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Panofsky's Concept of "Iconology" and the Problem of Interpretation in the History of Art*

Keith Moxey

RATHER THAN ATTEMPT to define and discuss the variety of peculiar problems that confront the contemporary interpreter of the visual arts of the past, these remarks are intended as a consideration of the interpretive system devised by Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky's contribution to art historical theory has recently attracted considerable attention. His work has been the subject of a new book, a symposium at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and a session at the 1985 College Art Association annual meeting in Los Angeles.¹

What prompts this renewed interest in Panofsky's contribution to art historical studies? While it is hard to find a conclusive answer to this question, there seem to be a number of factors involved. First, American art history has become increasingly self-conscious about the theoretical assumptions underlying its scholarly productions. In the context of the radical and far-reaching theoretical transformations that swept anthropology, history, and literary studies in the 1960s and 70s, art history seemed attached to eternal verities. There has been very little discussion of theoretical issues and those attempts that were made to raise them often appeared isolated and tangential to the main concerns of the profession.² However, it was perhaps the adaptation of philosophical and linguistic theories by literary critics that ultimately proved most influential. Criticism has always played a prominent role in art historical interpretation so that the development of critical theories inspired by the model of literary studies was not an entirely unexpected development.³ The application of critical strategies to the interpretation of the visual arts of the past, that is, the identification of significant intrinsic formal qualities in the works of art under discussion as the basis for interpretation, has necessarily

* This paper has benefited greatly from conversations and debates with David Summers which helped clarify my ideas on a number of different issues. I am particularly indebted to Joan Hart for having shared her paper on Panofsky's relation to hermeneutic theory with me prior to its publication. In addition I am grateful for careful readings and suggestions by Paul Barolsky, Herbert Kessler, Donald Posner, Holly Wright, Peter Parshall, and Suzanne Guerlac. I must, however, accept full responsibility for the views articulated here.

called into question Panofsky's "iconological" method with its concern to understand the work of art within the conceptual framework of the historical period in which it was produced.⁴

Second, there has been an increasing dissatisfaction with the type of art historical interpretation that has resulted from the application of Panofsky's concept of "iconology."⁵ Too often this approach has restricted itself to the analysis of "iconography," that is, to the analysis of the pictorial traditions on which a given work of art depends, and neglected the more ambitious "iconological" project of relating those visual traditions to the broader cultural context in which the work was produced.⁶ In those cases where "iconological" interpretation has been attempted this has often taken a highly speculative form that, more often than not, cannot easily find justification in historical terms.⁷ Alternatively this approach has resulted in a kind of "contextual" art history in which the interpreter's task is often regarded as complete once the work has been embedded in its historical setting. Such writing in fact eludes the demand for interpretation altogether by failing to specify the ways in which the visual arts intersect with other aspects of the culture of which they formed a part. However, it would be unfair to consider Panofsky's interpretive theory in the light of its influence. The following comments are meant on the one hand to describe the way in which his "iconological" method fails to do justice to a genuinely historical understanding of the art of the past and, on the other, to suggest ways in which it can still have meaning for us today.

I. The "Archimedean Point"

Panofsky's theoretical writings represent the search for what he called an "Archimedean point" from which to build a systematic interpretation of the visual arts. That is, they represent a search for a means of building a set of principles with which works of art of all ages could be analyzed and interpreted. This search depended upon his notion of the work of art as an object that transcended the historical moment of its creation as a consequence of its aesthetic value. The opening words of his analysis and critique of Riegel's concept of *Kunstwollen*, or the "will to art," complain that it is both the curse and the blessing of art history that its objects, the works of art, cannot be interpreted as if they were wholly historical phenomena.⁸ He goes on to explain that the "blessing" of the work of art is that it is a work of art and not a historical object, while the "curse" lies in the theoretical problems posed by the work of art's aesthetic values which must necessarily be defined in terms that transcend its historical context.

As a result of Panofsky's concern for the content of the work of art as much as with its formal qualities, a concern which had led him to reject the purely stylistic interpretive system developed by Heinrich Wölfflin,⁹ he developed a theory based on the intrinsic formal qualities of the work of art in which the organizing principle was the relation of form to content.¹⁰ This system consisted of opposing qualities such as optic/haptic, depth/surface, fusion/distinction, and time/space which were thought to interlock in such a way as to control the relation of form to content. Despite the importance ascribed to content in this scheme, the theory did not transcend the limits imposed by a consideration of the formal qualities of the work of art.

