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The invisible divine in the history of art. Is Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) still relevant for decoding Christian iconography?

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ABSTRACT

References to the divine have been frequent in the history of Christian art. As examples, this article surveys the symbolism of light and gold, the rhetoric of gesture, and the theatricality of the pictorial space. Sacred art is closely linked to biblical, liturgical and theological texts which are full of metaphorical expressions of transcendent realities. Since artists, patrons and viewers considered these texts authoritative, they must be consulted to interpret artworks correctly. This study argues that Catholic theology and the magisterium have constantly called for references to the divine. As a theoretical framework, this image theology helps to interpret the art-historical data with new questions that tourists and communicators today usually do not ask. This is because Christian art mediates the meaning of divine revelation, which is not self-explanatory. It needs to be decoded with a method interested in both images and texts. Erwin Panofsky has presented such a method. His 'iconology' consists of three steps for describing, analyzing and interpreting images. This article claims that the interpretation of Christian art is a prime example of the ongoing applicability of Panofsky's method as a tool for decoding iconography in pastoral, academic and social media communications, and examines a selection of best practices in such communications.

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1. Introduction: Learning how to see again

Visual representations are of increasing interest in the humanities and social sciences today. Earlier already, a 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1992), 'iconic turn' (Boehm 1994) or 'visualistic turn' (Sachs-Hombach 2003) in historical scholarship has been noted. A similar interest in visual culture can be found in religious tourism. The artistic heritage, in particular that of the Catholic Church, attracts visitors' attention all over the world, confirmed by the inflow of an international mass tourism in important

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churches, art museums, shrines, pilgrimage sites or charitable institutions (Stausberg 2011; Galindo García 2009; Vukonić 1996). These visits happen daily or on the occasion of special events. An example of the latter will be the 2025 Jubilee in Rome, soon to be announced with the bull of Pope Francis.

The mass tourism at religious sites, however, is often dominated by cultural curiosity combined with eagerness to explore new places (Wiśniewski 2018, 200). Christian artworks in museum exhibitions or in church architectures could be seen primarily as objects of aesthetic pleasure (Clifton 2007, 112). What is not considered then is that they can also be manifestations of ideas. In art, man makes sense of the world and what is beyond the world. To decode such ideas in artworks, the viewers need skills or a method: attentive observation, reflection and interpretation. But such abilities are not a given in our fast-paced times. The ubiquity of the pictorial in the new technologies of communications, information and entertainment has generated a 'flood of images' (Bredenkamp 2021, 1–3). Already in 1952, Josef Pieper had noted a lack of 'spiritual capacity to perceive the visible reality as it truly is'. The 'average person of our time loses the ability to see because there is too much to see', he argued. And such 'visual noise' makes clear perception impossible. He suggested 'learning how to see again' (Pieper 1990, 31–33).

These observations can be applied to understanding the deeper meaning of Christian art. Without concern for analysis and interpretation, it would be understood only superficially. For example, its potential to mediate transcendent ideas would go unnoticed. The Catholic Church is aware that the cultural setting and religious identity of its artistic heritage requires a historical, artistic and religious communication (Tan 2018, 283–285). Section 5 of this article will examine how this awareness is implemented in the Church's pastoral work. It will analyze a selection of best practice in communicating today the iconography of the divine, also in the academic areas and in social media.

For two reasons, this article on Christian art deals with the iconography of the invisible divine. First, the current problems of audience reception become clearer. This is because the genuine meaning of Christian art is not self-explanatory, especially not in a growing secular environment. A survey of tourists sightseeing churches in Venice found that 81% could not experience the spirituality of the places; however, 65% still responded emotionally to the sites (Saunders 2014, 63).

Second, and more importantly, the pictorial references to the transcendent divine have been a leitmotif in the history and theology of Christian art, as will be explored in sections 2 and 3. Depicting God, who is transcendent and invisible, is actually a major problem that emerges from the Bible. The Catholic theology and magisterium responded to this issue by referring to the Incarnation and the mediating role of artworks. It is an image theology that clearly expresses the expectations of the institutional patrons. Their arguments serve as a theoretical framework, that helps to interpret the art-historical data with new questions that tourists, educators, tour guides, catechists, journalists and communicators today usually do not ask.

In the history of Christian art, the metaphorical iconographies of the divine were mostly taken from biblical, liturgical and theological texts. Christian art should therefore be interpreted from a complementary perspective, because both art and

texts communicate the meaning of divine revelation (Bühren 2021, 623–624). This requires a method that includes also text sources. For that reason, [section 4](#) proposes to reconsider the iconographic-iconological method of Erwin Panofsky. He believed that the key to understanding the deeper meaning of artworks is familiarity with their text sources (Panofsky 1955). This is certainly true of Christian art, which is often a visual exegesis of authoritative texts.

2. Transcendence in the history of Christian art

2.1. *Biblical, liturgical and theological sources*

In the history of Christian art, pictorial traditions of the transcendent and invisible God are closely linked to textual sources. This is because Christianity, as a religion of revelation, uses various media to transmit divine revelation with texts, both spoken and written. And these texts, especially the biblical and liturgical sources, are full of metaphorical expressions to describe transcendent or spiritual realities (Bühren 2021, 623). The Bible is the most authoritative text in Christianity, indeed, it is sacred (Rush 2009, 131–134). Therefore, it serves as a reference for many themes in Christian art (Jensen 2000), including the metaphorical figures of speech. Old Testament metaphors for God's action in history are angels or powerful natural elements (fire, wind, storm). The New Testament, in turn, includes theophanies featuring a bright light or a white dove. Due to God's Incarnation in Christ, the visualization of transcendent realities in Christian images is possible through symbolic or metaphorical iconographies, mostly taken from theological and liturgical text sources.

From these biblical, liturgical, and theological sources, a large iconography of the transcendent and invisible divine in Christian art has developed. And herein, the texts and visual artworks are both complementary modes of communicating or speculating on the nature of divine revelation (Bühren 2021, 623–624). Such a close relationship between the verbal and the visual expressions of faith was already considered important in early Christianity (Jensen 2007, 2000).

An important pattern for the Christian exegesis of the biblical text is 'typology', which is based on understanding time as the linear history of salvation. The term 'typology' first appeared in biblical studies around 1840, but indicates a method of Christian exegesis of the Bible already found in the New Testament and in patristic theology, which sees in Old Testament persons, events and institutions *týpoi* ('types', patterns or prefigurations) of Jesus Christ, His Gospel and His Church. Since Late Antiquity, biblical typology has also been widely used in the liturgy (Hall 2002). Based on biblical, theological and liturgical text sources, the typological interpretation of the history of salvation was adopted already by early Christian art. It was even more common in medieval and early modern art until the 18th century (Telesko 2016; Greiselmayer 2001).

Typological imagery must be viewed as a system for the visual communication of God's plan, which consists of a sometimes complex interplay of prophecy and fulfillment (Linke 2018, 30; Kemp 1994, 75–87). As a divine mystery, the hidden plan of salvation is known only by revelation. In Christian art it is represented by

symbolic references between single images, that are to be interpreted typologically, i.e. in their theological context. Their meaning can only be understood through knowledge of the relevant textual sources.

However, a unidirectional approach to a primacy of texts over images would obscure the efficacy of Christian art. More than illustrations, sacred images are visual exegeses of authoritative texts. For example, the mosaics at Sinai monastery (mid-6th century), unfolding the biblical narratives and patristic commentaries, work together to direct the beholder's attention to the vision of the transfigured Christ in the apse (Elsner 1994).

In late antique and early medieval mosaics of Rome, images and texts could work complementarily to create a nexus of meanings, ultimately pointing to the divine. The apse mosaic in SS. Cosma and Damiano (526–530) is accompanied by a hexametric golden inscription on a deep blue background. The inscription's golden capital letters, themselves luminous and sparkling, refer to the radiant splendor of the church's interior, created by the apse mosaic: 'With bright metals, the splendid hall of God shines' (Thunø 2015, 209).

2.2. Symbolism of light and gold

In Christian art, light was a common metaphor for the divine. The biblical text is full of references to natural and artificial light, often with symbolic connotations (Gerstel and Cothren 2017, 465). Light can appear as equivalent to the truth, the good or even the Word of God. It can signify life and salvation, since it dispels darkness. Light also implies the presence of God or His grace (Exodus 34:29–35, Psalm 89:16), it even indicates Himself (John 1:5–9, 8:12). From an early age, the liturgical and theological texts of the Church have been using these biblical references to light, strengthening the belief that the divine is manifested in light (Gerstel and Cothren 2017, 465). That is one of the reasons why the altar area of late antique churches was the brightest space, compared with the nave. Light in the semi-darkness could give prayer its orientation and symbolically refer to the presence of the invisible divine.

However, some churches in the West had a well-lit nave, like the 5th-century Santa Sabina in Rome (Reveyron 2019, 124–125). In Eastern Christianity, some churches 'were conceived and perceived as containers of light, actualizing the symbolic value of illumination' (Gerstel and Cothren 2017, 465), like the 6th-century Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Its shimmering mosaics, shiny marbles, glittering silver furnishings and paraments, touched by the incidence of natural light, along with hundreds of lamps, gave a hint of the invisible presence of the divine mystery (Bühren 2021, 626; see also the cover photo of the book). St. Sernin in Toulouse (built ca. 1077–1119), one of the largest pilgrimage churches of the Romanesque, was constructed in view of a greater abundance of light in the chancel containing its main altar and reliquaries. In Gothic architecture, the thick walls were largely replaced by stained-glass windows. Light glowing from coloured glass could be perceived as a spiritual matter charged with 'virtus' (power, energy) of the depicted scene (Markiewicz 2011, 137), as a path towards the non-sensorial, towards the power and richness of the beyond (Barral i Altet 2003, 135).

