

Kessler, Herbert L.

**Presentation of the book: The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World, Ivan Foletti ed.,  
Rome: Viella 2013**

*Opuscula historiae artium*. 2013, vol. 62, iss. Supplementum, pp. 138-140

ISSN 1211-7390 (print); ISSN 2336-4467 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129806>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

### Presentation of the book:

## ***The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, Ivan Foletti ed., Rome: Viella 2013**

---

*Following pages are not a real book review but a text of a public presentation, held in Brno on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2013, on the occasion of the official inauguration of the Center for the Early Medieval Studies. The editor of this supplement asked Herbert Kessler to publish here his stimulating reflexion, a proposition that professor Kessler kindly accepted. That is the reason we wish to express here our thankfulness.*

Speaking at a university named for Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, curiously, brings my own long academic experience full circle. The great scholar and first president of Czechoslovakia loomed large in my education at the University of Chicago. Literally. As I walked between home and classroom in the late 1950s, I passed beneath a forbidding monument of a medieval knight on horseback created by the Czech-American sculptor Albin Polášek (1879–1965). [fig. 1] One day, I detoured from my path and learned from the words inscribed on it that it was a monument to Thomas Garrigue Masaryk who had taught at the University of Chicago fifty years earlier. A strange memorial for a professor, I thought, but a bronze plaque explained the point:

*Rising out of the fertile Bohemian soil, the Blanik Mountain stands eternally vigilant, its verdant slopes sheltering a wealth of age-old folklore. According to an old legend, slumbering within its cool mountainous depths, the Blanik Knights stand guard, ready to ride forth with Saint Wenceslaus to lead them in their nation's hour of need.*

And the text beneath the horse made the connection:

*Thus cast in bronze the Blanik knight is but a monumental symbol of Thomas G. Masaryk's eternally valid ideals of freedom, democracy, and humanity.*

I can't help but feel that my guardian so many years ago on the flat plains of Illinois led me to Brno in 2013.

Though begun four years after Thomas Garrigue Masaryk died in 1937 and, in fact, dedicated a mere three years before I started walking past it on my way to class and back home again, the monument in Chicago can, in fact, serve the specific reason I am in Brno, which is to introduce

the book *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*. Edited by Ivan Foletti in collaboration with Alžběta Filipová, and produced jointly by the Masaryk University and the distinguished Roman publishing house Viella, *The Face of the Dead* includes papers by Nicolas Bock, Claudia Corneli, Chiara Croci, Ivan Foletti, Stefano D'Ovidio, Valentina Cantone, Philippe Murdry, Jutta Dresken-Weiland, Manuela Studer-Karlen, and Ladislav Kesner.<sup>1</sup> Most of the contributions were presented at a conference in Brno in 2012; and several were added to what is the first volume of the *Studia Artium Medievalium Brunensia* devoted to depictions of the dead on memorial monuments like Masaryk's in Chicago, but mostly from the early Middle Ages. They are part of an ongoing interest in the face as the embodiment of artistic questions that has been especially acute recently, well-known from Paul Zanker's *Die Maske des Sokrates* published nearly twenty years ago and now re-activated also by Hans Belting's new book,<sup>2</sup> *Faces: Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*.

The essays in the Brno volume concentrate on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe, the critical period during which the Roman world was converted to Christianity and Christian culture transformed Late Antique art and literature into something distinct. It was a particularly intense time when a concern with the place a man or woman had occupied in this world – in history – was yielding to what was considered even more important to Christians, namely a person's place in the afterlife, not the fleeting moment on earth, in other words, but eternity. The issues came to be embodied in different ways by various cultures and times, as Kesner's fascinating excursus on portraiture in China also confirms; nonetheless, *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World* investigates many of the same problems that Polášek faced when he created the Masaryk monument in Chicago.

