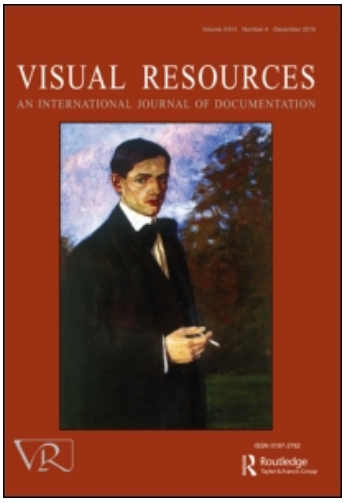
This article was downloaded by:
On: *15 February 2011*
Access details: *Access Details: Free Access*
Publisher *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Visual Resources
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713654126

ICONCLASS: A Historical Perspective

Claire Richter Sherman

Online publication date: 04 January 2011

To cite this Article Sherman, Claire Richter(1987) 'ICONCLASS: A Historical Perspective', Visual Resources, 4: 3, 237 — 246
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01973762.1987.9659131
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01973762.1987.9659131

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Visual Resources, Vol. IV, pp. 237–246
Photocopying permitted by license only
©Gordon and Breach, Science Publishers, Inc., 1987
Printed in the United States of America

ICONCLASS: A Historical Perspective

by Claire Richter Sherman

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

Introduction: A Brief Description of ICONCLASS

ICONCLASS (from *Iconography* and *Classification*) is an iconographic classification system originated by Professor Henri van de Waal (1910–1972) of the University of Leiden shortly after World War II, between 1948 and 1950. After his death, the project to classify all representable subjects in Western art using an alphanumeric decimal scheme was carried on by a team of art historians trained by him at the University of Leiden and headed by Leendert D. Couprie. In its published form ICONCLASS consists of 17 volumes: seven of iconographic subject headings and seven of bibliography, accessible by means of the subject headings and the accompanying alphanumeric system keyed to the classification structure. In addition, the final three volumes of index, published in 1985, permit easier access to ICONCLASS by means of key words that bring together all associated references to names and concepts located throughout the system. Finally, a user's manual is scheduled for publication by the end of 1987.

The ICONCLASS scheme breaks up all subjects, exclusive of abstract art, into nine main divisions. The first five represent basic concepts:

1. Religion, Magic and the Supernatural
2. Nature
3. Man (as a biological entity)
4. Society, Civilization and Culture
5. Abstract Concepts

The remaining four divisions reflect narrative sources of visual subjects.

6. History
7. The Bible

8. Non-Classical Myths, Tales and Legends
9. Classical Mythology and History

Within these nine areas, the subjects are subdivided in a logical, consistent manner, following an alphanumeric format that allows for progressive differentiation and increasingly specific headings. ICONCLASS establishes an abstract, comprehensive framework appropriate to classifying and retrieving visual images from the classical to the modern periods.

While ICONCLASS has for the most part been developed abstractly as a classification system to be applied by photo archives to individual works of art, various parts of ICONCLASS have been formulated by consulting the appropriate corpora of visual images. Moreover, ICONCLASS has been applied as a reference tool. The Decimal Index of Art in the Low Countries (DIAL) is a representable iconographic index based on the photographic holdings of the Netherlands Institute of Art History. From 1961 to 1983, 15,000 postcard-size images coded according to ICONCLASS subject headings were sent to about 120 subscribing institutions in Europe and the United States. Among other visual collections that have used ICONCLASS notations to index their holdings are the Free University of Amsterdam, the Art History Institute of the University of Leiden, and the Prague Documentation Center. More recently, the Marburg Photo Archive, the Witt Library of the Courtauld Institute, and the J. Paul Getty Center Provenance Index are using ICONCLASS to establish iconographic indexes retrievable by computer. The Fine Arts Library at Harvard University has published an *Iconographic Index to Old Testament Subjects Represented in Photographs and Slides in the Visual Collections* using the ICONCLASS system, and Davaco Publishers in the Netherlands are issuing an ICONCLASS index to several collections of prints.

As a research tool, ICONCLASS offers bibliographies accessible by the same alphanumeric notations as the subject headings to many topics covered in the classification scheme. Wide-ranging in chronological scope and going beyond purely art historical domains, the ICONCLASS bibliographies offer direct access to many specific areas of research unavailable in more conventional reference volumes. Like the classification system itself, the ICONCLASS bibliographies are not usually geared to individual objects, but to subjects and themes.

