

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO THE ANCIENT WORLD

A COMPANION TO
ANCIENT
EGYPTIAN ART

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WILEY Blackwell

Contents

Notes on Contributors	ix
Foreword	xiii
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii
List of Abbreviations	xix
List of Illustrations	xxi
List of Plates	xxxi
Chronology of Egyptian Kings	xxxiii
Chronology of Kushite Rulers	xli
Maps	xlvi
1 What Is Art? <i>John Baines</i>	1
PART I Methodological Approaches	23
2 Historiography of Ancient Egyptian Art <i>Diane Bergman</i>	25
3 Style <i>Melinda K. Hartwig</i>	39
4 Connoisseurship <i>Jack A. Josephson</i>	60
5 Iconography and Symbolism <i>Maya Müller</i>	78
6 Semiotics and Hermeneutics <i>Valérie Angenot</i>	98

7	Gender and Sexuality <i>Gay Robins</i>	120
8	Reception and Perception <i>Alexandra Verbovsek</i>	141
9	Representing the Other: Non-Egyptians in Pharaonic Iconography <i>Ann Macy Roth</i>	155
10	Interpreting Ancient Egyptian Material Culture <i>Salima Ikram</i>	175
PART II Materials and Mediums		189
11	Sculpture <i>Melinda K. Hartwig</i>	191
12	Relief <i>Alexandra Woods</i>	219
13	Painting <i>Francesco Tiradritti</i>	249
14	Coffins, Cartonnage, and Sarcophagi <i>Kathlyn M. Cooney</i>	269
15	Luxury Arts <i>Arielle P. Kozloff</i>	293
PART III Concepts in Art		307
16	Ideology and Propaganda <i>Ronald J. Leprohon</i>	309
17	Religion and Ritual <i>Emily Teeter</i>	328
18	Narrative <i>Nadja S. Braun</i>	344
19	The Ordering of the Figure <i>William H. Peck</i>	360
20	Portraiture <i>Betsy M. Bryan</i>	375
PART IV Interconnections with the Larger World		397
21	Egyptian Connections with the Larger World: Greece and Rome <i>Barbara Mendoza</i>	399
22	Egyptian Connections with the Larger World: Ancient Near East <i>Mehmet-Ali Ataç</i>	423

23	The Art and Architecture of Kushite Nubia <i>Peter Lacovara</i>	447
PART V Reception of Ancient Egyptian Art in the Modern World		463
24	<i>Egyptomania</i> : Fascination for Egypt and Its Expression in the Modern World <i>Jean-Marcel Humbert</i>	465
PART VI Technology and Interpretation		483
25	Interpretation <i>Nigel Strudwick</i>	485
26	Technology <i>Richard Newman</i>	504
27	Conservation of Egyptian Objects: A Review of Current Practices in the Field and in Museum Settings <i>Susanne Gänsicke</i>	522
	Index	545

CHAPTER 5

Iconography and Symbolism

Maya Müller

Introduction: What Is Iconography?

Iconography may be considered the foremost and leading method of art historical research in recent times. In Egyptological literature, very modest beginnings can be observed around 1910, followed by a noticeable improvement in the 1930s. Important progress began in the 1960s when fresh impetus occurred with the technological progress of the documentation of monuments. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the effectiveness of iconography was enhanced by combining it with other methods, such as semiotics, statistics, or linguistics.

The term “iconography” designates the totality of images; essentially the entire corpus of works of fine and applied arts which are preserved from ancient Egypt. Also, iconography is a modern approach to ancient art that deals with the themes and motifs on all types of works that must be identified, classified, and interpreted. The term thus refers to the contents of a picture, as opposed to its form, style, or design (Müller 1993, 2002; Eggler et al. 2006). The term “iconology” is closely related to iconography, even if its use is largely restricted to the Anglo-Saxon Warburg-School of European art history (Eberlein 2008). Iconology refers to elucidating the theme of a picture through the discovery of its cultural, social, and historical background (van Straten 1994). Iconology has largely remained ignored in Egyptology to this day. Only in recent years have authors used the term in titles or prefaces of publications, assuming that iconology refers to a second, higher level of interpretation. The term “symbolism” is rarely used in Egyptology (Wilkinson 2001). Nonetheless, the omnipresence of symbols in Egyptian art is of course well known and taken into account by researchers. In theoretical discussion, it is thought that art can be regarded as a system of symbols (Eggler et al. (2006), 3). However, there is some Egyptological discussion about the term “semiotics,” the theory of signs, which is used almost synonymously with the term “symbol.”

According to the semiotic approach, a work of art can be understood as a system of signs (Reiche 2006).

So much for a first orientation on the subject. More elaborate definitions of iconography, iconology, and symbolism will be presented in the section Theoretical Reflection on Iconography, Iconology, and Symbolism below. The theme of methodology and terminology first appeared around 1990, and was a latecomer to Egyptology.

