

CONCEPTUAL FINE ARTS

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LUIGI ZUCCHERI, THE ACCIDENTAL MODERNIST

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view of Luigi Zuccheri, *Untitled (Temporale con insetti e figure umane)*.
Courtesy MMXX Milan. Ph: DSL Studio.

A 20th century, ancient Venetian painter who found himself modern by chance, Luigi Zuccheri pushed localism to the limit.

'na lingua mia

Luigi Zuccheri was born on March 13, 1904 in Gemona del Friuli. He attended the gymnasium in Udine and high school in Venice. Later on he also took private painting lessons in both cities with two different teachers. Many places cross Zuccheri's path: the Friuli region—the family palace is located in San Vito al Tagliamento—Venice, Paris for a formative trip in 1929-30, and Florence in the late 1940s, where Zuccheri buys a farm and befriends Giorgio De Chirico.

[An exhibition at MMXX in Milan recently re-introduced the work of Luigi Zuccheri to a contemporary audience. The paper you are reading is part of the exhibition catalogue, Ed.]

San Vito al Tagliamento is eighty kilometers away from Caporetto and a few more kilometers from the river Piave. The young Zuccheri grows up in an aristocratic household situated between the countryside and the WWI trenches. Even in his later years, horror still dominates his life. Zuccheri becomes a fugitive during the Nazi occupation. His character is torn between gloominess and some kind of cheerfulness that leads him to turn every object in his house into sculpture.

The life and work of Zuccheri have often been accused of anachronism. For many, the twentieth century meant something different than his persona and aesthetics. However, understanding Zuccheri's places of origin—the regions of Veneto and Friuli—helps to understand his position in history.

Que rien ne pouvait le rendre ridicule

Precisely when Luigi Zuccheri is born, a famous unrequited lover happens to be in Venice. The revolutionary Anglo-German painter Walter Sickert, known in popular culture for being among the witnesses to identify Jack the Ripper, falls in love with Spanish Maria Luisa Fortuny, sister of the famous Mariano. She is said to keep rats as pets and use a chair

instead of a bed to sleep. Her rejection of Sickert is absolute, yet he is so in love that he writes hundreds of letters to his Spanish friends in France, desperately asking to intercede on his behalf. These letters only manage to spread the rumor of this unrequited love across Europe. When this reaches Degas, the French painter does not laugh but writes of his good friend Sickert “que rien ne pouvait le rendre ridicule” (that nothing could put shame on him).

Sickert is an excellent example to picture the city of Venice from the perspective of a popular painter in the early 20th century. At the San Vio tea parties in town, the young man meets impressionists from London such as Frances James, who has retired to Asolo, or portraitists traveling to India like Mister Ward. He converses with the Princess of Thurn und Taxis and writes praises for the three Montalba young sisters, who were educated in the use of the camera chiara.

The Venice Biennale, founded only a few years earlier, celebrates the marriage between English, German, French, Spanish and Venetian brush strokes, but fifteen years later, when Luigi Zuccheri reaches the waters of the Venetian lagoon, that world has already vanished, faded in the glow of the city, leaving behind a network of outdated influences, which are no longer relevant compared to the avantgardist ideas and forms blossoming elsewhere. The Venetian teacher of Zuccheri for example, Alessandro Milesi, is a genre artist influenced by numerous old ancestors, focused on reproducing reality in realistic and sentimental tones.

Imagine hundreds of painters who live in Veneto and Friuli in the first decades of the twentieth century: permeable souls, split between their roots and European fashions. They inherit tonal and elegiac views of villages and marinas, sometimes sensual portraits of peasants and acolytes, sharpened by the style of the Secession, lightened by Impressionism, addressed to the realism of the Macchiaioli, in the languor of decadent poetry, in the melancholy of the literature of the Crepuscolari.

