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From Eden to iPhone: The Image of the “Apple” in Peirce’s Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract: Background: This study focuses on the apple image, which has become a visual symbol with multiple meanings throughout the history of art. As the most common fruit, the apple continuously generates diverse meanings in artistic works. It goes beyond being a natural object, undergoing constant reconfiguration and reinterpretation across religious narratives, mythological tales, and secular imagery. It demonstrates symbolic significance across time, space, and media. **Objective:** By interpreting apple imagery in artworks, this study explores how apples transition from “natural objects” to “meaning carriers” embedded with religious doctrines, mythological systems, and secular cultural interpretations. **Method:** This paper analyzes the meanings associated in apple imagery using Peirce’s triadic model of symbols—“iconic symbols—indexical symbols—symbolic symbols.” Analysis shows that the boundary between creating apple imagery and interpreting its meaning is continually challenged, resulting in the ongoing renewal of conveyed significance. **Findings:** The study demonstrates that apple imagery is not merely objective artistic representation but, through a step-by-step process of “description-analysis-interpretation,” reveals its inherent meaning as a symbol of the zeitgeist, ideology, and visual communication. **Conclusion:** Peirce’s triadic model guides art historical research in shifting from representation theory to semiosis theory. The “symbolic interpretation chain” perspective offers a new interpretive path for understanding how visual elements in artworks generate meaning.

Keywords: Apple imagery; Peircean semiotics; Visual symbol; Meaning evolution; Signification

1. Introduction

Apple is one of the most common everyday objects, possesses unique qualities that make it ideal for visual imagery. Its highly recognizable shape, diverse colors, and direct connection to human consumption experiences contribute to its significance. However, in the development of art, the apple has transcended being a mere subject for replication or objective realism. It has been interpreted in various ways, embodying multiple symbols such as “temptation — redemption — power — science — consumption.” Throughout history, the apple has appeared in many cultural narratives, from the “golden apple” in ancient Greek mythology and the “fruit of youth” in Norse mythology, to the “fruit of temptation” in religious imagery depicting Adam and Eve and the “fruit of redemption” symbolizing Christ’s birth. Furthermore, the terms “fruit of technology” refer to Apple Inc. and the “fruit of consumption” in Andy Warhol’s works. The apple’s meaning spans multiple symbolic domains—religious, mythological, and secular. This evolution of meaning is not a simple transfer but a complex process involving the interaction between text, image, and audience.

Existing research often explores the apple’s significance through thematic or disciplinary approaches. Religious art studies emphasize interpretation and

iconographic relationships, while art history and aesthetics focus more on formal development or specific case studies. Each discipline offers valuable insights, but significant fragmentation remains. For instance, Panofsky's iconographic framework often overlooks how symbols are reinterpreted within communication and consumption networks. Conversely, Peirce's semiotic analysis of apple imagery—through the linear relationship of “image-signifier-signified”—highlights the detailed expressiveness of visual materiality, thus offering a more comprehensive understanding of image production and symbolic meaning. Therefore, studying Apple imagery is not merely an examination of isolated content but a classic case study of how visual culture transforms natural objects into symbols and constructs shared meaning through images.

1.1 Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to employ Peirce's triadic theory of signs to explore the semantic evolution of apple imagery in art and its corresponding symbolic meanings. By analyzing classic artworks, this research examines how apple imagery functions within specific artistic contexts to express diverse semantics, encompassing religious doctrines, mythological systems, and secular culture. Using semiotic theory and case-based image analysis, this study develops a theoretical framework linking cultural context, symbolic mechanisms, and pictorial meaning. First, a literature review clarifies the emergence of apple imagery in artworks, cross-referencing historical documents with artistic works and synthesizing existing research on its symbolic significance in art to establish the study's historical and theoretical foundation. Second, among various semiotic theories, Peirce's triadic model—icon, index, and symbol—serves as the primary analytical framework. This model supports both concrete images and abstract symbols, systematically highlighting how apple imagery changes across religious doctrines, mythological systems, and secular culture. Moreover, Peirce's triadic model emphasizes the ongoing interpretive process between image, sign, and interpretant. This helps clarify the connection between the “form and meaning” of the apple as an image signifier across different historical contexts, tracing its symbolic development. Through semiotic analysis of representative image cases, this study reveals the multifaceted meanings of the apple image.

Centering on these objectives, the core research questions are: How does the apple undergo a transformation from “object” to “symbol” across different contexts? How is the apple's symbolism influenced by institutional factors such as religious authority, mythic narratives, and secular life systems? Theoretically, this study employs Peircean triadic semiotics as its framework, using the apple image as an entry point to trace the historical origins and semantic evolution of the apple symbol. Through a semiotic methodology, the apple is elevated from a frequently discussed image to a theoretical framework for understanding how visual culture transforms matter into meaning and how this meaning is reconfigured and challenged across different contexts.

1.2 Research Objectives and Significance

This study introduces Peirce's concept of the “interpretant” into art historical analysis, revealing that visual representation is not the endpoint of meaning in the generation of the apple symbol, but rather the starting point of new interpretive chains. Rubens' apples, Cézanne's still-life apples, Magritte's surrealist apples, and Apple Inc.'s bitten logo—though formally distinct—form a coherent “symbolic evolutionary chain” (Zhao, 2016) through the continuous transformation of interpretants. This reflects Peirce's emphasis on “unlimited semiosis”: the apple's meaning continually develops through processes of re-examining, re-interpreting, and re-symbolizing, shifting its function from religious symbolism to an icon of technology and consumer culture (Chandler & Munday, 2011).

