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## Summaries

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### *Intention, invention, «artifizio». How figurative cycles were perceived in the Renaissance*

by Antonio Pinelli

Nowadays, if we wish to know the secrets of a product patented by our competitors, we purchase a sample and give it to an engineer who takes it apart, piece by piece, going over the productive process backwards and analysing how each single component, and the overall object, works, thus revealing the mechanism behind its construction and the idea behind the project. This article analyses this type of operation, known as “reverse engineering”. The idea is to reflect upon the creation, structure and methods concerning large decorative cycles, how exactly they were perceived in the Renaissance. A number of writings by Annibal Caro and Vincenzo Borghini, two of the most authoritative iconographic experts in the age of Mannerism, give us insight into production methods and how single works and great decorative cycles – works which presupposed the creation of an *ad hoc* iconographic programme – were perceived. Of particular interest for us, it is the letter explaining the fresco decoration of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese's bedroom in the Palazzo di Caprarola (the so-called *Stanza del Sonno*), which Annibal Caro wrote to Taddeo Zuccari in November 1562 and which is reproduced entirely by Vasari in the *Life of Taddeo*. Also Vincenzo Borghini's letter in May 1565 to the Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici concerning the festive decoration set up in honour of the wedding between Giovanna d'Austria and the eldest son of the Grand Duke, Francesco I, is interesting.

We see in these writings that there are three figures who preside over the creation of a Renaissance cycle: the patron, the iconographic expert, and the artist. The patron is clearly the main character, in the absence of whom the work was neither planned nor realised. He is the one who expresses the «intention», i.e. what he

expects and wishes to see realized in this particular work. The iconographic expert is the humanist (or, in cycles of a religious subject, the theologian) who translates the «intention» of the patron into the «invention», i.e. into that more or less elaborated, detailed «score» of themes intended as a script for the artists which, in more modern terms, is known as iconographic programme. Finally, the artist, the one who concerns himself with the «artifizio», who has to translate into the visual language of images the «invention» of the expert. The «triad» formula allows us to embrace almost all the cases, but we should point out that this does not concern so much the actual individuals – patron, expert and artist – but rather the three distinct functions corresponding to those roles; not a fixed scheme, rather something with a «variable geometry». Variable in terms of numbers (sometimes there are one, or in extreme cases, two of the three components missing) and sometimes in the tasks carried out by each of the components too, because the relation between them is not static, but dynamic, and is subject to different requests and interactions. The functions of the patron, the expert, and the artist are not in fact separated into fixed compartments. Usually they depend on a dialogue, with variable intensity, which, even when it is not a source of tension and conflict, can give rise to situations in which skills overlap, and mutual interference takes place. The information deriving from literary sources has been compared with interpretations of a limited but significant sampling of cycles (the *Armadio degli Argenti* by Fra Angelico, 15<sup>th</sup>-century decoration of the Sistine Chapel, *Sala del Concistoro* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena, the *Stanze del Sonno* and the *Solitudine* in the Palazzo Farnese in Caprarola, *Galleria delle Carte Geografiche* in the Vatican palaces). Thus, on the one hand, we get access to the «mental laboratory» of the expert who, to elaborate the «invention» (iconographic programme) dips into rhetoric and the diagrams of the *ars memoriae*, drawing out a series of combinatory principles («convenience», «centrality», «dimensional hierarchy», «contiguity», «symmetric correspondence», «narrative progression», etc.) applicable to any type of planned intention. On the other hand, we have a clarification of the

intentions, overlappings and potential areas of conflict which arise in the patron-expert-artist triad.

It is from this process of deconstruction, aimed at identifying the basic criteria with which iconographic programmes are formulated and elaborated, that we arrive at a construction of a veritable «theory of perception» of Renaissance decorative cycles – based on the presuppositions and expectations of those carrying them out and not on the interpretative methods and perceptive criteria belonging to our times.

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