CITIES AND THE SEA
PETER SPENS

By John Russell-Taylor. April 2000

You might think, today, that the worst thing one could possibly say about an artist is that he is not modern. So it may be, but what does it mean? After all, it was Dali of all people who said "The one thing we cannot help being, however hard we try, is a modern artist": that is, we cannot escape from our own sensibility, and that sensibility is willy-nilly the sensibility of our own time. No one could say that Van Meegeren did not try wholehearted to escape from that of his time, and yet what is the first impression on seeing one of his "Vermeers"? That we are looking at anaemic Thirties religious art - which, of course, is precisely what it is.

Peter Spens escapes from this sort of argument by blithely ignoring it. Just as Picasso was content to assume that anything he did in art had to bear the signs of his paternity, however inconsistent it might seem with what had gone before or what was to come after, so Spens cheerfully opines that if he is painting in the year 2000 what he does must somehow be a product of the year 2000. And moreover, that anything he is doing has to be his by definition, and therefore personal to him. Principle be damned! Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself!

One need only glance at his work to see what an eminently reasonable attitude that is. For while his stylistic approach is to a certain extent eclectic, going in now for pointilliste spots and dots, now for bold sweeping strokes, now for distant impressions, now for a strongly analytical delvings into the sheer structure of things, there is no mistaking the parentage of any of his works. It is his personality and preoccupations which bind the disparate elements together.

Certain things recur. Not only does he have favourite scenes, to which he returns over and over again - Monet's Thames, between Westminster and Blackfriars; Highbury Fields, just round the corner from his London studio; the valley of the Drome, where he spent his several years in France, but he has deep-seated attitudes to them. The Thames, like most of the London that he paints, he likes to observe from somewhere up aloft, with almost a bird's-eye view. And to add to the interest, if he turns his back for a moment, something else happens to the landscape.

He has already staked a particular claim to the view of Charing Cross station seen from across the river, presumably from an eyrie atop the Shell Tower, so the advent of the IMAX cinema in the middle of the roundabout at the southern end of Waterloo Bridge was in the nature of a colourful bonus. Even more so the giant Millennium Ferris Wheel opposite the Houses of Parliament - especially when it was lying flat athwart the river and seemed possibly never to attain its intended upright posture. After all, what else is there which makes most sense when observed, as is Spens's wont, from almost directly above?

Highbury Fields is a different matter. The shape of the green is ill-defined and scattered with interrupting trees. Moreover, there are no high vantage-points nearby. But its appeal to Spens is distinctly different in kind from the appeal of the Westminster Thames or the City. Here he does not want to analyse, so much as to wallow in the colours of autumn, the changing and indeterminate shapes of the trees. Here we are most aware of Spens as a colourist, rather than an analyst. Some of the pictures, admittedly, hint at analysis in another sense, in that they embody some

of his most striking skirmishes with Divisionism. But Spens makes us see why the French version of the movement was also known as Neo-Impressionism: what we get primarily is an impression of change and movement, as the leaves flutter and move from green to gold.

And like any painter of colours Spens has to be, more fundamentally, a painter of light. The light, after all, makes and modifies the colours, distributes the sunny highlights and the shadowy depths. And this, though the primary sensation in front of a Spens of this type is certainly not one of ratiocination going on, inevitably brings us back to the thought that lies behind and is embodied in Spens's art. First of all he reacts through the eye, which tells him at once, on an instinctive level, whether what he is looking at has anything to offer to the painter in him. But then, as a person and as an artist, he is interested in his own responses. Given that this scene has something to turn him on, the next question is: what and why?

This, ultimately, is the link between the most lush and sensuous landscape paintings and the superficially severe, Bomberg-esque black-and-white drawings and monoprints of London and New York. Here, evidently, the source of interest is not in the colours, but in the structures. If the colours got to him, he would no doubt paint the scene, but instead he finds himself wondering, more structurally, how it is put together. It is as though Monet at certain times, in certain circumstances, becomes Cezanne. That sounds impossible, but for Spens it is no problem, because both tendencies are very much part of himself, just as the two faces of a coin belong naturally and inescapably together

Spens the thinking man's sensualist? The sensualist's thinker? Either title would suit, and could be worn with honour. Taken together, they give a rough idea of this subtle and complex art. Colour and structure sometimes seem at odds and yet here, when they do not alternate they prove remarkably ready to cohabit, for our greater delight and edification. Finally Spens's art offers cheering and happy experiences, something warm and glowing to lay against the cold of winter. If we carry things no further than that, we have enough. And if we care to think as well as bask, then Spens will probably be happier and our lives indubitably much richer.

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