

ITALIAN MODERN ART - ISSUE 3 | INTRODUCTION

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Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020

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ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the third issue of *Italian Modern Art* dedicated to the MoMA 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, including a literature review, methodological framework, and acknowledgments.

If the study of artistic exchange across national boundaries has grown exponentially over the past decade as art historians have interrogated historical patterns, cultural dynamics, and the historical consequences of globalization, within such study the exchange between Italy and the United States in the twentieth-century has emerged as an exemplary case.¹ A major reason for this is the history of significant migration from the former to the latter, contributing to the establishment of transatlantic networks and avenues for cultural exchange. Waves of migration due to economic necessity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries gave way to the smaller in size but culturally impactful arrival in the U.S. of exiled Jews and political dissidents who left Fascist Italy during Benito Mussolini's regime. In reverse, the presence in Italy of Americans – often participants in the Grand Tour or, in the 1950s, the so-called "Roman Holiday" phenomenon – helped to making Italian art, past and present, an important component in the formation of American artists and intellectuals.²

This history of exchange between Italy and the U.S. therefore significantly intertwines issues of migration, exile, and diaspora, as well as questions of influence and the active construction of a nation's historical roots. Secondly, because of the dramatically changing diplomatic relationship between the

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two countries during Fascism, World War II, and the Cold War, cultural exchange played an active role in setting the tone of conversation and in reconfiguring the status of the relationship. Indeed, the Italian-American exchange offers opportunity to explore the complex dynamics of cultural diplomacy. Finally, as the U.S. emerged as the hegemonic power in the West and, concurrently, New York replaced Paris as the cultural capital, Italy and Italian art became a major interlocutor and source of legitimization for the U.S. within Europe. In such a fast-changing cultural-political landscape, instruments of diplomacy including art exhibitions, artists' travels, and transnational collecting facilitated the transformation of the relationship while also complicating power dynamics determined by the economic, military, and political imbalance between the two countries.

Reflecting the growing interest in international artistic exchanges after World War II, this issue of *Italian Modern Art* aims to analyze the pivotal role played by the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which constructed dominant interpretive keys that today continue to affect the study and perception of Italian modernism. By studying this exhibition from multiple angles, we intend to explore and combine various methodological approaches. The initiative involves a group of international scholars who have focused on topics connected with *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and the Italy-U.S. relationship from different fields of study, including exhibition histories, cultural transfer, cultural diplomacy, art and politics, the history of collecting, the history of the art market, and more. We hope that this issue builds upon the complexity of current transnational approaches to art history.

Twentieth-Century Italian Art, held at MoMA from June 28–September 18, 1949, was the first opportunity after World War II for American audiences to see the work of a substantial group of contemporary Italian artists. Curated by James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the exhibition was a foundational moment for the reception of Italian modernism in the international context, when twentieth-century Italian art's history was recognized independently from French art. Through a vast campaign of acquisitions, by 1949 MoMA had added key Italian artists, from Umberto Boccioni to Lucio Fontana, to its permanent collection and thereby situated them within the museum's

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influential narrative of modernism. Further, the Italian show aided MoMA curators in revising their institutional perspective in the Cold War context, moving it beyond a Paris-centered canon.

By studying the criteria, contextual circumstances, and consequences of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the present issue aims to historicize and evaluate the peculiarity of the Italian case in the formation of European modernism, expanding on previous scholarship on the subject.³ Moreover, it explores the reception of Italian art and artists in the U.S., the growth of networks and collaborations between dealers and artists, and the role that Italy played in the idea of art-making among American postwar artists. This particular subject allows for other questions as well: How did an important institution such as MoMA shape the narrative of American modernism? How did Italy help Barr and MoMA rethink a Franco-centric vision of modern art after the war? How did the American art world deal with the problematic legacy of Fascist modernism?

After the war, for American visitors to MoMA – many artists among them – Italy came to function as an important example of decentered modernity, that is, as an alternative to the traditional hegemony of Paris. Mediterranean, ancient, rural, and controlled by foreign rulers – and therefore excluded from nineteenth-century narratives of modernity – Italy had taken part in a prominent modernist experiment, Fascism, that resulted in disastrous failure. When it opened, just four years after Mussolini's death, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* stimulated, among American artists and the general public alike, important reflections on the complexity and contradictions of modernism: Americans were discovering the work of Italian artists such as Carlo Carrà and Giorgio Morandi, Marino Marini and Lucio Fontana, Afro Basaldella and Renato Guttuso, whose engagement with Italy's ancient and recent past informed a diverse range of modern options.

Soby and Barr declared in the introduction to the catalogue for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* that the exhibition provided an occasion to acknowledge the U.S.'s delay in recognizing modern Italian art's value, caused by "two formidable counter-attractions in Europe, the Parisian present and the Italian past." Barr and Soby's interest was not limited to Futurism and the Scuola Metafisica – two movements already entered into MoMA's narrative of modernism through exhibitions organized by Barr in the 1930s – but

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extended to lesser-known movements as well as isolated figures (Morandi first among the latter). And, most importantly, the curators were focused on the postwar moment.

Twentieth-Century Italian Art opened, notably, just two weeks after Italy's entrance into NATO, and embraced major aspects of Cold War rhetoric: the twofold message was that the climate for art was propitious in Italy now that the era of Fascist isolationism was over (it should be noted that many artists in the show had led successful careers under Mussolini's regime) and that a "new renaissance" was blossoming after the defeat of Italy's powerful Communist Party at the political elections of 1948 (even if key artists in the show were affiliated with that party). Despite the "new renaissance" claims, the exhibition originated in the 1930s, when the Fascist government approached Barr and MoMA to propose a show of twentieth-century Italian art, as part of the regime's larger effort to promote Italian modernity. The exhibition proposal did not go through: first, because Barr feared interference from the regime; and second, due to the outbreak of World War II, with Italy and the U.S. on opposite fronts. MoMA resumed the project immediately after the war, once the political context was significantly transformed. As Italy was still in rubble and Italian art museums had yet to resume their activities, MoMA filled an institutional vacuum, setting the tone and paving the way for the reconstruction of the country's art infrastructures.⁴

Twentieth-Century Italian Art showcased about 230 works by 45 artists.⁵ The emphasis was on painting and sculpture – in many cases, major works – interspersed with drawings, sketches, and etchings (no graphic design, architecture, industrial design, or photography). Organized chronologically, the survey began with Futurism and culminated with contemporary artists who had emerged in the four years following the conflict. Despite the prominence that Italian women artists such as Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, Leonor Fini, Adriana Pincherle, or Antonietta Raphael Mafai had achieved in the interwar period, the show an all-men affaire.⁶ The catalogue was designed with a more schematic structure than the show, to function as an addendum or revision of the genealogy of modernism developed by Barr in two foundational MoMA exhibitions of 1936, *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*. First in the Italian narrative were the movements and artists that Barr had already canonized in the 1930s: early

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Futurism, de Chirico and the Scuola Metafisica, and Amedeo Modigliani. Barr and Soby made sure to present this “heroic” phase of Italian modernism as predating 1922, when Mussolini took power. The following sections, which corresponded chronologically to the Ventennio (1922–43), suggest the problem of the complex intersections of Fascism and modernism, which the curators were careful to avoid addressing. Although Barr and Soby dismissed the Fascist period as a “dormant phase,” they gave considerable visibility and importance to art that had been promoted under the aegis of Mussolini: “Painting and Sculpture Since 1920” included later work of the Metafisica artists de Chirico, Carrà, and Morandi, and the uber-Fascists of the Novecento, including Mario Sironi, one of the most prominent artists supported by the regime. Among the other groupings for which margins and characteristics were deliberately left blurred were “The Middle Generation,” “Two Realists: Rosai and Donghi,” and “The Roman School.” Among these, the curators presented Morandi and exponents of the Roman School such as Scipione and Mario Mafai as major threads of continuity across the “Fascist interruption.” Despite these artists’ successful careers and state support during the Ventennio, the MoMA curators treated their work as anti-rhetorical, subdued forms of resistance, thereby initiating a long-lasting art historical myth.⁷ The section devoted to the postwar “rebirth” of Italian art focused on movements that reconnected with major modernist tendencies, as ratified by MoMA: the neo-surrealist “Fantasts,” the “Younger Abstractionists,” and the Neocubist “Fronte Nuovo delle Arti.” More open-ended was the section dedicated to sculpture, called simply “Recent Sculpture.” It celebrated the so-called “three Ms” (Marino Marini, Arturo Martini, and Giacomo Manzù) and embraced a substantial continuity between the Ventennio and the postwar moment; by including sculptures from 1919 (Martini’s *Il poeta Chechov* [*Portrait of Chekhov*]) to the present, this section showed, without declaring it, how the rise and fall of Fascism did not seem to affect the artistic trajectory of Italy’s three major sculptors.

Compared to the catalogue, the show presented a more fluid framework, especially with regards to Fascism, as documented by installation photographs and as illustrated by our reconstruction of the layout (figure 1).⁸

Although the installation’s emphasis was on the same artists and movements celebrated in the catalogue, the isolation of the Fascist period from the years before and after was less rigid. In contrast to the catalogue, the section

dedicated to the “Metaphysical School,” for example, combined works from the 1910s and 20s – that is, beyond Mussolini’s coup – to emphasize, arguably, stylistic continuity. Whereas in the catalogue the curators used the regime-sanctioned label “Novecento” to describe the kernel of Fascist art, in the exhibition’s wall texts they opted for the more neutral terms “Older Generation” and “Middle Generation.”

This section had no less than three large rooms, which formed the core of the show. Here, Barr and Soby juxtaposed key Novecento artists such as Massimo Campigli, Felice Casorati, and Antonio Donghi to a younger generation of postwar artists such as Virgilio Guidi, Renzo Vespi gnani or Fabrizio Clerici. In a gallery dedicated to the “Roman School,” works of the 1930s by Scipione, Mafai, Luigi Bartolini, and Fausto Pirandello were compared to postwar paintings by Giovanni Stradone, Toti Scialoja, and other contemporary Romans. Without declaring it explicitly, the curators aptly pointed to the continuity between interwar and postwar tendencies – against the postwar rhetoric of Italy’s “new renaissance.” Whether their critical reticence was due to lack of vision, subservience to the cultural-political agenda of the moment, or a mixture of the two is a matter of speculation.

Still, the show was an important occasion for Barr and Soby to round out and rethink MoMA’s permanent collection. Through an aggressive acquisition campaign, MoMA was intent on building one of the most important



Figure 1. Exhibition plan of “Twentieth-Century Italian Art,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1949. Compiled by Raffaele Bedarida, Silvia Bignami, and Davide Colombo based on photographic and written documentation. Some uncertainty remains regarding the location of works, including those by Pompeo Borra, Virgilio Guidi, Antonio Donghi, Giacomo Manzù, the Fantasts, and the Roman School. Illustration by Francesco Vicari.

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collections of modern Italian art – specifically, paintings, sculptures, drawings, and etchings – outside of Italy. Before the exhibition, the only Italian artists recognized in America had passed through Paris. As pointed out by the influential Italian magazine *Domus*, before 1949 MoMA only had three works by de Chirico and three by Modigliani – two artists who had emerged in Paris. After *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the magazine celebrated MoMA's newly acquired Italian collection and cherished the museum as a leading institution in the international understanding and appreciation of Italian art.⁹

The consequences of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* went well beyond the walls of MoMA. The exhibition had an enduring effect in creating interest in and a market for Italian art. Among the commercial galleries in New York encouraged to support Italian artists, the most important was the Catherine Viviano Gallery, which opened in 1950 with the explicit goal of promoting Italian art in America. In Rome, Irene Brin and Gasparo del Corso's L'Obelisco gallery promoted, as of the early 1950s, Italian artists in the U.S. and Americans in Italy. By 1960, the stature of Italian art in America was so solid that MoMA could organize *Twentieth-Century Italian Art from American Collections*. The show, curated again by Soby in collaboration with Barr, traveled to the Palazzo Reale in Milan (April 30–June 26, 1960) and the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome (July 15–September 18, 1960). The declared goal of the show was to demonstrate the positive and long-lasting effect of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* on the appreciation, understanding, and collecting of modern Italian art in the U.S., which it achieved by showing to the Italian public major works by modern Italian artists in private and public American collections – MoMA above all.

The resulting influx of Italian artists and dealers who came to work in the U.S. initiated important friendships and collaborations with American artists and created opportunities for the latter to exhibit in Italy. Afro Basaldella, who was in the MoMA show and then represented by Viviano in New York, befriended Willem de Kooning and hosted him in his studio in Rome for six months in 1959; there, de Kooning produced his celebrated enamel painting series *Black and White Rome* and began an enduring connection with Italy, where he repeatedly returned to work in the final decades of his career. Encouraged by the MoMA exhibition, the dealers Brin and del Corso, of L'Obelisco, came to the U.S. to promote some of the artists selected by Barr

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and Soby, such as Basaldella, Renzo Vespignani, and Alberto Burri. Back in Rome, they hosted the first Italian exhibition of Arshile Gorky, and, in 1953, organized the first exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg outside of the U.S. In Rome, Rauschenberg produced work incorporating ancient sculptures, as well as visiting Burri at his studio.

For other American artists, the MoMA exhibition introduced the idea of a new kind of Italian Grand Tour that focused on contemporary artistic and cultural production, and was no longer overshadowed by “the Parisian present and the Italian past,” but rather in dialogue with both. A few years in advance of William Wyler’s popular movie *Roman Holiday* (1953), MoMA’s *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* presented Italy as a vibrant center of cultural production, attracting countless American artists and intellectuals, among them, most prominently, Dore Ashton, Lee Bontecou, Milton Gendel, Milton Glaser, Philip Guston, and Cy Twombly.

Building on recent, in-depth art historical literature, the present collection of essays traces a number of trajectories that have the MoMA exhibition at their center. The collection’s main goal is to complicate histories of cultural diplomacy by considering the specific interests, agendas, and idiosyncrasies of individuals and groups of people whose stories intersect and occasionally overlap with larger historical phenomena, governmental policies, and institutional choices. Such histories participate actively in the construction of artistic discourse, and prompt the question: How much agency does an artist (or a curator, a collector, an art dealer) have in a history of transnational exchange vis-à-vis major policymakers such as governmental agencies, ministries, or museums? If T. J. Clark has addressed the methodological question of the tension between an artist’s intentionality and the public life of a work of art, the present publication presents a variety of methodological approaches to complicate a field of study – art exchange across national boundaries – in which countless institutions and individuals constantly negotiate for meaning and translation.¹⁰

Sergio Cortesini’s essay “Another History: Contemporary Italian Art in America Before 1949” focuses on an important precedent to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* by studying how the Novecento movement – a crucial and most problematic section of the 1949 show – was exhibited and received in the interwar period, when it was a contemporary art movement, at a major

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American institution, the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. The cultural translation process discussed by Cortesini, from the intentions of Italian artists and curators to their reception in the American context, initiated a tension that would persist after World War II. In "Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby's Grand Tour of Italy," **Silvia Bignami** and **Davide Colombo** follow the trip of MoMA's curatorial team across postwar Italy as they prepared for the 1949 show. Through Barr and Soby's travel journals and notebooks, the essay reconstructs the Americans' impression of Italy's artistic rebirth – their visits to studios, galleries, and collections as well as the first editions of the Venice Biennale and Rome Quadriennale after the fall of Mussolini. A key contact of Barr and Soby is the subject of **Laura Moure Cecchini's** "Positively the only person who is really interested in the show': Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York." Toninelli emerges as a major player in the organization of the MoMA exhibition not only because he mediated between the institution and the main collectors of modern art in Milan, but also because, as a private dealer and collector, he embodied the ideal cultural diplomat for both post-Fascist Italian institutions and the American curators. In the essay "Neocubism and Italian Painting Circa 1949: An Avant-Garde That Maybe Wasn't," **Adrian R. Duran** turns to one of the most significant artistic movements encountered by Barr and Soby in Italy, the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti. By comparing the specificity of the Italian political discourse and the critical framework utilized by MoMA, Duran dissects the intricacies of a translation process in the fast-changing postwar landscape. **Antje K. Gamble** situates the curatorial choices and exhibition design of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* within the history of MoMA, on the one hand, and that of major exhibitions staged in Fascist Italy, on the other. Gamble's essay "Exhibiting Italian Modernism After World War II at MoMA in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*" analyzes the political implications of Barr and Soby's curation. Absence and instability are major issues raised by **Will Norman** in "Saul Steinberg, MoMA, and the Unstable Cultural Field." Despite Steinberg's formation as an architect, early career as an illustrator in Fascist Italy, and strong connection with Italian artists and intellectuals after the war, he was an outsider to both Italian modernism and the fine arts and was not included in the MoMA exhibition. Indeed, the strategies through which Steinberg navigated both national identity and the cultural hierarchies of Cold War America destabilized the very cultural field that MoMA was solidifying. A major consequence of the MoMA exhibition, the development

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of an interest in and a market for contemporary Italian art, is analyzed by **Sharon Hecker** in "Friendly Competition": A Network of Collecting Postwar Italian Art in the American Midwest." Hecker discusses the social dynamics, influences, and rivalries behind the formation of a collecting community and their acquisitional trends, which in turn produced major public collections in St. Louis and a group of influential tastemakers in the field of contemporary art beyond the New York-Italy axis. **Ilaria Schiaffini** focuses on the transatlantic activities of Irene Brin and Gaspero del Corso, the owners of the Roman gallery L'Obelisco. "It's a Roman Holiday for Artists: The American Artists of L'Obelisco After World War II" documents how the MoMA exhibition initiated a two-way artistic exchange between Italy and the U.S. Not only did L'Obelisco invest in the exportation of contemporary Italian artists such as Alberto Burri and Afro, the gallery also opened its doors to artists coming from America such as Eugène Berman, Alexander Calder, Roberto Matta, Robert Rauschenberg, and Saul Steinberg, who experienced a new type of Grand Tour during Italy's economic boom of the 1950s, the "Roman Holiday" celebrated in Hollywood movies. The publication ends with a conversation with artist Milton Glaser conducted by **Matilde Guidelli-Guidi** and **Nicola Lucchi**. As part of the first wave of American artists going to Italy on Fulbright Scholarships, in 1952 Glaser chose to live in Bologna and to study with Giorgio Morandi, an artist who emerged as star of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* after being long unknown to American audiences. In "On Giorgio Morandi: Milton Glaser in Conversation with Matilde Guidelli-Guidi and Nicola Lucchi," Glaser recalls his encounters with Morandi as crucial to his formation as an artist, attesting to the unpredictable ramifications of cultural diplomacy.

This publication began with the conference "Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (1949)," organized by Raffaele Bedarida, Silvia Bignami, and Davide Colombo at CIMA in New York in February 2019, in connection with the Annual Conference of the College Art Association (CAA) and upon the seventieth anniversary of the original exhibition. The conference was made possible by a Terra Foundation for American Art grant. We extend our gratitude to CIMA and the Terra Foundation for supporting this research project, which we believe is in line with the two institutions' promotion of both the exchange of knowledge across national boundaries and transnational approaches to the study of art history. This publication could not be accomplished without CIMA's Education and Programs

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Manager, Chiara Trebaiocchi, whose relentless commitment to both the conference and the editorial process cannot be emphasized enough. Our copy editor, Deirdre O'Dwyer, went above and beyond her professional duty to participate actively in a process of cultural translation comparable to our subject of study. CIMA's former Executive Director Heather Ewing enthusiastically encouraged and supported this project since its inception, and Emma Lewis graciously hosted our study day. The feedback and theoretical framework provided by the conference respondents, Emily Braun and Melissa Dabakis, proved seminal for the development of the current publication. Likewise, the historical framework presented by Renato Camurri set the tone for a methodological reflection which exudes the disciplinary boundaries of art history. To them and to all the conference participants goes our gratitude.

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Citations

1. Beginning in the 1990s with publications exploring artistic exchange between Italy and the U.S. such as Germano Celant and Anna Costantini, eds., *Roma-New York 1948–1964* (Charta: Milan, 1993) and Emily Braun, ed., *Giorgio de Chirico and America* (New York: Hunter College of the City University; Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico; Turin: Allemandi, 1996), the field exploded in the 2010s with major conferences, publications, and exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the conferences: “Hybrid Republicanism: Italy and American Art, 1840–1918,” American Academy, Rome, October 2016; “The Course of Empires: American Italian Cultural Relations, 1770–1980,” Smithsonian American Art Museum, October 2017, Washington, D.C.; and “Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA’s *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (1949),” CIMA, New York, February 2019. Among the exhibitions: *Afro Basaldella. The American Period*, MART, Rovereto, Italy, March 17–July 18, catalogue edited by Gabriella Belli (Milan: Mondadori/Electa, 2012); *New York New York. Arte Italiana. La Riscoperta dell’America*, Museo del Novecento and Gallerie d’Italia, Milan, April 13–September 17, 2017, catalogue edited by Francesco Tedeschi (Milan: Electa/Mondadori, 2017); and *Peggy Guggenheim. L’ultima Dogaressa*, Peggy Guggenheim Museum, Venice, November 21, 2019–January 27, 2020, catalogue edited by Karole P. B. Vail and Gražina Subelytė (Venice: Guggenheim/Marsilio, 2019). Among the books: Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015); Flavio Fergonzi, Francesco Tedeschi, eds., *Arte Italiana 1960–1964. Identità culturale, confronti internazionali, modelli americani* (Milan: Scalpendi editore, 2017); Sergio Cortesini, *One day we must meet: Le sfide dell’arte e dell’architettura italiane in America 1933–1941* (Monza: Johan & Levi, 2018); and Raffaele Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l’esilio, l’America (1938–1947)* (Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2018). The latter is part of a series of books curated by Renato Camurri and published by Donzelli since 2015 on the theme of Italians in exile in the U.S. during World War II.
2. On this topic, see Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013); and Ariane Varela Braga and Thomas Leo-True, eds., *Roma e gli artisti stranieri. Integrazione, reti identità, XVI–XX sec* (Rome: Artemide, 2018).

3. See Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 147–69; Davide Colombo, "1949: Twentieth-Century Italian Art at MoMA di New York," in Tedeschi, *New York New York. La riscoperta dell'America*, 102–09; and Nicol Maria Mocchi, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art 1949: Il caso Morandi," in *ibid.*, 110–15.
4. On the conditions of Italian museums during the preparation of the MoMA show, see Emily Braun's intervention as a respondent at the "Methodologies of Exchange" Study Day, see video at this link, min. 1:42 (last accessed January 30, 2020).
5. Afro, Giacomo Balla, Luigi Bartolini, Umberto Boccioni, Pompeo Borra, Corrado Cagli, Massimo Campigli, Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati, Bruno Cassinari, Fabrizio Clerici, Giorgio de Chirico, Filippo De Pisis, Antonio Donghi, Pericle Fazzini, Salvatore Fiume, Lucio Fontana, Emilio Greco, Virgilio Guidi, Renato Guttuso, Stanislaw Lepri, Mario Mafai, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini, Arturo Martini, Marcello Mascherini, Amedeo Modigliani, Giorgio Morandi, Marcello Muccini, Fausto Pirandello, Armando Pizzinato, Ottone Rosai, Luigi Russolo, Giuseppe Santomaso, Toti Scialoja, Scipione, Pio Semeghini, Gino Severini, Mario Sironi, Ardengo Soffici, Giovanni Stradone, Arturo Tosi, Renzo Vespignani, Alberto Viani, and Giuseppe Viviani.
6. On the absence of women at the MoMA show, see Melissa Dabakis's intervention as a respondent at the "Methodologies of Exchange" Study Day and following discussion, see video at this link, min. 1:16 (last accessed January 30, 2020).
7. A revisionist effort is initiated in Emily Braun, "Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi's Still Lifes and the Cultural Politics of Strapaese," *Modernism/Modernity, Special Issue on Fascism and Culture* 2, no. 3 (September 1995): 89–115.
8. The reconstruction is based on installation views, but some information remains missing. Notably, there is some doubt about the location of a few groups of artists (Borra and Guidi, Donghi, the Fantasts, the Roman School, and Manzù).
9. Gio Ponti in *Domus*, nos. 248–49 (July–August 1950), no. 250 (September 1950), and no. 251 (October 1950).
10. Timothy J. Clark, "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 172–242.

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ANOTHER HISTORY: CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART IN AMERICA BEFORE 1949

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Sergio Cortesini **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

This essay looks at modern Italian art circulating in the United States in the interwar period. Prior to the canonization of recent decades of Italy's artistic scene through MoMA's 1949 show *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the Carnegie International exhibitions of paintings in Pittsburgh were the premier stage in America for Italian artists seeking the spotlight. Moreover, the Italian government actively sought to promote its own positive image as a patron state in world fairs, and through art gallery exhibitions. Drawing mostly on primary sources, this essay explores how the identity of modern Italian art was negotiated in the critical discourses and in the interplay between Italian and American promoters.

While in Italy much of the criticism boasted a self-assuring "untranslatable" character of national art through the centuries, and was obsessed by the chauvinistic ambition of regaining cultural primacy, especially against the French, the returns for those various artists and patrons who ventured to conquer the American art scene were meager. Rather than successfully affirming the modern Italian school, they remained largely entangled in a shadow zone, between the glaring prestige of French modernism and the glory of the old masters (paradoxically enough, the only Italian "retrospective" approved by MoMA before 1949). Some Italian modernists, such as Amedeo Modigliani, Giorgio de Chirico, and Massimo Campigli, continued to be perceived as French, while the inherent duality and ambiguity in the critical discourse undergirding the Novecento and the more expressionist younger generation – which struggled to conflate Italianism and modernity, traditionalism and vanguardism – made the marketing of an Italian school more difficult. Therefore, despite some temporary critical success and sales, for example for Felice Carena, Ferruccio Ferrazzi, and Felice Casorati, the language of the Italian Novecento was largely "lost in translation."

Introduction

With the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the Museum of Modern Art cast a light on the last four decades of Italy's artistic scene and embraced it as a prodigal son returned to the kinship of Western modernity. MoMA, as the uppermost artistic institution of the now hegemonic country, normalized cultural relations with Italy, and also winnowed out and reframed the history of modern Italian art that had circulated in the United States before the war. This paper accounts for the prewar vista, in which both American and Italian actors played a part, in a period charged with nationalistic biases, fantasies of renaissance, and anxiety for hegemony.

A thorough scanning of the period between 1900 and 1940 would rake together a wealth of scattered appearances of Italian artworks in private galleries, public venues, local societies, and international exhibitions, along with lists of short articles, reproductions, and collectors. The Julien Levy gallery, opened in New York in 1931, stands out in this landscape as the bridgehead of the Parisian vanguard; through its gate passed works by Giorgio de Chirico, Massimo Campigli, and Leonor Fini. Indeed, de Chirico and Amedeo Modigliani – whose works often appeared in American art magazines alongside scores of Picassos and Matisse's odalisques – were perceived as Italian stars within the superior Parisian firmament.

However, piecing together such a broad mosaic would likely prove redundant, since some of the tesserae have already been reconstituted by previous studies.¹ I myself recently discussed the challenges assigned by the Italian Fascist government to modern art and architecture in traveling exhibitions and world's fairs in New Deal America; my references here to those episodes will be minimal.² The essay that follows will instead focus on lesser-known – and more ephemeral – success stories that for a time bore the standard of Italian identity across the Atlantic. Before MoMA's 1949 show raised again the curtain on modern Italian art, the Carnegie International exhibitions of paintings were the most illustrious stage on which Italian artists sought the spotlight in America.³ If today the splendor of the Carnegie

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International is somewhat faded, due to the engulfment of biennials in the globalized art world, and to various interruptions/resumptions and changes in the format, scope, and periodicity of its editions, during the first decades of its history – and especially under the directorship of Homer Saint-Gaudens, who led the institution beginning in 1922 – the annual Carnegie event offered premier surveys of international art, second only to the slightly older Venice Biennale.

More to the point, when industrialist Andrew Carnegie founded the Carnegie Institute's Department of Fine Arts (now the Carnegie Museum of Art) in 1895, one of his ambitions was to create a public collection of modern art; the series of international exhibitions he established the following year became strategic in this policy of showcasing – and selectively acquiring – what Carnegie called “the Old Masters of Tomorrow.”⁴ Long before the founding of MoMA in 1929, the Carnegie took upon itself the role of educating its Pittsburgh audience in contemporary art; further, it claimed the status of a national institution in that field, while other public museums and private collectors were mostly interested in established Old Masters. It is thus relevant to consider the early Carnegie shows as a major gateway for the commercial and cultural traffic of Italian art in America, in an epoch predating MoMA's institutional dominance, and when the latter was still barely receptive to current artistic production in Italy.

Italian Art at the Carnegie

By 1900 only a small cohort of internationally renowned Italian painters had made their way into the American art market; they embodied the viability of the contemporary Italian scene. A handful of Venetian painters – the aging Ettore Tito (born 1859), the slightly younger Italo Brass, and the siblings Emma and Beppe Ciardi (born in the 1870s) – charmed their cosmopolitan American clientele with canvases “painted with a foil,” capturing the light and life of Venetian streets and canals, whether contemporary or recalled from the eighteenth century, along with landscapes, portraits, and even mythological figures.⁵ The Roman Antonio Mancini (born 1852) painted “like fireworks,”⁶ and had enjoyed recognition since the mid-1870s, enchanting wealthy patrons with Roman/Neapolitan urchins and peasants. His brushwork, especially late into his oeuvre, involved overworked impasto to highly tactile effect, while blurring forms to create a sense of visual flickering

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over the pictorial plane. "The colour is beautiful and technique épatante,"⁷ assured collector and dealer Ralph Curtis to Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1884, as he was commissioning, on her behalf, Mancini's *Il ciociaretto porta stendardo alla festa della mietitura* (The Standard Bearer of the Harvest Festival, 1884; figure 1), of an adolescent celebrating the harvest in a religious procession in the Roman Campagna. In 1895, this time at the suggestion of artist John Singer Sargent, Gardner again commissioned a work from Mancini: a seated portrait of her husband, John L. Gardner. Other collectors, including American painter William Merritt Chase, were attracted to Mancini's work, and in 1892 *Ragazzo del circo* (A Circus Boy, 1872), a picture based on a juggler seen in Naples, on being presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York became the first work by Mancini to enter a public collection anywhere.⁸

The Italians named above contributed to the annual exhibitions staged as the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, prompting the circulation of their works in additional American cities, including Cleveland, San Francisco, Brooklyn, and Toledo. From the first International curated by Homer Saint-Gaudens in 1923, until the war year 1940, the inclusion of Italian artists grew more prominent.⁹ Saint-Gaudens availed himself of a network of European representatives, including Ilario Neri in Italy, who assisted in scouting promising works and accompanied him in yearly studio visits; he also instituted the display of works by country, implicitly following the nation-based survey model of the Venice Biennale. Moreover, considering that the United States lacked a federal department of culture, unlike many European countries, Saint-Gaudens considered the Carnegie to have a de facto role in the matter of educating the public in contemporary art – although the International rarely welcomed more daring avant-garde works. He was committed to spreading European art in America and was persuaded of the necessity to broaden the vision of modern art beyond Paris. He was particularly attentive to the Italian art scene because it looked, to him, untainted by the subjectivist extravaganzas of the avant-garde. ("Modern Italian art is neither Cubistic nor Crazy," he wrote in 1924).¹⁰

Saint-Gaudens orchestrated the Italian section to present both "conservative" and "advanced" artists, as he named them. Even though generally the conservatives outnumbered the moderns – and the Carnegie advisory board requested that no aesthetically "radical" artists infiltrate the selection (neither

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Futurists nor abstract artists were invited) – the show aspired to be equitably representative of the actual current scene. Saint-Gaudens consistently considered Mancini, until his death in 1930, to be an outstanding artist and indispensable champion of the old school, and he exhibited Tito until the end of the decade. (This echoed late career tributes to these masters through solo shows at the Venice Biennale and their appointments to the Accademia d'Italia.)

However, in 1924 Saint-Gaudens “discovered” two new artists who, in his mind, embodied the “medium” and “advanced” trends. The first was Giovanni Romagnoli, from Bologna, who at his debut in 1924 won the second prize; he was the first Italian ever to receive the award, for *Dopo il bagno* (After the Bath, 1922; figure 2), a painting of a broad feminine back turned to the observer, which Saint-Gaudens praised for its “vitality and brilliance.”¹¹ The work was purchased by Edgard J. Kaufmann, Pittsburgh department store



Figure 1. Antonio Mancini, “Il ciociaretto porta stendardo alla festa della mietitura” [The standard bearer of the harvest festival], 1884. Oil on canvas, 64 15/16 x 33 7/16 in. (165 x 85 cm). Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

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owner (and, later, client of Frank Lloyd Wright, for the architectural masterpiece Fallingwater), who lent it for an indefinite time period to the Department of Fine Arts.¹² From then on, Romagnoli was regularly invited to participate in the Carnegie International, and he took part in the jury in 1926; he also had a solo show in Pittsburgh and received portrait commissions locally and in New York, taught in 1926 and 1930 at the Pittsburgh Technical School, and in 1940 was commissioned for a fresco to adorn the Italian room of the Cathedral of Learning at Pittsburgh University.¹³

Romagnoli, a delicate, fluffy colorist, represents a strain of traditionalist, softly erotic painting replete with reclining nudes, Venuses, and women captured in the intimacy of their toilettes – in other words, objectified by the male gaze (figure 3). The other “nut” picked by Saint-Gaudens in his scouting trip in 1924 was Felice Casorati, a painter who used iconographic motifs at times similar to Romagnoli’s – including nude women and still lifes – but treated them as accoutrements for self-referential interplays of pictorial planes, colors, and spatial ambiguities devoid of narrative content. Saint-Gaudens described him as “mildly ‘wild’”¹⁴ in selecting Casorati’s iconic pseudo-portrait *Silvana Cenni* (1922), a quintessential work of his blend of neo-Quattrocento and metapictorial references. Casorati later became a



Figure 2. Giovanni Romagnoli, “Dopo il bagno” [After the bath], 1922. Awarded Second Prize at “Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings,” Pittsburgh, 1924.

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modern pillar of the Carnegie shows, and exhibited twenty-five works over twelve editions, from 1924 to 1939; he sat on the jury in 1927, and was awarded the second prize in 1937, for *Donna vicino al tavolo* (Woman Near a Table, 1936; figure 4).

Other pillars of the “advanced” school were Ferruccio Ferrazzi and Felice Carena. Ferrazzi, in 1925, sent *Visione prismatica* (Prismatic Vision, 1924; figure 5) – an esoteric family portrait typical of his self-indulgent tendency to transfigure everyday gestures into mysterious rituals and settings. Here, the scene pivots around a prism, ostensibly held by the artist, shown to his baby daughter coming out of a bathtub. Ferrazzi was the first Italian to receive, in 1926, the Carnegie’s first prize, for *Orizia e Fabiola* (Horitia and Fabiola, 1926; figure 6), another remodeling of familiar figures (his wife and daughter) as well as space, through dramatic lighting and angularities; the painting was purchased by W. S. Stimmel of Pittsburgh. Until the end of the 1930s, Ferrazzi exhibited at almost every edition of the Carnegie (with the exception of 1929) his signature repertory of archaic rural scenes (in 1931 he was praised for a Roman countryside, *La trita del grano* [Thrashing of the Grain, 1928; figure 7]) and esoteric narratives wherein both portraiture and landscape are transfigured into an immemorial age (conveyed also by his revival of encaustic, a medium of the ancient Romans).

Certainly, the Carnegie International succeeded in fostering the visibility of Italian art. In 1924 (the first edition for which Neri served as an agent of the Carnegie) the exhibition was still heavily unbalanced in favor of American artists (with 130 paintings) and also British and French (with sixty pictures



Figure 3. Giovanni Romagnoli, “Summer morning,” 1929. Oil on canvas, 29 15/16 x 43 5/16 in. (76 x 110 cm). Private Collection. Exhibited at “Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings,” Pittsburgh, 1929.

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representing each nation); only seventeen works were included in the Italian section. The ratio progressively changed to a milder discrepancy: in 1935, one hundred paintings by Americans hung next to fifty each for Great Britain and France, and thirty-four for Italy. The percentage of sales rose from 7% in 1923, to an average of 13% in subsequent years.

Carena, in 1929, won first prize for the large painting *La scuola* (The School, 1928; figure 8); as an homage to Gustave Courbet's *Atelier* (1854–55) in Cézannesque brushwork, it represents the red-haired artist himself as a teacher surrounded by pupils at a figure drawing class in

Florence's Accademia di Belle Arti. It was purchased and lent to the Carnegie Department of Fine Arts by industrialist Albert C. Lehman, a self-professed enthusiast of Italian art and Benito Mussolini (with whom he managed to have an interview in the spring of 1930, when he was visiting Rome). Other pictures by Casorati entered public collections, such as the beautiful *Icaro* (Icarus, 1936; figure 9), bought by the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1938, while the Italians Ubaldo Oppi, Giuseppe Montanari, and Alessandro Pomi, among others, won prizes and attracted buyers.



Figure 4. Felice Casorati, "Donna vicino a un tavolo" [Woman near a table], 1936. Oil on canvas, 47 1/16 x 35 3/8 in. (119.5 x 89.8 cm). Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna. Awarded Second Prize at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1937.

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Over the years, the Carnegie followed evolving trends in Italian art, from the “magical realism” typical of the early Novecento (I am referring here to the postvanguard, neoclassicist style of the original group of seven Milan-based painters, gathered under the critical helm of Margherita Sarfatti in 1923)¹⁵ to the more expressionist turn of the mid-1930s. In 1925, Saint-Gaudens selected *Nudo* (Nude, c. 1925; figure 10) by Oppi, another “leader of the young Italian school;”¹⁶ the painting is one in a series elaborating on a French album of slightly erotic photographs presented as *études académiques* for artists, wherein Oppi indulged in the limbo between artificiality and the animation of real life – typical of magical realism. The picture earned him second prize and was bought by local businessman Walter A. May. In 1926, Saint-Gaudens became enthusiastic for two other exponents of Novecento: Piero Marussig, for *Signora in blu* (Lady in Blue, 1921), and Arturo Tosi, a painter of familiar Lombard landscapes “in which the modern yeast has not oversoured the dough of beauty.”¹⁷



Figure 5. Ferruccio Ferrazzi, “Visione prismatica” [Prismatic vision], 1924. Private Collection. Exhibited at “Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings,” Pittsburgh, 1925.

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In March 1926, Saint-Gaudens visited the landmark first exhibition of Novecento Italiano at Milan's Palazzo della Permanente, accompanied by Tosi and Neri. (By this time the original kernel of seven vanguard-turned-neoclassicist painters from 1923 had evolved into a looser, larger group, encompassing heterogeneous personal variations over a generally dominant naturalistic and archaizing idiom.) In January 1927, the movement's leading

artists – Tosi, Alberto Salietti, Marussig, Achille Funi, Carlo Carrà, Mario Sironi, and Ardengo Soffici – bolstered by the success of the Italian section at the previous Carnegie, took direct initiative, writing as a group to ask Saint-Gaudens to consider them as the unique Italian contingent in the upcoming exhibition.¹⁸ If their letter confirms the bold attempts of the Novecento to act as a semiofficial movement that could claim to be nationally representative and to boast political backing (Mussolini had attended the openings of the inaugural Novecento shows),¹⁹ Saint-Gaudens's polite refusal in response attests his ability to navigate a narrow path between cooperating with Italian advisors and cultural officials and remaining faithful to his mission to present as wide as possible a survey of "advanced" and "conservative" artists.

Saint-Gaudens's typically moderate taste adapted itself to evolving trends. In the late 1920s, he considered Sironi and Carrà too crude in their expressionist distortions. However, Neri, despite his personal disapproval of Sironi's coarse style ("Certainly, I think, nobody would like to have a portrait



Figure 6. Ferruccio Ferrazzi, "Orizia e Fabiola" (Horitia and Fabiola), 1926. Private Collection. Awarded First Prize at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1926. From "Thirtieth Annual International Exhibition of Paintings. October 14 – December 5, 1926," (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1926).

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made by him!"),²⁰ in 1931 had to admit, in a letter to Saint-Gaudens, that his works were "strong and important [...] modern, interesting, and original."²¹ Saint-Gaudens did invite the artist in acknowledgment of his role as a trendsetter, and *Pescatori* (Fishermen, c. 1930; figure 11) was awarded second prize. The picture, as one reviewer put it, left "critics as well as laymen [...] distraught" for its "crudity," while its "architectural strength" and "a sense of the elemental salt-wash and weather of the sea in its line and color [...] cannot easily be put into words."²² Sironi and Carrà, along with Giorgio Morandi, Casorati, and Carena, became the new protagonists of the Carnegie, while Oppi was left out, considered artistically exhausted.



Figure 7. Ferruccio Ferrazzi, "La trita del grano" [Threshing of the grain], 1928. Exhibited at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1931. From "Thirtieth Annual International Exhibition of Paintings. October 15 - December 6, 1931," (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1931).

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In choosing the artists to invite every year, Saint-Gaudens had only dim insight into – or interest in – the current debate and factions then dividing art criticism in Italy. He seems to have been oblivious of the feud opposing admirers of Sironi's expressionist style and traditionalists over the issue of genuinely Italian – and orthodox Fascist – art prompted by the revival of mural painting in 1933, nor does he seem to acknowledge the harsh polemic about "sound" (classicist in style, nationalist in subjects) versus "degenerate" (expressionist and allegedly un-Italian) art toward the end of the decade. His approach was more instinctual, based on his personal taste, defined by an innate conservatism that slowly acclimatized to incipient modernist innovations. He relied on Neri's and other acquaintances' counseling, had a sense of evolving trends through the catalogues of the Venice Biennale and the Quadriennale in Rome, but he never fully mixed with Italian factionalism and politicization.



Figure 8. Felice Carena, "La scuola" [The school], 1928. Oil on canvas, 66 15/16 x 125 3/16 in. (170 x 318 cm). Collection of the Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena. Awarded First Prize at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1929.



Figure 9. Felice Casorati, "Icaro" [Icarus], 1936. Oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 63 3/4 in. (115 x 161.7 cm). Detroit Institute of Art. Purchased in 1938 through the Founders Society. Exhibited at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1937.

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A case in point is his attitude vis-à-vis Corrado Cagli. In 1936, Cagli, then twenty-six years old, was the rising star of the younger Roman School. His loose brushstrokes and light palette set him apart from the naturalism and somewhat frigid archaism of Novecento painters. Saint-Gaudens's first meeting with him in Rome was less than sympathetic:



Figure 10. Ubaldo Oppi, "Nudo" [Nude], c. 1925. Exhibited at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1926. Purchased by Walter A. May, Pittsburgh. Reproduced from "Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration" (Darmstadt: Alexander Koch, 1928): 79.

Nothing less than a Principessa or a Contessa telephoned me. They knew that our show was run between a slice of lemon and sugar in the tea. Moreover, teacups run to Cagli, and Cagli will reform Italian art first and all modern art later. I investigated. I had a dreadful time sorting Cagli out of a litter of cats, babies, garlic, and vegetable ullage. At half past ten in the morning I rang his bell. At a quarter to eleven he appeared in pyjamas; a dark young man with quivering stained fingers, who lived [...] in the midst of the most extraordinary pictorial nightmares that have yet assailed my hard-boiled nerves. I hate to believe that Cagli is the Messiah of Art

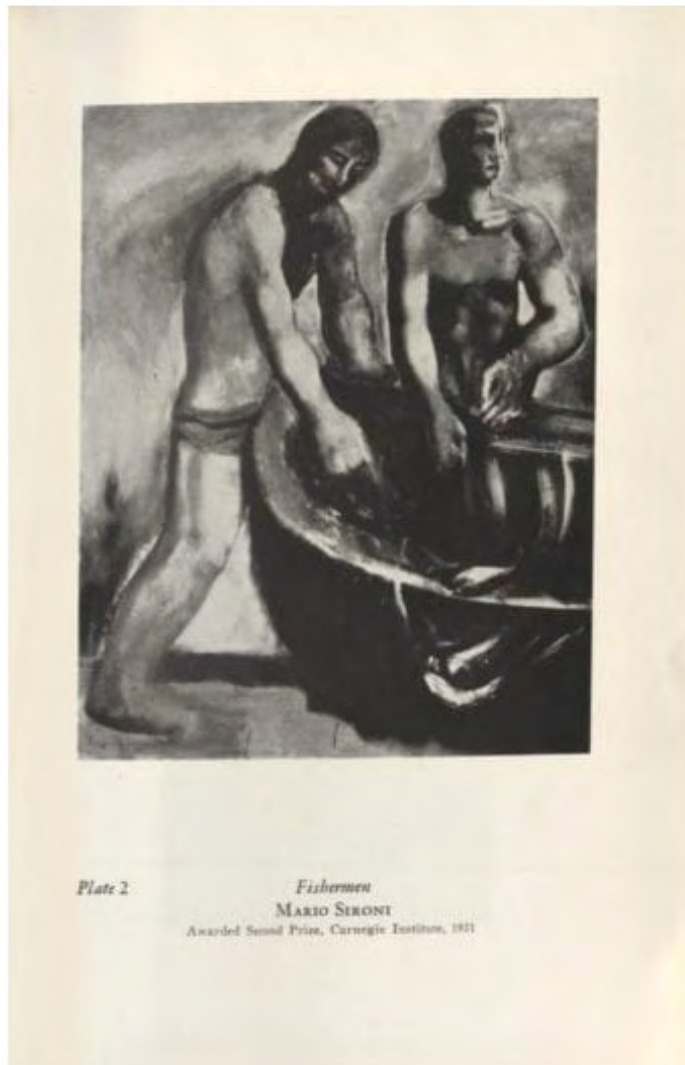


Figure 11. Mario Sironi, "Pescatori" [Fishermen], c. 1930.

Awarded Second prize at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1931. From "Thirtieth Annual International Exhibition of Paintings. October 15 - December 6, 1931" (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1931)

However, the following year, shifting from sarcasm to pragmatic irony, Saint-Gaudens included Cagli's *Davide e Golia* (David and Goliath, 1937; figure 12). "Do not blush," he wrote to Neri. "We are in need of a little excitement, and the young idea keeps calling 'Cagli!' to me. So I took the plunge."²⁴ And in 1938, in a *Life* magazine article, Saint-Gaudens went so far as to single out Cagli as one of "tomorrow's masters."²⁵

Italian Cultural Politics Beyond the Carnegie International

Despite his personal admiration for the sociopolitical actions of the Fascist regime, and his judgment that contemporary art in Italy expressed, in a lively manner, its society, Saint-Gaudens remained an idealistic self-appointed arbiter of taste for the American public. However, although the Carnegie International was a private venture, Saint-Gaudens cooperated with some of the eminences in the Italian art system, including critic Ugo Ojetti; painter and politician Cipriano Efisio Oppo; and Arduino Colasanti, Director General of Fine Arts. He also met personally with Mussolini in 1926 and 1931. In the attempt to secure from artists their best recent works, the Carnegie had to coordinate its plans with competing exhibitions – namely, Rome's Quadriennale and the Venice Biennale – which drained important paintings and offered more substantial prizes. Moreover, it witnessed the increasing autonomous engagement of the Italian government in support of its modern national art on America soil. An early example of this was in 1926, when the Directorate General of Fine Arts of the Ministry of Public Instruction organized a large exhibition at the Grand Central Galleries in New York that attested to an appreciation for Casorati, Ferrazzi, and Antonio Donghi, among others. Ferrazzi exhibited *Caratteri della mia famiglia* (Characters of My Family, 1923; figure 13), a mannered staging of his relatives acting out various attitudes, and *Viaggio tragico* (The Tragic Journey, 1923; figure 14); both were purchased by the New York collector Carl Hamilton, who in the following year also bought Donghi's *Carnevale* (Carnival, 1924; figure 15), awarded an honorable mention at the Carnegie. These were contemporary additions to Hamilton's splendid collection, already famous for its Italian Renaissance selection (including works by Masaccio and Piero della Francesca).

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Prior to 1930, Margherita Sarfatti had enjoyed sufficient political influence to streamline the Novecento Italiano as a quasi-official national art movement steered by a directive board tasked with an ambitious program of cultural expansion through exhibitions across European capitals and as far away as Argentina and Uruguay. However, with the decline of Sarfatti's political star, Oppo rose as the new *homme-orchestre* of the art system. As of 1930, when he was appointed Secretary General of the Quadriennale, he took the lead pursuing a more proactive policy in promoting the commercial success of Italian art abroad and its potential in fostering the national image. In 1931, he maneuvered adroitly to secure, through the cooperation of Roland McKinney at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the exhibition of a large selection from the Quadriennale in Baltimore, and these works subsequently traveled to Syracuse, New York; Boston; and Washington, D.C. He also managed to send

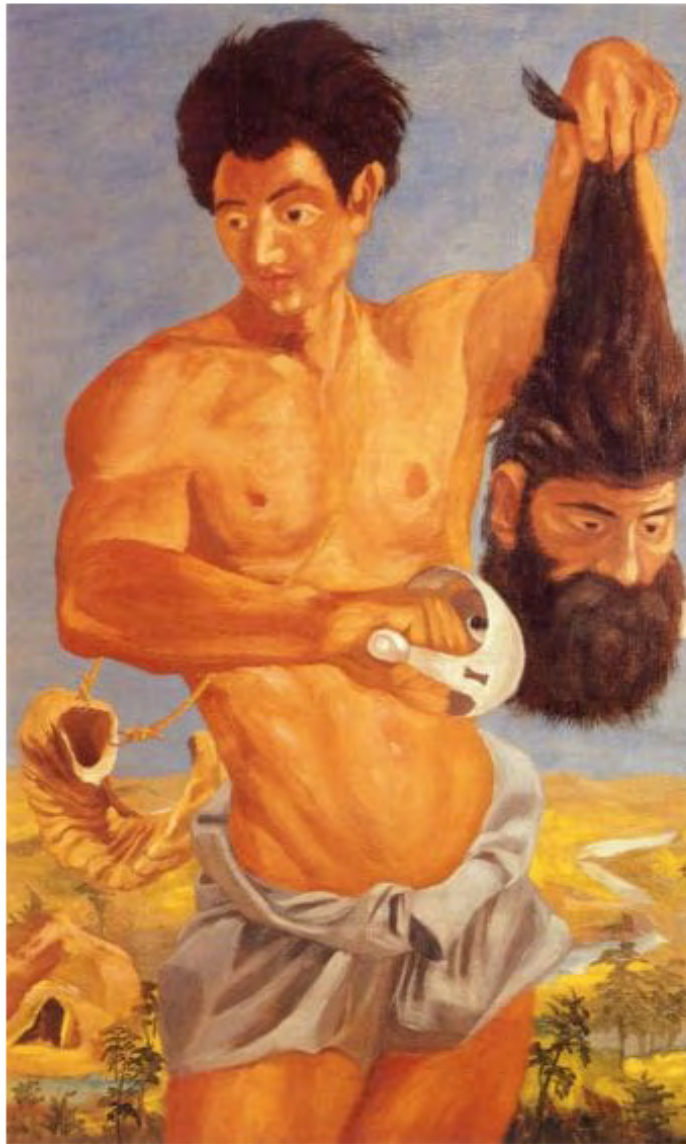


Figure 12. Corrado Cagli, "Davide e Golia" [David and Goliath], 1937. Oil on board, 48 x 29 15/16 in. (122 x 76 cm). Vatican Museum. Exhibited at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1937.

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works to Birmingham, Alabama. Moreover, he allowed the loan of pictures from the Quadriennale to the Carnegie, and personally arrived in Pittsburgh to sit on the jury (he would take credit for the prize to Sironi).²⁶

By the mid-1930s, more actors had joined the composite strategy of cultural trafficking. In 1935–36, an exhibition of ninety pictures curated by former gallerist and critic Dario Sabatello toured twelve cities across the U.S., and in 1938, Comet Gallery – patronized by Countess Anna Laetitia Pecci Blunt – ran a season of Italian art exhibitions in New York. Both Sabatello and Pecci Blunt promoted especially the younger generation headed by Cagli and his fellow painters of the so-called Roman School, who ventured into elusive narratives and archaic-looking landscapes picturing evanescent forms with expressionistic brushstrokes and softly hued colors; just like their Novecento older fellows, they avoided explicit political themes, but provided fresher alternatives to the overused reclining nudes, Susanna and the Elders, and the like. In 1939, the Italian government resolutely played the card of art's power by sending to the San Francisco World's Fair some thirty masters of the



Figure 13. Ferruccio Ferrazzi, "Caratteri della mia famiglia" [Characters of my family], 1923. Included in the "Exhibition of Modern Italian Art," Grand Central Galleries, New York, 1926. Purchased by Carl Hamilton. Reproduced in "Dedalo" year 7, vol. 2 (1926–27): 389.

