

# Putting iconology in the plural

Conference report on: 'Iconologies. Global Unity or/and Local Diversities in Art History', 23 – 25 May 2019, The National Museum in Cracow and Institute of Art History, Jagiellonian University, Cracow

Stefaniia Demchuk

One can hardly find a method more widely used and abused than iconology. Yet there is no consensus in how to define it – is iconology even a method or is it a discipline?

The conference held by Jagiellonian University in cooperation with the National Museum in Cracow aimed to redefine iconology as a unity, which is nevertheless split into localised pieces. During three intense days, scholars from all over the world strived to answer major questions and set the new ones.

On the one hand, the Cracow Conference had followed the suite of its predecessors and addressed rather usual questions, i.e. the iconology's theoretical basis, origin and development, artistic interpretation of symbols, use of images in political propaganda or in confrontation/exchange between iconology and visual studies. On the other hand, its focus shifted towards the variety of uses of iconology in the Central and Eastern Europe, its functioning as an embodiment of the 'Western' Art History and integration into the Marxist methodology in the Soviet times.

That is why the conference agenda could be logically broken down into two sections. The former encompassed presentations on the 'conventional' iconology in its threefold nature: 1) iconology as positivistic documentation (Emile Mâle); 2) iconology as symbolic/ideological interpretation (Panofsky); 3) iconology as examination of transhistorical psychodynamics (Warburg). The latter included case studies championing the idea of either presence or absence of the iconology in the Soviet and post-Soviet setting. This dichotomy was embedded into the structure of this conference report. However, one can easily notice that the latter section received substantially more coverage in my report due to the fledgling nature of the integration of the Soviet art historical narrative into the established world canons.

## **I. Global unity: Warburgian and Panofskian legacy**

Wojciech Bałus (Jagiellonian University) opened the conference with an introductory lecture where he outlined the milestones of iconology and the main questions asked at the different stages of its development. His closing remarks

addressed iconology in Poland, which for a long time had been a manifesto of anti-totalitarian attitudes. Claudia Wedepohl (The Warburg Institute, University of London) explored the beginnings of iconology through Warburg's preoccupation with the Fifteenth-century Florentine devices, emblems and 'types'. Altti Kuusamo (University of Turku) in turn focused on another crucial Warburgian notion, that of 'bewegtes Beiwerk' – 'accessories in motion' – a typical feature of the Nymph/Maenad, the most prominent female character in Warburg's personal mythology. Kuusamo pointed to 'the things Warburg did not want to see'. The Mnemosyne Atlas was also a point of reference for another paper. Instead of diving into the details, Stepan Vanyean (Lomonosov Moscow State University) sought to build up a map of the discipline by means of diagrams. This diagrammatical approach aimed at visualizing 'iconologies' as an assemblage of methodological 'ideograms'. In this way, he looked at the iconologies of Hans Sedlmayr, Max Imdahl, Ernst Gombrich and William Mitchell. While Sascha Freyberg (University of Ca' Foscari, Venice) explored the morphological principles of iconology.

Panofsky's legacy is no smaller a battlefield than that of Aby Warburg. Nuria Jetter (independent researcher, Berlin) dug into the problem of Panofsky's 'attempt to deal with historicity'. She examined Panofsky's epistemological paradox by contextualising his critique of historicism, so to say, by placing him within the field of hermeneutics.

From the very beginning, from the 'mythology' constructed around Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, iconology's history has been written through personal stories. Thus, Elizabeth Sears (University of Michigan) traced the roots of Iconology in G.J. Hoogewerff's writings, while Robert Pawlik (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) spoke about Ernst H. Kantorowicz and defined his approach to 'political iconology'. This tempting suggestion can be nevertheless regarded as problematic since another label, that of 'potestarian/potestary imagology',<sup>1</sup> was introduced a decade earlier by Mikhail Boytsov (Moscow). Thus, it would be of interest to compare (and combine) theoretical the foundations and practice of 'political iconology' and 'potestarian imagology'.

