

# DESCRIVEDENDO

## DESCRIVEDENDO THE MASTERPAINTINGS OF BRERA

### ***The Kiss* by Francesco Hayez**

Pinacoteca di Brera, Room 38

#### **Formal Description**

The painting's full title is *The Kiss. An Episode of Youth. Costumes of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century*, but it is more commonly known as just *The Kiss*. It was painted by Francesco Hayez in 1859.

It is a rectangular oil painting on canvas, the longer side being the vertical one, and it measures 112 cm in height by 88 cm in width.

The subject matter is fairly simple: the painting provides a realistic depiction of a young man and a young woman passionately embracing as they kiss each other on the lips.

The two figures, elegantly clad in medieval attire, are in an empty space inside a period building.

The viewpoint is from the front, with the two lovers portrayed full-figure and approximately half life-size.

To get a clearer idea of the painting, we should try to imagine it split into nine equal sections obtained by crossing three vertical columns with three horizontal lines. For the sake of convenience, we can number each sector like the keypad on a phone from left to right: 1, 2, 3 at the top; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; and 7, 8, 9 at the bottom.

Let us begin our description with the central sections, 5 and 8 (and 2, in part) which is where the two young lovers are situated in the painting. They are standing one in front of the other: the girl in the foreground with her back towards us is almost enveloped by the boy who, on the contrary, is facing us.

The boy is taller and has to lean down to kiss his beloved, gently holding her head in his hands, lifting her face with his right hand while holding her neck with his left. His right leg is planted firmly on the ground, while his left leg is bent and his left foot rests on the first of three steps rising into what we've called section 9 of the painting.

The young girl in her lover's arms arches her back to meet his face as he leans forward, gripping his shoulder with her left hand. To kiss him, she turns almost imperceptibly towards us, showing us the left-hand silhouette of her body and the outline of her face.

The painter has taken meticulous care in depicting their medieval costume.

The boy wears a pointed, taupe-coloured cap with dark feathers on one side, his long, frizzy brown hair emerging from beneath it and his face almost totally concealed by it.

His full brown cloak reaches almost to his knees and, in slipping off his right shoulder, allows us to see part of his dark green doublet beneath. We can just make out a dagger tucked into his belt beneath the open cloak. A pair of red hose and brown leather shoes complete his attire.

The girl has long brown hair, parted in the middle in a loose style allowing it to fall softly down to her shoulders.

She wears a long, sky-blue gown with a tight bodice, tight sleeves and full skirts falling to the floor, its sheen suggesting that it is made of silk satin. Beneath her gown we can see a white chemise peeping out at collar and cuff and pulled out to form a voluminous puff at the elbow. The cuff and collar of the gown are decorated with gold embroidery and she wears a thin gold belt around her waist.

A wall made of light-coloured blocks of squared stone provides the backdrop to the scene, particularly in sectors 2, 3 and 6, while the floor is laid with brick-coloured terracotta tiles in a herringbone pattern and occupies sectors 7 and 8, breaking off in sector 9 where we find three large, light-coloured stone steps leading up to an unspecified area outside the picture.

A tall, thin engaged column on the stone wall in sectors 1 and 4 frames an opening leading into a fairly dark space. We can only see part of the arch leading into it, the rest of the arch being outside the picture.

Beyond the opening with its pointed arch in sector 4, another weakly lit space opens up to reveal a barely perceptible backlit human figure going down to the floor below.

Apart from this dark area on the left, the scene is brightly lit, the light coming from a source outside the painting at 10 o'clock.

The light strikes the girl's left side especially strongly, creating reflections that are almost white in the folds of her sky-blue satin gown and casting the two young lovers' strong shadow onto the staircase and the right-hand side of the painting. The bright colours used for the two lovers' costumes, bathed in light, stand out sharply against the starkly neutral background.



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## Art Historical Description

This painting, which has proven extremely popular with the critics and the general public even since it was first shown at the Accademia di Brera's annual exhibition, is as celebrated today as it was back then; in fact it has become one of the Pinacoteca's best-known works and one of the most famous pictures in the whole of Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century art. There are numerous versions of *The Kiss*, the subject having proven instantly successful and allowing Francesco Hayez to replicate it many times over. Brera holds the first version, donated by Alfonso Maria Visconti di Saliceto who commissioned the picture, which was painted in 1859. In that year the troops of Vittorio Emanuele II, King of Sardinia and later Italy's first King, allied with the French Army led by Napoleon III, defeated the Austro-Hungarian Army in the Second War of Independence and victoriously entered the city of Milan. The liberation of Lombardy and the Veneto from the foreign yoke paved the way for the unification of Italy, which was proclaimed in 1861.

Despite its subject matter associated with love, we should view the picture in the context of what is known as Historical Romanticism, a style which Hayez championed in Italy. In *The Kiss*, the depiction of an episode from history or literature set in the past has become an allegory of the present and an expression of values closely associated with the Risorgimento (as Italy's unification movement is known) when civic engagement and love of country prevailed over personal sentiment. For all its medieval setting and costumes, the scene conjures up a picture of a patriotic volunteer taking his leave of his loved one.

Hayez, who joined other artists in using his art to testify to the Risorgimento struggle, celebrates here the expectations and enthusiasm of his own day. The concepts of hope and a strong civic sense are

expressed in this picture in an image whose very conciseness makes it hugely effective.

The two figures' half-concealed faces and the presence of only a handful of other elements cause us to focus all our attention on the action taking place, which consists of gestures as natural as they are riveting and passionate. The secret of the power in this painting, which has become something of an icon, probably lies in its depicting a kiss with such immediacy that it has become a timeless image.

Born in Venice in 1791, Francesco Hayez attended the Academy of Fine Arts in the city before going on to complete his studies in Rome under great Neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova's protective wing. On the strength of the experience that he built up amid ancient Classical sculpture and in Raphael's Stanze in the Vatican, he moved to Milan where he was to spend most of the rest of his working life. He immediately began to frequent the city's intellectual circles comprising fervent supporters of the Risorgimento movement, and indeed he himself became one of the chief exponents of that movement along with Verdi and Manzoni, to the point where Giuseppe Mazzini dubbed him the "nation's painter bard". While in Milan he trained future generations of artists, being appointed to the prestigious post of Professor at the Accademia di Brera in 1850. A highly skilled portrait artist and a tireless draughtsman, he died in 1882 at the age of 91.

*The Kiss*, a mature work, contains a number of features that are typical of his painting, for example its stage-like composition and the unimpeachable elegance of his draughtsmanship. His sensitive handling of light and colour, a legacy of his Venetian birth and a product of his lengthy study of the work of Titian and Giorgione, is seen at its absolute best in the girl's sky-blue satin gown. Reflecting a ploy much affected by Hayez, the neutral tones of the background and the diffused light skilfully modulated in space serve to highlight the bright colours of the figures in

the foreground, which also have a symbolic significance: the girl's blue gown and the boy's red hose and green doublet allude to the union of the two tricolour flags of Italy and France.