

# Chapter 5: Meaning in Art: Socio-Cultural Contexts, Symbolism, and Iconography

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## 5.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Place works of art in historical, social, personal, political, or scientific contexts.
- Define and distinguish between symbolism and iconography.
- Identify changes in symbols and iconographic motifs over time and in different cultures.
- Relate iconography to visual literacy.
- Describe connections between symbolism, iconography, and storytelling.
- Recognize metaphorical meanings in art.

## 5.2 INTRODUCTION

The process we go through when we look at a work of art to determine if we recognize and can make sense of its content is not just a visual one. It is a mental process as well, largely based on the elements within and about the work we can identify and categorize. As we look and think, we may be given clues about what the work means by where it is, when it was made, what culture it came from, who created it, or why it was made. Any information we can gather helps us understand the work's context, that is, for what historical, social, personal, political, or scientific reasons the work of art was made. And then, using all the contextual information we have gathered, we interpret the work of art's content to discover what it means or symbolizes.

## 5.3 SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXTS

### 5.3.1 Historical Context



We can learn about the historical context to help us interpret the content and understand the meaning of two seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Willem Claesz. Heda (1594-1680, Netherlands) created *Still Life with a Gilt Cup* in 1635, and Jan Davidsz. de Heem painted *Still Life with Flowers* around 1660. (Figures 5.1 and 5.2) Heda lived in his native Haarlem his entire life; de Heem was born in Utrecht but traveled in the Netherlands and then lived in Antwerp for the majority of his career, c. 1635 to 1667. He briefly returned to Utrecht but settled back in Antwerp in the 1670s where he remained until his death.



**Figure 5.1 | *Still Life with Gilt Goblet***

Artist: Willem Claeszoon Heda

Author: Web Gallery of Art

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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**Figure 5.2 | Vase of Flowers**

Artist: Jan Davidszoon de Heem

Author: User "DcoetzeeBot"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Although depicting different types of things, each of these paintings is a **still life**, an arrangement of objects both made by humans and found in nature, such as flowers, fruit, insects, sea creatures, and animals from the hunt. A still life falls into a subject category known as **genre** subjects or scenes of everyday life. Both Heda and de Heem specialized in painting still lifes that were beautifully arranged and stunningly lifelike. Each was well known for his ability to depict a variety of textures and surfaces often displayed side-by-side, as we can see here, to create a dazzling and sumptuous visual array.

There are a number of things going on in the Netherlands in the 1600s—known as the Dutch Golden Age—that can help explain why Heda and de Heem included some of the objects in their paintings. What is today the Netherlands (or Holland) and Belgium were together ruled first by the Dukes of Burgundy, the Burgundians, beginning in 1433 and then by Charles V of the Habsburg family in 1506. Charles V left the Netherlands in 1515, however, to become King of Spain. Tension created by family members who remained in place to rule led to friction with the Dutch and eventually to revolt beginning in 1566. At the same time, the Protestant Reformation



that originated in Wittenberg, Germany, under Martin Luther in 1517 had spread through much of northern Europe, including parts of the Netherlands. Followers of the new Protestant faith were at first tolerated by the Catholic Spanish rulers, but they were soon treated as heretics, and their faith was seen as a rebellion to be crushed. William I, Prince of Orange, a Dutch nobleman, turned away from his position in the court of the Habsburg rulers to lead his country into the Dutch War for Independence from Spain, more commonly known as the Eighty Years War (1568-1648). In 1581, the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands were declared independent, forming what we still know as Holland today. The southern area that remained under Catholic Spanish rule was known as Flanders and is modern Belgium. Fighting continued on and off between the Dutch and Spanish until 1618 when they both became embroiled in a larger European War known as the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). With the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the Spanish crown officially acknowledged the republic of Holland.

In the midst of this ongoing turmoil over politics and religion, as well as decades of disruption and destruction caused by war, the Netherlands also experienced a time of tremendous economic growth, revolutionary scientific exploration, dominance in worldwide trade, and flourishing of the arts. The rise of the merchant class (equivalent to today's middle class) led to the spread of education and wealth among new segments of society. Their knowledge of and appreciation for art, along with their discretionary income, in turn led to increased patronage. Patrons of art were not looking to purchase sculptures and paintings for churches, however, as Protestants do not embellish their houses of worship; they do not adorn the word of God as found in the Bible. This led to interest in new subjects in painting, such as genre and still life painting, as well as landscapes, city views, portraits, and religious subjects in works meant to hang in the home.

The subject of Heda's painting, *Still Life with a Gilt Cup*, is ostensibly the remains of a meal of oysters and bread, but it is even more about all the objects accompanying the food. (Figure 5.1) The tin plates and open-lidded pewter pitcher are relatively simply fashioned and could have been made by local craftsmen. But the remaining items, including a spiral ribbed clear glass cruet for oil or vinegar behind the tin bowl of oysters, the green glass wine römer, or goblet, decorated with **prunts** (applied blobs of molten glass, here drawn into points), and the tall, heavily ornamented, and gilded vessel topped by a lid with a figure of a warrior, are all luxury goods. They indicate wealth and good taste, and they allude to Holland's importance as a nation of traders who import beautiful objects from around the world.

We are not meant to look at this feast for the eyes and simply congratulate ourselves on our success and prosperity, though. The fact is the feast is over, and all we have here are the remains of what has too quickly passed. The richly decorated silver berkemeier, a wide-mouthed



drinking vessel with a slender stem, is overturned. The oysters are a delicacy that retain their freshness and appeal only briefly, and the lemon, while beautiful, is actually bitter and will soon dry out. These are reminders that life is fleeting. No matter what material riches and comforts one accumulates on earth, it is more important to prepare one's soul for life everlasting.

In a similar fashion, in *Still Life with Flowers* de Heem sets before us, teeming with life and in abundant disarray, the beauty and bounty of nature. (Figure 5.2) But he also shows the swift passing of the seasons by depicting flowers, fruits, and vegetables that bloom and ripen throughout the year. The tulips—from highly prized and costly bulbs imported by the Dutch from the Ottoman Empire (modern Turkey)—honeysuckle, roses, carnations, peas, grapes, and corn—introduced to Europe from the Americas—are among the profusion of colors and forms that de Heem unrealistically depicts as all in season at the same time. The viewer would instead know that long before the orange carnation blossomed in the fall, the blood-red striped tulip would have withered in the spring. De Heem is reminding us in this **vanitas** (Latin: vanity) still life of our own mortality and the transience of life in the face of certain death.

Both paintings' messages reflect the importance in the Protestant faith, as practiced in Holland at the time, of the believer's direct connection to God without the need for intercessors. The faithful do not need the word of God to be interpreted for them, and the messages of God are everywhere. Both paintings are celebrations of riches and pleasures of life, but they are also reminders of its brevity and the unimportance of earthly possessions and human achievements in the face of eternity. So, while the works demonstrate the Dutch viewers' pride in themselves and their young nation's accomplishments in the face of tremendous obstacles, they also carry a word of caution and a reminder to be vigilant.

