ICONOLOGY REVISITED

Ambiguity, hybridity, and the limits of Panofsky's methodology

By:
Adam Raul Kaya
Classical Archaeology

ABSTRACT: This article re-examines Erwin Panofsky's iconology through two case studies: a Gandhāran toilet tray (1st–2nd c. CE) and the grave stele of Eupheros (c. 430 BCE). Panofsky's tripartite ladder retains pedagogical clarity but presumes stable meanings and shared symbolic codes. The Gandhāran tray's hybrid motifs resist unitary synthesis, while the Eupheros stele's apparent coherence dissolves once reception and performativity are foregrounded. Both cases show that cultural stability is produced, not given. The article proposes an *iconology-plus*: a framework that keeps Panofsky's steps but embeds them within approaches attentive to hybridity, biography, and image agency.

Introduction

Erwin Panofsky's iconological method has long shaped the study of classical art and archaeology (Panofsky 1955; Lorenz 2016: 2–5; Holly 1984: 38–42). At many universities, including Copenhagen's Saxo Institute, it remains a default framework for teaching visual interpretation. Panofsky's tripartite ladder—pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation—aims to uncover the "intrinsic meaning" of images[1] as expressions of cultural worldviews (Panofsky 1955: 26–40). Yet this orientation presumes that images possess stable meanings, that audiences share symbolic literacy, and that such meanings can be systematically recovered.

As a teaching tool, the method provides clarity and rigour. As a research tool, however, it falters in the face of ambiguity, hybridity, and plural reception. Later critics emphasise instead the instability of images, their rhetorical and affective force, and the formative role of audiences (Berger 1972; Mitchell 1986; Freedberg 1989; Bredekamp 2018). These debates raise the central question of this article: Does Panofsky's search for intrinsic meaning illuminate cultural coherence, or does it conceal how stability is actively produced?

To explore this question, the article tests Panofsky's model against two contrasting artefacts. The first is a Gandhāran toilet tray from Sirkap (c. 1st–2nd century CE), featuring a hippocamp and rider, whose hybrid motifs resist synthesis (Pons 2011; Falk 2010; Francfort 1979). The second is the grave stele of Eupheros from Kerameikos (c. 430 BCE), unusually complete in its archaeological context and long regarded as a "textbook case" of iconology (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964; Stroszeck 2002; Margariti 2019). Juxtaposing these least and most favourable conditions — one marked by hybridity and cultural entanglement, the other by apparent homogeneity — is exactly why these

---

[1] In this article, "image" is used in Panofsky's broad sense, referring to visual representations in material culture (e.g. reliefs, sculptures, and decorated objects), rather than exclusively to painted or two-dimensional works.

cases were chosen: together they test the limits of Panofsky's framework, revealing that it falters not only in hybrid, cross-cultural settings but also in the supposedly coherent Classical world.

Cultural stability, I argue, is not uncovered but constructed. Iconology must therefore be reframed as an *iconology-plus*: a framework that preserves Panofsky's descriptive and identificatory steps while embedding them within methods that foreground hybridity, object biography, and the agency of images. The article first revisits Panofsky's tripartite model and its intellectual genealogy, then tests it through two contrasting case studies—a Gandhāran toilet tray and the Eupheros funerary stele— before drawing comparative conclusions on how cultural stability is actively produced rather than merely recovered.

Panofsky's iconology revisited

Panofsky introduced his influential distinction between iconography and iconology in the early 1930s, developing it fully in *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and later revisiting it in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955). His interpretive framework is organised into three successive levels. The first stage, pre-iconographical description, concerns the recognition of the basic subject matter of an image—the figures, objects, gestures, and events represented—identified through everyday experience and knowledge of style. The second stage, iconographical analysis, moves to the level of conventional subject matter, situating motifs within a broader repertoire of stories, allegories, and themes transmitted by textual and visual traditions. The third stage, iconological interpretation, seeks to disclose the intrinsic meaning of a work of art, treating it as the symbolic expression of a culture's fundamental values or worldview (Panofsky 1955: 26–40).

