

"CREATIVITY IN ART, SCIENCE AND BUSINESS: METHOD OR MADNESS?"

WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, DAVOS, SWITZERLAND, JANUARY 29, 1995

### Introduction

Irving Lavin, Institute for Advanced Study

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Before beginning my introduction to this session, I thought it might be helpful to describe how it came about. The idea came to me at Davos last year, my first year of participating in the World Economic Forum, when I truly grasped what an amazing lot of people was assembled here. I realized that the Forum had probably brought together a greater number of more exceptional individuals engaged in a greater variety of activities in more places than ever before at any spot on earth. Thinking about what all these individuals had in common, I concluded that they were 1) exceptionally successful, and 2) they were exceptionally creative. Everyone knows that there is no necessary connection between these two characteristics: not all successful people are creative, and not all creative people are successful. But the correlation tends to be pretty high, especially at Davos, where, however, the sessions tend—understandably—to focus on success, rather than on creativity. So I thought it might be interesting to devote a session to creativity by bringing together representatives of the highest success in the most disparate and seemingly incompatible fields—art, science and business. Frank Stella is a prime mover of contemporary painting; one of his splendid works is on display on the wall above the outside entrance to this room. He will receive a World Economic Forum crystal award at the end of the meeting tomorrow. Jerome Friedman is a professor at MIT who almost had the good sense to become a painter; instead he studied science and ultimately won the Nobel Prize in physics. He still has enough sense to continue painting

on Sundays and holidays, however. Lloyd Cotsen made Neutragena a household name, but he is also a disappointed architect, a great collector of all kinds of art and books, and a major supporter of education, from childhood to graduate studies. I have asked the panelists to devote their allotment of seven minutes to presenting their ideas on creativity in their own fields, leaving consideration of the similarities and differences to the following discussion period, with questions and observations from the audience.

I am probably the perfect introducer and moderator of the session since as a professional historian my mission in life is precisely not to be creative, but rather to "tell it like it is (or was)" as accurately as possible. The irony is that in my own branch of history, the history of art, I am almost exclusively concerned with creativity, and I can report that more than 40 years of struggle to understand my subject have led me to two simple conclusions: I have absolutely no idea what creativity is, but I have formed a pretty clear idea of how it operates, and I want to devote my seven minutes to illustrating by one example what I think I have learned on this score.

I shall discuss this monumental work (I refuse to call it sculpture or architecture), titled "Broken Obelisk," by Barnett Newman, one of the great figures of the previous generation of American artists, for whom the second World War was the unfathomably traumatic experience of their lives (**Fig. 1**). The work, which dates from the mid 1960's, today stands before Dominique de Menile's Institute of Religion and Human Development in Houston, Texas. It is huge, 25 feet tall by 10 feet square at the base, and it has been called "one of the most impressive monumental sculptures of the 20th century" (I agree, except for the word "sculpture"—a lot to claim for an object consisting essentially of 13 flat, planar surfaces joining at certain angles, an agglomeration of pure,

austere, universal and abstract shapes. But upon contemplation and consideration we begin to perceive meaning in these shapes because we associate them with two of the simplest, purest, most primitive, most monumental and most abstract forms known to man, the pyramid and the obelisk—purest not only because of their absolute simplicity, but also because they had no real, practical function: the pyramid as the burial place of the pharaoh (without inscriptions), the obelisk as his commemorative monument (not a tomb but covered with hieroglyphs describing his achievements and invoking him as a God).

We recognize these forms because already in antiquity and again from the Renaissance down to our own time the pyramid and the obelisk became the preeminent symbols of death and commemoration, to the point where no cemetery is complete without its supply of pyramids and obelisks (**Fig. 2**). By combining them Newman multiplies the symbolic power of these two perfect shapes symbolizing death and remembrance into one super-monument. And with the jagged, irregular shape of the 14th surface he adds, or rather multiplies, the evocative power of the work by the third great monumental symbol of death in western culture, the broken column, which since medieval times came to illustrate the fragmentary ruins of the proud grandeur of ancient civilization, and the vanity and ephemerality of all human pretensions (**Fig. 3**). But the way Newman combines and piles up these most potent emblems is crucial, for simply by turning the obelisk upside down he inverts the entire western tradition of death into an expression of its exact opposite. There is only one real precedent for the tension and energy that pass through Newman's point of contact between death and commemoration: Michelangelo's famous image of the creation of Adam in the Sistine ceiling, where God

