

## LEVELS OF MEANING IN HAIDA ART

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Art conveys meaning by providing visual messages which can be generalized by metaphor to mean more things. Two different kinds of visual messages may be used, and these are generalized by two different kinds of metaphor. The result is two different modes, axes, or levels of meaning. I suggest that these be called the "iconographic" level and the "expressive" or "iconic" level. Artistic statements, like verbal statements, convey much more meaning when they include "predicates" as well as "subjects", messages as well as topics. The "iconographic" level of art is concerned primarily (and in some art styles, solely) with identifying the subjects. The "iconic" level is concerned with providing predicates.

Haida art, as exemplified by Edenshaw's painting of the Raven crest, offers an unusually revealing case study of the interplay between these two levels of meaning. The iconographic level identifies what and who the art is about, by answering the question (the only question we have so far thought to ask of Haida art) "what does it represent?" Edenshaw's painting represents "Raven", and also by extension other subjects for which Raven stands as a metaphor. The iconic level enriches the artistic statement with predicates, by answering the further question "but what else is it trying to say?" Edenshaw's painting, I am now convinced, is trying to say many things, in fact it is straining to say everything it is capable of saying, about matters of supreme concern such as the proper conduct of Haida life, the essential shapes of things in the world, and the harmony that can exist between them.



The visual messages of the two levels of meaning are generalized on different kinds of logic, corresponding to the ways in which the mind, in its search for order, deals with "wholes" and with "parts". For an understanding of the profound importance of this difference I am indebted to the psychologist Silvano Arieti (The Intra-Psychic Self, 1967). According to him, the mind generalizes (creates classes of like things) in two fundamentally different ways, which result in the creation of two different kinds of classes. "Secondary classes" are products of our everyday logic and provide us with our regular food for thought. They consist of those things which are alike as wholes, which share all of their essential attributes in common (eg, all "ravens"). They are concepts, for which we have words. "Primary classes", on the other hand, are products of an archaic form of logic called "paleologic", which is part of the "primary process" of cognition. They consist of those things which are alike in part, which share one significant attribute in common (eg, all girls named Mary). Paleologic responds to them, however, as though they shared other attributes as well, as though similarity meant identity. Paleologic still comes into play in dreams and in schizophrenia (where it leads to such results as "I am Mary, so I am the Virgin Mary"). It also continues to operate, but now with self-awareness, in metaphor, which permits us to express similarities between things in different secondary classes, and thus see more order and meaning in the world.

One way to make art "mean" more things is to generalize the subject so that it is "about" more things. It is the role of the iconography to start this process by identifying to the eye and the mind a single primary subject ("Raven"). The generalization embarks from this concept, but it occurs in the mind, not in the art. The mind expands the subject either by metaphor ("Raven"



may stand for "people who use Raven as crest"), or by the logic of the part standing for the whole ("people who use Raven as crest" may stand for "all Haida"). The subject of Edenshaw's painting can therefore be read simply as "Raven", but it can also be generalized to mean "people who use Raven as crest", and even further, when the predicate requires it, to "all Haida", or even conceivably "things in general". This would comprise a preliminary list of things Haida art may be about. It is a limited chain of secondary concepts at ascending levels of generality, linked in a sort of taxonomic hierarchy, and anchored in a single primary concept.

Another way to make art mean more things is to create predicates, and generalize them, so that the art "says more things about" its subjects. The provision of predicates is the primary role of the iconic level. Its visual messages are not wholes like the icon "Raven" but parts: elements, attributes, relationships. Nor are its meanings anchored in a single concept, they can embark from any of the multitude of perceived attributes within the design. The visual messages already have the stance of predicates, because of their dependent relationship to the iconography. They convey their meanings by suggesting to the eye and the mind analogous predicates in other systems (the curve of a line may suggest a movement in dance, or a path of human conduct, or the shape of the sky). The analogy creates a new metaphor, bringing into mind a new subject. It is a metaphor of predicates, not of subjects. The iconic mode, therefore, can not only "say things about" the subjects, it can create more subjects to say them about. And not least among its meanings, as a satisfying by-product, is the repeated confirmation of the very premise from which it starts: that things in different classes do have essential similarities; that order, verity, beauty do exist in the world.



When we look at the visual arts of our own Western tradition, most of us remain unaware that there may be a level of meaning beyond the iconographic. Western art has developed a complex iconography, containing both subjects and predicates, and tends to carry a very large share of its total meanings at the iconographic level. In most works of painting and sculpture, indeed, there may not be anything beyond. In the great works of the finest artists there do seem to be deeper meanings of the sort which I am calling iconic, but that seems to be an esoteric matter understood by few. Our general habit in approaching a work of art is to learn what the iconography represents, and explore the ideas associated with the subject, and be satisfied with that. It is a habit which we should learn to break in looking at the arts of other cultures.