These symbolic references of light to the divine were fundamental also for images. Byzantine icons, gilded with gold leaf, were imbued with life through the reflective properties of light. Indeed, in icons, the radiance of gold was highly valued as a medium pointing to spiritual realities (cf. Pentcheva 2006, 639–645; Betancourt 2016). Also, the late antique apse mosaics inside churches revealed their semantic features in reflecting or absorbing light. They were lit with natural light, but also with candles and oil lamps. The shimmering reflections of these lights on the gold ground allow us to perceive these pictures as an allusion to the divine mystery (Bühren 2021, 625). Rico Frances has noted that these mosaics' gold ground, 'long interpreted as being symbolic of divinity, is not so much symbolic of it as demonstrative of it, an actualization of it' (Franses 2003, 18).

During the Middle Ages, gold was still used as a fictive source of celestial light. Its function was to emphasize key events of salvation history. Beginning in the 15th century, early modern painters often replaced the gold with a 'concealed or disguised symbolism as opposed to open or obvious symbolism' (Panofsky 1953, 141). In naturalistic compositions, the light effects could then symbolize the divine in a more suitable way. 'Annunciation' scenes or the 'Baptism of Christ', as moments of divine intervention, were featured by rays of light descending from heaven or directly from God's hand, sometimes together with the dove of the Holy Spirit, as in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (ca. 1435; Madrid, Museo del Prado). In his *Last Supper* (1592–1594; Venice, San Giorgio Maggiore) Jacopo Tintoretto staged the institution of the Eucharist as a divine mystery by presenting it among flickering lights in a dark space, enhanced by the transparent angels above.

In Caravaggio's work, the source of illumination is mostly outside the painting. The *Calling of Saint Matthew* (1599–1600; San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome), displays a broad beam of light, coming in diagonally from the top right. Christ's gesture of calling is parallel to this path of light, which indicates the divine origin of Matthew's vocation. Caravaggio employed illumination falling from outside the picture also in *The Seven Works of Mercy* in Naples (1606/07, Pio Monte della Misericordia). Here light serves as a metaphor for God's grace which allows mercy to shine as a virtue (Bühren 2017, 77–79). Early modern artists explicitly used biblical metaphors of light, if they included internal sources of illumination. Gerrit van Honthorst, one of the Utrecht Caravaggisti, did so in the painting *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ca. 1622; Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum). The child Jesus is depicted as the source of light and thus the origin of salvation ('I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life' [John 8:12]).

In the early 20th century, distinguished church architects used the effects of light to allude to the sacred. The window walls of *Notre-Dame du Raincy* by Auguste Perret (1920–1923), due to their construction as a concrete grill work, seem almost dematerialized. The surprising abundance of light echoed the tradition of French Gothic architecture (Bühren 2008, 121–122). Inside the *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona by Antoni Gaudí (1883–1926, since 1952 a work in progress), the incidence of light 'from above' transfigures the walls and vaults, indeed the whole interior of the church. In his many churches in Germany, Dominikus Böhm (1880–1955) increased the brightness towards the altar. Hidden light sources, mysterious chiaroscuro, light

effects on walls and space impart a mystagogical character that can be perceived far beyond the liturgical use (Bühren 2010).

2.3. Rhetoric of gestures and facial expressions

In early modern Europe, rhetoric had been an important part of persuasive speech, education and culture (Eck 2007). From the 16th to 18th centuries, in both public speech and artworks, a rhetorical shift came about which increased the imaginative involvement of the audience. Following Horace's famous saying 'ut pictura poesis' (cf. Lee 1940), the rules of classical rhetoric were applied to the production, perception and theory of art (Bühren 2021, 630–632; Eck 2007).

Rhetoric provides the tools needed to speak persuasively. A frequent strategy of visual persuasion in art has been the rhetoric of gestures and facial expressions. In his *Institutio oratoria* (XI, 3, 66–67), Quintilian praised the persuasiveness of both gestures and paintings which, although being silent and motionless, 'penetrate into our innermost feelings with such power that at times they seem more eloquent than language itself' (Eck 2017, 461).

Gestures and facial expressions could effectively refer to the invisible divine. In the altarpiece *Sacra Conversazione* by Giovanni Bellini (1505; Venice, San Zaccaria) the assembly of four saints is arranged around the enthroned Madonna in a semi-circular composition. Not one of the saints is looking at the Madonna. Their calm gestures and facial expressions show that they are not actually conversing, but, rather, silently meditating upon the mystery of Incarnation. It seems that one sees visually what they see with their 'mind's eye'.

Fra Angelico painted more explicit gestures which draw the viewer's attention to the divine. In his *Annalena Altarpiece* (1434–1435; Florence, Museum of San Marco), the pointing gesture of St. Damian is a firm request to contemplate the mystery of Incarnation (Bühren 2021, 631). Leon Battista Alberti suggested such pointing figures in book II (41–43) of his treatise *De pictura*, published in 1435/1436: 'It seems opportune ... that in the "historia" there is someone who informs the spectators of the things that unfold; or invites with the hand to show' (Alberti 2011, 63). Alberti also recommended the display of psychological affect, because through gestures and facial expressions 'we painters ... wish to express the states of mind with the movements of the limbs' (Alberti 2011, 64), since 'a "historia" will stimulate the observers' hearts when men ... will display, to the highest degree, their own activity of the mind' (Alberti 2011, 61).

The artistic goal of the visual rhetoric was that viewers would get sensorially and mentally involved in the scene. Titian achieved this aim in his altarpiece *Assumption of the Virgin Mary to Heaven* (1516–1518; Venice, Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari). Being raised to heaven, Mary is lifting her hands, astonished. Below, the apostles marvel at the miracle with excited gestures. And with them, also the viewers of the picture, who are meant to share in Mary's amazement at the celestial glory of God.

The pictures mentioned so far partly displayed the divine, at least visually implied. However, Antonello da Messina abandoned this tradition. In his painting *Vergine Annunciata* (ca. 1475–1476; Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia) he did not show

the archangel at all. The fact that it is the moment of the Annunciation is evidenced only by Mary's gestures and her gaze that hint at an invisible presence. Mary seems attentive, as if she were focused on listening, and also somewhat blurred, as if she were experiencing an inner vision and the voice did not come from this world. This scene ultimately becomes 'the manifestation of the invisible in the visible' and 'the divine in the temporal' (Krüger 2015, 78).

Already in the Late Middle Ages, a single gesture was enough for expressing divine speech. The apse mosaic (ca. 1190) in the Cathedral of Monreale represents *Christ Pantocrator* holding a codex with His left hand. His raised right hand signifies divine blessing or the voice of the Word of God, the divine Logos (Hazzikostas 1998, 54). Such a gesture of speech may also refer to the mediating role of the protagonist depicted. So, in Leonardo's painting of *St. John the Baptist* (ca. 1513–1516; Paris, Louvre) the figure points with his right hand up toward heaven. Through his enigmatic smile and gaze directed straight at the viewer, St John invites to reflect on the transcendent God.

Frans Hals painted *The Inspiration of St. John Evangelist* (ca. 1625–1628; Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum) as a mysterious event. John looks up searching for divine inspiration, which he receives as brilliant light. With his left hand on his heart, he expresses faith and attention to the breath of the Holy Spirit. The divine inspiration is only indirectly visible: in the gaze and gesture of the biblical writer. At the end of the 18th century, the rhetorical tradition of artworks was still alive only in a few regions of Europe. The sculpture *Guardian Angel with child* (1763; Munich, Bürgersaalkirche) by Ignaz Günther shows a huge guardian angel who leads a young boy safely by the hand, past a threatening snake as a symbol of sin. The angel points with his right hand to heaven.

In the pictures discussed, the rhetoric of gestures and facial expressions was a visual tool for attracting the viewers' attention to the transcendent. It was intended to persuade the viewer that an experience of the divine is possible in this world.

2.4. Theatrical scenery of the pictorial space

Along with the rhetoric of gestures and facial expressions, Renaissance and Baroque artists often used theatrical elements to draw the viewer's interest to the scene (Eck and Bussels 2010). A representation of the divine mystery would be more attractive, for instance, if the scene was set against an architectural backdrop (Bühren 2021, 631). Since the 14th century, artists increasingly used such backdrops as a scenic design, especially to 'frame narrative scenes' (Bayard 2010, 265). Paolo Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi* (1573, Venice, Gallerie dell'Academia) shows such a stage-like composition. Carlo Ridolfi in 1648 called it a 'maestoso teatro' (Eck and Bussels 2010, 209–210), valuing the efficacy of stage backdrops in creating a fictional representation, which results in a dramatic presence.

Architectural backdrops generally served as attention grabbers. Some also have a specific symbolic meaning, like the painted triumphal arch in the fresco *The Holy Trinity* (1425/1428) by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella, Florence. The two patrons, shown in profile, are kneeling prayerfully in front of the arch's pilasters and columns.

