C.G. BOERNER
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

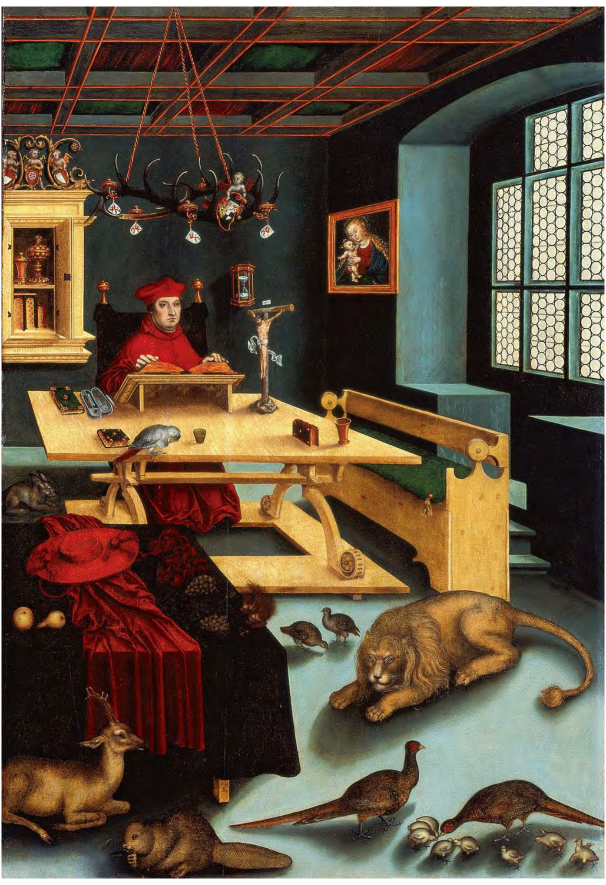
Distraction / Abwechslung
31 August 2023

Since Donald Trump was first indicted back in March of this year for one of his numerous alleged crimes, images began to appear showing the former president in mug shots or behind bars. More often than not, he is dressed in a color that also happens to perfectly match his hairdo as well as his complexion. And thanks to the omnipresence of the late-capitalist market in the form of multiple sales platforms, countless vendors seized the opportunity to offer endless variations of these images imprinted on a wide variety of merchandise, from T-shirts to mugs and stickers, their entrepreneurial initiatives further boosted by the fact that the potential market is as united as the United States are not. Emblazoned with “NOT GUILTY,” these tchotchkes appeal to roughly one half of the population, while the other half can opt for the logo “GUILTY A[s] F[uck].”

Life on Other Planets? What Webb Shows
Newsweek
WILL TRUMP DO TIME?
Inside the debate over charging, trying, convicting and jailing the former president

/ Products / Donald Trump Mugshot Jail Prison Long Sleeve Shirt
6'3"
6'0"
5'9"
5'6"
5'3"
5'0"
4'9"
4'6"
4'3"
DONALD TRUMP
44OROI4 - 45

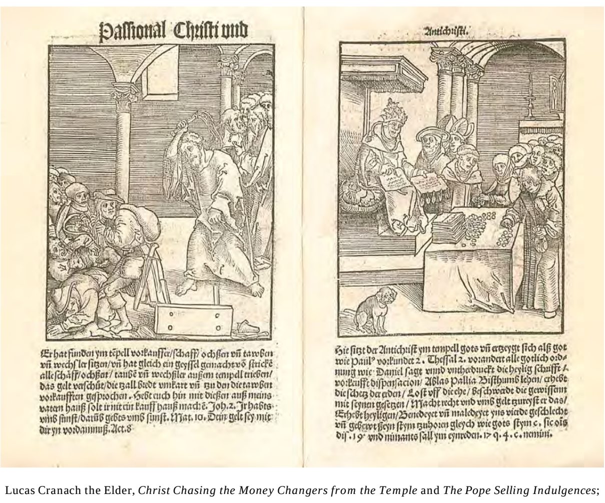
The merchants do not care either way, any more than certain artists did in times past. Lucas Cranach, a friend of Martin Luther, evidently had few qualms to fulfill what was arguably the largest painting commission of the day for the newly founded collegiate church in Halle. The patron was Elector Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg, whom Luther liked to refer to as the *Abgott von Halle* (*Abgott* means idol, but definitely not in the celebratory sense of “American Idol”).



Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Cardinal Albrecht von Brandenburg as St. Jerome*, 1525, oil on panel

(John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota)

While, starting in 1520, the workshop embarked on the production of dozens of altarpieces consisting of some 180 paintings, Cranach jotted down the designs for the comic-strip-like woodcuts illustrating Martin Luther’s *Passional Christi et Antichristi* to be published the following year.



Paſſional Chriſti und

Er hat funden ym tēpell vorkauffer/ſchaff/ ochßen vñ tawben vñ wechſler ſitzen/vñ hat gleich ein geyſſel gemacht võ ſtrickē alle ſchaff/ochßen/ taubē vñ wechßler außem tempell trieben/ das gelt verſchut/die tzall brede umkart vñ zu den die tawben vorkauffen geſprochen. Hebt euch hin mit dießen auß meins vatern hauß ſolt ir nit ein kauff hauß machē. Joh. 2. Jr habts umb ſunſt/darūb gebts umb ſunſt. Mat. 10. Dein gelt ſey mit dir yn vordamnuß. Act. 8

Antichriſti.

Hie ſitzt der Antichriſt ym tempell gots vñ erzeygt ſich alß got wie Paul⁹ vorkundet 2. Theſſal 2. vorandert alle gotlich ordnung wie Daniel ſagt unnd untherdruckt die heylig ſchrifft/ vorkaufft diſpenſacion/ Ablas Pallia Biſthumb lehen/ erhebt die ſchetz der erden/ Loſt uff die ehe/ beſchwerdt die gewiſſen mit ſeynen geſetzen/ Macht recht und umb gelt zureyſt er das/ Erhebt heyligen/Benedeyet vñ maledeyet yns vierde geſchlecht vñ gebewt ſeyn ſtym zuhoren gleych wie gots ſtym c. ſic oīs diſ. 19. und nimants ſall ym eynreden. 17 q. 4. c. nemini.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Christ Chasing the Money Changers from the Temple* and *The Pope Selling Indulgences*;

one of thirteen woodcut pairs illustrating Luther’s *Passional Christi und Antichristi*,

Wittenberg: Johann Rhau-Grunenberg 1521

The pamphlet exposed the excesses of the Roman Church and the Pope, whom Luther condemned as “the real Anti-Christ.” His foremost German representative in the German lands, however, was none other than Albrecht von Brandenburg, Cranach’s patron.

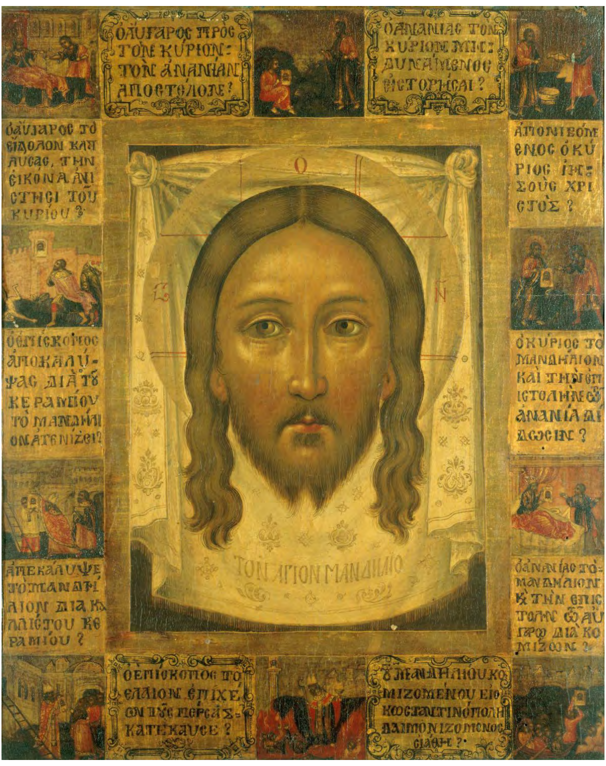
[Note: The art-historical discipline clearly remains somewhat unreconstructed since many scholars see Cranach’s refusal to take a clear side in the culture wars of his time as evidence of opportunism. Given the savviness of today’s corporations which bring in artists with all the correct credentials to decorate the gleaming lobbies of their headquarters, one might want to look at the historic situation in a different way. How about interpreting Albrecht von Brandenburg’s recruiting of Cranach as an indication of virtue signaling?]

