*Emilio Pettoruti*

# A Painter before the Mirror

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The memoirs of Emilio Pettoruti ( La Plata 1892-Paris 1971) "A painter before the Mirror" was published a few years before the painter´s death. Not only do we witness the vicissitudes of his struggle in order to impose his works, but we also find key aspects of his aesthetic convictions. His ties with Futurism and Cubism, his appreciation of color and light, in short a conception of art that led him to evolve towards an original abstraction, as his last paintings so well demonstrate.

His essential concepts about art and life are highlighted by an existence defined by his beliefs and passions".

**To María Rosa**

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# Introduction

## A landmark in Argentine art

Memoirs represent an essential source of documentary reference. They amplify and complement the vision we have of the author, often surprising us. Through them, not only do we better grasp his personality, but also the historical context in which he moved. Events in which the author played the main part, people he knew, significant circumstances: they are all reflected here, akin to multiple gazes in a fresco.

By entwining both personal and world history, often in remarkable ways, memoirs also pertain to the realm of fiction. They kindle the reader´s imagination, motivating him to recreate a vast and complex existential framework. His own knowledge is thus enriched, through the accumulation of facts and opinions he is not likely to forget.

«In the community of men, everything is recollection and fantasy», declares Giambattista Vico in his «Principi di scienza nuova», published in 1774. In 1589, almost two centuries earlier, Montaigne reminds his readers, when publishing his essays, that he is the one hiding behind them. Emphatically, he affirms, «I am the subject of my book». And in the same vein, Anatole France considers «all novels to be ultimately autobiographical», adding that «the good critic is the one who can tell the adventures of his soul through works of art».

These memoirs by Emilio Pettoruti (1892–1971) were first published in 1968, while the author was still living in Paris. They saw the light a few years after the major exhibition that was held at the Buenos Aires National Museum of Fine Arts in 1962, celebrating the artist´s international achievements, and after his last significant shows at the Charpentier Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, respectively held in 1963 and 1966.

In part, the interest that «A Painter Before The Mirror» awakens is due to Pettoruti´s theories on the laws of painting, as the artist is considered to be one of the major exponents of modern art in Argentina. His controversial exhibition at the Witcomb Gallery on Florida Street in October 1924, upon his first return from Europe, marks an important turning point in Argentine art, revolutionizing both the intellectual and artistic world of Buenos Aires. Atalaya (pen–name of Alfredo Chiabra Acosta), a distinguished critic of those decades, saw in this exhibition a new «Hernani», comparable to Victor Hugo´s romantic and liberating cry that had resounded in Paris in the 1830s. In the seventh issue of the «Alfar» magazine, published in Montevideo in 1931, Atalaya reports: «excited crowds burst into the halls arguing loudly».

From that moment onwards, Pettoruti became the leading figure of 20th century artistic transformation in Argentina and Latin America.

The book reflects the course of his life, beginning with his childhood in his native city of La Plata, and ending with his last years in Paris. We witness the first manifestations of his vocation, his friendship with the writers Benito Lynch and Rafael Alberto Arrieta, his studies and artistic training, his first exhibitions in La Plata. We see him, too, as a perfectionist, a characteristic that led him to systematically destroy a large part of his work.

In 1913 he travels to Europe, only to return in 1924. This European phase is crucial, as Pettoruti is at once an observer and a major figure of a particularly rich and vital period of avant–garde art.

His first objective is Italy: he travels across it, attracted by its grandiose artistic past and by the effervescent creativity present everywhere. In Florence he meets Pappini, Pallazzeschi and Marinetti, with whom he eventually develops a close friendship, and immerses himself in the Italian way of life. On November 30, 1913, he attends the renowned «Lacerba» exhibition, in which the Futurists are paid fervent homage, and the show has a decisive impact on him. At the same time, he visits Florentine museums, carefully analyzing the works of great Italian Renaissance painters. This age–old way of learning, favored by artists such as Cézanne, van Gogh, Kandinsky, Mondrian and so many others, allows him to study their pictorial techniques in depth.

In 1914 he begins to participate in collective shows, presenting oils and drawings, and in July 1916, holds his first solo exhibition at the Gonnelli Gallery in Italy, where the Futurists exhibit their art. He meets Xul Solar in Florence, with whom he becomes close friends, and in October he travels to Rome, where he remains up until the middle of the following year. There he becomes acquainted with Balla, De Chirico, Melli and Pampolini, among others, eventually settling down in Milan, where he joins the Equ group, composed of the painters Marussig, Sironi, Ungaretti, Bontempelli, Martini and Sartoris. In 1919 he holds another solo show, and participates in various collective exhibitions, not only in Milan, with artists from Lombardy, but also in Bologna and Trent.

In 1920 he exhibits at the Arte de Milan Gallery, together with Sironi, Carrá, Carpi, De Chirico, Russolo, Funi and Martini, among others, totally identified with the artists that embody the Italian avant–garde movement. It proves to be a successful show: after selling all of his work, he exhibits, for the first time, at the Venice Biennial.

In 1921 Pettoruti continues to exhibit in Italy: ironically, the Buenos Aires National Salon, inaugurated in 1911, rejects one of his paintings. He travels around Germany and Austria, exhibiting once again in Rome in 1922.

In 1923, in Berlin, the famous Der Sturm Gallery exhibits thirty–five of his paintings, while in other halls hang the works of Paul Klee, Zadkine, Marcousis and Archipenko. As a result, Pettoruti is hailed both by German and Italian critics. In Paris, he holds a collective show at the Galliéra Museum.

Through Marinetti, leader of the Futurist movement, he meets the art dealer Léonce Rosenberg in Paris. The latter proposes to manage his career in Europe, advising him not to return to Buenos Aires. However, due to family circumstances, Pettoruti decides to go back home.

During his stay in Paris, he becomes acquainted with Picasso, Juan Gris, Lohte, Gleizes, van Donghen, Zadkine and Tristan Tzara, among many others. In that respect, the book is filled with observations on what was going on in art in Europe in those days, revealing a wide array of anecdotes that reflect both people and circumstances.

When Pettoruti returns to Buenos Aires in 1924, after eleven years of absence, the staff members of the «Martín Fierro» magazine receive him with open arms. The publication considered itself the local exponent of a «new avant–garde sensitivity» prevalent in Europe, interlaced, however, with the defined characteristics of «Criollismo». Both Pettoruti and Xul Solar, the latter returning to the country after twelve years of absence, became paradigms of that movement, and the magazine is more than willing to publish their articles.

In October of that same year, the gallery on Florida Street exhibited eighty–six of Pettoruti´s paintings that had arrived from Europe. The show caused such an upheaval amid local artists, that it provoked disturbances on the streets calling for police intervention. «They fought for my cause, which was also theirs, like true lions», observes Pettoruti in his book. These anecdotes not only evidence the painter´s struggle for greater freedom of expression, but also the painstaking introduction of aesthetic modernity in a society in which, according to the author, «a rhetorical and obsolete Impressionism reigned».

In 1925, Pettoruti exhibits in the halls of the prestigious «Amigos del Arte» association, holding a show a year later in the province of Córdoba. Its governor Ramón J. Cárcano purchases «The Dancers» for the collection of the Córdoba City Museum of Fine Arts. Meanwhile, the artist and his work are relentlessly

criticized, revealing an unprecedented aesthetic intolerance. To crown it all, a Futurist show exhibiting counterfeit works is held in Buenos Aires, and Pettoruti, taken unawares, presents two paintings that eventually vanish.

In 1927 he is appointed director of the La Plata Provincial Museum of Fine Arts. He is dismissed at the beginning of 1932, only to resume his post in that same year. He remains at the museum until 1947, year in which political reasons oblige him to renounce after almost twenty years of distinguished labor.

After important shows held in Montevideo (1939) and San Francisco (1941), and a two–year tour exhibiting at different American museums, Pettoruti´s reputation strengthens abroad. The artist also exhibits at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santiago de Chile (1950).

In Buenos Aires he holds a retrospective at the «Amigos del Arte» association (1940) and at the Peuser Salon (1948). At the Witcomb Gallery a commemorative exhibition takes place, presenting eighty–six of his paintings (1962). Acclaimed by everyone, his name resonates throughout Europe and the United States. In the 50s he holds shows in Milan, Rome, Paris, Lausanne, Valencia (Venezuela), Washington, London, Florence and Minneapolis, now considered a master of 20th century art.

