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Leonor Fini or The Vitality of Art.

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LEONOR FINI

or
THE VITALITY OF ART

By K l a u s M a n n

There is something amazing and moving and very wonderful about the tenacious, indestructible vitality of art. The artistic impulse in man seems to be as strong as is man's will to live, his instinct of self-preservation. As long as the human race struggles on, there will be art: it survives, phoenix-like, the vicissitudes and cataclysms of history.

This was the kind of thoughts I was thinking when visiting the Italian painter, Leonor Fini, in Rome. *(at the time of the Italian campaign.)* I was in town on a five-day pass. The place I came from was bleak and sinister. I had been stationed out in the field, near the frontline in the Apennines, for a number of months, and my mind was still filled with the memories of boredom and destruction.

The streets of Rome were noisy, teeming with beggars and soldiers; but it was very still in the ancient palace where Leonor Fini has her studio -- Palazzo Altieri, a somber and pompous, somewhat dilapidated mansion built by a Roman cardinal, hundreds of years ago. The staircase appeared vast in an eerie twilight. There were curious sculptures welcoming me as I climbed upstairs -- marble busts with frozen smiles and white, sightless eyes; disconnected fragments from colossal statues: a gigantic foot, an isolated finger of prodigious dimensions, guarding, as it were, the entrance to Leonor Fini's apartment.

And there she was -- a tall, somewhat masculine woman; yet elegant and even delicate, with a capriciously baroque mane, a square forehead, and wide, lustrous brown eyes; and there were her paintings, drawings, and sketches. There she was, working -- an artist at work --, indefatigably preoccupied with that peculiar passion and fixed idea of imitating and transforming nature, of rivaling with the

demiurge, with God himself, by creating unprecedented, never-heard-of images and forms.

I had known some of her older works, and as I now saw what she has done more recently, I realized at once that she must have been working very hard during the past few years. She is a mature artist now -- probably the best painter living in Italy and certainly one of the most remarkable talents anywhere in Europe today. What used to be literary and fanciful in her work, has become vital and organic. Although classified by most Italian critics as a "Surrealist," and obviously influenced by certain surrealist formulas and devices, Eleonor Fini has definitely found her own idiom and established her own unmistakable style.

But what fascinated me about her was not primarily her accomplished craftsmanship or the originality of her vision; it was rather the spectacle of her indomitable creative elan and artistic vitality. Cities were reduced to rubble, dictators fell, battles raged, a continent was on the verge of anarchy and disintegration -- but, she, the artist, kept creating, endeavouring, experimenting, improving her technique, studying nature, exploring her own unconscious, discovering and inventing ever new symbols and visual parables to materialize her dreams and clarify her message.

She was in Paris when the war broke out, and then she moved to a small place, Arcachon, near Bordeaux, (where Salvador Dali was her neighbour and companion) and from there she went to another village near Toulouse. When the Germans caught up with her there too, she found refuge in neutral Monte Carlo, and later she went to Rome. Mussolini's regime collapsed, Badoglio hesitated, the Germans occupied the Eternal City: Eleonor Fini, who has never had any use for Nazi-Fascism, hardly ever left her studio; she spent her time painting. For some months she lived on a little island, Sola del Giglio, off the Ligurian coast. It's a much more beautiful, more primitive and more amazing place than Capri, according to Eleonor's reports -- rich in incredible rock formations and magnificent colors. It was there that she

did some of her finest work -- the striking "L'Enfant de l'Île du Giglio," for instance: that extraordinary vision of a child posing as an idol, nay, being transformed into a idol --, and it was in the solitude of this maritime retreat that the fresh, lively tints which are typical of her new period were added to the variety of her pallet.

At the beginning of 1944, she returned to Rome, and there she was on the day of liberation.

It has been a difficult time, since 1939, and even now life is full of hardships and complications for this Italian woman as for millions of her countrymen; but she has lived through it and has managed to emerge from the ordeal, not only undamaged, but strengthened, ~~and purified~~. While suffering and struggling, she has become a more balanced, more experienced, fully developed ~~being~~ ^{personality} -- and a better artist.

I like to visualize this spirited and ingenious ~~human~~ woman, Leonor Fini, as the embodiment of Art in all its capriciousness and grandeur -- the Artist par excellence, so to speak; a kind of robust and resilient Muse representing all the typical virtues and mannerisms of her guild. Not that I think Fini the representative, or the most important, artist of our time: if I wanted to write about the artist of the twentieth century, there would be only one genius for me to write about -- Picasso. But right now, the diligent sorceress at the Palazzo Altieri means to me the very personification of that curiously enchanting and perplexing phenomenon which is the artistic talent. Maybe she impresses me that way because I have been out of touch with the artistic world for such a long time and have not seen any artists, out there in the mud, where I spent the past twelve months or so. In any case, that is how I look at her, at this point and in my present frame of mind, that is how I see her, how I understand her; that's

I look at her, and I feel -- not without a kind of joyful little shock and amused surprise --: There is a typical artist for you, if there has ever been one! Voilà une artiste! Ecco una artista!

