

*Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's Twentieth-century Italian Art (1949)*  
CIMA – Winter Study Day – February 12, 2019

ABSTRACTS

**Davide Colombo / Silvia Bignami**

*Two Americans in Italy: Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James T. Soby at Venice Biennale and Rome Quadriennale*

After the Trustees of MoMA approved the exhibition *Twentieth-century Italian Art*, Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James Thrall Soby planned a “Grand Tour” from May to June 1948 to visit artists, dealers, collectors, museums and galleries throughout Italy.

In the process of organizing the show, Barr recognized it was important to contact the main figures of the Italian art panorama, and, particularly, to enlist Romeo Toninelli as Executive Secretary. However, he believed it was even more crucial to select artworks independently and carefully, as well as avoid official entanglements.

That’s the point. What did they see? What are they looking for? What did they choose? What did they borrow from their travels abroad? This paper aims to analyze the reasons underlying their interest in Italian art and to highlight the points of view of two American art critics. In *Twentieth-century Italian Art*, Soby and Barr highlighted a specific history and independence from French art, as well as a newer creative impetus that began to take shape in Italy after WWII. In effect, the show was a foundational moment for the reception of Italian art in the international context of modernism.

We can trace Barr and Soby’s Grand Tour along the peninsula thanks to two notebooks and a pocket diary belonging to Soby, as well as Margareth Scolari Barr’s travel diary: these texts outline a journey spanning from Milan to Brescia, from Rome to Venice; from the V Quadriennale in Rome to the XXIV Biennale in Venice. The first editions of the Quadriennale and Biennale after WWII manifested as a new opportunity for Barr and Soby to see the work of a substantial group of contemporary Italian artists after World War II and compare it to the more advanced artistic production taking place internationally. Thus, comparing what they saw with what they showed, it is useful to better understand their American point of view.

**Renato Camurri**

*A Transatlantic Intellectual Space: Italy and United States (1922–1950)*

This presentation aims to define a historical framework of cultural relations and cultural exchanges between Italy and the United States from 1922 to 1950.

Within this time frame, the report identifies three crucial steps: the first coincides with the rise to power of the Mussolini regime and the beginning of a new phase of diplomatic, political and cultural relations between the two countries. In the wake of the most recent studies on the foreign policy of Italian fascism, I am interested to highlight how culture became a fundamental tool of the so-called “parallel diplomacy” that Mussolini immediately used since 1922 to gain the consensus of the Italian-American communities. The second crucial passage coincides with the introduction in 1938 of anti-Jewish legislation and the beginning of the exile of Italian intellectuals and scientists to the United States. I want to outline, using a comparative

perspective, some peculiarities of the Italian exile, highlighting the impact that this migratory wave had on American academic and scientific institutions, the relationships that Italian exiles developed with various sectors of the American administration and their role inside the cultural circuits activated by European refugees. Unlike the antecedent period, cultural exchanges developed thanks to the continuous contamination of experiences and knowledge: this typology of intellectual moves inside a transnational cultural space, strongly oriented to the debate regarding the characteristics of totalitarian regimes and on the future of democracy. The third step concerns the period after 1945. The rapid redefinition of international balances and the beginning of the Cold War heavily influence the resumption of cultural exchanges. In other words, culture returns to be one of the tools of the political struggle (predominantly anti-communist) or an instrument for the construction of new diplomatic strategies, as it happens with the revival of Italian art. To better address this point I will use here some examples: the figure – in many ways exemplary – of Max Ascoli, an intellectual who moves between the academic world, political-diplomatic and cultural networks and international organizations; and I will refer to the activities realized by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation as well as by the Olivetti Foundation in various disciplinary fields.

### **Sergio Cortesini**

*The Italian Novecento in America before 1949*

“Our radical painters still get much of their inspiration from France, our conservatives from Italy”, claimed American editorialist Robert L. Duffuss in 1929. His remark describes the narrow terrain left to modern Italian artists as they attempted to attract critical attention and raise their market values in the United States during the 1930s. This paper aims to immerse in some of the critical discourses of the period and see how the identity of a modern Italian art was negotiated in the interplay between Italian promoters and American art-minded public. While in Italy much of the criticism boasted a self-assuring “unmistakable” and “untranslatable” character of national art through the centuries, and was obsessed by the chauvinistic ambition of regaining a cultural *primato*, especially against the French, the returns of various artists or patrons who ventured – either through private or government-sponsored initiatives – 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” accepted by the MoMA, before 1949). Some of the Italian modernists, such as Modigliani, De Chirico or Campigli, continued to be perceived as French, while the inherent duality and ambiguity in the critical discourse undergirding either the Novecento or the more expressionist younger generation – one that struggled to conflate Italianism and modernity, traditionalism and vanguard – just made the marketing of an Italian school more difficult. Therefore, despite some temporary critical success and sales, such as for Felice Carena or Felice Casorati, the language of the Italian Novecento by and large was largely “lost in translation.”