Ryszard Kasperowicz's (Warsaw University) addressed the issue of theoretical evolution of Jan Białostocki, the most famous follower of iconology in Poland, while Magdalena Kunińska (Jagiellonian University) evaluated impact into iconology theory and practice of a less known Polish scholar Zofia Ameisenowa.

Hans Hönes (Leo Baeck Institute, London) explored the intellectual assimilation of German and Austrian intellectuals to art and cultural history in Britain through their presumably growing adaptation to the 'British method' and

<sup>1</sup> Russian historian Mikhail Boytsov introduced this term in the collection of essays of 2010 to denote a branch of imagology concerned with underlying methods employed in cultivating and disseminating the image of authority by the means of literature, art, ceremonies and rituals. In contrast with the ethnography, term 'potestarian/potestary' should not be associated solely with an early political culture in that context, but rather denote any political culture (i.e. even the contemporary one). Currently, the notion of 'potestarian imagology' is widely used by Eastern European historians. Mikhail A. Boytsov, Feodor B. Uspenskij, eds, *Vlast' i obraz. Ocherki potestarnoy imagologii* [Power and Image. Essays on potestarian imagology], Sankt- Petersburg: Aleteya, 2010, 384.

positivist traditions. Yet despite the common myth of their impact in Britain, E.H. Gombrich stated that during the war of 1939–1945 the staff of the Warburg Institute were actually in isolation and barely survived.

Flashback to theoretical premises of iconology was followed by studies focused on the application of the method. Ute Engel (Institut für Kunstgeschichte und Archäologien Europas, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) compared two concepts of architectural iconography that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in works of Hans Sedlmayr and Richard Krautheimer. Mostly known for his Gestalt-approach and formal analysis Sedlmayr nevertheless wrote a rather Panofskian ‘Die politische Bedeutung des deutschen Barocks: (der ‘Reichstil’)’ (1938), where he boldly stated that German baroque originated in Austria and its driving force was Habsburgian ‘imperial consciousness’ expressed in the plan of Schönbrunn. Richard Krautheimer, who was much closer to iconology as positivistic documentation of Emile Mâle, wrote ‘Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture’ (1942), which was full of cautious statements and references to meticulously study medieval historical sources. Peter Kurmann (Université de Fribourg) approached Sedlmayr in a different way: he explored the limits of Sedlmayr’s iconology (if one might call it so) through his elaborations on Gothic architecture.

Elisabeth Pastan (Emory University) presented a case study based on Panofskian iconology. She argued that one should not take the idea of coherence between scholasticism and architecture too literally. It should be rather considered as a driver of a holistic way of thinking about medieval artworks, namely Gothic churches. As she aptly noted, rose windows were often considered to be an artful counterpart to the rota diagram widely present in such medieval texts as ‘Hortus Deliciarum’ and Isidore of Seville ‘De Natura Rerum’. And just like their counterpart, rose windows indicated a synthesis: not only of knowledge but also of the iconographical program of the western façade.

The invention of grand narratives and iconology’s canon was followed with another important topic that of iconology confronted with visual studies, developed mainly in the USA within the so-called ‘Rochester group’. Before going to papers, which dealt with the re-evaluation of iconology in the context of Phenomenology and Semiotics, I shall start with a paper that stood apart from the main trends.

Matthew Rampley (Masaryk University, Brno) approached an important theoretical issue, which caused a long-standing debate: what is the correlation between so-called pre-iconographic and iconographic stages of classical Panofskian scheme? As Robert Klein pointed out earlier, each act of identification occurs within the cultural and social context and thus the distinction between first two stages is rather problematic. This issue in the case of Palaeolithic art is intertwined with the so-called naturalistic theory of art. It regards art as one of the functions of the human brain, a result of the cognitive evolution marked by the emergence of the symbolic mind.

