CHAPTER 2

The study of artworks content and meaning

Although the history of art concerns the study of a common object, i.e., the work of art, it is divided into branches of study focusing on specific aspects. This diversity is reflected in the books that aim to provide an overview of the discipline and define the range of interests (Adams, 2010; Houston, 2013; Preziosi, 2009).

Since an artwork, due to its nature, cannot usually be fully comprehended only from its objective characteristics, most disciplines aiming at understanding a work of art include a grade of the interpreter's subjectivity. In the context of art comprehension, an interpretation is intended as 'any kind of assignment of meaning or significance to artworks' (Robert, 1996, p. 113).

Through interpretations, art historians can claim different types of explanations about art concerning different aspects, e.g., the content of the art, the trend of the art of a century, or the reception of art by the public (Houston, 2013). Among the possible art-critic approaches, some cover different aspects of the artwork. As shown in the detailed overview of art critics provided by Preziosi (2009), scholars who adhere to the branch of the study of iconography and iconology are described in various sections, including style, anthropology, and meaning. This reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the approach, aiming at identifying not only the subject matter of a work of art (iconography) but also a more comprehensive cultural understanding of images. It highlights how images can be read as historical documents of the context in which they were created, including facts and meanings ranging from the artist's personality to sociocultural phenomena. Such analysis includes multiple aspects of the work of art, examining formal and stylistic aspects and its content, and considering external sources, such as archival documents and literary texts.

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2.1 What is an interpretation act

To the author's knowledge, most art criticism agrees with the interpretative nature of the discipline itself since works of art are understood as 'rarely obvious' (Barrett, 2003, p. 199). Furthermore, contemporary criticism is slightly influenced by the postmodern approach, according to which oeuvres can potentially have infinite meanings, making 'the concept of interpretation one of the key concepts of our century' (Stecker, 1994). Some approaches even consider the interpretation as part of the identity of the artwork, as 'a work of art cannot be aaestheticly evaluated without an interpretation' (Rantala, 1991, p. 273).

Although the relevance of interpretation for art understanding is assessed, there is no unique agreement on the extent to which art analysis is of a descriptive or interpretative nature. Houston (2013) identifies description, interpretation, and judgment as the three main interpretation activities. The description of an artwork constitutes the first action made while interpreting it, including concrete visual traits, such as the colors, shapes, and everyday objects depicted. Nevertheless, even simple descriptions involve subjective choices (Houston, 2013) that depend on the background of an observer and his familiarity with the representational conventions used to represent the objects (Panofsky, 1955). Art critics define what should be meant as description and interpretation (Houston, 2013, pp. 113–115). Among the reported perspectives, we account for the position of Matthews (1977), who underlines that, while the description is verifiable, the interpretation is not. This perspective aligns with Gombrich's take, who points out that even decorative elements may convey deeper meanings (Gombrich, 1948).

Furthermore, different types of criticism can be conducted (Wollheim & Eldridge, 2015, pp. 124–136). When the art critic seeks to reconstruct the native meaning of the work, he/she conducts an *archeological* research, an act of retrieval of predetermined meanings. On the contrary, other critics see their act of viewing the work as an act of revision. According to them, 'critical objectivity is impossible, as every viewer is bound to perceive works of art from a different position' (Houston, 2013, pp. 116–18). Stecker (1994, p. 205) explores such perspectives on interpretation, concluding that as they are 'two different ways in which the desire for understanding can be satisfied', they deserve different names to be distinguished.

According to Panofsky, the art historian aiming at interpreting a work of art has to perform an intuitive, aesthetic re-creation of the artist's *intentio* condensed into the work of art. As the humanist deals with human intentions and creations, to understand such objects, he has to 'engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character: he has mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations', as their 'meaning can only be apprehended by reproducing and, thereby, quite literally, realizing, the thoughts that are expressed in the books and the artistic conceptions that manifest themselves' in the [artworks]' (Panofsky, 1955, p. 14). In these terms, every interpretation of art is subjective. Nevertheless, suppose that an art historian conducts such an interpretation. In that case, he/she will, at the same time,

conduct an *archeological research* to reconstruct the circumstances under which the work of art was created, such as the genre, artistic practices, subject, cultural aspects of the period, etc. This background knowledge will allow the art historian to re-create the artwork's original meaning as intended for the artist and contemporary viewers, allowing him/her to have a more objective view of the artwork itself. In this process, synthetic intuition and archeological research are a recursive process in which the former's results influence the latter's results and vice versa.

Art critics also seek to establish 'what makes a good, or valid, interpretation' (Houston, 2013, p. 118). Since retrievalists aim to retrieve the meaning embedded in a work of art, interpretations can be correct or incorrect. On the other hand, revisionists, welcoming the fact that alternative interpretations may coexist, base the interpretation evaluation on criteria. A convincing interpretation is based on a 'reasonable description of work of art', coherent in itself, and inclusive of all features of an artwork (Houston, 2013, p. 118).

