



Invisibles (Rui Rui & Laura), 2018. Stainless steel, 650 x 400 x 500 cm. each element. Photo: © Juan Gavilán

Jaume Plensa: Timely and Timeless

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Recipient of the 2025 Lifetime Achievement in Contemporary Sculpture Award

For every artist who has earned and sustained widespread critical acclaim and captured devoted international attention, there comes a moment when the poetic consideration of their work within a larger, longer historical framework arrives: More than merely converse with, how might they be considered within the ambiance of the masters and monuments of eras past? The canonical procession that is the history of art ebbs and flows with time, with generations, but certain navigable passages run deep. Perhaps, such a moment of poetic consideration is now appropriate for Jaume Plensa.

Born in 1955, the Catalan artist is best known as a sculptor, though drawing, prints, set design, installations, and architectural collaborations are vibrant within his repertoire. He is a part of one of the most gifted and acclaimed generations of sculptors we have known—most of whom were established before the dawn of the millennium and whose practices have flourished globally in

recent decades. His work is broadly figurative but a description of him as a singularly figurative artist falls short of a true level of understanding. Regardless of the exact form and medium employed, Plensa's oeuvre exudes and encourages quiet contemplation. Highly literary, it speaks to and about the human condition, to the breadth of humanity itself. Yet, despite such encouraged calm and perceived spirituality, writ large, Plensa works within one of the most socially complicated, politically divisive, and frequently violent eras in human history. Such isles of calm within the tumult of surrounding seas call to mind the fullest appreciation of historical chapters like the Italian Renaissance—an era elevated for extraordinary artistic flowering at a time of complex, internecine conflict.



Silence, 2016. Wood, 26 elements, dimensions variable. Photo: © Christopher Burke Studio

In general, Postmodernism has not gazed knowingly and affectionately on the Italian Renaissance, save for the titans Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Perhaps Titian, too. Recent and rewarding starburst exhibitions and auction plotlines are evidence. But to be Vasarian, it is not the Olympian apex, but the earlier moments of what is often called the Early Renaissance that merit further consideration through a Plensa lens. The distilled essence of the human form working toward universality that is Piero della Francesca, the inventiveness in the service of pathos and public outreach that is Donatello, the appeal to the communal spirit that is the very spirit of the era can all be appreciatively seen in sympathy with aspects of Plensa's work. To be clear, Plensa has never declared an allegiance to that distant era nor exuberated over Renaissance masters; on one hand, his genuine sense of personal humility would render it unimaginable and, on the other, the illuminators of his path tend to be literary: Blake, Wilde, even Shakespeare. Unlike the existing voluminous writings on Plensa, this consideration of his work takes us through the spirit and presence of one of the most critical chapters in art history and two of its timeless masters.

Experienced in many significant public and private collections, Plensa's repertoire is now iconic, yet a singular icon is perhaps not discernable. Abounding are curtained walls and interiors populated by alphabets; totemic carvings and monumental casts and fabrications of heads and figures; ribbons and spheres and towers with polyphonic notations and multilingual references; and multimedia, frequently illuminated, installations, among others. More than a world, his is a universe that speaks ecumenically of humanity to humanity. However, if one were to acknowledge the largest and most familiar presence within his repertoire, the planetary would be sculptures of the human figure, both in full and in part. Plensa's elegiac considerations of the human form can be in the round or in relief, solidly volumetric or a diaphanous carapace, approachably life-size or meaningfully colossal, but always monumental in presence. Decidedly feminine or suggestively more masculine, they are undeniably human.



Tel Aviv Man, 2005. Iron, 202 x 96 x 65 cm. Photo: © Jurgen Diemer

Two of Plensa's figurative groups have captured widespread attention. The first is a series of colossal female heads, realized as impenetrable volumes that, although elegantly stylized, retain physiognomic attributes of the models on which they were based. Dramatically sited in a Toronto public plaza, *Dreaming* (2017) is a quintessential example that explores the feminine as both mystic and muse, and the human form as a navigable terrain. The second, with origins in the *Tel Aviv Man* works, is the *Nomade* group, which was initiated in 2003 and reached international fame in examples like the 2010 colossus at the Picasso Museum in Antibes, France. Elegantly contoured shells of the human body, these works suggest a decidedly more masculine figure. Although most frequently made of industrial materials like steel, the schematic body contours can suggest the buoyancy and efference of malleable materials like lace, even cut paper. Yet despite the range of these two groups—the solid heads and the diffuse bodies—they share a distillation of form that is compelling and timeless; there is an air of the geometric beyond the organic and a concern for luminosity beyond light and dark. Such refinement and simplicity of form call to mind the figures of the painter, draftsman, and mathematician Piero della Francesca (ca. 1415–92).