Since iconography is a wide field, how does one explore it, technically speaking? To begin with, the modern beholder should be aware of how visual information is organized in a picture. The main parameters can be defined as follows (Müller 2002):

- Identifying carrier objects. Since every picture needs a medium on which to materialize, the first step is to identify it. There are two kinds of carrier objects: either buildings or mobile objects, and both categories comprise a multitude of types. Characteristically, buildings contain a large series of pictures, and this is even the case for some types of mobile objects, such as painted coffins or illustrated papyri.
- Identifying the elements of a picture. Among authors, there is a general consensus that human and animal figures, things, inscriptions, and their parts are the basic elements; however, designations and definitions may differ.
- Identifying the scenes, i.e. the actions carried out by the main figures. Actions normally are arranged in continuous sequences on tomb and temple walls or on illustrated papyri, etc., and their protagonists are often surrounded by subsidiary figures and objects. Consequently, specialists must begin by subdividing rows of figures or scenes into meaningful units, because they are organized like hieroglyphic script that is a continuous flow of signs not divided into words.
- Defining the relative position of a scene. On complex media, such as the rooms of a temple, the position of a scene in relation to its context, i.e. the neighboring or more distant scenes, must be defined. The aim is to recognize correspondences between scenes situated on different parts of the medium.
- Identifying the types of inscription on a picture, such as names and titles, offering formulas, or hymns.
- Stating the identity (social standing and occupation) of the figures represented.
- Identifying the ritualistic, mythological, or profane themes or cycles to which a single picture or a sequence of scenes may belong.

When choosing a research subject, the choices are extremely manifold, and can range from a single type of figure, such as the god Horakhty (Berteaux 2005), the pharaoh motif on scarabs (Wiese 1990), to the relief program of a whole temple (Arnold 1962). Ideally, researchers try to completely document a chosen subject, comprising all instances and not just a statistically relevant quantity. Only in recent years have electronic databases been used by individual scholars as the preferred instrument for storing and searching all kinds of documents. Interestingly, the traditional methods of iconographic work have not become obsolete in the course of time, but were modified periodically, as researchers accepted the challenge of seeing pictures from continually new perspectives. Methodically, iconography is most closely related to archaeology and to the analysis of style, to a degree that sometimes forbids attributing a publication clearly to the one specific discipline.

In the last three or four decades, we have been confronted with an increasing flood of publications in the field of iconography. However, there are no manuals containing the totality, or even the important parts, of the extant material owing to the immense amount of pictorial production in ancient Egypt. Nor do we have manuals on teaching methods for iconographical research for students, up to now. This lack is rooted in the fact that, at universities, chairs in the history of Egyptian art are almost non-existent to this day. For this reason, there is no wide-ranging and continuous teaching tradition that could be the foundation for the development of systematic guides.

First Phase of Iconographical Research: Emergence (ca. 1900–1950)

Iconographical research cannot begin until some basic requirements are fulfilled. First of all, monuments must be discovered and excavated. A critical mass of pictures of many types and of all periods must be known. This was the case around 1910 when royal relief sculpture and statues of the Old and Middle Kingdoms had been excavated in the sun temples and pyramid complexes of Dynasty 5 at Abusir (1898–1908), and the pyramid complex of Senwosret I at Lisht (1895). The second basic requirement concerns the techniques of documentation and printing. The chief technique of documenting the decorated walls of temples and tombs was graphic copying. The great pioneers of copying in meticulous accordance with the originals were Norman de Garis Davies and his wife Nina who worked for decades for the Egypt Exploration Fund's Archaeological Survey, beginning in 1898 (Strudwick n.d.). In 1907, Norman de Garis Davies became the head of the graphic section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's expedition to Egypt. That same year he worked with J.H. Breasted who founded, in 1924, the equally important Epigraphic Survey of the Chicago Oriental Institute. As vital as the copying and subsequent publishing of miles of reliefs was the rendering of photographs in books in good quality and at a reasonable price. The invention of the *heliogravure*, in the late nineteenth century, was the start of a new era of publishing on art themes, as witnessed by von Bissing's monumental volumes *Denkmäler ägyptischer Skulptur* (von Bissing 1906–1914).

In the initial phase of iconography, there was no need for methodological reflection. The well-developed method used in the history of Christian medieval art could be applied to different fields. Early iconographical themes normally focus on the explanation of a single motif or scene, for example the spear of Horus (Schäfer 1904), the blue crown (Steindorff 1917), the duck with reverted head (Hermann 1932), or scenes of hunting in the papyrus thicket (Balcz 1939). The process of introducing iconographical themes into Egyptology can be followed in the journal *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* (ZÄS). This periodical appeared in 1863 and welcomed new subjects of research as proposed by authors in the course of time. Since the late nineteenth century, an article on a stela, statue, or an object of applied art occasionally appeared in the ZÄS, and by the 1930s and 1940s, articles discussing the subject and meaning of a motif or scene became more frequent.

An interesting example is Part III of Georges Foucart's *Etudes Thébaines* (*Theban Studies*), published in 1924 in the *Bulletin of the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo* (BIFAO), bearing the title "The Precursors of the Sun" (Foucart 1924). He explicitly

interpreted the iconography of the New Kingdom Theban necropolis as dominated as he saw it by solar gods and stellar goddesses. The leitmotif is the so-called “Festival of the Valley” (the great procession of Amun-Re, the sun god of Karnak, to the necropolis on the West bank). While explaining pictures on tomb walls and grave goods through parallels in funerary texts, Foucart displayed of his knowledge of Egyptian theology from the Pyramid Texts down to the temples of the Ptolemies. Characteristically for his time, he does not bother to give references identifying the text passages and tomb paintings he mentioned, leaving readers who were less well acquainted with the material in despair.