As stated above, defining when a description becomes an interpretation is challenging. Since it is not within the scope of the current work to solve this hermeneutic issue, we will adopt the definition provided by Stecker, according to which an interpretation is intended as 'any kind of assignment of meaning or significance to artworks' (Robert, 1996, p. 113), consequently including in it the more objective descriptions of the visual representation examined. Moreover, we further specify the meaning of an interpretation in the context of this work by referring to the definition provided by Van Ruymbeke et al. (2017) relative to the archeological field, stating that the views produced by scholars are 'the result of an interpretive reasoning that includes the subjectivity of the author', due to the uncertainty and incompleteness that often characterize archeological data (Van Ruymbeke et al., 2017).

This study will focus on a branch of study, namely iconography and iconology, aiming to reconstruct the original meaning of the artwork in its original context. Therefore, the perspective involved is closer to the so-called retrievalist position. Nevertheless, as the scholars' claims made in the literature point out, such archeological interpretations are not strictly correct or wrong, as it is likely that we do not have available all the pieces of evidence needed to state that the interpretation is certain. Consequently, an interpretation is usually a circumstantial investigation (Warburg, 1999) often based on literary and archival research to reconstruct the context in which the work was created and the meaning that the artist or the patron wanted to express in the work of art. Criteria such as internal coherence of the interpretation, correspondence between visual images and texts cited as evidence (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 69), the knowledge of style, iconographies, and contemporary sociocultural phenomena (Panofsky, 1955) are consequently fundamental to determine whether an interpretation is acceptable. Sometimes, the lack of evidence does not allow us to decide which interpretation is correct, making multiple acceptable interpretations possible. An example is the different coexisting interpretations argued by Warburg and Gombrich about Botticelli's *Primavera* (Gombrich, 1972; Warburg, 1999).

2.2 Iconography and Iconology

As introduced, many disciplines study artworks from different perspectives. Among them, semiotics and iconography are dedicated to meaning, specifically how meaning is related to specific signifiers, but they have different scopes and origins. Whereas iconography regards precisely the recognition and identification of subjects and meanings represented in artworks and was born in the Western art history tradition, the semiotics of art is interested in exploring any relation between signs and meaning and has its origin in language studies.

These two approaches ask the same two fundamental questions, namely 1) the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and 2) the question of the hidden meanings of images (what ideas and values do the people, places, and things represented in images stand for? [van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 4]). However, they diverge in the traditional field of application and outcomes. While the semiotics of art are generally applied to contemporary images, iconology is usually applied to artworks, despite many semioticians working to extend the discipline to include them (Lancioni, 2019). Furthermore, whereas the main interest in semiotics is understanding the mechanisms that create meaning, iconography focuses on recognizing the given meaning. For this reason, since we are interested in studying works of art, we refer to iconographic study and its extension into iconology.

In the past, the two terms *iconography* and *iconology* were used indeterminately (e.g., Ripa used the term *iconologia* as a title for a collection of allegories and personifications). However, more recent descriptions define and discern their meaning, starting from the definition provided by Panofsky (1939). The aim of *iconography* is to identify the subject matter, i.e., what an artwork depicts and represents, through attributes. It also includes the analysis of how iconographic subjects change over time and the meaning they acquire (e.g., identifying the representation of Time as winged and with a sickle in Renaissance and depicted as Kairos in classical iconography [Panofsky, 1972]). Iconology, instead, focuses on interpreting iconographic subjects as documents of sociocultural phenomena and, therefore, explains the reasons for iconographical changes. Whereas iconography is descriptive, iconology is interpretative and highly based on the interpreter's subjective intuition, as it concerns nonobjective and less verifiable cultural meanings. For this interest, iconology is an interdisciplinary approach that includes anthropology, contextual studies, and cultural history.

Currently, iconography and iconology are associated with the studies conducted by Warburg and the scholars following his school. In the following sections, we provide a brief historical and methodological overview of this approach.

2.2.1 Aby Warburg and his influence on following scholars

In the 20th century European art scene, Warburg introduced a new perspective on art studies that focused on the anthropology of art, in addition to the traditional formal, historical, and stylistic approaches (Gombrich, 1972). Specifically, he delved into the endurance of classical antiquity in Renaissance society. Warburg was born in Hamburg