A strong point of ICONCLASS is that the classification of an image's content into a series of notations, each carrying an alphanumeric code, permits a separate filing and retrieval of each unit. Such flexibility allows the researcher to trace not only the main representation but also to isolate

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

and then group individual motifs or themes of particular interest in separate slots.

History of ICONCLASS and DIAL

Since the history of ICONCLASS and DIAL so much reflects the ideas of the founder, Henri van de Waal, it is necessary to begin with a brief discussion of his life and work. Then, one can approach the development of ICONCLASS and DIAL from their beginnings to the present day.

Henri van de Waal (1910–1972) was a Dutch art historian who received his training and spent his professional life at the University of Leiden, long a famous center of national and European learning. At Leiden he studied Dutch language and literature, as well as the history of art. He received his doctorate in 1940; the subject of his dissertation was *Zeventiende-eeuwse uitbeeldingen van den Bataafschen opstand*. This theme of 17th-century images representing the revolt of the Batavian tribe against the Romans became a key part of van de Waal's magnum opus, *Drie eeuwen vaderlandsche geschieduitbeelding, 1500–1800: Een iconologische studie*. [The Dutch portrayal of history (1500–1800): an iconological study]. Although the book was set in type at the beginning of World War II, the plates were destroyed by the Germans, and publication delayed until 1952. Of Jewish extraction, van de Waal was imprisoned by the Germans during the Nazi occupation. The hardships he suffered permanently affected his health, although during the time of his imprisonment he worked on a Dutch translation and critical edition of Eugène Fromentin's *Les maîtres d'autrefois*. After the war he resumed his career at the University of Leiden, where he was named professor and director of the University Print Room in 1946. In addition to his teaching and museum duties, van de Waal worked actively in the field of art education. In 1957, he was named a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences.

Van de Waal was a man of wide ranging and farsighted intellectual interests, with a longstanding concern for anthropology and the relationships between art and culture. Indeed, van de Waal's theories on form, content, and function in art have been compared to those of Lévi-Strauss. (See J. L. Locher, "Claude Lévi-Strauss en de structurele bestudering van de kunst," in *Opstellen voor H. van de Waal, aangeboden door leerlingen en medewerkers*, Amsterdam: Scheltema and Hokema, [1970], pp. 111–13). Van de Waal early saw the importance of the history of photography when in 1953 he founded a museum on that subject as part of the art collections of the University of Leiden.

Van de Waal's interest in iconography and iconology developed at a time

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

when these fields were not major focuses of Dutch art historiography. In fact, Jan Bialostocki considers van de Waal's early writings of the 1930s to be among the first that dealt with the concept of iconology generally associated with Erwin Panofsky. (Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology* was published in 1939. See Jan Bialostocki, review of H. van de Waal, *Drie eeuwen vaderlandsche geschied-uitbeelding, 1500–1800: Een iconologische studie*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952 in *Art Bulletin*, 43/2 (June 1971), 261. Bialostocki recognizes (p. 261) van de Waal's ties to Warburg's iconographic theory as well as to "the Dutch contribution by Hoogewerff in *Rivista di Archeologia cristiana*, 8 (1931), p. 53–82 which was probably the first to develop the differentiation of iconography and iconology in a systematic way."

In this book on the Dutch portrayal of their history, van de Waal made fundamental contributions not only to the subject, "the historical iconography of one national school," but to methodology. In his discussion of the interrelationships between new and older imagery created by Dutch artists of their national history, van de Waal treated this body of material "not as phenomena of art history proper, but as phenomena of the interpenetration between art, politics, moral philosophy, historical thinking, literature, and religion. In tracing the intricate links connecting all these fields of human activity, van de Waal has made an important contribution to cultural history and produced one of the most balanced 'iconological' works of art historical literature." (Bialostocki, *Art Bulletin*, 262). Using such concepts as "iconographic groups," van de Waal showed that in the construction of a Dutch national past, traditional themes drawn from the Christian or classical repertoire, rather than direct reference to contemporary events, constitute a politically charged visual language that relied on the "strong parallelism between the Roman and Dutch Republic" (Ibid., 262).