Second Phase of Iconographical Research: Consolidation (ca. 1950–1980)

A third requirement for essential progress in iconographical work was recognized at the beginning of the 1950s: entire relief cycles, mural paintings, complete corpora of statuettes, or decorated objects of applied art in museum collections, and so on, must be published in order to enable advanced research on their origin, development, and meaning. Important advances in documentary techniques also came at the right time. The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of the Photostat machine for half-tone copies, the reflex camera with autofocus, and color slides. Through the use of these devices, the creation of documentary photos became relatively easy and cheap for those who were not professionals in the field.

Researchers felt ready to tackle more ambitious tasks for the first time. From the 1950s through the 1970s, monographs focusing on a specific type of object in its entirety, or a complete cycle of scenes in relief or painting, were produced. Authors became aware of the importance of reconstructing the archaeological contexts and functions of objects carrying pictures. They also considered the connections between objects, relationships between representation and inscription, and the role of artisans, patrons, and users of works of art. Regrettably, the limited space of this chapter allows only a few examples to be mentioned.

Selim Hassan (1953) assembled and commented on the votive objects found in the sanctuary of Horemakhet at the feet of the great sphinx of Giza. Alliot (1949–1954) followed the course of the sun-god’s cult, in the Ptolemaic temple of Horus at Edfu, by comparing relief scenes and hieroglyphic inscriptions. Slightly later, Derchain (1962) discovered a non-sequential, complex layout of ritual scenes at the Edfu temple, which he termed “temple grammar.” Dieter Arnold (1962) thought of reading the ritual scenes on the inner walls of New Kingdom temples in order to identify the function of the rooms. Others dealt with the iconography of apotropaic wands (Altenmüller 1965), the funerary ritual (Settgast 1963) or the judgment of the dead scenes for officials (Seeber 1976). Important pioneering work was carried out by Hornung and Staehelin (1976) when they analyzed scarabs from a dozen different perspectives and reintegrated results into a holistic image of this peculiar kind of object. They were followed by Claudia Müller-Winkler (1987) who was the first to classify, date, and interpret a large collection of amulets.

At the same time, the first attempts at editing iconographical manuals occurred. The first great pioneering work of this genre, the *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Thebes*

compiled by Berta Porter and Rosalind Moss (1927–1929, second edition 1960–1972), did not mention the term “iconography.” Nevertheless, the two authors, focused for the first time on a complete bibliographical registering of the tombs and temples of Thebes, created *ex nihilo* a consistent terminology and syntax for describing all kinds of scenes and their parts, including a system for placing each scene and inscription on its proper wall, thus establishing the standards in use to this day. Their analytical scheme of describing walls reflects the Egyptian artists’ system of accumulating long rows of figures on a ground line, and, in the case of private tombs, the dominance of large key scenes showing the tomb owner or king over large subsets of anonymous personnel.

Jacques Vandier’s *Manuel d’archéologie égyptienne* (Vandier 1958–78) aimed at presenting, in volume III, a survey of the statuary. Owing to the conventional character of Egyptian art, he had to choose a typological order, restricting the criteria of classification by the number of standard postures, gestures, attributes, and articles of costume and headgear that occurred during all periods. Volumes IV–VI dealt with the profane imagery on the walls of the private tombs from the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms, the so-called “scenes of daily life,” and introduced a typological classification of scenes that followed the hierarchical order of actors, their attitudes and actions. Vandier identified a series of standardized scenes that represented either the occupations and pastimes of the tomb owner and his personnel, or the production of life’s sustenance, such as cattle breeding, agriculture, and transportation by ship.

The third case, the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (*LIMC*) (Ackermann and Gisler 1981–2009) was conceived in the early 1970s. In contrast to individual Egyptological undertakings, this Lexicon was a wide-ranging project of international classical archaeology. As suggested by the title, the Lexicon presents Greek and Roman deities and heroes as individual personalities, arranged by name. It pertains to Egypt in so far as it includes Egyptian deities identified, in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, with classical counterparts such as Isis-Demeter, Horus-Apollo, and Osiris-Dionysus. To this corpus may be added Richard Wilkinson’s succinct iconographical manual *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, even if it is of a more recent date (Wilkinson 2003). Its concept is related to the *LIMC*, by understanding Egyptian deities as mythical personalities. However, owing to their lack of individuality, the sequence, in the book, is a compromise of names and types of physical appearance.

Strangely enough, the term “iconography” went almost unused in Egyptology before the late 1960s as researchers began very slowly to realize what they were doing on the methodological level. It follows, therefore, that none of the above-mentioned manuals discuss the theory or method of iconography.

Third Phase of Iconographical Research: New Horizons (ca. 1980–2010)

From about 1980, iconographic research increased considerably in quantity and quality. Recent electronic catalogs of university libraries and complete digitized editions of

periodicals enable some spot-checks on the extent of iconographical publications. The *Bulletin of the French Archaeological Institute in Cairo* (BIFAO) enables us to observe the use of the term “iconography” through the last 120 years. After a single precursor in 1924, the term appears sporadically from 1965 to 1975, and then, from 1976 onward, it is regularly listed several times a year. Similarly, the Special Collection Catalog of Egyptology at Heidelberg University in Germany retrieves, from titles and abstracts of publications, the keyword “iconography” sporadically in the 1960s, and increasingly thereon from the 1970s. In 2008, the complete abstracts of communications to the Tenth International Congress of Egyptologists at Rhodes (Greece) were published on the Internet. About 12 percent of the lectures concerned art history, and over 80 percent of these, iconography.