in 1866 and received his education at the University of Bonn, where he not only studied art but also attended lectures on philosophy and psychoanthropology. These experiences sparked his fascination with the origins and changes of civilization (Cieri Via, 1994, pp. 28–29). The philologist Usener was also influential in Warburg's research, as he traced ancient mythology's evolution through etymology (Kany, 1985). In 1891, he discussed his dissertation on Botticelli, which revealed his interest in developing a method of reading images as social memory (Rossi Pinelli, 2019, pp. 272–273). His investigation differed from the prevailing aestheticizing currents dominating the art studies of the period, as each image type focused on the interactions and exchanges between cultures and periods. He adopted an anthropological approach to culture, encompassing art, literature, philosophy, science, craft activities, and superstitions (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 35). His primary goal was to comprehend the life of a particular culture as manifested in the works of art that it produced, achieved by consulting diverse types of evidence and interpreting the artwork as a historical document of such phenomena. This multidisciplinary approach (*Kunstwissenshaft*) addressed themes primarily related to astrology, the Renaissance's classicism (*Nachleben der Antike*), and the reappearance of emotionally charged formal motifs in different eras (*Pathosformeln*). In an international conference held in Ferrara in 1912, during which he examined the astrological aspects of *Salone dei mesi* in Palazzo Schifanoia (Ferrara, Italy), he used for the first time the term *iconology* to refer to this type of image inquiry (Warburg, 1999).

Initially located in Hamburg, Warburg's library is a testament to the scholar's broad range of interests, encompassing volumes beyond the conventional scope of art history. Even texts on subjects such as social studies, anthropology, astrology, or other areas of research that may be considered peripheral held significant value for his studies and were frequently consulted by the scholars who frequented the library (Rossi Pinelli, 2019, pp. 272–273). The books were organized in an uninterrupted space, with no rigid distinctions between fields, reflecting the thematic continuity that defined Warburg's approach. The library evolved into a full-fledged institute in 1921 and relocated to London in 1934 to avoid the Nazi regime. Eventually, the institute became part of the university in 1944. The migration of scholars to the United States and Britain surprisingly sparked even greater interest in scholarship. As Panofsky noted in his work *The History of Art* (1953), the American cultural climate was conducive to cultivating a more scientific approach to the discipline.

2.2.1.1 Aby Warburg's method

Warburg did not explicitly define his method to catch the deeper meanings of artworks. Due to the absence of an English translation before 1999 of the volume *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*[1] its work is not easily accessible (Rampley, 2001). Furthermore, according to some scholars, Gombrich's biography of Warburg (Gombrich, 1970) reinforced the idea of his various fragmentary research lines, shadowing the presence of an implicitly used method (Kany, 1985, p. 1267).

Ginzburg (1986) attempts to reconstruct a 'Warburghian method' from Warburg's quests and the results of scholars in his circle. Whereas Warburg mainly focuses on the role and meaning that classical antiquity had for the Renaissance, this is just a theme expressing the core question he addresses, namely the function of images in the life of a civilization (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 34). To this aim, he recurs to various documentary sources, from wills and letters to tapestries, to reconstruct the relations between sociocultural aspects and images. He uses figurative evidence, considered historical sources[2] (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 30), and documentary sources to understand a situation (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 44). In this sense, his history of art is located in cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*), as no purely aesthetic considerations are included (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 43). Style and form are analyzed in relation to content to gain a deeper understanding of the artwork. *Pathosformeln*, i.e., the 'forms of pathos' that Renaissance artists used as direct borrowings of emotional expressions from the Antique, are an example of this approach. Such forms were, as Gertrud Bing reports, 'evidence of moods and feelings become images' (Thomson, 2014). Indeed, stylistic and formal analyses, on the one hand, and iconographical ones, on the other, are fundamental to understanding the powerful influence such images had on Renaissance artists. For Warburg, mere iconographical analysis was insufficient, as iconography was only one of the possible approaches to fully understanding 'life' in pictures (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 52).

Similarly to Ginzburg, other scholars tried to clarify the underlying methodology that Warburg applied. Kany (1985, p. 1274) defines his iconology as 'the method of synchronic and diachronic comparison between the formular details'.[3] So, he points out that Warburg's method is based on details that emerge from a philological, comparative approach. This aspect is exemplified by Warburg´s studies of the interests of the Florentine society for antiquity, in which he reconstructs that they were fascinated by expressions of pathos as manifested by the movement of accessory elements, such as hair and clothes. This detail can be noticed in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, representing a theme treated in Homer. Nevertheless, the Greek author did not mention such traits. Indeed, they appear in the description of the contemporary writer Poliziano, who referred to the same passage by Homer. In this example, Warburg does philological

1 The volume was published in Italian in 1966, much before the English version. This allowed Italian scholars to access the material, such as Ginzburg (1986), who afforded the methodological question of Warburg's method a few years earlier than Rampley.

2 'utilizzazione delle testimonianze figurate come fonti storiche'

3 'il metodo di confronto sincronico e diacronico fra dettagli formulari'

research, not only finding the textual reference of the painting, but also measuring the difference between the painting, the contemporary source, and the classical prototype. Such details are not full of symbolism, which the author is fully aware of. The origin of such attention to detail is found in perspective, according to which the greatest is contained in the smallest, belonging to Neoplatonic thought and mysticism (Kany, 1985, p. 1278).

