

FORD, BOWEN, AND ITALIAN ART

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‘DECORATION, I shouted, as the patter of his descending footsteps died, IS THE SOLE . . . REASON . . . FOR . . . ALL . . . THE . . . ARTS . . . LET YOUR LIFE BE DECORATED BY CEZANNE [. . .] and you will be all right.’¹ That, of course, was Ford Madox Ford shouting at a testy and dated connoisseur who favored Reynolds and Gainsborough to the Post-Impressionists and dared to call Cézanne ‘an obscure Dago of whom hardly anyone in London ever heard’. But by 1935 Ford didn’t much care what anyone in London thought about any of the arts, though he certainly would have thought well of what Stella Bowen wrote about Cézanne for Londoners in her ‘Around the Galleries’ column for the *News Chronicle* of 8 July 1935: ‘He is the joy of critics and historians on account of his key position as the individual genius who seceded from Impressionism and introduced that more classical and architectural sense which afterwards found its logical conclusion in the purely formal abstractions of the Cubists’. Consequently, she promotes Cézanne as ‘the father of Post Impressionism and the greatest single influence on modern painting until the arrival of Picasso’.

What Paul Cézanne was to the Post-Impressionists, Giotto di Bondone was to the Italian Primitives. Giorgio Vasari writes about Giotto in very much the same way that Bowen and Ford write about Cézanne. He sees Giotto’s art as beautifying and honouring chapels, churches, and cathedrals because Giotto not only learned from Nature² but also brought design and invention³ to painting, laying the foundations of drawing and coloring in the process.⁴ He brought to these things ‘order, proportion, liveliness, and ease’.⁵ Thus Giotto was completely prepared to decorate ‘with the noblest of paints’⁶ the Arena Chapel in Padua, the church of Saint Chiara in Calabria, and even St. Peter’s in Rome with stories from the Old and New Testaments. His art of decoration was so accomplished that, as Vasari writes, ‘his fame is boundless among the moderns’.⁷ The ‘moderns’ in this case are Vasari and his contemporaries in the sixteenth century. But, as we shall see, writers and artists in the twentieth century also

celebrated the work of Giotto, Simone Martini, and their thirteenth and fourteenth century contemporaries. Ford and Bowen were among them.

One major difference between Cézanne and Giotto is that the former painted on canvas and the latter on fresh plaster or wet walls; that is, Giotto painted frescoes. Cézanne used oils; Giotto tempera or powder bound together by liquid made of an egg.⁸ But their aim, according to Ford and Bowen, was the same: to decorate life. Now the word *decoration* has distinctly different meanings. When Ford insists on having his life decorated by Cézanne, he means that such a painter will ‘adorn, beautify, embellish’ life ‘to grace [and] honour’ it by his work. He does not mean to ‘deck [it] out with ornamental accessories’.⁹ Clearly Bowen makes the same distinctions when she writes to Ford about Giotto’s frescoes at Assisi: ‘I don’t know when I’ve so enjoyed an interior’;¹⁰ whereas, at the church of Santa Clara, she finds a ‘peep-show’ in ‘a hideous coloured marble chapel, fearfully ornate of 18-something [. . .] On the altar, which was much belaced and beflowered was a large curly gilt casket, surrounded by wax flowers, & reposing on a satin cushion, was a small skull’.¹¹ Stella is clearly appalled by decorations of this kind.

In March 1923 Bowen traveled in Northern Italy with Dorothy Shakespear, Ezra Pound’s wife. This avant-garde couple tried to make Bowen into an abstract painter, but she resisted them mightily. Ford quite frankly tells Stella that she shouldn’t listen to them and that she should continue on her own way. He encourages her to embrace what she sees in Assisi, Florence, Siena, and elsewhere in her travels. ‘I do feel Italy to be so immensely important for the Artist-Painter that I believe yr. stature must grow by cubits for every day you are there’.¹² Why? Because Bowen will find there what Ford had said to her time and again to be true: ‘The prevalence of one type or other of Art – *any* Art – is merely a matter of cycles: or even of strata of society. – And again: there are certain axioms, one of which is that good drawing will always cause emotions to arise; so will good colour & good pattern. And goodness means observation rendered – in each case’.¹³ Good drawing, good color, and pattern are the very things that Vasari praised in Giotto. They are the very things that come to the fore in Ford’s biography of his grandfather, Ford Madox Brown, and his books on Holbein, Rossetti, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His credentials suggest that he knows what he is talking about when he writes to Bowen, ‘As for not going to the Old Fellows – you *must* go

to them! – to the serene ones, like Holbein & Cranach & Simone Martini'.¹⁴ Bowen did heed Ford's advice. She went to the Old Fellows and invoked them many times in writing about art, eventually under the pseudonym 'Palette,' for the *News Chronicle* in 1934 and 1935. And she constantly held up the norm of decoration, in the best sense of the word, as a constant in her criticism. Fortunately she was not a lonely voice crying in a painterly wilderness. There was a roar set up in France by the emergence of the Nabis, whose acolyte, Jan Verkade, proclaimed their doctrine: 'There are no paintings, but only decorations'.¹⁵

