

ALESSANDRO ROSSI

HISTORICAL METHOD AND HERMENEUTIC CREATIVITY

*The Risen Christ in Carpaccio's Vision of Saint Augustine**

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to focus on how the search for a gnoseological and art-historical model, prompted by the article studied here, "Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism," was articulated by its authors, Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood. Their starting point was a morphological approach that sought to identify the artistic model of a specific figure, the *Risen Christ*, which appears in the *Vision of Saint Augustine* painted by Vittore Carpaccio in 1502-1503 for the Confraternity of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni in Venice. This matrix of models – gnoseological and morphological – shows how history and morphology, at least in the realm of art history, can only proceed if they are in unison, but at the same time they require particularly attentive reciprocal methodological monitoring in order to avoid creating a theoretical cognitive model based on analogies of form that fail to convince through empirical evidence, as the author believes was true in this case study.

KEYWORDS: Method, Morphology, Gnoseological Model, Artistic Model, Carpaccio, A. Nagel, C.S. Wood.

Research tools are in turn parts of the world which need researching. (Wind 2001, 285)

Si la théorie ne peut faire abstraction de l'histoire cette dernière ne peut non plus se libérer de la théorie; l'histoire nécessite une théorie gnoséologique qui l'encadre de façon critique. [If theory cannot disregard history, the latter cannot free itself from theory either; history requires a gnoseological theory which critically frames it]. (Damisch 2011)¹

The elements fundamental to much of what underlies art-historical research can be recognized in the concept of "derivation" and in that of "influence". It is through resemblance, comparison and juxtaposition that the art historian constantly seeks what can probably be recognized as the "model"

*I am grateful to Frank Dabell for the translation of this text, and to Salvatore Tedesco for a generous and fruitful discussion of Edgar Wind's thinking on esthetics.

¹ The citation is taken from a lecture given by Hubert Damisch during the international symposium *Pierre Francastel, Historien de l'art* (Paris, INHA, November 7-8, 2011) and transcribed by the present author.

by which a given work of art is *inspired*, from which it is *derived*, or by which it is *influenced*. The goal – or at least one of the primary goals – of the art historian is to reconstruct, in the most rigorous and philological way possible, the various connections or filiations between given works of art, as regards both style and iconography, rebuilding the *corpus* of a painter or school rather than creating chronologically-arranged thematic repertoires. If one agrees with this premise one can acknowledge the question of the “model” as a central topic of art-historical research. In this instance, the question must be examined with the support of a significant case study that may serve as a testing-ground for history with respect to theory, and for theory with respect to history, understanding each one as watching over the other, as it were.

This study addresses the reflections prompted by a painting by Vittore Carpaccio as studied by two American art historians, Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, the authors of a controversial article titled “Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism” (2005; developed into a book in 2010).² The two scholars construct a fascinating theory of anachrony in Renaissance art, although – in our opinion – this is founded on faulty observation, and thus in the mistaken interpretation of the specific object in their analysis; the conception of their theory is therefore based on empirical data that fails to stand up to careful formal verification. Nagel and Wood focus their attention on the pictorial representation of the sculpture of Christ the Redeemer in the background of Carpaccio’s celebrated *Vision of Saint Augustine* (Venice, Confraternity of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni), painted between 1502 and 1503 [fig. 1].



Fig. 1. Vittore Carpaccio, *Vision of Saint Augustine*, Venice, Confraternity of San Giorgio degli Schiavoni.

² A few years later Nagel returned to the topic once again: 2011, 106-109 and 129-151.

