

## A FRENCH BOOK ON MODERN PAINTING<sup>1</sup> “LA FIERA LETTERARIA” 12 DECEMBER 1946

*Giorgio de Chirico*

A truly exceptional French book published in Paris last year, has arrived in Italy. It is a critique of modern painting, composed with much intelligence, acumen and courage, that I suspect the author of having read the writings contained in *The Comedy of Modern Art*. In fact most of these essays have been published (such as those by Isabella Far) in “L’Illustrazione Italiana” in 1942 and 1943, at a time when “L’Illustrazione Italiana” was widely distributed in Paris. The book bears the title: *A propos de peinture*, and its author signs himself as E. G. Benito, which is quite probably a pseudonym. It is the first time that a book published in France proves to be so intelligent and courageous on exposing the decadence and immorality of French artistic circles that have become the preferred model for artistic contexts worldwide. Even other people in France have attempted to criticise modern painting and show its negative and ridiculous side, but they have been people of mediocre standing and their efforts were stupid and banal, and therefore not very effective. I do not know how extensively Mr. Benito’s book has been read; certain that, both in Paris and outside it, the “modernists” and all those who, in one way or another, are linked to the mafia and the freemasonry of so-called “modernism”, will do everything to boycott it, in order to not discuss it. But this is a book, which, like everything right, true and profound, works below the surface and carves its own path. Mr. Benito’s book is a sign of the times and every true artist and every man of good will cannot but rejoice. I will quote a few passages from this exceptional book, which should be read from cover to cover, because everything that it recounts is of the highest order. It is only with regard to certain leaders of French Modernism that Benito expresses himself with undue caution and indeed it seems strange that he, who is a painter, (as he himself admits) and certainly an intelligent and honest one at that, chooses not to treat Henry Matisse with his just deserts. But the explanation is easy; it must not be forgotten that Mr. Matisse is, in the freemasonry of pictorial modernism, a sort of Grand Master. Therefore Mr. Benito, who probably has a living to earn and a family to support, is forced to adopt a minimum of diplomacy. I understand and forgive him for it. The excerpts that I quote now, I quote literally.

“In the year of grace 1637... Nicolas Poussin was forty-three; Jordaens, forty-four; Ribera, forty-nine; Zurbaran and Velázquez, thirty-nine and thirty-eight respectively; Van Dyck, thirty-six; And Rembrandt, the youngest, had just turned thirty. These men were not only contemporaries but

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<sup>1</sup> Original title: *Un libro francese sulla pittura moderna*.

also of the same generation. They might have sat around the same table to celebrate the birthday of an older master, Rubens, who had just reached his sixtieth year.

Is there a painter or a painting enthusiast who would not feel moved by the thought of looking upon such a spectacle?

Why so much splendour in the same moment, and why such poverty in ours (Salons of 1944-45)?

Are men less intelligent today, less gifted? We do not believe so. They give proof of it every day in fields other than painting. So? What did those men have that our contemporaries do not? One thing only: *They knew their metier*. The word “metier” recurs often in this book, like a leitmotif; which indeed it is.”<sup>2</sup>

Beautiful, just and touching words. Mr. Benito proves to be not only an exceptional connoisseur of paintings but also a man of elevated sentiment, a poet, an effective voice in contrast to all those lame and sterile “intellectuals” who today speak on painting. And in another section he goes on to say:

“It is the art dealers who have brought about this outbreak of eccentricity in painting.

Anything that may give rise to doubt is well worth exploiting, and all manner of nonsense has been encouraged and permitted to favour such speculation.

It will be agreed that this could lead only to the total deformation of taste, to the decomposition of painting.

Which is just what happened. As encouragement, this undertaking to demolish the spirit found fertile ground in the restlessness that distinguishes our age, and in the foolish and misguided snobism of the elite.”

– And in another still:

“The Art of the past may be dead, but uniquely due to our inability. The greatest task a new generation of artists can undertake is that of resuscitating it in all its splendour.”

How true. This is what Isabella Far and I have been repeating for several years now. Only that between saying and doing there is the sea, and a rough sea at that, upon which most of today’s painters prefer not to set sail, but instead choose to insist ever more with “modernism”.

To navigate that sea, we need navigators cut of my own cloth.

And now I must stop because otherwise I will quote the whole book. But you, the reader, buy it, and read it. Remember – *A Propos de Peinture*, by E. G. Benito, published in Paris in 1945. If by chance, you deal with painting or art criticism, buy this work that distinguishes itself from current publications and make it your bedside book.

Giorgio de Chirico

*Translated by Marco Mona*

<sup>2</sup>E. G. Benito, *A Propos de Peinture*, Publications Techniques et Artistiques, Paris 1945, pp. 15-18.