

Design Resource

## Static Visual Narratives

Visual Stories on Static Mediums

by

Sherline Pimenta K., Ph.D. Student

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives>



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## Introduction

Static Visual Narratives or SVNs are those visuals that do not move in time (per say). These visuals are represented on mediums such as paper, wood, stone etc. that render the visuals motionless. It is broadly owing to these criteria that we call such visuals 'static'. By 'static' we refer to the inability of the visual to move or change within the medium in time. Thus, a narrative that is visual in nature and occurs on a static (stationary, motionless) medium such as paper, wall, an object, stone etc. is called a Static Visual Narrative [SVN]. The image is fixed by means of etching, drawing, painting, printing, sculpting onto the surface. It is an illusion created to evoke the experience of the story being told. By this token narrative art, pictorial narratives, narrative sculpture, picture stories, comics, info-graphics on paper, picture books etc. are in core SVNs.

Definition of SVN:

We define the Static Visual Narrative as a notion that comprises of a set of physical markers on an immobile medium, which presents the content (story) through a mechanism of temporal and spatial visual representation.

Characteristic Features of the SVN:

1. The SVN executed on a medium occupies surface area. For example an illustrated comic book runs over many pages, or a mural painting may cover an entire wall. The viewer has to unravel the story by exploring the surface area covered by the visual. Thus the story unfolds across space.
2. In the case of the SVN the image is fixed on the surface of the medium. That is to say it remains materially unchanging. Le Poidevin defines 'A static image (as) one that represents by virtue of properties which remain largely unchanged throughout its existence' (Le Poidevin, 1997:175). For example once a story has been painted or printed on a piece of paper it does not undergo much change except for maybe fading with time.
3. SVNs bank on the spectator's prior knowledge of the narrative. Only then can the viewer fully enjoy reading the SVN, as the intent of the visual narrative is to engage the spectator within it. 'Perception' and 'Memory' play an important role in this respect. The viewer has to recall the event in story and match it to the event portrayed in the SVN. The spectator already knows what has happened (the past) and what is to come (the future) but engages in unravelling the SVN as the designer has presented.
4. The visual is fixed but the viewer or the viewer's eye is mobile. The SVN is viewed by a moving spectator, who finds connections between juxtaposed scenes that communicate a meaning. The spectator turns the pages or stands back in front of a sculptural panel; it is the eye that moves and explores the visual. Souriau illustrates this point by citing the example of viewing a statue 'His (the viewer's) movement around the statue brings to view, as it were, melodically, the various profiles, the different projections, shadow, and light; thus the most complete appreciation of the aesthetic complexity of the work is gained only by the moving spectator' (Souriau, 1949:295).

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5. The viewer of the SVN decides the speed at which to view the image. The SVN by the fact that it is fixed permits the spectator to travel around the visual at leisure, allowing for pauses at any given point for as long as is desired or quickly skimming through the visual.

6. In an SVN the order of viewing is not determined; the spectator decides the order in which to view the SVN. A choice can be made as to where to begin viewing the SVN. Having known the story, one can decide to begin viewing the story from any given point in the narrative and go backwards or forwards accordingly. One can even begin with the end and view the whole narrative in a flashback kind of manner. In other words the SVN can be read from beginning to end, vice versa or begin in media res as per the preference of the viewer.

7. Imagination plays a big role in the appreciation of the SVN. The SVN heavily banks on the imagination of the spectator to make use of the visual cues and build the story.

8. The viewer is in full control of the contemplation time or as Goswamy refers to it 'the ruminative viewing' i.e. time taken to carefully regard a work of art (Goswamy, 1998). The spectator is in control of the time taken for viewing the SVN.

9. Perception of movement in the SVN results from the active participation of the spectator. The viewer has to look at the SVN recall the story and engage in the process of narration. The SVN makes great demands on the viewer's 'Imagination'. The beauty of the SVN is that it only provides cues to the story in the form of visuals. It is up to the viewer to use those cues as a base to build the narrative.

Professor Hernshaw refers to this as 'temporal integration', the bundling together in one extended stretch of time of memories and expectations (as quoted by E.H. Gombrich, 1964).

An excellent example of a SVN is a panel from the Gates of Paradise that represents the story of Adam and Eve.

Shown in the SVN (Fig.01), at the left bottom corner, we see God in the act of creating Adam (moment 1 – M1). Next, in the centre unfolds the creation of Eve (moment 2 – M2). Show in low relief towards the left is Adam and Eve being tempted by the Devil in the form of a snake (moment 3 – M3). Finally on the right side, we see the couple being thrown out of the Garden of Eden by the angels on the orders of God (moment 4 – M4). Broadly speaking the narrative flows from left to right, but the viewer can read the narrative from any point moving back and forth in the intrinsic story-time.

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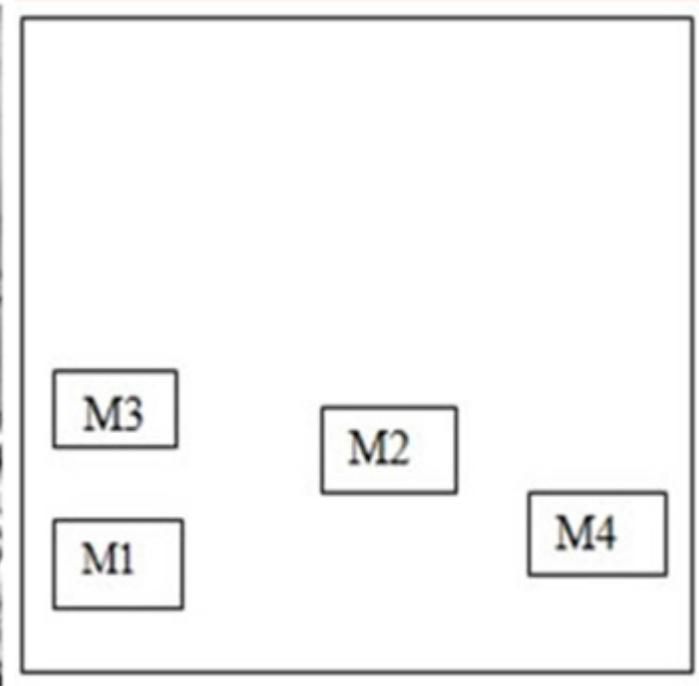


Fig.1: SVN representing the story of Adam and Eve, Gates of Paradise\*

\* Panel from Lorenzo Ghiberti's "Gates of Paradise", Florence Baptistery, Italy.  
Image Source - Web Gallery of Art.

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**Source:**

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/elements>

## Elements

SVNs are composed of certain finite elements. These elements are: Moment, Actor, Time, Space, Location / Place, Setting, Limits & Boundaries, Principles of Ordering and Relationship to text.

1. Moment: Refers to a slice of visual moment from the story represented.
2. Actor: Refers to the character in the story.
3. Time (Narrative time): Refers to the temporal aspect represented.
4. Space (Compositional Space): Refers to the surface area used to represent the visual.
5. Location or Place: Refers to the site where the event unfolds in the story.
6. Setting: Refers to the representation of the location or place where the event unfolds.
7. Limits and Boundaries: Refers to the demarcation technique of story space.
8. Principles of Ordering: Refers to the rational of arranging the story.
9. Relationship to Text3: Refers to the manner in which the texts (oral or written) relate.

Each of these is explained below using the example of the SVN – Adam and Eve.



