Conclusion

This chapter has defined theory and made a case for its importance in contemporary art history. The definition of theory proposed here is utilitarian, a working definition that can help you engage with these ideas. When writing this chapter, I looked at a number of theory handbooks and websites to see how they defined theory (I'll admit that I was struggling to come up with a clear, concise definition). Interestingly enough, a number of sources I consulted plunged right into the discussion of theory without defining it first, as if assuming readers knew this already. That didn't seem right to me, and so in this chapter I've tried to supply a basic discussion of theory as a common starting point for all readers. Where you, the readers, will end up is, of course, an open question.

A place to start

The guides listed below will help you get a broad understanding of the history of critical theory as it relates to the arts and culture. The readers provide helpful overviews of movements and authors, but, more importantly, they also include excerpts of primary theoretical texts.

Guides

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; 2nd edition, 1996.

Harris, Jonathan. *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

Macey, David. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000, and New York: Penguin, 2002.

Sturken, Marita and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Garland, 1999.

Readers

Fernie, Eric, ed. *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*. London: Phaidon, 1995.

Hall, Stuart and Jessica Evans, eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage, 1999.

Mirzoe, Nicholas, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Preziosi, Donald, ed. *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Richter, David H., ed. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. 2nd edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998.

Chapter 2

The analysis of form, symbol, and sign

The heart of this chapter deals with iconography, along with iconology—a closely associated theory of interpretation—and semiotics. Both iconography and semiotics address the meaning of works of art: what they mean and how they produce those meanings. Within the discipline, art historians developed iconography as a distinctive mode of inquiry first, but semiotics is actually older as a philosophy of meaning: its roots go back to ancient times.

As an introduction to these ideas, I'll briefly review some theories of formalism, an approach to works of art that emphasizes the viewer's engagement with their physical and visual characteristics, rather than contextual analysis or the search for meaning. Keep in mind that the methodology of formal analysis, as you practice it in your art-history courses, is distinct from the theory of formalism. The chapter closes with a short discussion of "word and image" and the sometimes knotty relationship between images and texts in art historical practice.

Formalism in art history

Art is significant deformity.
Roger Fry quoted in Virginia Woolf,
Roger Fry: A Biography (1940)

Formalists argue that all issues of context or meaning must be set aside in favor of a pure and direct engagement with the work of art. The artwork should be enjoyed for its formal qualities (e.g.

composition, material, shape, line, color) rather than its representation of a figure, story, nature, or idea. Although this perspective runs counter to the direction of much contemporary art history, the idea that works of art have a unique presence, and impact on us, is hard to dismiss.[1] In fact, it's an idea with a long history: the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for example, famously argued for the special character of aesthetic experience. He wrote that the poet seeks "to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature" for "as their proper office, [the arts] enliven the mind by opening out to it the prospect into an illimitable field of kindred representations."[2]

In art history, the theories of form and style proposed by the Swiss scholar Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) were highly influential during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Writing at a time when sciences and social sciences were uncovering seemingly immutable laws of nature and human behavior, Wölfflin argued that a similarly unchanging principle governed artistic style: the cyclical repetition of early, classic, and baroque phases. He likened the functioning of this "law" to a stone that, in rolling down a mountainside, "can assume quite different motions according to the gradient of the slope, the hardness or softness of the ground, etc., but all these possibilities are subject to one and the same law of gravity."[3] According to Wölfflin, the way to explore this dynamic was through rigorous formal analysis based on pairs of opposing principles (e.g. linear vs. painterly, open vs. closed form, planar vs. recessive form).

Wölfflin focused primarily on Renaissance and Baroque art, but with the rise of modern art, formalism found another champion in Roger Fry (1866–1934), an English painter, critic, and curator, and part of the Bloomsbury Group of artists and intellectuals. Fry held that artwork is irreducible to context: for him, the power of art cannot be "explained away" by talking about iconography, or patronage, or the artist's biography. Fry's personal and intellectual resistance to the growing field of psychoanalysis—which very directly addresses the relationship between form and content, whether in dreams or works of art—may have influenced his opposition to the discussion of content in art.[4] Unlike psychoanalysts, or some earlier art historians such as Alois Riegl (1858–1905), Fry argued that artworks have no real connection either to their creators or to the cultures in which they're produced. In 1912

he organized an influential exhibition of Post-Impressionist painting in England, and his catalogue essay explains his vision: "These artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life . . . In fact, they aim not at illusion but at reality."[5]

Henri Focillon (1881–1943), an art historian who worked in France and the United States, developed a widely debated theory of formalism: the 1992 reprint of one of his most famous works, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), has renewed interest in his work. Focillon saw artistic forms as living entities that evolved and changed over time according to the nature of their materials and their spatial setting. He argued that political, social, and economic conditions were largely irrelevant in determining artistic form, and, like Fry, he emphasized the importance of the viewer's physical confrontation with the work of art. In *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages* (1938), Focillon traced the development of Romanesque and Gothic style in sculpture and architecture, emphasizing the primacy of technique in determining artistic form. (Of course, from a different perspective, political, social, and economic conditions could be seen as primary factors in determining the availability of materials and the development of technology, both of which shape technique; see the discussion of Michael Baxandall in Chapter 3.) For him, the key to understanding Gothic art was the rib vault, which "proceeded, by a sequence of strictly logical steps, to call into existence the various accessories and techniques which it required in order to generate its own architecture and style. This evolution was as beautiful in its reasoning as the proof of a theorem . . . from being a mere strengthening device, it became the progenitor of an entire style."[6]

Even after the death of Roger Fry, modern art continued to have its formalist defenders. Perhaps chief among these was Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), a prolific and controversial American art critic who championed Abstract Expressionism. His first major piece of criticism, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), appeared in the *Partisan Review*, a Trotskyist Marxist journal; in it he claims that avant-garde art, unlike the kitschy popular art promoted by Stalin's regime, presented the only true road to revolutionary change. This was soon followed by "Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940), in which he argued that the most important modernist painting had

renounced illusionism and no longer sought to replicate three-dimensional space. Each art form had to develop, and be critiqued, according to criteria developed in response to its particular internal forms. In "Modernist Painting" (1961), Greenberg developed these ideas further, contending that the subject of art was art itself, the forms and processes of art-making: modern art focused on "the effects exclusive to itself" and "exhibit[ed] not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art."[7] Abstract Expressionist painting, with its focus on abstraction, the picture plane, and the brush stroke, was ideally suited to this perspective, although Greenberg took pains to emphasize that modernism was not a radical break from the past but part of the continuous sweep of the history of art.[8]

