



Panofsky and ICONCLASS

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Panofsky and ICONCLASS

In the past twenty-five years or so, there have been impressive developments in the field of Iconography. New interpretations of works of art, and studies of specific themes have formed a vast part of art historical literature.

A somewhat exceptional, but at the same time one of the greatest achievements in recent years is the publication of an important tool for iconographical research: the iconographic classification system ICONCLASS. In the years to come this system will prove its great value, and I am sure that it will result in a new direction in iconographical research methodology.

In another aspect of Iconography, the theoretical background, the developments are not so exciting. Panofsky's theory, that is his theoretical scheme, still seems to be the unchanging basis. It is well known that this theory is not perfect, but, although many critical remarks have been made, nobody has proposed a factual improvement as yet.

I would like to introduce a revised, and in my opinion more logical "scheme of Panofsky". The revised scheme will be tested at the hand of Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance*. Thereafter I will give a short introduction to ICONCLASS, thereby explaining how this system fits in with the revised theoretical scheme. As a conclusion I will try to give a short outline of a possible future of Iconography on the basis of ICONCLASS.

Although the paper presented here may seem to be of a fairly hybrid character, the whole forms the expression of one view of Iconography and iconographical theory and methodology. The fact that I linger relatively long on ICONCLASS is due to the fact that only few art historians and (cultural) historians already know and use this system.

Panofsky's Scheme Revised

In this part of my article, I will first give a short description of Panofsky's scheme, then point out where it goes wrong, and finally propose a revised scheme. Before I do so, I want to state that we are of course discussing on a purely theoretical level, and that I am aware of the fact that there is, or may be, a great difference between theory and practice. To philosophize on theoretical problems however, may sometimes help to make the use of certain terms or terminology clearer. One of my aims here is to try to draw a more logical boundary line between the meanings or definitions of the terms Iconography and Iconology, terms that, it seems, are interpreted

The present article comprises some material from my booklet *Een inleiding in de iconografie* (An Introduction to Iconography), Muiderberg 1985. My dearest thanks are due to Prof. Dr. J. Białostocki,

Prof. Dr. A. W. A. Boschloo, and Dr. L. D. Couprie, for their helpful suggestions and comments. My English text was corrected by Mrs. Penelope Gate, Marburg.

and used by every art historian in his own way¹. This may partly have been caused by Panofsky's scheme: in certain respects it is ambiguous and vague, and leaves too much room for personal interpretation.

Another remark beforehand: I do not see Iconography, at least theoretically, as an all-comprising method or approach toward art objects; stylistic aspects are left aside. I see the stylistic-historical approach as a phase foregoing, or perhaps parallel to the phases of Iconography².

Panofsky sees three layers of meaning in a work of art, which at the same time form three phases of iconographical/iconological research (Diagram I)³.

1. The first layer is that of the "*primary or natural subject matter*, constituting the world of artistic motifs". In this phase, to put it simply, Panofsky wants to give a pure description of what we see in a work of art: figures, animals, objects, activities, situations, etc. Thus, a sort of summing up of what we see. This phase is called the "*pre-iconographical description*", and what we need to be able to use this phase is knowledge of what the world around us, with all that is in it, looks like ("familiarity with objects and events").
2. The second layer of meaning in Panofsky's theory is that of the "*secondary or conventional subject matter*, constituting the world of images, stories, and allegories". To put it simply again, in this phase the what we usually call "subject" of a representation must be determined. Panofsky called this the "*iconographical analysis* in the narrower sense of the word". What we need here to operate successfully is

"familiarity with specific themes and concepts", i.e. knowledge of how specific themes and concepts are usually depicted in the visual arts, and knowledge of literary sources, among other things. Incidentally, Panofsky emphasizes that several sorts of subjects do not fit into the second phase; more about this later.

3. Third and last layer is the "*Intrinsic meaning or content*, constituting the world of «symbolical values»". Here we try to discover "deeper" meanings⁴ in works of art, which means that we should ask ourselves how cultural-historical developments are reflected in a representation. According to Panofsky, the artist was usually unaware of such "symbolism". This third phase of research is called the "*iconographical interpretation* in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis)". Since 1955 Panofsky has called it the "iconological interpretation".⁵ What we need in this phase is described by Panofsky as follows: "Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and «Weltanschauung»".

Panofsky's scheme also comprises a "controlling principle of interpretation", the correctness and practical use of which, however, is doubtful. This is partly due to the fact that (some of) the sources we need for this control are the same as those we use to make an interpretation. Thus, we have a double function or interaction between interpretation and control of interpretation. Panofsky saw this as positive point⁶, but it is not at all sure that such an interaction really exists in the practice of iconographical research; also some other points concerning the control are dubious.⁷ The controlling principle

¹ For instance in museum catalogues we may find an "iconographical index", or an "iconological index", both headings meaning the same. Göran Hermerén's *Representation and Meaning in the Visual Arts* (diss. Lund 1969, Lund Studies in Philosophy 1) makes us aware of the different use art historians make of many terms, such as depict, represent and allegory. See also note 14.

² Panofsky saw this likewise; although he incorporated the stylistic-historical approach in the "controlling principle" of his scheme, the history of style as aim of research is not part of it. See Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology. Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, New York 1939, pp. 3-17 *passim*. This "Introductory" is the basic article on the theory of Iconography, in which Panofsky introduces his scheme. Panofsky published an earlier stage of his ideas in his paper "Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst", *Logos* 21 (1932), pp. 103-119.

³ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology, op.cit.*, pp. 14-15.

⁴ I use "deeper" and "secondary" as is usual in art historical

literature, although I think they are dangerous terms because they are not defined and too vague.

⁵ Although Panofsky changed the name of his third phase, this did not mean any change as to the content. See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City (N.Y.) 1955, pp. 26-41 *passim*.

⁶ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology, op.cit.*, p. 11, footnote 3.

⁷ That the iconographer will make use of the "history of style" and the "history of types" is clear, but, for instance, it must be doubted if the "history of style" (first level) can be a corrective principle for the pre-iconographical description. It may serve as an additional, but not as the main corrective factor. Style says something about *how* something is represented, not *what* is represented. Also on the third level, "history of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general", Panofsky leaves us with something of which the use and the possibilities of control are rather vague. Hermerén, *op.cit.*, p. 135 ff., already drew attention to the vagueness of the term "world view" (Weltanschauung).

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION	EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CONTROLLING PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION	HISTORY OF TRADITION
I–Primary or natural subject matter - (A) factual, (B) expressional, constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).	
II–Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images , stories and allegories .	Iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word.	Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).	
III–Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of 'symbolical values'.	Iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense (Iconographical synthesis).	Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and 'Weltanschauung'.	History of cultural symptoms or 'symbols' in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).	

Diagram I: The "Panofsky's Scheme". Source: *Studies in Iconology*, pp. 14-15.

will not be mentioned again, because it is of no further importance for this paper.

