

Leonardo Ricci

## “A Sculpture that Allows a Journey through Expressionism”: a Reply to Nello Ponente

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*The text was published in Italian in Marcaté. Newsletter of Contemporary Culture, vol. 7, no. 8-9-10, 1964. The transdisciplinary and short-lived review (1963-1970) left the floor to the animated exchange between the art historian Nello Ponente and Leonardo Ricci regarding his setting designed for the exhibition “L'espressionismo. Pittura scultura architettura” (“Expressionism. Painting sculpture architecture”) hosted in Palazzo Strozzi, Florence (May-June 1964). The Editorial Team translated the text into English.*

Dear Director,

Thank you for inviting me to reply in your magazine to the letter of my friend Ponente, whom I have known for a long time and whom I esteem for his seriousness and preparation, regarding the setting up of the Expressionism exhibition that I planned and curated. Since each critic has his own freedom of judgement, instead of countering Ponente’s opinion (an opinion because other critics in Italy and abroad have spoken of it in an extremely flattering way for me), I prefer to send you the paper that should appear in the catalogue of the exhibition itself, in which my thoughts on the principles behind the exhibition design are expressed.

However, I must challenge some of Ponente’s statements as they do not correspond to reality or, in my opinion, are critically unacceptable.

First, I believe that few exhibitions have been as well-curated as mine from the



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point of view of space distribution, 'motifs' and 'perceptive accentuations'. In fact, the entire exhibition was designed after having a precise notion of the paintings on display and their measurements. Each work was not only designed in advance for a specific space but even study models were made for the exact placement of each work. So, the accusation of 'spatial gratuitousness' does not seem fair at all. Ponente may not like it as much as others did.

As for the presentation of the Klee and Kandinsky, my astonishment is heightened because these are precisely the rooms I have curated and love the most. I would have liked to have seen Ponente with twelve tiny Klee drawings and five very small paintings in his hands, compared to the large canvases of the other painters. So much for the dimensional question. On the one hand an introverted, subtly poetic, intimist world; on the other an extroverted, shouting, explosive world.

I remember that when the paintings were taken out of the crates and those tiny Klee works came casually into contact with those of the other artists, poor Klee was really killed. Something like delicate Mozart music played in the Los Angeles 'bowl'. That is why I had to create a different kind of 'reading' for the viewer by cashing in on the works.

When Ponente speaks of a 'cubic perspective dimension of the Renaissance type, as if it were not known to everyone that the perspective Klee put in place is infinitely more complex and varied, and open' my astonishment turns to genuine surprise. First of all, such a mistake, I would not have made if, as Ponente says, I am a 'man of broad culture and great intelligence'; secondly, I challenge anyone to say that that space was of the Renaissance perspective type.

On the desecration then of Kandinsky's watercolours, I want to make a statement even if it is naturally subjective.

I am pleased to have exhibited watercolours like this because they are generally exhibited like oil paintings, whereas watercolours, for good reading, need a more familiar presentation. The watercolour is something that smacks of 'folder', of 'study' and does not want magniloquent presentations. They were not arranged at random but placed horizontally or slanted near the benches to allow for careful, 'seated' reading, as one does when a painter shows a watercolour in his studio. One may not like this arrangement, but it is certainly not unwarranted. If anything, there is one thing in which I would, I think, agree with Ponente and which is evident from his letter. Unfortunately, in Italy, there are no exhibition halls that are architecturally and logically suited to allow architects an easy layout without being forced to alter the spaces of the generally unnecessarily pompous and rhetorical 'halls', which are, in any case, inadequate for the purpose. In other words, there is a lack of flexible organisms that allow the spectator to live in contact with the work, to consult it at length, calmly, to frame it historically through parallel exhibitions of photographs and historical documents.

In other words, we need to create new organisms in Italy, palaces that we could call 'cultural palaces', where it is pleasant to stay, where exhibition halls are flanked by libraries, film libraries, etc. so that the visitor sees the work of art as the work of man and not of demigods. In other words, the museum 'temple of

art must be demythologised and demystified.

The first<sup>1</sup> problem was to make two different worlds coexist from the measure of Renaissance man, the centre of the universe, to expressionist man, who attempts to leave the world of reality, at least as it is configured, to launch himself into a metaphysical adventure, sometimes obsessive, often evasive.

To ensure that the serene vaults of Palazzo Strozzi could contain the screams, in any case, the pain and anguish of these artists. And this without altering or touching the environment with absurd veils that would have completely destroyed the physiognomy of the palazzo itself. Thus, making two different types of space coexist, one courtly, compassed, and measured, the other every day, gestural, and dynamic.

The second problem of a mechanical nature was that of quadrupling the square metres required for such an impressive number of works.

The third problem with expressionism was that of comparing and at the same time isolating artists who, although starting from the same historical and cultural platform, expressed themselves in such different ways, not only that, but who often presented themselves with such different angles and problems from period to period. The last problem is that of not turning into 'museum paintings' a painting that was not born for the museum but which was born as a protest to bear witness to the drama of a certain time and which I personally have always been more willing to see in the collections of private individuals in direct contact, displayed more familiarly, rather than in actual museums, where expressionist paintings often seem to be stuffed.

I thus created, without touching the walls or vaults of the palace at all, thus leaving the Renaissance 'spectator' space indifferent to the drama of the Expressionists, 'empty' and absent sky, a kind of continuous sculpture within the rooms of the palace, with a space of its own and autonomous, that could truly contain the Expressionist world.

A sculpture that allows a journey through expressionism where individual artists can tell their personal 'story' and their collective story.

A story, therefore that starts in the first room of the 'precursors' and unfolds through the various personalities to the last expressionist experiences where the pain already subsides, and the protest becomes almost academic. During this itinerary, the spaces are set to the quality of the artists' works and where the pain is condensed into more contained accents and depicted in a new world as in Klee and Kandinsky, the space becomes more precise, capable of containing these worlds that are so different from each other and so autonomous.

In the middle of the itinerary, a place for sculpture, an attempt to make the various sculptors' 'characters' become a single sculptural group. Then a stop in the rooms for drawings and graphics, almost shop windows to allow the public to relax, so as not to mythologise works that, having a certain 'circulation' were

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<sup>1</sup> The text up to this footnote reference consists of the cover letter addressed by Leonardo Ricci to the Director. What was published in *Marcatré* comprised both the cover letter and Ricci's remarks to Nello Ponente's critics. The typescript of the second part of the document – starting from this footnote reference – belongs to the collection of Casa Studio Ricci.

born to circulate in a more everyday world.

Finally, the halls for architecture. The problem is reversed; instead of 'containing' spaces, a three-dimensional 'contained' space. Not exhibitions of photographs that cannot hold a candle to the direct work of painting and sculpture, but the artists' personal drawings that reveal the moment of the work's birth. For the photographs, the irony of modern television is a rotating projector.

In conclusion, I must say that my collaborators and I had 'fun', not in the sense of 'taste', but fun in experiencing this expressionist adventure as if it were our own as if we were the artists who did the works and wanted a space for them. And strangely enough, I got confirmation of this from Mrs Rholfs, the painter's wife, who recalled with emotion an exhibition made by the expressionist painters themselves and told me that it was made of simple brick walls painted white. I had made white walls for them in the Palazzo Strozzi.