

PICTORIAL CLASSICISM<sup>7</sup>

*Je höher ein Mensch, desto mehr steht  
er unter den Einfluss der Dämonen...*  
(Goethe to Eckermann, 24 March 1829)

Talk of Greek painting brings instantly to mind dry and cold forms, flat and fantastical appearances and the hieroglyphic style of decorated vases and patera.

We cannot fully grasp this kind of painting or know with any exactitude what its various aspects were throughout the centuries, when it flourished, what its primitive form was and when its decadence took place. We can however perceive its spirit in Pompeian frescoes, in fragments of mural paintings preserved in Rome and also in the designs and paintings of Greek vases conserved in the Europe's museums, of which, happily, there are many examples.

The spirit of Greek painting is above all linear, an element that comes to light again in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painting and is found in rare instances in different countries and in all epochs. Even recently we can witness its fleeting appearance.

Taking into account that the various periods in which the linear spirit had the most influence on art were followed by epochs of decadence and confusion (of a greater or lesser extent), we must conclude that the classical demon is a linear demon of dream or of style.

In Greek painting, lines and markings tracing necessary angles and curves at fatefully predestined points are the carriers of an inexplicable emotion which either goes straight to the mark or gets lost on the way. We can thus affirm that, like the Greeks, both Ingres and the 15<sup>th</sup> century Italians held that drawing was the foundation of all great art.

In what can be called the mysticism of line that characterises true classic art, one notes an aversion for useless masses and heavy fleshiness, elements alien to all spiritual subtlety. Instead, there is an evident tendency toward a reduction of elements uniquely to those of a religious alphabet of markings that form the outline of a figure or an object.

The profile of a foot traced by Douris or Botticelli is not something we would see in nature; it is the spectre of a foot, the spiritual effigy of a limb that the classic artist reveals for all time to us in dream, on a terracotta vase, on the surface of a wall or on plaster board. We can almost say that every deceivingly changing and fleeting aspect of nature has a particular sign or symbol with regard to the world of eternal things; it is precisely this sign or symbol, or at least some part of it, that the classic artist discovers.

The Greeks felt the magic of the line in a marvellous way.

In the paradise of art their spirit yearned for a perfectly straight line, a gentle curve or an exact spiral, like the curl of a goddess' hair, an ineffable freshness which cools the torrid winds scorching this existence, laborious and stained by sin.

They had no other preoccupation; they did not seek joy and relief in other forms.

This is why the Greek painter attributed the greatest importance to the fineness and the perfection of his brush, which assumed for him the value of a magic instrument.

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<sup>7</sup> G. de Chirico, *Classicismo pittorico*, in "La Ronda", n. 7, Rome July 1920, pp. 145-150; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 36-40. Published in English here for the first time.

For the Greek artist the possession of perfect brush was the height of bliss; he loved and cherished it as a warrior would his sword; it was his stylus, his bow of Philoctetes. Made of woodcock feathers or of a single horsehair tied to a small cane, the brushes of Greek painters demanded great skill in order to be used. Yet they allowed the tracing of fine lines of equal thickness throughout. Such lines are a joy and a surprise for the eye. Thus pictorial classicism is characterised by a subtlety and purity of linear sensation and a complete absence of anything gigantic or voluminous. A mysterious interpretation of nature is achieved which takes the enigmatic and symbolic shape of Man as the first and last letter of its alphabet, developing and multiplying the aspects of this form to infinity.

Here men are on a level with the gods and vice versa; statues stand on low pediments, Hermes, leaning on his hip, teaches us the grace of the curve and the broken line.

These strange and touching aspects are also seen in classic Greek architecture. The temples of Pallas and of Olympian Jupiter are on the level of mortals. Standing under their columns one never has the impression of the enormous, the overwhelming or the infinite that one has in temples of other less refined and more confused epochs, as for example in Gothic or Egyptian art.

The Greek temple is at hand's reach; it seems as if one could pick it up and carry it away like a toy placed upon a table. This wonderful impression reappears many centuries later in Tuscan architecture. One thinks of this in Florence when looking at the Baptistery and Duomo with its belfry.

We repeat again that the spirit of classicism is a spirit of signs and lines. Friedrich Nietzsche used to say that man's intellectual power could be measured by the level of irony he is capable of. In the same way we can say that the classic power of an artist is measured by the intelligence and emotion of his line.

