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Italian Art

in the 20th Century

Painting and Sculpture
1900-1988

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Introduction

For the people of other nations, Italy is still a land of the dead, an immense Pompeii still whitening with sepulchres. But Italy is being reborn, and in the wake of her political resurgence an intellectual resurgence is taking place. In the land of the illiterates schools are opening; in the land of *dolce far niente* innumerable factories are now roaring full tilt; in the land of traditional aesthetics one is struck today by a new élan, by lightning-bright inspirations of something utterly new.

(*Manifesto of Futurist Painters*, 11 February 1910)

The presence of the past is surely more visible in Italy than in any other country in Europe. In spite of countless wars and invasions over the centuries, every episode of history has left a seemingly inexhaustible quantity of cultural remains. No foreign visitor to Italy can fail to notice the plethora of Etruscan, Roman, medieval, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, painting, sculpture and artifacts, and he can almost be forgiven for overlooking the existence of a rich visual culture created in our own century. Italy has few prominent museums devoted solely to the art of the twentieth century, and those that do exist, most notably in Rome and Milan, do not have fully representative collections of contemporary art comparable to those found in France, West Germany, the United States or even Great Britain. There are many reasons for this, not least, the enormous burden which the preservation of the past has placed on Italy's human and financial resources.

It is therefore not surprising that the Futurist painters should have begun the first of their many manifestos (February 1910) with an outburst against museums and the oppressive culture of the past: 'We are rebelling against the sluggishly supine admiration for old canvases, old statues, old objects, and against the enthusiasm for everything worm-eaten, rotting with filth, eaten away by time . . . we are nauseated by the despicable sloth that, ever since the sixteenth century, has let our artists survive only through an incessant reworking of the glories of the past'.¹

With unceasing self-promotion and artificially provoked scandals, the Futurists Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini, encouraged and supported by that extraordinary art propagandist Filippo Marinetti, sent their art to exhibitions in Paris and London, Germany and America. Although the number of major works they produced was small in comparison to the Cubists, each canvas was conceived with the ambition of being a political and aesthetic manifesto. As the exhibition 'Futurismo & Futurismi', organized at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1985, demonstrated, the group's images and words were not without effect. Futurist groups sprang up everywhere, in England (with the Vorticist movement), France, Germany, Russia and even in Mexico and Japan. It was indeed a dynamic impulse for art on the eve of the First World War. If the inventions of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso provided a more revolutionary and, consequently, more esoteric means of expression, it was the deliberately loud and attention-seeking works of Futurism that shocked and shook the world.

Although the Futurists aimed at sweeping Italy clean of history to make way for the young, the violent and the headstrong, the culture of the past was not so easily disposed of. Indeed, the strength of Italian art of this century is to be found in the dialogue between innovation and tradition. The tension between desire for the new and self-consciousness towards the past has coloured the most diverse art movements

¹ G. Balla, U. Boccioni, C. Carrà, L. Russolo and G. Severini, *Manifesto dei Pittori Futurista*, 11 February 1910; translated by R. E. Wolf, in E. Coen, *Boccioni*, New York, 1988, pp. 229-30 (p. 229).

in Italy throughout the century. If modern German art (in its most characteristic style, Expressionism) has been concerned, above all, with the self, Italian art has addressed problems of place and cultural dislocation. Italy's culture is characterized by breaks and contradictions between north and south, neighbouring provinces, city and country, and the experience of these regional cultures and historical fractures has had a profound influence on the country's visual arts.

Despite the insularity of its visual culture during the late nineteenth century, Italy gave birth to two of the most influential movements of the early twentieth century: Futurism and Metaphysical painting. The latter was invented by a single artist, Giorgio de Chirico, one of the most complex and contradictory artistic figures of our century, in response, among other things, to a sense of historical rupture. Whereas the Futurists preached revolution, de Chirico longed for the past, and the anxiety inherent in both these attitudes reflected the chaos that was soon to engulf Europe.

