

Francesco Hayez

The Kiss, 1859

When he painted the work completely titled *Kiss. Episode of Youth. Costumes of the 14th Century* Hayez, at the age of 68, was an acclaimed artist with a full career behind him. Better known simply as *The Kiss*, the painting was commissioned by Count Alfonso Maria Visconti di Saliceto who willed it to the picture gallery of the Accademia di Brera where it is still exhibited today.

A Literary Inspiration

In this famous painting a young man holds his woman love close in a passionate embrace, a subject that appears to belong to the sentimental and literary tastes in vogue in the 19th century.

The setting is not modern but rather takes place in a castle, where the lovers are seen on a landing near a staircase. They wear costumes that are not clearly defined but suggest the Late Medieval period.

As we can see from the intensity of the kiss, **the basic theme seems to be love** and the woman's surrendering stance recalls other memorable figures such as Francesca da Rimini from Dante's poem or Juliet from Shakespeare's tragedy.

The Patriotic Theme

However a sentimental reading of the painting does not fully explain the work's significance. Considering it was carried out in such a crucial year as 1859, when the Second War for Independence was fought, we can see that it clearly has **political and patriotic overtones**. The young man who so ardently embraces his loved one symbolises one of the Risorgimento volunteers, their passion hints at the ideas of separation as well as the perils inherent in wartime.

The young man's foot resting on the first step suggests that he is tending toward action, ready to fly to his duty; he has only been delayed for the brief pause of a kiss.

Such an interpretation, easily understood by a contemporary public that was used to reading paintings in a political light, is supported by the fact that artist Girolamo Induno used a printed reproduction of *The Kiss* in his 1862 painting *Sad Presentiment*; ten years later the writer Francesco Dall'Ongaro renamed the painting *The Volunteer's Kiss* and added, "It is a touching scene, full of mystery and fondness; it is a drama waiting to happen; it is a poem that surpasses the beauty of our own contemporary Arcadian verses. From that fond kiss let there emerge a generation of robust and sincere young people who take life as it comes and imbue it with a love of beauty and truth."

Arabesque Line, Chromatic Dissonance

This double meaning, both literary and patriotic, is not sufficient to explain the wide popularity of the painting which has become **a true icon of Risorgimento spirit**. (It was no happenstance that Luchino Visconti referred to it in his 1954 film *Senso*, set in the Risorgimento period.)

The painting's remarkable efficacy depends mostly on its formal values, especially the **essential representation**; by excluding extraneous elements Hayez emphasises the **vertical arrangement** uniting the two lovers as well as his **daring choice of colour**. For instance the refined and cold light blues of the woman's dress are contrasted to warmer tones, especially the man's red trousers.

Falling from the upper left, light helps attenuate the colours while the contrasts of **chiaroscuro**, which are at times rather abrupt, accentuate the bodies' volume.

Fig. 1 Francesco Hayez, *The Kiss*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 112x88 cm. Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera.

