

The Interpretation of Symbols

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 14, No. 1 & 2 (Winter-Spring, 1980).

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The scholar of symbols is often accused of “reading meanings” into the verbal or visual emblems of which he proposes an exegesis. On the other hand, the aesthete and art historian, himself preoccupied with stylistic peculiarities rather than with iconographic necessities, generally avoids the problem altogether; in some cases perhaps, because an iconographic analysis would exceed his capacities. We conceive, however, that the most significant element in a given work of art is precisely that aspect of it which may, and often does, persist unchanged throughout millennia and in widely separated areas; and the least significant, those accidental variations of style by which we are enabled to date a given work or even in some cases to attribute it to an individual artist. No explanation of a work of art can be called complete which does not account for its composition or constitution, which we may call its “constant” as distinguished from its “variable.” In other words, no “art history” can be considered complete which merely regards the decorative usage and values as a motif, and ignores the *raison d’être* of its component parts, and the logic of their relationship in the composition. It is begging the question to attribute the precise and minute particulars of a traditional iconography merely to the operation of an “aesthetic instinct”; we have still to explain why the formal cause has been imagined as it was, and for this we cannot supply the answer until we have understood the final cause in response to which the formal image arose in a given mentality.

Naturally, we are not discussing the reading of subjective or “fancied” meanings into iconographic formulae, but only a reading of the meaning of such formulae. It is not in doubt that those who made use of the symbols (as distinguished from ourselves who merely look at them, and generally speaking consider only their aesthetic surfaces) as means of communication expected from their audience something more than an appreciation of rhetorical ornaments, and something more than a recognition of meanings literally expressed. As regards the ornaments, we may say with Clement, who points out that the style of Scripture is parabolic, and has been so from antiquity, that “prophecy does not employ figurative forms in the expressions for the sake of beauty of diction” (*Misc.* VI. 15)¹; and point out that the iconolater’s attitude is to regard the

¹ Cf. *The Hasidic Anthology* (New York, London, Scribner, 1934) p. 509: “let us now hear you talk of your doctrine; you speak so beautifully.” “May I be struck dumb ere I speak beautifully.” As Plato demanded, “*About what* is the sophist so eloquent?” a question that might be put to many modern artists.

colors and the art, not as worthy of honor for their own sake, but as pointers to the archetype which is the final cause of the work (Hermeneia of Athos, 445). On the other hand, it is the iconoclast who assumes that the symbol is literally worshipped as such; as it really is worshipped by the aesthete, who goes so far as to say that the whole significance and value of the symbol are contained in its aesthetic surfaces, and completely ignores the “picture that is not in the colors” (*Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, II.117). As regards the “more than literal meanings” we need only point out that it has been universally assumed that “Many meanings underlie the same Holy Writ”; the distinction of literal from ultimate meanings, or of signs from symbols, presupposing that “whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* III, App. 1.2.5 ad 3 and 1.10.10c).² We find in fact that those who themselves speak “parabolically,” for which manner of speaking there are more adequate reasons than can be dealt with on the present occasion, invariably take it for granted that there will be some who are and others who are not qualified to understand what has been said: for example, Matt. 13:13-15: “I speak to them in parables; because they seeing, see not; and hearing, they hear not, neither do they understand... For this people’s ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed lest at any time they should see” etc. (cf Mark 8:15-21). In the same way Dante, who assures us that the whole of the *Commedia* was written with a practical purpose, and applies to his own work the Scholastic principle of fourfold interpretation, asks us to marvel, not at his art, but “at the teaching that conceals itself beneath the veil of the strange verses.”

The Indian rhetorician, too, assumes that the essential value of a poetic dictum lies not so much in what is said as in what is suggested or implied:³ To put it plainly, “A literal significance is grasped even by brutes; horses and elephants pull at the word of command. But the wise man (*panditah* = doctor) understands even what is unsaid; the enlightened, the full content of what has been communicated only by a hint.”⁴ We have said enough, perhaps, to convince the reader that there are meanings immanent and causative in verbal and visual symbols, which must be read in them, and not, as we have said above, read into them, before we can pretend to have understood their reason, Tertullian’s *rationem artis*.⁵

The graduate, whose eyes have been closed and heart hardened by a course of university instruction in the Fine Arts or Literature is actually debarred from the complete understanding of a work of art. If a given form has for him a merely decorative and aesthetic value, it is far easier

² We need hardly say that nothing in principle, but only in the material, distinguishes the use of verbal from visual images, and that in the foregoing citation, “representations” may be substituted for “words.”

³ *Pancatantra*, I. 44.

⁴ Edgerton, Fr., “Indirect suggestion in poetry: a Hindu theory of literary aesthetics.” *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* LXXVI. 1936, pp. 687 f.

⁵ Tertullian, *Docti rationem artis intelligunt, indocti voluptatem*.

and far more comfortable for him to assume that it never had any other than a sensational value, than it would be for him to undertake the *self-denying* task of entering into and consenting to the mentality in which the form was first conceived. It is nevertheless just this task that the professional honor of the art historian requires of him; at any rate, it is this task that he undertakes nominally, however great a part of it he may neglect in fact.

