

## Johan Huizinga and Max Dvořák on images: A shared interest in medieval images in and around 1919\*

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In the turbulent time after the end of the Great War, educated Europeans were mostly forced to think about subjects that lay far away from late medieval images. An epoch of substantial problems and social changes may not seem the best time to speculate or even write about topics from the relatively distant past. Therefore, it may come as a surprise that the first Dutch edition of the famous book *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* by Johan Huizinga appeared in 1919. One year before, the Viennese professor of art history Max Dvořák published his famous treatise *Idealismus und Naturalismus in der gotischen Skulptur und Malerei*. Both thinkers have substantially contributed to the understanding of the role of images in the late medieval artistic cultures of France, Burgundy and the Low Countries (Huizinga, Wolff-Mönckeberg, and Lerch 1938; Huizinga – Hopman 1924; Huizinga 1950; 1996; Haskell 1993, 431–495). Dvořák's first substantial publication on this topic appeared in 1903 under the title *The Enigma of the Art of the van Eyck Brothers*. A comparison of the approaches of both scholars in this article will start with a brief questioning of the concept of “image”. In the main part, it will be focused on some concepts used in interpretations of images in the visual arts, such as “naturalism”, “idealism” and “symbolism”. This text is a first attempt at understanding, from the proposed comparative perspective, the complex questions of the semantics, functions and traditions associated with the concepts under scrutiny. As such, it will necessarily remain incomplete because of the inner complexity and continuing influence of the analysed texts that endures to the present time.

### “IMAGE” AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The word “image” has several meanings in the historiographical works of Johan Huizinga. The image, essentially a product of the human imagination, is above all a mental image, which can be materialized in several ways (Mitchell 1986). The imagination, a universal human faculty, is of crucial importance to any understanding of human existence. The historian, interpreting any part of the past, is forced to use his

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own imagination to form a mental image of events which ended a long time ago. This principle was completely clear to Huizinga (Otterspeer 2010, 149). Even a historian of art dealing with images created by visual artists must use his own imagination to understand not only the paintings or sculptures but also to mentally recreate the contexts in which they were created and perceived. The power of the imagination of a medieval artist or artisan who produced the visual images is inevitably confronted with the imagination of a modern historian. There is no understanding of historical images without such confrontation or dialogue. The work of any important historian can also be described as “an exercise in imagination, a creative leap that transformed a powerful sense of reality into an image” (170). Furthermore, the imagination of an individual – of a historian and/or of the subjects of historical research – is guided or at least informed by traditional images and concepts. Any new historical narrative creates a prolongation of this continuity of the communities sharing those images and concepts. Any kind of cultural history must offer some interpretations of images. Sometimes, the perspective of a historian studying a particular period is substantially different from that of an art historian looking at the same materialized images. This article is about a historian and an art historian, so it will necessarily consider some tensions between their approaches. The present article tries to understand the concepts that influence the imagination of modern historians describing and interpreting visual images. These concepts and their definition provide great help in understanding historical reality. They certainly could not describe all the aspects of the complex human experience with images, which included an intuitive understanding of images, too. Historical images can certainly inspire willful subjective imagination, too. These are much closer to dreams than to reconstructions of the past resulting from the disciplined work of a scholar who needs concepts as orientation tools. Dvořák and Huizinga sometimes used similar strategies to solve general problems with images. On the other hand, some contrasts between their approaches are not only a matter of personal difference but also a part of a methodological dialogue between the history of culture and the more specialized history of the visual arts.

### IMAGES, NATURE AND INDIVIDUALITY

In his early years, Max Dvořák understood the concept of naturalism as a closeness to nature – as a possibly true representation of the observable qualities of individual persons and things in the visible world. The monumental work of Jacob Burckhardt that focused on Renaissance art in Italy was one of the recognized sources of such an understanding (Burckhardt 1860; Burckhardt – Middlemore 1878). “Natur und Individualität! In diesen zwei Worten suchte man die Antwort auf das Problem der Entstehung der modernen Kunst, eine Antwort, die uns heute aus der poetischen Apotheose Burckhardts so geläufig ist” (Dvořák 1903, 164; Dvořák – Rosenauer 1999). A professor of art history at the University of Vienna, Dvořák understood the historical development of naturalism in accordance with the evolutionist paradigm typical for this school – artists slowly learnt how to represent nature. Differently from Jacob Burckhardt, Dvořák saw an important line of the development towards naturalism not only in Italian art but in the Northern Renaissance, too (Bakoš 2013).

