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A pantheon of icons: towards a South African iconolgy

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2018

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Freemantle, Barbara Joan (2018) A pantheon of icons: towards a South African iconolgy, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/25904>

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Introduction

A Pantheon of Icons

As I flew up the stairs of the Louvre Museum, I looked around for a friendly attendant to direct me to the *Mona Lisa*, the famous portrait by Renaissance artist Leonardo Da Vinci. No need. The route was clearly marked with several laminated signs showing the enigmatic face and an arrow indicating the way. After a few flights of stairs, a few turns, past other magnificent paintings and, there it was, a smallish painting just beyond a large knot of people.

I elbowed, apologised, shoved and burrowed my way to the front to finally lay eyes on the actual artwork which has become so renowned. On my left a small group of youngsters pushed even further, creating a deep bulge in the barrier. A sharp rebuke, followed by a question regarding their sanity, was issued from one of the vigilant attendants. I focussed on the painting, consciously cutting out the babble of the crowd, hoping to be able to assess what it was about this work that had brought me to this point.

While I pondered the popularity of the *Mona Lisa*, I also began to think about my own country. South Africa is also home to some remarkable artefacts, artworks, historical sites and unique, internationally renowned fossil records. Why are the millions of tourists who travel the globe annually not also queuing up and jostling to see them? Are our cultural products not equally valid?

Admittedly the cultural and artistic output of this planet is vast and varied. Many countries or nations have capitalised on this phenomenon and have built thriving tourist industries. In France, for example, the Louvre in Paris, which houses a culturally diverse collection of works of art dating from pre-history to 1848, is one of the most visited museums in the world with 2016 visitor figures of approximately 7.4 million.[1] With an average of 20 000

1 Visitor numbers have dropped from a high of 9.7 million in 2012 due to recent terrorist attacks in Paris such as the Charlie Hebdo incident.

visitors a day, 70% of whom are foreign tourists, this institution generates a substantial amount of money for the French state (Musée de Louvre 2017).

The culture of ancient Egypt which has long captured the imaginations of people all over the world can be seen in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. This institution has a collection of approximately 160 000 fascinating objects of antiquity, covering 5 000 years of that country's history (Supreme Council of Antiquities 2017). Overall the museums and ancient sites of Egypt hosted 5.4 million visitors in 2016[2] (Capmas 2017).

In America, The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA) has a collection of over 200 000 modern and contemporary artworks from around the world. It too receives millions of visitors which generates substantial income for the museum (MOMA 2017).

What is also worth considering is that these institutions, amongst others, are also home to internationally renowned artworks. The Louvre boasts works such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503-1506)*, Liberty Leading the People* (1830) by Eugène Delacroix and the *Venus de Milo* (c. 150-100 BCE). The Egyptian Museum houses the contents of the tomb of the famous Tutankhamun (c. 1340 BCE), the *Palette of King Narmer* (c. 3000 BCE) and the statue of *Chefren* (c. 2 500 BCE), as well as many other artefacts which are instantly recognisable from popular books on general art history. Within the walls of MOMA visitors can see *The Starry Night* (1889) by Vincent van Gogh and *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) by Pablo Picasso. The presence of these artworks is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the high visitor numbers recorded at these institutions.

So what of the South African situation? It also has a relatively healthy tourist industry, but in this instance it is wildlife safaris that prove to be the most popular and lucrative tourist attraction. The Kruger National Park, the most famous wildlife reserve, is South Africa's main tourist attraction, having recorded 1 659 793 visitors in 2015 (Department of Environmental Affairs 2017). Profits from accommodation in the park amounted to R 321 482 000 in 2015.

Cape Town is the most popular city for tourists in South Africa. When consulting a wide range of publicity media for the city, again it was the natural heritage institutions which received the most attention, while the cultural institutions were not as visible. Visitors are

2 Visitor numbers have dropped from a high of 14.7 million in 2010, due to the political unrest in Egypt in 2011.

urged to visit Cape Point Nature Reserve, a World Heritage site which accommodated 223 000 visitors in 2014 (Cape Point 2017). The cable car operating from the iconic flat topped Table Mountain had 909 000 visitors for the year in 2015 (Table Mountain Aerial Cableway 2107). These attractions, together with major sporting events, play a fundamental role in generating income for the city, while the city's art institutions do not seem to fare as well.[3]

The statistics for South Africa's art galleries speak for themselves. The Iziko South African National Gallery (ISANG) in Cape Town, housing a collection of South African, African, British, Dutch, French and Flemish artworks, had 45 010 visitors in 2017 (Iziko 2017). Johannesburg Art Gallery has a collection of local and international artwork dating from the 17th century to the present day. They experienced 36 000 visitors in 2016 (Gauteng Tourism Authority 2017). The Wits Art Museum (WAM), which hosts temporary local and international exhibitions, experienced a record breaking year in 2017, having visitor figures of over 34 000 (Charlton 2017).[4]

These visitor statistics for South African art institutions are a far cry from those quoted above for North Africa, Europe and America. Why is this so? Do South African institutions simply not own any works that may be considered iconic, hereinafter referred to as 'icons'? Alternatively, is it possible that these institutions have not developed their marketing strategies around specific works which could be considered icons? Don Thompson in his book *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art and Auction Houses* (2008), would certainly agree.

> The most important museums are the few that are internationally branded, the ones the guide books tell you not to miss ... Each features one or two paintings that are world famous ... Each museum has thousands of paintings in its collection, but each are defined by one or two that are essential viewing. The Louvre has found that of the 20 000 people a day who pass by *Mona Lisa,* more than half have come to the museum to see nothing else (Thompson 2008: 235).

3 The recent opening of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa (Zeitz MOCAA) in September 2017 may change this scenario.

4 It should be noted that these high visitor numbers were achieved due to the WAM hosting an exhibition by internationally renowned artist Andy Warhol. The show entitled *Warhol Unscreened: Artworks from the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Collection* ran from 25 July till 8 October 2017.

The purpose of this research is to explore the development of the concept of the fine art icon and possible reasons why South Africa appears to have failed to produce ‘iconic’ artworks which attract the kind of interest enjoyed by other collections and institutions.

In order to achieve this, the approach will be firstly to interrogate the concept of the fine art icon on a theoretical level in order to understand the phenomenon more clearly. These theoretical insights will then be applied to three different areas of investigation. Firstly, do the inherent *contents* of particular artworks contain something intrinsic that has made them so famous for so long? Secondly, can their iconicity be explained by the possibility that they so eloquently embody the particular issues, values, trends and desires of the *contexts* (time and place) in which they were created? Or is it possible that their iconic status is due to the fact that they are also capable of finding continued relevance with audiences from vastly different times or places from the one in which they arose? Thirdly, is their iconic status a *construct*, produced as a result of their becoming entangled in dense webs of signification created by broad, highly complex networks of players, events and circumstances? Are they the result of this particular type of socio-cultural discourse? Alternatively, could their iconicity be a combination of all three factors, their content, their context and their constructed significations?

Art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) explored the aspects mentioned above when he attempted to formalise the process of the aesthetic experience. In his work entitled *Meaning in the Visual Arts (1955)* he discusses a number of problematic assumptions about the concepts of form and function.

With regards to form, he argues that we cannot use this as a basis to identify an object as either utilitarian or aesthetic, as utilitarian objects can be experienced aesthetically. He provides the example of beautifully decorated African spoons displayed in art museums. When discussing function he remarks that artworks could be defined by their function as vehicles for the communication of ideas or concepts, but then reminds us that typewriters or traffic lights communicate ideas very efficiently and are not generally considered art (Panofsky 1955: 12).

Revealing the influence of the linguistic philosophers which will be discussed in Chapter 2, Panofsky concludes that artworks constitute an aggregation of form and idea: “[T]he more

the proportion of emphasis on ‘idea’ and ‘form’ approaches a state of equilibrium, the more eloquently will the work reveal what is called ’content’(Panofsky 1955: 14).

In conclusion, Panofsky suggests that aesthetic enjoyment occurs through the synthesis of materialised form, idea and content (Panofsky 1955: 16), in a process which he associates with *iconography* (Panofsky 1955: 26). He then suggests the investigation of meaning on three levels or strata; *Pre-iconographical, Iconographical and Iconological*.

Firstly, he recommends investigating the *Pre-iconographical* or representational meaning of a work which “concerns *primary* or natural subject matter” and is further divided into *factual* and *expressional*. This is where artistic motifs[5] (objects and events) are identified through practical experience (Panofsky 1955: 28-33). At this level the viewer will look at the history of style and technique.(Panofsky 1955: 41)

Secondly, the level of *Iconographical symbolism* requires attention to secondary or conventional subject matter. Here, motifs and combinations of motifs (compositions) are connected with themes or concepts. At this level images, symbols and narratives or allegories are identified though literary sources and images are described and classified (Panofsky 1955: 29-35) and the history of types identified (Panofsky 1955: 41).

Thirdly, the level of *Iconological symbolism* is considered, in a process which builds on the intrinsic meaning or content of a work mentioned above. At this level the viewer will “ascertain symbolical values or the essential tendencies of the human mind expressed by specific themes and concepts, the underlying principles which reveal the attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – distilled by one person into one work. The discovery and interpretation of these ‘symbolical’ values ... is the object of ‘iconology’ as opposed to ‘iconography’”. On this level of interpretation we interpret symbols through synthetic intuition (Panofsky 1955: 30-33) And investigate the history of cultural symptoms or symbols (Panofsky 1955: 41).

Once a theoretical framework has been established, three artworks will be discussed using the various theoretical models as a broad guideline. The first artwork to be explored will be the famous *Mona Lisa*, (1503-1506) by Leonardo da Vinci, the second *Chinese Girl* (1952-1953) by Vladimir Tretchikoff, a South African artist of Russian origin, and third the *Butcher*

5 A motif is a, “distinctive feature, dominant idea” (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* 1982: 660).

Boys (1985-1986) by South African artist and academic Jane Alexander. This analysis will be undertaken in order to argue that some South African artworks should be regarded as iconic, and as such could become the centre of strategic marketing plans for museums or any other type of collection. The methodology employed in this research will be largely theoretical and based on a literature review. It must be borne in mind that this research covers a broad range of artworks of different types, from different cultural and historical contexts by very different individuals.

In Chapter one, I discuss *The icon as* myth. Here the origin of the word icon is explored as well as its current colloquial use. This provides a sense of the icon as sacred or special. Then, drawing on cultural philosopher Roland Barthes' model of myth, I try to show how certain phenomena within popular culture, such as the celebrity or the superstar, become so essentialised that they come to stand for entire bodies of work, epochs, genres, artists or trends. In these instances it is popularity or fame which defines the myth or popular cultural icon. These myths or icons are so enticing and pervasive that they are unquestioningly adopted by large numbers of the population or culture from which they arise.

Chapter two, *The icon as meaning*, I investigate the possibility that it is the artwork's ability to generate and hold profound meaning that may result in its iconicity. This chapter comprises a high-level investigation of some of the theoretical models and observations of structuralist semioticians who investigated the concept of meaning. Using a broad definition of the sign (word, sound, object or image), these thinkers explored how signs facilitate the construction and transmission of meaning. They also considered how meaning is capable of change and multiplicity.

Chapter three, *The icon as value*, I look at the attribution of value to artworks. Here value would include both the monetary, economic sense of the term as well as those culturally determined values prescribed by the art world. This chapter also delineates how society more broadly, and the art world specifically, use artworks to create notions of taste and class in order to create and maintain social stratification.

Chapter four, *The Mona Lisa*, consists of a case study of the artwork by Leonardo da Vinci that is probably more widely regarded as profoundly iconic than any other in the Western art historical canon – the milieu to which this work belongs. From some of the latest

literature on this painting, a sense of what is considered iconic in the Western art tradition is gained.

In chapter five, *The Chinese Girl*, painted by Vladimir Tretchikoff, one of the most popular South African artists of the 20th century, is the second case study to be considered. Until recently, this work was not taken seriously by the fine art establishment in South Africa or indeed elsewhere in the world where the artist exhibited. But, purely through his personal charisma and his strategic marketing practises, this work achieved worldwide fame, becoming one of the most widely disseminated and internationally recognised images of art. This work may have achieved iconic status through sheer popularity.

In Chapter six, *The Butcher Boys*, I embark on a case study of the sculptural work of the same name by Jane Alexander. Unlike Tretchikoff, Alexander's work is widely accepted by her peers in the South African and international art establishments. I try to show how, as a hybrid this work generates, conveys and assumes multiple meanings. As a consequence this work manages to stay relevant in new and diverse contexts, illustrating how works can assume meanings beyond their initial signification. Here its iconicity can be considered on the basis of its intense and rich signification as well as its powerful and influential audience.

This research will conclude with a discussion on whether a formula for iconicity is possible or whether this phenomenon arises from a more complex and convoluted process.

Chapter 1

The icon as myth

> There is nothing more real than the images that we cannot get out of our heads. Nothing has greater power over us than that which compels our urgent attention. George Franck (1998: 172).

Definition

A casual browse through any form of current media will reveal that the term ‘iconic’ is widely and indiscriminately used in our society. We see it applied to almost anything from geographical locations, major events, all forms of creative output, and certain human beings. But what exactly is an icon?

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (COD)* provides the following definition: An icon is an “image ... of a sacred personage, itself regarded as sacred” (1982: 494). This definition of icon as a religious object is the original meaning of the term and will be found in most books on general art history.[6]

Martin Kemp, in his book *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* (2012), broadly discusses the various forms that icons have taken in our present day culture, and he also begins with the religious form. “The term icon comes from the Greek word *eikon* that refers to any image or portrait, but it came to be associated specifically with the hieratic and largely invariant paintings produced over the centuries in Eastern churches and favoured by Orthodox Christianity to this day” (2012: 17).

Sacred

This religious form of the icon dates back to the 8th century CE and comprises images of important Christian personalities such as Jesus Christ, the Madonna, and many of the

6 This definition is found in well-known volumes such as *Art Through the Ages* by Louise Gardner, (1980) and *History of Art* by H.W. Janson, (1977).

saints. Used to assist believers in worship, the icons not only represented the historical personality, albeit in a formulaic way, but were also believed to possess a spiritual dimension, to contain or embody the actual presence of the holy person or the supernatural (Eco 1977: 192).

The tradition of employing icons during religious ceremonies was almost universal in the early Christian Church until it was somewhat disrupted by the Iconoclastic Controversy of 726 CE. At this time the Byzantine Emperor, Flavius Anicius Justinianus, issued an edict prohibiting all religious images. This divided the Christian Church into two opposing groups; the iconoclasts (image-destroyers), who agreed with the Emperor and believed, in line with the second commandment given to Moses, that the use of icons amounted to idolatry,[7] and the iconophiles (image-lovers) who valued and continued the tradition (Janson 1977: 225).

The power of, and perceived problem with the religious icon, lies in its intermediary role. As it was both a tangible, physical object as well as a sacred 'presence' it ran the risk of becoming a more accessible form of deity and therefore a tempting substitute for an intangible, ethereal God. For Weibel, "The danger appears where images or words are used to represent, interpret or communicate the results of the senses and intervene between ourselves and nature or God thereby taking their place, thus becoming idols" (2002: 589).

Celebrity

Colloquial icon

This original, religious definition of the icon as a specific object depicting a particular person, both of which are regarded as sacred, is not fully congruent with our contemporary use and understanding of the term, and no doubt few people are even aware of these historical origins. Yet some of this meaning may still resonate within our colloquial use of this word. This sentiment of worship is found in much of the traditional media and other forms of mass communication which are not averse to lightly using words of reverence

7 In the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, the second commandment states: "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below." Exodus 20: 4 (*Holy Bible* 1978: 89).

such as ‘genius’, ‘ground breaking’ and ‘icon’ when describing or referring to a wide variety of natural and cultural phenomena as well as some human beings.

For example, today the term ‘iconic’ is often attributed to geographical landmarks such as Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa, Sugarloaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, or even the Nile River in Egypt. It is also used in reference to architectural structures such as the pyramids of Ghiza in Egypt or the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum in Agra, India. Political symbols such as flags or mascots are also considered ‘iconic’. Consumer items such as the fizzy beverage Coca-Cola and its distinctive bottle, the quintessentially British eggs and bacon, the American hot dog, the French baguette and the Neapolitan Pizza, are all considered ‘culinary icons’. Great works of art are also often labelled ‘iconic’ and could include grand musical compositions, great works of literature, powerful films, moving drama, some photography and the area which is the scope of this study, images within the realm of fine art.

By way of illustration, in an article for *The Collector Magazine*, Clyde Terry reviews the retrospective exhibition of the work of Vladimir Tretchikoff, entitled *Tretchikoff: The People’s Painter.*[8] He remarks:

> On entering the main gallery the iconic ‘*Chinese Girl*’ greets you – a solitary image on the wall – and though her gaze is averted the painting captures your attention immediately and welcomes you into a world that represents a lifetime of unique Tretchikoff talent (2011: 10).

The word iconic ‘appears’ two more times in the article. On the back cover of a book by Donald Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World’s Most Famous Painting* (2012) are the words, “With skill and wit Donald Sassoon traces the steps that turned an Italian housewife of the early sixteenth century into an international icon”.

While the term ‘iconic’ is routinely applied to exceptional examples within any form of cultural output, the most common use of the term colloquially is often linked to those human beings that society has deemed extraordinary such as celebrity musicians, artists and actors. Kemp confirms that the colloquial meaning of the word icon, found in the mass

8 Held at the ISANG from 26 May to 25 September 2011.

media, refers to the fact that someone is particularly famous, but that this kind of fame is often limited to “people and things of passing and local celebrity” (2012: 3).

According to Kemp, the contemporary use of the term icon has become entangled with the modern cult of celebrity (2012:342). This sense of the word is characterised by “a shallow replacement of spiritual values by a superficial worship of transitory qualities via the media” (2012: 342). According to Kemp, there have been many attempts to pinpoint the beginnings of celebrity worship, most of them unsuccessful. He mentions the rise of popular entertainment in Britain in the late 1700s along with mass photography, as well as the more recent rise of film, television and the internet, but concludes that history along with human behaviour is characterised by continuity (2012:343).

As we consume these articles in the popular media and consult established academics, it is apparent that the concept of the icon as it is used colloquially today, is difficult to define precisely because its meaning is broad and the term is fairly indiscriminately applied. In terms of the human icon specifically, it refers to someone who is particularly talented and widely popular, a celebrity. This results in the person becoming a temporarily famous celebrity.

But, the iconicity of celebrities is particularly evident if the artist is deceased, as can be seen from the coverage reporting the passing of musicians such as Michael Jackson or George Michael, or even other celebrities such as Diana Princess of Wales. In an article for Reuters, the news agency, Michelle Nichols discusses the effects of the internet on reputational development and management, using the title, “Can there be another Michael Jackson icon in the internet era?” (2009), and Rachel Tashjian, writing for *Vanity Fair*, recently published an article under the headline “How Princess Diana Became a Fashion Icon” (2017).

On hearing the news of the death of a celebrity, society responds by attempting to preserve their presence. Articles may include references to how these individuals embodied the time, place and discipline in which they operated, and in some instances to how they have come to define it. Should the artist be a musician, their playlist is aired on the radio and television for days. Biographical documentaries are shown and tributes pour in. These are then published or broadcast in both traditional as well as social media, many of which use the term icon. Death may even enhance the iconic status of the celebrity by

providing a specific type of closure. During this process a particularly positive image of the celebrity icon is consolidated in the public imagination, and their inevitable ageing or possible professional failure will usually not become part of their image.

The notion of the celebrity icon provides this study with an important aspect in the consideration of the art historical icon: popularity and widespread appeal.

While the popularity of the celebrity icon could be based on a wide range of possible characteristics and values, which may have global appeal and some lasting significance, in some cases this worship could result in their becoming one-dimensional. In these instances we would not perceive them to be normal, fallible human beings with personal problems and complications, but rather as shallow projections of our perception of what it would be like to be talented, beautiful and rich. In this instance we are shocked and intrigued when we see them later exposed in the tabloid media for being all too human. This idea of the simplified or reduced celebrity icon can be linked to the influential concept developed by Roland Barthes which he called myth.[9]

Myth

Barthes developed this famous concept, while writing for the monthly journal *Les Lettres Nouvelles* between 1954 and 1956. In these essays he critiqued various aspects of 1950s French mass culture, such as amateur wrestling, steak and chips, the brain of Einstein and plastic, amongst several others. One essay just happens to be a discussion concerning the faces of celebrity actresses Greta Garbo and Audrey Hepburn. As a consequence of these observations of popular culture, Barthes coined the term myth, and defined the myth as closely related to dominant ideas of our time (Chandler 2002).

Myth as devised by Barthes is a complex concept encompassing a range of models and applications. But, essentially he said “Myth is a type of speech ... a system of communication ... a message” (Barthes 1993: 109). Yet what distinguishes the myth from

9 Pierre Bourdieu in his works *The Logic of Practice* (1990) *and Outline of a Theory of Practise* (1977) developed a similar concept, which he called *doxa* (1990: 129 and 1977: 163 & 167). While both *doxa* and *myth* refer to strongly held beliefs, Barthes’ focus is on how *myths* are particular signifiers which assume certain meanings, while Bourdieu’s *doxa* refers to common beliefs and attitudes into which we are socialised. It is possible that certain meanings may be strongly related to certain *doxa*, which then become connected to the special kind of signifier which Barthes analyses as *myth*.

other types of communication systems is that it is a specific kind of message with a very specific function.

For Barthes a myth occurs when a signifier (word, concept or image) becomes attached to many meanings. These include the literal, or denotative meaning of the signifier, as well as many connotative meanings, resulting in a complex signifier around which several intense as well as nuanced meanings are in orbit. Over time these become associated with certain beliefs and values. Barthes also mentions that these myths and their meanings are not static but are also capable of mutation and transformation.

Barthes, who followed a Marxist paradigm, extrapolated the concept of unequal economic power relations to the realm of signification. In his poetic way he describes how myth is not only polysemic but also powerful, pervasive, persuasive, tenacious and discriminatory. He describes myth as

> essential; well fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly. It takes hold of everything, all aspects of the law, of morality, of aesthetics, of diplomacy, of household equipment, of literature, of entertainment. Its expansion has the very dimensions of bourgeois ex-nomination. The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple with all the possible degrees of dignity at its disposal; he has an exclusive right to meta-language .... [the bourgeoisie] ... conserves [the world], his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is myth (1993: 149).

But, according to Barthes, the unique power of the myth occurs in the way in which it presents itself. For him this power lies in its ability to appear ‘natural’ while in reality it is a disingenuous cultural construct. Barthes states that “Myth... [talks about things], it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (1993: 143).

These myths function on two levels; the psychological and the political. At the level of the human psyche they are presented as ‘natural’, ‘common sense’ and ‘the way things are’ (Chandler 2002). In this way they effectively short-circuit deliberation processes. As a

result the meaning of the myth is automatically recognised, received and accepted without consciously thinking it through[10] (Barthes 1993: 143).

Their second area of influence is played out in the social arena of politics. As noted by Barthes above, one of the functions of myths is that they can act, usually spontaneously and unplanned, as justifications of bourgeois dominance, via the media. Expressed in the very language of the bourgeoisie, they act to naturalise relationships of power, legitimising their dominant position as well as those political arrangements that serve their interests.

An example of a myth could be the belief that people with money have 'taste', while the poor do not, whereas in reality it is the people with money who, usually unconsciously, construct and define taste, and purvey the idea that taste is a neutral, natural concept innate to a select few. But this idea of myth as ideology has two consequences: firstly, it enables the message to be immune to the consequences of detection, exposure and rejection); but, secondly and more importantly, it "acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences" (Barthes 1993: 143). Could this concept of myth, in some instances tie in with our celebrity icons?

This idea that complex social and cultural phenomena could be presented to and accepted by our collective minds as simplified, predigested concepts, may provide us with an insightful explanation as to how we worship celebrities as icons. As a consequence of the way in which the media and other forms of culture pervasively convey the message of celebrity, some members of the public could automatically and unquestioningly attribute feelings of reverence and adoration to these constructed personas, resulting in their becoming popular or famous.

Whether we see our celebrities as demi-gods or icons, it should be noted that iconic status does not necessarily have to be entirely true or justified. It can be true, partially true or false, but true or not, according to the literature consulted, it has to be reinforced by the cultural mechanisms of our society, in order for it to be in any way effective. As Barthes observes, "Men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use..." (1993: 144).

10 Furthermore, the myth can serve to naturalise or present as given the social and cultural *doxa* defined by Bourdieu.

Mass media

Barthe's assertion of myths being created and sustained through use, and in particular through popular media, has been picked up by Italian author and cultural philosopher Umberto Eco in his work *A Theory of Semiotics.* Writing in the 1970s, he discusses the creation of myths or icons and observes that they are the product of mass media operating in an urban, industrialised context. According to Eco, for mass communication to be effective it needs three things: an industrial society which appears to be homogeneous, channels of communication which make it possible to reach a large proportion of the population from various sociological strata, and thirdly active groups who create and disseminate particular messages by industrial means (1977: 13).

John B. Thompson, writing in the 1990s in his work *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media,* emphasised this role of mass communication in our modern culture. Believing that meaning is only significant if it is shared, he eloquently said, "Communication media are spinning wheels in the modern world and, in using these media human beings are fabricating webs of significance for themselves" (1995).

Stuart Hall would agree. In *Culture, Globalisation and the World System*, he observed how current mass media builds iconic images just as Barthes predicted in the 1950s.

> Global mass culture is dominated by the modern means of cultural production, dominated by the image which crosses and re-crosses linguistic frontiers much more rapidly and more easily, and which speaks across languages in a more immediate way. It is dominated by all the ways in which the visual and graphic arts have entered directly into the reconstitution of popular life, of entertainment and leisure. It is dominated by television and film, and by image, imagery, and styles of mass advertising (1997: 27).

It should be noted that both Thompson and Hall were writing before the explosion of social media. We can only assume that the dissemination of images and their multitude of meanings will increase exponentially in the future via these channels.

Conclusion

In this chapter the concept of the icon in different guises was explored. Firstly the icon as a sacred object embodying a sacred presence. This religious definition was found to have been supplanted by a more secular and colloquial use of the term which was found to be more particularly prominent in the case of the celebrity, and synonymous with someone who is famous, popular and relevant to their time. These notions of reverence and popularity will be pertinent to our search for the definition of the icon.

The celebrity icon was also found to resemble an aspect of Barthes concept of myth. It was found that as myths they functioned within popular culture in such a way as to powerfully, pervasively and, more importantly, automatically represent complex social and cultural phenomena in a simplified or essential form. Then Eco, Hall and Thompson reinforced Barthes' theory that these myths gain their power of persuasion though complex networks of mass communication, or as we know it, mass media.

Having understood aspects of Barthes' myth, and how it represents particular expressions and practices within popular culture, it became apparent that becoming a celebrity icon or celebrity myth is the route to popularity in contemporary society. This is particularly so if supported by mass media.

As Kemp suggested, popularity is essential for iconicity. But is it enough? Can popularity alone carry the art icon through time and space and in so doing ensure its continued relevance? I would suggest not. Popularity is fleeting and entirely connected to specific times and places, whereas art icons are capable of transcending the time and place of their making. Consequently Barthes' notion of myth, while providing us with an understanding of how popular culture functions within society, cannot assist us further in the quest for iconicity in artworks and therefore an art icon cannot be a Barthian myth.

If this is the case, what does carry the art icon beyond mere popularity? Could it be that it carries particularly powerful sets of meanings? If so, how do these objects carry these meanings, and how do we receive them? Possibly they are magic, retaining the spirit of the sacred icon, which we receive instinctively by way of an "an organic reaction"(Cassirer 1944: 43). Alternatively, they could be part of a more complex system whereby certain attributes of the artwork become connected to existing ideas in our society, and in so doing become symbols carrying particularly powerful meanings. For an understanding of the

concept of meaning in artworks it is helpful to turn to the semiotic[11] and aesthetic theories of the twentieth century.

11 Semiotics is a “branch of linguistics concerned with signs and symbols” (*COD* 1982: 956). It is also “The study of how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality” (Chandler 2002).

Chapter 2

The icon as meaning

> A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside of it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980: 271).

Meaning

So far the literature has broadly delineated the concept of the art icon as an esteemed object with mass appeal. However this is purely descriptive and does not enlighten us as to why these objects are so appealing. Surely they must contain extra dimensions or have special meanings that inspire this widespread appreciation?

The realm of meaning is highly complex and hard to discuss with precision. Situated in the mind, it is difficult to describe, define or measure. Many disciplines such as psychology, social anthropology or philosophy have attempted to grapple with the concept, but one which has given this subject particular attention is semiotics, the study of signs.[12]

Theorists who have embarked on the study of semiotics have found that meaning takes a multitude of forms and pervades almost every area of human culture. We see a red light and we stop. We hear someone call our name and we turn and answer. We feel an itch and we scratch. The reason we respond to the light, the call and the itch is due to the fact that they are all signs that carry particular meanings.

Ernst Cassirer, as is evident from his 1944 work *An Essay on Man*, believed that human society does not casually use the odd sign here or there, but has developed entire systems of signs in order to adapt to the environment and make sense of the world. He further notes that this negotiation of the world occurs indirectly.

12 A sign is a “thing used as a representation of something” (*COD* 1982: 982). According to Peirce a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce in Eco 1977: 15). For Eco a sign is “everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else”* (Eco 1977: 16). Signs need not only be words or texts, but can be sounds, images, gestures or objects (Chandler 2002).

> Instead of dealing with the things themselves, man is constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium (1944: 43).

Consequently he named the human race *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer 1944: 44), while Daniel Chandler refers to us as *Homo significans* (2002).

Language

As signs are so pervasive, semiotic theorists began to question and explore the processes by which they are created, conveyed and received. For obvious reasons, most of them based their work on an analysis of language, our primary source of communication. Barthes, writing in the late 1960s in *The Fashion System,* asks: "Is there any system of objects, a system of some magnitude, which can dispense with articulated language? Is not speech the inevitable relay of any signifying order?" (1990: xi). Eco states in his 1977 book *A Theory of Semiotics* that "without doubt verbal language is the most powerful semiotic device that man has invented" (1977: 174). Consequently many of the theorists in this field make use of linguistic theory in order to understand how meaning is created and conveyed.

