Student Name: Megan Jenkins

Programme of Study: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

Module: Concept & Process ADAD5003

Essay Title: The Unspoken Language of Symbolism

Student Number: 2114455

Word Count: 2517

Table of Contents:

Introduction: The Unspoken Language of Symbolism…… 4

The Symbolism Movement..…….. 4

Hidden Messages in Art…… 5

The Evolution of Meanings…….. 7

Symbols in Plain Sight…… 7

The Nazi Swastika…… 9

The Changing of Symbols for Religious Purposes…….. 11

Artwork to Emoticon…… 12

Conclusion……..…….. 14

Bibliography…… 15

Appendix…….. 17

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Dulac, E. (1920) *Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon as Mediaeval Saints* [Tempera on linen]. Available at: https://artblart.com/2017/09/24/review-queer-british-art-1861-1967-at-tate-britain-london/edmund-dulac-charles-ricketts-and-charles-shannon-as-medieval-saints-1920-web/ (Accessed: 29 November 2023)

Figure 2. Bengtsson, D. (1971) *Interiör frän Kumlafängelset (Kumla Prison)* [Oil on masonite]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Dick-Bengtsson-Interioer-fran-Kumlafaengelset-Kumla-Prison-1971-Oil-on-masonite-225_fig5_341315454 (Accessed: 6 December 2023)

Figure 3. (Artist unknown) [Ivory figurine of a female bird carved into a Mammoth tusk]. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29644591 (Accessed: 8 December 2023)

Figure 4. (No date) Photograph of Adolph Hitler wearing the Swastika. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1935/02/swastika/308959/ (Accessed: 7 December 2023)

Figure 5. The Ankh [Egyptian Heiroglyph]. Available at: https://orthochristian.com/97480.html (Accessed: 23 November 2023)

Figure 6. Cross with drops [Christian symbol] https://orthochristian.com/97480.html (Accessed: 23 November 2023)

Figure 7. Hokusai, K. (1830-32) *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* [Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper]. Available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2008-3008-1-JA (Accessed: 23 November 2023)

Figure 8. Apple's Great Wave emoji (2015) Available at: https://www.iemoji.com/view/emoji/190/animals-nature/water-wave (Accessed: 23 November 2023)

The Unspoken Language of Symbolism

In the vast expanse of artistic expression, Symbolism emerges as a compelling language that weaves stories beyond the bounds of clear depiction. In this essay Symbolism is examined, delving into the intriguing journey of certain symbols as they undergo a metamorphosis from specialised or culturally particular meanings to becoming universally recognised. Over time, symbols that were previously hidden in obscurity have risen to prominence, transcending national and cultural borders. A vital part of this journey of transformation is the artist's clever alchemy, which skilfully uses the power of these symbols to whisper messages hidden in the rich tapestry of their works. This examination illuminates not only the dynamic evolution of symbols across ages but also the artist's adept use of this evolution to infuse their art with hidden narratives that beckon viewers to decode the enigmatic language of the visual realm.

The Symbolism Movement

Amidst much upheaval and change throughout Europe in the 1880s, symbolism developed as a literary movement in France. The word gained notoriety in 1886 when poet Jean Moréas published his "Symbolist Manifesto" in Le Figaro, a Paris-based newspaper (National Galleries, 2023), articulating how the principles of Symbolism, profoundly influenced the artistic community. Symbolist artists sought to express the inner self through symbolic imagery rather than a direct representation of the external world (Goldwater, 1979, pp.9) without being restricted to a particular style or method but having a shared fascination in the use of symbols to communicate feelings, inner experiences, and life's mysteries. The focus of symbolist painting moved from the accurate portrayal of nature to the realm of the imagination, they employed personal metaphors and symbols to evoke a meaning or emotion rather than providing accurate, realistic detail or factual information (National Galleries, 2023).

Hidden Messages in Art

For Queer communities, Symbolism became a popular means of nonverbal communication with certain symbols such as Peacock feathers holding special meaning. Edmund Dulac's 1920 picture, ‘Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon as Medieval Saints’ (Figure 1), demonstrates this.

