

RETURN TO CRAFT<sup>2</sup>

*Savoir pour pouvoir*  
Gustave Courbet

It is by now obvious that the painters who for the last half a century have worn themselves out striving to invent schools and systems, sweating through continual effort to appear original and flaunting their personality, now hide like rabbits behind the banner of multifarious ploys. As a last defence to their ignorance and powerlessness, they posture *spirituality* (an uncontrollable fact for most, including those who write about art, whilst the few intelligent men you and I know are capable of understanding what this spirituality consists of and judge it for what it is worth). These painters now return prudently with outstretched hands like men walking in the dark towards an art less encumbered with trickery, towards clearer and more concrete forms, towards surfaces that can testify, without beating around the bush, to one's knowledge and capability. In my opinion this is a good sign. Such a turn of events was inevitable.

It is interesting to note how this return is coming about. It is being carried out with prudence, or to be clearer, with fear. It would seem that these painters, as they make this return, are afraid of stumbling and falling into the same snares and traps they themselves had laid during their previous advance. Such fear is justified by the fact that they are unarmed, vulnerable and weak. This return also requires that they hold tight to a few of those same tricks and make use of the shields they used during their advance. The problem that terrifies them the most in this return is that of the human figure: Man who, with his canons, rises up once again like a spectre in front of man.

Neglect and deformation of anthropomorphic representation has encouraged entire legions of painters to turn out stupid and facile reproductions. The problem of the man-animal looms larger and more terrible than ever in this return, since the right weapons with which to tackle it are lacking, or rather, if they do exist are blunt and most artists have forgotten how to use them.

These painters who return can no longer hide behind the excuse of the primitive artifice: the Greek scraper of Xoanon or the 14<sup>th</sup> century painter.

The situation of today's penitent painter is quite tragic, although there is also a comic side to the puerile confusion that is taking place and that draws an ironic smile from the observer.

Some of the regretful limit themselves to still life, which, as everyone knows, was a great refuge and an easy way out for those who participated in the revolutionary era. One need only think of the thousands of still lifes painted by Cézanne's followers: the apple with the knife and the crooked dish on a table in false perspective on the so-called path of progress towards the cubist still life, the famous ploy of the guitar and the skeletal violin without bridge or strings, and the no less famous ruse of the thick black stencilled number, the bottles and playing-cards (the less complicated ones), and pieces of newspaper, imitation wood and marble glued to the canvas. (When this imitation proved too difficult or time was pressing and a painting had to be sold to make ends meet, instead of working with a brush like every good painter with a bit of self-respect, they would glue on the canvas one of the printed imitations used by decorators). And so now a group of painters turn once more to the still life, seeking, of course, to be honest and to represent the objects with

<sup>2</sup> G. de Chirico, *Il ritorno al mestiere*, in "Valori Plastici", a. I, n. 11-12, Rome November-December 1919, pp. 93-99; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 13-19.

clearer forms this time. Others, the most daring and bold, even attempt the human figure. Alas! Alas! But this is where problems occur. Whilst the road becomes treacherous and the pace slackens, they steady themselves on walls and lampposts, on trees on the boulevard, lest disaster befall them and they crash to the ground with all four paws in the air like amateur skaters. The strongest willed feel arthritic knots in their fingers, they feel faint and their confidence abandons them, like a surgeon facing a difficult and complicated operation who for years has not held a scalpel in his hands, like a violinist who attempts a tempestuous sonata after leaving their instrument silent in its little coffin for years. And yet one must start somewhere! And so, little by little, they tentatively take up primitivism again. They paint heads, hands, feet and torsos, which, although they do not belong to the reigns of cubism, futurism, secessionism or fauvism, nevertheless appear harsh due to deficiencies and mistakes which are prudishly veiled with stylistic contortions.

By now the phenomenon is as apparent in France as it is in Italy. I do not know as yet what is happening in Germany, but from the few German reviews I have seen, including *Jugend*, it would seem that our former enemies still find themselves in a *statu quo ante bello*. I would swear, however, that within six months the transformation that has taken place in the Entente countries will also occur in that of the divine Wolfgang.

