

**TODAY'S
“ITALIAN RENAISSANCE”
A Letter from Italy
by Corrado Cagli**

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hen, in 1945, I went down to Italy after months up front in Germany, I was surprised to find in the ruins a cheerful people and a great deal of activity in all fields. The field of painting was no exception. At first glance, this seemed almost unbelievable, for I could neither guess where a painter could get colors, brushes, and the various other materials of his craft, nor who, in the evident misery of the country, could afford to buy works of art.

I came to the conclusion that painting has much less to do with economics than with faith. It shouldn't, then, have surprised me that the tragedy of the last few years had strengthened the Italian faith in painting.

Right after my trip to Italy, I returned to New York, and there I found a tremendous amount of curiosity about Italian art. There was also a tremendous lack of information, easily explained by the fact of the war and of its length. Various magazines, from Vogue to View and from Harper's Bazaar to the portfolios of Caresse Crosby, attempted to cover the field.

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ince these publications appeared, I have heard a good deal of talk about an “Italian Renaissance”. Obviously, there is no “Italian Renaissance” whatsoever. Even the idea of a renaissance in the Italy of 1945 to 1947 seems pompous and unreal. A “renaissance” gives the impression of an *esprit de retour*. But since Modigliani, Boccioni, Morandi, and De Chirico (1912-18), the Italian school of painting has been an independent one. There has been no lack of continuity that would justify the necessity of a rebirth.

I wonder if the rhetorical interpretation of a “renaissance”, which has been given to simple facts, isn't due to the above-mentioned reportages – all optimistic but quite contradictory and each dedicated to a different selection of artists and facts.

I don't wish to accuse the American reporters of lack of critical judgment. On the contrary, some of them were very well prepared. But it is difficult to believe how hard it is for an American journalist to overcome the obstacle of the thick fence of feuds that cuts the narrow republic of contemporary Italian painting into a million fields, trends, styles, and schools. This is nothing new, nor is it typical of Italy. Paris has its Montparnasse, New York its Greenwich Village, and Rome its Via Margutta. The old joke – “Via Margutta, gente brutta” - is true enough, but it is here that the journalists usually land to discover new Italian painters, or an Italian Renaissance - and here that they find instead only a lot of picturesque characters, producing a lot of junk. What capable characters are these, crafty and arrogant enough to blur gently, with the help of Italian sun and wine, the judgment of some of the best American correspondents!

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f this were not the case, why are names unimportant in Italy known in New York, while outstanding figures like Arturo Martini, most important Italian sculptor of the last twenty years, have not yet

been heard of ?

For one good Italian painter, fifty mediocre ones make the atmosphere foggy. *Sciu-scias* on a higher level, they run their own racket - to isolate as much as possible the visiting foreigner in search of true values. As soon as the guest is completely convinced that the two painters and the one sculptor that he knows are the *only* good ones in Italy, the *sciu-scias* launch an attack to destroy the self-confidence of their foreign friend.

For example, when Caresse Crosby, with passion and good will, went to the Studio di Villa Giulia, an important atelier specializing in a high level of handicraft, the touchy head of the studio, perhaps offended by the interest Mrs. Crosby was taking in his work, told her, "You Americans had better stick to your iceboxes. As for painting, sculpture, mosaic, and so on, leave that to us".

Still the gentleman who took this stand was at that time sponsoring a tremendous output of monumental tables made of mosaic and intarsia, in precious stones and marbles, such as the Emperor Diocletian might have commissioned for his Terme. His studio was using designs by artists not always on a level with Noguchi and Graves. And Noguchi and Graves are not ice-boxes! If the latest rumors from New York are accurate, the Museum of Modern Art is planning a show of contemporary Italian art. Should such critics as James Thrall Soby and Alfred Barr be sent on a mission of this kind, their judgment and their selections would be an even greater contribution to the Italian milieu than to the art world of New York.

I am sure that the reason Italian painting is in a state of deep confusion is because there is no discrimination on the basis of quality alone. I am also sure that nothing is more rare in Italy today than a critic capable of being at once competent, honest and authoritative. If there is an exception to this rule, I apologize. But if any critic in Italy had all three of these qualities, he would be so outstanding that his influence would be felt, and his name could not easily be forgotten.

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n spite of the three main handicaps-the activity of the *sciu-scias*, the low tone of Italian critique, and the amateurish methods of Italian art dealers the Italian field is as rich in creative talent as any you can mention. But the art world of Italy is not centralized like that of France or the United States. An accurate survey of prominent Italian painters of the older generation (prominent rather for what they have done in the past, than for what they are doing now) finds De Chirico in Rome, Sironi and Carni in Milan, Morandi in Bologna, Casorati in Turin, Severini and De Pisis back in Paris. Ottone Rosai is still the only important painter that I can think of in Florence.

In Italy, when you ask about the work of an outstanding painter of the class of a Rosai, a Mafai, or a Carlo Levi, you may very likely be told "E' finito!" (He's finished). This is a question of *malcostume* on the part of people who mistake their wishes for reality. Painting takes a long time to develop, and to follow the growth of a true painter is like following the growth of a tree. Even if your eyes cannot register such a slow process, you don't come to the conclusion that the tree has stopped growing.

Painting itself is a slow-growing tree. Therefore, many of the names of the "new" Italian artists were not new to me. Mirko, Carlo Levi, and Guttuso had never been heard of in New York before the season of 1946-47. But in 1932-33, when I remember them, they were already potentially what they are today - even though they had not yet reached the fine international stature that now puts them quite above the crowd. In Rome, in addition to Mirko and Guttuso, you will find a few leading painters like Mafai, Afro, and Capogrossi, and some extraordinary painter-writers like Savinio and Carlo Levi. Among the sculptors in Rome, I prefer Fazzini and Leoncillo, though both are less strong than Mirko, and much less mature than Marino, who now lives in Milan and who is one of the best of the European sculptors.

Then there is "*una nuova fioritura*" of new painters, who haven't had time enough to grow to full-

sized trees, simply because they are young or have only recently started painting. Among these, Vespignani, aged 24, is one of the best, and Scialoja means something along the line established by the great Soutine. A slight American touch à la *View*, halfway between non-objectivism and neo-surrealism, can be found in the work of Polidori, aged 23, an interesting fellow. An American painter from New York, Nicolas Carone, has improved greatly since he started to work in Rome. Some of the younger artists, (Vespignani, Polidori, etc.) are centered around L'Obelisco, a gallery well run by Gasparo Del Corso and by the writer, Irene Brin. P. M. Bardi's large gallery, La Palma - a sort of Roman edition of Wildenstein - has given retrospective shows Morandi, De Pisis, Guttuso, and Cagli.

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peaking of Roman galleries, with the exception of La Palma, they remind you more of those of the Rive Gauche than those of 57th Street. L'Obelisco, for instance, suggests a boîte-de-nuit, on the order of the cabaret of Agnes Capri in 1938. La Palma, like Knoedler in New York, brings out all my infantile fears! In Knoedler, I feel as if I were in a bank; in La Palma, as if I were in a museum. You will not feel strange in the Roman galleries, for you will see many familiar faces. The American colony in Rome is very much alive and brings to all important openings a spirit of intelligence and warmth.

But remember, when you leave the galleries, beware! The sciu-scia waits around the corner. You can spot him easily - he always hides behind a tremendous pair of mustaches.

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