

Symbolism in Art & Literature

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Artifact type: Assignment

Developed for: In-class workshop for classes with a visual literacy component, such as art history, literature, or religion

Audience: Upper-level undergraduates

Time required: 1 class session + outside work

Method and tool: Digital exhibit with Knight Lab's StoryMap for Images (Gigapixel)

Description:

This project was developed with visual literacy in mind. By analyzing images, we describe, interpret, judge and theorize to understand what is being communicated—thus building our critical thinking and communication skills. This assignment I developed uses images I pre-selected, which students can use to create a StoryMap for Images (<https://storymap.knightlab.com/gigapixel/>). Like a regular StoryMap, students can choose different points throughout an image to annotate or illustrate certain ideas, symbols, philosophies, details, etc.

Suggestions for beginning this project:

If you chose to use other images than the ones already prepared, you would need to host the images. Knight Lab provides directions on how to host the images yourself (<https://storymap.knightlab.com/gigapixel/>). For hosting, you can speak with the library, departments or even Information Technology Services on campus. Knight Lab's help desk is very responsive for any questions or issues (<https://knightlab.zendesk.com>). Once the images are set up, you may use them as much as you would like.

Prepare for the assignment by creating your own StoryMap for Images. This will familiarize you with the “how to” as well as issues your students may have. You will want to dedicate at least one class session to introduce the students to the project and teach them how to create one. In addition, you may need to cover finding public domain and Creative Commons images to prevent copyright infringement. Knight Lab suggests no more than 20 slides/annotations per project. You may want to limit the number of slides for the purpose of your class, and decide which texts you will allow your students to use for annotations. I have provided some suggested texts as resources for annotations, however depending on the class you may need to use other sources.

I developed the lecture of “Symbolism in Art, Religion, & Literature” since students may not understand symbology. This assignment was developed for art history, religion, and literature classes. However, the project is very versatile for other subject areas. This lesson was adapted for a German philosophy class who will be learning about Degenerate Art and why it was offensive to Hitler. I suggest working with a librarian to create a research guide for the class to use, which could include directions to create a StoryMap, databases and books to use, allowed web resources, and any other information you think they may need. You can view an example of a research guide through Mississippi State University Libraries, which was developed for the German class (<http://guides.library.msstate.edu/entartetekunst>).

Supporting materials:

Assignment handout, lecture on symbolism, and guide for finding public domain and Creative Commons images.

Assignment: Create a StoryMap for a Well-known Painting Using Knight Lab’s StoryMap for Images.

Objective: Become familiar with commonly used symbols in art, religion, and literature, which prepares for more insightful analysis of art and culture.

Texts:

Gardner’s Art Through the

Ages History of Art by H.W.

Janson Art History by

Marilyn Stockstad

An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols by Jean C Cooper

A Dictionary of Literary Terms by Michael Ferber

Other Suggested texts:

Books on the artists/ authors

Books on classical literature Bible

Books on Christian art, symbols in art or allegory

Books on literary terms or symbolism (sometimes these are specific to the author) Books on stories portrayed in the artwork

Books on the language of flowers, sacred geometry

Scholarly Peer-Reviewed Articles

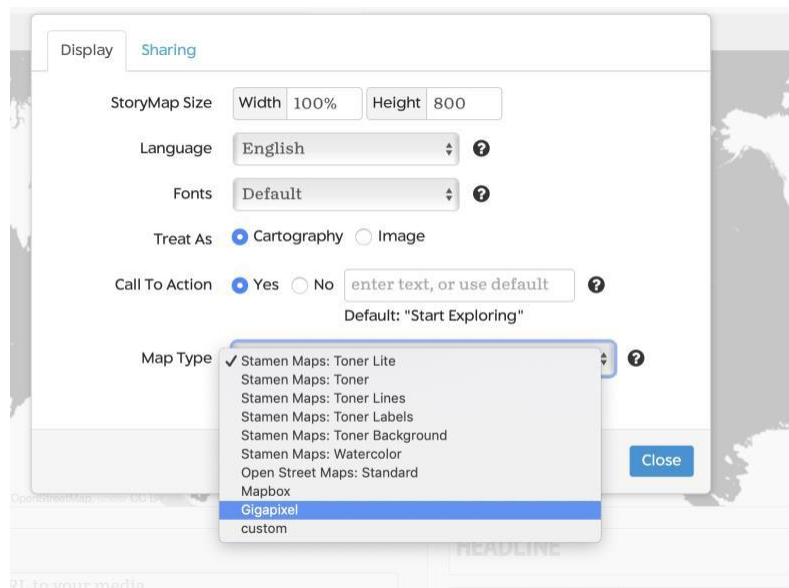
Directions: StoryMap for Images

Example: [Ophelia by John Everette Millias](#)

1. Pick one of the images of a masterwork from the list. The images listed below are licensed under Creative Commons for re-use & have been prepared for your use in this assignment. Click the title to see what the image looks like.