### **Adrian R. Duran**

*Neo-Cubism and Italian Painting ca. 1949: More Than Meets the Eye*

By the end of the second World War, Cubism's influence on European Modernism was omnipresent. This was uniquely true in the case of Italy, where the influence of the movement was equal parts aesthetic and ideological. Using MoMA's 1949 *Twentieth-century Italian Art* exhibition as a fulcrum, this essay will explore the specific manifestations of this influence, often described as "Neo-Cubism," within Italy's midcentury avant-garde. Groups such as Il Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, FORMA 1, and the Movimento per l'arte concreta absorbed and integrated the lessons of Cubism in myriad ways, from the geometric fragmentation of Analytic Cubism to the social and political commentaries of Synthetic Cubism and later works such as 1937's *Guernica* and 1939's *Nightfishing at Antibes*. These negotiations were critical factors in the development of both post-Fascist artistic languages and new agendas for Italian art of the late-1940s and the 1950s. Through formal explorations of the works themselves, married with de(re)constructions of the critical discourse of the time—particularly the writings of Giuseppe Marchiori, Lionello Venturi, and the artists themselves—this investigation hopes to reveal the true richness of this influence, as well as the ways in which Italian artists at the midcentury integrated other Modernist movements and aesthetics into their configurations of Neo-Cubism.

### **Sharon Heker**

*A Friendly Competition: Collecting Postwar Italian Art in the Midwest*

Collecting art is usually seen as an individual occupation, motivated by personal passion, desire to possess, economic investment or archival process. 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 Italian postwar art, which my paper will examine in detail. Through interviews with family members and research into archival material, I will trace the identities of these collectors (Pulitzer, Weil, Shoenberg, May, Bernoudy and Singer) and examine the mechanisms through which productive rivalries arose. I will concentrate 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 show and its organizers? How did MoMA shows, pre-packaged for further exhibition in the Midwest, influence collectors' tastes? How did travel abroad to exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale affect their acquisition habits, whose opinion did they trust and which dealers did they buy from? These questions and their ramifications will be discussed. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the process through which, by 1965, St. Louis collectors were identified in Harold Rosenberg's *Esquire* article as tastemakers in the field of contemporary art.

### **Laura Moure Cecchini**

*"Positively the only person to be interested in the show": Romeo Toninelli collector and diplomat between Milan and New York*

Romeo Toninelli, whose official title was Executive Secretary for the exhibition in Italy, was a key figure in the organization of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. An Italian art dealer, editor, and

collector, 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, who wanted this exhibition to signal the re-birth of Italian art after its presumed fall, represented by the rise of the fascist regime. Whether Toninelli agreed with this approach we do not know. Nonetheless, it is plain to see that he played a major part in the tortuous transatlantic organization of the show. Toninelli acted as the intermediary between the 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. As someone who had begun collecting recently rather than someone during the interwar period, Toninelli was mistrusted by the Italians, who suspected him of having commercial motives. Critics Lamberto Vitali and Fernanda Wittgens, for example, would have preferred the Italian artistic establishment to have a larger say in the organization of the show. Toninelli, by contrast, arranged the practical side of the operations but intervened little in the decision process about which artists to include in the show, which was exactly what MoMA wanted. Despite remaining behind the scenes, Toninelli was wholeheartedly committed to the 1949 MoMA show: as Barr wrote to him in 1950, "had it not been for the exhibition our Italian collection would still be seriously limited, and had it not been for you, there would have been no exhibition."

### **William Norman**

#### *Saul Steinberg and the Unstable US Cultural Field of the Late Forties*

This paper addresses the US 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 end of the decade, characterized by pronounced uncertainty and tension over what forms and practices should be understood as legitimate. The paper 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). Steinberg emigrated from Italy to the United States 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 early engagements with 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.

### **Ilaria Schiaffini**

#### *It's Roman Holiday for Artists: The American Artists of L'Obelisco*

From the second half of the '40s through the '60s, the Galleria L'Obelisco was among the most international of galleries in Rome. The two owners, Gaspero del Corso and Irene Brin, established close relationships with the United States from 1946, when the gallery was established, to the end of the 1950s. In 1953, the Obelisco organized the first European exhibition of Robert Rauschenberg, as well as shows of Eugène Berman, Roberto Matta, Saul Steinberg,

Alexander Calder and many others. In 1957, a retrospective exhibition was dedicated to Arshile Gorky, with a preface by Afro.

Irene Brin, a prominent fashion journalist, and Gaspero del Corso looked with a special interest at the United States starting in 1945, when they managed the small gallery La Margherita. It was there that the "Fantasts" section – included in *Twentieth-century Italian Art* exhibition at the MoMA in 1949, where it was scrutinized by the art dealer Peter Lindamood and Alexander Iolas, then director of the Hugo Gallery – took shape.

The American artists hosted in del Corso and Brin's gallery were drawn to Rome by the flowering of the Neorealismo and by Cinecittà, which struck them as a new Renaissance. Irene Brin was interested in cinema, photography and fashion and her international links (especially since she became the Rome Editor of "Harper's Bazaar" in 1952), made L'Obelisco a reference point for American artists, collectors and merchants when they were in Rome. L'Obelisco promoted neo-romantic and surrealist artists, who worked in fashion and ballet in NY, such as Berman, Carlyle Brown, Pavel Tchelitchew. In the 1950s, the collaboration with L'Obelisco intermingled with a number of paths that led many American artists to Rome: Matta and Berman moved there, Calder worked repeatedly in Italy, and (as it is well known) Rauschenberg owes to L'Obelisco the knowledge of Burri's "Sacchi", that were major influences on his own works from the 1950s. In addition to these factors, we should mention the strong relationships established by the Del Corso couple with Laurance P. Roberts, director of the American Academy in Rome from 1946 to 1960, as well as their friend and client. The exhibition dedicated to him at L'Obelisco in December 1960 ended fifteen years of intense cultural exchange between the gallery and US artistic culture.