### 5.3.2 Social Context

Lilly Martin Spencer (1822-1902, USA) painted *Conversation Piece* around 1851-1852. (Figure 5.3) A **genre painting**, it depicts an everyday scene of a mother holding her infant in her lap while the father stands beside them playfully dangling some cherries above the baby's eager grasp. It is a quiet scene of family life, a moment of contentment and peace, with the dining table not yet cleared after a meal adding an even greater sense of intimacy and informality. Spencer was the only prominent female painter at that time in the United States, and the majority of her works are narrative genre pieces such as this one. They are scenes of domestic life, often suggesting a story told through the setting, the arrangement and gesture of the figures, and their facial expressions.





**Figure 5.3 | *Conversation Piece***

Artist: Lilly Martin Spencer

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

Elements in Spencer's work often seem to reflect her personal life. The artist depicted herself and her husband in *Conversation Piece*, as she did in many of her paintings. Not only was it unusual that she was a successful professional painter, when she married Benjamin Rush Spencer, he took on the household duties and aided his wife in pursuing her career. Over the course of their long (and what is believed to be happy) marriage, while also bearing thirteen children and raising seven to adulthood, Spencer remained the breadwinner of the family.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of changes had been introduced into American industry and commerce that had far-reaching effects on the roles women, men, and children played in the home and in the labor force. The advent of new machinery and production methods in the textile industry, for example, generated a need for mill workers that in turn fostered the growth and spread of urban centers. At the same time, both those who owned and managed the mill factories as well as those who worked in them became part of a wage-based economy, and the demand for goods and services to support them rose accordingly. In New



England, the majority of the mill workers were young women who had been recruited from rural areas; the wages they earned were often saved in anticipation of marriage or to supplement their family's income. But critics feared the economic and social independence these young women gained would turn them against the often hard and isolated farm lives they left behind, and indeed many chose not to return. The greatest apprehension, however, was these women would turn away from their rightful place in the private sphere of home.

The growing industrialism of American society impacted men and their roles within and outside the home, as well. Men primarily worked in the public sphere, that is, outside the home in areas such as manufacturing, business, or commerce. Their roles were in sharp contrast to the domestic duties and roles of wife and mother played by women. This separation of obligations and expectations led to rigid gender roles in which both women and men were contained. The roles confined the woman to the protective environment of home, while the man sheltered her as he faced the harsh demands outside.

In Spencer's painting, the woman represents the feminine ideal of a nurturing and content mother. But rather than showing a father who holds himself apart from the womanly, domestic sphere—as was far more common at the time—Spencer depicts the man in an equally caring and warm role. An oval is formed by the mother's bent head and arm which extends from her hand supporting the baby's head through the baby's upraised arm to the father's bent arm, his bowed head, and his left arm resting on the back of the mother's chair. At odds with many at the time who believed men and women existed in separate spheres, Spencer draws the family into one circle.

American industrialism worked hand-in-hand with American ingenuity. Steamboat routes on the Mississippi River and its tributaries substantially contributing to the growth of settlements and cities from New Orleans to Pittsburgh began in 1811. The first steamboat to make that run was the *New Orleans* designed by Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston, both key figures in the development of steamboat design and travel. As would be the case with the thousands of steamboats that would traverse the Mississippi over the next century, it was made of wood and propelled by a paddlewheel that was powered by a steam engine; the steam was made by heating water in boilers which had to be watched to avoid pressure building to the point of explosion, a very real and constant danger. In attempts to better travel time between landings or by engaging in races with other steamboats, however, it was not uncommon for the engineer to stoke the fires while keeping the boilers' safety valves closed, allowing steam pressure to build past safe levels.

Although 230 boats were destroyed due to boiler explosions between 1816 and 1848 with the loss of nearly 1,800 lives, one of the great attractions of steamboat travel remained its speed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Steamboats." American Eras. 1997. [Encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2536600971.html). (June 22, 2015). <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2536600971.html>



The excitement and the danger of a steamboat race are captured in a print published by Currier & Ives in 1866, *The Champions of the Mississippi: A Race for the Buckhorns*. (Figure 5.4) Nathaniel Currier (1813-1888, USA) and his brother-in-law James Merritt Ives (1824-1895, USA) formed the company Currier & Ives in 1857. They published black-and-white and hand-colored lithographs on numerous subjects meant to appeal to a broad spectrum of the American public, including landscapes, genre scenes, portraits, depictions of politics and current events, and the latest innovations in science, industry, and the arts.



**Figure 5.4 | *The Champions of the Mississippi "A Race for the Buckhorns"***

Artist: Frances Flora Bond Palmer

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

The firm of Currier & Ives hired well-known artists of the day to create the drawings from which their lithographic prints were made. The artist who drew the *Champions of the Mississippi* was Frances Flora Bond Palmer (1812-1876, USA). Palmer, like Lilly Martin Spencer, supported her family as a full-time artist. Palmer produced hundreds of original drawings in the seventeen years she worked for Currier & Ives, more than any other artist they employed. She printed and



hand-colored many of her own works, as well, parts of the lithographic process generally reserved for artists in the firm with less training and expertise. For example, the prints were usually painted in an assembly line, with one artisan applying a single color and passing the work on to the next for another color. That Palmer took part in all phases of creating the prints was an indication of her great skill and versatility.

As was the case with the majority of scenes Palmer created, she did not witness the race between the steamboats *Queen of the West* and *Morning Star* or the cheering crowd on the shore. She depicted numerous such scenes, however, as competitions such as this were commonplace and prints commemorating them were popular and sold well. The races and the steamboats were a source of pride and a celebration of American ingenuity, competitiveness, and success. For those who owned a print such as *The Champions of the Mississippi*, the vast majority of whom had never seen the river or a steamboat competition, it represented the open possibilities of America's greatest waterway and indomitable spirit. As described by Mark Twain, who grew up in a town on the river's shore and spent four years as a riverboat pilot (1857-1861), there was a nearly magical quality to the allure and excitement of life on the river, especially when a steamboat race was coming. He related in his memoir *Life on the Mississippi* (1883):

In the "flush times" of steamboating, a race between two notoriously fleet steamers was an event of vast importance. The date was set for it several weeks in advance, and from that time forward, the whole Mississippi Valley was in a state of consuming excitement. Politics and the weather were dropped, and people talked only of the coming race.

The chosen date being come, and all things in readiness, the two great steamers back into the stream, and lie there jockeying a moment, and apparently watching each other's slightest movement, like sentient creatures; flags drooping, the pent steam shrieking through safety-valves, the black smoke rolling and tumbling from the chimneys and darkening all the air. People, people everywhere; the shores, the house-tops, the steamboats, the ships, are packed with them, and you know that the borders of the broad Mississippi are going to be fringed with humanity thence northward twelve hundred miles, to welcome these racers.<sup>2</sup>

### 5.3.3 Personal or Creative Narrative Context

Charles Demuth (1883-1935, USA) painted *The Figure 5 in Gold* in 1928. (Figure 5.5)

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co.), 1883. Accessed from: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/245/245-h/245-h.htm>



Demuth met poet and physician William Carlos Williams at the boarding house where they both lived in Philadelphia while studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Demuth's painting is one in a series of portraits of friends, paying homage to Williams and his 1916 poem "The Great Figure":

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.





