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Iconographic and Iconological Criticism of Nuri İyem's "Blacksmith" by Erwin Panofsky



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Abstract

One of the 20th century's leading artists of Turkish painting, Nuri İyem draws attention as a painter with a strong figurative expression who adopts social realism in his works. He is known for his works that reflect Anatolian people, especially women and laborers, in a simple yet profound way. In this study, the artist's work "Blacksmith", which focuses on rural life and labor, is analyzed based on the "Iconographic and Iconological Method of Art Criticism" developed by the German art historian Erwin Panofsky.

Panofsky's method proposes a three-stage examination in making sense of works of art: preliminary iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation. With this approach, elements such as the figure's posture, clothing, and working space in "Blacksmith" are first described; then the meanings of these elements in the historical and cultural context are interpreted. In the final stage, the underlying worldview, social, and intellectual structure of the work is analyzed.

As a result of the analysis, it is seen that İyem presents a multi-layered narrative symbolizing the concepts of labor, production, and identity through an artisan figure in "Blacksmith". In this context, Panofsky's method has been an effective tool in making sense of the deep structure of the work and has once again demonstrated that art is a form of intellectual expression.

Keywords: Art Criticism, Nuri İyem, Erwin Panofsky, Iconology, Iconography.

Introduction

The method of iconography and iconology, one of the most methodologically comprehensive approaches in art history, was systematically developed by Erwin Panofsky in 1939. Panofsky proposed that works of art must be interpreted through their formal, historical, cultural, and intellectual dimensions. His analytical framework is structured into three stages: pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation (Tükel, 2005, pp. 9–10).

According to Panofsky, interpreting a work of art requires progression from observable content to deeper conceptual meaning. The first stage—natural meaning—is subdivided into *factual* and *expressive* levels. Factual meaning is derived from the physical forms and their spatial relationships, while expressive meaning captures the emotional or symbolic expressions conveyed through those forms. These combine to form the natural subject matter of the artwork (Cömert, 2010, p. 15).

The second level, iconographic meaning, moves beyond daily experience and requires contextual knowledge to decode the symbolic meanings embedded within motifs, objects, or gestures. The third and deepest level, iconological interpretation, seeks to identify the underlying worldview and intellectual structure of the work. This involves placing the artwork within its historical, philosophical, and sociocultural context.

Iconography focuses on identifying and analyzing visual elements, while iconology synthesizes this data to arrive at a holistic reading. A precise and contextually informed iconographic foundation is essential for a successful iconological interpretation (Cömert, 2010, pp. 16–18; Panofsky, 1995, p. 29). This study applies Panofsky's methodology to Nuri İyem's painting *Blacksmith*, situating it within the larger discourse of Turkish visual culture and artistic identity.

Method

This study analyzes Nuri İyem's painting *Blacksmith* (1944) using Erwin Panofsky's Iconographic and Iconological Method of Art Criticism. Following Panofsky's three-tiered model:

1. The formal qualities of the painting are first described (pre-iconographic analysis),
2. Followed by an interpretation of figures, objects, and symbols within their cultural and historical context (iconographic analysis),
3. Culminating in a sociocultural and ideological interpretation (iconological analysis).

This layered methodology facilitates a comprehensive reading of İyem's painting, aiming to understand both its aesthetic structure and its philosophical dimensions, especially within the framework of social realism and Anatolian visual narratives.



Image 1: Nuri İyem, Blacksmith, 1944, 120 × 100 cm, Oil on Canvas.

Findings

Stage 1: Pre-iconographic Analysis (Natural Meaning)

In *Blacksmith*, Nuri İyem portrays a farrier's workshop with several figures engaged in tasks central to rural craftsmanship. The central figure, the blacksmith—is seen skillfully conducting his task, shoeing a horse whose leg is steadied by another figure. To the left, a worker is absorbed in saddle work; another assistant, back turned, is focused on a separate task.

The scene conveys a clear rhythm of coordinated labor. Each figure is engaged in functional, practical movement, reflecting a shared work ethic and mutual awareness. The horse's implied agitation is met with calm precision, emphasizing the workshop's disciplined environment. This phase of analysis captures the naturalistic and expressive forms of the figures and setting.