*

Hero worshipping as well as its flipside, the visual defamation of one’s opponent, is probably as old as image making. More recently, though,—and I am referring here to roughly the last three millennia—this primeval urge has been substantially impeded, in Western culture at least, thanks to the second Mosaic commandment that “thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above” (Exodus 2:4–5). This made it difficult for such newcomers as the fledgling sect of Christians to adorn their message with pictures, especially since their hero, whom they believed to be the Messiah, had been murdered, risen from the dead, and vanished to heaven. There was nothing left to venerate save the blood-stained tools of his torture and death, and his foreskin (he was, after all, a Jewish boy). This required a certain resourcefulness on behalf of the vendors of devotional images and knickknacks of all sorts. It has occasionally been quipped that all splinters of the holy cross combined would make a great ship or even a forest dense enough to cover Mount Golgotha. (As to the Holy Prepuce: During the Middle Ages, depending on which study one follows, there were eight, twelve, fourteen, or even eighteen different holy foreskins in various European towns, all of which claimed to own the real thing.)

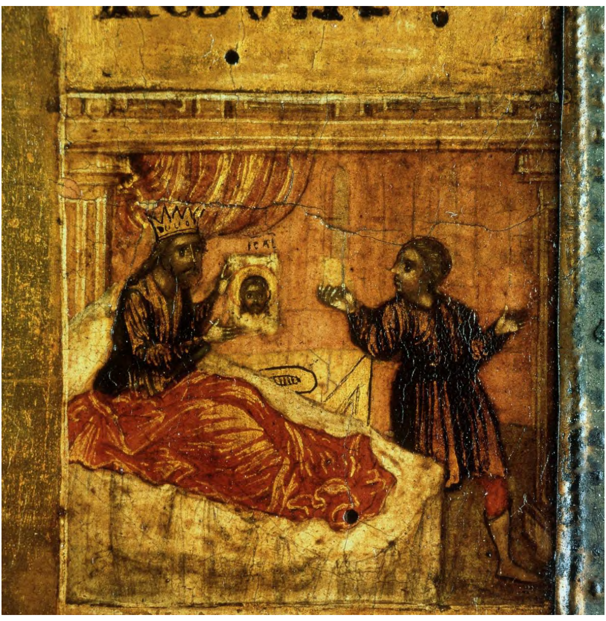
But what about images of Jesus himself? As son of God, he did fall under that unhelpful sanction writ in stone.

Fortunately, there have always been think tanks eager to bend the rules. Those early Christian scholars followed the example of the Talmudic Bible commentators and were as adept in "close reading" as later on the "New Critics" who dominated the literature faculties of the 1980s. Their solution was to point out that what the law explicitly forbids was not the images per se but their making. All that needed to be found were what the learned writers called *acheiropoieta* (Greek *a* = without, *cheir* = hand, *poiein* = to make; *non manufactum* in Latin), images "not made by human hands."



unknown Byzantinist artist, *Icon of the Mandylion of Edessa*, 18th century, tempera on panel (Royal Collection Trust, United Kingdom)

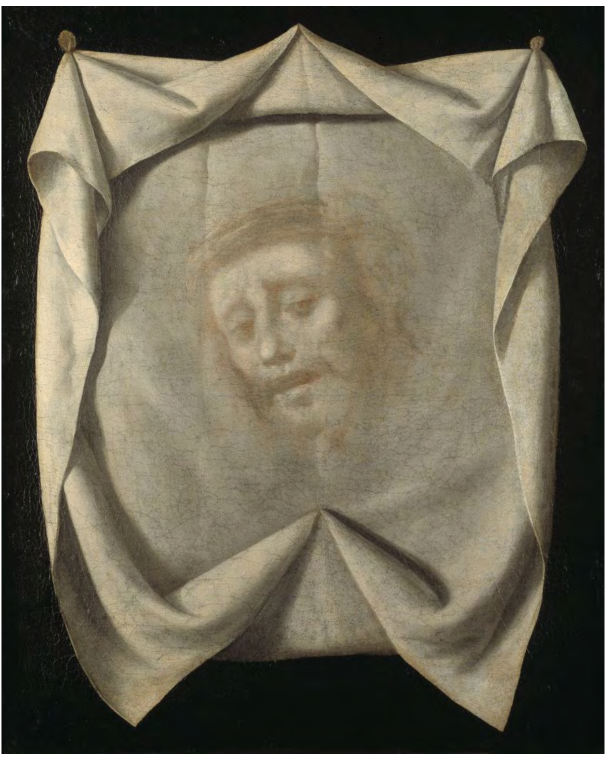
Starting in the sixth century, at a time when Christianity had already become the Roman Empire's state religion, various legends began to circulate of such miraculous images. One tells the story of King Abgar of Edessa (now Urfa, in Turkey) who fell ill and wondered if Jesus might be able to help him. His messenger Ananias happened to be a painter and, since Jesus was unavailable, he tried, but failed, making at least a portrait of him to bring back to his king.



