

“Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe” at the Guggenheim Museum in New York

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Italian Futurism, 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe, *at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City, February 21–September 1, 2014*

The exhibition of Italian Futurism now on view in the main rotunda at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City deals with the 20th century art movement whose ultimate fate was bound up with the betrayals of the working class and the rise of fascism in Italy after the First World War.

Some commentators have suggested that hesitation on the part of museums and curators to mount a comprehensive overview of Italian Futurism in the US prior to the current show has been due to a certain squeamishness about the movement’s association with fascism after Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922. If that were ever a consideration, it no longer seems one today. The exhibition, including 360 pieces by 80 artists, has been organized by Guggenheim senior curator Vivien Greene. It has been hailed as a tour de force, and called “epic” by *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith.

This current enthusiasm, however, is largely unwarranted. As an artistic movement, Futurism was not much more than an Italian variant of other European modernist trends, sharing and openly adopting many of the formal concerns and strategies of Cubism, Dadaism and Divisionism. At best the result is interesting, at worst derivative.

The movement coalesced around the poet-editor Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), and its subsequent development was more or less synonymous with his name. Marinetti’s long life and leadership role was key in aligning what had begun as a politically heterogeneous artistic circle with Mussolini’s fascism. Marinetti’s outlook was summed up as early as 1909 in his “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” which announced from the front page of the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*: “We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.”

The degree to which other Italian futurist artists shared Marinetti’s enthusiasm for militarism no doubt varied, but their petty bourgeois class position left them incapable of playing

any independent role in the emergent class struggles in Italy in the second and third decades of the 20th century. Most were sympathetic to the outlook of the “irredentists,” who wanted Italy to enter World War I to reclaim its northern territory. In the aftermath of the war, their political confusion was effectively channeled into support for the nationalist chauvinism advanced by Mussolini, to destroy the political independence of the working class and subordinate it to the needs of the Italian bourgeoisie.

The Futurists’ rightward political trajectory was mirrored in the artwork in the Italian Futurism exhibit. Its subordination to fascism ensured that whatever originality and spontaneity it once possessed was extinguished. Paradoxically, the art goes progressively “downhill” in quality after the sculptures by Umberto Boccioni in the first gallery, despite the uphill climb of the Guggenheim’s spiral layout.

Like most of Boccioni’s artwork in his short life—he was killed in action in 1916—his bronze *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (*Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio*, 1913) evokes velocity through the fragmented human form in a way that is visually striking, if not ground-breaking.

Boccioni’s paintings, such as *The City Rises* (*La città che sale*), 1910-11, as well as Giacomo Balla’s *Abstract Speed + Sound*, (*Velocità astratta + rumore*), 1913-14, and Gino Severini’s *Blue Dancer*, 1911, are similarly familiar in their use of brightly colored, arching, frenetically multiplied forms to suggest the speed and tumult of modern urban life. Carlo Carrà’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (*Funerali dell’anarchico Galli*), 1910-11, is one of the more compelling of these paintings, at least by virtue of its subject.

In addition to copies of Marinetti’s many manifestos, the exhibition includes other examples of “words in freedom” poetry, often with experimental typography used to convey its freedom of—or perhaps from—ideas. These bear a superficial similarity to the “nonsense” poems and performances of the Dada movement, which likewise were a gesture of disgust and rebellion by a section of bohemian artists. However, the Dadaists, active first in Zurich, Switzerland and then in Germany, put these aesthetic techniques to different purposes

and pursued a generally left-wing orientation, implicit when not explicit.

One also can see similarities between the unrealized architectural renderings of architect Antonio Sant'Elia and the design principles developed at the Bauhaus, founded by Walter Gropius in Weimar, Germany in 1919. Both groups looked to modern industry and technology to meet the needs of mass society for functional yet aesthetic architecture and furniture design. Again, however, the generally left-wing outlook associated with the Bauhaus meant that it was shut down and its buildings destroyed when the Nazis came to power under Hitler in 1933.

The exhibition's survey of Italian Futurism covers the period up to Marinetti's death in 1944. The final section is comprised of paintings from the World War II period—grim, unmoving images of serried ranks of faceless soldiers, tanks and gun barrels. The most interesting of these were views from airplanes (*aeropittura*) like Tullio Crali's *Before the Parachute Opens* (*Prima che si apra il paracadute*), 1939.

The show culminates with the much-hailed mural paintings created for the Palazzo delle Poste (Post Office) in Palermo, Sicily, by the only woman in the group, Marinetti's wife, Benedetta Cappa. Despite the Futurists' willingness to lend their art to the Fascist cause, *Syntheses of Communications* (1933–34) was the only public commission of Futurist art under Mussolini. Benedetta's mural series is meant to be the apotheosis of the movement's concerns with modern means of mass communication. With pastel colors and a rather bland decorative design, however, it ends the exhibit not with a burst of energy, but a sense of depletion—or perhaps relief.

In *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Trotsky identified the international Futurist trend with the tensions and contradictions of the pre-World War I period. The “armed peace” and routinism and banality of bourgeois political life, he observed, “weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave signs of impending social explosions.” Trotsky added, “Futurism was the ‘foreboding’ of all this in art.”

He was singularly unimpressed by Futurism's fierce “oppositional character,” noting that “violent protests against bourgeois life and art” had a long tradition in French Romanticism and other trends. Moreover, he pointed out, it was naïve to contrast the dynamics of Italian Futurism and its verbal sympathy for “revolution” with the supposedly worn-out bourgeoisie. The latter, Trotsky noted, was “bold, flexible and has claws,” and was entirely capable of making use of radical feelings and moods, “destined by their nature to feed rebellion,” for its own ends. He explained that Italian fascism, in fact, had come to power “by ‘revolutionary’ methods, by bringing into action the masses, the mobs and the millions, and by tempering and arming them.”

Thus, he concluded, “It is not an accident, it is not a misunderstanding, that Italian Futurism has merged into the

torrent of Fascism; it is entirely in accord with the law of cause and effect.”

The Guggenheim exhibit does not show any interest in this history. Far from understanding the dynamic that led the Russian avant-garde to support the Revolution while the Italians made common cause with Mussolini's fascists, the Guggenheim exhibit settles for a superficial look that seems a kind of “rehabilitation” of Italian Futurism. Underpinning this approach is the old canard that equates “left” and “right” extremism.

Asked whether she thought, in reference to Futurism, “it was about freeing themselves in order to better the future? Or was it more political?,” curator Vivien Greene replied, “[the Italian Futurists] start off as a left-wing revolutionary movement and then—*how it often happens when you're at one extreme of something totalitarian*—you shift to the other and end up being on the right.” (Interview with Karen Day in *Culture*, February 18, 2014. Emphasis added)

The argument that “fascism and communism are twins” sounds like a warning to sections of artists who are today impelled to examine political questions in an atmosphere of unprecedented inequality and the growing danger of world war that recalls the period of the rise of Futurism about a century ago.

There have been a few signs of radicalization among artists. Among them are the weekly “art occupations” that have been staged at the Guggenheim exhibit to protest the superexploitation of workers engaged in the construction of the new Guggenheim branch in Abu Dhabi.

After a long period characterized by indifference toward politics or preoccupation with issues of gender, race and sexual orientation, an increasing number of artists today are turning toward broader political issues. This is a positive development, but the trajectory of these circles will, as in the past, depend on developments outside the art arena. In examining and learning from the Futurists of the 20th century, the most serious among these artists will turn to the international working class and the struggle for socialism.



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