Figure 1. Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon as Mediaeval Saints

As you can see, one of the two men wearing monastic garments in the artwork is holding a peacock plume, the closeness, illustrate the familiarity between Ricketts and Shannon point to a relationship that goes beyond simple friendship. Dulac raises Ricketts and Shannon's connection to a divine plane by depicting them as mediaeval saints, perhaps going against the social norms of the day and implying a queer narrative in a subtle way. Peacock feathers were worn by males in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a means of identifying themselves to other gay men discretely

to express their sexuality, making them a symbol of homosexuality (Queering Museum, 2023). Back then, same-sex relationships put individuals at risk of persecution, discrimination, and social isolation and from 1885 until 1967, homosexual sex practices were still illegal in England. Although sodomy persecution shifted from a religious to a legal arena with the enactment of the Buggery legislation in England in 1553, the motivations behind the persecution did not change (Sharma, N. 2020) and people who identified as gay were therefore forced to conceal their true identities because of ingrained cultural norms that were founded on fear and ignorance, creating an atmosphere of repression and silence that pervaded society. However, there was a large cultural movement in favour of acceptance and inclusiveness with LGBTQ+ rights movement starting with the establishment of the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in Berlin in 1897, where gay and bisexual men and women were finally given a voice (Levy, 2023), and by the 1920s, homosexuals from all over the world were able to find safety and sanctuary in Berlin (Visit Berlin, 2023).

Additionally, the landscape of LGBT art changed along with attitudes, as artists became more comfortable expressing their queerness and the wider acceptance of other sexual orientations, the necessity for coded symbols became less and less. Queer art serves as both a memorial to the hardships of the past and a ray of hope for a more tolerant and inclusive future in this dynamic terrain.

The Evolution of Meanings

Symbols are dynamic with meanings that evolve throughout time and acquire new meanings, in turn making them lose their original importance as a result of historical and cultural changes.

> "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today. Nevertheless their idea of Hell owed a lot to the sight of fire consuming and the ashes remaining - as well as to their experience of the pain of burns" (Berger, 1973, pp.8).

The interpretation of symbols by various generations might vary due to the evolution of cultural norms and societal conventions. Symbols that held special meaning for older generations can be reinterpreted or take on other meanings by younger generations, instead of evoking feelings through the less literary and more immediate medium of an expressive form, their meanings are recognised and established, so they are immediately understood and read as a synonym (Goldwater, 1979, pp. 43).

Symbols in Plain Sight

The discrete symbols used historically in artworks by artists such as Edmund Dulac for covert communication is a juxtaposition to Dick Bengtsson's use of the Swastika in his artworks. Bengtsson, a Swedish artist, gained attention for his provocative use of swastikas in his artwork during the late 1960s and early 1970s, having grown up in a post-war Sweden as part of a culture associated with but in denial of their Nazi sympathising (Willems, 2019, pp.47), he engages with symbols to challenge thought and perceptions, whilst commenting on historical events, drawing attention to the history of contamination that the Nazi emblem possesses (Willems, 2019, Page 49). **S**hining a light on unsettling and intricate elements through colour, shapes, and composition (Castenfors, 2023), Bengtsson thought-provokingly infused the Swastika, a striking black and white symbol recognised worldwide, into his artwork, frequently manifested as an artistically created insignia in the lower left or right corner of the artwork (Willems, 2019, pp.48). The swastika does not function as the main focal point in his 1971 artwork 'Kumla Prison' (Figure 2), but rather

is a component of the entire visual composition. Because of the way it is included into the piece, viewers are encouraged to consider its relevance in relation to the painting.

Figure 2. Interiör från Kumlafängelset (Kumla Prison)

The sense of imprisonment or confinement that Kumla Prison evokes is symbolic of its oppressive environment. It's probable that the intention was to provoke viewers to think more deeply about the artwork's meaning and how it connects to the idea of incarceration in a correctional setting.