Furthermore, Warburg bases his analysis on a 'synchronical and diachronical' comparative method. In other words, he analyzed historical processes in their progressive evolution over time and between different cultures and places. The second approach included juxtaposing opposite poles and analyzing the continuum among them (Kany, 1985, p. 1273). For example, he traces the process of continuous exchanges between the poles of antiquity and contemporaneity in the Renaissance period. This perspective seems to align with the interest in polarities in the Renaissance highlighted by Rampley (2001, p. 309). In this way, he discovers hidden cultural traditions and traces them back to their sources in a perspective in which the past has never fully ended. According to Kany, such a comparative method is needed because of the symbol's meaning in Warburg's view. Moving from the positions of the philologist Usener, who traced the origin of mythological figures in the repetition of an event that becomes an abstract concept, Warburg sees symbols as 'formulae nourished by the memory of an anguished primordial experience, and at the same time charged with history, endowed with a classificatory function'[4] (Kany, 1985, p. 1277). Although Warburg did not explicitly state his approach, some recurrent traits of his research method emerge from his practice.

2.2.1.2 Scholars of the Warburg's school

Scholars at Warburg's Institute begin their research from a shared starting point but interpret it in personal ways. They all analyze images as carriers of meaning and draw from contemporary culture, including literature, philosophy, dominant iconography, and symbology, as evidenced by their work (Rossi Pinelli, 2019, pp. 374–75). Due to the diverse research lines and multidisciplinary approach taken by these scholars (Ginzburg, 1986), the question of whether a 'Warburghian method' exists is still open to debate.

Fritz Saxl (1890–1948) played a crucial role in fostering the library's cultural growth in the role of librarian from 1913 and substituting Warburg in running the institute, along with Gertrud Bing, from the '20s. Saxl continues Warburg's research line by investigating the combination of myths, astrology, and pictorial representations, using a method that interpreted variants of images as manifestations of the history of ideas (Rossi Pinelli, 2019, pp. 373–77). As he received his training at the Vienna school after Dvořák, Wölfflin, and Schlosser, he reemployed the methods of inquiry he learned to relate art history to other branches of history, namely politics, literature, religion,

4 'formula nutrita del ricordo di un'angosciosa esperienza primordiale, e insieme carica di storia, dotata di funzione classificatoria'

and philosophy (Cieri Via, 1994, p. 52). His research studied figurative evidence as historical sources based on stylistic analysis (Ginzburg, 1986, pp. 45–51). Ginzburg (1986) reports that Saxl is considered the scholar who follows Warburg's method more consistently.

On several occasions, Saxl collaborated with **Erwin Panofsky**, who joined the University of Hamburg in 1920. Their main contribution was the essay *Classical Mythology in Medieval Art*, in which they extended Warburg's research on the survival of antiquity to the still unexplored period of the Middle Ages. According to Garin, Warburg's method that emerged in the collaboration of the two scholars is characterized by concreteness and philological precision, adherence to things, interdisciplinary approach, and rupture of academic or traditional separations (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 39).

Fundamental was Panofsky's contribution to defining a formalization of art history and a method of iconological investigation in which the relationships between the form and content of images were established. Hence, he formulated the theory of subject matter and meaning interpretation divided into three levels, which will be discussed in more detail later.

His theory was profoundly influenced by the research of **Ernst Cassirer** on symbolic forms (Panofsky, 1955). While Cassirer was a professor at the University of Hamburg from 1919 to 1933, he got in touch with Warburg and the scholars of his library, with whom he had a proficuous exchange and material for his theory of symbolic forms. Although his philosophical approach differed from the historical one followed by the institute, he recognized the construction of a historical basis for a 'science of the spirit' as a core principle of institute research (Cieri Via, 1994, p. 61). As the Warburg school, Cassirer was interested in studies on the Renaissance and myth (Cieri Via, 1994, pp. 59–64).

Rudolf Wittkower (1901–1971), who was at the Institute between 1934 and 1956, belongs to the second generation of scholars of the Institute, in which he was the co-founder and editor of the Institute´s journal. In his research activity, he was concerned with symbols and their migration between cultures in interdisciplinary research that intertwined the figurative and ethnoanthropological fields. He contributed to the formalization of the discipline through his presence in London and the United States.

Edgar Wind (1900–1971) was the first student of Erwin Panofsky, whose doctoral thesis was also revised by Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer initially inspired Wind's primary approach to methodology through Panofsky, yet his close friendship with Aby M. Warburg brought him closer to Warburg's 'cultural history' approach. Ginzburg (1986, p. 36) underlines that he attempted to include the iconological method in a philosophy of culture deeply influenced by Cassirer.

