

## THE MEDITERRANEAN AND POPULAR ART IN SICILY

It is to a great English writer of the Enlightenment, Dr Samuel Johnson, that we owe the statement that 'nearly everything which makes us superior to the savages has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean'. This Mediterranean, of which we often speak when looking forward to ~~the~~ spiritual unity, is really already, as the historian Fernand Baudel well says, 'a meeting, a union, a human unit'. It is not our task to <sup>discuss</sup> ~~expound~~ what level has been reached by the interrelation of languages, customs and traditions, religions and legends in the Mediterranean basin. Nor can we say to what point the cross-breedings, interminglings and exchanges of thought and art of the various peoples have contributed towards bringing together the races which inhabit the shores of the sea, which it is not inappropriate to call the lantern of the world. Let it suffice merely to refer to the limitless function in history which its geographical position bestows on this sea, and, <sup>very</sup> ~~at its being~~ <sup>at its</sup> centre, on Sicily, the landfall of various races, of whom it is enough to mention the Roman, the Greek and the Arab.

The periods of history succeed one another, presenting themselves like a chain of many links, like a luminous trail in time. On this trail, <sup>stands out</sup> ~~we notice~~ only, or at least principally, the <sup>figure</sup> ~~image~~ in popular art; <sup>its</sup> ~~whose~~ themes seem to have remained constant through the centuries.

It is perhaps the special privilege of the Ethnographic Museum of Sicily, named after the distinguished folklorist Giuseppe Pitre (1841-1916), not only to gather together from its surroundings the unvarying lines of the history and customs of the island, but also to show to a considerable extent, the soul of the civilization and art of the Mediterranean. I take over this principle from Giuseppe Cocchiara, and make of it my aim, in my profession as a historian, <sup>who is</sup> ~~obliged~~ to look for the influence of Spain, Greece, France, and above all, the Arab world, at every turn in the history of this country, in every riddle of its language, ~~and~~ in every line of its artistic examples, and in every phase of its customs.

From Cocchiara we learn that 'to the ethnographer an object is not of interest because it has or has not aesthetic qualities, but simply because it is a document of the past which lives in the present. An ethnographic museum,' he concludes, 'is not an art gallery'. Although a proposition of that kind cannot be understood by some ethnographers and in every place, it is a preconception of foreign visitors, of whatever kind and provenance, in respect of Sicily, its regional museum, its private collections and its widely

scattered examples of popular figurative art. The criterion for the arrangement of such examples lies not in the order of aesthetic values but in the logic and continuity of historical change. It lies in the search for what unites, as it has already united and certainly in the future will unite, the generations which pass through a human scene which is among the most interesting in Europe, because various Mediterranean ingredients and importations gave contributed to give it colour and excitement.

Hence, the first and most uplifting satisfaction of an <sup>observer</sup> ~~examiner~~ lies in following up the discovery of the significance of an object, distant and perhaps lost in the mist of time. He may go on to its excavation, to ~~the~~ picking out ~~of~~ the vicissitudes of civilizations and races which have acted upon it to give it its present identify, and finally to contemplate <sup>ing</sup> the harmony which in the end results from it all. Let us not fear to declare the real existence of Africa <sup>in the</sup> ~~and~~ Sicily <sup>of the twentieth century</sup> every time its presence forces itself clearly, or even possibly, on our notice. If it is undeniable in the mosaics of Piazza Armerina, it is equally so in many examples in the history of Sicily, which have not formally been described, as a rapid review of individual examples of Sicilian popular art will reveal. And, if at some time, we come across cases of the meeting of distant and unexpected factors and we seem to be lost in a confused entanglement of connexions, it will be well to bear in mind the admirable picture of the life of the Mediterranean peoples shown to us by Fernand Brandel, according to whom the islands of the Mediterranean are hulks and strongholds besieged by their inhabitants.

