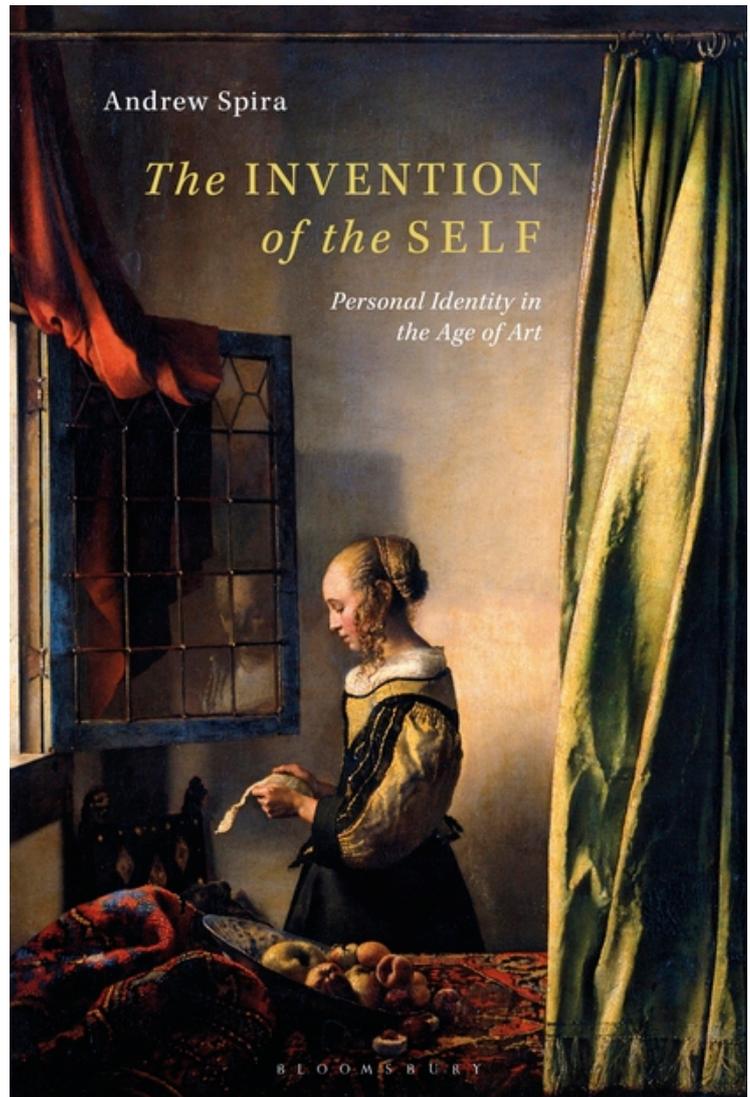


The Invention of the Self: Personal Identity in the Age of Art

Andrew Spira

The Invention of the Self: Personal Identity in the Age of Art proposes that the notion of personal identity is a social and psychological construction that has evolved over many centuries. While this idea has been widely discussed in recent years, it has tended to be seen from a theoretical or philosophical perspective. *The Invention of the Self* approaches the topic from a completely new point of view. Rather than rely on the thinking subject's attempts to identify itself consciously, and to articulate a sense of itself in words, it focuses on the traces that the self-sense has left in the fabric of its environment in the form of cultural conventions. These conventions developed, often *unconsciously*, in conjunction with the emergent self-sense and - so the book argues - in order to accommodate it. Covering a millennium a western European cultural history, the study amounts to an 'anthropology of personal identity in the West'.



The Invention of the Self follows a broadly chronological path, tracing the sense of personal identity from its emergence from the collectivity of the medieval Church to its consummation in the individualistic concept of artistic genius in the nineteenth century. On the one hand, it traces the development of tangible conventions, such as spaces, objects, images, gestures, behaviours and language, that were conducive to the exercise and propagation of the self-sense in the world. These conventions include private rooms, silent reading, mirrors, clocks and chairs; chief among them were the practices of painting and sculpture which were elevated from the level of 'craft' to that of high 'art', to the point at which the role of the

'In this radically new history of the self from the Middle Ages through the romantic period, Andrew Spira takes us on a grand tour of the evolving self-consciousness of the artist. Throughout he attends to the entire range of the material and cultural conditions that enabled particular notions of personal creativity to emerge [...] and makes it clear that the very notion of the autonomous self, along with our treasured notions of personal identity, are in fact the products of a long historical process.'

— *John Jeffries Martin, Professor of History, Duke University, USA*

'Beautifully written and extremely erudite [...] Spira's sensitivity, attention to detail, and understanding of psychological nuance are outstanding. This book deserves to be widely read.'

— *Raymond Martin, Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland College Park, USA*

'Through its innovative approach, grand scope and interdisciplinarity, this book offers a rich and exciting discourse that presents the idea of a cultural understanding of the self through the careful study of artefacts. This is a truly fascinating topic approached in a novel way.'

— *Marya Schechtman, Professor of Philosophy, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA*

The Invention of the Self proposes that personal identity is a psycho-social construction that has evolved over many centuries. While this notion has been widely discussed in recent years from a theoretical perspective, Andrew Spira approaches it from a completely new point of view, focusing on the traces that the self-sense has left in the fabric of its environment in the form of non-verbal cultural conventions. Covering a millennium of western European cultural history, this volume presents an anthropology of personal identity in the West.

Following a broadly chronological path, Spira traces the self-sense – both tangible signs of the self, such as images, objects and behaviours, and intangible dispositions, such as new sensibilities and experiences of emotion – from its emergence from the collectivity of the medieval Church to the concept of artistic genius in the nineteenth century. In doing so, he bridges a gap between cultural history and philosophy, and demonstrates that the sense of personal self is as much revealed by cultural conventions, and as a cultural convention, as it is observable to the mind as an object of philosophical enquiry.

Andrew Spira is an Art historian and educator who has worked as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Programme Director at Christie's Education London, UK.



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'artist' became an archetype of personal selfhood, for artist and audience alike. On the other hand, the book observes the emergence of intangible dispositions, such as new sensibilities and experiences of emotion, which functioned as mental environments in which the self-sense could thrive.

The Invention of the Self aims to bridge a gap that exists between the disciplines of cultural history and philosophy. With regard to cultural history (especially art history), it elicits profound, and even transformative, significances from its material that have been thoroughly overlooked.

Regarding philosophy, it highlights the crucial role that material culture plays in the articulation and understanding of philosophical values. Indeed, it argues that the sense of personal self is as much revealed by cultural conventions - and as a cultural convention - as it is observable to the mind as an independent object of philosophical enquiry. Reflecting the importance that the book ascribes to the role of non-verbal culture in the construction of the self-sense, it is generously illustrated.

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