

# IMAGE

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## **Summary**

The image which emerged from the pictorial sign has its roots in the cult of the dead and ancestors. Making pictures meant combating the power of death, to obliterate what had existed by calling up what was no longer there. The Early Neolithic engravings and paintings are for the most part representations of animals which were hunted with bows and arrows and were intended to ensure good hunting. Even here, at the earliest stage of development, it is obvious that the image is credited with living force and that reality is addressed through it. The pagan images of the gods and later those of the emperors were wreathed with laurels; worshippers fell on their knees before them, kissed them, washed and anointed them, burned incense before them and dressed them. Even now, in Buddhism and Hinduism, statues as images are dressed and fed. After centuries of dispute between the Iconoclasts and the Iconodouloi over the image's right to existence and the form in which it might be permitted to exist, the *imago* emerged, characteristically, as the em'bodiment' of the divine in human form from the sign of the Cross, the Crucifix. . The development towards autonomy of what is sometimes called the 'body of the picture' took place during the first half of the 15th century. The development of photography plunged the panel painting be into a devastating crisis, from which it ultimately went forth in a new, abstract form.

### **1. Image as Sign**

#### **1.1 Pictogram**

In the history of cultures and civilizations, the image first appears as a medium of communication in a mediating function. On thus emerging, the image enters into a close relationship with the sign. As a pictorial sign, it anticipates the semiotic icon and symbol. The term semiotics, used for the science of signs, derives from Greek *semeion* (σημείον) =sign. *Sema* in turn originally meant the sign by which a grave was recognized, that is, it referred to the gravestone as a monument and memorial.

Looked at from the genealogical standpoint, the image which emerged from the pictorial sign has its roots in the cult of the dead and ancestors. Making pictures meant combating the power of death, to obliterate what had existed by calling up what was no longer there. The first pictograms were scratched on pieces of bone, horn, ivory or skin, all of them materials directly associated with killing and death. Sign images of this kind functioned as means of communication, as mediators between the living and the dead, between people and spirits. Promoting reconciliation and protection, they ensured that what was no longer there would live on and, conversely, that something would come into being which did not yet exist. The image could, therefore, be both after-image and memory of a lost reality as well as prefiguring what was to come and thus foretelling reality. The evocative function of the image, its power to conjure up or away, and its efficacy in this function are expressed in the cult of images, which is an element of the cult of the dead and ancestors. Image and magic are interdependent. The anagrammatic

relationship between the French words "image" and "magie" is a good illustration of this point. The Early Neolithic engravings and paintings on caves in northern Spain and France (the Wounded Bison in Altamira, ca 20 000 B. C., wild horses and stags in Lascaux, ca 15 000 BC) are for the most part representations of animals which were hunted with bows and arrows and were intended to ensure good hunting. Even here, at the earliest stage of development, it is obvious that the image is credited with living force and that reality is addressed through it. Thus the image has freed itself from being a sign and, in becoming an idol, becomes itself. What is remarkable is that the development of writing into an independent logosphere promoted the shaping of an autonomous pictorial culture as the synthesis of image and cult. When letters take over the communication which has previously been conducted by pictograms, the image can also concentrate on the expressive and representative functions which are distinctively its own.

## **2. Image and Mediation**

### **2.1 Idol**

#### **2.1.1 The Archaic Idol**

The genealogy of the image in the cult of the dead leads to the cult image or idol. The archaic *eidolon* (είδολον) originally denoted the deceased's soul, spirit or ghost. Later the term became more concrete, shifting in meaning from shade to likeness and portrait. The archaic idol is the first object(-ive) after-image of a human figure as a statue(ette) in stone, clay, wax, ivory and other materials, a sculpted or formed and painted image. The earliest idols already indicate that the eidolon addressed the boundless exuberance of human vitality. They were idols of female figures in stone and clay (the prehistoric limestone statuette of the Venus of Willendorf, ca. 20 000 B. C., Neolithic clay idols from Strehlitz in Moravia, ca 3500 – 2900 B. C.), naked mother goddesses with exaggeratedly large breasts and/or broad hips. The cult veneration of such deities guaranteed both fertility in crops and human fecundity. Since the idol emanates power that it transfers to people, it could also be used for the opposite purpose of propitiating evil spirits as a votive or funerary offering. (see **Memorists**)

