RETHINKING VISUAL NARRATIVES FROM ASIA

Intercultural and Comparative Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION
Expansive Approaches to Visual Narrative Analysis

Alexandra Green

Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia: Intercultural and Comparative Perspectives is the product of an international conference with the same title, hosted by the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Hong Kong on the 8th and 9th of June 2009. The conference brought together twenty scholars to discuss the nature and function of visual narratives, and to explore cross-cultural connections and interactions in the interdisciplinary field of art historical narratology. During the course of the two days, the vibrant lives and artistic inter-relationships of visual narratives across Asia, in all its cultural diversity, were revealed.[1] The result is a volume analyzing and comparing these narratives, which were produced over a time span of nearly three millennia and whose points of origin stretch across Asia in its broadest geographical sense.

The papers in *Rethinking Visual Narratives* cover topics from the first millennium BCE through the present day, testifying to the enduring significance of visual stories in shaping and affirming cultural practices in Asia. Taken together, these studies demonstrate how different cultures engage with narratives through text-image relationships, formats of construction, methods of narrativization, and varying forms of reception. The essays trace multiple trajectories, from the function of symbols and the salience of non-narrative material in generating stories to the relationships between static visual narratives and performance art. The essays point out a number of features relevant to narrative studies. First, they reveal the multiplicity of ways that images can be narrativized beyond representing temporal progression through a particular space.[2] In fact, almost all the papers indicate methods of narrativization where the significance of the imagery emerges from discourses beyond the traditional features of time, space, and actors, and this challenges previous notions based on Western art. Of particular prominence are the relationships between the intentions of the sponsors/artists (narrator) in the creation of visual narratives and how the images are received by viewers, which lead to a greater understanding of the Asian cultures that generated this material. Secondly, specific narrative formats produce similarities in visual narration from disparate cultures. For example, the disposition of

narratives in an architectural space usually relates to how the space is used. Thirdly, in reading these essays we can compare and contrast how narratives function in a variety of Asian contexts. In particular, local art forms advance our knowledge of regional iterations and theoretical boundaries. Finally, the papers in this volume illustrate the relevance of pictorial stories to the cultural traditions of Asia. The popularity of telling tales visually emphasizes the importance of the genre within Asia itself, regardless of whether it is discussed by the producers and receivers of the art form.[3] In the process of exploring specific instances of visual narratives in this volume, we can begin to see the features that are important for the analysis of Asian pictorial tales.

A short narrative of narrative theory

Narratives are found across cultures globally, yet scholarship began to focus on this "narrative turn" theoretically only in the mid-twentieth century. Critics such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Robert Scholes, and others have assessed the function of narratives in literary genres, yet before the 1980s there was limited exploration beyond structuralist patterns. When other disciplines, including art history, started to draw upon narratology as an analytical device, they too focused upon determining narrative structures, in particular how time was depicted. It is germane at this point to consider the range of recent conceptions of visual narrative theory. The question of how to define visual stories and how they function narratively is addressed by such art historians as Ira Westergård in "Which Narrative? The Case of the Narrative Subject in Fifteenth-Century Altarpieces," Julia K. Murray in her article "What is 'Chinese Narrative Illustration'?", Wendy Steiner in "Pictorial Narrativity," and Werner Wolf in his "Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and Its Applicability to the Visual Arts," among others.[4]

Westergård suggests that art historians have applied narrative theories to a diverse range of material in two different ways—"narrative as illustration and narrative as located in the representation itself."[5] Visual narratives have been analyzed either as an illustration of a text or as self-sufficient, the former making the work of art too derivative and the latter requiring a loose definition of "narrative."[6] Yet, this very "looseness" makes narrative theory a valuable analytical device, even if the parameters are undefined.

A number of scholars, including Gerald Prince, Wendy Steiner, and Werner Wolf have indicated how the field in the West has moved beyond the simple binary division of narrative versus non-narrative. They emphasize that narrativity is a continuum, with narratives being considered "stronger" or "weaker" depending on which elements they exhibit.[7] Wolf believes that the question is to what extent visual material works as a narrative. In plotting narrativity on a continuum from strongly narrative to non-narrative, he defines the core traits of narrativity as comprising three areas. These include experientiality (perception of time), representationality (creation of a recognizable storyworld), and the purpose of the imagery. Thematic and compositional unity, chronology, causality, and teleology are among these fundamental narrative strategies. "Strong" narratives include all or most of these elements. "Weaker" narratives infer chronology, causality, and teleology, rather than depicting them explicitly. "Narrative reference" is even weaker, as it lacks temporality. Beyond this are "non-narratives" where there is no specific purpose or causal connection between separate states.[8]

Steiner defines visual narratives along similar lines, viewing narrative qualities as strongest in images portraying specific persons engaged in a particular action.[9] Narrative components include orientation (time, place, persons, and activity/situation) and temporality (which is part of all definitions of narrative, but which she does not consider sufficient to identify a narrative).[10] She argues that narrative has a variety of forms of cohesion, depending on sequence and configurational qualities, and it is cohesion (the continuity created by a repeated subject) that is a fundamental feature because it enables the narrative conclusion.[11] Yet, narrative needs something further, and that is a connection with experienced phenomena, which enables the viewer to relate to and therefore interpret the material.[12]

Both Steiner and Wolf's arguments accord with Marie-Laure Ryan's concept of narrativity as a "fuzzy set" with numerous potential characteristics. Some of these elements, such as temporality, are considered by Ryan to form a "core" and are essential to a narrative; under such a description, a narrative will be defined depending on which characteristics are present. Although it is clear that there is no consensus on what constitutes the key elements, plotting visual narratives on a continuum enables scholars to demonstrate the significance of aspects beyond the traditional "core."[13] Of particular importance is the shift from assessing the "narrative" features of an image to considering its construction for reception. This is not a new approach. In his assessment of literary narratives, Roland Barthes proposed that the reader/viewer activated five different codes during his or her interaction with a narrative, thereby placing the observer in the foreground theoretically.[14] Focusing on the ways images are narrativized for reception shows how images provoke responses within their cultural context, which fruitfully extends this model to the study of Asian narrative.

A brief narrative of Asian narratives

While studies of visual narration in the West extend back to the first half of the twentieth century, narratology in Asian art history only began in the late 1980s and 1990s. At first, analyses were structural in nature. Scholarship focused on the building blocks of visual narratives—how images narrate stories, and whether or not they actually do so. For example, Pao-chen Chen, in an article titled "Time and Space in Chinese Narrative Paintings of Han and the Six Dynasties," defined the presentation of time and space visually and discussed the reasons behind the changes in these relationships over time.[15] Vidya Dehejia, in a number of articles and her *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India*, identified eight ways in which time is represented spatially in Indian art.[16] Her work provoked a number of responses in the Asian art historical field. In his article "Narrative as Icon: The Jataka Stories in Ancient Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture," Robert Brown rejected not only Dehejia's categories, but also the idea that the visual imagery of stories in Southeast Asia was intended to function narratively at all.[17] Quitman Phillips in his study of Japanese screens, "The Price Shuten Doji Screens: A Study of Visual Narrative," explored the application of Dehejia's narrative categories, but found that they did not fit the complexity and diversity of Japanese art. Indeed, he questions the need for strict categorization, and argues that Dehejia's modes hide the nuances produced in Japanese art, where causal, hierarchical, and other types of associations are also significant. These components, however, are not wholly evident in a straightforward analysis of the relationship between time and space.[18]