The contradictions of the Futurists' modern vision are made plain in the art and aspirations of Boccioni. The series of paintings entitled *Stati d'animo* (*States of Mind*; Cat. 19-21) depict the modern subject of the railway station: while the image captures the sensation of dynamic movement, the figures in the train seem to be in a trance, and those leaving the station are like Dantesque shades passing through purgatory. Although the Futurists extolled the machine, Boccioni's favourite subject was, in fact, his mother (Cat. 22, 25), around whose features circulate all the explosions of modern life. Yet her static, immutable presence is surely a symbol of continuity and stability. She is the Italian matriarch, a symbol of Italy itself, facing the future but inextricably linked to the past.

Both Boccioni and de Chirico in their different ways reflected on the concept of time, influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson and by the idea of the continuum as the only true reality. Unlike Boccioni, de Chirico felt quite consciously bound to tradition. His city squares, empty of life, are perceived as if in a dream: a gloved hand disturbs the peace of an Italian *piazza* (Cat. 45), a factory chimney rises amidst buildings whose classical features have been obscured by time. De Chirico's schematic classicism has had a profound impact on twentieth-century non-modernist architecture from the inter-war period onwards. The first impression produced by his paintings is one of calm and serenity; but then the weight of civilization that bears down on de Chirico's images gives rise to an underlying sense of turmoil. These pictures pose a series of questions, but they give few answers.

The flat pictorial surface of de Chirico's canvases comes closer to the naive manner of Henri Rousseau than to the luscious '*bonne peinture*' of contemporary French painting. For Boccioni, too, technique was not a central issue; he borrowed from the Pointillism of the Italian Divisionists, from Cubism and Expressionism, as they suited his purpose. In this respect, Futurism and Metaphysical painting had something in common, despite their obvious differences. Pictorial technique was not an end in itself but only the means with which to express a dramatic or paradoxical point. This set a precedent which, with the possible exceptions of Filippo de Pisis (Cat. 83-6) and Giorgio Morandi (Cat. 55-7, 87-94), Italian artists were to follow. The values of a Roger Fry are hardly applicable to Italian art in this century, which, in the words of de Chirico's brother, Alberto Savinio, 'halted the plague of Cézannism that ravaged Europe in the first quarter of the century and, in part, continues to ravage it'.²

The First World War seemed to change everything, and nowhere more so than in Italy. Boccioni was killed after falling from a horse. His Futurist period had already come to an end, and in his last works – for example, *Ritratto del maestro Ferruccio Busoni* (*Portrait of Maestro Ferruccio Busoni*, 1916) – there were strong intimations of a *rappel à l'ordre*. The anarchic spirit was replaced by a more traditional approach to painting, a tendency which was to be found all over Europe but which was particularly marked in Italy. Carrà, too, abandoned Futurism and, after his *antigratzioso* (*anti-graceful*) paintings of 1916, turned briefly to a personal interpretation of Metaphysical painting. After 1918, he expounded his ideas on a new spiritualism in

painting in the periodical *Valori Plastici* and, a few years later, became a painter of the Italian landscape in a style that seemed deliberately to avoid anything radical.

De Chirico abandoned his early Metaphysical style for a method of painting inspired by Titian and Raphael. At the same time, he praised Masaccio and Uccello, whose stillness and calm he, like other Italian artists, sought to make relevant to the twentieth century. Writing in *Valori Plastici* in 1921, he proposed:

If an Italian spirit exists in painting, I can see it only in the fifteenth century. In that century, the toil and labour of the Middle Ages, the midnight dreams and nightmares of Masaccio and Uccello, were resolved in the immobile clarity and adamant transparency of a happy and tranquil art that nevertheless contained an element of unease, like a ship that reaches the calm port of a sunny land after battling through dark seas and hostile winds.³

The element of unease in the years following the First World War was reflected in art as well as politics. Futurism, of course, had been very much a part of that radical 'will to power' which seemed to justify both artistic and political violence. Yet Mussolini's March on Rome in 1922 was symptomatic of new cultural developments which also lay behind the return to order in art; they constituted an apparent abandonment of radical philosophical traditions in favour of a more conservative approach.