Structuralism

Within the field of linguistics, traditional semiotic theorists found that the most useful model for the understanding of signs and their meaning was derived from a theoretical approach which was to become known as structuralism.[13] Structuralism, a movement that became dominant in post war Europe, appeared in many disciplines of the social sciences. Its basic tenet was to search for the deep structures which underlie and determine the forms of all cultural and social phenomena. More precisely, structuralism allowed the social sciences "to describe the underlying systems of distinctions and conventions that enable objects and activities to have meaning" (Culler 2001: 28).

13 Structuralism is defined as "a preoccupation not simply with structures but with such structures as can be held to underlie and generate the phenomena that come under observation" *(The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* 1977: 821).

Later theorists continued to work within the structuralist paradigm. Eco, also relied on the basic tenets of structuralist semiotics. For example, in *A Theory of Semiotics* he discusses his aim to develop a broad but unified approach to every instance of signification and communication. The approach underpinning his general semiotic theory is that "every case of sign-function" must be explained "in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes". For Eco, "A code is a system of signification, in so far as it couples present entities with absent units. When – on the basis of an underlying rule – something actually presented to the perception of the addressee stands for something else, there is signification" (1977: 8).

Structuralist semiotic theorists did not concern themselves greatly with the content or meaning of the actual words in any semiotic system, but felt it was more important to "[establish] the rules and codes (the systems) which allow for the articulation of that content in the first place" (Allen 2003: 41). This approach provided a different understanding of language where it was no longer seen as a system which describes reality, but rather a system which shapes, and even creates our reality (Barry 2002).

As a result of the work of the semiotic theorists, it has become widely accepted that signs are not randomly employed within cultures, but that they form part of a broader complex system. It has also been revealed that human beings do not receive meaning through instinct or telepathy, but rather that the creation and reception of signs and their meaning is a specific process which is both determined by and decoded via language.

Signifier signified

The two founding fathers of the field of semiotics who first analysed the sign and its various processes were Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) who both began working at the end of the 19th century (Chandler 2002). For Saussure, who devised a dyadic model, a sign is composed of two elements functioning together as two sides of the same coin or page; the *signifier* (spoken or written word) and the *signified* (its meaning, or the mental concept associated with it). Barthes eloquently observed that a sign is an idea in form (1993: 112). This simple formula is also known as first order signification, or denotation (Barthes1993: 113, Hawkes 1977: 133). For Saussure this relationship is in the vast majority of cases arbitrary, which means the

association between signifier and signified is informed by social convention and must be learnt (Allen 2003: 40-41).

Peirce's model is triadic and is made up of three elements, a representamen (i.e. word, sound or image and similar to Saussure's signifier), the interpretant (the sense made and similar to Saussure's signified), and the object being referred to. Peirce's contribution is that he proposed that the existence of a sign is meaningless unless there is included an active process of interpretation by a receiver or person to whom it can make sense (Chandler 2002).

Denotation & connotation

Later, Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1966) developed the concept of meaning or the signified further, taking it to a greater level of complexity. He described two different types of meaning; denotation, which is the literal, generally understood meaning of a word; and connotation, which involves implied or nuanced meanings, which are most often culturally informed (Chandler 2002).

The models first developed by Saussure and Peirce provide an understanding that signs are forms that carry ideas to recipients, but fall short of dealing with the wide variety of signs in circulation. They did not differentiate between a sigh and a written word, an artwork or a traffic sign. Later Peirce, a compulsive taxonomist, predicted a theoretical projection of over 59 000 different types of signs, suggesting that they be classified on the basis of the varying degrees of relationship between the signifier and the signified. Selecting three for a more detailed discussion, he addressed the standard arbitrary symbol and two 'motivated' signs: the index and the icon (Chandler 2002).

Types of signs

According to Peirce, the universally used octagonal red stop sign would be classified as a symbol because it is "a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional" (Chandler 2002). Here, in order to understand the symbol the relationship between signifier and signified must be learnt.

Smoke, on the other hand, would be classified as an index because it is "a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to

the signified" (Chandler 2002). Here, the relationship between signifier and signified is so close that we do not have to learn that smoke means fire.

The semiotic icon would lie somewhere between the sign and the index. It is "a mode in which the signifier is perceived as naturally resembling or imitating the signified (recognisably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) – being similar in possessing some of its qualities" (Chandler 2002). A portrait or a cartoon would be an example of an icon. Consequently, the signifier and signified are so closely aligned that they share similar qualities (Eco 1977: 192).

Eco provides an explanation of how the above formula operates in the human mind using a glass of beer. He describes how his previous experiences of seeing the golden colour, feeling the cold glass and tasting the beer are immediately recalled when he sees a photograph of a glass of beer. When looking at the photograph he is fully aware there is no beer, but the image is so powerful that the identical sensory responses are reignited (1977: 193). Given this description, a comparison with the religious icon is more easily understood, with the acknowledgement that the responses being stimulated would be of a spiritual nature, informed by the worshippers' particular type of religion.

Contextual conditioning

With regards to the first assumption of universal understanding, semiotic theorists, especially those operating within the structuralist paradigm, have found that meanings are almost always culturally embedded. It was shown that for a message to be received, it needs to be both created from and understood within a particular cultural, social and temporal context. In other words, they are culturally and historically informed and interpreted.

Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), a structuralist anthropologist and theorist introduced the concept of *bricolage. Bricolage* is a French term for a casual type of handyman who plies his trade using whatever material comes to hand (Levi-Strauss 1962: 11). In his intensive study on folklore and mythical thought he describes *bricolage* here as, "a dialogue with the material and means of execution" (Levi-Strauss 1962: 19), meaning that societies both create and receive meanings from the cultural materials they have to hand in order to perform certain social functions. Consequently symbolic meaning is culturally conditioned. Eco illustrates this concept with an astronomical example, where he points out that we do

not physically see *Alpha Centauri,* but we see the cultural units used to communicate it, such as a photograph, texts or diagrammatic drawings (1977: 66). In this way Eco illustrates that we choose from a range of possible illustrations.

In addition, in his work *Introduction to Marcel Mauss* (1950) Levi-Strauss supplies a model for the creation of signs. Here he suggests the concept of the floating signifier: the signifier is completely empty, "a zero symbolic value .... A symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever" (1987: 64). Consequently a culture can take an empty signifier and attach whatever meanings, wherever they choose (Levi-Strauss 1987: 64).

This would imply that the potential for the creation of signifiers and their meanings is broad and almost limitless and, relatively speaking, it is. Levi-Strauss does however, refine his observation by noting that possible options on particular materials are limited due to the fact that certain meanings have already been 'taken'. "[T]he possible combinations ... are restricted by the fact that they are drawn from the language where they already possess a sense, which sets a limit on their freedom to manoeuvre" (1962: 12). Consequently, we have a relatively limitless range of signifiers which are drawn from a broad cultural context.

Multiple meanings

Semiotic analysis has shown that any given sign is not firmly hitched to one meaning. In order to accommodate multiple signification or polysemy, Eco developed his theory of degrees of iconicity. Based on the concept of field theory[14] he describes how cultures arrange information in an unfixed manner, and uses the light/colour spectrum as his model. Visible light is a system of undifferentiated colour ranging seamlessly from red to violet. In order to talk about colour, scientists have randomly and artificially divided up the continuum and given each section a particular name. The undifferentiated continuum is concrete 'reality' but parts of the continuum have been divided up in order to create manageable, recognisable portions. So too with culture. Meaning does not occur as a single, fixed unit, but instead the continuum can be tapped into, in several places,

14 According to Eco, Field Theory was first described in Hermann Weyl's *Was ist Materie?* (What is Matter?) (1924). He quotes from Weyl: "For Field Theory,... the world reduces to a complete continuum. Even atoms and electrons are not ultimate unchanging elements shoved willy nilly by bombarding forces of nature, but are themselves subject to continuous, extended and delicately flowing changes. The field is not a thing-concept but a concept of relation; it is not composed of pieces but a system, a totality of lines of force (1924: 35).

simultaneously and at various times in order to access meaning. This provides us with the ability to explain multiple meanings and nuances, both in the present and throughout history (Eco 1977: 77).

Dynamic signification

We know that meanings are not always static or fixed in time, and those that are, simply become redundant and irrelevant. Barthes again weighs in, providing a useful model for dynamic changes in meaning known as second order signification.

Devised as part of his theory of myth, Barthes explains how this occurs at the formal or structural level. Closely following Saussure, Barthes explains that a sign comprises three different elements, the *signifier* (image, word or form), the *signified* (the concept), and the *sign* which is the result, or totality, of the first two. In time this *sign* then shifts to become the *signifier*, to which is added a new *signified* in a second round or layer of meaning, which produces a new *sign.* This dynamic step-like and forward motion in formal structure illustrates how, over time, different meanings can develop and accumulate around a signifier over and above its initial meaning (Barthes 1993: 113-115). Earlier Cassirer said something not dissimilar about the arts: “Culture is forever creating new linguistic, artistic, and religious symbols in an uninterrupted stream” (1961: 158).

Consequently the structuralist semiotic theorists have provided models which resolved any erroneous assumption that meaning can be fixed. They provided explanations of how a physical object such as an artwork can carry multiple denotative and connotative meanings which are contextually embedded (historically, socially and culturally) and which are also capable of change.

This addition of multiple, dynamic and contextually embedded meaning is an important theoretical addition to the quest to define the art icon, as it now incorporates the concept of meaning, but it still does not explain how particular artworks carry signification or meaning more powerfully than other similar works.

Rich signification

Ambiguity

The answer may lie in the fact that not only do some artworks carry multiple, dynamic meanings, but that the meanings that they do carry, can themselves be complex[15], thus offering more layers of signification. The literature on semiotics suggests that one way to intensify meaning is through the use of ambiguity.

William Empson wrote the definitive work on ambiguity entitled *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930. In this work he classified and described the different ways in which we perceive rich meaning in literature, and this may be applicable to artworks as well. Eco, also discussing literature, suggests that the way in which ambiguity creates intensified meaning is through the disruption of convention. This disruption occurs at the level of form, as well as content. With regards to form, this happens when familiar formal structures are slightly or radically altered. With regards to content, this is manifest when familiar content is presented differently or when altogether new content is introduced – or both.

Eco, using the tradition of the Russian Formalists, believes that the results of ambiguity can be either an odd expression or an aesthetic one. In the instance of an aesthetic expression, ambiguity, “instead of producing pure disorder, … focuses my attention and urges me to an interpretive effort ... it incites me toward the discovery of an unexpected flexibility in the language with which I am dealing”. He illustrates this using a poetic example. “/Colourless green ideas sleep furiously/”. In this example disruption caused by the breaking of the rules of grammar and logic encourages greater engagement (Eco 1977: 263).

Tradition & innovation

Artists in the fine art discipline have also found various ways to visually illustrate ambiguity. In *The Logic of the Humanities* (1961) Cassirer suggests that one way in which they have achieved this is through the creation of a particular type of tension. This tension occurs in an artwork as a result of the uncomfortable coexistence of the forces of creativity and tradition. “Creativity is forever in conflict with tradition ... The creative process must always

15 This intensity could again be drawn from a continuum or sliding scale of density of meaning.

satisfy two different conditions: on the one side it must tie itself to something existing and enduring, and on the other, it must be receptive to new use and application ...” (Cassirer 1961: 200). He believes that these two forces energise each other, and that the result is something new (Cassirer 1961: 211).

Michael Findlay in his 2014 work entitled *The Value of Art: Money, Power, Beauty* would agree. In his discussion of great painters he remarks, “While at the time they often appeared to be making clean breaks with the art of the past,... [they]... were in fact in perpetual dialogue with the history of art, endlessly studying their aesthetic ancestors to borrow and steal, parody and pay homage. They respected the weight of the history that they were following but were not confined or intimidated by it. The new was perpetually informed by the old even as it sought to replace it” (Findlay 2014: 160). This dynamic described by Cassirer and Findlay could tie in with Empson’s second type of ambiguity whereby “two or more alternative meanings are resolved into one” (1949: v).

Aesthetic experience

While dealing with ambiguity as dynamic tension between innovation and creativity, Cassirer actually focussed more on the concept of ‘something new’, by which he meant that art must reveal new ways of looking at the world. For Cassirer, this occurs in the case of a truly aesthetic experience, and this aesthetic experience is a very particular type of spiritual event for both artist and viewer[16]. Here the artists initial inspiration is instilled into the artwork and in turn re-ignited in the viewer (Cassirer 1961: 83, 119 & 190-192).

For Cassirer this spiritual dimension is not a lightning bolt out of the blue, but rather related to the way in which the artwork acts as a conduit for a two-way communication between artists and viewers (1961: 190-192).

> For this path does not lead to the work [in isolation], that enduring presence into which the creative process has frozen itself, but in the “you”, the other person who receives this work, incorporating it into his own life and thence

16 He saw art and religion as linked because he believed that they are both derived from the same subconscious source. According to Cassirer the more primitive forms of world presentation such as myth and language, support and determine the higher, more sophisticated cultural forms. For him ‘mythical thought’ gives rise to religion and art and ‘natural language’ gives rise to theoretical science (Friedman 2016).

> transforming it back into the medium from which it originates (Cassirer, 1961: 192).

Cassirer suggests that an artwork's ability to successfully act as a vehicle for this spiritual, interpersonal communion results in its continued relevance because it allows us to repeatedly re-experience this spiritual dimension (1961: 194). "The living process of culture has its being in the fact that it is inexhaustible in its creation of such mediation and transaction" (Cassirer, 1961: 192). Could this spiritual dimension identified by Cassirer be a reincarnation of the religious icon?

Or, could the spiritual dimension referred to by Cassirer be better described as an aura? Walter Benjamin, a neo-Marxist who published the influential essay "*Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"* (1936), coined the term aura with regards to artworks. According to him, historically works of art possessed an aura – a sense of magic or spirituality arising from their uniqueness. "The aura is an effect of a work being uniquely present in time and space. It is connected to the idea of authenticity" (Robinson 2018: 3). Benjamin argues that once an artwork is mechanically reproduced both the original and the reproduction are impoverished. The cheap reproduction does not possess this 'presence' and the original is no longer unique. As Benjamin said, "By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence" (Benjamin 1969: 4).

So far the theorists Eco, Cassirer and Benjamin have provided us with concepts and possible explanations for the existence of powerful artworks, these being, amongst others, disruptive ambiguity, the dynamic tension between tradition and innovation and the inclusion of a spiritual dimension. Let us for argument's sake say that artworks which contain this rich signification become recognised as particularly significant, and as a consequence enter the art historical canon.

Art historical canon

Anna Brzyski, in the Introduction to *Partisan Canons* (2007), defines the canon as "a body of works traditionally considered to be the most significant and therefore the most worthy of study... an expression of a universalised or universal standard of quality" (2007: 1). The concept of the canon has been under discussion by several art historians, many of whom critiqued it as an elitist, exclusionary device, used mainly by the west in order to control positions of power and privilege within the art world (Brzyski 2007: 2 & 5). Brzyski argues

in support of the canon, observing that although the concept is flawed it has a useful application in the practical day-to-day business of curatorship and teaching. “We make qualitative distinctions, constantly identifying some artists as more significant than others. We may no longer regard the canon as the ultimate arbiter of cultural value, but we continue to embrace its logic” (Brzyski 2007: 2).

Once included in this position of privilege, art works undergo a type of accessioning process. They are specifically named, verified as being attributed to a specific artist, and recognised as key to known art historical periods where they become part of a self-perpetuating system (Brzyski 2007: 9). This is so because as an authoritative structure, the canon will continually be referred to by education systems, publishers and the media and in so doing will “shape our preferences and ultimately affect our perception of their significance” (Brzyski 2007: 10).

It must be noted that the canonical accessioning process is a complex one in which many judgements are made. We would like to think that works are included on the basis of merit, but this is not necessarily the case. Brzyski notes that many circumstances affect the inclusion process and these again occur on the practical level. Circumstances which could lead to inclusion in a canon are: the physical availability of the work for exhibition, existing research on the work, easily accessible digital images, and opportunities for the work to appear in published material, especially online (Brzyski 2007: 8). To this could be added current art world fashion and politics and possibly the charisma of the artist themselves.

Using the theoretical models of the continuum and the ‘empty’ structure, new research has reconfigured the concept of the canon. It is now no longer limited to a single monolithic structure of intellectual power, but is recommended as a useful paradigm operating more broadly both in terms of what is included within any given canon, and in its creation and operation by a wider variety of players, within more diverse ranges of geographical, temporal and cultural contexts (Brzyski 2007: 3-4 & 8).

Conclusion

In this chapter the idea of icon as meaning has been explored. Some of the theoretical models devised by the semioticians of the twentieth century have been discussed. These theories have facilitated an understanding of the ways in which meaning is created though the use of signs. Saussure and Pierce provide the basic building blocks of signs, the

signifier and *signified,* which enables a discussion of form and meaning. Structuralism provides models for the basic connection between signifier and signified, which creates denotative meaning. This is helpful as it enables us to understand that words or images can stand for a mental concept.

Later semioticians provide models for understanding more complex connotative signification. Peirce and Eco provide us with a way to classify signs into different types depending on the relationship between the signified and the signifier, and describe the icon in particular as an instance where the signifier resembles the signified.

We acknowledge that we can't assume that meanings will be the same for everyone, everywhere, throughout history. Levi-Strauss and Eco provide the contextual paradigm of cultural and historical conditioning. Thus we understand that signs and their meanings are contextually embedded. Through the concept of the continuum, Eco provides the means to understand multiple signification, and Barthes provides explanations of how signs transform over time and accumulate multiple, dynamic meanings through his model of second order signification.

In order to try to understand the power of artworks and how they may become iconic the semioticians again provide possible approaches. Eco suggests that ambiguity can provide rich, intense art, when both form and content are disrupted. Cassirer brings very similar concepts into the realm of the fine arts when he describes how an ideal artwork can be achieved through the dynamic tension created by the coexistence of tradition and innovation in the work. He also proposes that a more intense signification can be achieved when a spiritual aspect is incorporated into an artwork. I therefore argue that it is plausible that artworks which contain rich signification become part of an art historical canon, or can be said to possess the qualities Panofsky associates with iconicity and Benjamin with the aura of the work.

While the creation and appreciation of artworks are usually solitary experiences, they, just like any other cultural artefact form part of a shared system of values, both economic and social. In the next chapter, the artwork as icon will be situated within a specific social milieu.

Chapter 3

The icon as value

Good business is the best art. (Andy Warhol).[17]

Value

While it is plausible to say that powerful signification could lead to iconicity in fine art, the concept of value should be addressed in some detail, and in order to understand value, some insight into the art market is necessary. Michael Findlay, who has worked as an international art dealer for decades, reports that in his experience economic value plays a significant role in the amount of attention an artwork receives (2014: 52).

Don Thompson, Findlay and Bourdieu have written insightfully and often entertainingly on the subject of the economics of the art world and have been used in this chapter to illustrate how art, an essentially aesthetic pursuit, can not only be manipulated using the established practises of the marketing world (such as branding) to hold economic value but can also be used to indicate cultural and social value and prestige in our current capitalist system.

But value in the art world, much like the other issues discussed in the earlier chapters, is not set in a binary system of extremes, but can also be seen to appear on a continuum ranging from economic to the socio-cultural value,[18] with these aspects very often overlapping.

Much of the literature consulted for this research indicates that artworks, as material objects, hold very little intrinsic value, and that all value within the domain of the fine arts is both constructed and attributed. As Saussure said, “it is not the metal in the coin that fixes its value” (Chandler 2002). But rather it is by agreement that a value is attached to an object.

17 in Hughes (2008).

18 What is generally known as aesthetic value would be accommodated in the section on cultural value.

Economic value

Value in the economic sense is very much in evidence in the art world and usually attracts a great deal of media attention. The *Financial Mail* reported that on the 15th of November 2017 the work *Salvator Mundi* by Leonardo da Vinci, believed to be the only Da Vinci on the market, sold at Christie's in New York for US $450m (Leatherby & Platt 2017). *The Telegraph* reported that the work by Pablo Picasso entitled *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1955), sold in 2015, also at Christies in New York, fetched US $179m. *When Will You Marry* (1892) by Paul Gauguin also sold in 2015 for US $300m in a private sale (Crilly 2015). The economic values quoted above come about as a result of these artworks participating in a very specific system in the art world which operates according to conventional economic principles.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has done much to locate cultural artefacts within economic systems. In his work *Commodities and the Politics of Value,* he notes that value is attributed to objects largely through economic activity or exchange. Thus they become commodities which "circulate in different *regimes of value* in time and space" (Appadurai 1994: 76).

Appadurai suggests that a commodity is not one type of thing as opposed to another, but rather "one phase in the life of some things" (Appadurai 1994: 85). He observes that although objects circulate within the system of commodification, there is also a contradictory force which will restrict and control exchange. This leads to commodities becoming enclaved, or removed from the economic system. He also suggests that objects can just as easily be re-introduced into the system through a process he calls diversion (Appadurai 1994: 88).

These economic activities described by Appadurai do occur in the art word. For example, when an artwork is placed in a commercial gallery or art fair it is a commodity. Once it is purchased it becomes part of a collection and it is enclaved. Here it no longer circulates in the art market and its value could vary. The value could remain static, decrease or possibly increase. If, while it is in the collection, it successfully circulates within the museum and gallery context and becomes associated with, and subject to certain (non-economic) events, the work could increase in value. These events could be instances such as inclusion in important exhibitions and catalogues or citation in respected academic

studies. On its diversion back into the art market it will have gained in economic value. Alternatively if it languishes in obscurity, it could decrease in value. This work by Appadurai firmly locates artworks in the economic sphere. For art, “the regime of value” in which artworks act as commodities is known as the art market.

The art market

The art market consists of the primary and secondary art markets. The primary art market consists of the artist, a gallery agent or art dealer, and collectors. Here the artist and their work are exposed to the market for the first time. The value of the work will be determined by the size, material, number of editions of the particular work (if it is a print or cast sculpture), circumstances of manufacture, the artist’s time and skill and sometimes the difficulty of execution. In the case of a young artist just beginning their career, collectors take a risk when purchasing the work as the artist often has no track record and has not had an opportunity to accumulate a reputation. Depending on how well the artists career is managed from this point, an artwork can either increase in value or become devalued (Findlay 2014: 14-17).

The secondary art market is the realm of exchange where one collector sells to another and the artist is entirely absent from the exchange. Generally, in Western society, anything that is second hand will decrease in value. The secondary art market functions differently. Here the artwork or an artist – should their career have been correctly managed – will have built up a positive reputation and this always translates into higher economic value.

With regards to iconic artworks, due to the intensive social and historical journey that is required in order for an artwork to acquire iconic status no artwork will emerge from the artist’s studio immediately iconic. Consequently it would be fair to say that artworks that are potentially iconic would emerge from the secondary art market, if at all.

According to Findlay, much like Western capitalism, the secondary art market operates on the traditional rule of supply and demand, as well as the existence, size and character of the target market. Consequently the most important aspect governing the value of an artwork is the concept of rarity. “Not only does it justify the price, it also suggests an exclusive club of ownership” (Findlay 2014: 21). Rarity occurs when a respected artist is known to have not been prolific, or when most of an artist’s works already are in reputable

institutions, much like the *Salvator Mundi* discussed above. Consequently those that are on the market will be perceived to be of higher value (Findlay 2014: 25).

The second aspect would be the size and membership of the target market. The target market is made up of individuals who are usually from an arts patronage culture, with the learnt ability as well as the means to appreciate and purchase art (Findlay 2014: 28). This group of people can also contain celebrity collectors who can enhance the value of an artist or artwork. For example, to be added to the prestigious collection of someone such as Charles Saatchi or Jochen Zeitz who are considered to have knowledge, foresight and taste is likely to translate into enhanced economic value to the works of those artists. This occurs when these individuals actively manage their collections by buying and selling lucratively (thus increasing the value of an artist's work), as well as donating and lending to international museums and exhibitions (Thompson 2008: 100).

A third aspect of economics that affects the value of an artwork is that the artist is likely to benefit from being managed by a skilful marketer who is capable of implementing an integrated marketing plan. An integrated marketing plan is a strategy which ensures that a consistent message is conveyed via all aspects of both traditional and social media. This strategy should be actively managed by a team including a professional marketing agent, the artist's representing gallery or dealer, professional auction houses, as well as the artist's ability and inclination to market themselves though events such as strategic lectures, dinner parties and art fairs (Findlay 2014: 32-36).

Marketing & branding

Don Thompson in his 2008 book, *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark,* takes a jaundiced view of the contemporary art market. He argues that artists and collectors participate in the art world purely for commercial reasons, to create, buy and sell for profit. Largely disregarding the aesthetic or intellectual aspects of the discipline and how they may affect value, Thompson discusses his take on the intricacies of the art business.

Thompson asserts that economic value in contemporary art is determined almost entirely by the particular marketing practice of branding. Branding is the formal management of reputation and for an artist it begins in art school and is carried on throughout their career. From a branded art school the artist must be recommended by the teaching staff to a

branded dealer, sell work in a branded commercial gallery and appear in branded exhibitions and their catalogues, in branded museums, galleries and art fairs.

In the secondary market their work should appear in branded auction houses. Internationally branded auction houses such as Christie's or Sotheby's create the most value for an artwork as "they connote status, quality and celebrity bidders" (Thompson 2008: 13). Thompson maintains that an artwork sold at a branded auction house during a prestigious evening sale, will attract 20% more value than the same work at a daytime sale (2008: 16).

If the dealer is the starting point of the artist's reputation, then a branded museum such as MOMA or the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) must surely be the end point – the pinnacle of reputational achievement. Considered to operate above the art market, the judgement of these institutions is not questioned. Consequently if an artist's work is in a branded museum collection or exhibition, this can constitute the highest honour for an artist as their work will now be branded 'museum quality' (Thompson 2008: 234).

In this context, branded does not mean that the artist is sponsored by a commercial brand in the manner of sportsmen and women, but that the institutions which manage the artist are reputable and fashionable. Thompson states that once an artist becomes successfully and positively branded, the market tends to unquestioningly accept whatever the artist produces (2008: 14).

According to Thompson, these branded institutions manipulate the art market by shamelessly playing on collectors' insecurity and general lack of confidence when dealing with Contemporary Art. "Collectors patronise branded dealers, bid at branded auction houses, visit branded art fairs, and seek out branded artists. You are nobody in contemporary art until you have been branded .... Branding adds personality, distinctiveness and value to a product or service. It also offers risk avoidance and trust" (Thompson 2008: 12).

While Thompson's views are insightful and persuasive in their revelations of the possible machinations of the art world, I remain unconvinced that insecurity, due to lack of insider knowledge is a plausible explanation for the high prices paid by collectors. Many collectors of contemporary art are well-read and take an intelligent interest in collecting.

Cultural value

The above discussion has centred around how value is perceived and managed from a purely financial perspective. But value in the art world is not solely determined by the market, it is also gained via cultural criteria peculiar to the art world.

Possibly the most important factor with regard to the value of an artwork would be the aspect of quality. Quality, like ‘meaning’ or ‘taste’, is difficult to define. Findlay defines quality in fine art as “mastery of the medium, clarity of execution and authority of expression...” (2014: 47). Quality could also be ascribed to a work which shows confidence of execution, clarity and balance in composition, and if possible the successful attainment of Cassirer’s ideal, which one might call the ‘X factor’.

Conclusive attribution of the work to an important artist (particularly with historic works) is another profoundly important aspect. A work decisively proven to have been painted by Leonardo da Vinci will hold more value than one which is ‘attributed to’ him or ‘the school of Da Vinci’. Attribution to a recognisable, clearly defined period or style in an artist’s life is also important for the value of the work. Documents of authenticity by reputable professionals confirming these facts further enhance the value of a work (Findlay 2014: 23-24, 43).

The provenance or the artwork, its ‘biography’ or ‘CV’, is an important factor in determining or influencing its value. This would include a list of previous owners (the more prestigious the better), and details of previous sales (to track the rate of its increase in value). A list of its appearances in important exhibitions often enhances value. This proves that the work is important to the artist’s genre, or is typical of a particular art historical period or that it eloquently speaks to important concerns of the day.

But exposure can also prove to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand lending a work to an important branded exhibition, where it will be seen in famous galleries and museums by thousands of art lovers will definitely increase its visibility, enhance its provenance and hence its value. Moreover, having the artwork in the full colour catalogue, preferably on the cover, enhances its provenance and value even further. Should the image appear again in the gallery gift shop on posters, stationery items, bags, scarves or fridge magnets all the better. However private and public collectors are nervous as there is also the risk of breaches of security and theft or possible unwanted scrutiny by the tax authorities.

The artwork's inclusion in academic writing, be it in books, journals or magazines and even more importantly in a *catalogues raisonnées,* is advantageous as these texts are often written and read by powerful members of the art fraternity who could later prove influential. According to Findlay, based on his experience as an art dealer, a good overall provenance adds 15% to the value of an artwork (2014: 40).

The physical condition of the artwork is also pertinent to its value. For obvious reasons a work in good condition with no damage, warping, dirt or loss of pigment is more valuable than one that shows these signs of degradation. The work's condition documented in a professional conservator's condition report, is even better. The condition report will give a description of the physical integrity of the work and will note any damage or past restoration. The degree of restoration to an artwork is a matter of fashion. In the past conservators restored works to their original pristine condition. Today, restoration is kept to a minimum in order to lend more authenticity to a work, therefore more conservative methods of conservation are used. A good condition rating enhances a works value by about 15 -20% (Findlay 2014: 41-42).

The various aspects of economic and cultural value described above can all be regarded as pertinent to the construction of value in an artwork, but with regards to our quest to understand iconicity, the aspect of exposure and the resulting popularity would be the most important. As Findlay states,

> Museums that own such works capitalise on the images for both commercial and educational purposes and, worldwide, the same works become more and more famous. This has been happening for hundreds of years. Eventually, certain types of works become synonymous with the artist: van Gogh's self-portraits, Gauguin's Tahitian women, Monet's water lilies, Picasso's portraits of Dora Maar, Pollock's drip paintings, John's American flags, and Warhol's images of Marilyn Monroe. Such works are said to have achieved iconic status, and in the art trade "iconic" is a very expensive word (2014: 45).

