

The Table in Art: Symbolism and Interpretations

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ABSTRACT

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The depiction of tables in art is often a symbolic element that offers various meanings depending on the context and the artist's intent. Tables in art, including painting, are depicted to reflect everyday life scenarios, which can indicate the rhythm of human life, family life, or relationships between people. Additionally, the representation of tables can serve as a tool to explore social relationships, power dynamics, or hierarchy. Tables are also used in sacred art, where in this context, the table can symbolize unity, fellowship, food, or sacrifice, which is related to human spiritual or physical well-being. Tables can also be associated with psychological and emotional meanings, such as support, protection, or even mystery. Paintings featuring people sitting at a table may emphasize how they interact, as well as moments of reflection or communication. This theme should be explored from various aspects, such as depictions of domestic life, social relationships, religious meanings, exploration of art aesthetics, material and spiritual values, and psychological and philosophical associations.

The aim of the study is to explore and analyze how different artists have depicted tables in painting and what their meanings are.

Keywords: Art, Painting, Table, Symbol, Interpretations

Introduction

For centuries, painting has been able to reflect the diversity of human life, including relationships, daily rhythms, and social structures. Art often employs refined yet powerful visual imagery, as well as symbols that carry concealed conceptual messages. These symbols can reveal not only the artist's individual interpretation but also offer valuable insight into the cultural interactions of the past. One of the most frequently used symbolic elements in art is the table. Its depiction not only reflects the everyday aspects of human life but also encompasses various meanings that shift depending on context and the artist's intention.

The table is portrayed in various forms in art, and its symbolic meaning can be multifaceted. It can serve as a means to explore social relationships, power dynamics, or hierarchy. Depictions of tables are often associated with family life, human communication, and even spiritual and material values. In sacred

art, the table can symbolize unity, fellowship, and sacrifice—concepts closely tied to a person's spiritual or physical vitality. The table is also used to express psychological and emotional meanings.

The aim of this research is to analyze the significance of the table's depiction in art, examining how it functions as a symbol of human interaction, and exploring how this object is used across different artistic movements and styles—from everyday domestic scenes to sacred art—also taking into account psychological and philosophical dimensions. The table serves as a significant element that reveals the relationships and values that shape the essence of human life.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns the lack of a comprehensive symbolic and interdisciplinary analysis of the table as a recurring motif in painting, particularly in relation to social, sacred, psychological, and philosophical interpretations. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, based on visual analysis, iconographic and iconological interpretation,

and comparative analysis of selected artworks. The research does not involve quantitative data or statistical processing, as its focus is on symbolic meanings, visual structures, and interpretative contexts rather than measurable variables.

Depiction of the Table in Painting Domestic Representation

The depiction of everyday scenes in painting is an artistic style that highlights ordinary life and its routine moments, where the significance of the table often becomes a key element within these scenes. Rather than focusing on significant historical events, this genre of painting portrays simple human interactions and domestic settings, where the table is frequently the central element around which daily activities and life unfold.

The origins of this genre can be traced back to the Renaissance period, when artists began to shift away from religious themes and turned toward more intimate, personal subjects that depicted daily life. The meaning of the table in these paintings is not only practical but also symbolic. It is a place where people meet, share their life stories and experiences, and where various values are embedded—such as family, social interaction, and intimacy.

The table becomes a bridge between daily life and the artwork, allowing the viewer to experience the moment and understand how people live through these small yet meaningful episodes of life.

Paul Cézanne – “The Card Players” (1890–1892)

The painting emphasizes not only the card game but also the significance of the table as a place where human interaction and concentration gain particular importance. The surface of the table becomes a platform where the players immerse themselves in their own world, fully focused on their task. The diffusion of light around the table creates a calm, intimate atmosphere, and the composition of the table elements helps direct the viewer’s attention to the essence of the game, underscoring the importance of the moment.

By choosing the table as the central element in this painting, Cézanne not only depicts everyday life but also shows that this ordinary object becomes a symbol that draws the viewer’s attention to human interaction, reverence for simple moments, and human behavior. The painting’s narrative becomes a reflection on how everyday events that take place around a table can acquire profound meaning.

Jan Steen – “A Peasant Family at Meal Time” (~1665)

Jan Steen often uses the table as a central element in his paintings to portray not only everyday life but also how family values and upbringing are connected to broader life purposes. In a quiet, dimly lit room, a small girl folds her hands to say grace, following the example taught to her by her mother. The symbolism of the table in this work represents a foundation—the inner world of the family and its values—upon which the child’s faith, understanding of familial roles, and values are built, shaping her as a future member of society.

