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ICONOGRAPHY AS SYSTEM. THE STRUCTURAL PRINCIPLES OF REPRESENTATION IN VISUAL CULTURE

Summary. This paper constitutes a reflexive and theoretical approach to the study of iconographies from a cultural perspective. Its aim is to depict iconographies as the structural order which makes images representative of the social frameworks from which they stem. By analysing the stable principles which participate in the production of such representativity in any given iconography, and by considering the cultural agents which socially regulate them and make images culturally specific, it is possible to understand the cultural mechanisms by which the social construction of reality is projected onto images. Consequently, this approach favours a conceptualisation of iconographies as cultural systems through which the identity of social frameworks is conveyed thanks to the use of images.

Keywords: image, art, style, memory, semiotic ideology, cultural framework.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT MAKES AN ICONOGRAPHY?

Iconography is one of those concepts that seems to have served a wide variety of purposes in the humanities and, particularly, in art history. Its use in academic production through time shows a remarkable breadth of meaning that often flirts with ambiguity. Moreover, purely lexicographical approaches do not allow for terminological consistency in the concept of iconography, either. In a short but rather ambiguous manner, the Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English defines iconography as 'the *use or study* of images and symbols in art' (emphasis added)¹. There are two basic problems in this definition: first, the vagueness and semantic amplitude which it encompasses; and second, its restriction to the realm of *art*. Authors like Rebecca Zorach have eloquently argued that iconography is actually a term with a much wider socio-cultural scope², being applicable to the variety of cultural activities engaged in the production of images (from palaeolithic rock art to modern film and photography). Cambridge Dictionary, for its part, takes a different approach to the concept, as it considers iconography to be 'the use of images and symbols to represent ideas, or the particular images and symbols used in this way by a religious or political group, etc.'³. Although it includes a disturbing

use of the word 'etc.' (which seems to be intended to briefly account for the totality of the cultural scope of the term), this definition introduces a valuable idea which is absent in Oxford's: that iconographies are, in addition to cultural processes, cultural *products*, made out of images or ensembles of images. The same idea was already present in the 1913 edition of the Webster's Dictionary (arguably the most comprehensive among the three), which conceived of iconography as "the art or *representation* by pictures or images; the description or study of portraiture or representation, as of persons" (emphasis added)⁴. As will be elaborated on later, the inclusion of the word *representation* in any definition of *iconography/iconographies* seems to be essential.

Accordingly, based on these definitions one could summarise that *iconography (sensu lato)* is both *used* by human communities and *interpreted* by them. Therefore, we might consider that iconography actually refers to two basic and different ideas: on the one hand, there is Iconography (which will be capitalised) as the subdiscipline of visual studies that deals with the description and classification of images, attending to the similarities and correspondences between their forms and contents in their attempts at *representation*; on the other hand, there is the notion of *an iconography (sensu stricto)* referring to a particular set of images used by a

given community and embedded with an internal coherence or unity as they *represent* specific realities in specific frameworks (i.e. Christian iconography, Soviet iconography, Mayan iconography, etc.). This is in accordance with some recent culturally-based definitions linked to identity, like that of Mina Kaboudarahangi *et al.*, who consider that 'iconography is the image or images that can describe symbolic and traditional heritage.'⁵ *A priori*, the differentiation between the two terminological possibilities does not pose any conceptual difficulty, for it simply concerns a semantic case of metonymic polysemy between object and subject (as is the case with scenography or historiography, for instance).

However, a further, much more subtle distinction arises concerning the second terminological possibility. If we believe iconography to refer to "a given set of images embedded with internal coherence" then we shall contemplate what is it that *makes* an iconography: is it the set of images *per se* or is it the internal coherence which underlies them? If one were to follow 20th Century tradition in iconographic studies, one might easily argue that formal resemblance can be, by itself, accountable for the internal coherence of a set of images. Nevertheless, this view implies neglecting a basic aspect of images understood as constituents of visual culture: the idea of *culture* itself. In this sense, formal resemblance might be sufficient to account for the internal coherence of images when they are approached from an aesthetic/symbolic or purely artistic perspective, but it will fall short if we aspire to identify the cultural processes underlying the social construction of images and their meanings. In fact, formal resemblance between images is, ultimately, a by-product of a much larger iconographic structuration, resulting from the convergence of certain cultural parameters and principles which are the main focus of this paper.

Consequently, the theoretical approach exposed in this article is aimed at introducing the idea of culture into iconographic studies by showing that, when studying visual culture, it is the *iconographic structure*, and not mere *resemblance* (whether formal or semantic), that provides a set of images with

its categorial sense of cultural unity. This approach considers that the production and transmission of visual culture is underlain by some implicit ideological assumptions in a given community regarding the social production of images. Thus, iconographic structures (understood here as the structural foundation that underlies the production, signification and reproduction of particular sets of images) function as cultural systems which govern the morphological qualities of images, the social purpose of their production, their means of signification, and the social machinery involved in their preservation and reproduction. Ultimately, this proposal claims that through *structural analysis* – as introduced to the Humanities by authors like Claude Levi-Strauss⁶, Jean Piaget⁷, or André Leroi-Gourhan⁸ – of the formal, semiotic and reproductive mechanisms involved in the social configuration of images, along with the consideration of the ontological principles which shape the social construction of reality, any given iconography can be understood as a cultural system that orders and regulates important areas of the collective unconscious.

A basic issue that arises when reconsidering iconographies as systems is that, in themselves, *iconographic structures* are not historically, politically, linguistically, religiously, or economically contingent, but, rather, they can potentially be all of them. Not surprisingly, with the help of a little contextual knowledge one can easily conceptualise a 'Buddhist iconography', a 'Medieval iconography', a 'Romantic iconography', a 'Classical iconography', a 'Soviet iconography', a 'Nouvelle Vague iconography' or an 'Amerindian iconography'. This seems to suggest the conceptual persistence of a stable set of cultural relations and attributes that remain fixed within the notion of iconography, regardless of the *nature* or quality of the categorial unit of analysis. Furthermore, one can consider 'Christian iconography' as a valid categorial unit of analysis for the study of visual culture, and, at the same time, accept the existence of a 'Catholic iconography', an 'Anglican iconography' or an 'Orthodox iconography'. Thus, the categorial *level* of the iconographic structuration seems to be equally irrelevant for us

to understand and get a sense of the basic cultural or historical order which underlies each of them.

