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

Vernon James Knight

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ICONOGRAPHIC METHOD IN NEW WORLD PREHISTORY

This book provides an overview of iconographic methods and their application to archaeological analysis. It offers a truly interdisciplinary approach that draws equally from art history and anthropology. Vernon James Knight, Jr., begins with a historiographical overview, addressing the methodologies and theories that underpin both archaeology and art history. He then demonstrates how iconographic methods can be integrated with the scientific methods that are at the core of much archaeological inquiry. Focusing on artifacts from the pre-Columbian civilizations of the New World, Knight shows how the use of iconographic analysis yields new insights into these objects and civilizations.

Vernon James Knight, Jr., is Professor of Anthropology and College of Arts and Sciences Leadership Board Fellow at the University of Alabama. He is a recipient of research grants from the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, among others. He is the author of numerous books and articles, and his book *Mound Excavations at Moundville: Architecture, Elites, and Social Order* was the winner of the 2011 Society for American Archaeology scholarly book prize.

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VERNON JAMES KNIGHT, JR.

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Preface

Perhaps more so than other works, one that professes to draw from divergent disciplines – in this case art history and anthropological archaeology – recommends more than the usual measure of disclosure from its author. So let us begin with the fact that this volume has its origins in the classroom. Since 1993 I have taught a graduate seminar on the topic, from which comes the basic set of notes on principles of method, concepts, and associated concrete examples developed in these pages. From the beginning, the readings assigned for discussion in this seminar have been deliberately balanced between those written by art historians on the one hand and those written by anthropologists on the other. They have not been pitted against one another. On the contrary, my rationale in offering the course has been that each has its distinctive insight; that humanities and social science perspectives offer usefully complementary visions. Rather than dwelling inordinately on the disciplinary origins of ideas, the seminar's overriding question has been this: Is it possible to extract from these divergent authorities a set of methodological principles and definitions that lead to results that are both persuasive and logically coherent? In this book, given its origins in mining the works of authorities in search of gems, the reader therefore will not find much that is genuinely new. I am not the author of any new system for iconographic analysis. Yet I perceive a pressing need for a synthesis of this material – one going beyond a historical review to fill the wider need for a body of middle-range concepts useful to anyone who might tackle such material as a novice.

The iconography of ancient images is a peculiar area of scholarship, and not one with a stellar reputation. Its literature is relatively disorganized. Its important concepts are published in scattered places.¹ At the moment,

¹ The scattered nature of the key literature results, inevitably, in a certain amount of “reinventing the wheel.”

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the field has no primary journal.² “Poorly done,” Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus (1998:37) have written, “it results in some of the worst archaeology on record.” In a particularly stinging passage, these archaeologists further note that “no approach has greater potential for dilettantism, flights of fancy, charlatanism, and intellectual laziness” (1998:46). On the basis of what has found its way into print, it is hard to disagree with this harsh assessment, as much published work is long on assertions and short on proof. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the best published work in this genre is rigorously done and reasonably persuasive. What is heartening, given the genesis of this book in the classroom, is that ordinary graduate students can easily tell the difference without any special coaching. Students know clarity and real analysis when they see it, and no amount of apparent erudition or breadth of reading can hide the lack of it.

The intellectual history of this domain is characterized by a divide between art-historical and anthropological approaches. This divide, while fundamental, has never been absolute. Aby Warburg, who is in many ways the father of modern iconographic method in art history (Forster 1999), also did fieldwork among the Navajo that was essentially ethnographic, in which course he came into contact with such founding figures in American anthropology as Jesse W. Fewkes, F. W. Hodge, James Mooney, Frank Hamilton Cushing, and Franz Boas (Steinberg 1995). For his part, Alfred Kroeber, in compiling *Anthropology Today* as his “encyclopedic inventory” of mid-twentieth-century anthropological method and theory, invited art historian Meyer Schapiro (1953) to author the entry on “style.” However, the contrasts of emphasis between the two approaches are unmistakable. Iconography in the art-historical mode, from Warburg through Erwin Panofsky and a host of subsequent writers, viewed individual works as sources of information to be unpacked by exegetical procedures. Working in a humanistic tradition and inspired by semiology and the psychology of perception, iconographers of the twentieth century appealed to methods they developed to decipher, as thoroughly as possible, the pictorial content of works of art, generally considered one at a time. Works of art constituted problems to be solved (Bann 1996:87). In contrast, for the twentieth-century anthropologist, the “meaning” of works of art was something best elucidated by attending to the background conditions under which such works