A rapid review of the various popular arts in Sicily cannot leave out of consideration the premiss that, even in the island, in spite of a certain foreshadowing in the Archivio per lo studio delle tradizioni popolari (Archives for the study of popular traditions) (1882-1907), it took a long time to reach an adequate appreciation of popular figurative culture, just as it did in the whole of Europe. It did not happen until, as Toschi states, appreciation of comparable poetry was fully established. Yet when this interest in figurative culture did break out in Europe, in the wake of Sebillot <sup>(1888)</sup> ~~by means~~ <sup>through</sup> of the popular press, considerable curiosity was aroused with regard to Sicily, particularly when Salomone Marino revealed the existence of peasant artistic activities, almost unknown until then, referring particularly to those in painting and sculpture.

In truth, <sup>a</sup> considerable heritage was being accumulated in the last centuries, and a great part of it went back to feudal life, which did not become a hell in the island, as it did elsewhere. The name of Francesco Matera



(1658-1718), born at Trapani and forced to withdraw from society because of the persecution of the police, shines out in gold letters. He was the creator of the celebrated shepherds of wood, glue and cloth, which to-day enrich the Pitre Museum (with the spacious scenes of the Nativity and of the Slaughter of the Innocents), and, to a lesser degree, the Bayerische Nationalmuseum at Munich. Matera achieved the status of a great artist specially in the portrayal, sometimes hieratic, always realistic, of the figures of mothers expressing, in various dramatic attitudes, desperation at the violent and inhuman loss of their sons. The Museum also possesses another crib, the work of the Catanian craftsman, Salvatore Panebianco, and various other figures collected by Pitre in his wanderings. Among the secondary characters are some of local interest; e.g. from Caltanissetta comes the figure of a miner presenting sulphur in homage to Jesus. If the modelling of objects from Caltanissetta <sup>and</sup> Agrigento is clumsy and often also crude, that coming from Palermo seems on the other hand to be more careful and more harmonious.

The art of crib-making has had a wide and lasting development in the island because tradition still requires that every family shall provide itself with a crib at Christmas, not only in the country districts but also in the cities. A crib, moreover, is not a financial liability, since material <sup>(chalky ground)</sup> of which the figures are made is the clay which is easily found in the stazzuna and there is no house which does not possess an oven. The crib of Antonello Gagini, made at Palermo in 1526, does not belong, in view of the eminence of the artist, to the lowly world of craftsmen of the people, but it certainly claims its popular inspiration and improves on it. The humbler art of popular wax-modelling, instead, is truly of that world, and has recently found recognition in the exhibition of characters and scenes of the Nativity organized by Antonino Uccello in his House-Museum in the Palazzo Acreide. Humble pictures, painted on chests of drawers and the walls of houses, renew an art in which the Syracusan Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (1656-1701) excelled. A memory of that art is the Via Bambina in Palermo where the shops of ciraci (wax-workers) were very numerous. Popular esteem is directed above all to the bbammiddari, i.e. the craftsmen who model the Child Jesus in wax. The little Jesus, made thus, could assume the function of a thank-offering when a child in the family had enjoyed a grace.

The products of the potter's craft are of clay, dried in the sun and passed thence to be baked in the oven. The earliest things made in this

craft must have been bowls. Examples owned by the Pitrè Museum are comparable with those in the Archaeological Museum of Syracuse (Sican and Sicel). Bowls wrought without a lathe are also made in Phoenician Motya. The technique of the Greek period re-appears in examples of present-day Sicilian pottery. Arab influence in Sicilian crockery is on the other hand a matter of pure speculation.

A high artistic standard must also have been reached by popular ceramic art. Eminent witness to this is borne particularly by the collections housed by the State Museum of Ceramics at Caltagirone, directed by Antonino Ragona, and by certain superb exhibits in the Pitrè Museum. In the field of majolica tiles coming from Sicilian workshops of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the same Ragona has been able to put forward the theory that there were relations with Spain, which favoured their local production and that the beginning of such production is not later than that of factories set up in Italy. The work of Matteo Carnilivari of Noto is witnessed to us by the architectural works he has left, particularly in the Palazzo Aiutamicristo in Palermo.

