

A PORTRAIT BY TINTORETTO¹⁸

I have been living in Florence, guest of an antiquarian friend of mine, for several months. He owns a painting by Tintoretto representing a young admiral standing by a window, dressed in cuirass, his left hand on his sword-hilt, his helmet on the ground. Framed in the window, one can see a distant naval battle with collisions of galleys on troubled waters, broken masts falling amid the blazing and smoking of cannons, in a word, general destruction. The painting is in the antiquarian's office. When I am in that office where I go sometimes to look over some of the substantial monographs or to consult one of the numerous books on art that enrich my friend's library, it amuses me to see how that portrait is seen by the people who come there. This varies greatly according to whether they are intellectuals or not.

Intellectuals, that is critics, aesthetes, writers, art historians and people who, lacking a profession, belong to the rank of intellectuals always look in the same way and never changing as if it were a secret order passed along among them. They always look immediately at the battle scene as if the figure, which is the most important part of the painting, was non-existent. But when the spectators are not intellectuals, but rather, simple people without manias and with normally functioning brains, they look first at the portrait, at the figure of the man, with regard to which one hears them remark: "What an expression, he seems to be alive!" or: "Look at that cuirass, how one feels the metal!" and other reflections of the sort that are true and sincere. Any person of superior intelligence, who is normal and understands painting, would do as these non-intellectuals do: first look at the figure, which is the principal part of the painting, and then at the battle, which is secondary. Why then do intellectuals act differently and look at once and solely at the battle as if the rest did not exist, as if the old Venetian master had painted his picture not to represent the figure and give it life on canvas by means of accomplished painting with excellent qualities, but rather to amuse the intellectuals of our century with the representation of a clash of galleys executed with rapid strokes? This is what we will now try to explain.

The masters of remote epochs used to define and finish the foreground of a painting, whereas everything on the second plane was executed in a more summary manner and still more so in the background.

In Tintoretto's portrait the battle, seen in the distance through the window, is also far more summarily painted than the figure in the foreground. This summary quality of painting attracts intellectuals' attention causing them to forget the figure. The intellectuals look at the battle rather than at the figure not because they prefer it, not because it sincerely pleases them more; they look at it because it is the most summarily painted, the most sketchy part of the painting; they associate it naively with the roguery of modern painting and believe instinctively that that part of the painting, precisely because it is less well done, must be, according to them, the most interesting, the best painted, that it is "better painting" than the rest. One of the many stupidities filling the brain of those who concern themselves with art is the idea that for a painting to be good, it must not be finished.

There is another reason for which the intellectuals look at once and above all at the battle in this painting. Among the many idiocies with which the brains of intellectuals are stuffed, with regard to painting, is the one that a normal, well drawn and well painted portrait resembling its subject, with the face and body's shapes all in place, must be banal and that a portrait can only be looked at if everything is upside down, without design

18 G. de Chirico, *Un ritratto di Tintoretto*, in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 118-121. Published in English here for the first time.

or shape and resemble a bundle of rags rather than a human figure as are the faces and figures by Matisse, Modigliani and other “moderns”. Naturally, if intellectuals had even the slightest faculty of reason they would understand that in Tintoretto’s time, Matisse and Modigliani’s systems did not exist and if by some miracle they had, they would have had very little probability of success. But unfortunately for them, intellectuals are deprived of this faculty and their minds are only capable of collecting current formulas, banalities and catchwords of their milieu and thus avoid looking at the figure and go into ecstasy over the battle.

There is a third reason why they look at this before all else. In the battle the intellectuals sense an adventure, a drama, something that, should the occasion present itself, could serve them as a pretext to pose as intelligent raconteurs; in a word, to make literature. But this is not possible with a portrait. They see nothing in it; they see nothing of the *other* adventure, the other infinitely more mysterious and profound drama than what the subject of the naval battle offers them. They do not see the adventure and the drama of great and beautiful painting. But the intellectuals see nothing in a painting beyond its subject. They do not understand painting, hence the adventure and drama contained in the portrait’s painterly qualities does not exist for them. Intellectuals do not know that in the works of a painter the only things that count and that will save him in the centuries to come are precisely the drama and adventure of great painterly quality.

More about Intellectuals

The intellectual of today cultivates modern painting’s ugliness, nullity and roguery with the passionate love of a horticulturist who waters and fertilizes the earth around a delicate plant he fears losing. But the love of intellectuals for the foolish style of modern painting is not disinterested, nor was it born out of idealistic reasons. Their obstinate defence of all that odd painting which will remain as deplorable documentation of the incommensurable artistic decadence of our time, this obstinate defence, I say, has a very precise scope and a very definite aim: it is they themselves, their personal interests, their own comfort that the intellectuals are defending with such pertinacity. They need this painting to be able to speak of painting, as they understand nothing about painting. They need these so-called modern pictures to be able to confuse the mind of their neighbour creating thus favourable conditions for what they say and write. They see with terror the arising of a kind of painting that is beautiful, serious, clear, virile, strong, of a painting capable of affirming itself on its own merits, a painting that to be observed, admired, respected and bought has no need of obscure discourses, of pseudo-intelligent chatter, or all that empty, pretentious, hysterical and also often falsely and hypocritically lyrical rhetoric used so abundantly by intellectuals who have taken upon themselves the sad and ridiculous task of defenders, sustainers and exegetes of so-called “modern painting”.

Intellectuals know that the progressive regeneration of painting would bring an end to much of their rhetoric. They are not capable of understanding a painting of great quality and in it they see proof of their own incapacity. As the donkey feels the approach of a thunderstorm, they feel obscurely that valour and strength are on the other side; that adventure and the future are signalling from another shore. Then they get agitated and similarly to certain women and children, become nasty. The feeling of revenge ripens in their hearts. By sustaining so-called “modern” painting, they strive to diminish the importance of the other, which is its opposite. By sustaining ugly painting they hope to hinder in some way the inevitable advance of beautiful painting.