# Artwork of the Month / April 2020

*Imago Pietatis, Serie 1*
*Elena Franco*

2019
4 digital prints on Fedrigoni XPER paper, 220 gr
40 cm x 60 cm each, framed
Edition of 7 + 1 PDA



The series 1 of Elena Franco's project on the Imago Pietatis (Christ of Pity) consists of four posters. They are showing painted book edges of volumes from the Archivio Storico del Monte di Pietà di Bologna (Historical Archive of the Mount of piety from Bologna) on various green backgrounds. By definition, the Imago Pietatis illustrates the moment between Jesus Descent from the Cross and the Entombment of the Christ. For this series, the artist has chosen tomes indicating the signature of the letters L,O,V and E. With this selection, she refers to the Christian message and at the same time to the motive of the Mounts mission.

Due to the growing requirement for affordable loans for small craftsmen and traders, Christian fraternities founded the Mounts, which offered microcredits to the most vulnerable entrepreneurs. In 1462, the first Mount of piety was established in Perugia, others followed in whole Italy. Eleven years later, in 1473 the Bolognese Mount was created. Today hosted by the Fondazione del Monte, the present archive, contains 138 volumes of Libri mastri (ledgers) and Quaderni di cassa (cash journals), from the time between 1473 and 1808. In the second half of the 15th century, the Imago Pietatis became the emblem of the Mounts and decorates their spaces. Additionally, it adorns the edges of the documentary books like in the archive in Bologna.

First appearing as Byzantine icon in the 12th century as "Man of Sorrows", the Imago Pietatis propagated in the 14th century into the Occident. Depicted is Jesus, usually with naked torso, standing upright in his tomb. In earlier images, he has his arms crossed in the front; later the arms are open. Since the Late Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary and John the Apostle or one or two angels accompany the Christ. Likewise, the surrounding decoration developed. For example vine leaves and grapes refer to the blood of Jesus and the Eucharist; the passionflower hints to the Passion. Brought to Europe by the Jesuits in the 17th century, who associated several of its elements to Jesus suffering: the tendrils represent the whips used in the flagellation, the pointed tips of the leaves stand for the Holy Lance and the flower's radial filaments symbolise the crown of thorns etc. Moreover, other decorative elements, depending on the period of origin were used to embellish the depiction of the Christ of Pity. As devotional image, it should stimulate compassion and pity of the

contemplator. As symbol of the Christian message of Jesus suffering for the humanity, it stands for charity, solidarity and love.

All four images chosen by Elena for her series 1 show Jesus in his tomb, accompanied by two angels. At each side of the actual Imago Pietatis, the signature letter is twice on display. While the letters "L" and "E" have an arabesque-like decoration, there are vine leaves at the painting of the letter "O" and passionflower with its tendrils with the "V". The "L" is arranged next to the "O" and beneath them the "V" besides the "E". In consequence, it is not evident at first glance that the word "Love" is formed. Additionally, the green backgrounds are slightly contrasting, since the two lighter and the two darker ones are placed diagonally to each other. With this presentation, the series 1 rather reminds a mosaic than a scripture.

This should be intended by the artist and refers to the original arrangement of the volumes in the archive. At that time, the books were conserved with the edges to the front and not like nowadays with the spine to the front. For the visitor a kind of mosaic of images of the Christ of Pity appeared. This underlined the message, invited to reflect about the human condition and suggested to donate. On the other hand, Elena shows the photos of the volumes edges isolated from their original context. With their coloured background, they remind modern pop icons, like they were printed by Andy Warhol. However, the American Pop Artist reproduced his celebrities in the same posture, but mostly in different colours. Whereas Elena took four different photos of the Imago Pietatis and set them on coloured backgrounds, so that the volumes seem to float. Nothing refers to their provenience. As in Warhol works, the language of the series 1 is borrowed from advertising. Hence, there is a hidden referral to the advertising character of the Imago Pietatis at the volumes of the Mount of Piety.

