

New Visions of Ancient Signs

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700 years ago came one of the most sensational moments in the history of images, when Giotto embarked on a new, innovative direction in painting, opening up a new visual world to those who saw his works. With graceful restraint he invented new ways of observing and understanding art.

If we immerse ourselves in the recently restored frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padova, we invariably find ourselves facing the essence of revelation in the revolutionary force of these works, made by an artist who brilliantly paved the way for the Renaissance.

In the history of late mediaeval painting, Giotto made the first step towards what, taking from Aristotle, we now call “mimesis” – a term that is often rendered, though with rather debatable precision, as the “imitation of reality”. In a scene of the legend of Christ that takes shape around the central projection, Giotto attempts to bring us, through his painting, close to our everyday visual experience. By doing so, he breaks away from the artistic conventions of his day and thus prepares the ground for the developments of Renaissance art that have lasted all the way through to the present day.

The Italian and northern European Renaissance would be unimaginable without Giotto. Here I refer to the works of all the artists we know so well – Leonardo and Botticelli, Fra Angelico and Carpaccio, Mantegna and Uccello, and all the others – who took from Giotto’s reflections on mimesis, brought them into question and soon attempted to surpass them.

In most cases, this artistic trend – whether literary, cinematographic or figurative – initially conveys a revolutionary, avant-garde impression, but with the passing of time it inevitably and almost imperceptibly tends towards convention. This means that, as time passes, also the eyes of the viewer become in a certain sense accustomed to the works of Italian Renaissance painters. Like ancient coins, the reliefs of which are worn down over the years until their figures are recognisable only as traces of what was once visible, so too the viewer’s vision of the traditions of artistic styles is gradually smoothed away. Our perception of what originally appears as unusual, and thus as unknown, very gradually becomes confused with convention. And it is here that artistic revolutions and new theories of the image become necessary, like the one brought about by Giotto, so that viewers can acquire a new vision and discourse that is different from what was previously dominant.

The conceptual works of Francesco Pignatelli (born in 1971) erode the conventions of perception that have become consolidated over the years, and he achieves this by contrasting the pictorial works of Italian masters with the inherently mimetic medium of photography. By using the two media together, he brings about a sense of alienation and creates the conditions for giving potential new meaning to the works of the Renaissance. Both his works and those of Renaissance masters draw their vital spark from this, for both are newly and mutually reinvigorated.

In order to do this, Pignatelli uses museum reproductions of works of the highest quality and he takes possession of the composition of the image (*appropriation*) using a combination of

mechanical and individual-creative, almost pictorial processes, which makes it possible for a new aura to be created.

In Francesco Pignatelli the photogrammetric captation of Renaissance works also playfully reflects the alternating relationship between imitation and alienation, and between original and appropriation, as a representation of today's media environment.

In all of this, the theoretical process is genuinely semiotic. By recontextualising the signs that are consumed through differences of colour, almost incredibly, and for the first time, the artist discovers new meanings that could not be seen for what they were in the originals, or to which no significance of their own had been given.

As a result, both in their generative process and in their final outcome, these works constitute a combination of a creative and semiotic-media work, since they also rediscover and invent the paintings. By doing so, they provide a present-day basis for their semiotic value and thus make it possible for the viewer to obtain an innovative, more acute vision of reliefs that are newly and semiotically inscribed.

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