Adam und Eva in Garten Eden - Lucas Cranach;  
[Image source]

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### 1) Moment:

Six events from the story are presented as six visual moments (M) in this SVN -

Event 1: God creates Adam – M1

Event 2: God creates Eve from Adam – M2

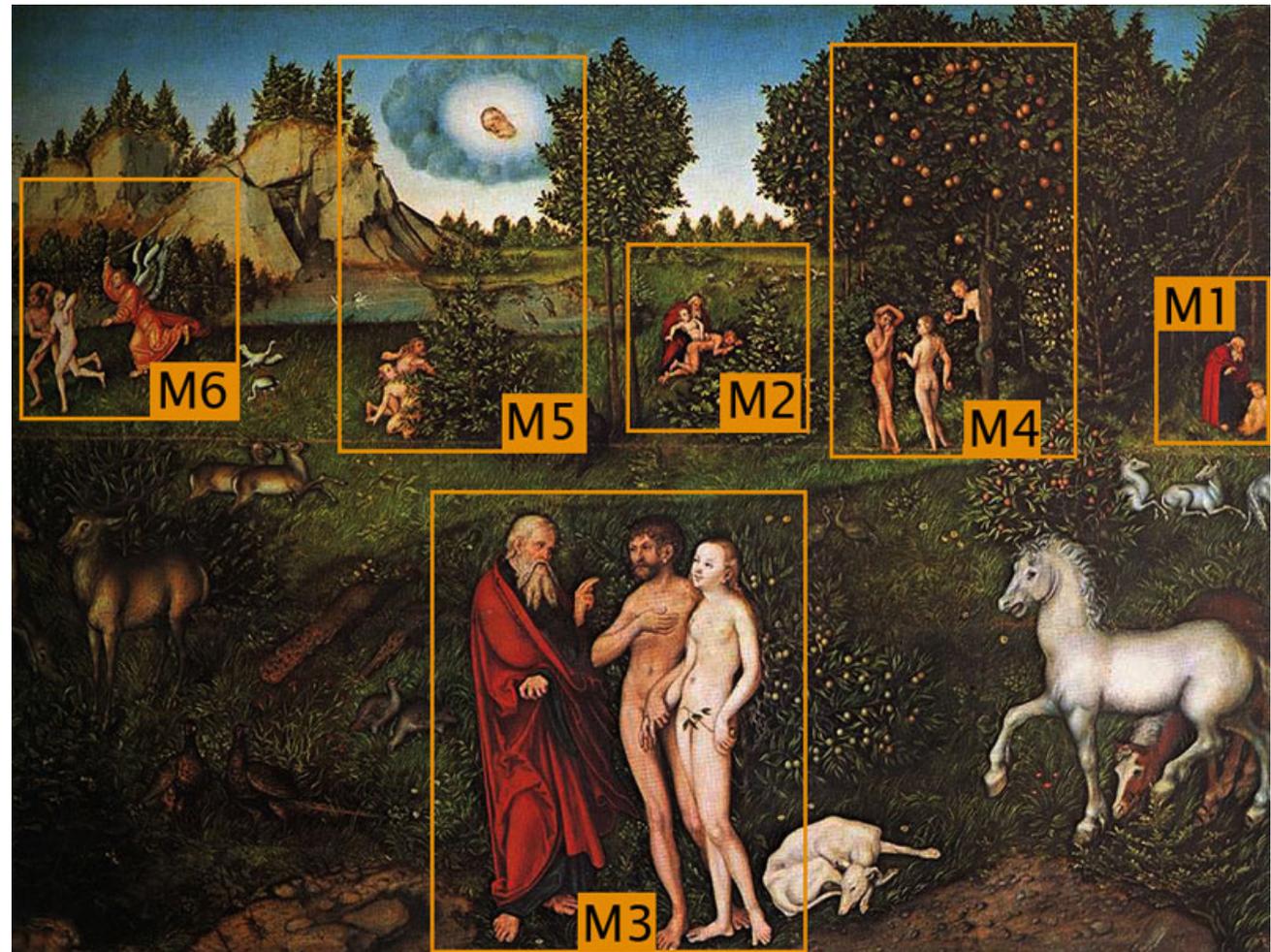
Event 3: God instructs Adam and Eve about the “tree of life” – M3

Event 4: The devil tempts Eve and she in turn tempts Adam to eat the apple from the “tree of life” – M4

Event 5: God admonishes Adam and Eve as they attempt to hide – M5

Event 6: Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden by an angel – M6

These are marked as M1, M2, M3, M4, M5 and M6 respectively.



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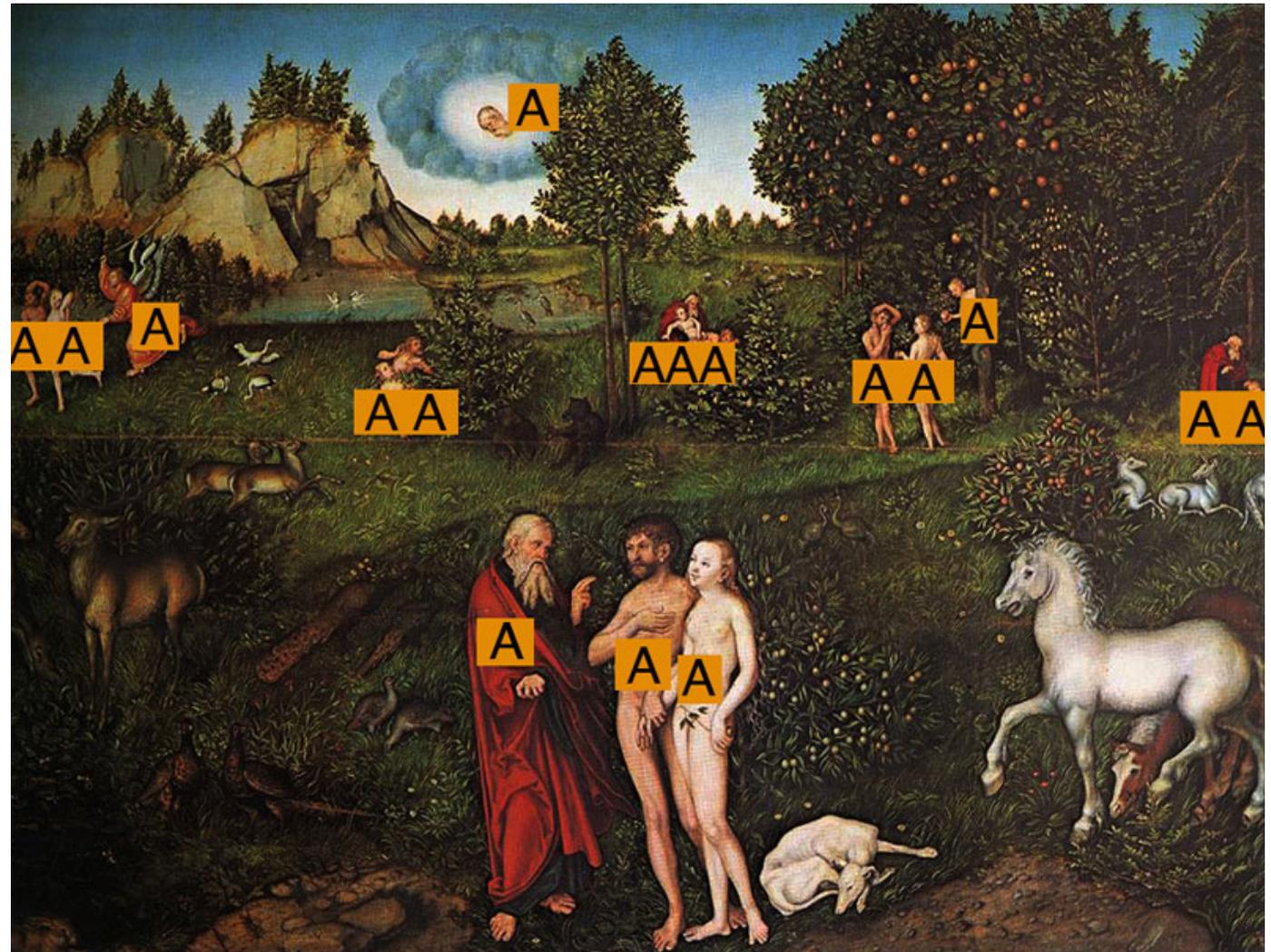
Source:

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### 2) Actor:

The actors in this SVN are Eve, Adam, God, the Devil in the form of a serpent and the angel. These are marked – A in the image. We identify the actors from the description we know of each of the characters.



