

Artifactual analysis of a picture of a potted plant resting on a white surface which has a gold-colored stripe

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## Introduction

This paper is accompanied by a scan of a photographic picture of a potted plant. The paper analyzes the possible phenomenological and artifactual implications of this photographic picture of a potted plant. The Analysis proceeds outward from the inner phenomenon/artifact, to the entire 'world' of the picture, moving in each stage to start in the more concrete or practical analyses of each artifact or artifactual grouping, and finishing with some conjectures as to possible symbological meanings inherent in each stage. As each stage groups the stage before, additional analyses covering subsets of the grouping are occasionally brought to light as a sub-analysis of the grouping.

## Analysis

### Part I: Overview

The artifact in direct question is a potted plant. The plant has three stalks and appears to be in relatively healthy shape; a bright green in color, leaves facing out. The plant is in what appears to be a clay pot which in turn is kept in some sort of supporting dish, the whole of it on a white surface scattered with dirt. A gold line is evident on the facing surface of the white supporting surface.

A plant, per se, is a phenomenological object. It grows directly in nature, without any necessary connection of intent (setting aside the *reductio ad absurdum* of deictical intent, which renders everything except deity non-phenomenological and makes the entire study of artifact vs. phenomenon quite useless). However, this plant, having been removed from nature and set into a pot, has an obvious intent in its current existence, thus making its artifactual nature plain. As there is no proof that the plant started growing in the pot, it may have had its original growth start as a phenomenon, and then with intent been removed to the pot; or it could have been grown in the pot from seed, or from transplant from another pot or other artifactual circumstance.

### Part II: Plant

## Section 1: Concrete

Aside from adducing an intent by its removal, as a plant, from its natural habitat, any conclusions as to the reason for the plant being an artifact for a particular intent would have to be inferred. The projection of a particular intent and reason for the artifact's existence, or of several such intents and/or reasons, does not necessarily mean that the intent of the creator has been reached. An intent other than what is projected may exist. However, several intents may be projected; these follow.

First, there are the direct purposes which the plant may serve. The first obvious purpose is decoration. The plant may simply be present to add some color to the place where it is, or a sense of life in having a plant growing in the place it is. (There is no way of telling from the picture whether the plant is inside a building or on a support somewhere outside a building.)

Another purpose the plant may serve is to aid in providing oxygen wherever it is located. This would necessitate that there be a perceived lack of oxygen - possibly in a building of some sort - and, of course, more plants that are not in the line of view.

The plant may serve the purpose of food. Again this would necessitate other plants, unless it's food for a very small animal or some sort of insect which is desirable to have around the plant. Alternately, the plant may be used to be harvested for some sort of garnish, which is used sparingly and allows the plant to grow back between uses.

The plant may have a useful flower of some sort - useful for decoration, for garnish, for nourishment, to attract beneficial insects, or for some other use not known. It may simply be out of flowering phase at this point.

The plant may be a young version of a much larger plant. It may be being cultivated in a separate environment to protect it from competition with other plants as well as from the depredations of insect and animal life, until it is large enough to survive these threats on its own. Once grown, it may serve the purpose of food directly; it may produce fruits or flowers that are of that use; it may provide a useful type of wood; it may be a type of plant that provides large quantities of oxygen and thus is useful generally, once grown to full height, for providing oxygen to an area.

The plant may produce a desired odor of some sort. This may be an attractive aroma, or some sort of smell which drives undesired animals or insects from the place where it is.

## Part II: Plant

### Section 2: symbological

Secondly, there are numerous symbolic purposes which the plant may serve. First and foremost, it may serve symbolically its real purpose as well - that is to say, each and every of the direct purposes outlined above may be a symbolic purpose in and of itself.

With symbolic purposes, instead of direct purposes, the intent of the artifact's creator is often less clear. With direct purposes, one can be fairly sure that the direct purpose of the artifact - that is, the scientific, physical purpose - can be found in a delineation of scientific physical purposes, unless, of course, the scientific, physical purpose is beyond the science of the person viewing the artifact. (An example of a scientific purpose not listed above would be that each leaf of the plant being viewed is, for some unknown reason, really useful in spaceflight propulsion, and is particularly amenable to safe interstellar antimatter engines. As our current science has no use for plant leaves - or anything else - in interstellar antimatter engines, enumerations of the possible direct use of the plant would not likely contain that as an option.)

