

Apolonia Sokol, or the art of reshuffling the cards

Apolonia Sokol does not take images lightly, she knows the weight with which the three great monotheisms and their sacred texts have weighed them down. The Bible, the oldest, is not tender on the subject: twenty-three thousand men, we read in Exodus, were put to death for having allowed themselves to sacrifice to the golden calf¹.

The divine tax on figure worship was high, and the injunction was clear: "You shall not make a graven image, nor any figure of all that is in heaven above, and on earth below, nor of all that in the waters under the earth" (*Exodus*, chapter XX, verse 4).

Jewish art is therefore essentially aniconic, even if there are rare exceptions here and there, which date back to the first centuries of the Christian era, particularly in North Africa.

The Muslim tradition will largely resume the condemnation of the sin of pride which consists in figuring what one cannot give life - with a very unequal severity however, according to the times and the regions, and we know many figurative miniatures ancient in the lands of Islam that we now call India, Iran or Turkey. But the Gospels do not convey this spiritual distrust: images of the life of Christ therefore began to spread in Christian communities from the fourth century, without any particular problem or specific theological justification. There was no need for it, until the power of the Church overshadowed the Byzantine emperors (even if they were Christians) and the image of Christ appeared on coins and on the walls of palaces instead of that of the sovereign. If we simplify in broad strokes, but without deviating too much from the truth, *the Iconomachy*, which violently opposed the partisans of figures (iconodules) to their iconoclastic adversaries, and which began in Constantinople in the 8th century, is only secondarily a theological debate: it was, with certainty, at the beginning a strict conflict of power. At a time when the images likely to be seen by everyone were those that passed from hand to hand during commercial transactions, or adorned prestigious buildings, it was essential to have control of them: the master could only be the one who is the image dominated, in number and in symbolic power.

The stakes of reforming iconoclasm at the beginning of the 16th century — they are far too complex for us to dwell on them here — were quite similar.

The political powers therefore always tried, even long after the extinction of the Byzantine quarrels, to keep control of the popular images of wide circulation, from the most monumental figures to the seemingly most harmless representations. The French Revolution, quick to track down to the daily habits of individuals newly promoted citizens any trace of the monarchical system, of the Catholic Church and of regional particularities (think of the abandonment of the Gregorian calendar, the adoption of the metric system throughout the territory, to the establishment of decimal clocks, to the substitution of the franc for the pound in the monetary system, etc. ...) has even gone so far as, very seriously, to look into the centuries-old iconography simple card game. In a world that was tearing itself away from feudalism, it seemed, logically, inappropriate that, on the gaming tables, the kings always prevailed over the queens, and that both always outclassed the jacks.

The draftsman Jean-Démosthène Dugourc and the merchant Urbain Jaume registered in 1793 - the year of the Terror - a patent for "new maps of the Republic" which deserves to be looked at closely for a moment, so much does it resonate with the contemporary debates on the dismantling of hierarchical systems perceived as untouchable. The "cards of the Republic" retained the four families of hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds, but substituted the Aces with

¹ Rather moreover a "little bull" than a calf, in the original text, if we are to believe contemporary exegetes and translators of the holy book (*Exodus*, chapter XXXII, verse 28)

the Laws, supreme values, for the Kings with winged figures (close to angels and therefore relatively indeterminate as to sex) called Geniuses, to Queens the images of Liberties, to Jacks the representation of Equalities. Each card included additional symbolic indications, which would also be interesting to study in detail, even if, overloading the emblem with information useless to the game itself, they probably contributed to the failure of the project of an imagery renewed fun (the revolutionary calendar and the decimal clocks have had little more success): one of the Freedoms is the Freedom of worship, it is associated with the value of Fraternity and takes on the features of a young woman who holds tightly together the Talmud, the Koran and the Gospels; Among the Equalities, there is the Equality of colors, associated with Courage and represented by a Black armed with a rifle.

Apolonia Sokol very early on had the intuition that much more was hidden in the iconography of the cards than the current use of these small cardboards would suggest: still a student at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, she had attempted portraits in the form of tarot cards, borrowing both from the symbols - so present in the minds of the surrealists - of the divinatory game, and from the double figures of the ordinary game, since it was possible to turn the paintings vertically. It is therefore in the strict continuity of her work that she proposes, for her exhibition in Istanbul (on the sites of the ancient Byzantium of iconoclasts and iconodules - but we will not follow this thread, that it would be long and risky to draw) a polyptych entitled *The Virtues*, which gives one of the keys to its universe and is presented without much ambiguity as a "hand" of five cards (the rule, belote or poker) deployed facing to the viewer. If the term "polyptych" is a little abusive (the canvas is partitioned into five, not painted on five articulated panels), the identification of the image of each of the "Virtues" with a playing card is on the other hand fully legitimate: proportions close to a tarot card, stylized figures with little modeling almost filling the frame, very marked emblematic character, even if the emblem sometimes remains mysterious.

The images on the left and on the right are obviously inspired by the *Judith decapitating Holofernes* painted by Artemisia Gentileschi in 1620, of which they provide in a way two different interpretations: on the left, Apolonia Sokol highlights the very great similarity already noticed by historians, and especially female art historians, between the decapitation² scene seen by Gentileschi and a childbirth scene³, on the right it rather illustrates the hypothesis that the figure of Holofernes is that of Agostino Tassi, tutor of Artemisia Gentileschi, but also her rapist. In both cases, it is the feminine power that is exalted, that of giving life, on the left, that of taking it back, on the right.

