



Painter and his Surroundings

The Work of Roger Raveel

The painting *Double Portrait of Arnolfini and his Wife*, the masterpiece by the Flemish primitive Jan van Eyck (1390/1400-1441) in the National Gallery in London, contains in the background a mirror which reflects not only the space within the room and the two protagonists, but also several other silhouettes from outside the painting. It is as though Van Eyck wanted to use this as a way of involving all the space in front of the painting.

Centuries later we see mirrors appearing in the work of another Flemish artist, Roger Raveel (1921-). This time they are not painted mirrors but real ones, literally breaking through the flat surface and the illusion of the painting. It is no coincidence that Raveel is a great admirer of Van Eyck's merciless eye, the spatial structure of his paintings and the depth of his illuminating coloration. Raveel's contemporary painting is rooted in a tradition which begins with the Flemish Primitives.

Roger Raveel was born in Machelen-aan-de-Leie in 1921. During his childhood years he was often sick, so he frequently had to stay at home and could not attend school regularly. His special gift for drawing led him to decide quite early to become an artist. He first saw works by Flemish expressionists at the age of 13 in a doctor's waiting room in Ghent, and also in the gallery *Ars* where he paid a quick visit after visiting a doctor with his mother. This gave him a shock. At that time he was a student at the academy of Deinze, where his work had to conform to academic criteria. However, at home he began to paint in a rather expressionistic way.

From 1941 to 1945 he studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent. After this period of study he stubbornly remained in the village where he was born. It was in Machelen that he was closest to himself, both literally and figuratively. He wanted to create a headstrong and self-willed artistic language, free of any aesthetic or academic prejudice. In an interview Raveel recounted: 'I observed a man in front of a wall. The man's torso made a very tangible shape, and so did the wall, because of the interplay of its lines – it was a concrete wall. I therefore went for the extreme contrasts, and drew the wall using lines. I painted the man's torso from pale to dark, including the necessary curves, but the face was far less noticeable as a fea-



Roger Raveel, *The Yellow Man*. 1952. Canvas, 105 x 75 cm. Collection of the artist (Photo by Heirman Graphics).



Roger Raveel, *Stooping Man and Cat*. 1952. Hardboard, 122 x 90 cm. Private collection, Marke (Photo by Heirman Graphics).

ture than the rest, in fact least of all. This may have been partly because the man's cap threw a shadow over his face. In any case, the face was far less noticeable as a concrete object. I wanted to go to the extreme, so I had to use stipples. That was still not enough, because the stipples were still too concrete, they looked too much like hair for instance, they had to be larger. I made them larger and larger and finally they were rectangles painted in complementary colours. So geometrical elements and elementary colours were necessary to arrive at the correct relationship and avoid isolating the painting as an object.'

The Impressionists already knew that the distinctive features of things disappear in shadow or in excessively bright light. For them however this loss of identity did not create a tension between the object and its surroundings. For the Impressionists, the distinctive features of objects were subordinated to the coloristic atmosphere of the painting. Raveel worked in a very different way. Wherever shadows or excessively bright light obscured the features of a perceived object, plant or person, he sensed an abstraction and translated it into a geometric element, an empty space or a colour which was out of context in the painting. In this way his work developed a spatial effect which transcended the confines of the painting. In a painting from 1952 such as *The Yellow Man* we can see how an empty white space between two black lines runs from the top to the bottom edge of the canvas. The empty



Roger Raveel, *Poultry-house with Live Pigeon*. 1962-63. Canvas, 150 x 440 cm. Private collection, Lovendegem (Photo by Heirman Graphics).



Roger Raveel, *Illusion Group*. 1965-67. Wood + mixed media, three objects (180 x 70 x 70 cm.) + (176 x 126 x 40 cm.) +

(180 x 70 x 70 cm.). Museum voor Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent (Photo by Heirman Graphics).



Roger Raveel, *The Creation of Woman*. 1990. Canvas, 61 x 50 cm. Private collection, Ghent (Photo by Heirman Graphics).

white space not only affects the space within the painting, but it also detaches itself from the representation to create a link with the edges and hence with its surroundings.

It is therefore not surprising that from 1961 Raveel did sometimes integrate mirrors into his work in places where he would previously have left white spaces. These took control of the environment in an unambiguous way. However not only the environment is involved in the paintings, but time as well. Sometimes he painted a prominent mark on the edge of the mirror, thereby creating a connection between mirror and painting and hence having an immediate pictorial effect on the reality reflected in the mirror. Raveel initiated a very explicit dialogue between art and reality.

However to assert that his work moves out into its surroundings only by means of the mirrors, would be to narrow his view of things. In fact the entire structure of the painting contributes to this, including the strongly coloured planes which can get out of hand, the abstract lines which cut off corners or edges of the composition, the geometric shapes.

Raveel not only wanted paintings to touch their surroundings, he also wanted them to be touched by reality and by their surroundings. He did not

wait for Johns and Rauschenberg to use real objects before he began to do so in his paintings. In *Self-portrait with Cigarette* (1952) a slanting piece of aluminium frame is fixed across the canvas. This functions as an interfering element, and it is used consciously. If one makes an effort and ignores it, other interferences come into view, for example the slanted intersection, the pronounced black edging of the collar or the white spots formed by the cigarette or the small pot.

In the beginning of the 1950s, people didn't know what to do with Raveel's very obstinate and contrary view of things. At about that time the anti-aestheticism of CoBrA (a group of painters from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam), abstract expressionism, *matière art* and the *Ecole de Paris* were all in their heyday. One only has to look at works from 1952 such as *The Yellow Man*, *Supine Man* or *Stooping Man and Cat* to realise Raveel's very specific place in the art scene at the time. While the abstract expressionists were laying the emphasis on the lyrical touch and physical painting, Raveel chose an economical, rather thin coat of paint and seemed not to be afraid of constructivist elements. While the CoBrA painters were seeking refuge in authenticity and the spontaneity of children's drawings, graffiti and shapes which have come about naturally or by chance, Raveel was again departing from visible reality. He found the material for his paintings and drawings in his contemporary environment. Instead of masses of paint and emotionally painted abstract works, we see Raveel's paintings from this period depicting trivial objects and situations which have not yet been poetised, such as a concrete wall, a bicycle cart, a pole or an anonymous vacant-looking man in a garden.

It was above all the way Raveel depicted these things which had such a bewildering and innovative effect: figurative elements were given an abstract or concrete meaning, reality juxtaposed with absence of reality, local colour set against colour as space. From 1960 he pushed these oppositions still further, thanks to the lessons learned from an abstract period (1956-60) which, paradoxical as it may sound, left him with a touch borrowed from nature.

The power of his art lies in the exceptionally varied way in which he attempts to give shape to the complexity of life. It is not possible to stick a straightforward label on his view of things. He cannot be catalogued. The variety and richness of his art come from his striving to juxtapose order and chaos, clarity and confusion in the most intrusive possible way. His work testifies to an elusive artistic freedom.

ROLAND JOORIS

Translated by Steve Judd.