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# Understanding contemporary images using iconography: Migration to the European Union and the representation of refugees and asylum seekers

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## ABSTRACT



Attaining visual literacy is becoming of growing importance, and iconography is an approach that allows people to become visually literate. Globalisation and technological advancements have transformed the way people communicate and understand the social and political realities that inform their everyday lives. The generation of information that guides these realities has become progressively more visual and accessible to a global audience. People's visual worlds have expanded to incorporate those that are not part of their environments. The increasing interconnectedness of the world and the rapid dissemination of information through visual mediums make visual literacy important and iconography relevant. This article explores the use of iconography to understand images and provides a framework for exploring their meaning. To accomplish this goal, iconography is discussed alongside the issue of migration to the European Union and the image of Alan Kurdi.

## KEYWORDS

Iconography; visual literacy; Erwin Panofsky; Alan Kurdi; migration

## Introduction

Globalisation and technological advances have changed the way people communicate and understand the social and political realities that guide their everyday lives. The production of information that informs these realities is increasingly visual and accessible to a global audience. Images are being widely produced and disseminated by entities like the mass media, advertisers, governments, and social media platforms. People's visual worlds are no longer confined to their environments, a message scribbled on the wall in their neighbourhood or a local billboard. People are increasingly inundated with images circulated globally and left to be interpreted. Sectarian messages written on walls in Northern Ireland are no longer confined to the communities where they exist. Likewise, messages of defiance written on the iconic 'Welcome to Free Derry' sign in Northern Ireland have become part of the local and broader global response to the recent murder of journalist Lyra McKee by the New IRA, a

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comment on the legacies of the Troubles themselves. Northern Ireland is just one example of many that can be observed worldwide. This phenomenon can also be seen in images of migrants in detention centres at the United States (US) Southern border and in those documenting the migration crisis along the borders of the European Union (EU) with many refugees trying to reach Europe on the Mediterranean Sea. These images are not only stimulating domestic debates in the US and the EU about immigration policies, but this is also stimulating discussions abroad. Images highlighting issues like migration in the EU, the US or places emerging from conflict like Northern Ireland are no longer isolated to those areas. Visual documentation of the migrant experience in trying to reach Europe, for instance, has become part of the more extensive global flow of images experienced by a broader audience. With this, people must not only navigate and interpret their visual environment but also a global one.

The growing interconnectedness of the world along with the increased production and dissemination of large amounts of information through visual mediums make it essential for people to become visually literate. Each image a person encounters is guided by a visual lexicon that acts as a language, communicating a message to its audience (See Arnheim 2004; Barthes 1977; Panofsky 1970; Richardson 1982). In order to understand these messages and attain visual literacy, it is necessary to establish an approach for doing so. One such approach is Erwin Panofsky's iconography. Iconography can be described as a form of visual content analysis and interpretation that seeks to understand the meaning of images (Müller, 2015, p. 249). This article argues that iconography is a valuable tool for attaining visual literacy in the contemporary context. It is accessible to anyone from scholars trying to understand a specific phenomenon or establishing a consistent approach to large volumes of visual data to those wanting to understand better the daily images they encounter.

In considering iconography as an approach for acquiring visual literacy in a contemporary context, it is insufficient to discuss only in theoretical terms. Instead, it is necessary to demonstrate how iconography works in its practical application to present-day images. In adopting this methodology, viewers can understand how to use iconography to decipher the meaning of images and acquire visual literacy. To accomplish this aim, this article discusses iconography alongside the iconic image of Alan Kurdi pictured below, which was circulated virally in 2015 (Figure 1).

### **The European crisis that led to the image of Alan Kurdi**

In 2015, the number of migrants and refugees reaching Europe surpassed one million. Of those arriving, around half had fled from the conflict in Syria, with one third seeking political asylum (Greenhill, 2016, p. 317). This figure was double that of those seeking refuge in Europe in 2014 (Bozdog & Smets, 2017, p. 4046). The matter of who should take responsibility for these migrants and refugees raised tensions among European Union (EU) member states. It also produced different migration policies that focussed on national interests rather than European unity. These differing state responses created public and political debate about the legal obligation of member



**Figure 1.** Alan Kurdi, photographed by Nilüfer Demir, September 2, 2015 (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, p. 4047).