In van de Waal's pioneer work, he built up a system of citations and indexes that created access points from and to various sections of the book. This careful order and structure reveal another personal aspect of van de Waal's intellectual characteristics: a passion for classification and systematic arrangement of a given subject. What came to be known as the ICONCLASS system grew out of van de Waal's attempts beginning in the late 40s or early 50s to devise a universal system of iconographic classification which could accommodate all representable subjects in Western art. In a short paper entitled "Some Principles of a General Iconographical Classification," read at the Seventeenth International Congress of Art held in Amsterdam in 1952, van de Waal gives a simple rationale and lists some models for his project. (This paper was first printed in *Actes du 17ième Congrès international d'Histoire de l'art*, Amsterdam 23–31 juillet 1952, The Hague, 1955; reprinted

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

in *Actes du 5ième Congrès international d'Esthétique*, Amsterdam, 1964, ed. Jan Aler, The Hague: Mouton, 1968, pp. 728–733.) Van de Waal states that the history of art will greatly profit from a systematic classification of iconography to permit various types of investigations. Leaving aside the systems of the Warburg Institute and the Index of Christian Art as too limited in scope, van de Waal says that a system must face the full range of possible problems, "the structure of the whole rather than enumerate the details." ("Some Principles," p. 729). He employs the analogy of a map "that represents the structure of the whole area," and "all geographical possibilities" (Ibid., p. 729). In addition to the consistency offered by proceeding from a general structure, ease of citation is another benefit. Van de Waal mentions several models drawn from other fields. The first is the system for identifying "every picturable subject and activity on earth and throughout history to the present day" adopted in the Hulton Picture Post Library by C. H. Gibbs-Smith (Ibid., p. 728). The second is a numerical index of ethnographic characteristics developed during World War II by the American army, the Human Relations Area Files (Ibid., p. 729). More influential as a model is the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* compiled by Stith Thompson (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 6 vols., 1955–1958). Impressed by the alphanumeric system devised by Thompson and applied to the "complex and abstract materials" of folklore, van de Waal thought it possible to arrive at a similar design for a "consistent classification of all the subjects which mankind has succeeded to portray." ("Some Principles," p. 730). In this paper, van de Waal lists two criteria for the workings of his system: consistency and ease of citation. Yet beyond these functional considerations, Van de Waal's research tool, which he calls a *globus iconographicus*, has an aesthetic, cosmological character inherent in the fashioning of an abstract system linking verbal and visual concepts in a perfect ordered whole.

Van de Waal continued to work on what came in the late 60s to be called ICONCLASS, a term coined by his student, Leendert D. Couprie, and first used in the *Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries, D.I.A.L., Abridged Edition of the Iconclass System*, published in 1968 in The Hague. As van de Waal explained in "Some Principles," he conceived "the clinical background" for working out his iconographic classification system with the aid of the photo archives of the Netherlands Institute of Art History in The Hague, known by its Dutch initials as the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie). Around 1950, the RKD decided to make postcards for its own use instead of large photographs that were easily damaged. In some way, van de Waal and the RKD decided to publish the postcards and send them to subscribers. Van de Waal coded the RKD postcards according

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

to the alphanumeric notations being developed in the iconographic system. Subscribers had already received an explanation of the classification scheme in 1951, according to the records of the Frick Art Reference Library. (A bibliography of the D.I.A.L. publications known to me is appended to this article.) A further clarification of the subject headings was sent out in 1958, now entitled *Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries* (D.I.A.L.). According to Couprie, a former student of van de Waal and collaborator on the project, Dr. H. Rookmaaker, coined the DIAL acronym. The next year saw the compilation and distribution to subscribers of an *Iconographic Index and Concordance*. This publication, issued like the previous ones by the RKD, matched up the iconographic notations supervised by van de Waal with the individual photos of the RKD (identified by numbers) sent to the subscribers in postcard format. In 1961 there appeared an *Alphabetical Subject Index* of all subjects included in the first 13 series of DIAL postcards issued. Each subject was followed by its iconographic notation. The year 1968 saw the publication of the above mentioned DIAL publication, in the subtitles of which the now-familiar name ICONCLASS was applied to van de Waal's system. Among the information contained in the preface, written by van de Waal, is that in unabridged form the system at that time contains "about 40,000 divisions and subdivisions; this summary gives only about 3,000 of these." Furthermore, he noted that a bibliography would accompany the publication of the entire system, as well as an alphabetical index. So were announced the plans for the publication of the 17 volumes of ICONCLASS, a goal realized by the end of 1985. At this point, van de Waal mentions computer retrieval of data, a technological possibility that he had in mind since the project began almost 20 years earlier.

