

# Some brushes and five friends

*“Going to the studios of simple people,  
those who work all day  
and consider painting to be a leisure and entertainment,  
you sometimes get pleasant surprises”.*  
Dino Carlesi, 1977

**G**iorgio Dal Canto began his artistic activity outside work he began to handle brushes and canvas, first at home and then in his studio in Via Roma 43.

Engravings and graphics were his first passions, but oil painting would come soon.

There is very little information about his early production, as these works lack a signature and thus authorship.

In 1963 he ‘anonymously’ realised a prophetic painting entitled *‘Anonymous - You will hear about me’*. An oil on canvas (60×50 cm) where he affixed the initials: ‘C.C.M.’. The painting is a homage to contemporary painters with a shapeless figure that seems to be hugging itself.

The first known ‘Dal Canto’ painting is dated 1967 and is entitled *‘Offerta’*.

It portrays a young man handing out a tray accompanied by an elderly person leaning on his shoulder. *“it is a message of solidarity between generations: the young man hands out the offering accompanied by the elderly person leaning on him”<sup>1</sup>.*

*“The signature is in full (Dal Canto), it does not yet appear as a stage name or initials. In a timeless atmosphere, in a space of a disconcerting absoluteness, with imaginary*



*buildings reminiscent of the Tuscan Quattrocento and Metaphysics, two figures stand out in the foreground, a young man holding the offering tray and an old man leaning on his shoulder.*

*There is, in a nutshell, the poetic world of Babb: solidarity between generations, an offering that the artist proposes to humanity. However, the colours are brown,*

*opaque, their gazes fixed, preoccupied, lost in emptiness, almost as if to signify a lack of confidence that the world will be able to accept this offer with conviction and sharing. This is the beginning of a creative journey of undoubted originality, dense with symbolism and hidden meanings, a journey that is gradually becoming clearer and clearer; it includes the ill-omenedness of the marginalised, the indifference of power to the tragedies of humanity, the prevaricating action that power has on every human activity, including culture, which is subject to it”<sup>2</sup>.*

In 2008, Babb produced a work entitled ‘The Offering’ where Pinocchio was the protagonist, but it was longer be a ‘message of solidarity’ but a mocking representation of Power.



**Sentirete parlare di me** (You will hear about me), 1963  
oil on canvas 60×50 cm

*In the early 1960s, Giorgio Dan Canto was painting unreal things without a precise direction; the influence of his contemporary painters was clear. The artist had not yet found the inspiring vein of reflecting on the real world, which he later reproduced in almost all his works, the representation of his indignant protest against Power and its effects on the world. The painting bears an anonymous acronym 'C.C.M.', as the painter did not want to be recognised and wrote on the back of the canvas 'ANONIMO - SENTIRETE PARLARE DI ME' (ANONYMOUS - YOU WILL HEAR ABOUT ME), foreshadowing an important future artistic activity that would later be committed and recognised.*

In 1968, *'The Soldier'* was the chosen subject: *'praised and highly decorated for his war-time exploits, he realised that he had operated with his eyes closed, causing immense damage'*. This subject would be the protagonist of a work created a good forty-four years later, in 2012: *'Poor Constitution'*. *"The simple soldier, naive and covered with all possible weapons, goes to die convinced by Power that Freedom is won through war; but Article 11 of the Constitution reads: 'Italy repudiates war...'*"<sup>3</sup>

His debut outside the safety of his working walls dates back to 1975, with an exhibition in a gallery in Via Palestro, Pontedera. It was a space created by his friends Astutillo Pasquinucci, Galletti and Sergio Vivaldi. More followed this first timid experience, and Giorgio began to participate in painting competitions, winning several awards: the second 'Valgrazirosa' Prize in 1975, the following year the 4th 'Uliveto Terme' Prize, then the first 'Andrea da Pontedera' Prize in his hometown, as well as a certificate of honour at the fifth 'Peccioli' Prize. In 1977, he won the First Prize in Villanova Monferrato.