Methodologically, this visual analysis follows Peircean semiotics. Beginning with resemblance, it explores the perceptual characteristics and formal logic of apple imagery, revealing how it establishes connections to “nature” through basic visual similarity. Next, it analyzes the narrative function of the apple as an indexical sign—how it references mythic stories, religious events, or social experiences. Finally, at the symbolic level, it examines how the apple becomes abstracted, institutionalized, and integrated into systems of cultural memory. This approach combines descriptive and interpretive methods, liberating art-historical image analysis from the limitations of “representationalism” and “formalism” to emphasize the ongoing process of creating meaning.

Peirce’s semiotics also offers a framework known as the “logical continuum,” which prevents the apple’s symbolism from being fragmented into discrete categories such as religious, mythical, secular, or contemporary. Instead, it is viewed as part of an ongoing evolutionary process of symbolism (Figure 1). The apple’s transformation from forbidden fruit to artistic motif to brand icon is fundamentally a history of symbolic logic that renews itself. The “interpretants” at each stage form the semantic foundation necessary for generating meaning in the next phase, thereby creating a mechanism of “recursive meaning” (Tian, 2023). This perspective challenges the traditional linear narrative of “image evolution” in art history, shifting toward a multi-directional generative theory centered on symbolic logic.

In summary, this study, based on Peircean semiotics, examines the concept of the “apple” as a dynamic visual sign. Its meaning is not a static cultural projection but rather the result of continuous restructuring, extension, and reinterpretation within the chain of sign actions. Through a threefold analysis of “likeness-signifier-symbol,” the study of apple imagery transcends purely aesthetic analysis to become a cultural investigation of symbolic processes. This approach not only broadens the interpretive dimensions of art history but also offers new opportunities for applying semiotics to research on visual images.

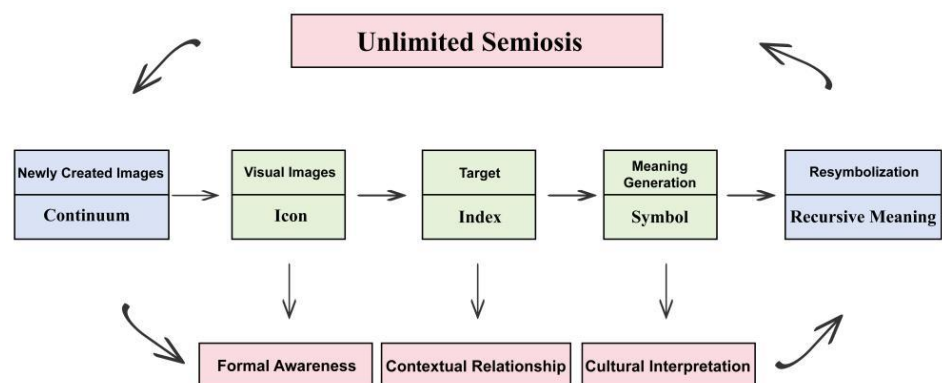


Figure 1. The Chain of Continuous Symbolic Evolution

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 The Emergence and Evolution of Apple Imagery

Images are not isolated, static symbolic systems but rather dynamic structures of meaning that continuously evolve within specific historical contexts, influenced by complex historical and social factors. The meaning of today’s “apple” is not the same as

that of the past. The use of symbols and images allows us to understand the core elements of an era—its sentiments, ideologies, contradictions, and ideals. Thus, the emergence of Apple as an image can be understood as a long-term cultural construction process. It is neither the direct use of a single image nor a random visual occurrence, but rather a visual symbol jointly formed by the object itself, through meaning construction, image stabilization, and widespread dissemination.

As an inherent object, the apple has a rounded shape, glossy skin, rich color, and a grip-friendly surface that matches the human hand. These physical attributes make its visual appeal stand out more than other fruits. Moreover, visual arts often use efficient, clear symbols to convey narratives and meanings, ensuring immediate audience recognition—a role the apple fulfills. The visualization of natural features is not merely a neutral representation but rather the original code of pictorial symbols shaped through artistic methods like painting, sculpture, and printmaking. Image stability and widespread dissemination helped the apple image shift from random occurrences to a more concentrated representation (Chen, 2014).

Depicting Hercules observing or approaching the golden apple tree, the Hesperides Garden was painted on an Athenian vase circa 360 BCE. An ancient Greek red-figure vase from circa 420 BCE shows the golden apple tree in the Garden of the Hesperides with a serpent coiled around it. This illustrates the classical mythological association of the golden apple with immortality and divine power. The golden apple (the apple of discord) awarded by Paris to “the fairest” sparked the Trojan War, making it a dual symbol of beauty and contention.

