

Personal Communication, May 26, 1972. LEVELS OF MEANING IN HAIDA ART

From: Wilson Duff

To:



For information and feedback only. Please do not quote me or hold me to this.

LEVELS OF MEANING IN HAIDA ART

Wilson Duff

Art conveys meaning by providing visual messages which can be generalized by metaphor to mean more things. Haida art, as exemplified by Edenshaw's painting of the Raven crest, uses metaphors created by two different modes of thought, and this produces two axes or levels of meaning. I have proposed that these be called the "iconographic" level and the "iconic" level. Both levels are used in conveying the complete artistic statement, the first to provide the subjects and the second to provide the predicates. The iconographic level identifies what and who the art is about, by answering the question "What does it represent?" The iconic level completes the statement by answering the further question "But what is it trying to say?"

The visual messages of the two levels are generalized on different kinds of logic, corresponding to the ways in which the mind, in its search for order, deals with "wholes" and with "parts". For an understanding of the profound importance of this difference I am indebted to the psychologist Silvano Arieti (The Intra-Psychic Self, 1967). According to him, the mind generalizes (creates classes of like things) in two fundamentally different ways, which result in the creation of two different kinds of classes. "Secondary classes" consist of things which share all of their essential attributes in common, they are alike as wholes (eg "ravens"). These are products of our ordinary logic, which is part of the "secondary process" of cognition. "Primary classes" consist of things which are alike because they share a single significant attribute in

common, they are alike in part (eg all "Marys"). Primary classes are built on an archaic form of logic called "paleologic", which is part of the "primary process" of cognition. Primary logic still operates in dreams and in schizophrenia (where it produces such results as "I am Mary, so I am the Virgin Mary"). It also operates, in a self-conscious form, in metaphor, which permits us to express similarities between things in different secondary classes and thus see more order and meaning in the world.

Art makes use of both ways of generalizing, and that creates the two levels of meaning. The iconographic level works with ordinary logic, with things in secondary classes. It is generalized (the meaning of the subject is expanded) on the logic "the part stands for the whole", by metaphoric jumps to larger classes linked in a kind of taxonomic heirarchy. The iconic level works with paleologic, with primary classes, with analogies that give rise to metaphors. Its generalizations (expanding the meanings of the predicates) are free of normal logic. It can cast a wider net to find the linkages that bring order into the world. The total meaning of the work of art is the product of the complementary use of both of these modes of thought.

Iconography

The iconographic level is "on the surface" and is perceived first. Its visual messages, "icons", are wholes, both in form and in thought. Formally, they are perceived as gestalts, because the eye, in its quest for meaning, projects pre-existing perceptions onto the work of art until it finds a "fit". Conceptually, the icons are perceived as concepts, secondary classes, which also pre-exist. The icon identifies itself by name, because secondary classes are mediated by language, and "there is a word for it". The named concept is

borrowed from the natural world, where it is itself a secondary class ("raven") but at the same time a member of a larger class ("species in nature"). Used as a crest ("Raven"), it is also a member of a larger class ("crest animals"), and its distinctiveness in the natural world provides the analogy for its distinctiveness in the cultural system. It is an easy metaphoric jump from "Raven" to "people who use Raven as crest", and that is the icon's real meaning most of the time. For artistic statements of a high degree of generality, however, the subject can be generalized to mean "all people who use such crests", or even "all like subjects".

The metaphoric generalization of the icon to give it wider meaning requires a certain effort of the mind. The lazy, uneducated, or unstimulated eye may see only the first level of meaning, as we see only "Raven" in Edenshaw's painting. Quite probably the Haida mind made the first jump as a matter of course, aware that "people who use Raven as crest" was the most usual meaning, and that the Raven icon was merely the handiest visual device for conveying it. The further generalizations may never have been verbalized, except by the artist to himself as he explored ways of conveying wider meanings, and by the occasional perceptive viewer who searched them out.

There are limitations on the kinds of subjects which the Haida could identify by such icons. Since they have to refer back to the natural world, they can stand for only tangible forms, and are not capable of denoting abstract nouns like "song" or "happiness". Choices may have to be made in filling iconographic niches; for example, the Haida have icons for "raven", "eagle", and other species used as crests, and this^{precludes} having one which denotes "bird". The icons representing undifferentiated human faces or human figures seem to denote "human" or "in human guise" in general, rather than any specific group

of humans in particular. In referring back to a segment of the natural world, therefore, Haida iconography has to content itself with a single taxonomic level. Conceptually, icons can stand only for concrete nouns, and only for classes which the language has named. Grammatically, they can only be subjects, not predicates.

