

An abstract painting with a complex, layered texture. The colors are muted and earthy, including shades of beige, light brown, green, and grey. The brushstrokes are visible, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is that of a rich, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large-scale artwork.

kunstmuseum basel

Anri Sala

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In the Midst of Old Masters

How do the most recent works of Albanian video and installation artist Anri Sala, born in 1974, situate him among Old-Master paintings of the 15th and early 16th centuries? By his revival of two, if not **three, early-modern craft techniques**.

On the one hand, Sala paints **al fresco** here, i.e. on fine, fresh lime plaster (*intonaco*) that has not yet fully dried, but which is only the thin top layer of a multi-layered wall surface. The work *Surface to Air XIII (Cipollino/Quasi pietra)*, 2023, provides an example for this structure based on layering. Of course, Sala does not fresco immovable walls, but rather creates transportable panels, with aluminum honeycomb panels from the construction industry serving as supports.

Fresco painting is a technique that the Italian masters of the early and high Renaissance in particular brought to perfection. Names such as Masaccio, Ghirlandaio, Raphael, and Michelangelo come to mind.

However, art sometimes forges its very own bonds, spanning centuries in an instant. In his search for a suitable point of reference, Sala chose another of the great Italians: the formal, meditative and always somewhat mysterious Piero della Francesca (c. 1410/20–1492), of whom there is hardly a painting that does not seem like a film still *avant la lettre*, full of vivid observation, but nevertheless frozen for eternity as if by inner necessity. (The philosopher among film directors Andrei Tarkovsky loved Piero, as can be seen in *Nostalghia* from 1983).



Fig. 1
Inverted false-color image of Anri Sala's
Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 2), 2023



Fig. 2
Inverted false-color image rotated by 90°
of Anri Sala's *Legenda Aurea Inversa*
(VII, fragment 3), 2023



Fig. 3

Piero della Francesca, *The Discovery and Proof of the True Cross*.
From the cycle *The Legend of the True Cross* (detail), c. 1453/66,
fresco, St Francis, Arezzo © akg-images

The two works by Sala in this room that are more modest in format – just as annotations are usually set in a smaller font – but draw from a work by Piero of relatively gigantic dimensions: his most extensive fresco cycle with the legend of the Holy Cross in San Francesco in Arezzo, which was begun in 1453 and was probably only completed in the 1460s. Sala deconstructs the narrative of Piero's cycle by picking out individual sections and focusing on them as if with the viewfinder of a camera. The frescoes shown here include two details from the *Identification and Veneration of the True Cross* [Fig. 3], although Sala modifies them significantly: The hands of the woman from St. Helena's entourage are rotated by 90° and, like the heads of the two women behind them in his other painting, are reversed in color as in a photographic negative [Fig. 1/2]. This yields a threefold reversal: large becomes small, vertical becomes horizontal, positive becomes negative.



Fig. 4
Allendorf, St Nicholas Church, Organ Case (detail),
18th century, oil on wood © Reinhold Möller

Sala thus adopts an artistic gesture that has a longer tradition. Said gesture could be described as an inverted quotation. For example, Rodin makes a gateway to hell out of bronze because the opposite, a gateway to paradise in the same medium, Ghiberti's Baptistery Doors, already enjoys fame in Florence. Henri Rousseau portrays himself in the pose of *Gilles*, a rococo icon by Watteau, dressed entirely in black, because *Gilles* himself already gleams in snow-white in the Louvre. And so on.

Anri Sala did not borrow the fresco technique from the paintings in Arezzo. That would hardly have been possible: the pigments dissolved in water sinter indissolubly with the extremely chalky fine plaster layer, which accounts for their fundamental permanence. How they were applied cannot be determined in front of the object; Sala learned the technical skills for this at the National Academy of Arts in Tirana (Albania). Almost 30 years later, the artist traveled to Naples with those skills in his luggage.

Looking at the paintings up close, the structure created by Sala with his brush seems strangely familiar. The way in which the artist loosely blends green, pink, violet and ochre tones in rather diluted paint into one another and on top of one another here recalls the colored plaster surfaces of baroque and rococo interiors that were intended to **look like marble** [Fig. 4]. Such imitations, known as stucco marble, were particularly popular from the 17th to the 19th century; it is said that they were sometimes more expensive than real marble.

