

The Sacred Art of Anthony Visco

by Gail Leggio

Anthony Visco, on a Fulbright grant to study sculpture in Italy, spent 1970 in the studios of the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Florence. But he considers his daily visits to Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* (1425–37) at the Baptistry and the Giotto chapels (after 1317) at Santa Croce a turning point, the beginning of his *vita nuova*. Ghiberti's influence can be seen in Visco's cultivation of the largely neglected art of bas-relief composition. His first commissioned work was a plaster *Stations of the Cross* (1981) for Old St. Joseph's National Shrine in Philadelphia. In "Simon the Cyrene Helps Christ Carry the Cross" the principal figures are three-dimensional enough to enter the viewer's space, while the arch and background landscape have the delicacy of a drawing. (A bronze *Stations of the Cross* was recently unveiled at Our Lady of Guadalupe Shrine in La Crosse, Wisconsin.) Another work at Old St. Joseph's, *Religious Freedom* (1984), takes the Exodus as a theme with resonance for Christians, Jews and Muslims. Commemorating the Shrine's 250th anniversary, the four-by-five-foot relief is a complex multigure composition. The crowd of men, women and children approaching the Red Sea, suggested by a ripple of waves, is propelled by a sense of urgency. This dynamism is underscored by the varied expressions of their faces and the wind-swept rhythm of the palm trees behind them. Visco's maquette for *The Door of Miracles*, with ten bas-reliefs illustrating Jesus's miracles, echoes the ten Old Testament scenes of Ghiberti's gilded bronze doors. Best known as a sculptor, Visco is also an accomplished painter and draftsman, with a career path more suited to a Renaissance artist than one at the turn of the twenty-first century. Committed to representational art, he sees the human figure as "the most expressive means of demonstrating spirituality"¹ and considers the decoration of churches one of the highest callings of the artist. Since 1998 he has been absorbed in a project combining sculpture and murals for the National Shrine of Saint Rita of Cascia in Philadelphia, which should be complete in 2007.

The Saint Rita ensemble displays the range of Visco's skills. The suffering of the pre-Resurrection Jesus is anatomically etched in a devotional bronze and marble bas-relief, *Christ of Holy Saturday* (2000); the crossed hands, wounded and tautly veined, are particularly moving. The woman depicted in *Saint Rita in Ecstasy* (2001), the artist's first life-size bronze statue and fully in the round, seems both spiritually transported and humanly earthbound. This substantial figure testifies to Visco's admiration for the cinquecento, when sculptures became, in his words, "entities in themselves,... many appearing to be the same size and in the same air as the worshippers." A large mural, *The Work of Peace* (2004), is an atemporal vision of Saint Rita in her native Umbria.

The setting—with its cerulean sky, edenic trees and rolling hills—suggests Visco’s mastery of another genre, landscape. He conducts teaching tours and has painted scores of views of the perennially inviting Italian countryside. The fifty invented characters in *The Work of Peace*, from various periods, are laying aside weapons to receive the saint’s olive branch. Despite the number of figures, the composition feels serene, uncluttered. Renaissance frescoes are good models for how to organize a multigure composition in plausible space, even when earthly time and eternity intersect. Details—an international trio of musicians seated on the ground, a child in Renaissance garb releasing a dove—reveal the charm of individual incidents. Another component of the shrine will be a sculptural *sacra conversazione* featuring life-size statues of Rita’s patrons, John the Baptist, Saint Augustine and Saint Nicolas of Tolentino.

Visco is an articulate proponent of a Catholic aesthetic rooted in Incarnational theology and Franciscan spirituality: “The notion of gravity, the sense of human weight, of compound, convex forms of its members, reinforced the message of the Poverello [St. Francis of Assisi] in his reminder that one could find the flesh of Christ in his nearest neighbor.” Visco’s statement puts the Renaissance rediscovery of the classical body in an explicitly Christian context. In Santa Croce’s Bardi Chapel the fullness of Giotto’s quietly eloquent figures endows them with a very human presence, something we associate with

Anthony Visco,
The Sermon on the Mount,
central panel of bronze
triptych, 1987–88

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Renaissance attitudes. In *The Funeral of St. Francis*, with the saint's brother monks gathered around his bier, we also see that Franciscan tenderness. Giotto fuses emotional spontaneity with what has been called the "crystallization of gestures" in the liturgy, the most important model for the language of movement in medieval society.² Visco's admiration for Giotto underlies his artistic sensibility, and he has lectured on the influence of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) on the arts and the creative imagination. Art historian Millard Meiss finds a potent example of stylistic change in depictions of a signature event in Francis's life, his receiving of the stigmata on Mount La Verna two years before his death. The agent of Francis's vision was a seraph, one of the highest orders of angels, sometimes depicted as a disembodied scarlet head surrounded by a pinwheel of six wings. But that esoteric form gave way to an image of the crucified Christ, aloft on the seraph's six wings. Meiss points out the "shift of emphasis from the seraph, emblem of the ineffable being, to the humanity of Christ, and from spiritual similarity to bodily likeness."³

