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The April Issue

The April issue will contain three articles on mid-nineteenth century painting in England: Marcia Pointon on Mulready, Deborah Cherry on The Hogarth Club and Christine Poulson on Pre-Raphaelite illustrations of Shakespeare. There are Shorter Notices on Stubbs, G6ricault and Jean-Baptiste Regnault. Extra pages will be devoted to the Literature of Art.

was interrupted by the war and the team broken up by death and migration.

Through the influence of John and Myfanwy Piper and of John Betjeman a bye-product of these tours, which has provided the basis for an index for the use of students and artists, was the recording systematically on cards and photographs of nineteenth-century stained glass, then a completely neglected subject. Kendrick himself did some substantial research into the history of the firms engaged in the stained glass industry and of the designers they employed. All this material is deposited in the Ceramics Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Meanwhile Kendrick was appointed Keeper of his department in 1938 and elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1941. During the war he started to plan a more coherent organisation of the gallery display of the rich and widely scattered collections in his charge. He also enthusiastically organised the first post-war display, opened in 1946, in the King Edward gallery; he was especially pleased that the medieval manuscripts could be shown side by side with other works of art in his section, as is obviously right and in accord with his own treatment of the subject in his Anglo-Saxon books.

In 1950 Sir John Forsdyke resigned the Directorship of the Museum and Kendrick was appointed to succeed him at a most difficult period, when frustration of the staff was deeply felt at the slow rate of rehabilitation of the building, and the lack of finance for purchase and for improving display. During his term of eight years Kendrick wrestled with these problems and when he retired a new Coin Room was almost completed and the Greek and Roman Life Room almost ready for reopening after their complete destruction in the war. By 1958 other changes in the organisation of the museum and library were pending which were not at all to his mind.

During these years Kendrick's active intellect was employed, mainly as a relief, in exercises in the study of faith and evidence, patriotism and scholarship, tradition and personal investigation in the attitude to antiquity in western Europe. This series of books starting with *British Antiquity* [1950] showed Kendrick as a persistent and wide-ranging investigator and a subtle and sensitive interpreter of the attitudes of antiquarian writers, from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Camden, to the past of Britannia. It was followed by similar treatment of the reporting and reaction to the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, written for the bicentenary, and probably inspired by an autograph manuscript of Voltaire's poem in the possession of Kendrick's old and close friend Louis Clarke; in 1960 by *St James in Spain* a rigorous but gentle exposure of the baseless cult of the Spanish national saint at Compostella through generations of fraudulence and faith; and by *Mary of Agreda* [1967]; all of them written in an admirably relaxed but delightfully ironic style. His only other late book was a novel, evidently autobiographical, *Great Love for Icarus* [1962], recounting a month on the Welsh seaside in the summer holidays of an eleven-year-old boy in the halcyon era of 1906.

BASIL GRAY

The Literature of Art Exploring the neo-classical imagination

BY ANNA OTTANI CAVINA

It is hard to speak moderately of a book* one has so much enjoyed, but I shall endeavour to give my reasons for being so delighted — not to say surprised — at finding a work which ventures outside the normal paths of art-historical research in Italy. This book might even come as a pleasant surprise to

Francis Haskell, who, with a somewhat British detachment, recently accused Italian specialists of pursuing sterile aims in their research — Sisyphean research, in his view, which amounts to chasing the avant-garde terminology of alien disciplines, generally with disappointing results.¹ Our work, to put it bluntly, is a depressing symptom of provincialism. Even if we decide that Haskell's criticism is perhaps a little harsh, the fact remains that much of our recent work has not been absorbed by the Anglo-Saxons or the French. This indeed is a dangerous sign of autarky, caused *inter alia* by the decline in the knowledge of Italian abroad, where it is now restricted to a narrow élite.

Giuliano Briganti has been working on this book for some years. As early as 1967 he published *Pittura fantastica e visionaria dell'Ottocento*, which outlined the themes to which he has now returned. The present work seems to me principally an attempt to escape from the impasse of sterile, introspective art-criticism: it is therefore valuable in that it proposes a new method.