Gombrich (1909–2001) characterized a second phase of the institute's studies, joining it in the 1930s, when he was already in London, and becoming its director from 1959 to 1976. Gombrich studied in Wien with Julius von Schlosser and addressed 'problems of the vision, reception, and representation of works of art' (Rossi Pinelli, 2019, p. 423). His frequentation of Freud and Ernst Kris deepened his psychological interests. In the art study, he applied the interdisciplinary approach of *Kunstwissenshaft*

that he learned in his training in Wien. According to him, the interpretation of the meaning of a work of art must start with the largest number of documents possible, possibly questioning the initial postulates to avoid coming to erroneous conclusions based on corrupted texts (Cieri Via, 1994, p. 172). The uncertainty of the results that can be obtained from the Warburgian and Panofskian approaches, based on irrational parallelisms among cultures and in which the style is intuitively interpreted as the expression of the culture of the time, in an anti-historical perspective, led the scholar to focus on problems of style, turning increasingly toward a psychoanalytic approach (Ginzburg, 1986, pp. 58–69).

Among art historians who were influenced by the iconographic and iconological approach, mention should be made of the Dutch **Henri van der Waal** (1910–1972), the founder of Iconclass, a classification system of art subjects (Sciolla, 1997; Waal, 1952).[5] Influenced by the theories of Ernst Cassirer, Aby Warburg, and Panofsky (Irving Lavin, 1992, p. 39), he was interested in studying images as cultural documents to highlight the connections between art and society. According to him, the study of iconography was the most appropriate way to study these relations (Sciolla, 1997, p. 521). In his view, the term *iconology* must be read in the broad sense of 'theory of images', intended as an investigation that, by equally examining the study of the forms, contents, and functions of artworks, seeks to understand the 'function that the image possesses in a certain society' (Van Den Heuvel, 2024).

In the 1960s, Van Der Waal worked on a second classification system, called *Beeldleer*, less known than Iconclass as it was never published nor finished (Nauta, 1993). The system provides a formalization of art historical topics and of the connections among them, to the extent that the 'entire system might be conceived of as the crystallization of a vision of the connection between (visual)art historical matters' (Nauta, 1993, p. 38). In detail, it provides an interlinked structure of terms, organized into eight categories, thought to be used as a tool to guide 'iconological exploration, both in teaching and in historical art research, to methodologically shape art historical studies (Van Den Heuvel, 2024).

2.2.2 Erwin Panofsky and the theorization of interpretation act

Among the art historians following Warburg's research line, Erwin Panofsky had a relevant role in his attempt to furnish a theorization of Art History as a scientific discipline and in providing a first definition of the interpretation act while interpreting its content and subject matter (Panofsky, 1955, 1972).[6] Although some critics of his approach have been raised, it is widely recognized that his formalization was crucial for the discipline (Liepe, 2019; Müller, 2014; Rampley, 2001). Aby Warburg's works provide a basis for understanding Panofsky's iconology, as both Panofsky and

5 The Iconclass system will be more thoroughly described in Chapter 3.

6 The current section was published in Baroncini, Sartini, et al. (2023), Section 2, for which S. Baroncini is responsible

Warburg illustrate the interconnections among cultures. Nevertheless, Warburg never explicitly expressed his method as a system. For this reason, Panofsky 'has most often been regarded as completing much of Warburg's work, endowing it with greater philosophical rigor' (Rampley, 2001, p. 305).

According to him, different types of meaning are recognized when interpreting a work of art subdivided into three layers. The depth to which the artwork can be understood depends on the background knowledge of the observer: the more s/he knows the artist, stylistic conventions, and cultural context of him/her, the more the interpretation at each level is correct, including more profound insights on cultural meanings. Although different types of meaning are recognized at each level, the overall process of interpretation, as it concerns the artwork in its unity, is organic and indivisible.

The first layer, the pre-iconographical description, deals with recognizing factual (e.g., objects, people, actions) and emotional meanings, namely primary or natural subjects. In detail, this description is achieved by recognizing pure forms (i.e., combinations of forms and colors) as carriers of primary subjects. The pure forms recognized are called 'artistic motifs', and their combinations are called 'compositions'. An enumeration of the recognition of artistic motifs constitutes a pre-iconographical interpretation of the artwork (Panofsky, 1955, p. 28). To recognize such subjects, the practical experience of the observer is usually sufficient. Nevertheless, some cases require the knowledge of the stylistic conventions adopted to distinguish, for example, if a person depicted in mid-air is an apparition, as it would be in a Renaissance painting, a person from afar (e.g., Japanese context), or just a depicted person in a medieval representation.