One of the most peculiar statements Panofsky makes in the introduction to his theory in *Studies in Iconology* is, in my opinion, the following: "... the correct analysis of *images*, *stories* and *allegories* is the prerequisite of a correct *iconographical interpretation* in a deeper sense, [and now it comes] – unless we deal with such works of art in which the whole sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter is eliminated, and a direct transition from *motifs* to *content* is striven for, as is the case with European landscape painting, still-life and genre; that is, on the whole, with exceptional phenomena, which

mark the later, over-sophisticated phases of a long development"⁸.

What does Panofsky want to say in this passage? And which conclusions can we draw from it?

In the first place, it is obvious that he believes that there are categories of subjects within the visual arts which have no "secondary or conventional subject matter", notably European landscape painting, still-life, and genre. Here lies a problem: Why put genre in the third phase, and "Images" (= personifications) in the second phase? Is it not so that many genre pictures are in a certain way representations of personifications, or even allegories, so that they should also belong to the second phase? And is it not so that every representation in the visual arts has a "conventional subject matter", even when we can only say "still-life with nautilus

⁸ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

cup" or "landscape with shepherd"?

What we may surely conclude from the passage quoted above is, that Panofsky meant all symbolic meanings to belong to the third phase, not only the symbolic meanings of a cultural-historical level.⁹ It is the following explanation of Panofsky's that has caused a lot of confusion in this respect: "The discovery and interpretation of these 'symbolical' values (which are generally unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he intended to express) is the object of what we may call *iconography in a deeper sense*".¹⁰ This "generally unknown to the artist himself" is more or less contradictory to "European landscape painting, still-life and genre", in which symbolism was of course *consciously* applied by the artist. But, as Panofsky states, these categories of subjects belong to "over-sophisticated phases". Here, an important contradiction within Panofsky's oeuvre becomes obvious, a contradiction that has already been pointed out by Otto Pächt in his review of *Early Netherlandish Painting*¹¹; later Lorentz Dittmann went into this matter still further.¹² Whereas Panofsky saw the third phase or layer as primarily reserved for unintended symbolical values in his earlier writings, later (for the first time in his *Early Netherlandish Painting*) he used this layer for intended symbolical values (and left out unintended values). It is clear that by 1939 Panofsky must have thought consciously intended symbolism in works of art a relatively rare phenomenon. Later, while writing *Early Netherlandish Painting*, he discovered that also in this early period symbolism was applied quite consciously (and not only in "over-sophisticated phases"), and he must have broken with his opinion, which Pächt correctly analyzed.

The essential reason for the discussion about what Panofsky means with the second, and what with the third phase, lies in the problem discussed here. Consequently, we may assume that it is one of the main causes for the confusing use of the terms Iconography and Iconology¹³.

The best solution to the (theoretical) problems we are

dealing with lies, it seems to me, in distinguishing between consciously applied symbolism, and "symbolical values" of which we may assume that they were "generally unknown to the artist himself", i.e. symbolism on the cultural-historical level. Recognizing this, we may now come to a revised scheme, which I will describe in some detail (Diagram II):

1. The first phase, the *pre-iconographical description*, remains the same as in Panofsky's scheme: a summing-up of what we see, without relating the things we see to each other, and without interpreting anything; some formal analysis (e.g. composition and colour) also takes place in this phase. All works go on to phase two.
2. After a pre-iconographical description, it is logical that an *iconographical description* follows. Here the loose elements of the first phase are brought into relation with each other: i.e. the "subject" of a representation is established. Normally we can use here the short descriptions that are commonly used in Art History, such as "Diana and Actaeon", or "Still-life with nautilus cup". To operate in this phase we need the same things Panofsky mentions in his second phase: "familiarity with specific themes and concepts" (and their sources). In the iconographical description we do not try to discover secondary or deeper meanings. All works go on to phase three. The difference here with Panofsky's scheme is that *all* works are dealt with in the iconographical description, including European landscape painting, still-life, and genre. Personifications and allegories are only to be recognized as such in the second phase; their further analysis takes place in the third phase.
3. The third phase is what I would like to call the *iconographical interpretation*. Here we try to find out if a work of art has a deeper or secondary meaning that was brought into it by the artist on purpose, and if so, we try to formulate this (mostly abstract) meaning. As well as a general knowledge

⁹ Panofsky speaks about a "direct transition from *motifs* to *content*". We cannot conclude anything else from this passage than that *all* "symbolic" meanings belong in phase three, unless we assume that Panofsky did not know about symbolism in a non-Cassirerian sense in landscapes, still-life and genre, which would be absurd.

¹⁰ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹ Otto Pächt, "Panofsky's 'Early Netherlandish Painting', II", *Burlington Magazine* 98 (1956), p. 276. As far as I know, Panofsky never reacted on the critique of Pächt.

¹² Lorentz Dittmann, "Zur Kritik der kunsthistorischen Symboltheorie", in: E. Kaemmerling (ed.), *Bildende Kunst als Zeichensystem I. Ikonographie und Ikonologie: Theorien, Entwicklung, Probleme*, Köln 1979, pp. 329-352 (i.p. 345-349). Both Pächt (see note

11) and Dittmann touch upon the problem of consciously and unconsciously applied "symbolical" values. However, they do not make a central point out of it, and only use it to remark on a discrepancy in Panofsky's oeuvre.

¹³ Whereas Pächt and Dittmann, in my opinion correctly, think of the third phase, many other authors on Panofsky's theory think that "intended symbolical values" belong in Panofsky's second phase. See for example Renate Heide, *Erwin Panofsky. Kunsttheorie und Einzelwerk*, Köln 1977 (Dissertationen zur Kunstgeschichte 2), i.p.: pp. 246-263, and Michael Ann Holly, *The Origin and Development of Erwin Panofsky's Theories of Art*, diss. Ann Arbor (Mich.) 1981, i.p.: ch. VI.

