

L'IMAGE AU PIED DE LA LETTRE

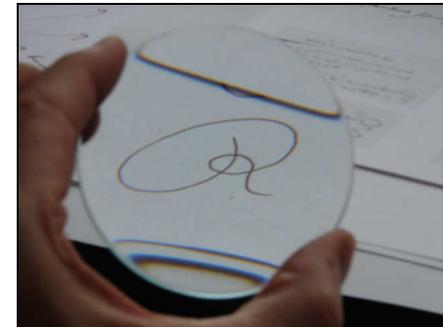
"Words in paintings are of the same substance as the images."

René Magritte, Les Mots et les Images

Figuratively speaking, to take something said or written "*au pied de la lettre*" means to take it literally, as in obeying the letter of the law, or taking images literally, i.e. on their own terms. Taken literally, this expression means the image at the letter's foot, close to being trod underfoot.

Inverting it for the sake of experimentation we get: "*la lettre au pied de l'image*." This could be taken figuratively to mean taking words figuratively (as in literary images). Taken literally, it would mean, "the letter at the foot of the image." Here, we have two possibilities, depending on where we locate the "foot" of the image: a signature or a title. This is how words get their foot into the proverbial door. No wonder painters go to such lengths to have the last word. This can drive prices very high. Who will foot the bill?

You know the story about Frenhofer, the mad 17th-century artist who spent ten years of his life working in secret to paint the most perfectly proportioned female nude ever to be offered up for purely aesthetic delectation. The result, when it was finally, reluctantly revealed turned out to be a sort of Action Painting *avant la lettre*. All that could be seen on the canvas was an inchoate mass of paint, but in the midst of this mess, in one corner, one could just make out the forms of the most breathtakingly beautiful foot that anyone had ever seen in paint. According to Balzac, we have Poussin's word for this (Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu, 1832).



Cherchez la lettre! Hint(1): it begins at a center, it sweeps around clockwise, it returns to the center, it steps out of the picture (near right, a work from 1632, orig. version, and another from ca. 1634). Hint (2): the letter looks roughly like the one I copied on the far right.