

Symbolism and Iconography in the Art of P. Buckley Moss

Symbols: A representation that stands for or has a meaning different from what is visually apparent. For example, a lamb may be used as a symbol of Christ in an image.

Symbolism in art is the practice of using an image to represent that which is tangible or intangible or to invest a thing or object with a meaning that is not readily apparent. The use of the image suggests a deeper or subconscious meaning other than what is visually portrayed. Symbolism is the hidden meaning behind the visual image.

Iconography: Not to be confused with "Icon." Iconography is the area of study dealing with the description of visual images and symbols. This is the 'subject' of a work of art.

Icon: A revered work, specifically a portrait representing a saintly person such as Christ, the Virgin Mary, Madonna and Child or any number of Saints. An icon can appear in any medium, though most often the word is associated with paintings. In art history, icons appeared specifically in Byzantine, Greek, Russian Orthodox church art representing Christ or the Madonna. In Buddhist art, the image itself becomes more than the image of the saint portrayed, but rather becomes the embodiment of that figure (usually Buddha). Some paintings, such as Leonardo Da Vinci's Mona Lisa was so beloved by its viewers it became an icon. In Moss art, The Blue Madonna could be considered an icon as it is a beloved work of a revered personage.

The Symbolism

The Canada Geese

Throughout the history of western art and civilization the geese served as religious icons to which virtuous qualities were attached. In early Christian art they represented the theological idea of Divine Providence. They were harbingers of weather and changes of season, and therefore seen as blessings from God. It was noted by some that geese mate for life and both the male and female participate in the raising of baby birds. This observation evolved with geese becoming symbols for loyalty and matrimony.

The one aspect of the goose which was unappealing was its clawed webbed foot. Traditionally, the webbed foot is a symbol for pride, a sin. During Medieval and Renaissance times, the devil was often shown with the webbed foot as part of its appendages.

Pat's Canada Geese are symbols of Divine Providence. They are often painted in pairs to represent loyalty, matrimony and vigilance. Pat paints her geese without their feet so as not to have any negative connotations associated with her symbols of divinity.

The Horse

From the very beginning of human history, the horse has played an important part in the imagery of artists. It continues to this day with images created by contemporary artists like P. Buckley Moss. The horse has traditionally been symbolic of human sexuality/sensuality or freedom. Pat's horses, with their flaring nostrils and flowing manes represent a spirit of freedom. The horses have an underlying sensuality as they are painted in the foreground, portrait style and are usually eye to eye with the viewer.

When shown in paintings with the plain people, they are always bridled in some way. This silent visual message represents the plain people as virtuous and with the ability to control their baser human emotions and carnal desires.

The Plain People

When Pat arrived in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia in 1964, she became acquainted with the Amish and Old Order Mennonites who lived in the counties surrounding Waynesboro. While the plain people have a long history going back to the Anabaptists, Pat's highly stylized interpretation of them is both generic and symbolic. The figures do not represent specific individuals, but are used for their visual archetypal value.

With their strong work ethic, traditional lifestyle and devotion to faith, family and community these plain people became part of her iconography; symbolic "Living Saints," supplanting earlier Catholic ones. The elongated figures, part of Pat's unique style, are shown as hard working, faithful, and family oriented. The woman is often depicted holding a basket of eggs or a baby in a basket to represent new life. The man is often shown with a bucket of sticks, a symbol of manhood or fertility, which is a common symbol found throughout art history.

The figures are depicted holding a basket of apples to indicate both a strong work ethic and the 'fruits' of labor. The female figures are painted as slightly transparent with the landscape showing through part of the torso. This transparency is used to symbolize the 'earth mother' or woman's intuitive nature.

Moss Trees

Pat has remarked that a friend of hers once said that as the artist, she was like the tree in her paintings, in the foreground observing the scene beyond. Moss trees are defined by a strength of character created from graceful, sensuous lines in a crisp clean style that is easily identifiable. While quite obviously a tree, it represents more than just a tree in a landscape. The black tree in Moss art is steeped in symbolic meanings.

