

A Critical Examination of the Foundational Principles and Conceptual Boundaries of Image-Based Narrative

Shijin Cui*

School of Innovation, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, Hubei, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: Visual images serve as historical and cultural narratives rendered through a visible, symbolic mode of representation. Research on visual imagery has moved beyond the limitations of textual discourse, enabling access to material traces of the past and evoking affective resonances with historical experiences. Building upon foundational theoretical contributions by art and cultural historians, even seemingly mundane visual artifacts convey the continuity and coexistence of human societies across time. As the scope and methodologies of visual narration expand—shaped by contemporary intellectual and technological currents—this field increasingly fosters interdisciplinary convergence among art history, cultural history, and visual studies. In today’s era of rapid digital and multimedia advancement, such scholarship also engages critically with the social construction of visual knowledge.

Keywords: Visual Arts; Iconography; Neo-Iconography; Art-Historical Research; Digital Media; Image Studies

1. Introduction

Images have served to convey meaning and emotion long before the advent of written text. As embodiments of human cultural practices—encompassing myth, custom, ethics, and morality—images transcend mere artistic expression; they operate as semiotic signs and documentary evidence of history. If Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (1568), with its visual readings and analyses of numerous eminent artists’ works, marked the inception of art history, then Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s concept of the “spirit of the age” signified an expansion of shared cultural attributes within contemporary representation and a challenge to the limitations of a narrowly defined art history. Art historians such as Jacob

Christoph Burckhardt and Aby Warburg positioned images on the same dimensional plane as human culture and history. They advocated for the inclusion of broader domains, such as politics and religion, alongside customs, morals, and ritual arts, into a unified account of historical development, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the origins and internal dynamics of cultural change.

2. Visual Traceability: The Background of Image Evolution

Burckhardt considered the state and politics as tangible “works of art” [1], utilizing an aesthetic framework to elucidate the political landscape of the Western Renaissance. His scholarship underscores the importance of translating the cultural meanings embedded in artworks; he posited that the primary function of painting is to reflect the historical context of its era through distinctive characteristics, thereby expanding art-historical inquiry into the realm of cultural history [2]. In Burckhardt’s perspective, the visual arts represent a fundamental mechanism for recounting visible history and act as essential witnesses to the cultural evolution of a period.

Burckhardt’s ideas had a profound impact, inspiring a group of distinguished scholars, among whom Aby Warburg stands out. Warburg introduced the discipline of iconography, emphasizing the significance of the Renaissance while conducting contemporary studies of artistic culture. He established an archive of materials and created base panels containing over a thousand images to facilitate the study of human cultural history, tirelessly striving to recover valuable remnants of human tradition. He posited that image signification forms conventionalized sign systems that convey historical and humanistic messages, referred to as “Pathosformeln” [3]. Pathos encompasses emotions, vitality, vigor, and movement; it serves as a specialized pictorial term for illustrating emotional disturbances and the

transformation of affective states. Viewers, when confronted with the pictorial history of their own cultures, will recognize certain image metaphors. Thus, images serve as a bridge to historical memory: grounded in national history and culture, they interpret the trajectory of humanistic history, document shifts in human sentiment, and delineate the contours of classical cultural evolution.

Warburg's approach to image analysis is grounded in a close interplay of multidisciplinary and multidimensional connections, which dismantles disciplinary barriers to foster interdisciplinary interpretations of images rooted in historical and cultural contexts. He introduced a comprehensive cultural-historical evolutionary perspective to the study of visual arts, juxtaposing previously distinct disciplines to facilitate subsequent advancements in Western art history and to support the eventual establishment of iconology as a separate field. His concepts were informed by the aesthetic theory of "figuration" (image), utilizing comparative methods to associate images with meanings, thereby elucidating the "magical connections" and "logical ruptures." This approach also draws parallels between elements of myth or fable and concrete entities, allowing images to be integrated with theological concepts [4]. He conducted an iconographic study of the frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara utilizing the "picture-reading" method, also known as the Warburgian method. By examining the subject matter and composition, and drawing on source texts transmitted from Western Europe as well as myths of Mount Olympus, he linked Greek mythological narratives with medieval astrology, ultimately unraveling the enigma of the palace's mural program. The diverse gestures of the figures and the latent meanings embedded in the backgrounds can be interpreted as morphological variants of ancient Greek mythological personae. After centuries of transmission and transformation through Western classical culture, and influenced by the humanistic milieu of the Italian Renaissance, these personae were reconceived as planetary or zodiacal deities. In this manner, Warburg illustrated an intrinsic connection between Renaissance art and classical culture, identifying a driving force behind the creative endeavors of Renaissance artists: their pursuit of cultural and humanistic renewal.