² The journal *Visible Religion*, an annual edited by Hans Kippenberg and others and published by the Institute of Religious Iconography, University of Groningen, seemed to have good potential as a venue for contributions to ancient iconography. Unfortunately, it had only a short run, from 1982 to 1990.

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were produced. Meaning could be understood by situating groups of cognate forms in their broad social and cultural contexts.

The divide has been much more than a struggle over turf. The distinction has been fundamentally philosophical, one between humanists and social scientists. The recent history of the field of study of pre-Columbian art is illuminating in this regard. Almost from the beginning, art historians who worked with pre-Columbian materials defined themselves in diametric opposition to the goals of science-oriented processual archaeology. Where processual archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s, with its strongly materialist foundations, seemed to abandon any interest in pre-Columbian “high art” other than as a symptom of sociopolitical relations, art historians found a niche. In describing the style, aesthetics, and iconography of pre-Columbian art, art history seized for itself topics that anthropological archaeology had seemingly abandoned. But as Cecilia Klein, herself an art historian, described the situation as of the early 1980s, pre-Columbian art history remained a narrow field with an identity crisis. Having walled itself off from the interests of mainstream archaeology, it risked being marginalized as atheoretical and irrelevant. At that juncture she recommended a healing of the divide and a merging of concerns (Klein 1982).

Interest in looking for common cause between these two traditions has been building by increments over time. To choose among many illustrations of this trend, art historian Esther Pasztor, in her book *Thinking with Things* (2005), writes much as a social scientist might. In framing the evolution of imagery as an aspect of social evolution, very much in an anthropological vein, she recommends that images be viewed as documents encoding social structure more than aesthetics (Pasztor 2005:117–118). In turn, since the 1970s a large segment of the archaeological community has diverged from strictly materialist approaches in favor of attention to cognitive phenomena and meanings. In their work with the iconography of ancient images, archaeologists have borrowed, explicitly and often, from concepts developed by art historians (e.g., Brown 2007:61–63; Graham 1998:203; Phillips and Brown 1975–1982, 1:103–106; Quilter 1996). Further, collaborations between art historians and anthropologists have yielded pathbreaking results (e.g., Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1993; Schele and Freidel 1990). Nonetheless, the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological gap between these two traditional approaches, though often breached, remains far from closed. It is a gap fostered by an old academic segmentation, grounded in Western European categories, that insists on hard boundaries between fields and fixed styles of research to which

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scholars are advised to adhere if they wish to get published or credentialed.³ Would-be iconographers of ancient imagery must come to terms with that gap in one way or another.

There is yet another and evidently growing divide between Americanist and European/Orientalist approaches to ancient iconography. Perhaps there is no better illustration of this divide than Richard Bradley's recent book *Image and Audience: Rethinking Prehistoric Art* (2009), which I take to be typical of current Europeanist work. In it we find a bibliography of authorities that is almost mutually exclusive from the one that is central to this book; there is no mention whatever, for example, of Boas or Holmes on the subject of art, nor of Panofsky, Kubler, Hermerén, Kippenberg, or Pasztory. The purpose of Bradley's book is to integrate studies of prehistoric art with modern archaeological theory and practice. Its focus is on the intrinsic properties of images and their settings and on what these might tell us about ancient artists, their audiences, and their motivations. There is almost nothing ethnographic about it, and little discernible regard for the verification of the "readings" being offered. According to the author, "it is rarely possible to infer the meanings of ancient images without the help of written evidence, but it may be possible to investigate the relationships between the designs that were created and displayed and the audiences who encountered them" (Bradley 2009:vii). In being mostly unconcerned with the referents of ancient images, this is, of course, not iconography strictly speaking. The work suggests an extraordinary divergence of intellectual traditions, leading lights, and modes of thought in relation to prehistoric art that I cannot hope to bridge.

