

3rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

---

Amsterdam - the Hague . July 2 - 10, 1951

-

5

" VAN GOGH : THE APPRECIATION OF HIS WORK BEFORE 1886 "

Report of G.L. Luzzatto :

Popular success, universal success, the emotion of the crowds in New-York, London, everywhere, have shed an unparalleled brilliance on the fame of Van Gogh . Criticism itself, refusing its laurels to painters very close in spirit to Van Gogh, remains faithful to him.

It is obvious that Van Gogh's success is due to his feverish creation in the South. But an attempt has been made to turn back to the Dutch period and to glorify the work which preceded the blossoming of the new painter and his conquest of colour in the teeth of the cold Mistral.

In particular, M. Vandesselaere, in his remarkable study of the Dutch period of Van Gogh's work, has not only given an exhaustive historical survey, he has tried to glorify this work to the point of putting his drawings of peasants on the same level as Michael Angelo's Sixtine Chapel frescoes . In addition, Van Gogh's colour in a still life dating from this period is described as having a musical beauty reminiscent of Beethoven .

Is it really necessary to reverse to this extent the appreciation of productions which would seem rather the preparatory work of a painter who has not yet found himself ?

I do not think this is permissible .

It is not only a question of admiration for certain pictures . The question is, should we refuse to accept the creative life of Van Gogh - as it is revealed to us so completely in the letters and the paintings - as an admirable and exemplary ascension, from the fumbings of the down - and - out artist of the Borinage to the prodigious joy of expression at Arles; or should we, once more, turn our backs on the evidence, and devote ourselves to an over-appreciation of less successful works ?

We remain convinced that the works of the Dutch period would never have attracted all this attention, had not the brilliant vitality of later works drawn attention to that period when Van Gogh was wandering, tormented, in his native country. And the suggestion, which has brought about this avowed appreciation of the silhouettes of peasant women, is only explicable by an admiration which has grown out of study.

And perhaps in this attempt to interpret the first steps as the summit, there is an almost subconscious attempt to escape from the fascination of a naïve eloquence, and to read into the work of Van Gogh an intellectual idea of plastic realisation?

If we look at the work by following the process and progress of a passionate man, who, in the light of Provence at last finds his voice, the Dutch period stands out vividly as the necessary training for what was to follow. Even so we do not diminish the absolutely Dutch character of Van Gogh's art when he came into his own in that powerful outburst under the Provençal sky.

Style and character - all remains Dutch; and it would be a further mistake to try in a certain manner to annex Van Gogh's painting, with which it was only closely linked in the Paris period; but this was a chrysalis period - and it is almost symbolical that his principal correspondence, that is to say the written evidence, is silent during this time, although the cause is of course external, Théo being with him.

But in Van Gogh's nature style, in his rapid calligraphy, even in his colour, the Northerner comes out again.

The great, the real Dutch Van Gogh expressed himself at Arles and at Anvers.

Let us be humble before the wonderful upward curve of a creative artist who was not, at first, gifted for drawing nor for painting, who even reached maturity before becoming a painter, and who became one day a powerful painter, discovering a language which today, alone, strikes the crowds of sensitive men and communicates to them his flight, his vigour, his enthusiasm, his exaltation inspired with love.

Any comparison between Van Gogh and other masters who perchance worked near him during the same period, is misleading. But it is equally mistaken to reverse the flow of the river of his life, and to seek in the period of research, that new young strength which was to burst into life one day in the revelation of sun and wind and olive trees.