

Luca Montanarini

ASTRATTISMO

Luigi Montanarini and Abstract Painting

Dedicated to our parents

Publisher/Copyright
Montanarini-Isler Foundation, 5610 Wohlen/AG
2012

www.montanarini-isler-stiftung.ch
info@montanarini-isler-stiftung.ch

CONTENTS

Introduction

Figurative-Abstract

About the Man

Dionysian-Apollonian

The Spiritual Aspect

Bibliography

Curriculum Vitae

Colour plates

Only inner accomplishments are beneficial to existence

Luigi Montanarini

INTRODUCTION

On 11th September 2010 an exhibition of the works of the painter Luigi Montanarini opened in the basement of the Rösslimatte Community Centre in Wohlen, AG, Switzerland. The exhibition was part of a Circolo A.C.L.I. (Italian and international Christian Workers Movement) cultural and culinary event dedicated to the Latium region of Italy, where Rome is situated.

The artist Luigi Montanarini was born in Florence. While at art school in Florence he met his wife, artist Heidi Isler from Wohlen in Switzerland. After graduating the couple married, and in 1933 moved to Rome, where they settled. Montanarini's extensive work stems almost exclusively from his time in Rome, his chosen home, and for this reason the A.C.L.I. decided to include some of Luigi Montanarini's paintings in its cultural celebration of the Latium Region.

The exhibition was an experiment inasmuch as it aimed to bring abstract art closer to the general public. The exhibition juxtaposed figurative and abstract works of the painter, which, at first glance, appear to have nothing more in common than a superficial similarity in their composition. All works shown contrasted a foreground of dynamic and colourful forms with a quiet, plain background in one muted tone (see figures I & II), and the exhibition explicitly drew visitor's attention to this fact. In this way visitors were given a set of criteria through which to view the artworks, and which also served to free them from the immovable parameters of realistic representation.

The following text is a revised version of the brief talk given by the author at the exhibition opening. It makes no claims to scientific rigour but aims simply to highlight and explain relationships between certain aspects of the artist's work, necessary for a full appreciation of the depth of Luigi Montanarini's painting.

It should be noted that the term "art" in this text, unless otherwise stated, refers to visual art, that is painting and sculpture of the western, and especially European cultural environment.

FIGURATIVE-ABSTRACT

In the current debate surrounding visual arts, the Abstract Art movement is viewed as somewhat obsolete. It is however a movement that continues to baffle and confuse the broader public, wherever they are confronted with it. This is probably due to the fact that for centuries, even millennia if one considers the French cave paintings in Lascaux, of all the arts, visual art alone was capable of representing the objective world as human beings saw it. For artists, realistic representation was not only an appealing possibility, but became the entire aim itself, that of describing visual experience. Artists strived towards reproductions, which were as lifelike as possible, but local references and socio-historical conditions nurtured and gave rise to an immense diversity of styles and methods of expression.

In the late nineteenth century, the art establishment and the wider public alike, were alarmed when French artists began producing works, which no longer aimed above all to portray reality. They sought to convey impressions and hence were later referred to as the "impressionists". They were the first to break with academic teachings and traditional techniques in order to achieve their artistic goals. Through innovative use of colour, paint application and brushwork their illustrations appeared to dissolve into the canvas. The conservative art establishment of the time dismissed Impressionists such as Manet, Monet, Degas, Gauguin, the Dutch Van Gogh or Cézanne to name but a few, as wholly lacking in ability or talent. Today however exhibitions of Impressionist works are among the most popular and successful of art events.

Through their new vision of painting, the Impressionists paved the way for the art movements of the twentieth century. Visible reality in art increasingly gave way to ever freer, more anarchic representations, and finally to complete abstraction. In this way, abstract art came into being.

