

THOUGHTS ON CLASSICAL PAINTING<sup>11</sup>

The importance of architecture in a painting and especially in the metaphysical expression of its composition, was proven by the ancients and especially by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Lombards and Tuscans, who knew how to unite with great wisdom and meditative lovingness, the lines of the constructions with those of the human figures, resulting in a surprising stability that one would search for in vain in the art of other countries and other epochs.

Abandoned in the void, the human figure is subject to a sense of instability; as such it lacks spiritual force and consequently is unable to make an impression or stimulate interest. The Spaniards, the most superficial painters of Europe, rarely united architecture to the figures in their works. Whilst referring only to the most famous of artists, Velasquez and Ribera, one notes that their portraits are almost always depicted in confused surroundings or against a dark background. When a landscape acts as the background to a figure, it is never made solid by the presence of architecture: trees and hills become lost as they are not held within the rectangle or square of a door or window, by a vaulted archway or by the lines of an architrave or of a cornice.

In indoor representations, a dark background rises up against the brilliance of the figures appearing in the foreground. This dark background is never alleviated by the perspective lines of the room, the compartments of a ceiling or the lines of floorboards. Modern artists, and here I speak of the worst, the official painters and the fashionable portrait painters, who chose the Spaniards as their masters, did this precisely because they found in them an excessive easiness which suited to perfection their superficial mentality.

The old Italian masters always united architecture to figures. Even the Venetians, who were the most superficial of Italian painters and hence the least architectural, often introduced architectural elements. In many of their portraits we see a window or a door, the perspective of a cornice, of a portico or colonnade solidifying the figures in the foreground which otherwise would be lacking in interest. Notice, for example, in Tintoretto's *Portrait of a Warrior* (now in Vienna's Imperial Gallery), how the figure of the bearded man appears solid and phantasmal against the perspective of the three columns and the perfect square of a window enclosing a distant sky and sea where a boat recedes. Likewise, in the *Portrait of Vincenzo Zeno* (Pitti Gallery), an exaggeratedly deep window enclosing a dark sky confers a profoundly metaphysical aspect to the painting.

This habit of portraying figures near doors or windows was something that was deeply felt by the artists of yore; it is a sentiment that the moderns, except in some rare cases (for example a number of Böcklin's portraits), have not yet grasped and hence cannot gain from it. Besides solidifying the figures, an open window introduces a supremely lyrical and suggestive element. The piece of world shown to us through the window next to the figure, which however remains separated from the figure by perceivably thick walls, excites the mind in such a way that an element of surprise and discovery enters into the portrait, which as a subject is generally not very thrilling. The spectator's mind is preoccupied with the idea of what may lie beyond that window and, if only sky can be seen, wonders what countries or cities lay beneath it.

In addition to the Italians, German and Flemish painters also put this sentiment into their portraits. Holbein exaggerated architectural details, especially in the two portraits of the Burgomaster Jacob Meyer and his wife (museum of Basle) and in *Portrait of Nicholas Kratzer* (Louvre), where the figure, surrounded by the lines of the walls and shelves, and geometrically precise rulers and sextants, takes on the aspect of an apparition. Dürer, in his marvellous self-portrait in the Prado museum, combines the ledge upon which he

11 G. de Chirico, *Riflessioni sulla pittura antica*, in "Il Convegno", a. II, n. 4-5, Milan-Rome April-May 1921, pp. 201-206; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 64-68. Published in English here for the first time.

rests his right arm with a window that is as deep as the entrance to a crypt.

Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain were two great French artists who united architecture with landscapes and figures in their paintings.

The former always included stone constructions in his compositions and landscapes. Sometimes, as in the painting, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (Wallace collection, London), the lack of buildings, palaces, villas, arches or ruins is compensated by a pedestal placed in perspective on the right side of the painting and by a rectangular block on the left placed near a column with a bust of Janus Bifrons on top. These architectural elements solidify the entire composition to an extraordinary degree and the four dancing women, holding each other by the hand, acquire a marvellous stability thanks to the perspective lines of the pedestal, the block and the column. It suffices, in one's mind, to take these architectural elements out of the painting in order to realise just how necessary they are. This allows one to get an idea of how much better paintings are when architectural elements are present, in comparison to paintings in which the figures are surrounded by open nature. One must only compare this work by Poussin to a painting by Corot in which dancing figures are also present. The undefined features in the landscape cause the figures to lose both solidity and stability, factors without which no painting can attain to the level of fine art.

As I made clear in a previous essay, an excellent way to free oneself from the unavoidable naturalism and verism inherent in copying living figures, is to copy and study statues.

