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# Erwin Panofsky

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Erwin Panofsky	
<b>Born</b>	March 30, 1892
<b>Died</b>	March 14, 1968 (aged 75)
<b>Occupation</b>	Art historian
<b>Known for</b>	The definition of modern iconography and iconology

**Erwin Panofsky** (30 March 1892 - 14 March 1968) was an art historian, born in Germany, but whose academic career was pursued mostly in America following the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s. Panofsky's work remains highly influential in the modern academic study of iconography. Many of his works remain in print, including *Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939), and his eponymous study of Albrecht Dürer (1943).

## Biography

Erwin Panofsky was born in Hanover, Germany. He studied at the universities of Berlin, Munich, and Freiburg, receiving his Ph.D. in 1914 from the University of Freiburg. His academic career in art history took him to the universities of Berlin, Munich, and finally to Hamburg, where he taught from 1920 to 1933. It was during this period when his first major writings on art history began to appear. A significant early work was *Idea: Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie* (1924; translated into English as *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*).

Panofsky first came to the United States in 1931 to teach at New York University. Although initially allowed to spend alternate terms in Hamburg and New York, after the Nazis came to power in Germany his appointment in Hamburg was terminated, and he remained permanently in the United States with his wife, Pandora Mosse. By 1934 he was teaching concurrently at New York University and Princeton University. In 1935, he was invited to join the faculty of the newly formed Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

Panofsky was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy and a number of other national academies. In 1962 he received the Haskins Medal of The Medieval Academy of America. In 1947-1948 Panofsky was the Charles Eliot Norton professor at Harvard University.

Panofsky became particularly well-known for his studies of symbols and iconography within works of art. First in a 1934 article, then in his *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky is the first to interpret Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait (London, National Gallery) as not only a depiction of a wedding ceremony, but also a visual contract testifying to the act of marriage. Panofsky identifies a plethora of hidden symbols that all point to the sacrament of marriage. In recent years, this conclusion has been challenged. And yet, Panofsky's work with what he called "hidden" or "disguised" symbolism are still very much influential in the study and understanding of Northern Renaissance Art.

Panofsky was known to be friends with Wolfgang Pauli, one of the main contributors to quantum physics and atomic theory, as well as Albert Einstein. His son, Wolfgang K. H. Panofsky, became a renowned physicist who specialized in particle accelerators. His other son was a meteorologist. As Wolfgang Panofsky related, their father used to call his sons "meine beiden Klempner" (German: "my two plumbers"), which revealed the usual attitude of the German elite educated in the humanities, who looked down upon those trained in the sciences.

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## Three Strata of Subject Matter or Meaning

In his 1939 work *Studies in Iconology*, (also published in various later redactions) Panofsky details his idea of three levels of art-historical understanding <sup>[1]</sup>:

- Primary or Natural Subject Matter: The most basic level of understanding, this stratum consists of perception of the work's pure form. Take, for example, a painting of The Last Supper. If we stopped at this first stratum, such a picture could only be perceived as a painting of 13 men seated at a table. This first level is the most basic understanding of a work, devoid of any added cultural knowledge.
- Secondary or Conventional subject matter (Iconography): This stratum goes a step further and brings to the equation cultural and iconographic knowledge. For example, a western viewer would understand that the painting of 13 men around a table would represent The Last Supper. Similarly, seeing a representation of a haloed man with a lion could be interpreted as a depiction of St. Jerome.
- Tertiary or Intrinsic Meaning or Content (Iconology): This level takes into account personal, technical, and cultural history into the understanding of a work. It looks at art not as an isolated incident, but as the product of a historical environment. Working in this stratum, the art historian can ask questions like "why did the artist choose to represent The Last Supper in this way?" or "Why was St. Jerome such an important saint to the patron of this work?" Essentially, this last stratum is a synthesis; it is the art historian asking "what does it all mean?"

For Panofsky, it was important to consider all three strata as one examines Renaissance art. Irving Lavin says, "it was this insistence on, and search for, meaning—especially in places where no one suspected there was any—that led Panofsky to understand art, as no previous historian had, as an intellectual endeavor on a par with the traditional liberal arts."<sup>[2]</sup>

## Influence

His work has greatly influenced the theory of taste developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in books such as *The Rules of Art* or *Distinction*. In particular, Bourdieu first adapted his notion of habitus from Panofsky's *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Works

- *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (1924)
- *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927)
- *Studies in Iconology* (1939)
- *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (1943)
- *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951)
- *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953)
- *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955)
- *Pandora's Box: the Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol* (1956) (with Dora Panofsky)
- *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (1960)
- *Tomb Sculpture* (1964)
- *Problems in Titian, mostly iconographic* (1969)

## References

- Holly, Michael Ann, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, (1985)
- Ferretti, Sylvia, *Cassirer, Panofsky, Warburg: Symbol, Art, and History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, (1989)
- Lavin, Irving, editor, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: View from the Outside. A Centennial Commemoration of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968)*, Princeton, Institute for Advanced Study, (1995)
- Panofsky, Erwin, & Lavin, Irving (Ed.), *Three essays on style*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, (1995)
- *Panofsky, Erwin.* <sup>[4]</sup> in the *Dictionary of Art Historians* <sup>[5]</sup> Lee Sorensen, ed.

## Footnotes

- [1] Panofsky, Erwin. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972. pp. 5-9.
- [2] Lavin, Irving. "Panofsky's History of Art" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Views from the Outside*. Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, 1995. p. 6.
- [3] Review (<http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrc1/Winter2007/Premodern.htm>) of Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition*, in *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature* 6:1 (Winter 2007).
- [4] <http://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/panofskye.htm>
- [5] <http://dictionaryofarthistorians.org>

## External links

- Biography (<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/panof.htm>)
- Erwin Panofsky Papers at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/findingaids/panoerwi.htm>)

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