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Published in:
Journal of Art Historiography

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Weststeijn, T. (2009). Iconography without Texts [Review of: P. Taylor (2008) Iconography without texts].
Journal of Art Historiography, 1, TW/1.

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Iconography without Texts

Review of:

Paul Taylor (ed.), *Iconography without Texts. Warburg Institute Colloquia 13*, The Warburg Institute – Nino Aragno Editore, London & Turin 2008, ISBN 978-0-85481-143-4, 205 pp., 110 black/white images

In the summer of 2005, the Warburg Institute hosted a colloquium devoted to the question: how, if at all, can we investigate the iconographic themes of cultures that left us few or no textual records? The aim of this meeting and its proceedings was to 'be of interest to art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists who are faced with the problem of interpreting visual artefacts which have become divorced from the cultural contexts within which they once had a meaning'.

This, obviously, is a general problem as no material object from the past has survived within its cultural context. Although most of the colloquium's speakers discussed works from preliterate civilizations, they therefore addressed methodological notions of wider relevance. This may be clear from one example, the Dutch Republic: this most literate of all European civilizations in early modern times, that kept punctilious city archives, permits sophisticated research into artists' biographies, patrons, and the public's reactions. The iconography of thousands of Dutch landscapes, still lifes, and genre scenes remains, however, intractable. After two decades of methodological debate, some scholars rather speak in favor of 'structural ambiguity' rather than assigning fixed meanings. This book's exploration of 'iconography without texts' thus offers reflections for art historians of all affiliations and actually encourages cross-cultural comparisons, for example referring to passages of scripture painted in Dutch Reformed churches to illuminate the role of writing in ancient Egyptian tombs.

The selection of papers confronts art historians with some of the field's most troublesome imagery, spanning the entire history of human civilization. Nine chapters discuss, subsequently, cave art of the Ice Age, rock art in Egypt, prehistoric design, Mesopotamian writing and art, writing in ancient Egyptian art, early Maya imagery, Peruvian Moche bottles, Hawaiian petroglyphs, and ancient and modern Cherokee baskets. The concise texts by an all-male cast lay little in the way of a nonspecialist public's interest, the only drawback being some authors' dependence on technical terms and, more seriously, an illness of digital design: a few unclear images printed from low-resolution photographs.

The introduction by Paul Taylor pleads for expanding on Erwin Panofsky's three levels of iconographic interpretation (a pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological one). It proposes at least ten levels of description differentiating, to begin with, resemblance, depiction, representation, and illustration. A discussion of a sixteenth-century devotional print by Hans Springinklee demonstrates how these levels may be applied to an individual case; regrettably, the rest of the book does

not return to these differentiations to develop their methodological relevance.¹ The introduction proceeds to some serious skeptical conclusions about iconography without texts. Cynicism should be shown especially towards a reductionist view of prehistoric designs, based on the misguided assertion that prehistoric people were simple thinkers who could only use symbols in a simple way. Studying art in preliterate societies leaves the researcher with one main approach, namely an analogical one: to study a parallel with 'images produced at some other time or place, for which we have either textual or verbal evidence' (8). This method, described elsewhere as 'upstreaming' or tracing particular traditions to their sources (134), is the basis for most of the book's papers. The authors apply it with various degrees of optimism. Taylor himself, for one, uses a 16th-century text to study Peruvian bottles from the 1st-8th centuries, supplementing this analogy with the observation that the function of a work can be retrieved from depicted scenes. Examining a Moche bottle which depicts a Moche bottle put in front of an idol, he argues that these objects were containers for liquid offerings.

One topic that returns throughout the book is the meaning of location. A work's location may tell us something about how it was to be used and, just as essential, how it could not have been used: even Pope Gregory's famous statement that paintings in churches are to be 'read' by those who cannot read in books, should be modified by the observation that 'the locations of many images, for example high on walls and ceilings or at small scale in stained-glass windows, are often such that people could not have learned directly from them because they could not have viewed them in the necessary detail' (98). As Paul Bahn demonstrates in the book's first chapter, in the case of a lot of primitive art, such as rock art, the location of a work has not changed and it tells us something about dichotomies such as public versus private or even gender (19). He also discusses an interesting cave in which the art only begins after a narrow and unpleasant passage. One of the engraved figures was made at arm's length inside a fissure into which the artist could not have inserted his or her head: the image was not meant to be seen by human eyes (and was probably a votive offering). In some cases, apparently, it was 'the process of journeying to a location and leaving an image there which counted, rather than the image itself' (21).

