

# MARCO SASSONE

JANET DOMINIK

During the last several decades the art world has seen dramatic changes in the styles of art. The preeminence of abstract expressionism and other nonobjective styles — the many «isms» for Pop to Op to Minimalism — led many artist away from creating representational art. It was difficult to defy the new movements and adhere to a personal style which by not flowing with the avant-garde brought negative criticism.

However, representational art never lost its popular audience, and today it is being viewed by patrons and critics alike with renewed appreciation. Some artists who have not painted in a representational manner for many years are returning to it. Some, a select few, have never abandoned it.

One such artist is Marco Sassone, an artist who developed his own personal, expressive vision early in his career, and who has steadfastly remained faithful to it while refining and developing it to the full power and maturity that is seen in his works today, works rich in coloration and filled with radiant, vibratory light. He says: «An artist must portray life the way he sees it — and not according to what's fashionable at the time in the art world»

Not liking the so-called «isms» by which his work might be defined, Sassone concedes to being what he calls a «realist expressionist.» He is a gestural painter, an artist who becomes totally absorbed in the act of painting. For him, it is the freedom of execution that is more important than being categorized in any particular style or mode. Nevertheless, no artist exists in a vacuum, and Sassone's work is clearly the result on multiple influences combined with his own particular perspective.

Sassone is truly a cosmopolitan artist. He has lived in the United States for twenty years, nearly half his lifetime, yet he returns annually to Italy, the land of his birth. There he feels regenerated. The he renews his ties to the rich artistic and cultural traditions of Florence, city of the Renaissance. He was born near there, in the village of Campi Bisenzio on 27 of July 1942. His father, Nicola Sassone, was an architectural draftsman by profession and a singer, actor, writer and painter by avocation.

The family moved to Florence in 1954. Sassone's father had given his son the box of watercolours with which he began his first tentative explorations in the world of painting. His first formal instruction came from Ottone Rosai, a well-known Florentine painter.

In 1959, at the age of seventeen, he enrolled in the Instituto Superiore Galileo Galilei, where, following his father's example, he studied architectural drafting for the next three years. For a while he assisted his father with his work, but the exacting demands of the architectural profession were not to his liking. He found greater pleasure in painting watercolor sketches of Florence, which he sold to tourists, many of whom were Americans and from whom he began to learn English.

Nineteen sixty-three proved to be a year of critical importance for the young artist. It was then that he met the famous Florentine painter Silvio Loffredo, who was on the faculty of the Accademia in Florence. Loffredo encouraged him to develop his own stylistic vision. For inspiration he studied the works of the 19th century Italian painters, the Macchiaioli.

The Macchiaioli were a group of artists primarily from Tuscany who were active in the 1850's and 1860's. In the same way that the French Impressionists received their name from an art critic, so too did that Macchiaioli. Macchia means smudge or blot, and the artists were so called because the paint was applied in short dashed strokes. Often, these small works were painted directly on wood panels, such as cigar-box lids. The grain of the wood became part of the texture of the painting and contributed to «its air of spontaneity. Above all [the artist were concerned] with rendering the appearance of forms dissolved in light.» Among its proponents were Telemaco Signorini (1835-1901); Silvestro Lega (1826-1895); Vito D'Ancona (1825-1884); and Giovanni Fattori (1825-1908).

In the work of Lega and in that of Signorini, one can see a definite interest in the contrast of dark and light and in the depiction of brilliant sunlight. However, it is especially with the work of Giovanni Fattori that an influence on Sassone is most clearly evident. In the work of Fattori, forms «are rendered without outlines, solely in terms of gradations of tone and colour.» It is also interesting to study Fattori's etchings. His use of a highly charged line gives an over-all texture to the work, not unlike the texture created by the agitated lines used by Sassone. In fact, Sassone concedes to the use of impressionistic brushstroke used in the “maniera” of the Macchiaioli. He further notes that «my early works were painted on wood, as were those of many of the Macchiaioli.»

In 1964 and 1965 Sassone served in the military. After his discharge he continued to study privately with Loffredo, who would become a close friend and critic. In search of new material, Sassone traveled to Naples, Amalfi, Sorrento, Capri and Greece. During this period he began to study and appreciate the work of the French neoimpressionist painters. In the neoimpressionist aesthetic as espoused by Georges Seurat (1859-1981) the «ephemeral visual effects» of the impressionists would be replaced by a return to the depiction of the underlying form. However, such depiction would be accomplished with the use of carefully conceived color harmonies or chords. Seurat, who called his technique «chromoluminarism», attempted to make oil paint «generate the luminosity and radiance of real light.»

It is the love affair with light, and especially with light as it is reflected on water, that is the hallmark of Sassone's work. Most of his interpretations of light and water are celebratory of the wonder of nature. Yet, ironically, one of the most profoundly moving experiences of his life was a result of water out of control — the devastating November 1966 flood in Florence.

