The Symbolism in Suffering: Art and the Holocaust

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From the cave paintings in Lascaux, to Vincent Van Gogh's starry skies, mankind has been adept at expressing emotion through symbolism in the artistic medium for thousands of years. The process of creating an art piece requires unity of mind, body, and spirit. The events of the Holocaust ignited a series of traumatic events - for both the survivors and their loved ones - and perhaps this is why there are so many artworks pertaining to these horrific events. The creation of art allows the artist to express emotions that may be deemed negative - anger, frustration, guilt. In these artworks, symbols become the vessels of emotion. For the purposes of this paper, I will be exploring the symbolism in many of the artworks found within the concentration camps, while comparing them to Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, Maus.

To begin with, I will elaborate on a few terms for better understanding. First, Holocaust artwork is, as Dr. Henry W. Pickford, author of A Sense of Semblance, defines it, "the class of any artwork that is about the Holocaust, that is, the intentionality or content of which includes reference, direct or indirect, to the Nazi project of humiliation, deprivation, degradation, and extermination against the Jews and other marked groups" (Pickford 3). This includes mediums ranging from the painting to the graphic novel, and everything in between.

Second, there is the concept of signs and symbols. By definition, a symbol is "anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols" (Abrams 392). Through this definition it becomes apparent that symbols rely on language, and vice versa. This is also stated by Ferdinand de Saussure: "without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas." (Saussure 5). In art, the way a specific object or word is depicted dictates its position as a symbol; for example, in Van Gogh’s piece, “Two Cut Sunflowers,” the sunflowers become the symbol by virtue of their solitude and placement on a plain blue background (see fig. 1, Appx. A). By following these definitions, symbolism in Holocaust artwork becomes more apparent and easier to analyze.

Perhaps some of the most symbolic Holocaust artworks are those found within Auschwitz. “The walls of Auschwitz,” states Czarnecki, “-- witnesses to this century’s worst horrors – contain many different kinds of art: paintings, drawings, scratchings” (Czarnecki xiii). Many depict scenes of torture and labor – historical records of the times. However, many more are simply small, seemingly unrelated images, images that do not record the everyday life of a Jewish prisoner, but instead represent their internal struggles. It is in these artworks that symbols play a larger role.

One of the most common symbols found in Holocaust artworks is the bird, or more specifically, the dove or pigeon. Traditionally, birds embody the “human desire to break free”, and in fairy tales are often depicted as guardians who bring food to people who are good (Biedermann 39). In one Auschwitz artwork, Pigeon with Message, a bird is depicted holding a small envelope embellished with a swastika (see fig. 2, Appx. A). The bird as a symbol of freedom in combination with the arrival of a letter could very well be the artist’s fantasy of the arrival of good news, such as a pardon. One thing worth noting is the lack of birds depicted in Spiegelman’s Maus. In fact, the only winged animals shown are the flies surrounding dead bodies (and in certain frames, Art himself), and the briefly depicted Gypsy moth who tells Anya her future (Spiegelman 201-293). However, later in the story Spiegelman draws a scene which shows the camp prisoners in a tranquil natural setting. There are trees all around them and – just across the lake – birds in flight. This is symbolic, as the prisoners – who are now technically free – are being marched away from safety by the Nazis. The birds in flight, just in view, symbolize the freedom that is just within their grasp, but still not close enough.

Subjects of innocence are frequently depicted in Holocaust artwork. Cherubs and kittens are often shown, and this is not odd, considering that “Cats,” as Biedermann states, “being difficult to catch or confine, signify liberty” (Biedermann 60). One prison camp artwork shows two kittens bathing (see fig. 4, Appx. A). However simple this sketch may seem, it still contains elements of the symbolic - the kittens engaging in the simple act of bathing, a creature comfort that many of the prisoners were not allowed. The artist’s idea of freedom may just be that – the ability to partake in the simple things in life.