Small things, monumental techniques

In spite of his conservative environment, Luigi Zuccheri's achievements are remarkable and original. His paintings from his maturity depict little men and their busy, rural lives. They stand next to large animals, vegetables, flowers, ambiguously placed in the foreground. We are left to wonder whether their monumentality is due to a primitive use of perspective or a declared intent to alter reality. Zuccheri is always but a step away from becoming a surrealist of ideas, rather abandoning himself to the inaccuracy of perception when this is left to thought. In his paintings we don't get to know whether the insect is bigger than the pear it is devouring, or the duck bigger than the man who is feeding it.

Old fishermen in Venice still remember how no more than seventy years ago swordfish would get stuck in heaps of algae, dying among the salt marshes of the lagoon. Where the ferries to the islands now pass, Peter's fish along with dolphins and small whales would follow the traditional bragozzi fishing boats. In the works of Zuccheri, these species that disappeared from the murky Venetian waters stand out disproportionately, similar to the sea monsters of ancient nautical charts. Like a fantastic fisherman and hunter, the painter contents himself with the vision of the beasts. He strolls, carrying cages full of crickets and other small animals with him. He makes zoological pilgrimages to the Venetian islands on the sailboat he bought after WWII.

Luigi Zuccheri's painting is feverish and contemptuous, similar to Francesco Guardi's in many ways, especially in their use of colors. The rural subject is anything but bucolic and elegiac. Thrushes, martens and egrets introduce a world in which humans are animals among other animals, surrounded by the kind of nature that marks time with the gravity of a liturgical calendar.

As to his technique, Luigi Zuccheri's mature work sticks with tempera, which is a real poetic declaration of intent: tempera brings back to a shocked but pure world, devoid of illusions, ambitions, far from the overbearing transubstantiation of oil painting. The painter studies the

ancient techniques but modernizes them in his own way. He collects stones along the river banks, grinding them at a local mill to create pigments that will be but his own.

Not a surrealist

From 1945 to 1950 Luigi Zuccheri paints portions of domestic walls with ex votos, rosaries and scapulars. These works are fundamental in his mature period. In the Catholic culture of a specific geographical area, he finds a rural alternative to the most dreamlike outcomes of the historical avant-garde at the time. Zuccheri seems to say that we do not need surrealism or metaphysics, as for centuries we have already given braids, silver, and flames to the saints.

The regions of Veneto and Friuli were and are soaked in the blood of soldiers. The perpendicular branches of the vineyards look like a sea of grave crosses. Tombs have always been shaping these lands, even before the World Wars. The frost on the Colli, the lapidary elegance of the Brenta canals, the rose gardens embroidered with cold scissors have always concealed a privileged relationship with death and those who could tame it, like the Virgin and the Saints.

Votive tablets and the pictorial ex votos narrate the encounters between the Madonna and the people of the farms, rivers, and lagoons. A votive tablet – *tolè/e* in the Venetian dialect – is a painting executed by a specialized artist, commissioned by a person asking for grace. The ex voto masters follow compositional schemes to which they often add naturalistic details after visiting the place where the miraculous rescue has taken place.

Almost all the Venetian and Friulian votive tablets are bipartite: the accident or illness for which remedy is sought is painted in the lower part, along with the supplicants and their family, sometimes joined by the souls in the Purgatory; the Virgin, the Saint, or both, are in the upper part, sometimes immersed in a triumph of clouds. Humble and devoid of nobility, ex votos open up an unprecedented visual heritage to Luigi Zuccheri.

At the Museum of people's devotion at the Santo in Padua, the ex votos are protected by thick display cases, hung on panels of pink and worn velvet. They are divided into sections, skilfully titled with words that evoke pop music of the past and the theology of sin: "The gift of the bride," "Conjugal love and the desired child," "The dangers of the road," "Retirement, widowhood, senility. Sister death."