Nevertheless, one could take a different approach and argue that there is in fact such thing as a ‘vegetal iconography’, a ‘religious iconography’, an ‘industrial iconography’, or an ‘iconography of the Virgin Mary’, all cases in which no cultural structure is discernible, as their unicity comes solely from their components all pertaining to a single semantic field or a single form, theme or topic. However, in the – culturally-based – conceptual framework of this paper, such cases should not be understood as iconographies. Instead, they should be conceived as *imageries*. In this sense, in the realm of visual culture, iconographies are culturally or historically *representative* of the ideological engagement of human communities with the “social production of images” (what both Cambridge and Oxford dictionaries generically refer to as ‘the use of images’), whereas imageries are just means of referencing the semantic relationship existing between images, and thus are not representative of any realm of culture. Hence, iconographies, as conceptualised in this text, deal with the *cultural unity* of images; imageries, for their part, deal with the nature of *formal* and *semantic resemblances* and *correspondences*.

Following the same line of argument, the sole convergence of themes, techniques or formal conventions

between images should not be regarded as an indicator of iconographical unity for them, either. To cite an example, the horses at the palaeolithic cave of Ekain (northern Spain, ca. 15.000 years before the present) are not *representative* of English Romanticism just as the horses by George Stubbs are not *representative* of Magdalenian Europe (Fig. 1). Even if theme (horse) and technique (pigment painting) may converge in these images, they are separated by a profound semiotic abyss and by a radical divergence in the social mechanisms of cultural perdurance, due to millennia of cultural drift. Consequently, one could consider these images to be part of naturalistic, faunistic, mammalian or equine imageries (or even as part of ‘painterly imageries’, or ‘imageries of painted horses’, or ‘imageries of painted horses in profile view’, and so on), but never as constituents of the same iconography, regardless of the categorial frame of reference being used. Thus, Magdalenian and Romantic iconographies might make use of the same imageries at times, but they are invested with formal and semiotic qualities that make each of them culturally specific. Iconography, under these premises, is always bounded by cultural or historical unity.

Thus, iconographies are understood here as stable cultural systems that account for the ordering of the production, interpretation, and reproduction of images within a given *cultural framework*. In the

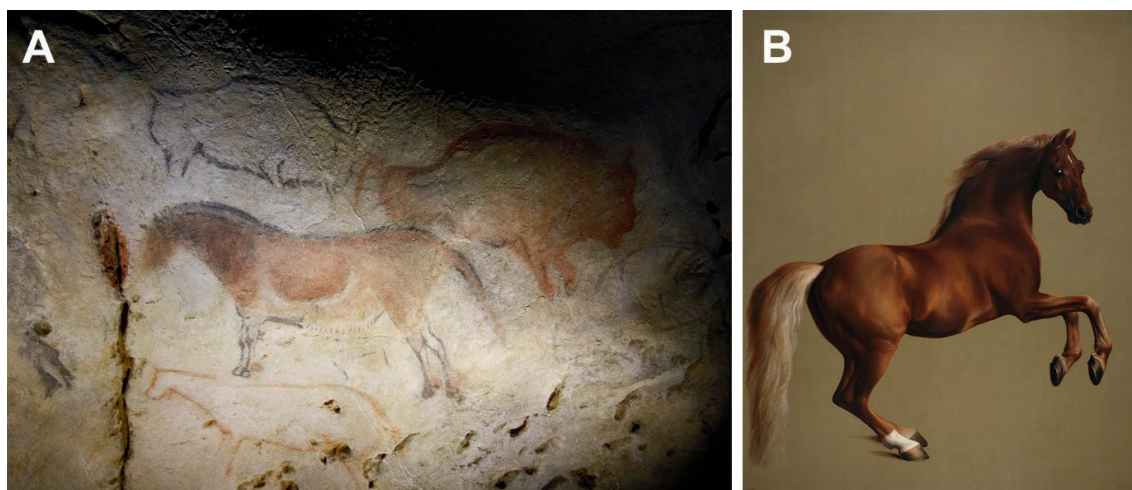


Fig. 1. Instances of imageries of painted horses from different iconographic structures.

A. Painted horse (ca. 15.000 years before the present) from Ekain Cave (Deba, Spain). Source: GipuzkoaKultura. Licensed under a Creative Commons license.

B. Whistlejacket (ca. 1762), by George Stubbs. Oil on canvas, 296 × 248 cm. Licensed for research purposes by the National Gallery repository.

study of visual culture, images are representative of a community's identity, and grandly contribute to the social construction of reality. In this sense, the cultural frameworks from which iconographies arise can be defined, much in the way of Maurice Halbwachs *cadres sociaux*⁹, as collective symbolic orders of very different types, sizes and configurations, being delimited by the scope of the shared ideological assumptions about reality and the social self. Therefore, one can consider as a cultural framework a religious creed or aggregation, an artistic movement, a political institution, a social gathering, a kinship structure, etc., that encompasses a common social construction of reality. Furthermore, cultural frameworks are not strictly bounded, and should be considered more like *matryoshkas*¹⁰: a cultural framework can contain within it very different frameworks, each containing some correspondences and differences with the rest that differentiate and identify them (think again of the case of Christian iconography and its subdivisions). Consequently, the social forces that underlie *iconographies* can be very different in nature and scope, which might alter the social (and, thus, academic) interpretation of their meanings, but a fixed and stable order underlies all of them. This paper claims that this order revolves around the notion of *representation* and the stable principles that configure it. Coming back to the question posed by the title of this introductory section, it can be argued that, indeed, representation is *what makes an iconography*.

Some brief considerations should be made regarding the rather ambiguous concept of representation, a term originally stemming from the field of semiotics which, as Richard Parmentier¹¹ points out, can sustain two basic definitions: to *represent* is for something to either stand for something else, or to re-present again that which once existed but now is absent. For its part, within the scope of visual culture that this paper sustains, *representation* will not refer to the semiotic relation between a visual form and its content (which in these terms might be called *referentiality*, instead), but to the *cultural representativity* of images. That is, to the extent to which a certain visual form is endowed with stable

meaning (stable referentiality, or what might be called *cultural representation*) through time within a single human community, independently of the cultural framework from which it arises (whether it is religious, historical, artistic, social, political or any other). Such representativity is socially construed, and therefore follows certain rules and norms that are culturally contingent. Put in simple terms: for an image to be considered as pertaining to 'Christian iconography' it has to be *representative* of the ideological concerns and assumptions of Christianity in a manner that is appropriable and identifiable by its members. This approach might look rather naïve, but there are important insights not to be overlooked within it; first, it allows for discussion of the notion of "representativity" and how it is produced and transmitted in visual culture; and second, it favours the consideration of images as results of socially fixed *systems of representation* which can be structurally approached and studied within the scope of visual culture. Although it is ultimately specific to each cultural framework, cultural representativity is produced in a stable and organised manner when it comes to images. To outline the cultural and ontological parameters accountable for such organisation is the purpose of this study.

