

PRO TEMPERA ORATIO

Part I

Nil est tam visu jucundum quam in materiae pulchritudine rerum patefacta metaphysica

By now there are many who believe, as I do, that the habit of neglecting tempera, which began with the painters of the *Seicento*, has thrown painting into the state in which it now finds itself. This habit entailed a widespread use of substances that, yes, do give the artifice a more immediate effect, but are substances which have a magna pars constituted of vegetable or mineral oils, which, as we shall see, is the ruin of the spirit and material substance of all painting and prelude to the decadence which has reached a climax in the last years.

In Europe more than one voice has risen up against such decadence. As, in fact, the aspect of nullity which painting has generally assumed in the last fifty years goes beyond all measure and alarms almost everyone. Although it seems to me that those who rise against such decadence, don't always realize just where the specific origins and the causes of this decadence reside.

Even when it is painters who protest, the question is treated marginally. To gain an idea of this, it suffices to read the excellent and psychologically acute small volume which Vollard published on Renoir's thoughts from his discussions on ancient painters. Tears and sighs and mute admiration in front of masterpieces in museums are not enough; nor are the general ideas and theories common today especially among the many writers on art (who are actually unsuccessful writers or painters who write), the principal goal of which is to beat around the bush and to fool the enemy. With this, I do not want to say that there exists a shortage of young courageous artists who take the problem seriously and search with every means to heal the wound. I know a few who, having sensed one of the principal causes of the problem make the effort to grind the colours they use themselves; but they mix them with oil, therefore apart from this small advantage, they continue with the same kind of painting that one obtains by buying commercial colours, and this is the mistake.

In order to fully understand the principal causes and the real cost of the decadence taking place, it is indispensable to observe the damage done by oil paints and the use of oil for painting; because the fact that such use allows one to work quickly, gives the illusion of a finished look when instead it is actually nothing more than foam and crust. Nor did such decadence begin yesterday; it goes back many centuries.

Looking once more at our great painting of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and even at that which continued until the death of Raphael, looking at such painting, I say, but not with an aesthete's eye or the eye of one who writes about art, because I know from experience how irrelevant all those books published in Europe today on various periods of painting are from a point of view of the material substance of paint, and how useless all the descriptive or pseudo-lyric rigmarole they contain is, with regard to the goal that we have set for ourselves. But by looking instead, I say, once more at our painting with an inquisitive and probing eye we see that, beyond the causes of spirit, of time, of tranquillity, of circumstantial support, of traditional craft, of patience etc, which contribute to infuse such power and such exquisite mystery, we see that there is even another cause, an astonishing one, which one does not, and can not ever think about enough. And since spirit, good spirit, exists in a few modern painters, there is no doubt that if time and tranquillity are found, circumstantial support and craft will be created bit by bit with method and a lot of patience, and we certainly don't lack patience, but tell me, friends, and look at your conscience of honest painters in doing so, with those paints and varnishes that you buy today at the merchant's, with those simple oil paints, can you ever get close, even vaguely, to the solidity, the transparency, the lyric strength of colour, to the clarity, the mystery, the emotion of any of the paintings of Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca, Botticelli, Dürer, Holbein or of young Raphael? Friends, have you ever realized that with the oil colours used today this is absolutely impossible?

It is not a question of imitating, remaking or copying. It is a question of finding a path toward a lost paradise, toward a garden of the Hesperides where we can gather other fruits than those already gathered by our great ancient brothers; but imagine that at wall encircles this garden and beyond this wall there is neither hope nor salvation.

We work in the most complicated art, the most difficult and tiring art there is: painting; an art in which one must do everything oneself, especially today; everything must be created from the beginning; therefore I am firmly convinced that now more than in any other epoch, that in this profession, one must think deeply of the material substance we use because this is where one must start if we want to radically heal the plague that afflicts painting today. It is in its very material substance that painting carries the germs of its illness, the germs that prevent it from becoming bright again and from shining, from drawing us to it like a magic mirror, from holding the passer-by's attention at length, and which even prevent it from being something sublimely playful and consoling, the supreme goal and supreme benediction of every great art: In materia venenum.

This is the thought that has been tormenting me for over three years, and I can swear on my honour as a conscientious painter that I have tried with all means to attain what I wanted by using the oil paints that all of you, my friends, use, whether I bought them ready to use, or whether for greater security I mixed them myself, but it was all of no use and so, after observing at length works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and even posterior works, after copying, in the museums of Florence and Rome, works which seemed to me more apt to teach me something, and after reading and studying everything I could find on painting technique in ancient as well as in modern treatises, I have reached the conviction that the most pure masterpieces of painting, from Flemish, German and Italian primitive art, to Dürer, Holbein, Botticelli, Perugino and Raphael,

are not oil paintings and that even Rubens and Titian did not paint with oil as is intended today, a word came to my mind, a word which has followed me since that time and is ever-present in the thoughts of a painter: tempera.

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It is of common opinion to think that Antonello da Messina brought the secret of oil painting to Italy from the Flanders and practically everyone imagines that the painter from Messina came back to Italy with knowledge of a way of painting more or less the same as that used by painters today: ground colours mixed with vegetable oil but more often with linseed oil which is then spread on canvas by using the same oil and some varnish. I believe, instead that Antonello's oil paint had nothing to do with the oil paint used today.

