

The bridge: suggestions about the meaning of a pictorial motif

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to understand whether the representation of bridges in painting is relevant for the building of meaning in a work of art. The beginning of this research is rather distant. Indeed, it goes back to 1983, when I received a fellowship from the Warburg Institute in London, and I proposed this theme to Ernst Gombrich, who agreed to follow me in my research, even if he was rather sceptical about the chance of finding a stable meaning content in this figure. I must also underline that he criticized the results of my research, as we shall see in a moment. In any case, I went on, and published a first short version of the work in *Casabella* (1979), and a more complete one in a book, *La macchina della pittura*, in 1985.¹

Gombrich's objections were the following. 1. Is the 'bridge' a motif? Indeed, there are 'bridges' which are not /bridges/, and /bridges/ which are not 'bridges'.² He meant that there are bridges which are recognizable as elements of the natural world, but they do not have the function of a bridge (that is, to let someone or something pass over an obstacle). On the other side, there are objects which have this function, but they are not bridges (e.g.: stones, pieces of wood, streets and so on). 2. How many cases may be considered as necessary and sufficient to state that there is a particular meaning (or a group of organized meanings) in representations of bridges? The risk is to begin a never ending research, because the analyzed figure is too small to be able to have a central relevance to every work of art that contains it. 3. A pure iconographic research is interesting as a statistical collection of data, but is unable to say anything about the question of meaning in the visual arts.

I will try here (28 years later!) to reconsider my previous analysis, accepting here and there what Gombrich suggested, and in places answering his remarks.

The concept of 'motif'

The first point is probably the most important one, because it involves the basic principles of iconology. But we must give consideration to the concept of 'motif', as it is not used only in the domain of visual arts, but also in other disciplines. It is often employed, for instance, in the field of literary studies, or to examine the

¹ Omar Calabrese, 'Uno sguardo sul ponte', *Casabella*, 471, 1981; *La macchina della pittura*, Bari, 1985.

² I use quotes to mean iconic figures, and slashes to indicate abstract figures, as linguists do to differentiate content and expression of a word.

structure of fairy tales. In literary comparativism 'motif' is used together with another item, 'type'. A motif is a minimal narrative configuration, and a chain of motifs can produce a story. But a partial combination of motifs is a 'type', that is a class of micro-stories often repeated during the history of literature. Erwin Panofsky transferred this idea into his theory of iconology, with the purpose of founding a 'scientific' ground for understanding meaning in the visual arts. His statements are well known. There are three levels of analysis. The first is called 'Primary or Natural Subject Matter' and it consists in the identification of objects belonging to the natural world. The second is called 'Secondary or Conventional Subject Matter, or also iconographical level', and it is directed to find a more complex (but typical) meaning in a given configuration. Finally, the third is called 'Tertiary or Intrinsic Meaning or Content, or also iconological level', and it is oriented to find a deeper meaning in a work of art, connecting it with a more general outlook inside an historic period or culture.

There is, of course, a similarity between these two points of view, but their differences are more interesting for us. In the first case, the motif is conceived as a 'minimal unit', while in the second Panofsky never mentions either its dimension or its closed autonomy. In the first case, a motif is a sort of 'brick', and the sum of all bricks creates a 'wall', which is the narrative. Panofsky, on the other hand, doesn't believe that the meaning of a work of art is built in such a mechanical way, and his concern is with another problem: are we able to explain how some configurations can migrate from one culture into another one (this topic belongs also to Aby Warburg and to Rudolph Wittkower).³

As we can see, there is a constitutional ambiguity inside the definition of the motif. On one hand, it is a morphologically stable element, in comparison with the variability of the single works in which it is included. Indeed, its meaning is autonomous from the meaning of a single text. But, on the other hand, its meaning becomes variable when the motif is placed in a text, which offers a unified vision constituted of its various parts. In other words: a motif is partially independent as regards to a single textual organization, because it has a mobile and migrant feature; but it is also partially flexible, as it depends upon the same organization.