THE STRUCTURE OF REPRESENTATION

Systems of representation

The idea of *systems of representation* is well established in academic literature, although its conceptualisation is far from being homogeneous. Most interesting for the purposes of this paper are the views of authors like Pierre Bourdieu, who hints at them as the rules which unconsciously govern particular representations in images,¹² and Stuart Hall, who understood them as sorts of ideological (and discursive) means of representing the world for ourselves and for others.¹³ This article's notion of "system of representation" draws on both of these scholars' ideas in order to apply them to the field of visual culture, and so will be defined as the set of beliefs, assumptions, technical knowledges and mechanisms concerning the production and

observation of images that is shared by a human group, and which allows its members to develop similar processes of visual signification for both the forms (the images themselves) and the contents (their senses and meanings), thus participating in the social construction of common graphic symbols that are maintained over time. Within any given iconography, the cultural representativity of images is achieved through the action of one or several *systems of representation*. For instance, Magdalenian communities (ca. 12.000–18.000 years before the present) relied on different systems of representation to convey their images with cultural representativity: rock art, portable art, ornamentation, artisanry, body painting, etc. The same can be said of the Renaissance (ca. 1450–1600 AD) and its sculpture, architecture, canvas-painting, textile production, urbanism, etc. A fundamental remark is in place at this point: it would be a mistake to conceptualise rock art, cinema or canvas-painting as mere technical resources or backgrounds for images, as each is embedded with certain cultural particularities which affect the morphological, semiological and communicative attributes of images in a manner intrinsic and specific to each system, but which, at a higher level, participates in the production of the same cultural representativity.

Consequently, systems of representation can be understood as unified and diachronous cultural means of socially conveying images with a representational status (that is, in a way that is *representative* of the community's sensibilities and ideological positions concerning the variety of subjects which are important for the persistence of the cultural identity) in the process of socially constructing reality. Of course, this leaves plenty of space for the diachronic continuity or transculturality of systems of representation (i.e. rock art was already present for thousands of years in European caves when Magdalenian people painted and engraved them, the same way that naturalist canvas-painting was consistently produced from the 15th to the 20th century, chronologically transcending historical, geographical and social boundaries). This is so because, at a certain level, cultural representativity

is constructed on long-term cultural trajectories that act beyond the historical or social boundaries of human communities, thus encompassing and affecting its various social frameworks through time and space. In this sense, Magdalenian people might have considered that something in pre-existing Gravettian or Aurignacian rock art was somehow representative of their own identity and sensibilities, the same way that Renaissance, Baroque or Romantic canvas-painting is considered, within certain cultural frameworks of contemporary Western world, as representative of their own (historical, aesthetic, and political) identity. Projecting further this view on the *longue durée* in the uses of systems of representation, one could even argue that some elements of Palaeolithic cave art are still today recognizable and appropriable by the Western world.¹⁴ In sum, as they are not likely to appear out of nowhere, iconographic structures are usually rooted in previous or coexisting iconographies: it is through the recognition of some degree of representativity in the systems of representation of other iconographies (and the appropriation of some of its formal and semiotic elements) that new iconographies develop and acquire their specific representativity in and through the use of images.

For a representative status to be achieved within any given cultural framework, three conditions must be met:

- a. The existence of a set of visual patterns, conventions, techniques, spaces, supports, and correspondences, that, through the mediation of collective experience, become embedded within the group's identity. We might call this set the "formal elements" of visual culture.
- b. The existence of an underlying order in the social model of signification for these formal elements, which is shared and organised dynamically by the group. This implies that the rules of visual semiosis are socially sanctioned and established.
- c. The existence of mechanisms of cultural transmission that allow for the survival and perpetuation of images, their meanings, and their modes

of meaning, so that they can maintain their representativity through time.

Accordingly, it is through the principles of *form*, *meaning* and *transmission* that unity and diachrony are culturally achieved and introduced in the social production and consumption of images. This conceptualization suggests that iconographical structures constitute a very complex social phenomenon, rather than mere juxtapositions of similar themes or formal conventions. In this sense, the systems of representation of a particular iconography are socio-culturally contingent, but such contingencies are always exerted through the principles of form, meaning and social transmission. It is via these stable principles that cultures (whether they are historical or prehistoric societies, political entities, religious creeds, associations, aesthetic movements, etc.) project their ideological needs and preoccupations onto the social production of images. Particularly, it can be claimed that the development of different formal, semiotic and transmissive assumptions regarding the production of images occurs through the social positioning of the group within the ontological opposition of continuity/separation. Furthermore, this opposition underlies other fundamental cultural mechanisms involved in the social construction of reality: language production, identity, and cognition, among many others. The following section attempts to briefly demonstrate how the continuity/separation opposition operates in the development of such cultural traits, setting the ground for the discussion that follows.

The role of continuity/separation in the social construction of reality

Arguably, language production constitutes the single most important means of socially constructing reality for any human community.^{15 16} In this sense, important differences have been pointed out by different authors such as Geoffrey Sampson¹⁷ and Walter Ong¹⁸ when addressing the divergent psychodynamics of orality and literacy. Unlike written speech, the oral production of language cannot rely on anything but memory (either understood as a collective or a personal attribute) and action

(the act of speaking) as the means of perpetuating knowledge and signification. Otherwise, they just get lost. As Ong puts it:

*In the total absence of any writing, there is nothing outside the thinker, no text, to enable him or her to produce the same line of thought again or even to verify whether he or she has done so or not. [...] An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end. Sustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.*¹⁹

As it turns out, orality creates a dependence on an external agent (the interlocutor) in order to access certain degrees of semiosis that need to be socially produced through communication, instead of individually abstracted like in literate *individuals*²⁰. Not surprisingly, the acquisition of writing/reading might easily be the single most important mechanism of individualisation that humans possess, as it triggers a new mind frame in which the abstraction of the self is achieved, ultimately separating the idea of the self from everything else. Moreover, it has been claimed that orality plays a crucial role in the whole structural experience of both time and space.²¹

For their part, referentiality and cognition are basic mechanisms of relating to the world, and thus participating in the social perception, interpretation, and construction of reality. The idea that metaphor and metonymy are cognitive models of representation rather than mere figures of speech was developed by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, who also pointed out that whereas metaphor implies a mental substitution, metonymy implies a mental continuity.²² These ideas have been recently discussed within the field of cultural semiotics²³ and cultural memory.²⁴ Furthermore, this distinction has led some scholars to associate metonymic cognition with *complex* thinking and metaphorical cognition with *conceptual* thinking.²⁵ In complex thinking, the bond between components or cognitive entities is concrete and factual (that is, it is continuous), while in conceptual thinking this bond is purely abstract (it is disrupted or based on substitution).²⁶ Partially based on works by Lucien

Levy-Bruhl, some authors have linked complex thinking to primary orality,²⁷ which has important implications for the work of anthropologists, archaeologists and art historians.

