Giorgio de Chirico – Still Lifes

Natura-morta has another name in German, one that is much more beautiful and much more fitting: *Stillleben* – Vita Silente. In fact, *natura-morta* is a painting that represents the still life of objects and things; a calm life, without noise or movement, an existence expressed through volume, form and plasticity; objects, fruit and leaves are motionless, but they could be moved by human hands or by the wind. Still lifes represent things that are not alive but which are tied to the life of humans, animals and plants and which are on earth, on this earth that breathes intensely with life, full of noise and movement.

Everything on our planet is enveloped in air. Without air, everything would die. Air surrounds our earth and penetrates soft objects, silk or velvet drapes, a feather pillow or a very ripe fruit. When observing these objects that offer so little resistance to the air, these soft bodies that are pleasant to the touch, one might say that the air embraces them more closely than other things and even becomes one with them. There is a need to make visible in a painting this penetrating embrace, of the air which in reality characterises soft bodies. Hard bodies, with their strong surfaces and pronounced contours, give the impression of repelling the air, which withdraws and moves away from these contours and impenetrable surfaces. The layer of air appears to have been cut by rigid contours and no longer offers our gaze the soothing rest that its softening presence provides. There is a need to paint this interplay of air that defines and clarifies the substance of objects and shows us their hardness or softness. The substance of things matters more than the colours; it is the substance that determines the form, while plasticity is intensified by the layer of air that envelopes things. It is the air which allows us to guess and see with our mind the side of objects that is invisible to us. The air allows things to emerge, softening contours while intensifying their shape at the same time. The air is everywhere, the air also needs to be painted on the canvas. Painting the air is incredibly difficult. Painting the air means giving such plasticity, such volume, such strength of form to things that you can feel the air circulating and that the objects appear suspended, motionless, yet alive, in the air that shifts and moves, while things seem frozen, immobilised as if by magic, with their boundaries, their promontories, their terraces, their towers, their viewpoints, their horizons. A still life contains an entire geography, a whole world in miniature, like an illustrated dictionary.

In a painting, as I have noted before in my previous writings on art, everything depends on the material with which it is painted. The plasticity of the shapes is determined as much by physical matter as by the metaphysical matter inherent in the painting. The physical matter is the tangible body of the painting and the metaphysical matter is the talent that has managed to create said body. Beautiful material used with skill, that is, two things produced by genius, allow us to see, or rather to feel in a painting, the air and the effects of its play.

A talented painter, painting a *natura-morta*, truly paints the still life of things created by nature or made by humans. Nature and reality have no aesthetic problems, no artistic concerns. It is the duty of the artist to give beauty to the things that he sees and interprets.

A jug can be quite modest and insignificant, to the point of not being seen when it is on a farmer's table, but in a beautiful painting it can become an object full of nobility and charm.

Beauty and excellence in painting are indispensable in still lifes, and this is proven by a characteristic example of a still life of white flowers painted by Manet, belonging to

the Louvre Museum (in the Camondo collection, if I'm not mistaken) and well known through reproductions. In this context, despite the artist's ability and his evident intention to paint the subject in the style of the great paintings, as is evident from the brushwork, which clearly shows an effort to create the fluid, sustained modelling found in the best paintings by Velázquez and Franz Hals – despite, I must say, the skill and good intentions of the painter, the goal is not achieved. The brush strokes are inefficient and lack drive, precisely because of the poor quality of the material. In short, it is like a suit that a well-intentioned tailor wanted to cut according to the rules of great art, but which nevertheless would have failed because the fabric is poor. The suit in this case does not fit the body in the way it was intended to; it is neither pleasant to wear nor to look at. Similarly, in Manet's still life, all the artist's good intentions and commendable efforts are shipwrecked on the fatal rocks of poor material.

The term "still life" started to be used in the last century. This term was a prophecy that was fully realised in modern painting. Modern works depicting fruit and objects without form or relief are indeed still lifes; they are unreal and flat, lacking in atmosphere. These fruits and objects are truly dead.

The still lifes painted by so-called modern painters could not even be used as signs for grocery shops. Indeed, a delicatessen, a fruit seller, a bakery or a pastry shop displaying a still life painted by a contemporary avant-garde painter as its sign would scare customers away rather than attract them, and those poor shopkeepers who had bet on the appeal of the modern still life would soon be forced to close their shops. The still lifes of modern painters are even inferior to the simple and banal folk art created by sign painters.

Those modern painters who, in the hope of making a better impression, of saving face in front of snobs and intellectuals, and also of getting by with even less effort than their aforementioned colleagues, those painters, I say, who today devote themselves ardently to ultra-stylised still lifes, to spiritual still lifes, rehashing certain Picasso paintings from no more than thirty years ago, those painters candidly believe that Picasso painted those expressions at the time because he carried them within himself, and did nothing more than raise the curtain on a spectacle whose secret and monopoly he alone possessed, those painters, I repeat, believe that such expressions can be reproduced ad infinitum, with more or fewer variations, and that their flat and belated imitations can have the same value, or almost the same value, as the works once created by Picasso, the grand master and hypnotist of the aforementioned painters.

