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## “...irresistibly attracted to certain complications”: queering desire and painting in Italian Magic Realism

ABSTRACT: This paper aims at a queer theoretical reading of what the painter Filippo de Pisis called “irresistible complications”, that is subtle deconstruction of heteronormative narratives, in Magic Realism paintings of the 1920s in Italy. Exemplified by rare emergences of the sociological reception of painted subjects concerning desire, the discussion takes into account two male painters, Felice Casorati and Ubaldo Oppi. Their works dedicated to disquieting female, same-sex affection (the typical subject of *Le amiche*) are analyzed through the lens of queer theory. René Girard’s triangular desire allows to articulate the thematic presence of the male gaze in this representation of sapphism.

KEYWORDS: art history, queer, Magic Realism, Sapphism, triangular desire.

1. In 1923, the painter Filippo de Pisis contributed an article to *Rassegna di studi sessuali*, the only Italian journal at the time that dealt with sexology in a “modern” or up-to-date way (and which was soon to be obstructed by the Fascist regime<sup>1</sup>). The artist lamented the clichés so often found in the construction of psychology in Italian novels, stories, plays, and popular literary taste. Instead, he argued,

True artists are irresistibly attracted to certain complications. In life (to speak of love, which so travails and gladdens the wretched mortal) there is not only the love, or the instinct of desire, of the male for the female, there is not only the drama of adultery, the trio ‘he, she, the other’ seasoned in all sauces and which some, posing as a ‘broad spirit’ might say is ‘the only thing that really interests’<sup>2</sup> (DE PISIS 1923: 336).

<sup>1</sup> The journal has been the subject of the MA thesis at the University of Pisa MASI 2015. In particular, see pp. 180-182.

<sup>2</sup> “I veri artisti sono attratti irresistibilmente da certe complicazioni. Nella vita (per parlare dell’amore, che tanto travaglia e letifica il misero mortale) non c’è solo l’amore, o l’istinto di desiderio, del maschio per la femmina, non c’è solo il dramma dell’adulterio, il terzetto «lui, lei e l’altro» condito in tutte le salse e che alcuno, atteggiandosi a «largo spirito» potrebbe dire «l’unica cosa che davvero interessi».” Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Italian sources are mine.

De Pisis then proposed a counter-example of psychological subtlety and refinement, namely the Socratic love between Elder Lama and Kim in Rudyard Kipling's famous 1901 novel. Not just as an attraction between two male characters, but above all one expressed with narrative strategies, such as a "subtle interweaving of reticence" and "few but revealing hints" (DE PISIS 1923: 337-338)<sup>3</sup> in order to bypass standard heteronormative binarism – in fact, as tools of queer deconstruction.

Of course, the term queer is anachronistic, and its present use is understood in a theoretical frame. In synthesis, it stands here for the "deconstruction of identity categories". Indeed, categories of heteronormativity are the object of de Pisis' polemic in 1923, and the subject of this paper, which is devoted to painting of the same time of his article for *Rassegna di studi sessuali*. Further in the same text, the painter brought up some positive examples from the visual arts, "from Greek statues to the Renaissance artworks, from Botticelli's paintings to Michelangelo's frescoes and sculptures, it is always present a mordant, tender psychological complication".<sup>4</sup>

Referring to the most advanced subjects discussed in the *Rassegna* (for example, the first updates in Italy on the studies of Magnus Hirschfeld on homosexuality, or the "intermedial sexual forms"), de Pisis encouraged the import of scientific knowledge in contemporary art, in order to create "an art of transition" "actually aware of our tormented period". "Suffice it to say, to conclude, that the facts that refer to the phenomenon we generically call sexual, of a purely psychic order, have and should raise a lively interest outside the specialist field. Those facts should not be considered from a rigidly scientific point of view, they require not only the study of the physician and the psychiatrist, but also the philosopher, the critic, the aestheticist, if they really want to make a work of profound and certain investigation" (DE PISIS 1923: 341).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "[...] intreccio sottile di reticenze [...] Kipling si mostra nell'intessere la sottile trama psicologia, artista finissimo, gli accenni sono pochi ma rivelatori."

<sup>4</sup> "[...] dalle statue greche alle opere della Rinascenza, dalle tavole del Botticelli agli affreschi e alle statue di Michelangelo, sia sempre presente una mordente e tenera complicazione psicologica [...]".

<sup>5</sup> "Ci basti dire, per concludere, che i fatti riferentisi al fenomeno che chiameremo genericamente sessuale, fatti anche di ordine puramente psichico, ànno e dovrebbero destare un vivo interesse anche fuori del campo degli specialisti. Tali fatti non si devono considerare solo dal punto di vista rigidamente scientifico, ma anche del filosofo, del critico, dell'esteta, se egli vuole davvero fare opera di profonda e sicura indagine".

The attempt to read the visual arts through this key (that is, the construction of desire) guides the selection of case studies for the following analysis. I aim at an examination of the “irresistible complications” that in the 1920s characterized a certain area of Italian painting, now known as “Magic Realism”, and the practice of artists like Felice Casorati and Ubaldo Oppi. The two were the protagonists of the 14<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale in 1924, contributing to establish a “neo-classical” taste, and becoming internationally known as Italian Magic Realists. On the other hand, the two artists soon encountered resistance in the reception of their paintings, and in 1926 two scandals arose, one concerning Casorati’s treatment of the female nude and the other Oppi’s use of photographic sources. The analysis of their work here attempts at a clearer definition of the sexual ambiguity often acknowledged as a major feature of the figurative culture of Magic Realism. The classic literature on the subject had maintained a rather vague approach, that is elusive as it came to address sexuality. For instance, a commentary by Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco appears to intentionally discourage a structural understanding of such ambiguity: “the subtle eros that permeates the paintings of this period is once again something indefinable. I think of the languid knot that binds Oppi’s female friends; of the complicit and discordant air that binds, in [Carlo] Levi’s painting, brother and sister; of [Mario] Tozzi’s attitude as he spies through the keyhole on his turgid women at the toilet...”<sup>6</sup>.