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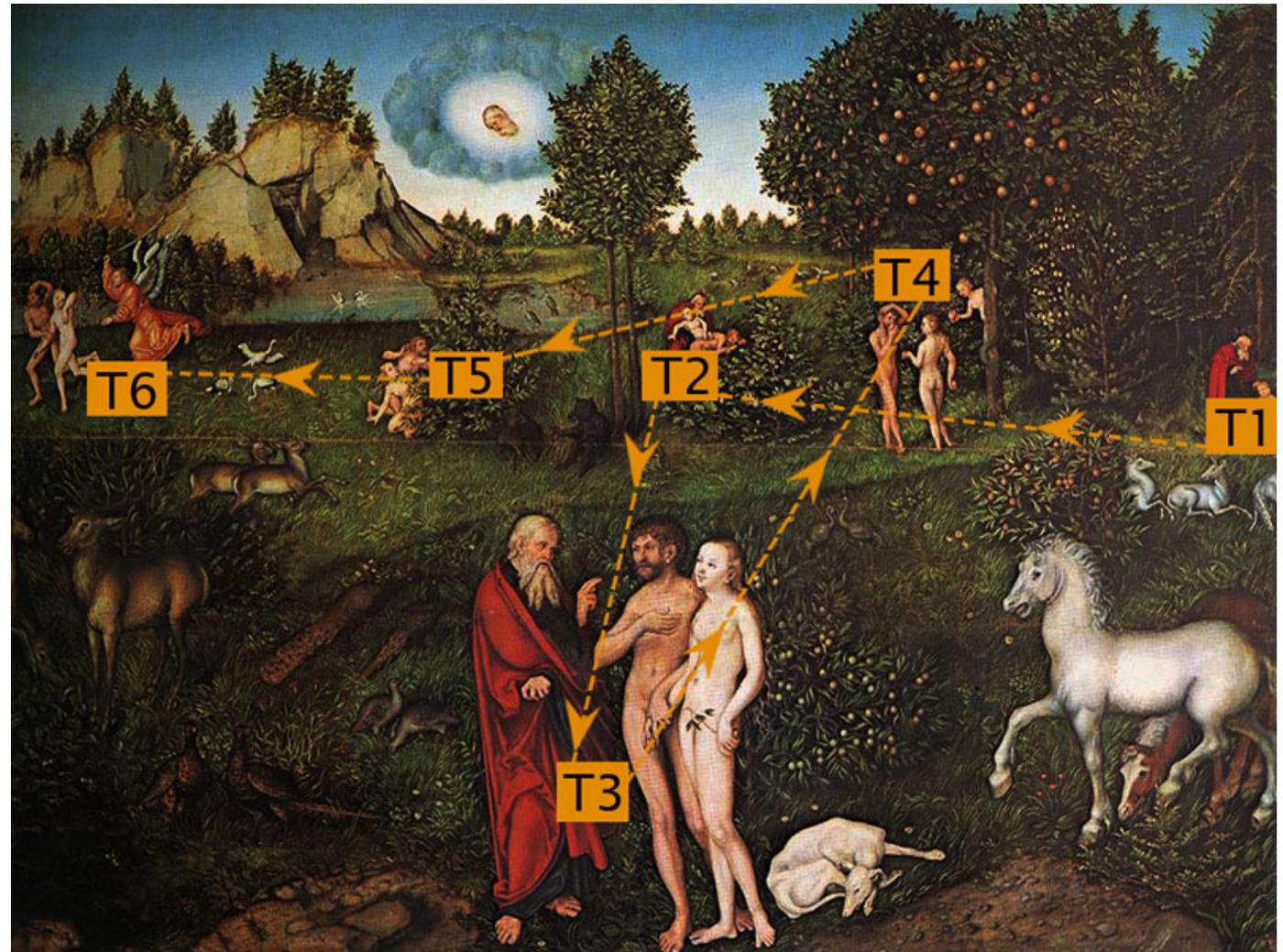
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### 3) Narrative time:

The narrative time in an SVN is indicated by the compositional space. The repetition of the actors indicates a movement in time from one event to the other. The narrative time in this SVN is traced by the dotted line. The direction of the movement of narrative story time is marked by the arrow. In this case the visual narrative flows broadly from right to left.



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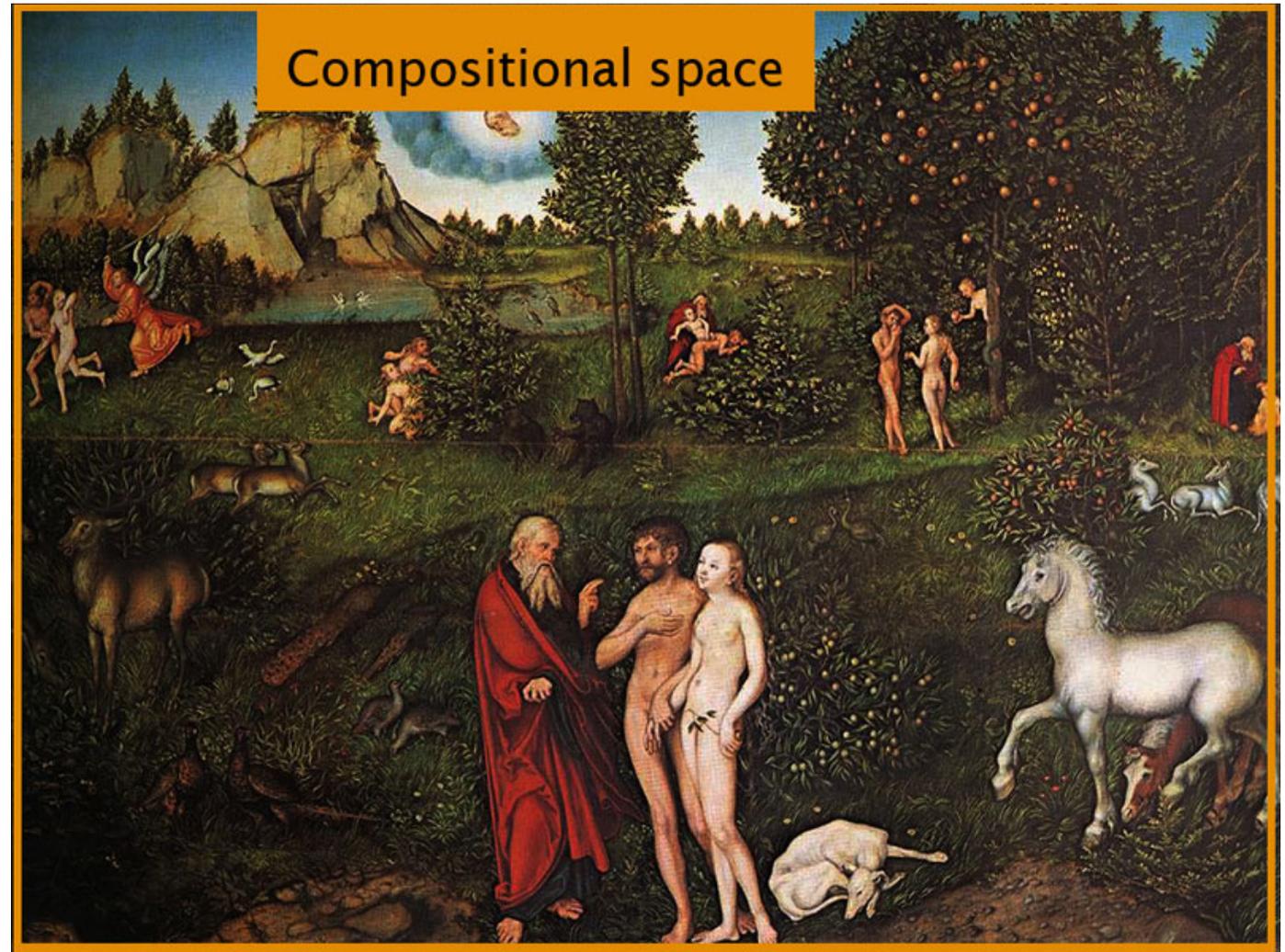
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Source:

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### 4) Compositional Space:

It is the surface occupied by the visual narrative on the medium. In this case the total visual composition occupies a rectangular area.



