

# VAST ANNOTATION METHODOLOGY IMAGES



# Preface

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Project: VAST: Values Across Space & Time

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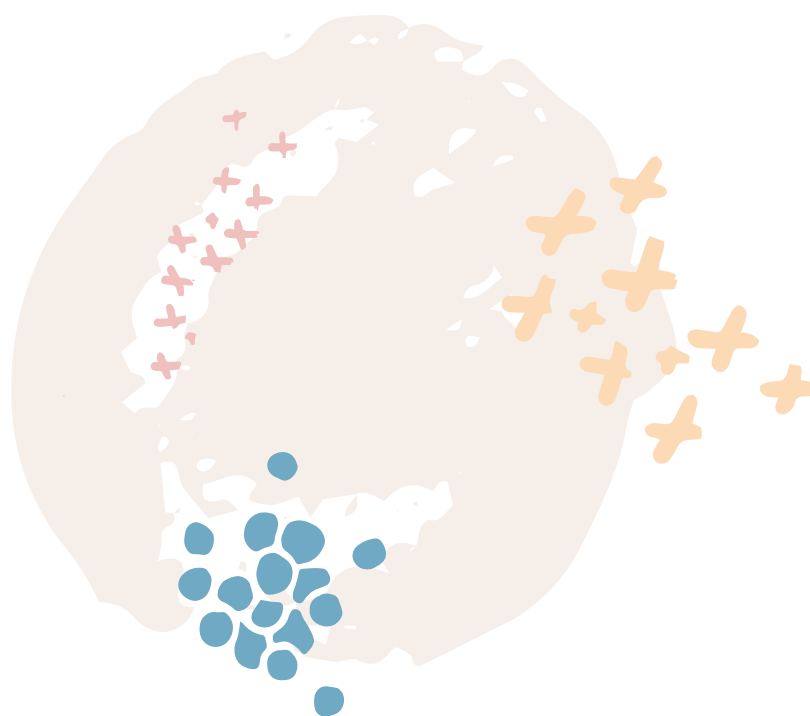


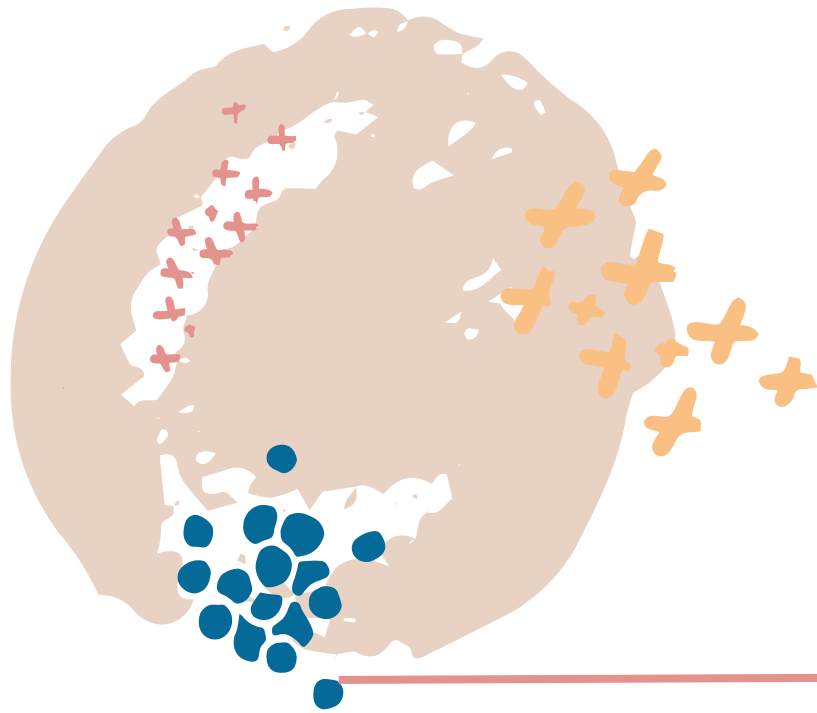
The VAST project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement **No 101004949**. This educational guide reflects only the view of the authors and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

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# Table of contents

1. Introduction	p. 1
2. Describing manifest content	p. 5
3. Non-expert annotation: annotating motifs	p. 8
4. Expert annotation: annotating symbols	p. 12
5. Conclusions	p. 16
6. References	p. 18





# Introduction

The VAST project (Values Across Space and Time - <https://www.vast-project.eu>) has studied the transformation of moral values across space and time, with particular emphasis on core European values that constitute the pillars of European society. To this end, the project has focused on three different historical periods ... TODO

- Pilot 1: Values in ancient Greek tragedies.
- Pilot 2: Values in texts of 17th century about natural philosophy,
- Pilot 3: Values in folktales and fairy tales.

