IX

I C O N O G R A P H Y

30

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I sometimes think that iconography is an invention of the devil. At least, it is a devilishly duplicitous term that marries two things almost genetically incompatible, an abstract idea called an image and a concrete object called a work of art. Plato long ago warned us that abstract ideas and concrete things could not be reconciled, and yet to my mind that is exactly what the study of iconography seeks to achieve. On the other hand, while it is duplicitous in theory, iconography as it is sometimes currently practiced might also be described as deceptively simple, since it is based on a conception of the meaning of works of art that I fear is becoming obsolete. Iconography has emerged as one of the major branches of art history, and far more systematic effort has been devoted to classifying subject matter than to any other domain. In part, of course, this popularity is due to the inherent intellectual interest of subject matter and to the brilliant achievements of great practitioners like Panofsky. Another, historically no less important factor, however, is the belief commonly held that subject matter is somehow more "scientific," less ambiguous, than other aspects of a work of art. Different observers, it seems, are apt to agree on the title of a work more readily than on almost anything else about it.

Interest in the systematic study of subject matter developed mainly in the period between the two world wars, and resulted in the creation of the two oldest, most elaborate and comprehensive tools we have for the analysis of works of art, namely

the Index of Christian Art and ICONCLASS. It is important to realize that both systems were developed in order to help art history escape as far as possible from what was perceived as the subjective quagmire of romantic art criticism. Although they have this goal in common, and although they pursue it in essentially the same way, by classifying works of art according to the subjects they depict, the two systems reflect radically different points of view toward the significance of subject matter itself.

Charles Rufus Morey at Princeton was not primarily concerned with what Panofsky called iconology, that is, the symbolic, philosophical, ideological, and theological implications of represented themes. Rather, Morey wanted to use subject matter as a means of replacing or buttressing purely stylistic analysis in classifying works of art geographically and chronologically. Certain subjects are more popular in some places and at some times than others. Moreover, certain ways of representing some subjects are more popular in some places and times than others. In this latter context especially, the design of the individual work becomes crucial, for variations in the treatment of a given subject make it possible to establish affiliations and differences between works on what is apparently a far more objective basis than stylistic analysis alone can provide. This approach led to a dual structure for the Index of Christian Art, which groups objects by subject matter but also includes detailed descriptions so that the researcher can use the features noted in a particular work in a comparative study of modes of depicting a given theme.

The interest of Henri van de Waal was almost the reverse of Morey's. Van de Waal was concerned with iconography precisely in the sense of conceptual import and the alternative approach he invented -- ICONCLASS -- focuses exclusively on the content of works of art, the significance of a subject being determined

by its relation to other subjects of the same species. This approach provides the means to classify objects on a purely thematic basis, without concern for when or where they were made. Here, a thoroughly structured framework of all possible subjects becomes essential, a framework in which any work of art may find an appropriate place.

Although subject matter is thus the common ground of both systems, the Index is ultimately morphology-oriented and therefore includes comprehensive descriptions of works of art, whereas ICONCLASS is content-oriented and consists of a comprehensive classification of themes.

Obviously, the two approaches are not really contradictory at all, but complementary, and the temptation to try to combine them is irresistible. Particularly in the age of the computer, the potential value of uniting a comprehensive and structured body of descriptions of representations of those subjects, would be immense. This was part of the reason for undertaking, with the support of the Getty Trust, a "pilot" study of ICONCLASS and the Index in relation to one another. Although "le Bon Dieu est dans les details" -- to quote a phrase Panofsky was fond of -- I will not burden you with the details of our project. Suffice it to say that in broad outline the results were predictable and easily summarized. The relationship between the two systems may be divided into three categories. To a large extent, ICONCLASS and the Index match in that they do the same things in the same way, that is, they define a given subject in the same terms. A second category consists of cases in which the systems overlap, in that they give different titles to the same subjects. In these areas the difficulty of collating the systems, while by no means simple, is surmountable to a very high degree. The real challenge is posed by the third category, in which there is no overlap. A portion of this uncommon ground is determined by the structural differences between the systems, and a portion by

