

JOHN RUSSELL 1960

ONE of the rarest of pleasures, for the enthusiast for modern painting, is that of in one and the same artist, a perfectly individual sensibility and a gift for construction. To name those who to-day fall short in one or other respect would be invidious: the point can be equally well made if we ourselves to *les illustres difunts*. Leger, for instance, was master of a certain sort of construction. Many of his pictures are so solidly put together that, metaphorically speaking, they would halt a charging elephant. But that solidity is bought, one may think, at too high a price: all is plain, distinct, uniform in touch: the Utopia thus brought so palpably before us lacks atmosphere, surprise, climatic variation.

Conversely an art of pure self-examination can very soon bore and antagonise those observers who do not immediately make themselves the painter's accomplices. A word against Jackson Pollock rings out, these days, like a *gros* in church; but the fact remains that his idea of construction was to take some readily-assimilable motif and bang it across, over and over again, until the picture seemed to stand up of its own accord. For drama of texture, and variety of image, and a certain sense of desperate activity, Pollock ranks high: but art can encompass, and some observers may demand, other qualities.

To say that Sergio de Castro has both a gift for construction and a perfectly individual sensibility is not to class him, for that reason, as "better than" or Pollock. It is simply to indicate the range and variety of this claims on our attention. Castro is not, in case, competitive by nature. He is not a member of any school, has not for years troubled to have an exhibition in Paris, and works intensively in what could, for Paris, be called isolation. At the beginning of his career he owed much to Torres Garcia; but from the time that he reached Paris (in November 1949) he had directed his own destiny, and he still keeps it in his own hands.

That destiny differs so greatly, in its particulars, from that of most members of the Ecole de Paris that it is worth while to recall it in some detail. Sergio de Castro was born in Buenos Aires on September 15th, 1922. His parents were Argentinians of Galician and Basque origin. From 1923 to he lived in French Switzerland, where his father was *en posle*. In 1933 he was sent to a Jesuit school in Montevideo, and remained there till he was sixteen. Music, painting, architecture and literature attracted him then as vividly as they do to-day, and from Montevideo itself he formed a passion, which likewise has never left him, for the open sea and the shore, and for the plain and palpable realities of harbour life. Montevideo has a stone subsoil, and its beaches of white sand are as beautiful as any beaches anywhere. The city itself had a tallness, a hardness: its sharp outlines and never-ambiguous structure were to re-appear, transformed and trans-when Torres Garcia's *esprit (onstructif)* got to work on them; and the marine landscape was to

form an ideal background for Castro's first acquaintance with Homer and the pre-Socratic poets. One could even trace, in Castro's comparative distaste for Buenos Aires, the origin of the preferences so clearly marked in his paintings: for Buenos Aires was built on mud, not stone, its waters are black or brown, rather than translucent, and coal-dust and chimney-smoke are even-where. .

In 1939 and 1940 Sergio de Castro studied architecture. (To this day, a curious or beautiful building will find in him its most discerning admirer, and he can also detect, in oddities disdained by others, the presence of the marvellous.) But, also in 1939, he began to compose; and in 1940 a concert of his work was given at the University of Montevideo. The year 1939 was remarkable also for his meeting with Torres Garcia, an artist in whom a rare feeling for construction, and for the of the *sign* in modern art, were combined with a great gift for pedagogy. Nothing is more important, in adolescence, than a wise choice of the Ancients to whom the novice-nature must look for guidance, and in Torres Garcia Castro found not only an "art-master", in the obvious sense, but also a *pemcr*, and one who impressed above all by his complete simplicity and naturalness.

From 1941, in any case, Castro began to study painting seriously and consistently. From 1942 he lived on his own in Buenos Aires, and in 1943 he had to take a job in an office to support himself; but he was able, even so, to work with Torres Garcia and his students on the execution of large mural-projects. In general, he was stirred to action by the contemplation of works of art which dominated their environment, rather than by cabinet-paintings or fragments of introspection. If asked to name his inspirations at this time, he will name the facades of those Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals in France and Spain which he knows from photographic reproduction; and Greek, Indian, and Far Eastern sculpture. He was, then as now, as much builder as ruminator.

In 1945, the double nature of his preoccupations brought him release from his office-work. A meeting with Manuel de Falla in Cordoba led to the suggestion that he should act as the great composer's assistant. Fanciful as it may be to see parallels between music and art, one might hazard the suggestion that in the needle-drawn outline and delicate registration of de Falla's harpsichord concerto, or the marvellously dark and austere timbre of a movement from his "Homenajes", there are elements which correspond to certain permanent preoccupations of Castro's. The human example of Manuel de Falla also meant a great deal to Castro. It was during the happy period of his association with the veteran composer that Castro was able, in 1946, to visit Peru and Bolivia and see something at hand of pre-Colombian civilisation.