In this respect, he manifested an ambition to correct a common misunderstanding, based on the cult of great Italian masters, especially that of Leonardo da Vinci, which started in the Renaissance and retains its vitality up to today.

Unter den vielen Irrtümern, die wir als Zutat zu den Nachrichtenschätzen Vasaris geerbt haben, gehört die Legende von der Erfindung der Helldunkelmalerei durch Leonardo. Schon im Londoner Arnolfiniporträt und in der Madonna des Kanonikus von der Pale finden wir eine Beobachtung der modellierenden Kraft des Lichtes und des Schattens, wie sie sich in der italienischen Malerei erst am Ende des Jahrhunderts nachweisen läßt (Dvořák 1903, 181).

Dvořák justly appreciated the major step in the accurate observation of the modelling power of light and shade made by the early Netherlandish masters. In this case, it was associated with the individuality of the artist – regarded as a magician and genius – Jan van Eyck. The search for the individualities of extraordinarily inspired and inspiring creators was a continuation of the narratives created in the Renaissance. Nevertheless, his work of genius was much more indebted to the preceding evolutionary development than to his individual imagination. Huizinga's understanding of the art of the van Eyck brothers was also based on the appreciation of their naturalism, seen as firmly rooted in medieval tradition.

The naive, and at the same time refined, naturalism of the brothers Van Eyck was a new form of pictorial expression; but viewed from the standpoint of culture in general, it was but another manifestation of the crystallizing tendency of thought which we noticed in the aspects of the mentality of the declining Middle Ages. Instead of heralding the advent of the Renaissance, as is generally assumed, this naturalism is rather one of the ultimate forms of development of the medieval mind (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 241–242).

The historical development of late medieval thinking was understood as a kind of hidden source of artistic innovation related to naturalism. In this respect, Dvořák and Huizinga shared a positive appreciation of the Northern Renaissance as a phenomenon of cultural continuity and a result of evolutionary development, which slowly led to major cognitive and technical discoveries.

For Huizinga, seeing the naturalism of van Eyck's images in connection with the art and thought of the Middle Ages did not mean only praise but also some sort of criticism. The close web of mutual relations between these artworks and some tendencies of medieval mentalities could pose, as he also observed, some limits in regard to the naturalist qualities of the image. What was gained in respect of accurate observation lacked contact with new theories concerning the geometry of space:

As soon as it becomes necessary to reduce reality in some sort to a scheme, as is the case when buildings and landscapes have to be painted, certain weaknesses appear. In spite of the charming intimacy of his perspectives, there is a certain incoherence, a defective grouping. The more the subject demands free composition and the creation of a new form, the more his powers fall short (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 291).

In this case, Huizinga was using the measure of the well-calculated mathematical perspective typical of the Italian Renaissance to criticize the van Eycks. The naive power of observation, paired with excellent technical skills in representing optical

phenomena, lacked some intellectual and cognitive tools that could make the power of illusion even stronger. This kind of late medieval naturalism did not lose its firm connections with the medieval understanding of “realism”. Should an image be “real” in this sense, it has to include references to ideas, more specifically, to a system of religious interpretation of the world, which – according to medieval theologians – possessed a higher degree of reality than the things that can be observed in the course of everyday existence. The observable qualities of things were associated with meanings belonging to unobservable, transcendental dimensions of religious truth. This quality of medieval images can be named as “realism” in a medieval sense, but it would be by no means adequately understood only as “naturalism”. Anyone who was interested in keeping this moment of medieval experience with images alive had to operate with concepts that led beyond the “scientific” perspective defined by the realism, positivism, naturalism and impressionism of the 19th century. Did this mean a return to scholarly practices based on empirical observation – a return to older concepts – or was it a kind of new creation, reflecting the changed conditions of the early 20th century?