Panofsky's concern with content was deepened by his association with the Warburg Library after his appointment to the University of Hamburg.¹¹ During this period he came into contact with the work of Aby Warburg who was concerned to view the work of art in terms of its social and cultural functions.¹² Furthermore, he is thought to have been much affected by developments in historical hermeneutics. Nineteenth-century theories of hermeneutics, a school of interpretation first developed for the understanding of biblical texts, affirmed the importance of the historical distance separating the interpreter from the subject of his interpretation, emphasizing the arduous and painstaking nature of any attempt to recreate the meaning of a work within the historical circumstances in which it was produced.¹³ In the earliest formulation of his "iconological" method, Panofsky recognized the difficulties confronting all attempts at interpretation. Panofsky was prepared to admit the way in which the act of interpretation is compromised as a result of the interpreter's own position in history. To this effect he quotes a passage from Heidegger's book on Kant, in which Heidegger discusses the difficulties of interpretation: "If an interpretation merely reflects what Kant expressly said, then it is by definition not an explanation; for the task of any explanation is to make visible what Kant's foundation brought to light over and above the literal formulation. Such an interpretation does not enable Kant to say more, for in any philosophical insight what is decisive is not what the articulated sentences say but the unsaid that is laid before the eyes by the said. . . . And, to be sure, since the words surround that which they want to say, every interpretation must use force."¹⁴ In order to counteract the interpreter's necessary use of "force" Panofsky suggested a system of checks and balances by means of which the interpretation could be evaluated. While he included the formal aspects of the work of art in this description of the interpretive process, the main thrust of his "iconological" method was to be the interpretation of content. The highest level of interpretation, that for

which he coined the term “iconology,” was that which dealt with the “general history of the human spirit.”

In spite of Panofsky’s replacement of a historically sensitive, hermeneutically inspired theory dealing above all with the content of the work of art for a theory dealing with its intrinsic formal qualities, the search for an “Archimedean point” was not entirely abandoned. During the 1920s he was much impressed by the work of Ernst Cassirer, a senior colleague at the University of Hamburg and a fellow user of the Warburg Library. During this period Cassirer published the three volumes of his most important work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. According to Cassirer “symbolic forms” were syntheses by means of which areas of human knowledge were organized on the basis of a Kantian epistemology. They depend on the view that human knowledge of the world is a function of the fact that the structure of our minds somehow corresponds with our experience of it. “Symbolic forms” are thus the means by which man deals with sensual experience: they constitute the fabric of human culture.

In Cassirer’s theory of “symbolic forms,” Panofsky found a means of putting together his theory of the way in which the formal qualities of the work of art interlock to control the relation of form and content with the desire to do justice to the content of the work in its historical context. In his essay “Perspective as Symbolic Form,” the structure of pictorial space was used as a means of gaining access to the “essence” of the civilizations of antiquity and the Renaissance.¹⁵ A formal principle was thus abstracted from its historical context, accorded the privileged status of a “symbolic form,” and used as a means of elucidating cultures belonging to different periods. The adoption of this strategy, however, conflicts with the historicist concerns of the hermeneutic school of interpretation which, we have seen, had decisively colored Panofsky’s scheme of “iconological” interpretation. While perspective as a spatial structure was undoubtedly freighted with meaning in the setting of Renaissance Florence, its use in a diachronic system of interpretation serves only to privilege the Renaissance above all other periods under consideration. The selection of a characteristic of the culture of one period as a means of understanding and evaluating others does violence to the historical “horizons” in which those cultures are situated.¹⁶

Despite the fact that in Panofsky’s later work his conception of the “iconological” level of interpretation depended little on Cassirer’s notion of “symbolic forms,” language associated with this theory is an important feature of his definition of the “iconological” method. This level of interpretation, which is to be dedicated to the study of the “*general and essential tendencies of the human mind*” (Panofsky’s italics), is equated with “what may be called a history of *cultural symptoms* or

symbols in Ernst Cassirer's sense . . ." (p. 16). The rhetoric of the "Archimedean point" is thus written into what is an otherwise straightforward description of a hermeneutic interpretation. It is the rhetoric, the references to "intrinsic meaning," for example, rather than the method itself that has invested the system with an air of authoritarian finality. The tone of Panofsky's writings and those of many of his followers has a lapidary quality that suggests that the reader is being vouchsafed eternal truths. Panofsky's rhetoric seems to imply that the meaning of a work of art is accessible to the historian in the same way regardless of his own position in history and that it is therefore possible for his interpretation to be valid for all time.

