

# FRANK GEHRY THE FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON

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# FOG MAGUS

## The Most Complicated Building ever Built

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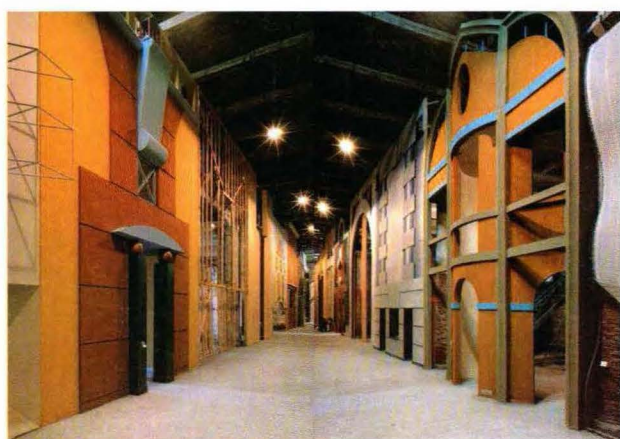
### PREFACE

The Fondation Louis Vuitton building is a combination and synthesis of two fundamental architectural metaphors that had preoccupied Frank Owen Gehry through much of his career, the fish and the sailing ship. They both move and they both take an infinite variety of shapes, but in working with them Gehry discovered that they have in common much more than meets the eye. In what follows here I will sketch Gehry's trajectory in this pursuit, citing where pertinent to my argument his own always trenchant responses to interviewers' questions.<sup>1</sup> The basic principle is encrypted in the extraordinary account he gave of the genesis of the Louis Vuitton building:

*"Well, it was pretty clear. Because it was to be in the Jardin d'Acclimatation in the Bois de Boulogne, the building had to be ephemeral, from day one. We realized that it couldn't be just a solid thing. It needed to have a relationship with nature and the trees, with the garden. And then in my early discussions with Bernard Arnault, we talked about that issue, and we realized that if you made it in glass you could make it higher. In other words, if it were more solid, it would be one level lower. And it felt squashed when it was one level*



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lower. It didn't feel like it would have an appropriate presence for a museum of this kind. So from the beginning, I was playing with glass sails, but I didn't know how I was going to build them. We knew we were going to have a solid piece inside, and then the glass exterior. And this is the exciting thing to me: you're in a children's park, in the Bois de Boulogne; you have a museum with a collection (...) the ensemble makes it "child-centric". No other museum I know has done that. And the reason to do it here is because it's in the Bois de Boulogne."<sup>2</sup>

## THE MAGUS

The Magus is an alchemist who transforms base materials into gold. Gehry first publicly proclaimed this magic touch when he clothed his own house (1978, 1991) with an array of the lowliest of building materials, lumber-yard wood framing, sheets of corrugated steel, chain link fencing — transforming the solid walls of a quintessentially ordinary Los Angeles bungalow into a fragile, toy-like deconstructed house of architectural fragments <sup>fig. 1</sup>. I first met Frank Gehry in Venice in 1980 at the first Biennale of contemporary architecture, with the theme *The Presence of the Past*. The site of the featured exhibition, the *Strada Novissima*, was the Corderia, a vast three-aisled construction with columns supporting wooden truss roofs, where from the middle ages on rope for the Venetian navy was fabricated. Each bay of the arcade was assigned to one of twenty leading architects of the day to design a façade after his own personal idiom, so that the arcade became a veritable runway of the latest architectural fashions <sup>fig. 2</sup>. I remember being stunned by Frank Gehry's submission, which stood out in glaring contrast to the others by its near invisibility—a simple wooden structure that might be thought of as the initial scaffolding framework for a building in course of construction, *in statu nascendi*. Instead of a more or less proper architectural façade, the very process of architectural creation took a reverse, metaphorical turn, as temporary as the Biennale itself, and as might appear in any street at any time. The quasi-façade is suspended in a moment of time as it moves toward completion. This quality of time-liness, of immediacy, evident from the outset in Gehry's notoriously swift and spontaneous sketches, became a constant theme in his work.