Jean-Loïc le Quellec discusses the ritual aspect of creativity more extensively in relation to rock art: using the analogical approach, he interprets prehistoric painting in Egypt through a parallel with Pharaonic symbolism of the world of the dead. He concludes that those who made the caves referred back to the memory of earlier places they had migrated from, thus conflating visions of the land of the dead with the land of origin. The rituals may have demanded 'a periodic return to

¹ A side remark is that these differentiations would not have been relevant for Springinklee himself. The introduction points out that a painting of the Virgin Mary does not *depict* the Mother of God, whose appearance was unknown, but a woman (she not only *resembles* a woman, but, as the context of her being a mother makes clear, also depicts one); this woman then *represents* the Virgin Mary. This kind of reasoning must have been incomprehensible to the sixteenth-century viewers, who thought that images of the Mother of God were based on the portrait miraculously made *ad vivum* by Saint Luke (several exemplars of which, just as miraculously, survive in the churches of Western Christianity). They would not have recognized an image that did not at the same time resemble, depict, and represent its subject, as an image at all.

ancient cult places' such as decorated caves (37). Location also plays an essential role in Jerome Feldman's contribution, about some of art history's more enigmatic imagery: Hawaiian petroglyphs. As late as the 1960s, an attempt to interpret them resorted to pointing out formal similarities with early Swedish rock engravings. Feldman prefers to examine the physical landscape to which the glyphs are inextricably tied, interpreting individual signs as elements of a larger whole related to the layout of the site. In one cave on a rocky coast, for example, clusters of figures are depicted on the floor with their heads facing inland and feet towards the ocean. A helmeted figure, placed on a ledge higher than the others, would be 'an unmistakable sign of the power of a chief', as Hawaiian culture allotted to a chief the role to be physically higher than others. The glyphs tell a 'narrative of invasion' that may have happened at precisely this place on the island: the landscape thus 'embodies stories that can be elaborated by the types of art added to it' (165-6).

A different approach of primitive art replaces the search for meaning with one that explores universal psychological mechanisms. In this regard, Robert Bagley comes to interesting conclusions in studying a wide array of objects that depict two eyes. He reacts to Ernst Gombrich's view that the belief in the protective power of paired eyes, as 'unconscious symbolism', is universal. Criticizing earlier scholars who interpreted all decoration as attempts to ward off malevolent influences, the author prefers a Darwinistic view: 'evolution has programmed us to respond to eyes with *attention*' (Bagley's emphasis, 46). Behavior that contributes to survival thus leads to 'universal motifs' that occur independently in unrelated cultures. These motifs, however, have different local meanings. Paired eyes occur in Mesopotamian temples, on Chinese jade objects, and in the design of cars of the 1950s; in all cases, the design attracts attention because our perceptual system has an inbuilt reaction to it, something that artists have apparently been aware of through the ages. However, the *meaning* allotted to paired eyes in these different contexts may vary widely.

The book's in a methodological sense most impressive paper is by John Baines, who analyzes of the role of writing in ancient Egyptian pictorial representation. He points out that the focus on illusion in Western art is antagonistic to including writing. Western art apparently privileges works that, because they need additional exegesis, demonstrate the importance of cultural knowledge: this knowledge 'encourages display and learning through explicit verbal exposition of the works when they are viewed' (97). In contrast to the West, where the iconological approach depends on texts that survive in parallel to pictorial works, in Egypt 'writing is integral to a visual composition at least as much as it explicates its meaning' (98). The relation between linguistic and pictorial signs, however, is never unambiguous: the fact that the signs of the hieroglyphic script are representational, facilitating interplay between the domains of word and image, only complicates interpretation. Artists exploited this complexity when they made signs that operate on more than one level at a time. For example, linguistic signs might be animated in order to 'act' in pictorial compositions: thus a hieroglyph meaning power was depicted with added dancing arms and feet to express the people's jubilant reaction to Pharaoh's might. Such a sign would not be a grammatical assertion but enable the artist to 'fuse discrepant but not discordant meanings that could not relate to any single textual formulation but could occur in the same are of a composition' (104).

