

## PORTRAITS<sup>23</sup>

In the golden age of painting a portrait was a work of art. Painters produced highly artistic pictures, paintings of superior quality, creations that were true art.

In those happy days, painting enthusiasts enjoyed a highly developed artistic sense, which they inherited naturally from their ancestors, and a sense of refinement resulting from true culture.

Artists and art lovers were on the same intellectual level, as they possessed the same lucidity and superiority of spirit. Direct contact existed between the creators and the spectators of art, as their love and comprehension of the stupendous and magnificent phenomenon that is art, bound them together.

Today, painting is no longer a great art. The painting of our time is decoration or fanciful imagery and what is known as modern painting is a frantic search for originality and false aestheticism. The real reason behind the alienation from true art seen in modern artists nowadays is found in the impossibility of superior artistic plastic creation. It is creative helplessness that causes modern artists to look for subterfuges and surrogates of art. As a result, we see monotony and profound tedium emanating from innumerable paintings that are essentially always of the same poor quality, in which one can but very rarely find a spark of talent.

The modern art enthusiast is perfectly suited to the artistic level of our time. He is, if possible, even further removed from art than the modern painter. The modern art lover does not even suppose that a painting should be a work of art before all else; he thinks of painting as representation and that its value depends upon the subject matter alone. It is thus with compliance that today's art lover has accepted sad and muggy landscapes, nonexistent and empty still lifes, and formless figures. Modern art enthusiasts content themselves with an entire range of extremely unattractive paintings. Such works, having nothing to say on their own, are supported by an entire literature that has found a way to interpret them using terms such as spirituality, purity, sincerity and an endless quantity of other words, which, used with regard to a painting, mean absolutely nothing.

Let us make it clear once and for all to people interested in art that a painting cannot be sincere, pure or spiritual; it can only be either well painted or badly painted, have artistic value or not, and it is precisely the quality of the paint that determines whether a painting is a work of art or not.

In this article I shall speak of portraiture.

Portraits painted over the last three-quarters of a century can be placed into two categories; to the first belong academic or society portraits; to the second, the so-called modern or avant-garde portraits. Academic or society portraits painted by official artists or by portrait painters frequenting high social milieus are naturally much more numerous than the modern ones, due to the fact that modern portraits are even incapable of satisfying an artistically uncultivated public as that of today. In using the word "uncultivated" I mean both the middleclass and the ultra-snob.

Generally speaking, people prefer to see their face reproduced in a more or less normal way.

Only a very few "intellectuals" have had the courage to sacrifice their terrestrial form on the altar of modernism. Their heroic sacrifice has given way to wan, flat, intellectual interpretations of modern or avant-garde portraits, of which luckily there are few.

---

23 G. de Chirico, *Ritratti*, in "L'Illustrazione Italiana", illustrated with *Portrait of Countess Edda Ciano Mussolini*, Milan 10 May 1942, pp. 451-452; republished signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 160-165. Published in English in *Giorgio de Chirico – Portraiture: Figure and Form*, exhibition catalogue edited by K. Robinson, Fortezza poliziana di Montepulciano, Maretti Editore, Falciano 2013, pp. 178-181.

Academic portraits contain less so-called spirituality, but in compensation they resemble the sitter more closely. They are less aesthetical but are drawn much better. The defect of these portraits consists in the fact that they are not works of art, for they are entirely lacking in artistic interest and painterly beauty. The main reason for the unartistic quality of academic and society portraits is the inferior quality of the material with which they are painted. The poor quality of the painterly substance is the principle difference between an academic or society portrait of our time and a beautiful old portrait.

With regard to the painting material, I have treated the question in an article entitled *A Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint*. But I must again remind the reader of something I wrote earlier on (and it can never be sufficiently repeated), which regards the difference existing between the material of a beautiful great master painting and that of a modern painting, which is as vast as the difference between a precious stone and a rock.

At the end of the last century and the beginning of ours, academic and society painters such as Bonnat, Sargent, Zuloaga, Boldini, Lazlô and others, had a certain aptitude but the paintings they made were not good, due to the bad quality of the paint itself. Their paintings will not resist the test of time, which is the best judge of real or false value. Who was the man who first spoke these words, which are so true: Time puts everything in place? Time, the great consoler, the great adviser of man who is incapable of living, creating and understanding without its help.

After the middleclass became the principal buyers of artwork, painting degenerated into decoration and gaudy imagery, whilst portraiture became the mere representation of the sitter who had commissioned the painting, a work without artistic value.

Portraiture, for a very good reason, has an extremely delicate position in contemporary painting. A portrait is very difficult to paint and the good or bad elements of its execution are evident and easily verifiable even for the layman. As I have already said, most people when commissioning their portraits prefer a faithful likeness to a so-called spiritual interpretation.

People, by their very nature, are too attached to their physical aspect to be willing to sacrifice it to literature or to the fashions of intellectualism. Even the most fervent mystics and apostles of modernism take it badly and are often quite displeased when their theories are applied to representations of themselves. This is why the majority of people who wish to have their portrait painted turn to academic or society painters who make portraits that resemble the sitter rather than turning to modern or avant-garde painters who only give them aesthetic interpretations.