Symbolic purposes, on the other hand, may contain purposes well within the reach of current belief, but because of cultural predispositions, lack of space, &c., may be left out of the descriptions of possible intentions of the artifact's creator. Nevertheless, some possible symbolic interpretations follow.

Most obvious of all is the possibility that, similar to the shamrock metaphor of St. Patrick, the plant - having three stalks - is somehow representative of the Christian deity, having three separate and distinct stalks, yet constituting one potted plant. In this wise, it is likely a better representation than that of the shamrock, as a stalk is a more directly seen representative of an individual "person" than a simple leaf is. This, however, is a possibility which is only obvious viewed from the current culture.

A second possibility along this line is that it represents some deity, generally. Phrasing it this way has the advantage of providing a catchall for many theologies that otherwise would not be thought of or described. There are, however, some specific guesses along this line: it could represent an earth deity, probably male, by bringing the earth into the place of worship and having the phallic symbols - the

stalks - growing from the pot; it could represent a triplex goddess, which is very common in European culture; it could represent a pantheist deity, bringing a type of the deity into a place for worship. It could even be worshipped as a deity in and of itself. The sprinkling of dirt around the pot could be seen as a 'connector' from the pot to the earth in which the plant would naturally grow.

The leaves of the plant, on close examination, have a definite convexity. The plant could be grown as a 'mother' symbol, the elongated convexity of the leaves representing the female breast engorged with milk.

The plant could also be in a place of elevation over other plants of its type; either to be saved from use unlike others, or sacrificed ahead of others. It could also be separated from smaller plants of its type and placed in a position of preeminence as a form of imitative magic, as an example of how the other plants that it's near are desired by the artifact's creator to grow.

The plant could represent some philosophical or religious point not connected to a deity. The positions of the three stalks could represent (left to right) a crawling child, a grown adult, and an elder person creeping along to the grave but not yet dead, still green with life.

### Part III: Pot

#### Section 1: Concrete

As a second major point, the pot itself should be taken into account. Note in the picture that as regards to the pot and the plant, no soil or water can be seen around the plant. For this reason, the notion that it is growing from earth becomes clearly a presupposition in and of itself which must be dealt with now that we are looking specifically at the pot itself.

Again, I will look at the artifactual explanations for the pot first concretely and then symbolically.

The most obvious reason for the pot is to hold the stalks in place. The stalks may be held in several different ways. If the intent is only a display, the stalks may well be tied together in the bottom of the pot, keeping them in a desired position for a specific decorative purpose. In light of this, the plant may not even be a living plant, but may be an artificial display made from paper, plastic, or other material used to create facsimile of plants.

The plant may be held in place by soil. This would also allow the plant, assuming it is a real plant, to grow from the soil; this brings into place the further assumptions that the soil is nurtured and watered on a regular basis, allowing the plant to continue growing in a healthy manner. Such activities would support the various concrete and symbolic reasons outlined above for the plant to exist as an artifact in the first place. Even if the plant is not a real plant, soil would allow more permanent placement of the stalks, making the location of them more reliable than by simply tying them together.

The plant may not be held in place at all. The pot could be completely empty except for the stalks. This would indicate that the artifact is of a transitory nature. This nature could further be divided into a temporary display or a plant ready for use (either as sacrifice, or food, or garnish, or decoration placed outside the pot).

The plant may be loosely held in place by water, growing in an aquaculture manner. This would imply that the growing of the plant is of importance, but not the location of the stalks, in turn implying one of the more concrete uses of the plant over the symbolic; but growing in water could also have a symbolic nature in the movement of the stalks, in that nature may forever be changing to the outer eyes as the stalks move within the pot without losing their essential nature of plant stalks with leaves hanging off of them.

Irrespective of how the plant is held, the pot may simply provide a highlight of shape and color, offsetting the discreteness of the stalks and the green of the overall plant, adding to the concrete decorativeness of the potted plant.

### Part III: Pot

#### Section 2: symbolical

Symbolically, the first notion that occurs to me is that the pot obscures needed information about the plant, as outlined above. In so doing, it may symbolize the mystery of life and of the universe, and the idea that no knowledge is ever complete.

The pot could also be used simply to highlight and elevate the importance of the plant symbolically. The placement of the plant within a special container as opposed to growing in a field or in a larger container with several other plants may indicate that the plant is of some special importance, building upon the previous symbolic interpretations.

Note that the rightmost stalk of the plant is leaning on the edge of the pot. The pot could represent of supportive deity, which allows beings (represented by the plant) to grow strong on their own, but is ready to catch them and hold them when they fall. The stalks of the plant, by derivation, could be seen, respectively left-to-right, as symbolic of struggling, confirmed in faith, and fallen.

