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Iconography at the Crossroads

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Contents

Introduction: Iconography, Texts, and Audiences

BRENDAN CASSIDY

Unwriting Iconology

MICHAEL ANN HOLLY

The Politics of Iconology

KEITH MOXEY

Iconography as a Humanistic Discipline ("Iconography at the Crossroads")

IRVING LAVIN

Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art

MICHAEL CAMILLE

Medieval Art as Argument

HERBERT L. KESSLER

Disembodiment and Corporality in Byzantine Images of the Saints

HENRY MAGUIRE

Diagrams of the Medieval Brain: A Study in Cerebral Localization

YNEZ VIOLÉ O'NEILL

Gendering Jesus Crucified

RICHARD C. TREXLER

Medieval Pictorial Systems

WOLFGANG KEMP

Piero della Francesca's Iconographic Innovations at Arezzo

MARILYN ARONBERG LAVIN

Miracles Happen: Image and Experience in Jan van Eyck's *Madonna in a Church*

CRAIG HARBISON

The Annunciation to Christine: Authorial Empowerment in *The Book of the City of Ladies*

V. A. KOLVE

The "Mystical Signature" of Christopher Columbus

JOHN V. FLEMING

Cleriadus et Meliadice: A Fifteenth-Century Manual for Courtly Behavior

HOWARD MAYER BROWN†

Images of Music in Three Prints after Maarten van Heemskerck

H. COLIN SLIM

Iconography as a Humanistic Discipline ("Iconography at the Crossroads")

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IRVING LAVIN

I MUST BEGIN with three preliminary explanations concerning the title of this little vignette. All three observations refer to the vocabulary used by Erwin Panofsky, whose name more than any other we associate with the study of the subject matter of works of art, to explain what he thought he was doing. First, I use the term iconography advisedly. Inspired by Aby Warburg, Panofsky drew a sharp distinction between iconography and iconology, reserving the latter term for the discursive interpretation of the deepest level of meaning conveyed in the visual arts. I am concerned here not with iconology but with what might be called the pre-iconological foundation for intellectual analysis, namely, the process of describing the content of a work of art as systematically as possible so that its underlying meaning may be discerned as systematically as possible through iconological study. I was rather dismayed to learn recently from Rosalie Greene, the director *emerita* of the Index of Christian Art at Princeton, that late in his life Panofsky gave up the term iconology altogether: "get rid of it, we don't need it any more," she said he said. I realized that what I have to say is indeed very close to getting rid of "iconology" (which never really caught on in professional parlance anyway), except I had not thought about it in quite that way; Panofsky was much more perspicacious than I, and much more succinct.

The second point concerns the second part of my title, which echoes that of Panofsky's famous little essay, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline." The paper was first published in 1940 and then reprinted in 1955 as the introduction to his famous little volume of essays (Panofsky was fond of referring to his shorter efforts as "little"), itself significantly called *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Both titles encapsulate the distinctive nature of Panofsky's primary preoccupation and his singular contribution to the study of art history. This point is crucial to my argument and I want to explain it with some care before continuing. A fundamental common denominator underlies Panofsky's vast outpouring of articles and books on an immense variety of subjects, from his astonishing dissertation on Albrecht Dürer's theoretical ideas about art (published in 1914 when Panofsky was 22, it brought him instant notoriety as a kind of child prodigy) to his last major work, published posthumously in 1969, a volume on Titian which he produced only at the urging of friends because, as he said, he felt

inadequate to write about his favorite artist.¹ The study of Dürer's aesthetics revolutionized our understanding of the position in European history of Germany's great national painter, who had previously been treated as the epitome, the very incarnation of the pure, mystical German spirit. Panofsky showed, to the dismay of many, that Dürer was in fact the principal channel through which the classical tradition of rational humanism, reborn in Italy in the Renaissance, was transmitted to Germany, transforming its culture forever (Figs. 1, 2). At the end of his career Panofsky revolutionized our understanding of Italy's most beloved painter of the Renaissance by showing, again to the dismay of many, that Titian was not just the painter's painter *par excellence*, the pure colorist, the virtuoso of the brush, the unrestrained sensualist of form and light. On the contrary, Titian was also a great thinker who suffused his brilliant displays of *chiaroscuro* with layers and layers of wide learning and profound meaning, like the many layers of oil glazes that lend to his canvases their luminosity and depth. One of the prime instances of this transformed understanding of Titian—and how one understands Titian is how one understands the nature of painting itself, indeed of visual expression generally—was his analysis of one of Titian's seminal works, commonly known by the rather common title of *Sacred and Profane Love* (Fig. 3). Panofsky showed that the picture, which includes two females, one scrumptiously dressed, the other divinely nude, in fact belonged in a long tradition of intellectual allegories. It can only have been providential, I might add, that the same tradition ultimately produced the official seal of the Institute for Advanced Study, in which an adorned figure of Beauty contrasts with the naked Truth (Fig. 4).² (Panofsky served as Professor of Art History at the Institute from 1936 until his death in 1968; 1992 was the centennial of his birth.)