As anticipated of a 15th-century master on the Italian peninsula, the majority of Piero's works are religious. Or are they? Primarily absent gilded backgrounds and crowning halos, Piero's paintings allow for an opportunity to engage with form and space. His figures, while based at some level on models, are the essence of a figure. They are unpolluted by detail. Specifically, they are an essence of a woman, a man, a head. So, too, are Plensa's sculptural figures. They have reduced a given likeness to an essence and as a result, they become universal. Even in those instances where one may recognize a Plensa model, the figure has been cleansed of unnecessary portrait details to be welcoming to all. Piero's *Madonna di Senigallia* (c. 1478, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino) is a rewardingly calm comparison. Here, absent the trappings of saintly recognition, the figures waver between the sacred and the secular. The faces, of a generalized type, are at once plainspoken and elevated—human and heavenly. The painting's contemplative nature is indebted less to its iconographic precedents than to the pervasive aura of calm that stems from the generalized, nearly geometrized description of form, and the carefully rendered and beautifully distributed light. Studied frontally and, in varying degrees, from the sides, the faces and bodies confer a mood of humanistic wholeness.



Utopia, 2021. Marble, 4 elements, 5.8 x 26 meters each. Photo: Laura Medina, © Plensa Studio Barcelona

When studying Piero, one encounters both structure and poetry. It's no wonder that artists like Georges Seurat and Paul Cézanne elevated him from the misty distances of history to the status of precursor to Modernism. On a grand scale, Plensa's cycle of relief murals at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, collectively titled *Utopia* (2020), is but one example that calls to mind Piero's structural description of form and poetic distribution of light. Clarity emerges out of dream for both. Simply consider the visages present in both the Renaissance panel and the contemporary relief: both offer the viewer a sense of stability and grace that is timeless, historic. Coincidental? Likely not, as each master searches beyond his given era through a presentation of form that connects to the past yet offers a great deal to the future. Beyond that, each artist values both intimacy and monumentality. Piero's panel is measurably small but reads larger. It suggests the architectonic even if it is physically petite. Plensa's reliefs are architectural, yet they read of delicacy and intimacy. Herein, the two works move symbolically toward one another. Of final note, recall Piero was primarily a painter who worked toward the three-dimensional stability of sculpture, while Plensa is primarily a sculptor who dissolves his volumes and mass toward painting.

Specific to sculpture, no Renaissance master has had more impact on the history of three-dimensional art than Donatello (c. 1386–1466), and he was singularly a sculptor. Two generations before Michelangelo, Donatello was one of the most impactful artists in his ability to communicate

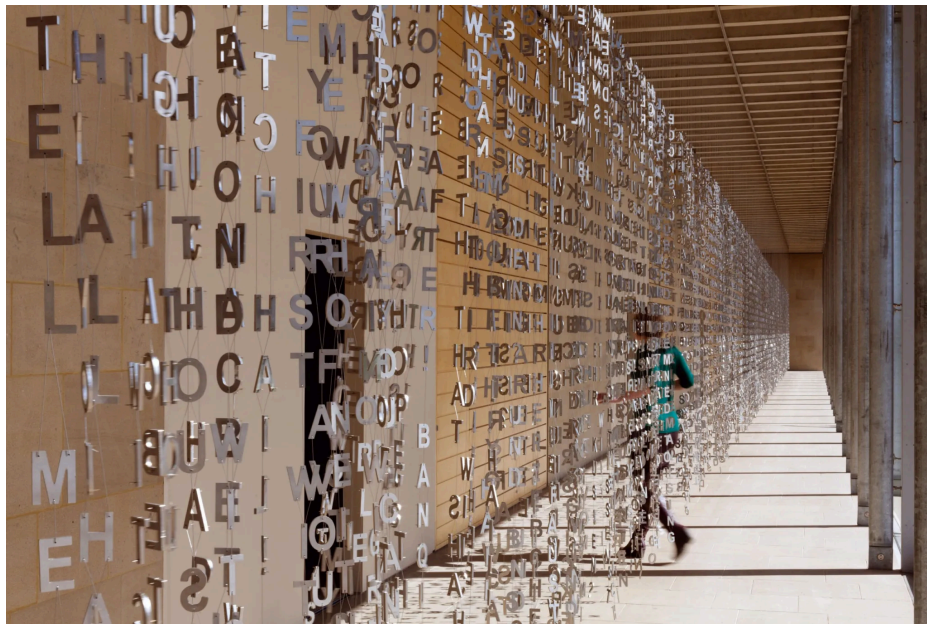
with the masses; today, we might logically be tempted to think of him as a “public artist.” Walking the streets of Florence today, one still feels the presence of Donatello. (Even though most of his original sculptures are secured in museums, exacting replicas convey his addresses to the public.) Further, he was highly innovative in terms of his choice of materials and his ability to manipulate them to great effect. Both characteristics apply to Plensa, who is inarguably among the most prolific and prodigious public sculptors of our time. He has learned how to speak to people.



