

SEMIOTICS · BUDDHIST ART · SIGN THEORY

Constructing Connotative Meaning by Bridging the Impossible: Peirce, Barthes, and the εἰκὼν

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Editorial note. This article presents the original theoretical framework, structure, ideas, and argumentation of Panayotis Zamaros, developed in the context of personal research on Buddhist devotional art. Preliminary academic editing — including prose refinement, structural organisation of the three-chain architecture, integration of the Eco critique, and development of the εἰκὼν section — was carried out by Claude (Anthropic, claude-sonnet-4-6), acting as editorial assistant. The final editing was performed by the author. All theoretical claims, scholarly judgements, and analytical conclusions are the author's own, grounded in and supported by the referenced sources.

Abstract

This article proposes an original semiological framework for the analysis of meaning in Buddhist devotional art. Zamaros proposes that Peirce's three sign types and Barthes' model of second-order connotation are nested rather than competing frameworks, yet with an added twist: rather than using the Peircean trichotomy as such, the framework constructs — with respect to Barthes — three chains of meaning, each consisting of two semiological systems. System 1, in each chain, corresponds to denotation: the plain meaning of the sign, whereas system 2 parallels connotation with an import of to the three types determined by the Peircean mechanism of the sign, be it the *evocative* (icon), the *presential* (index), and the *vicarious* (symbol). The cognitive outcome of each completed chain is a mental image of the Blessed One produced in the mind of the devotee, an εἰκὼν. Drawing on Cassirer, the εἰκὼν is understood as the Kantian-cognitive product of the completed semiological movement, distinct from Peirce's homonymous sign-mechanism. Many artefacts activate more than one chain simultaneously, producing compound connotation. The article also critically examines Umberto Eco's attempt to bridge the Peircean and Barthesian traditions, showing that his project moves in the opposite direction.

Keywords: Semiotics · Peirce · Barthes · εἰκὼν · Buddhist art · Connotation · Evocative · Presential · Vicarious · Sign theory · Eco · Cassirer · Second-order signification

The Two Orders of Signification: Barthes

The framework begins with Barthes (1957, pp. 114–117), who distinguishes between the "first-order semiological system", wherein the signifier is referred to as "meaning" and the signified as "concept", united in a "sign", and the "second-order semiological system", wherein the signifier is referred to as "form" and the signified as "concept", united in a "signification". Both systems are related in that what "is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second". This is the seat of myth (Zamaros, 2012).

Barthes (1985, p. 77) further highlights that under the "connotative semiotic" propounded by Hjelmslev (19, p. 103), the second system consists in the "connotative plane", whereas the first system consists in the "denotative plane" — a distinction owed to Mill (1882, p. 35, §5), for whom "a connotative term is one which denotes a subject, and implies an attribute". System 1 is therefore denotation: the plain, first-order meaning of the sign. System 2 is connotation: the elevation of that sign into the form of a higher-order meaning.

The Trichotomy: Peirce

Next, we look at Peirce's trichotomy as interpreted by Silverstein (1976: 27).

An *icon* is a sign where "the perceivable properties of the sign vehicle itself have isomorphism to (up to identity with) those of the entity signaled. That is, the entities are "likenesses" in some sense" (Ibid.). Put simply, an icon is a sign that works by resemblance to the object it points to.

An *index* is a sign where "the occurrence of a sign vehicle token bears a connection of understood spatio-temporal contiguity to the occurrence of the entity signaled" (Ibid.). To unravel this cryptic phrase, an index as a sign exists because the thing it signifies is physically *present* at one place and time: the sign is a *consequence* of the object it signifies.

Finally, a *symbol* is a sign where "neither physical similarity nor contextual contiguity hold between sign vehicle and entity signaled" (Ibid.), that is, neither icon nor index. What characterizes the symbol then is that the "sign vehicle and entity signaled are related through the bond of a semantico-referential meaning" (Ibid.): this is a learned, agreed-upon convention. Thus, the wheel or the bodhi tree perform a devotional function as Peircean symbols.

Three Chains of Meaning: Peirce Nested in Barthes

Peirce's trichotomy is to be understood not as a typology of signs at the denotative level but as three distinct mechanisms by which a System 1-denotative sign is made to carry or be associated

with a specified System 2-connotative meaning. Rather than using the trichotomy as such, the framework constructs three chains of meaning, each consisting of the same two-system Barthesian structure, but each producing a qualitatively different type of connotation.

Silverstein (1976, p. 27) notes that the nature of the relationship between the signaling and signaled entity informs "the nature of the meaning that is communicated", where each of the three types — icon, index, and symbol — is "characterized by its own type of meaning for the users".