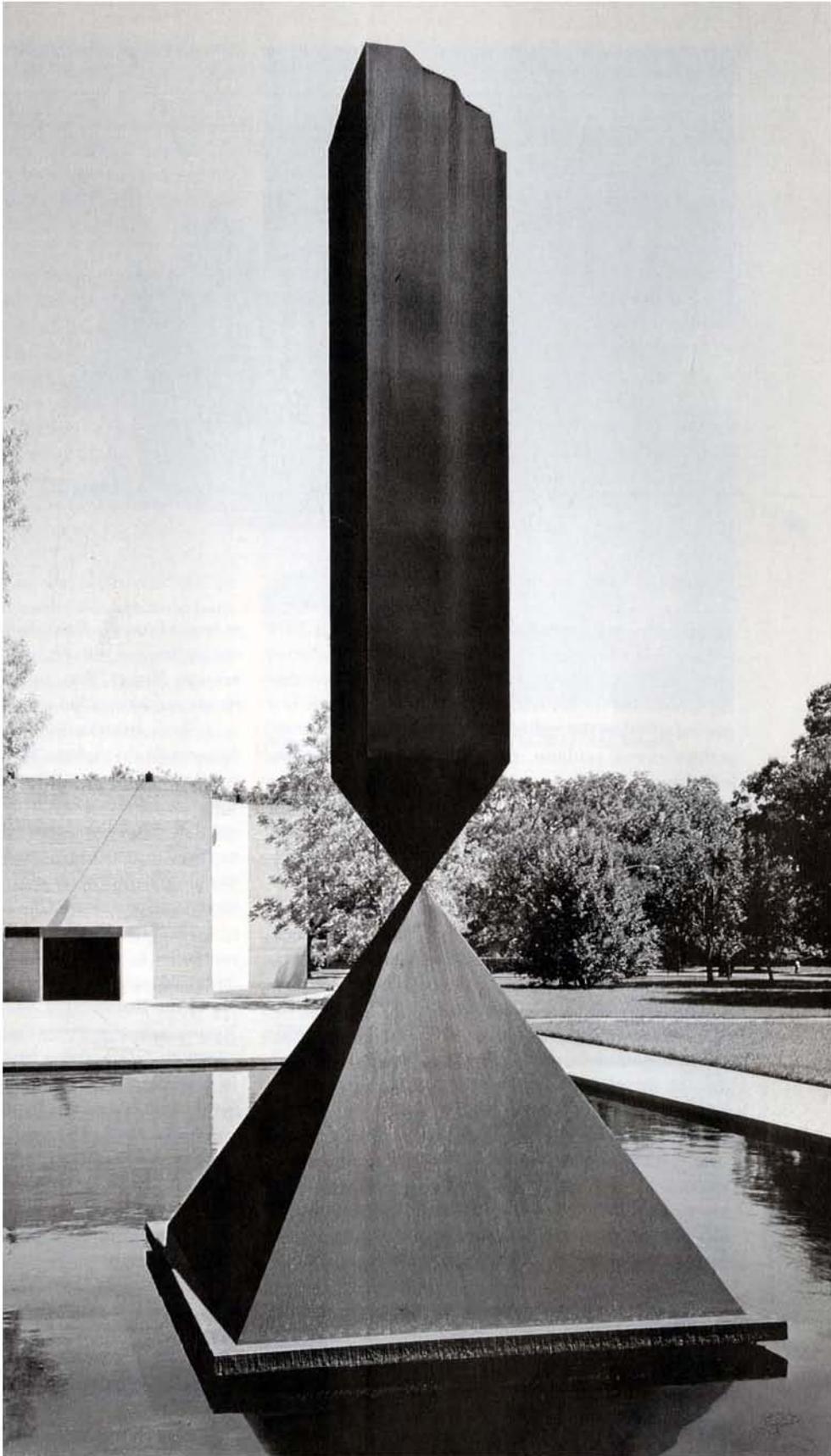
the Father reaches down from heaven to touch with the tip of his finger the tip of the finger of Adam's uplifting hand, thus giving life to the first man, whom God had created in his own image (**Fig. 4**).

