

INTRODUCTION

italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/introduction-4/

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Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916–1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà, Issue 4, July 2020

ABSTRACT

A brief overview of the fourth issue of *Italian Modern Art* dedicated to Metaphysical art, pointing out the novelties with which each researcher has contributed to the current art-historical debate.

By studying specific case studies, as well as wider artistic contexts, the present issue of *Italian Modern Art* aims to shed new light on the role played by Metaphysical art in the formation of Italian modernisms. The approach behind the exhibition *Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916–1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà* at the Center for Italian Modern Art provided

a solid starting point: the choice made by curators Laura Mattioli and James Bradburne to present *Metafisica* as the expression of many different voices, each giving a personal interpretation and contribution, facilitated the multiplication of potential points of view from which to engage with complex artistic phenomena. Thus, the themes that were selected for the call-for-papers for the *Metaphysical Masterpieces* Study Days were highly varied and wide-ranging. The aim was to have a sense of the directions in which the objectives of current studies of *Pittura Metafisica* were developing. Two main topics emerged as leitmotifs in the investigations of researchers across Europe and the United States. The first theme was the cultural relationship between Italy and Germany, and more generally within Europe, during World War I and in the years that immediately followed. The second theme was the reception, among contemporary patrons and collectors, of the Metaphysical phases of the artists exhibited in *Metaphysical Masterpieces*. Consequently, two sessions were dedicated to specific topics, whereas a third was reserved for papers that seemed less classifiable, although equally compelling.

The question of the impact of *Pittura Metafisica* in Germany reflects its multifarious facets and the difficulty of enclosing it within a rigid interpretative framework of influences and derivations. Although this topic has been tackled in previous literature, the research presented during the Study Days offered new perspectives that challenged assumptions often taken for granted, emphasizing the importance of long-overlooked aspects. Many of the essays seemed to suggest that the impact of *Metafisica* on the development of avant-garde movements in the 1920s needed to be addressed further.

In the present issue, Maria Elena Versari's essay "Chiriko wird Akademikprofessor': Expectations, Misunderstandings, and Appropriations of *Pittura Metafisica* Among the 1920s European Avant-Garde" sheds fresh light on similarities among Italian and German prewar movements including Futurism, Dada, and Constructivism, framing the early reception of Giorgio de Chirico's and Carlo Carrà's

works as experienced by artists at the forefront of visual experimentation, among them Kurt Schwitters, Raoul Hausmann, and Theo van Doesburg. According to Versari, by 1919 Schwitters was referring to Futurism's *bruitism* and to Umberto Boccioni's theorization of the use of a plurality of materials in sculpture as an alternative to Expressionism. The same call for a return to materiality was shared by other German Dadaists, and, in 1920, the critical reception of Vladimir Tatlin's art was intertwined with that of Pittura Metafisica. What looks like a misunderstanding of the theoretical premises of the Italian movement is at the origin of Hausmann's appropriation and obsessive analysis of the Metaphysical theme of the mannequin head, as Versari demonstrates by analyzing a corpus of his sketch drawings. Finally, articles published in *De Stijl* between 1918 and 1920 by Theo van Doesburg, under the pseudonym of Camini, are used by Versari to illustrate the controversiality of the interpretation of Carrà's rejection of Futurism in favor of Pittura Metafisica.

Carlotta Castellani's essay "'Dada Marshall and Propagandada' George Grosz and 'Metapolitiker' Theodor Däubler: Metafisica and Politics in Berlin, 1920," too acknowledges Pittura Metafisica's influence on Berlin Dada, although from a different perspective: it investigates the political implications underlying references to Metafisica between 1919 and 1920. Events such as the November Revolution (1918), the Spartacus uprising (1919), and the Kapp Putsch (1920) made the postwar years critical for German society; in Berlin, in particular, any separation between the aesthetic and the political became difficult. The interest of the politically engaged artist George Grosz and the more conservative poet and art critic Theodor Däubler in Italian modern art is considered in close relationship with this political context. Grosz's and Däubler's antithetical approaches to Pittura Metafisica and *Valori Plastici* is paralleled by the ambiguous fortune of de Chirico in the same period and context. Castellani shows that the influence of the Italian artist is particularly evident in Grosz's and Hausmann's Metaphysical paintings. On this point, her reading of Berlin Dada is aligned with Versari's