Apparently, most writing in Egyptian art fulfills a similarly performative role: occasionally it comments on and sometimes identifies what is shown, but most often it complements the visual content as a distinct bearer of meaning. What is more, most of the writing in the artworks was not intended to be read by humans, since most Egyptians were illiterate and the vast mass of inscribed decoration was at a small scale and in dark areas. The author therefore resorts to Jan Assman's concept of 'inhabitation' (*Einwohnung*): the decoration was created in order to fashion a perfect environment that the gods could inhabit. These divine readers were the only intended public. In this context, another observation is that in Egyptian inscriptions, the word 'god' may not only refer to the deity or other non-human being, but also to the depiction itself: the use of 'god' as term for image thus evokes the category of the not simply human. This same performative notion, where the process of writing appears to overlap with the process of image-making or even the fashioning of the deity itself, returns in an inscription named *The Book of the Cow of the Sky* (c. 1300 BC). Here, the reader is admonished to manufacture, during his reading, the image that is described and to accompany this magical process with purificatory actions, thus accomplishing the rite and conjure up the god's presence. Such direct interrelation between text and image reveals that the two modes were integrally connected: one cannot be said to elucidate the other, rather, the two together constitute an indissoluble object of study.

It will be clear by now that the contributions to *Iconography without Texts* share some basic tendencies. The most conspicuous of them is all authors' silence towards a major scholarly tradition that takes as its basic premise the interpretation of images without depending on contemporary texts. This approach, structuralism, looks instead at principles of organization in visual characteristics. Since structuralist arguments return throughout the book, the omission is remarkable; the attention to location, for instance, would be welcome subject matter for structuralists (to interpret the elevated position of a figure as reflective of a social hierarchy might be a classic structuralist argument). By contrast, refraining from the search for an overarching interpretative framework altogether, the book creatively develops synonyms for the term 'structure'. We thus hear about the 'internal coherence and logic of images': petroglyphs obtain meaning through their spatial 'layout' (163); sequences in Egyptian art running along walls can be analyzed 'through internal criteria and parallels' (102); in early Maya art, 'repeated clustering of individual scenes allow us to reconstruct something of the narratives that lay behind them': this is, apparently, the 'true iconography without texts' (128). Were the scholars convoked at the Warburg categorically unconvinced by the late Claude Lévi-Strauss's analyses of structural principles, ranging from Brazilian tattoos to, it must be said, patterns in clouds? We do not know, as this greatest of all iconographers without texts does not occur once in the book. In fairness, there is good reason to differentiate a structuralist approach from an iconographic one: however, the book even fails to discuss this difference. An exploration of the relative merits of structuralism and iconography would have greatly contributed to the book's methodological strength.

The chapter that comes closest to a structuralist view, and is therefore most optimistic about the possibility of iconography without texts, is Stephen Houston and Karl Taube's analysis of early Maya imagery. They take the point of view that

the replication of earlier stylistic motifs is itself meaningful as it evoked the 'hallowed, ancient times of gods and ancestors': 'A Maya image, like any other image made by skilled craft, cannot be *sui generis* – it "looks" back, recalling or "reacting to" images that came before' (131). The authors distinguish minimal units of meaning in an image, or 'graphs', that exist in a graphic 'system or pattern in which narratives coexist in orderly relation' (132). The paper suggests that these patterns are stable over very long periods of time (Lévi-Strauss would have agreed): one example is Meso-American rain symbolism that was predicated on a pattern of four gods. Depicted as a quadrangular sign, which also represents the cosmos as a four-sided world, it has been found among the ancient Maya and present-day Yukatek. Within such a persistent pattern (or structure), it is possible to interpret concatenations of meaningful graphs as 'scenes' that, when involved in actions, convey 'narratives' (136). To fully interpret these narratives, the authors conclude, it is of course necessary to reconstruct the original location of individual works in relation to other images.

Corresponding to the book's reluctance towards structuralist pretensions about formal constants in history, there is a tendency to locate meaning in the artist's intentions rather than in the way the work originated as integrated part of an image tradition. According to the introduction, 'clinching evidence' for a work's meaning are 'letters from the artist' (6). The first contribution even starts by stating that 'the only person who can really tell us what a particular image ... was meant to depict is the person who made it', thence proceeding to the conclusion that art historians need texts (15). This attitude towards authenticity, that implicitly challenges continental European notions about the 'death of the author', is probably deemed to accord to an ideal of positivistic scholarship. However, the focus on individual makers will not only chafe every art historian with a basic acquaintance with hermeneutics: it leaves little space for the possibility that more than one artist was responsible for a work and that authenticity should rather be located in a group, including agents such as patrons and advisors. Artists (or collectives of them) may also have decided to make images without fixed meanings; here, we may only think about the Indonesian-Dutch Symbolist painter and precursor of Mondrian, Jan Toorop: when showing female visitors his recent work, as reports of exhibitions recount, he often got carried away by his explanations and did himself no longer understand what his paintings meant.

