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Flavio Costantini

Stuart Christie

1976

More often than not it is the artist, writer or poet, rather than the historian or sociologist, who succeed in capturing the spirit of an age; in so doing, they make an important contribution to our understanding of society.

Flavio Costantini is such a person. Born in Rome in 1926, his earliest ventures into art were motivated more by intellectual frustration than by artistic masters. "I started to draw because I read the Kafka books... it was impossible to write like Kafka, so I began to draw". Other writers followed, but it was the human condition as portrayed by Kafka which was to remain the dominant influence in Costantini's world.

Retiring from the navy in 1955, Costantini returned to Italy to begin a new career as a textile designer and commercial graphic artist. Fascinated by structures, Genoa, his chosen home base, provided him with an antidote to what had been for Costantini the Kafkaesque nightmare of New York.

The ancient Mediterranean port offered him visual inspiration in so many ways-the detail of an archway, a balustrade or the geometry of a piazza. Colour also came to play a more important part

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in Costantini's work. After a brief flirtation with oils in the early 1960s, tempera became the chosen medium.

The period between the early 1960s and mid 1970s coincided with a flood tide of intense democratic hopes for large numbers of people. Costantini had been a communist until 1962, but a month long visit to Moscow caused him to reconsider his beliefs. In Moscow he saw "an endless stream of tourist peasantry who were strangely silent, neither sad nor happy, but were canalised in a disenchanted, unconscious pilgrimage ... The revolution had ended... In the squalid vertical squares of New York or in the equally squalid horizontal squares of Moscow, reaching beyond the languid reminiscences of old Europe, this was perhaps an alternative, an isolated but insistent voice, an ancient Utopia which, however, had nothing in common with the Fabian longings of HG Wells. Since then, since 1963, I have tried, within the scope of my possibilities, to publicise this uncompromising alternative."

He reread a book he had disliked some years previously, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* by Victor Serge. Serge's description of the heroic period of French anarchist activism which highlighted the end of the last century provided Costantini with a social theme which was to be his inspiration for the next two decades. He felt, like Serge, that although shot through with contradictions, the French anarchists were "people who demanded, before anything else, harmony between words and deeds". They were very often lonely and isolated individuals, sensitive in their own way, whose reaction to confusion and alienation was to act, to refuse to submit.

Costantini's work during these two decades is a documentation of this dramatic period in mankind's odyssey towards a free society based on the principles of social justice described by Bakunin over a century ago: "It is the triumph of humanity, it is the conquest and accomplishment of the full freedom and full development, material, intellectual and moral, of every individual, by the absolute free and spontaneous organisation of economic and social solidarity as completely as possible between all human beings living on the earth."

Like a sun-illuminated stained glass window in a cathedral, the impact of Costantini's work is immediate. Events are captured without perspective and on a single plane in a startlingly innovative manner.

There is irony here, too: the faces of the policemen, for example, firing on strikers in Chicago, 1886, are those of four US presidents. Another tempera, depicting the capture of Ravachol, has Toulouse-Lautrec as the arresting officer.

Costantini's haunting faces, drawn directly from contemporary sources, provide an element of photographic realism which contrasts starkly with the decorative backdrop. Whether it is in the faces of the protagonists, the architectural or stylistic minutiae, there is a lovingly researched detail, harmony and structural perfection.

The ebbing of revolutionary hopes and expectations in the mid 1970s gave Costantini the sensation that he was witnessing the end of an era. he came to believe that the act of revolution, as a cathartic means of achieving the good society, was no longer possible without serious risk of sinking into a sea of anomie.

His disenchantment with the apparent hopelessness of the human condition in late capitalism is expressed in the final tempera in the revolutionary series with Kafkaesque symbolism. The painting depicts the room in which the Tsar and his family were murdered. the furniture has been removed and the room is empty: only the bullet-torn wallpaper indicates something irreversible has occurred. Most of the paintings in this series were reproduced in the now out of print *The Art of Anarchy*.

Perhaps with the intention of cushioning himself from the effect of this radical shift in his outlook, in 1980 Costantini began to immerse himself in a series of light-hearted portraits of the authors who had contributed most to his understanding of the world.

Each is accompanied by rebus-like objects associated with the subject, or which provide an important theme in their work. Thus, Kafka is shown with his beetle; Poe with a bottle of Jack Daniel's

whiskey; Stevenson with a seagull, lifebelt and a kilted figure; Conrad with a compass and a photograph of a steamer, and so on.

By the mid 1980s, another theme had emerged from this period of introspection, a more deeply allegorical one, also in the Kafkaesque tradition-the sinking of the Titanic. The year in which this criminal tragedy occurred, 1912, was a portentous and pivotal year, in the artist's view, in the history of the contemporary world.

The original scene setting picture depicts the ship foundering of a peaceful evening with the great stern rising like a squat Leviathan and the lights from a 1000 empty portholes glittering on a calm sea. Even after the collision with the iceberg the passengers showed little concern for their safety-had it not, after all, been declared unsinkable- and continued to dance to the strains of numerous orchestras while others played poker.

Costantini is not a painter like all the rest; he is not prolific. His output these days may be two paintings a year, but in 1996, for example, he produced no work whatsoever. He earns a living out of his few and very select band of fans. His most recent commission has been to illustrate Dostoevsky's Letters from the Underworld and these tempera paintings are currently being exhibited throughout Italy.

Apart from *The Art of Anarchy* (Cienfuegos Press, London, 1975), Flavio's inspired graphic insights have visually enhanced a number of literary classics in Italian, including *Il Cavallino di Fuoco* by Vladimir Mayakovsky (Emme Edizioni, n.d), *The Shadow Line*, by Joseph Conrad (Edizioni Nuages, 1989) and Dostoevsky's *Letters from the Underworld* (Edizioni Nuages, 1997). Flavio's work has been exhibited all over the world, including at the prestigious 1972 Xth Rome Quadriennale and the 1984 Venice Biennale exhibitions.