

Garbo and Materia

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The truth in art is very difficult to define, perhaps even more complicated to find and the role of the critic appears completely marginal. Far more useful is the anthropologist who examines carefully the habits of the tribes, in that practice that the Germans call the *Sittengeschichte*, which the Italian language defines as "ethics" but which literally means "history of sedimented habits". Nino Perrone is in fact a visual narrator of sedimented habits.

There is no doubt: there is an imaginary of southern Italy, dominated by the sun, by the seasons, by the sea. And there is immediately a small ancient world of human curiosity, where social life is night when it is hot and imagination takes power as soon as the opportunity is offered. There are expressed transverse looks and unexpressed desires. It is the Italian version of the Hispanic Grand Theater of the Mundo, but it is known that in those parts, between the Aragonese and the Bourbons, the baroque spirit of Gongora has found fertile ground.

It is a strange question that of painting. The twentieth century just ended seemed to have decided that this practice of creating images thanks to the laying out of colored matter had been definitively overcome by more advanced languages and techniques more suited to the vast communication that required a mass culture. Yet painting has survived; indeed, it seems today in an excellent state of health. Nino Perrone celebrates it, is a witness and a polite protagonist.

Giorgio Soavi (1923-2008) and Mario Spagnol (1930-1999) were friends in Milan, the first born in Broni the second born in Lerici, both intellectuals, the former as a writer, the latter as an attentive publisher. Both of them had an almost pathological attention to painting, collecting and commenting on ancient and modern painting in a parallel way. This passion of theirs made them strangers to the avalanche of maniacalism and instead made them an intriguing duo of supporters of an expressive language that lasted through the centuries, not dying before the fashions then in force of minimalism and conceptuality. For them, painting was a natural expression of the human being, like singing and poetry.

And the two of them, always in a duet, supported Nino Perrone's painting with conviction and affection. Spagnol was born on the shores of the Mediterranean Tyrrhenian, Perrone was born where the Adriatic looks at the Ionian. Two very different seas, two very different lights, that of the West and that of the Levant. But not only two different lights were those because Bari is illuminated by the distant Byzantium, and Bari has drawn much of its imagination from the Byzantine culture. The city is still, unknowingly perhaps, under the mythical influence of the Orthodox tradition. It has inherited the complexity and intriguing baroque perception that was already present in the moving vascular culture of the ancients, when the earthenware vessels competed in

maritime businesses with the attic ones. These apulian terracottas were much more baroque, humanly narrative and domestic than the strict ones of the ancient Greeks. In Puglia it has always been baroque.

Being baroque is a way of the spirit, it is a mental verse to understand the world and also a tool to shape it daily. And so things are from parts of Bari since the night of antiquity, when the city was founded by merging the local peoples with a port of Cretan, adventurous dreamers from the Mediterranean island that had given birth to the first impressive statues of Kuroi. The nearby Calabria was very different, where Pythagoras and his disciples practiced monotheistic ratiocination, carefully avoiding eating broad beans.

In Bari today Nino Perrone revives the ancient gods turning them into carabinieri with plume. Their good-natured appearance is no longer fearful, but reassuring. Everything becomes human like a cheerful basket of bread. And Nino Perrone begins to narrate night parties where guests come together that seem to come from oriental rites while during the day he looks at the sea from which they land. He imagines human caricatures that very much recall those that antiquity transmitted in the fast paintings of vases decorated by his apulian ancestors.

Painting performs the miracle that photography is incapable of realizing: it transfers the mental and historical imaginary, the arcane felt or submerged, the myth and the fantastic into tangible icons. And painting takes on the virulence that only the thickness of its material allows. It gives life to the sign that articulates and shapes its depth. Because it is precisely in the act of writing on the canvas that the rhythm of the signs in the material is generated, that the psychological landscape is formed. The colors that only the lands of the sun and the night enhance are the protagonists.

And the ancient rite is perpetuated, with the ironic smile of someone who knows that.