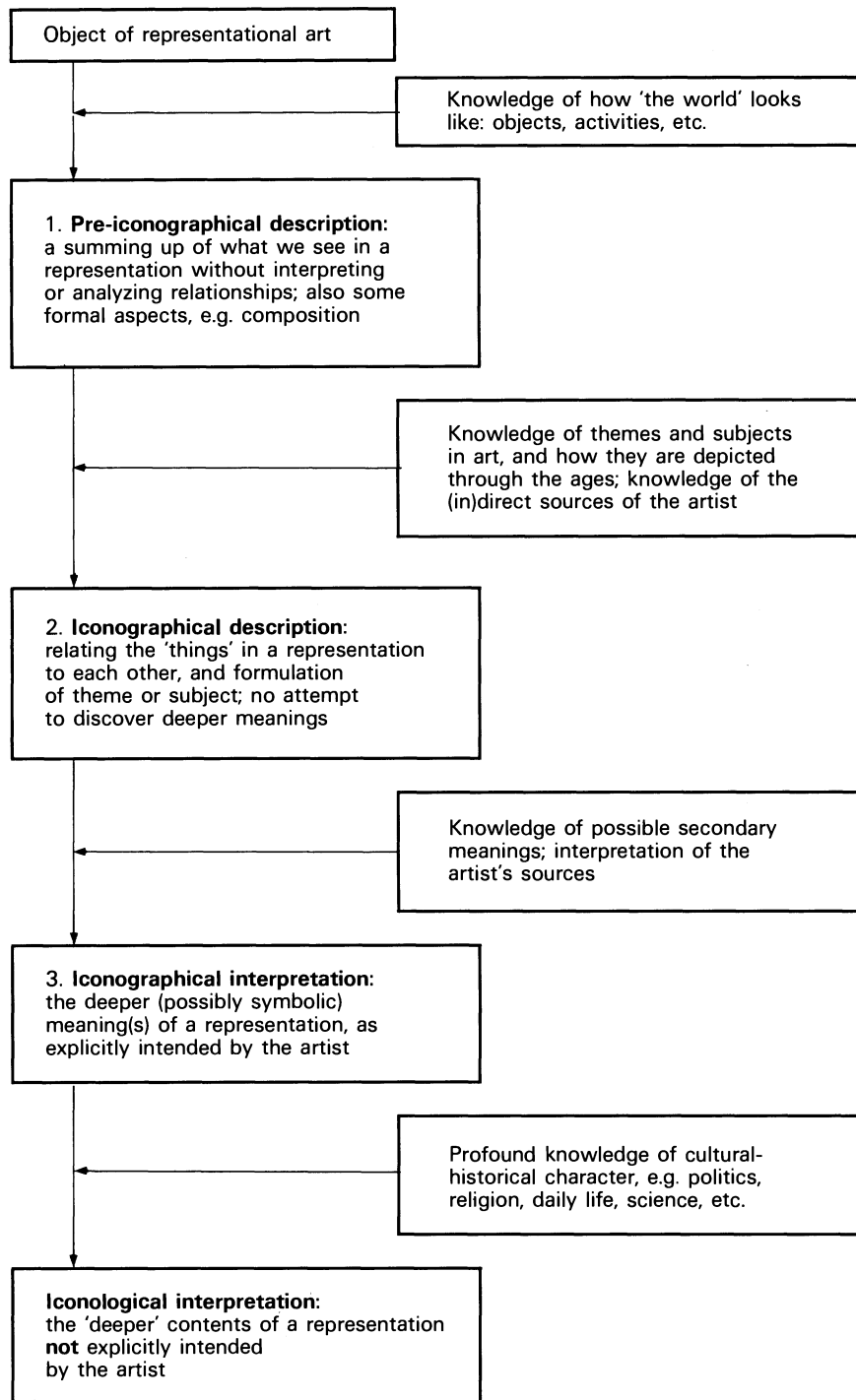


Diagram II: The Revised Scheme of Iconography and Iconology.

of possible “symbolic” meanings, and interpretation of the artist’s sources, I think Panofsky is right in assuming that a sort of “synthetic intuition” is necessary, to combine all the knowledge we have assembled about a representation and to draw the right conclusions. All representations, whether we found a deeper meaning or not, go on to the last phase.

4. Aim of the final phase, the *iconological interpretation*, is to find out in how far “symbolic values” appear in a work of art that were not explicitly intended by the artist. Thus, we see here the work of art as a document of its time, and in particular as a document of the artist as a person living in a certain period. For this phase we need a profound knowledge of cultural-historical character, varying from politics and level of scientific knowledge to religion and daily life at the time and place of the creation of a work of art.

The last two steps described here require some further comment. As we have seen, Panofsky makes no distinction between what in our opinion are two separate questions: a) an art historical question: What is the deeper or secondary meaning of a work of art (as put in it by the artist on purpose), and b) a cultural-historical question: Why was a certain work of art made (in a particular way), and how can we explain it (or its existence) as seen against its cultural, social, and historical background (and find the possible “symbolic values” *not* explicitly intended by the artist).

Of course one might argue that it is not always possible to make a distinction between consciously added “symbolic values”, and values that have assimilated into a work without the artist knowing it. This may be true in some cases, but in general a distinction can, and should be made. Consciously added values are usually given in the form of symbols, that can be analyzed and interpreted (but a deeper meaning may also be found in a work of art as a whole). The unconsciously applied “symbolical values” seem to account more for the work of art as a whole: the artefact seen as an object created by a certain person at a certain time (period) and in a certain place. Thus, whereas Iconography is part of Art History, Iconology in my view has its starting point in Cultural History. That iconographers, especially in the iconographical interpretation (phase three), will often make use of cultural historical knowledge is clear, but does not mean that they are then at

the same time working iconologically. Iconology tries to solve a completely different question, among other things by making use of the results of iconographical research.

Dividing Panofsky’s third phase into two separate phases allows us, in my opinion, to define the terms Iconography and Iconology a bit more precisely¹⁴:

- 1) *Iconography* is that branch of the discipline of Art History that occupies itself with the subject matter in art, and its deeper meaning or content (as intended by the artist), and
- 2) *Iconology* is that branch of the discipline of *Cultural History* that has as its task to discover the cultural, social, and historical background of subjects in art, and to explain from this background why a certain subject was chosen by a certain person (artist or patron) in a certain place and at a certain time (period), and why the subject is represented in a particular way.

Some examples of typical iconological questions in my view are: Why was the suicide of Lucretia such a popular subject in 16th-century German art?, and: Why did Caravaggio paint a drunken Bacchus (in the way he painted it)? Even the negative question why a certain subject was *not* popular (anymore) in a certain time and/or place, may be relevant of course.

Having described the revised scheme theoretically, a short practical example is called for. Let us therefore have a look at Vermeer’s *Woman Holding a Balance* from the National Gallery in Washington [Fig. 1]¹⁵.

First, I will give a short (pre-iconographical) description. A woman is standing at a table, holding a small balance in her right hand. Her other hand is resting on the table, on which a cloth, some small jewel-boxes, pearl necklaces, some coins, etc. are lying. A picture is hanging on the wall in the background; the head of the woman is situated in the centre of this picture. Another framed object, probably a mirror, is hanging in front of the woman. The curtain is closed, and a serene light fills the room.

One of the first to write on the iconography of this picture is Herbert Rudolph, who explains the picture as a representation of “Vanitas”.¹⁶ He remarks on the relation between the picture on the wall, a representation of the Last Judgement, and the scales the woman is holding, and notices that the scales are empty.¹⁷ This last fact is very important, because it means

¹⁴ That this is necessary not only follows from the confusing use of both terms, but is also caused by the continuing development of iconography as a field of study, as will be argued further on in this

paper. Göran Hermerén, *op.cit.*, ch. 6, has made an attempt to distinguish between Iconography and Iconology, however, without trying to formulate (new) definitions.

that the woman is not weighing anything at all. In all other representations I know of women (or men) who are weighing gold or money (or pearls), they are really weighing something, performing the act of weighing. I will not relate how Rudolph comes to his interpretation of this picture as a "Vanitas". The wordly goods on the table and the mirror on wall speak for themselves.