Such an ambiguity creates problems from a semiotic point of view. First: the traditional definition is too undefined with regard to the dimension of the motif. What are its material limits, for instance? Second: it is too undefined with regard to its identification. How do we establish the way we recognize it? How can we determine its level of invariability? Third: it is too undefined with regard to its capacity to be combined. How can we match different motifs and produce new meaning in a text? If we answer these questions, we will probably be able to recover

³ Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Leipzig/Berlin, 1932; Rudolf Wittkover, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, London, 1977.

the concept of motif for use in a semiotic perspective, from which it has often been excluded.⁴

The motif of the 'bridge'

We shall analyze a group of pictures that represent that object of the natural world we call 'bridge'. This choice is not innocent. Indeed, some anthropologists have remarked that the bridge is an important symbolic figure in the history of western culture, going back as far as Ancient Greece and Rome.⁵ But this figure also has a role from a philosophical point of view, according to Martin Heidegger, who wrote a famous essay about it.⁶ From the anthropological point of view, it is easy to understand why the bridge has a fundamental value. The bridge allows one to pass over an obstacle, usually a river or a ravine. That is, it lets people overcome a danger. But the obstacle is often a sacred frontier, as in the case of water (river, sea, lake). So, the bridge becomes sacred too, and its foundation must be accompanied by rites and ceremonies. These underline the fact that the bridge is a link between opposite sides, but its middle is actually the most intense point of their separation. This is the reason Heidegger spoke about the bridge as a cross between human and divine, earth and sky.

We often find the same function of connection/separation in narratives and folk tales. For instance, we know the legend of the bridge 'as thin as a hair', which a hero must pass over to save the princess. There are many Devil's bridges, where Lucifer obstructs the way. There is the Dangerous Bridge, which connects our world with the hereafter. We could go on with novels, movies, theatrical pieces, where the bridge is the centre of a dramatic action. In other words, the bridge is often represented as a stop in front of a danger, and it may be built/destroyed, crossed/blocked to overcome that danger. But often we also see it as a threshold and the story pauses for a while to force the hero to undertake a trial (duel, battle, sacrifice, exhibition of courage and so on).

Does the bridge accomplish the same function in painting? A very short phenomenology of our motif gives us a very complex answer. Let us try to outline a brief typology.

- a. The first case is the more trivial one. The representation of a bridge 'translates', or is the illustration of, a literary plot. A very good example is El Greco's painting *The Adoration of the Name of Jesus* (late 1570, London, National Gallery, Fig. 1), where we find (in the background) the image of the bridge 'as thin as a hair'.

⁴ See, for instance, what Algirdas Greimas has to say in the entry 'Motif', in Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtés, eds., *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, 1979, and the observations of Joseph Courtés, *Le motif en ethno littérature: essai d'anthropologie sémiotique*, Paris, 1983.

⁵ Anita Seppilli, *Sacralità dell'acqua e sacrilegio dei ponti*, Palermo, 1977.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken', in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Berlin, 1954.



Adoration of the Name of Jesus, late 1570, oil and egg tempera on pine, 55.1 x 33.8 cm, London, National Gallery. Detail

The Dangerous Bridge is present in Herri Met de Bles' (il Civetta) *The Inferno* (after 1530, Venice, Doge's Palace, Fig. 2), or in the right panel of Hieronymous Bosch' *The Haywain* (after 1510, Madrid, Museo del Prado, Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Herri Met de Bles (il Civetta) *The Inferno*, after 1530, oil on canvas, 57 x 72 cm, Venice, Doge's Palace.



Fig. 3 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Haywain Triptych*, after 1510, oil on panel, 147 x 66 cm, Madrid, Prado. Detail



Fig. 4 Illumination for the manuscript *Renaud de Montauban*, 1470c., Pommersfelden Castle Library 312, fol. 37v

And, finally, the difficult effort of crossing over a bridge is represented in many illuminations, such as this illumination for the manuscript *Renaud de Montauban* (1470c., Pommersfelden Castle Library 312, fol. 37v, Fig. 4), where a knight uses his own sword as a bridge to reach the imprisoned princess.

