

**Mimmo Jodice** was born in Naples (Rione Sanità) in 1934. He began experimenting with photography and creating his first conceptual works in the early 1960s, and in 1967 he had his first major exhibition in Urbino at the Palazzo Ducale. From 1970 to 1996 he was Professor of Photography at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples, where he directed Italy's first university course in that medium. Over the course of his career he has worked with many international artists and writers, including Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, and Robert Rauschenburg. His exhibitions include 'Il ventre del colera' (Milan, 1973), 'Napoli 1981' (Villa Pignatelli; Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco), 'Mediterranean' (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), and 'Les Yeux du Louvre' (Louvre, 2011). In 2003 he was awarded the Antonio Feltrinelli Prize, becoming the first photographer ever to win this prestigious award. In 2010, two large retrospective exhibitions of his work were held, in the Palazzo delle Esposizione in Rome (where his photographs appeared alongside the paintings of Giorgio De Chirico), and in the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris. In 2016 the MADRE museum in Naples held a large retrospective exhibition entitled MIMMO JODICE, ATTESA / WAITING (1960-2016). Mimmo Jodice lives in Naples with his wife and collaborator, Angela Jodice.

*This conversation with Jessica Hughes took place (in writing) between December 2020 and January 2021.*

**An illustrated version of this conversation is available on the Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies website:**

<https://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrcs/2021/jodice>

**Jessica Hughes.** Thank you, Maestro Jodice, for agreeing to talk to me about your work and its connections with classical antiquity. Your oeuvre encompasses an enormous range of subjects and themes: portraits, street photography, prisons and psychiatric hospitals, buildings and architecture, cityscapes, still-life, and much more. In this interview, though, we will be focussing on photographs which engage with classical antiquity – particularly through sculptures, and archaeological ruins.

May I begin by asking about your early encounters with the Greco-Roman past? I know that you loved painting and sculpture from a very young age. Did ancient Greco-Roman culture form part of this? And did you have a favourite ancient author, when you were growing up?

**Mimmo Jodice:** It's very difficult to answer this first question. I lost my father when I was five years old, in 1939. Shortly afterwards, the war started. My mother didn't have a job, and my brothers were in need of everything, so I started working when I was just ten years old. I've worked ever since then, and classical culture is something I've learned whilst walking through the streets of Naples, as well as going to evening classes. As an adult, with enormous sacrifices, I took evening classes at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples. I started by learning painting and sculpture.

**JH:** Naples is full of traces of antiquity – fragments of old temples built into the city's later fabric, like the ancient columns in the church of San Paolo Maggiore. When you were a child, were you attracted by these material traces of the past?

**MJ:** In the historic centre of Naples every corner, street, church and building reminds us what Naples used to be, and of its history from the earliest Greco-Roman settlements until the rich Baroque period. The area where I was born – Sanità – has some of the most important and ancient buildings in the city. As a child, my playgrounds were the royal staircases of the Palazzo dello Spagnolo, the Fontanelle Catacombs, the cloister of the Chiesa Santa Maria, and the paths which lead to the Royal Palace of Capodimonte. But my favourite place was the Archaeological Museum. On Sunday mornings, after a week of work, my reward was to spend the whole day in the Museum. The statues, frescoes, mosaics – these were real people and places that I could have conversations with. I read a great deal, and I knew everything about the peoples of the Mediterranean.

**JH:** Before we talk about your photographs of ancient subjects, may I ask you a very general and basic question about your work? Why do you prefer to photograph in black and white? I'm sure everyone asks you this question!

**MJ:** I've always thought that 'colour' is reality, full-stop. Instead, with black and white there is an 'immense' quality - something that makes me imagine, and dream, and participate. Working in black and white is a conceptual choice.

**JH:** In the scholarship and display of classical sculptures, there has been a movement recently towards colour – or I should say *back* to colour. That is, researchers have shown that our white marble sculptures were originally polychrome, and there have been various projects which reconstruct how the statues might have appeared in antiquity. What do you think about this approach?

**MJ:** During my work on *Mediterraneo* [1995], I saw some ancient statues on which a small portion of the original colour had been preserved. I remember some examples in Libya...but not too many, in general. I cannot imagine what Greek sculptures were like in colour, and re-painting them now seems something of a falsity. From my photographer's perspective, I'll always see them in black and white.

**JH:** One of your early collaborations was with the musicologist Roberto de Simone, in the 1974 book *Chi è Devoto*, which was a study of popular religious festivals in Italy. De Simone is another artist who draws on Naples' past, including its classical layers. Was this something that you spoke about – or continue to speak about – with Roberto De Simone? Do you think you have similar views of history and memory?

**MJ:** I started to work with conceptual photography around 1965-66, and I had my first exhibition in 1967. Around the end of the 1970s I was very engaged with problems of social injustice; through my work I denounced the difficult conditions of women, as well as workers, child labour, hospitals and so on. And this also underpinned my work on popular religious rituals in Campania. The book *Chi è Devoto* was the result of about four years of work. It was published at the end of 1974, with a Preface by Carlo Levi, the painter and the author of the book *Christ stopped at Eboli* [1945]. Roberto De Simone didn't influence my work; it was an extraordinary collaboration where I developed with my engagement in popular and social rituals, and Roberto developed his popular musical research.