Still life requires an extensive knowledge of technique and simultaneously a sense of simplicity, but not, let's be clear, the simplicity that is so popular today among modern artists and which stems from naive sculptural incompetence and a complete lack of artistic intelligence. Rather, it is that other simplicity, superior and lyrical, as can be seen, for example, in certain paintings by Louis Le Nain.

Still life requires a sense of authenticity, something like the joy one feels when looking at, touching or smelling a piece of fine leather, old walnut or cherry wood, or an antique ivory object, gilded by the patina of time.

That real, pure thing that we need to feel in a still life must make us forget the false, metallic, mechanical, ephemeral and, at the same time, provincial and boorish sense conveyed by certain aspects of modern life. A few days ago, I saw the castle of Ferrara in a dream. It was a strange dream. It was night-time during the dream: a national holiday, some important event was being celebrated in the city of Nicolò, and the whole castle was lit up. The flames, which must have been numerous torches fixed along the walls and towers of the castle, outlined its silhouette with red lines, with lines of fire, against the deep darkness of the night. After I woke up, I thought how much more banal, how much less beautiful or simple that spectacle would have appeared

to me if, in my dream, I had seen the castle lit up by electric spotlights, as was recently common practice in European cities to illuminate their main monuments at night, thus creating an atmosphere of insomnia, an aestheticising, cold and unpleasant atmosphere.

But let's return to the still life.

When faced with a beautiful still life, simple people, men without intellectual pretensions, can often be heard exclaiming, "Oh, how real those apples and oranges are, look, it's as if you can touch them. Look at those grapes, I want to pick them and eat them!" These naive statements, these words full of sincere enthusiasm, are a warning to those intellectuals who have not yet been submerged by the filth of snobbery, to those intellectuals for whom snobbery could not only atrophy but even suppress every human feeling of joy and pleasure.

It does not matter if those same men, those same simple and sincere people, can express the same admiration in front of a painting produced superficially, but ultimately lacking artistic beauty and interest, in front of one of those academic paintings in the style of the 1900s. What matters is the sincere joy that a man feels in the presence of a painting. The joy a simple man gets from an image that pleases him. The joy felt when looking at a painting gives rise to the hope that the day will come when this joy will be justified by the beauty of the painting, as it once was, and that the painting will be able to be reborn on earth. Then we will no longer hear or read those silly and ridiculous words and phrases that so many intellectuals and mystics of modernism write and parrot in front of the soporific emptiness of most modern paintings.

I wonder, before which still lifes of modern painting, starting with those of Cézanne, would one hear words of sincere enthusiasm? In front of Cézanne's still lifes, I have heard cries of admiration, oh yes, I have heard them!... But those cries were not sincere; their mouths cried out, but the rest of their faces remained motionless; they were automatons crying out, and indeed today's snobs and intellectuals are more like automatons than flesh-and-blood human beings. Their cries belong to that special language, created by modernism, which circulates from mouth to mouth among the circles of international snobbery.

In still lifes, as in figures, Cézanne was unable, even as planes and volumes moved towards cubism, to save those paintings from the immeasurable sculptural emptiness into which they sank.

The greatest merit that our "aesthetes" can find in a still life today is the so-called delicacy of tones; they speak of a grey close to pink, of different shades of beige, but they never speak of form, volume, plasticity, the power of modelling, of design, thus of painting that is painting, of what every painting worthy of the name should be... These gentlemen who today talk so much about tonal painting (it is a very fashionable expression at the moment), these gentlemen, I believe, must get it into their heads that a tone and a colour cannot have any value whatsoever unless they are contained in a form and a volume painted with great sculptural force, with great knowledge of the craft, with great talent.

In a still life by Chardin, the colours would lose all their beauty if, instead of having the sculptural power and perfect execution that it possesses, the work were painted in the empty, shapeless and flat manner that characterises modern painting.

Form, volume and modelling have disappeared from today's paintings, and their absence is explained away by the eternal excuse of style and spirituality. A beautiful phrase has been found to justify all the mediocrity of today's painters: it is said that they have created their world, their own world. The phrase is well chosen, except that, applied to both good and bad painters, it has lost its meaning. Yes, it is true that the

grand masters had their own world, a vast world full of passion and mystery; but today, the "worlds" of painters are expressed by a single standardised world, and this non-existent, uninteresting, unattractive "world" can be seen in every country, yet every painter would like to have a monopoly and exclusivity over it.

Let us change the name *"natura-morta"*, which was once a moment of prophetic inspiration for paintings depicting things and objects. Let us call these paintings "vita silenziosa", as they are called in German. Perhaps this name will help to abolish the sinister prophecy that has now come true so completely.

Giorgio de Chirico
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