Upholding the classical cultural tradition, Erwin Panofsky inherited and expanded upon Walther's image-study method, which is grounded in an interdisciplinary scholarly perspective and cultural-historical inquiry. He transformed this method into a systematic iconology, thereby establishing an image-interpretation framework characterized by a strong humanistic orientation. The development of perspective played a crucial role in the consolidation of iconology. Following Filippo Brunelleschi's 15th-century invention, which stemmed from his mathematical insights, perspective emerged as the standard for accurately reproducing visual art. Masaccio's implementation of the Trinity perspective further aligned the verisimilitude of visual images with the authenticity of physical space. Linear perspective introduced a novel mode of visual-cognitive construction in Renaissance art. Specifically, individuals of the classical period utilized various forms—perspectival signs, period-specific attributes, and cultural spirit—to create a distinctive visual cultural history. This approach allowed viewers to interpret the deeper meanings of images within established expressive conventions and the contemporary contextual framework. The research primarily examines medieval and Renaissance painting, including Early Netherlandish art and religious works. These symbolic signifiers, encompassing forms, matrices, subjects, styles, allegories, and myths, represent key concepts emerging from an integrated study of art history and cultural history.

Panofsky's expansion of iconology can be articulated as follows: it transcended the insular confines of contemporary formalist art history and extended into a broader humanistic tradition. This evolution progressed from image description to visual literacy, ultimately leading to the interpretation of underlying historical and humanistic dimensions, as well as the decoding of cultural depths embedded within images. Panofsky's most significant contribution to the study of images was his rigorous delineation of three levels of meaning. The first, natural meaning (pre-iconographical level), refers to the factual significance and affective expression elicited by the image's form, representing a basic narrative and surface-level interpretation. The second, conventional meaning (iconographical level), pertains to the social customs and cultural traditions reflected in the

image's facts, which is a social conclusion derived from knowledge of traditional conventions. The third, intrinsic meaning (iconological level), encompasses a deeper discourse that integrates all elements constituting the particularities of an era's traditions, national and class identities, and systems of knowledge. This level is approached through a distinctive method of inquiry aimed at observing, interpreting, and explicating the era's confirming evidence.

3. Visual Perception Translation: Three Interpretations in Iconography

Using Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (Figure 1) as a case study, I elucidate Panofsky's tripartite scheme of iconological interpretation to illustrate the evolving relationship of "images as historical evidence."



Figure 1. Leonardo Da Vinci: "The Last Supper", Oil Painting, 1494-1498, Collected by the Basilica of Santa Maria in Milan, Italy

At the primary level of iconographic representation, the artist reconstructs the motif by drawing upon rich life experiences and exegetical material from sacred texts, ultimately conveying his own mediated life experience. The *Last Supper* is a monumental oil painting measuring 910 cm in height and 420 cm in width. In terms of composition, Leonardo da Vinci deviates from the traditional arrangement in which Jesus and the disciples face one another; instead, he positions Jesus at the center of a long table, with the disciples seated or standing on either side. The interior layout adheres to one-point perspective, establishing both the vanishing point and the eye level at the painting's core. Three tall windows behind the group allow brilliant natural light to enter, creating strong contrasts that concentrate all centripetal forces, both within and beyond the picture plane, on Jesus, thereby producing a solemn and reverent effect.

At the secondary level of iconography, the artist elucidates the subject of the image through its visual composition, encompassing the story,

narrative, allegorical significance, and emotional or devotional content to which the image alludes. The *Last Supper* draws upon the teachings of the New Testament (The Teachings and Works of Jesus); in the Gospel of Mark, it is noted that the chief priests conspired to apprehend Jesus at night and, lacking a guide, bribed his disciple Judas Iscariot. The painting vividly portrays the meal scene in which, after Jesus reveals his impending betrayal, the assembled figures exhibit a spectrum of reactions—bewilderment, indignation, astonishment, and shock—reflected in their expressions and gestures. Leonardo captures Judas's greed, guile, and agitation with remarkable fidelity. Consequently, iconography at this secondary level extends and amplifies the primary iconographical meaning: the artist, attuned to the nuances of various historical contexts, employs objects and events pertinent to the era to convey the work's theme and intent, effectively supplementing and refining the canonical sources through a historical inquiry into types [5].