Thanks to the interest of friends, and in particular to Vladimiro Mori (who he described as 'his inventor') he found his way to the A5 Gallery. This fellowship was a strong partnership consisting of: Dino Carlesi (the renowned critic), Sergio and Francesco Vivaldi, (the printmakers) Vladimiro Mori himself (known as 'Miro'), and Sergio Castellani, two great persons who ran the driving school, Castellani and Mori.

Carlesi was to accompany him throughout his artistic life, producing wonderful writings for him, which enriched his catalogues and clarified his thinking and his art.

Vivaldi was the one who would print his works on paper, printing the majority; one would say almost the entirety, of everything Dal Canto would produce editorially.

In the printing shop, Giorgio was to become a co-existing, almost daily presence and the premises of the company, which in those years was located in Via della Repubblica, near the railway station, became as sort of second 'home'. In March 1977, our artist exhibited at Gallery A5, presented by Dino Carlesi: *'If you go into the studios of simple people, those who work all day and consider painting to be fun and entertainment, you sometimes get a pleasant surprise. In front of strange, polemical canvases, full of irony and, at times, of slow poetry, one wonders what the real motivations are for such work. One ponders which famous artists have been 'looked at' and admired, or what autonomous psychological charge drove him to these formal solutions. In Dal Canto's case, these are expressionistic and, on the borderline, between the surreal and the metaphysical. Then, however, one realises that man really does have infinite ways and resources to express himself beyond words and gestures, especially when painting has to take the place of unspoken words, of the frequent silences that characterise a man's day. In Dal Canto's studio, one gets the precise feeling that his painting is the confrontational but consolatory act with which he attempts to solve certain problems of 'his' reality that he could not solve in any other way.*

*The tour is only seemingly complex: life instrumentalises the painter in a way that he does not want, but rather is subjected to; he, therefore, produces fatigue by continually*



**Offerta** (Offer), 1967  
oil on canvas 45x50 cm



**L'Offerta** (The Offer), 2008  
oil on canvas 60x80 cm



**Il soldato** (The Soldier), 1968  
oil on canvas 50x70 cm



**Povera costituzione** (Poor Constitution), 2012  
oil on canvas 60x80 cm

**L'Offerta** (The Offer), s.d.  
oil on canvas 80×60 cm  
(famiglia Bellagamba)



alienating himself, accumulating bitterness and frustration, which prepare him for occasional, even frequent states of depression. It is at this point that the liberating act of drawing and painting is triggered, almost like a functional therapy that readjusts broken balances and restores a zest for life. Moreover, what kind of painting can be born from this play of psychological repercussions and, above all, what duration and value can this rewarding exercise have? Everything is, of course, linked to personal experiences and moods, but the quality of this painting is already capable of arousing curiosity and interest. It is a compact, plastic painting, supported by a graphic drafting (the drawing always precedes the act of painting) that aims to capture a certain 'reality' by deforming it according to very clear contentious intentions at the level of introspection or according to the melancholies of the moment. Deformation is always a function of a dilation of feelings: the hands of the people holding bowls are huge because their suffering is huge, the medals of the hero to be demystified

are in the foreground, because that is where the irony of the observer must be pinned down. Each scene is always an open 'problem'. The figures crammed between huge shoes and hands and T-shirts seem to be infected by our current madness. The faceless figure in front of a watching crowd reminds us all of a tragic and true 'shame'. The small man reaching out to climb onto the gigantic chair may indicate a common aspiration for peace or prosperity or success. The characters who descend with umbrellas on this poor human city no longer know whether they come to save it or dominate it.

Nevertheless, the recurring theme is not happiness.

It is true that he alternates moments of gloomy pensiveness with others of playfulness and light-heartedness, but difficult thoughts and unconscious fears evidently find their place in the mesh of a tiring life. A man walks backwards on a track towards a destination that awaits us all, while the meadows all around him are as green as if they were to be seen for the last time. The pictorial solution is really effective, clean and essential, as seen in 'Man and the Sea', a happy composition with three horizontal planes, with a figure waiting for who knows what kind of rest and a black moon watching over the melancholic vision. In short, there are simple men who sometimes amaze you with the sharpness of their discourse and the modesty with which they present their pictorial work. Not everything is perfect, indeed sometimes the painting becomes genre-like ('Manifesto' 'The Road') and loses autonomy and novelty, but even still there is a certain style and constituency in this slow and thoughtful produc-