Early in her career, the American art theorist and critic Rosalind Krauss was an associate of Greenberg's, but she broke with him in the early 1970s to develop her own very distinctive vision of modernism. Her work often stresses formalist concerns, though through post-structuralist semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives (see "Semiotics" later in this chapter, and Chapter 4). Her essay "In the Name of Picasso", first delivered as a lecture in 1980 at the Museum of Modern Art, is a prime example. In it, she argues against using biographical or contextual information to interpret Picasso's Cubist works, especially the collages, precisely because the works themselves reject the task of representing the world (or mimesis). According to Krauss, Picasso's collages engage in "material philosophy," that is, through their form and materials they assert that representation is fundamentally about the absence of actual presence.[9] Krauss criticizes the practice of interpreting artworks primarily in terms of artists' biographies, a phenomenon that she witheringly labels "Autobiographical Picasso."[10] She further challenges the way that art history ignores "all that is transpersonal in history—style, social and economic context, archive, structure" and as an alternative emphasizes the potential of semiotics as a concept of representation.[11]

Iconography and iconology

Iconography means, literally, "the study of images." At its simplest level, the practice of iconography means identifying motifs and images in works of art: a woman with a wheel in her hand represents St. Catherine, a figure sitting cross-legged with hair in a topknot and elongated earlobes represents the Buddha. Sometimes iconographers focus on a particular element within an image, such as a human figure who is part of a larger crowd scene, or a flower motif used to decorate a capital; at other times, they focus on the image as a whole, such as the Last Supper. The process of identification may not be all that simple: it often requires extensive knowledge of a culture and its processes of image-making.

Although the terms "iconography" and "iconology" are often used interchangeably, they actually refer to two distinct processes of interpretation. Iconology, in a way, picks up where iconography leaves off. It takes the identifications achieved through iconographic analysis and attempts to explain how and why such imagery was chosen in terms of the broader cultural background of the image. The idea is to explain why we can see these images as "symptomatic" or characteristic of a particular culture. So, for example, once you've determined that a statue represents St. Catherine, then you may want to ask why St. Catherine was depicted in this particular place and time by this particular artist.

Unlike some of the theoretical approaches discussed in this book, which developed in other disciplines and have been adapted by art historians, iconography and iconology were developed first by art historians specifically for the analysis of art. In a sense, iconography, as the identification of images, has a long history: the Roman scholar Pliny (AD 23–79), for example, in his *Natural History*, took care to discuss the subject matter of the images he was discussing. Iconography became more systematized in the sixteenth century, when iconographic handbooks that explained different themes and allegorical personifications were published for the use of artists and connoisseurs. Somewhat later, the Italian art connoisseur and intellectual Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1615–1696), in his *Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1672), combined elements of his predessor Giorgio Vasari's influential biographical approach with iconographic analysis, as he tried to explain the literary sources of images. In the eighteenth century, the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) laid the foundation for the modern, systematic approach to iconography in his studies of subject matter in ancient art.[12]

Panofsky's iconography and iconology

Working in England, the Austrian art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) and his students developed modern iconographic

theory, rejecting what they saw as a purely formal approach to art in the work of scholars such as Wölfflin. Warburg argued that a given period's art was connected in numerous ways with its religion, philosophy, literature, science, politics, and social life. As his student, the art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), put it: "In a work of art, 'form' cannot be divorced from 'content': the distribution of colour and lines, light and shade, volumes and planes, however delightful as a visual spectacle, must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning."[13] Iconography was the method that enabled scholars to retrieve content embedded in works of art. In *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955), Panofsky defined three levels of iconographic/iconological analysis, each with its own method and goal.

In the first level, pre-iconographic analysis, the viewer works with what can be recognized visually without reference to outside sources, a very basic kind of formal analysis. In the second level, iconographic analysis, the viewer identifies the image as a known story or recognizable character. In the third level, iconological analysis, the viewer deciphers the meaning of the image, taking into account the time and place the image was made, the prevailing cultural style or style of the artist, wishes of the patron, etc. So, for example, you might look at a small plastic object and identify it as the figure of a woman. Researching further, you might identify the woman depicted as Barbie, and recognize this object as a type of doll widely circulated in the United States and beyond since the 1950s. At the third level, you might examine the ways in which Barbie dolls express certain ideas about women's roles in society and women's bodies.

Hypothetically, when you're studying a work of art, you move through these three levels in order. In actuality, it's not always that simple. Many art historians have challenged the notion of the "innocent eye" necessary for pre-iconographic analysis: semiotics and reception theory have emphasized that viewers come to art as individuals shaped by their experiences, values, and historical and cultural knowledge. For example, if you've been raised as a Christian, or are very familiar with the history of European art, it will be a real challenge to see an image of the Nativity at a pre-iconographic level. You'll immediately jump to the iconographic, and then have to step back deliberately from that informed viewpoint. Of course, if your eye is too "innocent" you may have trouble engaging in interpretation at any level. The lotus motif in Egyptian art may look

like a purely geometric pattern to you if you're not familiar with the plant and can't see the representational aspects of the image. In historical and cross-cultural analysis, it may prove to be a challenge to move from level two to level three: all sorts of gaps in the historical record or your own knowledge, as well as your own preconceptions, may complicate your work. If you're completely unfamiliar with African art and are studying a Yoruba *gelede* mask, you may have to work very hard to identify the different figures depicted in the mask's superstructure, and some of them you may not be able to identify with any certainty.

At its most subtle, then, iconography works to retrieve the symbolic and allegorical meanings contained in works of art. Let me take a moment here to define these terms. A symbol is something that is widely recognized as representing an idea or entity. A set of scales is, for example, a symbol for the idea of Justice. An allegory is a narrative, using a set of symbols that is widely recognized to represent an idea or entity; it may be in the form of a personification (that is, a human or animal image). So a woman holding a set of scales is an allegorical figure of Justice. It's important to remember that symbols and allegories are culturally specific, and their meanings are not always evident to every member of that culture, much less outsiders. Among the Hawai'ian people, for example, the idea of *kaona*, or "veiled reference," underscores this: poetry and other arts have many layers of meaning, some of which are accessible only to those who are highly trained as artists.[14]

Iconology is the phase of interpretation that follows the identification of iconographies. Iconological interpretation investigates the meaning of motifs, symbols, and allegories in their cultural context. In developing his theory of iconology, Panofsky was strongly influenced by Ernst Cassirer's theory of significant form.[15] Cassirer (1874–1945), a German philosopher who fled the Nazis, argued that images represent fundamental principles or ideas (symbolic values) in a given culture, so that we can see works of art as "documents" of an artist, religion, philosophy, or even an entire civilization.[16] This idea of significant form is different from the formalist idea: the formalist idea strips away cultural meaning, while Cassirer argues that significant forms are loaded with cultural meaning. Cassirer noted that the researcher's own personal psychology, experience, and philosophy will shape her interpretation—an interesting precursor to ideas of reception and identity politics discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Iconography and iconology since Panofsky

Panofsky's method was widely influential in mid-twentieth-century art history, and he is still respected as a leading figure in the discipline. Although Panofsky developed his methods in relation to his pioneering studies of Renaissance art—his own field of expertise—they were widely applied to a range of periods and cultures (see, for example, the work of Fritz Saxl, Rudolf Wittkower, Ernst Gombrich, Richard Krautheimer, Jan Białostocki, and Hans Belting in the bibliography). Leo Steinberg's famous (and controversial) book, *The Sexuality of Christ* (1996), is a skillful and imaginative exercise in iconographic and iconologic analysis. Steinberg (b. 1920), an American art historian, first identifies Christ's penis as an overlooked icon. He demonstrates that in numerous Renaissance images, the penis of Christ is not only visible but deliberately displayed: the Madonna may reveal the infant Christ's genitals to the Magi, or the dead Christ's hand may fall over his genitals with subtle emphasis. Steinberg relates this iconography to the theological emphasis on Christ's humanization, his Incarnation as a mortal—and sexual—human being who unites God and Man.

