A Passion for Order: Classifications for Narrative Imagery in Art History and Beyond

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Introduction

Seeing the cult of certain artists, one would think that art history is first and foremost a discipline that celebrates individual achievements, unique talents, and the superiority of the artistic genius. It is. But this is only one side of the coin. Art history had and still has to deal with the masses of average good artworks. The endeavour of understanding and interpreting this considerable amount of artworks required certain types or categories within which works could be grouped and analysed. In art history, these categories concerned the origin, subject, function, style, context, technique, value, ownership, or other characteristics or theoretical frameworks of the artefacts.

When the concept of pictorial narration emerged and its systematic study began in art history in the late 19th century, the method that was chosen for studying narrative imagery was also based on categorisation. Since then, several taxonomies were elaborated in order to define and characterise different types of narrative images, to map their topography, describe their role, and in some cases, interpret them. Indeed, many disciplines now investigate visual narratives, each elaborating its own taxonomy: not only the different areas of art history (dealing with Medieval, Renaissance, or non-European art) and archaeology, but narratology and semiotics as well.

Narrative images, however, still cannot be easily classified and understood today. This is because numerous taxonomies exist simultaneously for rendering narrative imagery with similar or different underlying principles. However, during the century-long evolution of the tradition of historiography, none of these taxonomies reached

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1 I received very generous help from Oskar Bätschmann, David Peters Corbett, Irving and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Paul Meyboom, John Onians, and Tamás von Kálmán. I thank them all.
the status of a canonised system. Their divergence and the change in the meaning of certain narrative types makes grouping even more difficult. Consequently, any narrative object may eventually fall into more than one narrative boxes. An analogous problem in art history would be if there co-existed parallel systems of periodisation or thematic groupings, or there was a lack of consensus on whether a painting is an original made by a master or a fake copy produced centuries later. The reasons for such a proliferation of concepts can surely be found in the ideas and motivations that shaped the history and the development of these taxonomies.

Taxonomy-making practices in the humanities provoke many questions in themselves, but they also raise larger issues concerning the methods of art history, the nature of narrative imagery, or the appropriateness of classification for images. While categorisation is indeed effective and the employment of such taxonomies fulfils the desire of art history to embrace scientific methods, at the same time one must see that taxonomies promote the study of average narrative images rather than elevating exceptional visual stories.

This essay does not aim to amend, supplement or improve the already existing taxonomies, but to examine the phenomenon of their development. The first part of the essay introduces the history and characteristics of the existing narrative taxonomies and identifies the different motivations behind their formation. The second part argues three points about the importance of narrative taxonomies: that they engage one rarely addressed but central issue of art historical practice, that is, classification, that the approach of these taxonomies significantly changed over a century and that this change concerns a shift from evolutionism to positivism, and finally, that narrative taxonomies today form a battlefield where different notions of narrative images interfere with each other.
A quick chronological look at taxonomies

The problem of narrative classification has been the most enduring and most prevailing question in the study of pictorial narratives regarding the amount of scholarly responses and the number of disciplines involved. Table 1 lists chronologically the names of scholars who have contributed to the study of narrative taxonomies with the dates of their publications, the period or area of study their classification was elaborated for, and the narrative types they identified, defined, refined or analysed.²

The table demonstrates that systematic interest in visual storytelling appeared in modern art history in the 1880s, in the early period of the institutionalisation of the discipline and in the same cultural circle, in Germany and Austria. The first contributions, made by Carl Robert, Franz Wickhoff and Kurt Weitzmann, came sporadically. Then, with the narrative turn, from the 1970s onwards, a new expansion can be traced with growing intensity of inquiry. The problem is still alive and continues to attract scholarly interest today. The second column shows that the earlier classifications were mostly concerned (mythological) representations in ancient Greek and Roman art, the periods still most often studied for their visual narratives. It was only from the late 1970s when, with the contributions of Warman Welliver and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, classifications reached Renaissance art. Soon afterwards the scope of narrative taxonomies was widened to include such new areas as Early Buddhist art or the visual culture of Modernism. The last column lists the types of narrative the authors defined or analysed. These types show evidence of the expansion of terminology: the recurring names indicate the dissemination of certain types.

