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Review of "Ancient Mythological Images and their Interpretation: an Introduction to Iconology, Semiotics, and Image Studies in Classical Art History," by Katharina Lorenz

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Katharina Lorenz, *Ancient Mythological Images and their Interpretation: An Introduction to Iconology, Semiotics, and Image Studies in Classical Art History*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 288. ISBN 9780521139724. \$34.99 (pb).

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[Preview](#)

Katharina Lorenz's book is a welcome addition to the field of classical art history. Aimed at students, the text functions as an introduction to the use of art historical theories and methodologies in the study of mythological imagery. Lorenz describes three methodologies, iconology, semiotics, and image studies, analyzes their use in previous scholarship, and applies them to the same three ancient artworks. Lorenz positions her book as an experiment. The goal of the book is to consider how we study ancient mythological imagery, rather than specific conclusions on Greek and Roman art.

In the introduction, "The experiment: methods–images–objects," Lorenz outlines her approach to the material and highlights a number of current issues facing the discipline, including how to position the study of classical imagery within the larger field of art history. As she emphasizes, there exist methodological and disciplinary divides between scholars of ancient and modern art. Most current texts on art historical theory examine the art of the post-antique world; relatively few publications analyze these theories specifically in regards to ancient Greek or Roman art. Arguing for the value of art historical methodologies as a tool for the interpretation of ancient art, Lorenz encourages a greater engagement between scholars of classical art and the wider discipline. At the same time, she argues against an exclusive study of theory at the expense of the image. Lorenz's introduction is timely, and an important addition to current discussions among classical art historians as we determine the future direction of our field.

In the first chapter, “Introducing iconology,” Lorenz outlines the main tenets of iconology as well as tracing the development of the methodology through the works of its major writers. She begins with Erwin Panofsky, summarizing his three-stage process of iconological analysis before moving on to a discussion of other thinkers, including notably Alois Riegl, Aby Warburg, and Ernst Cassirer, and their influence on Panofsky and his development of iconology. She ends the chapter with a study of iconology after Panofsky, highlighting the critiques of Georges Didi-Huberman, who argues that Panofsky’s iconology ignores the viewer and the process of viewing.

While Lorenz’s direct engagement with the primary source material is thorough, since Lorenz does not tailor her summary of iconology specifically for ancient art, the chapter covers material that can be found in a number of other texts on art historical theories. It is not until Chapter 3, and the sections on semiotics and image studies follow the same organizational format, that she discusses iconology in terms of ancient art and examines how iconology has been used in classical scholarship. In addition, while the introductory nature of the material covered in the book clearly indicates that it is aimed at students, the language and syntax she utilizes complicate her explanations of the methodologies, and may make the book difficult reading for students at the undergraduate, and perhaps even graduate, level.

The chapter introducing iconology is followed by “Iconology in action,” in which Lorenz applies iconological analysis three well-chosen and well-known artworks: a fifth-century BCE Attic red-figure hydria depicting the Judgment of Paris now housed in Karlsruhe, the Hellenistic gigantomachy frieze from the Great Altar at Pergamon, and a second-century CE Roman sarcophagus depicting Meleager on his deathbed (Louvre, Ma 539). Each case study is self-contained. Lorenz’s discussion of the Karlsruhe hydria considers the Oriental dress of Paris in light of its production in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Her analysis of the Pergamon frieze compares the frieze to earlier representations of the gigantomachy, focusing on classical Athenian compositions. Finally, her discussion of the Louvre sarcophagus considers how the depiction of Meleager as both hunter and warrior evokes Roman virtues.

In “Narratives of object and meaning,” Lorenz unpacks how she utilized iconology in each case study. Using specific examples from the case studies, she considers how iconology can be used to elucidate meaning in the artwork, examining its strengths and challenges. For example, she highlights iconology’s contextualization of an image within historical context — the hydria in relation to Athenian social practices, the Great Altar frieze in light of Pergamon’s relationship with Athens, and the Louvre sarcophagus as a commemoration of a Roman life during a period of political instability. Lorenz’s evaluation of iconology is both thoughtful

and thought-provoking, and along with the later reflections on semiotics and image studies, serves as one of the most valuable sections of the book.