The practice of iconography and iconology resulted in productive new developments in the field. One area of concern was the changing meaning of images over time. Polish art historian Jan Białostocki (1921–1988) used the term "iconographic gravity" to describe the ways in which images and motifs take on new meanings. In fact, Aby Warburg had earlier commented on the persistence of such themes and images in the transition from Classical to Christian art: for example, the halo, which we typically interpret as a sign of Christian holiness, was actually used in late Antiquity to indicate princely status. "Iconographic gravity" is particularly prevalent in what Białostocki called *Rahmenthemen*, or encompassing themes, which, like *topoi* in literature, persist over time as important subjects in art.[17] In Western art, examples include the triumph of Virtue over Vice, the hero, the ruler, sacrifice, mother with child, divine inspiration, and the lamentation of the beloved dead. Each of these has appeared in Greek, Roman, early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance art—and beyond—in a wide range of historical and cultural contexts.

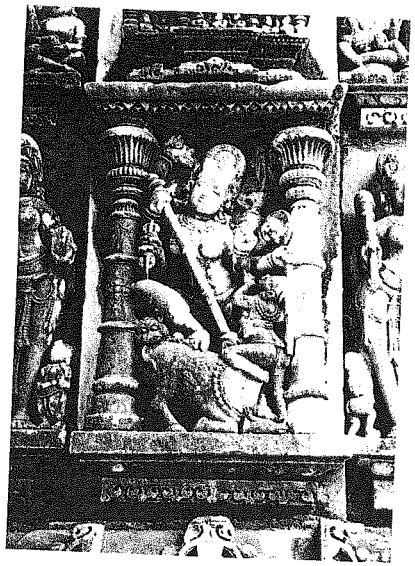
With the rise of the "new" art history in the late 1960s, a productive critique of iconography developed. Working at a time of dynamic intellectual and social movement, the new art historians

were engaged with emerging fields of critical theory, such as post-structuralism and semiotics, and the history of art history; they began to question the assumptions, methods, and aims of art history.[18] They emphasized the role of the viewer and social context in shaping works of art: the work of art wasn't a neatly packaged message delivered by the artist to the viewer, but a complex text that could be read (or misread) in any number of ways. In particular, these art historians criticized iconographic analysis that was limited and descriptive in nature: T. J. Clark dismissed Panofsky's less skillful followers as "theme chasers," while Svetlana Alpers (b. 1936) challenged the assumption that visual symbols inevitably have or express meaning.[19]

At the same time, Alpers and other scholars stressed that Panofsky's method had been developed for the analysis of Renaissance art, and argued that this was what it was best suited to. In their view, applying this method indiscriminately was to suggest, falsely, that Renaissance art—especially Italian Renaissance art—provided a universal model of image-making.[20] The debate was particularly heated with respect to seventeenth-century Netherlandish genre painting. Netherlandish art historian Eddy de Jongh and others had used an iconological approach to discuss such depictions of everyday life and objects as allegories rich in symbolic meaning.[21] In *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983), Svetlana Alpers countered that Dutch art, unlike Italian art, was not narrative and symbolic. In her view, Dutch painters participated in a distinctive visual culture that led them to value detailed paintings of everyday life as a way of knowing the world, not as a way of presenting disguised moralistic messages. She connected painting to the production of maps, lenses, and mirrors as expressions of a distinctive Dutch visual culture. Other scholars have argued that both perspectives on Dutch painting are right—that Dutch artists deliberately created open-ended works which viewers could interpret symbolically, if they chose to, or experience as a fresh and penetrating view of the world.[22]

Practicing iconography and iconology

When you begin an iconographic analysis, it can help to work your way through Panofsky's three stages, but only rarely will you systematically explain all three in your final analysis. I'll take as an example a South Asian sculpture that depicts the Hindu goddess Durga slaying the demon Mahisha (Figure 2.1).



2.1 Durga defeating Mahisha, 961 CE. Stone. Ambika Mata temple, Japgat, Rajasthan, India.

- The basic iconographic questions are a helpful way to start learning about this work, especially if you are unfamiliar with Hindu imagery: What does this sculpture represent, on the most simple level? (A multi-armed female figure decapitating a buffalo, with a lion biting the buffalo's hindquarters and a man seemingly crouching on its head.)
- Who are these figures? How did you identify them? (The woman's multiple arms and the many weapons she holds—vajra (diamond or thunderbolt), trident, sword, bow, chopper—help you identify her as Durga, the goddess who slew the demon Mahisha in buffalo form; as she decapitated the buffalo, Mahisha emerged from its heads in human form—this is the figure on the right.)

Having accomplished a basic identification of the figure, you could then proceed to ask a series of iconological questions, designed to explore the larger dimensions of the image:

- How is this artist's depiction of the subject similar to or different from other artists' depictions at the time this was made, or at different times?
- Did this image inspire, or was it inspired by, literary representations of this theme or subject? How is it similar to or different from such literary representations?
- How do you account for these differences and similarities?

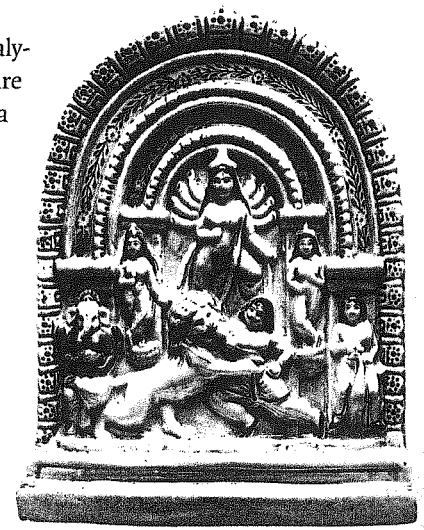
- Are there other visual images that directly inspired this representation?

An important aspect of iconographic/iconological analysis is comparison with textual sources, and so you might search out accounts of Durga's confrontation with the demon. Here's one such text, from Chapter 62 of the *Kalika Purana*, a late ninth- or early tenth-century collection of religious verses that includes numerous descriptions of Hindu goddesses:

> The demon started to worship Bhadra Kali and when [Durga] appeared to him again in a later age to slaughter him again, he asked a boon of her. [Durga] replied that he could have his boon, and he asked her for the favour that he would never leave the service of her feet again. [Durga] replied that his boon was granted. "When you have been killed by me in the fight, O demon Mahisha, you shall never leave my feet, there is no doubt about it. In every place where worship of me takes place, there [will be worship] of you; as regards your body, O Danava, it is to be worshipped and meditated upon at the same time."