The meanings of iconography, in the sense of the semantic associations, exist pre-packaged in the mind, as shared concepts already mediated by language. All that the icon has to do, and in fact all that it is capable of contributing to the meaning, is to trigger into consciousness these existing meanings. Visually, it only has to meet the minimum requirements of recognition to do its whole job: a simple pictograph tattooed in faint blue lines on a Haida chest evokes the same concept, with the same semantic load, as Edenshaw's mural painting. No amount of enrichment of the visual image, no more faithful portrait of Raven as it is in nature, can add or detract from this part of the meaning. "Raven" remains "Raven" no matter how well or poorly it is depicted. The locus of iconographic meaning is in the mind, not in the art. The Haida artist takes care of this chore almost as an aside, then gets on with the other visual ways of conveying meaning. The style, creativity, and beauty of Haida art do not reside in the iconography as such, but in its other aspects.

The iconographic level of art is a level of subjects without predicates. Its only meanings are statements of identity, which lead to chains of association which are in the mind, not in the art. In the art, it is an utterance started but not finished.

Iconics

The iconic level is deeper within the work of art and intrudes itself less easily and less completely on the consciousness. Its visual messages are

not wholes but parts, details, and its meanings arise from their character as open metaphors which invite analogies. The "parts" may be elements or attributes. Design elements may be perceived as entities without being icons, and their conduct and relationships may invite analogy with similar conduct and relationships in other realms, such as the society of men. Or the "part" may be an attribute, inviting analogy with similar attributes in other systems: the curve of a line may suggest a movement in dance, and a path of social conduct, and the shape of the world. The analogy conjures up the metaphor, suggesting the new subject to which the meaning applies.

If icons are "symbols" of the bundles of pre-existing meanings they trigger in the mind, the units of iconic meaning are "signs". To a much greater degree they must resemble in form the ideas they represent. They have to "look like" the attributes for which they stand. To say a beautiful thing, the iconic message has to be a beautiful thing. It has to activate the imagination, create the metaphor, bring into existence the new primary class which may never have existed before and for which there is no name. If the locus of iconographic meaning is in the mind, the locus of iconic meaning is much more in the art. In iconography, the visual message (icon) is isomorphic with a whole, but does not have to resemble it very faithfully in order to identify it. In iconic design, the visual message is isomorphic with a part, a quality or attribute in a larger system, and has to mirror it exquisitely in order to get its subtle meaning across.

Getting the iconic meanings out of a work of art is almost as difficult as getting them in. Because meaningful statements require subjects as well as predicates, the searching out of the iconic meanings cannot be dissociated from the reading of the iconography. From the outset, the iconography has a head

start. It is no mistake to speak of "reading" the iconography, for to recognize the icon is to discover its name. The reading of the iconography is a process of verbalization. Art names its subjects, but only suggests its predicates. Predicates do not come in classes.

Having recognized the icon, as we have seen, the viewer may well generalize its meaning to the level of human concerns, for these are what interest him most. But in the iconic realm there is no such direct way to capture his mind and launch it to the first plateau of higher meaning. There are no ready-made categories of meaning, there are only pregnant hints. By the same token, however, the meanings are not restricted to existing classes of related things. Ideally, they are limited only by the artist's power to imagine and suggest, the viewer's to perceive, and the ability of the mind to find order in the world. However, on this axis as well, it is the analogies with the affairs of men that are of most direct interest to the viewer. Dwelling on this level, the iconic meanings suggest the ideal shapes of conduct in human affairs, and relate them to the cosmic order of things. Haida art is mostly about people.

In Haida art the iconic messages are unusually abundant and expressive. One cannot always separate entities from attributes; for example, the "formline", which is the most typical design element, acts at the same time as an entity and its path of conduct. Haida lines are precise, self-conscious curves, sensitive boundaries and steered lines of action. Every element has its own space and its own clear role. There are primary and secondary, dominant and subordinate entities in Haida design, as there are in Haida society. Some of the shapes, like the "ovoid", are cosmic shapes, the ideal shapes for things to be. There is structuring, with inner lines of force and striving. And there is an all-pervasive precision and control, which says that every line, every relationship is exactly the way it should be, on purpose and with meaning.

Haida art is pre-eminently an art of line. Distinctive lines eventually create distinctive new forms, which seen as wholes invite identification as icons. When such new forms emerge, and do not refer back to forms in nature, we may suspect that a new kind of icon has been created. The "salmon-trout head" of Haida art seems to be such an iconic icon. Not burdened with a natural meaning (it does not represent a salmon trout head any more than a "herring-bone" pattern represents a herring), it is free to take a more abstract meaning, such as "nephews". Yet it remains iconic, inviting analogy with all things that share the attributes common to the salmon trout and nephews: life, growth, promise, emergence. It is in microcosm what all Haida art was striving to become: a beautiful design, constructed from beautiful behaviours, and conveying an open-ended range of meanings which align man and his conduct with the cosmic shapes of the world.