Décoration, a French term that had a highly positive and multilayered meaning in the artistic debates of the period, flourished in France throughout Stella Bowen's career. The principal practitioners of art as *décoration* were Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, and Ker Xavier Roussel. They were called 'Nabis,' the Hebrew word for prophets. Their aim was to create interior spaces pleasing to the eye. The reason for that was obvious, as Bowen explained:

We live in a world where most of man's work is ugly and where ugliness quite obviously does not hurt most men. To be a person who suffers from this and who cannot settle down in surroundings which have no grace or charm and who needs a daily dose of beauty as a sick man needs his medicine is simply to be at a great disadvantage in the modern world.¹⁶

Unable to change their surroundings outside the home – though they did vigorously promote poster art to please the eye on the street – the Nabis created beautiful interiors. Bowen's *Tusnelda's Interior* (plate 17) can be thought an instance of this program. With their focus on living spaces, the Nabis were also known as 'Intimists,' the rubric under which Bowen reviewed Bonnard and Vuillard in the *News Chronicle* for 13 May 1935. In her 'Round the Galleries' column she associates decoration with the 'smooth and literal manner' of Italian primitive painting and its 'intense emotional quality,' celebrating what is 'pure[ly] decorative' as a 'joy'.¹⁷ To achieve a decorative ideal the Nabis insisted that artists had to get 'beyond the easel'. They had to create works both larger and different from those an easel could hold, like screens and frescoes, for instance. They called these works *panneaux*, panels, not *toiles*, canvases.¹⁸ They sought not to copy life, but to create life through compositions that evoked a feeling for life by flattening out surfaces and harmonizing colors that complemented each other. Denis said 'that a picture – before being a battle horse, a

nude woman, or some anecdote – is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order'.¹⁹ The Nabis' attempt was to achieve the restraint and order of classical painting in 'artworks that were no longer "windows onto nature" in any traditional illusionistic sense . . . but rather evoked, through harmonious colors and forms, a thought, emotion, or in the case of Bonnard and Vuillard, a transcription of reality'.²⁰ Bowen showed herself clearly delighted with the Nabis program when she said of Vuillard's work, he 'rings my bell',²¹ anticipating what she said of the Italian primitives' work, 'which so quickly rang my bell'.²² Her triptych *Au Nègre de Toulouse* of 1927, which she exhibited in Paris in May 1931 as *Le Restaurant Lavigne* (plate 18), shows how clearly such bells sounded in her ears.

Au Nègre de Toulouse is a triptych done on wood panels and thus recalls altar pieces that she saw in Northern Italian churches. Working out of the primitives' tradition, Bowen remarked of her painting that 'I deliberately flattened out shadows and concentrated everything on linear design. I never began to paint until I had got a composition which I thought could stand up as a line drawing, and once I started, I never altered anything'.²³ *Au Nègre de Toulouse* shows a precise rendering of life in formal designs to create a decorative pattern, Bowen assimilating the Italian primitives to her own style and personality. M. and Mme. Lavigne and their staff seem almost to be watched over by angels; that is, if you ignore that what you actually see are white table cloths giving added definition to a basket of fruit.

One can see why, with an achievement like this, Bowen inveighed against academic painting, blasting it as 'usually as dead as mutton, but fortunately there are others'. Others like Augustus John and Walter Sickert. John 'is a wizard . . . for dragging the heart out of his sitter and giving it pictorial form'.

These are portraits of personalities, seized in a particular mood and at a particular moment. They are live and actual, and their essentials alone are rendered, in broad and supple brush work.