However, a framework can be articulated in order to account for the “indefinable” and investigate how desire works within painting. The following analysis is based on historical and social documents of gender and sexual constructs, and explores theoretical categories of queer analysis concerning desire and discourses about gender and sexuality. Such framework is tested on a typical subject for paintings of the time, *Le amiche* (“Friends”), in order to open a broader discussion of how lesbian affection can be framed within a (painter’s) male, heterosexual perspective, and yet devoted to what can be defined, following de Pisis’s proposal, a queer sensibility to “complication”.

2. An example of “complication” might have been found in *Conversazione platonica* (“Platonic Conversation”) painted in late 1925 by the Turin-based

<sup>6</sup> FAGIOLO DELL’ARCO 1988: 32.

artist Felice Casorati (figure 1). Let it be said incidentally, the painting may have appealed to de Pisis as it was an overt tribute to a shared master such as Edouard Manet – the composition of the reclining nude and its counterpart echoing the famous *Olympia* (1865)<sup>7</sup>. When it was exhibited at the first Milan exhibition of the Novecento Italiano, which was inaugurated by Benito Mussolini in February 1926, this artwork aroused a quite exceptional debate extended outside the art world. It thus offers a rare case of surfacing of a sociological reception, so to speak, of a nude painting and the theme of desire<sup>8</sup>.



FIGURA 1. Felice Casorati, *Conversazione platonica*, 1925, oil on board, 78×100 cm, private collection. [browse higher resolution b/w version at [Fondazione Ragghianti](#)]

The issue was raised by Daria Banfi Malaguzzi Valeri in the pages of the Milanese newspaper *L’Ambrosiano*; and a series of articles followed for about a month by some ordinary readers and cultural personalities. Born to a noble family that traced back to Ludovico Ariosto’s mother, Daria Malaguzzi Valeri was a writer and literary critic, wife to the philosopher Antonio Banfi, who had signed the Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals written by Benedetto Croce in 1925. At the time, she often contributed to the critique of Post-War costumes from a sort of anti-misogynist moralism, that is, a support of women’s role in society based on the need for

<sup>7</sup> See LAMBERTI, FOSSATI 1985: 106-107; FERGONZI 2013.

<sup>8</sup> “Casorati is an artist who has, at his best, the sensibility of our time and his paintings are syntheses that hit and invite to the analysis, because when a lifestyle emerges with such precision in an artwork, we sense that it is mature to offer to our investigation the most interesting consequences” (BANFI MALAGUZZI VALERI 1926a).

equal dignity with men.<sup>9</sup> According to her judgment, Casorati’s painting was symptomatic of the current idea of femininity:

The woman, as the fashion of today wants her to be, is continually in a state of semi-nudity and thus can live semi-disguised with a freedom she has never had. The man, particularly the young man, stands by her with quiet indifference and comes out of his planetary serenity only in time and place, showing either an admirable self-control or a lukewarmness that is perplexing. (BANFI MALAGUZZI VALERI 1926A)<sup>10</sup>

On the basis of the supposed collective reaction to the depicted situation, she lamented the superficial freedom of the female modern costumes and their “inferior sexuality”, behind the hypocritical platonism of the scene:

From the affirmed platonism this couple, that is poised on an absurd attempt, is ready to plummet into the most demeaning materiality: we all know it. (*Ibid.*)<sup>11</sup>

In her final reply to the objections of the other debaters, one of whom he questioned the relevance of such reflection in the new Fascist era of rigor and morality, she pointed out that:

[...] the very Executive these days has felt the need to protect the patriarchal family, the only one that can give the Fatherland strong children; now I ask: do we see at the head of the patriarchal family the little woman with her eyes to the black smoke, and her knees to the open air? (BANFI MALAGUZZI VALERI 1926B)<sup>12</sup>

The sexualized relationship of the two protagonists of the painting caused dissatisfaction on the opposite side of the debate too. The novelist Guido da Verona, already known as a retrograde sexist at the time, turned to the pensive male character and lamented his scarce virility and inaction. His comments are interesting as they call in other cultural references

<sup>9</sup> Her critique was collected in her 1928 book on “contemporary femininity” (BANFI MALAGUZZI VALERI 1928) and has been shortly discussed in DE GRAZIA 1993: 252-253 and BEN-GHIAT 2001: 104-105 (where Banfi Malaguzzi Valeri is mentioned as a “Bolognese writer”).

<sup>10</sup> “La donna, così come la vuol la moda d’oggi è continuamente in condizione di semi-nudità e così semisvestita può vivere con una libertà che non ha avuto mai. L’uomo, particolarmente l’uomo giovane, le sta vicino con tranquilla indifferenza ed esce dalla sua planetaria sensibilità solo a tempo e luogo, dimostrando un controllo di sé stesso ammirabile oppure una tiepidezza che lascia perplessi”.

<sup>11</sup> “Dall’affermata platonicità questa coppia che sta in bilico su di un tentativo assurdo è pronta a precipitar nella più avvilente materialità: lo sappiamo tutti”.