Suppose that the observer is familiar with the literary sources that the artist knows. In that case, the subjects already identified at level 1, viz. the artistic motifs or compositions, can be recognized at the second level by the combination of them with concepts and themes, obtaining, for example, characters (e.g., Venus), personifications (e.g., Virtue), or events (e.g., the Battle of Cascina). Recognized artistic motifs are called images or *Invenzioni*, the term used by ancient theorists to identify stories and allegories. Allegories are defined in opposition to stories as 'combinations of personifications and/or symbols', although there are many intermediate possibilities between them (Panofsky, 1955, p. 29, note 1).

Finally, by knowing and understanding the cultural and social aspects of the artist's time, it is possible to read the artwork and subjects identified at previous levels as symptoms of contemporary society, of the artist's beliefs and personality, or as expressions of voluntarily inserted meanings.

Correct identification of previous levels determines the subjects recognized in the deeper strata: 'a correct iconographical analysis presupposes a correct identification of the motifs' [p. 30].

The scholar emphasizes that the first two levels describe facts and are, respectively, in the domain of forms and iconography. On the contrary, the last level is in the domain of iconology, which is a synthetic intuition rather than a description. Table 2.1 resumes the synoptic table in Panofsky, 1955, pp. 40-41, integrating it with a further explanation of concepts.

Table 2.1: Levels of interpretation according to Panofsky (1955)

Level	**Type**	**Subject identified**	**Recognized elements**	**Necessary background**
1	Pre-iconographical description	Natural or primary subject, namely factual and expressional meaning	Artistic motifs and their combinations (compositions): pure forms recognized as carriers of primary meanings	practical experience
2	Iconographical description	Secondary or conventional subject	Images and their combinations (invenzioni, i.e., stories and allegories): artistic motifs recognized as carriers of a secondary meaning	literary sources describing themes and concepts familiar to the artist
3	Iconological interpretation	Intrinsic meaning or content	Symbolic values: artistic motifs, images, stories, and allegories are recognized as manifestations of underlying principles of a cultural context	familiarity with cultural phenomena, tendencies, attitudes

To illustrate Panofsky's theory and present an example in which each level of interpretation is covered, we describe Michelangelo's Tityus interpreted in (Panofsky, 1972, p. 216).

The drawing (Figure 2.1) shows a naked, laying man attacked by a vulture (level 1). It represents the story of Tityus (level 2), punished by Apollo for having assaulted his mother Leto by chaining him to a rock in Hades while two vultures eternally devour his liver, considered the seat of physical passions (symbol, level 2). The story had been commonly interpreted by Michelangelo's contemporaries as an allegory of the tortures caused by immoderate love (allegory, level 2). On this basis, Panofsky claims that the artist depicted this story as a symbol of his personal passion for Tommaso Cavalieri (level 3), to whom he gifted a corpus of drawings pervaded by Neoplatonic meanings (level 3). Table 2.2 shows how this interpretation can be subdivided into levels. For its completeness, this drawing will be considered as an example for the evaluation of the artworks in the currently available knowledge graphs in Section 3.6.3.

Figure 2.1: Michelangelo, *The Punishment of Tityus*, 1532, Charcoal drawing, a gift to Tommaso de' Cavalieri, Royal Collection Trust (Wikimedia Commons, public domain)

Table 2.2: Example of description of an artwork (Tityus, by Michelangelo) interpretation through three levels

Level	**Description**
1	Nude, laying man, attacked by a vulture
2	Tityus; story of Tityius, whose liver is devoured by a vulture; liver as the seat of physical passions; story of Tityus as an allegory of the tortures caused by immoderate love.
3	Agonies of sensual passion, enslaving the soul and debasing it even beneath its normal terrestrial state according to the Neoplatonic theory; Expression of the agonies of sensual Passion that pervaded Michelangelo after he had met Tommaso Cavalieri, for whom he realized the drawing.

2.2.3 Other theoretical approaches proposed formalizing the interpretation act and criticism towards Panofsky

Since scholars declined the iconological method in different, personal ways, alternative theories of the interpretation act were proposed. Some clearly state the limits or pitfalls of Panofsky's one, proposing extensions or new formulations (e.g., Van Straten, Imdahl, Taylor). In this section, we propose a brief overview of such theories.

Wittkower. In his essay titled 'Interpretation of Visual Symbols,' Rudolf Wittkower delves into the topic of how a work of art, with its visual symbolism derived from the artist's personal perception, can be comprehended by an observer attempting to reconstruct its depth of meaning through interpretation (Wittkower, 1977, pp. 173–216). Wittkower distinguishes between a 'rational interpretation', consisting of four levels of meaning, and an 'emotional interpretation'. The first level of rational interpretation, the 'literal representational' level, involves recognizing the literal meaning through object experience and knowledge of conventional representation codes. The second level pertains to the iconographic theme ('literal thematic' meaning), requiring familiarity with the artist's conventional code for attributes, allegory combinations, actions by mythological figures, and information from written or oral sources. An observer lacking awareness of these codes may fail to comprehend the work's subject matter (Wittkower, 1977, p. 176). However, more than recognizing the theme is required to fully understand the picture, as it may have an intentional meaning. A third-level meaning, namely, the 'multiple meaning', may be expressed. For example, in Raphael's fresco depicting Pope Leone I and Attila in the Vatican Rooms, a parallelism between the historical event and contemporaneity is voluntarily established, as the pope bears the portrait of Pope Leone X. This evokes the meaning of the power of the Church through centuries by recalling two military successes in which the two popes were involved (the retreat of the Huns in 452 and the win of the Church during the Novara battle in 1513).

