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# THE DROWNED MUSE

THE UNKNOWN WOMAN OF THE  
SEINE'S SURVIVALS FROM NINETEENTH-  
CENTURY MODERNITY TO THE PRESENT



*Anne-Gaëlle Saliot*

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# The Drowned Muse

*Casting the Unknown Woman  
of the Seine Across  
the Tides of Modernity*

ANNE-GAËLLE SALIOT

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## *Note about Translations*

Please note that all translations of non-English material are the author's, unless otherwise indicated in the notes.



# Introduction

Mir war darinnen ein Gespenst erschienen. Den Ort, an dem es sich zu schaffen machte, hätte ich schwerlich schildern können. Doch hatte er mit einem Ähnlichkeit, der mir bekannt war, wenn auch unzugänglich.

Walter Benjamin, 'Ein Gespenst', *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*<sup>1</sup>

A ghost had appeared to me. I could hardly have described its workings. Yet it resembled somebody I knew, but who was inaccessible to me.

Walter Benjamin, 'A Ghost', *Berlin Childhood around 1900*<sup>2</sup>

This is a study of the extraordinary destiny, in the history of European culture, of an object which could, at first glance, seem quite ordinary. It tells the story of a mask, the cast of a young girl's face simply and enigmatically entitled *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, *The Unknown Woman of the Seine*, and its subsequent metamorphoses as a cultural figure. *L'Inconnue de la Seine* names an object which enjoyed astonishing popularity during the 1920s and 1930s and that still today belongs to a European collective imaginary: the death mask of a young girl who supposedly drowned herself in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. Legend has it that the forensic scientist tending to the corpse awaiting identification on a block of ice at the Paris Morgue was so struck by her allure that he captured in plaster the contours of her face, threatened as it was by bodily decay. The mask was—and still is—famous for its ambiguous beauty: its serene smile, its eyes forever closed, the delicacy of its features. Its defined cheekbones are set into greater relief by the polished surface, its closed eyes are trimmed with matted eyelashes that give the impression of still being wet, and its hairstyling evokes a cameo. The mask was certainly resculpted after the mould was taken, a practice inherited from the Italian Quattrocento and also common in the nineteenth century among makers of casts.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Ein Gespenst', *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV-1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), p. 279.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, translated by Peter Szondi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

This face, whose power of fascination endures, emerged out of the shadows of anonymity and encountered a strange destiny. The unknown girl, also commonly called *La Joconde du suicide* ('The Mona Lisa of Suicide'), became the object of an obsessive interest that started in the late 1890s, reached its peak in the 1930s, and continues to reverberate today. The advent of mechanical and later digital reproduction allowed her mask to be copied, commodified in drawings, postcards, and photographs, used in films, and later widely disseminated over the Internet.

Aby Warburg defines art history, the history of images, as 'a ghost story for grown-ups'.<sup>3</sup> This book is, therefore, in more than one sense 'a ghost story for grown-ups', narrating the fascinating aura of a cultural object that crosses epochs, geographical and linguistic frontiers, and new fascinations embodied in the various cultural forms it has produced in return. It tells of a figure's power to return, to survive, to reappear—to haunt. The cast is something or someone you cannot forget, but that you have difficulty identifying or locating. It weaves and unveils a web of origins. The ramifications of this haunting power are the subject matter of the present work. It charts the trajectory of this cultural artefact—at once object and image—over a little more than a century. Concentrating on the cultural processes underlying the phenomenon of the Inconnue, it explores the meanings invested in a figure as well as the historical, critical, and theoretical questions that may raise. The Inconnue's many reverberations are offered here as a corpus and the source of methodological and theoretical reflections, as both an object of study and a theoretical object.

But what is the Inconnue de la Seine exactly? And who was the girl? Frequently reproduced, the features of the mask have become increasingly blurred and indistinct, which has endowed it with a timeless quality. Looking for an original, we might go to Lorenzi's studio, on the rue Racine near the Odeon Theatre in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, one of the last shops selling casts and death masks in France. Founded by Italian cast-makers who settled in the French capital during the nineteenth century, it was the first place to produce copies of the Inconnue and it continues to be famous for selling plaster casts of the supposedly drowned girl. Lorenzi's great-niece, the present owner, would tell you that Italian moulders were accustomed to swapping their mould casts, and switching original moulds and copies, a practice that might account for the cast's loss of definition.

The uses and meanings attributed to the mask are also bewildering. According to Lorenzi's descendant, the Inconnue was first utilized as a model for head studies at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. The mask thus invites comparison with the nineteenth-century *têtes d'expression*, which were widely used at the time in the teaching of sculpture. Such teaching consisted

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to his wife dated 2 July 1929.

essentially of inculcating mimetic skills: art students were asked to reproduce methods with great precision and several prize competitions were established, which indicates that the *têtes d'expression* were held in high esteem.<sup>4</sup> There is a strong resemblance between the Inconnue de la Seine and certain female *têtes d'expression*, such as *La Pudeur* by Grevenich, which won the 1826 prize, or *Madame Armand Jean* (1902) by Besnard.<sup>5</sup> Taken *en ronde-bosse* ('in the round'), the head studies, characterized by languid and peaceful features, evoke the Inconnue de la Seine.

For the catalogue of the 2001 exhibition *Le Dernier Portrait* (*The Last Portrait*) held at the Musée d'Orsay about the anthropological and aesthetic tradition of portraying deceased persons, Hélène Pinet wrote an article on the Inconnue de la Seine in which she describes an anonymous photograph dating from the 1910s that depicts a model in a lace negligee standing in a setting suggestive of an art studio, with the Inconnue hanging on the wall (Fig. 0.1).<sup>6</sup> It is possible today to find cheap plaster copies of the Inconnue in the shops near the Beaux-Arts that have traditionally provided students with materials and tools. No doubt the Inconnue is still utilized in the training of sculptors and painters. Lorenzi's great-niece recalls having seen, in the 1970s, wax and plastic models of the Inconnue's head being used in beautician training schools: for a time at least, young girls were learning to apply make-up on the regular features of a supposed drowned girl.

