

# Iconography

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Iconography is an important type of visual symbolism, seen by a large number of people throughout history. In this lesson, you will learn about:



### BIG IDEA

The idea of iconography is used as a tool in art historical analysis.

## 1. Iconography and Symbolism

**Iconography** is an important type of visual **symbolism**. Throughout history, iconography has been seen by a large number of people, and symbolism is something that would have been familiar to the people that were viewing it. Iconography is an important type of visual symbolism, especially for the illiterate. It's a way of depicting important symbolic references. In addition, it is a way of telling a story.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Iconography

A type of visual symbolism; Christian iconography, for instance, might reference the biblical story of the nativity.

#### Symbolism

When an object in a painting represents something else; in Baroque paintings, a woman holding a mirror often symbolizes vanity.

---

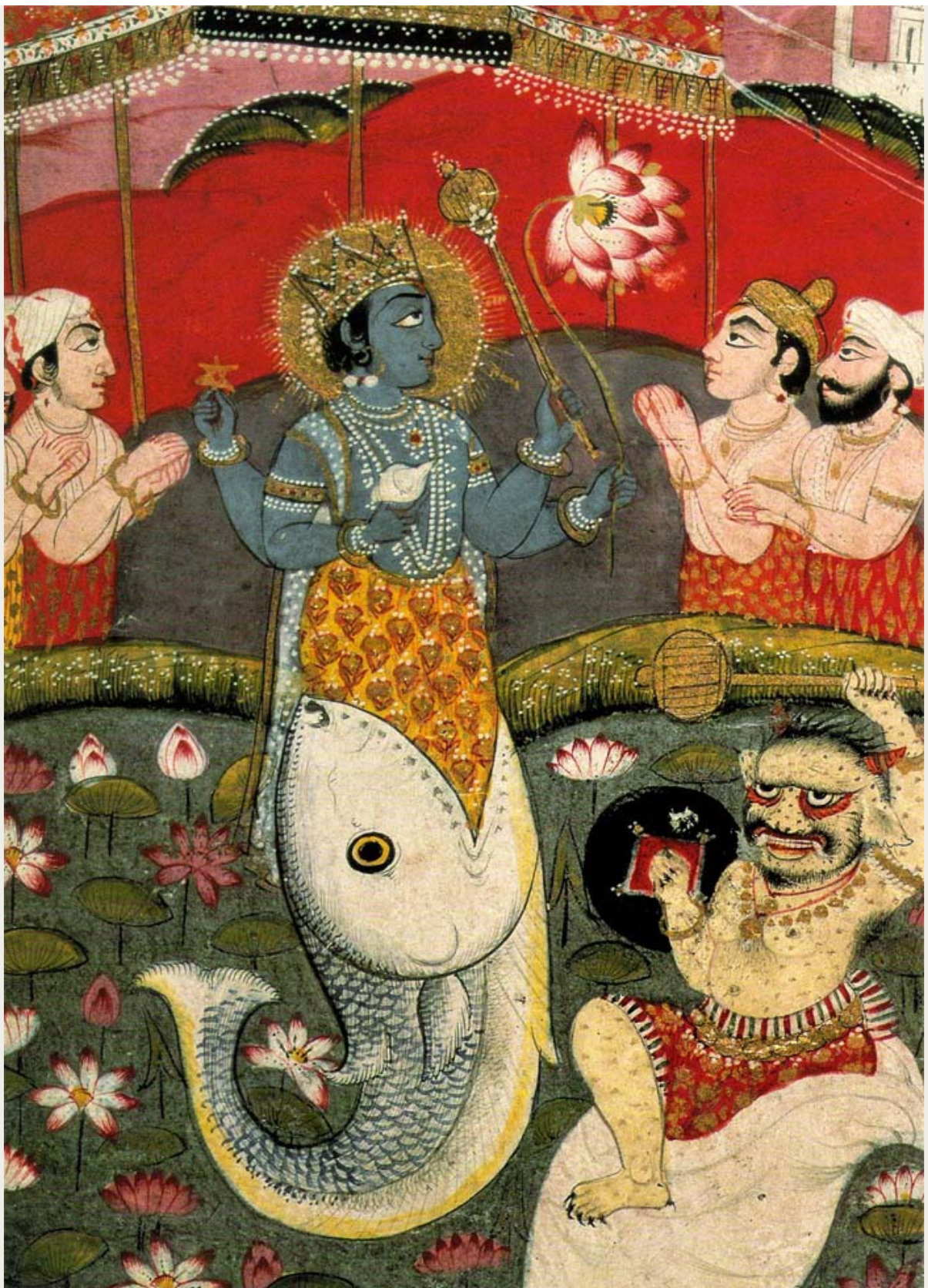
## 2. Examples of Iconography

### IN CONTEXT

Notice how each image below tells a story and depicts symbolic references.

