

The Union of Humanity and Nature in Lea Bradovich's Paintings

The American painter looks at the natural world as a source of constant inspiration. Among the subjects portrayed, her female portraits often refer back to 16th century Italian art, in particular to the classicist pictorial tradition. A prevalent theme is that of the bee, which shapes some of the details of the artwork, such as headdresses, necklaces, and even the background itself.

This artist (<http://leabradovich.com>) was born in 1955 in the United States, specifically in Chisholm, Minnesota. She lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Her work reveals a prominent interest in the world of nature in all of its facets. The artist wisely uses it in the rendering of human figures, especially female ones but also, in some cases, in male figures. The subjects often draw from a repertoire of traditional, figurative sacred art. Recurring images of graceful women and young girls recall religious iconography, in which bees have a leading role in the representational economy. Indeed, it is exactly such insects that form the halo and the Christian symbols, as well as the liturgical parameters. Bees acquire an analogous importance in other work by Lea Bradovich. In those, they shape the headdresses of men and women of high social class through their meticulous and methodical arrangement. The natural element perfectly marries the human element, so as to form an indissoluble union.

Lea Bradovich sent us some beautiful images of her work. The leading thread of her artistic production must be seen as a sort of elective affinity between the human and the natural components, almost as if they were two inseparable poles. Both these aspects find such a strong consonance that one could speak of natural anthropomorphism or anthropomorphic naturalism. In this regard, see *19th Century Queen Bee* (fig. 1), a painting that – just like the title suggests- totally plays upon the identification of the portrait of the noblewoman with the bee. The entire space of the representation is thought out with that reference in mind: the headdress, the clothes described in fine details, and even the background that surrounds the woman. A similar point can be made for *Manorbee* (fig. 2), a painting in which the male figure harmoniously marries the “figures” of the bees embellishing his clothes as well as the background. There is no lack of young people among the subjects painted by Bradovich, as evident in works such as *Honey Child* (fig. 3)

The Union of Humanity and Nature in Lea Bradovich's Paintings

or *Daughter of the Hive* (fig. 4) or also *Beehaloed* (fig. 5). From a formal viewpoint, the making of these portraits is affected by traditional figurative Renaissance art. This is especially evident in the gentleness with which all the physiognomic traits of the faces are rendered, in the elegance of the attire, and in the balanced composition. As already mentioned, the subject represented is inserted harmoniously inside the compositional space. In particular, *Queen Bee* (fig. 6) seems to recover the standpoint of figure rendering in the great tradition of Renaissance classicist art

(Note 1).

The female face, which scans the observer with a frozen stare and a certain detachment, can very well be juxtaposed to popular portraits produced in the 1400's. The formal symmetry is especially accentuated, and the image is built through geometrical forms that delineate the feminine face, the elongated neck and the headdress of the woman. In this painting -as well as in other portraits- there is a formal, stylish dignity that expresses social nobility at its best. The hieratic quality of the effigies that accompanies all this is also particularly relevant, and it is visible especially in the impossible pose and in the frozen glance from which a profound fixity stems.

The artist seems to have a particular interest in the world of bees. References to this insect are numerous and constant in her work: in the headdress formed by two enormous bees scrupulously arranged on some flowers, in the earrings, and in the meticulously defined dress adorned by tiny bees. The figure of the woman harmoniously inserts itself in and completely identifies herself with the background, becoming an integrant part of the same.

In the autonomy of a different cultural inquiry, one could speak of Lea Bradovich's work in the same manner in which Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) spoke about philosophy: *Deus Sive Natura*, meaning that Nature is everything, or, better, Everything. It is the substance from which everything derives and to which everything returns.

It is the world view that from Spinoza transfers to the cultural movement *Sturm und Drang*, and subsequently to the literary and philosophical conception of the younger Goethe and his natural classicism.

The Union of Humanity and Nature in Lea Bradovich's Paintings

This classicism, which also derives from the profound affinity of Lea Bradovich for Renaissance visual art (in particular portraiture), is re-elaborated and filtered by the personal sensitivity of the artist, who looks at the figurative experiences of the beginning of the XX century, in particular Surrealism. In the painter's artwork, the bees – in their orderly and methodical arrangement within the interior of the paintings- at first provoke in the observer a sense of disorientation, not dissimilar from the effect produced by paintings characteristic of the surrealist art movement, such as for example the work of Rene' Magritte (1898-1967) and Paul Delvaux (1897-1994). These two great artists are thus the cultural matrices closest to Lea Bradovich's pictorial conception. The theme that joins the painter to Delvaux is the representation of impassive women with enigmatic looks. That which associates her with Magritte is the interest for the juxtaposition of things that are usually irreconcilable. In the case of Bradovich, one can observe this in the bees and the way they create iconographic details relevant to the human figures. Also in this case, the unusual combination is created with a completely impersonal style, attentive to things' realism and objectivity.

Note 1 – In fact, Queen Bee reminds of the Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), datable to around 1541 circa and stored in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.