The Inconnue was, above all, considered a decorative item and sold as such on a massive scale. Commenting on the success of the Inconnue in his study of modern suicide, *The Savage God*, Al Alvarez characterizes her popularity as a genuine cult. He emphasizes the various ways in which reproductions of both the story and the figure of the Inconnue de la Seine, at a specific moment in time and over a long period, confirm its resonance for a wide audience. Incessant repetition, both of commentary and rhetoric—over the course of a century, in at least five countries, and in over thirty works—designates the Inconnue as the focus of deeply rooted and widely held cultural preoccupations. Alvarez locates more precisely the emergence of the Inconnue as a popular icon in the aftermath of the Romantic mythology of suicide:

This is a cult of suicide which has very little to do with real death. Thus early nineteenth-century romanticism—as a pop phenomenon rather than a serious creative movement—was dominated by the twin stars of Chatterton and Young Werther, the ideal was 'to cease upon midnight with no pain

<sup>4</sup> A. Le Normand-Romain, A. Pingeot, and I. Lemaistre, eds, *La Sculpture française au dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Examples given by Fabien Petiot, 'L'Inconnue de la Seine et le surréalisme', Master's thesis (University of Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Pinet, 'L'Eau, la femme, la mort. Le mythe de l'Inconnue de la Seine', in *Le Dernier Portrait*, catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition *Le Dernier Portrait* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2002), Cat. 46, p. 170.



Figure 0.1. Woman in an art studio with the Inconnue on the wall, Anonymous, c.1910

whilst still young and beautiful and full of promise.' [. . .] One hundred years later a similar cult grew up around the Inconnue de la Seine. During the 1920s and 1930s, all over the continent, nearly every student of sensibility had a plaster cast of her death mask: a young, full, sweet smiling face which seems less dead than peacefully sleeping. I am told that a whole generation of German girls modelled their looks on her. [. . .] There is no doubt at all about her cult.<sup>7</sup>

This description recalls the figure of the Romantic Muse, conjuring up images of the vanishing lady. Yet, while referring to the mask as a singular embodiment of a larger Romantic discourse on suicide, Alvarez reveals the ways in which its cult transformed the Inconnue de la Seine into a decorative object: the success of the plaster cast soon prompted a serial reproduction and a correlative process of commodification. In France and Germany, plaster casts and imitations of all sizes, as well as photographs, were sold. An anonymous article published in *La Presse* around 1951 evokes the success of the mask as a tourist item:

La mystérieuse identité de l'Inconnue de la Seine n'est pas encore découverte. Tous les touristes étrangers ne quittent pas la capitale en fourrant dans leurs valises une tour Eiffel de vingt centimètres de haut, un presse-papier représentant l'Arc de Triomphe ou un Sacré-Cœur en miniature. Beaucoup emportent en souvenir de leur visite à Paris quelques belles reproductions d'un des innombrables chefs-d'œuvre conservés dans nos musées, ou un moulage, toujours le même, l'Inconnue de la Seine.<sup>8</sup>

The mysterious identity of the Unknown Woman of the Seine has not yet been discovered. Foreign tourists do not leave the capital without having stuffed their suitcases with an eight-inch Eiffel Tower, a paperweight representing the Arc de Triomphe or a miniature Sacré-Cœur. Many take away a souvenir of their stay in Paris, some beautiful prints of the numerous works of art preserved in our museums, or a moulding, always the same, the Unknown Woman of the Seine.

The Inconnue was not merely a popular commodity; rather, her fame derives from an association between her image and the legend surrounding her. The figure took shape simultaneously as an image and a series of stories and legends that came to circulate alongside the commercial sale of the mask. Although numerous people, intrigued by the face and the legends, have scrutinized the registers and Parisian archives for any trace of her existence, no precise date or identity has ever been established. While conducting research for an article on the literary manifestations of the mask, David Phillips wrote to the Préfecture

<sup>7</sup> Al Alvarez, *The Savage God* (London: Norton, 1971), pp. 156–7.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted by René Vautrin in 'L'Inconnue de la Seine', *L'Intermédiaire des chercheurs et des curieux*, no. 195, June 1967, pp. 550–1.

de Paris in 1982, only to learn that they had no files on the Inconnue.<sup>9</sup> As for Hélène Pinet, she too consulted the archives of the Préfecture without success.<sup>10</sup> No trace of the Inconnue's actual body was ever found. She is, in a way, to quote Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, a true *inconnue des archives*.<sup>11</sup> The face remains, insistent, but many stories, none more credible than the others, continue to overlap. The story behind the mask never emerged as a stable and unified narrative; rather, new narrative elements or cultural codes were woven incrementally into successive stories. The unknown author of the article from *La Presse*, quoted by Vautrin in his own inquiry into the Inconnue, highlights the blurred and shifting oral tradition that was built up around the mask, which Vautrin locates in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He writes of two different narratives.

The first revolves around a certain English gentleman, a Mr. William Wood, who claimed to have recognized in the face of the Inconnue the features of a young noble Russian girl named Valérie, who supposedly ended up in the Parisian underworld of prostitution and finally decided to take her own life. Wood even tried to claim that the Inconnue's tomb could be found in the Père-Lachaise, the famous cemetery in Paris. Sacheverell Sitwell, the British art and architecture critic, gave credit to the story of suicide and dated the mask from the 1870s or 1880s on the basis of the mask's hairstyle. An even earlier date is supported by a picture of the mask in Charles Brague and Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1867 drawing manual, along with the busts of Lucius Junius Brutus and Homer<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 0.2).

This version of events was later dismissed in favour of that of the *mouleur*, Lorenzi's grandson, reported by Marius Grout in the 'Postface' to *Poèmes à l'Inconnue* (1943), his series of poems dedicated to the Inconnue. In this anecdote, the death of the Inconnue itself is reassessed, the face displayed by the plaster cast being too beautiful and well preserved to be that of a drowned woman. Marius Grout adds another facet: he considers the Inconnue to be an effigy of a famous model working for artists sometime

<sup>9</sup> David Phillips, 'In Search of an Unknown Woman', *Neophilologus*, no. 66, 1982, p. 326.