The Crown Fountain, 2004. Glass, stainless steel, LED screens, light, wood, black granite, and water, 2 towers, 1,600 cm. high on 2.2 sq. km. Installation view at Millennium Park, Chicago. Photo: Laura Medina, © Plensa Studio Barcelona

Among the most celebrated sculptures of the Renaissance, Donatello's *Prophet Habakkuk* (1423–25, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence) was created for the cathedral belltower. Commonly known as *Lo Zuccone*, its exaggerations of anatomy and dress are imperceptible from the street, the tilted head and open mouth seeming to speak directly to the crowds below. The flow of light and shadowy recesses within the stone have been manipulated as if stone were clay. As one of the finest examples of civic art prior to the modern era, the effectiveness of the sculpture is a seed of the energy and delight that flourish in Plensa's *Crown Fountain* (2004, Millennium Park, Chicago).

The work's two towers face one another to protect and engage audiences in the central plaza. Ingeniously, Plensa has used digital portrait imagery and technology to create a sculpture that speaks directly to the crowds before the respective towers. The traditional materials of monuments—marble, bronze, and steel—have been succeeded by materials of their time for their time. Donatello may have not understood the media of our epoch, but he would have likely appreciated the communicative impact of Plensa's project and its ability to co-opt materials frequently associated with commercial endeavors of the day toward an artistic end. It is no surprise that *Crown Fountain* was a near instantaneous success with the public and continues as such with crowds that throng the Chicago streets. Although of a grander civic scale than Florence, the import and impact of sculpture for public consumption are harmonious. Plensa understands how to connect with humanity as did his precursors from the Renaissance forward. Poignantly, he knows the need for calm and contemplation in the lives of others even when so many of the forces swirling around the individual are neither calm nor contemplative.



Twenty-nine Palms, 2007. Stainless steel, 29 elements, dimensions variable. Photo: @ Jonty Wilde

It is interesting to reflect that even in Donatello's most dramatic sculptures, he maintains clarity of message and equanimity in composition toward a contemplative end. The work doesn't echo the surrounding tumult of the day but rather offers a moment of visual calm from within the storm of a roughened everyday life. Like many artists of their time, Piero and Donatello worked in environments of social instability, where upheaval was common and fighting the norm. Yet they and their contemporaries managed to provide civic, secular, and religious visions that perhaps rose above or pierced deep within to nourish and restore their audiences. These are companionable sensations when viewing Plensa's work in the context of the cacophony of our world today.

Water's Soul (2020) is among the artist's most majestic recent works. The 80-foot-high colossus is positioned along the banks of the Hudson River in Jersey City, New Jersey, facing lower Manhattan. The sculpture describes the head of a female figure with hand extended upward and a single finger gesturing to her lips asking for quiet, for calm. The message is a clear reminder to all who experience the piece that there is a need, a desire, to rise above the complexities and noise of contemporary life. The distilled visage and studied volumes are familiar. The use of polyester resin and fiberglass is timely and practical for the location. But it is the unblemished public messaging to audiences of every age and experience that makes the encounter so engaging, so lasting.



Water's Soul, 2020. Polyester resin, 22 meters high. Installation view in Newport, Jersey City, NJ. Photo: © Timothy Schenck

Perhaps in this sculpture, Plensa's invitation to the canon of art history becomes an acceptance within it. It is understandable that *Water's Soul* could be viewed in conversation with grand monuments of the 19th and 20th century—Bartholdi's noble giant is nearby. However, Plensa's sculpture arguably rises above and pierces deeply within his own time and place. Its physical essence and communal appeal are timely and timeless. Isn't that why the masters and masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, for example, continue to nurture and sustain?