

V A N I T Y F A I R

October, 1915: p. 51

SOME ITALIAN FUTURISTS WITH A PAST

LIKE Heine's young genius, who had a brilliant career behind him, the Italian Futurists also boast a remarkable past.

This group of painters, sculptors, poets, musicians first made a stir in the world when at Turin in 1910 amid riotous circumstances, their manifesto was fired broadcast at a tottering civilization. As the six painters; Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini and Soffici are expecting to exhibit their canvases soon in New York it will not be amiss to ask what Futurism is. Of the dead we write obituaries—as a movement Futurism is moribund—but in this case we need not feel under obligations to speak well of the deceased, for Signor Marinetti the vociferous mouth-piece of the party, long ago declared war to the knife on all existing institutions; not forgetting the Post-Impressionists, Independents and Cubists. It may be added that Marinetti ought to feel happy at present for the reason that his dream may be realized; his dream of the total demolition of all existing art museums, churches, old public buildings, palaces, in a word, of civilization itself. War is the "only hygiene in the world," he has declared.

Impressionism, which gave us back a luminous world, has succumbed to the old bituminous palette and archaic forms. The Secessionists according to the Futurists are really not innovators but backsliders; they face the past, not the future, with their imitation of Egyptian linear devices, their puerile and grotesque synthesis. The Futurists propose to pave the way to a new and glorious domain. They worship movement, not mass. Rhythm is their god, and there shall be no other gods but Rhythm. They glorify war, militarism, patriotism, the destructive arm of the anarchist, the beautiful ideas that kill the contempt of women. Let me give you their side of the case. Luckily their manifesto is not couched in the Congo telegraphic code which Marinetti calls a new Italian prose style.

THE Futurists assert that they will sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and boldness. The essential elements of their art will be courage, daring, rebellion. Literature has hitherto glorified serene immobility, ecstasy and sleep; they extol aggressive movement, feverish insomnia, the double quickstep, the fisticuff, the box on the ear. They declare that the world's splendor has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing car, its frame adorned with great pipes, like snakes with explosive breath; a roaring motor-car, which looks as if running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace in the Louvre. Note the speed-mania motive. There is no more beauty except in strife. No masterpiece without aggressiveness. No emotion but that evoked by motion. We stand on the extreme promontory of centuries. Why should we look behind us when we must break into the mysterious portals of the impossible! Time and Space died yesterday. Already we live in the Absolute, since we have created Speed, eternal and ever present.

This betrays the influence of Henri Bergson, and his philosophy of rhythmic motion. Indeed, the Futurists mix their paint with meta-



"Decomposition of Female Figure at Table" (1912)

physics. Mother Earth is still spinning through space at the gait originally imparted to her by the sun. On her outer rind mankind spins with her. Because we have invented electric cars we need not arrogate to ourselves the discovery of speed. What has speed to do with painting on a flat surface, painting in two dimensions in space? We are coming to the application of rhythm to paint.

THE manifesto of the Futurists—dated Milan Feb. 11, 1910—may be summed-up: 1st: That imitation must be despised, and all originality glorified. 2nd: That it is necessary to rebel against the tyranny of the terms "harmony" and "good taste" as being too elastic definitions, by the help of which it is easy to demolish the works of Rembrandt, Goya, Rodin. 3rd: That all art critics are useless or harmful. 4th: That all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed. 5th: That the name of "Madman" with which we attempt to gag all innovators should be looked on as a title of honor. 6th: That innate complementariness is an absolute necessity in painting, just as free metre is in poetry, or polyphony in music. The Futurists call it "simultaneity" and attempt to represent half a dozen different things at the same time on canvas—a dog's tail, a woman's laughter, the morning thoughts of a man who has had a hard night, the inside of a motor-bus and the ideas of its passengers concerning bumping wheels. 7th: That universal dynamism must be rendered in painting as a dynamic sensation. 8th: That in the manner of rendering nature the essential is sincerity. 9th: That movement and light destroy the materiality of bodies.