Moreover, the artist selected depictions, where Jesus has his arms and eyes open and the stigmata are less prominent. Even though, the moment shown in the Imago Pietatis should be the one before the Entombment of the Christ, these images are ambiguous. Here Jesus stands upright in his tomb, he seems to be alive. Also the company by the angels might refer to the resurrection. In contrast to this moment of hope and reconciliation, Jesus' dead is the most depressive point in the story. There is only grief and despair. Hope could only return by the resurrection. Therefore, the chosen images are carrying a double message: the one of Jesus suffering for humanity and the Christian promise of salvation. Besides, also the passionflower refers to hope by its flowering duration of three days. Additionally, floral decorations stand for spring, the season of awakening of nature and is associated to Easter, Ascension and Pentecost.


**Elena Franco**

Born in 1973 in Turin, Italy, Elena Franco studied architecture and restoration at the Politecnico in her hometown. She works in the field of urban and territorial valorisation. As author of articles and essays about urban revitalisation for Il Giornale dell'Architettura, she often is invited as lecturer at congresses and workshops in Italy and abroad. Additionally, Elena is artistic director of the Fondazione Arte Nova, which is destined to enhance the Liberty culture and Art Nouveau.

In conjunction with her commissions from local communities, photography is essential to her for research and documentation. Hence, Elena developed in 2012 "Hospitalia" – her first artistic photo project. Therefore, she investigated in ancient hospitals and their archives in different countries of Europe, to find evidence of social aspects and community responsibility in medical care. The result is a photo series of historic care facilities, today abandoned, transformed or still in use. Presented in different solo shows or as part of group exhibitions in many Italian cities and in France the series entered in public and private collections. The artist was awarded with the Premio Mediterraneo and in 2016 selected as finalist for the Combat Prize and the Premio Streamers. Published by ARTEMA, Tiziana Bonomo edited a book with the pictures of "Hospitalia". Moreover, the series was object of several single publications.

During her research for her first photo project, Elena discovered depictions of the Imago Pietatis (Christ of Pity), devotional images, intended to stimulate compassion and pity in the contemplator. In the Bolognese

Archivio Storico del Monte di Pietà (Historical Archive of the Mount of piety) she studied the iconography of these pictures. The archive bears 138 administrative volumes from the period between 1473 and 1808. This was the time, when the Foundation of Mounts was active in the allocation of affordable microcredits for small craftsmen and traders. The book's edges are decorated with the Imago Pietatis. They are referring to solidarity of caring in the largest sense. Depending on the time of origin, the embellishing elements are varying. One prominent component is the passionflower, occurring after 1609. Brought to Europe by the Jesuits, the flower was identified with the passion of Jesus.

For Elena the passionflower implies the contrast between the beauty of the plant and the cruelty of Jesus' suffering. In her opinion, his dead is not simple, but an unjust death by injustice and domination and therefore inacceptable. Often, the Imago Pietatis, includes the Christian message of resurrection and with that of salvation. In her reflection there is a need of anticipation of a reality, which finds its only reconciliation with the death, no matter if physiologically or unjust, by the creation of artworks.

Consequently, Elena created several oeuvres related to the archive and its depictions. The result was presented in the exhibition "Imago Pietatis" at the Bolognese Studio Cenacchi from 24 January to 14 March 2020. On this occasion, the artist published an artist book in the edition of three, with 414 photos of the 138 archival images and many details. These volumes are following the design of the administrative books. Moreover, there are series of posters, where single photos are featured on coloured ground. Two of them are forming the word "Love" with the signature letters of the tomes; one in English and one in Italian. The series 1 was our artwork of the month in April 2020. However, the artist didn't limit herself in the reproduction of the originals in a new context. She also printed details on cloth. Additionally, she highlighted the passionflower by creating processed depictions of the plant. The series "Passiflora #1" shows it in different states of appearance: the flower itself, a leaf, the fruit from the outside and a cut-open fruit to show the inside. A catalogue with commenting essays referring to these oeuvres and the archive of the Mount of piety was also published. As one of the winners of the premio New Post Photography, Imago Pietatis will be on view in a special exhibition at the postponed edition of the MIA Photo Fair 2020.

All the works have in common that their artistic language is contemporary. Elena borrowed from different fields like advertising and the close art history to create original oeuvres. With her research and artistic echo to the archive, she enhanced the awareness of this cultural heritage. At the same time, she wants to inspire personal reflections in the observer.

Elena lives and works in the province of Turin.

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