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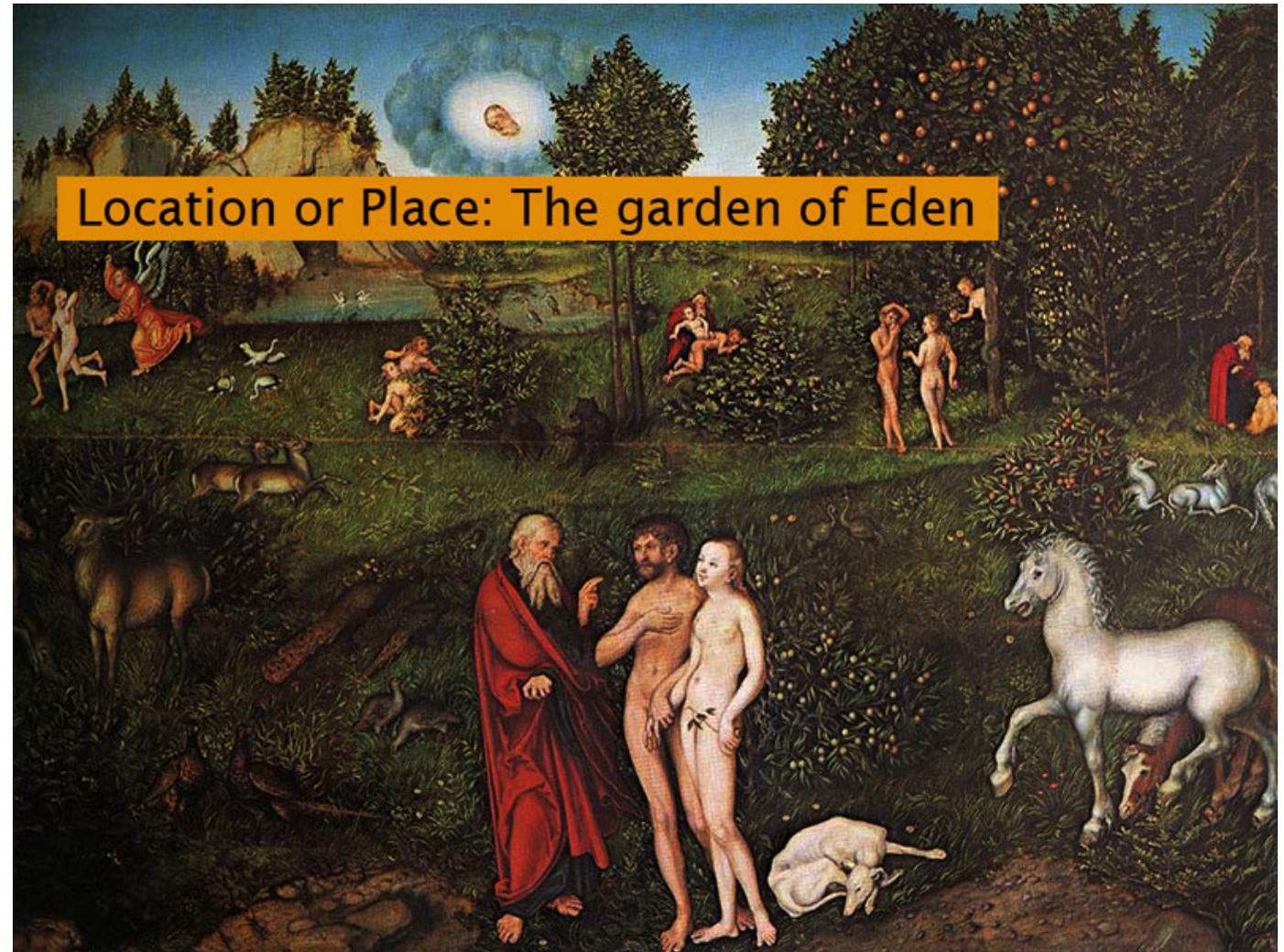
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### 5) Location or Place:

The location is mentioned in most stories. This is the location where the event occurs. Some designers try to indicate the location of the event with the help of a setting as in this case. Sometimes the location is not indicated and left for the viewer to imagine. In this SVN the story unfolds at the Garden of Eden.



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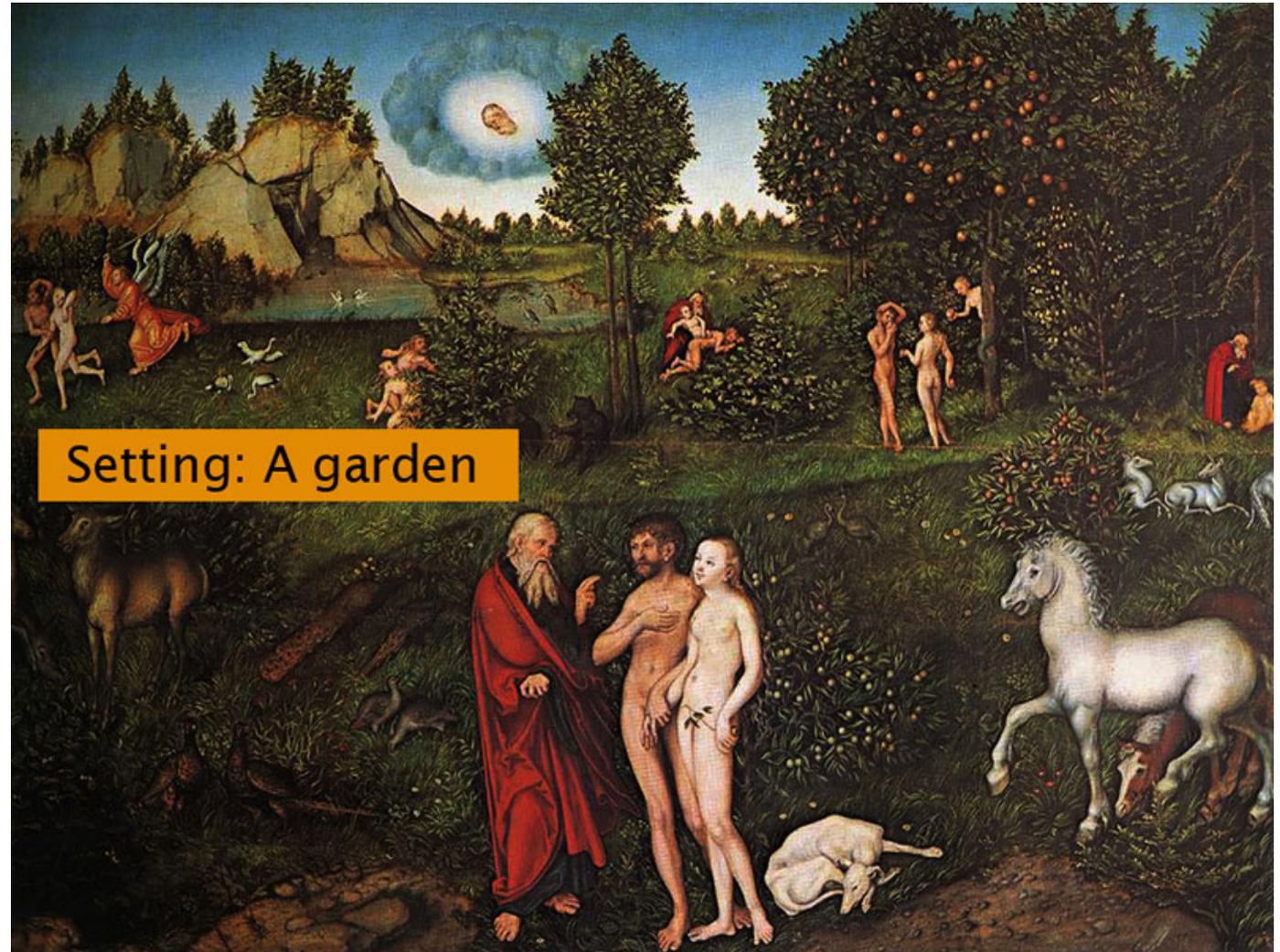
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### 6) Setting:

Also referred to as background. The setting is created by the designer to help the viewer imagine the location where the event unfolds. It presents the designers imagination of the location. In this example the designer imagines the Garden of Eden as a garden with lots of flora and fauna.



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### 7) Limits & Boundaries:

The frame is the device that demarcates the visual story space. In this example the SVN is enclosed by a rectangular frame.



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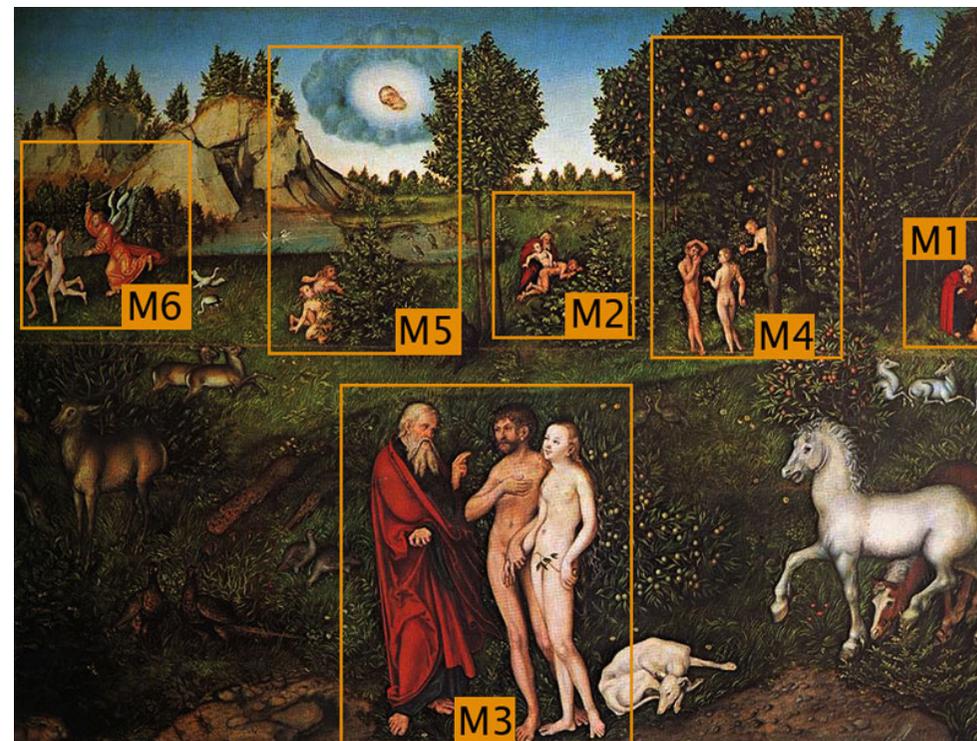
Sherline Pimenta K., Ph.D. Student  
IDC, IIT Bombay**Source:**<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/elements>**8) Principles of Ordering:**

The designer uses some philosophy to arrange the events of the story onto the surface of the medium. This guiding philosophy that governs the composition of the SVN is what we call as 'principles of ordering'. In this particular instance the designer possibly decided to order the events according to the place in the garden where he thought they might have occurred. Thus the setting is used primarily as the guiding principle for ordering the events.