Instead of following this widely accepted opinion, Rampley introduced a much more plausible scheme elaborated by Michael Tomasello in his book *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (1999). Tomasello insisted on a cultural aspect of cognitive evolution and rejected the concept of revolution. Thus, cognitive evolution was the result of the emergence of symbolic thinking and symbolic representation,

the slow accumulation of technologies and the gradual growth of our sensibility to the visual qualities of the object.

The concept of cultural cognition proposed a more nuanced way to evaluate early art and, at the same time, calls art historians not to leave methodological discussions to anthropologists or archaeologists, but to address this part of Warburg's 'iconological heritage'. In short, it drives us to multidisciplinary and not to attempt to make art history 'scientific' through its unequal union with biology, but at the same time to make it leave the hallowed ground of Renaissance art.

Phenomenology and iconology have been long considered as methodological counterparts as the former deals with the object itself and the latter is busy trying to find intrinsic meaning in artworks. Michael Ann Holly (Clark Art Institute) addressed this sensitive issue starting with the provocative title: 'Iconology's shadow'. Her paper argued that the opposition of presentation and representation, which stands behind the heuristic conflict of iconology and phenomenology, is a false binary. Holly ended with a rhetorical question: 'Has phenomenology been shadowing iconology all along or has phenomenology's shadow actually been iconology throughout the twentieth century?' Obviously, the notion of shadowing is crucial here – one cannot escape one own shadow and it would be foolish to try. Why not accept its existence instead?

Monika Leisch-Kiesl's (KU Private University Linz) paper attempted another compromise between iconology, phenomenology and semiotics. Based on Max Imdahl's concept of the 'image field' and Boehm's 'image grounds' she strove to develop an approach that could help to overcome the limitations of iconology's infatuation with meaning and phenomenology's ahistorical poetics of image. Leisch-Kiesl elaborated her own concept of 'ZeichenSetzung' ('Evoking a Sign') as another way to capture the volatile meaning by renouncing the idea of capturing it all! The approach she proposed had to serve a very specific end – to shift the focus from finding the intrinsic meaning or decoding/encoding it with another system of signs to the process of reception.

Keith Moxey addressed several methodological issues at once – historic time, iconology and postcolonial art history. He built up the lecture around two case studies – that of periodization of Chinese painting (and its pitfalls) and of Mughal art from the late 16th century. The notion of time, though used as a tool of objectivity, is obviously a sociocultural construct. Linear chronological time is unimaginable without notions of naturalism, creativity and artistic geniuses, which structure the narrative of art history until now. It implies progress as a key tool for making sense of art phenomena.

Chronological time, with its imperatives, distorted significantly art historians' attitude towards non-Western cultures and made them look, for example, for a Renaissance in Chinese art. Given that the history of Chinese art has never been seen as a linear progression, an art historian cannot stand on the common grounds of the chronological time.

In Chinese landscape painting, as Moxey stated, innovation did not play any significant role. Painters tended to relate to visual formulas from the past: interpretation or replacement was much more important than creativity as painters were interested in copying parts of the landscape as a reflection for a certain mood. These 'ahistorical' paintings were resistant to traditional interpretational models.

He suggested that Warburgian iconology opens a way for dealing with 'ahistorical' art and different temporalities through the concepts of *Nachleben* and *Pathosformula* as it fixes particular passions and makes them recognizable for other generations, which could work in the interpretation of borrowings in Chinese landscape art.

Based on the second case study of art at the court of Shah Jahan, Moxey suggested astrology as another key to art historical interpretation of Non-Western art. Astrological temporality, so different from the Christian linear time, sees time as cyclical, following the motion of planets. As Warburg thought, it represented a more primitive stage in the development of culture, which was nevertheless visible through the 'cracks' of the artist's consciousness. Warburg considered astrology as an alternative to art history's chronological order since 'that age when logic and magic blossom is inherently timeless'.