The visual arts had since antiquity been low man (or low woman, since the arts are always represented as women) on the totem pole of human creativity, far behind literature, music and history, for example. Painting, sculpture and the like were classed as mechanical arts, rather than liberal arts, since they were considered the products of manual, rather than intellectual labor. Panofsky was the first to hear clearly, take seriously and apply systematically to all art, what artists since the Renaissance—Leonardo, Raphael, Dürer, Michelangelo, Titian and the rest—were saying, sometimes desperately: that art is also a function of the brain, that man can speak his mind with his hands. Panofsky's predecessors were mostly concerned with the classification of artists, styles and periods, or with the social, religious and political contexts in which art was produced, or with the psychological and formal principles that determine its various forms. Panofsky also engaged in all those activities, but he was especially devoted to meaning. The artist had something special to say and found special ways to say it. (In 1934 Panofsky, who has often been accused of being antagonistic toward modern art, published a miraculous meditation on precisely this theme with respect to the movies; a pioneer effort to define the principles of what would now be called "filmic" tech-

¹ *Die theoretische Kunstlehre Albrecht Dürers (Dürers Aesthetik)*, Berlin, 1914; *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*, New York, 1969.

² I have in progress a study of the Institute's seal and the history of the equation of Beauty and Truth.

nique, he wrote the piece to support the nascent Film Library at the Museum of Modern Art.)³ This insistence upon and search for meaning—especially meaning in places where no one suspected there was any—led Panofsky to a new understanding of art as an *intellectual* endeavor, and to a new definition of art history as a humanistic discipline.⁴ It is no accident that one of Panofsky's primary contributions as a historian should have been in the definition and defense of the idea of the Renaissance. The modern struggle of art history to gain recognition was a reenactment of the struggle of Renaissance artists to have their activity counted among the liberal arts.

The third explanation concerns my subtitle, which is borrowed, a bit coyly perhaps, from the title of the present volume. The phrase is itself a *double entendre*, referring to one of Panofsky's grandest iconographical studies, *Hercules at the Crossroads*,⁵ and also to the fact that the iconographical method, so-called, has come under attack in recent years as an overly intellectual, socially unaware and irrelevant enterprise. In fact, to tell the truth, I did not realize *Iconography is at a crossroads*—I thought she had long since crashed and followed her older sister, *Stylistic Analysis*, into art historical limbo. I thought iconography died when the study of history *per se* came to be conceived as an exercise in social irrelevance, and the humanistic ideal itself passed away. Where there is a crossroads, however, I suppose there may yet be traffic.

"Iconography at the Crossroads" is particularly appropriate at Princeton because Princeton became, after all, the *locus classicus* of iconography, inhabited by two of the subject's inspiring geniuses, Charles Rufus Morey and Erwin Panofsky. Panofsky might have described their meeting at Princeton as, to paraphrase one of his *bons mots*, a happy accident at the crossroads of tradition. Panofsky was awed by Morey and often expressed his great admiration for and indebtedness to the tall, handsome WASP who brought the ungainly little German Jew to Princeton and secured his appointment at the Institute for Advanced Study. In the remarks that follow I shall conjure up these two benign spirits—I knew them both and I promise they are that—at the point where their intellectual paths met in Princeton.

³ "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures"; often reprinted, most recently in G. Mast and M. Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism. Introductory Readings*, New York and Oxford, 1979, 243–263. Reprinting the essay in 1947, the editors of "Critique," *A Review of Contemporary Art* referred to it as "one of the most significant introductions to the aesthetics of the motion picture yet to be written."

