

**The 25th Venice Art Biennale and the Avant-garde
Retrospective Exhibitions Designed by Carlo Scarpa: Palazzo
Centrale as a Space of International Dialogue between Italy
and France**
Letizia Giardini

Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate how Palazzo Centrale's main hall in the Giardini became a space for dialogue and cooperation between Italy and France during the 25th Venice Art Biennale. The two countries jointly developed a retrospective narrative on Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism, with a display designed by Carlo Scarpa.

For the first time, this research underlines how these exhibitions questioned the national dimension of each artistic movement and anticipated the critical debate on the transnational modern art koine, which non-governmental cultural institutions, such as AICA, addressed in the following years. Thanks to a delicate balance of administrative and diplomatic dynamics, new generations were finally able to acquire a greater knowledge of Modern Art.

Keywords

Modern art, Venice Art Biennale, France, Avant-garde Retrospective Exhibitions, Carlo Scarpa, AICA.

The 25th Venice Art Biennale and the Avant-garde Retrospective Exhibitions Designed by Carlo Scarpa: Palazzo Centrale as a Space of International Dialogue between Italy and France¹

Letizia Giardini

In 1950 three international retrospective exhibitions, hosted in the Palazzo Centrale of the Venice Biennale's Giardini, were dedicated to key avant-garde artists who profoundly changed European culture at the beginning of the 20th century: *I Fauves*, *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* (The Fauves, Four Masters of Cubism, The Signatories of the First Futurist Manifesto). Featuring a selection of artworks created between 1905 and 1914, the exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa spatially interpreted in the main hall the three curatorial projects conceived by the Commission for Figurative Art.

On this occasion, the Palazzo Centrale became a space for international dialogue between Italy and France, and this article aims to illustrate how these two nations' synergic collaboration made it possible to address a relevant topic which non-governmental institutions, such as the International Association of Art Critics (AICA)², examined some years later: the supranational dimension of modern art. To investigate the modernist koine, post-war art historians needed to question the existence of the movements' national boundaries and the value of their own identity and traditions. As a polyphonic curatorial platform, the Venice Biennale was the ideal framework for developing a historical-critical analysis of these phenomena.

Carlo Scarpa and the Commission for Figurative Art turned the Palazzo Centrale into a space where not only were Italian curatorial and academic interests expressed, but where it was also possible to understand the phenomena of modern art both nationally and internationally.

1

The methodology adopted to conduct this research was based on the in-depth study of each retrospective exhibition's curatorial project, from the organisational process to its critical reception. The comparative and interdisciplinary approach facilitated the framing of the museum narrative from a broader perspective, not limited to the Italian cultural scene, according to historical and geopolitical coordinates. This research presents several unpublished documents kept at the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee of the Venice Biennale, identified in the notes by the archival references. I also want to thank Prof. Irene Baldriga and Prof. Carla Subrizi for the stimulating exchange of ideas, Irene Quarantini for the careful reading and ASAC for permission to publish the images.

2

To further explore this topic, see: <https://aicainternational.news/about>.

Retrospective Narratives

In December 1950, the director of the Association Française d'Action Artistique, Philippe Erlanger, wrote to Giovanni Ponti, president of the Venice Biennale, to congratulate him on the great success of the 25th iteration. This was due “not only to the broad participation of foreign states, but also to the quality of the works presented, the contemporary relevance of the artists, and the significance of both solo and retrospective exhibitions”.³ Since 1948 these historical exhibition narratives have played, in fact, a pivotal role in the organisation of the Biennale's programme: as a cultural consequence of several years of conflict, it had become necessary to fill the public's widespread gaps in knowledge about late 19th and early 20th century international modern art movements.⁴ As explained by the General Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini,⁵ the members of the Commission for Figurative Art had to return to the principles that had guided the first biennial in 1895, therefore offering those unable to travel “the means of understanding and comparing the most diverse aesthetic tendencies” and enhancing “the intellectual heritage of young local artists, who, inspired by the works of their counterparts from other nations, would be drawn toward broader conceptions”.⁶ This would have been the only way to restore the quality of a Venice International Art Exhibition that had lately been reduced to a formal celebration of contemporary art, shaped by academic conformism.⁷

Nevertheless, in addition to its educational function, the Biennale represented an effective diplomatic tool at that time for restoring relations with the countries Italy had fought with or against during the two world wars. Furthermore, the involvement of foreign critics, collectors, and museum directors in the definition of curatorial projects became strategically necessary to obtain the loans of works of art. In this sense, the example of James Thrall Soby is illustrative: when Gino Severini was informed that the American critic would have joined the organising committee for the Futurist retrospective exhibition of 1950, he had positively welcomed the news, confident that his knowledge and experience would guarantee the presence of masterpieces from the United States.⁸

The analysis of retrospective exhibitions promoted during Pallucchini's era (1948-1956) reveals that the Venice Biennale devoted considerable space to the presentation of the French art scene, starting from the 19th century. After the impressionist retrospective of 1948 and those dedicated to Fauvism, Cubism, Georges Seurat, Jacques Villon and Henri Julien Félix Rousseau in 1950, the exhibitions *Divisionismo in Francia, Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Chaim Soutine* and *L'opera grafica di Henri Toulouse Lautrec* in 1952, *Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet* in 1954, *Eugène Delacroix* in 1956 were organised. However, this choice did not entail an absence of historical exhibitions on avant-garde artists from other nations. The celebrated retrospective of the 24th Biennale therefore turned out to be a vast watershed event. For the first time in Italy, French Impressionism was successfully contextualised, according to a scientific criterion, in the broader European

3

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Philippe Erlanger: letter from Philippe Erlanger–Direttore dell'Association Française d'Action Artistique to Giovanni Ponti–Presidente e Commissario Straordinario della Biennale, December 12, 1950.

4

Giovanni Ponti, Commissione per le Arti Figurative, “Regolamento della XXIV Biennale”, in *Ventiquattresima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice, May 1 – September 30, 1948), exh. cat. (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), 1.

5

Rodolfo Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, in *Ventiquattresima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte* (Venice, May 1 – September 30, 1948), exh. cat. (Venice: Serenissima, 1948), xii.

6

“Introduzione alla I Biennale”, in *Prima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, (Venice, April 22 – October 30, 1895), exh. cat. (Venice: Visentini, 1895), iv.

7

Pallucchini, “Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale”, xii.