Abstract Painting, in Italian known as "Astrattismo", is defined in the Zingarelli dictionary as "lacking any semblance of objective realism in visual art and sculpture" (1). The Garzanti dictionary defines the same term as "modern art movement that rejects the realistic representation of subject matter" (2). Both definitions implicitly point to a separate artistic reality, which cannot be verbalised and which therefore, according to Montanarini's maxims, necessitates the attempt at a new approach to this other reality (see bibliography, appendix 3). Luigi Montanarini writes on this theme "Of those painters who say, "I paint what I see", one should ask what it is that they see, and whether it is through art that they see it. Art has its own reality that is completely separate from the individual objective reality." (3, p.45) And with reference to art in general, "Art is not a term but a reality. For this reason it is only possible to experience art." (3. p.61)

From this it becomes clear that art criticism can in no way express the reality or truth of a particular work unless, through language, the critique elevates itself to the level of an artistic experience, a literary work.

The complex question remains as to how, after centuries of artistic realism, the latter half of the nineteenth century experienced such a radical change of direction. There are two possible explanations for this development.

Firstly, all art is rooted in a particular place, and a historical and cultural context. (3, p.41) It is therefore probable that the radical break with art tradition in the second half of the nineteenth century accompanied the socio-economic and political upheavals of the western world at that time. Hence the deformed and contorted images of early twentieth century art can be seen as harbingers of the imminent devastation, which followed.

Secondly, this time of great upheaval was also a time of considerable technical and scientific achievement giving birth, amongst other things, to photography, followed by film and video technology. As a result, traditional visual arts were no longer alone in the business of telling stories through pictures.

Photography, film and video offered endless and unimaginable possibilities for extremely true-to-life images, thus freeing the traditional visual arts from the confinement of realistic representation of its subjects. Figurative art was now a matter of choice, no longer a requirement. Art had achieved an aesthetic autonomy, which offered almost limitless possibilities of expression and form.

ABOUT THE MAN

Luigi Montanarini's artistic career is typical of many European artists of the early twentieth century. This is significant because the artists we now consider as the pioneers of twentieth century modern art were all born in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Wassily Kandinsky, for example, was born in 1868, Henri Matisse in 1869, Paul Klee in 1879, and Pablo Picasso in 1881, to name but a few. They all belonged to an earlier generation of artists. Luigi Montanarini was born in 1906. At the time of his graduation in 1931 the most significant art movements of the twentieth century already existed. To the fledgling modern movement born out of nineteenth century Impressionism, these included developments such as Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism and Fauvism. These modern movements originated for the most part in northern Europe, namely France and Germany, although also in the Netherlands and Russia.

Perhaps the most radical of all the twentieth century movements was that of Italian Futurism. In his manifesto, written and published in 1909, writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti called for the renunciation of cultural heritage, and for a rebellion against the dominant bourgeois social order of the time. This intellectual underpinning strengthened the Futurists in their call for renewal, and led to their hard-line advocacy of the sweeping revolution in the twentieth century art world. Sadly however, whilst celebrating youth and dynamics, Marinetti's manifesto also advocated ruthlessness and violence.

The futuristic performances, which principally involved provoking the audience, ideally to the point of all-out brawls, guaranteed media interest. It is possible that the later Dadaists, a movement originating in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, were influenced by Futurists, as they too organised provocative performances. These however, were not aimed at inciting aggression or violence.

The Futurist movement continued up until the death of its intellectual leader Marinetti in 1944, but began to lose significance with the outbreak of the First World War. Although many futurists welcomed such turmoil as a mechanism for radical rejuvenation, their active participation in the "significant" events did not bring about the social rebirth they had longed for, but only death and injury to their ranks. The vacuum which followed the deaths of two of their most vibrant proponents, architect Antonio Sant'Elia and sculptor Umberto Boccioni, was soon filled with popular young sympathisers such as the painter Ottone Rosai, Mario Sironi or Ardegno Soffici. But the movement was now compelled to come to terms with a new reality - that of fascism. Fascism may well have been inspired by Futurist slogans but on a cultural level it drew drastically different conclusions.

Unlike the fascist regime of Nazi Germany, Italian fascism gave free reign to the world of contemporary art and culture, interfering only where activities were seen as propagandist, or promoting political dissent. The regime did however favour conservative and classical art over modernism. Additionally, or perhaps rather as a result of this, a new movement known as the "Novecento" (nine hundred, referring to the century at that time) enjoyed the full approval of the Italian fascist regime as they advocated the continuation of traditional figurative art.