Our previous studies of the northern style of Northwest Coast art have failed to recognize the iconic level as a level of meaning. Our habitual aim has been to find out what the iconography represents, and then veer off to pursue the cultural associations of that segment of the meaning - a pursuit rewarding enough in its own right. The iconic level has entered our awareness only as "style"; and this most distinctive of all art styles has been masterfully analyzed and described by Bill Holm, but not explained. Each of us, from Boas on, has felt massive frustration at our inability to reach a satisfactory comprehension of what we know intuitively to be the greatest masterpieces. We have uneasily evaded the issue by speaking of the art as becoming increasingly "decorative", "applied", and "abstract". What we failed to see is that "style" must be understood primarily as another level of meaning, and that this particular style carries such a heavy share of meanings that it may at times dominate or even submerge the iconography.



### Iconography in Haida Art

Iconography may be considered the "shallow" level of meaning in art, since usually - and I think necessarily - it conveys its portion of the meaning first. Its visual messages, "icons" like Raven, are wholes in form as well as in thought. Visually they are perceived as gestalts, because the eye, in its search for meaning, projects pre-existing perceptions onto the work of art until it finds a "fit". The icon identifies itself by name, because such concepts are mediated by language, and "there is a word for it". Its meanings, in the sense of its mental associations, already exist pre-packaged in the mind. All that the icon has to do is trigger into consciousness these existing meanings; and in fact that is all it is capable of doing. Visually, it has only to meet the minimum requirement, recognition, to accomplish its entire job. A simple pictograph tattooed on a Haida chest evokes the same concept, with the same semantic load, as Edenshaw's mural. No amount of enrichment of the image, no more faithful portrayal of Raven as it is in nature, can add to or detract from this aspect of the meaning. Raven remains Raven no matter how well or poorly it is depicted. The locus of iconographic meaning is in the mind, not in the art. The Haida artist took care of that chore with a minimum of bother, for it was too easy a part of the artistic task to warrant much effort, and got on with the more challenging ways of conveying meaning. The style, creativity, and beauty we admire in Haida art do not reside in the iconography as such.

Iconography is rooted to the natural world of tangible and visible things. To the implicit question "what is the topic?" it can only reply with the likeness of a thing which is normally concrete and visible. Such a "thing" may already be abstracted and generalized a couple of steps out of the chaos of the actual world, it may be "Raven" rather than a particular black bird, but it



derives its identity from its isomorphism with a constant class perceived in nature. There are no natural icons for nouns such as "song" or "happiness". The language of iconography has a very limited vocabulary.

Traditional Haida art (ie, excluding argillite) utilized only segments of this natural vocabulary: those dealing with humans, animal "species" of the natural (including supernatural) world, and mythical creatures. The main purpose it served in the culture was totemic, to make the social system visible by providing crests to stand as visual metaphors for the different groups of people within the society. The distinctiveness of animal species in the natural world provided the metaphor for the distinctiveness of social groups in the human world. The "natural" world was conceived widely enough to include "supernatural" creatures like sea-bears which the Haida knew to be there, and also mythical beings like the culture hero Raven in all his guises, who had once been present. The iconography was also extended to include specific characters of myth, like the woman shaman with her circular rattles from the myth of Gonaqadet. In total, however, it remained a small and narrow vocabulary of subjects.

Haida iconography aspired to convey only a limited load of meaning: it identified the subjects but seldom attempted to provide predicates. When the creatures were shown "doing" something, like Bear Mother holding her cubs, the purpose was usually to identify the subject more specifically (unlike the traditional European "Mother and Child", which creates an iconographic predicate by generalizing the relationship per se). There were perhaps the first steps toward a more complex iconography in a few metaphorical acts, like the joined tongues on Raven rattles which seem to depict the conveyance of essence or power, but by and large it was a simple iconography. This level of Haida art, in summary, consisted of a restricted vocabulary of subjects without predicates, utterances started but not finished. It was hardly a sufficient vehicle alone.



Iconics in Haida Art

The iconic level is "deeper" within the art and intrudes itself less easily and less fully on the consciousness. Its visual messages in the design are not wholes but parts, details, and its meanings arise out of their character as open metaphors which invite analogies. The "parts" may be elements or attributes. Design elements may be perceived as entities without being icons, and their conduct and relationships may invite analogy with similar conduct and relationships in other realms, such as the affairs of men. Or the "part" may be an attribute, inviting analogy with similar attributes in other systems: the curve of a line may be seen as the shape of an act. The analogy conjures up the metaphor, suggesting the new subject to which the meaning applies.