The final, third level of iconographic analysis interprets the intrinsic elements of ethnicity, class, and religiosity within works of art. Through various historical characteristics and thematic contexts, the artist identifies general human traits and essential tendencies, employing synthetic intuition to refine these modalities. Similar to unraveling a cocoon, the artist corroborates the meanings embedded in an artwork with historical documentation, utilizing political, economic, humanistic, philosophical, poetic, religious, and faith-based sources to substantiate the visible narrative history. In this context, Panofsky, following Burckhardt's contributions to art history, regarded Renaissance art as a subject for broad synchronic study, focusing on the culture of the era and humanism. He exercised an integrative and objective approach, pursuing multilinear narratives within the humanities and thereby articulating the fundamental significance of images.

In this composition, the artist utilizes a parallel perspective, positioning six figures on either side of Jesus to create a visual focal point that converges on his brow. Although Jesus lowers his gaze and extends his hand, the serene atmosphere does not diminish the commanding presence conveyed by his posture; the twelve disciples surrounding him exhibit profound emotion and expressive body language. The

skillful interplay of stillness and motion imparts cohesion and a sense of order to the image. The disciples' fervor, emanating from Jesus, transforms into a "silent clamor," supporting E. H. Gombrich's description of this analogy as a poignant "mime," representing a live enactment of the Last Supper in pantomime [6].

Heinrich Wölfflin remarked on the artwork, "Nothing exists for its own sake; everything in the painting is for the whole." [7] Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* represents the apex of Renaissance artistic accomplishment. Beyond its compositional arrangement, perspective, chiaroscuro, and figural grouping, the piece recontextualizes the Eucharistic theme within its historical and cultural contexts. Its tripartite iconographic structure imparts both creative vitality and historical significance to the work [8].

4. Image Science Examination: Visibility Verification of Paintings

Another example is the panel oil painting *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434) by the Netherlandish painter Jan van Eyck (Figure 2), which depicts the betrothal ceremony of the merchant Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife, Joannetta Cenami [9]. Jan van Eyck adeptly developed a technique that combined linseed oil with pigments, marking a significant advancement in oil painting. When this artwork was publicly exhibited in 1843, it garnered considerable attention, and its interpretation has been the subject of ongoing debate. Some view it as an unusually rendered marital portrait, while others perceive it as a ceremony that confers authority from husband to wife, and still others interpret it as a posthumous commemoration for a deceased spouse. In Panofsky's analysis, the dog symbolizes conjugal fidelity, the single lit candle in the chandelier represents the gaze of God, the fruit on the windowsill alludes to prelapsarian innocence prior to the consumption of forbidden fruit, and the placement of the removed slipper subtly suggests contemporary distinctions in the domestic roles of spouses. This painting adheres to the medieval tradition of imbuing visual works with symbols and allegories, conveying meanings that extend far beyond the immediate "ceremonial" imagery of the scene [10].

Art-historical and iconographic methods can be employed to interpret this work, particularly in examining the relationship between the depicted

figures. Are they welcoming visitors or making vows at a wedding? Oranges, a highly valued commodity in fifteenth-century Europe, are scattered along the windowsill and beneath the window, indicating the sitters' wealth. The groom's expression is solemn, while the bride appears composed; she dons a white headdress symbolizing chastity and a green gown that evokes life. A round mirror occupies the center of the composition, introducing an element of mystery and intrigue. Above the mirror, the artist's playful signature in Latin reads: "Jan van Eyck was here, 1434." Surrounding the mirror are ten small enamel reliefs, each illustrating scenes from the Passion of Christ. The mirror reflects the backs of the two figures, yet the small dog—an emblem of marital fidelity—is conspicuously absent from the reflection. The mirror's significance extends further, connecting to the van Eyck brothers' earlier work, the *Ghent Altarpiece* (Figure 3); in the lower central panel, *The Adoration of the Lamb*, the lamb's head is positioned at the visual center, and that vanishing point emits a gleam that enhances the image's subtle prominence.



Figure 2. Jan van Eyck: "The Arnolfini Portrait," Oil Painting, 1434, Collected by the National Gallery, London



Figure 3. Jan van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece, Oil Painting, 1415-1432, Cathedral of St. Bavo, Ghent/u

