

Group 6 – Highlights of World Art, from 1600-1850
Symbolism in Art: Obvious and Implied

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to our group tour.

Our theme is Symbolism in Art: The Obvious & the Implied.

We will present 8 objects.

Symbolism for our objects may appear to be obvious at first glance. However we would like to explore the political, social or theological allegory which is implied.

We ask you to bear in mind that the meaning of visual symbols change over time and also change according to the audience. The symbolic meaning obvious to the culture for which it was created may have been deliberately obscured from those outside the culture. It's an idea which intrigues us.

We will begin our journey in New Zealand with a figure from the Maori culture.

Object 1: Maori, Ngati Kahungunu, *Poutokomanawa (Post Figure)*, c. 1840, Aotearoa (New Zealand), 2001.65a,b G256

Object 2: *Diptych icon*, about 1700, Ethiopia, 2009-39-2 G254

Object 3: Jali with Pointed Arc, Mughal dynasty, 18th century, Indian, 2000.78 G243

Object 4: *Vajrabhairava*, 18th century, Tibet, 89.52 G254

Object 5: Standing Screen with Marble Panel, 17th century, 96.120.7a-d & Folding Armchair, late 16th century, China, 98.80.3 G217

Object 6: Pierre-Phillippe Thomire, *Clock with Vestals*, c. 1790, French, 82.25 G314

Object 7: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Pier Table, Italian, c. 1768, 64.70 G307

Object 8: Chardin, *The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Which Are Accorded Them*, 1766, French, 52.15 G306

Transition 1: The large post figure of the Maoris had singularly strong familial and ancestral symbolism. The next stop on our tour will be to a continent and culture far removed from the Maoris of New Zealand. Let's take a close look at a unique and detailed icon from 17th century Ethiopia.

Transition 2: This Ethiopian icon is fully packed with many symbols, which would have had very specific meanings within the 17th Century Ethiopian Orthodox community. Now you will see another an object, which leads the viewer toward a more personal, unspecified, yet no less meaningful interpretation.

Transition 3: This ornately-patterned architectural element without recognizable features symbolizes the underlying (almost mathematical) order of the cosmos— it dapples light, providing shade and privacy. This is a calm vision to hold as we transition to a textile representing the “nature of the cosmos” in a completely different way!

Transition 4: (Not included)

Transition 5: The Folding Armchair and Standing Screen symbolize the values of traditional China through the use of rare materials and subtle designs. Next we will view a French decorative arts object, which uses classical images to convey a message.

Transition 6: We’ve now seen a luxury decorative arts object from the neoclassical period in France, which used many obvious classical references to silently preach Diderot’s idea of inspiring virtue and purifying manners while upholding the state. Now let’s go with Joan to see another luxury object with obvious classical images and let’s find out what was implied by the symbols.

Transition 7: In the 17th century, we’ve seen how classic symbols started to become appropriated for use as status symbols. In the process, the meanings of the symbols became less important than what the presence of the symbols implied about the knowledge and culture of the owners. In the pier table, the symbols announce how knowledgeable about antiquities and how wealthy and cultured the owners are. This is a piece meant to impress those who view it. In the next piece we see the classical symbols of antiquity laid out to represent the various specific accomplishments of the owner.

CONCLUSION

Symbolism in art has existed since humans first made marks on cave walls and carved small, portable sculpture. Some symbols seem 'obvious' but experts who study symbols and their meaning still puzzle over the 'implied' meaning of many marks or images used by different cultures all over the globe throughout history. When symbols are understood, they add internal depth, sharper focus, and deeper meaning to art objects.

Today you visited several different cultures that created work from the 17-18th Centuries. On this tour we examined the meaning of an oversize chair from China, a carved center post of a Lodge in New Zealand and an elaborately decorated clock from France, each offering clues to their overall meaning. We, as the viewer, just need to work a little harder to dig for deeper meaning.

Symbols often come from a specific place and time, but their meanings can metamorphosize as time progresses. We have seen here how symbols can have meanings that are personal to those who live with the objects, and other times when symbology is used as an outward statement to communicate the status or accomplishments of the objects' owners. The Enlightenment of the 17th century was a critical period when individualism started to eclipse communal values, and we saw this reflected in how classical symbols were used, particularly in Europe. We are enriched by seeking to understand not just the symbols that we can identify, but by reaching beneath the surface to understand how those symbols are used and what they imply in various cultural settings.

I hope you will visit Mia again soon and explore the collection through many scheduled activities and other tours. Thank you for viewing 'Symbols in Art: The Obvious and the Implied'.