<sup>10</sup> *Le Dernier Portrait*, n. 39, p. 190: 'Empreintes en tout genre ou inquiétante étrangeté', *Photographie*, no. 8, September 1985. David Phillips also relates in the footnotes of his article how his letter addressed to the Préfecture de Paris produced an unintentionally amusing reply stating that no information on the Inconnue was available in the archives: 'J'ai l'honneur de vous faire savoir que parmi les dossiers des personnes décédées non identifiées aucune ne porte le titre de l'Inconnue de la Seine. Il est permis de penser qu'il ne s'agit là que d'une légende', n. 18, p. 327.

<sup>11</sup> I am thinking here of their archival work on the *lettres de cachet*; see Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Le Désordre des familles. Lettres de cachet des archives de la Bastille* (Paris: Gallimard/Juliard, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Édouard Papet, 'Pour une histoire du masque au XIXe siècle', *Masques de Carpeaux à Picasso* (Musée d'Orsay: Éditions Hazan, 2008), p. 20.

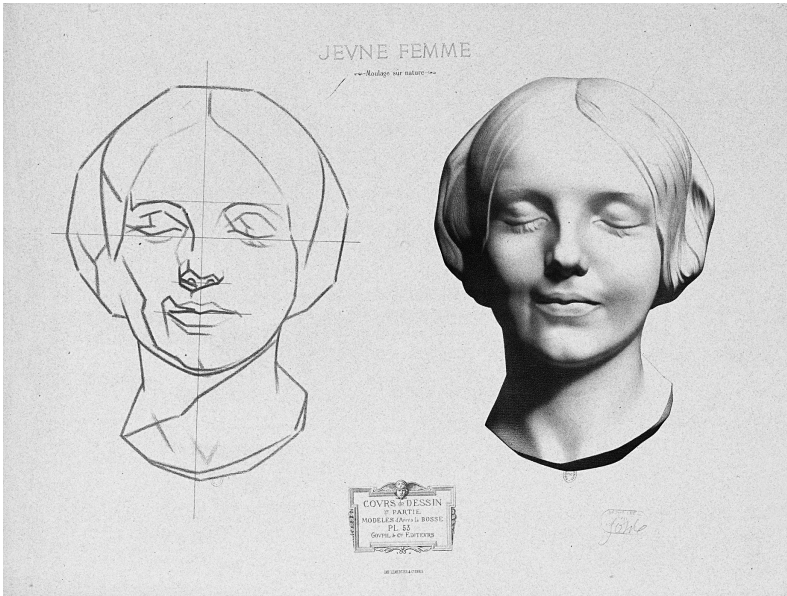


Figure 0.2. Charles Brague and Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Cours de dessin. Ire partie, Modèles d'après la Bosse*, 1867

around 1875.<sup>13</sup> Alvarez, for his part, contributes to the genealogy of narratives on the Inconnue by also supposing that the plaster cast might be the mask of a living woman, and privileges the story over the object: he relates how a researcher is said to have followed the trail of the Inconnue to the Hamburg factory that produced the plaster cast and encountered the living model in the features of the daughter of the manufacturer, who had himself found sudden prosperity through the reproduction of her death image.<sup>14</sup>

Verdicts and hypotheses of suicide, and even murder, however, have prevailed as explanations of the Inconnue's fate, heightening its mystery and drama. This matrix of tragic narratives undoubtedly contributes to the fame of the object. The power of fascination exerted by the mask over the beholder and the reader resides in its lack of a clear referent and in the story's ability to keep reverberating and reconstructing itself over time. The prismatic function of the cast, its capacity to spark and produce fictions, to trigger projections, to be a vehicle of and a locus for memory, recalls the figure of the Muse, the fictive or real woman invoked as a source

<sup>13</sup> Marius Grout, *Poèmes à l'Inconnue*, 'Postface' (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1943), p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Alvarez, *The Savage God*, pp. 156–8.

of inspiration by poets, and transmuted into fictional representations of aspects of the poetic imagination. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

La Muse anime, soulève, met en branle. Elle veille moins sur la forme que sur la force. Ou plus exactement: elle veille avec force sur la forme.<sup>15</sup>

The Muse animates, stirs up, excites, arouses. She keeps watch less over the form than over the force. Or more precisely: she keeps watch forcefully over the form.<sup>16</sup>

The drowned woman has paradoxically breathed life into many stories and images, thereby watching forcefully over forms.

According to Pinet, the starting point for the inspirational quest for the unknown woman and drowned muse, which can also be seen as a treasure hunt or a criminal investigation, must have been Lorenzi's shop itself. The first English translator of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*) (1910) was intrigued enough by Rilke's indirect references to the boutique and the mask to be the first—though far from the last—to visit Lorenzi's as part of an investigation into the mysterious mould.<sup>17</sup>

## THE DISCONTINUOUS CHRONOLOGY OF A SOCIAL, LITERARY, AND ARTISTIC PHENOMENON

A brief sketch of the Inconnue's artistic occurrences allows us to trace more precisely the circulation and notoriety of the object among both popular and intellectual audiences. There exists a great number of references to the mask reaching back into the nineteenth century. The Inconnue appears for the first time in a narrative as early as 1898 in an English tale entitled *The Worshipper of the Image* by the Symbolist author Richard Le Gallienne.<sup>18</sup> The narrative is interesting primarily for the way in which it refashions many codes of the nineteenth-century fantastic tale. The story's chief importance, at least to this study, resides in its status as the earliest textual occurrence of the Inconnue: it allows us to ascertain a starting date for the circulation of the Inconnue in Europe. The figure of the Inconnue then spread with exceptional rapidity. In 1910, Rilke published *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which alludes to

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Les Muses* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, translation Peggy Kamuf (Meridian, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. i.

<sup>17</sup> *Le Dernier Portrait*, p. 189: 'Le point de départ de ce jeu de piste qui, jusqu'à présent ne mène nulle part, reste le mouleur de la rue Racine. C'est sans doute le traducteur anglais de Rilke qui, le premier, s'était rendu chez M. Lorenzi. Il n'était que le premier d'une longue liste de chercheurs à faire cette démarche.'

