

## Painting as prayer



The head of the woman praying is covered in the lightest of veils, her hands rest on the candelabra with nine branches, a hannukah [menorah]. She has just lit the candles and is murmuring the blessing, all wrapped up, her hands cupped and her head veiled. This is a picture portraying the artist's mother, one of the first of her that Antonietta Rapahael Mafai painted. In another picture dating from 1931, painted in London, we see a Yom Kippur ceremony in the synagogue. It is crowded with the heads of Jews in prayer and in the background is a "very mystical" figure, as she herself told Mario Mafai in a letter, almost as if the canvas enjoyed an autonomy of its own and was able to paint itself.

### *"Self-Portrait with a Violin" (1928)*

These pictures are charged with silence, recollection and prayer. We could describe them as dense with mysticism. And yet Antonietta was far from being a mystic or even simply a religious woman. Painting in itself was already a transgression for a Jewish woman, as it was for Chagall; indeed the critic Roberto Longhi described Antonietta as Chagall's "little sister nourished by the same wet nurse". But the painter had had an intense and stormy life, splashed with the same colours that she used in her extraordinary canvases.

Antonietta was born in 1895 in Ekaterinoslav, a city in Russian Ukraine located to the north of the Black Sea. She was the daughter of a rabbi and on her mother's side descended from an important rabbinic family from Vilnius of Sephardic origins. Kaia, her mother, was a strong woman. In 1905 after the death of her husband, Kaia moved to London where her elder sons were already living, taking the little Antonietta with her. It was an enormous leap from the Russian shtetl to London. Antonietta, who was 10 years old when she arrived in London, chose to study music, gaining diplomas in violin and the piano. She had a promising career before her but it was ended by a nervous block which prevented her from performing in public. She changed the medium of her art and began to frequent London's cultural world, becoming a friend of painters and sculptors and even joining a small theatrical company. In 1922, her mother's death prompted her to leave London. She wanted to go round the world, travelling first to France and then to Rome, where however, she was to stop. Here she met Mario Mafai, a young Roman painter, seven years younger than her. It was the beginning of a

story of love, passion and rupture which was to mark both their lives for ever. Three daughters were born, Myriam the eldest, then Simona and then Giulia. In Giulia's beautiful book of memoirs we rediscover the family's dizzy but also strict life, with Antonietta as its driving force, while Mario was always somewhat remote, although he although he was strongly attached to his daughters. The girls were in the grip of a most intense relationship with this mother who was so out of the ordinary and painted them in thousands of forms and yet was quite capable of abandoning them for a while. "For years I thought she was unique, different from every other mother, from all the women I had ever met", Giulia writes in her book *La ragazza con il violino*.



Mario established himself and so did Antonietta, if in a less "canonical" way. Together with Scipione, they formed what has been called the Roman Via Cavour School. However, in order not to compete with Mario but perhaps also to distinguish herself from him more clearly, Antonietta turned to sculpture. They went to Paris, and later Antonietta went alone to London where she stayed for several years. There she rediscovered old friends, studied sculpture and took possession of herself once more. When she returned, she set up a studio on Piazza Indipendenza. As a sculptress she needed room, her sculptures were large, they must breathe. These were the years of the Flight from Sodom and of Narcissus. She remained an anomaly in the Italian artistic panorama and was to find her affirmation only in the 1950s when she became a well-known and established artist. The racial laws of 1938 saw the whole family seek refuge in Genoa: Antonietta was Jewish, her daughters were of mixed race and were not baptized. However, after 25 July 1943 and the fall of the Fascist regime they returned to Rome, believing that it was all over and done with. They were in Rome, more or less in hiding, during the months of the Occupation, protected by their recklessness rather than by taking any safety measures. Everyone knew that they were there, their house was always overflowing with friends and partisans. They survived and life, entirely dedicated to art, began again in that extraordinary Rome of the post-war years, seething with a very lively cultural leaven, poor yet vital. Mario died in 1965. Antonietta survived him for 10 years, continuing to sculpt and to travel, demonstrating her incredible vitality to the very end. She went on her own to Sicily and was mistaken for a lunatic fleeing from the mental asylum. She went to China and fainted from the emotion of seeing dawn break over the Great Wall.

She was a woman painter different from other Italian and Jewish women painters. The force of the

Jewish world of Eastern Europe immortalized, precisely, by Chagall's picture, burst out in her paintings. We see, for example, the girl with the violin, indeed the violin itself, the Jews' favourite instrument according to the old joke: "Why? Have you never tried to escape carrying a piano on your back?". And then, the mystical air of her inspiration of which we are reminded by the Hassidim with their ringlets and the dark robes of rabbis from the East. According to the norms of Judaism nothing in her life tells us of a religious Antonietta, yet everything in her painting and her art speaks to us of a Jewish woman who was fully and completely such, who may not have gone to the synagogue at Yom Kippur to pray there but rather in order to watch others pray and to dissect their souls. For the descendant of dynasties of rabbis this was a way of binding herself to her long history too, in order to pray in a way different from that of others, as she was indeed also different in everything she did.

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