

Artnews

Summer 1955 (June-July- August)

Scialoja paints a picture

By Milton Gendel

Toti Scialoja (pronounced; Sha-lóy-ah) has been described by a Roman friend as a "European" painter, a description which conveys his cosmopolitanism and broadness of inspiration as well as his detachment from the national groups and schools that have characterized his generation. Since the beginning of his career as a self-taught painter, in 1940 at the age of twenty-five, he has shown no specific relationship to his Roman antecedents and contemporaries - Scipione, Mafai, the Roman School and the Neo-Realists - but has explored beyond parochial, provincial, national and doctrinaire limits in pursuit of what he calls his "space-light ideal" His first experiments in a Neo-Impressionist vein were quickly succeeded by a series of Expressionist works that had a distinct parentage in Kokoschka and Soutine; these were followed by a mature phase of tonal painting which established his identity as an artist. At home in tonality, he found himself for the first time in rapport with one of the major expressions of modern Italian art and, generically inspired by Morandi, created a personal synthesis of Morandi's tonal effects and the Fauve colors and theme of his earlier experiments. Unlike the suspended still-life visions of Morandi, his canvases, even when dealing with the same repertory of bottles and candlesticks, conveyed a crepuscular uneasiness and a transience of hue as in marine animals.

In the hundreds of figure paintings and self-portraits produced during this phase, from 1945 to 1953, the same tendencies were even more apparent and increasingly led toward Metaphysical and Surrealist devices. At the culmination of this process, when reminiscences of Klee and of Picasso's work after 1943 had become paramount, his ten-year itinerary was summed up by an Italian critic: "Having left the silent chamber of Morandi, he has arrived on the alarmed beaches of Picasso's mythology." Since Scialoja's points of arrival are generally also points of new departures, he was soon off again in a direction that has brought him close - for the first time - to painters of his own generation in Italy. This year, somewhat to his surprise, he found himself welcomed by Lionello Venturi to the ranks of the so-called Abstract-Concrete group, who, as Venturi points out, do not constitute a school, nor follow the same rules, but move a certain distance along the same road.

Scialoja's arrival in the company of such road-companions as Afro, Birolli, Vedova, Corpora, Cassinari, Moreni, Breddo and Paulucci is attributable more to indirection than to any decisive move towards alignment with prevailing taste. No longer in tune with the brooding twilight of his metaphysical excursions or the anxiety and tension of Picasso's "alarmed beaches," he jettisoned much of the literary and cultural baggage of suggestion and reminiscence that had kept him laboring between the generations, and decided to return to the clearly defined structural sources of modern painting.

With his gift for verbal expression - he is the author of a book of critical essays and a volume of literary fantasies - Scialoja dramatically and volubly draws the parallel between the discovery of perspective in the fifteenth century and the discovery of Cubism in our own times. "Cubism is space after Kant, just as perspective is space after Aristotle. Cubism gave man a new dimension which has had to be incorporated in all the painting done since, just as all painting after the fifteenth century had to be in perspective. The contribution of Picasso and Braque in Synthetic Cubism is of the same order as that of Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel". The personal reappraisal that took place last

year in keeping with these convictions resulted in a series of canvases (including those shown at the Venice Biennial) which represented three important changes in his approach: the progressive elimination of representational elements, the adoption of a marked planar and linear structure and the replacement of the former high-keyed palette by muted but luminous earth colors. In his new orientation, however, Scialoja's passion for atmospheric effects and allusion has not abated, though the allusions are no longer literary but concern subjects observed in nature before the creation of the picture.

A group of paintings Scialoja was completing last autumn for a large one-man show in Milan was inspired mainly by his response to the space, light and color around the island of Procida - where he usually spends his summer holiday - and the play of these elements between exterior and interior through a window or an open door. Impressions from the objective world that have aroused his exuberant response (he will exclaim and grasp his neighbor by the arm to share his enthusiasm for the way a heap of gravel takes the light) are occasionally noted in rapid pencil sketches. One of these drawings, recording a glimpse of bright light through a half-open double-door, remained for some time on his desk as he worked on a number of canvases suggested by the marine light of Procida. Once or twice during this time he examined the drawing; but another theme, that of light through a window, presented itself as more compelling and, before pursuing the new idea, he painted two versions of this theme: *Roseate Window*, suffused with a color that reminds Scialoja of Joyce's line about the red of sunset on a rusty key; and *Dark Window*, a cool luminous treatment of the same theme in blacks, blues and grays ("like oil-stained asphalt under the street-lights") relieved by warm passages and accents.