**JH:** From the 1980s onwards, though, you stopped photographing human forms, and you removed any temporal references from your photographs. In your book *Lezioni di Fotografia* (2015, p. 71), you write:

‘I eliminated the human figure from my photographs, and I also removed any indication of the particular historical moment when I’d made the work. I eliminated the ‘everyday’ from the image, together with all the factors that could date it.’

**MJ:** When you’re young, you believe that social and political justice, honesty and care have the power to change the world. After that comes disappointment, and an acceptance of a world which is always deteriorating. This is why the human figure disappeared from my photographs and why I started to work on the city and its empty, silent spaces.

**JH:** Some of your earliest ‘classical’ photographs were taken in Pompeii – a place you’ve returned to many times over the years, including for the collaborative 2010 book *Pompei: Parole in Viaggio*.

**MJ:** From my earliest days as a photographer, Pompeii has always been my favourite place. Whenever I had a bit of time free from work, I liked to simply wander around, breathing the air of that extraordinary place. I have never seen it as a dead place: I heard voices, the noises of chariots, the rushing water of fountains, the pleasant smell of food cooking... And naturally I always took photographs. When I met the authors of *Parole in Viaggio*, and I read their stories, I already had an enormous amount of material that I’d collected over the years in Pompeii. There was a vast number of images to choose from.

**JH.** In 1995, you published the series *Mediterraneo*. Roberta Valtorta, in her book *Mimmo Jodice* (Mondadori, 2013, p. 115) describes this project as ‘the apex of a long and profound reflection, developed over many years, on ancient culture from its origins, on the persistence of the past in the present, and on [Jodice] as both a man and an artist’. Could you tell me how this project came about, and why it is important for you?

**MJ:** *Mediterraneo* developed over many years. When I was a boy, my only happy moments were those which I managed to spend in the Archaeological Museum of Naples, or in Pompeii. The statues were people I spoke with. The streets of Pompeii were, for me, real places. Inside me there grew this idea that all the Greco-Roman cities of the Mediterranean were just like Greco-Roman Naples – that they had the same culture, the same monuments, the same squares, and the same people. *People*, not statues.

**JH:** May I ask about your processes of working inside the museum, and of interacting with its collections? On a simple, practical level, how do you go about choosing which objects to photograph? Do you work before the museum opens and fills with visitors? Are there any particular technical challenges of photographing museum objects?

**MJ:** When I go to take photographs in a museum, I already have a project in mind, and I know exactly which sculptures interest me. The National Archaeological Museum in Naples has an extraordinary collection of bronzes. Amongst these, those which have always fascinated me are the Athletes and Dancers from Herculaneum. The sculptures come alive in the light – it doesn’t need to be an excessive light, but just enough to animate the forms of their bodies. When I photographed the Athletes and Dancers I used only the natural light which entered through the windows of the museum. I used only a torch to highlight the eyes, the curves of the face, or the drapery of the [dancers’] *peploi*. Yes, the kind of torch that we use when the electricity goes out!

I like working alone. The only person who comes with me is my wife, Angela, who has always worked alongside me. I ask for a permit to photograph while the museum is shut. This is for two reasons: firstly, I don't want anyone around me, and secondly, I am a very slow photographer. I've always used an analogue camera and I can spend hours looking at a sculpture, a landscape, a street. I'm a very slow photographer. For me, as the light changes, everything else changes too. It's true that, in a museum, the variations of light are quite minimal and slow. But for me, it's important to wait and keep watching any change.

**JH:** In your finished work, the eyes often look startlingly realistic.

**MJ:** For me, statues are real people. And what is more important in a person than their eyes? I light up their eyes, and I speak to them.

**JH:** Archaeological sites have also been a recurring subject in your work. For example, your photograph of the Grotto at Cuma...this is magical! Can you tell me the story behind this shot?

**MJ:** During my work for *Mediterraneo*, I travelled widely, and I photographed many Greek and Roman cities and places. But of course, I started in Naples and in all the places of extraordinary beauty that we have in Campania. South of Naples, we find Pompeii and Herculaneum, Velia and Paestum. But few people know the mysterious beauty of the ruins north of Naples: Cuma, the Grotto of the Cumaean Sybil, the Piscina Mirabilis, the mysterious Lake Avernus, Cocceius' Tunnel, the Roman port, Baia, Bacoli, Pozzuoli with its Amphitheatre and Macellum. Prior to photographing the Cumaean Grotto, I spent a whole day waiting for the light that was right for me. I came back the next day, without needing to use any artificial illumination.

**JH:** Naples and Campania have a truly special relationship with the classical past, and your photography celebrates this. May we end by returning to Naples? How would you sum up your relationship with the city and its classical past?

**MJ:** We need to look at Naples in a way that goes beyond the 'folkloristic' images that we're used to seeing. Naples is a Greek and a Roman city. It has seventeenth and eighteenth monuments of great beauty. It's true that it is a difficult city, with significant social problems, but it's given me so much culture and so much beauty. Maybe this is the reason that I never wanted to leave it.

**JH.** Maestro Jodice, thank you very much.

*Interview translated from the Italian by Jessica Hughes.*

## References

Mimmo Jodice with Isabella Pedicini (2015). *La camera incantata*, Lezioni di fotografia, Contrasto: Rome.

Roberta Valtorta (2013). *Mimmo Jodice*, Milan: Mondadori.

Find out more... <https://www.mimmojodice.it/en/>