Report from Milan: The ’30s: Art and Culture in Italy

BY PEPE KARMEL

Italian art of the 1930s, until recently the subject of near total historical amnesia, was given a thorough reassessment in this massive survey exhibition, mounted last spring in Milan amid much controversy.

Gli Annitretta: Arte e Cultura in Italia” (“The Thirties: Art and Culture in Italy”) opened in Milan on Jan. 27 and was originally scheduled to close April 30. But it was so popular—according to Washington Post writer Nina Hyde, attendance topped 300,000—that it was extended through May 23. The interest of the show seems, for many viewers, to have been more historical than artistic, however. The crowd-drawing controversy roused by “Annitretta” centered on its political implications. The viewpoint of the organizers was stated by Carlo Tognoli, the mayor of Milan, who wrote in the show’s catalogue that “moral and political condemnation of Fascism should not mean ignorance of the nature of social and cultural life of the period in our country.” But many Italians found this attitude of disinterested neutrality hard to believe; for them the show could not but be a whitewash, an attempt to rehabilitate Italian Fascism by fostering a nostalgic idealization of its era.

The size and diversity of the “Annitretta” show in fact left it open to a variety of interpretations. One set of galleries, in the old Palazzo Reale, off the Piazza del Duomo in Milan’s center, offered exhibits on architecture, urban renovation, colonial planning, anti-Semitism (a topic mysteriously omitted from the immense catalogue), official art exhibitions of the period, music, film, theater sets, fashion and industrial design. The exhibition continued next door in the “Arenario,” a Mussolini-era building; in fact the architect’s drawings for this typically pseudo-classical Fascist structure were displayed in the exhibition. The Arenario galleries themselves offered book and magazine illustrations, posters, commercial and “art” photography, and reproductions of official art from public buildings of the time, especially Milan’s own “Palace of Justice.” A pair of streamlined trains—the kind Mussolini supposedly made run on time—occupied the small piazza between the Palazzo Reale and the Duomo itself; according to the Washington Post, the yellow fasces (a symbolic bundle of wheat, which gave its name to Fascism) had been discreetly removed from the trains prior to display. Through April, a red fighter plane was hung in the center of Milan’s fashionable iron-and-glass-covered arcade, the Galleria, across the Piazza del Duomo from the exhibition.

The paintings and sculptures in “Annitretta”—several hundred works in all—constituted a major exhibition in their own right, but they were hidden away in an underground display space, the Sagrato del Duomo. To get to the art, you had to pass two television sets, set at ear-splitting volume, continuously recycling old films of Mussolini’s speeches and public appearances, and traverse a long corridor documenting the political propaganda of the time. This setting certainly gave you a good sense of the environment in which the art of the 1930s was created, but, as the Italian critics seemed to feel, to display something is implicitly to endorse it, and the absence of critical or moral commentary throughout much of the show was perturbing. Perhaps Mussolini’s buffoonish character and the absurd demagoguery of his regime were assumed to be sufficient insurance against the show’s being taken as an “advertisement” for Fascism, but the organizers may have been too quick to conclude that the appeal of Fascism is dead in Italy. Over the last few years, Italy’s right-wing terrorists have, after all, claimed almost as many victims as have their more widely publicized left-wing counterparts. In fact, a swastika graffiti had recently been penned across a “weigh-yourself” machine just outside the entrance to the show. Mussolini may seem like a bad joke today, but in his time he was admired by John Reed, George Bernard Shaw, Time founder Henry Luce, and the mass of the Italian people; and he might yet be again.

If the political sections of the show documented Mussolini’s frightening power in the 1930s, the cultural and artistic sections nonetheless suggested that there remained a measure of freedom in the cultural life of Mussolini’s Italy, a freedom that was ruthlessly erased in Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. Unfortunately, this ration of freedom does not seem to have led to a corresponding cultural originality. Italian fashion and poster designs in the 1930s were dominated by French styles. Industrial design and furniture were similarly dominated.

**Giorgio de Chirico: Combat, 1928, 35 by 45 1/4 inches. Galleria civica d’arte moderna, Milan.**
by Bauhaus and Art Deco influences. The film stills in “Annairena” looked like out-takes from Hollywood B-movies. An indigenous Italian style was obvious mostly in the Fascist architecture and official art, where a kind of overblown, simplified pseudo-classicism prevailed. The dreamlike recombinations of classical architecture which de Chirico had evoked in his works of 1912 to 1918 were made reality in the new public buildings and squares of the 1930s. A reality of conquest and oppression was camouflaged by the “metaphysical” elegance of the planned towns in Italy’s new colony of Ethiopia.

