The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art
STUDIES IN ICONOGRAPHY: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Studies in Iconography: Themes and Variations is a scholarly series that will present collections of essays on topics of interest to readers of the journal *Studies in Iconography* and to medievalists in a wide range of disciplines.
The Locus of Meaning in Medieval Art

Iconography, Iconology, and Interpreting the Visual Imagery of the Middle Ages

Edited by
Lena Liepe

Studies in Iconography: Themes and Variations

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THE TASK OF GAINING a deeper understanding of what images meant for their makers, patrons, and beholders, and by which means and forms this was eventually accomplished, is at the very core of medieval art historical inquiry. For much of the twentieth century, iconographic analysis was more or less a generic term for the culturally and historically oriented approach used for this pursuit. However, the criticism leveled at iconography, particularly since the 1970s, has altered the substance of the term; it is now often narrowly defined as a procedure that detects an image’s single meaning exclusively through an investigation of textual sources. For instance, the stern formulation of Brendan Cassidy in his introduction to the anthology *Iconography at the Crossroads* (1993), about how traditional iconography leads to “single, authorized, official, and closed” meanings being sought in textual sources, is frequently quoted and taken essentially at face value. The same applies to the classification by E.H. Gombrich: in 1970 he referred to iconography as something that “busies itself with emblems and allegories.” Critiques of iconography often merge with those of the work of Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) (figure 2.1), occasionally even touching upon the art historian’s own character or person.

Figure 2.1. Erwin Panofsky and his students and Dora Panofsky at an excursion, Hamburg July 1930. Black-and-white photograph, photographer unknown. (Photo: Archives of the Warburg Institute, London. Published with the kind permission by Warburg-Haus, Hamburg. Previously published in vol. 1, p. 366 of Panofsky’s correspondence, 2001).
Ever since Panofsky emigrated to the United States, in the early 1930s, his scholarship has held a firm place in the discipline of art history. Nevertheless, as noted by Michael Ann Holly in her groundbreaking study on Panofsky (1984), there is widespread incomprehension of the nature of his thinking. In spite of the number of contributions that have followed Holly's work, the general grasp of the matter has not, I would argue, advanced much, or at least not within mainstream medievalist art historical scholarship, where theoretical and historiographical questions still tend to be underemphasized.

This essay aims to discuss Panofsky's ideas and formulations, as well as their reception, primarily from the point of view of a medievalist situated in northern Europe, where many scholars continue to identify Panofsky's legacy with a restricted notion of "traditional iconography." His methods are apprehended as a contradiction to the multifaceted approach that has been embraced by art history now for decades. Iconography tends to be regarded as an unwanted concept, even though it goes without saying that concepts always travel in time. As Mieke Bal has pointed out, "using concepts just to characterize or label an object means falling back into a practice of typology whose point is limited as well as limiting." It seems that some practitioners of medieval art history in the Nordic countries, drawing chiefly from Anglo-American scholarship, have acquired a sense of shame about iconographic approaches by taking iconography as a labeling and limiting concept instead of subscribing to its conceptual mobility. Consequently, it is not uncommon for students of art history today to dismiss the viability of iconology and to subscribe instead to the methodologies of visual culture studies in its various versions, even though their investigation of motifs and themes within cultural contexts often conflates more or less with the general modes of iconological investigation, itself grounded in cultural contextualization.

In this text, I will address a number of essential topics related to Panofsky's thought that have been problematized and criticized and that can be seen to have contributed to the current skepticism among medievalists regarding the relevance of iconography and iconology. First, I briefly explore Panofsky's intentions concerning his three-level interpretational model, drawing attention to his own notion of its inherent circularity and questioning the common allegation that he sought an absolute perspective for determining correct interpretations. This is followed by a consideration of the interconnectedness of iconography and cultural contextualization. Second, I expound on the criticism leveled at Panofsky as part of the developments within art historical theory from the 1990s onwards, using Michael Camille as a prism. The scope of this essay prevents me from a broader discussion of the legacy of this pioneering scholar, yet Camille's role here is warranted, as many medievalists discuss Panofsky's position or "traditional iconography" through references to his studies; but, as is argued, Camille's work actually shared more with Panofsky's than is apparent at first sight. Finally, I wish to elaborate on what Holly insightfully expressed already thirty years ago; namely, how the "shadow of war and persecution and the threatened destruction of the values of humanism" affected Panofsky's thinking—that is, how his writings betray the abuse of art and words at the hands of the Nazis.

The word "panopticon" in my title derives from Jeremy Bentham's (in)famous design for institutional buildings—namely, prisons—of the late eighteenth century. Today it is perhaps best known from Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism. In the essay the term hovers in the background so to speak, serving as a metaphor for the contemporary scholarly scene: Panofsky's thoughts and concepts, spread around the perimeter of the panopticon's circular structure, are objectified and
observed (-opticon) from the “inspection house,” the academia of art history, placed in the center of this imaginary edifice. I am more than aware of the paradox the proposed constellation bears, because Panofsky’s own art historical philosophy has been understood as a reflection of such a system, as I shall discuss. The use of the term panopticon is inspired, not too glibly I hope, by Panofsky’s much-used nickname Pan. I am certainly not the first to make use of this name, and Panofsky himself—who loved playing with words and etymologies—did it as well.

