

Symbol, pattern & symmetry: the cultural significance of structure by Michael Hann (Book Review)

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Book Review

Symbol Pattern & Symmetry: The Cultural Significance of Structure

by Michael Hann

Books on visual analysis are always welcome, especially when they promise and provide systematic methods to interpret, categorise and understand imagery in its many forms. Also desirable in this most modern phase of globalisation is an approach which addresses the transmission of codes and idioms from one region to another and from one cultural context to another in its historical, cultural and religious context, interrogating this in relation to notions of more indigenous invention of pattern and symbol. This book seeks to do all those things and does this from the point of view primarily of educating undergraduate students, although the stated audience for this book is somewhat broader than this.

It is good to see that some very learned research both on the part of the author and the many sources used has contributed significantly and positively to this book and the collection and collation of images and diagrams provide an interesting array of visual examples to illustrate key 'traditions' and approaches. For me as a reviewer, the most interesting aspects were the more systematic analytical approaches being proposed because I felt I had something to learn about these and did so from reading this text. However, the issues and arguments around diffusionism and evolution are particularly interesting and pertinent at a fairly profound cultural level. This is still relevant to many of the issues faced globally today around the transmission of ideas, ideologies, beliefs and their representation and interpretation. Therefore this area of knowledge should not only be seen as an explanation of the development of apparently unique and sophisticated visual systems and approaches from a historical point of view. At this level, this text did not seem to provide anything significantly beyond the historical in terms of discussion and analysis and to some extent did not really commit itself to tackling what bigger conclusions one could make in particular historical and geographical contexts, nor the relevance of this knowledge to today's issues. This is however understandable if the intention is to raise questions for the reader to answer and argue for themselves as would be the case with undergraduate and perhaps also postgraduate students. But for myself it left me wanting more than was on offer in terms of theoretical discussion and argumentation.

I am unsure about the questions and exercises provided at the end of the chapters, as although I can see the value of these for students on a specific course, they quickly become less relevant when viewed in the context of another course which may only share some of the aims of this particular text and the course or module it was probably developed alongside. At this level, they become an unnecessary distraction. It is perhaps not necessarily appropriate to the medium of the book, even one with students in mind. Some of the questions and exercises for readers might live more happily as an accompanying online addendum to this book, thus not tying it so apparently to a particular curriculum and possibly connecting to a potentially rich social media discourse around these images and ideas.

Another issue is the book's strong dependence on a local archive which provides part of the underlying structure to the book. This work draws strongly on the Leeds University textile archive which clearly provides a very useful resource both for students and researchers. However, this

becomes not only a strength but also a weakness, as on the one hand this is a great resource for students who can consult the resource locally, but may be rather too specific for those outside Leeds who may not be able to visit and might benefit from a higher proportion of more widely chosen examples which they can access locally. Having said this, there are also some very good photographic images provided by the contributors to the book (including the author) which have been collected from around the world. The quantity of these examples overall is also valuable.

Without calling for a 'coffee-table' book, this text would benefit from more colour plates and a higher quality of reproduction and perhaps even a larger scale of reproduction. Nevertheless, it is understandable that the production costs of such an approach may well be unaffordable and also may make it too expensive to buy for the target audience. The quality of reproduction of the black and white images is good enough to illustrate the relevant points clearly and mostly to do justice to the artistry and structure of the designs they represent. An accompanying website might allow for further exploration of higher quality, higher resolution images, as well as allowing other more interactive approaches to demonstrating some of the methods of analysis through simple animations and infographics. The same could be the case in illustrating the diffusion of symbols patterns and motifs during particular historical eras. For instance, in terms of explanation, in the chapter on Facilitators and Intermediaries, images could have been used with text to more clearly geographically and temporally map-out occurrences of symbols and designs. Such visual linkages would probably help students to grasp some of the ideas more readily. The inclusion of some maps would also have helped. In fact the history, globality and visuality of this subject also lends this to possible television documentary treatment, possibly developing the online infographic approach mentioned above.

Many would be discouraged from taking on this rather global project simply because of the diversity and complexity of visual material both historically and in a modern media-rich global context. There is a sense that some regions and visual cultures get more attention than others, but not necessarily in an entirely objective way. So on the one hand we get a rich diversity of comparable and contrasting visual examples which can be applauded for not being *occidentiated* nor ethnocentric in their analysis or presentation, but the reader is left with the impression that some less famous and apparently less influential visual tradition are left unexplored and unmentioned and even some more famous ones such as historical visual traditions and approaches in the Americas are not included. This approach is explained and defended in the preface however, and ultimately this is actually quite an ambitious attempt to be quite widely inclusive within a limited number of pages.

Structurally the book makes sense overall in terms of establishing the principal ideas in the first few chapters and then looking at visual approaches used by some key religious traditions which spanned the parts of the world being examined. These are followed by sets of examples structured within individual regions. Although the structural aspects of the visual arrangements of the artefacts featured in relation to Buddhist and Islamic traditions provide particularly useful objects of study, it seems that these could have been examined in regional or trans-regional contexts in the following chapters, or alternatively could have been more of a feature of the earlier chapters which interestingly outline geometric approaches to creating or analysing visual designs.

In terms of the key aims of the book there are too many digressions in the later chapters which although interesting in themselves and are pertinent to a broader view of the artefacts being

discussed, do not always really contribute to the main arguments regarding the cultural significance of structure or the characteristics and narrative of how those structures came into being. In terms of the key proposition which the book makes, ultimately the key notions of diffusionism and more isolated developments termed as evolution in use of visual patterns, motifs and symbols and symmetry remain understated. This is not necessarily a problem as part of the purpose of this book appears to be for the students to come to some of their own decisions. Nevertheless, a more didactic position in the final analysis would make this a more interesting read overall and might present some more challenging starting points to students. Ultimately, the premise of this book remains an interesting proposition with well-chosen visuals rather than a convincingly developed analysis.

To go back to the textile collection which is featured prominently in this book, it is pleasing to see the value of textile tradition (especially Indonesian ikat) as a significant medium of visual discourse worldwide being recognised alongside other (sometimes more physically robust) forms of visual imagery worldwide. Any text which seeks to recognise the so called 'crafts' equitably alongside other 'decorative' forms and 'artworks' is providing an important service to the field of visual analysis and history of art. This book clearly has a commitment to address this and is a worthwhile and sometimes genuinely interesting and informative contribution to the field of visual analysis, especially to those less informed about this area of knowledge such as the undergraduate. There is clearly another more learned book than this one which could come from the same source and I hope that we will see such a work before too long, as this is a fascinating area which should interest practitioners, theorists or those seeking deeper knowledge about the history of humanity, beliefs, ideologies, their representation and their spread across the planet over time. As a book which can be referred to by people interested in exploring different methods for analysing images, this is undoubtedly a useful source to add to the current literature dealing with this area, especially for students learning to analyse and interpret the visual world.

Geff Green : Short Biography

Geff Green is a Principal Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. He is a cultural historian and creative practitioner with an interest in visual communication and constructions of ethnic, cultural and political identity within South East Asian national contexts. He has taught Visual Communication, Multimedia and Communication Design to undergraduate students, supervised a wide range of PhD and Masters theses including practice-based studies. His own PhD examined the birth of modern forms of tourist art in the contact zones of colonial Indonesia and his research has developed from focusing on 20th century colonial/postcolonial cultural history in the Malay / Indonesian world to more recently working with Burmese Karen refugees in his home city of Sheffield.