<sup>12</sup> “[...] proprio il Governo in questi giorni ha sentito la necessità di proteggere la famiglia patriarcale, la sola che possa dare alla Patria i forti figli; ora io chiedo: vediamo noi a capo della famiglia patriarcale la donnina con gli occhi al nero fumo, e le ginocchia all’aria aperta?”.

behind such a representation of masculinity apparently deprived of heterosexual desire: the hatted man could be a frigid reader of modern literature (“Novecentista”) or a homosexual inspired by Nietzsche.

It may also be that he read some novel by a Novecentist author instead, and this dissuaded him once and for all from woman, from the boredom of possessing her, and from everything concerning his love [...] a Nietzschean superman, passed beyond good and evil, - meaning by superman those who know how to be a woman as well if necessary. (DA VERONA 1926)<sup>13</sup>

Probably worried by such a broad reaction to his painting, and its immediate political or cultural consequences, Casorati tried to delegitimize any content reading of his work. Interviewed few months later, he provided some atelier anecdotes on the origin of the painting pushing to a purely formalist interpretation:

Meaning? But there is no meaning. Things went like this. I had a beautiful model, and I used to study her for her beauty and for certain purplish tones in her flesh, which was a wonderful and unusual thing. One day a friend [the architect Alberto Sartoris, ed] came in in that dress and sheath and approached the woman. I am not sure what emotion I felt, but I saw the picture, the picture to be painted and not interpreted. (Felice Casorati quoted in BERNARDELLI 1926)<sup>14</sup>

Even in 1929, when the polemics had ceased, he challenged unfair critical overinterpretation:

I don't know if [the man in the painting] looks at the woman. In that case he would be an indiscretion. But ancient examples would speak in my favor. Some said that gentleman is a sadist, others an impotent. Critics have so much imagination.... Take your pick. (Felice Casorati quoted in BERNARDI 1929)<sup>15</sup>

3. Obviously Casorati was true and right to highlight the fictionality of his painting in respect to any political or moral comment on Italian current,

<sup>13</sup> “Può anche darsi ch’egli abbia letto invece qualche romanzo d’autore Novecentista, e ciò lo abbia disincantato una volta per sempre della donna, della noia di possederla, e di tutto quanto concerne il suo amore [...] un super’uomo di Nietzsche, passato al di là dal bene e dal male - intendendo per superuomo quegli che sa essere all’occorrenza anche donna”.

<sup>14</sup> “significato? Ma non v’è alcun significato. La cosa è andata così. Io avevo una splendida modella, e la studiavo per la sua bellezza e per certi toni violacei delle carni, che erano cosa mirabile e inconsueta. Un giorno entrò un amico con quell’abito e quel tubino, e s’accostò alla donna. Io non so bene che emozione provai, ma vidi il quadro, il quadro da dipingere e non da interpretare”.

<sup>15</sup> “io non so se guardi la donna. In questo caso sarebbe un indiscreto. Ma gli esempi antichi parlerebbero in mio favore. Chi ha detto che quel signore è un sadico, chi un impotente. I critici hanno tanta fantasia... Scelga lei”.

actual society. But the question can be turned to the opposite: it was precisely the formal strategy of such paintings to trigger the beholders’ reaction and to actively cause possible readings in a sense of deviated representation – or “irresistible complications”. Casorati’s studio practices can be analyzed in order to highlight such sophisticated, intentional and effective strategy. For example, the drawing studies for the figures of *Conversazione platonica* suggest that female and male models did not pose together, and the insertion of the latter reportedly occurred at a later stage<sup>16</sup>. “Platonic” somehow defines both the mysterious, non-sensual relationship represented as subject matter, and the operative primacy of the author’s mind that constructed and staged the scene, over his real subjects. Other compositional sketches also indicate a former hypothesis for the title, *Disputa sull’amore* (“Dispute over love”), which appears philosophically ambitious rather than merely formal.

In other paintings from the following years, Casorati further developed the theme of desire of *Conversazione platonica*, and manipulated it as a pictorial function. This is highlighted by the sequence of other two paintings in which the dual and heteronormative structure was rearranged. Painted between the late 1928 and 1929, *Susanna* was titled after the famous biblical episode of Susanna and the Elders (figure 2<sup>17</sup>). What had previously been a verbal and acoustic function in the “conversation” is here transformed into a field of vision and a scopic determination of desire. However, Casorati replaced the male figure with a fully dressed mannequin, who turns to “look” at the female model. The eroticism between the two figures was then atrophied, “paralyzed”<sup>18</sup>; or rather it was revealed as an artificial construct itself at the same time as it was activated in the painting. The painter returned to the scene of the crime, and *Susanna* can be seen as a response to the debate surrounding him two years earlier. However, to theoretically frame Casorati’s strategy, it is possible to refer to the concept of “male gaze”

<sup>16</sup> Two studies of the single figures are published in BERTOLINO, POLI 1994: 275. The woman is studied in a full figure nude immersed in soft light, recently appeared on the private market. The drawing (43×63 cm) shows Casorati’s typical technique of dry oil on paper (and not “graphite” as indicated in the caption). The man instead is studied only in one quick sketch in ink.

<sup>17</sup> See *Ibid.*: 305-306, where Giorgina Bertolino defined it as a “variant on the theme of *Conversazione platonica*”.

