

Iconography

At the simplest of levels, **iconography** is the containment of deeper meanings in simple representations. It often makes use of symbolism to generate narrative, which in turn develops a work's meaning. Symbolic representation may occur when a representation takes on meaning that is unrelated to what it depicts. For example, when lilies are pictured with the Christian Virgin Mary, they symbolically represent the idea of chastity. Chastity and lilies have no direct connection; therefore the meaning is symbolic.

In other cases, the symbolic representation may have a more direct relationship to what it represents. For example, images of the Buddha always show him with elongated earlobes, it is one of the visual markers whereby the viewer can recognize the Buddha. This symbol represents his days as a wealthy young noble who wore heavy, jeweled earrings that stretched his earlobes.

Let's turn our attention to one of the most famous paintings of all of Western art to develop a deeper understanding of how iconography works: Jan van Eyck's, *Arnolfini Portrait* painted in 1434.



Each of the objects in van Eyck's painting has a specific meaning here beyond imagery. In fact, this painting may be a painted marriage contract designed to solidify the agreement between these two families. It is especially important to remember that this is not a painting of an actual scene, but an image constructed to communicate specific things.

1. You notice that the bride holds her garment in front of her belly in order to appear pregnant. She wasn't pregnant at the time of the painting but this is a symbolic depiction to represent that she will become fruitful.
2. The little dog at her feet is a symbol of fidelity, and is often seen with portraits of women paid for by their husbands.
3. The discarded shoes are often a symbol of the sanctity of marriage.
4. The single candle lit in the daylight (look at the chandelier) is a symbol of the bridal candle, a devotional candle that was to burn all night the first night of the marriage. Other interpretations claim that the single candle is a symbol of the presence of God.
5. The chair back has a carving of St. Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth.
6. The orange on the windowsill and the rich clothing are symbols of future material wealth (in 1434 oranges were hand carried from India and very expensive) and fertility.
7. The circular mirror at the back reflects both the artist and another man, and the artist's signature reads, "Jan van Eyck was present"—both are witnesses to the betrothal in the picture. (We don't think of this much anymore, but a promise to marry was a legal contract). The circular forms around the mirror are tiny paintings of the Stations of the Cross— moments near the end of the life of Jesus.

You can see how densely populated iconography in imagery can convey specific hidden meanings. The problem here is to know what all of this means if we want to understand the work. (And sometimes scholars can't agree on all the symbolic meanings.) Iconography helps situate an artwork in a specific time in history and also the cultural context, because certain symbolic meanings may only be meaningful to a specific culture (e.g., Christian versus pagan symbols).

Another more contemporary painting with icons embedded in it is Grant Wood's [American Gothic](#) from the 1930s. The dour expressions on the figures' faces signify the toughness of a Midwestern American farm couple. Indeed, one critic complained that the woman in the painting had a "face that could sour milk". Notice how the trees and bushes in the painting's background and the small cameo the woman wears mirror the soft roundness of her face: these traditional symbols of femininity carry throughout the work. In contrast, the man's straight-backed stance is reflected in the pitchfork he holds, and again in the window frames on the house behind him. Even the stitching on his overalls mimics the form of the pitchfork. The arched window frame at the top center of the painting in particular is a symbol of the gothic architecture from 12th century Europe.

In addition, a popular genre in painting from sixteenth-century northern Europe, especially the Netherlands, is known as [vanitas](#) painting. These still life paintings are heavily dependent upon symbolic objects that project the joy and accomplishments life affords, yet at the same time remind us of our mortality.

Edward Collier's painting below is a good example of how crowded these could be:



The armor, weapons, and medals show a focus on military accomplishments. The open book alludes to knowledge, and in this case the drawing of a canon mirrors the overall theme. The globe is a symbol of both travel and our common existence as earth-bound beings. Contemporary vanitas paintings could certainly include allusions to air and space travel. On the far right of the work, behind the book and in the shadows, lies a skull, again reminding us of the shortness of life and the inevitability of death.

We can find evidence of the process by which iconography, or representations, take on specific meanings in popular culture, as well. The “Golden Arches” means fast food, the silhouette of an apple (with a bite out of it) means a brand of computer, and the artist Andy Warhol’s soup can image forever links Campbell’s soup with Pop Art.

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