When nested within Barthes' two-system model, each type generates a distinct connotative chain. Crucially, it is not culture that determines the sign-type: it is the ritualisation of the originary sign that produces culture, not the reverse (Zamaros, 2007, p. 52).

The three chains are structured as follows:

Chain 1 (Icon): System 1 (denotation) → **System 2** (evocative connotation)

Chain 2 (Index): System 1 (denotation) → **System 2** (presential connotation)

Chain 3 (Symbol): System 1 (denotation) → **System 2** (vicarious connotation)

CHAIN 1 — ICON: EVOCATIVE CONNOTATION

Evocative connotation arises when a System 1 sign acquires, through the iconic mechanism, a further meaning at System 2, a coded association that calls up the Blessed One in the mind of the devotee through the iconographic Code rather than through contact or substitution. System 1 is simply denotation — a sandalwood statue, a pillar, a sculpted figure — carrying its plain first-order meaning with no Peircean character yet. It is at the moment of elevation to System 2 that the iconic mechanism operates: rather than producing resemblance to the historical person — we possess no image of the Buddha, and no statue can claim fidelity to his actual appearance — it produces coded association. What the Code establishes is a set of configurations decided, at an originary moment, to carry a specific meaning (Zamaros, 2007, p. 52), and whose ritualisation has produced the devotional culture that now reads them. The elevated sign calls up the Blessed One in the mind of the devotee through association rather than through contact or substitution.

The sandalwood Buddha, as recounted by Revire (2020, p. 352), was "executed in sandalwood by the order of a pious king when the Buddha went away on a preaching journey" — the first icon made not in the Buddha's presence but in his absence, to fill the void of that absence. System 1: a sandalwood statue — a sculpted figure, plain denotation. System 2: the iconic mechanism elevates this denotative sign — through the Code's association of this configuration with the Blessed One — into evocative connotation. The Blessed One is called up in the mind of the devotee through coded association, not through likeness to a known face.

The Ashokan pillars operate by the same chain. System 1: a monumental column bearing edicts and capitalised animal reliefs — an inscribed stone structure, plain denotation. System 2: the iconic mechanism elevates this denotative sign — through the Code that has inscribed Ashoka into the pillar's form, its edicts, and its established associations with imperial Buddhist patronage — into evocative connotation. The devotee does not read the pillar as a portrait of Ashoka; the Code calls Ashoka up through association. He is evoked, not depicted.

CHAIN 2 — INDEX: PRESENTIAL CONNOTATION

Presential connotation results from System 1 acquiring through the indexical mechanism additional meaning at System 2. System 1 is simply denotation — a mark in stone, an empty throne, a riderless horse — carrying its plain first-order meaning with no Peircean character yet. It is at the moment of elevation to System 2 that the indexical mechanism operates: not through coded association or substitution, but through the physical logic of contact and trace. The sign does not represent the Blessed One — it is a consequence of him. It points to where he was.

The *buddhapāda* — the Buddha's footprint — is the paradigmatic instance. System 1: a foot-shaped depression or relief — a mark in stone or earth, plain denotation. System 2: the indexical mechanism elevates this denotative sign through the physical logic that a footprint can only exist where a foot has been. This is what Snellgrove et al. (1978, p. 33) mean when they describe it as "the most unequivocal sign indicating the Buddha's personal presence" — unequivocal because the logic is not cultural but physical. The Blessed One is pointed to through the trace he left, not through a Code that names him.

The riderless horse at the Great Departure and the empty throne operate by the same chain. System 1: an absence — of rider, of seated figure — plain denotation. System 2: the indexical mechanism elevates that absence through the same physical logic — something occurred here, someone was here — into presential connotation. The Blessed One is pointed to through the trace of what took place: the departure that happened, the rising that occurred. He is indicated, not depicted or deputised for.

CHAIN 3 — SYMBOL: VICARIOUS CONNOTATION

Vicarious connotation results adding to System 1 connotative signification as System 2 through the symbolic mechanism. System 1 is simply denotation — a wheel, a hemispherical structure, a tree — carrying its plain first-order meaning with no Peircean character yet. It is at the moment of elevation to System 2 that the symbolic mechanism operates: the sign stands in lieu of the Blessed

One — it deputises, occupies his place in the devotional field. It neither points to where he was nor calls him up through coded association; it takes his place where he is not.

The Dharmacakra — the wheel of the Law — is the paradigmatic instance. System 1: a circular form with spokes — a wheel, plain denotation. System 2: the symbolic mechanism elevates this denotative sign through the semantico-referential bond established at an originary moment of naming (Zamaros, 2007, p. 52) and consolidated through ritualisation — the wheel stands for the First Sermon, and through the First Sermon for the Blessed One himself. There is nothing in the wheel's shape that compels this elevation; everything is in the bond.