If icons are "symbols" of the bundles of pre-existing meanings they trigger in the mind, the units of iconic meaning are "signs". They have to "look like" the ideas for which they stand. To say a beautiful thing, the iconic message must be a beautiful thing. It has to activate the imagination, create the metaphor, bring into existence the new primary class for which there is no name. If the locus of iconographic meaning is mostly in the mind, the locus of iconic meaning is mostly in the art. In iconography, the visual message (icon) is isomorphic with a whole, but does not have to resemble it very faithfully in order to identify it. In iconic design, the visual message is isomorphic with a quality or attribute, and has to mirror it exquisitely in order to get its subtle meaning across.

Getting the iconic meanings out of a work of art can be almost as difficult as getting them in. Because meaningful statements require subjects as well as predicates, the searching out of the iconic messages cannot be dissociated from



the reading of the iconography. From the outset the iconography takes a head start, intruding its primary message first. It is no mistake to speak of "reading" the iconography, for to recognize the icon is to discover its name. Reading the iconography is essentially a process of verbalization; art names its subjects, but only suggests its predicates. However, since the deep meanings are presumably about the same general concerns as the shallow meanings, the recognition of the icon is a necessary first step in pinning down the topic.

Having read the icon ("Raven"), the viewer may well generalize the subject to the level of human concerns ("people who use Raven as crest", which implies that the concern is with social behaviour), for these are what interest him the most. In the iconic realm, however, there is no such easy and logical way to capture the mind and launch it to the first plateau of higher meaning. There are no ready-made categories of meaning. But by the same token, the iconic meanings are not restricted to existing classes of related things. Ideally, they are limited only by the artist's power to imagine and suggest, the viewer's to perceive, and the ability of the mind to find order in the world. However, on this axis as well, it is the analogies with the affairs of men that are of most interest to the viewer. Dwelling on this level, the iconic meanings suggest the ideal shapes of conduct in Haida affairs. Haida art is mostly about people.

Iconic statements are statements initiated with predicates rather than with subjects. Such statements are perhaps more congenial to those who use a metaphoric mode of thought because they start with an open metaphor and let the mind choose which specific meaning to apply, rather than pinning down the meaning at the start. Iconics is the language of metaphor in art, opening the way to the full use of metaphor as a method of cognition.



Iconic meanings are not, perhaps, confined to the cognitive, conceptual level of experience. They are free to depict all predicate states, both cognitive ones of the sort which can also be mediated by language, and non-cognitive, experiential ones of the sort, for example, which are mediated by music. The shape of an iconic message, like the "shape" of a musical phrase, may be isomorphic not with a concept but with a feeling, urge, emotion. It yields its meaning to empathy, not analysis. Haida art depicts feelings as well as thoughts.

In Haida art the iconic messages are exceptionally abundant and expressive. The most fundamental attribute is a pervasive quality of exquisite precision and control, which says that every line, every relationship, even every "mistake", is exactly the way it should be, on purpose and with meaning. Every element has its own space, or field of force, and its own standardized role. It is not always possible to separate entities from attributes; for example, the "formline", which is the most typical design element, acts at the same time as an entity and its path of conduct. Haida lines are precise, self-conscious curves: sensitive boundaries or lines of mediation, and steered lines of action. There is structuring, with inner lines of force and striving. Some of the shapes, like the "ovoid", are cosmic shapes, the ideal shapes for such things to be. There are primary and secondary, dominant and subordinate entities in Haida design, as there are elsewhere in the Haida world.

Haida art is pre-eminently an art of line. Distinctive lines eventually create distinctive new forms, which invite identification as icons. When such emergent forms become fixed, but do not refer back to forms in nature, we may suspect that a new kind of icon has been created. The "salmon trout head" motif seems to be such an iconic icon. Not burdened with a natural meaning (it does not represent a salmon trout head any more than a "herringbone" pattern represents a herring), it is free to take more abstract meanings, such as (let me



reveal a hunch) "nephews". Yet it remains iconic, inviting analogy with all things that share the attributes common to salmon trout and nephews in Haida thought: life, growth, promise, emergence. It is in microcosm what all Haida art was striving to become: a beautiful design, constructed from beautiful behaviours, conveying an open-ended range of meanings which align man and his conduct with the cosmic shapes of the world.

### Style

Most of the iconic meanings in art are latent and implicit, lying mutely embedded in the "style". That, to a very large degree, is what style is. The young artist learns the art style of his people as a craft, just as he learns to make a speech, or perform a dance. He is necessarily conscious of all its attributes as craftsmanship and visual design. However he is not necessarily conscious of all of the meanings which his predecessors incorporated into the style, the analogies which they expressed by patterned nuances of visual design, which are still there, gently intruding their meanings on the consciousness. One suspects, however, that in an art so highly "stylized", while the tradition was still alive and evolving, many of these meanings must have lain very close to the threshold of consciousness. As he graduates from craftsman to artist he develops an edge of innovation of his own, discovering old meanings and expressing them more clearly, straining to convey new meanings. He might not always be able to verbalize this process of making art truer to the ideal shapes of things, but then speech is not the only medium in which analogies can be expressed and order brought into human experience.

