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A pantheon of icons: towards a South African iconolgy

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the development of the concept of the fine art icon and its possible application to the South African context. The study begins with an attempt to find a working definition of the icon. The original meaning of the word icon was found to have religious roots. This religious definition was found to have been supplanted by a more secular and colloquial use of the term which came to primarily signify fame and celebrity. These definitions were found to be merely descriptive and provided no clear definition or understanding of the fine art icon.

Consequently it was decided to pursue meaning as a possible route to the iconicity of artworks. For this the discipline of semiotics was consulted. The semioticians of the 20th century, using the cultural construct of language and the theoretical paradigm of structuralism, did much to develop models and theories of how meanings are constructed, conveyed, developed and manipulated.

Using a number of these semiotic theoretical models, three artworks as case studies were undertaken; the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Chinese Girl* by Vladimir Tretchikoff and *Butcher Boys* by Jane Alexander. When considering these artworks, three interconnected aspects were considered: their intrinsic content, their cultural and historical context, and the vast web of constructed meanings accrued to each work.

But the analyses and case studies revealed that the icon does not come about as a result of adhering to a formula or comprising certain criteria or characteristics. It is rather a complex set of multi-dimensional factors which include spontaneous and haphazard cultural and historical circumstances and events, the actions of particular personalities and players, and the inherent capacity of the work to accommodate and convey relevant meaning.