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After Paradigm Iconography and Giotto

The complex question of subject matter and iconography is manifest already in the vast number of possible approaches to the problem. The subject matter of a representation can be considered in its original historical context, but also in the various contexts of its subsequent history. Furthermore, representational subject matter, similarly to other systems of signs, can be investigated outside of any historical period, focusing on the changing structures of visualization. To some extent, mirroring this wide variety of approaches, iconography can be regarded as a specific art historical method investigating the conventional subject matter of representations in their original historical context, or – under the name of iconology – it can present itself as an art historical paradigm focusing on the multi-level meanings of representations. I propose that one way to describe the present state of iconography as a discipline (and, to some extent, the problem of subject matter in general) is to think about its position in comparison to other paradigms of art history (formalism, social art history or visual hermeneutics).

Based on Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific progress one may characterize iconography as being in a post-paradigmatic state. Iconology (and iconography) is no longer regarded as the leading paradigm of art history. However, iconography understood as a way to deal with the conventional subject matter of figurative representations successfully repositioned itself as one of the strict or hard methods of art history. That is to say, the collapse of iconology as an art historical paradigm did not ruin completely iconography as a method. This can be measured also on the fact that today iconography still remains an integrated element of visual hermeneutics and social art history. The main reason for this in visual hermeneutics is that the specifically visual aspects of a representation can be measured *vis-à-vis* its content. Also, even if iconography is no longer regarded as a place of the ultimate and exclusive meaning of the works, the reconstruction of the original subject matter is an important component for the understanding of their direct or subversive meanings and later reception. These tendencies may indicate that the relation between visual hermeneutics, social art history and iconography today can be regarded not only as a peaceful cohabitation but also as mutually beneficial cooperation and the potential synergies between them can be described by adopting Paul Ricoeur's dynamic interpretative model distinguishing between the sense and the meaning of a work.

We examine here three frescoes from Italy, dated shortly before and after 1300 and attributed to Giotto di Bondone: the *Dream of Innocent III* in the Upper Church at Assisi (c. 1290s), the allegory of *Obedience* in the Lower Church at Assisi (c. 1310s) and the allegories of *Justice* and *Injustice* in the Arena Chapel in Padua (1303-05). These three works can also be characterized as meta-images, since they reflect on the problem of representation as such. Furthermore, it appears that in these cases visual self-reflexivity was also combined with an innovative handling of the iconographic content. The importance of the subject matter on these examples shows that for Giotto subject matter was a central question, which could nuance further the general view on his artistic achievement and the understanding of iconography in general.