The aim of this interpretive process was not only to clarify the content of individual works but also to illuminate "the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts" (Panofsky 1955: 39). In this way, Panofsky positioned art history as a humanistic science with an anthropological dimension, capable of uncovering the cultural mentalities embodied in images.

Panofsky's iconology crystallised out of a contested genealogy of art-historical method. As Holly notes, by the early twentieth century, the discipline was institutionally secure yet increasingly self-critical, as Marxist, feminist, and semiotic critiques exposed its blind spots (Holly 1984: 21–27). It

was in this climate that Panofsky's method took shape, promising a rigorous way to recover the 'intrinsic meaning' of images (Panofsky 1955: 26–40).

The roots of Panofsky's project go back to Aby Warburg, who traced the migration of motifs across time and initiated the Hamburg tradition of cultural-historical art history (Bredekamp 2017: 12–13). Panofsky systematised what Warburg left open, turning a cultural-historical agenda into a replicable method. Equally decisive was Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, which defined art, myth, and language as autonomous meaning-systems and provided the framework for Panofsky's notion of iconology as the recovery of a culture's *Weltanschauung* (Holly 1984: 44–52). Panofsky also drew on the broader historicist horizon of Burckhardt's cultural cross-sections and Dilthey's hermeneutics, but it was Cassirer's symbolic forms that proved decisive (Holly 1984: 34-37, 114-119). Contemporary methodological debates—from Hans Tietze's call for a *Kunstwissenschaft* to Carl Robert's archaeological hermeneutics—supplied additional precedents but remained closer to philology and can be seen as precursors rather than direct models (Holly 1984: 98-100; Isler-Kerényi 2015: 558-559).

At the same time, stylistic analysis and connoisseurship dominated—Wölfflin, Dvořák, Berenson, and Beazley provided chronological scaffolding and attributions, but left iconographic meaning largely unexplored (Holly 1984: 46-51, 104-105; Donohue 2015: 450).

Panofsky's originality lay less in inventing iconology than in combining Warburg's cultural-historical vision, Robert's archaeological hermeneutics, and the broader historicist tradition into a coherent, teachable ladder of analysis.

At the University of Copenhagen's Saxo Institute, Panofsky's tripartite model remains the default framework for teaching visual interpretation. Especially in bachelor-level courses and monument assignments, its clarity and stepwise logic make it effective as a pedagogical scaffold (cf. Lorenz 2016: 4–5; Holly 1984: 178). Yet beyond its didactic clarity, Panofsky's framework endures because it still provides a systematic vocabulary for linking visual form, textual reference, and cultural meaning. This scaffolding remains indispensable even for approaches that seek to move beyond it. The "synoptical table" of Studies in Iconology presents the three levels—description, analysis, interpretation—as distinct operations, even though Panofsky stressed their interdependence (Panofsky 1939: 15; Holly 1984: 178). This didactic clarity explains the method's lasting appeal, even if, as Holly notes, it is often reduced to a "mere technique of deciphering" rather than a broader

theoretical inquiry (Holly 1984: 159, 174). Lorenz likewise warns that its neat structure risks turning iconology into a tautological exercise, where interpreters confirm only what they presuppose (Lorenz 2016: 33).

Yet what makes iconology effective in a teaching setting—its promise of a stable progression from surface description to intrinsic meaning—also risks obscuring the instability and performativity of images. Panofsky assumed that images contained inherent meanings tied to cultural worldviews, recoverable through analysis, implying that artworks reflected stable historical truths. Still, it would be reductive to cast Panofsky as an uncompromising essentialist. His notion of symbolic form and his insistence on historical conditioning already acknowledge that meaning is culturally mediated rather than fixed. While he did not employ terms like hybridity or polyvalence, his framework presupposes a dynamic relation between form, content, and worldview that allows for multiplicity within coherence. Even so, his synthesis reflects the epistemological climate of its own time (Panofsky 1939: 5–8; Panofsky 1955: 16, 31-39,). But as Lorenz and Holly have shown, even iconology itself is historically conditioned, a product of early twentieth-century intellectual traditions rather than a universal law (Lorenz 2016: 4–5, 20, 33; Holly 1984: 10–12, 147–174).