**Figure 5.5 | *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold***

Artist: Charles Demuth

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

Williams described the inspiration for his poem as an encounter with a fire truck as it noisily sped along the streets of New York, abruptly shaking him from his inner thoughts to a jarring awareness of what was going on around him. Demuth chose to paint his portrait of Williams not as a likeness but with references to his friend, the poet. The dark, shadowed diagonal lines radiating from the center of his painting, punctuated by bright white circles, capture the jolt of the charging truck accompanied by the clamor of its bells. The accelerating beat of the figure 5 echoes the pounding of Williams's heart as he was startled. It was the sight of the number in gold that Williams was first aware of at the scene, and Demuth uses the pulsing 5 to symbolically portray his friend, surrounded by the rush of red as bright as blood with his name, Bill, above as if flashing in red neon.

For Demuth, that connection between his friend and his poetry told us far more about who Williams *was* than his physical appearance. A traditional portrait would show us what Williams looked like, but Demuth wanted to share with the viewer the experience of the poem the artist



closely identified with his friend so that we would have an inner, deeper understanding of the poet. Demuth gave us his personal interpretation of Williams through the story, the narrative, that he tells us with the aid of “The Great Figure.”

Georgia O’Keeffe gives us a portrait of the American landscape in a similar way in her painting *Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue* from 1931. ([\*Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue\*, Georgia O’Keeffe](#)) Throughout the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century, the majority of artists depicted the American land through its mountains and forests, farmlands and prairies, rivers and waterfalls: the vast stretches, immense heights, bounty, variety, and majesty of the seemingly endless continent. In this painting, however, O’Keeffe chose to portray the beauty of the United States not through its fertile grasslands or rocky peaks but in the austerity and simplicity of the desert of the American Southwest that she had come to appreciate, as symbolized by the sharp lines of a bleached cow’s skull set against patriotic red and blue.

O’Keeffe was born in 1887 near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. After studying art and working as an art teacher in several areas of the United States, including Chicago, Illinois, Amarillo, Texas, and Columbia, South Carolina, O’Keeffe moved to New York City in 1918.

Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946, USA), a photographer, publisher, and art gallery owner who was instrumental in introducing audiences to and helping them appreciate European and American modernist art in this country in the first decades of the twentieth century, had exhibited O’Keeffe’s drawings in his gallery 291 in 1917. The following year she accepted his offer of support so that she could devote herself to painting full-time. After more than ten years in New York, depicting streets and buildings of the city and at the Stieglitz family home on Lake George in upstate New York, O’Keeffe decided to spend the summer of 1929 with friends in Santa Fe and Taos, New Mexico.

Painted after that trip, *Cow’s Skull: Red, White, and Blue* shows the artist providing a contrast to traditional and popular landscape views. She is inviting the viewer to contemplate how nature can be daunting and uninviting and to remember the flinty strength of the pioneers who moved across and settled in the demanding climate and terrain of the Southwest. The harshness of that life can be seen in the jagged lines of splintered bone in the skull, a reminder of inevitable death— similar to a seventeenth-century Dutch *vanitas* piece such as de Heem’s *Vase of Flowers*. But, the skull was also an object representing life to O’Keeffe:

To me they are as beautiful as anything I know. To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around...The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho’ it is vast and empty and untouchable—and



knows no kindness with all its beauty.<sup>3</sup>

#### 5.3.4 Political Context

As was the case with the painting *Pear Blossoms* by Qian Xuan (Figure 1.10), *Bamboo and Rocks* by Li Kan (1245-1320, China) was painted during the Yuan Dynasty when the Mongols ruled China. (Figure 5.6) There are similarities but also important differences between the works. *Pear Blossoms* was painted in 1280, shortly after the Mongols took power, and *Bamboo and Rocks* was painted nearly forty years later in 1318. During that period, the Mongolian leaders made substantial changes in the government, thrusting out those in imperial power and scholar officials, including painters. Those who had been at the top of the social and political hierarchy were now turned away from government positions and looked upon with distrust and distaste.



**Figure 5.6 | *Bamboo and Rocks***

Artist: Li Kan

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

Although the Mongols appreciated Chinese painting and artists were commissioned to

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<sup>3</sup> Georgia O'Keeffe, "About myself" in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition of oils and pastels* (New York: An American Place: 1939).



make (or appointed to produce) works for those in power, many were unwilling to paint for the foreign leaders. Kan's painting is interpreted as a reflection on China, its people, and its traditions under Mongolian rule. *Bamboo and Rocks* is a pair of scrolls painted with ink and color on silk meant to be hung side-by-side. Unlike *Pear Blossoms*, which is a scroll meant to be unrolled in approximately twelve-inch segments on a table then rolled again to reveal the next segment and finally stored away between viewings, *Bamboo and Rocks* would remain in view hanging on a wall. Both are ink paintings capturing the simplicity of beauty in nature. But the objects depicted also have symbolic meaning going back to ancient Chinese culture. Bamboo symbolizes virtue, grace, and resilience, while rocks symbolize strength and power to endure. In Kan's painting, their contrasting forms, low and curvilinear against upright and angular, balance each other. The artist is indicating that during the Yuan Dynasty, under the rule of the Mongol, the Chinese people would be like bamboo; they would bow but not break in the uncertain climate of the rocky landscape of occupation.

Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828, Spain) was court painter to King Charles IV from the beginning of his reign in 1789 until Napoleon ousted Charles from his throne in 1808 during the French invasion of Spain. Goya was hired the same year to make a visual record of the bravery of the Spanish people against the onslaught of the French invaders. The impact of what Goya saw, however, changed the direction and tone of the series of prints he made from the unflinching courage of his fellow citizens to despair over the barbarous atrocities committed and merciless suffering endured by all who are trampled in the path of war. He created the series of eighty-two etchings, *The Disasters of War*, between 1810 and 1823. *Y no hai Remedio (And There's Nothing to Be Done)* is the nineteenth print in the series; it reflects the hopelessness of war. (Figure 5.7) There is no escape, nor is there justice. Both civilians and soldiers become dehumanized and numb in the endless slaughter, here in the form of a firing squad.





**Figure 5.7 | Plate 15 from “The Disasters of War” (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*): And there is nothing to be done (*Y no hai remedio*)**

Artist: Francisco de Goya y Lucientes

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

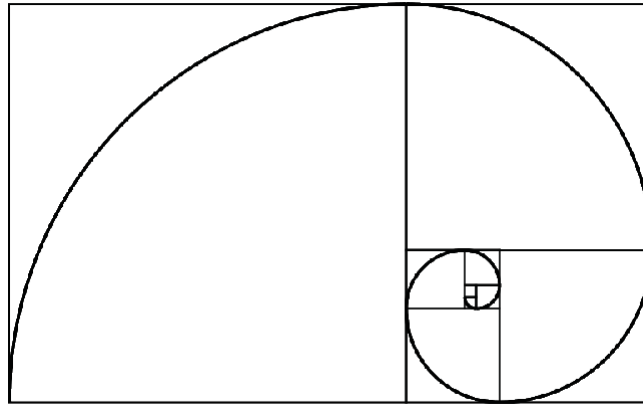
The print series was not published until 1863, thirty-five years after Goya’s death. There are theories why: the artist was fearful of political repercussions, the scenes were too graphic, or the wounds were too painful for public release in the immediate decades after the war. The artist himself gave no explanation. By the time *The Disasters of War* series was printed, the French and Spanish governments that had participated in and ruled immediately after the Peninsular War (1808-1814), as it came to be known, had both been superseded. Goya’s documentation of and cry against human self-destruction had no impact at the time of the disasters themselves, but they are still among the most powerful images of political protest ever made.