The recent rise of iconography owes much to new techniques of documentation, data processing, and publishing, thanks to advanced information technology including scanners, digital cameras, and the Internet from the 1990s onward. Moreover, Egyptological archaeology and philology are of primary importance for supplying the foundations on which to build iconographical research. I refer to a large number of excellent publications describing (re-)excavations of royal monuments or elite tombs. Categories of equal importance are new editions and translations of text corpora from tombs, or Leitz’s 2002–2003 *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Lexicon of Egyptian Deities and Designations of Deities).

The third phase is particularly characterized by the discovery and exploration of new fields of research. All categories of pictorial production, if regarded as art or as non-artistic, were now the subject of research. Moreover, material from new, rarely explored historical periods was taken into account, thus giving rise to a new multiplicity of themes. Documenting the large quantities of material became possible thanks to the use of electronic databases. A more differentiated analysis of data was achieved through complementing traditionally iconographical approaches with new ones, such as the history of religions, linguistics, archaeology, sociology, gender studies, statistics, and the history of interrelations with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant. Authors began to explain their interdisciplinary or multi-perspective methods and approaches in their publications in about 1990. Following is a brief presentation of some innovative methods of analysis.

At this time, new types of objects or categories of pictures were introduced into research. Very simple types were chosen, whether of artistic interest or not, such as amulets or votive offerings for a deity (Bulté 1991; Pinch 1993; DuQuesne 2009). An entire necropolis containing funeral buildings and burial chambers with their layouts of coffins and grave goods can be perceived as pictures (Seidlmayer 2001). The same is true for richly decorated Roman mummies that previously were not systematically considered as aesthetic objects or pictures rendering specific themes (Riggs 2005). New epochs or periods were introduced as well, that were rarely or never included in iconographic research before, such as the very early or very late periods of Egyptian history (Kaplan 1999; Fluck and Vogelsang-Eastwood 2004; Koetzsch 2004; Graff 2009; Del Vesco 2010; see Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2).

From “Osiris in the tree” to “Dionysus in the vine”: revival of a Pharaonic composition with the same god in the same antithetic scheme, yet in Byzantine transformation.



Figure 5.1 “Osiris in the tree” on a mummy sheath, Dynasty 22, ca. tenth/ninth centuries BCE, Museum of Cultures Basel, inv. III 129a. Photograph: Maya Müller.



Figure 5.2 “Dionysus in the vine” tapestry roundel, ca. sixth/ninth centuries CE, Museum of Cultures Basel, inv. III 575. Photograph: Peter Horner.

Recent methods of iconographic research can be included under the catch phrase “new analysis of data” and are summarized below.

Constructing highly complex typologies

The pictorial material that must be analyzed can be more or less homogeneous. An example of working with highly homogeneous material is Regine Schulz’s study *Der kuboid Statuentypus* (Schulz 1992). Reserved for officials, the cuboid or block statue type is clearly defined by posture. Baines’ *Fecundity Figures* (Baines 1985) is also a valuable example. Although mainly executed in relief and in royal monuments, the so-called fecundity figures are the most common allegorical representatives of prosperity and well-being granted by the king. In both cases, the complexity lies in the high number of subtypes and their possible connections with contextual factors such as the original location of a statue or relief figure. Myśliwiec’s *Le portrait royal dans le bas-relief du Nouvel Empire* (Myśliwiec 1976) and *Royal Portraiture of the Dynasties XXI–XXX* (Myśliwiec 1988) as well as Tefnin’s *La statuaire d’Hatshepsout, Portrait royal et politique sous la 18e Dynastie* (Tefnin 1979) likewise disclose the antagonistic relationship of the one and the manifold, i.e., the physical person of a king and the many facets he (or she) presents. On the other hand, the iconographical material to be analyzed can be less homogeneous, although belonging to a well-defined theme. Eminent examples are Niwiński’s *Studies*

on the *Illustrated Theban Funerary Papyri of the 11th and 10th Centuries* (Niwiński 1989), Bulté's *Talismans d'heureuse maternité* (Bulté 1991), and Pinch's *Votive Offerings to Hathor* (Pinch 1993). In these cases, not only the subject matter or contents of the pictures pertaining to such a theme are variable, but also the media (i.e., the objects or wall surfaces bearing pictures) are variable. This enhances the complexity of relationships that are possible between types of media and/or types of motifs and scenes. The challenge of such studies is to identify ancient patterns of choosing and arranging motifs and scenes, or rules governing the almost unlimited number of variants.