You could also study this relief as part of the overall iconographic program of the temple it decorates. Ambika Mata is a Devi (Goddess) temple, incorporating numerous images of Durga and other female divinities. Ambika, the principal image in the shrine, is a form of the mother goddess who is associated with Durga through her lion mount. So you might want to compare this image of Durga with others from the same temple depicting Ambika.

Often, iconographic/iconological analysis is comparative, and you might compare this temple image with another Durga image made in the nineteenth century (Figure 2.2). In this image, Durga's lion is emphasized, and the demon, instead of appearing as a buffalo, is shown in its final human form. Durga still has her many arms, but she is also accompanied by her children. In a comparative iconographic analysis, you would go on



2.2 Durga defeating Mahisha, nineteenth century. Painted porcelain. University of Pennsylvania (acc. no. 88.521).

to consider the significance of these similarities and differences. From an iconological perspective, you might try to understand the different ways in which the two images were used: the small porcelain image as part of a domestic shrine, the stone sculpture in an important temple. Also, the small porcelain image was made during the time that India was a British colony—it may have been made in Europe and exported to India or produced in India by a European manufacturer; either way, the colonial situation in which it was produced is an important iconological issue.

Of course, iconography and iconology don't have to be used alone. You could take this series of iconological questions, use them to generate some ideas, and then take those ideas as a starting point for addressing issues of ideology, class, gender, or colonialism using specific contextual theories presented in Chapter 3. For example, feminist theory would probably help you to analyze the range of female imagery found at Ambika Mata.

Semiotics

> *They say she cannot wear the color red because it is too old for a young girl, that maybe she will be ready when she is near the end of high school. She knows that red is the color of passion, that a woman in a red dress is sultry, sensuous, that a woman wearing a red dress had better look out. Red is a color for sluts and whores they say. She is trying on yet another pink dress. They say she looks so innocent, so sweet in the color pink. Secretly she loves the color black. It is the color of night and hidden passion. When the women go dancing, when they dress up to go to the nightclub they wear black slips. They sit in front of the mirror painting themselves with makeup, making their lips red and rich. To her they are more beautiful in their black slips than they will ever be in any dress. She cannot wait to wear one.*
>
> *bell hooks*, Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood *(1997)*

Semiotics is the theory of signs. Simply put, a sign is something that represents something else. Here's an example: look out of the window and find a tree. There are all sorts of signs for that thing you're looking at. One of them is the word tree itself, four letters spelled out on the page: t–r–e–e. A different sign is the spoken word, "tree." Another sign is a drawing of a tree. A little plastic toy tree is also a sign for tree. Yet another sign is gestural: if you were playing charades and stood straight with your legs together and your arms spread out in a V-shape over your head, your team might

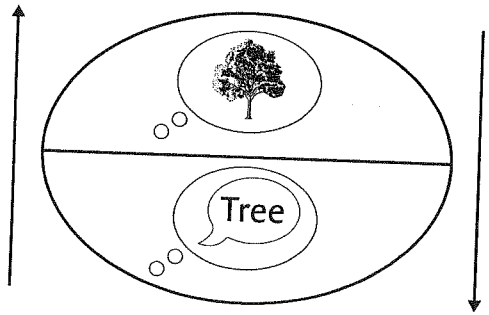
guess that you were representing a tree. So signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, objects, even ideas—the thought "tree" generated in your head by looking out of the window is also a sign. But although almost anything has the potential to be a sign, it can only function as a sign if it is *interpreted* as a sign: signs have to be recognized as signs in order for them to function as signs.

In the passage from bell hooks's memoir quoted at the beginning of this section, hooks describes her semiotics of women's dress, her study of the meaning of the style and color of women's clothing. bell hooks's system of signs is based both on cultural knowledge—widely accepted interpretations of these colors and styles—and also on her own personal signification. For hooks, the color black is a sign of night, both because of its darkness, like the night sky, and because it is worn at night. Red is a sign of passion; pink, a sign of innocent girlhood. These are meanings, or significations, for the color black that many might recognize and agree with. That black is a sign of *hidden* passion is hooks's own, more personal signification, prompted by the fact that the grown-up women around her wear black slips when they go out at night; the slips are sexy but worn underneath dresses, which is how they come to signify hidden passion for hooks. Black wouldn't necessarily signify *hidden* passion to other people who didn't share hooks's imagination or experience. For me, the analysis of this passage demonstrates two things: how a sign has to be recognized as such in order to function as a sign, and that signs, like the color black, can have multiple meanings.

In many ways, the kinds of issues taken up by iconographers and iconologists also concern semioticians. For many art historians, semiotics functions as a more interdisciplinary version of iconography and iconology, an expanded way of asking questions about what works of art mean and how they go about creating or expressing these meanings. Semiotics provides a different—and some would say more precise—language and framework for understanding the multifaceted connections between image and society and image and viewer, and for understanding not only *what* works of art mean but *how* the artist, viewer, and culture at large go about creating those meanings.[23]

The founding semioticians: Saussure and Peirce

Although the theory of signs has been around in different forms since ancient times, the modern theory of signs is based funda-



2.3 Diagram of Saussurean sign

mentally on the work of two theoreticians, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). According to Saussure, the sign is composed of two parts (Figure 2.3):

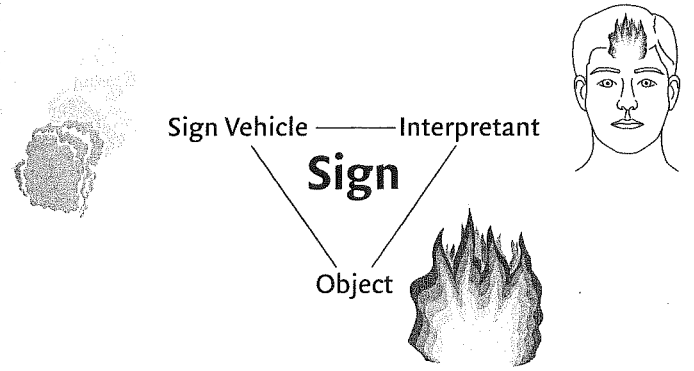
signifier	the form that the sign takes
signified	the concept it represents

The relationship between the signifier and the signified is the process of signification, represented by the arrows. So, to go back to the example of a tree, that thing you're looking at out the window would be the signified, and the word "tree" spelled out on the page would be the signifier.[24]

Charles Sanders Peirce explained the structure of signs somewhat differently. He argued that the sign is made up of three parts:

Representamen	the form that the sign takes (not necessarily material)
Interpretant	the sense made of the sign
Object	the thing to which the sign refers