The use of oil mixed with wax has been known since ancient times. The Greeks used this mixture to paint their ships with colours that were bright and resistant to humidity and inclement weather.

Fidia painted some of his statues with oil. And without going too far back, but in any case before Antonello, it suffices to remember Ezio the doctor who at the beginning of the VI^o century spoke of linseed oil used instead of cod-liver oil and even spoke of the use of walnut oil in painting. But let us get back to Antonello da Messina where, by basing ourselves on various treatises on painting, we see what the famous secret of oil painting consists of.

It is well-known that the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck are considered to be the founders and discoverers of oil paint, however, this discovery has never been clearly explained, because the use of oil in painting, as I have already stated, was known quite some time before the Van Eyck brothers. In the museums of Europe I have observed the work of the Flemish painters at length – those earlier, later as well as contemporary to the Van Eycks – and I am convinced that the abovementioned brothers were not the discoverers of oil paint in its true sense, as is held today, but that what they did was introduce oil in emulsion with other substances, especially live and fossil resins, into so-called oil tempera emulsion, which was already known in the Flanders, to enable them through the use of veiling to give a greater finish, cleanliness and strength of colour to their painting.

“These oils which are their tempera” said Vasari, speaking of the Flemish in his *Life of Antonello*; and without doubt he was alluding to Flemish oil tempera emulsion, but it is sure, absolutely sure, that it was not colour, simply ground and mixed with oil and applied with oil, that we are dealing with here, but rather, with a tempera based mixture (egg, glue, resin, tempera etc) in which oil was only used as a means of unity and for the finish of the painting.

My judgment can also be confirmed with the following words of Michelangelo Bono, who in the 23^o chapter of his Treatise spoke on the different methods of painting on canvas or wood and said: “work and paint with oil tempera”; it is evident that the oil tempera of Bono is the same that Vasari spoke of in saying “These oils which are their tempera”. Without doubt, it is with this oil tempera emulsion that Holbein, Dürer, Pietro Perugino and Raphael painted.

What has misled and still misleads connoisseurs of art, even the most expert of them, is the fact that a varnished tempera, especially if it is oil tempera emulsion, more specifically: a painting executed

with any material that can be mixed with water in which the emulsion of oil or resin is involved, is difficult to distinguish from an oil painting, especially when layers of varnish have been given on top of the paint, as occurs with ancient paintings. This is why many paintings that are simply varnished tempera, like the portraits and the Madonna of Raphael are erroneously indicated in art books as oil paintings. And then, those who make this mistake, do so due to the fact that they don't realize the power and emotion of certain paintings, and not being painters themselves they can not understand that certain strengths and certain lyricisms can not be obtained with oil.

I often think with melancholy at all the various exploits the Impressionists used to infuse greater luminosity in their work while on their pallets, the very tubes of paint they so generously squeezed carried within themselves the germ of darkness, the extinction of all sonority of colour. I would like a tempera painted on wood panel by Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca or Botticelli, be placed beside a painting by Monet or Pissarro, or Segatini or Previati, in order to see the difference; to see which would be the most luminous.

The tempera paintings of the fifteenth or sixteenth century are the works that have best preserved their freshness and possess an inalterable clearness and transparency. With regard to the duration and strength of the colour, it is to these paintings that we must ask advice, to these and to the paintings by the Flemish who followed the same path, in bringing to perfection the technique of their tempera (because tempera does in fact lend itself to infinite combinations and ways to perfection) like the Van Eyck brothers who discovered the process of oil and resin emulsions which when used as a finish give a painting such magnificent splendor, united with the highest plastic strength, which so enchant us today. This was the method used by all the Maestros of the early Renaissance; a method that continued even afterward and that had its apogee in Raphael's portraits and Madonna, but in the meantime Leonardo the pernicious also appeared.

He threw onto painting the twilight of chiaroscuro which is a plastic problem or rather, a solution (and not the best) to the plastic problem, and it is not a problem of colour. Since then many painters have averted the problem of colour.

Even today the problem of chiaroscuro reigns. While tempera was still in use, even after the Flemish influence and the start of the habit of using emulsions with oil, clear colours remained, but then the pernicious mania of using white ground with oil and then mixed with other colors dampened any clearness and beauty in paint.

In order to prove the superiority of tempera colour compared to oil paint, with regard to clarity and strength, try mixing any colour (yellow-ochre for example) with a gum or glue of a light tone, or rather, with cherry gum, and then the same colour ground with linseed oil, even one that is clear and purified, and apply the two hues one beside the other on canvas or on a plaster panel; when they are dry, give each an equal coat of strong varnish and the difference between the tempera and the oil will be more than obvious: the tempera will be clear, pure and transparent; the ochre of the tempera will be more ochre than that of the oil, that is, the individuality, the intimate essence of this colour will be clearer in the tempera than in the oil paint. Over time these qualities are inalterable. The tempera will remain more luminous than the oil because its volume changes very little and in time it loses its transparency, while gum remains transparent and in time

consumes its volume of water in such a way that the molecules of colour mixed with it are visible on the surface, one much closer to the other.

