

A DISCOURSE ON THE MATERIAL SUBSTANCE OF PAINT²²

*And the favour of the chaste Muse sings
The sacred source in the dark valley
But who will draw upon with pure hand
From the sacred spring of ancient art?
Eduard Mörike*

The discovery of a new material substance of paint which reconnects to the great painting of the past (in such classical painting I include all works of value painted in Italy and in Europe from Raphael, to Delacroix, Courbet, Böcklin and Carnovali); the discovery, I say, of such a substance was made a few years ago by Giorgio de Chirico. This discovery came about after 25 years of research, experiments, work and meditation. He has obtained results today that for our era and for the confusion and ignorance in which painting finds itself, without exaggerating one could define as stupefying. He can therefore not only announce this discovery, but consider it his sacred duty to announce this finding to all painters and men of good faith that we hope still exist in the world.

This discovery will allow painting, starting with Italian painting, and then that of other countries, to enter into the light of a true Renaissance.

In the present text, I will deal with the material substance of paint and the discovery that was made by Giorgio de Chirico.

For some time now, in “modernist” artistic and intellectual circles, one often hears the word “material”. Although, the majority of people who pronounce this word do not have a clue what they’re really talking about. Of course the body with which a painting is made today is a material substance from a physical point of view, given that on earth every concrete and tangible body is made of matter, but the matter with which modern paintings are made differentiates itself from true painting material like a rock from a gemstone.

In explaining the material substance of paint, I fully realise that the reader will only be able to follow up to the point that his intellectual and intuitive capacities allow him. I will endeavour to make clear to men of good will what the word “material” means in painting and how without this material a painting is not a work of art but merely a decorative object, or in the case of an invented painting, the value of the image resides in its spiritual content.

In order to be a work of art, a painting must be painted very well and the fine quality of the paint depends completely on the material substance with which it was executed. This material, which constitutes the substance of painting, is composed of two elements, which are equally important and absolutely inseparable: physical substance and metaphysical substance. These two elements complete each other reciprocally and when they are of a superior quality, create a masterpiece by way of their absolute harmony.

It is by means of talent that a painter feels and understands the quality of the body or mass needed to create a work of art. It is also this talent that teaches the artist how to use this body and mass which, when mixed with colour, forms the physical matter of the painting. It is also through talent that the artist searches, finds and perfects the different substances that compose the precious weave of the paint. We must also point

22 G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla materia pittorica*, in “Il Corriere Padano”, Ferrara 5 April 1942; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 150-159. Published in English for the first time in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 5/6, 2006, pp. 541-547.

out that it is precisely the metaphysical element of painting that provokes the creation of a physical substance that corresponds to its necessities, a material that permits the metaphysical element to manifest itself in the painted form desired.

If one wants to make a comparison between the phenomenon of the material substance of paint and the phenomena of man, one could define the metaphysical side of material substance as corresponding to the individual's soul or intellect, while the physical matter would correspond to the body. Just as a soul without a body does not belong to our world, as it is invisible and distant to us, in order to gain contact with the earth and reveal itself to us, a soul must unite with a body, which will be the link between it and us. In the same way, in order for the metaphysical element of painting to express its true substance to men, it must make use of a physical material, which for us is visible and concrete. In classical painting the two elements of painterly substance complemented each other and developed in a parallel way over the course of the centuries to arrive at the perfection attained by Rubens, Titian, Velázquez and other masters.

We will now try to shed light on another argument. Today, the so-called "intellectuals" often pronounce judgment in which recrimination is afforded to painters whom they deem have too much skill or of being craftsmen and of having nothing other than trade. This opinion, often expressed or written, is completely lacking in good sense, because in painting skill without talent could not exist and the mastery of craft possessed by a painter is in perfect equilibrium with the degree of his talent. In the majority of cases, what these intellectuals call craft is not true craft, but rather a bad surrogate composed on the one side by the idiocy and mediocrity of the painter and on the other by the idiocy and ignorance of the spectator. These intellectuals most probably consider painting a frivolous thing of little importance if they think it unnecessary for a painter to know his craft and, on the contrary, that it is a defect to have too much knowledge, while they never reprimand their surgeons or dentists for having too much knowhow. Although, painters without knowhow are just as noxious for man's spirit as ignorant doctors would be for his body.

