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Iconographic Method in New World Prehistory

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This work brings together diverse art historical and anthropological sources to formulate an iconographic method applicable to the ancient indigenous cultures of the New World. The goal of iconography is to identify the subject matter of images. As conceived by art historians like Panofsky (1955), working with European art, a crucial analytical move is to draw a link between an image and the text that will help explain it. For prehistoric imagery, the absence of texts raises the possibility that iconography itself is impossible. Knight convincingly shows that the method is applicable to ancient cases from North America, Mesoamerica, Central America and the Andes. Indeed, the necessary framework appears less novel than he suggests, since ethnohistoric and ethnographic texts end up playing the role that, in Panofsky's scheme, was played by texts contemporaneous with the imagery.

Knight conceives his effort as a contribution specifically to cognitive archaeology, and a few passages suggest a rather narrow theoretical allegiance: the results are to be a 'body of middle-range theory' that will establish a 'scientific' approach to iconography. These comments risk generating the impression of *naïveté* in archaeological borrowings from another discipline, since the troubled relation between iconography and positivism within art history is not explored. Such comments might also suggest a more partisan theoretical allegiance within archaeology than is actually present here. The outcomes of analysis, as envisioned by Knight, are not hypotheses or proofs but instead complex models, built up gradually in a process that moves from experience-distance to experience-near understandings. They are to be evaluated 'not only to the extent that they fit the material at hand in the best possible way and with the fewest loose ends but also … to the extent that they bear on related domains' (p. 167). In other words, the results and the process of getting there match quite closely what interpretive archaeology understands as 'hermeneutics'.

So instead of worrying about larger theoretical allegiances, we should concentrate on what this book aims to be: a do-it-yourself manual for the iconographic study of prehistoric imagery of the ancient indigenous societies of the New World. In the past few decades, the field has made considerable strides, but progress is impeded by a dearth of methodological syntheses. Analysts borrow haphazardly from art history, and they continually reinvent wheels, sometimes in suboptimal shapes other than round. Lack of correspondence in the use of terms generates problems in communication between analysts. Knight's goal, based on some 20 years of iconographic work, is to establish systematic methods for the field, in particular: (1) a 'consensus' analytical vocabulary and (2) a set of 'core principles' (p. xv). I consider these two goals in turn.

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Iconographic study involves the classic archaeological bridging trajectory that moves from observations on ancient objects (in this case, imagery) to conclusions concerning ancient social life (in this case, the intended subject matter or 'meaningful referents' of the images). The analytical vocabulary is intended to aid in that bridging effort, and Knight is particularly concerned with clear and precise definitions of concepts. The task is a challenging one, and the results appear to be somewhat unevenly successful. For instance, Knight rejects use of the term 'iconography' to refer to images themselves, seeing it instead as a field of study that traces the relation between image and referent. But he does apply the term to the world of the ancient makers of images, who had their own 'iconographic models' for recognizing subject matter. Thus, Knight chooses to emphasize a particular structural similarity between makers' and analysts' models: the fact that the models establish a relation between image and referent. That choice, however, distracts attention from the very different situation of the analyst compared to that of the maker and to the constitution of 'iconography' as a contemporary field of study.

Another example, which illustrates both the challenges of developing the requisite analytical vocabulary and the promising aspects of Knight's bridging efforts, is treatment of 'theme' as distinct from 'motif'. For Panofsky, motifs were aspects of images, whereas themes were among the referents — they were what images referred to. Knight brings 'theme' to the side of imagery in order to develop a richer hierarchy of analytical units at different levels of synthesis. However, he finds that he still needs the term 'theme' over on the side of the referent, so he introduces qualifiers: 'visual theme' versus 'theme of reference'. At first, this seems a bit awkward, but the overall structure here — in which visual themes are the outcome of several stages in the analysis of the imagery moving gradually towards an understanding of original themes of reference — seems to provide a rich and promising bridging scheme, just as Knight intends.

A second goal of the work is to establish a set of core principles for the study of prehistoric imagery. At first glance, the most obvious candidates for these are the 18 'principles', numbered and placed ostentatiously in boxes, scattered throughout the text. However, these constitute a heterogeneous set. One is definitional; others are general qualities of good arguments or specific methodological tips from an old pro; still others are basically theoretical claims about the structure of systems of imagery and the way such systems change. The boxed principles, though they provide pertinent advice, do not add up to the 'core' of an iconographic method; it would, for instance, be easy to expand the set further or to winnow it down.

Still, this book does, it seems to me, provide a promising working understanding of how one should go about iconographic analysis of prehistoric materials. I would locate the 'core' of its analytical framework in that considerable expansion of principle number 17 that is the book itself. Principle number 17 somewhat vaguely envisions a 'staged progression of analysis and model building' (p. 161). The actual stages are outlined in the last chapter, but they are also replicated in the progression of chapters themselves. Iconographic work needs to be founded on a preliminary stylistic analysis. The configurational analysis of motifs and visual themes needs to be conducted independently from and prior to work on ethnographic analogies (or historical homologies), though ultimately it will be the bringing of the two together that will yield models of original themes of reference. Knight provides a detailed discussion of all the stages of analysis, with appropriate, well-illustrated examples. In my opinion, his dismissal of the direct historical approach is based on something of a caricature and leads to insufficient attention to the importance of *series* in arguments for historical homologies (e.g. Nicholson 1976). However, overall, this book provides students and scholars with a well-rounded analytical program for efforts to reconstruct subject matter, a crucial but of course not the only mode of analysis in the study of ancient imagery (Lesure 2011, fig. 17). Given that the intended audience is primarily students, it is a shame that the price of this book is ludicrously high ($99 in the USA); hopefully, it will be issued in paperback at a more reasonable cost.

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