Moreover, this opposition between continuity and separation also has a leading role in the social conception of the self. Michael Cole *et al.* refer to the experiments carried out by Aleksandr Románovich Luria Luria with herders from Central Asia in 1931 and 1932:

*Luria concluded that, without having gone to school or engaging in modern work practices, people do not acquire the possibility of separating, or abstracting, themselves from the graphic-functional context, so that perception of one's personality is dominated by the attributes of concrete circumstances of life.*²⁸

This continuation of the subject into the so-called “graphic-functional” context determines the very nature of the signification of the self for people within oral frameworks. This line of study has been extensively explored by Almudena Hernando in some of her foundational works on the sociohistorical construction of identity through archaeological theory.²⁹ She argues that the rejection/avoidance of abstracting oneself from one's context (that is, individualising) implies that the self can only be signified through its relationship with something or someone else; that is, through the establishment of a certain continuation of the self into an *otherness* that aids giving full sense to the self. This model of human identification is what Hernando defines as *relational identity*, characteristic of communities with a low degree of socio-economic complexity and hierarchization³⁰; on the other hand, *individual identity* seems to characterise societies in which such abstraction or separation of the self from the outer context has already taken place, being typical of complex societies, such as modernity.³¹ This line of thought was already hinted in the works of authors like Georges Gusdorf:

Throughout most of human history the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does

*not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community.*³²

It should be noted that the social positioning at any point within this range is not a mere act of free will by one or several members of the community, but a product of social *habitus*.³³ By the repeated use of collective action, groups dynamically and continuously “position” themselves within the range of this opposition, privileging one pole or the other at various degrees in their different means of constructing social reality (language, cognition, identity, image production, etc.) (Fig. 2).

	<i>Continuity</i>	<i>Separation</i>
Mode of language production	Orality	Literacy
Mode of cognition	Metonymy	Metaphor
Identity	Relationality	Individuality
Mode of thought	Complex thought	Abstract thought

Fig. 2. Structural relations between different mechanisms in the social construction of reality and social positioning in the continuity/separation opposition.

All this suggests that the social construction of reality is greatly dependent on collective positioning regarding this opposition of continuity/separation. As has been outlined in this section, the underlying ontology that sustains the principle of opposition between continuity and separation considerably affects the degree to which a society communicates, identifies, thinks, and relates to the world, and, consequently, it is reasonable to consider that the same oppositional principle that underlies these ideological aspects of human societies is responsible for the means and forms in which they construe images, produce signification for them, and transmit their meanings in a social manner. Consequently, it can be concluded that the production and signification of images—which is another important cultural mechanism in the social construction of reality—is equally dependent on the ontological positioning of the group regarding this opposition. Thus, iconographies can be considered another of these

CULTURE		ONTOLOGY	
Principle	Agent	Continuity	Separation
Form	Style	Tendency towards stylistic stability	Tendency towards stylistic change
Meaning	Semiotic ideology	Metonymy, iconicity, analogy in visual representation	Metaphor, symbolism, allegory in visual representation
Transmission	Collective memory	Archetypation in visual representation Reiteration/ritualisation in the reproduction of images	Specificity in visual representation Institutionalisation in the reproduction of images

Fig. 3. Structural relationships between the ontological stance and the cultural principles and agents that participate in the production of iconographic representation.

means of socially constructing reality, something that occurs via several principles whose cultural products largely depend on this ontological opposition of continuity/separation.

THE PRINCIPLES OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION

To this point it has been hinted that representation is socially structured and systematised by the conjunction of several principles in which the particularities and specificities of each community's position within the continuity/separation opposition crystallise. This section will show that these principles –form, meaning and transmission– find their cultural materialisation in specific agents (*style, social semiosis* and *collective memory*), and that they are inseparably intertwined with cultural identity and the ontological principles outlined earlier (Fig. 3). Accordingly, for a single system of representation to be culturally representative of the iconographic structure in which it is embedded, all three must maintain a certain degree of stillness or stability that reflects that of the cultural framework from which they arise. The following lines constitute an attempt at outlining how the principles of representation relate to the social production of images, and how the opposition of continuity/separation is interwoven in its cultural production.

Form: distinctive features, style and cultural authorship

In an image, the formal elements of visual culture are those that are immediately apprehensible through the use of sight: technique, shape, colour,

space, composition, texture, tone, etc. These formal elements can be considered as static, for they are, *a priori*, stable and not dependent on the viewer's assumptions or background. They come together to create motifs and themes –semiotically–, and designs and conventions –aesthetically– which are the dynamic elements that are interpreted by the viewer. However, these formal elements in themselves are not representative of any cultural structure. It is only when they are compared with those present in other images that the formal resemblances arise, establishing the possibility of studying images as constituent parts of visual culture. This is why, although it can somehow constitute a methodological advantage, a strictly formalist approach cannot possibly reach the cultural strata of images, due to the lack of comparative frame.

Nonetheless, the notion of visual *resemblance* is largely restrictive, for it does not affect all the parts of an image. Instead, it affects only a certain number of its most basic traits. This implies the existence of a differentiating visual restriction which, following Roman Jakobson's approach to the study of language³⁴, we may refer to as the *distinctive features* of any image. These would be the formal elements which, due to their particular qualities, configuration or association, allow the viewer to attribute differentiating values to images. In this sense, using Europe as the iconographical landscape, the air-brushing of hand stencils inside caves can be generally identified as distinctive or representative of Gravettian iconography, just as the presence of the Four Evangelists in miniatures (illustrated books) can be identified as somewhat representative of Carolingian iconography, or the geometrization of

the superficies of natural objects can be identified as representative of Cubist iconography. However, this shows that, as is the case with the semantics of language, single distinctive features rarely can be traced to express the wholeness of cultural representativity through stylistic differentiation: it is its sum or association that usually produces them (airbrushing+hand stencil+cave/four male characters+evangelist attributes+miniatures). Thus, it can be suggested that there is a recursive process of formal differentiation in the construction of style: as distinctive features continue to associate and dissociate, they configure new styles granted with greater formal specificity, generating new cultural unities.