But let us return to the topic of the material substance of paint. First of all, in order to avoid a misunderstanding, I must make it clear that the metaphysical aspect in what we call an invented painting, which is a phenomenon of our epoch, has nothing at all to do with the metaphysical aspect of paint, that is, the metaphysics of the material substance of paint.

Every true work of art has a profoundly metaphysical side to it that intelligent men feel through intuition. It is the metaphysics of creation, metaphysics that puts us in the presence of the genius and that reveals to us the existence of Universal and Superior Talent that, by means of a chosen man, creates masterpieces.

Now, I must explain and clearly specify the difference existing between the metaphysics of great painting and the metaphysics of the subject or of the idea contained in an invented painting. An invented painting has a spiritual value. It is a painting that the artist makes after a revelation occurs. Someone opened the heavy, thick curtain that surrounds our earth and separates it from the Universe. The curtain was opened only slightly and for a brief instant. But this sufficed for an artist to have a very strong, surprising vision of a world that is beyond our limited knowledge, a world distant from our small, familiar Earth.

The moment of revelation had by an artist is a moment in which he managed to see something that is invisible to others; it is the moment in which he was able to see a world that exists outside the conceptions of thought and human reason. It is an unexplainable world, of which our brain can see nothing, which the artist must then reveal to us, offering our spirit, our intelligence and our eyes, an astonishing vision of this unknown world.

It is a superior instinct that drives man to share the spirit's wealth with other mortals and the painter who

has had a true revelation then draws for us the image of those things that are strange and inconceivable to our logic and which are not the fruit of his imagination, but rather the faithful image of a world different from ours seen by a chosen man and which no human fantasy could manage to create.

The name “invented painting” given to this kind of painting does not sound right to me. The artist who had a revelation and thus managed to see a metaphysical world, which he then expressed by means of an image painted on canvas, did not invent anything. He only managed to see what others do not see and understand what others do not understand. In this case, the merit, or rather the artist’s importance, consists in the fact that he was chosen by a Superior Will to widen the limits of the world known to our spirit and as such has helped us to penetrate slightly the mysteries of the Universe; mysteries the knowledge of which is forbidden to us.

Painterly material is not an indispensable element in paintings such as these, which are erroneously called “invented”, while they could have been given the name “revealed paintings”, which would be more exact. The execution of these revealed paintings can merely consist in the accurate and correct tracing of the image, given that these paintings are not paintings as such but rather manifestations of images and spiritual ideas. Their value consists in their intellectual content and not in the material substance of the paint with which they are made.

Revelation is not tied to Universal Talent, nor does it have a direct relation to art. The metaphysical aspect of a painting with a spiritual content, rather than a material content, does not come from that which we call artistic creation, rather, its metaphysical aspect derives only from the idea and the subject.

The metaphysical world revealed to us in such a painting is a non-human world, a world outside of ours, a world too distant from our feelings and desires; the contemplation of such a world does not give us the joy or pleasure that art provokes in us.

I will now try to explain the metaphysics of artistic creation. The existence of a Universal and Divine Talent explains the phenomenon of art on earth. Great painting is the fruit of inspiration given to the artist by this Superior Talent and it is also the result of serious and difficult work carried out by men of value. But how many men especially today believe and hope to create, if they so desire, works of art! This is why we see today so many people who have chosen the profession of art, without being true artists.

Every profession demands certain capacities in order to be correctly exercised. Through will and labour, men manage to learn professions that serve man’s needs, whilst in order to be an artist one must have the consent of Universal Talent, without which man cannot make works that have true artistic value. Such consent and the collaboration between man and Superior Talent, which could also be called Divine or Cosmic, give man the possibility of creating art.

The special thing that allows us to understand the superiority of a true artist compared to another, we habitually call talent.

The special thing that indicates the value of artwork to us and that gives us pleasure and joy, we call inspiration.

That certain hyperphysical and superior thing that we feel intensely in a work of art, or in an artist, we call genius.

But few men realise that the phenomenon of art is a manifestation of Universal Talent of which we men can be nothing other than faithful and grateful servants.