Medieval altarpieces, manuscript illustrations, and ecclesiastical decorations depicted biblical narratives, consistently using the same iconographic patterns in doctrinal preaching and liturgical participation. Although the Bible does not specifically name the forbidden fruit, Western tradition has universally identified it as an apple. Scholars have noted the linguistic similarity in Latin between “evil” (*malum*) and “apple” (*mālum*). This coincidence intertwined the imagery of evil with the apple, forming a religious symbolism that included figures, serpents, and trees (Blythe, 2018). For instance, the fresco *Expulsion from Eden* discovered in early Italian regions explicitly depicts an apple. In late medieval religious paintings, the Virgin Mary was often portrayed as the “New Eve.” Her embrace of the Christ Child, who is holding an apple, symbolized the cleansing of original sin through Christ’s birth. The apple in the infant’s hand represented the Virgin’s role in bringing redemption to the new world. A notable example is Martin Junger’s 1475 work, *Madonna with the Christ Child Holding an Apple*, in which the fruit represents rebirth and salvation.

During the Renaissance, the symbolism of the apple expanded. In Lucas Cranach the Elder’s painting *The Golden Age* (1530), the apple tree is prominently featured at the center of the composition, representing both the golden age and innocence. Artists of this period often blended mythological and biblical themes, giving the apple with both religious and humanist significance. In portraiture, apples were sometimes used to suggest specific character traits. For example, Raphael’s *Young Man with an Apple* (1505) depicts a young man holding an apple in his right hand, symbolizing his youth and vitality. Similarly, Dutch artist Pieter de Hooch’s *Woman Peeling an Apple* (1663) expresses the warmth of domestic life.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, apples became a prominent subject in still-life paintings. Paul Cézanne, renowned for his apple still lifes, elevated the humble apple into a symbol of new artistic concepts through his extensive body of work. Artists focused on the apple’s color and form, using it as a vehicle for modernist artistic exploration (Li, 2011). During this period, the apple transitioned from a religious symbol to a secular aesthetic, with its visual characteristics emphasizing texture and form while balancing color and structure in compositions. By the 20th century, modernist artists like the Surrealists offered new interpretations of the apple theme. Magritte’s *“The Listening Room”* (1952), an entire room filled with green apples, suggests themes of concealment

and alienation. Similarly, Andy Warhol's "Apples" (1983) redefines the semantic meaning of the apple through the replication of ready-made objects, embedding it within the contexts of "consumption" and "repetition" (Ma, 2017). Here, the apple image retains classical symbolism while critiquing tradition through unconventional compositions and perspectives, highlighting the multifaceted potential of its symbolic meaning.

In summary, the apple image draws archetypes from biblical and mythological and is represented through established religious art. Its symbolic meaning evolves continuously across different historical contexts. From its early representations of the "forbidden fruit" and the "golden apple" to its portrayal in Renaissance humanistic art and further into its role as an emotional anchor in secular life and consumer culture, the visual symbol of the apple has been reconstructed through multiple discourses, including mythology, religion, and daily life. The transformation of the apple image from a textual "fruit" to a concrete "apple in the picture" is not merely a matter of visual creation but a process of continuous attribution and reconstruction of meaning within the symbolic system.

Table 1. The Emergence and Evolution of the Apple Image

Work and Artist	Country	Time	Form	Background	Image Description	Symbolic Meaning	Work Image
<i>Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides</i> Ancient Artisans	Athens	c. 360 BCE	Pottery Pattern	Mythology	Hercules watches or approaches the golden apple tree.	It represents the divine perfection of "transcending desire" and is the opposite of "temptation".	
<i>The Golden Apple Tree in the Garden of the Hesperides with the Dragon Coiled Around It</i> Ancient Artisans	Ancient Greece	c. 420 BCE	Pottery Pattern	Mythology	The golden apple tree stands in the middle, coiled by the dragon Ladon. There are two golden apples on the branches.	It symbolizes marriage, eternity, divine immortality, and God-given wisdom.	
<i>Hercules</i> Ancient Artisans	Roman Empire	1st-2nd Century CE	Marble Sculpture	Mythology	Hercules stands naked, holding the apples of the Hesperides and a knotted club in his hands.	It symbolizes eternal life and divinity.	
<i>The Judgment of Paris</i> Sandro Botticelli	Italy	1483-1485	Tempera on Panel	Mythology	Hera, Athena and Aphrodite compete for the golden apple; Paris awards it to Aphrodite, which sparks the Trojan War.	The disaster caused by "superficial beauty", a dual symbol of beauty and strife.	

Work and Artist	Country	Time	Form	Background	Image Description	Symbolic Meaning	Work Image
<i>The Expulsion of Adam and Eve</i> Ancient Artisans	Italy	c. 1250	Fresco	Religion	Depicts the scene where Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden after eating the apple.	It symbolizes the fall of man and the acquisition of knowledge.	
<i>Madonna with the Christ Child Holding an Apple</i> Martin Junger	Germany	1475	Engraving	Religion	The Virgin Mary holds the Christ Child with an apple, implying the cleansing of human original sin through the birth of Christ.	It symbolizes rebirth and salvation.	
<i>Young Man with an Apple</i> Raphael	Italy	1505	Oil on Panel	Secular	A portrait of a young man holding an apple in his hand.	The apple symbolizes youth and vitality.	
<i>The Golden Age</i> Lucas Cranach the Elder	Germany	1530	Oil on Panel	Mythology	People dance around an apple tree.	The apple symbolizes the utopian ideals associated with the Golden Age.	
<i>Woman Peeling an Apple</i> Pieter de Hooch	Netherlands	1663	Oil on Canvas	Secular	A young woman with a basket of apples on her lap is peeling an apple and looking at a little girl standing beside her.	The apple symbolizes family harmony.	
<i>Still Life with Apples</i> Paul Cézanne	France	1878	Oil on Canvas	Secular	A subjective depiction of still life with apples.	It symbolizes the rise and development of new artistic concepts.	
<i>The Listening Room</i> René Magritte	Belgium	1952	Oil on Canvas	Secular	Green apples fill the entire room in an exaggerated and enlarged form.	It symbolizes "concealment" and "alienation".	
<i>Apples</i> Andy Warhol	USA	1983	Silkscreen	Secular	The reproduction of ready-made objects.	It symbolizes "consumption" and "repetition".	