Endeavouring consciously to confront its tarnished past, he established an energy that only such a potent emblem could evoke (Castenfors, 2023) instead of utilising the swastika to support Nazi ideology, Bengtsson's use of the Swastika brought attention to the power of visual language and the potential for symbols to be perverted and abused.

The Nazi Swastika

The Swastika is an ancient symbol with roots in many civilisations, but throughout the 20th century, its affiliation with Nazi Germany permanently tarnished its connotation. The first recorded usage of the sign was found in 1908 at the Palaeolithic settlement of Mezin near the Russian border engraved onto a 15,000-year-old ivory figurine of a female bird fashioned from mammoth tusk (Campion, 2014). Originally derived from the Sanskrit word 'Svastika', meaning "good fortune" or "well-being" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2017), today, for many people, the symbol holds a very different meaning.

Figure 3. Ivory figurine of a female bird carved into a Mammoth tusk

The significance of the swastika was significantly altered when Adolf Hitler made it the Nazi Party's emblem in the 1920s and by 1945, the symbol had undertaken a drastic evolution. What was once a symbol of positivity and optimism had now become adopted by the party to symbolise its objective of racial cleansing in Europe and Nazi Germany's effort at totalitarian domination of Europe (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023), its significance being lost illustrating of how cultural context may affect how symbols are interpreted. The symbol's persistently tarnished meaning makes it hard to view it outside of the context of Nazi atrocities.

Figure 4. Photograph of Hitler wearing the Swastika

This demonstrates how symbols that have been imbued with cultural or historical importance can suddenly lose their meaning. The destroyed symbolism of the Swastika serves as a warning about how easily historical events can appropriate and pervert symbols.

The Changing of Symbols for Religious Purposes

One of the best examples of intricate historical and cultural changes is the conversion of the Egyptian Ankh (Figure 5), a sign generally linked with "life," into the Christian Cross (Figure 6), a symbol denoting "death," or more precisely, crucifixion. As Christianity expanded and changed to fit various cultural contexts, it frequently appropriated and reinterpreted preexisting symbols to fit its own narratives. As Christianity took root in Egypt in the 4th century CE, early Christians adapted culturally familiar symbols to convey Christian concepts, such as The Ankh, with its deep association with life, they found resonance in this context, the Ankh soon became a symbol of the Christian promise of eternal life and resurrection (Mark, 2016).

Figure 5. The Ankh

Figure 6: Cross with drops

Christian missionaries most likely recognised an opportunity to use a well-known symbol into their teachings in areas where the Ankh held significance, with its looped top and resemblance to a cross, it was already recognised as a sign of life, and therefore an easy symbol to incorporate into early Christianity, remaining so to this day (Mark, 2016), the Christian Cross became a key symbol in Christian iconography over time, transcending and changing from its initial connections with death to stand for the prospect of salvation and spiritual rebirth. The way the ancient Egyptian Ankh found continuity and new meaning within the developing religious traditions of Coptic Christianity, becoming a central element in the Christian cross symbolism within the Church, illustrates the

dynamic interplay between cultures and the adaptive nature of religious symbolism over the course of history.

Artwork to Emoticon

It is possible to argue that emojis have become the universal symbols of the contemporary day, overcoming linguistic divides to become a commonly accepted way of communication in the digital age and being used more and more frequently to become a more diversified way of communicating (Frontiersin, 2019), the development of symbols from their religious roots to modern emojis is a reflection of changes in communication and cultural norms as well as technical breakthroughs. Emojis have become most common among younger people, who even prefer them to written words when writing (Schweber, 2023) highlighting how the evolution of complex religious symbols into widely used emojis for human communication has changed throughout time. Emojis might be considered the universal symbols of the modern day, offering a visual language that makes communication easier in the digital age.