There is nothing like the tempera ex votos to show the domestic relationship with death: masons and children fall from balconies in compositions with no realistic perspective, the hands of little girls are crushed by carts and their feet by tramways, hopeless parents wear their party dresses while lying in bed with their sick child.

Some ex votos are difficult to understand, either because of the delightfully primitive skills of the painters, capable of showing the same girl falling three times from the same balcony, or for the hallucinated representation of atmospheric phenomena: lightning bolts are depicted as red segments that cut the image in several parts; clouds of saints are shown to emerge from the exhaust fumes of the cars, or even confused with the smoke from the ocean liners. The interiors with the supplicants are like theaters. Married couples pray together in their robes, at a safe distance from each other, they rest on the old mattress looking suspiciously at a saint on the ceiling.

Luigi Zuccheri is somewhat of a meta-painter: he paints the painting in the painting, the ex voto in a wider pictorial composition. Subsequently he extrapolates elements, for example the candle, the saint and the cross to contextualise them in a landscape. He finally replaces the saint or the Virgin with animals. In the transition from sacred to natural subject, for years the painter maintains theatrical elements in the composition, dividing the fore and background of the picture with theatrical red curtains. This aspect reminds of different painters who nonetheless shared the intellectual pleasure of the pictorial set design. Think of Adriaen van der Spelt's *Trompe-l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* (1658);

or many works by Francisco de Zurbarán, who often painted heavy drapes of red velvet to frame figures praying or studying like in *The Young Virgin* (1632-33) or in the portrait of *Fray Gonzalo de Illescas* (1639). It is interesting to note that Zurbarán's work derives from the so-called statue-painting, or the custom of reproducing the devotional wooden and marble sculptures in paintings, often framed by red drapes from churches. Far away in time and place, Zurbarán and Zuccheri raise the theater of devotion to a metaphysical reflection on the nature of space.

*"I created a language for myself
From Venetian to Italian
This poetry has rights
Coming from Pan's reign"*

Giacomo Noventa, "A mo' de premessa"

Zuccheri's brother-in-law and friend Giacomo Ca' Zorzi—also known as Noventa—is an atypical intellectual. Like the painter, he also takes distance from his contemporaries. He is interested in those values and ideas common to both the aristocracy and the working class. The young Pier Paolo Pasolini, an intellectual with a great passion for the Friulian dialect and for the many local artists, contemporary if not fellow villagers of Zuccheri (Pasolini first wanted to graduate in contemporary Italian painting), writes critical, thoughtful, erudite texts, which strive to be modern by bringing a local dialect into the future and Friulian painting to the forefront of international art. So programmatic was Pasolini, so free-spirited Zuccheri and Noventa, nobly misunderstood throughout their life.

"I remember my neoclassical Vicenza, the beautiful Roman and Romanesque Verona, the Padua of Galileo, the cities of culture with Venice at the head. But here, on the Piave river, I was surrounded by a much earlier culture: the "tabula rasa" of the grass and its scent at the time of the mowing, the frogs, the light reflected by the nearby lagoon [...]. In this area of the Veneto region, Nordic and barbarian cultures lived with their elves and kobolds, no longer Mediterranean but sylvan, mushroomy, mossy, frozen and foggy [...]. I wondered what culture could tie the solemn beauty of the Palladian columns, the bricks and the arcades of Padua, the Veronese bridges, the sparkling Venice with its iron curl on the tip of the gondolas and its painters, to the enormous amount of small and large factories of the region. I found no answer except one: the barbaric force of the earth, which until yesterday would originate in the fields but now comes from the industries. It is this barbaric force that nourishes my art, not the Latin and Mediterranean cultures. [...] Not the white Veneto, Catholic, bigoted, etc., those political commonplaces! Veneto was, and still is strongly barbaric, therefore productive and industrial. Even if its art derives from high culture, it also sinks into the earth."

Goffredo Parise, "Veneto barbaro di muschi e nebbie"

"The fire of the sun lights up against my face but I remain insensitive, looking at life as if it were an old print. Mountains fade away in the afternoon and this silence encloses the crack made by a single, fleeting wasp."