Mussolini encouraged Fascist architecture and design with a new law requiring two percent of the cost of every state building to be set aside for officially approved decoration. Still, he did accept a degree of esthetic diversity. In the architecture section of “Annairena,” Fascist “classical” sketches and M-shaped triumphal arches alternated with plans for immense Corbusier-style garden cities. Indeed, the two forms of architectural megalomania seemed to coexist happily. And abstract art continued to be tolerated in Italy into the late 1930s, long after Hitler and Stalin had condemned it as mere “degeneracy.”

It is hard to define the precise relation between the dominant Fascist ideology and the actual character of Italian art in the 1930s. The art curators of “Annairena,” who included Vittorio Fagone, Rossana Bossagli, Paola Marescalchi, Alessandra Borgogelli, Guido Armellini, and Luciano Carmin, argue that, in general, the conservative “Novecento” movement, launched in the 1920s but continuing into the 1930s, represented the mainstream of official Fascist art, while the other movements of the period—the Turin “Group of Six,” the Milan “Chiaristi,” the Rome “Via Cavour School,” the Milan “Corrente,” and the abstractionists in general—should be regarded as anti-Fascist art. Just as Mussolini demanded economic “autarchy,” or self-sufficiency, for Italy, the Novecento school stressed adherence to the classic, indigenous Italian tradition. The Novecentists denounced the openness of the other movements to French, German, and Russian trends, such as Cubism, Fauvism or Expressionism. Hence, the curators of “Annairena” conclude, these other movements must indeed have been anti-Fascist. The Novecento movement, well represented in the show, offered a depressing spectacle in the self-immolation of some major artists—de Chirico, Carrà, Severini—who gave themselves over to a smug “classic” naturalism.

This argument takes place in something of a critical vacuum, since Italian art of the 1930s has been the subject, until recently, of a nearly total historical amnesia. Even the recent revival of interest in 20th-century “realist” painting has done little to rescue it from obscurity. The show “Les Réalismes: 1919–1939” at Beaubourg last year gave a great deal of space to Italian painting, but the selection was weighted heavily in favor of the painting of the 1920s. The work of the ’20s and ’30s was presented as basically a continuation or transformation of the earlier “metaphysical” paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. “Les Réalismes” left an image of Italian art in the ’20s and ’30s as dignified, melancholy, ascetic—a kin to the “Neue Sachlichkeit” of the German 1920s but minus its stridency. By the profuse- ness and diversity of the work displayed, “Annairena” made it obvious, however, that this strain in Italian art was merely one of many; indeed, that this dignified image was something of an artificial construct, tailoring the past to fit an idealized image, and perhaps even misrepresenting the artists.
subsumed in it. Many of the 26 Italians represented in "Les Réalismes" were also present in "Anitrenta": Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati, Giorgio de Chirico, Filippo de Pisis, Antonio Donghi, Achille Funi, Mario Mafai, Arturo Martini, Giacomo Manzù, Giorgio Morandi, Mario Sironi, Fausto Pirandello (son of the playwright), Gino Severini, and Mario Sironi, for example. "Anitrenta" also included several famous names absent from "Les Réalismes"—such as Giacomo Balla and Marino Marini—and a fair number of lesser-known but still remembered and respected figures: Afro Basaldella, Pompeo Borra, Renato Birolli, Lucio Fontana, Renato Guttuso, Carlo Levi (also known as a writer), Alberto Magnelli, Ottone Rosai, Alberto Savionio (de Chirico's brother), Pio Semeghini, and Emilio Vedova. But even this group of artists tended to be submerged in the mass of their little known compatriots. Most artists were represented by only one or two works. This dilution of talent certainly made the Italian 1930s look weaker than they did in "Les Réalismes"; on the other hand, it gave a richer idea of the typical art of the period.

