

Cultural Icons

Professor: Géraldine CHOUARD-
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Contact information

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Department: International affairs

Semester: 1 and 2

Course level: L3 Undergraduate, Graduate

Domain: Marketing &

Advertising **Teaching language:**

English **Number of in-class**

hours: 33

Number of course sessions: 10 + Exam

ECTS: 6

Course Description

Cultural Icons: Exploring Symbols, Figures, and Objects

This course explores cultural icons—people, objects, monuments, brands, gestures, and images—that have acquired symbolic power across societies. Icons function as condensed symbols of values, ideologies, collective memories, or social narratives.

Students will analyze how icons are **produced, circulated, contested, and transformed** in political, social, and commercial contexts. The course examines how cultural icons shape identities, communicate meanings, and influence global culture.

A cultural icon:

- Is widely recognized across social groups.
- Carries symbolic meaning beyond its original context.
- Represents values, beliefs, or ideologies (religious, political, social, cultural).
- Circulates across media, cultures, and time.
- Functions as a reference point in political, social, or consumer discourse.

Icons bridge the **material** (objects, images, monuments) and the **symbolic** (ideas, identities, values), acting as vectors for meaning, memory, and identity.

Key Questions

1. What makes something a cultural icon?
2. How are cultural icons produced and circulated?
3. How are cultural icons contested or transformed?
4. How do cultural icons influence identity and society?
5. What is the global dimension of cultural icons?

Prerequisites

- Open-minded attitude regarding general interest topics
- Fluency in written and oral English (B2 level)
- Familiarity with academic presentation requirements
- Attendance in all sessions, including final exam

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, students will:

- Understand the production, circulation, and institutionalization of icons
- Analyze the interplay between symbolic meaning and material form
- Critically reflect on cultural power, branding, and political imagery
- Develop academic presentation skills in English with visual support
- Examine globalization's effect on the life of icons

Assignments & Grading

1. **30-minute oral presentation** (individual or pair) with **PowerPoint support**
2. **Final exam**

Minimum passing grade: 10/20

Class Participation

- Active participation required

Exam Policy & Academic Integrity

- Exams are closed-book unless authorized
- Unexcused absence or missing work = grade of zero
- All submissions must be your own work or your group's contribution
- Plagiarism/cheating prohibited according to **Université Paris Dauphine** rules

Course Structure (Illustrative Examples)

1. **Political & Social Figures:** Cleopatra, Nelson Mandela, Simone Weil, Che Guevara, Greta Thunberg
2. **Painters / Visual Artists:** Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Frida Kahlo, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Edward Weston, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans
3. **Actors & Performers:** Audrey Hepburn, Robert De Niro, Meryl Streep, Timothée Chalamet
4. **Objects & Consumer Goods:** Coca-Cola, Starbucks, IKEA, Nutella, Nespresso
5. **Gestures & Symbols:** Peace Sign ☮
6. **Monuments & Architecture:** Taj Mahal, Eiffel Tower, Frank Lloyd Wright, Berlin Wall, Twin Towers, Frank Gehry
7. **Cultural Objects:** Maneki-neko, Totem Poles, Dreamcatcher, African Masks, Matryoshka Dolls
8. **Toys:** LEGO, Barbie, Cabbage Patch Kids, Hot Wheels, Paddington Bear, My Little Pony
9. **Sports Icons:** Pelé, Muhammad Ali, Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Usain Bolt, Michael Jordan, Marta Vieira da Silva

Selected Bibliography

- **Martin Kemp**, *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon*, Oxford Univ. Press, 2011/2012
- **Keyan G. Tomaselli & David Scott (eds.)**, *Cultural Icons*, Routledge, 2009/2018
- **Erica van Boven & Marieke Winkler (eds.)**, *The Construction and Dynamics of Cultural Icons*, Routledge, 2021

- **Géraldine Chouard Véron** is Professor of English at Université Paris Dauphine-PSL.

- **Lecturer's biography**

The course on Cultural Icons is taught by a former student of the École Normale Supérieure and *agrégée* in English, with teaching experience at Harvard University and Sorbonne University. Professor Géraldine Chouard-Véron completed her doctoral research on American literature at Sorbonne before turning to visual studies and material culture.

Drawing on over twenty years at Université Paris-Dauphine, she designed this course to explore cultural icons through objects, consumption, and material practices. The class emphasizes comparative approaches, intercultural exchange, and the development of academic writing and analytical skills in English, offering international students a space to analyze and debate diverse cultural perspectives.