states to those displaced across Europe. Often these debates renewed national divisions that would benefit right-wing, national political parties (Bozdag & Smet, 2017, p. 4046; Greenhill, 2016, p. 317). The absence of European unity in response to the growing humanitarian and political crises resulting from the increase in migration was further complicated by the limitations and failures of border control policies and refugee burden-sharing schemes. Schengen countries began to temporarily reintroduce internal border controls citing the 'exceptional circumstances' clause in Article 26 of the Schengen Border Code (Greenhill, 2016, p. 318). At present, six Schengen countries retain active border controls. These countries include Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Austria, and France (European Commission, n.d.). Beyond these newly imposed border restrictions, other countries like Hungary tried to control entry at its borders with its non-Schengen neighbours by implementing physical protections (Greenhill, 2016, p. 318).

Simultaneous to the actions and policies of the EU member states and Schengen countries, five boats carrying asylum seekers sank in the Mediterranean Sea in April 2015. It is estimated that 1200 people died as a result. This alongside Hungary's physical border barriers with Croatia and Serbia (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, p. 4046), and the capsized boat that led to the dead body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi washing ashore in Turkey the same year, fuelled the highly controversial debates on migration in Europe.

The photograph of Alan Kurdi's still body and remediations of the photograph have transformative and iconic power. Released on 2 September 2015, the images became part of the global headlines and within 12h reached 20 million screens (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, p. 4047). Before the dissemination of the photograph, numbers and figures predominantly framed discussions on the migration crisis. However, afterwards, the crisis was given a human face that resonated with people (Pekel & van de Reijt 2017, p. 19). The circulation of the images caused a significant rise in the public interest about the topics of migration and refugees, greater humanitarian emphasis by

newspapers, and the mobilisation of citizens (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, p. 4047). Politicians highlighted the photograph in national parliaments and both supporters and opponents of more 'generous' asylum policies tried to use the symbol to advance their cause. Nonetheless, publishing the photograph was controversial, and the appropriateness of the publication of the young, lifeless victim was questioned and debated (Pekel & van de Reijt 2017, p. 19).

The photograph momentarily became an emotive part of the on-going international debate on migration. While images like that of Alan Kurdi tell a story that has transformative power through political action, this devastating imagery is often slowly forgotten as attention moves elsewhere. More so, the photograph brings up ethical questions about the use of and the 'profitation' of these images. The ethical debate concerns issues like the publication of the image itself, the dignity of Alan Kurdi, the privacy of his family, the use of this image rather than others documenting migration, and the use of social media platforms for circulation.

In framing Western society as the object of protection and considering the 'suffering others' as 'hurtful spectacles', media visualities sustain an 'ethnocentric ethics' that preoccupies people's concerns while ensuring the 'suffering others' remain outside their scope of responsibility (Chouliaraki & Stolic 2017, p. 1166). The art director of *L'Obs* did not want to publish the photograph to preserve the child's dignity and argued the image would not 'change the course of history in any way' (Pekel & van de Reijt 2017, p. 19). Others however like the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* justified the publication finding 'beauty in horror.' There was an aesthetic to the image of Alan Kurdi's body that was not found in other images like the photographs of seven young children drowned off the Libyan coast the week before; the images of these children were considered horrific, their clothes and bodies showing the brutal state of the victims (Pekel & van de Reijt, 2017, p. 19). Beyond these ethical dilemmas, the rapid dissemination of Alan Kurdi's image on social media and news platforms drew criticism, some even calling it 'war porn.' This was not Demir's intent. Instead, she wanted to make the world aware of what was happening, telling CNN 'This is the only way I can express the scream of his silent body' (Durham 2018, pp. 240–241). Despite the ethical considerations in using such images; their accessibility, impact, reach and debate makes visual literacy essential and iconography relevant.

## Introduction to iconography

In order to place iconography in the contemporary context, the origins of the theory must be discussed. Through examining its evolution, it is clear how the concept first developed by the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) remains relevant today. Though Pliny the Elder first intellectualised the idea of iconography, the systematization of the concept did not occur until the sixteenth century. There are many contributors to the development of iconography (See GJ Hoogewerff; Johann Joachim Winckelmann; Giovanni Pietro Bellori; Heinrich Wölfflin) however Aby Warburg and his students, including Panofsky, are often considered the founders of modern iconography (D'Allewa, 2005, pp. 20–21).

