

Applying Iconology

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Young Woman at a Mirror, Meiffren Conte,
Seventeenth Century, Oil Painting, France

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Though not much is known about the work, Young Woman at a Mirror, the composition, objects, and figures give the impression that something should be interpreted. This beautiful mid 17th century oil painting is attributed to the French painter, Meiffren Conte. The composition of the piece revolves around a red-haired maiden looking heavenward, and the objects she has around her. These objects include a golden mirror, a silver pitcher, and a pearl necklace, which are all piled onto a beautifully woven carpet that adorns the table over which the maiden is leaning. The whole background consist of a muddled black which makes the overall color scheme quite dark; this dramatic color scheme or chiaroscuro, is reminiscent of Caravaggio. When looking at the details it is important to notice that the image actually gets clearer as you step away, which recalls the style of Diego Velazquez. An interesting aspect of this work is the different ways it has been interpreted and what historians have believed to be the intrinsic meaning of the work. Therefore I will explore the possible meaning or meanings of this work and what the audience is supposed to understand about it. To do this, the German art historian, Erwin Panofsky's method of iconology will be used to break down Conte's work. By interpreting Conte's piece through this three-part method, I will attempt to

reach an intrinsic meaning for Young Woman at a Mirror and discuss how useful this method actually is for this work, and the problems that arise.

Erwin Panofsky worked most of his life in the United States during the 20th century; his major belief was that art should be an intellectual endeavor. Thus works that had hidden symbols and clues leading to a greater meaning were his idea of a work of art. Panofsky believed that viewers of art should look for the symbols or motifs within, break these symbols down, and then discover an overall meaning of these symbols and their place in the work. This initial method is known as iconography which concerns itself more with subject matter and meaning rather than form. Iconography was a preexisting branch of art history that Panofsky employed for the first two parts of his iconographic method. Iconology, in the words of Panofsky, “is ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion- unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work”(Panofsky 7). This is the third step of the method which requires the analyzer to read and look at the political and social world of the time period in which the piece was created. This is the third step of the iconographic method it is necessary to read and look at the political and social works of the time period in which the piece was created. Then the information obtained must be compared to your original reading of the work to see if it makes sense in the proper historical context. Once these components are analytically compared an intrinsic meaning can be found which is, “ a unifying principle which underlies and explains both the visible event and its intelligible significance”(Panofsky

5). By putting Conte's piece through the iconographic method, the intelligible significance of this piece will become clear.

To begin applying Panofsky's method to Young Woman at a Mirror it starts with interpreting the first of the three levels of meaning in a work of art. This first step is the pre-iconographic stage where objects in the work are recognized for their primary, factual or natural meaning (Hasenmueller 289). This is done by "simply identifying certain visible forms with certain objects known to me from practical experience" (Panofsky 3). Thus this stage is simply recognizing the subject matter in Conte's piece: a young woman looking upward who is taking off her earrings, a golden mirror, a silver pitcher, and a beautiful tapestry. Having identified the pure forms within the work this step not only involves the natural qualities of the subject matter, but the expressional qualities. When looking at the woman it is understood that she is distressed in some way, her expression is not of joy it seems to be of wonder, thought, and possibly self-reflection. It can also be inferred that she must be taking off her jewelry for a reason, this reason will be analyzed further in the steps to come.

Next is the iconographic stage, which is the "intellectual interpretation of conventional subject matter"(Hasenmueller 290). In this stage we "must not only be familiar with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization"(Panofsky 4). Thus we are relating the combination of artistic motifs to greater themes and concepts. First, the silver pitcher, it should not be looked at as if it was timeless, it must be analyzed in terms of

what the pitcher must have meant in 17th century Europe. France during this time was known for its beautiful silver and King Louis XIV had vast quantities of silver furniture; King Louis is also known for his disastrous foreign policies which led to a collection of silver all around France above a certain poundage to be melted down to help pay the massive debts to his armies (Buckland 271). Because of this happening not till 1680, that event would not have influenced this work. But the importance and value of silver in this time is still an important factor. Panofsky not only believed in analyzing the work and its historical context, but the intention behind the work as well. This includes a background of the artist, and the social and cultural makeup of the patron who commissioned it (Moxey 269). Therefore after looking into Conte, his style and his previous works, information can be discovered that would aid in this second step. The majority of Conte's work is still lifes which all have similar compositions to Young Woman at a Mirror. Most of these works include vases with very interesting handles, one of Conte's favorite things to paint (Buckland 275). "His still life paintings often include silver dating from much earlier than the mid 17th century"(Buckland 275), thus this silver pitcher seems to have more meaning to the artist, than being representative of a hidden meaning. But placing his work in 17th century Europe, it can be concluded that it was lavish furniture that would require some wealth.