The latter, however, appears as a further element in Sala's works. Carefully hand-picked marble slabs not only stand out vividly in the relief of the paint layer, but even break the rectangular outline of the pictures at the edges. On the one hand, their stone textures are well integrated into the painting, in which they by no means appear as completely foreign bodies. At the same time, their whorled patterns stand out noticeably from Sala's brushstrokes despite their similar coloration, creating an island effect.

This brings us to the third historical technique to be mentioned here: exploiting **decorative stones** for pictorial effect by using a particular stone, selected for its texture, as a support and painting it only partially. It was particularly popular in the 17th century; Jacques Stella (1596–1657) and Frans Francken the Younger (1581–1642), for example, made use of it. Artistic form and masterfully found natural form complement each other and are interlocked in a meaningful way. The basis of this interlocking is the illusionistic reading of the picture surface.

Stella's partially unpainted lapis lazuli reproduced here [Fig. 5] serves as a night sky; a whitish vein of calcite in the gemstone can be seen as the Milky Way and as clouds in the moonlight, while the golden pyrite speckles behind the figures are a twinkling of stars. A border around the precious lapis lazuli oval made of – much cheaper – slate sets the earthy tone for the soil and the trees.



Fig. 5
Jacques Stella, *The Rest on the Flight to Egypt*, c. 1629/30,
oil on lapis and slate, Pajelu Collection

One other example: Johann König (1586–1642) [**Abb. 6**] uses the cloudy textures of an agate slab to depict the Red Sea, which in the biblical account of the miracle allows its waters to recede before the Israelites and then drown their pursuers, Pharaoh's soldiers, in it.

The fundamental characteristic of figuration connects Sala's works with their early-modern predecessors: they are not non-figurative paintings, but rather represent something. The pictures from the *Surface to Air* series show cloud cover from above, as seen from an airplane and as Sala systematically captures it photographically during his travels. Subtitles such as "*Morning*" or "*Afternoon*" indicate the time of day of such an overflight and very realistically the different lighting moods that result.

In line with this, the title "*Surface to Air*" takes up the Renaissance theorem of the image as a cross-section through the visual pyramid and thus as a segment of three-dimensional reality: The surface of the plaster becomes a fictitious air space by virtue of what is reproduced on it. Yet there is also an



Fig. 6

Johann König. *The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea.*
Door of the Art Cabinet of King Gustav II Adolf, c. 1625/31,
oil on agate, Gustavianum, University Museum, Uppsala

inherent sense of paradoxical connotation, as “surface to air” is also the military term for ground-based air defense, which is intended to make the point of view above the clouds, on which the images are based, impossible to access.

The marble incrustations fulfill two functions in Sala's frescoes: On the one hand, they are a continuation of the painting and complement it. Realistically, they could be interpreted partly as the fleeting wisps of cloud that pass by the cabin window outside, and partly as the fine ice crystals that have formed on the pane – both common perceptions that one often experiences when traveling by plane. But anyone who travels like this and gathers such impressions has something to tell us: here, an additional dimension, that of narration, opens up in the works. On the other hand, the stones interrupt the rhythmic brushwork of the painting; they signal disturbances and thus quote – without actually ‘depicting’ them – the typical flaws of historical wall paintings, mostly unintentional losses due to the vicissitudes of time. Sala's creations thus reflect yet another dimension: that of temporality.



Anri Sala (*1974, Tirana, Albania) has so far made a name for himself primarily in the media of video, photography and installation. In many of his works, disruptions and breaks in language, time and music are a means of questioning stories and compositions. Based on time, his narratives develop from a dense network of relationships between image, space, and sound.