There are clear differences between Italian Fascism in the early twenties and National Socialism in Germany, which came to power a decade later. Fascism was embraced by many Italian intellectuals in good faith, especially those who shared part of its roots in Futurism, such as Carrà, Mario Sironi and Marinetti. Their work was sympathetic to the new regime, which seemed to offer not only a more dynamic and efficient state but also opportunities for patronage and public art. It appeared that Italy was again destined for great cultural achievements, and artists looked back to a glorious past in an attempt to recreate it on a grand scale.

The art of the twenties and thirties, while often shown in exhibitions in Italy, has rarely been presented abroad, although art historians on both sides of the Atlantic are beginning to look more closely at the very remarkable artistic production of this period. Some have argued that there was no Fascist style as such, and in any case, modern art, as noted, was already retreating from its avant-garde positions all over Europe. In Italy, Second Futurism continued the spirit of the first, worshipping dynamism and the machine, and counting dozens of artists from all over Italy among its ranks. But Marinetti, like his counterpart in Berlin, Herwarth Walden, now found himself involved in a far less significant movement. The most authentic artistic expression of this period in Italy, the *Novecento*, was rooted once again in history and a dialogue between past and present.

This is best seen in the work of Sironi, whose sombre paintings closely identified with the claims of Fascist ideology to continue the great culture of the past. Sironi had begun as a Futurist in the years before the war, but soon developed his own Metaphysical style in a series of urban landscapes (Cat. 100-2). Unlike de Chirico, Sironi portrayed a bleak industrial environment, often devoid of people. When human beings do appear, as in *Il cavallo bianco e il molo* (*The White Horse and the Pier*; Cat. 103), they seem like actors in a contemporary political drama.

In 1920, two years before Mussolini's seizure of power, Sironi wrote the manifesto *Contro tutti i ritorni in pittura – Manifesto futurista* (*Against all Returns in Painting – Futurist Manifesto*), which proclaimed: 'One needs to progress at whatever cost, carrying forward all previous pictorial achievements, and reinterpreting them anew with an all-embracing synthetic vision. Futurism, having left behind the period of the formidably vital, vast and profound modern sensibility, now faces the problem of how to define style, to make it concrete form and create a final, ideal synthesis.'⁴ In retrospect, this synthesis represented, perhaps, a naive belief in the renewal of cultural values through political activism, a belief that allowed Sironi, an artist of exceptional talent, to associate himself publicly and whole-heartedly with the Fascist regime. He remained, however, a highly modern artist, both conceptually and pictorially, whose work, as we see it today, provides a further demonstration of the

² A. Savinio, *The Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare*, translated by R. Pevear, New York, 1987, p. 27.

³ G. de Chirico, 'La mania del seicento', *Valori Plastici*, no. 3, 1921; quoted in M. Carrà, *Metaphysical Art*, translated by C. Tisdall, London, 1971, p. 148.

⁴ L. Dudreville, A. Funi, L. Russolo and M. Sironi, *Contro tutti i ritorni in pittura – Manifesto futurista*, 11 January 1920; reprinted in M. Sironi, *Scritti editi e inediti*, ed. E. Camesasca, Milan, 1980, pp. 14-17 (p. 17).

sad dilemma of the Italian artist in this century, caught between an irretrievable past and the inescapable reality of the present.