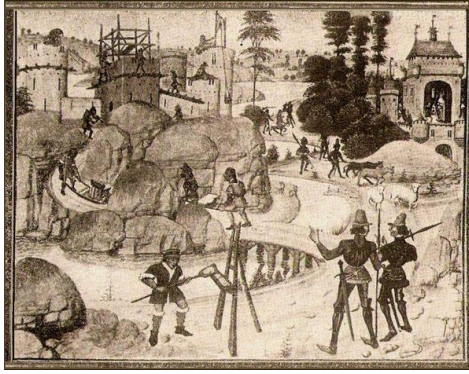
In all these examples, the crossing of the bridge is the illustration of a traditional narrative segment, called 'the overcoming of a task' in the well-known typology of functions elaborated by Vladimir Propp.⁷

- b. A second case is a more descriptive one, but it still concerns the organization of content. The bridge fulfils the function of connecting two separated wholes (for instance: territories, groups of men, and so on), while at the same time delineating their thresholds. According to Gombrich, we should remark that such a function requires one of the two general kinds of vision implied by an image, that is the cartographic one ('the map', if we use the words of the author, as opposed to 'the mirror').⁸ From an anthropological point of view, the presence of a threshold always underlines one of three possibilities: the bridge as a barrier, the bridge as a passage, the bridge as a controlled frontier (more or less open).⁹ Indeed, it is always accompanied by the presence of some actors (animals, men) who are crossing it, who control the entrance from the two sides or who obstruct / challenge the passage of other actors. This kind of representation of a bridge is common in medieval art and we can find many examples, particularly where description is the dominant aim of a picture, as in illuminations. One example is the image of a castle with a drawbridge, or the picture of a village on a river, which is protected by walls, but whose entrance is permitted/blocked by a bridge, as in this illumination from the previously mentioned *Renaud de Montauban*, in which we observe the building of a bridge, with one worker on the outside and another on the inside, a peasant crossing the bridge and two guards supervising the situation. Of course, the same content may be illustrated with objects other than a bridge, as in Maître de Boucicaut's *The Return of Marco Polo* (illumination from *Il Milione*, XVth century, Fig. 5-6), where the same function is represented with a ship.

⁷ Vladimir Propp, *Morfologija Skazki*, Moskva, 1946.

⁸ Ernst Gombrich, 'Mirror and Map', *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, London, 1974.

⁹On this subject see Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, Paris, 1909, and Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London, 1966. There are interesting remarks also in Timothy L. Carson, 'Chapter Seven: Betwixt and Between, Worship and Liminal Reality', *Transforming Worship*, 2003; Langdon Elsbree, *Ritual Passages and Narrative Structures*, New York, 1991; Arpad Szokolczai, 'Liminality and Experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events', *International Political Anthropology* 2 (1), 2009, 141-172; Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage', in *The Forest of Symbols*, Ithaca, 1967; Victor Turner, 'Liminal to liminoid in play, flow, and ritual: An essay in comparative symbology'. *Rice University Studies*, 1974, 60(3), 53-92.



Figs. 5-6 Maître de Boucicaut's *The Return of Marco Polo*,
Illuminations from *Il Milione*, XVth century

- c. A third case concerns narrative syntax. A story may be represented in a unique scene or landscape to show the Aristotelian unity of space and time, but the different episodes of the tale are connected by the means of a bridge. We have many examples of this technique, which is a 'translation' of the medieval habit of telling a story by separating it into episodes, as in the predella of an altarpiece. Let us consider just three works. In *The Thebaid* (1410c., Florence, Uffizi, Fig. 7), attributed to either Gherardo Starnina or to Beato Angelico, there is not a precise event but the description of many anecdotes concerning the lives of the Fathers of the Church in the desert near Thebes. The anecdotes are individual scenes linked by different passages: bridges, streets, ships and so on. In *The History of the True Cross* painted by Agnolo Gaddi (1380-90, Florence, Santa Croce, Fig. 8) we find a bridge in each episode, which has the function of coordinating the linear sequence of actions. Take *The Dream of Constantine* followed by *The Battle against Massenzio*. The hero is the same, but he is dreaming in the central image, and then, on the right, he is crossing a bridge (on horseback) to defeat his enemy. In Domenico Beccafumi's *The Justice of Seleuco* (1575, Siena, Palazzo Bindi Sergardi, Fig. 9) we do not find a coordinated sequence, but rather a subordinated 'sentence'. In the foreground we see Seleuco sentencing his own son, found guilty of violence against a woman, but, in the background on the right, we recognize the scene of the rape, which is the antecedent of the trial.