The Novecento movement, shown near the entrance to the galleries, offered a depressing spectacle in the self-immolation of several major artists—de Chirico, Carrà, Severini—each of whom abandoned his early innovative style in favor of a smug "classic" naturalism. "Anitrenta" made it clear that de Chirico's notorious reversal of course was no isolated fluke. Perhaps the most depressing image (from an artistic point of view) in the whole "Anitrenta" exhibition was the reproduction, in the "Political Art" section of the show, of a huge double mural of dadaic realism, a mosaic of The Arts by Severini, inset in the inverted "U" shape of a fresco of Italian Culture by de Chirico, painted for the 1933 Triennale in Milan. The reverse evolution of Italian art as the country fell under the spell of Mussolini at first glance resembles the process by which the Russian Revolution consumed its own artistic children, snuffing out the artistic revolution which had helped ignite it. Only, in the Italian case, artistic "conservatism" was not imposed from above, but willingly chosen by the country's leading painters and sculptors. (A few ex-Futurists, like Balla, continued to work in something like their original styles, turning out Cubistic propaganda.)

Aside from this sad spectacle, "Anitrenta" gave surprisingly little evidence of stylistic change in the careers of individual artists. Most of the painters—such as Guttuso, Mafai, or Afro Basaldella—who became well-known in the late 1940s but were already well-known in the 1930s, seemed to have found their personal styles early and merely continued to pursue them until they found recognition. Artists like Emilio Vedova, whose architectural drawings of the mid-'30s gave way to more calligraphic abstractions in the '40s or '50s, or Renato Birolli, who went from expressionist naturalism to a cloisonné Cubism, seemed to be the exception rather than the rule. One career thrown into unexpected relief was that of Lucio Fontana, best-known for his bare, slashed "Spatialist" canvases of the 1950s (though he first received recognition in America for the rough, tormented ceramic sculptures exhibited at the Modern in 1949). "Anitrenta" revealed that, during the 1930s, Fontana simultaneously pursued both naturalistic and abstract directions in his sculpture, ranging from an official bas-relief of Justice Between the Legislative and Executive Powers to eloquent abstractions somewhat in the style of Miró. Interestingly, Fontana's teacher, Adolfo Wildt, was represented by a huge, impressive hollow marble head of an aviator whose eerie, smooth vacancy might be considered to look forward to Fontana's Spatialist canvases.

The reactionaries of the Novecento movement were quick, in the 1930s, to accuse other artists of being too "international" (or, on occasion, too "Jewish"). While the political intent of their criticism was detectable, from a purely artistic point of view there was much truth to the charge of "internationalism." Walking through the galleries of "Anitrenta," the visitor could not avoid concluding that most Italian art of the 1930s was, like the fashions or the furniture of the period, hopelessly derivative. One abstractionist, Luigi Veronesi, rotated in his imitations, from Braque to Kandinsky to Moholy-Nagy, while his compatriot Manlio Rho knocked off De Stijl. Soutine seems to have been a popular source for Afro Basaldella, Aligi Sassu and others, while Carlo Levi jazzed up Modigliani with a Fauvist palette and colorists like Angelo del Bon and Francesco Menzio industriously mined Mattisse.

However, the Novecento artists' accusation that other Italians were too "international" had an ironic—indeed to say hypocritical—edge to it, because the Novecento's own claim (tacitly accepted by the curators of "Anitrenta") to artistic "autarchy"—rejecting dependence on any but past Italian art—was blatantly false, as a few minutes in that section of the exhibition made clear.
Just as much as their artistic opponents, the artists of the Novecento movement—despite a superficial adherence to "classical" motifs—based their styles on an amalgam of French sources. Bernardino Paluzzi's 1937 Feminine Nude, for instance, offered a blatant reworking of Manet's Olympia; A. Bresciani da Gazoldo and (alas) Severini imitated Renoir's late portrait style; and works like Achille Funi's 1930 Melancholy and Pompeo Borra's 1933 Repose were knock-offs of Picasso's swollen "neo-classical" style of 1917-1925. These last two at least offered a certain "metaphysical" charm (which no doubt accounted for Funi's presence in the "Les Réalistes" show) completely lacking in the vast mass of illustrational, naturalistic, sentimental and sometimes semi-pornographic Novecento work on display.