There are primordial emotions that cannot be lost without incurring the risk of straying from the path of classicism. Thus the emotions of a Troglodyte tracing the profile of a bison on the walls of a cave are as classical as are those of a Douris, an Apelles or a Polygnotos, and nearer to our times, that of Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Holbein and Dürer.

Through a strange phenomenon, the linear spirit of Hellenic classicism reappears in the works of our great 15<sup>th</sup> century artists, who relived the same emotions of the line and the sign as those of the Greeks.

Giotto traced the perfect circle, Cimabue drew the perfect line; Apelles and Protogenes, like two athletes in a stadium made a contest of who could trace the most perfect and sustained line in their frescoes and paintings; Holbein traced a simple line drawing of a head and trusting this drawing as a navigator does his compass elaborated perfect paintings from it without the need of a close-up study of nature. More than anecdotes or legends of disputable historical truth, more than stereotype truths, these are symbols of spiritual artistic emotions and of a particular period of art.

A true great man never loses himself in uselessness.

He chooses carefully and selects with accuracy from the mass of forms and volumes that clutter our world.

What will capture our attention in the study of Italian art history from the point of view of classical awareness? We already know that all the draperies and banners billowing in the wind, the overflowing clouds and fabrics of venetian art, and all such exuberance will not give our spirit the pure breath of craft and the profound finesse as do certain curves and hieroglyphic contours of the robe of the woman holding the drapery in Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*.

Classicism is not a problem of augmenting but rather one of pruning and paring, of reducing a phenomenon to its original appearance, to its skeleton, to its signs and to the symbol of its inexplicable

existence. If a Greek painter or a 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist had access to a painting from a decadent epoch, with no sense of line and sign or subtlety of emotion, and was put to the task of correcting it and rendering it classic, he would first have had to clean it and clear away all the superfluous masses and forms so as to allow the outline of the spectre to appear.

Michelangelo was the last great painter within whom classicism dwelt with all its signs and mysterious symbols. It is not for nothing that he was called demoniacal. However, those who gave him this name did so erroneously and with great incomprehension. Demoniacal, yes, but in another sense. This is evident, not so much in his frescoes and paintings, but in his drawings that attain such a profundity and subtlety of sign that they might be the works of a Greek born in the shadow of the Parthenon. Inattentive, nearsighted and flustered men did not grasp this phenomenon, impressed as they were by the immensity of his frescoes and of some of his sculptures, such as Moses and David, they called him a titan, whereas other even less crafty aesthetes of Nordic origin looked to the suffering Michelangelo, a revealer of the torment of life, the dilemma of existence etc. Nobody thought of the real, the 'Anacreontic' Michelangelo.

Raphael, who had an extreme propensity for assimilation, also perceived the mystery of the line, however to a lesser extent than Michelangelo. He is more demoniacally classical in his first works of the Peruginese period, whereas towards the end of his short existence he seems to have lost this sense. His last paintings already show a prelude of the twilight which was descending upon art and which is still enduring.

But the spirit of classicism has not disappeared.

Even today, it appears here and there amid the great confusion of contemporary art.

We will mention some names at the risk of being considered paradoxical. A glimmer of classicism can be seen in some of Gaetano Previati's drawings. Though his painting does not satisfy us completely, Segantini was also mysteriously tempted by the daemon of classicism in some of his later drawings and in certain figures of women flying in the night sky. And, searching, one could find others in our country and abroad. But all these are such fleeting and obscure apparitions that it is scarcely worthwhile discussing them.

A strong current of mysticism is indispensable for the formation of classical artists. Greek painters and the great Italian artists found this in religion.

We must not forget that "mysteries" flourished in Polygnotos' time, which could not have been alien to the essence of his severe drawing so full of emotion, and to the ethos enveloping his figures and the ideals so highly lauded by Aristotle.

Today, we hope we are still sufficiently mystical for a revival of classicism. Various factors have contributed to our mysticism but this is not important. We have waited too long; too much discontent, darkness and confusion cover the world and gravitate particularly on our Italian land. But in compensation, it is to our land ahead of all others that the spirit of classicism has returned to tempt men, to lure them on with promises of new signs and more perfect structures.

We will follow its call without confusion or extreme agitation, persisting in our work with ever-deepening clairvoyance and devotion.