Giovanni Comisso, "Solstizio Metafisico"

The collection of fragments by Giovanni Comisso entitled *Solstizio Metafisico* is an operetta whose only content is formal perfection. It is devoid of plot, ideas or extroversions of the soul. It is impossible to read more than a few of its sentences at a time. At every period, it stops like a boulder in front of words that always appear as virgin. In that book and in a few others, the Veneto and Friuli countries find their literary depiction.

Giovanni Comisso, Goffredo Parise, Arturo Martini, Filippo de Pisis are Zuccheri's artistic kins. Writers and painters of the same region, different from each other but equal in their

oxymoronically being empyrean seraphs and lovers of the flesh. When in the *Colloqui* on sculpture Martini talks about the moment in which he realizes the existence of form, he describes himself as a child watching the dilatory movement of a prostitute's butt defecating. When in the *Diario* Comisso recounts the Piave river, which smoothed his young soul like a stone, he writes: "On those pebbles in summer, all the Pan's and hermaphrodite myths were alive." They are not Mediterranean but barbarians, growing up in the womb of Venice and its sisters, and so is Luigi Zuccheri: a barbarian painter, unlike De Chirico, who he nonetheless loves, unlike anything he sees and hears in Paris during his journey, Picasso and Breton among others.

In addition to the aforementioned Guardi and the anonymous painters of ex votos, another artist may have taught something important to Zuccheri. It is Jacopo Ligozzi, a painter from Verona who lives in Venice in the sixteenth century, passionate about natural history and illustrator of volumes on birds and fish, subsequently employed as an expert drawer of animals and plants for the Florentine Grand Duchy.

[Here is our take on the work of Jacopo Ligozzi. Ed.]

Ligozzi's magnificent *A Marmot with a Branch of Plums* (1605) is remarkable: a funny, hairy and happy animal, painted in watercolors, observing the viewer sideways. The artist was clearly inspired by Durer and followers of his such as Hans Hoffmann. Ligozzi's animal portraits are never on a neutral background. For example, the marmot shares the scene with prunes, shriveled leaves and a fly, elements that make this study of nature one of the first examples of Italian still life in the modern age. Quality in painting often comes with the subtle and ambiguous transition from one genre to the other. A study on nature that suddenly becomes still life thanks to the insertion of an extra element marks a fundamental step in the history of artistic perception. What is the genre of Luigi Zuccheri's painting? Still life, landscape, surrealist composition, or religious? The art historian Guido Perocco, interviewed in a documentary from 1991, defines Zuccheri as "an ancient Venetian painter who finds himself modern by chance."

Zuccheri loves the figures of Saint Francis and Saint Catherine. He keeps a book of her letters on his bedside table during the last years of his life. For a painter working with tempera, the 14th century must have been the reference. An impetuous, mystical bride frequently caught in ecstasy, Catherine teaches that the things of nature—animals, plants, life—allude to the infinite pity of God. Taking a different path from what has brought him from the religious to the natural, Zuccheri ends up illustrating the writings of the two saints in the late 1940s, although the works dedicated to Catherine will come to light only after the artist's death in 1974.

Painters, poets or professors are not the only masters of surrealism or metaphysics: everything that the avant-garde reveals is already contained in the religion of a farmer or in the ecstasy of a holy child. In Zuccheri's illustrations of Catherine's writings, the angels watch over the sky, the animals over the earth and waters. The pelican pecks its chest to feed her babies with drops of her blood, rising to the symbol of Christ the Pelican. The path of a 20th century painter comes to an end: born in a fallen palazzo, raised to the sound of the trenches, weaned by Venice and Paris, by thrushes and starlings, prostrate by the horror of Nazifascism, consoled by the saints, so Luigi Zuccheri will live his visionary and barbaric intuitions.