### 5.3.5 Scientific Context

Art and science are inextricably linked. The words “technique” and “technology” both originate from the ancient Greek word **tekhnē**, which means art. For the Greeks, both art and science were the study, analysis, and classification of objects and ideas. Through the study of math and art, they arrived at the **golden ratio**: when dividing a line in two parts, the longer part divided by the smaller part is also equal to the whole length divided by the longer part. Expressed algebraically, that can be written as  $a/b = ab/a$ . The visual representation of the golden ratio, the



Greeks determined, results in the most visually pleasing proportions within and of an object or figure. (Figure 5.8)



**Figure 5.8 | Fibonacci Spiral: The Golden Ratio**

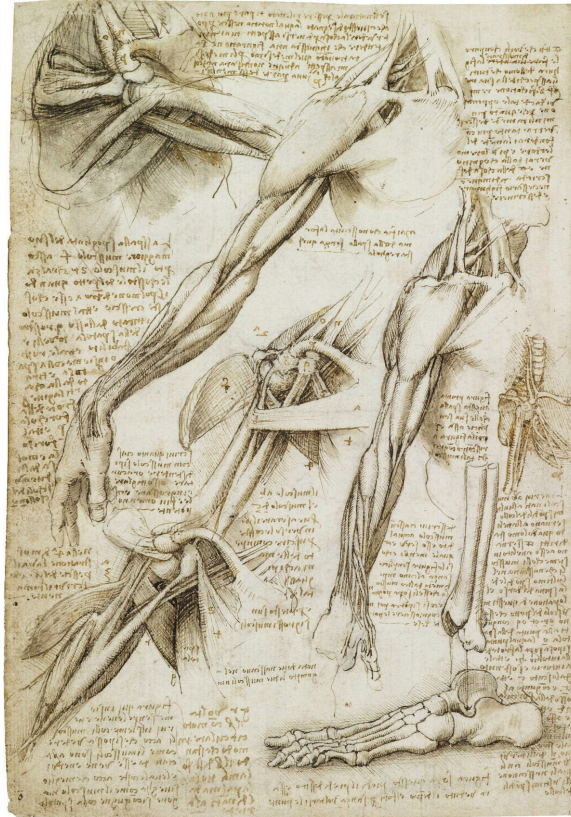
Author: User "Dicklyon"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Leonardo da Vinci was fascinated by how things work. The mechanics of nature, machinery, and the human body were all worlds to be explored deeply in order to be understood at their most essential, truthful levels. Although he was interested in human anatomy throughout his career, he spent the last twelve years of his life systematically studying and documenting his findings. He began in the winter of 1507-08 with a series of pen-and-ink drawings that he made of a dissection he carried out on an old man. In the winter of 1510-11, he completed additional dissections, probably working with anatomy professor Marcantonio della Torre at the University of Pavia. (Figure 5.9)





**Figure 5.9 | Anatomical studies of muscles of the arm and shoulder, bones of the foot**

Artist: Leonardo da Vinci

Author: User "Discovering da Vinci"

Source: Tumbler

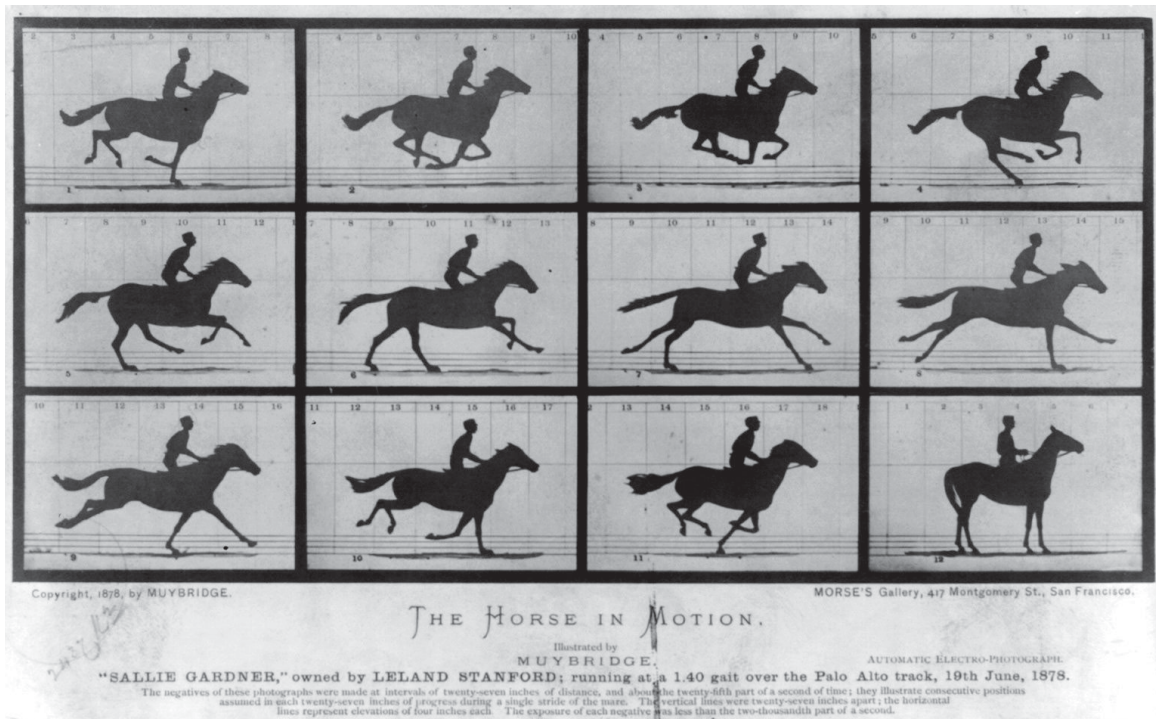
License: Public Domain

Leonardo intended to include his more than 240 drawings in a treatise on anatomy, but following Marcantonio's death from the plague in 1512 and political upheaval in the city of Milan where Leonardo lived, his focus shifted and he never completed and published his book. When he died in 1519, his drawings and notes on human anatomy along with approximately 6,500 pages from his other notebooks were dispersed and effectively lost to the world for 400 years. Leonardo's insights into such areas as the functioning of the heart and growth of a fetus, all completely accurate, had to be laboriously re-discovered by other artists and scientists in the succeeding centuries.