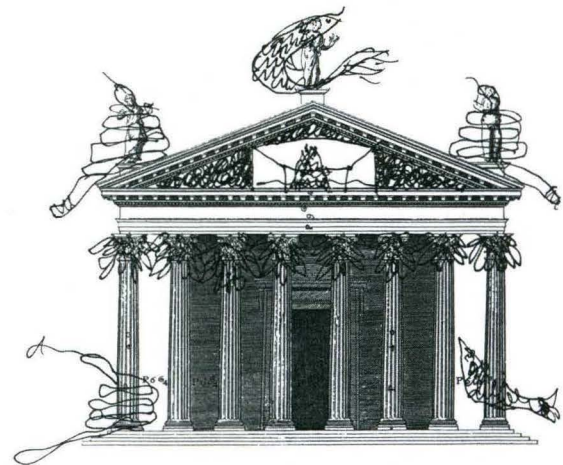
**Fig 1** Frank O. Gehry, Gehry House, photographed in 1978, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, California

**Fig 2** View of the Strada Novissima, including Gehry's façade (second on the left hand side), Biennale di Venezia, 1980, Curator: Paolo Portoghesi

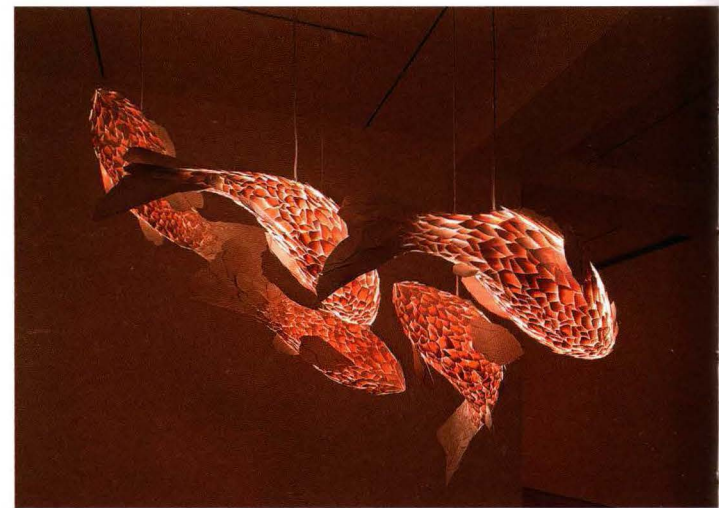
The *Strada Nuovissima* exhibition was the clarion call of a radical, not to say revolutionary shift in architectural philosophy and style, known as Postmodernism, which sought to return to the classical tradition of European architecture. For the most part this shift entailed resurrecting more or less salient features of the classical heritage, symmetry, perspective, elements of the ancient orders, Vitruvian proportions, columns with bases and capitals, often in fragmentary and ironic ways, to indicate that they were deliberate references assimilated in a new and different, contemporary context—hence the sobriquet deconstructivism for this vein of postmodern modernity.

Not so Gehry. At the following architectural Biennale in 1985 Gehry voiced his dissent from this kind of historicism. Together with Claes Oldenburg and Coosie Van Bruggen, he staged a quasi-cubist performance piece called *Il Corso del Coltello*. He played the role of the Canadian gangster Frankie P. Toronto costumed with body parts of classical architecture, columns, capitals, and volutes, which he amputated with a gigantic knife, and persiflaged in a lecture by showing images of famous Venetian monuments, decorated with graffiti-like scribbles in his own drawing style <sup>fig.3</sup>. Gehry's references are not to classical antiquity, or to any historical style, but to an ephemeral, passing phase in the creative process. Gehry's concept riveted me — here was a true think piece. At the same time it moved me, both in time and in space, as if I was passing along a multifarious city street where it happened that one of the structures was but a soupçon of its future self.

