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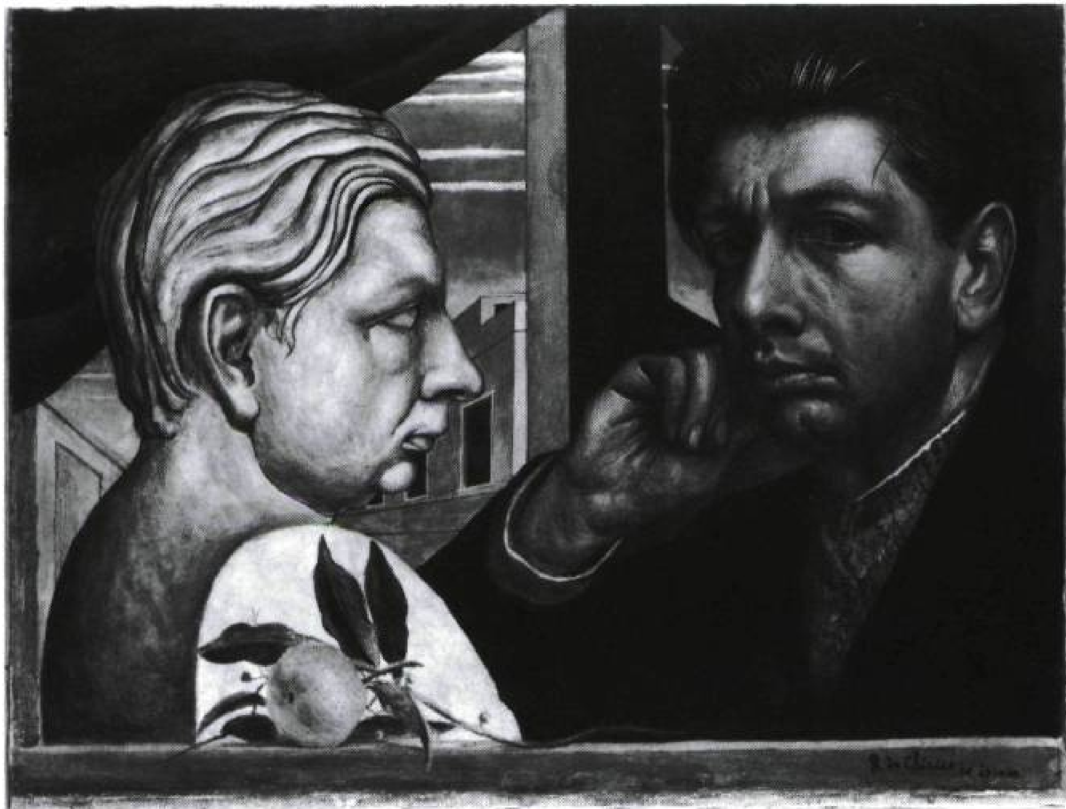
Memory and Modernity : Italian Art in the Twentieth Century



Giorgio De Chirico, *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1922. Oil on canvas; 38,4 x 51,1 cm.
Courtesy The Toledo Museum of Art. Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey

Italian Art in the Twentieth Century : Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988,
Royal Academy (London),
January 14 to April 9, 1989 —

The Monument to King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy is a mountainous snowscape of walls, columns and statues that squats ponderously near the centre of Imperial Rome. Built of Brescian marble that remains startling in its white brightness, the Monument rises storey upon storey until the two quadrigae on its summit become unexpected and unwelcome elements in the views from the Forum Romanum, the Colosseum, and Michelangelo's Piazza del Campidoglio. Its bombastic forms derive their basic syntax from Classical and Renaissance architecture, but this syntax is sufficiently altered that the Monument refuses to identify itself with its surroundings. Yet its destruction is almost unimaginable. Now often seen as emblematic of the pomposity and thuggery associated with Italian political life under Fascism, it seems as valid a statement of the first half of the twentieth century as the Piazza del Campidoglio was of the sixteenth, or the Forum was of the Roman Republic and Empire.