Valentin de Boulogne – “The Meeting in the Tavern” (1625)

The artist places the table at the center of the composition, using it not only as a spatial organizer but also as a symbolic object that facilitates intrigue, manipulation, and temptation, expressed through each figure’s gestures and actions. In the painting, the table acts as an intermediary between innocence and corruption, reflecting the moral values of society and individuals, and serving as a stage on which these manipulations are played out.¹

Social Relationships

The depiction of the table in art can serve as a way to represent social relationships and human interaction. This everyday object is used to highlight various aspects of human relationships—intimacy, conflict, work meetings, or social gatherings. Socialist realism is particularly effective in illustrating social relationships, as this art style was developed with the aim of portraying the emerging socialist society and its values.

In this type of art, social relationships are depicted not only as daily interactions between individuals but also as an essential element shaping a new collective spirit and social life. From 1934 onward, when socialist realism was established as the official art style of the Soviet Union, artists were encouraged to portray a society grounded in the principles of labor, collectivism, and progressive ideas.

Within this artistic framework, the table often served as a symbol around which social relationships were formed—a place where social ties developed, reflecting the new societal order in which labor and cooperation were the central value markers. By depicting people gathered around the table, artists emphasized the ideals of socialist society, where every job and every activity was tied to the realization of the broader socialist project: collectivism, authority, productivity, and the ideology of a better future.

Aleksandr Gerasimov – “Harvest Festival on the Kolkhoz” (1937)

This painting is one of many examples of how socialist realism utilized everyday objects, such as the table, to promote ideological goals and support the process of collectivization. In this work, peasants are depicted celebrating a communal harvest, and the table becomes a significant symbol that conveys ideological values—community, pride in labor, and the promise of a prosperous future. It serves as an embodiment of socialist ideals and collectivism.

Vladimir Serov – “Walkers to Lenin” (1950)

In this work, the artist depicts the table as a social and ideological link between Lenin and his people. The table becomes a tool for expressing not only dialogue but also ideological values. It functions as a space of communication, where everyday labor is united with political ideology, creating an atmosphere that draws the viewer into the conversation as a participant in this ideological moment.

Sacred Art

In Christian art, the table is interpreted not merely as a physical surface, but as a sacred space where divine presence is revealed. When viewed through the lens of art, the table transcends the

¹Lemoine A., Christiansen K. 2016. Valentin de Boulogne: Beyond Caravaggio.

boundaries of ordinary objects and becomes a sacred place in which a person experiences closeness with God. Thus, the table used in the Eucharistic celebration (Holy Communion or the Blessed Sacrament) becomes “our altar”—a place to which we are invited to partake. In art, the table is depicted as a symbol of life, a place where we share not only bread and wine, but also the spiritual strength that flows from them.

Artists in sacred art often choose to depict the table as a central element, with the Eucharist represented as a gathering at the table that is tied to the broader reality of life—from the everyday to the heavenly banquet. Such artworks reveal that the Last Supper is not merely an isolated sacred event, but also a part of daily life, where God is present in every meal and in every human community.

Some of the most notable sacred paintings include:²

Leonardo da Vinci – The Last Supper (1495–1498)

The artist not only addresses the challenge of depicting the Last Supper but also immortalizes the symbolic significance of the table in sacred art. The table becomes a connection between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human. It serves as a platform upon which sacred communion is experienced, while simultaneously revealing the emotional and spiritual depth of the moment.

Rembrandt – Supper at Emmaus (1628)

In this painting, the artist depicts a scene from the Gospel of Luke 24:30–31. This moment emphasizes not only Christ’s divine nature but also the act of breaking bread as a symbol of the sacrament. The table’s significance is essential, as it becomes the point of contact between the worldly and the divine. The table becomes a metaphor for how Christ offers himself as the Bread of Life—the bread he broke and shared, revealing his divine presence.

Through this work, Rembrandt affirms that anyone who joins Christ at the table can experience his presence and revelation. The arrangement of the table and its lighting are also of great importance. The artist uses the table not only as a spatial element but as a place where the deepest spiritual mystery is revealed, making it a sacramental experience through which we can encounter both Christ’s presence and divine revelation. Thanks to Rembrandt’s attention to light, scale, and space, the table becomes the epicenter of this revelation—physically present and spiritually filled with divine presence.

Tintoretto – The Last Supper (1594)

In this work, Tintoretto reinterprets Leonardo da Vinci’s approach, offering a new perspective on this sacred theme. Unlike Leonardo’s Last Supper, where the table is flat and symmetrical, Tintoretto tilts the table at an angle, introducing depth and directing the viewer’s gaze into the inner space of the scene. The table becomes the central focus, drawing attention to the sacramental meaning of the act of eating.

