

A Cryptic Dimension in Visual Art

Iconography and Iconology * are disciplines of Art History that deal with the meaning of a visual image rather than its form. That is, they go beyond the discipline of visual aesthetics. Both terms have most often been used interchangeably, but nowadays scholars make a distinction between the two.

The basic assumption is that many, or even most artists convey, beyond the primary subject of their work (a portrait, a religious or secular activity, a still life or even a landscape) an additional, often hidden message. It is expressed using signs, symbols or emblems, even color or lack of it.

The detection, decoding and interpretation of these messages is an intellectual exercise that becomes more difficult depending upon the length of time which separates the artist from the scholar because the meaning of the signs or symbols varies from era to era due to changes in customs and traditions. To complicate matters, the meaning may also change according to the context in which they are presented.

A symbol can be defined as an element that stands for something else. Since pre-historic times, symbolism has been used to express human feelings, activities and objects. The earliest expression of human feelings we know are the Upper-Paleolithic cave paintings** which depict hunting scenes, but which most probably have another dimension, a mystical or religious one that remains hidden to us. It is most unlikely that these images had any decorative purpose, taking into consideration that they could not be seen in the depth of the dark caves!

Compare this with the early Western Art of the Greek and Roman civilizations, which we now know as "classical". The visual aesthetics of Classical Art are above all decorative and based on technical skill in order to depict images of reality, in most cases, of nature. It has to be pointed out that the Latin noun "ars" means "skill" or "craft", not "art". The equivalent in Classical Greek is the noun "techne" (root of our word "technique"). Both words express something created, or put together by human skill (as opposed to nature). Something put together by non-natural means nowadays would be called "synthetic", which literally means "put together"! (Interestingly, in Classical Greek the word "synthesis" practically always means "agreement" or "convention". The latter has its Latin roots and also means "get together" or "put together"!)

In modern English we make a difference between an artist and an artisan: The one produces a work intended primarily for beauty, or may have intellectual content, whereas the other's work is more utilitarian in nature. Formerly that was not the case.

Starting in the High Renaissance we observe that what we now call "Fine Art" was increasingly used as a vehicle of self-expression. We have, of course, striking examples of much earlier time, like Jan van Eyck (1395-1441).*** It took more than two centuries before artistic self-expression was recognized or accepted. This is clear if we realize that even the great artists of the Renaissance and Baroque had the social standing of domestic employees!

The thinking of the 18th century philosophers, above all the Germans Kant, Goethe and Hegel were of great influence. They gave Art History another perspective, which finally led to an increased emphasis on content rather than form. The terms Iconography and Iconology were studied from a historical, etymological and artistic point of view, assuming that they could not be equivalents. The German-American art historian Erwin Panofsky's (1892-1968) definition is nowadays widely accepted:

Iconography: Study and identification of subject matter in art

Iconology: Study of their intrinsic meaning

Not all art historians seem to agree with this separation of the discipline into two levels.

However, after all, art history is not an exact science!

Therefore not each work of art can be elucidated: The recent controversy about the novel *The Da Vinci Code* is a good example. Another one is Picasso's *Guernica*, possibly the 20th century's most famous work, now at the Prado in Madrid. The painting was commissioned by the Spanish Republican government for the 1937 Paris World Exhibition. Before Picasso had selected a subject, the bombing took place of the small Basque town Guernica by the German Luftwaffe on request of the revolutionary forces of Franco. The near abstraction of Picasso's Cubist style provoked as much comment as the primary subject of the practically monochromatic canvas. The fact that the work is executed in grays, black and white obviously has a symbolic significance. But there is much more symbolism expressing the brutality of the act and the suffering of innocent people. When asked, Picasso's now famous comment was: "It isn't up to the artist to define the symbols. Otherwise it would be better if he wrote them out in so many words! The viewer must interpret the symbols as he understands them!"

This is only one opinion, but it is the opinion of a very influential artist.

It makes one wonder whether conceptual understanding is necessary in order to appreciate art!

* Both words are derived from the Classical Greek: "eikon" (image); "graphein" (to carve, write); "logos" (word, reason, etc); logos has many translations, being a key word used by the authors of philosophical texts from de pre-socratic times until the "koine" (Greek text of New Testament)

** Chauvet: more than 30.000 years ago; Lascaux and Altamira: more than 20,000 Years ago)

*** Van Eyck, and his contemporary Hieronimus Bosch, both of the Northern Renaissance, were far ahead of their time and are known for the complex symbolism (secular and religious) in their work.

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