Rejecting the more traditional and formal approach to interpreting art used by scholars like Heinrich Wölfflin, Warburg argued that art was closely tied to the religion, literature, philosophy, politics, science, and the social life of the period it was created. Supporting this notion, Panofsky found that in pieces of artwork form cannot be separated from content: 'the distribution of colour and lines, light and shades, volumes and planes, however delightful as a visual spectacle, must also be understood as carrying a more-than-visual meaning' (D'Alleva 2005, p. 22). As such, iconography became a method for interpreting the subject matter or meaning in an image rather than just the form (Panofsky, 1970, p. 51) and provided a way for people to understand the meaning embedded in images (D'Alleva, 2005, p. 22).

It is important to note that though iconography began as an approach used in art history, Warburg expanded the scope of the theory to include 'any visual image' regardless of its aesthetic value like press photographs or other forms of visual imagery. This broad classification makes the application of iconography among contemporary images possible (Müller, 2015, p. 249). In his essay *Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art*, Panofsky developed an iconographic approach to understanding the meaning of such images. This approach is composed of three stages of interpretation. Each stage has a procedure and a function (D'Alleva, 2005, p. 22).

The first two levels of interpretation, pre-iconographical description and iconographical analysis focus on content, while the third, iconological interpretation, focuses on perspective. The pre-iconographical description is concerned with the details in an image like people or events or what can be seen in the image. The iconographical analysis aims to understand a fuller account of the image or what can be observed in the image. Here, meaning is derived from outside sources related to social, political or cultural contexts. Iconological interpretation occurs when the structure and content are used collectively to interpret the intrinsic or central meaning of the image; it seeks to determine the meaning of the image (Lenette, 2016).

Much discussion about iconography concentrates on the explanation of external phenomena like images, symbols, events, objects, and figures. However, the meaning of these phenomena is understood by 'a self'. The role of self-understanding in Panofsky's theory is not addressed as a separate premise in each of the three levels of interpretation. Instead, it is an overarching theme in his theory, where 'a self' and 'I' is inherent in the interpretation process. In his discussion of the three levels of meaning, Panofsky uses the term interpretation rather than position or standing. By doing this, he acknowledges the utility of 'the role of the self in the acquisition of meaning from external phenomena' (Shin, 1990, pp. 17–18).

### Pre-iconographical description

To distinguish between subject matter or meaning and form, Panofsky uses the analogy of an acquaintance greeting him on the street by lifting his hat. In his initial visual interaction with the figure, he identifies a configuration of details composed of colours, lines, and volumes. After this initial interaction, the configuration is understood as an object, the gentleman, and as an event, the change in detail by the action of hat-lifting; this represents the first sphere of subject matter or meaning called

factual meaning. This type of meaning refers to the recognition of visible forms and objects using the knowledge gained from practical experience (Panofsky, 1970, p. 51).

The objects and events identified through factual meaning will generate a natural reaction. The way his acquaintance carries out the gesture of hat-lifting provides insight into the acquaintance's state of being. The meanings assigned by these psychological nuances constitute the second sphere of subject matter or meaning called expressional. Expressional meaning is different from factual meaning because it requires empathy and sensitivity, understood and shaped by practical experience. Together these two spheres of subject matter or meaning constitute primary or natural meaning (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 51–52).

This kind of meaning is acquired through the recognition of pure forms like 'certain configurations of line and colour, or certain peculiarly shaped lumps of bronze or stone, as representations of natural objects, such as human beings, animals, plants, houses, tools, and so forth; by identifying their mutual relations as events; and by perceiving such expressional qualities as the mournful character of a pose or gesture, or the homelike and peaceful atmosphere of an interior' (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 53–54). This realm of pure forms, identified as transporters of primary or natural meanings, is called the 'world of artistic motifs.' It is the inventory of these motifs that establishes the pre-iconographical description in an image (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 53–54).

Though this stage of interpretation may seem straightforward, certain criticisms must be addressed. Many art historians contest the idea of the 'innocent eye' required for pre-iconographical description. When looking at an image, the viewer will interpret it based on their values, experiences and cultural and historical knowledge. If a person is raised in the Christian faith, it will be almost impossible for that person to see an image of the Nativity scene at the pre-iconographical level. Instead, the viewer skips the pre-iconographical description and immediately arrives at the iconographical level. Conversely, if viewers of an image have too 'innocent' of an eye, they will have trouble engaging with the image at any of the three iconographic levels. If the viewer sees a picture of a lotus flower, a motif in Egyptian art but is unfamiliar with this symbol, it may only look like a geometrical shape, and the representational aspects of the image would be lost (D'Alleva, 2005, pp. 22–23).

