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# Una raccolta d'arte moderna italiana

Carrà, Campigli, Manzù,  
Rosai, Scipione, Sironi

22.05.2022–29.01.2023

All the artworks exhibited belong to a private collection on long-term loan at Ca' Pesaro- Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna- Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.

We particularly thank Fabio Belloni, who granted access to his historical and critical texts on the works exhibited, and Elisabetta Barisoni, for sharing the texts produced for the exhibition held at Ca' Pesaro- Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Venezia in 2019.

# Introduction

**Thanks to a partnership with the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, MASI has the opportunity to present in the exhibition titled *A Collection of Italian Modern Art* around 30 masterpieces of Italian art from the interwar period by some of the most important artists of the time: Carlo Carrà, Massimo Campigli, Giacomo Manzù, Ottone Rosai, Scipione and Mario Sironi.**

Originally belonging to important historic collections of Italian art, the works are now on long-term loan at Ca' Pesaro- Galleria Internazionale d'Arte Moderna di Venezia. With the exception of the works by Scipione, whose bright colours and daring perspectives foreshadowed the art of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the works share the succinctness and formal simplicity that characterized painting and sculpture not only in Italy, but throughout Europe from the 1920s to the end of the 1950s.

All the artists featured in the exhibition are united by their participation in several fundamental experiences of the avant-garde movements of the first two decades of the last century, before they adopted the principles of the 'Return to order' that characterized the Novecento Italiano group, whose foremost promoter and theoretician was Margherita Sarfatti. Campigli and Carrà collaborated with the magazine 'Lacerba', and Rosai also moved in its circle; Carrà and Rosai belonged to the Futurist movement, to which Campigli was also close; Campigli, Carrà and Sironi belonged to the Novecento Italiano group or took part in its exhibitions; and Campigli and Carrà signed Sironi's *Manifesto of Mural Painting*. Manzù and Scipione, on the other hand, took more independent paths.

The exhibition layout groups the works by artist – except for Manzù's sculptures, which occupy separate rooms – and is marked by several masterpieces that illustrate stylistic choices and fundamental themes in the careers of these artists or that have a notable collecting or exhibition history. Important examples include *The Amazons*, *The jailer's daughter* and *Woman with Jewels* by Campigli; *Houses by the River Sesia* and *Morning by the Coast* by Carrà; *The Lansquenet Players* and *Hawker* by Rosai; *Girl on a Chair* and *Cardinal* by Manzù; *The Roman Courtesan* and the series dedicated to the Dean of the College of Cardinals by Scipione; and *The Drinker* and *Pandora* by Sironi, with which the narrative begins. However, visitors are invited to choose their own path through the exhibition rooms.

## Massimo Campigli (1895–1971)

Born in Berlin, Campigli spent his youth in Florence before moving to Milan with his family in 1907. He soon came into contact with Florentine literary and intellectual circles, working for 'La Lettura' magazine and contributing articles to 'Lacerba'. He met the members of the Futurist movement, becoming friends with Carrà and Umberto Boccioni. In 1915 he was sent to the front, he was taken prisoner in Germany and then deported to Hungary, from where he escaped to Russia. Upon his return to Italy, he became a journalist for the 'Corriere della Sera' newspaper, which made him its Paris correspondent in 1919. In the vibrant environment of the French capital of the early 1920s, he discovered friends and ideas that encouraged him to take up painting. In 1926 and 1929, he exhibited with the Novecento Italiano group and was one of the seven artists, along with Giorgio De Chirico, Filippo De Pisis, Renato Paresce, Alberto Savinio, Mario Tozzi and Gino Severini, who formed the *Italiens de Paris* group in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1928 his discovery of Etruscan art during a visit to the Villa Giulia Museum in Rome marked a stylistic turning point in his mature production, of which *The Amazons* is one of the best-known examples. He combined formal simplification with a reduced spatial setting, adopting a sombre, earthy palette reminiscent of the tones of a time-worn fresco. The same year, the Venice Biennale devoted him a room, while the following year he held a solo exhibition at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in Paris. Around that time, he started painting his stylized female figures, with accentuated geometric forms dictated not so much by a tendency towards abstractionism, but rather by a quest for purity and compositional rigour – a stylistic choice to which Campigli would remain faithful for the rest of his life. His highly personal style and his international activity as an artist would place him among the standard-bearers of Modernism, ensuring him a role in the new course of Italian art, promoted in particular by Margherita Sarfatti. In 1933, he signed Sironi's *Manifesto of Mural Painting*, along with Carrà and Achille Funi, and in the following years executed a series of large murals. Starting in the 1940s, he flanked these challenging public commissions and easel paintings for important patrons with a highly successful career as an illustrator.