After studying at the National Academy of Arts in Tirana, Sala attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris from 1996 to 1998, where he studied video art, and then directing at Le Fresnoy – Studio National des Arts Contemporains in Tourcoing in northern France from 1998 to 2000. Sala belongs to the generation of artists who lived through the collapse of communism and who thematize their experience of this political and cultural change in their works. He attracted international attention with his video work *Intervista* (1998) as part of the exhibition “Voilà, le monde dans la tête” at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. In 2004, the Deichtorhallen Hamburg and the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris presented his solo exhibition “Entre chien et loup”. Since then his work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Serpentine Gallery, London (2011); Centre Pompidou, Paris (2012); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2014); the New Museum, New York (2016); Museo Tamayo, Mexico City (2017); the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, Turin (2019); Mudam, Luxembourg (2019); Centro Botin, Santander (2019); Buffalo Bayou Park Cistern, Houston (2021); Kunsthaus Bregenz (2021) or Bourse de Commerce, Paris (2023). In 2001, Sala received the Young Artist Prize at the Venice Biennale, where he represented France in 2013. In 2014, he was awarded the Vincent van Gogh Biennial Award for Contemporary Art in Europe.

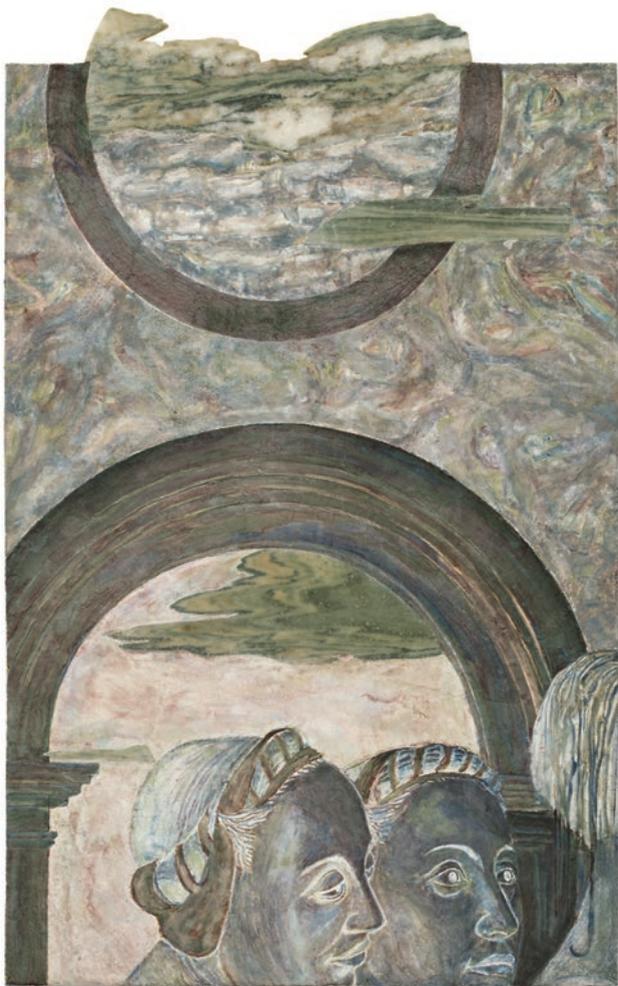
In 2023, the six frescoes exhibited here were added to the collection of the Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation. The foundation has been exploring Anri Sala’s artistic work and making acquisitions since 2004. In addition to the frescoes, it also owns four drawings and three large-scale video and sound installations.

Sala lives and works in Berlin.