Almost forty years after Rudolph, Svetlana Alpers came up with a basically new interpretation.¹⁸ She rejected any meaning of "Vanitas", and saw the woman as an "image of justice". She drew the conclusion that the woman represents "the kind of justice (justness) possible on this earth, in the Dutch home, of the woman".

There is something to be said both for and against the opinions of Rudolph and Alpers. There is some idea of the vanity of human life in the picture, and there is certainly some relation to justice. The scales the woman is holding being empty, we may see them as an attribute, and consequently the woman may be regarded as an image (or personification) of Justice. In this, I think Alpers is quite right, and we might even ask ourselves if the woman has her eyes closed, which would be a further reference to "Justice".¹⁹

¹⁵ Till in the Seventies, monographs on Vermeer almost exclusively deal with the stylistic-historical side of his works, e.g. Eduard Plietzsch, *Vermeer van Delft*, München 1939; Ludwig Goldschneider, *Johannes Vermeer*, London 1958; and Ernst G. Grimme, *Jan Vermeer van Delft*, Köln 1974. The first monograph that also deals more *in extenso* with the interpretation of Vermeer's paintings, seems to be Albert Blankert (with Rob Ruurs and Willem L. van de Watering), *Johannes Vermeer van Delft 1632-1675*, Utrecht 1975 (English version London 1978). A more recent paper on the Vermeer, is Nanette Solomon's "Vermeer and the Balance of Destiny", in: *Essays in Northern European Art. Fs. Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann*, Doornspijk 1983, pp. 216-221. Solomon does not give a basically new interpretation. She assumes that the woman is pregnant, which, however, costume experts seem to doubt. In my opinion Solomon's article is a fairly good example of an unbridled interpretation of a work of art. However, the recent exhibition catalogue *Masters of Seventeenth Century Dutch Genre Painting* (Philadelphia 1984) takes over her interpretation. After finishing the manuscript of this paper, a "shorter notice" by Ivan Gaskell was published in the *Burlington Magazine*, 126 (1984), pp. 557-561. He explains the Vermeer as a personification of Truth, thereby partly basing himself on a text from Ripa's *Iconologia*. Although there may be some "truth" in it, Gaskell's arguments are not too convincing, also because many other aspects from the description in Ripa do not correspond with the *Woman Holding a Balance*. Also, Gaskell does not designate the existence of some sort of tradition of this personification of Truth in Dutch art and/or literature; the examples he gives can hardly have been known to Vermeer. In the near future I hope to

Alpers relates this "image of justice" to the Dutch housewife, and here, in my opinion, she goes wrong. For one thing, she does not take the picture of the Last Judgement into account, which she, by the way, already remarked herself²⁰. Apart from that, the whole atmosphere in the picture, the peculiar light, does not speak in favour of such an "earthly" explanation.

Several sorts of justice, and their personifications, were known in seventeenth-century Holland.²¹ Among them is "Divine Justice", the justice of God. And by what is the concept of God's Justice better exemplified than by the Last Judgement? Here, in my opinion lies the relation between the woman with the scales, and the picture of the Last Judgement, and this explains the mystic (may we say divine?) light in the room: she is not the image of the justness of an ordinary housewife in a Dutch home, but the personification of Divine Justice.

The moral content of the picture may now be described thus: You who are looking at this picture, be not distracted by worldly goods (the jewelry on the table), but think of your soul that will be weighed by Divine Justice during the Last Judgement. Vermeer has, in a way, made a masterly combination of the concepts "Vanitas" and "Divine Justice", and put it in the form of a genre scene, the common motif of a woman

publish a more comprehensive paper on the *Woman Holding a Balance*.

¹⁶ Herbert Rudolph, "«Vanitas». Die Bedeutung mittelalterlicher und humanistischer Bildinhalte in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts", in: *Fs. Wilhelm Pinder*, Leipzig 1938, pp. 405-433. For an extensive bibliography see the exhibition catalogue *Masters of Seventeenth Century Dutch Genre Painting*, Philadelphia 1984.

¹⁷ Rudolph, *op.cit.*, p. 411. In recent publications (cf. note 16), the honour of discovering this fact is erroneously given to Arthur K. Wheelock, *Art Bulletin*, 59 (1977), p. 440.

¹⁸ Svetlana L. Alpers, "Describe or Narrate? A problem in realistic representation", *New Literary History*, 8 (1976), pp. 16-43. Nanette Solomon (cf. note 16) does not mention this paper.

¹⁹ Having one's eyes closed has, of course, the same effect of not-seeing as a blindfold, with which Justitia is often represented, and which enables her to give a fair judgement, without being distracted. But, if the woman really has closed eyes is difficult to say, as is also the case in some other works by Vermeer.

²⁰ Alpers, *op.cit.*, p. 40, footnote 26. Solomon, *op.cit.*, *passim*, assumes a relation between the pregnant state of the woman and the picture of the Last Judgement. But why a Last Judgement in connection with a child that has not even been born?

²¹ Cesare Ripa, in the Dutch version of the *Iconologia*, mentions seven personifications of Justice. See: Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of Uytbeeldinghe des Verstands. Introduction Jochen Becker*, Soest 1971 (reprint of the edition Amsterdam 1644), pp. 432-434. For instance from the *Allegory of Faith* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), we know that Vermeer knew Ripa.

weighing gold²².

We can easily distinguish the three iconographical layers or phases in our discussion of the Vermeer (if my interpretation is fully correct or not is of no further importance):

- 1. *Pre-iconographical description*, summing up what we see: "a woman is standing at a table..."
- 2. *Iconographical description*: the picture belongs to the iconographical type of "Women weighing gold or money".
- 3. *Iconographical Interpretation*: she is the personification of Divine Justice

The fourth phase, the *iconological interpretation*, should deal with the question why Vermeer painted this subject, and why he painted it in this way. I will not try to answer this question.²³

The division into three iconographical phases can always be made, at least in representative art. Some examples:

phase 1	phase 2	phase 3
a. description	Still-life with skull	"Vanitas"
b. description	Judgement of Solomon	Exemplary Justice
c. description	Winter landscape	the month January
d. description	River landscape	no iconographical interpretation
e. description	Two boys blowing bubbles	"Vanitas"
f. description	Suicide of Lucretia	Virtuousness

²² This is not the only picture by Vermeer that "hides" a deeper meaning in this way. Some interpretations of Vermeer's pictures, perhaps following a similar pattern, might still follow. For instance Leendert D. Couprie in a similar way explains Vermeer's *Milkmaid* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) as a personification of Temperance. See: Leendert D. Couprie, "Het Melkmeisje als symbool voor de Matigheid", *N.R.C. Handelsblad*, 19 November 1975, CS p. 2, and Idem, "Broodjes met betekenis", *Kunstschrift. Openbaar Kunstbezit*, 25 (1981) Jan./Feb., pp. 12-19.

