

VENEZIA 1984

**ART &
ANARCHY**

**a short
presentation
of the exhibition**

ART AND ANARCHY

The exhibition "Art and Anarchy" was initially conceived as an attempt to identify the links and points of contact between the anarchist movement and those artists who were anarchists, whether active or simply sympathisers, throughout their lives or even simply for a brief period.

During our research, we quickly discovered that both the works and the material available were much greater than we had foreseen. The limited time available for the preparation of the exhibition has forced us to limit both the number of artists and artistic movements and the depth in which they have been considered.

For this reason this exhibition is only the first step in a much deeper consideration of a subject that is both rich and relatively unknown. The following is a brief summary of the texts and captions of those works reproduced in the exhibition, so as to help those who do not understand Italian to understand the exhibition.

The exhibition begins with Delacroix's painting "Liberty leading the People to the Barricades" which, apart from the allegorical figure of Liberty, was painted with a degree of realism that was virtually unknown at that time. The painting expresses the spirit of the revolution of 1830 so well that it quickly became the symbol of early social radicalism.

While the painters whose works are shown in the first two panels, such as Delacroix, Daumier, Millet and Courbet, could not really be defined as anarchists, they have been included nevertheless for their role as the forerunners of a certain concept of art. They were the first to attempt a "realistic" approach to painting, abandoning the idea of 'Art for Art's sake' and beginning to paint scenes of daily life, farmers, workers and factories.

They were all anti-bourgeois, anti-academic and revolutionary republicans, in an era when Capitalism and the Bourgeoisie had not yet made republicanism particularly theirs. Among them, Courbet merits consideration apart as his rejection of art for its own sake was influenced by the anarchist, Proudhon, (his close friend, as the two portraits show) who, in his own turn, had, under the influence of Fourierism, decidedly rejected the idea of art as an end in itself, void of any social purpose. Courbet took part in the Paris Commune and, despite the largely artistic nature of his participation, was forced to flee to Switzerland after the defeat of the Federals.

These artists opened up the way for new artistic movements such as Impressionism, which furnished an almost completely artistic critique. The Impressionists rejected traditional artistic techniques but tended to ignore the social aspect of their works.

The only Impressionist of reknown who openly demonstrated his anarchist sympathies was Camille Pissarro. His radical stance is almost exclusively expressed in numerous drawings and paintings which show a lively interest in the urban and rural masses. His ideas are partly explained in a letter to Octave Mirbeau: "...I have just read Kropotkin's book. I must admit that, however utopian it may be, it expresses a marvellous dream. And, since we have often seen utopias become reality, there is no reason for not believing that it will all be possible one day - at least if man does not fall back

The Impressionist movement was immediately followed by neo-impressionism, which received its name from the anarchist art critic, Felix Fénéon. This movement has been extensively covered in the exhibition, because of its general support for anarchism. Those included are Seurat, Signac, Maximilian Luce, Theo van Rysselberghe and Lucien Pissarro. They had all read Kropotkin's writings and were attracted by his vision of a just society because they felt, quite rightly, that they were victims of the bourgeois social order. Lucien Pissarro in particular observed: "...the autonomy of the individual invoked by the anarchists is of particular interest to artists as it offers them their freedom from an aesthetic idea imposed by the collectivity.

Both Camille Pissarro and the Neo-impressionists contributed to many anarchist publications including La Révolte, Les Temps Nouveaux, La Plume and Le Père Peinard as well as illustrating various works by Kropotkin and Reclus.

In Italy in the same period, two painters, Lorenzo Viani and Telemaco Signorini, came into contact with the anarchist movement. Signorini had embraced Proudhon's ideas in 1885 while Viani, who was familiar with the writings of Gori, Grave, Kropotkin, Malatesta and Proudhon, was active in the anarchist movement. In 1909 he addressed 2,000 people at a meeting in protest at the execution of Francesco Ferrer and was later brought to trial for his participation in an anti-militarist campaign in 1912.

Panels 14 and 15, on the other hand, present two artists who were not part of any artistic movement: Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen and Ibels.