The stupa operates by the same chain. System 1: a hemispherical structure — plain denotation. System 2: the symbolic mechanism elevates it through the same bond — it stands vicariously for the Parinirvāṇa and through that for the Buddha's perennial abode. The bodhi tree completes the sequence. System 1: *Ficus religiosa* at Bodhgayā — plain denotation. System 2: the symbolic mechanism elevates it, vicariously, to the Blessed One himself — confirmed by Snellgrove et al. (1978, p. 28), who record that inscriptions at the site name the tree "bhagavato" — "the Exalted One." The sign has become its referent's proxy; it holds his place in the devotional economy.

The Question of Eco

Prior Scholarship · Why Eco Does Not Suffice

The most sustained prior attempt to relate the Peircean and Saussurean/Barthesian traditions is that of Umberto Eco, whose *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976) is frequently cited as a general synthesis of the two. Eco's project is, however, syncretic rather than structural: as Stancati (2016) observes, it aims at a unified general theory of signification applicable across all cultural phenomena, rather than at a systematic nesting of two distinct explanatory levels producing the three distinct connotative chains.

More critically, Eco does not preserve Peirce's trichotomy as an analytical tool but actively dismantles it. Already in his earliest semiotic text, *Signo* (1973, §2.8), Eco argues that a single sign "*puede ser considerado como un índice y como un ícono, o como un símbolo, según las circunstancias en que aparece y el uso significativo a que se ha destinado*" [can be considered as an index, an icon, or a symbol, depending on the circumstances in which it appears and the signifiatory use to which it has been assigned], a position developed in *A Theory of Semiotics* into a formal critique of the trichotomy "en faveur d'une division beaucoup plus complexe" [in favour of a much more complex division] (Stancati, 2016, p. 4). This dissolution is precisely what the present framework resists: the three chains depend on the trichotomy's distinctiveness.

The gap is most visible in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Eco, 1986, pp. 32–33), where Eco invokes both Hjelmslev's connotative model and "the diagram form popularized by Barthes" on the same page as an indexical sign (smoke as index of fire), and yet does not ask what kind of connotative elevation the indexical mechanism produces as distinct from the iconic or symbolic. With both tools simultaneously in hand, Eco still does not construct the chains, because his project requires dissolving the trichotomy rather than building with it.

The εἰκὼν: Cognitive Outcome of the Completed Chain

Each completed chain produces as its cognitive outcome in the mind of the devotee, an εἰκὼν. Drawing on Cassirer (in Zamaros, 2007, p. 47), a sign is an icon (εἰκὼν — likeness, semblance, resemblance in Greek) in that it "reflects what it denotes as it creates an image in one's mind" through "the conscious denotation of one thought content by the name of another which resembles the former in some respect or is somehow analogous to it". The εἰκὼν is therefore not a physical resemblance between sign and object, rather, it is a mental image produced in the interpreter by the completed semiological movement. In this sense it is akin to Kant's schema: the mediating representation that bridges pure concept and sensory intuition in the mind of the subject.

This Cassirerian εἰκὼν must be carefully distinguished from Peirce's icon, which names the mechanism of elevation in Chain 1 and not its outcome. The εἰκὼν as used here is the total mental image received by the beholder: what he sees (System 1, denotation) together with what he gathers from what he sees (System 2, connotation). These do not arrive separately — the beholder standing before the buddhapāda does not first register a mark in stone and then separately infer the Buddha's presence. The two systems resolve into a single apprehension: a unified mental image in which the plain sign and its connotative elevation are received as one. Connotative signifiers act as metaphors (μεταφορά — to carry over, convey, transfer) — "a meaning vehicle" (Zamaros, 2012, p. 19) — but the εἰκὼν is not the transfer itself; it is what the beholder holds in mind when the transfer is complete: the denotative sign and its connotative meaning fused into a single image of the Blessed One.

A parallel for the cognitive dimension formalised here as the εἰκὼν may be found in the work of Victoria Lady Welby (1837–1912), whose triadic theory of meaning — developed in *What is Meaning?* (1903) — anticipates the claim that the completed semiological movement produces something in the mind of the interpreter that exceeds both the plain sense of the sign and its intended meaning. Welby distinguishes three levels: Sense ("the sense in which it is used — the

circumstances, state of mind, reference, 'universe of discourse' belonging to it"), Meaning ("the intent which it is desired to convey — the intention of the user"), and Significance: "The Significance is always manifold, and intensifies its sense as well as its meaning, by expressing its importance, its appeal to us, its moment for us, its emotional force, its ideal value, its moral aspect, its universal or at least social range" (Welby, 1903, pp. 5–6). Welby's Significance — the interpreter-centred outcome that carries the emotional force and ideal value of the sign — maps structurally onto the εἰκὼν as defined here: what the beholder holds in mind when the denotative sign and its connotative meaning are fused into a single apprehension.

