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978-1-107-02263-8 - Iconographic Method in New World Prehistory

Vernon James Knight

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

Preliminaries: An Iconography of Prehistoric Images

This book concerns principles and methods used in the practice of iconography in *prehistoric* contexts. It therefore addresses a limited domain within a broader field. In being confined to prehistoric, nonliterate societies, it is a branch of iconography whose special characteristic is that any form of contemporaneous written record is completely denied to it. In it, there is no access at all to the kinds of texts, either generated internally by the people who made the images or externally by foreign observers, that other forms of iconography take for granted. The practice of a prehistoric iconography in a nonliterate setting, then, differs significantly from that of other kinds. It is the distinctive set of concepts, procedures, and problems posed by this branch of iconography that we aim to address here in detail.

In a New World context, such a focus draws us to the visual imagery of such peoples as the Mississippians of the North American Southeast, the Mimbres of the North American Southwest, the Taíno of the Greater Antilles, the Olmec, Teotihuacán, Izapa, and Preclassic Maya of ancient Mexico, the Coclé of Panama, the Marajoara of the Amazon basin, the Chavín and Moche of Peru, and many others. Each of these extinct peoples left a marvelous record of meaningful images that iconographers have been busily interpreting for decades without contemporaneous texts to guide their interpretation. These ancient peoples have something else in common: they were organized as what most archaeologists would call “complex societies,” meaning simply that their people were socially differentiated to some degree and their communities politically organized. In this book we will confine ourselves to images produced by such complex societies. Just as the concepts appropriate to the archaeological study of food production, social interaction, trade, warfare, and politics in complex societies differ from those used to study simpler hunters, foragers, and fishers, so too the principles and methods appropriate to their iconographic study differ

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(Pasztor 2005). One obvious distinction is that in complex societies, much of the expressive culture that survives in materialized form is functionally related to the existence of a political economy (Brown 2007). That is, much durable imagery in these societies was devoted to broadcasting the political and economic interests of elites.

The examples used herein are drawn primarily from New World archaeological settings, for little reason other than because that is the hemisphere with which I am most familiar. But the concepts to be discussed are applicable to a broad range of prehistoric complex societies worldwide that were either nonliterate or had writing systems that are still undeciphered. Old World examples are Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe, the early Minoans of the Mediterranean basin, the Scythian peoples of south Asia, Harappan civilization of the Indian Subcontinent, Jomon period Japan, and Easter Island in Polynesia. All are rich fields for iconographic research.¹

Despite recent statements among archaeologists that criticize or deconstruct the distinction between historic and prehistoric archaeologies (see, e.g., Funari, Hall, and Jones 1999), the difference between the iconography of a nonliterate complex society and one that is text-aided is decisive. There can be no better illustration of this than what has happened over the course of the past several decades in the field of Maya iconography. The ancient Maya had a sophisticated hieroglyphic writing system that was used extensively in conjunction with representational images on stelae, palace facades and lintels, altars, cylindrical vessels, folding-screen books, and many other genres. But only the most recent generation of Maya epigraphers has had much real success in reading these hieroglyphs. Translations by these epigraphers have been nothing short of revolutionary in our understanding of Maya images (Houston, Chinchilla Mazariegos, and Stuart 2001:14; Schele and Miller 1986). What we now know of Classic Maya iconography is a world apart from the interpretations of such distinguished Maya scholars as George Kubler and J. Eric S. Thompson of an earlier generation, who were laboring without translated texts. Indeed, the introduction of writing systems brings into existence entirely new kinds of visual communication, such as what Janet Berlo (1983) calls “conjoined texts,” compositions that combine figural depictions with written commentary in which the burden of communication is shared between image and text. There are still other novel forms of visual communication in which linguistic information is thoroughly embedded in figural images (Berlo 1983; Kubler 1969:6–7;

¹ Despite the terminology still found among art collectors and in some museum settings, this is by no means “primitive art.” For a witty and charming rebuke of that Western concept, see Sally Price’s (1989) *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*.

