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ARTH 303, Methods of Art History

April 2nd

Focus Work: Theory

I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized help upon the completion of this work

Jean-Antoine Watteau

Ceres (Summer)

1684 - 1721

Oil on canvas

55 3/4 x 45 9/16 inches

National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

Commissioned by Piere Crozat for his *hôtel particulier* in the *rue de Richelieu,* Paris, France.

Derived from the Greek words *eikon* and *graphein*, meaning "image" and "writing" the word 'iconography' literally translates to mean "image writing" or describing.[1] As a theory, iconography finds its origins solely within the field of art history.[2] Iconography was developed first by art historians who sought to analyze artworks in terms of symbolic content and conventional motifs found in certain contexts. This paper looks to establish the basic historical and scholarly foundations of Iconography as a theory, delineate its methodology, and ultimately apply it to French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Ceres (Summer)* (1717-1718).

As a framework of identification, iconography has an extensive historical background. The first traces of it appear in Greek literature, but its systematic usage in the field of art history was formally introduced in the late sixteenth century.[3] The publications of 'iconographic handbooks' during this period allowed artists and laymen to dissect thematic and/or allegorical artworks.[4] Dr. Roelof van Straten credits Giovanni Pietro Bellori as the 'first' iconographer, as he drew attention to iconographic aspects of Nicolas Poussin's work in his *Biography of Artists* (1672).[5] Iconographic development was later formalized in the eighteenth century with the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a German scholar who produced the foundations of iconographic analysis with his studies of antiquity.[6] During the nineteenth century, the scholarly pursuit of iconography was evolving in France with a sole focus on Medieval iconographic imagery.[7] Exploration of iconography beyond this content was later achieved by those we may consider to be the principal scholars of modern iconography.

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[1]Roelof van. Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography* (Yverdon: Gordon and Breach, 1994) 3.

[2] Micheal W. Cothren and Anne D'Alleva. *Methods and Theories of Art History*. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2021), 35.

[3]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 19.

[4] Cothren and D'Alleva, *Methods,* 35; and Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 19.

[5]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 19.

[6]Cothren and D'Alleva, *Methods,* 35; and Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 19.

[7] Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 20.

The discussion of modern iconography, however, cannot be fully informed without briefly addressing the work of Swiss Art Historian, Heinrich Wölfflin. In his research, Wölffin established that the formal qualities of an artwork composed the essential principles which, when analyzed, elucidated the development of artistic styles.[8] His emphasis on formalism established the notion that, above all else, stylistic analysis takes priority when interpreting the significance of an artwork. His work was overtly influential in the history of style as a focus in Art History, and, for the context of this paper, in the development of modern iconography.

In reaction to these foundations, scholars such as Aby Warburg developed new ideas surrounding the significance of artworks. Warburg proposed that an interpretation of an artwork's most intrinsic features cannot only be stylistically based, but also include a focus on the content and its contextual history.[9] It was here Warburg developed the first iconological approach to art.[10] This ideology was carried over into one of Warburg's most prominent followers, Erwin Panofsky; whose scholarship in the application of Iconographic analysis is tantamount in the modern employment of the theory. Together, alongside other scholars such as Ernst Cassier, they developed what is known now to be the theoretical basis of iconographic investigation.[11] In rejecting pure formalism as the sole means of uncovering an artwork's significance, and instead looking towards the symbolic content of a work, these scholars ultimately began to connect artwork to its broader contexts in numerous ways. Panofsky elaborates upon this in his publication: *Meaning in the visual arts: papers in and on art history,* stating that ''form' cannot be divorced from 'content'' and therefore must have a "more-than-visual meaning."[12] He then

[8]Cothren and D'Alleva, *Methods,* 33.
[9]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 20.
[10]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 20.
[11]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 20.
[12]Cothren and D'Alleva, *Methods,* 33; and Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History,* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1955), 205.

prescribes levels of evaluation to apply to this content in order to ascertain the full meaning of an artwork.

Erwin Panofsky's scholarship makes itself out to be the most comprehensive approach in applying the theory of Iconography. In his publication *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in The Art of the Renaissance* (1939) Panofsky details the fundamental steps to achieve a successful analysis: the *pre-iconographical description,* the *iconographical analysis in the narrower sense (*or simply the *iconographical description),* and the *iconographical interpretation.*

The *pre-iconographical description* involves itself solely with the enumeration of primary forms presented in the artwork.[13] It identifies the characteristics within a work without relating meaning to them or defining a relationship between the subjects. The first phase evaluates the composition and the subsequent forms within it, but never delves into thematic or symbolic content. Panofsky recognized that, while practical experience is often sufficient for a pre-iconographical description, it does not guarantee a correct analysis.[14] Sometimes personal experience is not broad enough to fully understand what is represented, thus one must rely on outside sources to expand one's knowledge. It must also be noted that, within this phase, a distinct 'controlling principle' that directs one's practical application of knowledge is applied, this being the "history of style."[15] The history of style essentially filters one's practical knowledge according to the manner in which things were expressed within their specific contexts.

