



FLORIAN HEINE

THE ART  
OF ILLUSION

PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

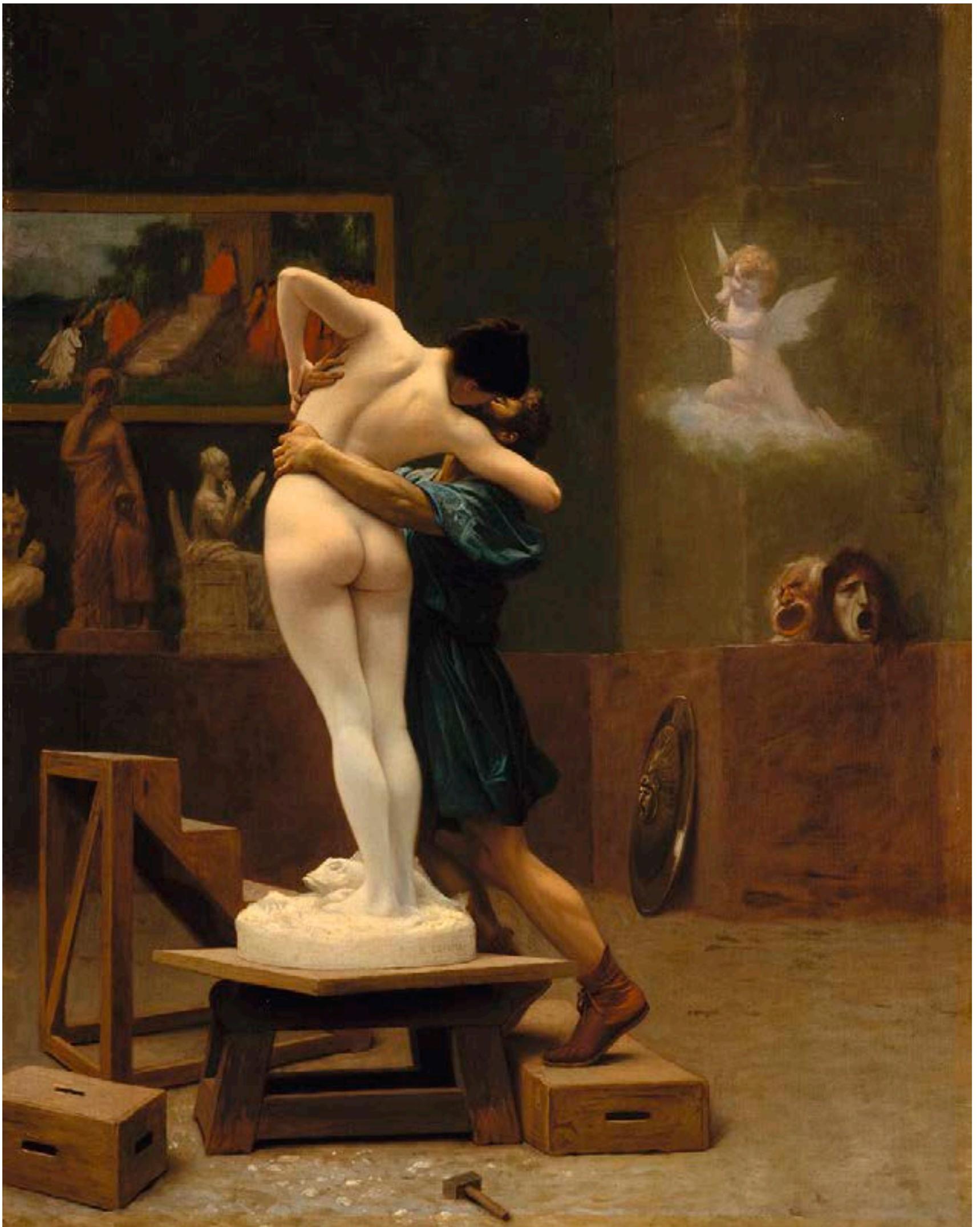
# INTRODUCTION

## Is Seeing Believing?

Everything we see is real. But not everything we perceive actually corresponds to that which we believe we see. “Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth”, wrote the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969).<sup>1</sup> And indeed, some things that artists create appear to be magic in the sense that a three-dimensional world is created before our very eyes on a flat canvas or a real wall. We are perfectly aware of its creation, and yet, all the same, we not only accept the ‘pretence’ but sometimes also find it difficult to see it for what it really is: paint on wall or canvas. The art here lies in the ability to imitate nature in the most deceptively real way. We see a painted object, as flat as paint on canvas is, yet we perceive it three-dimensionally. Trompe l’œil (French for ‘trick of the eye’) is a phenomenon. Painters trick us into believing that an object exists before us, and yet it does not. The only thing that exists is the two-dimensional image, when we finally recognise it as such. However, if one does not grasp the illusion and continues to assume that this object is actually present, then how real is it in our perception? If we assume that it is present, is it actually present, at least in our minds? In the special genre of the ‘optical illusion’, art manages to make things real that are not – at least for that short moment between seeing and perceiving, between perception and ‘(dis)enchantment’.

In painting, we see pictures, and it is clear to us that they are likenesses of reality or else of fantasy. This is the same case in sculpture, although sculpture possesses the greater closeness to that three-dimensional reality and thus the sculptors’ ‘attempts to deceive’ take

► Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, c. 1890















Mantegna in Mantua, Michelangelo creates his own illusory architectural framework, into which he fits his pictorial narratives from the Old Testament. Michelangelo suggests to the viewer a vault which raises the already very high chapel with a steeply curved ceiling.

Within real architecture, as well, the illusion that could be created by means of linear perspective was repeatedly used with a great degree of success, to the astonishment of the observer or even to make the reality of the thing unrecognisable. For, why should a technique that can credibly depict a three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface not also work in three-dimensional space, no matter how flat it may be? Donato Bramante (1444–1514), the later master builder of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, showed in the church of Santa Maria presso San Satiro in Milan just how this works (see pp. 42–43). The further away from the viewer, the more convincing the illusion becomes. And, of course, it is also an advantage to enter a space designed in this way without prior knowledge of what one is about to see.

The Venetian painter Titian probably had this same experience when he and Vasari visited the Villa Farnesina in Rome, which, from 1510, the architect and painter Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536) built and partly decorated. The highlight of this magnificent palace, built on top of an ancient villa, is the Sala delle Prospettive, the Hall of Perspectives (fig. pp. 24/25). Here, Peruzzi managed to create, with this illusionistic architecture, the quite disorientating impression of a huge loggia with a supposed garden view, which Vasari described by saying that “nothing more beautiful can be imagined.”<sup>4</sup> All around, one sees a diorama, as it were, of Rome at that time. One can recognise the Arch of Septimius Severus, the Torre delle Milizie and parts of the Ospedale di Santo Spirito between the various architectural elements. In order to properly appreciate the effects of perspective, it is necessary to view the space from different viewpoints. With the whole room decorated in perspective using stucco and imitation marble, one is more than happy to fall for the illusion. According to Vasari, it was Titian who “would by no means believe that it was painted, until he had changed his point of view, when he was struck with amazement.”<sup>5</sup> Titian would certainly have had a similar reaction if he had visited the Villa Barbaro by Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) and allowed himself to be overwhelmed by the frescoes of Paolo Veronese (1528–1588; see pp. 44–45).