Of the work of the Masters of ceramics at Caltagirone, Sciacca and Burgio we still have examples, but not ~~so much~~ of those of Eastern Sicily, for the earthquake of 1693 and later carelessness have destroyed almost all of them. The noteworthy collection of Sicilian majolica made by Guido Russo Perez has come to us unharmed, and is now looked after by the Sicilian Regional Council which has allotted it to the State Museum of Ceramics at Caltagirone.

However, the suggestions which are received on a visit to the ceramics in the Pitrè Museum - and Ragona has seen to it that each has its descriptive and historical label - indicate a desire on the part of the craftsman, specially at Caltagirone, to create plastic figurative documents. Among them, in the same Pitrè Museum, lamps in human shape show a more refined workmanship, excellent colouring and a nearly always achieved harmony. However, even in this rich field of study, it is not so much artistic worth which is paramount, but more the interest in the human and political significance of the individual figures. These, even as late as the end of the nineteenth century, seem copies of the models executed at the time of the Jacobian persecution and of the French ideas brought in by the Bourbons.

It is clear that those craftsmen of Caltagirone and Collesano gave rein to their imagination in the search for subjects which could express a protest against the authority that had willed persecution. Thereupon that authority showed alarm, as we know from police reports, by certain 'barbettes' and by



certain 'ways of protecting one's front'. The craftsmen lingered on those characteristics and did not limit themselves to lamps, but sought to convey their meaning in flasks shaped like people or in water-bottles in the shape of fish. It is also noteworthy that vessels with the human head, common in popular Sicilian ceramics are met in examples from Phoenicia and Africa, but even more from Hellas. History lives in these objects and is of interest ~~to~~<sup>to</sup>, not only the historians of every age, but to everyone who looks upon popular art as a historical document.

Strangely forgotten by Pitre, in spite of the fact that it was already flourishing in his day, and not held in due account by Cocchiara, is painting on glass, which in these post war years had been achieving special renown. To those scholars and their like it seemed strictly bound up with the fortunes of devotional pictures. Of these last the Pitre Museum possesses a collection of 800, studied by Cocchiara, and affording a wonderful field for examination and comparison to-day. Certainly the art of painting on glass flourished in the seventeenth century, as is affirmed by Buttitta, the most authoritative student not only of this art but in the whole field of Sicilian popular figurative culture. In its early days glass-painting was confined to an aristocratic cultural field. It is only in the nineteenth century that it began to be practised by popular craftsmen<sup>of the people</sup>, who, though not succeeding in giving it significance in the field of folk lore, certainly succeeded in effecting its passage from a drawing-room aspect, which was in the artistocratic field, to that of fable which was of more interest to the people. However, this transition seems to have been accomplished rapidly, <sup>very soon</sup> for the mythological themes disappeared, and more genuinely popular characters became prominent. ~~is~~ ~~it very much~~. The biblical and legendary themes which now appeared were destined in the course of time, to assimilate the best features of popular religious devotion. Thus the end was a reconciliation of contemporary features, which was brought into prominence on religious publications and in pictures on carts.

It is probable that as they influenced other matters, so socio-political motives had determined, opines Buttitta, the choice of subjects wrought by a craftsman working on a commission for the wealthy class. A change back in the choice, or, rather less, in the execution, of subjects is to be seen, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the sociologist Sebastiano Cammereri Scurti describes the Madonna of Custonaci,

portrayed in a picture on glass, owned by Uccello, as 'a stout peasant woman'.

Thus, aesthetic interest continues to be subordinated to that which is social and political. This is a better guide to the historical development of the people and now allows more scope to social matters. The history of this art, however, remains to be completed. In the early years of this century demand for it grew less, and interest began to turn instead to coloured lithographs, both Italian and foreign, in which the trend towards religious subjects once more became strong.