**Tension, Contextualization, and Resolution**

Contemplation of the differences between iconology and iconography has been one of the central art historical tasks in the wake of Panofsky’s work. As is well known, Panofsky himself used these terms with some inconsistency. For instance, in the 1950s he felt that the word iconography, especially as used in the United States, was too general and descriptive to cover the process of searching for a work’s intrinsic meaning, and so he chose to use iconology instead of the earlier expression “iconography in a deeper sense.” He made this decision despite earlier personal imputations leveled at him in conjunction with the term, one considered esoteric by nature. These unjust condemnations that attempted to link his art-philosophical approach to the rise of National Socialism vexed him at length; even in his last years he returned to it several times. As he wrote in a private letter, with a slight overstatement: “When it [Studies on Iconology] was published the very term ‘iconology,’ as yet unknown in America, proved to be puzzling to certain colleagues and one of them (the late-lamented Henry Frances Taylor, then Director of the Metropolitan Museum) became so angry that he made me personally responsible for the rise of Hitler, saying that it was small wonder the students ‘confronted with this kind of incomprehensible and useless investigation, turned to National Socialism in despair.’” The unstable terminology creates a sense of uncertainty as to whether the attempt to explain and interpret the meaning of a work of art should count as an exercise in iconography or iconology: indeed, it rests on how the notions are outlined. Panofsky elaborated on the point in 1951: “Though I tried to define in the Introduction [1939] what I meant by this revival of Ripa’s term, I have often been asked in what way iconology differs from iconography and used to answer that this depends upon the attitude of the reader.” Yet, he did not use nor comment upon the word iconology in the 1939 introduction; the reader is given no explanation as to why the term was chosen for the title of the book. Supposedly, he proposes the word to designate the “methods of approach” seen as a whole; the entire organic and indivisible process of interpretation rather than—as in the 1955 version of the essay—the third sphere of his interpretational model alone.

In the French edition of Studies in Iconology (1967), Panofsky once again reconsidered the question of terminology, and came to the conclusion that the word iconography could thereafter suffice. He confesses in the preface: “Today, in 1966, I could have perhaps replaced the keyword of the title, iconology, with iconography, more familiar and less subject to debate; but—and admittedly it fills me with a certain melancholic pride—precisely the very fact that this substitution is henceforth possible is, to a certain degree, due to the existence of these Studies in Iconology.” This passage conveys Panofsky’s perception of how his own studies had repositioned iconography within a broader conceptual frame, where it merges with iconology. Hence, if we listen to Panofsky with a sensitive ear, it all may be called “iconography.”
In theorizing iconological inquiry, Panofsky laid emphasis on the simultaneous character of all three spheres of the model: the pre-iconographic, the iconographic, and the iconographic in a deeper sense, later called the iconological sphere. In German, Panofsky employed the word *Sinnschicht* as a common denomination for these spheres. This is a word not easily translated into English: the commonly used “level” is misleading. Panofsky himself mostly uses the expression “sphere,” and this practice is followed also in the present essay. Almost apologizing for the graphic table that presents the essentials of the interpretative system, he explicates: “the methods of approach which here appear as three unrelated operations of research merge with each other into one organic and indivisible process.” In the first version of the essay, published in German in 1932, this conviction is even more dramatically described: the interpretational spheres, only recognizable afterwards, are described as being woven into a unified total event, expanding with both tension and resolution (*Spannung und Lösung*). Exposing the hermeneutical basis of his approach, Panofsky insists on the fusion of the three *Sinnschichten*.

Panofsky feared that his scheme was in danger of being mistaken for a sort of *lebensfremden* rationalism—one untethered to reality, or everyday life. His anxieties proved justified. For instance, Stephen Melville argues along with Margaret Iversen that “Panofsky’s stolidly rectangular synoptic table with its neatly carpentered rows and columns” opposes circularity. This claim fails to reflect what Panofsky himself wished to do, as it was precisely the correlative relation of the interpretational spheres (“the beginning of our investigation always seems to presuppose the end”) that he prioritized—an approach that in fact resonates more powerfully with Iversen’s and Melville’s “counter-Panofskian” definition of description as an interpretation, its outcome, and its precondition.

According to Iversen and Melville, then, Panofsky’s spheres are not intertwined, instead description and identification form the bedrock of interpretation. The “bedrock” element deserves a bit more consideration here, simply because medieval works of art are often so fragmentary, mishandled, or simply worn down that identification and description form a great challenge, and erroneous interpretations may lead one seriously astray. My own efforts to discern a coherent image or recognizable shapes out of the smudgy patches of paint on the southern wall of the medieval church of Inkoo/Ingå (southern coastal Finland) serve to illustrate the process. The figure located in the lower middle appears to depict a woman and child (see plate 1), but the motif has thus far been unidentified. Using various comparisons I identified this figure as the mother of the Virgin, Saint Anne, holding the infant Jesus, together with the Virgin Mary, of whom we can detect only one hand and a portion of the halo. Only after ascertaining with some confidence what the incomplete forms indicate is it sensible to continue and scrutinize, for example, the Trinitarian elements of the constellation and the accuracy of this devotional idea in early sixteenth-century northern Europe. Themes that, as expected, already guided my first glances. Circularity, then, should not be comprehended contradictory to reliance on the precision of identification and description.

Panofsky’s concept of “intrinsic meaning”—which ought to be grasped once the researcher has taken into account all three spheres—as well as his study of perspective as a visual representation have been read as a search for a single correct explanation for each work of art. This presumption stems from questions regarding theoretical points addressed by Panofsky himself: these include implications of his reading of Alois Riegl’s concept of *Kunstwollen*; and, related to that, the function of the notion of an “Archimedean point”; and, above all, what his thesis on perspective really encompasses.
Panofsky’s neo-Kantian reading of Kunstwollen provided him with a theoretical tool for addressing the dilemma of how to separate artistic intentions from general historical phenomena. He incorporated the term in the notion of intrinsic meaning, and, until the end of his life, Panofsky acknowledged Riegl “as one of the chief forces” that had shaped his thinking. Panofsky’s analysis of Kunstwollen has, however, been interpreted as something of a permanent critical judgment, an “Archimedean point,” in relation to which “all the products of art could be authoritatively understood.” This construal of his thinking is persuasively challenged by Allister Neher, who argues that while Panofsky was interested in developing the Kantian concepts that enable evaluation of judgments relevant to artistic phenomena, this philosophical mission was not identical to a construction of a model for the interpretation of images.