Castro has always been an artist of few but continually-revised. In 1941, for instance, when he gave his father a picture, it turned out to be a picture-within-a-picture of the kind now familiar in his "Ateliers"; and when, in July 1942, he lived alone

in a room of his own, his first act was to draw that room, as if in premonition of the long series of canvases in which his own surroundings are the subjects. But it seems as if, to release his powers, he had to get away, not only from South America, but from the two big men from whom he had learnt. In November 1946 Manuel de Falla died; and in August 1949, shortly after Sergio de Castro, then Professor of the History of Music at the Conservatoire at La Plata, had been granted a scholarship to study music in Paris, Torres Garcia died also. Three months later, Castro arrived in Paris, which has been his headquarters ever since.

Initially his status was that of an advanced student of composition, and in this capacity he took lessons from Arthur Honegger and Roland Manuel. He was still, on paper, a young composer when he had his first sight of Italy, at Eastertide, 1950, but in February 1951 he announced his definitive vocation for painting with the very large harbour-scene in oils (El puerto) which is, in effect, a summary of all that he had learnt from Torres Garcia. Even to-day this is an impressive picture, so tight and ferocious is the inter-locking of the forms, so decisive the reduction of those forms to what suited his purpose, so rigorous the order imposed on the amiable disorder of harbour-life. But what might have been taken for consolidation was, in reality, the step in a process of renunciation, or self-discovery, that was to last for several years. This was, in fact, Castro's last oil-painting for a considerable time.

Later in 1951 began what may be called the "graphic" period. In Castro's major works the human presence appears either not at all, as in the landscapes and the "Ateliers", or in monumental style, as in the "St en Eveque" of 1958. In the work of the graphic period there is, on the contrary, a wry and nimble humour in the treatment of the figures. This humour owes something to Klee, and something also to Torres Garcia, but the quintessence of it, the affectionate mischief of the story-telling, is Castro's own. When his Jonah gets clear away from the whale, or his idiotic St George gets down to the duty of killing the dragon, the familiar stories come up quite fresh and there is something at once dandified and incisive about the manner of their presentation. Four years were to pass before Castro again resorted to oils, and during the latter half of the period, when he installed himself in his present studio in the Rue du Saint-Gothard, he gradually abandoned his graphic subjects and began to paint, the blanced and fastidious arrangements of household objects which commended him to connoisseurs. (In October 1954 he had his second Paris show, at the Galerie Pierre, and it was made up entirely of *peintures*

Castro has always been an inspired traveller one who allows himself to be completely penetrated by the experience of a new world. His first visit to Greece, in the autumn of 1955, was an episode of great importance to his career. (It occurred, too, at a moment of some worldly significance, in that in October 1955 a painting of his was hung between

Bazaine and Picasso in the Ecole de Paris 1955 at the Galerie Charpentier). The Greek landscape, and the townscape of an island such as Mykonos, has some of the qualities Castro had relished in Uruguay: the hardness, distinctness, whiteness of the buildings, the underlying structure of rock. Added to this was the epic character of a scene which has not changed, in its essentials, since it gave us the beginnings of poetry, and thought, and drama, and our most enduring images of physical beauty and forthrightness in action. Given Castro's super-sensitivity to these things, it was inevitable that Greece would somehow make its way into his work. And, sure enough, when he began in May 1956 to produce once again *des huiles* pleine their subject was Greece: above all the view from the island of Hydra towards the Argive coast, but also and on many occasions the chalk-white houses of Mykonos and the islets of the Cyclades. To those who know these scenes, Castro's paintings make almost unbearably vivid the recollection of a landscape in

which, to-day as in pre-Homeric times, the gods would seem perfectly at home.

This evocative quality does not come, however, from any abundance of circumstantial detail, but rather from the combination of those qualities which I mentioned earlier: the gift for construction, so vital to the understanding of Greek landscape, and the individual sensibility. Many painters, perhaps, could plot the empyrean view from the heights of Hydra across to the Argive coast; Castro alone could have "reclected in tranquillity" in September 1956, nearly a year after his return to Paris, the innumerable nuances of atmosphere, the gradations of evanescence, which make its first large Greek landscape one of the most remarkable pictures to have been painted anywhere since the end of the war.

Castro has visited other countries since his return from Greece, but for practical purposes landscape, to him, means Greek landscape; and when a little canvas appears in the big "Ateliers", as a picture-within-a-picture, it is usually a Greek landscape. This said, one must point also to a considerable variety within the genre: some of the townscapes are firm and sharp in their construction, and seem to have been as much quarried as painted; others, the meteorological indications are so precise that one could tell to within minutes the time of arrival of the storm; and there is a third group in which light, rather than an identifiable scene, is the subject. In the autumn of 1959 Castro returned to Greece for two months, and later proved able to refine still further his interpretation of the enormous distances in which the Greek light allows the eye to move as a freeman.