### Massimo Campigli, *The Amazons* [Le amazzoni], 1928

In the summer of 1928, Campigli discovered the splendours of Etruscan art during a visit to the Roman museum of Villa Giulia. It was like a revelation that

soon led him to embark on a stylistic change. It was during this special moment that he painted *The Amazons*, which in time became one of the artist's most famous and distinctive paintings. The work features a sophisticated play of parallels, and we are struck by the solidity of the figures, which are still within a space without a horizon and stand out against the background as in a high-relief, with the nude set further back, resembling an idol fallen to the ground. The first owner of the painting was the poet and critic Raffaele Carrieri, with whom Campigli engaged in a very personal epistolary exchange, so much so that Carrieri became the exegete of his work.

### **Massimo Campigli, The jailer's daughter (The Jailer) [La figlia del carceriere (La carceriera)], 1929**

Campigli's extraordinary focus on the female figure resulted in repeated and immediately identifiable compositional layouts, which, however, gave rise to a repertoire that nearly always presupposes an invisible male eye. In this painting, the exception is very clear, for here the woman plays an active and even aggressive role. Chaste and bound in a full-length dress that constrains her, she advances escorted by a large dog. The virile bust enhances the mystery of the scene and is most likely a mental projection of the escapee the woman is tracking. Rather than recalling an ancient fresco like other paintings by the artist, the energetic use of spatula and brush gives the scene a billowing atmosphere. In the background, the architectural fragments are characteristic of Campigli's compositions.

### **Massimo Campigli, Women with Umbrella (Figures) [Donne con ombrello (Figure)], 1932**

*Women with Umbrella* illustrates the geometric synthesis that Campigli developed following his return from Paris in 1931. In this work the three female figures are squeezed around the central axis of the painting, hiding each other. The umbrella, which frequently features in Campigli's figurative vocabulary, finds a perfect spatial collocation in this scene, which is calibrated by symmetry and formal echoes.

In this painting, Campigli preferred the brush to the spatula, with effects of colour transparency and a more blurred application of paint. The work's first owner was Pietro Feroldi, a lawyer from Brescia, and it was exhibited in 1933 at the Galleria Il Milione in Milan in the exhibition *La protesta del collezionista* (The Collector's Protest). The show was designed with the aim of redirecting the taste of local collectors, thought to be overly focused on 19<sup>th</sup> century art.

### **Massimo Campigli, Woman with Jewels [Donna ingioiellata], 1942**

*Woman with Jewels* was painted during a period in which the theme of the frontal female bust with simplified features had almost become the leitmotiv of Campigli's art. The subject appears to be one of the painter's favourites: he could explore its pure formal values, with varying archaic inflections and combinations of ever-changing physiognomies and accessories. This painting stands out for the exuberance of the jewels adorning the woman and her deliberate lack of expression seems to highlight the set of precious jewellery she is wearing.

### **Massimo Campigli, Veiled Woman [Donna velata], 1946**

*Veiled Woman* is among Campigli's most important paintings of the decade. The hieratic tone combined with the delicacy of the face, the vertical extension of the body in what was an obsolete format for the artist, together with its refined pictorial execution make this a clearly evocative work. As the artist declared in 1941, 'The women in my paintings are shaped like amphorae, hourglasses, guitars. I try to depict the woman in her archetype, in her constants, in her form of yesterday and of always. This is why I show her constrained in a stiff girdle.' This painting belonged to the Milanese collection of Federico Balzarotti, and another version – very similar to the one exhibited here – also exists, which was donated by the industrialist Francisco Matarozzo Sobrinho to the Contemporary Art Museum of the University of São Paulo in Brazil. The latter was later bought, perhaps on suggestion of Margherita Sarfatti, who emigrated to South America during the Second World War.

## Carlo Carrà (1881–1966)

Born in Quargnento, in the province of Alessandria, Carrà initially trained as a decorator and muralist, in which capacity he travelled to Paris in 1889 and London the following year. Upon his return to Milan, he took evening classes in applied art at the Castello Sforzesco, and in 1906 he enrolled at the Brera Academy, where he studied under Cesare Tallone. In Milan, he engaged in particular with the painting of Giovanni Segantini, Gaetano Previati and Mosè Bianchi. He met Umberto Boccioni and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and helped draft the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters*, playing an active part in the Movement's activities until 1915. During the course of two trips to Paris, he came into contact with the exponents of Cubism. He was a contributor to 'Lacerba' and 'La Voce' magazines, in which he published articles on Giotto and Paolo Uccello. Following the end of his Futurist phase, in 1916 he started to paint his first metaphysical works. He was called up the following year but was hospitalized shortly after in Ferrara, where he met De Chirico, Savinio, Corrado Covoni and De Pisis. Following the war, he settled in Milan and started working for the magazine 'Valori plastici'. In 1921 Carrà felt the need for a return to natural reality and spent the summer in Liguria, where he painted landscapes like *Seascape at Moneglia*. He started working as an art critic for the new Milanese newspaper 'L'Ambrosiano' until 1938. In 1922 and 1926, he was invited to exhibit his works at the Venice Biennale, where two years later he would hold his first solo show with 14 works. Although he did not waver from his decision taken in 1922 not to longer belong to art movements, he participated in the two exhibitions of the Novecento Italiano group in 1926 and 1929. In 1937, Hoepli published the first monograph of Carrà written by Roberto Longhi.