Steinlen, a supporter of "art for the people", sought to transform painting into a vehicle for social propaganda through drawings published in various magazines. He was a socialist but, also due to his temperament, felt more drawn towards anarchism and often worked on anarchist publications such as Jean Grave's Les Temps Nouveaux and La Feuille. This latter was a broadsheet brought out by an individualist anarchist who called himself Zo d'Axa and who, from 1891 to 1893, had been one of the editors of L'Endehors, a subversive review directed by Fénéon; when Zo d'Axa was forced into hiding to escape the police.

Ibels also demonstrated a certain leaning towards anarchism and contributed drawings and posters to publications by Kropotkin and Grave. Together with another anarchist, he brought out L'Escaramouche and also contributed to Le Père Peinard.

Ample space has been dedicated to the painter Fantisek Kupka, a Czechoslovakian who was the first artist in France to define and elaborate abstract art. Kupka was first drawn towards spiritualism and then, like the Futurists after him, to anarchism. He settled in France where he eked out a living as a fashion designer and graphic artist, as well as illustrating anarchist pamphlets. For several years from 1900, he devoted himself almost entirely to illustrating anarchist or libertarian publications and also prepared various sketches for Kropotkin's book of the French Revolution. The reproductions shown here are illustrations from a special issue of L'Assiette au beurre in 1902, which was entitled L'Argent and was dedicated to anti-capitalistic drawings by Kupka with the ironic title of "Liberté".

Among those who contributed to Le Père Peinard was the Swiss anarchist Félix Vallotton, who was responsible for the rebirth of wood-cuts as an art form. In 1892, Vallotton produced a wood-cut entitled "L'Anarchiste" and he constantly attacked the State, accusing it of suppressing all freedoms. His drawings and posters were also published in books and papers produced by Kropotkin and Grave.

Yet another artistic movement with close ties with anarchism was Fauvism. Panels 19 and 20 deal with two artists close to the anarchist movement: James Ensor and Kees van Dongen. The former was a symbolist painter, a noted representative of the Belgian Fauvists, whose art was marked by striking individualism, preparing the way for many modern movements. An anarchist by inclination, Ensor loved to attack official circles but, in the last decade of the 1800's, he also painted scenes of striking workers. Unlike many of his friends who became socialists, he always remained an anarchist.

Kees van Dongen was a contributor to Les Temps Nouveaux about the turn of the century and he himself reported that: "One day I met an unusual gentleman called Félix Fénéon. I met him because he was an anarchist. We were all anarchists even though we did not throw bombs. Our ideas were anarchist."

Georges Grosz was a particularly well-known expressionist painter who was noted for his satirical works and his anti-bourgeois spirit. One of his paintings was dedicated to Oskar Panizza, a psychiatrist and author of fantasy tales, who was put on trial for offences against religion and lèse-majesté. While he was working on this painting, Grosz wrote: "At present I am working on an enormous and infernal painting - a narrow passage of grotesque death and madmen who have suffered everything. I have dedicated this painting to Oskar Panizza. It is a swarm of devilish men and beasts. I am irrevocably convinced that this era is heading for self-destruction. Our soiled paradise thinks: wherever you go there is the stink of shit." (December 1917) He was also a close friend of another anarchist, Erich Muhsam, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, and he dedicated various of his water-colours and drawings to him. "He was a writer" and "He is a writer" were two of these.

The futurist movement also included an anarchist - Carlo Carrà - of whom Masini wrote; "Carrà was a real activist during his early period in London, when he was a comrade of Errico Malatesta and other refugees. His contacts with anarchism continued after his return to Italy, with his graphic contributions to the Milanese publications Sciarpa Nera and La Rivolta and to the Parma paper La barricata. His painting I funerali dell'anarchico Galli, 1910-1911, dealt with an episode from about six years earlier which had moved him deeply. During the funeral of Angelo Galli, an anarchist killed during a general strike in Milan in 1906, the Horse Guards and the crowd came to blows: the coffin draped in red was knocked from the pall-bearers shoulders and trampled on and it is this moment that is shown in the painting.