differences in the actual interpretations of the subjects themselves. It remains to be seen how much of this material would be retrievable without doing violence to either approach. In my view, however, the most important challenge comes from information concerning the design and arrangement of works of art, information that is not strictly iconographical but to some extent appears inevitably in any practical definition of subject matter. I do not refer to stylistic notions such as composition or proportions, but to what one might call contextual notions, such as spacial relations, gestures, expressions, etc. Such features are recorded frequently in the descriptions in the Index because they make it possible to classify different depictions of the same subject. Ideas of this sort also occur in ICONCLASS, insofar as they form part of the definition of a given subject. They do not have a proper place in either method, however, and yet they become crucial the moment one begins to move beyond the subject or the form of a work to grasp its underlying significance. For it is above all by manipulating the elements of a subject that the artist interprets the theme and conveys the sense it holds for him.

It is no surprise that, whether knowingly or not, much of the work done on iconographic classification since the two pioneering systems were developed, combines features of both. Most directly relevant, of course, is the Index to the Marburg Photo Archive of German Art under the direction of Lutz Heusinger. The Marburg Archive adopted the ICONCLASS system and has devised a comprehensive method of applying it in the classification and analysis of works of art. This method takes the form of a voluminous manual, called MIDAS, that explains the terminology and rules to be followed. Needless to say, relating an abstract system to actual works of art is not a simple matter, and MIDAS is in itself the result of a very creative thought process in which the inevitable non-iconographic aspects of works of art, such as typology, and necessary

analytical procedures, such as sequence of descriptions, have been treated with the same thoroughness and organization as ICONCLASS itself.

Comparable to ICONCLASS in principle is Garnier's Thesaurus Iconographique, which also provides a systematic, hierarchically-arranged classification of subject matter. Among the differences from ICONCLASS, two are especially significant in our context. One is that Garnier starts his hierarchies from a higher level of abstraction, distinguishing in the first instance between general themes, such as war, and specific subjects, such as the War of 1812. This distinction is as useful to the researcher interested in depictions of concepts, as it is to the researcher interested in the depiction of events. Furthermore, Garnier conceives of his system not only as a subject matter classification but as a method of analyzing works of art. Accordingly, he incorporates many features that are not strictly iconographical but are germane in describing a work and may even be crucial to an understanding of its subject; for example, Garnier devotes sections to figure types, poses, and even formal effects such as color, surface and volume.

The Jerusalem Index of Jewish Art directed by Bezalel Narkiss, by contrast, takes the Index of Christian Art as its point of departure and, if anything, it is even more object-oriented. Indeed, the Jerusalem Index is as much a method of cataloguing objects as an iconographical index, subject matter being only one of some twenty-seven rubrics under which each work is treated. Most of the rubrics deal with the external facts about the object, such as its place of origin, function, material, history, etc. With respect to iconography, in the manner of the Index of Christian Art, abbreviated subject headings are combined with more extensive, essentially free-text descriptions. The great virtue of the system, as I see it, lies precisely in the possibility it offers to relate the subject of a

327

work of art to all the other categories of information, historical, physical and sociological, that are available in the other rubrics. Thomas Ohlgren's Index to Iconographical Subjects in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts is a more literal application of the Princeton system to a limited field of Christian Medieval Art. The most important difference is the use of the computer, which facilitates searching the material and compiling indices. An approach that comes close to merging the extremes represented by subject versus object-oriented analysis, is offered by Lenore Sarasan's concept of Visual Content Access. Here, subject matter as such forms part of a multi-faceted categorization of all kinds of information represented in works of art, including formal and expressive devices. Among the iconographical projects described in the papers·submitted for publication in the proceedings of this meeting, the CLIO program by Elizabeth Vavra and the MODICON program by Michael Eisner also lend themselves to this approach.