Rather with the ‘eyes of faith’ than through physical sight, they are perceiving the sacred figures staged theatrically in the background: God the Father with the Dove of the Holy Spirit supporting the crucified Son, flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John. Its stage is a chapel-like space, framed by the triumphal arch and referring to Christ’s victory over death (Bühren 2021, 631). Another example is the ‘Santa Casa’, placed behind Mary’s back in Caravaggio’s *Madonna di Loreto* (1604–1606; Sant’Agostino in Campo Marzio, Rome). Here the architecture may allude to the Holy of Holies, the place imbued with divine presence where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and where Moses spoke with God (cf. Exodus 33:7–11; Dekoninck 2015, 343).

Theatrical settings in artworks also included fictive curtains. Since Late Antiquity, the curtain has been used liturgically to indicate the altar area of churches as a ‘sacred place’. During the 14th and 15th centuries the veiling and unveiling of altarpieces and devotional images with curtains was common practice in Italy, Spain and England. The act of veiling and unveiling itself was performed and perceived as a revelatory process (Bühren 2021, 629). It was not until the second half of the 16th century in Italy that the use of curtains became associated also with the theater (Hénin 2010, 252).

Already around 1480, Hugo van der Goes depicted two Old Testament prophets in the painting *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie) pulling curtains aside to attract the viewer’s attention. These curtains could be seen as a metaphor of the unveiling of divine mysteries (Incarnation, Birth of Christ), performed like a mystery play (Bühren 2021, 629). Viewers are made doubly aware that what they are looking at is a ‘representation re-represented’ (Eck and Bussels 2010, 215). In Orazio Gentileschi’s *Annunciation* (1623, Galleria Sabauda, Turin) the painted curtain is at once a manifestation of the shadow of the Most High (cf. Luke 1:35) and an allusion to the divine mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption (Valenti 2001, 433).

In some artworks theatricality is further reinforced when figures are portrayed as if they were participating in a play as both actors on stage and spectators of the depicted scene in the background. One example of such an ‘image within the image’ is Sebastiano Carello’s painting *St. Catherine of Siena and St. John the Baptist before a Painting of the Annunciation* (ca. 1645; Savigliano, Museo Civico). The two saints contemplate the invisible mystery of the Incarnation presented to them and also replicate, within the picture, the worshipper’s situation in front of it (Krüger 2015, 94–99). By depicting the visual experience of the mystery of God’s Incarnation, Carello invited the viewers to reflect on the process of seeing and believing.

Another example is Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s altar ensemble for the *Capella Fonseca* (ca. 1663–1675, San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome). From a niche to the left, the donor Gabriele Fonseca is prayerfully looking towards the altar above which appears the painting of the ‘Annunciation’, held by two sculptures of angels as a reference to the descent of heavenly grace (Krüger 2015, 99–105). Bernini’s stage-like composition could give viewers the impression of participating in a kind of ‘theatrum sacrum’ in which a mystery is performed.

The same is true of his *Cornaro Chapel* (1645–1652) in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, where Bernini’s sculptural group of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* and its setting

convey spiritual aspects of mystical prayer. In boxes on the side walls, members of the Cornaro family observe the event and discuss the problem of experiencing the invisible God in prayer. In the 16th and 17th centuries, such debates were common in theological treatises on mystical ecstasy (Dekoninck 2019.)

In conclusion, the theatricality of pictures is expressed by scenographic compositions (curtain, architectural background). Early modern artists used these theatrical elements together with the rhetoric of gestures and facial expressions of the figures to make their pictures more persuasive. Symbolic references of gold or light to the divine have already been used since Late Antiquity. The referentiality of all these pictures let the viewers be actively involved in the relationship between the material image and the invisible reality hidden beyond its pictorial representation.

In contemporary art, however, the concord between artistic self-expression and the Christian understanding of divine revelation is no longer a given. During the first half of the 20th century, many artists of the avant-garde movements saw their work as an aesthetic expression of their own spiritual and religious ideas, based on esoteric traditions (Bühren 2021, 633–635). Their art focused on formal aspects of the composition, considered as more important than the iconographic subject, and only sometimes referred to transcendence. However, in the work of Emil Nolde, Georges Rouault, Alexej von Jawlensky, Alfred Manessier and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, references to transcendence were still symbolically present (Bühren 2008, 101–102, 210–212).

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had already ‘prophetically’ described this crisis of the religious image in modern times in the introduction to his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (published posthumously in 1835–1838): ‘No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, Christ, and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer’ (Squire 2018, 140).

The following section explains how theologians and the Church’s magisterium responded to these and previous challenges to the pictorial tradition.

3. Theology and Catholic magisterium on the pictorial reference to the divine

3.1. Problems and objections against depicting the transcendent God

Christianity, as a religion of faith, is based on divine revelation. Since early times Christians have transmitted the presence of the transcendent God through texts, both spoken and written. This transmission also included liturgical celebrations and the lives of the saints. Since the 3rd and 4th centuries Christians also communicated their message through non-verbal means, such as pictures and church architectures (Bühren 2021, 623–624; Jensen 2007; Jensen 2000). However, this was not as obvious as it seems.

A major problem with depicting God, who is transcendent and invisible, emerged from the Bible. Following the Jewish tradition of God’s transcendence, making any image of God was considered idolatrous (Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 4:16). The first Christians dealt with this problem of how the invisible God could be depicted in

images (Bühren 2021, 623–624; Christoffersen 2015; Jensen 2013; Jensen 2005, 4–19, 69–99). The ‘Deus absconditus’ was an invisible mystery (Exodus 33:20,23). This is why some Church Fathers, like Clement of Alexandria (150–215) or Epiphanius of Salamis (315–403), questioned the need for images of God (Jensen 2022, 6–7, 91–96; Finney 1994).

In the 8th and 9th centuries, the debate again became important if and how icons of Christ could actually represent His divine nature. The Christological discussion escalated into iconoclastic excesses. Iconoclasts rejected icons of Christ as pointless attempts to represent the whole person of the divine Logos, given that – owing to the materiality of icons – only the human nature of Christ could be portrayed. The iconoclasts objected that the divine nature remained entirely inconceivable, indescribable and invisible (Giakalis 2005, 93–94). The Byzantine controversy about the veneration of icons also echoed in Western Christianity. Carolingian theologians – such as Theodulf of Orléans or Claudius of Turin – rejected the possibility of a relationship between visible images and God’s spiritual transcendence, claiming that one should contemplate Christ through spiritual sight, and not through corporeal vision (Chazelle 1994, 54; Kessler 2005, 303).

The question of sacred images sprang to life once again during the 16th century when the fathers of the Reformation questioned their legitimacy or usefulness as intermediaries for contemplating the invisible God. Martin Luther considered religious images as neutral matters (‘adiaphora’), not necessary for salvation, but he considered biblical pictures useful and rejected the destruction or removal of religious images (Feld 1990, 122–123). Very differently, John Calvin insisted on an entirely aniconic divine worship (Feld 1990, 131–137). Then, during the 18th century, philosophical deists rejected the depiction of transcendent realities. In France, even Catholic writers who defended the use of sacred images were convinced that artworks would be inadequate to represent the divine mystery. Owing to the cultural importance of France in the 19th century, these ideas spread throughout Europe (Krasny 2019, 213–216).

There have also been recent rejections of images representing the divine. In 1963, Vatican Council II had requested that sacred artworks in the liturgical space require transcendent references as ‘signs and symbols of things supernatural’ (Second Vatican Council [1963] 1996, no. 122). In the liturgical arrangement of new churches after Vatican II, however, there was a strong decline in pictorial decoration. Against the expectations of the Council, very few contemporary pictures were commissioned. In the effort to adapt the altar area of older churches to the liturgical reform, which began in 1964, the existing sacred artworks were often moved to diocesan museums or eventually sold, sometimes even destroyed. The liturgical celebration was considered as the primary purpose of the church interior, while extra-liturgical devotions – especially those of popular piety – were regarded as secondary. Until the 1980s, and despite numerous exhortations by Church authorities, many patrons of contemporary church interiors considered references to transcendence through images to be unimportant for pastoral reasons (Bühren 2008, 267–281). Since the 1990s, however, the liturgical space of Catholic churches again has images and symbols that refer to the sacred (Bühren 2008, 614–615, 626).

3.2. In the logic of Incarnation

In theological discussions of Christians about the possibility of depicting the invisible God, the mystery of Incarnation was the decisive argument. Since the divine Word became flesh in assuming human nature (John 1:14), the transcendent God could be represented visually (Bühren 2021, 623).

Christianity of the first centuries had to confront the Old Testament prohibition against making images of God, since Christ revealed himself as ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15). However, early Christian apologists never condemned images as such; instead, they objected to making them into idols and worshipping them (Jensen 2012, 131). It was the very Incarnation that distinguished images of Jesus Christ from pagan idols. Moreover, the mission of the Incarnate Word on earth makes the representation of God legitimate and even necessary, precisely because of the need to evangelize and spread His message (Magris 2014, 199).

In the 4th and 5th centuries, the production and use of images of Christ, legitimized by the Incarnation, was confirmed by the teaching of Church Fathers. For both Athanasius and Augustine – though they differed in their approach to the matter – sacred images founded on the mystery of the Incarnation could be visual ‘means of mediating divine presence’ (Jensen 2012, 142), which is consistent with the Gospel’s claim: Anyone who has seen Christ has seen the Father (cf. John 14:9).

