

MEN AND PHENOMENA OF MODERN ART¹

Giorgio de Chirico

One of the main culprits responsible for the current downfall of painting was the famous Ambroise Vollard who excited the spirits of so many naive and provincial people, lacking in will and personality and above all in intelligence.

Even in our own country, polluted by snobbery and modernism, the “Vollard case” has excited and intrigued many people who, mistaking apples for oranges, did not understanding the matter. I, who have detailed familiarity with the “Vollard case”, like many other “cases” for that matter, and have personally met this great culprit, will try to clarify some things to those men of good will.

Vollard was a rather disturbing character. He was a tall and rather massive man; he had a slightly sloping mustache and a short, pointy-edged beard; behind his mustache one could see his mouth constantly moving as if he were chewing on something. His face, of a coloured complexion, betrayed a sly and elusive glance. He looked like someone who had something to hide, who did not have a very clear conscience.

I met him in 1912. At the time Vollard ran a gallery located in the rue Laffitte. On each side of the entrance was a huge glass showcase that seemed rather like a large window. The interior of the gallery could be seen through the glass of these two showcases, though the appearance was rather that of a junk shop. Amongst a dusty general disorder the horrendous paintings of Cézanne, Gauguin and other “masters” could be seen, stacked in the corners, resting against the walls and, almost always, unframed.

Vollard, cleverly, had purposely given his gallery that shabby, miserable and disordered appearance. He wanted to create the typical anti-luxurious gallery, the “poor” gallery, a “Franciscan” gallery *par excellence*, where everything was “spirituality”, where one could not even remotely think of those eternal values that have been the source of masterpieces in past centuries: mastery, beauty of shape and colour, freedom of execution, powerful depiction, etc.

Since the merchandise he sold was at the antipodes of great and beautiful painting, which evokes the idea of luxury and wealth, Ambroise Vollard decided that the “masterpieces” of the “Master of Aix” and other pseudo-painters of the same mold, would be better showcased in a dusty and disordered, shabby-looking gallery.

All that squalor and untidiness, those Franciscan and anchoritic aspects, the whole atmosphere, had to persuade people that the gallery was run by a sort of holy man, a dreamer, an

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idealist, a superior being, despising every richness, every luxury and every vulgar pleasure of this earth, and living in an ideal vision of pure spirituality.

However, all this beautiful holiness did not prevent the good Vollard from accumulating millions by immorally exploiting the imbecility, vanity and snobbery of his contemporaries.

From the first time I met Ambroise Vollard, I immediately realised that I, or even better my personality, did not suit him at all and disturbed him in a strange way. Just think, my dear reader, that this happened at a time when I was still very young, absolutely unknown and that I had not yet expressed, either verbally or in writing, the slightest judgment on modern painting. I met Vollard a few times after that, the last only a few days before the car accident that took his life. Every time we met, I noticed that my presence disturbed and annoyed him.

He was a great talker and I was always told that he aroused great interest in his listeners when he narrated facts and episodes of his life, especially in connection with those painters whom he had promoted. I have already written on other occasions that those who try to defend and justify the nullity of modern painting typically insist on distracting people by narrating episodes and facts that are more or less amusing and strange, in order to avoid touching upon the neuralgic and dangerous subject of painting itself. However, whenever I was present, Ambroise Vollard's loquacity suffered a sharp decline and sometimes he even became mute as a fish.

I remember one evening, in Paris, around 1925, I had been invited to dinner at the home of modern painting merchant Paul Guillaume. I arrived a little late and whilst handing my coat and hat to the manservant in the entrance, I heard the sound of voices and laughter coming from the door of the living room which was slightly ajar. Vollard's voice dominated, so I realised that the guests had already arrived and that the "promoter of ugly paintings" was already telling, perhaps for the fifteen-hundredth time, the story of how he had bought his first Cézanne. He, probably did not know that I had also been invited that evening, otherwise the thought of my arrival would have made him less loquacious even before my appearance. When I entered the drawing-room and approached the lady of the house to pay my respects, I noticed from the corner of my eye that Vollard's face twitched as though struck with a slight paralysis, and he immediately began to speak in an absent-minded way and with much less fervour. At the table, to his misfortune, we were seated next to each other, and he ate in silence, avoiding looking at me. In order to lighten the atmosphere between us, I began to talk to him about cinema and the most recent films that were showing in Paris; I hoped, with that choice of subject, which was somewhat removed from pictorial issues, to put Vollard's psychic state back into equilibrium. But to no avail; he answered me monosyllabically and when we got up from the table he found the excuse of having business to do the next morning that would oblige him to wake up early and disappeared like a ghost.