The study of style is, in essence, the study of the stable relationships between the formal elements of images³⁵, or, rather, the study of the stable relationships between the distinctive features identifiable in different images. Constantly and through the force of *habitus*, distinctive features are accepted and stabilised into different cultural frameworks in their process of acquiring representativity, or they are effectively changed or discarded. As James Ackerman put it in a quite simple but illustrative example:

*If German art is German, it is not because any creative innovation in it has been produced by a mystical German spirit, but because the nation and its artists show a tendency to keep certain kinds of innovation and to cast out other kinds. It is by this conservative, post-facto, pressure that society affects art (emphasis present on the original).*³⁶

Viewed from this perspective, style is nothing but a *post-facto* category, something that only acquires its full categorial sense when contemplated from outside. Consequently, style is understood here as the minimum sum of distinctive features which allows a viewer to consider the formal relationship existing between images to be representative of a single authorship, whether this authorship is taken to be individual (for instance, an *artist*), historical (a period), artistic (a movement, school or tradition), religious (a creed), anthropological

(a *culture*), sociological (a society or group), or of any other kind. Authorship, in this sense, should be understood as a cultural conceptualisation that refers to the structure from which representativity originates, instead of a personalistic attribution. As such, following Meyer Schapiro³⁷, we can assert that style is what formally provides images with their cultural unity.

It should be noted that this definition makes the notion of style depend greatly on the background of the observer and his/her ability to distinguish and define the unity among the formal qualities of images, and thus conceives that style is not only involved in the creation of images, but is also a matter of image appreciation. As Bourdieu very eloquently expressed it, 'the work of art only exists as such to the extent that it is perceived'.³⁸ Not surprisingly, in the field of art history, the history of styles can be conceived more as a history of the discourses about the ways in which art is formally produced (and perceived) rather than a history of the formal production of art. Any attempt to establish such a history of styles will be predetermined by the set of relations the historian or aestheticist can identify (and/or is willing to identify), and who or what he/she attributes them to.

From this we can suggest that the key when addressing style in iconographical structures is not only to understand to what authorship (single or collective) the distinctive features are referring to, but to grasp what these features imply about their common authorship; that is, to analyse and elaborate on why a given cultural framework develops certain specific distinctive features to convey its cultural unity, understanding what fundamental relation exists between those features and the originating framework. Within a system of representation, style functions as a marker of cultural identity for the different frameworks in which the image is embedded. Thus, images are not originally *made* in a Christian, a Cubist or an Urban style, but through some of the formal choices made by their authors they *participate* of one or several *styles* in which the cultural adscription and specificity of images is visually conveyed. This is, in short, the

most fundamental contribution of *style* to the study of visual culture: it creates cultural and identity boundaries through the use of images.

In the social production of style, the opposition between stability (linked to the ontological principle of continuity) and change (linked to the ontological principle of separation) appears to be crucial, being deeply rooted in social identity: an individualised society (that is, a society or group made of *individuals*: artistic movements, historical societies, etc.) will be more prone to change and innovation, as result of the individualistic quest for uniqueness, whereas a relational society (a society or group whose identity is highly reliant on its *relations*: kinship structures, religious aggregations, hunter-gatherer bands, political institutions, brotherhoods, etc.) will be more inclined to stability and continuation, as result of the social quest for tradition and sustainability. If we look at Palaeolithic Europe, we find that during the five thousand years in which the technocomplexes and industries of the Magdalenian were produced in European caves, its systems of representation show an incredible persistence of spaces, themes and conventions. The same can be said, for instance, about heraldry, military rank symbology, or vexillology, fields in which the formal elements of images (whether they are coats of arms, rank symbols or flags) show a very low degree of change through time. In all these cultural frameworks the sense of belonging and the relationality of its members is fundamental for the group's identity, so the distinctive features that constitute their styles are relatively fixed and stable. On the other side of the opposition, artistic schools and movements like Romanticism –arguably the first proper aesthetic movement of *Modernity*– or Avant-Garde schools show an increased rate of change in its themes and representational conventions, as new distinctive features are constantly incorporated and recognized as representative of the ever-changing aesthetic sensibility of the time, accelerating the renovation of visual representativity in culture through individual action. The same trend can be identified in some modern systems of representation, including cinema, posters or advertising, among many others.

Meaning: motifs, themes and semiotic ideology

Understanding the images that compose iconographies as *representations* (as do, for instance, the Cambridge and Webster dictionaries) implies recognising a semiotic relationship between that which is present in its forms and that which is denoted, expressed or implied by them. This relationship, however, is far from being stable or unique. Erwin Panofsky³⁹ indicated that, in the visual arts, images are signified at three different levels: natural, conventional and intrinsic. Although essentially artistic in nature, his model can be broadly exported to the study of images from a cultural perspective. Consequently, elaborating on Panofsky's views, these levels would separate the semiotic gap between visual forms and motifs (natural signification), between motifs and themes (conventional signification) and between themes and symptoms (intrinsic or symbolical signification). It is through these three levels of semiosis that the formal elements of images are signified in a manner that is stable enough to be representative of the group's sensibility.

However, for images to be representative of the identity and ideological concerns and beliefs of an entire community, it is necessary that its members share a common assumption about the processes that take part in the signification of reality. Thus, for representativity to be achieved, all three levels of visual semiosis must rely on a series of intra-cultural particularisms that result in social interpretations that are specific to each cultural framework. In this sense, Webb Keane has pointed at the social existence of 'underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce'⁴⁰, which he has termed as *semiotic ideologies*. In this manner, semiotic ideologies function as socially sanctioned means of attributing meaning(s) to signs. Therefore, we can argue that it is through the action of semiotic ideologies that communities express their sensibilities about the *meaning* (natural and conventional levels) and *signification* (symbolical level) of images, regulating and integrating them into their systems of representation. As Bryn Tapper *et al.* aptly suggest, semiotic ideologies are

‘socially and historically contingent and reflect the ontological commitments of their creators’.⁴¹ Particularly, semiotic ideology is largely sustained on the ontological opposition between *metonymy* and *metaphor*, as indicative of the larger cultural opposition between continuity and separation that has already been introduced as fundamental to the social construction of reality.