Throughout the work there is a certain impatience with that *'lukaciano rispecchiarsi, nelle manifestazioni artistiche, della realtà sociale di una epoca'*, (p.15), which, when it comes to the exploration of reality, tends to founder in mechanistic determinism. The same goes for the *Zeitgeist*, an approach which nowadays can offer little more than a superficial analysis of idealistic *Geistesgeschichte*. Briganti recognises the need to evolve a new method of interpreting our visual culture and responds to it with this study of the shift of artistic vision in late eighteenth-century figurative drawing. The innovative element, stated in the subtitle, is the psychological method of exploring the irrational aspects of a tendency which began in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

For the English reader, who does not at the moment have access to a translation of the book, there follows some information and a brief commentary on outstanding points.

The author defines his objectives thus: *'individuare, alle origini di una corrente, che, per più di un secolo, si pone come alternativa alle vie del moderno realismo, le ragioni di una sua autonomia, il configurarsi di strutture e di schemi mentali che si ripeteranno costantemente e che prendono forma nell'ambito di un mutamento decisivo del clima intellettuale negli ultimi decenni del Settecento'*. (p.242). The period is roughly that between Fuseli and Blake, including the sombre neo-classicism of the Ossianic revival. This book involves a long and elaborate investigation, then, of an area which, in recent studies and exhibitions, has been much explored by contemporaries. There was thus a risk of the author wasting his time, unless the discoveries were fresh and important.

This is the crux of the problem and the validity and cultural impact of the book depend on how this crux is resolved. In view of Briganti's dissatisfaction with previous analyses of the radical stylistic change occurring between 1770 and 1780, and his determination to follow paths other than those already well worn by social art-critics, it cannot be denied that Italian criticism has here made a real advance. Going straight to the nub, confronting the problem of the change of direction in those crucial years 1770-1780, Briganti, like Gombrich, chose to ask: 'How far a stylistic change may be used as an index to changed psychological attitudes, and what exactly such a correlation would have to imply?'²

Addressing the question of the *'rivoluzione che riguarda più la struttura antropologica che non la struttura della società'* (p.5), the author attributes the modification of expressive —

* I pittori dell'immaginario. Arte e Rivoluzione psicologica. By G. Briganti. 256 pp. + 237 ills. (Electa), L.35,000.

¹ FRANCIS HASKELL: *Arte e linguaggio della politica*, Florence [1978], p.vi.

² E. H. GOMBRICH: *Art Bulletin* [March 1953], p.82, review of A. HAUSER: *The Social History of Art*.

i.e. linguistic — norms in the art of men like Fuseli, Blake, Friedrich and Runge to modifications in the cultural and anthropological, rather than the social structure. And he posits, as the fundamental awareness underlying this visionary and fantastic art, an intimate connection with the most advanced, indeed revolutionary, strains of contemporary psychological thought. (p.16).

These declarations, going as they do to the theoretical basis of our discipline, could obviously give rise to lengthy debates and Briganti has in many cases anticipated and disposed of the counter-arguments which would be raised against him. The book, however, does not admit of such Byzantine quibbles; for it forces us either to adopt or reject concrete analyses of figurative phenomena. It compels us, in other words, to decide whether, compared to the studies of Antal or Schiff, this impassioned investigation of Fuseli's work is simply a restatement in different words of what we already knew, with only a slight change of approach — i.e. a purely structuralist exercise; or whether it allows the inclusion of factors which could not be taken into account without Briganti's notion of 'psychological revolution' — always bearing in mind the relativity of the interpretative method which Briganti is advocating, and which would certainly be less fruitful when applied to artists more firmly rooted in a socio-political context.

Now if we take, as it were, a test-drilling from this book, for example, the world of Fuseli — and the book is a real mine of information and exploration — I believe that Briganti's 'psychological approach', which focuses on changes at the deepest level, has several advantages: it allows us to reconstruct a more articulate historical context than can be done through the predominantly linguistic investigations of Schiff, or through Antal's study of the transmission of formal, iconographical models, which still retain the irreducible ambiguity of the artist himself.