Giorgio de Chirico

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This is what I think of tempera. I have tried to express myself clearly and briefly, and, above all, I wanted this preliminary discourse of mine to be persuasive; hence I have entitled it in Latin: oratio, as with ancient Roman orators, for whom the principal aim of their oration was, in fact, to persuade. Since theory isn't enough, in a following essay I will occupy myself with the technical aspect of tempera and specifically with that which I have experimented with personally.

(To follow)

Giorgio de Chirico

Pro tempera oratio by Giorgio de Chirico¹

The study, written by de Chirico around 1920 for the periodical «Valori Plastici»², seems to have been reworked and included in his later text *Pro Technica Oratio* in which many passages appear identical, which was published in the periodical «La Bilancia» in March and April of 1923.³ There are, however, interesting differences. For example, the mention of Botticelli, a painter whom de Chirico had already spoken of as one of the most significant exponents of the Tuscan vocation for drawing in a text entitled *Classicismo Pittorico*⁴, is absent in the second *Oratio*. The name Michelangelo Biondo, the sixteenth century author of one of the sources⁵ cited by de Chirico regarding his close examination of the technique of the Van Eyke brothers, appears erroneously as “Michelangelo Bono”, whereas in the essay of 1923 the name is correct. But the most important element on which our attention focuses is the affirmation: “This is the thought that has been tormenting me for over three years and I can swear on my honour as a conscientious painter that I have tried with all means to attain what I

¹ The unpublished manuscript dated ca 1920 (composed of 16 numbered pages measuring 21 x 16 cm) belongs to the Fondazione Primo Conti Archive (Inv. FC/VP Ms 4.5). We would like to thank Manuela La Cauza of the Fondazione Primo Conti Centro di Documentazione e Ricerche sulle Avanguardie Storiche, Fiesole, Florence.

² Some passages were transcribed in the catalogue of the “Valori Plastici” exhibition in Rome on the occasion of the XIII Quadriennale held at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. *XIII. Quadriennale - Valori Plastici*, exhibition catalogue edited by P. Fossati, P. Rosazza Ferrarsi and L. Velani, Skira, Milan, 1998, p. 281. The first and last pages of the manuscript were reproduced in: *La Metafisica: Museo Documentario*, exhibition catalogue edited by E. Coen, Grafis, Bologna, 1981, p. 103.

³ G. de Chirico, *Pro Technica Oratio*, in «La Bilancia», March and April 1923; published in G. de Chirico, *Il Meccanismo del Pensiero. Critica, Polemica, Autobiografia*, 1911-1943, edited by M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, Einaudi, Turin, 1985, pp. 238-244.

⁴ G. de Chirico, *Classicismo Pittorico*, in «La Ronda», July 1920; published in G. de Chirico, *Il Meccanismo del Pensiero*, cit., pp. 225-229.

⁵ M. Biondo, *Della Nobilissima Pittura et di la sua Arte, et dil Modo di Conseguirla Agevolmente di Michel Angelo Biondo. Utile et Breve Dottrina*, Venezia, 1549.

wanted [...] and so [...], a word came to my mind, a word which has followed me since that time and is ever-present in a painter's thoughts: tempera". If, as has been believed up until now, the text was written in 1920, this would make de Chirico's research regarding the material substance of paint date back to the Ferrara period (1917). Therefore, it would have been in this city where de Chirico, still dedicated to metaphysical themes, abandoned commercially distributed paints and resorted to powdered pigments, "grinding" them himself with linseed oil in order to obtain a more "ancient" material substance of the paint to adhere to his aesthetical requirements, as Jole de Sanna suggested some time ago.⁶ This research, as he himself specifies in this unpublished text (but also in *Pro Technica Oratio* of 1923) manifested itself in 1919-1920 with the "discovery" of oil tempera emulsion. It is noteworthy that the text ends with the intent of a second part of the text to follow, which would be dedicated more fully to the practical aspects of tempera painting. In reality, the text that appeared in its final version as *Pro Technical Oratio*, which appeared in two parts, this promise remains for the most part unfulfilled. Although, in this later text there are technical notes concerning oil tempera emulsion as binding and its advantages, it wasn't until the *Piccolo Trattato di Tecnica Pittorica* of 1928 that de Chirico provided a systematic report on his personal operative praxis with respect to the ways he used tempera from 1919-1920 on. At last, it is interesting to see that the artist felt the necessity of justifying the formula he used for this text as "entitled in Latin, *oratio*" in order to manifest explicitly its persuasive function. This demonstrates how, already in its first formulation, the text had, for de Chirico, an assertive technical-programmatic function, aimed at other artists in the Return to Order climate. This note, which clarifies the title and appears at the end of the text, is not present in *Pro Technica Oratio* of 1923.

Salvatore Vacanti

⁶ G. de Chirico, *Piccolo Trattato di Tecnica Pittorica*, edited by J. de Sanna, Scheiwiller, Milan, 2001, pp. 63-64.