Stage 2: Iconographic Analysis (Agreed Meaning)

Shadow–Light Scheme

İyem employs a controlled light–dark contrast to highlight the functional core of the painting. The light enters the space from the right and slightly to the front, illuminating key forms: the back of the blacksmith, the shoulders of the assistant in a fedora, and the upper body of the horse.

As seen in Image 1, the illumination from the right accentuates the blacksmith's back, reinforcing his central role within the composition.

This chiaroscuro strategy not only enhances volume and spatial depth but also guides the viewer's gaze to the primary labor activity, emphasizing the artist's focus on manual work.

Graphic Layout

The figures are arranged within a triangular composition bounded by a closed spatial frame. This geometric approach generates dynamic balance and rhythm. Foreground elements are proportionally emphasized, while intermediary objects, such as the sculptural water jug, serve both formal and symbolic roles.

The triangular structure, anchored by directional diagonals and weight distribution—imbues the work with internal stability, allowing viewers to engage with the figures as an interconnected unit.

Color Scheme

İyem's use of color is restrained yet rich in cultural resonance. He favors muted greens, yellows, and browns over sharp contrast. This selective palette blends harmoniously, creating an atmosphere that is both naturalistic and symbolically layered.

- Green, associated in Turkish culture with life, sacredness, and rebirth, evokes harmony with nature and spiritual depth.
- Yellow, traditionally symbolic of centrality and divine presence in Shamanic cosmologies, adds an ethereal tone to the composition.

These symbolic meanings are supported by ethnographic references:

- Ögel (2000) discusses green in Turkish rituals and Islamic iconography.
- Genç (1997) links yellow to ancient Shamanic cosmology and protective spirits.
- İnan (1947) and Kiselev's excavations point to the symbolic combination of green, red, and yellow as aristocratic markers during the Göktürk period.

By drawing on this cultural color symbolism, İyem elevates the painting's iconographic depth, embedding Anatolian traditions and collective memory into the visual structure.

Composition

The composition employs a closed frame to focus attention on the interior space and its occupants. Rhythmic movement is achieved through repeated gestures and spatial echoes between figures. Directional diagonals (e.g., tools, limbs, gazes) direct the eye through the scene, reinforcing the idea of ordered motion and purpose.

Color tones, light-shadow contrasts, and the angular positioning of figures function together to maintain rhythmic and compositional unity.

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Stylistic Features



Image 2: Nuri İyem, Portrait, 1981, 73 × 92 cm, Oil on Canvas.

İyem's painting reflects his stylistic synthesis of Byzantine visual influences, the Istanbul School, and his own socially grounded figurative realism.

As illustrated in Image 2, the stylistic influence of Byzantine iconography can be observed in the frontal gaze and flattened spatial depth of his portraits. In *Blacksmith*, the figures maintain their anatomical integrity while participating in a flattened, symbolic space. The balance between abstraction and realism heightens the work's interpretive impact.

İyem prioritizes wholeness over details, shaping forms that resonate with emotional and ideological clarity rather than technical precision. His use of transparent tones, atmospheric lighting, and gestural unity enables a compelling visual narrative rooted in cultural experience.

Stage 3: Iconological Interpretation (Original Meaning and Content)

Beyond its representational clarity, *Blacksmith* offers a profound **iconological** narrative rooted in labor, tradition, and identity. The blacksmith figure serves as a symbol of rural craftsmanship, a respected and essential archetype in Anatolian society. By focusing on this figure, İyem articulates values of community labor, skill, and cultural continuity.

The horse, central to the composition, adds both functional and symbolic depth. In Anatolian and broader Turkic traditions, the horse symbolizes mobility, vitality, and social status. While it serves a practical role as a working animal, it also holds mythic dimensions — appearing in epics, celestial myths, and symbols of divine connection. This dual symbolism enhances the painting's layered meaning.

As Köstem (2000) notes, horses played a transformative role in nomadic Turkic life: enabling migration, warfare, and social cohesion. İyem captures this cultural memory, presenting the horse not just as an animal, but as a carrier of identity. The water jug, too, transcends its utilitarian purpose. It becomes a signifier of human effort and bodily endurance, tied to the real conditions of manual labor. These objects collectively affirm the social realist ethos of İyem's artistic worldview.

The composition reflects a world shaped by discipline, harmony, and respect for tradition, yet rendered with modern expressive force — a blending of inherited iconography with personal, ideological commitment.