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Martin 2006:91; Miller 1975:26; Reents-Budet 1989:195–196). As images change character in the presence of writing, there can be no doubt that the “rules of the game” in the absence of texts are qualitatively distinct (Martin 2006:58; Pasztory 2005:78–79; Trigger 1996:517, 527).

The Domain of Iconography

In iconographic research on archaeological materials, the division of labor between those whose academic training lies in the field of art history and those trained in the anthropological tradition has not been kind to students who would wander into this terrain for the first time. The literature is unusually scattered. There is not only a lack of agreement as to procedures but also a lack of any real consensus on the meanings of even a basic vocabulary: “themes,” “motifs,” “symbols,” and so forth. That being the case, in this work we will pay very close attention to the precise definition of concepts, drawing from both the art-historical and anthropological traditions, but doing so in a way that is both internally consistent (i.e., avoiding self-contradiction) and theoretically coherent. And we might as well start with the term *iconography* itself.

Iconography as an academic discipline is concerned with the relation between visual imagery and its meaningful referents.² We see immediately that the field is not about a single thing but rather is about defining a *relationship* between two different domains (Graham 1998:194). Both of these domains can be, and routinely are, studied separately. Representational imagery, for its part, can be studied as forms that undergo change through time completely aside from attention to its meaningful subject matter (Kubler 1962). Likewise, the potential referents, which might be legends, myths, texts, events, real-world people, real-world things, or abstract concepts, can be studied apart from any images depicting them, by disciplines such as folklore or history.³

² In the literature, there is a tendency to use the terms *iconography* and the adjectival form *iconographic* in a different way, to refer to phenomenal images or sets of them. For example, one may encounter such a usage as “the iconography at Teotihuacán” (e.g., Earle 1990:74, 80–81), or a reference to the “iconographic art” at that site, by which is simply meant the set of representational imagery there. Using these terms as synonyms for “representational imagery” may find some support in an obsolete seventeenth-century definition found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “a pictorial representation, delineation” (*OED Online*, 2nd ed., 1989), but in a modern context such a usage is merely confusing and is best avoided. One of our primary aims is to offer a set of useful terms avoiding, wherever possible, alternative meanings.

³ In this book we consistently use the word *depict* in the following sense. Image X depicts Y if image X was or could be seen as Y according to the iconographic cultural model relevant

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One will note that the word *art* does not appear in our definition of iconography. That is deliberate. In this book we will not usually be shy about defining things, but what is and is not art is a hoary debate and one to which we are unlikely to add much clarification. For us to engage in it here would take us down an uncertain path where we need not go. Suffice it to say that for many scholars, things that qualify as art do so partly because they evoke a subjective aesthetic sensibility, whether that be a mastery of line, of surface and texture, of color, of symmetry, or something else. Certainly the definitions of art provided by Erwin Panofsky (1955:11–12) and Franz Boas (1928:10), early masters of art history and anthropology, respectively, both insist on this aesthetic dimension in art.⁴ In that sense, not all visual representations qualify as art (Gombrich 1977:6; Layton 1991:6–7). But to illustrate the point of our avoiding this word in a definition of iconography (and thus in the book generally), let us refer to a specific example, an archaeological case. Figure 1 depicts a petroglyphic tableau from near Millsboro, Pennsylvania (Mallery 1893:fig. 76). The tableau shows several of the characteristics of shamanic imagery; a palimpsest of crude drawings placed one on top of the other apparently at different times, with little or no regard for the finished image (Pasztory 1982). Whatever else one may wish to say about it, there is arguably little trace of an aesthetic concern in the drafting of the figures. They are rudimentary in the extreme. Thus whether these petroglyphs are, or are not, art is debatable, but that one can speak of their *iconography* – the relation of their imagery to their ritual referents – is clearly not.⁵

Principle #1. Because not all representational imagery is art, the domain of iconography is broader than “art.”

to the image. Göran Hermerén (1969) has spelled out in great detail how art historians traditionally have distinguished among *depict*, *portray*, *represent*, *illustrate*, *symbolize*, and *exemplify*. These terms are far from interchangeable, and we will try to be precise.

