

Introduction

Beyond the Crossroads: Iconography and Its Evolutions

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The essays in this volume spring from a conference celebrating just over a century of iconographic studies at the Index of Medieval Art at Princeton University, a span during which both the Index and its principal field have evolved dramatically. The founder of the Index, Princeton Art and Archaeology Professor Charles Rufus Morey, could hardly have guessed that his original Index of Christian Art, which began as a modest print collection of file cards and photographs recording the iconography of works from the earliest centuries of the Common Era, would grow into a complex taxonomic project with an internationally accessible online database presenting images and metadata from a “Long Middle Ages” that, if still centered in medieval Europe, increasingly reaches beyond that sphere. Nor might he have foreseen how the conception and mission of the Index have also evolved: from a tightly circumscribed print tool designed to track the iconographic variations that he hoped would shed light on the development of the earliest Christian art, it has become a multifarious print-digital hybrid open to a very wide range of topical and methodological questions and a home base for workshops, conferences, a book series, and a journal all dedicated to a deepened understanding of how medieval images work.

The evolution of the Index from research tool to research center has imposed a corresponding mandate: that its staff remain attuned to developments within its field of study by identifying, evaluating, and responding to the scholarly and methodological priorities central to it. In the early days, such awareness came rather easily to the

Index, which for much of the twentieth century stood at the epicenter of iconographic research at a university where the study of iconography, and of medieval art writ large, had long been promoted and supported. In the engaging essay that opens the present volume, Elizabeth Sears reconstructs how work on iconography at Princeton flourished in tandem with the “mutually supportive strands of study” undertaken by the Index founder Morey, in his role as professor of art and archaeology at the university, and the Warburgian iconologist Erwin Panofsky, who had settled at the nearby Institute for Advanced Study in 1935. Regular engagement with the Index by these figures; by other Princeton faculty such as Ernst DeWald, Frank Jewett Mather, Albert M. Friend, and Kurt Weitzmann; and by other esteemed medievalists—at the Institute for Advanced Study, in New York, and in the Delaware Valley—for many years ensured that iconographic work pursued at the Index could track closely along with the priorities of the field.

This easy exchange was disrupted in the 1980s, when profound transformations in the discipline of art history provoked what one might call an “existential crisis” for the study of iconography, along with many other methodological approaches once traditional to the field. Inspired by poststructuralist scholarship, medievalists along with other art historians struggled with questions about the relevance and efficacy of once-hallowed practices now perceived as too rigid, subjective, or paradigmatically outdated to yield the nuanced answers they desired. Such skepticism, paired with an enthusiastic embrace of critical theory, led some to dismiss iconography, along with other long-standing art-historical tools such as connoisseurship and stylistic analysis, as Darwinian casualties of the discipline’s forward movement.

Madeline Caviness’s essay, which closes this volume, sets these developments into their longest perspective, tracing the impact of poststructuralism both within iconographic studies and as a factor in the academic discipline and wider political culture upon which it unavoidably impinged. As she notes, the critique arrived at a moment when traditional iconographic methods often were, in fact, overfocused on descriptive identification and text-based interpretation at the expense of more flexible analysis, so it could hardly be ignored. Some methodological battle lines were negotiated at the Index itself, where the 1990 conference “Iconography at the Crossroads” attempted to frame them for the discipline overall.¹ There, a diverse cohort of scholars, among them Michael Camille, John V. Fleming, Herbert Kessler, Joseph Leo Koerner, Michael Ann Holly, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, and Keith Moxey, sought with great spirit and some success, if without marked unanimity, to chart a path for an art-historical practice clearly perceived to be in crisis.

Such multiple viewpoints notwithstanding, there was one thing on which all those conference participants seem to have agreed: that the human desire to find meaning in images is virtually inescapable. Even scholars who pronounced themselves ready to abandon completely the practice they called “iconography” could not refrain from asking what images meant and how they functioned for the people who made and

viewed them. As Caviness recounts, it would fall to theoretical pioneers such as Camille and Moxey, among other key practitioners, to set the field on its new road. These “New Iconologists,” if such they might have allowed themselves to be called, demonstrated that it is possible to pursue questions of meaning in medieval images without falling prey to either an obsession with canonical types or an overreliance on canonical texts. They invited art historians to consider a far wider range of images, from marginalia to ornament to graffiti, and to recognize that the meaning of all medieval images was informed by a commensurately wider range of conditions, from oral, performative, and scientific traditions to changing contexts for viewing and reception and the peculiar knowledge and experience of the individual viewer. Still more important, they contested the surprisingly tenacious assumption that iconographic meaning was both fixed by the artist at the moment of a work’s creation and limited to the original viewpoint of a docile, passive viewer. In a poststructuralist view, the contingency of iconographic meaning upon its context and reception ensured its subjectivity.

