Erwin Panofsky was a specialist in Renaissance art, but — in keeping with the humanist tradition of the period — the term ‘Renaissance’ must be applied to his work in its broadest sense. His studies cover a remarkable range: Albrecht Dürer's art theory, the history of perspective, the theory of human proportion, early Netherlandish painting, Gothic architecture, Baroque art criticism, and the relationship between the Northern Renaissance, Italian Renaissance and Classical Antiquity. His range is extended even further by several papers on ‘style’ in films. Much of Panofsky's research focused on Renaissance ‘types’. Due to this primary interest, he is known as an iconographer; however, unlike most iconographers, he was not satisfied with identification alone. He was interested in how the proper identification of subject matter could be used to uncover deeper meaning in the work and could thus lead to greater understanding, not only of the work itself but of the culture in which it was created. The search for meaning, combined with the acknowledgment of a vital link between art and culture, is central to Panofsky's approach to art history and is his most important contribution to the field. His brilliant explication of the method used to achieve this end can be found in the introduction to Studies in Iconology (1939).

In Studies in Iconology he set up a system of three distinct levels. The first level, termed pre-iconographical, consists of primary or natural subject matter. At this initial stage, forms in a work are identified as representations of natural objects (motifs). Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper is recognized only as thirteen figures around a dining table. Although identification on this level can generally be achieved through practical experience, accurate assessment of some kinds of representations, realistic versus unrealistic for instance, depends on an awareness of the conditions and principles related to a specific historical style. In a work whose orientation is realistic, a child floating in the air would be understood as an apparition or miraculous event; whereas, in a work in which the artist was unconcerned with realism per se, a city floating in the air would not be considered miraculous, but would simply be understood as a reference to the setting for the action. An understanding of the history of styles, therefore, provides the tools necessary to correct human error at this level.

The second level, iconography in its usual sense, consists of secondary or conventional subject matter, and is achieved by connecting artistic motifs with themes or concepts. Leonardo's Last Supper is recognized as the story from the New Testament. Since themes and concepts relevant to specific historical periods are not necessarily self-evident and are often revealed only in the literature and art of the historical period, the corrective vision necessary to secure proper identification of images is a knowledge of the history of types.

The third level is identified as Iconography in a deeper sense, or iconology. It consists of intrinsic meaning or content and is intent upon building an understanding of the relationship between one work and the larger context in which it was created. Recognizing that images are ‘symptoms’ of ‘something else’, and can be interpreted as ‘symbolical values’ (a concept borrowed from the German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer) is the business of the art historian on this level. Leonardo's Last Supper, then, can be understood as a document that reveals aspects of Leonardo's personality, the civilization of the Italian High Renaissance, and/or a religious attitude. Panofsky notes that the interpretation of symbolical values is a process of synthesis rather than analysis (as in the first two levels). Since this kind of interpretation depends on an individual's diagnostic skills, there is an even greater need for correctives on this level. Panofsky holds that the great susceptibility to errors on this level can be corrected by comparing the work in question to as many other documents of the same civilization as possible in an effort to see if perceived ‘intrinsic meaning’ holds true in all examples. An understanding of the history of ‘cultural symptoms or symbols’ is therefore required.

In his writings Panofsky provides many applications of his method. His study of Gothic architecture argues that the all-encompassing cathedral programmes parallel the all-encompassing vision of medieval scholasticism. His famous analysis of Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini double portrait identifies the work as a
pictorial marriage certificate. He discusses the manner in which the hidden meanings of objects realistically included in the contemporary room support this interpretation, and adds that this use of double meanings reflected the medieval tendency to view the entire visible world as symbol, a tendency that was still prevalent in Van Eyck's time. A third example, Panofsky's discussion of Dürer's Melencolia I in The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer (1943, revised 1955), is summarized below as a clear illustration of 'iconology-in-action'.

Panofsky opens with observations of the compositional elements present in Dürer's well-known master engraving of 1514 — pre-iconographical analysis. Moving on to level two, identification of the figure is aided in this case by Dürer's label within the print itself. Panofsky points out, however, that in Dürer's time 'Melancholia' would not only have been defined as a state of depression, but would be immediately recognized as one of the four humours that govern life in general and human temperament in particular. After considering other medieval and early Renaissance images that personify Melancholy, Panofsky seeks to explain the presence of artistic and intellectually oriented objects and looks to personifications of the Arts. He concludes that Dürer's image is a fusion of two iconographic types: Melancholy and Geometry.

Panofsky ventures into his third level by noting that, although the presence of all motifs can be explained by reference to the two types, Dürer invests them with additional expressiveness. Panofsky's thorough discussion includes the following examples. Tools are disarranged in order to create a feeling of 'discomfort and stagnation'. The bat and dog, traditional emblems of Melancholy, are presented so that they augment unpleasantness. The clenched fist, a reference to the 'tight-fistedness' that was traditionally a characteristic of the melancholic temperament, is given a different meaning when the clenched fist is made to support the head. In this way Dürer transforms the idea of miserliness into an expression of internal struggle; his Melancholia is 'a thinking being in perplexity'. Panofsky continues by tying the print's imagery to Dürer's theoretical writings and building the argument that Dürer's appropriation of these two types is meant to spotlight the internal struggle of the artist. Dürer, like many other Renaissance thinkers, held that consummate artistic mastery resulted from the perfect coordination of two accomplishments — theoretical insight on the one hand (especially the command of geometry), and practical skill on the other. Panofsky believes that this explains the two figures in the print: Dürer's figure of Melancholia typifies Theoretical Insight, which thinks but cannot act, and the child-like putto scribbling away on a tablet represents Practical Skill, which acts but cannot think.

