

Research Article

# Semiotics and Symbolic Politics in the Reception of Seventeenth-Century Art: Reflections on Guercino's *Prometheus*

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## Abstract

As happens in almost all eras, contemporary thinkers have been able to prepare new tools for understanding the historical phases that preceded them. Tools that have led to new disciplinary directions and new interpretative methods: think of semiotics which in relation to the artistic field has highlighted alternative exhibition languages for reading paintings; or to the philosophical question of symbolic politics. With these tools it has been possible to read the timeless myth of Prometheus with a decidedly original key and in the modern age we see a clear revival in the use of this myth, both in political essays, in philosophy, in literature and in art. Also because Prometheus brings with him many messages also based on how one wants to think of him, whether free to grant the flame to humanity or chained due to the punishment of Zeus. With this essay, we try to read the interpretation of Prometheus by one of the most important painters of the European seventeenth century, Giovan Francesco Barbieri known as Guercino who at the age of 25 decided to open the Academy of the Nude in his hometown, Cento between Bologna and Ferrara, for very young aspiring painters, and it is precisely in the rooms of that art school that he frescoed his first and only Prometheus in the act of granting flame to the inanimate clay statue. A gesture that marks the meaning of art considered one of the highest human virtues.

## Keywords

Guercino, Prometheus, Academy of the Nude, Myth

## 1. Introduction

Some mythological tales have diachronically maintained not only the ability to communicate their intrinsic meaning, but also to be represented in specific forms and languages. That is, they have never ended up in the oblivion of a single epoch, even though their reading grids have changed, being influenced from time to time by the 'spirit of the times', or by interpretations conditioned by the *weltanschauung* that tended to be hegemonic in that specific historical period. Bearing

in mind, however, that this 'spirit' cannot be considered as exhausted in a totalizing and locked-in value system [1]<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps superfluous to point out that, being social in nature, this grid is subject to cultural relativism and therefore sufficiently - but not infinitely - variable in time and space. Therefore, since each culture is endowed with its own 'worldview', it also sets variable conditions for the recognition of objects and, at the same time, for the identification of visual figures as 'representing' objects in the world.

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"what is valuable in a certain society, the taste that dominates in it, imprints itself on all social life" [2]. Among these inexhaustible narratives is surely that of the myth of Prometheus. The son of Japetus and Climene, or perhaps of Asia, or Hera, after forging human beings out of clay, he disobeys Zeus's orders, with whom he had sided during the revolt of the Titans, by stealing fire to (re)deliver it to men themselves, who had been denied access to the *téchnei* and reason [3]. Throughout the ages, the titan has almost always symbolized the idea of humanity's progress. This is not the place to delve into the hermeneutic approaches that have been used throughout history to interpret the philological and symbolic image of this mythical figure. The aim of this contribution is to introduce, synthetically and without claiming to be exhaustive, a hypothesis of both a figurative, plastic and theoretical approach through which a seventeenth-century painter such as Guercino was able to elaborate his own representation of the *Prometheus*, rarely studied until now, and how the same brilliant artist came to design this representation. The method followed represents an attempt at interaction between the toolbox of the semiotics of the visual text, understood as a fabric of signs, and the analysis of the image from an art-historical point of view [4]. Every pictorial object, in fact, is a discourse and a text, painting, which due to some of its specific constraints forces the invention of particular artifices to make the transmission of meaning logical, stable and intelligible [5]. The collaboration of semiotics, as a tool for the investigation of art-historical objects, is an effective, as well as fascinating, application for a greater understanding of style, but above all of the intellectual reflections that engage an artist in 'his century'. The aim is to trace the lineaments, therefore, for a subsequent challenge to the theories of art history as well, in an approach that takes into account, as mentioned, both the historical time in which these reflections took place, and the fact that each painting is proposed as an individually original text, discontinuous and in relation to the others.

There have been many aesthetic expressions assigned to the titan icon, but there has been a notable increase from the 16th and, later, in the 17th century. Some artists decided to portray the enchained Prometheus in the act of suffering punishment (think of Piero di Cosimo, or Gregorio Martinez), while others preferred to reproduce the profile of the philanthropic donor, thus idealizing the aspect of creativity that the myth has transmitted over the centuries (e.g. Parmigianino). Even Rubens, shortly before Guercino's fresco, painted the mythological character, whose liver is lacerated by an eagle or a vulture in the Caucasus: the extraordinary execution of Prometheus' contrition and pain, formulated through an extremely realistic syntax of the body, envelops the observer in a ruthless aesthetic rawness. It is, however, difficult to imagine a plausible influence of the Flemish painter on the very young Barbieri, at least in this early phase of his production. Rather, the Emilian master's interpretation could have been influenced by the humanist canon spread by the recent Re-

naissance rediscovery of the classical world and its renewed drive.

