

## A DISCOURSE ON THE NUDE IN PAINTING<sup>26</sup>

The most important works of art painted by the great masters all have figures or nudes as subjects. History seems to teach us that this choice is due to the fact that in painting and sculpture the most important works of the masters were commissioned by eminent people of the time. In addition to executing paintings to order, the subject of which was already decided and for which the artist had no freedom of choice but only of interpretation, we know that the masters produced works according to their own will and desire and that such works inevitably represented figures and nudes.

One cannot suppose that the great masters considered the human body as the most beautiful thing on earth and the worthiest of being represented. What was it then that caused the most celebrated artists to represent man in their foremost creations? One of the principal reasons to be found in the difficulty that exists in painting, drawing and sculpting the human face and body. Man knows his own body better than anything else, he knows it well as his body is that which is nearest to him and which he cares for the most. Nevertheless the human figure and the nude are the most difficult things to paint or sculpt.

Drawing an animal, tree or object is simpler; it is simpler because it is less controllable than the image of man, an image that we study attentively and which is so deeply impressed upon the mind that the slightest error in its drawing or modelling is evident even to the ignorant (except for the “intellectuals” and “modernists” who today represent a pathological phenomenon, one that is absolutely unknown to physiologists; the phenomenon of people having more or less normal eyesight, but who do not see).

Without doubt, artists were instinctively tempted by the difficulties drawing or modelling a beautiful naked figure presented and which constituted a test of their strengths, knowledge and talent. This was something the artist himself had to control in its finest detail, the result of which could be easily verified by the spectator. For an artist, a painting representing a nude was the surest way of testing his progress and experimentation of a new technique.

Difficulty was something the great masters were attracted to; they fell under its spell and strived to overcome it. All men of valour feel a fascination for difficulty. The proof that today the majority of artists are not men of true value is that instead of being attracted by difficulties they avoid them with care and prudence.

In this regard, the rush for frescos taking place in Italy these last years is particularly significant. The fresco is a convenient and easy way to avoid technical difficulties and save one's reputation by hiding behind “monumentality” and “tradition”.

A fascination for difficulty drove great painters of yore to persist in the representation of the nude. But there was another reason which urged them to study the human figure, clothed or naked, which is the following: a great artist, a genius is an anomaly on earth; he is a kind of monster, a miracle, a dweller of another planet, the inhabitants of which have reached a far higher level than that of our humanity. The eminence of great artists has removed them from the rest of humanity, it has defined clearly the separation between them and others, it has caused them to see the intellectual nullity and poverty of human beings and has “forever” separated them from other men. The superior man is solitary and a misanthrope, but yet he lives on earth and belongs to the human species and for pride's sake wishes that this species would in some way justify the tie that binds him to it. If the soul is insignificant, the spirit nonexistent, then the superior man will apply himself to

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26 G. de Chirico, *Discorso sul nudo in pittura*, in “L'Illustrazione Italiana”, illustrated with Ruben's *The Three Graces*, Milan 11 October 1942, p. 390; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 175-179. Published in English here for the first time.

the body. This is the task laid upon great painters and great sculptors.

To find a beautiful body or a beautiful face is infinitely easier than finding a great soul or a great spirit. In addition, when painting a body or a face one can embellish and perfect it both in its form and expression and enhance it with one's own genius by adding metaphysical beauty to the work of art.

Whilst painting a nude the artist is similar to prophets and apostles. Like them he tries to improve and perfect humanity, he embellishes the bodies of men and instils in them a superior spirit. The human body, perfected and idealised in the most profound sense of these words was the aim of great artists and also their consolation. The possibility of creating a representation of a perfect man or at least the vision of a perfect man was the prerogative of great classical artists, who were superior in this to philosophers and poets who could only raise humanity through the event of its existence and in the despair of not being able to change their fellow being, condemned human defects and proclaimed their discouragement caused by man's inferiority.

Great painters and great sculptors, not being able to make man morally or intellectually better, have had the privilege of sculpting and painting marvellous bodies. It is the most a man of genius could do for his species.