Vollard was a very curious individual. After all, he was a destroyer.

He was the exact opposite of one of those popes, of those princes, of those gentlemen who, in centuries past, had encouraged and helped the great artists, contributing to the creation of a renaissance in art and of great periods of artistic evolution. One could without exaggeration call

him an anti-Julius the Second, or an anti-Lorenzo the Magnificent par excellence. Deep in his soul he must have felt a sadistic voluptuousness thinking that the poison that he dripped and scattered throughout the world would gradually drag one of the greatest conquests of human genius: painting, into the mud. Vollard was not intelligent, in the higher sense of the word. He was sly, with a perverse cunning and a particularly developed and almost animalistic insight. He could *feel* people, second guess them, even having only just met them; he had a kind of almost telepathic sensitivity; just like the dog that starts to howl while sensing that his master is dying kilometres away. Or like the donkey that starts to bray and whip its hips with its tail, when the sky is still clear and there isn't the minimum sign of a coming thunderstorm. Thus, from the first time he saw me he recognised in me the One who was destined to one day give the signal of revival, he sensed in me the one who, by fighting courageously, would one day give back to painting those values that he, Vollard, had spent all his life trying to destroy with the most treacherous, sadistic and satanic manoeuvres.

The Vollard approach, which has inspired the circles of modernist painting gangsterism, continues to be applied by many individuals who, although not satanic destructors as Vollard – being mostly common, banal, and indifferent people – continue for personal gain to defend and to support with any means possible, all that pseudo painting and its imitations, so valued by Vollard.

The personal gain of these individuals concerns their material interests; they are merchants, with or without a shop, who have modern paintings to sell, or of people who are more or less tied to these merchants. The arguments that they make to support the value of their goods are then parroted by many individuals, lacking in intelligence or personality, who, hoping to make a good impression, and to seem cultured and up-with-the-times, insincerely praise all the scabs, incrustations and concretions of the infamous “*Ecole de Paris*” and its various surrogates in Europe and America.

But people are starting to tire of it; they've had more than enough of ugly painting presented as works of genius.

This fatigue is already discernible in the so-called American market. Even Europe begins to feel disgust for pseudo-painting.

A few days ago I was talking to a Swiss journalist who had come to interview me and he told me that in his country modernism is losing ground every day. And to think that Switzerland has so far been the stronghold of supermodernism.

There you could still find the last examples of a race in extinction: collectors of abstract painting. Until recently, there were some Swiss collectors who, when pronouncing the word “*abstraaakt*”, seemed to be chewing on candied chestnuts. Now it seems that they too prefer to “talk about something else”.

The great schemers of modern painting are aware of this. They run for cover, give orders, dictate new systems, publish series of monographs, but they cannot hide their unease and often exaggerate and make themselves ridiculous, even in the face of the naivest souls.

To give an example amongst many, I will mention the following story that was told to me by one of my students, present at the scene. It seems that a few days ago, a French gentleman who was guiding tourists and illustrating the paintings in the rooms of the Vatican Art Gallery, pronounced in front of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, that "Cézanne was very much inspired by Raphael!"

Now this is part of a whole new propaganda system that has been put into place quite recently and consists in putting on the same level, be it in a magazine, a book, a speech or a conference, the work of an ancient master with that of a pseudo modern painter. So, that while in a museum, in front of a painting by Raphael you can hear what I mentioned above, in an American magazine, or any other country, you can see the reproduction of a shoddy work of Chagall, Cézanne or other modern painter among the reproductions of works by Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, or other masters. And all this is done with the greatest of ease, as if it was the most logical and natural thing.

The system is sneaky but the purpose is clear: persuade those who are stupid enough to believe it, that a painting by Raphael is worth the same as a painting by Cézanne, a painting by Titian is worth the same as a painting by Chagall, and so on. But how many people will be persuaded with such tactics? "That is the question".² Meanwhile, one thing is certain, when the systems of propaganda reach such a point of impudence and exceed the limits of all modesty, it is a sign that such propaganda has lost its plot.

Translated by Marco Mona

² This phrase appears in English in the original Italian text.