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### How do Paintings Become Icons?

Iconography has been around for as long as people have been able to write and draw (Hourihane). The definition of icon is diverse and have taken many forms of different media. Ranging from symbols to paintings to photographs, icons influence and portray society's standards and culture shifts. One of the most famous and recognizable icons is the imagery of the Madonna and Child. It is one of the oldest iconographs in history and is used prominently in the Christian religion (Hourihane). How does an image become an icon? What events had to take place for the image to reach such importance in society? What are they used for today? Images become icons for three reasons: the image's historical context, societal influence or relatability, and its reproduction and appropriation. The history surrounding the image can impact its importance to the culture it is part of. Icons can symbolize, influence, or promote societal standards which includes religious beliefs, beauty standards, and class structure. The inventions of cameras, the internet, and other technologies have enabled paintings and images to be more accessible. Meaning that more people can view these images and negotiation the importance of that piece to the individual and culture. Viewers can then interpret the meaning and add to the message of the piece.

The painting *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix is a great example of how images become icons and stay an icon for many generations. This painting was made in 1830 after Delacroix witnessed the *les Trois Glorieuses* (Zelazko). For three days, the working- and

middle-class citizens protested and fought against the royal army (Zelazko). The protest started after the population disagreed with the restrictive ordinance that Charles X published in July of 1830 (Zelazko). It can be speculated that this event influenced Delacroix to make the painting, as a memorial and commemoration for the brave citizens who fought for their freedom. The context around the purpose for the piece gives the painting an impression on individuals and culture. This painting symbolizes the fight for freedom in a time of disagreement.

It can also be viewed as a moral boost for those struggling to gain their freedom. For more context, these events followed the French Revolution, which caused a major shift in the political landscape (History.com Editors). Even though the absolute monarchy was gone, the country was still fighting for more rights and less power to the government. The victory for citizens in the French Revolution continued to influence the population to keep fighting for rights. Therefore, this painting documents not only the protest but also the aftermath of the French Revolution. The historical context gives enough importance that it still stays relevant in modern times. For the painting to stay relevant in a culture for this long, satisfies its position to be an icon. One definition of icon is seeing how an image retains its meaning throughout history (Sturken, 2018, p. 41). The meaning behind the piece has not changed throughout history. How it is applied or appropriated throughout the decades is what changes.

There are multiple societal influences and standards that can be interpreted from this piece. Icons tend to hold trends and influences of the culture it comes from. The main focus in the painting is the female figure named "Liberty". She symbolizes the meaning of liberty in this piece. Liberty is shown as an allegorical figure, an idealized female figure (Carroll). A common trend in this time for both art and society standards was to show women in art as idealized figures, not actual women. Although, in this modern time, it is often perceived as diminishing to

present women in an unrealistic way but in this case, it does not come off that way. That is because the female figure is used to empower people not to make them submissive. Delacroix was clear in the way he used the female figure. It depicts the struggle of fighting and bravery the people had to retaliate against the monarchy. The painting was censored from the public because “of its controversial and emotionally charged nature.” (Carroll). The painting promoted retaliation against the government and as a constant reminder not to give up. Hence why it was censored by the government. The female helped promote the idea that to always keep fighting even when one is at their most vulnerable. To be nude in front of the audience showed vulnerability and confidence. Therefore, this painting is also viewed as a symbol of woman power in contemporary times.

Another interesting thing about this is that it shows the shift of woman power. After the French Revolution, women became more involved in political movements and became independent (Carroll). Women becoming more independent turned into social standards. Historical events lead to culture changes and therefore creates a new norm. To this day, women are still fighting for their equal rights across the world. The female figure in this image persuades the idea of change and woman empowerment. By symbolizing strength and vulnerability, this female figure becomes a symbol of woman power in contemporary times also. Artists have taken influence from this piece and used it in their own art to express ideas of gender and equality women empowerment. A piece in 2013 by COMBO, illustrates Liberty in a different setting. With a similar position to the original figure, women stood half naked with the French flag and signs that stated, “Naked War” (Carroll). This continues the message of not being afraid and staying strong times of trouble. It also indicates that women should not be ashamed of being

nude and vulnerable. Delacroix had taken influence from the change in women's roles in society and expressed that standard in his painting.

*Liberty Leading the People* has been shared and reproduced many times since it has been in the public. Sharing this image can further influence people to accept it as an icon. A painting becomes popular not only for being well painted but also the context and meaning behind it make it more important. Cameras and manufacturing techniques have made this more possible. With the ability to take a picture of that piece and share it on the internet, it allows more people to experience it. Once it becomes well known and understands the meaning behind it, people start to appropriate it. The piece by COMBO was just one example of the appropriation. Another is when the painting was used by Coldplay- an alternative rock band- for their "Viva la Vida" song cover. The song was greatly influenced by the historical context of the piece and its meaning. One blogger explains that the lyrics "Shattered windows and the sound of drums People couldn't believe what I'd become" depicts the struggle King Louis faced when the people retaliated against the government (Yoo). Historical events help shape the culture and any image that relates to those events become an icon for that era. In this case, a band inspired by the artwork that depicts historical events shows the relevance of that piece to a different era. In other words, the image was reused to tell the importance of that historical event. Frida Kahlo even has a relation to *Liberty Leading the People*.

The use of multiple artworks together can create another layer of meaning for viewers to interpret. In 1954, Frida Kahlo made a painting titled *Viva la Vida* which consisted of watermelons cut in a variety of ways (Shabi). The connection is with the title. Viva la Vida means "long live life" or "live the life" (Shabi). The title Frida Kahlo's piece was used by Coldplay therefore appropriating two pieces to create a more diverse meaning. Frida Kahlo's

piece was speculated to be the last of her paintings before she died. The title suggests that in her last moments of life, she strived to live life to the fullest. When Coldplay combined these two themes together, it further cemented the ideas and message Delacroix was trying to get across to the viewer. It added to the idea of to not be afraid and to live life fully. Appropriation and reproduction spread the message of *Liberty Leading the People*. The spread of the artwork and its message embedded itself in contemporary society through current technology such as music. When an artwork becomes part of the culture, it becomes an icon.

To reiterate, images become icons because of its relevance throughout cultures. We can see this by the impact it has from historical context, the societal influences it holds, and how reproduced and appropriated. *Liberty Leading the People* has been seen, reviewed, and used by many people who find it important in their daily lives. An icon must transcend past its original purpose. The meaning may stay the same, but it must stay relevant to the current time. In order for the image to stay relevant it has to connect to culture standards of contemporary times. Many people can still relate to the meaning perceived in *Liberty Leading the People* therefore it has been an icon.

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