Finally, the last level investigates the recognition of 'expressive meaning', namely the traces of the artist's personality. Differently from Panofsky, Wittkower's last level of interpretation focuses on understanding the extent to which an observer can grasp the message that the artist wanted to give to the work rather than an understanding of the society that influenced its production and modes of expression. The more the interpreter reaches a deeper level, the less objectively the interpretation results can be evaluated.

Besides the rational interpretation, an emotional one occurs, which is intuitive understanding depending on theoretical beliefs (e.g., aesthetics).

Van Straten. van Straten (2012) makes Panofsky's model more detailed by distinguishing the presence of intentional meaning expressed by the artist from unintentional meaning that sheds light on the context of production. Accordingly, his iconographic and iconological interpretation model is divided into four levels. He adds an intermedi-

ate level between Panofsky's iconographical description and iconological interpretation for identifying intentional or symbolic meanings. The last level concerns the uniquely iconological interpretation of the unconscious meanings projected by the cultural context into the artwork.

Imdahl. Although Imdahl (2012) generally agrees with the levels proposed by Panofsky, he criticizes that the relevant iconic language of visual images is ignored in the proposed theorization. For this reason, he proposes adding a parallel interpretation level concerning the iconic sense given by formal aspects of the representation.

Taylor. From Taylor's perspective, an *icon* interpretation highly relates to textual sources, making its interpretation impossible in cases where such evidence expressing a society's culture and cultural meanings is unavailable. Hence, his criticism of Panofsky does not concern his consistent reliance on textual sources. Rather, he states that Panofsky's three levels of meaning are insufficient to describe the interpretation of an iconography (Taylor, 2008, pp. 1–14). Instead, he proposes ten levels, answering, respectively, the following questions:

1. What does an image resemble?
2. What kind of things does it depict?
3. What specific thing or person, if any, does it depict?
4. What kind of things does it represent?
5. What specific thing or person, if any, does it represent?
6. Which iconographic type or scene does it represent?
7. Which text, if any, does it illustrate?
8. What, if anything, does it symbolize?
9. What was its apparent purpose?
10. What is its actual purpose?

A key aspect is distinguishing between the terms *resemblance, depiction, and representation*. He illustrates why all these levels of understanding are needed by interpreting a complex case, namely the iconography of Saint Kümmernis and its frequent overlapping with the iconography of *volto santo*. He interprets Hans Springinklee's woodcut showing *The fiddler and the golden shoe* (1513). In it, the crucified figure resembles a man (level 1). It is not possible to establish what kind of things it depicts (in this case, a statue; level 2) until we identify the specific object depicted, namely the statue of Christ known as *Volto Santo* located in Lucca Cathedral (level 3). Nevertheless, the woodcut under examination intends to represent a woman (level 4), specifically Saint

Kümmernis (level 5). According to the legend, a beard grew on the face of the beautiful woman to preserve her faith in Christ after her father insisted that she marry a prince. Then, the father had her crucified. As Saint Kümmernis shares attributes of Christ (male appearance and the cross), the two iconographies overlapped, and the legend of Saint Kümmernis started to be represented with the iconography of Volto Santo in Northern Europe. The scene depicted is a story (level 6) written in the saints' legend (level 7), telling that the saint gave a golden shoe to a fiddler praying for her. Even though it is highly probable that such an image had a symbolic meaning, we do not have enough elements to hypothesize what it was (level 8). The picture's apparent purpose may be devotion (level 9), but the actual purpose may be satyrical (level 10).

According to Taylor, he formulated the levels as feeding back one another rather than seeing a linear process, as shown by levels 2 and 3, in which identifying the object depicted (level 3) led to identifying the type (level 2).

