

# 1 | Introducing iconology

This ‘as if from an observation point’ obviously implies that Lucian himself was uncertain whether this figure was positioned further back, or was at the same time on higher ground. We need to recognise the logic of ancient bas-reliefs where figures further to the back look over those at the front, not because they are actually positioned above them but because they are meant to appear as if standing behind.

Lessing 1768/1769<sup>1</sup>

From its first, formative stages, iconology has been closely intertwined with the study of ancient art. This relationship distinguishes iconology from the other two methods discussed in this book, while underscoring the role of ancient art as a fundamental reference point for art-historical endeavours.<sup>2</sup> In the 1932 article that was the first to sketch out the iconological enterprise, Erwin Panofsky borrowed the observation by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing cited above, on how the ancients approached art, to drive his argument directly at the core of the heuristic problems he intended iconology to solve.<sup>3</sup>

Lessing had used Lucian’s somewhat clumsy description of Zeuxis’ famed masterpiece of the fifth century BCE to pinpoint the fallacious nature of visual art, incapable of providing unequivocal information.<sup>4</sup> Panofsky turned Lessing’s ridicule of the medium the eighteenth-century scholar so deeply despised into evidence that no such thing as *pure* description of an artwork

<sup>1</sup> Cited after Panofsky 2012: 467.  
<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that this mapping of art-historical phenomena onto what is perceived as the blue screen of ancient art is as popular as it is highly problematic for the study of ancient art itself: if ancient art is employed as an example of in effect *a priori* validity, the methods of its investigation are also easily taken as a given. Potential friction between the two – the material and the methods of its exploration – is thereby overlooked, leaving a false sense of security that no methodological scrutiny is needed for the monuments of Greek and Roman antiquity to be treated meaningfully.  
<sup>3</sup> Panofsky 2012: 467–9.  
<sup>4</sup> Lucian, *Zeuxis or Antiochus* 3–7. Lucian describes a copy of the painting (according to him an exact one), stating that the original had been lost by his time. On the painting and its literary documentation: Kraiker 1950; Tanner 2006: 178–9. Lessing’s choice of source is smart: Lucian’s comment is primarily concerned with the stylistic features of the painting, and yet he fails to capture its take on perspective. On Lessing’s difficult relationship with the visual arts, see Mitchell 1986: 95–115; Squire 2009: 97–111; Giuliani 2013: 1–18.

can exist. That Lucian of Samosata (120–80 CE), the learned polymath of the second century CE, had difficulty understanding the rules of perspective at play in a painting produced some centuries earlier – and during the classical period, a period seen as the epitome of artistic activity, and one understood to be accessible to all because of its ideal-typical character – was evidence enough for Panofsky to showcase that description is impossible unless based on an understanding of the workings of styles and artistic types at the time the artwork was created. And if description without such familiarity is impossible, the very process perceived as the unmediated part of any engagement with an artwork, then so too must be interpretation. In short, Panofsky held that one needs to be familiar with the artistic conventions of a period before one can attempt to interpret its artworks.

### 1) What is iconology?

Iconology in its contemporary codification, i.e., reading visual images as historical documents, connotes directionality, coherence, and lack of fragmentation.

Holly 1993: 17

Panofsky drew on antiquity to provide his argument with general significance, a clever trick to authenticate the otherwise simple assumption that artworks do not merely showcase sets of isolated aesthetic phenomena. Panofsky could claim that artworks also facilitate a better understanding of culture(s) and they do so because there exists an intimate relationship between an artwork and the period in which it is created. This idea sits at the core of iconology, as the method is based on the fundamental proposition that the objects that surround us, including artworks, reflect propensities of the human mind, and that they do so in ways specific to the individual cultures that produce them.<sup>5</sup>

But iconology as sketched out by Panofsky goes further, constructing a fully integrated epistemological framework, with the artwork as its ontological centre. It supports the idea that artworks – better than other cultural products – can portray the mind's exploration of reality, that they can show how the mind organises and conceptualises the world, displaying notions of space as expressed in the positioning of objects, or notions of volume in their rendering, and that they document how these formal articulations are combined to shape content.<sup>6</sup> By studying works of art, an iconologist would argue, we are able to track the workings of the mind within specific historical settings.