Introducing semiotics and statistics in the analysis of two-dimensional art

A combination of semiotics and statistics can be introduced to the analysis of two-dimensional art, that is reliefs and paintings on walls, or on mobile objects. Maya Müller (Müller 2003, 2009) introduced a semiotic-statistical method (although without using these designations) in order to analyze and explain unusual representations of deities. She focuses on static scenes that are neither ritual nor mythological, but allegorical, in a specifically Egyptian way. They are understood as specific combinations of some conspicuous motifs, that is properties of the body or attributes of the protagonist, such as nudity, frontal view, or standing on an animal or animal-shaped boat. The analysis is done in two steps: first, by identifying four or five of the most conspicuous and rare iconic components determining the meaning of the scene which is used as a paradigm. Second, by comparing the paradigm with other scenes containing all or at least two of these components, all possible contexts in which they can appear can be checked. Results demonstrate which combinations of decisive pictorial components belong to what kinds of symbolic or allegorical themes.

Gwenola Graff (Graff 2009) was the first to present a semiotic-statistical study on Naqada vase painting based on a comprehensive digital databank. Conditions for working on prehistoric ceramics are difficult: a surface has no lateral borders but curves around the body of a vase. Consequently, motifs on vases have no common orientation or direction, nor are they spatially related by intersections. Notwithstanding, pictures can be regarded as a complex communication system as Graff explains in her chapter on methods. Exploring relationships between pictorial elements, she found syntactic rules comparable to the ancient Egyptian language. Some constellations or groups of pictorial elements are supposed to express some basic ideas on the (re)creation and sustenance of life.

Amy Calvert (Calvert 2009) describes her method using the festival and battle scenes in the court of the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu as a demonstration. All pictorial elements are entered into her databases. The king as the most active figure is predefined as the center of attention to which all other elements are related. The king's costume and attributes, gestures and postures, names and epithets, and all other figures, objects, and inscriptions are registered to account for the complexity of the pictures. This comprehensive analysis aims at searching for correlations between elements that are significant, allowing one to ask, for example, what is the effect of the king's regalia on the persons in the picture or on the beholders, both ancient or modern?

Defining the role of key scenes, the so-called icons, in the officials' tombs

According to some authors, the entire design and decorative elements of a tomb form an active system under the leadership of the icons, intending to further the well-being of all implied persons, living or dead. Assmann, in an article of 1987, formulated a hypothesis on the functioning of a tomb's decorative program (Assmann 1987). In his understanding, there were rules for arranging scenes on the walls in analogy to the rules of grammar and syntax in language. For example, key scenes like the tomb owner sitting at the offering table or inspecting works are dubbed "constellations" which have remained unchanged for millennia.

Martin Fitzenreiter (Fitzenreiter 1995, 2001, 2006) redefines the function of pictures, particularly in key scenes or icons, based on their technical value in funerary practice, opening up a new perspective on the thematic cycles of Old and New Kingdom mastabas. Decorative programs describe neither the earthly life of the tomb owner, nor his ideal existence in the hereafter. Rather, the icons represent or confirm ritual actions taking place at the very location of the picture in the tomb, or pointing symbolically to a venue outside of the tomb. The dominating icons show the tomb owner large-scale in standard situations, while small-scale sub-scenes that comment on the main visual themes give us an idea of the tomb owner's individual intentions.

Melinda Hartwig (Hartwig 2004) finds a thoroughly new interpretation of the tomb installations and decorations of the mid-Dynasty 18. Her focus is on disclosing how the tomb owner continues his identity beyond death and into rebirth as well as how all components of the tomb—the building, the burial, and the performance of rites—serve that aim. The most important themes for the tomb owner are condensed into large standardized pictures, the icons. The author discusses how patrons and artists chose and redefined these icons for every new tomb individually, adding varying subsets of small scenes, as well as how priests and visitors contributed to the function of the pictures and the whole installations of the tomb continuously on behalf of the owner. The making and functioning of the tomb is conceived and described, by Hartwig, as an active process.

Reading sophisticated layouts of ritual scenes in temples

When it became clear, some decades ago, that the numerous ritual scenes involving kings and deities on Ramesside and Ptolemaic temple walls could not be read in a linear chronological sequence, alternative ancient systems of arrangement had to be discovered. The solution was to read decorative programs of a temple hall or a whole temple integrally, finding intertwined relationships between scenes after deciphering symmetries of form and of meaning on corresponding walls.

Françoise Labrique (Labrique 1992) studied five sequences of the ritual of "Offering the Fields" in the Ptolemaic Edfu temple. She found a dense net of mirrored, symmetrical correspondences between entire sequences of scenes, single scenes, or elements of the texts commenting on the scenes. While the corresponding entities (mostly text blocks)

are often not identical but complementary, it is the very difference between them that sheds light on the meaning of the ritual.

According to Benoît Lurson (Lurson 2001, 2007), ritual scenes in Ramesside temples do not have inscriptions that comment on the action represented in a picture. Rather, he had to identify distinctive iconographical elements “commenting” on the ritual act of a scene pictorially not linguistically. The elements, such as crowns, aprons, names, and gestures of the actors, recur on distant walls and pillars, forming complementary pairs (but not identical), or symmetrical patterns reminiscent of stylistic rules current in ancient rhetoric. They form “discourses” among scenes revealing the characters of the gods involved.

Martin Fitzenreiter (Fitzenreiter 2011) presents the case of a Late Ramesside official’s tomb, revealing, among the relief scenes and textual units on the walls, a number of relationships similar to the *parallelismus membrorum* of poetry. This enables a tentative reconstruction of the ancient beholders’ reception, and of the social interaction between artists and client.