The field’s growing refusal to accept iconographic meaning as a fixed significance handed down unilaterally from artist to viewer, along with its interest in the responsiveness of a diversity of signs to their context, had salutary effects upon the study of iconography at the Index as well. Not only did it transform the kinds of images and subjects that were selected for cataloguing by Index specialists, but it also restructured the ways in which such data can now be identified, described, and searched. Where a researcher of the 1930s might have found in the card files conventional biblical and hagiographical subjects like “Virgin Mary: Annunciation” or “Ursula of Cologne: Martyrdom,” one working in the recently redesigned online database can now also search for a diverse range of new subjects, including once-marginalized marginalia such as “Cat, as Musician,” workaday objects such as “Chimney,” and figures from religious traditions outside Christianity, such as “al-Buraq.” This taxonomic expansion affords researchers access to a far wider and more varied array of images and metadata as the Index seeks to align with the scope and ambitiousness of current iconographic questions.

And as the essays in this volume show, those questions entail considerable scope and ambition, generating a discourse around image and meaning that is as heterogeneous and far-reaching as it is reciprocal and collaborative. Each contribution published here was developed from a lecture given by one of seven leading medievalists at the conference “Iconography in a New Century: The Index at 100,” held at Princeton University on October 14, 2017, and the second of two Index-hosted conferences designed explicitly to address current directions in iconographic studies.² On this occasion, conference speakers were asked to consider the multiplicity of factors that contributed to how medieval images did their work in their own time and beyond, as well as to comment on the modern approaches through which such semiotic labor can be understood. They responded with case studies drawn from areas as different as eighth-century Italy, fourteenth-century Byzantium, and thirteenth-century China,

scrutinized through methodological perspectives that are just as diverse. The essays that open and close the volume apply explicitly historiographic and sociopolitical lenses to key moments in the development of iconographic studies, while the five they enframe consider how factors such as medieval habits of dialectical thought, the desire to imply the passage of time, the movement of the viewer in space, the injury and fragmentation of both object and image, and the juxtaposition of cultural paradigms all contribute to the meanings that have been drawn from individual images in the Middle Ages and today. Together they demonstrate the expansiveness, flexibility, and dynamism of a field that remains heartily engaged in the challenge of its own remaking.

Elizabeth Sears opens the volume with an account of the two Princetonian scholars Charles Rufus Morey and Erwin Panofsky, who, with legendary directors Helen Woodruff and Rosalie Green, helped to shape the mission of the Index from the 1930s to the 1960s, one of the most formative periods in its history. Against a finely drawn history of the early study of iconography in Europe and the United States, Sears highlights the contrasts and confluences between Panofsky's staged analysis of images, which proceeded from "pre-iconographical" to "iconographical" to what he would eventually call "iconological," and Morey's methodical pursuit of meaningful iconographic patterns. Her essay tracks the productive intersection between this "Princetonian 'iconography'" and "Hamburgian 'iconology'" to the late twentieth-century critical conflict that ultimately challenged the validity of both. Ending her account at this moment of reckoning, Sears points the way toward the phase of disciplinary self-criticism and renovation to be addressed by Madeline Caviness in the volume's concluding essay.

Aden Kumler's contribution confronts modern skittishness over the question of what iconography "does" with a firm defense of its continued viability as a tool for art historians. Directing her attention to the traditional identification of subject and source that was Morey's iconography, rather than the more contextualized and interpretive iconology that Panofsky had sometimes called "iconography in the deeper sense,"³ she argues compellingly for the need to correct the former's frequent under-theorization and lack of self-criticality to gain a fuller recognition of its potential as parallel to the dialectical structures of medieval thought and experience, whether the give and take of *sic et non* or the mutuality of viewer and viewed. Choosing as illustration the dialectics embodied by the mnemonic diagram known as the Porphyrian Tree, she compares the art historian's hunt for iconographic sources and variations along an imagined stemma of descent relationships with the tree's systematic ordering of knowledge along tidy subdivisions of trunk and branches. Her analysis presents a congenial counterpart to the iconographer's implicitly dialectical habits of collection, specification, and binary judgments, patterns of reasoning well suited to a deeper understanding of the medieval image.

The next three authors turn to recent methodologies and theoretical frames for the study of medieval images, asking how these might work with, and even redefine, traditional iconographic study. Christopher Lakey's essay on the sculptures of Modena

Cathedral explores the capacity of iconology to encompass questions of phenomenology, specifically the viewer's spatial engagement with the work of art. Reflecting on early writing about the topic by Heinrich Wölfflin and August Schmarsow as well as its revival by scholars such as David Summers, Lakey posits that current arguments about embodied seeing can be historicized by reference to medieval theories of vision, such as those of Augustine and Alhazen, to evoke a fuller understanding of how an image worked in its own time. His examination of the reliefs of Modena Cathedral lays out the ways in which movement and perception in space might have shaped the medieval apprehension of both iconography and iconology, terms between which he prefers to maintain a sharp semantic distinction. For Lakey, it is the latter iconological meaning that emerges in the spatial encounter with the Modena reliefs—a conclusion that he sees foreshadowed in Meyer Schapiro's famous engagement, decades earlier, with the trumeau of Souillac.