Later critics have extended this challenge. John Berger argued that "every image embodies a way of seeing," shaped by ideology and context (1972: 7–11, 33). W. J. T. Mitchell stressed that images act as agents that "want" things, structuring how they are perceived (1986: 1–12, 151–59; 2005: 11, 28–35). David Freedberg emphasised their affective force, the power of images to move, persuade, and provoke (1989: xxi–xxiv, 1–26, 82–98, 136–60, 283–319, 402–24). Horst Bredekamp developed this further in his theory of *Bildakte* or "image acts," analysing how images themselves produce effects (2018: 29–37, 98, 265–78).

Such critiques highlight problems already visible in ancient contexts. Greek funerary reliefs often replaced biographical accuracy with idealised personas, revealing symbolic rather than factual truths (Margariti 2019: 123–159). Gandhāran art, with its hybrid motifs and audiences, illustrates even more starkly how meanings fragment across cultural boundaries (Stoye 2020: 29–49; Lo Muzio 2011: 337; Falk 2010: 91–95). In both traditions, the gap between maker intention and viewer reception undermines any claim to stable intrinsic meaning.

Panofsky's framework thus remains foundational as a pedagogical scaffold, but it must be reframed as an *iconology-plus*: a basis to be complemented by approaches that foreground contingency,

hybridity, affect, and performativity. The following case studies put this to the test. A Gandhāran tray exemplifies how hybrid imagery resists synthesis, while the grave stele of Eupheros shows that even the apparent coherence of Classical Athens was itself a constructed stability rather than a given.

The Limits of Iconology in Hybridity

Tray No. 37 (No. 74 in Marshall 1951), now in the Taxila Museum (inv. no. 183/1932–33), was excavated in 1932–33 from Sirkap, the Indo-Greek and Indo-Parthian city at Taxila. The object dates to the early first century CE and belongs to Henri-Paul Francfort's Group B3 of Gandhāran trays, which comprises more schematic marine scenes rendered in a stylised Indo-Parthian manner (Francfort 1979: 7, 39).

Figure 1. Tray No. 37, hippocamp with rider. Taxila Museum, inv. no. 183/1932–33. After Lo Muzio 2011: 333.

Carved in grey schist and measuring approximately 12 cm in diameter, the tray was turned on a lathe before being finished in low relief (Francfort 1979: 39). At its centre appears a hippocamp, a composite sea creature with the foreparts of a horse and the tail of a fish, moving rightward. A semi-draped rider sits astride the beast, her garment crossing the torso and her coiffure or crown rendered as radiating lines. Beneath the animal's tail are a stylised palmette and two "goose-foot" motifs, while the rim bears a band of small comma-shaped incisions outside a single line—features characteristic of Group B examples. The hippocamp's eye, nostril, and musculature are rendered with single incised lines, a schematic treatment contrasting with the volumetric naturalism of Group A.

The archaeological context of the find is equally significant. Tray No. 37 was recovered from House 2A, a large elite residence immediately behind one of Sirkap's major stupa-courts. The house contained imported Greco-Roman jugs, ornaments, and amulets alongside the tray, which Marshall catalogued as "toilet-tray with rider on hippocamp" (Marshall 1951: 144–46, Pl. 145, no. 74), suggesting an affluent household with access to hybrid material culture. Its placement just behind a major stupa-court highlights the domestic–ritual interface of Sirkap—a placement that underlines

how sacred and domestic spheres intertwined in elite life, where household practice, Buddhist ritual, and elite display converged.