Exploring the many-sided nature of Egyptian gods in monographic studies

In recent years, three prominent deities have been studied. All three authors agree that iconographic studies uniting the totality (or a high percentage) of instances of a specific god were badly missing until recently, although this is a prerequisite for achieving a highly differentiated analysis of data.

Véronique Berteaux (Berteaux 2005) dealt with Horakhty, a solar god whose omnipresence contrasts with his unknown nature. She collected an important number of sources, and looked at pictures and inscriptions as equivalent bearers of meaning that must be processed together. Horakhty poses the problem of being present mainly in ritual scenes, but having no specific properties, save over seventy composite names containing other solar gods (Re, Amun, Atum, etc.). Trying to find a possible identity for this god, Berteaux discusses the relationship between texts and pictures, and suggest that pictures need to be read similarly to texts.

Kristina Lahn’s (Lahn 2005, in press) goddess Qedeshet (Qadesh) is the very opposite of Horakhty since the relatively small number of instances of her all come from popular belief, not the temple cult. Qedeshet is a rare case of a deity that originated in the Levant and whose appearance was imported from there, but was completely re-invented on entering Egypt. The author adapts her methods and approaches to the particular conditions of this case, combining iconography with semiotics, linguistics (Egypt, Syria), the history of religions, and archaeology. The double nature of Qedeshet as a Syrian and Egyptian goddess is studied with care, closely observing the possible transfers of pictorial or conceptual elements in both directions.

A third case, occurring in the Ptolemaic era, concerning the creation of a goddess for political reasons was studied by Maria Nilsson (Nilsson 2012). For Nilsson, any scene carved on the walls of Ptolemaic and Roman temples represents a system of signs forming a code. The message of a scene can be decoded by analyzing its components and all occurring constellations of these components. In this case Arsinoe II, the divinized queen

who was distinguished by an individual crown was studied together with a particular form of Hathor of Dendera who was created at the same time as Arsinoe the goddess. When analyzing all representations of Arsinoe II, the creation of the new goddess could be followed closely, together with her assumption of two roles: as the reigning co-regent for her husband and brother Ptolemy II, and as the God's Wife of the Ram of Mendes. Her integration into the circle of Hathoric goddesses conferred a singular political and religious authority to her. This was done to win the loyalty of both the Egyptian and the Greek population. The author aimed to demonstrate how the outer temple walls, visible for all to see, expand a program of assimilation in both directions, from Greek to Egyptian culture and vice versa.

The above-mentioned research ultimately widened the scope of the terms "art" and "iconography," achieving more complex interpretations, and experimenting with several levels of reading images. However, there may be an inherent danger that can be called "over-interpretation." Authors like to discover, in the minds of the ancient Egyptians, a wealth of methodical thoughts, and of sophisticated devices to express them that can be deduced from a series of images. In the end, this tends to be over-speculative. On the other hand, there is a promising recent trend among researchers to become aware of and explain their methods of analysis.

Showing, Propagating, and Discussing Iconography: The New Mass Media

For the purposes of this chapter, mass media is conceived in a broad sense, comprising museum exhibitions designed for a large public, electronic databases publicly accessible on the internet, and international congresses, such as those of the last 20 to 30 years. Through new forms of communication, iconography as a subdiscipline of Egyptian history of art begins to generate more attention to the art of reading images, among specialists and amateurs.

Museum exhibitions

Although major Egyptian exhibitions are more frequent since the 1970s, they rarely deal with iconographic themes. Two early exhibitions were created by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and have been documented in comprehensive catalogs. The first was called *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom* (Brovarski, Doll, and Freed 1982). Based on extensive research, 400 objects of applied art were assembled, embodying or symbolizing the professional and family life of the elite during the prosperous Imperial Age of Egypt. Six years later, the second project, entitled *Mummies and Magic: The Funerary Arts of Ancient Egypt*, was carried out (D'Auria, Lacovara, and Roehrig 1988). Since the Egyptians expressed concern for the afterlife in pictures accompanied by captions or spells, the exhibition offered a chronologically arranged "iconography of death." An exhibition of an entirely different character, sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, was held at the Rietberg Museum

in Zurich (Do. Arnold 2010). The show explored the symbolism of animal representation as based on the ancient artists' observation of behavior. A traveling exhibition with a uniquely attractive theme was conceived in 2008 by the Bibel & Orient Museum at Freiburg in Switzerland entitled *Gott weiblich, Eine vergessene Seite des biblischen Gottes* (Female God, a forgotten side of the Biblical God). A smaller part of the exhibits stemmed from Egypt, while the majority of the show consisted of female idols from the Levant. This imagery proves how the people of the ancient Orient clung to their female divinities even in strongly patriarchal societies, and documents the astonishing evolution of the divine in female shape (Keel 2008). Among smaller local exhibitions based on exhaustive iconographic research, one instance can be cited only: the Museum of Byzantine Art, Berlin and its presentation of Coptic tapestries with Biblical subjects—a category of images which is extremely hard to decipher (Fluck 2008).