Social value

Society & culture

If we accept the discussion above that art holds both economic and cultural value (as defined by the arts sector), then it stands to reason that these values must play a social

role. Anthropologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, writing in the late 1900s, contributed to our understanding of the role played by culture in western society. Here he identified the role of art and culture within society as a whole, as well as for the specific role players. In his analysis he argues that art is used to indicate and negotiate social status, and in this regard it is even more powerful than money.

For Bourdieu society is made up of a dynamic system of *classes* and *class fractions.* A class or class fraction is a group's "position in social space" (Bourdieu 1984: 6). These classes operate or play on fields, which is an "arena, or *structured space of positions or position takings*, wherein individuals and institutions compete for monopoly" (Wacquant 2007-2017).

For Bourdieu, these classes are determined by the complex interrelationship of contested social currencies. He identified various types of social currencies which he called 'capital', extending the concept beyond the established realm of economics to other social applications. These include *social capital*, (belonging to a network of mutual relationships based on shared education, sporting activities, cultural pastimes, accents etc. (Bourdieu 1984: 91)), *cultural capital,* (a familiarity with the arts whether gained from the family as well as within or outside the education system (Bourdieu 1984: 13-14)), *educational capital* and *symbolic capital,* (accumulated prestige or honour (Thompson in Bourdieu 1995: 351), manifest as appreciation, knowledge and recognition (Bourdieu, 1984: 291)).

According to Bourdieu, we are not defined by our social class alone, but by the creation, manipulation and exercising of the above kinds of capital within society, which we use to maintain and further our status. The result of this ongoing negotiation and manipulation would be our *habitus* or lifestyle. ("The habitus is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any 'rule'". (Thompson in Bourdieu 1995: 352)).

According to Bourdieu, each sphere or *habitus* of modern society creates a network of relationships through which the players engage or conduct their practice. At the same time, our position within the field will determine our tendency to behave in a particular way within this multi-dimensional space, which will again reinforce our position in it. "The

manner in which culture has been acquired, lives on in the manner of using it...” (Bourdieu 1984: 2).

According to Bourdieu’s model, *social origin* and *cultural capita*l will determine your position in society and hence your ability to exercise your social, educational and economic capital (1984: 63, 185). Unlike the Marxists who emphasise economic determinism, Bourdieu argues, after conducting empirical research regarding attitudes to food, that *social origin* (although influenced by material means) produces certain ‘higher’ aesthetic preferences i.e. *cultural capital* (regardless of economic capability to support it),[19] resulting in the aesthetically literate bourgeoisie or *connoisseurs*, as opposed to the *nouveau riche* who in the study were seen to maintain their low-brow tastes even though they could afford “better choices” (1984: 185).

Bourdieu’s empirical research published as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* corroborates his theory, revealing that people’s artistic choices often correlate with their social position. “Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept (Bourdieu 1984: 57). Bourdieu continues that the individual does not actually have to act on the social preferences of his or her class, but are “only required to express a status-induced familiarity with legitimate or soon to be legitimated culture” (1984: 63).

Bourdieu also shows how these ruling intellectual classes (or class fractions) preserve their social positions (or privileges) across generations. In the above study, he reveals how the next generation internalise their parents’ aesthetic preferences through early exposure followed by formal education. In going forward, they make unconscious aesthetic choices based on these previous experiences (Bourdieu 1984: 66). Mattick describes this as an “aptitude for aesthetic experience, appearing as a personal rather than a learned attribute” (2007-2017).

Who are these entitled individuals? Bourdieu identifies them as art lovers or collectors who belong to a group of people who have both the money and the leisure time to acquire aesthetic competence, but, more importantly, posses unquestioningly a sense of

19 As Bourdieu remarks,“[T]he literary and artistic fields attract a particularly strong proportion of individuals who possess all the properties of the dominant class, *minus one*: money” (1993: 165).

entitlement that “fosters the acquisition of competence” (Mattick 2007-2017). Bourdieu refers to this competency as effortless elegance (1994: 69) and suggests that it is acquired through a slow, unconscious familiarisation with art (1984: 66). This results in having and trading in the currency, or cultural capital, of taste.

Taste & kitsch

For Bourdieu, taste does not pertain to the physical nature of one particular item as opposed to another, but to the relationships around them as “markers of ‘class’” (1984: 2). “Taste ... functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which benefit the occupants of that position” (Bourdieu 1984: 466).

While the *connoisseurs* trade in the currency of taste, it could be argued that the *nouveau riche* would trade in kitsch. Kitsch is considered to be any object that “appeals to popular or lowbrow taste” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2017), or something which displays “excessive garishness or sentimentality” (*English Oxford Living Dictionary* 2017).

Again the above descriptions are rather vague. Clement Greenberg, writing in the 1939, produced the definitive text on kitsch entitled “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”. Written in order to establish an artistic vocabulary in support of the European avant-garde against Russian and Nazi visual propaganda, (often rendered in the style of social realism), it also provides a definition and some characteristics of this highly contested and sensitive genre.

He defines kitsch as “popular, commercial art and literature”. He goes on to say that this art is usually narrative art (which tells a story) and is often completed in the style of realism. Greenberg explains that this scenario hails from the industrial revolution where it was developed to entertain the working class who did not have the time or resources to cultivate true taste. For Greenberg, the newly urbanised peasant or the *nouveau riche* prefers realism because he “recognises and sees things in the way he recognises and sees things outside of pictures – there is no discontinuity between art and life, no need to accept a convention” (Greenberg 1988: 11-16).

Bourdieu would probably agree: He identifies realistic art as the realm of the culturally deprived who prefer this style because they have not practically mastered or familiarised

themselves with the accepted concepts, language and categories of the art world and so only relate to artwork using the concepts and frameworks that they use in daily life (Bourdieu 1995: 315). Both Greenberg and Bourdieu identified realism as the preferred artistic style for kitsch as they are easy to consume and thus accessible to a large number of people.

However this is not a hard and fast rule as many complex and coded works have been executed in the style of realism. Moreover some kitsch is executed in a variety of other styles, be they abstract, surrealist or in any other established genre. An example of this could be the teapot in the shape of a rabbit. Rather than an outright condemnation of realism, perhaps this could be modified to say that a characteristic of kitsch could be simplicity or ease of accessibility.

Another possible characteristic of kitsch could be a work which jars the senses, a work in which the process described by the Russian Formalists and Eco in ‘making it strange’ has gone awry and the result has been spectacularly unsuccessful. An example of this could be the South African radio in the shape of the Voortrekker Monument. While amusing to most people, to those with taste, this combination ‘feels’ wrong.

A further characteristic of kitsch would be its formulaic nature. Often having been produced mechanically it is seen to lack spontaneity, originality or uniqueness (Greenberg 1988: 12). In conclusion kitsch could be seen as art or design which is sentimental, simplistic and therefore easily accessible, jarring and formulaic, enjoyed by those with a lack of discernment.

Consequently through concepts such as taste or kitsch (amongst others), society uses the arts to classify and distinguish themselves from one another.

Artists

Having described the art viewing public and collectors, Bourdieu also analyses the protagonists within the art world,[20] whom he believes operate according to a different set of rules to broader society.

Here the art world comprises two groups of artists: the economically powerful artists and culturally powerful artists; those who create 'bourgeois art' and those who make 'art for art's sake'. This relationship is essentially antagonistic and takes the form of an inversion of the logic of the normal capitalist economy.

> [P]roperly aesthetic standards of judgement are affirmed over and against commercial criteria for profit; and participants wage an incessant internecine fight to establish the worth of their work according to the prevailing principle of artistic perception. The field thus produces and reproduces through its very functioning the unquestioned belief, shared by active and aspiring members alike, that art is a "sacred" realm, separate from and transcendent to mundane conduct and material interests (Wacquant 2007-2017).

Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I believe discussions around value, both economic and socio-cultural, are essential for the understanding of iconicity in artwork. This section dealt with the ways in which artworks circulate within the social and economic spheres of our society.

Appadurai situates objects within the economic system of commodities where they circulate or occasionally become enclaved. Findlay and Thompson explain how artworks operate within the art world and attract economic value via pedigreed biographies and strategic branded exposure.

Bourdieu shows how society is divided into various classes which are not solely determined by economic standing but also by the exercising of social, cultural, symbolic and educational capital. He reveals how generations pass down their social positions to

20 The artistic field is an "arena, or *structured space of positions* or *position takings*, wherein individuals and institutions compete for monopoly over artistic authority as the latter becomes insulated from economic, political and bureaucratic powers" (Wacquant 2007-2017).

their children and how these privileged positions are maintained by differing cultural tastes. For Bourdieu, the *nouveau riche* indulge in kitsch and the *connoisseurs* indulge in taste: the myth of discernment and assumed entitlement.

From the above discussions it could be suggested that the economic, cultural and social values of artworks can be placed on a continuum, from which varying degrees of values are attained. However in the case of the iconic artwork, these three areas of value would all be drawn from the high end of each of the continuums; the economic continuum, the cultural continuum of the art world and the social continuum.

The way forward

The theoretical approaches outlined in the previous chapters provide several useful models for a discussion of iconicity in art works. The first chapter described the icon as myth, tracing its historical origin as an object embodying a sacred presence and then its current colloquial use as a term denoting celebrity and widespread popularity. Celebrities were found to resemble an aspect of Barthes' myth, in that they represent complex social and cultural phenomena in a simplified form, which are disseminated via complex networks of communication.

Chapter two discussed the icon as meaning, where theories and models devised by structuralist and semiotic theorists provided us with an understanding of how meaning is created and conveyed. These theorists also provided the models to explain how meanings can be culturally relative, how they can multiply, transform and accumulate to produce complex signification. Theories on aesthetics provided us with the possible means to explain iconicity, which, in some instances could result from an intensification of meaning though ambiguity and a spiritual experience.

The third chapter discussed the icon as value. Here discussion centred around economic and socio-cultural value and revealed that icons contain high levels of both types of value and in so doing, become vehicles through which taste and discernment is exercised and social stratification is justified. It was suggested that the icon sits at the "high ends" of economic, cultural and social value.

The following three chapters will comprise case studies of three divergent artworks, the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Chinese Girl* by Vladimir Tretchikoff and *The Butcher Boys* by Jane Alexander. Elements of the above theories will be incorporated into a broad framework in an attempt to further investigate the concept of iconicity in artworks.

This framework will interrogate the artworks at three different levels of investigation: the *content, context* and the artwork at the centre of a web of *constructed* meanings. As with all conceptual frameworks, the distinctions and categories will not always be clear and and watertight: aspects of each will often overlap with the others.

Content

For the section on *content,* the inherent aspects of the physical artefact will be interrogated to see whether there is something in its form or content that makes it stand out. Theorists working in the field of aesthetics, such as Cassirer and Erwin Panofsky, uniformly suggest that any investigation of an artwork begins with the physical properties thereof (Cassirer 1961: 119, Panofsky 1955: 12). This area of investigation broadly coincides with Panofsky's pre-iconographical and iconographical levels of meaning.

Consisting largely of description, this level of enquiry requires the physical act of looking, along with some researched knowledge. Aspects such as the medium, size, age, condition, level of technical skill and economic value of the work will be noted as they often reveal aspects that are pertinent to other dimensions of the work.

In addition, during the discussion on content, the motifs and symbols depicted in the work will then also be analysed for both denotative, or first order signification, as well as the connotative meanings, being those which are more complex and nuanced. It is here that elements of the work's context may overlap with this section on content, as many symbols and motifs relate directly to the time and culture from which the work emerges. Aspects of dense or intensified signification such as ambiguity (either disruption or dynamic tension between tradition and innovation) or the spiritual dimension described by Cassirer will be included as a possible throwback to the religious origins of the icon (Cassirer 1961: 192). This rich signification may prove to be an important aspect of iconicity.

Context

The section on *context* will examine how the work was and possibly remains culturally embedded in its original as well as subsequent contexts. Benjamin too maintains that the artwork must remain in its context in order for it to maintain its aura (Robinson 2018: 4): “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 1969: 6).

I will look at whether it embodied the particular issues, values, concerns, questions, hopes and desires of its own context (time and place of its making), or whether it jolted and disrupted the status quo.

While an artwork can potentially be an icon at the time of its making, iconic status usually accumulates over time. Therefore this section will also investigate other subsequent contexts in which it may have continued or still continues to be perceived as iconic. This will overlap with the section on construct since as we know, all meaning is constructed.

Discussions in this section will briefly consider aspects of its geographical location, the historical and cultural era, the specific cultural and art historical traditions of the time, the personality of the artist, and the biography or life history of the artwork should they be deemed pertinent (Cassirer 1961: 119, Panofsky 1955: 29-41, Sassoon 2001). This physical and contextual positioning will tie in with Panofsky’s iconological level of meaning in which the attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – distilled by one person into one work – will be explored.

Then, as suggested by Barthes, Thompson and Hall the diaspora of the artwork or images of the artwork will be examined; how the image has physically escaped or spread from its original source to become widely disseminated, via mass communication, across time and space to manifest in a wide range of media. As far as possible the artwork in these other incarnations will be traced and analysed (Sassoon 2001). This aspect of analysis will reveal whether the image has widespread relevance, which is undoubtedly an aspect of iconicity.

Construct

An artwork can only become truly iconic if it is perceived to be so. In other words, if in the viewers' minds, its field of reference can be expanded to include major ideas or perceptions of their world. During the discussion on the artwork as a cultural *construct* it will be shown, using Thompson's model, that an artwork becomes iconic as a result of being the central point around which are spun a complex and wide variety of constructed, connotative significations (1995). These could include any residual reverence that was previously inspired by the historical religious icons in the icons of today, as well as the widespread popularity in our celebrity examples as discussed in chapter one. Contemplating the artwork as a construct is possibly the most rewarding type of aesthetic engagement.

While these meanings and concepts often arise spontaneously and haphazardly, having been drawn from Eco's continuum, they then expand, transforming, accumulating, snowballing and circulating around an artwork for so long that they then begin to become impossible to accurately trace. At this point the works will join the ranks of the art historical canon where they accrue the socio-cultural values attributed to them by the art world and/or the public. This would also tie in with Panofsky's iconological level of meaning (Panofsky 1955: 30-33).

From this position the works could then become engaged in a series of second order significations where they transform to become part of the creation of new signs or vehicles of meaning. This could occur when artworks are recycled (through self-referentiality or appropriation) or ridiculed (subversion), resulting in transformed meaning. Again Benjamin weighs in. While maintaining that the 'traditional' context of the work lends it authenticity, he also mentions that when an artwork is liberated from its context it can be recreated or reconstructed endlessly (Robinson 2018: 4).

It could be argued that it is only when an artwork is appropriated or subverted that it can be considered truly iconic. The works in the following case studies will be seen to illustrate the above processes rather well.

Chapter 4

The *Mona Lisa*



Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503-1506, Oil on wood panel, 77 x 53 cm, The Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Michel Urtado.

> Like a living being she seems to change before our eyes and to look a little different every time we come back to her ... All this sounds rather mysterious, and so it is, that is so often the effect of a great work of art. (Gombrich 1989: 227-228).

Within the context of the 21st century and the prolific number of artworks in museums throughout the world or depicted on the internet, why should an art historical work such as the *Mona Lisa* be considered an icon? Moreover, what relevance would this have to artworks and museums in South Africa today?

The *Mona Lisa* is arguably at the centre of the Western art historical canon. Having been painted by a highly regarded artist using great technical skill, survived unusual events, formed part of important collections and educational curricula, and having become entangled in new art movements and other diverse cultural practices, its provenance is rather impressive. Yet what is more so is that even after over 500 years it continues to have a spontaneous presence around the globe, across a wide variety of media. This is why the *Mona Lisa* is eligible for consideration as an icon in the first instance and as a possible template for iconicity in the second. Perhaps a consideration of this work and its multiple meanings and longevity could go some way to illustrating a path to iconicity for any work, whether in a private collection or public institution.

But, due to its long and active life, it will be impossible to accurately discover all the direct or nuanced meanings derived from the work and how it may have both represented or affected its own time and place as well as those of subsequent eras. Therefore, based on recent research by some leading art historians, on whom I have relied heavily, only a high level overview of this painting will be possible. These texts, amongst others include, *Mona Lisa: The History of the World's Most Famous Painting* (2001) by Donald Sassoon, *Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered* (2014) by Dianne Hales and the chapter on the *Mona Lisa* in Martin Kemp's inspirational book *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* (2012).

In order to attempt to unravel some of the *Mona Lisa's* secrets the work will be investigated from three different angles: its content, some aspects of its context, and its continued relevance as a social and cultural construct.

Content

The content of an artwork would include its intrinsic qualities, those material aspects and symbolic meanings which can be seen or deduced from it as a physical object. The *Mona Lisa* is an oil on wood, two dimensional painting, measuring 77 x 53 cm. It is believed to have been painted from 1503 to 1506, during Da Vinci's second Florentine stay which occurred between 1500 and 1516 (Kemp 2012: 147, Sassoon 2001: 21). As a museum object it is in the best possible condition it can be for its age (Sassoon 2001: 33).

This work shows remarkable technical skill. Using several layers of paint of varying degrees of depth and opacity, Leonardo succeeded in conveying a living human being set against a naturalistic backdrop of a landscape (Kemp 2012: 143).

It is not possible to obtain an accurate and formal value for the *Mona Lisa*. As a piece of poplar panel with some oil-based pigment it has little intrinsic value. Therefore its value is attributed. In 1525 it was valued at 100 *scudi*[21] (Kemp 2012: 147). Then during the 1540s King François I of France paid 12 000 francs for it, and from this point onwards it remained in the French Royal collections (Kemp 2012: 148, Hales 2014: 216).

On its arrival in the Louvre in 1840, experts valued the *Mona Lisa* at 90 000 francs – well below Leonardo's other work in the same collection, *Virgin of the Rocks* (1483-1486) and Raphael's *Holy Family* (1518) (Hales 2014: 235). In 1962 the *Mona Lisa* travelled to America. For this trip the insurance policy was set at US$100 million (Hales 2014: 243).

With regards to more recent evaluations, the world wide web contains much speculation and the Louvre website is not saying anything. Based on certain assumptions and known circumstances, it is safe to say that the *Mona Lisa* is priceless. As an extremely famous, unique item painted by a man popularly regarded as a 'Renaissance Genius'[22] approximately 512 years ago, its economic value is incalculable. In addition, once it had entered the French state collection and the Louvre it would have been permanently

21 This figure is noted in a legal document listing the possessions of Gian Giacomo Caprotti after his death. Caprotti, also known as Andrea Salaì, was Leonardo's companion and heir.

22 The notion of 'Genius' as a divinely inspired artist is a construction which arose from the art historical tradition begun by Vasari. A longer discussion on how Da Vinci was constructed as a 'Renaissance Genius' is included later in this chapter.

removed from the commodification system and entered the regime of value which Appadurai calls enclaved. Thus its commercial value would either be suspended or of no consequence as it is highly unlikely that the painting would ever be for sale. This idea of an item being beyond price is enticing to viewers who are fundamentally dependent on a capitalist system of currency, and this could add to the allure of the *Mona Lisa*.

Subject & symbols

Consideration of the content of an artwork would also include a description of the subject of the painting and its denotative meaning, as well as any symbols and motifs depicted. As an image representing something else the painting would be regarded by semioticians as a signifier. In addition, as per their classification systems, this work can be considered an icon because as a portrait it is a likeness of a particular person and, as such, the signifier resembles the signified. But this in itself does not make the work iconic in the broader cultural or art historical sense. Certain symbols and motifs shown in the work would have had to powerfully resonate with the people of Florence and beyond. These symbols could include: the woman, her dress, the landscape and her smile.

The woman

The work depicts a smiling woman with dark eyes but no eyebrows or eyelashes[23] and a direct gaze. She is wearing dark clothing which includes a veil. She is seated in a *contrapposto* pose (three-quarter) to the viewer's left (Sassoon 2001: 34, Kemp 2012: 145 & 149). Her left hand is folded over her right. She is placed against a background depicting a naturalistic landscape.

According to the literature this painting is a portrait denoting an Italian woman who is believed to be Lisa del Giocondo (*née* Gherardini), the daughter of landowner Antonmaria di Noldo Gherardini. Born in Florence, she was also the second wife of silk merchant Francesco di Bartolomeo di Zanobi del Giocondo and the mother of six children (Kemp 2012: 145, Sassoon, 2001: 16 & 18, Hales 2014: 3 & 9). The portrait is believed to have been commissioned by her husband from artist Leonardo Da Vinci in the early 1500s (Sassoon, 2001: 21).

23 These features must have originally been present, as Giorgio Vasari in his publication *Le Vite de'più eccelenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani* (1550) mentions them specifically in fine haired detail (2006: 238).

The dress

The *Mona Lisa* is dressed in dark, plain clothing. The fabric appears to be of a high quality and as implied by the gathering around the neckline, along the arms and in the extra draping, the tailor suffered no shortage of material. The neckline of the dress shows an understated border of gold embroidery but otherwise the garment displays no ostentatious adornment. She also wears a light translucent veil but no jewellery whatsoever. During this time, known as the High Renaissance, conservative clothing was used to denote the piety of the sitter, which is reinforced by her demure smile (Zöllner 1993: 12).

The landscape

The background to the *Mona Lisa* depicts distant mountains, plains, rivers and lakes. The landscape appears to be anonymous as Leonardo has not included any discernible landmarks or features. Scholars believe this asymmetrical landscape simply denotes nature itself (Clark 1988: 175, Kemp 2012: 150 &152).

The smile

The *Mona Lisa's* smile is possibly the most powerful symbol in the painting. During the Renaissance the pun[24] or double meaning was commonly used in portraiture and was widely understood. The Italians call the painting *La Gioconda.* In Italian *giocondo* means cheerful, merry or joyous. But in a clever play on words it also recalls her husband's name, del Giocondo (Hales 2014:2, Sassoon 2001: 162). Therefore Leonardo depicts Mrs del Giocondo with a smile (Harris 2001: 54). It can therefore be assumed that the smile on the face of the woman in the painting denotes simply that she is happy.

This high level analysis of the *Mona Lisa* has identified signs and symbols within the work itself and has deciphered them using minimal background research. This could be enough to explain its popularity in its day, but would not be enough to justify its iconicity. Possibly a search for more dense or intense signification should be undertaken to identify symbols of disruptive ambiguity as suggested by Eco and the Russian Formalists, or instances where tradition and innovation co-exist?

24 Note Empson's third type of ambiguity: "two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously" (Empson 1949: v).

Ambiguity

The *Mona Lisa* includes one of the most powerful symbols of ambiguity in Western art historical culture. This would be the aforementioned smile. The ambiguity in the smile is created through the use of a technical device used by painters known as open painting. This technique, used specifically in order to create mystery and speculation, can be achieved when an artist depicts an emotion without including the cause of that emotion in the painting itself, or even in the title. Consequently the viewer is forced to wonder and then create their own cause (Sassoon 2001: 13).

The painting of the *Mona Lisa* includes no amusing object or comedic character and the formal title is not at all helpful. The painting's *soubriquet, la Gioconda,* offers no assistance either as it is merely descriptive and provides no additional explanation. Consequently the open-endedness of the smile, as disrupted content, is highly mysterious.

Another technical device used by Leonardo to create ambiguity can be found in his use of both warm and cool colours. The warmth of the flesh tones and her clothing, contrasted with the cool blue of the distant mountains (Kemp 2012:143), provides both interest and balance.

The *Mona Lisa* also shows aspects of Cassirer's notion of the co-existence of tradition and creativity (1961: 200). Painted in the Flemish tradition, which was common for portraits during the Renaissance, the *Mona Lisa* is in fact much larger than most Flemish portraits, placing it into a new category of grand Florentine portraits, which reflected the importance and wealth of the patron (Zöllner 1993: 12). Leonardo was also an early adopter of oil paint (Sassoon 2001: 36).

A common feature of Renaissance painting was the compositional device of employing the shape of the pyramid. Used mainly to create balance in works showing groups of people, Leonardo uses it here for the first time with a single sitter (Sassoon 2001: 39-40). Another compositional technique which was commonly used for group paintings at the time was the *contrapposto* pose. Used for capturing movement, it showed the body and face in different positions. Here again, Leonardo is one of the first to employ it in the depiction of a single sitter (Sassoon 2001: 34).

Leonardo also used much innovation within the content of his work. At the time most respectable women were depicted with an averted gaze. Here the pious *Mona Lisa* in conservative dress regards the viewer with a direct and knowing gaze (Sassoon 2001: 34). Also during the Renaissance, portraits often included one or more identifying objects in the sitter's hands. These usually denoted their personality, place of origin, family name or occupation (Zöllner 1993: 12, Sassoon 2001: 35-37). Innovatively the *Mona Lisa* holds nothing, again reinforcing the feeling of mystery and inviting a subjective interpretation.

So too with the landscape. Usually in Renaissance painting the landscape included natural or man-made indicators of the identity of the sitter and their region of origin. Here Leonardo uses an anonymous landscape, creating mystery and intrigue. Consequently the *Mona Lisa* shows rich signification though ambiguity and innovation. Does it provide us with Cassirer's spiritual experience or possess Benjamin's aura? Some would certainly say so.

Aesthetic experience

As discussed previously, Cassirer states that ideal or great art serves as a spiritual mediator between God and humanity in a re-ignition of divine inspiration, known as 'expression-perception'. This experience comprises, amongst other things, "evidence of a unique personality (Raphael speaking to us)" (1961: 99). Sassoon would concur:

> It is intensely pleasurable to imagine that, as we face the products of Leonardo ... armed with nothing but our 'innate' artistic sensibility ... a mysterious yet almost palpable contact is established. The dead master is alive, and speaks to us, to me, directly, unmediated, his greatness confirmed once again because I, so different, so distant, separated by class, race, language, and above all by time, communicate directly with this great creator" (2001: 5).

According to Kenneth Clark this re-ignition of divine innovation occurs when an artwork taps into already existing, established symbols in our subconscious. "Ancient symbols come from the subconscious and continue to touch it. *Mona Lisa* is a comparatively recent creation that has the magical power of a very ancient one" (Clark in Sassoon 2001: 4).[25]

25 Both Clark and Sassoon fail to mention precisely which particular ancient symbol or archetype the *Mona Lisa* re-ignites, but the theory is plausible.

Martin Kemp describes an intensely spiritual experience of the Mona Lisa's aura, when he was permitted to view the *Mona Lisa* outside of its frame during one of its routine inspection and cleaning sessions, which occur annually. Describing it as an experience which unites the mind and the body in a reversal of Descartes' distinction he says:

> The result is spine-tingling in a way that is difficult to describe without sounding pretentious. Great art encountered in the flesh can produce sensations that go beyond visual stimulation. Somehow more seems to be involved than the eye and even the mind. The whole mind-body seems to be caught up in the process (2012: 142).

Consequently it can be seen that the *Mona Lisa* is rich in signification, both denotative and connotative. The work also contains ambiguous symbols, one of which enjoys great renown. It contains elements of tradition and innovation and some leading academics report extraordinary experiences of her aura, when viewing the work which could be regarded as spiritual. These aspects will no doubt point to the *Mona Lisa's* iconicity, but in order for true iconicity to be achieved these intense meanings must be felt more broadly than by a few academics. They need to relate to aspects of society more directly and be shared more broadly amongst the wider population. This will be explored more fully in the section on context.

Context

In 2018 we are approximately 512 years away from the time in which the *Mona Lisa* was painted. Therefore we are unable to know how Leonardo went about painting the work and how it was received. We cannot know what decisions he made about the painting and what informed those decisions, what discussions he had about the work and with whom. We cannot know which aspects of the Renaissance appealed to him and which left him cold. We can only make assumptions based on some of the available literature. Under these circumstances an attempt will be made to link the symbols and characteristics of the painting mentioned above to certain aspects of Renaissance Florence, to see if they reflect the time and place of its making.

The Mona Lisa *in the 1500s*

The Portrait

At the time the *Mona Lisa* was painted, Florence was an exciting place for artists. The vibrant cultural period known as the Renaissance was at its peak and Florence was its centre. The de' Medici family,[26] who were wealthy bankers and merchants, were also leading patrons of the arts and they dominated the political and cultural life of the city from the 14th to the 18th century. Popes Alexander VI and Pius III, Julius II and Leo X ruled in Rome and also materially supported the arts. This meant that both business and the church were comfortable sources of funding for artists.

The commissioning of portraits was a common occurrence for patrons during the Renaissance. The function of the portrait was to show the likeness of the sitter in the most flattering way possible. They were usually commissioned by the wealthier members of society to mark special occasions such as marriage or childbirth (Kemp 2012: 148).

With regards to the *Mona Lisa*, this painting was commissioned to celebrate a particularly important time in the lives of the del Giocondos. Francesco, being a well-off Florentine, had recently bought a new home. Now independent from his extended family, the new home required furniture and decoration. His family was also growing as Lisa had recently successfully borne him a son[27](Zöllner 1993: 9, Kemp 2012: 148).

Therefore del Giocondo's motives in commissioning the work fits the pattern for art patronage of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Florence, where works were often commissioned for specific private domestic settings and to celebrate important events.

The Renaissance[28] is defined as a time during which classical Greek and Roman models and values were revived in Europe. Spanning almost 300 years from the 14th to the 17th

26 Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici donated the de' Medici art collection to the city of Florence in 1737 (Oxford Art Online, 2007-2017).

27 Francesco's first wife died in childbirth, which was common at the time (Zöllner, 1993: 9, Hales 2014: 112). The survival of mother and child was therefore cause for great celebration.

28 Renaissance is a French term meaning rebirth and refers to the revival of classical Greek and Roman thinking. It is believed to have been sparked by the fleeing of scholars (with documents from the library) to Europe after the fall of Constantinople (Oxford Art Online, 2007-2017).

centuries, this was a time when great strides were made in the areas of both the sciences and the arts. Many inventions took place in the disciplines of anatomy, astronomy, mathematics, engineering and architecture. In the humanities, many Greek and Roman myths were used as narratives for works of art and literature. In the fine arts, Renaissance artists employed classical techniques and mathematical formulas in composition and sought realistic naturalism in their depiction of figures and landscapes (Oxford Art Online, 2007-2017).

