Secrets and Symbols in Art:
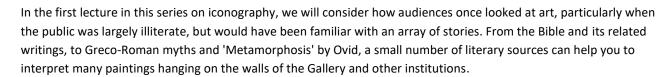## An Introduction to Iconography
Noah Charney
Monday, October 6, 2025 - 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. ET

In the first lecture in this series on iconography, we will consider how audiences once looked at art, particularly when the public was largely illiterate, but would have been familiar with an array of stories. From the Bible and its related writings, to Greco-Roman myths and 'Metamorphosis' by Ovid, a small number of literary sources can help you to interpret many paintings hanging on the walls of the Gallery and other institutions.

But this is not difficult to do, as we will see in this session. By focusing on a handful of key, most frequently referenced works, and images emerging from them, we can unlock the majority of symbolic works encountered in the Western art tradition. To illustrate this, we will consider Van Eyck's ['The Arnolfini Portrait'](#) and the concept of 'disguised symbolism'.

Learning Objectives:

- We'll discuss how audiences used to look at art and how that differs from today
- We will acquaint ourselves with the knowledge base, assumptions, and beliefs of pre-Modern Europeans and how this base informed what imagery appeared in art
- We'll learn about "disguised symbolism" and introduce ourselves to iconography, the study of symbols in art
- As case studies we will work our way through some 10 paintings to varying degrees of depth, with the goal of providing a foundation for the course

Focus works:

- We will explore some 10 paintings in this session, but our foci will be on works in the National Gallery collection throughout the course. For the first lecture, we'll dive into Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait* and Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, examine what women as symbols can represent in art, as well as opening up a famous unsolved mystery painting, Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*.

Taking it further:

- Reading any art history book that deals with symbolism will bolster your understanding of the course material. Among the most famous are works by Irving Panofsky, but you might try Charney's *The 12-Hour Art Expert,* Grovier's *A New Way of Seeing,* and Berger's *Ways of Seeing.*
- I also make filmed courses for The Great Courses/The Teaching Company. My forthcoming course will be their flagship survey of Western art history. You will be able to access this by subscribing to The Great Courses Plus or purchasing the course on Amazon.
- For fun, you might read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or his *Angels and Demons*, which are both fun, fast reads full of historical errors, but basing their treasure hunts on symbols in art. For a more sophisticated approach to the same idea (easy to read thrillers with plotlines based on symbols in art), I prefer Steve Berry's novels. My own novel, *The Art Thief* (2007), also has a similar theme.