

MISCELLANY¹⁷***The Song of the Sirens***

According to a very ancient legend the song of the sirens began with a horrifying shriek, which growing in intensity, became ever more acute and upon reaching its apex was transmuted into a song of ineffable sweetness. The irritation that intellectuals and art critics manifest against me may take the same course. In parallel to the progression and evolution of my painting and the publishing of my writings, this irritation may augment continually, and possibly, I say, upon reaching its apex, will transform into wild love and immense passion. Well! Let us hope for the best....

The Staircase of Art

Painting is an extremely difficult art. To paint and draw well requires many years of relentless work. A true artist must continue to make progress, enriching his experience, continually improving on his craft and progressing constantly so as to draw and paint increasingly better. For an artist, being in a stationary state is indeed a form of regression. An artist must constantly aspire to perfection for the staircase of art has no top step. This staircase is placed on solid supports: talent and intelligence; it rises up infinitely and climbing it is never causes dizziness for one does not look downwards.

The greater part of those who occupy themselves with art nowadays crawls around the bottom of the sacred stairs without being able to climb even the first step. They look with envy upon those who have managed to climb to a certain height on this blessed flight of steps.

It is not those who climb quietly ever higher that suffer from vertigo, but rather those who crawl about at the bottom dragging themselves in the dust of the sacred stairs and see the others rising up. It is those underneath who tormented by the thought of their weakness and incapacity are often full of envy and desperation.

Donkeys who have lost their Way

As critics and followers of so-called “modern art” are used to coarse, unrefined sketches, which make up the greater part of pictures painted nowadays, when they do find themselves before a finished painting they become nervous and irritable like donkeys who have strayed from their usual path leading them to the security and comfort of their manger with a crib full of fodder. To avoid all misunderstanding I hasten to say that with regard to the modernists and their way of seeing and speaking about painting, the word manger is used in metaphorical allusion to a recipient wherein all those pretexts and urgings to act “intelligently”, “imaginatively”, “lyrically” and “spiritually” can be found in abundance.

I must also add that according to me, the modernists have not a very exacting palate concerning quality or variety. On the contrary, one can say that the spiritual taste of modernist critics and intellectuals is rather careless, for their mental stomachs, spoilt by bad food, refuse all good and real nourishment.

Intellectual Stupidity and Malice

Another mania of today’s intellectuals is to become stubborn and obstinate about some given painting, repeating like parrots phrases circulating for mercantile reasons and designed for profit. Thus the refrain of

17 G. de Chirico, *Miscellanea*, in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 104-108; later published in “La Gazzetta delle Arti”, a III, 1947, p. 3. Published in English here for the first time.

the *Disquieting Muses* was invented in reference to my so-called “metaphysical painting”. That painting of mine, which I executed twice, the better version of which is now in America, served as a pretext for many intellectuals and others to try and put obstacles on the path of my artistic career. Many in fact, moved by envy or personal interest, sought to distract the attention of the public from my more recent production and draw it towards a given period and even towards some particular work of a given period. In doing this they hoped to harm me both materially and morally. But a limit was reached at the 1942 Biennial when, not managing to boycott me with so-called “metaphysical art”, they launched the refrain of “the goose”.

The Plucked Goose was a painting exhibited in the room dedicated to me along with many other works containing other, better solutions to painterly problems. But many persisted on speaking of the “goose”. Five, ten, twenty, times a day I would meet people who maliciously, stupidly or ingeniously would exclaim: “Dear Master, that goose of yours, what a masterpiece!” It would have seemed that from the time of “Metaphysical Art” until the recent Biennial I had managed to paint nothing but that goose. I listened with my usual tolerance and patience but in my heart I had a great wish to tell these malevolent idiots: “very well about the goose, but in this moment, it seems to me that the real goose is you!”.

As a matter of fact the same phenomenon happened to Renoir in France, where in a similar way intellectuals created a sort of myth round a painting entitled *Portrait de Madame Charpentier*, that Renoir had painted in his youth. It seems incredible but even towards the end of his long life the old painter used to be bothered by people who, from idiocy or malice, would come and speak to him about that painting. It seems that one day, shortly before his death, while working in his garden at Cagnes with his brush tied to his right hand that was deformed by arthritis, someone had the impertinence to approach him and to speak about *Le portrait de Madame Charpentier*. But this time the old master really lost his patience. Turning around abruptly to his interlocutor, he gave what in fascist times was called a curt reply: “Yes, yes, the *Portrait of Madame Charpentier*, put it in the Louvre and leave me alone”.

Then, resuming his working position he continued to paint.

