

Smithsonian Associates

“Secrets and Symbols in Art: The Iconography of Allegory and the Personification of Ideas”

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The study of iconography—how symbols and allegories function in art—offers a way to understand masterpieces that have puzzled scholars for generations. In the third program of a series, art historian **Noah Charney** explores the use of allegory and the personification of ideas. When figures represent abstract concepts—such as justice, envy, or time—an artwork enters the world of allegory.

Charney breaks down how allegories were constructed by artists, sometimes following conventions like those in Cesare Ripa’s book of symbols, *Iconologia*, and sometimes entirely original. He compares Titian’s relatively straightforward *Allegory of Prudence* with a brilliant and baffling painting by Bronzino, *Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, a complex riddle whose layers of eroticism, disease, deceit, and time have long fascinated scholars.

Learning Objectives:

- We’ll learn the difference between disguised symbolism, hagiographic icons that act as name tags, and allegories
- We’ll dive deeply into my favourite painting, a star of the National Gallery, Bronzino’s *Allegory*
- Join me in some interactive “match the allegory” games during the lecture
- See how iconography became codified circa 1603 with the publication of Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*
- Explore several Titian allegories, and see how various interpretations can sound equally reasonable, yet are mutually contradictory
- Walk through how art historians analyse a famous puzzle picture and where what you’d think is the most reliable source—primary source references—can mislead

Focus works:

- The focal work will be Bronzino’s *Allegory of Love and Lust* (1545), as I was taught to call it. This is the work that led me to the study of iconography, and I’ve had a poster of it in my dormitory since I was at boarding school. The subject of one of my MA theses, I have what I think is a definitive interpretation but it differs from what most think—you can decide if it is convincing or not!

Taking it further:

- Read the seminal classic on iconography, Erwin Panofksy's *Studies in Iconology* (1939), or Matthew Wilson's *Symbols in Art* (2020, he was a student of mine, which makes me feel rather old)
- I also like James Elkins' *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles* (2004), and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1990)
- You can have a look at the National Gallery in London's in-depth description of Bronzino's *Allegory* as a point of departure to see how my own analysis differs. That is accessible [here](#).
- If you'd like you can read my own script for my video course in The Great Courses series, which I'll be filming in 2025, about the *Allegory*. You can access it (very homemade—it's my own personal Google Drive), [here](#).

Optional Homework:

- Read Margaret Healy's article, "Bronzino's London Allegory and the Art of Syphilis," published in the *Oxford Art Journal* (1997, Vol. 20, Issue 1).
- Another alternative view is found in Simona Cohen's article, published [here](#).
- For fun you can browse a hi-res digital scan of all of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* [here](#).