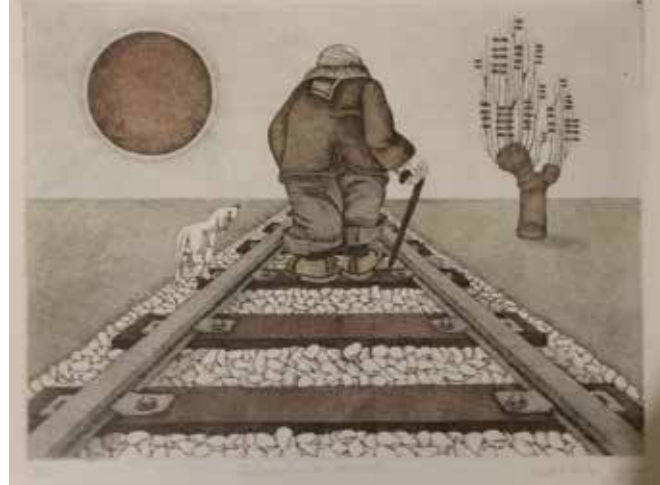
**Senza titolo** (Untitled), 1977  
china on paper 50×70 cm (Filippo Lotti)



The first exhibition at Gallery A5

tion, where some layouts truly rise to the level of poetry ('Dog of cloth', 'Market'): scenes of hidden violence, of oppression suffered, of disappointed hopes. The woman in front of the guillotine waits for a justice that never arrives. Men struggle to compete around a hypothetical tree of plenty that promises only fights and vanity. A man rides another man almost by historical nemesis on a red mat as long as eternity. It is not easy to understand where certain men find the time and the will to devote themselves to such arduous and complex pictorial undertakings. It is, however, easier to identify the general sense of a discourse that overruns the painter's entire life, the world of work and affection, and which tends to become a commentary on everyday life, and sometimes even a protest and a curse. Especially when the pencil skillfully torments figures of derelicts and men's bodies: these are very free drawings, rich in suggestion and intuition, with precise autobiographical references to their own tensions and dimensions. When they are then invaded by colour, they become more solid and peremptory, but their graphic texture is already indicative of a disposition to paint that Dal Canto should follow with greater continuity and confidence.'

This text by Dino Carlesi was again used for the exhibition 'Le carte' at the *Il Pisanello* gallery, which opened on 14 January 1978, but in this case, the critic adds a postscript: 'A few months have passed and Dal Canto is exploding with



A painting work presented at the first exhibition (Bellagamba family)

more concentration and life. The vein of irony does not die out; on the contrary, it has been fuelled by new motivations. What we wrote some time ago is still valid. We might add, indeed, that the themes are now on ground that is more problematic and less exposed to the risks of pietism and emphasis. The invention has not lost its bite, and the play of colour seems more rigorous with these limpid drafts that are cohesively related to the desired atmosphere. The world continues to be seen 'in episodes', as is now the custom in certain films, and each canvas appears complete and exhausted in itself. One thinks of the 'quadrupeds', this coloured caption of a very precise and humiliating human condition. Or one might think of these yellow-brown chairs piled up in another useless monument to the vanity of human toil, or of the stupendous colours of the spectators watching the 'last show' on the sun-baked beach, which is not enough to make us forget the pitiless immobility of those who do not want to save anyone! Let us look beyond the ironic message of the man caged in his own cruelty (*Homo sapiens*'), beyond the confrontational message of the 'puppeteer' who deftly manipulates the wooden gestures of a humanity wrapped in the meshes of a dreadful 'director of consent'. See beyond - as I was saying - the surreal reminiscences to condemn an increasingly power-hungry 'power' ('High Protections' or 'Anonymous Power'), what counts and is worthwhile is above all this executive mastery that throws colours in your face like rainbows whose calculated scansion recites with intelligent simplicity its own limpid history of spaces and



**Senza titolo** Untitled, 1977  
china on paper 50×70 cm (Filippo Lotti)



## GIORGIO DAL CANTO



14 GENNAIO 1978

The first show at the Il Pisanello gallery

colours. In addition, this makes you better accept even the least inventive and easiest moments, because what prevails is the incessant movement of a life in motion. This is the 'ladder' from which descend crowds of young men, priests and women with the bravado of their hidden secrets, those to be carried inside to the 'last nest', the extreme refuge - high above the strange city - where they can reflect on their last unconfessed hopes, the 'expectations' of those who await the miracle.

However, Dal Canto needs invention. It is the weapon that saves him from the pathetic and the literary. It is the invention that catches our attention and will be the one that legitimises his future work. His techniques must always be at the service of this'.

The newspaper *Avvenire* effectively reviewed the exhibition using words of praise: 'A personal success that of Giorgio Dal Canto



**L'attesa** (Waiting), 1970s  
oil on canvas, 48.5x57.5 cm  
(famiglia Bellagamba)

at 'Pisanello'. Expressed through a solidity of Composition, remarkably supported by an accurate graphic layout, his painting is mature and deserving of great attention.

Various are the subjects of his paintings, various the themes he deals with, but, pervaded by a sense of melancholy or, even better, of disenchanted awareness, the spirit of condemnation always leaps to the eye. Dal Canto's work contains, in our view, an ethical, not moralistic, implacable judgement that touches all those who have a position of responsibility in society and whose task it is to pursue authentic justice. So that it will not happen to them to become mere accessories of a structure (like his priests who decorate the immense cathedral) or worse 'actors of hostility'<sup>4</sup>.

In the same year, Babb returned to Gallery A5, and it was again Dino Carlesi who curated the exhibition. This time 'The Cards', where Dal Canto produced five etchings representing five tarot cards, were the subject of display.

Carlesi wrote in his text 'To falsify man' that accompanied the exhibition: "These five tarots breathe the air of the ancient 'playing cards' that were already widespread among the low-

er strata of the population, five centuries ago all over Europe. Tradition says that they were invented by a courtier to amuse or 'tarot' his mad king, Charles VI of France. Then they spread to taverns and courts, and the 50 Italian cards depicting the Muses, Arts, Sciences and Virtues are attributed to Mantegna. Figures taken from history and mythology were engraved on copper, often ironic or satirical, in any case linked to everyday life and human conditions. The Page, the Knight, the Merchant, the Woman, Death, the Angel: all emblematic values of a typical Renaissance or Baroque society, attentive to the meticulous decoration of facts and people, to changing fashions, customs and tastes. These are the Lombard 'tarots', the Bolognese 'tarocchi', the Florentine 'minchiate': they are all documents of an epoch and a culture, played in taverns and palaces with 'triumphs', 'danari', 'coppe', 'coppe', 'spade', 'bastoni', in an infinite range of values, trumps, knaves, horses and kings.

Dal Canto continues the traditions on these five cards, also related to today, to our customs, to our events. The 'King of money' has become 'power', from whose earring the man-in-waiting dangles like a useless trinket, while all around him, the power that has been planted sprouts and proliferates like a luxuriant shoot. The 'Queen of Hearts' is prosaically collapsed in a flowery alcove, the melancholic object of a swinging and avaricious story. The 'Knave of flowers' is the ancient pageboy or bishop, an idealist of a thousand heroisms, who, despite his dream of an impossible palace with Byzantine arches, is left with nothing but the intimacy of his own dream to share with tender pigeons and the barren landscape of his loneliness. Sim-