The immense damage caused by the flood, the loss of priceless and irreplaceable works of art, left the entire city in mourning. Sassone's painting, *Aftermath*, presents a horrifying image of a solitary figure under a lone street lamp, his entire world covered in thick layers of soil and debris as imparted by the irregular forms and heavy impasto of Sassone's brush. Ten years later, the artist would remember the flood with a serigraph depicting a somber and desolate image of the chapel of San Remigio covered in mud.

Seeking a refuge from the overwhelming personal depression he felt in Florence after the flood, Sassone travelled to France and then to England, where he spent several months in London. He struggled to make a living as an artist and increased his command of English. In the summer of 1967 he returned to Florence. He began a friendship with a young American woman, and, in the fall, accepted her family's invitation to come to the United States. On 23 November 1967 he arrived in New York on his way to California.

It was serendipitous that his American hosts lived in the California beach community with canal-front homes. The proximity of the ocean, the marina, the quaint homes and shops provided

exactly the right inspiration for Sassone's brush. And as a painter whose focus was light, he was quite naturally enchanted with the brilliant sunlight and colorful coastal areas of Southern California.

His first American works — watercolors of the harbour area of Belmont Shore — reflected his growing interest in the play of light upon the constantly moving surface of the water. In these watercolors, Sassone applies the pigment in broad sweeps of transparent washes, allowing the white of the paper to show through as tiny glimmers of light. However in Tree on the Bay, 1971, the picture is dominated by the mass of foliage of the tree depicted in the short, dashed strokes that would become characteristic of his oil painting style.

In Belmont Shore, Sassone — remembering the work of the Macchiaioli — he first began by painting on wood. One such work is Sails at Belmont, 1967, which — again like that of the Macchiaioli — is quite small, only 13 by 15 inches. It has been observed that the essentially sketchy technique of the Macchiaioli could not be adapted to larger sized works. (One of Fattori's largest works was approximately 22 by 30 inches.) Sassone felt challenged to create much larger images. Wood, of course, because of its weight, was not a practical material, and so he switched to canvas as the support developing his own technique by using backgrounds on the canvases that simulated wood.

In 1968 Sassone's works were shown for the first time at the Dalzell Hatfield Galleries in Los Angeles. The works were critically well received, and soon he was participating in group exhibitions as well, while slowly developing a patronage. He decided to remain in California.

In 1970 he loved to Laguna Beach, a community geographically and climatically Mediterranean, with its own modest heritage of commitment to the arts. At the turn of the century artists had begun settling there, attracted by the warmth of the climate, the charm of the village, and the rustic beauty of the canyon that led down to a sparkling beach by the sea. As more and more artists settled there, an art association was formed which held its first public exhibition in 1918. A little more than ten years later the association built a small museum on a cliff overlooking the ocean, which is today the Laguna Art Museum.

Laguna Beach has an annual summer Festival of the Arts, and Sassone soon became a regular exhibition. Some have criticized the Festival as being too commercial. However, in defense of his work and that of his fellow artists, Sassone commented that «commercial art — that which pleases and profits a particular audience to purchase it — need not be a synonym for shabby art.»

There is no question that Sassone's impressionistic paintings fit a popular idiom. Sometimes that idiom is not to a critic's liking, as when Los Angeles Times art critic William Wilson remarked on Sassone's emphasis on what he termed «potboiler subjects.» Yet, at the same time, Wilson noted that in the «broadly dappled impressionist works» the artist was «impressively gifted as a colorist and skilled in rendering reflections and color in light.»

During the 1970's Sassone's paintings were exhibited in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. His success enabled him to return annually to Italy, where he would paint in Florence and in Naples. A one-man show of California works was held at the Galleria d'Arte Internazionale in 1973.

Throughout the seventies, Sassone's work essentially stayed within the general format of an impressionistic style. Emphasis is placed in the depiction of light and the rendering of form with broken brushstrokes. Color is essentially true to its natural occurrence. The emphasis on surface texture gives a rich tapestry effect to the work. In 1974 he added printmaking to his repertoire, collaborating with Guy McCoy on a limited edition serigraph (of one of his paintings). He con-

tinued to work in that medium, utilizing over eighty and sometimes a hundred colors to create unique and vibrant works.

In 1978, a little more than ten years after he left Florence for the United States, he was awarded a gold medal for his work by the Italian Academy of Arts, Literature and Science, a truly prestigious honor for such a young painter. The following year he was further honored with a retrospective exhibition at the Laguna Art Beach Museum of Art (today called the Laguna Art Museum).

A further high point of his career in the Seventies was the publication in 1979 of his monograph written by noted American art historian Donelson F. Hoopes. Hoopes recognized Sassone as an important California artist, part of a long-continuing tradition of artists whose concern were for «space, light, and form.» He also felt that Sassone had, at that time, arrived at a position of maturity while at the same time observing that his art had «evolved from within, and such an organic, psychological and spiritual process may take his work along new and unforeseen paths.»