² Only those scholars are included in this list who elaborated a new taxonomy, made a significant improvement to an already existing one, introduced a new type, or directly addressed the problem of narrative classification. In the history of research, different notions were used interchangeably for the elements of narrative taxonomies: types, methods, styles, modes, modalities, narrative strategies, narrative representations, or narrative patterns.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Types of narrative images</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881-1919</td>
<td>Carl Robert</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Kompletive Verfahren – Complete</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Situationsbilder – Situational</td>
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<td>Chroniken-Stil/Bilderzyklen – Cylcical</td>
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<td>1895-1900</td>
<td>Franz Wickhoff</td>
<td>Late Roman and Early</td>
<td>Complementary</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Christian art (vase</td>
<td>Isolating</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>painting, reliefs,</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>manuscripts)</td>
<td>Pseudo-continuous</td>
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<tr>
<td>1947-1957</td>
<td>Kurt Weitzmann</td>
<td>Ancient Greek, Roman,</td>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Early Christian and</td>
<td>Monoscenic</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Medieval art</td>
<td>Cyclic (full, epitomised)</td>
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<td>Polyscenic</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Peter H. von Blanckenhagen</td>
<td>Ancient Greek and Roman  art</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Warman Welliver</td>
<td>Renaissance art (painting)</td>
<td>Continuous action</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Paul Meyboom</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Monoscenic</td>
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<td>Complementary</td>
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<td>Cyclic</td>
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<td>Continuous</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Summary, standardisation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Anthony Snodgrass</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Synoptic</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Evelyn Byrd Harrison</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Progressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Andrew F. Stewart</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Paradigmatic</td>
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<td>Syntagmatic</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Jeffrey Hurwit</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Serial</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Marilyn Aronberg Lavin</td>
<td>Medieval and Renaissance art (Italian fresco cycles)</td>
<td>Double parallel</td>
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<td>Wraparound</td>
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<td>Counterclockwise</td>
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<td>Apse pattern</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Cat’s cradle</td>
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<td>Boustrophedon</td>
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<td>Straight-line vertical up-down</td>
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</tbody>
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### Table 1: Chronological list of taxonomies elaborated for narrative images.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Art Type</th>
<th>Taxonomies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990-1997</td>
<td>Vidya Dehejia</td>
<td>Early Buddhist art</td>
<td>Monoscenic, Continuous, Being in action/being in state, Synoptic, Conflated, Frieze, Narrative network</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>H. Alan Shapiro</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Unified</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Joan Breton Connelly</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Episodic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Áron Kibédi Varga</td>
<td>Early Modern art (painting)</td>
<td>Single monoscenic, Single pluriscenic, Sequence of monoscenic images, Sequence of pluriscenic images</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Lew Andrews</td>
<td>Renaissance art</td>
<td>Continuous narration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Mark Stansbury-O’Donnell</td>
<td>Ancient Greek art</td>
<td>Panoramic (Summary, standardisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Roger David Von Dippe</td>
<td>Roman art</td>
<td>Continuous narration (Summary, standardisation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Visual narration as powerful inspiration: Franz Wickhoff

The first influential taxonomy for narrative images was elaborated by the founder of the Vienna School, the formalist art historian Franz Wickhoff. It was published in *Die Wiener Genesis* (1895), which Wickhoff co-authored with Wilhelm Ritter von Härtel. The dissemination of Wickhoff’s taxonomy is partly due to the fact that shortly afterwards the book was translated into English and was published under the title *Roman Art: Some of Its Principles and Their Application to Early Christian Painting* (London 1900). One of the principles mentioned in the title concerns methods or types of narration. Four such methods were defined on the basis of stories represented in frescoes, ancient vase painting, reliefs and book illumination. To get an insight into what type means in this context, and because some later taxonomies were heavily based on Wickhoff’s system, it seems useful to briefly introduce his definitions. In the complementary method, the main hero appears without repetition in the composition; narrative complexity is achieved through the presence of other episodes, actions, or signs that happen before or after the central action. The isolated method shows more scenes from a story. Each captures a scene using only single, isolated moments of the story, but the scenes are distinguished from each other. The third and most significant method is that of continuous narration. Images and reliefs belonging to this type show episodes of a story without separating boundary lines and without division of the background. The episodes often repeat the main hero. Wickhoff introduced a supplementary, fourth method called pseudo-continuous that fills the gap between the isolated and continuous methods. It operates with distinctive scenes in front of a seemingly identical landscape or architectural settings. In all of this, Wickhoff was only building on the triple scheme of narrative modes of the archaeologist Carl Robert (*Bild und Lied*, 1881), who had adapted one of his terms from Otto Jahn.

3 Wickhoff 1900, 8–16.
4 This connection was recognised by Paul Meyboom (1978, 55–57, 72).
Wickhoff’s narrative model is unique for two reasons: it is an evolutionary taxonomy, and it gives visual narration an exceptionally prestigious position. Narrative types were located in a specific historical, geographical and cultural context and were also related to literary genres. The *complementary* type belonged to what Wickhoff called ‘Asiatic and Oriental art’, including Egyptian imagery and is linked to epic poetry; the *isolating* method was adopted by the ancient Greeks and was connected to drama; and the *continuous* method was an innovation of the Romans, which was later improved by the Early Christians, and was connected to prose. The narrative methods formed different stages of the progress of artistic periods. Wickhoff especially emphasised the method of continuous narration, with which this linear development reached its summit and conclusion.

It is in Wickhoff’s theory that pictorial storytelling as a phenomenon reached its most prestigious position. Wickhoff was in search of meaning in the art of the past. He addressed a universal question: why is art subject to change and what causes such changes? Art historians at the end of 19th century dared to raise ambitious and comprehensive issues about the historical development of art. Wickhoff’s theory primarily served to establish a legitimacy for Late Roman and Early Christian art that, driven by the hierarchy of classicism, were at that time considered as transitory and decadent periods. The evolutionary taxonomy was embedded in the answer: visual narration is the phenomenon that is capable to effectively influence the formation of artistic styles. The continuous type of visual narration is presented as a new and powerful invention of Late Roman art that reached its perfection by the Early Christians. To prove his theory, Wickhoff turned to absolutely well known and appreciated reference points, for example to the art of a never-questioned genius, Michelangelo. The appearance of continuous narration on the walls and the ceiling of the Cappella Sistina in Rome not only advertised the glory of this type of narration, but effectively strengthened the validity of

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5 For the connection of literary genres, narrative methods and periods, see Wickhoff 1900, 14–16. 111.

6 Wickhoff 1900, 9–21. 112–114.
the method. The strategy of re-evaluating continuous narration was very much needed, as this type, along with others that did not satisfy the Aristotelian triple unity of time, space and action, was strongly rejected since the eighteenth-century Academicians. In Wickhoff’s evolutionary taxonomy, types of visual narration are both historical and natural features: different eras are dominated by different types of narration, and changes of artistic style are the product of change in narrative method. Like organisms, narrative types change, are subject to transitions, and progress over time.