Another possible principle of ordering could be – the ordering of events. As seen in this SVN, event 3 (marked as E3) is not only centered but also rendered larger compared to the other events. Based on this feature we can surmise that the designer wanted to draw attention to this particular event. Thus it may have been thought to be the most important event given that it contains the warning.

Yet a third possible principle of ordering could be deduced from the arrangement of the events, one that is time-line based.

The centered and enlarged event can be read as happening “now” in the present (as we watch) compared to events past and future.



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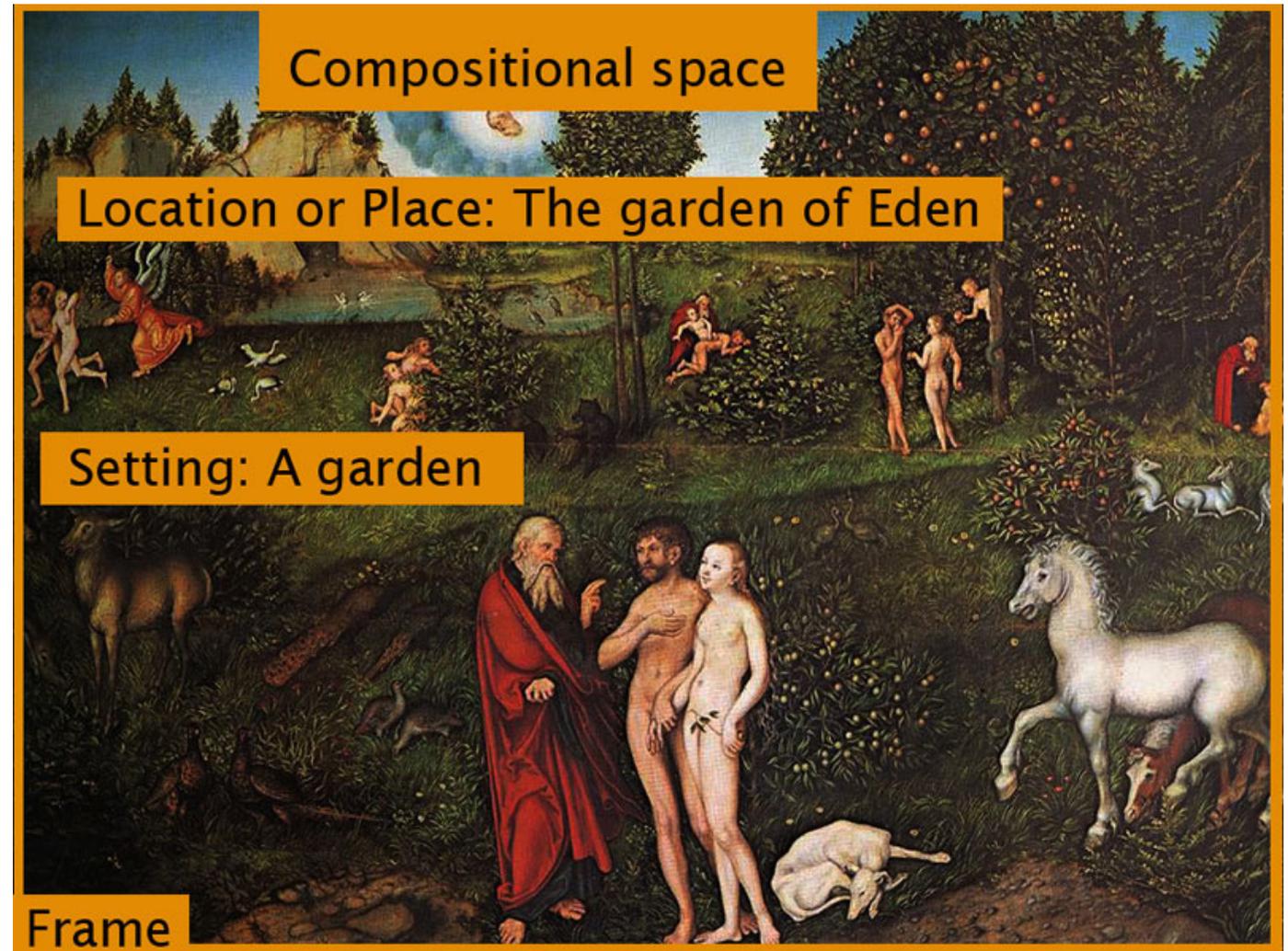
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### 9) Relationship to Text:

Three ways of interaction have been identified by Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott in their study of picture book communication, to which we concur. These are: Symmetric interaction: the image depicts exactly what the story says; Enhancing interaction: the image depicts more than what the story says; Complementary interaction: the images shows something totally different to what the story says.

Mc Cloud in 'Understanding Comics' also illustrates ways in which the text and visual interact.



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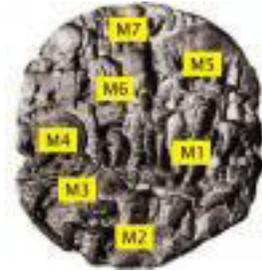
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Source:

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## Examples



Chaddanta Jataka



Odysseus and Polyphemus



Story from the Ramayana



Cupid and Psyche

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Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/examples/chaddanta-jataka>

## Chaddanta Jataka

### The Story of Chaddanta

Once the Bodhisatta was born as the king of Chaddanta elephants. [Chaddanta (literally meaning - having six tusks)]. The body of the elephant king was pure white with red face and feet. He lived in a golden cave (Kanchana-guha) on the bank of a lake. He had two queens, namely, Maha-subhadda and Chulla-subhadda. (M1)



The story of Chaddanta, Amravati  
(Image Source: Vidya Dehejia, Early Buddhist Visual Narratives)

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Once after bathing in the lake and frolicking in the forest with his queens and attendants he sportingly hit a fully blossomed sal tree. Incidentally, the dry leaves, twigs and red ants from the tree fell on Chullasubhadda but the flowers and the pollen of the tree rained on Maha-subhadda(M2). This made Chulla-subhadda feel insulted and desert her husband (M3). Chaddanta, however, tried to look for her but failed.

In course of time, Chullasubhadda died (M4) and was reborn in a royal family of the Madda kingdom. Later, when she grew up she was married to the king of Varanasi and became his chief consort. Still, she remembered her humiliation in the kingdom of Chaddanta. So, she hatched a plot to get Chaddanta's tusks cut off; and convinced the Varanasi king to obtain his tusks for her. The king in turn summoned all the hunters of the kingdom and finally assigned the task to Sonuttara.

Nonetheless, it took seven years, seven months and seven days for Sonuttara to find the Chaddantas abode. There he stealthily dug a pit and covered it with dry leaves and twigs. When the elephant passed over it he shot him with a poisoned arrow(M5). The elephant was to charge against him but when he saw Sonuttara clad in a saffron robe of a monk he recoiled and did not harm the hunter. Affected by the victims extreme religiosity the cruel hunters heart changed and he narrated the entire story to the elephant out of sheer respect.

As the hunter was not strong enough to cut off the Chaddantas tusks he himself held the saw in his tusk and cut them off and handed over to the hunter.(M6) The hunter then carried these back to the palace. (M7)

When the chief consort of Varanasi saw the Chaddantas tusks being brought by Sonuttara she fainted and died because she could not bear the shock.