perspective, but gives more importance to the political implications of these Italian references. They are interpreted as a way to subvert the bourgeois idea of the “Metaphysical” as a spiritual value given to art, promoting a materialistic *Metafisica*, or *neue Gegenständlichkeit* (generally translated ‘new Representationality’ into English-speaking literature, although slightly inaccurate), linked to Russian contemporary art. In contrast, Däubler’s participation in the organization, with Ludwig Justi, of the *Valori Plastici* exhibition at the Kronprinzenpalais, during the “Berlin Museum War,” assumes a more “conservative” connotation.

The Kronprinzenpalais art show is central in Emanuele Greco’s essay “The Origin of Ambiguity: Considerations on the Exhibition Strategies of Metaphysical Painting in the Exhibitions of the *Valori Plastici* group, 1921–22,” which focuses on the different exhibition strategies Mario Broglio implemented, between 1921 and 1922 in Germany and Florence, to present the output of *Pittura Metafisica*. Between the spring and autumn of 1921, the “traveling” exhibition of the *Valori Plastici* group entitled *Das junge Italien* (The Young Italy) was set up in the Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Kestner-Gesellschaft Cultural Association, Hannover; Hansa Werkstätten Bookshop and Art Gallery, Hamburg; Vereinigung der Göttinger Freunde, Göttingen; and Richter Art Gallery, Dresden. A detailed analysis of the two hundred works exhibited allows Greco to underline the prominence of Metaphysical works by de Chirico, Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi with respect to works made in previous phases. After the conclusion of the German tour, at the end of March 1922, a considerable number of the works were sent to Florence for the *Fiorentina Primavera*, where a room was devoted to the *Valori Plastici* group. In this exceptional case, Broglio presented more recent and naturalistic artworks.

The relationships between German and Italian artists throughout the decade of the 1920s is analyzed also in Filippo Bosco’s paper “*Italienspielerei*: Italian and German Painting from *Metafisica* to *Magischer Realismus*.” Starting from the expression *Italienspielerei* (Italian game), coined by the art critic Paul Westheim to describe the

inconsistent impact of de Chirico's and Carrà's paintings on German artists who were part of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), Bosco carefully examines a web of transnational contacts, beyond the well-known influence of *Valori Plastici*. The output of artists like Georg Schrimpf, Richard Seewald, and Max Unold, who presented works of an "Italian-like" style in Munich and Berlin in late 1921, is analyzed in order to show the role they played in the so-called "crisis" of Expressionism. Moreover, Bosco overturns the usual perspective to focus on the strong ties that did exist between German painters and Italian artists from 1921 to 1925, which were underestimated in historiographies of Italian realism in the 1920s, and rejected by coeval Italian critics and in the chauvinist rhetoric of Margherita Sarfatti's *Novecento Italiano*. Access to knowledge of German art was possible through the illustrated journals that widely circulated in libraries and cultural clubs: these German visual sources were important for many Italian painters, such as Raffaele De Grada, Gigiotti Zanini, Niklaus Stoecklin, Ubaldo Oppi, Carlo Mense, Pierangelo Stefani, and Cagnaccio di San Pietro. Thus, according to Bosco, the formalist analysis offered by Franz Roh in *Nachexpressionismus – Magischer Realismus* (Post-Expressionism – Magic Realism, 1925) still represents a valid framework for reconstructing actual points of contact among European artists and for re-collocating *Pittura Metafisica* at the core of European realism in exhibitions of the late 1920s, and in their retrospective interpretations.