<sup>18</sup> To paraphrase Emily Braun’s observation on compared strategies in German, Italian and American Magic Realism: “A sense of paralysis haunts the mannequin-like heterosexual couples of Anton Raderscheidt, while in the ostensibly erotic scenes by Donghi, Felice Casorati, and Cagnaccio di San Pietro, the feigned sobriety of depiction simultaneously masks and insinuates desire – or the fear of it” (BRAUN 2018: 75).

notoriously formulated by Laura Mulvey in respect to the cinematographic visual treatment of the woman: her figure functions both as “erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (MULVEY 1975: 12). In respect to Casorati, Paolo Fossati has addressed a similar shifting function when he discussed *Conversazione platonica* under the category of “self-portrait”<sup>19</sup>. Adding on such observations, it may be suggested that the mannequins work as a “drag” strategy, both in a literal and theoretical sense. Casorati literally dresses up the inanimate object “as a (desiring) male observer/painter”. The critical potential of drag as a marker of the artificiality of identity categories deconstructs the heteronormative binarism of desire and overturns the subject-object relationship in respect to the female model.<sup>20</sup>



FIGURE 2. Felice Casorati, *Susanna*, 1929, oil on canvas, 123×98 cm, Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Rome. [browse at <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/susanna/dAHaVswfZHQZSA>]

The large 1929 painting that concludes this virtual series, *La lezione* (“The Lesson”)<sup>21</sup> adds a fundamental element to the deconstructive analysis of heteronormative desiring male gazes. This time, Casorati positioned

<sup>19</sup> “Casorati need not be directly present for the work to be about himself” (FOSSATI 1998: 26).

<sup>20</sup> Casorati’s “drag” operation might be accounted among other painting strategies (for example, in Rembrandt’s *Bathsheba at Her Bath*) that James D. Bloom theorized as a “post-Mulvey understanding of male gazing [...] as a cognitively demanding, conceptually sophisticated intellectual practice” (BLOOM 2017: 26).

<sup>21</sup> See *Ibid.*: 304-305.



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the clothed mannequin not only unusually standing in front of the female model, but also in front of the canvas with a palette in “his” hand (figure 3). The identification of the male pole of the platonic-desiring dual structure with the painter himself is then evident, and is also supported by a few autobiographical hints.<sup>22</sup> And yet this painting seems to overturn the vectorial axes of the relationship towards the female, who turns from looked-at object to looking subject, from model to painter, from pupil to teacher of a disquieting, magical “queer lesson”. However, in respect to *Conversazione platonica* and *Susanna*, this further deconstruction ultimately addresses a third implicit pole of the desiring function in painting, that is the painter and beholder, which in *La lezione* is represented as within the composition.



FIGURE 3. Felice Casorati, *La lezione*, 1929 (destroyed; see BERTOLINO, POLI 1994).

Casorati pointed to artificiality, and various themes of modern painting as a self-referential operation (which came from the generational model of de Chirico’s *Pittura Metafisica*, to put it shortly), in a way that seems to exclude any direct or “natural” content reading of his works. He expressed this opinion quite clearly in a 1928 article, with which he participated in a debate on the “crisis of figurative arts” that took place on the Turinese

<sup>22</sup> For example, the painting on the easel probably alludes to *Mozart*, a large oil painting from 1928 that was sent to the XVI Venice biennale. Interestingly, the view from the open window corresponds quite exactly to the skyline that was visible from Daphne Maugham’s studio. Maugham had been attending Casorati’s school since 1926 and by the late 1920s they were in a romantic relationship.

newspaper *La Stampa*. Some critics (Marziano Bernardi, Roberto Papini) deplored the current detachment of art from the public and from everyday life as an avant-garde and snobbish claim to isolation<sup>23</sup>. This position was in fact represented by Casorati:

it doesn't seem right to me [...] to think about art with the same logic that is needed for the other things of life. It is not possible to use the same words, draw the same inferences and make comparisons, balances, predictions, that are made when one speaks about trade, professions, industry, politics. *It is not possible to speak about the social function*, about supply and demand, about production and purchase, of furnishers and clients, it is not possible to establish fixed rules nor to speak about personal or class interests. *Art is an exception in every sense of the word; and, as an exception, it escapes any rule, any statistic, any law*. If the correct and logical reasonings, that are made for any other manifestations of the social life, are to be extended to art, then the pessimism of today [for the loss of the social function of art] seems unjustified to me [...]. (CASORATI 1928, emphasis added)<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, careful insertions of details from contemporary daily life are intentionally evident in all the three paintings taken into consideration: the fashionable haircut of the female models; the bowler hat of the looking man and the clothes dressed by the mannequins; the front pages of newspapers, which were indeed faithfully copied from actual issues published in late 1928 and early 1929<sup>25</sup>; finally, a subtle anti-idealization of the female bodies<sup>26</sup>. In other words, Casorati intentionally avoided presenting

<sup>23</sup> The debate occurred on the Turinese newspaper *La Stampa*, and involved other personalities beside Bernardi (who started publishing on February 9, and concluded the debate on April 10) and Papini (February 14, March 6), namely sculptors Michele Guerrisi (February 29) and Leonardo Bistolfi, architect Giuseppe Pagano, and painter Luigi Onetti (all on March 22). The physiognomy of the debate echoed, with a different problem at stake, the inquiry about the definition of the fascist art, which took place on the journal *Critica fascista* between 1926 and 1927.