The linear Renaissance perspective, it is maintained, had a privileged universal status for Panofsky, and, according to Christopher Wood, Panofsky—regardless of his intentions—failed to undermine the claimed naturalness of the geometrical perspective. Panofsky’s purpose, in any case, is clearly conveyed, as he repeatedly conceded alternative readings, referring to the geometrical perspective as a “seemingly natural visual space” (scheinbar natürlichen Sehraum), referring to its “correctness” with the quotation marks, and urging specificity regarding the perspective employed. Although Panofsky regarded the Renaissance perspective as an extraordinary and forceful transformation in the history of pictorial and optical realms, this should not overshadow his readiness to acknowledge the multiplicity of visual territories. While it is true that Panofsky’s vocabulary is sometimes ambiguous, we should be attentive both to his tenets and the rhetoric of 1920s academia; as Joel Snyder notes, it is unfeasible that a twentieth-century neo-Kantian scholar such as Panofsky would have believed the Renaissance perspective to have a privileged, natural claim upon us. Still, the concept of central perspective has been appropriated as a metaphor meant to encapsulate Panofsky’s intellectual undertaking as a whole.

To return to the panopticon metaphor, Panofsky’s “perspective” is, then, reproduced as follows: the art historian represents a voice of authority at the center of the edifice pronouncing the right interpretation for each work of art that remains; here I am tempted to quote Foucault’s panopticism and its definition of a patient or inmate as “the object of information, never a subject in communication.” In effect, to his critics, Panofsky bears responsibility both for presenting such an ideal in his own studies and for advancing art historical scholarship as a whole to assume such a structure. Iversen and Melville, for instance, have sought to show that “Panofsky positions the art historian at the apex of a perspectival apparatus from which detached vantage point he surveys a field of already-constituted objects.” This apparatus, they say, is his methodology and, additionally, the basis for the prevailing art historical curriculum. A related image is offered from the viewpoint of feminist and medieval studies as articulated by Marilynn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn. In their study of manuscript illuminations in Christine de Pizan’s Epistre Othea, they compare Panofsky’s spectatorship—which, according to the authors, “objectifies the female body and expresses a distaste for female sexuality in the guise of appreciation”—to that of the peering draftsman, who, in the famous instructional woodcut by Albrecht Dürer, makes use of an elaborate device to draw a reclining nude in an effort to achieve the “right” perspective.

As the aforementioned examples attest to, Panofsky’s theoretical reflections are flexible enough to generate manifold art historical narratives, including that of the peeping Tom provided by Desmond and Sheingorn. While it is true that Panofsky was keen on deploying abstract theoretical apparatuses and he aimed to find authoritative viewpoints—meaning incisive and scholarly rather
than dictatorial and dogmatic—he did not endorse a fixed “Archimedean point” from which each individual artwork should be interpreted and understood. On the contrary, Panofsky’s rendering of interpretation is based on contextualized subjective views, as will be discussed below.

“Iconology does not unlock a painting or other representational form as a statement of explicit meanings as much as it addresses itself to the elusive underlying cultural principles of representation,” asserts Michael Ann Holly. “It asks,” she continues, “why certain images, attitudes, historical situations, and so forth have assumed one particular shape at one particular time.”41 Panofsky voiced the need for contextualization without using this specific word, fairly novel as it is in broader academic discourse. “Context” is built on the Latin verb *contexere*, to weave, or to knit or bind together. Like many other terms, it originally referred to something concrete but later came to encompass a greater array of connotations, and the definition became “the part or parts of something written or printed, as of Scripture, which precede or follow a text or quoted sentence, or are so intimately associated with it as to throw light upon its meaning.”42 Thus, context could be found from the scrutinized text itself. Later, the definition of context expanded further, and an object (or text, or a person, etc.) was to be interpreted in the context of its environment or surroundings; context is now a synonym for such terms as background, conditions, or frame of reference. Context, however, should not exhaust the actual work of art: “Even the critical or theoretical statements of a whole period cannot immediately interpret the works of art produced in that period but first have to be interpreted by us together with the work,” Panofsky affirmed, underlining the unity of content and form, both of which require contextualization in order to be properly understood.43

As David Summers has put it, Panofsky’s “objective correctives” define what we call contexts.44 Panofsky advocated that “our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment,” which is intertwined with our worldview; and exactly because the interpretations are born from so fundamentally subjective grounds, this process needs to be supplemented with insight into the historical processes.45 They provide the “objective correctives.” Thus the subjective and intuitive approach, dependent on, for instance, one’s gender, political commitment, or philosophical stance, always has to be tempered by considerations of the historical conditions under which a work of art has been created. Their formation, nonetheless, tends to be complicated, not least because, to again quote Holly, “the history of art might go a long way toward recovering the facts of a historical object’s existence, but one obstacle the discipline decidedly cannot overcome is its loss of world. The historical work of art is contemporary but not synchronous.”46

**Michael Camille’s Patricide**

One of the most innovative medievalists of the late twentieth century, Michael Camille, whose work never reached maturity owing to the author’s untimely death in 2002 at the age of forty-four, was a critic of Panofsky. According to Camille, Panofsky’s method was “fraught with problems” when applied to the Middle Ages.47 Aiming to devise an alternative method, Camille sought to shape an “anti-iconography,” which would surpass the prevailing cultural ideas of each era and dive into the “hidden” countercultures. This strategy connects to the theoretical approach of “reading against the grain” that was popular when he presented the concept, at the beginning of the 1990s. Anti-iconography was a response to the conviction that intrinsic meaning was to be found only by relying on the texts produced by the dominant culture.
Camille was among those who faulted Panofsky for confining himself to the textual realm and dismissing the evidence of the visual; he stated provocatively: “There could be no meaning for Panofsky without pointing to the scroll of verbal explanation.” To be sure, Panofsky foregrounded the necessity of a thorough familiarity with textual sources to a degree that in today’s academia, with its weight on fast-track graduation and employment, seems remote and unattainable. In Panofsky’s letter to New York University in 1950, he describes his forthcoming seminar and states: “Since iconography requires extensive reading of literary sources it is necessary that students wishing to take the seminar have a sufficient command of German, Italian, French, and Latin.” These demands notwithstanding, it should be kept in mind that Panofsky’s interpretational scheme includes familiarity with the visual entries of the history of style and types to complement the references provided by the literary texts.