In the course of time this early mode of what I would call temporal intimation became truly metaphorical, a form of extra-architectural reference in flat contradiction to both the purist, abstract, form-follows-function, tenets of Bauhaus modernism, and to the quasi archeological disquisitions of Postmodernism. Gehry's two metaphorical themes became particularly relevant to the Louis Vuitton project.



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**Fig 3** Frank Gehry, persiflage of a classical façade for the *Corso del Coltello*, 1985

**Fig 4** Frank O. Gehry, *Untitled (Hong Kong VII)*, metal wire, ColorCore formica and silicone, 140 × 160 × 160 cm, 2013

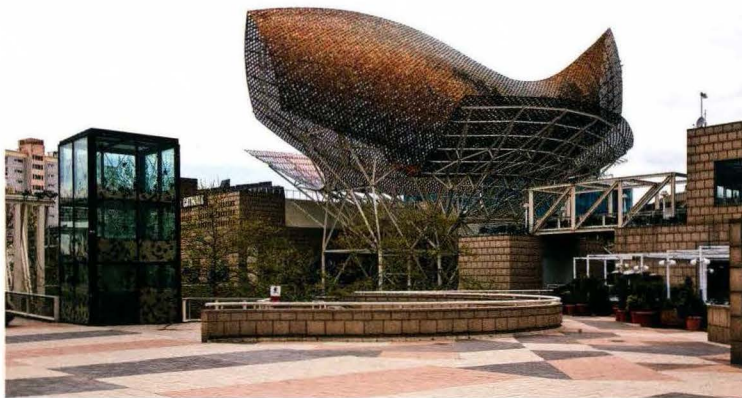
**Fig 5** Frank O. Gehry, *Peix*, stainless steel plates on a metallic frame, 35 × 54 m, 1992, Barcelona Olympic Marina, Spain

**Fig 6** Maerten van Heemskerck, *The Colossus of Rhodes*, 16<sup>th</sup> century engraving, private collection

This quality of timeliness, of immediacy, evident from the outset in Gehry's notoriously swift and spontaneous sketches, became a constant theme in his work.

## THE FISH

The fish, along with the snake, have had a long history in Gehry's career.<sup>3</sup> Taking the fish scales and serpent skin as transparent, in the 1980's Gehry made an infinite variety of swimming squirming and leaping fish lamps, in which the inner, structural skeleton is illuminated <sup>fig.4</sup>. The animals become magic lanterns, like the multicolored illuminated paper fish and snake-dragon lanterns the Chinese carry bouncing and wriggling through the streets in celebration of the New Year.



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Gehry designed structures in the form of grandiose and monumental fish in two cases where the image was consonant with the location and purpose, seaport restaurants, Kobe 1986-7 (appropriately called the Fishdance Restaurant); and Barcelona 1992 <sup>fig.5</sup>. They evoke the character of beachside follies like the famous inhabitable Elephant on the beach at Margate, New Jersey, and recall the Colossus that guarded the harbor at Rhodes <sup>fig.6</sup>, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Gehry's fish, however, while unmistakably figurative, are also unmistakably buildings, which, like fish, leap, or even fly in the air. Here the transubstantiation involved the fusion of luminescent fish scales with transparent glass, in the twenty-two foot 1986 *Standing* (rather, rearing) *Glass Fish* <sup>fig.7</sup> at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (pieced together scale by scale, by hand), while the internal structure defining the shape evoked the animal's skeleton. The whimsical animal-architecture pun suggests a kind of narrative, a fishy story, as it were — unheard of in the history of architecture — on a heroic scale, the scale of the sea itself. The fact is that Gehry's fish actually do belong in that "revival of historicism" espoused by the Postmodernist movement, but in a deeper, more archaic and non-conformist way than the relics of classical tradition, as Gehry himself declared:

*"It was by accident that I got into the fish image. My colleagues were starting to replay Greek temples. Y'know in the post-modern thing, I don't know, when was that... the '80s. That was hot,*

*everybody was re-doing the past. I said, y'know, Greek temples are anthropomorphic. And three hundred million years before man was fish. If you wanna, if you gotta go back, if you're insecure about going forward, dammit, go back three hundred million years. Why are you stopping at the Greeks? So I started drawing fish in my sketchbook. And then I started to realize that there was something in it."*<sup>4</sup>

In Paris the "something" appears as a gigantic glistening light-creature rising up from the sea, on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne.