The purpose of this document is to provide **guidelines for annotating images**. Even though the guidelines are modeled after the work already done in Pilot 2, they are general in scope and can be used in all the pilots. In VAST, the annotation is done manually by an annotator through the use of VAST annotation tool, i.e. the Ellogon Annotation Platform (<https://annotation.vast-project.eu>)

To annotate moral values in images, **we adopt an iconographical/iconological approach**. Pioneered by German art historian Aby Warburg at the beginning of the 20th century and popularized by cultural theorists and art historians such as Erwin Panofsky, Rudolf Wittkower, and Ernst Hans Gombrich, **iconology concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning in works of art**, as opposed to their form, and **investigates the function of images in allegory and symbolism**, and their reference to what may be called ‘the invisible world of ideas’ (Panofsky, 1955).

As a method of interpretation, contemporary iconology has reached a high level of sophistication (Van Straten, 1994; Taylor, 2008). For annotation, however, we will employ a simplified version of Panofsky’s method, which still lies at the heart of contemporary iconological research. Our simplified method consists of three steps: **(1) describing manifest content; (2) annotating motifs; and (3) annotating symbols**. The distinction between (2) and (3) roughly corresponds to the distinction between non-expert and expert annotation.

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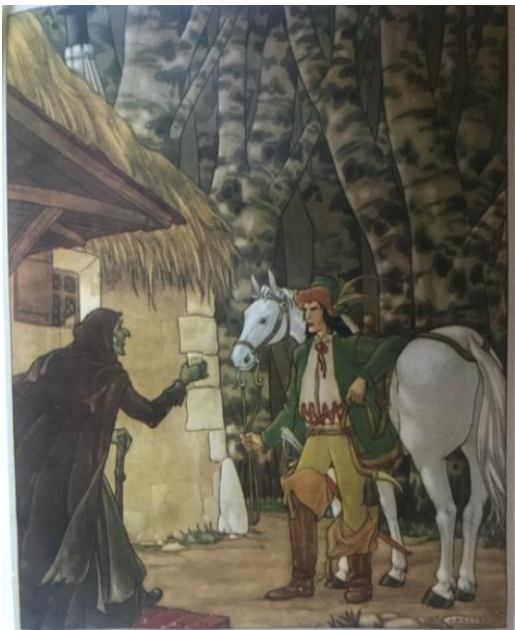
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In this guide, we will make use of three images as examples. Each image is related to one of the three VAST pilots.



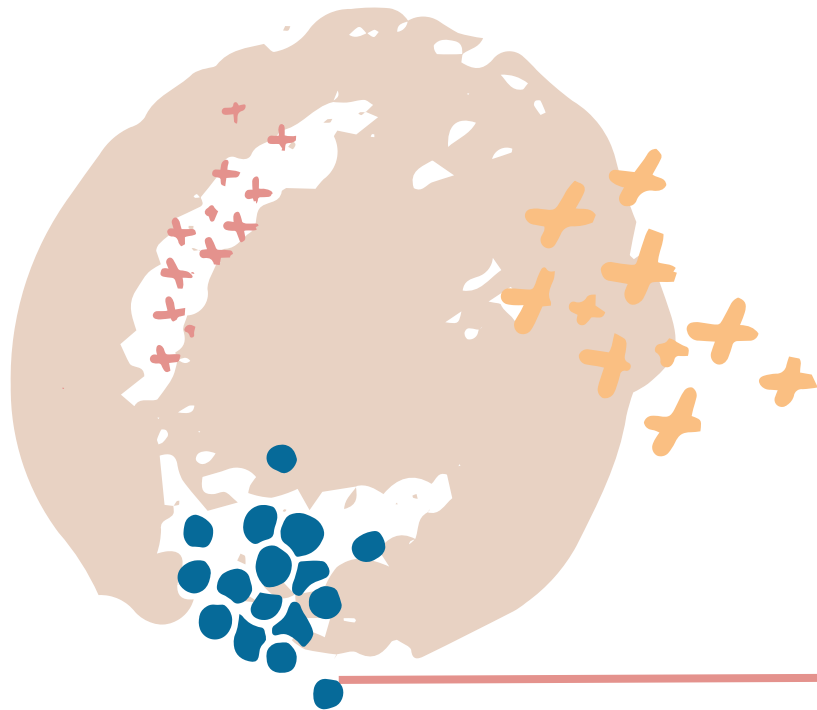
*Figure 1. Photograph taken by Tristram Kentom at the 2014 Carry Cracknell's Medea premiere in London.*

