

► A Brief Presentation

About half the works which formed part of the “National Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Painting” organized by the University of Trieste in December 1953 are present here. 1953 was a particularly difficult period for Trieste in the aftermath of the war when, amidst the uncertainties of international and local politics, just a month before, the suppression of youth patriotic movements on the part of the civilian police directed by the Allied Military government, resulted in six deaths. Trieste became part of Italy just a year later, in October 1954.

The “National Exhibition” came about thanks to the efforts of the then Rector Rodolfo Ambrosino, the then Superintendent of the Monuments Galleries and Antiquities Benedetto Civiletti and the first holder of the chair of History of Art, Gian Luigi Coletti. The exhibition also served as testimony to the cultural links between Trieste and Italy and was particularly relevant to the artistic history of those years in that as many as 75 of the most important Italian artists accepted the invitation to present their works, thus bearing witness to the most representative tendencies in that crucial period of Italian art. Having emerged from the “autarchic” experience (although not without its moments of fine quality and artistic originality) of “Novecento” painting was attempting to redefine its own, more open identity: national, certainly, but

at the same time, fruitfully linked to what was happening on the international front. This fact was highlighted by the great art critic Lionello Venturi when he was invited to hold the Inaugural Lecture of the exhibition where he singled out from among the many works exhibited the «European school» to which could be relocated the true Italian «tradition» and the «resumption» of its artistic life: a life, as he said, that was «tumultuous and full of vitality, and fully aware of the most wide-ranging experiments: cubism, abstract art, expressionism, post-impressionism and so on».

Lionello Venturi, who had lived in exile during the period of Fascism in France, England and the United States and was later holder of the chair of History of art at the University of Rome, was recognised as a master in the field and a perceptive critic of contemporary tendencies. Just a year before the exhibition, at the Biennale in Venice in 1952, he was conscious of the validity of the work of the “Gruppo degli Otto” (“Group of Eight”) (Afro, Birolli, Corpora, Moreni, Morlotti, Santomaso, Turcato and Vedova) whom he defined as «abstract-concrete» artists who were capable of avoiding the pitfalls of the mannerism of abstract art and the political conditioning of realism (at that time the two main opposing art currents) and working according to an «abstract» modality because they were inspired by the universal values

inherent in representation and «concrete» because based on the feelings of the artist. The work of all the painters of the “Gruppo degli Otto” was included in the Trieste Exhibition and was particularly appreciated by critics although not really understood at that time by the public. Santomaso and Afro were awarded the first two prizes by the jury and the third prize was awarded to Nino Perizi, a local artist; Vedova, who was among the finalists with his work *Crocifissione contemporanea (Contemporary Crucifixion)* (which was acquired by the Gallery of Modern Art in Rome), in the oblique signs and sabres of light in the work, means to evoke the tragic events of Trieste at the time.

In any case, all the most important exponents of the Italian art of the period with all their peculiarities were represented in the Trieste Exhibition. Within the limits of the availability of the acquisitions made by the University and still present in this Collection, we shall comment on them in the light of what Decio Gioseffi, “secretary” of the exhibition and assistant of Coletti who was later to become, for more than twenty years, holder of the chair of History of Art at the University and master of several generations of students who would, in turn, become teachers of the subject, had to say. The present collocation of the works follows the original one, with the exception of the entrance hall of the Rector’s offices which is reserved for the three prize winners: in fact here we find Giuseppe Santomaso’s *Cantiere (Shipyard)* in which stylisation and strong chromatic definition recall the idea

of the little Venetian shipyards with their hawsers and hulls resting on pedestals; here too we have the work by Afro Basaldella who in a purely abstract style and with a sense of linear musicality brings back to the surface, in a symphony of pink and orange, his *Ricordo d’infanzia (Childhood Memory)*; there is also a work by Nino Perizi who reproduces in a solid architectonic style and with tones that owe something to Picasso, his own interpretation of “hispanidad” in his *Omaggio a Garcia Lorca (Homage to Garcia Lorca)*.

Gioseffi, for the sake of convenience and in order to meet the requirements of the numerous members of the public who attended the exhibition, had divided the artists into three basic groups: the traditionalists and those in the middle who fell between this group and the group of masters of abstract art who made up the third subdivision. This subdivision has been maintained now in the layout of the works in the Rector’s offices. There now follows a brief guide to the works which will later be followed up in more detail in the “files” on the works and their executors.