In order to convince you that what I have been saying is not just a bad historian's creative fantasy, I must tell you that Barnett Newman was a well-educated New York Jew, steeped in philosophy, history and the Talmud, deeply spiritual but without formal religion. He owned two copies of an important book on Egyptian art published in 1947. There he learned of a quite new understanding of the pyramid, which was not really a monument of death at all, but a kind of launching pad from the apex of which the soul of the pharaoh would rise to heaven to take its place beside the Sun God in his eternal mission of bringing his life-giving rays to the world. And the obelisk was not just a commemorative monument: its pyramidal top was gilded, so that it caught the first, life-giving rays of the sun at dawn and funneled them down to earth. By inverting the obelisk Newman brought man's aspirations for triumph over death into contact with God's gift of life. And the uppermost tip of the jagged, broken surface points heavenward, as if yearning for restoration and completion to its original, perfect, form. Newman's relentless compilation of death, destruction and despair becomes a new symbol of hope. We can, I think, appreciate the sincerity and humility of his statement about the work: "It is concerned with life and I hope I have transformed its tragic content into a glimpse of the sublime."

After 40 years of study I can say with absolute confidence that I have no idea what creativity is, but I can assure you that every original creation I have studied turns out to be, paradoxically, a systematic expropriation and exploitation of previous

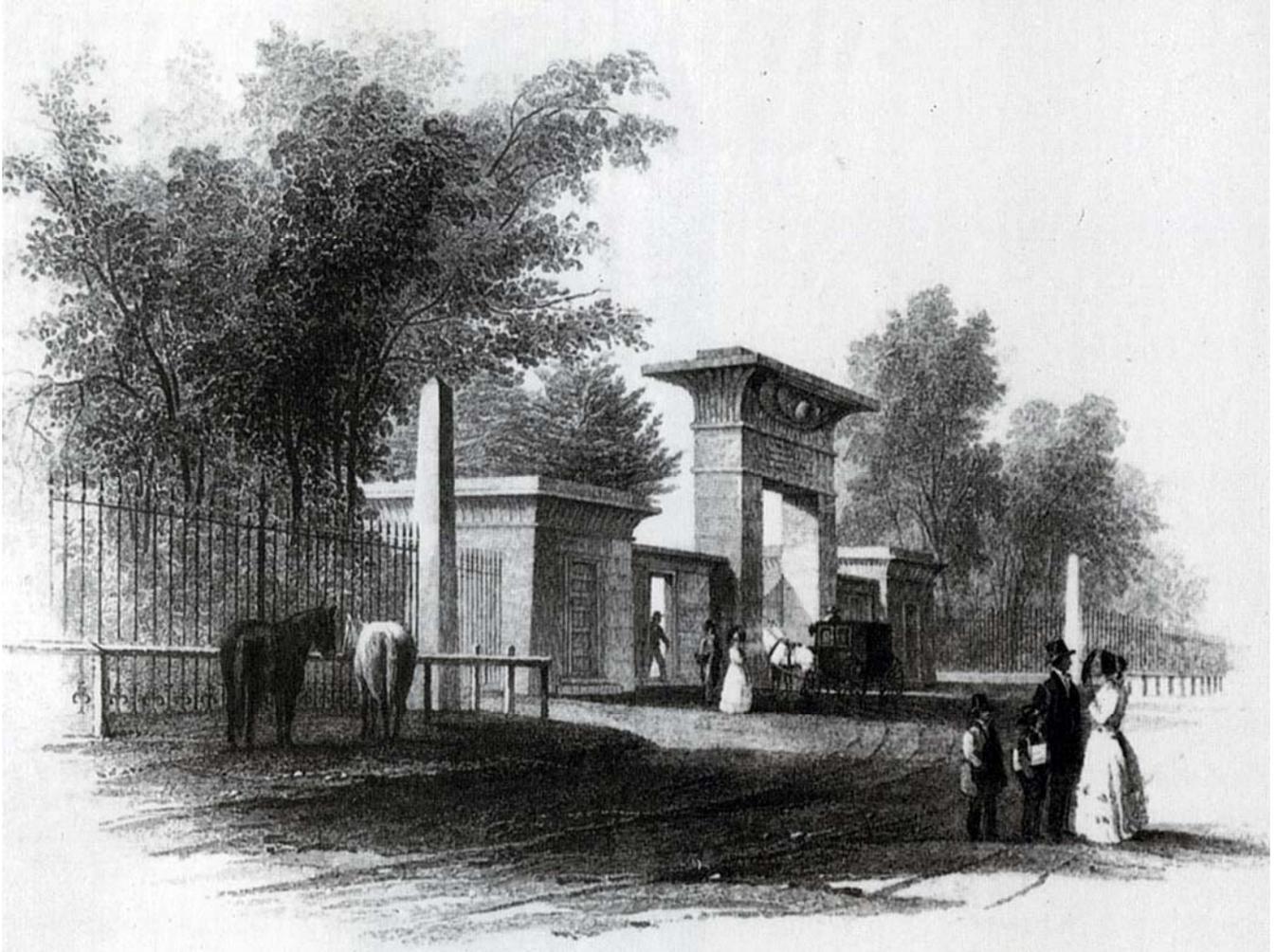
inventions—obelisks, pyramids, broken columns, or what have you. I even suspect Newman borrowed the idea of inverting the obelisk from the spectacular images of the installation of a famous obelisk he knew intimately, Cleopatra's needle, which rises just behind the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Fig. 5).