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Renaissance along with forty contemporary paintings and sculptures, plus several drawings; the selection, which included works by Morandi, Scipione, and Filippo de Pisis, outnumbered the initial request of the American organizers (figure 16).²⁷

Saint-Gaudens's personal taste can perhaps be best ascertained from his private correspondence with Neri and the Committee of Fine Arts at the Carnegie. The critical apparatus of the catalogues of the Carnegie is meager, and their texts merely informative and circumstantial. As a result, the Carnegie remained an exhibition aimed at offering

synthetic, nonpartisan, unpolitical surveys based on visual qualities, where both modern (but not "radically" so) and conservative tendencies were displayed to the public. In 1927, the Committee of Fine Arts advised against publishing an interview with Mussolini as a foreword to the Italian section, because it would introduce a political element. In the hanging of the rooms, the intention was that visitors compare the variety of options seen next to one other – the mix of styles and generations, the purist Donghi next to the overcharged Mancini, for instance (figure 17). Also, the illustrations in the

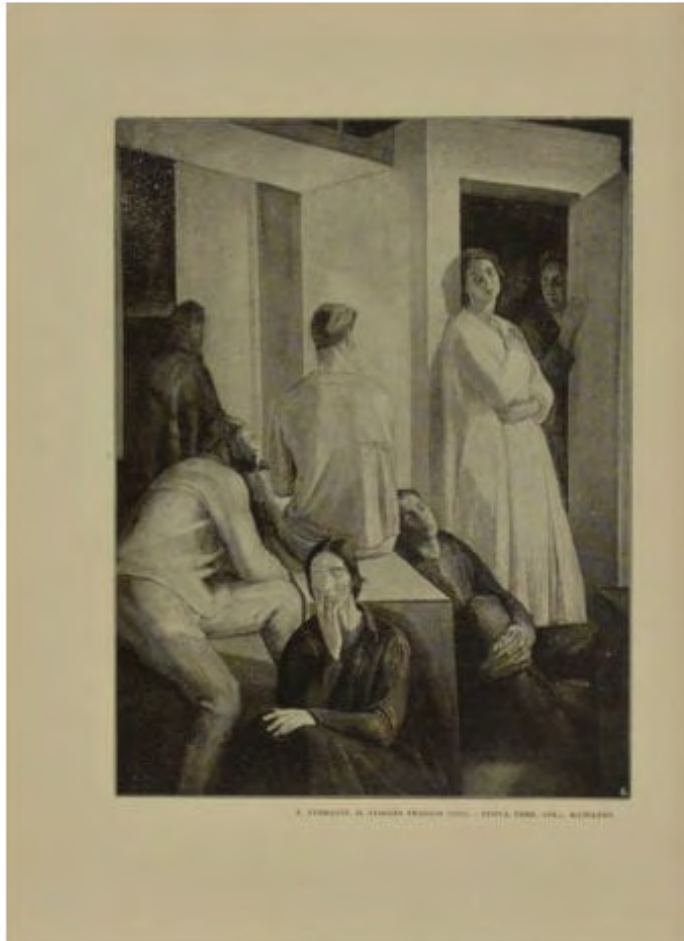


Figure 14. Ferruccio Ferrazzi, "Viaggio tragico" [Tragic journey], 1923. Included in the "Exhibition of Modern Italian Art," Grand Central Galleries, New York, 1926. Purchased by Carl Hamilton. Reproduced in "Dedalo" year 7, vol. 2 (1926–27): 396.

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catalogues offer didactics based essentially on analogy, matching artists of different nationalities but comparable for echoing iconographies or compositional schemes (figure 18). The accompanying publications managed directly by Italians were equally lacking in loquaciousness (with the exception of Sabatello's foreword to the catalogue of the traveling exhibition in 1935–36); even so, in comparison with the rather instinctual, adaptive, and pragmatic curatorial choices made by Saint-Gaudens, the Italian curators backed the artworks with a more opinionated cultural agenda.



Figure 15. Antonio Donghi, "Carnevale" [Carnival], 1924. Oil on canvas, 59 7/16 x 59 7/16 in. (151 x 151 cm). Private Collection. Awarded First Honorable mention, "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1927, purchased by Carl Hamilton.

From the Italian point of view, the Carnegie and the other events or venues directly run by Italians were outposts in a four-point campaign: to proselytize the alleged national identity in modern art; to conquer the spotlight against the critical and commercial monopoly of the School of Paris; to restore Italy as a cultural world power; and to angelize its Fascist regime. Yet for all the stylistic developments over nearly two decades – from the heightened plasticity of the Novecento in the early 1920s to the looser expressionist forms of the late 1930s – the discourse around Italian art changed little, and conformed to the script of a grand historical drama. This indicated a move from decadence to regained vigor, from passivity and cultural colonization

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under the French heel to new grandeur and hegemony.

From Sarfatti's early writings on the Novecento, to her *Storia della pittura moderna* (History of Modern Painting, 1930), to Sabatello's foreword in 1935, to Pecci Blunt's catalogue preface²⁸ and speeches for the opening of the Comet Galley, and so on, the standard discourse revolved around the same obsessions. These were the historical and

cultural categories of "Latin" and "Mediterranean" – played against "Nordic" and "Protestant" – with stylistic corollaries of "plasticity" and "architecture" within paintings. The predictable target was the nineteenth century, when Italy's artistic prestige was eclipsed by French Realism and Impressionism, which, however, had ultimately debased the artistic imagination to anecdotal and descriptive trivia. Counter to this, postvanguard Italian art had regained "the spiritual directives at the roots of our culture" – as Sabatello put it – that is, the sense of synthesis, measure and balance, and well-defined structures.²⁹ Even when these characteristics were, in fact, hardly visible – such as in the pictorial handling of Cagli, Scipione, or Carlo Levi (figure 19) – their quasi-surrealist or expressionist transfigurations were discursively reframed as the resurgence of humanism and of the historical drive for "good painting," which preferred subtle tonalities to violent color, and harkened back to the palette and frail figures of Pompeian frescoes.

The obsession against French dominance betrays the inferiority complex and revanchism of a country that refused to admit its art had lost its pivotal position in Western culture. The very anxiety and claim for the lost *primato*



Figure 16. Scipione Bonichi, "Piazza Navona" (Study), 1930. Oil on board, 13 1/4 x 16 1/4 in. (33.7 x 41.3 cm). Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. Exhibited at the "International Exposition of the Golden Gate," San Francisco, 1939.

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summons up the phantom of the Renaissance, but this self-assuring relation with the glorious past was a Holy Grail as much as it was a burden. I would argue that it proved impossible for both Italian and American viewers to do away with the meter of this myth. Saint-Gaudens often peppered his diary of studio visits in Italy with considerations of the social meaningfulness of art during the Renaissance, at odds with the materialism and lack of taste in his own Pittsburgh. He considered the Renaissance to have been the historical period that set the standards of art – an age of “nearly universal consensus of opinion on the part of a social order concerning the rules and regulations which bounded what gave that order visual delight.”³⁰ He believed that contemporary Italian art was the living expression of a national society now spiritually rejuvenated and strengthened by Fascism, in contrast to Nazi Germany, where art was artificially Aryanized. And yet, for all his esteem for Italian painting, he could not help musing about stereotypical



Figure 17. View of the Italian gallery at the “Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings,” 1927. From left to right: Felice Casorati, “Conversazione platonica” [Platonic conversation], 1925; Ferruccio Ferrazzi, “Toro legato” [Captive bull], 1925; Giuseppe Montanari, “Nudi” [Nudes], also known as “Sonata a Venere” [Sonata to Venus], 1926; Giuseppe Montanari, “Dalie” [Dahlias], undated (year undetermined); Ferruccio Ferrazzi, “Festa notturna” [Night festival], 1921–23 ca.; Beppe Ciardi, “Acque d’argento” [Silver waters], undated (1909 ca.); Antonio Mancini, “Signora in rosso” also known as “Donna in rosso” [Woman in red], 1921; Beppe Ciardi, “Da Altino a Aquileia” [The road to Aquileia], undated (1913–14 ca.); Ferruccio Ferrazzi, “Attesa” [Expectation], 1925; Giuseppe Montanari, “Figura di giovane nudo” [Figure of a nude boy], also known as “Bimbo e gattino” [Boy and Kitten], 1927; Antonio Donghi, “Carnevale” [Carnival], 1923; and Beppe Ciardi, “Arco sul mare” [The arch to the sea], 1922–23.

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discourses – the paragon of the Renaissance and the vulgarity of America:

How do we dare talk art to an Italian, we whose sense of beauty must be as attractive to them as their losanges [*sic*] of garlic are to us? What do we know about civilization just because we can screw more bolts on the bottom of a Ford in one minute than any other race on earth? Venice for six hundred years fought and reveled and traded and produced, carried on by a surge of the emotions that still echoes through that old square, and we for one hundred and fifty years have grown fat upon the crudities of nature, and I come over here to pat the Italians on the back. Oh shut up!³¹



Figure 18. A comparison between Miguel Covarrubias (Mexico), "Tehuantepec River," and Antonio Donghi (Italy), "Canzone" [The song], 1934. Reproduced in "The 1935 International Exhibitions of Paintings. October 17 – December 8" (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1935).

American critics often returned to the Renaissance in reviewing various Italian artists, whether to praise or attack them. "It's a dismal little Renaissance. This art, we are told, is one of the elements 'bearing witness to the rebirth of a people.' Judging from it, they must have used plenty of chloroform," wrote a *New York Post* critic in 1935, in a review of the apparently dull figures of the Roman School in Sabatello's show.³² On the other hand, an enthusiastic Arthur Millier noted, in the *Los Angeles Times*, that Italian art had broken the chain of a long decadence to reemerge strong, Mediterranean, and modern, and he praised the overpowering masterpieces

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of Sironi as those of a new Michelangelo.³³ Not surprisingly, when the show stopped at the Seattle Art Museum, an exhibition of facsimile pictures by Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, and other Quattrocento masters was hung next to it.

The Italian critics' discursive rhetoric explained contemporary art as a move from degeneration to the recovery of Italian selfhood, and it was not simply constructed as rebirth. The rhetoric obeyed a more complicated and paradoxical teleology, one that rationalized history as moving forward while seeking

eternity. Sarfatti's conferences reiterated the concept of an evolution from the modern to the eternal. If her dialectical acrobatics – which saluted "Italian, traditionalist, modern" artists, willing to "halt in time some novel aspect of tradition"³⁴ – served as a mantra of the domestic discourse, the self-assuring *intraducibilità* (untranslatability), as she put it, of Italian artistic expression over the centuries was, in fact, lost in translation in America.

Despite some noteworthy evidence of success – the number of sales, an *Art News* cover dedicated to Carena (1935 ca; figure 20), and a mention of a Casorati as the only Italian amid the all-French roster of notable paintings in the market³⁵ – Italian artists remained largely entangled in the shadows,



Figure 19. Carlo Levi, "Testa di vitello scuoiato" [Head of a calf], September 1935. Oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 15 3/16 in. (46 x 38.5 cm). Venice, ASAC. Exhibited at "A collection of paintings by Gino Severini and Carlo Levi," March–April 1938, Comet Art Gallery, New York.

between the glaring prestige of French modernism and their own national past. The task of showing their modern artistic face was Sisyphean. In the major art magazines of the period, the coverage of French artists was comparable only to that of shows and sales of Renaissance works, and the Italian moderns appeared only rarely (with the exception of the Modigliani-Chirico duo, *bien sr*). Paradoxically enough, the only Italian “retrospective” sponsored by MoMA before the war was the greatly acclaimed *Italian Masters*, in 1940: thirty Renaissance artworks shipped from Italy (and already lent to the San Francisco World’s Fair and the Art Institute of Chicago). Alfred H. Barr, Jr., accepted them as a source for modernism, but kept MoMA impenetrable to the Italian government’s attempt to slate a show of contemporary art. Instead, he mounted the parallel exhibition *Modern Masters from European and American Collections* – not one master was Italian.

Conclusion

In 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* did include some artists who had already appeared at the Carnegie International and other shows before the war. By putting more emphasis on their formal qualities, the exhibition lifted the spell of pompous nationalist rhetoric to recast them in a progressive narrative that set the beginning of modern art in Futurism, and schematized from there onward a chain of subsequent movements: Metafisica, followed by the reactionary Novecento, then the counter reactions of the Roman School, Corrente, and, finally, the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti (New Front of the Arts).

If we consider retrospectively the three approaches to Italian art, we find three models of temporality. Barr and Soby’s evolutionary scheme subverted the synoptic vision pursued by Saint-Gaudens. On the other hand, they disrupted the Italians’ ideological mobilization of the past and their temporality, which unfurled and returned to itself as a pendulum, only to reach alleged ultimate “eternal” values. The MoMA show, along with the contemporaneous establishment of the Greenbergian canon of a diachronic trajectory culminating in abstraction, led to the downplaying of Novecento. In 1949, the museum left out not only the older Tito and Brass but also the more traditionalist Carena and Romagnoli, and the idiosyncratic Ferrazzi, while Casorati was downsized to the rank of exponent of the Turin School.

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The didactic criterion chosen by Saint-Gaudens in the old days of the Carnegie was later echoed on a vast and comprehensive scale in another landmark exhibition, *L'arte moderna in Italia 1915-1935* (Modern Art in Italy, 1915-1935), curated by Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti in Florence in 1967. Here, virtually all the significant artists once active in the Italian system were purportedly presented "objectively," nonjudgmentally and free of historicist/teleological schema, for the contemplation of viewers. Based on the assumption that the act of looking at artworks revives the cognitive process of the artist's original look onto the world, and that any true work of art opens the humane "poetry" of its creator, Ragghianti shunned any other benchmark (ideological, political, cultural) as dogmatic and conformist pseudoconcepts.³⁶ Adamantly defending the tenet that a work of art is the "concrete thought" of any given artist, that is the visual configuration of his/her spiritual life, the exhibition was a belated bulwark of idealism based on Benedetto Croce's and Konrad

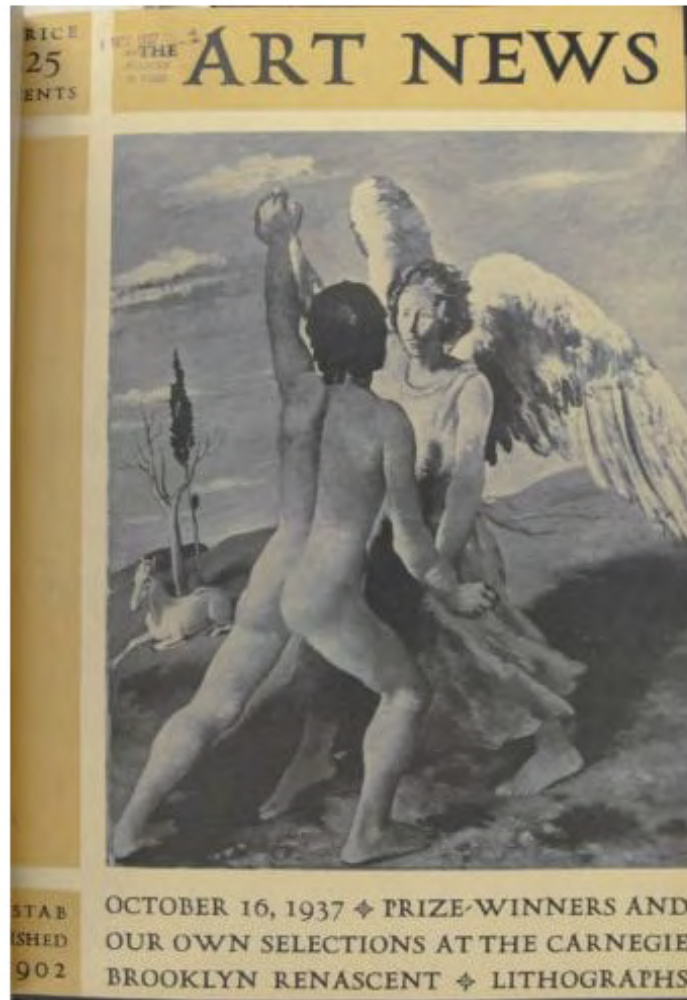


Figure 20. Cover of "The Art News" 36, n. 7 (October 16, 1937) with reproduction of Felice Carena, "Giacobbe lotta con l'angelo" [Jacob wrestling with the angel], exhibited at "Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings," Pittsburgh, 1937.

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Fiedler's aesthetic theories, and it was unyielding to the contemporaneous dawn of poststructuralism. Yet, despite its idealist dream of the "universal" poetry flowing out the solitary work of any true artist, Ragghianti's enterprise can also be considered as a pioneering postmodernist remapping *avant la lettre*. Meanwhile, in the U.S. many of the Carenas, Donghis, Ferrazzis, and Casoratis had fallen into critical oblivion, and were being deaccessioned by museums and private collections.

The Carnegie Museum of Art has sold the majority of the pictures that marked the success of the Italian section. In 1957, it deaccessioned Casorati's *Colline* (Hills), purchased in 1931 directly from the painter. Felice Carena's *The Studio*, given to the museum in 1938 by Mrs. Albert Lehman, and *Meriggio* (Midday in Summer, 1934), exhibited in 1936 and purchased in 1937, were both deaccessioned in 1978. (*The Studio* is now in the collection of Monte dei Paschi di Siena.) Ferrazzi's *The Tragic Journey*, purchased in 1939 from dealer and Old Masters expert Julius Weitzner, was auctioned in 1978 (it is now in a private collection in Rome). Romagnoli's *Dopo il bagno* remained at the museum on indefinite loan from Kaufmann until 1950, when it was formally accessioned, only to be sold in 1978. Two paintings by Mancini, *Ritratto in rosso* (Portrait in Red, undated, ca 1920 and possibly retouched in 1926) and *Conchiglie* (The Shells, 1925; figure 21), both exhibited at the 1926 Carnegie International and bought for the permanent collection, were deaccessioned in 1965 and 1966.

Casorati's *Woman Near a Table*, honored at the 1937 Carnegie, purchased by collectors Earle and Mary Ludgin, and later donated to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, was deaccessioned in 2006 (now it is in the collection of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna). Carrà's *Dopo il bagno* (After the Bath, 1931; figure 22) was exhibited in Los Angeles in 1935, within the show curated by Sabatello. It caused a fuss over "degenerate art" when it was purchased by philanthropist Preston Harrison and given to the Museum of History, Science and Art in Los Angeles (now the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) as the first item of a prospective gallery of modern Italian art, to be established next to French and American galleries; *Dopo il bagno* was sold in 1977.³⁷

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Most of these pictures (and the list may continue) have returned to Italian hands, to their original market. They were dusted off, as of the postmodernist 1980s, with the scholarly rediscovery of the interwar period, which took its lead from Ragghianti's unique and wide-angled perspective. The MoMA exhibition of 1949 played a major role in writing the modernist narrative of Italian art in America. The show offered Barr the chance of conspicuous acquisitions for the permanent collection of historic Futurist masterpieces by Carlo Carrà, Gino Severini, Umberto Boccioni, and Giacomo Balla, along with a group of post-World War II emerging artists who were then reviving modernist idioms (particularly Renato Guttuso). The acquisition policy instead overlooked the interwar period.³⁸ In the long run, however, the perspective of Saint-Gaudens – one that implicitly privileged the criterion of contemporaneous art over modern art, and banned Italian Futurists of any generation from his selections – reveals more affinities with the posthistoricist revisions triggered by Ragghianti. He dared – unconventionally enough in 1967 – to set the starting point of his gigantic, panoptic, non-evolving survey of Italian “modern” art in 1915, when the virtual demise of



Figure 21. Antonio Mancini, “Conchiglie” [Shells], 1925. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 29 3/4 in. (101 x 75.5 cm). Private Collection. Exhibited at “Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings,” Pittsburgh, 1936.

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the first wave of Futurism occurred. Raghianti dismissed Marinetti's movement as overrated and as merely an historicist myth, thus affirming – analogously, if unintentionally, to what Saint-Gaudens had done – the value of contemporaneity over modernistic ideology, and suggesting the possibility of a different, antimodernist, politically aseptic modernity.

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Figure 22. Carlo Carrà, "Dopo il bagno" [After the bath]. Oil on canvas, 38 1/4 x 24 3/4 in. (97.5 x 63 cm). Private Collection, Padua (acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1935, deaccessioned in 1977).

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1. An outstanding example is Emily Braun, *Giorgio de Chirico and America* (New York: Hunter College of the City University of New York; Rome: Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico; Turin: Allemandi, 1996). For Felice Casorati's market and critical success in the United States, see Sergio Cortesini, "Casorati negli Stati Uniti," in *Felice Casorati. Collezioni e mostre tra Europa e Americhe*, ed. Giorgina Bertolino (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2014), 47–63.
2. Sergio Cortesini, *One day we must meet. Le sfide dell'architettura e dell'arte italiane in America 1933–1941* (Monza: Johan and Levi, 2018).
3. All the uncredited information concerning the Carnegie international prize is drawn from the Archives of American Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art Records, 1883–1962 (hereafter: Carnegie records), box 100, "Neri Ilario 1923" folder, and box 101, "Neri Ilario 1940" folder.
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5. Guillaume Lerolle, "European Art," in *Catalogue Twenty-fourth Annual International Exhibition of Paintings*, (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute Press, 1925), unpaginated.
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7. Ralph W. Curtis, letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner with sketch of Antonio Mancini's *The Standard Bearer* (c. 1884), available at this link (last accessed August 21, 2019). See also Cinzia Virno, *Antonio Mancini. Catalogo ragionato dell'opera*, vol. 1 (Rome: De Luca editori d'arte, 2019), 240–41.
8. For Mancini's market and exhibitions in America, see Ulrich W. Hiesinger, *Antonio Mancini. Nineteenth-Century Italian Master* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007), 13, 50, 71, 72; and Virno, *Antonio Mancini*.

9. Homer Saint-Gaudens succeeded to John W. Beatty in the post of director of the Department of Fine Arts at the Carnegie Institute late in 1922. The twenty-second International, which opened in April 1923, was the first edition he curated. He maintained his post until 1950.
10. Homer Saint-Gaudens, letter to Edward D. Balken, December 8, 1923, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts Committee 1923" folder.
11. Giovanni Lipparini, "Il pittore Giovanni Romagnoli," *Dedalo*, year 6, vol. 1, no. 3 (1925–26): 197–98. Saint-Gaudens' statement is reported in Royal Cortissoz, "The International at Pittsburgh, Prevailing Currents in European Paintings," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 4, 1924. For press reviews of *Dopo il bagno*, see Franco Solmi, *Giovanni Romagnoli* (Bologna: Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna, 1981), 32–33.
12. Ilario Neri, letter to Homer Saint-Gaudens, June 7, 1924, Carnegie records, box 100, "Neri Ilario 1924" folder. *Piazzetta San Marco* by Tito was purchased by the Carnegie Museum of Art (since deaccessioned).
13. For the fresco representing Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Priscopia, commissioned in 1940 but completed in 1949, see *Giovanni Romagnoli. L'eterna giovinezza del colore 1893–1976* (Bentivoglio: Grafiche dell'Artiere, 2014), 25–30.
14. Homer Saint-Gaudens, letter to Edward D. Balken, December 8, 1923, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts Committee November–December 1923" folder. On the rise and decline of America's interest in Casorati, see Cortesini, "Casorati negli Stati Uniti."
15. The group – comprised of Anselmo Bucci, Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, Gian Emilio Malerba, Piero Marussig, Ubaldo Oppi, and Mario Sironi – was officially presented at the exhibition *Sette pittori del Novecento italiano* (Seven Painters of the Italian Novecento), which opened on March 26, 1923, at Milan's Pesaro gallery. In attending the opening, Benito Mussolini gave a speech whereby he argued for the social meaningfulness of modern art for the state and the analogy between artistic and political creativity, while maintaining that artistic freedom was a vital necessity.
16. Homer Saint-Gaudens, "Paintings Recommended for Purchase," Carnegie records, box 101, "Fine Arts Co, May–Dec 1929" folder.
17. Homer Saint-Gaudens, letter to Edward D. Balken, April 1, 1926, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts Committee – 1926" folder.

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18. The visit to the Novecento exhibition and correspondence with the artists is described in letters from Neri to Saint-Gaudens, January 13, 1927, and Saint-Gaudens to Neri, January 31, 1927, Carnegie records, box 100, "Neri Ilario Jan–May 1927" folder.
19. See note 15. Mussolini also attended the opening of the Novecento Italiano exhibition in 1926 and gave another speech.
20. Neri, letter to Saint-Gaudens, October 6, 1931, Carnegie records, box 100, "Neri 1931" folder. The excerpt continues: "Sironi is really an advanced painter and his work, I think, are valued only in the present moment of confusion in everything and also on account of his friendship with the Premier and Mrs. Sarfatti. [...] However, our duty is to show what we are doing here and what is appreciated here [in Italy] [...]. Certainly the history of art will never consider him, nor many others like him as a painter of this period."
21. Neri, letter to Saint-Gaudens, July 10, 1931, Carnegie records, box 100, "Neri 1931" folder.
22. Mary Powell, "The Foreign Section of the Carnegie International Exhibition," *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis* 17, no. 2 (April 1932): 25.
23. Saint-Gaudens, letter to John O'Connor, April 15, 1936, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts Committee, 1935" folder. Saint-Gaudens was likely alluding to countess Anna Laetitia Pecci Blunt, collector and owner of the Galleria della Cometa. The princess might be Marguerite Caetani di Bassiano, née Marguerite Chapin, American naturalized Italian, who was a publisher, journalist, art collector, and patron; Cagli mentioned her twice in his CV attached to the application for a Guggenheim fellowship in 1939: see Raffaele Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l'esilio, l'America (1938–1947)* (Rome: Donzelli, 2018), 78.
24. Saint-Gaudens, letter to O'Connor, March 30, 1937, Carnegie records, box 161, "January–October 1937" folder.
25. "Homer St.-Gaudens Runs Great Carnegie Show," *Life* (December 12, 1938), 72; Saint-Gaudens is also quoted in Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli*, 65–66.

26. On Oppo's role in transferring sections of the First Quadriennale to Baltimore and Birmingham in 1931, as well as on loans to the Carnegie, see Cortesini, "Casorati negli Stati Uniti," 51; and Sergio Cortesini, "La Italian Art Exhibit di Birmigham (AL) del 1931: arte italiana, ascesa sociale, progetti civici nel profondo Sud americano," *L'uomo nero*, nos. 11–12 (May 2015): 105–25.
27. On the Italian participation in the San Francisco World's Fair, and on the ensuing projects for the promotion of contemporary Italian art, see: Cortesini, *One day we must meet*, 165–214.
28. *Anthology of Contemporary Italian Painting* (New York and Rome: Cometa Art Gallery, 1937).
29. *Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Painting, under the Auspices of the Western Art Museum Association and the "Direzione Generale Italiani all'Estero"* (Tivoli: Officine grafiche, 1934), 9.
30. Saint-Gaudens, letter to George E. Shaw, May 13, 1933, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts committee Jan–May 1933" folder.
31. Saint-Gaudens, letter to Edward D. Balken, April 4, 1926, Carnegie records, box 161, "Fine Arts Committee – 1926" folder.
32. "New Fascist Art Dismal and Inert," *New York Post*, March 21, 1936.
33. Arthur Millier, "Mussolini's Sponsorship of Art Shows Striking Results," *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1935.
34. Margherita Sarfatti, *Storia della pittura moderna* (Rome: Cremonese, 1930), 126. On the modern-eternal concept in Sarfatti's writings, see Elisabetta Barisoni, *Viaggio alle fonti dell'arte. Il moderno e l'eterno Margherita Sarfatti 1919–1939* (Treviso: ZeL Edizioni, 2018).
35. "Notable Paintings in the Art Market, Part II: Modern European Masters," *Art News* 36, no. 13 (December 25, 1937): 10–13.
36. For Ragghianti's formalist and idealistic critical vision undergirding *L'arte moderna in Italia 1915–1935*, see Sergio Cortesini, "Lo storicismo estetico di Ragghianti e altri miti critici nel 1967," in *Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti e l'arte in Italia tra le due guerre. Nuove ricerche intorno e a partire dalla mostra del 1967 'Arte moderna in Italia 1915–1935,'* edited by Paolo Bolpagni and Mattia Patti (Lucca: Edizioni Fondazione Ragghianti Studi sull'arte, 2020), forthcoming.
37. "Buys Italian Painting," *Art Digest* 9, no. 16 (May 15, 1935): 10.

38. "Museum Purchases Modern Italian Works From 20th-Century Italian Art Exhibition," Museum of Modern Art, New York, press release available at this link (last accessed November 10, 2019).

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ALFRED H. BARR, JR. AND JAMES THRALL SOBY'S GRAND TOUR OF ITALY

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Silvia Bignami | Davide Colombo **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

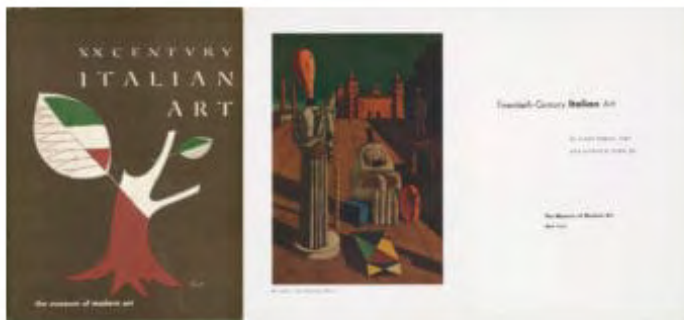
From May to June 1948, and with the approval of MoMA's trustees, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby did a "grand tour" of Italy, visiting artists, collectors, critics, dealers, museum, and galleries in Milan, Bergamo, Brescia, Rome, Venice, and Florence. Along the way they saw the Fifth Quadriennale in Rome and the Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennale; these, the most important art events of the time, would prove major sources for Barr and Soby as the curators of the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. The mission of the journey was double: selecting artworks for the show, and acquiring artworks for MoMA's collection, which was sparse in its Italian modern art holdings.

This essay analyzes how and why Barr and Soby worked to shape a history of Italian modern art within the international context of modernism according to the stylistic genealogy of art that Barr had, since 1936, proposed at MoMA. The details of whom they met; which works they saw and selected, borrowed or purchased; and which works weren't available makes it possible to better understand the framework of the exhibition. In effect, Barr and Soby's approach was ambivalent: their desire for autonomy and their strategy of not involving public institutions allowed them to build direct relationships with artists and private collectors. *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was an operation of cultural diplomacy that needed to go through official channels, even as the curators insisted on selecting works based primarily on their artistic value and high quality, without prioritizing the political affiliation of the artists. Barr and Soby considered the new democratic and political order in Italy after the end of Fascism an indispensable prerequisite for an artistic "renaissance," which merited the organization of an exhibition at MoMA; they often agreed on selected artworks, and their personal tastes and interests emerged during the process.

As detailed in the foreword to this issue of *Italian Modern Art*, the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (figures 1a–1b), reflected the Cold War rhetoric of its moment.¹ The climate for art was propitious in Italy, after the end of presumed Fascist isolationism,² and – the message went – a “new renaissance” was blossoming after the defeat of Italy’s powerful Communist Party in the political elections of April 18–19, 1948, which signalled a return to democracy.³ In effect, the new political order was the prerequisite for the United States’ participation in the re-establishment of cultural exchange with Italy, and the 1949 show was a crucial step.

Along the Peninsula

Thus, with the approval of MoMA’s trustees, in the spring and summer of 1948 Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby did a “grand tour” of Italy. On April 24, 1948, Barr wrote from Paris to Charles Rufus Morey, the Cultural Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Rome: “[A]fter two years of discussion and uncertainty which has lasted right through the current week, we have finally decided that we can go ahead with our exhibition of Italian painting and sculpture.”⁴ *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was largely the product of Barr and Soby’s research activities and interactions with Italian critics, dealers, and collectors (figure 2) – in particular Romeo Toninelli, who functioned as the “executive secretary” of the exhibition.⁵ During their journey, Barr and Soby were accompanied by



Figures 1a–1b. James T. Soby, and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. “Twentieth-Century Italian Art” (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949): cover and frontispiece with reproduction of Giorgio de Chirico, “Le muse inquietanti” [The disquieting muses], 1916. Mattioli Collection (formerly the Feroldi Collection). New York, MoMA. © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

Soby's wife, Eleanor "Nellie" Howland Soby, and Barr's Italian-born wife, Margaret Scolari Barr, who had much experience in organizing exhibitions as well as fluency in the Italian language; indeed, Scolari Barr's long-recognized role in the exhibition's planning is now well documented in the Margaret Scolari Barr Papers, available to researchers through the MoMA Archives since 2015.

In Italy, Barr and Soby spoke with everybody: artists, collectors, dealers, important critics (such as Roberto Longhi and Lionello Venturi), and museum superintendents and directors. However, while discussions with the leading figures of the Italian art world were prioritized to a degree, for the two curators it was most important to maintain their "independence" in deciding the selection of artworks; this required that they avoid official entanglements:



Figure 2. "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" exhibition views in Roberto Mango, "The Museum of Modern Art in New York," in "Domus" 241 (December 1949): 24–25.

We realize of course that the present political situation in Italy is delicate and complicated. Although we hope that the exhibition will promote sympathy and understanding between Italy and the United States on a cultural level, we feel that it is essential to act independently of official channels insofar as possible. We should like your sympathy and understanding in this problem, for if it were to appear that the exhibition – whatever its quality – were officially sanctioned or supported it would suffer in the eyes of the artists and critics because of the political implications. We believe that we must choose the exhibition on artistic values alone irrespective of the political affiliation of the artists. This may seem unrealistic during this period, but after a great deal of thought we are convinced that no matter what happens in the next year or so, in the long run even the political consequences of the exhibition will be better if it is selected for quality alone.⁶

In time, Barr and Soby's autonomy caused friction. A number of the Italian collectors and critics who met with them – Emilio Jesi, Carlo Frua de Angeli, Fernanda Wittengs, Lamberto Vitali, and Raffaele Carrieri – complained about the role given to Toninelli, and lamented the curators' final selection. Some likely felt their institutional charge, expertise, and scholarship had not been sufficiently appreciated. Barr and Soby treasured each meeting, but, in the end, they made their choices according to their own point of view.

It's also clear that the scenario arranged by Barr and Soby corresponded to the Italian strategy of "indirect cultural diplomacy" evident in the activities of the Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi during his travel in U.S. in 1947.⁷ Despite their desire for autonomy, theirs was an operation of cultural diplomacy that needed to go through official channels. Between the summer of 1946 and the spring of 1947, Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions and Publications at MoMA, involved Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Director of the Division of Antiquities and Fine Arts of the Ministry of Public Instruction, in the exhibition planning of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and both the Circolo delle Arti in Milan and the American Academy in Rome contributed to the ministry's administrative, logistic, and economic support. As officially approved by Bandinelli, the ministry placed its staff at the disposal of Barr

and Soby for their curatorial research; covered the cost of the works' transportation to the port of embarkation; and lent pictures from the State collection.⁸

The MoMA team's research trip was hugely fruitful, thanks to meetings, discussions, and visits with artists, collectors, museums, galleries, dealers, critics, and scholars. One of Barr and Soby's missions in Italy was to fill in gaps in MoMA's collection of Italian modern art. As Director of Collection, Barr oversaw the museum's expanding holdings,⁹ and with Soby he planned an important acquisition campaign in advance of the Italian show and after. They worked together with intensity: proposing tentative lists of works, comparing their opinions (they often agreed), and finding a commendable balance in the number of items by various artists and loan requests to collectors.¹⁰ Aware that the show would probably not be a comprehensive historic survey, Barr and Soby nonetheless aimed to trace a history of Italian modern art that would establish its role in the international context of modernism. Beyond Futurism and the Metaphysical School, the two curators were interested in younger artists emerging after World War II, as well as in the leaders of the older and middle generations born before the 1890s or soon after, respectively.¹¹ Further, although the planned exhibition focused on the twentieth century, the curators' attention stretched back into nineteenth-century traditions of Italian painting in order to better understand to sources of Italian modern art. Thanks to his first-hand exposure, Soby could review, in 1949, the *Exhibition of Italian Nineteenth-Century Paintings* sponsored by the city of Florence and displayed in New York at the Wildenstein Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art,¹² and he especially appreciated the Tuscan group of Macchiaioli painters' innovative approach: "[T]he accomplishment of the Macchiaioli seems just that much more impressive [...] not until the arrival of the futurists did Italian painting begin once more to move forward"¹³ (figure 3).

Barr and Soby's selection process worked on two levels: they studied the careers and research directions of individual artists, selecting those useful to their curatorial vision of Italian modernism;¹⁴ and they closely evaluated each and every painting, sculpture, and print under consideration, choosing the only the best quality possible, according to the canon of MoMA's idea of modernism. Altogether, the complex activity of designing an exhibition such as *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* involved both analysis of modernism rooted in

knowledge of its historic, political and artistic context, and the practical motives of organizing activity.

We can follow Barr and Soby's grand tour along the peninsula in five notebooks and pocket diaries: two notebooks usually attributed to Soby, but written in by Margaret Scolari Barr as well;¹⁵ a pocket diary by Soby; a travel diary by Soby; and a last pocket diary by Margaret Scolari Barr.¹⁶

Barr and Soby traveled together for portions of the trip. They were all in Milan until May 4, and then in Rome, until May 15. At that point, Soby returned to Milan, then proceeded to Venice for the Twenty-Fourth Biennale; the Barrs stayed in Rome until at least the end of month, then moved on to Venice. Thus, we can follow the Barrs and Sobys to Milan, Bergamo, Brescia, Rome, Venice, and Florence. The Fifth Quadriennale in Rome and the Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennale were the most important art events in Italy at the time and major sources for the American curators. They were the first edition of the Quadriennale and the Biennale, respectively, after WWII, and exposed Barr and Soby to a breadth of Italian artists' postwar work, which they could compare to international advanced art production. Moreover, as Soby pointed out in one of his reports to MoMA, the Quadriennale included special galleries devoted to Futurism, while the Biennale had a large section on the Metaphysical School – the two movements that would open *Twentieth-*



Figure 3. James T. Soby, "The Fine Arts: Realism – Macchiaioli Style," in "The Saturday Review of Literature," March 5, 1949: 28.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby's Grand Tour of Italy

Century Italian Art. Barr and Soby intended to propose Futurism and the Metaphysical School as Italian versions of Cubism and Surrealism, the two main tendencies Barr's modern art genealogy according to his landmark exhibitions *Cubism and Abstract Art* and *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* in 1936–37.

Soby's penned a review of the Biennale for the *Saturday Review of Literature* that provides an overview of both movements – despite a major interest in metaphysical painting transpired –, highlighting their contrasting elements and the specificities of their influence on younger artists:

The aims of the *Scuola* [*metafisica*] were the opposite of those of the futurists (1909–16), who had so avidly embraced their era's industrial characteristics of speed, precision and clangor. The painters of the *Scuola* achieved an enigmatic and poetic art, based on philosophical meditation, in which still-life objects and mannequin figures were assembled in strange settings, amid an uncanny calm, with emphasis on that evocative incongruity of juxtaposition which led to surrealism in later hands. Since the Futurists' accomplishment was also reviewed this spring in a special gallery at the huge Quadriennale Exposition in Rome, it was possible to reconsider in one season the two principal movements of earlier twentieth-century Italian art – Futurism and the *Scuola metafisica*. Both movements are revered by many younger Italian artists – they are, indeed, the cubism and surrealism of Italy – and both are perhaps more influential now than any time during the past twenty years. But the contrast between them is fairly absolute, and passing from one to the other is like turning from Vachel Lindsay's 'Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM' to Lewis Carroll's unforgettable, disquieting lines 'Of shoes-and-ships-and-sealing wax-of cabbages and kings.'¹⁷

Soby's and the Barrs' travels in Italy were noticed by the Italian press, including *L'Osservatore Romano*, on May 19, 1949:

Two representatives from the Museum of Modern Art, James Thrall Soby, Director of Painting and Sculpture Department, and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Director of Collections, came to Italy in order to study the last developments of contemporary art and to select works for the Italian modern art exhibition that the museum has planned for next year. The show will include about 150 paintings and sculptures and 50 drawings and etchings.¹⁸

The news of an upcoming exhibition dedicated to Italian modern art by MoMA was confirmed by the artist Corrado Cagli in the newspaper *Gioventù*, on July 22, 1948. Cagli enthused about how Barr and Soby had been impressed by the art they had recently seen in Italy – more so than they had expected to be. Similar commentary was related by Soby and Barr in their reporting to MoMA.¹⁹ However, Cagli also complained that the major effort by MoMA, achieved through and Barr and Soby's abilities, would not be enough to support the lasting success of Italian modern art in the international art system, if Italian dealers did not work systematically to support Italian art in the US.²⁰ As examined by Raffaele Bedarida in his book dedicated to Cagli's years exile in the U.S.,²¹ the artist was a primary point of connection in the American and Italian artistic panorama. Starting with the list of Italian artists and galleries in his article "Italian Renaissance," published in *Harper's Bazaar* in March 1948, he provided ample suggestions for Barr and Soby's research trip.²² In fact, Cagli was aware of MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* project as far back as early 1946, when, in a letter to Pietro Maria Bardi, he professed his aim to be a promoter and consultant for the exhibition.²³

The Italian Collectors of Italian Modern Art: "White Flies"

Following their strategy of not involving public institutions or critics, Barr and Soby based their research on building direct relationships with artists and collectors, whose contributions compensated for museums' indifference to supporting Italian art during the 1930s through the purchase paintings and sculpture.²⁴

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In effect, around 1950, artistic historiography started to celebrate the “heroic” role played by private collectors in the 1930s – those who had first bought works from contemporary artists. Between February 16 and March 23, 1952, the dealer Gino Ghiringhelli arranged an exhibition dedicated to the tailor and art collector Adriano Pallini at the Famiglia Abruzzese-Molisana association in Milan; the preface to the catalogue lauded the cultured and polished Italian collector.²⁵ The following year, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti presented the Gianni Mattioli Collection at Florence’s Palazzo Strozzi, which he called “the first modern art museum of Italian contemporary art.” Recognizing the foresight of private collectors went together with decrying the paucity of public museums, the involution of art criticism, and the backwardness of bourgeois tastes.²⁶ The recognition of private collectors was also advocated in the organization of the Twenty-Sixth Venice Biennale, in 1952. Rodolfo Pallucchini, General Secretary of the Biennale institution, proposed to Roberto Longhi, member of the Executive Commission, an exhibition of Pallini and Mattioli’s art collections; however, Longhi declined.²⁷

The praise worthiness of private collecting was already being acknowledged in the 1930s. *Mostra Protesta del Collezionismo* opened at the Galleria del Milione in Milan on December 23, 1933, a presentation of works from the Pietro Feroldi Collection,²⁸ and Raffaello Giolli published an article dedicated to the Della Ragione Collection in the journal *Colosseo Colonna* in December 1934.²⁹ In 1938, Giuseppe Gorgerino wrote in *L’Ambrosiano* of these few collectors’ bravery: “They attempted a mystical act, a leap in the dark; they trusted in their art expert – if they have one – or in their own taste – the best way – or in foreign rules and trends. If men of good will should be blessed, they really are: white flies.”³⁰ In 1949, the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition at MoMA, of paintings and sculptures lent by Italian private collectors, seemed to confirm the notion that advanced art in Italy was collected much more by private citizens than by public institutions.³¹

The Barrs and Soby started their Italian journey in Milan, where the Circolo delle Arti – of which Toninelli was President, coordinating a membership of many Milan-based collectors and critics – was an excellent base for pursuing information and publications on Italian art.³² It also facilitated the curators’ exposure to paintings and sculptures from several different collections that were installed in the waiting room, two galleries, and bar of the Circolo delle Arti. On display were works by Carlo Carrà, Arturo Martini, Giacomo Manzù,

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Mario Sironi, Osvaldo Licini, Ardengo Soffici, Felice Casorati, Amedeo Modigliani, Giorgio de Chirico, Pompeo Borra, Massimo Campigli, Arturo Tosi, Giorgio Morandi, Virgilio Guidi, Scipione, and Pietro Marussing.³³

Carrà and Alberto Savinio were the first artists that Barr and Soby visited in Milan, between May 1–3. The details of their meeting with Savinio, including a discussion of the Metaphysical School and de Chirico, were recorded by Soby in the notebook “Milan II-X;”³⁴ no works by Savinio, however, would be included in the MoMA show. Their visit to Carrà’s studio, as noted by Soby and Margaret Scolari Barr, focused on his Futurist, Metaphysical, and later works, such as *L'estate* (Summer, 1930) and *Natura morta con anguria* (Still Life with Watermelon, 1941). In particular, Margaret Scolari Barr listed some Futurist sketches, several of which be lent to the show by the artist. On May 3, the Barrs and Soby started examining the holdings of the Milan-based collectors Antonio Boschi, Jesi, and Riccardo Jucker. The day after, in Brescia, they looked at the Pietro Feroldi Collection;³⁵ Gianni Mattioli would acquire the latter collection and lend a number of the works to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.³⁶

The pages of the travelers’ notebooks list masterpieces of Italian art held in private collections, bearing witness to the high quality of collecting in Milan in the first half of twentieth century. Soby and the Barrs were shocked by the collections, and such impressions and thoughts are recorded along with lists of titles and the occasional small sketches they drafted as they worked towards a mutually agreed upon selection for MoMA.

At Boschi’s home, Barr and Soby took note of many important works by Sironi, de Chirico (figure 4), Casorati, Gianni Dova, and Italo Valenti. They recorded their admiration for works from Jesi’s collection by Gino Severini, Ottone Rosai, Umberto Boccioni (*Studio per la Città che sale* [Study for The City Rises], 1910; and *Rissa in galleria* [Riot in the Galleria], 1910), Campigli, Morandi, Mario Mafai, Scipione, Filippo De Pisis, Casorati (*Nudo nello studio* [Naked Woman Seated Frontally], 1921), Carrà (*Ritmi di oggetti* [Rhythms of Objects], 1911; *La casa dell'amore* [The House of Love], 1922; and *Il Cinquale*, 1926), and Marino Marini (*Ritratto di Jesi* [Portrait of Mr. Jesi], 1947). But unfortunately nothing would be lent both by Boschi and Jesi. In the Jucker Collection, they found remarkable Boccioni’s *Bevitore* (Drinker, 1914), Carrà’s *Figlio del costruttore* (Builder’s Son, 1917–21) and *Natura morta con la squadra*

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(Still Life with Triangle, 1917), Morandi's *Natura morta con manichino* (Still Life with a Mannequin, 1918) and *Natura morta con scatola e birillo* (Still Life with Box and Ninepin, 1918), and de Chirico's *Giorno e notte* (Day and Night, 1926); the two Morandi works would be lent to MoMA.

After Soby arrived back in Milan from Rome, on May 16, he continued to visit private collections – belonging to Toninelli, Carrieri, Frua de Angeli, Giuseppe Vismara, Franco Marmont, and Cesare Tosi – as well as art galleries – Galleria Bergamini, Galleria Barbaroux, Galleria Borromini, Galleria della Spiga, Galleria Il Camino, and Galleria Il Milione. Also in Milan, he went to the warehouse of Galleria d'Arte Moderna, which officially reopened in the following year (having closed during the war);³⁷ there he saw Futurist paintings, drawings, and collages; MoMA would borrow Boccioni's *Scomposizione di figura di donna al tavolo* (Woman at a Table: Interpenetration of Lights and Planes, 1914) and *Dinamismo di un corpo umano* (Dynamism of a Human Figure, 1913).³⁸

Of course, Toninelli was well-disposed to lend his own works to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and to discuss selling some paintings to MoMA. Soby selected many works from Toninelli's collection, some of which he would display in New York: Boccioni's *Materia* (Matter, 1912) and *I selciatori* (Street



Figure 4. Boschi Di Stefano residence, with Giorgio de Chirico's paintings including "La scuola dei gladiatori: il combattimento" [The gladiators school: Fighting], 1928, and "Les brioches," 1925. Casa-Museo Boschi Di Stefano, Milan. Photo: Gabriele Basilico (1980s). Courtesy Archivio Gabriele Basilico.

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Pavers, 1914), and de Chirico's *Ettore e Andromaca* (Hector and Andromacha, 1926). Among the works in Frua's collection, he admired two Campiglis, which would be lent to the show (*Isola felice* [Happy Isle], 1928; and *Uomo a cavallo* [Horseman], 1928), Sironis, Morandis, and, in particular, de Chirico's *Pesci sacri* (Sacred Fish, 1918–19), which MoMA would eventually purchase at the exhibition's end. From the Vismara and Marmont Collections Soby chose De Pisis's *Pollaio* (Poultry Yard, 1928) and *Natura morta con imbuto e borsa della spesa* (Still Life with Funnel and Shopping Bag, 1925). Cesare Tosi lent two recent works by Sironi, De Pisis's *Il cavallo di Napoleone* (Napoleon's Horse, 1924), a Futurist collage and *Natura morta* (Still Life, 1914) by Soffici, and Casorati's drawing *Commessa* (Midinette, 1935).

Soby and the Barrs went to Rome on May 5 or 6,³⁹ where they benefitted from the support of Laurence P. Roberts, Director of American Academy in Rome (1947–60), where works for the exhibition were collected for shipping. Since the great and wide private collecting in Milan had no parallel in Rome, here they visited galleries, museums, and above all artists, like Renato Guttuso, Emilio Greco, Fausto Pirandello, Antonio Donghi, Carlo Levi, Pompeo Borra, and many others. In Guttuso's studio they saw him working on the important painting *La Mafia* (The Mafia, 1948), which MoMA bought for the exhibition, though later Barr exchanged it for *I mangiatori di cocomero* (Two Figures and the Watermelon, 1948), which they also saw in studio. At Greco's studio they selected *Testa maschile* (Head of a Man, 1947) and *Il cantante* (The Singer, 1948). Of their visit to Donghi's studio, Soby noted his appreciation for the artist's intense realism and emotional simplicity, comparable to that of "primitives" like Henri Rousseau. In fact, Soby dedicated a section of his text in the exhibition catalogue to Donghi as well as Rosai, as two different versions of social realism, but pointed out that Donghi's had nothing to do with political-social commentary.

Among the art galleries Soby and the Barrs visited Galleria La Margherita, L'Obelisco, Studio d'Arte Palma, and Galleria del Secolo. The owners of Galleria L'Obelisco, Irene Brin and Gasparo Del Corso, played a crucial role in facilitating the organization of the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.⁴⁰ The curators visited the Del Corsos' gallery and home repeatedly, where they saw pieces by Afro Basaldella, Toti Scialoja, Luigi Bartolini, Marcello Muccini, and Renzo Vespignani. At the Galleria del Secolo, Soby and Barr saw works by Pio Semeghini, Giovanni Omiccioli, Guttuso, Roberto Melli, Pirandello, Giovanni

Stradone, and much admired works by Mafai such as *Foglie e garofani secchi* (Dry Leaves and Carnation, 1934), which would be lent to the show by the gallery owner's, Giulio Laudisa. On May 13, while speaking with Lionello Venturi about Futurism, Impressionism, and Novecento, as well as Casorati, Birolli, Antonio Corpora, Guttuso, and Vespignani, Soby learned of Mafai's extremely important role in Rome during 1930s: as Fascism celebrated Rome as the eternal capital of the new Caesar, Mafai painted scenes of demolition, of old buildings slithering to the ground to make way for triumphal boulevards.⁴¹ Soby and Barr would see an important group of paintings and sculptures by Mafai, Scipione, and Antonietta Raphael at the Venice Biennale, where the Roman School was well represented and supported by Italian critics.⁴² In particular, Scipione's solo show at the Biennale allowed them to evaluate his historical place in the development of Italian art, and also his influence on younger artists.