*Figure 2. Portrait of Sibylla of Anhalt by an anonymous painter, 16th century.*



*L'indovinello*

*Figure 3. Illustration for Grimm's story "The Riddle" by Vincenzo Accornero de Testa, featured in an Italian edition of Grimm's selected fairytales, Hoepli, Milano, 1949.*



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## Describing Manifest Content



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Just as text annotation requires careful reading, so image annotation requires careful looking. The process of looking at an image involves at least three key components: the manifest content being delivered by the image; what the image means to the viewer; and what the author meant to signify.

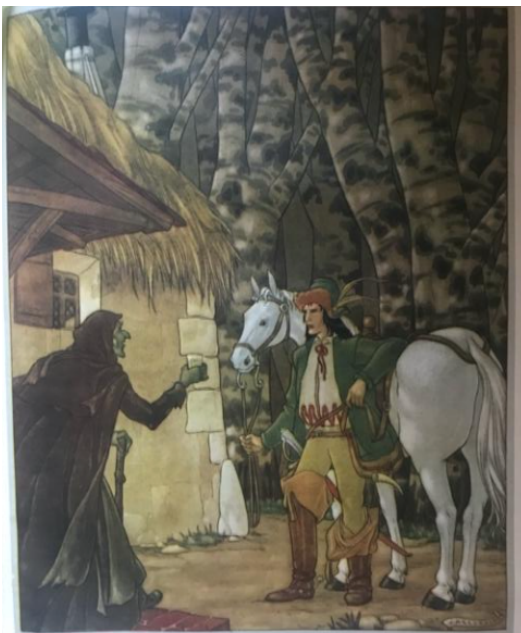
The first step is to describe the “manifest content” of the image, that is, the basic shapes and objects depicted in it. This is done by looking at the image in its entirety and then by identifying discrete elements and their mutual relationships through foreground/background discrimination and spatial discrimination. The manifest content of the image will result in a textual description as neutral as possible. In this stage, writing down the description may be of help.

In describing manifest content, annotators (both expert and non-expert) should be careful to keep the description factual, so it can serve as a common ground for identifying motifs and symbols.



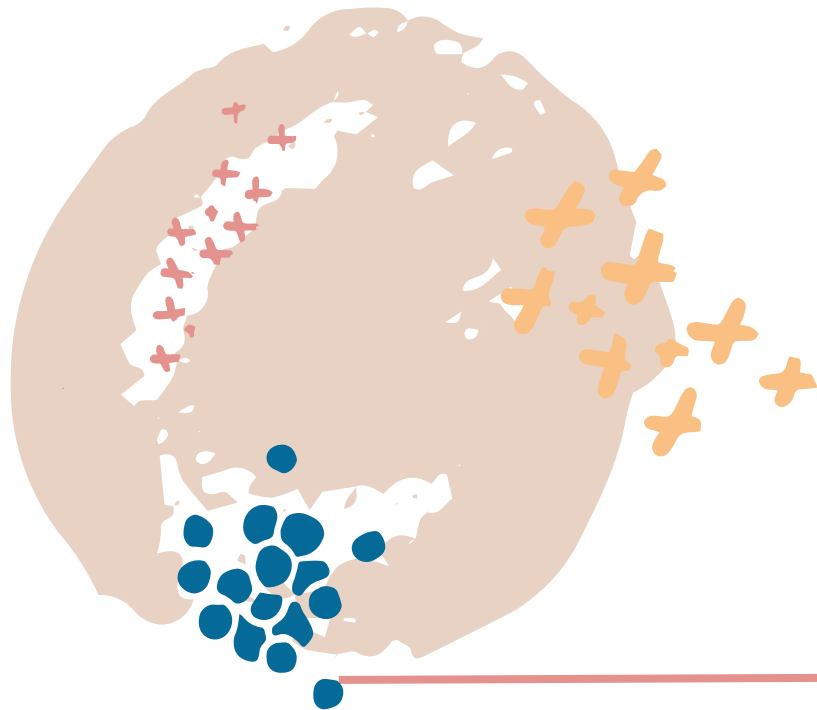
*On the foreground, a human figure in white robe sitting at a table. In the background, eight human figures wearing pinkish flower-decorated dresses.*

