Iconology and Iconography: Describing, Classifying and Interpreting Religious and Artistic Objects
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Student Guide

Introduction

When you have artistic objects or images from religion or art and wish to understand and analyse the meanings of the signs or symbols portrayed therein then iconology and iconography provide useful tools to make the process easier.

This dataset focuses on systematising the process of iconology and iconography research by drawing on Edwin Panofsky’s three levels of analysis. The data provided in this example are two famous paintings: The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci and Guernica by Pablo Picasso. A third image, The Birth of Venus by Botticelli, is provided for you to practice on.

Iconology/Iconography

Originally iconography referred to the description and classification of religious or artistic objects/images, while iconology referred to the interpretation of their meanings, but these two terms now tend to be used interchangeably or as closely interwoven. In order to systematise the process, Edwin Panofsky (1974) constructed an integrated frame of three levels of analysis; primary, secondary and tertiary.
1. **Primary level** (factual description of representations); the purpose of this is to enable the researcher to see all aspects of the object/image in order to prepare for the secondary level…

2. **Secondary level** (iconographical analysis at a more abstract level – seeking the meanings of the signs/symbols/images presented);

3. **Tertiary level** (iconological interpretation involving seeking the deepest meaning through clarifying how the signs/symbols/images reflect the underlying principles or period in which the object/image was created).

Although Panofsky did not suggest this, an overall alternative analysis can often help by giving you another perspective/lens through which to view the image/object. In the following two examples an alternative interpretation has been provided.

Taking two famous artistic images: the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci and *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, Dr. Carol Gbrich will now explain how you can apply Panofsky’s analytical levels.

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**Analysis: Iconology/Iconography of the Mona Lisa**

Iconology and Iconography: Describing, Classifying and Interpreting Religious and Artistic Objects
1. **Primary level** (factual description of representations):

Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa is an early sixteenth-century portrait. The painting is in oil, 31 × 21 inches in size, painted on a panel, using the *sfumato* (blended smoke) method in which translucent layers of paint are applied in such a way that the transitions between colour changes on the clothing are hard to detect. The chiaroscuro technique of using light and shade for skin contrast is also used. The portrait is of Lisa Gherardini, wife of Francesco del Giacondo, a Florentine dignitary and wealthy silk merchant. Lisa presents as a Florentine woman of the era, with shoulder-length black hair with a centre parting, dark head veil, dress of dark brown/black fabric, square-necked with the top of her breasts exposed. Her face appears to be made up of two not quite matching halves (the side on the viewer’s right appearing fuller, with upturned mouth and eye) and overall a half smile (lips closed). She sits, body turning to the right but head facing left centre to the viewer. Her left arm is on the arm of a chair arm or some support, right hand folded over left wrist. She is portrayed against a mountainous, watery landscape with curved pathways. Flat fertile land appears behind and on the left (viewer facing) of her chest and lower body area and rockier bridged land appears on the right behind her neck-head area.

2. **Secondary level** (representation at a more abstract level – iconographical analysis understanding the accepted meanings of the signs and symbols presented and seeking any obvious themes):

This painting represents beauty, calmness and the enigmatic power of women – the complex smile can be both alluring and mocking at the same time. The complexity of the composition can be seen through the male/female, older/younger face and landscape body/mind complexities, and other (somewhat
contentious) themes. Other signs lie in numbers and measures, particularly the geometry of the figure (comprising 12 circles and the pyramid-like placement of the figure in the landscape), providing a possible link to ancient cultures and to astronomy. Other signs lead to a form of numerology and to myths, for example – using a simple latin code of values for particular letters ‘Mona Lisa’ and ‘La Gioconda’ and ‘Leonardo’ all come to the same number value – 84 – suggesting some connection. Numerology has counted the numbers to 84 (8+4=12), 12 (1+2=3). The number 3 refers to creative, artistic, optimistic and imaginative people. Going into mythology, the title Mona Lisa has been seen as a rebus (a code) for sol + anima or sun and moon or male and female, again giving support to the argument regarding the male-female dimensions of the face providing a global human rather than a gender-specific portrait. Supporting this is the term ‘La Gioconda’ meaning light-heartedness, happiness or contentment – here perhaps particularly the happiness and contentment of a woman who has recently given birth to a son.

3. **Tertiary level** (iconological interpretation involving seeking the deepest meaning reflecting the underlying principles or period).

