

ASSORTMENT OF TRUTHS¹⁹*The first Admirers of Bad Painting*

With the death of Courbet (1877), the last painter who used refined paint substance disappeared; his material was not however as good as that of Delacroix, for Courbet had begun overindulging in the use of oleo-resinous substances and less in the indispensable quantities of glue, water, tempera and emulsion and of emplastical oil. Nevertheless, Courbet's material was still good and had the fluid, plastic strength, depth and preciousness, luminosity and transparency that characterise the fine painterly material of earlier painters, so different from that used today.

Thus with the death of Courbet the use of quality paint came to an end and hence the love and understanding of good painting among the public, critics, art lovers and collectors diminished and finally disappeared completely.

From that time on paintings were executed with poor-quality material and consequently could not impart the profound joy, the exceptional joy and the rare and complete pleasure that the contemplation of a painting executed with a beautiful material substance of paint provides. There was, it is true, the case of Böcklin who died in 1901, a quarter of a century after Courbet, but Böcklin was interesting principally for his lyricism and imagination, whilst the precious quality of his painting material was noticed by few. His was an isolated case amid increasing mediocrity and poor quality painting of his epoch. The case of Böcklin was so isolated and so misunderstood that there was even a legend, especially among people who were naive and provincial and had been skilfully misled by French Impressionist propaganda that said he was an extremely bad painter. With exception of Böcklin, all painters after Courbet have painted with poor materials and hence have painted more or less badly. I say more or less, for paintings by an artist like Hans Thoma, for example, are certainly better painted and of a nobler material substance than those of someone like Léon Bonnat.

Amid all the dullness that the reign of poor materials created in painting, people who were sincerely interested in art had a sense that something essential to painting had disappeared and that the divine flame of great art had gone out. Many of those who still had a true passion for painting concentrated their attention and love on the external aspect of paintings which, due to the exaggerated deficiencies and plastic and colouristic anomalies – let this be clear: rather than their painterly quality –, distinguished themselves among the mass of general production. It was to paintings of this kind that these well-intentioned men dedicated all their love and admiration, striving to find, all else lacking, some spiritual quality in them. In fact, it was like a man who had lost a lovely woman to whom he was deeply enamoured trying to find consolation in another, far less beautiful woman (perhaps even ugly), affording her all his care and affection, whilst theorising, striving and arguing within himself to find in her inexistent moral and spiritual qualities.

Thus were created the reputations of artists like Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, etc...

In reality the first admirers of bad painting are to be excused for they were too near to the cataclysmic moment and thus had not the perspective and distance needed in order to judge such an important event. Perhaps not even I, notwithstanding my exceptional acumen and intelligence, would have been able at that

19 G. de Chirico, *Assortimento di verità*, published with the title *Miscellanea di alcune verità* in "L'Illustrazione Italiana", illustrated with *Self-portrait in Torero Costume*, Milan 19 July 1942, p. 60; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 122-127. Published in English here for the first time. The final passage, *Pregghiera del mattino del vero pittore (Morning Prayer of the True Painter)* is translated by W. Bohn from de Chirico's French version *Prière du Matin du Vrai Peintre* and forms part of *The Collected Poems of Giorgio de Chirico* published in English for the first time in this periodical.

time to make the extraordinary discoveries I am making now; nor could I have judged, as I do today, the true impact of the painterly nullity, bad faith, imbecility and immorality, imparted through the painting of Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

But after these first admirers, came the great rogues such as Vollard and company who with an obstinacy and intelligence worthy of nobler aims imposed ugly painting upon the world.

The Mania for the Primitives

When critics want to make a comparison between modernistic and classical painting they always drag in Giotto and Masaccio. From this one might deduce that our good Aristarchs probably think that Italian painting came to a halt with these two painters. But then we ask, were Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese and Tiepolo not painters? Or perhaps our critics consider that they were not sufficiently spiritual because they drew and painted too well? It is also true that to compare even from afar a modern painter with someone like Tintoretto for instance or Tiepolo, one would have to find a painter endowed with special talent for painting and who knows his craft well. The critics do of course realise that it is not easy nowadays to find such individuals and even if it were possible it would scarcely suit their convenience, for the comparison between a good modern painter and someone like Tiepolo or Tintoretto would leave no room for hermetic spiritual observations, without mentioning the fact that never having understood anything about painting they would be at a loss as to what to say. Thus they prefer comparing bad painters to Giotto and Masaccio and let themselves delve into pseudo-spiritual literature. Now we ask ourselves, what affinity can there be between extravagant modern paintings and Giotto and Masaccio? Exterior facts and deceptive appearances alone make such comparisons possible.