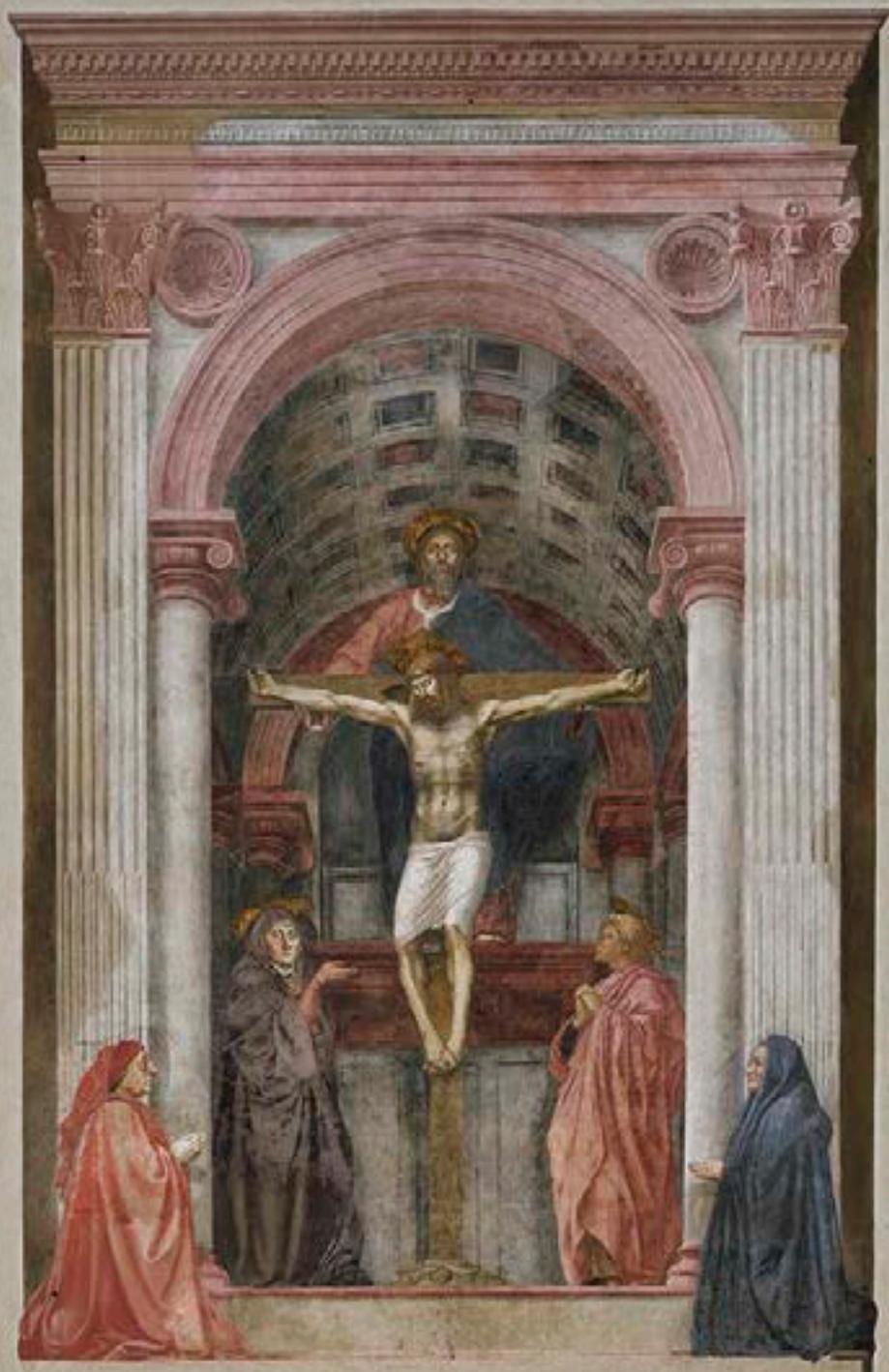
◀ **Previous spread**

Baldassare Peruzzi, Hall of Perspectives at the Villa Farnesina, c. 1515

Illusions are one of the specialties of theatre. There, a world is created that, ideally, allows the people in the audience to recognise themselves but seen from a completely different perspective. Poets are responsible for its content; the task of ensuring that their words are also accentuated in visual form is left to stage designers and architects. In 1580, one of the most influential architects in history, Andrea Palladio, planned and built the first free-standing theatre building since antiquity, the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza (fig. below). Andrea Palladio incorporated all his thoughts on ancient theatre into this building, right up to the sky-blue ceiling intended to evoke the illusion of an open-air theatre, as was customary during antiquity. In Palladio's time, up to eight hundred people could follow the staged spectacles from the fourteen stepped rows of seats. They saw – and still see today – a three-storey scenery flat with three portals that provide a view onto five streets. If one follows the streets with only one's eyes, one may imagine wandering down long urban canyons; but if one were actually to walk into this city of scenery, one would come up against its limits after a

▼ Andrea Palladio and Vincenzo Scamozzi, stage and scenery of the Teatro Olimpico, 1580–1584





## Masaccio

### *Holy Trinity, c. 1427*

Fresco, 667 × 317 cm  
Santa Maria Novella, Florence

The earliest three-dimensional image that we know today was painted by a close friend of Filippo Brunelleschi, Tommaso di ser Giovanni Cassai, known as Masaccio (1401–1428), who created a chapel with a view of the *Holy Trinity* for the church of Santa Maria Novella around 1427. In front of the observer, the space of a chapel seems to open up, in the centre of which is the crucified Christ, God the Father and a dove, the symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit. Beside the cross stand John the Apostle and the Virgin Mary, who, with a simple gesture, draws our attention to Christ. In front of the supposed chapel, the two donors who commissioned it kneel on the left and right.