### **Carlo Carrà, Seascape at Moneglia [Marina a Moneglia], 1921**

This is a simple view with compact volumes and mottled colours. *Seascape at Moneglia* was painted by Carrà during his stay in Liguria in the summer of 1921. The artist constructs an image in which the clarity of the lines and the depth of the colours evoke a dimension that is both tangible and indefinable. This is a pivotal moment in the artist's mature production, as after his Futurist and metaphysical experiments it is the first work in which he tackled a natural scene to record its luminous and atmospheric values.

Remembering that time, in 1940 Carrà wrote, 'I spent the summer of 1921 in Moneglia, where I painted several seascapes in silent contemplation, trying to

give the images a harmonious construction of forms, colour and light, while also bearing in mind certain compositional requirements of the chosen motifs that I considered essential to the vitality of the painting.' The painting's first owner was the Milanese lawyer and president of the Brera Academy Rino Valdameri, and it was exhibited for the first time at the Rome Biennale in 1925.

### **Carlo Carrà, Lakeside Village [Paese lacustre], 1922**

### **Carlo Carrà, Sunset over a Lake [Tramonto sul lago], 1922**

During the 1920s, Carrà experimented with human figures of epic inspiration, but what most interested him was landscape. He was not attracted by urban views, however, which he considered to be too teeming with existential implications, but preferred silent scenarios immersed in nature that he transposed to canvas taking care to ensure that they did not appear anonymous, but were actually identifiable. *Lakeside Village* and the contemporary *Sunset over a Lake* belong to the cycle painted in 1922 at Belgirate, on Lake Maggiore, and differ from the best-known works of the decade for their vibrant pictorial rendition and evident lyrical tone. Indeed, the year 1922 marked one of the most intense and troubled periods in Carrà's artistic career. The 20 or so canvases dating from that year betray an experimental apprehension that led the artist to embark on a variety of expressive fronts.

The 'mythical realism' of a dozen works, characterized by an archaic formal synthesis, is contrasted by a group of landscapes in which a greater attention to the actual view emerges, coupled with a less intellectualistic execution. Both works once belonged to the collections of Rino Valdameri and Pietro Feroldi.

### **Carlo Carrà, Houses by the River Sesia [Casine sul Sesia], 1924**

In 1924 Carrà spent the summer and part of the autumn in Valsesia in Piedmont, for the first time measuring himself with interpretations of the mountain landscape. This led to a cycle of over 20 paintings centring on the relationship between architecture and vegetation; among which *Houses by the River Sesia* is one of the most representative. Carrà reduces the landscape to its constituent parts so as to suggest an ideal, almost archetypal, image but with a strong rhythmic tension, rendered by just two motifs: the rounded profiles of the mountains and vegetation and the solids of the houses. The same year that he painted this work, he wrote, 'There are two ways of conceiving landscape painting. The first consists of faithfully rendering the outline and modelling of a certain grouping of trees, mountains, bodies of water and houses. This method, which we could call realist, does not rule out idealization in the choice of the most characteristic position, that which best expresses the time and the weather. The second method consists of turning a landscape into a poem full



of space and dreams, where the natural elements are accessories. In this case, art is more difficult, in that it is more ambitious.' Carrà clearly identified with the second option: he was well aware that naturalism in painting can become dangerously close to a 19<sup>th</sup> century style with which he certainly did not want to be confused. The simplified composition, solid volumes and sparing use of colour that characterize the landscapes of this series were considered by many artists of the 1930s and 1940s as among the highest examples of that style of painting that, without regressing to Impressionism, strove to respond to the excesses of the avant-gardes, also by appealing to the formal values of Italy's artistic past.

### **Carlo Carrà, Morning by the Coast [Mattino sul mare], 1928**

Painted in 1928 in Forte dei Marmi, where the artist had spent the past couple of summers, the painting portrays a seascape immersed in a crystalline light exemplified to the point of becoming an archetypal image. Carrà observes the landscape in wonder, as though seeing it for the first time, and seeks its hidden enigma, deploying a visual arsenal of metaphysical inspiration. There are no human figures, even though they are strongly alluded to, and their sudden intrusion would break the balance of the relationships between geometry and colour, architectural construction and chromatic synthesis.

