# STUDIES IN ICONOLOGY

# Humanistic Themes In the Art of the Renaissance

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# I. INTRODUCTORY

§ I

CONOGRAPHY is that branch of the history of art which concerns

itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form. Let us, then, try to define the distinction between subject matter or meaning on the one hand, and form on the other.

When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. When I identify, as I automatically do, this configuration as an object (gentleman), and the change of detail as an event (hat-removing), I have already overstepped the limits of purely formal perception and entered a first sphere of subject matter or meaning. The meaning thus perceived is of an elementary and easily understandable nature, and we shall call it the factual meaning; it is apprehended by simply identifying certain visible forms with certain objects known to me from practical experience, and by identifying the change in their relations with certain actions or events.

Now the objects and events thus identified will naturally produce a certain reaction within myself. From the way my acquaintance performs his action I may be able to sense whether he is in a good or bad humour, and whether his feelings towards me are indifferent, friendly or hostile. These psychological nuances will invest the gestures of my acquaintance with a further meaning which we shall call expressional. It differs from the factual one in that it is apprehended, not by simple identification, but by 'empathy.' To understand it, I need a certain sensitivity, but this sensitivity is still part

of my practical experience, that is, of my every-day familiarity with objects and events. Therefore both the factual and the expressional meaning may be classified together: they constitute the class of primary or natural meanings.

However, my realization that the lifting of the hat stands for a greeting belongs in an altogether different realm of interpretation. This form of salute is peculiar to the western world and is a residue of mediaeval chivalry: armed men used to remove their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions and their confidence in the peaceful intentions of others. Neither an Australian bushman nor an ancient Greek could be expected to realize that the lifting of a hat is not only a practical event with certain expressional connotations, but also a sign of politeness. To understand this significance of the gentleman's action I must not only be familiar with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization. Conversely, my acquaintance could not feel impelled to greet me by removing his hat were he not conscious of the significance of this feat. As for the expressional connotations which accompany his action, he may or may not be conscious of them. Therefore, when I interpret the removal of a hat as a polite greeting, I recognize in it a meaning which may be called secondary or conventional; it differs from the primary or natural one in that it is intelligible instead of being sensible, and in that it has been consciously imparted to the practical action by which it is conveyed.

And finally: besides constituting a natural event in space and time, besides naturally indicating moods or feelings, besides conveying a conventional greeting, the action of my acquaintance can reveal to an experienced observer all that goes to make up his 'personality.' This personality is conditioned by his being a man of the twentieth century, by his national, social and educational background, by the previous history of his life and by his present surroundings, but it is also distinguished by an individual manner of viewing things and reacting to the world which, if rationalized, would have

to be called a philosophy. In the isolated action of a polite greeting all these factors do not manifest themselves comprehensively, but nevertheless symptomatically. We could not construct a mental portrait of the man on the basis of this single action, but only by co-ordinating a large number of similar observations and by interpreting them in connection with our general information as to the gentleman's period, nationality, class, intellectual traditions and so forth. Yet all the qualities which this mental portrait would show explicitly are implicitly inherent in every single action, so that, conversely, every single action can be interpreted in the light of those qualities.

The meaning thus discovered may be called the *intrinsic meaning* or *content*; it is essential where the two other kinds of meaning, the *primary* or *natural* and the *secondary* or *conventional*, are phenomenal. It may be defined as a unifying principle which underlies and explains both the visible event and its intelligible significance, and which determines even the form in which the visible event takes shape. This *intrinsic meaning* or *content* is, of course, as much above the sphere of conscious volitions as the *expressional* meaning is beneath this sphere.

Transferring the results of this analysis from every-day life to a work of art, we can distinguish in its subject matter or meaning the same three strata:

I—PRIMARY OR NATURAL SUBJECT MATTER, subdivided into FACTUAL and EXPRESSIONAL. It is apprehended by identifying pure forms, that is: certain configurations of line and colour, or certain peculiarly shaped lumps of bronze or stone, as representations of natural objects such as human beings, animals, plants, houses, tools and so forth; by identifying their mutual relations as events; and by perceiving such expressional qualities as the mournful character of a pose or gesture, or the homelike and peaceful atmosphere of an interior. The world of pure forms thus recognized as carriers of primary or natural meanings may be called the world of artistic motifs. An enumeration of these motifs would be a pre-iconographical description of the work of art.