The scholars view the figure of Christ [fig. 2] as a derivation from a bronze sculpture of the *Risen Christ* – which was present in the artist’s day in the Venetian church of Santa Maria della Carità and is now in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan³ [fig. 3] – and regard the statue as the “substitution” for another work, lost and only recorded in early sources (Eusebius and Jacopo da Varagine) (2005, 404-405). According to them, Carpaccio inserted in his painting a sculpture that was to be read as the pictorial reproduction of a work that was in itself considered ancient (because it was drawn from a modern work that “substituted” an ancient one, fully identifying itself in that work, *coinciding* with it); thus – more or less consciously – they trigger a general theory of anachronic images that evolved during the Renaissance. Nagel and Wood write:

We will argue that the bronze Christ cited in the painting was not merely, for Carpaccio, a modern work functioning as an ingenious hypothesis of a lost ancient work. The bronze Christ did not just ‘stand for’ or refer poetically to antiquity. Rather, for him, the statue was an antique work. (2005, 405)



Fig. 2. Vittore Carpaccio,
Vision of Saint Augustine, Venice,
Confraternity of San Giorgio
degli Schiavoni, detail of Christ
the Redeemer.



Fig. 3. Follower of Pietro Lombardo (?),
The Redeemer, bronze, Milan,
Poldi Pezzoli Museum.

³ It has been proposed that the author of the bronze was Severo da Ravenna (see Museo Poldi Pezzoli 1987, cat. no. 24, 198-199 and 229). At this moment, on the Poldi Pezzoli Museum website the bronze is registered as “Bottega veneziana / 1495-1505 / Numero di inventario: 0432”. Peter Humfrey attributes the statue to a follower of Pietro Lombardo (1993, 106-107 and 288, 336n44).

Having gone beyond the first level of similarity, affirming that Carpaccio's Christ could derive from the Poldi Pezzoli figure appears not to have any foundation. If – as demonstrated by Giovanni Agosti and Vincenzo Farinella's study on Trajan's Column (1984, 373-444) – the most rational and effective way of asserting a *derivation* or *inference* from a model lies in exercising a close comparison between objects that one supposes to be directly associated (such as for example the degree to which one work can almost be *superimposed* on another), the application of such gnoseological-morphological themes yields a result which is the opposite of that proposed by Nagel and Wood.

Apart from sharing an identical subject, the painting and sculpture do not have any stylistic or strictly morphological similarity that might warrant the claim of direct derivation. If Carpaccio had wanted to make explicit reference to the antique sculpture, then the correspondence with the modern one should have been much stronger. Taking the frontality of Christ's chest as a homogenous point of view for both works, we may note that the pose of the legs is different: the knee of the bent leg in the bronze statue is turned outward, and the foot, therefore, appears in profile, with the heel almost resting on the ground, while in the painting the corresponding knee is bent inward, and the foot, raised from the ground and diagonal to it, is depicted with the instep visible. In the sculpture, the forearm with the blessing hand is perpendicular to the ground, whereas in the painting it is positioned diagonally, at an angle of 45 degrees to the base. The other forearm, in the sculpture, is raised and appears parallel to the ground, while in the painting it is stretched downward, following the line of the body, and attached to Christ's waist. The head, more frontal in the sculpture, leans more decisively toward the blessing gesture in the painting. As for drapery, each work presents a completely different structure and rendering. An accentuated loop of the mantle covers Christ's abdomen in the bronze, covering his navel, and approximating the figure's literary source: in his *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.18, Eusebius describes the statue as dressed decorously or decently (κοσμίως: Nagel, Wood 2005, 414 note 16), whereas in the painted figure the mantle barely covers the Redeemer's genitals, clearly visible through the description of the wet-look drapery – which makes the figure most unbecoming and in no way aligned with the description provided by Eusebius). Then, in the painting, the mantle does not fall to the ground as it does in the sculpture. This feature is in no way secondary, nor is it strictly one of style, but on the contrary a fundamental point with respect to the two scholars' interpretation of the bronze as a reproduction of the lost ancient sculpture known from early sources (406). Had Carpaccio wished to represent the Poldi Pezzoli sculpture with the full awareness of retrieving a lost work, he would certainly not have eliminated this key iconographic feature. In particular, this is relevant to the base [fig. 4], which has been recognized as an integral part of the iconography

