

He who works with his hands is a laborer. He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman. He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist.

–St Francis of Assisi

The Art of Devotion: Sacred Conversation

On Laetare Sunday, 14 March 1981, Father Robert Curry approached the sanctuary Old St. Joseph's, Philadelphia's oldest Catholic Church, after blessing the newly installed Stations of the Cross. As the Jesuit pastor took to the ambo, he looked over the congregation, paused for a moment, then began his Lenten homily with the words, "Lorenzo di Medici, eat your heart out!" With that he turned to the artist and said, "And as for you, young man, this is just the beginning."¹ And so began a long line of commissions for artist Anthony Visco.

These Stations of the Cross, Visco's first major liturgical commission, are depicted in fourteen austere painted plaster bas-reliefs. As opposed to those Stations of the Cross that are often depicted in polychrome, gilt, wood, metal, or alto relief, these plasters reduce the imagery to its formal essence—line. In this way the conveyance of somber expression makes an indelible mark in the visual memory of the viewer. Each 30" high x 20" wide panel represents a part of the narrative of the Passion of Christ. Starting with Garden of Gethsemane, through the ascent of Mt. Calvary, and culminating in the Crucifixion, Visco conveys the final mortal suffering of Christ through his use of unadorned finely modeled images and pictorial space.

Visco's manipulation of the spatial imagery allows the viewer to participate in the misery and tragedy of a much beloved figure. All who are involved share the eye-level line: Christ, his followers, mourners, and the Roman guards. The unembellished plaster permits nothing to distract the viewer's eye and, this, concentrates the mind on imagery's spatial constructs. Through such representationist arrangement Visco places the viewer in a receptive and reflective state of mind: he subtly expresses the entwined fate of all in a universal language: protagonist, antagonists, and the chorus. The misery of the chorus is compounded by the fact that few comprehend the inevitability of Christ's fate. The corporeal suffering is such that even the depicted putti, those otherworldly beings, who occupy the metope of the frame for each Station of the Cross, are inconsolable. [see fig.

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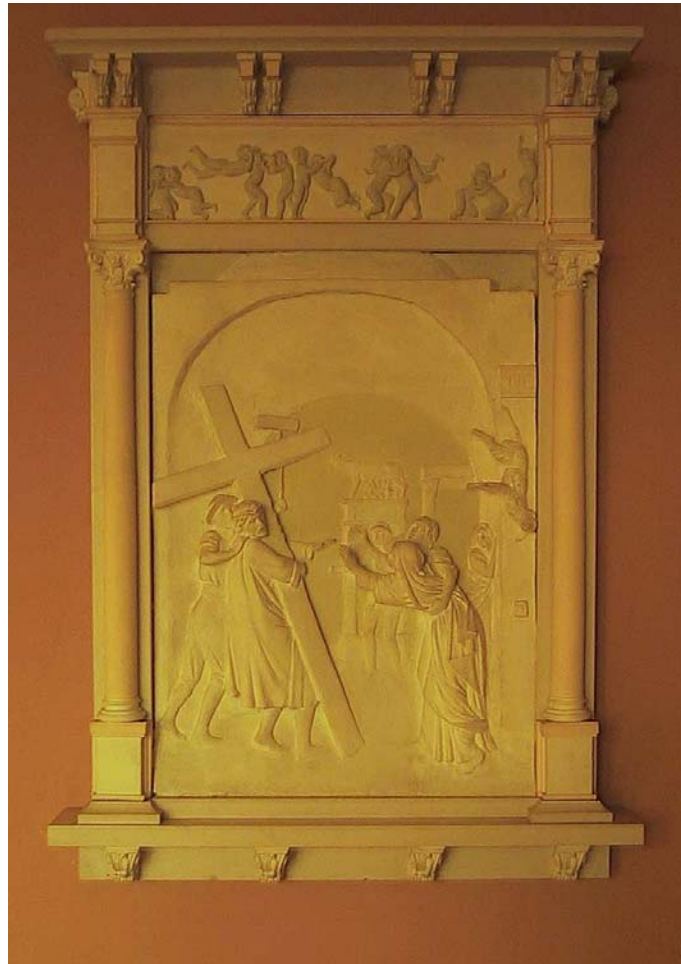


Figure 1.

What inspires Visco is similar to the inspiration attributed to another poet: “His imagination is supplied and made ample by a fundamentally religious vision, the one based on the idea of Incarnation. What this entails is an assent to the stark, astonishing proposition that through the incarnation of the Son of God in the figure of Christ, the eternal has intersected with time, and through that intersection human beings, though creatures of time, have access to a reality out of time. This is the vision, after all, that gave us much that is glorious in Western architecture and art— Chartes Cathedral and *The Divine Comedy*, *The Book of Kells* and *Paradise Lost*, Gregorian chant and the Sistine Chapel,”²

Anthony Visco came of age, artistically, in the 1970’s and so it is a common misconception to place him in the realism movement of that period. Unlike the camera-conditioned artists of that movement, Visco is a representationist who derives much of

his aesthetic impulse from an aspect of Christian Humanism. In his artwork, Visco attempts to restore an expression of empathy, through narrative content, and thereby fulfill a moral responsibility of the artist to his audience.