detail of the previous image, showing how the messenger Ananias presents the letter and the cloth bearing the image of Christ to King Abgar of Edessa

Yet when Christ washed his face and dried it with a cloth, the cloth retained his likeness. Instead of a portrait, the untalented painter-messenger brought this *mandylion* (from Arabic *mandil* for veil and Latin *mantele* for small cloth) back to Edessa. Upon seeing it, the king was healed and, out of gratitude, converted to Christianity. After having worked further miracles, the *mandylion* was taken to Constantinople in 944 where it was lost during the sack of the city at the hands of devout crusaders in 1204.

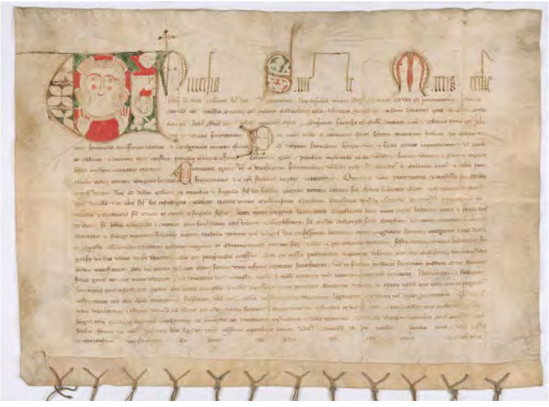
Conveniently, a different *archeiropoieton* was soon discovered: The Veil of Veronica, also known as the *sudarium* (from Latin *suder* for sweat). It has different origin stories found in the gospels and elsewhere, including one suggesting that it preserved Christ's likeness when he sweat blood on the Mount of Olives.



Francisco de Zurbaran, *The Veil of St. Veronica*, ca. 1635–40, oil on canvas (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm)

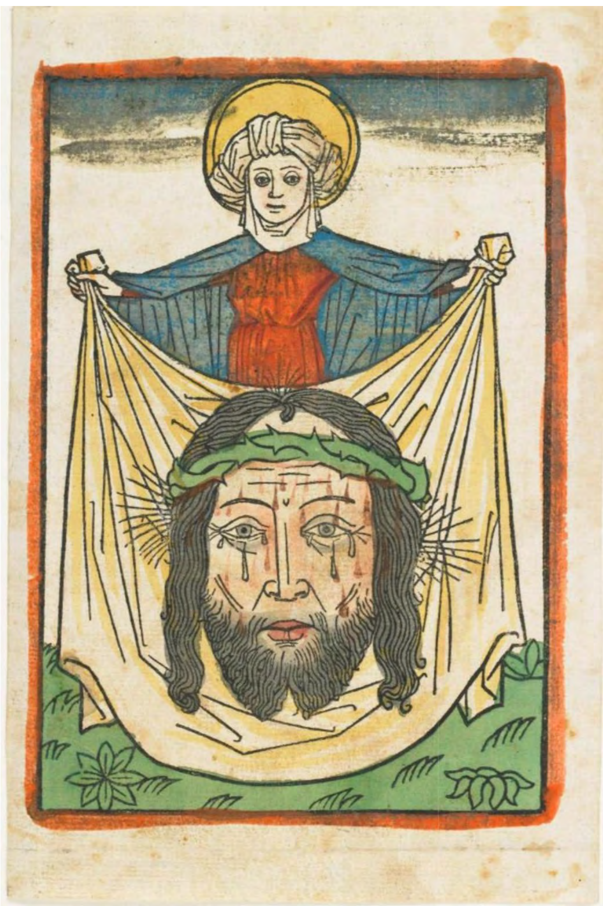
By the thirteenth century, these various story lines came together through the introduction of a woman named Veronica—note the anagram: Veronica / *vera icon* (true image)—into the Passion narrative. Around 1300, in the influential Bible of Roger d'Argenteuil, the story had obtained its canonical form:

While on her way to the marketplace to sell her cloth, Veronica encountered the procession to Calvary. She took pity on Jesus and gave him a piece of cloth with which to dry his face; after he had done so, an imprint of his face in blood and sweat appeared on the cloth.



letter of indulgence from 1329, issued for the Vilich monastery near Bonn (Stadtarchiv, Bonn)