The often-voiced assumption concerning Panofsky’s “logocentrism” has been questioned, recently by Audrey Rieber, who elaborates on the importance of visual materials for Panofsky. She echoes certain issues raised by Michel Foucault some forty-five years earlier, when he wrote a short review of the newly published French translation of Panofsky’s thesis on iconology in 1967 for Le Nouvel observateur. Foucault remarked how Panofsky’s iconology expanded the classical iconography à la Émile Mâle that treated visual art as a form of writing. He declared himself a panofskien neophyte et bien sûr enthousiaste, and stressed Panofsky’s ability to study the complexities of the relations between words and images as a reciprocal system, that is, “the garland of the visible and the articulable [dicible]” and their interchange, consistency, transformation, and translation. While Camille undoubtedly valued Foucault as one of his theoretical mentors, it appears that he was unaware that Foucault considered Panofsky to be as much a reformer in this field as Camille saw himself. As Camille declared in his The Gothic Idol, his own wish was to move away from the tradition of Mâle and chart “the complex interdependence of scriptural and visual traditions.”

Camille emphasized oral traditions, the interactivity of reading, and performativity as vital features to consider when examining artworks and the discourses around them. This brings us to the question of sources in general: within medieval studies, as in other fields exploring distant times, information—except for the material objects themselves, of course—comes to us through some form of literary mediation; we cannot conduct interviews, nor can we observe, not to mention take part in, live performances. This can, to some degree, be compensated by being alert to the “nonliterary” elements of the written sources. In stressing the importance of orality, Camille preceded many current studies that underscore the interconnected character of oral and written traditions in the medieval world. For example, Eamon Duffy has discussed churchwardens’ accounts by stressing the fact that these records were read aloud to the parishioners. Panofsky himself, of course, relied on numerous sources connected to mythology that had originated in oral form. The pool of sources generally accepted for scholarly research has grown substantially in all academic fields, now including, for example, unofficial hagiographies that historical research previously deemed suspicious for studies on saints. On the other hand, medieval images to which no written material can be applied are extremely difficult to grasp: the interpretation of the so-called primitive or constructor wall paintings in Nordic medieval stone churches serve as an example.

The discipline of theology has also expanded, embracing many medieval theologies, some even contradicting each other. Studies such as Barbara Newman’s on the religious imagination have provided medievalists, including art historians, with a wealth of new material and ideas to use in
connection with images. When medieval theology is not viewed as a narrow field administered by elite clerical circles but as creative religious thinking, then the division between a dominant culture and countercultures is less distinct.

For Camille, who drew attention to medieval “marginal images,” the role of lesser-valued images held a significant status. Although the expansion of scholarly interest to all visual culture is sometimes credited to postmodern critique and visual culture studies, the merits of previous scholarship toward this development are also widely acknowledged. Whereas the broadminded and open application of iconology towards various visual materials and images is commonly credited to Aby Warburg, Panofsky’s iconology is traditionally perceived to be limited to only fine art. However, W.J.T. Mitchell, Camille’s former colleague at the University of Chicago, whose influence on the “pictorial turn” has been considerable, reckons Panofsky to be an inevitable model for visual culture studies and recognizes how he saw the need for art history “to deal with ‘third-rate’ art.” Additionally, Horst Bredekamp includes Panofsky among the forerunners of Bildwissenschaft, that is, research of all kinds of pictures and images, in which Bredekamp situates not only iconography, but art history in general. Bredekamp’s argument regarding Panofsky’s role in encouraging art historical scholarship of nonart images is founded on a discussion of the latter’s interest in film studies, as established in the essay “Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures” (1936). This article inspired not only Desmond and Sheingorn, in their aforementioned study in which they read Panofsky’s analysis of the physical, bodily nature of film to apply only to male, heterosexual viewers, but many others too, including the film theorist Sigfried Kracauer, as his correspondence with Panofsky reveals. Despite Panofsky’s focus on art, his iconology does share a common ground with cultural studies dedicated to critical study of discursive elements of all images. As an example, his three interpretative spheres have been applied to the classification and analysis of graffiti pieces within information studies.

Camille’s criticism of Panofsky represents an inevitable separation, a “patricide,” which is, in fact, a rather commonplace occurrence in any professional life. Today his assumed fatherhood of art history seems an exaggeration, at least from a European standpoint. Since Camille’s work was tragically interrupted, we do not know in which direction his thinking—undeniably tied to iconography—would have shifted. An article on a small devotional Man of Sorrows painting by Meister Francke of Hamburg, whose work intrigued Panofsky too, seems to direct to new approaches. In the essay, Camille foregrounds the prevailing academic discourse of his own era by remarking on how a topic he longed to explore, namely, artistic creativity, was so unfashionable. He points to the artist as the first and most important viewer of the work and, moreover, posits the painting as a site of identification: Meister Francke’s work is not only by him, it is also a painting of him. Art history has now experienced “the return of the author” (as if she/he were ever really absent), which Camille anticipated in the late 1990s. Moreover, Camille’s interpretation of the Francke panel can be juxtaposed with Panofsky’s reading of Dürer’s Melencolia I (1514) as a reflection of the artist’s sense of his own personality: it became his spiritual self-portrait. What I propose here, with hindsight, is that Camille was perhaps not so far from Panofsky as he believed himself to be.

“The Black Blood Once Shed upon the Earth”

The preface to the English edition of Georges Didi-Huberman’s influential book Confronting Images (2005) is called “The Exorcist.” By recalling a Jewish mystical tale about love, ghosts, and magic,
Didi-Huberman compares Erwin Panofsky to an exorcist, who warns people about books and seeks to exorcise power from the efficacious and anthropologically crucial parts of images; the exorcist explains images rationally, without understanding them. Although Didi-Huberman does offer both philosophical and historical reasons for Panofsky’s cautiousness, Didi-Huberman’s tone, paradoxically, is more rational and explanatory than one that reflects understanding.