Another gallery the MoMA representatives visited in Rome was Studio d'Arte Palma, which Pietro Maria Bardi founded in May 1944 (before he went to Brazil in 1946). It was an unusual experiment in the Italian art system to combine within the same commercial art gallery, spaces for ancient and modern art, a restoration workshop, and radiography and photograph labs (for art diagnostic, conservation, and documentation), inspired by French and American galleries and museums models such as Wildenstein and Knoedler galleries in New York.⁴³ Barr and Soby visited Studio d'Arte Palma on May 13, when the gallery was holding the exhibition *Quattro accademie straniere: USA, UK, Ungheria, Belgio*. Rather than the current show, however, they went to see Cagli's work, held in the gallery's storage. In November 1947, Cagli organized his first major postwar show at Studio d'Arte Palma, in which the artist exhibited a combination of expressionist paintings and of non figurative works on n-dimension inspired by de Chirico's *Metaphysica*.⁴⁴ Soby and Barr appreciated the latter kind, of which they borrowed for the exhibition at MoMA *Teatro tragico* (Tragic Theatre, 1947), one of the most accomplished paintings in the show, (figures 5 and 6) and *Studio per Spie al palo* (Study for Spies at the Stake, 1947).⁴⁵

A pivotal event of their sojourn in Rome took place at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (GNAM), then directed by Palma Bucarelli, who was rethinking the setting up of the museum collection after the war, with an

emphasis on promoting international and Italian abstract art.⁴⁶ Here the Americans wrote down a long list of names: Martini, Tosi, Mino Maccari, Marini, Casorati, Manzù, Gianfilippo Usellini, Franco Gentilini, Pirandello, Pericle Fazzini, Omiccioli, Boccioni, and Mafai. GNAM would indeed lend a remarkable group of paintings and sculptures to MoMA: Fazzini's *Ritratto di Ungaretti* (Portrait of Ungaretti, 1936), Manzu's *Cardinale* (Cardinal, 1938), Mafai's *Due donne che si spogliano* (Two Women Disrobing, 1935), Guttuso's *Battaglia con cavalli feriti* (Battle with Wounded Horses, 1942), and Armando Pizzinato's *I difensori della fabbrica* (Defenders of the Factory, 1948).



Figure 5. Corrado Cagli, "Teatro tragico" [Tragic theater], 1947. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 24 in. (92 x 61 cm). Private Collection, Rome.

Also in Rome, Soby and the Barrs visited great private collectors of Italian art: Pietro Rollino, Riccardo Gualino, and Giorgio Castelfranco. In Rollino's collection, Soby especially admired a group of works by Morandi, de Chirico, De Pisis, and Sironi; he also sketched Morandi's beautiful *Natura morta (metafisica)* (Metaphysical Still Life, 1918; figures 7 and 8). At Gualino's home

there were important paintings by Casorati; among them *Ragazza a Pavarolo* (Children at Pavarolo, 1943) would be included in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. Moreover they appreciated de Chirico's paintings, and above all, many Manzù's sculptures: *Deposizione* (Skeleton Hanging from the Cross, 1940), *Deposizione con prelate* (Cardinal and Deposition, 1941), and *Crocifissione con soldato* (Christ and the German Soldier, 1942). The topic of conversation at Giorgio Castelfranco's was again de Chirico, specifically his earlier paintings and Metaphysical production.⁴⁷



Figure 6. "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" exhibition view with Afro, "Trofeo" [Trophy], 1948; Lucio Fontana, "Cristo" [Christ - Crucifixion], 1948 (bought by MoMA after the exhibition); Lucio Fontana, "Maschera" [Masker], 1948, and "Maschera" [Masker], 1948; Corrado Cagli, "Teatro tragico" [Tragic theater], 1947; and Salvatore Fiume, "Isola di statue" [Island of statues], 1948. Gelatin silver print, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (19 x 24.1 cm). Photo Soichi Sunami. Photographic Archive. MoMA Archives, NY. Cat. no. IN413.28. New York, MoMA. © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

At the end of Soby's stay in Rome, the trio visited Margherita Sarfatti,⁴⁸ an episode that filled several pages of a notebook with titles of artists and works collected everywhere in her home, kitchen included: Sironi, Carrà, De Pisis, Casorati, Soffici, Alberto Salietti, Pirandello, Michele Cascella, Raffaele De Grada, Boccioni, Severini, Achille Funi, and Martini.⁴⁹ However, just two paintings, Casorati's *Stanza d'albergo* (Room in an Inn, 1929) and Luigi Russolo's *La nebbia* (The Fog, 1912), would be lent to the 1949 show.

On May 16, Soby left for Milan again, and the Barrs stayed on in Rome until the end of the month, visiting more collectors, artists, and critics.⁵⁰ Alfred Barr was also sick at this time. Notable was Barr's long visit to Benedetta Marinetti's house, where he looked through scrapbooks, heard Zang Tumb Tuuum record, and discussed the sale of Boccioni and Balla works in collection.⁵¹ At the time Barr purchased Boccioni's two bronze sculptures *Sviluppo di una bottiglia nello spazio* (Development of a Bottle in Space, 1912) and *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913; figure 9), and after the MoMA exhibition the second version of his triptych *Stati d'animo* (States of Mind, 1911) and the charcoal *Dinamismo muscolare* (Muscular Dynamism, 1913), lent by Benedetta Marinetti together with *Elasticità* (Elasticity, 1912). As Barr wrote to Soby, his encounter with Yvonne Müller Casella – second wife of the composer Alfredo Casella,⁵² who had just passed away in 1947 – was highly interesting too. Nevertheless, this didn't persuaded Barr to include in MoMA show a section dedicated to music, theater or any kind of futurist work different from painting, sculpture or



Figure 7. Giorgio Morandi, "Natura morta metafisica" [Metaphysical still life], 1918. Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 in. (54 x 38 cm). Fondazione Magnani Rocca (formerly the Rollino Collection), Mamiano di Traversetolo – Parma.

drawing. Barr suggested to his colleague that they add some paintings by Casorati, Carr, de Chirico, Donghi, and Morandi; of these, they would later decide upon Carra's *Pino sul mare* (The Pine, 1921 – “one of his best” – Casorati's *Conversazione platonica* (Platonic Conversation, 1925, and de Chirico's *Paesaggio romano* (Roman Landscape, 1922).⁵³

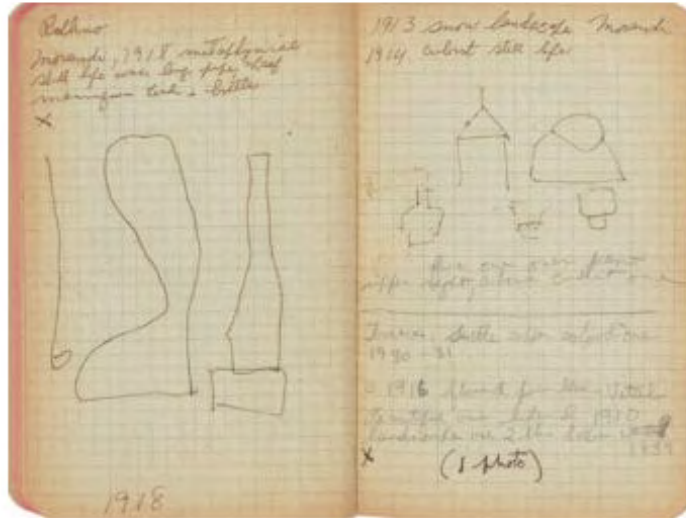


Figure 8. James T. Soby's sketch of Morandi's "Natura morta metafisica" [Metaphysical still life], in "Rome" notebook, 1948. James Thrall Soby Papers, MoMA Archive, I.135. MoMA Archives, NY. Cat. no. ARCH. 9569. New York, MoMA. © 2020. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

Break or Continuity? The Fifth Quadriennale in Rome

At Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna (GNAM), Soby and Barr visited the Fifth Quadriennale, organized by the new General Secretary of the event, the sculptor Francesco Coccia, who had replaced Cipriano Efisio Oppo, the Secretary who oversaw the Fascist editions of the exhibition.⁵⁴ The 1948 edition, on view from March 31 to the end of May, included 816 artists and 1292 works in 36 rooms – all the possibilities in Italian art were there. Coccia was supported by an organizing committee and a selection jury, both composed above all by artists: in addition to the critic Giuseppe Marchiori, the lawyer Alberto Carocci, and Giuseppe Natale and Carlo Speranza from the board of directors, among the committee's members were the artists Nino Bertolotti, Aldo Carpi, Casorati, Vincenzo Ciardo, Giovanni Colacicchi, Guttuso, Levi, Marini, Melli, Morandi, Natale, and Carlo Speranza; and the jury included Casorati, Fazzini, Alberto Gerardi, Guttuso, Mafai, and Paolo Ricci.⁵⁵

On November 22, 1944, the Italian Prime Minister Ivanoe Bonomi had appointed Coccia temporary director of the institution.⁵⁶ In this role, Coccia began consulting with artists who were members of the various political factions within the Committee of National Liberation in order “to implement the changes in the institution in the superior interest of Italian art and with the consent of all the artists interested in this development.”⁵⁷ The Palazzo delle Esposizioni – the past location for the Quadriennale – had been used as a warehouse for food supplies during the war, then as a club for the allies, and had since been converted into a polling station. The Fifth Quadriennale was planned, early on, for December 1947 at the Mercati Traianei, and only later was the GNAM decided up as the hosting venue.⁵⁸ The 1948 edition changed its name to the *National Exhibition of Visual Art* in order to mark the gap with



Figure 9. Giacomo Balla, “Rondoni: linee andamentali + successioni dinamiche” [Swifts: Paths of movement + Dynamic Sequences], 1913, and “Automobile in accelerazione” [Speeding automobile], 1912; and Umberto Boccioni, “Sviluppo di una bottiglia nello spazio” [Development of a bottle in space], 1912, and “Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio” [Unique forms of continuity in space], 1913, purchased by MoMA for the exhibition. Reproduced in Gio Ponti, “La collezione italiana del ‘Museum of Modern Art’ di New York,” in “Domus” 248–49 (July–August 1950): 42.

previous, Fascist editions,⁵⁹ though the institution's statute continued to exist on the same terms as before the war. Indeed, some critics and artists – such as Carlo Levi, from the Partito d'Azione, and the Communist Guttuso – found the exhibition's continuation troublesome.⁶⁰

Though it has been overlooked in art historical scholarship for a long time,⁶¹ the first postwar Quadriennale (figure 10) presented a strong portrayal of the Italian artistic panorama after the war, including its breadth of generations: it combined past and present, older masters and younger artists, figurative painting and Neocubism as well as abstract art, as we can see in this video from the Archivio Istituto Luce.⁶²

Among this broad abundance of proposals and names—though most of them were not particularly known to Barr and Soby – and especially due its lack of a systematic and progressive organization, the Quadriennale seemed more mixed up than the concurrent Venice Biennale (even if the latter displayed 3065 works by 1108 Italian artists). The



Figure 10. Visitors in 1948 to the Fifth Quadriennale in Rome, from "Nel mondo della pittura: ieri e oggi alla Quadriennale," *La Settimana Incom*/00158 (May 27, 1948), black-and-white film. Archivio Istituto Luce, Rome.

Quadriennale required multiple visits by Barr as he stayed on in Rome until the end of May. In effect he wrote⁶³ that the third and fourth visits revealed little new – three good pictures by Pirandello,⁶⁴ a big Guttuso, a big Cagli (but inferior to oils already listed), and Pietro Annigoni. During a second visit to the GNAM collection, Barr appreciated some Casorati's works, as well as Mafai's *Donne che si spogliano* (Women Undressing, 1934–35) and Guttuso's excellent *Battaglia con cavalli feriti* (Battle with Wounded Horses, 1942); these last two paintings were both lent for the New York show.⁶⁵

Connecting to the past, the Fifth Quadriennale included masters of Italian modern art – Carrà, Casorati, Levi, Mafai, Martini, Marini, Modigliani, Morandi, Pirandello, and Savinio – and dedicated Room 10 to Futurist artists of the Pre-World War I years, showing approximately thirty works by Boccioni, Balla, Carrà, Russolo, Severini, Sironi, Soffici, Funi, Fortunato Depero, and Enrico Prampolini. Many of the exponents of the so-called Second Futurism had not been invited; others, including Fillia, Benedetta Marinetti, Marasco, and Tato, were exhibited with artists affiliated to different movement or stylistic tendencies. This choice – vociferously disapproved of by Benedetta Cappa Marinetti⁶⁶ – was the result of a tendency emerged after WWII to separate out the Futurist artists who were active primarily after the First World War, and more connected with Fascism;⁶⁷ this chronological division promoted the founding members of Futurism as the precursors to the latest trends in advanced art, and, chiefly, abstraction.

Of course, this display of Futurism was a significant reference point for Barr, who went on to dedicate the first and largest section of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* to the movement. In effect – as Raffaele Bedarida had pointed out⁶⁸ – Barr finessed a resolution to the main problem facing the postwar reception of Futurism: its involvement with Fascism. He demarcated the movement into two generations, considering the activities of the second group marginal and their works minor in quality in comparison to those of the original Futurists;⁶⁹ in doing so, he proposed a Boccioni-centric interpretation of the movement (even if he recognized Balla's significant role, which was more appreciated by Soby, who especially commended Balla's kinetic innovations and talent as a colorist). Barr's presentation of Futurism was limited to the aesthetic qualities of painting and sculpture rather than ideological grounds – and the same held true for the representation of the Novecento group in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.

Since one of Barr and Soby's missions was to fill in the gaps in MoMA's collection of Italian modern art, the museum bought, with the mediation of Laurance P. Roberts, two of Balla's paintings shown in the Quadriennale: *Rondoni: line andamentali + succession dinamiche* (Swifts: Paths of Movement + Dynamic Sequences, 1913), and *Automobile in accelerazione* (Speeding Automobile, 1912).⁷⁰

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Near to the Futurism section at the Quadriennale, Rooms 11 and 12 featured abstract compositions (paintings by Magnelli, Mario Radice, and Mauro Reggiani, made in the 1930s, to works by the young Forma 1 group, for example by Ugo Attardi, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Giovanni Guerrini, Achille Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, and Giulio Turcato) as well as Neocubist (by Prampolini, Afro, Corpora, Nino Franchina, Guttuso, Mattia Moreni, and Pizzinato). These rooms were praised by Italian critics as the most innovative and dynamic sections of the Quadriennale, but Barr and Soby noted only minor appreciation of them initiating a long-term oblivion on this area of artistic production in the United States.⁷¹ On the one hand, the curators positively evaluated several works by members of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti as possible items for display at MoMA⁷² – works that demonstrated the influence of Pablo Picasso's paintings of the past fifteen years; neocubism was a way to a semi-abstraction for painters like Cassinari, Giuseppe Santomaso, and Pizzinato, who also revived the Futurists' interest in kinetics. On the other, the two American curators didn't select any Forma 1 works – since they needed to be very careful with younger artists – nor abstractionists operating in non-objective direction during the 1930s. Soby and Barr professed to preferring the non-representational paintings of Afro and Cagli – both on view at the Fifth Quadriennale – who “added to abstraction an element of enigmatic mystery by reviving in a personal manner the strong linear perspective and dramatic shadows of de Chirico's ‘metaphysical’ period.”⁷³

After all, “abstract art” was missing in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition. The only non-figurative works included by Barr and Soby came from neocubism or metaphysical models, instead the 1930s Italian abstract production wasn't considered good enough, save Magnelli. Two curators identified Magnelli as a fine abstractionist, but his absence was unfortunately due to his works unavailability for the exhibition in New York.⁷⁴ Moreover Soby mentioned in the catalogue Lucio Fontana as an “abstract Constructivist” who had abandoned the non-objective forms and machined materials of his early career for the expressionist figures in ceramic that he was producing in 1947 (included in the MoMA exhibition).⁷⁵ Also the name of Osvaldo Licini was missing; unlike Italian critics, Soby didn't like his work: “so many people feel is the greatest living abstract artists. To me he seems rather dull school of Klee.”⁷⁶

Among the retrospective section of the Quadriennale dedicated to early twentieth-century masters of Italian art, a major one focused on Amedeo Modigliani. As a Jewish artist who was part of international milieu, Modigliani had been target of Fascist censorship during the 1930s. After WWII a series of publications and exhibitions attempted to pick up the thread where it had been interrupted.⁷⁷ Between April and May 1946, Jewish critic Vitali (who had just returned to Italy from the exile) organized at Casa della Cultura in Milan the first major solo show dedicated to Modigliani since the large exhibition curated by Lionello Venturi at the 1930 Venice Biennale.⁷⁸ Vitali's show included sixteen paintings and forty-five drawings and was widely reviewed. One of these reviews, published by Umbro Apollonio in the art journal *Emporium*,⁷⁹ was included by Barr and Soby in the selected bibliography about Modigliani in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* catalogue (figure 11). In the Quadriennale (room 7), the two curators saw six drawings and four paintings by Modigliani.⁸⁰ Unlike the Italian shows, however, which limited themselves to paintings and drawings because of the lack of Modigliani's sculpture in Italian collections, Barr and Soby were keen to include in the MoMA exhibit two sculptures as well. One of them was already in the Museum's collection – *Testa* (Head, 1911–12; figure 12) –, and the second one – *Cariatide* (Caryatid, 1919 ca.) – was lent by the Buchholz Gallery. Comparing paintings, drawings and sculptures, Soby pointed out that like so many painters whose drawing is incisive, Modigliani “was attracted to sculpture, and in that medium his love of stylization is conveyed with exceptional clarity and force.”⁸¹

The curators' emphasis on sculpture was no limited to Modigliani. The “Recent Sculpture” section of the MoMA catalogue – unique in the volume for its focus on a specific medium, even if the sculptures were exhibited in different rooms within the exhibition – reveals the curators' increasing interest in Italian sculpture: “perhaps the most agreeable surprise of the trip was the amount of good sculpture by modern Italian artists.”⁸² Barr and Soby recognized a line in sculpture that run from Medardo Rosso, Boccioni, and Modigliani to the so-called “Three M's” (Martini, Marini, and Manzù), and younger sculptors. Such sculptural production was well represented at the 1948 Rome Quadriennale and Venice Biennale, which included an homage to Martini, who had just died in 1947.

At the Quadriennale, different approaches to sculpture, ranging from various types of figuration to non-representational ones, were displayed together: works by Martini, Marini, Manzù, Gerardi, Greco, Edgardo Mannucci, Luciano Minguzzi, Venanzo Crocetti, Amerigo Tot, Leoncillo, Fontana, Carmelo Cappello, and Giuseppe Mazzullo

along with plenty by Consagra, Alberto Viani, Franchina, Renato Barisani, Antonio Venditti, Francesco Somaini, and Pietro Cascella. A second short newsreel on the Quadriennale produced from the Istituto Luce⁸³ documents how an icon of futurism such as Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* was exhibited next to a traditionally representational, academic piece such as Mario Vita's *Vanità nascente* (Rising Vanity, 1948 – without any curatorial or critical framework. Among this huge and undifferentiated set of sculpture samples, Soby and Barr selected Viani's *Nude*⁸⁴ – a work that was clearly influenced by the biomorphic forms of Jean Arp – their section "The Younger Abstractionists; the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti."

Despite this opening to the new abstract and neo-cubism proposals, the accrochage of the 1948 Quadriennale, as well as the ways to communicate it, reveals how much the framework of the first Quadriennale after the WWII was still related to the Fascist Ventennio. Thus, even if Barr and Soby selected some works from the Quadriennale, they displayed them at the MoMA show in a different way, much more inspired to the Venice Biennale approach.



Figure 11. Umbro Apollonio, "Breve omaggio a Modigliani," in "Emporium" CIII, no. 6 (June 1946): 260–61.

“A Step in the Right Direction”: The Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennale

If the Quadriennale was suspended between past and present, the Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennale looked forward, by presenting a new perspective and breaking with the Fascist past.

In his review of the Biennale for the *Saturday Review of Literature* – which would be the basis for his essay in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* catalogue – Soby asserted that the “biennial now current is more advanced in approach and more comprehensive than ever before. This is a suitable fact to report, for the first thing to be said as the modern art’s prospects in postwar Italy is that the atmosphere is propitious, in fact is amazingly energetic and hopeful.”⁸⁵

The rhetoric of a “new renaissance” after the end of Fascism – at the basis of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition at MoMA – inspired the Venice Biennale editions after World War II directed by Rodolfo Pallucchini as General Secretary of the institution. Through grand retrospective exhibitions, the Pallucchini Biennales (1948–56) proposed a historical reconstruction of



Figure 12. Amedeo Modigliani’s sculpture and paintings in MoMA’s collection before the exhibition: “Testa” [Head], 1911–12, “Moglie e marito” [Bride and groom], 1915–16, and “Anna Zborowski,” 1917. Reproduced in Gio Ponti, “La collezione italiana del ‘Museum of Modern Art’ di New York,” *Domus* no. 250 (September 1950): 59.

the pivotal artistic developments and events of international modernism, in order to create a bridge between European avant-garde masters and new, further advanced international endeavors.⁸⁶ Unlike the Quadriennale's approach, the Venice Biennale went back until Impressionism to find the sources of current not-academic and of modernism, and to propose the right models to younger generation involved in the most innovative artistic researches: going back to go forward.

In the foreword to the Biennale catalogue of 1948, Pallucchini claimed to come back to the original agenda of the Biennale to offer "to all smart men the way to know and compare different aesthetic directions and styles, as well as to enrich the intellectual heritage of young artists." This, according to Pallucchini, had proved impossible in the still recent past because of the "purist creed of Nazism that was unfortunately embraced by some supporters in Italy too. The freedom of the new climate, a remarkable achievement of the European spirit, has been welcomed by the members of the Executive Commission for the Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennale."⁸⁷ In the catalogue's preface, Giovanni Ponti, President of the Biennale, encouraged everyone to go beyond national borders and ideological walls in favor of a humanism: "I don't think I am wrong in saying that, for the first time since the war's end, we have a large and complete vision of what has been done by the most significant artists of modern times. All movements are included: from the first reactions against the academy by Impressionism, to Post-impressionism, Expressionism, abstract art, and Surrealism."⁸⁸

In his review Soby pointed out that "this year's Biennial is a step in the right direction. It includes the first important exhibition in Italy of the French impressionists – fantastic as this may seem. It includes as well selections of the art of [Georges] Braque, [Marc] Chagall, [Paul] Klee, [Oskar] Kokoschka, [Henry] Moore, Picasso, [Georges] Rouault, and other leaders of the modern movements."⁸⁹ He added that it was important to give to young artists the tools and information to learn more about what has happened elsewhere in the art.

Following the suggestions of the Committee for Arts⁹⁰ and the organizers of the national pavilions, the first postwar edition of the Biennale was an arrangement of numerous focuses: an exhibition of Impressionism⁹¹ was curated by a special committee at the German Pavilion and featured works

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by Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, Camille Pissarro, Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat (figure 13);⁹² solo shows were presented of Picasso (whose work was returning for the first time since its removal during the Biennale of 1905), Klee, and Oskar Kokoschka; and a collective exhibition was dedicated to German artists including, among others, Willi Baumeister, Otto Dix, Max Pechstein, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and Emil Schumacher. The national pavilions' significant exhibitions included: at the French Pavilion, Braque's paintings from 1940s and works by Chagall and Rouault; at the Austrian Pavilion, Fritz Wotruba and Egon Schiele; at the British Pavilion, William Turner and Moore, who was awarded with the international prize for sculpture; at the Belgian Pavilion, Paul Delvaux, James Ensor, René Magritte, and Constant Permeke. The Greek Pavilion was empty because of the civil war in that country, and hosted the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

Among the exhibitions dedicated to Italian artists, the most significant ones concerned the three major Italian sculptors Martini, Manzù and Marini, Campigli and De Pisis, members of "School of Paris," thus aware of the international researches, Gino Rossi – Venetian painter who had just died in 1947, and was able to merge Italian models with international influences by Gauguin, Cézanne and Cubists –, Cagnaccio di San Pietro (dead in 1946), Scipione and Mafai from "Roman School," and Maccari, awarded with the international prize for etching; particularly remarkable were the cohesive group presentations *Tre pittori italiani dal 1910 al 1920. Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi* (Three Italian Painters from 1910 to 1920: Carlo Carrà, Giorgio de Chirico, Giorgio Morandi) and *Il Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (The New Front).

By identifying Impressionism as the progenitor of modernism, through which European artistic tastes developed, and in also considering the relevance to modern art and Surrealism of the Metaphysical paintings of de Chirico, Carrà, and Morandi,⁹³ the Biennale aimed to reaffirm the central position of modernism in contemporary European culture, highlighting the roles played by France and Italy.

Thus, for Barr and Soby the opportunity to attend the Venice Biennale was an important and educational experience. Indeed, on June 25, 1948, having evaluated Soby's long list of works displayed at the Biennale,⁹⁴ Barr wrote to Soby: "I visited the Biennale five or six times for many hours carefully checking your notes with my own made independently. I find that we agree to a remarkable extent and that my most radical differences developed usually after I had seen the pictures many times."⁹⁵ Comparing both lists, a role-playing seemed to emerge.

Soby – considered the expert on Italian art by Barr – started the discussion on artworks displayed at the Venice Biennale and suitable for the 1949 MoMA show, and suggested artists and works or dismissed them thanks to a more refined look; moreover he summarized the features of some works referring to well-known International and Italian artists.⁹⁶ Barr, by a more concise approach, removed excess. Anyway, the main differences concerned above all minor artists (according to his personal taste)⁹⁷ and didn't change the shared whole framework of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition. Instead it's more interesting note they agreed to consider not



Figure 13. Lionello Venturi and Rodolfo Pallucchini, "Gli impressionisti alla XXIV Biennale di Venezia" (Venice: Edizioni Daria Guarnati, 1948).

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enough good works of artist well appreciated by Italian critics, such as Mino Maccari,⁹⁸ Gino Rossi, and Osvaldo Licini.

After Futurism, Metaphysical painting was the second original contribution to modernism that Barr and Soby proposed in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, represented in a selection of names and works based on the Biennale's aforementioned show *Tre pittori italiani dal 1910 al 1920*. In including Carrà and Morandi as members of the Scuola Metafisica along with de Chirico, the Biennale's curators interpreted Metaphysical painting as an innovative expression of Italian identity (despite de Chirico's claim that it was, for him, a personal philosophy and experience). Thus, the Metaphysical style clearly visible in great masterpieces on display in Venice, and also lent by the Italian private collectors mentioned above, was identified as an Italian model as prominent as Futurism. In the MoMA catalogue, Soby would credit Mario Broglio's *Valori plastici* journal, published from 1918–21, as having brought the Scuola Metafisica international fame and lasting influence.⁹⁹

In his 1948 review of the Biennale (figure 14) (and in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* catalogue too), Soby considered the careers of de Chirico, Carrà, and Morandi separately, and in so doing spotlighted Morandi's role in Italian modernism. In recalling Morandi as a great discovery during their travels in Italy, he confessed to having previously assumed that Italians' esteem for Morandi was exaggerated and simply the result of the isolation imposed on Italian art by the Fascist regime. But "as one sees whole rooms hung with Morandis in the leading Italian collections, one becomes aware that his art reflects the most subtle modifications of form and tone, that he has in fact devoted himself to a research whose formal purity and lyric impetus are comparable, in more representational terms, of the late Piet Mondrian."¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Soby grasped just how much Morandi had influenced younger painters of different tendencies throughout Italy – abstractionists, expressionists, romantics, and realists.

Reviewing Soby's list of works at the Biennale, Barr of course agreed with him on Morandi, selecting several works; he bought the beautiful *Natura morta* (Still Life, 1916) from Morandi for MoMA's collection, and *Natura morta con bottiglie e piatto di frutta* (Still Life with Bottles and Fruit Dish, 1916) and *Oggetti* (Objects, 1919) would be lent from the Feroldi and Longhi collections. For MoMA's print collection Barr purchased five etchings also from Morandi

(three landscapes, from 1913, 1928, and 1933; and two still lifes, from 1933 and 1934), as well as additional items from Bartolini (*La storia del martin pescatore* [The Story of the Kingfisher], 1935; *Il sogno di Anna* [Anna's Dream], 1941; *Tacchi alti* [High Heels], 1946; and *Lungotevere* [Tevere Waterfront], 1947), Giuseppe Viviani (*La gamba* [The Leg], 1939; *Bicicletta dal mare* [Bicycle by the Sea], 1941; and five miniature etchings, 1947), Casorati (*Ragazza che dorme* [Girl Sleeping], 1946; *Due donne* [Two Women], 1946, and lithographs from an album portfolio), and Manzù (etchings for *Le Georgiche di Virgilio* [Virgil's Georgics], 1948); these works were included in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. After WWII the print collection of MoMA became more and more important, leading to the opening of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Print Room in May 1949, which was inaugurated with the show *Master Prints from the Museum Collection*. Despite prints having always had a place in the museum's collection, only at the end of 1940s MoMA established a department of prints, naming William Slattery Lieberman as its first curator. This development followed the model of other pioneering institutions in



Figure 14. James T. Soby, "The Venice Biennial," in "The Saturday Review of Literature" (August 7, 1948). With reproduction of Giorgio Morandi, "Natura morta" [Still life], 1939. Exhibited at the Biennale and lent by Pietro Rollino to "Twentieth-Century Italian Art."

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championing printmaking, such as the Brooklyn Museum, the Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago. In a special bulletin dedicated to the print exhibition, Barr highlighted the extraordinary flowering of printmaking, which as an art had reached unprecedented levels of accomplishment.¹⁰¹ He presented printmaking as an essentially democratic medium and the most efficient means for disseminating abstract art far and wide.

Similarly to the Quadriennale, the Venice Biennale gave a special visibility to the sculpture, but in a different way: by focusing on the main figures such as Martini, Marini, and Manzù thanks to dedicated rooms, and also by displaying the pieces in the rooms according to the painting on the walls, in order to suggest a mutual visual dialogue between both medium and languages. Thus at the Venice Biennale, Barr and Soby also appreciated the sculptors Minguzzi, Marcello Mascherini, and Fontana, with his ceramic piece *Cristo* (Christ, 1948).¹⁰² But they focused above all on the three most-esteemed Italian sculptors: Martini, Marini, and Manzù. The latter had a special position of preeminence at the 1948 Biennale having been awarded the top prize for Italian sculpture. Soby asserted that the "Three M's"¹⁰³ contributed enormously to the call for modern Italian art to be better known internationally.¹⁰⁴

Among Martini's sculptures on display in the rotunda (figure 15) and other rooms of the Italian Pavilion, Barr borrowed from Brigida Pessano, Martini's wife, *Dedalo e Icaro* (Dedalus and Icarus, 1935–36). Moreover the terra-cottas *Le collegiali* (Women Chatting, 1927–31) and *La moglie del pescatore* (The Fisherman's Wife, 1931) were lent by the art dealer and collector Count Contini Bonacossi, whom Margaret Scolari Barr visited in Florence, while Alfred Barr "wasted a dreary two hours going through the modern Collection on the top of Pitti, closed to public."¹⁰⁵ *Dedalo e Icaro* (Daedalus and Icarus, 1934), which would be purchased by MoMA during the run of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, is exemplary of Martini's language, featuring a rude, powerful expressionism and sense of archaic grandeur that draws equally on primitive and mannerist sources.¹⁰⁶

As is well known, since 1948 Marini enjoyed strong success in America thanks to the dealer Curt Valentin and Soby,¹⁰⁷ as his sculptures were exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the country.¹⁰⁸ Soby's interpretation of

Marini's work was partially based on the analysis of Lamberto Vitali, specifically a long article published in the American magazine *Horizon* in September 1948: Marini was an heir of Italian tradition – primitive and anti-academic – but he was also extremely modern and connected to European developments.¹⁰⁹ Soby was enthusiastic about Marini's sculpture, and he highlighted his plastic values of Marini's sculpture as well as his strong textural interest, and his sensitivity to the particularities of character: "Marini is today one of the few major figures of his generation in European sculpture. [...] His presence in Italy today is an extraordinary asset in the resurgence of creative impetus among the younger men."¹¹⁰

For *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, Barr and Soby selected a few Marini drawings and some outstanding sculptures: *Pugile* (Prizefighter, 1935) from the Valentiner Collection; *Nudo* (Nude, 1943), shown at Buchholz Gallery in New York in 1948; the great *Cavallo e cavaliere* (Horse and Rider, 1947–48), purchased by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III and by MoMA just before the show; the *Ritratto di Lamberto Vitali* (Portrait of Lamberto Vitali, 1945), lent by the critic and then acquired by MoMA after the exhibition; and *Ritratto di Carlo Carrà* (Portrait of Carlo Carrà, 1947), lent by the artist.



Figure 15. Arturo Martini's sculpture at the XXIV Venice Biennale, in Giorgio Castelfranco, "La XXIV Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia," in "Bollettino d'Arte" XXXIII/IV, no. 3 (July–September 1948): 277.

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Italian critics saw the sculptor Manzù as continuing in the the tradition of Medardo Rosso.¹¹¹ Though Soby on the whole preferred the work of Marini, since it was more original and stronger,¹¹² both he and Barr deeply admired Manzù's sculpture *Ritratto di signora* (Portrait of Lady, 1946), on display at the Venice Biennale and later at MoMA. They described it as "a moving and gracious work of art, achieving an atmospheric magnetism through its delicacy of line and surface."¹¹³ Soby added that Manzù was a sculptor "warm, tender [and] romantic, belonging essentially to older sculptural tradition."¹¹⁴

Barr agreed with Soby also on Semeghini, Borra, Casorati, Pirandello, Campigli and Mafai; on many of Scipione's paintings; Stradone's *Coleotteri* (Beetles, 1944) (even if *The Colosseum* seen in the Laudisa Collection in Rome was the best); Cassinari's *La madre* (The Mother, 1948),¹¹⁵ purchased by Barr from Vitali; and above all on Carrà, whose paintings enriched the Metaphysical School section of the MoMA exhibition, as well as the focus on Italian painting during 1920s and 1930s.¹¹⁶ As Soby wrote, Carrà was a problem because of the difficulty of selecting among many great works.¹¹⁷ The selection of De Pisis's works wasn't easy either: Barr got generally bored by his paintings seen at Biennale and he only liked few items, mostly suggested by Soby since excellent in quality: Jesi's brilliant portrait of *Soldato nello studio* (Recruit, 1937), Novacco's *I peltri* (Pewters, 1941), Romanelli's *Il Coniglio* (The Rabbit, 1933), Venturi's *La porta del mio studio* (The Door of My Studio, 1935), which will be showed at *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition. Soby well identified the different sources of De Pisis' painting (Manet, Impressionism, Metafisica, Baroque, eighteenth century's venetian landscape painting) and the virtuosity of his technique. Also, he pointed out De Pisis' "contradiction": "Because he improvises with such rapt faith in his own virtuosity, he succeeds or fails according to the clarity and depth of the emotion that prompts a given work. His lack of meditative integrity is his vice and his virtue."¹¹⁸ Another specific case was Gianfilippo Usellini's one; Barr and Soby appreciated his work, but they didn't find any very good piece available.

In Venice, Cagli's *La Chanson d'outrée* (The song of outraged ones, 1947) was, for Barr, good but inferior to the best works seen in Rome; Alberto Ziveri (influenced by Scipione's and Mafais' painting) and Gianni Vagnetti were interesting; and Virgilio Guidi – thanks to his simplified language¹¹⁹ – rose in

his opinion, so much so that they chose to borrow from the artist both *Figure nello spazio III* (Figures in Space III, 1947) and *Nudo* (Nude, 1945). Instead Barr and Soby considered of insufficient quality those paintings on view beyond their very different stylistic affiliation: Rossi, Rolando Colombini, Antonio Calderara, Mario Cavaglieri (despite Longhi's recommendation), Orfeo Tamburi, Vittorio Bolaffio, Lega, Maccari, Birolli, Turcato, Corpora, Sante Monachesi. Moreover, Barr didn't like enough paintings by Emilio Vedova, Giuseppe Aimone, Arnaldo Ciarrocchi, and Giuseppe Capogrossi, and he disparaged works by Domenico Cantatore, Omiccioli, Domenico Purificato, Ennio Morlotti, and Leoncillo.¹²⁰

It's clear that Soby and Barr were demanding and very careful in their selection of young artists at the Rome Quadriennale and Venice Biennale or supported by the commercial galleries, since they were "uneven in quality."¹²¹ In effect in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Soby wrote that "perhaps it is too early to decide whether in Italy a strong new generation of artists is emerging, but at least the young there are really young (many of the most promising are under thirty), and they work with the enthusiasm of those who believe that history is ahead of them instead dogging their tracks."¹²² Notably, they chose only a few members from Fronte Nuovo delle Arti group to appear in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. The group – composed of Birolli, Corpora, Franchina, Guttuso, Leoncillo, Morlotti, Pizzinato, Santomaso, Turcato, Vedova, and Viani, who were linked much more by a common will of renewal than a shared style – was supported by the critic Giuseppe Marchiori and much discussed by Italian critics in newspapers and art journals during the Biennale; indeed, they were widely considered the most dynamic emerging practitioners of painting and sculpture. Among them, Guttuso was the most attractive to the representatives of MoMA, thanks to a visual rather than political or ideological approach: they appreciated his neo-cubist style and didn't consider his affiliation to Communist party. Both Barr and Soby appreciated also several of Pizzinato's and Santomaso's paintings,¹²³ and Viani's sculpture (which they had already enjoyed at the Fifth Quadriennale).¹²⁴

Of course, the Italian Communist-artists topics was one of the main troubles which Barr and Soby faced. They always asserted that their selection was made solely on the basis of artistic quality, but they were aware of political

instability in Italy after WWII, that could be a problem as well as an opportunity:

Our choice of works for the exhibition, though not yet final, was made solely on the basis of quality. We made clear from the beginning that the political convictions of the artists would not be a factor in our judgment. As a result, we were able to work with a free hand, and perhaps it is not too optimistic to claim that our impartiality had a good if minor effect. We found on arrival in Italy that a majority of the living artists were Communists. Before the elections of April, the Communist party had made all manner of promises to prominent Italian artists. But when one of the most intelligent of the younger Italian Communist-artists was asked what he had really received from the Communist party, he reply was 'Nothing but orders.' These orders began to be a serious matter before we left Italy. Before the elections, the Communist party has assured the artists that they would be entirely free to paint what they liked – abstractions, expressionist pictures, anything they wanted. The assurance was frequently given that Italian Communist would not follow the Russian pattern of forcing artists to create image useful to the Communist Party, that is, to create "socialist realist" images to direct propaganda value to the Party. But soon after the elections, the Communist members of an important jury were instructed not to award prizes to any abstract paintings but rather to favour realistic and social works. This action came as a bombshell to advanced artists of Italy. It made the Museum's non-political impartiality of choice seem the more welcome, and perhaps we are justified in saying that at least a few good artists began to consider a new the virtues of the democratic principle "Freedom of expression."¹²⁵

Thus, Barr and Soby's grand tour was utterly educational and they departed confident that an extremely interesting exhibition would result – one surely more varied and of better quality than what they had supposed possible before their trip.

Quality was the refrain of Barr and Soby, but which is "quality?" In a transnational exchange operation like *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition, the evaluation of "quality" of artworks was totally arbitrary and according to a specific point of view, influenced by the context and many factors: establishing the role of Italian art in the international context of modernism according to Barr's stylistically derivative system proposed since 1936 and at the base of MoMA presentation of twentieth-century art; a schizophrenic and contradictory methodology, from one hand, that aimed to select artworks by a stylistic and visual approach and neglected any social and political influences, from the other, that considered the new democratic and political order in Italy after the end of Fascism indispensable prerequisite for a new "Italian renaissance" in art too; Barr and Soby's personal taste and interest.

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2. The historiography has for long time asserted the cultural and artistic isolationism of Italian artists during Fascism – the MoMA 1949 show was also based on this thesis –, but in the last years some scholars and texts – in this issue as well – contested it.
3. See Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 157.
4. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., letter to Charles Rufus Morey, April 24, 1948, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, 3154: 271, Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. All future references to letters, notebooks, and diaries, unless otherwise noted, are from MoMA's Archive.
5. See Laura Moure Cecchini's essay "'Positively the only person who is really interested in the show': Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York," in the present issue of *Italian Modern Art*.
6. Barr, letter to Morey, April 24, 1948, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, 3154: 271.
7. See Raffaele Bedarida, "Export/Import: The Promotion of Contemporary Italian Art in the United States, 1935–1969" (PhD diss., Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2016), 21.
8. Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, letter to Monroe Wheeler, August 22, 1946; Wheeler, letter to Bandinelli, February 24, 1947; Bandinelli, letter to Wheeler, March–April 1947; and Rene d'Harnoncourt (on behalf of Wheeler), letter to Bandinelli, April 15, 1947, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.8.
9. See Davide Colombo, "1949: Twentieth-Century Italian Art at MoMA di New York," in Francesco Tedeschi (ed.), *New York New York. La riscoperta dell'America* (Milan: Electa, 2017), 107–8. See also Davide Colombo, "MoMA and the Italian art collection: a debate between Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and Gio Ponti," paper presented at the study day on Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Margaret Scolari Barr, Center for Italian Modern Art, New York, April 23, 2015.
10. See several tentative lists and comments by James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
11. Based on their specific areas of interest and responsibility, Barr focuses on Futurism, and Soby – as well as in his *The early Chirico* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1941) – wrote about the Metaphysical School and the middle and young generations of painters and sculptors.

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12. James T. Soby, "Realism – Macchiaioli Style," *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 5, 1949: 28–29
13. *Ibid.*, 29.
14. Soby and Barr requested many books and photographs of paintings and sculptures from Italian institutions, galleries, and critics. See the bibliography in Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949).
15. Elena Cordova, "Discoveries from the Margaret Scolari Barr Papers at the MoMA Archives," paper presented at the study day on Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Margaret Scolari Barr, Center for Italian Modern Art, New York, April 23, 2015.
16. The Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, holds two notebooks penned by Soby and Margaret Barr: "Milan II-X" and "Rome" (James Thrall Soby Papers, I.135); a pocket diary and a travel diary by Soby: "J.T.S. 1948," "Milan" (James Thrall Soby Papers, II.F); and Margaret Scolari Barr's pocket diary (May 18–29 pages missing) (M. Scolari Barr Papers, IV.5).
17. James Thrall Soby, "The Venice Biennial," *Saturday Review of Literature* (August 7, 1948): 30.
18. "Una mostra dell'arte Italiana moderna a New York," *L'Osservatore Romano* (May 19, 1948): 2. Translation by the authors'.
19. [James Thrall Soby], Report on MoMA exhibition of Twentieth-Century Italian painting and sculpture, [after June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
20. Corrado Cagli, "Cagli risponde a De Chirico con un vivace discorso polemico. Una rassegna di pittura italiana al museo di New York," *Gioventù* (July 22, 1948), available in Raccolta Documentaria Arti Visive, BV 1948 records, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC), Venice.
21. Raffaele Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l'esilio, l'America (1938–1947)* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2018).
22. Corrado Cagli, "Italian Renaissance," *Harper's Bazaar* (March 1948): 227–33. See also a list on artists and galleries from the article in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6. In the same article Cagli wrote that MoMA was organizing an exhibition on Italian art and planning Soby and Barr's journey in Italy.

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23. Cagli, letter to Pietro Maria Bardi, February 11, 1946, reproduced in Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli*, 201–03.
24. This topic is analyzed in Silvia Bignami, "'Ti prego di preparare I vestiti, perché sono nudo'. La collezione di Adriano Pallini negli anni Trenta," *L'uomo nero*, no. 3 (2005): 31–50.
25. Gino Ghiringhelli, ed., *Mostra Pallini. Alcune opere* (Milan: Ind. Grafica Moneta, 1952).
26. Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, ed., *Arte moderna in una raccolta italiana* (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1953).
27. Rodolfo Pallucchini, letter to Longhi, September 24, 1951, and draft by Longhi, reproduced in Maria Cristina Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra 1948–1956* (Milan: Charta, 1999), 142–48.
28. "Mostra Protesta del Collezionista," *Bollettino del Milione*, no. 20 (December 23, 1933–January 4, 1934).
29. Raffaello Giolli, "Genova: dell'ingegnere Della Ragione," *Colosseo Colonna* (December 1934): 32–36.
30. Giuseppe Gorgerino, "Utilità delle opera d'arte," *L'Ambrosiano* (February 9, 1938): 6.
31. Already in 1935 Barr contacted directly Galleria Il Milione and artists in order to request artworks for *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition held at MoMA in 1936.
32. See Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919–1943* (Bologna: Minerva Edizioni, 2000); Antonello Negri (ed.), *Il sistema dell'arte a Milano dal 1945 al 1956: gallerie ed esposizioni* (Cernusco Lombardone: Hestia, 1998); Antonello Negri (ed.), *Il sistema dell'arte a Milano dal 1945 al 1956: arte e critica in "Avanti!", "Corriere della Sera", "L'Unità"* (Cernusco Lombardone: Hestia, 1998).
33. A typewritten list on the letterhead of the Il Camino and Il Milione galleries with handwritten notes by Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
34. "Milan II-X" notebook, James Thrall Soby Papers, I.135.
35. Guido Piovene, *La Raccolta Feroldi* (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1942).
36. See Flavio Fergonzi, *La collezione Mattioli. Capolavori dell'avanguardia italiana* (Milan: Skira, 2003).

37. See Mario Bezzola, *Situazione delle opere nella Galleria d'Arte Moderna*, December 6, 1948, Archivio dei Musei Artistico e Archeologico Municipali, Servizio Biblioteche e Archivi Artistici e Archeologici Civici, Castello Sforzesco, Milan, folder 157; quoted in Marina Pugliese, Danka Giaccon, Iolanda Ratti, "Un secolo di storia per un museo definitivo," in *Museo del Novecento. La collezione* (Milan: Electa, 2010), 31. "... the artworks were not displayed in the rooms of the museum. They were provisionally in the warehouse; the paintings were placed on the floor 'on each other' and 'contrary to good preservative standard.'" Translation by the authors'.
38. "J.T.S. 1948" pocket diary and "Milan" travel diary, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.F.
39. "Rome" notebook, James Thrall Soby Papers, I.135; Margaret Scolari Barr's pocket diary, Margaret Scolari Barr Papers, IV.5.
40. See Ilaria Schiaffini's essay "It's Roman Holiday for Artists: The American Artists of L'Obelisco After World War II," in the present issue of *Italian Modern Art*.
41. This feature of Mafai's work was highlighted promoting him after WWII, despite his painting was well appreciated during 1930s as well as it was institutionally recognized thanks to the Venice Biennale in 1938 and the Premio Bergamo, promoted by Giuseppe Bottai (Minister of National Education) in 1940.
42. Soby, "The Fine Arts: The Venice Biennial," 31–32. Despite her role in "Roman School" together with Scipione and Mafai recognized by the Venice Biennale (as well as the persecution because of the racial laws), Antonietta Raphael was missing in MoMA show and unquoted in Soby's texts.
43. See Viviana Pozzoli, "Lo Studio d'Arte Palma: Storia di un'impresa per il commercio artistico nell'Italia del dopoguerra," *Acme*, vol. 69, no. 2: 145–58.
44. See Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli*, 3–4, 271–82.
45. *Spies at the Stake* (1947) was displayed at Fifth Quadriennale.
46. See Mariastella Margozi, ed., *Palma Bucarelli. Il museo come avanguardia* (Milan: Electa, 2009).

47. Since 1945, Soby was working on revising his monograph on the de Chirico's early paintings (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1941) in order to reprint it (New York: MoMA, 1955), thus each discussion with Italian scholars on this topic was very useful, as he also wrote in the "Acknowledgments" of the 1955 edition (7–9); moreover Soby asked to critics, collectors and dealers good pictures of de Chirico's paintings. In an index card, Soby summarized the topics of his talk with Castelfranco on May 14, 1948: de Chirico's using siccatic de Courtrai up to 1918 and using tempera from 1921–22; two de Chirico's works from Girardon Collection destroyed by fire in New York; copy of *Muse Inquietanti* purchased by Breton (see "Chirico" index card [post summer 1948], James Thrall Soby Papers, I.353).
48. Margherita Sarfatti – writer, journalist, art critics – was the promoter of the Novecento Italiano group, established in 1922 (Anselmo Bucci, Leonardo Dudreville, Achille Funi, Gian Emilio Malerba, Piero Marussig, Ubaldo Oppi, and Mario Sironi). For twenty years she was intimate with Benito Mussolini and she wrote his biography, *Dux*, published in Italy in 1926; after the racial laws in 1938, she left Italy, where she came back in 1947.
49. "Rome" notebook, James Thrall Soby Papers, I.135.
50. See Margaret Scolari Barr's pocket diary, Margaret Scolari Barr Papers, IV.5; Barr, letters to Soby, May 22, 1948, and May 28, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
51. Barr, letter to Soby, May 22, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
52. Alfredo Casella contributed to Depero's *I balli plastici*, staged at Teatro dei Piccoli (Palazzo Odescalchi) in Rome, on April 15, 1918, and to Anton Giulio Bragaglia's shows at Teatro degli Indipendenti in 1921.
53. Ibid.
54. After the fall of Fascism, Oppo came out of two court cases unscathed: he had been fully acquitted of the charges brought against him by a special committee against Fascism and the profits of the regime. Thus, he was invited to the Quadriennale as painter. See Francesca Romana Morelli, ed., *Cipriano Efisio Oppo. Un legislatore per l'arte* (Rome: De Luca, 2000), 397.

55. On the history of the Fifth Quadriennale, see Claudia Salaris, *La Quadriennale. Storia della rassegna d'arte italiana dagli anni Trenta a oggi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004), 69–83; Enrico Crispolti, "Ricapitolazioni e prospettive in scena problematica," and Roberto Ciuni, "Uno sterminato 'catalogo di pittura e di scultura,'" in *XIV Quadriennale di Roma. Retrospective 1931/1948* (Milan: Electa, 2005), 133–37 and 139–42.
56. Bonomi, letter to Coccia, November 22, 1944, Rome, Archivio Storico della Quadriennale II, carteggio, b. 2, u. 8, quoted in Claudia Salaris, *La Quadriennale. Storia della rassegna d'arte italiana dagli anni Trenta a oggi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004), 226.
57. Coccia, letter to Premiership, January 10, 1945, Rome, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri, 1948–50, 14.1.12422, quoted in Salaris, *La Quadriennale*, 226.
58. Memorandum of Organizing Committee of the Fifth Quadriennale, Rome, ASQII, c.1, in *XIV Quadriennale di Roma*, 222.
59. It is useful to remember that the Quadriennale commemorated, in two solo shows, the artists Arturo Nathan and Rudolf Levy, who died in Nazi concentration camps. A small solo show was dedicated to Nathan also in the Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennial. Nathan's name is mentioned in the catalogue of MoMA show, with Savinio's and de Chirico's, reviving certain aspects of the Metaphysical premise during the 1920s. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 26.
60. Ernesto Valentino, "La 'Quadriennale' si farà ma come si farà," *Umanità* (July 27, 1947).
61. Enrico Crispolti suggested this underestimating the Fifth Quadriennale was probably caused by its all-inclusive approach, unlike some many others shows focusing on a specific artistic research: *Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Astratta e Concreta* [International Exhibition of Abstract and Concrete Art] (Milan, 1947), *Quattro pittori fuori strada* [Four Painters off-road] (Rome, 1947), *Prima Mostra del Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* [Fronte Nuovo delle Arti First Exhibition] (Milan, 1947), *Forma 1* (Rome, 1947), *Arte Astratta in Italia* [Abstract Art in Italy] (Rome, 1948), *Prima Mostra Nazionale d'Arte Contemporanea* [First National Contemporary Art Exhibition] (Bologna, 1948), and, later, *Arte astratta e concreta in Italia* [Abstract and Concrete Art in Italy] (Rome, 1951). See Crispolti, "Ricapitolazioni e prospettive in scena problematica," in *XIV Quadriennale di Roma*, 134–35.

62. *Arti figurative. Rassegna Nazionale a Roma*, La Settimana Incom/00140, April 8, 1948, black-and-white film with sound, 1 min. 26 sec., Rome, Archivio Istituto Luce.
63. See Barr, letter to Soby, May 22, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
64. One of them, *Bathers*, was purchased by Augusto Caraceni and later lent to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.
65. See Barr, letter to Soby, May 22, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
66. Benedetta Marinetti criticized the organizers for focusing on early Futurism and minimizing the second generation. See Benedetta Marinetti, "Sulla 'Mostra dei Futuristi,'" *Il Tempo* (March 31, 1948), quoted in Salaris, *La Quadriennale*, 70 and 226.
67. After WWII few references to second generation of futurist artists appeared in Raffaele Carrieri, *Pittura scultura d'avanguardia in Italia 1890-1950* (Milan: Edizioni della Conchiglia, 1950); Guido Ballo, *Pittori italiani dal futurismo a oggi* (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1956); Tristan Sauvage, *Pittura italiana del dopoguerra (1945-1957)* (Milan: Schwarz, 1957). But a new and more complex analysis of the "second Futurism" started at the end of 1950s thanks to Enrico Crispolti, "Appunti sul problema del secondo futurismo nella cultura italiana fra le due Guerre," *Notizie: Arti figurative*, 2: 5 (April 1958): 34-52, and Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori, eds., *Archivi del futurismo* (Rome: De Luca, 1958-62).
68. See Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940-1949," 157-58.
69. The second generation of Futurists was just mentioned by Soby in the catalogue, introducing the Italian situation of 1920s, after the collapse of Futurism and of the Scuola Metafisica. See Soby and Barr, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 26.
70. See Barr, letter to Soby, May 22, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6; see also Gisella Conte, "L'ufficio vendite," in *XIV Quadriennale di Roma*, 232.

