

PAMELA PATTON

1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

Iconography has been at the center of my research and publications on medieval Iberian art over the past 30 years, and I’ve seen the boundaries and potential of iconographic studies change considerably over that time. My training in the late 1980s and early 90s was extremely traditional: I was taught to think of iconography, and especially the pictorial narratives that I studied for my dissertation and first book (*Pictorial Narrative in the Romanesque Cloister*, 2004), in terms of Weitzmannian model-copy stemmata and presumed textual models. However, coming of age as a scholar in the 90s also enabled me to profit from the disruptive approach to iconographic studies taken by such scholars as Michael Camille, Madeline Caviness, and Keith Moxey, who explored how the meaning of images could be shaped by such factors as folk and oral traditions, space and place, and the variable cultural frameworks of successive medieval viewers. Over time, their ideas transformed the potential I saw in iconographic work, and in my second book (*Art of Estrangement*, 2012) and subsequent scholarship, they played a key role in my investigation of the ways in which artists and patrons deployed visual images to promote community ideologies, proclaim identity, and stake out cultural affiliations and oppositions for their viewers.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

Michael Camille’s *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (1992) sets out cogently his revolutionary vision for iconographic studies; this and his other work encouraged me to think more flexibly about how images made meaning in the Middle Ages. The essays in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *The Post-Colonial Middle Ages* (2001) offered an influential argument for the ways in which postcolonial theory could apply to medieval society and culture, providing an important lens for my understanding of how images could be used to negotiate identity and difference in the Middle Ages. And the many works published by Jerrilyn Dodds, including her articles and exhibition catalogs as well as her *Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Medieval Culture* (2008), co-

authored with María Rosa Menocal and Abigail Krasner Balbale, shaped my thinking about the ways in which the significance of images originating in one cultural context might transform when adopted in other, neighboring ones.

*3. What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

There’s value in mastering the various old-fashioned ways in which a work of art might be approached – for example, one has to be able to differentiate a color choice or compositional detail that derives from stylistic tradition from those drawn from iconographic conventions, and one needs connoisseurial skills to assess the formal and material properties of a work of art. But there’s little to be gained by trying to narrow one’s scholarship to just one methodological focus, whether style, iconography, or even a particular theoretical approach, and doing so risks neglecting other dimensions of a problem that might lead to a better answer for it. I prefer to think of methodology as an array of tools in a toolbox: each research topic raises object- and context-specific questions that will be better answered by some tools than others, and we should use the ones that help us most. There’s no point in trying to drill a hole with a hammer.

*4. Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

As suggested above, I’ve found the poststructuralist and postcolonial turns especially relevant to my iconographic research. Poststructuralism helped me to break open the field’s rigidified assumptions about how iconographic traditions developed and made meaning, while postcolonial theory called attention to the ways in which medieval power relationships and notions of identity could shape the production, presentation, and reception of the works of art I study. More recently, I’ve found critical race studies quite important to my work on skin color and identity in medieval Iberia; here, it highlights the racial and racist dynamics that contributed to the ways in which some images were produced and understood, and that still can shape the ways in which we currently study them.

*5. In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

Poststructuralism and the many other theoretical approaches with which it intersects (feminist theory, reception theory, postcolonial theory, to name a few) effectively created a watershed moment for image studies: they offered an alternative to the formulaic image-text equivalencies once dominant in the field while also making room for more context- and reception-oriented research. Removing the traditional iconographic “rules” in this way does carry some risk, in that it opens space for scholarship that may become over-

ly speculative or subjective. However, if researchers maintain the high evidentiary standards that such work deserves, the resulting scholarship can be both innovative and persuasively grounded. This is a challenge I consider constantly in pursuing my own research.

6. *What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

I can address this best for my own field of medieval art. Modern ideas about how medieval images made meaning has broadened significantly in recent decades. Rather than assuming a stable context in which a medieval image always means the same thing, we now can see meaning as subject to variations produced by the interaction of multiple parties – the artist, the patron or stakeholder(s), and the viewers – and in relation to visual traditions that were often, but not always, fully shared by all of them. Looking at iconography in this way permits a richer sense of how images “mean” because it combines awareness of what the artist and/or patron presumably intended with awareness the meanings to be drawn from it by a potentially diverse group of viewers, under varying conditions. In this model, meaning is not just “conveyed” from a maker to a passive recipient but is also drawn from the work by a viewer who may understand the image in unforeseen ways. All aspects of this interchange tell us something about what the work of art meant within medieval society, and all are worth examining.

