

la rivista di **en**gramma  
**2000**

**1-4**

**2**

ottobre **2000**

LA RIVISTA DI ENGRAMMA N. 2

DIRETTORE  
monica centanni

REDAZIONE  
sara agnoletto, maria bergamo, lorenzo bonoldi, giulia bordignon, monica centanni, giacomo dalla pietà,  
claudia daniotti, silvia fogolin, marianna gelussi, katia mazzucco, giovanna pasini, alessandra pedersoli,  
daniela sacco, valentina sinico, lara squillaro, luca tonin

COMITATO SCIENTIFICO INTERNAZIONALE  
lorenzo braccesi, maria grazia ciani, georges didi-huberman, alberto ferlenga, kurt w. forster, fabrizio  
lollini, paolo morachiello, lionello puppi, oliver taplin

*this is a peer-reviewed journal*

La Rivista di Engramma n. 2 | ottobre 2000

©2016 Edizioni Engramma

SEDE LEGALE | Associazione culturale Engramma, Castello 6634 30122 Venezia, Italia

REDAZIONE | Centro studi classicA Iuav, San Polo 2468 30125 Venezia, Italia

Tel. 041 2571461

[www.engramma.org](http://www.engramma.org)

ISBN pdf 978-88-94840-01-8

L'Editore dichiara di avere posto in essere le dovute attività di ricerca delle titolarità dei diritti sui contenuti qui pubblicati e di aver impegnato ogni ragionevole sforzo per tale finalità, come richiesto dalla prassi e dalle normative di settore.

Bergamo | Bonoldi | Bortesi  
Centanni | Collavo | Mazzucco |  
Sacco | Simonato | Thomson

# La Rivista di Engramma 2

a cura di Redazione di Engramma

# SOMMARIO

- 1 | SAGGI | Tradizione e attualità nell'icona di Edith Stein  
ELEONORA SIMONATO
- 17 | SAGGI | Tradition and innovation in the Icon of Edith Stein from  
the monastery of Harissa, Lebanon  
ELEONORA SIMONATO  
EDITED BY ELIZABETH THOMSON
- 29 | MNEMOSYNE ATLAS | Tavola 42  
SEMINARIO MNEMOSYNE, COORDINATO DA MONICA CENTANNI E  
KATIA MAZZUCCO
- 33 | MNEMOSYNE ATLAS | Il teatro della morte  
SEMINARIO MNEMOSYNE, COORDINATO DA MONICA CENTANNI E  
KATIA MAZZUCCO
- 39 | MNEMOSYNE ATLAS | The theatre of Death  
EDITED BY ELIZABETH THOMSON
- 45 | MNEMOSYNE ATLAS | Letture grafiche di Tavola 42  
A CURA DEL SEMINARIO MNEMOSYNE
- 57 | P&M | Reinvenzione di un'immagine: Julianne Moore e la Grande  
Odalisca  
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA LORENZO  
BONOLDI
- 58 | P&M | Ripresa di una postura dall'antichità classica: Kate Moss e  
l'Ares Ludovisi  
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA LORENZO  
BONOLDI
- 59 | P&M | Rivisitazione di un topos iconografico: Milano Freestyle e la  
Maestà  
SEMINARIO DI TRADIZIONE CLASSICA, COORDINATO DA LORENZO  
BONOLDI
- 61 | EUREKA! | *Ab ovo*, o della rigenerazione  
LUCIA COLLAVO

- 63 | NEWS | Kazmir Malevich e le sacre icone russe. Presentazione della mostra di Palazzo Forti, Verona  
MARIA BERGAMO
- 65 | NEWS | Recensione a: James Hillman, *Politica della bellezza*, a cura di F. Donfrancesco, Moretti & Vitali Editori, Milano 1999  
DANIELA SACCO
- 66 | NEWS | Recensione a: *Mission Impossible 2*, regia di John Woo, USA 2000  
DILETTA BORTESI

# MNEMOSINE ATLAS | The theatre of Death

## Guide to reading Plate 42

edited by Elizabeth Thomson

Plate 42 appears to be the vertical development of one of the themes of plate 5: grief and mourning, oscillating between the extreme poles of rage and desperation, and impotence and destruction, a theme which, in a horizontal direction, engages the entire plate.

From a chronological and thematic perspective, the plate is quite concentrated: the works of art belong almost entirely to religious art of the early Renaissance in Italy, and the subject is death and its effects of suffering and grief. The figure of death is, crucially, the body of Christ (46.5, 46.13, 46.14, 14.18), and archetypally, grief is represented by the figure of Mother.