Within Peirce's model of the sign, a traffic light, when considered as a sign for the concept of stopping your car, would consist of: a red light at an intersection (the representamen); vehicles halting (the object); and the idea that a red light indicates that vehicles must stop (the interpretant). Peirce understood that the process of interpreting signs tends to generate even more signs: the way the driver formulates the *idea* that cars should stop is a sign as well as an interpretant. Peirce's structure is often represented as a triangle in which the dotted line between the sign vehicle and the reference indicates that there's no automatic or natural connection between the two—the connection must be constructed (Figure 2.4).[25]



2.4 Diagram of Peircean sign

Peirce developed a very elaborate taxonomy of signs (over 59,000 types!), but what's most helpful to art historians is his identification of three basic kinds of signs:

Symbol	the signifier is purely arbitrary or conventional; it does not resemble the signified. Examples: alphabetical letters, numbers, traffic signs.
Icon	the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, or being similar to it in some of its qualities. Examples: a portrait, a model airplane.
Index	the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified in a way that can be observed or inferred. Examples: medical symptoms (an index of disease), smoke (an index of fire), footprints (an index of a passing person), photographs and films (the direct result of the imprint of light on a sensitized surface).

Signs don't usually belong exclusively to one category: there is a great deal of overlap, and signs often partake of characteristics of more than one of these types. For example, a photographic portrait is both an index and an icon, because it is a direct trace of the physical presence of the person (via light) and because it resembles that person. For your purposes, labeling an image as a particular type of sign isn't as important as the kinds of questions you can generate by thinking about these different processes of signification, these different relationships between signifier and signified, and the relationship between them (interpretant) generated by an observer.

Rosalind Krauss's essay "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America" (1977) serves as a model here. Krauss asserted that despite the diversity of seventies artistic practice—the seemingly "willful eclecticism" that encompassed everything from video to performance to earthworks to abstract painting—these works were united by their adherence to the terms of the index, rather than traditional concepts of style or medium. For example, Dennis Oppenheim's *Identity Stretch* (1975) transferred his thumbprint, greatly magnified, onto a large field and fixed its traces in lines of asphalt. Krauss notes that the work "focused on the pure installation of presence by means of the index."[26]

Systems and codes

Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of "sign systems," groups of signs that work together to create meaning and to construct and maintain reality. The concept of the "code" is fundamental in semiotics. Saussure, for example, stressed that signs are not meaningful in isolation, but only when they are interpreted in relation to each other: the code is the complex of signs circulating in any given society. The Russian-American linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) further emphasized that the production and interpretation of signs depends on the existence of codes or conventions for communication. The meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated: codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Interpreting a text or image semiotically involves relating it to the relevant codes.

Here's an easy way to understand codes. Let's say you're a person who speaks only French. Now, if you see the English word t–r–e–e spelled out on the page, you won't recognize that as a sign for "tree," because you don't know the code—the English language in this case—that makes this particular arrangement of letters meaningful. Of course, you would recognize the word *arbre*, which is the word for tree in French, as a sign for tree. At the same time, you may also recognize a little plastic toy tree as a sign for a tree, because that's a visual code that many English-speaking and French-speaking people share. But even though it seems so natural a connection—the little plastic tree obviously represents a tree to your eyes—you can't assume that everyone knows that code. For example, a person from the remote Highlands of Papua New Guinea, who didn't have much exposure to plastic toys and had not learned that particular code for representing things, might not

recognize the little plastic tree as a representation of (as a sign for) "tree." A particular kind of representation, such as a plastic toy, may seem natural or obvious if you grow up with it, but it actually belongs to a highly specific cultural code that has to be learned, just like a language.

In relation to the working of codes, Jakobson's semiotic theory of communication has been influential in both literary criticism and art history.[27] A message (text, utterance, image) is sent by a sender/speaker to a receiver/reader/listener/viewer. In order to be understandable this message must refer to the reality that sender and receiver share; this reality is called the context. The message must be transmitted via a medium the receiver can access, and it must be set in a code that the receiver understands and can use. (People who successfully send and receive email file attachments will recognize this principle.) So a communication exchange consists of these steps: emission–message–reception–reference–code. Jakobson's theory emphasizes that signs are about communication as a culturally specific process. Of course, communication isn't always successful. The sender and/or the receiver may not be particularly adept at manipulating the code, or the code may not be very well suited to expressing the message. (Think about the text messages that cell phones let us send: they're functional for certain kinds of communication, such as "Call home," but not for others, such as "Fifth Avenue is completely congested through midtown so if you want to meet me downtown, take Park.")

In fact, semioticians have elaborated the theory of codes in a number of ways and sometimes use a complex typology of codes to distinguish the different ways in which they work. Jakobson's work is influential in reception theory, and I'll discuss his ideas further in Chapter 4.

Interpreting codes and signs

> *A sign . . . is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign.*
>
> *Charles Sanders Peirce, 1931–58*

For Peirce, the sign was a process (Saussure thought of it more as a structure). The three-part Peircean notion of the sign—representamen/interpretant/object—leads to an important question: where

does semiosis, the production of signs, stop? If the process of interpreting a sign always generates another sign (the representamen), then semiosis could potentially go on for ever. Semioticians call this condition semiotic drift.

For the Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco (b. 1932), the idea that an infinite number of readings is possible for any text (or sign) is more hypothetical than real.[28] Building on the work of Peirce, Eco argues that the possible meanings generated by a sign, although hypothetically unlimited, are in actuality confined by social and cultural context. To take a simple example, we can't interpret a figure of a mother with a child as the Virgin and Christ Child unless we already, within our culture, know about Christianity: our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, puts a limit on the range of interpretations we can create. At the same time, on a smaller scale, semiosis may also be limited by the (in)competence of the interpreter—the extent to which she knows the relevant codes to employ in interpreting the sign. It's important to remember that context isn't a given, it's produced. The cultural reality that restricts semiosis is a creation of the community: it may be an arbitrary, pseudo-reality, but its effect is none the less powerful.

Are works of art puzzles? Are art historians detectives?

Underlying formalist, semiotic, and iconographic/iconological approaches to art history is the basic question of whether or not a work of art is something to be deciphered, like a puzzle or a murder mystery. The Italian art historian Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939) raised the issue in "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method" (1980). Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), an Italian doctor and art historian, developed a method of attribution based on the theories of scientific classification he had studied as a medical student.[29] He believed that what truly set artists apart from each other was not the dramatic, eye-catching features of their work, but minor things such as the rendering of earlobes. Ginzburg argues that Morelli and Freud, like the great fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, were masters of the overlooked detail, the small but telling clue that unravels the mystery. Ginzburg actually calls this a "lower" empirical methodology, and compares it unfavorably to scientific method.[30] (Of course, this empirical approach runs exactly counter to formalism, which would claim that there's nothing to be deciphered in looking at a painting, only something to be experienced.)

