Iconographic Analysis

Considering a work of art in terms of the life of the person who made it creates one kind of historical context. There are many other ways to relate a work to history, though, involving different elements of the period from which it came. One of them is an iconographic analysis, which establishes the meaning a work of art had at the time it was made. This may or may not include what the maker of the work intended or, usually a more important factor, what the person who paid for the work wanted. Any particular time or place provides different possible audiences, each of which will demand specific kinds of information and make certain assumptions. The iconographic argument always depends upon assembling historical evidence to reconstruct these things.

Like all types of art historical analysis, an iconographic analysis must begin with what can be seen in the object or objects being considered. On the basis of these observations, the objects are related to other visual images and, probably, texts. This process may involve considerable historical research in primary sources and many languages, or a single reference to an authoritative secondary source. The result may be more than one interpretation. If they are mutually exclusive, the historian and the reader must decide which one seems most convincing. More often, though, different interpretations address different aspects of the work, so all of them can be historically accurate.

In the easiest case, a work of art depicts a subject that can be identified by anyone who knows what to look for. A handful of scenes from the life of Jesus, for example, appear again and again in Christian art. Just a few details are all it takes to turn a picture of a woman and an angel into an Annunciation, or a mother and a baby in a stable into a Nativity scene. Images like these were meant to be understood by many people, and they use well-established traditions that lasted for centuries. Research is needed to understand how a particular example differs from others and why that matters, or who created it and who paid for it, but the basic subject is clear. Something for which there is no known context, on the other hand, or that describes private feelings of the artist or patron, may be very hard to interpret.

Any iconographic analysis must explain as many visual elements in a work as possible. This is not as easy as it sounds, because people tend to see what they “know” is there. Leo Steinberg remarked about Michelangelo’s Last Judgment (Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome):

The fresco’s critical history is a classic instance of how an interpretative tradition feeds on itself, and how rarely the object interpreted is permitted to interfere. Through four centuries of continuous exposure, the Last Judgment ranked with the world’s best-known monuments, incessantly reproduced and described, praised and denounced, scanned and scrutinized daily by thousands, with detail photographs available for the past hundred years. Yet it was not until 1925 that the face in the flayed skin held by Saint Bartholomew (to the right below Christ) was identified as the artist’s self-portrait. Why this delayed recognition? What inhibited th[is] perception, which now seems so overwhelmingly obvious . . .?

Sometimes, Steinberg observed, copies provide a new view of a familiar work:
Where a copy is manifestly at odds with its model, it not only leads me to see what the copyist missed but what I hadn’t noticed. Ours is by nature a pejorative eye, better adapted to registering a mismatch than agreement. The discrepancies that lead to the eye in comparing replicas with their ostensible models are jolts to one’s visual sloth. 61

The art historian most closely associated with iconographic analysis is Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968). Panofsky brought his immense learning to the study of many subjects, but most of all to the study of Renaissance art. In Early Netherlandish Painting, he argued for a very particular way of understanding pictures made in Northern Europe during the 15th century. He suggested that many apparently ordinary objects actually symbolize religious ideas, with the result being a total “sacntification of the visible world.” The problem, however, is that if “all forms meant to convey a symbolical idea could appear as ordinary plants, architectural details, implements, or pieces of furniture: how are we to decide where . . . symbolism begins?” Panofsky answered his own question:

We have to ask ourselves whether or not the symbolical significance of a given motif is a matter of established representational tradition . . . ; whether or not a symbolical interpretation can be justified by definite texts or agrees with ideas demonstrably alive in the period [the work was made] and presumably familiar to its artists . . . ; and to what extent such a symbolical interpretation is in keeping with the historical position and personal tendencies of the individual master.

