

# SYMBOLS OF TIME IN THE HISTORY OF ART



BREPOLS

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# Symbols of Time in the History of Art: Introduction

Christian Heck and Kristen Lippincott

The essays brought together in this volume represent the majority of the papers presented in the section entitled 'Symbols of Time' at the Thirtieth International Congress of the History of Art (CIHA).<sup>1</sup> The premise of the section was that it was impossible to embark upon an art historical examination of the theme of Time without addressing issues relating to the symbolic representations of Time and the visual language that artists have used to depict their thoughts, assumptions and, indeed, dreams about the subject. It was also felt that when considering specific examples, it was essential to place them within the cultural and historical context in and for which they were created. The papers delivered represented a wide range of perspectives. For Western art, the subjects considered spanned periods from antiquity to the modern day. There were also studies based on recent research into continental African art, Islamic architecture and Chinese, Japanese and Korean painting. The breadth of this collection illustrates the diversity of the visual languages used in these works and, in doing so, highlights one of the central issues of the conference itself – the exploration of those temporal themes in the history of art that lie well beyond the scope of mere iconography.

If one accepts that, by their very nature, symbols are attached to a specific context, the history of their presence in works of art can be used to demonstrate lines of transmission, evidence of mutation and adaptations, and even complete ruptures within a tradition.

## A typology of symbols

The essays in this volume do not pretend to address the whole history of time-related symbols, the bibliography of which is already considerable.<sup>2</sup> But it seems worth trying to define a basic typology of these symbols in order to

help understand their different functions. In Western art, for example, one could identify the following categories:

- Allegorical figures of Time, such as Chronos, Aion, Kaitos, the Ouroboros and Father Time
- Symbols relating to the measurement of time, such as personifications or abstractions relating to the calendar, zodiac, seasons, months, etc.
- Symbols used to express the passage of time in an irreversible, but neutral way – such as the hour-glass, clock, watch, the cycle of the seasons, etc.
- Symbols representing the passage of time in terms of its consequences on inanimate objects. This would include objects such as the extinguished candle, the architectural ruin, etc. The threat of temporal consequence is embodied in the well-known motif of the iridescent soap bubble or the water droplet
- The consequences of the passage of time upon animate objects – evidenced by the verities of aging, decay and death – is captured by images of wilting flowers and rotting fruits, and the insects that their disintegration attracts; by the corrupted remains of human and animals being eaten by worms, serpents and toads; by the motif of the human skull; and by numerous other images that appear repeatedly in the so-called *Vanitas* painting, and as an integral part of many funerary sculptures
- Allegorical themes drawn from the real or imagined effects of the passage of time on the *status quo*, such as the symbolic visual language connected to the topoi of the Ages of Man, the Wheel of Fortune, the Fountain of Youth, and so on
- The large body of images derived from musings about other temporal states, such as mythical pasts or futures; the different

ages of the world; parallel dimensions; time travel; and philosophical or political utopias, whether they are humanist or totalitarian by design.<sup>3</sup>

### Iconography and modes of representation

The issue of modes of representation cannot be excluded from this examination of temporal iconography. To take one example: in his study of the paintings of a number of early Flemish artists, and of Rogier van der Weyden in particular, Alfred Acres examines the extent to which a number of forms and objects in these works – which many art historians would more-or-less dismiss as ‘evocative details’ – actually appear to carry huge symbolic weight. They serve as temporal signs, indicating the existence of a past and a future that exists beyond the boundaries of the picture plane. These discrete and inanimate traces of change do not constitute an iconographic tool *per se*, but they create a frame of reference which encourages the observer to compare these pictorial allusions with the temporal elements encountered in real life.

In his study, Jack M. Greenstein shows how certain pictorial formulae that are used to express the temporal aspects that underpin the apparent verisimilitude of Renaissance portraiture have been adapted according to the function of the portrait itself. Some portraits are intended to be a descriptive likeness, which corresponds to the specific form of a person’s face at a certain moment in his or her life; others reveal the essence of a person’s character through an underlying, physiognomic structure; and still others capture the vibrancy of a living being, animated by movement and expression.