A fair amount of scholarship has laid out the connection between Panofsky’s early writings, German idealism, and what is now called continental philosophy, a relationship that would later be abandoned in the United States, when his prose became more pragmatic and pedagogical. The reasons behind Panofsky’s later expressions are complexly connected to the effects the Nazi takeover had on intellectual discourse. This shift in Panofsky’s scholarly itinerary is considered by many to be fundamental, and even “depressing.” Regardless of the altered rhetoric and emphasis, it is not profitable, in my mind, for general art historical scholarship, not to mention medieval studies, to split his work in two. Although Panofsky was pressed by the historical circumstances and was attentive to subsequent paradigmatic changes, he nonetheless valued his early studies and did not abandon the core of his theoretical stance. As several scholars have pointed out, Panofsky began to explain his views in ways that appear to be almost mandatory adjustments so as to intellectually survive in a new and sometimes inhospitable environment. Finally, as a man who considered the knowledge of multiple languages to be requisite for study, he could hardly have envisioned that an understanding of German, and thus an ability to comprehend his early essays, would not be self-evident for future generations of art historians. He lived long enough to see the new 1964 print of his early essays, but he luckily avoided witnessing its fall into oblivion for the next twenty-odd years.

The shadow of the Third Reich reached far into Panofsky’s life until its end, including even the usage of the very term “iconology,” as discussed earlier. In 1957, when the German Art Historians’ Association (Verband Deutscher Kunsthistoriker) planned a resolution to condemn the events of the Nazi era, Panofsky deemed it to be an empty gesture. Quoting Aeschylus’s Oresteia, he wrote to Paul Frankl, an art historian and fellow refugee: “the black blood once shed upon the earth, no one can bring it back by singing upon it.” Over and over again Panofsky’s correspondence reveals his resentful attitude, often with a certain humorous, or sarcastic tone. For example, in his reluctance to recommend refugee art historians go to the University of Cologne, he writes: “If people are very mediocre … it would not be fair to wish them on the Germans. If they are better, it would not be fair to wish Germany on them, especially if they happen to be Jewish.” Also, his visit to Sweden, including the ensuing lectures held in Gripsholm Castle in the summer of 1952 that led to the publication Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art (1960), was an indirect outcome of the war-time atrocities. The event was part of a lecture series funded by the Hungarian-born Jewish-American banker and pulp-paper merchant D. Samuel Gottesmann, who, with this gesture, wished to thank Sweden for organizing aid to the Jews. It can even be said that the past continues to haunt Panofsky even fifty years after his death: in 2012 Panofsky’s unpublished and hitherto lost Habilitationsschrift (1920), or postdoctoral thesis, on Michelangelo was found in what used to be the NSDAP headquarters and later became the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich.

The fate of the German language in the hands of the Nazis left a mark on Panofsky, and, as Didi-Huberman observes, it resulted in his preference for English in many professional situations. Panofsky himself commented on his problematic use of German by, for instance, saying that the language had become “tainted with so many disagreeable overtones.” The violation of verses,
that is, the Nazi appropriation of language for propagandistic purposes, pained Panofsky, a lover of words. Although Panofsky’s postwar attitude to his mother tongue was highly complicated, Didier-Huberman’s claim that Panofsky hardly ever used it is an overstatement: as his correspondence reveals, he often communicated in German with his friends, colleagues, and former students. The extensive use of English in his missives, in turn, was a practice borne in part from his custom of dictating letters to his assistant when in a hurry.

One of the many expressions exploited by the Nazis was _Erlebnis_, a common word, but also a traditional German philosophical term pertaining to lived, immediate, and sincere experience. The Nazis transformed the word from having a subjective and poetic use to one embracing various emotional effects in public life; as Victor Klemperer in his striking eyewitness testimony writes, everything was drawn into the realm of experience. Panofsky has been criticized for distancing himself, or the interpreter in general, from the image and for rejecting _Erlebnis_: in short, for establishing iconology as an objective science based on rational distancing. Margaret Iversen goes as far as to say he “was the very model of a detached scholar, cut off from his body and unconscious.” This reading of Panofsky and his pursuits is not only quite harsh, but also places him in direct opposition with much of the scholarship of our day, which favors “presence” as opposed to ‘meaning’, affect as opposed to effect, phenomenology as opposed to hermeneutics,” as Michael Ann Holly has summed up the prevailing paradigmatic preferences.

As I see it, the tension between objectivity and lived, subjective experience ceaselessly bedeviled Panofsky. In an interesting passage, he meditates on the difference between subjective experience and “the objective, or artistic, value,” as he puts it. Panofsky states that “in experiencing the work of art aesthetically we perform two entirely different acts which, however, psychologically merge with each other into one _Erlebnis_.” He argues that art historians should be able to distinguish _Alters-und-Echtheits-Erlebnis_ from _Kunst-Erlebnis_. By this he meant the ability to distinguish between the experience of aesthetic pleasure caused by the age and genuineness of the work, and that of the experience of intentional values imparted to the work by the artist. Without specifying it, Panofsky alludes here to Riegl's notions of _Alteswert_ and _Kunstwert_ presented in _Der moderne Denkmalkultus_ (1903). This is in step with his “leading light” Riegl, who in that essay problematizes temporal distance and challenges ahistorical objectivism. Panofsky modifies the terms by replacing the word “value” with “experience,” an adjustment that is, however, consistent with Riegl's meaning. Differentiating or, for that matter, combining the two approaches was not an easy task for either man, and according to Panofsky, as private individuals art historians are justified in not destroying the “psychological unity” of the two modes of seeing. Panofsky fully acknowledges the “lovely mellowness and patina” of the sculptures of Chartres Cathedral as well as the “sensual pleasure in a peculiar play of light and color and the more sentimental delight in ‘age’ and ‘genuineness’” that they evoke. But the use of only sensory experiences would constrict art historical analysis. In a sense, there is a conjunction not only between Panofsky and Riegl but also that embraces Camille as well, who reminded his readers, though with less melancholy and aesthetical dawdling, that medieval sculptures with their lost polychrome and liturgical setting, are not “in our terms, finished ‘art objects’ —even though we might like them stripped down to their pristine or fragmentary Brancusi-like abstraction.”

