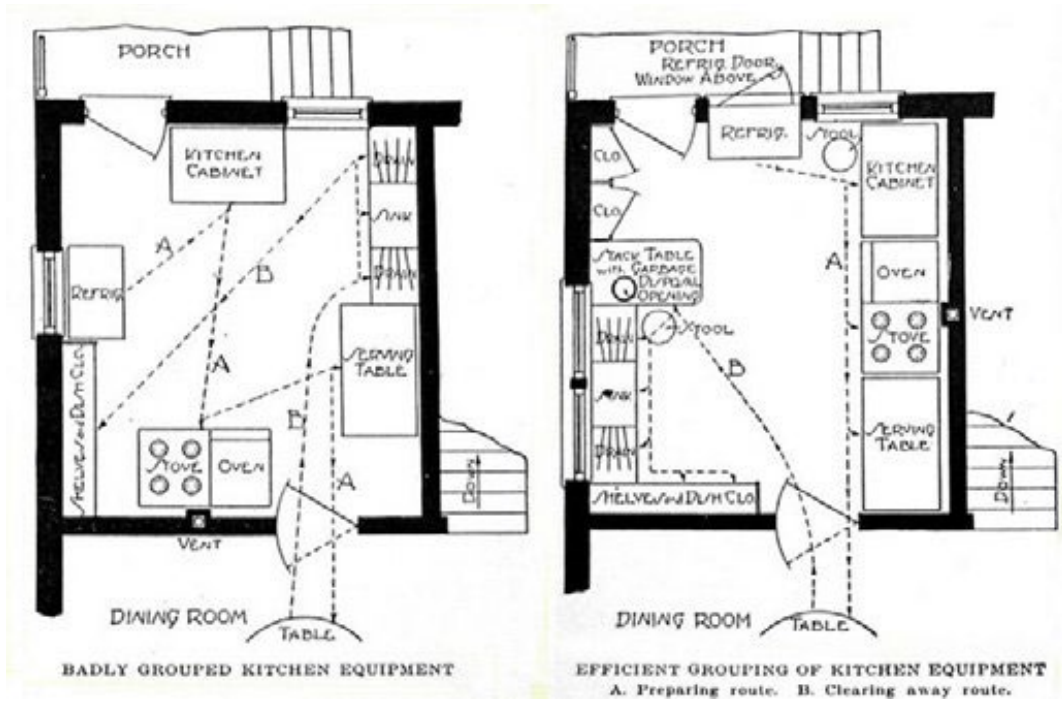


Figure 5.2 – Christine Frederick, *kitchen efficiency studies*, 1913



Figure 5.3 – Eric Limon, *Drawing Room at The Mount (Edith Wharton's Home)*, February 2, 2021



Figure 5.4 – R. Donald Jaye, “The Playboy Town House Production Recommendations,” The Playboy Company, *Playboy*, May 1962



Figure 5.5 - Tade Styka, *Rough Rider*, 1909, White House Museum, Washington DC., 39" x 54", oil on canvas

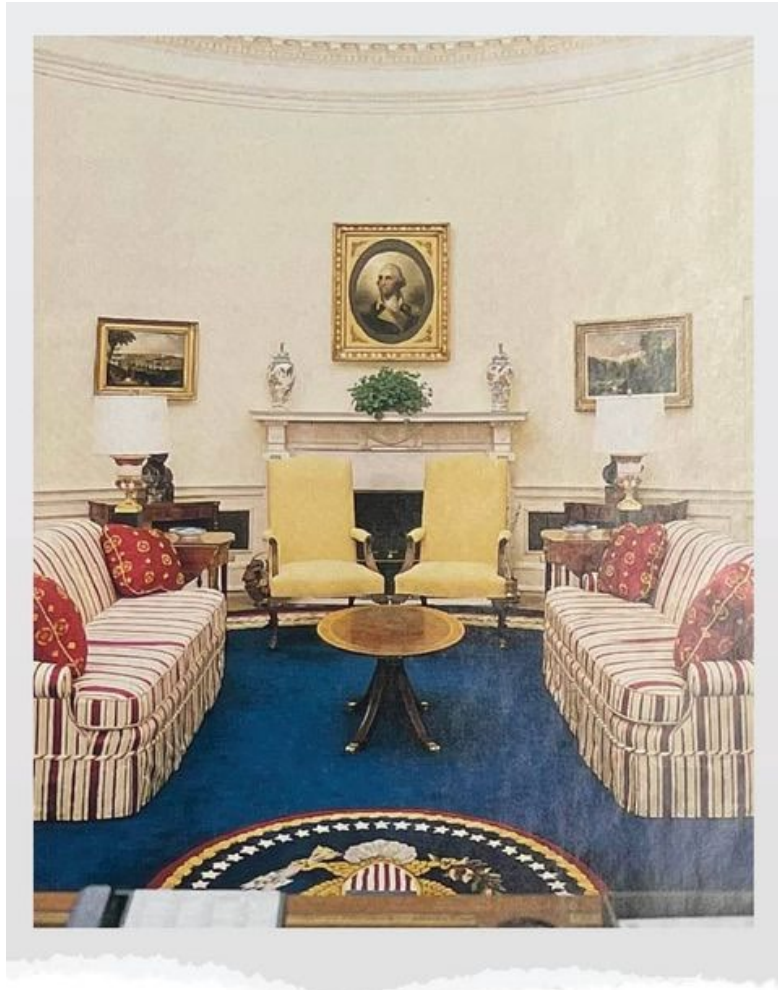


Figure 5.6 – Oberto Gili, “Inside the Clinton Whitehouse,” *House Beautiful*, 1994.