In the Sala Cammarata are the so-called traditionalists, «those who don’t aggressively deform the elements of the vision», subdivided by Gioseffi in impressionists, classicists, neo-primitives, realists and surrealists. Along the long wall we find views of the Venetian lagoon by Seibezzi and Carlo Dalla Zorza and the landscapes of the Tuscan artist Colucci and the *Natura morta (Still Life “an Abundance of Fish”)* by the Neopolitan artist Giovanni



Brancaccio. On the opposite wall we have the so-called classicists. This is a form of classicism that was already present in the “Valori plastici” the return to forms of the fifteenth century and taken up again in the “Novecento Italiano” and represented here by the strong colours of Ziveri and even more so by Pino Casarini and by the *Venuses* of Edgardo Sambo and – just outside the Sala Cammarata, in the vestibule of the gallery as such – the *Still Life in Blue* by Salietti and the metaphysical implications of Trombadori’s landscape.

In the Rector’s study we are faced by the realism of the *Ritratto di Umberto Saba (Portrait of Umberto Saba)* painted with great intensity and introspection by an artist who was also a writer, Carlo Levi, the author of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (Christ stopped at Eboli)*, and *Viso (Face)*, by Leonor Fini in which the eyes intently scrutinise the observer. There are also two works by so-called exponents of neo-primitivism: one is by the Trieste artist Edoardo Devetta and is entitled *Il giardino (The Garden)* and which, in a deliberately simplistic language, reproduces a slice of everyday reality and the other is by Antonio Donghi with his intimately desert landscape.

When we have left the Rector’s study, we find before us the corridor gallery where Neo-primitive art is characterised by a painting by Ottone Rosai who, in the simplification of his forms, evokes the atmosphere of the studios where he worked and by *Outskirts of Ponte Milvio* a painting by the Roman artist Giovanni Omiccioli in which he perceives and relives the area in all its chromatic beauty.

In the gallery, we can admire the different styles of the so-called central group which – for all its heterogeneity – was, according to Gioseffi, ascribable to «a generic unity of intention in the sense of expressionism». From the Picassian use of colour of a Paulucci, to the delicate and tranquil view of a bay by Cadorin and a seascape by Camillo Caglini we come to some important local artists who are, however, never provincial: we have *Case a Parigi (Houses in Paris)* by Righi and then the surrealism of Tomea *Candele in riva al mare (Candles on the Seashore)* followed by the abstract montage of *Spaventacchio n.2 (The Scarecrow n.2)* by Romeo Daneo and the abstract surrealism of *Cattedrale distrutta (The Destroyed Cathedral)* of Dino Predonzani who evokes within a metaphysical dream world his memory of the bombardment of Hamburg cathedral. Last but not least we have *Groviglio di cose (A Tangle of Things)* by Leone Minassian with its brilliant red and violet colours that lets the observer see what he chooses to and also the abstract neo-cubism of Melecchi’s *Fiori (Flowers)*. We come to the end of the journey with the abstract artist Gastone Breddo, not to forget the *Figura in blu (Figure in Blue)* by the Tuscan Neo-cubist artist Vagnetti.

Having left the gallery, we find a wall hung with prints and drawings. Among these there could not but be present Marcello Mascherini who left to the university, as a sculptor, the decoration of the ceiling of the Aula Magna, *L’Anello degli Argonauti (The Ring of the Argonauts)* and the *Minerva* of 1954 on the staircase to the main building. Ugo

Carà is also the author of the mosaics in the right wing of the ground floor of the same building and, in the entrance hall to the Rector' offices, of the *Testa* in bronzo (*Bronze Head*) of the architect Umberto Nordio, designer of the University. Tranquillo Marangoni, to whom the then Rector Cammarata had entrusted the composition of the logo of the University in 1950, is present with the wood engraving *Oblò* (*Porthole*), a blunt and inward presentation of the manual labour of the shipyard. I should also like to mention the drawing *Tafferugli* (*Brawling*) by Mino Maccari which may perhaps remind us of the serious events of November 1953 which I mentioned at the beginning.

This, in short, is the picture gallery of the Rectorate - the main nucleus of the art collection of the University which also includes other works mostly by artists connected with Trieste such as Gianni Russian, Miela Reina, Lucio Saffaro and Sergio Altieri. Thanks to the specific initiative which started the collection off in 1953 and which was intended to create a strong link between the Univer-

sity and its territory, offering to the people of Trieste the possibility of getting acquainted with contemporary art and to students a valid didactic instrument, Trieste University can boast a Collection of figurative art that is second to none in Italian Universities.

Our picture gallery is now a museum in its own right and the object of numerous visits, also on the part of foreign guests. It is also a place where University lecturers and students and, on occasion, pupils from secondary and high schools can profit from a direct confrontation with works of art in accordance with the intentions of the Exhibition of 1953.

In 2011 as a result of the increasing appreciation that has been shown in the collection, two Emeritus professors of the University donated two more works that fit perfectly into the collection: one by Livio Rosignano painted in the fifties and the other by Nino Perizi which highlights another side to the work of this artist from Trieste who was among the winners of the 1953 exhibition.

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