8

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con artisti o famiglie. Futuristi, Gino Severini: letter from Gino Severini to Giovanni Ponti – Commissario Straordinario, October 23, 1949.

panorama.⁹ Developed from Roberto Longhi's proposal, this anthological exhibition benefited from Lionello Venturi's expertise and his relationships with figures such as the heirs of Paul Durand-Ruel.¹⁰

During the first preliminary meeting for the 25th iteration of the Biennale, held on September 16, 1949, art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti immediately drew the attention of the other members of the Commission for Figurative Art to the need to discuss the chronological criterion according to which the artists would be selected for the following historical exhibitions.¹¹ Opening a lively debate, he proposed orientating the programming to the early French 19th century or the post-impressionist period and beginning of the 20th. Despite their proverbial difference of opinions, on this occasion, both Venturi and Longhi supported Ragghianti's second idea and agreed to present European art from more recent decades: while Venturi recommended focusing on Cubism and Futurism, and organising a solo exhibition of Matisse and one of abstract sculpture, Longhi instead suggested including George Seurat and the Fauves.¹² Their proposals, all of which were to be realised that year, should be read in the light of the two art historians' respective positions in the debate on figurative and abstract art,¹³ a debate that became increasingly urgent to document within the Biennale.¹⁴

In the end, as Pallucchini pointed out, the criterion had to be chosen given the difficulties of obtaining French loans for exhibitions on painters such as Delacroix and Courbet: "We hope that the French government will take appropriate action should the legislation concerning the exchange of works of art be enacted. On the other hand, if we were to turn to America, the substantial costs involved would not be compatible with the funding available".¹⁵ For this reason, two months later the General Secretary wrote to the ambassador J.R. Vieillefond:

As you can see, this year the Biennale once again dedicates a part of its programme to French art! Naturally, we would now require the backing of the French Government to secure certain loans from state museums, as well as those from provincial institutions. [...] I am likewise of the opinion

9

Francesca Castellani, "Il 'Quarantotto' degli impressionisti in biennale. Storie, politiche, battaglie", in Claudio Lorenzini (ed.), *Rodolfo Pallucchini: storie, archivi prospettive critiche* (Udine: Forum, 2019), 281; "Venice Biennale 1946. The Mostra degli Impressionisti at the German Pavilion and its Politics", in *OBOE Journal*, no. 5, vol. 1 (2024): 59-77.

10

Laura Iamurri, "Collegli nell'università e nella lotta per l'arte moderna", in Claudio Lorenzini (ed.), *Rodolfo Pallucchini: storie, archivi prospettive critiche* (Udine: Forum, 2019), 72.

11

At that time, the twelve members of the Commission for Figurative Art were Nino Barbantini, Carlo Carrà, Felice Casorati, Giuseppe Fiocco, Leoncillo Leonardi, Roberto Longhi, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini, Giorgio Morandi, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti and Lionello Venturi. ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949.

12

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949, 6-9. To further explore Roberto Longhi and Lionello Venturi's involvement in the critical debate on Cubism and more specifically on Futurism in the first decades of the 20th century, see: Silvia Evangelisti, "Longhi e il futurismo", in Claudio Spadoni (ed.), *Da Renoir a De Staël. Roberto Longhi e il moderno* (Milano: Mazzotta, 2003), 77-82; Stefano Valeri, "Lionello Venturi e Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Documenti della nota polemica dalla stampa degli anni 1929-1930", *Storia dell'Arte*, no. 130 (2011): 123-144.

13

Venturi's proposal to organise an exhibition on abstract sculpture became a bone of contention between the two art historians and, to counterbalance this idea, Longhi suggested presenting the Fauves and a selection of George Seurat's drawings. In 1950 he dedicated an essay to the French artist in the journal *Paragone*, where he also announced the participation of John Rewald in the Biennale's retrospective exhibition committee. For further discussion, see: Maria Cristina Bandera, "Longhi tra la Biennale di Venezia e 'Paragone'", in Claudio Spadoni (ed.), *Da Renoir a De Staël. Roberto Longhi e il Moderno* (Milano: Mazzotta, 2003), 151-173; Maria Cristina Bandera, *Il carteggio Longhi-Pallucchini. Le prime Biennali del dopoguerra 1948-1956* (Milano: Charta, 1999).

14

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXIV Biennale", xiv.

15

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale I riunione, September 16/17, 1949, 7.

that it would be in the best interest of the French Government to make a significant effort in support of the Biennale, a platform where French artistic culture can truly shine, especially considering the increased number of foreign participants expected in 1950 compared to 1948. Moreover, the pilgrims who visit Rome will undoubtedly visit Venice as well.¹⁶

Thus, the international and multidisciplinary constitution of the commissions of *I Fauves*, *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* was conceived to multiply the possibilities for exchange of artworks. Nevertheless, they were also designed to broaden the perspectives of critical interpretation and to encourage the comparison of different research methods. For this latter reason, alongside chief curators of prestigious institutions and collectors, well-known art dealers such as Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler were involved for their expertise.¹⁷ The purpose of this decision was to undermine preconceptions about the controversial role of the art merchant, which was still being debated during the second meeting of the Commission for Figurative Art in October 1949. As the minutes show, Roberto Longhi strongly disagreed with the idea mooted by the artists Carlo Carrà and Felice Casorati of listing foreign art dealers as mere lenders in the catalogue to avoid the eventual wrath of Italian gallerists. According to him, doubting their competence was just a “long-standing Italian hypocrisy”,¹⁸ since merchants were increasingly proving to be among the best art connoisseurs, to the point that museums were beginning to place complete trust in them. As confirmed by Venturi, Kahnweiler’s publications and the acuity of De Haucke were proof of this.¹⁹

Economic and financial factors also determined the quality and quantity of the masterpieces presented in the Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist retrospective exhibitions of 1950. The example of *Les Femmes d'Alger* is emblematic of how difficulties and high costs of transportation from the United States were managed. The significance of this painting in the development of Cubism made its inclusion in the exhibition essential, and since the painting could not be exhibited at the Biennale, it was decided that a preliminary sketch of the artwork belonging to the European collection of André Lefèvre should be shown instead.²⁰ The Commission for Figurative Art was convinced that this solution could clarify some original aspects of the artistic movement and, therefore, preserve the scientific accuracy of the exhibition.²¹ An article by Alberto Rossi on the newspaper *La Stampa* sustained this choice as follows:

The “Femmes”, now housed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is not present at the Biennale. However, there is a study for one of the figures on the right, which clearly reveals both the innovative use of deep and intense colours — particularly the phosphorescent blues — as well as the way in which the form and volume are interpreted and rendered by moving beyond traditional chiaroscuro and employing bold striations within the pictorial medium.²²

16

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Rapporti con l'ambasciatore francese a Roma, il Prof. Vieillefond; l'ambasciatore italiano a Parigi: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Prof. Vieillefond, November 21, 1949.