Figure 5.7 – *Oval Office Detail*, November 8, 2007. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.



Figure 5.8 – “President Reagan with saddle sculptures,” *The Reagan Library Education Blog*, 1982.



Figure 5.9 – “Life on the Crawford Ranch,” *The Bush Presidential Library*, 2007.



Figure 5.10 – Pablo Martinez Monsivais, “President George W. Bush, showing off boots with the presidential seal at his inauguration,” *Associated Press*, January 2001



Figure 5.11 – *Oval Office Detail*. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library, November 8, 2007



Figure 5.12 – Kevork Djansezian, “Saddam Hussein’s pistol,” *Associated Press*, 2003



Figure 5.13 – Tom Lea, *Rio Grande*, 1954. Oil on canvas. Collection of the El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas. Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.



Figure 5.14 – W. H. D. Koerner, *A Charge to Keep*, 1916, collection of George W. Bush, Courtesy of George W. Bush Presidential Library.



Figure 5.15 – George W. Bush Oval Office Tour

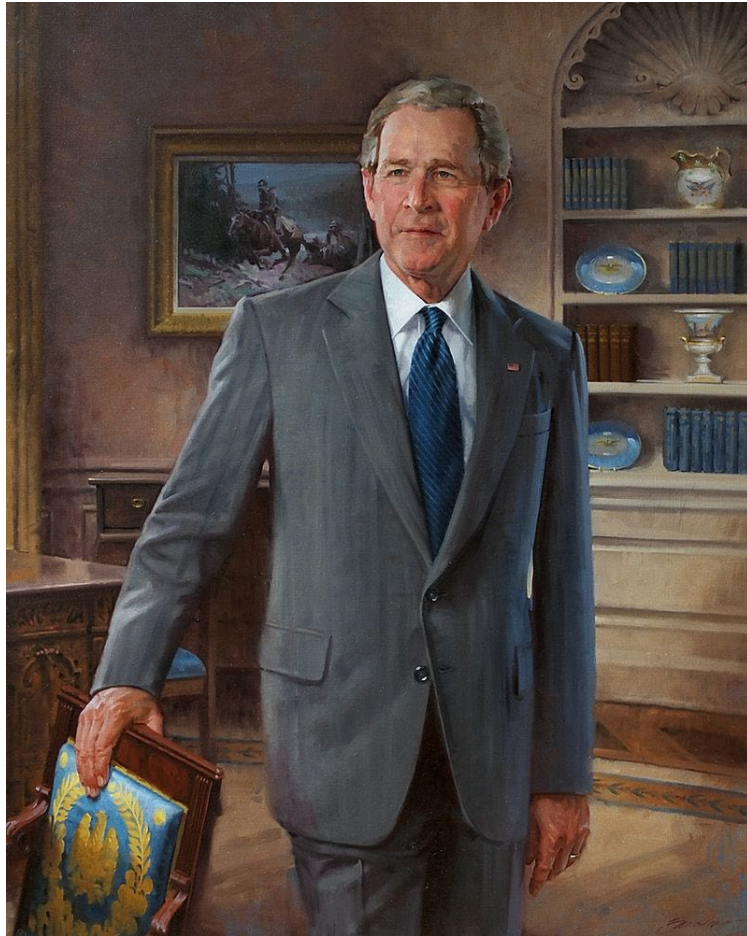


Figure 5.16 – John Howard Sanden, *George W. Bush*, 2012, The White House Museum, Washington, D.C., Oil on canvas