2.2 Peirce's Semiotics as a Research Framework for Apple Images

American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce divided the triadic structure of signs into three interconnected elements: representamen, object, and interpretant. The representamen is the sign itself, which is the impression or concept perceived by the senses. The object is the entity that exist in reality or an imagined entity. The interpretant is the meaning that sign conveys, representing the fundamental characteristic that validates the sign. These three elements form a triadic structural relationship.

Peirce further proposed a classification of symbols into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. An icon shares common, similar properties with its referent, enabling recognizable similarities. An index has a direct or causal relationship with its referent, indicating an association. A symbol involves a socially conventionalized relationship with its referent, meaning its significance is established through societal agreement rather than inherent qualities. These symbolic conventions are not inherent; they emerge through prolonged development within specific sociocultural contexts, where they rely on shared meanings established by communities (Figure 1). Peirce's model reveals the complex nature of signified, where the interpretant serves as the starting point for further signification, enabling infinite derivation. Consequently, Peirce's theory represents the most significant paradigm in contemporary semiotics and marks a pivotal turning point in the field.

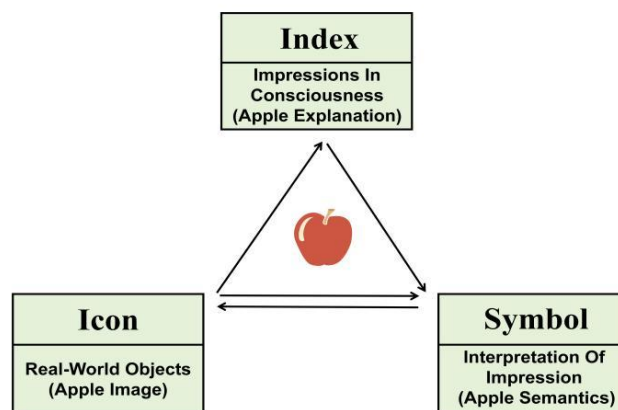


Figure 2. The Semiotic Composition of the Apple Image in Peircean Semiotics

Peirce's triadic structure not only clarifies activities related to symbolic meaning but also formalizes theoretical thinking, creating universally applicable analytical methods. It serves as a formalized theory for understanding and interpreting diverse cultures and societies. Consequently, Peirce's triadic semiotics provides a valuable analytical tool for analyzing the layered nature of images in image studies. Peirce's triadic system enables more detailed tracing of meaning across perception, context, and the sign domain. Against backgrounds blending myth, religious narratives, and secular life—as shown in apple imagery—Peirce's model offers a methodology for interpreting how apple images function as carriers of ideological and cultural content. It emphasizes interpretive processes and the diversity of meanings rooted in historical-cultural contexts. This theoretical flexibility makes it particularly useful for examining the chains of meaning formed by apple imagery across different settings. Peircean semiotics, with its emphasis on the triadic relationship between image, signifier, and signified, provides a strong methodological framework for studying the symbolic meanings conveyed by apple imagery.

3. Cross-Contextual Analysis of Apple Imagery through Peircean Triadic Semiotics

3.1 Symbolization of Apple Imagery in Religious Contexts

In Peirce's semiotic framework, the generation of meaning depends on direct or causal connections between symbols and their referents. Unlike pictorial symbols that establish associations through similarity, the referential function of symbols is based on their actual relationship or contextual links with objects. This link can be expressed through spatial proximity, temporal continuity, or associations constructed by sociocultural contexts. It is precisely at this level that symbols transform from being merely passive indicators to become crucial mediators. They reveal existential relationships and generate meaning.

In Christian tradition, the apple is not explicitly identified as the fruit mentioned in biblical texts. However, in Western visual culture, the "apple" has become the conventional image for the "forbidden fruit" from the Eden narrative. This association is not coincidence; the apple's distinctive shape, color, and texture makes it an ideal medium for the icon—a recognizable and reproducible symbol. The indexical sign corresponds to ethical themes of knowledge, temptation, and fall. The early use of apple symbolism in religious contexts relies on the interplay between scriptural texts and early Christian commentary. Biblical narratives outline the structure of the events (temptation—fruit consumption—fall—expulsion), while ecclesiastical tradition and theological reflections add moral and redemptive dimensions to these events. In art history, the apple functions both as a narrative entity and as a means for conveying moral lessons and discourses about redemption. To study the apple as a religious symbol requires considering three layers of logic: First, institutionalized textual interpretation provides the semantic framework for visual representation. Second, images transform abstract doctrines into visible, tangible, meditative visual objects. Third, audiences engage with and reinforce these symbolic meanings through reception.