In engaging with these criticisms, it is helpful to look to Roland Barthes who grappled with similar problems in his semiotic theory as applied to visual mediums. His noncoded iconic or denoted message can be compared to pre-iconographical description. The noncoded iconic message is the literal meaning in the image or the informational matter. This message cannot be entirely separated from the highest level of interpretation, the coded iconic message or symbolic message that can be likened to iconological interpretation. The noncoded message is imprinted on the coded iconic message and will always be connected. However, even if the viewer of an image can understand the coded iconic message, they can still perceive the noncoded iconic message (Barthes, 1977, pp. 35–37). If Barthes' idea is applied to iconography, then it becomes possible for pre-iconographical description to be perceived even if the viewer understands an image at a deeper level.

Regarding the idea of too innocent an eye, Barthes' semiotics may again prove helpful. Though it is conceivable to have too innocent an eye, Barthes finds that to



understand the image at its most basic level the viewer must simply be old enough to understand what an image is and the basic items in the image. He argues that most children learn what an image is by the age of four and refers to this kind of understanding as an anthropological knowledge (Barthes, 1977, p. 36). In his Panzani advertisement example in *Image Music Text*, the viewer must only have knowledge of items like a string-bag, a tomato and a packet of pasta (Barthes 1977, p. 36). Again, if this aspect of Barthes' theory is applied to pre-iconological description, it is possible for the viewer to perceive the pre-iconological description.

### Pre-iconographical description of the image of Alan Kurdi

This section offers a pre-iconographical description of the photograph of Alan Kurdi. At this point, it is possible to identify the boy in the photograph as Alan Kurdi. However, by applying the ideas taken from Barthes' semiotics, viewers of the image can still perceive the pre-iconographical description of the image. In this reading of the photograph, the author does this because she has a deeper understanding of the image.

In the image, a young boy lies still on a beach. His body is at the water's edge; sea-water lightly laps his small frame. The position of the boy's body replicates that of a sleeping child, but he is not sleeping, his breathe has gone from him. The first sight of the dead child lying at the edge of the sea like he is asleep 'drives you to the limit of looking and the edge of listening' (Bhabha, 2018).

The whole of the little boy is soaked as he lies on his stomach, arms stretched at his sides. His face is somewhat turned up so the viewer can see part of his left cheek and one of his closed eyes. His red t-shirt, his blue pants and his shoes remain in good condition, left un-tattered by the water that most likely brought him to where he rests on the wet sand. The above discussion is the pre-iconographical description as interpreted by the author guided by her practical experience.

### Iconographical analysis

The recognition that the lifting of a hat signifies a greeting is part of the second level of interpretation. This gesture is specific to Western culture and comes from medieval chivalry. It should not be assumed that another culture will understand this gesture is not only a practical event with expressional meanings but also an indication of politeness. To understand the meaning of the gentleman's gesture, Panofsky needs not only to be familiar with the primary or natural meaning but also with the deeper customs and cultural traditions specific to a civilisation. Likewise, the acquaintance would not have lifted his hat in greeting had he been unaware of the importance of the gesture. The interpretation of the acquaintance's action as a respectful greeting is the second level of meaning called secondary or conventional. Secondary or conventional meaning is different from primary or natural meaning because it is intelligible instead of sensible (Panofsky 1970, p. 52).

The secondary or conventional subject matter is acquired by assigning meaning to the objects or events identified in the first level of interpretation. Like the action of



the man lifting his hat was recognised as a polite gesture, there are key attributes in artworks that help assign more meaning; this is illustrated in the realisation that a figure of a man holding a knife characterises St. Bartholomew or that people sitting at a dinner table in a specific way represents the *Last Supper* (1498). Through this interpretative process, artistic motifs and groupings of artistic motifs or compositions relate to themes or concepts. In this, motifs identified as transporters of a secondary or conventional meaning are called images and groupings of images are called *invenzioni* by ancient art theorists. *Invenzioni* refers to artistic devices that carry meaning. More contemporary theorists like Panofsky call them stories and allegories (Panofsky, 1970, p. 54).