Within Francfort's typology, Group B trays are marked by schematised versions of Hellenistic motifs—"debased" Nereids, stylised banquets, and simplified marine creatures—mediated by Indo-Parthian artistic conventions. Whereas Group A preserves more naturalistic mythological scenes and Group C moves toward frontal Indian-style drinking couples, Group B occupies the transitional middle ground (Francfort 1979: 6-7, 39). Tray No. 37 exemplifies this hybridisation. Its hippocamp recalls Greek thiasos imagery, as in the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus (Rome, late 2nd c. BCE), yet its streamlined anatomy and ornamental fillers signal a local workshop adapting imported models. The rider's radiant crown evokes both Helios and Sūrya, combining Hellenistic and South Asian traits. As Jessie Pons notes, such sea-monsters are best understood as "composites" rather than copies—recognisable forms recombined into new visual languages that resonated differently across audiences, from Indo-Parthian elites to Kushan women (Pons 2011: 157).

Beyond questions of style, the tray's life history also complicates fixed meaning. Approached through an object biography, the tray emerges not as a static vessel but as a circulating artefact that may have served multiple functions. Its fine material and decorative rim suggest use as a luxury object, perhaps in cosmetic or dining settings. Scholars have debated their precise function: Francfort emphasised their domestic, cosmetic use (Francfort 1979: 5), while Harry Falk argued that they also played roles in libation rituals, particularly in nuptial contexts (Falk 2010: 97–102). As with many Gandhāran artefacts, its function was polyvalent: it could shift between domestic, ritual, and gift-exchange settings, with each use generating new meanings. This dynamic is well captured by Igor Kopytoff's concept of 'object biography' (Kopytoff 1986: 64–91).

The tray's polyvalence in function finds a parallel in its visual hybridity. Borrowed motifs were reconfigured into new forms: a Greek-derived hippocamp is paired with a rider whose crown recalls both Hellenistic divine attributes and local solar iconography. The decorative fillers echo Mediterranean forms, stripped of original associations. Tray No. 37 thus embodies Gandhāra's cosmopolitan environment, where motifs from multiple traditions were recombined into new visual languages. This hybridity makes the tray a limit case for iconology—an issue that becomes clear when Panofsky's method is applied next.

At the pre-iconographical level, Panofsky's method would simply register: a hippocamp in motion, a semi-draped rider, stylised palmette and goose-foot motifs, and a decorative rim. The calm rightward glide and the rider's closed, composed pose lend the scene a restrained, ceremonial character.

At the iconographical stage, the motif points toward Greco-Roman thiasos imagery—hippocamps bearing Nereids or accompanying Poseidon along marine processions (cf. Pons 2011). Yet the rider resists secure identification. What would be a Nereid in a Mediterranean context slips here: the figure's mantle and posture diverge from classical formulae, while the radiant coiffure/crown evokes solar or divine associations — Helios in the Hellenistic repertoire, or Sūrya in the Indian — a link emphasised by Falk (2010). The attributes that would anchor a conventional identification are conspicuously missing: there is no trident, hydria, billowing himation, accompanying Triton, or inscription. Even the so-called "fillers" — palmettes and goose-foot repeated across related trays — operate less as narrative cues than as elements of a local decorative vocabulary whose meaning remains opaque (Francfort 1979). Even when tested against Panofsky's own correctives — the history of types, of style, and of cultural symbols — the image resists determinate classification.

At the iconological stage, a conventional Panofskian synthesis would read the tray as expressing an Indo-Parthian worldview in which Hellenistic forms were recontextualised to signal cosmopolitan prestige, divine favour, or cultivated taste. The tray's small scale, fine carving, and recovery from House 2A would seem to support such an interpretation, suggesting use in intimate domestic or ritual settings. Yet precisely where it seeks a single Weltanschauung, the reading falters. Is the rider Nereid, a solar deity, an allegory, or none of these? The same forms circulate across Greek, Iranian, Buddhist, and local systems without stabilising into one symbolic code. The method's ladder can be climbed, but at its summit it yields not 'intrinsic meaning' but polyvalence: a hybrid play of motifs that resists reduction. Instead of encoding a clear ideology, the tray reflects a fluid visual negotiation, in which meaning is contingent and activated differently depending on the viewer's background and the contexts of use.