Questions that had long intrigued artists and scientists but could not be answered by observation with the naked eye, such as details about a planetary body in space, a specimen under a microscope, or an animal in motion, were finally being answered in the nineteenth century with the invention of photography. Leland Stanford, head of the Union Pacific Railroad, former governor of California, and racehorse owner, in 1872 accepted the challenge to prove whether all



four feet of a horse left the ground when galloping. He hired photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904, England, lived USA) to conduct a study of the sequence of movement that is too rapid to be captured by the human eye. Muybridge experimented with setting up cameras along a track to photograph the horse and rider at evenly spaced intervals. He was soon able to prove that indeed all four hooves are in the air when the horse's legs are under its body—not when the legs are fully extended to the front and rear as many had thought. (Figure 5.10)



**Figure 5.10 | The Horse in Motion**

Artist: Eadweard Muybridge

Author: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

While the first set of photographs Muybridge took for Stanford were lost, the industrialist (who with his wife Jane would found Stanford University in 1885) encouraged the photographer to continue his studies. Muybridge published his findings on the galloping horse in *Scientific American* in 1878. In the aftermath, Muybridge spoke frequently throughout the United States. He was invited to continue his studies at the University of Pennsylvania where his work was valued for the information it would provide in the areas of technology, science, and art. He conducted his photographic experiments there from 1884 to 1887, and the following year he published his book *Animal Locomotion*, which contained 781 photographic plates of a wide



variety of motion studies including men, women, children, horses, lions, bison, ostriches, cranes, and cats.

## 5.4 SYMBOLISM AND ICONOGRAPHY

**Symbolism** refers to the use of specific figural or naturalistic images, or abstracted graphic signs that hold shared meaning within a group. A **symbol** is an image or sign that is understood by a group to stand for something. The symbol, however, does not have to have a direct connection to its meaning. For example, the letters of the alphabet, which are abstract graphic signs, are understood by those who use them to have individual sounds and meanings. The users have assigned meaning to them, as letters have no meaning in and of themselves. An example of a naturalistic image is a rose, which in most Western civilizations symbolizes love. When one person gives a rose to another, it is a symbol of the love the person feels.

**Iconography** is the broader study and interpretation of subject matter and pictorial themes in a work of art. This includes implied meanings and symbolism that are used to convey the group's shared experience and history—its familiar myths and stories. Iconography refers to the symbols used within a work of art and what they mean, or symbolize. For example, in different cultures a snake may stand for evil, temptation, wisdom, rebirth, or the circle of life. A depiction of a snake in a scene with Adam and Eve has specific meanings for those of the Christian faith or others who understand the snake stands for temptation within the context of that subject or story. In Chinese culture, however, a snake represents the power of nature and is said to bring good fortune to those who practice the snake's restraint and elegance of movement.

### 5.4.1 Changes in Meaning of Symbols and Iconography

While a symbol might have a common meaning for a certain group, it might be used with variations by or hold a different significance for other groups. Let us use the example of a cross. At its core, a cross is a simple intersection of vertical and horizontal lines that could refer to the meeting of celestial and terrestrial elements or forces or could lend itself to other variations of meaning. The cross most frequently associated with Christianity is the Latin Cross, with the long vertical bar intersected by a shorter horizontal one—believed by many to be the form of the cross upon which Jesus Christ, the central figure of the faith, was crucified. ([Variants of the Cross](#)) But its simplicity of conception lends itself to various other readings, as well, and in pre-Christian use it was related to sacred and cosmic beliefs.

Within Christian usage, the cross has taken a great number of different of forms, including



the equal-armed Greek Cross, favored by the Byzantine Christians; Celtic crosses, with a circular addition to the crossing; X's and upside-down crosses associated with specific Christian **martyrs**, individuals who died for their faith, on such instruments of torture; and many others. In art, we might see them as simple flat graphic works, or decorated in two-dimensional renditions, or as fully developed three-dimensional interpretations, like the numerous grave markers in Irish cemeteries, where they are further embellished with intricate motifs and iconographic depictions of Bible stories. (Figure 5.11)



**Figure 5.11 | Celtic Cross**

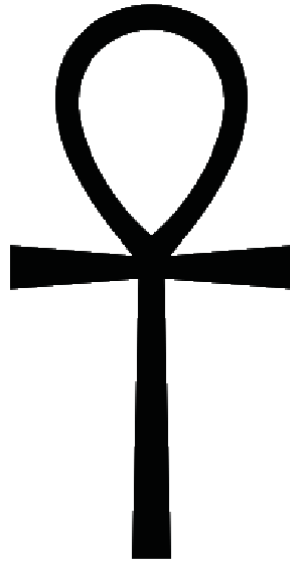
Author: User "Sitomon"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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The Ankh, another cross form, with a looped handle, seems to have been devised by the ancient Egyptians as a symbol of the life-giving power of the Sun. (Figure 5.12) It was one of the numerous pictographic symbols they used both as a separate sign and as part of the hieroglyphic system of writing they developed.





**Figure 5.12 | Ankh**

Author: User "Alexi Helligar"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Clearly, many other symbols have various meanings, especially when they are represented as more abstract graphic signs. To read their implications in any particular application will require your considering where it was made and for what specific purposes, as well as how it might have been adopted and turned to different use at that time or later. Sometimes the shifts in meaning may be radical, as in the form of the swastika, an ancient sacred sign used in many different cultures, including India and others throughout Asia, as well as the Near East, and Europe. (Figures 5.13, 5.14, and 5.15) It has historically been a very auspicious sign with implications of good fortune and positive movement, and was therefore adopted for the ground plan for Buddhist stupa worship centers. Of course, in the twentieth century, its appropriation by the Nazi Party as a symbol of the superiority of the Aryan heritage led to very different and now generally negative connotations.





**Figure 5.13 | Hindu Swastika**

Author: User "Masturbis"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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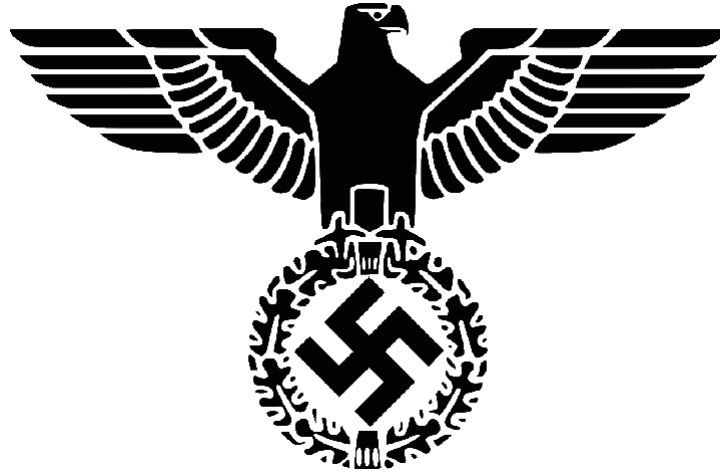
**Figure 5.14 | Tian Tan Buddha**

Author: User "Henry\_Wang"

Source: Pixabay.com

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**Figure 5.15 | The Emblem of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP also known as the Nazi Party)**

Author: User "RsVe"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Iconography is often more specific and definitive, with concrete reference to world experiences and, beyond that, to some form of narrative for the group involved. Again, analysis of the pictorial form requires examination of the context in which the artwork was created. We can and must look at the underlying narrative, but, as we shall discuss in the next several chapters, the pictorial expressions evolve both independently of the narrative sources and in response to narrative and artistic change.

For example, Christians (more specifically that branch now known as Roman Catholics) debated the "true nature" of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ. Among the points of debate was whether Mary was bodily in Heaven with her Son or whether she had to wait until the end of time when the whole of mankind would experience bodily resurrection, that is, at the time of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, when everyone would have their lifetime of deeds assessed for purposes of learning whether they would spend eternity in Heaven or Hell. These Christian ideas are among those a great amount of art has been devoted to over time.