Viewing the fresco today, we are no longer deceived by this alleged chapel. We understand and recognise immediately that it is a flat wall. At the time of its creation, however, things were obviously somewhat different. The people looked into the illusionistic chapel and saw a space flanked by pilasters and columns, the vaulted coffered ceiling of which draws the eye into the depths of the room. It is very likely that Brunelleschi designed the architectural template. Masaccio applied the rules of linear perspective in an exemplary manner. Using a vanishing point and intersecting vanishing lines, he constructed a system of lines that he scratched into the fresh plaster and which is still, to some extent, visible today.

With illusionistic spaces such as these, what counts is the surprise of the observer, and this would have been achieved here, since something comparable had never been seen before, neither the architecture nor this kind of linear perspectival representation. Masaccio's intention, however, was not to entertain the public; quite the contrary, he wanted to show the story being depicted as realistically as possible in order to make the Passion of Christ even more tangible.

To further enhance the three-dimensional effect of the chapel space, Masaccio positioned it above a niche framed by short columns, in which a sarcophagus may be seen, upon which a skeleton seems to lie. Here, too, the faithful would have looked a second time in amazement, for it was not uncommon for some priests to display such real desiccated corpses for the edification of their flock. Masaccio's skeleton surpassed everything that had ever been painted before: It is, in fact, the first skeleton painted according to all the rules of anatomy and illusionist art, more than half a century before Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings. People would have been frightened by their initial sight of it, especially since one must not forget the original freshness of the colours and thus the high degree of realism. The not exactly encouraging inscription on the sarcophagus, "I once was what you are and what I am you also shall be", will have done the rest.

Of course, even then, viewers quickly understood that no new chapel had been built here, but that they were dealing with an illusion. But even in his *Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari still reports on Masaccio's chapel, which after more than a century was already obscured by newer altars, but still gave him the impression that the wall had been "pierced".<sup>8</sup>