Beyond these tests of historical plausibility lies the ultimate test of what Panofsky called the restraint of “common sense.” 62

An early example of “disguised symbolism” discussed in Panofsky’s book is Robert Campin’s Mérode Altarpiece (Cloisters, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which shows the Annunciation in the central panel and the couple who commissioned the painting and Joseph in the left and right wings respectively. “The pot of lilies is perfectly at ease upon its table,” Panofsky wrote, “and if we did not know its symbolical implications from hundreds of other Annunciations we could not possibly infer from this one picture that it is more than a nice still-life feature.” Because of the many other times lilies appear with Mary in the same scene, however, “we are safe in assuming that the pot of lilies has retained its significance as a symbol of chastity; but we have no way of knowing to what extent the other objects in the picture, also looking like nice still-life features, may be symbols as well.” He went on to suggest that several more were symbols, citing extensive visual and textual evidence as support:

The laver and basin . . . [are] an indoors substitute for the ‘fountain of gardens’ and ‘well of living waters,’ one of the most frequent symbols of the Virgin’s purity. The lions on the armrest of her bench bring to mind the Throne of Solomon . . . [a] time-honored simile of the Madonna. . . . And the candlestick, supporting the candle, . . . was also a familiar symbol of Our Lady . . . [although] the Marian symbolism of the candle itself seems to be superseded by the radiance of the Light Divine: the candle on the table has gone out, emitting a wisp of smoke, at the approach of the angel. 63
Panofsky’s understanding of Campin’s *Annunciation* transforms a detailed depiction of Mary and a splendidly winged angel Gabriel in a 15th-century room into a description of the Virgin Mary in her many roles. For the informed viewer, this includes not only a reminder of all the events that are to come, but also their ultimate significance. These dimensions change the painting from one that tells a single story, a narrative painting, to one that alludes to the most profound truths of Christianity. The kneeling donors shown in the left panel offer a model of response for the viewer, as reverent witnesses to the founding event of the religion.

Panofsky used the same method to interpret Northern Renaissance paintings that did not have religious subjects. His discussion of Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding* (National Gallery, London) begins with a full description of the “comfortably furnished interior, suffused with warm, dim light, [in which] Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife are represented in full length.” Taking into account the positions of the two figures, their gestures, and their facial expressions, as well as the symmetry of the composition and the signature of the artist displayed so prominently on the back wall, Panofsky concluded that the picture shows a marriage ceremony. If this is the meaning of the scene, then many individual details take on new meaning:

We begin to see that what looks like nothing but a well-appointed upper-middle-class interior is in reality a nuptial chamber, hallowed by sacramental associations and often sanctified . . .. It is not by chance that the scene takes place in a bedroom instead of a sitting room, for the matrimonial bed was so sacred that a married couple in bed could be shown and visited by the Trinity . . .. The crystal beads and the ‘spotless mirror’ . . . are well-known symbols of Marian purity. The fruit on the window sill recalls . . . the state of innocence before the Fall of Man. The little statue of St. Margaret, surmounting the back of the chair near the bed, invokes the patron saint of childbirth. The dog, as seen on so many tombs of ladies, was an accepted emblem of marital faith.

Although subsequent scholars have disagreed with many of the details of Panofsky’s account, many have accepted his interpretation of the scene as one related to the marriage of these two people.

Iconographic analysis must be used differently for those works of art that seem not to have a single meaning. Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* (Uffizi, Florence), painted in Italy just a few decades after Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding*, has attracted the attention of many writers without one interpretation of it being accepted. “Are we dealing,” wrote Martin Kemp, “with a high-flown form of painted philosophy or a delightful piece of secular invention which works a playful theme on mythological characters, with a particular emphasis on scantily dressed women?” He concluded that there was no one key to meaning could be found in the historical evidence, especially when different points of view and points in time were considered:

We may regard the immediate genesis of the picture as the devising of a delightful ensemble on the theme of the spring months over which Venus and Mercury preside. We may even make the more specific proposal that the ensemble was devised as a gift to celebrate the politically motivated wedding in 1483 of Lorenzo with Semiramis Appiani . . . We may imagine its assembly, much in the manner of a secular *Sacra conversazione*, with Venus [instead of Mary] and her [equivalent of Mary’s] attendant saints and angels, not as a narrative or mythology, but
as an assemblage evoking the realm of the goddess – an orange grove in the Garden of the Hesperides – and symbolising the specific season which is uniquely conducive to the flowering of young love. . . . [Renaissance texts] can be regarded as providing a vital underlying sanction for the commissioning of this type of picture and give an insight into the set of knowledge and attitudes through which some privileged viewers may have been able to endow it with high significance . . .