**Storytelling and book illustration: Kurt Weitzmann**

The first steps of Wickhoff’s narrative taxonomy proved to be the beginning of a very long trajectory: even a hundred years after the first attempts, scholars were still engaged with the problem of narrative classification. Wickhoff’s followers thought that advancing the study of pictorial narration could be best achieved by correcting and clarifying former taxonomies or making new ones. However, these later taxonomies in some sense are less effective, as they lacked Wickhoff’s great ambition to give explanation about the general role and function of visual narration.

It was Kurt Weitzmann who first came up with more precise definitions of Wickhoff’s narrative types, effectively relocating the interest in visual narratives, characteristic of the Vienna School, from German speaking countries to the US. Weitzmann’s career clearly reflects this move: he arrived in Princeton in 1935 and as an influential professor there, for many generations he promoted the topic of narrative illustration in manuscripts of early Christian and Byzantine periods. Most influential was the *Illustration in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration*, published in 1947 as an excerpt of his manuscript teaching course. This was the first book which was definitely built upon earlier accounts of narratives: he crit-
ically evaluated and redefined Carl Robert’s and Wickhoff’s terminology, but his system is still compatible with theirs. Following the triple scheme, his types are the simultaneous (images with one scene showing more episodes and moments), the monoscopic (images representing the unity of space, time and action), and the cyclic (image cycles with the repeated appearance of the protagonist) types of narrative images. The latter was divided into subtypes and it is here that the later famous opposition of monoscopic and polysenic types appears.8

Weitzmann maintained the evolutionary idea, although his approach was never purely theoretical. The types bear values in themselves. Their progression moves from the simultaneous method, regarded as simplistic and contradictory,9 towards the cyclic method, which is praised for its precision.10 Weitzmann elaborated his typology with the help of examples from vase painting and relief sculpture, although the main field for its application was codex illustration. His expeditions to Sinai prior to the publication of the Roll and Codex resulted in hundreds of new images for the Index of Christian art, the repository for early Medieval visual culture, which generated an urgent need for both a terminology and a useable theoretical apparatus for the historical and geographical localisation and the scholarly investigations for these images.

**Taxonomies by disciplines**

Kurt Weitzmann’s classification became the source, and ultimately a common denominator for almost all later narrative taxonomies. The post-Weitzmann period, from the 1970s, along with the affirmation of narratology as a discipline, shows a sudden and intense increase in the interest in narrative with the study of narrative methods being extended to later periods and other areas of art. However, in some sense, generalisation caused simplification. These subsequent attempts, although they achieved further clarification and refinement,

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8 Weitzmann 1947, 12–36.
10 Weitzmann 1947, 17–33.
were reduced to the study of forms, became technical, and lost their grounding historical context as well as their interpretive character. The study of narrative methods became more of an obsession with categorisation, lacking the visionary and exemplary characteristics of Wickhoff’s theory. The disciplines involved in this historiography did not standardise previous achievements, most probably because they were not aware of them, but took separate pathways and elaborated their own classification system. Table 2 gives an outline of the existing narrative taxonomies based on their disciplines: there are different routes for archaeology, for Western art (Medieval and Renaissance art), non-European art, narratology and semiotics.\textsuperscript{11}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Table 2: Taxonomies for narrative images by disciplines.}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{11} Full lines mean direct influence, dash lines an indirect or supposed influence between the scholars.


Archaeology

The field of ancient art produced a coherent and conscious development driven by the general aim of investigating the history of narrative types. Various examples of the narrative art of ancient Greece and Rome urged scholars to either amend extant types or to propose new ones and expand the taxonomy. Two features of the previous taxonomies had survived for a long time: the evolutionary scheme and the need for the localisation of the types to certain geographical areas. Following the Robert-Wickhoff-Weitzmann-line, Paul Meyboom is the first to revise the question of typology in Greek art. He expanded the inherited triple scheme into a system of four, and offered more exact definitions, noticing certain subdivisions. In this system there are monoscopic, cyclic, complementary and continuous images.\(^\text{12}\)

For Meyboom, the evolutionary model means the development of these types for which the origin and place was also investigated. Later refinements in archaeology brought some new types: synoptic (Anthony Snodgrass, 1982), progressive (Evelyn Byrd Harrison, 1983), paradigmatic and syntagmatic (Andrew F. Stewart, 1983), serial (Jeffrey Hurwit, 1985), unified (H. Alan Shapiro, 1991), episodic (Joan Breton Connelly, 1993),\(^\text{13}\) and panoramic (Mark D. Stansbury-O’Donnell, 1999).\(^\text{14}\)

The great move in this sequence toward consistency was made by Stansbury-O’Donnell in his excellent book on Greek narrative. Based on more objective criteria, he standardised the already existing eight categories and placed them within a time-space framework. This gave a comprehensive overview of the already existing knowledge and unified the vocabulary.\(^\text{15}\) Recently, Roger David Von Dippe, whose thesis concerned the continuous type in Roman art, made a further step: he expanded Stansbury-O’Donnell’s system, which now has ten different elements.\(^\text{16}\) These achievements are well

\(^{12}\) Meyboom 1978, especially 70–72.


\(^{14}\) Stansbury-O’Donnell 1999, 137–139.


\(^{16}\) Von Dippe 2007, 1–26, and especially 8–14.
known in archaeology. They became part of both historiography and terminology in the field; however, these achievements had no influence beyond the discipline.

