

7 Christ “Saviour and Source of Life”. Macedonian Icon

XIV Century. Temper on wood. 131x88, 5cm. Legend and inscription in Greek. Skopje Art Gallery.

This icon formed part of the iconostas of the monastery of Zrze Cathedral in Macedonia. Its author was Jovan-Zograph, celebrated metropolitan prelate and artist, inheritor of the last period of the Palaeologus. The stylistic features are still the beams of white lines, as well as the degraded passage of the shades to the clear ochre in the faces, necks and hands of the figures.

The fact that the same Man, the Son of God made Man (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” – John I: 14 -), is converted into an icon (image), encloses within a dignification of the image (it was the body of Christ, the Humanity of God, the argument with which John Damascene defended the image in the great iconoclastic debate in the VIII Century). Although in reality the mystery of The Incarnation may well have been a ruse by God who, trying by all means to preserve Absolute Power, became Man, in anticipation, to avoid, at least during a time, that Man succumbs to the more and more irrepressible desire of himself becoming God.

The image of Christ is much the most recurrent of all the history of art (according to Baltrusaitis, it is in Christian art where for the first time psychological expression is shown, as Amador Vega reminds us in his book about Rothko). Like all religious painting as a whole, it enters in decadence parallel to the religious crisis of the European society when, from the XV century, Art is little by little freed from its devotional function. Its splendour includes Bizance, Romanesque and Gothic, as well as Renaissance art and especially that of Counter-Reform Baroque.

In Italy, the crisis in the representation of Christ and everything related to his atrocious Calvary can already be seen at the end of the XVI Century in pictures such as those by Annibale Carracci, whose Pietá (Piety) in the National Gallery of London is “pure theatre” in the forced staging of its “affections”. And later in painters such as Sebastiano Ricci, Piazzetta (where, in the “Supper in Emaus”, in Cleveland Museum, the unusual plate of asparagus in front of Christ is much more convincing than the same Christ who is breaking the loaf of bread with the face of a fool), or the same Tiepolo. The marvellous and very unappreciated Venetian (for what dark reason all “kind” artists have, almost without exception, an identical and unjust destiny?) had a large influence on Goya (and not only on the young Pink Goya, but his engravings, fantastic and enigmatic like dreams, titled Caprichos and Scherzi di fantasia, were also important references for the Spaniard, together with those of Rembrandt). And, in spite of his incapacity or disinterest for the truculence which surrounds a good part of anything relative to Christ, nobody like Tiepolo has painted Angels (there are 266,613,336 Angels faithful to God and 133,306,668 fallen Angels, according to the calculation of the bishop of Tusculum, which has been taken as definite), pages and all the “Fellinesque” troupe of “character” actors which prefigure the Neapolitan Nativity with its highly detailed figures wrapped in starched and vaporous oriental clothes which make them look like filibusters.

The religious works of Goya, commissions he possibly could not avoid, are particularly weak, which is not unusual taking into account the liberal French like ideas of their author that brought him so many problems in the times of Fernando VII. Van Gogh, in a letter to his brother Theo, commented the strangeness he felt when looking at a crucified Christ by Rubens, which more than tormented by the crucifixion seemed to be suffering from stomach-ache (despite its so “human” Catholicism, the bourgeois and liberal seventeenth century Flanders was more given to celebrating the good things in life than to remembering the sufferings of the Calvary, although religion, as the “weapon of massive destruction” which it has always been shown to be, was still quite important enough to provoke long and bloody wars).

From then on religious art only became worse, as can be seen by visiting the collection of Sacred Modern Art in the Vatican Museums. The splendour which this type of art had in Spain

around the sixties of the XX century (something between abstract and futuristic, but without ceasing to be figurative, an art commissioned by the most archaic sectors of the Catholic Church) can be seen nowadays, as nowhere else, in the new façade of Gaudí's "Sagrada Familia" in Barcelona, by the sculptor Subirachs, about which any comment would be too much.