Degas said that a painting "requires as much cunning, malice and vice as the perpetration of a crime." And I accuse all of you creative people of being utterly unscrupulous and devilishly clever thieves who appropriate other people's ideas for your own selfish reasons, and make something new, with immense potential for both evil and good—like Prometheus, the first man in Greek mythology, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity.

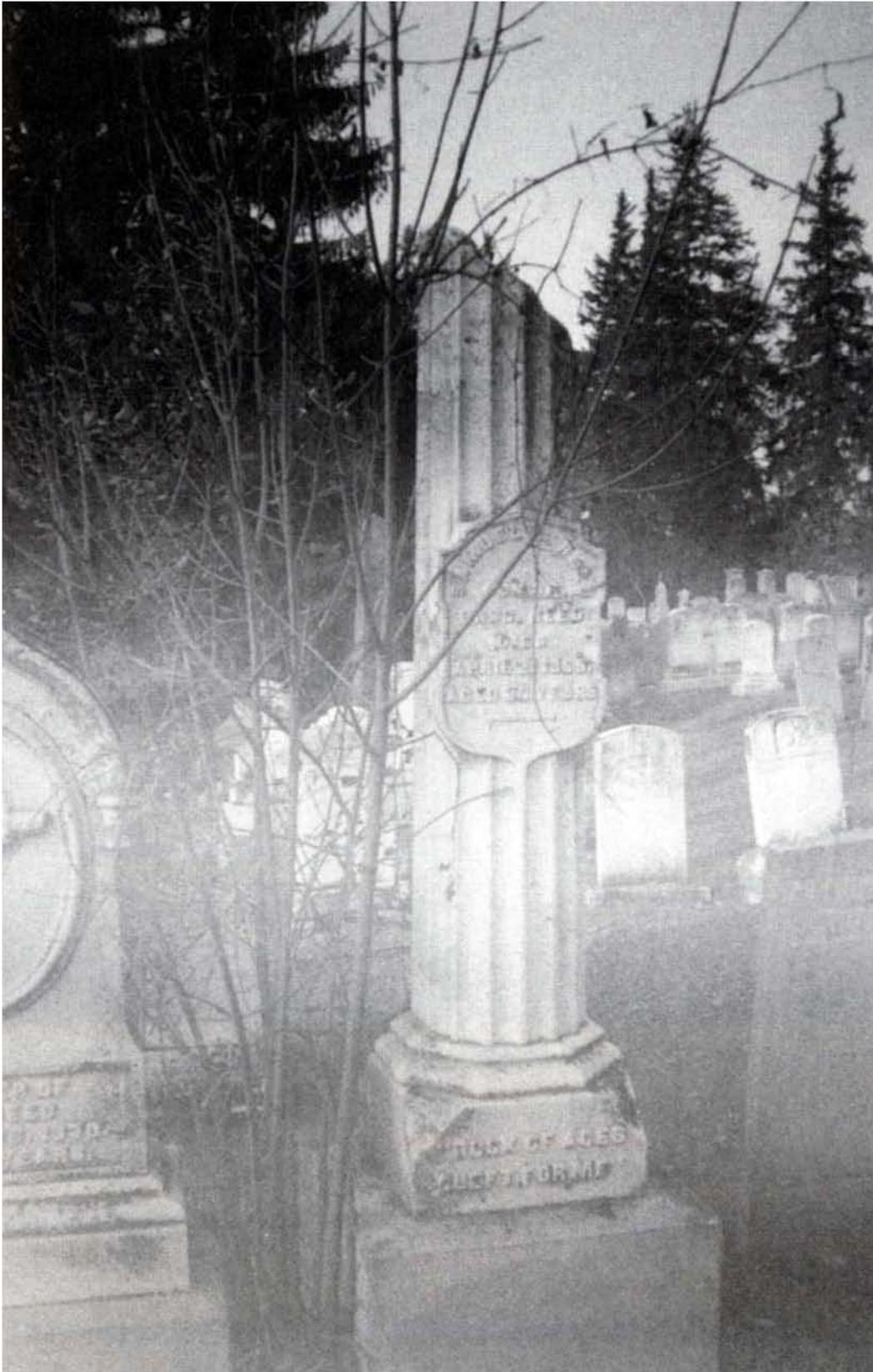