The sense of isolation surrounding each element is overcome by the repetition of a triangular shape – visible in the post with wires, the open easel and the pair of sailing boats – that helps give the composition unity. Carrà used a spatula to paint the sky, imitating the chalky and rather worn consistency of the 14<sup>th</sup> century frescos he so admired. A year after its completion, the work was displayed at the *21 artistes du Novecento italien* (21 artists of Novecento Italiano) exhibition held at the Galerie Moos in Geneva.

# Giacomo Manzù (1908–1991)

Born Giacomo Manzoni, in Bergamo, Manzù was the twelfth son of a shoemaker and sacristan. The family's financial hardship forced him to leave school and start working for a firm of carvers, gilders and stuccoists. In 1921, he enrolled in evening classes in decorative sculpture at the Andrea Fantoni School of Applied Arts, where he was noticed by the teacher Aiolfi, who took him on as an assistant at his stucco workshop, where he worked until 1927. He enrolled in art school in Verona and the following year travelled to Paris. After leaving the French city due to his lack of means, in 1930 he settled in Milan and started signing his work 'Manzù'. In 1932, he exhibited his work with Renato Birolli, Gianni Cortese, Luigi Grosso, Aligi Sassu and Fiorenzo Tomea at the Galleria Il Milione. In 1936, he made a second trip to Paris with Sassu and won the Prince Umberto Award for the first version of his *David*. The following year he exhibited at La Cometa gallery in Rome, where he met Cesare Brandi and Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. In 1938, he showed his work in a personal room at the Venice Biennale for the first time. At the Rome Quadriennale the following year, he exhibited his first sculpture of a Cardinal, which became a recurring subject over the subsequent years. During the same period, he started working closely with the Corrente group. In 1940 and up until 1954, he taught first at the Brera Academy and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Turin. In 1947, he made the first large-scale version of *Girl on a Chair* and Palazzo Reale in Milan staged the first important retrospective of his work, presented by Lionello Venturi. The same year, he entered the competition for the doors of Saint Peter's in Rome, and in 1952 he was officially granted the commission for one of them, the *Door of Death*, which was inaugurated 12 years later.

## **Giacomo Manzù, *Girl on a Chair* [*Ragazza sulla sedia (Bambina sulla sedia)*], 1949**

From the beginning of his career, the theme of the seated nude preadolescent had a special value for Manzù, to the point of becoming an identifying feature of all his work, together with that of the Cardinal. Standing before this life-size sculpture, the observer is ensnared by the objective, and partly mimetic, rendering, so much so that it appears to be a life cast. Dealing with the most academic of themes – the model posing for the artist – Manzù extracts its metaphysical and timeless dimension to make it an exercise in linear purity. Compared to the first version made in 1947, purchased by the Galleria d'Arte

Moderna in Turin, and the successive ones, the sculpture featured in the exhibition displays a different surface treatment: it is neither polished and glossy, like the Turin version, nor rough like the reworkings of the mid-1950s. The mouldings of the chair are also different, and while it retains its simple lines, it is tilted slightly backwards, giving the work an almost streamlined effect.

### **Giacomo Manzù, David, 1950**

After more than a decade, Manzù returned to a high point of his early mature period that satisfied him and consolidated his fame. The result is this *David*, a bronze that replicates – albeit with some differences – the contrivances of the better-known homonymous work of 1938. It is striking to see this energetic figure imbued with pathos in a huddled pose with his shoulders pushed forward, his slender arms between his knees and his head tilted to the side as though listening to something. Comparing it with known versions of the same subject, we can assert that Manzù's expressive approach is, in this case, strictly anti-heroic.

### **Giacomo Manzù, Cardinal [Cardinale], 1952**

In his late maturity, Manzù declared that he had been overwhelmed by the image of cardinals when he attended a ceremony in Saint Peter's presided over by the pope in 1934: 'I saw them like so many statues, a series of aligned cubes, and the impulse to create my own vision of that ineffable reality in sculpture was irresistible.' In the early 1950s, the artist created a cycle in which he rendered the Cardinal theme with sophisticated linear figures, sealed within sharp, imperturbable, enigmatic forms but dramatized by their surface treatment. The figure, characterized by block-like forms and a simplified treatment, is not intended as a portrait, but rather as an emblematic image in which its contemplation and inscrutability are accentuated by the lowered eyelids. Despite its explicitly Catholic iconography, the theme of the cardinals never had commendatory motives, and many critics have interpreted the hieratic quality and expressive coldness of the figures as a reference to the trials and tribulations that have often accompanied commissions Manzù made for places of worship.