In reality what has happened during these last centuries in the West is that the religious spirit, or the spiritual component inherent in art, has gradually abandoned the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church which had it trapped like a precious singing bird in a golden cage (or like those "castrati" whose angelical voice blossomed after an atrocious genital "pruning"), leaving for ever its secular servitude and purging itself of the extensive collection Biblical anecdotes which during centuries it had been forced to illustrate (artists had even competed in religious doctrine with the most eminent and wise Doctors of the Church), giving place to the advent of the new Religion of Art, above all after Romanticism, during part of the XIX century and almost all of the XX (the religion of the XVIII** was that of pleasure, not of art, not to say that art and pleasure can not go hand in hand; maybe this is why we find XVIII man so familiar). With the triumph of Modern Art as a consequence of it, with its museums*** as the new cathedrals, its millionaire donors (who instead of deducting in Heaven, like those of the Middle Ages, deduct from the Tax Office), its great critics and directors of museums as high priests or hierophants and, of course, its Inquisition (its curators, an entire Committee of Great Terror) with its indispensable heretics and excommunicated, sent into ostracism and condemned to the fire of forgetfulness for not communing with orthodoxy (it is surprising how quickly the "new man" born from the revolutions which have taken place in the name of the highest political or aesthetic liberating ideals becomes dogmatic). To the present situation, when the collapse of this hegemonic model occurred during the last decades (a collapse which coincides fully with the end of the lengthy Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the momentary disappearance of the Socialist Block – it will be interesting to see under what new appearances the socialist ideals will reincarnate, in this unsustainable, unjust world in which we are inevitable doomed to-) has risen the Market as the unique and only deity. A market which, although it was always linked to art in one form or another, does not nowadays need it, although it does need its fake, ably invested with the enormous prestige that art has acquired during the previous centuries, in this way justifying the only thing which is transcendental nowadays: its high, almost astronomical prices (current museums and centres of Contemporary Art have followed a metaphysical drift towards the "idea museum", being the collection, the DNA of the museum, a mere detail without much importance; and the museum itself an aspiration to pure action, to pure happening).

In other cultural habitats such as Africa, the decadence of their marvellous tribal art is related to their disastrous contact with Western culture. They continue to make similar objects, but now only with commercial ends, be it to satisfy tourism's demand for souvenirs, or to trick the greedy dealers and collectors with copies, frequently very well made (the Africans use more homemade, more "natural" techniques in falsifying, although not for this any less ingenious and effective than the Chinese; such as submerging the wooden sculptures during a time in the village latrine for it to acquire the so appreciated patina).

The new African and Chinese urban artists have assimilated in a very short time the contemporary Western art methods. But above all the Chinese, with their innumerable art academies which have known how to adapt to the times (passing quickly from the traditional motives of birds and flowers, mountains and water or bamboo swaying in the smooth spring breeze, to neo-expressionist painting with thick fillers and gestural strokes, neo-abstract painting, post-pop, installations or immense digital and hyper-realistic photographs) and with their ancestral virtuosity for copying. Owing to the fact that in their tradition, copy and plagiarism are not badly considered (maybe for reasons not far from the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, as the copy is the bearer

of the spirit of its author, the copyist, therefore is always, in some way, an original), they are able to copy a Gucci bag with the spirit of Gucci inside (or that of the copyist, who is also a son of God), a Tàpies (an artist who, together with Miró, is especially easy for them to copy) or a bottle of Mouton Rothschild full of some odd liquid produced on the arid slopes of the mountains in the Northern region of Xingjian****. Thanks to all these abilities, the Chinese are now the last cry in contemporary art*****, in the Era of the Global Triumph of the Globalizing Globalization.

And, speaking of a universe as fascinating as that of the copy and falsification, about which Orson Wells made his famous film *F for Fake*, it must be said that in these matters the Great Tradition of Occidental Painting takes the cake. Copying was already well established in the Late Roman era, and in Renaissance and Baroque Europe there was an entire industry of falsification which gave work to many young artists (“painting in galleys”, as it was called), that Andy Warhol would have wished for his own Factory.

No-one less than the same Michelangelo began his career with a falsification (a sleeping cupid, now disappeared, which he tried to pass off as antique, as very high prices were paid for these). And Mancini, in his “Considerazioni” published in Rome in 1620, explained how these copies were made on old pieces of wood, smoked in the smoke of wet hay. The illegal practice was so overwhelming that Albrecht Dürer had to put this final warning in the series of woodcuts dedicated to the Life of the Virgin: “Beware thieves and imitators of works and the talent of others, of laying your hands on this Master Piece”.

Jorge Luis Borges, who had probably read everything, took for granted the fruitful and inexhaustible polemic around the virtues and defects of plagiarism and copying on affirming that plagiarism is legitimate if it improves on the original (Borges is usually considered as the father of Appropriationism, as one of his characters, Pierre Menard, had rewritten the Quixote word by word).

* It would be unjust not to mention some of the achievements of Modern Sacred Art, commissioned from great artists by the more advanced and “visionary” sectors of the Church:

Ronchamp Church, by Le Corbusier (confessed atheist, but unimportant, as the creative imagination of the artist may perfectly, as has been more than demonstrated throughout the history of Art, supply the artificer’s lack of faith).

The Dominican Chapel in Vence, by Matisse (greatly fond of the brothels during a good part of his life, as a voyeur, “professionally”, his passion for the unshaven nude female body being well known).

Marc Chagall (whose Judeo-Russian, oniric, popular and very folkloric mysticism is connected to that of Saint Francis, who went around the mountains with his fraticelli speaking to the animals face to face) carried out many public interventions, among which stand out the window glass in the University Clinic of Hadassah Synagogue, in Jerusalem and the stained glass windows in Reims and Metz Cathedrals (neither was he adverse to accepting the commission for a mosaic for the First National City Bank in Chicago, as Bankers are also sons of God). And, in Niza there is a “Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall”, in strict coherence with the life and work of an artist who pretended nothing less than “insufflate in his paintings the breath of prayer and sadness, of the prayer for salvation and resurrection”.

