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Fausto Melotti

In May 2021 Galleria Christian Stein in Milan presented a series of works by Fausto Melotti, which had not been in the public eye for more than sixty years. These were landscapes that Melotti painted in the early 1950s and only exhibited once, in 1956, also in Milan. I had been interested in Melotti's art for many years. In 2011, I organized a retrospective of his work at Kunstmuseum Winterthur and on that occasion also took note of some paintings in the store of his estate. However, the focus of the retrospective was on Melotti's sculptural work in the first instance and on his drawings, in keeping with the artist's own approach. To see these scintillating colourful paintings in an exhibition was amazing, and I was fascinated.



A short time ago a catalogue was published documenting the exhibition at Galleria Christian Stein. While writing the text for this publication, I realized that these paintings were not a mere marginal addenda to his oeuvre. They were painted at a time when Melotti was trying to reclaim his artistic identity and his expectations in this respect were high. To recap: Melotti first attracted attention in 1935 with abstract sculptures. These pieces demonstrated his conviction that art is not about modelling, in the sense of art indebted to nature, but about modulating: about an order defined by the artist. In Italy his sculptures were not greeted with acclaim; during the first years of the war in Rome Melotti conformed to the classical style of the period and created allegorical groups of figures. On returning to Milan in 1943 he found that his studio had been completely destroyed in the bombardment of the city, so he started again from scratch, but this time as a ceramist.



In the exhibition at the Stein gallery one of his large female ceramic figures with its richly coloured glaze was on show. This was commissioned by Gio Ponti in 1949 to adorn a cruise liner. Melotti enjoyed considerable success with his ceramics, was celebrated in the journal Domus as "Il mago Melotti", and received international commissions, yet he did not see himself as a craftsman. He missed the precision and clarity of work that only art could aspire to fulfil. Alongside his daily work he made small gracious figurines inspired by Romanesque reliefs, which he exhibited at the Biennale in Venice. However, painting did not yet play any part in his practice.



A marked change came about in 1950 when Melotti rented an apartment in Zoagli on the coast of Liguria, where he spent the summer months with his family in the years to follow. Instead of getting bored on the beach, Melotti sought out suitable locations and painted canvasses as vedute of the seaside resort with views out to sea. The landscapes and houses in these paintings are bathed in gentle luminous light, muting the colours and lending an ethereal quality to the objects. One might think of Bonnard's paintings, which Melotti would have encountered at the 1950 Biennale, but also of pre-war Italian versions of "Impressionism". His love of drawing is evident in the way the paint is applied, with sprightly brush marks taking command of the picture surface and bringing it to life; in his final years he turned to working in watercolour and gouache on paper.



In 1956 the Zoagli paintings were exhibited by the renowned L'Annunciata gallery in Milan and were highly praised in the reviews. At heart, his motivation to turn to painting was his desire to re-establish himself as an artist, Melotti told a journalist. As a painter, he had discovered an idiom that enabled him to communicate in a personal fresh manner. "I am free", he announced, "free from trends and groups; it is so fashionable these days to 'toe the line' ... I don't write Christ with a small c, as is fashionable, nor ... gruppi, allineamenti — groups, enforced conformity!" Even a decade later, when Melotti's new career as a sculptor working with metal began to take off, he always kept his paintings, his symbols of artistic freedom, close by him in his studio, where visitors might come across them and be amazed.

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