<sup>24</sup> “Non mi sembra giusto, amici, ragionare delle cose d'arte con la stessa logica che serve per le altre cose della vita. Non si possono adoperare le stesse parole, trarre le medesime deduzioni e fare i raffronti, i bilanci, i pronostici che si fanno quando si parla di commercio, di professioni, di industria, di politica. Non si può parlare di funzione sociale, di offerta e di domanda, di produzione ed acquisto, di fornitori e di clientela, non si possono stabilire leggi fisse e non si deve parlare di interessi personali o di classe. L'arte è eccezione in tutto il senso della parola e, come eccezione, sfugge a qualsiasi regola, a qualsiasi statistica, a qualsiasi legge. Se si dovessero davvero estendere alle cose d'arte i giusti e logici ragionamenti che si fanno per tutte le altre manifestazioni della vita sociale, allora non mi sembra giustificato il pessimismo di oggi”.

<sup>25</sup> In *Susanna*, the newspaper under the chair corresponds to *Il Selvaggio* published on December 31st, 1928, with urban landscape on the front cover. In *La Lezione*, the February 29th issue of the same journal is recognizable by the cartographic plan of the invented “Strapaese” island.

<sup>26</sup> In many documented examples, photography was the means with which Casorati maintained a certain degree of realism and even a morbid detailing in the description of the female

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the scene as a reassuring and innocuous “elsewhere”, to charge it with the urgency of the present times. Scandalized reactions like the following (by another painter and engraver, Luigi Bartolini) can be explained precisely by this intentional tension:

A certain danger to morals could be seen by the Royal Police [...]. If there is anything in Casorati, if there is anything to be gleaned from his paintings and drawings, especially the recent ones, it is a love for the unplumed and the prepubescent, a love for little girls of fourteen, their lips already swollen with desire, but with eyes full of wonder; female blackbirds who have glimpsed the hunter among the bushes. [...] A Japanese drawing made by such an academic [...], that’s what Casorati is, and the subject is, invariably the ‘Vie Parisienne’. (BARTOLINI 1929)<sup>27</sup>



FIGURE 4. Covers and illustration from *La Vie Parisienne*, (from left to right, 1927, 1922, 1921; browse full issue on [Gallica.fr](https://gallica.bnf.fr)).

Although blatantly adverse to the painter, this critique is a useful trace of another theme offered to the social debate about contemporary paintings. The accuses of pedophilia may have generically referred to the appearance of young models in Casorati’s paintings and drawings, often portrayed in languid positions and seeming availability to the observer. The final reference though addresses the French weekly journal *La Vie Parisienne*, that was figures.

<sup>27</sup> “Un certo pericolo per la morale potrebbe vedercelo la Regia Questura [...] Certo che se in Casorati c’è qualche cosa, se vi traspare qualche cosa dai suoi quadri e disegni, specialmente i recenti, è l’amore per l’implume o l’impubere, l’amore per le bambine di quattordici anni con le labbra già gonfie di desiderio, ma con occhi stupiti, di merle che hanno scorto il cacciatore tra le fratte. [...] Un disegno giapponese tratto da un accademico [...], ecco cos’è il Casorati e il soggetto è, invariabilmente la «Vie Parisienne»”.

famous at the time for its equivocal, erotic imagery of women. In the 1920s, it was considered a pornographic journal, in which male fantasies constructed images of desiring women, actively lustful, and often ambiguously represented in sapphic attitudes (figure 4). This imagery was partly incarnated by the literary work of the French writer Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette published regularly from the beginning of the century. Obviously, again, Casorati would have denied any of such qualities in the representation of women in his paintings. However, again, Bartolini's reaction points to another "irresistible complication" present in Magic Realist paintings, that of the desire of women and between women.

4. A painting like *Le amiche* ("Friends"), also painted in 1928, may have been among those disturbing Bartolini. Representing two naked models in the act of reading together the same book, it stands out as a rare adoption in Casorati's oeuvre of the title, which was very common at the time. However, at least since 1922 Casorati had largely explored the dimension of the "gynoecium", in Maria Mimita Lamberti's expression,<sup>28</sup> when he grouped female models together in suspended or indefinite activity in the painter's studio. Male figures were significantly excluded from this dimension, but the presence of the painter's gaze was all the more highlighted by the atelier background and the usual stress on the artificiality of the creative process. This point is perfectly explained by the genesis of *Concerto* ("Concert"), exhibited at the 1924 Venice Biennial: the heirs of the model and painter herself, Cecilia Lavelli Gilardi, had recently documented how she (addressed to as Lia by the painter in his letters to her) posed for all the eight nudes in the painting, and she was photographed for the seated figure with the guitar.<sup>29</sup> The eventual feminine world was then produced by virtual multiplication, as such gatherings never occurred in the studio, where it was rare that more than one model posed at one time (as photographs document). In this sense it is particularly significant that a drawing that had been published under the title *Two Nudes* on closer inspection reveals that Casorati actually used a large mirror to multiply the model (figure 5).

As already said, the subject of "women friends" was very typical in the 1920s. By that time, its historical parable was already long, as its origin

<sup>28</sup> See LAMBERTI 1989.

<sup>29</sup> See LAMBERTI 2007.



DUE NUDI (1923)  
Coll. Casorati - Torino

FIGURE 5. Felice Casorati, *Nudo*, 1923, graphite on paper, size unknown (see CARLUCCIO 1964).

traditionally traced back to the fortune of “the bohemian world in the 19th century” in which, according to art historian Sigrun Paas, for the first time “the depiction of lesbian love became a motif of ‘real’ contemporary life” (HAMBURG 1986: 257). Italian art was no exception: a first spread of the subject, *Le amiche*, evidently responded to the impactful trend of international, *fin de siècle* symbolisms and secessionisms (Gustav Klimt’s homonymous painting exhibited at the Venice Biennial in 1910 appears to have been one of the most important prototypes). However, the theme enjoyed great fortune throughout the following decades, being included in different aesthetic regimes, stylistic orientations and formal predilections, and was then transformed in its internal values. Sapphism was declined – in a quick roundup – into a large spectrum of explicitness, ranging from a typology of modern, bourgeois portraiture of women gathered in cultural or social activities without men, to purely formal compositions deprived of any sensuality; from representations of affection that almost resembled family ties, to overtly erotic gestures like touching hands and embracing.

The relationship between such representations, mostly by male painters, and the real, extra-diegetical reality of lesbians or loving women is rather difficult to define. It is likely to be interpreted in a perspective of “fiction as a weapon”, as Lisa Faderman defined the popular narratives on

female same-sex affection in early 20th century, which in fact produced a form of control by the male, heteronormative narrative:

The ‘popularity’ of lesbianism increased during the 1920’s and 1930’s. [...] lesbianism was the new cosmopolitan chic, which women were not only anxious to experience but delighted to talk about. In the 1930’s it was associated with “the beauty of evil, the magic of the lower depths” (*The Secret Paris of the 30’s*). The fashionability and excitement of lesbianism together with its sinful connotations must have created a painful ambivalence in many women who chose to be lesbians during those decades. (FADERMAN 1981: 361)

Paintings devoted to *Le amiche* in the 1920s mostly avoided the typical narratives on lesbians as decadent immoral, evil vampires or “carnivorous plants”, often pursuing a corrupted substitution with masculine roles and qualities of power. Such features were still to be found in a bestseller novel like Victor Marguerite’s *La Garçonne* (“The Bachelor Girl”), that was timely translated into Italian in 1923.<sup>30</sup> Instead, as Paas put it, “the voyeurism of the [painters] artists left women their feminine qualities even in self-relationships, for it was precisely here in the two females act and its intimacy, which could actually be shielded from men’s eyes, that the ‘more attractive’ views lay” (HAMBURG 1981: 259). From a visual and formal point of view, a central device was the doubling of the female figure: “In painting, lesbian contact between women was portrayed as an inevitable extension of their narcissistic desires. Women were frequently depicted as if mirror-images of each other: identical faces, hair, clothes. They were usually shown as locked in a close embrace as in Fernand Khnopff’s *The Kiss* (1897), Edmond Aman-Jean’s *In The Theatre Box* (1898) and Pablo Picasso’s *The Friends* (1903)” (CREED 1995: 86).

The list may be extended to include Casorati’s already mentioned specular multiplications of female figures. However, the psychoanalytic reading of the narcissistic mirror image does not take into account the third pole of the painted desire structure, that is the (male) painter’s gaze and desire.

5. René Girard’s theory of triangular desire has proved to be a useful theoretical instrument in order to frame desire as a construct, which is both

<sup>30</sup> “In all these novels the lesbian is obsessed with a need to control a human life and lead it to destruction, a drive as irrational as that of the worst hell-engendered villains in eighteenth-century gothic novels” (FADERMAN 1981: 344). On the Italian fortune of Marguerite’s novel, see also BERTILOTTI 2019.

an aim of queer theory and of my present analysis dedicated to narrative of desire in painting. In synthesis, Girard argues that the desire that moves narrated action is always mimetic, and therefore it is modeled after a triangle rather than a vector: the subject of desire is actually moved towards their object by a “mediator”, a third character that can be external or internal, that is implicit or declared.<sup>31</sup> Coherently, it is possible to frame in this way some fictions of the twenties in which same-sex female desire is narrated from a male point of view, positioning the male gaze as the mediator. Pier Maria Rosso di San Secondo’s *La festa delle rose* (“The Roses Festival”) is a novel of this kind, written in 1921, which can be taken as the average treatment of the theme in Italian taste of the twenties, in theater, writing, and painting. Rosso di San Secondo was positively mentioned in Filippo de Pisis’ article on the “irresistible complications”, as an example of the Italian trend of subtle psychological description of the relationships between characters.

The apparent structure of Rosso di San Secondo’s 1921 novel is actually the trio “he, she and the other”, that is the brilliant and irresistible composer Quintilio Majani, his fiancée Lucilla, with whom he takes a trip to the Netherlands, and the new local maiden, Hedda, who becomes the man’s muse. She arouses Lucilla’s jealousy, so that Lucilla starts seducing Hedda only to have her ruined for revenge (confirming the model of the “lesbian as evil vampire” accounted for by Faderman in early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature). For many pages, the reader assists in the blossoming of love between the two women: they separate progressively from the male figure, spending time together, sharing intellectual connection through reading and visiting museums. A turning point occurs when a painting enters the seduction game. Walking through the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Lucilla and Hedda, who repeatedly call each other “friends”, are captured by a portrait of Helena Fourment by Peter Paul Rubens.<sup>32</sup> The text makes explicit the mediating role of the painting. First, Lucilla pushes towards an erotic reading of the painting: “she [the portrayed woman] smiles and tells you

<sup>31</sup> We shall speak of external mediation when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of possibilities of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers. We shall speak of internal mediation when this same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly (GIRARD 1965: 9).

<sup>32</sup> Peter Paul Rubens (and studio), *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1620-1630, oil on panel, 98×76 cm, in the collection of the Mauritshuis since 1822. See <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/251-portrait-of-a-young-woman/>.



that these are the signs of her spasms of voluptuousness: it seems that she has now salted her lips to regale the last kisses she has received. Hedda, look at her hands too!” (ROSSO DI SAN SECONDO 1921: 164). Hedda in turn completes the mediation by identifying her friend with the portrait, “running her eyes from the painting to her friend” (165). At that point Lucilla seizes the opportunity for physical contact: “Lucilla freed her arm and passed it around [Hedda’s] neck, tipping her head on her cheek, pressing her hand to her mouth and chin; while Helena, from the picture, continued to look at her, and seemed to still faint with love” (166).

Such mediation of sapphic love might also be interpreted as a *mise en abîme* that points to the presence of the male author. Helena Fourment’s erotic gaze is directed to Rubens, and inevitably reminds to the other painter, Quintilio, loved by the two women who look at the portrait. Moreover, going further in the transitive construction of meaning, the figure of Quintilio at the heart of the whole affair reminds to the narrator and author of the novel himself (Rosso di San Secondo), who is “looking at” the female-only seduction while he describes it with overt eroticism. Obviously, the eventual male control over female non-heteronormative affection ensures the non-subversion of the patriarchy, not only in the narrative.<sup>33</sup>

The inclusion of the male gaze by the triangular structure of desire in the representation of lesbianism can also be read in the light of the tension that Faderman pointed out in Edouard Bourdet’s 1926 *La Prisonnière* (“The captive”), as “an interesting comment on romantic friendship in the context of the twentieth century”. In a conversation between two male characters, one warns the other for

he had once been deceived into viewing the relationship between his wife and other women with complacency. It is dangerous, he suggests, to accept ‘ardent friendship’ and ‘affectionate intimacy’ between women, to say that it is ‘nothing very serious—we know all about that sort of thing!’ Men know nothing about it, [the other man] protests: ‘We can’t begin to know what it is. It’s mysterious—terrible!’ Women have an intimacy with each other that men cannot possibly fathom, “a secret alliance of two beings who understand one another because they’re alike”. And once those female beings get together, man becomes the stranger, the enemy, powerless to separate them because there are no terms on which he can fight them. (FADERMAN 1981: 348)

<sup>33</sup> “When lesbians enter the field of visibility as it has been constructed within gender dimorphic parameters, the threat that they pose to the dominant order is seen as a usurpation of masculine privilege” (HART 1994: 93).





FIGURE 6. Ubaldo Oppi, *Le amiche*, oil on canvas, 1924, 100×80 cm, private collection [browse higher resolution b/w version at [Fondazione Ragghianti](#)].

6. The most famous painting devoted to the sapphic theme of the women friends in the 1920s was Ubaldo Oppi's *Le Amiche* (“Friends”, figure 6). It was resoundingly exhibited at the 1924 Venice Biennale and then reproduced on art journals, where it was praised by influential critics such as Margherita Sarfatti and Ugo Ojetti mostly for its harmonious formal values, its smooth surface and rhythmical and plastic composition, a manifesto for classicism and the “return to order”<sup>34</sup>. Two women dressed with long robes that adhere to their body embrace in the middle of the scene, under the appearance of a classical sculpture in the background.

The painting can be associated with the taste for subtle, psychological allusion to sapphism, that was found in Rosso di San Secondo's passage published only a few years earlier. The striking analogy with the gestures of Lucilla and Hedda in front of Rubens' painting may be coincidental, but it seems that Oppi's artwork can be read according to a similar triangular structure of desire. Obviously, painting does not support proper narrative analysis; nevertheless, as it was pointed out in Casorati's example, desire can be thematically constructed through careful pictorial strategies. In addition to the biunivocal vector of the women's affection represented by

<sup>34</sup> “He already knows the hierarchy of the elements constituting an artwork, and he knows that measure is the norm of art and that style is born from a thought sobriety: more is not said than is said. His classicism [...] is the need to comfort himself and us with a humanity more beautiful and ordered, which gives to our feelings a calmer and more lasting expression” (OJETTI 1924: 792).

the chaste embrace, the statue of an Amazon, copied after the type of the Mattei *Amazon*, works as a third focal point in the reading of the image. A classical model of beauty, it subtly strengthened the female-only system of desire and gaze. However, like Rubens and Quintilio (and Rosso di San Secondo) behind the portrait of Helena Fourment, the presence of art itself in the scene triggers a new *mise en abîme*, and the artwork points to the painter, Oppi himself, as mediator of the sapphic desire.

However, the particular visual source at the origin of *Le amiche* problematizes the obvious acknowledgment of the male (painter's) gaze onto this lesbian fantasy. As it was the case for Casorati, real models never posed for the painting, for Oppi followed the trace of a photograph published almost fifteen years earlier in the Parisian periodical *L'étude académique*.<sup>35</sup> The demure-title journal was one of numerous publications of the kind that provided artists with less expensive and ready-to-use "models" in academic poses; their success, however, was due to the circulation of almost exclusively female and frankly pornographic images. Starting from 1924, Oppi largely resorted to such materials, which also caused him a huge scandal in 1926.<sup>36</sup> Sapphism was then the result of actual "collage" manipulations of found images and poses: it is the case of another painting also exhibited in Venice, *Le amazzoni* ("Amazons", figures 7-8), a work that dialogued with Casorati's gynocelia but made their disquieting, matriarchal contents more evident. In the case of *Le amiche*, Oppi chose an overtly sapphic image that gave the subject a veiled eroticism (figure 9), in apparent contrast to his formal choices of balanced, slightly cold classicism (note the way the anatomy gently comes out from under the robes). The source itself carried a very specific discourse on sapphism: the photograph was titled *Gestes d'affection* and the ages of the two models were given, with a sensible difference, 21 and 30 years old, which does not seem accidental. "Affection" was a generic and ambiguous definition that avoided referring directly to love, sex or any fixed category of heteronormative love. Such undefinition matches with the historical manifestations of lesbianism as accounted by Faderman.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, indicating the age gap confirmed the cliché of the

<sup>35</sup> See PORTINARI 2019: 25-27. The author lists here nineteen possible visual sources for Oppi's *Le amiche* (artworks from Old Masters to contemporary international painters), none of which can substitute the direct photographic source in its making.

<sup>36</sup> See COLOMBO 2019: 198-199; and PONTIGGIA 2002. An anthology of the debate is in FAGIOLO DELL'ARCO 1988: 337-339.

<sup>37</sup> "[Two loving women] might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of

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mentoring lesbian, who seduces a younger mate by occupying a position of relative power over her.



FIGURE 7. Ubaldo Oppi, *Le amazzoni (bozzetto)*, 1924, oil on canvas, 120×100 cm.

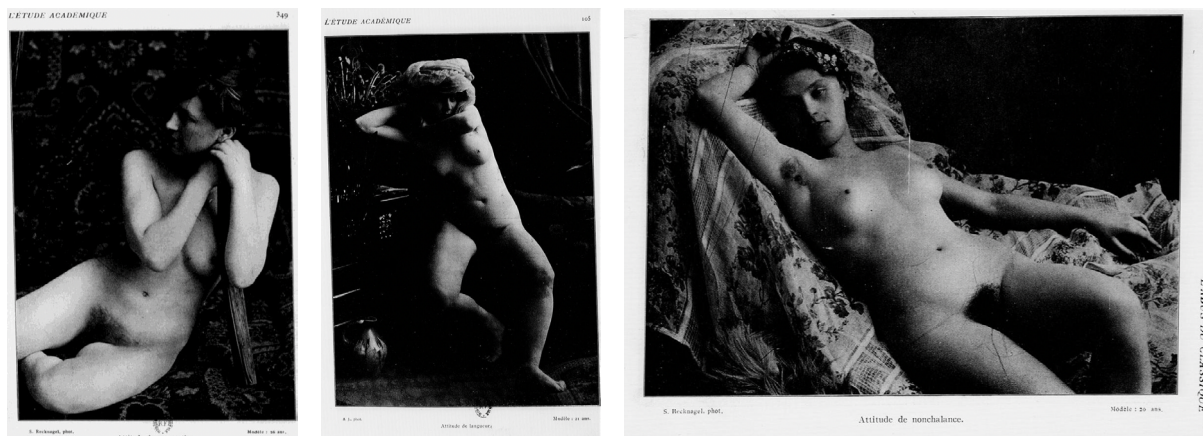


FIGURE 8. From *L'étude académique*, 2, 1906: 349, 105, 300 [browse full issue on [Gallica.fr](https://gallica.fr)].

In a crucial passage of the creative process, Oppi corrected the original kiss by bending the gaze of the blond woman towards the beholder. This strategy was not merely dictated by a censoring move; it actually created the third element of the scene, namely the painter/ beholder's gaze. In this way,

overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness, and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit. If they were sexually aroused, bearing no burden of visible proof as men do, they might deny it even to themselves if they wished. [...] What surprised me most about these romantic friendships was that society appeared to condone them rather than to view them as disruptive of the social structure. I needed to find what it was that made such relationships [...] seem nonthreatening in other eras” (FADERMAN 1981: 16).

the manipulation highlights the male gaze already included in the source's pornographic quality, or scopophilia. In particular, it eventually mirrored the statue in the background, looked at by the brunette, on the axis articulating the third pole, the mediator, of the triangular desire.



FIGURE 9. From *L'étude académique*, 2, 1905: 259 [browse full issue on [Gallica.fr](https://gallica.bnf.fr)].

The “irresistible complication” of *Le amiche* diverted heterosexual desire into a triangle, the vertex of which remained a male beholder. Therefore, these paintings should not be taken as lesbian manifestos, nor documents of the social condition of women or the real experience of queer subjects of the time. However, they can provide material to lesbian historiographies and theories on lesbian visibility.<sup>38</sup> Sapphic artworks entered the visual culture and taste of the time, becoming available for reappropriation and for unexpected cultural discourses by contemporaries. Few months after Oppi's *Le amiche* was exhibited and acclaimed in Venice, Anne Weber started the publication of the first female homosexual magazine, titled *Die Freundin* (“Girlfriend”). The term was then reappropriated to designate a platform of aesthetic, cultural and political affirmation of the lesbian identity, as were photographs and paintings dedicated to female sensuality and desire. In 1925, Tamara de Lempicka debuted in Italy with a solo show in Milan, where she exhibited female sensual portraits and sapphic figures like *Irene and her Sister*, mentioned by Stefania Portinari as an evident echo

<sup>38</sup> See in particular the vast debate recapitulated in JAGOSE 2002: 6-13.

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of Oppi's masterpiece<sup>39</sup>. A study on the female perspective and reception of these paintings as sapphic fiction is yet to be undertaken; however, it will benefit from a detailed analysis, internal to the works, within the painting strategies of Magic Realism and the queering of heteronormative desire.

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<sup>39</sup> See PORTINARI 2019: 25, 27.

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