<sup>5</sup> Panofsky 2012: 479.

<sup>6</sup> Panofsky 2012: 480–2.

Object of interpretation	Subjective source of interpretation	Objective corrective of interpretation
1. Phenomenal meaning (to be separated into factual and expressive meaning).	Vital experience of being.	History of styles (the quintessence of what it is possible to represent).
2. Meaning dependent on contact.	Literary knowledge.	History of types (the quintessence of what it is possible to imagine).
3. Documentary meaning (intrinsic meaning).	Worldview Ur-behaviour.	General intellectual history (the quintessence of what is possible within a given worldview).

Fig. 1.1 Erwin Panofsky’s three-step model of iconology (1932).

With this latter claim Panofsky propelled iconology into the realms of philosophy: no longer simply an analytical device to appropriate pictures as historical evidence, the method appears equipped to monitor the relationship between mind and world, thereby affording engagement with such cardinal issues as aesthetics, perception, and causality. This, in turn, raises the stakes for art history as a discipline. By reconciling empiric art-historical endeavour and deductive philosophical thought, Panofsky introduced a refreshed sense of the importance of artworks as evidence on par with that tackled in other fields of scientific pursuit. But by the same token, that reconciliation put a considerable obligation on the discipline as envisaged by Panofsky, for it must not be content with collecting observations on form and style, but must pursue truth itself.

Panofsky devised iconology as an interpretive process consisting of three steps (fig. 1.1),<sup>7</sup> but he attested that during interpretation those distinct

<sup>7</sup> Panofsky’s model undergoes considerable changes: voicing his ideas for a methodological interpretation of works of art first in the introduction to *Herkules am Scheideweg* (Panofsky 1930), his 1932 article based on a paper delivered to the Kant Society in Kiel the previous year presents a tripartite interpretive model (Panofsky 2012). After emigration to the United States in 1933 Panofsky published an English version of this paper as the introduction to *Studies in Iconology* of 1939; in this version, the model retains its tripartite structure, with similarly spirited categories, but the argument is more pragmatic and notably toned down with regard

levels are amalgamated to form one undividable process, a circle of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> The first level, that of *primary or natural subject matter*, or *phenomenal meaning*, incorporates everything that a viewer can identify in the lines and colours of the artwork based on his or her own experience. This is the level of pre-iconographic description.

On the second level, that of *secondary or conventional subject matter*, or *meaning dependent on content*, specific identification of these natural objects takes place. Panofsky's classic example for this step is that a dinner table with thirteen guests is likely to represent the Last Supper. This level, with the correct identification of the natural subject matter, the secondary or conventional meaning of which is unveiled, is that of iconographic analysis.

On the third level, that of *intrinsic meaning or content*, or *documentary meaning*, Panofsky hoped to capture within the work of art the principles that unveil the attitudes of 'a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion'.<sup>9</sup> The exploration and interpretation of these symbolic values is positioned in contrast to *iconography* and, consequently, labelled *iconology*. The activity that leads to iconology is re-creative, with the intuitive synthesis of a multitude of information, whereas iconography is achieved by analysis. In the 1955 iteration he explained the relationship between the two more fully:<sup>10</sup>

It is because of the severe restrictions which common usage, especially in this country, places upon the term iconography that I propose to revive the good old iconology wherever iconography is taken out of its isolation and integrated with whichever other method, historical, psychological or critical, we may attempt to use in solving the riddle of the sphinx. For as the suffix 'graphy' denotes something descriptive, so does the suffix 'logy' – derived from logos which means 'thought' or 'reason' – denote something interpretive.