The recognition of these images, stories, and allegories is often classified under iconography. The argument that iconography is concerned with the subject matter rather than form refers to the realm of the secondary or conventional subject matter. Here, the themes and concepts in images are represented as stories or allegories and not merely by primary or natural subject matter. From the perspective of Wölfflin, formal analysis primarily concerns motifs and the groupings of motifs or compositions. In a strict interpretation, expressions like man, horse or even phrases like the admirable clarification of the joints in the human body would need to be avoided. An accurate iconographical analysis assumes an accurate understanding of the motifs. In the case of St. Bartholomew, the knife enables the correct identification, but if the knife was replaced with another object, the figure is no longer St. Bartholomew. It is essential to point out that the statement, this figure is an image of St. Bartholomew, infers the artist's conscious intent to portray St. Bartholomew. The expressional qualities, however, can be unintentional (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 54–55).

### Iconographical analysis of the image of Alan Kurdi

This part of the article provides an iconographical analysis of the image of Alan Kurdi. Here, the author uses more than practical experience and looks at sources to help contextualise the social, political or cultural conditions in which the photograph was taken. By investigating the photograph using outside sources, the next level of meaning can be understood.

The boy in the photograph is a Syrian Kurdish child named Alan Kurdi. He was shipwrecked along the Turkish coast with his mother and brother in 2015. They were attempting to enter the EU; their final destination was to be Canada where his father lived. Like many other Syrian Kurdish refugees in Turkey, two things were clear: The United Nations (UN) would not be granting them refugee status and the Turkish government would not be issuing them Turkish visas (Bhabha, 2018). They entered the black hole in the migration crisis that many fell into, suspended in eternal limbo.

Like Alan and his family, there are presently 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons in the world. 25.9 million are classified as refugees, half of which are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2019). Alan Kurdi's image has become a symbol of the broader European migration and the refugee crisis. Despite the mass attention given to the image, it can be argued the photograph itself did not change the discourses about the refugee

crisis but instead became a part of already established discourses (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, p. 4048).

The image is comparable to images of children in other humanitarian crises like Kevin Carter's photograph of a vulture stalking a starving Sudanese child (1993), and the Vietnam War image of Phan Thi Kim Phúc photographed in the middle of a napalm attack (1973) (Bozdag & Smets, 2017, pp. 4046–4047). It is also likened to Julia Le Duc's photograph of 23-month-old Valeria drown with her father while attempting to cross the Rio Grande to seek asylum in the US (2019). The depiction of the lifeless body of Alan Kurdi has a similar iconic presence, located in a crisis marked by the mass movement of displaced people, 'walking or waiting at detention centres or to watery graves' (Bhabha, 2018).

### Iconological interpretation

At this stage, the process of interpretation enters the third level. Here, the action of Panofsky's acquaintance can reveal the full makeup of his personality. His personality is informed by the period in which he lives, his gender, nationality, education, social, and life experiences as well as his surroundings and personal worldviews. Though these factors cannot be determined through the single act of a polite greeting, they can be discerned by compiling large sums of comparable observations and interpreting them with general information about his gender, class, period, and educational background. The qualities revealed from this inquiry are inherent in each of his actions and in turn, every action can be understood according to these qualities. This kind of meaning is called intrinsic meaning or content (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 52–53). This level of interpretation is considered an underlying principle that unifies and explains the visible event and its intelligible meaning as well as determines the form wherein the visible event is shaped (Panofsky, 1970, p. 53).

This type of meaning is acquired by identifying the underlying principles that convey the attitude of a period, a class, a nation, a religion or philosophical persuasion. Compositional methods and iconographical importance establish these principles. To illustrate this argument, Panofsky points to a modification in the traditional Nativity scene in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The traditional Nativity scene has the Virgin Mary reclining in bed or on a couch, but this was often replaced with the Virgin Mary kneeling before Baby Jesus in adoration; this illustrates a new emotional attitude specific to the late stages of the Middle Ages. A comprehensive interpretation may find technical procedures distinctive to a specific country, period or artists like Michelangelo's predilection to use stone rather than bronze in his sculptures (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 55–56).