### IMAGES AND IDEALS

Huizinga and Dvořák knew that the course of historical events was influenced by various ideals, which were themselves subjected to change over the course of time. This clear understanding of the historical variability of ideals made them different from preachers speculating about ideals as eternal forms hovering somewhere in a transcendental sphere independent of the dynamic changes of history. They understood that the visions of leading artists in different periods were driven by ideals that could be occasionally incompatible. In spite of all the differences, there appears to be something which can seem to be similar, if not the same, in the course of historical development. For example, some words in Huizinga’s description of the Arnolfini double portrait in London might resemble the famous words about “noble simplicity” (“edle Einfalt”) used in Winckelmann’s description of the ideals of classical antiquity: “here at last this spirit proves itself happy, *simple*, *noble* and pure.” In such a formulation, the image possesses qualities which did not result only from empirical observation, because they are associated with certain qualities of human mental constructs. Precisely for that reason, Huizinga knew that such ideal constructs cannot be directly identified with the ideals of the medieval Christian Church. These are ideals not aimed at posthumous salvation but at a certain quality of mental operation. They focus on “private life, outside courts and outside the Church [...] The master, who, for once, need not portray the majesty of divine beings nor minister to aristocratic pride, here freely followed his own inspiration” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 237). Nevertheless, such a “Classicist” reading would not be just to the hidden ambiguity of Huizinga’s text. Differently from Winckelmann and his followers, Huizinga loved the contrasts or even contradictions included in the human historical experience and tried to understand medieval spiritual ideals. Therefore, he was able to describe the “immaterial values” of the picture. He saw these ideals manifested – not that far from impressionist principles – above all in the atmosphere of the image: “All that tenderness and profound peace, which only Rembrandt was to recapture, emanate from

this picture. That serene twilight hour of an age, which we seemed to know and yet sought in vain in so many of the manifestations of its spirit, suddenly reveals itself here” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 237). For Huizinga and his contemporaries, the “atmosphere” or the “mood” (“stemming”) of the image is not just an easily thrown word but had many contexts and philosophical meanings in their understanding of the human experience in this world (Otterspeer 2010, 118, 164).

For Max Dvořák, the atmosphere of the picture was also an important manifestation of medieval idealism. He attempted to characterize the three moments of artistic conception by which Jan van Eyck in the Arnolfini portrait created the unique atmosphere of the image. The first one should stress the participation of the figures at a spiritual community („Die Teilhabe and einer geistigen Gemeinschaft“) – the figures are not united by a dynamic action in the material world but stand calmly next to each other, using their gazes to create a community with the viewer (Dvořák 1918, 262).

The second moment witnesses a profound change in Dvořák’s thinking during the years of the Great War. Above, we have quoted his “naturalist” description of the light in the Arnolfini portrait. In the later text “the lighting fills up the space with an immaterial movement”, („die Beleuchtung, die den Raum mit einer immateriellen Bewegung erfüllt“) (264). This immaterial phenomenon should connect the viewer with the endless space associated with transcendental Christian ideals.

The connecting moment with Huizinga’s view can be seen in the third moment of Dvořák’s considerations, pointing to “the power of the subjective view as such”, which he interpreted as “penetrating the painting up to the last corner and giving an individual life to each object” („die Kraft der subjektiven Anschauung überhaupt, die das Gemälde bis in seine letzten Winkel durchflutet und jedem Gegenstand ein charakteristisches Eigenleben verleiht“, 265).

Both Huizinga and Dvořák were interested in the survival and revival of ideas, even if each of them studied this problem with different methods (and again – differently from other cotemporaries with a similar interest, such as Aby Warburg). It would not be adequate to consider the concept of “ideal” without reference to its roots in the great tradition of Platonism. This tradition was for centuries taken into account in various forms by the important thinkers about images. The corresponding knowledge was studied in the time we are discussing. Erwin Panofsky, one of the most important interpreters of this tradition in art history, published the first edition of his impressive summary of the subject in 1924, (Panofsky 1924; 1968). Huizinga’s thinking on images did have one more vital relation to the circle around Aby Warburg, especially through his frequent use of the term “symbol”.

## IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

It is impossible to understand Huizinga’s thinking about images without the concept of “symbol”. It is a keyword in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. In its various forms, it appears 108 times in the text (including the contents and registry). It would go beyond the scope of this article to analyse all the occurrences of this term in the text, but it is extremely important to observe how Huizinga understood the complex relation between “symbol” and “image”. Proceeding from the famous dictum of St.

Paul (1 Kor 13, 12), Huizinga provided a definition in which the “symbol” is understood as a result of a complicated play of images: “*Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate*. The human mind felt that it was face to face with an enigma, but none the less it kept on trying to discern the figures in the glass, explaining images by yet other images. Symbolism was like a second mirror held up to that of the phenomenal world itself” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 194).