The convex mirror in *The Arnolfini Portrait* serves a dual purpose: it compresses space while extending the visual field, thereby incorporating

the external world into the center of the composition. Additionally, to the left of the small dog at the bottom of the painting, a pair of wooden clogs evokes the biblical notion of removing shoes or going barefoot as a sign of the sacred. Alongside the red shoes positioned near the bed, this imagery suggests that the newlyweds have removed their footwear and are participating in the ceremony barefoot. A small statue of Saint Margaret, the patron saint of childbirth and guardian of new life, is situated on the bedpost, while the broom hanging nearby symbolizes the diligent care of the household anticipated after marriage [11]. Jan van Eyck utilized an exceptionally realistic approach to create a genre portrait rich in religious significance, and his innovative use of oil-painting techniques contributed to the work's esteemed status. He adeptly incorporated multiple layers of detail, allowing viewers to almost perceive the textures of the brass chandelier and crystal, the glass beads and suspended garlands, the pile of the carpet, the hairs on the dog, the heels of the wooden clogs, the window glass, and the tactile quality of the fur-trimmed robes worn by the two figures. Each of these pictorial elements and their arrangement serve as extensions of the image's visual components, conveying symbolic meaning and representing a profound interpretation of iconography as "visibility narrative."

5. Resonance of the Times: New Images Narrate the Boundaries of History

At this juncture, as the foundational contours of iconography within the visual arts become clearer, it is pertinent to present the following summary of the development of iconography and the evolution of visual culture:

Burckhardt and Warburg were pioneers in establishing a connection between images and the history of human culture. By invoking cultural meaning to express the spirit of an era and employing aesthetic methodologies to examine politics, society, and the state, they utilized images—distinct from traditional textual sources—to substantiate cultural phenomena. On a more concrete level, they annotated the cultural representations and historical connotations embedded in visual art. Warburg, in particular, transcended historicism and provided a conceptual impetus for visual historical narration through his notion of "affectual forms." This interdisciplinary

engagement with the historical and cultural substratum of images, along with the reinterpretation of classical art and culture, constitutes an initial framework for visual cultural history and represents one of the earliest inquiries into visual culture within art-historical and cultural-historical scholarship.

Subsequent scholars in the study of images turned to figures such as Panofsky and Gombrich. Panofsky developed iconology and established its academic legitimacy through a tripartite method of interpretation, thereby consolidating iconology as an autonomous research paradigm. Nicholas Mirzoeff even praised Panofsky as the "Saussure of art history" [12]. This perspective is echoed in the remarks of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who, in a 1938 lecture in Freiburg titled "The Metaphysical Foundations of the Concept of Nature," discussed the interconnected effects of the modern world and image-society. Heidegger argued that the images of modern society are constructed by humanity and perceived by the world through the logical evolutions of classical, medieval, and later periods. Similarly, art-historical pioneer Michael Baxandall observed that the "period eye" connects artistic production to social history. These interventions underscore the imagistic nature of social development. In summary, the evolution of art history and the history of fine art presents a comprehensive historical perspective, with the origins of visual art rooted in the progression of images.

A precise delineation of the boundaries of image-based narration in the context of contemporary resonance allows for a clear assertion: since the twentieth century and continuing to the present, the expansion of art-historical inquiry into cultural history has significantly benefited from iconography. Art history, in conjunction with the humanities and social sciences—including history, religious studies, political science, and ethics—has collaboratively mapped the *longue durée* of cultural history. Humans have constructed this history through visual signs, thereby broadening the scope of art history, which has increasingly evolved through successive phases of historical cultural study. Fueled by the dynamic forces of electronic media and computational innovations characteristic of the new industrial revolution, the twenty-first century has ushered in a complex, information-rich "new image age" of multimedia. This era is marked by a proliferation

of cartographic tools, image-editing software, and advancements in Internet-of-Things big data, all of which document human society visually and enable global dissemination. Images have emerged as a symbolic language with enhanced communicative impact and emotional resonance, serving as the visual embodiment of contemporary cultural mainstreams. Meanwhile, mass media have created a novel context for the advancement of contemporary iconographic and visual culture studies.

The contemporary resurgence of iconography is rooted in a visual culture that prioritizes imagery and the visual system. Interdisciplinary scholar W. J. T. Mitchell introduced the term “pictorial turn” to explain the transformations occurring within contemporary culture and the humanities. This concept not only highlights the significance of images but also signifies a shift in scholarly attention from documentary and textual sources to pictorial representation. In this “new image era,” a “new pictorial landscape” has emerged; images, once considered supplementary to reading, now assert visual culture as an independent and influential domain. This evolution also illustrates that throughout the extensive history of seal engraving and calligraphic practice, images have been dependent on and linked to script, while translating textual information into visual literacy remains a complex challenge [13]. Warburg articulated a paradigm of “cultural regeneration” in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, providing a profound insight into the “crisis of modernity” identified in Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. This crisis pertains specifically to the Renaissance’s appropriation of classical art and the evocation of Eastern art. Although images have long been displaced throughout human cultural history, humanity no longer relies on them to convey concepts or ideas [14]. Visual arts and iconography are indeed not without their shortcomings. The former is limited by its spatiotemporal constraints, while the latter relies heavily on the proprietary term “image.” Iconography fundamentally signifies a broad concept of “representation” and functions as a scientific rather than a political endeavor. This overreliance somewhat constrains its applicability and hampers its ability to effectively engage with extensive studies of material culture globally [15].