Style in art can convey meaning in another way as well, since it can be perceived not only as a multitude of patterned visual attributes but also as a whole, as a gestalt. Seen this way, the style can act as a semantic "frame"



to identify immediately the system being dealt with. Every icon rendered in the visual style "Haida crest art" is read as falling within that semantic system as well. In this way style can assist the iconography to do its part of the job.

### Abstraction

Haida art is commonly said to be "conventionalized" and "abstract", and it is important to try to discern what has produced these qualities. For one thing, the artists were not making any attempt whatever to make faithful portraits of the creatures of the natural world; they were portraying concepts, or perhaps more precisely, metaphors. The icons "refer back" not so much to nature itself as to the Haida taxonomic system. "Raven" stands already analyzed and translated into the essential attributes of its species; it has already been lifted out of the hard, chaotic reality of the physical world. Consensus has also been reached on which attributes have to be shown, and which emphasized, to identify it visually. The icon is an ideograph rather than an illustration. In this sense the art is "conventionalized" rather than realistic.

All arts are in some sense "abstract". The degrees of what has been called abstraction in Haida art, however, are products of the interplay between the iconographic and iconic modes of representation. The more prominent the role of iconic design, the more difficult it is to identify the iconographic subject, and the more "abstract" we consider the art to be. It is from an examination of this interplay that we may obtain our most penetrating insights into the meanings of Haida art.

Iconic design cannot exist alone, except as an esoteric exercise or as empty decoration. It requires a foundation of ordinary iconography on which



to root and feed and grow, just as poetry needs a foundation in ordinary speech. Yet in order to get its messages across, it has to compete with the iconography for attention. It is a competition in which the iconography has a strong advantage, for the eye and mind strain first to recognize the icons and concepts of that realm, and are then tempted to rest, feeling that to know what it represents is to know what it means. The task of the artist is to draw the attention back into the design, pique it again to a high state of vigilance, and present it with the subtle pre-gestalt images and signs which convey the iconic meanings. Just as the poet makes use of devices such as versification, rhyming, and repetition to draw attention to his words, and then uses the words as images endowed with more than their natural meanings, so the artist has to use visual devices such as disproportion, patterned repetition, and self-conscious perfection of form to draw attention to the visual elements which he has endowed with more than their iconographic meanings.

The competition does not at first pose any threat to the iconography. A Raven design can become "highly stylized" without losing its ability to trigger the identification "Raven". It can easily afford to "give some ground" so that the iconic messages can be conveyed. These messages are, after all, about the same general subjects, even though they are being transmitted on a different wave-length.

But in Haida art the competition is carried much farther than that. In the most abstract designs, not only is the iconic mode built up, but the iconographic mode is broken down. Bill Holm perceived this unusual process and even felt impelled to create a new terminology to describe it. In his terms, the designs show increasing degrees of abstraction, from "configurative" design through "expansive" to "distributive", by which point the silhouette (gestalt)



has completely disintegrated and the iconography seems impossible to read. We have been interpreting this process as a consequence of "adapting the design to the field", and of the design becoming "completely decorative". What we have been failing to see is that it also represents the ascendance of a new level of artistic meaning.

This interplay, to some degree at least, must have been consciously manipulated by the artists. How did they decide on how far to go with the subjugation of the iconography? Does Edenshaw's Raven represent a nice equilibrium, like a good poem, between the literal and the metaphoric levels of meaning? Or, to give equal advantage to the iconic mode, should the iconography be broken down into parts so that the eye has to search out clues to its identity one at a time, as seems to be the case on some of the basketry hats painted with "distributive" designs? Or indeed was the iconic mode pushing toward a climax of total victory, in a vain attempt to possess the sublime free of the mundane, the generalized free of the particular; an attempt bound to tip the art over the brink into complete abstraction, where it could only detumescence, like sails without wind, into empty decoration? Or were the two modes best used in different proportions for different tasks: permitting the iconography to speak first when the primary task was to display a chief's emblem, as on the Raven screen; but utilizing the full powers of the language of iconics to resolve profound and general problems, as may well be the case on the painted box from Chilkat which has established itself so clearly as the final test of our ability to understand this art? Or, perhaps, as I think may be the case with Edenshaw's great chest front designs, was he straining to achieve the logically impossible feat of fusing the two modes of thought into one, of creating an iconic iconography, combining the cognitive powers of metaphor and logic into a single mind-stretching pattern of awareness, with which to see and express the essential order of things in the world, and set man into harmony with it?