- [Madonna & Child](#) by Cimabue, c. 1280-90, tempera on Panel
- [Primavera](#) by Sandro Botticelli, c. 1482, tempera on panel

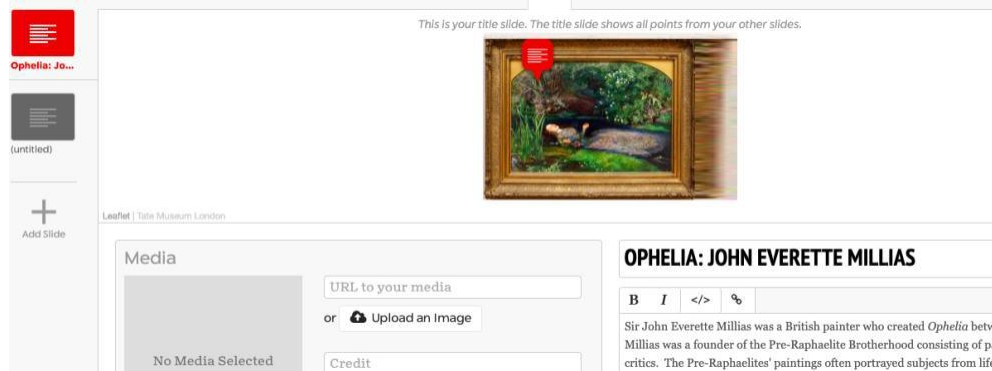
- [The Last Supper](#) by Leonardo da Vinci, 1495-98, tempera on gesso
 - [Melancholia I](#) by Albrecht Dürer, c. 1514, woodcut
 - [Galatea](#) by Raphael, c. 1518, Fresco
 - [The Triumph of Death](#) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c. 1562, oil on panel
 - [Union of Earth & Water](#) by Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1618, oil on canvas
 - [A Dance to the Music of Time \(The Dance of Human Life\)](#) by Nicolas Poussin, c. 1638-40, oil on canvas
 - [The Night of Enitharmon's Joy \(formerly called 'Hecate'\)](#) by William Blake, c. 1795, watercolour & graphite on paper
 - [La Pia de' Tolomei](#) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, c. 1868-69, oil on canvas
2. If you do not have a Google account, [sign up](#) for one. If you already have one, skip to #3.
 3. Go to Knight Lab to create a project (<https://storymap.knightlab.com>) & select “Make a StoryMap.”
 4. Sign in with your Google Account & select “New” to create you assignment.
 5. Name your StoryMap.
 6. Setting up your images for the map.
 - a. Select “options” at the top of the screen. In this area you will set up the image for the StoryMap.
 - b. Go to the “Map Type” drop down & select “Gigapixel.”



- c. Depending on the image you chose, you will need a URL to add into the Zoomify URL. Copy & Paste the Web address for the painting you selected from below. Be sure to add in the pixel size of the image in the same box. Then close the box.

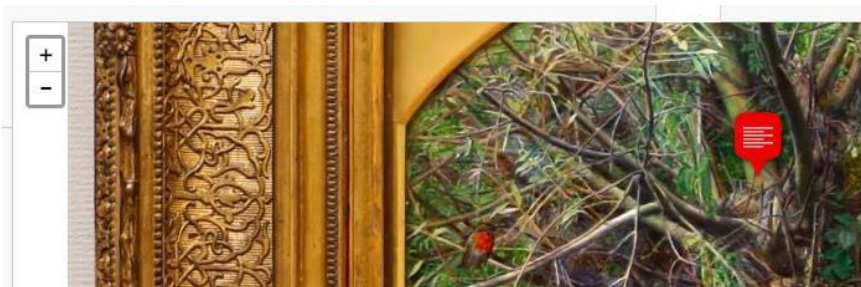
- *Madonna & Child* by Cimabue (1789 x 3100 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/madonna-child/
- *Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli (4,926 x 3,236 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/botticelli-primavera/botticelli-primavera/
- *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci (5,381 x 2,926 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/the-last-supper/
- *Melancholia I* by Albrecht Dürer (3,146 x 4,000 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/melancholia-i/
- *Galatea* by Raphael (1,050 x 1,381 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/galatea/
- *The Triumph of Death* by Peter Breugel the Elder (2,126 x 1,517 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/the-triumph-of-death/
- *Union of Earth & Water* by Pete Paul Rubens (1,016 x 1,255 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/union-of-earth-water/
- *A Dance to the Music of Time (The Dance of Human Life)* by Nicolas Poussin, (2,590 x 2,049 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/the-dance-of-human-life/
- *The Night of Enitharmon's Joy (formerly called 'Hecate')* by William Blake (1,024 x 768 pixels)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/enitharmon-joy/
- *La Pia de' Tolomei* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (3,882 x 3,426)
https://library.msstate.edu/_assets/img/ckennedy/orig/la-pia-de-tolomei/

7. You should now see the image for your title slide. Title your project & give a brief description of your painting & why this painting has significance.