## Ottone Rosai (1895–1957)

Rosai was born into a humble family in a working-class neighbourhood of Florence. His father was a carpenter and woodcarver. After finishing elementary school, he started work in a cabinetmaker's workshop. He managed to enrol at the Institute of Decorative Arts in Piazza Santa Croce (from which he was expelled) and subsequently at the Academy of Fine Arts, attracted in particular by the school of engraving headed by Celestino Celestini. In 1912, he was expelled from the Academy too, again for his unruly behaviour. The following year he nonetheless displayed his etchings at the exhibition in Pistoia held by Celestini for his pupils and also exhibited 15 or so works in a room in Via Cavour in Florence, which was noticed by Giovanni Papini and visited by the Futurists, who invited him to join the movement. Encouraged by the intellectuals of 'Lacerba', in 1914 he embarked on his Futurist period and took part in the exhibition held at the Galleria Sprovieri in Rome. He became friends with Ardengo Soffici, who introduced him to Cubo-Futurist deconstruction and collage, as well as the work of Cézanne, Picasso and 'Le Douanier' Rousseau. At the outbreak of the First World War, he enlisted and was among the soldiers at the Battle of Monte Grappa. He returned from the war highly decorated and recounted his experience in a book entitled *Il libro di un teppista* (The Book of a Hooligan) published by Vallecchi in 1919. At the same time, he created a series of small-format works in which he portrayed from life solitary figures or groups of people, often players, whom he met in the taverns or streets of Florence, using an unsophisticated language that sometimes bordered on the grotesque.

At the end of the 1920s, he staged his first solo exhibition at Palazzo Capponi in Florence, presented by Soffici.

In 1922, he was devastated by his father's suicide due to debts, which forced him to take over his carpentry shop and paused his career as an artist from 1923 to 1927.

### **Ottone Rosai, *The Lansquenet Players [I giocatori di toppa]*, 1920**

Rosai's return to Florence after the war in May 1919 coincided with a search for a manner independent of the avant-gardes and for more autonomous stylistic traits. His preferred subject was a type of humanity living on the edges of society, which he explored avoiding all forms of psychological approach or social criticism. *The Lansquenet Players* emerges as a founding precursor of

Rosai's aesthetic, an archetype of numerous replicas and variations until the end of his career in 1957, when the artist died.

A couple of passers-by are watching from above a group of six figures seated on the ground. The sole attributes of these street people are their rough clothes and the frowns of the few visible profiles. In this small space, Rosai manages to concentrate great pictorial intensity, further heightened by the painstaking care with which he applies the colours in thin layers, smoothed with his spatula. The first owner of this work, which was featured in the solo exhibition at Palazzo Capponi, was Giorgio Castelfranco, protector and promoter of De Chirico, and who played an important role in protecting Italy's artistic heritage during and immediately following the Second World War.

### **Ottone Rosai, My Father (Daddy) [Mio padre (Il babbo)], 1920**

This small painting is a classic of Rosai's early maturity. Around 1919, his work underwent a change towards purism and this painting is one of its most striking results, while also being related to highly significant autobiographical features. Rosai's gaze, which is merciless when describing grotesque human physiognomy, is more indulgent when painting portraits, particularly of his own family members.

The artist paints his father seated at a table in a bare room. His wan complexion, pronounced dark circles beneath his eyes and shoulders bent by fatigue clearly convey his humble existence. The almost bare table heightens the desolation of a scene lacking all but the most rudimental elements. There is a hidden reference to Cézanne, who exhibited 28 paintings at the Venice Biennale in 1920 and was at the centre of much debate by critics, including Soffici, published in the Italian press: Rosai's moustachioed male figure, depicted in profile, seated at a table with hunched shoulders inevitably recalls Cézanne's *Card Players*. The artist was very close to this painting of his father for sentimental reasons; its first owner was the Brescian lawyer Pietro Feroldi.

### **Ottone Rosai, Hawker (Pandiramerinaio) [Venditore ambulante (Pandiramerinaio)], 1921**

Without distorting the consolidated styles he had established, Rosai introduced some notable formal and pictorial variations around 1921. Differently from the past, he executed his paintings rapidly, using thin, transparent paint, very different to that applied in layers with a spatula. The shaded profiles and luminous variations of the background offer a foretaste of the downy brushwork effect that characterizes the artist's mature work, in which he used an almost dry brush. The job of this figure, typical of Rosai's work, is revealed by the Italian title 'Pandiramerinaio' with which it was published in the 1931 catalogue by

Alessandro Volta: he is a hawker of *pan di ramerino*, a Tuscan sweet bun traditionally eaten at Easter.

In a critical article on a collective exhibition in Milan, published in 'L'Ambrosiano' (13 January 1921), Carrà briefly praised the work: 'Among the finest things in this lavish exhibition is Ottone Rosai's *Hawker*.' The work's first owner was the Florentine publisher Attilio Vallecchi, who was one of Rosai's most generous patrons and, over the years, put together a collection composed almost entirely of his masterpieces.

### **Ottone Rosai, Woman before a Mirror [Donna allo specchio], 1922**

Very few women appear in Rosai's human gallery. In terms of subject, intimacy of the scene and pictorial language, this oil on cardboard from 1922 is in a way unprecedented: in no other work Rosai attempts – and achieves – such an effective exercise of abstraction of the human body.