As anticipated by some of the essays presented in the session devoted to Italian-German relationships, Metaphysical painting, as well as other artistic trends, was visually disseminated in the interwar period through exhibition and editorial networks, thanks to the proliferation of art magazines and commercial galleries as spaces of cultural production and taste. Simona Storchi's essay "Metaphysical Writing and the 'Return to Order': Artistic Theorization and Modernist Magazines Between 1916 and 1922" looks at the extensive theorization and critical activity carried out by artists involved in the Metaphysical movement between 1916 and 1922, with particular reference to the writings of Carrà and de

Chirico. Storchi's focus on the Italian magazines *La Brigata*, *La Raccolta*, *Valori Plastici*, *La Ronda*, *Il primato artistico italiano*, and *Il Convegno* as distinctive spaces of cultural production casts new light not only on magazines as important forums for the theorization of Metaphysical art, but also on the reconceptualization of the classical as central to the redefinition of interwar national culture. This ample circulation, which mostly involved artists, critics, art dealers, and collectors, led to the reinterpretation of Metaphysical forms and themes activated new artistic research. In this context, in the years of the so-called Return to Order, seminal art groups were founded, among them the above-mentioned *Valori Plastici* and *Novecento Italiano*, whose output was characterized by the reappropriation of Italian tradition through the establishment of a modern language. In this context, Antonio David Fiore's study of the processes through which, during the 1920s, the pictorial solutions of recent Italian painting were appropriated by Gio Ponti and Giovanni Muzio – in the transfer of iconographies, atmospheres, and processes of Metaphysical painting onto objects and wall decorations – shows how Italian decorators facilitated Metaphysical art's penetration into private and public spaces (see "Metaphysics into Everyday Life: Traces of Metaphysical Painting in Italian Decorative Arts of the 1920s").

While the search for a "modern classicism" became a primary concern for artists, on the other side collectors were focusing on shaping a peculiar identity for Italian contemporary art, able to outdo other European modernisms both culturally and commercially. In the interwar years, different kinds of collecting practices spread throughout Italy: on the one hand, collecting remained instrumental to the cultural and social ladder, following the artistic taste disseminated by the most conservative cultural institutions and art galleries; on the other hand, a progressive group of collectors began to support contemporary trends with the purpose of tangibly impacting Italian culture, and to cover the gap left by museums with regard to contemporary art. Additionally, along with these two opposite lines, a third collecting practice emerged:

although characterized by a conservative *modus operandi*, these collectors were strongly fascinated by pictorial languages, so much so that, in order to foster taste and contribute to a national modern cultural plan, they economically supported select artists to represent Italian modernity. These diverse practices were examined during the second Study Day session, which sketched out portraits of some extremely interesting personalities.

Erica Bernardi's essay "'Intellectual Lucubrations': Lamberto Vitali, Giorgio Morandi, and Metaphysical Art" reconstructs the collecting *modus operandi* of Italian art historian Lamberto Vitali. During the 1930s, Vitali supported nineteenth-century artistic groups such as the Macchiaioli and the Divisionists, as well as works by innovative twentieth-century artists, in particular Morandi, who became one of the main subjects of Vitali's seminal collection as well as his art critical writings. As Bernardi elucidates, Vitali's approach to Morandi's Metaphysical phase exposes the critic's limits in engaging with a more experimental turn by the artist, and the difficulty of a generation of "experts" in adapting their mindset to a speedily changing cultural context that was developing towards the contestation of all assumed certainties characterizing pre-avant-garde visual culture.

Additionally, the discourse here on collecting and exhibiting reinstates politics as an element to consider in freshly assessing Metaphysical painting. In this context, the ambiguous and multifarious characterization of *Metafisica* emerges strongly: apparently animated by an anti-avant-garde purpose, considered as the embodiment of the Italian Return to Order, and often misinterpreted and criticized for its over-intellectualism, during the 1940s Metaphysical art was presented as a "canonical" passage as influential as the Futurist movement in the development of Italian modern art. This passage is clearly shown in two crucial historical moments during which the political situation could not be more antithetical: in 1942, when Rino Valdameri's collection was exhibited with the support of Minister Giuseppe Bottai, who was then shaping the Fascist regime's cultural policy; and, in 1949, after the

disastrous end of the dictatorship, in the first major exhibition of Italian modern art in the U.S., organized at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The first episode is analyzed in Caterina Caputo's essay "Shaping an Identity for Italian Contemporary Art During the Interwar Period: Rino Valdameri's Collection," which investigates the history of the large Valdameri collection. Caputo focuses on the Lombard lawyer's taste as well as his relationship with influential figures of the Italian artistic and political scene of the interwar years, in order to deeply analyze the identity of Valdameri's collection and his role in Milanese cultural networks. The travel notebooks of American art critic and curator James Thrall Soby, compiled in 1948 during a trip to Italy, are examined by Nicol Maria Mocchi's essay "'Chiricos checked': Metaphysical Art in James Thrall Soby's Notebooks, Spring 1948." Accompanied by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and his Italian-born wife Margaret Scolari Barr, Soby visited the most significant Italian art collections, both private and public, in order to select contemporary works for inclusion in the *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition, held at MoMA in June 1949. Comments on Italian Metaphysical works present extremely interesting testimony on the changing critical considerations of this creative experience.