In France – yes in France! – the country that up until yesterday laid down the law in matters of art, in France, the very geniuses whose praise Apollinaire sang in his lyrical book on cubism, in France, these much-lauded geniuses are now busy drawing careful sketches of the human figure. To think that these painters are now doing something done years ago by others whom they used to consider absolute imbeciles! This brings to mind an acquaintance of mine in Paris, a painter called Zack, a Polish Jew transplanted with all his household gods and Penates on left bank of the Seine. This Zack painted pictures similar to those we see produced today by the little hands of the cubists and the penitent avant-garde. *Inter nos*, as a painter this Zack was not worth a worm-eaten walnut. This was also the opinion of my good friend Apollinaire who used to clutch his chest in mirth at the mere mention of the Polish painter's name. He would have been dumbfounded if someone had predicted that in 1919 his favourite painters would be producing work of a quality more or less identical to that of the derided Pole. But what can one do? The history of art has its paradoxical turns just like the history of a people. There is no need to be discouraged, however, for time, the best judge of all, will put things in their rightful place.

To return to craft! It will not be easy and will demand time and effort. Schools and teachers are lacking, or rather, do exist but have been polluted by the colouristic foolishness that has invaded Europe over the course of this half-century. Academies exist, with their instruments, methods and systems, but, alas, what results they produce! What artwork – oh divine fathers! What would the worst 17<sup>th</sup> century student say if he could see a masterpiece by a professor of a German or Italian academy, or by a *cher maître* of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts of Paris? Let us take the Academy of Munich as an example, which is perhaps the best organised of all and offers its students the most elaborate means of learning the complicated and difficult arts of drawing and painting. A student is admitted after a practical test that consists in making a small charcoal copy of a head or a nude from nature.

If the student passes the test he is admitted to one or other of the professors' classes and immediately begins to copy live models in colour. The majority of students who begin learning the extraordinarily complicated science of painting in this way are completely unprepared: they do not know how to draw. And yet, indeed, the art of drawing necessitates a lengthy and laborious apprenticeship.

One must begin with copying printed reproductions of the figure, paying particular attention to the details of the human body: the hands, feet, eyes, nose and ears, and from this, progress gradually to making copies of sculptures, first of busts and then of full-bodied statues, from draped ones and then on to nude statues. Such preparation requires at least four or five years before one is able to tackle copying directly from nature.

And so it happens that these budding painters who find themselves in an academy with palette in hand in front of a live model, lacking in practice and unknowledgeable of the science of drawing, modelling and of chiaroscuro, are inevitably attracted by the superficial lure of colour and are encouraged in this by their teachers, who for the most part are “secessionists”. The official academies are controlled by secessionists, that is, by that idiotic band of daubers who reduce the magical, severe and complicated art of painting to a sort of decorative trick, to an ornament of ephemeral aestheticism, whose value could be compared with a piece of modern style furniture, with cushions and carpets decorated in accord with the facile refinements of Russian popular art and the elegance and taste of the latest international socialite boudoirs.

In Munich, such teachers include Angelo Jank, Leo Putz, Samberger, Otto Wirsching, etc., in Paris, Henri Martin, Lucien Simon, Besnard, Laprade, etc., and in Italy we have our dear Sartorio, Tito and Cia. This is the point we have reached. This is the state of confusion, ignorance and overwhelming stupidity in the midst of which the very few painters whose brains are clear and whose eyes are clean, are preparing to return to painterly science according to the principles and teachings of our old masters. Before anything else, our masters taught drawing, the divine art and foundation of every plastic construction, skeleton of all fine work, the eternal law that every artifice must follow. Drawing, ignored, neglected and deformed by all modern painters (I say all, including the decorators of parliamentary halls and various professors of the realm), drawing, I say, will return not as a fashion, as those who talk of artistic events say, but as an inevitable necessity: as a condition *sine qua non* of good creation.