One thing to note is how Spiegelman represents the Germans as cats. While they are still the villains of the story, they do, in fact, represent liberty. The Germans are not the ones being held prisoner; on the contrary, they make up the majority of those in charge. Still, Spiegelman does not depict his German cats as innocent looking kittens. They are angry, fanged, and frightening. This could play along with belief that cats symbolized evil, lasciviousness, and cruelty, or it could simply be a representation of the binary opposition between cat and mouse, Germans and Jews (Biedermann 59).

Although Spiegelman does not include them in his graphic novel, camels are a common subject in concentration camp art. Also considered to be a symbol of moderation and sobriety, the camel became a symbol of accepting life’s burdens humbly and without complaint (Biedermann 56). Camels are also viewed as a symbol of obedience, and perhaps this is why they
are seen depicted frequently on the walls of Auschwitz. However, the camels are not portrayed on their own. In the piece *Camels and Pyramids* (see fig 5. Appx. A), a camel is depicted alongside a man and palm tree in the foreground, with darkened pyramids in the background. This kind of decorative art depicts the exotic and fantastic, and in some respects it is like a mirage or an escape. As Czarnecki states, “This is the one example in this book of a kind of decorative painting that was fairly widespread in Auschwitz, by which the walls were adorned with stripes, ‘marbling,’ and repeated patterns of various kinds, often stenciled” (Biedermann 58). Whether or not these decorative paintings were commissioned by the German officers is unknown, and so for now it is safe to assume that these were created solely for the pleasure of the artist, as a distraction from the grim reality they faced every day.

Though animals are some of the most commonly depicted symbols in Holocaust artwork, plants such as trees and flowers have their place as well. In many cultures, trees represent life, but there are many variations on the theme (Biedermann 352). A Jewish legend tells that “the progenitor Abraham planted trees everywhere he went, but that they did not thrive; only one, in the land of Canaan, shot up tall. Through it Abraham could tell whether someone believed in the true God or was an idolater. Over the believer the tree would spread its branches and offer its shade for protection” (Biedermann 352). In Spiegelman’s *Maus*, lush trees are rarely ever depicted. In fact, most of the trees drawn are dead, leafless, and thin, with very few extended branches. Following the Jewish legend of Abraham and the trees, this could symbolize the lack of belief in the Jewish religion held by the Germans officers in the concentration camps, for most of the trees drawn in *Maus* surround the camps, which are already grim settings. In one instance (see fig. 6, Appx. A), trees make up the entire background, creating a sense of gloom and darkness, as they envelop the surroundings and cover both the prisoners and officers.

As we can see from *Trees* in Appx. A, the dead, leafless tree is a common symbol of death and despair. The tree symbolizes the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and in this piece we are shown only three dead trees; there is no cycle, only a constant. This bleak depiction of nature contrasts with the more hopeful representation of a sunflower, as depicted by Uri Kochba, one of the few known Holocaust artists (see fig. 8, Appx. A). In this artwork, a man is shown peering out from behind bars at a large sunflower waiting outside the wall. In the “language of flowers,” the sunflower’s code states: “It turns ever toward the sun. As sunlight is to it, so is your love to my life.” In Kochba’s piece, the sunflower represents hope in the face of an unthinkable situation. Flowers in general are universal symbols of youth, and because of the arrangement of petals, they are also associated with the sun (Biedermann 135-137). The portrayal of a sunflower in this piece further confirms this symbolization. If we follow this path, it becomes apparent that the sun is a secondary symbol in Kochba's work. Commonly viewed as the destroyer of darkness, the sun represents victory, life force, and force of will (Biedermann 331).

Eyes are another common symbol in Holocaust artwork. Eyes are considered to be among the most important symbols, associated with “light and intellectual perspicacity; at the same time the eye has long been considered not only a receptive organ but also the transmitter of ‘beams,’ the image of spiritual expressivity. Evil creatures or those with great magical powers were thought to have eyes whose gaze rendered others powerless or turned them to stone.” (Biedermann 122). The representation of the eye as evil is apparent in Van Danzig's drawing, *Fright* (see fig. 9, Appx. A). In this image, a man is depicted running from several evil looking people, possibly demons, while two large eyes take up the background. This gives the viewer the unsettling feeling of being watched, and the eye as a “beam”, or the jailer, is exemplified by its size and position in relation to the man in the image.