The Great Wave Off Kanagawa (Figure 7) was created during the 1820's by Katsushika Hokusai as part of his series Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji (katsushikahokusai.org, 2023) and has become one of the most well-known and cherished works of Japanese art. The ocean, sky, and tall wave are all depicted in blue, being one of their most important lucky colours, symbolising coolness, passivity, and fidelity (Olesen, 2013) adding to the scene's lively and dynamic quality. The exotic and distinctive, saturated blue colour used in this artwork was imported from Europe, a colour unknown to Japan prior to this work, recognised today as the Prussian or Berlin blue (Smirna, 2018) adding to the artworks mystique. Mount Fuji, a symbol of purity, perseverance and eternity to the Japanese (Bouzon, 2023), can be seen in the distance, appearing tiny in comparison to the enormous wave. Even though it was made at a period when Japanese trade was severely limited, copies of this print were mass produced and sold for a low price (Harris, 2023), making it one of the most famous and identifiable artworks in the world.

As of 2015, 'The Great Wave off Kanagawa' has been included in the list of Apple emojis (Figure 8) increasing the variety of visual expressions available to users worldwide. Because of the picture's distinct visual elements and significance, the image of the towering wave has become a

symbol of Japanese art and culture which almost definitely contributed to its inclusion into the Apple emoji library. Because of the picture's distinct visual elements and significance. Famous pieces of art like "The Great Wave" provide the emoji set a creative edge and give users more visually appealing alternatives than just commonplace items and sentiments.

Figure 7. The Great Wave off Kanagawa

Figure 8. Apple’s Great Wave emoji

While emojis are a common way to express oneself in digital communication, they don't completely replace symbolism. Emojis are now a common way for people to express themselves digitally, but symbolism is still an important and timeless part of writing and art that allows for a more in-depth examination of the human condition. The two coexist in the changing communication landscape, each with a distinct function.

Conclusion

The never-ending endeavour to comprehend the connections between objects and ourselves is a reflection of our insatiable yearning for connection, meaning, and a deeper comprehension of the profound tales woven into the visual fabric of our lives. The fundamental idea behind symbolism is the common human urge for a connection to the inexpressible, the spiritual, and the sublime. Humans are naturally inclined to use philosophy, religion, or the arts to try to make sense of the world around them and Symbolism as an artistic movement helped achieve this objective by providing a visual language that addressed the universality of human experience. The power of symbolism to elucidate several levels of meaning and entice readers or viewers to interact with a work more deeply is what makes it valuable. Through the integration of academic understanding with practical observation and experimentation, one may cultivate a nuanced comprehension of symbols and use it skilfully in their artistic endeavours.

> "But why we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves? The human inclination to seek a connection between things and ourselves is deeply ingrained. 'The desire to make emotion meaningful, by connecting it with humanity at large and by seeing nature as its reflection, is the common element…"(Goldwater, 1979, pp.6).

This search is a reflection of a need for comprehension, purpose, and a feeling of inclusion in the complex fabric of life. The realisation of our intertwined existence is the foundation of the never-ending quest to understand the relationship between objects and ourselves. Symbols provide an ongoing conversation between the observer and the observed by acting as links between the known and the unknown, the tangible and the intangible.

Works Cited

- Berger, J. (1973) *Ways of Seeing*. England: Penguin Books-

- Bouzon, C. (2023) *Mount Fuji: A natural wonder that became the symbol of Japan*. Available at: https://www.en-vols.com/en/inspirations-en/culture-en/mount-fuji-symbol-japan/#:~:text=For%20the%20Japanese%2C%20Mount%20Fuji,the%20search%20for%20spiritual%20enlightenment (Accessed: 23 November 2023).

- Campion, M. J. (2014) *How the world loved the swastika - until Hitler stole it*. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29644591 (Accessed: 9 December 2023).

- Castenfors, M. (no date) *Why did Dick Bengtsson paint swastikas?* Available at: https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/dick-bengtsson/why-did-dick-bengtsson-paint-swastikas/i (Accessed: 8 December 2023).

- Frontiers (2019) *A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives*. Available at:https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02221/full (Accessed: 26 November 2023).