Style. Most of the iconic meanings in art are latent and implicit, lying mutely embedded in the "style". That, to a very large degree, is what style is. The young artist learns the art style of his people as a craft, just as he learns to make a speech, or perform a dance. He is necessarily conscious of its attributes as craftsmanship and visual design. However he is not necessarily conscious of all of the meanings which his predecessors have incorporated into the style, the analogies which led them to inject the patterned nuances of visual design whose meanings are still there, gently intruding on the consciousness. One suspects, however, that in an art so highly "stylized" as that of the Haida, while the tradition was alive, many of those meanings must have lain very close to the threshold of consciousness. As he graduates from craftsman to artist he develops an edge of innovation of his own, discovering old meanings and expressing them more clearly, and straining to convey new meanings. He might not

always be able to verbalize this process of making art truer to the ideal shapes of things, but then perhaps speech is not the only medium in which analogies can be expressed and order brought into human experience.

Style in art can convey meaning in another way as well, since it can be perceived not only as a multitude of patterned visual attributes but also as a whole, as a gestalt. Seen this way, the style can act as a semantic "frame" to identify immediately the system being dealt with. Every icon rendered in the visual style "Haida crest art" is read as falling within that semantic system as well. In this way style assists the iconography to do its part of the job.

Abstraction. Haida art is said to be "conventionalized" and "abstract". In their crest art the Haida artists were making no attempt whatever to portray faithfully the creatures of the natural world; they were portraying concepts, or perhaps more precisely, metaphors. The icons "refer back" not so much to nature itself as to the Haida taxonomic system. "Raven" stands already analyzed and translated into the essential attributes of its "species"; it has already been lifted a couple of levels of abstraction out of the hard, chaotic reality of the physical world. Consensus has also been reached on which of the attributes must be shown, and which emphasized, to identify it visually. In this sense the art is "conventionalized" rather than realistic.

The various degrees of "abstraction" in Haida art are products of the interplay between the iconographic and the iconic modes of representation. The more prominent the role of iconic design, and the more difficult it is to recognize the iconographic subject, the more "abstract" we consider the art to be. Iconic design cannot exist alone, except as an esoteric exercise or as empty decoration. It requires a host or foundation of iconography on which to root and feed and grow, just as poetry and oratory need foundations in ord-

inary speech. Yet in order to get its messages across, it has to compete with the iconography for attention. It is a competition in which the iconography has strong natural advantages, for the eye and the mind strain first to find the icons and concepts of that realm, and then are tempted to rest (assuming that to know what it represents is to know what it means). The task of the artist is to draw the attention back into the design, pique it again to a high state of vigilance, and then present it with the subtle pre-gestalt images and signs that convey the iconic messages. Just as the poet makes use of devices such as versification, rhyming, and repetition to draw attention to his words, and then treats the words as images endowed with more than their natural meanings, so the artist has to use visual devices such as proportion, patterned repetition, and self-conscious perfection of form to draw attention to the visual elements which he has endowed with more than their iconographic meanings.

The competition does not at first pose a threat to the iconography. A Raven design can become highly "stylized" without losing its ability to trigger the meaning "Raven" (in fact the style, as gestalt, may assist). It can easily afford to give some ground in order that the iconic messages may be conveyed. These messages are, after all, about the same general subjects, even though they are being transmitted on a different wave-length.

But Haida art carries the competition much further than that. In the most "abstract" designs, not only is the iconic mode built up, but the iconographic mode is broken down. In Bill Holm's terms, the design shows increasing degrees of abstraction, from "configurative" through "expansive" to "distributive", by which point the gestalt (silhouette) has completely disintegrated and the iconography seems impossible to read. In the past we have seen this process as a consequence of "adapting the design to the field", and of the design becoming

completely "decorative". What we failed to see was that it also represented the ascendance of a new level of artistic meaning.

This interplay, to some degree at least, must have been conscious in the minds of the artists. How did they decide on how far to permit the subjugation of the iconography to go? Does Edenshaw's Raven represent a nice equilibrium between the two modes, permitting both to express their meanings with appropriate clarity and emphasis? Or, in fairness to the iconic mode, should the iconography be broken down into parts, so that the eye has to search out clues to its identity one at a time, as seems to be the case on some of the painted hats with distributive designs? Or were the two modes best used in different proportions for different artistic tasks: permitting the iconography to speak first when the primary job was to display a chief's emblem, as on the Raven screen; but utilizing the full powers of the language of iconics to resolve profound and general problems, as may well be the case on the painted box from Chilkat which has established itself so clearly as the final test of our ability to recognize meaning in this art? Or was the iconic mode pressing toward a climax of total victory, in a vain attempt to possess the sublime free of the mundane, the general free of the particular, an attempt bound to push the art over the brink into complete abstraction, where it could only detumescence, like sails without wind, into empty decoration? Or, perhaps, as I think is the case with Edenshaw's great chest fronts, the veritable climax of Haida art, was he straining to perform the logically impossible feat of fusing the two modes one into the other, of creating an iconic iconography, blending the cognitive powers of metaphor and logic into a single wider pattern of awareness, with which to see and express the essential order of the world, and set man and woman into harmony with it? Is that the self-appointed but impossible goal of all great arts? Isn't it more than worth the effort to try?