Bettering the soul of man, not to mention his spirit, is a task beyond the power of genius. According to certain ancient writings men do not yet possess a spirit. Again according to such texts, the humanity of our planet is in the phase of the soul. The phase of the spirit will appear much later and on another globe, to which our terrestrial humanity will be transferred when the phase of the soul has ended. According to this theory living beings must pass through three successive phases before reaching the fourth, which will close the cycle. The first phase is that of the body or the physical phase; living beings in this phase exist simply, almost instinctively without consciously understanding good or evil. The second phase through which our humanity is now passing, is that of the soul. We have not yet reached (again according to these writings) the halfway point on the road we must cover before reaching the third phase which is that of the spirit when man will purify himself for the fourth phase where he will contemplate God. These writings also affirm that our humanity is one of the most backward. Humanity dwelling on planet Mars is considered to be already in the phase of the spirit.

Should, as I suppose, this theory be correct then it would seem that those few terrestrial men who do possess a spirit are the victims of their own error of having mistaken which planet to be born on.

A man of talent, full of intelligence and also genius, in a word, a man possessing a spirit, is, I repeat, very lonely; he lives in isolation, full of bitterness and profound disgust for the rest of humanity. It is the great painter or great sculptor who is destined to paint or sculpt the naked figure in order to reconcile the superior man with his origin, idealising the body of the species to which he belongs.

Painters and sculptors of genius have perfected the body and given it their own spirit, which is full of greatness.

What living body can be compared to a Venus of Titian or a woman by Rubens, in which the beauty of the body is united to that marvellous something that is the presence of genius?

We are standing before the perfect human being. Art in general is vision and the expression of past and future perfection, of that perfection which we all long to attain and which was promised and preached to us by prophets as being our ultimate aim. Art is a divine flame on our earth; it is the only visible and concrete preannouncement of perfection.

Art must be respected and venerated above anything else and not as we see it done today, where it is transformed into an instrument for hiding incapacity or lack of will to work, or used as a sham, as speculation

or even as swindling for greater gain. What is going now on in art is a sacrilege. It is certainly not the “artists” of our time who are destined to elevate the species, but probably they too, in their own way are trying to balance the aspect of human body with the level of their intellect. But the aim is different. Today it is a question of deception; false values are being created that have their origin in evil, ignorance, incapacity and negation. Men hide their bodily defects with clothes. The imperfections of the soul and spirit are less evident to the majority but more difficult to hide from those who know how to see.

The intellectual, the modernist, has resorted to a stratagem: he has found a way, by using painters, to surpass the ugliness of his spirit through the ugliness of the human body and thus began painting those flat, deformed, hideously coloured nudes (see the portraits and nudes by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse and the legion of their imitators). Exceptions are seen in some of Picasso’s deformed nudes, painted following a revelation, which is a saving fact for these.

To return to our modernists, it is the horrible nudes of the so-called modern school that are joyfully accepted by intellectuals preoccupied by their own lack of spiritual value. In exalting these nudes as expressions of spiritual visions, these men actually make a terrible confession.

Owing to intellectuals such as these ugliness is identified today with spirituality. The same individuals who go into ecstasy in front of these ignoble nudes give vent to cries of horror before a nude by Boucher or Rubens. Such magnificent nudes are too dangerous for them. If someone got the idea of comparing the beauty and richness of these bodies with the ugliness and poverty of spirit of the “modernists” and “intellectuals”, the latter would certainly be irremediably lost.

There are only two categories of people that can look with joy at these magnificent nudes: simple, unpretentious people or superior people. Simple people have no pretence and are afraid of nothing, their modesty is recompensed by the pleasure they feel when seeing beauty. Superior men understand the joy of being able to raise their eyes to real greatness.

Superior men feel neither envy nor fear when surpassed by a masterpiece. They know that a masterpiece is always greater than man, greater even than he who created it; they know that this masterpiece could only be created because man carried forth what Universal Genius willingly conferred to him.

Everyone is in their place and everyone does only what he is destined to do. Now that art has been desecrated, man is being punished. Artists of talent become ever rarer and the others, those who want to be artists, who want to make art, have ended up making a sort of parody of art, and by producing ugly, inefficient work they obtain nothing other than being constantly tortured by their own mediocrity and powerlessness.