[13]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 15.

[14]Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology; Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance, (*New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 9.

[15]Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology,* 15.

The following step, the *iconographical description* delves deeper in that it establishes the secondary, or conventional subject matter. This phase goes beyond identifying the forms and focuses on the specific details and symbols that are used to describe the "subject" of the work of art.[16] It identifies the themes conveyed by the subjects and identifies iconographic motifs within the work. This is the phase that connects the relationships between the forms and considers how they contribute to the overall message or meaning of the image. This phase is ruled over the controlling principle Panofsky aptly calls "History of Types," ultimately determining the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by specific motifs.[17]

The final step in the application of iconographic analysis is the *iconographical interpretation.* This phase considers the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which the image was created, and how these factors may have influenced the artist's intent and the viewer's interpretation.[18] In this phase, the findings of the previous two phases are synthesized and used to interpret the overall significance of the image. The themes and symbols within the work are explored in tangent with their historical makeup and the cultural aspects of the era/place the work itself was made. With this final phase, a full understanding of the work's content and significance is achieved.[19]

Looking to apply iconographic theory, let us now turn our focus to Jean-Antoine Watteau's *Ceres (summer)*. Painted in 1717, *Ceres (summer)* was commissioned by Pierre Crozat, an art collector most famously known for his dedicated patronage of Watteau's early

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[16]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 6.

[17]Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology,* 15.

[18]Straten, *Introduction to Iconography,* 16.

[19]Unlike Straten, who includes a fourth iconological phase, Panofsky's construction of this phase includes both the iconographic and the iconological. For all practical purposes, Panofsky's model will be the basis for this paper.

career.[20] Crozat hired Watteau after being introduced to him by the "traditional history" painter Charles de La Fosse (1636-1716), of whom Watteau was heavily influenced by.[21] The painting, *Ceres (summer)* was created as part of a series of four, its counterparts each representing one of the seasons all in an ovular composition. This series was made specifically to adorn the walls of the dining room in Pierre Crozat's *hôtel particulier* in the *rue de Richelieu*, a well known center for "artists, connoisseurs and collectors" in Paris.[22] Unfortunately, the other paintings have been either destroyed or lost, with only their compositions recorded in engravings.[23] La Fosse was hired as the primary artist for the project, but upon his death in 1716, he was substituted for Watteau.[24] Further observations of the social and historical contexts of the work will be explored with the application of phase three, the *iconographic interpretation.*

Employing Panofsky's first level of iconographic analysis, *pre-iconographical description,* let us consider the forms situated within the composition of *Ceres*.[25] In it, we see a seated woman, reclining atop clouds in the sky. She holds a sickle in her left hand, and leans against the figure of a lion on her right. She wears a long, flowing gown with a white upper half and a shimmering pink skirt; as well as a crown of wheat and flowers. Below the lion's paw, a large crayfish can be seen amidst dark clouds. To the lower right of the central women, two secondary figures with an ethereal quality embosom sheaves of wheat. One figure is identifiably

[20]Cordélia Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings in the Collection of Pierre Crozat," *Master Drawings* 45, no. 1 (2007): 38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20444490.

[21]Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings," 40.

[22]Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings," 38.

[23]Michael Levey, "A Watteau Rediscovered: 'Le Printems' for Crozat," *The Burlington Magazine* 106, no. 731 (1964): 53, http://www.jstor.org/stable/874181.

[24]François Marandet, "Nouvelles hypothèses sur la genèse du décor peint de la salle à manger de l'hôtel Crozat," *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche du Château de Versailles,* no. 15 (February 2019): 1.

[25]As the first step in Panofsky's theoretical framework was previously completed in my prior work (ex: the Visual Description), this particular employment of the step is not as great in detail.

female, the other young and androgynous. A third sheaf of wheat appears above the mane of the lion.