## 2. Prometheus in Guercino's Academy

Inspired by the experience of the *Accademia degli Incamminati* started in Bologna by the Carracci, in 1616, at the age of twenty-five and with the indispensable support of Father Antonio Mirandola, Giovan Francesco Barbieri decided to open a similar place in Cento, his hometown [6]. He thus inaugurated the Academy of Nude. He did so thanks to the availability of two rooms granted by the community councillor, Cavaliere Bartolomeo Fabri. By virtue also of his very high standard of living, the patron fully represented the intellectual, economic and political evolution of the new bourgeoisie of Cento and, perhaps more generally, of the Italian province [7]. The purpose of the Guercino Academy of Nude was to educate in art and provide the first rudiments to beginners in the discipline of painting. The students, right from the early years, came from different places: Bologna, Modena, Reggio Emilia, Rimini and even France [8]. For these students, Giovan Francesco Barbieri managed to produce, and then have engraved, manuals of drawings depicting mainly anatomical details, with the help of important engravers of the time [9]. In 1642, Guercino moved his studio to Bologna, effectively closing the art school in Cento. To honour the new institute, the master frescoed the chimney hood of the entrance room with the image of Prometheus: a decidedly original and innovative sign. But why did the painter propose the *Prometheus* at the entrance to the premises of the Academy of Nude? Why should the first impact of the new disciples with that place of art have been through the mythological character who took fire from the gods to give it to men?

## 3. The Figurative Level and Its Narration

Now on canvas (200 x 150 cm) at the Cassa di Risparmio in Cento, the fresco shows the Titan in the centre of the painting against a white background, possibly a cloud. He is depicted wearing a tunic that stretches roughly up to his knees, orange at the top and red at the bottom, evidently moved by the wind: the rest of his body is uncovered [10]. Prometheus has a torch in his right hand, which he is handing over to the other protagonist of the scene. From the giant titan to the little man [11]. The latter appears livid, leaning on a boulder, apparently unconscious, with a sort of waving white drape at the height of his pelvis, in shadow compared to the rest of his body [12]. To the observer's left, a brown structure appears, a geometrically regular building that hides the action from the outside. Behind the wall, Guercino places a green tree, behind which emerges a rise overlooked by a cloudy sunset.

The 'figurative formants' enable us to recognise each figure in the fresco as an element of the natural world and with its respective meaning [13]. Through the understanding of these features, the narrative, i.e. the respective relationship within the unfolding of the action, also begins. Our painting follows the phases of the canonical narrative scheme [14]. The first of these, i.e. *manipulation*, appears unclear. Nobody orders Prometheus to give fire to the inanimate man in front of him. He moves consciously and completely autonomously. He himself could have been thought of as both the *giver* and the *receiver*. Sharper, however, appears the *competence* phase. In order to realize the mission entrusted to him, the mythological character must take possession of the torch to be held out to man and prepare himself with the right state of mind in order to carry out his purpose, so as to be *modalized* by possessing certain aptitudes [15]. Prometheus, in fact, feels the inner duty to deliver the flame of techniques; he knows the way to do it and can materially perform the action that also corresponds to his deepest desire. At this point, the titan must complete his project, and deliver the fire to man. Prometheus is a divine bearer of light that spreads in the darkness of reason [16]<sup>2</sup>. The fresco immortalizes this phase of the narrative. Finally, there is the *sanction*, in which the *addressee* judges the *recipient's* actions. But we have just postulated that the addressee and the addressee of this work could be identical. Who, then, judges Prometheus? The spectrum of hypotheses before us could be composite. It can be assumed that this painting lacks the concluding phase; on the other hand, it could depict the narrative up to the handing over of the lamp, although it is useful to remember that the handling and competence phases can only be assumed, as they are not really depicted. However, the members of the cultured elite of the 17th century and the pupils of the Accademia of the Nude for whom the work was intended should already have been familiar with the stage developments of the mythological tale. Thus, it is difficult to think that this key interpretation is plausible. In the second instance, one could envisage Prometheus retaining both roles and judging his actions independently. But even in this case, the cultural element of knowledge of the myth comes into play: the audience of the time was aware of the tragic ending of the protagonist and this makes it difficult to imagine such a solution. A tempting hypothesis could envisage a sort of 'twist of fate', with Zeus taking over the role of recipient/judge only in the final phase. The observer of the fresco already knows the punishment Prometheus faces: on the other hand, that cloudy sky is not accidental and could be an expression of the wrath of Kronos' son [17]. This semantic

