

# Renaissance iconography

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| An Analysis of Iconography and its Importance in Italian Renaissance Art  
Mariah Garlitos Art 323 Margaret Goehring November 30, 2012 Upon first glance at a work of art we are tempted to distinguish recognizable figures and apply a deeper meaning to them. It becomes a sort of challenge to figure out what the artist intended for their audience to get out of their work. As we examine particular pieces of art, focusing on art of fifteenth century Italy, we come to realize Italian artists used a set of recurring symbols and gestures that denote particular people, places, or ideas. It is important to understand the aim of Italian Renaissance art in order to interpret the purpose of such commonly used symbols. Religious works of art were generally meant for a public audience, most likely common churchgoers. Because it was meant for the general public, who were often more likely than not uneducated and unable to read, it was important for images to be easily recognizable and meaningful. Works intended for altarpieces or in religious contexts were not meant to be icons for worship but rather reminders of important information or to prompt an action for worship or prayer. (Baxandall, 40-43). It is for this reason that artists of the time refer to common use of particular iconography to portray certain figures or ideas; they needed to make their subjects and their meanings clear to the audience. It is important to know and understand the iconography behind fifteenth century Italian art in order to fully understand the narratives that the artists are attempting to portray. This was also a time when the study of psychological qualities was becoming more prominent. Artists began to use gesture and body language to transmit messages that before were transmitted through icons. It is important to also understand the

interpretations and meanings of the more understated non-verbal ideas of the time. Symbols, in terms of iconography and gestures, are crucial to understanding the narrative and purpose of art of the period, however evolved with the progression of humanism in art. We often encounter, in the study of art, pieces that would inherently lack meaning if the exclusion of a certain object or identifying material were to occur. It is safe to say that without the proper tools to decipher the meaning of even the smallest objects, we lose a certain ability to fully understand the narrative and purpose of the work as a whole. It was particularly important during the Renaissance to include identifiers for the audience to determine what the narrative of the work was and be reminded of its importance to daily life. (Baxandall, 56-66). These symbols often included objects, a certain use of color or lighting, and identifiable saints or people. Gentile da Fabriano , The Adoration of the Magi, tempera on panel, 1423, Uffizi, Florence Gentile da Fabriano , The Adoration of the Magi, tempera on panel, 1423, Uffizi, Florence The use of objects as clues to the narrative and meaning of a particular piece of work is one of the most prevalent and recognizable features. Particular items were consistently used in fifteenth century Italian art to evoke a particular thought, feeling, or identity. We can examine the use of popular symbols such as the halo or botanicals and how these images were crucial to cultural understanding of the overall work. The use of the halo to denote a holy figure such as the Virgin Mary, Jesus, or a saint was used long before the Renaissance era. It became an important symbol for the general population to recognize holy persons in art. This kind of imagery was popular in altarpieces of the period, a work that would receive high

volumes of viewers. Haloes helped the masses to identify the key subjects and stories associated with the piece and assisted them in contemplating and understanding the purpose of worship. (Stemp, 36). If we examine such works as *The Adoration of the Magi* by Gentile da Fabriano, 1423, we see a mass of people and animals approaching a woman and child. Without the inclusion of the haloes, and prior knowledge of the narrative, one would be left with questions as to what the purpose of the panel was. With the identifying Duccio, *Madonna Enthroned*, tempera and gold leaf on panel, 1308, Siena Duccio, *Madonna Enthroned*, tempera and gold leaf on panel, 1308, Siena symbols we come to realize that this is the Virgin Mary with infant Christ in hand being worshiped by the three magi. The inclusion of the haloes served to clarify to the audience that these figures were the important and Raphael, *St. Paul Preaching in Athens*, tapestry, 1515, Vatican Raphael, *St. Paul Preaching in Athens*, tapestry, 1515, Vatican divine subjects. (Sill, 173). It is also interesting to consider the way in which haloes changed throughout the Renaissance. The shift from a highly stylized and solid halo to a softer, more naturalistic halo is also important to understanding the cultural viewpoint on this iconography. The style of artwork throughout the fifteenth century was shifting from a linear Byzantine structure, as seen in Duccio's *Madonna Enthroned*, 1308, to a more realistic and humanist style as seen with Raphael in his *St Paul Preaching in Athens*, 1515. The halo has effectively gone from being a solid disk that encompasses the head to a more supernatural glowing light floating above the holy figures. This change in the style of the iconography is important to understanding the cultural environment that the works were being produced