The question of how far an ancient author or artist has understood his material also arises. In a given literary or plastic work the iconography may be at fault, by defect of knowledge in the artist; or a text may have been distorted by the carelessness or ignorance of a scribe. It is evident that we cannot pass a valid judgment in such cases from the standpoint of our own accidental knowledge or ignorance of the *matière*. How often one sees an emendation suggested by the philologist, which may be unimpeachable grammatically, but shows a total lack of understanding of what could have been meant originally! How often the technically skilled restorer can make a picture look well, not knowing that he has introduced insoluble contradictions!

In many cases, however, the ancient author or artist has not in fact misunderstood his material, and nothing but our own historical interpretation is at fault. We suppose, for example, that in the great epics, the miraculous elements have been “introduced” by an “imaginative” poet to enhance his effects, and nothing is more usual than to attempt to arrive at a kernel of “fact” by eliminating all incomprehensible symbolic matter from an epic or gospel. What are really technicalities in the work of such authors as Homer, Dante, or Valmiki, for example, we speak of as literary ornaments, to be accredited to the poet’s imagination, and to be praised or condemned in the measure of their appeal.⁶ On the contrary: the work of the prophetic poet, the texts for example of the *Rg Veda* or of Genesis, or the *logoi* of a Messiah, are only “beautiful” in the same sense that the mathematician speaks of an equation as “elegant”; by which we mean to imply the very opposite of a disparagement of their “beauty.” From the point of view of an older and more learned aesthetic, beauty is not a mere effect, but, properly belongs to the nature of a formal cause; the beautiful is not the final cause of the work to be done, but “adds to the good an ordering to the cognitive faculty by which the good is known as such;⁷ the “appeal” of beauty is not to the senses, but through the senses, to the intellect.⁸

Let us realize that “symbolism” is not a personal affair, but as Emil Mâle expressed it in connection with Christian art, a calculus. The semantics of visible symbols is at least as much an

⁶ As remarked by Victor-Emile Michelet, *La Secret de la Chevalerie*, 1930, p. 78 : “L’enseignement vulgaire considère que le poème épique, en vertu de sa tradition et de la technique du genre, renforce le récit des exploits guerriers par des inventions d’un merveilleux plus ou moins conventionnel destiné à servir d’agrément et d’élément décoratif.”

⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* I.5.4. ad 1, and Comm. on Dionysius, *De Div. Nom.* V.

⁸ And thus, as recognized by Herbert Spinden (*Brooklyn Museum Quarterly*, Oct. 1935), “Our first reaction is one of wonder, but our second should be an effort to understand. Nor should we accept a pleasurable effect upon our unintelligent nerve ends as an index of understanding.”

exact science as the semantics of verbal symbols, or “words”. Distinguishing “symbolism” accordingly, from the making of behavioristic signs, we may say that however unintelligently a symbol may have been used on a given occasion, it can never, so long as it remains recognizable, be called unintelligible: intelligibility is essential to the idea of a symbol, while intelligence in the observer is accidental. Admitting the possibility and the actual frequency of a degeneration from a significant to a merely decorative and ornamental use of symbols, we must point out that merely to state the problem in these terms is to confirm the dictum of a well-known Assyriologist, that “When we sound the archetype, the ultimate origin of the form, then we find that it is anchored in the highest, not the lowest.”⁹

What all this implies is of particular significance to the student, not merely of such hieratic arts as those of India or the Middle Ages, but of folk and savage art, and of fairy tales and popular rites; since it is precisely in all these arts that the parabolic or symbolic style has best survived in our otherwise self-expressive environment. Archeologists are indeed beginning to realize this. Strzygowski, for example, discussing the conservation of ancient motifs in modern Chinese peasant embroideries, endorses the dictum that “the thought of many so-called primitive peoples is far more spiritualized than that of many so-called civilized peoples,” adding that “in any case, it is clear that in matters of religion we shall have to drop the distinction between primitive and civilized peoples.”¹⁰ The art historian is being left behind in his own field by the archeologist, who is nowadays in a fair way to offer a far more complete explanation of the work of art than the aesthetician who judges all things by his own standards. The archeologist and anthropologist are impressed, in spite of themselves, by the antiquity and ubiquity of formal cultures by no means inferior to our own, except in the extent of their material resources.

It is mainly our infatuation with the idea of “progress” and the conception of ourselves as “civilized” and of former ages and other cultures as being “barbarous”¹¹ that has made it so difficult for the historian of art—despite his recognition of the fact that all “art cycles” are in fact

⁹ Andrae, W., *Die ionische Säule*, 1933, p. 65: The reader is strongly recommended to the whole of Andrae’s “Schlusswort.” Cf. Zoltan de Takacs, *Francis Hopp Memorial Exhibition*, 1933 (Budapest, 1933), p. 47: “The older and more generally understood a symbol is, the more perfect and self-expressive it is” and p. 34: “the value of art forms in (the) prehistoric ages was, therefore, determined, not simply by the delight of the eyes, but by the purity of traditional notions conjured by the representation itself.”