To illustrate, we can look at differences between two works about Mary and her place and role in Heaven that appeared in church relief sculpture during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These differing ideas focused on the implied elevation of Mary to a divine status, or to her not being seen as divine herself, in which case, the faithful needed to keep a view of her as being in a more subordinate or secondary status. The questions included consideration of Mary as the "Queen of Heaven," who might be ruling alongside her son. At Senlis Cathedral (1153-1181) in France, she was depicted as apparently a co-ruler with Christ, but ensuing theological discussion



took issue with this possible over-elevation. (Figure 5.16) So, while the renditions of Mary as the celestial queen continued in popularity, they made it clear that she was only considered to be there at the bidding and will of Christ. This can be seen at Chartres Cathedral in France, where she bows her head to Jesus. ([North Portal of Notre-Dame Cathedral](#))



**Figure 5.16 | West Portal of Notre-Dame Cathedral**

Author: User “Clicsouris”

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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What we see here, again, is that our full analysis of the artworks we encounter needs a complex approach that includes a variety of visual clues and a wide range of research on the contextual details of its creation and use. In contrast to the longstanding assertion that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” the appropriate interpretation according to the intended symbolism and/or iconography must take the society, culture, and related circumstances into account to accurately reflect its intended meaning or original meaning for viewers. We will be exploring these ideas in greater detail in the next several chapters.

#### **5.4.2 Symbolism, Iconography, and Visual Literacy**

Symbols like the cross or the swastika will only have shared meaning for those who agree upon and affirm a specific interpretation, which can be positive or negative for any particular group of people. This specific meaning in symbols is always going to be the case for viewing of any



visual expression, whether in simplified graphic sign form or a more detailed pictorial rendition. Additionally, the viewers must also often have some measure of instruction about how to view a particular work so they can understand its meaning more fully.

Also noteworthy is that members of any group use art as a means of sharing ideas and sentiment, as well as for expressing and teaching ideology. While the didactic uses of art have often been discussed in terms of instruction for the non-literate, we should recognize that the meanings of pictorial content and the tools used to create the picture must be learned as well. The apparent superficial meanings that are evident through unschooled visual examination do not produce the level of comprehension available in a more fully developed illustration of a tenet of a faith, political message, history lesson, or chart or graph of economic trends. So “visual literacy” should be considered a skill related to verbal and reading literacy for any didactic function. Only members of a group who have been led to understand and perceive the underlying principles will know how to “read” an illustrated message.

For example, we can look at the *Ritual Vase from Warka* (today Iraq) or the *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* by Rogier van der Weyden. ([The Warka Vase](#)) (Figure 5.17) One could likely identify the basic pictorial content of either work, but further knowledge would be needed to analyze them further. If you were a member of the intended audience, you might have a bit more insight into what each artist had created in pictorial terms, but even the initiated viewer would likely have a limited “reading” of the work.





### Figure 5.17 | Seven Sacraments Altarpiece

Artist: Rogier van der Weyden

Author: Web Gallery of Art

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

In the case of the *Ritual Vase from Warka*, even if you had lived in ancient Sumer and had been a devotee of the goddess Inanna, you would likely need further instruction about how the carvings on the different registers of the vase were arranged to show the cosmological conception of the created world. That is, one starts at the bottom with the primordial earth and waters, moves to the plants and animals above them drawing sustenance so that they could be harvested and herded by the humans, who then offer part of their gleanings to the goddess serving them from the temple as seen in the upper realm of the middle photograph. This design would be further explained as a neatly **hierarchical** arrangement, in which the levels of the created world were presented in different sizes, according to their relative importance. Additional meanings could be layered upon this cursory explanation with repeated teaching occasions and viewings.

The *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* was painted by Rogier van der Weyden in a region and an era of tremendously complicated iconography: Flanders during the Late Gothic/Northern Renaissance period. The presentation here includes detailed pictorial description of each of the seven sacraments that marked the stages and stations of Christian life. This symbolism again developed over time, and often in response to theological writings that informed the artist and the viewer about specific meanings. The written sources are detailed and complex, with the pictorial rendition richly reflecting what the well-instructed Christian would know about these important rituals and their effects.

The larger central panel of the **triptych**, or three-part, format was used by the artist to emphasize the Crucifixion as the dominant overarching event that is related to each of the sacraments. Additionally, he provided angels with scrolls to identify them as if speaking to the viewer. So, here the messages are both pictorial and inscribed, and the iconography is a complex program that relates all these ritual events to the whole of the Christian life and faith. Truly, the viewer must be an initiate to discern the meanings behind all the symbolism or a scholar to discover them. Nonetheless, even the casual or uninitiated can read much of what is present in the painting and can identify both familiar elements and those that might lead you to further investigation. This is often the task and the path in interpretation of iconography in art.

### 5.4.3 Symbolism and Iconography in Mythology and Storytelling

From early on, art contained expressions of mythical accounts that people shared about



their beliefs and ways of living. From the time of the first great civilizations, for example, in Egypt, the Near East, China, Japan, and India, artwork related to the stories of the people. The degree to which any contemporary written sources confirm these interpretations varies, but that these myths had commonly understood meanings for the people for whom they were made is confirmed by both their frequent appearance and their apparent places in their culture's artistic traditions, sometimes over centuries. Artistic iconographic traditions therefore show strong relationships to beliefs and practices known from written sources—although written documentation sometimes does not appear until later times.

Because early stories were often passed along through oral tales, we do not always have a literary record of them until later times, even after the ideas had been expressed symbolically in pictorial art. An example of this symbolism may be found in the rich **hoard** (a collection of objects) known as the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, found in England and deriving from the early Middle Ages era known as the Migration period (300-700 CE). Although the wooden ship itself has disintegrated, the burial hoard it contained provides details that confirm and broaden our incomplete understating of the adventurous societies of that time and their beliefs about needs for the afterlife. The diverse objects also lend certain insights into the epic tales of such warrior kings as Beowulf, whose story seems to have been a long-standing oral tradition, one perhaps re-told for centuries before being committed to written form. The lavish ornaments, such as this belt buckle and purse cover, give visual testimony to the tales of dragons and heroes like Beowulf through their expressive and intricate patterns and rich materials. (Figures 5.18 and 5.19) The fine metalwork on the purse cover is **cloisonné**, which is created by affixing gold or metal strips to the back surface, making compartments, that are filled with powder (in this case, ground garnets) and heated to 1,400-1,600 degrees F.