Continuing with the theme of differentiation, Sabine Blumenröder explores how Mantegna’s use of grisaille unites a specific painterly device with temporal content. In his paintings, Mantegna regularly limits his use of grisaille to those subjects taken from the distant past, such as figures from ancient history or the Old Testament. Although partially based on contemporary practice, Mantegna seems to

have been the first painter to have used this device in order to make two points: first, to tie his own work to the canon of the lost paintings of classical antiquity and, second, as a self-conscious allusion to his personal role in the on-going *paragone* between painting and sculpture.

One issue that falls outside the scope of the papers in this volume is extent to which the very process of looking itself can be considered as a determining factor in the temporal significance of a work of art. There are numerous issues surrounding the problems of representing a continuous narrative<sup>4</sup> or the ‘itinerary of the eye’ as Bernard Lamblin has called it.<sup>5</sup> Another topic could have been how our temporal experiences of a work of art are conditioned by its format. For example, there are considerable differences between experiencing an antique *volumen*, where the reader is led towards discovery by unrolling (in an analogous but not identical manner to the Chinese handscroll) and the *codex*, where images are presented in their entirety but are isolated from one another and placed in sequence.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, there is the division of elements within an ensemble, where the different pictorial fields are not simultaneously visible, such as on faceted vases; or in compartmentalised retables, where the various openings are used to demonstrate the successive phases of the liturgical year; or the decorative murals, where the programme extends beyond the parameters of a single room or chapel. One’s experience of these works involves an extremely complex interaction amongst the viewer, the objects, the space, and at least three different kinds of time. One might consider, for example, the iconographic programme of the fifteenth-century decoration of the Chapel of the Consistory of the Papal Palace in Avignon. Here, the sequence of scenes from the *Lives of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist* encircle those of Christ’s incarnation in such a way that they cannot be understood by any other means than by the real entry of the faithful into the space of the chapel.<sup>7</sup> And, as one last example, one is reminded of Wölfflin’s observation that the perception of a work of art depends heavily on how its various elements have been set into a composition.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, how one ‘reads’ a composition

depends on a wide range of cultural pre-conditionings. For example, those who read from left-to-right tend to let their eyes fall on the left side of the painting first; right-to-left readers favour the right side.

### **Conceptions of time and the theory of history**

Beyond the more obvious iconographic themes and details, there is also the complex issue of how a work of art can be seen simultaneously as an object that may depict certain aspects of 'the ephemeral' but, nevertheless, still alludes to the possibility of 'the eternal'. In some cases, the iconography itself underscores this ambiguity. One senses 'the eternal' in depictions of cyclical time – calendrical programmes, representations of the seasons and so on – but the underlying premise of this unending sequence is based on the understanding that 'eternity' is composed of a series of ephemeral states of being. In other cases, the images are used to depict a linear narrative and are made up of events that proceed from a definite beginning and pass through a series of specific steps before arriving at an absolute end. But, once this narrative becomes enshrined in history – or, for that matter, within a work of art – the sequence of events become transformed into a very different kind of eternal verity.

Indeed, one is tempted to ask whether it is possible to discern other temporal traits in a work of art, such as:

- immutability and the allusion towards some kind of permanence that transcends the effects of time or something that is so unchanging that it exists in a non-historical state;
- a theology of time – such as the Christian conception of teleological time and of God's pre-ordained plan which is revealed in the rationality of events leading to man's final redemption with the Second Coming of Christ;
- a philosophy of history based on the theme of human progress through the centuries.

Or, one might consider the ways in which art integrates symbols inherited from previous

ages, but adapts them to serve the needs of a new cultural context.

In the West, one of the central questions regarding perceptions of time is how the Aristotelian concept of the eternity of the universe meshes with those Christian doctrines, developed in late antiquity, relating to typology – that fundamental principle of Christian exegesis which presents the past, the present and the future as parallel universes, with events in one time frame interpreted as analogues to events in another.

The issue of radical mutations of temporal concepts has been examined in the essay by Philippe Junod. He questions what effect the economic, political and social upheavals of the nineteenth century had on the iconography of Time itself. When considered against the backdrop of a general crisis in the language of pictorial allusion in other areas, it is interesting to note that, far from being undermined or destroyed, the symbols used to depict aspects of Time were actually revitalised during the period and were subtly adapted to promote the new, self-conscious sense of modernity that pervaded the age.