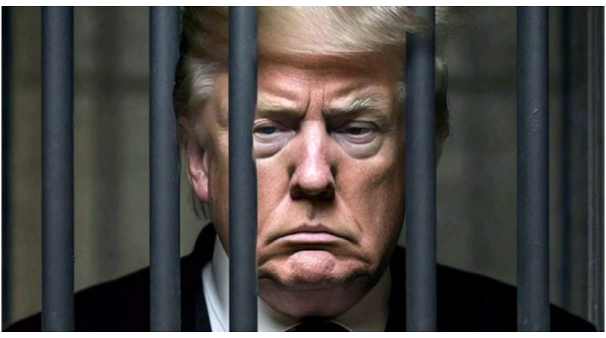
Pope Innocent III, sensing a commercial opportunity, issued an indulgence that offered a relief of ten days from purgatory. And the more successful the cult around Veronica's Veil became, the more time-off from purgatory was promised to those who prayed in front of it.



anonymous German *Briefmaler*, *Veronica Showing the Sudarium*, ca. 1475, hand-colored woodcut

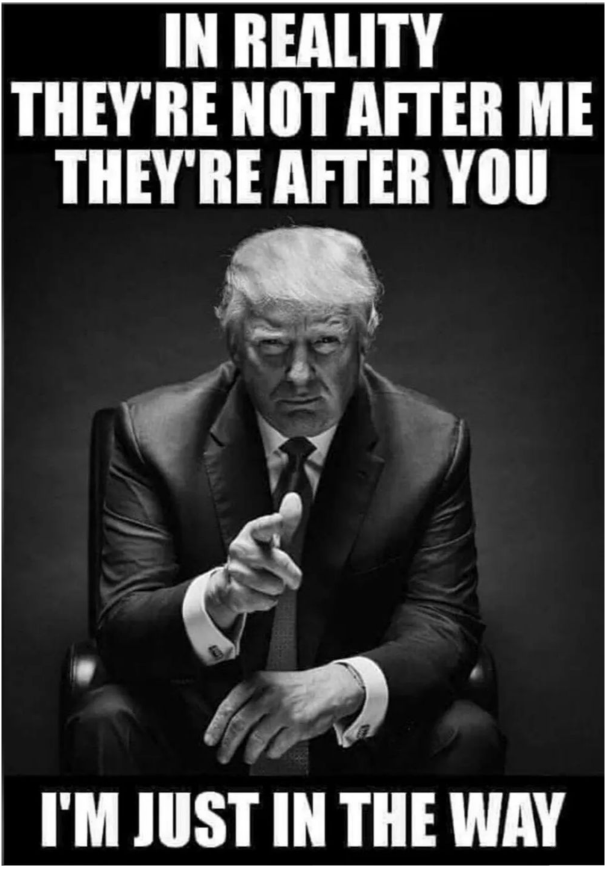
(Minneapolis Institute of Art)

With the advent of printmaking in the fifteenth century, a totally new way of maximizing profit (beyond merely boosting Rome's tourist industry) opened up—as long as that unfortunate Second Commandment was conveniently forgotten. The fine print of the indulgence contract, so to speak, now included a waiver stating that prayers could be recited not only before the relic itself, but also before its replicas. Copies of the Veil of Veronica, both painted and printed, abounded, making it ultimately Rome's most venerated reliquary and, in turn, further increasing the number of pilgrims. Talk about a win win situation! (The strategy worked well until that pesky Augustinian monk in a tiny backwater called Wittenberg came along with his pedantically close adherence to the Biblical text—and more than one iconoclasm insued.)

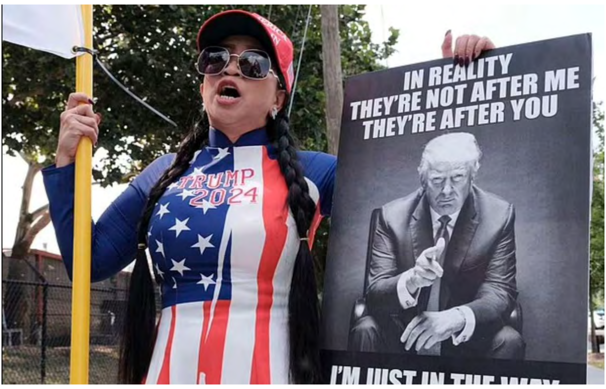


All of this shows that it took the followers of Jesus centuries to come up with a viable marketing strategy for the "True Image." In contrast, the campaign strategists of the former president needed only a few days between the first indictment and its exploitation to create added value. Admittedly, significant help came from the opposing camp which had arguably been the first to promote the image of "Trump in jail." Yet, as mentioned above, the "Trump Imaging Complex" (TIC) instantaneously appropriated this brilliant idea by merely switching captions.