Whereas Gert Schiff, confronted with Fuseli's anti-naturalism, simply points out *'il suo disgusto, se non incapacità per lo studio della natura...accompagnato da un timore puritano di fronte alle sue calde seduzioni'*,³ Briganti places this undervaluing of the physical world in the context of a process consciously experienced by a whole generation of eminent artists. To these artists, the rigorously sensory perceptions which had been among the great conquests of the seventeenth century, appeared suddenly reductive. Reductive, because based on the elaboration of *external* experience, while artists now were widening their field of inquiry to include the discovery of the subconscious and the legitimacy of inner perception. 'Damned reality never stops getting in my way!' — Fuseli's words can be viewed as his poetics. The key thing is the interpretation which Briganti has been able to propound by relying on the notion of 'psychological revolution', which he identifies as the notion which gives coherence to the experience of many different artists (not just Fuseli and Blake, but also Barry, Alexander Runciman, the 'Master of the Giants', Romney, J. T. Serpell, Abildgaard, Flaxman, Giani...). This notion, which allows the author to establish a common denominator — what I might call a psychic brotherhood — between these artists, is then tested by reference to specifically formal investigation. In other words, the author, analysing a representative work by means of a few individuating parameters (e.g. the crucial notion of space) demonstrates that the same features appear on the stylistic, formal plane as the artists have already revealed in their psychological sensibility.

Now I must make two points. The first is a plea that we should not allow this lucid, concise and elegant work to pass unnoticed. It explores many issues which few works on the eighteenth century have touched upon. Perhaps my plea is unnecessary, in view of the quality and importance of Briganti's

previous studies, all of which have become respected historical works. The true measure of the book can only be gauged by reading it: that, however, is not easy, and it requires a real effort to grapple with a text which never allows one to relax. Many of the images discussed are not unknown, but much of the information is in the process of being re-assessed.

The second is a more personal observation and concerns the structure of the book. This is in some degree, as Testori wrote, a *'libro-simbolo'* of the author's life, giving partial vistas (the more intellectualised side of eighteenth-century aesthetics), which do not have the same significance and resonance for everybody. It is thus on the same plane as Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, which some critics — Testori, Castelnovo and to some extent Praz — have sought to dismiss, only to be forced back to the admission that it is nonetheless a great book.

Briganti's contribution, which from now on must be compulsory reading in any study of these decades of the eighteenth century, not only gives us a new understanding of the paintings left by the *'pittori dell'immaginario'*. It also provides us with a historical picture of Rome in the second half of the century, which surpasses the fragmentary studies produced hitherto, as well as recreating, through documentation of impeccable rigour, what Lucien Febvre simply called the 'climate' of a whole generation. This vibrant, palpatingly real 'climate' — friendships, enthusiasms, crises, the terrific discoveries made by those restless Northern spirits during their Roman years — certainly did not emerge from Antal's *Fuseli*, where the attempt to recreate an atmosphere remained detached and external, expository, rather than going to the heart of the central theme.

One concrete example: the theme of antique revival and attitudes towards the past (p.204-18). This was, of course, one of the great themes common to all artists of the neo-classic era, so much so that Schiff wound up with the conclusion that every artist drawing on the antique repertoire was a classicist, whether by choice or *malgré lui*. The diagnosis is not entirely wrong: it contains some truth. Briganti, however, concentrates on the essential differences rather than the generic similarities. His is not a detailed study of one small area, but a methodological approach, a reading, which differentiates and interprets this gravitation towards the past. A past, moreover, which, like Janus, pointed different ways and in which for the more visionary painters did not stop *'agli inizi di una civiltà che si si identificava nell'archetipo classico recuperabile'*, but was rather *'un abisso di memorie...che si spingeva non sino a Roma e alla Grecia, ma sino ai primordi della vita'*, and went right back to *'quel passato che ogni uomo porta con sé nel fondo oscuro della propria coscienza'* (pp.104, 204).

Bearing in mind the critical stance of Starobinsky, for whom the interpretation of images means the transcending of visual perception in order to discover latent significance, Briganti offers fascinating 'readings' of topics discussed simplistically by others, such as certain artists' reserve *vis-à-vis* the neoclassical credo. In as much as antique images were quoted lucidly, being used as survivors of a formal system which was irretrievably lost, such reserve is charged with very specific meaning and becomes an alternative consciousness, diametrically opposed to that of the neo-classicists. It leads to the liberation of the emotions and clears the ground for the creative potential of the unconscious and of dreams.

From now on, anyone working on the eighteenth century will have to consult this book, whether their main concern is neo-classic rationalism or visionary art. It is written in a remarkable style, terse and crystalline. At every step, Briganti insists on a complex articulation of the world, yet his desire for knowledge never degenerates into abstract classification. And his genuine striving for totality is underpinned at every point by the necessary excursions into individual examples, which full and highly readable foot-notes make accessible and concrete.

³G. SCHIFF: *Füssli*, Milan [1977], p.9.