Visual images that represent the collective

heritage of society encapsulate the complexities of history and human experience. They engage in dialogue with individuals across various eras and evoke emotional connections to the past, fostering cultural self-confidence. In this era of continuous visual transformation, it is essential to clarify the authenticity of visual images along with their historical and humanistic dimensions. Additionally, there is a need to develop new research frameworks that can effectively distinguish the genuine from the spurious. Such initiatives can address the limitations of image science and alleviate the shortcomings of visual art. Amid the extensive growth of digital media, this approach articulates the shared aesthetic and humanistic values of images while promoting the ongoing development of socially situated visual imagery.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigates the visual provenance of iconography by analyzing concurrent shifts in thought and modes of evolution. Through iconographic commentary on paintings, it identifies and isolates issues arising from complex visual elements. Set against the backdrop of an era-wide resonance that redefines the boundaries of new image narratives, it offers reflections and responses regarding the future development of iconography. The concept of “figure-ground” has transcended its limitations within a single linguistic sign system, fostering equilibrium within an internal spatial spirit while striving to convey the enduring interrelation between individuals and society. This represents both a reliance on humanistic history and a pursuit within iconographic inquiry. In light of the ever-changing multiplicity of human possibilities, individuals seek a symbiotic relationship between ground and boundary within visual-image contexts. By drawing on the reconstruction of art research, aesthetic theory, and historical humanistic studies, they evoke a “chordal resonance” among art history, cultural history, and the history of fine arts. This process filters authentic images to restore historical continuities, mitigates undue overinterpretation in iconography, and collectively promotes the ongoing development of visual literacy and image evolution across contemporary interdisciplinary domains.

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by Hubei Provincial

Collaborative Innovation Center for Urban Public Space Arts, 2025 Funded Project “Research on Strategies for Promoting Urban–Rural Coordination through Art Curation” (No. XT-2025-08); Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, 2025 University-level General Research Project “Research on Mechanisms and Strategies for Integrating Urban–Rural Cultural Tourism through Art Curation” (No. 2025XJ15); Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, 2023 University-Level Graduate Teaching Research Project: “Exploration and Practice of an Interdisciplinary Arts Talent Training Model Based on the ‘Three Dimensions and Four Levels’” (No. YJSJY202302).

References

- [1] Peter B. What Is Cultural History. Peking University Press, 2009.
- [2] Cui H C, Wu J W. A Chronology of Research on Visual Narratives. Journal of Jiangnan University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2024, 23(6):101-113.
- [3] Fan J Z. The Shapes of Art History I: From Vasari to the 1920s. China Academy of Art Press, 2003.
- [4] Edgar W, Yang S L. The Concept of “Kulturwissenschaft” by Warburg and Its Significance for Aesthetics. Xin Meishu, 2018, 39(3):15-27.
- [5] Panofsky E. Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance. Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2011.
- [6] Gombrich E. H.. The Renaissance: A Great Age of Western Art. China Academy of Art Press, 2000.
- [7] Heinrich W. Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art. Renmin University of China Press, 2004, p. 27.
- [8] Ge Z Y. A Study on the Relationship between Image Space and Occupied Space: The Case of the Last Supper. Architectural Journal, 2023, (3):100-107.
- [9] Gombrich E. H. The Story of Art, translated into Chinese by Fan Jingzhong. Guangxi Fine Arts Press, 2008.
- [10] Carr D. The Principles of Art Historiography. Renmin University of China Press, 2010.
- [11] Wu R M. How Does an Image Become an Image? - An Examination of the Generation and Pathways of Michel’s Image Epistemology. Art Critique, 2025, (11): 91-105.
- [12] Mirzoeff N. Introduction to Visual Culture. Jiangsu People’s Publishing House, 2006.
- [13] Mitchel W.J.T. Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- [14] Zhang W. Media, Objects, and Space: Three Dimensions and the Practical Logic of Contemporary Visual Rhetoric. Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2023, (2):74-82.
- [15] John O, Wan M C. Visual Research: Past, Present, and Future. Xin Meishu, 2010, 31(3):4-12.