In his "Narrative Turn in the Humanities" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, Martin Kreiswirth wrote, "The narrative turn encompasses more and more disciplines concerned not just with story as story but with storied forms of knowledge."[19] As Ryan, Steiner, Wolf, Murray, and Phillips demonstrate in their different ways, narrative must be conceived broadly and flexibly for it to be useful in exploring visual narratives through time and space. Murray begins her article titled "What is 'Chinese Narrative Illustration'?" by asking questions about how to define narrative illustration. She proposes defining Chinese narrative illustration as referring to a story "… where 'story' means the presentation of one or more events that occur in a sequence of time and bring about a change in the condition of a specific character."[20] She goes on to say that the imagery must have a specific purpose, particularly that it "… record, affirm, inform, instruct, indoctrinate, proselytize, propagandize, or even entertain …"[21] According to her, the third aspect to consider is the mode of presentation, created by the interaction of three variables. These are format (the location of the image—on a wall, a vase, a fan, etc.—which can affect how the narrative is presented), compositional structure (the arrangement of the story in space, and here, Murray considers a modified version of Dehejia's theory useful), and conceptual approach (the general relationship between a textual or oral story and its depiction). Murray suggests that the latter aspect enables an image to function as a reminder of a story without depicting specific events from it. She concludes that there are three main combinations of these variables, and here she moves

far beyond Dehejia's classificatory modes, expanding the basic approach of assessing the relationship between time and space to include the content and purpose of the imagery.[22] Murray's article, like those of Steiner and Wolf, is paradigmatic of the direction of visual narrative studies, where many factors are acknowledged to coalesce to form pictorial stories.

The re-thinking of visual narratives in Asia

The papers in *Rethinking Visual Narratives* generally take core narrative elements as given and explore the pictorial narrativity of imagery, demonstrating means of conveying narrative in visual images beyond conventional text-image, time-space, and story-discourse relationships. The complexity of visual narratives in Asian art demands that we go beyond defining what constitutes a visual narrative structurally, to addressing how they are actualized and utilized in specific ways by different cultures through time. The papers here reveal the variety of ways that images interact with narrative, shaping a broad approach applicable in the analysis of images, particularly those from non-Western contexts. Although this position is viewed critically by some theoreticians, the concept of narrative theory as an analytical tool does not depend on narrative being strictly defined,[23] which would drastically restrict the possible discourse in cultural terms. Rather, its features expand to reveal the way diverse peoples and cultures tell stories. This is the narrative "fuzzy set" applied as an interpretive resource.

The representation of stories in art as illustrations of texts, references to texts, and as new pictorial versions of a tale in varied cultural contexts indicates the importance of narrative for expressing ideas. This publication does not attempt to define the term "visual narrative" explicitly, but through the assessment of a variety of narrative expressions addresses many of the issues being currently considered in the field. The papers in *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia* explore multiple trajectories in narrative studies by assessing them in Asian contexts, and show the range and depth of visual narratives' cultural significance across a vast continent.

The contributions are organized culturally, chronologically, and thematically. The East Asian material forms the largest group and is placed first. Dore J. Levy's paper on vignettism is one of the most theoretical papers, and, as it establishes parameters for viewing the subsequent Chinese and Japanese narratives, is the commencing paper after Julia K. Murray's keynote address. The Chinese papers are largely arranged chronologically, yet this also neatly develops specific themes. Thus, the literati products seen in Murray's, Levy's, and Shane McCausland's papers are followed by Yeewan Koon's discussion of images that overturn the world view of the Chinese intelligentsia. Zhang Bao's imagery, as assessed by Catherine Stuer, is another unusual rethinking of traditional Chinese artistic production. Yonca Kösebay Erkan's paper on an Ottoman manuscript is presented between two papers on East Asia because it relates thematically to both of them in discussing the narrativization of seemingly non-narrative material. The papers that address narratives in architectural spaces, most of which concern South and Southeast Asia, are grouped together and arranged chronologically, except for Dominik Bonatz's paper on Assyrian and Khmer relief carvings. This has been placed with Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate's contribution and Mary Beth Heston's paper because all three address issues of performance in visual narratives.

Murray's keynote address sets the stage by describing the state of the discipline and indicating that studies of visual narratives in their local context, rather than within a more theory-based environment, would benefit art historical inquiry, in part by encouraging closer connections with other disciplines. Her analysis of the Chinese text, *The Emperor's Mirror Illustrated and Discussed* (*Dijian tushuo*), dating to the late Ming dynasty of the 1570s, looks at a series of illustrated historical anecdotes, the initial purpose of which was to provide an admonitory lesson for an emperor. As the pictures are reproduced over time and in different cultures, including France, we see how significant changes in text-image relationships, conventions of visuality, methods of narrativization, social belief systems, the connections between the imagery and contextual material, and crucially, the role of the viewer, have an impact on the text's repro-

duction and on the uses to which it is put. The reader/viewer's cultural context is clearly an essential feature in determining how the story was both plotted and received. This contextual construction, as well as the purpose of compiling the pictures as a group, narrativizes the depictions, which theory scholars would classify as being low on the narrative gradient.

The qualities that narrativize images are not necessarily a universal standard that can be applied through time and across cultures, as we see in a number of papers in this volume, particularly those on Chinese narrative. Dore J. Levy argues that a fundamental principle underlying Chinese narrative illustration is vignettism, which applies across genres and media. She proposes that there are two main structures—episodic and integrative—that underlie this principle. The former advances the narrative through a series of episodes connected chronologically, rather than by cause and effect. This reminds viewers of their outsider status. The integrative structure, however, invites the viewer into the experience, combining text and image within a temporal and spatial progression. As it is the integrated succession of tableaux that characterizes Chinese narratives, she concludes that "the vignette is the form of expression which allows perception of time through experience, and suspension of time through lyric transcendence." This is a redefinition of narrative for the Chinese cultural context. Here, the structure is shaped by connective themes and the integration of the lyric moment with time and space. In such instances, the roles of the narrator and, as with Murray's discussion of *The Emperor's Mirror*, the receiver/viewer are essential. Levy's concept of vignettism in Chinese art forms a foundation for the construction of narrative sequences that superficially appear to lack conventional, core narrative characteristics.

Looking at artistic response to societal values, Shane McCausland asks how the process by which the artists of two handscrolls from China and Japan around 1600 turn texts into visual narratives reveals social norms and values, as well as commercial pressures. He assesses how the two paintings portray shared boundaries of East Asian narrative scroll painting in the early modern period. Dependent on patrons and their interests, the artists constructed visual narratives to transmit particular concepts to culturally literate viewers, with social presuppositions thus constraining both the painters and the viewers. The "romanticizations, embellishments, displacements, and corruptions" indicate the weight of the discourse in re-telling well-known stories. Such elements as the construction of a visual loop to indicate the continuing anguish of grief and the connection of scenes to emphasize feelings implied in the written text contribute to the narrativization of the imagery by reinforcing specific concepts and reaching beyond spatio-temporal concerns. In keeping with Levy's ideas on vignettism, these theoretically strong narratives that reveal clear story progressions thus indicate that a variety of factors beyond the "core" contribute to the construction of a narrative.