17

To further explore the role of Kahnweiler in the development of Cubism, see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, “La costruzione del canone modernista. Un fenomeno circolare di accumulazione simbolica (1850-1970)”, *900 Transnazionale* 2, no. 1 (March 2018): 42-55.

18

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale II riunione, October 27/28, 1949, 2.

19

Ibid.

20

Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, 56.

21

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, Verbale stenografico della riunione della commissione dei giorni 28 e 29 gennaio 1950 (Sartori), 2-3.

22

Alberto Rossi, “Storia del gusto alla Biennale. Nascita del Cubismo”, *La Stampa-Torino*, June 29, 1950.

Carlo Scarpa's Exhibition Projects

fig. 1
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Central hall of the Italian Pavilion (Room IV, V, VI) with the Fauvist, Cubist and Futurist retrospective exhibitions designed by Carlo Scarpa. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.53. 1950. 16. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC. Photograph by Foto Giacomelli – Venezia.



In 1950 the main hall in the Palazzo Centrale was made up of three interconnected but distinct areas, where the retrospective exhibitions *I Fauves*, *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, and *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* were set up chronologically [fig.1]. Since the beginning, the Commission for Figurative Art conceived the three exhibition projects as interrelated.²³ During the first meeting in September 1949, in response to Pallucchini who presented the possibility of showing Cubism and Futurism in the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale, Ragghianti proposed increasing the number of artworks included in the adjacent Fauvist exhibition, thereby affording a comprehensive representation of European painting between 1900 and 1914.²⁴ The limited space and the adopted curatorial principle of quality over quantity required a meticulous selection of artists.²⁵ To prevent jumbled or sloppy displays, it was decided that the Cubist and Futurist historical exhibitions would be solely dedicated to the initiators of these movements.²⁶ As further explained by Pallucchini in an interview for *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, a chronological continuity had been established with the impressionist exhibition of the previous year.²⁷ Speaking of Italian art, he added: “New movements in modern art are emerging, creating

23

The commission for *I Fauves* was composed by Jean Cassou, Douglas Cooper, Georges Duthuit, Jean Leymarie, Roberto Longhi, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, Arnold Rüdinger, and Denys Sutton; Carlo Carrà, Jean Cassou, Douglas Cooper, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, Maurice Raynal, Lamberto Vitali were nominated for *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*, while the *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista's* committee comprised Umbro Apollonio, Carlo Carrà, Raffaele Carrieri, Giuseppe Marchiori, Benedetta Marinetti, Gino Severini, James Thrall Soby.

24

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 32, I quattro verbali delle sedute della Commissione AF XXV B1950, I riunione della Commissione per le Arti Figurative alla XXV B. 16 e 17 settembre 1949 – nella sede di Ca' Giustinan e S. Marco (verbale con appunti manoscritti), 10-12.

25

Rodolfo Pallucchini, “Qualità contro numero”, *La Biennale*, no. 2 (October 1950): 3.

26

In response to the letter from Raymond Cogniat dated February 24, 1950, Pallucchini wrote: “After lengthy discussions, it has been decided that, given the limited space at our disposal, we shall exhibit only a few leading figures — specifically the initiators of the movement, namely Braque, Picasso, Gris, and Léger. The same approach has been taken for the exhibition of Italian Futurism, which will only showcase the origins of this movement by limiting itself to the initial exhibitions in Paris and Milan.” ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo to Raymond Cogniat, March 1, 1950.

27

P.R., “Fauves, cubisti, futuristi e importanti personali”, *L'avvenire d'Italia Bologna*, January 28, 1950.

a discourse that is more universal than ever. One might say it is international, paralleling political ideas that have evolved from the concept of region to that of nation, and which today are moving towards a supranational perspective”.²⁸ French and Italian avant-garde artists largely contributed to the development of the modern art koine, and the critical texts of each Biennale’s retrospective exhibition underlined the osmosis between them.

In his contextualisation of the Fauves, Roberto Longhi included references to Ardengo Soffici and the Cubist period of Georges Braque; he contrasted the poetic animal imagery that characterised this group of artists with the formal conceptualism evoked by the term Cubism.²⁹ Art historian Douglas Cooper underlined the influence of Cubism on figures such as Boccioni and Carrà,³⁰ while the art critic Umbro Apollonio highlighted the differences between the two avant-garde movements. The latter explained that Futurism did not pose problems of a formal nature, as did Impressionism and Cubism, but rather represented a critical and cultural manifestation; in his opinion, the parallelism between the Italian and French movements could not be overlooked.³¹

Carlo Scarpa was in charge of the exhibition projects and managed to convey this historical-critical perspective through the simplicity and clarity of the display’s elements. The architect resorted to panels of different heights and colours to mark out the space rhythmically: visitors were invited to dwell on the artworks of each avant-garde without ignoring those presented in the adjacent room since the partitions had a disjunctive and conjunctive function. Although these dividers defined areas, they did not isolate the three retrospective exhibitions and made it possible to visually connect Fauvist, Cubist, and Futurist artworks.

Scholars Bianca Albertini e Sandro Bagnoli highlighted that the 25th Biennale’s main hall project was a variation of the one conceived for the 1948 iteration, when the corresponding rooms hosted the exhibitions *Arturo Martini, Tre pittori metafisici dal 1910 al 1920, Massimo Campigli-Filippo De Pisis*.³² The shows shared many similarities, from vertical partitions to textile elements that interacted in different ways with the light sources. Comparing the plan drawn up for the Palazzo Centrale in 1948³³ [fig. 2] with that published in the 25th Biennale’s catalogue, it shows that the former was still a provisional version based on the 1948 layout: the longitudinal panel, which had previously divided Massimo Campigli’s from the Filippo De Pisis’ exhibition, was removed and the space rearranged. *I Fauves* took up more space than Cubism and Futurism, which an orthogonal partition separated. Despite this diaphragmic structure, the architect made it possible to glimpse artworks in room VI from rooms IV and V, as if visitors could experience the permeability of cultural and geographical borders through their gazes and bodies.

