

Excerpts from GOXWA

by Paul Sant-Cassia - 06 Décembre 2008

I.

A three-quarters figure of a young girl glances down at a fluttering, hovering bird. A split golden-yellow background unifies the two paintings that make up this painting. The left picture contains a single tall flowering stem with interspaced dark and red leaves. The right painting depicts a bird and a girl. The girl's top figure is almost chalky white. Her dress is dark but there are tinges of red creeping up the edges of the skirt towards her body. The dress appears diaphanous next to her thighs. The girl's right arm extends partly out of the picture. She appears to be studying the bird almost as if there is an interaction between the two. There is an element of uncertainty in the girl's apprehension of the bird, a hint of a situation somewhat out of the ordinary. The painting is entitled *The Talk*. But: who is talking to whom? It clearly is the bird talking and the girl is listening. Or more precisely, the girl has just received a message, is looking at the bird and puzzling over it.



Melissa

The same girl. She is looking at the bird. She appears calmer. Her arms are neatly folded behind her back. Her dress has changed. It is golden. Her dress has taken on the background shades of the first picture. Her flaxen hair is partly covered by a dark headscarf. She appears composed, almost like a young girl from one of the pages of Proust. The bird is roughly at the same height as in the previous one, but it is not flying. It is resting on a wire. The picture appears much stiller than the first one. It has a calmer atmosphere. The girl appears composed, at peace, accepting. Her eyes seem closed.



The Gold Hat

The same girl: She is wearing an exotic Eastern-looking tall golden hat and long pearl earrings. She is done up and is wearing a sort of golden crown. Her long hair is in a single plat behind her back. She is looking proudly and firmly at us, her head thrown back at an angle that raises her above the viewer. A slash of red marks her belt, and hints of red hover behind her. The lower part of the picture is dark: darkness seems to be enveloping the picture from the bottom left hand corner. She could remind us of Salome.



Young Pride

The same girl. Here she is seated and facing us like some Renaissance half-figure portrait. She has a fine silk jacket over her shoulders covering a low bodice with small adolescent breasts. A open single stemmed flower rises to her left.. One arm is extends over the table. It could almost be holding a breviary, or a key. The other arm is tucked in against her chest. Her cheeks are slightly rouged. Her lips are full red, her earrings are likewise crimson. Her hair is done up .She is glancing not at us but downwards out of the corner of her eye at something beyond the corner of the picture. She seems assured and also concealing something from us. The lips are slightly parted. She is entertaining a thought that we are not privy to. That thought could involve a situation and a plot .

II.

One Model, Four Scenes, Four Different Situations, Four Different Narratives. These four paintings by Goxwa could appear as single works. They work well individually. They are very attractive to look at. Their textures are rich, multi-layered, luminous. But together they also say something else which weaves them in the history of western Art and in particular to a central theme in the depiction of women: their sexuality, their fertility and also, perhaps, their danger. Let us look at Picture 1. There is a narrative here. It is that of a message, and of a message that disturbs. The fluttering hovering bird is straining to keep still. It is not in its normal condition.

Effort is involved. The young girl is drawn towards the bird but is also disturbed by it. Indeed the bird is moving towards the girl. It hovers almost too close to her, she looks down towards it, but it has invaded her private space. Her skirt billows to the left, an indication of a gust of wind. There is an interaction between the two and the movement, the doing, the action, is from the bird to the young girl. The result of this interaction is a predication, an effect: the girl appears to be half-trying to escape. What could have passed between the two characters?

Let us turn to Picture 2. The relationship with the bird has changed, There is acceptance, a docility, in the scene and in the re-arrangement of the figures. The bird is no longer in flight, it is even slightly further away from the girl in Picture 1, and the girl appears to be contemplating it with a calmness of submissive contemplation. Her arms drawn behind her further emphasize the element of calm demure acceptance.

These scenes could easily be taken merely as pure representations, as the attractive pictures they are. But I think we would be missing something very significant if we merely treated them as such. They have an effect on the viewer which belies their apparent simplicity, and it is this that I want to explore. All painters are engaged in a complex exchange with other artists before them or contemporaneous with them. And leaving aside any potential exchange with other contemporary artists that the artist may be engaged with, it seems to me that Goxwa is clearly engaged here in an exchange with classical artists. And the answer to this is that these paintings are her version of an important theme in western Art: the Annunciation. This is not to say that the artist consciously thought or planned to paint such a scene. Annunciation scenes rarely overtly engage the attention of contemporary artists. But we should not be surprised if the structure, the transposition of the characters, and the narrative of an interaction even in our contemporary artistic world is influenced - even if subconsciously - by a pre-existing iconic language and tradition which we, but especially artists, inhabit.

III.

When women are interposed with birds, winged creatures, in western art, something is happening. And that main 'something' has generally been The Annunciation. Of course, the winged creature is an angel, not a bird, although most angels are depicted with wings. Let us for the moment concentrate on the structure not the detail: two characters in an exchange, a woman and a winged creature. We shall have more to say on the bird later. As Baxandall (1972) has shown, the theme of the Annunciation clearly exercised Renaissance painters especially in depicting the various emotions Mary experienced on the apparition of the angel. Initially she was frightened: "And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be" (Luke 1:29). This mood of disturbance, of *perturbatio*, is clearly found in Botticelli's paintings. His Marys always seem to be trying to escape from the room (or from the picture in the example below).



The second mood Mary passes through is that of puzzlement: "Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke,1:34). Let us look at the critical detail of painting 1 (The Talk) again:



The third emotion is that of acceptance, when Mary accepts her fate, and is usually presented as humility: “And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38). The position of the arms and the disposition of the body usually provide a very clear indication of the Virgin’s emotions. In Botticelli’s paintings, the arms are extended towards the angel as if to push him away. In Fra Angelico’s paintings the mood or emotion of the virgin is expressed through crossed arms. Here, humility is the dominant emotion.



Fra Angelico: Annunciation

Convento di San Marco, Florence

Similarly, the perfectly proportioned classical portico and the disposition of the bodies of the Angel and Mary in Domenico Veneziano's Annunciation at the Fitzwilliam beautifully convey sublime acceptance.



Is not a similar emotion being expressed in Goxwa's fortuitously titled Melissa? (Melissa, whose name means "Bee" in Greek, and who posed as the model is the daughter of the Portuguese concierge at her apartment block). Here the disposition of the body and arms similarly evokes the emotion of sublime acceptance.

But the artist does something with the arms that is more contemporary, more modern. She arranges them behind the model's back, in a posture that recalls another famous image of poise and calm, that of Degas' *La petite Danseuse*.



La petite Danseuse

If we have succeeded in establishing a parallelism between these paintings by Goxwa and a tradition of iconography in western art we can perhaps understand a bit more why these paintings can evoke a particular response in us. They satisfy us not just because of their execution, but also because we respond to them from a pre-existing language, a world that we have interiorised.

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