



## The Mirror: A History

By Sabine Melchior-Bonnet

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This engaging and witty cultural history traces the evolution of the mirror from antiquity to the present day, illustrating its journey from wondrous object to ordinary trinket. With its earliest invention, the mirror allowed us to gaze upon ourselves, bestowing a power both fascinating and terrifying.

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## **The Mirror: A History** By Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Tool of the devil, luxury item, optical device, decorative accessory, humble grooming aid—the mirror, so commonplace today, has meant many things through the ages. This erudite meditation on the development and marketing of the mirror, and on its social and psychological implications, reveals how significantly the mirror has influenced Western culture. In its capacity both to reflect and to distort, to reproduce and to fragment, the mirror profoundly changed both notions of physical space and ideas of the self. Medieval thinkers feared the mirror's power to distort and to provoke pride and vanity; later, the looking glass was considered an aid for reaching self-knowledge. At the Court of Louis XV at Versailles, mirrors made social life "a theater of reflection and artifice"; by the 18th century, "the utopia of transparency helped to foster the birth of an egalitarian ideology." Mirrors opened up dark interiors, revealing hidden—and sometimes troubling—points of view, enabled artists to create self-portraits and confronted individuals with modern questions of self and image. Drawing on history, philosophy, theology, art, psychology and literature, Melchoir-Bonnet establishes the mirror's central contribution to visual culture. Her decision to organize her material thematically rather than chronologically sometimes compromises the clarity of her presentation, which will appeal most readily to those with a solid background in European history and thought. Nevertheless, this beautifully illustrated study offers so many intriguing glimpses into the meanings of reflection that it will reward anyone who peers beneath its surface.

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From [Booklist](#)

Imagine life without mirrors. It wasn't long ago that only the wealthy could check their appearances, Melchoir-Bonnet explains in this brisk, surprising, and enjoyable history. She describes the small and precious polished stone and metal mirrors of antiquity and the crafting of the first sizable glass mirrors in sixteenth-century Venice, where a mirror cost nearly three times as much as a painting by Raphael. Mirrors quickly became all the rage among European nobility, and Melchoir-Bonnet relates some amazing tales of industrial espionage and skullduggery associated with France's effort to establish its own mirror-making factories to meet the decadent demands of Louis XIV. Melchoir-Bonnet also explores the profound symbolism associated with the looking glass in a richly metaphorical inquiry that illuminates the realms of religion, magic, philosophy, literature, art, and science. Socrates encouraged people to learn from what they saw in the mirror; the church warned against vanity and lasciviousness; while writers and artists celebrated beauty even as they pondered the pitfalls of illusion and the valuing of image over substance. *Donna Seaman*  
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Review

"An engagingly written work, well worth reading."

—"Choice, January 2002

""The Mirror is an amusing jewel of a book, a sparkling reflection of the history of the mirror in Europe, and the role of the mirror in European imagination.."

—"Los Angeles Times

"Presents such facts with erudite relish. The early chapters of "The Mirror are a feast of technological information and curious details of European social history."

—"The Wall Street Journal

"Sabine Melchior-Bonnet has taken the reflective piece of glass and turned it into a unique historical treatise on -- when you boil it down -- why human beings like to look at themselves and what that instinct means."

—"Chicago Tribune

"Melchior-Bonnet's research-rigorous and vast-reveals much about our most carnal selves, our lust for control over our image, and our most lofty spiritual aspirations."

-The National Post

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