#### Part IV: Potted Plant

##### Section 1: Concrete

In this artifactual form, the pot and plant together are of prime importance to the clear definition of the subject as an artifact. Without the pot, the plant could well be in its natural format, and in so being, a prima facie phenomenon. By derivation, therefore, the pot is actually of more importance in artifactual classification than the plant itself, even though the term "potted plant" renders the pot of secondary importance via the adjectival form.

The pot also may serve the purpose of placing the stalks in a single grouping referred to as a "plant". As the bottom of the plant cannot be seen, the plant may in reality be three completely separate plants. The common use of that type of pot for a single plant, however, adds credence to the notion that it is one plant - even though that notion may be entirely illusional.

#### Part IV: Potted Plant

##### Section 2: symbolological

The pot and plant together may form a primitive fertility symbol of union; unlike the previous mention, where the stalks 'grew' from below, the stalks may also represent entry into the pot, which in turn would represent a receiving feminine principle - even though, concretely and assuming the real nature of the plant, the stalks are proceeding outward from the pot instead of inward to the pot.

#### Part V: Potted Plant on White Surface with Gold-Colored Stripe

##### Section 1: Concrete

The white surface may be a simple shelf, for the purpose of supporting the pot. This may in turn elevate it above items that may block sunlight from getting to the plant. Also possibly helpful in having the plant so supported is access to the plant to feed and water it, as the plant has been removed from the phenomenal state. The gold stripe may mark some sort of boundary line, for aid in holding watering implements. On the other hand, the white surface as well as the gold stripe, or either of the two, may be purely decorative.

## Part V: Potted Plant on White Surface with Gold-Colored Stripe

### Section 2: symbological

The pot, the associated dish, and finally the white surface, may symbolize a series of 'steps' from the ground to the true knowledge of nature. The gold stripe may represent a symbological boundary, past which human knowledge is generally limited. The space between the stripe and the pot may represent a wasteland, scattered with dirt, the remains of those who have tried to achieve the "plant" but failed in some way.

As the surface and the potted plant constitute the entirety of what is viewed in the picture, the whole of it may be taken as a microcosmic universe. The whole artifactual structure becomes, in essence, phenomenal, and all symbols and "concreteness" become projections of the viewing agent who creates artifacts of viewpoint based upon the phenomenon observed.

## Part VI: Moralities

Various moralities could be invoked by differing agents observing this artifact. Indeed, any particular agent's moral view of some of the symbologies involved might differ simply based on how the symbology was presented.

One such circumstance would be the two symbolic instances cited above where the symbology is close to well-known symbolic stories of the Christian deity. The first is where I have compared the stalks to the shamrock story of St. Patrick; the second is where the stalks represent three different people in different states of faith - struggling, confirmed, and fallen. Just as St. Patrick was successful in having his symbology accepted, so one might think that these two - the first like Patrick's directly, and the second reminiscent of the poem "Footprints" (see appendix) - would naturally be accepted as well.

However, such is not always the case. Depending on the presentation - or if the observing agent is just having a paranoid day, for that matter - some Christians might actually see the symbolism involved as intending to be a mockery of the Christian deity. For example, there was the furor about the light-up heart in "E.T.", where some Christians saw the heart as representing the Sacred Heart of Jesus in a mock fashion. This furor seems to have mostly died off by now, although there is at least one reference extant on the World Wide Web at <http://www.freerepublic.com/forum/a374978046e26.htm>: "Speilberg's "E.T." with its constant usurpation of Christ Images (Sacred Heart, Healing Touch...)" (posted by beryl@pugetsound.net).

Neo-Pagans, too, might have differing reactions to this artifact. Some Neo-Pagans might see it, assuming that it was inside, as a welcome touch of nature being brought into the artificial caves of our buildings. Others might see it both concretely and symbolically as an herbal source of healing. Still others might see it - and all cultivation, which inflicts intent on the phenomenon of nature - as an affront to nature and an attack on Gaia.

In sum, as with the general actions of agents in viewing an artifact, there is no telling what an agent will view this artifact as from a moral point of view. Often times two agents supposedly sharing the same basic moral outlook will come up with diametrically opposed moral viewpoints as projected on the artifact.