2-SECONDARY OR CONVENTIONAL SUBJECT MATTER. It is apprehended by realizing that a male figure with a knife represents St. Bartholomew, that a female figure with a peach in her hand is a personification of Veracity, that a group of figures seated at a dinner table in a certain arrangement and in certain poses represents the Last Supper, or that two figures fighting each other in a certain manner represent the Combat of Vice and Virtue. In doing this we connect artistic motifs and combinations of artistic motifs (compositions) with themes or concepts. Motifs thus recognized as carriers of a secondary or conventional meaning may be called images, and combinations of images are what the ancient theorists of art called 'invenzioni;' we are wont to call them stories and allegories.1 The identification of such images, stories and allegories is the domain of iconography in the narrower sense of the word. In fact, when we loosely speak of 'subject matter as opposed to form' we chiefly mean the sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter, viz. the world of specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories and allegories, as opposed to the sphere of primary or natural subject matter manifested in artistic motifs. 'Formal analysis' in Wölfflin's sense is largely an analysis of motifs and combinations of motifs (compositions); for a formal analysis in the

<sup>1.</sup> Images conveying the idea, not of concrete and individual persons or objects (such as St. Bartholomew, Venus, Mrs. Jones, or Windsor Castle), but of abstract and general notions such as Faith, Luxury, Wisdom etc., are called either personifications or symbols (not in the Cassirerian, but in the ordinary sense, e.g. the Cross, or the Tower of Chastity). Thus allegories, as opposed to stories, may be defined as combinations of personifications and/or symbols. There are, of course many intermediary possibilities. A person A. may be portrayed in the guise of the person B. (Bronzino's Andrea Doria as Neptune; Durer's Lucas Paumgartner as St. George), or in the customary array of a personification (Joshua Reynolds's Mrs. Stanhope as 'Contemplation'); portrayals of concrete and individual persons, both human or mythological, may be combined with personifications, as is the case in countless representations of a eulogistic character. A story may convey, in addition, an allegorical idea, as is the case with the illustrations of the Ovide Moralisé, or may be conceived as the 'prefiguration' of another story, as in the Biblia Pauperum or in the Speculum Humanae Salvationis. Such superimposed meanings either do not enter into the content of the work at all, as is the case with the Ovide Moralise illustrations which are visually indistinguishable from non-allegorical miniatures illustrating the same Ovidian subjects; or they cause an ambiguity of content, which can, however, be overcome or even turned into an added value if the conflicting ingredients are molten in the heat of a fervent artistic temperament as in Rubens' 'Galerie de Médicis.'

strict sense of the word would even have to avoid such expressions as 'man,' 'horse,' or 'column,' let alone such evaluations as 'the ugly triangle between the legs of Michelangelo's David' or 'the admirable clarification of the joints in a human body.' It is obvious that a correct iconographical analysis in the narrower sense presupposes a correct identification of the motifs. If the knife that enables us to identify a St. Bartholomew is not a knife but a cork-screw, the figure is not a St. Bartholomew. Furthermore it is important to note that the statement 'this figure is an image of St. Bartholomew' implies the conscious intention of the artist to represent St. Bartholomew, while the expressional qualities of the figure may well be unintentional.

3—Intrinsic Meaning or Content. It is apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion-unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work. Needless to say, these principles are manifested by, and therefore throw light on, both 'compositional methods' and 'iconographical significance.' In the 14th and 15th centuries for instance (the earliest example can be dated around 1310), the traditional type of the Nativity with the Virgin Mary reclining in bed or on a couch was frequently replaced by a new one which shows the Virgin kneeling before the Child in adoration. From a compositional point of view this change means, roughly speaking, the substitution of a triangular scheme for a rectangular one; from an iconographical point of view in the narrower sense of the term, it means the introduction of a new theme textually formulated by such writers as Pseudo-Bonaventura and St. Bridget. But at the same time it reveals a new emotional attitude peculiar to the later phases of the Middle Ages. A really exhaustive interpretation of the intrinsic meaning or content might even show that the technical procedures characteristic of a certain country, period, or artist, for instance Michelangelo's preference for sculpture in stone