⁴ See, however, Gell (1998) for a vigorously anti-aesthetic definition of art.

⁵ Franz Boas, for his part, used a comparable ethnographic example, pictographic representations of incidents in the life histories of Plains Indians of North America, to argue that this kind of representation should not be considered art: “The figures are in no way ornamental and bear no relation to the object on which they are depicted. They are made for the purpose of representation only. They are not art in the rigid sense of the term. Judging from the character of the figures and their use we may safely say that the artistic interest is entirely absent” (Boas 1928:67–68). Layton (1991:6–7) illustrates a comparable example of crude figurines used in East Africa entirely for didactic purposes. More recently, Esther Pasztory (2005:13) has remarked on how the Western category of “art” has become increasingly unsatisfactory for talking about material images and their referents.

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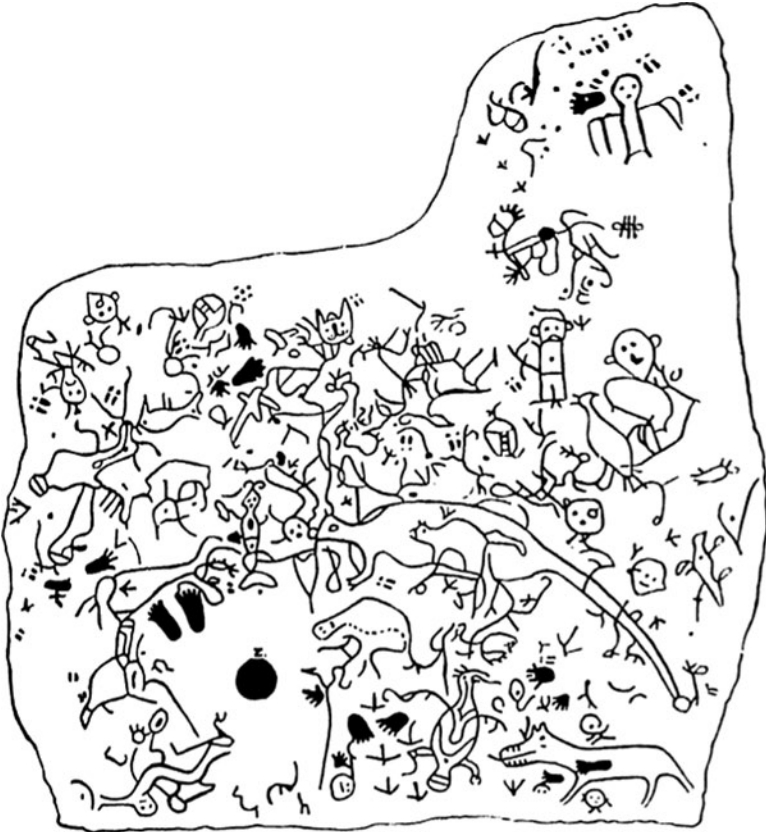


FIGURE 1. Petroglyph tableau near Millsboro, Pennsylvania (Mallery 1893:fig. 76, p. 111).

It goes without saying that the kind of imagery referred to in our definition is representational imagery only – that which stands in relation to some external referent.⁶ Thus we exclude by fiat an enormous realm of ornamental, decorative, and purely formal designs, although distinguishing what is representational from what is merely ornamental from our distant point of view is by no means straightforward. We will come back to that issue in due course.

Our definition implies that the academic business of iconography is that of making a connection between visual images and their associated subject

⁶ Some may prefer substituting the term “figural art” for Boas’s “representational,” especially where the subject is animate. For a philosopher, to say that an image “represents” an object or an event is not a straightforward claim (Ziff 1966:75–84).

matter, and doing so correctly. Ultimately, it is a matter of *identification* (Panofsky 1939:6). Moreover, especially in our particular case, this identification is necessarily done at a distance in space and time, from an external, analytical point of view. We begin the exploration of these connections much in the role of the anthropologist, from the outside looking in (Martin 2006:57). As H. G. Kippenberg (1987:7) puts it, iconography is “a description of how *other cultures* read their images” (emphasis added). Moreover, while we are attending to our definition of iconography, we should also note that it says nothing about context or function. For the moment, we must not allow that fact to mislead us. Most iconographers understand that a consideration of context and function is absolutely essential to iconographic method; we will have occasion to elaborate on that question later on. The point here, instead, is simply to alert ourselves that as soon as the gaze of the analyst shifts to one of determining the function or use of images rather than the referents of those same images, the investigator has stepped across an analytical line and is now engaging in something other than iconography strictly speaking (Lesure 2002).

