By LIONELLO VENTURI

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA—SEURAT—GRIS

The director of the National Gallery in London told me recently that the most popular pictures in his museum are Piero della Francesca's 'Baptism of Christ' and 'Nativity', and it is common knowledge that art-lovers sensitive to the present trends of taste nowadays go to Arezzo to see the frescoes in the Church of St. Francis rather than to Rome for the sake of Raphael's Loggias or Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Piero has not always been so high in public favour. His contemporaries appreciated and admired his skilled geometry and his effects of light; the same point of view is found in the sixteenth-century writings of Giorgio Vasari, who was born at Arezzo, a descendant of one of Piero della Francesca's pupils, and who took a special interest in the master. But the survival of Piero's fame depended on overcoming the difficulty that Florence and Rome were for long the cynosure of all eyes whenever there was talk of art centres. Piero was not a Florentine, and his works were not easily accessible. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries few people made the journey to Arezzo, Borgo San Sepolcro, or Urbino. And if they had done so, they would have found neither what Raphael

would have called beauty, nor observance of the rules of classic composition, and still less the Baroque tendencies then so much in vogue.

Those who, early in the nineteenth century, took a fresh interest in the 'primitives', were frankly repelled by Piero della Francesca's painting; Baron von Rumohr, for instance, tells us that it is not worth attention. It is understandable, moreover, that people who regarded Perugino as the perfect incarnation of the ideal in art should be chary of Piero della Francesca!

When nineteenth-century taste took a turn towards a realism tempered by the painter's selection from nature, Piero della Francesca came into favour because of the vigour of his brush. But he was increasingly criticised for the absence of ideal beauty and the over-emphasis on the geometry of forms in his work. Even Mr. Berenson, who drew attention to Piero's greatness as early as 1897, stressing the impassive calm of his pictures, free from emotion, admitted that his knowledge of perspective was sometimes a hindrance and that his works did not always attain beauty. This year, however, Mr. Berenson has published an essay on Piero della Francesca in which, without reservation, he expands on the theme of the artist's impassivity, emphasising its importance so far as to arrive at a definition of universal art, whose purpose is to *be* or exist rather than to express or represent. In the interim, Mr. Longhi had drawn attention to the unity of perspective and surface, of geometrical form, and of light and colour in Piero's painting. Many other writers, too, had taken a deep interest in him.

It should be realised, however, that the critics are not responsible for the enthusiastic public interest in Piero today, or, where they are, only to a very limited extent. The interest of art-lovers in Arezzo is attributable to the passion for the abstract which has possessed the greatest artists throughout the world in their work during the last seventy years.

Mr. Berenson considers Cézanne the cause of this development, but I do not think he is right. The Italian primitives who came back into favour with the contemporary public as a result of Cézanne's influence were Giotto and Masaccio. There is very little abstraction in Cézanne, who is closely attached to life (*pace* the critics who still maintain the opposite view today).

Of the great painters of the late nineteenth century, Georges Seurat bears most resemblance to Piero della Francesca. 'Painting is only a demonstration of surfaces and bodies with increasing or diminishing bounds.' It is a demonstration of perspective, designed to give a scientific

knowledge of the essence or natural objects apart from transient phenomena. The same applies to Seurat; the method he uses to achieve 'the art of penetrating a surface' is thoroughly scientific. Seurat said on another occasion: 'Art is harmony. Harmony is the analogy of opposites, the analogy of counterparts of tone and colour and line.'[1]

Neither Seurat nor Piero has said anything about his experience of nature, although each was intensely aware of it. Piero owes his experience to his immediate predecessors, the Florentine painters (above all, Masaccio) and the artists of Bruges (first and foremost, Jan van Eyck).[2] Seurat gained his from the Impressionists, particularly Pissarro. Both artists show the same double development in their work, moving, firstly, from the concrete to the abstract or from nature to harmony and, secondly, from the abstract to the concrete or from perspective geometry to the image. The art of both masters is a combination of these two trends.

Immobility, impassivity, impersonality, the view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, all follow from the double development to which I have referred; all our experience of the natural world is in fact moulded by the absolute, impassive, transcendency of geometrical form, and no harmony of line and colour, even though it be fixed for all eternity, is devoid of the vibrant quality of life.