<sup>18</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Worshipper of the Image* (London: John Lane, 1898).

the mask and was translated into French in 1923.<sup>19</sup> In 1924, Albert Rudomine, famous for his photographs of nudes and sculptures, made a portrait of the Inconnue: *La Vierge Inconnue, canal de l'Ourcq* (*The Unknown Virgin, canal de l'Ourcq*) (Fig. 0.3). Around the same year, he produced a photomontage in which the mask was shown floating among water lilies (Fig. 0.4). In 1926, the German historian Ernst Benkard published a collection of death masks called *Das Ewige Antlitz* (*Undying Faces*).<sup>20</sup> This collection of 123 masks, all illustrated with captioned photographs, represents the first serious account of the Western practice of funerary modelling. The mask of the Inconnue closes the collection. Eventually published in nineteen editions, the book met with very rapid success. It was translated into French in 1927, and into English at Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press in 1929 (we can, in passing, reflect on the impact of the drowned maiden's image on a writer who committed suicide by drowning). That same year, Yvonne Chevalier took a photograph displaying the face of a young girl obviously in the process of drowning herself. It was, of course, named *L'Inconnue de la Seine* (Fig. 0.5). Also in 1929, the photographer and film director Willy Zielke, a member of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity)<sup>21</sup> mainly known for his pictures of commodities, took a snapshot of the mask (Fig. 0.6).

The 1930s were the peak years of the mask. In 1931, the French poet Jules Supervielle published a collection of short stories for children, *L'Enfant de la haute mer* (*The Child of the High Seas*), which included a tale whose title—'L'Inconnue de la Seine'—is a direct reference to the mask. In the story, fanciful speculation over the fate of the young girl after her death constitutes the narrative frame. The young girl is pictured as she drifts down the river towards the sea: 'elle allait sans savoir que sur son visage brillait un sourire tremblant mais plus résistant qu'un sourire de vivante' ('she didn't know that a smile, trembling but more resistant than a living woman's smile, shone on her face').<sup>22</sup> This story, shot through like most of the stories of *L'Enfant de la haute mer* by the image of a dead young girl, is a narrative characteristic of Supervielle's work as a whole: it is located at that site in which life and death merge. The face of the young girl with its 'sourire d'errante noyée'<sup>23</sup> ('drowned wanderer's smile') recurs as a haunting figure. On 4 November of the same year, the German actress and novelist Herta Pauli published in

<sup>19</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 [1910]).

<sup>20</sup> Ernst Benkard, *Das Ewige Antlitz. Eine Sammlung von Totenmasken*, Frankfurter Verlags-Anstalt, Berlin, 1926; English translation, *Undying Faces. A Collection of Death Masks* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

<sup>21</sup> New Objectivity originated from a rejection of Expressionism. The term was invented in 1925, in Mannheim, at an exhibition that assembled a collection sharing both a new take on Realism and a critique of Weimar bourgeois society. First applied to painting, the term soon became broader and was used particularly in relation to photographs and film.

<sup>22</sup> Jules Supervielle, *L'Enfant de la haute mer* (Paris: Folio, 1958 [1931]), p. 66. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Supervielle, *L'Enfant*, p. 82.



ALBERT RUDOMINE

*La Vierge Inconnue* 1924 (noyée dans le canal de l'Ourcq en 1901)  
photographie n/b, tirage d'époque 40x25 cm  
courtesy galerie michèle chomette, Paris

Figure 0.3. Albert Rudomine, *La Vierge Inconnue*, 1924



ALBERT RUDOMINE  
*L'inconnue de la Seine* ca 1925  
photographie n/b surimpression, tirage d'époque  
collection particulière  
courtesy galerie michèle chomette, Paris

Figure 0.4. Albert Rudomine, *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, c.1925



Figure 0.5. Yvonne Chevalier, *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, 1929

the *Berliner Tageblatt* a short story also entitled 'L'Inconnue de la Seine'. In her memoirs, she recalls her fascination since childhood with the mask.<sup>24</sup> While Supervielle does not account for the Inconnue's life and her reasons for drowning herself, Herta Pauli details the girl's biography and searches for an

<sup>24</sup> Reference given by H el ene Pinet in *Le Dernier Portrait*, p. 178: 'Alors qu'elle n' tait qu'une enfant, ses parents, qui avaient tous deux un temp r ment suicidaire, l'avait parfois laiss e seule en t te- -t te avec le masque, tandis qu'ils mimaient la mort allong s sur



WILLY ZIELKE  
*L'inconnue de la Seine* ca 1929  
photographie n/b, tirage d'époque  
collection particulière  
courtesy galerie michèle chomette, Paris

Figure 0.6. Willy Zielke, *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, c.1929

explanation for her supposed suicide. The story in turn inspired Pauli's friend, the Hungarian-born novelist and playwright Ödön von Horváth, who published a play on the subject two years later, again called *L'Inconnue de la Seine*.<sup>25</sup> That same year (1933), Louis-Ferdinand Céline published his first play, *L'Église*, placing a picture of the death mask by the Berliner publishers Amsler and Ruthardt on the front cover, in place of the personal photograph required by his publisher (Fig. 0.7). In March 1934, the same photograph could be found on the frontispiece of Reinhold Conrad Muschler's reactionary novella, *Die Unbekannte* (*The Unknown Woman*), which was instrumental in spreading the Inconnue's fame all over Europe, since this tearjerker was a phenomenal success during the interwar period.<sup>26</sup> An early edition lists translations into eight languages, and the print run exceeded 250,000 copies. The novella is still in print in Germany and must by now have sold several million copies. The cover jacket of an edition dating from 1973 pictures the death mask in profile and defines it as 'the book that millions love'.<sup>27</sup> It was translated into English and published in September 1935 under the title *One Unknown*. In 1936, the German director Frank Wisbar adapted *Die Unbekannte* for the screen in a film of the same name. And the story does not end there. Two months after the publication of Muschler's novel, Vladimir Nabokov, who was in Berlin at the time and was a friend of Supervielle,<sup>28</sup> published an untitled poem in Russian that also referred to the mask. Nabokov's piece appeared on June 28, 1934, in a Parisian newspaper for Russian émigrés, *Poslednie Novosti*.<sup>29</sup>

Following the craze for the mask during the interwar years, the figure of the Inconnue maintained its grip on popular and elite audiences. In 1944, Aragon published the first edition of *Aurélien*, the masterpiece that finally anchored the legend of the Inconnue within literature.<sup>30</sup> The Inconnue de la Seine is a crucial figure and motif in the novel's structure. In 1966, Aragon and Elsa Triolet gave the mask an even more prominent role: within the scope of the *Ceuvres romanesques croisées*, they republished *Aurélien* alongside a series of photographic illustrations by Man Ray consisting of fourteen variations on the plaster cast (Figs. 7.1–14).<sup>31</sup> In the 1950s

leur lit. À la disparition de sa mère, l'année de ses vingt ans, elle avait été saisie à nouveau par l'inquiétante étrangeté du masque de plâtre.'