of the ancient sculpture and its modern “substitution”. According to Nagel and Wood, the foliate decoration encircling the round base of the bronze represents the miracle described in the early source: when Christ’s mantle touched the arid ground, it made it suddenly blossom (414 note 16). Why, then, did Carpaccio totally revise the type of base of his presumed model, not reproducing the vegetal ornament that was so important for the iconographic recognition of its very model? Moreover, this decoration, identified as illustrating a specific miraculous episode, could instead be a typical foliate motif with stylized palmettes, without any particular iconographical meaning, as Charles Dempsey has already suggested (2005, 417). Having noticed this inconsistency, the two scholars settle the question in a note to their article: “He [Carpaccio] missed, however, the telling detail of the drooping hem. The statue clearly carried authority for him without the support of ‘philological’ clues such as this” (414 note 24). In their response to Dempsey’s critique, Nagel and Wood further insist on the point that there was no need for philological support for the recognition of the “substitution” (2005a, 431). The point – in our opinion – is that what is lacking here is not only philological support but also the minimal, necessary morphological one, so that the phenomenon of substitution can be hypothesized.



Fig. 4. Follower of Pietro Lombardo (?), *The Redeemer*, bronze, Milan, Poldi Pezzoli Museum, detail of the base.

The two sculptures (both painted and three-dimensional) are also distinct in their colour and material components. Since Carpaccio paints a gold or gilded statue, why would he wish to distinguish it so starkly from its presumed model, which from its very origins is instead made of brown bronze?

Apart from this detailed clarification of the differences between the two works, it is clear even at first sight that the two representations are generated by entirely separate spirits. Leaving aside the distinction between pictorial and sculptural renderings of the same subject, the bronze, set firmly on the ground with a fairly rigid contrapposto and weighty, compact drapery, is clearly different from the lightness in the pose of the painted Christ. The

latter's contrapposto, which captures the figure as if it were almost in motion, and its transparent dress, characterize it as an airy, almost impalpable figure.

Thus, bearing in mind what we have stated so far, there are not enough elements to consider a close relation between Carpaccio's *Risen Christ* and the bronze in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, nor can any such relation exist between the painted Christ and the lost figure mentioned in the sources. Consequently, we cannot find ourselves in agreement with the creation of a theory of anachronic images based on this specific case, even beyond the wealth of reflections that might be prompted by the theory in and of itself. Carpaccio's *Risen Christ* was probably based on other models. Indeed, there were numerous engravings circulating in Venice during the period in which he painted the *Vision of Saint Augustine*, for instance, the *Risen Christ* signed by Jacopo de' Barbari (with his customary caduceus) and datable to circa 1498 [fig. 5] (Ferrari 2006, 119-120).



Fig. 5. Jacopo de' Barbari, *The Risen Christ*, engraving.

The awareness of the disconnection that can sometimes occur between theory and direct observation of a work of art – like research into sources and documents that tries to confirm visually unconvincing morphological similarities – allow us to introduce the *pars construens* of this short essay. According to Erwin Panofsky, the tension – often manifest – between different cognitive methods can and should take on positive energy. The German scholar considered two methods as fundamental for the interpretation of works of art: on the one hand, what he defined as “archaeological research” and on the other, what he called “aesthetic recreation”. On the basis of this

distinction, he identifies two types of researchers: the *connoisseur*, defined as “a laconic art historian”, and the *art historian*, seen as “loquacious connoisseur” (1955, 22). These two types – adds Panofsky – work in the same field (that of art), the first adopting an essentially historical approach, the second functioning more through theory, as if “one of them owns the gun, the other all the ammunition” (22). It thus goes without saying that for Panofsky the two forms of research cannot exist as separate entities if they wish to be efficient.