instead of in bronze, or the peculiar use of hatchings in his drawings, are symptomatic of the same basic attitude that is discernible in all the other specific qualities of his style. In thus conceiving of pure forms, motifs, images, stories and allegories as manifestations of underlying principles, we interpret all these elements as what Ernst Cassirer has called 'symbolical' values. As long as we limit ourselves to stating that Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco shows a group of thirteen men around a dinner table, and that this group of men represents the Last Supper, we deal with the work of art as such, and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as its own properties or qualifications. But when we try to understand it as a document of Leonardo's personality, or of the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, or of a peculiar religious attitude, we deal with the work of art as a symptom of something else which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms, and we interpret its compositional and iconographical features as more particularized evidence of this 'something else.' The discovery and interpretation of these 'symbolical' values (which are generally unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express) is the object of what we may call iconography in a deeper sense: of a method of interpretation which arises as a synthesis rather than as an analysis. And as the correct identification of the motifs is the prerequisite of a correct iconographical analysis in the narrower sense, the correct analysis of images, stories and allegories is the prerequisite of a correct iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense,—unless we deal with such works of art in which the whole sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter is eliminated, and a direct transition from motifs to content is striven for, as is the case with European landscape painting, still-life and genre; that is, on the whole, with exceptional phenomena, which mark the later, over-sophisticated phases of a long development.

Now, how do we arrive at a correct pre-iconographical description, and at a correct iconographical analysis in the narrower sense, with the ultimate goal of penetrating into the intrinsic meaning or content?

In the case of a pre-iconographical description, which keeps within the limits of the world of motifs, the matter seems simple enough. The objects and events whose representation by lines, colours and volumes constitutes the world of motifs can be identified, as we have seen, on the basis of our practical experience. Everybody can recognize the shape and behaviour of human beings, animals and plants, and everybody can tell an angry face from a jovial one. It is, of course, possible that in a given case the range of our personal experience is not wide enough, for instance when we find ourselves confronted with the representation of an obsolete or unfamiliar tool, or with the representation of a plant or animal unknown to us. In such cases we have to widen the range of our practical experience by consulting a book or an expert, but we do not leave the sphere of practical experience as such.

Yet even in this sphere we encounter a peculiar problem. Setting aside the fact that the objects, events and expressions depicted in a work of art may be unrecognizable owing to the incompetence or malice aforethought of the artist, it is, on principle, impossible to arrive at a correct pre-iconographical description, or identification of primary subject matter, by indiscriminately applying our practical experience to the work of art. Our practical experience is indispensable, as well as sufficient, as material for a pre-iconographical description, but it does not guarantee its correctness.

A pre-iconographical description of Roger van der Weyden's Three Magi in the Museum of Berlin (fig.1) would, of course, have to avoid such terms as 'Magi,' 'Infant Jesus' etc. But it would have to mention that the apparition of a small child is seen in the sky. How do we know that this child is meant to be an apparition? That it is surrounded with a halo of golden rays would not be sufficient proof of this assumption, for similar

halos can often be observed in representations of the Nativity where the Infant Jesus is real. That the child in Roger's picture is meant to be an apparition can only be deduced from the additional fact that he hovers in mid-air. But how do we know that he hovers in mid-air? His pose would be no different were he seated on a pillow on the ground; in fact it is highly probable that Roger used for his painting a drawing from life of a child seated on a pillow. The only valid reason for our assumption that the child in the Berlin picture is meant to be an apparition is the fact that he is depicted in space with no visible means of support.

But we can adduce hundreds of representations in which human beings, animals and inanimate objects seem to hang loose in space in violation of the law of gravity, without thereby pretending to be apparitions. For instance, in a miniature in the 'Gospels of Otto III' in the Staats-Bibliothek of Munich, a whole city is represented in the centre of an empty space while the figures taking part in the action stand on solid ground (fig. 2).2 An inexperienced observer may well assume that the town is meant to be suspended in mid-air by some sort of magic. Yet in this case the lack of support does not imply a miraculous invalidation of the laws of nature. The city is the real city of Nain where the resurrection of the youth took place. In a miniature of around 1000 this empty space does not count as a real three-dimensional medium, as it does in a more realistic period, but just as an abstract, unreal background. The curious semicircular shape of what should be the base line of the towers bears witness to the fact that, in the more realistic prototype of our miniature, the town had been situated on a hilly terrain, but was taken over into a representation in which space has ceased to be thought of in terms of perspective realism. The unsupported figure in the van der Weyden picture counts as an apparition, while the floating city in the Ottonian miniature has no miraculous connotation. These contrasting interpretations are suggested to us by the 'realistic' qualities of the painting and the 'unrealistic' qualities of the miniature. But

<sup>2.</sup> G.Leidinger, Bibl. 190, PL.36.