**Figure 5.18 | Belt Buckle from Sutton Hoo ship burial**

Author: User "Jononmac46"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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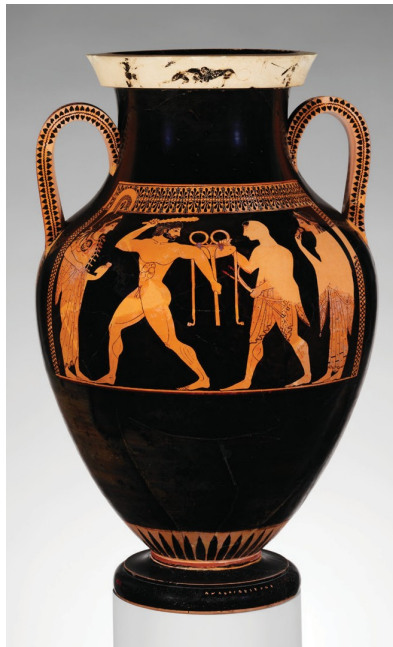




**Figure 5.19 | Purse Lid from Sutton Hoo ship burial**

Author: User "Jononmac46" Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

The art of ancient Greece often showed great concern with the stories of Greek mythology as well. Tales of the gods and warriors abound, including those about great physical or intellectual contest, such as the well-known struggles of Herakles (known as Hercules under the Romans) one of which is seen on this amphora. (Figure 5.20) Such tales were very familiar, and viewers were expected to supply the details of the rest of the story through the parts that were shown. However, the skillful artist can enliven the presentation of the figures with posture, gesture, expression, and such symbolic props as the club and the tripod Herakles holds.



**Figure 5.20 | Terracotta Amphora (jar)**

Artist: Andokides

Source: Met Museum



As with literary accounts, the artworks associated with historical and legendary events often include a very wide range of symbols and imagery to help convey ideas. These range from mundane details to grand historical moments, as in the Column of Trajan, nearly 100 feet in height, which commemorates the military campaigns of Roman Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 CE) against the Dacians (101-102 and 105-106 CE) in 155 scenes. (Figure 5.21) Or as appear in the Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidered cloth 230 feet in length that pictorially recounts the events of the Norman Invasion and Battle of Hastings in 1066. (Figure 5.22) Each of these works shows decisive points in their respective historical events in army operations and in the details of the hard work involved in preparing for battle. (Figures 5.23 and 5.24) In this way, they provide us with glimpses of everyday life in the respective eras alongside specific details about the particular campaigns, the cultures in which they were significant, and the individuals who were key players in the historical events. The details of arms and armor, organized troops and chaotic fighting, building of defensive structures and devices, moments of victory and defeat, and innumerable other items and activities—all are individually and collectively efficient means of recounting the evolution of the events which, in each of these works, is dramatically developed across a long scrolled compositional field that further emphasizes the lengthy narrative each one progressively disclosed.





**Figure 5.21 | The Column of Trajan**

Artist: Apollodorus of Damascus

Author: User "Alvesgaspar"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: CC BY-SA 4.0



**Figure 5.22 | Section of the Bayeux Tapestry depicting the Battle of Hastings**

Author: User "Thincat"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain





**Figure 5.23 | Detail of Plate XLVI, The Column of Trajan**

Artist: Apollodorus of Damascus

Author: User "Gun Powder Ma"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



**Figure 5.24 | Detail of the Bayeux Tapestry depicting Odo, half brother of William the Great, in battle**

Author: User "LadyofHats"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Like many works of public art of the Roman Imperial era, the column glorifies not only Trajan (the base of the column was designed to contain his ashes) and his deeds, but also the ideas of imperial rule, the role of conquest in expanding the Empire, and the skilled work of Roman soldiers in battlements and tactics. By contrast, the Bayeux Tapestry has more emphasis on the



actual tumultuous battle scenes—replete with mounted cavalry in chain mail and elaborate helmets—but it also includes a great deal more sense of historical context: events leading up to the 1066 Battle of Hastings after the death of King Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-1066) and his burial in the newly refurbished Westminster Abbey he had adopted as his royal church. Both of these works also include inscriptions that explicate ideas and events, as well as serve to further present the political messages about the battles—presented on the tapestry in a sort of scene-by-scene narrative—again, for each, underscoring the relationships between literary and pictorial presentations of ideas.

#### **5.4.4 Exploring Symbolic and Iconographic Motifs**

Such items as arms and armor are obvious sorts of symbols that clearly depict their purposes, but much symbolism that we see in other artworks has more veiled and variable meaning. Such simple items as flowers and candles can be used in very complex ways in pictures that carry diverse meanings, thus requiring careful study and even deep research in order to discern their implications in a particular work.

For example, the *Merode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (c. 1375-1444, Belgium) depicts the Christian story of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary by the Angel Gabriel that she will become the Mother of Christ, the son of God. (Figure 5.25) This work is full of symbols that have been widely studied to discern and interpret their messages. The lilies are generally interpreted to symbolize the purity and virginity of Mary—in other pictures, though, they might have other meanings, including reference to death, resurrection, birth, motherhood, or other events or conditions. Within this one work, the use of the candle, just extinguished with a trail of smoke, is given several different meanings by diverse viewers and scholars. It might show the moment of acquiescence, when Mary agrees to bear the Christ child, in which God takes human form. It has also been read as a foreshadowing of Christ's death, of human death in general, and of the fleeting nature of life for all.





**Figure 5.25 | Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)**

Artist: Robert Campin

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC

In the time and place of the altarpiece's creation, symbolism in paintings was particularly apt to be rich and varied, offering the viewer/believer a lot to see and to contemplate further. In this way, if the symbols could be read in different ways, they could then provide ongoing stimulus for meditative reflection on the diverse levels of meaning.

And some symbolic **motifs**, distinguishing features or ideas, carry different meaning in one context from what they might in another. Most symbols are not universal, although they often bear related meanings in diverse contexts. For instance, the sort of figure you might identify as an angel, that is, a winged creature with a human-like bodily form, has appeared in the art of many different cultures. They generally represent beings that can travel between the terrestrial and celestial realms, but their more specific roles can vary widely, for good or evil purposes. The Angel Gabriel, just seen in the *Merode Altarpiece*, was a messenger from God, according to the Christian tradition. This motif was built upon the Jewish tradition of angels sent from God for bringing news or instructions, or intervening as needed. Islamic interpretations, also building on the same traditions, are similar—although the figural representation is less common in Muslim artwork.

Prior to such figures, winged creatures known as Nikes were depicted by ancient Greek and Roman artists to show a moment of victory, sometimes, as is the case here, further symbolized by the award of a fillet, a band wrapped around the head, or laurel wreath. (Figure 5.26) These winged figures were sometimes gods or goddesses. The genie figures that adorned palace walls in



the ancient Near East, including horses, bulls, lions, and other animals, were also winged to show their superior and sometimes god-like powers or origins. (Figure 5.27) Other examples include the goddess Isis of ancient Egypt, and the Persian god Ahura Mazda. (Figures 5.28 and 5.29)



**Figure 5.26 | Terracotta Bobbin**

Artist: Attributed to the Penthesilea Painter

Source: Met Museum

License: OASC



**Figure 5.27 | Lamassu**

Author: User "Trjames"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: CC BY-SA 3.0





**Figure 5.28 | The Egyptian Goddess Isis**

Author: The Yorck Project

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain



**Figure 5.29 | The Egyptian Goddess Isis**

Author: The Yorck Project

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain

Another set of prominent Christian iconographic motifs are the winged symbols which often represent the Four Evangelists in art: Matthew is the winged man or angel; Mark, the winged lion; Luke, a winged ox; and John, an eagle. (Figure 5.30) At the same time they refer to four key events in the life of Christ: the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension. Interpretations of these evangelist symbols are rooted in the Old Testament Vision of Ezekiel and the New Testament Book of Revelation, as related by the writings of St. Jerome in the fifth century CE. They



accrued additional iconographic details over the centuries, with implications of their status as the special creatures who surround the celestial throne of God— again, signifying that the wings facilitate movement between the realms traditionally ascribed to a **deity**, a god or goddess, and divinely related creatures. This use of wings clearly reflects human contemplation of the abilities that birds have to defy gravity and to express artistically the lofty aspirations of the earthbound.