The art historian James Elkins (b. 1955) notes that, because this deciphering mode has become such a basic art-historical practice, art historians tend to focus on works of art that can be treated this way: "We are inescapably attracted to pictures that appear as puzzles, and unaccountably uninterested in clear meanings and manifest solutions. The discipline thrives on the pleasure of problems well solved, and it languishes in the face of the good, the common, the merely true, the skillful, the private, and above all, the image that refuses to present itself as a puzzle".[31] If art historians are detectives, it's because we choose to be.

The idea that signs relate to each other, that they're part of a larger context and not "closed," discrete little units of signification, was also emphasized by the French semiotician Julia Kristeva (b. 1941). In the sixties and seventies, Kristeva was one of a group of post-structuralist thinkers associated with the radical journal *Tel Quel*, in which she published some of her most important writings. Kristeva developed the concept of intertextuality to explore the ways that texts (or signs) actually refer to each other. She situates texts in terms of two axes: the horizontal axis connects the author and the reader of a text, while the vertical axis connects the text to other texts. Shared codes unite these two axes, for according to Kristeva, "every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it."[32] It's up to the creator of the sign and the interpreter of the sign (author/reader, artist/viewer) to activate those connections. Intertextuality becomes an important idea in post-structuralist and postmodern thought, and I'll return to it in Chapter 6.

The question of intertextuality relates, too, to the ways that signs signify both directly and indirectly, indicated by the terms *denotation* and *connotation*. Denotation indicates the meanings of a sign that are obvious or generally recognized. Connotation refers to meanings of the sign that are less obvious, that are inferred: it's the interpreter's job to bring the relevant codes to the process of interpreting the sign. For example, most readers would agree that the word "rose" denotes a fragrant flower with multiple petals and thorns, but would they be able to recognize all the flowers that are classified as roses (i.e. denoted by the word "rose")? Wild roses, for example, don't look anything like the roses that fill florists' shops on Valentine's Day. The word "rose" also has many connotations: it suggests romance, purity, elegance—and, during the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485) in England, red and white roses signified the two warring factions, the houses of Lancaster and York. While the word "rose" may readily connote romance for you, only if you bring the "code" of a knowledge of English history to bear will red and white roses connote the Wars of the Roses.

The Russian linguist and semiotician Valentin Voloshinov (1895–1936) pointed out that it is hard to separate denotation from connotation completely because even the act of deciphering denotations requires interpretive abilities—the process is, as he insisted, "molded by evaluation . . . meaning is always permeated with value judgement."[33] The French semiotician Roland Barthes (1915–1980) took this idea a step further. He argued that although denotative meanings may seem to be the "basic" or "natural" meanings of the sign, they are in fact themselves produced by the sign's connotations: "denotation is not the first meaning, but pretends to be so; under this illusion, it is ultimately no more than the last of the connotations (the one that seems both to establish and close the reading), the superior myth by which the text pretends to return to the nature of language, to language as nature."[34] Barthes elaborated this argument through examples drawn from advertising and photography, and a number of art historians have responded to these ideas—not least because they present, indirectly, a critique of the notion of the innocent eye or pre-iconographic interpretation.

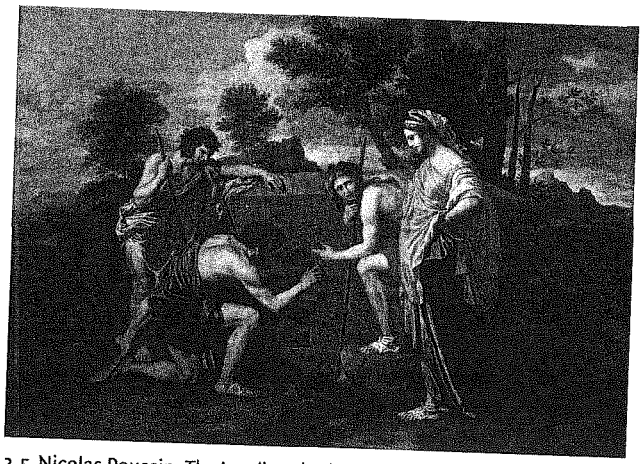
Semiotics and art history

Both Peircean and Saussurean semioticians recognized early on—before art historians—that semiotics might be a very productive approach to the interpretation of art, and it wasn't long before semioticians were looking at images as well as words. In a landmark 1934 paper, "Art as Semiological Fact," Czech linguist Jan Mukarovsky (1891–1975) declared that "the work of art has the character of a sign." He went on to apply Saussure's method to the analysis of the visual arts, although where Saussure distinguished between signifier and signified, Mukarovsky distinguished between the "sensuously perceivable 'work-thing'" and the "aesthetic object" existing "in the consciousness of the whole collectivity." In 1960 the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) published a book, *Signs*, which applies a Saussurean model to the phenomenology of perception (phenomenology is the study of experience). Merleau-Ponty connected painting and language because paintings are composed of signs, assembled according to a "syntax or logic" just like language. Barthes's influential *Elements of Semiology* (1964) applies a Saussurean framework to popular images such as cartoons and advertising.

In the 1960s, within the discipline of art history itself, the American art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996) had begun to explore the idea of semiotic analysis in the visual arts. In 1969 he published an important essay, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Arts: Field, Artist, and Society," in which he links the formal analysis of works of art with the examination of their social and cultural history. In particular, he focuses on the relationship between a painted image and the surface (ground) on which it is painted, and the issue of whether or not the image is framed in any way. Schapiro ranges broadly, from Paleolithic cave painting to Egyptian art to twentieth-century art, in exploring how different devices of framing enable artists to manipulate the signs of the image. To create meaning, figures can be positioned in various ways (e.g. the right side of a god is the favored side), enlarged, elevated, lowered, etc. in relation to the frame. It's a provocative essay, but it can't be considered a blueprint for art-historical semiotics, nor is it systematically semiotic in its observations.

It was up to the "new" art historians, who were exploring critical theory in a variety of arenas, to engage semiotics in a more sustained way. The American scholar Norman Bryson has been a key figure in this development, and it's no accident that he came to the field from literature. In his landmark study *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (1981), Bryson explores the language-like qualities of art, as well as art's relation to actual written language (see **Word and image** below). Semiotically, he is interested in examining the openness of the artwork: to him, an image is not a closed sign, but open, with multiple overlapping sign systems at work in the image and in the cultural environment. For Bryson, semiotics opens up a vision of art as a dynamic force in society, for he sees that sign systems "circulate" through image, viewer, and culture (Kristeva's idea of intertextuality is obviously relevant here).