Our sphere of activity is, of course, considerably narrowed by limiting it to the products of prehistoric, nonliterate complex societies. Iconographic research in this arena involves pondering the intended subject matter of numerous familiar categories of material culture. Among the classes of two-dimensional representations we deal with are painted murals, stone tablets, engravings on bone and ivory, basketry, mosaics, and painted and incised designs on pottery vessels. Three-dimensional forms range from monumental stone sculptures to diminutive figurines and adornos of fired clay. There are, of course, many more archaeologically preserved genres than these few, most of them readily acknowledged as “art” by all concerned.

Much of this material, too, is recognizably of a religious character, either depicting things, personages, and events from the supernatural realm or occurring on objects plainly meant for ritual use. But acknowledging this connection reveals a common trap. Because of the religious character of much of the material, there is a tendency to equate the iconography of prehistoric images with the iconography of ancient religion. This is a mistake. In the first place, there is no warrant to assume that all prehistoric imagery susceptible to iconography is of religious character, as images can belong to secular domains (Langley 1986:11; Pasztory 2005:56). But the more significant, and the more subtle, issue is this. Prehistoric representations, especially in complex societies, were generated by a variety of distinct kinds of institutions. Only *some* kinds of institutions generate representational images of a permanent character, so we need to devote considerable thought

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to *which* kinds of institutions tend to do so (Borhegyi 1956; Pasztory 1982:9). Given a corpus of prehistoric visual imagery, one of the central problems facing the analyst is to identify the general class of institution that produced it. Were they guilds, priesthoods, sodalities, social houses, shamanic cults, political offices, ordinary households, or none of these? Whatever the case, in traditional societies we are obliged to consider that the production and use of such imagery occurs in the context of what Marcel Mauss (1967) termed “total social facts.” That is, these events are never merely religious but have, in the words of Lévi-Strauss (1969:52), “a significance that is at once social and religious, magic and economic, utilitarian and sentimental, jural and moral.” We might add that there is often a political dimension to these “total” social realities (Helms 1993:69–77).⁷ Now, the domain “religion” may be carved off analytically from these social realities. That is perfectly justifiable and at times it may suit our purposes to do so. However, it has been anthropology’s burden to show that the social, the utilitarian, the religious, and the political are all thoroughly intermeshed in events that produce and manipulate visual imagery in traditional societies. To use a vocabulary that implies that religion in these societies constitutes a discrete social institution is both perilous and ethnocentric.

Principle #2. Only some kinds of social institutions generate representational imagery of a permanent character. Not all such institutions are primarily religious.

Representational imagery in the absence of writing is often thought of as a kind of visual communication system. It cannot be *only* that, for there are cases in which artisans deliberately hide portions of their work from the view of any potential beholders (e.g., Boas 1928:27–28) and other cases, as in shamanic art, where any communicative intent of the final product is subordinated to the act of creation (Pasztory 1982). Moreover, especially in religious philosophies, there are entire visual traditions that consider imagery as esoteric, metaphoric, the language of the divine, a mystery only partly to be understood by the devout (Gombrich 1972:13–15). In some cases, visual imagery may be *deliberately* obscure as to its referent (Knight 1989). As Gombrich (1972:2) expresses it, iconographic models occupy a

⁷ Robert Layton (1991:92–93) argues that art and ritual are complementary modes of expressive culture that lie at the core of social and political interaction, having many of the same functions.