<sup>25</sup> Ödön von Horváth, *Eine Unbekannte aus der Seine, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II Komödien (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970), translated by Henri Christophe as *L'Inconnue de la Seine, Théâtre complet*, vol. IV (Paris: L'Arche, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Reinhold Conrad Muschler, *Eine Unbekannte* (Dresden: Heyne, 1934); English translation, *One Unknown* (London: Putnam, 1935).

<sup>27</sup> Figures and information given by David Phillips in 'In Search of an Unknown Woman', p. 324.

<sup>28</sup> Brian Boyd, *Nabokov. The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 393.

<sup>29</sup> See the translation of and commentary on Nabokov's poem in Don Barton Johnson, 'L'Inconnue de la Seine and Nabokov's Naiads', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 44, no. 3, 225–48.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Aragon, *Aurélien* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

<sup>31</sup> *Ceuvres romanesques croisées d'Elsa Triolet et Aragon*, vols. XIX and XX (Paris: Lafont, 1966).



*Photo Amsler et Rulhardt*

L'INCONNUE DE LA SEINE (1930)

Figure 0.7. Frontispiece of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *L'Église*, 1933

and 1960s, references to the mask continued to be made in a number of articles and essays.<sup>32</sup> In the late 1950s her face was used by the Norwegian toymaker Asmund Laerdal to create 'Resusci Anne', a female doll conceived for students to practise the rescue of drowning victims and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation during cardio and pulmonary resuscitation training. It is still in use, mostly in the United Kingdom and the United States. Over and over again and even today, the Inconnue dies, only to be resurrected. The unknown face might have become the 'world's famous life-sized doll and the most kissed woman in the world'.<sup>33</sup>

In 1962, the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar incorporated the figure of the Inconnue into an enigmatic three-page short story, 'El río' ('The River'), allegedly first written in French as 'Le Fleuve' and later self-translated. The Spanish version would eventually be regarded as the definitive one by Cortázar himself. Written in the first person, the very dense tale, imbued with a fantastic atmosphere, evokes an ambiguous suicide by drowning, which could also be read as an allegory for sexual possession. The allusion to the Inconnue reappears very shortly after the tale in what is often considered Cortázar's masterpiece, the 1963 experimental *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*).<sup>34</sup> Held to be the epitome of the Latin American modernist novel, it is reminiscent of many European avant-gardes, such as Surrealism, the *nouveau roman*, and the cinematic *Nouvelle Vague*. The Inconnue surfaces in the first part of the book, shot through again with an obsession for drowning and for dangerous wanderings on the banks of the river.

In 1966, the Swiss artist Daniel Spoerri created an installation called *L'Inconnue de la Seine*. French film directors, especially those of the New Wave, also re-appropriated the mask. It surfaces obliquely in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934), Georges Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1959), Agnès Varda's documentary on Jane Birkin, *Jane B par Agnès V* (*Jane B by Agnès V*, 1987), and in François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962), *La Mariée était en noir* (*The Bride Wore Black*, 1968), and *Les deux Anglaises et le continent* (*Two English Girls*, 1971). Her figure is an ethereal presence in Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). In a recent interview, Alain Resnais confirmed the Inconnue's impact on his work.<sup>35</sup> We can detect its elusive presence in many of his films, such as *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (*I Love You, I Love You*, 1968), *Stavisky* (1974), *Mon Oncle d'Amérique* (*My American Uncle*, 1980), *Mélo* (1986), *On connaît la chanson* (*Same Old Song*, 1997), and *Les Herbes folles* (*Wild Grass*, 2008). In 1990, the artists Alexandre Nahon and Jean-Pierre Larcher were inspired to direct a short film on the mask, for which they

<sup>32</sup> *Intermédiaire des chercheurs et curieux*, no. 195, June 1967, 550–1; *Lilliput*, vol. 16, no. 4, April 1945.

<sup>33</sup> Angélique Chrisafis, 'Ophelia of the Seine', *The Guardian*, 1 December 2007.

<sup>34</sup> I owe these two references to my colleagues Ariel Dorfman and José-María Rodríguez-García.

<sup>35</sup> Jean-Louis Leurat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues, *Alain Resnais. Liaisons secrètes, accords vagabonds* (col. Auteurs; Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2006), p. 209.

