

About "SKIN TALES"

[photos by [Gaetano Belverde](#)]

Recension Written by Prof. PHD Ludvík Baran and published on [PHOTOART](#) Magazine, May 2007 issue



"Vision is a mental creative organ"

This was F. X. Salda's description of the way in which the eye probes the world. Through direct contact, it gathers the experience of "understanding", which depends on the individual's psyche. A "picture", however, is the world mediated by someone else, as seen by that person. Each person explains it in their own way, in their "language", in their "style", vividly or dully, and awaits our understanding. It depends on the "discourse", the way in which it is expressed, which elements of the composition are used, what is emphasised, what is concealed, and what is left out because the person simply does not see it, does not want to see it, or does not know about it.

It seems that the picture over the centuries has exhausted all its forms of address, and also that man has no difficulty in distinguishing two worlds – the real world and the world mediated by pictures. Examination of the world through pictures is thus a mental reflex of seeing and thinking about reality, whether external or internal.

First, myths were portrayed – gods, idols, totems in animal and human form, as fiction and non-existent beings. Then came people in a divine setting, and later in real surroundings; even time and change were captured. From fiction, painters created a "reality" for the image of man, and photographers hurried from "reality", which was their foundation, to spiritualisation, by withdrawing from reality in order to reach sublimity, generalisation or the elevation of actual reality to a new value. While journalists, scientists and technicians preserved credibility by faithful representation, "artists" elevated the image by transforming reality through "mental" vision. The image fulfils its one and only true vital function through contact with the viewer.

The Italian photographer Gaetano Belverde follows the route of the creative document, which he describes as an act of experiencing. We could regard this picture of an old man as a reportage portrait of a specific person. In its directness, it could be just a topical document for the family album. But it is not. It is too natural and unostentatious, departing from aesthetic norms. Nor is it reportage in the sense of description of an "event" as commonplace as drawing water from the public fountain.

The distortion of the sizes of the hands, inadmissible in a portrait, the luminous simplicity modified by artificial shadowing of the corners, and the gesture in which the old man is captured, seem to be sheer chance; a lucky chance, like the framing widthwise. After all, it is a theme as commonplace as many other photographs showing the life of ordinary people, photographs of the kind that have, for many long years, been the province of artistic, amateur photography, seeking, in the lack of ostentation of the behaviour and manners of "those others", the strangeness of their condition. Who has Belverde really photographed here? An Italian, a Frenchman, a Czech, a town-dweller or a villager; in the present, in the past? Did the photographer know the scene beforehand, or was it a spontaneous idea, chance, prescience, knowledge of the man's habit of going to fetch water, portrayal of a way of life, a meeting? A staged scene, reconstruction, a conceived document? Is it a portrayal of us as we are or of "them" as they are – not us? Is it destiny, or the daily round? Perhaps an "incident"? Depending on how the picture addresses us and how much time we have to devote to it. This is called "fascination", interest, curiosity, finding what attracts us!

This old man is a "chatterbox" – a "preacher" who instructs and commands. He is prattling at his own fountain of wisdom. He has plenty of time; his bottle was filled long ago. There is water in it. If it had a cork, it would suggest wine being cooled in a stone water-basin. There is also a hidden metaphor here. Water flows like idle talk and like the passing of time. Meanwhile it has grown dark and the streetlamps have been lit. The photographer provided the picture, which is from the series "Skin Tales" – the "self-confident old skin", and tells stories. The old man explains things himself, he doesn't want an explanation from anyone, he knows everything, or he's "hammering" something in like a "sly old fox". How can the expression and meaning I have described be changed? Cover the left hand and the picture loses emphasis. Leave out the flowing water or stop the flow and the action loses meaning. Button up the old man's shirt and he becomes a dandy with his old peaked cap. Cover the squinting left eye, and the man's expression makes him look like a cocksure rascal. The squint seems to introduce uncertainties into the picture, about whether we should believe him. The work-worn hands, the shaven chin, the unfrayed shirt, the traditional demijohn and, above all, the slightly open mouth caught in mid-speech, bear witness to an unostentatious self-respect and a natural, relaxed encounter. The seemingly open composition of the elements in the space and the distortion of the proportions by the short focus are now an accepted characteristic of photography. The depth of field makes it possible to read all the details, including the stone cartouche with the tap in its mouth. This tap can stop the flowing "current". But the old man has no tap on his mouth, he seems unsilenceable.

"Vision is a mental creative organ" – it recognises what the fleeting glance obscures. Or in other words, "What the mind doesn't perceive, the eye doesn't see". The important thing is not the classification of genre, but the photographer's eye for a picture where all the elements relate to the main motif – revealing the character of the talkative old man. Seeing it immediately, without any setting-up or preliminaries (staging), requires talent.

Ludvík Baran