In the media section you may upload an image or copy & paste a web address for it. (see handout on finding images)

8. You can start your StoryMap with the 1st slide. Use your symbols to mark a pathway through the painting. You can drag the marker around the image to mark a point of interest.
- a. You can also make your image bigger or smaller using the (+) or (-) in the upper left corner of your slide.



- b. You may also add in a specific picture to highlight your marker - be sure to only use images in the Public Domain or Creative Commons. This prevents copyright infringement (see directions on finding PD & CC images).
9. Follow the slide directions to create points in the image. Keep slide count under 20 slides.
10. Your last slide should include your Works Cited/ Bibliography.

Image StoryMap: Symbolism in Art, Religion, & Literature

Background: Art and literature often reflect well-known stories from mythology, legends, folklore, literature, or religion. Before alphabetic literacy became common, societies and civilizations used symbols to communicate meaning and provide context for recognizing meaning through objects, colors, events, or relationships.

For example, the lily, a white showy flower, has been used for centuries to represent chastity, virginity, innocence, and purity. The meaning can vary a bit from one culture to the next. The word lily comes from *Lilium*, Latin, which comes from Greek *leirion*, meaning "true," as exemplified by the Madonna Lily.¹



Fig. 1. Walter Hood Fitch, "Lilium Candidum." lithograph, 1877, (Missouri Botanical Gardens) in *A Monograph of the Genus Lilium* by Henry John Elwes, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1877), pg. 16, Plate 9.

This representation applies to many lilies, not just the white ones; but, *Lilium Candidum* most traditionally carries the symbolism of purity as the true lily. While cultivated worldwide for over 3000 years, *Lilium Candidum* is a native lily to the Middle East and Balkan Peninsula. Of course Biblical association with the lily goes back to Song of Solomon, or Song of Songs, the Hebrew being *Shoshannah*, meaning "lily" or "rose," and described by Biblical scholars as a white blossom with six petals and six stamens. It has been said these lilies decorated the columns of King Solomon's temple. With the establishment of the catholic church, the *Lilium Candidum* became the recognizable symbol for the Virgin Mary, or Madonna, fitting for the Madonna Lily - pure, white, and true to her God.

¹ Roger Hyam & Richard Pankhurst. *Plants and Their Names: A Concise Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 186.



Fig. 2. Model Quatrefoil 4-story Lily Capital, BCE 400-30, pottery, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

The Greeks and Romans (circa 1200 BCE – 500 AD) used *Lilium Candidum* to symbolize the Goddesses Hera and Juno, referring to the flower as the “Milk of the Lily” or “Milk of the Gods,” which they thought gave immortality. The myth tells the story of how Heracles secretly fed Hermes from a sleeping Hera’s breast. The force of Hermes feeding woke Hera, causing the goddess to thrust him from her. Yet, her milk continued to flow, creating the Milky Way in the heavens; falling droplets created white lilies here on Earth (Fig. 3).²



Fig. 3. Peter Paul Rubens. *The Birth of the Milky Way*, c. 1636-37, oil on canvas, 181 cm; Width: 244 cm, Muse del Prado, Madrid, Spain.

Although the Greek and Roman goddesses Juno or Hera have lost popularity and reverence today, the Catholic reappropriation of the lily to represent the Virgin Mary -- her purity & virginal state, as well as the immaculate conception. Artists often depict Mary with a single lily (Fig. 4 & 5) some illustrate the angel Gabriel presenting the lily to Mary or place the lily in vase near her.

² Marina Heilmeyer. *The Language of Flowers: Symbols & Myths* (London: Prestel, 2001) p. 50.



Fig 4. Robert Campin, *The Annunciation: Merode Altarpiece*, c. 1425. Oil on oak, 25 3/8 x 46 3/8 in, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.



Fig. 5. Lily on table in *The Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)*

After the Renaissance, the Victorians gave flowers significant meaning, using them to communicate secret messages known as Floriography or the “Language of Flowers.” As this underlying language grew and spread, the white lily represents female figures and their purity. Considering the different colors of lilies, only the white lily represents female figures and their purity. Of course, these floral representations can be found in literature, which contains symbols within texts to signify meaning from the author.

For instance, the American Romantic poet, Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), well-known for using flowers as a metaphor in her poems, as well as her preference to dress in white. Growing up as a

Calvinist, Dickinson became familiar with pictures of nuns dressed in white, most likely from art books her family collected.