The Monument was inaugurated in 1911. This, despite the subtitle of the Royal Academy's *Italian Art in the Twentieth Century : Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988*, is almost exactly the same date as the one implied by the organizers of that exhibition as the beginning point of twentieth-century Italian art. They favour c.1909, when Giorgio de Chirico began to formulate the iconography of nostalgia for what became Italian Metaphysical painting, and the year in which (on February 20) Filippo Marinetti published his "Manifesto del Futurismo" in *Le Figaro*.As Norman Rosenthal (who, with Germano Celant, organized the exhibition) writes in his introductory catalogue essay, "The tension between desire for the new and self-consciousness towards the past has coloured the most diverse art movements in Italy throughout the century." The Futurists sought to murder time, while de Chirico registered the eerie dissonance of the blending of the visual and psychological trappings of a noble past with the mundane reality of the present. Although nowhere mentioned or represented in this exhibition, the Monument to Victor Emmanuel II is — in its well-intentioned reworking of architectural tradition within an unabashedly modern context — paradigmatic of the relationship with the past and the determination to be contemporary that is addressed by most of the artworks on display.

This argument for a past-present dialectic is one of the strengths as well as one of the potential weaknesses of this exhibition, as was the corresponding argument for the 1985 show of twentieth-century German art at the Royal Academy. With the exceptions of Futurism, de Chirico and the current neo-figurative painters, Italian art since the end of the eighteenth century has received comparatively little attention in North America. A conceptual framework for ordering the 234 works on display is thus useful, and the Royal Academy is happy to play Kant. Conversely, such a schema risks reinforcing the accepted reductionist wisdom of many art historical surveys that there is little to discuss in twentieth-century Italian art *except* Futurism and de Chirico, the former seen as a forerunner of Surrealism, and the latter of Conceptual Art. The Academy's approach replaces this teleological emphasis with one based on a supposedly shared set of national responses. Such approaches must necessarily be handled carefully to avoid slipping into the historicist and/or essentialist fallacies.

As if to illustrate this danger, the Symbolist painting that was such an important part of pre-WWI art in Italy is completely absent from the walls of the RA, while two nearly Impressionistic 1890's wax sculptures by Medardo Rosso *are* included. The viewer suspects that Rosso's inclusion is owed to the Futurists' praise for his ideas about simultaneity and the persistence of retinal images. Certainly Rosso was implacably hostile to the Futurists' fascination with the depiction of movement, but in the context of this exhibition he is a bridge between the poles of artistic tradition, and engagement with modern society. The same reconciliation of dichotomies can be found in the Novecento group of painters. They formulated a visual accompaniment to Mussolini's tragi-comic attempt at a renaissance of Italy as a world power through the replacement of the radical aspirations of the Futurists with his own reactionary Fascism. Significantly (given the twin poles of tradition and anti-tradition around which this exhibition revolves) these Novecento artists included such erstwhile Futurists as Mario Sironi and Carlo Carrà. They abandoned their earlier splintering of form and retreated from the antihistorical rush of modernity to the timelessness of Quattrocento solidity of form (*valori plastici*; the term even became the name of an influential journal published from 1919 to 1921).

Approaching the same problem from the opposite direction after the Second World War, Alberto Burri typified the 1950's Informel and the 1960's Arte Povera readiness to attack traditional conceptions of art and beauty when he began metamorphically manipulating such traditionally non-art materials as burlap and iron. Yet his objets, like those of such next-generation artists as Lucio Fontana, Jannis Kounellis and Pino Pascali, are pungent with the artist's yearning to penetrate beneath surfaces to find primal essences. Historical ideas about aesthetic acceptability may be denied, but history is evoked nonetheless. The yearning is culture-historical in Kounellis' plaster casts of antique portrait busts, and evocatively primal in the black scorch marks and the elusive smell from Calor gas bottles in his sculptures employing fire, that most archaic symbol of change and purification. Personal, cultural and anthropological nostalgia are conjoined aspects of a single desire that is — fittingly— subsumed within a determination to redefine what one means by art in the impersonal context of contemporary, technologically-advanced Western Society.