II. The Humanist Bias

One of the consequences of Panofsky's view that the "blessing" of the work of art consists in its status as an ahistorical object was the "curse" of attempting to define the nature of the aesthetic values that allowed it to escape time and place.¹⁷ For all their abstraction Panofsky's definitions of the formal structures that control the relation of form and content, whose balance was regarded as the hallmark of the "great" work of art, were decisively colored by his experience as a historian of the Italian Renaissance. Panofsky was, of course, fully aware that different historical periods held very different views as to what constituted a work of art and that these were quite distinct from those we hold today. Nevertheless his own prejudices are clearly revealed in his selection and treatment of the artists and works he chose to discuss.

A prime example of his humanist bias is found in his interpretation of the work of Albrecht Dürer.¹⁸ The central thesis of his book is that Dürer's experience of Italian art was responsible for deepening a dualism inherent in his nature and that this found expression in his artistic production. According to Panofsky, this dualism was to be accounted for in terms of Dürer's striving after the artistic ideals of the Italian Renaissance, on the one hand, and by his inability to put them into practice, on the other. Dürer's desire to obtain theoretical insight is thought to have clashed with his talent for empirical observation in such a way as to produce tensions that may be traced in the products of his hand. Panofsky's characterization of the "dualism" of Dürer's personality does more than simply characterize the nature of his artistic achievement. The emphasis he places on Dürer's theoretical interests is intimately associated with an alleged desire to attain the ideal beauty of High Renaissance art. According to Panofsky, Dürer's obsession with theory marks him as a member of the hu-

manist tradition, thus enabling him to transcend the German culture of which he was a part.

Another manifestation of Panofsky's humanist bias is found in the subject matter he chose to discuss. His choice of subject matter tends to coincide with the values of the academic "hierarchy of the genres" adopted by Renaissance and baroque theorists of art.¹⁹ This hierarchy, which depended on a Renaissance revival of ancient art theory, tended to prefer allegory and history painting over landscape, still life, scenes of everyday life, and portraiture. Panofsky's commitment to these values may be discovered in his assertion that landscape, still life, scenes of everyday life, and portraiture were in fact "non-subjects," in which there existed an identity between the subject of the work and the subject represented (p. 8). This bias in favor of the subjects most highly regarded by the humanist tradition served to eliminate the others from the field of art historical interpretation. It has been the task of more recent scholarship to show that far from being devoid of intellectual content such subjects as landscape, still life, scenes of everyday life, and even portraiture were packed with references to both humanist and nonhumanist values.²⁰

When not invoking the humanist canon for the selection of works of art worthy of consideration, Panofsky relied expressly upon "tradition."²¹ By "tradition" he meant those works of art which had traditionally received the approval of informed taste. In other words the selection was based on a tradition of aesthetic judgments dating mainly from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The consequences of the use of such a principle is particularly evident in *Early Netherlandish Painting* where he is concerned principally with the "founders" of Flemish painting, Robert Campin, Jan van Eyck, and Roger van der Weyden.²² Little attention is paid to the interpretation of the work of artists traditionally regarded as aesthetically inferior to those named above even though, by his own admission, they included some of the most popular and successful painters of the age. Nothing is more revealing of his attitude than the chapter entitled "Epilogue: The Founders' Heritage," a chapter that includes a summary account of the achievements of Petrus Christus, Dirk Bouts, Geerteen tot Sint Jans, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling, and Gerard David.