Fig. 6. Charles Allston Collins, *Convent Thoughts*, c. 1851, oil on canvas, 84x59 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

Dickinson typically dressed in white, “the patroness of a single and aesthetic life.”³ Some scholars have been known to call her the “Nun of Amherst.”⁴ Indeed, Dickinson never married, essentially becoming the pure virgin like unto the biblical Madonna. In addition, Dickinson’s lifetime in America coincided with the Victorian period in England and making the poet familiar with the works of the Pre-Raphaelites, who expressed a penchant for using Christian symbols in their art.

Besides dressing in white, Dickinson avidly cultivated a garden that included Madonna lilies.⁵ Apparently, she habitually greeted her benefactor, T.W. Higginson, with two lilies in hand, and could be seen with cuttings from her cultivated lilies frequently.⁶ These images provided the partial basis for Dickinson’s signature characterization of white and association with the *Lilium Candidum*.

Dickinson knew lilies represent hallowed beauty, purity, and virginity. The poet uses lilies in at least four poems to discuss religion. In Thomas Johnson’s, collected, *Poems of Emily Dickinson*, poem #392:

³ Judith Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 36.

⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert, “The Wayward Nun Beneath the Hill: Emily Dickinson & the Mysteries of Womanhood,” in *Feminist Critics Read Emily Dickinson*, ed. Suzanne Juhasz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983) 22..

⁵ Marta McDowell, *Emily Dickinson’s Gardens: A Celebration of a Poet & Gardener* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 71-72.

⁶ Jine Wang, “Language of Flowers in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry,” *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10, no 6 (2015): 49.

Through the Dark Sod—as
 Education— The Lily passes
 sure—
 Feels her white foot—no
 trepidation— Her faith—no fear—

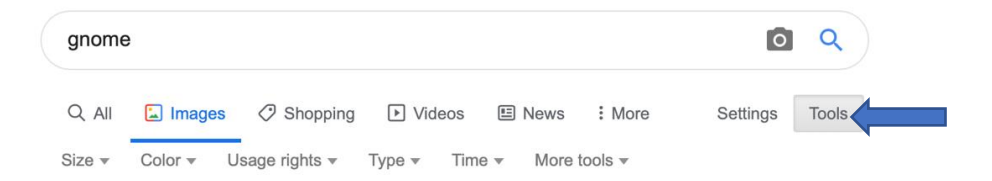
Afterward—in the
 Meadow— Swinging her
 Beryl Bell—
 The Mold-life—all forgotten—
 now— In Ecstasy—and Dell—⁷

Like Dickinson's poem including lilies, this poem expresses the "education" of the lily as it pushes through soil, bravely, to sprout, grow, and bloom, representative of Easter and resurrection. The lily, identified in the female, happily forgets the grave and joyfully swings through the meadow and the dell with grave forgotten -- an illusion to the immaculate conception and Christ's resurrection. The poem can generally be viewed as a celebration of spring, of the Virgin Mary, or of surviving trial and tribulation.

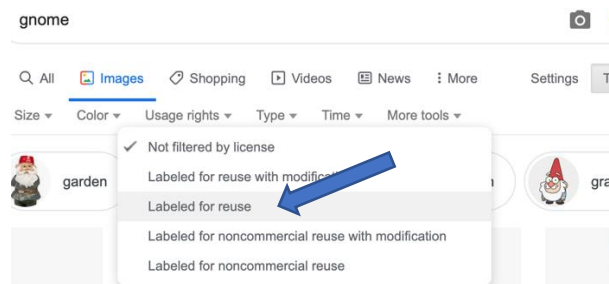
Keep in mind, symbolism uses objects other than flowers; geometric shapes, numbers, or colors have taken on traditional meanings that artists and authors use them to aid the viewer/reader in recognizing important aspects of the image/ story. Symbols act a bridge by revealing subtle parts of a story, so one may understand the entirety of the image and its message.

Finding Public Domain & Creative Commons Images:

1. Open Google Image Search - www.images.google.com.
2. Search for an image you would like to use.
3. Now you will limit your images to only ones labeled for re-use.
 - a. First select 'tools' under the search bar.



- b. Then open 'Usage Right' and select 'labeled for reuse.'



- c. Find a picture from *Wikimedia Commons* or *Flicker*, as these typically work best for the Image StoryMap.



4. Once you have gone to the *Wikimedia Commons* Web page for the image, select the mid- pixel size image.



Size of this preview: 792 × 600 pixels. Other resolutions: 317 × 240 pixels | 634 × 480 pixels | 800 × 606 pixels.

[Original file](#) (800 × 606 pixels, file size: 561 KB, MIME type: image/jpeg)

5. This should take you directly to a view of the image. Save the image to your computer.