In 1935, Sironi, Carrà and Massimo Campigli (who, together with Sironi, was involved in a revival of the Etruscan style) proposed public murals as a means of reuniting the artist with the community. Sironi received numerous commissions in the thirties to decorate public buildings, including a mural for Rome university, *L'Italia fra le Arti e le Scienze* (*Italy between the Arts and the Sciences*, 1935; see Cat. 108). The design was clearly based on classical imperial models and, at first glance, seems to embody an epic vision of a new Italy. On reflection, however, this is not the crude propaganda of false heroes encountered in the official art of Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. Metaphysical melancholy still pervades Sironi's image: the figure of Victory descends over the scene like an omen of destruction, and the mythical image seems none too stable. The sculpture of Arturo Martini (another artist virtually unknown outside Italy, though greatly admired by Henry Moore) is also pervaded by melancholy, by an artistic disposition which looks to classical models in a highly emotional manner that is far from simple revivalism (Cat. 110-13).

Contemporary with these large-scale public works there existed manifestations of 'internal' opposition to the classical tendencies favoured by the regime. In Como and Milan artists such as Osvaldo Licini sought inspiration elsewhere in Europe and evolved a highly personal, lyrical interpretation of geometric abstraction (Cat. 131). Lucio Fontana, long before the period of his famous 'holes' and 'slashes', experimented with abstract notions of mass and space that carried further the ideas of Medardo Rosso and the Futurists (Cat. 124-30). Yet at the same time, Fontana was eclectic enough to create such works as *Signorina seduta* (*Seated Girl*; Cat. 120), a gilded sculpture of a young girl that hovers between a figurative and an abstract conception of form, deliberately ambiguous in a way that, like the sculpture of Martini, was derived from Metaphysical painting.

De Chirico's work in the 1920s was both classical and surrealistic; his images circumvented the concept of stylistic originality, creating their particular effect by referring to all histories and cultures (Cat. 70-76). At the same time, Scipione, the dominant figure of the so-called *Scuola Romana*, painted small expressionist works that evoked a decadent Baroque Rome (Cat. 143), while Fausto Pirandello produced unglamorous pictures of the working class (Cat. 141) – both far from the classical grandeur celebrated by the regime. None of these artists, however, whether abstractionist or expressionist, was ever prevented from working, and they all found ways of exhibiting in public. Opposition in the form of artistic expression was never totally suppressed, even as the inherent cruelty of Fascism in Italy became more extreme later in the decade. Paintings of protest, such as *Fucilazione in campagna* (*Execution in the Countryside*; Cat. 146) and *Crocifissione* (*Crucifixion*; Cat. 148) by Renato Guttuso, a Communist partisan, indicted the regime in public exhibitions – a freedom that was never permitted in the Germany of the Third Reich. Until the Racial Laws of 1938, 'degenerate art' was of no concern to Italian Fascism, which had preferred a strategy of stylistic pluralism. And anti-semitism, even though it was to lead to terrible atrocities after the pact that Mussolini made with Hitler in 1936, never took hold among the mass of the Italian people as it did in Germany and in most occupied countries north of the Alps.

The twenties, thirties and early forties in Italy were fundamentally conservative in their attitude to art; the avant-garde experiments that characterized Second Futurism were never more than tentative. In the years following the Second World War, however, Italian design, architecture and film began to have a profound impact on international culture. The infrastructure of the visual arts changed little; Italy remained, and remains, a country with very few institutions for the exhibition of contemporary art (with the notable exception of the Venice Biennale). Artists, critics and those concerned with the promotion of culture continued, as they continue today, to align themselves with the ideologies of political parties. There were many arguments about how best to respond to the task of restructuring the moral fabric of

Italy. Once again, it was a question of how to combine a radical position with tradition. Painters such as Guttuso, whose Realist style was largely supported by the Communist party, and sculptors such as Marino Marini and Giacomo Manzù enjoyed prominence owing to their cultivation of a strong sense of continuity with past Italian models.