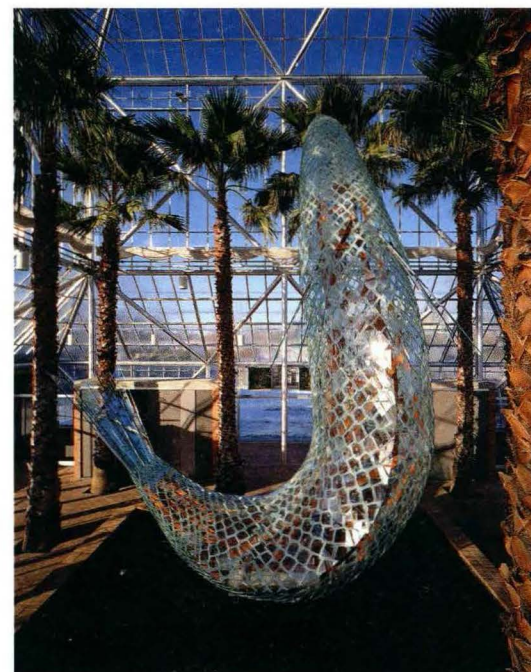
## THE SAILING SHIP

The ship theme that inhabits the Louis Vuitton building is actualized by the fountain, frequently a distinctive feature of museum designs, whether indoors or outdoors. In Gehry's version, however, it is not a separate entity. Instead, the water spills down a broad stairway from the front perimeter of the site and flows under the building itself where it forms a pool on which the building-fish-sailboat seems to ride.

There was a Renaissance tradition of ship fountains, but rarely with the implication that the vessel is actually navigating the water basin. A fully dressed galleon firing the peacemaking water of baptism from its cannons, seems to float on a basin in the garden of the Vatican palace, the *Fontana della Galera*<sup>fig. 8</sup>, suggesting the papacy as the guardian Ship of State. At the opposite end of the marine metaphor is Bernini's famous fountain at the foot of the Spanish Steps in Rome<sup>fig. 9</sup>, a foundering *barcaccia* (a common workboat) rescued from sinking into the shallow pool by its four cannons gently firing sweet, refreshing water.

Gehry acknowledged specifically the maritime figurative reference in the Neuer Zollhof buildings<sup>fig. 10</sup> on the bank of the Rhine in Düsseldorf (1998), where the original design was geometric and then turned into curved shapes, of which Gehry said,

The gigantic white body inevitably brings to mind the great mythical white whale of Melville's *Moby Dick*.



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**Fig 7** Frank O. Gehry, *Standing Glass Fish*, wood, glass, steel, silicone, Plexiglas and rubber, 22 × 14 × 8 feet, 1986, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, United States

**Fig 8** Fontana della Galera, Vatican, Italy

**Fig 9** *Barcaccia* fountain, by Pietro Bernini, on the Piazza di Spagna, Rome, Italy

**Fig 10** Frank O. Gehry, Neuer Zollhof, 1998, Düsseldorf, Germany



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*"They're sails; I am a sailor. I have a boat, you know? I love sailing and I like those Dutch sailing paintings, 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch paintings; do you know them? When you sail, and you are changing course, the sail is full and then you turn it slowly to the other direction. There is a moment when you are directly facing the wind, the wind is coming equally on both sides of the sail. The split second before catching the wind in the other direction, you get a little bit of ripple in the sail called luff, and the sail folds. It's very beautiful; you get the sense of movement of the ship in this ripple; I can't explain it, even if I had taken a picture of it. [...] It is a magical moment because there is a movement that is interesting. I like those images".<sup>5</sup>*