that we grasp these qualities in the fraction of a second and almost automatically, must not induce us to believe that we could ever give a correct pre-iconographical description of a work of art without having divined, as it were, its historical 'locus.' While we believe ourselves to identify the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we really read 'what we see' according to the manner in which objects and events were expressed by forms under varying historical conditions. In doing this, we subject our practical experience to a controlling principle which can be called the history of style.<sup>3</sup>

lconographical analysis, dealing with images, stories and allegories instead of with motifs, presupposes, of course, much more than that familiarity with objects and events which we acquire by practical experience. It presupposes a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources, whether acquired by purposeful reading or by oral tradition. Our Australian bushman would be unable to recognize the subject of a Last Supper; to him, it would only convey the idea of an excited dinner party. To understand the iconographical meaning of the picture he would have to familiarize himself with the content of the Gospels. When it comes to representations of themes other than biblical stories or scenes from history and mythology which happen to be known to the average 'educated person,' all of us are Australian bushmen. In such cases we, too, must try to

<sup>3.</sup> To control the interpretation of an individual work of art by a 'history of style' which in turn can only be built up by interpreting individual works, may look like a vicious circle. It is, indeed, a circle, though not a vicious, but a methodical one (cf.E.Wind, Bibl.407; idem, Bibl.408). Whether we deal with historical or natural phenomena, the individual observation assumes the character of a 'fact' only when it can be related to other, analogous observations in such a way that the whole series 'makes sense.' This 'sense' is, therefore, fully capable of being applied, as a control, to the interpretation of a new individual observation within the same range of phenomena. If, however, this new individual observation definitely refuses to be interpreted according to the 'sense' of the series, and if an error proves to be impossible, the 'sense' of the series will have to be re-formulated to include the new individual observation. This circulus methodicus applies, of course, not only to the relationship between the interpretation of motifs and the history of style, but also to the relationship between the interpretation of images, stories and allegories and the history of types, and to the relationship between the interpretation of images, stories and allegories and the history of cultural symptoms in general.

familiarize ourselves with what the authors of those representations had read or otherwise knew. But again, while an acquaintance with specific themes and concepts transmitted through literary sources is indispensable and sufficient material for an iconographical analysis, it does not guarantee its correctness. It is just as impossible for us to give a correct iconographical analysis by indiscriminately applying our literary knowledge to the motifs, as it is for us to give a correct pre-iconographical description by indiscriminately applying our practical experience to the forms.

A picture by the Venetian seventeenth-century painter Francesco Maffei, representing a handsome young woman with a sword in her right hand, and in her left a charger on which rests the head of a beheaded man (fig. 3), has been published as a portrayal of Salome with the head of John the Baptist. In fact the Bible states that the head of St. John the Baptist was brought to Salome on a charger. But what about the sword? Salome did not decapitate St. John the Baptist with her own hands. Now the Bible tells us about another handsome woman in connection with the decapitation of a man, namely Judith. In this case the situation is exactly reversed. The sword would be correct because Judith beheaded Holofernes with her own hand, but the charger would not agree with the Judith theme because the text explicitly states that the head of Holofernes was put into a sack. Thus we have two literary sources applicable to our picture with equal right and equal inconsistency. If we should interpret it as a portrayal of Salome the text would account for the charger, but not for the sword; if we should interpret it as a portrayal of Judith the text would account for the sword, but not for the charger. We should be entirely at a loss did we depend on the literary sources alone. Fortunately we do not. As we could correct and control our practical experience by inquiring into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms, viz., into the history of style, just so can we correct and control our knowledge of literary sources by inquiring into the manner in which, under

<sup>4.</sup> G.Fiocco, Bibl. 92, PL. 29.

varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events, viz., into the history of types.

In the case at hand we shall have to ask whether there were, before Francesco Maffei painted his picture, any unquestionable portrayals of Judith (unquestionable because they would include, for instance, Judith's maid) with unjustified chargers; or any unquestionable portrayals of Salome (unquestionable because they would include, for instance, Salome's parents) with unjustified swords. And lo! while we cannot adduce a single Salome with a sword, we encounter, in Germany and North Italy, several sixteenth-century paintings depicting Judith with a charger; there was a type of 'Judith with a charger,' but there was no type of 'Salome with a sword.' From this we can safely conclude that Maffei's picture, too, represents Judith, and not, as has been assumed, Salome.