Paying attention to forms of time to which images belong can afford access to different forms of temporality. This offers us an opportunity to write different art histories with other temporalities in mind, Moxey argued. Whether different temporalities that are translatable are commensurable remained much an open question.

## II. Local iconologies? Colouring the grey areas

For a long time 'Eastern' Iconology was a kind of grey area for American and West European scholars. Therefore, it came as no surprise that two panels were mostly dedicated to this previously neglected topic. How did iconology get into mostly Marxist historiographies and what does it tell us?

Heinrich Dilly (The Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg) focused on the so-called 'Jenaer Arbeitskreis für Ikonographie und Ikonologie' (1978–1990) founded by Friedrich Möbius and Helga Möbius-Sciurlein Jena. Organised in different German cities their meetings were supposed to foster studies in the methodology of art history. However, it was a short-lived enterprise, for it was later established that Möbius had worked as an agent for the Ministry for State Security of the GDR. Thus, in 1990 the circle was dissolved and its initiators expelled from the university.

Milena Bartlová (Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, Prague) addressed the issue of the so-called 'Marxist Iconology' introduced by Jaromír Neumann and Rudolf Chadraba. The aim of Czech Marxist iconology was to define meaning in terms of the history of class conscious. Thus, they saw in religious art 'symbolic depictions of current social relations dressed in religious robes'.

Chadraba's research dealt with the medieval tradition of triumphs.

Methodologically, he combined Dvořák, Strzygowsky and Sedlmayr. Neumann developed a political iconology of Czech baroque architecture, which he defined as the expression of Czech national character. Chadraba also interpreted Gothic symbolism as 'folk knowledge'. Milena Bartlová considered the 'Prague School' of iconography to be a failed attempt to reinvent Panofsky through the lens of Marxism-Leninism. Nevertheless, she designated this more or less short-lived trend

in Czech historiography as a 'school' introducing a notion, which seems to be problematic and definitely deserves further analysis.

Iconology's implementation in the Soviet Union was no less problematic than in the former Czechoslovakia. Even more, by the 1960s there emerged in Soviet art historiography a genre on its own – the ardent criticism of 'bourgeois' historiography', which had to be described as being in the state of the permanent decay. At the same time, one could remark on the fact methodologies from Western Europe and North America were frequently adopted and adapted in writings of the Soviet art historians. This 'doublethink' was, of course, a result of severe censorship. Thus, Marina Dmitrieva's (Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe, Leipzig) paper on Iconology in art-historical discourse in the Soviet Union dealt with a very sensitive topic. How did Soviet art historians perceive iconology? Did they manage to find a Marxist overtone, as did their Czech colleagues? In a paper published in 1964, Mikhail Liebman<sup>2</sup> severely criticized iconology: he criticized it as 'purely idealistic' and deprived of 'healthy realism'. Iconology, in his opinion, left no place for formal analysis, which was, together with Marxism, the main tool of art historical research in Soviet scholarship.

In the 1970s Victor Graschenkov and his teacher Victor Lazarev revised iconology. However, it was Mikhail Sokolov,<sup>3</sup> who first advocated adopting the method associated with Erwin Panofsky. In his paper 'On the limits of iconology' published in 1977, Sokolov argued that the 'theory of intrinsic meaning' was very close to the socialist notion of 'reading between the lines'. Later, he applied an iconological approach in his habilitation thesis on images of everyday life in Western art of the 15th – 17th centuries. In subsequent years, Sokolov published several books with the term 'iconology' in the title, although they strayed away from actual iconology towards historiosophic generalisations.

Another way to deal with iconology within the Soviet realm, Dmitrieva noted, was to combine it with semiotics as a form of intellectual resistance. Thus, Panofsky was baptized as the 'Saussure of Art History' and an anti-Marxist form of iconology emerged within the Moscow semiotic school in the 1960s – 1980s. Their common theoretical background was to approach the artwork as a text, and culture as a communicative system (Mikhail Gasparov).