In periods of the full blossoming of painting, the Primitives were never mentioned; not that they were despised, on the contrary, their contribution to art was well-known and in a far clearer way than it is today. In the hierarchical order of painterly values they were given their just place and at the time there were no profiteers, snobs, impotent and agitated intellectuals using the Primitives as a rescue board to save themselves, in order to be able to speak about painting in a hermetic and cunning manner without ever having understood a thing about it. Great artists such as Delacroix and Géricault, who in speaking of art cited Titian, Tintoretto, Rubens and Jordaens, and not Giotto and Masaccio; and it seems to us that Delacroix and Géricault drew and painted somewhat better than their colleagues of today and from a spiritual point of view are also considerably superior to all our Giotto and Masaccio lovers.

But in epochs of plastic weakness, periods like ours of profound artistic decadence, primitive painters are the order of the day. Especially in Italy one cannot open an art magazine, read an article on painting without finding Giotto or Masaccio; the former has also been served to us in the cinema with the accompaniment of modern music if I am not mistaken. Why does one not make instead a film on the works of Tintoretto to the accompaniment of music by Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi? I think such a film would have a certain success especially among people who do not have complete collections of “Verve” and “Minotaure” in their library.

There are also other primitives with D’Annunzian names about which our intellectuals and modernists become positively gluttonous: Duccio da Buoninsegna, Piero della Francesca, the divine Piero called by some simply “Piero” as if he were their cat.

In Paris, I remember, in the circles of snobs and homosexuals it was the fashion to use the first name and omit the surname of a celebrity of the moment. Thus for example one heard “Jean” or “Marie” and would have to understand that it was Jean Cocteau and Marie Laurencin they were referring to.

If by some miracle Giotto and Masaccio returned to the earth this is what they would say to our intellectuals and our modernising painters, looking them straight in the eye: “Oh, you ingenuous provincials, foolish and ignorant of all semblance to art, the false admiration, the incense offered does not move nor flatter us, but indeed were it not for the small value we set upon it we would feel deeply insulted.

“We know very well, we know perfectly well, that what you pretend to admire in our works and what you painters cunningly try to take advantage of in order to mask your bad painting, and you, intellectuals, to be able to take up with ease your pose at intelligence; what you pretend to admire in our work are our imperfections which we were ever striving to correct, because we are workers and real artists and not the pretenders and melancholy buffoons you are.

“We also tried to learn and progress notwithstanding the limited possibilities of our epoch. Had we been born later, had we had the great, exceptional fortune which is yours to live after such masters as Tintoretto, Michelangelo and Veronese, to name only a few of Italy’s great, without mentioning those of other lands, had we had before our eyes the grand sight of Greek and Roman sculpture of which the museums of Italy and Europe are full, you can be assured that we would not have had those very imperfections that you pretend to admire. But our consciences as painters and Italians are at peace for we have always worked with the greatest ardour and stroven to make progress in our art, to bring it to a higher state of perfection and thus to pay tribute to our country. But you, with the examples of Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese before your eyes, you waste your time in degrading painting, in aping the trite painterly decadence of your neighbours from the West, ten, twenty, and even thirty or forty years later. The worst of all is that this is taking place in Italy, in the country which for centuries was the master of the world in plastic power and painterly beauty”.

Thus Giotto and Masaccio would have spoken to the intellectual modernists.

The Envy of Critics

One must not forget that many of those who practice the scarcely laborious profession of art critique are generally failed writers and, in the most serious cases, even failed painters. This explains their incurable envy, the immense and inexorable contempt that fills them when they are before the work of living artists of exceptional talent and exceptional painterly strength. This also explains the zeal and obstinacy with which they praise and exalt mediocrity and nullity hoping thus to create confusion and at the same time to cast a shadow on those whose presence and work prevents them from sleeping and impedes their digestion.

Horror for the Well-painted Female Nude

A very curious phenomenon that can be observed in so-called modernist circles is the diffidence, the aversion and even horror, which the moderns, both painters and intellectuals, feel or pretend to feel for well drawn and well painted female nudes executed by a living artist. However, such an aversion disappears before male nudes, even when well drawn and painted.

A female nude is only bearable to these refined idiots when it is absolutely deformed, does not look anything like a human body and is of a colour that would make an adult ostrich vomit.

This way of seeing was imposed in Paris by critics, art dealers, aesthetes, collectors and homosexual painters more than twenty years ago in snobby modernist circles. Today in Italy there are modern individuals, poor spiritless brainless provincials, who even though they are not homosexuals, make grimaces when looking at a well-painted female nude, acting out this ridiculous comedy in total ignorance of its causes and origins.

The Morning Prayer by the True Painter

Lord, allow my profession as a painter – To continually improve itself. – Lord allow me to make great progress in the quality of my paint – Until the last day of my life – Give me, Lord, more intelligence, more force, health and willpower – So I can continue to improve my emulsions and my colour mixtures – So they can always give my paint more transparency and density – Still more splendour and more fluidity. – Finally, Lord, help me – And give me more than anything the inspiration – To solve the material problems – Of my work as a painter – So I can return to painting – The lustre that for almost a century – It has lost, – Help me, Lord, to give back that lustre – While solving painting's material problems – Since metaphysical and spiritual problems are today the concern of critics and intellectuals. *Amen.*