Only in this latter version did he use the term *iconology* for this level, which previously he had labelled 'iconographical interpretation in the deeper sense'.<sup>11</sup>

Panofsky distributed specific requirements to each of the three levels, as correctives for the interpretive process. For the first level the interpreter

to its theoretical trajectory. Yet another English version, similar to that of 1939, was published in 1955 (Panofsky 1955). On the different versions and their origins: Holly 1984: 158–93; Davis 2011: 234; Elsner & Lorenz 2012: 495–506.

<sup>8</sup> Panofsky 1939: 16–7.

<sup>9</sup> Panofsky 1939: 7.

<sup>10</sup> Panofsky 1955: 32.

<sup>11</sup> See Schmidt 1993: 17–18.

needs to have an awareness of the history of styles, in order to be able to recognise different objects in their period-specific manifestations. For the second level, a thorough familiarity with literary predecessors, with themes, thoughts, and ideas of a specific period, is required. Here, the interpreter has to have an awareness of the history of types. For the third, the toolbox is even more varied: here, Panofsky relies on the synthetic intuition of the interpreter, and on 'a familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind, conditioned by personal psychology and *Weltanschauung*'.<sup>12</sup> To gain a corrective for this last step, the interpreter has to have an awareness of the history of symptoms or symbols, and thus an insight into how these tendencies can be expressed throughout world history.<sup>13</sup>

Very much in line with the approach of the whole Warburgiana, for Panofsky the formal aesthetics of an art object and the layers of meaning added to that object by its relation to a specific iconographic tradition and historical context are not captured by two distinct modes of perception, but come together to form one holistic experience. Historical baggage does not taint the aesthetics of an object but enhances and adds depth. To capture this wholly integrated aesthetics, Panofsky's model throughout its three stages favours an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating different methods and heuristic remits.

## 2) Iconology: premises, positions, and problems

'It is not true,' he [Panofsky] said, 'that the art historian first constitutes his object through a re-creative synthesis and then begins his archaeological research, as one first buys a ticket and then boards the train. Actually, the two processes do not occur successively, but rather proceed in an interwoven manner; not only does the re-creative synthesis serve as a basis for the archaeological research, but the latter in its turn serves as a basis for the process of re-creation. Both qualify and correct each other in a reciprocal relationship.' The work of the iconologist is completely different from that of the iconographer; the latter describes the connotations of the figure as an entomologist describes the characteristics of an insect; the former synthesizes, not analyzes, because he reconstructs the previous existence of the image and demonstrates the necessity of its rebirth in that present absolute which is the work of art.

Argan 1975: 300

<sup>12</sup> Panofsky 1939: 15. For the origin of the concept of *Weltanschauung*, see below, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> In his later writings, Panofsky ventured so far as to proclaim a 'disguised symbolism' in works of art, identifying a process by which the artists would deliberately weave doctrinal and other ideological messages into their images for the viewer, and subsequently the art historian, to decode; he exemplified this interpretation in his study of Netherlandish painting (Panofsky 1953).

The methodological sweep of iconology as originally devised by Panofsky is considerable, and it is therefore not surprising to find its positions, and post-Panofskyan repositioning, both wildly applauded and heavily contested down to the present day. A closer look at the method's founding father, Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968),<sup>14</sup> should ease our way into the hotly debated issues. A characteristic feature of his oeuvre is a penchant for combining close autopsy of an artwork, the traditional analytical technique of art history, with an interest in the wider cultural impact of art and, more broadly, the philosophical concepts to which it pertains. Employing astute logical argument, his analyses seek to bring out the assumed meaning(s), historical and philosophical, behind what is on display. Following his dissertation on Albrecht Dürer's theory of art,<sup>15</sup> Panofsky produced a series of articles in which he argued fiercely for a more methodologically aware discipline of art history, attacking the most prominent products of art-historical scholarship at the time: initially the work of the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945),<sup>16</sup> then, and vociferously, the studies of Alois Riegl (1858–1905).<sup>17</sup>