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

If one agrees that meaning is determined in part by the viewer’s experience and cultural background, then these must affect which visual aspects of the work they’ll see as significant and how they will interpret them. But ultimately, these visual aspects are what trigger the apprehension of meaning.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

I think we are, in the sense that we’re now more open to considering the viewer’s side of the equation when we assess the meaning of an image. However, I also believe this to be an ongoing process: there’s always more we still don’t know about human experience in the past, and we’ll surely continue learning and revising our views so long as our field exists.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers’ understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

Again, my response relates to the Middle Ages, where images seem strongly to have informed their viewers’ understanding of the world. In the absence of widespread literacy or significant chances to travel, images provided medieval people with one way of mak-

ing sense of the world. They could impart (and revise) core cultural narratives, chart the changes of the seasons, articulate political and social relationships, and envision foreign places and peoples. Such functions are suggested, for example, by widespread medieval traditions of public ruler portraiture, by the propagandistic imagery of western European church portals, and by world maps represented as hosting the so-called “Monstrous Races.” I’m not suggesting that images consistently served as “Bibles of the illiterate,” as they’re sometimes described, but I do believe that they often were used to articulate and reinforce key concepts and values within a shared community.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

Materiality can shape the meaning of a work in important ways, and of course it often bore meaning itself. The expensive pigments of a purple-dyed manuscript or the gems added to a crucifix brought connotations of wealth, authority, and/or global reach to the core iconography of these works; the marks left on an ivory from rubbing or kissing it shed light on its religious and social role. This is why it remains so important to study works of art in physical form, not merely through photographic images, and to train students to recognize what kinds of things the materials of the object can tell them.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

If we grant that meaning is made not just by the creation of a work of art, but by its reception and use by viewers, then understanding how such viewers interacted with it in different times and places necessarily will enrich our sense of that meaning. Examples of such interactions are numerous: the veneration of an icon; the purchase of a pilgrim badge that is then displayed on clothing; the handling of an amulet; the annotations of ownership and other signs of use in a manuscript. In my view, some of the most exciting scholarship under way our field today has to do with this.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

The context within which a work is viewed logically must have an impact on its reception. While at times this may be accidental, there are some cases in which the artist seems to have provisioned or even planned for such phenomenological complexity. An excellent case from my field is Patricia Blessing’s recent treatment the carved stucco designs in the cloister of San Fernando in the monastery of Las Huelgas (“Weaving on the Wall: Architecture and Textiles at the Monastery of Las Huelgas de Burgos,” *Studies in Iconography* 40 [2019]: 137–182). Blessing identifies the large carved roundels of the cloister vault as visual and haptic echoes of the Andalusí silks imported and worn by the monastery’s elite Castilian patrons; she shows how their translation into architectural form activated the liminal potential of the cloister to assert the foundation’s ties to royalty and dynastic power.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

The designation of the form as iconic must involve some human agency, whether it's the transformation of distinctive landscape elements at sites such as Sinai or Montserrat into meaningful visual signs or the representation of the Cross through gesture. Because these are human-made images, I would argue that their significance could be studied using many of the same approaches that scholars use to study meaning in figurative objects.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

Good models for this are abundant in my research field of medieval Iberia, where the cross-cultural and transcultural use of images and objects is common. The most successful work of this kind has been case-specific, pursuing socio-cultural evidence of how a particular transferred image or type of image was likely to have been understood in its new context. Because contexts and viewership in Iberia were so variable, it's sometimes hard to draw conclusions that are broadly applicable beyond the level of case studies: as I've argued, for example, a silk textile sold as a luxury good in Cairo had a quite different connotation when it was used to line a Christian reliquary in León, and still another when it was represented pictorially as the costume of the devil in a fresco at the latter site (“Demons and Diversity in León,” *Medieval Encounters*, 25, nos. 1-2 [2019], 150-179). In such cases, a closely focused study tends to yield more conclusive answers.

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

As a US scholar who publishes mainly in English, I'm acutely aware of this challenge. The first steps are to recognize how tightly language can be tied to cultural paradigms that may not apply well to one's topic, and to recognize when these might steer one's arguments into anachronism or inaccuracy. It's critically important to define one's terms when such language comes into play: for example, if one chooses, as I do, to use the word “race” in the study of the Middle Ages – an era when neither the word itself nor a strict equivalent for it existed – one has to acknowledge what that term means in modern English and which of its dimensions one finds applicable and relevant to a medieval context. Another step is to listen carefully to scholars whose roots and training extend beyond traditional Euro-American discourse, whose perspectives can challenge and revise the cultural assumptions European or North American may bring to their research.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

As a medievalist, I'd like to see scholars continue to broaden the geographical and cultural parameters of iconographic studies, including not only the lands directly contiguous to European and Byzantine zones but also the more far-flung areas with which these connected indirectly through trade, such as west Africa or central and east Asia along the Silk Routes. It's increasingly clear that these contacts affected the visual traditions of communities all along their paths, so they are well worth exploring. I also think the time has come to reassess what we have learned and might still learn from certain pioneers of iconographic studies, such as Erwin Panofsky, whose third or "iconological" level of interpretation foreshadowed many of the context- and reception-oriented approaches that researchers use today. It's easy to reject foundational scholarship as outdated or superseded, but it sometimes offers quite relevant insights.

Pamela Patton  
Princeton University  
ppatton@princeton.edu