In this analysis, multiple interpretations are not just possible, but they are historically defensible and exist simultaneously. Even if the painting is, like Van Eyck’s Arnolfini Wedding, about a particular marriage, it does not represent the people involved or the ceremony. Only “privileged viewers,” those who possessed special “knowledge and attitudes,” would be able to understand the subject. In this reading of Primavera, allusiveness and indirect references to things the painting does not show are as much a part of the intended meaning as the elements that actually appear in the composition.

Iconographic analysis also can be used to explain the meaning of a group of related works. In The Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art, Michael Camille considered what seems to be a puzzling, even shocking, kind of image. Around the most solemn prayers and sacred texts in many Gothic manuscripts, scribes introduced “lascivious apes, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jungleurs,” among many other things. The problem for the art historian is to understand how a reader of the words ”Deus in audiutor” (O Lord hear my prayer) at the beginning of a 14th-century Book of Hours (British Museum, London, and J. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York) could possibly maintain a mood of devotion and concentration when the page also shows: “three monkeys [who] ape the gestures of the wise men seen above,” “a spiky-winged ape-angel [who] grasps the tail of the ‘D’ [of ‘Deus’], as if he is about to pull the string that will unravel it all,” “a marvellous monster, known as a sciapod because of his one enormous foot, who proffers a golden crown,” “a glaring gryllus,” and more. These images, equivalents of which exist in Gothic sculpture, seem inconceivable in a sacred context to a modern viewer. Thus an analysis of them has to consider not only what they meant, but how they could exist at all.

Camille tried to find evidence of a way of thinking as a context in which these images would have made sense to their medieval viewers. Like Kemp, he looked for a “set of knowledge and attitudes” they might reflect. First he considered how 19th- and 20th-century writers had described them, but dismissed their concepts as inappropriate:

The butterfly juxtaposed with a cooking-pot in the right margin of the opposite page [of the Book of Hours] might remind modern observers of the Surrealists’ pleasure in the ‘fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table’. But . . . the exquisite incongruity of medieval marginal art refuses us the illusion of a dream. . . . Other words that, like ‘surreal’, are inappropriate for describing these creatures include the Romantic term ‘fantastic’. . . and, most important of all, the negatively loaded term ‘grotesque’.

Then Camille looked at words used by medieval writers, hoping to find a category to which the images might belong. Among the terms that seemed useful were the Latin “fibula” or “curiositates” (a fable; an elaboration, an extravagance) or a variant of “babuini” (monkey-
business), or "fatrasies" from "fatras" (trash or rubbish), a genre of humorous poetry found in the Franco-Flemish region from which the Book of Hours came. The only problem with likening these types of writing to the Gothic works he was analyzing is that they did not exist in sacred contexts. A crucial aspect of the visual imagery is that the “systematic incoherence of marginal art is placed within, perhaps even against, . . . the Word of God.”

Camille concluded two things. One is that the modern sense of an absolute separation between the sacred and the secular does not correspond to medieval attitudes. All kinds of manuscripts, lives of saints as well as bawdy tales, could be bound together in a single volume. This mixing of very different things seems typical of the period:

The concoction of hybrids, mingling different registers and genres, seems to have been both a verbal and a visual fashion for elite audiences. . . . But this still does not answer the question of what it was that such elevated patrons wanted in this garbage-world, this apish, reeling and drunken discourse that filled the margins of their otherwise scrupulously organized lives.

To answer the question of what might be meant by such mixing, Camille looked again at the Book of Hours with which he had begun his inquiry.

Every element springs into disordered life: line-endings lurch, rabbits run out from behind pen squiggles, hands emerge from holes in the vellum to play catch across the page. . . . Cooking-pots boil and pour water of their own accord, while other household objects dance . . . . Alongside the solemn text of the Office of the Dead, skeletons grin and cavort in playful putrefaction. . . .

These images would not have shocked the Franco-Flemish lady who used this book, precisely because they articulated her world. . . . The people of the Middle Ages saw themselves at the edge, the last ageing dregs of a falling-off of humanity, the dissipated end of a Golden Age eagerly awaiting the Last Judgement.