Comment & Judgment

Nuri İyem, who achieved significant success in the *Yeniler Group* exhibitions, graduated from the academy in 1944 by winning first place in the final stage of the three-phase academic competition with his painting *Blacksmith*. This work represents a major early milestone in İyem's career and reflects the formation of his stylistic identity as a young artist. It stands out for its complex narrative structure, including the spatial positioning of figures, their natural movements, and the expressive relationships between them. The narrative is further deepened by İyem's use of deformation and color-stain relationships, demonstrating a subjective interpretive power. These elements illustrate how İyem blended traditional techniques with modern compositional strategies to construct a distinct personal style (Giray, 1998, pp. 30–31).

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An important turning point in his artistic journey came with his first solo exhibition in 1946, held on the top floor of a furniture store in Beyoğlu. This exhibition marked the beginning of

İyem's struggle to earn a livelihood through painting, solidifying his place in Turkey's modern art movement (Tansuğ, 1993, p. 228).

İyem's *Blacksmith* is not merely a depiction of a rural workshop; it is a metaphorical representation of Anatolian life and the dignity of labor. The title alone reinforces the centrality of the artisan figure, elevating a modest trade into a symbol of cultural identity deeply embedded in rural experience (Tansuğ, 1993, p. 228).

İyem's deliberate choice to minimize abstraction in favor of realistic gesture, natural posture, and spatial intimacy results in a composition that is both formally rigorous and emotionally evocative. Each object—the horse, the water jug, the tools—performs both a literal and symbolic role. The water jug, for instance, reflects the physical endurance of laborers, while the horse signifies not only agricultural function but also deeper layers of Anatolian cultural memory and identity (Köstem, 2000, pp. 18, 24).

With the onset of modernization, the blacksmith's world has largely receded into memory. Today, *Blacksmith* functions as a nostalgic artifact, preserving a disappearing tradition while offering critical commentary on social endurance, transformation, and identity. These themes remain especially relevant in regions where traditional professions still form the backbone of rural communities (Giray, 1998, pp. 30–31).

İyem's synthesis of traditional forms and modern expressive language marks his legacy as a foremost figure of Turkish social realism. His work not only reveals technical mastery but also demonstrates a deep empathy for the cultural psyche of Anatolian society. Following a period of abstract experimentation in the 1950s, İyem returned to figurative painting in the 1960s, focusing on the lives, resilience, and inner worlds of rural and migrant communities. His visual language became both accessible and intellectually resonant, firmly situating him within the lineage of socially engaged modern artists (Giray, 1998, pp. 30–31).

With modernization, the blacksmith's world has faded into memory. Today, *Blacksmith* becomes a nostalgic artifact, documenting a vanishing mode of life. At the same time, it serves as a social commentary on endurance, identity, and transformation — particularly relevant in developing contexts where such figures still survive.

İyem's integration of traditional forms with modern interpretation underscores his status as a master of social realism. His approach reflects not only a technical mastery but also a deep empathy for the cultural psyche of his people.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the strength and adaptability of Erwin Panofsky's iconographic and iconological method in analyzing modern Turkish painting. By applying Panofsky's three-stage framework to Nuri İyem's *Blacksmith*, the paper has shown how visual, cultural, and ideological dimensions of a work can be interpreted in tandem.

İyem's composition combines formal clarity, cultural symbolism, and emotional depth, achieving a multifaceted reading of Anatolian identity. His color choices — muted greens, yellows, and browns — resonate with traditional meanings, while his triangular composition and rhythmic layout create a sense of visual order and purpose.

The painting's strength lies in its ability to honor the past while addressing the present — serving as both a nostalgic homage and a critical statement. As a reflection of social structure, labor division, and cultural memory, *Blacksmith* is a vital contribution to Turkish visual history.

The Iconographic and Iconological Method of Art Criticism offers a robust framework not only for decoding historical works but also for engaging contemporary or transitional art. Through this lens, Nuri İyem's painting is revealed as both aesthetic expression and intellectual discourse — a visual narrative of meaning, memory, and identity.

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Visual References

Image 1: Nuri İyem, Blacksmith, 1944, 120x100 cm, Oil on Canvas.
<https://www.hayatagaci.biz.tr/2014/08/turk-ressamlari-nuri-iyem/>

Image 2: Nuri İyem, Portrait, 1981, 73x92 cm, Oil on Canvas.

Note: Image originally archived via Artam Auctions. Public access is no longer available.