The theology of the Incarnation in relation to images was deepened during the iconoclastic controversy in the 8th and 9th centuries. The objections that images are merely dead matter and that they are incapable of reproducing the physical features of Christ, much less His divine nature (Pyc 2012, 28–30; Giakalis 2005, 94), received an authoritative response from the ‘Horos’ of Nicaea, the doctrine on the sacred images (Second Council of Nicaea [787] 1990). The Council fathers drew on the thought of John of Damascus (+ 749): ‘When He who is bodiless and without form (...) is found in a body of flesh, then you may draw His image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it’ (Elsner 2012, 378). One can see in John’s teaching an emphasis that God, through the Incarnation, wanted not only to make Himself visible but also to give a new quality to the relationship between divinity and ‘flesh’. As a consequence, the Incarnation could be seen as ‘the originating archetype of image-making’ (Melion and Wandel 2015, 3). According to the ‘Horos’ of Nicaea, sacred images have yet another highly significant function: ‘in harmony with the history of the spread of the Gospel’, they provide ‘confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary’ (Second Council of Nicaea [787] 1990, 135).

In medieval theology, the mystery of the Incarnation again was used as an argument to justify the use of images of Christ and the saints. In his *Commentary on the Sentences* (1253–1257), Thomas Aquinas explained the importance of images inside the sacred space by the fact that so ‘the mystery of the Incarnation and the examples of the saints are remembered better when they can be seen every day’ (Büttner 1998, 202). In a sermon in 1425, Bernard of Siena observed that due to the mystery of the Incarnate Word, what cannot be represented (‘infigurabile’) infuses

the image in the way that the ‘ineffabile’ enters the language (Krüger 2015, 82), and thus becomes visible.

During the Reformation, John Calvin did not include the incarnational argument when he discussed the traditional use of sacred images (Wandel 2015, 195–197). Calvin was convinced that the placement of images inside churches ‘serves no other purpose than to draw folk from the pure and true knowledge of God’ (Klejnowski-Różycki 2017, 189). In the early modern era the Christological argument of the Incarnation was not used in the controversy and doctrine about images, because the Protestant Reformers had largely adopted the early Church’s dogmas of Christology (Hecht 2016, 186–187), and the Council of Trent did so in any case.

After Vatican II, Pope John Paul II repeatedly raised the argument of Incarnation to explain how Christians can see the invisible through artworks and with their mind’s eye. In 1994, addressing this issue in his homily ‘Entriamo oggi’ in the Sistine Chapel, the Pope referred to Nicaea II’s doctrine on sacred images (Bühren 2008, 552–554): ‘The icon is not only a work of pictorial art. It is, in a certain sense, like a sacrament of Christian life, since in it the mystery of the Incarnation becomes present. In it the Mystery of the Word made flesh is reflected in a way that is ever new, and man – the author and at the same time participant – is gladdened by the sight of the Invisible. ... Christ is the visible sign of the invisible God’ (John Paul II [1994] 1996, no. 4). In his address ‘Tutto quello’ of 1995, the Pope encouraged the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church to promote sacred artworks used in liturgical contexts, because ‘when the Church calls upon art to assist mission, it is not only for aesthetic reasons, but to obey the very “logic” of Revelation and Incarnation’ (John Paul II [1995] 1998, no. 6).

In preparation of the pastoral ‘Jubilee of Artists’ 2000 in Rome (Bühren 2008, 571–573), John Paul II published his ‘Letter to artists’, in which he recalled several times that at the very heart of the artwork’s ability to depict the invisible God is the mystery of the Incarnation (John Paul II 1999, nos. 5, 7, 12).

All in all, since Late Antiquity the Incarnation has been at the core of statements legitimizing images of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarized this long doctrinal tradition: ‘The veneration of sacred images is based on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God. It is not contrary to the first commandment’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, no. 2141) and: ‘By becoming Incarnate, the Son of God introduced a new ‘economy’ of images’ (no. 2131).

3.3. Mediality and referentiality as core issues of image theology

Mediality was another argument for the possibility of representing transcendence. Christian art, in mediating the presence of the invisible divine through pictorial means, mimics the action of God, who wants to reveal Himself and who has become flesh. Pictures in this tradition can ‘give the transcendent or divine a visual form’ (Bühren 2021, 622; cf. Hofmann 2016; Lenten 2004, 13–15; Viladesau 2000, 123–166, 217–229).

In early Christianity the mediating nature of images was already evident. Wall paintings in catacombs and – since the 4th century – apse mosaics in churches

served ‘as a focus for contemplation or meditation on the nature of the divine Being’ (Jensen 2012, 126). Early Christian pictures were ‘not to be the recipient of adoration itself, but to mediate the prayers and reverence of the faithful, effectively transmitting them from the image to its prototype’ (Jensen 2012, 126–127). ‘Honor refertur ad prototypa’ – this statement by Basil of Caesarea (+ 379, *De spiritu sancto*, 18) would later become important in the history of dogma because it was adopted by the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 (Sahas 1986, 179).

In Late Antiquity, both in Byzantium and in Western Christianity, sacred images could be viewed as ‘intentionally epiphanic’ (Jensen 2012, 136). They were credited with being able to express the ineffable divine. In the 6th century, Bishop Hypatios of Ephesus justified images in the sacred space by referring to the spiritual ascent of the soul: ‘We allow even material adornment in the sanctuaries ... because we think that some people are guided even by these [material adornments] towards intelligible beauty and from the abundant light in the sanctuaries to the unintelligible and immaterial light’ (Parry 1996, 36). This idea of mediated presence of the divine through light inside the church space corresponds to Neoplatonic ideas. According to the theology of light as taught by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th century), sensible things are important for the human ascent towards the transcendent God (Ivanović 2020).

Every icon ‘makes manifest and demonstrates something hidden’, stated John of Damascus in the early 8th century when he explained the purpose of sacred images in his *Discourse against those who attack the august and holy images* (cf. Bühren 2021, 626). He considered icons as ‘devised to guide us to knowledge and to make manifest and open what is hidden’ (Treatise III; John of Damascus 2003, 96). In another treatise, his *Defence against those who attack the holy images*, John of Damascus rated the icons as visual ‘books’ which give access to the knowledge and presence of God: ‘They are not our gods, but open books, manifestly set in place in the churches and venerated for the remembrance of God and His honor’ (Treatise I; John of Damascus 2003, 52).

Due to this mediating role, sacred images ‘were venerated, ... carried in processions, touched, kissed, approached by believers, but also criticized, violated, and destroyed in the iconoclastic periods’ (Vicelja 2017, 223). But, as the *Horos* of Second Nicaea confirmed, it was not ultimately to the pictures that the veneration was directed: ‘He who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image’ (Second Council of Nicaea [787] 1990, 136; cf. Sahas 1986, 179 [377E]).

In the Western tradition of medieval art, the discussions about the use of images in religious instruction were mostly based upon Gregory the Great’s two letters to Bishop Serenus. According to his first letter (599), images are ‘displayed in churches ... in order that those who do not know letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they are unable to read in books’. His second letter (600) also defended the use of narrative pictures in churches, which could instruct ‘the ignorant’ because in them ‘they read who do not know letters’ (Chazelle 1990, 139). Gregory expressed the hope that, seeing the depicted narrative, the viewers would feel the ‘burning of compunction’ and would be conducted beyond the sensible towards God (Kessler 2000, 120–124). Although the text of Gregory’s letters underwent an interpolation in

the 8th century, it came to be included in the *Registrum Gregorii* (Kessler 2005, 304). And so the Pope's approval of the medial status and pedagogical utility of narrative pictures became the origin of the Western theology of sacred images (Bühren 2021, 627–628; Kessler 2019).

Using Gregory's arguments, the *Decretum Gratiani* (ca. 1140; pars 3: De consecratione, distinctio III, c. 27–28) explains the function of images as helpful for instructing the unlearned and as a medium of memory and remembrance (Schiewer 2010, 88–89). In addition to 'instructio' and 'memoria', the liturgical treatise *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* (before 1286) of William Durand mentioned a third function that aims at the 'affectus' of the viewers: 'pictures seem to move the soul more than texts' (Schiewer 2010, 89–90; Büttner 1998, 199–200). Durand also said that 'through pictures certain deeds are placed before the eyes, and they seem to be happening in the present time' (Lib. I, cap. 3). This important observation emphasizes the fictitious presence of past people or events in the medium of the image.

Since the 13th century almost all theological theories considered 'instruction', 'memoria' and 'affectus' as the main reasons for displaying images in churches, including the *Commentary on the Sentences* by Bonaventura (1248–1253) and Thomas Aquinas (1253–1257) (Büttner 1998, 199–209). Still in the 15th century preachers referred to this picture theory, for example the Dominican Michele da Carcano in a sermon published in 1492 (Baxandall 1988, 41).

The *Decree on sacred images* (1563) of the Council of Trent adopted the dogmatic core of the 'Horos' of the Second Council of Nicaea: 'imagines ... in templis praesertim habendas et retinendas, eisque debitum honorem et venerationem impertiendam, ... quoniam honos, qui eis exhibetur, refertur ad prototypa, quae illae repraesentant' (Hecht 2016, 17–20, 501–504). Then Trent also emphasized the didactic, ethical and devotional purposes of sacred images as a visual medium of knowledge ('erudiri et confirmari populum in articulis fidei commemorandis') which should inspire both the imitation of the saints ('ad sanctorum imitationem vitam moresque suos componant') and the practice of piety ('excitentur ad adorandum ac diligendum Deum, et ad pietatem colendam') (Bühren 2008, 634–640).