*On the foreground, a standing human figure in a flower-decorated dress holding gloves and a flower-decorated napkin. In the background, the internal of a building.*



*L'indocinello*

*On the foreground, two human figures interacting and a white horse standing. One of the human figures is moved to the side of the picture and the other to the center. In the background, a rustic building and brownish-black tree trunks.*



## **Non-expert Annotation: Annotating Motifs**

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In iconology, a **visual motif is a recurring element** that, within a culture, **serves as a carrier of messages**, both conventional and abstract, **related to themes and concepts conveyed by literary and/or oral sources**. For example, seeing an image of an individual with her right index and thumb connected into a circle while the other fingers remain extended may lead us to conclude that the individual represented in the image is showing approval.

**Recognizing motifs is a process that depends on the viewer's experience, knowledge, and culture.** The OK gesture may not be recognized as such outside English-speaking countries, and it may signify something entirely different to a non-English speaking viewer. **Motifs shape how we subjectively experience an image** as members of a shared culture and co-participants in a collective experience. It is by recognizing motifs that we are often able to tell at first sight if a movie character is a scientist, a lawyer, or a war hero. In the French animated series *Il était une fois... la vie*, for example, motifs are exploited to anthropomorphize human anatomy. Bacteria and viruses are represented with the stereotypical features that in 1980s movies were commonly associated with bullies, “bad guys”, and subcultural urban groups; white blood cells are modelled after the police force from the same movies (aviator sunglasses included); and the “brain manager” is a Leonardo-ish old man with an impossibly long beard.

After having described the manifest content of the image, **the annotator must identify motifs relying on her/his personal experience and knowledge**. Once identified, **motifs can be annotated according to the annotator's personal view of their meaning**.



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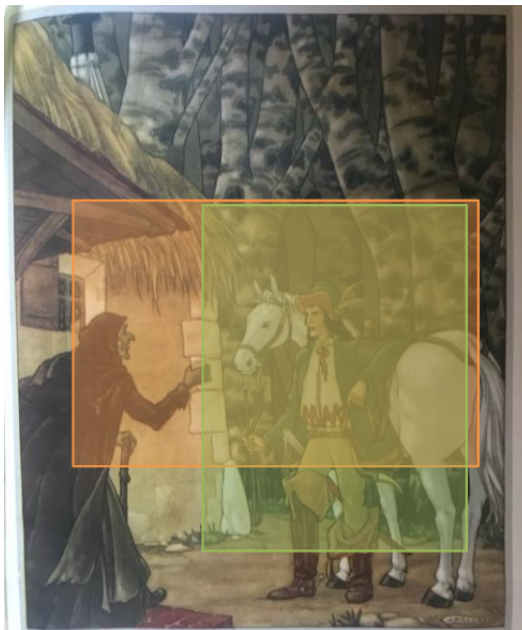
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For non-experts, identifying motifs may look difficult. One of the easiest ways to overcome the difficulty is to **start by asking who or what the manifest content is, and then provide evidence for the identification.** So, a non-expert annotator who looks at a portrait of a male human being may identify him as an honest and wise king because, in her/his personal experience, kings are depicted wearing crowns, honest people are often represented with soft facial features and reassuring look, and almost all the wise men she/he had seen in portraits or in other visual media wore long white beards. The same goes for non-human visual elements: a sword may tell the annotator that the king is strong, a scale that he is fair, a cross that he is pious. All these visual elements can be annotated.