Having accomplished the primary assessment of forms, let us now turn to Panofsky's second level of interpretation, the *iconographical description.* The central woman within the composition can be identified as the titular figure, Ceres. Adopted from the Greek deity Demeter, Ceres finds her origins in the Roman pantheon as the goddess of fertility and abundance. This association was multifaceted, and extended both to human, and most significantly agrarian, fertility. Essentially, her principle function was to "cause things to grow" and produce fruits, she was associated thus with nurture and cultivation.[26] Ceres oftentimes would have been viewed as the personification of grain; therefore the presence of the three sheaves of wheat are apt representations of her relationship with the crop, and the abundance of its harvest.[27] The sickle represents Ceres' role as the goddess of agriculture and her "responsibility for ensuring a bountiful harvest," and is specifically attributed to her as the personification of summer.[28] This is further emphasized by the sheaves of wheat, as they represent the success of the harvest. The Poppy-woven, wheat-stalked crown she wears perpetuates this connection as well, called the "*corona spicea"* it symbolizes her regency over all that grows and its abundance.[29] Her appearance in this painting immediately imbues it with themes of prosperity and plenty.

In this particular interpretation, Ceres is shown in connection with the canon of symbols that mark the summer zodiac: the Gemini twins (May), the Leo lion (June), and the Crayfish representing Cancer (July). Ceres herself stands in representation of the maiden Virgo (August). Together, these symbols have been traditional motifs used to represent the season of summer

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[26]Barbette Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 7.
[27]Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres,* 14.
[28]James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art,* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 285.
[29]Spaeth, *The Roman Goddess Ceres,* 35.

since medieval times. The origins of each symbol is rooted in Babylonia and has been modified overtime by outside influences.[30] Nevertheless, in the context of this work, the signs and compositional motifs likely generate from traditions originating in medieval manuscript representations of labors and zodiacs. The antique tradition of manuscript illustration often depicted personifications of the seasons surrounded by attributes characteristic of the month.[31] The calendar was decorated with signs of the zodiac, and layed out in a circular format to "[echo] the circular rotation of the year."[32] Often the season is depicted both with the labors of the month, and the zodiacs. Here, however, only the zodiacs are present. Zodiacs frequently encircled deities of pagan origin and served to indicate their heavenly realm.[33]

The symbols and compositional structure in *Ceres* reflect this established canon, and ultimately stand to represent the cyclical nature of the months, and characterization of summer. In the furthermost right one sees the Twins, symbolic of Gemini and the earliest summer month of May. Historically, the Twins are seldom portrayed as infantile or female. The classic canon for the Gemini "draws on myths based on the duality of strong males" and the twins are often represented as opposites.[34] Watteau instead likens them to putti- which are generally depicted in Renaissance and Baroque art as mischievous, playful figures who are associated with love and fertility.[35] In the context of *Ceres*, the twins as putti can be seen as representing the abundance of the harvest and the fertility of the land.

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[30]B.L. Van der Waerden, "History of the Zodiac," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 16, (1952): 217. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41635784.

[31]Marjorie Jean Hall Panadero, "The Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac in Twelfth-Century French Facades," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1984), 124.

[32]Panadero, "The Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac," 125.

[33]Panadero, "The Labors of the Months and the Signs of the Zodiac," 123.

[34]Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Signs of the Zodiac a Reference Guide to Historical, Mythological, and Cultural Associations* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1997), 16.

[35]Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols,* 264.

Following the twins, the crayfish continues the cyclical nature of the signs in the lower left. Representing Cancer, the sign has historically been considered a feminine symbol, associated with rebirth and renewal. Both Cancer and Ceres are seen as symbols of nurture within the feminine archetype.[36] Crayfish themselves offer a connection to the theme of abundance, as they inhabit lakes and streams, providing a source of food during the summer months.[37] This sign essentially promotes themes of nourishment and the maternal, both integral to Ceres as a deity and to the representation of summer.

Above the crayfish, the lion stands in representation of the Leo zodiac. His positioning and expression is somewhat traditional for the representation of the sign, as Leo is consistently shown as an uncontrolled beast with its claws outstretched and snarled teeth.[38] In the context of this work, however, the lion most significantly reflects lore extending from the Middle ages. According to this lore, Virgo, "the unsullied maiden," could "overpower Leo by the strength of her virtue."[39] Thus, Ceres, in connection to this myth, can be seen as a civilizing force over the untamed, as the lion is shown to be visibly more restrained with his rested paw.

As Virgo, *Ceres* acts as the final zodiac: the maiden. Historically, Virgo is represented by Ceres, Demeter, and the Virgin Mary. Thus, her symbolic use within this painting establishes dominant themes of abundance, fertility, purity, and nurture; all of which are heightened by the presence of the summer zodiacs that surround her.[40] Overall, the symbols in Watteau's *Ceres* serve to reinforce the goddess's role as a guardian over the bountiful harvests of summer and as the feminine nurturer. The signs of the zodiac work together to create a visual language that speaks to the cyclical passage of the months and their key connections to Ceres and summer.