During the debates on sacred images after Trent, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti published his treatise *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane* (1582). He assigned to pictures the medial task of transmitting the meaning of the divine, because 'painters of sacred images ... are like mute theologians' (II, 51) or orators (I, 21–25) who have to delight, instruct, and move to persuade their audience (Paleotti 2012, 110–120, 309; cf. Bühren 2021, 632).

Since the early 20th century, the Catholic magisterium increasingly reaffirmed the need for references to the divine in sacred art. The reason was that the relationship between the Church and contemporary artists in many areas has been tense and distant (Bühren 2014, 228). In his address during the inauguration of the new Pinacoteca Vaticana, Pius XI criticized those new artworks in churches that 'seem to evoke and visualize the idea of the sacred only by distorting it into caricature and very often into a real profanation' (Pius XI 1932) and requested that the liturgical legislation of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* (Peters 2001) should be respected,

especially regarding the sacred character of images within the church building (Bühren 2008, 108–112, 117–118).

In ‘Mediator Dei’, the encyclical on the sacred liturgy, Pope Pius XII acknowledged the importance of contemporary art and church architecture in accordance with the aims of the Liturgical Movement. These works ‘can lift the mind to higher things and foster true devotion of soul’ (Pius XII 1947, no. 193). ‘Modern art should be given free scope in the due and reverent service of the church and the sacred rites, provided that they preserve a correct balance between styles tending neither to extreme realism nor to excessive “symbolism” ... Nevertheless, ... those works of art, recently introduced by some, which ... at times openly shock Christian taste, modesty and devotion, and shamefully offend the true religious sense ... must be entirely excluded and banished from our churches, like anything else that is not in keeping with the sanctity of the place’ (no. 195).

Since around 1900, many artists of the avant-garde movement were open to transcendence, but they saw their work as an aesthetic expression of their own spiritual or religious ideas. Their spirituality was mostly an uncommitted religiousness based on anthroposophy, theosophy and similar esoteric traditions (Bühren 2021, 633–635). Since the 1920s, the gap between this subjective spirituality and the religious understanding of revelation in Judaeo-Christian tradition had increased. This trend was probably what Pope Paul VI was addressing in 1964 at a meeting after the Mass with artists in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican: ‘You have abandoned us a little, you have gone far away to drink from other fountains in the still legitimate search to express other things; but no longer ours’ (Paul [1964] 1965). But ‘we need you’, he affirmed, ‘our ministry needs your collaboration. It is because, as you know, our ministry is to preach and to make accessible and understandable, even moving, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of the ineffable, of God. And in this operation, which transmits the invisible world in accessible, intelligible formulas, you are masters’ (cf. Bühren 2014, 229–230).

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council claimed that sacred artworks require transcendent references as ‘signs and symbols of things supernatural’, being ‘oriented toward the infinite beauty of God’ and ‘turning men’s minds devoutly toward God’ (Second Vatican Council [1963] 1996, no. 122). This clue to referentiality can also be found in the message to artists at the conclusion of Vatican II in December 1965 (cf. Bühren 2008, 242–243): Artists, who have helped the Church for centuries ‘in translating her divine message into the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable’ are the ‘guardians of beauty in the world’ that ‘needs beauty in order not to sink into despair’ (A vous tous 1965).

In his pastoral concern for artists, Pope John Paul II continued to stress their mission as mediators of God’s self-revelation. On several occasions he noted the artists’ vocation to express references to transcendence, so in his address to Christian artists in Rome: ‘Both art and faith exalt the greatness of man and his thirst for the infinite’ (John Paul II 1986, no. 2), ‘you will thus become witnesses of the Absolute’ (no. 6). In his homily during the Mass for artists in Brussels, he recalled that Christian artists ‘willingly use the languages of art to evoke, through the beauty of sensible forms, the mystery of what is ineffable’ (John Paul II 1985, no. 3). ‘The

deeper reality of things is beyond. However, our artworks act on this 'beyond' as signs (no. 4). 'The artist who is a Christian therefore has in the Church, in the world, a vocation ... His symbolic language evokes the reality that is "beyond things"' (no. 12).

In his 'Letter to artists' (cf. Bühren 2008, 560–571), which could be considered a synthesis of what the Catholic Church's teaching has said so far about the relation between Christian art and transcendence, John Paul II reminded them that just like the Church itself, artworks should 'make perceptible, and as far as possible attractive, the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God', and 'it does so without emptying the message itself of its transcendent value and its aura of mystery' (John Paul II 1999, no. 12). The letter recalls that beauty could be 'a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence' and that, 'as a glimmer of the Spirit of God', it can open the human soul to the sense of the invisible (no. 16).

In liturgical matters, the Apostolic See recalled repeatedly the legitimacy and usefulness of venerating sacred images. By referring to the councils of Nicaea II and Vatican II, the fourth instruction for the right implementation of 'Sacrosanctum Concilium' recalled that 'believers can be helped in their prayer and in their spiritual life by seeing works of art which attempt ... to express the divine mysteries' (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments 1994, no. 44). The *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* explained that sacred images 'by their very nature, ... belong to the realm of sacred signs and to the realm of art. ... The primary function of sacred images is not, however, to evince aesthetic pleasure but to dispose towards Mystery' (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments [2001] 2002, no. 243). The worship of images has a 'relative nature', the 'image is not venerated in itself. Rather, that which it represents is venerated' (no. 241). These images are 'sacred signs which, in common with all liturgical signs, ultimately refer to Christ' (no. 240).

In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI invited artists to the Sistine Chapel, as Paul VI did in 1964. In addressing the participants, Benedict devoted much space to the question of authentic beauty, of which artists are the guardians. It 'unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond' (Benedict XVI [2009] 2010). 'Beauty, ... expressed in art, precisely because it opens up ..., pointing us beyond ourselves, bringing us face to face with the abyss of Infinity, can become a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God' (Benedict XVI [2009] 2010).

After Vatican II, the mediality of images was also an argument of the theological aesthetics. In 1965, Hans Urs von Balthasar pointed out that sacred art, in the centuries-old tradition of the Church, mediates divine revelation (Balthasar 1965; Nichols 2007, 55). Richard Viladesau examined the theology of the Cross in various periods of Church history regarding its conceptual and aesthetic mediations (Viladesau 2014; Viladesau 2008; Viladesau 2006). He noted that what is primarily 'mediated' by both theological reflection and Christian artwork 'is meaning: specifically, meaning deriving from the immediacy of God's self-revelation' (Viladesau 2006, 7). An artwork could be perceived as a 'visible reflection of the divine beauty and mystery', and as such it becomes a 'locus' of revelation or a 'medium of general

revelation insofar as it serves as a language for intellectual, moral, and religious conversion' (Viladesau 2000, 144–151, 227).

In conclusion, Christian art, both in practice and as taught by the Catholic theology and magisterium, has an intended meaning. In order to understand this meaning, expressed in artworks, an appropriate method of interpretation is needed. Erwin Panofsky has presented such a method.

4. Erwin Panofsky and his method of iconography and iconology

4.1. Academic impact of Panofsky in art historiography

Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968) was concerned with meaning in the visual arts (cf. Lavin 1993, 33–35). In the 1930s, he conceived iconology as a 'method of interpretation' (Panofsky 1955, 32). His approach consists of pre-iconographical, iconographical and iconological levels to describe, analyze and interpret images (Timmermann 2001a and 2001b). Sometimes the whole method is just called 'iconology'. Due to its broad reception, Panofsky is considered one of the most influential art historians in the 20th century (Straten 2000, 20; Landauer 2000).

In the early years of his academic career, Panofsky became known for his criticism of current trends in art historiography – as represented by Alois Riegl (1858–1905) and Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) – that overemphasized the formal analysis of artworks and neglected the subject matter (Timmermann 2001a). To expand the research perspectives, Panofsky 'dared to ask new questions and to invent fresh principles of interpretation' (Holly 1985, 193).

In 1934 Panofsky emigrated to the United States, which contributed to the popularization of his iconological theory among English-speaking scholars. Although in the postwar period his followers began to 'canonize' iconology (Kuczyńska 2008, xvii), it also met with critics. Because of his philosophical and literary erudition, Panofsky has been criticized for a tendency to overintellectualize art (Landauer 2000). His method would foster overstretched theories (Białostocki 2008, 52) or overvalue the sometimes-nebulous notion of 'meaning' compared to the aesthetic experience as a starting-point for the interpretation (Lash 2003; Timmermann 2001b). Panofsky himself was aware of the possible dangers of an excessive interpretation and warned against them (Białostocki 2008, 52–55).

The limitations of the iconological method have not obscured its many advantages for the interpretation of images. It also has opened new horizons in the historiography of architecture as manifestations of ideas (Białostocki 2008, 46; Timmermann 2001b), as Panofsky had explained in his book *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (Panofsky 1951). Among the critics, no one has found a model to replace Panofsky's theory of art interpretation (Wuttke 2017, 119). Brendan Cassidy stated, after naming important scholars still involved in iconographical analysis: 'Such a wide diversity of topic and approach suggests that, contrary to prognostications of its imminent demise, iconography is alive and well, and as fruitful a subject for research as ever' (Cassidy 1993, 15).

4.2. Three levels of interpreting artworks according to Panofsky

4.2.1. Pre-iconographical description

Panofsky was the first to develop a systematic foundation for the iconographic-iconological discipline. It is a method that helps to decode the various layers of meaning in artworks by using a three-step procedure. In 1930 Panofsky published the methodological principles in a preliminary version in the introduction to his book *Herkules am Scheidewege*. The ‘introductory’ of his book *Studies in Iconology* presented the mature form of his iconographic-iconological method (Panofsky 1939, 3–31). He published his three-step model again, with minor amendments, in the book *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Panofsky 1955). It was Panofsky’s greatest achievement, and it went down in historiography.