## THE ASSOCIATION WITH THE RIVER WAS ESSENTIAL TO THE CONCEIT

Transferred to Paris the playful wit and charm of these ingenious aquatic drolleries perfectly suited the playground for children that is now the prime function of the Jardin d'Acclimation. And like Noah's Ark, this nautical time capsule carries within and preserves for the future a vast, comprehensive collection of contemporary works of art. There is certainly a concordance between this aspect of Gehry's life experience and the decades-long commitment of Vuitton to the international yacht races that bear the company's name, Louis Vuitton Cup Races <sup>fig. 11</sup>.

There was a long tradition for using glass in buildings intended to exhibit works of commerce and art, most notably the Crystal Palace in England (1850), and in Paris in the Grand Palais (inaugurated 1900), and the Palmarium (for exotic plants) that once stood nearby in the Jardin d'Acclimation (1895). The glass in all these buildings served to provide illumination for the exhibits without expensive artificial lighting. The space was entirely closed and in the case of the Palmarium there were no solid walls. Our glass building was largely indebted to the French tradition of glass making initiated at Saint-Gobain under Louis XIV (and crowned, appropriately, by

I. M. Pei's pyramidal entrance to the Louvre). The crucial differences were that the Fondation Louis Vuitton needed closed spaces for exhibitions, security, heating, lighting, climate control. The challenge was to combine these functions in the body of a fish (equally, the hull of a boat), with the sails of a schooner — the building incorporates elements of both.

The structure consists essentially of four towers (two containing back-of house programs, two containing stairs) and three huge “icebergs” (each containing gallery spaces). Sheathed with panels of white *Ductal* (a ultra-high-performance fiber-reinforced concrete), these massive bastions rest directly on the foundation and support the superstructure, that is, the sails, which are cantilevered out from them or, in one case, from a “boom” anchored underneath. The nomenclature adopted in the Gehry office for the salient features of the project—icebergs, sails—also declares the underlying metaphorical concept, while the gigantic white body inevitably brings to mind the great mythical white whale of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Moby Dick was an awesome beast, and there is, withal, something intimidating about the Louis Vuitton building that adds to its particular titillation, for grown-ups as well as children. A recollection of the biblical Leviathan would not be remiss <sup>fig. 12</sup>.

Perhaps the primary image of the interior structure of the building is of a vast ambience crisscrossed by a kaleidoscopic system of interconnecting straight and curving stairways, straight struts of steel, and curving arches of compressed wood. You never know whether you are inside or out; the spaces are in a constant state of interpenetration. The outside is always present: overhead, the sails become umbrellas. The only closed spaces are the exhibition rooms contained inside the icebergs, which have no windows but are partially lit by tall skywells in the ceilings. A similarly labyrinthine articulation of space was projected by Piranesi <sup>fig. 13</sup> in his series of etchings which he evocatively and provocatively titled *Capricci di Carceri* (“*Caprices of Prisons*”), as if



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**Fig 11** “Emirates Team New Zealand”, winner of the 2013 Louis Vuitton Cup, in San Francisco, United States

**Fig 12** Attributed to Gustave Doré, *The Destruction of Leviathan*, engraving, 1865, private collection

**Fig 13** Giambattista Piranesi, “The Drawbridge”, etching from the *Carceri* series, 1749-60, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Prints and Photographs department, Plate 7, II, F. 30, Paris



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to epitomize the expressive range of fantastic visionary architecture, both a dark and heavy melancholy incubus and a light and airy caprice.