⁴ After completing this essay I received from Dieter Wuttke, who is preparing an edition of Panofsky's letters, a copy of an article that includes a remarkable and very pertinent letter about Aby Warburg written by Panofsky in 1955 (D. Wuttke, "Erwin Panofsky über Aby M. Warburgs Bedeutung. Ein Brief des Kunsthistorikers an den Bankier Eric M. Warburg," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Feuilleton, January 7, 1992, 17f.). Panofsky credits Warburg with precisely the same emphasis on subject matter and content that I ascribe to Panofsky. I may therefore be guilty of the very error of misattribution Panofsky decries in observing that Warburg's ideas were better known through the writings of the "Warburg School," including Panofsky, than from the much less widely read works of the master himself! Still, there is a fundamental difference: Warburg was ultimately concerned with psychic truth (E. H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford, 1986, 73ff.), whereas Panofsky was after intellectual meaning. For Warburg art history was a means toward a "psychology of culture"; for Panofsky it was a humanistic discipline.

⁵ *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, XVIII), Leipzig and Berlin, 1930.

In his essay on the discipline of art history Panofsky is concerned first of all to define the nature of humanistic study, and to defend the process whereby the study of art in particular had been transformed from an elite form of aesthetic satisfaction into a wide-ranging scholarly enterprise that encompassed the whole gamut of historical materials and methods and came to be accepted without question as a proper and fully accredited academic subject. Panofsky defines the subject of the art historian's study as an interconnected amalgam of three constituent elements: form, subject matter and content, and he quotes C. S. Peirce's definition of the distinction between the latter two: "Content, as opposed to subject matter, is that which a work betrays, but does not parade." Content is, Panofsky says, "the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—all this unconsciously qualified by one personality, and condensed into one work."⁶

The curious thing is that he never actually defends the notion of the history of art as a humanistic discipline—he simply asserts, "It may be taken for granted that art history deserves to be counted among the humanities."⁷ The reason he thought it could be taken for granted is evident from a preceding passage in which he distinguishes between the "naïve" appreciator of art and the art historian. It is a bit long and we may take exception to what it includes and what it leaves out; but in view of the accusations of narrowness often leveled, and sometimes with justice, at iconography, the passage is worth quoting at least to indicate what Panofsky himself thought he was about. Unlike the naïve art lover, he says:

The art historian *knows* that his cultural equipment, such as it is, would not be in harmony with that of people in another land and of a different period. He tries, therefore, to make adjustments by learning as much as he possibly can of the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created. Not only will he collect and verify all the available factual information as to medium, condition, age, authorship, destination, etc., but he will also compare the work with others of its class, and will examine such writings as reflect the aesthetic standards of its country and age, in order to achieve a more 'objective' appraisal of its quality. He will read old books on theology or mythology in order to identify its subject matter, and he will further try to determine its historical locus, and to separate the individual contribution of its maker from that of forerunners and contemporaries. He will study the formal principles which control the rendering of the visible world, or, in architecture, the handling of what may be called the structural features, and thus build up a history of 'motifs.' He will observe the interplay between the influences of literary sources and the effect of self-dependent representational traditions, in order to establish a history of iconographical formulae or 'types.' And he will do his best to familiarize himself with the social, religious and philosophical attitudes of other periods and countries, in order to correct his own feeling for content. But when he does all this, his aesthetic perception as such will change accordingly, and will more and more adapt itself to the original 'intention' of the works. Thus what the art historian, as opposed to the 'naïve' art lover, does, is not to erect a

⁶ *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Garden City, N. Y., 1955, 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

rational superstructure on an irrational foundation, but to develop his re-creative experiences so as to conform with the results of his archaeological research, while continually checking the results of his archaeological research against the evidence of his re-creative experiences.⁸

In referring to Panofsky's text and in co-opting his title, I certainly do not intend to urge universities to establish departments of iconography in any sense of the word. But I do believe the intellectual revolution about which Panofsky wrote so eloquently and to which he contributed so fundamentally, has reached the point of no return, and we must face the consequence. We normally suppose iconography to be a branch of art history, whereas I think the reverse is true, for two, interrelated reasons. Our definition of art has so broadened as to include virtually any man-made image; and our attitude toward art thus defined has so deepened as to preclude the notion that the meaning of a work of art is exhausted either by its aesthetic value, on the one hand, or by its social value, on the other. The study of the history of art, conceived in this broader sense, has become the study of the history of the meaning, conceived in this deeper sense, of images.⁹