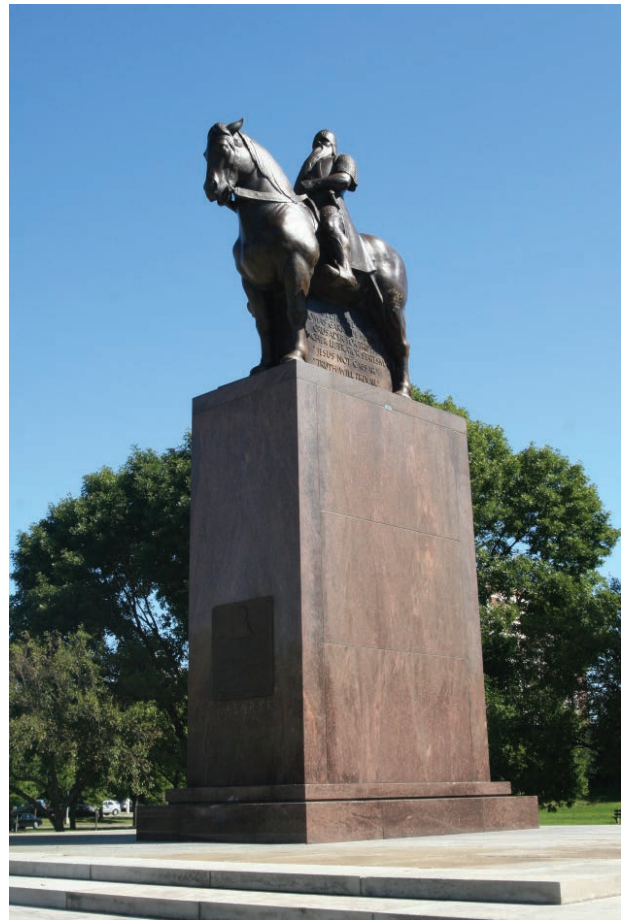
The first and most problematic of these is: How can a physical depiction secure memory of a deceased per-

son? An equivalent of assertions on gravestones that the bones of the dead person are actually present, *Hic iacet* or *Hic quiescit*, a portrait needs somehow to be recognized as the particular woman or man and, hence, to evoke an actual person in the mind of the viewer looking at it in the present time and place. Portraits on tombs were like seals on documents, *The Face of the Dead* teaches us; they authenticate bodily presence and guarantee that memory is activated.

Evoking the physical presence was only a first step. The memorial had also to recall a person's special qualities and, as a number of the papers in the volume note, the departed spirit's moral condition. So the second question is: How can what is essentially a mimetic exercise be elevated into something that captures a person's essential character? In the case of Masaryk, conjuring up a mythic figure, the Blanik knight is used to evoke the deceased's role as protector of his people. In Late Antique Christianity, several of the papers show, the aspiration was accomplished either by rejecting verisimilitude altogether and relying on words or symbols to create an anagogical ascent or by assimilating the real effigy to conceptual conventions that elevated it. Thus, we learn that St. Ambrose was given the features of a philosopher and ruler to evoke his special roles; St. Martin of Tours served as the prototype for the portrait of Paulinus of Nola; and St. Agnes' appearance was mapped onto those of one of her devotees. Distinguishing particular and conceptual features could also set up a hierarchical ordering within a single work, moreover; and as time progressed—in the catacomb of San Gennaro in Naples for instance – the distinctions in portraits were used to capture the essential ambiguity of the dead Christian as simultaneously a sinner and a person who sought an eternal place in heaven.

As the papers reveal in various ways, the Early Christian portrait often engaged a third possibility, namely, the representation an exceptional or occasionally even ordinary dead person as an exemplar for the living. To confront the face of a deceased relative made to resemble a saint, for instance, was to affirm (for the witness) his or her own hope of eternal elevation. The fluidity is marked in a number of works, this remarkable volume teaches us, by manipulation of modes and styles that transform the image of a “dead” person into something more saintly and that serve as rungs on the ladder of ascent from the earthly life to celestial status.