# PAINTING

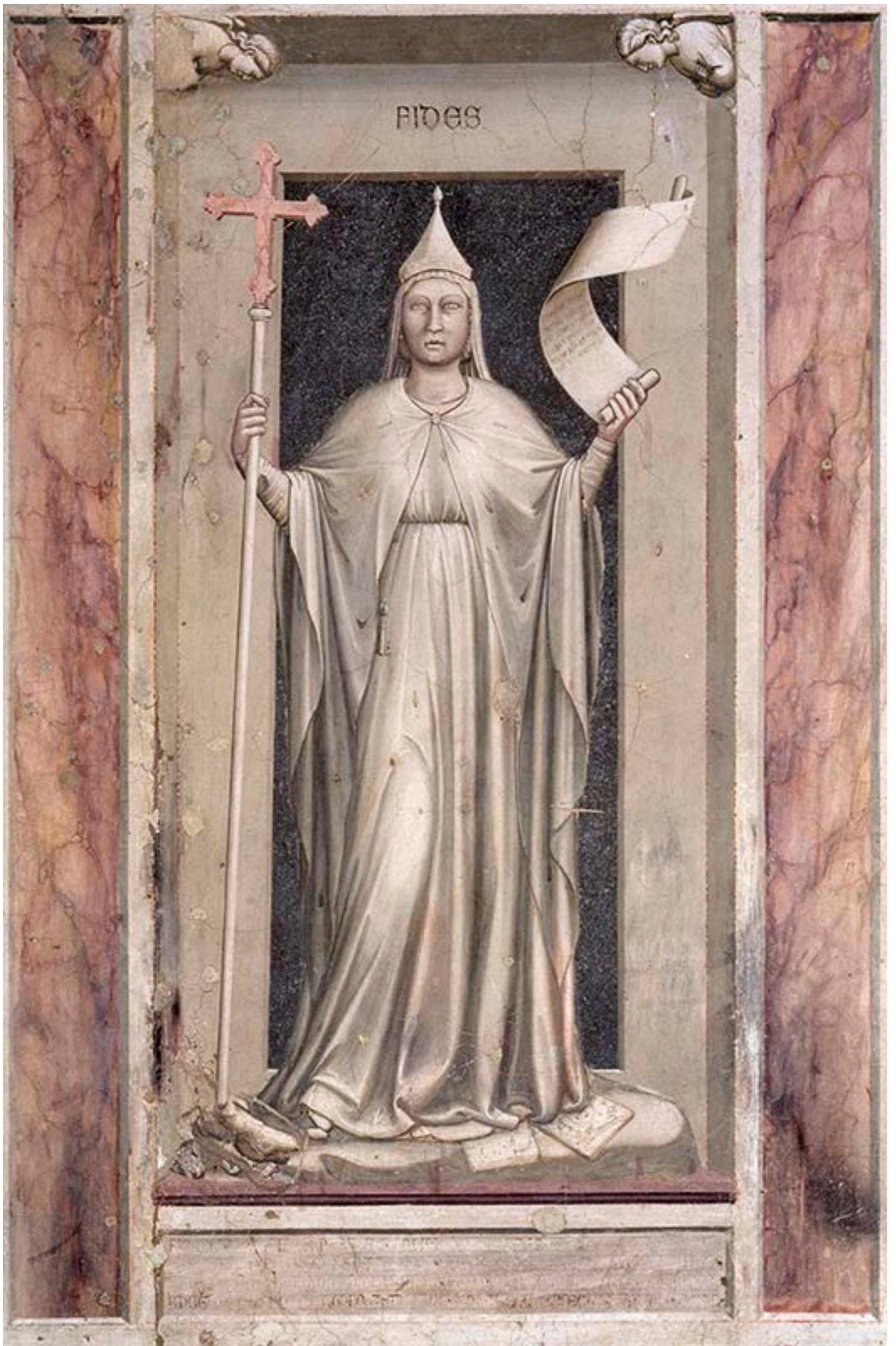
## Seeing and Perceiving

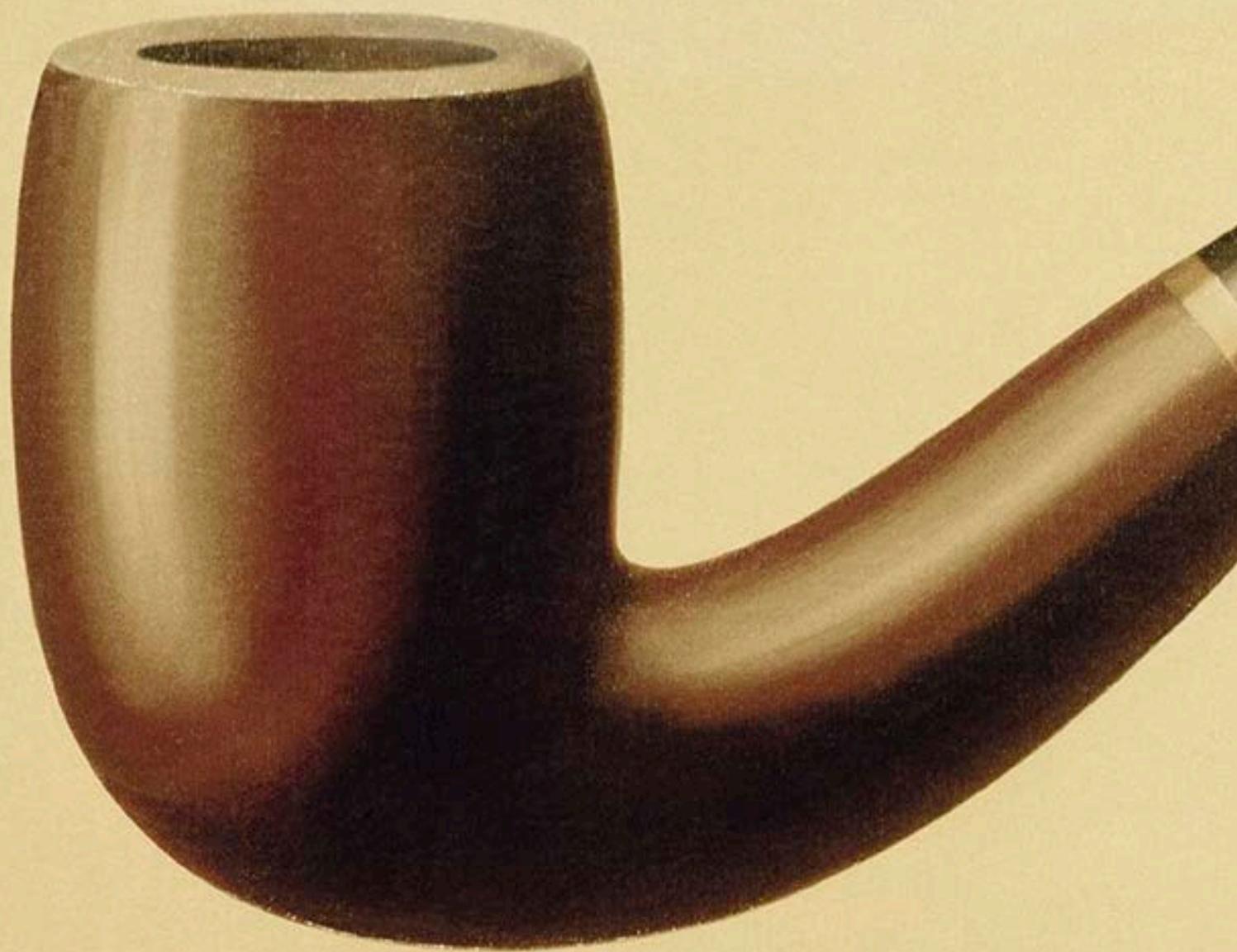
Theological reform was accompanied by a renewal in painting. After the end of the Middle Ages, during which the Church had kept artists in check, so to speak, some time was needed to rediscover old skills and techniques, as well as develop new ones. A period of artistic experimentation and research began to catch up to, or even surpass, the artistic developments that had come before during the period of antiquity, or what was considered 'antiquity'. Painters tried, once more, to reconnect their art to nature.