The understanding of pure forms, motifs, images, stories, and allegories as indicators of principles is called symbolical value. To limit the interpretation of Leonardo da Vinci's famous fresco showing a group of people sitting at the dinner table and that group of people signifying the *Last Supper*, the interpretation is confined by the compositional and iconographical elements of the work of art. However, if the Last Supper is understood as a product of Da Vinci's personality, of the Italian High Renaissance or a specific religious perspective, the art becomes an indication of something else, and

the interpretation of its compositional and iconological elements become unique elements of this something else. This understanding of symbolic values is referred to as iconology rather than iconography (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 56–57).

'Graphy' is a suffix that originates from the Greek verb *graphein*, which translates as, to write, inferring a descriptive or statistical approach to a process. In this, iconography is a description and categorisation of images in the same way ethnography is a description and classification of human ethnicities. It can be considered an axillary study that informs when and where specific motifs envisioned specific themes. For instance, it makes clear when and where Christ was dressed in a loincloth or when and where he was placed on the Cross. From this, iconography helps establish dates, origins, and authenticity as well as serving as the required basis for additional interpretation. Iconography does not arrive at this interpretation alone. It may collect and classify evidence but does not automatically investigate the origins or significance of this evidence; the interaction between different kinds, the persuasions of theological, philosophical or political ideas or the objectives and leanings of artists and patrons. In this, iconography only considers partial aspects of the intrinsic content (Panofsky, 1970, p. 57).

Because of the restrictions on the term iconography, Panofsky proposes using the word iconology when iconography is combined with other methods to understand the meaning of a work of art. Like the suffix 'graphy', 'logy' means thought or reason, thus denoting something interpretative. Iconology then becomes 'iconography turned interpretative'. Here, iconography is an interpretive approach that results from synthesis instead of analysis. Like the precise identification of motifs is required for a correct iconographical analysis, the precise analysis of images, stories, and allegories is the precondition for a correct iconological interpretation. The exception to this being when the secondary or conventional subject matter is removed, and a direct transition from motifs to content occurs (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 57–58).

### Iconological interpretation of the image of Alan Kurdi

Here, the final level of interpretation is presented, the iconological interpretation. In this stage, the intrinsic meaning of the image becomes clear. On the European migration crisis, Homi K Bhabha argues, 'a refugee's journey constitutes a reimagining of Europe's geographic space' (2018). The photograph of Alan is a death amid a crisis defined by mass movement and detention, a crisis with complex historical ironies. The 'camera mortise' have framed the crisis a lone lifeless child, absent from the violent and complicit world that surrounds him, distant from the bureaucracy of Brussels and the savageries of war like those in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The image is 'empty of wars lost in pursuit of lost causes whether they are weapons of mass destruction or weapons of mythic destruction; empty of wars for oil and global sovereignty; empty of the moral responsibility of reconstruction and resettlement; empty of tyranny of the countries that have killed their citizens and displaced them and destroyed their cities' (Bhabha, 2018). Alan Kurdi's tragic death represents the refugee's journey and reimagines Europe's geographical space. The viral global circulation of the image became part of a virtual society that reimagines Alan's own global journey (Bhabha, 2018).

## Accuracy in interpretation

Though iconography offers steps and procedures for understanding images, people can interpret images differently and, at times, misunderstand the intended meaning. The theory does, however, try to account for such instances and offers recommendations to help viewers discern these meanings. Panofsky discusses these recommendations concerning each of the three levels of interpretation.

Being limited by the sphere of motifs, reaching an interpretation of the pre-iconographical description of an image may seem simple. The objects and events (represented by lines, colours, and volumes) that make up the realm of motifs are identified through practical experience. Most people can recognise the form and behaviour of animals, plants and human beings as well as distinguish between gestures representing happiness or anger. It is reasonable, however, to assume that in some circumstances, practical experience is not enough, and people may encounter unfamiliar representations. When these circumstances arise, a person must expand the range of practical experience they have through activities like referring to books or experts (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 58–59).

It is here that another problem arises. Putting aside the fact that the artist is responsible for the recognizability of the objects, events, and expressions represented in a piece of art, a pre-iconographical description cannot be reached by haphazardly applying practical experience to the artwork. While practical experience is enough to reach a pre-iconographical description, it does not guarantee that the intended meaning of an image will be understood (Panofsky, 1970, p. 59).

Though perceiving the qualities of a piece of an artwork happens more or less automatically, understanding the intended meaning in the pre-iconographical description cannot be accomplished without considering its historical positioning. While the basis of the identification of motifs is practical experience, the viewer of a piece of art is really reading what they see based on how the objects and events are represented under different historical circumstances. In this way, practical experience is subjected to a corrective principle called history of style (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 58–60).

