

THE ART OF PAINTING.

PHILIPPE SMIT. Philippe Smit who began with following the trail of the realistic impressionists (with Manet as the leader) and came via this natural path in the land of dreams, in the same Arcadia in which Puvis de Chavannes sojourned. He changed from sensual to spiritual, his art is not a reaction, but a continuation of the, with personal discoveries enriched, traditions of the Arts of France, set in our time, of which Poussin, Ingres and Puvis are the classics.

He was not moved by the things modern because this pushed back the old. He found no satisfaction from impressionism. He strove for a more substantial realization; for an Art that served an abstract outline and a completed composition. His art is in a good sense conventional, because he already left out of tradition what was lacking.

To be conventional is to be generally, always and everywhere understood. It is more altruistic than to follow one's own will or the cultivation of weirdness. This impersonal attitude is exactly what is of most value in a person's work.

One of his first works, the "Spelrecommandeur" is painted on account of a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé, in which the poet exhibits the last healthy woman of France, as a never before seen miracle, at the county fairs. One of the most attractive paintings of this period is "The Innocent at the bank of a river", who doesn't fear the poisonous world, for whom all flowers bloom in great beauty. In "The Apparition of the Fairy" the influence of El Greco becomes visible, and in a work such as "The Wanderlust", and in the triptych "Apparition" (moonlight), "The Wanderers", "The Centaurs" the influence of Puvis de Chavannes is

noticeable. In "The Wanderlust", in which he painted the poetry of Greek Mythology, one thinks of Charon, who rowed the dead across the river Styx to the netherworld. In "The Lost Child", a little girl is sitting on the beach of the ocean near a ship which is ready to sail her to the banks of a land that she is seeking with her whole being, it is like a new Iphigenia. Just like all the works of Philippe Smit are driven by desire, this tender and powerful painting is also an expression of longing. In "La lavandière du Paradis" (The Bather of Paradise) an immensely tender thought was beautifully brought to life. Also from this period comes "De Profeet" (The Prophet) who looks toward heaven with a soulful gaze. He holds the books like a person whose thoughts are in higher spheres.

There are artists, like for example Henri Rousseau, who elevate everyday reality into a sphere of strangeness and mystery and there are others who can depict an invisible secret as tangible and real. To the latter belongs Philippe Smit. Imagination is perhaps one of the most recognizable characteristics of his being. He makes real the imagination; the poetry is for him reality. He lives in a state of longing and ties everything to an eternal life. His art is based on love, it is creative and brings forth living beings. The sweet memory of a painful loss makes him in to an artist and mystic, because all mysticism is personal and it is the suffering which - as Millet said - most powerfully expresses the artists' self. Everything which this artist experiences and lives makes him introspective. Content and not form is for him arts' task, and has to be an ethical apparition.

Philippe Smit is not a glamorous talent, his work up to now is only

known to a few insiders. He is a silent and lonely one in the land. He doesn't give himself to trivial company and doesn't partake in our modern exhibitions. He doesn't strive for fame and honour but for freedom. At most from time to time he will hold a special exposition – like the one of his first work in the "Society of Visual Arts" – or in his studio. In the show windows of the firm J.S. Fetter one could see some of his works twice after they were framed there. Two of which were pastels. One titled "Heilige" (Holy one) one of the highlights of his art, and a portrait of a young girl. In the first one one doesn't see a piece of heaven; and yet the scene is a world where things are more beautiful and better than ours. At the base of a small tree which blooms in a dream, a holy lady sits against a fairy tale background. Created as a mediator between earth and heaven. She holds a divine book in her hand but she doesn't read it, she already knows everything, she casts a soulful glance toward heaven – inattentive angel distracted by old memories. An innocent little lad lies playing at her feet, while a little girl presses herself softly against the holy one. The artist could us pathos because he was not given to sentimentality. With an internal meaning like in this work, one doesn't speak of the technique of the "mystical" triangle on which rests the building of composition, nor of colour, which is limited to blue, rose and green. (an often recurring trio), though Philippe Smit belongs even in this technical respect to one of the most cultured and knowledgeable painters.

This youth has not suffered because he lives in this, modern age. In his earlier work he was sometimes influenced by El Greco, especially by the gothic, the divine in Theotokopuli. In his last works, in "Heilige" (Holy One) and in the portrait of a young girl, he delves only in his own esse. They belong to

the lasting creations of the painters of this day and age.

To find the pose and lighting of the young girl's portrait was half the work. Both are thoroughly researched. Also both are inspired only by feelings. The law placement of the white colour of the feather fan and the melancholy shadow on the face become full of meaning. It is a portrait full of spiritual tension, it is not only a pleasant unity of colour and tone, it is a realization of the state of a soul. The real value of this portrait lies in the "accent", in the miraculous sphere which surrounds it.

The director of the committee which collected the exhibition of artists from the Gooi area to be held in "Huize Corvin" (Corvins' House) in Hilversum, the Netherlands, was very lucky to be able to get the painter to surrender four of his works

There hanging on a special wall were a still life with flowers, a self-portrait, a young girls portrait and a painting titled "Verlangen" (Yearning). On the bottom of the frame of the last painting was written the following poem by Stephane Mallarmé:

*« Mon âme vers ton front où rêve ô calme
soeur
Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur
Et vers le ciel de ton œil angélique,
Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,
Fidèle, un blanc jet d'eau soupire vers
l'azur ».*

"Longing was in my opinion the most beautiful most poetic because it was the most melancholy one. Mallarme's poem may have been the inspiration of it, but the origin lies deeper, in his own soul. It is painted from the very tender memory – a memory which just like art idealizes everything of his sister from whom he even by death is not parted because she lives in his dream takes part in his work. A happy mysterious sphere surrounds everything. In the one of the diagonally composed portrait of a young girl, he painted

in a remarkable way the awakening of womanhood. In a muted green costume, more reclining than sitting, like a tigress on an island on which some roses have washed ashore. As if with a sudden movement she raised herself from her reclining position and looks with lots of contained excitement toward the distance, searching for the future.