Tray No. 37 exemplifies the limits of Panofsky's method in hybrid, transcultural contexts. Iconology rests on the assumption that images contain retrievable "intrinsic meaning," the symbolic expression of a shared worldview. Yet this tray destabilises that premise. Its power lies in ambiguity: it does not resolve into a singular reading but resonates differently across audiences. An Indo-Parthian aristocrat

might see Greco-Roman prestige; a Kushan woman might see ritual efficacy or protection. These divergent literacies exceed what Panofsky's framework can accommodate.

Scholars themselves diverge: Jessie Pons interprets Gandhāran sea-monsters as "composites" recombining Greek and Indian forms, while Harry Falk stresses Indo-Iranian solar and aquatic symbolism. The coexistence of such readings shows that meaning is not fixed but negotiated.

Moreover, the image is performative. As Freedberg and Bredekamp argue, images act—persuading, provoking, enchanting. W. J. T. Mitchell similarly describes images as "desiring" entities that demand interaction rather than passive viewing. Tray No. 37, likely handled in intimate domestic or ritual contexts, did not merely depict hybridity; it enacted it. Its meaning was contingent, activated through bodily engagement, ritual action, and social framing.

Instead of encoding a stable ideology, the tray reveals hybridity as a strategy of openness: a fluid negotiation of forms that refuses closure. It is precisely this instability—its refusal of a single *Weltanschauung*—that exposes the limits of Panofsky's iconology.

The "textbook case"

The Eupheros stele is a Classical Attic funerary relief recovered in 1964 from a child's burial in the Kerameikos, south of the Sacred Way (Stroszeck 2002: 468; Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 88). The grave lay about two metres below the later Hellenistic surface; the stele was found face-down above the southwest corner of the tomb, suggesting deliberate removal and careful deposition rather than casual destruction. The inhumation, placed in a wooden coffin, was accompanied by a compact but carefully chosen assemblage: six white-ground lekythoi (one of exceptional quality), a red-figure oinochoe, a kantharos, a salt-dish, terracotta toys (including a small ape), two strigils, two styli, an astragal, and writing implements (Stroszeck 2002: 468–69; Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 99–101). These goods situate the burial firmly within the socialised funerary program of a well-to-do Athenian child, combining athletic, educational, and domestic registers of commemoration.

The monument itself is a mid-fifth-century gabled relief showing the youth Eupheros standing draped in a mantle and holding a strigil beneath a pediment with palmette ornament. The architrave bears the neatly cut single name "Eupheros," without patronymic, providing the sole on-monument identification of the deceased (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 94, 102–3; Stroszeck 2002: 469, 474).

Conservation notes and UV photography revealed traces of a thick blue painted ground with additional pigments, consistent with the canonical three-part polychrome schemes of Attic gabled stelai (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 88; Stroszeck 2002: 469, 473). Stylistic parallels with the Parthenon frieze situate the relief in the Parthenon-period milieu (c. 430 BCE), though scholars have debated whether the mason was a local Attic craftsman or trained in Boeotia (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 102–4).

Because inscription, pigment, figural type, and grave goods all survive in situ, the Eupheros monument offers a remarkably complete conjunction of epigraphic, pictorial, and archaeological evidence. For precisely this reason, it has often been treated as a "textbook case" for Panofskian iconology. At the pre-iconographical level, we can describe a mantle-draped youth with a strigil, framed by a gabled pediment and named "Eupheros," set above a child's inhumation furnished with vessels, toys, and grooming implements. At the iconographical stage, these elements resolve into conventional motifs of Attic funerary art: the strigil and athletic kit index gymnastic culture, the styli and writing implements evoke paideia, the lekythoi function as ritual tokens, and the inscription provides the dispositive identifier. At the iconological level, the ensemble synthesises into a coherent civic identity — an Athenian youth formed by elite domestic conditions, athletic training, and literacy — commemorated in a public place of remembrance.