Thus, for cultural communities situated within the “continuous range” of the semiotic opposition, we might expect to find iconical, analogical or metonymic means of representing cultural values through images. These would be characterised by the existence of a referential continuity between that which is formally present in an image (the formal elements) and that which is ideologically implied or referred to by it (the content). In consonance with what was pointed out earlier, these systems of representation would be typical of communities that privilege orality as the primary mode of communication, relationality as the primary means of identifying the social self, and which are immersed in the psychodynamics of complex thinking. As such, iconic or metonymic systems of representation underlie, among many others, the paintings and engravings of palaeolithic hunter-gatherers, the artistic production of modern indigenous societies with low degrees of socio-economic complexity, or the artisanry of contemporaneous nomadic groups of herders in different parts of the world. In these systems of representation, the relation between form and content is based on a semiotic continuity (which can be achieved through naturalistic resemblance, schematization, or reconfiguration of its basic formal traits), which implies that signification is mostly sustained on the analogy of forms as they are in reality and forms as they are depicted. This does not imply, however, that images are not charged with further social or cultural values beyond its pure analogical relation to reality; it just implies they are not charged with any further *semiotic* values in regard to the relation between form and content.

On the other hand, the “disruptive range” of the opposition would produce allegorical, symbolical,

or metaphorical means of representing cultural values. These systems would be sustained on a semiotic separation between form and content within the image, by which what is formally present in the image stands for further values, ideas and concepts that are ideologically conveyed and socially constructed. This mode of visual semiosis pervades the totality of human *history* (as understood through its linkage to writing), from Classical Greece to modern-day Western world, and found its highest expression in the invention and apogee of the idea of *Art* in the 18th century as characterised by the Romantic conception of the *artist* as a spiritually elevated *individual* capable of sublime levels of abstracting, through the use of images, his/her sensibilities regarding his/her perception of nature. Accordingly, in these cultural frameworks, systems of representation make use of formal elements as constituent signs from which further meanings can be achieved, resulting in an allegorical, evocative and highly discursive/subjective use of cultural images which is fully exploited by advertising and mass media nowadays.

There is, of course, plenty of semiological space in between these extremes. This space would be occupied by cultural frameworks in which, for a number of reasons, the opposition is ambiguous or not so clearly defined. Again, a good example of this would be Christianity. Christianity constitutes an immense cultural framework which encompasses a wide variety of human communities throughout the world, and thus different positions within the semiotic range might coexist inside it. Also, its enduring historical trajectory has subjected its social modes of meaning to significant modifications, subsequently changing the position of its communities within the ontological range through time. This resulted in a semiotic diversity for the cultural framework of Christianity that permeates its systems of representation, which might explain why certain Christian images are allegorical of some of its most important moral values (for instance, representations of the Cross as denotative of the sacrifice and sanctity of Jesus Christ, or the dove as representative of the Holy Spirit), whereas others are eminently iconic (like the narrative

scenes from the Bible used as a visual aid for illiterate Christians to properly familiarise themselves with the Gospel).

In sum, when dealing with images, for cultural representativity to be achieved it is required that a stable semiotic bond between the formal and the signified components is established, so that the dynamic elements (themes, motifs, conventions, etc.) can become, at least in cultural terms, static and fixed within the community. This occurs through the action of semiotic ideologies, responsible for the social structure of semiosis in any given cultural framework; therefore, the nature and stability of representation depend on several cultural factors that can be traced, at least in general terms, to the social positioning of the group within the range of the continuity/separation opposition.

Transmission: time, memory and the social reproduction of images

In order for the symbolic structure that holds cultural frameworks together to properly function through time, communities need a base of shared knowledge. Moreover, it has been claimed that it is upon collective knowledge that communities construct their own awareness and unity.⁴² The idea that this knowledge is socially integrated and regulated by a shared sense of communal belonging was first proposed by French philosopher and sociologist Halbwachs, who framed it under what he called “collective memory.”⁴³ However, his conceptualization was soon proven to be too ambiguous, and different authors have since worked on further sub-categorizations of Halbwachs’s original idea.⁴⁴ Thus, following the ideas of authors like Yadin Dudai⁴⁵ or James Wertsch and Holly Rodiger⁴⁶, we might argue that collective memory is actually a threefold expression that refers to 1) the sum of specific knowledges and assumptions accumulated by a group (memory as cultural product); 2) the socially constructed idea of the group’s trajectory (memory as cultural identity); and 3) the tools and social devices by which both these knowledges and ideas are transmitted from generation to generation (memory as cultural mechanism). This paper claims that particular iconographic structures can

be considered as a subdivision of the first concept (for they work, via images, as an accumulated corpus of knowledge for the group), that they are fundamental to the acquisition of the second (for images are fundamental to the construction and remembrance of the social “past”), and that their systems of representation are one of the mechanisms that configure the third (for it is through them that the first and second are achieved). Thus, when it comes to social or collective memory, systems of representation can be conceived as cultural means of *reproducing* the knowledge of the group through the production and consumption of images. However, as was the case with signification, knowledge is not reproduced in a universal or unified manner, and instead depends on the group’s own conscience and assumptions about certain aspects of reality. In particular, the way a society reproduces itself (which includes its use of images) is partly dependent on the manner in which its members understand, perceive and order time.

The social perception of time was categorised by Mircea Eliade, arguably its first major proponent, through the notions of *mythical time* and *historical time*.⁴⁷ Although this opposition might be a little too dualistic and constraining for our case (especially regarding the idea of *historical time*), it will be delved on for the purpose of simplification. In broad terms, this paper claims that mythical time involves the belief that the self develops parallel to the formation of time itself, thus locating the existence of the social self at an indeterminate point in time, and considering the self to be an integral part of a narrative that is currently taking place. In other words, there is a continuity between the self and time. Time is not understood as something objective, but is tightly rooted in the individual (or collective) experience of the ‘flux of life’⁴⁸, being its social perception and construction linked to the natural tempo of the environment (seasonal recursivity, moon calendar, etc.). Therefore, this cyclical conception of time would be characteristic of cultural frameworks in which the self is ontologically and perceptually continued into nature, and which do not develop a need to chronologise the structure of past or future time (i.e., groups with a low degree

of socio-economic complexity such as hunter-gatherer bands, some herders and nomadic groups, slash-and-burn farmers, etc.).