The Eden narrative serves as the core semantic framework for understanding apple imagery. This narrative incorporates several key elements: characters (humans and the tempter), fruit, trees, actions (reaching, eating), and consequences (shame, concealment, expulsion). These elements form an "event field" within the visual space through composition, direction, and gaze interactions. The apple is typically highlighted as the primary signifier, with its color, position, and physical contact with figures anchor visual attention. From a semiotic perspective, Peirce's tripartite analysis highlights the apple's multiple sign functions. As an image, the apple retains physical resemblance, enabling viewers to first recognize it as fruit on a perceptual level. As an index, its interaction with figures, such as biting, establishes causal and temporal chains that indicate the unfolding of the Fall. Finally, as a symbol, culturally and doctrinally linked to "original sin," the apple represents ideas that go beyond the object itself, addressing ethical and theological concepts (Akbar, 2005).

In medieval and Renaissance depictions of the Madonna and Child, the apple is often held in the hands of the infant Christ or the Virgin Mary. This serves as a visual symbol of the "New Adam—New Generation Redemption" typology. Christ, referred to as the "New Adam," rectifies Adam's transgression, restoring humanity's relationship with God through his suffering and redemption. Thus, the indexical function of the apple in Madonna and Child paintings no longer signifies mere fallenness but serves as a symbol of the "antidote to original sin" or the "object of redemption." The symbolic representation of the infant Christ holding an apple both indicates his role in bearing the burden of atonement and signifies the inauguration of the New Covenant. This transformation illustrates how symbols can acquire new meanings: an object originally associated with fallenness is reinterpreted within the narrative of redemption, gaining a positive religious significance. Semiotically, this constitutes a "transference of meaning," achieved through typological associations (parallels between the Old Testament and the New Testament) and deliberate iconographic programming—such as the posture of the infant holding the apple and the Virgin's act of offering it.

The specific meaning of the apple motif in religious contexts is not fixed but profoundly influenced by era, geography, theological schools, and variations in pictorial content. Any interpretation of the apple motif must be understood within a specific historical context, avoiding the danger of applying meanings from one context to another without consideration. Thus, meaning does not develop in isolation; it evolves through the viewer's cultural background, theological understanding, viewing habits, and interpretation process. The apple's significance is both conferred and reproduced through confirmation. The viewer's actions such as prayer, penance, and bodily associations all influence the image's emotional and moral impact. From a semiotic perspective, this emphasizes the interpreter's role within Peirce's model: the interpreter both translates the image's index or symbol into concrete ethical actions and reinforces the symbol's social function within collective memory.

Table 2. The Hierarchical Relationship of the Symbolization of Apple Images in Religious Artworks

Artist	Work and Time	Icon	Index	Symbol	Work Image
Hans Baldung Grien	<i>Adam and Eve</i> 1507	The painting presents full-body images of a man and a woman; the man holds an apple in his hand, and the woman on the right raises an apple with her right hand as well.	The apples held by Adam and Eve indicate that the act of "taking the fruit" or "passing the fruit" is in progress, forming a temporal reference to the event of "temptation-response".	The round shape of the apple is a metaphor for the cycle of perfection and desire. In the work, the apple transcends the material level and becomes a symbol of "the origin of human morality" and "the awakening of desire".	
Peter Paul Rubens	<i>Adam and Eve</i> 1597	The man is on the left side of the painting, stretching his right hand toward the woman and pointing at an apple; the woman on the right raises her left hand slightly to her cheek, as if hesitating or thinking.	The physical connection between the outstretched hand and the apple indicates "giving" or "tempting". The posture of not taking the apple implies the critical point of the event, i.e., "temptation is about to be completed".	The apple represents the forbidden knowledge and desire of God, bearing the metaphor of "human beings attempting to transgress God's commands", and refers to the coexistence of life, temptation and the fall.	
Anthony van Dyck	<i>Madonna and Child</i> 1621	The Christ Child stands in a relaxed posture, holding an apple in his hand, which becomes a link between the Christ Child and the Virgin Mary.	Through the physical exchange of the apple from the mother to the child, the index points to the causality and time sequence from the "event of sin" to the "realization of redemption".	The symbol of the apple is reversed and recoded, transforming from a "symbol of sin" to an "omen of redemption". It symbolizes the innocent who undertakes the mission of salvation in	

Artist	Work and Time	Icon	Index	Symbol	Work Image
				religious art.	
Nicolas Poussin	The Holy Family on the Steps 1648	Apples appear in two positions in the painting: one is placed in front of the Virgin Mary within the Christ Child's reach, and the other is a cluster of fruits in a basket in the foreground.	The passing of the apple between hands forms an indexical relationship: the apple becomes a medium of contact between the two children, pointing to the future destiny of bearing the original sin of all mankind.	The apple is re-"accepted" through the hands of Christ and becomes a symbol of redemption, representing the dual structure of religious history with "sin" as the starting point and "redemption" as the end point.	

In summary, within the religious context, the apple functions as a multi-layered symbol representing both the revelation of knowledge and moral warning, the temptation and its caution, and the symbol of redemption. Its semantic meaning emerges from the interaction of four factors: text, image, institution, and audience. Text provides the narrative framework; images objectify the narrative through perceptual grammar; image institutions determine presentation methods and educational functions; audiences interpret and reproduce meaning through reception and devotional practices. Peirce's semiotic framework offers analytical tools that expand the examination of this unique object into a comprehensive understanding of moral, epistemic, and redemptive ideas within Christian visual culture. This study demonstrates that the religious context serves as the starting point for understanding how the apple's intentionality develops, rather than its only endpoint.