In an influential essay on Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*, the French art historian Louis Marin (b. 1931) addressed the challenges inherent in using semiotic theory, which had largely developed in language, to interpret the visual arts (Figure 2.5). He focused in part on the issue of deixis, the "direction" of an utterance. Every utterance exists in space and time: it is produced by a speaker (sender) and sent to a listener (receiver) in a particular context that brings them together. The deictic traits of an utterance include things such as personal pronouns, verbs, adverbs of time and place. So how do we translate this to works of art—especially history paintings, like Poussin's, which don't seem to address anyone in particular? Marin points out that except for the physical existence



2.5 Nicolas Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, c. 1630. Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris.

of the painting, and the fact that we're looking at it, nothing within the image tells us about its situation of emission and reception: it does not address the viewer (with, say, a figure who looks out of the picture). As viewers, we seem simply to catch sight of the figures in the painting going about their business, as if they don't need us in order to perform their story: in this way, the painting conceals its enunciative structure. And yet, curiously, the concealment of enunciative structures (and their reappearance as representation) is the painting's very subject. A shepherd traces the words *Et in Arcadia ego* on a tomb, words that address the shepherds but in an open-ended way, for the verb is missing from the phrase—"I too in Arcadia" is the literal translation of the Latin. Marin's reading, which involves subtle textual and visual analysis, reveals a Jakobsonian model of communication as the subject matter of the painting, with the painter (or viewer) occupying the position of the linguist who constructs a model.[35] Marin's essay is doubly important because it reminds us that theory is not a one-way street: it's not just that theory is applied to the interpretation of art, but that the interpretation of art can alter our understanding of theory.

Although Dutch scholar Mieke Bal (b. 1946) is a literary critic by training, she has made significant contributions to the semiotics of art. She emphasizes that the work of art is an event—one that takes place each time an image is processed by a viewer. In this way the work of art is an agent, too, an active producer of the viewer's experience and, ultimately, of the viewer's subjectivity. The task of

semiotic art history is to analyze simultaneously the image and the interpretation of the image, the relation between the two (why does a subject interpret it in a particular way?), and the anchoring of the image in the interpretation and vice versa. She points out that the established iconographic approach in art history emphasizes what is common to images—the history of types, for example—rather than what is distinctive about a particular image and a particular viewer's way of approaching that image. Paradoxically, she says, although iconography may claim to have been developed uniquely for visual images, it may, in fact, ignore their unique qualities.

Practicing semiotic art history

A double-page spread from the lavishly illustrated prayer book, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, provides an opportunity for a range of semiotic analyses (Figure 2.6). Wealthy lay people used such books as they observed the daily round of prayers adapted from monastic

Do we "read" works of art?

As you read more art history, you'll often see the word "read" used to talk about the process of interpreting a visual image. It sounds a little strange—how is it possible to "read" a visual image? Isn't reading only for words and texts?

The idea of "reading" works of art comes from semiotic theory, which often uses terminology based on language to discuss the process of interpretation: for semiotics, language has become the model form of communication (though the visual arts, gesture/movement/dance, and music are other forms). In semiotics, a text is an assemblage of signs constructed (and interpreted) according to the rules or conventions of a particular medium or form of communication. Thus a novel is one kind of text, a poem another. So in this sense, a work of art can be referred to as a text, and the systematic process of interpreting that work according to the rules governing that kind of text can be referred to as "reading."

A number of art historians, including Mieke Bal, Louis Marin, and Norman Bryson, have developed this idea of reading as a very specific semiotic methodology for interpreting visual images.[36] Their point is not to give preference to the textual over the visual, but to engage more fully with the visual nature of the image. In various ways, they argue that confronting a work of art requires more than just simple, direct apprehension: it requires reading (remember that reading isn't natural to humans, we have to be taught it). Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), an important art historian who worked in England, also proposed the idea that pictures are "read," because pictures are not natural or self-evident, but created according to a "pictorial language" that must be deciphered.[37] Unlike semioticians, who maintain the openness of the signifying process, Gombrich believed in the art historian's ability to fix the "real meaning" of images.

ritual, and Jeanne d'Evreux's husband, Charles IV, King of France, commissioned this precious book for her. I'll pursue just a few of the possible lines of questioning here—these images are so rich that they spark endless debate and interpretation.

- *You may want to start with some basic questions, similar to Meyer Schapiro's, about the visual semiotics of the work: what part of the image catches the viewer's eye first? Are certain elements larger than others? Are certain elements more brightly colored, or, in the case of sculpture, in greater relief?*

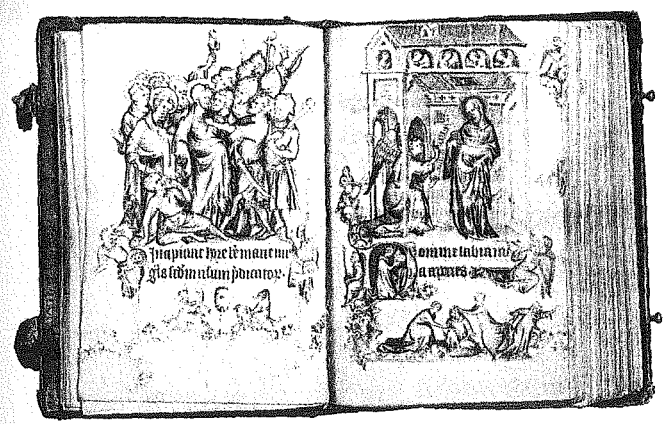
  With respect to the right-hand page, for example, you might note that there are three distinct images on the page, yet they are all interconnected visually. One is the large scene in the architectural setting at the top of the page. The other is the text, which incorporates the image of a kneeling woman inside the large letter "D" (the illustrated capital). A scene of a game (rather incongruously, to a modern viewer) runs along the page below the text.

- *What are the denotative and connotative aspects of this image?*

  Each of these images functions as a sign, and you can seek to interpret them individually and in relation to each other. The denotative meanings are fairly straightforward. The large scene is the Annunciation, the kneeling woman in the capital is Jeanne d'Evreux—the queen for whom the book was made—at her prayers. The game is a medieval version of "blind man's bluff" called "frog in the middle."

  These three signs have overlapping connotative meanings. Jeanne d'Evreux is a queen, just as Mary, the mother of God, is Queen of Heaven. The parallel is enhanced visually because the letter D enclosing Jeanne d'Evreux functions like the architectural frame enclosing the Virgin. The juxtaposition of these two women on the same page may have encouraged Jeanne d'Evreux, as queen and as an aspiring mother, to take the Virgin Mary as her role model and inspiration.

  Each of these three images is also composed of multiple signs. In terms of the formal issues raised through your questions, you may note, for example, that the main floor of the Virgin's house is enlarged, signifying the importance of her encounter with Gabriel; the upper floor, charmingly filled with a supporting cast of angels, has shrunk accordingly. The figure of the Virgin is large on the page, while Jeanne d'Evreux herself is relatively small.



2.6 Jean Pucelle, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, fols. 15v, 16r: *The Arrest of Christ* and *The Annunciation*, circa 1324–1328. Each folio 3½ × 2 7/16" (8.9 × 7.1 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection.

The very elaborateness of the scenes, which mark the start of a new section of prayer, invites a moment of pause, or contemplation, appropriate to starting an act of devotion: so that the elaborateness connotes that a new section is beginning.

- *What are the codes that are brought to bear on the interpretation of these images—either by yourself, as art historian, or by contemporary viewers?*

  Even when you understand that the image of the game signifies the capture of Christ, it still seems strangely sacrilegious to a modern sensibility. Why is a frivolous scene incorporated into such serious devotional imagery? What "code" made this juxtaposition possible for Jeanne d'Evreux and her contemporaries?

- *What kinds of intertextuality are at work in these images?*

  Think also about this page in relation to the opposite page. Why juxtapose the Betrayal of Christ and the Annunciation? Thinking about each scene as hingeing on a greeting (Judas's kiss, Gabriel's "Ave, Maria") may help you explore the intertextuality between the two images further. The idea (or sign) of salutation or greeting also includes the little portrait of Jeanne d'Evreux—for prayer is itself a form of direct address to God, the Virgin, or the saints. The two pages are potentially further connected by the game: the abuse of the blindfolded person in the game echoes the abuse showered on Christ as he was captured at Gethsemane.

  A focus on intertextuality would lead you to relate this image to other prayer books or items belonging to Jeanne d'Evreux, or other books produced by this artist. At the same time, inter-

textuality can make you aware of the uniqueness of this image —that it may employ a new code of representation in some way (the grisaille technique, discussed below, is one example).

- *How do materials and techniques signify meaning in the work?*

  Although materials and techniques may not be symbols or motifs, they can be signifiers. Within a semiotic framework, you can treat the material as productive of meaning. In Jeanne d'Evreux's prayer book, the use of grisaille is unusual, as is the lack of precious materials, such as gold leaf, in a book made for a queen. And yet its original owners considered the book to be extremely precious—it was listed in one inventory of royal property among the jewels, not the library. Perhaps it was the extraordinary artistry and originality of the book that made it valuable: the artistry, emphasized by the understated grisaille technique, signified value, rather than costly materials such as gold leaf.

  The grisaille technique, combined with the double-page spread images, may have brought to mind another kind of image, the ivory diptych (a hinged image in two parts). Like this double-page spread, small ivory diptychs often depicted paired scenes from the life of Christ or the Virgin, and the grisaille technique could evoke light and shadow falling across the carved surface. In this regard you might note that the smallness of the work also signifies its jewel-like preciousness and emphasizes its use as an object of private devotions, in the manner of an ivory diptych. These connections may be part of the intertextuality of the prayer book.

- *What is the deixis, the enunciative structure, of the image? Who is being addressed by this image, and how?*

  This becomes a complicated question here, in a set of images that are on some level about salutation. The images specifically address Jeanne d'Evreux, because the book was made for her, and yet they do not engage her directly in visual terms (no figure looks out of the frame at the reader, for example). At the same time, Jeanne d'Evreux is depicted here in the deictic act of prayer. Louis Marin's tracing of the deictic structure of Poussin's painting (page 37 above) would be a good model for teasing out these relationships within the image and between image and viewer.

To explore the contextual issues generated within semiotic analysis, you may also want to access Marxist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories (see Chapter 3). Also, semiotic art history brings

attention to the role of the viewer, and so psychoanalytic and reception theory may be relevant (see Chapter 4). I do want to mention here a potentially problematic issue: both iconographic and semiotic analysis in the context of art history can be very object-oriented. If you are interested in performance art or artistic practices such as diplomatic gift-giving, you may want to think hard about how to use these frameworks effectively.

Word and image

> *But here the speakers fell silent. Perhaps they were thinking that there is a vast distance between any poem and any picture; and that to compare them stretches words too far . . . But since we love words let us dally for a little on the verge, said the other. Let us hold painting by the hand a moment longer, for though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common.*
>
> *Virginia Woolf*, Walter Sickert: A Conversation, *1934*

Many of the issues pertaining to iconography and semiotics discussed in this chapter have more recently been framed as the "word and image" problem. What is the relationship between texts and images? Do visual images simply illustrate the text? Do texts control images? Or is there a form of dialogue between them? What does it mean for art historians to bring words to bear on the interpretation of images?

The first part of this "problem" is the relationship between texts and images, especially within works of art that themselves contain images. This is an issue with a very long history: the Greek philosopher Aristotle discussed the parallels between poetry and painting, and today we still quote the Roman poet Horace's elegant phrase *ut pictura poesis*—"as is painting so is poetry" (*Ars Poetica*). As Mieke Bal points out, "Words and images seem inevitably to become implicated in a 'war of signs' (what Leonardo called a *paragone*) . . . Each art, each type of sign or medium, lays claim to certain things that it is best equipped to mediate, and each grounds its claim in a certain characterization of its 'self', its own proper essence. Equally important, each art characterizes itself in opposition to its 'significant other.'"[38] W. J. T. Mitchell likens word and image to two countries that speak different languages but have a long history of contact and exchange. The idea is neither to dissolve these borders nor to reinforce them, but to keep the interaction going.[39] In *Iconology:*

Image, Text, Ideology (1986) and *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994) Mitchell argues that both visual and verbal representations have an inescapable formal uniqueness as processes of representation, even though they are often linked to each other through previous artistic practice and social or political contexts. A number of art historians, such as Michael Camille in his work on medieval illuminated manuscripts, directly address these relationships in the works of art they study.

But images also give rise to texts—that is, they give rise to art-historical texts. The first chapter of Bal's *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word–Image Opposition* (1991) maps out the tensions between word and image in the practice of art history. Bal points out that with the changes in the discipline that began in the late sixties, "new" art historians accused more traditional art historians of neglecting the word (or theory) in art history, while the traditionalists accused the new art historians of neglecting the image.[40] Mitchell observes that some of these tensions were heightened because several of the key practitioners of theoretically informed art history actually came over from literature studies—including Mitchell himself as well as Bryson and Bal—so that the development seemed to some like "colonization by literary imperialism."[41] These issues are very much unresolved in art history—almost necessarily so, because the discipline's internal critique is ongoing and because these questions lie at the very heart of the discipline. James Elkins goes so far as to argue that art history's words are always doomed to failure on some level, because there are aspects of images that are beyond explaining.[42]

Conclusion

Perhaps of any chapter in this book, this one has presented the most divergent group of theories, from formalism to iconography to semiotics, each of which has its passionate practitioners. In the end, each of these approaches to art is concerned with interpretation, which can be defined as the deliberate, thoughtful explanation of something, or the search for meaning. Where and how that meaning is to be found is hotly contested—whether, as formalists claim, it lies only within the work, or, as iconographers and semioticians would assert, within the work as it exists as part of, and

in dynamic interaction with, larger contexts. Just how art historians are to deal with these larger contexts is a question taken up in the next chapter.

A place to start

These books are separated into the fields highlighted in the chapter: Formalism, Iconography/iconology, Semiotics, and Word and image. Some of these sources are scholarly studies in the field, while others are primary texts and anthologies.

Formalism

Focillon, Henri. *The Life of Forms in Art*. New York: Zone Books, 1989.

Fry, Roger. *A Roger Fry Reader*, edited by Christopher Reed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

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