Finally, as a corrective measure, Panofsky looks to other cultural documents to corroborate his interpretation of Melencolia I. He finds that, like Dürer, Neo-Platonic philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino also revised the concept of Melancholy, emancipating it from its pejorative role as the most unpleasant of the humours and closely connecting it to creative genius. The link between Melancholy and Geometry is justified by other Renaissance writers. Henry of Ghent, in particular, argued that some intellectuals are recognized by their great ability for imagination; however, since this ability is characterized as the need to understand everything in terms of location and space (the foundations of geometry), it also limits their ability to grasp spiritual and metaphysical issues, leading them to a melancholic state-of-mind. Yet another source, Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, provides the specific connection between Melancholy and the Artist. Neo-Platonic philosophy had previously limited the dual tendency for melancholy and creative genius to theologians, poets and philosophers. Agrippa's tripartite reclassification of creative genius included artists endowed with imaginative reason on the first level, statesman with discursive reason on the second, while the third belonged to theologians and intuitive reason. This expanded view of genius corresponds with Dürer's presentation of Melancholia and also explains the enigmatic in the title. The evidence provided by these sources adds fuel to Panofsky's thesis that Dürer is carefully addressing not only a personality type or a visual presentation of the Renaissance approach to art (via geometry), but is consciously illustrating the central irony of artistic creativity: intellect, imagination and skill, dependent upon each other but also at odds with each other. It is a condition that frequently leaves the artist in complete desolation and, according to his writings, was a
condition with which Dürer identified. Panofsky concludes that Dürer's *Melencolia I* is an ‘objective statement of general philosophy and the subjective confession of an individual man’.

Panofsky presents his iconological system with such clarity that it seems comfortably self-evident; and yet, its elegant simplicity is carefully crafted and it stands as a tour-de-force of theoretical thought. It is uniquely Panofskian, but is nevertheless firmly rooted in the pioneering developments of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art-historical theory. Influenced by the formalist systems developed by Heinrich Wölfflin and Alois Riegl, Panofsky utilized the basic model of thesis—antithesis—synthesis. Although he does not share their formal focus, he does not fully reject formalism either. Instead, Panofsky's approach is best seen as a forceful re-orientation towards content and cultural meaning. In this, Panofsky is more closely allied with Max Dvorák and Aby Warburg. His insistence on underlying principles which ‘reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion’ is similar to their efforts to see art as manifestation of cultural history. Panofsky can be seen to stand, philosophically speaking, between the two. Dvorák portrayed art as simply a reflection of an all-powerful ‘Spirit-of-the-Age’. Warburg, on the other hand, resisted placing art into any kind of framework at all, focusing instead on reconnecting individual creations with their own specific context. If Panofsky's system is less of a system than Wölfflin and Riegl's constructs are, it is more of a system than can be found in Dvorák and Warburg's work. As a system it can be criticised for not being comprehensive in terms of the entire history of art. It limits itself to a specific period within Western civilization and is not easily applicable to non-representational and non-Western art. But his system does not, in fact, attempt to be a complete methodology, and should not be judged as such.

More significant criticism relates to the manner in which Panofsky deals with the role of the artist. He calls attention to the artist's conscious use of cultural symbols (as is the case with Dürer and Van Eyck), but also acknowledges that cultural symbols are ‘generally unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express’. Of course, the problem may lie in the fact that artists are sometimes conscious of their appropriations and at other times are not, but Panofsky does not clarify or attempt to resolve the discrepancy. Another major drawback to his iconological system centres on the search for hidden meanings — and the potential for finding symbols where they are not. Panofsky himself admitted that ‘there is … some danger that iconology will behave, not like ethnology as opposed to ethnography, but like astrology as opposed to astrography’. He attempted to address the issue by adding ‘correctives’ to each level of his system, but the problem persists.

In spite of the criticism, Panofsky's work and his approach remain important. Panofsky can be commended for his attempts to balance artists' individuality with their connectedness to a larger cultural/ideological group, and for the recognition of a similar balancing act in the efforts of art historians. He also stands out as one who incorporated into his working method elements both intrinsic and extrinsic to the work of art. The heart of Panofsky's contribution to art history is his recognition that a single element in a single work can reveal the larger image of a culture. His work opened the door for a variety of other philosophical and psychological approaches that are significant to art history — the work of Gombrich and the development of semiotics in particular. His method influenced other fields as well, a development that would have pleased him since he strongly advocated interdisciplinary studies: ‘It is in the search for intrinsic meanings or content that the various humanistic disciplines meet on a common plane instead of serving as handmaidens to each other.’ Panofsky was a modern-day humanist, an approach to life that was rare enough in the early twentieth century let alone in recent times. His example, together with his writings, provide a unifying vision that continues to be valuable for the increasingly fragmented field of art history.

### Biography

Erwin Panofsky. Born Hanover, 30 March 1892, to a wealthy family. Panofsky was educated at the Joachimsthalches Gymnasium, Berlin; the University of Munich; the University of Berlin; and the University of Freiberg (where he received his PhD in 1914). He became a private lecturer at the
University of Hamburg in 1921, and a full professor, 1926—33 (dismissed by the Nazis). He emigrated to the United States, 1934, later becoming naturalized. He was visiting professor at New York University, 1931—5; and at Princeton in 1934—5. From 1935 to 1962 he was Professor, The Institute of Advanced Study, Princeton; and Samuel F. B. Morse Professor at New York University, 1962—8. Panofsky died at Princeton on 14 March 1968.