



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

Importance of Symbolism in Visual Art: A Critical Analysis in Contemporary Scenario

Dr. Abid Hadi
Associate Professor
Dept. of Fine Art
AMU, Aligarh
Email: drabid110@gmail.com

Abstract

Basic semiotic theories are taught in most art schools as part of a contextual studies programme, but many people find it difficult to understand how these ideas might impact on their own practice. Visible Signs tackle this problem by explaining semiotic terms and theories in relation to visual communication, with illustrative examples taken from contemporary art and design. Concepts such as signs and signifiers, and language and speech are all explored within the framework of graphic design and fine art. Semiotics is the study of meaning-making, the study of sign processes and meaningful communication, in language, programming languages, formal logics, and semiotics. It focuses on the relationship between signifiers—like words, phrases, signs, and symbols—and what they stand for, their denotation.

Keywords: semiotics; sign; signifier; logics; denotations

Art and symbol both have juxtaposed and since inception their reflections are encountered through various shapes and forms in the diverse culture of the society. It is assumed that cultures and cultural expressions such as art, music, and language etc., are composed of signs, and each sign has a meaning beyond, and only beyond, its literal identity. Although sign theories are not new, their systematic application to the visual arts developed from the work of



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914) and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Language would be one of many semiotics or symbols, whose purpose was the communication or share the feeling. All the visual arts are linked to the sign or symbol. In the Palaeolithic caves, paintings were applied to the natural cave wall on unprepared ground. The Palaeolithic painters so disregarded the field as a sign in its own right that they superimposed figures- unusually animals. Semiotics can translate a picture from an image into words. Visual communication terms and theories come from linguistics, the study of language, and from semiotics, the science of signs. Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no natural meaning and become signs only when we provide them with meaning.

In the Egyptian picture language known as hieroglyphics, the profile of a standing man with arms reaching upward symbolizes praise and welcome. For a symbol to have meaning, it is important to understand what it represents. Hieroglyphics were embedded into every aspect of ancient Egyptian art: tombs, paintings, statuary and decorative arts. The ankh, a hieroglyphic pictograph representing life, holds its symbolic meaning to this day. The ancient Greek civilization is famous for its use of symbols in art. Greek gods and goddesses, such as Athena (goddess of war and wisdom), Hermes (god of merchants and messenger of Zeus) and Zeus (god of the sky and ruler of Olympus) appear throughout Greek art with their representative symbols: Athena with the owl and olive tree, Hermes with his winged boots, and Zeus with his thunderbolt. The use of ancient symbols in art can be found in nearly every culture and historical period. This is an important point to remember as we teach about the ways in which artists incorporate symbols into their work. Why does an artist include a particular symbol in the work, and for what purpose? Because symbolism can be quite abstract, especially for



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

beginners, understanding a symbol's context within history will take some of the mystery out of this often perplexing subject.

Symbols can represent ideas, concepts, beliefs, doctrines and feelings. Symbols can have powerful meaning and evoke strong emotion. Symbolism is humankind's oldest form of visual communication. Artists have incorporated symbols into their work since man first began to delve into the world of visual expression. Long before the advent of written language, man used symbols to convey what he did and did not understand of the world. As early as 25,000 B.C., Stone Age artists carved female figures with swollen abdomens and breasts as symbols of life and fertility. Cave artists working in what is now in Lascaux, France and Altamira in Spain, whose work dates from 15,000-10,000 B.C., painted abstract symbols on cave walls along with representations of animals. It's clear these prehistoric artists were incorporating symbols and symbolic content into their visual language. Evidence of prehistoric art that includes symbolic representations was not confined to present day Europe. Cave art has been found on the continents of Asia, Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Australia.

Visual Art consumers have become highly sophisticated readers of signs and signals, decoding subconsciously art work compositions. Everything surrounding us human beings today, including our own identities are all moulded and manipulated by signs, words, images and our visual language. Communication can be a form of mind control; the one that has the power to speak higher and have the right speech can have a power over others in a certain way by making the individual point stand above all. The same happens with artworks with a conceptual meaning that stand and activate other people's minds. Visual signs look for the possibility of a language that already exists and is used already by a large amount of people connected or not with the arts and the media. The linguistic sign consists of content like sense and meaning of an expression like letters or sounds. Language is ruled by strong codes or rules and becomes complicated when



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

we look at it in the form of visual artworks. It becomes a translation from linguistic to visual expression and the forms are as random as in linguistic signs.