Other artists, in contrast, considered abstract art to be the style of both political and creative freedom. Fontana in Milan, Alberto Burri in Rome and Emilio Vedova in Venice were the leading figures in the post-war creative explosion. Unlike their *Informel* contemporaries in Europe, the Italians were particularly concerned with material qualities, which they used to express a spiritual aestheticism. Fontana's punctured canvases, with their idea of '*spazialismo*' (spatialism; Cat. 153-9), edged towards a rediscovery of universal values that had seemed to have been destroyed by the catastrophic events of 1943 to 1945. They suggested limitless expanses, while referring back to the dynamic possibilities of Futurism as evoked by the precocious abstractions of Balla.

Burri's work was a statement of extreme radicality when it first appeared in the fifties; his canvases made of rough burlap (and, subsequently, wood, iron and plastic) initially seemed to negate the whole tradition of painting (Cat. 165-70). Yet they represented a continuation of the work of Kurt Schwitters and were to influence such American artists as Robert Rauschenberg. Though icons of industrial culture, in the course of time they have taken on a beauty that enables us to appreciate their metaphysical quality. Here again, Italy and its landscape are restructured and presented as images with a very specific sense of time and place.

Piero Manzoni and Pino Pascali built on both the spatialism of Fontana and the materiality of Burri to achieve an even more radical position in the combination of matter and metaphysics. Theirs was a particularly optimistic or ironic vision of art which was nevertheless infused with a sense of fatality, a mood that led to suicide in the cases of Manzoni and Francesco Lo Savio. The contemplation of the infinite proved too much for them to bear.

Such positions led increasingly towards an art that broke away from traditional notions of painting and sculpture. Metaphysical speculation went so far that art became simply the object itself. Artists like Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Giulio Paolini, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone and Gilberto Zorio were amongst those who expanded the concept of art, challenging the conventions of the gallery space and museum system as the Futurists had over half a century earlier.

Germano Celant gave this new artistic climate in Italy a name that stuck: *Arte Povera* (Poor Art), an art that used simple materials to trigger off memories and associations. Like de Chirico, these artists isolated the object, but in the space of the gallery or in the open air instead of on the canvas, endowing it with mythological, almost archaic, poetic significance. The work of art was heightened in a personal, autobiographical sense, as real objects replaced illusionistic images as vehicles of poetic ideas and ambiguities.

Similar movements existed in other European countries, particularly Germany, where Joseph Beuys (who has been extremely influential on recent Italian art) was one of a number of artists who perceived art as an agent of social reform and revelation. Objects and materials of everyday life were brought forward by the artist in an attempt to heighten the consciousness of the viewer and make him aware of both the spiritual and the plainly practical nature of the world around him. As Pino Pascali observed, 'Europe is a different condition from America. Rather than being a place of action, it is a place for reflection on action.'⁵

Kounellis, like de Chirico, was born in Greece; he moved to Rome in 1946. His work examines the tensions and paradoxes that exist within Mediterranean culture. From his early *Alfabeti* (*Alphabets*; Cat. 213), his work has reflected the observations of a restless wanderer moving through time and space. As he stated, 'I believe that the artist, whether of today or yesterday, never engages in a dialogue with the present, the present in a pejorative sense. But he is engaged in a permanent dialogue with the culture of the past. Certainly, this has always been the case in Europe.'⁶

⁵ P. Pascali, Interview with C. Lonzi, *Marcatre*, July 1967.

⁶ J. Beuys, J. Kounellis, A. Kiefer and E. Cucchi, *Ein Gespräch/Una Discussione*, Zurich, 1986, p. 96ff.

One of his most notorious pieces, *Cavalli* (Horses; Cat. 215), consisted of eleven live horses in the white room of a gallery. At the time, it seemed to be an extreme, almost anarchic statement, yet it is also remembered as a particular moment of contemplation – like a painting by de Chirico (Cat. 72) – a moment to reflect on the horse as a symbol of history and of art.