Foolish Imported Phrases

In Paris, intellectuals, art critics and “modern” painters used to pronounce, and probably continue to do so, certain phrases like “I have seen the finest Cézanne!” or “I have seen the finest Van Gogh!” or “I have seen the finest de Chirico!”. In French they pronounced it “Sheereecò” abolishing the particle “de”. This way of speaking, except for the “Sheereecò”, which is instead pronounced de Chirico, has been imported into Italy’s modernist circles since some time. This manner is proof of the superficiality, frivolity and stupidity of today’s intellectuals when speaking of painting. Such phrases as “I have seen the finest Cézanne!” or “that collector possesses the finest Van Gogh!” are mechanically pronounced without the slightest conviction. Those who voice them are more like talking automats rather than living human beings with seeing eyes, working brains and minds that reason. Besides, such phrases are utterly deprived of meaning when said of certain painters as for instance, “I have seen the finest Cézanne!”, which is perfect nonsense for all Cézanne’s paintings are ugly and equally ugly at that. Consequently, in the case of the “Master of Aix” one could not even say: “I have seen the least ugly Cézanne!”, for all are ugly.

In days of old, people understood painting better than they do now and spoke of it in a more serious manner. Hence, such expressions were not in use in writing or speaking. I remember that when I was in Paris I used to frequent the Richelieu library where I searched for volumes and documents to gain knowledge of the technique of the 16th century French masters. I had the patience to read all the conferences and reports which were given weekly by painters such as Largillière, Oudry and others and also by learned men and writers who

occupied themselves with painting; these conferences and reports used to take place in the Academy of Fine Arts, called at that time Académie Royale de Peinture. I do not remember having once read a phrase such as “I have seen the finest Poussin!”, or that in such and such a place one can find “the most beautiful Le Nain” and so on. At the time, people who were interested in art were serious; people who knew how to speak about it and did not emit void sentences and opinions. These were people who did not venture forth grimacing absentmindedly whilst defining “the finest pictures of a painter” and where these can be found.

Orchestral Conductors and Art Critics

An orchestral conductor who moves with exaggeration and gesticulates when conducting creates a complicated pantomime, taking on the manner of someone who is exalted, rapt, detached, frenetic, languid, sentimental, ardent, trembling, delicate, inspired, obsessed, attentive, precise, carried away, concentrated, exploding and vehement etc., is similar to an intellectual, a critic of modern art who, when speaking of painting is preoccupied above all with the thought of seeming to be witty, vivacious, brilliant, intelligent, acute, refined, ironic, imaginative, clever etc. Both of them, instead of thinking seriously about what they have to do and doing it honestly and conscientiously, strive to make a good impression with the least possible trouble to themselves, exploiting the stupidity and snobbishness of their contemporaries.

“Modern” Cooking

In matters concerning cooking and hosting, it is only in the restaurants of grand hotels that today one can still find what remains of technique and good prime materials which are disappearing entirely from the face of the earth. The good country inns, the good inns of yore, clean places where one ate well, the good city trattorias, lacking elegance but neat and hospitable, no longer exist. Except for rare exceptions they have been replaced by filthy, evil smelling premises where one eats atrociously, is treated like a dog and has to pay the prices of Foyot or La Pérouse. This has been going on for some time and not only in Italy but in other countries as well.

Intellectuals who take everything in an opposite way, pretend to have an incurable contempt for the cooking in grand hotels and are convinced that one can only eat well in dirty taverns, the dirtier the better, according to them. Because of this, at twilight, at supper hour, you will see them moving slowly like sheep to the fold towards the malodorous premises of the filthiest taverns.

Drawings by Men of Letters

I saw an exhibition of drawings by men of letters in Venice. The prizes consisted of trophies and medals.

The exhibition was a mosaic of memories. Cocteau, Chagall, Dali etc., appeared and disappeared as in a kaleidoscope; there were even manuscripts bespeckled with vignettes that might have been pulled out of the drawer of Mr. Gallimard of the “Nouvelle Revue Française”. What struck me most in this exhibition was the effort, the labour of all these men of letters, not to draw well or at least decently, which would have been both logical and normal, but to seem acute, full of genius, spontaneous, refined, intelligent, ironic, diabolic, satanic etc. I thought with melancholy of the drawings by Musset (there is a portrait of George Sand which could be signed by Delacroix), of the drawings by Goethe (some of the poet’s landscapes seem to be works by Poussin or Claude Lorraine), of the drawings of Victor Hugo, of Baudelaire...

Is it possible – I thought – that in art today all must be done badly, ever worse; is it possible that I must be the “monomachos” *par excellence*?