The first is a Hindu image of Vishnu, who is one of the principal deities of the Hindu faith. Vishnu is known for manifesting in a number of physical forms, which are called avatars. This particular manifestation is a fish.

The image tells the story of how Vishnu saved several sages, or wise men, as well as samples of plants and animals from a great flood. It's a very similar story to the Christian story of Noah and the Ark. Although the story may be foreign to many Westerners, the symbolism in it would be well known by its Hindu observers.



**Incarnation of Vishnu as a Fish**

The second image, below, is of a fresco painted by the artist Fra Angelico. It depicts the important Christian narrative of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel brings news to the Virgin Mary that she is chosen to be the mother of God's son on Earth, Jesus Christ, which would be quite the news if you weren't expecting it.



**The Virgin of the Annunciation by Fra Angelico**

The next image you see is another fresco, this time by the Italian painter Giotto. It is a depiction of another important Christian narrative—the nativity, or the birth of Jesus Christ.



Nativity by Giotto

The fourth image, seen below, is of Adam and Eve. It is a good example of important Christian symbolism, such as the snake or serpent, which symbolized Satan, or the devil. The apple itself is also symbolic as apples were often used to represent the fall of man, when the first humans were evicted from the Garden of Eden for disobeying God, which was the first sin.



Adam and Eve by Lucas Cranach the Elder

---

### 3. Disputes in Symbolic Meaning

*The Arnolfini Wedding*, by the Flemish artist Jan van Eyck, may not seem to be an example of iconography.

However, iconographic interpretations of works of art are not necessarily an exact science.



#### DID YOU KNOW

There occasionally are disputes among historians as to what a particular work of art is trying to symbolize. This is the case particularly if there are no supporting documents or if the symbolism is obscure, like in the example below. It is believed among some scholars to be a form of iconography under the guise of a wealthy merchant's wedding portrait. Notice how the wife is depicted in a similar manner to that of the Virgin Mary in many scenes of the Annunciation. Whether this was the intention of van Eyck is subject to debate.



The Arnolfini Wedding by Jan van Eyck

## 4. Allegorical Figures

Allegory is a form of visual symbolism. **Allegorical figures** are visual **metaphors**; they stand for something. Often they represent abstract concepts, such as justice or victory.

### IN CONTEXT

The Statue of Liberty, shown here, represents the abstract concept of liberty and is therefore an allegorical figure. It's liberty personified, meaning it's a person representing liberty. Personification can be seen here, where a person is representing an idea or a concept.





**The Statue of Liberty**

Below is another example of allegory. Here, the winged Greek goddess Nike represents the abstract concept of victory, even though she is headless here.



**The Winged Victory of Samothrace (also known as The Winged Nike)**



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Allegorical Figure

A form of visual symbolism in which a human figure represents an abstract concept, such as justice

### Metaphor

A figure of speech in which a word or concept stands for or represents another concept



## SUMMARY

Symbolism is often present in works of art. Iconography is an important type of visual symbolism. In this lesson, you learned about **iconography and symbolism** through observing several **examples of iconography**.

Sometimes there are still **disputes in symbolic meaning**, however. This is the case in the example of *The Arnolfini Wedding* by Jan van Eyck. These disputes take place if there are no supporting documents or if the symbolism is obscure. **Allegorical figures** are visual metaphors, meaning they stand for something. Often they represent abstract concepts such as justice or victory, as in the Statue of Liberty.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our [Terms of Use](#).



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Allegorical figure

A form of visual symbolism in which a human figure represents an abstract concept, like justice.

### Iconography

A type of visual symbolism. Christian iconography for instance, might make references to the biblical story of the nativity.

### Metaphor

A figure of speech in which a word or concept stands for or represents another concept.

### Symbolism

When an object in a painting represents something else. In Baroque paintings, a woman holding a mirror often symbolizes vanity.