In April 1956 Castro was commissioned to design stained glass windows, covering an area in all of 82 square metres, for the Monastere des Benedictines du Saint-Sacrement in Couvrechef, near Caen, Normandy. This work is unluckily not accessible to the public, but those fortunate enough to have seen it consider it one of the most remarkable realisations of its kind. One of them, the poet critic Pierre Lecuire, wrote to Castro:

« J'ai vu votre vitrail et la mer, comme on voit l'amour et l'amour profane, separees par une mince bande verte de ciel et de prairie. Le vitrail et la mer chantent le hymne, mais au lieu la mer contient le soleil dans son ventre, le soleil celeste promene dans le du verre une suite ininterrompue de paroles dont la premiere nous fut donnee, des la porte franchie, une apres-midi vers quatre heures, comme un immense rideau de pourpre se dressant dans le vide du monde.

« Castro, vous avez fait une GRANDE oeuvre, haute, complete, concertee comme le jeu des mondes et des mots, une de developpement fort et simple comme l'univers passe par notre esprit. » (Fragment de la lettre Sergio de Castro du 9 avril 1959).

Throughout the year 1957 Castro's energies were occupied by the windows to such an extent that he more or less had to stop painting altogether. The idea of painting continued, none the less, to work on his imagination -so much so that he would dream that he was engaged on new canvases, wake up exhausted, and remember clearly the two main categories in which his work was to develop: the interiors, in which the constructive side of his art was applied directly to his own environment, and the landscapes in which he achieved an ever greater degree of deliquescence while losing none of his control of light, and distance, and the delicate relation of sea to sky.

These dreams came true in the works, dated 1958, 1959, and 1960, which are illustrated here. The stained glass, brought forth by a sustained and prodigious effort, had temporarily drained away certain sides of Castro's creative nature: the invention of forms, the delight in lively and combative colour, the re-invention of the letters of the alphabet, the interest in calligraphy, the use of colour-symbolism to express religious belief, and in general the renewed use of the *sign*, the eye-signal, to express a coherent view of the world. None of this appears in the canvases now to be discussed. In so far as they relate to earlier theoretical preoccupations, it is in their mastery of proportion, and in the abstract *jeu des formes* which makes itself felt in, for instance, the bookshelf-paintings of 1960. *Succession* is their subject: and in the prehistory of their execution we glimpse the Castro who devoured Matila Ghyka on the science of proportion and once tried to make Cranach's "Eve au Belier" of 1533 correspond to the Belier constellation.

Already in the earliest picture here reproduced, the "Table aux trois poissons" of 1955-56, Castro was interested in the manifold still-life -the canvas in which a whole family of objects was brought together, setting the painter a problem of reconciliation. This problem he solved at that time by tilting each object up towards the observer and presenting it in terms of a flattened area of paint most subtly and succulently applied. (In many gouaches of this period the object *is* almost lost to view, or at any rate loses

much of its identity, in the marvellously concise and elegant play of colour and form). Still earlier pictures had the generic title of "Hommage Chardin", but to my eye that title should really be reserved for pictures like the "Bois, fruits, fleur et plante" of 1958, where the long-pondered and unemphatic mastery of tone gives each object its true value and yet makes, of all of them, a perfectly unified creation, a creation independent of its individual features.

But, *en fin de compte*, it is in the "Ateliers" that Castro's art can best be surveyed by a newcomer to it: not that the "Ateliers" are "better" than any others among his pictures, but because they represent, in many cases, the *summe* of his preoccupations. (All that is lacking, indeed, is the presence in an Atelier of one of the enormous brooding human figures, images of wisdom and cerebration, on whom he worked in 1958). Take, for instance, the "Atelier de l'artiste" (1958). It lacks one aspect only of Castro's work as a painter: the delicious, miniature

festin pour j that he can serve up in gouache. All other qualities are there, not least the element of dignity and reserve, the *restes d'un espagnolisme inne*, which distinguish him from his contemporaries in the Ecole de Paris. All bespeaks a noble and lofty calm. The space is laid out with the grave assurance of classical architecture. To the right, in the lower half of the canvas, is one of the complex still-lives, plain statements of reality, in which Castro explores, once again, the Spanish element in his nature. To the left the stored canvases, seen from the back and the side, make the subtlety of play with the protruding wall and provide, in addition, one of Castro's most fully-elaborated essays in pure tone, and in the science of succession. In the background is a complete landscape, one of those independent canvases which Castro delights to introduce into, and harmonise with, the already-complex structure of his "Ateliers". And the marvellously eloquent treatment of the floor deserves an essay to itself, as does also the ravishing but never gratuitously "beautiful" application of the paint.

What Sergio de Castro does in pictures such as these is to reassert, against the evidence of everyday life, the miraculous powers of an art that is organised, reflective, deliberate in its design: and yet, at the same time, true also to what is spontaneous and fugacious in our experience. His is not an airless, classicizing art: it is a classic art, in which passions are none the less tempestuous for the perfected moderation of their expression. It is modern, without being modernistic; original, without ever striving to appear so; serious, but with never a moment of dullness or *emphase*, and entirely seductive, without ever using that seduction for vapid or ephemeral ends. Altogether I know of no painter of Sergio de Castro's age whose work gives the observer so encouraging an idea, not so much of "the future of art", as of the future of the artist as a human being.

John Russell, 1960.