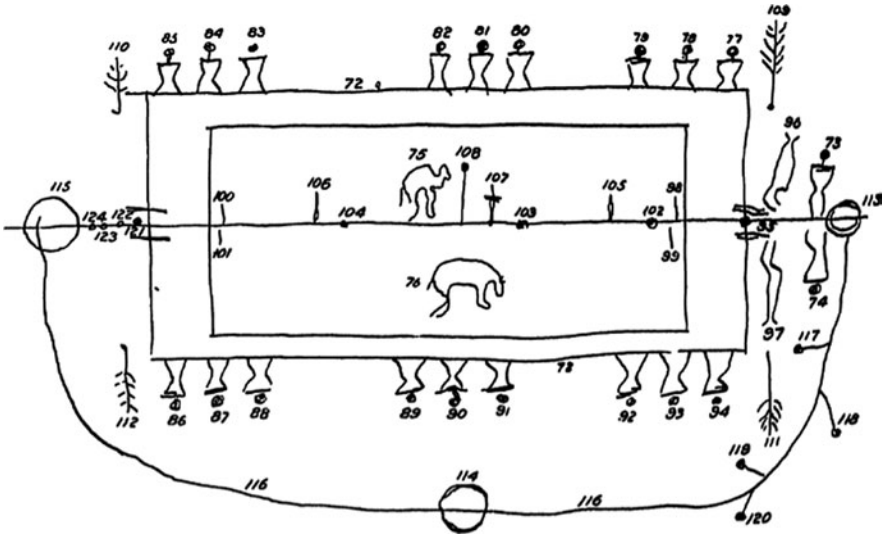


FIGURE 2. Birch-bark scroll drawing of the Ojibwa Midéwiwin medicine society, used as a mnemonic device for ritual performance (Hoffman 2005:pl. 4, facing p. 171).

peculiar space somewhere between language, which aims to express a definite meaning, and the visual forms given by nature, to which meaning can only be ascribed by the beholder.

Nonetheless, one can readily admit that much representational imagery does have a communicative purpose, much as writing systems do. But there is an important third category, between pure representational imagery and language-based writing, that we must be careful to distinguish from both. These are systems of formal notation that have been called *semasiographic* (Greek *semasi[a]* “meaning” + *-o* + *graphos* “writing”). Semasiographic systems include such things as Mixtec and Aztec “picture writing” (Boone 1994a, 1994b), Plains Indian pictographic records (Blish 1967; Mallery 1893), and Ojibwa bark scrolls used as mnemonic devices in medicine lodge ritual (Hoffman 2005) (Figure 2). Although these systems possess both orthographic and syntactic conventions, they are not tied to spoken language. In this aspect, semasiographic systems contrast with what many would call “full writing,” or *glottographic* systems, which do convey, if only imperfectly, the sound values of specific spoken languages and reflect the language’s syntax and grammar (Martin 2006:63–64). Because glottographic systems are inextricably linked to a spoken language, an understanding of that language is required to decode the text. Maya hieroglyphic writing is glottographic in this manner, in

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contrast to the highland Mexican notational systems that could be understood across linguistic boundaries.⁸

Figure 3, adapted from Simon Martin's (2006) exposition of the topic, conveys the relationship between iconographic, semasiographic, and glottographic systems of visual communication. The overlap shown between the circles suggests not that their boundaries are conceptually indistinct but instead that there are known systems that include some elements of the adjacent type. Thus Teotihuacán mural painting (Langley 1986, 1991; Pasztor 2005:134) and Moche fineline painting on pottery (Martin 2006:68–75) are primarily iconographic but contain some clear semasiographic conventions as well. Similarly, Mixtec codices are primarily semasiographic but contain some phonetic information as well (Boone 1994b:55; Monaghan 1994:87). In the diagram, no evolution or ranking of systems is implied; they are simply *different* in the way they communicate.⁹ Toward the iconographic pole, signs tend to be more iconic (i.e., more veristic relative to the referent) and less discrete. Toward the glottographic pole, signs tend to be both more arbitrary relative to the referent and more discrete.