Still in her petticoat, a woman is absorbed in doing her hair. Her body, with its simple forms, has the sculptural vividness of an object turned on a lathe, while the composition is devoid of all details. Rosai chose the approach of depersonalization and economy of formal means to transform a commonplace, everyday ritual into a particularly fascinating visual experience. This immobile iconography can be traced to his study of the work of Georges Seurat, who came to the attention of the Italian public on occasion of the 1920 Venice Biennale and was a source of inspiration for Rosai. The dialogue with Seurat's work can be seen in the choice of theme and the depiction of the standing figure in profile, the use of abrupt changes in the light, and the curviness of the buttocks and breasts delineated by blurred outlines.

The first owner of the work was again Attilio Vallecchi.

### **Ottone Rosai, Landscape [Paesaggio], 1923**

Throughout his career, Rosai alternates scenes in closed, smoky environments with views of the Tuscan countryside with villages and farms. From his Decadent beginnings to post-war Realism via a Futurist parenthesis, rural landscapes were explored with the same expressive sensitivity that permeates his interior scenes. In this work, the contrast between the massive presence of the buildings and the vegetation is very powerful: on the one hand, the sharp profiles are reinforced by ruled pencil lines, on the other hand, nature is denoted with tenuous, Impressionistic brushstrokes.

Buildings and nature, interpreted in such discordant pictorial manners, are unified by the light of the setting sun in which the entire landscape is swathed. Once again, the weight of Cézanne's teachings can be seen. Still, a vaguely metaphysical atmosphere is also perceptible, reinforcing the idea that the artist did not simply intend to paint a landscape view of the Tuscan countryside from life.

## Scipione (Gino Bonichi, 1904–1933)

Born in Macerata, the last of the six children of an administrative captain, he moved to Rome with his family in 1909. He contracted tuberculosis as a teenager and was admitted to a sanatorium in 1919. Apparently recovered, he was discharged and in 1925 he enrolled at the Free Nude School at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, from which he was expelled for arguing with the director. In Rome he had the opportunity to study the original works of old masters such as Velázquez, El Greco, Caravaggio, Magnasco, Tiepolo, Bernini and Borromini, as well as reproductions and prints of works by Goya, Piranesi, Ingres, and the more contemporary Daumier, Picasso, Soutine and Rouault. He flanked this visual culture by reading widely, from the Bible to Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*, which constantly opened up new moral and poetic horizons for him. He used the pseudonym 'Scipione' for the first time in 1927. The same year marked the start of his interest in the figure of Cardinal Vincenzo Vannutelli, to whom he would not only dedicate his most famous portrait, but also a series of drawings, sketches and studies. Motivated by ardent sentiments of faith, the Cardinal became the symbol of spiritual power for him, but also of the decline of the Catholic Church and a civilization – that of Rome – to which he would dedicate his entire life and his art. The subsequent year, along with Mario Mafai, Renato Marino Mazzacurati and Antonietta Raphaël he founded the Scuola Romana (or Scuola di via Cavour) in opposition to the Novecento Italiano group. He spent the following summer in Colleparado. In 1930, he exhibited *The Dean of the College of Cardinals* at the Venice Biennale, and participated in the Rome Quadriennale the following year. He contributed drawings and covers to the magazine 'L'Italia Letteraria'. In 1931, with Mazzacurati he founded the magazine 'Fronte', of which only two issues were published but featuring prestigious contributors like Giuseppe Ungaretti and Alberto Moravia. His health declined and he was admitted to a sanatorium in Arco, Trentino, where he died in 1933 at the age of 29.

### **Scipione, Skittish Horse (The Little Horse) [Cavallo infuriato (Il cavallino)], 1929**

The image of the horse recurs frequently in Scipione's oeuvre. It is an allusive motif, a sign of a tormented inner state and often a harbinger of ominous forebodings. *Skittish Horse* dates from a decisive moment in his stylistic development: the 25-year-old artist had just abandoned an archaizing manner

marked by solid and well-turned volumes to embrace a new expressionistic vein that was still unknown in Italy.

At the end of the decade, Scipione declared the visionary energy that would underpin his future work, far removed from the ubiquitous classicizing aesthetics. These figures are often irrational, with sinewy profiles, defined by a sombre palette that gives the scenes a strong emotional impact.

### **Scipione, Sketch for the Portrait of the Dean of the College of Cardinals [Bozzetto per il ritratto del Cardinal Decano], 1930**

In 1930, he commenced the cycle of works depicting Cardinal Vincenzo Vannutelli. In terms of commitment, subject and size, the portrait of the Cardinal (now at the Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome) – whose sketch is featured in this exhibition – is Scipione's most ambitious work and critics have always attributed it a central place in his brief career.