Trees have been used as symbols for over 2000 years in both Christian and non-Christian art. The black tree often appears in the foreground of the image becoming the symbolic silent witness to the scene. In Christian art, biblical references abound, "The Tree of Knowledge," the "Family Tree," and "Tree of the Cross." In pagan art, the tree was worshiped as a nature spirit by the Druids. In Moss art, the tree can be a witness to a scene (*Within My Soul*), the cross of the crucifixion (*Sugar Valley Farm, Blue Crucifixion*) or sometimes a reference to the family tree (*All in a Tree*).

The branches of Moss trees often extend beyond the confines of a circular format, a technique dating from the period of the Renaissance, which allows the subject within the painting to extend out into the world of the viewer. The black tree is one of Pat's most recognizable forms of iconography and a favorite subject among collectors.

The Religious Works:

The Madonna

The Madonna is depicted as a saintly and loving, protective and suffering, archetypal female. She is one of the most common forms of iconography found in both art and literature. The Virgin Mary historically is seen as the earth mother, goddess, protector and holy creator.

Pat often paints the Madonna both with and without child. The depiction of the mother-figure shows the influence of her Catholic upbringing and her respect for the mother-child bond. Pat has created two versions of her Blue Madonna, one an oil painting and one an etching, yet there are other lesser well known Madonnas in Pat's historic collection that are as worthy of respect as any great Renaissance masterpiece.

The Crucifixion

Like the Madonnas, there are numerous paintings of the Crucifixion in Pat's repertoire showing the influence of both her Catholic upbringing and an acknowledgment of this iconography in the context of art history. Pat is a trained artist who studied at The Cooper Union in New York City during the 1950's. This was a time in art history when the center of the art world was not in Europe as it had been previously, but in New York City. Abstract expressionists made a name for themselves, all the while revolutionizing how the rest of the world looked at American art and art in general. In *Blue Crucifixion* and *The Yellow Crucifix*, Pat expresses her strong religious convictions in an abstract expressionist style with rich sumptuous color and graceful lines.

From the time of early Christian art (3rd through the 6th century) through the Gothic and Renaissance periods, the depiction of the crucified Christ is an important part of iconography in art history. Aside from modernist versions of the Crucifixion in Pat's historical works, there are also realistically rendered images such as *Crucifixion*, a pen and ink work which was created early in Pat's career. These religious images show the profound influence of Pat's Catholic upbringing and her strong moral and spiritual sense.

The Black Cat

(See definition of "The Drollery in Art" located in another part of this volume.)

Illuminated manuscripts, books created by hand by monks or nuns were meant to 'enlighten' and to convert the heathen to Christianity. The drolleries, stylized or fantastic images, were used as a symbol of humility by the monks who 'signed' their work not with a written word, but with an image, usually an animal. During the Middle Ages drolleries were used in the margins of books to add humor and much later with the decline of the church, drolleries became grotesque or fantastical caricatures with political undertones.

During Pat's studies at *The Cooper Union* she was required to create her own illuminated manuscript transcribing St. Thomas Aquinas' *Book on Man* (on display in the Main Gallery at the P. Buckley Moss Museum in Waynesboro, Virginia). St. Thomas explained that the human being is both soul and substance (having both a soul and a body). Through this exercise of creating her own illuminated manuscript, Pat was well acquainted with the use of the drollery in early Christian art.

Pat's drollery, the stylized black cat, appears in her art as an additional signature. It is also said to represent her within the image of the work itself, therefore the cat is often hidden in the image, but is always depicted looking out at the viewer. Over the years, the cats have evolved into individual characters much like Kris Kringle or the little fledgling. The cat has also become very popular with Moss collectors to the point that some collect only the images of the cats.

The Fledgling

In Pat's history, the fledgling first appears in the pages of her St. Thomas Aquinas' *Book on Man*, but it is believed that she actually started drawing the little bird quite a bit earlier. The bird also appears in an early etching of St. Francis, eventually evolving in Moss' art to become a personal symbol for the artist; the underlying belief being that even an ugly little bird can still make beautiful music despite it's outward appearance.

Traditionally, the baby bird is symbolic of the human soul. In Moss art, the little fledgling inspires the viewer to, "*Open your mouth and sing your own song,*" or in essence become the person you truly aspire to be using all of your God given talents while being true to yourself.