3.2 The Symbolization of Apple Imagery in Mythological Contexts

In mythological contexts, the "apple" signifier functions as a means for cultural narratives and symbolic systems. Mythology provides archetypal patterns for the collective imagination while also creating symbolic carriers, such as objects, animals, and plants, for memory and transmission. Thus, applying Peirce's semiotics reveals how apples are consistently encoded and translated across major mythological traditions, becoming visual semantic carriers of themes like power, desire, eternity, and aesthetic judgment. Research into ancient Greek and Norse mythology not only reveals how the apple became "supernaturalized" across different cultural contexts but also elucidates its interconnection with socio-political-aesthetic orders within imagery and narrative. This study begins with the "Judgment of Paris" in ancient Greece and the "Apples of Idun" in Norse mythology. Using semiotic analytical tools, it outlines the semantic network and evolutionary logic of the apple within the framework of mythological culture (Che, 2019).

The original archetype of the apple in ancient Greek mythology is the "golden apple." In this narrative, a golden apple inscribed with "For the Fairest" becomes the object of divine rivalry. (Zhang, 2019) Here, the golden apple symbolizes "supreme beauty" and desire while also foreshadowing conflict and destruction. The golden apple became a symbol of "desire and calamity, vanity and cost," with Paris's choice directly igniting the spark that led to the Trojan War. In this context, the apple goes beyond a

mere physical object, representing the concrete function of aesthetic judgment. From a semiotic perspective, its iconic shape makes it easy to recognize and highlights its significance, symbolizing “the authority to judge beauty,” “the coding of power,” and “the catalyst for desire.” The golden apple holds the authority to define “beauty.” Aesthetic judgment either legitimizes power or sparks conflicts over power, triggering the desire—love—and competitive mechanisms associated with “the most beautiful.” Thus, the apple becomes a mechanism for triggering desire. The “judgment power” attributed to the apple is formally the delivery of an object, but in substance, represents a symbolic transfer of power, sovereignty, and the fate of society. Artistic representations of this motif often emphasize this triadic relationship by placing the apple in the hands of deities or arbiters. This imagery or narratives directly link the “object” to “fate,” compelling viewers to recognize that aesthetic judgment is not a purely apolitical act of observation, but a complex synthesis rooted in desire, interest, and divine imagery.

The symbolic significance of apples, referred to as the “fruit of youth” in Norse mythology, reveals distinct cultural aspirations. Idunn and her apples are depicted as the source of the gods’ youth and immortality. Idunn, representing youth, guards golden apples that sustain the gods’ vitality. Although the gods are not inherently immortal, they bite these apples when aging to restore youth and divine power, highlighting the symbolic mechanism of “eternal youth” and “perpetual divine strength.” In this context, the apples connect to cycles of time, life regeneration, and communal continuity—not to the political conflicts associated with aesthetic judgment. Semiotic analysis highlights a semantic distinction that aligns with both Norse cosmology’s cyclical, fated, and epic sense of time and with the pantheon’s institutional reliance on vitality and the maintenance of order. As objects that “bestow youth,” apples are essential to sustaining the gods’ power. Their physical properties—ease of preservation, repeatability of consumption, and symbolism of eternity—are tightly integrated into cultural practices, forming an “institution-myth” complex. This complex supports the stability of institutions and communities through the consumption and sharing of objects. Within Peirce’s framework, the Norse apple primarily serves as an indicator and a symbol. Its indicator role is clear in its direct connection to the gods’ longevity, while its symbolism is established in cultural narratives representing eternity and rebirth.

Comparing these mythological contexts shows that the cross-cultural “symbolization” of apples depends on several shared mechanisms. The object’s visual prominence provides the perceptual foundation for its role as a focal point in narratives and imagery. Mythological structures require objects as triggers and links, connecting individual actions to collective history or destiny. Cultural discourse uses typology and symbolic systems to establish stable pairings between objects and values. Rituals, customs, and textual interpretations repeatedly reproduce these pairings, thereby institutionalizing and naturalizing the object’s meaning. The value of semiotics here lies in establishing a clear relationship between “object-meaning-institution” and analyzing how different cultures achieve distinct associative meanings through similar objects.

Table 3. The Hierarchical Relationship of the Symbolization of Apple Images in Mythological Artworks

Artist	Work and Time	Icon	Index	Symbol	Work Image
Jacob Jordaens	<i>The Golden Apple Incident</i> 1633	The golden apple is at the center of the painting, with its luster, round shape and golden texture becoming	The apple is the direct cause of “strife”. The gods’ gazes and gestures point to this fruit, and the apple	It symbolizes the idealized concept of “the judgment of beauty” and “divine competition”, and the	

