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Iconography at the Crossroads Revisited

Despite criticism, iconography continues to play a pivotal role in art historical studies. New iconographical fields are being studied and these include sound, light, color, gender, taste, smell, and the non-representational. The approach is far more expansive than in the past and the canonical has been extended. The observations in this paper are based on the Index of Christian Art and I have taken it as a barometer for the study of iconography and examined how and if the concept has changed over the last twenty or so years. The first thing that has happened in the last twenty years has been the explosive growth of the Internet and our consequent inundation with images which is the foundation stone for iconography. Methodologies have changed significantly and we are now supposedly in what has been termed "Digital Art History". Iconography has been significantly influenced in a number of ways by the application of the computer. The first of these has been the ease of access to these new resources which has been drastically improved. Instead of supporting research, in many ways the image is now determining how it proceeds and in what direction. Secondly, greater and improved access has been developed with the application of new methodologies and classificatory systems to this material. The impact the computer had as an iconographic cataloguing tool has been one of its major benefits. Within the last twenty five years the belief that that iconography is static, constant and firmly set has been abandoned. The idea that iconography can be flexible and framed in a much bigger picture than we had hitherto suspected is now widely accepted. Iconography is now understood as frequently embodying many concepts and not just the single one to one equation that existed in the past. Iconography is now also understood as embodying contradictory qualities and that its meaning can differ given context and situation. Over the last twenty years the iconography of gender, feminism, reception, to name just three have been examined along with topics such as the liturgy, gift-exchange, inter-pictoriality, and hierothopy. The fields of gesture, music and color looked particularly promising in the past and it is true that there has been considerable research undertaken in these areas but not with the investment they deserve. Over the last few years it seems that a number-but certainly not all disciplines are looking at art historical images as active constructs and not simply as illustrations or reflections of social values. One existing iconographical sub-field that is gaining wide acceptance and interest is the classification of the non-representational. Nowadays, iconography need not even relate to the visual but has connotations of 'aboutness' or 'related to'. If the parameters of iconography have broadened then the processes of classification have tightened and become more concise. In Europe iconology seems to have supplanted the iconographical approach while the latter still continues in North American studies. Iconography continues to be a major field in art historical studies and it seems an intuitive part of the discipline. If stylistic barriers are broken down then the value of iconography will become even more obvious and iconography or iconology will play an even bigger role in art historical studies. A major concern however is the extreme limits that some studies go to under the name of iconology or iconography. Despite all the criticisms and uncertainty as to what future directions the discipline may take it is clear that iconography is going to stay with us and continue to be one of the most important ways we have of understanding images.