Gombrich does not accept the validity of different levels of meaning, as it simplifies the problem and is highly problematic. For example, at the first level of interpretation, it is difficult to clearly define what is considered a subject and what is purely decorative. On the contrary, he analyzes the understanding of the meaning of a work by investigating the criteria leading to a correct interpretation and what and how many meanings the same work can express (Gombrich, 1972). According to him, iconology is the discipline aimed at reconstructing a lost iconographical program of each work of art that defines both the depicted themes and their intended meanings. He affirms that a correct interpretation is made step by step, and the correctness of each step should be verified before proceeding. Applying Hirsch's theory of literary text interpretation to visual art, he states that the first step consists of recognizing the genre of the painting, which will also determine the themes and whether more profound interpretations may exist. The scholar indicates how proper iconological interpretation must be based on the study of 'institutions,' in other words, the context and function of the object, rather than on the 'study of symbols,' and stresses how it is necessary to return to the study of documents following any iconological interpretation, so as not to risk basing 'another even bolder hypothesis' on one's conjectures (Gombrich, 1978, pp. 32–33).

Although it is a central reference for formalizing the discipline, some alternative theories described above show that criticism against Panofsky's theory was raised. Gombrich refuses to divide the interpretation into levels, judging it as simplistic. Some other scholars underline that defining a 'natural meaning' is problematic. Furthermore, Imdahl proposes adding an iconic level to the model since, according to him, Panofsky's approach focuses on textual sources without giving the proper relevance to the iconic language of artworks. Taylor accepts the subdivision into levels, but he proposes a more thorough framework of ten levels, judging Panofsky's one insufficient to represent the complexity of meaning unveiled by an iconological interpretation. However, he

underlines the centrality of documentary sources for conducting an iconographic and iconological analysis. Similarly, Gombrich agrees with a more faithful approach to documentary sources, cautioning about the possible problems raised by interpretations based on conjectures.

Several scholars moved critics opposite to the previous ones, claiming that Warburg's iconological approach was narrowed down to a study of the transformation of artistic motifs through their interaction with texts. One criticism is that, contrary to iconology, which focuses on the unconscious culturally related symbolic meanings of forms, he tends to 'focus on the conscious artistic use of symbols and conventions' (Ginzburg, 1986, p. 57; Rampley, 2001). Finally, Moxey (1986) underlines that his work reflects some biases as he refers to the traditional genre hierarchy, preferring allegories over landscape, still life, and portraiture, and refers to the art tradition as it was established. (Moxey, 1986, p. 270)

It is true that Panofsky's theory was proposed nearly one century ago and that a clear definition of the subjects included in the analysis is complex. Nevertheless, a shareable research method or framework to support art interpretation has not yet been validated because of the high level of subjectivity involved in each claim and the various interpretations of the discipline itself that the scholars gave in their practical research. Despite its limitations, many scholars still recognize his theory as central (Liepe, 2019), providing art interpretation with the first and most robust framework. Moxey, who reported some of the critics described above, underlines that 'Panofsky's 'iconological' method still offers the discipline one of the most sensitive approaches to the understanding of the art', as 'the system of checks and balances that characterizes Panofsky's 'iconological' method has proven to be the door through which it has become possible to essay an interpretation of works of art that does justice to their complex historicity' (Moxey, 1986, pp. 271–72).

2.3 The adopted theoretical perspective

The introductory overview provided in this chapter regarding the art criticism concerning art interpretation, with a specific reference to iconography and iconology, reported on the varied panorama of approaches proposed and the single art historians' take on them. This situation challenges the definition of a common theoretical framework. However, to the aim of the present study, we make explicit the theories and definitions that we chose as representative of the domain.

In the current study, we intend an **interpretation act** as any assignment of meaning and significance to artworks, as all the authors identifying a descriptive phase included a percentage of subjectivity even in it, also making simple descriptions of what is depicted in a work of art subjective. Furthermore, we refer to a branch of art history that sees criticism as the retrieval of the meaning of a work of art as intended by the artist or by the society in which and for which it was produced. Indeed, we are mainly interested in investigating past artworks from a historical perspective. Nevertheless, in our perspective, multiple contrasting interpretations can coexist. Whereas only one interpretation is ultimately theoretically accurate, the lack of clear evidence that

often occurs (e.g., the lack of the artist's explanation or the iconographical program) makes it impossible to judge whether an interpretation is correct. Furthermore, even if pieces of evidence are present, the highly subjective and interpretative nature of iconological understanding determines the impossibility of an objective judgment. Nevertheless, strategies for defining whether an interpretation is likely correct exist, such as the citation of evidence and the consideration of contemporary stylistic and artistic conventions and ideas proposed by Panofsky.

Furthermore, for the high relevance he had and for being the broadest and most thorough theoretical systematization provided, **we refer to the three-layered model proposed by Panofsky**. His theory gains particular importance when dealing with standard description of artworks, as it is the reference for international standard description of subject matter and content.[7] Nevertheless, we consider the fundamental contribution provided by other scholars, such as Warburg's importance of visual citation and style, Imdahl's importance given to the iconic language, and van Straten's subdivision of conscious and unconscious meanings.

7 E.g, by Getty's Categories for the Description of Works of Art (CDWA) and Categories for Cultural Objects (CCO). This aspect is discussed in more detail in Section 3.1.