Just as the granite and bronze Polášek used to realize the Masaryk monument evoke eternity through their very substance, so too, we discover, the choice of materials and the artistic working were a fourth issue confronting the manufacturers of funeral memorials in Late Antiquity.



uity. Sometimes, the portrait of the deceased was made of a separate matrix and inserted to connote the face's special status; sometimes it was rendered in a way that recapitulated the very essence of the memorial, as when the delicate encaustic technique of pigments applied to wood with hot wax mimicked the portrayed's own perishability; in gold to suggest the opposite, namely, the person's incorruptibility; or through references to sculpture or painting that engaged the viewer's eye with thought-provoking complexity. Sometimes, the materials and fashionings even bore protective power in themselves, as when gold bowls were used literally as seals to secure *loculi* in catacombs or lost wax process reenacted the relationship of essence to accident.

But why the face? And how do we even know that the portrayed person is meant to be dead? Those questions constitute the fifth important question the papers seek to answer. In *The Face of the Dead and the Early Christian World*, we learn that contexts and syncretic borrowings engage the idea of resuscitation in the portrayals themselves, and hence, Christian faith in resurrection. We are reminded that the face is also not the only part of the body that distinguishes a person from his friends and family and,

indeed, that in some cultures, the physiognomic face is less important than the social appearance, the mask. But even the relationship of face to body was a complicated business in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, when repugnance toward the dead body extended to autopsy and medicine; it was culturally determined, in Ptolemaic Egypt, with the ascent of Christianity and the eschewal of the death mask, following Neoplatonism's rise in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and – In China – when Buddhist ideas of reincarnation brought about a change in previous practices.

Finally, the essays in the volume consider the interplay of words and images. Not only, we learn, did inscriptions authenticate the images and function within the anagogical structure of the monuments, but in a sense they made the mute images speak and, in their very style, conveyed additional status on the dead person. Like the portraits themselves, the tituli assumed shapes with rhetorical power and worked to animate and elevate the effigies.

As Albin Poláček understood when he created the monument that haunts my memory, mimesis is only one way to memorialize the dead, and probably not even the most important. Especially in medieval Christianity when a person's character not the accidents of his or her earthly appearance served as an example for those left behind, the likeness was a contentious mode of remembering the departed. The death mask may have been essential in Greek and Roman veneration; but, in Christian belief, the portrait

had to create a channel of communication between the world of the living and the living world in heaven. The subtle and complicated ways in which depictions of the face and body served that belief, in what is Christianity's characteristic reformulation of representing the dead, is the real subject of this excellent and interesting volume.

Herbert L. Kessler  
Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore  
e-mail: herbkessler@earthlink.net

---

#### Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> [ed. note] Nicolas Bock, Making a Silent Painting Speak: Paulinus of Nola, Poetic Competition, and Early Christian Portraiture; Claudia Corneli, Studies on the Painting of Rome's Christian Catacombs. On the Trail of a Portrait Included in the Wall of the Arcosolium; Chiara Croci, Portraiture on Early Christian Gold-Glass: Some Observations; Ivan Foletti, Physiognomic Representations as a Rhetorical Instrument: "Portraits" in San Vittore in Ciel d'Oro, the Galla Placidia "Mausoleum" and San Paolo Fuori le Mura; Stefano D'Ovidio, Devotion and Memory: Episcopal Portraits in the Catacombs of San Gennaro in Naples; Valentina Cantone, The Syncretic Portrait. Visual Contaminations in Early Christian Art; Philippe Mudry, Beloved Faces. Prohibited Bodies. The Obstacles to Anatomical Investigation in Antiquity; Jutta Dresken-Weiland, A New Iconography in the Face of Death? A Sarcophagus Fragment with a Possible Crucifixion Scene in the Museo Pio Cristiano; Manuela Studer-Karlen, The Depiction of the Dead in Early Christian Art (Third to Sixth Century); Ladislav Kesner, Face and Dead in Early China.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Zanker, *Die Maske des Sokrates*, Munich 1995. – Hans Belting, *Faces. Eine Geschichte des Gesichts*, Munich 2013.