The ‘introductory’ of 1939 included a synoptical table (Panofsky 1939, 14–15; cf. Fozi 2019, 253) – revised later (Panofsky 1955, 40–41; cf. Figure 1) – showing the respective ‘object’, ‘act’ ‘equipment’ and ‘corrective principle’ of each level of interpretation. Each of the three levels has its own ‘object’ and its own research approach, called ‘act’ (in fact, all three stages take their name from the interpretive act proper to them). The ‘equipment’ is the appropriate disposition of the researcher (‘practical experience’, ‘knowledge of literary sources’, ‘synthetic intuition’). A ‘corrective principle’ is the historical knowledge of ‘style’, ‘types’ and ‘cultural symptoms or “symbols” in general’, which should ensure legitimate interpretation and guard the art historian against excessive subjectivism (Białostocki 1970, 77).

Panofsky called the first level ‘pre-iconographical description’. It involves an identification of the depicted objects and figures, their arrangement and the expressions associated with them (Białostocki 2008, 39). In other words, the object of pre-iconographical description is the natural subject matter that constitutes the world of artistic motifs.

In practice, that means that viewers of Rogier van der Weyden’s painting *The Descent of the Cross* (1438, Madrid, Museo del Prado) begin their description by noticing a group of people gathered around a dead man and a fainting woman, in

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION	EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION (<i>History of Tradition</i>)
I <i>Primary or natural subject matter</i> —(A) factual, (B) expressional—constituting the world of artistic motifs.	<i>Pre-iconographical description</i> (and pseudo-formal analysis).	<i>Practical experience</i> (familiarity with <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).	History of <i>style</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i> were expressed by <i>forms</i>).
II <i>Secondary or conventional subject matter</i> , constituting the world of <i>images</i> , <i>stories</i> and <i>allegories</i> .	<i>Iconographical analysis</i> .	<i>Knowledge of literary sources</i> (familiarity with specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i>).	History of <i>types</i> (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific <i>themes</i> or <i>concepts</i> were expressed by <i>objects</i> and <i>events</i>).
III <i>Intrinsic meaning or content</i> , constituting the world of “ <i>symbolical</i> ” values.	<i>Iconological interpretation</i> .	<i>Synthetic intuition</i> (familiarity with the <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i>), conditioned by personal psychology and “ <i>Weltanschauung</i> .”	History of <i>cultural symptoms</i> or “ <i>symbols</i> ” in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, <i>essential tendencies of the human mind</i> were expressed by specific <i>themes</i> and <i>concepts</i>).

Figure 1. Synoptical table of Erwin Panofsky’s three levels of iconology (from Panofsky 1955, 40–41)

front of a cross. Viewers also pay attention to their gestures and faces, clearly indicating grief and mourning. Once the natural subject matter of such painting is identified, the second stage of the method can begin.

4.2.2. Iconographical analysis

At the second level, the act performed by art historians (or viewers in general) is iconographical analysis in the narrower sense of the word. By means of this analysis, the conventional subject matter of the depicted objects or actions is recognized. In the various elements of the picture, one discovers symbols, allegories, stories, types, etc.

For a correct understanding of the conventional nature of paintings, it is essential to know the literary sources on which the artworks are based: in case of Christian art above all the Bible and the apocrypha, as well as liturgical, theological, hagiographical, mystical or philosophical texts (Białostocki 2008, 40). The corrective principle of the researcher's efforts is the history of iconographical types. To be able to interpret the subject, it is necessary to know how different themes and concepts were expressed through objects, figures and events in a given era.

Rogier van der Weyden's painting, in turn, appears clearly as a deposition of Christ from the cross. Knowledge of the biblical text makes it easy to identify the figures of Mary, John and Mary Magdalene. The painting's gold ground, the ornamental details, as well as the gestures and facial expressions, the rich costumes and the vegetation let the pictorial space appear as a vivid 'passion play' or 'theatrum sacrum' and shift the viewer's attention to a probable theological meaning of the representation. The suffering that fills the whole narrative includes the redemptive death of the divine Saviour and also the grief of the people who represent those whose sin led to this event. Through the emotional charge and lifelikeness of the painting, the viewers can identify with both Christ and the saints.

As Białostocki notes, at the second stage of Panofsky's method the examination of the intentional content of an artwork actually ends (Białostocki 2008, 40). The third level does not deal with the artwork's meaning or message intended by the author, but interprets the picture as a historical phenomenon.

4.2.3. Iconological interpretation

The third step was initially called 'iconographical interpretation' (Panofsky 1939, 3–31). In its ultimate form Panofsky called this level the 'iconological interpretation' (Panofsky 1955: cf. the synoptical table in Figure 1). Its task is to detect the artwork's 'intrinsic meaning or content', constituting the 'world of "symbolic" values'. The researcher's equipment is 'synthetic intuition': the familiarity with the important tendencies of the human mind. As a corrective principle, Panofsky named historical knowledge of the 'cultural symptoms or "symbols" in general', that is, the awareness of how the basic tendencies of human mind have been expressed through themes and concepts. As Dieter Wuttke has put it concisely, on this level 'the interpreter will need an all-encompassing knowledge of the humanities and the sciences. This is the area of iconology. Iconology depends on synthesis, as opposed to analytic iconography' (Wuttke 2017, 119).

The iconological interpretation of the aforementioned painting by van der Weyden is equally illuminating. An in-depth analysis draws attention to the striking representation of Mary, who, together with the body of Christ, forms two wavy lines, in their very form signifying the human suffering. A close study of theological texts shows that the idea of the Mother of God's co-suffering and co-redemption was alive in the Netherlands during the artist's lifetime. Thus, *The Descent of the Cross*, interpreted iconologically, becomes a 'symbolic' form of the Late Middle Ages during which it was painted, an era in which Marian devotion merged with theological meaning of compassion so that altarpieces and devotional pictures could serve the faithful as visual media for their knowledge and worship of God.

Finally, it should be noted that Panofsky's three-level method of description, analysis and interpretation of artworks does not exclude the hermeneutic unity of content and form. Style was part of many of his analyses (Landauer 2020). Panofsky stressed that iconography and iconology are also the basis of an adequate understanding of form (Wuttke 2017, 119). Besides, the 'corrective principles' protect the iconological interpretations from excessive subjectivity or ahistorical 'arbitrariness'. Interpreters need to carefully search out what sources could have inspired the artist to create a given work.

4.3. Applying Panofsky in order to understand the invisible divine in Christian art

4.3.1. Close relationship between the visual arts and texts

The initial question was whether Panofsky's method could be relevant for the interpretation of Christian art. The following subsections give reasons why this is certainly true.

The interdisciplinary and intercultural approach of art historiography, pioneered by Aby Warburg (1866–1929) and conceived as a counterweight to the prevailing formalist approach, has found fruitful ground in the work of Erwin Panofsky (Cassidy 1993, 5). Literature, philosophy, and theology were his interpretive tools for finding the intrinsic meaning of visual artworks. As Ernst Gombrich described it, Panofsky's humanistic erudition often led to the misunderstanding that he was mainly interested in texts to explain the meaning of symbols, images or buildings and 'that he did not respond to the formal qualities of art' (Gombrich 1968, 359). Białostocki argued that this criticism can only be directed at some followers of the iconological method, and not at Panofsky himself (Białostocki 1978, 330).

Regarding interpretation, Panofsky's method is useful because Christian art is largely linked to text sources, especially when it represents the invisible divine. Since early Christianity the biblical, liturgical and theological texts have guided the faithful in the production and reception of their pictorial imagery, because these texts were considered authoritative (Bühren 2021, 623). This close relationship between the visual arts and texts still exists today in the Christianity of both East and West.

Some pictures of Christ and saints are even inscribed with texts that serve as a link. For example, icons of post-iconoclastic Byzantium were marked with the name of the represented person to emphasize the connection of the image – as a visual

medium – with its invisible and transcendent prototype (Bühren 2021, 626–627). In some medieval depictions of the ‘Annunciation’ the biblical words of the archangel appear directly in the scene, as in Simone Martini’s *Annunciation* (1333, Florence, Uffizi).

The fact that Christian art is rooted in or linked with textual sources is evidenced by many images in the altar area of churches. In Late Antiquity, the apse mosaics express the sacramental meaning of ritual texts and actions in liturgy. They visualize celestial realities and divine presence, corresponding to the mystery of God revealed (Bühren 2021, 623–625). From the Middle Ages until the 16th century, the altarpieces and large crucifixes, suspended above the altar, have their content in accord with the meaning of liturgical and biblical texts (Frese 2013; Lane 1988, 114; Sinding-Larsen 1984, 82).

The knowledge of possible text sources can clarify and deepen the interpretation of artworks because they allow for understanding how the artist and his contemporary audience thought and perceived the world (Cassidy 1993, 10). It was Panofsky’s achievement in historiography to have recognized this close relationship between the visual arts and texts. Ever since, ‘a familiarity with contexts, translated in practice primarily as “texts,” became the necessary prerequisite to any art historical analysis’ (Holly 1985, 164).