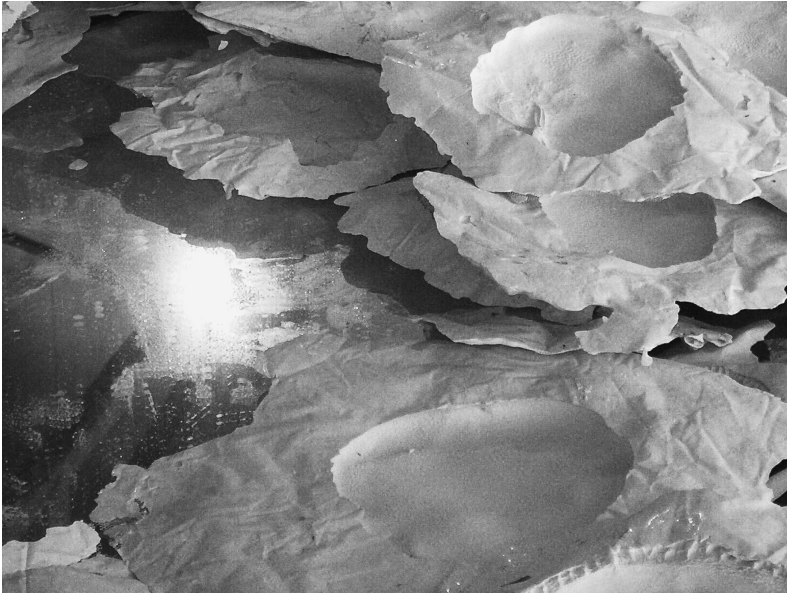


Figure 0.8. Elizabeth Presa, *Moon Water*, 2004

were awarded a prize in 1992 at the third *Biennale Internationale du Film sur l'Art* held under the auspices of the Georges Pompidou Centre. In 2002, on the occasion of the exhibition *Le Dernier Portrait* held at the Orsay Museum, the *Inconnue* was on display for thousands of spectators to see, which allowed them to discover her mysterious story and artistic destiny.<sup>36</sup> In 2004, the Australian artist Elizabeth Presa created an installation utilizing the artefact of the *Inconnue de la Seine*. Inquiring into the connections between Maurice Blanchot's ways of approaching text through the metaphors of the moulding process or death mask and Rilke's comment that Rodin's casting and sculpting studio practices resembled a matrix of his own writing, she was prompted to conceptualize an installation linking the skin patterns of jellyfish with the death mask of the *Inconnue*, accompanied by a text by Jean-Luc Nancy (Fig. 0.8).<sup>37</sup> Poetic work on the drowned girl continued apace, as witnessed by René-Guy Cadou's postwar poem<sup>38</sup> or, more recently, Maurice Blanchot's essay *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs* (1992), where the image of the *Inconnue* serves as an

<sup>36</sup> *Le Dernier Portrait*.

<sup>37</sup> See Elizabeth Presa's Internet site, <<http://www.elizabethpresa.com/moonwater.html>>; as well as Elizabeth Presa, 'White Work', in *After Blanchot. Literature, Criticism, Philosophy*, ed. Leslie Hill, Brian Nelson, and Dimitri Vardoulakis (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> René-Guy Cadou, 'L'Inconnue de la Seine', *Que la lumière soit (1949–1951), Poésie la vie entière. Œuvres poétiques complètes* (Paris: Seghers, 2001), pp. 240–1.

introduction for Blanchot's commentary on Louis-René des Forêts's poetry, which is haunted by a drowned child.<sup>39</sup> The Inconnue serves as a pivotal image in various theoretical discourses on the ontology of images, such as Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire* (1955) and Nancy's *Au fond des images* (2003).

The drowned girl continues to haunt French contemporary literature. She is a ghostly presence in the first story of Patrick Modiano's narrative triptych on female anonymity and search for identity, *Des Inconnues* (*Unknown Women*, 1999).<sup>40</sup> She is one of the principal inspirations for Marie Etienne's *Inconnue de la Loire* (*The Unknown Girl of the River Loire*, 2004), which features a female narrator's quest to find the reasons for the drowning of another woman. She is the subject of Didier Blonde's eponymous novel *L'Inconnue de la Seine* (2012), first published as *Le Nom de l'Inconnue* (*The Name of the Unknown Girl*) in 1988. A compulsive and compassionate investigation into the destiny of the drowned girl by a lonely bookshop owner structures the narrative. Abounding with personal revelations and red herrings, suffused with melancholy, the text roams both Paris and the Parisian archives, weaving together detective fiction and forms of *autofiction*.

The Inconnue makes a number of appearances in American literature. She is a literary and artistic reference in William Gaddis's intertextual, post-modern, and labyrinthine narrative *Recognitions*. John Straley's 1999 mystery novel *The Angels Will Not Care* depicts a fictive club ironically called 'L'Inconnue de la Seine', whose members have terminal illnesses and wish to end their own lives. The doll Rescusi Anne has been the particular object of inspiration for recent fantasy and horror stories. Chuck Palahniuk, in his 2005 pulp novel *Haunted*, writes about Rescusi Anne in the story 'Exodus', although he calls her 'Breather Betty'. Caitlin Kiernan, a contemporary author of 'weird fictions', writes about the model for Rescusi Anne in her latest novel, *The Drowning Girl* (2012).

Finally, the Inconnue's destiny now faces a new turning point with the advent of digital technologies, especially with the development of Google and online social networks. A simple search on Google yields nearly 500,000 results, and the mask now has its own Wikipedia and Facebook pages.<sup>41</sup>

The preceding panorama of the Inconnue's influence from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries undoubtedly sheds light upon the double nature of the mask: the Inconnue is at once a verbal and a visual phenomenon. Within the visual arts, the mask has inspired mostly photography and cinema. According to Pinet, while the mask is redolent with iconography inherited from the nineteenth century and was used as a model at the *École des Beaux-Arts*, it is very unlikely to have had a real impact on sculptors

<sup>39</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs* (col. Folio; Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> This reference was given to me by Michael Sheringham.

<sup>41</sup> <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Inconnue\\_de\\_la\\_Seine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Inconnue_de_la_Seine)>; <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/LInconnue-de-la-Seine-the-unknown-woman-of-the-Seine>>.

or painters.<sup>42</sup> To my knowledge, except for Presa and Spoerri's installations, Eugène Dépleschin is the only sculptor to have used the cast at the end of the nineteenth century, for the rather unimportant monument that he dedicated to the popular-song composer Alexandre Desrousseau. Dépleschin's monument still adorns the place Jussieu in Lille, while the plaster model lies in the attic of the city museum.<sup>43</sup> The mould of the Inconnue was used to capture the face of a young mother who had put down her lacework to cradle and rock her baby. Entitled *Le Petit Quinquin*, the marble composition is a literal illustration of Desrousseau's song of the same name.