#### **2.1.2 The Classical Idol**

With time the archaic idol evolved away from the symbolic, abstract-schematic figurine represented by the Cycladic idols of Aegean civilization (idol from Amorgos, ca. 2500 B. C.), and more particularly the fiddle-shaped idol, into realistic portray(ing) of human figures. The creative idea takes on shape as re-creation of the human figure to take the place of the deceased. The idol as the portrait of an ancestor becomes the living deputy of the deceased. In the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt the desire to guarantee the dead eternal life was expressed in almost life-size standing and seated figures in the round as tomb images (the limestone statues of Prince Rahotep and his wife Nefret from the 4th dynasty, ca. 2650 B. C.) as well as portrait busts (the head of Queen Nofretete, ca 1360 B. C.). Painting the figures which re-created bodies invoked a human being of flesh and blood.

The essential vitality of the image reaches its full flowering in the pagan eidolon, which brought forth polychrome sculpture in the round as likenesses of human beings which were both faithful to reality and expressive (the Late Hellenistic Laocoön group, between the 2nd century B. C. and the 1st century A. D.). Whereas man's veneration of the divine was still linked with the archaic idol as cult statue and ancestral image, the representation of anthropomorphic gods emerged with the classical idol of ancient Greece. The statue in the round is the legitimate representative of what it stands for. It is the guarantor that the image is entirely real. Body and image, original image and after-image are identical. That belief in the coincidence of image and (living) being, the identity of image and corpse, was unshakable is confirmed not least by the imperial Roman practice of the *funus imaginarium*, the cremation of images of the deceased together with their physical remains. The portrait of the dead person *is* the dead person her/himself. The image is a human being and as such also has a life of its own. The image does not represent, it is present as empirical reality. This belief ultimately led to the veneration of images of gods and emperors as a substitute for venerating their persons. The pagan images of the gods and later those of the emperors were wreathed with laurels; worshippers fell on their knees before them, kissed them, washed and anointed them, burned incense before them and dressed them. Even now, in Buddhism and Hinduism, statues as images are dressed and fed. The shift from cult image to the cult of the image, for which the deprecatory term idolatry, idol worship, is used, would ultimately spark off a vehement discussion on the nature and essence of the image. By now the image had fully absorbed the idea of divine worship and had consequently changed into a divine image or an image of a deity. The image, which had emerged from the cult of the dead and been intended to represent beings who were in the other world, would inevitably be transformed into the image of god at some time on its way through history.

## 2.2 Icon

The distinction between idol and icon (*είκου*) does not appear until the close of the 4th century AD. The eikon ushered in the emergence of a distinctly Christian image, by means of which the pagan eidolon was transformed from a cult image into an image for private devotions. Since the Early Christian Church banned images of god as heretical on the basis of Exodus 20, 4 ('Thou shalt make thee no graven image, neither any similitude of things that are in heaven above, neither that are in the earth beneath, nor that are in the waters under the earth.'), the Christian image could only develop into an autonomous type via the pictorial tradition of the pagan eidolon, the idol. When Régis Debray outlines the three ages of seeing in his mediological model as extending from the onset of the age of the idol on down to the emergence of the picture as a work of art in the Renaissance, thus validating the delimitation of its range via the existing form of the image, its essence and its aura, he is confirming the continuity between the idol and the icon.