We may further ask why artists felt entitled to transfer the motif of the charger from Salome to Judith, but not the motif of the sword from Judith to Salome. This question can be answered, again by inquiring into the history of types, with two reasons. One reason is that the sword was an established and honorific attribute of Judith, of many martyrs, and of such Virtues as Justice, Fortitude etc.; thus it could not be transferred with propriety to a lascivious girl. The other reason is that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the charger with the head of St. John the Baptist had become an isolated devotional image (Andachtsbild) especially popular in the northern countries and in North Italy (fig.4); it had been singled out from a representation of the Salome story in much the same way as the group of St. John the Evangelist resting on the bosom of the Lord

<sup>5.</sup> One of the North Italian pictures is ascribed to Romanino, and is preserved in the Berlin Museum, where it was formerly listed as 'Salome' in spite of the maid, a sleeping soldier, and the city of Jerusalem in the background (no.155); another is ascribed to Romanino's pupil Francesco Prato da Caravaggio (quoted in the Berlin Catalogue), and a third is by Bernardo Strozzi who was a native of Genoa, but active at Venice about the same time as Francesco Maffei. It is very possible that the type of 'Judith with a charger' originated in Germany. One of the earliest known instances (by an anonymous master of around 1530 related to Hans Baldung Grien) has recently been published by G.Poensgen, Bibl.270.

had come to be singled out from the Last Supper, or the Virgin in childbed from the Nativity. The existence of this devotional image established a fixed association between the idea of the head of a beheaded man and the idea of a charger, and thus the motif of a charger could more easily be substituted for the motif of a sack in an image of Judith, than the motif of a sword could have penetrated into an image of Salome.

The interpretation of the intrinsic meaning or content, dealing with what we have termed 'symbolical' values instead of with images, stories and allegories, requires something more than a familiarity with specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources. When we wish to get hold of those basic principles which underlie the choice and presentation of motifs, as well as the production and interpretation of images, stories and allegories, and which give meaning even to the formal arrangements and technical procedures employed, we cannot hope to find an individual text which would fit those basic principles as John xiii, 21ss. fits the iconography of the Last Supper. To grasp these principles we need a mental faculty com-

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION
I-Primary or natural subject matter— (A) factual, (B) expressional—, constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).
II—Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word.
III-Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolical' values.	Iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis).

parable to that of a diagnostician,—a faculty which I cannot describe better than by the rather discredited term 'synthetic intuition,' and which may be better developed in a talented layman than in an erudite scholar.

However, the more subjective and irrational this source of interpretation (for every intuitive approach will be conditioned by the interpreter's psychology and 'Weltanschauung'), the more necessary the application of those correctives and controls which proved indispensable where only an iconographical analysis in the narrower sense, or even a mere pre-iconographical description was concerned. When even our practical experience and our knowledge of literary sources may mislead us if indiscriminately applied to works of art, how much more dangerous would it be to trust our intuition pure and simple! Thus, as our practical experience had to be controlled by an insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms (history of style); and as our knowledge of literary sources had to be controlled by an insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes and

EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CONTROLLING PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION
Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the man- ner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).
Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung.'	History of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).

concepts were expressed by objects and events (history of types); just so, or even more so, has our synthetic intuition to be controlled by an insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, the general and essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts. This means what may be called a history of cultural symptoms-or 'symbols' in Ernst Cassirer's sense-in general. The art-historian will have to check what he thinks is the intrinsic meaning of the work, or group of works, to which he devotes his attention, against what he thinks is the intrinsic meaning of as many other documents of civilization historically related to that work or group of works, as he can master: of documents bearing witness to the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation. Needless to say that, conversely, the historian of political life, poetry, religion, philosophy, and social situations should make an analogous use of works of art. It is in the search for intrinsic meanings or content that the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to each other.

In conclusion: when we wish to express ourselves very strictly (which is of course not always necessary in our normal talk or writing, where the general context throws light on the meaning of our words), we have to distinguish between three strata of subject matter or meaning, the lowest of which is commonly confused with form, and the second of which is the special province of iconography in the narrower sense. In whichever stratum we move, our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be corrected and controlled by an insight into historical processes the sum total of which may be called tradition.

I have summarized in a synoptical table what I have tried to make clear thus far. But we must bear in mind that the neatly differentiated categories, which in this synoptical table seem to indicate three independent spheres of meaning, refer in reality to aspects of one phenomenon, namely, the work

of art as a whole. So that, in actual work, the methods of approach which here appear as three unrelated operations of research merge with each other into one organic and indivisible process.





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