### Riegl and Panofsky: an overture to iconology.

In three seminal studies, first *Problems of Style*, then *Late Roman Art Industry* and *The Dutch Group Portrait*, the Austrian art historian Riegl sketched out his model of a new type of formalist art history (*Problems of Style*, originally published in 1893).<sup>18</sup> Whilst following ideas formulated by Gottfried Semper (1803–79) and Wölfflin on the evolution of ornament and the interconnectedness of visual phenomena within one period,<sup>19</sup> Riegl forged a new line of argument by turning the attention away from the artwork and onto the forces, artistic and attitudinal, that impact its creation. He summarised, and classified, these forces under the heading *Kunstwollen*, translated as *artistic volition* or *the will to art*.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On Panofsky and his work: Podro 1982: 178–208; Holly 1984; Hatt & Klonk 2006: 96–119; Davis 2011: 234–74.

<sup>15</sup> Panofsky 1915a.

<sup>16</sup> Panofsky 1915b.

<sup>17</sup> Panofsky 1981; Panofsky 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Riegl 1985; Riegl 1992; Riegl 1999.

<sup>19</sup> On Semper, see Podro 1982: 44–55. Wölfflin's *Sehformen* ('forms of seeing') had particular relevance for Riegl: Wölfflin 1932; Wölfflin 1964. For a critical discussion of Wölfflin's work, see Podro 1982: 98–116; Schwartz 2005: 1–36; Hatt & Klonk 2006: 71–80.

<sup>20</sup> For a critical appraisal of Riegl's approach, and particularly the concept of *Kunstwollen*, see Pächt 1963: 190–1; Alpers 1979: 139–48; Panofsky 1981; Sedlmayer 2001; Podro 1982: 71–118; Holly 1984: 69–96; Olin 1992: 148–53; Iversen 1993: 3–18, 149–66; Wood 2000: esp. 26–30;

With *Kunstwollen*, Riegl set into place a framework for the scrutiny of the artistic output of a period beyond its aesthetic substance. Its aim is to carve out the conceptual attitudes of a period as evident through its artworks, and to do so by dissecting the typological development of the artworks' individual features. Riegl argued with notably non-hierarchical thrust that any artistic output, and any artistic period, is driven by intentionality and purpose, regardless of that output's aesthetic achievement. He thereby opened the way for the study of artistic material hitherto neglected or pigeonholed as undeserving of art-historical study, such as decorative embellishments, alongside products of *high art*, the traditional domain of art history, including sculpture, painting, and architecture. And he directed the scholarly focus to periods previously regarded as merely troughs between peaks of artistic production.

Riegl was interested in the perceptual world as it finds itself organised in the artworks of any one period,<sup>21</sup> assuming that differing stylistic periods are characterised by differing *artistic vision*, by distinct ways of seeing the world. Hence he set out to map the internal causality that shapes the stylistic development of individual forms – for example, how the Egyptian motif of the lotus flower undergoes transformation in Greek architectural art to become the acanthus leaf.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, his reassessment of the Arch of Constantine, which forms the core of his study of late antique art, is fuelled by a comparison with Egyptian relief sculpture that captures its character as constituted by its tactile rather than optical nature.<sup>23</sup> Traditionally regarded as a monument documenting the beginning of the decline of Roman art during late antiquity, the arch in Riegl's analysis, which is complemented by the discussion of a vast array of other artistic material, provides the scaffolding for a commanding counter-narrative of artistic development in Italy from the fourth to the ninth centuries, with the arch presented not as an end, but as a beginning of art.<sup>24</sup>

Sedlmayer 2001; Crowther 2002: 22–35; Reichenberger 2003: 17–28; Schwartz 2005: 137–45; Elsner 2006; Gubser 2006: 153–61. The influence of Riegl's *Kunstwollen* reaches as far as the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (Bloch 2000: 18–20 and 94–6, turning to *Kunstwollen* as an example of how to capture social affectivity), Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981, criticising material aesthetics; further on Bakhtin, see below, p. 115), and not least Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 2002); see Kemp 1973; Kemp 1978.

<sup>21</sup> Hatt & Klonk 2006: 82.

<sup>22</sup> Riegl 1992; Hatt & Klonk 2006: 85.