On the other hand, historical time can be characterised by belief in the self as a *product* of time or, rather, as a product of the time that has already elapsed, in which the separation of past, present and future is effectively produced⁴⁹, as is the separation between culture and nature, and in which the self is effectively conceived as an “autobiographical subject” (an individual) aware of the temporal limits in which he/she lives.⁵⁰ As Mark Freeman sums it up while discussing Hayden White’s ideas on time, historical time might be related to the emergence of ‘a separation between the real and the imaginary’⁵¹, exemplified, for instance, by the social embracing of a sense of objective measurability and apprehensibility of time (emergence of clocks and numeric calendars that fix the social experience of time). Nonetheless, in order to measure and apprehend time, societies cannot just perceive it, and instead develop the need to institutionalise it. Consequently, a historical being is aware of its own position within a socially sanctioned, linear and irreversible structure of time.

The distinctive alternatives in the social use of memory are undoubtedly linked to these different conceptions of time. Probably the most influential account on collective memory in recent times is that of Aleida and Jan Assmann. They effectively separated communicative memory (associated with the quotidian realm of orality, social reciprocity and lack of organisation) from cultural memory (associated with temporal fixation, concretion of the group’s identity and reflexivity), basing the separation on their different means of remembering.⁵² However, his choice of nomenclature has been regarded as rather confusing: ultimately, communicative memory is anthropologically cultural, and cultural memory is linguistically communicative.⁵³ For that reason, this paper proposes the terms *formative memory*, *normative memory*, and *historical memory* to refer to the different means in which societies reproduce themselves and their *corpuses* of knowledge.

In this fashion, formative memory would be characteristic of non-linear (strictly *mythical*) conceptions of time, being sustained through social *repetition* (for it relies greatly on the continuous reiteration of ritual and meaningful social practices in order to maintain its basic beliefs and ideological preoccupations); in it (as in Assmann’s communicative memory) there is ‘no fixed point which would bind [memory] to the ever expanding past in the passing of time,’⁵⁴ and thus it is continuously being formed in the dynamic perception of social time (ceremonies, rites, performances, celebrations, etc.). In formative memory, thus, the image and the act by which it is produced and/or consumed are inseparable. Normative memory, for its part, relies on a sense of historical time by which the time of the self is objectivised and configures the fixed point from which the construction of reality emerges. This mode relies on the *institutionalisation* of certain norms and mechanisms within the social framework which fix ideas and discourses in time without the need of being enunciated continuously (history, literature, collectionism, academia, universities, schools, etc.). Finally, historical memory is, in essence, nothing but an exacerbation of the normativisation of memory: in it, not only is there a fixed point in time from which the discourses about the self emerge, but there is also a deep awareness of the temporality and contingencies of other (previous and forthcoming) points in time. This implies a historicity that impregnates the whole sequence of time (and not only that of the self) as it is understood by the community through its *construction* or *reconstruction* (political, historical, patrimonial, and archaeological *discourses*).

Accordingly, iconographies characteristic of cultural frameworks with formative memories recur to prominently ahistorical, atemporal and relational means of achieving representation (and representativity) through images. Subsequently, its themes, conventions and ideas are not bound to temporal referentiality, and thus they do not generally represent specific events or reflect on the place in time occupied by the content of the images. Along with this, its means of transmitting knowledge of images (and through images) are conventionalized and

inscribed within the group's ideology through the ritual or ceremonial reiteration of visual practices. We might think, once again, of Magdalenian rock art: its depictions are strictly atemporal (they are essentially made out of animals and signs), rarely referencing specific events, places or creatures, and only exceptionally showing a narrative structure. Furthermore, the very few instances in which humans are depicted, they appear to be archetypal representations of humanity (anthropomorphs), instead of specific people. This might be extensible to the whole zoomorphic production of Magdalenian communities, which shows stable technical and formal conventions that suggest an *archetypation* (in the Benthamian sense) of the animal realm (mostly made out of bison, deer, ibex and mammoth) which is strongly persistent through a vast time and space. For its part, archaeological knowledge seems to suggest a strong basis of rituality in its production and reproduction, being that culturally-engaged interpretations like shamanism⁵⁵ or periodical aggregation⁵⁶ are some of the most fruitful for palaeolithic art specialists in recent decades.

For its part, cultural frameworks that exert a normative or historical use of memory impregnate their systems of representation with a highly historical awareness of the temporality from which *representation* emerges. Therefore, it is common for images included in such systems to represent

specific places, events and people (leading, for instance, to the birth of *portraiture* as opposed to archetypation). However, differences between normative and historical uses of memory arise when temporalities other than those concerning the self are involved in images. If, for instance, we consider the representations of Cleopatra hanging at El Prado Museum in Madrid, we might find some illustrative iconographical distinctions that can be attributed to the structuration of time and memory within their originating (historical) frameworks. In *Cleopatra* (ca. 1640; Fig. 4A), by Guido Reni (1575–1642), the character of Cleopatra is represented as a highly erotised, half-naked Caucasian young woman dressed in the Italian aesthetic taste of the 16th century, being bit in her right breast by the asp to which historical tales attribute her death.⁵⁷ For its part, in *Cleopatra* (1881; Fig. 4B), by Juan Luna y Novicio (1857–1899), the already dead pharaoh is depicted fully dressed (although still showing some transparency in the upper body) wearing golden ornaments like those found in the first archaeological excavations carried out in Egypt during the 19th century, the scene including ancient Egyptian columns and fabrics showing images of ancient Egyptian iconography (like that of the Egyptian deity Anubis), and appears accompanied by the handmaidens which, according to Plutarch's historical account, were found dead by her bedside.