The emphasis on visuality and visual propaganda by the Nazi regime included the appropriation of art historical genres and compositions. One such appropriation obtruded into the very core of Panofsky’s scholarship, namely, the appropriation of Albrecht Dürer’s life and art for the service
of the Reich.94 There were momentous celebrations of the artist in his hometown of Nuremberg, and his art was used for all kinds of everyday items, such as stamps and banknotes (figure 2.2).95 This came as no surprise, of course, as Dürer had long been a key figure in debates on German national art.96 Panofsky’s postwar analysis of Dürer’s copper engraving *Knight, Death, and the Devil* (1513) was, thus, grounded in his mental need to reestablish something from the real Germany he had belonged to: in keeping with the construction of Dürer as a cosmopolitan humanist in general, it was necessary to redeem the Knight from being read as a pre-Nazi—as the National Socialist art historian Hubert Schrade had done—and reinstate him in line with the Romantic vision of miles Christianus.97 As Whitney Davis has pointed out, this transformation of the Knight to a Nazi was, in fact, visually executed, in Hubert Lanzinger’s painting of Adolf Hitler as the Knight with a swastika standard.98 Keith Moxey, too, has maintained that Panofsky’s vision of Dürer as “an agent of reason” was based on his own past, and, furthermore, the interpretation of *Melencolia I* reflected Panofsky’s personal melancholy because of his “sense of loss [of German culture and his homeland] with which he could never be reconciled.”99 The past affected Panofsky’s scholarly work profoundly; this is conveyed through both his interpretations of artworks and the expressions he chose for illustrating his theoretical standpoints.

**Conclusion: A Lover of Images**

In this essay I have recycled Panofsky’s nickname by using it in the term panopticon, but to close I would like to drop the latter part of the word and its reference to surveillance and focus for a

![Figure 2.2 Twenty Reichsmark note with a reproduction of Albrecht Dürer’s drawing *Portrait of an Architect*, 1506. (Photo: Francisco Evans / CC-BY-SA-3.0 / Wikimedia Commons.)](image-url)
moment on the prefix “pan,” that is, in this case, “all,” “of everything,” “involving all members.” The themes taken up in this essay, ranging from epistemological models and postmodernity to the Nazis, are in themselves substantial and have ample histories of research; my purpose within the limited frame of one essay has been, then, to furnish a horizontal and inclusive view concerning Panofsky’s significance for medievalists rather than to offer an in-depth treatment of a particular problem in his thinking.

Panofsky is part of our shared art historical inheritance, and his theoretical ideas invite a dialogue with contemporary thought. To take full advantage of this opportunity presupposes what Allister Neher has proposed: Panofsky’s language deserves a similar openness and interpretive generosity, which, for instance, Riegl has lately attained. A more secure connection with art history’s past is essential in order to give greater precision to historiographical questions and to better estimate recently introduced approaches; “contemporary theory should be set in closer contact with the older reflections on the discipline,” as Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville have stated. Scholars working in the subfield of medieval art history in particular would benefit from the ideas of earlier writers, as many of the pioneering art historians were especially fervent in their study of that era. Art historical thinking should, in many respects, assume a pantemporal frame of mind.

What has been regarded, by and large, as Erwin Panofsky’s quest for a normative point of view for the interpretation of images is itself a subject for interpretation: instead of reading the “Archimedean point” as pertaining to one correct perspective—let alone the Renaissance perspective—for art historical understanding, it can be understood to allow for a complex and particular philosophical examination of the foundations of artistic phenomena. The nucleus of Panofsky’s contribution—namely, interpretation—can be done from numerous “points”; but these need historically situated factuality to supplement the fundamentally subjective source of knowledge. When estimating Panofsky’s usefulness to investigations of medieval imagery, it is profitable to consider his whole production, allowing the early essays to assume greater significance and letting his vast correspondence convey complementary formulations and views.

Are Panofsky’s theoretical reflections a method? His work may be conceived from an “anti-methodological” perspective, too: David Summers, for instance, characterizes it in this way: “The space Panofsky opened for what came to be called ‘iconology’ was not so much the inauguration of an art historical ‘method’ as it was an attempt to establish the discussion of the manifold meanings of the visual arts within the study of human culture.” Whether we choose to call this “space” a methodology or not, medievalists continue, employing all of their faculties, to carry out iconographic investigations, discerning forms and unraveling meanings of often fragmentary visual constellations.

What can we say, then, about Panofsky’s postwar vocabulary? Deemed distanced and objectifying, it is adjusted to suit his new audience and manifests his fear of the potential dangers of people exploiting history and art for their own purposes. This fear was far from being an abstract theoretical principle but a consequence of a genuine, lived sense of terror, a prevailing issue in many parts of the world even today. If the concept of fear is variable, love is hardly stable either; Horst Bredekamp, who in his early years was accused of being an iconoclast, says—in fact echoing Michael Camille’s words in 1989—“the iconoclasts are the real iconophiles. They believe in the social, the religious, the psychological power of images.” I presume that Pan likewise had no fear of images, but he was constant in his conviction of their intrinsic powers. He delighted in not only words but also art, and thus as an iconophile he was determined to prevent its abuse.
NOTES