This panelled solution, codified in several of Carlo Scarpa’s displays,³⁴ allowed the public to get a foretaste of what they would later find themselves in front of, meaning they had at the same time the opportunity to re-examine paintings and sculptures from different perspectives. Moreover,

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Ibid.

29

Roberto Longhi, “I Fauves”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 44-46.

30

Douglas Cooper, “Quattro maestri del cubismo”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 51-53.

31

Umbro Apollonio, “I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista”, in *Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d’Arte* (Venice, June 8 – October 15, 1950), exh. cat. (Venice: Alfieri, 1950), 57-60.

32

Bianca Albertini and Sandro Bagnoli, *Scarpa. I Musei e le esposizioni* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1992), 255.

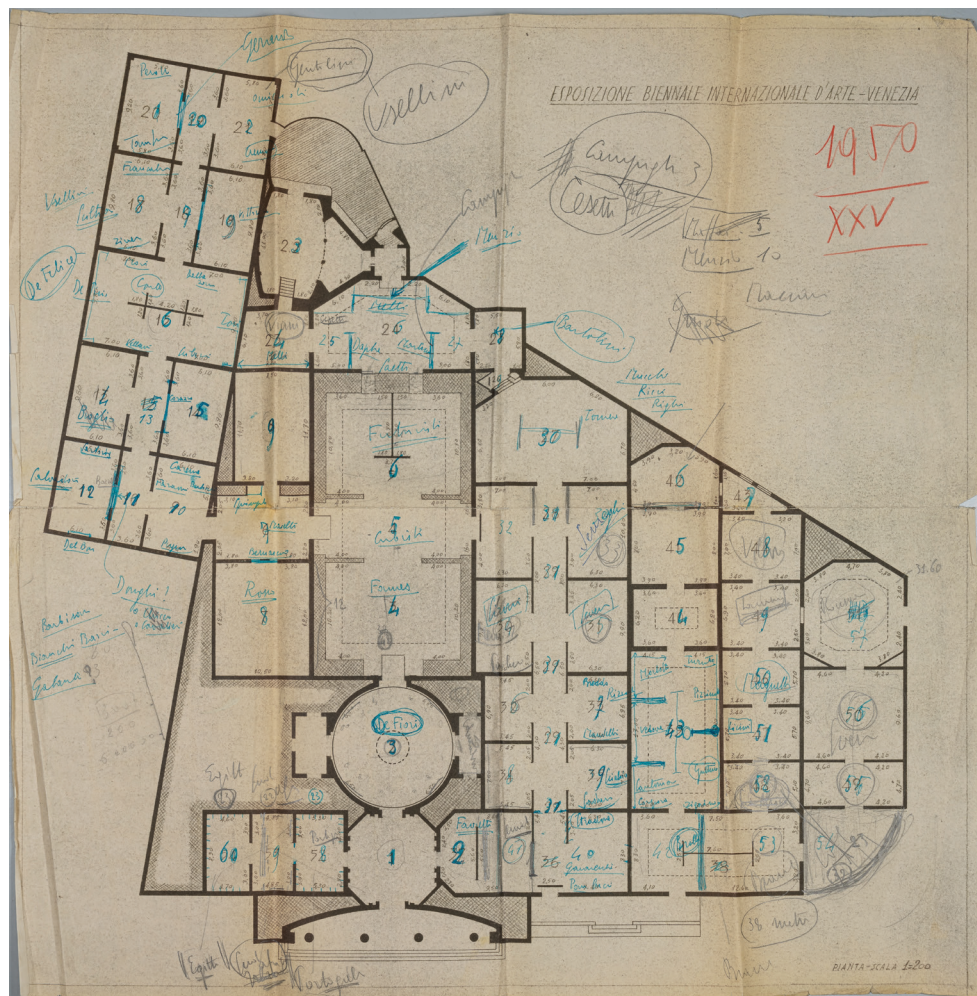
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The blue inscriptions were not drawn by Carlo Scarpa; his handwriting is recognisable in the pencil notes.

34

To further explore this topic, see Bianca Albertini and Sandro Bagnoli, *Scarpa. I Musei e le esposizioni*, 18, 44-45, 57-72.

fig. 2
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Plan of the Giardini Central Palace. Scale 1:200. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fondo Storico, Lavori e gestione delle sedi, Padiglioni, 3, Padiglione ITALIA 1948-1962. Courtesy: Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



photographic documentation shows that the overall view was as important as the focus on each historical avant-garde. The homogeneity of the project was guaranteed by the uniform colour of the walls (except for a few partitions), the balanced distribution of the artworks, almost all displayed at the same height, and the short veil running vertically around the hall's perimeter.³⁵ This last exploited the light medium to create meaningful shadow zones and ensured continuity in reading the movements by physically connecting the three spaces.

Paintings also represented a way to reinforce the thread running through the avant-garde movements displayed in the main hall: the retrospective exhibitions included artworks created between 1905 and 1914³⁶ and those of Braque, displayed in two of the three rooms simultaneously, demonstrated how during these years the French artist distanced himself from the Fauves³⁷ and became one of the four masters of Cubism. The display allows a comparison between Braque's early *Port of Antwerp* (1906) with *The Waltz* (1912), situated in Rooms IV and V respectively. The painting of Gino Severini instead provides a reason to investigate two additional aspects of the Biennale's three retrospective exhibitions related to the spatial

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Orietta Lanzarini has been alone in providing architectural analyses of these Carlo Scarpa's exhibition projects, until now. See Orietta Lanzarini, *Carlo Scarpa. L'architetto e le arti. Gli anni della Biennale di Venezia 1948-1972* (Venice: Regione del Veneto Marsilio, 2003), 72. To investigate Carlo Scarpa's use of textile elements, see also Paolo Iannello, *Carlo Scarpa in Sicilia 1952-1978* (Roma: Campisano, 2018), 33.

³⁶

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXV Biennale", xvi.