In seeking a model, at least with respect to how this has been formulated, the “morphological approach” – first used systematically by Goethe in his studies on botany, zoology, anatomy, mineralogy, meteorology, and colour theory between 1776 and 1832 (1946), and applied to figurative art by Nagel and Wood in the case before us – must therefore be regarded with due attention and caution. A key element of such an approach is the “*immaginazione pontefice*” (*pontifical imagination*, in the literal sense of *bridge-building*) which if left uncontrolled, can use the powerful tool of analogy more as a creative poetic form capable of associating and assimilating elements that are truly heterogenous, or even only superficially comparable, rather than examining their slightest features through the lens of philological attention and incisive reasoning (Pinotti 2010).

The relationship between “historical method” and “hermeneutic creativity” thus shows itself to be a highly delicate one. This should be given a more prominent place, at the heart of the shared discipline of art history. Working on the possible point of contact between *context* and *concept* involves deeply-rooted methodological complexities which are hard to disentangle, if not with occasional use of paradox. At this stage – also as regards the problem dictated by the search for a “model”, especially in the realm of history and art history – one must quote what Edgar Wind proposed in the opening of his 1925 essay on the systematics of artistic problems. Wind writes:

An ‘artistic problem’ [which that of the “model” certainly is, in this author’s view] is posed by the *thought of the systematic study of art for artistic creativity* – yet not in such a way that the problem *precedes* the solution, but rather so that it is *sought out* for the interpretation of the solution. A paradox thus emerges: given [*gegeben*] the solution, the problem is posed [*aufgegeben*] – posed, so that the solution can be understood as ‘solution’. (1925, 440)

As Salvatore Tedesco has rightly recognized, the procedure expressed by Wind on how one should address an “artistic problem” calls for

enhancing the theoretical framework so as to make it capable of ordering the possible forms of the relationship between a given work and empiricism [...]. In this way, history

is not so much simply engulfed by theory as made functional to a theoretical understanding of that work. (2010, 19)⁴



Fig. 7. Marco d'Oggiono, *Suicide of Lucretia romana*, private collection.



Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, detail.

The observation of paintings as suggested by Wind, with special attention given to the question of the “model”, sometimes allows one to read the gestures of certain painted figures as the esthetic-compositional “solution” found by artists to make such figures perform a symbolic function appropriate to the pedagogical and moral character of the whole image. For example, in a recent study (Rossi 2020) of a privately-owned *Suicide of Lucretia* painted in about 1506 by Marco d'Oggiono, a pupil and collaborator of Leonardo da Vinci [fig. 6], it was possible to detach the gesture of the Roman heroine – that of the “mano a cupola” (domed hand), morphologically resembling that of Mary in the *Virgin of the Rocks* by Leonardo [in both versions, Paris and London; fig. 7] – from its quality as nothing more than perspectival bravura or a simple citation from the great master, and thus a mere reproduction of a known model. A reconstruction of the painting's possible origins as a wedding gift for a bride who bore the same name as the ancient heroine, Lucrezia Franciotti Della Rovere (wife of Marcantonio Colonna and niece of Pope Julius II, an historically documented patron of Marco d'Oggiono) allowed the “mano a cupola” gesture to be understood as the “solution given” to the “problem posed” by the composition itself to

⁴ Tedesco's considerations come in the wake of Carchia (1995, 97-110). For a more detailed study of Edgar Wind's thinking on esthetics, I would also direct the reader to Tedesco 2006, 75-114, and Branca 2019.