If an artist is familiar with stone figures, when he looks upon a living figure he will see its statuesque aspect. The same happens to an artist who spent time on the study of architecture, who knows well the laws of perspective and who feels profoundly all the lyricism and metaphysics of construction. When such an artist looks upon a landscape, even if totally deprived of any architectural element, he sees in a tree, a forest, a valley or a mountain, the precise lines of an edifice, the compact and solid aspect of palaces and towers, porticoes and pediments. Hence his landscapes will have none of the banality or superficial verism proper to the work of those who have no feeling for or knowledge of architecture. Thus Poussin, a profoundly architectural spirit, when painting landscapes with only fields, trees and sky, infused them with such a quality of solidity and construction that nature seemed transformed. Examples of such of his paintings are: *Spring (The Earthly Paradise)* (Louvre) and *Autumn or The Grapes from the Promised Land*.

Landscapes and compositions by Poussin without architecture are rare. Having lived a long time in Rome, the aspects of this city – perhaps the most beautiful in the world –, were stamped in his soul and mind: its eternal blend of landscape and architecture, of stone cut and built up in geometrical forms within the freedom of nature, distant horizons and the refreshing consolation of trees and plants.

In Claude Lorrain, the architectural element is more romantic and adventurous. He favoured seaports, villas, palaces and towers near to rocks where ships are moored. His architecture is more elaborate than that of Poussin. He also made use of the profoundly surprising and poetic aspect of statuary united with buildings as in the composition in the Louvre representing *Samuel consecrating David to the Kingship*. In other paintings as for example that of *The Adoration of Golden Calf* in the Duke of Westminster's collection in London, he substituted architecture with square rocky mountains on the left side of the canvas, solidifying the idyllic landscape in which the effigy of the calf stands surrounded by groups of adoring men and women.

But where the fantasy of his adventurous poet spirit managed to give itself full vent is in his visions of seaports. Antinaturalist above all, as are all great artists, Claude Lorrain never painted a port as he saw it. In what corner of the earth could one really see so much beauty united? Such a glorious conjunction of

human construction and freedom of nature? He chose the elements he needed from various places and in his studio combined them in a painting. A glance through the collection of his sepia drawings is sufficient to see countless studies of landscape and architecture, in which every plant, every tree, every capital and column are lovingly studied (similar to Michelangelo's studies of human anatomy), in order for one to grasp the immense preliminary study involved each time he prepared himself to paint one of these works, which seem the revelation of a moment. Claude Lorrain often intensified the poetic and perspective aspect of his paintings through the effects of sunset; in this way some of his paintings are close to Rembrandt's best. The sun, low over the horizon, shoots forth with rays as so many luminous lines, which, to the spectator seem to spring from the painting's foreground and meet the solar disc on the line of the horizon. This gives the same effect as perspective drawings in which various lines starting from the sides of objects conjoin the line of the horizon at its centre or vanishing point. Besides this linear effect, the tones and colours of Lorrain's paintings augment the effect of distance, due to the fact that when the sun is setting, distance objects surrounded by a luminous mist are almost invisible; the nearer to the spectator one gets, figures and objects become more precise in outline, until the figures in the foreground are almost sculptural in their definite solidity. For some time now painters have lost their architectural sense. The reason for this is easy to grasp. Naturalism and verism, the two great destructive forces of all that is elevated in art, have eliminated this aspect from painting. Moreover, knowledge of perspective is necessary in order for architectural sense to manifest itself clearly. Today, who are the artists familiar with its laws, with the exception of those who paint theatre scenery? I want to quote here the words of a painter who sees clearly in the affairs of art, who knows the road that should be followed, the difficulties that must be surmounted. Mario Bacchelli in a treatise on perspective says:

“We notice that, if one was to draw a nude without perfect studied knowledge of the human body, they either repeat the simplistic linearity and the caricatural deformity of our immediate predecessors or fall in an arbitrary and false imitation of the antique. The same occurs when drawing buildings and architecture, to avoid falling into flat decorativism or Giotto-style mannerism. An objective and precise knowledge is necessary of the forms we wish to draw and the volume they occupy and project within the image.

I have specified buildings and architecture as examples most commonly used. But they are not the only subjects of perspective. Everything that occupies space and has volume, the human body, a flower, a mountain, gives its image to us according to perspective, which is our grammar and our syntax, our counterpoint and our abacus.”

May these words of an intelligent painter be an admonishment to all the followers of easy painting, to all those who have a sacred horror for those marvellous and magic instruments such as the rectangle, the ruler, the compass and the plume-line.