1 See Lena Liepe, “The Study of the Iconography and Iconology of Medieval Art: A Historiographic Survey,” in the present volume. I am greatly indebted to Lena Liepe for her insightful advice regarding this essay. I also wish to thank my dear colleagues Jukka Cadogan and Marja Väätäinen, the inspiring students of my Panofsky reading group, as well as Kathryn Boyer and Leila Virtanen for their most helpful comments concerning the language.
2 Cassidy 1993: 12 (emphasis added).
3 Gombrich 1970: 313.
4 Panofsky’s interpretations and his general importance to art history have, of course, been widely studied; the following contributions have been particularly useful for this essay, here in chronological order: Holly 1984; Reudenbach (ed.) 1994; Iconography at the Crossroads 1993; Hart 1993; Summers 1995; Stewen 1995; Neher 2004; Didi-Huberman 2005; Lang 2006; Iversen and Melville 2010; Rieber 2012; Elsner and Lorenz 2012.
5 Holly 1984: 10.
8 For instance, in the much-quoted volume Iconography at the Crossroads, Cassidy articulated his definition of “traditional iconography” (1993: 12) to be in contrast to that presented by Camille in the same publication.
11 The usage of the name is best detected by looking at Panofsky’s correspondence; see the massive five-volume editorial work by Dieter Wuttke (here: Panofsky 2001, 2006, 2008, and 2011).
12 It can be traced in Pandora’s Box, a book written by Panofsky and his wife, Dora (which, amusingly enough, was published by Pantheon Books); see Panofsky and Panofsky 1956. Oskar Bätschmann (1994) has used the name “Pan” as a tool in his analysis about Panofsky’s writings on Arcadia. See also Breidecker (1996: 224–25) on “Pan” and Panofsky’s interest in anagrams and other wordplay.
13 Panofsky 1955a: 30–32, 40; Panofsky 1939: 8. See, e.g., Holly 1984: 40–41, nn. 48 and 159. About Panofsky’s progressive development of the model for iconographic and iconological interpretation put forward in essays in 1932, 1939, and 1955, respectively, see the introduction in the present volume.
16 Panofsky to Günther Bandmann; Panofsky 2006: 1457.
17 Panofsky 1939: 17.
18 Panofsky 1967: 3: “Aujourd’hui, en 1966, j’aurais peut-être remplacé le mot-clé du titre, iconologie, par iconographie, plus familier et moins sujet à discussion, mais—et l’avouer me remplit d’une sorte d’orgueil mélancolique—le fait même que cette substitution soit désormais possible tient précisément, dans une certaine mesure, à l’existence même de ces Essais d’iconologie.” See a slightly different translation in Persinger 2007: 135. Evidently, the French have been paying the most attention to this statement; see Arasse 1983: 145; Didi-Huberman 2005: 123.
19 He uses also the word Region, borrowed from Mannheim; see Panofsky 1964: 93.
20 Panofsky 1939: 17.
21 Panofsky 1964: 95; Panofsky 2012: 482.
26 Iversen and Melville 2010: 10.
27 Ibid.
28 My analysis and earlier interpretations of these fragmentary paintings are found in Räsänen 2009: 91.
29 The essay Die Perspektive als symbolische Form (1927) is reprinted in Panofsky 1964: 99–167 and Panofsky 1998; translation to English is from 1991 (see Wood 1991). On his ideas on perspective see also the introduction in Panofsky 1953.
30 Panofsky to Otto Pächt; Panofsky 2011: 3276; Panofsky 2012: 479. For Panofsky’s main discussion on Kunstwollen, see Panofsky 1981.
31 Iversen 1993: 149. See Podro 1982: esp. 178–86; Wood 1991: 23. In addition to the much-quoted analysis of Podro, I find that Iversen’s critique (1993: 166) has been influential in canonizing Panofsky as a scholar who “sacrificed” the reflexivity of Riegl because of his interest in “establishing a single-point perspective for art history.” Moxey (1986: 269)—who put the blame on Panofsky’s rhetoric rather than his method proper—asserts that “the reader is being vouchsafed eternal truths.”
34 Panofsky 1964: esp. 126.
35 See Mitchell 1994: 31, n. 29. Mitchell, too, holds that pictorial perspective was not an ahistorical norm for Panofsky but that the model was embedded in his rhetoric. For examples of other more inclusive readings of Panofsky’s endeavor, see Lang 2006 and Stewen 1995.
36 See, for instance, Moxey (2001 [1995]: 92), who argues that Panofsky viewed Renaissance perspective as an epistemological paradigm and was thus a guarantee for historical interpretation.
37 Foucault 1977: 200; Foucault 1975: 202: “objet d’une information, jamais sujet dans une communication.”
38 Iversen and Melville 2010: 10.
39 Iversen and Melville 2010: 23. Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen (2003: 137–38) has compared art historical, or scientific, inquiry to a panopticon structure, aiming to seek alternative ways to position the viewer.
42 Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary 1913.
43 Panofsky 1981: 24 (emphasis added). Panofsky brings up the unity of form and content in many essays; see, e.g., Panofsky 1955a: 168.
46 Holly 2013, xi. On the problems of contextualization, see also Bryson 1992; Liepe 2003.
47 Camille 1993: 43, esp. n. 2.
48 Camille 1993: 43. Many have expressed similar criticism; see, e.g., Pächt 1999: 44, 70–73; Belting 2003: 142–43.
49 Panofsky 2006: 12.
51 Rieber 2012: 11, 30–45. See also Holly 1984: 165.
52 Foucault 1994: 620. The extent of Mâle’s persistence in his treatment of visual art as writing, as well as to what degree it worked as a mere metaphor, is a discussion of its own and would and require historicization of his scholarship.
“A Panofskian neophyte and definite enthusiast.” Foucault’s little text on Panofsky is rarely quoted; see, however, Rieber 2012: 31–32, 59. My warm thanks go to Søren Kaspersen for bringing it to my attention. It is peculiar and, indeed, clear-sighted, of Mitchell (1994: 18) to write that Foucault might have made a connection between Panofsky and his ability to manage the complex cultural field of the “visible and the articulable,” as this is, in fact, what Foucault did. The similarities between Panofsky’s iconology and Foucault’s archaeological project, or between the concept of episteme and Panofsky’s “symbolic form,” are often mentioned yet contested; see Holly 1984: 186; Kuusamo 1996: 162; Boström 2004: 43; Rieber 2012: 59–61. Panofsky’s relation and debt to the philosopher Ernst Cassier, from whom he adapted the “symbolic form,” is a vast subject; see the literature in note 4.

Camille 1993; Camille 2002a: esp. 75–77.