guise, finally, could also be covered by the observer himself, who identifies himself in the part of the recipient of the fire of reason. In this direction, the evaluation of the titan's actions would be positive, because the virtuous outcomes resulting from the bestowal of that light are being enjoyed by mankind in its historical being and becoming. The observer and the rational faculty within him, with which he scrutinizes the course of action, would thus be invested: the judging reason would thus give due recognition to the titan's courageous work. With the awareness that any of these narrative solutions could be considered forced and not pertinent to the *corpus of analysis*, it is not excluded that Guercino himself wished to keep the conclusive judgement suspended, or simply not express it.

What, then, should we recognize in the visual sign told by the character of Prometheus and how should we identify its iconic message? Guercino's attention is primarily directed at the ontological essence of Prometheus. The fire of Guercino's depiction represents artistic creation, also a cultural peculiarity of humanity. The objects of the image retain different allegorical meanings that refer to further connotations; and it is this semiotic plurality that gives the visual text a renewed theoretical power, as well as considerable aesthetic and symbolic appeal. Without losing *focus* on the object of analysis, however, it is useful to mention the myth beyond the fresco for a further reconstruction of the narrative program represented in it. Initially, Zeus placed irrefutable trust in Prometheus, to the point of assigning him the task of moulding mankind from mud and water. However, once the job was done, the heroic Titan realized the need to disobey the will of the lord of the gods who wanted to keep humans in their intellectless *status*, and decided to entrust them with what was lacking [18]. The mythological figure of the Nude Academy is clothed in an even more precipitous significance. The legendary hero 'provokes the spark that gives life to man and his intelligence, and should be thought of as the mythical transposition of the artist who, with his mastery, transforms inanimate matter into living flesh; an act that becomes a metaphor for the creative power of art' [19]. Upon entering the Academy, one must symbolically immerse oneself in the world of art, in which Guercino assumes the role of Prometheus, bearer of the creative fire to future generations. The new painters in the *nude* would thus bring such wonder. A new Prometheus modelling new creators of beauty, through an unprecedented artistic clay. The painting also deals with the social question of the time. In Gian Francesco Barbieri's depiction, the mythological figure represents the desire for revenge of the new bourgeois class and its new cultural aspirations, even in the provinces, in homage to the patronage of Fabri's house, which hosted its activities.

## 4. The Plastic Language

Up to this point, the denotative plane of the signifier, i.e. the way in which the mythological protagonist is immediate-

<sup>2</sup> Hesiod tells us of an earlier episode in which Zeus is said to have taken fire away from human beings after being deceived by Prometheus himself, who, having divided an ox or a sacrificial bull, assigned the worst part to the deity, covering the bones with fat: in addition to the hidden idiosyncrasy, the fury is also the result of this event (*Theog.*, vv. 521-564).