While the methods of narrativization in visual images are conservative in Murray's, Levy's, and McCausland's studies, following contemporary cultural requirements, Yeewan Koon provides an example where traditional values are rejected and subverted. The artist Su Renshan, working in the mid-nineteenth-century Qing dynasty, drew upon novels, vernacular tales, and classical histories and reshaped them through images and text to expose the corruption and emptiness of Chinese literati culture. Su dispensed with spatial and temporal constructions and created complex, multivalent images. His opposition to traditional texts and stories created new ways of narrativizing seemingly non-narrative imagery, and the textual material included in the paintings proves essential in revealing the significance of the imagery. Su played an increasingly active authorial role during his artistic career, controlling the viewer's response and giving himself a strong presence in the paintings. Ultimately, the artist's presence narrativizes the paintings by inverting the storyworld of the Chinese literati and arguing against it. The pictures project out into society, pushing for change in the future, so that the visual imagery is the starting point for a larger story. The "actual or attempted change of situation" that Wolf deems important in visual narrative representations is situated beyond the borders of Su's paintings,[24] with his imagery framing and focalizing the social commentary.

Like Koon's work, Catherine Stuer's study of Zhang Bao's pictorial travelogue from the late Qing dynasty of the early nineteenth century reveals new relationships between text and image. Zhang Bao's six volumes, consisting of extensive landscape scenes, deliberately set out to be a narrative, following the conventions of Chinese book and literary culture, but, uniquely, use images as the body of each tale and written material as the paratextual frame. As with Su Renshan's imagery, Zhang Bao's draws upon and is expanded by the accompanying textual material, some parts written by the author, but others by friends and colleagues. The latters' interpretations of his imagery indicate potential new directions and significances for the pictorial sequences, which cause the author to rethink the plot of the narrative, and, in subsequent books, to shift the teleological thrust accordingly. In contrast to Su Renshan, Zhang Bao welcomed audience participation in his work; his is an interactive authorship. What begins as straightforward narrative development of an individual's travels is transformed and expanded into an exploration of the relationship between self and cosmos. Zhang Bao activated his illustrations of Chinese landscapes through a sequential arrangement in the books, his often implied presence as an author and protagonist, and the shifting purposes of the series. The story occurs through a sequence of pictures that often lack a perceptible protagonist, indicating that visual material functions narratively even with only an implied actor who experiences change, a feature seen also in the Ottoman *Beyan-ı Menazil* manuscript discussed by Yonca Kösebay Erkan.

In the *Beyan-ı Menazil*, non-narrative material, such as buildings, rivers, and plants, also tells a story—in this case, Sultan Süleyman I's first military campaign of 940–42 AH (1533–36 CE) against the Safavids which resulted in the fall of Baghdad. The book appears to have been a gift for Süleyman, and it was clearly planned as a source of information, a travelogue, and a celebratory artifact. Although organized sequentially, the illustrations to the text are devoid of human representation, and yet, Erkan argues, through the depictions of urban centers, topography, and the flora of the regions that the army traversed, the artist Matrakçı Nasuh unfolds the sultan's successful progress. Changes in the number of imperial tents indicate the meeting of armies, and the presence (or not) of fruit and leaves tells the viewer at what season the army occupied a specific location. Although they are elements traditionally considered to represent a hiatus in a story, the details of the pictures become the narrators of an historical event. The pictures accompanying a textual document of a military campaign could be construed as a simple illustration of a text, yet the lack of anthropomorphic figures and an implied protagonist argues against this identification, as does the fact that the images report on more than just the campaign. A generalized manner of illustrating specific building types and the use of floral types to portray topography transform the pictures into a guide to what a traveler could expect to find in the region. Such images were also politicized by Nasuh through his representation of architecture as generally Ottoman in style. Thus, as the campaign is read through its details, so too is the foregone conclusion of the sultan's success.

In producing the *Beyan-ı Menazil*, Nasuh shapes non-narrative material into a narrative, and in Japan, non-narrative images also played such a role. Sarah E. Thompson explores how the expansive classic, *The Tale of Genji*, was distilled into a set of highly codified visual symbols, printed on playing cards, and transformed into a popular game, related to incense-identification and earlier shell-matching games. The user would have needed familiarity with *The Tale of Genji* to participate in the activities, yet when playing, he or she would also have drawn on the imagery and discussions with other participants to develop and display knowledge of the book. Since they are largely iconic, the images are clearly "weak" as visual narratives, yet they present an implied narrative of the expanding production and consumption of textual stories across Japanese literate society aided by forms of visual codification. Initially, the original text was essential in the reception of these visual mnemonics, but eventually, the Genji poems and pictures so permeated society that they could be incorporated into visual and literary parodies of the classical tradition. Thus emerges a cycle of text to image as visual clue and back to text or expansion into a "stronger" visual narrative, making reception by the viewer

paramount in the comprehension and narrativization of the visual material found on the Genji cards. The relationship between text and image is thus highly complex with a familiar story translated into codes that over time promoted new interpretations of the original story.

Images that tell stories also adorn architectural spaces in innumerable iconographic permutations. Six of the papers in this volume address the ways such narratives were received and contributed to the significance of architectural spaces in which they were housed. Playing an essential role in narrative construction, donors and patrons commissioned the embellishment of temples, caves, and palaces with pictorial stories to create an auspicious environment, and the prevalence of such imagery indicates its importance across Asia from an early period. These are often strong narratives with a clear protagonist, temporal sequence, and purpose, yet they are frequently depicted and arranged in ways that emphasize other features which narrativize the imagery. Disposition within space adds an extra dimension that can convey ideas to the viewer. In a number of these papers, the argument is made that spatial form, rather than chronological or causal principles, is a major organizing principle, with specific themes determining the arrangement of the story. Here, the cohesion and coherence deemed necessary for narrativity emerge from the connections presented in the imagery, yet this requires the active participation of the viewer to make linkages.[25] Architecture thus contributes an additional semiotic layer to the analysis of narratives, and draws the viewer into the narrative production process.

Sonya S. Lee analyzes the rise of pictorial nirvana narratives in Chinese cave temples from the late seventh to the early eighth centuries. The relationship between the arrangement of the visual narratives and the architecture was carefully designed by the sponsors to communicate their religious ideas, as well as to indicate their support of Empress Wu Zetian's regime. Lee argues that the arrangement of the stories within the caves did not follow the storyline as it was generally known, but was determined by the pathway of the devotees through the cave and how they encountered its contents. Of course, progress through the space was deliberately guided to ensure that the devotee absorbed particular ideas linked with the religion and politics of the period. Episodes associated with the Buddha's nirvana not only communicated his supernatural abilities and his filial piety, but also indicated the next stage in the process of viewing the cave. While the methods of organizing the scenes elucidated the stories in one way, the overall arrangement narrativized the material in another and illuminated other significations. Spatial relationships in this case superseded temporal progression in transmitting ideas to viewers.