The kinship between the two painters is not confined to the principles they followed, but also extends to their artistic qualities; their sense of stability and their love of absolute proportion, their passion for the monumental, the fine balance of light and colour, make their art similar in spite of the centuries which lie between them and their different environment.

Yet it was not Seurat who sent art-lovers flocking to Arezzo. It was Cubism.

Among the great Cubists, Picasso has twice in his career come close to the same conception as Piero. The first was the 'rose' period. 'La Femme à l'éventail' in the Mary Harriman Collection in New York is a masterpiece of concrete abstraction, a living exemplified ideal. Again in 1924, at the time of the revival of Cubism, Picasso painted several pictures, such as 'Le Tapis Rouge', in which it is difficult to tell what are geometrical shapes and what represents real objects.

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[1] cf. John Rewald, *Seurat*. Paris, 1948.

[2] cf. Piero della Francesca's treatise, *De Prospectiva Pingendi*. Edited by G. Nicco Fasola. Florence, 1942; and *De Corporibus Regolaribus*. Memoria di G. Mancini. Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 1915.

In several of his 'Barques sur la Plage', Braque also combined concrete and abstract form with such genius that the effect achieved is magical. But though he owes much to Cubism, it was not an essential factor in the development of his genius. Contrasted with the rigorous precision of Piero, Braque seems to come closer to the Impressionists.

On the other hand, we can see that same rigorous precision and objective detachment in Juan Gris. Mr. Kahnweiler tells us that, long after the painter's death, Picasso remarked, in speaking of one of Gris's pictures, 'It's good to see a painter who knows what he's doing.' Gris knew so well what he was doing that he was able to evolve a very clear theory.[3] 'Painters have always worked inductively. They have given a pictorial representation of something proper to a specific reality; they have taken a picture from a subject. My method is just the opposite. It is deductive. The picture X comes to coincide with my picture . . . . Pictorial mathematics brings me to representative physics. The quality or dimensions of a form or a colour suggest to me the denomination or the adjective describing an object' (p. 278). 'There is no doubt that a purely scientific discovery, which is merely capable of application to the technique of painting, like the Italian discovery of perspective, has influenced all æsthetics since the Renaissance' (p. 281). 'The only methods which are constant in painting are those which are purely architectural. I would go so far as to say that the only possible technique in painting is a sort of architecture of colour on one plane' (p. 282). 'I am well aware that, at the outset, Cubism was a form of analysis, no more constituting painting than a description of physical phenomena constitutes physics. But now that all the elements of so-called Cubist æsthetics are judged by the technique of picture-painting, now that the analysis of yesterday has become a synthesis, by setting forth the relationships between the objects themselves, this reproach can no longer be levelled at it. Regarded as only an aspect of style, what was called Cubism is no more; regarded as a theory of art, it has become an integral part of painting' (p. 290).

In the view of Piero della Francesca, perspective was not a method of painting; it was an ideal, an artistic tenet, the prime source of all formal creation. His method was thus very similar in essence to that of Juan Gris, who has the modern man's awareness of the distinction between the empirical and the mathematical, the inductive and the deductive way of proceeding. Gris regards his own method as akin to the Italian use of

[3] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Juan Gris*. Paris, 1946.

perspective; in his opinion, the ideal is Cubist abstraction, proceeding from the mathematical to the physical. Admittedly, the ascendancy of the purely physical element is much less obvious in his work than in that of Piero or Seurat. The important thing is the ultimate destination, the result of creative activity—in this case, an *idealised architecture*. That is the common bond between Piero della Francesca, Georges Seurat, and Juan Gris.

There is the source of the present current in favour of Piero della Francesca. It is to be found in our hungry desire for architecture, which architects, in spite of their magnificent efforts in the last forty years, have not succeeded in satisfying. As we are not yet able to produce real architecture in houses or churches, we produce it in painting, or we go to Arezzo. It does not matter whether or not painting is thus sacrificed to architecture; what matters is that the creative imagination of man shall develop freely.

We are witnessing a very impressioned, bold, and deeply committed phenomenon of taste. We cannot know where it will lead. It may lead nowhere, but, in history, it is the phenomenon itself which counts.