in and for. The importance of the humanism of the holy figures was brought to the forefront as well as the ability for the artists to render illusionistic realism in their work. (Baxandall, 17-27). Even with this shift the use of that halo continued to be a way for artists to denote a holy figure and figures of status in their work. Carlo Crivelli, Annunciation, 1486, National Gallery, London Carlo Crivelli, Annunciation, 1486, National Gallery, London Another object that helped audiences of the time to identify the subjects of the works was the use of fruit, foliage, or specific plants as symbols. Literature of antiquity, religious writings, and herbals would become the source of Renaissance botanical imagery in art. In Literature of antiquity we often see plants used as metaphors of virtue and vice; grapes represent Bacchus, god of wine, while wheat represents Ceres, goddess of agriculture. (Meagher, 1). Religious writings, mainly the Bible and Apocrypha allude to plants in relation to parables. In Annunciation by Carlo Crivelli, 1486 we see a flurry of religious symbolism being used. The potted plants work to represent the walled garden to symbolize Mary's virginity, which is accentuated by the enclosed room with a small window to allow the beam of light to enter upon her. There is also great importance in the inclusion of the apple and gourd. The Apple represents the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge and Adam's expulsion from Paradise, while the gourd represents Christ's resurrection and forgiveness. (Stemp, 37). These two items being included in the piece serve as a tension between the fall of man and redemption as well as a foreshadowing into the life of Christ. In this same work we can also examine the white flowers in the hand of Gabriel, also a symbol for the Virgin Mary. (Meagher, 1). Understanding the meaning and symbolism behind these

elements is vital to the understanding of the narrative of the piece. Without knowledge of the apple and gourd symbolism, one might well assume that Crivelli simply wanted to show his skill of three-dimensional illusionism.

Michelangelo, Pieta, Marble, 1499, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

Michelangelo, Pieta, Marble, 1499, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City In later works however, we notice that the setting and iconographical symbols tend to fall away or not be included. We see a shift in the early and middle 1500's taking place in regards to how important scenes are being portrayed. Biblical stories no longer required a standardized scene in order to be understood. In Michelangelo's Pieta, 1499, we simply see a woman holding the limp corpse of a man. There is no cross, no landscape, and no other figures to identify the narrative. The scene has effectively been taken out of the narrative and placed before us. It has now become the challenge of the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the piece and place it within the narrative on our own. The renaissance had brought out the idea of enlightenment and reason, of one using knowledge and thinking to come to one's own conclusion.(Straten, 11) We see this transition in the cultural viewpoint clearly in the shift of stylized and highly symbolical representations of Biblical stories, to a more naturalistic and human portrayal of the same subject. Coronation of the Virgin attributed to Jacopo di Cione, 1370 Coronation of the Virgin attributed to Jacopo di Cione, 1370 Saints and holy figures played an integral role in defining the meaning and purpose of art of the Renaissance. These saints, not known by their own individual appearance or facial features, were recognized solely by the items they possessed, their clothing, or a particular position they were in. Many

altarpieces of the time were made up of a composition of a Madonna enthroned surrounded by saints. The saints that were depicted depended upon many things such as patronage, intended place of display, and narrative context. (Ferguson, 93 ). In the image of the Coronation of the Virgin attributed to Jacopo di Cione, 1370, we have the Virgin Mary being crowned amongst a large assortment of Saints. We can recognize each of these Saints based upon the objects they hold or the clothing they wear. Almost immediately we spot St. Francis in his monastic garb, St. John the Baptist wearing his hair suit, and St. Jerome donning his large brimmed red hat. These are a few examples of how people in fifteenth century Italy were to recognize the Saints they modeled themselves after. People of the time knew and recognized the symbols of the Saints rather than the Saints themselves. We can recognize these same saints based on their symbols in the later 1445 St Lucy Altarpiece by Domenico Veneziano. The composition has progressed and we see the use of the ‘ sacra conversazione’ as well as a more developed perspective and three dimensionality, however the same symbols are used to depict St. John the Baptist and St. Francis. (Stemp, 106). Domenico Veneziano, St. Lucy Altarpiece, tempera on panel, 1445, Uffizi, Florence Domenico Veneziano, St. Lucy Altarpiece, tempera on panel, 1445, Uffizi, Florence The inclusion of particular Saints was one way of stressing to the audience a particular value or story that was deemed important by the city, church, or a particular individual. In the St Lucy Altarpiece, commissioned by the Medici, we see St. John the Baptist and St. Zenobius, two of Florence’s patron Saints depicted on either side of the Virgin. The purpose of the altarpiece was to focus attention on acts of worship, saints

depicted in them were those worthy of particular devotion of the church, patron, or both. (Straten, 3). The iconography was particularly important to achieving the goal of altarpieces and other works in Italy at the time. Had the symbols associated with each saint been left out, people would have been left to decipher the imagery and purpose of the work with no basis to start from. In addition to the important role of symbols in determining the narrative and purpose of Renaissance art, the less consistent, however just as effective, use of gesture is became a prominent way for artist to have depicted a certain message to its viewers. In the later 1400's and early 1500's we see a progression to using body language and gesture as a means of transmitting a particular message as opposed to the heavy use of iconography. An Niccolo della arca, Lamentation, terracotta, 1463, Bologna Niccolo della arca, Lamentation, terracotta, 1463, Bologna important aspect of gesture is emotion and expression through non-verbal language. In paintings and sculptures of the period there was a growing interest in how psychological qualities could be evoked through the use of less iconography. Artists were attempting to communicate, on a more intimate level, a sense of empathy with the characters being depicted. (Cavendish, 50-60). During this transition it was popular for the most human times of Jesus' life to be depicted in art. (Stemp, 100). Looking to Niccolo della arca's Lamentation, 1463, we see a great use of expression and emotive qualities. The faces of each figure contorted, the complicated nature of the fabrics, and the dynamics of the costume flying behind the figure of Mary Magdalene all work to depict a scene of extreme grief as the dead Christ lays before us. Donatello in his Repentant Magdalene, 1454, uses a similar idea, giving Mary