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3a. **Chaddanta Jataka**

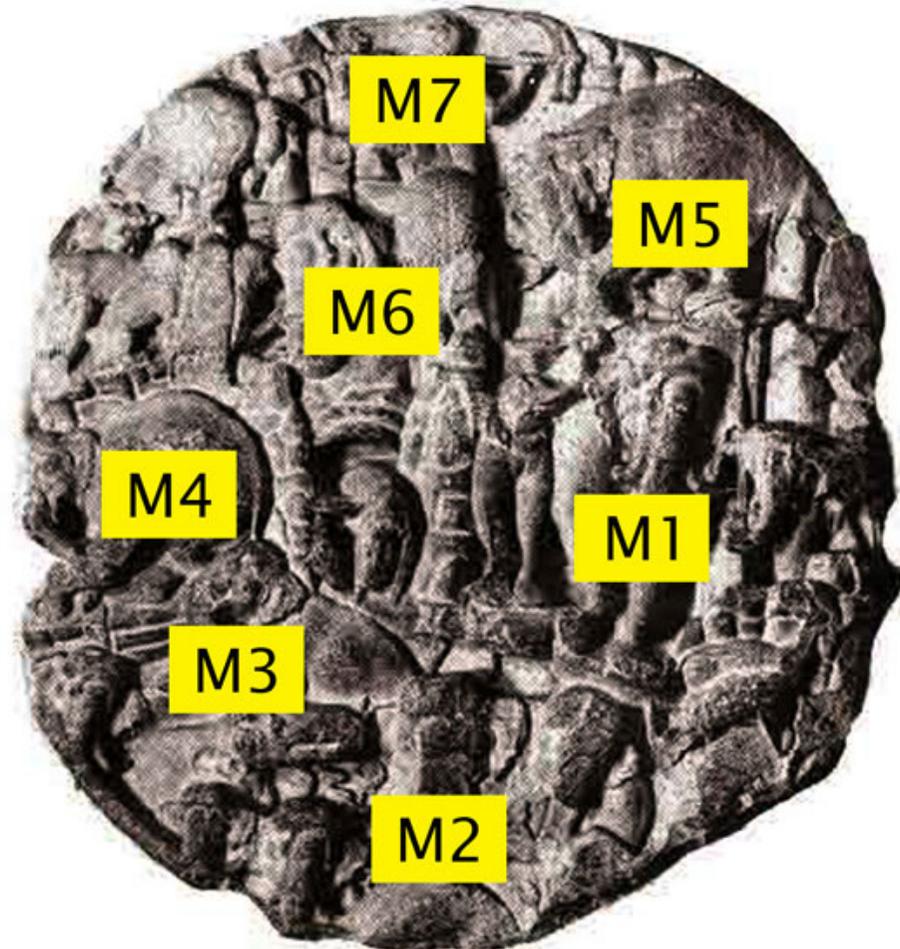
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In this image the viewers are presented with three episodes and a total of seven moments.

M 1: Chaddanta in the forest, with the identifying regal parasol above him.

M2: Chaddanta presents his chief queen, Maha-subhadda, with the trouble-causing lotus (to the right).

M3: to the left, his offended and jealous junior queen, Culla-subhadda leaves the pond.

M4: Her figure is repeated to the extreme left just beyond the pond, where she is lying

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down to die (praying for revenge in a future birth).

The story now moves to the upper zone, where to the far right the artist has depicted his next episode.

M5: Here is the unsuspecting Chaddanta, at whom a hunter (sent by Culla-subhadda reborn as the queen of Benares) aims an arrow from his hideout in a concealed pit.

M6: To the left of the upper zone, the hunter saws off the tusks requested by the queen, while Chaddanta quietly acquiesces.

M7: The final scene chosen by the artist, located at the very top of the medallion, portrays the hunter departing with the tusks.

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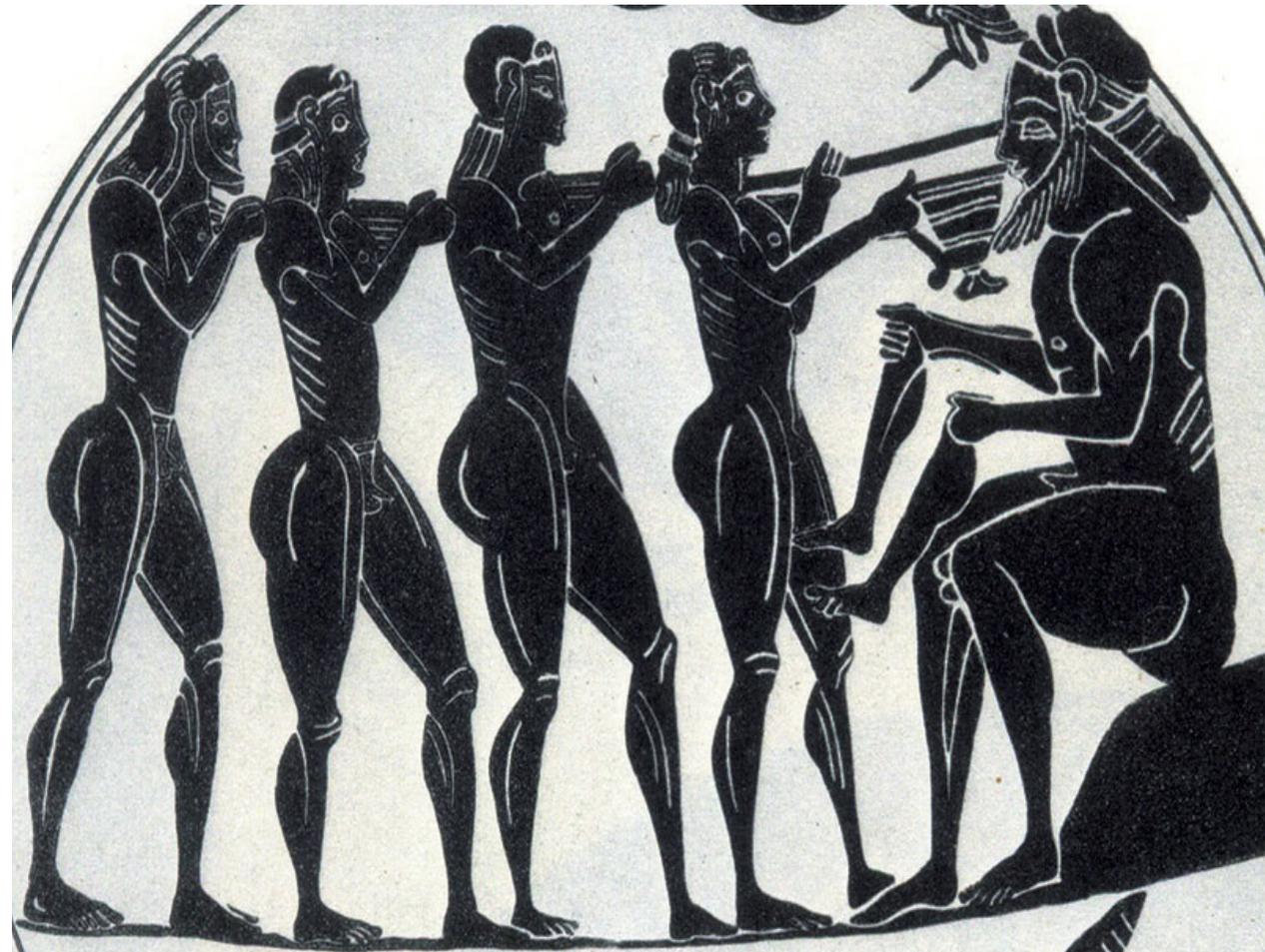
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Source:

[http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/  
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## Odysseus and Polyphemus

This story is one amongst the many adventures that Odysseus encountered. The Greeks (Odysseus and his men) find and enter a large cave, which is the home of the great Cyclops Polyphemus (a one eyed giant). When Polyphemus returns home with his flocks and finds Odysseus and his men, he blocks the cave entrance with a great stone, trapping the remaining Greeks inside. The Cyclops then crushes and immediately devours two of his men for his meal. The desperate Odysseus devises a clever escape plan. He devises a spear, gets the giant drunk enabling Odysseus and his men to pierce the great eye and escape. ([www.pantheon.org](http://www.pantheon.org))



SVN on a Spartan cup from the sixth century B.C. Image source: Wetizmann, 1947: 14