This leads to my second authorial disclosure, which is that my primary training is in Americanist, anthropological archaeology rather than in art history. Although I have tried to maintain a balance of source materials, if there is a bias to be discerned in the present work it is no doubt in favor of Americanist social science approaches. This potential bias, however, is only partly a matter of training. In many ways, we are here addressing a field of study that is still in search of academic respectability. In such an environment, the fact that I think a book of this nature, focusing as it does upon consensus of method, is at all possible reveals a distinctive attitude about the business of "authority." This attitude is that there is a legitimate *scientific*, or at least science-like, mode of doing prehistoric iconography, one that appeals to common procedures of data gathering, methodological consistency, and verification by well-formed argument. Some will no

³ I am grateful to John Pohl for his observations on this point.

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doubt argue that this attitude is misplaced, that any emphasis on ultimate verification is illusory and out of step with postmodern notions. They might well believe that argument by weight of erudition or other modes of authority is more appropriate. Further, some may be put off by such a pedestrian approach to method, when it is theory that is so obviously at stake. But a choice has to be made (see Boyer 2003; Bruner 1986:11–43), and mine sinks or swims on how well (or poorly) the methods espoused herein enhance discipline-wide confidence in iconographic conclusions.

In my view, what is needed, at this point, is a methodological summary of the domain of prehistoric iconography that ideally meets the following criteria: first, that it incorporates the most fruitful concepts that come down to us from both traditions of scholarship – the art historical and the anthropological; second, that it places emphasis on unambiguous definitions of these concepts; third, that it is theoretically sound, both in being non-self-contradictory and in being true to a brand of modern culture theory agreeable to the topic; and, finally, that it reflects in its bibliography the best of modern scholarship within the domain. To the degree that this work can measure up to these criteria, the result should be a useful foundation for students who are just beginning to delve into these matters. They are the intended audience.

What is called for, in my opinion, is a renewed focus on systematic method in this field. I place emphasis not on the sources of ideas in one tradition or another but instead, pragmatically, on what works. I will not attempt to give a history of ancient iconography, nor have I found the need to wander very far into the terrain of formal semiology.⁴ Instead, I will try, primarily, to establish two things: first, a consensus vocabulary, and second, a set of core principles, drawn from both art-historical and anthropological approaches, that will constitute, if you will, a body of middle-range theory allowing the kind of structured analysis backed by a richer descriptive language that I believe is critical to our success. I will stress the methodological importance of keeping the domains of style, meaningful form, and ethnographic correlation analytically separate and will cite examples in which doing so was the key to success. In the concluding chapter, I will propose a logic for integrating these into a larger research framework. Perhaps above all, I hope to show that iconographic interpretation of prehistoric images does not necessarily take us into unknowable domains of belief, religion, and worldview, as some seem to think.

⁴ A minor exception to our avoidance of semiological terminology lies in our discussion of “substitution sets” in iconographic research, in Chapter 4. For an explicitly semiological approach, see Martin (2006) and references therein.

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In the preparation of this work I am indebted, in the first place, to my graduate students over many years whose insightful debates have helped me considerably to form and refine my own opinions.

The book took its shape during a sabbatical leave granted by the University of Alabama during 2010. During that time I was the beneficiary of a stipend from the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections in Washington, D.C., which afforded me access to its impressive resources and an environment wonderfully free from distraction. I am grateful to Joanne Pillsbury, Director of Pre-Columbian Studies at Dumbarton Oaks, to her staff, including Emily Gulick and Bridget Gazzo, and to the Fellows in residence at that time for their many kindnesses and helpful suggestions.

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