The deviation of these themes into the religious sphere is determined by the temporal and spatial selection that has been made. However, what matters, and what Warburg draws our attention to, is not the dichotomy between 'Christian art' and 'pagan art', which was unknown during the Renaissance. Rather, it is the persistence of a common language of symbolic and formal structures, translated into gestures, which exist in the memory of our cultural tradition.

In this plate, the subject of death and grief is never alluded to in an abstract fashion. Rather, it is personified physically in a series of *Pathosformeln*, or emotive formulas, which are sufficiently powerful and distinct that they and their variants become the real protagonists. These *Pathosformeln* by their formal attraction, influence and even resemanticise themes which appear to be less meaningful, such as the irascible man cured by Saint Anthony (42.1, 42.2); death and grief in the funeral monuments of Francesca Tornabuoni (42.6) and Francesca Sassetti (42.12); the agony of the dying man in the funeral monument of Della Torre (42.17).

The syntax of the *Pathosformeln* reveals a very definite itinerary that places the gestures of death and those of grief in opposition with each other. The



progression towards total motionlessness of the body on the point of death, dying, abandoned and finally become rigid in the posture of death is countered, on the other hand, by the progression towards the dynamism of grief. The melancholic posture of the grieving, distressed, sorrowful figure becomes contained rage and finally explodes with desperation in the impetuous figure that bursts into the scene with the emphatic gesture of open arms. In a circular fashion, the movement of grief is frozen into the posture of silent self-containment represented by the veiled figure at a distance from the passion scene, who, assailed by unbearable grief, distances herself from the theatre of death (42.2, 42.12, 42.14, 42.18).

Death brings to an end the dynamism of existence. The loose, wavy hair, the billowing garment (which can also be seen in 42.9), the arms waving in the air, are all signs of vital energy — the pathos which stirs the Nymph, the Maenad, and the impetus of maternal despair. As a counterpoint, the dropped and relaxed limbs, and the lifeless arms supported and gathered together signal in detail the heaviness of the body, whose mass shows through the funeral shroud. (42.3, 42.13, 32.14). It represents the affirmation of life as a violent and pathetic reaction against the necessity of death and the negation of self that death brings. The physicality of the dead body is a powerfully persistent presence in the plate, and is shown always in the foreground. Paradoxically, the gaze is forced to look for what is less apparent: not the progressive stillness towards death but the figure who represents the outburst of passion in the death scene.

At the point where the lines of semantic gravitation of the plate cross (42.14), an image placed randomly at bottom centre represents the theatre of death. It portrays the explosion of grief of the woman, who, in the sequence of figures, is enclosed between two male figures who hold the shroud containing the body of her dead son.

The extreme despair of the first female figure on the left — a Maenad with tousled hair and upraised arms — forces into a bend the legs of the second female figure, who literally appears to collapse with her arms extended outwards behind her. Although the third figure, standing, has regained a certain composure, her open hands spread across her hips and her torso folded forward reveal the depth of her emotion.

The fourth figure, her burden too much to bear, all gestures hollow and words futile, draws away from the scene locked in her despair, her face in her hands and her head veiled. The same emotive formula can be found in

the texts and iconography of classical tragedies: Aeschylus' *Niobe*, Sophocles' *Jocasta* and *Eurydice*, and Euripedes' *Phaedra*. Even the garments are an expression of the various stages of pathos. Whilst the veil conceals entirely the face and torso of the first figure on the right with her back turned on the scene, it reveals the face and torso of the figure that follows (reading the scene from right to left). The cloak falls from the shoulders of the central female figure, kneeling, and a sash girds her garment under her breast. Nothing can contain the despair of the female figure on the left. Her head is uncovered, her shoulders bare, and her billowing garments reveal the shape of her breasts. The scene depicts three versions of Mary in successive photograms of despair. From left to right grief follows an implosive course, which passes from emphatic paroxysms of despair to the personification of inexpressible grief. Conversely, reading the plate from right to left, despair leads to gestures of hysteria.

