Producing the Legible Body: Personification, the Beholder, and Tiepolo’s Würzburg Frescos

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In the late autumn of 1750, Giambattista Tiepolo, one of the most celebrated Venetian painters of the eighteenth century and at the age of fifty-four at the height of his artistic powers, arrived in Würzburg, in Franconia, to create a suite of frescos for Prince-Bishop Karl Phillip von Greiffenklau's Residenz. By the time Tiepolo departed the Prince-Bishop's sumptuous palace nearly three years later to return to his native Italy, he had completed what is undoubtedly his crowning artistic achievement: a 600-square-meter fresco titled the Allegory of the Planets and the Continents for the vaulted ceiling of the Residenz's Treppenhaus, or grand staircase.

In both its design and layout Tiepolo's fresco is formidable. In the center of the vaulted ceiling Tiepolo painted Apollo with his chariot, surrounded by putti and other gods, preparing to make his daily journey across the heavens. Above the room's architectural cornice he painted elaborate figural groupings representing each of the four continents [Fig. 23.1]. On three sides of the Treppenhaus Tiepolo depicted the personified female figures of Asia, America and Africa, each occupying its own wall and each shown with a large retinue of people and animals en route to pay homage to the figure of Europe, located on the fourth wall.1

Tiepolo devised the four continents section of his fresco to be viewed by a beholder on the move, composing it in ways that assumed and acknowledged the constantly shifting perspective of visitors as they ascend the grand staircase toward the Europe fresco and the formal state rooms beyond. Such a consideration of the viewing experience would have been of some complexity, as the procession up the staircase—and the various vantage points for seeing the fresco—unfolded in several phases. Upon entering the Treppenhaus a guest would have first climbed a wide, central flight of stairs up to a midway landing.

1 Although Tiepolo's frescos are customarily referred to as the ‘Four Continents’, and will be throughout this chapter, it is worth pointing out that the female personifications of Asia, Africa, America and Europe have at times also been collectively referred to as the ‘Four Parts of the World'.
As the visitor ascended this initial flight of stairs, a flight that is itself broken into two stages, Tiepolo's *America* fresco would have been visible in front of him with portions of *Asia* and *Africa* gradually coming into view on the walls to the left and right, respectively. Upon reaching the midway landing, visitors would have then turned and, reversing direction, advanced up one of the two narrower side flights, also in two stages, up to a balustraded gallery and towards *Europe*—which would have only come into full view near the end of the visitor’s journey. The beholding experience was a dynamic one, with the mobile visitor never able to view the entirety of Tiepolo’s ceiling all at once, but instead afforded only selective and carefully contrived views of the four continents fresco as they climbed the Treppenhaus stairs.\(^2\)

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\(^2\) For a detailed description of the staircase and analysis of the shifting viewing positions throughout the space, see Alpers S. – Baxandall M., *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence* (New Haven: 1994) 107–118. See also Levey M., *Giambattista Tiepolo: His Life and Art* (New...