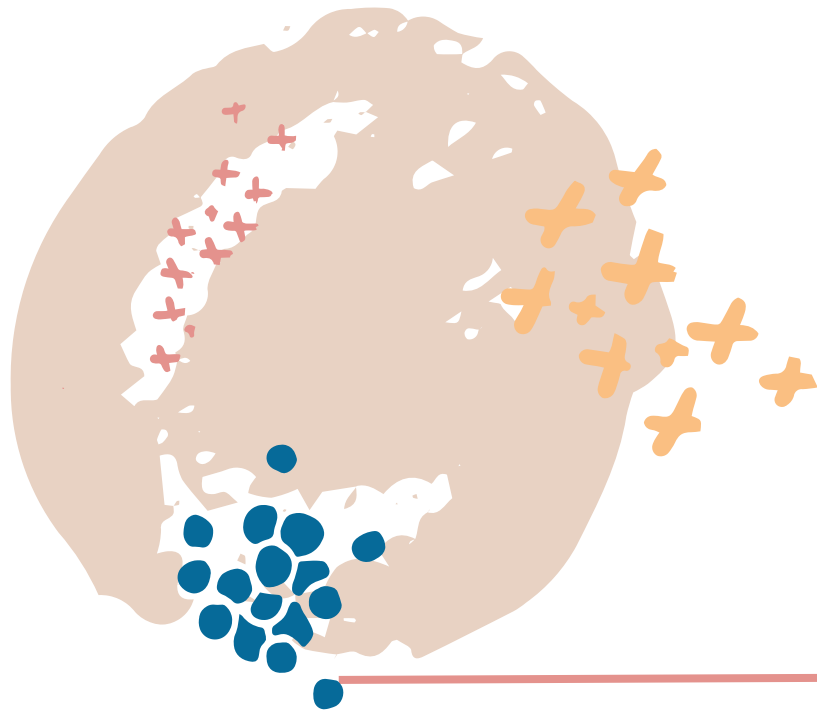


*A non-expert annotator identifies the human figure on the foreground as a "distressed woman" and annotates the corresponding visual motif with "Female oppression and Devaluation vs Female Emancipation and Autonomy."*

*A non-expert annotator identifies the human figure as a "queen" and annotate the entire visual motif with "Rule of Law".*



*A non-expert annotator identifies the human figure on the left as a "witch" and annotate the entire visual motif with "Good vs Evil". The figure in the center, together with the horse, is identified as "hero on a white horse" and is labeled as "Integrity".*



**Expert annotation:  
annotating symbols**

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Expert annotators are supposed to be able to **identify symbols as annotation objects**. This means that they should move beyond subjective feelings about motifs and try to **provide an iconic sense to the image**. In other words, while in the case of motifs the annotator was on the viewer's side of the meaning, in the case of symbols she/he will work on the author's side of the meaning.

**In expert annotation, motifs are associated with themes and concepts on the basis of literary, visual and/or contextual sources.** An expert annotator, for example, will identify the naked lady in Giulio Bonasone's engraving *Astrologia* (1544) as the Truth on the basis of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) and from the ubiquitous presence of the motif in allegories from the same period. The annotator will probably also note that, since the representation of Astrology/Astronomy as the Truth was not common, it can be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of a new attitude towards mathematical disciplines.

Since this kind of interpretation requires **familiarity with additional textual and non-textual resources**, an expert annotator, besides being knowledgeable about symbols, must also be **already familiar with or willing to further research into the main topic of the image, the general context within which the image was produced, and the specific context of its production**. Therefore, if we consider example 1, an expert annotator is someone who knows about the original *Medea*, the contemporary takes on *Medea*, and the 2014 London National Theatre's *Medea* production starring Helen McCrory.