Magdalene a ghostly appearance to remind viewers of original sin that is washed away and the presence of death among the living. (Fleming, 245-248). The body and how it is portrayed also plays a key role in how art was interpreted during this time. Previously, as we saw in Duccio's *Madonna Enthroned*, figures were very flat, stiff, and linear. With the progression of humanist and naturalistic techniques artists were moving away from this style. (Hartt, 593-606). They were expressing emotive qualities to accentuate the narratives that they were depicting. In order to express emotion the way in which the body was executed needed redefining. The people of the time had a sense of close relation between movement of the body and movement of the soul and mind. (Baxandall, 56). This notion was particularly important to artists and how they presented figures in their work. Donatello was innovative in this aspect, particularly with his series of prophet statues; incorporating the way elongating limbs and facial features would appear at the point of view of the audience. (Fleming, 246). Masaccio, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, Fresco, 1427, Florence Masaccio, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, Fresco, 1427, Florence This continued with Masaccio, particularly in his fresco *Expulsion from the Garden*, 1427. The gestural method used to execute the figures of both Adam and Eve in this fresco and an understanding of the positioning of the hands and arms is crucial to interpreting this image. Upon first glance, without any further insight on gesture, one might think that the figures are sad or in agony. However, upon closer observation we can come to understand that the placement of Adam's hands over his face and Eve's over her chest denote highly specific emotions. (Stemp, 78) According to Baxandall in *Painting and*

Experience, the Benedictine order serves as a sort of cipher for gestures of fifteenth century Italy. In this record hands over the face express shame, while a hand pressed against the chest expresses grief. (Baxandall, 61). This information is key to understanding a very important difference between Adam and Eve in this fresco. Other ways in which the hands and arms become important gestures in artwork are in how they convey a particular message to the viewer. The very pose of a hand or the Piero della Francesca, Annunciation, Fresco, 1452, Arezzo Piero della Francesca, Annunciation, Fresco, 1452, Arezzo positioning of an arm can give great insight as to what the artwork is attempting to convey. In many different versions of the annunciation from different years of the Renaissance, we see Gabriel and Mary lifting a hand toward each other signifying invitation. (Stemp, 81). In Annunciation by Piero della Francesca, 1452 we see both figures with palms facing outward and fingers raised yet slightly bent. This gesture signifies Mary's invitation of both Gabriel and the conception of Christ. We see an almost identical depiction of this in Annunciation by Sandro Botticelli, 1489. If we did not understand this gesture as one of invitation we might assume Mary to be a woman dismissing the angel or even being frightened by him. Understanding gestures of the hands is a very important part of understanding the narrative of these works. Sandro Botticelli, Annunciation, tempera on panel, 1489, Uffizi, Florence Sandro Botticelli, Annunciation, tempera on panel, 1489, Uffizi, Florence Returning to the work of Crivelli in his Annunciation, however, we see only Gabriel performing the gesture of invitation. Mary is depicted with her arms crossed over her chest. This common gesture is often used to signify unquestioned faith. This is a position

in which people were placed after death and there is a strong correlation between this position and the Cross. (Levin, 17). There are certain aspects of Italian Renaissance art that serve to portray a deeper meaning.

Iconographical images and symbols worked to give people a better understanding and focus on worship or political stand points. The general audience needed pictorial depictions of biblical accounts and topics of worship, as many could not read the Bible themselves. The symbols that go along with well-known Saints and figures helped the public to understand these concepts and ideas by detailing the narratives read to them by preachers. As the renaissance and art progressed humanism and connecting people to the psychological aspects of the integral figures became more important. Understanding the meaning behind specific expressions and gestures of the body helped to detail the narratives that iconographic symbols used to. Symbolism in terms of iconography and gesture was pivotal to art interpretation of the masses during the Renaissance in Italy, however the introduction of reason encouraged imaginative iconography and the development of perspective as art became an intellectual pursuit no longer a vehicle for telling stories to the illiterate. Works Cited Baxandall, Michael. *Painting And Experience In Fifteenth Century Italy, A Primer In The Social History Of Pictorial Style*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1988. Print. Cavendish, Marshall. *The High Renaissance*. 2. New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1987. Print. Ferguson, George. *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*. New York, London: Oxford University Press, USA, 1961. Print. Fleming, William. *Arts & Ideas*. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, Print. Hartt, Frederick. *Art a History of Painting Sculpture Architecture*. 4th.

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