4.3.2. Pictorial perspective and space as persuasive modes

In the introduction of his book *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky examined the use of perspective in the history of European art (Panofsky 1953, 1–20). Already in 1927, he had published his lectures on perspective (*Die Perspektive als symbolische Form*). The English version was published much later (Panofsky 1991). His study of 1927 combined the history of perspective with the history of understanding space. According to Panofsky, with the decline of Antiquity (between the 2nd and 6th centuries), art almost lost its ability to ‘see through’. The spatial relationships between single pictorial elements disappeared. Panofsky was not at all concerned with examining the obvious spiritual value of ‘two-dimensional art’ (late antique apse mosaics in churches, Byzantine icons and mosaics, Romanesque sculptures and paintings). When he turned to the late Gothic and Renaissance art, he recognized in its revival of the pictorial space the ability to effectively express the infinite.

The pictorial space of early modern art had acquired a performative function by replacing the previous two-dimensional composition with a three-dimensional one that captured the viewer’s imagination. Since the 15th century, space was shaped as a rhetorical device to convey pictorial fictions in a more persuasive way. Figures, events and objects – often taken from real life and sometimes imbued with symbolic meaning – were set in a space much closer to the viewers’ world.

In his treatise *De pictura* (1435/1436), Leon Battista Alberti had claimed that the painting functions for him ‘as an open window through which the “historia” is observed’ (Alberti 2011, 39). At the same time, many paintings of Northern Europe presented a profound depth of space. The rather unusual perspective of the *Madonna in the Church* of Jan van Eyck (1438–1440, Berlin; Gemäldegalerie) makes the viewer naturally ‘gravitate’ towards Mary and Child – positioned in the distance – as if the

aesthetic barrier between the painting and the real world could be crossed. To put it in Panofsky's words, such perspective 'makes perceptible the infiniteness and continuity of the space' (Panofsky 1991, 61). In analogy to Alberti's metaphor, such a perspectival space draws the viewers' attention to the visual performance, framed like an open window through which a lifelike event can be viewed (Bühren 2021, 631). It seems the beholders could become active participants in the scene.

For Panofsky, the quality that makes Italian Renaissance perspective a 'symbolic form', is its being a 'system of projection that actually coincides with what we see' (Moxey 1995, 778). The perspectival space renders pictures more vivid and persuasive. Panofsky noted that through perspective and depth of space, early modern religious art entered 'the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense erupt into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to "internalize" their supernaturalness'. By this, the perspectival view of space is a persuasive mode. It 'expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine' (Panofsky 1991, 72). This phenomenon is important for interpreting early modern Christian art. The same is true of the 'disguised symbolism'.

4.3.3. 'Disguised symbolism': spiritual meaning in visible forms

Panofsky introduced the concept of 'disguised symbolism' in 1934 in his article on Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*. He noted that the symbolic content of the painting is hidden by the 'realistic' elements of the composition and figures, but the viewer may be 'inclined to suspect a hidden significance in all and every object' (Panofsky 1934, 126). Later he would see the main purpose of the 'disguised symbolism' as a characteristic of the new way of painting that corresponded to a 'hunger for reality' (Panofsky 1953, 135). After more than thousand years of Christian art history, the abbreviated style of symbolism had become 'less compatible' (Panofsky 1953, 140) with the naturalism of early modern art which needed a particularly detailed symbolism, cloaked in objects that appear as real as the world of the viewers.

In his book *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Panofsky analyzed a number of representations of the 'Annunciation', pointing out the elements in which the symbolic presence of God is 'concealed' or 'disguised'. For example, in Melchior Broederlam's painting of the *Annunciation* (1393–1399, Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts) the tracery windows placed above the cornice of one of the left buildings are so incongruous with the whole that 'we are simply forced to accept them as a Trinitarian symbol' (Panofsky 1953, 142). And of the *Mérode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (1425–1428, New York, The Cloisters), Panofsky said that 'God, no longer present as a visible figure, seems to be diffused in all the visible objects' (Panofsky 1953, 142), saturated with a hidden meaning. In Campin's painting, even the smoldering wick of a candle and the plume of smoke could be read as symbols of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

To these examples of Panofsky could be added the *Adoration of the Shepherds* by Hugo van der Goes (ca. 1480, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie). The realistically painted curtains pulled aside by two Old Testament prophets metaphorically refer to unveiling divine mysteries through the Incarnation. The plants and the bundle of

wheat in the foreground are objects of daily life, but viewers could associate them with the mystery of the Eucharistic presence. So, they both conceal and mediate the sacred (cf. Bühren 2021, 629–630).

The concept of a ‘concealed or disguised symbolism’ has been criticized (Holly 1984, 162–164). Panofsky himself was aware of its limited applicability. Although he insisted on the possibility of a hidden meaning in early modern art, he was still careful in his interpretation to determine which elements contained a deeper symbolism. Panofsky verified if a given detail was an isolated case or was also found in other artworks, such as the architectural features of Broederlam’s painting (Panofsky 1953, 132), and he always consulted relevant written sources. It is not without reason that Panofsky quoted a text from Thomas Aquinas when he stated that the apparently secularized naturalism of early modern art ‘was still rooted in the conviction that physical objects are ... “corporeal metaphors of things spiritual”’ (Panofsky 1953, 142). All in all, the shift from the overt or explicit symbolism of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the ‘disguised’ symbolism prevalent since the 15th century, as Panofsky has explained (cf. Fozi 2019, 255), requires any interpreter of early modern Christian art to be open to the possibility of a spiritual meaning in visible forms.

5. Communicating the Christian iconography of the divine today

5.1. Relevance of Panofsky to current communications on Christian art

As the texts of the magisterium have shown, the Catholic Church has continuously called for the need of references to the divine in sacred art. However, to create and understand these references, it requires knowledge and experience from both artists and viewers. In order to be able produce or interpret meaning in Christian artworks, appropriate methods are necessary. The previous section sought to prove that Erwin Panofsky’s method of iconography is useful for such a task.

Panofsky himself ‘viewed art as fundamentally communicative’ (Hasenmueller 1978, 294). His three-level method of description, analysis and interpretation of artworks, still used by many art historians today, allows us to reach deeper levels of meaning in artworks. Panofsky’s attention to texts as possible sources of images is an excellent starting point for the iconographical analysis of Christian art which is mostly based on biblical, liturgical and theological texts. Panofsky’s interpretation of perspectival space as a persuasive mode, and also his concept of ‘hidden symbolism’ in the detailed realism make it possible to find references to the transcendent divine, especially in early modern art.

Communicating the deeper meaning of art is more than imparting knowledge. It could be practiced as storytelling, including the imaginative experience, and open a new vista on our world and time. Arts journalists, academic teachers, museum curators, religious educators, tourist guides or social media communicators will therefore benefit from exploring both the Christian iconography of the divine and the Panofskian method.

5.2. Pastoral activities

As regards the pastoral care for communicating the Christian iconography of the divine, currently there are few successful examples. One of them is the ‘Ufficio Diocesano per la Catechesi attraverso l’Arte’, created in Florence in 1990–1991 (Bühren 2008, 583–584; Fossi Todorow 2002). The Diocesan Office of Catechesis through Art has run a variety of programs for school students, tourists and the general public, introducing also to the transcendent meaning of Christian art (Tan 2018, 296–297). Subsequent publications of this office contain elaborate interpretations of art and architecture as references to the divine (Verdon 1992a, 37–38). Inaugurating a series of conferences on the Baptistery of the Cathedral, Timothy Verdon emphasized that the goal of the Florence project is to recognize Christian architecture and art as figures of God, a cultural imprint of His presence among His people (Verdon 1992b, 14–15).

In Germany, the ‘Domforum’ was founded in 1995 as a visitors’ centre of Cologne cathedral for tourists and passersby. It organizes public guided tours of the cathedral’s interior for groups of adults, children and teenagers. As in Florence, the Cologne guides explain the historical, artistic and religious aspects of the architecture, its liturgical furnishings and iconographic programs (Bühren 2008, 584–586).

In the United States, Bishop Robert Barron and *The Word on Fire* media association is communicating the faith by using Christian art as a visual tool for catechesis. Their most widespread initiative was a 10-episode video series *Catholicism*, produced by Mike Leonard, which was also published as a book (Barron 2011). Following the script of the series, one finds extensive interpretations of the iconography of the divine (Barron 2011, 74–75). *The Word on Fire* has also published the *Bible* in volumes where the biblical text is accompanied by four commentaries: from Bishop Barron, from a patristic source, from a contemporary writer, by using reproductions of Christian artworks with essays explaining their spiritual meaning (The Word on Fire Bible 2020).

Although single guided tours in churches are increasingly offered today, there are rarely systematically organized and large-scale programs by Church institutions. The pastoral activities in Florence and Cologne and of Bishop Barron are rather an exception than the rule. Despite the requests of the Church’s recent magisterium, evangelization at an institutional level has not yet fully explored the potentials of the ‘via pulchritudinis’ to communicate the invisible God in art.

5.3. Scholarly publications and university courses

A recent increase in publications, in the most part by English- and German-speaking scholars, shows the current academic interest in both the iconography of the invisible divine and the iconographical method of interpreting artworks. The subject of the representation of the divine in early Christian art has been addressed by Robin M. Jensen in her book *Face to Face* from 2005. In 2022, Jensen again contributed to this problem with *From Idols to Icons*. In his book *Spiritual Seeing*, published in 2000, Herbert Kessler provided a synthetic look at the relationship between medieval images and the divine. He outlined how Byzantine and Western imageries managed

to position themselves on the border between the physical and spiritual worlds. He explains the ability of art to stimulate the faithful to contemplate the divine.