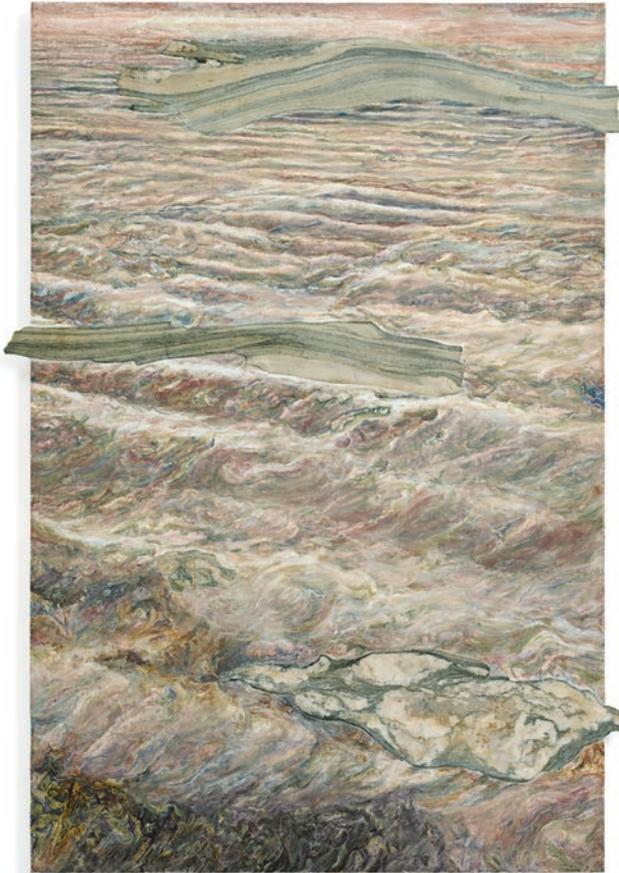
Works by Anri Sala



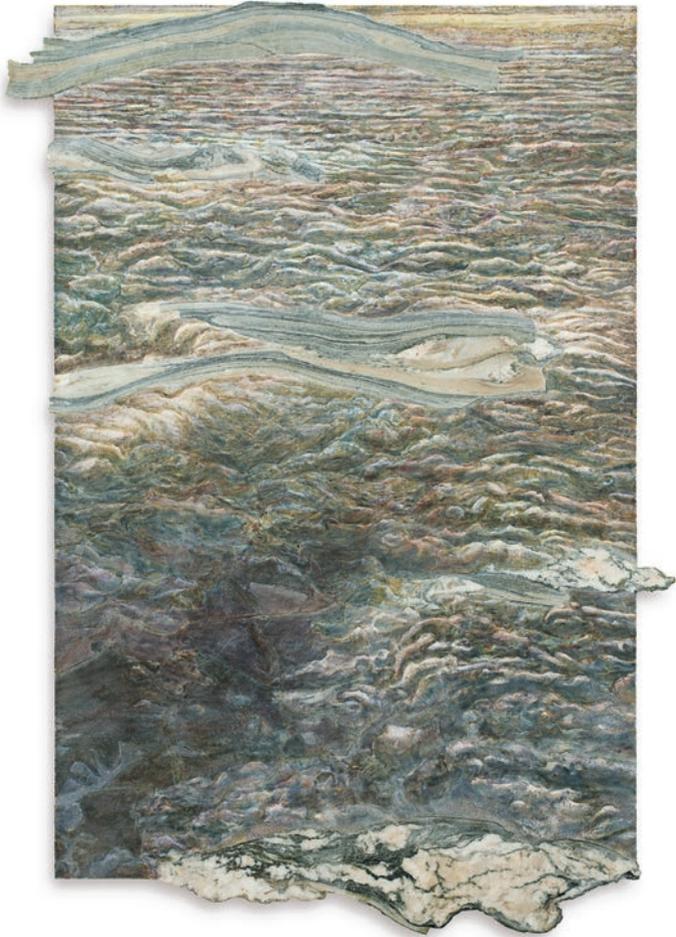
Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 3), 2023,
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Bardiglio marble, 25.8 × 18 × 5



Legenda Aurea Inversa (VII, fragment 2), 2023,
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 63 × 40 × 4.8 cm



Surface to Air V (Cipollino/Morning), 2023,
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 120 × 86 × 5 cm



Surface to Air VII (Cipollino/Afternoon Slightly After), 2023,
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 129 × 91.8 × 5 cm



Surface to Air VI (Tartaruga/Afternoon), 2023,
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Tartaruga marble, 50 × 38 × 4.8 cm



Surface to Air XIII (Cipollino/Quasi pietra), 2023
fresco painting, intonaco on aerolam, Cipollino marble, 100 × 72 × 5 cm

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In the Midst of Old Masters

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From the cycle The Legend of the True Cross, c. 1453/66,

fresco, St Francis, Arezzo © akg-images

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