Painting on glass, as Uccello observes, ceased to be used merely for ornament and was turned to objects of devotion and as such enriched chests of drawers and walls to provide protection for the hearths and homes of the people. Freed from the initial Venetian influences which marked it in its aristocratic phase, glass-painting, now that its scope is extended to the popular classes, gives us valuable documents of religious folklore. Henceforth, if we no longer meet, as in the eighteenth century, artists of the eminence of the Zizolfo brothers, of whom Buttitta tells us, we do find modest and imaginative tendencies, like those noted by Uccello. He chooses, among pictures wrought by people on transparent panes of glass 'aureoles of a brilliant transparency, and clothes and ornaments of a particular exotic and Turkish character, <sup>involving</sup> ~~assuming~~ a frankly sumptuous display of silks and oriental damasks, which mingle with dresses of popular or simply romantic style'. It was, perhaps, only then, when this kind of pictured document, locked away for centuries in upper-class houses, began to benefit a wider society and to draw attention in the 'flea-markets', that the greatness of the technical effort needed to produce a picture on glass came to be noticed and appreciated. Such a picture, as has been said, was achieved by a kind of 'writing in reverse as though it were reflected in a looking-glass', in Buttitta's happy ~~illustration~~ <sup>phrase</sup>.

Mediterranean influences on popular Sicilian art reached their most obvious peak in the cart and in the 'opra'. The mistaken belief that the painted cart was a recent invention, no earlier than the eighteenth century, lasted for a long time. Pitre indeed supposed that the first to take note of it was possibly the geographer, Eliseo Reclus, in 1865 - but this was not so, for, as Salvatore Lo Presti pointed out, the <sup>Baron</sup> ~~Canon~~ Gastone di Nerva had already written about it in his diary of a journey in Sicily in 1833.



Similarly, the archaeologist Biagio Pace announced in 1935 his belief in a much more remote origin for the cart, - that it was, in fact, the <sup>ce</sup>Sicilian chariot of which Pindar had made mention. Agility, balance and solidity were necessary for travelling on Sicilian roads, which remained until the Bourbon period, in much the same condition as in Greek or Roman times.

The architect Capito (1923) <sup>maintains</sup> that the cart is a badly made vehicle, for, while it is not unsuitable for meeting the difficulties of the terrain, nonetheless it involves useless expenditure of energy (because it lacks brakes and metal studs under the body) and so dates from a time when the problems of traction had not been studied in Sicily. This centuries long lack of development need not be a matter for surprise since we are dealing with a very backward aspect of the technical history of the Island.

It is of greater importance to emphasize that the cart of Sicilian times has accumulated considerable enrichment in the course of centuries from the Arab to the Mediaeval. The vivid colours used by the painters of the sides of the carts look back to the oriental and Greek worlds. The choice of subjects by <sup>carvers</sup> ~~carvers~~ and painters, after the Wheelwright has assembled the various sections, ~~the unvaried sections~~ is unvaried: the Norman Conquest. the Sicilian Vespers, the battles between Paladins and Saracens, and, as time goes on, the epic of Garibaldi, the <sup>Libyan</sup> ~~Libyan~~ War and the Great War. Capito has looked for aesthetic and historical connexions not only in a vague Arab-Norman influence which had already assimilated Byzantine elements, but in precise local architectural similarities, in certain capitals in the Benedictine Cloister at Monreale (ladies and sunflowers), the vestibule of the Castle of Zisa (formal foliage), the wooden ceiling of the Palatine Chapel, those of the Palazzo Chiaramonte, or Steri, or the original ceiling of the Cathedral of Nicosia. Again, Capito has discovered a direct affiliation with Arab art (the Mosque of Ahmed I) in the work of the Sicilian Wheelwrights. In particular, when they worked in beaten iron (nabiscu, i.e. arabesque) for the decoration of the cart, they <sup>m</sup> ~~imitated~~ <sup>imitated</sup> closely the brazen lamps of the famous mosque. In a similar way the imagination of the Sicilian carver expresses itself in the 'key' i.e. the board which closes the vehicle at the back, and in the 'peak' i.e. the centre of the axle-tree which, according to Li Gotti, is the shrine where the image of the patron saint finds a place of honour.