Figure 2. Funerary stele of Eupheros. Kerameikos Museum, inv. no. I 3876, Athens. Mid-5th century BCE. After Stroszeck 2002: 471.

Methodologically, the Eupheros stele appears to exemplify Panofsky's vision: inscription, pigment, grave goods, and iconographic motifs align into a coherent synthesis of Athenian paideia, athletic cultivation, and civic commemoration. It seems to be precisely the kind of monument his method was designed for — one where material, iconographic, and archaeological

evidence converge to recover cultural meaning. But coherence on paper is not the same as stability in practice. Once we consider not only how different audiences encountered the monument, but also the polyvalence of its symbols and the performative force of its display, the neat mapping from motif to single cultural meaning begins to fracture.

The stele constructs an idealised Eupheros, projecting civicised youth over the biological remains of a child (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 90; Stroszeck 2002: 468). This rhetorical strategy asserted polis values while veiling personal grief. Meaning, therefore, lay less in transparent biography than in rhetorical projection: an idealised Eupheros embodying civicised youth, which invited viewers to grieve, admire, and reflect on Athenian values (Berger 1972: 7–10; Mitchell 1986: 1–4, 44–68, 151–59; Mitchell 2005: 11, 28–35, 46–48; Freedberg 1989: 1–26; Bredekamp 2018: xi, 29–35, 160–90, 283). The monument thus reveals more about Athens' ideals of youth than about Eupheros himself.

Second, the individual motifs themselves were never univocal. The strigil could index gymnastic culture for some viewers, but for others it might evoke erotic grooming, ritual purification, or metaphors of cleansing and rebirth. White-ground lekythoi functioned simultaneously as funerary tokens, canvases for mythic imagery, and objects of visual display. Meaning, therefore, varied according to social position, gender, memory, or personal association. A metic or slave, for example, might not read Eupheros as an embodiment of civic virtue but as a lost child; a grieving parent might focus on the toys, not the gymnasium. Panofsky's assumption of a culturally literate, homogeneous viewer overlooks this variability.

Panofsky's account also risks reifying Athens as a closed, homogeneous system. Even within Attica, reception was plural, and in multi-ethnic contact zones such as Samos the same imagery circulated among Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians, underscoring that poleis were never as ideologically sealed as Panofsky's model presumes. Indeed, the very framing of Eupheros as a "textbook case" of civic ideology reflects not only the monument itself but also the historiography of iconology: its role as a didactic example may tell us as much about modern interpretive traditions as about Athenian funerary practice.

Third, the stele's original setting amplified its performative and affective force in ways iconology cannot capture. Erected along a trafficable route in the Kerameikos, vividly painted and life-sized, the bright colour fields heightened its impact, soliciting attention in ways that monochrome stone

cannot convey today. The monument worked upon passersby, eliciting grief, admiration, and civic reflection. As Freedberg (Freedberg 1989: 1–26) and Bredekamp (Bredekamp 2018: xi, 29–35, 160–90, 283) argue, images act: they project affect, solicit bodily responses, and inscribe the deceased into communal memory. The stele was not only a sign-system but an active participant in Athenian civic and familial self-fashioning. This performative agency is drastically diminished in a museum vitrine, where the monument becomes an aesthetic specimen rather than a site of mourning and public pedagogy.

What appears at first as ideological coherence is, in fact, structured ambiguity. The stele mediates between public memory and private grief, between the codified signs of civic paideia and the irreducible pathos of a child's death. Idealisation here produces a meaning that is both stabilising and unstable: it asserts social values while leaving room for plural, personal receptions. Panofsky illuminates what Eupheros represents but not what it does. His method highlights symbolic structure but neglects reception, affect, and performative agency. The stele shows that even in Classical Athens — the most "favourable" context for iconology — cultural stability was actively constructed, not simply recovered.