Merz, like Kounellis, is one of the leading figures of *Arte Povera*. He is both a Futurist, in the sense that his art is the art of a prophet, and a metaphysician who continually reflects on the universal condition. The *Igloo* (Cat. 221) is the central image of his sculpture, and represents, in the artists' words, 'the globe and its balance'.⁷ The spherical form provides a framework that is endlessly rich in meanings. His structures suggest a post-apocalyptic vision of a world which has nonetheless not been totally destroyed; they offer protection and are penetrated by dynamic energy. Merz's *Igloos* are also a reflection of time and movement and of the engulfing jungle of civilization from which man, the nomad, needs protection. His work seems to point even further back in time than that of the other artists discussed here, evoking those tribes who moved eastwards across Europe and effected a fusion of barbarian culture with that of Rome.

Merz is also a painter of primeval animals which seem far in spirit from the Futurist optimism that opened the century. Like Beuys, to whom he is often compared, Merz presents himself to the world as a witch doctor, offering remedies for the materialistic and barren culture that surrounds us. He belongs to that tradition of Italian art which is almost exclusively concerned with metaphysical problems, and his work can be seen as an extension of the ideas invented by de Chirico.

Italian art of this century has resembled the head of Janus, facing two ways. Movements which at first seemed to contradict each other have emerged as two aspects of the same fundamental problem. There can be little doubt that, some ten years after the radical optimism of 1968 and *Arte Povera*, there was a forceful reaction among younger artists against the international style of Conceptual Art. At the beginning of the eighties, there was much talk about a return to painting and sculpture in a traditional sense, although the practice of these genres had never died out, in Italy or elsewhere. Italy was very much at the forefront of these developments, and it was an Italian art critic, Achille Bonito Oliva, who christened the renewal '*transavanguardia*'. Like most such terms, it is ambiguous, but has nonetheless proved useful in denoting an art which broke with the international conceptual style in an attempt to replace it by one based more on local traditions.

Perhaps it is precisely because of its rich cultural heritage that Italy has led the revival in contemporary painting. The exhibition 'A New Spirit in Painting', held at the Royal Academy in 1981, was just one symptom of a changed perception of the possibilities of art that was emerging most notably in Germany and the United States, as well as Italy. Artists such as Sandro Chia, Mimmo Paladino, Enzo Cucchi and Francesco Clemente suddenly took the centre of the stage, and modern Italian art received probably more international attention than at any time since Futurism. The primarily figurative art of the *transavanguardia* never entirely abandoned conceptual possibilities; full of ambiguities and personal mythologies, it drew quite strongly in its initial stages on the example of *Arte Povera*. It soon became apparent, however, that these artists also looked to earlier Italian art, especially that of the twenties and thirties. It was this deliberate eclecticism and almost mannerist opulence that contrasted with the purity and economy of the previous generation (Cat. 225–34). The art of the *transavanguardia* seemed so dangerously all-embracing in its references that some saw it as signalling the end of the concept of the avant-garde.

Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Now, at a distance of ten years, we can place the *transavanguardia*, like *Arte Povera* before it, in a continuum of responses to cultural traditions that was initiated at the beginning of the century. The *transavanguardia* represents more than just another *rappel à l'ordre*, though it is that too, and it is also more than a return to private mythologies, even though this is an important element in the work of a new generation of Italian artists. In the final

⁷ M. Merz, 'Did I say it or didn't I?', *Parkett*, no. 15, 1988, p. 82.

analysis, it is a question of employing new approaches to express, once again, psychological and subjective truths within the tradition of figurative painting. The *transavanguardia* thus constitutes a vital stage in, not the end of, the avant-garde, and has already become a part of history. Like all movements, perhaps, it is an assessment of the past, and it is highly appropriate that the way in which it is developing has enabled it to draw together all the threads of Italian art in this century. We have arrived at a moment when Italian art would seem to possess a remarkable unity of purpose, and it is especially the art of today which allows us to view that of the past with a more precise and acute sensibility.

Norman Rosenthal