Spatial relationships at the Saivite temple of Candi Loro Jonggrang in central Java not only produce new narratives, but they also trace *yantra* diagrams within the complex and provide evidence of network connections through the specific arrangement of narratives and imagery on the buildings. The carvings represent the epic tales, the *Ramayana* and the *Kresnayana*, and, due to the complexity of the material, Mary-Louise Totton proposes that scientific network theory is a fruitful way of understanding how the images relate to each other. In analyzing how specific iconographic features form multiple "hubs" embedded in the visual narratives, Totton explores the links between these centers, showing how they generate additional meanings and bring less prominent parts of the iconographic program to the fore. She demonstrates that complex coding enables the site to function as "a testament to its period and patrons," despite sustaining damage over its millennium-long history. Her findings parallel Thompson's analysis of the Genji code game that in one way sustained the original text over hundreds of years and enabled multiple expansions of the story in a variety of media. In the Javanese context, the text-image relationship is less important than the overall construction of Loro Jonggrang and its dense methods of narrativization. The complexity of the iconographic program suggests that good comprehension of the imagery would have been limited to an educated few who had a thorough knowledge of numerology, symbols, myths, literature, and folktales. The restriction of physical and intellectual access can be seen in other narratives here. The Assyrian sculptures discussed in Dominik Bonatz's paper and the Keralan murals in Mary Beth Heston's paper are both located in areas the general

population would not have been allowed to enter, and the handscroll and album-leaf format of many of the Chinese narratives in this volume would have made them inaccessible to most.

The narrative manipulation of space for political purposes also reveals the nature of donors and their intentions. Charlotte Galloway focuses on the emergence of narrative art in central Burma during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, linking this phenomenon to the arrival of Buddhist texts. As sources of information about the Jataka stories, the life of Gotama Buddha, and the Buddhas of the Past became available, they were incorporated into iconographic programs in Pagan's early temples. While the texts were a source of information, the manner in which the stories were represented stylistically corresponds to that of Pala India, and the imagery was created through the juxtapositioning of monoscenic depictions of the stories. The images and texts were manipulated politically by the Burmese kings to support specific religious concepts, and the disposition of these various stories in temples politically narrativized them to demonstrate the links between merit, *karma*, kingship, and Buddhahood, bolstering belief in the kings' future enlightenment.

My own essay compares and contrasts similar subject matters, consisting of the Jataka stories, the life of Gotama, cosmology, and the Buddhas of the Past, and the variant disposition of mural paintings in Thai and Burmese temples of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. It examines the salient role of the donors in the narrative arrangement. The dissimilar political intentions of the Thai and Burmese sponsors, in part a result of their different social statuses (royal for the former and provincial for the latter), had an impact on the spaces utilized for the display of wall paintings. Thai murals were housed in large congregational spaces, while the Burmese murals adorned small temples primarily constructed for the purpose of enshrining an image and individual worship. These dissimilar spaces in turn mandated diverse roles for the imagery, as indicated by the disparate organizations of the visual narratives themselves. Burmese narratives created an environment that focuses on the religious needs of individuals, whereas Thai murals emphasized cosmology and the defeat of Mara with large-scale depictions portraying general and particular political ideas. The intent of the sponsors thus played an essential role in the political and social narrativization of the imagery.

Performativity plays a role in the presentation of visual narratives, as the final three papers demonstrate. In such instances, the imagery not only presents but also acts on the concepts depicted.[26] Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate's article shows how a painting becomes part of the recreation of the very story it represents. Mary Beth Heston demonstrates how murals can use features essential to the performing arts, and thus become a dramatic event themselves. And the relief sculptures of the Assyrian and Khmer kingdoms affirmed political worldviews by mirroring royal activities, as discussed in Dominik Bonatz's paper.

The sponsors of historical sculptures in ancient Assyria and the Khmer empire, particularly during the reign of Jayavarman VII, commissioned imagery that reflected their distinctive methods of governance. Bonatz describes how the disposition and internal organization of reliefs of hunting, warfare, building activities, and the king illustrate the necessities of royal legitimacy and ideologies associated with kingship, and record the achievements of specific rulers in both polities. Limited access to the palace and temple interiors of ancient Assyria ensured that the narratives were the exclusive preserve of an elite group and acted as devices for self-affirmation. Bonatz suggests that, in contrast, the historical reliefs of the Khmer were more public and showed a very different type of kingship—one that displays the king as a "unifier of the state and guarantor of its productivity," as well as an essential patron of events. He argues that the structures of these narratives contribute to a better comprehension of how they emerged from their religio-political contexts and were agents in the manipulation of power. While they shared some formats and methods of narrativization, the imagery of the visual narratives from these two regions was constructed to be viewed quite differently by the observer.

While the arrangement of the murals of the *Ramayana* epic in the Mattanceri palace in Kerala, India emphasizes a martial theme, the paintings themselves focus on performative features to evoke specific audience responses. Mary Beth Heston describes performance in eighteenth-century Kerala as an important literary mode that portrayed and celebrated warfare, competition, and heroism. These performances defined kingship for rulers of the region, and in themselves became a means of inter-court competition. *Rasa* provides an aesthetic vocabulary that is shared across a number of art forms, and Heston argues here that the *vira rasa* (heroic, active, vigorous) is promoted in the Mattanceri murals because of the scenes chosen, the way in which space was allocated, and the expressions and body positions of the story's illustrated characters. *Alamkara*, the concept of embellishment and ornament in all its senses, was also essential to the comprehension of the detailed painted compositions in the Mattanceri palace. Heston thus demonstrates that it is possible to incorporate aesthetic concepts associated with performance into static images in efforts to elicit viewer responses similar to those produced by dramatic performance. To experience the paintings fully, viewers needed to be familiar with visual cues from Kathakali performance and the aesthetic conventions of *rasa*. Relating to the use of pictures during story recitations known in India and China,[27] elements of performance not only featured as essential aspects for understanding the visual narratives, but were fundamental in the production of the wall paintings at the palace.

The physical participation of visual narratives in performance can be seen in Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate's article on the painted cloth scrolls of the Vessantara Jataka, which are used ceremonially in Northeast Thailand and Laos. As part of the Bun Phra Wet festival, participants carry the lengthy scroll from the forest back to the village, transforming their position from audience to one of active participant in the construction of the narrative. Gotama Buddha becomes "present" for those involved in the event, and his life and dispensation are thus linked with the actors. The merging of narrator and subject invites interpretations beyond the perfection of generosity associated with the Vessantara Jataka in the realms of Buddhist practice that ensure people's rebirth into the future Buddha's community. The re-creation of the city to receive Vessantara constitutes an apology for misunderstanding his actions and banishing him, and Lefferts and Cate suggest that this reconstructs the relationships between ruler and ruled, in turn reaffirming the villagers' loyalty towards the central government of Thailand. While the imagery on the scroll presents a sequential re-telling of parts of the Vessantara Jataka, the method of narrativization actually lies in the use and reception of the painting.

Conclusion

Analysis of Asian visual narratives contributes to general theoretical discussions by demonstrating that there are more permutations constituting a narrative than previously supposed. The papers in *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia* reveal the necessity of considering narratives more broadly than has been done in the past. Narrative definitions need to be expanded to address the complexity and diversity of narratives beyond the confines of Western art upon which much narrative theory rests, and accepting variable features as creating narrativity is essential in examining visual narratives globally.