Except for the rectangular dimensions of the ever-curving walls of the *Ductal* cladding units that suggest masonry and panes of sail-glass, no two structural elements are alike. Needless to say, such a construction is unthinkable without the computer, on which were created programs that made it possible to manufacture the individual units at much lower costs than by traditional methods. It is notorious that Gehry does not himself use the computer in his work as a designing tool, and even derides it as inherently cold and dehumanizing. But he readily recognizes that otherwise he could not have conceived a real building in which the exposed structure is constantly changing and never repeated, so that the viewer moves, indoors-outdoors and vice-versa, through a constantly shifting architecture-scape of billowing, wind-blown sails.<sup>6</sup> This effect of interconnectivity is reinforced by the composition of the material used for the sails: sandwiched between two panes of transparent glass a coating of white ceramic frit that suggests the color and texture of sail cloth, and a coating of reflective film, *Ipasol*, which augments the natural reflectivity of the surface so that one also sees reflections and refractions of the environment at every turn <sup>fig. 14</sup>. The consequence of these technologies is a work that is physically, as it appears to be visually, one hundred percent idiosyncratic. Paradoxically, thanks to the computer, it is unique, handmade. The translucent white reflective sails and the glistening white body sublate any sense of weight or mass and effectively dematerialize the building, to create an ephemeral vision that recaptures the open luminosity and exuberant spontaneity of the original sketch.

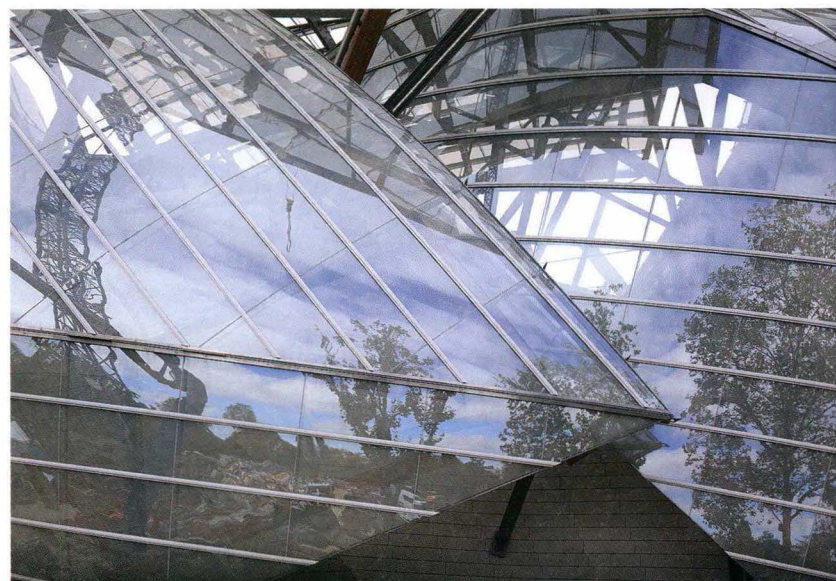
Finally, unlike any of Gehry's sailboat-inspired buildings, here the sails are not mounted vertically, schooner style, but extended in many directions. Reminiscent of the panoply of sails displayed

by a classic fully rigged clipper ship, the winds propel the building forward powerfully and inexorably, and so express the very current of high fashion that Louis Vuitton represents.

## CHIMAERA

These two great themes of Gehry's lifework, the fish and the sailing boat (not a sailboat), converge in a single creature, the Louis Vuitton museum. The fusion is a mythic creature that supersedes (rises above) architecture itself. The visitor is transported into a delirious domain of endless wonderment, where every step is a new, dizzying environment, as mystifying and intriguing (metaphorically speaking) as the möbius-strip illusions of impossibilities by M.C. Escher <sup>fig. 15</sup>. The Louis Vuitton building is thus a kind of metaphysical *summa* of what might be called the mystical streak in Gehry's architecture, which leaves the viewer speechless before and within this never-ending, gleeful, display of wit and ingenuity. Herein, I think, also lies the ultimate metaphor of the project, to which Gehry himself alluded when he was asked to respond to the very perceptive question why there tended to be perimeter-like elements surrounding his buildings. Gehry replied that the enclosure of space and manipulation of the enveloping surface is the principal characteristic of architecture. He was interested in the "oneness" to give unity to the various elements of the design.<sup>7</sup>

His use of that word is astonishing: it echoes Barnett Newman's conundrum name of the very first of his famous series of single-stripe paintings <sup>fig. 16</sup>, *Onement* 1948 (perhaps coincidental, perhaps not). Gehry's glowing, ectoplasmic apparition riding on water, perhaps the most complicated building ever built, no less a miracle of engineering and fabrication than a miracle of design, has precisely this ineffable quality of oneness.