Needless to say, a dominant focus on the stable identity of the author also neglects, on the one hand, philosophical notions about meaning as a function of use rather than of intentional creativity, and, on the other, psychological theories about subconscious behavior. In this connection, the contributions share a skeptical approach towards a previous generation of scholars of primitive art in particular, who explained images as reflective of 'altered states of consciousness'. Thus, the attempt to interpret rock art from the point of view of religious studies – as related to hunting ceremonies, fertility magic, and shamanism – is here dismissed as 'nonsense' (17) that only makes things 'murky' (127). The authors rather replace this view with an explanation from 'the sheer pleasure of creation and self-expression', and, not unimportantly, humor, which is apparently an interpretative key for rock art (17) and Egyptian tomb decorations (107).

A critical view towards individual authorship is, however, not absent from the book, and this brings us to Ivan Gaskell's remarkable contribution on the interpretation of baskets from two Native American groups, the Cherokee and Chitimacha. From his experience in conserving and displaying these baskets, the author points out that the notion of artistic authenticity is a profoundly Western construction that can not be projected on other cultures. The system of organizing and identifying works by ascribing them to individual makers 'lends privilege to the conception of, and validation of, makers as individuals at the expense of either group inventiveness or group or individual conformity to existing patterns. Preference for individuality and inventiveness over communal responsibility, anonymity, and tradition reflects ideological assumptions' (176). This assertion may also provide food for thought to scholars who struggle with the notion of 'influence' in the history of art. Ultimately, locating agency in group conformity and image traditions, Gaskell's vantage point becomes remarkably similar to Panofsky's iconology: to study images as they reflect the ideas of a 'nation, period or class,' 'unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work' (1). Gaskell also points out that meaning is a function of use and he discusses the complications of this insight in relation to cross-cultural appropriation. On the one hand, although some basketry was made for Western colonists, they never adopted the propensity to treat it as a living being; as a Californian curator witnessed recently, a local Native American sung regularly to the Indian baskets in the museum to assuage the loneliness of these objects. On the other hand, some colonists, by sponsoring the teaching of a fading craft tradition, bore part of the responsibility for the baskets that presently survive in museums.

In conclusion, *Iconography without Texts* confronts varying degrees of optimism towards the feasibility of its topic, presenting differently nuanced views towards notions as varied as: 'upstreaming' or the argument from analogy; the meaning of location and its consequences for narrative and ritual aspects, possibly involving images that were not seen by humans including the artist; visual patterns that reveal universal psychological behavior, narrative sequences, or the transmission of artistic conventions; performative practices in which artworks are intricately connected to the landscape or to the recitation of texts; and intentionality of meaning versus the flexibility of image traditions. The broaching of this thought-provoking matter makes the book more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, the Warburg colloquium must surely have been a beginning of something rather than an end. This reviewer, at least, was inspired by thoughts about a subsequent work involving, for one, the structuralist approach: although the book stresses the importance of visual narrative on several occasions, there is little analysis of how these narratives actually worked – here the introduction of theories of narrativity, such as focalisation, seems a promising line of action for future iconography without texts.

Finally, there is a fundamental kind of insight hidden in these pages. The book is basically skeptical about its topic, presenting word and image as 'false friends' and ultimately questioning whether we should look for textual meaning to be attached to images at all. We are reminded, for instance, that the reliance of the modern viewer on the picture title for interpretation is not a cross-culturally general phenomenon and rather the result of developments in museum presentation (and

art history itself). Indeed, as objects from minority cultures are concerned, one question should be whether scholars from the hegemonic culture should wish to appropriate the meaning: the orally transmitted stories that might help us to understand objects representing origin myths and religious beliefs 'are not for everyone's lips and ears' (175). Other doubts arise from the observation that certain pictographic signs do not embody a grammatical assertion but only have 'meaning' in a fuzzy sense of this word, expressing inchoate or contradictory notions that make visual sense but can never be expressed in a textual way. In sum, not only does this book point towards the limits of the iconographical approach since 'visual and written modes are not directly commensurable' (98). It also suggests that, on a fundamental level, the objects of study may be incompatible with text. The confrontation with such a cathartic insight is something every art historian will benefit from in this remarkable book.

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