I want to try to prove my point by retracing Panofsky's geographical and intellectual pilgrimage from Hamburg, Germany, to Princeton, New Jersey, from the iconographical point of view. Panofsky himself recounts the saga of his displacement in another beautiful composition, "Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European," first published in 1953, which he appended as the epilogue to *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. From this bittersweet reminiscence it becomes clear that there is a consonance between Panofsky's experience as a refugee from Fascism, his passionate embrace of the humanistic tradition, and his taking it for granted that the history of art belongs among the humanities. For its openness, its enthusiasm, its candor—but above all for its sheer perspicacity—Panofsky's account of his "Americanization" and estimation of what he found here, inevitably recalls Tocqueville. It has no equal as an assessment, by a sophisticated but somewhat surprised European intellectual, of this strange and rather barbaric new land into which he had been, as he says, transplanted. Whereas most historians emphasize what America gained from the talented immigrants—those delicious apples America caught from the tree that Hitler shook—Panofsky suggests that for him it was a two-way street.¹⁰ He distilled the two main benefits he felt he received from his translocation into one of the most extraordinary of the many extraordinary paragraphs of that extraordinary memoir:

To be immediately and permanently exposed to an art history without provincial limitations in time and space, and to take part in the development of a discipline still animated by a spirit of youthful adventuresomeness, brought perhaps the most essential gains which the immigrant scholar could reap from his transmigration. But in addition it was a blessing for him to come into contact—and occasionally into conflict—with an Anglo-Saxon positivism

⁸ Ibid., 17f.

⁹ On the foregoing, see I. Lavin, "The Art of Art History," *ARTNews*, LXXXI, 1983, 96–101.

¹⁰ The familiar aphorism about Hitler's apples was invented by Walter W. S. Cook, founder of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, who was Panofsky's first employer in America (*Meaning* [as in note 6], 332).

which is, in principle, distrustful of abstract speculation; to become more acutely aware of the material problems [posed by works of art,] which in Europe tended to be considered the concern of museums and schools of technology rather than universities; and, last but not least, to be forced to express himself, for better or worse, in English.¹¹

However, I think Panofsky may have been a little coy in this case, because I suspect that he found something more when he came to Princeton in 1933, of great importance for his future work and development—the Index of Christian Art. He found in the Index an unparalleled and unfathomable reservoir of carefully organized and easily accessible material out of which he could realize his great, all-encompassing vision of the history of art among the humanities. Ironically, this was not the purpose for which the Index was originally intended. Ironically, in fact, the diminished esteem in which iconography has been held by art historians in recent years has been counterbalanced by the greatly increased use to which the Index has been put by people in other fields: the literary historian looking for illustrations or visual analogies to his text, the lexicographer interested in medieval naval terminology studying the boats in which Christ rides on the Sea of Galilee, the economic historian interested in medieval agronomy studying the hoes Adam wields in Paradise.

In order to make clear my case for the indebtedness of Erwin Panofsky to the Index of Christian Art, however, I must first confess that, personally, I sometimes think iconography is an invention of the devil. At least, it is a devilishly duplicitous notion that marries two things almost genetically incompatible, an abstract idea called an image, and a concrete object called a work of art. Plato long ago warned us that abstract ideas and concrete things really cannot be reconciled, and yet that to my mind is exactly what good iconography seeks to accomplish. Conversely, while it is duplicitous in theory, iconography as it is sometimes currently practiced might also be described as deceptively simple—based, that is, on a conception of the meaning of works of art that has become obsolete. I venture to say that during the half century or so before the recent demise of iconography, far more systematic effort was devoted to studying and classifying subject matter than to any other aspect of art. In part, of course, this popularity was due to the brilliant achievements of great practitioners like Panofsky. Another, historically no less important factor was the commonly held belief that subject matter is somehow the most “scientific,” the least ambiguous, aspect of art. Different observers, it seems, are more apt to agree on the title of a work than on almost anything else about it. Nonsense. On the contrary, the form, style if you will, of a work of art is no less important to its meaning, and no less susceptible to rational and fruitful analysis than its subject. As the passage I quoted earlier testifies, Panofsky entertained this strange notion, too.

Interest in the systematic study of subject matter developed mainly in the period between the two world wars, and resulted in the creation of the two oldest, most elaborate and comprehensive tools we have for the analysis of works of art, namely, the Index of Christian Art and the classification system known as Iconclass. It is important to bear in mind that both projects were developed in order to help art history escape as far as possible from the subjec-

¹¹ *Meaning* (as in note 6), 329.

tive quagmire of impressionistic art criticism. Although they have this goal in common, and although they pursue it in largely the same way, by classifying works of art according to the subjects they depict, the two systems reflect radically different points of view toward the significance of subject matter itself. I am going to compare them briefly, not to choose between them, since they have both become indispensable and mutually reinforcing tools of our trade, but simply to illustrate my point about Panofsky, the Index, and the nature of art history.