Constructed stability

Placed side by side, the two monuments illuminate different stress points in Panofsky's framework. The Eupheros monument seems almost tailor-made for iconology: relief, inscription, pigments, and grave goods align and can be synthesised into a coherent civic narrative about paideia, virtue, and commemorative practice (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964; Stroszeck 2002; Margariti 2019). As seen already with the Gandhāran tray, hybridity destabilises Panofsky's search for intrinsic meaning. Its forms and functions were polyvalent, resisting reduction to a single symbolic code (Francfort 1979; Pons 2011; Falk 2010).

Yet the contrast is not as simple as dividing "coherent Athens" from "hybrid Gandhāra." Even in the supposedly ideal case, the Eupheros stele is less a transparent reflection of civic ideology than a rhetorical construct aimed at plural audiences. Its motifs—the strigil, the lekythoi, the toys—were multivalent, read differently across gender, status, and personal memory. Its vivid colour and monumental scale worked performatively upon passersby, soliciting attention and emotion, while its idealising depiction of a youth overlays the biological reality of a child's body and the private

grief of a family. Gandhāra makes the limits of iconology explicit, but Athens reveals that the same instabilities were already present, if less immediately visible.

What these cases expose is not the futility of Panofsky's model but the fragility of its central presupposition: that recurrent motifs can be reliably synthesised into a unitary Weltanschauung. Three correctives emerge. First, meanings are produced through plural literacies, not a single shared code. The same object may index citizen ideology, mercantile prestige, or ritual efficacy depending on who views or handles it (Berger 1972; Mitchell 1986). Second, images act as well as signify: they persuade, console, and enchant in ways that are historically consequential (Freedberg 1989; Bredekamp 2018). Third, objects have careers. A static reading obscures the fact that artefacts accumulate and shed meanings as they circulate through different contexts of use and re-use, a dynamic well captured by Kopytoff's notion of object biography (Kopytoff 1986). When these perspectives are added, "intrinsic meaning" becomes less a universal truth than a best-fit synthesis valid for particular audiences, sites, and phases in an object's life.

The comparative lens sharpens this point. In Gandhāra, hybridity and polyvalence are not flaws but deliberate strategies of openness: composite sea-monsters, ambiguous riders, and schematic fillers invite multiple recognitions and thus widen social reach (Pons 2011; Francfort 1979). In Athens, the Eupheros stele appears to instantiate civic coherence, but closer analysis shows that such coherence was itself a rhetorical achievement of funerary display. Its apparent stability derives not from any intrinsic essence but from the conventions of genre, the choreography of display, and the institutions of civic commemoration that temporarily narrowed interpretive possibilities. Both cases, therefore, suggest that cultural stability is not something that iconology uncovers but something that societies actively construct.

For this reason, the way forward is not to discard Panofsky's ladder but to reframe it as an "iconology-plus." Description, identification, and synthesis remain valuable steps, especially pedagogically, but they must be embedded within approaches attentive to object biographies, audience variability, and the performative agency of images. Intrinsic meaning, in this light, is less a universal core to be uncovered than a contingent synthesis, valid only for specific audiences, contexts, and moments of use.

In practical terms, an iconology-plus approach would follow three successive steps after Panofsky's descriptive stages. First, it would trace the object's material and social biography, mapping its

production, circulation, and recontextualisation over time. Second, it would examine audience variability, reconstructing how different viewers or users might have engaged with various layers of meaning. Third, it would analyse the performative and affective dimensions of the image—how its material presence, scale, or sensory qualities elicited responses in specific settings.

Collectively, these steps transform iconology from a search for intrinsic meaning into a dynamic analysis of how meaning is created, enacted, and transformed.

Conclusion

This study has revisited Panofsky's iconology by testing it against two sharply contrasting artefacts: a Gandhāran toilet tray and the Eupheros funerary stele. The comparison demonstrates both the continuing value and the inherent limits of the tripartite model. In Gandhāra, hybridity, polyvalence, and shifting contexts of use render the search for an "intrinsic meaning" untenable; in Athens, the apparent coherence of civic symbolism unravels once reception, affect, and performativity are brought to the fore. What appears stable under Panofsky's schema thus emerges as a rhetorical construction rather than a cultural essence.