I trust it will have become evident at this point that I see the study of subject access in general and ICONCLASS-Index in particular as part of a much larger opportunity and challenge offered by the computer to classify works of art systematically. I am convinced that the different approaches represented by ICONCLASS and the Index in the context of subject matter would find their exact counterparts in the analysis of any other context, such as color or composition. I also suspect that other approaches to classification would all be related in one way or another to the alternatives represented by ICONCLASS-Index. The alternatives would be essentially the same, as would the need to combine them. So, too, would be the need to express systematically the relations between one color or one compositional element and another, if we are to achieve a deep understanding of the significance of any of these features to the work as a whole. I myself became interested in the problem of subject access to works of art not because of any special knowledge of

or interest in iconography, but because of the potential lessons to be gleaned from such vast undertakings as ICONCLASS and the Index. And I am convinced that no matter how we approach the work of art, if we wish to do so systematically we will be faced, mutatis mutandis, with these very problems.

It is important to be wary about two computer techniques that are sometimes seen as panaceas for the problems we have been discussing. It is often said that works of art are so complex that efforts to classify them are hopeless; nor is there any further need to do so since the computer makes it possible to conduct word searches of free text descriptions. Word searching is certainly useful up to a point, but it is no substitute for classification. One reason, of course, is that the efficiency of the search decreases progressively as the range of the search increases, thereby tending to frustrate one of the chief motives for conducting the search, to discover connections where none are suspected. This is precisely what systematic classification makes possible, by indicating where to look in order to find connections.

There are also those who like to say that no analysis can replace the work of art itself (or a picture of it). Some, I suppose, look forward to the time when, through electronic technology and artificial intelligence, visual scanning and retrieval of images will solve all these problems. Yet, I am afraid the opposite premise is equally true, namely, that no work of art can replace the systematic analysis of an intelligent interpreter. The reason is that in order to search in visual terms we shall have to organize the material in visual terms, and this means finding visual equivalents for all the very same structural elements the verbal approach requires. The negative corollary of this realization is that there is no easy way out -- the difficult and sometimes painful analytical process cannot be avoided. The positive side is that not one iota of our effort in

this direction is wasted, since the structural solutions we reach, if they are valid, will be readily transferable from the verbal to the visual sphere.

Before closing I feel I must confess that much of what I have had to say derives from certain perhaps dangerously heretical tenets I hold. One is that I cannot see anything inherently more concrete and objective about iconography than about any other facet of a work of art. I cannot see that I am saying anything more precise when I say that a picture represents the Madonna, than when I say that her mantle is blue or that the composition is symmetrical. Insofar as subject matter is related to literary texts, exactly the same is true of color or composition or proportion, all of which have long and rich verbal traditions of symbolism, metaphor and pure description. Indeed, it seems to me wrong, not to say meaningless, to think of the subject of a work of art apart from its form, or vice versa. I submit that art history has moved beyond the stage when content could be divorced from style, and I say this not only as a matter of principle but for the very practical reason that to do so ignores the basic premise of any work of art and virtually guarantees that the underlying meaning for which we seek will elude us. I am also anxious that the promise of the computer not become a threat to the humanistic nature of our discipline, that it not encourage the process of disintegration inherent in our natural tendency to break down problems into manageable units. I believe we should try to maintain a balanced approach, applying to the problems we encounter in one domain the lessons we have learned in another.

Finally, I want to express the concern I am sure I share with many of you over what Jacques Thuillier has aptly described as the Tower of Babel we are currently constructing in computer-oriented projects throughout the world. I am not for a moment suggesting that ICONCLASS or the Index, or any of the

major ongoing projects go out of business; on the contrary, in a very real sense their value actually increases as our horizons widen. Yet, the surveys of Markey and Homulos amply and alarmingly document the proliferation of data banks, often dealing with similar material and with similar content, but following different and sometimes incompatible principles. At this rate, we will soon be able to take pride in having achieved something like the utter chaos of medieval metric systems! My plea, and my fondest wish for this session, is that it may encourage you experts to join with us amateurs in arranging a reasonably convenient marriage of art history and the computer -- always allowing, of course, for the maverick off-spring who challenges the system.

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