Both "strong" and "weak" narratives in Asia show us that telling stories visually is a vital part of Asian cultures and provide us with a greater understanding of what is important across this broad landscape. In particular, there is a focus on meaning above and beyond the creation of a "strong" narrative. The papers by Lefferts and Cate, Heston, Bonatz, Totton, Lee, McCausland, and myself present narratives that contain a clear protagonist experiencing change over time that results in a new, specific condition. Thus, Rama wins the war against Ravana and regains his wife, Sita; the Buddha perfects the virtues and becomes enlightened; the king demonstrates his power by defeating his enemies; and Chinese emperors suffer grief and loss due to excessive devotion to women. Despite the fact that these are "strong" narratives, however, it is not the transformation of the situation through time and space that primarily narrativizes the

imagery and makes it significant to the local viewer, but the different means by which the imagery presents a clear purpose—the "plot" according to Paul Ricoeur.[28] "Weak" narratives lack a strong sense of temporality, chronology, unity, action, or storyworld because we cannot see a clear progression and change through time. Yet, as the papers by Murray, Levy, Stuer, Koon, Thompson, Galloway, and Erkan demonstrate, these characteristics are not essential in transmitting a narrative concept to the viewer. Instead, an evident sense of cohesion, in part emerging from the audience's use, generates the necessary teleology.

As a group, the papers in *Rethinking Visual Narratives from Asia* provide a series of vignettes drawn from the visual narratives of Asia, revealing the multiplicity of ways in which pictorial stories have been conceived, produced, received, and performed across the region. As Greg M. Thomas observed in his conclusion to the conference, the papers offer a cross-cultural perspective to the discipline of narrative studies, and reveal the great potential for visual storytelling that extends across time and borders. His contribution here indicates how the multiple ways of presenting and viewing visual narratives reify the emphasis on audience perception, interpretation, and response that is highly relevant for narrative studies today. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson warn against the easy generalization of societal viewing expertise, arguing that any analysis of reception must include the degree to which audiences understand the narrative codes.[29] Yet, the variant methods of narrativizing imagery represented in this volume reveal the perceived need to guide and shape the viewer's reception of the visual material and the numerous ways in which this is accomplished in Asia. Most of the images presented here strongly direct viewers towards a specific understanding of the pictorial material, with little room for debate from those with shared cultural backgrounds. This creates fairly rigid relationships between the pictures and audience, although the spectators' participation in these prescribed viewings is still required. The manner in which narratives shape their viewers' responses is clearly a critical part of assessing Asian visual narratives. However, Thompson's discussion of *The Tale of Genji*, in which the visual chapter codes gave rise to new narratives, Stuer's analysis of the changing purposes of Zhang Bao's pictorial books, and Murray's presentation of the ideological alterations of *The Emperor's Mirror* over time and across cultures demonstrate that not all narratives close off audience participation in the construction of narrative purpose. Viewers' actions and responses remain an essential feature in creating and sustaining the full narrative significance of the imagery.

In sum, this juxtaposition of diachronically and synchronically disparate narratives will enable theoreticians to define further a narrative gradient by expanding our knowledge of Asian cultures. Asian art historical analyses give us local specificity within broad criteria of what constitutes a narrative, drawing on interdisciplinary material so that narrative art is seen as part of culturally salient perception and experience.

Notes

1. The regions represented in the papers were not deliberately orchestrated. Papers were chosen on the basis of their narrative approach and thematic relationship to other submissions. This has resulted in some areas of Asia not being represented. However, it is not possible in a volume of this size to explore all the particulars of such a vast region over extended periods of time. Here, papers on the particular must stand for the general.
2. Marie-Laure Ryan separates "narratives" from images possessing "narrativity." Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 347.
3. Julia K. Murray, "What is 'Chinese Narrative Illustration'?" *The Art Bulletin* 80, 4 (1998): 602.
4. Ira Westergård, "Which Narrative? The Case of the Narrative Subject in Fifteenth-Century Altarpieces," *COLLeGIUM* 1 (2006): 60–83; Murray, "Chinese Narrative Illustration"; Wendy Steiner, "Pictorial Narrativity," in *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 145–77; Werner Wolf, "Narrative and Narrativity: A Narratological Reconceptualization and Its Applicability to the Visual Arts," *Word and Image* 19, 3 (2003): 180–97.
5. Westergård, "Which Narrative?" 62.
6. Ibid.
7. Steiner, "Pictorial Narrativity," 147; Wolf, "Narrative and Narrativity," 189; Gerald Prince, "Surveying Narratology," in *What is Narratology?: Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory*, eds. Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 46.
8. Wolf, "Narrative and Narrativity," 184–93.
9. Steiner, "Pictorial Narrativity," 147–48.

10. Ibid., 149.
11. Ibid., 146, 154–55.
12. Ibid., 146, 155–56.
13. Ryan, "Narrative," 345.
14. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). For a summary, see Mieke Bal, "Narrative and the Visual and Literary Arts," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
15. Pao-chen Chen, "Time and Space in Chinese Narrative Paintings of Han and the Six Dynasties," in *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, eds. Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 239–81.
16. Vidya Dehejia, "On Modes of Visual Narration in Early Buddhist Art," *Art Bulletin* 72, 3 (1990): 374–92; "Narrative Modes in Ajanta Cave 17: A Preliminary Study," *South Asian Studies* 7 (1991): 45–57; *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art: Visual Narratives of India* (New Delhi: Munshiran Manoharlal Publishers, 1997).
17. Robert L. Brown, "Narrative as Icon: The Jàtaka Stories in Ancient Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 64–109.
18. Quitman Phillips, "The Price Shuten Dōji Screens: A Study of Visual Narrative," *Ars Orientalis* 26 (1996): 1–21.
19. Martin Kreiswirth, "Narrative Turn in the Humanities," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 380.
20. Murray, "Chinese Narrative Illustration," 608.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 612.
23. Prince, "Surveying Narratology," 1.
24. Wolf, "Narrative and Narrativity," 186.
25. David J. Mickelsen, "Spatial Form," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 555.
26. "Performativity," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 421.
27. Victor Mair, *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1988).
28. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 170–76.
29. Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73, 2 (1991): 186.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Narrative Visualization and Embodied Meaning

Greg M. Thomas

Twenty years ago, when I took a course on Chinese narrative art taught by Wu Hung, the theoretical texts we read were based primarily on Western art. They were also heavy on taxonomy, describing and classifying the several main ways by which images create a sequence of actions: episodic, as in comic strips or Giotto's *Arena Chapel*; continuous or cyclical, as in a handscroll or the frieze of the Parthenon; momentary or monoscenic, as in the *Laocoön* or David's *Oath of the Horatii*; and a few other less common solutions. Science often begins with taxonomy, but good science uses it to interpret cause and effect, helping people understand processes of interactivity in time and space—how a mural or scroll functioned in a particular cultural ritual, for example, and what meanings people made of it. What the essays in this collection now offer to the science of narrative art is a greatly expanded understanding of the multi-layered *processes* through which narrative imagery can interact with other images, with texts, and with people across time and space to create cultural meaning. Analyzing cases all across Asia, these writings advance our understanding by comparing a range of narrative models from a variety of particular local contexts, by testing Eurocentric theories of narrative art against multiple non-Western examples, and by expanding the notion of narrative itself from a one-dimensional attribute of subject matter (the story, content, or intended meaning of an image) to a multi-dimensional process involving perception, interpretation, and responsive action. My summary reflections, rooted in my own Western art historical perspective, thus emphasize two main points. One is how these writings stretch the malleable boundaries of narrativity in art, not only within their narrow regional and chronological traditions but in comparison to other traditions across Asia and Euramerica. The other is the essential importance of examining not just narrative typology and narrative content, but the varied processes of viewing and responding that particular narrative forms engender. Narrative is an especially powerful, universal mode of cultural communication, and the special power of narrative imagery is

evident in the physical, emotional, and ideological impact it exerts on its viewers both at its point of origin and beyond.