As a Renaissance artist Leonardo used mathematical formulas for the achievement of perfect composition and perspective. In the *Mona Lisa* he employed the triangular pyramidal composition, showing the sitter's arms to be the base and the head the apex. He also achieved realistic naturalism and perspective through his placement of the sitter in the foreground creating a monumental effect as well as having the elements in the landscape recede into a hazy distance (Sassoon 2001: 39-40).

The woman

Like many Renaissance artists, Leonardo pursued natural, realistic portrayals of human figures in his paintings. We are unable to say if this work is a true likeness of Lisa del Giocondo as no other images of her exist and in fact many scholars have debated the true identity of the sitter. Nevertheless, Leonardo did indeed achieve a masterful degree of realism in this figure using fine detail. This is evident in her face, hair, dress and translucent veil (Sassoon 2001: 34).

Realism is also displayed in his ability to accurately depict the play of light and dark, a technique known as *chiaroscuro*. According to Kenneth Clark, Leonardo "In the *Mona Lisa,* shows a continuity of modelling which he could only have achieved by the scientific study of light striking a sphere" (Clark 1988: 129). Another technical aspect he mastered in order to achieve realism was known as *sfumato* or smokiness. This occurs when the painter blends and harmonises colours and tones to create a softened effect. Leonardo applied this technique especially to the mouth and corners of the eyes, providing subtlety and warmth to the smile (Sassoon 2001: 39-40).

However, Renaissance artists were ambitious. They hoped to take realism to an even greater level. Not satisfied with accurately representing the human body, they strove to depict the soul of the person as well. The origin of this ambition is believed to be the poetry

of writers such as Dante and Petrarch, as direct imagery from these poems was often found in Renaissance portraits (Kemp 2012: 148-149, Hales 2014: 137).

Kemp observes that the *Mona Lisa* is "deeply infused with Dantesque metaphors drawn from the poem *Convivio*". In this poem in which Dante writes of an idealised beloved, and in a supporting commentary Dante states that he believes that the soul resides and is also revealed in the eyes and the mouth and that sweetness and beauty could be indicated there (2012: 149):

> Such things appear in her aspect. As show the joys of Paradise. I mean in her eyes and her sweet smile. For love draws them there as to his place. They overwhelm this intellect of ours. As a ray of light does weaken the vision (Kemp 2012: 149).[29]

Leonardo must have succeeded in depicting a living being with a soul via the sweetness in the eyes and the mouth, as Kemp confirmed that on seeing the *Mona Lisa* unframed, he felt the presence of a living person (2012: 143-144).

The dress

The *Mona Lisa* is dressed in dark, if sumptuous, clothing with a veil. She is wearing no jewellery or extra adornment. The fashion for dark clothing originated in Spain and was first seen in Italy at the wedding of Lucrezia Borgia in 1502. As Francesco del Giocondo was a silk merchant, Lisa would have been aware of this trend and her husband would have been in the best position to provide her with the latest fashions (Zöllner, 1993: 14).

The fact that she has no jewellery or ostentatious adornments in the painting may have been due to the influence of a radical monk named Girolamo Savonarola (Zöllner 1993: 12). Savanarola, a Dominican monk, believed the Medicis were a corrupting influence in Florence. On the 7th February 1497, in a dramatic act of piety, he ordered artwork and other items of vanity such as mirrors, cosmetics, books and valuable cloth to be destroyed in a large fire. This event, which later became known as the bonfire of the vanities, was conducted in the belief that these items tempted the citizens of Florence to sin. Under his influence the Medici's were driven out of Florence and the centre of the Renaissance moved from Florence to Rome (Gardner 1980: 518 & 480).

29 These sentiments would not be out of place amongst the writings of the Romantics Walter Pater (1839-1894) and Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) and must surely have influenced them also.

The landscape

Kemp and Clark suggest that the *Mona Lisa* contains an eloquent illustration of Humanism,[30] in this instance the idea that human beings and nature can and should live in harmony. They suggest that Leonardo took an innovative leap and depicted this via the concepts of the macrocosm and the microcosm: the macrocosm being the fictitious landscape, which here signifies nature itself and the microcosm represented by the body of the woman:

> By the ancients man was termed a lesser world and certainly the use of this name is well bestowed, because, in that man is composed of water, earth, air and fire, his body is an analogue for the world: just as man has in himself bones ... the world has rocks; just as man has ... blood ... so ... the earth has its oceanic seas ...(Clark 1988: 175).

Yet the landscape may not have been merely fictitious. It could have been inspired by one of Leonardo's engineering projects for which he was researching prehistoric Tuscany (Kemp 2012: 150-152).

The smile

As discussed previously, during the time of the Renaissance the smile could have represented an example of the 15th and 16th century convention of the pun, an artistic device widely used and well understood. Dante may also have inspired its use as an indicator of the soul and of beauty. But Giorgio Vasari in his publication *Le Vite de'più eccelenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani* (1550) firmly attributes the smile to the comic entertainment that Leonardo laid on for his sitter (2009: 239).

The artist

When considering the context of the *Mona Lisa*, a brief discussion of the artist Leonardo da Vinci is necessary as it will enable a greater understanding of his personal circumstances and intellectual influences.

30 Humanism is a broad set of assumptions, theories and tendencies. Based on a revival of classical Greek and Roman teaching that man, (rather than the gods), is the centre of all things, Humanists believe that human experience is the starting point for our understanding of ourselves, God and nature. Experience, enquiry and education were considered the route to personal freedom and consequently were widely practised (Fontana 1977: 396).

Leonardo was born in 1452 in the small Tuscan town of Vinci. He was trained in Florence under Verrocchio, an established and respected artist (Janson 1986: 437). Leonardo then left Florence in 1481 to work for the Duke of Milan, Lodovico Sforza. In 1499 Sforza was defeated by the French and Leonardo returned to Florence. He travelled and worked all over Italy, often returning to Florence as well as to French controlled Milan. In 1513 he went to Rome and worked for Giuliano de Medici. When Giuliano died in 1516 Leonardo was invited to stay in Amboise, France and the court of King François I, where the artist died in 1519 (Sassoon 2001: 19-20).

Renaissance Italy is believed to be the era in which the concept of the artist as a divinely inspired genius arose. This sentiment stems again from Humanism which revered and encouraged learning as broadly and deeply as possible in order for a person to realise their full potential (Oxford Art Online, 2007-2017). Leonardo, possibly more so than any other Renaissance artist, is widely regarded as typical of this phenomenon. He is believed to have been a multi-faceted, highly inquisitive 'genius', larger than life and completely brilliant, so much so that his reputation has been labelled 'the cult of Leonardo' (Sassoon 2001: 79). Again Vasari was the first to describe him as such:

> The greatest gifts are often seen, in the course of nature, rained by celestial influences on human creatures; and sometimes, in supernatural fashion, beauty, grace and talent are united beyond measure in one single person ... his every action so divine, that, surpassing all other men, it makes itself clearly known as a thing bestowed by God ... (Vasari 2006: 227).

Characteristics which support the theory that Leonardo pursued the Humanist ideals of broad learning and individual freedom, are that he was known to be have had a wide range of interests, which have been revealed in his famous notebooks. He was also believed to be fiercely independent, which resulted in his being beholden to nobody and answerable only to himself. With interests so diverse he apparently seldom finished anything. This tendency to procrastinate is mentioned by Vasari throughout his chapter on Leonardo in *Le Vite de'più eccelenti* (2006: 227-243).

Consequently this characteristic left him unsuited for commissioned work and he was not a favourite of the patrons of the day. One of his patrons, Pope Leo X, was reported to have said, "This man will do nothing at all since he is thinking of the end before he has even

begun to work!" (Hales 2014: 201). Consequently much of the commissioned work, including projects such as the Sistine Chapel, went to his competitors Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian (Kemp 2001: 20).

With regards to some of the cultural practices of the Renaissance and Florentine Italy, the *Mona Lisa* is an excellent example of some of the values and ideals of the time and seems to eloquently reflect its time and place. As a commissioned work it is the product of patronage. As a portrait in the pursuit of realism it succeeds through Leonardo's employment of the techniques of fine detail, *chiaroscuro* and *sfumato.* As a Renaissance work it successfully achieves accurate composition and perspective through the use of geometrical formulas and employs the use of a pun. As a product of the Renaissance fashion for piety, Humanism and the poetry of Dante, the work moves from functional portraiture to illustrated philosophy (Kemp 2012: 152). This is portrayed by the capturing of a pious soul in dark clothing with sweet eyes and a sweet mouth as well as the relationship between the microcosmic body and the macrocosmic landscape. As a work which the artist may have considered incomplete, it is the product of a fiercely individual, divinely inspired 'genius', who searched for perfection.

The Mona Lisa *in the world*

In private hands

Popularity and relevance have been identified as essential factors in iconicity. So how was the *Mona Lisa* received at the time and in the place of its making? Based on the literature consulted, the *Mona Lisa* was highly influential in the art world of the time, but I would suggest it was not yet iconic.

We know the *Mona Lisa* was influential because as an innovative portrait, its composition was widely copied, and copying began almost immediately. Raphael used it in his *Maddalena Doni* in 1506, and Leonardo himself also used the *Mona Lisa* as a template for a cartoon which his studio used to produce other portraits such as the nude *Monna Vanna* (1520). Other artists followed suit in a variety of media including engraving and canvas (Kemp 2012: 152-160).

This practice continued during the 16th and 17th centuries when art students both directly copied and experimented with the innovative forms and composition in the *Mona Lisa*

(Sassoon 2001: 44). Many professional court artists also painted portraits in the same style, including that of Diane de Poitiers, the mistress of Henri II (Kemp 2012: 159-160).

This powerful influence on the art world is remarkable since according to the literature, the *Mona Lisa* was not seen in public. It did not leave Leonardo's studio until it was bequeathed to his heir Andrea Salaì (Gian Giacomo Caprotti) and returned to Florence.[31] The painting was later sold to King François I of France in the early 1540s where it remained in the bathroom suite in Fontainebleau till the late 16th century (Hales 2014: 230, Kemp 2012:148). The painting then moved to a general gallery of paintings at Fontainebleau from the early 1600s, from where it was later moved to a bedroom in Versailles by Louis XIV. Then it was moved to the office of the keeper of royal buildings (Hales 2014: 231). All this time the painting remained in private hands and out of the public eye, unable to cast a broad influence.

Consequently in 16th century Italy, the time and place of the *Mona Lisa's* creation, it can be assumed that the work was influential with a small group of the population – the artists who copied his composition and possibly attempted to replicate his masterly treatment of realistic painting. But notwithstanding Vasari mentioning it in his book, the painting was not available to the public. While it may be pertinent that the painting was in the collection of royalty and therefore owned by influential people, we are told the painting was confined to private quarters and would therefore not have been seen by their noble visitors. Kemp also mentions that during its time in these collections the *Mona Lisa* was not more highly regarded than other works by artists such as Raphael, Titian and Rubens (2012: 153). Therefore, as the *Mona Lisa* was not seen by the broader public, it cannot have achieved iconic status at this stage.

In the public domain

Iconicity is usually a process long in the making and while the work may have been informed by Renaissance Florence, it has undoubtedly persisted beyond the 16th century and this is due in part to its entrance into the public domain.

31 We know it was in Caprotti's possession as on 21 April 1525, after his death, a draft document of his possessions destined to be shared by his two sisters clearly lists the *Mona Lisa* (Kemp 2012: 147).

One of the consequences of the French Revolution was that the Louvre was opened in 1792 to the general public. Later, in 1797, the Royal collection, including the *Mona Lisa,* was moved from Versailles and installed in this new public space. The museum was opened to the general public but also exclusively to artists for 5 days in a 10 day cycle. These artists copied the works in the Louvre, duplicating and spreading the conventions and images of the masters. In 1800 Napoleon Bonaparte had the *Mona Lisa* brought from the Louvre and placed in his bedroom at the Tuileries palace, again removing it from the public eye. But by 1815 the work had returned to the Louvre (Sassoon 2001: 47-49, Hales 2014: 233-234).

With the museum being open to the public for free, the middle class increasingly began to visit the Louvre and bought the painted copies of their favourite works, much like we buy posters or reproductions from gallery shops today. The *Mona Lisa* was apparently copied 71 times, but was not particularly highly valued, as French works as well as the works of other Italians such as Veronese and Titian were more popular. The first known exact copy of the *Mona Lisa* is an engraving by Luigi Calamatta, which took 20 years to complete, in 1857 (Sassoon 2001: 49-53, Hales 2014: 235). Even as part of a public collection the *Mona Lisa* probably had not yet achieved iconic status, as we are told here that other works were more influential.

During this time, the 19th century, also known as the Romantic era in Europe, there was an increased interest in the 'dark side' of human experience and the imagination as well as the values of aesthetic sensibility and refinement. Books containing literature in the Romantic style were printed becoming highly popular throughout Europe. In these books were human interest stories, crime, adventure, stories about royalty and celebrity and the *Mona Lisa* featured often (Sassoon 2001: 175).

What some of these publications achieved was to introduce the archetype known as the *femme fatale.*[32] This construct of late Romanticism or Decadentism was to bring another dimension to the image of women generally and to the *Mona Lisa* specifically. The *femme fatale* possessed supernatural powers with which she entranced and seduced men,

32 Other women considered to be *femme fatales* were; Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, Salomé and Lucrezia Borgia. But "[t]he identification of *Mona Lisa* with the disquieting women of the past is a totally arbitrary and an utterly modern construction" (Sassoon, 2001: 150).

drawing them into dysfunctional, disastrous relationships. According to these Romantic authors, the *femme fatale*

> was not an ugly demon, or one sent by the devil to bring discord, to destroy cities and brew deadly poisons, ... The *femme fatale* was beautiful, and perfidiously used her beauty to ensnare hapless men. These unfortunates, once in love, were enticed towards inescapable perdition, folly and ruin (Sassoon 2001: 96).

Femmes fatales were also,

> sensual, mystical, moody women; disdainful women, women absorbed in thought; women with melancholic expressions... It was as if 'the feminine' was a distant mysterious land, just sighted by apprehensive explorers who, afraid to conquer it, let alone understand it, contented themselves with describing it from afar, magnifying its danger, exaggerating its mystery, embellishing their own predicament (Sassoon 2001: 140).

With regards to the *Mona Lisa* and the archetypal *femme fatale,* two writers were particularly influential in firmly casting her in this role. Firstly, Walter Pater (1839-1894), a popular British prose-poet and critic who as a member of the Romantic Movement wrote in support of aesthetic sensibility. In 1869, he wrote an essay on Leonardo for the *Fortnightly Review* and later in 1873, this essay was published as a chapter in a book entitled, *The Renaissance: Studies in art and poetry.* In this text Pater discussed the work of Leonardo generally and mentioned the *Mona Lisa,* changing the image of the *Mona Lisa* radically and for ever. What follows is an extract from Pater's description:

> The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world had come... (Pater 1961: 120).

In Britain, where Leonardo was already an established icon with documents and paintings in important British institutions and collections,[33] Pater's work found resonance, as did the

33 Kemp mentions that Charles I and Henrietta Maria were great admirers of Leonardo. They owned *St John the Baptist* (1513) and *Salvator Mundi* (1490) and were keen to swap a Holbein and a Titian for the *Mona Lisa* (2012: 154).

writings of his French counterpart Théophile Gautier (1811-72) in France (Sassoon 2001: 138-139). Gautier's writing runs,

> *La Joconde!* ... Her gaze intimating unknown pleasures, her gaze so divinely ironic. We feel perturbed in her presence by her aura of superiority (Sassoon 2001: 113).

At this point it becomes interesting to note that by not physically moving an inch, the image of the *Mona Lisa* now travelled well beyond the private and intimate portrait of a middle-class Florentine housewife to become more easily available to the consciousness of Western Europe. These multiple copies and duplications may have begun the image's induction into iconicity.

On Monday the 21st of August 1911 another event occurred to further change the image and reputation of the *Mona Lisa*. Vincenzo Peruggia, a painter-decorator who had been employed to place glass in the frames of important paintings at the Louvre, stole the *Mona Lisa.* The museum was closed for the day and he removed it from the frame which he discarded in the stairwell and placed the painted panel under his coat (Kemp 2012: 157, Sassoon 2001: 175). A group of suspects including Apollinaire (who had recently promised to burn down the Louvre) and his close friend Picasso (who had previously received stolen pieces of Iberian art from the Louvre), were rounded up for questioning and later released (Sassoon 2001: 178).

The space on the wall where it had been hanging created a sensation and queues of people lined up to see it. Meanwhile Peruggia kept the work in his apartment in Paris (Kemp 2012: 156-157, Hales 2014: 238). Then, on the 29th of November 1913, Peruggia explaining that he wanted to repatriate the *Mona Lisa* to its rightful home in Italy, attempted to ransom the painting to an antique dealer named Alfredo Geri, in Florence. Geri, stalling Peruggia, approached the Director of the Uffizi, Giovanni Poggi, and together with the police they retrieved the work and apprehended Peruggia.

There was much celebration in France and Italy and the *Mona Lisa* was exhibited in Florence, Milan (with approximately 60 000 visitors) and then in Rome (30 000 visitors) before returning to Paris. A commemorative medal was minted and the *Mona Lisa* returned to Paris amid much political, diplomatic, and media fanfare. On its return to the Louvre visitor numbers exploded to over 120 000, and the museum also reported an

increase in membership of the *Friends of the Louvre.* Since this incident the *Mona Lisa* became particularly attractive to the press and dissemination of the image increased considerably.(Sassoon 2001: 186-188 & 225, Hales 2014: 238-241).

French popular culture also took up the story of the theft, satirising the incident in postcards, variety shows and songs, each time reproducing the image of the *Mona Lisa* and reinforcing her image in the consciousness of the French people (Sassoon 2001: 180).

The painting was now safely back home in the Louvre and by the 4th of January 1914 it was back on display. The co-operation between France and Italy during the incident resulted in improved diplomatic relations between the countries (Kemp 2012: 157). The art world too was energised by the incident and much debate circulated around the work. By 1924 all references to the theft had ceased, but the protracted delay between the theft and the recovery had doubled the media attention. Not only did the theft enable the work to remain in the public consciousness, but it also served to anthropomorphosise the painting by turning Lisa into a vulnerable person who had been wrenched away from her home in the Louvre by a mad man, and finally returned home. This sentimental media attention meant that the *Mona Lisa* was now a celebrity (Sassoon 2001: 183-197).

All these events increased media coverage and public interest 400 years after its creation could lead us to conclude that the *Mona Lisa* was finally iconic. Due to the theft as well as the technological improvements in the mechanical reproduction of artworks identified by Benjamin (1969), her image was everywhere and readers and museum visitors were fully engaged. Kemp asserts that it is indeed this event that definitively solidified the *Mona Lisa* as an icon (2012: 157). But what could be the cause of this continued engagement centuries from the time of its initial creation? After all, many artworks are stolen from museums and galleries the world over. Possibly it is the event of the theft locking neatly into the 20th century's obsession with celebrity that facilitated this continued relevance? As Hales says, "The *Mona Lisa* left the Louvre a work of art; she returned as public property, the first mass art icon" (2014: 242).

Another event which tied into the *Mona Lisa's* celebrity status and increased her visibility was the American tour. In 1963, in spite of the work's age and fragility, the *Mona Lisa* again played a diplomatic role for France and French culture. The painting was sent to

Washington DC and New York by then president Charles de Gaulle and his French Minister of Culture, André Malraux. Malraux, the charismatic, prize-winning novelist, art critic and former Resistance fighter, together with John[34] and Jacqueline Kennedy, managed the negotiations of the loan. The painting left France by boat, with much media fanfare and was shown in Washington and New York to 1.6 million people (Sassoon 2001: 243-245).

In 1974 the *Mona Lisa* toured again. This time de Gaulle's successor Georges Pompidou agreed to send the painting to Japan and Moscow. This was done in order to thank the Japanese Network Nippon Television for funding a specific room in the Louvre which still houses the painting and safely accommodates the crowds (Sassoon 2001: 10 & 247).

Since the 1970s the *Mona Lisa* has stayed firmly at home in the Louvre. But due to events such as the theft and the American and Japanese tours which created her celebrity status in both the west and the east, her image has escaped the oil painted panel as well as the Louvre in Paris and has spread everywhere, colonising many forms of media. The *Mona Lisa's* iconicity is renewed again and again through the ubiquitousness of her image in the mass media. Here follows a brief list of some of her sightings.

Authors who have written about Pater's essay on the *Mona Lisa* are G.K. Chesterton, Oscar Wilde and Somerset Maugham (Sassoon 2001: 149-150). Other authors who wrote about the *Mona Lisa* via the influence of Pater are, Ronald Firbank Charles Conran, Henry James, James Joyce, Élémir Bourge, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Marcel Proust and Dmitri Merezhkovsky, to name a few (Sassoon 2001: 136-159). More authors who mention the *Mona Lisa* generally are D. H. Lawrence, Stella Gibbons, Mary McCarthy, Jean Paul Sartre and many others. She has also appeared in children's stories, comics, romantic pulp fiction and historical novels.

As mentioned above, a novel by Stella Gibbons entitled *Westwood* (1946) mentions the painting. In this novel two friends are casually chatting in a bedroom. On the wall is a large monochrome of the *Mona Lisa*. One character Hilda refers to the work as a "fat pan"[35] expressing some revulsion at the general ugliness of the work. The heroine of the novel

34 John Kennedy (aka JFK) was the President of the United States at the time.

35 A pansexual. A derogatory term denoting someone who can love or be attracted to any sex (*Urban Dictionary* 2007).

Margaret responds, “Its beautiful” but then begins to question her own response: “Was it?” (Gibbons 1946).

The *Mona Lisa* has also been adopted by popular culture in the forms of music, cinema and television, which has contributed to its continued popularity. In America, songs such as “You’re the Top”, written by Cole Porter and covered by Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Barbra Streisand and many others, mention the painting. Other musicians who refer to the painting are Demis Roussos, Willy Forst, Elton John and Bob Dylan (Sassoon 2001).

On his 1966 album *Blonde On Blonde*, in a track called “Visions of Johanna”, Dylan refers to the *Mona Lisa*,

> Inside the museum infinity goes up on trial.
>
> Voices echo, ‘This is what salvation must be like after a while’.
>
> But *Mona Lisa* musta had the highway blues.
>
> You can tell by the way she smiles.
>
> See the primitive wallflower freeze.
>
> When the jelly-faced women all sneeze.
>
> Hear the one with the moustache say ‘Jeez’... (Dylan 1966, Songfacts 2017).

In his characteristic style Dylan is obscure. Possibly he refers to the museum as a place where history (infinity) is judged and the reward or sentence is preservation in a museum. He mentions the smile, which by the 1960s would have become compulsory, but adds nothing to it. He then anthropomorphosises the *Mona Lisa.* She has the blues, she is a neglected wall flower and she is a little prim as she is repulsed by the sneezing of the overweight (jelly-faced) women. He may be obliquely mentioning Duchamp’s moustached version. Here Dylan’s lyrics are potentially rich with metaphor, although rhyming rather than eloquence seems to be his overall goal with the lyrics of this song.

The most famous and long lived song which refers to the painting is “Mona Lisa” written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans in 1950. Written for the film *Captain Carey U.S.A.* and sung by Nat ‘King’ Cole, this song won an Academy Award and was subsequently performed by many other artists (Songfacts 2017).

The song takes the form of questioning an aloof lover as to the cause of her remoteness. In the tradition of the Romantics the lyrics make reference to both the smile and the woman in the painting. The smile is considered mysterious as revealed in the two lines "You're so like the lady with the mystic smile" and "For that *Mona Lisa* strangeness in your smile". The *femme fatale* is referenced in the lines;

> Do you smile to tempt a lover *Mona Lisa*? Many dreams have been brought to your doorstep. They just lie there and they die there. Are you warm are you real *Mona Lisa*? Or just a cold and lonely lovely work of art? (Livingston, Evans 1950, Songfacts 2017).

In these lyrics the sentiments of a helpless man beseeching a mystical woman with great charm, first linked to the *Mona Lisa* by Pater and Gautier in the 1800s, live on into the 1950s and beyond.

The painting has given its name to the 1986 Neil Jordan film *Mona Lisa* starring Bob Hoskins, although the story in no way refers to the painting (Sassoon 2001: 226-228). Television has also played its part in disseminating the image of the *Mona Lisa* and her stories. She has appeared many times in *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and other television shows too numerous to mention.

In our present culture dominated by images and the media there is probably no greater force for the proliferation of an image than the world of advertising and more recently social media, which is also becoming increasingly dominated by advertising. Sassoon suggests that while advertising is not often a factor in the creation of iconic images its value lies in its ability to disseminate the image of the *Mona Lisa* broadly and repeatedly, maintaining its position as one of the dominant images in the global arena (2001: 263). He notes, however, that this only occurred after artists such as Marcel Duchamp had opened the way by appropriation and subversion (Sassoon 2001: 218-219). As early as 1915 we see the first use of the *Mona Lisa* on a label for a laxative, *Acqua Purgativa Italiana* (Sassoon 2001: 211). Other products include; toothpaste, deodorant, condoms, cigars, matches, milk and rum, and the list goes on (Hales 2014: 255). One wonders what her husband the astute and tenacious silk merchant may have come up with had he known of the longevity and fame of his wife's portrait.

Marketing has also played its role in the proliferation and sustaining of the image in the public eye. The Louvre itself has contributed to this. The museum's magazine as well as the database for all the paintings in French state museums is called *Joconde*. The café had a poster of the *Mona Lisa* holding up a muffin and the website uses the image for one of their icons.

Gallery shops throughout the world stock *Mona Lisa* merchandise in the form of stationery, fashionable clothing, jewellery, cosmetics, dolls, posters and cards. The *Mona Lisa* is also on computer programmes, mouse pads, food labels, lingerie, interior décor for shops and restaurants, postage stamps, magazine covers, album covers, board games, finger nail art and many other applications too numerous to track (Sassoon 2001: 11, 249, 265-273).

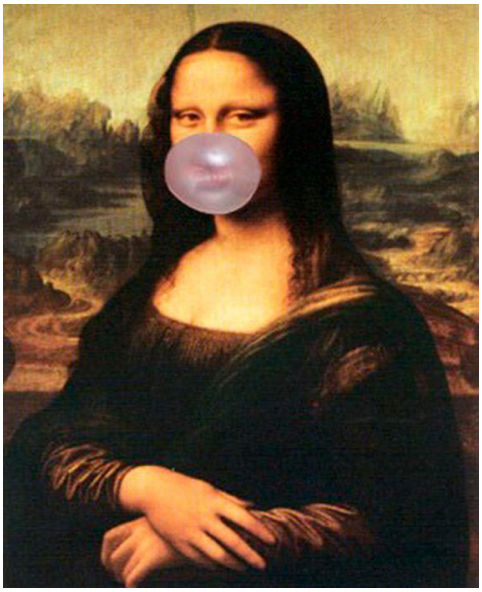


Mona Lisa merchandising available online. Photo images by: www.indiana.edu (watch), Cafe Press (slip-slops), Art Print Clothing (bag).

Despite having been created in the 1500s, the *Mona Lisa* has not escaped the world wide web. Merchandise is available online as well as a range of images of the original work, of varying quality. Most of the images found online are parodies and satires, the majority of which are pornographic (Kemp 2012: 157-160). Sassoon identifies this process as the kitchification of the *Mona Lisa* (2001: 192). This process was described by Greenberg: "when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new 'twists' which are then watered down and served up as kitsch" (1988: 12).

While the world wide web has increased the spread of the image of the *Mona Lisa* exponentially, more interestingly it has facilitated the manipulation of the original image into a potentially infinite number of variations. One wonders where the image of the *Mona Lisa* will eventually end up?





Mona as Supergirl. Photo image by: Teddy Royannez and *Munchin' Mona*. Photo image by: kaius.

Two of the most eloquent variations of the *Mona Lisa* online is *Mona Taking a Selfie* and *Mona as Icon. Mona Taking a Selfie,* more than any other variation, shows graphically how the image is able to take on and accommodate new trends and values. Here our 21st century self-absorption, which we simply must share, is reflected back to us complete with iphone and pout. The warmth of the smiling eyes takes on a new and ironic signification.



Mona Taking a Selfie. Photo image by: Thinglink.

Mona as Icon shows the face from Leonardo's painting superimposed over the face of a religious icon, complete with formulaic pose, gold leaf and ageing wood panel. This variation suggests that the cultural icon may still retain some of its religious value.



Mona as icon. Photo image by: René Design.

In another incarnation, the *Mona Lisa* does not only live in the cloud or as a medium for spiritual expression, but has literally left the planet. In 2013 NASA, in its initial testing of a laser interplanetary communication system, sent an image of the *Mona Lisa* to the moon (Hales 2014: 255).

Sassoon notes that "What is fundamental is to be seen, noticed, discussed and to be the centre of attention, of debate, of controversies, of mysteries. The cardinal principle is to use all available communication systems" (2001: 173), and this is what the image of the *Mona Lisa* has done. But what of the painting itself?

A survey conducted by the *Instituto per gli studi sulla publica opinione* in 2000 in Italy asked the unprompted question, "What do you think is the best known painting in the world?" The *Mona Lisa* was the outright favourite at 85.8%[36](Sassoon 2001: 9). The painting also won the polls in a *Paris Match* survey in 1984, as well as in a 1989 survey by *Hamburger Abendblatt* (Sassoon 2001: 9). In addition, the information desk at the Louvre was surveyed for one day in 2000. The results showed the *Mona Lisa* was asked for 76 times, *Venus de Milo* once and no other paintings were requested (Sassoon 2001: 6).

36 In second place was Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* scoring 3.6% and in third place Boticelli's *Spring* at 2.1%.

What is more important for the *Mona Lisa's* iconic status is that visitors to the Louvre are relatively young ensuring its ongoing popularity. The French government website states that more than 50% of their visitors are under 30 years of age and many are from China, Brazil and Japan (France Diplomatie 2018). Using these statistics it can be ascertained that the *Mona Lisa* is indeed famous, but whether the crowds flock to see the painting because they love it, or if they are motivated by particular types of social pressure to see it, would require more specific research. Whatever the motivation, a great number of people do visit the work, and the reason for this could be that it is somehow relevant to us today. What aspects of 21st Century culture is it reflecting or signifying to which we respond?

