

Perseverance and Journey: The realistic portrait odyssey of Pietro Annigoni

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Abstract: On March 24, 2016, “A Steady Light: Works by Pietro Annigoni, Italian Realist Painter” opened at the China Children & Youth Art Museum. Jointly presented by the China Children & Youth Art Museum and the Quan Shanshi Art Center, and supported by the Italy–China Cultural Exchange Center, the exhibition showcases more than fifty works by Annigoni in oil, drawing, pastel, watercolor, ink and other media.

Keywords: Pietro Annigoni, tempera, Florentine School, traditional realism, royal portraits, Manifesto of Modern Realist Painters, Italy–China cultural exchange

1. A chance encounter

Quite by accident, I spotted a striking drawing in a shop-window on a Florence side-street: traditional technique yet unmistakably alive, modern in spirit, breathtaking in its finesse—though I had no idea whose hand had made it. Weeks later, while visiting the Italian painter Thomas Froni, I noticed the very same image on his bookshelf. It turned out to be the work of Pietro Annigoni, the contemporary Florentine realist. As luck would have it, Annigoni had been Thomas’s teacher; through him I met the master’s son and the researchers of the Annigoni Study Centre, gaining access to a wealth of paintings, drawings and first-hand material.

Pietro Annigoni was born in Milan on 7 June 1910. His father Riccardo was an engineer; his mother, Teri Hibbard, though of Italian descent, had been born in San Francisco. The family—Pietro was the middle of three sons—moved from Brescia to Milan and finally settled in Florence. Cradle of the Renaissance and fountain-head of European humanism, Florence offered an inexhaustible visual grammar: Giotto, Leonardo, Michelangelo walked its streets in the mind’s eye of every child who grew up there. Annigoni absorbed the lesson early. He first attended the Scuola Parrocchiale of the Padri Scolopi, then the Nudo School attached to the Circolo degli Artisti, and in 1927 entered the Accademia di Belle Arti, studying painting with Felice Carena, sculpture with Giuseppe Grattarola and etching with Celestino Celestini. These years gave him a draughtsman’s armoury in the pure Florentine lineage: line to model form, subtle half-tones, exquisite finish, the ghost of Leonardo in every stroke.

At the close of the 1920s Annigoni added another weapon to his arsenal: the oil-tempera technique (tempera grassa), learnt from the Russian painter Nikolai Lokoff. In essence it is the old Florentine method itself—egg emulsion modified with oils—demanding both flawless drawing and the swift, sure touch of the tempera painter. Annigoni mastered it almost at once, and it would become the luminous skin of his lifelong realism.



Figure 1 Pietro Annigoni Self-portrait Oil tempera on panel, 40 × 30 cm 1986

2. Solid drawing and the tempera calling—Annigoni’s formative years

Tempera grassa is a branch of egg tempera. It demands both rock-solid draftsmanship and absolute command of the tempera medium; Annigoni mastered the oil-tempera technique swiftly and wielded it with effortless authority. In 1930 he appeared for the first time in a group show in Florence and caught the public eye. Two years later the Palazzo Ferroni’s Galleria Bellini gave him his debut solo exhibition, and in the same year he was awarded the Premio Tre Torri. The 1936 Milan exhibition proved an even greater triumph, after which he set out on a sketching tour that took him from Germany to France, Switzerland and the Netherlands. In 1937 he married Anna Giuseppa Maggini. These were prolific years: “Anacletti in the Desert”, the early “Self-portraits” and many other works were born. Yet success brought clarity: “I have come to see that my paintings—if not every one—stand in open opposition to the prevailing currents, almost as though they were out of step with the times.”