**Art history**

It was only in the late 1970s that the problem of visual narrative reached mainstream art history, the field of Renaissance painting. Due to their pragmatic nature, Weitzmann’s types were relatively easy to borrow and allocate without further reservations. These older types were applied to other media like panel paintings and frescoes. *Continuous action*, as a new and more complex subcategory of continuous narration was defined by Warman Welliver based on the bodily poses, actions, gestures and movements of Peter, Christ and the tax collector in the central scene of Masaccio’s *Tribute Money*.\(^{17}\) The evolutionary model, which seemed adequate in archaeology on the first appearance of narrative types, was replaced by chronological approaches. Narrative fresco cycles were the topic of Marilyn Aronberg Lavin’s grandiose book, *The Place of Narrative, Mural decoration in Italian Churches 431–1600* (1990), of which she examined more than two hundred from Medieval and Renaissance Italian churches. A huge database was built in order to compare the depicted stories and their dispositions with regard to the architectural setting. A statistical survey proved that these dispositions follow certain patterns of which the eleven most frequent ones were named, making possible an almost full classification for image cycles.\(^{18}\) It is important to emphasise that there is no trace of these patterns in the tradition of writing on art. However, as Lavin claimed, the expertise on dispositions might have been common knowledge that could have formed part of the orally transmitted skills of the workshop tradition over the

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17 Welliver 1977, 43. 55 fn. 17.
Middle ages.\textsuperscript{19} At the level of single images, Lavin followed Weitzmann’s scheme of \textit{monoscenic}, \textit{polyscenic}, and \textit{continuous} types of narrative images.

Art historians’ favourite type – continuous narration, the only widely recognised type – was studied in its own right in the context of Renaissance art, too. Lew Andrews in his \textit{Story and Space in Renaissance Art: The Rebirth of Continuous Narrative} (1995) was interested in why continuous narrative had become so popular in Italian Renaissance painting, especially during the period when proper perspective construction was developed. It is remarkable that spatial unity for Renaissance painters offered a perfect setting for displaying consecutive moments of a story.\textsuperscript{20} In Andrews’s book, new aspects of studying pictorial narratives, such as their discussion in art theory of the time, the issues of perception and memory, or space representations, were innovations.

Weitzmann’s narrative taxonomy is surprisingly well adaptable to the art of distant but synchronic cultures, such as that of early Buddhism. The analogy does not come from direct artistic exchange but from similarities both in narrative solutions and in compositions. Vidya Dehejia’s taxonomy is based on the reliefs of Sanchi and the murals of Ajanta and is an extended version of Weitzmann’s system. It contains eight distinctive categories ranging from the simplest monoscenic to the most complex narrative networks.\textsuperscript{21} The fact that similar narrative methods illustrate not only Greek and Roman mythological, biblical, but even buddhological cycles, suggest that a more general visual language may exist, at least on the level of visual storytelling.

\textbf{Narratology and semiotics}

Since the 1990s, two new disciplines – narratology and semiotics – have become attracted to the topic of pictorial storytelling. Áron

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Lavin 1990, 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Andrews 1995, 96–100.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} See Dehejia 1997, 10–32, a system grew out of Dehejia 1990, 378–392.
\end{itemize}
Kibédi Varga, a literary critic, created a quadrinomial taxonomy for narrative images: on the first level, argumentative and narrative images are distinguished, then narrative images are further classified as single images and sequences of images, and these sets are both subdivided into monoscenic (without repeating the main character) and pluriscenic (with repetition of figures) types. The domain of this taxonomy is Western painting in general, in which visual narratives are seen merely as illustrations or history paintings depicting written stories in a simplified way. The author admits that modern media might produce visual narratives without verbal aids, but their independence ceases when their stories are rendered verbally. This rather simple but effective classification approaches images from a verbal point of view, from where it is obviously more difficult to recognise the specifically visual characteristics of pictorial narration. There is no reference to any prior narrative classification; however, the terminology used suggests familiarity with Weitzmann’s notions.

Semiotics also discovered visual narration and studied it as part of the broader area of visual communication. Gunther Kress’ and Theo von Leeuwen’s full narrative taxonomy mostly relies on Rudolf Arnheim’s research into the language of images and shows no connection to any of the previous taxonomies, not even at the level of terminology. Here, narrative images can be classified as certain processes (action, reactional, speech, mental, conversational). Visual stories function in a specific social context, but semiotics often overlooks the historical perspective. As the examples show, narrative art in the practice of narratologists ranges from Giotto to Hogarth, in semiotics, from Modernism to contemporary visual culture.

The proliferation in narrative taxonomies and the lack of connection between the disciplines elaborating them caused a fragmentation of knowledge. There are plenty of boxes available now for classifying narrative objects, but the question still remains: what are the benefits

22 The argument in Kibédi Varga 1988 was further elaborated in Kibédi Varga 1993.
23 Kibédi Varga 1993, 176.
of these taxonomies for studying visual narration? Would this approach reveal the uniqueness of visual storytelling as compared to or as opposed to verbal or oral storytelling? For possible answers to such questions, one needs to address the problem of taxonomy-making in a wider context.

**Classifications in theory and in practice**

Narrative taxonomies are spatio-temporal classifications, and, as such, they need to meet a few preliminary criteria. Theoretically, taxonomies share the following properties: categories are consistent and are mutually exclusive, and as systems, classifications are complete. In an ideal world, this would mean that the types in taxonomies are discrete entities with clear boundaries, all their properties being shared by all its members. Ideally, too, these properties should uniquely establish the categories capturing their meaning and provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for their recognition. All examined objects fall uniquely into one (and only one) category. Finally, the taxonomy covers the entire set investigated, i.e. is able to “provide total coverage of the world it describes.”