The painting is a spontaneous tribute to the dean's authority and, more generally, fits into the series of works revealing Scipione's fascination with the symbols of Catholic and Baroque 'Roman-ness'.

Scipione infers the acute observation and bright palette of the famous portraits of ecclesiastics from Velázquez and Titian, but it is in the painting of El Greco – the artist of one of the best-known cardinal portraits in the history of art (that of Cardinal Fernando Niño Guevara, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) – that he found that balance of formal study and spiritual intensity to which his own art also aspires.

### **Scipione, Study for the Dean of the College of Cardinals [Studio per il Cardinal Decano], 1930**

This is one of the artist's most intense works, and it is all the more impressive if we observe the economy of means by which he achieved it. This time, the artist renounces his usual symbolic apparatus, focusing instead on the subject and its pictorial rendering. It is possible to sense the speed of execution, and the liquid colour, tinged with sulphurous tones, undergoes sudden highlighting on the forehead and nose. The artist demonstrates an awareness of the manner of the 17<sup>th</sup> century *tenebrosi* artists (making use of pronounced chiaroscuro), whose teachings he revives with dashing and summary brushstrokes.

In respect to the other portraits, this work lacks all references to the subject's status in the ecclesiastic hierarchy and the symbolism with which Scipione's compositions are normally imbued. Here, everything is concentrated on the subject and its pictorial rendering.



## **Scipione, The Roman Courtesan [La cortigiana romana], 1930**

*The Roman Courtesan* is the work that best sums up Scipione's artistic evolution. The provocative mixture of sacred and profane subjects, a caustic spirit bordering on the grotesque, a stylistic manner of anticlassical inspiration that is nonetheless attentive to the values of tradition, and absolute dedication to his city of adoption: these are the ingredients underpinning this painting from 1930, and at the same time defining the poetics of an entire painterly evolution. The woman has a wild-eyed air to say the least. Everything about her seems unrestrained, prompting us to identify her as a sex-worker. Behind her, is an exceptionally splendid backdrop: a view of Imperial and Baroque Rome, in which we can recognize Trajan's Column and the churches of Santa Maria di Loreto and the Santissimo Nome di Maria. A portrayer of Catholic and working-class Rome, Scipione creates an enigmatic image in which he seems to establish an analogy between the woman and the city, symbolically united by decadence and immorality, to which he himself – constantly torn between yearnings for intemperance and redemption – was attracted.

## Mario Sironi (1885–1961)

Born into a family of architects, artists and musicians in Sassari, Sironi was the second of six children. When he was one year old, his family moved to Rome, where he attended school and technical college. From an early age, he displayed great skills in drawing, influenced by Symbolist artists such as Morris, Beardsley and Rops. In 1902, he embarked upon a degree in engineering, which he abandoned a year later due to severe depression, the first of many such episodes that would recur throughout his life. He decided to focus on painting and in the autumn of that year he enrolled at the Free Nude School at the Academy of Fine Arts. He got to know the sculptor Giovanni Prini and became friends with Gino Severini and Umberto Boccioni, both of whom were then pupils of Giacomo Balla. In 1905, he started making illustrations and covers for the weekly magazine 'Avanti! della domenica'. He commenced a period of travel, staying in Milan and the following year in Paris accompanied by Boccioni, before returning to Milan and then going to Germany, where he developed an interest in classical art. In 1913, he experimented with Futurism and the following year took part in the performance of *Piedigrotta*, the first international Futurist exhibition and conference at the Sprovieri gallery. At the outbreak of the First World War, he enlisted in the Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists with Marinetti, Boccioni and Russolo, among others, and signed Marinetti's *L'Orgoglio Italiano* Futurist manifesto.

Following the war, he moved to Rome, where he had the chance to see the metaphysical works of Carrà and De Chirico, and subsequently Milan, where he painted his first urban landscapes. In 1919, he joined the Fascist Party and would remain faithful to its doctrine until the end of his life. He frequented Margherita Sarfatti's salon and was among the founders of the Novecento Italiano group in 1922, participating in all of the group's exhibitions over the subsequent years. Between 1922 and 1943, he was one of the leading illustrators of the *Popolo d'Italia* newspaper. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he adopted an Expressionist style, inspired by the paintings of Rouault, which was characterized by violent brushstrokes and roughly sketched figures. He had solo exhibitions at the Rome Quadriennale in 1931 and the Venice Biennale in 1932. At the same time, his interest in monumental painting grew, leading to his 1933 *Manifesto of Mural Painting*, which was also signed by Campigli, Carrà and Funi. Throughout the decade he produced a series of large-format works, ranging from fresco and mosaic to bas-reliefs and stained-glass windows. In 1943, he

sided with the Republic of Salò. After being stopped by a brigade of partisans, he was spared thanks to Gianni Rodari, who recognized him and gave him safe passage. In 1944, a lavish monograph by Luciano Anceschi was published by Giampiero Giani.