While Panofsky's humanist bias was undoubtedly related to his view of the work of art as an object invested with more than historical significance, the treatment of the work of art as a wholly historical object does not in itself afford the interpreter with an alternative means of selecting and ordering the artists and works he wishes to discuss. On the other hand a selection based on a historical understanding of its status would have to come to terms with more than

the meaning of the work for the patrons who commissioned it. It would, in other words, have to account for the role of the work of art in its social setting. One of the features of Panofsky's "iconological" method is its focus on the "intention" underlying its creation.²³ More often than not this has meant a careful study of (1) the biography of the artist including his artistic training; (2) the social and cultural makeup of the patrons for whom the work was undertaken; and (3) the historical circumstances in which the work was carried out. While it is clear that much of what is known as the "reception" of the work of art, that is, the way in which it was understood by different individuals, groups, or classes, is included in Panofsky's account of the work's "intention," the theoretical bias in favor of the latter has led to a neglect of the study of the work's interaction with its audience after its completion. The focus on the "intention" of the work of art assigns it a "terminal" role in the life of culture, a location representing a synthesis of the ideas current in the culture of the patron or patrons who commissioned it.²⁴ It ignores the life of the work of art after it has entered a social context. By concentrating on the way in which the work of art "reflects" the life of its times, the preoccupation with "intention" fails to recognize the function of the work of art as an actor in the development of cultural attitudes and therefore as an agent of social change.²⁵

III. Conclusions

Panofsky's most important contribution to art history as a discipline was undoubtedly his concern to incorporate a discussion of the content of the work of art within the parameters of art theory. The concern with content was the means by which he was able to break with the formalist theories that dominated art historical scholarship in his youth. While never abandoning the idealist view of the work of art as a transcendental object, his sensitivity to the work's historical location enabled him to explore hermeneutic theory as a means of developing an interpretive system. The critique of Panofsky's "iconological" method from a historicist position does not, as is often suggested, write art out of the work of art by refusing to consider its aesthetic implications. It merely consigns questions of aesthetics to the history of reception or to the history of taste. In seeking to evaluate the work of art within the context of its status and function for the age in which it was produced, a historicist perspective attempts to emphasize its radical alterity. The problem of interpretation, in other words, lies in confronting the "otherness" of a different historical moment. The system of checks and balances that characterizes Panofsky's "iconological" method has proven to be the door through

which it has become possible to essay an interpretation of works of art that does justice to their complex historical particularity. Stripped of its daunting rhetoric associated with Cassirer's theory of "symbolic forms" as well as of its humanist bias, Panofsky's "iconological" method still offers the discipline one of the most sensitive approaches to the understanding of the art of the past.

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NOTES

1 See Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca and London, 1984), which concentrates on his early writings. The same period of Panofsky's career is discussed by Michael Podro in his *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven and London, 1982), ch. 9. The papers delivered at the Centre Pompidou have been edited by Jacques Bonnet, *Pour un temps / Erwin Panofsky* (Paris, 1983). Earlier treatments of Panofsky's work are to be found in the collection of articles edited by Ekkehard Kaemmerling, *Ikongraphie und Ikonologie. Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme* (Cologne, 1979) and in the book by Renate Heidt, *Erwin Panofsky. Kunsttheorie und Einzelwerk* (Vienna, 1977).

2 See, e.g., Leo Steinberg, "Objectivity and the Shrinking Self," *Daedalus*, 98 (1969), 824–36; Paul and Svetlana Alpers, "Ut Pictura Noesis? Criticism in Literary Studies and Art History," *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 437–58; Kurt Forster, "Critical History of Art or Transfiguration of Values?" *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 459–76; James S. Ackerman, "Toward a New Social Theory of Art," *New Literary History*, 4 (1973), 315–30; David Rosand, "Art History and Criticism: The Past as Present," *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 435–45; Svetlana Alpers, "Is Art History?" *Daedalus*, 106 (1977), 1–13; Michael Baxandall, "The Language of Art History," *New Literary History*, 10 (1979), 453–65. It is significant that none of these articles appeared in art historical journals.

3 For the equation of art historical interpretation with criticism see Rosand, "Art History and Criticism."

4 Two of the most ambitious recent critical readings are by Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley, 1980) and Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983). In both cases historical evidence is marshalled to support the interpretation of what are regarded as important formal qualities of the works of art under discussion.

5 For Panofsky's definition of the aims and methods of "iconology," see his Introduction to *Studies in Iconology* (1939; rpt. New York, 1967), hereafter cited in text. This essay was republished virtually unaltered as the first chapter of *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955). Some of the ideas contained in this piece are already found in Panofsky's article "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst," *Logos*, 21 (1932), 103–119. This is included in the useful collection of Panofsky's theoretical essays edited by Hariolf Oberer and Egon Verheyen, *Erwin Panofsky: Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 85–97.