Another image with a similar representation of evil and power is Holocaust artist Wiesenthal’s *Mauthausen Camp* (see fig 10. Appx. A). Here a guard of gigantic proportions is seen looming over the entrance of a giant oven, watching as dozens of camp prisoners march into the flames. He is depicted with long, claw-like fingernails and a remorseless expression, much like a devil of sorts. The presence of a “watchful” eye mirrors that of Van Danzig's *Fright*. This feeling depicted, the feeling of constantly being watched, is apparent in *Maus*. When Vladek was in a cell with his friend Mandelbaum, he came across a Polish man in need of someone with the ability to write in German (Spiegelman 158). The only way prisoners were allowed to send or receive packages was by writing in German so as to allow the officers to intercept and read what was leaving and entering the camps. The constant lack of privacy strips the prisoners of any sense of safety, comfort, and individuality that they may have.

Through analyzing all of these symbols, it becomes apparent that many of these artworks are created with an audience in mind. Whether the artist created with future generations in mind, or if the works were simply a means of keeping one's self sane is of no consequence; the sign is always in address to someone (Easthope 73). The very nature of a symbol lies in its addressing a subject, and in its opposition to something else. As Cixous states: “Thought has always worked through opposition...Through dual, hierarchical oppositions. Superior/Inferior” (Cixous 157). In the case of Holocaust artworks, the opposition is between the Germans and the Jews. Much of the symbolism within artworks, such as Wiesenthal's *Mauthausen Camp* rely on binary opposition. There can be no prisoner without a captor, no oppression without an oppressor; it is through these oppositions that the symbolism of the art pieces
gain their meaning and power. Aside from the subject and substance, there is also opposition in the style of the artworks; the majority of the pieces were done in black and white, the most widely known couple of contrast. Through the play of black and white, and the shades in between, the mood is set for many of these pieces. While a piece that is predominantly black can express darkness, despair, and death, a piece that is predominantly white can express a lack of life, of emotion, etc. - and the feeling of bleakness. Only when a balance is struck does the strength of expression balance out, but in many of these artworks there is no balance, and therein lies the point.

Symbols are all around us, whether we recognize them or not. When artists create, they transform symbols from representations of thought and feeling into vessels of emotion, with vast dimensions and endless planes. Holocaust artwork is a chunk of the art world drenched in history, trauma, and most of all, emotion. From symbols of hope, to symbols of death and despair, the world of Holocaust artwork represents a vast range of emotional capacities. It is through symbols that the artist expresses themselves, and it is through expression that the trauma of events too horrific to imagine can be released to create beauty and understanding.

Works Cited


Appendix A

These materials are included under the fair use exemption and are restricted from further use.

Fig. 1 Sunflowers: Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, Zundert 1853–1890 Auvers-sur-Oise). 1887. Oil on canvas. 17 x 24 in. (43.2 x 61 cm). Paintings. Rogers Fund, 1949. 49.4. (Met)

Fig. 2 Pigeon with Message. Artist unknown. Block 11, Cell 26 Main Camp. N/Y. (Czarnecki)

Fig 3. Maus (p. 266). Spiegelman, Art. (Spiegelman)
Fig 4. *Kittens*. Artist unknown. Block 7, ground-floor washroom. Main Camp. N/Y. (Czarnecki)

Fig 5. *Camels and Pyramids*. Artist unknown. Block 14, ground-floor. Main Camp. N/Y. (Czarnecki)


Fig 7. *Trees*. Michel Fink. Charcoal and chalk. 1943. (Novitch)

Fig 8. *Hope*. Uri Kochba. Linoleum block on paper. 1940. (Novitch)

Fig 9. *Fright*. M. M. Van Danzig. Drawn in the lead mine, 1944. (Novitch)
Fig. 10. Mauthausen Camp. Drawing, mixed media. Simon Wiesenthal. 1945. (Costanza)