Morey, who started the Index just after the first World War, was not primarily concerned with what Warburg and Panofsky called iconology, that is, the social, symbolical, philosophical, ideological, and theological implications of represented themes. Rather, Morey wanted to use subject matter as a means of replacing or buttressing purely stylistic analysis in classifying works of art geographically and chronologically. Certain subjects are more popular in some places and at some times than others. Also, certain ways of representing some subjects are more popular in some places and times than in others. In this latter context, especially, the design of the individual work becomes crucial, for variations in the treatment of a given subject make it possible to establish affiliations and differences between works on what is apparently a far more objective basis than stylistic analysis alone can provide. The approach led to a dual structure for the Index, which starts with the objects, groups them initially by subject matter, and then also includes detailed descriptions that enable the researcher to use the features noted in a particular work in a comparative study of modes of depicting a given theme. Following this method, the Princeton school of art history was able to make major contributions to the taxonomy of medieval art, and to our understanding of the processes by which medieval art evolved.

The Dutch scholar Henri van de Waal, who invented and developed the system known as Iconclass during the 1940's and '50's, derived his ideas largely from the theories of significant form represented by Ernst Cassirer, Aby Warburg, and Panofsky, and his approach was almost the reverse of Morey's. Van de Waal was concerned with iconography precisely in the sense of conceptual import, and the alternative instrument he invented focuses exclusively on subject matter, the significance of a theme being determined by its relation to other subjects of the same or related species. This approach provides the means to classify objects on a purely thematic basis, regardless of when or where they were made, or what they actually look like. Here, a thoroughly structured framework of all possible subjects becomes essential, a framework in which any subject and any work of art may find their appropriate places.

Although subject matter is thus the common ground of both systems, the Index is ultimately morphology-oriented and therefore incorporates comprehensive descriptions of works of art, whereas Iconclass is content-oriented and consists in a comprehensive and thoroughly hierarchical classification of themes. Works of art are the Alpha and Omega of the Index, whereas in the entire Iconclass system there is no reference, nor can there be, to any work of art. Iconclass is as profound as can be concerning subjects that may be represented, including sometimes many variants of the same theme, but it is oblivious to the way they are represented. The Index is quite superficial concerning the classification of subjects, including sometimes many variant examples under the same heading, but it contains more or less elab-

orate descriptions of the way they are depicted in individual works. Iconclass, to take a tiny detail for example, includes a separate category for Crucifixions in which Christ is dead on the Cross, which the Index does not; in the Index descriptions, however, under the category Crucifixion, one can find those cases in which the dead Christ's head droops to the left, rather than the right—a potentially crucial distinction for the iconographer with imagination. In practice, to be sure, both systems are sensitive to their contentual alter egos: the hierarchies of Iconclass may be infinitely extended to incorporate thematic variants represented by individual works of art; conversely, subjects may be added to the Index or subdivided when greater descriptive precision is required. Nevertheless, the main virtue of Iconclass lies in its logic, consistency and comprehensiveness. The great virtue of the Index lies in its *ad hoc* hybridity and Anglo-Saxon positivism, that is, the indissoluble link it forges between the subject of a work of art and its design.¹²

Panofsky perceived that link: his classic definition of the Renaissance in art—often challenged but never surpassed—as the reintegration of classical form with classical subject matter, depends upon it. Here we grasp the profound insight this reciprocity may provide into the historical process itself. To my mind, indeed, the link between form and content holds the very key to the significance of works of art, to the study of the significance of images in general, and hence to art history (“iconography,” “iconology”—call it what you will) as a humanistic discipline.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

I append this note for readers who may wish to pursue further the matters discussed here. Brendan Cassidy has kindly provided the following bibliography on the Index of Christian Art: H. Woodruff, *The Index of Christian Art at Princeton University: A Handbook*, Princeton, 1942; R. B. Green, “The Index of Christian Art: A Great Humanistic Research Tool,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, LXIII, 1963, 8–10, 16–17; A. C. Esmeijer and W. S. Heckscher, “The Index of Christian Art,” *The Indexer*, III, 1963, 97–119; W. L. Burke, “The Index of Christian Art,” *The Journal of Documentation*, VI, 1950, 6–11; L. Drewer, “What Can be Learned from the Procedures of the Index of Christian Art,” in P. M. Daly, ed., *The Index of Emblem Art Symposium*, New York, 1990, 121–38; I. Ragusa, “The Princeton Index of Christian Art,” *Medieval English Theater*, IV, 1982, 56–60; M. M., “The Princeton Index of Christian Art: After Twenty Years,” *UCLA Librarian*, XXXIX, 1986, 13–15; E. De Jongh, “Index of Christian Art voor Utrechts Instituut,” *Vrij Nederland*, 22 September 1962, 7; A. C. Esmeijer and W. S. Heckscher, “Wij richten de scijnwerper op: De Index Afdeling van het Kunsthistorisch Instituut,” *Solaire Reflexen/Orgaan voor het personeel van de Rijksuniversiteit*.

