

TORMENT IN ART³³

Though art is one of the highest phenomena known to man, it lays the best terrain possible for evil in its fight against good.

Art, or rather, the “backstage” of art, is the stage upon which the most turbid passions unfold, where the worst human instincts give themselves free vent, where envy, jealousy and hatred assume a force only seen in Greek tragedies. It is also in this backstage that baseness and meanness attain to frightful dimensions.

Art in all its manifestations gives man both sublime felicity and terrible torment; happiness through the realisation of superior creation, torment when he sees his own artistic sterility.

Whilst brandishing the spectre of art the devil shows man inferno while promising paradise.

In this terrible epoch of art of ours, great painting is no longer carried out, inspired music is no longer composed. Sculptural beauty has been replaced by revolting ugliness and cold form, void of the sacred spark of life, poetry has become nothing but a quantity of words deprived of sense and idea, and the work of writers has become totally unreadable. It is in this epoch that talk began of the torment caused by artistic creation in the soul of artists, something frequently and stupidly spoken of.

The almost total disappearance of craftsmanship is one of the significant and disastrous events that have contributed to the decadence of contemporary art. Today all those working in the arts want to become great masters without any training.

The truth is, owing to the present confusion reigning in art, anyone who wants to become an artist must improvise, as schools and the will to learn are practically inexistent.

Talent was rare even during inspired epochs. Those who possessed merely a natural disposition became craftsmen and those who for one reason or another wanted to become artists but were lacking in talent gave up at the start of their apprenticeship for they realised it was work they were not suited for. Today everything has changed. No one forgoes engaging in artistic activity. There are no more craftsmen, but rather, a quantity of bad artists who are illiterate in art and insist nevertheless in their deplorable activities. These frivolous individuals have a profound contempt for the modest and laborious life of the craftsman.

One must also add that to be a good craftsman much labour and effort are needed, while the majority of people of our time who are attracted by the profession of art only chose it because of the facilities with which this bluff, presented today as artistic creations full of seriousness and even genius, can be performed. In fact it is infinitely easier to be a modern painter than a good craftsman. But the altars of art cannot be desecrated with impunity; this sacrilege will be punished by the Muses, who in order to chastise these narrow-minded men, have imparted them the torment of art.

In all countries, torment in art became the drama of many mediocre artists, of many artists who are not artists.

To escape the fate and torments from which so many artists are now suffering, to create true works of art that can satisfy their creator, more work is needed, much harder and more intense work than in inspired times when artists were guided from youth onward by great masters who taught them how to paint well. I say paint well, for in this essay I address myself especially to painters but what I say is just as true for artists in other branches of art. One thing is certain, only through such work can serenity be reached. Or then, if necessary, if lacking in ability, one must give up the profession of art.

³³ G. de Chirico, *Il tormento nell'arte*, in “L'Illustrazione Italiana”, Milan 4 July 1943; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 205-208. Published in English here for the first time.

Torment in art is a disease that weakens the whole being, taking the joy of living from it. It develops bad instincts that lay dormant in its very nature and all the worst passions that exist in an embryonic state in man's character.

Such torment shapes the life of an artist struck by the full force of this plague, guiding his actions and his feelings whilst poisoning his existence.

Torment in art inflicts far greater suffering than the bitterest disillusion in love. I write these lines to warn future generations that will follow our present one, so stricken by this cruel disease. I entreat you to believe me, oh my readers, you who will read this in times to come, the violation of Art's sanctuary, the entrance into which is for the chosen alone, is an act for which a great price will be paid. In all countries, I have seen quantities of artists suffering terribly because of the torment of art, they are embittered, irritated, envious and above all profoundly unhappy men. To perceive the possibility of artistic creation without being able to achieve it, to intimately understand one's incapacity, sterility and powerlessness, to understand one's lack of talent, and nevertheless try again with the same negative results, creates great drama and tragic anguish in failed artists. The fact of being successful, of having a name and achieving a good position in no way alters the state of mind of artists who are discontented with their work; honours, fame and money can do nothing in this case. The only thing that counts and that will protect an artist from the torment of art is the internal satisfaction given by a job well done and the creation of true works of art. A successful and even brilliant career cannot deliver man from the consciousness of his own small value. All bad artists are more or less conscious of this.

I write this especially for the young, whom I advise not to trust all the confusion in which art is now immersed and not to choose the career of artist lightly, attracted by the idea of an easy profession in which they can give free scope to their natural laziness, make money and receive honours at the same time.

I would like to make it clear to all that to be a real artist, to be satisfied, one must have talent and work hard. In choosing the career of an artist, one must know above all else that they have chosen a difficult and tiring career, that great efforts are required to surmount innumerable difficulties, finally they must know that they will have to work hard and constantly throughout their life, for an artist's place is not in a café making small talk and gossiping, but at the easel or working table, intensely labouring.

Now let us return to the backstage of art. Defined a revolution in art, what happened in France towards the end of the 19th century was not revolution but sudden decadence. The painters of talent of the time, such as Manet, Degas, Monet, etc., (I cite the most famous French painters) were far inferior to Delacroix, Géricault, Courbet and Corot. The only reason Manet, Degas, Monet and others of that time chose a new pictorial language is because they no longer were familiar with the old language. This phenomenon can be compared to what would happen if humanity, after having developed language to its highest, most evolved form of expression, suddenly forgot all the words. Probably after such a catastrophe men, having forgotten words, would try to make themselves understood by gestures, sounds and cries; the more intelligent would at once find, I could even say invent, some manner of expressing themselves. But their efforts would in no way signify that these new makeshift means could surpass or even merely replace or equal the complexity of expression of the rich, refined languages which their predecessors had created and developed fully. This is the impression I get from the various "tendencies" and "schools" that have risen as a result of the complete oblivion of knowledge on fine painting.

Modern painting with its poverty and naiveté of expression is nothing but a too lengthy consequence of this loss of language. In children of a tender age, we see how angry and irritated they are if they cannot speak

and tell us what they want. How far greater must be the pain, irritation and fury of those poor devils, the mediocre artists, tossing restlessly about without being able to express anything.

The torment of art is a serious disease. It renders man conscious of his own lack of value and nothing can quiet its voice; it is a punishment that falls upon those who have dared too much, trying to approach the sanctuaries of art without Universal Talent having granted them permission.

Universal Talent chooses its disciples and without its will no one can become an artist.