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1. Alejandro Zaera Polo, *With Frank O. Gehry. Conversations*, in *El Croquis*, No. 74-75, 1995, pp. 12-42; Interview with Frank Gehry and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Paris, February 11, 2009 (pages unnumbered)

2. Hans Ulrich Obrist, *ibid*

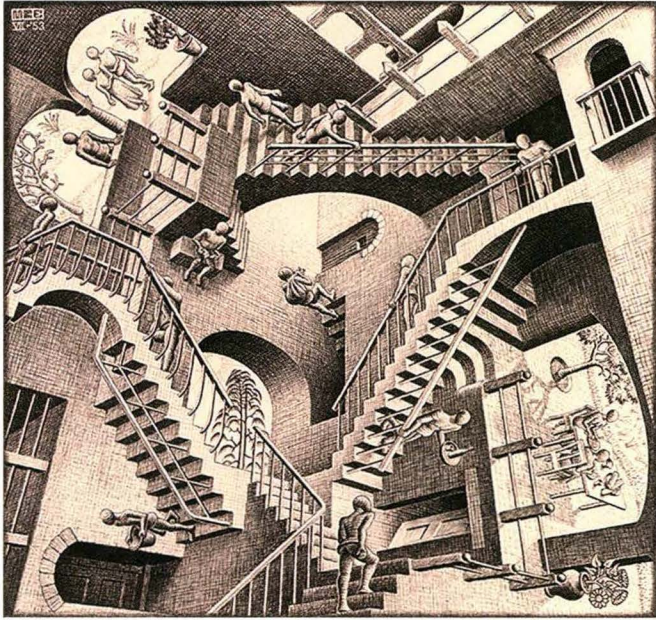
3. The fish lamps were the subject of an international exhibition in 2013 at the Gagosian gallery, with a fine essay by Paul Goldberg

4. Cited in the PBS *American Masters* film series

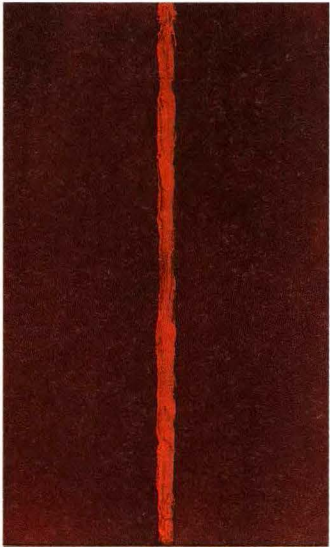
5. Alejandro Zaera Polo, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38

6. For more on movement in Gehry's work see my essays *Going for Baroque: Observations on the Post-modern Fold* in: Sebastian Schütze ed., *Estetica barocca. Atti del convegno internazionale tenutosi a Roma dal 6 al 9 marzo 2002*, Rome, 2004; and *The Gehry Move*, introduction to a speech, "Thinking Out Loud," by Frank O. Gehry, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton NJ, March 16, 2011:

7. Alejandro Zaera Polo, *op. cit.*, p. 30



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The Vuitton building is thus a kind of metaphysical *summa* of what might be called the mystical streak in Gehry's architecture, which leaves the viewer speechless.

**Fig 14** Glass reflection

**Fig 15** M.C. Escher, *Relativity*, print, 27 × 22 cm, 1953

**Fig 16** Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, oil on canvas and oil on masking tape, 69,2 × 41,2 cm, 1948, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, NY, United States