It is the influence of Universal Talent that drives the artist to do serious and constant work. It is with the help of Universal Talent that he progresses and perfects himself, and finally, it is in being in communion with a Superior Talent that gives the artist joy and inspiration, that gives him happiness in a human creation which

is at the same time a supernatural creation, because it is superior to the man who has created it.

It is a Universal Force that helped man in artistic creation; but he also contributed with all the strength that his spirit and hands could muster. The artist is satisfied.

True painting offers the artist who makes it, as well as men who look upon it, a greater feeling of satisfaction than that offered by what we have called a spiritual or invented painting, executed after a revelation. Because true painting, pure and complete art, is closer to us, to our feelings and to our desires, it gives us a pleasant sensation, a feeling of warmth that comes from a life that will never extinguish itself, from an immortality that emanates from such a painting and which we feel subconsciously.

The material substance of paint, which is the body of great painting, possesses a deeply metaphysical side, and the metaphysical element of this substance is a mysterious and sacred phenomenon that puts us face to face with Universal Talent and allows us to see a better world, a world which consoles us of the miseries and the banalities of man; a superior, eternal and perfect world, where genius reigns.

What is the physical material of painting? What are the substances that compose the physical fabric of the paint seen in the works of the ancient masters? It is a great mystery that no treaty on painting explains to us. Treatises on painting are full of literature and aestheticisms, but when dealing with actual technique they give incomplete, vague explanations, which are impossible to apply to real, concrete work. The secret of how to paint can only be revealed through laborious and continuous research of talented painters. It is a kind of talent that manifests itself by searching for and finding the right physical matter that will make a return to true painting possible. For a connoisseur, the difference existing between classical painting and modern painting is evident. This difference consists principally in the "quality" of the paint that makes up its physical fabric.

The material substance of paint in classical paintings is beautiful as a body unto itself and is at the same time easy to work with. This is demonstrated to us by the perfect execution of these paintings in which the artist's ability would not have been enough. By carefully looking at and comparing an classical painting with a modern painting, we can see without a doubt that the physical matter with which the ancients painted has an entirely different body from that seen in modern paintings.

The body with which modern paintings are made is composed of simple elements like paint used straight out of the tube or diluted with a spirit or oil to make it more liquid. In the end, as a chemical substance, this is oil paint that has dried. In order to make myself clear, I will say that the physical matter of modern painting is exactly the same as that used by house painters to put colour on apartment walls and doors.

Everyone knows that to paint a door well it is necessary to cover the surface with numerous layers of paint. These layers have to be applied gradually. After the first coat has been given it must be allowed to dry before a second coat is applied and then the second coat must dry before a third is given. Since one must wait for the paint to dry before applying a successive layer, one understands that oil paint is not easy to handle and that if it is not dry, the paintbrush takes the paint away from the underlying layer.

With these observations, I would like to make it clear to the reader that it is practically impossible to execute a painting with such material. In order to paint well, one must be able to model, draw, blend and shade the paint, that is, work with ease, without the physical nature of the substance working against the painter's effort and obstructing his work and without the material losing its beauty once finished.

The task of painting consists in the creation of a fabric that weaves and plays with the brush used to apply the material in layers on a surface.

In oil painting, or more exactly in the modern way of painting, the problem of drying is not resolved

but rather is avoided by modern painters through the use of absorbent surfaces. By soaking up the paint, an absorbent surface allows the painter to paint continuously and with greater ease, as the successive strokes of paint stick to the paint that has been absorbed by a surface prepared with gesso. But this is only a surrogate of real work, as are the other procedures used by modern painters to steer clear of the inconveniences that oil paint presents, procedures in which varnishes as well as oil and turpentine-based dryers are employed.

The grand characteristic of beautiful matter, of matter that is surely the same as that of the classical masters, consists in the fact that the brushstrokes cling perfectly to a surface that is still completely wet, they adhere to it and, I say, remain firm and fluid, without taking the soft underlying paint away.

In conclusion I will say that in modern painting, as I have already had occasion to note, the paint is the base and very substance of the painted body. With this modern system, the resulting material makes the fabric of the paint dull, dry, ugly and inconsistent. The enormous difference between the material of the classical painters and that of modern painters consists in the fact that the substance of classical painters is strong, dense and brilliant, full of beautiful vigour and robust fluidity, while that of the modern painter is poor, weak, empty, tired and at the same time, rigid and dry.