- Goldwater, R. (1979) *Symbolism*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers

- Harris, L. A. (no date) *Hokusai, Under the Wave off Kanagawa (The Great Wave)*. Available at: https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/south-east-se-asia/japan-art/a/hokusai-under-the-wave-off-kanagawa-the-great-wave (Accessed: 23 November 2023).

- Katsushika Hokusai - The complete works (2023) *Katsushika Hokusai*. Available at: https://www.katsushikahokusai.org/ (Accessed: 23 November 2023).

- Levy, M. (no date) *Gay rights movement*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/gay-rights-movement (Accessed: 30 November 2023).

- Mark, J. J. (2016) *The Ankh*. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/Ankh/ (Accessed: 23 November 2023).

- National Galleries (2023) *Symbolism*. Available at: https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/symbolism#:~:text=Symbolism%20began%20as%20a%20literary,the%20Parisian%20newspaper%20Le%20Figaro (Accessed: 20 November 2023)

- Olesen, J (2013) *Color Meanings in Japan*. Available at: https://www.color-meanings.com/color-meanings-japan/ (Accessed: 25 November 2023).

- Queering Manchester Museum (2023) *Peacock*. Available at: https://queermuseum.wixsite.com/queermuseum/peacock#:~:text=Peacock%20feathers%20have%20become%20a,to%20subtly%20signal%20their%20sexuality (Accessed: 29 November 2023).

- Schweber, B (2023) *Are emojis and icons the new hieroglyphics?* Available at: https://www.eeworldonline.com/are-emojis-and-icons-the-new-hieroglyphics/ (Accessed: 22 November 2023).

- Sharma, N. (2020) *The Perception of Male Homosexuality in Great Britain from the 19th century to the Present*. Available at: https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-britannique/the-perception-of-male-homosexuality-in-great-britain-from-the-19th-century-to-the-present (Accessed: 29 November 2023).

- Smirna, K. (2018) *The Great Hokusai - Why do We Still Obsess over that Japanese Wave Painting?* Available at: https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/japanese-wave-painting-hokusai (Accessed: 23 November 2023).

- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2023) *Nazi Party*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nazi-Party (Accessed: 8 December 2023).

- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC (2017) *The History of the Swastika*. Available at: https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/history-of-the-swastika#:~:text=The%20word%20swastika%20comes%20from,the%20sun%20through%20the%20sky (Accessed: 11 December 2023).

- Visit Berlin (2023) *History of Homosexuality in Berlin*. Available at: https://www.visitberlin.de/en/history-homosexuality-berlin (Accessed: 30 November 2023).

- Willems, S (2019) *How Not to Disappear Completely: Characterising the Role of Anonymity in Contemporary Figurative Painting*. Available at: https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/88070/3/21804286_Willems_Thesis_Redacted.pdf (Accessed: 28 November 2023).

Bibliography

- Amrou, A. K. (2017) *Hidden in plain sight: How gay artists expressed forbidden desire in code*. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/queer-art-tate-britain/index.html#:~:text=These%20expressions%20of%20queer%20desire,them%20holding%20a%20peacock%20feather (Accessed: 1 December 2023).

- Crystal, D. (2021) *The past, present, and future of emojis*. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2021/07/02/the-past-present-and-future-of-emojis/ (Accessed: 10 December 2023).

- Gardner, H. (1982) *Art, Mind, and Brain*. Basic Books. Inc. Publishers

- Hogeback, J. (2023) *How the Symbolism of the Swastika Was Ruined*. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/story/how-the-symbolism-of-the-swastika-was-ruined (Accessed: 8 December 2023).

- Nittve, L. (2023) *Dick Bengtsson*. Available at: https://www.artforum.com/events/dick-bengtsson-2-226658/ (Accessed: 7 December 2023).

- Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (2017) *Untangling Emoji Popularity Through Semantic Embeddings*. Available at: https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14903 (Accessed: 29 November 2023)

- Zelanski, P., Fisher, M. P. (1999) *Colour*. London: The Herbert Press Ltd