Online databases

A few museums have published their Egyptian collections in the form of online databases. Examples include: the *British Museum Collection Database*, and the *UCL Petrie Collection Online Catalogue* in London; at Freiburg, Switzerland, the *Bibel & Orient Museum Datenbank Online* (BODO); and a specific part of the collection at the Louvre Museum, Paris is registered in the *Catalogue en ligne des céramiques coptes* (online catalog of Coptic ceramics). These databases are in various states of completion in terms of photographs and descriptions of objects. However, they are not designed for iconographical research, with the possible exception of the British Museum's database.

In the last decade, archives pertaining to the exploration of great archaeological sites were made available online, containing object records and photographs with important iconographic potential. For example, *The Giza Archives Project* of the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston, based on the Harvard-MFA expedition to Giza, is equipped with advanced search functions for users. Furthermore, there are the *Electronic Resources from the Griffith Institute Archive* at Oxford with a wealth of documentary material from the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the Theban necropolis in general. A third case is the *Karnak Cachette Database*, offering a complete inventory of the statues, stelae, and so on, found between 1903 and 1907 by Georges Legrain in the cachette found in the court of the VIIth pylon at Karnak. This is a joint project of the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, Cairo (IFAO) and the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

At least three iconographic research projects are being carried out at present by university institutes, aiming at the creation of important databases. At the University of Heidelberg, rituals are the focus of the Institute for Cultural Studies (*Ägyptologische Forschungsstätte für Kulturwissenschaft* (AeFKW)), headed by Hubert Roeder. Since 2005, a digital database is being compiled containing, ideally, all extant ancient Egyptian ritual scenes. Input and retrieval of data are guided by an elaborate system of thesauri, as explained on the AeFKW website. The image database was designed as a research instrument that will result in a series of publications on iconographic aspects of rituals. An equally ambitious research project at the History of Religions Chair of the University of Zurich is called *Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East* (IDD). The aim of this project is to produce an online version alongside of a print version

of an iconographic dictionary with special emphasis on Palestine/Israel during the first millennium BCE. The first part is concerned with theoretical and methodological issues, followed by a second, systematic section containing the entries. Egyptian deities are included if they are related to the religious world of the Near East. Owing to the focus of this multi-disciplinary experiment on the complete Near Eastern iconography, occurrences of deities and demons, whether Egyptian or other, are treated integrally, not in separate entries according to their countries of origin. Thus, Egyptian deities are seen from a new perspective. *AIGYPTOS* is the designation of an in-progress, comprehensive bibliographical database sponsored by the Egyptological Institutes of the universities of Munich and Heidelberg. Entries are systematically indexed with search keywords covering many fields including art and iconography. In 2012–2014, *AIGYPTOS* will be merged with the *Online Egyptological Bibliography* (OEB) of the Griffith Institute, Oxford.

Congresses and international meetings

Congresses and international meetings specializing in iconography are still rare. The theme of the Third Egyptological Conference on Temples held at Hamburg in 1994 was, however, entirely devoted to iconography as it pertained to systems and programs of decoration of Egyptian temples (Kurth 1995). New concepts of reading and interpreting ritual relief cycles in temples were discussed. For the first time, international researchers became aware of a topic that had formerly been relegated to the domain of French-speaking Egyptologists who were engaged in documentation projects in huge Ptolemaic temples. In the case of the conference on the art of the Old Kingdom in Cairo, which took place at the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut (DAI) in 1991, iconographic subjects were complemented by some stylistic issues. Participants demonstrated the importance of detailed observation, causing fragmentary statues to speak out about their original “condition of life” (Anonymous 1995).

Theoretical Reflection on Iconography, Iconology, and Symbolism

Theoretical reflection on the methodology of iconography and iconology began late in Egyptology, and may be considered to be in its incipient phase, to this day. It was not until around 1990 that the first tentative works appeared.

Iconography

Two articles deal with the fundamentals of Egyptian iconography (Müller 1993, 2002). At a time when digital databases were supposed to become available on the desk of every individual researcher, it appeared urgent to develop a terminology for entering iconographical data. However, Egyptian relief sculpture and mural painting largely avoid referring to space and time, arranging rows of figures on horizontal ground lines from

right to left, or vice versa, in a rhythmic order. Owing to this particular structure of pictures, conditions of readability are fundamentally different from those of classical and later cultures. A primary task was therefore to define and designate all basic pictorial elements and their parts (things, figures, etc.), as well as actions and scenes. Next, pictorial elements and scenes had to be classified in order to build a general foundation for advanced iconographical research.

The so-called Freiburg School, founded by Othmar Keel, the former head of Old Testament studies at the University of Freiburg (Switzerland), was (and still is) active in this newly disclosed field. Focusing on the Near East of the first millennium BCE, the Freiburg School invented iconographic research on all those categories of anepigraphic applied art which had, so far, been virtually ignored such as scarabs, cylinder seals, amulets, bronze and clay figurines. Iconographic research was established as an autonomous discipline. It was realized that the interpretation of pictures may shed new light on the understanding of Biblical and related texts. This was in contrast with the traditional method of interpreting pictures through texts only. Moreover, all neighboring cultures of Palestine/Israel were included in the study, comprising Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, and thus achieved a multidisciplinary approach (Uehlinger (2000), xv–xxx).