Though painstaking in technique, Scialoja is a rapid painter, completing many of his canvases in a single afternoon and rarely spending more than two days on his largest work. Completion is relative, however, and most of the paintings are brought back to the easel for changes in detail and even in major areas. As the ideas for changes occur at random, the canvases remain in flux until a series is completed. This, combined with Scialoja's intimate and sensual relationship to the paintings, which he addresses, personifies, apostrophizes and sings to as he works, gives the studio an organic rhythm of creation, mutation and dissolution. Some of the pictures that do not meet the standards of the group are condemned: they are covered with paint-remover and scraped away. Unsatisfactory pictures must be reduced to a removable sludge not only because they would be distracting to paint over, but also because Scialoja does not like to think of them as still existing, abortive and concealed, beneath his fresh work.

When Scialoja finally decided to paint a picture of the light-through-a-double-door theme, he consulted his sketch to determine on what scale he should elaborate the idea. For the double-door picture, he decided on one of his largest canvases, measuring 3 feet 9 inches by 2 feet 8 inches and technically called a "*paysage 50*." Held vertically and the same size as the two "window" paintings, this picture appeared to share with them an inspiration connected with Scialoja's environment.

Scialoja lives and works in a wing of the large apartment his family has occupied for more than twenty years. The apartment, on the top floor of a staid Roman apartment house built during the Umbertine *belle époque*, overlooks the Villa Medici gardens, and the tall windows of Scialoja's studio and bed-sitting room are filled every evening with the long Roman twilight as the sun slants down beyond St. Peter's across the Tiber. In contrast to the rest of the apartment, which is rich and somber, the bed-sitting room and studio are spare and cheerful, despite the dark woodwork and the haughty monumental space. The apartment's lofty situation and the brilliant southwestern exposure make it necessary most of the year to draw the curtains or close the shutters during the day. The attenuated, constantly varying light creates a play of unmeasured spatial depths from room to room when the connecting double doors are left ajar. The windows, tall, narrow and somewhat austere,

are not designed for looking out, nor do they serve as a frame for the splendid view of the city; instead they have the effect of a baffle between the light inside and the light pouring in. Scialoja, who paints only by natural light, prefers to work in the afternoons when the light is most “tonal”; mornings are reserved for reworking completed paintings and for such chores as weeding out unsatisfactory pictures.

The canvas destined for the double-door painting was occupied by a picture, reminiscent of the still-lives of several years ago, showing two objects. He placed it on the floor and poured acetone paint-remover over it. Since it had been done only a week before, the paint quickly softened and could be scraped away with a palette knife. When the canvas was clean and had been washed with turpentine, one of the two principal tones which he had in mind was laid in as a ground. Sometimes, as in the case of the double-door painting, where he had already made a pencil sketch of the main lines, he lays in the ground in two sectors, one for each of the major tones.

After placing the cleaned canvas on his easel, he sketched in the main lines of the composition with conté crayon, working from the pencil drawing. The three-part vertical division of the canvas was suggested by the two wings of a double door partly open on a luminous space; the two trapezoids, above and below on the canvas, are a sort of after-vision of door-paneling; and the protuberance on the left-hand vertical and the cavity on the right recall the latch and handle. To prepare the ground for the wings of the door, he squeezed some zinc white (Maimeri), Cassel earth and a little brown madder (Winsor & Newton) into a porcelain bowl and mixed them with turpentine and powdered pumice. The pumice, widely used as a household scouring powder, is added so that the oil paints will dry mat. This mixture, described by Scialoja as having the consistency of zabaglione, was painted into the left-and-right-hand vertical spaces with a 3/4-inch brush (Sovrana), leaving most of the lines defining the trapezoids bordered by a narrow strip of blank canvas. The right-hand outline of the lower trapezoid and the left-hand outline of the upper were deliberately blurred.