In 2015, Melion and Wandel addressed similar issues in *Image and Incarnation*. The important chapter by Klaus Krüger explained Antonello da Messina's *Annunciation* (ca. 1475–1476, Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia) as a pictorial poetics of Incarnation that aims to mediate between the viewers' sensory experience and their spiritual contemplation of the divine mystery.

In his chapter on *Revelation in Visual Arts* (2021), Ralf van Bühren dealt with sacred images as media of divine revelation. Throughout the history of the Church, Christian art served anagogical purposes leading beyond the work to transcendent realities. Both artistic and textual interpretations of revelation conveyed the invisible God to the audience.

A primary tool of Panofsky's iconographic-iconological method is to explore the connections between visual art and text sources. Among the critics of this approach, no one has found a model to replace it, with the exception of Roelof van Straten who has proposed to apply the term 'iconology' only to those intentions of which the artist was unconscious (Wuttke 2017, 119). So Straten introduced a fourth level: the 'iconological interpretation'. In Straten's system, the third level – called 'iconographical interpretation' – explores the deeper meaning of the artwork intended by the author, while the 'iconological interpretation' focuses on the social-historical influences 'that the artist might not have consciously brought into play but are nevertheless present' (Straten 2000, 4 and 12).

In her study from 2019, Shirin Fozi analyzes the beginning of scholarly interest in iconography between 1840 and 1940 and its further development as method between 1940 and 1990, identifying Erwin Panofsky as a key figure. Fozi also delineated new directions in which the iconographic-iconological method could develop in the search for the deeper meaning of artworks.

Only few *university courses* combine Panofsky's method with the exploration of the spiritual meaning of Christian iconography. The point can be made by the course 'Iconography' delivered by Joana Antunes at the University of Coimbra. The scholarly output of Panofsky was one of its subjects, and his publications appeared in the course bibliography. Antunes included lectures on 'iconography, theology, hagiography' and also case studies of 'iconological analysis' (Antunes 2023). It is to be assumed that the course has equipped the students with the iconographic tools for a deeper interpretation of Christian art.

The Pontifical University of Santa Croce in Rome offers two courses on Christian art, taught by Ralf van Bühren, that include the iconographic-iconological method based on Erwin Panofsky's three-level method. 'Christian Art and Architecture as Communication Media' provides students with resources to analyze and communicate the theological meaning of Christian art as a visual language of faith (Bühren 2019a). In the course 'Christian Art and Architecture in Rome. From Antiquity to the Present', students learn to explore the theological meaning of Christian art by decoding the iconography of the divine in the churches of Rome (Bühren 2019b).

It is evident that courses at Catholic universities focus more explicitly on the spiritual and theological dimensions of artworks, while courses at public universities

are concerned with the method in general. The small number of university courses on the subject is surprising compared to the many recent publications on it.

5.4. Websites and social media platforms

Currently, there are only few websites with pictures and texts that offer quality content on iconographic interpretations of the divine in Christian art. Bernard Dick's personal website provides extensive information about Christian art, downloadable as PDF files (Dick 2015). In chapter 2 ('The Period of Recognition: AD 313–476'), the author explains the meaning of the halo as a symbol of divinity or holiness and of the *Majestas Domini* as a representation of the divine ruler. Dick also interprets the luminosity of the gold mosaics as a reference to heavenly glory and divine presence, in syntony with visions of the Apocalypse. In one section ('Seeing God') he deals directly with the problem of depicting the invisible God in Early Christian art.

Recently, cultural institutions or single art historians have been using *social media platforms* to publish online posts or lectures on Christian artworks. Some of these also explain or apply the iconographic-iconological method. In 2017, the YouTube channel of the National Gallery in London uploaded a series called 'The Audacity of Christian Art'. Here Chloë Reddaway explains how art has dealt with the problem of portraying Christ. The sixth video (Reddaway 2017) emphasizes that the challenge of artists is to represent Christ's invisible divine nature in a visible form. Reddaway interprets curtains as referring to the revelatory and medium-like nature of the painting, which conveys the divine reality (1:05–3:32). Commenting on *The Vision of the Blessed Gabriele* by Carlo Crivelli (ca. 1489), Reddaway's video points to the golden mandorla as a symbol of the divine. The illusionistic garlands of fruit she explains as a symbol of the separation of two worlds: the real world of the beholder and the pictorial world in which the friar Gabriele experiences a vision of God (4:45–6:32). While Reddaway delves into theology and art history, she uses a comprehensible language and interweaves the method of iconography with storytelling. This video is an excellent contribution.

In December 2020, the Uffizi Galleries started their Instagram account (@uffizigalleries) with the hashtag #MasterRecipe. The series of posts implicitly applies the method of Panofsky. The first post shows the *Pala di Santa Lucia de' Magnoli* by Domenico Veneziano (1445; Florence, Uffizi). The description explains the iconography of the *Sacra Conversazione* also by reminding us to always pay 'attention to the direction of light and the use of shadows, which are essential for the Divine to be perceived as a real presence' (Gallerie degli Uffizi 2020). Another post features the *Rucellai Madonna* by Duccio di Buoninsegna (ca. 1285, Uffizi) and interprets the gold background as 'a medium to reach closer to the Divine' (Gallerie degli Uffizi 2021a) and to emphasize Christ's royalty. A third photo post shows the *Madonna del Granduca* by Raphael (1505, Palazzo Pitti). Blue and red colors are interpreted as symbols of Mary's heavenly and royal dignity. The nakedness of the Child refers to his humanity, and the halo to his divinity. It is emphasized that 'beauty speaks of the Divine and brings about contemplation' (Gallerie degli Uffizi 2021b).

In his Instagram account ‘Academic storytelling’, Ralf van Bühren shares didactic experiences with on-site lectures in Venice, Florence and Rome. Student-centered activities, like worksheets to be filled out (Bühren 2022c), encouraged to combine the visual and contextual analysis of artworks (Bühren 2022a). The ‘iconological method of Erwin Panofsky was applied’ (Bühren 2022b) and problem-based learning challenged to both analyze the composition and to decode the iconography.

A video entirely dedicated to the discussion of Panofsky’s iconographic-iconological method, applied to Christian art has been posted on YouTube by the University of Saint Thomas in Bogotá, Colombia (Godoy Acosta 2019). A video with similar content comes from ‘KU Eichstätt Kunstgeschichte’; in it Dominik Brabant explains Panofsky’s approach in detail, along with the concept of disguised symbolism, and compares Panofsky’s approach with that of Aby Warburg (Brabant 2021).

The websites and social media posts discussed here present only an abbreviated examination of Christian iconography. Panofsky’s three-step model is mostly generally applied in communicating the iconography of Christian art. Some videos, posts and texts faithfully follow Panofsky’s method but refrain from theological conclusions. Reddaway’s videos and Bühren’s posts offer the most in-depth content, both apply the iconographic-iconological method and explain the symbolism of the divine.

Communicating the iconography of the invisible God using Panofsky’s method requires knowledge and experience. Also, the creation of visual content online requires professionalism. This could explain the current scarcity of excellent practice. But TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and other image- and video-based platforms are content hubs that are increasingly relevant to younger generations. It is to be expected that in future there will be more in-depth online resources on iconographic interpretations of the divine in Christian art.

6. Conclusions

This article aimed to explain why the iconography of the transcendent divine is important in the history of Christian art. Another objective was to explore the reasons why the method of Erwin Panofsky could be relevant to understand and communicate this iconography today.

In Catholic tradition, the production, use and theory of sacred art are based on the Incarnation of the Word of God. Because of this divine mystery, Christian art can and should refer to the transcendent or divine in a visual form. Theology and the magisterium have for centuries affirmed this referentiality and mediality of sacred images. Christian art is produced for aesthetic reasons, among others, but essentially as a pictorial medium that bridges the visible and the invisible. Any analysis and interpretation of Christian art should keep this mediating role and profound theological rationale in mind. Unfolding it opens a fascinating world of meaning, visually expressed in artistic forms.

The iconographic-iconological method of Erwin Panofsky has been criticized for its alleged preference for texts or words over the formal qualities or aesthetic

experiences of art (Kippenberg 2005, 4297; Białostocki 1963, 780–781). When applied to the analysis and interpretation of Christian art, however, this criticism seems to miss the point. The present article has explained how closely the verbal and visual expressions of faith are connected in Christianity, especially when they metaphorically refer to the invisible divine. This particularity makes it even more necessary, when analyzing and interpreting Christian art, to regard also the biblical, liturgical and theological text sources, because the patrons, audiences and artists of that time considered them authoritative. We could therefore claim that the hermeneutics of Christian art is a prime example of the lasting practicability of Erwin Panofsky's method.

Public speaking and media communications, equipped with Panofsky's method, will readily meet the challenge of leading their audience into an aesthetic experience of Christian art, and also into a deeper reflection on its meaning. Section 5 dealt with a selection of today's communications of the Christian iconography of the divine. They also considered the theological meaning included in text sources. Although the range of best practice in profoundly communicating this issue is still limited – except for scientific publications – a further development and professionalization can be expected in future. This concerns museum curators, academic teachers, arts journalists, multimedia experts, tourist guides, religious educators, catechists, social media communicators, etc. In Panofsky's approach they all find a methodical tool for decoding the transcendent in Christian art and architecture.

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