In the Introduction of the 1968 DIAL publication, the difference between DIAL and ICONCLASS is clearly stated, although their relationship continues to confuse some users of both systems. It is worth quoting these sentences: "There is a definite difference between this D.I.A.L. (a collection of reproductions of Dutch art) and the underlying system, which is merely a set of pigeon-holes, a kind of elaborate filing-cabinet which can also be used for materials of quite different origin. The system as such is called ICONCLASS." (Introduction, DIAL, 1968, p. 5). After an explanation of decimal classification and other principles governing the alphanumeric notations, the author states in the conclusion: "We do not consider this classification as a goal in itself. If used with proper understanding and insight, it is a tool which will greatly facilitate the retrieval of stored material." Reference is made to "similar modes of classification . . . successfully

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

introduced to the study of folklore as well as in ethnography." Despite the similarities between the fields in offering "an ordered system of decimal classification," a major dissimilarity exists. "As art history deals with forms, all questions in this field, iconographic ones not excluded, have a definite formal aspect. The material offered for consultation should therefore always be visual. Any other reference (either verbal or by means of codes) can never be more than the first stepping stone." These words of caution need to be kept in mind in any consideration of the ICONCLASS system (Ibid., p. 14). In short, this 1968 DIAL publication is important for its definition of the goals of the ICONCLASS system. The abridged list of subject headings, as well as the outline of the nine fields and subdivisions, has received continued use in some photo archives because their relative simplicity makes them easier for readers to consult.

A second edition of the 1968 DIAL publication appeared in 1971. The collection of postcards, sent to 120 institutions all over the world, numbered some 13,000 by 1978, and according to Couprie, a total of 15,000 by 1983. It should be noted, however, that since multiple cards of a single image were issued to be filed and retrieved under separate icongraphic notations, there are considerably fewer objects indexed than the total listed above. The processing of the postcards continued as a joint process shared with the RKD. Preliminary coding of photos chosen, some 250 or 300 annually, was done by Lia de Bruyn, former head of the Iconography Department at the RKD. The selection of photos was sometimes based upon the parts of the iconographic system being developed. In yearly discussions with de Bruyn in Leiden, the coding and other processing of the postcards took place. First van de Waal, then Rookmacher, and finally Couprie supervised the coding. A slowdown in the DIAL distribution occurred between 1974 and 1977, when no sets were issued. The combination of van de Waal's death and the beginning of the publication of the ICONCLASS volumes, as well as new administrative constraints, may explain the reasons for the delay. Two new sets issued in 1979 and 1983 have come out. One difficulty that has surfaced is the necessity of changing 70 percent of the ICONCLASS codes on the DIAL postcards, because notations have changed as the system reached its final form. At this time, the financial and administrative situation does not look encouraging for the continuation or expansion of the DIAL postcard enterprise.

Negotiations with publishers for the publication of the ICONCLASS system and bibliography had begun before the unexpected death on 7 May 1972 of Professor van de Waal. With the support of grants from the Nether-

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

lands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.) and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, an ICONCLASS research team led by van de Waal's former students decided to continue the project. Housed at the Institute of Art History of the University of Leiden and headed by Leendert D. Couprie, a small group of art historians—augmented by experts in various fields—have achieved their goal of putting out 14 volumes, divided equally between the systems and bibliographies of the 9 main divisions. In addition, the 3-volume alphabetical index, was published in 1985. A user's manual written by Couprie, will update the didactic material scattered throughout the volumes, particularly in the introduction to *2–3 System*.

The publication pattern of ICONCLASS in separate, soft-covered blue volumes is explicable because of the complexities of working simultaneously both on the over-all scheme and the myriad details extending to correlating the alphanumeric codes with the bibliography. Moreover, certain sections that in van de Waal's scheme remained a brief outline (the part on saints (11 H) and all of division 9) were considerably amplified. As noted above, special complexities were involved in the organization and division of overlapping subjects in divisions 1 and 7 relating to Christian art. For such reasons, the order of publication of the ICONCLASS volumes did not appear in consecutive order from 1 to 9. (For the order and dates of publication of the ICONCLASS volumes, see the attached chart.) Indeed, the last division of the system to be published was 1, in 1981, whereas 2 and 3 were published in 1974 in one volume. Since the explanation of the workings of the ICONCLASS system appears only in the introduction to divisions 2 and 3, the researcher—as well as the librarian or cataloguer—experienced difficulty in finding explanations of the total system. The inclusion of an outline of subject headings at the beginning of each division and its corresponding bibliography has proved a helpful guide. Since the whole ICONCLASS system is published, it will perhaps now be possible to bind several volumes of divisions and bibliography together. Such a procedure would make it possible for the researcher to find and consult at the same time the two parts of ICONCLASS that need to be connected. The indexes and the user's manual greatly improve the accessibility of ICONCLASS.