³⁷

Garibaldi Marussi, "Anticipi sulla Biennale", *La Provincia - Como*, April 20, 1950.

organisation of the Palazzo Centrale and the precedent of *Twentieth-century Italian art* held at MoMA in 1949.³⁸ The Commission for Figurative Art made *I Fauves, Quattro Maestri del Cubismo, I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* the lynchpin of the exhibition's itinerary, establishing connections with other areas in the building. The rooms IX and XXXV offered a diachronic presentation of the artworks of Carrà and Severini, documenting their Metaphysical and Cubist periods respectively.³⁹ Jacques Villon's solo exhibition in room XLIX was not located far away and was curated by Jerome Mellquist and Lionello Venturi, whose critical text explained the artist's role in founding the Section d'Or. Furthermore, Gino Severini's *Hiéroglyphiques dynamiques du Bal Tabarin* (1912) did not go unnoticed in room VI.⁴⁰ The artist, a member of the exhibition's organising committee, had advocated the loan from America, writing to Umbro Apollonio:

I would strongly recommend that you take prompt action regarding the painting *Hiéroglyphe du Bal Tabarin* from 1911-12, which is located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It seems that it was displayed there during the Italian art exhibition, receiving widespread acclaim. Some time ago, I wrote to Mr. Soby, who, as you are aware, is a member of the committee, but I have not yet received a reply. There are other works in New York, as you will see in the lists, and I respectfully urge you to take every possible measure to include them. The same applies to the two works in London. Essentially, it is of utmost importance to organise an exhibition of significant historical value. Given that there is a retrospective of Cubism, this is indeed a unique moment to properly situate our movement according to its merit. It seems that Professor Pallucchini shares this view, and I am very pleased about that.⁴¹

This letter suggests that the commissioners of the Biennale's retrospective exhibitions were well aware of the relevance of the *Twentieth-century Italian Art* exhibition that was held at MoMA. Curated by James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr Jr., it was conceived as "a general introduction to modern Italian art"⁴² and represented "the first exhibition since World War II to focus on a single European nation"⁴³ hosted by the American museum. Regarding the historical narrative developed in Venice a year later, it is not only noteworthy that James Thrall Soby was a member of the Futurist representation, but also that Barr related the genesis of the Italian avant-garde to the French context in the 1949 exhibition catalogue. MoMA's director emphasised Severini's decisive role in introducing the Futurists to Cubism in France and establishing contact with the critic Félix Fénéon for the 1912 exhibition at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune.⁴⁴ The juxtaposition of the three retrospective exhibitions at the Palazzo Centrale in 1950 deepened this perspective, while Carlo Scarpa's display contributed to portraying Paris as one of the epicentres of the European avant-garde of the early 20th century.⁴⁵

38

Twentieth-century Italian art, Museum of Modern Art of New York (June 28 – September 18, 1949).

39

Venticinquesima Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, 71-73; 163-164.

40

Ibid., 62.

41

ASAC, Fondo storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con artisti o famiglie. Futuristi, Gino Severini: letter from Gino Severini to Umbro Apollonio, February 15, 1950.

42

Alfred H. Barr and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-century Italian Art* (June 28 – September 18, 1949), exh. cat. (New York: MoMA, 1949), 5.

43

Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940-1949", *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (2012): 149.

44

Alfred H. Barr and James Thrall Soby, *Twentieth-century Italian Art*, 10.

45

It is important to note that an exhibition dedicated to *Cavaliere Azzurro* was hosted in the German Pavilion.

I Fauves and Matisse: the French Pavilion as an Ideal Extension of the Giardini Central Palace

The exhibition *I Fauves* took place in 1950, at a moment of critical rediscovery of these artists. Between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, the international scene had reconsidered their merits as epigones of Impressionism and as forerunners of abstraction. The Biennale's historical narrative anticipated Alfred H. Barr's essay *Matisse, His Art and His Public* (1951) and the *Les Fauves* retrospective exhibition organised by the MoMA in 1952; it followed the Bern Kunsthalle exhibition *Die Fauves und die Zeitgenossen*, whose organisational process was interwoven with the Venetian show, through the director of the Swiss art gallery Arnold Rüdlinger. As explained by Rodolfo Pallucchini, Rüdlinger decisively contributed to the success of the Biennale's project,⁴⁶ which had suffered delays during the loans' requests stage:

Mr. Rüdlinger from the "Kunsthalle" in Bern has decided, without our prior knowledge, to organise an exhibition of the "Fauves" in April. However, we had previously been in contact with him, and it was mutually agreed that the exhibition of the "Fauves" organised by the Biennale would later be held in Bern, with an additional selection of artworks. Conversely, Mr. Rüdlinger has opted to bring forward his exhibition for a variety of reasons. This situation naturally explains why some Swiss collectors have not yet responded to us. Nonetheless, Mr. Rüdlinger assures us that we will be able to obtain the paintings in time for the Biennale.⁴⁷

Besides the director of the Kunsthalle of Bern, the curatorial committee also included Georges Duthuit and Denys Sutton. The French art historian, who in 1949 published the controversial volume *Les Fauves*,⁴⁸ investigated the criteria for the selection of artworks in a letter to Pallucchini.⁴⁹ Asking whether the avant-garde's origins, "if not obscure, at least somewhat muddled", would be considered, he was disappointed to hear that the Biennale could not count on the loan of masterpieces by Matisse from Copenhagen and the Barnes Foundation. Months after the opening of the Biennale, Denys Sutton pointed out in *The Burlington Magazine* that the Italian Pavilion had finally drawn "attention to one of the most interesting, if underestimated, artistic movements of modern times".⁵⁰

Even if the Fauves were not widely appreciated by their contemporaries, there were public institutions who immediately recognised their potential: an example is Andry Farcy, director of the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Grenoble, who strongly supported the group. Longtime friend of these artists, he ran the "first French museum to exhibit the works of the "Fauves", more than fifteen years before other public collections in France".⁵¹ This local institution, "in this case a designated lender",⁵² seized the opportunity to contribute to the international rediscovery of this European avant-garde, unlike more prestigious museums, such as the Louvre, which did not guarantee their loans.

46

Pallucchini, "Introduzione alla XXV Biennale", xvi.

47

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con i Commissari-Fauves, Georges Duthuit: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Georges Duthuit, March 24, 1950.

48

Georges Duthuit, *Les Fauves. Braque, Derain, Van Dongen, Dufy, Friesz, Manguin, Maquet, Matisse, Puy, Vlaminck*, (Geneve: Editions des trois collines, 1949).

49

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con i Commissari-Fauves, Georges Duthuit: letter from Georges Duthuit to Rodolfo Pallucchini, November 26, 1949.

50

Denys Sutton, "Fauves", *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 570 (September 1950): 263.

51

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Varie, Musées des Beaux-Arts de Grenoble: letter from Musée de Grenoble (Andry Farcy) to Rodolfo Pallucchini, March 28, 1950.