3. Against the tide – doubt and decision amid the avant-garde

From the moment Cubism stepped onto the Italian stage in the early twentieth century, Futurism surged through literature, poetry, theatre, music, architecture and the visual arts. Both movements rejected tradition, craving the new. Their subject was no longer the outward world but the artist’s own sensations and emotions. Cubism pursued a “mechanical, geometric, static beauty”; Futurism sang hymns to velocity and dynamism. During the 1930s and ’40s the peninsula sprouted manifestos and collectives, each louder than the last, all united in their contempt for the past—precisely where Annigoni’s deepest loyalties lay.

4. 1947 Manifesto: In defense of tradition

In 1947 Annigoni and six like-minded artists issued the Manifesto dei Pittori Moderni della Realtà. “The only novelty that sets me in motion,” Annigoni wrote, “is my joy, my pain, my excitement, my passion for the life that belongs to me. I follow every contemporary phenomenon at home and abroad, and I keep my ears wide open.” Yet Italy’s climate had turned inhospitable; in March 1949 the Bulgarian painter Dimitri Kratzkirov arranged an invitation to England. The Royal Society of Arts received him warmly, and soon he was painting the Queen (Elizabeth II), the Duke of Edinburgh, Princess Margaret, Lady Courtauld, Lord David Cecil and many others. Solo exhibitions followed in London and the provinces, all greeted with enthusiasm for their technical brilliance and human depth. In the 1960s he crossed the Atlantic, showing at the Brooklyn Museum and in San Francisco to equal acclaim. “I trust,” he said, “that I can still draw fruit

from the precious experience of the old masters, even though much of that knowledge has been lost. In the solitude that frightens so many young painters today, I have never slackened my labour.”

5. Brushstrokes through the fire—florentine ruins and wartime ink drawings

Annigoni revered tradition, confronted reality and refused to drift with fashion. Working with time-honoured methods, he painted only what he saw and loved; even his religious subjects are steeped in everyday humanity. During the Second World War he watched Florence bombed and scarred, and recorded the wounded city in a series of spontaneous ink sketches—evidence of an artist who was also a citizen, upright and unflinchingly patriotic.

A true uomo universale, he fed his imagination with music, theatre and philosophy, practising not only painting and print-making but also sculpture, architecture and literature. He died in Florence on 26 October 1988. The city honours him with a permanent museum, a street and a square bearing his name; in 2010 Italy issued a national postage stamp commemorating his achievement.

6. China’s 2001–2008 Annigoni relay

In early 2001, after returning from Italy, I introduced Annigoni’s art to Chinese readers for the first time in the magazine Chinese Oil Painting. This was followed by the publication of the album Pietro Annigoni: An Italian Painter, offering wider insight into the enduring charm of Renaissance tradition and the master’s own artistic achievements.

In 2008, on the 20th anniversary of Annigoni’s death and with the support of the Italy–China Cultural Exchange Center, we released a newly enlarged edition of the monograph, which was also warmly received in Italy.

Today, we present Annigoni’s original oils, temperas, drawings and other works to the Chinese public, hoping they will provide fresh inspiration to contemporary Chinese art and open a new chapter in Sino-Italian cultural dialogue.



Figure 2 Pietro Annigoni Old House Ink on paper, 38 × 44 cm 1940



Figure 3 Pietro Annigoni Portrait of a Man Work on paper, 39 × 29 cm 1965



Figure 4 Pietro Annigoni Female Nude Ink on paper, 61 × 37 cm



Figure 5 Pietro Annigoni Playing Music Marker on paper, 28 × 50 cm 1950



Figure 6 Pietro Annigoni Portrait of a Lady Wearing a Pearl Necklace Oil on canvas, 80 × 60 cm 1958

7. Conclusion

Annigoni spent his life demonstrating that true innovation lies not in severing tradition, but in letting the blood of the classical pulse on within the heartbeat of the present. While avant-garde waves rose and fell around him, he held fast to “what I see and love,” wielding tempera and oil through solitude and applause, leaving behind portraits and landscapes that cross every border. His quiet admonition to us all: honor the past, confront reality, and only then can we touch the eternal.