The main representatives of the school of Freiburg explain their opinion on iconography in an online article in *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (WIBILEX) (Eggler et al. 2006). According to them, the term “iconography” refers to the methodical exploration of pictures. The actual method is still based on Erwin Panofsky’s three-step scheme as designed and adapted in 1932, 1939, and 1955, in which he defined three phases. The first phase identifies and describes pictorial elements; the second phase analyzes pictorial representations in order to attribute them to specific themes and ideas; and the third phase of interpretation aiming at a deeper understanding may be called iconology (see below). While traditional iconography in classical and Christian art largely relies on pertinent texts for interpretation, in the Ancient Near East texts and pictures are generally incongruous. Pictures or texts from the latter region should ideally be treated separately in order to avoid superficial correlations. Ancient Near Eastern figurative art does not normally refer to texts; rather it is a partially autonomous system of symbols that exist alongside literature.

An eminent specialist of Egyptian iconography, Quaegebeur (1989), found Keel’s method inspiring. However, he objected that, when dealing with the highly complex Egyptian material, a motif cannot be interpreted using a random selection of pictorial representations only, but rather must be understood based on a thorough check of all occurrences including those from written sources.

Achievements of classical archaeology such as the LIMC and of the Freiburg School devoted to Ancient Near Eastern Studies, have a considerable effect on Egyptology. However, Egyptology cannot dispense with developing an appropriate theoretical framework for the iconography of religion. Ancient Egyptian concepts of the divine have an original structure, because the ancient Egyptians seemed to think in images: one’s perception of deities depends on icons, as if it were icons that created deities. This is what follows from the words of Amenhotep III, engraved on the granite stela from his mortuary temple at Thebes, explaining how he, the creator next to the sun-god, created new images of all deities. Through this process, the gods and goddesses came into existence in his temple.

Iconology

The term iconology was scarcely used in Egyptology until very recently. John Baines called his book on fecundity figures the “Iconology of a Genre” (1985). Notwithstanding, he did not use the term in the modern way, but in the Renaissance sense, that is for deciphering allegorical or symbolic figures. The article on “Iconography” in the WIBILEX (Eggler et al. 2006) considers iconology to be the third step in Panofsky’s methodological model, as mentioned above. This last step aims at “interpreting the very meaning of a representation in its intellectual (*geistesgeschichtlich*) context which can be seized through intimate knowledge of the ideology (*Weltanschauung*) of a specific culture or period.” The authors prefer not to use the term iconology, but to integrate this step into iconography.

Symbolism

This expression is scarcely used in Egyptological art literature. As mentioned above, the authors of the article “Iconography” in WIBILEX take it for granted that art can be understood as a system of symbols. In the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, an entry under “god” contains Jan Assmann’s concept of “the symbolic structure of the divine” (Assmann (1977), 760–762). The author explains that deities, while being essentially distant and hidden, are revealed by symbol. The main symbols of the deities are their forms as they appear in art and literature, i.e., their names, their pictures, or their earthly incorporations such as the reigning king or the Apis bull.

Richard Wilkinson (1994, 2001) wrote a book and a Lexikon article on symbols, agreeing with Schott’s (1953) assertion that symbolism is a primary form of Egyptian thought. Symbolism was manifested not only in the representational forms of art and architecture, but also in other areas of life, such as magic or religious ritual. Designating the term “symbol” as composed not of conventional signs but stylistic ways of expression in pictures, he defines nine categories (form, hieroglyphs, relative size, location, material, color, number, action, gesture), bearing in mind the complexity and ambiguity of Egyptian symbolism.

Besides theoretical considerations on iconography and symbolism, a trend that may be called “applied methodology” and that appeared around 1990, is growing in importance. In recent books and articles on iconographic themes, methodological chapters contain the author’s or editor’s reflections on their research methods used in the work (Schulz (1992), 1–16; Seidlmayer (2001), 205–208, 245–247; Hartwig (2004), 2–4, 54–55; Berteaux (2005), 1–6; Calvert 2009; Graff (2009), 18–23; Nilsson (2010), 20–27; Lahn (in press)).

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

There are not many sources on iconography in Egyptological literature. Works that are mentioned here are studies which either pertain to a much wider field, not iconography alone, or to classical and more recent European, not Egyptian art. Other studies are in preparation and have

not yet appeared. In Verbovsek, Backes, and Jones (2011), the articles in part III.2 (“Kunst-, Bild- und Medienwissenschaft,” 255–401, in German or English) discuss a number of modern methods and approaches to art, including iconography. Van Straten (1994) is a recognized expert on iconography, having been one of the founding editors of ICONCLASS, the leading classification system designed for European art at the Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague.

Hölscher (2002), 85–88, contains a brief chapter that provides a didactical introduction to the use of iconography in classical archaeology. The IDD project aims at producing an internet database (a description of the project and a number of entries including some names of Egyptian deities are available at: www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/) and a print version in three volumes. The first volume of IDD consists of regional introductory essays, some of which address general issues of IDD’s scope and methodology, while others provide religious and historical background information as well as the “grammar” and “syntax” of the iconography of deities. Müller (2013) provides a comment on methods in Egyptological studies of art history, with bibliography. Müller (in press) will analyze all visual elements indicating the divine nature of figures represented on pictures.

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