Since the light was beginning to fail, Scialoja stopped work for the evening.

On resuming work in the morning, he laid in a ground mixture of zinc white, lamp black, greenish umber (Lukas) and pumice, carefully brushing the paint horizontally to avoid shine. As he stepped back to observe the effect of the cooler ground of the space against the warmer ground of the wings, he knew that if they were in key he could proceed, and if not he would have to abandon the picture. The tones proved to be in harmony. He set aside the two dishes of ground tone to be used later for changes. Though details and whole areas may be altered, the structure of a painting, in its main lines, is never changed. If the structure does not lend itself to completion, it is reorganized on a new canvas. With black and purple oil chalks (Kohinoor Mona Lisa No. 377) he drew a number of lines picking up the directions of the basic structure. The ground was thick enough so that the chalks furrowed it unevenly and the lines in turn came out irregular and grainy. Scialoja uses chalks not only for incisive linear details, but also for whole small areas to provide a transparent change of texture and color over the ground

Working rapidly, Scialoja elaborated the linear framework of the picture with oil chalks, painting wider bands with a heavily loaded brush or laying them on in flattened pellets with a palette knife. Broader areas of various tones - including burnt umber and white; Cassel earth and white; brown madder and white; Cassel earth, Payne's grey and white; raw umber and white - were built up on the sides of the canvas, the surface varying in thickness and brush-stroke. Denser and heavier earths, like burnt umber, were used pure only to accentuate the rhythm of the more extensive spaces, as in the left-hand upper edge of the upper trapezoid.

Until two years ago, Scialoja excluded the earth colors from his palette, working mainly with cobalts and cadmiums. Since then, because of their high sensitivity in tonal relationships, he has used only the earths except for lines, accents and passages in oil chalk, whose grainy texture goes well with the earths. As he puts it: "What looks like mud in the tube will give you an infinite variety of color. Raw umber on a cold violet ground becomes a fine warm green; on a warm ground it is a violet pink. This is obvious, but it is a spiritual, not a technical discovery, made long ago and brought up to date by Braque and Morandi. The earths are not for shock painters, but for those who seek to explore the serene world of light and color."

With white and blue oil chalks, Scialoja marked off within the central vertical space a series of planes that connected with or interpenetrated those to the left and right. Cool earth mixtures were brushed in, mainly at the angles of the planes, to give a play of direction and depth. The next problem was to paint the bare bands of the trapezoids without overweighting them. Using a palette knife, he began filling the bands with a mixture of raw umber and zinc white. At midday the picture seemed to be almost complete, and Scialoja postponed the finishing touches until the afternoon. But when he returned to the painting he was dissatisfied with the "latch" tying the two halves of the composition together at the center, and also found that the trapezoids were too closed and obvious. "The composition is integrated enough. The latch insists too much. Why insist?" Because the painting still had too much "*dinamismo e zig-zag*" he removed the dark protuberance at mid-left of the center space and made a number of small adjustments in plane and color to increase the vertical movements. The picture was now complete, but Scialoja felt that he would return to it because it had "not grown spontaneously from beginning to end like the *Dark Window* and most of the others."

The *Roseate Window* took the place of the *Double Door* on the easel, and the simple geometrical central forms were rapidly obliterated and replaced with a system of vertical and diagonal movements more in keeping with the idea of a fall of light and less descriptive of a window structure. That evening a visitor who had praised the literal effect, the editor of a literary review, called again at the studio and attacked Scialoja roundly for having, as he said, ruined a beautiful picture. Scialoja observed mildly that possibly the painting had been more beautiful before, but that was not the beauty he had been seeking. "A painter may please others, but he can only satisfy himself. There is no more room for titillation than there is for shock in painting. My aim is to convey what I can of contemplation, calm, order, luminosity."