Futurism had lost its initial momentum and its role as leader of the modernist movement. Between the two world wars, the international influence of Italian art and culture dwindled. Italian modernist artists, among them Modigliani, Magnelli and De Chirico began to leave, mostly for Paris. However there were exceptions to this, for example in architecture, where, alongside the fascist pomp, Giuseppe Terragni's (1904-1943) "Architettura Razionale" came into being.

On settling in Rome, Luigi Montanarini joined a group of young artists, the so-called "Scuola Romana". The group shared a concern for Italy's cultural isolation, and a determination to break out of it. Despite their common goal, the group made no attempts to define themselves in terms of a manifesto or particular artistic programme, each member following his or her own direction. At that time Montanarini's work was still heavily influenced by what he had learned at art school, and closer to the art of the "Novecento" movement than to modernist art. Montanarini was a talented artist and his work enjoyed considerable success in Rome. Despite this, he did not become complacent but retained a critical perspective towards his own work. As he increasingly oriented himself towards European avant-garde, he soon arrived at the conviction that a break with his entire former work was needed. In the years immediately following the Second World War he began afresh and, as a result of this, turned his back on the Scuola Romana.

His radical artistic re-orientation presented him with many challenges. His bold excursions in new directions were beset by constant doubts. It was as if Montanarini wanted to relive and recycle the first forty years of twentieth century art history.

For this reason allusions to various modern movements can be seen in the works of this period although these works retained a distinct quality and signature. Montanarini continued to develop his very own artistic language and to follow a path away from his provincial artistic environment, towards a more European art. Compared with his works of the 1930s, his painting style of the post-war period had moved towards a new vibrancy, luminosity and towards ever-greater abstraction. In the mid 1950s he took the definitive step to pure abstract art.

Luigi Montanarini first presented his abstract paintings at the 1958 Venice Biennale, which dedicated an exhibition room exclusively to his works, and pure abstraction was to remain the theme of his painting over a working period of forty years. It was only towards the end of his life, when he no longer possessed the strength to paint, that he took to drawing and in this way returned to figurative art. Using tusche, ink or felt pen he produced works on biblical and mythological themes.

Montanarini permanently questioned his painting, and in search of his own truth, contradiction became his chosen work method. For this reason his work is not easy to grasp or indeed to categorise, much to the annoyance of some historians, critics and gallerists. But in another way, his work is indeed comprehensible. It must however be viewed in its entirety, with an intensity, earnestness and perseverance comparable to work method of the maestro himself. Consideration of Montanarini's work should not however, be a purely intellectual exercise but should, above all, involve the senses. "To understand a painting, I suggest a comparison; just as we understand a rose by smelling it, so we can understand a painting by looking at it." (3, p.41)

DIONYSIAN-APOLLONIAN

In 1872 the twenty-seven year old German philologist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche released his first publication under the title "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music". A later publication from the year 1886 carried the new title of "The Birth of Tragedy, or: Hellenism and Pessimism". (4)

These texts are relevant to our subject in that, educated and well read as he was, Montanarini was not only familiar with Nietzsche's first published work. In conversations and talks he often highlighted various aspects of Nietzsche's writing that he considered pertinent to his own painting.

Nietzsche's theory was based on the original ancient Greek tragedy, where a singing and dancing chorus confronted a single actor. In his first publication he argued that the highest goal of art could only be achieved through the marriage of opposing basic instincts. These conflicting instincts he named the Dionysian and the apollonian instincts, after the two opposing gods of Greek mythology. The Dionysian instinct represented intoxication, lust, enchantment, passion, and all things emotional and authentic. On the other hand, consciousness, dreaming, moderation, outlook, self-control, intellect and appearance were categorised as the apollonian instinct. Visual and literary arts were also referred to as apollonian, and the non-figurative arts like music as Dionysian. And when he speaks of universal truths, "...which music alone can so directly express..." it becomes clear that he ascribes not only to music, but also to the Dionysian phenomena itself, the greatest importance. Indeed he sees in the Dionysian aspect "... the sole root of Greek art in its entirety". (4, p.131ff)

Of all the arts, music alone enjoys an extraordinary immediacy in its ability to communicate with the listener. This is apparently due to its aural perception, according to the French ear, nose and throat specialist Professor Alfred A. Tomatis, as outlined in his fascinating book "L'oreille et la voix" (5). For Nietzsche this immediacy in our perception of music is by no means abstract, and here we must be careful not to confuse "abstract" with "Astrattismo". Perceiving music is in no way abstract despite the fact that, according to the definition of "Astrattismo", it is pure abstraction in the sense that it is completely free from figurative or visible reality.