In other words, the prayer book comes from a world that viewed itself as near its end. This idea informed every aspect of life and, in Camille's view, provides the context needed to understand the images.

Historians of 19th- and 20th-century art often face another kind of problem. The subject of a work seems so immediate as to need no interpretation at all. Many Impressionist paintings create a sense of just this ease of access. In fact, it forms an important part of their appeal. John House discussed this question at the beginning of his book about Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s La Promenade (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles):

At first sight, La Promenade is one of the most engaging and approachable of all Impressionist paintings. Dappled sunlight plays across a woodland glade; a young man pulls the foliage aside from a narrow path to allow his female companion to pass; she turns her head aside, perhaps momentarily hesitant to go farther into the woods. The [painting] technique – ebullient, variegated, informal – complements this scene of relaxed companionship and courtship. To late-twentieth-century eyes the work raises few questions and poses few problems . . . .
After assessing the usefulness of a variety of historical sources of information about the painting, House stated the goal of his analysis: “How did Renoir’s choice of this theme and the ways in which he treated it relate to the art of his contemporaries and to contemporary debates about the purpose of fine art and its role in society?” In other words, what was the world like in which La Promenade was made, and how does that knowledge contribute to our understanding of this particular picture.

The analytical methods used by House are the same as those used by Panofsky, Kemp, and Camille. Despite the fact that La Promenade has no hidden symbolism or reference to mythology or religion, it too was created in a visual context that can be reconstructed by looking at similar pictures from the same period and texts written about similar subjects. The most important difference is that what the artist said about the work might survive, along with responses from contemporaries. So the first question the historian must consider is what importance should be given to which sources and, second, whether the artist has a privileged place in determining the meaning of a work. What if the artist’s stated intention makes no sense of what viewers see? What if, instead of seeming like different aspects of the same meaning, the two seem incompatible? Who matters more, the artist or the viewer?

House decided that evidence from the 1860s and 1870s, the time when Renoir painted La Promenade, was more revealing than statements the artist made late in his life. “Many of the stories about Renoir and most of the accounts about his views come from his old age. . . . His accounts of his early career were viewed through the filter of . . . later concerns.” By contrast, the figures and setting [in La Promenade] linked it closely to contemporary social and moral debates, and the action itself is not seamless: the viewer is invited to interpret the play of gestures, although no clear outcome to the action is indicated. On the borderline between popular illustration and fine art painting, its imagery would have resonated with familiar narratives of courtship and seduction, while its status as a fine art painting and its “artistic” technique would have marked it as an object of high culture, appealing to an enlightened elite.75

In other words, La Promenade represents not only a story suggested by the two figures, but also a very curious picture in 19th-century terms. The subject and the method of painting seemed to be at odds. The first was compatible with images that were popular at exhibitions and appeared by the thousands in contemporary publications. The second was new and distinctively modern, thus identifying the work as one of great artistic ambition.

This sense of contradiction between subject and technique, and recognition of deliberate choices dictated by an artistic purpose, are dimensions of La Promenade that modern viewers do not see. Separating the subject from the way it was painted creates a new way of looking at the picture, and suggests a method that can be applied to other works. House concluded: “In a sense this paradoxical combination sums up the early history of Impressionism – an utter rejection of the idealist world of academic art, coupled with an appeal to a new elite that placed the highest value on the virtuoso transformation of the individual’s sensations into fine art.”76
References:

61. Steinberg, 85-6.
63. Panofsky, 1:143. For a summary of the recent scholarship about the *Mérode Altarpiece*, especially as it relates to Panofsky's interpretation of it, see Bernhard Ridderbos, “Objects and Questions” in Bernhard Ridderbos, Anne van Buren, and Henk van Veen, eds., *Early Netherlandish Paintings. Rediscovery, Reception, and Research*, tr. Andrew McCormick and Anne van Buren (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2005), 16-23.
64. Panofsky, 1:201.
65. Panofsky, 1:203.
66. For a discussion of the painting and interpretations of it, see Ridderbos, 59-77.
70. Camille, 12-3.
72. Camille, 52-3.
74. House, 1.
75. House, 78.
76. House, 79.