Next we look at the golden mirror, reflecting only the darkness that consumes the background. Mirrors were sometimes used in Baroque paintings to show the ability of three dimensionality in painting, but because this mirror reflects nothing, this is not the

case. Mirrors are timeless in the sense that they represent vanity, and the obsession with one's own physical appearance. When looking at the overturned empty pitcher and the mirror together, it can be inferred that these could both be objects representing vanity. A beautiful silver pitcher was also known to symbolize the emptiness of earthly possessions, and then paired with the vain motif of a mirror, these two fit well together.

The extravagant tapestry and expensive pearls and earrings all seem to encase this display of wealth and therefore shows the evils of vanity. Taking this into account, the woman looking heavenward and casting off her jewelry must be lastly iconographically interpreted. Thus this nicely flows into the woman looking what seems to be heavenward and casting off her jewelry. During this time period of intense religious scrutiny under the Catholic Church biblical figures had certain ways they were to be portrayed. The Repentant Mary Magdalen was usually shown looking heavenward, crying, in a submissive position, usually wearing or just had taken off lavish jewelry. Especially when looking at other paintings of the repentant Magdalen, it is hard to not to assume the woman in "Young Woman at a Mirror" is representing the biblical woman. During this stage of iconography it is discovered that symbols of vanity litter the composition, and the probable identity of the figure is Repentant Mary Magdalen. Therefore an accurate interpretation so far would be that the work is representative of the importance of modesty, and the emptiness one will soon come to find with being vain and finding too much importance in worldly possessions.

The last step is Panofsky's iconology, which he said was an iconographic interpretation

in a deeper sense or even an iconographical synthesis (Panofsky 14). This constitutes the world of symbolic values. Where already having dealt with the world of stories (Mary Magdalen) and artistic motifs. Conte was working during the Counter Reformation where religious imagery was closely watched, thus it is not hard to understand why most of Conte's work were still lifes. The Council of Trent in late seventeenth century laid out rules for religious imagery, and Francesco Pacheco published Arte de la Pintura which also set out major guidelines on how saints and biblical figures should be portrayed in art. Conte seems to get around these this by not recognizing the woman as Mary Magdalen in the title, though the cues for her are very significant. Religious works of art during this time were mainly done to teach the bible to the illiterate, to glorify the saints, and to enhance or inspire prayer, worship and piety. Therefor Conte show a Biblical figure who casts off her objects of vanity, and looks heavenward to inspire people to do the same. Conte was able to create an inspiring religious work in his own manner, showing the independent and creative nature of this artist. Thus in this piece I believe he was showing the biblical figure who casts off her objects of vanity, and looks heaven ward to inspire people to do the same. By understanding the historical context a proper analyzation can be found.

Though Panofsky's goal was to reach an Archimedean point, which was where one could build a systematic interpretation of the arts or in other words a set of principles that can be used to analyze and interpret art of all ages (Moxey 266). Panofsky's method only works for certain types of art and he admits, "unless we deal with such works of art in

which the whole sphere of secondary of conventional subject matter is eliminated and a direct transition from motifs to content is striven for, as is the case with European landscape painting, still-life and genre”(Panofsky 8). Other more contemporary styles wouldn’t work as well such as abstractionism. Conte was known as a famous French still-life painter, though it seems this work’s genre could go either way with its allegorical significance and Biblical references. Another issue with Panofsky’s method is he never seems to address the life of a piece after it is created, how is an accurate social and historical contextual reading done if one doesn’t know how the public actually received the piece? Nonetheless, Young Woman at a Mirror shows a possible Biblical figure rejecting the vanities of life in the importance of modesty and piety for the purpose of inspiring the viewer to do the same.

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