Next, Lorenz creates a historiography of iconology specifically for ancient art, considering how previous scholars have utilized the methodology. Lorenz begins with examinations of two books with similar goals to her own: *Looking at Greek Art* by Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell and *Interpreting the Images of Greek Myths: an Introduction* by Klaus Junker. Lorenz then analyzes specific scholarly studies in relation to the chosen methodology, including notably the work of Otto Brendel.

Lorenz then moves onto the next methodology: semiotics. The section follows the same format as that on iconology with three similarly titled and formatted chapters. "Introducing semiotics" describes the methodology as developed in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce before giving a short introduction to structuralism and post-structuralism focusing on the work of Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Mieke Bal.

In "Semiotics in action," Lorenz considers the same three artworks. Lorenz's semiotic analysis of each object focuses on how the interactions between the figures and their arrangement within the composition communicate specific thematic messages. With the Karlsruhe hydria, she focuses on how the theme of desire is conveyed. Her examination of the Pergamon frieze considers how the familial relationships between the gods are shown, and how an overall theme of the gods as a unified group who enforce order in the universe is indicated. Finally, with the Louvre sarcophagus, she analyzes how the interwoven ideas of love, loss, and vengeance are communicated.

In "Narratives of sign and signification," she examines how the ahistorical nature of semiotics can be utilized within a historical framework. She also compares semiotics to iconology, considering how each approach differs and how the utilization of each methodology led to different insights in the case studies. For instance, she argues that semiotics' focus on the production of meaning allowed for a greater understanding of the roles of age and gender in Roman concepts of mourning displayed on the Louvre sarcophagus. The second half of the chapter's considers how scholars of classical art including Tonio Hölscher, Jas Elsner, and Luca Giuliani utilize semiotics in their work and consider questions of form and style, the gaze, and narrative.

In chapter 7, "Introducing image studies." Lorenz begins by defining the parameters of image studies as broader than that of traditional art history with its incorporation wider variety of visual imagery. She then includes an explanation of her use of the term image studies, arguing that it encompasses both Anglo-American visual culture studies and German *Bildwissenschaft*, before tracing the development of the two approaches,

focusing on the work of William J. T. Mitchell, Gottfried Boehm, and Hans Belting.

In Chapter 8, “Image studies in action,” Lorenz compares the Karlsruhe hydria to other depictions of the Judgment of Paris and analyzes how the hydria communicated narrative visually. The Pergamon frieze case study is Lorenz’s first examination of the sculpture within its architectural framework. She analyzes the physical process of viewing, arguing that it was key to the communication of messages of both divine and Attalid power. Finally, her examination of the Louvre sarcophagus focuses on Atalanta, arguing that she plays a central role in the construction of a narrative that asks a Roman viewer to ignore certain aspects of the well-known myth to communicate specific allegorical meanings.

In “Narratives of space and perspective,” Lorenz argues that image studies overcomes some of the limitations of iconology and semiotics by both treating the artwork as an object as considered by iconology and as a social process as examined by semiotics. She then examines the usage of image studies in classical art scholarship considering the work of Bettina Bergmann and Richard Neer.

In the final chapter, “The study of mythological images as a threesome – assessing the experiment,” Lorenz analyzes the strengths and limitations of the methodologies and their application in the case studies. She brings together the conclusions made in each case study and considers both how the interaction of the methodologies can produce further insights. This conclusion provides a model for how to use multiple methodologies in tandem, and reemphasizes the importance of considering the process as well as the conclusions in the study of ancient art.

Overall, Lorenz’s book is successful. The case studies exemplifying effective applications of art historical methodologies, as well as the well-researched footnotes and bibliography, make the book a valuable resource for students. In addition, it is important that we as scholars continue to reflect on the discipline and ask ourselves and our students how we study ancient art and why these methodologies are valuable. Lorenz’s book not only asks these questions, but helps students to answer them.