Adjoining the two tributes to Artemisia Gentileschi, if the eye moves towards the center of the painting, two other "real allegories" (they are inspired by existing characters) of the force seen from the feminine side. On the right, if we always place ourselves in the position of the spectator, a kind of *Origin of the World* revisited a century and a half after Courbet: a woman in an acrobatic posture that can be identified with the famous "hysterical arc" whose Charcot popularized the imagery, exhibiting a vulva high, like a face, above a container filled with blood - one could look at it as containing the blood of menstruation, but the artist specifies that it is the blood from an abortion: in any event, female blood, in a sacrificial cup. On the left, from

² In the Bible, Judith is a young widow who frees the Hebrew people from the siege of the Assyrians by seducing Holofernes, who commands their armies, to get him drunk and behead him.

³ If we carefully observe the painting by Artemisia Gentileschi, the analogy is indisputable and all the stronger since the concrete representation of childbirth is extremely rare, in painting; one of the few that we know of is a very surprising little canvas by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, dated 1870 and kept at the Petit Palais in Paris.

the same point of view, a singular character, his nose shod in butterfly glasses like starlets wore in Hollywood in the 1950s, is surrounded by the signs of his function: a glass of water intended to absorb the spells 'we throw you, cabalistic book. She is a witch — and an artist: on the wall, a self-portrait represents her holding in her hand... a deck of cards!!! In the center, Apolonia Sokol has chosen to make a majestic figure appear whose bandaged chest and feet dipping in clear water indicate what is now called gender fluidity: her hand is very skillfully painted "outside frame" (in other words outside the imposed standards), and the bright red of his clothing is enriched, unsurprisingly, by the complementary color — green — of the background against which he stands out.

Almost all of the canvases that will surround the polyptych are also forms of cards: all of the Queens, including a transgender Queen inspired by the mermaid of the Danish sculptor Niels Jacobsen, who caresses a fish (and who should not be confused with the mermaid d'Erikssen, brand image of the port of Copenhagen), a melancholic Queen, partially demarcated from the allegory of Inconstancy by Abraham Janssens, and a Queen Mother, if one dares to say, which evokes realistic motherhood painted by Sironi in 1916 (as if to repent of the futuristic paintings that had shattered the world, in images, before it shattered for good in the horror of war).

Quotations are never gratuitous with Apolonia Sokol, and in no way should they be seen as a scholarly or formalist subterfuge: she only borrows from the past archetypes that are still active, lurking deep in our imaginations. The artist Queen therefore has hands as disproportionate to her body as those of Michelangelo's David. Capable of defeating all Goliaths, they are lapis lazuli blue (and it is the real pigment that is used here - it was once so precious that Italian Renaissance painters meticulously billed their patrons for its use), not ultramarine such as those of Yves Klein (Apolonia Sokol refers to the discovery in 2019, in Germany, of a thousand-year-old body whose teeth contained lapis lazuli: that of a woman painter — no other reason presence of blue pigment in a dentition than the regular passage of a smoothed brush between two lips — alas forever anonymous). The militant Queen (we will recognize a portrait of the young Oksana Shachko, the Ukrainian activist who killed herself in 2018 in Paris, and whom Apolonia Sokol had collected on her arrival in France) poses with her legs apart, hands firmly leaning on the thighs, very exactly in the posture of authority that Ingres had highlighted in his portrait of Monsieur Bertin, omnipotent head of the press at the beginning of the 19th century, and that the feminists of the 21st century rather jokingly call the "manspreading (in essence: "the fact of spreading out like a guy") in reference to "mansplaining" (which in English designates the strong propensity of men to always explain to their female interlocutors what the latter already know⁴). The modest obligation which was imposed on the women to sit with their legs oblique and close together prevented them, basically, quite simply from occupying the space which was due to them: the simple position of Oksana Shachko appears as a gesture of claim, certainly immediately decipherable by activists, but also well documented in the history of painting...

Many emblematic poses listed in treatises for the use of artists, many gestures that it is up to us today to decipher in the paintings of yesteryear, come to us, as we know, from the theatre, street processions, popular culture — the sign language used, for example, by workers at the port of Naples to make themselves understood by the thousands of sailors of different origins who paraded there each month. It is a class artifice that has drawn a boundary between scholarly iconography and popular iconography, between the major arts and the minor arts. Apolonia Sokol knows all the registers, despises none and mixes them with impressive erudition and remarkable inventiveness: she offers us, in painting, a universe where majesty is

⁴ We could francize: "mectalage" and "mecspliation" would no doubt be audible.

an attribute of the excluded, where jacks fight back, where the Queens always prevail over the Kings, because Jokers with a fluid and impertinent identity, alternately sad or happy but always agile, come to disturb the game. To put it in a nutshell, she tries less to change the world than to reshuffle the cards which are its reduced model: anyone who, like her, recognizes the power of images at its fair value will understand that her gesture, turned towards the future but in no way forgetful of the past, is even more singular than it it seems.