Philippe Smit doesn't belong to the artists, who can imagine the ascension of Christ and whose works are just as bad as their deeds. The dignity of the subjects he usually treats elevates his feelings of worth as a priest of beauty. It is this dignity as a human being, which he painted in his self-portrait. He portrayed himself in a deep blue painter's smock, blue like the robe of a Madonna, a beret on his head while a delicate hand nonchalantly holds a yellow book. We should be happy that in our country, (the Netherlands) painters as a rule excel in the representation and interpretation of the often without intellectual inspection accepted suggestions of reality.

That we now again have a young poet-painter, in whom the "felt" thought is in the centre of his activity and who just like Rembrandt, Millet and Vincent puts a deep meaning in his work. An artist must - he wrote to me once - not want to be more than this one or that one but, like Claude Debussy says, constantly top oneself. Then we will realize something deeper, because a lack of depth of most artists at this time is "à vomir": "exists very little or very far from the noble or sublime ecstasy which art presents, they have been confused by all the theories and fundamentals which remove them further and further from the original fountain".

To his last works belong the painting at Fontainebleau in the summer of 1923 a view of the woods with the perfect name of "Weg van het geheimnis" (Road of

mysteriousness) which is softly calming, one is a field bouquet with a deep humility for nature. The "Woning van den droom" (House of the dream) and the "Hemelvaart in een sterrennacht" (Ascension on a starry night) belong to the largest pieces he ever made. On the first he worked without stopping for three months. It was painted under the influence of a poem by the highly adored by the painter - poet-musician Maurice Rollinat: "Manoir tragique".

The stage is in a hall of an old castle. The moon shines in through an with ivy encircled window. In the high fireplace a fire is burning. Two candles illuminate an opened holy book, one of those well read tomes like Rembrandt loved to paint. (The difficulty of three separate light sources in one and the same painting is here gloriously conquered). An angel has descended from heaven and sits in the moonlight while playing a harp. She is so beautiful that the paintings of the women on the wall weep from emotion.

The painter told me that if he knew of a way to satisfactorily fix pastels he would have painted the "Woning van den droom" in that medium. Indeed the colours of this oil painting are as soft and clear as if it is a pastel. The "Hemelvaart" is inconceivable in another medium.

The "Woning van den droom" is as all of Philippe Smits works an invitation to dreamland. It connects earth with heaven. One feels oneself become a better person because of it. "It is so difficult" he wrote to me "to connect things real with those of dreams, which for a pure artist are not fulfilled until he has given as much truth as possible to the external and the internal. Because there is no beauty without poetry and without a great external truth. Form has to be a pure statement of the emotions. Colour

and form modulate themselves after the sublime ecstasies of the soul. Then one arrives to a variety of ones work and one is free of all aesthetic and theoretical formulas which in our time are so heavy and painful a burden".

Since El Greco's "Hemelvaart van Maria" (Ascension of Mary) there has never again been painted so real heavenly and majestic an "Ascension" as Philippe Smits. He is one of the very few painters of our time, who strictly speaking, should be allowed to deal with such a traditional holy subject. With this painting he made no concession to an external and swiftly passing fashion, like so many for whom religious subjects are just a reason to paint, but he was prompted by an inner necessity to witness, by the feeling in his heart and not only by the knowledge in his head Art is for him a language, he doesn't paint just to say something, but rather to express his deep and pure soul. Painters of saints must be saintly painters, at least observe a strict moral code in their daily life. A painter who, without believing in Christ paints a holy scene of Christ's life commits blasphemy and compromises pious thought

It is not possible in a short article in which only those who make up our culture and wish to view this art to describe all paintings in depth. Taking in account that words could describe another artform. Each reproduction is more eloquent. Sometime I hope to devote time to a more comprehensive study of the man and his work. The sphere of the soul meets and engulfs you in all his work, like in the "Pieta" a desperate lament by John and Mary that God has left the earth. In "De zingende engel" (The singing angel), an angel child is singing in front

of an open window, through which one becomes aware of a landscape with a rainbow, which connects earth with heaven, just like the angel represents a connection of heaven and earth. "De Dwaas" (The Fool) who lost her memory and roams around a high hill, covered with ferns, in which stands an old broken down castle, forlorn in the somber sky. "De Burchtvrouwe" (The Lady of the Castle), a jailed soul, on an ivy covered balcony of a silent old fortress - indicated only by a dilapidated wall with a dead window - longingly looking at the rising moon over the moat with two stately swimming swans. As a title one could put Rollinat's poem "Le Silence" under this painting since it is full of the poetry of ruins.

*Le silence est l'âme des choses
Qui veulent garder leur secret", etc.
(Silence is the soul of those who wish to
guard their secret)*

Because just as Rollinat makes the silence audible, Philippe Smit makes the invisible visible. At the end of a glowing article about El Greco and Philippe Smit a young poet wrote o.a. "It may seem unreal to you that so great a person and artist lives in the Netherlands at this time and yet is almost unknown ...; one forgets however that very few people in our society have contact with the sphere of the soul. Let us hope that through the works of Philippe Smit this number will grow! Because herein lie the words of the sages: "Material reality is only an apparition of a deeper i.e. a psychic origin", brought to life in beautiful form. One who has no understanding of the abstractions of philosophy or of the parables of religion, he is the one who has a feeling for art!

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