Fig. 7 Gherardo Starnina or Beato Angelico, *The Thebaid*, 1410c.,
tempera on wood, 80 x 216 cm, Florence, Uffizi.



Fig. 8 Agnolo Gaddi, *The Dream of Constantine in The History of the True Cross*, 1380-90, fresco, Florence, Santa Croce.



Fig. 9 Domenico Beccafumi, *The Justice of Seleuco*, 1575, fresco, 148x197 cm, Siena, Palazzo Bindi Sergardi.

- d. Syntax in painting is not only narrative, but also simply formal. In other words, the function of connecting/separating some elements of an image may concern the different parts of the whole, with the aim of building a particular structure of the composition. Let us analyze Jan Van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin* (1435, Musée du Louvre, Fig. 10). In the background, we see the perspectival effect of a river that recedes toward the horizon. There is a bridge in the first part of the scene, in front of the two characters who observe the landscape from a balcony. Its geometrical function is to produce a sort of stop in the continuity of our gaze towards the vanishing point. Thus, Van Eyck is able not only to describe a landscape, but also to represent in this painting the theory of perspective. In my opinion, this purpose was perfectly understood by the artists of the same period, and the evidence of this is that a very similar solution is also presented by Rogier van der Weyden (*Saint Luke Drawing the Portrait of the Virgin*, 1435-40, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) and Dieric Bouts (*Saint Luke Drawing the Portrait of the Virgin*, 1455c, priv. coll.).



Fig. 10 Jan Van Eyck, *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*, 1435, oil on panel, 66 × 62 cm, Louvre.

The bridge is sometimes used to solve a particular perspective problem, for instance the passage from the foreground to the background of a wide landscape painting. The question is well known: the centre of a scene (the middle ground) is too thin to give the idea of continuity. As we saw before, Netherlandish painters layer the different planes one after another.¹⁰ Claude Lorrain, on the contrary, was maybe the first to conceive the transition through the different planes as a group of diagonal lines, and even as a zigzag. Here is a typical example of his way of constructing space (*Landscape with Apollo and Mercury*, 1645c., Rome, Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Fig. 11):



Fig. 11 Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Apollo and Mercury*, 1645c., oil on canvas, 74,5 x 110,5 cm, Rome, Doria Pamphilj Gallery

Of course, not only bridges are able to accomplish this function but also streets, rivers, rows of trees and columns, herds and so on.

We may find an original syntactic device in Giorgione's *The Tempest* (1505-08, Venice, Accademia Gallery, Fig. 12). There is a bridge in the centre of the composition. Of course, it represents the connection between the two banks of a river. If we continue to analyze the painting, however, we may remark that the river itself is a break that is repeated in the sky (a fork of lightning), in the water (a vortex) and in the earth in the foreground (a ditch).



Fig. 12 Giorgione, *The Tempest*, 1505-08, oil on canvas, 83 x 73 cm, Venice, Accademia Gallery.

¹⁰ Kenneth Clark, *Landscape into Art*, London, 1949.

We may summarize: in the vertical middle of the image there is a range of fractures and the bridge helps to overcome them all. However, the bridge does not connect only the two banks. Indeed, on the left side of the painting there is a set of vertical objects: a man with a long stick, a column, two trunks, a building. On the right side, on the other hand, we find a series of round shapes: a cloud, the foliage of another tree, the woman and her son in the foreground. In my opinion, there is an abstract organization of the surface of the painting, with a contrast between right and left, represented by three formal rhythms, that is 'vertical' / 'fracture' / 'round'. The bridge has the role of connecting two opposites, overcoming their separation.

Thus, from these examples we recognize that a bridge is able to link different zones of a picture's surface, while representing a link among objects belonging to the natural world.