[36]Snodgrass, *Signs of the Zodiac,* 122.

[37]Małgorzata Taborska, "The Constellation of Cancer on Antique Celestial Globes," *Globe Studies*, no. 64/65 (2018): 103. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45410615.

[38]Snodgrass, *Signs of the Zodiac,* 136.

[39]Snodgrass, *Signs of the Zodiac,* 138.

[40]Snodgrass, *Signs of the Zodiac,* 144.

Having observed the prominent themes and symbols found in *Ceres,* let us develop our understanding of the work through Panofsky's final phase, the *iconographical interpretation.* As a subject, 'The Four Seasons' were popularized in 18th century France, specifically with French painters of fêtes galantes.[41] Watteau would have been familiar with the canon of symbols through their established history, and their extensive usage in French art and architecture. His specific handling of the forms and symbols can be attributed to his influences while working under the patronage of Pierre Crozat. At this time, art promoted by the Académie Royale was considered the most desirable. Crozat's artistic taste did not stray from the conventions of the Académie Royale.[42] Through Crozat, Watteau became "intimately engaged" with Venetian artistry, influenced by Titian and other such masters; a tradition that was well encouraged in France during the regency period (1715-1723).[43] Watteau was fulfilling the specific tastes of his patron by applying a Venetian style to the figure Ceres. Other depictions of the allegory of summer, such as Antonio Pellegrini's (1675-1741) *Ceres (Allegory of Summer)*, reflected this very same influence, as it was painted during his visit to Paris in 1720.[44] Pellegrini's style demonstrates the very same smooth, luminescent quality as that of other Venetian masters, Marking both its prevalence and approval during this time.

This period emphasized the favorability of works that appealed to the frivolous salon culture of the upper class. Being placed with the other Four Seasons in the dining room of the Crozats hotel, *Ceres* would have assisted in maintaining an air of intimate sociability for the French elite as the works provided contemplative topics surrounding the renewal of the seasons.

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[41] Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols,* 134.

[42] Hattori, "Contemporary Drawings," 40.

[43] Philip Conisbee et al, *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century* (Washington D.C: National Gallery of Art, 2009) 465.

[44] Conisbee et al, *French Paintings,* 470. The author notes that the location of this work is currently unknown.

With minimal decorative detailing, The symbols within *Ceres* dominate the scene, this is attributed to the fact that they would not have been seen up-close by viewers.[45] As it housed in a center for artists and collectors, the decorative elements of the room catered to the common motifs and styles of the era designed to be both engaging, familiar, and palatable for the audience.

The context in which Watteau lived elucidates why each symbol is represented in the way it is. Substituting the Gemini twins for light, airy figures resembling putti would have catered to the tastes of the time, their serene and youthful nature appealing significantly more to the french elite than their historic, generally more masculine usage. The lion referenced for the painting came from La Fosse's painting *God the Father*; Watteau would have had access to it as he was sponsored and mentored by La Fosse during his time in Crozats hôtel.[46] Neither of them would have ever been able to see a lion in person, therefore its form is proportionally awkward. In regard to the symbol of the crayfish, only three species of crayfish lived in Europe during Watteau's life: the European crayfish, the white-clawed crayfish, and the stone crayfish.[47] Observing the formal qualities of the crayfish within the painting, Watteau clearly was referencing the latter. These factors demonstrate that the social culture of the time, specific location, and specific tastes of the patron, reveal Watteau's decisions to alter some of the traditional representations of the signs and the construction of their forms. While their traditional symbolic meaning revealed in the *iconographical description* remains present, the

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[45]Conisbee, *French Paintings,* 466.
[46]Conisbee, *French Paintings,* 469.
[47]Małgorzata Taborska, "The Constellation of Cancer on Antique Celestial Globes," *Globe Studies*, no. 64/65 (2018): 106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45410615.

iconographical interpretation allows us to understand their significance within the context of the painting itself.

In essence, having observed the formal qualities of Watteau's *Ceres* and developed their meaning and historic significance through the *iconographical description,* the themes portrayed are ones of fertility, abundance, and the cycle of the summer months. Through the *iconographical interpretation* the presence of these symbols and their respective use as a common pictorial subject in France during Watteau's lifetime provides insight as to why they were painted the way they were, and why they were the chosen theme. Overall, using Panofsky's levels of Iconographic analysis, the elements of the work revealed themselves in a deeper-than-visual way and succeeded in developing a well-rounded understanding of the work and its motifs.

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