Finally, two essays deal with, respectively, a new look at de Chirico's art as influenced Luigi Pirandello, and the influence of Metaphysical art on Italian art movements of the 1970s. Damian Dombrowski's "'Sentimento del contrario': Giorgio de Chirico's Irony and Luigi Pirandello's *Umorismo*" offers interdisciplinary research on de Chirico's *Piazze d'Italia* series and Pirandello's writings, in particular his essay "L'umorismo" (1908). The paper aims to map out an elective affinity between the painter's aesthetics and the author's theoretical viewpoint. According to Dombrowski, de Chirico's irony and Pirandello's humor found their common ground in the Italian history of the beginning of the twentieth century and the two artists' philosophical interests. Indeed, Pirandello anticipated de Chirico in considering German philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Professor Emeritus Renato Barilli's "Italian Art in the 1920s and 1970s: Affinities and Differences" aptly closes this issue. Barilli chronicles the Metaphysical "revival" that occurred in the 1970s, beginning with the Arte Povera movement, which took inspiration from de Chirico. Drawing on Heinrich Wölfflin's pendulum-swing theory, Barilli analyzes similarities and differences between eras, framing phenomena within recurring cycles of history: art, like any aspect of culture, periodically retreats to an earlier-held position, but with an added degree of innovation, because new phases inevitably occur in changed situations.

The wide-ranging topics that were selected through the call-for-papers resulted in extremely varied and interesting output on the part of the researchers who participated in the Study Days: the essays that comprise this issue benefited from the exchange that the encounters at CIMA prompted. Although it was decided to present the essays following the main themes that emerged from the original call, other recurrent topics emerged that allow cross-references to be traced and possible alternative engagements with the research presented here. For example, the role of magazines in the spread of Pittura Metafisica's aesthetics keeps resurfacing as a key aspect in the assessment of this artistic phenomenon.

The relation of Metafisica to the concept of the "classical" and other ways of looking at the past is often considered through the lenses of plural facets: starting from Greece, then Rome, and passing through the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, all the way up to the Arte Povera movement. Classicism is also connected to the increased nationalism that was fueled by the political extremism that emerged from the chaos of post-World War I politics. Not by chance, the word *Italianità* (Italian-ness) returns frequently in the essays in this issue, marking the inevitable, though often ambiguous, relationship between cultural phenomena and the sociopolitical situation.

A critical approach to the concept of *Italianità* permits reconsideration of some deeply rooted assumptions of the art historical discipline. As demonstrated by the essays that analyze the role played by Metaphysical painting in German art – not only as reference and stimulus, but also as receiver/translator of influences – the relationship between cultural phenomena and political contexts and situations is rarely straightforward. Here, although World War I had seen Germany and Italy on opposite sides of the barricade, after the end of the conflict a rich and extremely important exchange was reestablished. Indeed, it already existed, and many of the Italian artists who dealt with *Metafisica*, directly and indirectly, had looked at German modern art as a source of inspiration before the war.

In the future, it would be interesting to investigate potentially overlooked relationships that developed in additional different directions and cultural contexts: the countries that emerged from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the British and American artists who, at the beginning of the 1920s, trained for a period in Italy and were exposed to the novelties of Metaphysical painting and its later metamorphoses. Other possible topics that seem in need of further development involve assessing *Pittura Metafisica* within the framework of avant-gardes, in particular the discourse on the status of form and content developed in this context, not only in the interwar period, but also after World War II.