Naturally this inclination has greatly irritated intellectual purists who, disgusted by the lack of understanding of spirituality, treat ordinary portraits that resemble the sitter with profound contempt.

In their discourses on art, people who intellectualise (but who at the same time have firmly decided never to commission their own portrait), insist with implacable conviction that resemblance in portraits is useless, that it is even a notion that has been surpassed and can only be requested by the foolish and the ignorant.

Modern painters fully agree with this opinion, as it is indeed convenient for them to do so; whereas academic and society artists say – with good reason – that this contempt for resemblance arises from the incapacity of modern painters to succeed in creating a true likeness.

The affirmation modern painters make that a portrait must be a spiritual interpretation of a person is only a way of getting around the difficulty of executing a portrait with likeness.

Naturally, I do not accept the idea that spirituality in painting is an invention of the moderns.

Spirituality has always existed in great painting and is a phenomenon that is naturally inseparable from Art. It is a phenomenon that assumes many forms, given the variety and complexity of the phenomenon of the spirit itself.

The intention, so to say, that the moderns have of detaching themselves from reality and replacing it by something else, is an effort as useless as it is absurd. Reality cannot exist in painting because in general it does not exist on earth. The Universe is solely our own representation. The uniformity with which this representation or vision is reflected on the human brain depends entirely upon the uniformity of the intellectual capacities of men in general, who make up the mass of humanity. Consequently, it is natural that an artist of talent, a man who distinguishes himself from the masses, must substitute the conventional vision of things with a vision belonging to him alone, a vision that is more perfect, created by his exceptional ability. These new and different visions born from the deeper comprehension that artists have for the things that surround us, these visions and exceptional representations, have little by little over the course of centuries, influenced and coloured the common representations and visions of men creating, in this way, civilisations.

The “mass” of humanity is made up of men who from father to son have passed on a conventional representation of world. This accepted and traditional comprehension of the phenomena of the Universe is gradually modified and transformed by men of genius who show us other aspects of things and ideas as yet unbeknown to us. The resemblance found in a portrait depends on the preciseness and correctness of its drawing and I am resolutely convinced that portraits painted by the great masters, even if they are masterpieces (which means that they are the highest expression of spirituality), perfectly resemble the people portrayed.

When it is well drawn, a portrait must be the exact image of the person who posed for it, and at the same time it must be a work of art, meaning that it must have the elevated painterly quality generally found in all good paintings.

A portrait requires a great knowledge of drawing. The slightest error in drawing changes the expression and even the features of the face. Painting a portrait is a difficult endeavour demanding the use of a painterly substance and materials that are far superior to the canvases prepared by the kilometre and paint sold in tin tubes. Painting a face is a difficult and complicated task that requires the means the old masters employed and which allow the artist to carry out his work with the highest level of perfection, the very memory of which is lost today. It is for this reason that so many modern artists dedicate themselves to still life and landscape painting. But these are not the still life of Chardin or Jordaens, or landscapes like those executed by Titian, Poussin or Rubens.

As I have already noted in my writings on art, it was a question of fate that at the same time the middleclass became the main art buyers (taking the place of aristocrats and individuals of exceptional quality), talent was very rare among the painters. Artistic geniuses did not want to be born in an epoch of transition when a new, unprepared public was taking an interest in art. The type of man social change produces is instinctively and immediately attracted to the material inventions of the human spirit; in fact, since the middle of the last century, man has worked specifically and productively towards the development of civilisation rather than for the advancement of culture. The rapid disappearance of the artistic sense became almost universal and even touched on the sphere of the most highly placed individuals, who by their ancestral tradition and elevated position should have maintained a comprehension and love of art greater than those around them.

Since Louis David, who was the last great painter of portraits of royal or illustrious personages, the official portrait has lost the place in art it has held throughout history. Ingres did not find himself painting portraits of

eminent people who lacked comprehension of his painting. Delacroix and Courbet considered Napoleon III and his entourage incapable of understanding their painting; in fact Napoleon III (according to witnesses of the time) understood nothing of the talent of these painters. With the exception (at a later time) of Lenbach, who was a good painter but not the best, and constituted an isolated case in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (with portraits of Leo the XIII, Queen Margaret, Chancellor Bismarck), the execution of official portraits was entrusted to academic painters. Highly placed individuals commissioned their portraits mechanically, out of force of habit and certainly not because of an interest for or a love of painting.

The confirmation of a lack of interest in art shown by the elite of modern times is clear from the fact that not a single official portrait was executed by the few artists of genius who lived and worked in our era, a time so lacking in artistic creation. Carnovali, Böcklin, Segantini, Previati, Max Klinger and Renoir, who were artists of value and exceptions to the predominating mediocrity in the artistic life of the last hundred years, were never asked to produce works of art representing leaders or politicians, literary or ecclesiastic elite, for future generations.

The official portrait must regain the important artistic place it rightly deserves and which it has occupied for centuries. The banal representations to which the portraits of eminent people have been reduced in modern times must not cause one to forget that the great of this earth were once models to artists of genius and stimulated the creation of works of inestimable artistic value.