With the classical masters, paint only served as colouring and not as the principal substance that composed the fabric of the paint. In great painting, pigment was added in small quantities to the mass with which the artist painted and was added, I repeat, uniquely to colour this mass, while the mass itself was composed of various elements that when mixed one with the other formed a kind of pomade or unguent, an emplastic substance that was dense and unctuous.

Various qualities were demanded of the emplastic substance that classical painters used: it had to be malleable, fluid and elastic. It also had to work with fresh matter, that is, be able to gather each brushstroke, to hold it tight while remaining fluid, without mixing with or taking the soft underlying matter away.

The emplastic substance was meant to help the artist paint and the quality of the material was meant to resolve the physical and technical difficulties of painting.

The work done with emulsion and emplastic oils rendered the fabric of the paint precious, luminous, transparent and at the same time dense, robust and resistant.

This allowed one to achieve a unified surface, despite the great thickness of the impasto.

All of this shows that in order to execute a good painting one must be in possession of certain physical means.

The mass classical artist's painted with, in which colour was added only as a colouring element, was composed of different elements emulsified together. This emulsion is the painting's original physical material in its original liquid state, just like gold is liquid before being transformed into an object, or crystal before becoming a goblet or jug. In order to better explain the meaning of liquid matter, I will give the example of Sèvres or Rosenthal porcelain, whose fineness and preciousness are known worldwide. It is a special composition of the mass that bestows these porcelains their fineness and exceptional beauty after being worked and fired.

The same phenomenon occurs in painting. The liquid or rather, emplastic body with which one paints must be composed of substances, which, once the work is completed, form a beautiful and precious fabric of paint. The material substance of paint must be beautiful through and through, like an object made of solid gold and not only on the surface like a gold-plated object. It is evident that a beautiful substance must be applied on top of an impermeable surface, to allow the matter to remain on the surface with all its elements unaltered, unlike paint on absorbent canvases where the best part of which is absorbed into the priming.

In high quality painting, the brushstroke is not absorbed by the canvas but adheres to it by a sucking effect, and remains blended and precise where the painter placed it. Its material must also allow for perfect modelling and full fusion of tones and hues when required.

It is only by being in possession of such a substance, the quality of which allows for the perfect execution of a painting, that the creation of a beautiful and solid fabric of paint is possible.

After long years of experience and research Giorgio de Chirico discovered a material like that used by the great masters, the substance of which is a flowing matter that is not liquid oil paint. It has been a few years now that the well-merited fruits of this discovery have been enriching his work and continue to enrich his work.

Firstly, he had to identify the very principal of this flowing matter, the principal of its emulsion and then an oily emplastic substance which, when worked, allows one to compose the material substance of paint. He then had to find the elements or substances of which this matter had to be composed. This research has been long and difficult but at the same time extremely interesting and passionate.

The positive results of this research constitute the true discovery in painting of this century. It is the recovery of the tradition of the great masters, of the tradition that was interrupted around the middle of last century and which caused painting technique to become a true mystery.

Today, when the “intellectuals” and the art critics speak of the “mystery” of certain paintings, they use the right word but with the wrong connotation. There is mystery in painting but one must not look for it in the subject and images of a certain kind of modern painting, because this mystery resides in the physical and metaphysical substance in works painted by the classical masters.

Only when the painters of today will have understood this truth, that is, the truth that painting's value and interest depends uniquely on its quality and not its subject and style, only then will we be able to have an artistic renaissance and will painting once more become an art.

The frenetic search for a subject (which, by the way, the little demon of modernism has exhausted for some time now) and of a special style must be substituted with a “frenetic search for quality”.

A Flemish artist discovered the material substance of paint in ancient times and an Italian brought this discovery to Italy. Today this substance, which has been long forgotten, was newly discovered by an Italian. Let us hope that the painters of Europe and America will manage to understand the importance of such a discovery and that those who have talent and who truly love the art of painting will abandon the easy road and will come and learn of this discovery, to then bring it to their countries and thus provoke the Renaissance of Great Painting.