### **Mario Sironi, Urban landscape with figures [Paesaggio urbano con figure], 1922-1924**

In the early 1920s, Sironi introduced significant variations to the urban landscape cycle he had commenced in 1919 after moving from Rome to Milan. These changes relate to the framing of the scene, which shifted from a frontal to a lateral view, the raising of the viewpoint and a new way of applying the paint that, while remaining dense and compact, assumed a less gritty texture. The most significant innovation, however, was the introduction of an unprecedented type of humanity and the enlarging of the figures compared to the background. The first owner of the work was Filippo Anfuso, a well-known politician who was among Mussolini's loyalists. A diplomat during Fascist rule (he was the Italian ambassador in Germany), he owned an important art collection with works that dated from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary times.

### **Mario Sironi, The Drinker [Il bevitore], 1923-1924**

The peak of Sironi's classicizing style of the mid-1920s was foreshadowed by attempts to reconcile the solidity of the Novecento Italiano group with formal solutions reminiscent of the avant-gardes of the turn of the century. *The Drinker* is the most significant example of this experimental phase. This theme articulates Sironi's experimentation and is featured in several Futurist tempera and collage works from the beginning of the century. It reappears in some drawings during his metaphysical period, and then between the 1920s and 1930s it re-emerges in his personal interpretation of European Expressionism. Finally, in the post-war years it can be found in paintings with violent gestural brushstrokes.

While his architects, engineers, sculptors and then, in the 1930s, athletes, ploughmen and peasants convey a superior, epic, vigorous humanity, drinkers embody a condition on the very edge of existence, emblems of the malaise of city life, of which Sironi himself was at times a victim. Extremely prolific periods in his career were cyclically followed by phases marked by depression and creative crises. The work is characterized by a highly calibrated formal balance and a complete lack of detail in favour of volumetric unity and an extremely restricted palette. It belonged to Margherita Sarfatti's collection until 1950.

## **Mario Sironi, Pandora (The Myth of Pandora)**

### **[Pandora (Il mito di Pandora)], 1924 (with later revisions)**

The woman's body flanked by a pot-bellied vase is a *topos* of Italian painting of the 'Return to order', especially among the Novecento Italiano group. With its solid physical presence and sleek sinuosity, the vase has always been the ideal object to set alongside a human figure and has become the emblem of a rediscovered Mediterranean classicism. In *Pandora*, Sironi freezes the potential erotic aspect of the female nude in a figure with a vaguely archaeological appearance and a severe, inexpressive face, depicted three-dimensionally and no less solid than the statue at her side with which she converses in silence. The dark, stark architecture of this interior is interrupted by an arched window behind the female nude that opens onto a landscape that recalls the primordial ones painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. Although the painting marks an important stage in his early maturity in terms of commitment and end-result, we find no trace of it in Sironi's biography until 1944, when it was reproduced and published in the monograph by Giampiero Giani, the work's first owner.

## **Mario Sironi, Urban Landscape with Gasometer (Outskirts)**

### **[Paesaggio urbano con gasometro (Periferia)], 1943-1944**

The collapse of the Fascist regime not only sealed the defeat of Sironi's political beliefs, but also marked the interruption of an aesthetic project based on the primacy of mural painting and the return to traditional painting. His definitive resumption of easel painting coincided with the recovery of themes elaborated over 20 years earlier, namely urban views and metaphysical compositions. *Urban Landscape with Gasometer* is an excellent example of this period, but this theme was destined to be interrupted in the middle of the decade, at least with regard to the Milanese suburbs, and was only intermittently resumed. In comparison to the urban landscapes of the early 1920s, marked by a raised viewpoint, the later ones are characterized by buildings aligned on a lowered horizon. In contrast to the past the masonry, where walls and windows were depicted using well-defined blocks of colour, now the outlines appear to crumble and the paint is applied far more thickly. The combined effect is to intensify the painting's dramatic weight and air of desolation.

## **Mario Sironi, Outskirts (Urban Landscape)**

### **[Periferia (Paesaggio urbano)], 1944**

In the space of a few years, Sironi went from being one of the most representative and industrious artists of his time to one of the most controversial. For almost two decades he chose the path of anguished isolation. *Outskirts*, painted in 1944, visually translated his inner torment. The constructive ideal of the urban

views of more than 20 years earlier appears irremediably lost here and the plastic solidity that characterizes Sironi's work is less prominent. On the contrary, a stark contraposition of light and shade transforms the volumes into disembodied silhouettes. This spatial simplification allows the artist to focus on the material, resulting in a surface tormented by the broken lines of spatulas and brushwork. The framing of the scene, the formal and chromatic economy, and the brushstrokes create an image full of anguish and assure its originality among the works of the period. These formal and linguistic choices inspired the artists who developed a figurative style with strong fundamental features in the aftermath of the War.



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