In reality, this is seldom true. Classifications in art history (or in the humanities more generally) are quite different from those used in mathematics or science. And although these requirements constitute an essential need, in the end this level of precision is impossible to reach. Perfection would, for example, mean first of all, that the concepts borrowed from art history are exact (for example: culture, period, geographical area, and all questions on any detail of the composition). Definitions of narrative categories, framed by these concepts, should also be clearly defined without any ambivalence. Newly discovered narrative objects should naturally find their place in the system without any fear that just one counterexample would destroy it. This level of agreement seems unimaginable in a discipline where

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questions like “what is a unified background?” generate discussions.\textsuperscript{27} Not to mention the controversy around the core concept of narrative investigations, the concept of the narrative image.

Taxonomy-making as a process usually follows an inductive method, advancing from recognition, distinction and description to identification and understanding. The definitions reflect the carefully chosen examples and are subject to repetitive refinement. This practice is closer to what Hope A. Olson emphasised in describing this method in practice, when choosing one category means not choosing the rest:

The duality of sameness and difference is an underlying principle of classification as we construct and practice it in Western culture. We try to group similar things together and separate them from things that are different.\textsuperscript{28}

In art history, comparison means a key step in the process, as Oskar Bätschmann claims,

Drawing up lists with information on the iconographic type, the genre, or the style of the work reflects the view that one can determine a work’s characteristic features only on the basis of distinctive comparison.\textsuperscript{29}

The grounding dichotomy of comparison, sameness and difference, is present in Western thinking since Greek philosophy and mathematics. According to Olson, this duality has importance in the learning process, so we tend to regard it as an almost natural law, an idea shared by Jerome Bruner as well.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{From evolutionism to positivism}

Premising the laws of nature in connection with taxonomies would only seem a strange idea at first glance. “To classify is human”,\textsuperscript{31} and it functions at a biological level. It is an activity through which we observe, understand and explain the world, create relations between

\textsuperscript{27} See for example Blanckenhagen 1957, 78–79, and more recently Von Dippe 2007, 13–14.
\textsuperscript{28} Olson 2001, 115.
\textsuperscript{29} Bätschmann 2003, 186–187.
\textsuperscript{30} Olson 2001, 115-116; Bruner et al. 1956, 7.
\textsuperscript{31} Bowker – Star 1999, 2.
things, and it helps us make the world we live in comprehensible. Our lives once depended on a proper recognition and categorisation of things, people, and phenomena around us, and it still does. Recent neuroscientific experiments show that object recognition and object categorisation are linked, and categorisation is immediately there when objects are identified. Although categorisation requires a further step after recognition, this step does not require more processing time. However, strikingly, at each exposure duration, subjects performed just as quickly and accurately on the categorization task as they did on a task requiring only object detection: By the time subjects knew an image contained an object at all, they already knew its category.\textsuperscript{32}

Categorisation thus seems to be an almost automatic behaviour in humans, which helps to explain why taxonomies were such an obvious response when art historians met works of art, including narrative works.

The use of evolutionary models in taxonomies has a different source: it is associated with Kunstwissenschaft, the ambition of art history, an otherwise historical discipline, to follow a systematic approach, the methodology and the rigorous precision of science. Biological metaphors in art theory go back at least to the Greek sources of Pliny the Elder and are present in Giorgio Vasari’s linear-cyclical model, which aimed to describe the development of art and reflected a biological growing. “Based on an organic model – of birth, maturity, and decay – this narrative line of rise and fall means that the lows must be overcome for the next cycle to start again.”\textsuperscript{33} The biological model was promoted again by Winckelmann in the \textit{Geschichte der Kunst in Alterthums}.\textsuperscript{34}

In the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Darwinism did not just generate a renewed interest to evolutionary ideas, it also provided a new model to follow.

\textsuperscript{32} Grill-Spector – Kanwisher 2005, 152.
\textsuperscript{33} Payne 2001, 51–52. 75–76.
\textsuperscript{34} For a general outline of the evolutionary theories in art history, see Kleinbauer – Slavens 1982, 17–27.
Under the impact of Darwinism, art historians began to conceive of groups of art works as developing slowly and gradually, in a continuous linear sequence from the simplest to the most complex. That sequence was equated with the concept of time, from earliest to the most recent.\textsuperscript{35}

This is clearly true for Wickhoff’s evolutionary taxonomy, which lists categories one after another, with their temporal progression leading towards perfectionism. Darwinism provided scientific legitimation at a time when the concept of Kunstwissenschaft was gaining importance in the discipline. With it Wickhoff “raised art history above the level of empirical observation or submission to aestheticizing norm, endowing it with striking conceptual and methodological sophistication.”\textsuperscript{36}

Less ambitious but wider in its scope, the idea of evolutionism remained a powerful aspect of Weitzmann’s theory. Evolutionary changes appear in his argument on three levels: as in Wickhoff’s, it is the evolution of types, it is the evolution of the relation between the textual source and its illustration, and the evolution of illustrated manuscripts as a genre. Types are still viewed as organic categories: they have their origins, are disseminated, and they develop.\textsuperscript{37} The evolution of Egyptian narrative art in Helene J. Kantor’s explanation again follows a chronological pattern, and culminates at a point when art most strongly correlates with the written sources.\textsuperscript{38} Recently, the biological metaphor is expressed less directly, but the idea can be detected through the use of such words as emergence, assurance, or maturity of certain types.\textsuperscript{39}