Possibly it is that we live in an age of rebellious individualism and the subversion of an icon, considered to be high art, essentially representing exclusionary bourgeois elitism, taps into a need for anarchic self-expression. Moreover, as we live in the age of the world wide web and mass, shared communication, ungoverned by an overall authority, this sense of anarchic power is reinforced via this medium. This form of socio-cultural rebellion appears again in the retro movement currently being enjoyed by Tretchikoff described in chapter five. However there must be more to the *Mona Lisa's* continued relevance than anarchy. The next section on the image as constructed signification may provide more answers.

Construct

Direct signification

The *Mona Lisa* is arguably the most written about, talked about and debated artwork in the Western art tradition. As Carlo Pedretti has said, "Over the *Mona Lisa*, the proverbial rivers of ink have flowed. The painting is a victim of too much erudition, too much philology, too much philosophy, too much psychology, too much arrogance and, on the whole, too much misunderstanding" (2000: 70). Findlay would agree; for him the image has been "so savagely bowdlerized that it is impossible to separate our experience of seeing the actual painting from the plethora of abuse it has suffered" (2014: 187). But can our continued engagement with the *Mona Lisa* really be arrogantly and flippantly dismissed as misunderstanding and abuse? Or is the *Mona Lisa*, as an empty signifier, always ready to nimbly embrace new signification, not simply doing her job?

Over the last 500 years, the *Mona Lisa* as a signifier, has had enough time to gather many constructed multiple, rich significations. There has also been enough time to have those significations altered and manipulated to create many complex webs of meaning (Thompson 1995). In a brief overview of a few of the significations and meanings discussed above, changes and additions to certain symbols in the painting will be traced below. At this point it must be noted that multiple signification is not serial signification and many meanings can accrue and co-exist simultaneously.

The woman

The wife

The initial signification of the painting the *Mona Lisa* could arguably be its denotative meaning; a portrait of a young Italian, Florentine woman of the early 1500s. There are also the connotative meanings of; daughter of a once noble line, a sister within an extended family, the wife of a wealthy man and a mother of six children.

Madonna

In time the painting was named. The word *Mona* is a shortened version of *Madonna* or *Mia donna* which means *Madame* or My Lady and is a sign of respect (Sassoon 2001: 2, Hales 2014: 2). Renaissance women were encouraged to follow the example of the Madonna and live pious lives and representations of virtuous social appearance such as modest dark coloured clothing, a veiled head and folded hands were common in female portraiture of the era (Zöllner 1993: 9-13). The *Mona Lisa* is also compositionally similar to several images of the Virgin Mary and this could reinforce the other references to piety and moral rectitude.

Another theory which was popular at the time of the Renaissance was that of physiognomy reflecting the inner person. This was a belief that inner beauty and virtue are manifest as outer beauty, and conversely evil is manifest as ugliness. Leonardo was known to have followed this line of thinking and may also have signified Lisa's virtue painting her as physically beautiful (Zöllner 1993: 16).

The artist may also have alluded to moral virtue in his depiction of the eyes. If a person looks you in the eye then it is assumed that they are being honest and truthful, with nothing to hide. Moreover the direct gaze from the eyes that appear to follow the viewer,

just like those of the traditional religious icon, could reinforce the *Mona Lisa's* iconic status (Kemp 2012: 145).

Femme fatale

As discussed in the section on context, during the late 1800s the *Mona Lisa* was decisively linked to the *femme fatale*, and in 1911 it was this *Mona Lisa,* which was stolen from the Louvre. In France, newspaper coverage of the theft (and a little in England) dramatised the incident. Speculation was rife and the virtues of the painting were emphasised, exacerbating the loss. Stories ran in the French media for three weeks. Crash courses in Renaissance art and artists as well as Pater and Gautier's theories on the mystery of the smile were now more broadly published in newspapers to the masses, introducing the Romantic signification of the *femme fatale,* initially the domain of the intelligentsia, to the broader French public (Sassoon 2001: 177). On her return to the Louvre she was almost human – a kidnap victim and a celebrity.

Celebrity

By the 1960s the *Mona Lisa's* image as a celebrity was about to become more international. This occurred during and continued subsequent to her tour of America in 1963. Hughes identifies this world tour as the catalyst for a fundamental change in meaning for the *Mona Lisa*. During this event, as millions of people filed past the work, they did not do so to engage with it but to "have seen" it. For Hughes the work changed from an independent artwork to an "icon of mass consumption". Furthermore Hughes maintains that this event fundamentally changed the way all art was seen and led to art becoming a commodity rather than an intellectual or spiritual practice (Hughes 2008). Therefore, as a touring superstar, the *Mona Lisa* gained the additional signification of global celebrity.

Consequently the woman in the painting signifies many types of women; a wealthy housewife, daughter, mother, sister as well as a *Madonna*. But this virtuous and religious signification was revolutionised when she also became a *femme fatale*. Then, due to certain circumstances, she became French as well as an international celebrity. All these multiple and constructed significations are made possible by her acting as an empty signifier, enabling the iconic work to find relevance in each new age.

The smile

Due to its mystery, the famous smile is the symbol within the painting with the most accrued signification, as well as one of the most highly debated signifiers in the history of Western art. One interpretation was related to the straightforward denotative meaning of happiness or contentment. We know that Lisa del Giocondo had a new home, fashionable clothes and had fulfilled her duty of producing a son for her husband. As discussed previously, Dante and the Humanists provided yet another layer by professing that the smile along with beauty is a sign of a virtuous soul (Kemp 2012: 149).

Vasari's publication *Le Vite de'più eccelenti* was the first known or surviving work to mention the smile. He wrote, "And in this work of Leonardo's there was a smile so pleasing, that it was a thing more divine than human to behold; and it was held to be something marvelous (*sic*), since the reality was not more alive" (2006: 239). Already the smile was considered something special, but not particularly mysterious.

Then the famous smile was used as a fundamental component of the *Mona Lisa's femme fatale* image by Pater and Gautier. With the smile now read as a weapon to beguile men, an element of strangeness was introduced. Gautier was the main proponent of the concept of the *Mona Lisa* with the strange smile. He wrote, "*La Joconde*! This name makes me think immediately of this sphinx of beauty who smiles so mysteriously (Sassoon 2001: 113), and Pater entrenched this signification with "the unfathomable smile, always with a touch of something sinister in it (Pater 1971: 122).

As discussed above, the history of the *Mona Lisa* shows clear and traceable instances of polysemy. This came about as significations both accrued and transformed, entangling the painting in a number of webs of signification. As an open signifier the work successfully accommodated the theories and philosophies of subsequent ages, thus enabling the painting to remain relevant. In the process the *Mona Lisa* and her smile have both changed to reflect the times.

Indirect signification

The above significations can be linked directly to elements or motifs in the painting. What of those constructed meanings which are more indirectly attributed or connotated? A few will be discussed below.

Mystery

One such signification or meaning is that of mystery, and the *Mona Lisa*, being 500 years old and supported by no original, written documentation, is shrouded in mystery. Could it be that the mysterious smile and *femme fatale* persona has been extrapolated from the circumstances of mystery surrounding the painting generally?

Leonardo and the *Mona Lisa* have had their fair share of unanswered questions: Is the woman really Lisa del Giocondo? Why did Leonardo keep it?

The sitter

According to the literature the sitter's identity was uncertain as there are no clear written records of the commission. The sitter's identity was first questioned by André-Charles Coppier in the twentieth century, who maintained that she is actually an idealised person. But the sitter has now more or less been confirmed as having been Lisa del Giocondo (Kemp 2012: 145, Sassoon 2001: 30, Hales 2014: 9). The most convincing document confirming the authenticity of the sitter was found in Germany in 2005 and consists of a copy of Cicero's *Epistulae ad familiares* (1477), which was owned by Agostino Vespucci. In the document Vespucci added an annotation in the margin. Next to a paragraph describing the painting technique of a Greek painter Apelles, Vespucci added: "That is the way Leonardo da Vinci works when painting all his pictures, for example the head of Lisa del Giocondo ..." (Kemp 2012:147).

Non-delivery

Another mystery surrounding the *Mona Lisa* is the fact that as a commission, it was not delivered to the patron. Sassoon, in line with Coppier, suggests that as Leonardo worked on the painting it became more 'idealised woman' and less Lisa de Giocondo and as such, he could not in good faith give it to the del Giocondos (Sassoon 2001: 16-30). Another possible reason for the non-delivery is mooted by Kemp, who suggests that the work was so eloquent in depicting the philosophies of the day that Leonardo could not bear to part with it (2012:152).

Other Mysteries

Two versions

The theft in 1911 also created opportunities for the creation of mystery. While the work was still missing, D'Annuncio wrote a movie script about the theft. Consequently people with fakes came forward, claiming theirs to be the original. An Englishman, Mr John R. Eyre, claimed that Leonardo had painted two versions. Eyre contended that one of these he kept, which is now in the Louvre, while the second was actually delivered to del Giocondo. This second version was eventually purchased by the Eyre family and then sold to art dealer Henry F. Pulitzer in England (Sassoon 2001: 202-203).

Androgyny

Another layer of mystery added to the *Mona Lisa* was that of androgyny or transgenderism. This was first proposed in 1913 by painter Maurice Vieulle. As discussed above, this theory was depicted in Gibbon's novel with the pejorative reference to the *Mona Lisa* as a "fat pan". Later, in 1952, an X-ray 'confirmed' it. This was closely followed in 1953 when the New York journal *Sexology* published a picture of the *Mona Lisa* with cropped hair. The subject was again revived in 1956 when Georges Isarlo suggested this after seeing a student play. Then in 1986, Lillian Schwarz, a technician at the Lucent Technologies Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, after analysing the work proposed that the *Mona Lisa* is in fact an androgynous self-portrait of, and a joke by Leonardo – and this is why she smiles (Sassoon 2001: 270-271).

Cult of Leonardo

Another layer of constructed, indirect, attributed meaning added to the *Mona Lisa* is the cult of Leonardo, the Renaissance Man, a distinct advantage in the contest for iconicity (Sassoon 2001: 60-61 and 80-81).

The cult of Leonardo already begun by Vasari persisted into the 19th century, during which time the myth continued with often fictitious and romanticised incidents of his life practised in the genre known as history painting. One story for which there is no historical evidence is that Leonardo died in his patron's arms. This was depicted in a painting by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres entitled *The Death of Leonardo in the Arms of King François I* (1818) (Sassoon 2001: 82 and Kemp 2012: 154).

The cult of Leonardo has also been supported by three artworks concerning the narrative of Leonardo actually painting the *Mona Lisa.* One, was by Aimée Pagès (1845) (after an engraving by Paul-Prosper Allais) entitled *Raphael Being Introduced to Leonardo,* and the third is a painting by Cesare Maccari entitled *Leonardo che ritrae la Gioconde* (1863) (Sassoon 2001: 85).

An interesting observation regarding the cult of Leonardo is the idea of the adverse effects of professional pressure on the 'Renaissance Genius'. This notion was first mentioned by Vasari:

> It is clear that Leonardo, through his comprehension of art, began many things and never finished one of them, since it seemed to him that the hand was not able to attain to the perfection of the art in carrying out the things which he imagined; for the reason that he conceived in ideas, difficulties so subtle and so marvellous, that they could never be expressed by the hands, be they ever so excellent (Vasari 2006: 231).

and

> But, in truth, one can believe that his vast and most excellent mind was hampered through being too full of desire, and that his wish ever to seek out excellence upon excellence, and perfection upon perfection was the reason of it (Vasari 2006: 236).

Hales agrees and suggests that this self-imposed stress may have been inspired, as so much else, by Dante. In one of Leonardo's notebooks he is said to have copied this line from Dante: "he who uses up his life without achieving fame/Leaves no more vestige of himself on earth/Than smoke in the air/Or foam on the water" (2014: 77). Leonardo also wrote, "I wish to work miracles" (Hales 2014:77). This may be the reason why Leonardo was not satisfied that the *Mona Lisa* was complete, and the work remained undelivered to Francesco (Sassoon 2001: 28-30). But the cult of Leonardo persisted. In the 1960s, during the visit of the *Mona Lisa* to America, French Minister of Culture André Malraux, amongst others, was quoted as saying that the *Mona Lisa* is "the most subtle homage that genius has ever rendered to a living face" (Harris 1999: 54).

Even today the cult continues. Several books on the man are published continuously, many concerning his famous notebooks and his work as an inventor. More recently, the

record breaking sale of the *Salvator Mundi* created a media storm keeping Leonardo centre stage.

It has been suggested that the reason this cult persists to this day is that Leonardo is perceived to be a victim of his technologically backward time and place, more suited to the advancements of our age. As he was respected in his day, his works were preserved, but had he lived today, the myth goes, he would have been able to achieve a great deal more (Sassoon 2001: 69).

The Mona Lisa *as icon*

As we have seen, the *Mona Lisa* is the centre of a vast and complex web of significations. Is it possible that one or more of these significations could have been seized upon and developed even further into another level of signification, that of an icon?.

For example, could the discussion on context above regarding the *Mona Lisa* as a reflection of the High Renaissance not lead us to use the *Mona Lisa* as short hand for 'The Renaissance'. I argue below that this is indeed what has happened and illustrate this with a few examples.

Icon of French culture

The *Mona Lisa,* having been painted Leonardo da Vinci, the adopted son of the French Republic, purchased by the French monarchy, forming part of the prestigious French state collection, housed in a French state museum, as well as its celebrity status through the episode of the theft and its diplomatic return to France by the Italians and its international tours, suggest that the *Mona Lisa* could be an icon of 'French Culture'. This would then produce a political or ambassadorial role for the artwork.

There has always been a link between politics and art. This has played out in instances of national pride, propaganda, patronage and censorship. With regards to Leonardo, politics was evident in the form of patronage, in particular that of King François I, who in 1516 invited Leonardo to live at his court at Amboise in France in order to boost the cultural status of his country. By permanently hosting an Italian 'Renaissance Genius' he would show himself and France to be forward thinking, progressive and indeed part of the Renaissance (Sassoon 2001: 242).

Later, during the French Revolution, liberal intellectuals, inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, fought to unify Italy and free France from Catholic monarchism. During the French invasion of Italy in 1796, Napoleon's armies plundered France, gathering as much material connected to Leonardo as possible. While raiding the Ambrosiana Library in Milan they collected 14 volumes of original drawings and texts and brought them to the Louvre (Hales 2014: 234). Also, by transferring the Royal collection to the Louvre and by extension to the people, the French Republic transformed the Louvre from a private palace to a symbol of the new democratic order (Sassoon 2001: 74-75). From this point on the French claimed a stake in the Leonardo legend. This time it was done in order to present France as progressive and rational. Thus Leonardo was again appropriated by the French nation.

Much like that of Leonardo, the political career of the *Mona Lisa* began when she was purchased by King François I and as part of the Royal collections was used to symbolise the monarchy's sophistication. Then, as part of a state public collection set up by the French Republic, she also symbolised the French as a forward thinking, cultural nation.

Later testaments to her political status as a French icon concern the fact that during the Second World War she was considered sufficiently strategic to require evacuation to a safe house between 1939 and 1947 (Hales 2014: 243).

In the 1960s the *Mona Lisa's* political career went more broadly international when she toured America and Japan. And a further political incident indicating her diplomatic standing occurred in 2009 when a Russian woman who had been denied French citizenship, threw a terracotta mug at the *Mona Lisa* in protest (Hales 2014: 243).

Icon of fine art

The *Mona Lisa* is a painting accomplished by a well known Renaissance artist showing exceptional technical skill. It has been part of important collections and has also received much attention from published authors in art historical, philosophical and literary circles. Consequently it has been inducted into the art historical canon with all the attendant privileges. Therefore it could be argued that through this historical path the *Mona Lisa* has become an icon of 'Fine Art' or even simply 'Art'. In turn 'Fine Art' has connotations of class, taste, exclusivity, discernment, sophistication and status, and as such would fulfil the social role of illustrating class distinction as described by Bourdieu in Chapter 3.

Subversion

If we accept the proposed theory that the *Mona Lisa* is an icon of 'Fine Art', then what often occurs in society is that symbols of status and convention become challenged. Within the art world this practice is formally known as iconoclasm or subversion. Sassoon agrees when he says,

> At a certain stage in this process of artistic definition it becomes difficult, almost impossible, to change the meaning attributed to and thence acquired by a painting. ... All that was left to others was ... to use it for what it had become, a cultural reference point. [and] ... the more a reference is repeated, the greater force it acquires – until eventually it becomes a true cliché and begins to be disparaged or parodied by true intellectuals" (Sassoon 2001: 151).

After the theft of the *Mona Lisa* and as a consequence of the work becoming 'Fine Art' and a celebrity, the *avant garde* or intellectual elite led a backlash against her elevated status. Art critics began to write eloquently about how they had always thought the painting and Leonardo to be unremarkable and overrated. Amongst these were Roberto Longhi, Bernard Berenson, T.S. Elliot and Somerset Maugham (Sassoon 2001: 193-194), as well as Stella Gibbons, whose heroine Margaret wondered if the *Mona Lisa* truly was beautiful.

The earliest known example of the subversion of the *Mona Lisa* is an image by Sapek (Eugène Bataille) created in 1887 for Coquelin Cadet's book, *Le Rire.* Here the *Mona Lisa* is seen smoking a pipe. Other artists who joined the trend were B. B. Col, Jean Metzinger, Kasimir Malevich, Fernand Léger, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Lucio Del Pezzo, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol (Sassoon 2001: 212).



Eugène Bataille (Sapek), *Le rire* (The laugh), 1887. Photo image by: Gallica Digital Library.

The appropriation and subversion of established artworks began in earnest with the Dadaist movement. Dadaism which began on 5 February 1915 with the Cabaret Voltaire, "radicalised the rejection of past art into an overall condemnation of art as such, as seen as part of the values and civilization that the War revealed to be false and destructive" (Latour, 2002: 108). In practice the Dadaists took up the *Mona Lisa* amongst other works in order to achieve this. The most famous iconoclastic image of the *Mona Lisa* was made in 1919 by Marcel Duchamp. In this work he obtained a photographic postcard of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre shop and added, in pencil, a jaunty moustache and goatee beard and the saucy inscription '*L.H.O.O.Q.'* (Kemp 2012: 160).[37] As an assisted or rectified ready-made the *Mona Lisa* as '*L.H.O.O.Q*.' had now become part of the Conceptual Art movement of the early 1900s, ushering her into the era of Modern Art.[38] This reincarnation points not only to the resilience of the image of the *Mona Lisa,* but also indicates her function as an empty signifier. Here Duchamp is using her as an icon of 'Fine Art' to encourage the art viewing public to rethink the parameters of art and its meaning.

37 Pronouncing these letters of the alphabet in French sounds like '*Elle a chaud au cul'*, which translates as 'She has a hot ass' (Sassoon 2001: 213).

38 Later Duchamp put forward an untouched, clean postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, and titled it *Shaved*. This pure ready-made indicates Duchamp's complete appropriation of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* as the title *Shaved* implies that '*L.H.O.O.Q*.' is the original work.



Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q*, 1919, photographic postcard and pencil, 19.7 x 12.4cm, Private Collection, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France Photo image by: Wikipedia.

The Dadaist practice of using the *Mona Lisa* as 'Fine Art' or high art was later continued by a younger generation of artists. In 1964, Daniel Spoerri created the work *Use a Rembrandt as an Ironing-Board* (1964). This work is a response to Duchamp's anti-art challenge which was found in a note written between 1911 and 1915. In the note, known as "Reciprocal Ready-made", Duchamp challenged his contemporaries to indulge in iconoclastic behaviour by encouraging them to 'use a Rembrandt as an ironing-board'. Spoerri took up this challenge but instead of using a Rembrandt he referenced Duchamp by using a photo of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* printed onto a cloth, adding yet another layer of signification to the *Mona Lisa* (Latour 2002: 110).



Daniel Spoerri, *Use a Rembrandt as an Ironing-board (Marcel Duchamp),* 1964, assemblage, 34 x 29 x 16, Tel Aviv Museum of art. Photo image by: Mae Travels.

In 1963 Andy Warhol used repeated images of the *Mona Lisa* in his work *Thirty Are Better Than One,* but Sassoon notes that there is a shift in these two acts of appropriation. Where Duchamp's work subverted the *Mona Lisa* as high culture, by the 1960s, and through the work of the Dadaists, the *Mona Lisa* was no longer high culture, but a popular cultural icon. Challenging it was no longer necessary and Warhol was left to deal with the image as another celebrity icon of mass culture (2001: 254). According to Kemp this work "captures both the remorseless serial repetition of the image and its often debased transmission" (2012: 161).



Andy Warhol, *Thirty Are Better Than One*, 1963, Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 32 x 200 cm. Collection. Photo image by: Artsy.net.

Other artists who used the image in the style of pop art were Jean Dubuffet, Fernando Botero, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and several others (Sassoon 2001: 255). Consequently the significance of the *Mona Lisa* has accumulated a great number of meanings; Lisa del Giocondo, pious housewife, *Madonna, femme fatale,* celebrity, diplomatic ambassador, high art and now social commentary*,* and this could not have happened with the *Mona Lisa* unless she was widely regarded as 'Fine Art' or 'Art'.

Is the *Mona Lisa* iconic? It is difficult to conclusively say why or how. Her content is unremarkable if sometimes innovative for its time. It is a small, demure and quiet painting but it also shows supreme technical skill. It contains few symbols and motifs but those symbols such as the open smile, acting as Levi- Strauss' free floating signifier, enabled it to accrue multiple significations as well as contain an unexplainable air of mystery. The work has elements of tradition and innovation, allowing the viewer to access the work comfortably, but also to be inspired by something new. This duality may also have provided the impetus for other artists to push their own boundaries too. Those with intimate knowledge of the work report extraordinary experiences, recalling Cassirer's and the historical religious icons spiritual dimension and Benjamin's concept of aura.

The effects of her context and varying circumstances and events of her life and their contribution to her iconicity are pertinent but somewhat more difficult to pin down. While she was painted by the quintessential Renaissance man and icon in his own right, so were many other portraits. The uncertainty around the true identity of the sitter and the other unanswered questions about the works origins adds to its mystery. Her provenance in royal and state collections was and still is elitist. But this also meant that she was initially accessible to particularly powerful people. Her inclusion in the French state collection meant that she was then accessible to the public but this was only for the last two hundred years of her lifespan to date. Undoubtedly the theft and its international tours built the work's renown, but other works have been stolen and toured too, raising less media attention. While it was decisive that the painting landed up in Paris, many other works also reside there in the same institution (Sassoon 2001: 278). Its adoption by advertising, the *avant garde* and the world wide web has certainly helped, but nothing seems to stand out as *the* decisive factor in the life story of the *Mona Lisa*.

Her entanglement in some complex webs of signification is also an aspect to consider. As a well established icon of 'French Culture' the painting has functioned as a diplomatic ambassador. As an icon of 'Fine Art' she has been employed as a symbol to be used in the interrogation and subversion of long held traditions and assumptions by artists such as Duchamp, Dali and Warhol.

Even today, the *Mona Lisa* in its role as 'Fine Art' icon, is sufficiently relevant to our time, that many of us post selfies with the painting. It is also sufficiently robust to stand up to endless computer-generated caricatures. As we play with, manipulate, lampoon, parody, and satirise the image, what is most telling is that we share these images on social media accounts. As we document our encounter, what does this say about us? Possibly it says that we recognise and respect a long art historical tradition, or it means we are cool, cultured, well-travelled, well-educated and worldly. It could also say we are boring, conventional, Eurocentric and conservative. But what is more interesting is that it could also mean all of these things simultaneously, proving that we have accessed all these significations from the continuum of signification.

Conclusion

Therefore, in conclusion, it is safe to say that the *Mona Lisa* represents not just a portrait of a Florentine woman, but rather a wide variety of derived meanings and constructed concepts. However, it is the ambiguity of these concepts and meanings stemming from the ambiguous smile that allows the painting to continue to be attached to certain values, hopes and desires of any current time and remain relevant. The symbols and motifs in the work as well as certain events prompted another and then another dip into the continuum of signification so that yet more layers of meaning could be harvested and laid on the ever growing web of signification. Therein lies the *Mona Lisa's* iconicity.

In the next chapter the role of marketing will be seen to play a decisive role in the reputation of the painting to be discussed. While the *Mona Lisa* supports advertising, advertising supported the artist Vladimir Tretchikoff. According to Sassoon, "The use of art in advertising was a way of linking a unique, high-quality object to the less than unique commodity being promoted" (Sassoon 2001: 260), but he also quotes Ernest Elmo Calkin's remark that "advertising art, reaching millions of people, was in effect the poor man's picture gallery" (Sassoon 2001: 160).

Chapter 5

The Chinese Girl



Vladimir Tretchikoff, *The Chinese Girl,* 1952/3, Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 66.5 cm, Private Collection: Delaire Graff Estate, Stellenbosch, RSA. Photo image by Tretchikoff Foundation.

> Some artists can make their images live in an uncanny way that transcends the inert material they are using ... It is a question of working the spectator's mechanisms of perception, of giving them enough to see what is needed but not giving them so much that they have nothing left to do. (Kemp 2012: 142-143).

As a result of the above discussion, we can assume that the *Mona Lisa* is an art historical icon, and as such its analysis could be used as a broad guide for the investigation of South African works. If this is to be the case, the issue of popularity in terms of widespread recognisability of the image emerged as an important factor in the *Mona Lisa* story, and should again be addressed. Moreover it is the main tenet in Kemp's definition of the iconic artwork:

> An iconic image is one that has achieved wholly exceptional levels of widespread recognisability and has come to carry a rich series of varied associations for a very large number of people across time and cultures, such that it has to a greater or lesser degree transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context and meaning (2012: 3).

As we are using broad appeal and recognisability as a starting point for an investigation of South African icons, we are obliged to consider the work of an artist considered to be the most popular in South African art history: Vladimir Tretchikoff, along with one of his portraits entitled *The Chinese Girl* (1952/3).

Tretchikoff's supporters believe him to be the most famous artist in South Africa, and they support this claim with the number of recorded visitors to his exhibitions. Moreover Tretchikoff is renowned for having taken an active part in 'working' his exhibitions, going out of his way to welcome people to his shows, make them feel comfortable and even engage with them. While doing so he kept accurate records of visitor attendance figures by means of a hand held 'clicker' (Gorelik 2011: 128). Tretchikoff claimed that the number of visitors to his one-man shows in South Africa and overseas during the 1950s and 1960s totalled 2.5 million[39] (Gorelik 2011: 123). While often attracting or even actively courting controversy, the public loved him and his work. According to a journalist for the *Cape*

39 Tretchikoff stated that between 1948 and 1952 he received 250 000 visitors to his shows (Gorelik 2013: 115).

Argus “Tretchikoff made ordinary South Africans take an interest in his paintings, attend his shows, discuss, and even defend his work in the press” (Gorelik 2013: 107).

Tretchikoff’s first exhibition in South Africa was at the Maskew Miller Gallery in Adderley Street, Cape Town, in 1948, and ran for 13 days during which he received 12 000 visitors (Gorelik 2013: 102). This success was repeated in several subsequent exhibitions. His Johannesburg show at the Carlton Centre ran for 10 days and drew 20 000 visitors (Gorelik 2013: 105). Even in Durban, in the then province of Natal, which was known to have a population largely indifferent to the arts, he received 34 000 visitors at the Greenacres Department store in 1949 (Gorelik 2013: 107). In 1959, at his solo exhibition at Harrods in London, he attracted a massive 205 000 visitors in four weeks (Gorelik 2013: 163). He also exhibited to high numbers in the USA and Canada (Gorelik 2013: 120-123).

Even after his death, a Tretchikoff exhibition would command high visitor numbers. *Tretchikoff: The People’s Painter,* held at the Iziko: South African National Gallery (ISANG) from 26 May to 25 September 2011, received 34 740 visitors, a 33% increase in the usual number of gallery visitors (Kleinsmith 2017). Even today, South African galleries and museums rarely see these sort of attendance figures, and if they do, it is usually only in response to shows by Intentional artists.[40]

His artworks were also popular. But what is more interesting with regards to Tretchikoff’s images is that they became well known in a very different way from the norm. Unlike the *Mona Lisa*, whose initial popularity radiated from the work itself as a unique and precious object, Tretchikoff’s images, such as *The Chinese Girl*, entered the consciousness of the Western world via multiple reproductions, which often found a place in their homes and with which the family created a familiar bond. According to Lindley, at the end of his career, Tretchikoff claimed to have sold half a million large format reproductions of *The Chinese Girl* worldwide (Gorelik 2013: 125). Records for the sale of smaller reproductions, bootleg copies or even other formats such as posters or T-shirts and the like have not been kept. The success of this particular print is revealed in the reference by Tretchikoff to

40 At the Standard Bank Gallery in central Johannesburg, where the author worked for 25 years, recent annual attendance figures average 12 000. In 2000, the first International show hosted there featured the work of Marc Chagall and attracted over 21 000 visitors. In 2006 an exhibition of the works of Pablo Picasso attracted 56 000 viewers (Standard Bank 2016).

his mansion in Bishops Court, a wealthy area of Cape Town, as 'the house *The Chinese Girl* bought' (Gorelik 2013: 150).

Consequently it is the sheer popularity of this artwork which has motivated its inclusion here. In order to attempt to unravel the possible cause of the *The Chinese Girl's* wide appeal this work will also be analysed using the three categories of content, context, and construct.

Content

The Chinese Girl is an oil on canvas, two dimensional painting, measuring 76.2 x 66.5 cm. It is dated 1952/3 and the work appears to be in perfect condition, as I have been able to establish myself in October 2017.

This work shows technical skill. Tretchikoff was a competent, confident draughtsman and the figure is depicted accurately. The painting also shows balanced composition and use of colour and is visually very striking. While most people, particularly those working in the art world, profess not to like his work, not one claims that he was technically incompetent.

With regards to value, the monetary worth of *The Chinese Girl* is easier to quantify than the *Mona Lisa*. Unlike the *Mona Lisa*, this work has not left the circle of commodification. It sold on the primary art market in 1954, when it was bought for $2000 by a young woman named Mignon Buehler at Marshall Fields Department Store in Chicago during Tretchikoff's American tour (Bell 2013). At this point the original painting vanished from public view into her private collection and became enclaved. It was not seen in its original form again until the 20th of March 2013, when Ms Buehler's daughter put it up for auction in London at Bonhams Fine Art Auctioneers. Now on the secondary market, it was bought by Laurence Graff (British diamond dealer of Graff Diamond International) for £982 050, nearly double the expected price. It is again in private hands but on public view at the Delaire Graff Wine Estate, Stellenbosch, South Africa (Rojas, 2013). With regards to the print of *The Chinese Girl*, in 2018, according to the Tretchikoff Foundation website, a large vintage print can be bought for R1 550.