In 1956, the «Fondo Nacional de las Artes» (National Fund of the Arts) presents to him the prestigious Guggenheim Continental Award of the Americas, and in 1967, the Great Award of Honor. Widely acclaimed, he is appointed Doctor Honoris Causa by the La Plata University, and holds successive shows over the years. In 1968 he travels to Germany, where his work is exhibited in different cities, and in 1969, when in Switzerland, presents a retrospective at the Rath Museum in Geneva.

In 1971 Pettoruti represents Argentina at the XI San Pablo Biennial, with works ranging from 1914 to 1917. Finally, as a result of a liver and kidney trouble, the artist dies in Paris.

In «A Painter before the Mirror», not only does Pettoruti describe his struggle in order to earn recognition, but also discloses his views on aesthetics. His identification with Futurism and Cubism, his understanding of color and light, progressively lead him towards the creation of original abstract art, especially evidenced in the last years of his life. His fundamental concepts on art reflect an existence defined by his beliefs and convictions.

Fermín Fèvre
Buenos Aires, November 2003

# A Painter before the mirror

## By Emilio Pettoruti

Although Emilio Pettoruti was honored with the First Prize by the National Fund of the Arts (only granted to the most outstanding Argentine artists), rewarded with the Guggenheim Award, fêted and warmly welcomed in France, Italy, Germany and the United States, he continues to be a relatively unheard–of artist in Argentina: his resonant triumphs are received in vast circles with incomprehensible reticence and his human qualities remain in the shadows. Today, this great artist publishes his memoirs spanning six decades of his remarkable life. We are witnesses to his meticulous investigation, to his intense creative activity, to his heroic battles against adversity. With elegance and simplicity, in a pleasant conversational tone, he evokes long years fecund in works of singular perfection, his friendship with notable intellectuals, interspersed with humorous or dramatic episodes. These recollections, at times bitter, at times amiable, often moving, possess a two–fold significance: on the one hand, we behold the intimacy of the painter himself, entirely devoted to the artistic activity with ardent passion and strict discipline, and on the other, the brilliant cultural atmosphere present in both Europe and the United States.

The memoirs of Emilio Pettoruti, that now see the light, comprise his childhood period to the day he took up residence in Paris in 1953. Consequently, nothing or relatively little is said about his most recent and memorable achievements. Rather, his memoirs often delve into moments of great importance in the history of contemporary art. Historians would greatly benefit from them, particularly if interested in the birth, development and decline of Italian Futurism, as they contain substantial detail in that respect. Pettoruti´s observations are sharp, and his opinions categorical, of a forthright

frankness. Though not all readers might agree with him, all of his reflections are significant, bearing the seal of competence and sincerity. Funny anecdotes, quaint portraits of celebrated artists –Marinetti, Yrurtia, Greta Garbo and so many others– enhance a text throbbing with richness of thought and extraordinary considerations on pictorial technique. While Pettoruti´s writing fascinates, what truly strikes is the deep sensitivity, the cordial and passionate nature, the capacity for loving and the incomparable humanity of one of the greatest masters of Argentine abstraction.

December 1967
Julio E. Payró
From the first edition: Solar Hachette, 1968

# Part One

## Chapter 1

### La Plata- First Steps

The story of a life course, viewed through so many years of work and struggle –that haven´t yet come to an end nor seem to want to– has no justification other than the hope that there might be those interested in closely following the development, at times universal, at times local, of one aspect of Modern Art. These memoirs also reflect my arduous attempts at combating prejudice, so embedded when it came to accepting novel ways of comprehending art.

It will not be easy to fulfill the task, nor do I know whether I will ever be able to complete it. Let me begin, however, by thanking my parents, Carolina Casaburi and José Pettoruti: my good health and will of iron I owe to them, and these aspects, together with some others, have allowed me to act decisively, enabling me to accomplish most of my goals: all I did was carried out with determination and with the utmost rejection of any influence foreign to my feelings and conscience.

I am indebted to my parents for their tact and exceptional common sense. They did not oppose themselves to my vocation with observations of any kind; much to the contrary, I have always received their full and solicitous support. To my maternal grandfather, José Casaburi, for having contributed, through his affection, temperament and wisdom, to the detection of my inclinations and favoring them in the best of manners.

I lived with him and my beloved grandmother from childhood, my days filled with long conversations and my nights with activity. In effect, I was a sleep–walker, sign, perhaps, of my inability to demonstrate all that I felt during the day; I went to see them, it seems, during my unusual slumber, or headed for the stable to feed my horse some grass and water.

My grandfather –wide–brimmed hat and long frock coat, in the guise of President Bartolomé Mitre –was a slender, proud man, and not as tall as he seemed, with smiling eyes, and rosy cheeks. He stood with his hands folded behind his back, the left foot slightly forward, drumming an inaudible beat. He was extremely kind to me and never gave me a toy, for he knew, watching me grow, that toys did not amuse me; the ones I had been given by my parents piled up in the corner. Instead, he gave me paper and colored pencils, the «toys» that truly made me happy. It was he, when I was an eleven–year old child who had never seen a painting before, nor knew how to use color, who made me paint a large basket of flowers on the top of a patio wall. His words were categorical: «You have to invent the flowers, not copy them».

He had bought colors in powder form and prepared them while explaining how to use them; as far as the choice of color was concerned, that was up to me. He then improvised the scaffold: two stepladders joined by a pair of planks, upon which I had to «work». This is how I achieved my first painting, a wide blue basket, brimming with yellow flowers. This painting accompanied my grandfather until his death, at the age of eighty–six, a few months after my return to the country, in 1924. I think it needless to mention that the large house with a double patio was painted more than once in the course of two decades; it was grandfather who on every occasion closely supervised the work so as to keep the first mural by his grandson undamaged and spotless.

Singular being, this José Casaburi: intelligent, curious, intransigent, always tormented and dissatisfied with everything, who seemed to have concentrated his love on the child that I was and on the adolescent and the man I became. All the while I was gone, from 1913 to 1924, he yearned to see me, and when I stopped sending him so many letters, he turned my portraits against the wall.

Originally from Polla, he and a close friend of his had studied together: both belonged to families that had settled in the city, bonded across generations with ties of friendship stronger than those of blood. Yet life separated them, for his friend entered the seminary, while my grandfather, a staunch liberal, became a passionate Garibaldi partisan. Both of them men of principles, the moment came when one preached from the pulpit and the other in the canteen.

In the small–town atmosphere, my grandfather´s exhortations were inappropriate and scandalous. To be a liberal, in those times, especially when surrounded by narrow–minded people, was worse than being an ultra–communist in countries under conservative regimes today. My grandfather found himself in an adverse condition, and that is how his father, assessing the situation, decided to give the couple part of the family inheritance for the unruly youth to «come to his senses» elsewhere.

Married quite young, in the course of time father of six children, José Casaburi set out for Argentina, and landed, by a whim of fate, in the newly–founded city of la Plata, where he acquired lands that soon became valuable. There his children grew and were educated; there his eldest daughter Carolina, my mother, married a generous and kind–hearted young Italian, who after squandering the small fortune he had brought along in order to progress in the sparkling city of Buenos Aires, was able to intelligently rekindle it in La Plata. At the time, José Pettoruti not only owned a productive cigarette factory, but also represented an Italian store in Buenos Aires that imported oil and wine from the distant Peninsula.

It was a prolific and happy marriage, which began its «brood» with me. I was born on October 1, 1892, at a quarter past four, and apparently, my coming into this world was held by my family to be of singular importance. At my grandfather´s request, the umbilical cord barely cut, I was bathed in one the most exquisite wines from Italy, while my father, prodigal by nature and always ready to enjoy himself, declared three days of merriment in a row to properly celebrate the event. As a result, they forgot to record my name at the register office within the time allotted by the law, reason why my birth certificate reads October 3.

Eleven more brothers joined the household in which abundance reigned for a quarter of a century. From a very early age I lived in the home of my grandparents, for they wanted to spare my mother the exhausting attention that my sensitive nature required. For reasons I will never know, if my days were placid, my nights were restless, assailed by terrible dreams that obliged my grandmother to stay at my bedside.

When I returned to my parents´ home, old enough for school, it wasn't in a continuous manner either; often my grandfather came to fetch me under the pretext of going for a horse ride or an outing in his convertible, that he affectionately called a «birloche»[1]. I spent weekends, as well as the short and long holidays, in his company.

Many are the cities I love, either for the beauty they store, the memories they bring to mind or the way they have influenced my life; among them, and in the first place, stands Florence, then Rome, Milan, Munich, Paris, Buenos Aires. Above all there is one I feel deeply attached to, imbued with memories that are very dear to me; it is La Plata, my country´s youngest city, a square urban plant crossed by open diagonals, situated on an endless plain on the banks of the widest river in he world, with its thick and dazzling oxide or silver–colored waters, forever changing hues.

The colors and forms that I observed as a child I took along wherever I went and are still present in my work. This city had squares of incomparable greens and a magnificent eucalyptus forest where my grandfather´s «birloche» or our horses slowed down in order to better inhale the perfume of

1 *Birloche*: Type of sled pulled by oxen, used to carry potatoes or timber.

the leaves; dream–like forests later devastated by ugly constructions and the gigantic trees felled.

When I turned fourteen or fifteen my grandfather, though knowing I was strong on mathematics, believed Art, rather than Humanities, to be my vocation, and asked one of my uncles, whom he knew to be on cordial terms with Pío Collivadino´s brother –the former had recently been appointed director of the National Academy of Fine Arts– to try to enroll me at that Academy. My uncle´s reply was not promising: his friend had let him know that my admission would be difficult, for his brother was very strict.

That was lucky for me. Indignant at the answer– and possibly to please my father a little, who preferred to see me pursue my secondary education– my grandfather remembered that there existed an Academy of Fine Arts within the city itself, founded and directed by a painter named Antonio del Nido, a Spanish artist brought to La Plata in order to teach at the «Colegio Nacional», financed by the Provincial government.

I was registered for the evening class, but did not meet the director right away for we had been told he was ill. However, his helpers gave me pictures to copy: I meticulously reproduced mouths, ears, noses, eyes, something I did with exemplary regularity. At one point the director stopped by the classrooms, and that was the only time I saw him. He was a tall and pleasant man, with a pale face framed by a bushy black beard. He kindly stood next to me and stroked my head, asking me whether I truly loved art. Then he told his helper to show him my drawings, ordering him to immediately bring me a model of a plaster foot. He died some days later.

Two young painters, Atilio Boveri and Enrique Blancá, took charge of the Academy. The former was a conceited talker, who behaved and dressed accordingly. He addressed himself to others arrogantly, twirling his walking stick, and with his long hair and tinted glasses, was a well–known figure in the calm and sunny town. The latter was a postal employee, member of a distinguished and musical family –where I had often enjoyed exquisite concerts– who disliked appearing in public, preferring to sit alone on a café corner or exchange views with a good friend rather than walking along 7th Street.

After Professor del Nido´s death, my grandfather went to see Boveri in order to interest him in my progress, and the latter recommended to enroll me in the afternoon classes, for they had longer hours. I tackled still–lifes without a single indication from my new teacher, observing how he spoke to others and corrected their work with a paintbrush, while to me he would say: «Carry on…»

I sweated blood trying to add volume to an orange, and though he noticed and listened to my difficulties, he never revealed to me that if I continued to apply touches of light on the edges, I would never be able to reproduce the corpulence nor the sensation of solidity present in fruit.

However, Boveri took me into account. Friends in common told my mother what he used to say in the intimacy of his home; he had spotted in me no ordinary conditions. He also trusted me –probably relieved by my young age– and was determined to teach me painting according to his methods.

There are beings that do not realize that children grow, soon turning into men that judge. He often rambled on about how to act in life and how he always came out on top. For instance, he insisted on me wearing black glasses like the ones he wore, telling me they «made it easier to observe without others noticing it». One afternoon, with his thumb on his chest discreetly pointing at a student talking to a young girl in a corner, he demonstrated his point: «Watch this. While we speak, without even turning my head, I am observing him».

One of his most shocking confidences concerned his citizenship. He disclosed he had been born in Italy, but that he had needed a grant from the Provincial government in order to study in Europe. He thus declared having been born in a certain provincial village in which, he said, the register office had burned down, his documents disappearing in the blaze. «Only a wizard would find out the truth», was his comment.

At the Academy I had nothing to do and stopped attending it. I stayed a couple of months, during which time no one taught me anything; the little I learned came from drawing the plaster foot over and over again. All things considered, it was better to study at home, and decided to work on my own just as my childhood friend Carlos Scotti was doing, or Humberto Causa, another companion, born in Montevideo. This youth was later awarded a scholarship so as to study painting in Germany. That was his downfall, and after spending a few months in Mallorca, he returned to La Plata, where he literally let himself die of hunger. These friends were intelligent young men, inquisitive, yet without means or motivation, smothered by their environment.

Causa´s death plunged me in bitter reflections. It wasn´t the first time that someone close died, but it was the first time that I grasped a man could die when he loses his will to live. From that moment onwards, I told myself that one has to think about life and never about death, only way to conquer both.

Once I had made up my mind, I began to skip school often without my parents realizing it; I went to the woods to draw trees and plants, or to the Museum of Natural History, where I stealthily copied the extraordinary birds that were kept there. But my true models, from that time up until my departure to Italy, were «The Skinned Man» by Brancusi and my sister Aída, who with infinite patience, posed hours on end. The oval of her face and the expression of her eyes became so engraved in my memory that my later portraits always had something of her. With respect to the «The Skinned Man», I knew it so well I could draw it from memory, entirely or in parts, foreshortening it most daringly.

At the La Plata Natural Museum, known to scientists all over the world, there functioned a School of Drawing where the painter Martín Malharro had taught for a while. I enrolled in a perspective course in charge of the architect Emilio Coutaret. Before or after this class, provided with a special permit, I walked about the museum halls copying, here and there, stones, minerals and birds, developing a collection worthy of an ornithologist. I also often copied Michelangelo´s Moses, and its magnificent plaster reproduction, placed on the landing of the main stairs leading to the second floor, was an imposing sight.

A personal friend of my father´s, Coutaret became particularly interested in my studies, and many of the problems related to perspective, so complex they had to be solved in class, he explained to me at his home. I studied with him for a year, and believe I did not disappoint him as a student.

Little by little and due to my own activity –my drawings were frequently exhibited in the shop windows at the «Gath & Chaves» department store, and reviewed by the press– I got involved in La Plata´s artistic and intellectual scene, composed mainly of writers and poets. I frequented Benito Lynch, reputedly the surliest of writers. However, I believe he sought the company of people who wouldn´t bother him in any way.

He made appointments to see me, or we met by chance at the Jockey Club where he enjoyed taking his baths, and we spoke about many things there. In the evenings we took strolls along the solitary streets or reached the edge of the wood. I think that at the time I was a young acquaintance with whom he felt comfortable, for our true friendship was to develop later, upon my return from Europe, when by age differences no longer matter.

I recall, however, he took me into his confidence. I thus learned that the reason he shunned intellectual circles was due to an interview in which a reporter had made him speak nonsense. Of what nature I ignore; I only know that he paled when remembering the episode.

I saw little of Rafael Alberto Arrieta, who also enjoyed leading a solitary life, and in general we met at the newspaper for which he worked. Our relations were cordial; he was a cultured man, of a refined spirit. I once drew a caricature of him, displayed at my first solo exhibit, in 1911. Upon returning to the country, I saw him even less; he already lived in Buenos Aires, and his life, just like mine, was quite busy. He wrote the preface to the catalogue of one of my exhibitions in La Plata, in 1925.

I visited the poet Almafuerte at his home, a small house with rooms in a row all facing the patio, similar to those existing in the outskirts of the city; today it is situated downtown.[2] This ordinary house had no personality other than the one generated by the negligence of a man living on his own. I can still see him with his worn out canvas sandals walking along the forlorn corridor.

2 66 Street, no. 530. Presently a Museum Library.

The frankness of his language was proverbial, and, let me add, frightening. I heard him complain with unspeakable violence against the frequent felling of the eucalyptus in the forest and other offenses perpetrated in our young city. Yet what he was fond of talking about, at least with me, was painting. One fine morning, he said he had been born to be a painter, and told me about a grant that the legislature had refused to award to him.

He believed the destiny of a painter to be much more viable than that of a writer, especially in a country like ours. «Here –he told me– people are uncouth. You portray a handsome head or a beautiful landscape, and the painting is sold. Images are immediately understood. However, you write the «Divine Comedy» and you are nothing but a mangy dog, doomed to starvation».

My regular friends were the poets and writers Rafael de Diego, Alcides Graca, Raúl Oyanaharte, José María Rey, Aníbal González Ocantos, Antonio Gellini among others, and art students or painters, such as Ernesto Riccio, Pepe Fonrouge, Carlos Dillon, Carlos Scotti, Enrique Blancá, and Humberto Causa.

From the end of 1909 to 1911 I became quite active; I drew and painted profusely, contributing to the «La Ciudad» and «Rayos de Sol» magazines, of which I was the artistic director until 1923, when I was replaced by Carlos Scotti. In December 1910 Enrique Blancá and I opened a free studio, where we taught drawing and painting.

Among my paintings of this period, I recall numerous portraits and still–lifes, a large quantity of forest scenes, and depictions of the Pereira estate, which I often visited to paint on Sundays, together with Scotti or Dillon. I often portrayed the cathedral still under construction, its left wing barely roofed, the columns on the ground where they were still being worked on. The whole scene reminded one of antique ruins.

Only two still–lifes remain of all these paintings: both are drapery studies, with an ancient candlestick placed on top. Wistfully, I still recall a basket full of onions lit by sunlight pouring through the window, which I destroyed myself, clumsily, because an angle had failed. My ignorance at the time had me believe that a painting, in order to be perfect, had to be accomplished my way, and this can be seen in the studies, which were all executed in one brush stroke.

In July 1911 I exhibited caricatures in the halls of the «Buenos Aires» newspaper, today no longer in existence. Actually, they were pseudo–caricatures, for I never was a caricaturist, nor was I interested in my models to be well known: I drew my companions, my hairdresser and the salesman on the corner. This exhibition was well received by the press, yet the reason for my comment is to stress the benefic consequences of the show.

I recall that the young La Plata artists met at the «Bazar X». We held

conversations there and exchanged views on art. The owner, a friend of ours, gave us loans, and at times, generously exchanged paintings for frames.

Previous trips to Córdoba had kindled in me the desire to paint its surroundings and its beautiful hills. I went there to spend a month in the fall of 1912, reproducing landscapes, as well as portraying local men and women. The days were mostly gray, or rainy, and I barely saw the sun, which didn´t help my work much. Upon my return, while preparing a show where I would display these works, I went, as I regularly did, to the House of Deputies to listen to political speeches. On one occasion it was deputy Rodolfo Sarrat´s turn to speak, and I became interested in both his discourse and the man himself. I decided to sketch him, later transforming the drawing into a caricature, though I cannot remember whether I sent it to the «La Ciudad» or to the «Rayos de Sol» magazines. Once published, painter Pepe Fonrouge came to see me, telling me that Sarrat had wanted to know, in his capacity as an artist who knew his milieu, who had been the «gentleman» that had caricatured him. He was surprised to learn it had been done by a «kid, a word that some months ago was used by almost all who had reviewed my exhibit and which some months later, as a result of my Córdoba landscapes, was to be repeated in almost all newspapers. I did not look my age, and everyone believed me to be younger.

Sarrat had asked Fonrouge if I deserved to be helped, something that encouraged me. I was then asked to visit him, which I did, and after countless questions, he saw me out in the most amiable of ways, inviting me to have coffee with him at the House someday.

I continued to see him often, almost always at his home, for he quite grew to like me and I him. He became used to my company, and the week I stopped visiting him, for my show [3] «A Month in Córdoba» was about to open, he sent an office boy to find out what had happened to me. Through the same messenger I invited him to the exhibit, to which opening he came.

Of the thirty some paintings exhibited, I only know the fate of one, currently in my possession. I reckon that «Bad day», donated to the «Circle of Journalists», might still belong to them, and that the third one, «Río Primero», donated to the «Circle Ars», (at the time directed by José María Rey), might be in the hands of some of his descendants.

Months went by without Sarrat mentioning the possibility of me being awarded a grant. Nonetheless, he would often ask me very paternally whether I wanted to study in Europe, to which I replied enthusiastically. It was probably in the month of March 1913, though I cannot recall the exact date, when an office boy brought me a card in which Sarrat asked me to see him around ten in the evening.

At the time he was a deputy and president of the Budget Commission. I found him working, alone. We had some coffee, chatted for a while, and

3 The show opened on 8 July 1912, in the hall of the "Buenos Aires" newspaper.

he immersed himself once again in his thick open books, not before handing me a volume he had promised me. I understood something was in the air and waited for the news. The telephone then rang in an adjacent room (I later learned it was the direct line to the manor of the Provincial Governor, Marcelino Ugarte, an imposing residence situated in the woods facing the Museum of Natural History).

When Sarrat returned to his office, I realized, by the sadness on his face, that something unfortunate had happened. He told me: «I wanted to bring you good news tonight, Emilio, yet they are bad. I had hoped for a grant, and the governor asks me to economize …». Again he sat down in front of his big books, pondering, when I heard him triumphantly exclaiming: «That´s it! I will award you a grant and still economize!»

When reviewing the province´s long list of scholarship holders, all of them in Europe –many of them without any merit other than being spoiled brats– he had stumbled upon abnormal amounts that called his attention. In effect, some scholarships were worth one hundred and fifty pesos, while others were only worth one hundred. He instantly figured that if some students could live on one hundred pesos, so could others who had been awarded one hundred and fifty. Fairly distributing the amount so as to give each scholarship holder one hundred pesos, he awarded me a grant while contenting the governor at the same time.

That same night he came to the conclusion that it wasn´t appropriate for so many students to remain unchecked in foreign countries; and since it was impossible to nominate a special inspector due to financial reasons, he managed to get the Government to see to it that its Scholarship Patronage, then directed by Ernesto de la Cárcova, also inspect Provincial grants.

This outstanding measure would not last long. In 1914 the war was declared, and the bridge that had once linked Buenos Aires to Europe narrowed for aspiring painters. At any rate, when I arrived in Florence in August 1913, and met my colleagues, some of them wondered how I had managed to be awarded a grant, considering both the state of the economy and the reduction of their monthly pay, reduced to a third.

I only told one student who had become my friend and who had received a hundred pesos from the very beginning; he thought it amusing and we both laughed madly every time someone complained.

At home, the news of me leaving for Europe was received with both joy and consternation. My mother, taciturn, resigned, began the preparations taking care of the linen (I had the impression a trousseau was being put together), and when our gazes met, her moistened eyes revealed ineffable tenderness. My father, for whom crossing the Atlantic held few secrets, (he often traveled to Europe), disclosed details of my future journey, or spoke to me about the New World.

I personally went to tell my grandfather the news; unfortunately, at the time, my grandmother had already died. He fell silent, tightening the muscles of his face, trying to be brave. He motioned for me to sit down, and disappeared from the room. When he returned, he was carrying a tray with two cups of steaming chocolate with a hint of coffee, named by him «the drink of the Popes», and a dish with pastry.

He was quite unstinting in his advice, much of it heard since I was a child: «You have to eat well but not a lot, and sleep little. Sleep is a question of habit. Great men have been able to achieve wonderful things because they barely rested; it is the lazy who came up with the idea that man needs to sleep eight or ten hours daily. If you don´t make good use of your time, you won´t accomplish anything». And he added: «The main thing, remember, is not to be thrifty when acquiring useful things. You always have to buy quality shoes, regardless of how much they cost, and sleep in good beds. With good shoes you will be able to walk without tiring, and in comfortable beds, your rest will be complete».

I had a slight squint in my left eye, present since childhood; as it didn´t bother me, the operation was postponed. In the course of time, however, my sense of aesthetics overrode any apprehension, and I presented the following dilemma to my parents: either the operation was to be performed before my departure, or carried out in Florence, city of my destination. Considering I would have no–one there to accompany me, I went to see an oculist recommended by our physician. Established in Buenos Aires, he also had a practice in La Plata, where he saw patients three times a week. He recommended the operation and performed it, assisted by our family doctor.

For fifteen days I remained in darkness, my head enveloped in bandages that were taken off a few at a time. When they removed the last one, not only was my left eye poorly aligned, my vision was also badly impaired. The oculist that had operated on me, Dr. Raúl Argañaraz, assured me that with the help of a device that exercised the eye, I would fully recover. Not being an expert, I believed him.

Still convalescent, I was welcomed home by my friends, happy for me I was leaving; all of them dreamt of imitating me and said they envied my luck. Fonrouge arrived home one day with ten kilos of coffee asking me whether I could deliver them to his teacher, Tito Lessi. My father advised me not to, for it was too bulky, and hence I only took with me the cardboard box upon which the brand name was printed so as to fill it up in Florence with the best of coffees. I was also bringing along three letters of introduction: one for Tito Lessi, another for Cesáreo Bernaldo de Quirós and the third one for Arturo Dresco, our consul stationed in the city of the Medici, and who was also a sculptor. The latter was working on a monument dedicated to Columbus, sit-

uated today on the promenade named after it. It was thus as light as a feather that I traveled to Europe.

Around that time, a friend who was also an artist, had difficulties in accomplishing a painting he wanted to send to the National Salon, and came to me for advice. It was a true aesthetic conundrum, and as my friend offered no resistance, I painted it all over again. I also put aside one of my works in order to send it to that Salon, which opened in September, after my departure. My small painting was rejected, yet the one that belonged to my friend, accepted.

When the day came to leave, I went to say goodbye to my grandfather, early in the morning. He saw me coming and froze, unable to utter a word. Tense and quiet, he urged me to remember his recommendations, advising me to speak as little as possible to strangers, to listen a lot and above all, to ask questions. His voice faltered and he stopped talking. Overcome with emotion, we hugged each other.

Here and there some handshakes, and I returned home, where my father was waiting for us to leave; the rest was confusion. My older brothers didn´t know what to do and some cried; the younger ones gripped my trousers. Overwhelmed, I embraced my mother who, inconsolable, could not release her embrace. My father was astonished to hear me tell him in a whisper not to accompany me: I told him Juancito, a childhood friend would be there.

Someone shouted the train was leaving, and I jumped into the coach. We arrived in Buenos Aires at two in the afternoon. Not far from the North Dock, where the steamboat Cittá di Torino was moored, I asked the driver to stop in order to see Quiros´ exhibition. Then, we headed towards the harbor.

I thus left La Plata, city where I saw the light, and where I spent my childhood and my youth up until August 7, 1913, when I embarked for Italy, land of my parents and forefathers.

# Chapter 2

## Florence- First Impressions

On the Cittá de Torino, the small, old ship that crossed the ocean with me for the last time, there existed only two classes. My cabin had two beds, and was beautifully situated; I had obtained it thanks to a friend of my father´s, who was a travel agent, and did not have to share it until Rio de Janeiro. From the first night, my table companion was an Italian gentleman who also traveled by himself, a very intelligent mathematics professor, so tall he seemed infinite. He visited his country every two years and knew every port like the back of his hand.

While we anchored at the harbor, we explored the quaint town of Santos. With its black people dressed in curious garments, the loud voices, its markets overflowing with color, its strange fruit and its striking and extensive beaches, Brazil dazzled me.

We set sail at nightfall, while a furious storm broke out. Far from being alarmed, the spectacle captivated us. When we went down to the dining room, the tables were already set, each one with its own violinist. Unfortunately everyone abandoned the room, seasick, except for my companion, a fat gentleman and me. At one point everything rolled around the floor. Sailors ran about, helping out other passengers. In Rio de Janeiro the ship anchored for a day. The impression this city made on me is beyond description. Listening to my guide, I couldn´t get over my surprise, and felt like someone whose eyes open to a magical world. He took me to the most beautiful and to the most sordid places that clustered high up on the hills: the famous «favelas». Together we walked through a neighborhood situated a few minutes away from the glittering city center, named «Mangue». The name, he told me, was a tribute to a foul–smelling river delimiting our district: there

the nights were day and the days were night… It was at sunset that we explored its dilapidated streets, while barely dressed women of every kind and color exhibited themselves in the doorways and behind windows, like dolls in glass cases.

From Rio de Janeiro to Genoa the sea was magnificent and the dusks unforgettable. The beauty of it all led me to reflect upon the vulgarity of the enriched bourgeoisie that traveled with me, fussing about everything, but never having time for contemplation. Whenever I could, I exercised my eyes with the help of the device recommended by the oculist. Remembering my grandfather´s advice, I rarely held full–fledged conversations: my sole interlocutor was the mathematician, who in practice was the only one that spoke, for I assailed him with questions. The rest of the time I read books by Ruskin and Taine, given to me by my grandfather at the last minute.

The arrival to Dakar was spectacular. As if by enchantment, an infinite number of slender canoes surrounded the ship while it reached the harbor, filled with gesticulating young black men displaying minuscule loincloths or completely naked. They dove like fish towards the bottom of the sea to pick up the coins that travelers tossed to them. When we disembarked, I realized that a ship´s deck is altogether different from dry land; for a while, I found it impossible to regain my sense of balance.

My companion and I then took a car, and the driver offered us a screen to protect us from the blazing sun. As we drove through the city, we saw people walking by, tall and black, who wore vivid earrings and necklaces, their swaying bodies enveloped in flamboyant cloth.

Sailing into the Gulf of Naples on a radiant day was simply fantastic. The distant silhouettes of the Ischia and Procida islands stood out against the sky, with Capri on the right and the Vesuvius facing us. We finally had reached Italian soil, and that changed my mood for the better. We remained there almost all day, and my travel companion showed me many remarkable places.

On September 3 we disembarked in Genoa where I remained for ten days; the first four I spent with my friend, the mathematician. After he left, it was easy to orient myself, and took in every detail of the city. The Chiassone Museum was closed, but I visited the Palazzo Bianco and the Staglieno cemetery. Contrary to what I had heard, I found it uninteresting, though stunningly situated.

From Genoa to Florence I took the train, skirting the shore. How wonderful and varied the landscape for a young man like me, born in the plains! Tunnels succeeded each other without interruption; I opened and closed the window, at times to avoid the smoke and at times to behold the novel scenery. Passengers protested loudly, but I paid no heed to them. Only later did I re-

alize the smoke suffocated them. The Tower of Pisa came into view unexpectedly, but it was just for an instant, lasting as long as a flash of lightning does, or a sudden brightness. I held my breath, like a child from whom something is snatched, stretching my neck in vain to see whether the miracle would repeat itself.

In Florence (it was September 13), I stayed at the Stella d´Italia e San Marco Hotel, on the Via Calzaioli. I had noticed some people furtively gazing at me, and standing in front of the mirror I understood why: my face was as black as that of an African from Dakar. I washed it immediately, and went out for a walk.

Night fell, and I began to explore the city feverishly, craving to find out all of its secrets. It is difficult to describe how much I saw; all I remember is that this mad race, not even interrupted to eat, wore me out, and I collapsed from exhaustion on a chair in a café on Piazza Vittorino Emanuele II [4] well past midnight. It was the Caffé delle Giubbe Rosse, served by four waiters wearing, as the name indicates, light red livery, where I gobbled up a couple of eggs and greedily drank a cup of coffee with milk.

For a few days I did nothing else than visit the city, knowing its topography as well as its artistic and political history, entering churches that lay on my path, without even thinking about museums. The city itself was a work of art, and its monuments and palaces entranced me. My first «formal» visit was Lorenzo the Magnificent´s tomb, where I stumbled upon Michelangelo´s marble blocks. Never before had I had a close encounter with the masters, and God knows how thrilled I was. My second visit was the Academy, where I had the opportunity to behold «The slaves», achieved by this brilliant Renaissance artist. I was overcome by emotion, for it was the first time in my short life that I stood face to face with the originals. This certainly had nothing in common with the reproductions I had seen in La Plata.

Running as if pursued, I crossed Piazza San Marco and entered the convent named the same way, burning with curiosity to see Beato Angelico´s work. His small «Annunziazione» overwhelmed me. What exquisite spirituality! I must have been enraptured, for I lost all notion of time until a guard tapped me on the shoulder telling me they were about to close.

In order to calmly digest everything I had seen, the following day I changed my itinerary. I visited our consul, the sculptor Arturo Dresco. He wasn´t in, but I obtained his personal address. He received me very kindly, and trying to be helpful, asked me to accompany him to Pablo Curatella´s studio. Besides being a sculptor, Curatella was also his art student. Through him, Dresco suggested, I would meet both Argentine and Latin American artists that met to eat at a neighboring «trattoria».

Curatella greeted me warmly. He was a short and lively young man,

4 Today, Piazza della Repubblica.

with abundant black hair. At the time, he was finishing a life–size clay sculpture [5]; facing each other, stood a worker and his wife, the latter holding a baby in her arms. After we had exchanged a few words, Curatella offered me a stool: I was elated to find myself in Florence, and in a studio similar to the one of my dreams.

The sculpture, on the whole, did not seem beautiful to me, but it was there and I glanced at it every time it wasn´t hidden from sight by the silhouettes of both teacher and student. At the same time, I was listening to Dresco´s comments. Suddenly, I heard something that seemed hard to believe. Dresco said: «Look, Pablo, it´s getting late for lunch and I don´t see any other solution than to eliminate the man: let´s keep only the woman and the kid» [6].

Curatella had no defect in his youth other than giving out advice, regardless of how people took it. The rest of the time he was pleasant. That noon I went with him to the «trattoria» Dresco had recommended. It was late and many people had already left. He introduced me to the sculptors Nicolás Lamanna, Miguel Angel Negri, and José Luis Zorrilla de San Martín, as well as to the tenor Antonio Codegoni, from Lomas de Zamora [7]. I took to the latter as soon as I met him, and soon we became excellent friends. That same afternoon he asked around and obtained the address of a good oculist. Then, he accompanied me to look for a suitable studio. Fortunately, we found one on 6 Via Degli Artisti, not fifty steps away from the «trattoria»: the owner rented it to me for 450 lire a year. It was exactly what I wanted, and as it wasn´t very large, the cost of the heat could be kept down.

On the following afternoon, Antonio went with me to the oculist´s. I exposed my situation briefly, and after telling him I was a painter, begged him to be honest. After a thorough examination, he assured me my right eye was completely normal, but that the left one had been poorly operated on. He did not think the exercises would in any way bring about a modification, and suggested corrective surgery at some point in the future. For the time being, I had to continue strengthening my eye.

Needless to say his answer terrified me: it was the most horrendous thing he could have told me. Yet, candidly hoping that the practitioner might have made a mistake, I carried on, more determined than ever, with the annoying exercises. Every fifteen days I went to see him; he never asked for a cent, and we became good friends. Then the war broke out, and he disappeared in the turmoil.

Codegoni was of great assistance when I first arrived in Florence. In order for me not to spend a penny on hotels, he found me a room that ended up being even more expensive: at one point, all the garments my mother had lovingly bought me vanished. In dismay, I noticed the landlady´s sons wearing them, but I felt too embarrassed to say anything: their impudence baffled me.

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5 The photograph of this sculpture, which I had seen at the end of 1913, is published in "Curatella Manes", by Osvaldo Svanascini (Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1963), who mistakenly dates it 1911.

6 Curatella complied. In effect, three years later, when walking through the felled forest of La Plata, I ran into the sculpture " Woman with child in arms", seen in Curatella´s studio in Florence.

7 Neighborhood in the City of Buenos Aires.

Endowed with solid common sense, Codegoni also accompanied me to look for second–hand furniture that he helped me paint white. I believed, and still do, that cleanliness never opposed itself to art, and decided to whitewash the walls for them to harmonize with the furniture. I then realized that many of my best friends (de Chirico, Archipenko, Juan Gris, just to name a few), were even tidier than I was. Although not many people are aware of this, hygiene is especially recommended to painters, as dust is particularly damaging to paintings, particularly oils.

Though I could have easily painted the studio gray or any other color, my choice of white was due to some kind of emotional response. All the other studios I had seen were gloomy, and I was always under the impression they were filthy. It was hard to understand how an artist could work in those conditions. However, I soon realized that painting in an entirely white space was a tricky thing, for light reflected off the walls. As months went by, and in spite of my warnings, my idea became popular, especially among some young Italian painters. All in all, the experience proved to be quite useful, in terms of the «recherche de la lumière», as it is now called.

Almost immediately after arriving in Florence, I bought the ten kilos of roasted coffee for professor Tito Lessi. I carried them in the same cardboard bag my father had given me in La Plata. Pleased with his letter and his gift, the professor received me with open arms, and upon my request, showed me some of his work. However, I immediately discarded the idea, suggested by Fonrouge, of becoming his pupil. It wasn´t the type of painting that suited my temperament, nor was it my style. Quite by chance, I saw Lessi again on the street, and he thanked me on the occasion for the exquisite coffee I had brought him from America.

Carrying Fonrouge´s third letter in my pocket, I went to visit Quirós, who lived in Ponte a Mensola, halfway down the road to Settignano. From where I got off the streetcar up to the large gates of the splendid villa in which the artist lived, it was all uphill. When I arrived I felt slightly weary; the weather in Florence becomes clammy when summer draws to a close. Standing before the imposing entrance, provided with a bell–pull, I hesitated for a while, pondering on whether to meet the artist whose work I had recently seen in Buenos Aires. The mansion and the man intimidated me. Through the gates I saw a large park, and in the background, in between the clearing flanked by trees, Settignano´s landscape delineated by a winding river. After meditating for a while, I returned home.

I repeated the visit, with the same results: shyness has always plagued me. The third time, I closed my eyes telling myself that it was «now or never», and pulled as hard as I could on the heavy ring attached to the rope. Bells chimed in the distance and I felt like running away. Yet I couldn´t move, feeling I had been nailed to the ground. I saw a maid walking towards the

entrance, wearing a starched uniform, and I took a deep breath. I handed her the letter through the gate, and followed her silhouette crowned by a white headdress until she was out of sight. A few moments later, I saw a gentleman approaching, tall, strong, carrying a child in his arms. From afar his face looked odd. When he got nearer, I realized it was a mustache cover. Before reaching the gate, the masked gentleman sermonized me for a long time. I shook like a leaf, and a crimson one at that. He described Argentines as being pedantic and ungrateful, vehemently affirming he had grown tired of their company and that if he received me, it was only because his friend Pepe had recommended me. This much said, we shook hands and he let me in. I later found out he was right in criticizing our compatriots thus. Once in the villa, he introduced his wife to me, a beautiful Roman woman. We talked for a while, and he offered me white vermouth and pastries. Apparently I made a good impression on him, for he invited me back to paint in his park, kindly proposing to guide me in my work. At the time, he was still at work on a family portrait, which he worked on in the open air: his wife, his oldest daughter and the infant I had seen in his arms. I ran into this painting some fifteen years later, at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro.

By the end of September, I had already settled in my brand–new studio. Already I had visited many places, starting with the museums. I woke at cockcrow, (just as I had in La Plata, where I used to read) and exercised my eye for an hour. Then, I had breakfast, and either went to visit the Il Duomo cathedral to admire the variations of light shining through the tall stained–glass windows or the Del Carmine church, where only in the early morning can the magnificent Masaccio´s frescoes be seen without any electric light. I also enjoyed going to Santa Croce to see Giotto, or to Settignano or Fiesole with my little paint box, first tool bought in Florence. Other mornings I worked in my studio, especially since I now owned it.

Libraries, galleries, venerable monuments, nothing escaped my fervor and I felt the stones confided in me. Asking, often insisting, my determination opened doors; I had even obtained a special permit to copy paintings in museums. I began doing so at the Hall of Prints and Drawings at the Degli Uffizzi Gallery, where I studied the preparatory drawings the great masters had used to guide themselves in their work. Depending on the seasons, I copied many of them with numb hands, for in those days even important Italian museums lacked heating.

I had no idea what an official academy was like in a country that possessed a high artistic tradition, and reckoned I was better off studying regularly. I headed for the «Reggio Istituto delle Belle Arti», intending to attend classes in a disciplined way. I took the Nude Model examination under the condition to be tested every three months on the rest of the course load, until completion. My admission depended upon the results, and I anxiously

awaited the outcome. Fortunately, having copied «The Skinned Man» so often in the past came in handy, and I passed the test successfully. One of the judges, however, not quite satisfied with the result, whispered to his neighbor that he found it «troppo parigino»: too Parisian. Turning towards me he inquired if I had studied in Paris, and upon replying I had been educated in La Plata, he looked at me incredulously.

In the end I was accepted, only to find out I had knocked at the wrong door. The students became angry for I insisted on understanding the teacher´s corrections and they made my life miserable: he was regarded as a god, never giving any explanations, and all he modified in charcoal was deemed perfect.

One day, after he had corrected my work, I told this Eternal Father that my nude was not standing straight. Rather, I remarked, she seemed to be stooping. That was too much for the students, horrified by my impertinence. To make matters worse, they called me «the Indian», and I decided to quit the Academy. I felt sorry about one thing, however: I would no longer attend my engraving class, taught by Celestino Celestini. This teacher had grown fond of me, and had made it possible for me to participate in his classes. Relatively young, Celestini wasn´t only an excellent teacher, but also a delightful person and a friend to the boys: he gave them advice and in some cases, his own money.

Around that time, I became a member of a sports club. I wished to continue with my boxing practice and take hot baths.

I enrolled at the Reggio Istituto, and wrote a letter to the Budget Inspector, Mr. Ernesto de la Cárcova, who was posted to Paris. I knew I was breaking the rules, since my obligation was, as a grant holder depending on the Buenos Aires Provincial Government, to travel directly to Paris, and await his indications. Though the decision was up to him, I wished with all my might to study in Florence, for it held a special attraction for me. I was drawn to its history, its gentle tranquility, and truly believed there was no better place to study and take care of my eyes. They were my major worry, and ever since, the fear of losing them has always obsessed me.

I wrote him an explanatory letter, informing him about my health and of my reasons to remain in Florence. Since Dresco had told me the inspector was a fine painter and a sensible man, I believed the matter was settled, and I awaited his response with a clear conscience.

Among the first things I did in Florence, was to browse through books likely to interest me. I had been told the Ferrante Gonnelli bookstore, on Via Cavour, was provided with the largest supply of art books. At the same time, it functioned as an art gallery. I bought a book by Ruskin on drawing (it taught me many useful things and recommend it to young painters and in particular to drawers), and discovered a magazine edited in Florence named «Lacerba», dated September 15. The store attendant encouraged me to buy

it, telling me I was lucky to find the last two copies, as no more issues would be published.

I browsed through it at home: what an exciting discovery! So much audacity seemed incredible to me. On the front page there was an article written by Papini, whose name at the time was still new to me. In capital letters, it read: «Frankness when Addressing Imbeciles». In brief, it stated that all men were imbeciles, except for the Futurists. Signed by Marinetti, «liberated words» peppered the text, such as «pataplum–pluff», «fraaaaaaah», «plupluflac», and intertwined with the absurd language, beautiful poetic language not always easy to understand. The other texts were a hymn to the new movement, to dynamic pictorial forms. No photographs illustrated the ideas, however, and I was left eager to know what these new forms meant. I bought the following number, dated October 1 –it was published every fortnight– written in the same incisive tone, but this time hinging on vaudeville and politics. It included an off–text drawing by Carrá that I did not grasp: probably, no–one had.

The owner of the library, a young man of about thirty, tall and corpulent, used to my presence or to the avidity of my search (I rummaged through a lot but bought little), suggested two small books containing reproductions that had just arrived from France: one portrayed Van Gogh and the other Gauguin. Noticing I was interested, he mentioned that a brief essay on the French painter Cézanne was being published in Florence. I did´t dare inquire who Cézanne was, lest he´d think I was an ass. Moreover, he said, more books of the same series would be published on Futurist painters and sculptors. He seemed to be quite informed about everything, and I had heard him say he was a friend of Ardengo Soffici´s, who advised him on the selection of art and literature books coming from France. However, he himself gave me the impression of being a man well versed in artistic matters.

Often, I had dinner at the Caffé delle Giubbe with Codegoni, when my day´s work had ended. I enjoyed its atmosphere and the quaint charm lent by the waiters´s old–fashioned attire: short breeches, white socks and buckle shoes. After our meal, I sometimes stopped by a large café, on the Piazza San Gallo, where a rather small group of students and Argentine artists working in Florence gathered around Dresco. Their meetings lasted past midnight: Lamanna, Donis, Curatella, Amadeo and González Roberts were some of the regular members; the names of the others I cannot recall. One night I referred to the «Lacerba» magazine in order to support a certain argument, yet as no one knew of it, I kept quiet.

On the grapevine I heard that the International Academy was in Lungo il Mugnone. A nude model session was held there every morning, from eight to half past twelve. It was inexpensive, the admission was free, and if one so desired, two professors, one academic, the other «modern», corrected the

work twice in the week. I enrolled in the class taught by Augusto Giacometti. Sturdy, with enormous feet and hands, his mouth was shaped like a crescent. He had a wide and good–natured face, tapered–off by a pointy red beard, and tiny eyes. He came in on Tuesdays and Fridays, and he corrected my work right away. One day, as I stood next to my easel, he asked me point–blank why I didn´t use a spatula. My reply was flippant: «Because I don´t like them. The only frescoes I like are those made by masters who do not resort to texture and yet produce quality–work». «Bravo!» he answered, while disconcertedly stroking his chin.

I understood my reaction had been out of line. The truth is that I did not expect his question nor knew the language well enough to use it with more subtlety. At any rate, I regretted having been so harsh with such a pleasant and good man. However, I disliked him as a teacher, for all students painted uniformly, using only spatulas and shrill colors.

Though I felt reluctant to follow his indications, I didn´t want to give up this real bargain that working on nudes meant, practically at no cost. I thus decided, since both Giacometti and the students always arrived late, to reach an understanding with the only two students who, just like myself, arrived at 8 in the morning. One was Russian and the other Japanese, and barely spoke Italian. With our limited vocabulary and through signs, we agreed to work together from 8 to 10 in the morning, time at which the first students turned up. For a small amount of money, a model would show us a new pose every morning, different from the one studied every week in class. Imperceptibly, fall settled. It was cold, and still somewhat dark when we reached the Lungo il Mugnone studio, but nothing discouraged us.

Domingo Candia, an artist originally from Rosario [8], had his studio in the other wing of the same building. His teacher was the mediocre painter Giovanni Costetti, who worked in the studio facing his. I visited Candia´s studio only once, often meeting him quite by chance in Florence, together with his brother. Our friendship developed much later, in Buenos Aires, upon his first return to the country.

Augusto Giacometti, an artist especially versed in decorative arts, occupied a studio on 6 Via degli Artisti. We all used the same entrance, a large iron door, and the concierge we had in common, a woman named Beppa, had a splendid collection of works given to her by artists. Almost immediately, to the left, stood my studio, totally isolated and surrounded by a garden. To the right, in a vast two–storied building –each floor had a large corridor that allowed access to the studios– stood the one belonging to a Swiss painter. Being neighbors, we could not help but meet, and soon grew to like each other.

Giacometti was twice as old as me, and he was a connoisseur of primitive art. We often chatted, for I was attracted to his great his kindness. In spite of his age, deep down he was an innocent child, easily tricked. However,

8 City in the Province of Santa Fe.

he was careful in choosing his acquaintances. At first, I believed that if he so generously offered me his friendship, it was because he appreciated youthful company. Once, I invited him to join all the young painters for a bite at the «trattoria» on the corner of Via degli Artisti and Masacchio, instead of going to Paoli´s. He replied the restaurant was too close by, and that living in such a confined space, he needed to exercise his legs. «Jogging whets my appetite», he said smiling, and added: «and on the way back it helps me digest».He draped his cloak around his body and nearing his mouth to my ear as if to arouse my gastric juices, he opened up his heart: «At Paoli´s one can eat great «faggioli»: they´re delicious». He must have been persuasive, for at times I ended up imitating him.

All in all, I must have visited Quirós five times, to paint in his park. Among other reasons, I stopped going for it was a long way to Ponte a Mensola. The second time we met I brought him, upon request, a few sketches of Florence. He studied them attentively, only to say: «You are wasting your time in this city; you must leave for Paris immediately».

His advice was of no avail, for Florence filled me with such enthusiasm, that his words lost all meaning. I respected him, and this admiration remained unchanged over the years. I believe he felt the same way, in spite of our diametrically opposed temperaments and our very different conceptions of art. Though he was already a consummate painter when I first met him, and despite the fact that he greatly intimidated me in the beginning, my anxiety dwindled as soon as I discovered the man beneath it all.

That day, Quirós showed me work he had accomplished in the summer, and we held our first –and last– discussion on art. The argument began when he handed me a sketch he intended to use as the basis for a large historical painting. I objected that his approach contradicted that of the preparatory works I studied and copied with so much care in the Hall of Prints. Quirós was taken aback: I still recall the startled look in his eyes. «I don´t understand why I don´t ask you to leave», he mumbled, referring to my impudence.

In Florence his arrogant silhouette was familiar. They called him «il bel pittore», the handsome painter. On one occasion, as I was walking along Via Calzaioli towards Piazza della Signoria, I witnessed the most incredible sight: a gentleman, canvas in hand (or rather, his drape, for it measured no less than two meters long by two meters wide), stood holding a palette and brushes. A curious crowd of all ages recoiled whenever the painter stepped back to contemplate his work from a distance, only to draw closer like a tide when he neared his canvas, paintbrush extended like a foil. It was Quirós, abandoning himself to his task, and probably unaware of the commotion he was causing.

De la Cárcova did not take long to reply. His letter arrived one morning, dry and peremptory: I had to leave for Paris and place myself under his orders. The unexpected request upset my day. I wrote back at once, more

explicitly, if that had been possible, than the last time. In my letter I explained I was in the hands of a skilled specialist who possibly saw the need of another operation. Furthermore, and among other things, I told him I was working well and a great deal, and that Florence quite suited me.

I wrote my mother a letter every week, not failing her once in the eleven years my absence lasted. Perhaps I should say I wrote to her a little bit every day, the way one keeps a diary, telling her all I had seen, perceived, suffered or enjoyed. Knowing she understood how much I loved Florence, a safer city in a mother´s eyes than Paris, so full of perilous temptations, I justified my insubordination in advance. Only after getting everything off my chest did my peace of mind return, and I headed towards the post office.

At the hall of Prints, I began by copying Bassano: a head belonging to his «Family Portrait», a few hands and fragments of fabric. I believed it useless to copy the entire painting, the way other students did, for I had neither time nor patience to reproduce a painting for months on end. Besides, I believed that copying part of it –without its patina– led to the same result. In this case, my intention was to study the Venetians´ technique.

Since Bassano had been Tiziano´s disciple, and Tiziano, Giorgione´s, I thought their most skilled followers would reveal their technique. A great artist is rarely methodical while executing his work, and it this ineffable quality that copiers have to face. Disciples, on the other hand, adjust themselves to this method. This explains the large production achieved by painters living from their art, for they knew how to begin a painting and when to finish it. If the disciple was talented, and the case is not rare, his painting revealed his talent, and if he wasn´t, his art always possessed the dignity or the poise of the well–accomplished work. All museums in Europe are full of this type of painting, some of them admirable, achieved at times by unknown authors who follow either their masters or their school.

I think a sixth sense guided and taught me these things, for I had no teacher. This holds true in my life as well: my intuition never led me astray.

I hardly rested, but did not mind because the work was varied. Each activity provided a respite from the previous one, and I only wished to learn other useful things in order to support myself one day without having to give up the arts: too often had I seen the squalor in which many painters lived, limiting their actions to easel painting. As far as my profession was concerned, there was no duty I disdained, as long as it would allow me to earn my living. I believed and still do that the poetry the artist carries within can express itself regardless of whether he decorates a wall, a floor or builds a chimney. Only renowned artists sold their paintings, and I wondered if someday I would make a name for myself.

Finding myself at the Baptistery one morning, where Ghiberti´s famous Door of Paradise can be seen, I noticed an artisan restoring the mosaics that

decorated the floor. This prompted me to ask him whether he had a studio, for there was something I had in mind, but he replied he was following orders and gave me the address of the workshop that had engaged him.

I went to see the owner who also happened to be a master craftsman, and offered him part of my afternoons for any kind of work that had to be done in his studio. In return, they would reveal the secrets of their trade. The man looked at me suspiciously, but after telling him I was a student interested in learning about mosaics –not in schools, I emphasized, where this technique was poorly taught, but with artisans who transmitted this tradition from father to son– he immediately understood and accepted my proposal. I went to his workshop every day from 1.30 to 4.30 in the afternoon, from mid–October to the first days of November. I learned so much, that I adopted the system, and eventually presented myself to the painter and decorator Galileo Chini, a rather mediocre artist, but quite knowledgeable about the fresco technique, who also accepted my services.

Exchanging time for instruction, in the course of the months I learned the ropes of many trades: frescoes, mosaics, and stained glass, as well as the rudiments of their technique and manufacture. I reflected upon the fact that I would have had to attend a technical school for a number of years in order to learn as much as I had in such a short time.

My new arguments did not convince my patron, Ernesto de la Cárcova. In a brief letter, this time not signed by him but by his secretary, I was told to head immediately towards the French capital, within the stipulated period. This lack of understanding on the part of the bureaucracy filled me rage. I replied at once that I felt quite comfortable in Florence, and that consequently I would not be traveling to Paris. That night, considering my rash behavior, I weighed the gravity of the situation, and realized it could cost me the grant. Once it expired, would they stop sending me money? Though my anxiety had worn me out, I was unable to fall asleep. I thought about Rodolfo Serrat, and his almost fatherly love, and told myself my attitude was bound to upset him. To make matters worse, he was the only person who could intercede, if that proved to be necessary. I jumped out of bed and wrote him a long letter, telling him all that had taken place, without concealing any detail of my violent reaction and apologizing for it. I also told him about the intensity of my work in Florence, my apprehension with regard to my eyes, and the inspector´s lack of interest in the face of it all. At the time, Sarrat was a Secretary of State and the grants depended on his department. I posted my letter the following day, and resigned myself to waiting, knowing that it would not reach La Plata before twenty–five days.

No one knew about my worries in the long days that followed. Fortunately for me, I had so much work that it required my constant attention,

preventing me from drifting towards my personal problems. I have always disliked paying attention to my troubles, and never have I deemed it necessary to share them.

I usually got together with the other grant holders at the «trattoria», where trivial conversations were held in between bites. Sporadically, I saw them at the Café on the Piazza della Libertà, and listened to them speak with complacency about their work. One had just created a group sculpture, the other boasted about having painted three pictures in a month. «And you, Pettoruti, what is it you do?» one of the students once asked, provocatively. Shrugging, I replied I had done nothing, and as he insisted, I quietly observed, «Well, what can I say? I visit museums, churches, libraries; I go to galleries, bookstores; I observe paintings, illustrations; I talk to people. This is how I spend my life, and in the mornings, I try to achieve something, but it takes a lot of work».

Actually, I didn´t want to hear any confidences, and wasn´t keen on establishing relationships that would make me lose my precious time, for one always has to devote some attention to them. I was convinced that an artist, in order to improve himself, has to tackle it all, without limiting himself to what he likes best, and I had arrived to Florence, alas, knowing practically nothing.

One day Giacometti came to my studio announcing that he would teach a night class after dinner on ornamental composition at the academy in Lungo il Mugnone, based on the method introduced by the Frenchman Gasset. I signed up and told Curatella and Lamanna, who did the same. The course began with approximately thirty students, who jotted down all Giacometti wrote on the blackboard. After our second or third class he asked us to solve certain problems at home, yet after he had corrected the tasks, many students quitted, including Curatella and Lamanna. Soon, there remained only five or six left. Almost at the end of the month, Curatella announced the course had finished. It had lasted exactly four weeks, and I had attended eight classes, finding them to be of great help in my composition studies, which I undertook later on my own.

It is through the observation of nature, its plants, its animals, and the infinite prodigies it encloses –skies laden with oddly shaped clouds, powerful and alive– that one learns composition. One must always keep, however, a spiritual and physical discipline. Harmony is present in all our eyes can behold; it is a question of discovering it, analyzing it with all of our determination, for without study there is no practice, and without practice beauty cannot be interpreted, no matter how deeply we experience it.

I soon became friendly with Ferrante Gonnelli, an intelligent, enthusiastic and good man. He wished to visit my studio, something that encouraged me deeply, for he had taste and great intuition. It was through him and the

third copy of the Lacerba magazine bought in his bookstore, that I was introduced to this particular art called «Futurism». The copy included a drawing by Boccioni and represented a cyclist. I realized this novel and dynamic way of understanding form did not leave me indifferent.

Some time later, I learned from Gonnelli that the Futurists were holding a show at his gallery, funded by the «Lacerba» magazine, and of course, I decided to go. Concurrently, «La Voce», an important Florentine literary magazine, published a monograph on Cézanne, and I felt compelled to buy it. The monograph did not include any text, only several black and white illustrations. Seen on paper, Cézanne´s paintings transmitted solidity, ampleness: in effect, the forms expanded, but at the same time the works seemed incomplete, as if unfinished. Tradition was not overlooked, however, and I found his paintings to be superior to those of Van Gogh and Gauguin, who had definitely left convention behind.

These impressions did not vary substantially when I finally found myself face to face with the work of these two painters, but they did in Cézanne´s case. I realized his first paintings were perfectly finished, and they opened up my understanding of modern works. So much so, that my incipient monograph collection grew, and Manet, Monet, Renoir, Douanier Rousseau and other painters were readily incorporated.

Fall had drawn on and Quirós was leaving Florence to establish himself in Majorca. He had bought an abandoned church and he adapted it to his needs: he assured me it was paradise. Before his departure, he organized a farewell party for his friends at his Ponte a Mensola villa. It was a splendid day and the table had been set in the open air. All the guests were Argentine, yet I only knew Amadeo. The latter introduced me, among other people, to the sculptor Luis Falcini, a petulant youth if I ever saw one. He inquired what I was doing in Florence and invited me to his Porta Romana studio.

The day we met, I noticed he was working on a sculpture, but cannot recollect which. However, I do remember he showed me some folders packed with drawings and said: «This is for you to see how they study in Paris. The drawings in this folder took me one minute to achieve, those in that one over there, two and those in the third folder, a quarter of an hour. Believe me: it´s great exercise». I then showed him some sketches I had made in La Plata based on Brancusi´s «The Skinned Man». Instead of only working with pencil, something Falcini had done and which conveyed a certain monotony, I had also used charcoal, as well as a pen and brush. I did not see my interlocutor again for another ten years.

One afternoon, before the grant expired, I found a telegram upon my arrival home. It came from Serrat and read: «Do not leave Florence. Take care of your eyes. Work if you can. Don´t worry about your grant». As can be imagined, my satisfaction and relief were indescribable.