The Meditation Chapel in Dallas, lined with large abstract canvases by Rothko (tormented like a modern Michelangelo, obsessed by a mystic of artistic experience, his “terribilità” led him to refuse converting the refractory of the Seagram Building in Chicago into a tabernacle, in his

particular attempt to cast the merchants out of the temple – an honorable and worthy endeavour, but entirely useless: they go there anyway and wash their feet in the baptismal font if they so wish-).

Emil Nolde, in his old age, painted many pictures where the religious theme is treated with a colouristic Expressionism of great primitive strength and a simplification of form frequently bordering on infantile (in his search for the “original cry” or Urschrei, characteristic of the members of the Die Brücke group, without knowing that only a few years later a frustrated painter converted, thanks to politics, into “total artist” would make “erleben” –experiment- all of Europe into a real Urschrei, not limited to the surface of a canvas or to the three dimensions of sculpture).

Georges Rouault could almost be considered as a modern icon painter (without doubt to him is owed the best “religious painting” of the XX century, both in technical quality and depth of content).

It is surprising that the only aspect of the Art of all times the insatiable vampire of the XX century, the unavoidable Picasso, did not pass through his personal and voracious shredder, terrible as a carnivorous plant, was Western Sacred Art (it would be interesting, even though it were only an experiment, maybe a subject for the thesis of some student, to try to imagine XX century art without Picasso; in the same way as one could write a history of XX century Art with only his uncountable creations).

Not so many years ago, Antoni Tàpies, (whose pretension, more than to make works of art, it to create true relics) made a sculpture in the shape of a sock which was big enough for the troubled citizen of the end of the XX century to enter and meditate in its interior in front of a small holey sock which, in the way of the old crucifix or the cold and bare skull Saint Ignatius of Loyola proposed, would remind him of humility and poverty, the stripping which leads the search for “the spiritual”. All the peripetia around the sculpture failed to materialize, which was no obstacle to the “controversial” artist to achieve by making a meditation room, called Espai-Reflexió, in the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. In the empty space of the hall there is a large painting by the artist-priest, a large “unique stroke” which draws the silhouette of a bell, in black on a clear background, as well as a group of chairs hanging from the wall in the back as a weightless and surreal auditory. Visiting hours are from one to four.

**Proof of the decadence which affected religious art from the beginning of the XVIII Century, is that when the priest brought the crucifix to the face of the painter Antoine Watteau (died in 1721) with the intention of pacifying his last moments, the only thing he achieved was to horrify the painter when he saw how badly sculptured were the features of Our Lord.

***The affair of Museums is a passionate theme and has a great future. There is already a Tree Museum in Rapperswil-Jona, Switzerland, born through the will of the tree collector Enzo Enea to help the public understand basic elements of life such as time and space, the quintessential of these old trees. Soon, a good walk through the countryside with our children will be substituted by a very instructive visit to the Tree Museum, or one of these rural life museums where we can see a cow, a sheep, a chicken or the artisanal way of making bread (not in vain the artist Thomas Mailander has created an installation called the Chicken Museum, a photographic exhibition thought for a community of a dozen laying hens). The first stones are being laid for the new People’s Museum near the Zero Zone in New York, where some examples can be seen of the human being as he is now, in view of the changes in human nature which, having begun to appear, will accelerate in such an unpredictable way in future decades thanks to the new scientific advances.

Despite everything, the “institution museum” is not completely free of dangers. As taken to its extreme the “infinitely expanded concept of art” which can currently be enjoyed, the aestheticized reality which surrounds us could be seen, more and more, as a great open air museum. Thus these controversial institutions whose functions their managers do not stop trying to redefine could easily become definitively obsolete (or even return to what they have always been: a simple but worthy warehouse more or less well ordered and usually quite charming).

****To avoid the temptation of falsifying wines costing over one thousand Euros a bottle, every day there is an auction in Las Vegas of the Petrus crop of the year.

***** When Napoleon said that about: “Ah, when the sleeping lion awakes!” (like Hegel, the “Small Great Man” saw China as immobile, frozen in time forever, maybe thinking that the fallen eyelids of the Asiatic people could indicate that they were sleepy, when in reality they were waiting patiently and sibylline for their opportunity to give the definite Great Jump Forward), he could never have imagined that, once “awake”, instead of destroying the great creations of Western culture, as did the Tatars or Huns, in reality they were to be their faithful depositories. In charge of making their “security copy”, so that they would not be definitely lost like so many marvels created by ancient civilizations which, despite knowing that one day they existed, we will never see (although maybe, more than about copy, it would be pertinent in this case to speak of a concept like that of shadow).