Krista Kodres (University of Tallinn) considered the connection between Iconology and the Moscow-Tartu school, which she presented as a 'sneaking in' of Iconology behind the 'Iron curtain', specifically the Estonian SSR. Due to the political climate, discussions of iconology in Estonia started only in 1970, after

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Liebman (1920–2010) was a Soviet, Russian and Israeli art historian specialised in the Italian and German Renaissance art and in the art of the 20th century. Liebman worked in the State Institute of Art History and in the Expert Committee of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR. He represented Soviet art history during the Congresses of the International Committee of the History of Arts in Bonn (1964), Budapest (1969), Granada (1973), and Vienne (1983).

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Sokolov (1946–2016) was a Soviet and Russian historian and philosopher of art specialised in the Northern Renaissance art and Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Arts (RAKh). He worked as Principal Investigator in the Department of Western European Art in the Research Institute for the Theory and the History of Fine Arts of the RAKh.

prominent Soviet scholars from Moscow published more or less favourable accounts of it. In addition, much in the footsteps of the Moscow-Tartu school, Estonian art historians combined Panofskian iconology with semiotics. The theoretical discussion so rarely appealing for an object-based research were indeed taken in account by Estonian Medievalists (Sirje Helme, 1975). Nevertheless, as Kodres points out, one should not exaggerate the impact of iconology on Estonian art history, which remained rather limited.

Ada Hajdu and Mikhail Mihnea (New Europe College, Institute for Advanced Study, Bucharest) provocatively entitled their paper as 'The absence of iconology in Romania. A possible answer'. As it was shown, works of Erwin Panofsky were widely available, but iconology as a method for Medieval and Renaissance studies was almost absent from the Romanian research landscape. Hence, scholars avoided iconology both for ideological and methodological reasons.

It seems like iconology became a mirror for Central and Eastern European art historians. If one evaluates historiography in respect to iconology – how was it adapted and perceived it leads inevitably to the conclusion that iconology is a measure of all-important things – especially that of freedom of speech and research. A mirror that reflects perfectly the Soviet distorted reality and Post-Soviet uncertainty. This consideration might also explain an approach taken by Romanian colleagues. It would be not without interest to ask whether iconology is regarded as one of the markers of 'Western identity' for Central and Eastern Europeans.

Marina Vicelja (University of Rijeka) looked at the foundations of Croatian art history and its ties with iconology and the Vienna school of art history. Joseph Strzygowski triggered studies that treated early medieval art as a part of the Croatian national identity project. What happens if you take iconology from familiar territory to the early medieval period? The question Vicelja asked is still to be answered.

## Conclusions

Firstly, it is worth pointing to the 'grand absences' of the conference – Georges Didi-Huberman and Ernst Gombrich. One might also think about Dutch/Belgian iconologies. It is hard to imagine discussion on iconology without Georges Didi-Huberman's interpretation of Warburg or without the lively discussion between Svetlana Alpers and Eddy de Jongh. Eddy de Jongh,<sup>4</sup> one of the 'founding fathers' of seventeenth-century Dutch art, in a Panofskian way explored at large the themes and motives in relation to contemporary concepts. After Alpers has published in 1983 her famous and polemical 'The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century' Eddy de Jongh wrote a negative review and labelled it 'failed book'. His main concern was a literal reading of the Dutch emblems Alpers advocated, which left 'no room for disguised meaning or symbolism' as Walter S. Gibson aptly put it<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> His major essays were published in English: Eddy de Jongh, *Questions of Meaning; Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting*, Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2000, 296.

<sup>5</sup> Walter S. Gibson, 'The Art of Describing: the Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century by Svetlana Alpers', *Art Documentation Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, Vol. 2, No. 6, 1983, 210.