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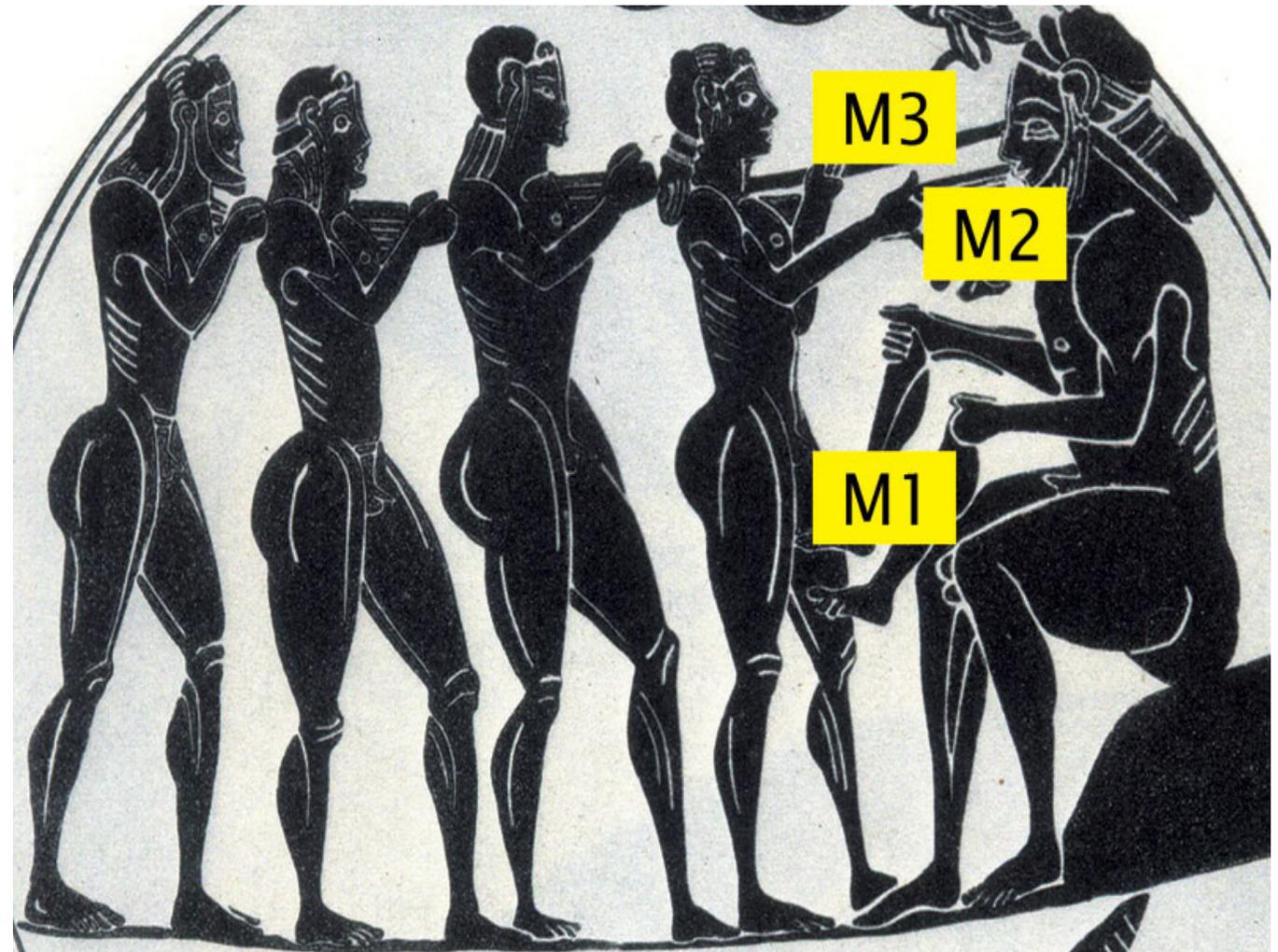
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The visual moments represented in the SVN are as follows—

M1. Polyphemus sits upright and holds the legs of one of Odysseus' companions whom he has just devoured.

M2. In front of him stands Odysseus, who offers a cup of wine in order to intoxicate him, expressed as.

M3. Odysseus holds with the other the beam which he is going to thrust into the giant's one eye, and he is accompanied by three companions, expressed as.



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Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/examples/story-ramayana>

## Story from the Ramayana

Story from the Ramayana: The demoness Shurpanakha assumes her real form.



From the Ramayana series as No.119, Pahari, 1st century; from the family workshop of Seu-Nainsukh, Chandigarh Museum, Chandigarh, No. E -98

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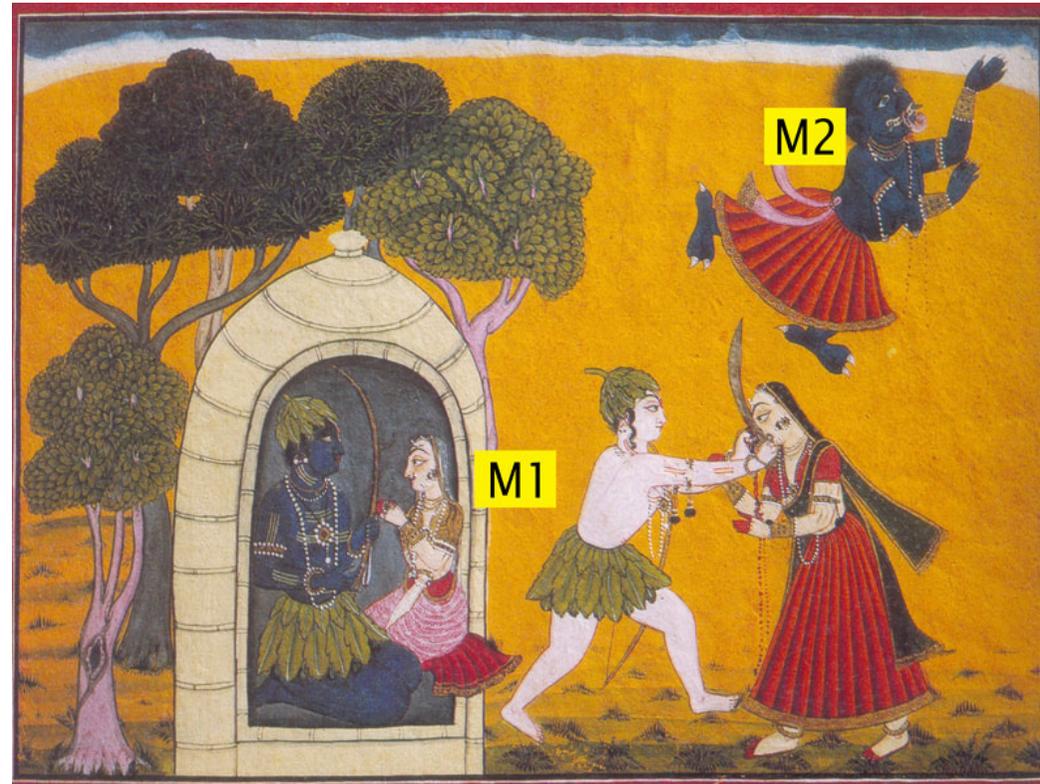
This story is from the epic Ramayana. In the long years of exile in which he was accompanied by his wife Sita and his younger brother Lakshmana, Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, walked a hazardous course. This painting depicts an extraordinary event, the first in the chain that culminated in the abduction of Sita and the final battle between Rama and the mighty Ravana, demon king of Lanka.

Shurpanakha, Ravan's sister, chances upon Rama and Lakshmana in their forest hut and falls head over heels in love with them. But despite her assumed form of a beautiful damsel, they make light of her advances and rail at her, for neither Rama nor Lakshmana could be tempted; nonetheless, Shurpanakha persists and will not take no for an answer. Lakshmana greatly incensed, decides to teach her a lesson. With his sword he cuts off her nose and ears, and in that instant, Shurpanakha assumes her true, hideous form. Wailing aloud and greatly enraged, she flies off towards Lanka, her brother's kingdom, to urge him to punish the two forest dwelling brothers.

The visual moments represented in the SVN are as follows:

M1.

M2.



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## Static Visual Narratives

Visual Stories on Static Mediums

by

Sherline Pimenta K., Ph.D. Student

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/examples/cupid-and-psyche>

## Cupid and Psyche

There are fifteen visual moments shown in the Fitzwilliam panel:



Jacopo del Sellaio, c.1442 – 1493; Cupid and Psyche panel 1, c.1473

M1: The sun god Apollo visits Endelechia in her bedchamber one night and impregnates her.

M2: A child is born, Psyche, who is brought up in the palace, tended by her 2 older sisters.

M3: She grows up into a girl of outstanding beauty and is admired by many suitors.

M4: Venus, the goddess of love, grows jealous at the honours paid to Psyche. She therefore sends her son Cupid to instill in Psyche an irresistible love for an ugly, worthless creature. But Cupid on catching sight of the girl is himself smitten.