71. It's interesting to note that a commercial gallery like Sperone Westwater has recently held the exhibition *Painting in Italy 1910s–1950s: Futurism, Abstraction, Concrete Art* (2015), as an answer to correct the historical narrative proposed in the exhibitions *Chaos and Classicism: Art in France, Italy, and Germany, 1918–1936* (curated by Kenneth E. Silver) and *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (curated by Vivien Greene) organized by the Guggenheim Museum in 2010–11 and 2014. In her essay in the exhibition catalogue – “The Utopias of Italian Abstract Painting, 1910s–1950s. A Contested History” – Maria Antonella Pelizzari proposed a line of continuity within a wide chronological period.
72. See Adrian R. Duran's essay, “Neocubism and Italian Painting Circa 1949: An Avant-Garde That Maybe Wasn't,” in the present issue of *Italian Modern Art*.
73. *Ibid.*, 33.
74. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 32. See also a list of Magnelli's abstract collages compiled by Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
75. Soby and Barr, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 34 and 129.
76. See James Thrall Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6. Soby spent four days visiting Biennale and filled a detailed list of artists and artworks to be evaluated by Barr.
77. See Léopold Zborowski, *Modigliani* (Milan: All'Insegna del Pesce d'Oro, 1945); *Note e ricordi su Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920)* (Genova: Saiga, 1945); Lamberto Vitali, ed., *Mostra Modigliani* (Milan: S.A. Alfieri & Lacroix, 1946); Raffaele Carrieri, *12 opere di Amedeo Modigliani* (Milan: Edizioni del Milione, 1947).
78. On Modigliani during the 1930s see also Palma Bucarelli, “Modigliani, Amedeo,” *ad vocem* Enciclopedia Italiana (Rome: Treccani, 1934).
79. Umbro Apollonio, “Breve omaggio a Modigliani,” *Emporium*, vol. CIII, no. 618 (June 1946): 261–69.
80. See Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, *Amedeo Modigliani*, in *Rassegna Nazionale di Arti Figurative [V Quadriennale]* (Rome: Istituto Grafico Tiberino, 1948): 28–29.
81. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 24.

82. Report on MoMA exhibition of Twentieth-Century Italian painting and sculpture, [after June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records 413.6.
83. *Nel mondo della pittura: ieri e oggi alla Quadriennale*, La Settimana Incom/00158, May 27, 1948, black-and-white film with sound, 1 min. 38 sec., Rome, Archivio Istituto Luce.
84. *Nude*, a marble sculpture, was lent for the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition by the collector Leone Traverso and later sold to MoMA.
85. Soby, "The Fine Arts: The Venice Biennial," 30.
86. See Pascale Budillon Puma, *La Biennale di Venezia: dalla guerra alla crisi 1948-1968* (Bari: Palomar, 1995), 29-30; Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra 1948-1956* (Milan: Charta, 1999), 7-41; and Enzo Di Martino, *Storia della Biennale di Venezia 1895-2003* (Venice: Papiro Arte, 2003), 53-58; Nancy Jachec, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948-1964. Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).
87. Rodolfo Pallucchini, foreword to *XXIV Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: Edizioni Serenissima, 1948), xi. Translation by the authors'.
88. Giovanni Ponti, preface to *ibid.*, viii-ix. Translation by the authors'.
89. Soby, "The Fine Arts: The Venice Biennial," 32.
90. The Committee for Arts of Twenty-Fourth Venice Biennial consisted of Nino Barbantini, Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati, Roberto Longhi, Marino Marini, Giorgio Morandi, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Pio Semeghini, and Lionello Venturi.
91. See Lionello Venturi and Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Gli impressionisti alla XXIV Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Edizioni Daria Guarnati, 1948).
92. The selection of artists by the committee involved much lengthy discussion, due to disagreements between Longhi and Venturi about van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat. See Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra 1948-1956* (Milan: Charta, 1999).
93. Francesco Arcangeli, "Tre pittori italiani dal 1910 al 1920," in *XXIV Biennale di Venezia*, 29-30.
94. See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6. Soby spent four days visiting Biennale and filled a detailed list of artists and artworks to be evaluated by Barr.

95. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Biennale notes for J.T.S., June 25, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6. Barr spent more time than Soby in Venice, visiting Galleria d'Arte Moderna at Ca' Pesaro – despite finding nothing interesting – and Galleria del Cavallino, which lent works by Campigli, Morandi, Rosai, Scipione, and Sironito the MoMA exhibition.
96. For example: Orfeo Tamburi: very De Pisis; Achille Lega: ½ Rosai, ½ Carrà; Domenico Cantatore: Modigliani style; Renato Birolli: less Picasso, more Klee; Emilio Vedova: Futurism plus Leger; Armando Pizzinato: Kandinsky-Futurism; Carlo Corsi: very Schwitters; Giuseppe Ajmone: Villon cubism. See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
97. Among artists proposed with positive comments, see, for example: Luigi Mariano's *Uomo e fanciulli* (Man and children, 1947), bought by Soby; Mario Marcucci, influenced by Scipione and Mafai's painting during 1930s; Italo Valenti, member of Corrente group; Carlo Martini, influenced by Novecento group and by Chiarismo group. Other works by Renato Birolli, Emilio Vedova, Giulio Turcato, and Giuseppe Ajmone (refused by Barr) were listed by Soby without any comments thus it isn't easy understanding clearly his point of view. See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
98. Soby noted in his list five works by Maccari, but he added he "didn't really like any Maccari very much." See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
99. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 18.
100. Soby, "The Fine Arts: The Venice Biennial," 30.
101. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Modern Prints and the Museum," in *Master Prints from the Museum Collection* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949).
102. All the three ceramics lent by Fontana to Twentieth-Century Italian Art at MoMA – "Christ" [Crucifixion] (1948), "Masker" (1948), and "Masker" (1948), where displayed at XXIV Venice Biennale. The "Christ" reproduced on MoMA catalogue was not the item displayed in the show.
103. Italian critics also sometimes referred to them as the "Three MA's." See Raffaele Carrieri, "Tre 'MA' dominano il campo," *Tempo* (August 28, 1948).

104. On the “mid-century” success in the U.S. of Italian sculpture, see Davide Colombo, “Chicago 1957: ‘Italian Sculptors.’ Qualche vicenda attorno alla scultura italiana in America,” *LUK*, no. 23 (2017): 138–54.
105. Barr, Biennale notes for J.T.S., June 25, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
106. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 33.
107. On Marini’s success in U.S., see Teresa Meucci, “Marino Marini e Curt Valentin: la fortuna dello scultore in America,” *Quaderni di scultura contemporanea*, no. 8 (October 2008): 6–21; and “Il debutto di Marino sulla 57^a Strada di New York,” in *Manzù/Marino. Gli ultimi moderni*, ed. Laura D’Angelo and Stefano Roffi (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2014), 69–77.
108. Before *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition Marini’s sculptures were showed in *Handicrafts as Fine Art in Italy* exhibition at House of Italian Handicrafts in New York (1948) and his *Cavallo e cavaliere* (Horse and Rider, 1947) was reproduced in *Art News* (see “Artigianato. Artisanary as practiced by Italy’s top painters and sculptors in New York,” in *Art News* [1948]: 37); in *Sculpture* exhibition at Buchholz Gallery in New York (September 28–October 16, 1948) and Marini’s *Nudo* (Nude, 1943) was reproduced in M.C., “Contemporary Sculpture,” in *Art News* (October 1948): 46, and *Cavaliere* (Horse and Rider, 1947) in Sam Hunter, “European Sculpture. Work by Modern Artist. Painters in Contrast,” in *The New York Times* (October 3, 1948): X13; in *Rodin to Brancusi show at Society of the Four Arts* (March 4–27, 1949); in *3rd Sculpture International* exhibition at Museum of Art in Philadelphia (May 1949).
109. Lamberto Vitali, “Contemporary sculptors. VII – Marino Marini,” *Horizon*, vol. 18, no. 105 (September 1948): 203–07. See also Barbara Cinelli, “Marino Marini e la critica. Qualche fonte, una mancata storiografia e una leggenda,” in *Marino Marini. Passioni visive*, ed. Barbara Cinelli and Flavio Fergonzi (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2017), 40–61.
110. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 33.
111. The topics of influences from Impressionism and Cézanne as well as from Rosso, Degas and Renoir on Manzù was proposed by Manzù himself in “Risposta a un referendum. Dove va l’arte italiana?,” *Domus*, no. 108 (February 1937): 30–31, and it was better analyzed by Lamberto Vitali, focusing on Rosso in “Lo scultore Giacomo Manzù,” *Emporium*, vol. LXXXVII, no. 520 (May 1938): 254.

112. See James Thrall Soby, *My Life in the Art World: 20/3–20/4*, James Thrall Soby Papers, VIII.A.1.
113. Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 33–34.
114. Ibid.
115. Soby proposed to Barr other Cassinari's paintings too – *Ritratto di giovane ragazza* (Portrait of young woman, 1948) and *Nudo in rosso* (*Red nude*, 1946) – and suggested him going to visit Cassinari solo show at Cardazzo's gallery. See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
116. See Barr, Biennale notes for J.T.S., June 25, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
117. Soby, letter to Barr, August 17, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
118. Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 28.
119. See Barr and Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 29: "Very recently, like many Italian painters, he has turned to abstraction, working in a manner which recalls the rounded simplifications of Germany's Oskar Schlemmer but is exceptionally pungent in color."
120. See Barr, Biennale notes for J.T.S., June 25, 1948; and Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
121. Report on MoMA exhibition of Twentieth-Century Italian painting and sculpture, [after June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
122. Soby, "The Fine Arts: The Venice Biennial," 30.
123. About Santomaso, Soby noted: "I probably overrate Santomaso but after four days I thought his pics had a certain quality, as did Guttuso's whereas Birolli, Corpora, Turcato and the others faded out. His color in quite good." See Soby, Biennale [June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.
124. See Adrian R. Duran's essay, "Neocubism and Italian Painting Circa 1949: An Avant-Garde That Maybe Wasn't," in the present issue of *Italian Modern Art*.
125. [Soby], Report on MoMA exhibition of Twentieth-Century Italian painting and sculpture, [after June 1948], *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.6.

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“Positively the only person who is really interested in the show”:

Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York

“POSITIVELY THE ONLY PERSON WHO IS REALLY INTERESTED IN THE SHOW”: ROMEO TONINELLI, COLLECTOR AND CULTURAL DIPLOMAT BETWEEN MILAN AND NEW YORK

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Laura Moure Cecchini **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

Romeo Toninelli was a key figure in the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and given the official title of Executive Secretary for the Exhibition in Italy. An Italian art dealer, editor, and collector with an early career as a textile industrialist, Toninelli was not part of the artistic and cultural establishment during the Fascist *ventennio*. This was an asset in the eyes of the James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., who wanted the exhibition to signal the rebirth of Italian art after the presumed break represented by the Fascist regime. Whether Toninelli agreed with this approach we do not know, but he played a major part in the tortuous transatlantic organization of the show. He acted as the intermediary between MoMA curators and Italian dealers, collectors, and artists, securing loans and paying for the shipping of the artworks. He also lent several works from his collection, and arranged for the printing of the catalogue. A recent collector and gallery owner, Toninelli was mistrusted by many Italian critics and collectors, who suspected him of having commercial motives. Yet he arranged the practical side of the operations while intervening little in the decision-making about which artists to include – exactly as MoMA wanted.

Analyzing Toninelli's role in organizing the pioneering display of Italian modernism at MoMA provides important insights into transatlantic cultural exchanges between Italy and the U.S. in the postwar period, and illuminates critical fractures of the Italian art system in the aftermath of Fascism. Were native-born critics and artists obliged to hand the narrative of modern Italian art over to outsiders who had not been compromised by the Fascist regime, or were they entitled to an account independent from the modernist vulgate promoted by MoMA?

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In December 1946, the Italian textile industrialist Romeo Toninelli, who was also an art collector and a gallery owner, visited the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “It didn’t take me long to see that Italian art of this century was almost completely ignored,” he recalled in 1963, in an interview in *Domus*. “[Giorgio] de Chirico and [Amedeo] Modigliani were framed as ‘French.’” He reached out to Monroe Wheeler, Director of Exhibitions at MoMA, “with the conceit and boldness that good ideas afford,” proposing a “large exhibition of modern Italian art [...] animated by the desire to render our respective countries the service of high cultural value devoid of any commercial interests.”¹ Over the course of a lunch with Wheeler, Nelson Rockefeller – the newly appointed president of MoMA (1946–1953), after his first tenure (1939–1941) – Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, important decisions were made for what was to become the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.²

Retrospective analysis of Toninelli’s role in organizing the pioneering display of Italian modernism that ran at MoMA from June 28 to September 18, 1949 provides important insights into transatlantic cultural exchanges between Italy and the U.S. in the postwar period, and illuminates critical fractures of the Italian art system in the aftermath of Fascism. The latter particularly come to light in the entry onto the Italian scene of external players – in this case, MoMA’s curators and Toninelli himself. Were native-born critics and artists obliged to hand the narrative of modern Italian art over to outsiders who had not been compromised by the Fascist regime, or were they entitled to an account independent from the modernist vulgate promoted by MoMA?

Toninelli consistently claimed to have been the originator of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. Yet the idea for an exhibition of Italian modern art was in the works even before he contacted MoMA.³ In February 1946, Milanese art dealer Peppino Ghiringhelli proposed to Soby, trustee and advisor to MoMA’s Committee on the Museum Collections, a major exhibition of de Chirico’s paintings.⁴ Soby answered that although there were no immediate plans to devote a retrospective to de Chirico, what was in the books was “a general exhibition of 20th century Italian painting and sculpture.” Soby continued:

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“Personally I think such an exhibition would be a revelation in this country where very little is known of Italian modern art except for the Futurists, de Chirico, [Leonor] Fini, and a few others.” He added, “If it takes place, I imagine the Museum will send one or more representatives to Italy to discuss the matter with you and other authorities on modern art there.”⁵

It seems that despite the interest in a show on Italian modern art, it took Toninelli’s initiative and enthusiasm to set the MoMA machine in motion. In December 1946, a few days after his visit to the museum, an agreement was signed with the Milanese Circolo delle Arti (also known as Le Grazie), of which he was President. The Circolo included the owners of the Milan-based Galleria del Camino (that is, Toninelli) and Il Milione (brothers Peppino and Gino Ghiringhelli) as well as the directors of Italian museums, art historians, and collectors.⁶ The agreement guaranteed MoMA’s staff “absolute freedom of choice” of Italian artworks to include in the exhibition, while the Circolo would take logistical and financial care of their gathering, cataloguing, packing, and shipment to the U.S.⁷

Cognizant of the volatile Italian political landscape, and of the stakes of this show at a moment when U.S. officials were preoccupied by Communism’s spread in Italy, Barr and Soby investigated Toninelli’s ideological affiliations before committing further. As Soby advised, “the political implications are most serious, particularly now when America’s name is mud in Italy and can become muddier; we don’t want the Museum on the wrong side of the fence, and we can be sure that the Communists in Italy would make the most of it if we were.”⁸ Through American sculptor Mary Callery (who had been married to Milanese industrialist and collector Carlo Frua de Angeli), they enlisted architect Luciano Baldessari to make inquiries about the political affiliations of Toninelli and other Italian gallery owners. Soby and Barr were shocked to find out that the Ghiringhelli brothers were accused of having denounced, under Fascism, the artists Pompeo Borra and Aldo Carpi, who were subsequently deported; worse still, the brothers were believed to hold neo-Fascist allegiances.⁹ Toninelli’s past was less checkered. “The Camino Gallery is somewhat commercial and ‘social,’ i.e. ‘tony’ (no pun intended),” Baldessari explained to Barr, who in turn “described to [Baldessari] our feeling that Toninelli was quite generous and honest, that he did not conceal the

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commercial aspects of the Camino, and that we had no illusions about his being a Rightist – though we know nothing of any active Fascist participation. [Baldessari] knew nothing definitely [*sic*] about Toninelli’s politics either.”¹⁰

Having received political clearance, in March 1947 Toninelli met with Charles Rufus Morey, the Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy in Rome. “I told him about our programme concerning the great Italian painting exhibition combined with the Museum of Modern Art,” Toninelli wrote to Soby. “Prof. Morey was delighted and made me [*sic*] his compliments for the initiative.”¹¹ Indeed, U.S. diplomats based in Italy agreed that an exhibition of Italian art was highly desirable at the time. It would “(1) promote friendly relations between the two countries; and, (2), demonstrate the revitalization of the creative force in Italy under a democratic regime,” as the Economic Advisor to the American Embassy in Rome, Paul Hyde Bonner, wrote to W. Averell Harriman, U.S. Secretary of Commerce, in July 1947.¹² These two objectives would frame Barr and Soby’s curatorial decisions. Toninelli became the Italian official liaison for the exhibition. Yet his outsider position in the Italian art system also hindered the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* by alienating key Italian critics, artists, and collectors.

Romeo Toninelli (1908–76)

There is very little published literature on Romeo Toninelli.¹³ Born in 1908, he was a textile industrialist based in Lombardy and specializing in luxury silks for *maisons de haute couture*, among them Christian Dior (figure 1).¹⁴ A portrait by Gregorio Sciltian, made in 1942, before Toninelli became invested in Italian modern art, shows him as a suave thirty-four-year-old sitting in front of a table covered with silkworms, threads, and fabric swatches. A green and yellow silk pocket square is the only note of color in his otherwise sober attire, appropriate for a businessman. Staring at the viewer with an indecipherable expression, Toninelli is sketching, perhaps designing a new pattern for his fabrics, or he is daydreaming sketching, evidence of a personality that aspired to more than financial success.

During the German occupation of Northern Italy after the 1943 armistice, Toninelli was forced to close his factory to avoid converting it to the war effort. As he had fought during the campaign in Greece and was a widower, Toninelli was exempt from enrolling in the army; and so he found himself

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idle.¹⁵ Around this time he befriended Elena Amor de Celani, a Mexican aristocrat married to an Italian count, whose sister Inés Amor was founder of the Galería de Arte Mexicano, where the famous *Exposición Internacional del Surrealismo* (International Exhibition of Surrealism) had taken place in 1940.¹⁶ According to family lore, in encouraging Toninelli to acquaint himself with modern art, Elena Amor introduced him to Milanese collectors and critics. She is thanked in the catalogue of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, although she did not lend any works.



Figure 1. Gregorio Sciltian, “Ritratto di Romeo Toninelli” [Portrait of Romeo Toninelli], 1942. Oil on canvas, in. (75 x 86 cm). Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Bergamo.

Toninelli’s art activity seems to have begun around 1943, when his *studio d’arte* had a solo show for painter Riccardo “Ricas” Castagnedi.¹⁷ As part of “Second Futurism,” in the 1930s Ricas had opened the graphic studio R + M with Bruno Munari. Ricas, Toninelli, and their families evacuated to Villa Greppi in Monticello Brianza during the Allies’ bombing – testifying to a friendship that went beyond common artistic interests.¹⁸ Ricas portrayed Toninelli in his 1942–43 painting *Il tessitore* (The Weaver; figure 2), which is set in the Brianza countryside and inspired by the Italian Quattrocento (the tent on the left is a tribute to Piero della Francesca’s *Constantine’s Dream*, 1458–66). The industrialist is represented as a 1940s gentleman holding an ancient-looking halberd, ready to defend his looms.¹⁹

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In October 1945, only five months after the liberation of Italy, Toninelli opened in Milan the Galleria del Camino; it would close in 1949. The gallery shared a building with the renowned Galleria Il Milione of the Ghiringhelli brothers, whose offices had been destroyed during the bombardments of 1943. Through the activities of the Galleria del Camino, Toninelli became



Figure 2. Riccardo Ricas Castagnedi, “Il tessitore” [The weaver], 1943. Oil on canvas, 172 1/2 x 119 1/4 in. (68 x 47 cm). Private Collection.

acquainted with prominent Milan-based collectors such as Gianni Mattioli, Riccardo Jucker, Emilio Jesi, and Carlo Frua de Angeli, and such connections were of use in the organization of the 1949 MoMA show. Mattioli was, like Toninelli, a textile industrialist and art collector with a taste for Italian modernism, and he helped secure an exhibition of Fortunato Depero’s recent works at Toninelli’s gallery in 1946.²⁰ As an art dealer, Toninelli’s big coup was the acquisition, from the artist’s sister, of fifteen works by Umberto Boccioni, among them *Materia* (1912), which was exhibited in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and would eventually become part of the Mattioli collection. In 1947, the Galleria del Camino fused with Il Milione, which was similarly committed to exhibiting both Italian and international modernism.²¹ But the collaboration was brief, and the two galleries soon parted ways.²²

Around this time, Toninelli became an art editor and, in October 1945, oversaw the first issue of *Le tre arti. Giornale mensile artistico e letterario*. Under the direction of critic Raffaele Carrieri, the journal published the work of prestigious collaborators who, for the most part, had successful careers during the Fascist period – such as the writer and painter Alberto Savinio; the poet Vincenzo Cardarelli; and the critics Carlo Bo, Francesco Flora and Massimo Bontempelli – but only five issues were produced before *Le tre arti*

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folded, in February 1946.²³ The first issue was devoted to a key factor that would also haunt the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*: the relation of a liberated Italy to its Fascist past. Bontempelli had been an avowed Fascist and a member of the Accademia d'Italia, but was expelled from the party in 1938, when, after the racial laws forbid Jews from working in Italian universities, he refused to take the place of critic Attilio Momigliano as Professor of Italian Literature at the University of Florence. In his article on *Le tre arti*, Bontempelli panned those who viewed the art of the *ventennio* as “insignificant, because political tyranny had suffocated it.” “These are just excuses,” he denounced.²⁴

By contrast, the anti-Fascist Flora, who had been a student of Benedetto Croce and like his teacher openly opposed the regime, addressed French intellectuals in an article titled “Siamo nuovi di fronte al mondo” (We are new in front of the world), making an argument that MoMA’s exhibition would aspire to illustrate. Flora underscored the difference between Fascism as a regime and Italy as a country. “Italy still existed only among the few who at home and abroad fought against Fascism,” he declared in a view that grew to have much currency in the postwar period. Thanks to the partisans, Flora continued, Italy purified itself from its faults, so that “true Italy [...] is now resurrected after a dark parenthesis,” that is, after “the break from civilization that Italy had for twenty years.” Yet in the postwar period, Flora concluded, neither democratic Italy nor democratic France needed to bear the weight of their respective Fascist and Nazi pasts. They both had a duty, however, “to continue defending classical and humanistic civilization, which generated the key ideas from which arts derive.”²⁵

James Soby knew of *Le tre arti*, which was first sent to him by Peppino Ghiringhelli, and which he found “a very interesting magazine.”²⁶ Through it, for instance, Soby came to know the work of critic Lamberto Vitali on Carlo Carrà, and he went on to get in touch with Vitali to ask clarifications about the careers of Giorgio Morandi, Filippo De Pisis, and de Chirico.²⁷ Writing in February 1947, Toninelli assured Soby that he would send him the complete collection of *Le tre arti*, as well as “the red brocade stuff [probably fabric, or *stoffa*] required by Mrs. Soby.”²⁸

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In 1947, Toninelli became President of Milan’s Circolo delle Arti, which soon merged with the Associazione Cultori e Amatori di Arte Contemporanea (without changing its name).²⁹ The group organized art exhibitions, lectures, and conferences, but seems to have limited its contribution to international engagements to the MoMA show.³⁰ After the Circolo began to dissolve over the course of 1948, Toninelli took personal responsibility in financially supporting the MoMA exhibition, contributing almost \$12,000 in all (the equivalent today of US\$129,000).³¹

Insiders and Outsiders in the Organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*

Barr and Soby aspired for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* to symbolize a break with members of the Italian artistic and cultural establishment who had been involved in any way with the Fascist regime – that is, with basically the entirety of the Italian artistic and cultural establishment. The catalogue insisted: “The climate for art is propitious in Italy just now, with the shackles of Fascist isolationism rusting empty on the ground, and we have sought – again without claim to finality – to indicate what directions the newer creative impetus is taking.”³² With equal parts naiveté and deliberate ignorance, Barr and Soby overlooked the multiple ways in which most of the artists on view in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* had been exhibited, sponsored, and collected during the Fascist *ventennio*.

Toninelli seems to have had very little, if anything at all, to do with the Fascist official infrastructure of art and culture – precisely as Soby and Barr desired.³³ Unlike other Italian art dealers, Toninelli was quite well-connected in New York City, where, in 1945, he had opened an office for his textile business, the Toninelli Corporation of America. Indeed, every year he would spend two or three months in the U.S. His commercial projects sometimes overlapped with his artistic interests. For example, when a 1948 Munari exhibition at MoMA was cancelled due to artworks’ having been damaged in their cross-Atlantic voyage;³⁴ the few “useless machines” that survived were exhibited in Toninelli’s office in New York City, in advance of a solo show in Milan’s Galleria Borromini.³⁵

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Above all, the reason why Toninelli proved such an important collaborator for MoMA was his wish to not intervene in aesthetic matters. By contrast, other Milan-based critics, artists, and art dealers disagreed with the artistic choices made by Barr and Soby. Toninelli and critics and dealers based in Rome, Florence, Venice, and Turin were generally cooperative, but some of their Milanese counterparts hindered and obstructed the work of the MoMA curators, forcing them to change the exhibition checklist and to constantly explain the rationale of the show. Vitali wrote to Soby: “We have a duty to defend those we believe to be the true pillars of our contemporary art, the art for which we have fought for so many years. And it is this faith in our essential values that impels us to think very seriously about the inevitable consequences of an exposition based on a too eclectic and wide choice [of artworks].”³⁶ Italians were afraid that by including those whom they considered to be “minor” artists, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* would offer a skewed image of Italian art that had the potential to weigh heavily on future scholarship.

One of the main points of contention was the maturity of the artists on view. In accordance with Soby and Barr’s theme of rebirth – symbolized by the blooming tree on the cover of the catalogue (figure 3) – works by young Italian artists were favored. As was common practice at MoMA at the time, these would be on sale, and the museum would take a commission of 10% on sales made.³⁷ Italian critics and curators pushed for the inclusion of recent works by acclaimed artists such as Carrà, Arturo Tosi, Achille Funi, and Piero Marussig, whose works Soby and Barr found “most feeble in quality;” Soby argued that they “would weaken the show.”³⁸ Wheeler recounted that “from the [Italian] point of view the ideal show would be a large gallery of the futurists, another of the metaphysical school, and a gallery each for Morandi, and each of the really first rate painters; not more than four sculptors; and then a few galleries showing recent tendencies.”³⁹ The critic Carrieri, in particular, could not fathom the inclusion of Corrado Cagli, Emilio Greco, Marcello Muccini, and Carlo Levi. The latter, he argued, “is not a painter – it is absurd to represent him because he is a magnificent writer unless you include the Sunday-painting of fifty other important people.” Carrieri suggested that works be added by Gino Rossi, Enrico Prampolini (“compared to whom the above are nothing – and he did it twenty years earlier”), the symbolist painter Alberto Martini, abstractionist Osvaldo Licini, sculptors

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Agenore Fabbri and Mirko Basaldella, and former Corrente artist Renato Birilli.⁴⁰ Soby and Barr did not follow any of Carrieri’s suggestions, insisting on their own vision of Italian art.

In a letter to Soby dated February 1949, at the height of a crisis that had forced him to travel to Italy to mollify key Milanese collectors who declined to deal with Toninelli, Wheeler recounts a tense meeting with Emilio Jesi, who had refused to lend his paintings to MoMA if Barr and Soby did not attend to his suggestions. Wheeler described Jesi as “stubborn and conceited, just doesn’t like [your] choice of his pictures or anyone’s else’s.”⁴¹ Jesi would indeed not contribute to the show. Lamberto Vitali too disagreed with Barr and Soby’s choices.

“Not only does he want to choose the works by the great painters,” Wheeler wrote, “he also insists upon the *exclusion* of those he thinks unworthy [...] and he wants you to add his own pets: [Alberto] Magnelli, Gino Rossi, Birilli, Licini, [Atanasio] Soldati, [Emilio] Vedova, [Mino] Maccari et al.”⁴² Vitali added that the inclusion of artist such as Cagli, Levi, and Stanislao Lepri, along with “the other little Romans,” was “fine [...] for *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, but what has happened to the standards of the Museum of Modern Art?”⁴³



Figure 3. Cover of the catalogue of “Twentieth-Century Italian Art,” Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1949.

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Some Milan-based collectors and museum curators personally distrusted Toninelli, which further colored their assessment of MoMA's show. As Soby explained, “Toninelli is a new collector in their eyes and apparently they suspect him of commercial motives” – not unfounded, one could add, given that Toninelli owned a gallery and loaned several paintings to the exhibition.⁴⁴ Frua de Angeli and Jesi “distrust [Toninelli] as an *arriviste* who knows nothing about painting,” Wheeler recounted; they “just won't believe that Toninelli is disinterested” and considered him “a lesser tycoon” than other textile industrialists with art collections.⁴⁵ Toninelli's participation provoked so much resentment that in their internal correspondence Wheeler and Soby referred to Jesi, Vitali, Frua de Angeli, and Fernanda Wittgens (Director of the Pinacoteca di Brera) as the “anti-Toninelli camp.”⁴⁶ As Wheeler mused to Soby, “the snobbishness of many Italians about him is difficult to understand.”⁴⁷ The members of the “anti-Toninelli” camp knew him from the Circolo delle Arti: he was its President, and Wittgens, Vitali, and Frua de Angeli were members. It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons for their reservations, although Toninelli's break with the Ghiringhelli brothers – esteemed art dealers for decades, who personally worked with many of these collectors – likely had something to do with it.⁴⁸

Soby reckoned that MoMA was right to side with Toninelli rather than his critics because “if we do get the money from [the anti-Toninelli camp] there may well be strings attached, i.e. Jesi-Vitali may want to have a good deal to say about what will be in the show. With Toninelli we are free to make our own choice and he has confirmed in writing his willingness to pay for packing and shipping [...] we now have the money promised, with no strings attached as to choice of objects.”⁴⁹ For MoMA, the best Italian asset was the one who did not intervene in aesthetic matters – as if being an Italian critic, artist, or art dealer meant being inevitably corrupted by the Fascist vision of art.

Wittgens, for her part, was appalled that such a geopolitically relevant exhibition was not being organized through official channels. Soby, by contrast, deemed that Italian museums often presented their own artistic patrimony in unexciting ways. He thought that Wittgens needed to be reminded that “the *official* show of 19th century Italian painting now at Wildenstein's has effectively wrecked all American interest in that period of Italian art, though even a glance through the various books on the 19th century Macchiaioli make clear that much better pictures could have been

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chosen” (figure 4).⁵⁰ Soby was referring to the *Exhibition of Italian XIX Century Paintings*, curated by critic Enrico Somaré and sponsored by the Mayor of Florence and the Italian Minister of Public Education.⁵¹ The show included works by Giovanni Boldini, Telemaco Signorini, Daniele Ranzoni, and Giacomo Favretto, among others. In the interwar period, Somaré was among the most active promoters of the Italian Ottocento painters, which he presented as anticipating the French Impressionists, as “honest and sincere interpreters of the eternal myth of Truth,” and as inspired by “Art as the expression of sentiment.”⁵² Such an approach could not have been more distant from Barr’s own reading of the nineteenth-century origins of modernism.

After failing to convince Barr and Soby to pay heed to their suggestions, Jesi, Wittgens, and Cagli apparently spread the rumor that “the show is indefinitely off because the choice of works is so inadequate that no one who has the prestige of Italy at heart can participate in it.”⁵³ Frua de Angeli, Wittgens, and Vitali did not want to be in any way associated with a show that they disapproved of, and they asked to not be included in the exhibition’s honorary committee, although they are thanked in the catalogue’s acknowledgments.⁵⁴



Figure 4. Gino Severini, “Ballerina in blu” [Blue dancer], 1912. Oil on canvas with sequins, 24 x 18 1/8 in. (61 x 46 cm). Gianni Mattioli Collection.

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In preparing the show, Barr and Soby did consult leading Italian critics and curators (for example Lionello Venturi, Giulio Carlo Argan, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Umbro Apollonio, Raffaele Carrieri, and Lamberto Vitali) as well as some Italian artists, but they had their own agenda and intended not to grant to individuals outside the museum any special role in the intellectual conception of their show.⁵⁵ As Nelson Rockefeller wrote in 1949 to James Dunn, U.S. Ambassador in Rome, “it has always been the fixed policy of the Museum not to delegate authority for the actual choice of works to people outside the Museum” because “there is a decided advantage in choosing a show from a fresh and foreign viewpoint.”⁵⁶ Such reasoning, which framed private enterprise as a form of intellectual freedom, was, at the time, typical rhetoric for MoMA, and in particular Rockefeller and Barr.⁵⁷ Yet it was also quite alien to many Italian collectors, critics, and curators, who rather believed that the true threat to intellectual and artistic independence was not public institutions but rather private, commercial interests. Thus, they distrusted MoMA and Toninelli both.

As “Executive Secretary for the Exhibition in Italy,” Toninelli took care of its logistic organization, while Barr and Soby focused on its aesthetic and ideological claims. Toninelli contacted collectors, gathered all the works for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* in Milan (at the Castello Sforzesco, with Wittgens’s permission), supervised their packing and insurance, and paid for their shipment from Italy and back again. Although Toninelli was accused of profiting economically from the exhibition, he loaned only a few works: Gino Severini’s *Ballerina in blu* (Blue Dancer, 1912; figure 4); Boccioni’s *I selciatori* (Street Pavers, 1914; figure 5), the only work to end up in a U.S. collection, and *Materia* (figure 6); and de Chirico’s *Hector and Andromache* (1924).

As part of his commercial travel in 1948, Toninelli visited Mexico. He met with museographer Fernando Gamboa, probably through the mediation of Inés Amor. Gamboa suggested that *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* travel to Mexico City and open in what Soby referred to as “the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City,” which was either Amor and Gamboa’s foundation Sociedad de Arte Moderno or the recently formed Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas, where Gamboa was Director.⁵⁸ Italian-Mexican industrialist and art collector Bruno Pagliai offered to pay for the Mexican leg of the show, but this plan fell through. A de Chirico work owned by Pagliai, however, was included in

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Twenty-Century Italian Art. A plan to send the exhibition to the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was not realized because the expense was beyond the means of both institutions.⁵⁹

Toninelli is profusely thanked in the exhibition catalogue’s acknowledgments: “Without the initiative, efficient services and generous support of the exhibition’s Executive Secretary in Italy, Romeo Toninelli, the exhibition would not have been possible. We are greatly indebted to him, and should like to extend our thanks for his major part in the exhibition.”⁶⁰ In June 1949, he was made an Honorary Life Member of the Museum of Modern Art, for “his initiative, efficient services and unfailing support.”⁶¹

After *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* closed in September 1949, Toninelli received requests to send the exhibition to Australia, but he was more interested in proposing it to a British or Belgian museum.⁶² He also tried to recreate the show in Milan and Rome.⁶³ Although these plans did not pan out, Toninelli continued to ask MoMA to send him catalogues to distribute among critics to supplement his tireless promotion of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* in Italy, which included organizing an exhibition of photographs of the MoMA show at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan.⁶⁴



Figure 5. Umberto Boccioni, “I selciatori” [The street pavers], 1914. Oil on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in. (100 x 100 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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Toninelli and MoMA in the 1950s

Indeed, Toninelli’s communications with MoMA did not end in 1949. In 1950, he contacted the museum to request that *Guernica* (which was on an extended loan to MoMA until 1981) be included in a major Pablo Picasso retrospective planned for Milan. The museum’s initial response was negative due to Picasso’s request that MoMA lend the painting to the second edition of the São Paulo Biennial.⁶⁵ As Barr explained to Toninelli, “Picasso told me explicitly last summer that he did not wish to lend the *Guernica* for exhibition in Europe.”⁶⁶ Whether through Toninelli’s insistence or through other channels (Wittgens was one of the Milan retrospective’s curators), MoMA relented, and *Guernica* was movingly exhibited in the bombed Sala delle Cariatidi of the Palazzo Reale in 1953, before being shipped to Brazil.

In 1958, Toninelli was tasked with bringing to Milan the traveling exhibition *New American Painting* (figure 7).⁶⁷ The show was organized by the International Program of MoMA; founded in 1952 with the aim of promoting



Figure 6. Umberto Boccioni, “Materia” [Matter], 1912. Oil on canvas, 88 9/16 x 59 1/16 in. (225 x 150 cm). Gianni Mattioli Collection.

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U.S. art internationally, the program’s mission was often propagandistic on behalf of the Western bloc.⁶⁸ In some respects this exhibition was the U.S. equivalent of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*: it emphasized the connections between national identity and artistic practices, and was similarly framed around a palingenetic idea of new beginnings. Architect Ignazio Gardella’s plans for a new building next to the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna (inaugurated in 1954) were shown to Wheeler when he visited Milan in February 1949. Jesi said to him “[Milanese collectors] are determined to have a museum like [MoMA] in Milan and they would lean heavily on our advice which would mean a great deal to them.”⁶⁹ The effects of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, and of Toninelli’s role in its organization, were thus long-lasting and shaped the framing and display of modern art in Milan.

In 1959, Toninelli closed his textile factories; in the following year, he opened the gallery Toninelli Arte Moderna, with locations in Rome and Milan. During the 1960s and ’70s he organized shows for sought-after Italian artists including Afro, Fortunato Depero, Renato Guttuso, and Armando Pizzinato, as well as for international artists such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Franz Kupka, and Kurt Schwitters, thereby maintaining the double gaze – national and international – that had been a hallmark of his



Figure 7. Cover of “The New American painting / La nuova pittura Americana” (Milan: Silvana Editoriale d’Arte, 1958). Exhibition held at Galleria civica d’arte moderna, Milan 1958.

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Galleria del Camino and his work with MoMA.⁷⁰ In 1972, Toninelli published Soby's *L'arte moderna e il suo recente passato*, a translation of his 1957 book *Modern Art and the New Past*, providing Italian audiences with MoMA's view of modernism (figure 8).⁷¹ Toninelli died in 1976. His heirs are still in the art-dealing business, having moved the gallery from Italy to the Principality of Monaco.

Toninelli's involvement with *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* reveals what MoMA expected from transatlantic collaboration in the years immediately after World War II, especially when dealing with a former enemy nation. Only the logistics could be delegated to local individuals, while the intellectual conception of the show had to remain purely MoMA's. Barr and Soby consulted with Italian critics and artists on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, yet ultimately their selection reflected their own view of Italian modern art. The exhibition was not the result of an evenly balanced intellectual dialogue, and can instead be seen as a “one-sided geopolitical



Figure 8. Cover of James Thrall Soby, “L’arte moderna e il suo recente passato” (Milan: Toninelli, 1972).

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exchange,” in art historian Emily Braun’s words.⁷² It ended up buttressing MoMA’s vision of the modernist canon rather than challenging it through a consideration of alternative narratives of modern art in relation to totalitarian politics. Italian modern art could have been a privileged site to question MoMA’s complacent view that only under a liberal democracy can modern art flourish.⁷³ By imposing onto Italian art MoMA’s narrative on modernism, however, this potentially productive counterexample was not addressed.

With this article, my aim has been to call attention to the crucial role that ostensibly secondary figures such as Toninelli had in the organization of a major show such as *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. Although exhibition studies generally focus on the intellectual contributions of curators, artists, and museum directors, individuals like Toninelli, who are not part of museum staff, equally deserve attention. The personal relations he cultivated in Milan crucially facilitated – and in key cases hindered – the organization of the show. Examining Toninelli’s participation as a cultural diplomat in the coordination of such a politically sensitive exhibition reveals that without his involvement, MoMA’s exhibition would have been radically different. I would thus like to conclude with Wheeler’s appreciation for Toninelli’s work on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, as captured in a letter to Soby written on February 28, 1949: “[Memo] is in poor health, everyone says how badly he looks, and if he were to fall ill, God knows what would happen to the show because he is positively the only person who is really interested in it. We certainly owe him a lot.”⁷⁴

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2. Harriet S. Bee and Michelle Elligott, eds. *Art in Our Time: A Chronicle of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 248; Toninelli reminded Wheeler of his original proposal, which involved a traveling exhibition of Italian art in Europe, in a letter dated December 27, 1946, available in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.14, Archive of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. All future references to letters and telegrams, unless otherwise noted, are from MoMA's Archive. See also Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
3. See Raffaele Bedarida, “Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 147–69. See also Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, “Argan e il Museum of Modern Art in New York. Un ‘mismatch’ amichevole,” in *Giulio Carlo Argan. Intellettuale e storico dell’arte*, ed. Claudio Gamba (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2012), 97–108.
4. Peppino Ghiringhelli, letter to James Thrall Soby, February 16, 1946, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.C.2.16.
5. Soby, letter to Ghiringhelli, April 20, 1946, James Thrall Soby Papers II.C.2.16.
6. It is interesting to note that Toninelli underlined the absence of art dealers from the Circolo, as if he and Ghiringhelli brothers did not have any commercial interests. Interviewed in *Domus* in September 1963, he underplayed the importance of “Il Camino,” claiming “I was not yet a true art dealer [...] only in 1960 did I open this new gallery.” See “A Milano, Romeo Toninelli (serie I mercanti d’arte),” *Domus*, 49. For the minutes of a December 1947 meeting of the Circolo, see Laura Mattioli Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli dal 1943 and 1953,” in *La collezione Mattioli: capolavori dell’avanguardia italiana*, ed. Flavio Fergonzi (Milan: Skira, 2003), 13–106, 71–72.
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9. However, both Borra and Carpi wrote to Toninelli denying these accusations. Pompeo Borra and Aldo Carpi, letter to Toninelli, February 27, 1947, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* Exhibition Records, 413.14.

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13. To my knowledge, Toninelli is addressed in Mattioli Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli,” 13–61, and is briefly mentioned (with some chronology errors) in Angela Madesani, *Le intelligenze dell’arte. Gallerie e galleristi a Milano. 1976–50* (Busto Arsizio: Nomos Edizioni, 2016), 205–08. His later career is considered in Duccio Nobili, “Toninelli 1972: Mauro Staccioli e ‘il lavoro dello scultore,’” *Studi di Memofonte* 21 (2018): 128–46.
14. Interview with Luigi Toninelli, January 20, 2019.
15. Ibid.
16. See J. A. Manrique, *Memorias de Inés Amor* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas UNAM, 1987); and Inés Amor, Jorge Alberto Manrique, and Teresa del Conde, eds., *Una mujer en el arte mexicano. Memorias de Inés Amor* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005).
17. “Riccardo ‘Ricas’ Castagnedi,” Archivio Storico del Progetto Grafico website (last accessed January 19, 2019). Interviewed by the author on January 20, 2019, Luigi Toninelli, Romeo’s son, does not recall any such artistic activity on the part of his father during the Fascist period. Yet Ricas himself recalled this exhibition, see “Mostra Ricas: I filmati – Il tessitore,” available at this link (last accessed April 16, 2019).
18. Paola Ricas, correspondence with the author, April 17, 2019.
19. See Alberto Bassi, ed., *Riccardo Ricas. Opere dal 1929 al 1994* (Rozzano: Editoriale Domus, 1994), 32; and Grazia Verfasser Ambrosio, “Riccardo Ricas fra realtà e futursurrealismo. La poliedrica attività di un manager votato ai pennelli,” *Arte*, no. 264 (July–August 1995): 38–39.
20. *Fortunato Depero alla Galleria del Camino, dal 9 marzo al 31 marzo 1946* (Milan: Galleria del Camino, 1946); Mattioli Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli,” 22.
21. Madesani, *Le intelligenze dell’arte*, 207.

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22. Toninelli nonetheless seems to have remained President of the Board of Directors of Il Milione. According to Luigi Toninelli, Il Milione was a “società per azioni” or spa, unlike other galleries, and Toninelli remained involved with the gallery at least until 1949. Interview with the author, January 20, 2019.
23. Lucia Strappini, “Carrieri, Raffaele,” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 34 (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 1988).
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28. Toninelli, letter to Soby, February 21, 1947, James Thrall Soby Papers, II.C.2.17.
29. For the naming confusion, see Soby, letter to Vitali, February 3, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15.
30. See Rossi, “La collezione di Gianni Mattioli,” 24; and Bedarida, “Operation Renaissance,” 154.
31. Soby, letter to René d’Harnoncourt, Wheeler, and Barr, November 1, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3.
32. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, foreword to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949).
33. Toninelli’s name is absent in the most thorough analysis of the art system in Fascist Italy: Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia 1919–1943* (Bologna: Minerva Editoriali, 2000).

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34. *Domus*, nos. 223–25 (October–December 1947). In a letter to Irv Koons dated May 20, 1948, Bruno Munari wrote: “I am sorry to say the showing of my work in New York did not take place, because, during the voyage, damp sea air spoiled the balance of my wooden ‘useless machines’ and at the customs they completed the good work by opening the boxes and pulling out things pell mell and almost everything was ruined. Some of them which escaped ship wrecking’ are hung in the office of Mr. Romeo Toninelli, who gave a party to show them.” Munari to Koons, May 20, 1948; see description at this link (last accessed October 21, 2019). My thanks to Luca Zafferano for this information.
35. See “Dipingere la luce,” L’arte di Bruno Munari website (last accessed January 19, 2019); and Dino Buzzati, introduction to *Mostra di Munari* (Milan: Galleria Borromini, 1948).
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45. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 28, 1949; Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 9, 1949.
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48. “Circolo Delle Arti-Milano,” undated, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3.
49. Soby, letter to Wheeler, February 17, 1949.
50. Ibid. Underscore in the original.

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51. See Enrico Somaré, *Exhibition of Italian XIX Century Paintings* (New York: Wildenstein and Company, 1949).
52. Ibid., 20.
53. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 21, 1949.
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58. Soby, letter to Barr and Wheeler, September 3, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.3. See also Ana Garduño, “Fernando Gamboa, el curador de la Guerra Fría,” in *Fernando Gamboa, el arte del riesgo* (Mexico City: INBA, 2009), 17–65; Nayeli Romero Santos, “Museo Nacional de Artes Plásticas: la revaloración del legado artístico mexicano,” *Discurso visual* (July 2016), available at this link (last accessed April 29, 2019). The literal translation of the name of the Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City corresponds with Soby’s reference to a “Museum of Modern Art,” but it did not open until 1964.
59. Wheeler, telegram to Soby, October 30, 1948, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15; Wheeler, letter to Max Ascoli, May 20, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.15.
60. Barr and Soby, acknowledgments of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*.
61. Allen Porter, letter to Toninelli, June 14, 1949, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition records, 413.14.
62. Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949.
63. Wheeler to Toninelli, September 12, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
64. Toninelli, letter to Wheeler, September 8, 1949; and Toninelli to Wheeler, September 20, 1949, Monroe Wheeler Papers, IV.24, Correspondence T.
65. Maria Alexander, letter to Toninelli, July 6, 1953, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.A.285 mf 2181 379.

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66. Barr, letter to Toninelli, July 14, 1953, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.A.285 mf 2181 378.
67. See the exhibition catalogue *The New American Painting / La Nuova Pittura Americana* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1958).
68. On this well-explored argument see, among various sources, Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* (May 1973): 43–53; Eve Cockroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June 1974): 39–41; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2013); and John Curley, *Global Art and the Cold War* (New York: Laurence King Publishing, 2019).
69. Wheeler, letter to Soby, February 24, 1949.
70. See the collections of catalogues at the Biblioteca Hertziana, Rome; Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence; and Biblioteca del Castello Sforzesco, Milan. For a very harsh assessment of Toninelli's personal integrity, see Antonio Marasco, letter to Tullio Crali, December 13, 1961, Cra.4.248, Archivio del '900 – Museo d'Arte di Trento e Rovereto.
71. James Thrall Soby, *Modern Art and the New Past* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957). Published in translation as *L'arte moderna e il suo recente passato* (Milan: Toninelli, 1972).
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“Positively the only person who is really interested in the show”:

Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York

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NEOCUBISM AND ITALIAN PAINTING CIRCA 1949: AN AVANT-GARDE THAT MAYBE WASN'T

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Adrian R. Duran **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

This essay considers the category and style of "Neocubism" within the Italian avant-garde of the 1930s and 40s. A term applied to artists such as the Corrente group and Il Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, "Neocubism" became loaded with political and aesthetic connotations in the last years of Fascism and the first of the postwar period. These young Italian artists were deeply influenced by the work of the Cubists, but especially that of Pablo Picasso. His 1937 *Guernica* became an ideological touchstone for a new generation that had endured Fascism and joined in the partisan fight against Nazi occupation. This essay seeks to disentangle this knotted legacy of Cubism and point to the rapidly changing stakes of the surrounding discourse, as Italy transitioned from Fascist state to postwar Republic to Cold War frontier. Adding nuance and diversity to a term so often applied monolithically will allow for a truer sense of Italian Neocubism when and if it was manifested throughout this period.

To be found amidst a panorama of earlier, often better-known examples of Italian modernism on display at the Museum of Modern Art's 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was a new generation of painters and sculptors, thrust into the spotlight of a discourse within which they had not yet found their place. Groups such as the Futurists and the Scuola Metafisica and individual artists, for instance Amedeo Modigliani, had already been integrated into the master narratives of early twentieth-century modernism. For the newly emergent generation, which MoMA named "The Younger Abstractionists; the *Fronte nuovo delle arti*," the narrative was still being written. Indeed, their young careers had already faced massive uncertainty –

Fascism, World War II, the Resistance, and postwar recovery – and the last years of the 1940s were very much about establishing their historical place as a recently opened new frontier.

Looking back upon *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, it is clear that curators Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby had an understanding of the postwar generation that was a work-in-progress, intimating certain *a priori* notions of modernism that had existed since the *fin de siècle*. That is to say, Barr and Soby did not see postwar Italian abstraction autonomously, but rather within an aesthetic and ideological matrix that was first enunciated by Barr's now legendary cover diagram of the catalogue for the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, but had undergone important revisions in the wake of World War II and the emergence of both the New York School of Abstract Expressionism and the wider phenomenon of global abstraction.¹

With this essay, I hope to disentangle these narratives and reinvest postwar Italian art with some of its indigenous specificities, and to understand how its introduction into a paradigm of modernism such as that espoused by MoMA was as much an act of sublimation and obfuscation as it was a recognition of certain key actualities of the works on display. The goal here is not to undo MoMA's work, but rather to buttress it with documents and historical reframings that have come to light in the decades since. Indeed, this essay will attempt to do double duty: firstly as an augmentation of MoMA's exhibition, and secondly as an attempt to understand how and why MoMA's place in this exchange served to reify the broader dialogues surrounding painting and sculpture at midcentury.

A key wrinkle within the writing of this history is the idea of "Neocubism," a term that in the late 1940s seemed innocuously useful, but has since become something of an overdetermined red herring, and appears infrequently in recent critical discourse. Retrospectively, Neocubism reveals itself to be a misnomer in several ways. Cubism was but one among many sources for these artists, and it should not disproportionately obscure the importance of others. Further, and perhaps most interestingly, *neo* implies a second, later coming. This, too, is deceptive. Though a generation older than the youngest artists represented in MoMA's exhibition, Pablo Picasso continued to create influential works understood as Cubist into the 1950s, and he was often spoken of as a contemporary beacon rather than a past source.

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Picasso and this new generation of Italian artists were exhibiting contemporaneously, and sometimes in the very same exhibitions. Though the focus of this essay will be on the years leading up to MoMA's groundbreaking exhibition, the years after witnessed as rich an exchange of influence and ideas from Picasso to Italy, with works such as *Guernica* (1937), *Le Charnier* (The Charnel House, 1944–45), and *Massacre en Corée* (Massacre in Korea, 1951) resonating well into the Cold War.