Here the focus is on the links between nature, mythology, astronomy, mathematics and the power and beauty of women/males and females/humans in the dual creation of human life and the environment. The primary link between nature and beauty characterises the major value of the Renaissance period.

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**Alternative Lens**

An alternative feminist reading could emphasise the power and longevity of the presence of women with their strong link to the earth and to nature and their capacity to produce the future (children, food) and their mental and physical strength to survive all that the patriarchal society imposes upon them.
Analysis: Iconology/Iconography of Guernica

Guernica, Pablo Picasso (1937), oil on canvas, 349 × 776 cm, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid.

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1. Primary level (factual description of representations):

This painting falls within the synthetic cubist tradition, with its grey, brown, white and black colours and its incorporation of geometrical experimental constructions of collage-forming layers which can be seen through to create and impart other, less obvious, meanings. The purpose is to represent images as the mind rather than the eye sees them. The painting, 350 × 750 cm in size, was undertaken for the Spanish pavilion at the Paris Work Fair for the Spanish Republican government. It represents a massacre of civilians at Guernica, the capital city of an independent republic, in the Basque country of Northern Spain. The massacre occurred as the outcome of German military practice and was permitted by the Head of State, Francisco Franco, in exchange for military aid for the Spanish Civil
War. The Germans bombed the town and surrounding area for three hours on 27 April 1937. Sixteen hundred people were killed or wounded and the town burned for three days.

The painting uses two- and three-dimensional imagery to depict dead and wounded people and animals – some dismembered, others mutilated. The agony and horror experienced by the victims is evident on their faces. A woman wails, head thrown back and holding an inert baby, another woman with outstretched arms and head thrown back weeps, body split. A bull’s head looks impassively over the scene, while a horse’s head is open-mouthed in horror and pain. In the centre is a representation of Hitler impaled by a spear. A fallen warrior lies in crucifixion position holding a broken sword. A hand holds a flower in the foreground. Another hand holds out an oil lamp to the exploding electric lamp which occupies a central position on the top of the painting. Rays of light penetrate the dark and lines intersect at points, creating apparent explosions. There appear to be layers within the painting; a Lucifer is present as well as a second bull’s head goring the horse, and a human skull penetrated by a spear can be deciphered beneath the wounded horse. The horse has been stabbed by a spear which has a diamond tip – the symbol of a Harlequin. A Harlequin, mouth open, looks down on the scene and four other hidden harlequins can be seen when the painting is inverted.

2. **Secondary level** (representation at a more abstract level – iconographical analysis understanding the accepted meanings of the signs and symbols presented and seeking any obvious themes):

According to Picasso any analysis of the painting lies solely within the meanings that the observer takes from the symbols. Some suggestions, which have been previously accepted, have included:

- the bull may represent fighting in general but more likely represents Franco
• the gored (sexual imagery) and speared horse – the Spanish Republic.
• the weeping women symbolises suffering and loss
• Lucifer is often the bringer of light/evil
• the light – the bomb explosions.
• the crucified warrior with the broken spear is seen as Christ or the incapacity of good to reign over or to combat this situation
• the surviving flower represents hope and peace
• Harlequins are often seen as having power to combat death.

3. **Tertiary level** (iconological interpretation involving seeking the deepest meaning reflecting the underlying principles or period).

The major reading is a negative representation of the horrors of war through the portrayal of a barbaric act, the death of hope and goodness, the self-serving duplicity of political leaders, and the resulting pain and suffering of innocent people and animals.

**Alternative Lens**

An alternative reading is difficult to find in the face of such destruction except perhaps a hope that this form of violence will never recur or that hope survives all and peace will prevail.

Remember to consider that this analytical approach enables the identification of the meanings of the icons/signs being used, but interpretations may change over time, so the original meaning could be lost. When analysing artworks from other eras it is necessary to seek out the historical meanings relevant to the era. For example, most Renaissance paintings were undertaken for religious patrons so they will have obvious meanings of relevance to the context and values of the patron.
Reflective Questions

1. Download the data exemplar provided and look at the third image, The Birth of Venus by Botticelli. Using the steps detailed above, practise analysing it on:
   a. the primary level
   b. the secondary level
   c. the tertiary level.

2. Artists, although dependent on patrons, would often include secret or hidden signs/symbols to transmit their own beliefs, e.g. the Mona Lisa. Can you identify any of these in The Birth of Venus which might provide an alternative reading of the painting?

Reference