52

Ibid.

fig. 3
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. Display of the Matisse's solo exhibition in the French Pavilion.
Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.54. 1950. 38. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



Matisse's solo exhibition, displayed in the French Pavilion of the Giardini, represented an ideal extension of the Fauvist retrospective in the Palazzo Centrale. At that time, Matisse's most recent production was largely unknown in Italy, and the Biennale wished to offer a complete overview of his artworks, including sculptures from the beginning of the 20th century [fig. 3], such as *Madeleine* (1901), *La Serpentine* (1909), or *Large Seated Nude* (1923-1925). Furthermore, in 1950 the artist shared the crowning achievement of the "Premio Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri" (Award of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers) with Ossip Zadkine; this fact aroused the wrath of Giorgio De Chirico, who wrote a public letter condemning the choice to the director of *Il Nazionale*.⁵³

After the closure of the Venice Biennale, Matisse's solo exhibition was held in Milan and Rome, where it inaugurated the programming of the Fondazione Premi Roma, with some slight changes in the selection of the artworks.⁵⁴ Rodolfo Pallucchini was commissioned to present the show in the catalogue at the behest of Giovanni Sangiorgi.⁵⁵ The relevance of this preface⁵⁶ lies on the explanation the scholar gave for the delay with which Matisse and the Fauves were rediscovered in Italy, thus affirming the importance of the joint programming between France and Italy for the 25th Biennale:

I am fully aware that many Italians, who had never seen Matisse's paintings except in reproductions, were somewhat taken aback by the canvases exhibited last summer at the Biennale. [...]

The academy, which continually renews itself under increasingly specious labels, and the modernist polemic [...] both contribute to delaying the comprehension of certain facts that are so eloquent for those familiar with the masters of the past.

Was it not perhaps entirely justified to speak of "atonement", as some have done, when it was only in 1950 that the Italian public, thanks to the Biennale, had the opportunity to see a hundred works by the "Fauves" together, and, owing to the French government's support, a room dedicated

53

The following words appeared in *Il Nazionale*: "La Commissione della Biennale, di cui fanno parte due eminenti Storici d'Arte e Modernistologhi, i professori Lionello Venturi e Roberto Longhi, oltre che premiare l'autore del soprariprodotta sgorbio, gli ha offerto nelle sale della *Biennale* lo spazio per ben due personali. La stessa Commissione ha rifiutato l'invito, anche per una sola opera, a nobilissimi e valentissimi artisti italiani." See Giorgio De Chirico, "Incompetenza ed esterolatria alla XXV Biennale", *Il Nazionale* 2, no. 44 (October 29, 1950): 3.

54

Francesca Castellani, "'Posizione' di Matisse", *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte*, vol. 35 (2011): 157.

55

Draft letter in ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con Sangiorgi: annex to the letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Giovanni Sangiorgi, December 11, 1950.

56

In 2011 Francesca Castellani examined the structure and content of Pallucchini's preface (see note 57): she highlighted how it was exemplary of his philological practice and critical thinking on modern art.

to Matisse? It is not that no Matisse works had been shown here before: in fact, thirty of his paintings were shown at the second exhibition of the Secessione Romana in 1914. But what has remained in our artistic culture, if not the cold memory of a catalogue? [...].⁵⁷

Two monographic Matisse exhibitions were preludes to the one set up in the French Pavilion in 1950. Curated by Jean Cassou, they took place in 1949 in Lucerne and Paris and showed respectively the evolution of the artist's production and the artworks he created in 1947 and 1948.⁵⁸ It might be assumed that the chief curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, who joined the commission for *I Fauves*, also contributed to the Giardini exhibition that had been set up by Raymond Cogniat. As General Commissioner of the French Pavilion, Cogniat was the delegate of the foreign government in charge of the relations with the Biennale's decision-making committees. He was responsible for national programming and promoted historical-critical comparison between Italy and France;⁵⁹ however, he did not directly manage the logistics of the building because the French Pavilion was still at that time "the only foreign pavilion of Italian ownership, as France has never wished to purchase it".⁶⁰

The Italian Pavilion as a Space for Discussion on Cubism and Futurism

While the Fauves retrospective exhibition occupied a larger area of the main hall in the Palazzo Centrale, the *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo* [fig. 4], and *I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista* were, as noted above, juxtaposed in two narrower rooms. This solution fostered the critical comparison between the French and Italian avant-garde phenomena, recalling the Parisian playing field where they arose and grew to prominence. In this way, the 25th Venice Biennale made it possible to rediscover Futurism's role in the development of modern art: visitors could question the assumption that restricted its revolutionary cultural impact within the national borders and grasp its mutual influences with Cubism. Giulio Carlo Argan underlined this aspect in *The Burlington Magazine* and emphasised Italy's first attempt to actively contribute to European avant-garde:

fig. 4
Twenty-fifth Venice Art Biennale. The exhibition display of the *Quattro maestri del Cubismo*. Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC, Fototeca, Attualità e allestimenti, A.V.52.1950.62. Image courtesy of Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia, ASAC.



57

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 21, Corrispondenza con Sangiorgi: annex to the letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Giovanni Sangiorgi, December 11, 1950.

58

Jean Cassou, Aloïs Troller and Hanspeter Landolt, *Henri Matisse* (July 9 – October 2, 1949), exh. cat. (Lucerne: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1949); Jean Cassou, *Henri Matisse. Œuvres récentes, 1947-1948* (June – September 1949), exh. cat. (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1949).

59

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Raymond Cogniat, January 16, 1950.

60

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Raymond Cogniat, March 1, 1950.

If Futurism refuses to confront the problem of form with the same clarity and objectivity that Cubism does, this is chiefly due to the fact that Italy lacked a modern artistic tradition. Whereas Cubism sets out systematically to revise traditional values, and aims deliberately at extracting from impressionist ideology just what was still required, Futurism aims at the indiscriminate destruction of all tradition, at detaching itself from the history of art by wholehearted participation in contemporary life.⁶¹

Moving from room V to VI, the public could grasp the diverse cultural atmospheres that characterised the development of each avant-garde and led to their distinct aesthetic solutions: the Futurist experience of modernity, passionate and polemical, the Cubist's more rational and Cartesian.⁶² Moreover, for the first time in the Biennale's postwar era, these French-Italian retrospective exhibitions made it possible to face up to Futurism's problematic fascist spectre: a fair historical distance had been achieved to re-examine the movement in terms of its most authentic values.⁶³