Additionally complicating this history is the very nature of the exchange. MoMA's 1949 exhibition was the most impactful view of Italian modernism assembled for American audiences to date. And, as press statements at the time reported, the exhibition's most recent works were sourced from a trip taken by Barr and Soby to the 1948 Venice Biennale and Rome Quadriennale – hardly a year before *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* opened at MoMA.

The central, and best documented, concern is how Cubism was absorbed by this new generation of Italian artists. By 1949, Cubism was known and regarded very highly by Italian artists. Indeed, the artists included in this younger generation had revered Picasso's *Guernica* since its unveiling. This history adds important nuance to Barr and Soby's categorization of Italian artists, revealing both its logic and inadvertent oversimplifications.

What the indigenous Italian discourse reveals is some indebtedness to Cubism. Certainly, the formal vocabularies and techniques of Cubism were imitated and integrated in various permutations, and the writings that surround the works reveal more pointedly ideological allegiances to Cubism, particularly in the hands of Picasso, particularly recently. This is, in part, the simple result of Picasso's works having been ideologically resonant during the Fascist years, when these artists were reaching their early maturity. Though they borrowed much from Cubism's formal innovations, their history with the movement was determined first, and most profoundly, by its intellectual and political tenets.

This history begins approximately a dozen years before MoMA's exhibition, during the mid-1930s, when the Milan-based anti-Fascist artists' group Corrente was pushing against the dominant strains of Fascist culture.² Artists and intellectuals traveled widely throughout Italy, including Armando Pizzinato to Rome in 1936, where he met Scipione, Renato Guttuso, Mario

Mafai, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Roberto Longhi, Cesare Brandi, and Elio Vittorini. The following year, painters Giuseppe Santomaso, Ennio Morlotti, Corrado Cagli, and Afro Basaldella visited Paris. Afro and Cagli, who were working on canvases for the Italian pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exposition, might well have seen *Guernica* firsthand.³ In 1940, while in Rome, Guttuso received a postcard of the work sent by the critic Brandi, who had seen it in New York.⁴ Brandi was not the only critic distributing images. In a 1997 interview, militant critic Mario De Micheli recalled that

Picasso was the symbol of the intellectual opposition to Nazi-Fascism, beginning at the time of the war in Spain. His *Guernica* was the manifesto of the opposition. I went to the art library at Castello Sforzesco [in Milan] and I made myself a series of reproductions of *Guernica*, which I then distributed to my friends: we carried them at all times in our wallets, as the membership card of an ideal political party.⁵

To emulate Picasso was to embrace not only the most advanced formal vocabularies of modern painting – remember that this is a generation who came of age under Fascism – but to mobilize them in opposition to the oppressions of artistic freedom by totalitarian regimes, as many had done with their actions of the mid-1930s, including Sassu and Guttuso, who, while in Milan, had stolen Italian military weapons intending to distribute them to partisans before the former's arrest.⁶

In 1943, before its windows were shuttered by Fascist authorities and its membership dispersed to various Resistance factions, Corrente issued its "Primo manifesto di pittori e scultori" (First Manifesto of Painters and Sculptors), which claimed:

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We look upon Picasso as the most authentic representation of he who has invested himself in life in the most complete sense, but we certainly do not wish to create of him a new academy. We see in the attitude of Picasso a surpassing of the intimism and subjectivism of the expressionists. We see reflected in the canvases of Picasso not his particular struggles, but those of his generation. The images of this painter are provocations and banners for thousands of men.⁷

These encomia continued into the next years, most notably in De Micheli's essay "Realismo e poesia" (Realism and Poetry),⁸ which began circulating in draft form in 1944; in letters to and from artists and critics (including one written on June 2, 1944, from Corrente veteran Renato Birolli to critic Giuseppe Marchiori, which stated: "If *Guernica* is an indication, we are saved. We will come to understand a historical turning point and how we will be at the head of the renewal. [...] We will be among the pioneers of a vital idea");⁹ and in articles such as "Communist Picasso," in the October–November 1944 issue of Communist Party newspaper *l'Unità*, which reprinted excerpts from an interview originally published in the American weekly *The New Masses*, and, in the same issue, Guttuso's "Saluto al compagno Picasso" (Salute to Comrade Picasso), in which he referred to *Guernica* as "in its essence [...] a new work, a cry of revolt and vendetta."¹⁰ Fellow Fronte Nuovo delle Arti member Ennio Morlotti's "Lettera a Picasso" (Letter to Picasso) was published in the same February 1946 issue of *ll '45* as "Realism and Poetry" and was another call to arms:

We were all convinced that with *Guernica* painting had put itself in the fire, had returned to [the] depths of life. [...]

In 1937 the people called Picasso and Picasso showed the way. [...]

Dear Picasso, we were all convinced that with *Guernica* painting had found the way. This much brought us to absolute conviction. With *Guernica* we began to want to live, to leave the prisons, to believe in painting and in ourselves, to not feel ourselves alone, arid, the uselessly refused; to understand that also we painters existed in this world to act, that we were men amongst men, that we must receive and give. [...]

You continue to break chains [...] to defeat sadness, resignation, disorder [...] you continue to give clarity, courage, and joy. You affirm and prove that the new civilization of free men exists. And we ask of these free men that they give to you new walls because with your words you can give the new images of the new reality.¹¹

The first tectonic shifts of the postwar period came in the spring of 1946. In the March issue of *Numero*, in anticipation of a May exhibition organized at Milan's Caffè di Brera, a group of artists, including some members of Corrente, published the "Manifesto del realismo di pittori e scultori" (Manifesto of realism for painters and sculptors), better known as the "Oltre Guernica" (Beyond Guernica) manifesto.¹² Despite its name, this manifesto is not overwhelmingly concerned with visual style or language. Instead, taking a cue from the painting for which it is named, the document emphasizes painting as an act of participation and political engagement.

"Oltre Guernica" coincided with the opening of *Pittura francese d'oggi* (French Painting of Today) at Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, an exhibition that featured a collection of color posters showcasing French modernism from Impressionism to Matisse and Picasso. It was Italy's first large-scale glimpse of the wellspring of twentieth-century painting that Barr and Soby's catalogue would refer to as Italian painting's "supplementary diet."¹³

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October 1946 witnessed the founding of the Nuova Secessione Artistica Italiana (New Italian Artistic Secession), which would morph into the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti (New Front of the Arts) by November. In January 1947, six months before the group's debut exhibition at Milan's Galleria della Spiga, two of its founders, Birolli and Morlotti, endured a trip to Paris that, other than a brief visit with Picasso himself, seems to have been a total failure. The Milan debut was a financial disaster and the last straw with gallerist Stefano Cairola. Nonetheless, it set the groundwork for the group's appearance at the 1948 Venice Biennale and, thus, MoMA's 1949 exhibition. Moreover, it was one of the first issuances of a programmatic response regarding the influence of Cubism. Lead critic Giuseppe Marchiori's catalogue introduction and all but three of the twelve additional essays (one per participating artist) acknowledge the influence of Picasso and/or Cubism, and nearly every artist is positioned within a modernist avant-garde tradition.¹⁴

In addressing "Picassism" as a phenomenon, Marchiori in his introduction asks, "Is it possible to rid oneself [...] of every memory? And what is tradition if not a record that manifests and affirms itself even in the most 'revolutionary' works?"¹⁵ Marchiori allows for indebtedness and influence, an acknowledged necessity given the collective estimation of Picasso and the centrality of his artistic and ideological innovations to the formation and membership of the entire Fronte Nuovo.

The artists of the Fronte Nuovo offered permutations of a basic formula: - Cubism filtered through individual histories, allegiances, and nuances. Guttuso's work was heavily contoured by his studies with traditional Sicilian painters of horse-drawn carts, which he merged with his own interpellations of modernism – especially planar color, flattened geometries, and spatial collapse. He had already reached acclaim with works like 1941's *Crocifissione* (*Crucifixion*; figure 1), and he would go on to push deeper into social justice content while moving away from explicit representationalism. Certainly, as early as 1940, Guttuso's debt to the language of Cubism, through his interest in Cézanne, is evident. It is an early Cubism – the geometric landscapes and planar modelling of the first decade of the 1900s – that is the foundation here, not the more canonical Analytic and Synthetic Cubisms. Also, by 1941 Guttuso had seen images of *Guernica*. The Cubism of *Crucifixion* is, more than

anything else, this kind of Cubism – the social justice, populist, antitotalitarian Cubism that emerged from the Spanish Civil War a short few years before Italy's own Resistance erupted.

Pizzinato's abstractions were simultaneously gestural and geometric, marked by a painterly expressionism and a palette reminiscent of Henri Matisse and Georges Rouault, mixing the thick, delineated brushwork of Picasso and Georges Braque with the dynamic geometries of Futurism. Flat areas of color overlap and counteract with more dryly applied areas of paint, the brushstrokes of which echo the dynamism of the intersecting geometries, from within which specific, recognizable imagery emerges.



Figure 1. Renato Guttuso, "Crocifissione" [Crucifixion], 1941. Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 78.7 in. (200 x 200 cm). Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome.

The works of the Rome-based artist Afro in this moment also reveal the continued influence of Picasso, situating central forms across broadly brushed, loosely geometric backdrops. The linear subdivision of forms into constituent planes recalls works such as Picasso's 1937 painting *La Baignade* (On the Beach), in Peggy Guggenheim's collection.

The endeavors of the Fronte Nuovo were mirrored by those of the Roman group Forma 1, which issued its manifesto in March 1947, leading with a now famous sentence:

We declare ourselves to be Formalists and Marxists, convinced that the terms Marxism and Formalism are not irreconcilable, especially today when the progressive elements of our society must maintain a revolutionary avant-garde position and not give over to a spent and conformist realism that in its most recent examples have demonstrated what a limited and narrow road it is on.¹⁶

Wonderfully, Forma 1, which included artists Carla Accardi, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Antonio Sanfilippo, and Fronte Nuovo member Giulio Turcato, among others, has received very recent attention within the Anglophone discourse, notably through the work of art historians Juan José Gómez Gutiérrez and Catherine Ingrams.

Following Ingrams, we should look at Forma 1 as a multifaceted reconsideration of the potentials for Italian modernism. Firstly, the movement is a telling, if less known, example of the emergence of abstraction in the postwar context, from Abstract Expressionism to Tachisme and Arte Informale. These associations, however, can be deceptive – as is the case, too, with the Fronte Nuovo. These artists engaged reality subjectively, and their artworks were intended as registrations of psycho-political experiences, manifesting responses to the rapidly changing landscape of mid-1940s Italy, as it shifted from Fascism to occupation, Civil War, invasion, reconciliation, and the republic. Abstraction, in short, was often realistic.

Beyond this, their debt to Russian Constructivism, as Ingrams argues, offers an alternative genealogy to those provided by Cubism, Futurism, or the Fascist *ventennio*. Ultimately, the results are much like those of the Fronte Nuovo – a vibrant new language built on the synthesis of an increasing inward flow of evidence from prewar European modernism, as filtered through the first-person experiences of an Italian nation that had just survived a bloody, turbulent decade. Unsurprisingly, the works are varied in tenor, resting on the knife's edge of abstraction and representation, a divide that would become the Achilles's Heel of its generation.

This division was revisited when, in the issue of *Pravda* published on August 21, 1947, Picasso was denounced on the grounds that his deformations of the human form were offensive to Soviet views on art.¹⁷ This prompted a

heated response from Guttuso, who came to Picasso's defense in the pages of the November issue of *L'Avanti*.¹⁸ In the March 1948 issue of the *Rassegna della Stampa Sovietica*, Picasso was again criticized, this time by Soviet art historian and critic Vladimir Kemenov.¹⁹ These exchanges attest to how high-pitched the debate had become in the rising tensions of the Cold War. Picasso, who would soon be known as one of Europe's most conspicuous Communist artists, was still subject to the ebbs and flows of the doctrine being shared by Soviet Cominform with its European allies.

The 1948 Venice Biennale, the first such event in six years – the first since the end of the war and the fall of Fascism – would change everything. It offered one of history's great accumulations of modernist art, and included works by J. M. W. Turner, the Impressionists, Marc Chagall, Rouault, Braque, René Magritte, Henry Moore, Jacques Lipschitz, and Germaine Richier, plus the collection of the recently arrived Peggy Guggenheim, installed in the unused Greek pavilion.

The Biennale commission placed its hopes for the future in the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti.²⁰ Responses were mixed. Luigi Bartolini referred to them as a group of "bean eaters" before demanding: "You degenerates of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, why do you love Picasso's *Cat*? Why do you love the bestial obscenity in every one of Picasso's works, that defiant matador of painting?"²¹ In many ways, said matador was the patron saint of the 1948 Biennale, a role confirmed by the first Picasso retrospective in Italy. Organized by Rodolfo Pallucchini, it assembled twenty-two paintings dating from 1907 to 1942, and included *Pêche de nuit à Antibes* (Night Fishing at Antibes; 1939), largely regarded by the Italians as his greatest masterpiece since *Guernica*.

Fittingly, Guttuso wrote the catalogue's introduction. Citing Paul Éluard's dedication in his book on Picasso, Guttuso speaks of the "'faith of man in man.' Young Italian painters have and have had this same faith – not abstract, not cultural, but human, of struggle and of hope – in the work of Picasso, during the years of their formation, which were [also] those of Fascism, the years of the progressive and methodic murder of culture, of liberty, of peace."²² He ends by calling for artists to rise above simplistic formal categories to embrace the larger moral and ideological conflicts at hand: "Picasso brings [us] back to this objective [...] to a debate that is no

longer between abstract and concrete, or figurative and nonfigurative, or formalism and naturalism, but of human and inhuman, ultimately between 'good' and 'evil.'"²³

The group simply couldn't – and likely didn't feel obligated to – escape the shadow of Picasso. Enrico Gaifus called them *picassini*, or "little Picassos," claiming that "one can declare that Picassism has finished. It has finished badly, with a third-class funeral. It has died lonely."²⁴ Three weeks later, Marchiori responded: "The few Cubist canvases by Picasso, collected at the Biennale, suffice to explode the legend of Italian 'Neocubism:' a denomination invented by certain poorly informed, or even completely blind, denigrators."²⁵ This statement was set in the middle of a review of Picasso's retrospective at the 1948 Biennale, wherein Marchiori is most interested in distinguishing the various periods of Picasso's career so as to emphasize the differences between *Guernica* and *Night Fishing at Antibes*, casting the latter as a kind of hallucinatory Surrealism quite distinct from the anguished realism of its predecessor.

Interestingly, Ercole Maselli reviewed the Fronte Nuovo exhibition at that same Biennale, embracing a taxonomic approach much like Marchiori's. Ultimately, and anticipatory of Marchiori's objections, Maselli determines that the Cubism of these artists was overdetermined in the critical press: "Another current idea, mistaken, is that these young artists of the Fronte Nuovo are all Cubists or *picassini*." His only concession is an admission of the influence of Picasso on Renato Birolli – an assertion without doubt.²⁶

The idiomatic heterogeneity exhibited at the Biennale was abundant. Guttuso exhibited the planar, color-driven studies of labor and life that would appear at MoMA. Armando Pizzinato and his fellow Venetian Emilio Vedova exhibited works driven by energetic explorations of planarity and color shot through with contemporary content and politics. Renato Birolli, Antonio Corpora, and Giuseppe Santomaso offered more moderated abstractions, certainly Cubist in heritage, but also full of other influences and autobiographical references. Giulio Turcato's work had found the most advanced languages of abstraction, though he would move closer to representation in subsequent years.

This diversity would soon become a liability: in October 1948, on the occasion of the First National Exhibition of Contemporary Art, at Bologna's Palazzo Re Enzo, Italian Communist Party (PCI) leader and ideologue Palmiro Togliatti called abstraction "scribblings and monstrous things" and demanded that PCI-affiliated artists return to a figuration informed by Soviet Socialist Realism.²⁷

This, effectively, was where things were prior to MoMA 1949. Retrospectively, Barr and Soby's choices for the postwar period are easy to understand. Guttuso and Pizzinato were leading representatives of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti as well as the interwoven Roman and Venetian scenes. Santomaso and Viani were also members. Included as well were two leaders of Rome's new school, Afro and Toti Scialoja; the work of the former was, according to MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* catalogue, a representative of "non-representational" art. Bruno Cassinari, Renzo Vespignani, Marino Marini, Giacomo Manzù, Pericle Fazzini, Emilio Greco, Lucio Fontana, and Marcello Mascherini rounded out the cast.

Obviously, not all of these artists make sense within the notion of "Neocubism." Nonetheless, the connection of the new Italian avant-garde to Cubism is an unsurprising rhetorical strategy. They themselves had spilled much ink on the importance of Picasso to their agendas, and Picasso was the main attraction at the 1948 Biennale, visited by Barr and Soby, who had built an institution in many ways predicated on the centrality of Picasso and Cubism to all subsequent movements. To reiterate the role of Picasso for Italy was to validate the role of MoMA for modernism – smart and convenient.

The works, however, tell a more diverse story. Guttuso's *Mangiatori di cocomero* (Melon Eaters, 1948; figure 2) is typical of this moment. Its broad color planes and collapsed space belie a debt to early pre-Analytic Cubism, and the painting is as much about Cézanne as Guttuso's Sicilian upbringing and fascination with labor issues.²⁸ Pizzinato sent *Cantieri* (Dockyards, 1948; figure 3), an excellent representation of his energetic Cubo-Futurist language, synthesizing his interests in painting, the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the industrialization of Venice, and socialist legacies. Santomaso, like Guttuso, was informed by a kind of Fauvist colorism and a tendency towards quotidian content. Viani's figurative sculptures were most commonly

associated with Jean Arp and the ancients. Scialoja's *Fabbriche sul Tevere* (Factories on the Tiber), an expressionistic 1946 landscape built of heavily worked paint, is utterly unlike the abstractions that would bring him to greater prominence in the 1950s. Even Afro, the "non-representational" artist, employed a polyglot aesthetic. Whatever this alleged Neocubism was, monolithic it was not.

Within this matrix of making, writing, and exhibiting, there is a more difficult story to tell, of exchange with the United States. What is clear is how much more visible the exchange was *after* MoMA's exhibition. The New York exhibition was discussed in an article in Venice's local paper, *Il Gazzettino*, that happens to sit in the Biennale archives adjacent to



Figure 2. Renato Guttuso, "Mangiatori di cocomero" [Melon eaters], 1948. Oil on canvas, 35 x 45.6 in. (88.9 x 115.9 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

New York Times and *New York Herald Tribune* articles about a Pizzinato show at Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York. The latter seems to have been 5 *Italian Painters*, which also included Afro, Cagli, Guttuso, and Morlotti. Afro had a solo show at Viviano immediately after, one of many such links between the gallery and the peninsula. That same summer, the Museo Correr in Venice hosted the Jackson Pollock retrospective that gave birth to his famous "No chaos damn it!" quote.²⁹

The 1950 Venice Biennale featured a Cubism exhibition of works by Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, and Fernand Léger, organized by Douglas Cooper. In response, Lionello Venturi pointedly juxtaposed Picasso's legacy with the emergence of Renato Birilli, an ex-Frontista and one of Venturi's new Gruppo degli Otto (Group of the Eight).³⁰ Similar gamesmanship was afoot in Albert M. Frankfurter's "International Report" in the September 1950 issue of

Art News, for instance in his characterization of Guttuso and Pizzinato:

In the 1948 Biennale, such men as Guttuso and Pizzinato were justifiably hailed as among the best practitioners present of Picassoid abstraction in Italy. Since then the Party issued irrevocable orders for them to stop that sort of thing and paint pictures the masses would understand, pictures or posters of the coming revolution. Now they are here, as arid and dictated as the worst savings-bank mural any capitalist ever dictated. Here is the only place in living art where story-telling subject matter still goes on. The future of art, in other words, depends on which political side wins.³¹

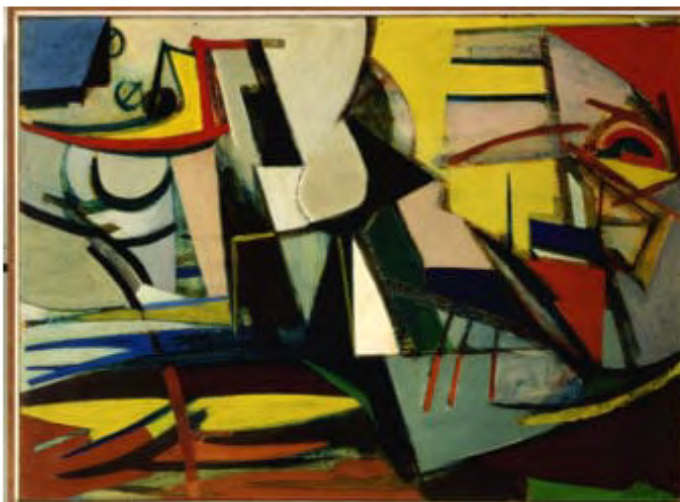


Figure 3. Armando Pizzinato, "Cantieri" [Dockyards], 1948. Oil on board, 25 x 34 in. (63.5 x 86.6 cm). Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

By mid-1950, equating the styles of Guttuso and Pizzinato was increasingly difficult. Though they both embraced leftist politics and subjects, their visual languages continued to diverge: Guttuso began exploring wobbly-form colorism, while Pizzinato finished off a Cubo-Futurist phase that would soon give way to much more traditional figuration. Of course, to an Anglophone art audience newly familiar with the new landscape of Cold War Italy (Barr and Soby among them), these nuances were still developing. Over the course of the next decade, the exchange would become more constant, intense, and informative, laying the foundation for our current understanding. To quickly summarize an active period about which much work remains to be done, everyone was seeing a lot of everyone else.

Picasso's 1953–54 retrospective exhibition in Milan and Rome has been the source of much attention.³² To say the least, it was a major success, reminding the Italian public that Picasso's influence was decades long, had spanned the entire lives of this new generation, and would surely resonate into the future. Similarly, MoMA continued to acquaint itself with the most recent developments in Italian art. The 1950s are littered with overlaps, ranging from the exhibition *The Modern Movement in Italy: Architecture and Design* (1954), which included, for instance, imagery of Fontana's 1951 installation at the Milan Triennale, and also the Giuseppe Guerreschi work in the *Recent Acquisitions* show of 1958. In between were retrospectives of Modigliani (1951), Olivetti (1952), Giorgio de Chirico (1955), and a constant flow of acquisitions from Italian artists ranging from Futurist Umberto Boccioni to Frontista Emilio Vedova. We should also remember that 1958 saw the European and Italian iterations of MoMA's Jackson Pollock retrospective and the now infamous exhibition *The New American Painting*.

This momentum, however, was different back in Italy. In the first months of the 1950s, the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti would fragment under the pressure of Cold War politics, forced to choose between the languages of abstraction and realism, largely under the influence of Italian Communist leader Palmiro Togliatti and other party ideologues. Of course, the visual record tells a somewhat different story and, like it had done for decades, Italy's avant-garde found infinite variations within and between these languages of art. Once the Fronte Nuovo crumbled, it was swiftly replaced by groups such as Lionello Venturi's *Gruppo degli Otto* and the by-then global momentum of painterly abstraction, which swiftly came to be associated more with New York than the European examples to which this Italian generation looked for influence.³³

By 1958, the generation of the Fronte Nuovo was entering middle age. They had evolved from "The Younger Abstractionists" to the generation soon to encounter, in the 1960s, an utterly different landscape for the arts. That history, to our great benefit, is traced in Germano Celant and Anna Costantini's book *Roma–New York, 1958–1964* (1993).³⁴ Now two and a half decades old, and still a reliable source, it offers an important reminder that we are always compelled to revisit established histories as we plot the path for future work.

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Neocubism and Italian Painting Circa 1949: An Avant-Garde That Maybe Wasn't How to Cite

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Citations

1. To this point, and directly related to this topic, is Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 147–69.
2. The individual politics of Corrente and its affiliated artists were, naturally, diverse. And, it is certain that the group took advantages of the connections and protections afforded them by Ernesto Treccani's father, Giovanni, a senator and count as well as the force behind the *Enciclopedia Italiano di Scienze Lettere ed Arti*, first published in 1929. Nonetheless, many of those associated with the group – including Aligi Sassu, Renato Guttuso, Emilio Vedova, and Armando Pizzinato – were involved in partisan actions as early as the mid-1930s. For more on Corrente, see Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "The Politics of Realism: Corrente di Vita Giovanile and the Youth Culture of the 1930s," *Stanford Italian Review* 8, nos. 1–2 (1990): 139; and Bette L. Talvacchia, "Politics Considered as a Category of Culture: The Anti-Fascist *Corrente* Group," *Art History* 8, no. 3 (September 1985): 336–55. Giorgia Bottinelli's doctoral thesis, "The Art of Dissent in Fascist Italy: The Bottai Years, 1936–43" (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2000), provides incredibly valuable context. See also the exhibition catalogues *Corrente. Il movimento di arte e cultura di opposizione 1930–1945*, ed. Mario De Micheli (Milan: Palazzo Reale, 1985); and *Corrente e oltre. Opere dalla collezione Stellatelli, 1930–1990*, ed. Marina Pizziolo (Milan: Palazzo della Permanente, 1998). I deal with the group in-depth in the first chapter of my book *Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate), 2014. Another fascinating example is that of Lucio Fontana, who was able to play the shifting terrain of Fascism to his advantage. See Emily Braun, "The Juggler: Fontana's Art under Italian Fascism," in *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold*, ed. Iria Candela (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), 29–39.

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3. Their trips to Paris are discussed in Franco Miracco, "Dalle avanguardie storiche al Fronte Nuovo delle Arti," in *Modernità allo Specchio. Arte a Venezia (1860–1960)*, ed. Toni Toniato (Venice: Supernova, 1995), 204; and Mario De Micheli, *L'arte sotto le dittature* (Milan: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2000), 119.
4. Costanzo Costantini, *Ritratto di Renato Guttuso* (Brescia: Camunia, 1985), 182 and 214.
5. Marina Pizziolo, "Mario De Micheli," in Pizziolo, *Corrente e oltre*, 79. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.
6. See chapter 1, "Corrente, Italian Art under Fascism, and the Resistance," in Duran, *Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy*, especially 11–12. By the mid-1940s, a number of Corrente-affiliated artists were partisans, including Vedova, Pizzinato, Leoncillo Leonardi, Giulio Turcato, and Mirko Basaldella.
7. See Arturo Schwarz [Tristan Sauvage, pseud.], *Pittura italiana del dopoguerra* (Milan: Schwarz Editore, 1957), 222.
8. Originally published in *Il '45* 1, no. 1 (December 1946), the text is reprinted in Mario De Micheli, *Arte contro. 1945–1970 dal realismo alla contestazione* (Milan: Vangelista Editore, 1970), 283–88; and Nicoletta Misler, *La via italiana al realismo. La politica culturale artistica del P.C.I. dal 1944 al 1956* (Milan: Gabriele Mazzotta, 1973), 240–49.
9. Giuseppe Marchiori, *Renato Birolli* (Milan: Edizione di Comunità, 1963), 34–35.
10. Renato Guttuso, "Saluto al compagno Picasso," *l'Unità*, December 24, 1944. Quoted in Misler, *La via italiana al realismo*, 196.
11. Ennio Morlotti, "Lettera a Picasso," *Il '45* 1, no. 1 (February 1946): 33–34. Reprinted in Ennio Morlotti, *Questa mia dolcissima terra: Scritti 1945–1992* (Florence: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1997), 21–28.
12. "Oltre Guernica" was signed by Giuseppe Ajmone, Rinaldo Bergolli, Egidio Bonfante, Gianni Dova, Ennio Morlotti, Giovanni Paganin, Cesare Peverelli, Vittorio Tavernari, Gianni Testori, and Emilio Vedova. The manifesto was originally published in *Numero 2*, no. 2 (March 1946). It can also be found in the original Italian in Sauvage, *Pittura italiana del dopoguerra*, 232–33; and as a photostat of the original in Misler, *La via italiana al realismo*, 254.
13. James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 31.

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14. The exhibition catalogue *Prima mostra del Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (Milan: Galleria della Spiga, 1947) is reprinted in its entirety in Giuseppe Marchiori, *Il Fronte Nuovo delle Arti* (Vercelli: Giorgio Tacchini Editore, 1978).
15. This unpaginated catalogue is reprinted in toto in *ibid.*
16. For more detail on Forma 1, see Catherine Ingrams, "A Kind of Fissure': FORMA (1947–49)," *Object*, no. 20 (2018): 59–81; and Juan José Gómez Gutiérrez, "The Politics of Abstract Art: Forma 1 and the Italian Communist Party, 1947–1951," *Cercles. Revista d'història cultural*, 15 (2012): 111–35.
17. See also Guglielmo Pierce, "Fischi a Picasso," *l'Unità*, February 2, 1946. Reprinted in Mislner, *La via italiana al realismo*, 236–37.
18. Renato Guttuso, "Pablo Picasso e le guardie bianche," *L'Avanti* (Milan), November 13, 1947. See also Mislner, *La via italiana al realismo*, 56–59 and 212. The denunciation of Picasso was also the subject of a letter of October 3, 1947, from Elio Vittorini to painter Paolo Ricci, published in Elio Vittorini, *Gli anni del "Politecnico." Lettere 1945–1951*, ed. Carlo Minoia (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1977), 134–35.
19. Kemenov's critique was published as "La pittura e la scultura dell'Occidente borghese," in *Rassegna della Stampa Sovietica* 3 (March 20, 1948). See also Mislner, *La via italiana al realismo*, 212. One imagines that this text is a translation of a Russian original. Indeed, it matches some of the language originally used in Kemenov's "From Aspects of Two Cultures," originally published in the VOKS bulletin by the U.S.S.R. Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Moscow) in 1947; translation available at this link (last accessed October 28, 2019). For a deeper sense of the interchange between the Italian and other Communist Parties, including Moscow's Cominform, see also chapter 5, "The Communist Politics of Abstraction and the Onset of the Cold War," in Duran, *Painting, Politics and the New Front*.
20. By the time of the Biennale, the group's membership included painters Renato Birolli, Antonio Corpora, Renato Guttuso, Ennio Morlotti, Armando Pizzinato, Giuseppe Santomaso, Giulio Turcato, and Emilio Vedova; sculptors Pericle Fazzini, Nino Franchina, and Alberto Viani; and ceramicist Leoncillo Leonardi.
21. Luigi Bartolini, "Lettere dalla Biennale di Luigi Bartolini," *Il progresso d'Italia* (Bologna), December 2, 1948.

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22. Renato Guttuso, "Pablo Picasso," in *XXIV Biennale di Venezia* (1948), 189. It is also worth noting that Eluard's writings had been published by the journal of Corrente, to which Guttuso belonged.
23. *Ibid.*, 190.
24. Enrico Gaifus, "La Biennale Riapre i Battenti," *Alto Adige* (Bolzano), June 6, 1948.
25. Giuseppe Marchiori, "Realismo magico di Picasso," *Il mattino del popolo* (Venice), June 29, 1948.
26. Ercole Maselli, "Il fronte nuovo dell'arte," *Avanti* (Rome), October 10, 1948.
27. Togliatti published the review under his pseudonym. See Roderigo di Castiglia, "Segnalazioni," *Rinascita. Rassegna di politica e cultura italiana* 5, no. 11 (November 1948), 424.
28. Lara Pucci has done much to shed light on the significance of otherwise innocent-looking domestic objects in these works. See her "Fighting Fascism in the Kitchen: The Domestic Context in Visconti's *Ossessione* and Guttuso's Still Life Series," *Immediations*, no. 3 (2006): 61–77.
29. Pollock's response was to a review by Bruno Alfieri, as noted in the *Time* magazine article "Chaos, Damn It!" (November 20, 1950).
30. Venturi's time in the U.S. in the early 1940s is chronicled in Romy Golan, "The Critical Moment: Lionello Venturi in America," in *Artists Intellectuals and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942–44*, ed. Christopher Benfey and Karen Remmler (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).
31. Alfred M. Frankfurter, "International report," *Art News* 49, no. 5 (September 1950): 14–19 and 57. This Cold War discourse is markedly common in American responses to Italian painting with Communist sympathies. See also Sam Hunter, "Contemporary Italians: Guttuso and de Chirico," *The Magazine of Art* 43, no. 7 (November 1950): 266–71; and Milton Gendel, "Guttuso: a Party point of view," *Art News* 57, no. 2 (April 1958): 26–27 and 59–62.
32. Regarding the Picasso retrospective, see first and foremost Bruno Mantura, Anna Mattiolo, and Anna Villar, eds., *Picasso 1937–1953: Gli anni dell'apogeo in Italia* (Rome: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 1999).

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33. For more on this context, see chapters 5 and 6, "The Communist Politics of Abstraction and the Onset of the Cold War" and "The Rise of Realism and the Demise of The New Front of the Arts," in Duran, *Painting, Politics and the New Front*.
34. See Germano Celant and Anna Costantini, *Roma-New York, 1958-1964* (Milan and Florence: Edizioni Charta, 1993).

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EXHIBITING ITALIAN MODERNISM AFTER WORLD WAR II AT MOMA IN "TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART"

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Antje K. Gamble **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

Foregrounded as a kind of exploratory survey of work outside of the "two formidable counter-attractions in Europe—the Parisian present and the Italian past," *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* curated a particular view of Italian modern art. The 1949 exhibition at MoMA would become the precedent for international investigations of Italian modern and avant-garde art, and one that represented Italy as a modern democracy. In part to uphold this idea, curators Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby presented Italian modernism as apolitical aesthetic experiments.

In part, the works were selected by using Fascist art world contacts and exhibitions as guides, which helped shape Barr's coalescing vision for a modernist hegemony. The installation also foregrounded a depoliticization of the cultural production of the former combatant country. The works were not presented in the more innovative manner seen in exhibitions like the prewar *We Like Modern Art* (1940–41) or the wartime *Road to Victory* (1942), which gained inspiration from the same avant-garde exhibition models that Fascist exhibitions like the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (1932–34) had evoked. Rather, the exhibition was installed in a more deadpan manner, with most works displayed with ample space at similar heights. Precedent for this installation style can be seen in MoMA as well as in Italy, particularly in the presentations at the Rome Quadriennale of the 1930s and 40s. Barr and Soby were able to visually reframe the production of Italian artists as part of a transatlantic modernist project, rather than an Italian Fascist one.

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The Museum of Modern Art began planning a large survey of Italian modern art in 1947, to present important aesthetic trends to an uninformed American public. According to co-curators Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby, the Italian modernists were those "that we in America have tended to neglect, not only because of our rightful interest in our own contemporary painting and sculpture, but also because of two formidable counter-attractions in Europe – the Parisian present and the Italian past."¹ The 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* would be a way to showcase this underappreciated, in the curators' estimation, vein of modern art. Barr and Soby's curatorial choices have since become canonical within Anglo-American discourse on Italian modern art. At least in part, the exhibition's enduring legacy, with its recent resurgence of scholarly interest, can be attributed to the museum's deployment of modernist exhibition design. Though in recent years scholars including Raffaele Bedarida, Nicol Mocchi, and Davide Colombo, to name a few, have considered this exhibition with respect to both its Fascist-era precedents and the postwar reframing of Italian modern art, there has not yet been an investigation into the exhibition's design.² This modernist design was used to present Italian art as just another aesthetically progressive, culturally modern, and, importantly, apolitical vein in the development of art during the last century (figure 1).

The organizers of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* sought to sidestep the Fascist elephant in the room, namely, Italy's recent history as part of the Axis alliance in World War II, including art's integral part in the success of Benito Mussolini's two-decade-long dictatorship. To this end, the exhibition presented Italian modern art primarily in relation to the developing canon being cultivated at MoMA. The exhibition's catalogue and press praised Italian contemporary art as having rid itself of "the shackles of Fascist isolationism [that were] rusting empty on the ground."³ Correspondingly, the exhibition design showed the work to be formally and ideologically in line with modernist and avant-garde aesthetics, in avoidance of possible political references. In this essay, I will show that the modernist design at MoMA was part of larger transatlantic exhibition practices, including in Fascist-era Italy: it was not the apolitical framework it is often understood to have been. In short, context was everything. At MoMA in 1949, Italian artists were seen as reflecting progressive aesthetics in a lineage leading to postwar democracy, even while some of the same works had been presented in a similar fashion

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in Fascist Italy to reflect the progressive aesthetics cultivated by a modern Fascist regime.

Two veins of modern exhibition design informed *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. One was an avant-garde style that combined various art media, graphic design, documentary photography, and historical artifacts in an installation that was visually dynamic; the other was a modernist style, where works of art were the primary focus on plain walls. The 1949 show followed after experimental avant-garde MoMA exhibition designs including *We Like Modern Art* (1940–41) and the wartime *Road to Victory* (1942).⁴ These earlier exhibitions would become precedents for the iconic *Family of Man* exhibition of 1955, which is an important touchstone in MoMA's more explicitly political and curatorially avant-garde exhibitions.⁵ These exhibitions were part of a lineage of avant-garde curatorial practices that combined various media to create visually dynamic and often immersive exhibition experiences. There were a small number of moments in the 1949 exhibition of Italian modern art that resonated with this installation style, for example the Futurist section reflected this design to correspond with the first European avant-garde group. However, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was primarily installed in a modernist manner that Barr had spearheaded for the majority of MoMA's exhibitions of art during his tenure as the museum's first director. Soby, who was the primary organizer of the exhibition, likewise



Figure 1. Installation view, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art." June 28, 1949 through September 18, 1949. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photographer: Soichi Sunami. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

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avored this modernist design.⁶ The legacy of Barr’s modernist exhibition design preferences can still be seen as canonical within museum practices in the U.S. Importantly, this design style intended that the viewer read a neutral presentation of individual works, to be contemplated as aesthetic objects.

While Soby oversaw the exhibition’s logistics and authored most of the catalogue’s texts, Barr’s part in choosing the works, as well as his legacy of modernist, so-called ‘white-cube,’ exhibition design, worked to foreground the aesthetic significance of Italian art over any sociopolitical context or import. While interwar Northern European models for MoMA’s modernist exhibition designs have been well researched, little examination has yet been done of exhibitions in Italy that might have served as precedents.⁷ Scholarship has overlooked Italian modernist exhibition design likely due to bias both towards Northern European modernism and also away from any acknowledgment of the Italian Fascist support for modernism’s aesthetic and curatorial contributions. This essay will unpack current scholarship of modernist exhibition design at MoMA, in general, and present possible Italy-specific precedents.⁸

MoMA and the White Cube

Barr and Soby’s *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* showcased over two-hundred paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings – making for an exhibition truly grand in scale. Though it focused heavily on early twentieth-century developments, particularly the work of the Futurists and the Scuola Metafisica, a number of post-WWII works were also exhibited. The inclusion of a younger generation of artists who were in early to midcareer at the time of the exhibition allowed the curators to drive home their articulated curatorial agenda: the rebirth of Italian culture after the fall of Fascism.⁹ Though this will not be discussed in-depth here, Barr and Soby’s curatorial choices were as important as the exhibition design.

With a primarily-modernist display for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, Barr and Soby were able to visually reframe the production of Italian artists – those working before, during, and after Fascism – as belonging to a transatlantic modernist project. The reasons for their curatorial choices were likely numerous and undoubtedly political.¹⁰ MoMA’s institutional position within cultural Cold War networks – in addition to individual curators’ and

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administrators' connections to political actors – impacted choices in curation, exhibition design, and even programming.¹¹ *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* strove to present Italian modernist and avant-garde art primarily as formal exercises that allied Italian artistic production with that of America's cultural (and political) allies, namely, France and Britain. In addition, since Italian modern art allowed American tastemakers to create an image of the U.S. as both the inheritor of an idealized humanist culture and also the true modern space for its future development, curatorial choices were of political import. In other words, Italy created a strong connection to a cultural past that the U.S. felt it did not have.¹² Therefore, the presentation of Italian art in a modernist exhibition allowed Americans to strengthen their desired role as purveyors of a vibrant postwar culture made possible by U.S. intervention in international politics.

For the larger curatorial and collecting program at MoMA, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* continued the projects that Barr had started as Director of Exhibitions before the war. In fact, Barr had been fired from that position and then rehired as Director of Museum Collections over the course of the war; the latter position he held when this exhibition was organized.¹³ Though a number of exhibition design precedents for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* can be seen within MoMA's history, the most significant is the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (figure 2).¹⁴ Not only did the earlier show include works by Italian Futurists, it was also important in the development of modernist exhibition design at MoMA.

Like the 1949 show, Barr's 1936 articulation of modernist abstraction was both interdisciplinary in its curatorial choices (showcasing painting, sculpture, drawing, and printmaking) and also focused on formalist advances, creating a deeper lineage for contemporary art. Importantly, *Cubism and Abstract Art* became a canonical presentation of abstract modernism for the rest of the century, with Barr's curatorial choices joining with his modernist exhibition design to present a new narrative of twentieth-century art, involving the progressive advancement of aesthetic choices.¹⁵

This early version of modernist exhibition design made the works read, within the context of the institution, as pure aesthetic choices. Overwhelmingly, Barr's curatorial program focused on formalism, a stance for which he was criticized by contemporaries such as Meyer Schapiro.¹⁶

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However, Barr's program at MoMA was not ahistorical, despite Schapiro's critique. As art historian Kristina Wilson convincingly argues, Barr's legacy of formalist ideals often ignored his awareness of the "social, ethical, and political aspects of art."¹⁷ In the exhibition design, this can be seen in the more avant-garde exhibition design moments in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, like inclusions of graphics and archival texts, and unexpected installation choices, which point to a desire for visual contextualization. Barr's larger project was to connect art with the larger public through formal aesthetics as well as considerations of modern American society. He understood art's power in creating a particular view of national culture and identity.¹⁸ This is an important point for the present study. Even when the program at MoMA seemed, on the surface, to have been a purely formal presentation, the social and political import of art in contemporary culture cannot be overstated.

The mix of a seemingly apolitical formal context is particularly true in considering the museum's 1936 and 1949 presentations of Fascist-era Italian art. For example, the Futurist room in *Cubism and Abstract Art* (figure 2) implicitly and explicitly connected modern Italian art to a classical lineage – a small model of the famed *Winged Victory of Samothrace* from the Louvre Museum overlooked Umberto Boccioni's *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913) – and it presented pre-WWI Futurism as foremost a modernist formalist exercise. More recent examples of interwar Futurism were not included in the exhibition within Barr's narrative, and the chronology ends in 1914–15, well before the rise of Fascism.¹⁹ In the accompanying catalogue, his description of pre-WWI Futurism connected it to French Impressionist and Neo-Impressionist painterly breakdown of "the materiality of objects" and also to Cubism's "disintegration."²⁰ Any relation to indigenous Italian Divisionism or Macchiaioli was disregarded. For Barr, Futurism's French roots resulted in "the simultaneous presentation of different aspects of the same object in a single work of art."²¹

The 1936 installation of the works likewise focused the viewer on a kind of modernist auratic experience rather than any social or political reading. Each work has space for the viewer's visual contemplation. Even the inclusion of the *Victory*, which was placed above eye-level, allowed the viewer to create a visual lineage without distracting the viewer from the individual works. The

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white plaster facsimile on a tall white pedestal would have read visually almost as a ghost of art past, in contrast to the shiny bronze Boccioni on a dark-painted pedestal, set farther from the wall. The formal abstraction of the work took precedent, as it did in the catalogue's texts. With deep roots in both MoMA's history and the larger history of European exhibition design, *Cubism and Abstract Art* served as a



Figure 2. Installation view of the exhibition, "Cubism and Abstract Art." The Museum of Modern Art, New York. March 2, 1936 through April 19, 1936. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

clear curatorial precedent for the later show of Italian art. This of course contradicts the central tenants of Futurism's ideals; the *Victory* was specifically highlighted in the founding manifesto as outmoded.²² Boccioni's sculpture would be present in the 1949 show too, with a similar dark base but no Hellenistic ghost (figure 1).²³

Between these two shows, MoMA built a new permanent home for the museum, specifically designed to highlight modern art in modernist exhibitions. *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was presented in this new gallery architecture, designed by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone. Their building, completed in 1939, had been inspired by new exhibition practices developing in interwar Europe and the U.S.²⁴ Before moving into the West Fifty-Third Street location, MoMA temporarily occupied a number of townhouses. At this time, Barr and the rest of the MoMA board had worked to create a modern space to exhibit the new modern art.²⁵ The now ubiquitous 'white cube' style began with works hung just below eye-level (articulated from the average height of men, foregrounding a male viewership), on neutral walls devoid of architectural decoration.²⁶ By

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standardizing the exhibition design, it was seen to add to the viewer's ability to consider an artwork's "self-sufficient structure of meaning."²⁷ The installation design emphasized the importance of individual works as unique representations of certain styles or ideas.

Nineteenth-century installation precedents, where works were hung as if within designed interiors of rich estates – commonly known as 'salon-style' – had begun to be abandoned by museums and private galleries alike in Europe and the U.S. starting in the 1920s. The most innovative of modernist museum installation practices from this period came from inside the German states. Alexander Dorner, Director of the Landesmuseum in Hanover, brought together enlightenment ideals and avant-garde aesthetics to simplify the gallery space, creating "atmosphere rooms" appropriate for cultural epochs.²⁸ Barr had visited an innovative installation by El Lissitzky that inspired Dorner's later redesign realized at the Hanover museum; the latter which he and Philip Johnson, then Curator of Architecture at MoMA, also visited in the early 1930s.²⁹ This encounter was a watershed moment for American ideas about modernist exhibition design, though entrées into this style were taking place on both sides of the Atlantic already.

Aligning with these contemporary exhibition practices, stark walls and regularly spaced artworks were theorized as allowing the viewer a vision free from distraction; and these ideas were just the start of Barr's exhibition design legacy. Art historian Mary Anne Staniszewski argues that "the installation experimentation at MoMA was [...] very particularly an American (i.e., U.S.-specific) realization of Modern culture."³⁰ MoMA's practices showed off America's modernity as much as the new art. For Barr, with Soby following his lead, "this conventional manner of displaying modern culture and art [was] itself far from neutral: it [produced] a powerful and continually repeated social experience that [enhanced] the viewer's sense of autonomy and independence."³¹ Importantly, the modernist exhibition design became a code for modernist "aesthetic authority."³² For this consideration of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the framing of the modernist exhibition as both authoritative and within American cultural control is not insignificant.

The constructed authority of the museum meant that it led in the cultural education of its visitors. Consequently, not only was *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* meant to educate the American public about Italian modernism in

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particular, it also was presented as part of a larger cultural education mission at the heart of MoMA’s purpose as an institution.³³ Victor D’Amico, who was hired as head of the new “Education Project” in 1937, supported a focus on engaging children in learning about modern art, and many of the tenth-anniversary speeches delivered in 1939 spoke to the role MoMA was playing in reaching the American public.³⁴ Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt foregrounded this educational role, connecting the aesthetic tastes cultivated by the museum with the upholding of American Democracy.³⁵ MoMA had well established its position as a cultural custodian of American democracy. Therefore, the aesthetic neutrality of MoMA’s exhibitions was meant to be seen as a kind of democratization of modernism.³⁶ In the case of the 1949 exhibition, a democratization of Italian modernism – which had been corrupted for a time by Fascism – was part and parcel of the choice of a modernist exhibition design.

Italian Precedents for Modernist Exhibitions

Though Barr and Soby visited studios during a brief Italian tour in 1948 that was funded by the Office of International Information and Cultural Relations (OIC), Barr had preexisting knowledge and interest in Italian art.³⁷ Barr’s wife and collaborator Margaret Scolari Barr was an art historian of Italian modernism in her own right, having published and taught on the subject before meeting Barr.³⁸ Scolari Barr’s father was an antiques dealer in Rome, where she had spent her formative years; she was fluent in Italian and had a number of important contacts in Europe. In the initial planning stages of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, Barr wrote to the new Director of Exhibitions at MoMA, Monroe Wheeler, that Scolari Barr was integral to the project because of her knowledge of the Italian landscape; and she joined her husband and Soby for the 1948 trip.³⁹ Not only did Scolari Barr’s personal and professional background connect Barr to Italy, she would undoubtedly have had a clear understanding of contemporary exhibition practices there, not to mention the contemporary political landscape.⁴⁰

Barr and Soby consulted with a number of other Italians on choices for *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, though not without some contention. Connections to Italian Fascism were not absent in the exhibition’s artworks, nor in the curators’ network of collaborators throughout Italy. The Ghiringhelli brothers (Peppino and Gino) were wartime Fascist

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collaborators.⁴¹ It is not surprising, however, that Barr and Soby worked with them, since they were friends of Scolari Barr and had helped her access the 1933 Triennale di Milano exhibition before it opened to the public (she wrote a review of the show for the *New York Times*).⁴² Though Barr denounced the Nazi regime and its treatment of artists, there is no evidence of a similar censure of Italian Fascism.⁴³ This seeming double standard was fairly typical in the Euro-American interwar context, for a variety of reasons – among them, lasting admiration for Mussolini’s modernization efforts and wide-ranging support for the arts.

During their 1948 planning trip, Soby, Barr, and Scolari Barr visited both the postwar Venice Biennale and the Quadriennale in Rome.⁴⁴ However, the Barrs were also already familiar with the diverse exhibition practices of Fascist Italy, from the avant-garde *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, 1932–34) and the modernist editions of the *Triennale di Milano* (Triennial Exhibition of Design in Milan in 1933 and 1936) to the modernist Quadriennale editions of 1931, 1935, and 1943.⁴⁵ In looking at these Italian precedents for the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition, the messiness of presenting Fascist-era art in postwar America as a representation of a cultural renaissance becomes more apparent. The art scene, with its varying levels of state support, was not monolithic under Fascism.⁴⁶ Even when considering state-sponsored exhibitions, the specific type of exhibition design varied based on the venue, audience, and propaganda motives.

As the 1932–34 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* represents the Italian Fascist precedent for avant-garde exhibition design at its pinnacle alongside the later shows at MoMA such as *We Like Modern Art* and *Road to Victory*, the Quadriennale similarly presents an Italian Fascist precedent to *Italian Twentieth Century Italian Art*’s modernist exhibition design. Though it is unclear if Barr or Scolari Barr visited the Quadriennale in either 1931 or 1935 (when they were staying in Rome), the national exhibition best exemplifies the utilization of modernist exhibition design principles to present contemporary artistic production under the Fascist Regime. These two veins in Italian Fascist exhibition design were developed concurrently with those in other parts of Europe and in the U.S.

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This diversity in Fascism's exhibition design was tied to the three camps in Fascist-era debates about art: conservatives, modernists, and antimodernists.⁴⁷ The Quadriennale under the direction of Cipriano Efisio Oppo supported more abstract and avant-garde art, from the Novecento to the Futurists. Though there was a growing number of antimodernists calling for purges of art and artists – similar to Nazi Germany – theirs was a small group until the mid-1930s.⁴⁸ Organized to present the best emerging contemporary artists in Italy, the Quadriennale was run by a semiautonomous body of artists and critics; this was until it came under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Corporations in 1937, in correspondence with the conservative shift in politics in the lead-up to war.⁴⁹ The exhibition's first two iterations, in 1931 and 1935, were at the fore of presenting modernist and avant-garde aesthetic movements within Fascist Italy. Oppo was a vocal proponent of the idea that "Fascist art is that which has been created during the Fascist Era," rather than art depicting intensely Fascist themes in a directly propagandistic way.⁵⁰ He was well connected, with close relationships to prominent critics and gallerists; and Margherita Sarfatti even proclaimed Oppo the "greatest arbiter of artists in Italy."⁵¹

Oppo's characterization of Fascist art as a reflection of a general epoch and not a defined style or subject matter is important to remember. As with the use of a modernist exhibition design in Northern Europe and the U.S., Italian Fascist exhibitions such as the Quadriennale sought to present artworks as auratic reflections of contemporary culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that support for modernist and avant-garde art was central to the rhetoric, curated content, and exhibition design of the Roman show. Along these lines, the prize for painting in 1935 went to the former-Futurist painter Gino Severini, whom Oppo brought in from France both to meet Mussolini and also to highlight the international popularity of Italian artists abroad.⁵² Though the Quadriennale was centrally a platform to highlight national production, it would play a similar role to MoMA's in the international understanding of recent advancements in art. The exhibition was significant in highlighting progressive aesthetics among Italian artists within a modernist exhibition framework as a way to highlight the Fascist regime's success in bringing modernity to a still largely agrarian Italy. Oppo himself saw the Quadriennale as a way to bring Italian art to the international public – especially looking to the U.S. He was the "guarantor for countless Pecci

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Blunt’s New York gallery” (the Cometa Art Gallery), and traveled to the U.S. twice in the 1930s to work on various projects including a collaboration with the Carnegie International.⁵³

The pinnacle of modernist Fascist culture’s support for progressive aesthetics has been marked as that 1935 Quadriennale.⁵⁴ Marino Marini won that year’s prize for sculpture – the cognate prize to Severini’s for painting. Therefore, it was unlikely a coincidence that Marini was of particular focus in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and singled out in one of the exhibition’s few reviews. During the organizing of the show, Soby said that Marini was “among the best sculptors of our day” and a large number of his works were highlighted in a separate room in the show.⁵⁵ Foreshadowing the focus on the sculptor at MoMA, the concluding section of the Quadriennale’s exhibition catalogue likewise praised Marini above all others in the four years prior.⁵⁶ Though Barr and Scolari Barr may not have seen that 1935 exhibition in person, the catalogue and photographs of the installation were widely available.