- e. Up to now, we have seen that a bridge (or other objects with the same shape) is a separation/connection among different spaces. These spaces may belong to the represented world, to various episodes of a represented narrative, and to the space of representation (the surface of a picture). There is, in any case, a final frontier, the so-called 'aesthetic frontier'¹¹, that is the threshold between the space of representation and the space of the spectator. Some artists have put their attention on this point. A beautiful example is El Greco's *Escape to Egypt* (1572c., Basel, coll. Hirsch, Fig. 13)



Fig. 13 El Greco, *Escape to Egypt*, 1572c, oil on panel, 15.9 × 21.6 cm, Madrid, Prado.

Joseph stands in the middle of a bridge, while Mary is riding a donkey, which refuses to cross the threshold of the bridge. We see that the left side of the bridge is not visible in the frame. It is placed – we could say – in the observer's space, outside of the picture. In addition, the point of view of the observer (out of the image) and that of Joseph (inside the image) are exactly the same. Therefore the bridge achieves the function of connecting outside and inside, with an admirable perspectival deception. Once again, the same

¹¹ Victor Stoichița, *L'instauration du tableau*, Paris, 1993.

function can be carried out by the representation of objects that are not 'bridges' in the natural sense of the word. In many still lifes, for instance, we find a table top whose surface advances towards the spectator's space. Adriaen Coorte often repeated this device, as we may observe in these two examples (Fig. 14-15):



Fig. 14 Adriaen Coorte, *Still Life with strawberries*, 1696, oil on panel, 28,9 x 22,3 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 15 Adriaen Coorte, *Still Life of Medlars, Redcurrants, Grapes and a Dragonfly*, 1686, oil on canvas, 40.6 x 34.9 cm, Boston, Maida & George Abrams Collection.

But there are many other similar cases in the domain of *trompe-l'œil* painting.¹² This is evidence that a picture must be considered at the same time as a surface (worked out by the author) and a represented scene (a three-dimensional fictional space), but also as an image offered to a gaze, and placed inside its own space. Some objects have the job of connecting/separating these three constitutional parts of the vision.

Towards a 'grammar of the bridge'?

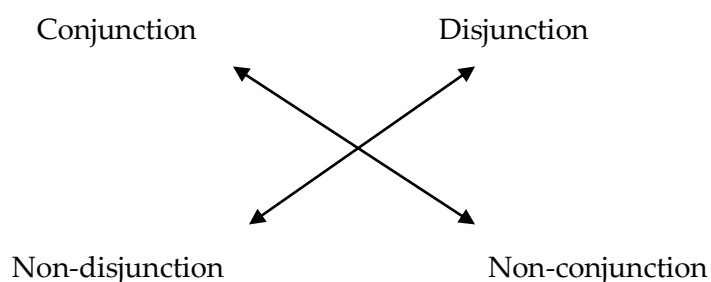
We can now advance towards some more general conclusions. All the types of bridge we have analyzed demonstrate some common features. First: a bridge always leads something or someone towards something or someone. Martin Heidegger already remarked on this point: 'The bridge lets the stream run its course and at the same time grants their way to mortals so that they may come and go from shore to shore. Bridges lead in many ways'.¹³ Indeed, the bridge is always a 'conductor' such as we find in physics. From a narrative point of view, it leads someone or something towards someone or something; that is it links two figures of a story. In a more structural sense, we can speak about the connection between a

¹² See Omar Calabrese, *L'art du trompe l'œil*, Paris, 2010.

¹³ Heidegger, Martin, 'Bauen, Wohnen, Denken', 12.

subject and an object or anti-subject (what in semiotics is called 'narrative program'). From a syntactic point of view, a bridge leads from one moment towards another moment (*temporalization*); or from one place towards another place (*spatialization*); or, finally, from someone inside the representation towards a spectator who is outside (*actorialization*).¹⁴

At the same time, characters, actors, times and spaces are separated, and they often represent a conflict or a contrast. In structural semiotics there is a term to define such a condition, and it is the category of 'junction', in which we may distinguish two opposite items, 'conjunction' and 'disjunction'. The expansion of the category produces a typical 'semiotic square', as seen in the following diagram:



Thus, the bridge may be observed as a 'theoretical object',¹⁵ because it implicitly shows the entire development of the category above mentioned. The description of a single pictorial text becomes deeper. For instance, a particular representation may show a starting point and its future conclusion, but also a potential alternative resolution. The knight and the princess are separated and the knight uses his sword as a bridge to join her. We can argue the actual action, but also its antecedents, and its potential and opposite results. Another example: the spectator's space is separated from the represented scene but a bridge allows us to believe that they are connected. We can feel ourselves as part of the picture but we also perceive the fact that the depth of the represented scene and the spectator's space are separated by the painting's surface. Third example: two episodes of a story are separated, but a bridge makes us understand that there is continuity. In this case the bridge allows us to understand the connection between them, but it also shows that they are isolated.