In recent decades the evolutionary approach has slowly disappeared, to giving way to a positivist attitude that comes with a more objective approach to classification. The taxonomy in archaeology is a good example of this change. In order to avoid ambiguity or flexi-
bility in the definitions, types are set against abstract time-space parameters and became elements of a visual vocabulary. The urge for such abstraction was phrased by Lew Andrews: “We need not refer back to their origins, to the circumstances of their invention, in order to distinguish between various methods of narration.”\footnote{Andrews 1995, 122.} This shift towards standardisation does not imply a new methodology: the categories are still distinguished based on the different ways images can transgress the Aristotelian rule on the unity of time, space and action. The latest taxonomies are supplemented with some new features, the number of images (Stansbury-O’Donnell) and the number or times and arrangements (Von Dippe) are also taken into account.\footnote{Stansbury-O’Donnell 1999, 7, and Van Dippe 2007, 18.}

Classifying narrative objects as a process is by now a rather mechanical activity, being reduced to checking the presence or absence of certain features. What Stansbury-O’Donnell wrote about early typologies is actually much more valid for these later attempts: “Throughout these studies, there is a predominant concern for the nature of time and space within a picture, and whether their link in the real world is maintained in art.”\footnote{Stansbury-O’Donnell 1999, 1.} Once the definition of these types reaches full abstraction (if ever), they will be immune to break down into geographical areas, periods, styles, or meanings of the artworks. It is true for narrative taxonomies that “Evolutionism is dead but the facts which gave rise to its myth are still stubbornly there to be accounted for.”\footnote{Gombrich 1969, 22.}

The case of continuous narration

The shift towards positivism can be detected on the level of types as well. Continuous narration, the most popular and most controversial type, well demonstrates this change. Evaluation and interpretation fall away. The definition of this type varies from author to author; here the earliest and the latest one will be examined. In Wickhoff’s
taxonomy, the rather elusive description of continuous narration was based on a perceptual feeling, and the aesthetic experience was expressed through a metaphor of travel:

... as the text flows on the heroes of the narrative accompany it in a continuous series of related circumstances passing, smoothly and unbroken, one into another, just as during a river voyage the landscape of the banks seems to glide before our eyes.44

The flow of the scenes is inherent to this type. On Traian’s column, the example par excellence of this type, the repetition of the protagonist guides the viewers through the story with a crescendo that culminates in the victory of the emperor.45

By now, the perceptual aspects of continuous narration are completely forgotten, new definitions rely on the more abstract and formal treatment of time and space. Classifying means counting temporal moments and the number of times when the protagonist appears rather than experiencing or feeling.

Continuous narrative consists of two or more events from the same story, occurring at different time periods and featuring the same protagonist in at least two distinct activities. These sequential events are not separated into definitively segregated regions of space. They share a background that may contain landscape or architectural elements or may be completely blank, consisting of so-called negative space. The style has two subcategories. In the extended frieze type of narrative events are arranged sequentially against a background continuous from one scene to the next. In the single panel type, events are distributed within a single, unified setting.46

The advantage of Von Dippe’s definition is that it clearly sets the demarcation lines for this narrative category.

For a long time, the continuous method was regarded as controversial: it was praised for the very same reasons it was rejected. This type does not align with the requirements of temporal unity, and thus was seen as a mistake. Its harshest critic, Percy Gardner, the opponent of Wickhoff, regarded this method as undeveloped and imperfect. His view set off an almost century-long denunciation of this type of narration. Continuous method

44 Wickhoff 1900, 8.
45 Wickhoff 1900, 112–113.
46 Van Dippe 2007, 17.
flourishes in the first sketch-books of clever children: it is in fact a childish method, and wherever art is in a childish condition, it may be found. (...) And the infant art of Christianity took it quite naturally.  

Hence, continuous narration, which was “the bright, waving flower that grew on the strong root of realism” in Wickhoff, in Gardner’s account became a primitive technique of underdeveloped societies. Gardner’s view is reflected in the thoughts of certain narratologists, for whom Lessing is still an absolute reference point. 

For the admirers of early movies, continuous narration was a progressive method advancing the language of films. The process-like narration, as seen on Traian’s column, is indeed able to evoke scenic experience. Horst Bredekamp, when analysing the scenic tradition in art history, referred to Sergei M. Eisenstein and Erwin Panofsky, who both admired the cinematic view of Wickhoff:

Franz Wickhoff’s analysis of Vienna Genesis from 1895 had attempted already to project the cinematographic gaze back into the history of art. Sergey Eisenstein at least saw Vienna Genesis as a paradigmatic study of running action and as an essential impulse for the training of his film eyes. 

The change in approach in the history of narrative taxonomies from evolutionism to positivism can be interpreted also as a shift between what Jerome Bruner calls perceptual and conceptual. It is particularly valid for the method of continuous narration. Wickhoff’s perceptual approach and Von Dippe’s abstract-conceptual approach constitute the two extremes on this scale. This shift also meant a move away from the value-based and historically determined types. It proves that, “However, categorization is a dynamic process, which updates the knowledge about categories, their members and their relations constantly throughout new experiences.”

47 Gardner 1917, 20–21.
48 Wickhoff 1900, 144.
49 Gardner 1917, 21.
50 For example Wendy Steiner, when writing about pictorial narration. See Steiner 2004, 145–146.
52 Bruner et al. 1956, 8–10.
53 Frey et al. 2011, 2.
Classifications in art history

Categorisation as a way of understanding and interpreting art is indeed very deeply rooted in art historical thinking. Almost all the main tendencies in the history of art reacted on a certain problem by elaborating a system of categories. Naturally, art historians are expected to be capable to distinguish artworks based on their medium, condition, value, quality, etc., or group them into thematic or stylistic sets and subsets. The historical tradition provided a model for such classifications: as early as in the 17th century, art academies categorised painting as a hierarchic system of subgenres with history painting on top, followed by religious painting, portraiture, landscape, genre and animal painting, and with still life at the bottom. In modern art history, categorisation became an obvious and often unreflected practice.