The Italian painter Giotto di Bondone (c. 1266 - 1337) was an artist with fundamentally new ideas. He put an end to the flat, rigid painting style of the Middle Ages and turned towards nature, which he could depict like no other before him. The poet Dante Alighieri (1265 - 1321) praised him in his *Divine Comedy*, and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313 - 1375) wrote in his *Decameron*, "[One of our fellow citizens,] whose name was Giotto, was so very skilful that there was nothing created by nature [...] that he could not copy, with a stylus or a pen or a brush, so closely that it seemed not like, but rather the thing itself".<sup>9</sup> If one looks at Giotto's paintings today, one can only truly understand this sense of astonishment by also comparing them with the contemporary art of the time. Giotto did not copy the standard models and formulas, but instead translated his personal observations into pictures. He gave his figures a new kind of physicality and weight. A skilful use of light and shadow also plays an essential role in this. The frescoes along the dado of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, from 1304, show this particularly well. Here, Giotto painted figures as symbolic representations of the Virtues and

► Giotto di Bondone, *Faith*, c. 1306

FIDES





*Ceci n'est pas*

◀ René Magritte, *The Treachery of Images (This is Not a Pipe)*, 1929



une pipe.

Magritte

# PHOTOGRAPHY

## Automated Drawing

The invention of photography can be seen as a provisional end point to the development of naturalistic painting. Since the end of the Middle Ages, painting has attempted to draw closer and mimic nature as accurately as possible. Brunelleschi's linear perspective was a significant step in this direction, as was the use of oil paint. Many painters also used the technical means available to them in their time, be it concave mirrors, lenses, the camera lucida or the camera obscura. In regard to the physics of optics, these artists were well equipped. In the mastery of their craft, too, many artists made considerable contributions. For others, however, this was not enough; they wanted the image they saw projected by their lenses to be transferred automatically to the paper. There were two kinds of innovators who invented photography for their own purposes: those who could actually paint and wanted to use the possibilities of the camera obscura to inject their work with a certain amount of rationalism, like Louis Daguerre (1787-1851), and those who drew less well and wished the image that the camera obscura provided them to be transferred as accurately as possible to paper. The latter group included William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877). Disappointed by the quality of the sketches he made during his honeymoon, he came up with the idea of leaving the art of drawing entirely to the sun and chemistry. Both Daguerre and Talbot were extremely successful with their respective methods, the daguerreotype and the negative-positive photographic process, and both would have a lasting influence on art. And by using a machine to capture something exactly, 'true to life' as it were, they also seemed to hold out the promise that what one sees in a

photograph must have been exactly the same in reality at the time it was taken.