Jean Dominique Ingres said, “*un tableau bien dessiné est toujours assez bien peint*”, and I think he knew more about this than all the modern painters. Just as in political elections voters are encouraged to go to “the polls”, we, who were the first to set a good example in painting, summon the redeemed painters and the redeemers back “to the statue”. Yes, to the statue; to the statue to learn the nobility and the religion of drawing, to statues in order to dehumanise you a little, you who in spite of all your puerile devilries were still “human, too human”. If you lack the time and the means to go and copy sculptures in museums, if the academies have not yet adopted the system of shutting a future painter up for at least five years in a room in which there is nothing but marble and plaster statues, if the dawn of laws and canons has not yet arisen, have patience; and meanwhile, so as not to lose any time, buy a plaster copy though it need not be a reproduction of an antique masterpiece. Buy your plaster copy, and then in the silence of your room copy it ten, twenty, a hundred times. Copy it until you manage to produce a satisfying work, to draw a hand or a foot in such a way that if it were to come alive miraculously, the bones, muscles, nerves and tendons would all be correct.

To return to craft, our painters must be extremely diligent in perfecting their means. Their canvas, paints and brushes, oils and varnishes must be of the highest quality. Paints are unfortunately of very poor quality nowadays due to the roguery and immorality of manufacturers as well as to modern painters’ mania for speed. This has encouraged merchants to peddle extremely poor products, knowing that no painter was likely to complain. It would be a good thing if painters took up the habit of making their own paints and canvases

again. Patience and effort will be necessary, but, when painters have finally understood that a painting does not have to be carried out as quickly as possible, that its only aim does not have to be that of being exhibited or sold to a dealer. One must work on a painting for months, even years, until it attains its maximum finish and once the painter's conscience is completely at rest. When a painter has understood this he will not find it difficult to sacrifice a few hours a day to the preparation of his own paints and canvases. He will do it with care and love; it will cost him less and provide him with safer and more consistent materials.

When this transformation is enacted, the finest painters, who will be considered "masters", will be able to exercise control and act as judge and inspector for lesser painters. It would also be wise to adopt the discipline used in the time of great Flemish painters who, united in congregations and societies, would elect a president who had the power to inflict punishments, to impose fines and even expel from the society a painter guilty of negligence or who had used inferior materials.

When Ingres painted, he had within his reach over one hundred paintbrushes of the finest quality, perfectly washed and dried and ready for use the moment he needed them. Today our avant-garde boasts of using a couple of rough decorator's brushes that have never been washed and are clogged hard with dried paint.

In Italy it has often been said nowadays, especially after a number of painters with separatist sentiments abandoned sects and began following a more personal path, that although futurism did not produce any complete artists or definitive works and although it furnished excessive encouragement for the ignorant and the impotent, served nevertheless to rid Italian art of an academic spirit, of a considerable amount of old and rotten things, and of a maniacal cult for the museum, etc.

When I hear such chit-chat, I think of what was said about the war, which is that the war was necessary, that in spite of all the risks involved, Italy could not have avoided entering the war, etc., but what if the war had not in fact been necessary?... Going back to futurism: in my opinion futurism was as necessary to Italy as the war was. It came, like the war did, because it was ordained by destiny, but we could perfectly well have done without it. Humanity needed anything but war! And art needed anything but futurism! Futurism actually got rid of nothing and liberated no one. The painters liberated by futurism are like the men liberated by the war: "they do not exist".

The people who had foolish ideas about art before futurism still have them, and as for the very rare intelligent beings living on this peninsula, I believe they have learnt little from futurism, and the small amount of good they have done and are doing, they would have done just the same without the futurist interlude. As far as spiritually is concerned, futurism did not benefit Italian painting in the least.

Futurism is actually a sort of confused D'Annunzianism and contains the same deficiencies and falsities found in his work: a lack of profundity, no sense of humanity, absence of construction, hermaphroditism feelings, homosexual plasticity, fake historical interpretation and false lyricism.

Futurism dealt the final blow to Italian painting as far as material and craft are concerned. Even before the advent of futurism Italian painting was navigating murky waters, but futurist revelry was really the last straw.

A general downfall is currently taking place. We have reached the second half of the parabola. Politics have taught us something. Hysteria and buffoonery have been voted down. I think that by now we are all satiated by the various antics seen, whether they be political, literary or painterly. With the fading out of hysteria, more than one painter will return to craft, and those who have already done so can work with freer hands, and their work will be more adequately recognised and recompensed.

As for me, I am calm, and define myself with three words that I wish to be the seal of all my work: *Pictor classicus sum*.