## Part VII: Photograph of a Potted Plant on White Surface with Gold-Colored Stripe

### Section 1: Concrete

To go a further step, the photograph of the potted plant is an artifact in and of itself, which lends an additional layer of complexity to the nature of the artifact. Here, we must consider the importance of the photograph in and of itself, as well as the accent it lays on the differing analyses of the potted plant proper.

Concretely, the photograph is in color, surrounded by plastic. This indicates that it is likely of the "instant photograph" type, as the more conventionally processed types usually have either a thin border of the same substance as the photograph, or no border at all.



The act of photographing the plant indicates that an agent desired a visual record of the plant at this particular time. However, that does not necessarily say that the condition of the plant at this time was of importance; it could simply be that the most opportune time to photograph the plant had presented itself irrespective of the current condition of the plant. The apparent "instant" production of the photograph could indicate that time was of the essence in producing the visual record, possibly for study or comparison; on the other hand, it could also indicate that the camera most ready to hand was simply of the "instant" production type. Any or all of these listed conditions may have occurred simultaneously in the production of the photograph of the plant.

The photograph, moreover, taken as a concrete object, may have both concrete symbolical implications with respect to the potted plant without yet considering the symbolical implications of the photograph in toto. These implications are such as to place certain accents on the value of earlier-considered artifactual characteristics of the potted plant and the white surface.

In a general sense, the existence of the photograph conveys a certain sense of importance on the various symbolical implications. It implies that some or all of the symbology involved with the plant's position at this time, in this pot, on this surface, is of such importance as to necessitate an immediate and relatively permanent record. The photograph may even provide an object of worship, without actually becoming a symbolical element in and of itself.

The photograph may also have concrete importance for concrete reasons. It may be used in studying the best position of plant stalks (the leaves on the right stalk do not look as healthy as the leaves on the other two stalks). It may be used as part of a series of photographs to study the development of this plant. It may be used to study the placement of the pot, also possibly as part of a series showing differing pot placements.

## Part VII: Photograph of a Potted Plant on White Surface with Gold-Colored Stripe

### Section 2: symbolical

The photograph, in and of itself, may serve as a symbol too. The most obvious symbol is that of the impermanence of objects which are photographed, and the need to preserve them via a visual record. It may also serve as a symbol of the further reduction of nature to the artifactual intent of man; the plant, possibly an example of a phenomenon, was first reduced (as detailed above) to an artifact by placement into the pot. The photograph takes the whole of that and adds another layer of artifactual

intent, quite possibly different from the original intent which eliminated the plant's position as a simple phenomenon.

Another symbolism possibly served by the photograph is the tendency of humans to create artifacts without regard to waste. The intent that took the photograph may not have had a really good reason to photograph the plant; the instant nature of the photography making the creation of artifacts 'just to see what it looks like' too tempting to avoid the waste accrued.

While the photograph may serve as proxy for the plant as an object of worship, the photograph itself - by derivation from what is photographed - may itself become symbolical of what the potted plant symbolizes, and thus become an object of worship - and symbol - in its own right. If not recorded to a more permanent medium, the photograph may, over time, decay to where the potted plant is not actually visible - but, if by that time the photograph has acquired the same meaning, people who have never seen the plant may accept the photograph for the meaning originally induced by the plant. Eventually, the photograph may acquire this meaning in such wise that it is no longer a true proxy for the plant.

## Conclusion

Artifacts that, *prima facie*, appear to be simple in meaning can have quite complex meanings to different agents. To explore the meanings that an artifact may have requires careful consideration of all elements which an artifact contains. As each element of an artifact is studied, meanings previously discovered may be further supported, added on to, or both. Concrete meanings, grounded in defined science, are relatively easy to explore; symbolical meanings, which may differ from person to person, can only be touched on unless the audience agent is of a limited, well-defined nature from which good inferences of symbolical meaning can be drawn. Even then, however, daily differences in mood by individual observer agents can drastically change the accepted symbolical meaning of any given artifact.

## Appendix

### "Footprints"

by Margaret Fishback Powers

Taken from Rainbow Connexion ( <http://www.rainbowconnexion.com/support.htm> )

One night a man had a dream.

He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.

Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.

For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,  
one belonging to him, and the other to the LORD.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him,  
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.

He noticed that many times along the path of his life  
there was only one set of footprints.

He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest  
and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it.

"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you,  
you'd walk with me all the way.

But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life,  
there is only one set of footprints.

I don't understand why when I needed You most you would leave me."

The LORD replied, "My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you.

During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints,  
it was then that I carried you."

(Note 5/20/11: Picture misplaced but may be added if found.)