The category of 'junction' is very useful to explain the internal structure of our motif, because it is able to recognize its operating directions at different levels of depth. If we agree with Greimas's idea that a text is structured on three superimposed levels (discourse, narration, deep semantic level), we may argue that the category of 'junction' always works in the same manner but is oriented towards

¹⁴ See Algirdas Julien Greimas, Joseph Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris 1979.

¹⁵ With this term, I mean that a figure, represented inside an image, implicitly requires a reference to a theory to be understood. Cf. what scholars belonging to the Centre Histoire/Théorie de l'art (Paris, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales) have written on this subject: Hubert Damisch, *Théorie du nuage*, Paris, 1972; Louis Marin, *On Representation*, Palo Alto (Ca), 2001.

different aims. On the discursive level, we recognize the organization of the roles of represented objects and characters (also those that belong to the so-called 'enunciation', that is the relation between a text and its reader). On the narrative level, we are able to see how a narrative structure builds an architecture of deeper elements (like subject, object of value, anti-subject). Finally, we may arrive at interpreting the deepest organization of the fundamental meaning, that is the opposition/connection of essential semantic items (for instance, in our example of the building of a bridge near a castle, the opposition between 'nature' and 'culture', or their potential connection). We must add that the category of 'junction' is also able to explain the nature of the 'thymic' (emotional) value invested into our motif. Let's take a significant example, *Cain Killing Abel* from a French illuminated manuscript (Boucicaut Workshop, XVth century, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, Fig. 16):

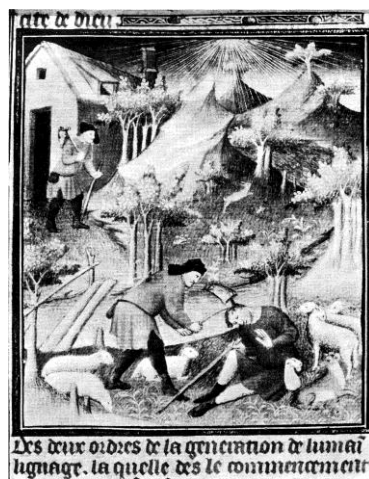


Fig. 16 Boucicaut Workshop, *Cain Killing Abel*, from a French illuminated manuscript, XVth century, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery.

The scene is divided in two parts: in the background Adam lives in the Garden of Eden, happy and surrounded by animals and lush vegetation. This part is separated from the foreground by a river but connected with the latter by a bridge; in the foreground Cain is killing Abel. Therefore, there are two opposite emotional values attributed to each side, a euphoric one (above) and a dysphoric one (down). The spectator's point of view is, of course, more closed to Cain's (dysphoric) space. In other words, we live in the space of mortal sin, and we must feel invited to go back to cross the bridge and to return to the euphoric state of grace.

We can now advance some final proposals, and answer Gombrich's doubts quoted at the beginning of this article. First observation: the bridge may be considered as a motif, provided that its representation contains an internal structure corresponding to the category of 'junction'. According to this perspective, not every 'bridge' is a /bridge/, and many others objects may be /bridges/ without being 'bridges'. Second remark: the meaning of our motif doesn't depend upon the number of examples we can find but only upon their relevance. In other words, when we arrive at an outline of a complete 'grammar of cases', and many examples

reflect it, we may be able to interpret their general content, as well as many local meanings included in their individual representation. Third and last note: the discovery of an internal structure of our figurative motif moves us away from the traditional iconographical research, but also from the panofskian description of iconology. Indeed, we are directing our analysis not only towards the simple or complex content of a figure (which should imply that the meaning of a picture is a trivial sum of single elements), but also towards its formal description. It is a minimal, but important step towards a correct new semiotics of image.

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