Sickert goes further than John in the matter of elimination. And what he retains are the pictorial essentials rather than the essentials of personality.²⁴

We find this in Bowen's portraits too. When she was appointed Official War Artist by the Australian War Memorial early in 1943, one of her assignments was to paint portraits of high ranking officers

like Sir Ragnar Colvin (plate 19), who was involved with the defence of Australia. He is seated in front of a map of Australia, which the Japanese, who had already bombed Darwin, intended to invade and occupy. He has a decidedly anxious look on his face as he holds his head in a very large – and presumably – capable right hand. The left hand is appropriately folded into a fist. Below the hand and above the fist his experience as a seasoned warrior is emphasized – in addition to his campaign ribbons – by his golden admiral's stripes; these are complemented by the gold buttons that alleviate the intensity of the navy blue which dominates the picture. The vertical lines made by each set of buttons, when imaginatively extended by the eye upward, exactly frame the admiral's face, quietly emphasizing the design and composition of the portrait. Colvin is, so to speak, completely defined by his uniform and deeply concerned that he might prove worthy of it. To be so, he covers Australia with his whole body. This rendering of Admiral Colvin is one of Stella Bowen's most remarkable portraits. She does in it exactly what she praised Augustus John for doing: 'for dragging the heart out of his sitter and giving it pictorial form'.

She does the same in other portraits, like the famous one of Ford playing Solitaire (plate 20). Sisley Huddleston indicated that Ford would not write until he had completely conceptualized what he wanted to render. He did this by playing Solitaire or Patience.²⁵ Thus he sits with cards lying in rows before him and with his left hand pushing out another card. He is totally abstracted, seeking not the next card so much as the next sentence of the novel he is working on. The suggestion is that the next card will bring the next word. Although everything is subordinated to hand and eyes, nothing is as important as the mind. With Ford posed in this setting, Bowen emphasizes metaphorically that imaginative creation demands solitude and patience. The six prominent wine bottles framed at the top left, a distraction indeed for an oenophile like Ford, further suggest his need for concentration; even as, pictorially, two of their labels balance the cards displayed below. And the strong vertical lines left and right, with the beginning of a horizontal line to the left ending at Ford's shoulder, further emphasize Ford's head by giving it a frame of its own. The personality of Ford is indubitably that of artist writer, which is further emphasized when you look carefully at the cards and note that his attention is not primarily on the game.

Two self-portraits of Stella Bowen complement each other. In one there is a head (plate 21), in the other there isn't a head (plate 22).

Not only is she wearing the same smock in them, but taken together they also give us a mature, resolute woman whose hands are dedicated to her art as a painter and whose eyes express her determination. In the former there is a circular motif in the buttons, brooch, and earrings as well as strong vertical lines in the clothing, in the light on the face, and the line on the wall: these lead the viewer's gaze upward to Stella's eyes where Bowen indelibly expresses her character. This strong woman, whose face is emerging into light, is the artist in the painting – alas, now lost! – that was exhibited as *La Palette* in 1931. Stella also referred to it as *Still Life with Part of Me*, which her biographer, Drusilla Modjeska, thinks 'invites us to absorb the full impact of the woman as artist: the artist with a woman's body'.²⁶ This painting shows Stella Bowen the artist dressed in a smock and holding a palette and paint brushes, her mouth expressing determination, as she faces an off-canvas viewer who stands exactly where her easel should be. This, without a doubt, is a woman who, before all else, is an artist. In it Stella Bowen defines the identity she maintained in signing her later art reviews for the *News Chronicle* as Palette.

These paintings emphasize what Bowen learned from the Italian primitives: that, in Ford's words, 'good drawing will always cause emotions to arise; so will good colour & good pattern. And goodness means observation rendered – in each case'. This is what we have in these portraits and what we have in the Italian primitives too. Indeed, without intimating imitation, we need only look at Ford's portrait next to that of one in Giotto's depiction of the Ascension, where we see the same intensity of concentration in the eyes; or we need only look at another self-portrait of Bowen next to that of one of the shepherds in Giotto's depiction of Joachim among the shepherds. The similarities are striking.

But perhaps nothing is quite as striking as the similarity between two of Bowen's group portraits: that of the owners and staff in *Au Negre de Toulouse* and that of a group of airmen in *Bomber Crew* (plate 23), painted some seventeen years after the restaurant portrait. Commissioned as Honorary Captain on the Reserve of Officers, Bowen became an Official War Artist for the Australian War Memorial. One of her jobs was to do portraits of officers like that of Admiral Colvin; another was to give us the ordinary fighting man. There are, consequently, many group portraits in the forty-six paintings of hers that are now in the Australian War Memorial in

Canberra. To do portraits like that of *Bomber Crew*, Bowen returned to the lessons she learned from the Italian primitives.