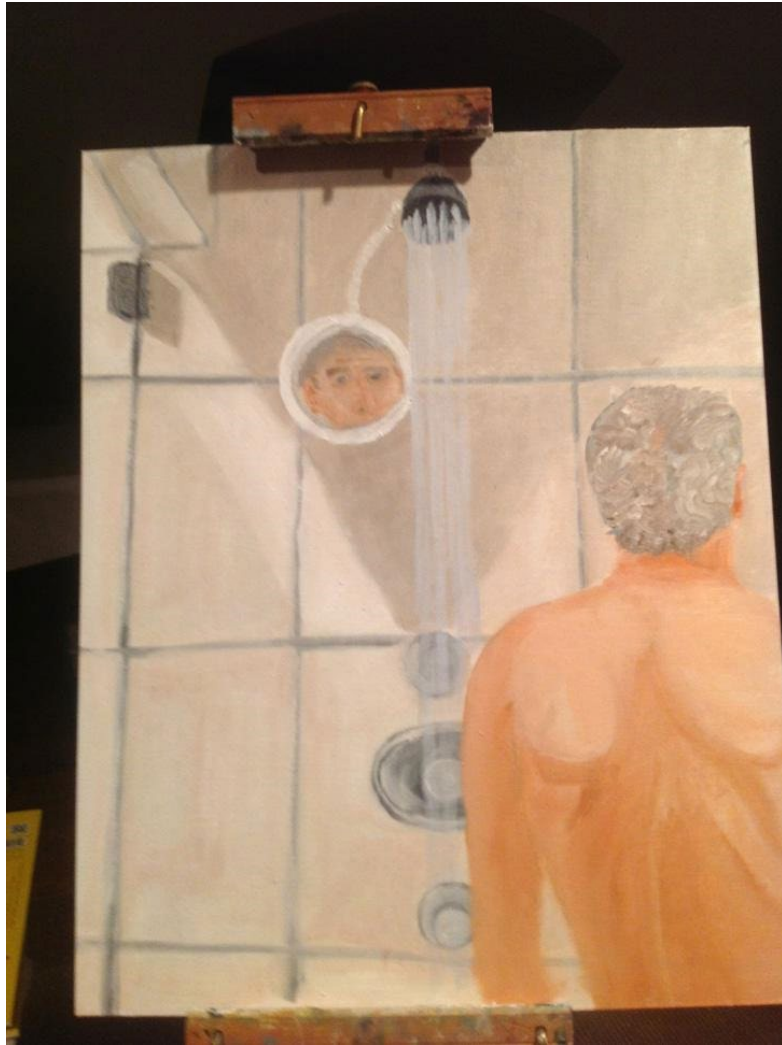


Figure 5.17 – George W. Bush, *Self Portrait in the Shower*, oil on panel, 2013

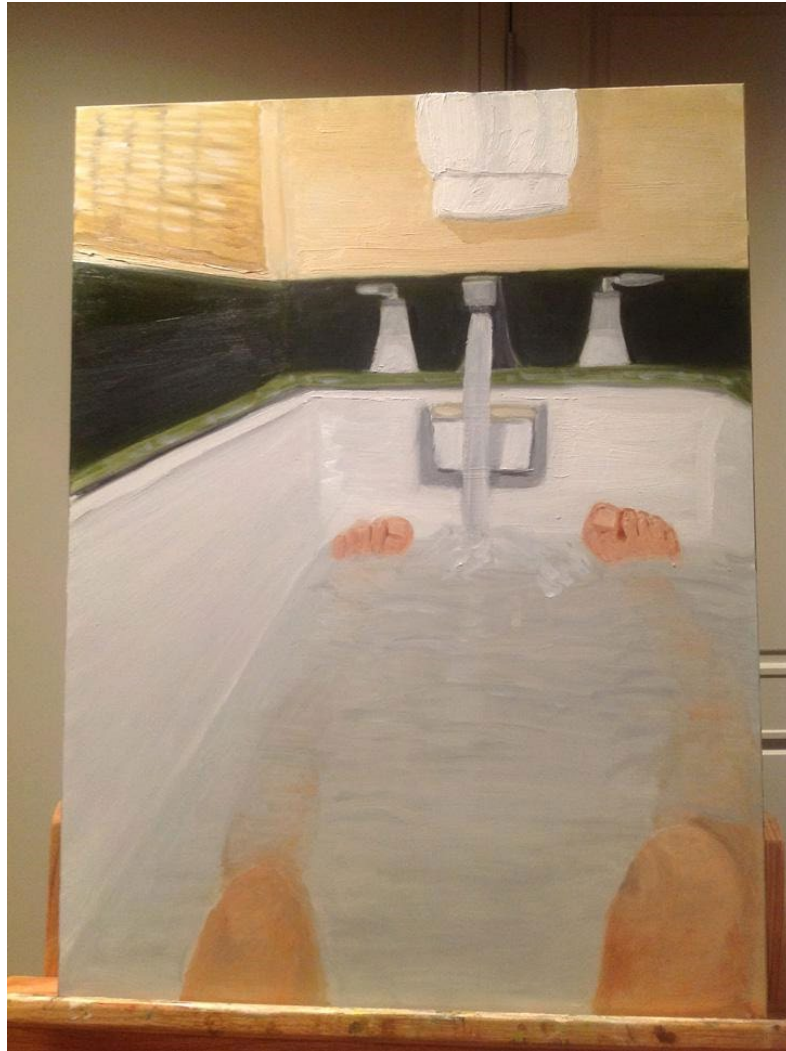


Figure 5.18 – George W. Bush, *Self Portrait in the Bathtub*, oil on panel, 2013



Figure 5.19 – Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Snow Capped Mountains*, oil on canvas, 1955.



Figure 5.20 – George W. Bush, *The Art of Leadership Exhibition*, 2014



Figure 5.21 – George W. Bush, *Putin*, oil on board, 2014