

friend to find out if Morandi would sell it to me. The painter agreed and asked for a price so absurdly low that I vigorously objected that dealers in Milan would have asked nearly one hundred times more for similar works. Morandi seemed distressed and irritated. He turned to my friend and said 'I get annoyed talking about prices. If he keeps complaining, I will cut the price in half'. I gave in and went away with the painting. I felt like a thief, but I was extremely happy with my painting. And I still am today.

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## Lamberto Vitali

in *L'opera di Giorgio Morandi. Catalogo della mostra*, Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna, 30 October – 15 December 1966, Edizioni Alfa, Bologna

[...] Morandi reappears finally *tel qu'en lui-même l'éternité le change*: the real, the truest Morandi, since he always puts all of himself, his view of life, his most private and secret world, into his work. He who, even in the cordial loyalty of his loved ones, was ready to defend himself, he was so resolved to keep a distance, to live alone, closed within his own little realm. [...]

It is unnecessary to recall that for years and years his fame did not extend beyond a very small circle of friends (all artists like himself), and he did nothing to emerge from a kind of voluntary seclusion, indeed refusing—and not out of fear of judgement, he was so secure and rightly aware of his own value—to display his paintings and watercolours except on rare occasions. Even outside of Italy, Morandi had his followers, like him secret, acutely attentive [...]. Today, the approval of Morandi's work among non-Italians, of which we have had by now constant and decisive proof and which in a certain way anticipates that of posterity, coincides with our own and comforts a critical judgement that we intuit stands on solid foundations and is not merely dictated by a feeling of affectionate friendship or by nostalgia now that he is gone.

And yet, if we think back to the flowering and maturity of Morandi's art, we must admit that in the Italian climate of his time, this artist was an outsider for his entire life. [...]

We could, therefore, continue paradoxically to talk about what Morandi was not (and was not even during the period after World

War II), to the point of concluding that for the more than fifty years of his activity he appears to have not been a modern painter. But this statement, which at first blush can be deemed unconsidered, should be understood in the following sense: he appeared such because he unfettered by passing fashions, easily swallowed mannerisms and politically opportune compromises. Because above all and first and foremost, his personality was firmly defined from the beginning [...]

His admirable, rare balance between emotion and reason, an innate balance, must have fatefully led him to intuit, even from poor black and white reproductions, the lesson of Cézanne, whose compositional formulas appear right from his very first paintings. His innate, truly exceptional gift for tonal values stands at the base of his art in the same way, as explained by his later predilection for Vermeer, Chardin and Corot (the Corot of Italy). The painting of relationships, all subtlety, was indeed the only one suited to Morandi's poetic world, a closed world, with no interest in subjects drawn from the spectacle of everyday life, in all that is transitory and changeable. A world populated by few, very few objects of the most common variety that returned for decades in his compositions with a loyalty that could even be described as obsessive, like the repetition of the same musical phrase can be obsessive.

Morandi had an innate need to live for a long time with the motifs of his paintings, to make them familiar, to reflect on them before translating them on the canvas or sheet. And this also explains the timelessness of some of his landscape themes, the ones of the Bologna Apennines around his beloved Grizzana, where he spent memorable seasons working and that offered him motifs of spare, solemn simplicity for composing with large masses and the austerity of the tonal agreements of the earths and greens.

But this timelessness of motifs never coincides with a monotony of effects [...]; in reality, Morandi's pictorial language continued to develop from the early years with a range of variations that could not have been richer. Indeed, if we trace back over his path from the still lifes of his youth [...] to those from the end, we immediately see the complexity of Morandi's corpus, the fruit of constant research, the terms of which might escape the hurried observer, and of a process that never left anything to chance or improvisation.

[...] It seems that the most successful periods were the ones where there was a perfect balance between reason and feeling, a

balance that Morandi found immediately after his metaphysical phase. Gone were the heavy outlines, the light went from harsh and strong to enveloping and he set all of the elements of the composition within the intricacy of the tonal effects.

The more delicate accents alternate with the tragic stories of the dark still lifes, but the compositional block always aims to be compact, supported as if by a highly considered system. His interest in landscape returned at the same time, having completely disappeared between 1918 and 1920. [...]

Sometime after 1930, one of the highest and especially most singular chapters in Morandi's painting began. Form aimed to lose its earlier imposing consistency to break up into a heavily mixed, sometimes very thick material, with a prevalence of earths, into which he sometimes inserted a bright, unexpected yellow. In this series of works, which one would rightly suppose had a decisive influence on the anti-Novecento activity of the young Roman school, Morandi increasingly distanced himself from a textual rendering of his models, orienting himself towards a fantastical, magical world populated not by things but by their larval aspects, ghosts that disintegrate as if used up and worn out, Then, by contrast, in the immediately subsequent years, a sudden change of course. New problems, but always problems of a purely pictorial nature, concerned the artist. This is represented in a series of still lifes with unusual colouristic accents: objects in reds, from browns paired with intense blues to clear whites, that reveal precise forms, an

objective precision with a propensity for a purist, almost academic taste. In the end, a brief interlude.

The Grizzana landscape that had attracted Morandi since 1913, was the great, if not the only, protagonist of the war years, or more precisely the first three years of the war. The same constant need to proceed through variations on just a few exclusive, essential themes that led the artist to become almost morbidly attached to the humble objects that he diligently arranged in his studio on Via Fondazza before calling upon them to be represented, explains what we can call his life-long predilection for the Grizzana landscape, with its modest, almost hidden beauty but by then known and reflected upon in its every house, tree and trail. [...]

Morandi's time in Grizzana corresponds to the height of his mature period, but not to the exhaustion of a trajectory. Indeed, in the twenty years before his death new problems, and so new solutions, followed one after the other, expressing the vitality of an art that was, it must be recognised, to its core safe from regression and failure. [...]

A dual need seems clear in the still lifes of those years. The composition is more concise, with elements placed one next to the other to create a single block inscribed within a rectangle, sometimes clearly off-centre with respect to the background. At the same time, there was a prevalence of pale, extremely delicate hues in the different, subtle, almost imperceptible tonal variations of the whites, yellows, greys and violet pinks. [...]

It is senseless to place the accent on the intimate connection between pictorial work and graphic corpus. They both emerged from the same needs, the same motivations, still lifes and landscapes, extremely rare figures. Sometimes, Morandi began from the painting to arrive at the etching, transporting the composition verbatim to the plate, even many years later. Sometimes, he did the opposite. [...] For Morandi, etching was instead a constant endeavour, not only, but his language was, through slow conquest, profoundly thought through, with effects of even absolute rigour. He proceeded through families of subtle and rectilinear, but never mechanically inert, signs, which, thanks to the elements of a gradually varying grid, create tonal areas of differing value. [...]

There are very few examples of drawings that Morandi made as ends in themselves, possibly not even ten, and for the most part from his early period. [...] And it also needs to be observed that, as he grew older, the shy, awkward line became increasingly free, more decisive and authoritative [...]. But in the drawings, one should look above all for new evidence of the complexity of Morandi's art, which never failed to start from the attentive, meticulous observation of reality and yet goes beyond it thanks to a controlled pictorial skill and a poetic sentiment that has been mistakenly described as shadowy. Morandi's art, at once both gentle and severe, can seem marked by spare simplicity, but his is the solid simplicity of work with even classical foundations and developments.