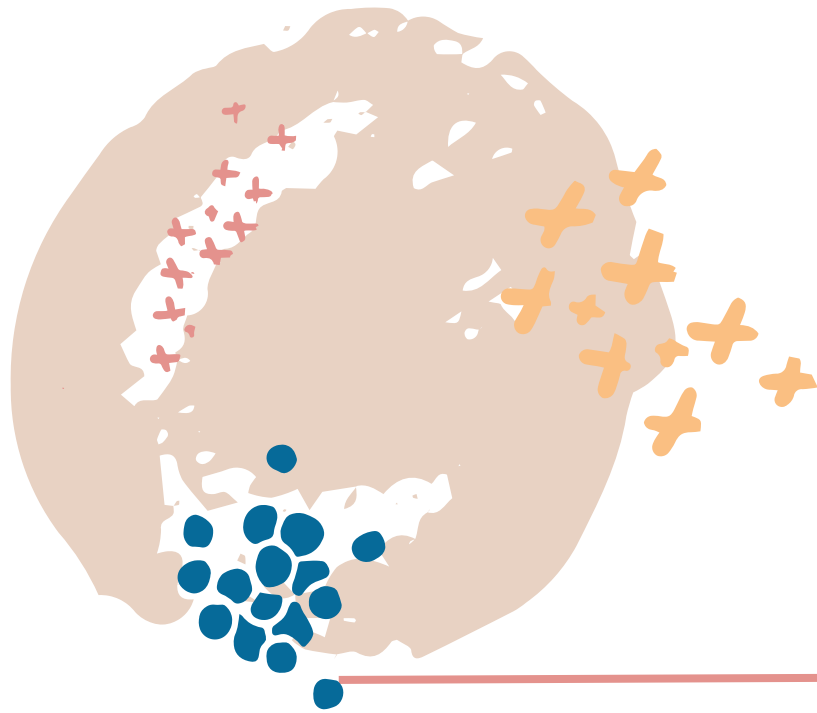
*Knowing that director Carrie Cracknell purposely replaced the chorus with dancers and noting that the dancers' performance somehow evokes the changes in women's body during labor, an expert annotator labels the group of human figures in the background with "Power of Motherhood".*



*An expert annotator labels the floral decorations on the napkin and on the dress of duchess Sibylla as "Science for Public Good" and "Female Emancipation and Autonomy" on the ground that they are representations of medicinal plants: in fact, Sybilla of Anhalt, after her husband Frederick died, retired in Leonberg, where she established, together with her friend Maria Andreae, an alchemical-pharmaceutical facility to produce medicine for the poor. She was so proud of this work that she had the artist portray her wearing images of medicinal plants as her own specific insígnia of power.*



*An expert annotator observes that the scene is a recurring motif in Vittorio Accornero De Testa's illustrations for children's books, as variations of it appear also in his work for "Pinocchio" and Perrault's selected works. Accornero exploited the motif both to speed up work by reusing the same model over and over, and to represent, through the opposition of white and black, the radical opposition between good and evil that was the main didascalic focus of Italian children literature of the 1940s-1950s. So, the annotator labels the interaction between the two figures as "Good vs Evil". Since it is known from the story that the glass contains poison, the annotator also labels the act of offering the beverage as "Deceptiveness vs. Honesty". As the recipient of the poison will manage to turn the deceit to his master's advantage, the visual motif is labeled with "Ingenuity."*