Placed side by side, the two cases reveal that Panofsky's framework falters not only where hybridity makes instability explicit but also in contexts traditionally regarded as coherent. Iconology remains powerful as a heuristic scaffold, yet its promise of recovering a unitary worldview rests on fragile foundations. Stability arises less from intrinsic meaning than from social practices of display, reception, and commemoration.

Reframed as an "iconology-plus," Panofsky's method can retain its descriptive and analytical discipline while opening itself to the contingencies of object biography, audience, and affect. Rather than seeking universal meanings, it invites us to trace how artworks negotiate coherence amid diversity, how they act upon viewers, and how they construct—rather than merely reflect—cultural worlds. Panofsky's framework remains foundational, but its relevance depends on recognising the very instability it sought to master: cultural coherence is always achieved rather than given, and ambiguity often proves the most potent strategy images possess.

Bibliography

- Berger, John 1972: *Ways of Seeing*. British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, London.
- Bredekamp, Horst 2018: *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*. De Gruyter, Berlin. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110548570
- Donohue, A. A. 2015: "The Historiography of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture". Clemente Marconi (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 440–454.
- Falk, Harry 2010: "Libation Trays from Gandhara". *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 2010:24, p. 89–113.
- Francfort, Henri-Paul 1979*: Les palettes du Gandhāra*. Diffusion de Boccard, Paris.
- Freedberg, David 1989: *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226259031.001.0001
- Holly, Michael Ann 1984: *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Isler-Kerényi, Cornelia 2015: "Iconographical and Iconological Approaches." Clemente Marconi (ed.): *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 558–573.
- Kopytoff, Igor 1986: "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process". Arjun Appadurai (ed.): *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 64–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819582.004
- Lo Muzio, Ciro 2011: "Gandharan Toilet-Trays: Some Reflections on Chronology". *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 17, p. 331–340. https://doi.org/10.1163/157005711X595167
- Lorenz, Katharina 2016: *Ancient Mythological Images and Their Interpretation: An Introduction to Iconology, Semiotics, and Image Studies in Classical Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139013802
- Margariti, Katia 2019: "Funerary Sculpture: Women on Attic Grave Reliefs". Olga Palagia (ed.): *Handbook of Greek Sculpture*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, p. 123–59. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614513537-006
- Marshall, John 1951: *Taxila: An Illustrated Account of Archaeological Excavations carried out at Taxila under the Orders of the Government of India between the years 1913 and 1934*. Vol. II. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Mitchell, W. J. T. 1986: *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226148052.001.0001
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 2005: *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images.* University of Chicago Press, Chicago. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226245904.001.0001
- Panofsky, Erwin 1939: *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance.* Oxford University Press, New York.
- Panofsky, Erwin 1955: *Meaning in the Visual Arts.* Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, NY.
- Pons, Jessie 2011: "Sea Monsters on Gandhāran Toilet-Trays: Tentative Interpretations of a Composite Motif". Anna Kouremenos, Sujatha Chandrasekaran and Roberto Rossi (eds.): *From Pella to Gandhara: Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East.* BAR International Series 2221, Archaeopress, Oxford, p. 153–75.
- Schlörb-Vierneisel, Barbara 1964: "Zwei klassische Kindergräber im Kerameikos". *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 1964:79, p. 85–104.
- Stoye, Martina 2020: "On the Crossroads of Disciplines: Tonio Hölscher's Theory of Understanding Roman Art Images and Its Implications for the Study of Western Influence(s) in Gandhāran Art". Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart (eds.): *The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art: Proceedings of the Third International Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project, University of Oxford, 18th–19h March 2019*, Archaeopress, Oxford, p. 29–49. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.15136064.8
- Stroszeck, Jutta 2002: "Das Grab des Eupheros". Wolf-Dieter Heilmeyer, Andreas Scholl and Hans-Ulrich Cain (eds.): *Die griechische Klassik: Idee oder Wirklichkeit. Eine Ausstellung im Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, Berlin, p. 468–475.