In her autobiographical memoir *Drawn from Life*, Bowen lamented in 1941 that ‘I never succeeded in getting the commission that I really would have liked, for a large group of people treated as purely formal decoration [. . .] I was not frightened by the unfashionable word ‘decorative’ and I was dismayed by the tedious realism of the “groups” that were painted by Royal Academicians and such’. She longed for ‘a lot of nice fleshy faces to portray surrounded by their insignia of office, symbols or what not, all woven into a formal pattern’. Criticizing a realistic group portrait of academics, Bowen saw how much better such a picture could have been done if ‘the painter had played up the sameness of their attire and concentrated on the facial characteristics. And the actual portraiture could have been much more intimate if their realistic lighting [. . .] had been abandoned’.²⁷ One can easily think of Giotto doing paintings of this kind in depicting a group of angels at the Ascension, for instance: same attire, different faces, no realistic lighting (plate 24). Given their airy wanderings, these angels might well be considered alongside a group of flying men. In *Bomber Crew* the lighting falls without shadow. With the uniforms all uniform and symbolic insignias mandatory, the difference in the facial characteristics tell the human story. That story in its simplest terms is that these men represent the paradox of war itself. Their corporate identity looks toward death, inflicting it or suffering it; their individual identities look toward life. They need to be one with a fighting force and, simultaneously, they need to survive the fighting into which their corporate identity pitches them. Each young man here is an individual who wants to and, indeed, deserves to live. Sad to say, all but one of them died, their plane being shot down over Friedrichschafen, Germany, even before Bowen completed this portrait. But a photograph she took of the group and individual pencil portraits that she drew of each man in it enabled Bowen to finish this strikingly poignant portrait – a portrait which she would never even have begun had she not made the acquaintance of Giotto and his contemporaries in Northern Italy in the March of 1923.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Plate 17. Stella Bowen. *Tusnelda's Interior* (Cagnes-sur-Mer, France). Oil on cardboard. 63.5 x 75.7 cm. Not dated (c. 1936). Private collection.
- Plate 18. Stella Bowen. *Au Nègre de Toulouse* or *Le Restaurant Lavigne*. Triptych, oil and gold paint on three wooden boards. 41 x 15.7 cm (left), 41 x 33.2 cm (center), 41 x 15.5cm (right). 1927, Paris. Private collection.
- Plate 19. Stella Bowen. *Admiral Sir Ragnar Colvin*. Oil on canvas. 91.4 x 71 cm. Not dated [1944]. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Plate 20. Stella Bowen. *Ford Playing Solitaire*. Oil on wood panel. 41.2 x 32.8 cm. c. 1927. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Gift of Ann Croser, Dr. Michael Drew, Geoffrey Hackett-Jones, Dr. Michael Hayes & David McKee through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation Collectors' Club 2003.
- Plate 21. Stella Bowen. *Self-Portrait*. Oil on plywood. 45.0 x 36.8 cm. c. 1929, Paris. Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. Gift of Suzanne Brookman, the artist's niece, 1999.
- Plate 22. Stella Bowen. *La Palette* or *Still Life with Part of Me*. Black and white photograph of painting, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide; slide at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. Medium, dimensions, date, and whereabouts of painting unknown. [c. 1925-1929].
- Plate 23. Stella Bowen. *Bomber Crew*. Oil on canvas. 86.1 x 63.3 cm. Not dated [1944]. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Plate 24. Giotto di Bondoni. Section of a fresco painting of *The Ascension*. Arena Chapel, Padua. [1305-1313].

NOTES

- 1 Ford Madox Ford, *Providence from Minstrels to the Machine*, Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935, p. 239.
- 2 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, ed. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 19.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 8 E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 7th ed. revised, London: Phaidon, 1955, p. 172.
- 9 See *decorate* in the OED.
- 10 *The Correspondence of Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen*, ed. Sondra J. Stang and Karen Cochran, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 180.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 190.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 15 Nicholas Watkins, 'The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic' in Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001 – hereafter 'Groom'; p. 1.
- 16 Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*, London: Collins, 1941 – hereafter *Drawn*; p. 99.
- 17 *News Chronicle*, 4 February 1935, 28 January 1935, 11 November 1935.
- 18 Groom, p. 35.
- 19 Watkins in Groom, p. 17.
- 20 Groom, p. 35.
- 21 *News Chronicle*, 13 May 1935.
- 22 *Drawn* 97.
- 23 *Drawn* 100.
- 24 *News Chronicle*, 13 May 1935.
- 25 Sisley Huddleston, *Bohemian Literary and Social Life in Paris: Salons, Cafés, Studios*, London, Bombay and Sydney: George G. Harrap, 1928, p. 139.
- 26 Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Sydney: Picador, 1999, p. 110.
- 27 *Drawn* 231, 232.