ly perceived in the eyes of the observer under the arbitrary suggestion of the artist [20]. And partly also of the signified to which the *signifiers* refer. In a given culture, in this case that of the 17th century, the phenomenal study of an object of reality can be associated with several contents within a visual text, which, on the other hand, is to be understood as a model of interpretation, rather than as an object in itself [21]. The interpretative variations regarding the mutual exegesis of configurations of the visible do not follow completely random itineraries, but rather reasoned perceptual and inferential patterns [22]. Looking at the *composition* of this pictorial text, further observations can be made. Guercino attaches central importance to the visual balance of his painting and is therefore very attentive to the relationship between the main figure and the background in which the action takes place. The reference grid follows the analysis of lines, colours and the placement of objects in the space of the painting. Pictorial expression is thus also an interaction of contours, colours, shapes and light [23]. From an eidetic point of view, it is useful to note that the figure has solid edges, while the horizon, although clearly showing a mountain, appears less sharply outlined. The lines with which the lying man is depicted also seem to be defined, at least in the part closest to the observer. And so does the square structure that follows. Less clean appear the contours of the tree and the dangerously thickening clouds. The optical process is also influenced by the spatial organization of the objects arranged in the fresco. Prometheus seems to bend towards the other character. The movement suggests arrival from above, along the diagonal that runs from right to left, in a downward closing movement. The tree on the left is a vector of balance directed, on the contrary, upwards, as a guarantee of the rebirth of future generations, in discontinuity with the man who is receiving the flame, suggesting a direction of verticality opposed to the horizontality of the figure lying down, in opposition both to the two characters and to the flat aridity of the mountain, testimony to the uniformity of *physis* [24]. The wall clearly separates the inert man from the tree by placing itself transversally, but it also sends out a signal of antithesis between the immobility of that same human figure and the movement of Prometheus. It is not only topological distribution, but also visual concentration: the protagonist, therefore, laboriously comes from the right and is slightly slouching towards the sky, in a slow, *contracted movement* [25]. He knows that he will suffer violent resistance from the lord of Olympus, yet he faces his self-imposed challenge. In fact, compared to an initial effect of *suspension* of the titan's body, without a solid point of support other than the vacuous cloud, the approach to the unconscious body grants the protagonist a certain dynamism, as it helps to direct his own motion *into the air*. A process that allows the transition from an *unstable equilibrium* to a more *dynamic* one; and the muscular tension confirms this transition [26]. At least, this is the sensation that is perceived. The whole procedure ends in a graceful gesture, because the titan is giving man precisely this unex-

pected grace. Prometheus' body itself becomes a text of semantic narration within the visual content. Nothing is blocked. On the contrary, the unfolding of the action not only communicates what is happening at that precise moment, but where it is coming from and, probably, the consequences of that movement. Thus, one glimpses both the synchronic qualification to reason and art of the static reclining character and the diachronic punishment that the titan is about to face. The cloudy sky hints at the uncertainty of the reactions coming shortly from Zeus. Another element of staticity is, rather, represented by the geometrically square shape that, instead of separating the main scene from the background, is placed behind the clay statue, affirming, if there was still a need, the inert fixity with which this inactive figure is presented to the observer's left, in clear contradiction with Prometheus' curved and continuous forms and with the action that those limbs and those garments dictate, stretched out precisely towards the passive figure that offers itself before him. These clues relating to the eidetic and topological order also highlight the work's visual dynamism. But the conflict continues in the impact between the verticality of the tree on the left, in the presence of the corresponding horizontality of the mountain. *Spatiality*, understood as *simulated* space, as well as *temporality*, accord further coherence within the painting [27]. The intersection between these different areas of the fresco, in fact, is a counter-evidence of this. From a chromatic point of view, Prometheus is frescoed with compact, *epiphanic* colours, in contrast to the background, which is presented with less dense and defined characteristics, one might say *filmic*. The light that illuminates the titan emphasizes the further contrast between the vivid fullness of the orange and red of the tunic, both with the achromatic white of the clay statue's complexion, and with the semi-chromatic brown, first intense of the square and then faded of the mount [28]. The colours of brightness, once again, inexorably recall the awakening of the creativity of art.

The painting continues to be read as the likely representation of a narrative scene, but at the same time makes evident the abstract structures, the logical framework on which the figurative tale is articulated [29]. The symbolic reference to which the plastic formants analyzed here refer is connected to the collective sense with which the figure of Prometheus is perceived, led by Guercino with the tools of the technique of art [30]. Thus linking up with what has already been discussed regarding the metaphorical meaning expressed through the figurative formants. But the articulated link, plastic and figurative, between these visual objects within the fresco also registers a semi-symbolic appeal, relating the two discordant planes of nature and culture [31]. It also applies to the topological categories of the high that refers to the divine marked by softer and darker colours (in this case synonymous with harshness and vengeance at least as far as pre-Christian deities are concerned), and the low that intercepts the charitable profane. However, through the role of the protagonist, resistance if not disappearing certainly loosens up.