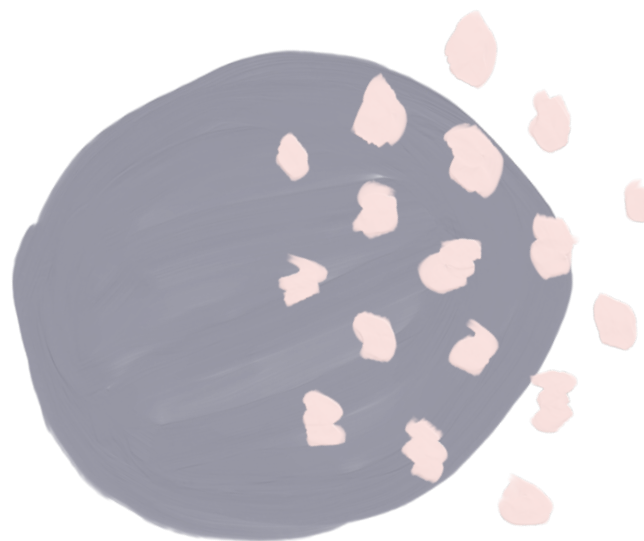
## Conclusions

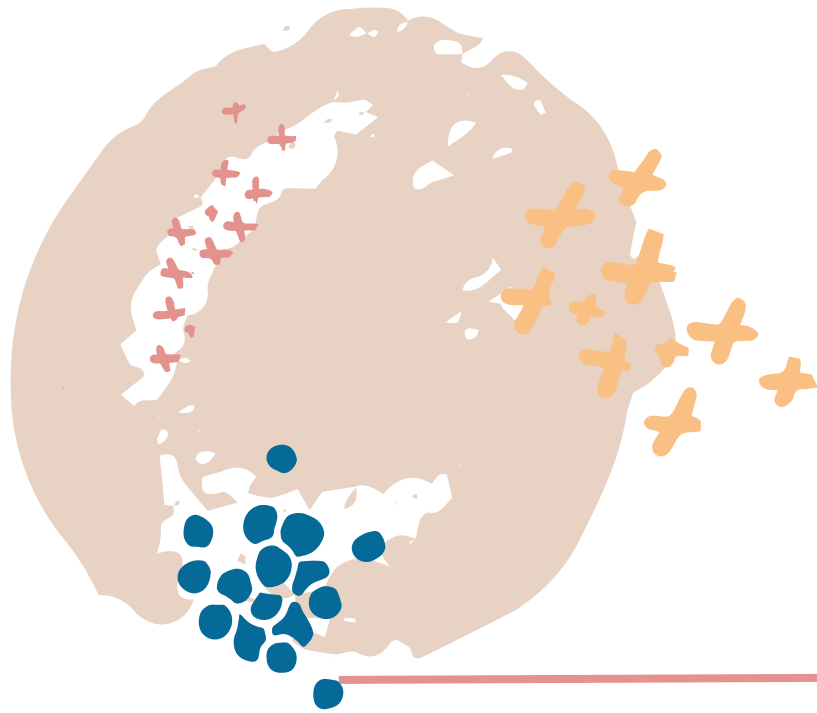
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**Identifying motifs and symbols ultimately rests on intuition.** When we look for them, we understand **images as mere representations of reality but rather as symbolic systems.** What particular symbolic system is embodied in a specific image, however, is up to us to decide, and this is mostly a matter of intuition. **In the interpretive process, subjective intuition plays a predominant role. Images speak differently to different audiences.** A landscape that looks “ominous” to a viewer may look “peaceful” to someone else.

Even when there is factual evidence, an interpretation remains a subjective reading. The depiction of Judas Iscariot turning his head and throwing a seductive look at the viewer in Sodoma’s Last Supper can be interpreted as a statement of the author’s disenchanted worldview on the one side (“we are all seduced by evil”) or as some sort of ironic “self-portrait” expressing his own character on the other, considering that, according to Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi got the nickname “Sodoma” (Sodomy) because of his lifestyle. It can also be interpreted as a combination of the two, as more often than not symbols and motifs convey multiple meanings and can be interpreted in several ways.





## References

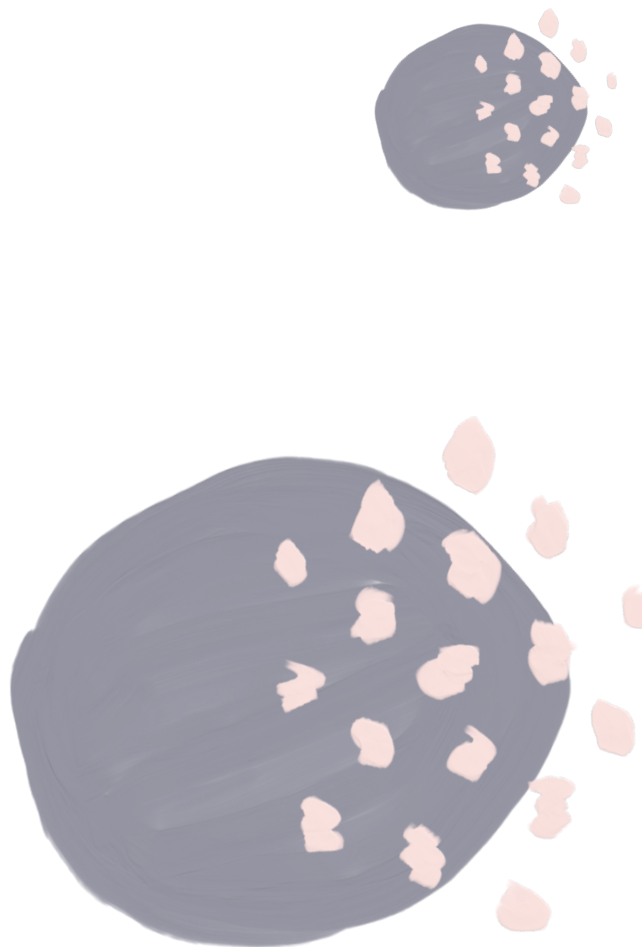
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