De Jongh stated, 'Alpers, however is convinced that these emblems and indeed Dutch emblems, in general, are straightforward, and not in the least problematical. She believes that they are similar to Dutch painting in that their import should not be sought beneath or behind the surface of the page but on the surface, for it is there that they have been made visible, or so we are told'.<sup>6</sup> Their polemic about emblems laid bare crucial conflict between iconology and visual studies. Unfortunately, this conflict was not discussed during the conference. Nor was the Dutch iconological tradition apart from its very beginnings.

It was no less a surprise that Ernst Gombrich's attempts to deal with iconology's limitations passed this time unnoticed. His 'ecological approach' to images is a convincing alternative to the quest for symptoms. Instead of diagnosing 'mentality' or 'Zeitgeist' based on the 'symptoms', he suggested looking at numerous factors, which created an 'ecological niche' for an artwork or style to appear. He explained the use of the concept as follows: 'The metaphor of ecological niche appealed to me precisely because it does not imply a rigid social determinism. Indeed, the study of ecology has alerted us to the many forms of interaction between the organism and its environment which render the outcome quite unpredictable'.<sup>7</sup> He was among the few scholars of his generation who renounced following in the footsteps of Panofsky. Being an attentive reader of Warburg, Gombrich tried to take iconology further, beyond the limits defined by Warburg or Panofsky. His views are by no means the truth of the highest instance but an important milestone in iconology's theory and practice.

Secondly, speaking about the theory and practice of iconology one might have noted another issue, that of the gap between theorising about iconology and applying it. In most cases, the practice of iconology remains almost intact since the famous scheme of Erwin Panofsky while theory explores other possibilities of enrichment of this approach. Michael Ann Holly argued that Merleau-Ponty offered an alternative to what she regarded the iconological tyranny of semantics and historicity. Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that one could follow their path given its unique ties to the personal experience of the authors. Iconology's shadow remains rather the way of thinking about the aesthetic experience of art than being a method of art historical analysis.

Thirdly, the notion of 'local iconologies' is problematic as in most cases iconology as the study of symbols in art was incorporated into other methodologies. In the case of Soviet and Post-Soviet traditions, dealing with iconology or semiotics was more than a choice of analytical tools: it meant taking a stand in a milieu hostile to all Western 'bourgeois' novelties. The attempts to mix iconology with Marxism might be historically interesting but are they or theoretically significant? And if we cannot really label the Soviet synthetic approach as a 'local iconology', are 'local iconologies' possible at all? It seems that they are either variation on the major three themes mentioned at the beginning of the review or different approaches with some theoretical borrowings from iconology. They have historical significance as a

<sup>6</sup> Eddy de Jongh, 'The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century by Svetlana Alpers', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1984, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *The Uses of Images*, London: Phaidon Press, 1999, 48.

testimony of intellectual exchanges between Eastern and Western European art histories.

And what about the absence of iconology in certain traditions that was problematised in the paper of Ada Hajdu and Mikhail Mihnea? The paper provoked lively debates and received a critical remark by Matthew Rampley. He asked why they felt necessary to justify the absence of iconology in Romania. He hinted at postcolonial syndrome in Central European art history and at an (unconscious?) wrestling with the heritage of German art history. This assumption was rejected by the speakers but drove a discussion on iconology and its intellectual dominance and even as a possible means to exercise colonialism.

Iconology remains diverse. So does iconology's temporality— one may encounter traditional biographical sketches, surveys of national schools of art history, Panofskian or Warburgian iconological studies, and essays on the edge of semiotics, phenomenology, and iconology at the same time. We cannot consider iconology to be a unity nor semantically nor temporally: it is too widely used to be a school. In every case, local historiography, language, the art historian's national or gender identity and professional background determine iconology's use and understanding.

Thus, the Cracow conference was successful not only in bringing together scholars from more than ten countries, but also in challenging the image of iconology as a unity and fostering debates about its 'local' modes.

**Stefaniia Demchuk** is an assistant professor of art history at Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Ukraine). She is currently studying intellectual exchanges between 'Western' and 'Eastern' European art histories.

stephanierom07@gmail.com



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