

CRAFT AND TRADITION¹⁵

In terms of art, we live in a world of anarchy and lack of discipline. There is no one to correct and judge, to advise and teach, to dictate a law or establish a principle. Mediocre artworks are no longer subject to the risks they formerly were. As painters have lost all real passion, the same phenomenon, by reflex, is manifest in the public, hence the public, completely lacking in enthusiasm, neither celebrates painting with praise nor inveighs it with criticism.

The recent enthusiasm shown by young people during the genesis of new systems was not true artistic enthusiasm, but excitement born of collectivism. This animation was part of a special stratum of modern psychology based upon movement and amusement. This state of things is due in good part to the progress of science and the evolution of transportation means allowing rapid displacements and nonstop contact from city to city, country to country, nation to nation. These enthusiasms, I repeat, do not touch the profound depths of art. The breathless competition between young artists, the fervour which urged them to surpass each other had as its sole aim originality, personality and the ambition to acquire a name, an ambition easily satisfied in our days thanks to the overflowing development of the press especially in its ephemeral and superficial forms (booklets, dailies, periodicals, etc.). Not one of these young people was driven by the desire “to do better” than his neighbour. This is especially due to the fact that, as far as their effective grasp of the complicated science of painting is concerned, they were all on the same level. Emulation in questions of real painterly value demands the presence of teachers: this is where the power of old masters lies. If among today’s hustlers one did arise by managing to sell himself better than the others, to push his name to the front, to interest, to tickle a lyric vein of an art critic, this would happen not because his work was superior to that of the others, but rather such success would be due to some of the following factors, such as: the discovery of new systems, plagiarism or the exploitation of systems already discovered by others, but which owing to circumstances remained in obscurity. The intervention into his artistic and commercial activities of people who for reasons of interest, sympathy and vainglory help out by opening their hearts and their purses to him is another possibility. It may be said, in passing, that the up-start would probably possess some small quality lacking in others. But genius would have nothing to do with it. Genius can only intervene on the plane of great art, only where plastic construction emerges from the masses of forms, pure of any sensuality of collectivism, immobile in form, controllable in all its aspects. Only then do the “metaphysics of art” emerge. The work of genius, the result of progressive effort, a human and real effort is at the same time beyond the invisible limits of things eternal. Therefore, as Schopenhauer justly observes, the artist of mere talent is one who achieves an objective apparent to all but achievable by few, whereas the artist of genius achieves an objective which none can even see.

The lack of teachers, as I have already said, has deprived the young enthusiasm for their own work. I call to mind the words of Domenico Veneziani in a letter which he wrote to Piero de’ Medici expressing his admiration for Fra Filippo Lippi and Fra Angelico: “if you only knew”, he said, “what desire I also have to do some famous work”.

In those days the master trained the disciple, but the disciples also collaborated more than a little in the master’s progress; with this I am not alluding to the material help that in many cases pupils gave to the master, but to moral help. Today, although there are many groups and many sects, artists are all terribly isolated; nobody can help his neighbour and nobody can ask for help, because nobody is sure of what he is doing or

15 G. de Chirico, *Mestiere e tradizione*, in “Il Primato Artistico Italiano”, a. I, n. 2, Milan March 1920, s.i.p., published with the title *Le scuole di pittura presso gli antichi*; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 93-97. Published in English here for the first time.

what he wants and everyone resides in a miserable state.

In the time of the old masters, the school constituted a real family. These schools had different standing according to the value of the master, but in all of them the spirit of intimacy and solidarity was alive, the enthusiasm of the master to teach and the pupil learn.

Some of the inferior schools were more like shops where a painter of sacred subjects worked and taught. Youths desirous of learning art often entered such schools in childhood to study its first rudiments and its principal secrets. It must be remembered that principles and secrets taught by painters of a second order, were identical to those instilled in the schools of the masters; thus there was no risk of going astray; nor was one allowed to work at random as is done nowadays. Beginners entered early into these inferior schools and also left early; the pupil strove to learn the first laws of art as quickly as possible so as to be able to perfect themselves under the guide of great masters. He would begin by attentively studying the grinding of colours (the manner varied from school to school and was a secret jealously guarded by each), the spreading, according to all the rules of this art, of plaster on board or of damp fresco on mural spaces and then how to trace with rapidity and precision the cartoon upon which the images had been rigorously set. Having acquired basic knowledge, the pupil went in search of a more learned master and often it was the painter-teacher himself who inspired his young pupil with the longing for unknown horizons, which his advanced age or limited knowledge only allowed him to see from afar. Often he would exhort the youth to change to a better master without any spirit of recrimination, for above all he had become a friend and almost a father to his disciple.

On leaving this primary school, a truly fruitful period of formation began for the youthful painter. He wandered from town to town, from studio to studio. He carried everywhere the curiosity and enthusiasm of youth, he was ever on the lookout to discover the secrets of the most renowned masters, in order to make careful use of these. Thus at the age of twenty a painter was already in possession of important reserves of knowledge, his path was traced for him, he knew the secrets of the art; now all he had left to do was to progress. His youth notwithstanding he could register himself in a corporation, be honoured with the title of painter and open a school himself.