Artist	Work and Time	Icon	Index	Symbol	Work Image
		the visual focus. The gods gather around the golden apple.	“indicates” that conflict and choice are about to occur.	contradiction between “the order of beauty” and “the morality of choice”.	
Peter Paul Rubens	<i>The Judgment of Paris</i> 1636	The golden apple in Paris’s hand, the posture of Cupid, the peacock and other elements all have direct visual recognizability, being a direct reproduction of mythological images.	The apple is the trigger of the event, indicating the upcoming choice and consequences—the beginning of the Trojan War.	It symbolizes “the highest reward for beauty” and “the temptation of desire”, and at the same time is the starting point of the Trojan War, a symbol of war and destruction.	
Herman Wilhelm Bissen	<i>Idunn</i> 1858	Idunn’s apples have the realistic texture of round fruits, smooth surfaces and stacked accumulation, constituting a reproduction of the “real apple”.	As the god-given fruit, the apple has a direct causal connection with “divine power”.	It is a symbol of youth and immortality, representing that the gods maintain eternal life by eating it. The apple becomes a symbol of the divine order and the cycle of time.	
John Bauer	<i>Loki and Idunn</i> 1911	The fruit basket and apples held by Idunn truly reproduce the natural form of apples through their depiction of round, smooth shapes and detailed lines.	The apple becomes an indexical object linking time, divinity and the turning point of fate, connecting the development of the story and the psychological subtext of the characters.	It symbolizes eternal youth and the renewal of life, becoming a spiritual symbol and cultural metaphor of mythology, pointing to human beings’ longing for immortality and moral predicament.	

Research indicates that apples undergo a phased evolution within mythical contexts, transforming from “concrete objects” to “symbolic carriers.” This progression emphasizes the object’s prominence, anchoring it narratively within pivotal plots and establishing conventions that link expanded symbols to abstract values. Ultimately, it leads to symbolic stabilization, enabling the apple to function as a repository of cultural memory and ritual resources. Interpreting apple imagery within a semiotic framework helps reveal the internal logic of specific mythic motifs. Thus, meticulous analysis of mythic contexts holds significant methodological value for tracing the historical transmission and evolution of symbolic intent. The “symbolization” of apples within mythic-cultural frameworks is not a mysteriously spontaneous growth, but rather the result of multiple mechanisms working together, including perceptual accessibility, narrative function, cultural conventions, and institutionalized representation (Hang, 2013).

3.3 The Symbolization of the “Apple” in Secular and Modern Contexts

The apple holds a profound symbolic significance rooted in religious and mythological contexts. However, with shifts in modern aesthetics, media, and consumer culture, its meaning structure underwent a fundamental transformation. It has evolved from a traditional narrative and moral lesson into material for formal experimentation, an alienated pictorial element, and a pop symbol used in consumer branding.

Modern painting, as exemplified by Cézanne, transformed the apple from a simple object of “religious or literary allegory” into an object of formal artistic inquiry. Cézanne’s treatment of still lifes went beyond mere representation; it established a new symbolism between “object” and “compositional structure.” The apple’s volume, color blocks, light-and-shadow interplay, and spatial relationships became compositional challenges for the painter. Through simple brushstrokes and compact compositions, the apple still-life series elevates the apple’s image into a subject of formal inquiry. (Li, 2021) By repeatedly observing and reconstructing the apple, Cézanne reveals the geometric and structural laws of visual experience, thereby facilitating the transition from representationalism to modernism. Within a semiotic framework, the apple goes beyond being just an edible fruit to become a metaphor for the artist’s exploration of “pure form” and visual truth. Its pictorial symbolism demonstrates how art transforms everyday objects into a medium for aesthetic contemplation and philosophical exploration. Researchers must meticulously annotate the formal attributes of apples within these compositions. Through formal substitution, perspective manipulation, and the reconfiguration of color relationships, artists encourage viewers to reinterpret the relationship between “image and symbol”, thereby elevating the apple as a “cultural symbol” within modernity (Chen, 2007).

Modern art explores the tension between image and meaning by examining how the motifs, such as the apple, can be alienated, concealed, repeated, or commodified (Jiang, 2018). For example, in Magritte’s painting “The Son of Man,” the apple is not a literal symbol in the traditional sense. Instead, by obscuring the face, the apple becomes “defamiliarized.” This concealment prevents easy recognition and creates a sense of mystery, encouraging viewers to reflect on the relationship between subjectivity, visibility, and concealment. Thus, the technique of using an apple to obscure the face functions more as a philosophical image. It borrows the metaphor of the “forbidden fruit” while emphasizing the tension between the visible and the hidden, prompting contemplation of the relationship between concealment and visibility. Here, the apple functions both as pictorial material and a conceptual trigger, retaining its material perceptibility while also symbolizing deeper ideas related to cognition and recognition.

The cultural phenomenon centered on the commercial brand “Apple” logo demonstrates how the apple image has been translated into a visual shorthand for “knowledge, innovation, and modernity.” The brand logo’s design strategy leverages Apple’s advantage as a universally recognizable signifier—its simple silhouette, adaptability across media, and associative space linked to the “fruit-knowledge-curiosity” tradition. Semiotically, the brand logo drastically simplifies and institutionalizes the signifier, transforming its symbol into a highly communicable phrase within cultural discourse. However, this symbolization is not a natural evolution but a construction jointly shaped by markets, advertising, and cultural narratives (Hao, 2013). When the Apple logo detached from its original referents—like natural fruit or religious motifs—and became a self-referential system, it entered a state of simulacrum. The symbol not only represents the commodity but also constructs the very desire for consumption itself.

Another signature strategy in contemporary art is the use of repetition and replication. Andy Warhol used industrial reproduction techniques to de-individualize images of consumer goods, presenting them within a gallery context to confront viewers with the cultural reality that “the image is the commodity.” One notable example is the Apple (FS II.359), a 1985 silkscreen from Warhol’s “Advertising” series, which centers on Apple’s vintage rainbow logo. Although it retains the original logo’s basic form—a

bitten apple outline filled with multicolored stripes—the work incorporates graffiti-like brushstrokes and dazzling gradients onto the original design, transforming a commercial icon into an appreciable artistic image. The apple imagery serves as a bridge between consumer culture and brand significance. In Apple 359, a widely recognized brand logo is placed within an artistic context. It not only symbolizes technological products but also promotes associations with consumer desire. Thus, the apple depicted in “Apple from Ads” (F. & S. II.359) serves both as a symbol of Apple’s products and as a representation of 20th-century advertising culture (Li, 2025).