Visualizing and viewing narrative imagery

At a fundamental descriptive level, these essays confirm that in Asian traditions as in European traditions, the use of imagery to illustrate religious, historical, and literary stories has been a major, perhaps even dominant, cultural practice from the earliest periods of civilization to the present. They also confirm that much of this narrative art conforms to one of the standard modes of visually representing sequential action. It seems astonishing that the arrangement of episodic scenes in a more or less rectangular architectural frame is as prevalent in Asian as in Western art. On the other hand, Asian art has a greater number and variety of such episodic, multi-scenic formats than Western art, as well as far more examples of continuous scroll and frieze formats. Tellingly, almost none of the papers gathered here deals with the format most common in Western art, what might be called the Laocoön paradigm, a single-scene action painting or sculpture that illustrates a poignant moment excerpted from an extended text or event.[1] This suggests not any great difference in the function or importance of narrative in east and west, but rather a special dominance in Western art-making of the framed easel painting. Any unified understanding of narrative art must equally encompass those formats dominant in Asia, and the essays here help us understand the diversity and complexity of such formats.

It helps first to distinguish three dimensions of narrativity in art. There is narrative *content*, most often a story or event that is being illustrated. There are narrative modes of *representation*, with an apparent sequential development from a beginning to an end. And there are narrative modes of *viewing*, involving a patterned sequence of movement or extended examination, such as when a viewer walks around a temple interior tracking a sequence of paintings, unrolls and re-rolls a scroll, or leafs through a book. These dimensions of narrativity do not necessarily coincide; a scroll might contain a series of discrete non-narrative pictures, for example, and a small rectangular picture might represent a story but depict only one moment of action, with no extended directional viewing process. In practice, we find a variety of nuanced combinations. Levy and McCausland show that many Chinese and Japanese handscroll paintings, though illustrating a story and using a continuous scroll format, are not as straightforwardly narrative in representational form as we tend to assume. Instead, they break the continuous story—and scroll—into a series of excerpted scenes or episodic vignettes. The game cards analyzed by Thompson convert an archetypal narrative text—the classic *Tale of Genji* novel—into discrete poem-image ensembles, each of which functions as an icon referring to a particular chapter of the novel but without sparking any narrative recounting of the story. Each playing of the game also creates a unique game narrative whose sequence jumbles the sequence of the novel. Such discrepancies between content, form, and viewing force us to complicate and refine our basic definition of what constitutes narrativity in art.

At the level of narrative *content*, the essays demonstrate the rich variety of narrative sources or stimuli for images, including not only stories and texts but also political rituals (twelfth-century royal processions at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, discussed by Bonatz); theatrical performances (Heston's eighteenth-century *Ramayana* murals in Kerala); and travel (Erkan's sixteenth-century book of landscapes and cityscapes tracing Sultan Süleyman I's military campaign, Stuer's nineteenth-century book of landscapes recounting Zhang Bao's personal tour of China). These remind us of other possible non-textual narrative stimuli such as music, geological or meteorological phenomena, biography, dreams, daily experience, and so on. Narrative images also vary in their temporal relationship to their sources. Whereas most narrative imagery illustrates anterior sources—pre-existing stories or events from the past—some examples interact with contemporaneous narrative subjects, as when Zhang Bao continued creating images and commentaries as he traveled to new places. Other images are produced in conjunction with texts, simultaneously making the image an equal partner to the text, rather than a derivative

illustration. Comic strips are a common example but are not represented here.[2] Su Renshan's nineteenth-century rants against Confucianism and government officials are an extreme example, which Koon shows to be a highly personal form of individual expression. More mainstream Chinese ink painting propagates yet another temporal model, images that are made first and then attract posterior narrative inscriptions and commentary. This seems partly the case with Zhang Bao's travel book, but typical landscape paintings (whether narrative or non-narrative in format) have an image painted first, with the painter often adding a colophon to comment on the image, and with subsequent viewers and collectors adding their own reflections and stories in text. The object itself thus sparks a perpetual narrative of reception and art historical evolution. Works of pure calligraphy are another special case of narrative art, as the linear progression of the brush evokes an originating bodily performance and authorial presence that are often more important to the image's meaning than the text represented by that brushwork.

At the level of narrative modes of *representation*, the essays likewise reveal multiple models of image formatting. Two key challenges in narrative modes of presentation are how to indicate directional time and how to link text and image. In Western art, the Laocoön paradigm is the most common visual format for representing narrative subjects, depicting a single moment of action set in a single unified frame of vision. Though representing narrative content, this format is not itself narrative in form, as there is no visual development over time and space.[3] The episodic series, by contrast, has an inherently narrative form, using a number of individual framed images to suggest momentary stages of a story and organizing them in a particular sequence to parallel the story's plot. This format is common in European churches and palaces and is one of the dominant narrative formats in Asia, where it is used most often in decorations of religious architecture, as we have seen in the seventh-century nirvana narratives painted in Buddhist cave temples at Dunhuang (Lee); in the terracotta plaques and paintings representing the Buddha's lives in eleventh-century Burmese temples and stupas (Galloway); and in the murals depicting the Buddha's lives and other Buddhist stories in eighteenth-century temples in Thailand and Burma (Green). All these cases, furthermore, combine paintings with sculpture and juxtapose narrative imagery with symbolic imagery, converting two-dimensional pictures into three dimensions and multiplying connections among different textual sources and different modes of visual communication.

A second dominant format in Asia is the scroll or frieze, which uses a continuous, highly extended horizontal field of vision to suggest the passing of time while indicating action by showing large numbers of figures across a wide area or showing the same figures multiple times. The scroll format is often used in relief carvings on buildings, from the ancient Assyrian palace images of the ninth and eighth centuries BCE showing military campaigns (Bonatz) to the ninth-century Hindu temple complex in Java showing scenes from two classical epics (Totton) and the twelfth-century palace-temple complexes in Angkor combining divine Hindu stories with secular military scenes and royal processions (Bonatz). It is also commonly used in handscrolls, where a narrative viewing process—unrolling the scroll to expose one section at a time—organically enhances the sense of represented time. The painted scrolls of the Buddha's penultimate life that are used in Thailand and Laos today are typical in depicting innumerable figures, sometimes against an illusionistic ground, sometimes in abstract space, in poses of active motion driving from one end of the scroll to the other (Lefferts and Cate). Literary handscrolls from China and Japan, ranging from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, are typical of sophisticated Chinese and Japanese scroll formatting, in which painted pathways and buildings create an imaginary travel route facilitating the viewer's imagined movement, with the carefully modulated placement and perspective of people and objects creating a sense of moving inward and outward, viewing some things from nearby and other things from afar (McCausland, Levy).