The curatorial choice of both organising committees to focus only on the initiators of the movements further strengthened the dialogue between Cubism and Futurism. Since November 1949, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Rodolfo Pallucchini have discussed the selection criteria for the French artworks.⁶⁴ The former pondered whether to consider only the "heroic years", as had been done in the volume for which he had written the foreword which Braun would publish in 1950, or to include artists who had only been Cubists temporarily. In the end, the commission preferred to focus on painting and narrow the time frame to 1908-1914: this meant concentrating exclusively on the protagonists of the French avant-garde.⁶⁵ Similarly, the Futurist retrospective was restricted to the artists who signed the First Manifesto, mainly to ensure a balanced display; this choice inevitably led to exclusions that were not ignored by the press.⁶⁶

Margherita Sarfatti was one of the collectors who lent Italian masterpieces, and she guaranteed the loan of Luigi Russolo's *Solidità della nebbia* (1912). The letter that Rodolfo Pallucchini wrote to her in March 1950 clarifies why the Italian 20th century avant-garde was represented by Futurism that year and how this preference was in line with the Biennale's programme of 1948:

But you now clearly express the reason behind your dissatisfaction with the Biennale: namely, that the Committee did not select the Italian Novecento movement for a retrospective exhibition.

Allow me to respond directly: it seems to me that, before the Novecento, there were Metaphysical painting and the Futurists. In 1948, we featured the Metaphysical artists, and this year, we are showcasing the Futurists. [...] This represents a rotational selection of exhibitions rather than a stance against you or the Novecento. Additionally, several members of our Committee have been involved in the same movement.⁶⁷

61

Giulio Carlo Argan, "Futurism", *The Burlington Magazine* 92, no. 570 (September 1950): 265-266.

62

Garibaldo Marussi, "La Sistemazione del Futurismo tra Fauves e Cubisti", *Fiera Letteraria Roma*, July 23, 1950.

63

Apollonio, "I firmatari del primo manifesto futurista", 57.

64

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i commissari e gli artisti – Cubismo, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: letter from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler to Rodolfo Pallucchini, November 9, 1949; letter from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler to Rodolfo Pallucchini, January 5, 1950.

65

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i commissari e gli artisti – Cubismo, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, January 17, 1950.

66

Alfredo Mezio, "I futuristi al Museo", *Il mondo*, July 1, 1950.

67

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i prestatori – Futurismo, Margherita Sarfatti: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Margherita Sarfatti, March 18, 1950.

The other masterpieces in room VI mostly belonged to American private and public collections.⁶⁸ Besides the above-mentioned example of *Hiéroglyphiques dynamiques du Bal Tabarin*, whose loan was reluctantly granted because of its precarious condition, MoMA authorised the transportation of *Les Funérailles de l'anarchiste Galli* (1911)⁶⁹ by Carlo Carrà to Europe. The Biennale consolidated its relationships with the United States mainly thanks to the collaboration of James Thrall Soby with the other commissioners involved in the Futurist exhibition. His presence, together with the participation of Jean Cassou in the *Quattro Maestri del Cubismo*'s committee, allows us to put in dialogue the supranational narrative of the Biennale's retrospective exhibitions with those of the aforementioned *Twentieth-century Italian art* and the 1950 *Exposition d'art moderne italien* in Paris,⁷⁰ that contributed to the canonisation of Italian modern art abroad in the postwar years. By exposing a selection of works of Italian artists, they both addressed the problematic reception of Futurism and considered its development in relation to Cubism, as was also done by the Venetian exhibition. When Pallucchini was informed by Cassou of the Musée National d'Art Moderne's project, he welcomed the news, guaranteeing institutional support:

Personally, I greatly prefer that such events take place through foreign initiatives rather than being organised by the Biennale, as envisaged by Italian law. We are still too close to the period when, under Fascism, the Biennale organised exhibitions abroad with a political connotation. I believe it is far preferable for the understanding of Italian art that they take place through initiatives such as those of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, and the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris.⁷¹

Significantly, those organised by the Biennale were not the only foreign exhibitions promoted by the fascist government. In 1939 Italy took part in two universal expositions held in America, San Francisco's *Golden Gate International Exposition* and the *New York World's Fair*.⁷² In the former, Longhi e Argan, under the supervision of Minister Giuseppe Bottai, chose to exclude Futurism to ensure greater stylistic coherence of the exhibition;⁷³ conversely, in New York, the avant-garde was presented but with a "minor profile",⁷⁴ as evidenced by the absence of reviews. Ten years later, Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby contextualised Italian modernism inside the international scene: they mainly devoted critical texts to the analysis of early Futurism and Scuola Metafisica, although they also exhibited painting and sculpture from the 1920s to younger abstractionists.

Futurism and Metafisica were also the protagonists of the narrative conceived for the *Exposition d'art moderne italien*, which opened in May 1950. The event coincided with the publication of the *Cahiers d'Art*'s monographic issue

68

"Cronache Venezia. La Mostra Storica del Futurismo", *Emporium* 56, no. 5 (May 1950): 228.

69

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Arti Visive, b. 20, Corrispondenza con i prestatori – Futurismo, Museum of Modern Art: letter from Dorothy C. Miller to Giovanni Ponti, March 7, 1950.

70

The *Exposition d'art moderne italien*, organised under the auspices of the Association Française d'Action Artistique and with the high patronage of the French and Italian Governments, was held at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris from May to June 1950.

71

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Jean Cassou: letter from Rodolfo Pallucchini to Jean Cassou, February 15, 1950.

72

The two exhibitions, respectively, took place in San Francisco (Treasure Island: 1939-1940) and New York (Flushing Meadows, Queens: 1939-1940).

73

Flavio Fergonzi, "Périodiser l'art italien du XXe siècle", *Perspective*, no. 4 (2008): 738.

74

Raffaele Bedarida, "Export/Import: The Promotion of Contemporary Italian Art in the United States 1935-1969" (PhD diss., Graduate Center City University of New York, 2016), 56, https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/736/, accessed November 2024.

dedicated to Italian art by Christian Zervos.⁷⁵ As preparations for the Biennale were being finalised, the French and Italian governments collaborated on this cultural project, supported by the Association Française d'Action Artistique and the Amici di Brera: the exhibition adopted a historical perspective that considered the cultural premises of the late 19th century in its catalogue and presented Italian artworks from 1910 to 1930.⁷⁶ Following intentions expressed by Cassou to Pallucchini, particular emphasis was placed on Futurism, whose impact in France was re-evaluated.⁷⁷

Transnational Perspectives to Investigate Modern Art: AICA and the Venice Art Biennale

In 1950, the Biennale's three retrospective exhibitions hosted in the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale demonstrated that, from a museographic perspective, it was possible to adopt a transnational approach to investigate French and Italian avant-garde artists. The exhibition's narrative introduced a topic that the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art (AICA) would debate in the following years: the balance between national and transnational forces that animated the modernist koine.⁷⁸

In 1948, several European and non-European art historians rebuilt the network of relations interrupted by the two world wars, inaugurating the AICA's First International Congress under the aegis of UNESCO⁷⁹. Experts who also joined the Venice Biennale organising commissions included Paul Fierens, Lionello Venturi, Raymond Cogniat, James Johnson Sweeney, Herbert Read, Jean Cassou, and Denys Sutton. In 1950 Venice hosted the AICA's Second General Assembly at the proposal of Cogniat. He was convinced that, despite its administrative nature, the meeting might represent an excellent opportunity for Italy and France:⁸⁰ the association's members would visit the Biennale and, consequently, the Giardini's retrospective exhibitions.