**Fig. 1** Barnett Newman, Broken Obelisk. Institute of Religion and Human Development, Houston, Texas.

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**Fig. 2** James Smillie, Entrance to Mount Auburn Cemetery, ca. 1847, engraving.  
Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Mass.



**Fig. 3** Broken Column, mid nineteenth century. Sharon, Connecticut

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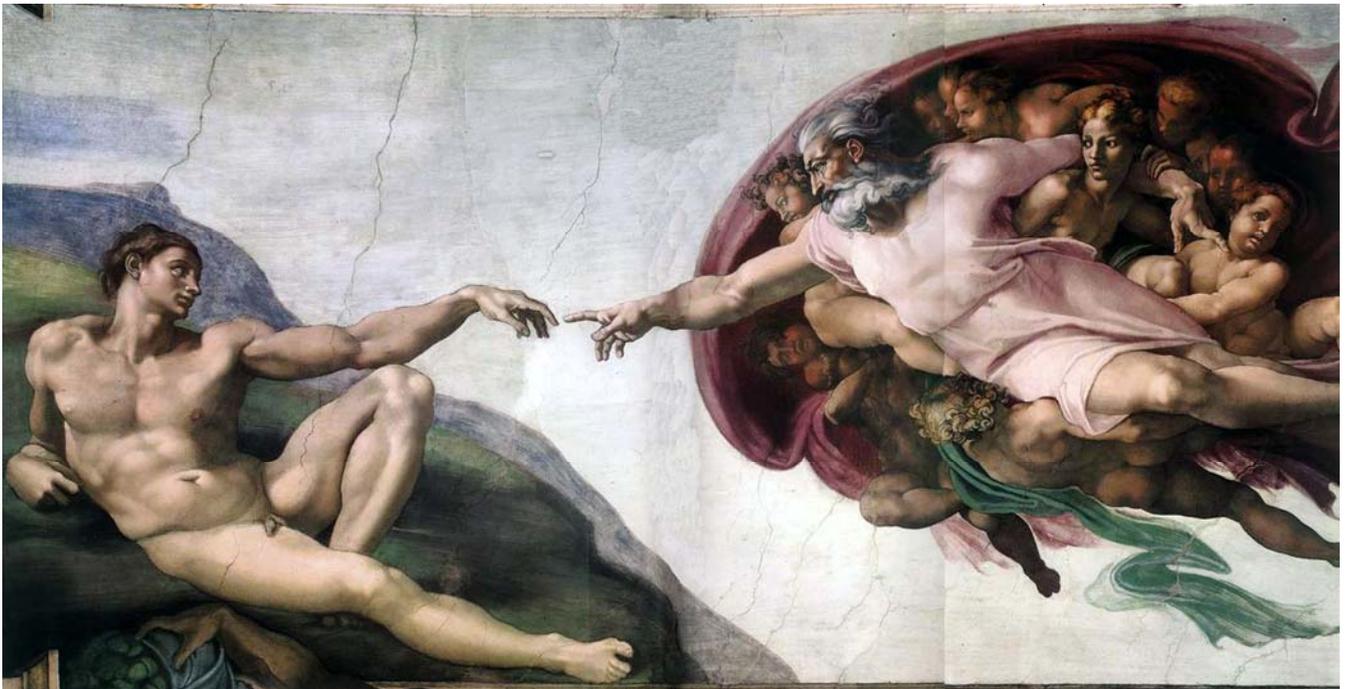