Subject & symbols

Like the *Mona Lisa, The Chinese Girl* is an image representing something else and would also be a signifier, and as a portrait it is a semiotic icon. While looking at the work itself, a

few symbols and motifs can be identified: the woman, her dress, her face and the background.

The woman

The work depicts a woman with a blue face turned to the viewer's right with downcast eyes. She has full red lips and curling black hair. Her body is faced forward and her hands are folded out of view within her sleeves. Apart from her face no other part of her body is visible. She is wearing a dress with an ornate, detailed, pattern on the top half of the dress. The rest of the garment is drawn in charcoal and has no colour or detail. The background has also been left clear.

The painting denotes a young woman who is known to have been Monika Pon-Su-San (nee Sing-Lee), a resident of Cape Town in the 1950s. From her facial features and dark hair she appears to be of mixed European and Asian origin.[41] This portrait was not commissioned but was painted for Tretchikoff's forthcoming show in the United States of America. Tretchikoff met Ms Pon-Su-San in her uncle's laundromat in Cape Town and asked her to sit for him (Gorelik 2013: 133-136).

The dress

The dress consists of two contrasting aspects: a plain lower section which has been achieved by the artist leaving the charcoal outline of the garment unfinished and a prominent yellow pattern at the top. This pattern appears to have been embroidered onto the garment around the short, unfolded, stand-up, mandarin collar, the lower neckline and down the right side of the sitter's body, which is known as the cross collar. The pattern comprises a detailed design of decorative, stylised organic shapes in white, black, blue, green and red on a yellow background. The dominant element in the pattern is the Manchurian crane which is a symbol of immortality (Gorelik 2013: 136). These elements identify the sitter as a person of Chinese origin and symbolises the 'exotic'.

41 According to Gorelik in an article for the *Mail & Guardian*, she is of Chinese, Portuguese and Dutch origin (2011).

The face

In this portrait the sitter has been given a blue complexion which denotes an otherworldly strangeness (Gorelik 2013: 136). She has typically Asian features; however, these have been somewhat changed with the application of Western style make-up. This includes a permanent wave in her medium length, loose hair, thin sculpted eyebrows and shiny red lips. The face is lit by contrasting shadows. These allusions to the glamour of the 1950s and how it influenced the popularity of the image will be discussed later in this chapter.

Unlike the *Mona Lisa* her *contrapposto* pose has her body facing forward and her head turned. This pose of avoidance and submission is symbolic of an unselfconscious sensuality which is conventionally seen as appealing. She has no enigmatic smile and her gaze is downcast, demure and averted, denoting remoteness, submission and a touch of sadness.

The background

The background to the work is entirely clear. This results in the lower part of the garment and the background having the same colour, creating a unifying effect. This blank background provides no contextual information regarding the sitter's exact place of origin, occupation, family name or personality and this reinforces the otherworldliness of the blue face.

Ambiguity

Rich signification in the form of ambiguity does appear in and around *The Chinese Girl*. This ambiguity takes the form of disruption. Formal disruption occurs with the co-existence of the painted, colourful, realistic detail in the face and pattern and the loose, unfinished charcoal drawing of the lower garment and background. It is also evident in the contrasting colours of blue and yellow. These contrasting elements achieve the desired effect. The viewer is engaged while trying to accommodate the disparate elements.

Content disruption occurs with the mixture of traditional Asian and more modern 1950s Western elements. These are evident firstly in her traditional Chinese dress and demure demeanour which contrasts with the Western style make-up and loose, permed hair.

Consequently the painting is ambiguous: she is a Chinese girl, but in this instance her beauty is expressed in terms of 1950s Western ideas of glamour.

Secondly, content disruption is shown in the realistic portrait with a startling blue face. The figure is clearly human, but no human being has a blue face, which creates intrigue. Thirdly, Tretchikoff also uses the technique of open painting, and like the *Mona Lisa,* it is displayed in the mouth. *The Chinese Girl* is clearly not happy, and once again, both within the work or the title, we do not see or read a cause for her state of mind.

Context

What cultural materials have been used in the making of *The Chinese Girl?* How has this *bricolage* been created? *The Chinese Girl* is a strange mixture of cultural elements, influences, ambitions and spontaneous events all possibly rooted in the artist's unconventional life. Therefore clear cultural sources and influences will be difficult to identify and unravel. The main reason for this entanglement is that this work, and the artist who made it, are in no way typical of the time or place of their origin.

From the literature consulted, *The Chinese Girl* could be the product of multiple contexts and influences. The artist was a Russian national, but he left Russia early in his life and did not learn or practice art there. Motivated by necessity stemming from political events, he lived and worked in Asia but did not integrate into the community, keeping largely to expatriate circles.

He spent a great deal of his life in Africa and made Cape Town his home, but was not accepted by the formal art community, thus forcing him to make his own way in his artistic career, enjoying no camaraderie, support or professional influence from established artists.

Another difficulty with regards to tracing reliable contextual information is that the literature on Tretchikoff is scarce and serious, academic information even more so. Of those books that are in circulation, most were produced by himself and read more like adventure stories than serious analysis. Most of what has been published recently is in the form of newspaper and magazine articles. These texts have been generated mainly in response to the sales of his works at auction and much of the information is contradictory. Consequently studies which engage critically with Tretchikoff and his work are rare,

leaving just the recent book by Boris Gorelik entitled *Incredible Tretchikoff: Life of an Artist and Adventurer* (2013) and the 2011 exhibition catalogue by Andrew Lamprecht entitled *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter* (2011) as the main sources of reliable scholarship.

Given this situation, an attempt will be made to discuss some contextual aspects which may have influenced the work and its journey through history to possible iconic status.

The Chinese Girl *in the 1950s*

The portrait

Gorelik believes that Tretchikoff began painting *The Chinese Girl* in 1947 in Java and completed it in Cape Town in 1950 (2013: 133). Being conceived and executed in the time of Pop Art and later Modernism, *The Chinese Girl* is in no way typical of the formal fine art movements of the day and is somewhat of an anomaly. It is only in the mass marketing his works that Tretchikoff has practises in common with the Pop Art movement.

Gorelik believes that our continued comparison of Tretchikoff to the formal, academically inclined artists of his time is misguided.[42] This is so because he worked in a completely different genre to Irma Stern,[43] Alexis Preller and Cecil Skotnes, who were some of his contemporaries. He suggests that Tretchikoff should rather be studied in relation to other popular artists of the time who worked with the same subject matter, such as Joseph Henry Lynch and Lou Shabner, who also performed well in the print market[44] (Gorelik 2017).

Wayne Hemmingway in his book *Just above the Mantelpiece: Mass-Market Masterpieces* (2000), has labelled this genre mass-market art, describing it as being populated with "unreasonably vibrant-skinned oriental beauties" and "big-eyed animals and even bigger-eyed children" (2000). In this genre, feminine youth dominates in the idealised images of Shabner, the Mediterranean beauties of Lynch and the exotic ladies of Tretchikoff. These

42 This tendency may be as a result of his insistence that this was his rightful place.

43 While Irma Stern and Maggie Laubser also painted 'exotic' women, they were committed expressionists pursuing very different objectives to Tretchikoff.

44 If we are to heed Gorelik's suggestion, even in this arena of print sales, Tretchikoff out-performed his competitors. This could be due to the fact that the artists above painted mainly Western women, and did not embrace the exotic as Tretchikoff had done.

women are usually depicted close-up, alone and fully engaged with the viewer, creating a sense of exclusive intimacy.

Another aspect of mass-market art at this time was its easy availability. These photographic reproductions of originals could simply be popped into your trolley along with the cosmetics and taken home. This phenomenon led to an increased interest and confidence in collecting images amongst the middle and working class.

But what is interesting to note is that while these images approximate the pin-up, they were mainly bought by women. They were sold, and sold well in department stores and chemists, the domain of women. Consequently, can it be assumed that these images of idealised beauty, like those in fashion magazines, were something to which middle-class women could aspire?

Whether the motivations for purchasing were aspirational or escapist, this context in which art was easily accessible, both in terms of content and affordability, were the circumstances which enabled the prints and therefore the image of *The Chinese Girl* to flourish.

The woman

The Chinese Girl and her counterparts do indeed reflect the popular mass culture of the 1950s. During this era, entertainment was dominated by Hollywood movies, Rock ‘n Roll, and an optimistic spirit of possibility. Advertising and the graphic arts were developing and became widespread in the media generally (Tennen 2017).

These idealised beauties, and *The Chinese Girl* in particular, show clear indications of graphic and advertising techniques. Tretchikoff, working in advertising, must have practiced these techniques regularly in his working life and applied them to his art. One such technique would include the convention of showing high detail mixed with loose drawing, which we see in The *Chinese Girl,* which Lindley states was typical of the graphic art tradition of the inter-war years (Gorelik 2013: 133).

According to Meggs, posters were a popular form of graphic design during the two world wars. These posters were characterised by the use of large, close-up, tightly cropped

images and photography. *The Chinese Girl* appears to be closely based on this poster format (Meggs 2018).

Lindley also notes that the type of lighting used in the Hollywood Glamour Photography of the 1950s typically resulted in highlighted cheekbones and brow (Gorelik 2013: 133). Glamour photography, first perfected by George Hurrell, is a mode of Hollywood publicity portraiture that emerged between 1929 and 1933. Used exclusively in still photography, this aesthetic included “Sharply focussed, high-contrast portraits, often centred on the face ... produc[ing] iconic sensual imagery, which helped elevate actors and actresses to godlike status (Willis-Tropea 2011: 262).

The Chinese Girl shows clear similarities with the glamour photograph of Joan Crawford by Hurrell below. They are both closely cropped close-ups, have full unsmiling lips, thinly shaped eyebrows and dramatic lighting which creates areas of contrasting planes.



Joan Crawford, 1932, publicity photograph. Photo image by George Hurrell.

The dress

Chinese women in the 1950s wore Western fashion as well as the *cheongsam,* a figure hugging dress with short sleeves and mandarin collar. *The Chinese Girl’s* clothing does not appear to reflect these trends. Her garment shows more traditional elements such as the oversized sleeves and the cross collar from the Qin to Han Dynasties and the

mandarin collar from the Ming Dynasty (Doung 2013). In this instance *The Chinese Girl* does not reflect the 1950s.

The artist

Like Leonardo, the life of Tretchikoff was to have an impact on his art. Vladimir Griegorovich Tretchikoff was born on the 13th of December 1913 in Petopavlovk, Siberia. In 1917, at the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, his family moved to Manchuria, where he later became a scene painter for the local opera house. In 1932 he moved to Shanghai and became a cartoonist. While there he married another Russian exile, Natalie Telpregoff, in 1939 and they moved to Singapore where he worked in advertising and various other jobs, including some graphic work for the British government. In 1941 the Japanese invaded Singapore and in 1942 Tretchikoff moved to Java, where he became a prisoner of war, while his wife and new daughter fled. Unbeknownst to him they became part of a refugee programme and were evacuated to South Africa. This destination was not chosen, but part of the evacuation programme. In Java, while waiting to be released, he had an affair with Leonora Moltema (known as Lenka), whose exotic looks enchanted him. Her mother had been Javanese and her father Dutch. At the end of the war he located his family in Cape Town and joined them in 1946. Once settled in Cape Town he began to pursue his artistic career seriously (Tretchikoff Foundation 2006, Gorelik 2013).

Clearly Tretchikoff's time in Asia and his intimate relationship with Lenka must have informed his choice of portrait subjects and the sensual way in which he painted them. Asian women, amongst others, were to become regular subjects for his paintings, including *Nude Study of Lenka* (1945), *The Red Jacket* (c. 1945), *Miss Wong* (1955) and *The Chinese Girl*.

A defining point in Tretchikoff's South African artistic career took place in 1947. Having joined the South African Association of Arts in Cape Town, he requested and was granted a show in their gallery which was situated in Argus House, Berg Street, but was later rejected with no explanation. This experience and his continued rejection by the South African art establishment led him to seek out unconventional venues for his exhibitions, mainly department stores (Gorelik 2013: 115-118). Consequently his first exhibition was held in 1948 at the premises of his print publishers, Maskew Miller Gallery in Adderley

Street (Gorelik 2013: 102). These unconventional venues for his shows must have provided him with a larger and broader market.

In 1952 the Rosicrucian Order in California offered Tretchikoff a fully sponsored international show in America which was to take place in 1953 (Gorelik 2013: 109). Tretchikoff began working in earnest to prepare for this show. But, in December of 1952, he entered his studio to find approximately a dozen of the canvasses bound for the USA slashed. He opened a case with the police but the motive and perpetrator remain unknown to this day (Gorelik 2013: 114).

Tretchikoff and his work proceeded on tour and *The Chinese Girl* was purchased in 1954. We are told that the painting hung in Ms Buehler's dining room for 20 years and then in the 1970s was given to her daughter. Her daughter kept the work as she moved to various homes. The younger Ms Buehler recounts how her flatmates disliked the work and she was forced to keep the painting in her bedroom (Bell 2013). Another testament to the work's unpopularity at this time was the fact that apparently her home in Arizona was twice robbed, but the burglars did not take the painting.

A possible reason for this could be that the print was not on sale in America which meant that the younger Ms Buehler and the robbers were not aware of the work's fame outside of America. She then recalls how she saw the work in a daytime television drama and suspected it might have some value. Subsequently the work went on auction where it was bought by Graff (Bell 2013). Again in opposition to Benjamin's theory, this scenario reinforces the assertion that it was the prints and not the actual artwork which created the renown and possible iconicity of *The Chinese Girl*.

Gorelik observes that Tretchikoff's career was effectively over by the 1970s, as his prints were no longer selling well (2013: 207), but he lived a full and happy life with his family in Cape Town, and died, still wealthy, on 26 August 2006, at the age of 93 (Tretchikoff Foundation 2006).

Above we have briefly explored some of the contextual aspects informing Tretchikoff's art. These included his life in Asia, his training and work as a graphic artist, the influence of 1950s graphic art and glamour photography and his intimate involvement with at least one beautiful Asian woman. But Tretchikoff's work has also had some influence on the popular

culture of the world of the 1950s and 1960s. Just like the *Mona Lisa* it has achieved this through copies and duplications.

The Chinese Girl *in the world*

Gorelik states that Tretchikoff is believed to be one of the first living artists to sell mass-produced lithographs of his work on a vast scale, charging extra for signed prints. These prints were distributed via art dealers, mail order catalogues, department stores and pharmacies (2011: 123).

By 1952 Tretchikoff had brought out more than 20 different prints, which were sold, in London (but not the USA), by the New York Graphic Society and Frost & Reed Bond Street Art Dealers, to English department stores for most of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, outselling works like Constable's *Haywain* (1821). From 1958, which was the start of the annual poll, till 1966 Tretchikoff's prints topped the ten new best-selling prints in Britain, 9 times more frequently than any other living artist (In Gorelik, 2013: 146 &149).

The print of *The Chinese Girl* was the number three best-selling reproduction for three years[45] in the United Kingdom between 1958 and 1960. In the first eight years of the reproduction's release in the United Kingdom, British print merchants sold more than 125 000 copies[46] (Gorelik 2013: 149-150). Consequently these prints must be the single most important device through which the image of *The Chinese Girl* achieved widespread recognisability.

Like the *Mona Lisa, The Chinese Girl* has also appeared in a variety of other media, having been adopted or appropriated by these other disciplines. These include books, music videos and the like. In many of these instances *The Chinese Girl* is often referred to by her alternative title, *The Green Lady.*

Many books feature the image and serve to disperse and popularise the work. As discussed above, these include those books produced by Tretchikoff himself which functioned more as marketing and promotional texts than serious academic interrogation. They include a 1952 coffee table book of colour reproductions of his work, titled *The Gold*

45 It had sold well in previous years although no records had been kept (Gorelik 2013: 149).

46 *Rand Daily Mail,* 24 March 1962.

Book and featuring *The Chinese Girl* on the cover, a second coffee table book of his works published in 1969 and his biography, written in collaboration with Andrew Hocking and entitled *Pigeon's Luck* (Gorelik 2011: 206 and 122). The image has also appeared more recently on the cover of Boris Gorelik's definitive biography entitled *Incredible Tretchikoff: Life of an artist and adventurer* and the catalogue for the ISANG exhibition entitled *Tretchikoff: The People's Painter* (2011) edited by Andrew Lamprecht, curator of the exhibition of the same name.

Authors who have referenced Tretchikoff's work include Don Paterson, Stuart Cloete, Amanda Botha, Wilbur Smith, Hunter Davies, Louis Nowra, and Chukwuemeka Ike (Gorelik 2013: 151). But what is interesting here is the way in which some of these authors have physically and metaphorically located *The Chinese Girl*.



Publications showing the use of *The Chinese Girl*. Including *Incredible Tretchikoff: Life of an artist and adventurer, Tretchikoff: The People's Painter,* and *Pigeons Luck* (open book) Photo image by: Barbara Freemantle.

In the poem "God's Gift to Women" (1997), Don Paterson positions the image in a living room,

> The frame yawns to a living-room.
> Slim Whitman warbles through the hum
> of a bad earth. The Green Lady cries
> over the scene: you, compromised,
> steadily drawing out the juice
> of the one man you could not seduce (1997: 30).

Here Paterson makes allusion to middle-class existence when he talks about the badly connected radio playing Country and Western music, a genre generally considered appealing to the unsophisticated and the *Green Lady*, both locating it within and using it as a metaphor for a frustrated middle-class life, symbolised by frustrated romantic love.

In Hunter Davies' novel *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush* (1965), a teenager sees a Tretchikoff in a friend's suburban house, and mentions that his own mother could not afford one but had to settle for merely admiring it (1965: 84).

Musicians have also referred to the work, most notably David Bowie. Bowie recounted how his mother purchased a reproduction of the *The Chinese Girl* from Boots Pharmacy, and having lived with the print all his life, professed a desire to own the original (Gorelik 2013: 3 & 153). Bowie's reminiscences could have led to the inclusion of *The Chinese Girl* in the music video "The Stars are Out Tonight" (2013). Like the poem by Paterson, this video references the painting as a signifier of middle-class boredom. It can be seen clearly in the living-room while the lady of the house unenthusiastically performs her morning aerobic exercises to the TV.

Again she is referenced in the music video "Green Lady" by the group Big Audio Dynamite, Here *The Chinese Girl* not only features but is the star. And again, she is situated in a domestic environment: "Lady of the Orient/ in a council flat/ she never looks me in the eye/ she never answers back" (Gorelik 2013: 152).

Other musicians featuring *The Chinese Girl* are The White Stripes, whose music video "Dead Leaves and Dirty Ground" (2001) (Gorelik 2013: 152) shows a chaotic middle-class house filled with mass-market art. The video shows the couple in happier times hanging *The Chinese Girl* prominently in the entrance hall. Then at the end of the video, as the girl leaves the relationship and the house, she takes the print with her, but leaves the cat.

The *Chinese Girl* has also appeared in cinema and television productions. These include; *Alfie* starring Michael Cain and Shelley Winters, *Frenzy* by Alfred Hitchcock in 1972, two Monty Python sketches and *Hancock's Half-Hour*. The work was also the subject of a 1974 documentary entitled *Success Story: The Green Lady*, produced by Alan Yentob and featuring William Feaver. In this film we see a poster of *The Chinese Girl* in a BBC prop

room on which someone had drawn a moustache in the tradition of an infinite number of school children and Marcel Duchamp (Gorelik 2013: 203 - 213).

She has also featured on the stage in a 1968 British drama called *Performance* with James Fox and Mick Jagger, and drag performances by Tricity Vogue and Fionna Flauntit (Gorelik 2013: 203 & 241).

The Chinese Girl has further been mentioned on the radio, specifically in a 1961 radio interview with Tretchikoff. During the interview the BBC host asked the artist, “Which painting do you think is the most famous in the world? Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*? Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*? Gainsborough’s *Blue Boy*?... Before you answer, let me tell you you’re wrong. It’s the green-faced *Chinese Girl* by Tretchikoff” (Hocking & Tretchikoff 1973: 279).

Designers have also taken to the work. South African fashion designer Marianne Fassler and British stylist Wayne Hemingway have used the image which has appeared on nightclub dresses, T-Shirts and other items. It has also been used by cosmetics entrepreneur Millie Kendall (Gorelik 2013: 227). She is also to be found on wall paper in restaurants and guest houses.

In addition, marketing and advertising have played their role. McDonalds and MTV adverts using the work have been seen (Gorelik 2013: 227), and Tretchikoff himself used the work on exhibition posters, such as one outside the Trust Bank in Cape Town (Swift 2011: 19), and for his show in London in 1972, even though the work was then 20 years old and not featured in the exhibition (Gorelik 2013: 211).

In 2010 an exhibition, also curated by Andrew Lamprecht was held at Salon 91. Entitled *Tretchikoff and Me*, the show included a series of Tretchikoff prints and responses by young and emerging South African artists (Cowie 2010).

Like the *Mona Lisa*, in spite of having been created in the 1950s *The Chinese Girl* is also featured on the world wide web with countless images both in original and subverted forms.





World wide web images showing the appropriation and subversion of the image of the *The Chinese Girl,* (left) with superimposed head of cinema icon Marilyn Monroe. Photo image by The Tretchikoff Project and (right) Jo Giacomet, *Bubblegum*, undated.Photo image by Jo Giacomet.

The most important contemporary factor in the Tretchikoff legacy is the Tretchikoff Foundation which is managed by his grand-daughter Natasha Swift, from which vintage and modern prints, stationery, jewellery and many trendy household items can be purchased from stores or online.





The Chinese Girl lampshade and wallpaper available from the Tretchikoff Foundation website. Photo image by Tretchikoff Foundation.

As discussed above, it is the technological reproduction of *The Chinese Girl* which is fundamental to and responsible for its success. This has allowed the image to enter global popular consciousness. This was quite remarkable since the work was never in a prestigious private collection or public institution where it would have enjoyed all the

marketing and publicity campaigns, educational programmes and adult lectures which would have accompanied it there.

Moreover, it was painted in South Africa, a country which was geographically and soon to be politically isolated from the rest of the world and did not experience much cultural tourism. In addition to this, it was bought by a private collector straight away and kept in her private home. With such private and restricted contexts, why was the work so popular?

Why Tretchikoff and his works were and continue to be so popular has not been formally researched. Riason Naidoo, the then Director of Art Collections at Iziko and host to the first exhibition of Tretchikoff's work in a formal art museum in South Africa, suggests this popularity could be attributed to the fact that his work reflects a cross-section of South African society, as testified by the fact that he used a wide variety of models of all races.

> One wonders whether it was the honesty and warmth of his early portraits that people responded to, or whether subjects like the *Crayfish Seller* (1951) struck a chord with the working class, or whether it was the exotic nature or just pure romanticism that appealed to the affluent. Whatever the case, the artist was immensely popular locally. Whatever suburb or township you grew up in, whatever your racial categorisation under apartheid, we all grew up with a Tretchikoff – a shared sociological phenomenon in a racially dislocated and fragmented context (2011: 11).

Considering the fact that Tretchikoff was popular outside of South Africa too, his work must have had a universal appeal beyond representing and unifying South Africans. This appeal can only be explained via the meanings and significations to be found in the work.

Construct

With such widespread renown *The Chinese Girl* has had almost 66 years to accumulate signification, to become the centre of a network of meanings, shared significances and powerful essential symbols.

Direct signification

The girl

The denotative signification of the painting *The Chinese Girl* is simple: this is a portrait of a young Asian woman of the 1950s. For some readers the image may have had connotative meanings given the evident beauty of the girl.

Glamour

The overriding impression given by the work *The Chinese Girl* is that of glamour and this adds an additional layer of meaning to the work. She has a clear complexion, full red lips, reminiscent of a lollipop, and thick, shiny hair which has a bounce and a curl. The light provides the sheen to the hair and highlights her elegant cheek bones and clear brow and complexion. However all this glamour is not permitted to spin out of control as she is grounded in tradition, symbolised by her clothing.

Exoticism

The Chinese Girl, shows a woman of Asian origin, wearing a highly embroidered dress with eastern patterns and a symbol of immortality. Due to the fact that this work is painted by a Russian expatriate in Asia and later an immigrant to South Africa, it denotes the exotic.

Exotic East

Exoticism is a highly complex and sensitive concept. The COD defines exoticism as “attractively strange or unusual” (1982: 338). This aspect of strangeness is the root of the complexity as it implies a central point of normality from which something exotic will deviate. As the word exotic is English we can assume white, European culture to be the normative culture, or as Heaver states, “Whiteness serving as a marker against which difference is drawn” (Heaver 2007: 65). This locates the exotic in the vicinity of the more contemporary ‘the Other’. Again whiteness or European culture is the starting point, a constructed concept “against which ‘Other’ identities are constructed” (Marx & Milton 2011: 723).

The term exotic denotes the strangeness of the ‘Far East’ or ‘Orientalism’.[47] But it can also be associated with many connotations such as, amongst others, an ancient culture, paper, writing, tea, spices, heat, humidity, emperors, gunpowder and opium.

Exotic woman

Regarding *The Chinese Girl,* her traditional clothing would mark her as ‘exotic’. But as her clothing does not adhere precisely to particular features of specific Chinese cultures, regions or Dynasties, her exoticism is rather vague. These loose references to exotic tradition mean that she also belongs to the realm of fantasy. This aspect of fantasy is reflected in the comment by Tretchikoff himself who said, “Asian women are refined and demure and with all the charm and infinite promise of the East” (Hocking & Tretchikoff 1973: 215). This 1950s perception of Asian women as demure and ‘full of promise’ taps specifically into concepts of sexual fantasy.

Fantasy

The conjecture that Tretchikoff regarded Asian women as creatures of fantasy is corroborated by Gorelik, who observes that Tretchikoff saw Chinese women through the prism of Western mass culture (i.e. as the exotic), and that these views were not challenged by reality. He had no discernible engagement with the Chinese communities of his youth and had no close Chinese friends, neither did he speak the language (Gorelik 2013: 134).

What is interesting about the dictionary definition, Tretchikoff’s quotation and the lyrics of “Green Lady” by Big Audio Dynamite, is that there is nothing threatening about this type of submissive, enigmatic allure. This notion of Chinese womanhood implies an undemanding, remote sexiness which resides in the realm of ‘promise’. No *femmes fatales* leading to ruin and destruction here. Instead, as Feaver suggests, these women constitute gentle “spiritual pin-ups” from whom it is easy to walk away (Gorelik 2013: 133). This is reinforced in the title where the subject is identified not as woman, but a girl.

This aspect of remote, fleeting sexuality in Tretchikoff’s work has been taken up by Ashraf Jamal. He suggests that Tretchikoff had a talent for conveying this sensibility in his work and was particularly successful in this regard with *The Chinese Girl* (2011: 54):

47 This term, largely outmoded and considered pejorative today, was widely and evocatively used in the 1950s.

> [T]here is also stylistically an iconic and abstracted rendition of the subject; some proximity, and yet distance; some tactile grasp of the subject, and yet an incompletion that allows the viewer a momentary sense of knowledge and possession in that instant that the painting denies that very knowledge and possession (Jamal 2011: 56).

The technical strategy above is of course reminiscent of the discussion on open painting techniques as well as Kemp's observation that some artists can work "the spectator's mechanisms of perception, of giving them enough to see what is needed but not giving them so much that they have nothing left to do" (Kemp 2012: 142-143). Consequently, it is probably the ambiguous, vague, fantastical exoticism depicted in his work which allowed Tretchikoff to outperform his competitors and underpins the success of the work.

What is most striking about *The Chinese Girl* is the blue face which gives the sitter an otherworldly appearance. Moreover, the clear background reinforces this impression by providing no contextualising information and thus setting the stage for pure fantasy.

As a result of her complex and fragmented context, *The Chinese Girl*, in her 66 year history, has generated and accumulated a few direct significations, which more or less centre around glamour, exoticism and fantasy and can be seen to reflect the attitudes of 1950s sexuality as well as Tretchikoff's life experience.

Indirect signification

The above constructed significations or connotations are directly informed by elements or motifs in the painting. What of those constructed meanings which are indirectly attributed?

Business

With regards to more indirect signification, has *The Chinese Lady* benefited from being associated with Tretchikoff in the same way that the cult of Leonardo serves his works? There is no question that Tretchikoff was a highly charismatic person. This charisma is reflected in a well known quotation which has famously been attributed to the Tretchikoff brand.

On receiving negative reviews, he is believed to have said, "I laughed all the way to the bank". This saying is based on a quote by his musical counterpart Liberace who said, in

response to his critics, “I cried all the way to the bank”. The Tretchikoff version was in fact coined by a British gossip columnist,[48] when the British critics boycotted his show at Harrods. Tretchikoff simply adopted the phrase and it has become synonymous with him ever since and is still in circulation to this day (Gorelik 2013: 181). This dismissal of high-brow taste and the snobbery of the art world must have endeared him to the general population and encouraged his fame.

Another aspect of Tretchikoff’s personality which may have had a positive effect on his work is his professional attitude to his career, treating his work not as a divine gift awaiting a muse, but as a solid business. This commitment to managing his career professionally paid off. During his exhibitions, he actively sold up to 1000 prints per day (Gorelik 2013: 146-149); moreover, he personally managed his reproductions, controlling colour, copyright and sales (Lamprecht 2011: 29). He also actively marketed his shows, launching elaborate advertising campaigns before any of them opened, producing large colour advertisements in local newspapers and bold posters, conducting extensive lecture tours and being in attendance at his exhibitions every day (Gorelik 2013: 111 and 118).

He also proved that an artist does not need to sell a single painting as it is possible to make a good living selling reproductions (Gorelik 2013: 146). By the 1950s Tretchikoff’s reproductions were providing him with a salary of approximately R30 000 a day (as of 2013) (Gorelik 2013:149).