This brief inventory of textual and visual materials on the Inconnue de la Seine is obviously not exhaustive. Yet it would be no exaggeration to claim that the 1930s saw something close to an infatuation with the mask. The historical account of the mask's success in the interwar period appears nonetheless intriguing: how was it that a rather outmoded image of a drowned girl could have exerted such a fascination over both intellectual and popular audiences at a moment when avant-gardes of all kinds were blossoming and when awareness of a new modernity was otherwise so acute? Indeed, as Pinet emphasizes in her article, the style of the mould largely recalls the Second Empire's statuary art, especially with its *coiffure en bandeaux*. Furthermore, the topos of the drowned woman was already a cloying cliché, having been compulsively represented by the Symbolist poets and Pre-Raphaelite painters. The figure elicits a series of paradoxes: in a way, the Inconnue was already dated when her fame reached its peak; she is an anachronistic cultural phenomenon; her destiny is always already that of a cultural ghost, hovering as she does between an elusive past and a spectral present, between life and death.

The notion of pre-histories provides an apt framework to address these paradoxes. Elaborated by Terence Cave in *Pré-histoires I* (1999) and *Pré-histoires II* (2001), this critical method aims to trace the shifting interactions between cultural objects and their various contexts through time. Pre-history may help us understand the specific temporality of the mask's cultural trajectory as it attempts to collect the discontinuous testimonies that cultural objects offer. By understanding the past as an archipelago of fragments, we can consider some pre-figurations of the Inconnue's destiny.

There are indeed some earlier figures pre-dating the Inconnue as a cultural phenomenon. At the end of the nineteenth century, the European art world was drawn to a series of female busts now attributed to Francesco Laurana,

<sup>42</sup> *Le Dernier Portrait*, p. 176: 'Ce visage que l'on n'aurait peine à comparer aux têtes d'expression dont la copie était à la base de leur formation, semble avoir laissé indifférents les peintres et les sculpteurs.'

<sup>43</sup> *De Carpeaux à Matisse. La Sculpture française de 1850 à 1914 dans les musées et collections publiques du Nord de la France*, Trésors du Nord de la France, exhibition held in Calais, Arras, Boulogne, and Paris in 1982–3 (Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux), notice no. 95, pp. 197–8.



Figure 0.9. Francesco Laurana, *Battista Sforza, Duchess of Urbino* (1444–72)

private sculptor to the medieval king René.<sup>44</sup> The delicately carved faces with their exquisite smooth features, hooded, downcast eyes, and carefully held-back hair intrigued artists because of their uncertain provenance and function. Some were believed to have been modelled on the death casts of young Italian princesses (Fig. 0.9); others appeared to have been moulded *sur le vif*, since they were most certainly betrothal portraits destined for future husbands. In 1883, the American art historian Charles Perkins, referring to one of the busts, underscored its ambiguity: ‘The face is not beautiful, but it fascinates and rivets the attention. The drooping eyelids seem about to close as in sleep or death.’<sup>45</sup>

Documentary evidence on the busts has yet to come to light. Connoisseurs and scholars have speculated that they were court portraits corresponding to the values, ideals, and decorum considered appropriate for court ladies in

<sup>44</sup> The busts are now displayed in Washington (Mellon Collection), New York (Frick and Rockefeller Collections), Florence (Bargello Museum), Paris (Louvre and Jacquemart André), and Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum).

<sup>45</sup> Charles Perkins, *Italian Sculptors. Historical Handbook* (Boston: Remington, 1883), p. 119.

Naples and Urbino.<sup>46</sup> Francesco Laurana was unknown in the nineteenth century, because of the absence of historical documentation (Vasari's well-known *Vite*, for instance, does not mention him). He is still a relatively mysterious figure today, though he is an acknowledged master of sculpted portraiture in Italian Renaissance art. At the height of the Art Nouveau period, the somewhat anachronistic busts, simultaneously recalling Roman Antiquity and fifteenth-century Italy, established an image of the ideal woman, bringing together the quasi-anonymity of the sculptor with something of the myth of Salome. Salome, as sculpted by Max Klinger in 1893, certainly brings to mind Laurana's busts. Belgian symbolist Fernand Khnopff repeatedly referred to the busts exhibited at the Louvre and the Palermo Museum in his studies of the Sphinx, thereby affirming the vogue for fifteenth-century Italian art.

Today, the Museum of Lille in northern France displays another eerie object that has fascinated visitors since the nineteenth century, a wax bust known as *La Tête de cire* (*The Wax Head*, Fig. 0.10). The Knight Vicar, the founder of the museum whose personal treasures once constituted half the collection, acquired the bust in Florence. With its meditative, melancholy eyes, its tilted neck, and pained smile, the mysterious female bust has survived the years in spite of its fragility. Thought to be the work of an Italian Renaissance artist, the bust revisits an ancient form commonly used by Roman patriarchs in funerary rites: the wax images of dead ancestors displayed in atriums. *La Tête de cire* has been successively attributed to Raphael, Leonardo, Andrea del Verrochio, and his pupil Orsino Benintendi. The popularity of the young girl was enhanced by her tragic aura: the bust was thought to have been moulded on a dead girl. In the fifteenth century, Italian chroniclers recounted macabre findings, contemporary with and strangely similar to the *Tête de cire*. On 14 April 1485, workers busy quarrying for marble in the Via Appia near Rome found, ten feet beneath the surface, a marble sarcophagus in which the corpse of a young girl lay embalmed in a thick, odoriferous layer. Once the workers removed this covering, they discovered a miraculously preserved corpse: the limbs were flexible, the lips red, and the skin pearly white. The cadaver gave a perfect illusion of life. So uncannily did the dead maiden resemble the effigy of the *Tête de cire* that legend held the embalmed body to be the model for the bust—despite the fact that the wax head was unlikely to have been modelled on a corpse, however well preserved it might have been.<sup>47</sup> The legend persists, nevertheless, and still surrounds this curious object displayed behind a glass window in Lille. Just before the First World War, she was still notorious. Writing about her in *La Dépêche*, the daily regional newspaper of northern France, journalist André de Porcheville evokes the universal nature of *La Tête de cire*. Like many commentators on

<sup>46</sup> Chrysa Damaniaki, *The Female Portrait Busts of Francesco Laurana* (Rome: Vecchiarelli Editore, 2000), p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Jules Tardieu, 'La Tête de cire du Musée de Lille', *La Vie du Nord*, 25 July 1942, p. 3.