The links between the Dadaist movement and anarchism are much more easily discerned? Dada had a great urge towards destruction and was against modernism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, abstractism and against the

universe in general. For the Dadaists these artistic movements all served as surrogates for all that had been or was to be destroyed. Dada was not for the crystallisation of the spirit - it maintained that the spirit should never be imprisoned in a strait-jacket, no matter how new and different but should always be free and continually moving in a continual re-invention of its own existence. There was to be no slavery, not even of Dada to Dada. For them there was no fixed freedom but rather an unceasing dynamism of freedom, which exists in continually denying itself. For Dada the gesture is more important than the work. There was only one thing that was important: that every act must always be a challenge to good sense, to morality, to rules, to the law. For this reason, the Dadaists favourite means of expression was scandal.

Dada anarchism was not, therefore, a thinking or traditional anarchism; theirs was a rebellion, without a real stand on conscience, a rebellion against all law and dogma. According to the Dada manifesto: "Morality atrophies, like all scourges of the intelligence. The control of morality and of the intelligence have obliged us to be impassive in front of the police, who are the putrid rats fattened by the bourgeoisie, the source of all our slavery and who have infected the only clear and crystal passages that were still open to artists..... Every man must shout. It is a great destructive and negative act to be done.

What Dadaism, for its very nature, did not succeed in doing then became the aim of Surrealism. While Dada sought freedom in the constant practice of negation, Surrealism sought to give this freedom a basis in "doctrine". This was the passage from negation to affirmation. The pure anarchism of Dada stressed the derisory humour of its polemic and reached a concept of freedom as the rejection of all conventional behaviour. Surrealism, on the other hand, put forward a solution that guaranteed a positive and attainable freedom for man.

Surrealism and anarchism came together towards the middle of this century. On 12 October, 1951, Le Libertaire, the official mouthpiece of the French Anarchist Federation, published the manifesto "Surrealism and Anarchism; Initial Declarations" and this collaboration continued until January 1953.

Arturo Schwarz made the following comment on Surrealism: "...to be a surrealist means first and foremost to be an anarchist, with all that the term implies - that is a conscious declaration, a conscious revolt, a rejection of all principles of authority, all systems, all hierarchy, all violence."

Speaking to French students at Yale, Breton declared that Surrealism would only yield its place to a movement that was still more emancipatory; a movement that surrealists, in fact, would immediately join.

The subversive nature of the fundamental choices of Surrealism lies in their expression of man's deepest aspirations; Surrealism is love, poetry, revolution and, like the poet, the lover, the alchemist, the surrealist is a pariah, a solitary being, even when he is acting in a group. The group itself is outside the system whose rules it rejects.

The solitude of the surrealist is that of Nietzsche and Stirner: the boundary between solitude and egoism is difficult to define as the love for the other is only there to the degree in which the other is identified with oneself. Self-love is a presupposition for self-knowledge and to understand oneself signifies understanding and loving

the other. The transformation of society must perforce come about through the transformation of the individual.

The exhibition ends with the contemporary artist, Enrico Baj, who says, in speaking of his work: "I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli": I had just finished a reinterpretation of Picasso's Guernica and in fact often dedicated myself to reinterpretations of paintings that I found particularly meaningful. I was searching for a new subject for my next painting and was also interesting myself in futurism when the Pinelli affair occurred and so was inspired to begin this work, based on Carrà's futurist painting "I funerali dell'anarchico Galli". Initially the title was to be "L'assassinio dell'anarchico Pinelli" but this was modified to avoid sensation." Enrico Baj has, for some decades, been one of the most active artists of the avant-garde. In the early 1960's, he was one of the founders of the "Institutum Pataphisicum Mediolanense".

In a recent interview given to A-Rivista Anarchica Baj outlined his artistic and political stance: "There is one driving force of an artist that always has a basis in anarchism; that it, the desire for freedom and the rebellion against the dictates of conformity in art. We can say that every artist has a certain degree of the anarchist spirit and, in me, it is perhaps greater because I have considered the ideas deeply and I have cultivated this sensation which, for other painters, is only superficial. In order to invent one must break the bonds that bind us to pre-determined formulae. The most important thing is not to passively submit but to understand what is happening around us. I believe that an artist must build and signify his own freedom."