Elsewhere, however, one can sense a kind of emotional hesitation in other parts of the artistic world, where modernity is not embraced as quickly. In her study of the paintings of Eleanor Brickdale, Pamela Gerrish Nunn illustrates the extent to which the public reception of Brickdale's work reflects a change in attitude. With the dawn of the new century, there is a perceptible shift from a whole-hearted subscription to the nostalgic sentiments embodied in the visual references of pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist painting to a curious kind of cultural amnesia about those values which had been openly shared in the last years of the nineteenth century, but almost completely abandoned by the end of the first year of the twentieth century.

As the twentieth century gathered pace, artists' responses to the issue of temporal iconography become increasingly personalised. Dagmar Motycka Weston analyses Giorgio de Chirico's vision of the world and his interest in archaic notions of cyclical time as a sup-

port for his own, personal critique of rationalism. Ruptures of scale, celebrations of the mystery of deep space counterpoised against the flatness of the picture plane, and special constructs formed by fragmentary and juxtaposed points of view – all these features are brought together as part of de Chirico's visual manifesto against a linear concept of time and the rules of perspective. For de Chirico, the real interest is in a world where temporality is aligned to the world of dreams and memories.

Another issue addressed in the essays is how the relationship between time and symbols is conditioned by an pre-existing literary tradition. Barbara Winston Blackmun explores a series of objects associated with the court of Benin and notes the importance given to the visualisation of the passage of time in figurative pieces that were created by a culture which did not have a written tradition. In Sabine Blumenröder's study of the paintings of Andrea Mantegna, painted histories are seen as being equal to written histories. In the examples presented by Seunghye Sun, however, one needs to understand the world of poetic allusion in order to penetrate the real significance of these works. The pictures on their own are not sufficient.

### The polyvalence of symbols

One of the most interesting aspects of the iconography of time is the polyvalence of symbols used to denote the multivalent aspects of 'Time'. An image, a character or a theme can take on different meanings according to subtle changes in context or even as a response to contact with the volatile influence of jokes and word play. Maia Wellington Gahtan presents a study of the allegorical representations of 'the past' and 'the future' in Italian art of the late sixteenth century. During this period, it became fashionable to construct new images that were based on classical or medieval motifs, but to which a new, contemporary twist had been added – possibly influenced by a new, positivistic conceptions of man's relation to time itself.

Julie Berger Hochstrasser proposes a new reading for a specific group of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes. Side-stepping the more conventional interpretation of these works as mere

*vanitas* images, she focuses on the role of the painter. In creating a work of art – even if its primary theme is the transience of life – the artist is investing time in making something that will live long beyond his or her death. The meaning of the paintings themselves, then, can be seen as operating on two, very distinct levels.

By attaching a number of apparently contradictory levels of meaning to a single symbol, it is often possible to endow it with a new profundity. For example, the common distinction between linear and cyclical time, which may be useful for a rapid classification or elementary conceptualisation of complex ideas, can be blurred in order to introduce a new way of thinking. For Kathleen Enz Finken, the presence of personifications of the seasons in the decoration of the early Christian catacombs, are used not just to signal the cyclical nature of the year, but also to provide man with a visible and comprehensible symbol of the concept of God's gift of universal time in the promise of salvation. This rooting of profound concepts within the apparently commonplace is also discussed in the essay by Wendy Pullan, who explores the conceptions of time that are manifest in the architecture of Mamluk Cairo. Here, precepts of the Last Judgement are skilfully interwoven with ideas about the Garden of Paradise and the voyage of the soul after death – and all are set within the tangible context of a civic monument, which functions as a vital symbolic and decorative component of the city's topography

### Time as a philosophical and sociological construct

As Erwin Panofsky has argued, it is perhaps this bringing together of apparently contrary notions, that endows the symbols of time with their greatest power.<sup>9</sup> Contradiction lies at the heart of almost every philosophical exploration of time. One might recall Alain Boureau's study of how the medieval Christianisation of time is based on 'culmination without end', thus making a narrative element, which is by definition temporary, the basis of perpetual evocation.<sup>10</sup> Or, there is the theological history of Saint Bonaventure, in which time is described as being both a line and a circle simultaneous-

ly. The line of time is the unique unrolling of events in a single direction; and the circle of time is not just a repetitious loop, but a unique circle of emanation and return, making time itself the home of salvation.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there is Nicolas of Cusa's concept of an extreme bipolarity between being and appearance. The participation of appearance within the idea results in a 'positive theory of experience'.<sup>12</sup> As his progression through the time of the finite world does not permit man to rejoin the infinite and eternal, this radical distance saves mankind from a journey without end.