Like Leonardo, Tintoretto uses contrasts of light and shadow to heighten the drama, but he does so with even greater intensity and energy. The lighting around the table highlights the presence of Jesus as the central figure, complemented by the glow from a ceiling lamp—visualized by the artist as the Holy Spirit illuminating all who are present. This illumination sanctifies the table, transforming it into a sacred and spiritual moment that transcends an ordinary meal and becomes a source of life.

The angle and lighting of the table not only create a dramatic atmosphere but also visually express the meaning of the Eucharist—as a source of life that comes from God.³

Psychological Associations

When analyzing perception, it is important to consider the three main areas of the “Science of Perception” in order to explore how, in artworks that depict the table, visual psychology allows the artist to manipulate the viewer’s perception. By using color, composition, and symbols, the artist can create a variety of emotional and psychological effects.

Visual Physics focuses on the function of light, which is the first step in making objects visible to our perceptual system. The wavelength and intensity of light determine how we perceive colors and shapes. In art, this means that a table is perceived according to how light interacts with its surface, highlighting its texture, shadows, and reflections. The light source—such as windows or lighting elements—can alter the appearance of the table, giving it different moods and creating emotional effects.

Visual Physiology examines how our eyes and brain process visual information. From the receptors in the eyes to the visual centers in the occipital lobe of the brain, our body undergoes a complex process to convert light wave signals into a coherent image. When we look at a table, we perceive not only its form and structure but also its detailed characteristics—such as the smoothness of the surface, its sheen, or saturation. These physical reactions evoke emotional responses, such as calmness or tension, depending on the shape of the table or its arrangement.

Visual Psychology is concerned with how the human brain constructs a perceptual image. This means we don’t merely perceive tables as objects, but also assign meaning to them based on our experiences and associations. A table can evoke various emotions and convey significance in relation to social interactions. It may be a place for intimate conversations or family dinners, or it might be perceived as a symbol of order or chaos. In paintings that depict tables, visual psychology allows the artist to influence the viewer’s perception by using colors, composition, and symbols to create a range of emotional and psychological effects.⁴

Philosophical Associations

The artist is also a philosopher—just like a philosopher of philosophy. What matters here is the engagement with being and its interpretation. One creates interpretation through canvas

²Phelan, J. R. (n.d.). 2017. The Passion of Christ in Art.

³Meldrum, L. (n.d.). Inspired Through Art: The Last Supper by Tintoretto, 1594.

⁴Benšs H. 2008. Psiholoģijas atlants attēli un teksti 1, daļa.

or melodies, while the philosopher does so with concepts. Yet reason and sensitivity are interrelated, and together they create human harmony. The depiction of the table in art goes far beyond the portrayal of a simple object—it becomes a philosophical reflection that reveals human existence and one's relationship with the world. When an artist paints a table on canvas, they are not merely depicting a physical object but offering us an interpretation of human interaction with that object and its meaning in life.

In studying the depiction of the table in art, philosophical associations can be viewed from various perspectives—interpretation, metaphor, and philosophical object.

By painting a table, the artist creates an interpretation of human life, where the table is not merely a place for eating or working. It is a space where relationships unfold, where conversations and ideas emerge, where the individual experiences themselves and the world through their body and senses. Philosophically speaking, the table becomes a symbolic space where the person encounters their own existence, forms relationships with others, and derives meaning from being.

The table's presence in art reveals our inner world—it serves as an object that is more than just a physical surface. It is a metaphor for the order of our lives, our efforts to create structure and meaning in the world. Just as philosophy seeks to understand the essence of humanity and the structure of the world, so too does art, through the symbol of the table, offer a deeper perspective on human existence. In paintings, the artist uses the depiction of the table as a reflection of humankind's attempt to comprehend their place in the world—a place where everyday rituals and higher existential reflections converge.

The table is not merely a physical space—it is a philosophical object that offers a perspective on human life as a constant interaction between the internal and external worlds, between the material and the spiritual. In art, the table is interpreted not only as a functional object but as a place where a person encounters themselves, where they seek and construct meaning and relationships with the surrounding world. The philosophy of the table in art gives us an opportunity to view it as an all-encompassing, emotionally and intellectually rich space, where human existence is revealed in a multilayered way.⁵

Conclusions

This study concludes that the artist's aim in depicting the table is not simply to portray an ordinary object, but rather to give the table a deeper meaning—a place where eternal reflection and ritual become part of our everyday world, creating a balance between the spiritual and the material. By using the table as a symbol, the artist expresses our continuous efforts to understand the essence of life and to create meaning in everything that surrounds us.

By examining the meaning of the table from various perspectives in painting, we can conclude that a common thread throughout

these aspects is the table as a place of connection—whether with people, spiritual values, or personal existence. The table is used to express and construct relationships, symbolizing the rhythm of human life and the value system across different spheres of experience.

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⁵Kūle M., Kūlis R. 1996. Filosofija.