<sup>23</sup> Riegl 1985. Cf. Riegl's discussion of two Mycenaean drinking vessels, the Vapheio cups: Riegl 2000. The binary terms used for discussion are mostly adopted from Wölfflin's fundamental terms for art history; see Wölfflin 1932.

<sup>24</sup> Brendel 1953: 21–7.



From the vantage point of *Kunstwollen*, artworks serve as historical documents. On first sight, Riegl's approach seems therefore closely in line with the method of iconology as described above. And indeed, in his 1925 essay on the relationship of art history and art theory, Panofsky appropriated this aspect of Riegl's concept, the formal and stylistic appearance of the artwork as a means to unlock historical knowledge, to argue for a concept he refers to as *Kulturwollen*, a 'will to culture'.<sup>25</sup> This assessment seems to sit somewhat uncomfortably with his earlier, and later, charges against Riegl's model, and those of the New Vienna School, which followed in Riegl's wake.<sup>26</sup> There, Panofsky attacked *Kunstwollen* for its psychologising nature and engrained concept of history, admonishing its tendency to act as a levelling tool in interpretation, with any discrepancies in the evidence trimmed to fit pre-determined historical analogy.

The essence of Panofsky's vision for iconology, and the reason for both his compliance with and objection to Riegl's approach, lies in the way in which the two approaches negotiate empiricism. Riegl understood *Kunstwollen* as a supra-individual dynamic force that determines the formal appearance of the artwork and can be captured through its erudite formal analysis, and therefore by empirical means, while Panofsky propagated a metempirical approach: for him, artworks – along with any other cultural artefact – pertain to discourses around fundamental (philosophical) problems, problems that are specific to their period and in need of elucidation.

Panofsky thereby unmasked Riegl's approach as simplistic and as playing into the hands of those who held that art history developed linearly<sup>27</sup> because it was founded on the unreflective assumption that artistic form could directly explain history.<sup>28</sup> Panofsky aimed to overcome this 'merely causal account of art'.<sup>29</sup> In its stead, he introduced a system of fundamental concepts, a set of *a priori* antithetical categories within which, he argued, the mind operates and with which it infuses experience with causality.<sup>30</sup> His interest was not in changes in mode of vision, à la Riegl, but in the symbolic function of artistic expression – a difference that was manifest in Panofsky's disregard of the viewer, whose presence was firmly integrated in Riegl's model. Panofsky's approach superseded Riegl's supra-individual concept of *Kunstwollen* and

<sup>25</sup> Panofsky 2008: 65–6. See Lorenz & Elsner 2008: 37.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Panofsky 1981; Panofsky 2012. The protagonists of the New Vienna School were Otto Pächt and Hans Sedlmayer. For Sedlmayer's approach, see Sedlmayer 2001; Schwartz 2005: 146–51. For the Vienna School now Rampley 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Podro 1982: 97, who discusses the Hegelian influences of Riegl's model.

<sup>28</sup> On Riegl's failure to explain art as a 'metempirical object': Holly 1984: 147–9; Panofsky 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Podro 1982: 178–9.

<sup>30</sup> Panofsky 2008: 47–56.



model of accessing history through the artwork, by locating the driving force behind artistic expression explicitly in the human mind, which was to be understood by an analytical synthesis of artwork and history.

### Panofsky between Kant and Warburg: the shaping of iconology.

Iconology's subscription to the metempirical, and to pictorial signification as its facilitator, differentiates it from formalism as propagated by Riegl, despite the approaches' shared interest in stylistic form. Panofsky's investment in conceptual theory grew out of an entirely different allegiance, to reasoning as expressed by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his 1781 work, *Critique of Pure Reason*.<sup>31</sup> In his fundamental concepts, Panofsky adopted from Kant the idea of an *a priori* system that organises the relationship between mind and world, as he strived to satisfy Kant's model of scientific judgement. The result was an analytical framework that is not empirical but exists above experience: it is structured around the duality of what is determined *a priori* and of sensual perception organised in relation to this.<sup>32</sup>