One perennial problem for the religious artist is how to depict events that can be seen as occurring simultaneously on temporal and eternal planes. How can pictorial space be engineered to accommodate, for example, a martyr, executioners and the angel bearing the palm of victory? The gold-ground fairytale space of many medieval artists was one solution. The tenebrous stage sets of the Counter-Reformation naturalist Caravaggio were effective in a radically different way. Visco recognizes this problem: "Sacred art perhaps more



Anthony Visco, *The Work of Peace*, 2004 NATIONAL SHRINE OF SAINT RITA OF CASCIA, PHILADELPHIA

than any other art form has for millennia struggled with the concept of likeness and for very good reasons. How do we represent the unseen without making the visible recognizable?" In the bas-reliefs for the *Stations of the Cross* at St. Joseph's we can see Visco grappling with the problem. In "Jesus Is Taken Down from the Cross" the broken body of Christ, realistically observed, is poignantly present. The dove, while also naturalistic, is outsized, its disproportionate scale denoting supernatural power. The way the wings mimic the spread of Christ's arms is dynamic in purely formal terms yet hints at the release of the coming Resurrection. Geometry adds a level of subtle symbolism: a triangle, emblematic of the triune godhead, is superimposed on the circle of eternity, bound by the earthly square of the panel itself. Visco takes a more naturalistic approach in a bronze triptych for Bryn Mawr Presbyterian (1987–88). The central panel, *The Sermon on the Mount*, is a dynamic yet stable composition with groups of listeners anchoring the lower corners and Christ at the center.

Bodily likeness lies at the foundation not only of Visco's art but also of his pedagogy. For centuries the expertise of master artists was passed on to succeeding generations through a system of academies and apprenticeship programs. That continuity, which extended through the training of modernists such as Matisse (who studied at the Académie Julian and the École des Beaux-Arts), was broken in the mid-twentieth century but is being re-established today. Visco—with his know-how in handling a variety of mediums and rich philosophical approach to art-making—has become an important figure in this revival. For the last two decades he has taught at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the New York Academy of Fine Art graduate school, and run workshops out of his own atelier. His program is built on a solid understanding of sculptural form, both in low relief and in the round, but also emphasizes drawing. Visco's own mastery of chiaroscuro and *paneggio* (drapery) is showcased in his drawings. At the heart of everything he does, he confesses, lies drawing, which he describes as "a non-stop search, a relentless homily on the human autonomy....a visual poem by, for and to the vigilant of the world." He uses drawing to hone his skills and think through compositions. Like the Renaissance masters he admires, he produces a plethora of designs, from quick, compositional studies to sensuously finished drawings in charcoal or charcoal and pigment. Lay-figure scaffolding sketches establish compositions for his *Stations of the Cross*. Haunting portrait heads in charcoal—*Giordi*, *Narkios*—and a dynamic angel in charcoal and pigment, *Seth*, are independent works of art. The artist's pleasure in the physical act of marking the paper is palpable. *Magdalene*, a blue-green study in charcoal and pigment, includes her traditional attributes of skull, mirror and ointment jar, but it is the saint's body language that eloquently conveys her penitence.

For Visco, as for another Philadelphia artist, Thomas Eakins, understanding the body is vital. Visco teaches *ecorché*-making, which he describes as

“the art of building the body from its skeletal framework to its superficial musculature.” “Anatomy,” he believes, “is to representational art what grammar is to literature,” and he is preparing a handbook on the subject. It is possible to find a parallel between the mid-twentieth-century rejection of figure drawing and anatomy in art schools and the eclipse of the unclothed body in church art. In Ghiberti’s time nudity was recognized as legitimate in a variety of iconographic contexts, *in bono* as well as *in malo*—from the innocence of the prelapsarian Adam and Eve to the shame of their fallen state, to the virtue of the young John the Baptist or Francis of Assisi casting off his worldly garments. Rejecting prudishness as he rejects abstraction, Visco works in a specific Western spiritual tradition, what he calls “corporeal sacred art,” and follows the Renaissance classicism of artists such as Ghiberti.

The title of a 2002 exhibition of Visco’s drawings, models and maquettes, at Villanova University, played on the relationship between the handiwork of design and the deeper purpose of art-making. “Disengo/Dio-Segno” juxtaposed the Italian word meaning design, drawing, project, plan, scheme, intention with the phrase translated as “sign of God.” In shaping his career around the aesthetic dimension of the life of the church, Visco taps into some core theological metaphors, especially the notion of the faithful collectively representing the Mystical Body of Christ. The interrelatedness of the members provides a paradigm for the ensemble of artworks within the church building, which is itself envisioned as “corporeal architecture.” It is in no way inconsistent that Visco, thoroughly and humbly grounded in the physicality of art-making, also sees his vocation as part of the ongoing work of the Church.

NOTES

1. All quotations from the artist are taken from his Website at www.anthonvisco.org.
2. Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 7.
3. Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena After the Black Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 121.