How to cite

Erica Bernardi, Caterina Caputo, Carlotta Castellani, and Antonio David Fiore, "Introduction," in Erica Bernardi, Antonio David Fiore, Caterina Caputo, and Carlotta Castellani (eds., *Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916–1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà*, monographic issue of *Italian Modern Art*, 4 (July 2020), accessed [insert date].

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erica Bernardi received her Ph.D. from the University Ca' Foscari in Venice. Her research focuses on Franco Russoli, the art historian, museologist, and director of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan; most recently she published the book *Senza utopia non si fa la realtà. Scritti sul museo 1952-1977*, based on her PhD dissertation. She is currently the curator of the Franco Russoli archive and collection, and collaborates with the Brera on historical research projects. She is also coordinating a work team regarding contemporary museology for ICOM – Italy. After writing a specialization thesis on Gaudenzio Ferrari and the North Italian Renaissance, she ended up studying the criticism of the twentieth century – catalyzed by her work with Russoli's archive. Her first project was the catalogue of La Raccolta Berenson (1962; during an internship at Villa I Tatti, Harvard University, she developed what became *La nascita del Fogg museum nella corrispondenza Forbes-Berenson (1915-1928)*). She also catalogued and put online historical photographs from Berenson's family archive.

Caterina Caputo received her PhD from the University of Florence, Pisa, and Siena. Her work addresses topics at the crossway of collecting, art market, cultural dissemination, and transnational exchanges related to Surrealism, Avant-gardes, and Modernity. She recently turned her PhD dissertation into the book: *Collezionismo e mercato. La London Gallery e la diffusione dell'arte surrealista, 1938-1950* (2018), and she is working at the English version of the volume (forthcoming). She participated in several international conferences in Europe and the U.S., and published articles on Belgian and British Surrealism (*Ricerche di storia dell'arte* 2017; *DFK's Passage* 2019, 2020, Giorgio de Chirico (*StudiOnline* 2016, 2019; 2020, the history of collecting (*Getty Research Journal* 2020; she contributed to the "Art Market Dictionary" (Berlin: De Gruyter. In 2018 Caterina Caputo was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for the History of Collecting at the Frick Collection and Art Reference Library, and in 2019 she was a research fellow at the Center for Italian Modern

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Carlotta Castellani received her Ph.D. in Art History, Literature, and Cultural Studies in a joint program of the Universities of Florence and Paris IV Sorbonne (2016). During her doctoral studies, she was responsible for the historical archive of the German artist residency in Florence's Villa Romana. In 2019 she was awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Center for Italian Modern Art, in a joint program with the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In 2020 she was awarded a Postdoctoral Fellowship with a project on "The impact of Raoul Heinrich Francé's theories on El Lissitzky" in the research program "4A Lab. Art Histories, Archaeologies, Anthropologies, Aesthetics" based in Berlin (2020)," a cooperation of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin. Her most recent book is *Una rivista costruttivista nella Berlino anni Venti: «G» di Hans Richter* (Padua, Cleup: 2018). Since 2019 she teaches Contemporary Art as Adjunct Professor at the University of Florence.

Antonio David Fiore graduated in Heritage Studies at the Tuscia University of Viterbo and was awarded a post-graduate diploma by La Sapienza University of Rome. Between 2006 and 2010, he worked as Assistant Lecturer for the Industrial Archaeology and History of Architecture course of the Faculty of Heritage Studies, Tuscia University, Viterbo. As an art historian researcher and cataloguer, Antonio has worked for various galleries and museums in Rome, including the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Museo della Centrale Montemartini, and Musei Vaticani – Modern Art Collection. Antonio passed his Viva in November 2017, completing a fully funded PhD in History of Art at the Open University (UK) supervised by Tim Benton and Susie West. His research focused on the output of the Italian decorator Giulio Rosso (1895-1976), reconstructing Rosso's career while considering the significance of his practice in the context of the decorative arts of the interwar period. Between September 2017 and January 2018, he worked

as Associate Lecturer at the School of Art and Design of the University of Bath Spa, where he taught “Art and Design since 1945.” He has contributed articles, studies, and catalogue entries to a number of different journals, conference proceedings, exhibition catalogues, and books. His monograph on the history of the Centrale Montemartini was published in autumn 2019. Since January 2019, he works as an Art Historian for the Italian Ministry of Heritage and Culture.