▼ Louis Daguerre, *Boulevard du Temple*, 1838

## The Credibility of Photography

This credibility was long one of photography's greatest assets and it has still not been completely disregarded. Yet, even one of the first daguerreotypes from 1838 fails to live up to this 'promise' (fig. below). It shows a street in Paris, the Boulevard du Temple, swept empty except for a shoeshine boy and his customer. The picture was celebrated for its 'objective', detailed representation. But it is far from 'truthfully' depicting the street. The people seem to have completely disappeared from Paris and the colours with them. Nevertheless, a well-disposed observer might say that it did indeed look like this. Of course, Daguerre's intention was not to deceive the viewer; the passers-by on this busy street were not captured by the daguerreotype simply because of its long



► JR, *The Secret of the Great Pyramid*, 2019





# SCULPTURE

## Humanity's Other Image

“Noble simplicity and sedate grandeur” is a dictum used by the archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) to describe the dignity of ancient statues, which – carved in pure marble or cast in fine bronze – show the idealised bodies of the gods and of myth. Our image of antiquity has been lastingly influenced by Winckelmann and his bon mot – and it is wrong. Antiquity was far from being as lacking in colour as is often imagined. The mistake lies not only with Winkelmann, but also in the perception of antiquity within Renaissance art theory. In fact, antiquity was colourful; the temples were painted, and the gods and warriors were covered in pigment. Even then, artists wanted to present a picture of the heroes and gods that was as true to life as possible, however one may interpret the idea of gods being ‘true to life’. The ancient statues, which were later uncovered in the Middle Ages and increasingly in the Renaissance, had over the centuries largely lost their colour. In addition, Winckelmann was studying Roman copies of the original Greek sculptures and thus became a victim of their own misinterpretations. But the bare marble matched the image of the world of antiquity which had been popularly formed. The written word painted a different picture, however, with plenty of references in ancient texts to the colourfulness of their sculptures. In Euripides’s tragedy *Hypsipyle*, for example, we read, “Look – run your eyes up towards the sky and take a look at the painted reliefs on the pediment” (fig. right).<sup>40</sup> The pediment figures had to be clearly and precisely recognisable because, though placed high up, they told the

► *Paris*, archer from the west pediment of the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina, c. 480 BC, colour reconstruction



## Mark Jenkins

*Embed Series #1, 2006*

Mixed Media  
Washington, D.C.

► **Facing page**

*Project 84, 2018*

84 sculptures, mixed media  
London

► **Overleaf**

Ordinary figures in ordinary places, whose behaviour, however, is unusual. This is how one could describe the sculptures of the American artist Mark Jenkins (b. 1970). Sometimes a woman sits in a dustbin, sometimes a man has a traffic cone on his head and sometimes a man is stuck with his head in the wall (fig. right). What is he doing there? Did he try to get through a wall and got stuck? It may seem unlikely, but it may not be impossible. Mark Jenkins often lets his characters, with their completely inconspicuous outfits, get into places or situations that range from peculiar to bizarre, when otherwise they appear completely normal. The figures often do not stand out, but if they do, it sometimes happens that passers-by may call the police for help. For example, when one of Jenkins's figures is floating, held over water by only a few balloons (Malmö, Sweden, 2008). And the rescue would be easy, because his figures are sculptures made of cling film and adhesive tape. The artist himself or his colleagues are wrapped with it and taped in a certain pose, and then cut out again. The resulting hollow forms are reassembled as sculptures. They are then dressed and sent on their mission. This is the confusion, the attention and the possible dialogue with the public that results.

Mostly the figures are found in rather comical situations, but not always. In 2018, Mark Jenkins drew attention to the issue of suicide with an impressive installation in London. Eighty-four male figures suddenly appeared out of nowhere, standing on the edge of the roof of the London Studios on the South Bank, as if they would collectively throw themselves off at any moment (fig. pp. 188/189). Suicide is the most common cause of death amongst British men under forty-five. The eighty-four very real-looking male figures stand for the number of weekly deaths. As part of a prevention and education project ("Project

84"), each figure was intended to remind us of a real person whose story was told as part of the campaign. Street art, which usually causes amusement, confusion or at least astonishment on the streets of the world, can also deal with very relevant and charged topics if it is created by artists who have developed an ability to do so – over and above the humour.

