

## *Negotiating Truth in post-Tridentine Culture: Ars Historica, Rhetoric and the Visual Arts*

One critical aspect of the post-Tridentine debate on the theory of history, or *ars historica*, was that of the definition of the object of history - whether history was concerned with events that had occurred in the past or rather with their memory - as the importance of historical events lay primarily in the fact that they had been recorded. Intimately related was the question of historical narrative, of how to translate those past events into truthful accounts. It had been a controversial question since Antiquity: if the object of history is truth, as Polybius declared, the truth of past deeds and events must then be preserved in their accounts through specific strategies of narration that could mediate real and imaginary, actual and possible.

This problem – still relevant today – became particularly urgent in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation amongst both Protestants and Catholics, especially in the wake of the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-1578) and of its Catholic response, the *Annales Ecclesiastici* (1599-1607). Given how much was at stake – from the claim to supremacy of the Roman Church, to the legitimacy of Catholic cults and rituals – the debate regarding the possibility of truthfully reconstructing and representing the past was to become rapidly heated. Religious controversy and the rise of skepticism called for an urgent and profound discussion of history, its objective and its *methodus*. It became of vital importance to establish principles of criticism and interpretation, as vital became the discussion on the best “manner of speaking about” such events, preserving their actuality and negotiating history and fiction. These were the basic points of the crucial debate on the modes of understanding and representing the past that took place in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, and that reveal a world profoundly different – with its contradictions and epistemological tension between truth and dogma, certainty and doubt, past and present – from the usually perceived post-Tridentine world built upon dogmatic certainties and granitic faith.

But there was another powerful protagonist of the intellectual discourse on truth in the aftermath of the Council of Trent: art. In response to the strict yet vague 1563 Tridentine decree on images, dictating that “figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust,” diverse suggestions emerged with regard to how to reform the visual arts, and a number of treatises were produced in order to offer guidance to artists and their patrons. But even among Catholic authors there was not complete agreement as to how, for instance, to reconcile conformity to religious content with artistic invention, devotional simplicity with artistic sophistication, autonomy of the artist with ecclesiastical censorship. Inevitably, the complex process of the artistic reform after Trent was not to be a smooth process guided by univocal directives from above. Rather, it was to derive from the ongoing, often conflicting and problematic, conversation among artists, patrons, and ecclesiastical authorities in an attempt to elaborate a pictorial language that reflected the new Tridentine *pietas* and could guarantee historical and scriptural “realism.” The result was the distinct creative diversity that marked the artistic scene in Rome at the turn of the century. Although often dismissed as derivative and propagandistic, post-Tridentine Italian art developed specific visual and rhetorical strategies and became instrumental in constructing and negotiating ideas of truth, ultimately shaping people’s beliefs during a period of deep spiritual divisions.

In a time of growing distrust with regard to the very possibility understanding (let alone reviving) the past, images unveiled an unparalleled power to evoke the past and – with their ability to blur the line between fictional and historical – to create the illusion of its proximity and almost tangible reality. To understand the debate on truth, history, and historical narration as it emerged in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the limits of the *ars historica* and look at the visual arts, and painting in particular. After all, Plutarch had long before proclaimed that “the most effective historian is he who (...) makes his narration like a painting.”