The theatre of death that features in this plate has a pace that alternates between movement and stasis. As in the syntax of music and tragedy, dramatic action is achieved by the counterpoint, originally two-way, between death (the impotent contemplation of the fate of the body), and the gesturally powerful dance of phobic passion. In plate 42, the binary rhythm between movement and stasis can be traced with particular detail in the general structure of the composition, which develops from movement to the closing scene of perfect stasis represented by Carpaccio's *Christ*, at this stage forsaken by all grief. The same rhythm can be found within each work shown. T

he *incipit*, the opening image (42.1), depicts the scene of the miracle in which the lines of the perspectival structure are recalled by the powerful lines which precipitate dynamically towards the motionless centre of the composition and the figure of the obsessed man, freed of his demons and exhausted by his delirium. The polarisation between stasis and movement is personified by the contrast between male and female figures. In this scene the female characters that enact grief follow faithfully the posture and gestures associated with Dionysan pathos copied from Roman sarcophagi. The male characters enact minimal variations of motionless postures. Excepting the funeral monument of Francesca Tornabuoni, the dying or dead figure is always male. Standing male figures are present at the scene of mourning, and play almost always a passive rôle (with the exception of the laureate figure in 42.5), and manifest no compassion (the old man standing, in 42.4; the bearers in 42.3, 42.7, 42.10, 42.13, 42.14). Neither male nor female, the funerary *putti* on the Bargello bas-relief (42.11), fool around

playing dead (body abandoned, bottom right), and also enact a frenzied confrontation which is expressed in emotive postures.

A rôle apart is played by John the Evangelist who occupies a place on the boundaries of the suffering of the women, expressed in gestures of grief and sorrow, and the detachment and composure of the male figures (41.5). From the desolation portrayed in Carpaccio's painting, in which the solitary figure of an aged, melancholic man keeps a distant vigil over the rigid body of Christ, John the Evangelist emerges silently in his grief, set apart and shrouded in his cloak, like the veiled woman of 42.14.

In this case, too, deep ties connect the montage of plate 42 to the plates that precede and follow. One of threads that connect plates 42 and 43, which is devoted to the Sassetti Chapel, can be found in the figure isolated in its sorrow. In the iconographic program of the Tornabuoni chapel in Santa Trinità, Florence, the funerary theme of desperate tears, spilled not only for the Redeemer, but at the bereavements of the Florentine middle classes, is portrayed in the monuments dedicated to the Tornabuoni and Sassetti families, and represents the felicitous integration between faith, superstition and the cult of antiquity (43.3, 43.4, 43.5). The cult of antiquity is relegated as both background feature and contemporary model using the artifice of a testimonial rendered in *grisaille*. The theatricality of the gesture of compassion is compensated by the composed devotion of a shepherd, with one hand on breast and the other extended forward indicating on this occasion not a lifeless corpse but the newly born Christ (43.12). The same gesture is sublimated in the inner transport of Botticelli's *St. Augustine* (43.15), his hand on the scriptures (which represent the Word of the Lord). The posture of the grieving figure, whose melancholy was heralded by the mourning female figure seated under the tree in Carpaccio's painting, becomes the posture which typifies the intellectual in his *studiolo* as portrayed by Botticelli's *St. Jerome* (43.14).

In plate 41 the pathos of dynamic despair — at the opposite extreme of melancholic grief or sorrow — has its precedent in the model provided by the agony of Laocoon, whose arms raised to the sky (41a.9) and contorted face represent for Ripa the symbol of pain (41a.22). As in plate 6, the punishment of Laocoon is compared with the sacrifice of Polyxena (Plate 41), around whom the abandoned bodies of Cacus (41.14) and Orpheus fall. As the network of interwoven threads becomes more dense, Orpheus becomes once again the image of the impotence of man in the face of destiny (41.8), and the postures of his aggressors — the Maenads — are reflected in those

of Christ's killers in Luca Signorelli's *Christ at the column* (41.19) and in Ercole de Roberti's *Christ climbing Mount Golgotha* (41.20), whilst at the right of the same painting the despair of the three Marys following the cross heralds one of the scenes of the theatre of death.



pdf realizzato da Associazione Engramma  
e da Centro studi classicA Iuav  
Venezia • settembre 2018



la rivista di **engramma**  
anno **2000**  
numeri **1-4**

**Raccolta della rivista di engramma del Centro studi classicA | luav, laboratorio di ricerche costituito da studiosi di diversa formazione e da giovani ricercatori, coordinato da Monica Centanni. Al centro delle ricerche della rivista è la tradizione classica nella cultura occidentale: persistenze, riprese, nuove interpretazioni di forme, temi e motivi dell'arte, dell'architettura e della letteratura antica, nell'età medievale, rinascimentale, moderna e contemporanea.**