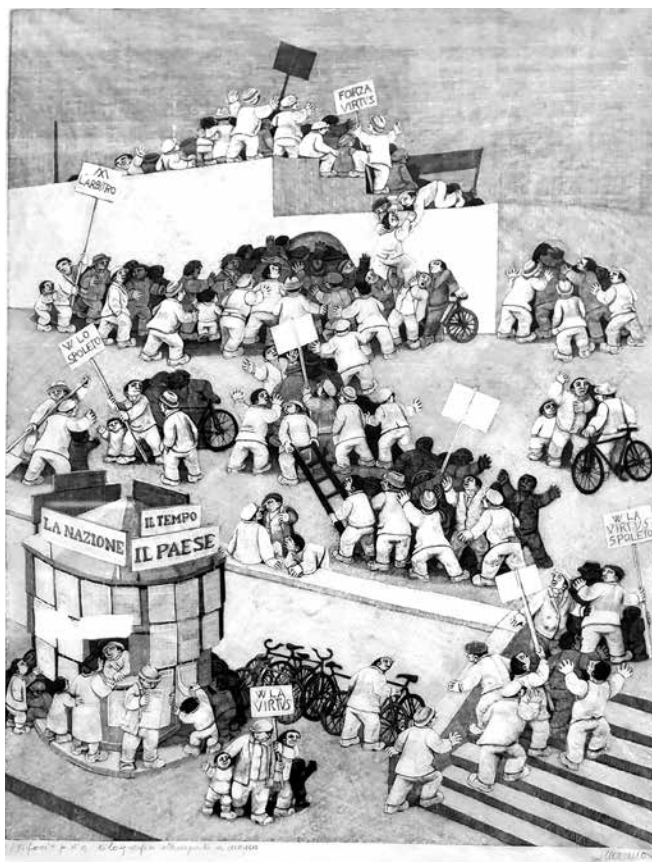
ilarly, the ten defeated men sitting on each others' shoulders - they build in the '10 of Spades' a tower of pain, to which the cobweb of the pavement gives strange effects of imprisonment and resignation.

Finally, the 'Joker': by luck or misfortune, the man continues his ordeal. Those who set off on their adventure on the 'Occident Express', those who remain ashore after having burnt the adventure! The 'Joker' is the man who is everywhere, without whom history has no meaning, available to be placed in the game of life and death, in every space, in every time, always winning and always losing, open to the game of risk, to the tension of love, to the habit of suffering. This is the meaning of the tarot cards invented in the five etchings with Dal Canto's sad wit. They enclose a whole story in five plots. From the '10' to the 'Joker': a 'straight flush', the players would say, in the cunning game of cards, but tremendously 'minimal' in the hierarchy of life, of human values, of poetic and existential scales. The joker-man thinks he is the one who conditions the game, but it is he who is used in a thousand ways on the ungrateful earth: he is the 'trickster'. He can be at the beginning or the end of the story, he can leave or stay, but his baggage is always extremely bitter'.

So far, it had only been Carlesi's pen to try to tell the story of this artist starting to come out of his shell, signing paintings and putting himself on the line.

The critic does not mention from which models his art derives and wonders 'which famous masters were 'looked up to' and admired'. Perhaps it is still too early to recognise them; perhaps Dal Canto has them all inside him but does not allow them to come out.

Alberico Morena, *I tifosi* (The Fans), 1959  
woodcut 39.5x47 cm  
(Sauro Macelloni)



According to the painter Leopoldo Terreni: 'The inspiration for Babb's paintings comes from Alberico Morena from Gubbio, who was the protagonist of an exhibition in Pontedera in the 1970s'<sup>15</sup>.

In 1977, Dino Carlesi published the catalogue edited by Guido and Giorgio Guastalla of Morena's complete graphic works (1954-1997) with an introduction.

For others, however, one of the sources of inspiration is the great painter Giuseppe Viviani

<sup>1</sup> Babb, Giorgio Dal Canto, *Harmonious Conflict* edited by Ilario Luperini, directed by Alberto Bartalini, Bandecchi&Vivaldi, Pontedera 2013, Index of Lies

<sup>2</sup> Babb, Giorgio Dal Canto, *Harmonious Conflict*, The debut, p. 4

Giuseppe Viviani, *Uomo con calla* (Man with calla lily)  
etching 13x20 cm  
(Sauro Macelloni)



iani who would light the sacred fire of art in Babb.

These were the beginnings of a long career spanning four decades, forty years of works, movements, encounters, always with a straight back.

Dal Canto was to accompany the historical, social and cultural changes in our country and tell them in his own way: from his observatory and with his telescope. Without listening to anyone and without compromise.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p. 92

<sup>4</sup> *Avvenire*, 29 January 1978

<sup>5</sup> Paolo Falconi, Babb, un modo graffiante e ironico di vedere il potere, *Il Tirreno* 11 April 2019



**Orafo** (Goldsmith), 1985  
oil on canvas 30×40 cm  
(Fabio Neri)