

ICONOGRAPHY WITHOUT TEXTS

WARBURG INSTITUTE COLLOQUIA: 13

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The practice of iconography is popularly associated in readers' imaginations with the Warburg Institute and it is fitting that it should host a colloquium devoted to the topic of iconography without texts. As the conventional basis of iconography is to analyse the meanings of images by associating them with written texts, two familiar problems have been whether all images are open to iconographic analysis of this type and how one might recover oral associations. This volume sets a new agenda by transferring the problems of analysis out of the familiar territory of post classical European history in to far less familiar domains and using material that has a variety of relationships to written scripts and oral traditions.

The contents consist of Paul G. Bahn, 'Holding onto smoke? Wishful thinking vs common sense in rock art interpretation'; Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, 'Can one 'read' rock art? An Egyptian example'; Robert Bagley, 'Interpreting prehistoric designs'; J.S. Cooper, 'Incongruent corpora: writing and art in ancient Iraq'; John Baines, 'On functions of writing in ancient Egyptian pictorial representation'; Stephen Houston and Karl Taube, 'Meaning in early Maya imagery'; Paul Taylor, 'Moche libation bottles'; Jerome Feldman, 'Hawaiian petroglyphs as narratives'; Ivan Gaskell, 'Some Cherokee and Chitimacha baskets: problems of interpretation'. And there is an introductory essay by Paul Taylor that offers to replace Erwin Panofsky's famous three levels of interpretation by ten.

There is no unanimity in the scholarly community about the possibility of assigning meaning to images without the evidence of written textual sources and the authors themselves acknowledge that. Even in the cases where there are written texts, Cooper and Baines raise interesting questions about the relationships between those texts and their conjoint images. There are also cases where the scripts are poorly understood, presenting problems of a different order.

As Bahn points out there is, indeed, a great deal of wishful thinking around with many avenues and cul-de-sacs. The greatest mistake, apart from simply getting things wrong, would be to apply over-generalising theories, such as the prevalence of shamanism, to account for culturally specific

situations. He argues that locations of rock art may offer some insight into its functions but their 'non-empirical environment', being cultural, is subject to the possibility of change. Le Quellec intuitively recognises swimming figures in shelters at the Wadi Sora, which is not in south-eastern but south-western Egypt, and then reads meaning into them from the Egyptian Coffin Texts. Bagley offers a convincing argument for adopting a biological approach to paired eye images and running spirals: 'Running spirals and paired eyes and musical scales are ways of exploiting the mechanisms of our perceptual system' (p.50). He also produces highly cogent criticisms of Ernst Gombrich's view of the specifically protective function of eyes and 'an unconscious symbolism unknown to the craftsmen themselves' (p. 45). Cooper shows that the ancient Near East, though always in close touch with its Egyptian neighbour, was much slower to combine images with writing and did so in distinctly different ways. Baines's paper, though difficult, shows that text-image relationships in Egyptian art are enormously varied and sometimes extremely subtle and complex; some of them have no parallel outside Egyptian art. The Egypt-Mesopotamia difference is of course intimately related to deep differences between their writing systems. Houston and Taube observe of Mayan art that 'the main problem in finding meaning in Preclassic images is that the texts which accompany them lie so far outside later conventions that the better-understood glyphs of the Classic period provide little help in interpreting them' (p. 132) But they then proceed to do the job by intuition and analogy. Paul Taylor proceeds by way of intuition and analogy as well. Then Gaskell talks about historically recent baskets supported with evidence from native informants. Taylor's introduction is based on unravelling the mystery of the meaning of a European woodcut dated 1513.

It is clear that whilst the contributors discussed different topics, they shared each other's concerns. A starting point for analysis would be Bagley's observation that 'ethnographic analogy does not supply proofs, it only suggests possibilities. And while it is invaluable when our problem is the function of a tool, it is useless when our problem is symbolic meaning, because ... the possibilities for meaning are limitless.' (p. 52) Talk about deciphering codes is not helpful either, as symbols do not work like codes. Depictions of 'figures in a setting' do not justify the attribution of narratives, let alone the notion that the setting is unambiguously there. One cannot assume unchanged continuity of traditions, on the basis of which one can retroject meanings from documented to undocumented images. The contributors have definitely provided food for thought. Readers interested in the foundations of iconography will certainly want to get this book for their libraries.

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