²³ It would take a lot of time to answer such a question. As will be argued further on in this paper, Iconology is a field of which the whole basis, such as its methodology, still has to be developed. A very recent publication which may properly be called an "iconological"

If a work of art does not have a meaning in the iconographical interpretation (example d), this does not mean that an iconological interpretation is not possible either. Every work of art in principle can be interpreted iconologically. Only, in practice it is not easy to get satisfying results. In fact Iconology is a completely uncultivated approach towards art objects, and the (cultural-historical) methodology for it still has to be developed. Incidentally, the fact that I define Iconology as belonging to the field of Cultural History does not mean that art historians should not practice Iconology. However, they should be aware of the possibility that they might have some shortcomings, because they are not trained for it.

In recent years, Panofsky's iconographical theory has found some renewed interest, particularly among scholars who are working in the field of (computerized) iconographical documentation. For the theoretical background of this specific direction within Art History, it is important of course to think about the several layers of meaning that works of art may contain. One of the problems here, is the question which iconographic aspects (i.e. which layer(s)) of works of art should be indexed. Should there always be a *pre-iconographical description* and an *iconographical description*? And how to index possible meanings (the *iconographical interpretation*)? For instance, should a representation of Lucretia (example f) be indexed as a naked woman with a dagger, and as the suicide of Lucretia, and perhaps in some cases as an example of the abstract notion Virtuousness?

Discussing such problems *in extenso* would lead too far here, and therefore I would like to limit myself to discussing an iconographic documentation and research system that in fact combines the several layers of meaning, solves many iconographical documentation problems, and will probably become "the international standard and authority for describing iconography".²⁴

study, is Svetlana L. Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, London 1983. It is a pity that Alpers has not in some way tried to create a methodological theory for her work. Instead of making use of the results of Iconography she more or less rejects the iconographical method. Her book at least makes the impression of a lot of loose facts that are only held together by a fascinating use of American language, which, I fear, must hide the methodlessness of her work.

²⁴ Quotation from Karen Markey, "Visual Arts Resources and Computers", *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 19 (1984), p. 271-309. For Panofskyan theory in relation with iconographic indexing see for instance Karen Markey, "Computer-Assisted Construction of a Thematic Catalog of Primary and Secondary Subject Matter", *Visual resources*, 3 (1983), pp. 16-49.



1) Johannes Vermeer, «Woman Holding a Balance» (c. 1662-1665). Washington, National Gallery of Art.

ICONCLASS: a New Direction in Iconography

In the previous part of this paper I distinguished sharply between Iconography and Iconology, the one being art historical, the other belonging to the field of Cultural History. In this vision it is impossible to stick to the purely literal meanings of Iconography as "image-describing", and Iconology as "image-explaining". Apart from theoretical reasons, the continuing developments within the sub-discipline Iconography are also a good reason for abandoning the linguistic definitions.

The most important step forwards in Iconography since the Second World War is, in my opinion, the publication of ICONCLASS, an ICONographic CLASsification System. Working with this system is in fact working along the lines of the revised "scheme of Panofsky" presented above, as will be shown later.

First, what is ICONCLASS? This question is, perhaps unexpectedly, rather difficult, and a first answer must be fairly abstract: ICONCLASS is a decimal system of classifying (bringing into logical order) the things which are or can be represented or depicted in works of visual art. The system is made up of system numbers (notations), with descriptions of what these notations mean [Fig. 2]. Thus, the system is in fact an empty framework that can be "filled" with material, e.g. with references to works of art, or with references to iconographically interesting literature. This means that with ICONCLASS we can firstly store the iconographical knowledge we have, and secondly, retrieve the stored material efficiently. Before philosophizing on the possibilities ICONCLASS offers I will give some further details about this tool, which was originally devised by the late Professor Hans van de Waal (†1972) of the University of Leiden, and has been published in 17 volumes over the last fourteen years.²⁵

Van de Waal created nine main categories or divisions, in which everything that is or can be depicted in the visual arts has found a place (has been given a notation):

1. Religion and Magic
2. Nature
3. Human Being, Man in general
4. Society, Civilization, Culture
5. Abstract Ideas and Concepts

6. History
7. Bible
8. Literature
9. Classical Mythology and Ancient History

Whereas the first five divisions form the classification of more general things, the last four divisions deal with the more specific themes and subjects in the visual arts. Everything within these nine divisions is built up systematically. If we analyze for example the ICONCLASS notation for the Finding of Moses, 71 E 11 24 (to be pronounced as seventy-one – E – eleven – twenty-four), we find the following construction:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 7 | = Bible |
| 71 | = Old Testament |
| 71 E | = from the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt to their settlement in Canaan |
| 71 E 1 | = the book Exodus |
| 71 E 11 | = Exodus (part I): events preceding and preparing the exit of Israel from Egypt |
| 71 E 11 2 | = Moses' birth and education (Ex. 2:1-10) |
| 71 E 11 24 | = the finding of Moses: Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe with her maidens in the river and discovers the child floating on the water. |

In Fig. 2 we see that there is one further subdivision of 71 E 11 24; the sign in the right margin means that the ICONCLASS bibliography contains iconographically interesting literature on the Finding of Moses, of course under the same notation.

Access to the system is provided for by a three-volume General Alphabetical Index. This index gives references to every theme, subject, object, person, etc. under every relevant heading. Thus, the ICONCLASS Alphabetical Index is the greatest and most easy to handle iconographical corpus ever published (c. 1500 pages). Fig. 3 is a sample page from the Alphabetical Index.

As already mentioned above, together with the System and the Alphabetical Index, an important iconographical bibliography was published. In it, iconographically interesting books and articles are referred to under the relevant notations [Fig. 4]. The seven volumes of the Bibliography correspond

²⁵ Hans van de Waal, *ICONCLASS. An Iconographical Classification System*. Completed and edited by Leendert D. Couprie, Els Tholen, a.o., Amsterdam 1972-1985 (7 vols. System, 7 vols. Bibliography, 3

vols. General Alphabetical Index). For a recent article on ICONCLASS see Leendert D. Couprie, "Iconclass: An Iconographic Classification System", *Art Libraries Journal*, 8 (1983), No. 2, pp. 32-49.

71 E 11 3 Moses' flight to Midian

71 E 11 24	the finding of Moses: Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe with her maidens in the river and discovers the child floating on the water	⊕
11 24 1	Moses is pulled out of the water by the servants	
11 25	Moses is either presented to Pharaoh's daughter or surrounded by women fondling him	
11 25 1	Miriam induces Pharaoh's daughter to entrust him to a Hebrew nurse	
11 25 2	Moses is entrusted to the care of his mother	
11 25 21	Moses' mother suckling her child	
11 26	when the child is old enough, Moses' mother brings him to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopts him	⊕
11 27	Moses is educated in the king's palace	
11 27 1	Moses and Pharaoh's crown: Pharaoh playfully places his crown on the head of the infant Moses, who throws it to the ground and tramples on it; or Moses breaks the crown while playing*	⊕
11 27 11	Moses' trial by fire: when given the choice between two plates, one containing burning coals, the other a ruby ring (or cherries), Moses chooses the burning coals and puts them in his mouth*	⊕
11 27 2	the infant Moses among the philosophers*	⊕
71 E 11 3	Moses and his people; the flight to Midian (Ex. 2:11–25)	
11 31	Moses sees how the Israelites are forced to do hard labour	
11 31 1	Moses beholding one of his countrymen being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster	
11 31 2	Moses kills the Egyptian	⊕
11 31 21	he buries the body in the sand	
11 31 3	Moses, when rebuking two Israelites who were quarrelling, is upbraided for the murder of the Egyptian	
11 31 4	Pharaoh is informed of the murder of the Egyptian	
11 31 5	Moses flees to Midian	⊕
11 32	Moses at a well meets the seven daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian	⊕
11 32 1	Moses drives away the shepherds who wanted to prevent the daughters from watering their father's flock	
11 32 2	Moses waters the sheep	

2) Page from ICONCLASS, System 7.

Chirurgia

'Chirurgia' 49 G 35 0

chisel

attributes of the Four Crowned Martyrs see 11 H (CROWNED MARTYRS, FOUR)
tools, aids, implements ~ crafts and industries (with NAME) 47 D 8 (. .)
the molten sea made by King Hiram of Tyre with hammer and chisel
71 I 43 22 31

chiselling

chiselling, chipping (industrial processes) 47 C 34

chivalry

nobility and patriciate; chivalry, knighthood see 46 A 12

Chloe

Daphnis pulling a thorn out of Chloe's foot 82 A (DAPHNIS) : 31 A 52 2 : 35
Chloe (literary character) 82 AA (CHLOE)

Chloris

Hours ~ fertility, seasons (with NAME) 92 D 21 (. .)
Zephyrus abducting Flora (or Chloris), who usually scatters flowers
92 E 54 21

chocolate

chocolate (solid) 41 C 63 52
chocolate, cocoa (drink) 41 C 72 3

choice

see also choosing

Christ offering St. Catherine of Siena the choice between two crowns,
one of gold and jewels, and one of thorns; St. Catherine, kneeling before
him, takes the crown of thorns 11 HH (CATHERINE OF SIENA) 34 2
the (difficult) choice (~ courting) -C- by men -CC- by women 33 C 33
difficult choice between the paternal home and the future 42 D 22 1
Choice; 'Elettione' (Ripa) 53 A 11
Abraham gives Lot the choice of the surrounding country 71 C 11 53
Moses' trial by fire: when given the choice between two plates, one
containing burning coals, the other a ruby ring (or cherries), Moses
chooses the burning coals and puts them in his mouth 71 E 11 27 11
the prophet Gad comes to David and gives him the choice between three
punishments 71 H 54 5
Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar's captain of the guard, gives Jeremiah the
choice of going or staying 71 O 78 11
choice between Christ and Barabbas 73 D 32 31 1
Hercules at the cross-roads, 'Herkules am Scheidewege': the choice of
Hercules 94 L 72
Penelope, having to choose either to remain with her father Icarius or to
follow Ulysses, covers her head with her veil 95 A (ULYSSES) 21 1
Jupiter separates the fighting Apollo and Idas, and gives Marpessa the
choice of suitors 95 B (MARPESSA) 22 21
Quintus Fabius Maximus, surnamed Cunctator, gives the council of Carthage
the choice between war and peace; he is seen gathering the folds of his
toga 98 B (FABIUS MAXIMUS, Q.) 51

choir(s)

the nine choirs of angels, hierarchy of angels 11 G 1
parts of church interior (with NAME) 11 Q 71 31 (. .)
choir (in church) 11 Q 75 71 1
choir in Synagogue ~ Jewish religion 12 A 34 24 2
'parthenia', Greek religious songs by choirs of maidens see 12 E 2
choir 48 C 75 52

choir-screen

rood-screen, choir-screen; iconostasis 11 Q 71 45 7

choir-stall(s)

seats of the clergy, choir-stalls 11 Q 71 45 3

References to ICONCLASS-notations are in ascending numerical order. Always check ICONCLASS-system for possible elaborations and for indication of relevant literature ☞.

3) Page from ICONCLASS, General Alphabetical Index A-E.

71 E 11 Moses is exposed and found

71 E 1 – 71 E 4 story of Moses (continued)

(1958–1959) No. 3, 220–226

H. Schade, Hinweise zur frühmittelalterlichen Ikonographie. II: Die Enthüllung des Moses, *Das Münster* 11(1958)375–392 (i.p. 387–389)

G. T. van Ysselsteyn, De Mozes-serie in de Prinsenkamer van het raadhuis te Maastricht en haar ontwerper, *Publ. Soc. hist. et archéol. dans le Limbourg (à Maastricht)* 92/93(1956–1957)369–383

J. Daniélou, Sacramentum futuri. Etudes sur les origines de la typologie biblique, Paris 1950 (i.p. 131–200)

T. C[arr] H[owe] Jr., The Moses and Aaron series, *Bull. of the Legion of Honour Mus.* 2(1944–1945)91–95

M. F. Allotte de la Fuÿe, L'iconographie de Moïse sur quelques médailles modernes à légendes hébraïques, *Rev. numismatique* 4th ser. 22(1919)169–186

G. Kutna, Moses in der bildenden Kunst, *Ost und West* 9(1909)281–294, 353–356, 509–518

71 E 1 the book Exodus

Donati, Miniatura, 366 s.v. (Bibbia) Esodo – RAC VII 22 – Réau II (1) 193

71 E 11 15 Pharaoh decrees the drowning of every new male offspring among the Israelites

Wilberg, Hoefnagel, Alph. Themenverz. s.v. Ertrinken der Söhne der Israeliten in Ägypten

71 E 11 23 Moses is exposed in the ark on the banks of the Nile

Réau II (1) 180

71 E 11 24 the finding of Moses

Réau II (1) 181

K. & U. Schubert, Die Errettung des Mose aus den Wassern des Nil in der Kunst des spät-antiken Judentums und das Weiterwirken dieses Motivs in der frühchristlichen und jüdisch-mittelalterlichen Kunst, Fs. Walter Kornfeld, Wien [1977], 59–68

L. Kötzsche-Breitenbruch, Die neue Katakomben an der Via Latina in Rom. Untersuchungen zur Ikonographie der alttestamentlichen Wandmalereien, Münster 1976 (i.p. 76)

J. Schneider, Die Auffindung des Moseskindes auf zwei Seidenstickereien des 17. Jahrhunderts, *Zs. f. schweiz. Archäol. und Kg.* 25(1967–1968)153–158

M. Calvesi, La Tempesta di Giorgione come 'Ritrovamento di Mosè', *Commentari* 13(1962)226–255

R. Wischnitzer, The messianic theme in the paintings of the Dura synagogue, Chicago [1948] (i.p. 46)

71 E 11 26 Moses' mother brings Moses to Pharaoh's daughter

Deckers, SMM, 128 – Réau II (1) 182

71 E 11 27 1 Moses and Pharaoh's crown

Pigler (2nd ed.) I 95 – Réau II (1) 182

4) Page from ICONCLASS, Bibliography 7.



5) Unknown master, «The Choice of Moses». Present whereabouts unknown.

to the seven system volumes.

To give an example of how ICONCLASS functions, let us suppose we are confronted with a work of art and do not know what it represents [Fig. 5].²⁶ Our aim is to find out what its subject is, and to see if we can find further material on

the theme. The order of the activities is given in Diagram III.

First, to stick to the revised "scheme of Panofsky", we make a sort of *pre-iconographical description*. From such a description we can distil some useful and typical catchwords for the representation, e.g. *King, Queen, Dishes (or Plates)*,

²⁶ Almost nothing is known about this picture. It seems to have been in a private collection in Berlin. The photograph, the negative of which is in the Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, seems to have been taken

by the restorer S. Robitsch in 1936. See *Marburger Index* microfiche 233 F 14.

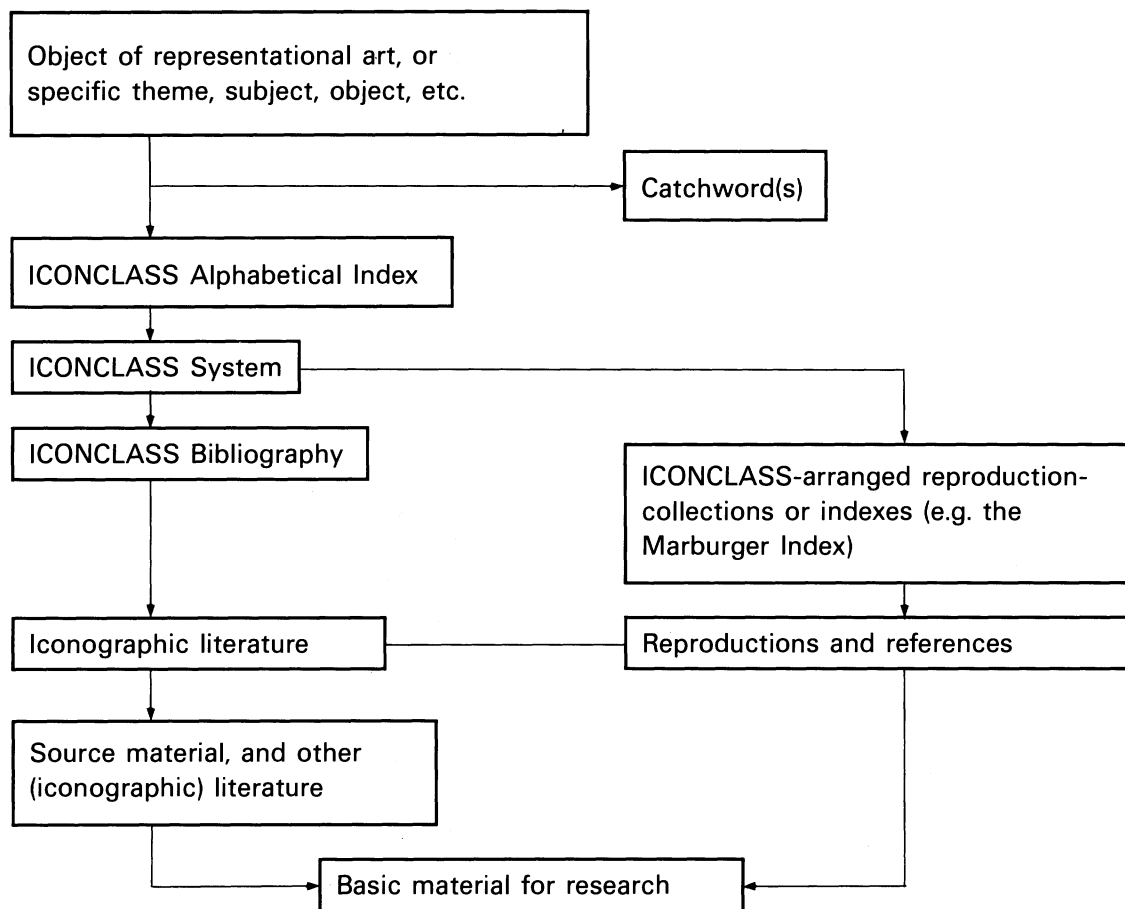


Diagram III: How to collect basic material for iconographic research with the help of ICONCLASS.

Fire, Coins, Infant (or Child), and perhaps the word *Choice*. The next step now is to look under these words in the General Alphabetical Index of ICONCLASS, the iconographical corpus as we called it. Under *King* and *Queen* we do not find anything relevant, but if we look under *Plates, Fire, or Choice* [Fig. 3] for instance, we find a very interesting entry:

Moses' trial by fire: when given the choice between two plates, one containing burning coals, the other a ruby ring (or cherries), Moses chooses the burning coals, and puts them in his mouth 71 E 11 27 11.

²⁷ In fact, it is not always necessary to look in the system; one might also look directly in the ICONCLASS bibliography and other "iconclassified" publications or (reproduction) collections. However, in many cases, the system volumes offer additional information, in

Although there are some minor details in the ICONCLASS description that do not exactly correspond with our representation, there can be no doubt that this is the subject we are looking for. This means that with the help of ICONCLASS we have found the *iconographical description* of our picture.

Following diagram III, we now look in the System, part 7, under the given notation 71 E 11 27 11 [Fig. 2].²⁷ There we learn by the asterisk in the description that Moses' trial by fire is not a biblical subject, but a legendary extension of the story of Moses. We are shown by a sign in the margin that

the form of cross-references, or further sub-divisions of a theme. If we look for instance under "Madonna" in the General Alphabetical Index, we find a reference to 11 F 4 only, whereas the system offers no less than three pages of sub-notations of this theme.

the ICONCLASS bibliography contains references to some iconographic literature on our subject: under the same notation again, we find references to Pigler and Réau.²⁸

Pigler mentions nine other works of art with the same subject, and refers to the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* as a literary source of the subject. Indeed the story occurs in the *Speculum*²⁹, where it is combined with another legend about young Moses, in which he tramples on Pharaoh's crown. In the *Speculum*, one of the most important typological works of the late Middle Ages, the story is used as a type of the massacre of the Innocents. Earlier than in the *Speculum*, the story was told by Petrus Comestor in his *Historia Scholastica*³⁰, c. 1175.

Réau gives an account of the story of Moses' choice. One of Pharaoh's ministers has a dream in which he sees Moses taking over Pharaoh's crown. He advises Pharaoh to have Moses killed, but another minister proposes an ordeal. Then the baby Moses has to choose between two things, a ruby ring (or cherries, or, as in our representation, gold pieces) and burning coals. Of course he takes a burning coal, and burns his mouth with it. This should explain why Moses says in Exodus 4:10: "... but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue".

Unfortunately, Réau has confused his references to literary sources and the examples in art of our story with the story of young Moses trampling Pharaoh's crown. It is true that Petrus Comestor combines both stories, and that they are represented together in the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, but the story of Moses trampling the crown stems from a still older source, Flavius Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*³¹, and both stories are more often than not represented separately.

Having looked under 71 E 11 27 11 in the ICONCLASS bibliography, it is advisable also to look under the more general literature about Moses, which can be found under 71 E 1 - 4;

²⁸ A. Pigler, *Barockthemen. Eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, Budapest 1974 (3 vols., 2nd revised ed.), I, p. 94. Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, Paris 1955-1959 (3 pts. in 6 vols.), II (1), p. 182.

²⁹ See for instance the edition by J. Lutz & P. Perdrizet, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, Mulhouse 1907-1909, (2 vols.), I, p. 201.

³⁰ See for instance *Scholastica Historia Magistri Petri Comestoris...*, Argentinae 1485, Libri Exodi, caput V.

³¹ Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books I-IV, with a translation by H. St. J. Thackeray, London 1967⁴, Bk. II, vs. 233 (p. 267) (Loeb Classical Library).

³² Peter M. Daly is trying to realize an *Index Emblematicus*, an indexing of all known emblem books. For the iconography of the *picturae* a fairly primitive method of word indexing is used. In my opinion, ICONCLASS would be the perfect system for this project. See: Peter M. Daly (ed.), *The European Emblem. Towards an Index Emblematicus*, Waterloo (Ontario) 1980 (i.p. Daly's own contribution on pp. 29-57), and *Idem*, "Zur Inventarisierung der Emblematis: Ein

the titles mentioned there may also contain information on our subject.

Besides studying the iconographical literature, in which we also found references to works of art (or reproductions), we may look under the same notation 71 E 11 27 11 again in ICONCLASS arranged reproduction-collections and in iconographical indexes working with the ICONCLASS system. For instance, I found a few other examples of Moses' choice, that were not mentioned in Pigler or Réau, in the ICONCLASS reproduction-collection in the Institute of Art History in Leiden.

As the example shows, ICONCLASS provides us immediately with basic material for further research on a specific theme or subject, which may then lead us towards an *iconographical interpretation*, that is, if a third layer of meaning is present. As I have shown, the theoretical basis of (working with) ICONCLASS follows the revised "scheme of Panofsky".

With such a tool at hand, what can we expect of the future of Iconography? In the first place, I think many iconographical problems will be solved, i.e. the correct subject of many works (e.g. drawings) will be found. Secondly, making iconographical interpretations will probably become increasingly easier. For, by continually storing iconographical knowledge with the help of ICONCLASS, the results of retrieval will get better all the time. Imagine for example an ICONCLASS index to scenes from classical mythology occurring in 16th-century Dutch literature; or an ICONCLASS index to all emblems³²; or an index to all German prints of the 15th and 16th centuries; or an ICONCLASS index to... (see Diagram IV).

If we imagine such a development, and it is by no means unrealistic to do so, we can perhaps also imagine the masses of material that will come together, arranged according to subject (and possibly further subdivided according to country and/or period).³³ Iconographical research will be improved

Arbeitsbericht", *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik*, 15 (1983), Heft 1, pp. 100-120.

³³ For an over-view of projects and publications that in some way work with ICONCLASS, see: Leendert D. Couprie, "Iconclass: An Iconographic Classification System", *Art Libraries Journal*, 8 (1983), No. 2, pp. 32-49. A first ICONCLASS index to visual material was published last year on microfiche by the Bildarchiv Foto Marburg (West Germany), as one of the indexes to the *Marburger Index* microfiches. I myself made a preliminary ICONCLASS Index to the first one and a half volume of Hollstein's *Dutch Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts*, as a preparation for a project to "iconclassify" the whole Hollstein series on Dutch prints. In the Institute of Art History in Leiden, an ICONCLASS index to the *Illustrated Bartsch* (ed. by W.L. Strauss) is in preparation. In the course of 1986, I hope to publish my ICONCLASS Index to Hind's *Early Italian Engraving*. Furthermore, it is to be expected that the ICONCLASS Bibliography will be continued in the near future in the form of supplementary volumes.

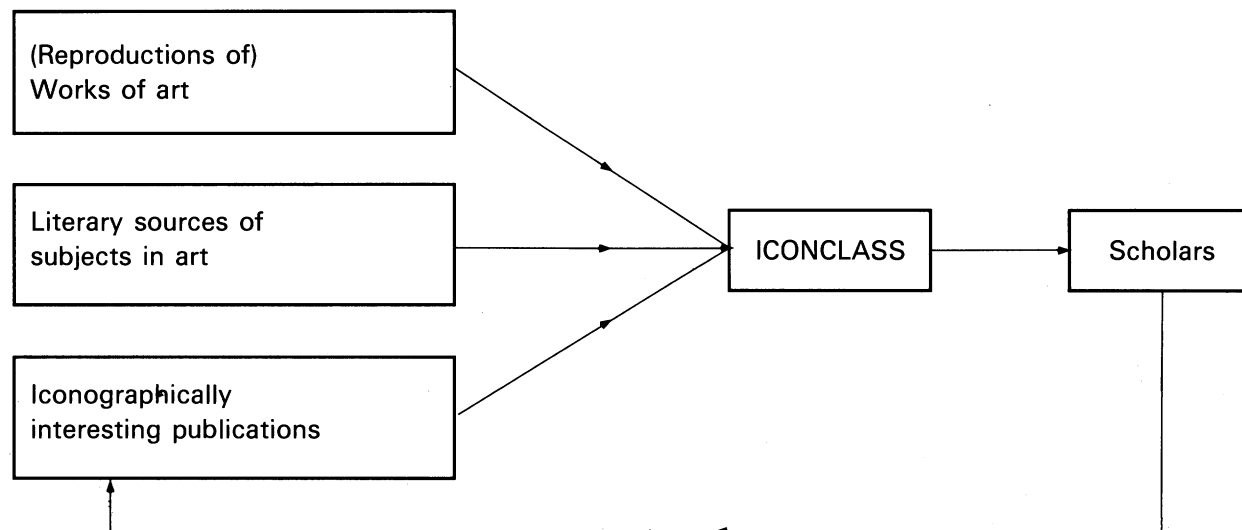


Diagram IV: The role ICONCLASS might play in the further development of Iconography.

enormously, and I think that is on the whole a very positive development. It might in fact mean that it will be possible to use the time which art historians, cultural historians and others normally need to get their material together, for much more sophisticated research, in which for example literature and history may play a still more important role. Also, the time

may then come for Iconology, which will then be based on iconographical knowledge of a much higher level of development than we have reached as yet.³⁴

³⁴ Hermerén, *op.cit.*, ch. 6, offers a first basis for further thinking in the direction of a theory of Iconology.