

STILL LIFE²⁴

In the German and English language “natura morta” has another name that is far more beautiful and correct. This name is *Still leben* and Still life: “*vita silenziosa*” (silent life). It refers to a painting, in fact, which represents the silent life of objects and things, a calm life, without sound or movement, an existence that expresses itself by means of volume, form and plasticity.

In reality, the objects, the fruit, the leaves are motionless but could be moved by the human hand or by the wind. Still lifes represent things that are not alive in the sense of movement and noise but are connected to the life of humans, animals and plants; these things are of this earth, which breathes life intensively and is filled with noise and movement.

The entire planet is surrounded by air; without this air everything would die. Air surrounds our earth and penetrates soft objects, the folds of silk and velvet, a feather pillow or very ripe fruit.

When one looks at these objects it would seem that they offer themselves to the air with such little resistance that the air embraces these soft objects, which are pleasurable to touch, more tightly than other things and that it blends into them. In a painting one needs to make visible this penetrating grip of air that in reality characterises soft forms. Hard forms that have strong surfaces and defined contours, give the impression of repelling air, which seems to withdraw and distance itself from those impenetrable contours and surfaces. It is as if the layer of air has been cut, repelled by the rigid outlines, and no longer offers our eyes the restful caress that its soft presence brings us.

One needs to be able to paint this play of air that defines and gives substance to objects and allows us to see their hardness and softness. The substance of objects counts more than colour; it is substance that determines form, whilst plasticity is intensified by the layer of air that envelopes things. It is air that allows us to guess and see with our mind aspects of things that are invisible to us. Air makes forms apparent and softens their outlines, whilst at the same time reinforcing their shape. Air is everywhere and must be “painted on the canvas”. Painting air is very difficult; to paint air means to give such plasticity, such volume, such energy in the shape of things so that one can feel the air circulating between one object and the other; the objects appear as if suspended, immobile but alive in the air that moves while the things seemed stopped and immobilised as if by magic, with their frontiers, promontories, terraces, towers, viewpoints and horizons. A still life contains a geography all of its own, a whole world reduced like in an illustrated dictionary.

In a painting, as I have already noted in my other writings on art, everything depends on the material with which it is painted. The plasticity of forms is determined just as much by the painting’s physical material as it is by its metaphysical material. The physical material is the palpable body of paint and the metaphysical material is the talent that created it. Beautiful material applied with technique – two elements that are the product of genius –, allow us to see or rather to feel the air in a painting and the effects of its play.

A talented painter who paints a still life is really painting the silent life of things created by nature and made by men.

Nature and reality do not have aesthetic problems or artistic worries. It is the artist’s duty to give beauty to the things he sees and interprets.

24 G. de Chirico, *Le Nature morte*, in “L’Illustrazione Italiana”, Milan 24 May 1942, p. 500; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 166-169. Published in English in *Nature According to de Chirico*, cit., pp. 278-279.

A jug can be modest and insignificant, to the extent that it is not noticed on the peasant's table, and can become an object full of nobility and charm in a beautiful painting.

A good example of how the beauty and quality of the material substance of the paint are indispensable in a still life can be seen in Manet's painting of white flowers in the Camondo collection at the Louvre, which is well-known from numerous reproductions. In this painting, despite the artist's skill and his evident intention to paint the subject in the style of great art, which is clearly visible in the effort made to give the brushstrokes a particularly mobile and fluid movement, characteristic of Velazquez and Franz Hals' best work, I say, he did not achieve his aim. The brushstrokes are not effective and lack bite, due to the poor quality of the substance of the paint. It is like a suit that a well-intentioned tailor has cut according to the rules of the grand art of tailoring, but would still not succeed due to the poor quality of the material. Such a suit cannot dress the body it was designed for; it is neither pleasurable to wear nor to look at.

Manet's good intentions and worthy efforts are shipwrecked on the fatal cliff of the still life's "poor material".

The term "natura morta" (dead nature) came into use in the 19th century. This word was a prophecy that has been fully realised in modern painting. "Modern" paintings, in which fruit and objects without form or relief are, in fact, paintings of dead nature, seeing that these objects are portrayed as flat, non-existent and without air, as such they are "truly dead". The still lifes of modern painters would not even be good enough to serve as signs for general food stores. If a still life painted by a modern painter was used by a delicatessen, a greengrocer, a bread or cake shop as a sign the poor shopkeepers would see their customers run away. The unfortunate shopkeepers who had the unhappy idea of relying on a modern still life to attract attention would eventually force them to close shop. Modern still lifes are, in fact, inferior to the simple and banal popular art produced by sign painters.

And then there are other painters who dedicate themselves with fervour to the production of elusive, ultra-stylised and spiritual still lifes in order to impress intellectuals. They recreate Picasso-style paintings of ten, twenty, thirty years before, fooling themselves in thinking that they can come even a little close to the creations of Picasso, their master and hypnotist. If Picasso painted those pictures it was because he had them in him and he simply lifted the curtain on a performance of which he possessed its exclusive secret and monopoly.

You often hear ordinary people, without intellectual pretence, exclaim in front of a beautiful still life: "Oh, those apples and oranges look real, it looks as if you can touch them! Look at those grapes, it makes you want to take them and eat them!" These enthusiastic and innocent exclamations, these sincere words are a warning for those intellectuals who have not yet sunk into the morass of snobbery, for those intellectuals in whom snobbery might cause the reduction or even the suppression of all human sentiments of joy and pleasure. I will even go as far to say that it does not matter if these simple, enthusiastic and sincere people are also capable of saying the same words in front of a painting of doubtful artistic value. What counts is the sincere joy that one experiences in front of a painting. The joy generated in the spirit of a simple man by a real work of art, is indeed stronger and more profound than if it derives from just a pleasant image. The joy one feels in front of a painting breeds hope that the day will come when beauty in painting will be reborn on earth.

Let us change the name "natura morta" which has been assigned in a moment of prophetic inspiration to paintings depicting things and objects. Let us call these paintings: "*vite silenti*" [still or silent life, *ed.*], as they are called in English and German. Perhaps this new name will help us to abolish this sad prophecy that today has become so true.