

**A Pantheon of Icons:  
Towards a South African Iconology**

A Dissertation submitted to the Department of History of Art, Wits School of the Arts,  
Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements for  
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## Abstract

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

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

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

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

## **Declaration**

I declare that this is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (History of Art) (Dissertation) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction:</b>	<b>A pantheon of icons</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1:</b>	<b>The icon as myth</b>	8
	<b>Definition</b>	8
	<b><i>Sacred</i></b>	8
	<b><i>Celebrity</i></b>	9
	<i>Colloquial icon</i>	9
	<i>Myth</i>	12
	<i>Mass media</i>	15
	<b>Conclusion</b>	16
<b>Chapter 2:</b>	<b>The icon as meaning</b>	18
	<b>Meaning</b>	18
	<b><i>Language</i></b>	19
	<b><i>Structuralism</i></b>	19
	<i>Signifier signified</i>	20
	<i>Denotation &amp; connotation</i>	21
	<i>Types of signs</i>	21
	<i>Contextual conditioning</i>	22
	<i>Multiple meaning</i>	23
	<i>Dynamic signification</i>	24
	<b><i>Rich signification</i></b>	25
	<i>Ambiguity</i>	25

	<i>Tradition &amp; Innovation</i>	25
	<i>Aesthetic experience</i>	26
	<b><i>Art historical canon</i></b>	27
	<b>Conclusion</b>	28
<b>Chapter 3:</b>	<b>The icon as value</b>	30
	<b>Value</b>	30
	<b><i>Economic value</i></b>	31
	<i>The art market</i>	32
	<i>Marketing &amp; branding</i>	33
	<b><i>Cultural value</i></b>	35
	<b><i>Social value</i></b>	36
	<i>Society &amp; culture</i>	36
	<i>Taste &amp; kitsch</i>	39
	<i>Artists</i>	41
	<b>Conclusion</b>	41
	<b>The way forward</b>	42
	<b><i>Content</i></b>	43
	<b><i>Context</i></b>	44
	<b><i>Construct</i></b>	45
<b>Chapter 4:</b>	<b>Case study: the <i>Mona Lisa</i> (1503-1506)</b>	46
	<b><i>Content</i></b>	48
	<i>Subject &amp; symbols</i>	49

	<i>Ambiguity</i>	51
	<i>Aesthetic experience</i>	52
	<b>Context</b>	53
	<i>The Mona Lisa in the 1500s</i>	54
	<i>The Artist</i>	57
	<i>The Mona Lisa in the world</i>	59
	<b>Construct</b>	71
	<i>Direct signification</i>	71
	<i>Indirect signification</i>	74
	<i>The Mona Lisa as an icon</i>	78
	<b>Conclusion</b>	86
<b>Chapter 5:</b>	<b>Case study: the <i>Chinese Girl</i> (1952/3)</b>	87
	<b>Content</b>	90
	<i>Subject &amp; symbols</i>	90
	<i>Ambiguity</i>	92
	<b>Context</b>	93
	<i>The Chinese Girl in the 1950s</i>	94
	<i>The Artist</i>	97
	<i>The Chinese Girl in the world</i>	99
	<b>Construct</b>	104
	<i>Direct signification</i>	105
	<i>Indirect signification</i>	107
	<i>The Chinese Girl as an icon</i>	111
	<b>Conclusion</b>	115

<b>Chapter 6:</b>	<b>Case study: the <i>Butcher Boys</i> (1985/6)</b>	117
	<b><i>Content</i></b>	118
	<i>Subject &amp; symbols</i>	119
	<i>Ambiguity</i>	120
	<b><i>Context</i></b>	121
	Butcher Boys <i>in the 1980s</i>	121
	<i>The Artist</i>	124
	Butcher Boys <i>in the world</i>	125
	<b><i>Construct</i></b>	131
	<i>Direct signification</i>	132
	<i>Indirect signification</i>	136
	Butcher Boys <i>as an icon</i>	137
	<b>Conclusion</b>	143
<b>Conclusion:</b>	<b>Formula or Process?</b>	144
<b>References &amp; Bibliography:</b>		148