In 1949 and 1953 respectively, the AICA Second International Congress and Fifth General Assembly laid the groundwork for the 1960 International Congress, which finally interrogated the supranational character of modernism. The first one, held in Paris, investigated the relationship between art and modern lifestyles, underlining people's struggle to comprehend modern art and an attendant urgency to define the role of the critics.⁸¹ Four years later, in Dublin, the issue of centralising the documentation on contemporary art trends was addressed: the Archives de l'Art Contemporain were established and annual collection documentation promoted to improve them⁸²; far-reaching research into 20th century art would be carried out, starting with Cubism and Futurism under the leadership of Francastel and Argan.⁸³

75

For further discussion, see: Erica Bernardi, "Franco Russoli - Fernanda Wittgens. Le prime lettere tra Pisa, Milano e Parigi", *Concorso. Arti e lettere*, no. 6 (2012-2014): 53-63; Massimo Maiorino, "Parigi 1950. Dalla Francia l'Arte italiana tra Cahiers d'Art ed Exposition d'Art Moderne", *Incontri* 35, no. 1 (2020): 68-82.

76

Jean Cassou and Paolo D'Ancona, *Exposition d'art moderne italien* (May 12 – Juin 11, 1950), exh. cat. (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, 1950).

77

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia, Corrispondenza con il Prof. Jean Cassou: letter from Jean Cassou to Rodolfo Pallucchini, February 10, 1950.

78

Septième Congrès International de l'AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (September 6-13, 1960) Warsaw, Krakow.

79

Denys Sutton, "The First International Congress of Art Critics", *College Art Journal* 8, no. 2 (1948-1949): 129-135.

80

ASAC, Fondo Storico, Paesi, b. 12, Francia: Corrispondenza con il Prof. Raymond Cogniat: letter from Raymond Cogniat to Rodolfo Pallucchini, February 6, 1950.

81

Deuxième Congrès International de l'AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (June 27-July 1, 1949) Paris.

82

Cinquième Assemblée Générale de l'AICA, Minutes of the third session, (July 20-27, 1953) Dublin, 4.

83

Ibid.

Finally, before the Seventh International Congress, the AICA met in Naples and Palermo, where the main topics discussed concerned the methodology and vocabulary adopted by critics, but also the combined and reciprocal influences of “everyday life and the value of forms”.⁸⁴

In 1960, based on these earlier debates, the members gathered in Poland to open the first AICA International Congress ever organised in Eastern Europe; they sought to analyse the complex dynamics that shaped modern art trends in their national and universalistic dimensions. For these reasons, three sessions were conceived and dedicated to *Modern Art as an international phenomenon*; *Modern Art as an outcome and expression of diverse national traditions and tendencies*; *Modern Art and perspectives of the development of the art of different peoples*.⁸⁵

To address these matters, the president of the first session, Jacques Lassaigne, suggested examining the concept of unity in modern art: it was necessary to figure out whether it should be intended as “unity in language, function, issues, and unity of historical process”.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the AICA’s commissioners had to question the extent to which national experiences transcended their original reality by participating in the development of modern art. National identities were inevitably compared with each other through an international figurative language but, as Jean Cassou⁸⁷ stated, at the origin of any expressive form, there was the creative universe of an artist, that had “his personal existence, destiny, guiding star, temperament, language, and culture”.⁸⁸ Thus, it became inevitable to re-examine the concept of “international style”, considering how mass media largely contributed to strengthen relations between contemporary artists, critics, and art historians. During the second session of the congress, Giulio Carlo Argan provoked his colleagues by asking:

Does this international character stem from a certain universality, from a non-historical nature of modern art, or does it depend on a synthesis of national traditions and tendencies? Furthermore, if we agree that the character of art depends on a synthesis of the traditions and tendencies of different peoples — what do the terms “tradition” and “tendency” truly signify? What do they mean? And above all, what gives art its national character — is it genuinely a historical tradition or rather a contemporary situation?⁸⁹

To respond to and stimulate the debate, he quoted extracts from the report by the art critic Michel Ragon, who was not able to attend the meeting. He underlined that in contrast with the 19th century artworks exhibited in academic salons, all depicting the same scenes similarly worldwide, Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism all had a specific national character, one granted by the gravitation of current reality on the historical past and not by its contrary.⁹⁰ According to Ragon, these examples might explain how modern art could exist, at the same time, through unity and diversity, internationalisation and folklore.⁹¹

84

Sixième Congrès International de l’AICA, Minutes of plenary sessions, (September 16-22, 1957) Naples, Palermo.

85

Septième Congrès International de l’AICA.

86

Ibid., 11.

87

The French art historian could not physically attend the AICA’s Seventh International Congress. He was in charge of the curatorship of the exhibition *Les sources du XXe siècle: les arts en Europe de 1884 à 1914*, promoted by the Council of Europe. Held in 1960 at the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris, this event aimed to rediscover the humanist spirit that animated the European cultural panorama in the years before the outbreak of the World War I.

88

Septième Congrès International de l’AICA, 13.

89

Ibid., 41.

90

Ibid.

91

Ibid.

These considerations by AICA on the universalistic and individual dimension of modern art trends appear to be validated by the historical narratives that Carlo Scarpa, together with the Commission for Figurative Art, developed for the main hall of the Palazzo Centrale ten years earlier. The resourceful cooperation between France and Italy had succeeded in conveying the dynamism of the early 20th century artistic panorama and, as highlighted by the art historian Garibaldo Marussi, the avant-garde phenomena's different approaches to universal problems.⁹²

92

Marussi, "La Sistemazione del Futurismo tra Fauves e Cubisti".

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