Not by chance did the Christian idol, the icon, develop in the cultural landscape of Asia Minor which was shaped by the pagan ancient Greek eidolon, specifically in Byzantium, the center of the Eastern Church. The Western Church at first had no images of God and only tolerated images as symbolic and signs of salvation such as the Arma Christi and the original symbols of the fish and lamb or relics and holy vessels

assumed the deputy role of a representation of God. In the Eastern Church, by contrast, the icon evolved as the image of a saint in the broader sense and the image of Christ in the narrower meaning of the term. The pagan idea of the image continued in effect, as is shown, on the one hand, in the existential yet also magical interpretation of the icon and, on the other, in the cult of images. The image was the deputy of the saint or the figure of Christ represented, was living presence. Behind this deputy function is the idea of hypostasis, which was introduced at the Council of Nicea in 787, also as the theological validation of the Christian image. The image is different in substance from what is represented yet, hypostatically, in sense and meaning identical with it. The grace and efficacy of the saints are preserved in the images of them. Christ, too, is present in the icon in his human and divine form. Since the icon is linked with what is represented and thus is given a mediating function, it represents likeness as archetype with great effectiveness. That the icon was credited with the powers of validating legal actions shows that it entirely embodied the corporeal presence of what was represented. Subsumed in such efficacy is also the idea that, conversely, veneration had a positive effect on the image and could bring forth aid and protection. Taking up the pagan tradition of image veneration schooled in the cult of the Roman emperors, worshippers set burning candles or lamps before the image of a saint, wreathed it and burned incense in front of it, kissed, washed and anointed it, gilded it or attached coins to it. Through ritual acts of this nature, people hoped for protection, for instance against enemies in war, as well as miracles. Consequently, icons were affixed to city fortification walls and the gates in them. Belief in the miraculous powers of icons was so powerful that there was talk of healing being effected by substances such as oil and dew alone which were exuded by images. Images were also known to have bled when they had been treated irreverently or wounded by unbelievers. Further, images were heard of which had withstood destruction through natural disasters and fires. The belief in the metaphysical ontological properties of the image transcending itself as a medium in its material essence culminated in the Acheiropoeita, images of Christ, the Virgin or saints which were self-created, not made by human hand. It was thought that simply touching them could cause them to multiply. An example of this is the famous image of Christ in Edessa, which is said to have been created by the imprint of the figure of Christ on canvas.

Icons are usually paintings on small panels that fit comfortably into one's hand – frequently they are painted in encaustic on wood, just like the images of the dead known from Egyptian mummy portraits. Nonetheless quite a number of ivory reliefs and pictures in enamel are also extant as icons. What mattered was that such images had to be portable and not tied to a particular place, since people had to have them before their eyes so that they could venerate them everywhere they went, at home and on travels, in monks' and prisoners' cells, on ships. Therefore people also wore icons in the form of amulets to ward off evil. Thus freed from the constraint of place, and that means specifically a church, icons, with their new mobility, could enter into private dwellings, where they became images for private devotions. Now autonomous, a status which was expressed not least in the circumstance that churches were by this time being built around miraculous images, a new type of picture emerged which prefigured the panel painting. Ultimately, over the centuries, it was to smooth the way for the non-representational picture of modern art.

## 2.3 Imago

Imago is the medieval Latin term for picture, more precisely, any type of representation, embracing visual representations in tangible form, reliefs, paintings, manuscript illuminations, etc. The human figure, man as God's creation in his likeness, is of paramount importance for the imago. The Greek term eikon is simply taken over as a loanword (icon) and translated into Latin. In old Latin, icon is related to 'imor' (= to be the same as). The Greek word icon already meant what corresponded or came to the same thing.

Moreover, the etymological relationship between 'imor' and 'imitor' underscores the component of after-image, which is decisive for the imago and, therefore, prefigures the mimesis theme as the focus of approach to the question of imaging. Although imago derives etymologically from eikon, its determinant reveals a metonymic shift all the way to différence. Whereas the pictorial function of eikon is to indicate corporeal presence and magic, that of the imago is more closely oriented towards the symbolic and towards representation.

The inherent pictorial reality of the icon, which rests on the identity of representation and what is represented, was not, with the exception of Rome, tolerated by the Western Church. Rome of course still belonged to the Byzantine Empire before Iconoclasm. First it had to be established how much reality, corporeality and accessibility might be conceded to the image.

### 2.3.1 Imago Dei

As for the Imago Dei, the image of god, scholars dealing with the Christian imago point out the similarity between the two. They take pains to emphasize likeness, Christ being the likeness of God the Father and man, whose form he assumed. God himself is peerless and therefore cannot be represented. God's creating Christ in his own image as a mortal is, however, possible. The incarnation, God's becoming flesh in the human figure of Christ, was therefore advanced as the main argument by the Iconodouloi during Iconoclasm for defending the Imago Dei. Nevertheless, the conception of the image of Christ as a mystical deputy of God was rejected.