Indeed, it is with these new paintings from the Eighties that one can see new developments in his style. His move to San Francisco in 1981 may have precipitated those changes. There is a different quality to the light in Northern California — it is cooler and less glaring. He also found new structural images — the cityscape of San Francisco, the magnificent Golden Gate Bridge, and charming harbor at Sausalito.

San Francisco's more dramatic setting brought new inspiration. The works are much more expressive, the color bolder, more dramatic, and as an element in and of itself rather than as a definition of the subject. This treatment of color is not unlike that of the French Fauves. In discussing Fauvism Marcel Giry stated:

The essence of Fauvism lay in a novel way of conceiving the world, of regarding nature not as the subject of art but as a realm in which the painter's own impulses, his emotional and mental tensions, his imagination could find release. Drawing and color must obviously have the utmost freedom in the way they express reality. The Fauvre picture is a lyrical explosion whose brilliant coloring is the most spectacular feature,...

In these recent works it is indeed their explosively brilliant coloring that is most striking, combined with an expressive brushwork that at times borders on frenzy. In Alcatraz, the intensity of the brushwork creates an impression of some kind of aura emanating from the abandoned prison which sits in San Francisco Bay. Often a subject for the artist's brush, Alcatraz is usually depicted as desolate and cold. Here it seems to be in the center of a maelstrom. The brushwork is very gestural and agitated. In some areas it almost seems to have been applied like fingerpaint. Such intensity of expression can be explained by the artist entering «some sort of altered state for a few minutes» when he becomes deeply involved with the act of painting.

This same intensity can be seen in Castello di Lerici, where the upward thrusting of the castle is repeated in bold vertical brushstrokes along the right edge of the sky. Sassone sees a continuing process of development in his work as a result of an emphasis on the freedom of execution, a process in which with time «the 'materia' breaks more and more.»

Like other impressionist painters whose focus is light, Sassone also paints the same subject at different times of day. San Francisco Marina Dusk and San Francisco Marina from Telegraph Hill, are two examples. The cooler palette of the latter work suggests morning, whereas the setting sun casts a golden glow over the former. Colors remain rich in both works. In the dusk painting the dark tones in the foreground indicate shadow. Sassone notes that «even in subjects

revealed in a dim light, I paint darkness as a chromatic tone. Shadows are colorful to me.»

An ongoing series of works which the artist began in 1979, is the Sausalito houseboats. These works act as a counterpart to his Venice paintings, thus providing a link between his two worlds.

Sassone discusses another aspect of his work, what he calls the «full images». «What I mean by this is that I construct full images by painting with equal intensity the entire canvas. This gives my painting the power of a full image chromatically balanced...» An example is Monterosso all'Alba, in which the opulent colors take on a jewel-like brilliance, resulting in a work of extraordinary power beauty. The result of such balancing has been that in most of his works there is no definitive focal point. However, in Vista della Baia, the eye is immediately drawn to the building at the lower right. Here the brazen red pigment is applied in broad strokes, in contrast to the balance of the work, which is done in the more typical Sassone dashed technique. The red tone is repeated on another building in the background, as well as the sky. This dominant red form is also seen in Le Cabine Rosse, in this case as a horizontal band, which boldly divides the picture plane.

Over-all there seems to be an increased use of red, orange, and gold tones in his paintings, and this, too, results in more expressive work. A very dramatic painting done in those tones is Bodega Reach, which is dominated by the gnarled tree at the left looming like a spectre over the beach below. It is this kind of intensity that prompted the artist to observe that «sometimes you put [my paintings] in a house next to other pieces and they are too powerful.»

Sassone admits that he prefers to be referred to as a «contemporary colorist.» Yet the power of his color lies also with the strength of his compositions. At times he takes unusual viewpoints as in Riomaggiore and House Boats IV. In both these paintings, Sassone's subject is semi-abstracted which, combined with the unique point of view, results in a more dynamic composition.

Today, with these works, it is clear that Sassone has become even more passionate about his environment. The dominant factor in his art is his fascination with light, whether radiant or reflective, and especially the play of light on the constantly moving surface of water. In the Sixties and Seventies he mastered the art of communicating the essence of that light. Now, as his works become even more personal in interpretation, as the act of painting itself becomes equally important, his paintings evoke impressions that are powerfully expressive, evocative, and sometimes haunting in their beauty. If the role of the artist is to provoke the observer into seeing more clearly, to make the observer more acutely aware of the beauty around him, then Sassone is truly a consummate artist.

Essay originally published as Janet Dominik, 'Marco Sassone,' in *Marco Sassone*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Municipal Art Gallery/Paris: Bernheim Jeune, 1988) pp. 23-28 © Arti Grafiche.

Janet B. Dominik is an art historian, writer and curator specializing in early California art. She has written many articles and books including *Christian van Schneidau, 1893-1976* and *Early Artists in Laguna Beach: The Impressionists*.