Attribution, the method that concerned the authenticity and quality of artworks, was developed by Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson at the end of the 19th century. The knowledge of connoisseurs, practitioners of attribution, is first and foremost based on the appropriate use of such categories as style, period or geographical era. The act of discrimination, “a fundamental sensory faculty” is an essential part of this knowledge. In Gary Schwartz’s words:

In ordinary language, a connoisseur is someone with expert knowledge of a particular field, or someone with greater powers of discrimination that the ordinary run of humanity. In art-historical usage, it has a more specific meaning: close analysis and comparison as a means of judging the quality, authorship, and authenticity of art.

Authenticity is still the most expensive category of art.

Formalism developed stylistic categories that helped both in formal analysis and in the process of periodisation. This is best recognised in Heinrich Wölfflin’s famous book, Principles of Art History (1915), in which the art of the Renaissance and Baroque was distinguished by five distinct pairs of opposite categories (linear-painterly,
plane-recession, closed-open form, multiplicity-unity, clearness-un-
clearness). Buildings, sculptures and paintings that were placed in
the same class shared common characteristics of the ‘period style’.
Each artwork also belonged to a few more refined and interlocking
categories, such as ‘the style of the school, the country and the race’.
Single works of art, just as in Wickhoff’s theory, were regarded as
representatives or variants of these categories.

Improving the obvious thematic classes, iconology created a the-
monic structure of iconographic categories. Works of art grouped as
the same type shared a common theme and similar thematic solu-
tions for their subject matter. Although the idea originated from Aby
Warburg, it was Erwin Panofsky who elaborated it into a method.
Panofsky’s method consists of three steps: pre-iconographical de-
scription, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation.
It is the second step where the recognition of types and their classi-
fication takes place. When describing it, Panofsky refers to a more
general practice of classification:

Iconography is, therefore, a description and classification of images much as eth-
nography is a description and classification of human races: it is a limited and, as it
were, ancillary study which informs us as to when and where specific themes were
visualized by which specific motifs.

Even nowadays, classification is regarded as a viable method in art
historical research. Darwin’s practice is echoed in Martin Kemp’s ap-
proach to categorising Renaissance altarpieces:

The taxonomy I am adopting is biological, but without intending to suggest that the
products of artists can be handled precisely as if they were products of nature. As
we will see, such a system of classification breaks down at key points. The biological
taxonomy is simply used here as a way of categorising objects within a system
that proceeds progressively from the general to the particular. The taxonomic clas-
ses I will be using are ‘kingdom’, ‘family’, ‘genus’, ‘species’, and ‘individual’.
The categories correspond with ‘works of art’ in general, religious
images, altarpieces, types of altarpieces, and individual artworks, re-
spectively. Taxonomies may help defining the borders of art history

56 Wölfflin 1950.
57 Panofsky 1955, 41–42.
59 Kemp 1990, 3.
as a discipline. Presupposing that images all belong to a huge family, W. J. T. Mitchell created a ‘family tree’ classifying them into types of graphic, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal images; different types are used by ‘different institutional discourses’.\(^6^0\) Similarly, in order to better articulate the boundaries of art, James Elkins addressed the question of non-art images (he calls them informational images) as opposed to images of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.\(^6^1\) The most recent achievements in classification may challenge the knowledge of connoisseurs: a computer program has been developed that is capable of grouping together ‘similar’ paintings based on their visual features (colour, texture, form, contrast, etc.) and so predicting their style, genre or the artist.\(^6^2\) This program at the moment does not have better abilities in distinguishing artworks than a first year art history student, however, soon computers may be able to classify more precisely than humans’ eyes.

Narrative taxonomies can be paralleled with other classifications in the discipline. In the late 19th century, Wickhoff’s taxonomy was aligned with the art historical paradigm of the time, formalism. Narrative types played a key role in the formation of styles. As types were attached to certain historical periods, they were chronologically arranged. Recent taxonomies emphasise the coexistence of narrative types (as in Dehejia, Lavin, or Gunther-Kress). Kibédi Varga’s narrative taxonomy resembles the Darwinian tree-type with binary junctions on each level. It is similar to Martin Kemp’s system, as in both new categories form subclasses of the previous ones, narrowing the classes from general down to particular examples.

**Narrative taxonomies as a battlefield**

By now, all the disciplines interested in pictorial storytelling – art history, archaeology, narratology and semiotics – possess their own narrative taxonomies. Given this state of affairs, one would expect there

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60  Mitchell 1984, 504–507.
62  Elgammal-Saleh 2015.
to be lively theoretical debates and dynamic co-operation, resulting in interdisciplinary studies. However, in reality, this seldom happens, the map of knowledge about visual narratives remained unintegrated. There is no one widely accepted taxonomy, but there are many in use by relatively small and fairly isolated scholarly communities who exist like enclaves. Concerning the narrative types, the use of terminology in general scholarship is rather arbitrary.

Consequently, even scholars working on these taxonomies are sometimes unaware of the achievements of other groups. This may be demonstrated by Kibédi Varga, who pleads for the study of taxonomy and the relevance of his types without referring to any of the previous studies in the topic. Andrea Pinotti transcribed Wickhoff’s narrative categories onto Renaissance art and contemporary comics, and proposed several relevant questions and research topics for further study, however, his lecture revealed no knowledge about this historiography. One reason certainly is the fact that very little has been published on this historiography, and many ideas concerning visual narration are left unreflected. Some scholars would argue that the interest in narrative has only reached art history in the last few years. Some would say it has not reached at all. Wendy Steiner’s statement, which says: “In fact, the narrativity of pictures is virtually a non-topic for art historians” demonstrates similar lack of familiarity with this century long tradition.