The smooth transition between archetype and ectype so characteristic of the Byzantine icon, which guarantees the transference of efficacy, could not be accepted for the imago. The archetype (God) infinitely irradiated the after-image (Christ). Identity is transmuted into simile. The understanding of images is based on the word and tolerated as signum. The concept of imago is used to mean sign and symbol in texts as early as the 7th and 8th centuries. Images were to serve as didactic exemplars and were not for veneration. The image thus became allied with the idea of education - a synthesis which would become the theological foundation of Lutheran Protestantism. It also decisively influenced attitudes to the image. Mediation takes the place of the unmediated and magic. As after-image or ectype, the image becomes detached, untouchable. Now kept at a far remove from the corporeal, it is elevated to the plane of the idea and the ideal. Consequently, the imago was banished from sculpture for a long time. Large sculptures in stone contradict inimical attitudes to the physical and the

material in the image. The image retreats from the spiritual plane, tying itself strongly to the picture support, allying itself with the surface and subordinating itself to the whole conception of the pictorial system of reference, the cosmic iconographic programme of sacred architecture in the basilica and cathedral. It appears as ivory carving on sarcophagi, retables, manuscript illuminations, wall paintings and mosaics. One of the definitive imago-representations of Early Christianity is the *Imago Dei* in cross-domed churches. Christ is enthroned as Pantocrator in the dome; the Virgin is represented in the apse with saints. *Majestas-Domini* representation of this type is a formal borrowing from the Roman emperor portrait. However, it dismisses the idea of corporeality and being the deputy of God personified in a mosaic, dissolving both into immateriality. What is reserved for the *Imago Dei* is the mystery of unification with the image, the *unio mystica* with what is represented. This is granted solely to relics, the Bible, liturgical vessels and the Cross, that is, to consecrated symbols.

### **2.3.2 Imago Pietatis**

After centuries of dispute between the Iconoclasts (chief exponents: Eusebius, Epiphanius, Gregory of Nyssa, Asterius of Amasia) and the Iconodouloi (leading exponents: John of Damascus, Theodorus Studites, Alexander Nicephorus) over the image's right to existence and the form in which it might be permitted to exist, the *imago* emerged, characteristically, as the em'bodiment' of the divine in human form from the sign of the Cross, the Crucifix (the Crucifix of hereditary Bishop Gero in Cologne Cathedral, ca 975; the Cologne forked Crucifix in St. Maria in the Capitol, ca 1300).

The *Imago Pietatis*, which Gothic art developed as the group of three-dimensional sculpted figures and in which the Body of Christ is present as the embodiment of God in persona in his corporeal sufferings, is evidence for this change in the Western conception of the image. It was caused by the import of Early Byzantine icons to the West. Thus, the return of depicting the human body was concomitant with the return of the idea of the incarnation of the image. The Gothic image venerated by pilgrims was regarded as miraculous; since it invariably contained relics, it, too, was venerated. Dominant over the icon and its model of the *incarnatio*, the *Imago Dei* emerges from its decorporealized, shadowy existence as reproduction and mediator of the Christian doctrine of Salvation to promote the creation of the work of visual art in the form of the free-standing figure (representational carvings, sculpture), as it came to full maturity in the Renaissance, also aided by the revitalisation of the ancient tradition of the idol. Sculpture as three-dimensional art grew out of the church as a whole building and its discrete architectural elements. The Gothic picture column illustrates superbly how the column first became associated with the representation of the human figure before ultimately detaching itself from its architectural context. It gained in volume of its own, began to invade space and was elevated to the free-standing figure, i. e. the statue. Whereas the *imago*, reversing the original conception of it as a sign or simile-like image, formed an independent picture space which brought forth sculpture and plasticity, the icon does not achieve the transition to three-dimensionality. It remains limited to the pictorial panel and thus contributes to the emergence of the panel painting. (see *Visionaries*)

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