What matters for the present framework is the structural recognition, articulated a century ago, that the sign's highest register of meaning is constituted not in the sign itself but in what it produces in the mind of its interpreter. Crucially, the εἰκὼν can apply to all three chains: it is not the exclusive product of iconic connotation but the shared cognitive outcome of all three Peircean mechanisms when elevated through the Barthesian second order.

The evocative εἰκὼν

The devotee who knows the iconographic Code — who has been initiated into the programme of *pang*, *mudras*, *laksanas* — arrives at the image of the Blessed One through a process that is neither contact nor substitution but evocation. The Code calls him up, and what the beholder holds in mind is the denotative sign — statue, pillar, painted figure — fused with what he gathers from it: the Blessed One, present through association.

The presential εἰκὼν

The devotee before the *buddhapāda* does not arrive at the Blessed One through cultural learning or coded association — the footprint compels the image through the logic of physical co-presence. What the beholder holds in mind is the denotative sign — a mark in stone — fused with what he gathers from it: the Blessed One, present because he was here.

The vicarious εἰκὼν

The devotee before the wheel or the stupa arrives at the Blessed One through a deputising sign that occupies his place. What the beholder holds in mind is the denotative sign — wheel, hemispherical structure, tree — fused with what he gathers from it: the Blessed One, present because the sign holds his position.

The εἰκὼν as cognitive outcome is singular in nature but triple in origin. It is the same mental image — the Blessed One, present in the mind of the devotee — arrived at by three different semiotic

paths. The unity of the outcome is what gives Buddhist devotional art its coherence across media, periods, and traditions; the diversity of the chains is what gives the analytical framework its power to distinguish between artefacts that have previously been treated as homogeneous.

Compound Connotation: Multiple Chains in a Single Artefact

Many Buddhist artefacts activate more than one chain simultaneously, producing what may be called *compound connotation*, that is a layering of εἰκὼν types within a single object. The identification of compound connotation in specific artefacts is one of the central analytical tasks of the broader study from which this article is extracted.

ARTEFACT	CHAINS ACTIVATED (εἰκὼν TYPES)
<i>Footprint stamped with a wheel</i>	Chain 2 — <i>presential εἰκὼν</i> (index: the Buddha was here) + Chain 3 — <i>vicarious εἰκὼν</i> (symbol: the wheel stands in his place)
<i>Buddha statue holding an alms bowl</i>	Chain 1 — <i>evocative εἰκὼν</i> (icon: coded association calls up the Blessed One) + Chain 3 — <i>vicarious εἰκὼν</i> (symbol: the bowl deputises for renunciation)
<i>Stupa containing relics</i>	Chain 3 — <i>vicarious εἰκὼν</i> (symbol: stands for the <i>Parinirvāṇa</i>) + Chain 2 — <i>presential εἰκὼν</i> (index: physically houses traces of the Buddha's body)

Conclusion

This article has proposed a semiological framework structured around three chains of meaning, each consisting of two Barthesian semiological systems — System 1 (denotation) and System 2 (connotation) — differentiated by the Peircean mechanism operative within them. Chain 1, driven by the iconic mechanism, produces evocative connotation. Chain 2, driven by the indexical mechanism, produces presential connotation. Chain 3, driven by the symbolic mechanism, produces vicarious connotation. The cognitive outcome of each completed chain is an εἰκὼν, a mental image of the Blessed One produced in the mind of the devotee, understood in the Cassirerian sense developed in Zamaros (2007, 2012) and distinguished throughout from Peirce's homonymous sign concept.

The framework departs from prior approaches in three respects. First, it does not oppose Peirce and Barthes but integrates the former within the latter, using the trichotomy as the engine of connotative differentiation rather than as a standalone sign typology. Second, it does not treat the sign-types as cultural categories produced by prior cultural agreement: the ritualisation of the

originary sign produces culture, not the reverse. Third, it adds a cognitive dimension, the εἰκὼν, relative to the outlined semiotic frameworks.

Critically examined against Eco's synthesis, looked upon as the most sustained prior attempt to bridge these traditions, the present framework is shown to be structurally distinct: where Eco dissolves the trichotomy, this framework preserves and deploys it; where Eco's project ends at the level of sign production, this framework continues to the cognitive outcome.

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