Panofsky was not the first in this period to adopt Kantian philosophy for cultural study. Through the 1920s the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), Panofsky's colleague at the University of Hamburg,<sup>33</sup> completed his seminal work on the philosophy of symbolic forms,<sup>34</sup> a study developed out of Kant's assumption, as expressed in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, that reason can produce knowledge of things but cannot create these things as objects. Cassirer argued that in compensation symbols act as navigational devices for humans: they organise the multifarious approaches devised by the mind in its attempt to relate to the world – effectively, what we perceive as our knowledge of the world – into a coherent system. And he examined the processes by which these symbolic forms are constructed within different fields of cultural activity: language, the production of scientific knowledge, myth, religion, and art.

With this wide sweep, Cassirer cultivated the Kantian judgement of reason into a fully-fledged critique of culture.<sup>35</sup> Panofsky harnessed both, the Kantian foundation and its cultural appropriation by Cassirer, to devise his

<sup>31</sup> Most recently on Kant's *First Critique*: Guyer 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Podro 1982: 181, 202; Ferretti 1989: 182–4; Neher 2004: 45–6.

<sup>33</sup> Cassirer had joined the university upon its foundation in 1919, Panofsky in 1921. See Podro 1982: 181.

<sup>34</sup> Cassirer 1955. Bayer 2001 provides a commentary on the philosophical consequences of Cassirer's work.

<sup>35</sup> Cassirer lay down here the foundations for his later work in the field of cultural anthropology: Cassirer 1944; Cassirer 2000. A concise assessment of his work can be found

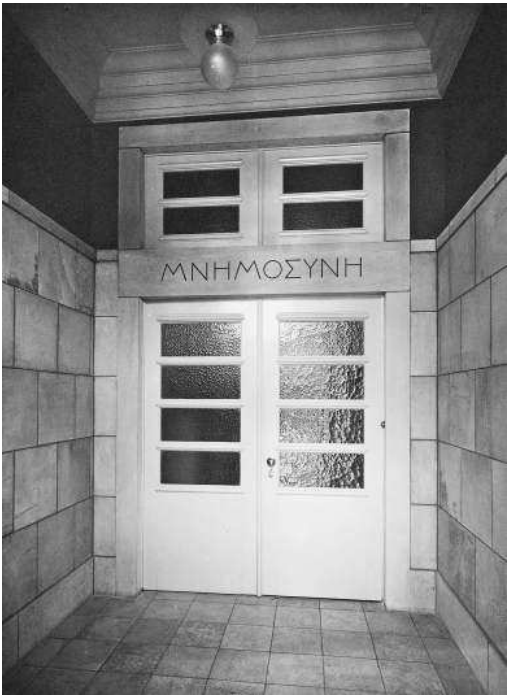


Fig. 1.2a Mnemosyne, the motto over the entrance to the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg (K.B.W.) in Hamburg (1920s).

own interpretational model.<sup>36</sup> He applied the idea of the symbolic forms and on that basis argued that the study of a visual representation with regard to its iconological emergence allows direct access to the mental dispositions that shaped it. He thus opened up a way for visual analysis to reach beyond the manifestation of the object and towards the capture of reality, a reality mediated by psychological dispositions as they show themselves in the visual.<sup>37</sup>

Further influence on Panofsky's iconology came from another circle of scholars, again based in Hamburg: those related to the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg, including its patron, Aby Warburg (1866–1929).<sup>38</sup> Warburg's interest in the visual aspects of culture

in Holly 1984: 114–30; for a more detailed discussion: Skidelsky 2008: esp. 100–27 on the symbolic forms.  
<sup>36</sup> On Panofsky's relationship with Cassirer, see Holly 1984: 114–57; Ferretti 1989: 97–8, 158–9; Crowther 2002: 36–68.  
<sup>37</sup> Moxey 1993: 27.  
<sup>38</sup> Founded in 1901 and funded by his family's bank business, the library was established as an important resource for culture-historical study and included a large collection of pictures. On the library: von Stockhausen 1992; Raulff 1997; Schäfer 2003.