Now what is there astoundingly novel in all these maxims, except the doctrine of simultaneousness, and even that has been discounted by the Italian and French Primitives in their depiction of a dozen different happenings on the same canvas? "But," say the Futurists, and they are more intolerant and doctrinaire than any academic body, "the spectator must be conceived as standing in the centre of the picture, and view it thus close at hand and not from afar." I confess that this has a certain disconcerting novelty. Otherwise, this manifesto betrays a purely "literary" attitude towards art, and not the true, if old-fashioned, pictorial one of all the great masters. Rather is their logical goal the art of the film pictures.

However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof. I saw the Futurist show of 34 pictures in Paris in 1912; later in Amsterdam and Munich. It was also exhibited in London, Milan, Berlin. I am not ashamed to say that I enjoyed it in part, and after I had optically "oriented" myself I discerned the point of view of

Futurists

these clever and accomplished Italian painters, hag-ridden to be sure, by fantastic theories, but indubitably sincere in their procedure. Power is power, no matter the strange airs it may assume. I found myself staring at Carrà's "Funeral of the Anarchist Galli" and wondering whether a conflict should not be represented thus violently. Richard Strauss thought so when he wrote the battle episode in his symphony, "A Hero's Life." Realism of a crass sort is the dominating factor in Carrà's violent canvas. The motive of the crossed canes of the demonstrating students is as vividly rhythmic as the lance motive in Velasquez's great battle-piece at the Prado. "The Memory of a Night," by Russolo is a "fantastic impression produced not by line but by color." An elongated insect or snail—is it a man or a grasshopper?—is in the first plane; behind him is a girl's face with pleading eyes; an explosion of light in the background is evidently an electric lamp; another woman's face, a drunken house, smothered onions and a splitting headache. I couldn't discover the rum-motive beyond a champagne glass; perhaps that is purely psychological. The rest is chaos.

"THE Pan-Pan Dance at the Monico" by Severini, as confused as it seems on first view, contains some vital bits, excellent modelling, striking detail. The interest is nowhere focussed though the woman dancer catches the eye. A crowded supper-room in a Continental café, the white napery, variegated colors of feminine attire, the movement and blinding glare of the lights make chaotic blur, but the human eye with its almost infinite capacity for adaptation—"accommodation"—soon resolves disorder into order. The trouble with the Futurist is that while he catches the full force of the primal impression he later loads it with his own subjective fancies. "The Milliner" is by the same Severini—a talented painter—which he describes as "An Arabesque" of the movement produced by the twinkling colors and iridescence of the frills and furbelows on show; the electric light defines the scene into defined zones. A study of "simultaneous penetration." The deadly grin of the modiste is the only "simultaneous impression" I could detect. Boccioni's "The Street Enters the House" is a curiosity, for, as the painter explains, he does not limit himself to what he sees in the square frame of the window, but he represents what he would see on looking out from every side of the balcony; also the ideas of the street as it enters this madhouse. There is an effort to delineate the collision of two forces in Russolo's "Rebellion"; that of "the revolutionary element composed of enthusiasm and red lyricism" against the force of inertia and the reactionary resistance of tradition. The angles are the vibratory waves of the former force in motion. The perspective of the houses is destroyed, just as a boxer is bent double by receiving a blow in the wind." Symbolism with a vengeance!

Suffice to say that doubtless you will find, as I did, that the Futurists are amusing as well as instructive. Marinetti, the chef d'école, has invented a "prose" which while it is not so voluptuous as that of "Tender Buttons" by Gertrude Stein is dynamic, after the fashion of an armament factory in full operation. I've seen no Futurist sculpture. The Futurists' musical composer, Pratella, has some piano music in *Musica Futurista* which is quite tame. I prefer Arnold Schoenberg. Pratella has also written a symphony, of modern noises said to be scored for 42 centimeter cannon, subway trains, lawn mowers and rug beaters. Futurism is kaleidoscopic mystification.