“artistic creativity”. In other words, the established iconography of the Roman matron, who takes her own life with a dagger, becomes an *exemplum virtutis*: this extreme and violent gesture is placed under the symbolic control of another gesture (this too a well-established iconographic tradition) enacted by the woman herself to express her complete command of the situation, safeguarding and enhancing the virtue of modesty which she embodies, creating an ethical “model” for the newlywed for whom the picture was made. The painter had to find a visible and intelligible solution that allowed the figure of Lucretia, the model of virtuous behaviour for Roman matrons, to also become an exemplar for an early-sixteenth-century bride. For this reason, Marco d’Oggiono borrowed a gesture from the Christian canon (in particular the figures of God the Father, Christ, the Virgin, Sant Anne, Saint Joseph, and the Archangel Michael) – a gesture with which these figures are often represented – and has the secular figure perform it, thus transferring the function of the “mano a cupola” (which expresses control, dominion, protection, justness) from one sphere to the other (Rossi 2020, 103-109). Having received such a gift from her uncle, a young woman of excellent family and Christian education, who had entered marriage (arranged by that uncle, the Pope) at the beginning of the sixteenth century, would have been able to understand or intuit the symbolic meaning conveyed to her by such an image: that of strenuously preserving conjugal fidelity and family honour, for politically strategic motives as well. This comprehension or intuition would have come precisely from a reading of the violent action of the Roman heroine painted by Marco d’Oggiono filtered through the gesture of the “mano a cupola” enacted by the matron herself. The symbolic gesture enables the crudeness of the scene to take on ideal value, shifting attention from a drastic action to the ethical and moral principle that informs and guides it.

The weaving together of “models” – gnoseological, artistic, morphological and ethical – thus offers fertile ground for the detailed study of the delicate rapport between history and theory in the field of art history. What is at stake here is the “concrete sense of a theory of the work of art”, that is (paraphrasing Hans Sedlmayr), the attempt to achieve a historical understanding of the work in question, capturing the theoretical specificity which the work, historically understood, manifests in itself (Sedlmayr 1955).

By following this interweaving of models and modelling, one can also connect the “bridge-building imagination” mentioned earlier in the context of the analogical investigation, to the “bridge images” themselves – that is, to those samples in which the most frequent morphological transmission mechanisms may be tested: 1) deduction of form and meaning from a model; 2) citation; and 3) reinterpretation. Based on this classification, one can define certain phenomena of morphological migration within a single cultural system, or different systems, throughout history (Tonini 2005). In this sense, the theory of “Renaissance anachronicity” formulated by Nagel and Wood fits

within the parameters of the transmission of models in an intellectually sophisticated way because it questions the very concepts of history and temporality; yet – as I have sought to argue – it fails to find due confirmation through the attentive morphological study of the artefacts from whose comparison their theory is deduced.

Furthermore, the theoretical model conceived by the American scholars appears to *imitate* and *repeat* the concept of “myth” conceived in 1949 by Mircea Eliade as an “exemplary model” for all gestures, rituals and modes of behaviour of human action. Every single sacrifice, asserts the celebrated historian of religion, not only *repeats* the initial sacrifice narrated by the myth but *coincides* with it (Eliade 1976, 404; 1989, 56). The same dynamic appears in Nagel and Wood’s article, now in the realm of art history: the bronze *Risen Christ* in the Poldi Pezzoli Museum and the figure of the resurrected Christ painted by Carpaccio in his *Vision of Saint Augustine*, in the two art historians’ view, *repeats* the appearance and significance of the lost sculpture described in the literary sources (the mythical account of its origins), *coinciding* with it and thus triggering the theorized process of “substitution” and “anachronicity”. However – as we have attempted to demonstrate on a specifically morphological level – given the absence of a *coincidence* (something that can be *superimposed*) between the bronze and painting in question, we may, from this point of view affirm the following: the “*New Model of Renaissance Anachronism*” sought by the scholars (*Toward ...*) was undermined from its very conception, as they unwittingly transformed the concept of “myth” as “exemplary model” into “myth of the exemplary model”.

In concluding this article, which seeks to reconcile different but complementary methodologies, may I be allowed to quote the words of a historian and theoretician of art who left us in December 2017, to whom I wish to pay tribute. In an English-language interview, Hubert Damisch asserted that

I never pronounce the word *theory* without also saying the word *history*. Which is to say that for me such an object is always a theoretico-historical object. Yet if theory is produced within history, history can never completely cover theory. That is fundamental for me. The two terms go together but in the sense in which each escapes the other. (Bois *et al.* 1998, 8)