As MoMA’s interior spaces were initially modified in its temporary homes, the Quadriennale installations seem likewise to have used a “textured fabric known as friar’s cloth or monk’s cloth” on the walls of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, designed by Pio Piacentini and opened in 1883.⁵⁷ The presentation of the artworks against this seemingly neutral backdrop was meant to reinforce their modernity and aesthetic autonomy. As would be the case in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, most works were given ample space and hung at similar heights. Both shows utilized the power of modernist exhibition design to highlight the aesthetics of the artworks understood to reflect the modernity of the epoch, from Fascist Italy to democratic America.

Also installed at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in 1932–34, the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, used a very different exhibition design to achieve different but not unrelated effects. The avant-garde exhibition design of the *Mostra* was intended to directly illustrate Fascist power in quite literally a narrative of Fascist political mythology. Akin in exhibition design and purpose to the later MoMA exhibitions *We Like Modern Art* and *Road to Victory*, the *Mostra* was a spectacle of presumed political superiority.⁵⁸ It became the site where the “identification of the exhibition medium [took place, recognizing its potential] as a key propaganda tool that allowed organizers to affirm a

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national style, gather together the various needs of modernity, and reference Roman history."⁵⁹ In other words, it made clear to the Italian and international public that Fascist propaganda was being staged through the medium of the exhibition.

The Quadriennali were too set up to support the regime's power, though not as overt propaganda like in the *Mostra*, but rather through progressive aesthetics. Its successive editions presented the most progressive art as a way to push Fascism forward, exemplifying Mussolini's idea that "art always has been a spiritual force of Italy."⁶⁰ Importantly, the connection between the state and its art was foregrounded at the Quadriennale, which differentiated the Regime from that of other modern totalitarian states, particularly Germany.⁶¹ As historian Marla Stone writes,

Fascist faith in the ability of exhibitions to transform consciousness and to carry the Fascist message led to (1) a radical transformation of and official intervention in the system of display of art in Italy and (2) the employment of the exhibition as a container of Fascist visions of the past, present, and future.⁶²

Both the *Mostra* and the Quadriennale editions worked to create various "Fascist visions" in the move to solidify political power through culture.⁶³ So when the 1935 Quadriennale foregrounded young artists – even if the artist's personal politics were anti-Fascist – and showed the work within the modernist exhibition, the Fascist state displayed itself as modern, young, open, and vital.⁶⁴ The most progressive aesthetics were presented within the most modernist exhibition design to represent Fascism's modernization of Italian culture.

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While *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* represented Italian modernism as a neutral aesthetic experience, the use of the modern exhibition design for the show was inherently political. The rooms were set up chronologically, as narrated in the catalogue, starting with Futurism and ending with the most recent contemporary production. Most of the exhibition had light-painted walls. While a few were painted a darker color, those dark walls highlighted specific

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works; for example, a dark wall behind Alberto Viani's *Nude* (1945; figure 3) was used to accentuate the work's light marble. Some works were labeled individually, others in groups. Some exhibition sections received larger wall texts for contextualization, similar to those included in the catalogue, but more often than not the walls were clean and free from text. Headings in a modernist sans-serif font, installed high above the artworks, matched those in the exhibition catalogue. All of these installation choices were meant to give the viewer space to contemplate individual works – an idea rehearsed in the exhibition's publicity photographs (figure 4). Differing from avant-garde exhibition design, which almost collaged together works, documents, and wall text, the modernist design here allowed space for contemplative viewing.

There was still some variety in the formalism of the modernist installation, as some variants seem to emphasize the subject matter of the works, while others were more pragmatic. For example, the presentation of the Scuola Metafisica hung most of the works at eye-level, while two seemed to sit outside the linear logic of the modernist exhibition design. Though there are no installation notes from the curators existent in the archives, it seems clear that this divergence from the modernist exhibition framework was intended to highlight the uncanny nature of those specific works. This, alongside the darker walls, asked the



Figure 3. Installation view of the exhibition, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art." June 28, 1949 through September 18, 1949. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Photo: Soichi Sunami. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

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viewer to consider these works a little differently than those elsewhere in the exhibition.

At other moments in the exhibition, groupings of works were hung or placed in closer proximity than the standard in order to visually mark them as a pairing or triplet. One example is the tiered presentation of three ceramic sculptures by Lucio Fontana. Two are on colored pedestals of varied heights, while the third was on a white shelf on the wall behind. Here, the deviation from that standard line of the modernist exhibition hang created a moment of contemplation within the otherwise standard and progressive visual narrative – a moment of pause for the viewer to consider a set of works in comparison. For the sculptures in the exhibition, Barr and Soby seemed to have taken into special account their tone and volume, often highlighting them with darkly colored pedestals or darker walls, painted to create dramatic backdrops as with the installation of the aforementioned *Nude* by Viani (figure 3).

In short, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was presented similarly to other early modernist exhibitions at MoMA, with the intention of highlighting the institution's coalescing understanding of modern art. In 1949, MoMA was celebrating its twentieth anniversary and the Italian show was just one of a



Figure 4. Unidentified visitors at the exhibition, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art." June 28, 1949 through September 18, 1949. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Homer Page. Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

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number of exhibitions foregrounding the institution's influence in showing American and international art. These included exhibitions that addressed the museum's growing collection, for example *Master Prints from the Museum Collection* (1949), as well as contemporary production in various media, from painting and sculpture to photography and design.⁶⁵ These exhibitions utilized, consistently, modernist design. They represented MoMA's vision for the presentation of modern art as developed by Barr over the previous decades. Modernist exhibition design at MoMA in the early twentieth century was part of a larger Euro-American move to present modernist art so as to reflect the modern epoch – whether within the Fascist or democratic context.

The modernist exhibition style would remain supreme within MoMA at midcentury, even as more avant-garde exhibition designs were used for special exhibitions such as the later *Family of Man* (1955). Like *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, the choice of exhibition design style was political in *Family of Man*. While in 1949, it was important to show Italian modern art as purely aesthetic in a ploy to symbolically sever the connection between modernism and Fascism; in 1955, *Family of Man* was meant to show the rich collections of images as a "mirror of the essential oneness of mankind" after the devastation of the WWII.⁶⁶ The large exhibition ostensibly created a three-dimensional collage of images, which had five different iterations and traveled to eighty-eight venues in thirty-seven countries, plus more throughout the U.S.⁶⁷ In *Family of Man*, the avant-garde exhibition design would serve to give a sense of liveliness that helped along the sense of the colloquial, the everyday, the human in the atomic age.

In contrast, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* utilized the modernist exhibition design style to create a sense of distance; not between the viewer and the work of art, but the art and the sociopolitical context of the works' creation. The works in the show were presented in a way that allowed them to be read as auratic works of formalism, disassociated from politics or specific context. Rather, they were just another vein in modernism formalist development. Barr and Soby understood the very real connection between modernism and Fascism in Italian art, so for an exhibition of it after the end of the World War II, a reframing was required. Like many thinkers in Italy, the reign of the totalitarian dictatorships was relegated to a parenthesis in the MoMA exhibition.⁶⁸ Italian art had been saved from Fascism, as had Italy.

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Citations

1. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, foreword to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 5.
2. See Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (2012): 147–69; Davide Colombo, "1949: Twentieth-Century Italian Art at MoMA di New York," in *New York New York / Arte Italiana: La riscoperta dell'America*, ed. Francesco Tedeschi, Francesca Pola, and Federica Boragina. (Milan: Electa, 2017), 102–09; and Nicol M. Mocchi, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art 1949: il caso Morandi," in *ibid.*, 110–16.
3. Barr and Soby, foreword to *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, 5.
4. See Helen M. Franc, "The Early Years of the International Program and Council," in *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad*, ed. John Elderfield (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 108–49.
5. See John Szarkowski, "The Family of Man," in *ibid.*, 12–37.
6. Soby curated a solo exhibition of the work of Amedeo Modigliani the following year (1950), which showcased a similar preference for the modernist exhibition design. See details at "Modigliani" at *Museum of Modern Art*, available at this link (last accessed December 31, 2019).
7. Two major studies are Elderfield, *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century*; and Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

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8. The most recent study of Italian Fascist exhibitions was the 2018 exhibition at the Fondazione Prada. The exhibition catalogue had a number of important essays about Fascist politics and exhibition culture, including exhibitions – both planned and realized – of Italian art in the U.S. See Francesca Romana Morelli, "Italian Art Exhibitions in the United States," in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum: Art, Life Politics, Italia 1918–1943*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2018), 208.
9. For the best description of the rhetoric of rebirth in the 1949 show, see Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance," 147–69.
10. It is important here to cite the movement that informs my articulation of the politics of exhibitions, which are often presented as neutral iterations of culture. In part, this has developed from institutional critique practices (e.g., Fred Wilson's work) that reconsider the politicized nature of museums; but in particular, I wish to highlight the recent hashtag/movement #museumsarenotneutral, created by cultural organizer LaTanya S. Autry and museum administrator Mike Murawski in August of 2017, "to refuse the myth of neutrality that many museum professionals and others put forward." See "Museums Are Not Neutral," *Artstuffmatters* available at this link (last accessed July 12, 2019).
11. For further discussion, see Antje K. Gamble, "Exhibiting Italian Democracy in the 1949 'Twentieth Century Italian Art' at the Museum of Modern Art," in *The First Twenty Years at MoMA 1929–1949*, ed. Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter (London: Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming in 2020). The history of MoMA as an agent of the U.S. government has been widely discussed. See, for example, Serge Guilbaut, "Postwar Painting Games: The Rough and the Slick," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 30–84; and Michael Kimmelman, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern, Its Critics, and the Cold War," in Elderfield, *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century*, 39–55.
12. For a discussion of Italian art's place in postwar American culture, see Gamble, "Buying Marino Marini: The American Market for Italian Art after WWII," in *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'*, ed. Sharon Hecker and Marin Sullivan (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2018), 155–72.

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13. For more details of Barr's employment at MoMA, see Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 354–65.
14. The progressive view of Italian modernism presented resembled Barr's diagrams for the MoMA exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which included Italian Futurism as an important node. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).
15. Susan Noyes Platt, "Modernism, Formalism, and Politics: The 'Cubism and Abstract Art' Exhibition of 1936 at the Museum of Modern Art," *Art Journal* 47, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 284.
16. Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, 328–30.
17. Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 110.
18. Wilson argues for this reading in terms of Barr's exhibitions of American art: "When viewed from within the context of Depression-era inspirational national histories, *American Painting* [a 1932–33 exhibition at MoMA] is revealed as a powerful mythmaker for the discouraged audiences who entered the Rockefeller mansion in the winter of 1932–33." See *ibid.*, 126.
19. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 61. Interwar and World War II-era Futurism continue to be excluded in most canonical histories of both Futurism and modernism more generally. The first thorough international consideration of Futurism's long history is Vivien Greene, ed., *Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2014).
20. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 56.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism (1909)," in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 147.
23. MoMA acquired the sculpture through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest in 1948. See "Umberto Boccioni *Unique forms of Continuity in Space*," MoMA website (last accessed August 14, 2019).
24. See Bruce Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions That Made Art History*, vol. 1, 1863–1959 (New York: Phaidon, 2008), 17; and Wilson, *The Modern Eye*, 133–46.

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25. "When asked about the neutral, non-skied installation method inaugurated at MoMA, Philip Johnson [...] stated simply: 'That was Alfred Barr.'" Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 64.
26. For a general overview on the place of gender in the history of museums, see Levin, Amy K., "Introduction." In *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, edited by Amy K. Levin (London and New York: Routledge 2010), 1–10.
27. Wilson, *The Modern Eye*, 139.
28. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 16–23.
29. Sybil Gordon Kantor even argues that Barr's conception for the lineage of Cubism in the 1936 exhibition comes from the 1924 book *The Isms of Art* by El Lissitzky and Jean (Hans) Arp. See Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, 318. Scolari Barr States that Barr had visited the museum in 1928, and saw it again in 1935, on a guided tour by Dorner. Margaret Scolari Barr, "'Our Campaigns': Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and the Museum of Modern Art, a biographical chronicle of the years 1930–1944," *New Criterion* (Summer 1987): 39. In Barr's *Cubism and Abstract Art* catalogue, he notes travels in Europe in 1927–29 as influencing the "plan of the exhibition." See Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 9. Altshuler says that Barr and Phillip visited together in 1932 and 1933. See Altshuler, *Salon to Biennial*, 242.
30. Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*, 57.
31. *Ibid.*, 66.
32. Wilson, *The Modern Eye*, 142.
33. Though the educational purposes of exhibitions like *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* were "meant [for] the narrow cult of collectors, scholars, critics, and fellow museum professionals, not [really] the general public," the curatorial program was no less concerned with the kind of lessons being taught. See Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum From Boullée to Bilbao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 171.

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34. The best work on MoMA's education program under D'Amico has been done by Briley Rasmussen. See her "The Laboratory on 53rd Street: Victor D'Amico and the Museum of Modern Art, 1937–1969," *Curator* 53, no. 4 (October 2010): 451–64. It is also interesting, perhaps, to note that D'Amico's place as an Italian-American made him a somewhat strange choice for the position because of ongoing anti-Italian racism. Often only hired for low-wage and unskilled labor, Italian-Americans were grouped with African-Americans workers before World War II – a powerful statement in the Jim Crow Era. See David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 220.
35. Transcript of Roosevelt's Address on Museum of Modern Art (Herald Tribune), President Rockefeller, Friends of the Museum of Modern Art, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilmed by Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, MF 3153, 1. Materials found in the *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers* will be hereafter referred to as *AHB*. Also in 1941, MoMA President John Hay Whitney declared that the museum would "serve as [a] weapon of national defense" in collaboration with Central and South American allies. See "John Hay Whitney announces MoMA will serve as weapon of national defense," Museum of Modern Art, New York, press release, February 28, 1941.
36. Cultural freedom was explicitly connected to "Western" democracy at this time. See Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of The Congress for Cultural Freedom," in *A New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 322–59.
37. The OIC was one of the early Marshall Plan programs created in 1946. The discussion of the OIC funding of this initial Italian trips is detailed in the MoMA archives. See Monroe Wheeler, Memo to Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby, April 17, 1946, *AHB*, MF3153; and letter to Charles Rufus Morey, February 24, 1947, *AHB*, MF3153. See also Paul Hyde Bonner, letter to Monroe Wheeler, October 8, 1947, *AHB*, MF3153.
38. Edward P. Alexander, *The Museum in America: Innovators and Pioneers* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1997), 71.
39. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., memo to Monroe Wheeler, re: Italy Trip, November 28, 1947, *AHB*, MF3154.

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40. The "influence Margaret Barr may have had on the exhibition project cannot be determined from any extant archival sources, and remains a matter of speculation." See Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," 147–69.
41. For more details, see Gamble, "Exhibiting Italian Democracy," forthcoming. For other Italian connections, see James Thrall Soby, memo to Monroe Wheeler, re: Italian Show, February 9, 1949, *AHB*, MF3154; Monroe Wheeler, letter to Charles Rufus Morey, February 24, 1947, *AHB*, MF3153; Fernanda Wittgens, letter to Alfred H. Barr, Jr., January 26, 1949, *AHB*, MF3154; and Laura Moure Cecchini's essay, "Positively the only person who is really interested in the show": Romeo Toninelli, Collector and Cultural Diplomat Between Milan and New York," in this journal issue, on the collaboration of the diplomat and art dealer Romeo Toninelli, who was an associate of Wheeler.
42. Scolari Barr, "'Our Campaigns,'" 34. See also Margaret Scolari Barr, "In the Triennale, International Style Triumphs: Important Exhibition of Architecture and the Decorative Arts At Milan Brings Modern Theory and Practice to the Fore," *New York Times*, August 6, 1933.
43. Barr tried to warn colleagues in the U.S. about activities Nazi Germany, though only one brief statement was published in 1933. Barr used MoMA's clout to help a number of artists and scholars escape Nazi concentration camps and emigrate to the U.S. and the U.K. See David A. Hanks, "The Bauhaus: Mecca of Modernism," in *Partners in Design: Alfred H. Barr Jr. and Philip Johnson*, ed. David A. Hanks (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2015), 38. There are detailed descriptions of Nazi atrocities throughout Scolari Barr's various recollections of their European travels. The strongest denouncement of Italian Fascism is her brief comment in a 1974 interview: "I mean Alfred was *a priori* anti-Fascist. I had lived in Italy through the March on Rome while I was still Italian. So neither of us was Fascistically inclined." Scolari Barr, in "An interview of Margaret Scolari Barr conducted 1974 February 22–1974 May 13, by Paul Cummings, for the Archives of American Art," Archives of American Art. See also Scolari Barr, "'Our Campaigns.'"
44. The curators' visit to Italian exhibitions is discussed in Davide Colombo and Silvia Bignami's article, "Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby's Grand Tour of Italy," in this issue.

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45. It is likely that the Barrs knew of, if not visited, the Biennale and the Quadriennale di Roma before or even during the war – though this is speculative because of the lack of extant sources. Any reference to visiting Fascist-sponsored exhibitions is conspicuously missing from Scolari Barr's recollection of their time in Italy, especially since the Barrs were in Rome when the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* was on display. See Scolari Barr, "Our Campaigns," 28–36. Raffaele Bedarida will publish evidence of the Barrs visit to the *Mostra* and the *Foro Mussolini* in his forthcoming article "Out of the chart: Boccioni-centrism and Barr's Struggle with Italian Modernism."
46. For a brief overview of Fascist state support for the arts, see Emily Braun, "L'Arte dell'Italia fascista: il totalitarismo fra teoria e pratica," in *Modernità totalitaria: il fascismo italiano*, ed. Emilio Gentile, trans. Sandro Liberatore and Roberto Cincotta (Rome: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 2008), 85–99.
47. Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 43. Even though I agree with the general categories as set out by Stone, I diverge from her characterization of personalities and allegiances. She writes that Oppo was a conservative, alongside Mariani. From my own research into the two curators, as well as through numerous discussions, Oppo is more allied with modernists. To understand the complexities of Oppo's position, see Francesca Romana Morelli, "Oppo 'grande arbitro degli artisti d'Italia?'," in *Cipriano Efisio Oppo Un legislatore per l'arte: Scritti di critica e di politica dell'arte 1915–1943*, ed. Francesca Romana Morelli (Rome: Edizioni De Luca, 2000), 1–6.
48. Stone, *The Patron State*, 45–46.
49. Claudia Salaris, *La Quadriennale. Storia della rassegna d'arte italiana dagli anni Trenta a oggi / History of the Exhibition of Italian Art from the Thirties to Today*, trans. Felicity Lutz (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2004), 12.
50. "Oppo, del resto è convinto, e lo afferma in numerose occasioni, che l'artefascista è quella che si farà durante l'era fascista." Quoted in Morelli, "Oppo'grande arbitro degli artisti d'Italia?," 2.
51. Quoted in *ibid.*, 1. Translation by the author.

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52. Salaris, *La Quadriennale*, 31. See also Elena Pontiggia, "La Grande Quadriennale," in *La Grande Quadriennale. 1935 La Nuova Arte Italiana*, ed. Elena Pontiggia and Carlo F. Carli (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2006), 14.
53. Salaris, *La Quadriennale*, 43–44. See also Bedarida, "Export/Import: The Promotion of Contemporary Italian Art in the United States, 1935–1969" (PhD dissertation, Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2016); and Morelli, "Italian Art Exhibitions in the United States," 208. See also Sergio Cortesini's essay, "Another History: Contemporary Italian Art in America Before 1949," in this journal issue.
54. Pontiggia, "La Grande Quadriennale," 11–111.
55. James Thrall Soby, Letter to Nelson A. Rockefeller, June 8, 1948, *AHB*, MF3154. For more on Marini's import in the U.S. after WWII, see Davide Colombo, "Chicago 1957: Italian Sculptors. Qualche vicenda attorno alla scultura italiana in America," *LUK Studi e Attività della Fondazione Ragghianti*, no. 23 (January–December 2017): 138–54; and Gamble, "Buying Marino Marini," 155–72. This is also discussed in Cortesini's essay, "Another History: Contemporary Italian Art in America Before 1949," in this issue.
56. Càllari, *Quadriennale D'Arte Nazionale*, 174.
57. Wilson, *The Modern Eye*, 136. The archival images of the 1935 Quadriennale, reproduced in Salaris's book *La Quadriennale*, show the kind of cloth described as typical for these early modernist installations in Wilson's book.
58. See Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
59. Mario Mainetti, "The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution," in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*, 266.
60. "L'arte è per noi un bisogno primordiale ed essenziale della vita – L'arte è stata sempre una delle forze spirituali dell'Italia." Translation by the author. Càllari. 11. *Quadriennale D'Arte Nazionale*, title page.
61. "[...] se la comprensione spirituale fra Arte e Regime ancora non è intera perché lasciano a desiderare per immediatezza e naturalezza, quindi per intimo sentimento quelle opere che si vogliono chiamare d'ispirazione fascista, è già organato il campo disciplinare e gerarchico senza con ciò essere costrette ed obbligato a servire lo Stato, come ed esempio in Germania." *Ibid.*, 9.

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62. Stone, "Exhibitions and the Cult of Display in Fascist Italy," in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*, 188.
63. Here I am borrowing the terminology of the seminal text on European Latin fascistisms: *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, Edited by Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).
64. Stefania Gagliardini, "The 2nd National Art Quadriennale in Rome," in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum*, 336.
65. MoMA's exhibition history is easily accessible on their website, often with digitized archival sources from photos to press releases. See here (last accessed October 15, 2019).
66. Szarkowski, "The Family of Man," 14.
67. Ibid., 13.
68. Christopher Duggan, "Italy in the Cold War Years and the Legacy of Fascism," in *Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture and Society 1948-58*, ed. Christopher Duggan and Christopher Wagstaff (Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg Publishers Limited, 1995), 3.

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Antje K. Gamble is an art historian of Italian modernist sculpture and midcentury transatlantic exhibition practices. She is Assistant Professor of Art History in the Department of Art & Design at Murray State University. From Fascism to the Cold War, her work examines the exhibition, sale, and critical reception of Italian art and how it shaped and was shaped by national and international sociopolitical shifts. Gamble's scholarship has been included in the recent volume *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'* (ed. Sharon Hecker; Marin R. Sullivan; New York, NY: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), in which her chapter "Buying Marino Marini: The American Market for Italian Art after WWII" looks at politicized collection practices during the early Cold War. Among her forthcoming essays are an assessment of the 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, which will be published in *The First Twenty Years at MoMA 1929–1949* (ed. Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter; Bloomsbury Press, forthcoming), and another of the 1947–48 ceramic *Crocifisso* by Lucio Fontana, for the exhibition catalogue *Material Meanings: Selections from the Constance R. Caplan Collection* (Art Institute of Chicago). Gamble is currently working on a monograph on Marino Marini, for which she received the CIMA-Civitella Affiliated Fellowship at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation for Spring 2020.

SAUL STEINBERG, MOMA, AND THE UNSTABLE CULTURAL FIELD

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Will Norman **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the U.S. cultural field of the late 1940s as an unstable territory in which the protocol for evaluation and judgment of the literary as well as visual arts underwent considerable and radical revision. It argues for the identification of a brief but discrete period lasting from the end of World War II to the closure of the decade, characterized by pronounced uncertainty and tension over what forms and practices should be understood as legitimate. It traces the onset of this moment of instability in relation to modernism, transatlantic exchange, and the institutions of culture, using the particular example of Saul Steinberg (1914–1999) and his relationship to the legacy of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944). Steinberg emigrated from Italy to the U.S. during the war, having been interned as a Jew under Mussolini. A trained architect, fluent in the visual grammar of European interwar modernism, Steinberg reinvented himself in postwar America as an artist and illustrator. Steinberg proved himself exceptionally capable of traversing high and low culture, commercial and restricted fields, by virtue of his ability to negotiate the cultural field. By examining his engagements with Mondrian and the New York art world of the late 1940s, we stand to learn something new not only about him, but about the instability of the field at that time.

In studies of the "intellectual migration" of writers, artists, and thinkers from Europe to the United States in the 1930s and '40s, the dominant narrative for many years was built upon potent emblems of ivory tower isolation.¹ One might think of Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno working together on *Doktor Faustus* in suburban Los Angeles in 1943, intent on shutting out the effects of a pernicious culture industry operating around them, or of French Surrealists in New York, blithely indifferent to American culture, waiting for

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the opportunity to return to Paris as soon as World War II concluded.² Such images have contributed to a persistent misconception by which the United States at midcentury functions as modernism's banal other, its brash consumerism, burgeoning entertainment industry, and perceived lack of cosmopolitanism forming a backdrop against which European tradition could perform its destiny. This version of the narrative risks degenerating into cultural history as if written by Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), but without the parodic jokes.

A more productive way of thinking about what happened to transatlantic modernism after World War II is to consider the ways in which émigré figures found themselves to be at once creative subjects and premature historical objects, having experienced the era of modernism twice, as it were – as European tragedy in the interwar period, and as American farce in the 1940s and '50s. Figures such as Theodor Adorno, Vladimir Nabokov, George Grosz, and Saul Steinberg lived through the heyday of modernist culture as a living movement in Europe. They witnessed its decline amid the crises of the 1930s and '40s, but also its prolonged afterlife in the various institutions of culture in the postwar U.S., where modernism was reborn as a commodity and as an object of study. For Adorno, Franz Kafka and Marcel Proust never recovered their dignity after he found cheap paperback translations of their work in the studios of pseudo-Bohemians in postwar L.A.³ Grosz tried, rather disingenuously, to reinvent the Dada photomontage for America, to sell it as something never tried before.⁴ And Steinberg, as I suggest in this essay, documented the death and rebirth of the grid in the legacy of Piet Mondrian, recognizing its continued existence in the figure of the business sales chart.

In order to grasp these more complex and conflicting instances of transatlantic exchange, we must come to terms with the particular and distinctive qualities of the U.S. cultural field in the key period from the later stages of World War II to the early 1950s. When I use the term *cultural field*, I am drawing on the work of the French thinker Pierre Bourdieu, in whose work the term is used to conceptualize spatially the way artists, writers, and intellectuals assume in their practices certain positions that can only be plotted and understood in relation to one another and in relation to a larger cultural system.⁵ Inherent in Bourdieu's theorization of the cultural field is the struggle among its actors to assume positions that will bring them certain

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rewards, such as financial ones from sales or the prestige of critical recognition. For Bourdieu, each actor can be distinguished by their *habitus*, a term he once glossed simply as “a feel for the game.”⁶

What makes the late 1940s so distinctive is that it represents a period of flux in the U.S. cultural field, during which the rules of the game, to use Bourdieu’s analogy, were themselves being contested. For a time, it was not at all clear what legitimacy or prestige might look like, what the criteria for evaluating them might be, or, indeed, what might appeal to the shifting market for culture as reconfigured by a newly emergent American middle class. Bourdieu made a distinction between a conventionally governed cultural field and an autonomous restricted one for high art, in which economic principals are reversed and, as he put it, the “loser wins.”⁷ He was influenced in this idea quite directly by the discourse of nineteenth-century Parisian *l’art our l’art*, and the great French novelist Gustave Flaubert in particular. In the late 1940s, however, part of the confusion over the cultural field derived from the ways in which governing principles of conventional and restricted fields began to blend and overlap with one another, meaning that it was never quite clear who had won and who had lost.

Could popular crime fiction be high literature? For a few years in the late 1940s, intellectuals and writers such as W. H. Auden believed that it could.⁸ Edmund Wilson was among those who were sure that it couldn’t, but he still felt obliged to devote several essays to making his case.⁹ The pivotal years in the development of what would be later called film noir were also characterized by this kind of confusion, with film critics in France lauding the arrival of a revolutionary and subversive new aesthetic, while U.S. intellectuals, with a few notable exceptions, just saw violent entertainment not worthy of sustained consideration.¹⁰ In 1947, Simone de Beauvoir toured the U.S., and waxed lyrical to the New York intellectual set about what she saw as the great strides made by American writers like Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, and John Steinbeck, only to discover that among the highbrow elites these writers were already discredited as painfully naive in form and themes.¹¹ You will notice that my examples all involve some kind of transatlantic dimension, in which aesthetic protocols and *habitus* don’t quite translate across the ocean, and in fact interfere with one another disorientatingly. Kenneth Fearing summed up the fluidity, provisionality, and

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uncertainty of this moment when he described it in 1944 as “a curious interim between two ages, when history has dropped the curtain upon one of them but seems in no hurry to give the next one its shape and color.”¹²

The particular confusion I am interested in here involves the question of whether cartoons could be considered art. I’ll begin with a scene from New York in the fall of 1945, with Steinberg writing, in the Fiftieth Street apartment he shared with Hedda Sterne, a letter to his Italian friend Aldo Buzzi. Steinberg had arrived in the United States in 1941, from Italy via the Dominican Republic. Romanian by birth, Steinberg had originally migrated to Italy to study architecture in Milan, where he had also begun to experiment with humorous drawings and cartoons. During the war he was interned as a Jew in an Italian camp, before being allowed out on condition of his leaving the country. A man with considerable cultural fluency, well versed in the art and literature of Romania, Italy, France, and Britain, he drew upon arrival in the U.S. on contacts at various magazines, and began publishing his drawings. Very quickly he nurtured a relationship with Harold Ross at the *New Yorker* and began to publish regularly there, including during his military service in World War II, when he sent drawings back from China, Burma, North Africa, and Italy, among other places.¹³

Steinberg’s letter to Buzzi begins with the observation “here there’s a lot of activity, reconversion and a return to normal in grand style. A real ‘postwar’ is in sight. Plenty of inflation in art and literature.”¹⁴ This letter introduces what would become a consistent theme for Steinberg: his acute awareness of how New York cultural institutions created the conditions under which modern art was created, judged, and consumed. In a direct echo of Grosz’s metaphor for the émigré artist’s arrival in America – “you have come to a gigantic fairground so make your booth as attractive as possible”¹⁵ – Steinberg continues:

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The museums are crowded like the fun section at a fair, theaters and concert halls sell tickets at black market prices. The quality isn't very high but there's vitality and a hope for something better. The most acclaimed painters are the European abstractionists, a few good and most of them fake.

Mondrian, who died a year or two ago, has had a big post mortem exhibition and much publicity. He's quite in vogue right now.

The Mondrian exhibition had opened on March 20, 1945, at the Museum of Modern Art, and effectively established Mondrian's reputation as the patron saint of modernism, the vital connection between the European tradition and New York, where he spent his final years. As MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., proclaimed at Mondrian's memorial service, he "gave his life to his art more completely than any artist I know of."¹⁶ Yet Mondrian's assimilation into the New York artistic establishment was understood ambivalently by Steinberg, as a sign both of the frenzied commercialization of European abstract art and as a glimmer of utopian hope. Mondrian remained an important point of reference for Steinberg throughout his career, and his subsumption by high art institutions still rankled as late as 1968, when he composed *Luna Park* (figure 1), a work in which Mondrian, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Rimbaud are to be found hawking themselves at a fairground. It is worth noting, however, that whatever doubts Steinberg had over MoMA's role in determining cultural legitimacy, he was to exhibit his own drawings at MoMA in 1946 in the exhibition *Fourteen Americans*, demonstrating a complicity with institutional power that was to define his career.

We gain a clearer sense of Steinberg's self-positioning in the conclusion to the 1945 letter to Buzzi: "In my unbiased opinion, I think the only thing good here, honest and genuine, is the cartoon, the humorous drawing." This statement serves as an explicit reminder to scholars of Steinberg's work that if his preferred medium originated in the need to earn money as an architecture student in Milan in the 1930s, it became, in the U.S., part of a calculated strategy for negotiating the cultural field: he understood the medium of the cartoon (or humorous drawing) to shield its artist from the wave of publicity and boosterism that swept "Cultureburg" in the immediate postwar era, as New York sought to establish itself as the new center and authority of the modern art world.¹⁷ Even while Abstract Expressionism was

enshrined as the aesthetic representation of existential freedom, Steinberg found in humorous drawings more practical, if covert, forms of experimental autonomy. Indeed, his work for the *New Yorker* and other magazines provided him with a more transparent relationship to the cultural marketplace than the complex system of patronage that obtained in the world of painting.

Steinberg's first years in the U.S. coincided with a desperate and at times brutal war for position within a fluid and unstable cultural field, in which it was not yet clear what aesthetic regime might emerge with the greatest claim to legitimacy. This confusion was visible in many of the critical responses to Steinberg's work at the time. Howard DeVree, writing in the *New York Times*, decided to mitigate against the risk of an egregious error in taste formation by equivocating: "Is it art? Yes. No. Anyway, it's funny and we like it."¹⁸ Our two 1945 scenes are symptomatic of a brief moment when it seemed possible that the cartoon might provide a way of resolving some of the formal problems that had recently presented themselves. It might, for instance, be claimed that the cartoon form had the flexibility to develop the legacy of Joan Miró and Paul Klee while remaining faithful to what was popularly perceived as a classically American form. Thomas Craven, who had

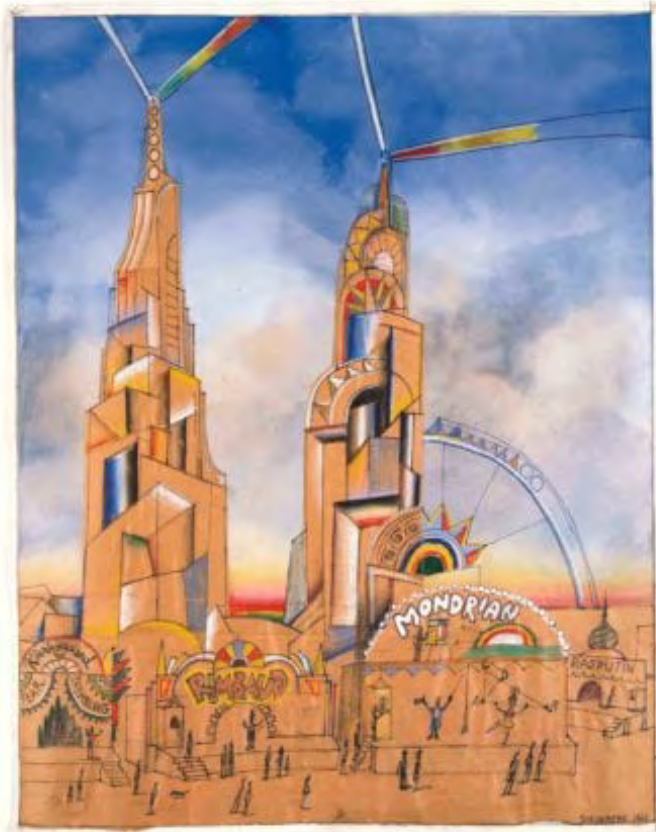


Figure 1. Saul Steinberg, "Luna Park," 1968. Collage, crayon, and watercolor on paper, 29 x 23 in. (73.6 x 58.4 cm). Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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championed Grosz after his immigration ten years earlier, argued as the editor of the 1943 book *Cartoon Cavalcade* that the *New Yorker* cartoon represented the latest evolution of a humorous American tradition reaching back from James Thurber to Thomas Hart Benton and Mark Twain.¹⁹ Also in 1943, Clement Greenberg reviewed cautiously but approvingly William Steig's collection of drawings *The Lonely Ones*, published in 1942 by Duell, Sloan and Pearce, the same publisher that would bring out Steinberg's first book, *All in Line*, in 1945.²⁰ He noted how Steig appeared to be making a bid for the status of the cartoon as legitimate art: "For what he is, Steig is certainly very good, but I am not sure that he is satisfied to be taken just for what he is. He is after a new genre in these psychographs, a new combination of literature and picture, and he does well enough to be judged by severe standards."²¹

"A new combination of literature and picture" sounds like a fair description of the experimental ambitions of the young Steinberg, and this sense of formal possibility likely led to his inclusion in *Fourteen Americans*. Greenberg's short review of that exhibition admits that Steinberg's drawings are "surprisingly strong on their own terms," and yet goes on to remark that "the inclusion of Steinberg, good as he is in his limited way, seems almost a last-minute gesture of despair: for even if he were much better, he would still be relatively unimportant in terms of modern art."²² By the end of the decade, however, it had become clear that the war for position in the cultural field had concluded with a victory for abstract painting followed by a period in which it consolidated and enjoyed its new position of legitimacy.

One of the clearest indications of this settling of accounts was the publication of a pair of articles by Russell Lynes for *Harper's Magazine*, in 1947 and 1949, both accompanied by Steinberg drawings. The first, titled "The Taste-Makers," provides an astute survey and breezy critique of the newly established "art boom" in New York, led by self-appointed cultural guardians, "a well-trained (if not well-disciplined) band of zealots who have constituted themselves as a sort of Salvation Army of our sensibilities."²³ The magazine gave the designation "pictorial comment" to Steinberg's series of drawings depicting taste itself in the process of being formed, practiced, and institutionalized. In the most interesting of these (figure 2), a dense crowd of faces stare blankly at a series of abstract figures hung in a museum or gallery. While this theme of the incomprehension of abstract art had been popular among satirical cartoonists for some time, the anarchic energy of

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Steinberg's lines achieves the effect of rendering the viewers themselves as formal echoes of the works on display; for example, the hairstyling of the women is occasionally indistinguishable from the abstract style of the artworks. In this sense, Steinberg played out the worst fear for abstract painting in the 1940s – that it might become mere decoration.

The second article by Lynes would become one of the classic accounts of cultural stratification at midcentury. "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" marked the acceptance of New York intellectuals as figures of cultural authority, and also their vulnerability to satire, responding directly to the impact of such articles as Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939) and Dwight Macdonald's "A Theory of Popular Culture" (1944).²⁴ Lynes's approach was to organize his map of the cultural hierarchy through attention not to the essential qualities of particular artists, writers, or thinkers, but to the construction and display of aesthetic taste by particular social groups. Steinberg's accompanying drawing (figure 3)



Figure 2. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in Russell Lynes, "The Tastemakers," in "Harper's Magazine," June 1947, 483. Whereabouts unknown. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

once again draws attention to the sense in which high art might be assumed to be decoration, with the torch of illumination transformed for the middlebrow into a decorative lamp for a bourgeois apartment.

Steinberg later described this postwar moment in U.S. cultural history as one in which, just as “news is caused by journalists,” so “art was caused to happen by museums,” and this dialectical aphorism, which would not be out of place in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (1951), represents one of the keys to understanding his distinctive practice.²⁵ Whereas Adorno’s response to this situation was the prescription of ascetic retreat from the culture industry, Steinberg’s solution was to cultivate an intensely reflexive aesthetic that incorporated the institutionalizing practices of taste formation and performance themselves into both the style and subject matter of his work. In this way, one of his most distinctive aesthetic strategies came into view: the reframing of abstraction in the realm of figurative representation. This strategy had the effect of conveying a facility with the theory and practice of

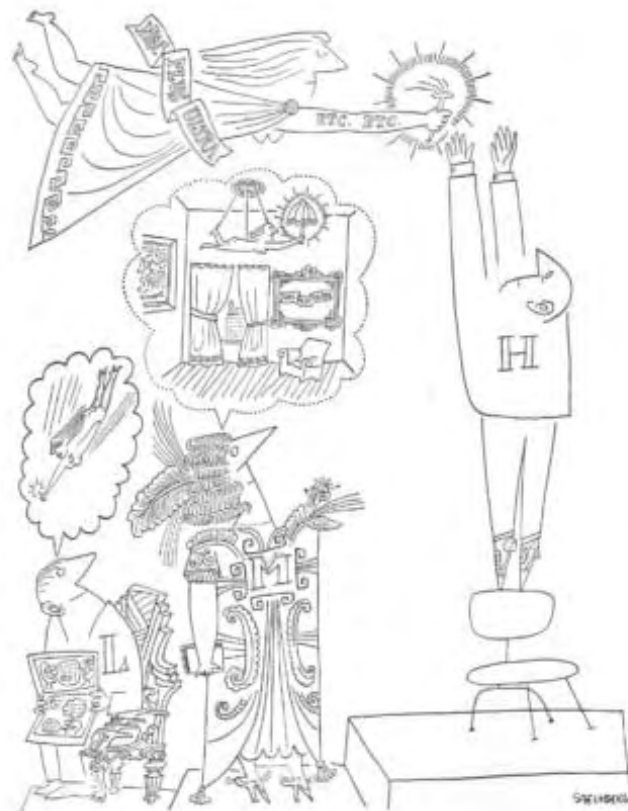


Figure 3. Saul Steinberg, *Untitled*. Published in Russell Lynes, “Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow,” in “Harper’s Magazine” 198, no. 1185, February 1949, 24. Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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modernist painting while also maintaining an ironic distance from it. Even more importantly, it permitted middle-class readers of slick magazines the luxury of gentle self-criticism.

The solution was so successful that it became possible for Steinberg to create an illusion of privileged independence from the cultural field altogether, when in fact it only tied him closer to certain other institutions in the publishing world: *Harper's Magazine*, *Time*, and, above all, the *New Yorker*. These magazines constructed and marketed a position of autonomy and critical independence to advertisers as a disposition of cultural sophistication, a commercially desirable quality that entailed a detached facility with all strata of culture alongside a refusal to accept the categories themselves as absolute. A marketing pamphlet produced by the *New Yorker* in 1946 made the claim that its subscribers were "at least all of the following: Intelligent, well-educated, discriminating, well-informed, unprejudiced, public-spirited, metropolitan-minded, broad-visioned and quietly liberal."²⁶ The term "sophisticated" is likely absent here because of the way it had, in this period, taken on pejorative connotations for intellectuals critical of the *New Yorker's* tendency to bring commerce and *Kultur* into apparently peaceful cohabitation in its pages.²⁷ Nevertheless, the language of the pamphlet, and especially its gestures towards accumulated cultural capital and discrete cosmopolitanism, speak to the magazine's unwavering loyalty to Steinberg, whose developing style conformed so precisely to its projected image, tacitly assuming familiarity with a common set of broadly spaced cultural coordinates that he described in 1952 as "the alphabet invented by the moderns."²⁸

One such convention, which Steinberg addressed regularly throughout his oeuvre, was the grid. Following Rosalind Krauss's brilliant 1979 essay on the subject, the grid has been associated with a particular canonical enunciation of modernist values, focused on "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse."²⁹ Tracing the development of Steinberg's grids, from the drawings of his early career to his architectural satires and beyond, takes us some way towards understanding his relationship to modernist aesthetics and the cultural field more generally. If Krauss reads the grid as a formal device that "states the autonomy of the realm of art" and "crowd[s] out the dimensions of the real," then Steinberg's grids perform the work of returning those components of the real to the

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work, thus making abstraction itself the object of interrogation.³⁰ In his work, the grid becomes more than a method for organizing the visual field – it is also recognized as a form of spatial discipline with concrete social effects. This attitude to the grid is in evidence even in Steinberg's earliest humorous drawings. In one (figure 4), it is figured as a sales chart through which a line descends before exceeding its boundaries and breaking, violently, a path through the floor. Like so many of Steinberg's drawings from this period, its wit derives from the way in which his line breaks out of the confines imposed on it by convention to unexpectedly take on some other representative function. Not only does the drawing indicate a covert identity shared between the aesthetic grid and the world of business that abstraction claims to exclude, but it also performs the cartoonist's line, errant and irascible, refusing to pay allegiance to either.

In 1940, for his essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Clement Greenberg composed the first formulation of what would become the defining argument of his career, which sets out a number of concerns for the next generation of modernist art critics to navigate, among them Krauss and Michael Fried.³¹ Greenberg claimed that the logic of the avant-garde across all the arts had been established as demanding "purity and the radical delimitation of their fields of enquiry," leading to the conclusion that the "purely abstract or plastic qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count."³² Seen in this context, Steinberg's drawings appear willfully heretical in a sense that was to recur throughout the 1940s and '50s, as Greenberg's authority as theorist for the New York avant-garde grew steadily. Tom Wolfe's coruscating history of the New York art world in *The Painted Word* (1975) later testified to the aura of unshakeable moral authority that came with these pronouncements; according to Wolfe's account, "when Greenberg spoke, it was as if not merely the future of Art were at stake but the very quality, the very *possibility*, of civilization in America."³³

But Steinberg's drawings internalized the rhetorical excesses of art theory and deliberately turned them on their head, in a travesty of their Eliotic pretensions of high culture. Whereas the logic of modernism in the visual arts was revealed as the impulse towards media-specific purity – or, in Fried's rapturous prose, "space experienced in sheerly visual terms" – Steinberg foregrounded the interactions between abstraction and language, and began to describe himself as more of a writer than a visual artist.³⁴ When the avant-

garde was defined as a defense against the incursions of bourgeois kitsch, Steinberg perversely staged their mutual relation, as in his drawing of Mondrian as a romantic aesthete painting his grids in a baroque interior (figure 5). And when the achievement of a painting was measured by its ability to collapse the distinction between the absolute space of the image's surface and the space represented to the mind, then Steinberg consistently sought opportunities to stage dissonant encounters between the two.



Figure 4. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in "All in Line" (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pierce, 1945). Whereabouts unknown. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

Despite the irony, and bantering wit, that appropriates the grid as a sales chart, we need to credit Steinberg's serious statement that Mondrian was the "key to modern art." Mondrian's essay "Liberation and Oppression in Art and Life," begun in London in 1939 and completed in New York in 1940, reads now like a founding document of the cultural Cold War, with its explicit analogy between the dialectic of freedom and limitation in painting, and the Allies' struggle against totalitarianism in World War II. "They develop together," he wrote, "until the oppression of limited form is ended."³⁵ Mondrian set out here an immensely positive vision for the future of abstract painting in its inexorable movement towards freedom, and implied through his analogy that the victory of the Allies was just as necessary. New York's particular sense of rhythm, "marvelously determined and full of vitality [...]"

expressed in real jazz, swing, and Boogie-Woogie music and dance," made it the ideal place for artistic culture, as "the continual search for freedom," to flourish.³⁶ Steinberg likely read this essay in 1945, when it was included in the first English translation of Mondrian's collected prose, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, published to coincide with the MoMA exhibition mentioned in the letter to Buzzi. By that time Steinberg had seen enough to recognize Mondrian's utopian vision of modernist transcendence in exile as beautiful and precious but untenable. If we recognize something of Mondrian's dialectical formal oppositions in Steinberg, they are robbed of their grand historical teleology.

The instability of the cultural field of the postwar United States, at the moment when, to use Serge Guilbaut's famous phrase, "New York stole the idea of modern art from Paris," generated a distinctively reflexive, sophisticated, and ironic aesthetic – one far removed from the heroic narratives of Abstract Expressionism that have dominated accounts of the New York scene in the late 1940s.³⁷ Steinberg's example shows the way in which this instability could be negotiated and indeed exploited at the levels of form and content. It was never clear if, accepting for a moment Bourdieu's metaphor of the game, Steinberg had really won or not. What we can say with more certainty is that unlike many of his painter friends in this period, such as Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, Steinberg achieved considerable personal security and comfort while maintaining modest prestige. The latter was to grow as his career developed, until, in 1969, John

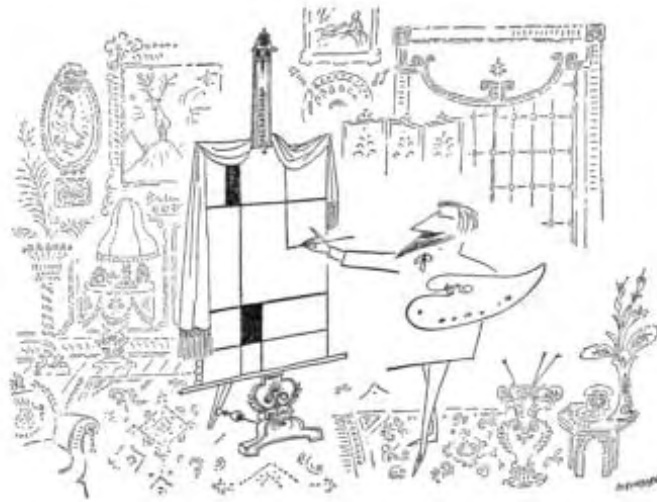


Figure 5. Saul Steinberg, Untitled. Published in "The New Yorker," November 1, 1952. Private Collection. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society, New York.

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Ashbery could finally claim that "Steinberg's genius [...] over his and everyone else's protestations, gently but firmly transformed his inspired doodles into art."³⁸

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38. John Ashbery, "Saul Steinberg: The Stamp of Genius," *ARTnews* 68, no. 7 (1969): 45.

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“FRIENDLY COMPETITION”: A NETWORK OF COLLECTING POSTWAR ITALIAN ART IN THE AMERICAN MIDWEST

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Sharon Hecker **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA’s “Twentieth-Century Italian Art” (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

Collecting art is usually seen as an individual occupation, motivated by personal passion, desire to possess, and economic investment. This paper suggests that there are social aspects of collecting that need to be considered as well. These aspects can lead to a form of “friendly competition” among local collectors. This is evident in the case of St. Louis and the collecting of postwar Italian art. Through interviews with family members and research into archival materials, this paper traces the identities of collectors (Pulitzer, Weil, Shoenberg, May, and Bernoudy) and examines the mechanisms through which productive rivalries arose. It concentrates on the collections of the Kemper Art Museum and the Saint Louis Art Museum, where one finds similar-looking works by Alberto Burri, Afro, and Marino Marini, made in the same years and bought by local collectors in the same period.

What were the relationships and connections that developed between St. Louis collectors of postwar art? How did this web develop into a community or social group, and how did this lead to donations of works to local museums? What were the relationships between these collectors and the 1949 MoMA exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and its organizers? How did MoMA shows, prepackaged for further exhibition in the Midwest, influence collectors’ tastes? How did travel abroad to exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale affect acquisition habits? Whose opinion did the collectors trust and which dealers did they buy from? Such questions and their ramifications are discussed before the paper concludes with a consideration of the process through which St. Louis collectors were identified in Harold Rosenberg’s 1965 *Esquire* article on tastemakers in the field of contemporary art.

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Collecting art is commonly seen as an individual pursuit, a quest motivated by personal passion, desire to possess, or economic investment. A phenomenon that has received less attention is the fact that collecting may involve networks of collectors who are interested in a common theme, artist, or period of art. Such networks can spread outward to reach a wide range of cities, countries, exhibitions, dealers, and curators. As well, they can be influenced by local, national, and international events. This essay highlights networks of collectors, examining their interactions and the effect they had on shaping public taste. My analysis aims to contribute to the study of networks in the art world as a growing field that has until now focused on the role of artists' networks but not on those who collected, promoted, and exhibited artworks.¹

The acquisition patterns of postwar Italian art in St. Louis, Missouri, can serve as a model for examining networks of collecting and the entry of postwar Italian art into public collections in the U.S. As a case study, I will look at such works found in the permanent collections of the Washington University Gallery of Art (known today as the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum of Art at Washington University) and the City Art Museum of St. Louis (known today as the Saint Louis Museum of Art). The two museums include similar-looking contemporaneous works by Alberto Burri, Afro Basaldella, and Marino Marini that were bought by St. Louis collectors in the same midcentury period and then donated.

Within the networks of collecting formed in St. Louis, a “friendly competition”² emerged among collectors vying for works by similar artists. Through a series of interviews with collectors and family members as well as research into archival materials, I trace the histories of collectors that belong to the same network and consider the mechanisms that developed among them, leading to acquisitions and donations.³ The common impetus for all collecting of postwar Italian art was provided by the landmark exhibition, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

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in 1949. With the MoMA show as external motor, the museums in St. Louis were able to build two collections that went beyond the initial stimulus, extending and diversifying the artists and artworks collected.