Another frequently used iconographic motif that appears across the ages and across cultures is the **halo**, usually a circular area of light appearing behind the head of a person or creature. One example is the halo that appears behind the heads of Christ and the symbolic winged creatures in Figure 5.30. Note that Christ's halo has a cross form embedded in it, and his entire body is surrounded by a circle of light (made up of four arcs) known as an **aureole** or **mandorla**. Such devices, in many related forms, indicate a radiance that surrounds certain figures, showing their sanctity, divinity, or divine favor. It indicates their aura of holiness, with implications of their being infused with warmth, inflamed with divinity or with divine love. In some of the Asian versions, notably Hindu or Buddhist, the radiance is literally comprised of flames.



**Figure 5.30 | The Four Evangelists**

Author: User "AnonMoos"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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Frequently seen, as well, are such items as crowns, thrones, regalia like scepters, garments



like official capes, monks' robes, or uniforms of all varieties—indications of a person's belonging to a specific group, class, or office that lead the viewer to identify some specific aspect of who the person might be and what role they have in the depiction. The positioning of figures relative to one another should also be read in order to discern meaning, interactions, relative rank, and other implications. The types of garb, accompanying items, and positioning often relate the message to a specific time and place by giving historical and cultural context through details of style or motifs used.

For example, on the stele depicting his victory over the Lullubi, the Akkadian ruler Naram Sin (r. c. 2254-2218 BCE) wears a horned helmet and is much bigger than the men around him. (Figure 5.31) He ascends the mountain as his enemies beg for mercy under the watch of astral deities, and that shows his relationship to them as the source of his power and right to rule. In the *Ghent Altarpiece* by Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441, Belgium), we can also see a variety of such motifs: Christ, wearing the papal tiara as a crown; Mary, richly dressed and humbly reading; and John the Baptist, in his garment of penitence, and preaching. (Figure 5.32) Adorned with jewels and gold on his clothing, the throne on which he sits, and the crown at his feet, Christ is here being shown as the king of Heaven as well as Earth.





**Figure 5.31 | Victory Stele of Naram Sin**

Author: User "AnonMoos"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

License: Public Domain





**Figure 5.32 | The Ghent Altarpiece**

Artist: Jan van Eyck

Author: Web Gallery of Art

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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### 5.4.5 Metaphorical Meanings

The metaphorical meanings of specific artworks also depend upon a certain level of viewer knowledge and insight. A **metaphor** is a figure of speech in which one thing symbolically stands for another, perhaps unrelated, thing or idea.

In *1550 Chairs Stacked Between Two City Buildings* by Doris Salcedo (b. 1958, Columbia), we see a metaphorical treatment of life change. ([1550 Chairs Stacked Between Two City Buildings, Doris Salcedo](#)) It is a view of displacement resulting from a 1985 uprising in her Colombian homeland that left many migrants displaced or dead, as well as similar catastrophic events in locales across the globe. The jumbled mass of furniture alludes to the upheaval of lives that are overturned by mass violence and terrorism, often of those already without roots, community, or stable lifestyles. The victims, frequently anonymous and relatively invisible in the site of such a revolt, nonetheless left some hints of their presence in the chaotic remnants of



their fleeting existence, in a place where they had established so little sense of their individual identities. Her metaphorical expression gives a probing glimpse of the devastation such events have wrought around the world.

## **5.5 BEFORE YOU MOVE ON**

### **Key Concepts**

Another way that we can consider art is to consider the context of its creation and use. Any work of art will reflect, to some extent, the cultural moment in which it appeared. This means that the artist and/or patron made choices that reflect the physical place and the cultural or subcultural group in which they lived and worked and the shared ways of being, living, or thinking that defined that group. The group's defining features might be national, regional, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, or related to gender, age, occupation, avocation, class, condition, or some other aspect(s) they have in common, by choice or by chance.

The artworks we encounter are filled with iconographic reference, symbols, and metaphorical allusions that give us clues to the broader and deeper meanings that were intended by the artist or patron. These prompt us to further investigation and/or contemplation that can lead us to those meanings. At the same time, they can also prompt insights beyond the original meaning, especially when they are presented as a partial statement of a larger myth or narrative we already know and understand or we might discover through further research. It is important for us to distinguish between those types of reading as we explore—to carefully differentiate between what we can learn about the original meaning and our own responses to what we see. This is true of all sorts of symbolism, as we should avoid the temptation to ascribe a truly universal idea or meaning for a symbol or motif. This makes both the discovery process and the viewing experience endlessly interesting.

Some works purposefully oppose prevailing issues in the culture, and pointedly so. We will see these oppositions in detail when we look at works concerned with religion, war, race, gender, and other themes. Thus, in order to understand and analyze the full meaning of any specific artwork, we must take into account just where and when it was made and what socio-cultural, symbolic, and iconographic features and meanings might be considered as relevant factors in its creation and use.

### **Test Yourself**



1. How are seventeenth-century Dutch still life paintings related to historical events in the Netherlands at that time?
2. How did Lilly Martin Spencer counter social conventions of behavior at the time she was painting?
3. Describe an example of how industrial advances in the nineteenth century impacted art in the United States.
4. Give an example of how personal identity might be expressed in art.
5. Give an example of symbolism used and its meaning in Chinese painting during the Yuan Dynasty.
6. Give an example of art being used in scientific discoveries.
7. Give an example of a symbolic object and its meaning.
8. Define symbolism and iconography, and describe the difference between them.
9. Describe the relationship between symbolism and visual literacy.
10. What did objects found at the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial visually communicate?
11. What are some commonalities in what is represented in the Column of Trajan and the Bayeux Tapestry?
12. Describe changes in the symbolic motif of winged creature in human form (today an angel) prior to Christianity.
13. Describe how symbolic motifs can be used to indicate divinity or a ruler.
14. Give an example of metaphoric meaning in art.

## 5.6 KEY TERMS

**aureole or mandorla:** a pointed circle of light or radiance surrounding a holy figure.

**cloisonné:** decorative work created by affixing metal strips to a surface, making compartments, that are filled with powdered material and melted at high temperatures.

**deity:** a divinity, a god or goddess.

**genre:** subjects or scenes of everyday life.



**golden ratio:** a relationship of parts achieved when the longer part divided by the smaller part is also equal to the whole length divided by the longer part; the golden ratio in art and architecture provides the most harmonious and visually pleasing proportions.

**halo:** usually a circular area of light appearing behind the head of a holy person or creature.

**hierarchical arrangement:** where the hierarchy or ranking of people or objects is represented by their different sizes, according to their relative importance.

**hoard:** a collection of objects.

**iconography:** the study and interpretation of subject matter and pictorial themes in a work of art.

**mandorla:** (see aureole).

**martyr:** individual who died for their faith.

**metaphor:** a figure of speech in which one thing symbolically stands for another, perhaps unrelated, thing or idea.