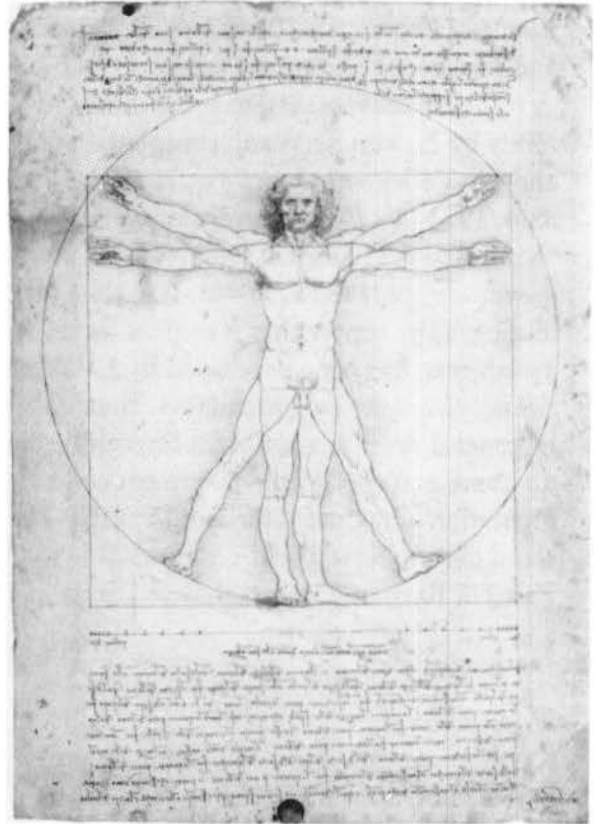
¹² Leendert D. Couprie, the current Director of Iconclass, who was kind enough to read this paper in manuscript, offered a very felicitous paraphrase of the distinction I am making here: idealist vs behaviorist.

siteit te Utrecht, xi, 1964, 2-3; B. Cassidy, "The Index of Christian Art: Present Situation and Prospects," *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vi, 1991, 8-14.

The Iconclass system is contained in the comprehensive compendium, bibliography and index by H. van de Waal, completed and edited by L. D. Couprie, R. H. Fuchs, E. Tholen and G. Vellekoop, *Iconclass: An Iconographic Classification System*, 17 volumes, Amsterdam, 1973-85. For a fine discussion of Iconclass and Henri van de Waal, see C. R. Sherman, "Iconclass: A Historical Perspective," in *Visual Resources. An International Journal of Documentation*, iv, 1987, 237-46. Iconclass has been widely applied in indexing projects and the bibliography concerning it is quite large. Another system, based on descriptive themes as well as subjects, has been developed by F. Garnier, *Thesaurus iconographique. Système descriptif des représentations*, Paris, 1984. Invaluable tools for the study of subject matter classification in general are the annual bibliographies published since 1984 in *Visual Resources*, and the database and specialized document collection maintained by the Clearinghouse on Art Documentation and Computerization at the Thomas J. Watson Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. I am indebted to Helene E. Roberts, editor of *Visual Resources*, and Patricia Barnett, Clearinghouse Director, for their generous responses to my inquiries.



1. Albrecht Dürer, Vitruvian Man, drawing. London, British Museum (after W. L. Strauss, *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer*, New York, 1974, V, p. 2431)



2. Leonardo da Vinci, Vitruvian Man, drawing. Venice, Galleria dell'Accademia (after L. Cogliata Arano, *Disegni di Leonardo e della sua cerchia alle Gallerie dell'Accademia*, Milan, 1980, p. 32)



3. Titian, *Sacred and Profane Love*. Rome, Galleria Borghese (after C. Hope, *Titian*, London, 1980, pl. v)



4. Official seal of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton