

# **The Cultural Icon of Thomasian Tradition: The Arch of the Centuries**

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## **Abstract**

*An icon uplifts the object or person identified as the exemplar of a particular generation, a stylistic epoch, and a feeling about a particular set of social experiences. The icon being identified is something which all people can recognize but it is to be seen as a construction which can be seen to work in varying ways: first, as icons invested with historical significance; second, as secular icons or materials in the real world that through time accumulate to themselves a specific exemplary cultural status. On a different note, cultural icons also reflect the profoundly held aspirations as well as the concerns of receptive communities over-time. This study aims to qualify the Arch of the Centuries as the cultural icon of Thomasian tradition. This study will lean on the critical concepts expounded by Mike Parker and Wolfgang Iser.*

*Key Terms: Cultural Icons, Symbols, Perceptive Communities, Iconization, Meaning*

## **CULTURAL ICONICITY**

"Icon" is a term used nowadays in the field of journalism and popular speech to signify a cult object or a celebrity (Tomaselli & Scott, 2009). It is used in a wide array of contexts for the notions of image, picture, or representation. It is a sign that stands for an object by signifying it either concretely or by analogy. A cultural icon can be in any form.

In a study conducted by Dennis R. Hall (2008), he explores the evolution and function of the wristwatch as a contemporary cultural icon. Because the watch oscillates between use and signal values, the watch enjoys a distinct iconic status in contemporary American culture, evoking a host of often conflicting associations: those allied to work, productivity, enterprise and success, on the one hand, and those related to self-indulgence, status luxury and excess, on the other hand. The development of cheap electronic movements ought to have spelled disaster for the watch both as a business and as a cultural icon, but beginning in the 1980s the watch aggressively fought back within the signal economy to represent a postmodern sense of the concept of time and culture. Wrist watches have a much fuller history, technical and cultural, than reported here and many more metonymic associations than those considered in this paper. Considering the wrist watch, a common

bit of material culture, as a cultural icon enables one better to consider and to appreciate the iconicity of common objects, as well as the iconicity of places and people.

The term "cultural icon" has become equivocal in its contemporary usage as averred by Mike Parker (2012) in his study concerning cultural iconicity titled "Cultural Icons: A Case Study Analysis of their Formation and Reception." In present discourse, the term "cultural icons" has been used in different ways. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in its draft edition of February 2011, defines "cultural icons" as, "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or movement; a person, institution, etc., considered worthy of admiration or respect (12). Such general definition offers limited characteristics to set the limits for iconicity; therefore, a scholar of cultural icons can further provide a more detailed definition to aid the discussion. In his study, Parker provides a four-point distinction bringing sterner restrictions for further comprehending the notion of cultural iconicity (Parker, 2012):

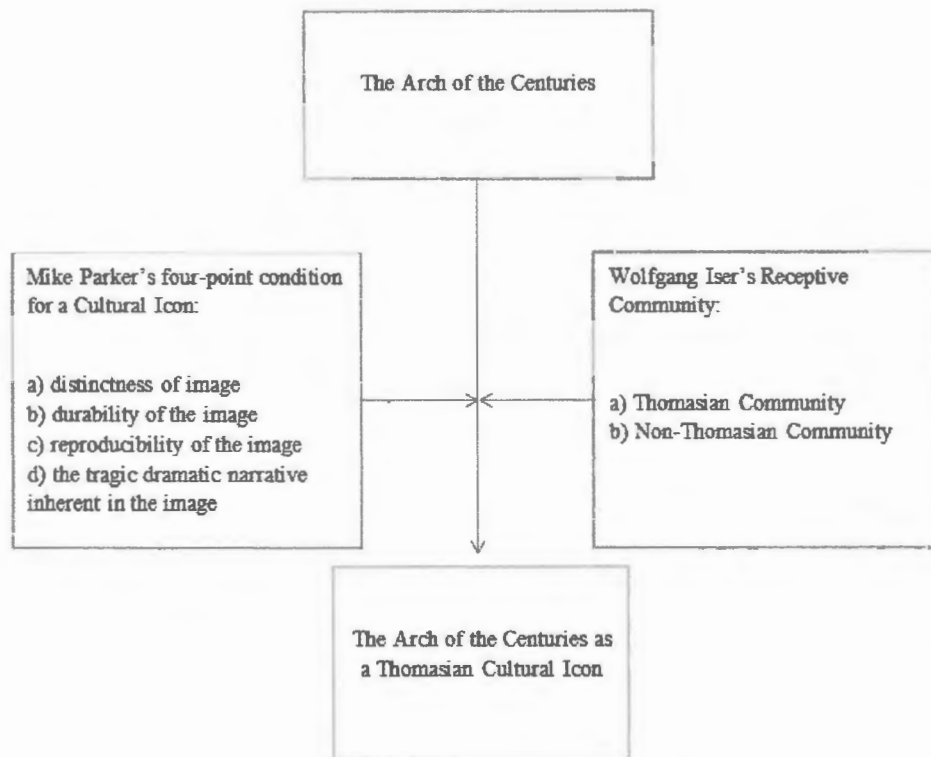
- Cultural icons are always associated with images
- Such images are clear-cut and sturdy
- They reside in the collective memory of large groups of people
- Lastly, cultural icons reveal recognizable tragic and dramatic narratives that are formed and received by the communities specifically receptive to the development of iconic meaning

Such four-point definition by Parker is an essential guide for benchmarking a prominent cultural icon of the Thomasian tradition. Recognizing its historical magnitude and significance for the Thomasian community, the cultural icon resides in the shared and communal memory of Thomasians. The Arch of the Centuries, formerly the original entrance to the Intramuros campus from 1611 to 1642 until it was relocated to its present location in España (Gregorio, 2014), is seen as an essential part of the initiation rites into the university, known as the Thomasian Welcome Walk. Invested with historical significance, it has been imbued with the iconic meaning of the Thomasian spirit and as an object that bestows Thomasian identity. The iconic meaning of the arch is further affirmed by the inscription: "Gateway to the history of the finest breed of Filipino," a reference to the countless alumni who have made an impact in Philippine History.

## **Context of Problematising**

This paper aims to qualify the Thomasian cultural icon, namely, the Arch of the Centuries according to the characteristics provided by Parker and Iser, respectively. As a cultural icon, it reflects the deeply held aspirations and the concerns of respective communities over-time. Invested with historical significance, such cultural icon transmogrifies the paradigm of a specific age band, the sentimentality and romanticism of a peculiar array of social experiences, and a stylistic epoch.

**Fig.1 Qualifying the Arch of the Centuries as a Cultural Icon**



The diagram presents the structure of the study with both concepts of Parker and Iser utilized to qualify the arch as a cultural icon. To meet Parker's four-point condition, the arch shall be examined for its historical significance and function to the immediate communities. Iser's criterion, on the other hand, shall be answered through determining the perception of the communities relevant to the arch. This paper then scrutinizes the Arch in terms of the criteria for cultural iconicity with the Thomasian tradition as context:

- How is the icon viewed as object, symbols, and events that represent some aspect of the values, norms, or ideals that are perceived to be inherent in the Thomasian spirit and culture?
- How is the icon in the Thomasian tradition seen as a construction invested with historical significance?
- How is it viewed as a secular icon or material in the real world that, through time, accumulates a particular cultural studies paradigm?
- How does it reflect a close relationship with the affairs of an amenable community throughout the course of time?
- How does the cultural icon disclose the narratives that are formed and received by the Thomasian community receptive to the development of iconic meaning?

### **The Notion of Cultural Iconicity**

Cultural icon, in its contemporary usage, has been confused in its general sense. Mike Parker (2012), in his study titled "Cultural Icons: A Case Study of their Formation and Reception" addresses the notion of cultural iconicity as a site of contestation and as a poorly defined subject area of cultural studies. The main objective of the study was to clarify what are cultural icons are.

There are deliberate considerations of the three specific uses of the term in the popular media as means and channel of national identity articulation, and in academic settings and publications. Such uses of the term show the range in which the term is presently poorly understood and misapplied. Considering room for the improvement of the definition of the term in the draft edition of February 2001 of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "cultural icons can be a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol for a movement or culture," Parker, proposes the introduction of tighter demarcating parameters to cultural iconography and presents what could be an authentic definition (Parker, 2012).

His definition of iconicity included four interconnected conditions: a) distinctness of image, b) durability of the image, c) reproducibility of the image, and d) the tragic dramatic narrative inherent in the image (Parker, 2012). These four interconnected conditions become an essential guide for viewing a cultural icon not simply as an object that is representative of some aspects of the values, norms, or ideals inherent in a culture and its various sections. From such perspective, Parker further avers that people will always make cultural icons. Icons are phenomena that people can see (distinct images), last with the people in collective memory (durability and reproducibility), and have natural meaning reflecting a collective identity as human beings. Modern-day primary cultural icons also have great stories to tell, enacting narratives and revealing uncomplicated meanings that are intrinsically formed into iconic images; themes with universal, timeless, appeal such as, sex, rebellion, defiance, murder, intrigue, and love.

On the other hand, Wolfgang Iser provides the importance of the receptive communities. These communities play an important part in the formation and reception of cultural icons, and it is the natural inter-relationship between the relevant communities and the icons that are subsequently formed. Receptivity to the tragic-dramatic narratives of iconic phenomena, together with retaining the distinct imagery in collective memory, is argued as an integrative relationship, working naturally in the absence of constructed, mediatized involvement.

### **The Arch of the Centuries**

The arch was declared a National Cultural Treasure by the National Museum last January 25, 2010 together with other prominent landmarks like the Main Building, Central Seminary and the UST Open Field.



Students and visitors who enter the España main pedestrians' gate are immediately drawn to the Arch of the Centuries, right in front, about fifteen meters away. Classical Greek and Roman in inspiration and notable for its Doric fluted columns, but baroque in its wealth of carvings and embossed details, it looks like one of those arches for victorious Athenian athletes or returning Roman generals that are seen in history books. The medallion arch is usually a memorial for all distinguished Thomasians. The inscription says, "Gateway to the history of the finest breed of Filipinos." On the lower facade of the pillar, a commemorative plaque honors Jose Rizal, national hero and UST alumnus; and another plaque, Manuel L. Quezon, President of the Philippine Commonwealth, also a UST graduate. The sides of the rectangular top of the arch are the panels depicting some milestones in the life of St. Thomas Aquinas. Above all these, sits the serene, regal image of the angelic doctor, scholastic philosopher and theologian, patron of the University and of all Catholic schools: St. Thomas Aquinas.

The side of the arch facing the campus was the main doorway to the university building before it was destroyed by World War II. The stones of that gateway, now rough-hewed and eroded, were transferred and reassembled piece by piece to its present site. The side with its Grecian design facing España Street is a reconstruction of the gate's original look. All first year students, as part of their initiation rites, enter the arch of iconic meaning, recognizing its historical significance to the Royal and Pontifical University and believing that it guarantees their Thomasian identity. It becomes a badge of identification with the Thomasian belief. On the other hand, in March, graduating students after their Baccalaureate Mass and post-Mass activities (that include the blessing and imposition of the Thomasian Mission Cross, the recitation of the Thomasian Pledge of Loyalty, and the Ceremony of the Light, and fireworks display) the Rector and the Secretary General lead the send-off rites for the candidates for graduation -- passing the Arch of the Centuries. This time, the students symbolically "leave the University" by walking through the arch facing España Blvd. This is symbolic of their "readiness to face the challenges of professional life and fulfill the mission of serving the Church, the nation, and the family as future "Thomasian professionals."

