



## Pisis, Filippo Tibertelli De (1896-1956)

by Linda Rapp

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With a style that combined elements of metaphysical and impressionist painting, avant-garde Italian artist Filippo De Pisis did not belong to any one particular artistic movement. His individualism may have contributed to a certain marginalization of his art, yet he gained acclaim for his cityscapes, still lifes, and voluptuous male nudes. His work is distinguished by a palpable sensuality.

As a young man De Pisis earned a university degree in literature, with an eye to a possible career as a writer. Although painting became his principal means of artistic expression, he continued to write poetry and other works throughout his life.

De Pisis came from the Tibertelli family, established in Ferrara since the fourteenth century. The founder of the family, Filippo Tibertelli da Pisa, was a condottiere, or commander of a troop of mercenaries, from Pisa whose reputation rose to near-mythic proportions over the years. De Pisis changed his name from Luigi Filippo Tibertelli in recognition of his ancestor's place of origin.

Ferrara was dominated by Socialists and anti-clericals at the time of De Pisis's birth on May 11, 1896, and so the staunchly Catholic Tibertelli family found itself somewhat isolated from the social life of the city. De Pisis's parents chose to have their seven children educated at home by priests and later at a private high school.

De Pisis began to study drawing at the age of six, but it was not his sole interest. He was also fascinated by antique objects and developed a love of nature, especially butterflies, of which he had a large collection.

At eighteen De Pisis entered the University of Bologna, where he studied literature and philosophy. He also continued to paint. During his college years he met the brothers Giorgio De Chirico and Albert Savinio. Through them and their circle, he became exposed to the French avant-garde in literature and art, and he entered into correspondence with poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Tristan Tzara.

After graduating from the university, De Pisis went to Rome, where he worked for four years as a high school teacher. He began dedicating himself seriously to painting, producing still-lives that featured unexpected juxtapositions of objects and also some landscapes. An exhibition of his works was presented at Rome's Galleria Bragaglia in 1920.

In artwork not intended for public display De Pisis sought to create an ideal androgynous human figure. He wrote "L'elemento maschile e femminile è fuso strettamente in ogni individuo" ("The masculine and feminine element is tightly fused in every person.") In his celebration of androgyny De Pisis rejected traditional heterosexual sex roles.

In the early 1920s, De Pisis also became aware of his homosexuality. He wrote of sexual fantasies in his diary, and he eventually fell in love with a young man named Berto. De Pisis wrote of enjoying his lover's body, which he said caused him "delirium and pangs of the soul."

De Pisis moved to Paris in 1925 to study the work of French artists, especially Eugène Delacroix and Édouard Manet, whom he particularly admired. The political situation in Italy may have contributed to his decision to leave Italy since the country was then in Fascist control.

Although De Pisis described himself as neutral--neither for nor against the Fascists--he was attacked in Italian newspapers as disloyal for abandoning his country and might have been declared a traitor had not Fascist minister Italo Balbo, an old schoolmate, intervened on his behalf.

In Paris De Pisis moved in circles of artists and writers, meeting Henri Matisse, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, and James Joyce, among others. Giorgio De Chirico was also among his associates there.

De Pisis continued painting still-lives and also produced city scenes of Paris, including a series of water colors for a book, *Questo è Parigi (This Is Paris, 1931)*, written by his friend Giovanni Comisso.

In addition, he created paintings of the male figure, such as *Nudino sulla pelle di tigre (Nude man on a tiger skin, 1931)*. He generally recruited his models from young working-class men whom he encountered on the street. In his diaries he recorded appreciative comments about the bodies of his subjects.

In the late 1930s De Pisis made several trips to England, where he worked with artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant of the Bloomsbury Group. He subsequently held successful exhibitions of his paintings of London.

When World War II broke out, De Pisis moved back to Italy, settling first in Milan. The Fascists were still suspicious of him, and once threatened to arrest him as a "perturber of morals."

After the overthrow of the Fascist government in 1943, De Pisis moved to Venice, where he soon established a reputation as an eccentric character. He dressed as a dandy and appeared in public with his pet parrot on his shoulder. He maintained a large house and his own gondola. He continued recruiting young men to be his nude models, and made notes about them in his diaries "*delizioso*" being a frequent description.

De Pisis chose one of these models, Bruno Scarpa, to be his gondolier. The handsome Scarpa, decked out in the splendid livery that De Pisis had designed for him, also served at De Pisis's afternoon teas, which attracted a diverse group of guests.

De Pisis was known for his evening entertaining as well. To celebrate the end of the war, he threw a party at which twenty boys--"*uno più bello dell'altro*" ("each one more beautiful than the other"), he noted in his diary--danced wearing only strings of shells around their loins. Local police raided the event, described in the *Giornale di Venezia* as an "*assemblea orgiastica*," and arrested nineteen people including De Pisis, who spent a night in jail.

Despite his growing notoriety, De Pisis enjoyed professional success and critical acclaim. At the 1948 Venice Biennale a room was devoted to some thirty of his works. He was not, however, awarded the grand prize, apparently because of objections on the grounds of his sexuality.

At about this time De Pisis's health began to decline due to a nervous disorder, and he found it necessary to enter a neurological clinic near Milan. Despite his medical problems, he continued to paint nearly until his death on April 2, 1956.

De Pisis's art is at once individual and synthetic. Because his work is not within a particular movement, it has to some extent been marginalized. Barry Schwabsky states that "de Pisis was . . . uncannily able to pay rich and explicit pictorial homage to other artists without violating the canons of his own style."

Matthew Gale and Valerio Rivosecchi describe his "distinct style" as "fresh and sensual" and contend that it "is shared by his male nudes, cityscapes and extraordinary still-lives, in their liberal juxtaposition of disparate objects and free ordering of space, the whole suspended in delicate patterns of light and patches of colour."

Loredana Parmesani also alludes to the sensuality of De Pisis's painting, saying that in it "[e]veryday simplicity oozes with lust, eroticism [and] voluptuousness."

The Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Filippo de Pisis in his native Ferrara has a collection of some two hundred works--oil paintings, water colors, and drawings. Subjects include still-lives, cityscapes, and paintings of young men, described as *voluttosi nudi maschili* ("voluptuous male nudes").

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