M5: Meanwhile, although universally admired, Psyche's extreme beauty intimidates suitors and in a bid to see how they can find her a husband, her parents take her to consult the oracle of Apollo – her true father.

M6: The oracle says that Psyche is to be left on a mountain top where she will not meet her predestined husband – a divine but monstrous creature. Psyche is therefore dispatched to the mountain top.

M7: At the summit she is blown upon by Zephyr, the west wind.

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#### 3b. Odysseus and Polyphemus

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M8: She floats down into a valley.

M9: There she falls asleep on a bed of flowers.

M10: On waking she sees the palace of Cupid and goes in.

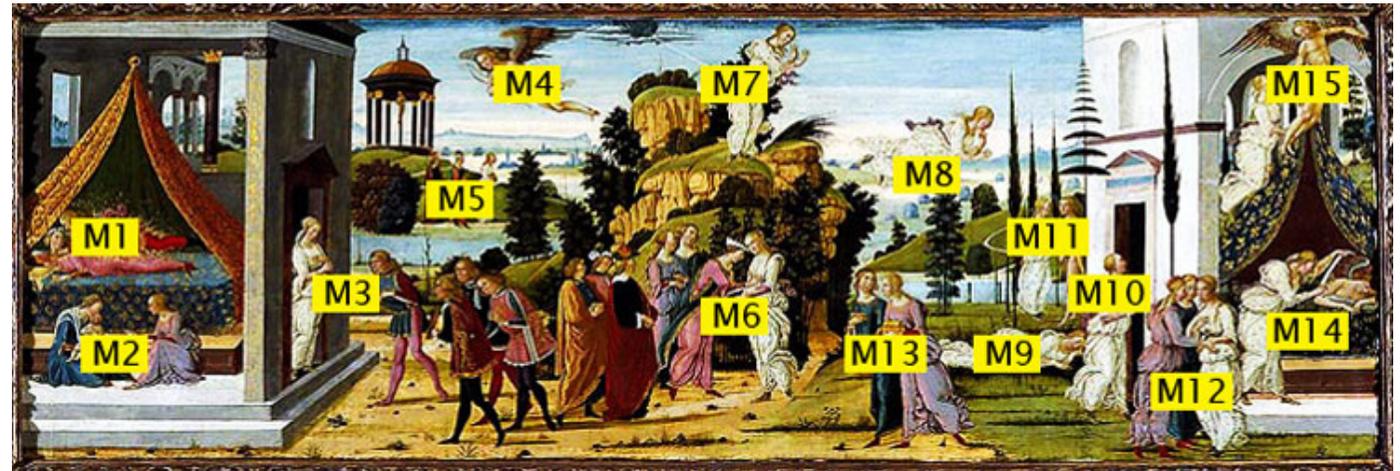
M11: Psyche is welcomed in the palace by invisible maids and sleeps with her new spouse, but is never allowed to set eyes upon him. This prohibition is essential for the story to continue as it does, but Sellaio unexpectedly includes a scene of Psyche standing before Cupid pleading with him to allow her sisters to visit.

M12: Her sisters do visit. They jealously persuade her to break her vow and take a look at her husband as she sleeps, convincing her that he must be the monster prophesied by Apollo.

M13: The sisters leave the palace, carrying gifts.

M14: At night Psyche lights a lamp and gazing upon her sleeping husband, is struck by his beauty.

M15: A spit of oil from the lamp wakes Cupid & he flies away. Psyche tries to stop him by clinging onto his leg.



The story continues on the next panel.

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Jacopo del Sellaio, c.1442 – 1493; Cupid and Psyche panel 11, c.1473

M16: Psyche cannot keep a hold on Cupid and falls to the ground.

M17: Cupid hovers above her lamenting his love and her disobedience.

M18: In sorrow Psyche attempts to drown herself, but the river throws her back out of its waters, where the god Pan consoles her.

M19: Psyche ten begs Ceres the goddess of corn to protect her and having been turned away.

M20: She turns to Juno, queen of the gods and goddess of childbirth for help. She learns from Juno that she is enslaved to Venus, and so seeks out that goddess to put an end to her sufferings.

M21: As she looks for her, one of Venus' servants catches her.

M22: and takes her into the goddess's presence where she is whipped and chastised.

M23: Meanwhile Cupid begs the king of gods Jupiter to be allowed to put an end to Psyche's torments and marry her.

M24: Finally we see the heavenly marriage taking place, attended by several gods & their attendants.

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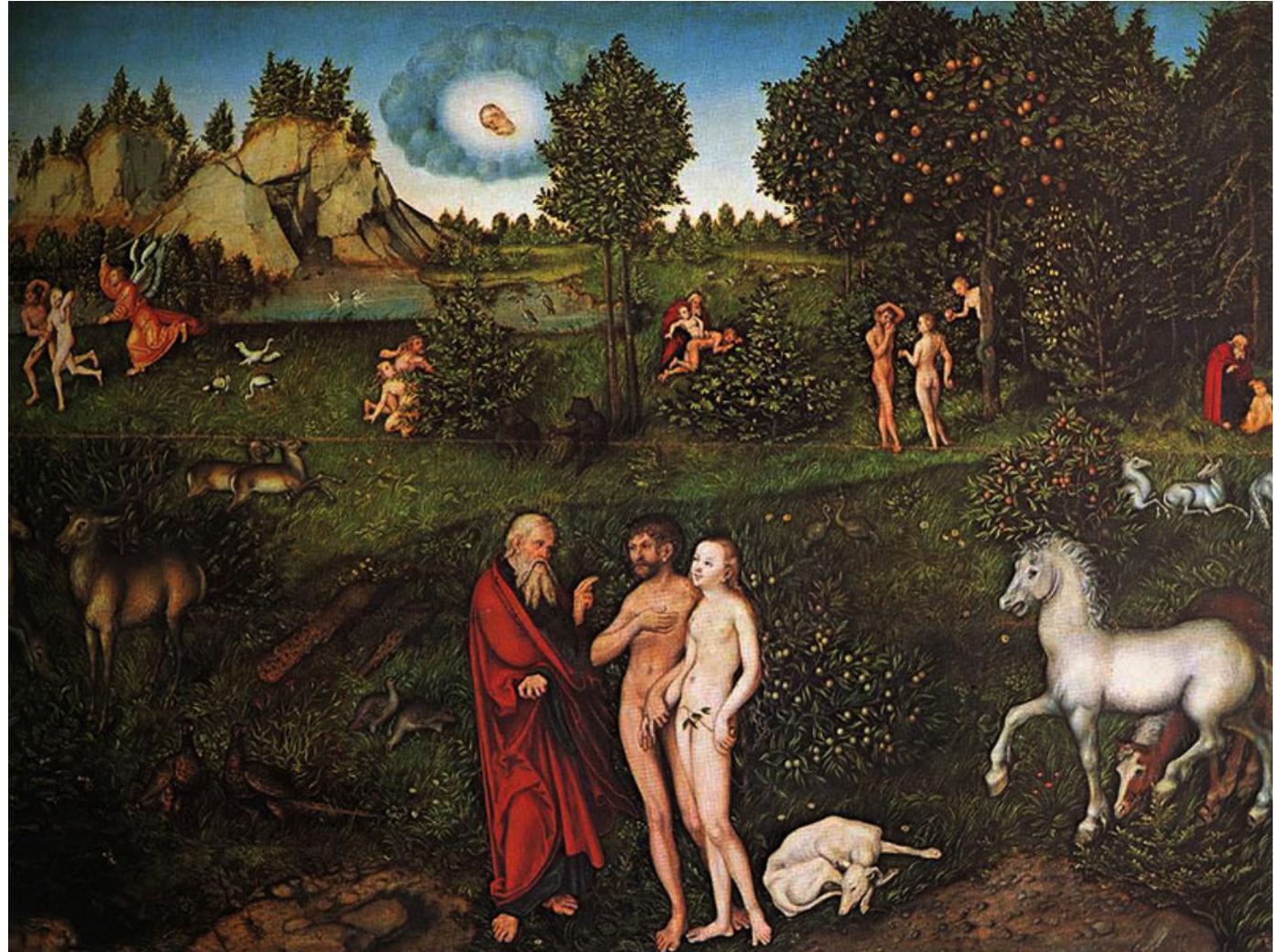
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/links>

## Links

- [IDC Journal - Design Thoughts - January 2009](#)
- [Useful resource e-links related to 'Visual Design' in India](#)
- [Visual Communication at IDC IIT Bombay](#)



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[http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/  
contact-details](http://dsource.in/resource/static-visual-narratives/contact-details)

## Contact Details

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