Here, then, is a clue in the archaeology of Post-modernism — the emotional and classically figurative heroism of Sandro Chia (so like the Monument to Victor Emmanuel II in intention and impact), the fall-of-Empire visions of Enzo Cucchi (who, as Norman Rosenthal reminds us in one of his catalogue essays, lives in the Romanesque-soaked atmosphere of Ancona), the Beuys-like rituals encoded in Mimmo Paladino's paintings, and the now-searing/now-comic explorations of self and history in the work of Francesco Clemente. Post-modernism may be as much a dynamic inherent in the logic of twentieth-century Italian art as an international phenomenon of the past two decades. In Clemente's *Priapea* (1980) six putti (recognizably culled from Italian Renaissance paintings) play a cruel game with Clemente/Orpheus, handing and tossing his severed head and limbs to one another. It has elsewhere been argued that each of the putti is Clemente's child-

hood self, wreaking vengeance upon his adult self for the latter's inability to satisfy the child's «hungers»[1]. Whether or not that is an accurate reading, *Priapea* is rife with images of the potency of the unrecapturable personal and cultural past, and of how that past continues to exert its simultaneously constructive and destructive influence on the present. In this sense, the artists of the transavanguardia are the inevitable culminating figures of this most carefully structured exhibition. Their art combines, in single images, the doppelganger concepts of tradition and modernity, past and present, the known and the unknown. Despite their protestations to the contrary, Boccioni and de Chirico were two sides of an indivisible Italian coin.

The inevitable danger of structuring such a temporally expansive exhibition around a specific theme is that artists' careers may be slighted or interpreted with excessive rigour. This was a significant problem in the Academy's 1985 German exhibition which, in its search for an expressionist essence, entirely ignored Nazi art and gave only a nod to Berlin Dada and the Bauhaus. In the present exhibition this tendency is less problematic, a fact which may well be a tribute to the validity of the organizers' basic thesis. Modigliani causes slight awkwardness insofar as he had little interest in saving or slaying the Italian past, and even less of an impact on other Italian artists after c.1930. Consequently he is the only artist in the show to have a room entirely to himself. (Is it significant that this room is the only dimly-lit one in the exhibition ? Has Modigliani, whose work cannot be squeezed into the theme of the present as dialogue with the past, been given a shrine in homage to his ability to transcend what the Academy identifies as the essence of twentieth-century Italian art ?)

Of course it is always possible to play Spot-the-Missing-Artist. Where, for example, is Carlo Maria Mariani ? His obsession with late eighteenth-century Neoclassicism (based largely on what he sees as that era's melancholy nostalgia for the classical past) seems tailor-made for this exhibition. In most cases, however, deploring the omission of artists is unfair. The organizers necessarily had to limit the number of exhibited works, and to try to identify some salient themes that would allow the visitor to come to terms with the wealth of material on display. In many cases examples of the work of excluded artists are reproduced in the uniformly perceptive catalogue essays. It *is* fair, however, to ask why, of the 50 exhibited artists, only one (Carla Accardi) is a woman. The exclusion of all media other than painting and sculpture was also a limiting factor, particularly because the photographs of someone like Luigi Ontani are particularly trenchant comments on the inter-relationship of past and present as an issue in contemporary Italian art.

Conversely, the organizers' underlying thesis has encouraged them to put unusual and valuable emphases on neglected aspects of certain artists' careers. This is particularly the case with de Chirico. Whereas de Chirico's post-1919 work is almost always ignored in exhibitions, this one includes nine paintings from the 1920's as well as twelve from the preceding decade. As Paolo Baldacci points out in his catalogue essay, Mnemosyne (the persona of Memory) was both the mother of art and the inspiration of the poet, and the poet uses memory to telescope the past and the future into the present. In Orphic religion Memory redeemed human beings from individual destiny by reuniting each person's soul with its divine principle, thus removing it from the temporal cycle of life. De Chirico articulated this ideal (the strength of which can be gauged by the vehemence with which the Futurists felt obliged to attack it) throughout his career, and had a profound impact on many (possibly most) of the artists included in the Royal Academy's survey. With 21 paintings, therefore, it is fitting that he is the undisputed linchpin of this frequently contentious but consistently intelligent exhibition.

Brian Foss

NOTE

1. Carter Ratcliff, "On Iconography and Some Italians", *Art in America*, 70 (September 1982), pp. 154-155