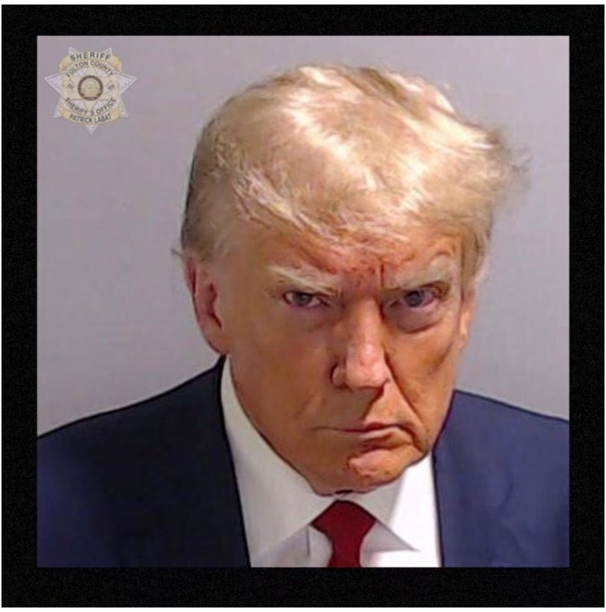
If anyone thinks this brief excursus into the origins of the *vera icon* is blasphemous in this context, please do remember that the recent Trump campaign's most fundamental argumentative twist has been the clever inversion of perpetrator and victim. To deflect from the former president's outrageous (and probably indefensible) crimes, the focus is now solely on the "suffering" that has to be endured by the accused at the hands of his persecutors turned prosecutors.



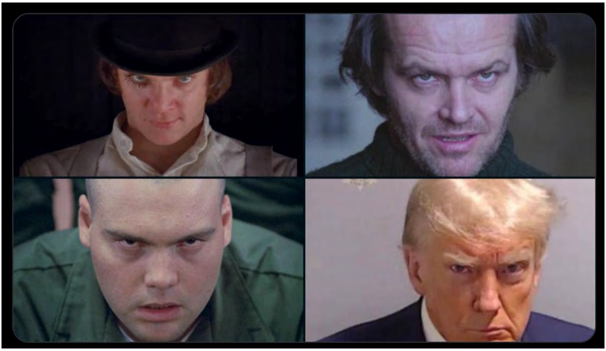
Instead of the fraudulent politician he is, Trump is now presented as a martyr. This is where the "Jesus complex" comes into play, and there is clearly no shortage of true believers.



Nonetheless, we live in a time of wide-spread skepticism about all and everything—actual news that is deemed fake, images that have been manipulated or even entirely generated by AI. Therefore, everybody surely knows that those devotional items pushed by the TIC are not "really real." Now, however, all those doubts can be brushed aside. It looks as if Fulton County Sheriff Pat Labat, merely "following normal practices," has finally provided the world with a copyright-free "true image," an indeed "veritable" *vera icon*, authenticated with the official seal of the sheriff's office.



But isn't the logo smaller than those in the mug shots of his co-conspirators? And how could Trump get away with posing in such a mannered way? One still feels as if caught in an endless hall of mirrors. Are we seeing “the real Donald” or a carefully studied posture? And if the latter, did nobody in the TIC foresee what a witty commentator on what-was-formerly-known-as Twitter immediately pointed out, namely that Trump’s forward-tilted stare at the camera does not make him look tough and defiant but like someone at the peak of derangement in a Stanley Kubrick movie? Could this perhaps even be the intention?



All possible interpretations apply. The new *vera icon* is un-predetermined and can be used in any way marketable: “Never surrender!” or “I will get you after all!” or “He’s totally lost it!” Take your pick. What counts is the attention, and the money that it washes into the campaign coffers (not least to fight those lawsuits, especially since there are probably more to come). In his analysis of the mugshot as “Portrait of a Frightened Boy-Man” in *Hyperallergic*, David Levi Strauss mentions a fundraising email sent out soon after “the mug shot seen around the world” was posted. In it, Trump petulantly blames “many of those vendors [who] are just trying to profit off of President Trump’s persecution without even supporting him! Not nice!” Perhaps it is here that a glimpse of “the real Donald” finally emerges in what is yet another farcical and well-rehearsed performance of defiant bluster. And yes, it is truly not nice.

Copyright © 2023 C.G. Boerner, All rights reserved.