Fig. 4 Michelangelo, Creation of Adam. Sistine Chapel, Rome

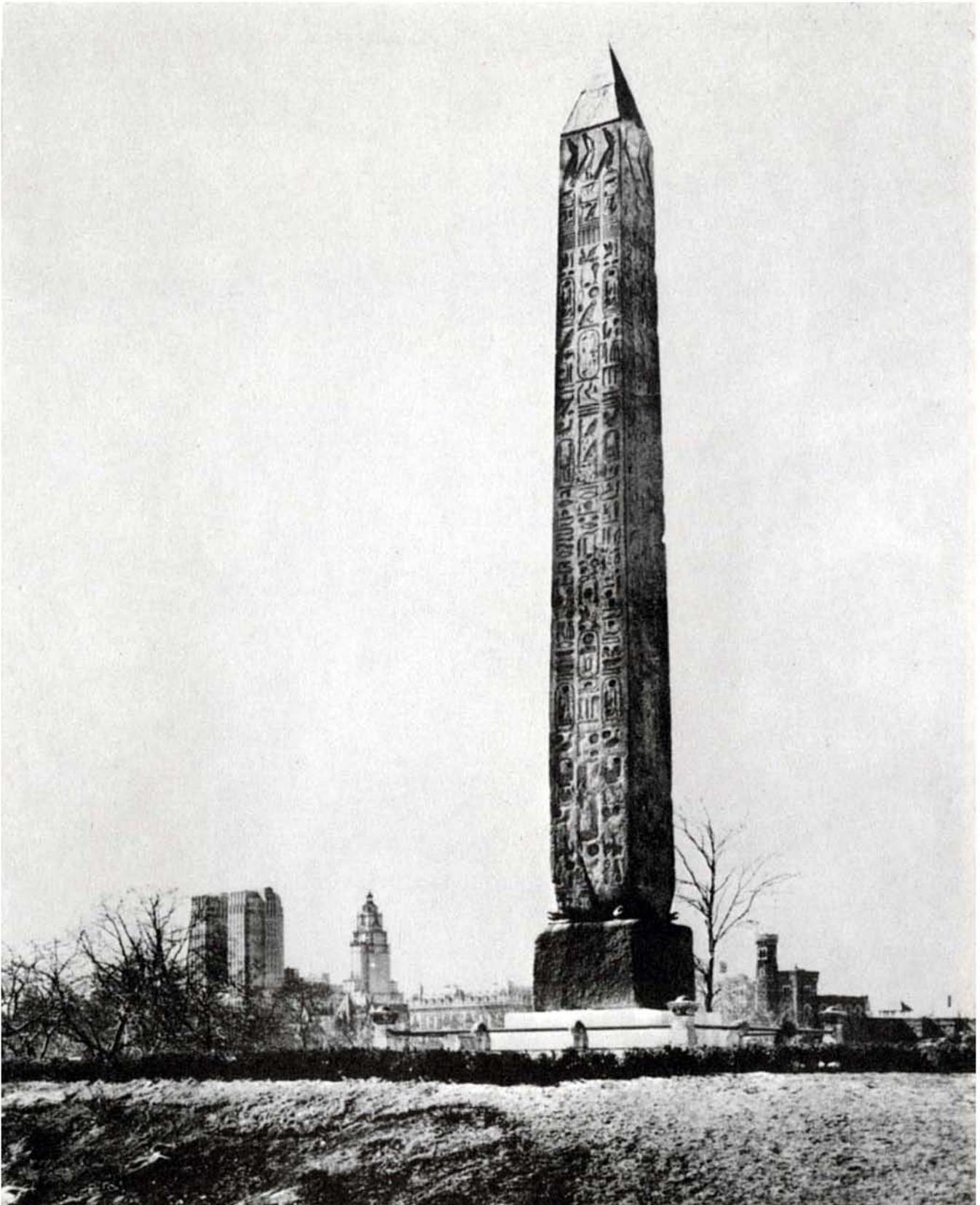


Fig. 5 Cleopatra's Needle. Central Park, New York.

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