Art is cosmopolitan. Leonor -- born in Argentina, brought up in Trieste, for a long time at home in Paris -- is of mixed race: Italian, Spanish, Slavic, and Germanic. She speaks several languages, is intimately familiar with several literatures, has friends all over the world. She loves traveling! it's fun to listen to her when she remembers trips to Greece, Turkey, Spain, Austria, ^(Switzerland) or when she talks about the somewhat hectically crowded weeks she spent in New York, in 1936 and 1937. A citizen of the world, she despises nationalism.

Art is at once complex and simple, refined and elementary. What could be more complex, indeed, more intricate and fraught with various traditions, than the cultural sphere to which the work of this European artist, Leonor Fini, belongs? Her fantasies seem to be laden with secret implications and erudite allusions; the strange images she creates suggest the discoveries of psychoanalysis and the uncanny rituals of long-forgotten cults. At the same time, they are all freshness and naïveté, the spontaneous expression of a childlike lust to play.

Art is playful, given to masquerades, transformations. How essential and how delightful is this metamorphic element in Leonor Fini's inventions! She loves to transform flowers into human faces, to animate stones and trees, to change women into animals, to disguise her contemporary models as renaissance princes or rococo courtesans. She mixes the sexes -- the young men she portrays display often an almost effeminate grace and softness, while her female figures have at times boyish, indeed, manly features and gestures --; she mixes the ages and styles. Profoundly versed in all kinds of suggestive fusions and confusions, she seems to bewitch whatever she touches.

Art is conservative and yet revolutionary. A talent like ~~Elle~~ Leonor Fini's has been shaped by many traditions and ^{influences} ~~masters~~. I am not only thinking of those with

whom she has been personally in contact -- first the Italian Futurists and the Novocento group in Milan, including Carrà, George de Chirico, and others; later the Surrealists in Paris, especially Dali and Max Ernst --; but I am thinking also, and above all, of the old masters to whom Eleonor Fini owes so much. She was indeed a conscientious and sensitive pupil ~~was~~ of the great Italians of the Renaissance and, particularly, of the following "Mannerist" school -- that fascinating interlude between Renaissance and Baroque. She has been stimulated by the sculptors of the Baroque and Rococo periods, and she has learned from Dutch masters like Jan Van Delft Vermeer, from the Germans Dürer and Holbein, from the Frenchmen Ingres and Courbet. All these influences can be traced in Eleonor Fini's work: she has absorbed the techniques and moods of several centuries -- and yet she has remained independent, given to bold experiments and improvisations.

That's the way artists are -- traditional and at the same time iconoclastic. Artists are full of contradictions -- at once tragic and gay, morbid and vigorous.

Is an artist like Eleonor Fini "decadent"? No doubt, there are unwholesome elements in her work; some of her vagaries may appear macabre and eccentric. And yet, what creative energy, what elan vital! -- indeed, occasionally, what tonic sense of humor!

Some of her ^{figures} ~~characters~~ seem to be frozen in an air of deadly solitude. ~~Take the~~
~~at once princely and wretched youth and the mad-looking girl, sitting --~~ ^{terribly}
~~separate from each other -- in a scenery of ruins which anticipates with truly proph-~~
~~etic, truly artistic precision the horrors of bombed cities.~~

And again, there are other Fini characters who seem all iridescent charm and graceful sensuality: they are innocent like flowers, voluptuous like animals. Obviously, the woman who painted them is the same ~~woman~~ who once said to me that she would like to be an animal: "a happy animal, of course; a beautiful cat or a very elegant bird..."

The favourite symbol of this women-artist who is versed in riddles and would like to be an animal -- her trademark, so to speak -- is the sphinx, that prodigious creature with the Mona-Lisa smile, the lovely breasts, and the deadly claws. Eleonor recognizes herself, portrays herself in those mythical monsters.

The sphinx in her presentation is not strictly Egyptian, to be sure; she has an eighteenth-century touch, an at once saucy and sturdy aspect. Her secret is profound, indeed, inscrutable; yet she is not without a certain coquettish elegance and sensual robustness. The Fini sphinx is enigmatic and sacred as it behooves her kind; but she has also jolly, down-to-earth features. An attractive demon she is -- at once spiritual and seductive, terrifying and amusing, admirable and ambiguous, as is Art and as is this artist's, Eleonor Fini's, work.

~~Early, 18th, 19th~~