In practice, these formats are often combined in various ways. McCausland points out that a common Japanese tradition for handscrolls is to intersperse mono-

scenic rectangular paintings with calligraphic text, and that even in continuous visual formats, Chinese scrolls are usually divided into a number of discrete excerpted scenes that simply share a common visual ground. According to Levy, this scenic effect is so strong that it shifts viewers' attention from the narrative plot to the particular characters and events of each scene. The reverse occurs as well, when a roughly rectangular painting such as one of the Dunhuang murals is filled with large numbers of people scrolled along a number of horizontal spatial registers or crammed together into an overlapping crowd (Lee).

Books offer yet another format for narrative progression, the turning of each page again enabling a heightened sense of directional time. Zhang Bo's travelogue (Stuer) is a succession of framed rectangular pages, but many have scroll-like compositions, with scenes seeming to extend horizontally off the sides of the page, thus reinforcing the directional momentum of the ensemble. The leaves of the book recounting Süleyman's campaigns (Erkan) alternate abruptly among several pictorial formats, including map-like views, profile pictures, and seemingly continuous landscapes. It consequently lacks the visual continuity of scrolls and episodic series, but makes up for this by showing seasonal variations in foliage and depicting numerous bridges and pathways at the edges of pages to indicate connections to neighboring scenes.

The most spectacular difference between Asian narrative formats and Western ones is that much Chinese and Japanese imagery inscribes text on the same field of vision as the images, a practice deeply discouraged by the illusionistic conceit of the single-image format. Scroll paintings may have narrative stories, poems, biographies, and commentaries written on top of images, between images, or at the beginning and end of an image, as we have seen in examples from McCausland and Levy. This text-image interweaving is extended into books and print culture in examples such as Stuer's Zhang Bao travelogue and Thompson's *Genji* game cards. But whereas text and image are usually carefully balanced to maintain the image's spatial integrity and a visual harmony between image and text, Su Renshan's vertical ink paintings (Koon) make the text aggressively dominant, squeezing images to the side of the composition and creating visual patterns that undermine the aesthetic unity of the image.

While the above findings on content and format offer numerous complications and refinements to current scholarship on narrative art, the essays actively advance current scholarship by also expanding on the third dimension of narrativity, *viewing*. Meeting Julia Murray's introductory call to emphasize the contexts of narrative experience, the authors have detailed the special physical and social conditions under which these images were originally perceived and used. Such viewing contexts mediate an image's interpretation of a narrative source just as deeply as visual formats do, helping us round out our understanding of the actual, embodied experience that viewers can have in front of these narrative images. Several variables affect a viewer's perceptual experience of narrative imagery. First, perception can be more or less momentary or extended in time; a viewer can perceive David's *Oath of the Horatii* within a few moments, giving the dramatic scene an enormous visual impact, whereas a handscroll or book or series of murals requires minutes of time just to glimpse all the imagery. Second, the act of perceiving can be relatively static or active; the extended viewing of a book or scroll usually occurs with the viewer in one fixed position, whereas seeing the imagery of the Hindu complexes in Java (Totton) or Cambodia (Bonatz) requires moving around buildings and in some cases climbing to different levels of buildings. Third, the viewing experience can be individual or collective, with a printed travel book (Stuer) probably regarded by one individual at a time, a handscroll (McCausland, Levy) often viewed by a small group of companions, and temples and festivals seen by large groups of strangers at the same time.

The latter is an especially important yet neglected point of analysis in studies of narrative art. With its special function linking imagery to external narrative sources, narrative art's success depends essentially on communication to an audience and the essays here explore a varied range of image-audience relationships. Zhang Bao's travel book (Stuer) and Su Renshan's

paintings (Koon) emphasize the individual voice of the creator, speaking to one or two viewers at a time. Kano Sansetsu's *Song of Lasting Sorrow* (McCausland) and the anonymous *Story of Lady Wenji* (Levy) have a similar viewing intimacy, but they convey traditional, widely known stories rather than the artist's own personal experience. Most of the temple decorations we have seen similarly transmit traditional, well-known stories, but they program viewing to be open to a communal public audience. Even here, however, communal viewing conditions were often segmented either physically or socially. Only a few viewers at a time could fit into one of Dunhuang's cramped caves (Lee) or one of Pagan's small temples (Galloway), whereas ceremonies might gather crowds of viewers for collectively viewing temple murals in Thailand (Green) or Jataka scrolls in Laos (Lefferts and Cate). Totton suggests that various parts of the exterior ornamentation were accessible only to various segments of the political and religious elites. Similarly, the public audience for palace interiors was highly restricted, as in Assyria (Bonatz), and Heston points out that the *Ramayana* murals at Kerala decorated a room next to the coronation room, implying a special role directed at the king or king-to-be. One of the most interesting cases here is the book of Süleyman's military campaigns (Erkan), as it seems to have been presented to the sultan himself as a personal souvenir with important public aims such as reinforcing his political rule and guiding future military campaigns. And art historians should not forget that sometimes images are made to be seen only by the gods, as when images are positioned too high for practitioners to perceive (Galloway).

Whatever their content and format, the primary aim of most works of art is an effect on an audience. For narrative art in particular, then, the ultimate aim and effectiveness of an image should be evaluated not just on the basis of how clearly or cleverly it visualizes its narrative source, but on how creatively or completely it engages with an audience to create a physical, emotional, or psychological effect or to stimulate a particular kind of active, embodied response. This is an aspect of narrative theory that remains deeply understudied, and to open it to analysis requires pushing the exploration of audience one step further, as the following section attempts to do.

Audience interpretation and response

The above points essentially concern the processes of producing and perceiving a narrative image or image ensemble. And much art history stops here. Especially with narrative imagery so closely bound up with stories and other narrative stimuli, art historians have too easily fallen into a straightforward "reading" of narrative art, interpreting a picture by matching it, action by action and symbol by symbol, to a text. While an essential first step, such passive reading is a disembodied form of interpretation, abstracting the art from its original living context and threatening to reduce art to mere signification. By probing visual formatting and viewing contexts, the essays have underscored art's active interpretation of its narrative sources. They help us progress even further by demonstrating a range of ways in which narrative art not only represents narrative sources, but actively incites powerful individual and collective thoughts, feelings, and actions in response. Such embodied responses bring us closer to the ultimate meanings that narrative art can generate, both locally, for viewers at the point of origin, and transculturally, for viewers across time and space.

In a recent treatise on literary narrative, Rick Altman argues that narrative theory has relied too exclusively on action and plot in defining narrativity. Narrative content, he says, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for narrative communication to occur. More crucial are two other factors: a narrating of the content via framing the action and focusing on a particular character; and the implied presence of a reader who consciously "follows" that narration.[4] Applied to visual imagery, this implies that an experience of narrative communication relies essentially on an image or image ensemble that has a narrative content; a form of representation that narrates that content in a particular way; and a viewer who is motivated to follow the narration and interpret the source narrative accordingly. Art historians are already highly sensitive to visual narration—the fact that a representational image never simply conveys or neutrally illustrates its subject matter, but rather interprets it. But we have been less

sensitive to "following," to the process by which various viewers perceive, interpret, and respond to the depicted subject. For narrative art in particular, this means recognizing that a viewer experiences narrative *meaning* not simply by recognizing an image's semiotic signification of a textual source but by engaging with the image and story mentally, emotionally, or physically. How does a religious work actually enhance people's belief? How does a scroll bring one to tears? The essays gathered here explore two important aspects of this process, which we might characterize as synthetic viewing and performative response.

