

How to Read Religious Images (Steven Engler)

Visual Expression of Concepts across Disciplines

This following five steps set out a straightforward method for analyzing an image (or, often, an object or building). The key is to analyze the image *as an image* and to look for correlations between its visual elements and concepts from a specific discipline.

1. Examine images that express (or are said to express) concepts of your discipline.
2. Analyze basic artistic elements (line, shape, form/space, colour, texture) to see *how* the concepts are conveyed
3. Brainstorm a list of concepts, distinguishing general concepts from specific iconography
4. Create a list of key concepts and their visual expression (link 2 and 3)
5. Choose and write out a set of examples to support your specific analysis.

Common Cross-Cultural Images

Iconography is the study of artistic symbols: signs and visual elements that stand for some specific idea or narrative event. To understand iconography, you have to know the stories (e.g., the saint with the keys is St. Peter). At a more general level, this list gives some visual symbols that make sense more intuitively. You can often figure out symbols like this even without knowing specific scriptures or myths.

- Circles: Perfection
- Spirals: Movement to More Sacred Level
- Bread: Life
- Wine: Ecstasy
- Journey: Life/Death
- Books/Scrolls: Wisdom
- Fertility: Creation
- Youth: Innocence
- Age: Authority
- Weapons: Power of Righteous Authority
- Protecting Figures: Salvation
- Calm demeanor: Spiritual Depth
- Solidity: Truth/Righteousness

Selected Religious Themes That Are Often Expressed Visually

- Transcendence and immanence
- Presence or absence of the sacred
- Separation of the individual or gathering of the community in a state of sacredness
- Boundaries, separation, openings onto, framing of the sacred
- Sacred distinctions expressed in social distinctions (us/them, female/male, religious expert/lay person, elder/youth)
- Presence of writing in the image (sacred scripture?)
- Ritual gestures and postures
- Sacredness indicated by the use of valuable media in the art work (gold, jewels)

Religious Imagery Often Expresses Paired Concepts

The most important step in making sense of religious images is to draw the connection between specific visual elements and certain religious concepts. One of the most common ways in which religious concepts and ideas are expressed visually is through contrast: i.e., a visual contrast (e.g., light vs. dark) is used to represent a religious contrast (e.g., good vs. evil or knowledge vs. ignorance). The chart below shows some of the most common visual contrasts in the left-hand column. The two right-hand columns show religious contrasts that are often represented visually. Each religious contrast can usually be represented using more than one of these (and other) visual contrasts.

Visual Characteristics	Paired Concepts	
Light/Dark	Divine/Human	Creation/Destruction
Big/Small	Sacred/Profane	Righteousness/Sinfulness
Central/Peripheral	Purity/Impurity	Salvation/Damnation
Up/Down	Life/Death	Spiritual Riches/Worldly Riches
Solid/Faint	Nature/Culture	Reward/Punishment
Unique/Repeated	Good/Evil	Enlightenment/Ignorance
Distinct/Indistinct	Spirit/Matter	Celebration/Solemnity
Smooth/Rough	Heaven/Hell	Subservience/Authority
Continuous/Broken	Order/Chaos	Individual/Community

See Engler, Steven and Irene Naested. 2002. "Using Images in the Religious Studies Classroom." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5/3: 161-168. Available at http://stevenengler.ca/?page_id=590