Fifteen years before the installation of these Stations of the Cross at Old St. Joseph's, Anthony Visco began his art education. He went to art school full of hopes— to learn how to make art that stirred the imagination, the heart, and the soul. His hopes were never realized because evangelical modernists taught him. Modernism's ignorance or intolerance to representationist art negated its place in the art school curriculum. Typical of art schools at that time, there were no life models from which to work. Instead of the life painting or sculpture classes he and other students were forced-fed Albers, surrounded by little bits of colored paper. Art educational teaching was a 'convert or die,' a method still in place in most art schools. Visco essentially learned nothing in art school that would prepare him for his life's work aside from the modernist instruction to, "do something and we will talk about it.' It wasn't that the emperor had no clothes; it's that there was no emperor."³

Visco readily admits that his art training was not in school but rather on his own. It began the moment he arrived in Florence in 1970 under the auspices of a Fulbright Scholarship, received, ironically enough, for doing conceptual installation artworks. That one year in Florence was a crucial experience and would provide Visco with decades of imagery and thought, an ever-lasting fountain of original inspiration. In his art and in his life, Florence will always be the point of entry and the point of departure— for it restored in him the basic human instinct of quality. The person he was before his arrival and the one he became afterwards are distant mirrors of one another. "In that one year, I learned more about art and art history than in all my four years of art school. In fact, nothing in my training had prepared me for what I was about to learn or how the lessons would be imparted."⁴

There were two specific artworks that contributed to this profound turnabout, from traditional modernist to an avant-garde representationist. While living in Florence he partook of two experiences that were to become a daily ritual: each morning, he visited the chapel at Santa Croce to see the Giotto frescoes and each evening, he visited the Ghiberti Doors [the east and north doors of the Baptistery]. The frescoes and the doors displayed so many of the lessons that he wished to learn— the very lessons that

Visco's art school teachers had told him were unlearnable, or anachronistic, or irrelevant.⁵ To return to the Florentine Renaissance was neither a means to the past or a denial of the future. It was, and still is, a means to representationist art— a means to depict the manifestation of hope.

“After my sojourn in Florence, the voice of the Zeit Geist was no longer in my ear, but I had to learn to listen the Muses once again. This proved to be very difficult. The reason is that the art school eunuchs, my instructors, always talked of “risk-taking” but it was seldom explained other than an incomprehensible grumble. It was soon after Florence I learned that real “risk-taking” was to try to make something beautiful.”³ This is a major distinction between Visco and the modernists. As Salvador Dalí noted, the introduction of the ugly and its subsequent triumph over beauty signify the beginning of modern art. Dalí attributes this conversion to the “romantic adolescent naïveté” ramblings of Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote, “Beauty seated itself upon my knees and I grew weary of her.”⁶

Visco had not set out to challenge the dominant aesthetics of the period but did so inadvertently by trying to return to the original thought and meaning of representationist artwork. His research brought him to an earlier important iconic shift that had occurred when Romanesque and Gothic art ceased to be dominant and illusionistic art became ascendant. Visco attributes this shift to the introduction of Franciscan spirituality into the teachings of the Church. Visco notes that this effected an ecclesiastical philosophical change— from the heavenly to the mortal, the spirit made flesh. In the imagery of Christ it would esteem that of Christ the Sufferer over that of Christ the King. This necessitated a transformation in the means of depiction in the imagery of the Church.

The codified visual language of Romanesque Gothic and even that of Byzantium, as seen in Greek icons, would be deemed inadequate by the Roman Catholic Church to convey this profound change. For the Christ Passion, the suffering of His Flesh, a new art would be created. The fathers of the church decided that the visual imagery and vocabulary of the antique Greco-Roman world would suffice. Visco found that this philosophy was timeless and crucial to his own artistic and personal development.

In 1972, Visco set out to make a career as an artist. As do so many would-be artists, he assembled a portfolio of drawings, paintings, and sculpture to show galleries, in the hope that they would represent him. In the 1970's few galleries were exhibiting

representationist art; and those rare ones that did, did not want to display artwork with religious or mythological themes. Visco tried genre art, the depiction of the everyday occurrence; but as successful as it was, it left him unsatisfied. He returned to the art that inspired and interested him— religious and mythological art.

In this manner, the mature phase of his career would start. Visco notes, “I live by the slogan, ‘Every good Florentine keeps his shop and his shop keeps him.’ I did whatever it took to keep the studio opened, it taught me how to juggle several careers at once—a little teaching, a small commission, some prototype work for industrial application, and of course artwork from my own musings.”⁷ Since opening his studio, Visco has always been a commissioned artist. This is an important achievement for him because all of his favorite artworks are commissioned.