The history of collectors of Italian art in St. Louis should first be contextualized within the broader history of American art collecting and existing models for researching patterns of art purchasing. It is useful to consider the situation in St. Louis with reference to studies on major nineteenth- and twentieth-century American collectors such as Albert Barnes, Louisine and Henry Osborne Havemeyer, Charles Lang Freer, and John Pierpont Morgan. Thus far historians have maintained a methodological approach that focuses on these collectors as individuals.⁴ Writing in the late 1950s on “the lives, times, and tastes of some adventurous American art collectors,” Aline Bernstein Saarinen described them as “the proud possessors.”⁵ In this respect, St. Louis collectors were no different – they followed in the same tradition. Marked by American individualism, such collectors were mostly entrepreneurs/businessmen or wealthy couples who sought to distinguish themselves and acquire a lasting name as well new knowledge and aesthetic appreciation. In collecting art, they became cultural trailblazers.

In contrast to the transformation of European private collections into public museums, U.S. museums typically began as public institutions. Since the late nineteenth century, U.S. collectors were concerned about the lack of art in the country’s cultural institutions with respect to Europe. They therefore collected with the intention of ultimately sharing their works with a public audience. While they belonged to the economic elite, they shared egalitarian ideals of “art for everyone” and the pursuit of joy through aesthetics. For U.S. collectors from the late nineteenth century and throughout the postwar period, buying art in Europe was relatively simple, with few obstacles. Indeed, this form of culture became both fashionable and an attractive economic investment.⁶

In his study on collecting in early modern Europe, philosopher and cultural historian Krzysztof Pomian proposed a different methodological approach to histories of collecting: he shifted from a focus on individual collectors to a sociological analysis of the collections themselves to thereby develop a

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theory of collecting.⁷ Moving from biography to cultural history, he went beyond the question of why certain people collected and towards an examination of what was collected.

A third approach, hitherto unexplored, would be to examine the impact of networks and social interactions among collectors around their acquisitions. Some of the questions I have been examining in my research are: What were the relationships and connections that developed among St. Louis collectors of postwar art? How did this local social web become a loose community of collectors, and how did this lead to the next step of donating works to local museums? What was the impact of relationships between such networks and curators or museum directors with respect to acquisitions and exhibitions that were mounted in these years? What were the relationships between collecting Italian art in St. Louis in the 1950s and 1960s and MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition in 1949, which defined many subsequent exhibitions throughout the U.S.?⁸ How did MoMA's shows, often prepackaged for later exhibition in the Midwest, influence St. Louis collectors' tastes? How did travel abroad to exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale affect their acquisition habits? Which dealers did they buy from and whose opinions did they trust? How did it come about that St. Louis collectors were identified in a 1965 *Esquire* article by Harold Rosenberg as tastemakers in contemporary art?⁹

It is clear that Saint Louis collecting was strongly based in a broad notion of the need to develop U.S. cultural patrimony through public institutions such as museums, which in turn needed to be filled with art. My investigation here was not planned to be exhaustive, but rather to shed light on one aspect of the collecting patterns in a network.¹⁰ At this stage, it seems premature to draw conclusions about the construction of hegemonic groups and hegemonic taste within American society, although this is certainly a subject worthy of research.

Turning to the specifics of St. Louis and the collectors of Italian art there, various groups of related works in the collections of the museums known today as the Kemper and the Saint Louis Art Museum are striking. The first group includes three drawings by Marino Marini donated to what was then known as the City Art Museum of St. Louis: two from 1950 that were donated by Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. (*Acrobata e due cavalli* [Acrobat and Two Horses] and

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Due acrobati e un cavallo [Two Acrobats and a Horse]) in 1955 and 1967 respectively, and another from 1951 gifted to the museum by Mr. and Mrs. Morton D. May (*Cavaliere e cavallo* [Horse and Rider]) in 1956. A fourth related drawing, from 1957 (*Cavallo e due acrobati* [Horse and Two Acrobats]; figure 1), was purchased a few years later by Mr. and Mrs. John Shoenberg from the Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York and donated to what was then known as the Washington University Gallery of Art in 1961.

Similar works by Afro include *Una crisi di coscienza* (A Crisis of Conscience, 1951; figure 2), exhibited in the gallery of Catherine Viviano in Manhattan in 1952 and sold in 1954 to Pulitzer, who donated it to the City Art Museum of St. Louis in 1967.¹¹ Not to be outdone, in May 1955, Richard and Florence Weil also purchased a work by Afro from Viviano, *Il giardino della speranza* (The Garden of Hope, 1954; figure 3), which they donated to the Washington University Gallery of Art in 1962. Although the subjects differed, the two works are stylistically similar and almost identical in size.



Figure 1. Marino Marini, “Cavallo con due acrobati” [Horse and two acrobats], 1957. Casein on paper. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Shoenberg, 1961.

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In March 1960, Pulitzer acquired Burri's *Grande Ferro M1* (Large Iron M1, 1958; figure 4) from Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Following on his heels, in 1961 Weil purchased *Grande Ferro M3* (Large Iron M3, 1959; figure 5) directly from Burri via Odysia Skouras at the Galleria Odysia in Rome. Both collectors donated their Burris – of the same materials, roughly the same size, and very similar title and subject – to the Washington University Gallery of Art soon after.¹²



Figure 2. Afro, “Una crisi di coscienza” [A crisis of conscience], 1951. Oil on canvas, 59 x 78 1/2 in. (149.8 x 199.3 cm). Saint Louis Art Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer Jr. 52: 1967.

The closeness of acquisition dates and similarities in subject, medium, and size are surely not coincidental. They make sense if one sees this form of collecting in terms of “friendly competition.” The Pulitzers and the Weils were the two main collector-couples in St. Louis, although others, such as Mr. and Mrs. John Shoenberg (the Shoenberg family had established a dry goods businesses that became part the May Department Stores Company), Mr. and Mrs. Morton D. “Buster” May (founder of May Department Stores Company), and architect William Bernoudy (student of Frank Lloyd Wright) also collected Italian postwar art in the 1950s; together their donations created a sizeable collection between the two museums, of works by Afro, Renato Birolli, Bruno Caruso, Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Pietro Consagra, Pericle Fazzini, Lucio Fontana, Giacomo Manzù, Marini, Luciano Minguzzi, Luigi Parzini, Oscar Piattella, Toti Scialoja, Tancredi, and Massimo Campigli, among others. The collectors’ mutual interest in Italian art was part of American collectors’ broader interest in postwar European art; the larger focus in St. Louis specifically seems to have been on Italian, French, Spanish, and some British art, as well as art from the CO.BR.A movement (the name stands for

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Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, the cities from which the artists who formed the group came from).¹³ It should be noted that some of these artists were exhibited in 1949 at MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition (Afro, Fazzini, Fontana, Manzù, Scialoja, and Campigli), while others were not (Birolli, Caruso, Burri, Capogrossi, Consagra, Minguzzi, Parzini, Piatella, and Tancredi). Many of the latter artists were introduced on the U.S. market by dealers such as Catherine Viviano and Rome's Galleria dell'Obelisco after the 1949 show.



Figure 3. Afro, “Il Giardino della Speranza” [The garden of hope], 1954. Oil on canvas, 57 x 68 7/8 in. (144. 7 x 174.9 cm). Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard K. Weil, 1962. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Some details about the individuals involved are necessary before discussing this collecting network. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., was the pioneer and most prolific collector, with Weil following suit. As a well-known newspaper publisher, Pulitzer began buying postwar Italian art in the early 1950s. For nearly two decades, between 1951 and 1968, he acquired sculptures, paintings, and works on paper by Marini, Afro, Burri, Capogrossi, Caruso, Birolli, Fontana, and Andrea Cascella. The reasons for Pulitzer's interest in contemporary Italian art are not made explicit in his biography and are hard to trace.¹⁴

By collecting modern European art and maintaining constant contact with national and international cultural events, Pulitzer was well positioned to appreciate the latest artistic developments in postwar art from various countries. When he began to buy Italian art, his reputation as a collector of modern European art, especially the *École de Paris*, was already established.

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Though based in St. Louis, Pulitzer, like his fellow collectors, traveled regularly to exhibitions in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Boston, and New York, as well as throughout Europe; indeed, his national and international contacts in the art world were extensive.¹⁵

The early date of Pulitzer’s attention to contemporary Italian art is noteworthy. He began buying these works when U.S. market interest was in its initial stages. The purchase of Italian art would have

appeared particularly advantageous to American buyers given Italy’s shattered postwar economy. Price lists reveal that these artworks were initially minimal investments, though this situation changed significantly after the mid-1950s, when prices of works by many Italian artists tripled.

Another reason for Pulitzer’s turn to acquiring Italian art could have been its social and political overtones, which possibly resonated with his spirit. The move to buy Italian contemporary painting and sculpture was part of a broader resistance on the part of collectors (many of whom were Jewish) to supporting German-made products after the war. U.S. financial support for Italy – especially given the Marshall Plan’s heavy investment in rebuilding the country – was a leitmotif throughout the late 1940s. Buying Italian art could be seen as a way to contribute to this greater cause.¹⁶



Figure 4. Alberto Burri, “Grande Ferro M1,” 1958. Welded iron with paint and nails, 78 3/8 x 79 in. (199 x 31 1/8 cm). Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., 1963. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

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Certainly, MoMA’s midcentury *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition, organized by Pulitzer’s friend and MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr., with James Thrall Soby, was influential on his collecting. Pulitzer’s acquisitions generally came from the most important New York dealers in the promotion of contemporary Italian art, such as Viviano, Curt Valentin, and Martha Jackson. Pulitzer’s first purchase of a Marini drawing came only two years after a Marini sculpture was shown at MoMA in 1949 – before Marini’s reputation

began to spread across the U.S.¹⁷ At midcentury, Marini’s work was being collected only in the most sophisticated circles – acquisitions were made by Mary and Henry Gates Lloyd; Nelson Rockefeller; Blanchette and John D. Rockefeller; department store owner and philanthropist Edgar J. Kaufmann; and Soby, the MoMA show’s co-curator, who commissioned from Marini a portrait of his wife, Nelly. Pulitzer’s choice of gestural drawings rather than sculpture by Marini is noteworthy, for the drawings are more forward-looking, bold, and exciting than his sculptures, which suggest the archaic.

Similarly, Pulitzer’s acquisition from Viviano of paintings by Afro between 1952 and 1957 confirms his anticipation of Afro’s importance. Afro had exhibited in the U.S. before the war, but in the postwar period he was



Figure 5. Alberto Burri, “Grande Ferro M3,” 1959. Welded iron with paint and nails, 78 9/16 x 74 5/8 x 3 in. (199.5 x 189.5 x 7.6 cm). Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Richard K. Weil, 1963. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

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present in major shows such as MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art, Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy* (held at the House of Italian Handicraft in New York in 1947), and *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, again at MoMA (1955). In 1954, Pulitzer bought *Portico d'Ottavia* (Portico of Ottavia, 1943) directly from the artist. In 1955, he acquired an Afro made that year, *Per una ricorrenza* (For an Anniversary, 1955), from another solo show at Viviano's gallery, which he later donated to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. This is interesting, considering that the New York museum's directors wanted little to do with Peggy Guggenheim, who had been collecting Italian contemporary art in Venice for a long time by then. Finally in 1957, Pulitzer purchased *Terra di Quercia* (Land of Oaks, 1956; figure 6), again from Viviano, and gifted it to the Washington University Gallery of Art in 1966. He donated *El Sereno* (Night Watchman, 1955) to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1959. Other acquisitions by Pulitzer include a gouache by Capogrossi (*Tema etrusco* [Etruscan Theme], 1953) bought in 1954 from the Schneider Gallery in Rome, and an ink drawing by Caruso (*Lo zoo* [The Zoo], 1954), bought in 1955 from Arthur Jeffress's gallery in London; both were donated to the City Art Museum of St. Louis, in 1958 and 1959 respectively.

Pulitzer continued to acquire Italian works after 1955, such as a painting bought in 1958 directly from Birolli (*Memoria del Veneto* [Memory of the Veneto], 1957; figure 7) and gifted to the Washington University Gallery of Art in 1962, and Caruso's *The Factory* (1958) which he purchased from Jeffress in London in 1958 via the Galleria dell'Obelisco in Rome, after the work had



Figure 6. Afro, “Terra di Quercia” [Land of oaks], 1956. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 59 in. (99.7 x 149.8 cm). Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., 1966. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

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already been exhibited in Rome and London. Pulitzer gifted it to the City Museum of Art in St. Louis in 1959. As mentioned earlier, Pulitzer acquired and donated the Burri *Grande Ferro M1* (1958) in 1960; by that year, Burri was well known and widely collected in the U.S. (In 1954, Martha Jackson had been attracted to Burri’s work when it was exhibited in Rome at the Obelisco, in the exhibition *Major Works, Minor Scale*, which circulated to eleven venues in the U.S. and Canada between 1955 and 1957.) Pulitzer also bought works by Fontana, including *Concetto spaziale nero* (Spatial Concept Black, 1966) and *Concetto Spaziale, New York 22* (Spatial Concept, New York 22, 1962), from dealers who emerged in the 1950s, among them Beatrice Monti of the Galleria dell’Ariete in Milan.

To date there has not been a published study of Richard and Florence Weil and their contribution to collecting postwar art in St. Louis. Florence was the daughter of Etta Steinberg, a St. Louis collector of modern European art.¹⁸ Etta was advised and endorsed by local, national, and European critics, dealers, and cultural figures such as Harold Rosenberg, Pierre Matisse, Galerie Beyeler, Fritz Nathan, Sam Salz, Paul

Rosenberg, Gimpel Fils, Knoedler Gallery, and Louise Leiris. Although she did not typically acquire postwar Italian art, Etta did buy a Pietro Consagra, which she donated to the Washington University Gallery of Art. As art historian Elizabeth Childs has shown, Steinberg wished for St. Louis to have the national and international profile enjoyed by New York, Boston, and Chicago.



Figure 7. Renato Birolli, “Memoria del Veneto” [Memory of the Veneto], 1957. Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 x 55 in. (109.8 x 139.7 cm). Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis. Gift of Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., 1962.

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Etta also shared a concept of “Jewish womanhood,” as Childs calls it, which believed in philanthropy.¹⁹ Etta was aided by the healthy postwar economy: the 1950s was a golden age of philanthropy due to tax breaks and incentivized giving programs initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ample private resources were directed to develop museums, universities, and nonprofit art institutions. Steinberg’s home was a destination for out-of-town visitors such as the board members of MoMA. She benefited from the advice of Perry T. Rathbone, director of the City Art Museum of St. Louis until 1955, and William Eisendrath, who joined the staff in 1952 and wrote about her collection in *Connoisseur Magazine*.²⁰ Letters show that Eisendrath advised her not to buy works that would overlap with other private collections in town; in one case he told her that the Shoenbergs already owned a cast of a sculpture she was considering. It seems that Eisendrath had an expansive vision for the mission of the St. Louis collecting network.

Etta’s daughter Florence and her son-in-law Richard K. Weil would often accompany her on her art-seeking trips to Europe. In 1959 they visited Peggy Guggenheim,²¹ who may have functioned as an influencer and go-between. The Weils’ son John recalls dinners with Sir Herbert Read in Venice, and that Rathbone came with them on one trip, during which the children were skirted off to see a collector of ancient Italian art in a villa while their parents were visiting Guggenheim.

John Weil confirmed to me that St. Louis’s most important collectors – the Pulitzers, Bernoudys, Weils, Mays, and Shoenbergs – were socially intertwined, although they did not all travel in the same social or economic circles. Weil defines these collectors as “a group of people who had art in common.”²² They were very friendly with each other, frequently discussed collecting, and exchanged information. Many of them were Jewish, but they were not religious and did not attend synagogue. They did, however, play tennis at the Westwood Country Club, the Jewish country club of St. Louis. Weil recalls at least one City Art Museum of St. Louis party at their home, which many of the collectors attended. The children of these collectors were friendly as well. There were moments of social conviviality at the art museums and the symphony, to which all had subscriptions. On such occasions, art was always discussed. The university setting further helped to coalesce the group. They all traveled to the Venice Biennales, although not together.

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Richard Weil went to New York frequently, but bought more art in Europe. His son recalls that he would go around to dealers and art people to “figure out who were the up-and-coming artists.”²³ The economic situation was advantageous for buying. Finally, what emerged from my interview with John Weil is that this group shared the same philanthropic goals, especially their willingness to give significant art to the city. “People did not start their own art museums – it was not all about them but about giving to the community.”²⁴

The same people helped shape St. Louis collectors’ tastes. Although Rathbone was not always universally liked in St. Louis, Weil feels that he did build camaraderie among the collectors. In art historian Kate Butler’s opinion, Eisendrath was enormously influential. He benefitted from a friendship with James Johnson Sweeney, who, as curator at MoMA and later director of the Guggenheim in New York, probably influenced Eisendrath’s interest in pre- and postwar abstract art.

The apex of the St. Louis collecting network was a 1955 exhibition curated by Eisendrath and called *Contemporary Italian Art: Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture*, at the City Art Museum of St. Louis. Butler describes it as a major international loan exhibition drawn from collections throughout the U.S. and Italy. It was the first exhibition Eisendrath curated at the museum and it benefitted immensely from his close network of St. Louis collectors.²⁵

Eisendrath modeled his show on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, making the relationship between the New York and the St. Louis exhibition clear. The idea for the show was given to him by Rathbone. Numerous loans came from MoMA, and the exhibition catalogue’s acknowledgements profusely thank Soby, Barr, and Andrew Carnduff Ritchie (the director of the Albright Gallery from 1949, who, in 1957 would become director of the painting and sculpture department at MoMA).²⁶ The show included thirty-four artists, nineteen of whom had been featured in one-person shows at the Venice Biennale. Viviano loaned heavily to the 180-work show, which she may have seen as an opportunity to showcase works for sale. A bronze Marini sculpture, *Horse and Rider* (1949), acquired by the City Art Museum of St. Louis, was chosen for the catalogue’s cover.²⁷

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According to Butler, the exhibition reflected Italian art’s appeal to the group of local collectors who lent to it. Unlike exhibitions of European art organized by major U.S. institutions slightly later into the 1950s, *Contemporary Italian Art* did not favor abstraction. Rather, it presented social realism (for example, Renato Guttuso) alongside abstraction (Emilio Vedova). Eisendrath aimed to demonstrate American openness to a variety of styles and the cultural creativity of postwar Italy. In a nod to the narrative established by Barr and Soby in the MoMA show, Eisendrath linked contemporary Italian artists to precedents in European modernism (Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Wassily Kandinsky). Afro’s work was given its own room. He commented in a letter to Scialoja that he was amazed to be “received like a great personality,” and found himself “at the center of academic conferences and television interviews.”²⁸

So appreciative of Italian contemporary art was St. Louis that, in the spring of 1961, a show dedicated to sculpture, *Italian Sculptors of Today*, was organized by the Galleria Odyssia for the Washington University Gallery of Art.²⁹ It subsequently circulated to the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts and the New Orleans Museum of Art. In one photograph from the St. Louis opening, Consagra is seen with dealer Odyssia Skouras, while in another, Pulitzer can be glimpsed through a mesh of sculpture.

The study of the St. Louis collecting network helps understand the broader critical fortune of Italian modernism in the U.S. If, for Midwestern collectors, the initial impulse was MoMA’s 1949 exhibition in New York, they extended their acquisitions far beyond what MoMA had offered. Through “friendly competition,” St. Louis collectors were able to assemble two substantial permanent museum collections of Italian art of this period. The cooperation between the networks of collectors and the museums led to further exhibitions that circulated around the United States, highlighting particular mediums, themes, and artists. Such shows enhanced wider public exposure to and familiarity with Italian postwar art around the country. All of these activities and connections are the context for Harold Rosenberg’s *Esquire* article identifying St. Louis collectors, in 1965, as among the tastemakers of contemporary art.

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Sharon Hecker is an art historian and curator specializing in modern and contemporary Italian art. A leading expert on Medardo Rosso, she has authored over thirty publications on the artist, including *A Moment's Monument: Medardo Rosso and the International Origins of Modern Sculpture* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), awarded the Millard Meiss Prize and recently published in Italian by Johan & Levi Editore. Hecker has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions* (Harvard University Art Museums, 2003), the retrospective *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* (Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Nov 11, 2016–May 13, 2017), and, with Julia Peyton-Jones, *Medardo Rosso: Sight Unseen and His Encounters with London* (Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Nov 23, 2017–Feb 10, 2018). She has been awarded fellowships from the Getty, Fulbright, and Mellon Foundations. Hecker has also published numerous essays on twentieth-century Italian artists such as Lucio Fontana, Luciano Fabro, and Francesco Lo Savio. She co-edited, with Marin R. Sullivan, *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018). Her forthcoming books include *Lead in Modern and Contemporary Art* (co-edited with Silvia Bottinelli; NY: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020) and *Finding Lost Wax: The Disappearance and Recovery of an Ancient Casting Technique and the Experiments of Medardo Rosso*. She is currently curating an exhibition on Fontana's ceramics that will open at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in 2022.

IT'S A ROMAN HOLIDAY FOR ARTISTS: THE AMERICAN ARTISTS OF L'OBELISCO AFTER WORLD WAR II

italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/its-a-roman-holiday-for-artists-the-american-

Ilaria Schiaffini **Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020**

ABSTRACT

L'Obelisco was among the most international of galleries in Rome (1946–81). Its owners, Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin, established particularly close relationships with the United States starting in 1946, when the gallery opened. They organized the first European exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg, in 1953, and shows of Eugène Berman, Roberto Matta, Saul Steinberg, Ben Shahn, and Alexander Calder, among many others. In 1957, they facilitated the first European retrospective dedicated to Arshile Gorky, with a catalogue that included a preface by Afro.

This paper addresses the presence in Italy, from World War II through the 1950s, of artists from the U.S. including exiles who had fled there from elsewhere in Europe during the conflict. Artistic, commercial, and political factors intertwined and favored the concentration of American artists in Italy after the Liberation. Starting with their management of the small gallery La Margherita (1943–45), the del Corso couple were a reference point for all sorts of visitors from the U.S., including intelligence agents. Thanks to the complicity of one such agent, the journalist and antiquarian Peter Lindamood, and of the gallerist Alexander Iolas, the "Fantasts" section of the MoMA exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* took shape. In this complex scenario, the program of exhibitions held at L'Obelisco appears to be very much in line with the cultural policy of the U.S. State Department, as indicated also by the personal and professional relationship of the del Corsos with L.P. Roberts, dynamic director of the American Academy in Rome from 1946 to the end of the 1950s. Furthermore, the role of Irene Brin cannot be underestimated. She was a prominent fashion journalist, interested in cinema, photography, and fashion, and her international connections (especially after she became Rome Editor of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1952) attracted a heterogeneous mix of foreign visitors to the gallery, who were also drawn to Rome by the thriving Neorealist artistic movement and new job opportunities through Cinecittà for Hollywood productions. For some artists coming from the U.S., Rome was a decisive destination: Matta, Berman, and Tchelitchev moved to the city; Calder worked in Italy repeatedly; and, as is well known, Rauschenberg encountered in the capital a major influence on his own works from the 1950s, Burri's *Sacks*.

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L'Obelisco (1946–81) was the first gallery to open in Rome after World War II, under the direction of the couple Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin, and the most characterized by relations with the United States (figures 1a–1b). From November 1946 to December 1959, over thirty exhibitions of overseas artists were held at L'Obelisco, if we include exiles who fled Europe during World War II – an astounding number. Also remarkable was the gallery's timeliness in staging the Italian debuts of some of the most highly esteemed contemporary artists: Salvador Dalí in 1948; Roberto Matta in 1950; Saul Steinberg in 1951; and Yves Tanguy in 1953, the same year as Robert Rauschenberg's first European exhibition, at L'Obelisco. In 1956, the first Italian solo exhibition of Alexander Calder was held at the gallery, which also organized, in the following year, the first European retrospective of the late Arshile Gorky (1904–1948).

The preeminence of L'Obelisco in this context is much mentioned, but this paper draws on recently published research and new archival acquisitions¹ to provide new insight into the presence of U.S. artists at the gallery during the 1950s. That decade was a pivotal period for both



Figures 1a–1b. Exterior and interior views of L'Obelisco, Rome, Via Sistina, 146. Courtesy Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.

the dissemination of American art in Italy and the “export” of Italian art to the U.S. – greatly encouraged by the seminal 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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In fact, L'Obelisco contributed significantly in the selection presented at MoMA. When Alfred H. Barr Jr., and James Thrall Soby came to Rome in the spring of 1948 to choose the exhibition's artworks, they considered L'Obelisco as their main reference for the Roman School (Luigi Bartolini, Marcello Muccini, and Renzo Vespignani), as well as for Afro.² The Del Corsos' influence on the arrangement of the "Fantasts" section of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was, in comparison, more indirect, but arguably more pervasive.

Thus, the history of L'Obelisco traces the closely connected artistic exchanges, commercial transactions, and broader political-cultural trends that led to the hegemony of U.S. art relative to Italian during the Cold War period. The most remarkable impact of this process was the Grand Prize for painting awarded to Rauschenberg at the 1964 Venice Biennale.

U.S. Visitors to the Roman Art World After World War II

"At the end of World War II artists from all over the U.S. began to head for Italy where, for the past six years, they have swarmed the hillsides and made Rome the rival of Paris as art headquarters," reads a *Life* magazine article from 1952.³ The possibility of examining first-hand the extraordinary remains of antiquity, freed from the rhetoric of Fascism, and the perception of a new vital energy following the devastation of war, along with the affordability of travel and renowned Italian *musts* (food, wine, and weather), conferred a newly attractive identity to the *Belpaese*, and in particular to its capital.⁴ Photographs in magazines animated the monumental ruins of ancient and baroque Rome, turning them into fascinating settings for glamorous living. The city became a place where aristocratic offspring met with writers, artists, and Hollywood actresses and actors, who all enjoyed a carefree daily life alongside models, set designers, and entrepreneurs. According to a *Time* magazine article, "it is probably the combination of beauty and stability that has made Rome irresistible to travelers in the unstable world of 1949."⁵ Also contributing to its appeal were developments in the film industry, as American filmmakers came to Italy for the availability of highly specialized low-cost craftsmen. The promotion of Italian-made

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fashion was an additional factor in the flow of visitors, especially from the U.S., whose marvelous experience of the dolce vita was perfectly captured by Audrey Hepburn and Gary Cooper in the film *Roman Holiday* (1953).⁶

Several personalities in the Roman art world played a mediating role with respect to Americans in the years immediately following the war, among them the art critic Lionello Venturi and the painter Corrado Cagli, who, after Fascism, returned from exile in the U.S. The first important Italian artist to mention is Afro. In frequenting the American Academy in Rome under the direction of the dynamic Laurance P. Roberts, he became a close friend of both Philip Guston, who first came to the city in 1948 on the occasion of the Prix de Rome,⁷ and Patrick Kelleher, who was a fellow there, studying Baroque art from 1946–48, and became, in 1949, director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, replacing Andrew Ritchie. The latter, who moved on to New York's MoMA, was another important contact for Afro, and would, among other things, write the catalogue of his solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1956.⁸ In Rome Afro also met Catherine Viviano, with whom he established a personal and long-lasting relationship. Her New York gallery, which opened in 1950, was at the center of initial, crucial import-export exchanges between Rome and New York, including the introduction of Abstract Expressionist painters in Italy.⁹ Also to be noted are the interactions of the critic Gabriella Drudi; the artists Ettore Colla, Piero Dorazio, and Toti Scialoja; and the poet Emilio Villa with U.S. contacts,¹⁰ which facilitated the circulation of American abstract painting in Italy through the Gruppo and Fondazione Origine and the magazine *Arti visive*.

Many Americans resided in Rome for a more or less long period, for instance the art journalist and photographer Milton Gendel, who settled in Rome in 1950 and some years later began to report from Rome on the novelties of the art world for the magazine *Art News*.¹¹ Another personality connected with the Roman art world was the African-American writer William Demby, who lived in a sort of artist's commune with Muccini and Vespignani, and married Lucia Drudi, Gabriella's sister.

The Italian-American artists who settled in Rome after WWII didn't form a national group, as certain of their predecessors had done in the nineteenth century. Their experiences varied from one individual to the next, but for the most part these artists found it difficult to work in Rome and therefore they

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remained more connected to critics and gallerists at home. In essence, according to Peter Benson Miller, Rome remained for Italian-American artists a foreign locale.¹² Among them, Nicolas Carone should be mentioned; he was granted a residency at the American Academy from 1947–51 and joined the circle of Via Margutta before returning to New York to work as assistant director at Eleanor Ward's Stable Gallery.¹³ That American gallery is indeed a main point of reference for the art exchanges between Rome and New York during this period, along with the Catherine Viviano Gallery. At the Stable Gallery, Carone oversaw an Alberto Burri exhibition in the fall of 1953; Carone would later claim it was he who introduced the Italian artist to America.¹⁴ Salvatore Meo moved to Rome from Philadelphia in 1951, remaining there for the rest of his life. Close to the Fondazione Origine, he was the U.S. art director for *Arti visive*, and in Rome was in touch with Burri, Colla, and Carone.

After the mid-1950s, two more Italian-Americans who strengthened connections between the Roman and American art worlds were Salvatore Scarpitta and Conrad Marca-Relli.¹⁵ Through the gallery La Tartaruga, owned by Plinio De Martiis and inaugurated in 1954, they particularly contributed to the introduction of Abstract Expressionism in Rome. The American artist most identified with De Martiis's gallery, however, is Cy Twombly: he moved to Rome with the help of Eleanor Ward, his dealer, and soon came into contact with De Martiis and his close associate the collector Baron Giorgio Franchetti, whose sister Tatiana would marry Twombly.

In the second half of the 1950s, La Tartaruga joined L'Obelisco in playing a central role in Rome for avant-garde American artists, hosting, in 1958, the first European solo exhibitions of Franz Kline and Twombly, in addition to, in 1959, the second Roman show of Rauschenberg.¹⁶ In 1956, events in Hungary had caused many left-wing Italian intellectuals and artists to shift towards the Western bloc, and cultural exchanges between Italy and the U.S. significantly intensified thereafter. The inauguration of the Rome–New York Art Foundation by Frances McCann in 1957 and a solo exhibition of Jackson Pollock at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna the following year marked the beginning of a new phase.

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The Success of L'Obelisco Among American artists: Relations, Government Promotion, and Intelligence Operations

Until the end of the decade, L'Obelisco was undoubtedly the most appealing gallery for American artists in Rome. The increasing success of the gallery in the years immediately following the war is partly explained by the fact that it was able to intercept the various expectations of a cosmopolitan jet set eager to enjoy the *Belpaese* while rediscovering the primitive charm of local places and the spontaneity of residents. Irene Brin (born Maria Vittoria Rossi) was a highly cultured, brilliant polyglot; her work as a fashion journalist and prominent international proponent of Italian style won her, in 1955, the highest decoration awarded by the Italian President of the Republic.¹⁷ In 1951, she actively cooperated with Baron Giovanni Battista Giorgini to promote a seminal high fashion show at the Palazzo Torrigiani in Florence, when "made in Italy" was successfully presented to American buyers. Moreover, after becoming the Rome editor of *Harper's Bazaar* in 1952, her travels with del Corso and international contacts increased notably (figure 2). 1953 is the year within which the highest number of L'Obelisco solo exhibitions of U.S. artists took place: five out of a total of thirty-one.¹⁸ That same year, the exhibition *Twenty Imaginary Views of the American Scene by Twenty Young Italian Artists* began touring internationally, financed by Helena Rubinstein, the cosmetics queen – another vital link between fashion and art. Some artists who came to L'Obelisco from America – namely, Eugene Berman, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Carlyle Brown – were linked to fashion by a rich network of commissions in New York, where they had worked as interior designers for private residencies, fashion magazines, the theater, and the ballet performing with the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Furthermore, as an extension of her professional relationships with photojournalists working in Rome on behalf of international magazines, Irene Brin was among the first in Italy to present photography exhibitions in the private art gallery setting; worth noting are the L'Obelisco displays of Herbert List, in 1949, and Brassai, in 1962, and of the Italian photographers Pasquale De Antonis, in 1951 and 1957, and Enzo Sellerio, in 1956.²⁰ In sum, Irene Brin took advantage of her public prominence and professional role in order to promote captivating exhibitions for an American clientele intent on discovering "Hollywood on the Tiber."

Starting in the postwar period, the U.S. government increasingly focused on Italy in pursuing initiatives aimed at consolidating its sphere of cultural and political influence. Fellowships such as the Fulbright, which granted its first

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awards for U.S.-Italian travel in 1946, and the already existing Guggenheim, were particularly concentrated in the *Belpaese*,²¹ and a pivotal role in sponsoring travel to Italy was played by the American Academy thanks to the reestablishment of the Rome Prize in 1947. Laurance Roberts, the open-minded reformer in charge of that well-aged institution from 1946–59, linked the cultivation of artistic refinement to cultural diplomacy. Following Martin Brody's advice, he transformed the Academy into a stronghold of liberal and anticommunist cultural politics in the decade after World War II.²²

Cultural support was also often accompanied by intelligence agencies' objectives, as set up during World War II.²³ Following the armistice of September 8, 1943, the U.S. established extensive contacts among Italian intellectuals and deserters, who were united in more or less explicit opposition to Fascism. The first investigative and cultural support structure was the new civilian intelligence agency established in 1942 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, soon to be known as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and headed by William J. Donovan; it would carry out secret activities



Figure 2. Exhibition leaflet for "Joie de vivre," L'Obelisco, Rome, 1954. The drawing represents exhibitions organized abroad by L'Obelisco in 1952–54.

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abroad and analyze information related to national defense (and eventually became known as the CIA).²⁴ Moreover, one must not forget the Psychological Warfare Branch, a joint Anglo-American section of the Allied Forces Headquarters (AFHQ), established after the landing in Sicily and intended to coordinate propaganda efforts in recently liberated European countries. In 1953, the different branches in charge of the U.S. State Department's international cultural and informational policies merged into the independent agency United States Investigation Services (USIS), based in embassies and consulates.²⁵ It had a pivotal role in the "Americanization" of Italy during the Cold War.

The U.S. federal government passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act in 1944 – better known as the GI Bill – which provided, until 1956, a range of benefits for returning war veterans to aid them in readjusting to civilian life, for instance low-interest home mortgages, unemployment insurance, and financial assistance for a wide range of educational and vocational training opportunities. With this support, many veterans had the chance to visit Italy. Cultural developments were additionally produced by economic recovery programs such as the Marshall Plan, established in 1948; in the following years, select American photographers were tasked with documenting the infrastructure constructed in Italy under the plan to address wartime devastation and regenerate the national economy.²⁶

Some protagonists of the Italy-U.S. exchange arrived in Rome through the channels of the intelligence services, and frequented La Margherita gallery before becoming part of the entourage of L'Obelisco. La Margherita was the art gallery and antiquarian bookshop run by Irene Brin as of September 1943, when she needed to support herself economically while del Corso was forced into hiding after having deserted the army following the armistice. (This latter fact might explain the origin, or at least the ease, of the del Corsos' relations with the U.S.)

One of the first to arrive at La Margherita was journalist and antiquarian Peter Lindamood, who was then working for the Psychological Warfare Branch of the U.S. Army. Lindamood became responsible for the opening of a first channel of exporting Italian "Fantastic" art from Rome to New York. In 1945, he noticed a group of young Italian artists who exhibited together with Leonor Fini at La Margherita, and whose works would later be presented at

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L'Obelisco. He actively promoted their circulation in the U.S. through the very cultural and commercial channels that influenced the image of Italian Art presented in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition.

Also on the scene was the photographer Leslie Gill; employed by the magazines *Town and Country* and *Life*, he was simultaneously working, as his daughter has confirmed, for Donovan's OSS.²⁷ Gill, as a collector of L'Obelisco artists, was very close to the del Corso couple. Some beautiful photos taken by Gill of Irene Brin and del Corso at L'Obelisco are archived at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome (figure 3).²⁸

The most famous American artist of the L'Obelisco cadre engaged in intelligence activities was Saul Steinberg. Following his first participation in an art show – the group exhibit *Fourteen Americans* held at MoMA in 1946, Steinberg had his first solo show ever at L'Obelisco in 1951, organized by Cesare Zavattini (figures 4a–4b). As the L'Obelisco exhibit stimulated interest in the artist in Italy, Mondadori published Steinberg's book *L'Arte di vivere* in 1954 (originally *The Art of Living*, 1949), the first of many books by the artist to be produced in Italy. Romanian by birth, Steinberg had studied architecture at the Milan Polytechnic.²⁹ Thanks to his graphic skills and language fluency, Steinberg was a prime candidate for the Morale



Figure 3. Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin at L'Obelisco, Rome, 1947. Courtesy Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome and Leslie Gill, New York.

Photo: Leslie Gill.

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Operations branch of the OSS in Europe, a propaganda effort. He was first assigned to the Navy in China,³⁰ and after a period in Africa reached Italy, passing through Naples and arriving in Rome. At the time of his show at L'Obelisco, he had already returned to New York; however, until his final discharge from the naval reserve in 1954, Steinberg could be recalled to active duty, and he was required to report his dates of travel any time he left the U.S.³¹

William Congdon and Bernard Childs, who exhibited at L'Obelisco, respectively, in 1953 and in 1958 (the first) and in 1952 (the second), also actively participated in the war.

Enrolled in the American Field Service, a voluntary health

service organized during the war, Congdon joined the invasion of Italy as an ambulance driver and continued to help civilians after the war. During the 1950s he expressed his deep sensitivity in lyrical, thick informal painting. After many stays in Italy, and in particular Venice,³² and having converted to Catholicism, he moved first to Assisi, then to nearby Buccinasco, in Lombardy, where he stayed until his death in 1998. The painter and engraver Childs, oriented instead towards abstract experimentation involving the sign, was a son of Russian immigrants. He came to Italy in 1951 through the GI Bill, having served as a quartermaster aboard the destroyer escort USS Wesson in the war. He became a friend of Burri and Enrico Donati, an Italian-American late-surrealist painter and sculptor who exhibited at L'Obelisco in 1950 and was connected to Carone and Ward.

L'Obelisco was pivotal for American artists in Rome thanks to the close relations the two owners entertained with Roberts at the American Academy, as well as with his wife Isabel; they in turn were very close to Clare Boothe Luce, the U.S. Ambassador in Rome from 1953–56.³³ At the end of June 1954, del Corso phoned Isabel to try to obtain an exhibition for Ben Shahn; at the time the artist's solo exhibition was on view at the Venice Biennale, curated



Figures 4a–4b. Cover and interior of exhibition leaflet for "Steinberg," L'Obelisco, Rome, 1951.

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by James Thrall Soby. Given the prevailing attitudes of McCarthyism in the U.S., the U.S. Pavilion's official emphasis on a Russian-American artist and anarchist placed heavy emphasis on America as a place of freedom and opportunity – an image functional to the propaganda of the Western bloc in a critical phase of the Cold War.³⁴ Shahn would exhibit at the Del Corso's gallery in 1956, after a successful solo exhibition at La Tartaruga in 1955.

Two American artists exhibited at L'Obelisco during their residencies at the American Academy of Rome: the painter and muralist George Biddle, in 1952; and the surrealist painter Eugene Berman, in 1959, following his earlier exhibitions at L'Obelisco in 1949, during his Guggenheim Fellowship in Italy, and in 1952. It should also be mentioned that among the U.S. sculptors who exhibited at L'Obelisco were as Harvey Fite, in 1950, and Joseph Greenberg, the following year. Additionally, Stanley B. Kearl, in Italy in 1949–50 on a Fulbright Grant, was given a solo exhibition in 1951 by the del Corsos, while in 1959 they spotlighted Beverly Pepper, who would settle in Italy with her husband, journalist and author Curtis Bill Pepper.

The similarity of choices made by L'Obelisco and American institutional politics is undeniable, although to date it has not been possible to draw further conclusions from recorded observations. A dominant feature of the unconventional and international openness of the era is the ease with which personal relationships and suggestions from the artists themselves translated into exhibitions, often of short duration, which alternated at a dazzling rhythm in the small gallery at Via Sistina 146. The idea of exhibiting Kay Sage in 1953 was hatched a month before her show opened in March – during the exhibition of her husband, Yves Tanguy. Hedda Sterne was recommended directly by Steinberg for her show on April 1953,³⁵ while Vera Stravinsky's exhibitions, in 1955 and 1958,³⁶ were arguably prompted by the frequent participation of Igor Stravinsky in music festivals and receptions organized by Roberts at the American Academy.³⁷ Berman, friend and collaborator of the Russian composer and the del Corso couple, wrote the introductory text to Vera Stravinsky's first exhibition.

As of the mid-1940s and far into the following decade, the del Corsos' exhibition policy was marked by its plurality and eccentricity of proposals, while maintaining a certain continuity in displaying Fantastic art of metaphysical and surrealist derivation.

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Beginning the Exchange between Rome and New York: the Young Italian Fantasts and the American Surrealists.

Many of the Americans who arrived in the Italian capital after its liberation frequented the first gallery of the del Corso couple, La Margherita, including the director William Wyler, who filmed the aforementioned *Roman Holiday* in 1953, as well as the award-winning *Ben-Hur* in 1959. Stimulated by such clientele, Gaspero del Corso decided to conduct his overseas business through a trusted collaborator.³⁸ Among those in del Corso's purview was Peter Lindamood, who, as previously noted, was involved in an intelligence operation in Rome. As Giulia Tulino has documented, Lindamood's articles on Italian Fantastic art in *Town and Country*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *View* facilitated the export from Rome to New York of works by Italian artists such as Leonor Fini, Fabrizio Clerici, and Giuseppe Viviani.³⁹ In his writings, Lindamood located in the works of Giorgio de Chirico and his brother, the musician, writer, and painter Alberto Savinio, the origins of a lasting visionary art that mixed together archeological quotations and surrealist glances, descriptive realism and oneiric sceneries. In so doing he identified a certain continuity between metaphysical art and the various figurative stances of younger Italian artists, such as the citationist surrealism of Clerici, the visionary etchings of Viviani, the Fantastic art of Stanislao Lepri, the "naive" narratives of Gianfilippo Usellini, inspired to Fifteenth-Century Italian Art, and the expressionist satire of Tono Zancanaro.

The commercial surrealist connection recognized by Lindamood was supported by a fundamental figure, Alexander Iolas, a resourceful Greek-born dancer who moved from Paris to New York, where, in 1944, he began an extraordinarily successful career as an art dealer. Secretly advised by Lindamood to contact the del Corsos, he wrote to Gaspero introducing himself as "a friend of Leonor" and requesting to exhibit works by some La Margherita artists (Fini, Stanislao Lepri, Filippo de Pisis, and others) in the opening exhibition, in 1945, of the Hugo Gallery in New York, where he was director. Titled *The Fantastic in Modern Art presented by "View,"* the exhibition's invitation documents that Fini and Lepri did take part, as did Clerici (figures 5a-5b); the works of de Pisis and Vespignani (a discovery of Gaspero del Corso) were featured by Iolas in two solo exhibitions.⁴⁰ This is how the otherwise inexplicable section of MoMA's *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*

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exhibition called "The Fantasts" originated: Clerici, Lepri, and Viviani – introduced in the catalogue as disciples of Fini – all came from La Margherita, while Salvatore Fiume joined them through other channels.⁴¹

In subsequent years, "Iolas's artists" traveled to Italy from America. Among the artists included in Iolas's 1945 inaugural exhibition: Tanguy held his first Italian exhibition at L'Obelisco in 1953; Tchelichew exhibited there twice, in 1950 and 1955; Berman was introduced by Corrado

Cagli in the catalogue of his first Italian solo exhibition at L'Obelisco, in 1949, and also exhibited there in 1959 and 1961; and in 1954 it was the turn of Eugene's brother, Leonid. The visitors to Rome in the aftermath of the war and the fortuitous exchange with Iolas thus favored the opening of a channel for Fantastic art's import and export – "Americans" (perhaps naturalized) in exchange for young Italians.

Berman, Tanguy, and Tchelichew had all been in Paris during to the war, as was Iolas, who thus came into contact with many exiled artists, including Fini. In New York in 1942, they participated together in the exhibition *Artists in Exile*, at the Pierre Matisse Gallery. Whereas Tanguy obtained American citizenship in 1948 and would remain in Connecticut with his wife, Berman and Tchelichew were particularly fascinated by the Roman context; Berman, looking for change after his wife's suicide, settled in the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj and remained there until his death, in 1972, while Tchelichew spent the last years of his life in Grottaferrata, a few miles from the capital, with his partner Charles Henri Ford. Among other things, Ford was co-editor of the surrealism-focused magazine *View*, which in 1945 featured the *Fantastic Art* exhibition at Hugo Gallery.



Figures 5a–5b. Cover and interior of exhibition leaflet for exhibition "The Fantastic in Modern Art presented by 'View.'" at the Hugo Gallery, New York, 1945.

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For Tchelichew and Berman, Rome was a particularly favorable location from a professional point of view, for it brought them into contact with new collectors, and notably, members of the aristocratic clientele of L'Obelisco. This was also the case for Carlyle Brown, an admirer of Tchelichew, who was immortalized by the camera of Herbert List in 1951 in Ischia; in those years he frequented several artists from L'Obelisco, such as Clerici, Leonardo Cremonini,⁴² and Tchelichew, who loved spending time on this island. Among the gallery's aristocratic Roman clientele, Brown found patrons in Enrico D'Assia, Prince Alessandro Ruspoli, and Countess Anna Laetitia Pecci Blunt (figures 6a–6b).⁴³

Berman deserves special attention for having developed his artistic vision through his career as a set and costume designer for Italian theater and opera.⁴⁴ He adapted his metaphysical and Dalí-influenced imagery in



Figures 6a–6b. Cover and interior of exhibition leaflet for “Carlyle Brown,” L'Obelisco, 1954.

paintings of the Mediterranean landscape and Rome's archaeological ruins. The mixture was highly attractive to American visitors to the Eternal City. Indeed, their point of view is well depicted in the best-seller *Rome and a Villa*, by the American writer Eleanor Clarke; the 1952 book is dedicated to Isabel and Laurance Roberts and illustrated by Berman. The scenery of “Hollywood on the Tiber,” where fake ruins get thrown up around real ones, is described by Clarke as dreamlike, “both real and not real,” “a place secret, sensuous, oblique, a poem and to be known as a poem; a vast untidiness peopled with characters and symbols so profound they join the imagery of your own dreams, whose grandeur also is of dreams, never of statements or avenues.”⁴⁵ Quoting Füssli and Piranesi, Berman adds nostalgic flavor, by which inner solitude in the present encounters the temporal vertigo disclosed by Roman antiquities (figure 7). Berman also illustrated *Viaggio in Italia* (1951) by Raffaele Carrieri, a writer and critic sensitive to metaphysical and Fantastic art who, three years later, would curate a Venice Biennale exhibition dedicated to surrealism.⁴⁶ A group exhibition titled *Viaggio in Italia*,

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held at L'Obelisco in January 1952, was accompanied by a brochure that included an illustration by Berman, of *Souvenir d'Italie* (Souvenir of Italy; figures 8a–8b). In Berman's rendering, the Grand Tour of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe acquired a glamorous and touristic hue – extremely appealing to the international clientele that frequented the gallery during the 1950s.

Like Berman, Roberto Matta started to frequent L'Obelisco following a period of mourning: his friend Arshile Gorky had committed suicide, and Matta was widely held responsible because of his romantic affair with Gorky's wife. The event isolated him in the New York art community, as well as bringing André Breton's (temporary) moral condemnation. After a quick return to Chile, following the advice of Iolas he headed to Rome, where he was welcomed by American acquaintances including Carone, Gendel, the secret agent Peter Tompkins, and Cagli.⁴⁷ Introduced by

the latter to L'Obelisco, his exhibition *Fosforesciamo* opened there on January 12, 1950 (figure 9). However, relations with the gallery owners were abruptly interrupted – as recounted by a bewildered del Corso in his agenda – by unspecified unacceptable behavior on the part of Matta.⁴⁸ Matta would settle in Italy, and after only two months he had already formed new contacts with



Figure 7. Eugene Berman, illustration for Eleanor Clarke, "Rome and a Villa" (New York: Doubleday, 1952).

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the galleries La Salita and Schneider in Rome, and Il Naviglio in Milan and Il Cavallino in Venice, both run by Carlo Cardazzo. His art impressed artists such as Afro, Burri, Marca-Relli, and Giuseppe Capogrossi.⁴⁹ His painting, which in New York had reached its peak as abstract and multidimensional landscaping, in Italy acquired greater narrative and iconographic concreteness.



Figures 8a–8b. Exhibition leaflet for “Viaggio in Italia,” L’Obelisco, Rome, 1952. On the cover: Eugene Berman, “Souvenir d’Italie.”

Three famous cases: Robert Rauschenberg, Alexander Calder, and Arshile Gorky

While the programmatic line of L’Obelisco can be identified according to a general post-metaphysical and surrealist trend, other cases can also be related by circumstance. In March 1953, L’Obelisco held the first exhibition in Italy, and Europe, of a very young Rauschenberg, *Scatole e Feticci personali* (Personal Boxes and Fetishes; figures 10a–10b) – a display of developments from his study trip to Morocco and Italy with his friend Cy Twombly. Rauschenberg exhibited some boxes with found objects, reminiscent of the work of Joseph Cornell,⁵⁰ while his “personal fetishes” were assemblages of “bones, hair, faded clothes, feathers [and] ropes” alongside “mirrors, insects, pearls, and shells.” A probable re-elaboration of apotropaic objects and rituals he had learned about in North Africa, the “fetishes” found an environmental outward dimension at Villa Borghese, a few meters from L’Obelisco, as documented in Rauschenberg’s photographs. (At the time he considered himself primarily a photographer.)

What del Corso in his agenda defines as “random objects, but indicative of the research of many young people today,”⁵¹ were put on sale at a very low

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the unsold objects Rauschenberg threw into the River Arno after an exhibition in Florence in March 1953, in a "Futurist" gesture suggested to him by a sardonic reviewer, the art historian Carlo Volpe.⁵²

Thanks to L'Obelisco, Rauschenberg visited Burri, who had already exhibited at the gallery in 1952 and would do so again in 1954 and 1957. The meeting was described by the American as a cordial trade of works, while the Italian recalled it with ostentatious indifference.⁵³ A second phase of this relationship would play out in New York, at the Stable Gallery under Carone's direction. Rauschenberg and Twombly's two-person exhibition in September 1953 was followed by Burri's solo exhibition two months later, which was carefully photographed by Rauschenberg.

A lot has been written about the Burri-Rauschenberg meeting and the impact of Burri's *Sacks*, begun in the 1950s, on Rauschenberg's *Combines*, begun in 1954. Some Italian critics, such as Maurizio Calvesi and Germano Celant, have spoken of the elder artist's decisive influence on the American, and comments from Burri recorded in a 1995 retrospective interview reflect this



Figure 9. Roberto Matta, "Fosforesciamo." Exhibition leaflet, L'Obelisco, Rome, 1950.

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view.⁵⁴ Recently, the tendency has been to talk more about an exchange between the artists, whose lines of research were markedly individual, and would remain substantially different.⁵⁵ No doubt a contribution to the introduction of extra-pictorial materials in the *Combines* was

accelerated by contact with the Roman Informel art milieu: another piece of this mosaic can be identified in Salvatore Meo, an Italian-American who met Twombly and Rauschenberg in Rome in 1952. Close to Burri and Colla, he was making poetic assemblages with found objects that – he claims – exerted a decisive influence on both Burri and Rauschenberg.⁵⁶

Generally, the Rauschenberg exhibition is attributed to the mediation of Burri. A small novelty that emerges from the documents of L'Obelisco is that, according to Irene Brin, the person behind the exhibition was Guidarino Guidi, friend of the del Corso couple and a future casting director at De Laurentiis, who spoke English fluently and who in those years acted as a press agent and valued assistant to film producers. Thus, Gaspero del Corso's incredible insight was defined by particular flexibility and curiosity in grasping external suggestions from outside of the art system. This unconventional openness led him to oversee artistic debuts of varied kinds, from the young American photographer and advertising producer Will Golovin, who exhibited at L'Obelisco in 1951,⁵⁷ to the American model Ivy Nicholson, whose forays into painting were displayed at L'Obelisco in 1956 (and eventually led her to Andy Warhol's Factory).

Two other developments should be mentioned. The first is the solo exhibition of Alexander Calder held in March of 1956 (figure 11). In 1952 he had been awarded the Grand Prize for sculpture at the Venice Biennale, and two years later he created a mobile for the Milan Triennale. A decisive meeting at his L'Obelisco exhibition favorably marked the career of the



Figures 10a–10b. Front and back of exhibition leaflet for “Bob Rauschenberg. Scatole e feticci personali” [Personal boxes and fetishes], L'Obelisco, Rome, 1953.