Figure 0.10. *La Tête de cire*, Lille

the Inconnue, he reads the absence of identification and date as the paradoxical reasons behind the girl's radiance:

Image charmante tu n'as pas, à vrai dire, de pays d'origine et les discussions des savants ne sauraient t'en attribuer aucun. Tu es l'image de nos plus belles espérances déçues, de l'adolescence courbée par le destin. Et chacun de nous quand il t'a contemplée, songe à ses deuils intérieurs.<sup>48</sup>

Charming image, you do not really have a country of origin, and scholarly discussions could not give you one. You are the image of our great expectations and disillusion, of adolescence dominated by fate. And each of us, upon contemplating you, reflects on his or her inner bereavements.

De Porcheville goes on to relate how Alexandre Dumas *fils* was infatuated with her image. The writer owned a copy of *La Tête de cire*, which adorned his office. We can glimpse the image of *La Dame aux camélias* in the description of her presence:

<sup>48</sup> André de Porcheville, *La Dépêche. Journal Quotidien de la Région du Nord*, Tuesday 10 March 1914.

Elle est le Grand Tout en un petit volume, car son expression donne l'image de la vie, et la matière dont elle est faite donne la sensation de la mort. Ce que nous avons écrit ensemble depuis plusieurs années est prodigieux.<sup>49</sup>

She is the Great Book in a small volume, since her expression embodies life, and the material of which she is made intimates a morbid sensation. What we have written together these last years is prodigious.

The suspension between life and death, the projection of a romantic story coupling the themes of love and a life cut short, the moulding of a face, the object's fragility and its pervasive survival throughout time: all these elements combine in the case of Laurana's busts and *La Tête de cire*—exactly as with the Inconnue—to create an image that functions both as an archive of old images and as a generator of new ones. The physical resemblance between these earlier 'inconnues' and the Inconnue is also striking. It is the same ghostly charm that conjures up hidden practices and forms. The objects are anachronistic: they seem to enclose layers of images from other places and times, thereby disrupting temporal continuity.

Francesco Laurana's female busts and Vicar's *Tête de cire* provide a pre-history of the Inconnue's own story: they can be interpreted as ambiguous and disparate traces that, in a way, anticipate the phenomenon of the Inconnue's diffusion. I follow here the lines of inquiry sketched out by Cave, for whom the 'pre-' of pre-history designates the phase before the continuity of history, since 'at the beginning there was no narrative, there were only traces'.<sup>50</sup> My sketch of the Inconnue's histories, survivals, and pre-histories shows that her figure cannot help but invite us to reflect on the multiplicity of time frames. The aim of this study is to render legible the constellation of ambiguous traces that constitutes the image of the Inconnue de la Seine.

## CHARTING A CONSTELLATION: DRAWING MAPS AND LINES

The narratives previously mentioned all arose from the common desire to endow the Inconnue with a name and a time, and to establish the cause of such a death, if death there ever was. The initial encounter with the mask seems always to generate emotional reactions from writers, artists, and critics. The cast triggers fascination, intrigue, and curiosity. Like a puzzle

<sup>49</sup> De Porcheville, *La Dépêche*.

<sup>50</sup> Terence Cave, *Pré-histoires I. Textes troublés au seuil de ma modernité* (original French edition) (Geneva: Droz, 1999), p. 17: 'Les préhistoires que je voudrais reconstituer ne s'offrent pourtant pas comme des origines. Leur statut est plutôt celui d'une trace ambiguë, le "pré" signifiant ici le stade d'avant la continuité d'une histoire: au commencement il n'y avait pas de récit, il n'y avait que la trace.'

awaiting decipherment, it prompts a series of resemblances and recognitions. Yet the mystery remains intractable, since it is through her very anonymity that the Inconnue maintains her fame. The Inconnue is like one of those images that appear to defy attempts at interpretation: it is at once familiar and eerie, dated and ageless; it has an air of *déjà vu*, while remaining mysteriously opaque. It is characterized by a visual intensity, a simultaneous radiance and concealment.

If the story behind the mask is likely to remain ungraspable, however, the story of the Inconnue de la Seine as a cultural object opens up productive lines of inquiry. After the initial excitement and inevitable succession of disappointments provoked by the absence of any final answers or historical facts concerning the young girl, a number of questions take shape. Why has the object retained its power of fascination for both popular and intellectual audiences for more than a century? How can we articulate the persistent presence of the Inconnue without entering into an endless and, in all probability, ultimately fruitless interpretative game? How can we analyse a phenomenon marked by heterogeneity and fragmentation without producing a unified discourse that reduces the singularity of the object?

Any attempt to trace a chronology or genealogy of the Inconnue's history would have to deal with a number of issues. First, the diversity of primary materials on the mask is striking: the wide range of works includes oral legends, minor newspaper articles or *faits divers*, short stories, novels, plays, poems, popular illustrations, photographs, and short and feature-length films. The mask crosses cultural, generic, and media boundaries. Such disparity calls for an approach that reformulates the usual relations between high and low culture and valorizes both canonical works and literary ephemera, both central and marginal artistic practices. Any attentive study of the figure of the Inconnue must go beyond the conceptual framework of influence and inspiration common in art criticism. Exploring the diffusion of the Inconnue throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries involves investigating the existing bonds between literature and other artistic disciplines and media such as painting, sculpture, photography, cinema, and the recent aesthetic forms of cyberspace.

Secondly, attempting to deal with such a wide range of studies and images, while tracing the fortunes of a single object, also raises problems of selection and contextualization, and calls into question the very possibility of a corpus. Using the rhetorical and visual occurrences of the mask as a thread with which to organize my study, I have nonetheless felt—in charting the constellation of sources—the proliferating nature of my object to be also, at the same time, elusive. The Inconnue is often so discreetly encoded in texts and images that she can, at times, be present without being visible. I have identified some of her multilayered visual and discursive functions that inspire a range of significations beyond the mask's status as an object. I have uncovered many appearances, sudden disappearances, and even more elliptical