

ON SACRED ART³²

The greatness of painting was revealed to Giorgio de Chirico during his adolescence through the Madonna's of Raphael, Correggio and Murillo. He remained enchanted standing before these paintings, the execution of which was so miraculously vibrating, so marvellously blended and soft, that while looking at them his eyes and brain felt a gentle caress. Although still an adolescent at the time, it was thanks to such masterpieces that he intuitively felt that the mystery of art was held within the grandeur of Divine Mystery. Thus it was granted to him to understand that art is a phenomenon, the perfection of which brings us nearest to God; it was granted to him to understand that the Divine Presence is revealed in art and that the contemplation of a work of art purifies us as does Holy Communion when approached with profound faith. The Divine and Universal Genius is the Creator of Art and man whilst working on a masterpiece is only executing his commandments. If it was not for a superior force guiding his hands and spirit, how could man, a weak creature so limited in his possibilities and thoughts, attain to the necessary heights of great artistic creation? And it is thus, for Art in its most varied expressions remains ever the same in essence during the course of centuries. One epoch follows another, artists are born and die, others are born and the eternal spring never runs dry, never changes in substance, for it is the Genius of the World that causes it to gush forth.

Time, implacable master of man, lies immobilised and impotent at the feet of Genius like a faithful dog; like a rapacious wolf, it becomes gentle and mild as a lamb. Thus even Time loses its power over man whilst he contemplates a work of art and lives in that moment an eternal life, the eternal life that has been promised to those who are sinless; indeed, a man under the dominion of Art is pure.

Divine Presence is always manifest in Art for it is the soul of every artwork. The artist, if he is really such in soul and spirit, knows that it is his sacred duty never to back down before difficulties, never to avoid any hard work in order to attain his sole objective of achieving ever greater perfection in his work and thus revere the art to which he has consecrated himself.

Many years have passed and this truth, which Giorgio de Chirico felt in his early youth, has always guided him in his work. He has worked hard, for hard, serious work is the work the man-artist must fulfil in order to merit divine grace and feel the immense joy of having created a work of art. An artist's work is exceptionally difficult but does not entail torment as is fallaciously affirmed nowadays. On the contrary, such work brings happiness notwithstanding all the trials it imposes, for it allows the artist to feel the revelation of a constant Divine Presence while he creates. The supreme force with which he becomes one, together with his consciousness of this elevation, fills man with a joy far greater than glory, celebrity or any other materiel satisfaction could give him.

Although difficult and tiring, the work of an artist is everything in his life, the justification and aim of his whole existence; naturally I mean an artist intended by Providence to be one, and not, as it is too often seen today, those men who have coldly chosen the career of an artist without any vocation. Therefore, I am not speaking of men called artists merely thanks to the misunderstandings allowed by today's ruling anarchy in art.

The consequence of this dramatic error is the spectacle at which we are now assisting, that shows us men who are absolutely hopeless at artistic creation becoming famous and exercising an influence on the intellectual life of their contemporaries. The undeniable influence of these pseudo-artists, as was inevitable,

32 G. de Chirico, *Sull'arte sacra*, signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 201-204. Published in English here for the first time.

has had extremely dire results.

Men of our times believed that everything could be desecrated without giving thought to the disaster this sacrilege would inevitably lead to.

The decadence and profanation of art has brought on general decadence. This influence on the spirit of men has caused a state of immoral and intellectual weakness, which is evermore dominant in our time. Men have forgotten that art is always sacred even when the subject is profane. Art is sacred in itself and its greatness is independent of exterior circumstances such as the subject treated. What I am affirming is all the more evident when one looks at the works of the old masters, who did not hesitate to represent Parnassus and pagan divinities next to a wall on which Christian scenes with the Virgin, Jesus Christ and the Saints were painted.

In art, when it is truly art, everything is permissible, but it is absolutely forbidden to make false art, to construct, as is done today, false and ridiculous artistic theories, which only exist because they are based on men's incomprehension of true value and the lack of intelligence of most of them.

It is immoral and forbidden for artists to lead a lazy life, to refuse difficulties or to circumvent them, justifying their ignorance or laziness by high-sounding words such as spirituality, sincerity, interpretation, overcoming, etc.

It is forbidden to avoid work and effort, for work purifies man (in the writings of ancient Indian wisdom one reads: "The hands of the artisan are always pure when he works"). It develops his intelligence, makes him better and in general raises his moral level. I speak of work in which man participates fully rendering his mental capacities and not of the mechanical, debasing work which modern machinery obliges him to do. Machines were invented to replace human hands. The great danger is that they may end up substituting his brain.

Not only art but also craft, which at the present time is in complete decadence, is a factor of primary importance for human intelligence which in general develops itself thanks to the form of the human hand. Because of its agility and consequent ability, the hand has always impelled the brain towards effort, thus developing and stimulating his intellectual capacity.

With the progressive loss of manual ability caused by the ever-growing use of machinery, the brain, no longer necessary for guiding the hand, will gradually diminish in power. Let us hope that all is not lost and that humanity will be able at the last minute to stop itself on this dangerous incline.

The abandoning of paintings representing religious subjects by artists of our time is without doubt due to the fact that these paintings demand real knowledge of craft, firstly of drawing, for without knowledge of how to draw it is too dangerous to take on subjects representing various figures in different positions and even stylisation would not help in such a risky undertaking.

I am obviously speaking of drawing as I would of the alphabet as one must know how to draw to be able to paint, just as knowledge of the alphabet is necessary to be able to write. Speaking particularly of painting it is sufficient to call to mind paintings of the Madonna and scenes inspired by the Old and New Testaments to understand the greatness the old masters had attained to and how this greatness obliges even the most ardent "modernist" to be modest.

Standing before a masterpiece, they feel intimidated by its mystery and spirituality, fearful and full of awe and anguish when they think of the punishment that might be inflicted upon them for the desecration brought upon mystery and spirit, that they have too often invoked regarding modern art without any respect for the importance and the significance of such ideas.

I say this because it is an open secret that men who work today in modern art use great words for

small things. The prolixity and magnificence of modern intellectual language can only be compared to the abundance and lack of significance of modern artistic production.

Today more than ever one can say with regard to art: fewer words and more deeds. The constant influence of religious art in Giorgio de Chirico's work is very important. He owes his comprehension of painterly beauty to the paintings he copied with devotion in museums trying to make copies that would be works of art. This event was such a great revelation for him that from that day on he began the search, without ever allowing himself to be discouraged, to discover the secret of the great masters.

An artist's labour is rewarded, as I said, by the Divine Presence he feels while working, and this gives him the constancy to persevere in art's arduous research.

Only the return, if it ever does take place, of seriousness and conscientiousness in artists will allow the revival of religious painting, which requires real knowledge and men of talent.

Let us hope that now, when so many churches and monasteries have been destroyed and so many great works have disappeared forever, God will grant us a revival of art and will allow a few men to become great artists once more, artists worthy of building his temples and of beautifying them with "real works of art".