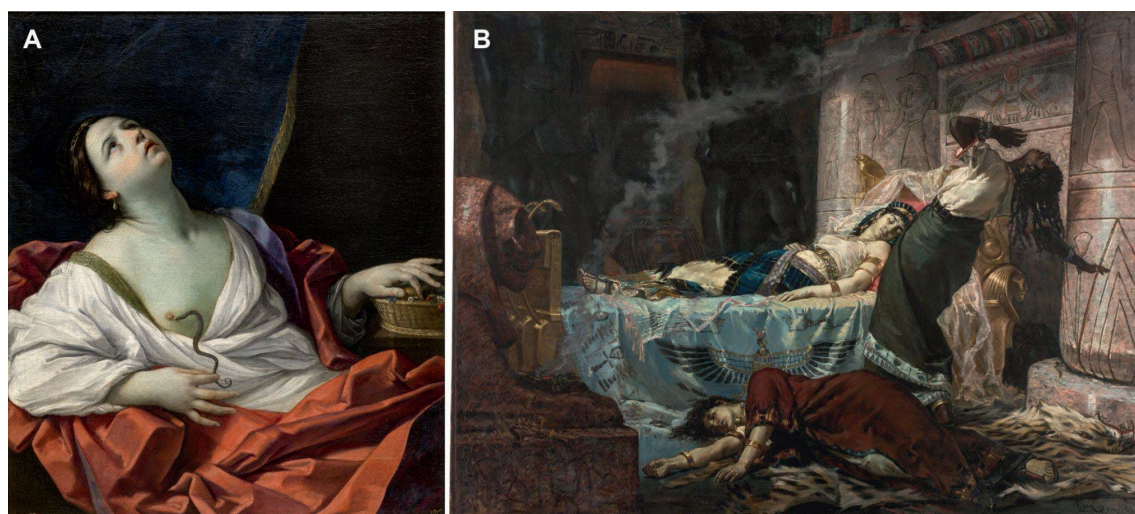


Fig. 4. Instances of the representation of Cleopatra in the Prado Museum, Madrid. Both images were obtained and licensed from the Prado Museum repository.

A. *Cleopatra* (ca. 1640), by Guido Reni. Oil on canvas, 110 × 84 cm.

B. *Cleopatra* (1881), by Juan Luna y Novicio. Oil on canvas, 250 × 340 cm.

From this we can infer that both instances reflect a historical sense of time which is projected onto the images, as they show a narrative structure which depicts a specific historical event: the death of Cleopatra through the bite of the asp as result of the collapse of her reign following her defeat against Octavio. It seems rather obvious that both images are underlain by the social preconceptions and biases of their time (for example, the sexualisation of the female body and the undermining of women's capacity for power⁵⁸). However, in Reni's representation, a strictly historical being might find a case of visual anachronism, as it does not fit with the logic of the archaeo-historical discourse which has been constructed in our time for what we should expect to find in Ptolemaic Egypt. On the other hand, Juan Luna y Novicio (a representative of the Spanish school of Historical painting) creates an image that can be easily incorporated into the logical discourse of what Modernity thought (and still thinks to some degree) life in Ancient Egypt might have looked like, as it has been "unveiled" through archaeological practice and historical reconstruction.

All this sums up in the claim that Magdalenian iconography denotes a formative memory by the communities that participated in some of its systems of representation (like rock art) throughout more than 5000 years, showing a lack of interest in temporal referentiality and factual specificity, its images being indissociable from the rituals and performances from which they originated. For its part, the iconographic structures to which Reni's *Cleopatra* can be ascribed (Bolognese School, Classicism, Italian Baroque or Early Modernity, among many others) are immersed in a normative use of memory that is aware of time as an objectified reality that emanates from the factuality of the present, but which projects the temporality of the self onto images that are recognised to have pertained to different times. Finally, Juan Luna y Novicio's *Cleopatra* arises from cultural frameworks (Realism, Spanish History Painting, Academicism, Modernity, etc.) that seem to be immersed in a strictly historic use of memory, as it is expressed in the preoccupation with the historical accuracy

of representation, which is highly symptomatic of a historical use of memory. As has been pointed out, these differences in representation can be traced to the social experience of time that each of the cultural frameworks develop in regard to its position in the continuity/separation opposition. Thus, in sum, images pertaining to each of these cultural frameworks acquire their cultural representativity by making use of different mechanisms of representation in which social ideas about time and memory are projected, either consciously or unconsciously.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this article⁵⁹ has been to integrate cultural processes and ontological assumptions into the study of images, hence producing alternative categorizations that better fit the needs of iconographic studies from a cultural perspective. In this sense, it has been shown that studying images as pertaining to visual culture requires recognising the underlying cultural unicity from which they arise, further conceptualising its basic components and idiosyncrasies. In order to do so, the concept of *cultural representativity* has been established here as the pivotal point from which the sociocultural construction and structuration of *iconographies* can be approached in academic research. Ultimately, this implies that analysing and comprehending what makes an image representative of any given cultural framework, and recognising what processes participate in the achievement of such representativity, should be considered among the main concerns of Iconography as a discipline that aspires to reach the cultural spectrum of images.

Consequently, through a theoretical approach to the very concept of *iconography*, this text has outlined the structural principles – form, meaning and transmission– that participate in the cultural production of representation and representativity through the use of images. Furthermore, the cultural agents responsible for the social regulation of such principles have been signalled and analysed in

the light of the ontological stances from which they stem. Hence, the study of style, semiotic ideology and collective memory are presented here as necessary for the understanding of the cultural forces underlying the social use of images. This helps to demonstrate that Iconography, approached in this fashion, can become an analytical tool in the academic study of culture and cultural trends, stretching far beyond the epistemic boundaries of art history, and moving into the wider scope of visual culture.

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⁵⁹ The author wishes to conclude by expressing his infinite gratitude to Carmen Viú, whose numerous advices and corrections have been essential for the development of the article. Equally, the reviewers' suggestions have helped to greatly improve its content.

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IKONOGRAFIJA KAIP SISTEMA. STRUKTŪRINIAI ATSTOVAVIMO VIZUALINĖJE KULTŪROJE PRINCIPAI

Santrauka

Šis straipsnis yra refleksyvus ir teorinis požiūris į ikonografijų tyrimą iš kultūros perspektyvos. Jo tikslas – atskleisti ikonografiją kaip struktūrinę tvarką ir iš jos kylančias bei ją vaizduojančias socialines sistemas. Analizuojami stabilumo principai, dalyvaujantys reprezentatyvumo kūrime ir konkrečioje ikonografijoje. Atsižvelgiant į vaizdų kultūrinius veiksnius ir specifiką, galima suprasti kultūrinius mechanizmus, kuriais grindžiama socialinė tikrovės rekonstrukcija. Pasitelkus vaizdus perteikiamas socialinis tapatumas. Nustatyta, kad šis požiūris ikonografiją vertina palankiai – kaip kultūrinių sistemų konceptualizavimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: įvaizdis, menas, stilius, atmintis, semiotinė ideologija, kultūrinis karkasas.

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