Today we are astonished to see the importance and quantity of work done by a number of painters who died relatively young. The fact that they began studying painting at such an early age is the reason behind this. When one thinks that Perugino entered the school of a master at the age of nine and Andrea del Sarto when he was seven, it does not strike us as strange that Mantegna, Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo were masters at the age of twenty.

Before acquiring the qualification of discipline, a lad attended the school for a preparatory period that ended when he was capable of offering some concrete service to his master. In some schools this period of learning lasted for seven years, in others it was longer. It is easy to image the spiritual affinity and sincere friendship between master and disciples, especially when the teacher discovered signs of talent and genius in their pupils. The members of the school felt themselves to be custodians of something sacred, the “secret of art”, secrets that went from grinding colour and filtering resins to the complicated and difficult technique of painting. The master loved his disciplines as sons and brothers, he knew that thanks to them his labour would not be lost. In Bologna, Francia wrote the following regarding the departure of one of his pupils: “1496 – 4 April – Departure of my dear Timoteo Viti, may God grant him blessings and favours”. In the *Memoires* of the Florentine painter Neri de’ Bicci, we find a record of his having received into his school without payment a pupil who was the son of a poor widow who could not afford tuition. In the Umbrian schools the pupil did not pay the master but committed himself to be constant in the art of painting, to serve and obey the orders of the master *in rebus licitis et honestis* (as we learn from contract dated December 1441 regulating the conditions

under which a certain Domenico Cecchi Baldi entered the studio of the famous Ottaviano Nelli where he would be given board). In short, there were few obligations on the part of the pupil. These were far greater on the master's side. Not only was he bound to teach the art of painting in the best possible way, but he was also obliged to have constant care of his pupil, to feed him, to give him shoes and clothes. For the duration of the pupil's stay in his studio he had to pay all his expenses and take him along on his travels to other towns. From the status of being a pupil, the young painter passed to that of aid or apprentice. At the time, this term was not one of disparagement and is often seen in Vasari's writings where he spoke words of praise of his apprentice Cungi del Borgo who accompanied him on all his travels and was his principal collaborator in many works executed in Venice.

All the great artists had numerous disciples to help them. Bernardino Pinturicchio, Lo Spagna, Raphael, Giannicola Manni, Melangio da Montefalco had all been apprentices of Perugino. Each of these painters in their turn congregated others. Lo Spagna was surrounded by a true family of honest artificers who covered all the churches in the Spoleto area with paintings. It is likely that Pinturicchio had even more helpers while painting the frescoes of the Borgia rooms, which were open to the public in 1900; seemingly only a part of these frescoes belong to the master's hand. But Umbria was the region where artistic solidarity and mutual affection between master and disciple were the strongest. Among all the artists of the 15th century no one had such great a number of disciples as Perugino, devoted to his cult and scrupulously observant of his teaching; this is fully proved by Sanzio who in two of his masterpieces, *Transfiguration* and *The Marriage of the Virgin*, followed so closely the tracks of the master that the second seems almost to be a copy of Perugino's *The Marriage of the Virgin* painted for the cathedral in Perugia and which is now in the museum of Caen.

In modern times, the classical tradition of schools continued up to David and Ingres.

It seems that Courbet was also assisted by pupils, especially in the last years of his life when, suffering from liver disease and oppressed by the displeasure caused by the politics of the Commune and the envy of certain colleagues such as Maissonier, he could no longer work with his former security and ardour. In fact, it was through the collaboration of three painters, Marcello Ordinaire, Cherubino Pata and a certain Cornu, that the master of Ornans was able to intensify his artistic production shortly before his death.

With the turn that painting has taken today, could we go back to the cult of school? To me it seems very difficult. Certainly it is not the various academies of the kingdom that the spirit of the schools could be reborn and there are many reasons for this. Firstly because, as I have said, the "masters" are lacking, secondly because the method of teaching is extremely bad or, to be more precise, nonexistent. A painter hired by the government to teach in an academy limits himself to passing rapidly a couple of times a week among the student's easels, giving vague advice, making some dubious corrections. Pupils cannot learn in such a manner; it is as if they were working alone. It must also be taken into account that masters have no authority in today's academies. Even if they possessed true craftsmanship and were finished artists they could not impose a method or discipline of work, for today, certain principles of anarchy and independence have taken root among modern artistic youth that prevent any doctrinal prevalence.

It would be better if serious painters, conscious of their own value, having attained maturity and craftsmanship, assembled a certain number of young men disposed to follow them blindly and work with them disinterestedly, whilst ignoring external noise. These disciples would have to be profoundly convinced of the master's importance. Thus, little by little, a kind of painting could arise on solid grounding, which would be an excellent corrective to universal inanity. Italy is possibly the country best adapted to such a beginning, as the stupidity of our modern painting is more of a superficial quality than a deeply rooted one.

Let us see who will set the example.