¹⁰ Strzygowski, J., *Spuren indogermanischen Glaubens in der bildenden Kunst*, 1936, p. 334.

¹¹ Gleizes, A., *Vie et Mort de l’Occident chrétien*, Sablons (1936), p. 60 “Deux mots, *barbarie* et *civilisation*, sont à la base de tout développement historique. Ils donnent à la notion de progrès la continuité qu’on lui désire sur tous les terrains particuliers en éveillant l’idée d’infériorité et de supériorité. Ils nous débarrassent de tout souci d’avenir, la barbarie étant derrière nous et la civilisation s’améliorant chaque jour.” I cite these remarks not so much in confirmation, as to call attention to the works of M. Gleizes, himself a painter, but who says of himself “Mon art je l’ai voulu métier... Ainsi, je pense ne pas être humainement inutile.” M. Gleizes’ most considerable work is *La Forme et l’Histoire; vers une Conscience Plastique*, Paris, 1932.

descends from the levels attained by the “primitives,” if not indeed descends from the sublime to the ridiculous to accept the proposition that an “art form” is already a defunct and derelict form, and strictly speaking a “superstition,” i.e. a “stand over” from a more intellectual humanity than our own; in other words, exceedingly difficult for him to accept the proposition that what is for us a “decorative motif” and a sort of upholstery is really the vestige of a more abstract mentality than our own, a mentality that used less means to mean more, and that made use of symbols primarily for their intellectual values, and not as we do, sentimentally.¹² We say here “sentimentally,” rather than “aesthetically,” reflecting that both words are the same in their literal significance, and both equivalent to “materialistic”; *aesthesis* being “feeling,” sense the means of feeling, and “matter” what is felt. To speak of an aesthetic experience as “disinterested” really involves an antimony; it is only a noetic or cognitive experience that can be disinterested. For the complete appreciation or experiencing of a work of traditional art (we do not deny that there are modern works of art that only appeal to the feelings) we need at least as much to *eindenken* as to *einfühlen*, to “think-in” and “think-with” at least as much as to “feel-in” and “feel-with.”

The aesthete will object that we are ignoring both the question of artistic quality, and that of the distinction of a noble from a decadent style. By no means. We merely take it for granted that every serious student is equipped by temperament and training to distinguish good from bad workmanship. And if there are noble and decadent periods of art, despite the fact that workmanship may be as skilful or even more skilful in the decadent than in the noble period, we say that the decadence is by no means the fault of the artist as such (the “maker by art”), but of the man, who in the decadent period has so much more to say, and means so much less. More to say, the less to mean—this is a matter, not of formal, but of final causes, implying defect, not in the artist, but in the patron.¹³

¹² Despite the recognition of a typical “descent,” the notion of a meliorative “progress” is so attractive and so comfortably supports an optimistic view of the future that one still and in face of all the evidence to the contrary fancies that primitive man and savage races “drew like that” because they “could not” represent natural effects as we represent them; and in this way it becomes possible to treat all “early” forms of art as striving towards and preparing the way for a more “mature” development; to envisage the supersession of form by figure as a favorable “evolution.” In fact, however, the primitive “drew like that” because he imagined like that, and like all artists, wished to draw as he imagined; he did not in our sense “observe,” because he had not in view the statement of singular facts; he “imitated” nature, not in her effects, but in her manner of operation. Our “advance” has been from the sublime to the ridiculous. To complain that primitive symbols do not look like their referents is as naive as it would be to complain of a mathematical equation, that it does not resemble the locus it represents.

¹³ It is extraneous of the business to the art historian or curator, as such, to distinguish noble from decadent styles; the business of these persons as such as to know what is good of its kind, exhibit, and explain it. At the same time, it is not enough to be merely an art historian or merely a curator; it is also the business of man as patron, to distinguish a hierarchy of values in what has been made, just as it is his business to decide what it is worthwhile to make now.

We say, then, that the “scientific” art historian, whose standards of explanation are altogether too facile and too merely sensitive and psychological, need feel no qualms about the “reading of meanings into” given formulae. When meanings, which are also *raisons d’être*, have been forgotten, it is indispensable that those who can remember them, and can demonstrate by reference to chapter and verse the validity of their “memory,” should re-read meanings into forms from which the meaning has been ignorantly “read out,” whether recently or long ago. For in no other way can the art historian be said to have fulfilled his task of fully explaining and accounting for the form, which he has not invented himself, and only knows of as an inherited “superstition.” It is not as such that the reading of meanings into works of art can be criticized, but only as regards the precision with which the work is done; the scholar being always, of course, subject to the possibility of self-correction or of correction by his peers, in matters of detail, though we may add that in case the iconographer is really in possession of his art, the possibilities of fundamental error are rather small. For the rest, with such “aesthetic” mentalities as ours, we are in little danger of proposing over-intellectual interpretations of ancient works of art.