By synthetic viewing, I mean the process of synthesizing the multiple parts of a narrative image ensemble to form a coherent interpretation of the whole work. For some examples, this is fairly straightforward, though still complex. To interpret a literary handscroll (McCausland), a viewer unrolls and re-rolls the scroll, reading the text as it appears, examining the images as they appear, allowing text and image to enhance each other's poetic and emotional effect, and pondering the symbols, oblique references, and in this case euphemisms that refer to ideas and events outside the depicted story. It is in this process of external referencing that Levy finds Chinese paintings actually de-emphasizing the narrative source, using it instead as a basis for generating ideas and emotions originating outside the work. Leafing through a narrative book (Stuer, Erkan) is similar; a viewer can progress page by page, alternately reading the text and examining the imagery, and thinking of external links and references—personal memories, biographical and historical events, cosmological ideas—that enhance the effect and meaning of the whole book.

Synthesizing architectural decorations adds further complexities. As discussed by Lee and Green, particular architectural arrangements of image ensembles can profoundly alter their meaning. The expansion of two-dimensional images into three-dimensional spaces often makes the sequence of scenes unclear or open to multiple interpretations, freeing the narrative from the linear constraints of a book or scroll. Architectural settings also bind meaning to a viewer's bodily experience, with both perception and interpretation mediated by the need to move around the building and by the resulting variations in light, height, color, temperature, and so on, all of which can profoundly affect the drama and emotion an individual attaches to the site and its narrative images. Finally, the combining of narrative image ensembles with other narrative and non-narrative decorations multiplies the potential networks of external references and relationships that a single narrative can generate. Bonatz demonstrates this multivalency at Angkor and in Assyria, where images of royal hunts, royal battles, religious stories, gods, plants, and animals all interact with one another, mixing religious and political meanings and adding layers of significance to each type of visual decoration. Totton analyzes this process in the greatest detail, offering network theory as a way of better appreciating the interconnected and multi-layered meanings that become active when narrative image ensembles are combined with other narrative ensembles, juxtaposed with non-narrative symbols and images, and arranged in a pattern based on spiritually symbolic *yantra* diagrams. Such spatial patterns of organization generate especially rich networks of correlative meanings across multiple media. Any study of narrative ensembles should include consideration of this kind of synthesizing pattern of organization.

A number of papers deal with the second key aspect of embodied interpretation, performative response. In these instances, art and architecture often correlated with actual life experience, and the narrative imagery both reflected and instigated actual performances of power, presumably impressing viewers and leaders alike to believe the ideology being propagated and to behave according to its cosmological truth. For example, Bonatz emphasizes that Angkor's kings used temple complexes for political-religious processions and rituals. Some images actually matched the king's real processions, meaning that the users and viewers of the site were interacting with the imagery not only mentally or imaginatively, but physically and historically, extending the power of the narrative into real life. Such lively interaction between art and life becomes vividly apparent in Lefferts and Cate's analysis of contemporary religious ceremonies in Thailand and Laos. Anthropological approaches can provide insight into the effects of such performative engagements with narrative

art, but Heston also provides one detailed analysis of a historical example. By tracking the specific aesthetic principles that people in eighteenth-century India attached to theatrical performances of the Rama stories, she is able persuasively to suggest how viewers of Rama mural paintings might have experienced the images both physically and emotionally. Her example suggests that we look at other works of narrative art with a similar new goal, not just deciphering an image and connecting it to its visual and historical context, but also pursuing evidence of how people in that context actually experienced and reacted to the embodied image.

There is one other major aspect of narrative viewing and response that is not discussed in this selection of essays: narratives of collection and display. This is not an issue unique to narrative art, since all forms of art are subject to collection and display. But I see it as a crucial form of narrativity in art production and viewing because it powerfully mediates many people's experience of art and combines elements of synthetic viewing and performative response as elucidated above. Museums, for example, routinely organize groups of objects in a sequential order with clear beginning and ending points, accompanied by textual narratives in wall panels and audio-guides, urging people to move in a certain way through a carefully designed architectural setting.[5] Guided tours of buildings and monuments are similarly narrated and controlled to graft a story onto viewers' experience of meaning at the site. Photograph albums are another way in which individuals and institutions narrate images and objects to both private and public audiences. And then there is art history itself, which narrates all kinds of art in all kinds of places. Like any other narrative ensemble, many kinds of art historical books and catalogues create a written story to coincide with the images being studied, select some scenes and objects while eliminating others, and package text and image together in a way that will create a unified text-image experience for reader-viewers. All these narrative modes of reception mediate narrative images, just as the narrative images mediate their narrative sources.

Conclusion

All art has the power to convey meaning and to stimulate individual and collective actions and reactions. But the extra temporal and dramatic force of narrative art forms intensifies their importance as vehicles for the propagation of ideas and actions, and narrative modes of communication—in text, image, and film—have dominated human cultural production, dispersed across a wide range of cultural and historical contexts. By analyzing the particular formats and viewing effects of numerous works of narrative art across Asia, these essays have enhanced our appreciation of the power, diversity, and flexibility of narrative art. By exploring the processes by which viewers have perceived, interpreted, and responded to the works, the essays pioneer a more embodied reading of narrative art as it has functioned in specific historical contexts. And by comparing these visual modes and embodied interpretations of narrative imagery, the volume as a whole offers new insights for a universal theory of narrativity and narrative's central role in human thought and experience.

Ultimately, the narratives represented in art, the narrative forms of art, and the narratives generated in response to art all contribute to a sort of meta-narrative of cultural production and perpetuation. It is through various sequencing mechanisms and narrative performances that we keep culture alive and meaningful. As Paul Ricoeur wrote in one of my more provocative classroom texts, tradition itself is a communal act of repetition.[6] Since all forms of narrative art share an elemental base in storytelling, it is only through acts of re-telling—visually, textually, bodily, mentally—that these art forms perform their varied functions. Texts of course must be translated from one language to another, supplanting source texts with new ones. Images, by contrast, remain intact in acts of translation, retaining some degree of universal affective power even when the original language and cultural context is alien to a viewer. Narrative art therefore provides a special opportunity to widen channels of communication and understanding across cultures, and across eras, by activating visual, physical responses of sympathy or identification that amplify the sympathies elicited through translated texts. Whether looking across cultural or temporal barriers, or both,

viewers can make direct physical contact with narrative images, using them as an anchor of common experience underlying the tides of cross-cultural interpretation and action that spin around them.

Notes

1. The Laocoön statue is the subject of the famous eighteenth-century essay by Gotthold Lessing arguing that a single visual image can convey narrative content more fully and effectively than a narrative text.
2. The conference from which these essays are drawn included a paper by Ritu Khanduri on Indian political cartoons ("Modern Articulations: Visual Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India").
3. However, a semi-narrative variation of the single-scene image, common in Renaissance art, is to show the protagonist multiple times in different parts of the same image.
4. Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 1–27.
5. Ting Chang discussed this topic at the conference in a paper on the Musée Guimet titled "Polymorphic Narratives of Asia and Europe in the Nineteenth Century."
6. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 165–86.

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