The characterizing function of myth, in fact, is that of conciliation between ontologically antithetical poles, between profound semantic oppositions. In a process of migration from one text to another. Thus, from one model to another. At the discursive level, mythological narration mediates between terms that are irreconcilable in reality: good and evil, progress and preservation, shaping and flatness. Both the figurative and plastic language of Guercino's visual text confirm this irreducible opposition. However, on a semiotic level, in the figure of Prometheus the antinomies attempt to re-compose themselves, finding a mediation between the state of nature and the state of culture; in the transition, that is, from one to the other. On the one hand, the barren nature of the mountain and the dull condition in which the man lies; on the other, the culture reproduced in the luxuriant vegetation of the tree and, before that, in the liveliness of the flame brought by Prometheus. The clay statue is thus led from the state of nature into the state of culture, reaching a condition of grace and lightness, while the authentic promoter of this relay race is about to be condemned to atone for his sins in a desolate patch of nature, on the eastern borders of the world, taking on the consequent condition of heaviness [32]. And art bears witness to this transition.



**Figure 1.** Giovan Francesco Barbieri known as Guercino, *Prometheus giving life to a clay statue*, 1616, Collezione Cassa di Risparmio, Cento.

## 5. Conclusions

The rediscovery within Humanism and the Renaissance of the Greek classics was undoubtedly one of the fundamental characteristics of the literary and intellectual momentum of those centuries. And, clearly, it was not *unique*. Its legacy also characterized the ideological attitude towards myth in subsequent periods. In particular, within the reception of the 5th century B.C. Attic tragedies, we note how in seventeenth-century culture the legacy of the allegorical, political

and social significance present in the humanist lesson of Aeschylus' *Prometheus* intercepts several elements of continuity with the previous two centuries. The fortune of Aeschylus and his works, first and foremost thanks to Angelo Poliziani at the end of the 15th century, marked the understanding that the literati and artists of later historical periods had of these tragedies, and of their protagonists [33]. Certainly, even the self-taught Guercino had approached them: the semiotic approach in relation to the figure of Prometheus followed a kind of custom that assigned the mythological character a varied range of meanings. The socio-political value must not have escaped the artist from Cento either. And these aspects are also of interest to the present study, since painting as a whole is precisely this architecture of cultural forms that the pictorial text conjures up, from the literary text to social practices, from representational conventions to the many forms of knowledge sedimented in a culture, and which it organizes in a specific and peculiar manner through the geometric distribution of colours and lines on a surface, which in turn become the bearers of further meanings, determining the singular and cultural character of the pictorial text.

In the eyes of the Athenians of the classical period who watched the play, the image of Prometheus was representative of the desire to emerge and the feeling of revenge of the new social group composed of artisans and merchants, in contrast to the interests of the old aristocracy. No revolutionary overturning of the urban balance and order, but the desire for advancement of another class: did Giovan Francesco Barbieri also have this in mind when he frescoed the mythological animator of arts and techniques in the Fabri house, thus paying homage to the aspirations of the new rising middle class? Guercino was a typical representative of the Italian bourgeoisie, with all the Christian bourgeois virtues and weaknesses, his 'humanity' that saw man as the measure of the world, derived distantly from Pico della Mirandola's *De Hominis Dignitate* and translated into painting with depictions of bodies and landscapes that participated in a serene universal harmony. Barbieri is therefore an expression of the bourgeoisie and of that message of rewarding individual abilities typical of the new liberal social group: the artist of humble origins who thanks to his extraordinary qualities manages to emerge and who together with the other 'emerging' artists builds a piece of that class whose members are associated by common values and interests. Including support for art. Aesthetic forms are innovative and structured responses to existing social contradictions. The affirmation of Guercino's artistic subjectivity combined with the development and success of the city bourgeoisie. In this context, Prometheus has a paradigmatic function: saving humanity from destruction in order to create a new one, just as art saves from aesthetic, as well as spiritual and social disharmony, and creates new visual forms. It is also for these reasons, in conclusion, that Guercino's *Prometheus* can be included among the masterpieces of the noble history of depic-

tions dedicated to him.

## Author Contributions

Leonardo Masone is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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- [32] Cf. Giorgio Cerri, (1975), *Il linguaggio politico nel Prometeo di Eschilo. Saggio di semantica* [Political language in Aeschylus' Prometheus. Semantics essay], Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, pp. 27-44.
- [33] Cf. Nicosetta Roio, Emilio Negro, Massimo Pirondini, (2004), *La scuola del Guercino* [Guercino's art school], Modena, Artioli, p. 9.