This fall 2005 he recently completed a commission for the National Shrine to St Rita of Cascia (www.saintritashrine.org) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It began in 1998 when the congregation of Saint Rita of Cascia in South Philadelphia commissioned Visco to do the statues and murals for the shrine. There are four bronze statues in the round, a bas-relief, a cornucopia monstrosity, and two murals. This commission was seven years in the making— from the measuring of the interior for the site-specific installation, the first designs, sketches, and maquettes; to the second group of sketches and maquettes both to finalize the ideas for himself and to show the committee how things would look; and then, to the installation of the final artwork. It meant that, in the studio, he kept in concert many divergent things: sculpting on several different figures at once, the overseeing of the assistants, the casting the moulds for the sculptures, the organizing the work so that it can be cast at the foundry, and then scheduling for the installation of the artwork.



Figure 2. *Christ of Holy Saturday*

Visco started the commission with the bronze bas-relief of “Christ of Holy Saturday,” which he completed in 2000 [see fig. 2]. He then did the titular saint, a life-size bronze who kneels before the Resurgent Christ. In this bronze, Visco recalls the versatility of Donatello; in that he adjusts his skills to the content. He has succeeded in making a relief with no perceptible or static central bilateral composition to contrast with the dynamic expression of the saint. St Rita’s [see fig. 3] gesture demonstrates the duality of her divine nature— she is both rising and falling; both accepting from Christ and offering to devotees the thorn that has been bestowed upon her.



Figure 3. *St. Rita of Cascia*

Three life-size statues of the saint's patrons: St Augustine, John the Baptist, and St Nicholas of Tulentine are placed on the periphery of the shrine. Together they compose what is often referred to in painting as "*Sacra Converszione.*" In this type of composition the figures work in concert to elicit a feeling of sacred presence in the secular coil.

Thirty years ago, an important rupture occur that placed Visco in singular vision for his artwork and career. Then, few galleries were exhibiting representational art; and those rare ones that did, did not want to display artwork with religious or mythological themes. Visco tried genre art, the depiction of the everyday occurrence; but as successful as it was, it left him unsatisfied. He returned to the art that inspired and interested him—religious and mythological art.

Initially, Visco tried to get city-sponsored art commissions but was rejected each time. The response to his work was the same, he received the same form letter informing him his work was "deemed inappropriate" for public art. "Public art" is no longer public. It does not hold the best of the culture's ideals nor does it appeal to a universal or "grand norm" but rather to an elite few. For this reason, contemporary public art is rarely

inclusive– to place or install something in the outdoors does not make it public art– at best it is outdoor sculpture and at worse matter out of place.⁷

Visco sought a venue for which his art could serve and one in which the depiction of the human figure– nude or naked, sacred or profane; but never figurative– could address an audience whose humble inarticulateness often masked their rich and profound lives. He found such an opportunity in the grand tradition of commissioned artwork of the Catholic Church. For the past thirty years, Visco has served as a vessel of the assent of faith.

A close examination of the St Rita statue reveals that there are neatly creased sheets of paper tucked in the folds of her dress and elsewhere. Members of congregation and visitors to the Shrine placed these there. These bits of paper, with names or prayers, represent the hope of their authors for St Rita to intervene on their behalf (She, along with St Jude, is the patron saint of impossible causes.) For Visco, these bits of paper are significant for they are evidence of his “attempts to restore an expression of empathy, through narrative content, and thereby fulfill a moral responsibility of the artist to his audience.”

One may see examples of Anthony Visco’s artwork at his website:

www.anthonvisco.org/

This article is published in connection with Mr Connors’ lecture, “Why Catholics Invented Pictorial Space; The Need for Perspective in the Art of Incarnation.”

¹ Interview of Anthony Visco by the author, 13 September 2003.

² Seamus Heaney’s comment of the aim of Czeslaw Milosz’s poetry can similarly be applied to that of Visco’s. Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers, Selected Prose 1971–2001*, [New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002] p. 448.

³ Interview of Anthony Visco by the author, 14 June 2004.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Baptistery Doors have played a crucial part in inspiring and imparting the profound lessons of the art of the Renaissance. John White notes, “It is important to remember that the invention of a mathematically based system during the early years of the fifteenth century was heralded, not by the publication of a treatise, but by the painting of a pair of

panels [*of the Baptistery Doors*]-italicized addendum by author. It was Filippo Brunelleschi who chose to make known his new discovery this way. The panels are now lost” (The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space [Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987], 13).

⁶ Salvador Dalí, Dalí on Modern Art, The Cuckolds of Antiquated Modern Art, trans. Haakon M. Chevalier [Mineola, New York Dover Publications, Inc., 1996], p. 19.

⁷ Interview of Anthony Visco by the author, 24 June 2004.

⁸ George Bernard Shaw defined evil as “matter out of place.”

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