As a young admirer of Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883), Nietzsche had originally dedicated his first publication to the composer in an introduction addressed exclusively to him. Nietzsche found in Wagner's music the rebirth of tragedy, and for this reason unsurprisingly at that time, few reacted favourably to the text. Few, that is, aside from the great Basler historian, Jacob Burckhardt, Richard Wagner himself, his second wife Cosima, her ex-husband the conductor Hans von Bülow and, albeit with some reservations, her father, the pianist and composer, Franz Liszt.

Nietzsche's contemporary German philologists however rejected his ideas as wholly unscientific. Even Nietzsche himself later harshly criticised his own work in the "Versuch einer Selbstkritik" from 1886. He repeatedly referred to the book as "questionable and impossible", and criticised his misapplication of the past to the present. He now viewed as mistaken his hopes for a rebirth of tragedy in Wagner's music, and subsequently distanced himself from the composer (6, p.155ff).

Luigi Montanarini had had first-hand experience of the interaction of opposing basic instincts in his own work and could therefore very well comprehend Friedrich Nietzsche's statements. Further, as an illustrious representative of abstract art, he was clearly fascinated by the fact that Nietzsche's first literary work was published at a time when painting and sculpture were as yet completely representational, and abstraction in the sense of "Astrattismo" completely unimaginable. The question arises as to whether, with the rise of abstract art in the twentieth century, Apollonian art in Nietzsche's sense experienced a shift towards Dionysian art. If one considers gestural abstract expressionism alone, the answer to this question must be a resounding yes. Gestural Abstract expressionism, such as that of Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning, has an ecstatic, instinctive quality and is therefore characterised as Dionysian. The twentieth century however, saw the birth of other forms of abstraction based on geometrical or mathematical principles, called Constructivist or concrete. With their strict, moderate and rational expression, these works are markedly Apollonian in character. With the disappearance of objective reality in visual art, artists now enjoyed an almost limitless creative freedom to explore the very boundaries of both Dionysian and Apollonian poles. Such freedom however poses certain risks as extremely one-sided behaviour can lead to a total negation of polarity, and consequently to either chaos or to stagnation.

The interaction between Dionysian and Apollonian is visible in Montanarini's painting, especially in those works from his "Astrattismo" period (see figures III & IV). The emphasis of one or other direction can be seen not just in the individual paintings but also in comparisons between entire groups of works. Should such changes of artistic direction astonish the observer, it is helpful to consider what Montanarini himself has to say on this: "Contradicting or negating myself is neither game nor vice for me, but a way of searching for my own truth." (3, p.29)

Montanarini had already been exposed to the tension between Apollonian and Dionysian poles as a child, albeit unconsciously. His accounts of his parents suggest that his mother's character was rather Apollonian; his father on the other hand was apparently by no means averse to the Dionysian aspects of life.

The compositional similarities of the works on display in the Circolo A.C.L.I. exhibition, as previously described, stem from this interplay between Apollonian and Dionysian elements. What initially seemed mere form now reveals itself as an expression of true content typical of Luigi Montanarini. He confirms this in a further aphorism: "Two conscious intellectual aspects, two inherently opposing and irreconcilable aspirations live within me: on the one hand the necessity to let go and on the other, the need for discipline. These two forces alternate in my work or try to connect. Whether distanced from one another, or merged to the point of becoming one with each other, it is these forces which have determined my work from the start." (3, p.53; also see figs. V & VI)

THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT

"At this stage of my endeavours I have realised that my creative drive is of a spiritual and mystical nature." (3, p.87)

Montanarini wrote this in one of the small notebooks he constantly carried around with him, possibly after an intense day's work or maybe on completing a longer work phase. This spiritual component is critical to a thorough appreciation of his work and so it seems appropriate to explore this aspect in greater depth, wherever possible, through the aphorisms of the maestro himself.