What strikes one is the simplicity of the technique and the evident absence of a studied design in painter, as in carver, but this in no way detracts from the life, the effective colouring for the vivacity of the work. 'It is a superb manifestation', resumes Lo Presti, 'of the instinctive genius

of a great breed of artists and poets, which was shared in the dark ages by all the Mediterranean peoples'. In reality, it was a matter, with few exceptions, of a humble but enormous gathering of designs in which were handed down in cartoon the outlines of the stories with which they purposed to deal. Indeed there was a great interaction between the artist and the people, and if the latter encouraged the former by its approbation, the artists succeeded in gathering together and throwing light upon fairy-tales and myths which would otherwise have remained barren of feeling. We must not be blind to the fact that while, little by little, in the eighteenth century the knightly epic was growing more vigorous, together with the opra, the cart-painters allowed themselves to be drawn away by the common trend. They abandoned themes which were foreign to it, like those from the Bible, mythology and the New Testament and turned to the glitter of the areas of the French paladins alone. Meanwhile, in the piazzas, the ballad-singers enlarged upon and popularized the themes of Orlando, Rinaldo di Montalbano and Oliviero. They dwelt on the grief and terror of the death of the Paladins in the disaster of Roncesvaux, or of the frenzy of Orlando; they beat out and perpetuated disgust and contempt towards <sup>Ciano</sup> ~~Grand~~ di Maganza<sup>2</sup>, the traitor. The 'puppeteers' responded with enthusiasm.

The last masterpieces of this architectural art were the triumphal chariots' of Santa Rosalia which the Senate of Palermo fitted out each year in honour of their patron Saint, entrusting the work to the most eminent architects of the time. These chariots, fashioned like ships, rode majestically, high over the sea of heads<sup>in the piazzas</sup>. The Pitre museum keeps drawings by Paolo Amato and the model <sup>in the piazzas</sup> of a chariot of 1914.

The cart with its colourful stories, showed us, <sup>even in the</sup> ~~after a~~ most difficult <sup>tracks</sup> ~~transition~~, new versions and varieties of that art which, from the end of the nineteenth century, had become an expression of corporate joy or grief. It was like a way of living openly for individuals who, for too many centuries, had been shut up in feudal isolation, in the shackles of <sup>bigotry</sup> or, at least, always conditioned by the geographical limits of the Island, a beleaguered place in the Mediterranean, as Brandel has described it.

Lastly, the 'puppets' are the reflexion of the Sicilian soul, the means of knowing what the 'Sicilian Nation' may have been in the past, the expression of that mixture of history and art which is the figurative world of the Sicilian people.

We must clearly distinguish between the world of 'marionettes' which



flourishes in many European countries (that of Liège is the first to come to mind) and that of the 'puppets', characteristic of the Island. First of all, we notice that whereas the marionettes have no joints in hands or feet, the 'puppets' could be moved not only mechanically, but whenever the 'puppeteer', as Natoli relates, 'controlled by a thread, a sliver of iron in the right hand of the puppet, in such a way that it might have strength and stability for the drawing of the <sup>s</sup>word, taking guard and fighting'.

The accoutrements of the puppets, as to-day they still celebrate the feats of the opra have something of the armaments of the knights of the aforementioned Steri di Palermo (1377-80) and are certainly unlike those of Charlemagne's day. There is in fact in Italy a romantic re-presentation of mediaeval costume, which has been sympathetically welcomed by the people, and nowhere so much as in Sicily. In that Island, carts and 'puppets' came to life, or at least to light, at roughly the same time, the time of romanticism. In Sicily, they use (for clothing) something from the Arab tradition, for fighting and for asserting their own ideals they look to Norman chivalry, and in general to that of France. But both heritages are no more than ways of vividly, often violently and solemnly, expressing what is crying out in the breasts of the people, i.e. a passion for justice.

From this primary and universal need derive the long, haughty speeches which the 'puppets' recite on the stage. Since they themselves are none other than the image of the people which looks for justice and, when that is violated, seeks revenge, the clash between warring parties cannot be other than noisy and ruthless. A people which has suffered fifteen different overlordships, and has been the victim of oppression and fraud, thus compensates itself for the suffering of the centuries, with the knightly epic, not fabricated, but certainly <sup>revised in its own style. In the 'puppets'</sup> is the psychological history of the Island, the key to unlock the spirit of its popular figurative art.

GAETANO FALZONE