

ARCHITECTURAL SENSE IN CLASSICAL PAINTING⁶

Among the many senses that modern painters have mislaid, architectural sense must be included. Artists of old were greatly preoccupied by the way architectural constructions accompanied the human figure, alone or in groups. They paid the same attention to life's episodes and to historical drama, applying their severe and loving spirit to studying and perfecting the laws of perspective.

The architectural sense in human intellectual manifestations goes back centuries to very remote epochs. The Greeks had a great cult for architecture and the arrangement of sites reserved for reunions of poets, philosophers, orators, warriors and politicians, and in general those whose intellectual capacities surpassed those of common men.

The Greeks had a predilection for the portico where one could stroll whilst discussing and philosophising, sheltered both from rain and the powerful rays of the Attic sun, at the same time enjoying the sight of the harmonious lines of the mountains, the ridges of Hymettus descending into the sea with the gulf of Phaleron in the background.

A landscape enclosed in the arch of portico or in the square or rectangle of a window acquires greater metaphysical value, for it is solidified and isolated from surrounding space. Architecture completes nature. This constitutes the progress of human intellect in the field of metaphysical discoveries.

The primitive poet, Homer for instance, who sings of infinite spaces, the high-sounding sea, the abyss of a sky fertile with the gods, the forests and the great open lands still free from the geometrization of construction, this poet, I say, is less advanced in lyrical profundity than the dramatic author who within the limited, enclosed spaces of a stage moves the few characters of a tragedy that, narrowly bound by the lines of construction, appear with greater depth and more astonishing lyricism than those same images sung freely by the primitive poet.

Architectural sense is clearly manifest among primitive painters. Figures often appear in doorways or windows, surrounded by arches and portals. The fact that saints were often portrayed in moments of solemn ecstasy or in prayer within churches or houses accentuated this effect.

The Christian spirit is much closer to a constructive and architectural sense than that of the pagan. This is especially true because the Christian spirit almost invariably avoids the vast poetry of nature in its changing and eternal aspect. Following the lead of the Semitic spirit, it rises to the mysterious joys of mysticism and metaphysics in a bare geometrical setting, where an architectural sense is more easily developed than in the freedom of nature. The artist of old saw nature with the eyes of an architect and constructor. To him the sky was a cupola and a vault and he felt its solidity. In the life of man, primitive images and sensations from childhood develop over the years into profound thought. In a similar way, the first solidly architectural and sculptural images of primitive craftsmen were developed by painters who came afterwards into the magnificent sense of solidity and equilibrium that would so severely characterise great Italian painting.

Perugino, in the full maturity of his art, would enclose within the arches of his *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, the clear horizons and solid magnificent skies he had seen in his childhood behind the dark houses and the hills of Muiano. He did this with Phidias-like metaphysics. The same occurred in his triptych of the Santa

⁶ G. de Chirico, *Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica*, in "Valori Plastici" a, III, n. 5-6, Rome May-June 1920, pp. 59-61; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 32-35; published in English in *Nature According to de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue edited by A. Bonito Oliva, Sole24Ore, Milan 2010, pp. 274-275.

Maddalena dei Pazzi church, where the vaults merge with the infinite distant sky above the deserted Umbrian landscape, scene of the tragedy of the Crucifixion.

In Giotto architectural sense also attains high metaphysical regions. All the open doors, arches and windows that accompany his figures allow one to feel a presentiment of cosmic mystery. The square of sky defined by the lines of a window is a second drama that adds to that of the people portrayed. In fact, more than one disconcerting question comes to mind when the eye encounters those blue or greenish surfaces closed in geometrical lines of stone: "What lies there beyond? That sky, is it above an empty sea or a crowded city? Or does it extend over free, grand and troubled expanses of nature, wooded mountains, dark valleys, plains and rivers?" The perspectives of the constructions rise up full of mystery and presentiments, the corners conceal secrets, and the work of art is no longer a dry episode limited to the actions of the figures represented, but it is the whole cosmic and vital drama that envelops mankind and draws it into its spirals; where past and future get mixed up, where the enigmas of existence, sanctified by the breath of art, cast off the tangled and frightful appearance that outside art man imagines, to clothe the eternal, tranquil and consoling appearance of talented construction.

Among the French, Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain had the profoundest architectural sense. With Poussin this sense is so engrained that even his simplest landscapes manifest his powerfully constructive spirit; thus trees, plants, hills, horizons expand and are superimposed, they uphold and complete each other, merging with circumambient air. The same occurs with various parts of a building that concur and combine to create a great edifice, which, in turn, is limited and completed by surrounding buildings, streets and piazzas. In some paintings, as for example *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*, Poussin attained to the highest grade of balance and architectural power. In this composition full of genius, the figures resemble statues, they seem to be wedded to cubes of stone and rise like caryatids to uphold the corners; despite the struggle and movement, the bodies are full of a divine sense of stability and immobility, without which no work achieves great art. Likewise in another painting at the Louvre *The Healing of the Blind of Jericho* in which the figures in the foreground, Christ touching the eyes of the kneeling blind men, seem to be a continuation of the architecture which extends with a purely biblical serenity and solidity, balanced and harmonious to the distant, clear horizon.

A magnificent example of nature rendered metaphysical by architectural construction is given us by another painting of the Franco-roman master: *Theseus Finding his Father's Sword*. Here the human figure is secondary to the idyllic nature, the leafy trees, rivers, mountains and a high and terribly serene sky framed by vaults and arches, columns and buildings receding according to the immutable and exact laws of divine perspective, which acquire a surprising aspect of stability and distance. When architectural representation is lacking in Poussin's paintings, as in the landscapes of the Prado in Madrid, then it is the trees that take on the aspect of constructions, scaffoldings and the anatomic framework, the trunks and branches which, studied like human bodies, bring to mind some antique sculptured nudes with perfectly muscled limbs. In other works, the complicated and at times painfully tangled positions remind one instead of the sad verses of Dante's Comedy:

Uomini fummo ed or sem fatti sterpi

whilst masses of branches dappled in serene light arise in the solemn grandeur of Corinthian capitals.

Claude Lorrain's paintings of seaports act as a prelude to the emotion of romanticism. This is seen in the

classic magnificence of his palaces surmounted by statues in thoughtful attitudes – Muses wrapped in severe draperies, tired warriors leaning on staffs –, looking with their eyes of stone out toward the distant and sombre sea and vessels laden with arms and merchandise and fruit ripened in distant lands, sailing towards peaceful havens. One dreams of princes, philosophers and poets who inhabit these palaces; further away are gloomy towers, prisons and fortresses, places of suffering and melancholy.

He loved seaports and portrayed a poignant and distant lyricism in their architecture. The arrangement of his perspectives was often full of genius. Thus a line of columns, a high wall or portico hide elements of life and nature behind their masses, a suggestion of which is garnered by tall flagged masts and swollen or drooping sails in the background. On the other side, one finds far off horizons and desert or inhabited lands that give the onlooker the delightful tremor of surprise and curiosity that is the truest sign of the presence of a work of art.