A new belief was that art possessed an internal logic that could be understood through language theory. Art was perceived as a primitive language that combined visual signs and linguistic principles. Structuralism in art focused on the language that exists between compositional elements and the conventions of art, rather than form or subject matter. It centered on process and system analysis. Structural art does not inspire the viewer through aesthetic perception, but was a model for the analytic appraisal of art. Structuralism interpreted art like a sentence. Images are often thought of as a second form of communication that is just as expressive as a natural language. In visual art, semiotics interprets messages based on their signs and symbolism. Most signs are iconic as well as symbolic. Humans use these signs to convey feelings, thoughts, ideas, and ideologies. Semiotic analysis uses cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language and art. There are many similarities between a visual image and the image that written language creates. Semiotics translates a picture from an image to words. Art subconsciously consists of signs, signals and symbolism. Symbolism is a literary movement that spread to painting in the 1880s. Symbolists were trying to cope with the notion of subjective ideas, which determined that the senses are inseparable from human emotions and that people and objects are symbols of a deeper existence. Visual language is an expression of deep, emotional, ambiguous thoughts.

In Indian art, each component of the dancing Shiva holds symbolic significance, including creation, destruction, grace and liberation. Buddha sculptures are also symbolic of peace and spiritual force. Lotus is one of important symbol of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Japanese Zen gardens, what appear to be serene arrangements of sand, rock and mounds of moss are actually symbols for water, mountains and islands. It would be a difficult hunt, indeed, to



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

find a culture on the planet that has not at some time used the language of symbols in their works of art.

Medieval art relies heavily on symbols and iconography. The iconography found in early Christian art, or its set of symbolic forms, would include the crucifix, the apple, snakes, haloes, flowers, fruit, hearts, orbs and crowns--to list just a small handful of early Christian symbols. The large, circular rose windows characteristic of Gothic cathedrals were more than just a beautiful architectural element: their circular shape and light-emitting stained-glass represented the eye of God. The Late-Gothic painter Jan van Eyck used a device called "disguised symbolism" in his *Wedding Portrait* (1434), also known as the *Arnolfini Wedding*. Every object in the room, such as the mirror, the little dog, the shoes or the single burning candle, holds symbolic meaning.

Renaissance artists in both Italy and Northern Europe borrowed symbolism from both the ancient world and the medieval period. In *Primavera* (1478), by Sandro Botticelli, the Roman goddess Venus is surrounded by allegorical symbols of love, fertility and spring's renewal: Amor (the Roman version of Cupid) aims his arrow at the Three Graces, Flora strews flowers and a garden's trees hang heavy with fruit. German artist Albrecht Durer packed many of his works with symbols that related to the subject. In *Melancholia I* (1514), Durer placed at least eight symbols of Melancholy in his master print, such as a sphere, a ruler and scales. According to popular belief of the time, people of Melancholic temperament were prone to possess intellectual and creative gifts and inclined to experience depression; here Melancholy, represented as a winged woman, sits among objects and tools that symbolize her endeavors. Symbols appear in artistic periods and movements after the Renaissance as well, such as those found in Dutch still-life paintings of the Baroque period, the allegorical paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolist movement of the late 19th century. The works of such 20th



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 3

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 July-September, 2018

century artists as Marc Chagall, Jasper Johns and Jim Dine often use symbols in or as its subject matter.

An analysis of a work of art would consider primarily the aesthetics effects created by the component parts of design. These parts, called formal elements, constitute the basis of the artist's visual language. A formal analysis of the artistic composition considers how each element contributes to the overall impression made by the work. The methodology adopted for this review consisted of a number of approaches. We were clear from the outset that this review would focus on research and evaluation studies that present evidence from practice and practical examples of impact, rather than more discursive material that presents opinions, theories and ideas. Research on the how the semiotics impact is a burgeoning and wide-ranging field of research. Despite the variety of research subjects and methodologies alive and well in the field, there are a number of avenues this research paper has yet to explore.

Bibliography

Adams, Laurie Schneider. *Research Methodology of Arts an introduction*, Westview Press, 1996. Print.

Tomory, Edith. *A History of Fine Arts*. Orient black Swan, 2010. Print.

Berger, John .*Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books Publication, 2008. Print.

Edwards, I.E.S. *Tutankhamun: His Tomb and Its Treasures*. A Mondadori Editore, 1977. Print.