That these distinct realms of visual communication convey information very differently is central not only to defining the contours of our topic but also to determining how we talk about iconography. Iconographers are prone to think of their realm of visual communication as language-like when in fact it is not (Hermerén 1969:59; Layton 1991:148–149; Martin 2006:60–61).¹⁰ Thus there is a perilous tendency for iconographers to use linguistic phrasing: they would “decode” their images as “texts,” learn to

⁸ There is an active debate on whether to expand the definition of “writing” so as to include semasiographic systems (Boone 2009) or instead to continue to confine that term to glottographic systems linked directly to languages. The urge to expand the domain of “writing” comes from the historically implicit tendency to denigrate semasiographic systems as “proto-writing” or in some sense failed writing systems, whereas they are more properly viewed in neutral terms as simply specialized, in the manner of musical notation. Either way, the distinction between semasiographic and glottographic systems is both valid and important.

⁹ The fact that semasiographic systems need not be viewed as developmentally intermediate between iconographic and glottographic systems is nowhere better illustrated than in Mesoamerica. There, semasiographic pictography flourished in the Postclassic period as a means of international communication, having mostly supplanted glottographic writing in importance by the time of European contact (Pohl 2003:26). This sequence shows that an evolution of sign communication completely contrary to that seen in the ancient Mediterranean and Europe is possible.

¹⁰ In addressing Mesoamerican visual communication, Elizabeth Boone (2009:58–59) adopts a point of view virtually the opposite of that espoused here. She advocates treating Mesoamerican iconographic, semasiographic, and glottographic systems as part of a historically unique, unified whole, to be understood using linguistic tools.

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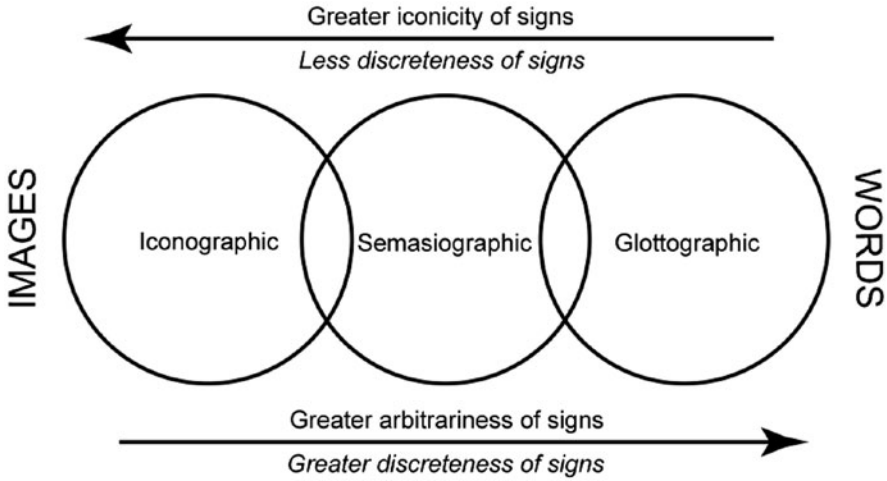


FIGURE 3. The relationship between iconographic, semasiographic, and glottographic systems of visual communication (adapted from Martin 2006:63).

“read” them, “decipher” them, learn their “grammar,” become “visually literate,” produce a “glossary” of them, and so forth. These are metaphors at best (cf. Conkey 1990:10–11). The problem is not so much that visual signs are “multivocal,” it is rather that they are not vocal at all (Gell 1998:6). In general, linguistic metaphors as applied to iconographic topics are *always* misleading.

Principle #3. Linguistic terminology as applied to nonlinguistic visual expression is misleading at best.

Is an Iconography of Prehistoric Objects Possible?

We come now to a central question to which we must find a convincing way to answer affirmatively, else we have no book! Like most modern conceptions of iconography in the fields of both art history and anthropology, our own definition is ultimately descended from that of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968). Although recognizably modern concepts of iconographic research can be traced to the works of Renaissance scholar Aby Warburg (1866–1929) (Forster 1999), it is Panofsky’s systematization of the subject in his *Studies in Iconology* (1939) that underlies most modern scholarship. Therein, it is stated in the very first sentence that “iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works