Mystery

Apart from charisma, another way in which he could have created an interesting persona was to court or utilise mystery wherever it presented itself. One such mysterious incident already mentioned is the slashing of his works bound for his first international show in America in December 1952. This was widely reported in the press and engendered much interest and sympathy (Gorelik 2013: 114). While this incident was clearly not fabricated as Tretchikoff was generating work for his show, it could be one of those spontaneous incidents, much like the theft of the *Mona Lisa,* which certainly contributes to the reputation of an artist and keeps them in the public eye. In this instance the event would have certainly elicited engagement by the public, be it intrigue, sympathy or even outrage.

48 Quoted in “Art Critics ignore Tretchikoff” *The Star*, 25 March 1962.

Another instance of mystery which may have been fabricated to engage public interest is the debate around the sitter for *The Chinese Girl*. Just as the sitter for the *Mona Lisa* is under debate, Tretchikoff may have also attempted to create a similar mystery. While Monika Pon-Su-San is widely accepted as the lone sitter for the portrait and comparisons between the painting and old black and white photographs from the 1950s compare very accurately, according to Gorelik there was some uncertainty about whether it was in fact her.

Tretchikoff claimed that he painted two works, one in Cape Town which was slashed in December 1952, and the other in San Francisco after his American tour had already begun. Tretchikoff claimed that the sitter for this second work was an anonymous San Franciscan model who portrayed the mysticism of the east more eloquently than Monika (Gorelik 2013: 127-128). Is Tretchikoff here recreating aspects of the legacy of the *Mona Lis*a? Or is this controversy merely underscoring the fantasy aspect of the woman in the painting, which Tretchikoff had already set in motion with the generic title of the work? Tretchikoff clearly knew about Da Vinci's work as his portrait entitled *Miss Wong* (1955) is a clear copy of the *contrapposto* pose and smile of the *Mona Lisa*.





Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, 1503, Oil on wood panel, 77 x 53 cm, The Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée de Louvre)/ Michel Urtado.

Vladimir Tretchikoff, *Miss Wong*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 75.5 x 63.5 cm. Private Collection. Photo image by Tretchikoff Foundation.

Kitsch

Regardless of his widespread fame, Tretchikoff was never accepted by the South African art intelligentsia and neither can his work be seen to embody an essential South African sensibility even though he painted several works depicting South African women. In a catalogue supporting his local shows, he was presented as South Africa's unofficial cultural ambassador, but his work never did play an ambassadorial role.

This was not just as a result of his work not being 'serious' or 'good enough', but also stemmed from the fact that the formal art establishment ensured that this would not happen. Ruth Prowse, the then chairperson of the New Group, wrote an open letter stating that his work had never been officially recognised in South Africa, no state institution had either acquired or hosted his work on a show and it had not been included in a recent overseas exhibition on South African art (Gorelik 2013: 135). In addition, the South African Association of Arts had unceremoniously cancelled his first show and given the spot to Irma Stern. In addition, Professor Matthys Bokhorst, a one time director of ISANG, openly said his style was irreconcilable with fine art (Gorelik 2013: 133). This brings to mind and illustrates the tension between economically and culturally powerful artists, observed by Bourdieu.

This animosity stemming from the formal South African art world resulted in much sympathy for Tretchikoff, garnering him public support and giving him the identity of a maverick, which he carried reluctantly. The reason for this animosity was that his work was considered kitsch. In the 19th July 1972 issue of *Punch Magazine*, an unmistakable reference to *The Chinese Girl* as kitsch was made. The article states that she is "the biggest thing in tasteful domestic furnishings since ducks flying up the chimney-breast" (Gorelik 2013: 149).

The concept of kitsch as discussed earlier often conveys sentimentality and Tretchikoff was certainly accused of this. Bokhorst said of Tretchikoff, in the *Cape Times* of 16 September 1952, that "he has surrendered to the masses' desire for cheap sensation and lacrymonious sentimentality" (Gorelik 2013: 112). Tretchikoff himself was also branded as the 'King of Kitsch' or the 'Kitsch Merchant' (Gorelik 2013: 258 and 164), due to his fondness for using a pallet of 'Brilliant Tretchicolour' or 'Trashicolour' (Gorelik 2013: 106).

Tretchikoff's work was so often linked to this pejorative term that he was approached by Peter Ward for permission to use *The Chinese Girl* on the cover of his book entitled *Kitsch in Sync: A Consumer's Guide to Bad Taste* (1996). Tretchikoff rejected this request outright, missing out on possible further fame (Gorelik 2013: 258).

Middle-class suburbia

Reference to or inclusion of *The Chinese Girl's* image in other forms of media such as music videos, literature and television revealed that the constructed meaning of middle class suburbia is a strongly associated signification. They all appear to mention her in the context of a middle-class living room, but do not seem to meaningfully engage with her signification to any great extent. This is reinforced by the interior design items for the home offered by the Tretchikoff Foundation's online store.

Just like the case of the *Mona Lisa*, could these multiple, direct and indirect significations be attached to *The Chinese Girl* because she too functions as Levi-Strauss' empty, floating signifier? Todd St John would concur: "The name *Green Lady* was an open vessel that we could pour different ideas into" (Gorelik 2013: 243). While the *Mona Lisa* gave us an open, unmotivated smile and an anonymous landscape, at least we had a name. *The Chinese Girl* provides us with far less; a broad title, an unmotivated remote sadness, vaguely exotic clothing and a completely blank background which have all facilitated the attachment of multiple meanings.

The Chinese Girl *as icon*

Have these multiple significations of glamour, sensuality, exoticism and easy accessibility enabled *The Chinese Girl* to become an icon of these various significations? Feaver would agree. He stated that *The Chinese Girl* is not a work of art but rather "an image stamped into the popular consciousness" (Gorelik 2013: 213). If this is the case what does this image on our consciousness stand for?

Icon of retro kitsch

One possibility is that of *The Chinese Girl* is an icon of retro kitsch. This is possible as Tretchikoff's work has been labelled as such and the work has also been found in contexts

representing middle class, low-brow culture. If this is so, how has this icon functioned in society?

Firstly, in the 1950s and 1960s it functioned as accessible art. Art for everybody. But now, in the early 2000s, *The Chinese Girl* along with other works in this genre have found a new social role. Again reproductions of *The Chinese Girl* are being collected, but this time not as something easy to live with on the living-room wall, but as part of the retro movement. The retro movement involves the adoption or imitation of the styles, music, fashion, tastes and attitudes of the past. In this instance adherents would be harking back to the popular art of the 1950s ad 1960s. This 'kitsch is cool' fad is characterised by a deliberate cultivation of bad taste in an attempt to challenge snobbery and elitism and in the process be seen as an individual (Gorelik 2013: 224-227).

Lamprecht believes that the retro trend is indicative of Tretchikoff as 'a signifier for a complex idea that may include nostalgia, counter-culture, a disregard for stuffy convention and an endorsement of what fashion designer Wayne Hemingway calls "spitting in the face of elitism in the art world"' (2011: 30). Although these trendy urbanites purchase Tretchikoff's vintage prints for very different reasons from his original audiences in the 1950s and 1960s, it still means that the image of *The Chinese Girl* lives on.

In this way *The Chinese Girl* is acting as an icon with a social role, but here, much like the fashion for tattooing, the application of the icon is not so much to preserve or maintain the dominance of the bourgeoisie over other classes as a Bourdieu predicted, but for those within the bourgeoisie to challenge established definitions of culture and in so doing redefine it for themselves.

One possible instance where the parameters of high art and kitsch are being challenged and possibly redrawn is the sighting of *The Chinese Girl,* a known kitsch icon in contexts of class and high living. The first example is her appearance on the cover of a magazine called *Good Taste*.



Good Taste Magazine cover featuring *The Chinese Girl.* Photo image by Matthew Bell.

The second is the actual location of the original painting at the upmarket, classy Delaire Graff Wine Estate. Here the mystical original which spawned millions of copies, resides in an atmosphere of high-living where expensive meals, a spa and tailored personal attention is the order of the day. Within this context, *The Chinese Girl* holds its own but also gathers yet another layer of signification. That of Retro chic.

Icon of submissive femininity

Apart from being part of the retro movement, which runs the risk of being merely a fad, the image of *The Chinese Girl* does appear to have performed another role as an icon. This time it is that of the submissive female. This signification is evident in the abundant still and moving images on the world wide web which subvert her demure femininity. She can be found in various poses and undertaking many rough activities such as wearing a Che Guevara beret, blowing bubble gum bubbles and wearing curlers in her hair with a cigarette dangling from her lips.



Jo Giacomet, *Rollers*, undated, Photo image by Jo Giacomet.

This incarnation of *The Chinese Girl* entitled *Rollers* is particularly pertinent as these elements eloquently reference a perception of the lower middle-class. But it is the wide recognisability of the image together with its signification of demure femininity which makes it possible for the work to become a cultural reference point or icon from which instances of irony and satire can arise.

While the painting may embody the 'essence' of Asia and all that it and her ladies may 'promise', can it be regarded as an icon? Did Graff, when he purchased *The Chinese Girl,* say, "I have just bought my own *Mona Lisa*", in the same way that Ronald S. Lauder, when he purchased the portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer by Gustav Klimt in 2006 said, "This is our *Mona Lisa*, this is the great picture of our time, just like the *Mona Lisa* – there is no better painting" (Hughes 2008).

Various authors such as Feaver have suggested that the work is iconic but that the success of the image has less to do with the complexity of the image, and more to do with it's graphic form. He maintains that it is the clear and simple schematic form, which successfully lends itself to duplication and therefore facilitated its iconicity. In addition, the modern digital age in which we live has allowed us to duplicate this image *ad infinitum,* resulting in its wide distribution and its iconicity (Gorelik 2013: 158). This finding is at odds with Benjamin who asserts that the aura of the work is depleted by reproduction, not enhanced by it.

But, perhaps more importantly, the work's iconicity lies in the fact that as a print, a particularly personal relationship with the image could be formed. In this format the image could be owned by yourself, your friends and your neighbours and consequently become part of the family or local community. This intimate relationship means that the image could possibly even become associated with the warmth and comfort of 'home', as in the sentiment expressed by Bowie.

Lamprecht would agree, when he states that it is not Tretchikoff's art itself that is significant, but that the true value of Tretchikoff and his work lies in the fact that he changed the way the general public responded to and consumed art (2011: 29). He did so by demonstrating that with the availability of these prints, art was no longer the domain of just the wealthy and the educated, but now everyone could own it.

Conclusion

It is my opinion that the webs of signification around *The Chinese Girl, and its aura sufficiently qualify it for iconicity. While it may never be the same type of* icon as the *Mona Lisa,* its non-threatening, exotic, glamorous sexiness, and its element of fantasy and nostalgic familiarity are enough. What it lacks in 'taste' it compensates for in popular and wide-spread appeal. Its relevance as an exotic pin-up which enables the viewer a few minutes of escapism, as well as its ability to be a vehicle for the disciples of retro-chic to thumb their noses at elitism in an ironic act of rebellion, may prove to be sustainable.

But more work will need to be done in the way of managing the artwork professionally to encourage the world to take *The Chinese Girl* more seriously. While it holds pride of place in the reception of the wine estate, perfectly placed for visitors to take a selfie, it does not appear in the pamphlet at reception entitled, *Delaire Graff Estate: Private Art Collection*, a document featuring a number of works on view on the estate. The reflection on the glass is distracting and cannot be avoided, no matter how much the viewer shuffles and dances from side to side. Over a few days of telephoning, emailing and even a visit, there was no-one available to talk to me about the work, however casually. The only person happy to discuss the work was a young contractor, whose presence in the reception was incidental, but whose engagement with the work was sincere.



Tourists at the Delaire Graff Wine Estate taking pictures with the *The Chinese Girl*. October 2017. Photo image by Barbara Freemantle.

Chapter 6

The *Butcher Boys*



Jane Alexander, *Butcher Boys*, 1985/6, Plaster, bone, horn, oil paint, wooden bench, 128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5 cm, Iziko, South African National Gallery, Cape Town, RSA. Photo image by Mark Lewis. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

> Oh I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. *Othello*, Act II, Scene III, 240. (Shakespeare 1977: 81).

This sculptural artwork by Jane Alexander entitled *Butcher Boys* is an entirely different work from the classical *Mona Lisa* and the synthetically glamorous *Chinese Girl.* Formally it is three dimensional, conceptually it is political and more interestingly it is student work. While this work was completed by an artist younger than Da Vinci and Tretchikoff, it has a power and a presence which has made a significant impact on a very different audience to those who responded to *The Chinese Girl.* And it is this exceptional power which makes the *Butcher Boys* particularly interesting to consider within the realm of iconic art.

Content

The *Butcher Boys* consists of three life size, mixed media, plaster figures on a bench measuring 128.5 x 213.5 x 88.5 cm. It was completed in 1986. As they are made from plaster they are fragile and have experienced some damage and subsequent restoration. But as part of an established and professionally run state collection they are well looked after and are in good condition.

The figures are anatomically accurate and well constructed, showing the artist's skill. Their deathly pallor and monstrous aspects indicate that the artist was competent in portraying creatures capable of invoking discomfort and trepidation.

Again there are no public records showing the value of *Butcher Boys*. However, from auction records we may be able to form an educated guess. On the 11th of November 2013, a lesser known, single figure sculpture by Alexander, *Untitled* (1986) was sold by auctioneers Strauss & Co on the secondary market for R 5 456 640. This work was produced and initially exhibited at the same time as *Butcher Boys,* providing it with a similar provenance (Bedford 2017). As *Butcher Boys* has since been exhibited and written about more widely and consequently become more famous, we can assume its value will be well in excess of the 2013 figure achieved by *Untitled.* This conjecture is purely academic as the *Butcher Boys* forms part of a state collection and as such is subject to strict rules of collections management and therefore unlikely to be sold. Consequently the work is enclaved and outside of the circuit of commodification.

It is difficult to compare these figures with other successful South African contemporary artists as very few of them work in sculpture, and those that do, usually do so on commission and their fees are not revealed. On the primary market, a similar sized sculpture by Deborah Bell can be purchased for approximately R 500 000, and a William Kentridge can be purchased for about R 6 000 000. However a work entitled *The Visitor* (1995) by Marlene Dumas, an internationally renowned South African artist, sold for £3 177 250 in 2008 at Sotheby's London (Sotheby's 2018). Possibly due to its impressive provenance, and if ever offered on the international market, Alexander's work could go for much more.

Subject & symbols

As with the previous works the subject of this sculpture will be discussed together with any symbols and motifs depicted. As this section concerns the inherent contents of the work, denotative and connotative meanings drawn from the work itself will be considered.

As objects representing something else, the sculpture, as with the other two paintings is a semiotic signifier. But as it is not a portrait it is not a semiotic icon. But this does not mean it cannot be an art historical or cultural icon. The symbols and motifs in this work are highly complex and could prove powerful enough to qualify it for iconicity. These symbols could include the figures, their heads and their skins.

The figures

Butcher Boys consists of three human-like figures seated on a wooden bench. While human in form they also have animal characteristics. They are life-sized, pale, naked, male, mutant figures, each with powdery white skin, horns, deep scarring and exposed spines and sternums. The first figure from the left appears to be casually relaxed, the second seems passively aggressive and the third is fearfully poised on the verge of fight or flight. All appear to be hyper alert.

On first inspection these figures bombard the viewer with signification. Adjectives such as masculine, bestial, feral, violent, aggressive, menacing and intimidating come to mind (Williamson 1989: 42). But on closer inspection the viewer begins to doubt this assessment and see that these figures also show elements of vulnerability such as degradation, fear, impotence and dissolution.

These figures, while human and bestial, also seem to be otherworldly, displaying none of the culturally constructed characteristics of humanity such as race, social standing, cultural norms or sensuality. While clearly male they have tight cod pieces, implying that they are in no way sexual.

The heads

The heads of the creatures in *Butcher Boys* display disturbing characteristics. While human shaped, they are dominated by animalistic features as well as evidence of disfigurement. They have horns and solid black eyes situated in furrowed brows. The noses, ears and mouths are misshapen and fused, making breathing and hearing difficult and eating and communication impossible. If occurring at all, communication would be reduced to a series of snorts and grunts. This also implies that they would be particularly deaf to the cries of their victims. The two figures on the right (from the vantage point of the viewer), appear alert and wary, a characteristic necessary for survival in the wild.

The skins

Their skins are pale, dry and powdery, modulating between white and dark grey. This lack of any form of normal human pigmentation denotes that they are otherworldly. This also suggests that, should they have a moral code at all, it is not of this earth. But it also comes across as an awful pallor, denoting death and implying that these creatures are the living dead.

Ambiguity

From the above discussion it is apparent that even at the most basic levels of description and analysis this work is rife with ambiguity, leading to rich, powerful signification. With regards to disruptive ambiguity, as this is a sculptural work, content disruption is closely linked to formal disruption and occurs with the employment of a device known as the hybridity principle.

Hybridism is defined as the “offspring of two animals or plants of different species or varieties” and, a “thing composed of incongruous elements” (*COD* 1982: 488). In the case of *Butcher Boys* this is illustrated by the co-existence of the lithe, animated human bodies, contrasting with their bestial features, their mutant disfigurement and their pallor which is

reminiscent of the undead. But does this hybridism lead to iconicity? Should it not also resonate powerfully within its context and community?

Context

Unlike the first two case studies the circumstances which gave rise to *Butcher Boys* are specifically political. While the *Mona Lisa* and *Chinese Girl* are broadly informed by their time and place, *Butcher Boys,* much like Picasso's *Guernica,* was made in response to a particular political context.

Butcher Boys *in the 1980s*

This political context is South African, specifically during the time of state-sanctioned violence. Apartheid was the policy of the ruling Nationalist Party, which divided South African society along the lines of racial classification, severely disadvantaging all those classified as 'non-European'. At the time these sculptures were made, apartheid was at its height and Pieter Willem (P.W) Botha was Prime Minister.

At this time in South Africa the state was firmly in control, often using military force. But, also political tensions ran high as the majority of South Africans had lost patience with the rule of the governing party, and many forms of political protest were exercised including the armed struggle, the establishment of formal political movements and strategic events such as rallies and marches. Two events in particular are of significance: June 1976 and the establishment of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

In 1976 a rally took place which was to become a watershed event for South Africa. On June 16th, secondary school children marched against the use of Afrikaans as a medium for teaching in their classrooms. This was met with force by the South African police and several people were shot. This event had far reaching consequences for the country, including the loss of foreign capital, political isolation and calls for sanctions. This event has itself become iconic in South African political history (Saunders 1988: 368).

In response to the on-going opposition to apartheid, the Nationalist Party established the tricameral parliament in 1983. This consisted of three different houses divided along racial lines: one for whites, one for coloureds and one for Indians. There was no house for the black population as they were meant to be accommodated in the 'homelands', separate

geographical and administrative areas demarcated for African people (Saunders 1988: 467).

Broad based opposition continued to grow and included a wide variety of organisations such as political parties, trade unions, student organisations, religious, business and community groups. In 1983, one organisation in particular, the UDF arose in response to the tricameral parliament. Broadly standing for non-racialism in South Africa, they quickly gathered the support of over 600 organisations and approximately 3 million people (Saunders 1988: 471). As a consequence of the establishment of the UDF, the anti-apartheid movement was becoming increasingly prominent and influential.

Within the white South African community, young South African men were conscripted into the South African Defence Force (SADF). While some saw this as an adventure, many deeply resented being forced to use violence to uphold a system they did not morally support. As opposition continued to grow, marches and rallies became more common. In response the SADF was deployed into the townships and conscription became even more controversial as military force was now being deployed closer to home and not on the borders of the country as had previously been the case. Consequently the End Conscription Campaign (ECC) was formed and enjoyed much support.

Political tensions increased to the point where the government declared a National State of Emergency in 1985/6 which continued until 1990 (Saunders 1988: 368). However, in spite of this increase in political force by the Nationalist government, there was a strong feeling of imminent change in the air. Jane Alexander created *Butcher Boys* within this particular context (Mercer 2013: 84).

During this time of rising political tension and imminent change, the art world responded. In July 1979 a conference was held at the University of Cape Town entitled “The State of Art in South Africa”. Here artists pledged that they would not exhibit overseas for South Africa until all state funded institutions were open to students of all races. Three years later, in 1982, another conference was held in Gaborone, Botswana entitled “Art towards Social Development and Change in South Africa”. As a result of these conferences artists from all disciplines were increasingly being recognised as an important part of the struggle against apartheid. It was now accepted “that cultural resistance was a tool of immense power” to

bring about change (Williamson 1989: 9). This too was part of the context in which Jane Alexander produced her work.

If South African politics and South African protest art are the contexts in which Alexander operated, what is South African art? Many have tried to delineate this genre with no clear definition emerging. Okwi Enwezor, curator and academic specialising in African contemporary art, in discussing the exhibition *Fault Lines* (1996), has come closest when he suggested that some South African art, at the time of apartheid, was essentially politically informed: “Art and politics were not seen as separate spheres of practice but complex systems in which artists played important cultural and intellectual roles” (Enwezor 2008: 23).

This would appear to be correct with respect to *Butcher Boys.* The artist has stated that it was made in the mid-eighties as a response to the dehumanizing effects of apartheid. “My work has always been influenced by the political and social character of South Africa. My themes are drawn from the relationship of individuals to hierarchies and the presence of aggression, violence, victimisation, power and subservience and the paradoxical relationships of these conditions to each other” (Williamson & Jamal 1996: 22). Therefore *Butcher Boys* was undeniably intended to be political art.

What is most interesting about Alexander’s work is that these political references are not direct but are contained in the subtlety of the metaphor, within the work and specifically within the title (Tietze 2016: 25). Subtlety in political art often enables the work and the artist to avoid detection, especially in a system that utilises censorship and banning as was practised by the apartheid state. But more interestingly it allows for multiple interpretations. In *Butcher Boys* there are no overt political symbols: no flags, military uniforms or vehicles, no photographs of politicians, slogans, fists or barbed wire. But “In form and content [the *Butcher Boys*] express the artist’s awareness that the atrocities which humans commit are inscribed on their bodies” (Bedford 2000: 225).

Enwezor also mentions a fundamental relationship to Europe as a characteristic of South African art. He describes South African art as a “hybrid of modernism and contemporary conceptual frames” and states that “even during isolation, South African art was informed

by European forms and references"[49] (2008: 26). *Butcher Boys* can be seen to adhere to this characteristic as well, as it is philosophically poststructuralist[50], and stylistically surrealist, which were originally developed, defined and named in Europe, but also speaks to a specific South African political context.

Consequently *Butcher Boys* is reflective of some South African protest art of the 1980s. But has its reputation and social standing been affected by having been made by Jane Alexander?

The artist

Jane Alexander could not be more different from the artists already discussed. Unlike Leonardo who is regarded as the quintessential Renaissance man who continues to have a cult following even to this day, or Tretchikoff who actively used his charismatic persona as a marketing strategy, Alexander prefers her work to speak for itself and rarely makes public statements or appearances (Alexander 2017). It should be noted, however, that as a professor in a tertiary institution her position and influence is relatively public and persuasive.

Alexander was born in 1959 in Johannesburg, South Africa. She studied at the University of the Witwatersrand with and graduated with a Master's degree in Fine Art in 1988. At present she is Professor of Sculpture at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, where she has been since 1998. Her work has had considerable international exposure, beginning with the Havana Biennale in 1994 and the Venice Biennale in 1995. She has won several awards and has exhibited extensively around the world (Morris 2017).

Alexander completed *Butcher Boys* amongst other sculptures in 1986 as part of her MAFA studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. In fulfilment of this qualification, the work was exhibited at the Market Theatre Gallery in Johannesburg. After the show, *Butcher Boys* was stored at her parents' home in the city. This is where *Butcher*

49 It must be noted that these narrow definitions are being challenged by new definitions and that "there are multiple different manifestations and developments of ... styles and modes of making" (Nettleton, Mdluli, Mahlangu 2016: 2).

50 According to Marion Arnold, "The instability of signs and references that characterises the recent work situates it within poststructuralism where meaning is acquired, not intrinsic" (Arnold in Powell 1995).

Boys remained until it was purchased by ISANG in 1991, narrowly escaping destruction (Bedford 2017). In 1995 she won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award. As part of this award the artist is given a national tour. Consequently *Butcher Boys* visited most of the major cities of South Africa including Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg, Durban, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town.

At its home at the ISANG the work proved most popular, resulting in pressure from the public to keep the work constantly on display. At the time of their purchase by ISANG, Emma Bedford, Curator for Contemporary Paintings and Sculpture and Head of Art Collections at ISANG at the time, observed, “So central have these sculptures since become in the psyches of subsequent generations of South Africans that the constant demand to see them necessitates their being on permanent display” (Bedford 2017). The work has also toured extensively in Europe, America, South America and Africa, appearing in, amongst others, the *Identità e Alterità* exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1995, and *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1955* exhibition, which toured Germany and America from 2001 to 2002.

Above is a brief synopsis of the South African context in the 1980s, specifically the political climate of the country at the time of apartheid, the time which informed the creation of the *Butcher Boys*. We have noticed that this political reality has been consciously and indirectly signified by Alexander via her formal and conceptual treatment of the sculptural bodies. It has also been noted that South African art comprises a strong intellectual influence from Europe with local content. This is shown in the *Butcher Boys,* which is surrealist in style and conceptually poststructuralist, with specifically South African political content.

Consequently the circumstances and events which gave rise to *Butcher Boys* are clearly if subtly traceable in the work, meaning that *Butcher Boys* is without question deeply embedded in their political and historical context. But the existence of art in society is a dialogue and a powerful work such as *Butcher Boys* has arguably exerted some influence.

Butcher Boys *in the world*

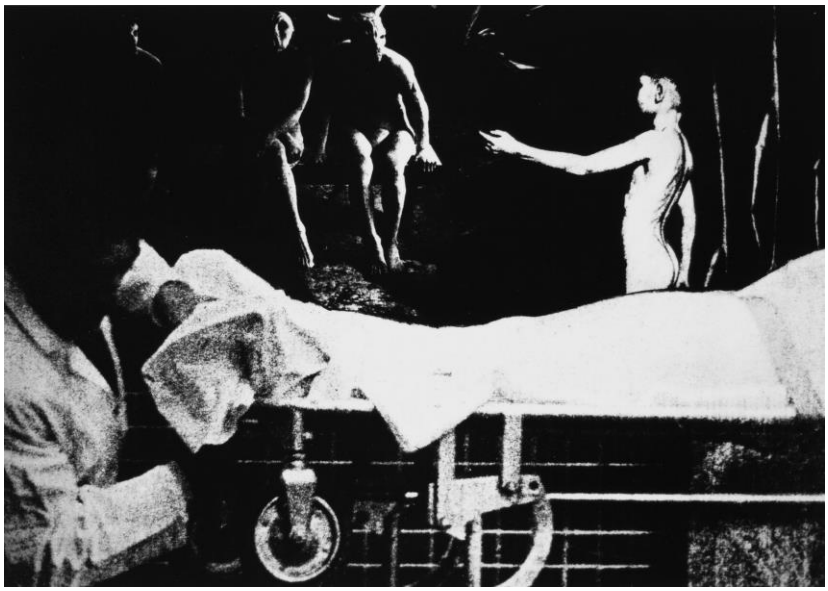
There have been no traceable reproductions of *Butcher Boys* in the same sense as the *Mona Lisa* or *The Chinese Girl.* No artists that we know of have made direct copies and Alexander has not sold millions of reproductions in department stores or gallery shops. But

duplication has happened in a more interesting way, by Alexander herself, in a postmodernist practice known as self-referentiality. In this practice, artworks are recycled in a multitude of ways and as a result become entangled in new and varied meanings. This is described by Tietze:

> A notable feature of Alexander's work is its self-referentiality: an image is introduced in one work and then reused in others so that it acquires multiple associations, encouraging us to see the work as part of a surreal continuum rather than as an isolated statement. A familiar figure or motif from one work reappears in a new setting, carrying with it some of its earlier life and impact but requiring from us an adjustment to its new context (Morris 2017).

Alexander achieves this in two formal ways. The first is in the context of exhibitions. Much of her work contains multiple figures and is site specific. Therefore the layout of the work will be dictated by these varying locations, and consequently many of her sculptural figures will reappear in different configurations, often with additions, deletions and extensions and in so doing generating new significations.

Secondly, she utilises a different medium, in this instance photography. Using this medium she constructs photomontages in which her sculptural figures reappear. These black and white, grainy, atmospheric images appear to have been shot surreptitiously, reinforcing the sense of unease already evoked by the figures, but creating an entirely different work (Williamson 1989: 42).



Jane Alexander, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I be whiter than snow”. Psalm 51, v 7. 1986, silver print on paper, 19.5 x 23.5 cm. Photo image by Mario Todeschini. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

This is illustrated in several photomontage works by Alexander in which the *Butcher Boys* are seen as a whole or in part, and in varying poses and configurations. These include *By the end of today you are going to need us (1985), “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I will be whiter than snow”. Psalm 51, v 7* (1986), *Warehouse* (1985), *Shepherd* (1986), *Ford* (1986), *Landscape* (1985), *At the Restorer* (1995) and *Landscape with Transmitter* (2008). Here previously constructed meanings, now used differently in new settings, produce not only new works, but also extra layers of signification for the *Butcher Boys* in their original form. This recontextualising of artistic motifs using other media, is described by Tietze as message scrambling (Tietze 2016: 20).

For example, in the work *By the end of today you are going to need us (1985)* the three figures are placed in the same positions but on two different benches and situated in the clinically tiled London underground. In the background is a poster advertising the London underground to commuters. This poster suggests that after a long days work the underground will get you safely home. In this new context, the *Butcher Boys’* alertness now appears to be more focussed towards dangers which may lurk in the narrow passages. In this context the figures could stand for protectors, or guardians of our humanity, claiming that although you fear and loathe us and may not approve of us, you need us to preserve your safety or even your humanity. This is a sentiment expressed by

many soldiers and policemen. Consequently within the new setting the *Butcher Boys* themselves have taken on a new meaning.



Jane Alexander, *By the end of today you're going to need us*, 1985, silver print on paper, 28 x 19cm. Photo image by Mario Todeschini. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

In another interesting layering of meaning Alexander again uses the *Butcher Boys* in a new artwork, but this time in reference to their own provenance. As part of the Standard Bank Young Artist Awards tour in 1995, the work travelled for the entire year.

