



Folon

The ethics of poetry

Between civil commitment,
condemnation and hope in man

Edizioni Musei Vaticani – Fondation Folon

Foreword

My generation grew up with Jean-Michel Folon's graphic works. I, too, perhaps more than others, given my liking for and attraction to the sign, to backgrounds of shapes and colours, especially if these signs, shapes and colours were associated with important issues, condemnations or testimonies of attention focused on the civil values of our society.

So it is a real pleasure to host the exhibition *Folon: the ethics of poetry. Between civil commitment, condemnation and hope in man* within the Vatican Museums' itinerary, presenting the broad and cosmopolitan Vatican public with a rational selection of works on paper by the famous Belgian illustrator, painter and sculptor.

Most of the works are unpublished and all focus on civil issues: the condemnation of injustice and the support of the weakest are the two ideal horizons that embrace the unfolding and meaning of this exhibition.

It was decided to set it up in the rooms assigned to hosting small temporary exhibitions within the section dedicated to the Vatican Museums' modern and contemporary art, and is intended as an opportunity to reflect on some current issues, but also shows the vitality of the project launched by Paul VI in 1973, confirming the fertility of the dialogue between the Church and the many contemporary voices of art and culture.

Folon was a refined and perceptive representative of the present throughout his long career: his creative "action" drew lifeblood from what surrounded him and the variety of creation was the source of inspiration for his works. The small size of the papers here becomes a stage for visual horizons that, recounting his constant civil and environmental engagement, merge with the innate poetry of his images.

I am sincerely grateful to the Director of the Folon Foundation, Stéphanie Angelroth, for this shared project, which confirms the importance of dialogue as a raw material for conceiving culturally significant events. *Dialogue* is the title of the enchanting watercolour chosen as the symbol image of the exhibition. The dialogue began in

2017 among the Vatican Museums, in particular with the Contemporary Art Collection, curated by Micol Forti, whom I thank for her commitment and enthusiasm, and who with Marilena Pasquali and Stéphanie Angelroth curated the exhibition, the result of an open gaze, based on fundamental values for our present so packed with questions.

The exhibition also includes a magnificent series of prints entitled *About the Creation*, which Folon dedicated to the Book of *Genesis*. It consists of eight papers, produced in 1989–1990 in etching and aquatint, which, unlike the other works shown, will remain in the Vatican collections after the exhibition.

For this I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Folon Foundation, its scientific staff and its Board of Directors, who decided to donate them to the Vatican Museums along with the sculpture *Guardian Angel*, a bronze of 2005 – the year the artist died – thus embellishing our nucleus of modern and contemporary works with the presence of an artist who was previously absent and is so very representative of the underlying values of our Vatican collections.

Folon was an artist who confirmed the lasting nature of a special sensitivity towards the sacred, even in artists who have not made this their chosen field.

The series that Folon titled *About the Creation* is a gallery of visions that reveals this sensitivity and also a sincere interest in reformulating universal subjects, inspired by the Holy Scriptures and filtered through a gaze always steeped in poetry. The outcome very effectively reveals the artist's ability to condense the narrative into sharp, essential images of a powerful evocative impact. The chosen captions also show Folon's exceptional ability to synthesise the meaning of things in a few words, a few lines: *About light*; *About space*; *About day and night*; *About animals*; *About Heaven and Earth*; *About the apple*; *About the angel*; *About the serpent*. Such ability is corroborated by the artist's use of the techniques chosen to give life to this story: etching defines the edge of the shapes, traces their outlines, while aquatint defines them chromatically, giving the colour a decisive function in the description of the subject.

As Stéphanie Angelroth points out in her absorbing introduction, there is an indelible thread that links past to present and the echo of that past reverberates in the choices made by the artists of our time. Folon's works are vibrant testimony to the persistence of subjects that cross through the history of art over the centuries, and fissures that, though deriving from tradition, open up new visual pathways.

I would like to thank the architect Roberto Pulitani, of the Infrastructure and Services Direction of the Governorate of Vatican City, for the staging of the exhibition, which shows his usual sensitivity at "entering" into the event, the artist and the context to be shared.

I would lastly like to thank Jean Cornet d'Elzius, Belgian Ambassador to the Holy See, and Claude Giordan, Ambassador of

the Principality of Monaco to the Holy See for their support, and to acknowledge the work of the many people who have made this wonderful project possible, from my colleagues in the Direction and the Modern and Contemporary Art Department, to the Paper Restoration Laboratory, the Exhibition Office, the Maintenance team and the Events, Press and Security Offices, who along with many others have made possible this small but significant example of “dialogue” in the Pope’s Museums.

Barbara Jatta
Director of the Vatican Museums