The lack of awareness of parallel or past scholarship in this case is symptomatic: the situation reflects the ambiguous relationship of the three main fields in this game, art history-archaeology, narratology, and semiotics. The history of art has a long, but little studied tradition of engaging with visual narratives. It is the field that still produces the largest quantity of work on this topic but it does not seem strong enough to have a significant impact on, or to generate much response from cognate disciplines. This is mostly due to the

63 Kibédi Varga 1993, 177.
64 Pinotti 2004, 23–25.
65 Steiner 2004, 146.
fact that art historical studies, even when they address theoretical questions, focus on a certain period or culture and thus fail to attract scholars from outside (as in case of Lavin or Stansbury-O’Donnell).

The huge and constantly growing domain of narratology is now the dominant discipline. It is a well-organised field that is advertising its achievements with greater self-confidence. Taking advantage of the seemingly unexplored field, a few practitioners of narratology feel authorised to make general claims about the visual arts. These generalisations are often made without taking into account the historicity of the examined artworks. Often they are made on the basis of a supposed primacy of verbal art and of the more elaborate theoretical framework developed for literature and film. A few narratologists would even question the ability of images to convey narratives. Recently, Werner Wolf, an iconoclast narratologist claimed that “the pictorial medium offers considerable resistance to narrativity”.66 His argument, supported by Kibédi Varga’s taxonomy, attempted to prove that each type of narrative image is less capable of expressing a story than its textual equivalent. This meant that images generally have only restricted possibilities for conveying narratives. In this case, taxonomy is used not for but against images, and is emphasising the limitations rather than the benefits of visual storytelling. Semiotics, as the youngest of the three disciplines, holds a more balanced view on visual and verbal fields and aims to find common grounds between verbal and visual communication. There are iconodule semioticians, who think that even non-figurative, or purely abstract paintings are able to convey stories. With a narrative interpretation of geometric symbolism, El Lissitzky’s Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge can be seen as a storytelling image.67 These examples in themselves show the distance between the disciplines. Both semiotics and narratology would offer, however, great theoretical ammunition for art history, but art historians rarely use these sources.

Summary

These investigations into taxonomies are motivated by the need to find out what a narrative image is. Sometimes they are driven by an unspoken desire to find the limits of visual narration. Pictorial storytelling, when examined in art history, is often restricted to a certain period or area; in narratology, it falls into a hierarchy and is opposed to verbal storytelling; in semiotics, it survives only because it possesses its own structure. For these disciplines the issue of narrative taxonomies, *pars pro toto*, points toward the presumption that making types indeed has a meaning: the representatives of types help us understand the entire phenomenon, i.e. narrative types enable us to understand what pictorial storytelling is on a general level.

However, while the existing taxonomies work well for the masses of average images, they do not work well for the exceptional examples. It is clear that episode-based classifications are not able to deal with quality or with complex visual narratives, for example those with rich or layered temporal frameworks. Gentile Bellini’s *Procession in Piazzetta San Marco*, with its complex multi-level narrative, communicates not only the story of the procession but some fundamental traditions of Venice as a state. But this painting would end up in the simplest box in any of these narrative taxonomies, as it does not repeat the protagonists, and there are no visible actions with multiple temporal moments. Indeed, these taxonomies do not operate perfectly for simple or average narratives either, as they cannot account for painterly elements that transcend the episodic, such as facial expressions, body language, gestures or movements.

Nonetheless, with taxonomies, there is a lot at stake. The *Rembrandt Research Project* (RRP), which investigated the authenticity of disputed Rembrandt paintings, is a recent example when the art world and the art market had to face up to the hard consequences of the act of classification. The aim of the project was to categorise all the paintings related to Rembrandt so as to distinguish those painted

by his own hand from those made by his pupils, copied after him, or imitated later.\textsuperscript{69} It was believed, as a premise, that such categorisation was possible. Although the RRP has produced great achievements, the initial vision proved deceptive because the categories of authenticity turned out to be rather elusive. With this situation, according to Gary Schwartz’s view, the discipline has reached its current limits:

It is time to face up to the fact that we have no general definition for authorship and no general standards for quality in art. (...) These imply that no amount of effort, with whatever intelligence, artistic sensitivity, and methodological rigor applied, can possibly resolve, without the prior setting of arbitrary parameters.\textsuperscript{70}

This opinion may be associated with the issue of narrative taxonomies: even a rigorous application of principles fails to catch the substance of the problem. The categories, in any of these classifications, cannot be clarified ad infinitum. Boxes of narrative types, just as Rembrandtness, one day will only be one among many others that characterise narrative paintings.

The study of narratives is often accused of being only a study of forms. At present, narrative taxonomies are indeed not much more than systems for formal classifications. While the recognition and description of certain narrative types can be paralleled with iconography, the interpretation of these types and their meaning finds its parallels in iconology. According to Panofsky, iconology is “an iconography turned interpretative”,\textsuperscript{71} therefore, taxonomy-making as a practice could be labelled as “narratography” rather than narratology. The obsession with classifications can indeed overshadow the need for interpretation. However, the previous research does offer a basis for ‘why’ questions that could make a good starting point for interpretative approaches. In the future, perhaps, more weight should be placed on individual cases of especially complex visual stories than on the perfection of classificatory systems.

\textsuperscript{69} On the exact categories see Schwartz 1993, 323–325.
\textsuperscript{70} Schwartz, 1993, 332.
\textsuperscript{71} Panofsky, 1955, 32.
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