

# Iconography



Iconography The definition of iconography is, according to Webster, a symbolic representation. According to iconographer, Vladimir Grigorenko (iconsexplained. com 2005), it is a revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven in our material world. It reveals the ultimate truth about God and man.

Entry into Jerusalem / St. Seraphim Cathedral

Iconograph by Vladimir Grigorenko 2000

Symbolism in iconography has been important in art over the centuries, including this one, for its ability to convey more meaning from a painting to the beholder about the subject matter, which is often spiritual in nature.

Wikipedia. com states that iconography " usually refers to the design, creation and interpretation of the symbolism within religious art." Hinduism and Christianity use a lot of symbolism in their art, while Muslims are forbidden from viewing iconic art. There have been divisions within the Christians over the use of icons, such as the Iconoclasts vs. the Iconodules (787 a. d.). The iconodules won their argument, over time, that icons were an integral part of the Christian tradition. Adoration of icons was not taken literally as love for the icons themselves but the meaning of them. It is said that St. Luke, the Evangelist, was the first iconographer when he painted an image of the virgin Mary on a panel, a woman he is thought to have actually known. The Byzantine Empire is known for its abundance of iconographs. The symbols used in iconography must relate to that which is apparent to people of the culture or time in which they are created. For instance, the color gold, in Eastern Orthodoxy, means the radiance of Heaven, while red is the color of martyrs (wikipedia. com 2006). Dragons are a symbol for sin and temptation. The wheel that St. Catherine was tortured on is an example of overt symbolism.

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In more recent times, submerged iconography was incorporated into works of art. Two examples are Jan Van Eyck's iconographic painting and Hieronymus Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The differences in their iconography are striking.

In Van Eyck's work, *The Adoration of the Lamb* (1432, Oil on panel, Cathedral of St Bavon, Ghent) the symbolism is much more overt with common elements of religious meaning, such as the cross, the lamb, the angels, etc. But the way the painting was divided right down the middle with different groups on either side as well as the cities, seems to suggest a way for divided factions of the religion, as well as different cultures, to come together in their mutual spirituality in a peaceful garden away from the influences that separate them. It is the East meeting the West in spiritual harmony. This type of symmetry in painting is not considered good design. On a much different note, Bosch's painting (*Garden of Earthly Delights*, oil on triptych panel, Museo del Prado, Spain) seems to be very threatening and mysterious. With its surreal quality, there is almost a message of warning to those partaking in 'earthly delights'. In a detail of the terrors of hell, a young woman sits near a black dog while a nightmarish creature wraps branch-like tentacles around her. There are so many submerged symbols in this piece that it has captured viewers' imaginations for decades. Rats and ravens seem to be symbols of dark urges, while the light that emanates from some of the people implies a naivety and even purity by contrast.

detail from *Garden of Earthly Delights*

According to Grigorenko, an artist wants to show the truth about the "created world" while an iconographer shows the truth about the Creator. He

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says that an iconograph is a church service and an iconographer is a servant (of God). Iconographers do not intend to show realism. Again, iconographs are more about surrealism. They may show any time or place to get their message across. In this way, the virgin Mary could be shown to be sitting with the King of England on a mass of clouds.

I personally do not 'read' symbolism very well and am not interested in art that puzzles the mind as much as overt symbolism, so its importance in today's art is negligible.

#### References

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