REFERENCES

- AGOSTI, G., FARINELLA, V. 1984. "Memorie dall'antico nell'arte italiana." In S. Settis (ed.). *L'uso dei classici I*: 373-444. Torino: Einaudi.
- BOIS, Y-A., HOLLIER, D., KRAUSS, R., DAMISCH, H. 1998. "A Conversation with Hubert Damisch." *October* 85: 3-17.
- BRANCA, B. 2019. *Edgar Wind, filosofo delle immagini. La biografia intellettuale di un discepolo di Aby Warburg*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.
- CARCHIA, G. 1995. *Arte e bellezza. Saggio sull'estetica della pittura*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- DEMPSEY, C. 2005. "Historia and Anachronism in Renaissance Art." *The Art Bulletin* 87/3: 416-421.
- ELIADE, M. 1976. *Trattato di storia delle religioni*. Torino: Boringhieri. Originally published in 1949. *Traité d'histoire des religions*. Paris: Payot [Trans. by R. Sheed as *Patterns in Comparative Religion*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958].
- . 1989. *Il mito dell'eterno. Archetipi e ripetizioni*. Roma: Borla. Originally published in 1949. *Le mythe de l'éternel retour*. Paris: Gallimard. [Trans. by W.R. Trask - revised and enlarged - as *Cosmos and History. The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Pantheon, 1954].
- EUSEBIUS. *Historia ecclesiastica*. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.toc.html> [Accessed November 2019].
- FERRARI, S. 2006. *Jacopo de' Barbari. Un protagonista del Rinascimento tra Venezia e Dürer*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- GOETHE, J.W. 1946 [1790]. *Metamorphosis of Plants*. In "Goethe's Botany." *Chronica botanica* 10, 2. Trans. by A. Arber.
- HUMFREY, P. 1993. *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press.
- MUSEO POLDI PEZZOLI. Catalogo generale completo 1987. *Tessuti-Sculture-Metalli islamici*, vol. VII. Milano: Electa.
- . Online Catalogue. <https://museopoldipezzoli.it/scultura/> [Accessed June 2020].
- NAGEL, A. 2011. *The Controversy of Renaissance Art*. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press.
- NAGEL, A., WOOD, C.S. 2005a. "Toward a New Model of Renaissance Anachronism." *The Art Bulletin* 87/3: 403-415.
- . 2005b. "The Authors Reply." *The Art Bulletin* 87/3: 429-432.
- . 2010. *Anachronic Renaissance*. New York: Zone Books.
- PANOFSKY, E. 1955. *The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline*, introduction to *Meaning in the Visual Arts. Papers in and on Art History*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books: 1-25. Originally published in 1940. T.M. Greene. (ed.). *The Meaning of the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 89-118.
- PINOTTI, P. 2010. "Pazienza del dissimile e sguardo pontefice." *Aut aut* 348: 66-83.
- ROSSI, A. 2020. *Gestualità leonardesca tra teologia cristiana e virtus pagana. La Vergine delle rocce e la Lucrezia romana di Marco d'Oggiono*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis.
- SEDLMAYR, H. 1955. "Analogie, Kunstgeschichte und Kunst." *Studium Generale* VIII/11: 697-703.
- TEDESCO, S. 2006. *Il metodo e la storia*. Palermo: Aesthetica Preprint.
- . 2010. *Morfologia estetica*. Palermo: Aesthetica Preprint.
- TONINI, C. 2005. "Meccanismi di trasmissione: deduzione iconografica e reinterpretazione." In M. Centanni (ed.). *L'originale assente. Introduzione allo studio della tradizione classica*: 109-137. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.

WIND, E. 1925. "Zur Systematik der künstlerischen Probleme." In *Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* 18: 438-486. [Trans. by F. Elliott, 2009 as "On the Systematics of Artistic Problems." In *Art in Translation* 1/2: 211-257. <https://doi.org/10.2752/175613109X462681>].

—. 2001 [1934]. *Das Experiment und die Metaphysik*, hrsg. B. Buschendorf. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. [Trans. as *Experiment and Metaphysics: Towards a Resolution of the Cosmological Antinomies*. Cambridge: Legenda].