"I used to talk about my art as my declaration", he wrote, "but now I say it is my transfiguration." (3, p.81)

The word transfiguration may evoke in some associations with the transfiguration of Christ, as told in the synoptic Gospels of Mathew, Mark and Luke. (7) The Garzanti dictionary defines the term also as an alteration in the exterior of a thing, which mirrors an inner change. (2) Creativity is all too frequently understood as a form of self-expression, and this sadly, not just among the wider public. Evidently Luigi Montanarini himself shared this understanding in his early years. However he soon came to experience his work in a completely different way. "I have realised that there is something more important than self-representation. It is the representation of the overcoming of the self, that is the stepping outside of oneself and entering into art - and art alone – a higher state of being than oneself." (3, p.76) Entering into art, and art alone means "... it is not just that the painter's idea, will and feeling condition art, but equally the artist becomes a tool of art. The artist defines art as art defines the artist. " (3, p.23)

And so he must relinquish the obsession of wanting to create art, and instead allow a work of art simply to happen. (3, p.61)

For Luigi Montanarini, art, and in his case painting, could not have as its goal an external accomplishment through paintbrush and colour. The accomplishment had to be within the artist himself. Brush and colour were nothing but a pretext for something that could easily take place without them, no more than a means to an end, a support in the last decisive step. (8, p.16)

"Through his craft, the artist submits to the supernatural," (3, p.65) according to Luigi Montanarini.

Montanarini asserted that it was not by studying old masters that he had learned to understand his profession. It was rather through his own experiences of painting that he came to recognise, in the old masters, the essence of true art and so, through his own learning process, to experience its timeless quality. (3, p.17) This timeless dimension points to another of his aphorisms, which describes a work of art as the story of a painted canvas (3, p.21), although the work methods of the old masters in no way resemble those of Montanarini and his contemporaries. In order to achieve on a canvas the most lifelike portrayal of a chosen subject, the old masters produced detailed sketches and studies, which were as significant to the creative process as the final work itself.

It was not until the twentieth century, with the rise of gestural abstract expressionism, that artists began to work directly onto canvas, without sketching and pre-study phases. In this way the painting surface literally became an experimental ground, at times painted over, at times scraped clean and corrected, where the spontaneous could be integrated as an element of painting process.

Every work of art that deserves this description carries within itself a unique story and meaning. It is these values, which represent the true content of the work. It is therefore fascinating to observe that in a time when the overt story telling of figurative art was giving way to growing abstraction, the basic condition for true art began to reveal itself. The individual deeper story and meaning carried within a painting began to emerge. Montanarini says of this, "The story and meaning of a painting are to be found in their entirety in its reflection of a creative process ("how"). Beyond this, there is no further meaning." (3, p.45)

"It is futile to ask too many questions. The essence ("how") can only be found and experienced in the act of painting itself." (3, p.83)

Montanarini had given up his teaching post at the Academy of Art in Rome five years previously when, in 1981, Marko Ivan Rupnik, student at the academy, wrote his thesis "Luigi Montanarini and the problem of interpretation" (9). In his thesis Rupnik argues that in the decades following the Second World War, art critique in Italy and elsewhere was dominated by Marxist ideas, accompanied by Freudian psychoanalytical elements. This resulted in a critique, which rejected the transcendental, spiritual and metaphysical in art. Much was written during this time about Luigi Montanarini, however little of significance. Those critics whose interpretations came close to understanding his ideas were few in number. Only one such critic, Carmine Benincasa, dared to write what could be termed a metaphysical, even theological interpretation, and described Montanarini's work as the "revelation of the invisible". (9, p.93)

Surrounded by critical opinion, which mostly failed to understand, and even wilfully misunderstood his work, Montanarini was driven in time to a form of exile, forced to assume the role of a lone fighter. It was thanks to his high level of consciousness, that he never allowed this role to divert him from the search for his own truth.