Using history of style to help guide how artwork is understood may appear to be a vicious circle. Although it is a circle, it is not a vicious one but an orderly one. Regardless of if the object of interest is a historical or natural phenomenon, individual observations are only considered 'fact' when connected to other corresponding considerations in a way that makes the entire series have meaning. This meaning can be used as a control and applied to the interpretation of new individual observations in the same set of phenomena. However, if this new observation does not fit into the interpretive framework of meaning, and no error is found, the meaning of the series must be reworked to include the new observation. This methodical circle does not only account for the correlation between the interpretation of motifs and the history of style; it also rationalises the relationship between the 'interpretation of images, stories and allegories and the history of types, and to the relationship between the interpretation of intrinsic meanings and the history of cultural symptoms in general' (Panofsky, 1970, p. 61).

Iconographical analysis, engaging with images, stories, and allegories instead of motifs, infers greater familiarity with objects and events, which is acquired through

practical experience. It assumes knowledge of themes and concepts as understood through literary sources. When the observer is unable to recognise the subject of an image, they must become familiar with the content to understand the iconographical meaning. To attain this knowledge, the viewer must become familiar with what the artist would have read or the knowledge the artist would have had. To understand the *Last Supper* as more than a dinner party, the observer must be familiar with the content of the Gospels. Though awareness of specific themes and concepts understood through literary sources is important and enough material for an iconographical analysis, it does not guarantee a proper interpretation. In the same way that it is impossible to find an accurate pre-iconographical description by the indiscriminate application of practical experience, here it is impossible to achieve a reliable iconographical analysis by indiscriminately applying literary knowledge to motifs (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 61–63).

Iconological interpretation requires a more comprehensive knowledge of themes or concepts beyond what is communicated in literary sources. The basic principles that dictate the presentation and motifs as well as the production and interpretation of images, stories, and allegories that assign meaning to the formal structure and technical procedures used, cannot be understood through an individual text like John 13:21 corresponds to the iconography of the *Last Supper*. To understand these basic principles, synthetic intuition is required. Like pre-iconographical description and iconographical analysis, iconological interpretation does not guarantee an understanding of the intended meaning. In this, the observer must compare the understood intrinsic meaning to other established documents that bear witness to ‘the political, poetical, religious, philosophical, and social tendencies of the personality, period or country under investigation’ (Panofsky, 1970, pp. 64–65).

## Conclusion

Globalisation and advances in technology have transformed the way people communicate, interact and understand their daily realities. People are no longer confined to their environments but are now engaged with a global one. The rapid dissemination of information and images by advertisers, mass media, governments and social media makes visual literacy important. Iconography is an approach that helps people navigate their visual world and understand the visual lexicon in the images they encounter. In this article, iconography is discussed in conjunction with the practical application of the theory to a contemporary image. The image used is the photograph of Alan Kurdi taken 2 September 2015 by Nilüfer Demir.

The concept of iconography was established by Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) but the concept itself was not systematized until the sixteenth century. While there are many contributors to iconography, Aby Warburg and his students are considered the founding fathers of contemporary iconography. Panofsky was one of those students. Iconography was founded in art history; however, Warburg expanded the theory to include any visual image, including press images like that of Alan Kurdi.

Panofsky’s iconography has three stages, each with a unique purpose and strategy. The first, pre-iconographical description, identifies the details or what can be seen in

an image like people or events. In the image of Alan Kurdi, this includes details like his clothes, the position of his body or the location of where he lies. The second is the iconographical analysis. In this phase, a fuller account of the image is attained through the analysis of outside sources associated with the social, political or culture of the period the image was created. At this stage, the viewer understands information like that the boy lying on the beach is Alan Kurdi, his background and the European migration crisis. The third level of iconography, iconological interpretation, considers the intrinsic meaning of an image. This stage of interpretation looks deeper at Alan Kurdi's journey and the broader underlying problems that led to his journey as well as his deeper real-life and symbolic connection to the European migration crisis. As illustrated in this article, iconography can be used as a tool for visual literacy. This approach helps scholars understand specific visual phenomena and offers a consistent approach for studying large sets of visual data as well as helping people understand the bombardment of images, they face daily.

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