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American sculptor in Italy, with Giovanni Carandente, an art historian and good friend of Gaspero del Corso, inviting Calder, in 1962, to create the famous *Teodelapio* in the square of the Spoleto railway station, as part of the prestigious Festival dei Due Mondi, founded in 1958 by the composer Gian Carlo Menotti to foster relations between Europe and the U.S. "Caro Carandente, instead of a mobile I am making you a *stabile*, which will stand in the ground, + arch the roadway," wrote Calder to Carandente on April 20, 1962.⁵⁸ *Teodelapio* was Calder's first monumental *stabile*, and, according to Carandente, "the only truly modern large and important sculpture"⁵⁹ erected in an Italian square. As was true for Berman and Matta in Rome, the exchange was reciprocal and the encounter productive, for Calder and for Italy.

The last episode to mention here is the first European retrospective of Gorky's work. As mentioned above, visits to the capital by young Abstract Expressionists did not revolve only around L'Obelisco but also Plinio De Martiis's gallery La Tartaruga, inaugurated in 1954. In the summer of 1957, an issue of *Arti visive* was dedicated to Gorky by Drudi and Scialoja, who had just returned from America; in New York they had seen Gorky's solo exhibition at the Catherine Viviano Gallery.⁶⁰ The *Arti visive* issue was to be the "first tribute to the artist in Europe," Drudi wrote.⁶¹ However, L'Obelisco had anticipated this celebration on February 4 of the same year; their



Figure 11. Palma Bucarelli at Alexander Calder exhibition at L'Obelisco, Rome, 1956. Courtesy Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.

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presentation of the artist has since been described as “the last of the surrealists and the first of the Abstract Expressionists.”⁶² According to Irene Brin’s account, the exhibition involved a brilliant solution to a difficulty caused by the political context. The fear of another war, caused by events in Hungary, had stranded the artist’s works at an American gallery, but the couple managed to replace them by contacting Gorky’s widow, Mougouch Fielding, who was then residing in Tuscany. Fielding lent L’Obelisco twenty-nine drawings and nine oil paintings⁶³ for the exhibition, which was acclaimed by critics and the public and traveled from Rome to Bologna.⁶⁴ A strong network of contacts had allowed the couple to once again break new ground.

The catalogue exhibition was introduced by Afro with a sincere personal tribute.⁶⁵ According to Adachiara Zevi and Barbara Drudi, it was Afro and Scialoja who organized the exhibition, and they were rewarded by Fielding with two works by Gorky.⁶⁶ After having held his “first abstract exhibition” at L’Obelisco in 1948, Afro had become detached from the gallery for commercial reasons: the high-price policy of his New York dealer Viviano was disturbed by the less select clientele and low-cost sales of the del Corsos. From the perspective of the market, the couple were carrying out a strategic double policy: the bold experimentation and risk taking of radical artists ahead of their time was supported by the constant profitable trade of poor-quality works by minor authors, such as Nino Caffè or Andrea Spadini, who were much admired by tourists, entrepreneurs, and newly rich Americans.⁶⁷

A Symbolic Epilogue: Farewell to the Roberts, 1959

Afro wrote a text as well for the exhibition *Saluto ai Roberts* (Farewell to the Roberts; figure 12), which concluded the decade of exhibitions held at L’Obelisco. With it, the gallery owners wished to thank the director of the American Academy for his affectionate and constant support of Italian art over the course of his long tenure in Rome. Before an audience of diplomats, intellectuals, and first-rate artists, Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin celebrated their friends. Surprisingly – though perhaps not really – the works on display from the Roberts’ art collection were almost all by artists from the circle of L’Obelisco.⁶⁸ The del Corsos were thus also celebrating their own artistic and political position and successful commercial enterprise. The

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episode once again confirmed the strength of their network of contacts – which indeed involved a certain unscrupulousness, and a position of strategic proximity to the major American cultural institution in Rome – and symbolically marked the end of an era of exciting, mutual openness between Italy and the U.S., achieved independently and off the beaten track.

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Figure 12. Exhibition leaflet for “Saluto ai Roberts” [Farewell to the Roberts], L’Obelisco, Rome, 1959.

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Citations

1. See, in particular, Irene Brin, *L'Italia esplode. Diario dell'anno 1952*, ed. Claudia Palma, with texts by Claudia Palma, Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo, and Ilaria Schiaffini (Rome: Viella, 2014); and Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo, Ilaria Schiaffini, and Claudio Zambianchi, eds., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco* (Rome: Drago, 2018). I wish to thank Claudio Zambianchi for his precious suggestions on this text.
2. On Thrall and Soby's trip to Italy, see Silvia Bignami and Davide Colombo's essay, "Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby's Grand Tour of Italy," in this journal issue. Vespignani was the first young Italian talent discovered by L'Obelisco. The two drawings reproduced in the catalogue of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* were purchased by MoMA from Alexander Iolas, who had received them from the owner of L'Obelisco, Gaspero del Corso. During their Roman trip in the spring of 1948, Barr and Soby visited Afro's first abstract exhibition at L'Obelisco, and the gallery lent two of Afro's works of 1948, *Lis Fuarpis* and *Trophy*, to the MoMA exhibition. See Ilaria Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la galleria L'Obelisco*, 127–30.
3. "Americans in Italy: U.S. Artists Repeat Migration of 1800s with Fresh Results," *Life*, September 15, 1952, 88.
4. On the presence of U.S. artists in Rome in the nineteenth century, see Melissa Dabakis, *Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014).
5. Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Farnham Surrey, U.K. and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2015), 68.
6. Another notable Hollywood film in this vein is *Three Coins in the Fountain* (1954).
7. See Peter Benson Miller, ed., *Go Figure! New Perspectives on Guston* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2014).

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8. Of the Americans in Rome in that period, mention should also be made of Mark Rothko, Clement Greenberg, and Helen Frankenthaler. See Barbara Drudi, *Afro da Roma a New York* (Pistoia: Gli Ori, 2008); Gabriella Belli, ed., *Afro. The American Years* (Rovereto: Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto [MART], 2012); and Barbara Drudi, "Come Afro conquistò l'America," in *Afro*, ed. Philip Rylands (Paris, Tornabuoni Art; Florence: Forma Edizioni and Tornabuoni Art, 2018), 73–123.
9. See Raffaele Bedarida, "Export/Import: The Promotion of Contemporary Italian Art in the United States, 1935–1969" (PhD diss., Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2016).
10. Gabriella Drudi, "Prima e dopo," in *Roma 1950–1959. Il rinnovamento della pittura in Italia*, ed. Fabrizio D'Amico (Turin: Civiche Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 1995), 25–32. See also Davide Colombo, "Arti Visive e dintorni," in *Emilio Villa. Poeta e scrittore*, ed. Claudio Parmiggiani (Milan: Mazzotta, 2008), 285–97; Davide Colombo, "Arti Visive, una rivista 'tra': astrattismi, interdisciplinarietà, internazionalismo" (PhD diss., Milan: Università degli Studi di Milano, 2010); Davide Colombo, "Arti Visive e Ann Salzman: un ponte tra Italia e America sulla scena artistica degli anni Cinquanta," in *L'Uomo nero* 8, nos. 7–8 (December 2011): 86–107; and Barbara Drudi and Giacomo Marcucci, *Arti Visive 1952–1958* (Pistoia: Gli Ori, 2011).
11. See Barbara Drudi, *Milton Gendel. Uno sguardo lungo un secolo. Gli anni tra New York e Roma 1940–1962* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017).
12. Peter Benson Miller, "Resident/Alien: American Artists in Postwar Rome," in *Roma e gli artisti stranieri. Integrazione, reti identità (XVI–XX sec.)*, ed. Ariane Varela Braga and Thomas Leo-True (Rome: Artemide, 2018), 228–29.
13. See Nicholas Carone interviewed by Paul Cummings, May 11–17, 1968, Oral Histories, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, available at this link (last accessed October 29, 2019); and Megan Fontanella, "Begun Behind Barbed Wire: Alberto Burri's Early Career in America," in *Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting*, ed. Emily Braun (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2015), 95.

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14. "I knew Alberto Burri before he really became a painter, I was the American that introduced him to American art. I used to give him my magazines, *Tiger's Eye* and *ARTnews*." Carone interviewed by Cummings, Archives of American Art. The first Burri exhibition in the U.S. took place at the beginning of 1953 at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago.
15. See Ilaria Bernardi, *La Tartaruga. Storia di una galleria* (Milan: Postmedia, 2018), 27–28. Scarpitta, who moved from California to Rome in the 1930s, obtained a grant from the American Academy in Rome between 1946–49. At La Tartaruga he exhibited his famous *bende* in 1958, before returning to the U.S. Marca-Relli was among the artists exhibited at the Stable Gallery in New York; after his first shows in Rome at the Il Cortile gallery at the end of the 1940s, he returned to the capital in 1956 and held a solo exhibition at La Tartaruga the following year. On Scarpitta, see Raffaele Bedarida, "Mr. In-Between," in *Salvatore Scarpitta 1956–1964* (New York: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2016), 8–12; and Davide Colombo, "Salvatore Scarpitta: on both sides of the Atlantic," in *Salvatore Scarpitta 1956–1964* (New York: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2016), 12–19.
16. See Peppino Appella, "Artisti, scrittori, critici, architetti e gallerie a Roma negli anni Cinquanta," in D'Amico, *Roma 1950–1959*, 109–35.
17. See Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo, *Irene Brin: Italian Style in Fashion* (Milan: Marsilio; Garsington: Windsor [distributor], 2006).
18. Robert Rauschenberg's show opened on March 3; Kay Sage's, March 16; Hedda Sterne's, April 14; Gertrude Schweizer's, November 18; and William Congdon's, November 28. See Rita Camerlingo and Maria D'Alesio, "La Galleria L'Obelisco (1946–1981). Regesto delle mostre," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco*, 282–85.
19. See Ilaria Schiaffini, "Between Fashion, Art and Photography: Irene Brin and the Early Activities of the Galleria L'Obelisco," in *Fashion Through History: Costumes, Symbols, Communication*, ed. Giovanna Motta and Antonello Biagini, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 591–603; and Raffaele Bedarida, "Viviano, Brin e la conquista di Hollywood," in *New York New York*, ed. Francesco Tedeschi with Federica Boragina and Francesca Pola (Milan: Electa, 2017), 117–26.

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20. Richard Avedon, Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Duncan Douglas, Lisette Model, and Karen Radkai are some of the names mentioned in Irene Brin, *L'Italia esplode*. On the photography exhibitions at L'Obelisco, see Ilaria Schiaffini, "La fotografia alla Galleria L'Obelisco: documentazione, esposizione, comunicazione," in *Archivi fotografici e arte contemporanea in Italia. Indagare, interpretare, inventare*, ed. Barbara Cinelli and Antonello Frongia (Milan: Scalpendi, 2019), 81–100.
21. Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art*, 69.
22. See Martin Brody, "Friendship and Ideology at the American Academy in Rome," in *Music and Musical Composition at the American Academy in Rome*, ed. Martin Brody (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 228. On Roberts's direction of the Academy, see Denise R. Costanzo, "'A Truly Liberal Orientation': Laurance Roberts, Modern Architecture, and the Postwar American Academy in Rome," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 2 (June 2015): 223–47.
23. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999).
24. See Salvatore J. LaGumina, *The Office of Strategic Services and Italian Americans: The Untold History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Douglas Waller, *Wild Bill Donovan: The Spymaster Who Created the OSS and Modern American Espionage* (New York: Free Press, 2012); and Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
25. See Simona Tobia, *Advertising America: The United States Information Service in Italy (1945–1956)* (Milan: LED Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2008).
26. See Lindsay Harris, "Pictures in the Mind: Photography and Matera," in *Matera Imagined: Photography and a Southern Italian Town* (Rome: American Academy; Matera: Palazzo Lanfranchi, 2017), 81–82. On the case of a photojournalist, Marjorie Collins, whom Gendel accompanied on a reporting tour of Sicily in 1950, see Drudi, *Milton Gendel*, 77–78.
27. Leslie Gill, email to the author, October 25, 2017.
28. See Ilaria Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la galleria L'Obelisco*, 138.

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29. Steinberg had a degree in architecture from the Milan Polytechnic, where he befriended Zavattini, Achille Campanile, and Aldo Buzzi; in the 1930s he created caricatures for *Il Bertoldo* and *Settebello*. Forced to emigrate because of racial laws, he moved to New York in 1942, and went on to serve as an officer in the U.S. Navy in China and Europe. The first publications that earned him fame internationally were *All in a Line* (1945) and *The Art of Living* (1949), translated into Italian by Mondadori in 1954. In 1950, *L'Europeo* acquired exclusive reproduction rights to his drawings.
30. See Joel Smith, ed., *Saul Steinberg: Illuminations* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College; New York: The Morgan Library, 2006); and Mario Tedeschini Lalli, "Descent from Paradise: Saul Steinberg's Italian Years (1933–1941)," *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History*, no. 2 (October 2011): 312–84. Much detail on this topic, though not always correctly reported according to the Saul Steinberg Foundation (see here), can be found in Deirdre Bair, *Saul Steinberg: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2012), 97–98. Milton Gendel was deployed to China in August 1945, after having collaborated with the U.S. Army in perfecting the techniques of camouflage. See Drudi, *Milton Gendel*, 52.
31. Bair, *Saul Steinberg*, 111–13 and 144.
32. See the mention of Congdon's Venetian paintings in "Americans in Italy," a *Life* article (April 30, 1951) devoted to his solo exhibition. See also Rodolfo Balzarotti's and Giuseppe Barbieri's contributions to *William Congdon: An American Artist in Italy* (Vicenza: The William Congdon Foundation and Terraferma, 2001).
33. See Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," 141. As an actress, a fashion journalist, and the wife of an editor of many high-profile American magazines – including *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* – Clare Booth Luce carried out a markedly anticommunist diplomatic activity.
34. Frances K. Pohl, *Ben Shahn – New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate 1947–1954* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). On the Italian debate, see Chiara Di Stefano, "La partecipazione di Ben Shahn alla Biennale di Venezia del 1954," in *Crocevia Biennale*, ed. Francesca Castellani and Eleonora Charans (Milan: Scalpendi, 2017), 181–90.

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35. "Steinberg telephoned from Paris to arrange an exhibition for his wife Hedda Sterne." Gaspero del Corso, agenda entry on March 6, 1953, available at Fondo Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome. Translation by the author.
36. In 1959, Vera's son Theodore Stravinsky exhibited at L'Obelisco.
37. The important festival of contemporary music was directed and organized in 1954 at the American Academy in Rome by the former CIA agent Nabokov, who invited his long-time friend Stravinsky. See Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?*, 198–99. The opposition of the cosmopolitan Western modernism of Stravinsky to Soviet realism aimed to demonstrate aesthetic pluralism as a sign of cultural freedom. See Brody, *Music and Musical Composition*, 239ff.
38. See Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," 129.
39. See Giulia Tulino, "Alberto Savinio, Critic and Artist: a New Reading of Fantastic and Post-Metaphysical Art in Relation to Surrealism Between Rome and New York," *Italian Modern Art*, no. 2 (July 2019), available at this link (last accessed October 29, 2019); and "Dalla Margherita all'Obelisco: arte fantastica italiana tra Roma e New York negli anni '40," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco*, 109–24.
40. See Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," 129–30.
41. See Davide Colombo, "1949: *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* al MoMA di New York," in Rylands, *Afro*, 59–67. Leonor Fini, mentioned in the introductory text of the catalogue, was not included in the exhibition. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 31.
42. See Davide Colombo, "Un caso singolare: il mercato americano di Leonardo Cremonini durante gli anni '50," in *Ricerche di S/Confine* 8, n. 1 (2017): 21–45.
43. In the leaflet of Brown's solo exhibition at L'Obelisco, these names are among those of his collectors, and the Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York is thanked as a supporter of the exhibition. See "Carlyle Brown," Galleria L'Obelisco, November 16, 1954, Fondo Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome.

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44. See Michael Duncan, ed., *High Drama: Eugene Berman and the Legacy of the Melancholic Sublime* (New York and Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 2005); and Vittoria Crespi Morbio, *Eugene Berman alla Scala* (Milan: Amici della Scala; Parma: Grafiche Step Editrice, 2017).
45. Eleanor Clark, *Rome and a Villa* (New York: Doubleday, 1952), 23–24.
46. The illustrations by Berman were later collected in *Imaginary Promenades in Italy* (New York: Pantheon, 1956).
47. See Claudia Salaris, "Tutte le strade portano a Roma," in *Sebastian Matta: un surrealista a Roma* (Milan: Giunti; Rome: Fondazione Echaurren Salaris, 2012), 134. On the spy activities of Peter Tompkins, see his autobiography, *A Spy in Rome* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962). Carone spoke of the role Iolas played in suggesting that Matta contact him in Rome. See Carone interviewed by Cummings, Archives of American Art.
48. See Schiaffini, "L'arte sullo sfondo de *L'Italia esplode*: Irene Brin e i primi anni della galleria L'Obelisco," in Irene Brin, *L'Italia esplode*, 179.
49. According to Carone, Matta was welcomed by him in his studio, where he worked during his first year in Rome. He also exerted a great influence on Afro, Burri, and Capogrossi. See Carone interviewed by Cummings, Archives of American Art.
50. Rossella Caruso, "Robert Rauschenberg alla Galleria L'Obelisco. Scatole e feticci personali," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco*, 211. Translation by the author.
51. Ibid., 210.
52. Carlo Volpe, "Alla Galleria d'Arte contemporanea," *Il Nuovo Corriere*, March 25, 1953, 3.
53. Nicolas Cullinan, "Double Exposure: Robert Rauschenberg's and Cy Twombly's Roman Holiday," *Burlington Magazine* 150, no. 1264 (July 2008): 467.
54. Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri. I pensieri di una vita* (Turin: Edizioni Allemandi, 1995) 33–38. On the *querelle*, see Germano Celant, "Roma–New York 1948–1964," in Celant and Costantini, *Roma–New York 1948–1964* (Milan: Charta, 1993), 19–23 and cited bibliography.
55. See Cullinan, "Double Exposure," 466–68; and Mario Diacono, "Burri e/o l'America: il Ground Zero della pittura," in *Burri. Lo spazio di materia tra Europa e USA*, ed. Bruno Corà (Città di Castello: Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri, 2016), 59–61.

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56. Miller, "Resident/Alien: American Artists in Postwar Rome," 227. On the proximity of Meo to Burri and Colla in the early 1950s and on Burri's appreciation of him, see Angelo Savelli, "(April 1951)," in *Salvatore Meo. Mostra antologica: assemblages e disegni (1945–1971)* (Rome: Galleria Ciak, 1971), 17; and Sid Sachs, *Salvatore Meo: Assemblages 1948–1978* (New York: Pavel Zoubok Gallery; Philadelphia: Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery, University of the Arts, 2008), 21–22.
57. "[Golovin] is thirty-seven years old, he is a Russian-American, he is an advertising producer, and his dream is to become a painter. For now he is content with photographing every corner of the world he visits on his long journeys." G.B.V., "Un secolo in Quattro passi," *Il Momento*, February 9, 1950. Translation by the author.
58. Biblioteca Giovanni Carandente, Spoleto.
59. Giovanni Carandente, *Calder e l'Italia*, in *Calder. Scultore dell'aria*, ed. Alexander S. C. Rower (Rome: Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 2009), 29.
60. The tribute in 1957 in issues 6 and 7 of *Arti Visive* included anticipations of the still-unpublished monograph with texts by Ethel Schwabacher for the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. See *Arshile Gorky* (New York: The Macmillan Company for the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1957). See also the tribute by Toti Scialoja in these issues of *Arti Visive*, "Per Gorky," written in October 1956. On Gorky's impression of Scialoja when he was in New York for the show at the Catherine Viviano and for Gabriella Drudi's account, see Celant and Costantini, *Roma–New York 1948–1964*, 119–22.
61. Drudi, "Prima e dopo," 32. See also Gabriella Belli, ed., *Arshile Gorky: 1904–1948* (Venice: Ca' Pesaro, Galleria Internazionale di Arte Moderna, 2019).
62. Melvin P. Lader, "Arshile Gorky: un artista moderno nella tradizione accademica," in *Arshile Gorky. Opere su carta* (Rome: Carte Segrete, 1992), 15. Fabrizio D'Amico recalls how Gorky was the least American of the Americans, the one most tied to European culture because of his Armenian origins and the relations he had established with the entourage of Pierre Matisse – that is, the Parisian surrealist milieu that had roots in New York. See *Arte a Roma dal primo al secondo dopoguerra* (Rome: Edizioni della Cometa, 1995), 129.
63. Irene Brin, "Crónica de Roma," *Goya*, April–May 1957, 316–17.

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64. The exhibition had a second venue in La Loggia gallery in Bologna. In her article, Irene Brin mentions also the Galleria Montenapoleone in Milan, but this is not confirmed by the Arshile Gorky Foundation. See Irene Brin, "Crónica de Roma," 317.
65. Barbara Drudi contests Afro's authorship and hypothesizes a contribution by Toti Scialoia. See Drudi, *Afro da Roma a New York*, 36–39.
66. See Adachiara Zevi, *Peripezie del dopoguerra nell'arte italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2006), 112; and Barbara Drudi, "A Step on the Stairway to Heaven. Afro alla Galleria L'Obelisco 1948–1959," in Caratozzolo et al., *Irene Brin, Gaspero del Corso e la Galleria L'Obelisco*, 181.
67. Gabriella Drudi recalls how in that period "there was never any money, but there was always the tourist on his way to L'Obelisco gallery who instead of buying Nino Caffè became enamored with Burri." Drudi, "Prima e dopo," 28. On the relationship with Viviano, see Drudi, "A Step on the Stairway to Heaven," 179–80.
68. See Schiaffini, "La Galleria L'Obelisco e il mercato americano," 138–41.

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ON GIORGIO MORANDI: MILTON GLASER IN CONVERSATION WITH MATILDE GUIDELLI-GUIDI AND NICOLA LUCCHI

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Milton Glaser | Matilde Guidelli-Guidi | Nicola Lucchi

Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949), Issue 3, January 2020

ABSTRACT

This is the transcript of a wide-ranging interview with artist and graphic designer Milton Glaser that took place at CIMA in 2016. Glaser discusses his experiences as a Fulbright grantee in Bologna, Italy, where he enrolled in an etching class taught by Giorgio Morandi at the city's Accademia di Belle Arti. The interview provides insights into Morandi's personality and teaching method, into Glaser's consideration of Morandi's oeuvre, and into the designer's own artistic vision.

In 1952, a young Milton Glaser (b. 1929, New York) traveled on a Fulbright Scholarship to Bologna, where he would study with Giorgio Morandi. If this serendipitous encounter resulted from the system of cultural diplomacy put in place in the aftermath of World War II, Italian geography helped, too. Glaser was pursuing a research project that required frequent travel between Venice and Florence. The members of the U.S.-Italy Fulbright Commission recommended that Glaser make Bologna his temporary home, as the city constituted a strategic node in the peninsula's railroad network and residing there would ease Glaser's commute. Furthermore, they suggested that as a graphic arts student with knowledge of etching, Glaser might find a congenial mentor in Morandi, who had resumed teaching that technique at Bologna's Accademia di Belle Arti after the war.¹

Visiting Italy under the aegis of the Fulbright program in the 1950s was a cultural experience for a new generation of intellectuals as well as a diplomatic mission sui generis. The Fulbright Program is named after United

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States Senator J. William Fulbright, who in 1945 introduced a bill that called for the use of proceeds from the sales of surplus war property to fund the “promotion of international good will through the exchange of students in the fields of education, culture, and science.”² The bill was signed into law by President Truman in 1946, with the first participants in the Fulbright Program going overseas in 1948. A bilateral partnership between the U.S. and Italian governments was signed on December 18, 1948, with Fulbright grantees first traveling to and from Italy in 1949.³

In the early stages of the Cold War, the program also functioned as a vehicle of American soft power. To be sure, its partnership with Italy began in the midst of the country’s institutional reassessment and in the early stages of the economic reconstruction catalyzed, in 1948, by the Marshall Plan. The Fulbright program was not an isolated strategy of cooperation and cooptation: political tensions in Italy had prompted U.S. diplomatic channels to rekindle conversations with Italians on a number of cultural initiatives that had been interrupted by World War II, and that could now play a role in an anti-Soviet political framework. Chief among these initiatives was the Museum of Modern Art’s 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, a large survey that sought to systematize the evolution of Italian contemporary art while at the same time expunging its unpalatable Fascist connections. Thanks to the enthusiasm of James Thrall Soby and additionally prompted by the artist receiving first prize for painting at the 1948 Venice Biennale, Morandi had a great showing at MoMA. With thirteen paintings and five etchings on view, he was the third-most-represented artist in the 1949 exhibition, after Umberto Boccioni and Amedeo Modigliani. The MoMA survey laid the ground for more showings of Morandi’s work in the U.S., making him the most acclaimed Italian artist abroad.

What follows is the transcript of a conversation with Glaser that took place at CIMA on March 23, 2016. The occasion for the event was a 2015–16 CIMA exhibition that featured some forty quiet masterpieces from the full span of Morandi’s career, including rarely seen paintings from the 1930s and a selection of etchings. Morandi’s work alters our way of seeing, Glaser states in this conversation; he adds that the capacity to transform reality through a rearrangement of the visual is the attribute of true art. The elder artist’s hands-off approach to teaching – “You teach what you are, not what you say” – marked the young Glaser, who would go on to become a beloved teacher

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himself. In Glaser's account, Morandi's classroom was place of everyday interactions, with the teacher discussing restaurants and the movies, and limiting his suggestions to short but exacting technical remarks, with the gentle exhortation that his pupils process their plates with "*coraggio!*"

The text has been lightly edited for clarity. A video of the event is available at this link.

GUIDELLI-GUIDI: So, thank you very much for being here at CIMA to talk about Morandi with us. You studied with Morandi at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna as a Fulbright Student to Italy in 1952, and we were hoping that you could tell us a little bit about how it happened – if you knew of Morandi before going to Italy, and how it was to be a student of Morandi?

GLASER: If I only had a memory. [*Laughter*] Being a student of Morandi was one of the real transforming experiences of my life. I had graduated from the Cooper Union [in New York] and gone to work, and I received the Fulbright grant the following year. I had a proposal that involved a study project between Venice and Florence. The Fulbright committee approached me and said, "Since you're going to be between Venice and Florence, why don't you associate yourself with the Accademia in Bologna?" I said, "That sounds fine." They said, "Incidentally, there's a guy there named Giorgio Morandi who teaches a course in etching. We noticed that you are a graphic arts major and that you've studied etching." I said, "That's true." "Would you be interested in registering for his class?" As a requirement of the Fulbright, you had to be attached to an institution that taught something, and so I said, "That would be fine." And I had actually known of Morandi's work. Not comprehensively, certainly, but I had seen his work and admired it for many years – that is, his etchings. I didn't know anything about his paintings.⁴

And so I registered at the Accademia, and I started to go to class with Morandi, who taught one day a week. He taught a class of young girls between fifteen and seventeen, who had no art experience of any kind, which was a curious level to be teaching at, particularly for Morandi.⁵ He would teach them the rudiments of etching. They were sweet girls, but I was the only one in the class that had ever actually done an etching before the beginning of the class. One of the things I learned from Morandi, which was perhaps most critical about teaching, was, you teach what you are, not what

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you say. One thinks that teaching is about telling people things, or instructing them to do something, or criticizing them in some way, or correcting errors. But that is not what significant teaching is about.

I've been teaching now for fifty-five years, inspired by the fact that Morandi had such a profound influence on my life. You teach by providing a model for students that they want to emulate, about the nature of life, about the nature of art, about the nature of being in the world. That is the most powerful instrument you have as a teacher. Simply criticizing what people do, as you all know, is not a very effective way of teaching anyone anything. But it was a powerful and extraordinary time for me, largely because I was in the presence of an extraordinary man.

It is astonishing, after you're in this room [at CIMA] for a while, to see the power and the effect of these modest works, and to realize that was an intention of Morandi's, to transform your idea of what reality was. It is accomplished by these works in a half hour. When you leave this space, you are no longer the same. I think that almost everybody who comes here realizes the extraordinary invisible power of these works. I think that you would call them "art" to designate the experience you have in looking at the Morandi as an alternative to looking at most of the things you see in life, including other paintings. One thing you discover is that many, many things called "art," many of which are painting, actually are not art. They are something else. There is one characteristic of art that is essential to the experience of Morandi, which is that he transforms your idea of what is real because, as you all know, there is no such thing as reality, only a process that occurs in the brain that invents something you then call "reality." But with Morandi, and with great artists – and I think of Morandi as being as great as Leonardo – there is this capacity through a single work to transform your idea of what an ear is, what an eye is, what atmosphere is, what color is, what light is. It occurs deeply and experientially. You no longer feel the same. And that is a test, I must say, that I apply to all experiences that are called "art." Conversely, some things that are not intended to be art, that exist in the world for other purposes, may have the same effect as art. Although not intentional, they still affect us as art does because of some strange way that the brain receives vibrations from objects. I think one of the things I learned from Morandi was the distinction between the two.

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So it was an incredibly powerful time for me. Morandi was a very modest man; he never talked about art. He talked about restaurants [*laughter*] and good hotels, and the best trains to take to get out of Bologna, although he didn't leave very often. He was an extremely provincial man.⁶ How somebody could be so provincial and so worldly at the same time is a great mystery. He was generous, never self-serving, and, as you know, largely overlooked, because he didn't enter into the realm of commerce, or self-promotion, or style – all of which are preeminent characteristics of the art world today. I mean, if you are not a commodity, you're not in the art world. But Morandi was truly dedicated, a fully committed artist. It was the only thing he wanted to do; he worked at school once or twice a week, went home, where he lived, as most of you know, with his three sisters, and painted all day. That literally was the only thing he spent his life doing, and that commitment shows in everything you have experienced in seeing the show here. I guess you would use the word "authenticity" – a word frequently used, but rarely experienced.

It was a great, great experience, because I found him to be a model for what I would hope to be, in terms of his commitment to the work that he did, and to his sense of its appropriateness to the community he served. He was a great, great man.

GUIDELLI-GUIDI: So you mentioned that he didn't talk about art, but would he show you art? From the Accademia or...

GLASER: No, he would never show you anything he did.

GUIDELLI-GUIDI: Or other works?

GLASER: He would never talk about art. That just wasn't part of it. He might say, "Could you make that a little darker?" [*Laughter*] I mean, the criticism was fundamental. It wasn't "Change that line," or "Move that over here," or "Maybe you should," it was really the simplest kind of gestures, because he knew you had to learn it yourself.

GUIDELLI-GUIDI: Right. There was no example that he would put in front of you?

GLASER: Not at all.

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LUCCHI: Going back to the practice of etching, I'm wondering if you could say something as to how his work in etching, and your own practice as an etcher, influenced your work as a graphic designer?

GLASER: Well, you know, it's odd, because if you look at Morandi's paintings, you rarely think of him as a skillful technician. I mean, because the paintings are fuzzy, or rough. But if you look at the etchings, they are extraordinarily precise, with a kind of control that is almost impossible to master. So if you're looking at these two variations [*Natura morta con caffettiera* (Still Life with Coffee Pot, 1933), and *Grande natura morta scura* (Large Dark Still Life, 1934; figures 1 and 2)], of by and large the same composition, you realize that it's very hard to get that kind of density in etching, because you have to consider the actual strength of the acid and the amount of time you leave it in place. Incidentally, the one thing he used to say, as you were about to slip your plate into the acid, was "coraggio!" [Laughter]

Which, I must say, is a great attitude to have for all of life and life's encounters. But it is an extremely complex methodology, and depends on extraordinary sophistication of timing and acid strength, and all other things. But you can see here the total control between going from a light version of what he was doing, and making it as though the lights had gone out. Everything is fully realized in both cases. The light one is fully realized, the dark one is fully realized.

For Morandi, and probably also for Matisse and Picasso, the idea of doing a sequence of paintings probably came from their activity as printmakers. If you start making prints you realize that the inevitable consequence of printmaking is that you do proof after proof, change after change, modification after modification – that's the truth of the advent of printing. Rembrandt is always doing additions that reflect a whole new set of



Figure 1. Giorgio Morandi, "Grande natura morta con caffettiera" [Large still life with coffee pot], 1933. Etching, 15 3/8 x 11 11/16 in. (39 x 29.6 cm). Private Collection. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

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inserts into the print. And that idea that you take a theme and then produce its variations probably came from one's experience making prints, because the whole point of making prints is to see them as mutable, and to take five of this, add something, take another five, add something, and so on. And of course, Morandi did the same thing in his paintings. I suspect that the origins of that impulse to take the same composition, or the same elements, and reconfigure them in some way – dark in some areas, light in some areas, take some areas out, introduce new things – all came from the physical act of making prints, largely engraving and etching, a little less so lithography.



Figure 2. Giorgio Morandi, "Grande natura morta scura" [Large dark still life], 1934. Etching, 15 1/8 x 11 11/16 in. (38.4 x 29.6 cm). Private Collection. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

It's a wonderful introduction to form making, because you have to be so precise about every choice, you have to really know the effect if you're using a borer and then digging in on a plate, you have to understand exactly how much pressure to apply. Morandi is unexcelled in that way in his printmaking, even though you would think from the later works, and from his paintings alone, that he had a kind of expressionistic flare. But the control he had was truly extraordinary. I'm always interested in the idea of abstraction versus reality, or versus naturalism, because everything is an abstraction. And Morandi is constantly walking the line between what is abstract and what is naturalistic, and actually introducing the contradictions between the two. As you all know, you look at a painting by Morandi and the space between bottles turns out to be a third bottle, and things go from being fully

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realized objects to pure space, because the idea of the space changes, and the idea of what is real changes, in every Morandi. He basically plays with you constantly by guiding you along false paths from abstraction to reality.

Incidentally, one of the most extraordinary experiences you have in front of a Morandi is the fact that it's constantly shifting its meaning from form to space, and from abstraction to reality. At a certain point you realize a painting, and an etching, cannot be anything but abstract: going from two to three dimensions demands abstraction. And I find that in my own life, when I look at something, I'm very conscious that when I see something abstract, I immediately fill it in with something that's real, and when I see something that's real – I'm talking here about painting and etching – I immediately fill it in with abstraction. The great experience you have in looking at a Morandi is your own attempt, realized or not, to conceptualize what it is that you're looking at, and to separate out, to separate the spaces from the forms. Every painting by Morandi has this series of puzzles for you to solve, that you do automatically, basically, but with a sense of accomplishment, not knowing exactly what it is you've accomplished.

LUCCHI: Could we see some of your work that illustrates this practice?

GLASER: I'll show you some of the work I did when I was invited to do a poster for the Hermitage [in St. Petersburg]. It was basically a celebration of their poster collection. And what I have come to in my life, and maybe inferentially I learned this from Morandi, is that when I do something, I don't wait to start. Every time I have an interview with a student they always say, "What inspires you?" This is a misunderstanding, and what I have to tell them is, "What inspires me is the act of work." That inspiration doesn't come from out there because it's all in your brain to begin with. What I do is I step on the path and I start moving towards an objective that I don't know yet. I don't know where I'm going, all I know is that I've started. So, when I work on a computer – and I love the computer, even though at first it seemed like the worst enemy of anybody who was capable of drawing – when I work on the computer now, I love the path and its deviations. I love the fact when it goes off the path, then you have to pull it back and get on the path. When you design something, you always have an objective in mind, and the goal in design is to turn an existing condition into the preferred condition. You set the elements up so that you can follow a path by reducing the complexity,

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until you arrive at the objective. It's the opposite of what you do for a painting or a work of the imagination. When you do that, you start blindly down a path, and hope that walking down the path will lead you to the solution.

When I started working on the Hermitage design on the computer, I started with a head that I did as a paper cut (figure 3).

It wasn't interesting, so I went to a reverse of it in paper. That wasn't going anywhere, so I went to combining the two, the red one and the blue one, and splitting them. That looked like hell. Then I put them flat top to bottom with the words, and that didn't look good either. I widened them to see if they would look more interesting with typography, and that wasn't going anywhere. So I changed them and did another, and pulled another proof in paper. That didn't look like anything, and then I remembered that I had done some scarves on the computer, a series of five scarves that were related, so you could wear one, two, three, four, or five at the same time – a good commercial product that nobody ever bought. [Laughter] I started distributing the arrangement of the scarf forms until they looked sort of interesting. I worked on another one, and made the black more dense, eliminated most of the triangular forms, and I kept the typography, with dots left over. I brought back that white grid, superimposed on the pattern of scarves, and made it more intense and frequent. Then I remembered a Velázquez that was in the collection at the Hermitage, an extremely ugly man [laughter], and I thought, "Maybe I should start elsewhere..." I imposed that grid I had used earlier over him, but then decided he was *too* ugly. So I thought, maybe I can bring back the scarves? I

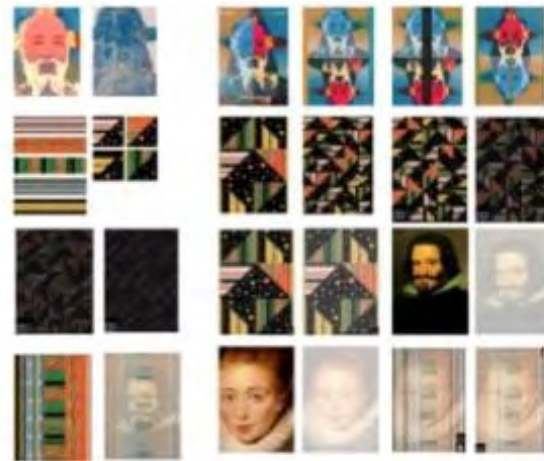


Figure 3. Milton Glaser, suite of designs in preparation of a poster marking the 250th anniversary of the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, 2014.

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brought back the scarves, superimposed on him. It was interesting, but he was now obliterated and still ugly. I went on. I remembered they had this fabulous Rubens painting of a beautiful woman. I threw out the Velázquez, placed her in the grid – it immediately looked better – and I reintroduced the scarves. [Laughter] And put on the logo for the show.

But the interesting thing was that the image itself, and the path of moving the image, led me to a conclusion that I wouldn't have arrived at if I had simply objectified it and decided in advance how to get there. And actually, these are things I did when I was in Bologna.

GUIDELLI-GUIDI: We have here some works that you made for Olivetti (figure 4). We were wondering if you wanted to talk about the influence that Italian art, old masters as well, have had on your imagination. Consider these two posters, one for Campari and one for Rimini.

GLASER: Well, there I don't think there was any direct influence from Italian art history, except in the Piero Di Cosimo that I used with that dog for Valentine typewriters. That is a part of a painting by Piero Di Cosimo, a mourning dog at the feet of Paris, I believe. I thought it would be funny to use the dog – I always loved that dog – at the base, showing only the feet of the poet and introducing an Olivetti typewriter into the composition. I don't know how many typewriters sold. [Laughter] The other poster was just references from other Italian paintings and architectural details, because the Olivetti typewriter was a ball typewriter – not much thinking there. But there are other things that occur, where being in Italy makes you think Italian, as you know...



Figure 4. Milton Glaser, selections of poster designs realized for Olivetti in the 1980s.

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LUCCHI: Another thing that is quite interesting, going back to your rapport with Morandi, is the idea that as a graphic designer you are a person who works a lot in communication. It's all about communication with your posters and your designs and the logo types, whereas the work of Morandi oftentimes is considered very silent, and laconic to some extent.

GLASER: The difference between communication and art is that in the communication business you're always trying to persuade someone to do something. Buy a product. Wear their hair differently. Eat more chocolate. Whatever it is. At the root of all commercial communication is persuasion. One of the great ethical problems for anybody in the communication business is, what are you persuading people to do? And is that persuasion useful to them or not? As you know if you are related to the advertising field, it is very rarely useful to the person who is being persuaded. The role of art, on the other hand, is to illuminate the real, to give people enough of an insight into the idea that their view of the world may not be accurate or real, so that they can reevaluate what reality is, or see it differently experientially.

Those are two very different functions. Sometimes they overlap, sometimes one can't be separated from the other, sometimes things that persuade also are life enhancing. I would use that term, I would say that art is intrinsically *life enhancing*. What it does is create a kind of relationship between all those who share the experience. So, if I listen to Mozart and you listen to Mozart, we already have something in common. That commonality, or that role of uniting a culture, and making people feel as though they have something in common, is essentially what art is about. Communication, and design, has no such responsibility, unless you want it to have that responsibility. And for people in professional life, increasingly they realize that they don't want to be responsible for people causing harm to themselves. So, one of the first questions I ask my students to ask themselves is, does this cause harm? And then, make up your mind whether you're going to do it anyhow, because at least awareness of the fact that you're producing harm is the beginning of a process. What we have now is denial about the harm that you do. I mean, cigarettes are an obvious villain, but the truth of the matter is almost anything you advertise is a villain. But at least you acknowledge that, right? And acknowledgement is the only way to begin.

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AUDIENCE QUESTION: What do you consider yourself – an illustrator, a graphic designer, or an artist?

GLASER: Well, I'm a designer. That's the way I live – hopeful that occasionally my work may have artistic content. I think you're an artist not by aspiration but by the effect your work has on others. You can call yourself anything you want, it doesn't make you anything you want. Everybody aspires to be an artist – who have you met that doesn't want to be an artist? How many artists are there, actually? The issue is not what you call yourself, because the great thing about art is that it's self-designated. Anybody can say they're an artist, there are no tests to pass! Any jerk, any moron, any guy on the street can say, "I'm an artist," and in fact be believed! So, the great thing about it is, finally, there is no criteria by which you measure an artist except by history, and the effect on others. You don't have to bother naming yourself, it doesn't matter. Others will name you.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Did Morandi extend any interest towards you as a visiting Fulbright scholar taking his class?

GLASER: Did he extend his interest to me in any way? Not at all. [Laughter] I mean, he was always polite, because he was a polite man. But I was indistinguishable from the other thirty girls in the class. [Laughter]

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Are there other Italian artists who have influenced you?

GLASER: Historically, yes. I was influenced by the great history of the Renaissance. I have a great love for Piero della Francesca, and Morandi had that same admiration. He loved Piero. And it would be easy to overlook the relationship between Piero and Morandi. But experientially, that same solidity, that same powdery color... I mean, it's hard to see, but once you see it, it's everywhere between the two. And I guess I would use that word again, the same sense of *authenticity*. You really believe what Piero is telling you. Even in his most fantastic creations, you believe because apparently he did too.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Could you speak about the issue of ethics in art? Do you think this topic should be taught in art school?

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GLASER: Well, it certainly shouldn't be taught as a separate issue for art students. I mean, ethical behavior is something you hope everyone shares. Certainly, art students shouldn't be exempted from that study either. First you are a member of a community, and now, above all, the need for ethical behavior has become overwhelming – this idea of doing no harm. When you see what's going on in the world, how are we going to get to a state where we recognize what we're doing? But because designers and artists are in the communications business, that means they have a central role in shaping understanding. And it's the same thing for journalists, right? You might look at this responsibility as a journalist does – you don't want to misrepresent reality, you don't want to lie to people, you don't want to persuade people to do things that are not based on their own good. I would not separate the need for artists to have this, except for the additional complexity of being in a situation where people are informed and persuaded by what you do to them. That means you have an extraordinary burden.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How have you experienced the work of Morandi over time? Has it changed?

GLASER: That's an interesting question, because it's so internal. I feel closer to Morandi now as an influence than I ever did when I was young and studying with him. I mean, we just bought a new house in the country, and we're painting the walls based on a Morandi painting. [*Laughter*] Yellow and tan and a pale blue...

Also, there's the idea of clarity and density and tonality and recognition. The question of when you recognize what you're looking at has become more interesting to me, and more a subject of what I do. What does it mean to make something clear, as opposed to making people reach for it? Those fundamental questions that exist in Morandi have – not consciously – basically changed the way I think about my work, particularly this idea of recognition. At what point do you do something where people understand what they're looking at? I've done a series, for instance, of portraits of Shakespeare, where he disappears by giving less and less information in the details. That is a kind of influence that I couldn't even evaluate, and didn't know I was going through, but I realize so much of it came out of my experience with Morandi.

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AUDIENCE QUESTION: What do you think about Morandi's choice of objects in his still lifes?

GLASER: That's not a question. [*Laughter*] The objects were chosen because Morandi was dealing with ideas about form – tall forms, squat forms, fat forms – and so what he has is a theater with a lot of different actors playing different roles on different occasions. What I find so touching is something I wasn't conscious of then, that many of these objects didn't otherwise exist! Many of them were not fully realized objects until Morandi saw the opportunity to turn them into a painted object. And so, what he needed was a repertoire of forms going in different directions, of different thicknesses, of different surfaces, because the way the surface receives life – light – is obviously one of his great concerns. Everything seems to have been encased in something before the light was shone on it. I think the tallness of some objects is just so he'd have a repertoire of being able to move up when he wanted to move up, or move sideways when he wanted to move sideways, or go squat when he wanted to go squat. The objects represent, many people have said, his little theatre. All those objects are actors.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Could you share some examples of what you were discussing earlier, of objects that were not intended as art in the first place but become perceived as art?

GLASER: I think they're all over the place. You know, one of the great discoveries of Duchamp and early Surrealism was this idea of found objects. Marcel Duchamp spent his whole life identifying urinals and common objects that he considered as good as sculpture. If you have that frame of mind, they are! That is one of the things about changing your perception. If you look at a urinal and forget about what it is, and see the light off of its surface, and the intersection of light and metal forms... There are things that lend themselves to that, and then the question of whether it's art or not becomes moot. If Duchamp was able to make a lifetime of work out of that, it's good enough for the rest of us. [*Laughter*]

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Is there a particular period in your working life that you favor the most?

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GLASER: You know, one thing I learned from Picasso was that you don't have to be loyal to style. That there was no way of creating art that was guaranteed to work. That modernism was a style, it was not the inevitable consequence of truth, but merely a way of working at a certain period that was useful for a certain time because it communicated certain things to a certain audience. I realized that fairly early in life, probably about the same time I was studying with Morandi and looking at Renaissance Italy and going around and realizing that a building built in the fourteenth century was much more beautiful than a Mies van der Rohe. I began to think of how limited we are, as practitioners, to think that the style of the moment is the only one that can be effectively practiced. Morandi suffered from this all his life, really. He was always a kind of outsider among the Futurists, for instance, and among the Surrealists who were around him and succeeding.⁷

Morandi was always out there by himself, not identifying with a particular methodology or style, but just doing his work, these magnificent things that have no precedent, they are just inventions that could have come from anywhere in history. And so, in my own work, I'm really interested in what I've been doing and I hate the idea that people identify me with a particular way of working. We're all limited by our own neurology, but I'd like to think that has not been my practice – that I've tried to move the way I think along to accommodate my own change of interests, rather than the marketplace.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Did Morandi teach drawing in that etching class that you took?

GLASER: No, Morandi never taught. Remember what I said earlier – all those girls had never studied art. I mean, they couldn't draw if they had to! So they would draw in a very rudimentary, unexperienced style, and Morandi would just criticize it from a production point of view – if you put it in the acid this long, and you dampened the paper this way, you get this kind of imagery. We never talked about drawing.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: So what did you talk about in class?

GLASER: I told you, good restaurants, good transportation. [Laughter] He spoke rarely, but he never talked about art. He would talk about what was going on in town, if there was a good movie playing, etc. But never about art.

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AUDIENCE QUESTION: Did you take any other classes at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna?

GLASER: No, all I studied was with Morandi. One or two days a week, that's all. You know, what is really astonishing is how powerful an effect a very short experience can have. Sometimes, you can have a conversation with somebody, it lasts twenty minutes, and your life is changed forever. And with Morandi, his presence, and his authenticity, was so powerful that once you were willing to accept it, it was totally transformative, in the same way as these paintings are transformative. You will not be the same after seeing Morandi.

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Citations

1. Glaser's participation in the Fulbright program is sometimes erroneously reported as 1951, notably in the exhibition catalogue, *Giorgio Morandi, Milton Glaser* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989). The date 1952 is confirmed by a number of official Fulbright sources, including an interview to Glaser for the Fulbright alumni project, and Glaser's 2011 Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal. These can be accessed, respectively here and here (last accessed October 29, 2019). The date 1952 is further corroborated by Glaser's participation in a 1953 exhibition by Fulbright artists held at the American Academy in Rome; see "Cronache," in *Emporium. Rivista illustrata mensile di arte e cultura* CXVIII, 704 (August 1953): 82.
2. "Fulbright Program History," U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs website (last accessed October 29, 2019); see also *Congressional Record*, vol. 91, Part 7 (1945), 9044.

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3. See Board of Foreign Scholarships, *Fulbright Program Exchanges* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1980), 25; and Board of Foreign Scholarships, *A Quarter Century, The American Adventure in Academic Exchange; A Report* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1971).
4. A native-born New Yorker, Glaser in his youth would have not had much occasion to see Morandi's paintings. The few exhibitions of his work in New York in the 1930s and 1940s consisted of etchings. With Morandi's international renown increasing exponentially in the aftermath of World War II, in the 1950s his paintings were featured in focused group and solo shows, leading to two large solo exhibitions of his work at the World House Galleries in 1957 and 1960–61.
5. In 1930, through the intercession of Fascist minister Giuseppe Bottai, Morandi was appointed chair of etching at the Accademia di Bologna – “per chiara fama.” He held this position until he retired, in 1956. It remains unclear why Glaser's classmates in 1952 were teenage girls, but it is known that by 1952 Morandi was only sporadically making new etchings because of his declining eyesight.
6. Morandi's provinciality is legendary. He spent his life between Bologna and Grizzana, a mountain town south of the city, and traveled abroad only once. He did, however, travel to Florence, Venice, and other notable Italian locales more often than is commonly alleged, and kept in contact with the artists, dealers, critics, and collectors of his generation.
7. Dissatisfied with academicism, the young Morandi befriended artists in Bologna such as Osvaldo Licini, Severo Pozzati, and Mario and Riccardo Bacchelli, who avidly absorbed modernism through illustrated magazines and exhibitions. In 1913, he traveled to Modena and Florence to attend Futurist-organized evenings of art and music; in 1914, in Bologna, he attended Filippo Tomaso Marinetti's performance of *Elettricità futurista* (Futurist Electricity). Around that time, Morandi and his peers exhibited their Futurist-inspired paintings at the Hotel Baglioni in central Bologna; through that exposure he was called to participate in the *Esposizione libera futurista internazionale* (Free International Futurist Exhibition) at Galleria Sprovieri in Rome. Glaser's mention of Surrealism is likely in reference to Morandi's early encounter, in 1917, with the work of Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. Over the following two years, his own brief metaphysical period gave him international visibility through the publication of his work in Mario Broglio's international journal *Valori plastici* (1918–22) and traveling

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Milton Glaser

Milton Glaser is an artist and graphic designer. He was a founder of Push Pin Studios, and later established *New York Magazine* and his own graphic design studio, Milton Glaser, Inc. He is the author of the iconic "I Heart NY" trademark logo (1977) and of many successful advertising posters and trademarks for companies including Brooklyn Brewery, Campari, DC Comics, and Olivetti. As a Fulbright grant recipient, he traveled to Italy in 1952 and worked alongside Italian artist Giorgio Morandi in Bologna. Glaser is the recipient of a National Medal of Arts (2009).

Matilde Guidelli-Guidi

Matilde Guidelli-Guidi is Assistant Curator at Dia Art Foundation and a PhD candidate in Art History at The Graduate Center, CUNY, where she advises master's degree students. Titled "Archipelagos of Knowledge: Le Corbusier's Museums, 1919–1965," her dissertation takes Le Corbusier's lifelong commitment to reimagining the modern museum as an entry point through which to analyze discourses and practices of museum architecture in France, from the aftermath of World War I through the decades of decolonization up until 1965. At Dia, Matilde is preparing exhibitions of the work of Mario Merz, Jill Magid, Meg Webster, and Luciano Fabro, among other projects. She was the recipient of two Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellowships and a 2015–16 Fellow at CIMA, where she researched the work of Giorgio Morandi.

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Nicola Lucchi is Substitute Lecturer of Italian at Queens College. He received his PhD in Italian Studies from New York University in 2016. His research interests include twentieth-century Italian art and literature, industrial history, labor history, and the reception of Italian culture in the United States. He has published articles and book chapters on Eugenio Montale, Bruno Munari, and Italian Futurism.