This definition of “symbol” is made more precise in other places in Huizinga’s text. Firstly, it was very important to him that the play of images, which is constitutive of the existence of the “symbol”, is not a result of an arbitrary combination of images. This is made clear in the following distinction between “symbol” and “allegory”, or “personification”:

Symbolism expresses a mysterious connection between two ideas, allegory gives a visible form to the conception of such a connection. Symbolism is a very profound function of the mind, allegory is a superficial one. It aids symbolic thought to express itself, but endangers it at the same time by substituting a figure for a living idea. The force of the symbol is easily lost in the allegory (186).

In this formulation, the image as the constitutive element of a symbol was replaced by the “idea”, which clearly shows the Platonic heritage forming the basis of these definitions. Huizinga knew very well that the medieval philosophical understanding of “realism” was based on the Platonic belief in the autonomous existence of ideas in a sphere independent from any historic reality:

Symbolism will lose this appearance of arbitrariness and abortiveness when we take into account the fact that it is indissolubly linked up with the conception of the world which was called Realism in the Middle Ages, and which modern philosophy prefers to call, though less correctly, Platonic Idealism (185).

Platonic idealism continues to influence the analyses of symbolic meanings of images, especially in iconology. It influenced the philosophy of symbolic forms of Ernest Cassirer – an important source of the whole circle of Aby Warburg in Hamburg and the Warburg institute in London (Cassirer 1923; 1953a; 1953b). Defining symbolism as a “very profound function of the mind”, Huizinga attempted to offer an anthropological understanding of the human imagination in which both images and ideas play a fundamental role in the mental life of an individual or an epoch. Symbolism is a kind of tool through which the artistic production of a particular epoch can be associated with other spheres of culture, e.g. with religion: “Symbolism opened up all the wealth of religious conceptions to art, to be expressed in forms full of color and melody, and yet vague and implicit, so that by these the profoundest intuitions might soar towards the ineffable” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 188).

Because it is not arbitrary, the sphere of true symbolic images is not a realm of chaotic imagination. It has its own order and system, which is a necessary condition for the order of images in medieval culture: “The abundance of images in which religious thought threatened to dissolve itself would have only produced a chaotic phantasmagoria, if symbolic conception had not worked it all into a vast system, where every figure had its place” (183).

Huizinga and Dvořák around 1919 agreed in their insight that the logic and order of a symbolic system or of a deeper sense of artistic images in the Middle Ages cannot be explained on the basis of the causal thinking typical of the modern scientific approach towards nature. Corresponding formulations can be found in their texts: “From the causal point of view, symbolism appears as a sort of short-circuit of thought” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 184) or even “Symbolical interpretation of the world was inestimable. Embracing all nature and all history, symbolism gave a conception of the world, of a still more rigorous unity than that which modern science can offer” (187).

For Max Dvořák, the higher logic and order was closely associated with the unity in the composition of images:

und von diesem Begriff [the new concept of the truth of nature – I. G.] ging er auch aus, wo es sich darum gehandelt hat, naturalistische Einzelstudien zu einer bildlichen Einheit zu verbinden. [...] [N]icht wie vom naturalistischen Positivismus der Neuzeit aus ihrer natürlichen Kausalität folgerichtig entwickelt, sondern vielfach „unnatürlich, wie man heute zu sagen pflegt, aneinander gereiht und mit einer abstrakten kompositionellen Konstruktion verbunden“ (Dvořák 1918; 1989, 266).

In Huizinga’s interpretation, this order was based on hierarchy and a belief in sanctity: “Symbolism’s image of the world is distinguished by impeccable order, architectonic structure, hierarchic subordination. For each symbolic connection implies a difference of rank or sanctity: two things of equal value are hardly capable of a symbolic relationship with each other, unless they are both connected with some third thing of a higher order” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 187). For Dvořák, the order was rooted in the spiritual functions attributed to the artistic production of the period: „Nicht um das tatsächlich Erreichte handelt es sich, sondern um neue Ziele und Anschauungen, um eine neue geistige Stellung der Kunst und ihr Verhältniss zur Natur und zum Leben“ (Dvořák 1918; 1989, 266).

