

A MATTER OF LIGHT *Nine photographers in the Vatican Museums*

Collections represent the constitutive part and the *raison d'être* of any museum. Scientific research, aimed at studying them better and better, is the primary purpose of every serious museum's activity. To accomplish this purpose, museums adopt different strategies, ranging from restorations to study programs, up to temporary exhibitions. Alongside these more traditional strategies, the museums are increasingly experimenting with other methods, some of which are well described in the essay by Johanne Lamoureux published in the catalogue of the exhibit. For the most part, these projects have the common denominator of inviting individuals, external to the museum's organization, to interpret the museum collections: art critics, contemporary artists, intellectuals.

The reason for these invitations lies, in my opinion, in the widespread and correct awareness that the work of art is by definition polysemous, having multiple meanings and a wide range of interpretations.

On this theme I recall Pietro Toesca, who said that in the field of art everything is unprecedented because the semantic complexity of works of art is inexhaustible. The meaning of an artwork is not only given by the artist and is not given only once and forever: it changes continuously since its meaning stratifies over time, it grows and changes at the same time. In a work of art, we often do not see what is there, but what we want there to be. Each work of art is the product of a story, of a technique, of a style; but it is also emotion, memory, remembrance. It could be said that every time a glance focuses on an artwork, it contributes to change its meaning. Only the action of looking at it, of studying it, of experience it, allows the existence of the work and therefore his ability of producing meaning; vice versa, due to the indifference of men, it dies.

In this context, I found particularly appealing the project of the Vatican Museums aimed to deepening the knowledge of their collections – and of the very same invaluable work of art represented by the Vatican Museums themselves – through the call for nine great photographers asked to interpret them. This project, included in the program of the second edition of Photoweeek, spreads two key words: interpretation and photography.

Actually, photography, like any critical genre, is never objective. Photography by its nature is

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unfaithful, for it reproduces reality through a double, perhaps a triple filter: that of the technical instrument, that of the photographer – who first chooses, amongst the many available, the object to be photographed and then makes other choices: the angle, the framing, the contrast, the lighting ... – and then the last filter, that of the person who looks at the photograph. Therefore, photography is interpretive by nature and, as such, cannot be impartial.

Consequently, photography has a critical function, because the main task of criticism is not to judge the artwork but at least to judge it after having allowed us to penetrate it. Criticism must be able to overcome the barrier of immediate impression, to go under that surface, not denying the emotion but rather explaining it, in order to clarify why that work provokes that emotion. Critical inquiry therefore embarks on a journey that is different from the pure sensibility and is characterized by rationality, intelligence, *intus-legere*, by reading deep inside, by grasping the hidden and not immediately evident aspects. Critics must teach to look at the artwork explaining why that work gives us that particular emotion. Only after this process, we will possess not only a knowledge, but a greater, more justified, more structured awareness of that work.

The photographers, therefore, in this project are critics-artists who creatively interpret the Vatican collections in a relationship that I'd call *artifex additus artificis*. The results, excellent from the purely formal point of view, will also constitute the first nucleus of the Vatican Museums' photography collection. They teach us about other possibilities to question on, to look at, to think about works that we thought we knew well and that are instead inexhaustible sources of never ending surprises.

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