The Moravian Style House

The Moravian Style House, also called the generic house or spirit house, is based on the German style houses from the Moravian period of 1741 to 1844. The Moravian community was founded in Pennsylvania to form a kind of utopia which attempted to bring Christianity to Native Americans while still allowing for cultural expression. Their communal way of life established extraordinary 18th-century industry and hand made crafts which came about through shared cooperative efforts. The Moravian style houses and other communal buildings, including churches, were combined with 18th-century German style architectural elements. These included the use of herringbone pattern doors, high pitched roofs with flared eaves, brick jack-arched windows and doors, tiled roofs, sloping-roofed dormers, and parged stone walls. The deep-set windows represent the largest collection of Germanic style architecture in the United States.

In Pat's art, the Moravian style house is also referred to as a 'spirit house' or 'generic' house. The house is often painted without doors or a roof to symbolize a spiritual dwelling. A spirit or soul doesn't need a door or a roof in order to be closer to God. These stylized buildings are generally painted as a vertical element with long, clean lines. Buildings depicted with doors and a roof are usually realistic representations of an actual place.

Other symbols:

The Number Three often appears in Moss art as imagery; three cats, three children, three trees or even as a tri-oval or triptych-like format. The number three has a history in early Christian and Medieval art up through the Renaissance period. The use of the number three signifies balance and harmony and is symbolic of the Holy Trinity.

Eggs in Moss art signify new life or resurrection. Eggs in art history are often used as symbols of fertility.

Apples in a basket represent the 'fruits' of physical labor, or if the figure holding the basket is female, it could denote the woman's ability as a child bearer or archetypal earth mother.

The Horse Drawn Buggy is said to symbolize the passage of time.

BASKET OF APPLES ...

Apples are an ancient fertility symbol (particularly red apples) and are also a widespread symbol of love. In Christian symbology, the spherical form of the apple is an image of the earth, its beautiful color and sweetness correspondingly represent the temptations of the world. The apples consequently symbolizes the Fall and is often equated with the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil from which Adam and Eve ate.

A basket of apples in a Moss painting usually carried a mixed meaning. At times, the apples will symbolize love, especially when the basket is carried by either a young woman or a young man. At other times, a basket of apples will refer to hard work and, perhaps, to various human tribulations. These more negative references go back to a Biblical interpretations whereby our first parents, Adam and Eve, brought sickness and death and the necessity for hard work into our world by their disobedience in eating "the forbidden fruit."

BOWL OF EGGS ...

Eggs always symbolize new life.

In Christianity the egg is a resurrection symbol because Christ broke forth from the grave like a mature chick from the egg; the Easter egg, which had played a role as a fertility symbol in heathen spring celebrations, thus received a specifically Christian meaning.

In a P. Buckley Moss painting, a bowl (or a basket) of eggs always refers to the potential of new life. The egg with its oval shape is one of Pat's favorite symbols.

CARRIAGE ...

Obviously, a carriage is a vehicle of transportation. Its iconographic meaning in a painting by Moss usually is related to this obvious function -- that is, it provides the means for somebody to make a journey, both visually and intellectually, from one point of thought in the work to a second point of thought. Quite often, the people in the carriage will be seen as traveling along a road leading to some distant point in the painting's background. This point is frequently portrayed as a church. Paintings such as these can be referred to as "JOURNEY PAINTINGS."

Traditionally, the meaning of a carriage is closely associated with the symbolic meaning of the WHEEL and consequently with the symbolism of the SUN. In both cases movement is involved (the so-called "wheel-of-life") as well as the symbolic meaning of any circle (eternity -- with no beginning and no end). The iconography here is quite complicated!

MAN DRESSED IN BLACK ...

Amish figures are included in many of P. Buckley Moss' paintings. A man dressed in black is most likely such a reference.

For Pat Moss, the Amish people have become her "living saints." Their lives and their attitudes represent for her "the good life." The Amish that she portrays are models of goodness and integrity that she intends to be both contemplated and admired, if not emulated, by her viewers.

For more information on the Amish, their beliefs, and their life style please consult your local library.