Even before the completion of the ICONCLASS published system, a new phase of its existence began by its adoption as the iconographic classification system of the Marburg Photo Archive. Other projects concerned with visual materials are also using ICONCLASS. These new applications of ICONCLASS are a recognition of van de Waal's broad vision, as well as the untiring efforts of the ICONCLASS team.

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

Publications Relating to DIAL and ICONCLASS, 1951–68

N.B. These typescripts were issued in The Hague by the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Netherlands Institute for Art History, which credited Henri van de Waal with the design of the system and the coding of the images.

1951 Exact title unknown. Explanation of the classification scheme. (Information obtained courtesy Frick Art Reference Library)

1958 *Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries (D.I.A.L.)*
38 pp. A later version of the classification system, beginning with an explanation of its workings and arranged according to codes.

1959 *Iconographic Index: Concordance*
A guide to the first series of DIAL postcards, correlating the RKD negative numbers, the subject of the work, and the iconographic code devised by van de Waal. 56 pp.

1961 *Decimal Index to the Art of the Low Countries (D.I.A.L.) Alphabetical Subject Index.*
"Alphabetical list of all subjects found in the photographs of the 13 DIAL series" of postcards. Each entry followed an iconographic notation. A precursor to the alphabetical index. 101 pp.

1968 *Decimal Index to the Art of the Low Countries (D.I.A.L.): Abridged Edition of the Iconclass System.*
Revised edition, 1971. The first use of the word ICONCLASS to describe the classification system, represented here by 3,000 of the 40,000 headings. Contains an explanation of the system and keys to the various divisions. Preface by van de Waal, who mentions computerization of the system. This volume still used in photo archives. n.p.

Biographical and Bibliographic Notes on Henri van de Waal

Biographical information about van de Waal comes from various necrologies written after his death on 7 May 1972. Among them is the account in English by a former student and ICONCLASS collaborator, R. H. Fuchs that summarizes his education, intellectual background, and achievements. (*Simiolus*, 6/1 (1972–73), 5–7). A lengthy and revealing essay in Dutch by Horst Gerson was published in the *Jaarboek van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* (1972), pp. 166–80.

A bibliography of van de Waal's writings through 1969, compiled by Els Tholen, is included in the *festschrift* presented to him on his 60th birthday.

(*Opstellen voor H. van de Waal, aangeboden door leerlingen en medewerkers*, 3 Maart 1970, ed. L. D. Couprie et al., (Leidse Kunsthistorische Reeks, deel 3), Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema [1970], pp. 241–43). Published later by van de Waal is a revealing article, "In Memoriam Erwin Panofsky, March 30, 1892–March 14, 1968," in *Medelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen*, nieuwe reeks, deel 35/6 (1972), pp. 227–44. A further publication by van de Waal is *Steps Towards Rembrandt, Collected Articles, 1937–1972*, ed. R. H. Fuchs and tr. Patricia Wardle and Alan Griffiths, Amsterdam and London: North Holland Publishing Co., 1974.

ICONCLASS PUBLICATION PATTERN

Date of Publication of *System* Volume		Date of Publication of corresponding *Bibliography* volume		Last year for which Bibliography entries entered
1	1981	1	1983	—
2–3	1974	2–3	1973	1969
4, pt. 1	1976	4, pt. 1	1975	1972
4, pt. 2	1977	4, pt. 2	1977	1973
5–6	1978	5–6	1979	1976
7	1981	7	1982	1979
8–9	1980	8–9	1980	1977

The index to the ICONCLASS system was published in three volumes in 1985.

Downloaded At: 14:50 15 February 2011

Acknowledgment

This article is excerpted from a report on ICONCLASS commissioned in 1983 by the Getty Art History Information Program and is published with its permission. For their guidance I wish to thank Professors Irving Lavin of the Institute for Advanced Study and Henry A. Millon, Dean of the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art. I am grateful to colleagues and staff members of the Center and the National Gallery for their help and support. In Leiden Leendert Couprie and his associates at work on ICONCLASS were extremely helpful, as were Lutz Heusinger and his colleagues at the Marburg Photo Archive.