### **Addressing the Notion of Cultural Iconicity**

To generate the best results that address the notion of cultural iconicity, this study employs the use of the descriptive-analytical research design. Mirroring the features of the qualitative approach, descriptive research is designed to study what is -- the conditions or relationships, held opinions and beliefs, and developing trends as they describe, explain, and qualify the cultural icon of the Thomasian tradition. Anchored on its historical perspective, this descriptive analytical research is concerned with the conditions, structures, differences, or relationships evident in the prominent cultural icon of the University of Santo Tomas, the Arch of the Centuries. The research design will also make use of content analysis as a research technique for the objective and systematic description of the manifest content of cultural iconicity. (Manifest content means the apparent or the evident content of the icon which should be coded as it appears.)

## **Iser, Parker, and the Arch of the Centuries**

### ***Iser's Concept of Receptive Community and Meaning Creation***

The Arch of the Centuries is identified with the Thomasians. They are considered as the receptive community of the Arch because they are the immediate group among whom the Arch serves its purpose. The Thomasian freshmen take the traditional "Freshmen Welcome Walk" by passing through the Arch of the Centuries as a symbol of 'becoming Thomasians' because the same Arch was the doorway of the University when it was still in Intramuros. This is called the 'Rite of Passage'. This culminates in the traditional concelebrated Mass in which the presiding Rector himself takes the opportunity to welcome the new set of UST students personally. On the other hand, every March, the graduating students gather at the Grandstand for the Baccalaureate Mass and the post-Mass activities. Then the Rector and the Secretary General lead the candidates for graduation in passing through the Arch of the Centuries. This time, the students symbolically "leave the University" by walking through the Arch facing España Blvd. The cultural icon transcends into a meaning to serve the Thomasian community as a badge of identification for their beliefs, a sign that distills their core beliefs into a simple formula. With Thomasians serving as the receptive community, the Arch of the Century has given been given a meaning as both the entry and the exit point of the students' university stay.

### ***Parker and the four-point definition of a Cultural Icon***

- *Cultural Icons are always associated with images.* Upon knowing The Arch of the Century's role to the community, one can both visualize the entrance and exit ceremonies of the Thomasians. The image is not only limited to the community but also to the non-Thomasians for they can see the image produced by the history it has since 1611.
- *Such images are clear-cut and sturdy.* The images associated with the Thomasian cultural icon are backed by history and not by immaterial claims hence, they are not abstract. By being a fact, it gains an undeniable and consistent existence together with the images it sends to both its community and visitors.
- *They reside in the collective memory of large groups of people.* The university where the arch is located has been educating students since 1611. In addition to its long existence, it is also hailed as one of the top universities in the country (Robillos,2015). Given its prestige, a lot of students have studied in the university, and graduated from it. It is also the largest university, based on the enrollment figures (UST, n.d); therefore, it meets the condition that it must reside within the memories of large groups of people.
- *Cultural Icons reveal recognizable tragic and dramatic narratives.* Serving as an entrance to the university life of a student, the arch serves as the material embodiment of the anxiety and hopes of a freshman who is about to experience a dramatic shift in academic environment

from high school to college level. After enduring all the rigors of academic life in the university, the arch now serves as the embodiment of a graduating student's success in overcoming all the trials required by his respective program. Hence, every Thomasian looks forward to entering and exiting the arch. As to the point of view of non-Thomasians, it serves as the epitome of Philippine education for it once educated the national hero of the country, revolutionaries, saints, and presidents (UST, n.d).

### **The Arch of the Centuries as a Cultural Icon**

The Arch of the Centuries meets the criteria given by Iser and Parker for a cultural icon. Its historical background and the receptive community it belongs to provided most of the requirements for it to qualify. Thomasians can identify with both the good and the bad in their academic stay in the university as the arch serves as a representation of their student life. Future students shall continue to be initiated by the arch, granting them the Thomasian identity as time progresses.

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