Today, over fifteen years after his death, the homepage of a Rome gallery speaks of an all but forgotten painter "whose depth and complexity of subject matter sadly remain, to this day, misunderstood". (10) Yet in a time when appearance is valued over reality, where the meanings of quality and quantity have been blurred and where success is orchestrated rather than achieved, an appreciation of what until now has gone so wholly unrecognised, is likely to take a while longer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- (1) Zingarelli, Nicola: Vocabolario della lingua italiana, Zanichelli Editore, Bologna, 2004
- (2) Cusatelli, Giorgio: Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana, Garzanti Editore, Milano, 1965
- (3) Montanarini, Luigi: Aforismi sull'Arte-Aphorismen zur Kunst, Montanarini-Isler Stiftung, Eigenverlag, Wohlen, 2002 (liberal translation)
- (4) Nietzsche, Friedrich: Die Geburt der Tragödie, Reclam Universal-Bibliothek Nr. 7131, Stuttgart, 2010 (liberal translation)
- (5) Tomatis, Alfred A.: L'oreille et la voix, Edition Robert Laffont, Paris, 1987
- (6) Wohlfart, Günther: Nachwort zu Nietzsches Geburt der Tragödie, Reclam Universal Bibliothek Nr. 7131, Stuttgart, 2010
- (7) Die Synoptiker: Mathew (17, 1-9), Mark (9, 2-10), Luke (9, 28-36)
- (8) Herrigel, Eugen: Zen in der Kunst des Bogenschiessens, Otto Wilhelm Barth Verlag, München-Planegg, 1975 (liberal interpretation)
- (9) Rupnik, Ivan Marko: Luigi Montanarini e il problema dell'interpretazione, Eigenverlag, Roma, 1981
- (10) Galleria Vittoria Roma: www.galleriavittoria.com
www.galleriavittoria.com/amontanarini.html

CURRICULUM VITAE

Luigi Montanarini was born in Florence on 22 July 1906. He studied at the Florence Academy of Art from 1927 to 1931. In 1933 he was awarded the national art prize "Pensionato Artistico" along with the sculptor Perricle Fazzini. He moved to Rome where he then settled. He exhibited his works all over the world and took part in both national and international art events, including many exhibitions at the Venice Biennale where in 1958 an exhibition space was dedicated to him.

His works can be found in Italian and foreign collections and in galleries in Rome, Milan, Bern, and the Aarau Art Museum in the canton of Aargau. Several works were also commissioned for public buildings in the city of Rome, especially during the nineteen fifties, including several significant religious works of art for Roman churches, and the pilgrimage site honouring Saint Rita in Cascia.

His teaching career began in 1936 at the Institute of Art in Civita Castellana and in 1939 he was made director of the art school in Velletri. The following year he was appointed Professor at the art lyceum in Rome. In 1956 he became Professor of painting at the Academy of Art in Rome and became Academy Director in 1965. One year later he became a member of the Italian Arts Council.

Luigi Montanarini died in Rome on January 7, 1998.

Luca Montanarini was born in Rome on 6 January 1944, fourth and youngest child of the artist couple Luigi Montanarini and Heidy Isler. He is a qualified architect ETH-Z/SIA, artist and member of the Visarte Society. Together with his siblings, Silvia, Roberto and Marco he founded the Montanarini-Isler Foundation in Wohlen/AG 1998 and has since then acted as foundation president.

Luca Montanarini lives and works in Wohlen/AG.

"If you cannot free yourself of the belief that it is possible to see elements of the visible world in abstract painting, then you will never grasp the truth of the work you try to understand."

Luigi Montanarini



FIGURE I
Luigi Montanarini Anemones ca. 1932
Oil on canvas

A foreground of lively and colourful flowers contrasts with a calm, grey-brown background



FIGURE II

Luigi Montanarini
Oil on canvas

Nuove
Variazioni

1974

A lively and colourful foreground contrasts with a monochrome background



FIGURE III
Luigi Montanarini
Oil on canvas

Composizione n° 10

1958

Abstract work with strong Dionysian emphasis, very free but at the same time structured



FIGURE IV
Luigi Montanarini
Oil on canvas

Composizione

1982

Abstract work with strong Apollonian emphasis, very structured but at the same time free



FIGURE V
Luigi Montanarini Composizione 1983
Oil on canvas

Dionysian and Apollonian intertwined



FIGURE VI
Luigi Montanarini Composizione 1982
Oil on canvas

Apollonian fragments, some constraining Dionysian magma