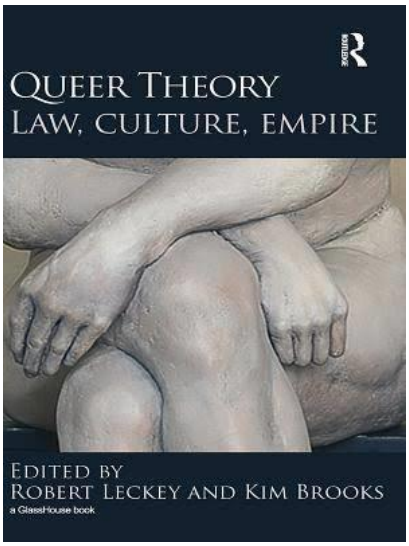
Consequently these fragile plaster figures inevitably suffered some damage. Alexander documented their trip to the restorer in a work entitled *At the Restorer* (1995). Here, lying on their backs on a table, now under the control of the restorer who engages directly with the viewer, they lose their menacing aspect and look like undignified dolls in the props room of a theatre. The two paintings visible in the photomontage are also pertinent since within this context the *Butcher Boys* take on the signification of being part of a collection, inanimate objects that are managed and processed.



Jane Alexander, *At the Restorer*,1995, photomontage, silver print on paper, 20 x 18 cm. Photo image by Mario Todeschini. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

In terms of general duplication, *Butcher Boys* has appeared in countless publications. There are so many that the artist and her copyright agency DALRO have not been able to keep accurate track (Alexander 2017). Most publications traced are exhibition catalogues, surveys on resistance art or dictionary type compilations of South African artists. A few include; *Jane Alexander: Sculpture and Photomontages* (1995) by Ivor Powell, *Resistance*

Art In South Africa (1989) by Sue Williamson, *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (1996) edited by Sue Williamson and Ashraf Jamal and *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire* (2010) edited by Robert Leckley and Kim Brooks, which has an attractive cover showing a detail of one of the figures, whose arms and legs connote a Gordian knot.



Cover of book showing a detail of the first figure of the *Butcher Boys* trinity. Photo image by Mark Lewis.

Consideration of these various references to *Butcher Boys* is of greater interest and relevance than an estimated list of occurrences. As mentioned previously, the work does not have broad, popular appeal in the manner of Tretchikoff, but those who do engage with the work such as academics and teachers, generally wield some intellectual power and can influence broader understanding and reception.

The academic life of *Butcher Boys* begins with its inclusion in part of the Grade 12 Visual Arts school syllabus (Hackney, Vorster & Brenner, 2016: 110). But it has also been cited and discussed numerous times by academics and other artists. When referring to *Google Scholar* during the course of this research, *Butcher Boys* occupied 10 pages, with each reference showing multiple citations.

The *Butcher Boys* is also featured extensively on the world wide web. It has a Wikipedia page independent of the artist and appears numerous times on Pintrest. It has been analysed on several private blogs and featured on established arts and culture websites, including the websites of newspaper publishers and magazines such as the *Mail &*

Guardian and *Art Times.* The work also appears on some tourism sites marketing Cape Town and the ISANG.

There is no way to accurately ascertain the popularity of *Butcher Boys* in the same way as the first two works in this study. The sculpture is owned by the South African state and is housed in the ISANG. Statistics are not kept for visitors to individual artworks in the museum and regardless of public pressure, displays are temporary, meaning that the same works are not always on show. But the average number of visitors to the museum generally could provide some idea. The statistics for the museum from the year 2007 to the present show an average of over 40 000 visitors annually. Consequently it can be assumed that thousands of people have seen the work (Kleinsmith 2017). Having said that, the work is no doubt visited on the world wide web extensively by art lovers the world over, which again we have no way of being able to track.

What is more significant than numbers of viewers in this case study, is the respect the *Butcher Boys* commands amongst academics and serious art critics. Though this group may be small in number, they are a powerful and influential force, specifically in South Africa where academic sources on South African art are relatively scant. Consequently any writing by these individuals will contribute greatly to the reputation and recognisability of the work. This high regard will also positively affect the reputation of any of Alexander's other work. Nevertheless, the reason these academics and thinkers appreciate the work is due to its complex webs of constructed signification.

Construct

Butcher Boys is a particularly rewarding artwork with which to engage because it holds a multitude of direct and nuanced meanings. Marion Arnold in the introduction to the catalogue, *Jane Alexander: Sculpture and Photomontage* (1995) for the Standard Bank Young Artist Award touring exhibition stated, "precisely because strong and contradictory responses to the forms are possible, many interpretations can be generated. Since the works cannot be positioned within a coherent and known reality, they gain power as art for only in the arena of art can visual disjunctions be connected to make meaning" (Arnold in Powell 1995: 1).

Direct signification

Formal ambiguity

The most powerful signification with regards to *Butcher Boys* is the hybrid human/animal. This is powerful because the hybrid appears incongruent to the human mind. This incongruence occurs as a result of the opposing positions of the two elements (being human and animal) within the system of binary opposites, a system which the human brain finds particularly appealing.[51] The value in presenting the brain with binary opposites is that, as Eco observed, the dissonance does not lead to chaotic disorder but rather stimulates greater attention, engagement and deeper contemplation as the brain struggles for resolution (Eco 1977: 263).

This process whereby, ambiguity perceived by the intellect and transmitted directly to the viewer's psyche, eliciting powerful, conflicting emotions at the conceptual level, is often associated with the alluring power of the grotesque. The "grotesque acts as a counter discourse by connecting disparate worlds – the corporeal and the spiritual, the conscious and the unconscious – in a style that ... sows seeds of doubt and confusion in the beholder" (Mercer 2013: 84).

When reflecting on the *Butcher Boys*, five instances, amongst possible others, of binary ambiguity can be perceived; human/animal, powerful/weak, beautiful/ugly, physical/spiritual and living/dead.

The figures

Humanimal

The first combination is manifest in what Kobena Mercer in his 2013 article entitled *Postcolonial Grotesque* calls the "humanimal". The three figures are recognisably human, clearly cast from real bodies. This humanness is shown by their *homo sapiens* form, as well as the ways in which the figures are seated on the bench, in typically human poses. But, their dominant features are horns, which are usually found only on male bovine or antelope species. These horns are especially disturbing because they are "situated in the

51 This type of binary ambiguity aligns with Empson's seventh type, which occurs with "full contradiction, marking a division in the authors mind, a conflict which is never resolved" (Empson 1949: vi).

place where reason resides" (Mercer 2013: 80). Their solid, black eyes are also animal-like, and are alert and wary, ever watchful for danger.

In this manifestation of the humanimal, Alexander diverts from the art historical norm. In many depictions of animal/human hybrids it is usually the human face that is depicted on the animal body. The most famous instance probably is a creature known as a satyr, of whom Pan is a well known example. This combination as a hybrid is disturbing. In the *Butcher Boys* Alexander has switched this convention. She places an animal head on a human body to create an even more disturbing, less accessible creature, because as Mercer has noted, the head is where cognition resides.

Powell adds yet another layer of meaning to the humanimal. He alludes to them as being in the process of mutation, catalysed by mutilation. He notes that their faces are not simply a static mixture of human and animal, but once human they appear to be transforming to eventually become pure animal (Powell 1995:15). This increases our sense of revulsion.

Interestingly *Butcher Boys* can also be seen to be a clear illustration of Barthes' process of second order signification. In this instance we could create the formula; Human + Animal = *Butcher Boys*, a signification of the dehumanised butcher. The dehumanised butcher could then go on to become the signifier in another round of signification.

Power/weakness

The second set involves the binary code of power and weakness. The *Butcher Boys*' horns allude to masculine power, as do their muscular bodies. Their expressionless eyes also denote a kind of power. But on closer inspection there are signs of decay. Some of the horns are broken or bent inward, offering no weaponry or defence. The bodies are naked, pale and chalky, giving a deathly appearance with dark patches of bruising, especially around their wounds. Their spines and chests are split open, exposing the body's spinal structure, throat and heart. These areas are vital for survival and are instinctively designated as sites for attack by predators in the animal kingdom. These wounds look old and seem unlikely to close up or heal, giving the impression that the bodies have undergone some basic, unrefined and nefarious medical procedure.

Their misshapen noses and ears mean that breathing and hearing will be difficult. Their fused mouths mean that communication and eating is impossible. This mute deafness means that their attention could be inwardly focussed, making communication with anyone

including each other, impossible. In addition a desperate impromptu negotiation with their potential victims would also be ruled out, thus rendering them incapable of spontaneous decision making. While these creatures are powerful they are not likely to sexually assault their victims as they are emasculated by tight cod pieces. This implies that any violence perpetrated, although personally experienced, is not personal and individual but broad, indiscriminate and systemic.



Detail of *Butcher Boys* showing broken horns and exposed spines. Photo image by Svea Josephy. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

Beauty/ugliness

The third set is the dichotomy of beauty and ugliness. The figures show a classical physical beauty. Their muscles are toned but not overly developed and there is no evidence of fat, or any other signs of an overindulged, sedentary lifestyle. There are no growths or tumours and the skin is smooth. There are no hooves, excessive body hair or fur. But this is disturbed by elements of ugliness such as the animalistic features, damage, distortions and a deathly pallor.

Physical/spiritual

The fourth combination comprises the duality of the physical and spiritual. The overwhelming impact of these figures is that initially they confront the viewer at a purely visceral level – a physical blow to the senses. But for those who are Christians, the three figures could possibly recall the holy Trinity.[52] While the other side of the religious binary scale – that of evil – is evoked by the horns which recall the devil, imparting a satanic feel. A further spiritual allusion could be that once dehumanised and bestial, the creatures no longer have souls, thus relinquishing the opportunity for a happy afterlife. All these references give the figures a strangely disturbing spiritual aspect.



Detail of *Butcher Boys* showing deformed facial features. Photo image by Svea Josephy. ©Jane Alexander, DALRO.

52 The trinity, comprising the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is considered a powerful symbol in the Christian faith, and Mercer states that Alexander's work is "steeped in the knowledge of religious art" (2013: 90).

Living/dead

Linked to the spiritual aspect of the work are the unseeing eyes which convey a sense of otherworldliness. Just like the burial statues of the ancient Egyptians, the *Butcher Boys* do not see the present, but look to an unseen world, another dimension (Jamal 1996: 13).

While the poses of the body's of the humanimals are dynamic and alive, their death-like skin and glassy eyes connote death. In addition, the fact that they have no mouths, suggest that like other constructs of the living dead they do not need sustenance in the normal way of food and water.

Title

The title of the work, *Butcher Boys* also contains ambiguity. While 'butcher' connotes a formalised, professional, grown-up brutality, 'boys' implies a more junior, apprentice like status. While the binary sets above, can be read directly from the work, what are the more complex indirect significations in the work?

Indirect signification

Terror/compassion

One such indirect signification could be the opposing responses of terror and compassion. While the humanimal evokes terror, loathing or aggression we can also experience an opposing twist. Instead of, or in addition to this fear, we may feel compassion, shame or responsibility: "[o]ur attitudes to the animal world have become far more nuanced. We are now as likely to view animals as mute, powerless victims of human aggression as we are to fear the danger they pose" (Tietze 2016: 8).

Mutilator/mutilated

Another level of indirect signification could occur in the realm of consequence. Alexander shows that as agents of violence or butchery, the *Butcher Boys* themselves become affected by their actions and consequently become 'butchered' in the process. Thus the grotesque, dehumanised bodies and faces of these creatures are the consequences of their malicious power (Mercer 2013: 84). This depiction of the personal consequences of wielding impersonal, institutionalised power was the artist's intention. Alexander has stated that in her work she explores the ambiguity of systemic oppression, "the degradation,

anxiety and vulnerability of the aggressor, or the capacity of the victim to transcend deprivation and damage" (Williamson & Jamal 1996: 22).

Butcher Boys *as an icon*

While the *Butcher Boys* undoubtedly contain and evoke multiple, highly complex, direct and nuanced meanings, drawn from many binary continua, it is difficult to say whether these highly complex meanings lead to the works iconicity. The subtlety and ambiguity of the work means that it is difficult for it to easily take on a clear symbolic signification. Yet several authors believe that the work is iconic and possesses Benjamin's aura.

Tietze states that the *Butcher Boys* is an "iconic work for which the artist became famous" (2016: 7). Hackney and Vorster state: "The three otherworldly figures, sitting beside each other on a bench, have reached iconic status, appearing in quotation in South African art and popular culture" (2016: 109). Linda Stupart says, "Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys* is a pivotal work in the history of resistance art and of apartheid. While it functions as an artwork in the public realm it is also more than that – a cultural artefact, an historical testament, an affecting reminder of the dehumanising horrors of apartheid" (Stupart 2012).

The quotes above suggest that the work is iconic due to its fame and popularity, but how has the *Butcher Boys* achieved this? What does it symbolise? I propose that in a somewhat complex way, it has come to symbolise, (amongst other possibilities) two concepts; firstly the dehumanising consequences of violent action towards others, [53] and secondly a rejection of apartheid and by extension a new identity for South Africans based on tolerance.

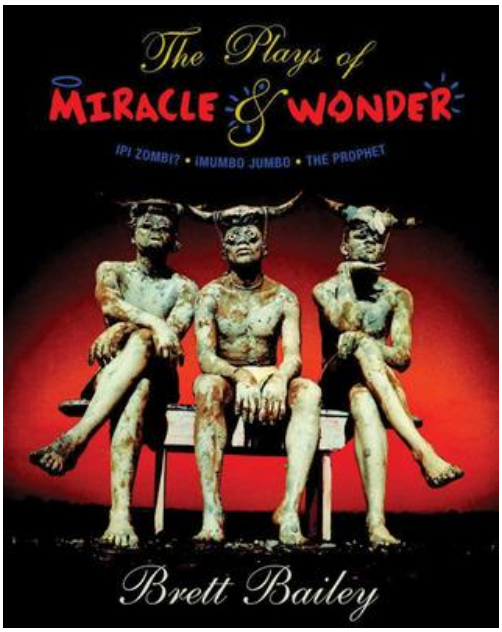
Icon of dehumanisation

As an icon of the dehumanised bully, the work has played, a powerful role at a personal, individual level. Sello Duiker describes how the *Butcher Boys* greatly affected him as a youth, helping him to make sense of what was going on in the country under apartheid. At a time when traditional media was often banned and regularly sanitised of the

53 In this instance this work is a formal illustration of the concept of *karma,* or the Christian tenet which states that "you reap what you sow".

uncomfortable political and social realities of the time, this work assisted Duiker to reconnect with a sense of humanity (Duiker date unknown: 8).

But this symbol of the non-human has also found significance in South African culture more broadly. Controversial playwright Brett Bailey was the first to formally reference the *Butcher Boys*. In his drama productions entitled *The Prophet* (1999), and *macbEth* (2007) the figures appear as characters. In *The Prophet* they depict 'the dead', and in *macbEth* they are used as the three witches. They again appear in this human form on the cover of his book *The Plays of Miracle & Wonder: Betwitching Visions and Primal High-Jinx from the South African Stage* (2003).



Cover of *The Plays of Miracle & Wonder: Betwitching Visions and Primal High-Jinx from the South African Stage* (2003). Photo image by Brett Bailey and Elsabe van Tonder.

According to Alexander, when the work was first referenced in these drama productions she was not particularly concerned. But as time went on the work began to be associated directly with the black body: On one occasion as *amaXhosa* mourners, and on several others as racial stereotypes referring to aggression and brutality.

Traditionally the *amaXhosa* use white ochre on their bodies during initiation. In the Bailey production of *The Prophet,*[54] the often black bodies of the whitened performers became

54 *The Prophet* is a production referring to an event in Xhosa history in which cattle were destroyed supposedly under instruction from the young prophetess Nongqawuse.

strongly associated with the chalky *Butcher Boys*. Thus the sculpture *Butcher Boys* apparently became associated with the black body, and with Xhosa culture. Then, by extension, the brutality and aggression signified by *Butcher Boys* became associated with the black body (Alexander 2018).

What concerns Alexander, is not only the racialised interpretation of the *Butcher Boys*,[55] but more the fact that this interpretation of black 'brutality' and 'aggression' is starting to find its way into scholarly publications and school syllabi, often within the context of racist typecasting by 'white' authors (Alexander 2018). Consequently through spontaneous and unforeseen events the *Butcher Boys* have changed from symbolising a dehumanising political system to a more broadly racist interpretation.

Icon of a new South African identity

As a consequence of the work functioning as an icon or symbol of the rejection of apartheid and a new South African identity, the *Butcher Boys* have been included in major exhibitions on South African and African art both locally and overseas. But this notion of a new South African identity has also, over time become somewhat distorted. In February 2012, *Die Antwoord*, a South African rap group, referenced the work in a 37 second, online trailer for their album *Ten$ion.* In the trailer the two members of *Die Antwoord,* Yo-Landi Vi$$er and Watkin Tudor Jones (aka Ninja) and their daughter are depicted as characters resembling the *Butcher Boys*. Ninja appeared as the curly horned butcher boy, now wearing boxer shorts depicting the American flag. Yo-Landi and their six year old daughter repeatedly sang the same line, "I fink u freeky and I like you a lot". Yo-Landi then proceeded to remove the butcher boy's still beating heart from his chest and eat it. This instance of appropriation changed the work from being a symbol of the rejection of unjust political power to now operate in a more personal paradigm. Here the two female characters are showing tolerance towards a member of their family depicted as a pitiful freak.

55 If anything they represent non-racialised systemic aggression.

The social life of things

Alexander is aware that the new signification was never Bailey's intention, but that it is a consequence of "the social life of things".[56] However, when the characters were picked up by *Die Antwoord*, who are strongly associated with what Adam Haupt first referred to as "blackface" in his lecture at Harvard in 2010, she felt compelled to publicly disassociate herself from these significations (Alexander 2017).

Alexander objected legally to "the work being referenced in a context potentially associated with racism, in a promotional trailer visually unrelated to the music video and track it advertised", and was successful (Alexander 2018). The trailer was removed at the end of the promotional run with an apology, although as with anything published on the world wide web, it remains accessible. Martin Heller, the artist's lawyer, made a statement to the effect that Alexander was not attempting to limit the use or interpretation of her work but wished not to be associated with the interpretation of *Butcher Boys* in the trailer: "Ms Alexander is concerned that *Die Antwoord's* use of her work and its context might be publicly perceived as reflecting her own artistic intention. In creating the work, Ms Alexander referred to the dehumanising forces of apartheid. Ms Alexander does not intend to limit her work's interpretation and she does not seek to interfere with other artists' work" (Revolvy 2018).[57]

In response Watkin Tudor Jones remarked that his featuring the character was a "homage to one of our favourite South African icons" and that he considered it "one of the few South African artworks we are truly proud to be associated with," going on to say that the characters "are such strong and immediately identifiable icons" (Jones 2012).

56 Phrase coined by Arjun Appadurai (1988).

57 In spite of rumours to the contrary, it was never Ms Alexander's intention to sue *Die Antwoord* (Alexander 2018).



Yo-Landi Vi$$er and Ninja (*Die Antwoord*) in still from the online trailer for the video *Ten$ion*. Photo image by iol.

Alexander's legal action sparked some debate around aspects of appropriation amongst academics and the media. Marx and Milton in their article, *Bastardised Whiteness: "Zef" - culture,* Die Antwoord *and the reconfiguration of contemporary Afrikaans identities* (2011), state that the adoption of other artists' work by musicians such as *Die Antwoord* and Jack Parow is an example of the use of available cultural resources to construct and perform a new white identity in post apartheid South Africa. "Popular culture plays an active role in representing and negotiating identities" (Marx & Milton 2011: 725).

Chris English, in his video blog entitled *Die Antwoord and Appropriation,* asserts that while Alexander would like to fix her work's meaning, "post apartheid South Africa must re-conceptualise the work to fit current social and cultural tradition" (English 2012). Kathryn Smith stated, "The person who created the original work ...wants their due. I support this. But I also support the individual's right as cultural agent to respond creatively to what we are exposed to whether it is pop culture or so called 'high' art" (Jones 2012).

The responses above are misguided. Alexander does not object to the use of *Butcher Boys* as a symbol to be used in other media. This was made clear in her lawyer's statement. Moreover, as an academic she is cognisant of the theories and instances of reference and appropriation. As explained to me, she took the decision to challenge the use of the *Butcher Boys* by *Die Antwoord* as the characters, within the context of the plays by Bailey and the online trailer, had begun to take on a potentially fixed racialised meaning

with which she was not comfortable. She therefore wished to publicly disassociate herself from these interpretations (Alexander 2017).

With regards to the 'freaky' signification created by *Die Antwoord:* this becomes problematic when it potentially appears to be associated with an insensitive and flippant view of the South African postcolonial context. Stupart in her article "Butchered", published on the arts website *Mahala,* quotes Ninja who apparently said, "God made a mistake with me. I'm actually black, trapped in a white body". Stupart deems unacceptable this "indiscriminate masquerading as the Other, wrenching out elements of existing cultures and extinct subcultures in what becomes a parody of Otherness, to freakify difference". She goes on to conclude that *Butcher Boys* clearly signify a certain time and space (South Africa in the 1980s) and "*Die Antwoord's* kitchification of the *Butcher Boys* is endemic of the callousness of their production in the South African context" (Stupart 2012).

In the comments section following the article by Stupart, an entry by Foom says in defence of *Die Antwoord:* "They are now as pivotal as Alexander's work was back then in terms of our new "struggle" - and far more relevant and accessible to large parts of the public" (Stupart 2012).

Others, such as art critic, Mary Corrigall suggested in her blog that Alexander's objections were less about the management of meaning and more about protecting her fiscal status:

> [W] hat is driving her claim is the fact that her artistic "signature" might be eroded by the repeated circulation and appropriation of the "Butcher Boy" motif. It has to be acknowledged that her signature has considerable monetary value at art auctions; aside from Marlene Dumas and William Kentridge she is one of the only other contemporary South African artists whose work fetches considerable sums. She clearly believes that if this signature of hers was more widely circulated, it would dilute or erode its fiscal value and therefore her status (Corrigall 2012).

As is characteristic of the world wide web, comment and debate continued. Some interesting remarks and observations were made about appropriation and its history, and the fact that authorships is an outdated concept, while others typically descended into the territory of personal attack.

Here we see a contemporary, local example of the semiotic theories discussed. Levi-Strauss' *bricolage* is apparent in the fact that South Africans are "selecting, editing and

borrowing from the cultural resources available to them to reinterpret old selves in the light of new knowledge and possibilities ...” (Steyn 2007: xx in Marx & Milton 2011: 725). In addition the *Butcher Boys* is acting as an empty signifier accumulating several complex, convoluted and highly sensitive significations. This example has also shown how in a process of second order signification the appropriation of the *Butcher Boys* has caused its initial signification to change and become a new signifier in different contexts and applications.

Conclusion

In conclusion *Butcher Boys*, like the *Mona Lisa* and *The Chinese Girl,* can be considered iconic. Not only does it eloquently embody the time and place of its making, it does so particularly profoundly. This facility for profound meaning is as a result of its formal and conceptual hybridity, which in turn accommodates multiple, ambiguous signification. This has enabled the work to become highly respected by important and powerful members of the arts community, as well as remain relevant.

In addition the work could also have become an icon of dehumanised power and identity, acting as a recognisable cultural reference allowing for new meanings to be generated even within new or different contexts. As we have seen with the *Mona Lisa,* this ongoing reception of and engagement with the work appears to be the norm when works become iconic. What is particularly interesting in the case of *Butcher Boys* and its appropriation is that we are privileged enough to witness this process. This natural, cultural procedure by which iconic works inspire and then become part of a continued cultural dialogue, is being played out before our eyes.

Conclusion

Formula or Process?

At the start of this research there was some discussion as to whether there was, or could be, a formula for the creation of the iconic fine art artwork. Even though a formula proved elusive, the possibility of a given set of characteristics and procedures which would enable an artwork to qualify for iconic status was also debated. The latter possibility, too, presented difficulties as iconicity was found to be difficult to define and impossible to quantify, and the words of Donald Sassoon rang true:

> The renown of masterpieces rests on a complex, historically determined sequence of events, the participation of various historical agencies (people, institutions, processes) working in a largely unplanned or unconscious manner for different ends (2001: 6).

The study began with an attempt to find a working definition of the icon. The original meaning of the word icon was found to have religious roots, with the iconic image being a stylised object embodying a sacred Christian presence on earth. 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. Celebrities were found to resemble Barthes' concept of myth because as part of popular culture they function in such a way as to powerfully, but unconsciously, represent complex social and cultural phenomena in a simplified or essential form. Eco, Hall and Thompson reinforced Barthes theory that these myths gain their power of persuasion through complex networks of communication, and this phenomena has proved useful in the popularising of artworks too.

What was gained from chapter one was the possibly that the art icon retains some aspect of reverence from the religious form, as well as the element of widespread popularity from the colloquial form. It was also found that the mass media is a powerful force which required consideration with regards to art icons. But the concept of being popular with a media presence is not enough to explain iconicity in artworks. It was then proposed that it is perhaps the meaning in the artwork which qualified it for iconicity.

This led to the need to consider the vast and complex area of meaning in chapter two. 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 and conveyed.

Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure were the first theorists to provide insights into how form is related to meaning. At more or less the same time, Hjelmslev made a major contribution to the understanding of different levels of meaning including literal denotation and multiple, nuanced connotation.

Claude Levi-Strauss revealed how meanings are contextually embedded, and therefore culturally relative, and also showed how signs can act as empty signifiers, accommodating multiple meanings and significations. Roland Barthes provided a model to explain how meanings are created and are capable of transformation and change, while Umberto Eco showed how meanings in works of art are not rigidly fixed, but are accessed along a continuum, giving rise to the possibility of multiple meanings.

Barthes, through his theory of myth, also provided us with the means to understand that meanings can become both powerfully pervasive and essentialised, allowing for complex meanings to be reduced to much simpler significations, thus obscuring the complexity of reality. In this process, the myth becomes manifest as a sign which carries fixed, powerful, culturally embedded meanings which are widely shared, immediately recognised and automatically subscribed to.

This theory of myth proved tempting with regards to the art icon as it felt possible that an artwork could be seen to be so firmly attached to one meaning that we simply do not question it. For example, the *Mona Lisa* means Art. However this proved unsustainable as it was found that artworks attract and retain far too many multiple meanings. The *Mona Lisa* means ‘Art’, but it also means, among other things, ‘The Renaissance’, ‘Leonardo’ and the ‘Smile’. Consequently Levi-Strauss’ model of the empty signifier and Thompson’s model of webs of signification proved more valuable.

These multiple meanings were also found to be rather complex and Eco, Cassirer and Benjamin explained how rich signification occurs with authenticity, disruptive ambiguity, the dynamic tension between tradition and innovation and the aesthetic experience.

Chapter two provided the quest for iconicity with the models of multiple, dynamic signification, the empty signifier and webs of signification.

It is not possible to talk about iconic artworks without discussing value in its various forms. In chapter three, Appadurai, Thompson and Findlay described how economic and social values are attributed to artworks. During this discussion it was found that economic, cultural and social values of artworks can also be placed on a continuum, and in the case of the iconic artwork, these three areas of value would all be located at the high end of the continuum.

Art does not exist in a vacuum and is indeed part of the social structure. Cassirer and Pierre Bourdieu provided an understanding of how art and culture function in the art world and in society more broadly. This provided a context for the cultural and social value of the fine art icon and its role in society. Here the fine art icon could be seen as a weapon in the battle for class distinction.

Using these findings from the preceding chapters, three case studies were undertaken, in which three interconnected aspects of each artwork were considered: their intrinsic content, their cultural and historical context, and the vast web of constructed meanings accrued to each work. These categories were found to sometimes coincide with Panofsky's three levels of meaning but not overlap entirely.

The first case study in chapter four, investigated a work widely regarded as an icon, the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci. Acknowledging that this work is viewed as iconic from the context of the Western European art historical canon, it was chosen because it is considered the most famous artwork in the Western world and because a great deal of literature could be found with regards to its iconicity. It was hoped that this chapter would provide a broad framework within which to investigate other works. But the analysis revealed that there is no formula or recipe that can be brought to bear to create iconicity. It was shown that iconic status is the result of a complex set of historical circumstances, particular agents and some intrinsic properties all coming together at just the right time and place.

The second case study of *The Chinese Girl* by Vladimir Tretchikoff, in chapter five, investigated a work whose distinguishing factor was its popularity, in order to investigate whether popularity and broad appeal was all it takes to be iconic. This was found to be

inconclusive because although *The Chinese Girl* was popular at the time it was painted and has found new relevance in the current retro trend, it is thin on meaning and more time will be required to see if its exotic glamour can carry it through to long lasting relevance.

The third case study in chapter six was chosen as it is popular in South Africa and abroad with a small but powerful sector of society, the academic art world. The respect commanded by *Butcher Boys* by Jane Alexander rests on its polysemic capacity which it conveys with elegance and sophistication. Using the formal construct of the hybrid and conveying multiple forms of ambiguity, this work is rich in meaning, keeping academics, scholars, the media and the broader arts community busy for hours. We can conclude with some cautious optimism that this work will continue to have some iconic status in the future provided the ISANG maintains its profile in the public eye.

To conclude, iconicity in a fine art artwork cannot be prescribed or reduced to a simple formula. Neither can it adhere to certain characteristics and criteria. If this was the case, these would have been identified, shared and executed many times over; moreover, even if it had been defined, it would probably fail. Kenneth Clark notes that “if paintings try too hard to anticipate social process, they run the risk of ending up speaking to nobody” (Clark 1984: 119). However this research has shown that iconic artworks broadly share some similarities;

Firstly, the *content* of the works revealed that they were all technically well crafted, were attributed great economic, social and cultural value and that the subject and symbols within the work allowed them to convey a little of the sacred, or something special.

Consideration of their *contexts* revealed that they all found relevance and popularity within their own as well as subsequent contexts. In this way they both reflected and in some way affected the cultures and societies around them. However, they were also lucky enough to be subjected to fortuitous spontaneous events and actions.

The area of *construct* proved most important of all. Each artwork was found to be the centre of multiple webs of interconnected, multiple significances including those used in acts of appropriation and subversion.

Consequently iconicity is a product of all the elements, working together, which make up its content, its context and its constructed significations.

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