What, then, was of artistic—rather than sociological—interest in the anthology of painting and sculpture offered by "Annitrenta"? There were a number of isolated discoveries and rediscoveries to be made among both the Novecentists and their opponents. Gianfilippo Usellini's Chorus of 1931, despite its stylistic conservatism, offered an attractive mix of pathos and reserve (owing much, no doubt, to de Chirico), in the juxtaposition of three singers' heads against an architectural backdrop of a dome and columns. Gigi Chessa's Girl Seen from the Rear, also from 1931, mixed loose, Fauvist handling with areas of precise, gnarled drawing, in a combination anticipating Larry Rivers's Double Portrait of Berdie. Antonietta Raphael Mafai (wife of the better known Mario Mafai) contributed a 1928 Self-Portrait with Myriam and Simona whose flat shapes, bright colors, and faux-naif drawing were reminiscent of Florine Stettheimer, as was Renato Birolli's unexpected 1931 Saint Zeno the Fisherman (though the immediate influence in both cases was probably Chagall). Antonio Donghi's 1934 Concert was like an Edward Hopper executed by the Douanier Rousseau. Alberto Magnelli's 1938 Young Maid and Carla Badiali's Composition #3 stood out, among the collection of competent but derivative abstract work, for combinations of abstract forms with heavy, cartoon-like outlining that seemed to prefigure Roy Lichtenstein.

But what was perhaps most interesting in the "Annitrenta" display was the number of paintings and sketches (and an occasional sculpture) that seemed to anticipate the "New Wave" or "Bad" art of our own historical moment. For instance, Leoncillo Leopardi's superlatively tasteless polychrome ceramic busts, representing the four seasons as dopy-looking, bare-breasted nymphs, would look right at home in any number of contemporary New York galleries. In equally amusing bad taste were Ferrucio Ferrari's tapestries on industrial sub-

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A more profound identification between historical eras was apparent in a number of Michelangelo-esque images of the (usually male) nude, seeming precursors of the kind of simplified, over-scale, often tormented figures found today in the work of American artists such as Jed Garet, Robert Longo, David Salle and Jim Sullivan, as well as in the canvases of such contemporary Italians as Sandro Chia and Enzo Cucchi. Indeed, these last are probably quite consciously influenced by their compatriotic predeces-
sors. Examples in the “Annitrenta” show included Aligi Sassu’s 1931 Dice Players, which depicts bright red-orange, elongated, roughly brushed nude figures standing around a small table in an abstracted picture space, and Scipione’s 1930 Apocalypse, in which similarly generalized nude figures float in an abstract wilderness, beams of light flashing from their eyes. Scipione and Sassu could themselves be described as belonging to the Italian avant garde of their time, but similar imagery appeared in several huge paintings, sculptures and sketches by supposedly more conservative Novecento artists. Augusto Colombo’s 1936 black-and-brown sketch for The Expulsion from the Terrestrial Paradise presents two swollen, agonized figures striding through a desolate, reduced landscape. Carrà’s huge cartoons of isolated figures (from 1935), kneeling, collapsing, or falling back, have a power quite absent from the finished fresco of Universal Justice, which he executed in Milan’s Palace of Justice between 1938 and 1939 (a transparency of which was displayed in the “Political Art” section). A similar obsession with the power of the isolated figure could be deduced from the sculptures of Mirko Basaldella, whose Narcissus at the Fountain looks less as if he were gently admiring his own image than as if he had been knocked to the ground, like a figure by Robert Longo.

The fervent thunder of mass rallies, which dominated the political temper of the time, seems to have encouraged this trend of violent expressiveness in art. Individual perception was subordinated to the evocation of force. If the other currents in Italian art, trying to preserve and express the individual sensibility, seem enfeebled in comparison to this simplified, expressionist mainstream, it may be because the problems of individual sensibility in fact had, at that moment, too little connection with the crisis of the age. The artists of the preceding generation had worked at a time when a revolution in personal style could authentically symbolize the transformations of social life. Perhaps such expansion from the personal to the public was no longer possible in the 1930s—Picasso’s Guernica being one of the few exceptions.

Ultimately, the figural mainstream in Italian art of the 1930s—like the oversized, pseudo-classical architecture—was a form of baroque, a rhetorical art in which the striving for effect took precedence over the search for individual authenticity. Questioning, even self-questioning, is not acceptable to dictators. Mussolini may have professed allegiance to classical ideals, but the self-critical honesty of a true classical style was not what he wanted.

Whatever its flaws as a critical exposition of Mussolini’s era, “Annitrenta” posed a serious question for the modern viewer, especially a modern American viewer: why does some of this art, especially the work associated with Fascism, so strongly resemble the latest work in our contemporary galleries? What forces today provoke our own craving for violent sensation, our impatience with abstraction or personalized vision? It was a relief to walk up out of the underground galleries of the “Annitrenta” art section, but it wasn’t so easy to leave the 1930s behind.

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