6 See Henri Zerner, "L'Art," in *Faire l'histoire*, ed. Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris, 1974), I, 183–202, 188.

7 This point was emphasized by Leopold Ettlinger in his unpublished talk, "Panofsky Understood or Misunderstood," delivered at the 1985 College Art Association meeting.

8 Erwin Panofsky, "Der Begriff des Kunstvollens," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 14 (1920), 321–39; also in Oberer and Verheyen, pp. 29–43.

9 Erwin Panofsky, "Das Problem des Stil in der bildenden Kunst," *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 10 (1915), 450–67; also in Oberer and Verheyen, pp. 19–27.

10 Erwin Panofsky, "Über das Verhältnis der Kunstgeschichte zur Kunsttheorie: Ein Beitrag zu der Erörterung über die Möglichkeit 'kunstwissenschaftliche Grundbegriffe,'" *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 18 (1925), 129–61; also in Oberer and Verheyen, pp. 49–75.

11 For Panofsky's intellectual development during this period see Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, ch. 4.

12 See Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1970).

13 The importance of the hermeneutical tradition of literary interpretation in the creation of Panofsky's theory of "iconology" has recently been pointed out by Joan Hart in a paper entitled "Panofsky within the Hermeneutic Discourse: Implications for Art History," delivered in the seminar on "Intention" at the 1985 College Art Association meeting.

14 Oberer and Verheyen, p. 92, my translation. The passage is from *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (1925): "Gibt nun eine Interpretation lediglich das wieder, was Kant ausdrücklich gesagt hat, dann ist sie von vornherein keine Auslegung, sofern einer solchen die Aufgabe gestellt bleibt, dasjenige eigens sichtbar zu machen, was Kant über die ausdrückliche Formulierung hinaus in seiner Grundlegung ans Licht gebracht hat; dieses aber vermochte Kant nicht mehr zu sagen, wie denn überhaupt in jeder philosophischen Erkenntnis nicht das entscheidend werden muss, was sie in den ausgesprochenen Sätzen sagt, sondern was die als noch Ungesagtes durch das Gesagte vor Augen legt. . . . Um freilich dem, was die Worte sagen, dasjenige abzurufen, was sie sagen wollen, muss jede Interpretation notwendig Gewalt brauchen." I am grateful to David Summers for having drawn my attention to this passage.

15 Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form,'" in *Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg*, IV (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927), 258–330; also in Oberer and Verheyen, pp. 99–167. For an illuminating discussion of this article see Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, ch. 5.

16 For the notion of historical "horizons" and the importance of their role in hermeneutical interpretation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975).

17 See n. 8.

18 Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1943). This has also been noted by Svetlana Alpers who wrote, "If we turn to Panofsky's masterful study of Dürer, it is characteristic that he sees Dürer as a kind of captive of the alien northern darkness struggling toward the southern light" ("Is Art History?" p. 5).

19 See the account of Giovanni Bellori's artistic theory offered by Panofsky in *Idea: A Concept in the History of Art*, tr. Joseph Peake (Columbia, S.C., 1968).

20 See Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, tr. Christina Hedström (New York, 1956); Eddie de Jongh, *Sinne en minnebeelden in de schilderkunst der zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, 1967) and *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenissen van hollands genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (exh. cat.) (Amsterdam, 1976); R. H. Fuchs, "Over het landschap. Een verslag naar aanleiding van Jacob van Ruisdael, *Het Korenveld*," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 86 (1973), 281–92; Lisa Vergara, *Rubens and the Poetics of Landscape* (New Haven and London, 1982).

21 Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, p. 18, n. 13. Panofsky fails to acknowledge the way in which the traditional canon of "great" works is subject to the vagaries of taste. For an excellent study of these fluctuations, see Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste*,

Fashion and Collecting in England and France (Oxford, 1976). A recent discussion of the social and political forces at work in canon formation and transformation is included in the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (10 [1983–84]) edited by Robert von Hallsberg.

22 Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1953).

23 Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," pp. 20–22.

24 The way in which Panofsky's "iconological" interpretations tended to ignore social realities has been pointed out by Kurt Forster, "Critical History of Art or Transfiguration of Values?" 466–67.

25 For some brilliant analyses of the social function of the work of art, see Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1974) and Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Sherry Welzer (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). An exemplary treatment of the role of works of visual art in the context of social change is provided by Timothy J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, 1973).