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Camille 1993; Camille 2002a: esp. 75–77.
See Fält 2012.
Panofsky 1995 (after the original print in 1936, the article was published as an enlarged version in 1947). Bredekamp 2003. See also Christopher Wood’s conversation with Bredekamp (Wood 2012: 524–25).
Desmond and Sheingorn 2003: 30.
On Panofsky’s published correspondence with Kracauer, see Breidecker (ed.) 1996. On Panofsky’s influence on film studies, see Levin 1995.
Gottlieb 2008.
Ibid.
Panofsky 1955b: 171.
Didi-Huberman 2005: xvi–xxvi, esp. xxv. The text, slightly modified, was published in French in 2008; see the collection edited by Waschek 2008: 69–87. See also Martin Warnke’s critique of Didi-Huberman’s analysis of Panofsky, also located in this same volume (Warnke 2008: esp. 59–62), pointing to its lack of historicism.
See the detailed analysis by Elsner and Lorenz (2012). The links, both real and surmised, between National Socialism and the German philosophical tradition had tremendous consequences not only for Panofsky but for art history as a whole: for instance, the rejection, or misreading, of Hegel, advocated especially by E.H. Gombrich based on the argued connection between Weltgeist and Nazi ideologies, has not ceased; on the rejection of Hegel, see Jason Gaiger’s (2011) important contribution.
Summers 1995: 9; Rieber 2012: 297. The overall academic climate, with its preference for the natural sciences, differed from what he had been accustomed to in every possible way. As Joan Hart (1993: 562–65) has analyzed, Panofsky’s brief printed memoir (1955a) gives a rosier picture of circumstances in his new home
country than does his correspondence; the humanities were not interested in theory, and art history focused on connoisseurship. See also Elsner and Lorenz 2012; Michels 2003. Matters to do with avoiding unnecessarily complicated scientific language, today called academic jargon, deserve consideration as well: as the English translators of “Der Begriff des Kunstwollens” (1920) (see Panofsky 1981: 17) note, “it was couched in that opaque language which German scholars frequently feel necessary if the gravity of their views is to be correctly communicated to their public.”

75 Panofsky to Paul Frankl; Panofsky 2008: 2031.
76 Panofsky to Paul Frankl; Panofsky 2006: 1502.
77 Gregor Paulson in the editor’s preface to Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art; see Panofsky 1960. Panofsky’s visit had been prepared by art historian Carl Nordenfalk, from the National Museum in Stockholm, who became friends with Panofsky during his visit to Princeton. See the correspondence concerning the preparations for the visit and its aftermath in Panofsky 2006, passim.
78 Voss 2012. The lost thesis on Michelangelo has been studied (from its fragments) by Horst Bredekamp (1994), and now the whole thesis has been edited and published by Panofsky’s widow, Gerda Panofsky; see Panofsky 2014. Panofsky’s former student and lifelong friend Ludwig Heinrich Heydenreich (1903–1978), an expert on Leonardo, was the director for the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte for decades; his role in the fate of Panofsky’s lost manuscript remains unsolved.
80 Panofsky to Carl Nordenfalk; Panofsky 2008: 2199.
81 Didi-Huberman 2005: 102. See also Michels (1994), who has analyzed Panofsky’s use of German, although not touching on the influence of the National Socialist “language.”
82 This is mentioned, even with apologies, in his correspondence, e.g., Panofsky to Ludwig H. Heydenreich; Panofsky 2006: 1361; Panofsky to Günther Bandmann; Panofsky 2011: 2841.
83 Klemperer 2000: 244. See also Michaud 2004: 255.
84 Didi-Huberman 2005: xx–xxi, xxiii. Parallel with this, Iversen (1993: 152) thinks Panofsky places such high value on the intelligible or discursive register that this “must imply a devaluation of the visible, the sensory, lived experience.”
86 Holly 2013: xxi.
87 Panofsky 1955a: 15, n. 11.
88 Panofsky 1955a: 15, n. 11. Panofsky leaves the word Erlebnis in German in his English text—not only, I think, because of its importance to him as has been suggested by Joan Hart (1993: 554), but because there is no proper translation for the word in English. On Panofsky’s usage of Erlebnis, see also Summers 1995: 18, n. 45.
89 Riegl’s text has been translated into English as The Modern Cult of Monuments; see Riegl 1998.
90 For an acute analysis of Riegl’s notion of age value, see Lang 2006: esp. 157–66.
91 Panofsky 1955a: 15, n. 11. For a captivating discussion of art historians’ melancholic encounters with the material presence of art, see Holly 2013.
93 On Nazi art and aesthetics, see e.g. Hinz 1979; Michaud 2004.
94 Panofsky’s doctoral thesis in 1914 was on Dürrer’s theory of art, and it was published the following year. He continued lecturing and writing on Dürrer throughout his life; see Panofsky 1955b.
95 The celebration Tag der Deutschen Kunst in 1939 was commemorated with a stamp bearing Dürrer’s Portrait of a Milanese/Venetian Girl (1505), which also can be interpreted as a beautiful blond, young (German) woman. Dürrer’s drawing Portrait of an Architect (1506) was printed on the 20 Reichsmark note from 1940.
96 On the reception of Dürrer during past centuries, see Białostocki (1986: 211–18, 224–42), although the Nazi era is treated only cursorily. See also Belting 1998.
97 See Dilly 1988: 73–76; Davis 2011: 265; Panofsky 1955b: 151–54. As Bialostocki (1986: 217) has clarified, the connection to Erasmus's Christian man had been suggested by Herman Grimm already in the 1870s.

98 Davis 2011: 264–73. Lanzinger's Der Bannerträger (ca. 1935), "The Standard Bearer," is today in the Army Art Collection, Washington, DC. Dürer's famous engraving has a particular reception history in Germany: it had been understood, for instance, to illustrate Nietzschean philosophy, and it was eagerly adopted by the Nazis, too. See Bialostocki 1986: 211–18, 224–42.


100 Neher 2004: 48.

101 Iversen and Melville 2010: 3. Recommendations in the same vein have been articulated by Altti Kuusamo in many of his writings since the 1980s. See Kuusamo 1996; 2011.

102 On the early medievalists in art history and the importance of knowing of them, see Brush 1996.

103 Iversen and Melville (2010: passim, esp. 8–10 and 152) see it so and wish to diminish the role of “methods” within art history and to stress the essential nature of the discipline as writing.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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