Beyond this, there is also what one might call the 'sociology of time'. Norbert Elias, for example, offers the reminder that time is also a social

construct, which is based on memory and the human capacity to see the total picture of what has been produced separately by the flux of events.<sup>13</sup> Krzysztof Pomian has shown how an investment in the order and the theories of time by societies is, actually, the basis of an agreed history.<sup>14</sup>

In all the papers presented in this volume, the works of art themselves are used as the starting point for discussions about the depiction of time in the visual arts. In providing insights into the genesis, coherence and evolution of symbols of time across a number of specific cultural contexts, these essays provide valuable material for the larger study of the history of ideas.

## NOTES

1. The conference, entitled 'Time: Art History for the Millennium', was held in London, 3-8 September 2000.

2. See, for example, *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by E. Kirschbaum and W. Braunsfels (Freiburg, 1968-76), esp. the entries under 'Aeon', I (1968), col. 85; 'Jahr' and 'Jahrzeiten', II (1970), cols. 363-70; 'Kalendarium', II (1970), cols. 482-89; 'Monate', III (1971), cols. 274-79; 'Uroboros', IV (1972), cols. 408-10; 'Zodiakos', IV (1972), cols. 574-76. Although it is impossible to cite adequate bibliographical references here, the reader might begin by consulting those bibliographies included in B. Lamblin, *Peinture et temps*, Collection d'esthétique, 42 (Paris, 1983); *L'art et le temps. Regards sur la quatrième dimension*, exhibition catalogue, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, ed. by M. Baudson (Brussels, 1984) and K. Lippincott, *The Story of Time*, exhibition catalogue, The National Maritime Museum, London (London, 1999). The other sessions of the Conference that touched upon these topics included section 8 ('The Beginnings of Time') and section 11 on the Apocalypse ('Dangerous Times').

3. See, for example, some of the images in *Utopie. La quête de la société idéale en Occident*, exhibition catalogue, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, ed. by Roland Schaefer and Lyman Tower Sargent (Paris, 2000).

4. See S. Ringbom, 'Some pictorial conventions for the recounting of thoughts and experiences in late medieval art' in *Medieval Ikonography and Narrative. A Symposium*, ed. by F.G. Andersen, E. Nyholm, M. Powell, and F.T. Stubkjaer (Odense, 1980), pp. 38-60.

5. Lamblin (as in n. 2, above), pp. 43-125.

6. See Otto Pächt, *Buchmalerei des Mittelalters. Eine Einführung* (Munich, 1984), pp. 22-24. For an English translation, see *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages*, trans. by K. Davenport (London, 1986), pp. 27-28. See also, I. Illich, *Du visible au visible. Sur l'art de lire de Hugues de Saint-Victor* (Paris, 1991).

7. See C. Heck, 'La Chapelle du Consistoire et les Crucifixions dans la peinture murale avignonnaise du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle: le renouvellement d'un thème d'origine romaine au service de l'affirmation de la légitimité pontificale' in *Genèse et débuts du Grand Schisme d'Occident*, Actes du Colloque international du C.N.R.S., no. 586 (Paris, 1997), pp. 116-25.

8. H. Wöflin, 'Über das Rechts und Links im Bilde' in *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte. Gedrucktes und ungedrucktes* (Basle, 1941), p. 82-90. For the French translation, see *Réflexions sur l'histoire de l'art*, trans. by Rainer Rochlitz (Paris, 1997), pp. 116-25.

9. E. Panofsky, 'Father Time' in *Studies in Iconology. Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Oxford, 1939), pp. 69-93.

10. A. Boureau, *L'écoulement sans fin. Réels et christianisme au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1993).

11. J. Ratzinger, *Die Geschichtstheologie des Heiligen Bonaventura* (Munich, 1959).

12. E. Cassirer, *Individualismus und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927), pp. 10-25.

13. N. Elias, *Über der Zeit. Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie*, Norbert Elias, 2, ed. by M. Schröter (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1984).

14. K. Pomian, *L'ordre du temps* (Paris, 1984).