Table 4. The Hierarchical Relationship of the Symbolization of Apple Images in Secular and Modern Works

Artist	Work and Time	Icon	Index	Symbol	Work Image
Paul Cézanne	<i>Still Life with Apples</i> 1879	The round volume and realistic light perception of apples are expressed with heavy brushstrokes and layered color blocks, allowing the viewer to accurately identify the “apple” image.	The apple is more than an object; it is evidence of the contact between the artist’s gaze and reality, becoming an index of the painting act.	The apple symbolizes order, perception and formal exploration, no longer referring to religion or mythology, but becoming a symbol of modern artistic thinking, moving from sensibility to rationality and from the object to form.	
René Magritte	<i>The Son of Man</i> 1964	The floating apple is highly similar to the real apple in shape, color and texture, representing a natural, real and tangible object.	The obstruction of the apple points to the “hidden human face” and “the invisibility of identity”, becoming a medium of “concealment and revelation”.	The apple becomes a symbol of modern people being obscured by appearances, longing for truth but trapped by reality.	
Steve Jobs	<i>Apple Logo</i> 1998	The “bitten apple” as a graphic symbol retains the basic shape characteristics of an apple (roundness, stem on the top, gap).	The trace of “a bite taken” indicates human participation, desire and behavioral marks; the bite mark is also an index of “thinking” or “enlightenment”.	The apple has completely transcended the natural object, becoming a symbol of technology, innovation, aesthetics and individual thinking.	
Andy Warhol	<i>Apple from Ads (F. & S. II.359)</i> 1985	The outline of the apple, the tilt angle of the fruit leaf, the shape of the bite mark and other elements all have a direct similarity with real objects.	The coexistence of hand-painted traces and printing texture points to the blurred boundary between humans and machines, and between art and industry.	It transforms the brand logo into art, representing the integration of consumerism, the spirit of innovation and pop culture.	

Research indicates that Apple's shift from "religious taboo" to "consumer desire" has multiple layers of meaning. First is "recontextualization," where symbols are redefined within new contexts. This transition reinterprets the apple's negative ethical connotations in the biblical Eden as positive values associated with the modern brand. Second is "decanonization," where traditional meanings are diluted or displaced in consumer contexts. The symbol's historical significance has been replaced by market discourse. "Resymbolization" involves creating new narratives and symbolic meanings within consumer culture. Through repeated exposure via advertising, product experiences, celebrity endorsements, and media narratives, the Apple image embeds itself as a second-order symbol within everyday conversation. It is accepted as "common knowledge"—for instance, that "Apple represents innovation" often requires no further justification. The apple motif in secular and modern art contexts reveals multiple shifts: from materiality to form, from private to public, and from tradition to brand. Employing semiotics as a theoretical tool and integrating formal analysis with socio-economic contexts, this study captures both the apple's immediate material effects as a visual object and its cultural significance as an image source and identity symbol in modern society.

4. Conclusion

This study centers on Peirce's triadic semiotic framework to trace the chain of semantic transformations of the "apple" image across three contexts: religion, mythology, and secular culture. As a visual symbol, the apple's signifier is not a static object but rather the result of continuous reconfiguration and recontextualization within the interactions of image production, social dissemination, and cultural reception. It has evolved from a natural object into a cultural symbol, and from a sacred narrative to a consumer metaphor. This symbolic migration reveals the openness and repetitive nature of meaning generation within visual culture, while also addressing the initial research question: how does the apple change from "object" to "symbol" across different institutional frameworks and media?

Methodologically, this study extends Peircean semiotics from linguistic and logical contexts to the analysis of visual art, emphasizing the critical role of the dynamic "interpretant" in image interpretation. Through the logical model of "iconic sign—indexical sign—symbolic sign," semiotic analysis establishes a framework for understanding how meaning is generated. However, this study also acknowledges the limitations of Peircean semiotics in visual culture: the generation of "interpretants" in real-world communication is often influenced by media technologies, visual conventions, and market discourses—factors which are not considered in Peirce's original logical-semantic framework. Therefore, within art history and visual culture studies, the Peircean model must integrate with diverse perspectives from iconology, communication studies, and cultural semiotics to form a more resilient analytical system.

Findings indicate that Apple's transformation from "material object" to "symbol"—its separation from physical form and symbolic representation—is enabled by the very material qualities that render it sensually accessible in daily life. Peircean semiotics' logical tripartite structure translates into an operational framework for visual culture studies. However, during symbolicization, the concrete material is progressively abstracted; artistic forms employ strategies like simplification, distortion, concealment, and repetition to transform the edible apple into an artistic symbol. By tracking "apple" imagery across different times and places, this paper reveals the migration logic of symbolic meaning across cultural systems and demonstrates how art historical research shifts from a theory of representation to a theory of symbolic action. The perspective of the "symbolic interpretive chain" offers a new way to understand how the visual elements in artworks generate meaning.

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