If Lakey's essay demands consideration of medieval space, Beatrice Kitzinger's contribution calls attention to medieval time and its intersection with the narrativity fundamental to the portrayal of salvation history. More precisely, Kitzinger asks how pauses or gaps implied in the narrative flow within a visual composition can introduce new possibilities of meaning to a time-honored story. Through interlinked short case studies of works as diverse as the Drogo Sacramentary, the Boucicaut Hours, and an eighth-century enamel plaque from Italy, she demonstrates that a concern with the handling of time in narrative—both through the disposition of narrative elements and the impact of format and medium—repeatedly played a role in medieval iconographic practices across far-flung times and places. In such cases, iconography became far more than a question of mere content or story: it demanded engagement with material objects in a way that activated temporal structure and narrative relationships as functional storytelling elements. In this way, she concludes, "Classic iconographies can reveal themselves to be not static, but in the making."

Glenn Peers argues for the recognition of how the incompleteness and fragmentation of many medieval objects can shape the meanings that art historians may draw from them. He looks to disability studies, and especially the work of Tobin Siebers, as a model for understanding how the damage and fragmentation of many works of medieval art—their particular forms of "disability"—may be embraced as constitutive of meaning. His test case, an intriguingly concentric study of the damaged mosaics depicting Christ healing the disabled in the Kariye Camii, sets out how the fragmentary state of the mosaics themselves allow a new apprehension of suffering, empathy, and divine engagement that was essential to Byzantine theology as well as to the meaning of the episodes they present. He concludes that the medieval viewer's contemplation of the supplicants' heterogeneous vulnerabilities, juxtaposed as they are with the "homogeneously abled" figures of Christ and the Apostles, tracks closely with theological impulses to contemplate human vulnerability and God's ineffable power to both permit and heal human suffering.

The study of iconography has traditionally been considered the purview of historians studying medieval Europe and the cultures contingent to it. Jennifer Purtle confronts this view with a study that juxtaposes narrative images on the west portal of Santa Maria Nuova in Monreale, Sicily, with those of the Zhenguo Pagoda of the Kaiyuan si, a Buddhist temple in Quanzhou, China, two sites set at the limits of the maritime networks known respectively by Song Chinese and medieval European geographers in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Examining the divergent conditions and expectations behind the development of the two “superficially similar” visual narratives, Purtle tests both the limits and the relevance of traditional European-born iconographic work for the study of imagery produced beyond that sphere. Her combinative approach to the monuments finds that despite tempting resemblances in design, content, and patronage, the disjunction between their cultural contexts undermines the possibility of setting them into meaningful comparative relationship. This extends to the understanding of their respective iconography, which was grounded in quite different expectations about the making and reading of images, as well as their relationship to other images, to text, and even to mnemonic practices. In this sense, Purtle argues, they illustrate the limitations of traditional iconographic methods beyond European borders and pose a challenge to the concept of the “global medieval” at the center of much current medievalist scholarship.

If the central essays of this collection assert the positive potential of iconographic study for a modern understanding of medieval art and culture, the final essay by Madeline Caviness explores its darker side. Her trenchant contribution describes the collapse and rebirth of scholarship on iconography following the poststructuralist turn, as well as the birth of the new relativism made possible by a world in which everything was “post-,” as factors enabling the use of medieval iconography by popular and political movements within which historical accuracy has been of very little concern. While her account traces both the freedoms and the losses that deconstructionism brought to the profession, it emphasizes the more widespread effects of this turn upon politics and society. Among these, she argues, is the co-optation of medieval history and culture by populist movements for which ingrained relativism justifies the rejection of scholarly authority and the validity of historical evidence in favor of a selectively fabricated Middle Ages, in which medieval iconography is repurposed for modern ideological ends. Caviness calls upon medievalist scholars to reclaim iconographic interpretation as part of a larger defense of medieval history and a corrective to the modern slide away from the factual.

While the 2017 speakers at “Iconography in a New Century” might not have set out to resolve all the questions posed in 1990 at “Iconography at the Crossroads,” their contributions proffer an exhilarating view of the paths that now lie open to the iconographic traveler. Where these roads will take us next will be for their readers to consider.

Notes

1. Many of the lectures offered in this conference were later published in Cassidy, *Iconography at the Crossroads*.
2. See also Patton and Schilb, *Lives and Afterlives*.
3. Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 3–31.

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