Medieval images offered both thinkers a kind of mirror in which they could see the negative characteristics of the culture of their own time. Nevertheless, they did not agree on a methodology for describing this ideal unity. Max Dvořák, in accordance with the traditional position of the Vienna school of art history on this topic, continued to believe in the autonomous development of art. Even if, in his narrative, the images were nourished from the spiritual culture of the period, they continued to exist in a sphere separated from other branches of real life. They offered a kind of refugium, or even a model, on which ideal human communities could be built. Following Alois Riegl, his teacher in Vienna, Dvořák saw the artistic life of a particular period mysteriously united by a kind of spirit of the time (*Zeitgeist*). This was the only connection between the art and culture of the period, which remained beyond the horizon of his investigation. Contrastingly, Huizinga was primarily a historian of culture, who studied images as a part of the real life of the period. In this real life, ideas, ideals and symbols performed at least a double function. On the one hand, they were a source of unity and identity which could be expressed by a ritual, e.g. in the veneration of the Eucharist. “Eventually all symbols group themselves about the central mystery of the Eucharist; here there is more than symbolic similitude, there is identity” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 187). Nevertheless, Huizinga knew very well

that the religious ideal, as represented by such an extraordinary artwork as the Ghent altarpiece, was not shared by all the people of the time.

The intellectual and moral life of the fifteenth century seems to us to be divided into two clearly separated spheres. On the one hand, the civilization of the court, the nobility and the rich middle classes: ambitious, proud and grasping, passionate and luxurious. On the other hand, the tranquil sphere of the *devotio moderna* [...] One would like to place the peaceful and mystic art of the brothers Van Eyck in the second of these spheres, but it belongs rather to the other. Devout circles were hardly in touch with the great art that flourished at this time. [...] They wanted their books in a simple form and without illuminations. They would probably have regarded the altar-piece of the Lamb as a mere work of pride, and actually did so regard the tower of Utrecht Cathedral (238).

Despite this contrast in the way of investigating and understanding the place of images in life, both Huizinga and Dvořák registered the decline in medieval religious cultures and associated it with the progress of modern culture, based on scientific discoveries.

Symbolism at all times shows a tendency to become mechanical. Once accepted as a principle, it becomes a product, not of poetical enthusiasm only, but of subtle reasoning as well, and as such it grows to be a parasite clinging to thought, causing it to degenerate [...] Symbolism, with its servant allegory, ultimately became an intellectual pastime. The symbolic mentality was an obstacle to the development of causal thought, as causal and genetic relations must look insignificant by the side of symbolic connections (188).

Dvořák described the catastrophe in similar terms:

Following the collapse of a world-wide edifice, such as the world views of the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Reformation, ruins necessarily emerge [...] Thus we stand before a drama of enormous disturbance where, drawing on a colorful mixture of the old and the new, artists no less than philosophers, literary authors, scholars and politicians search in different directions for new crutches and goals. Artists, for example, do this by resorting to aesthetic virtuosity or new formal abstractions, which they imaginatively work up into academic doctrines and theories (1989, 69–70).

The question of the survival of religious symbolism as expressed in the layers of hidden meaning in the paintings remained one of the central themes of art-historical literature in the 20th century. It was the central theme of Erwin Panofsky's celebrated book *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953), and a focus of ongoing scholarly debate (Shone – Stonard 2013, 89–101; the article by Susie Nash). Nevertheless, due to his profound understanding of the history of culture, Huizinga was able to see and describe one more dimension of medieval religious life which could be perceived as a symptom of the disintegration, if not decline, of the period – the legends of saints and their place in popular culture: “The medieval Church was, however, rather heedless of the danger of a deterioration of the faith caused by the popular imagination roaming unchecked in the sphere of hagiology” (Huizinga – Hopman 1924, 149). Criticism of this theme does not mean only observation of negative phenomena but a description of some positive techniques which continue to be relevant to our understanding of the images created in this period. Nevertheless, any understanding of this problem would require an analysis of further influential concepts of image

analysis, such as “illusion” and “presence”. Also, it would lead to a broad range of problems associated with the social functions of images and social history of art. Seen from this perspective, Huizinga’s methodology appears even more stimulating than the one presented by Dvořák. The analytical proof of this idea will be provided in another place.

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## Johan Huizinga and Max Dvořák on images: A shared interest in medieval images in and around 1919

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Huizinga. Dvořák. Image.

Huizinga's contribution to the understanding of late medieval artistic cultures can be productively compared with the treatise *Idealismus und Naturalismus in der gotischen Skulptur und Malerei*, published in 1918 by the famous Viennese art historian Max Dvořák. My paper will focus on the polarity between naturalism/realism vs. idealism/symbolism clearly present in both texts. My comparison will focus on the following questions: 1. What was the exact meaning of the concepts? 2. How had they been rooted in various philosophical traditions? 3. How do they appear in the light of recent criticism?

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