

## 2. ITALIAN DISPLAY CULTURE UNDER THE FASCIST DICTATORSHIP: INFLUENCES AND DEVELOPMENTS.

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the relationship between Fascism and the exhibition culture developed in Italy in the 1930s, paying particular attention to three interrelated themes: the challenging of traditional museum display culture; the call by artists for a synthesis of the arts; and the recognition of exhibition design as an autonomous area of architectural practice. It is from the interaction between these three elements that the thematic exhibition would emerge as a new genre with the power to revolutionise the traditional presentation of contemporary art that had been based either on art history or on art criticism. Two events frame the chronological analysis of the development of these themes and how they eventually transformed Italian fine art exhibition culture: the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* (from now on MRF), held in Rome in 1932, and the *Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei*, held in Milan in 1941. While the MRF was the historic event that triggered – and created the conditions for a public debate about – the three identified themes, the Scipione exhibition marked the coming-of-age of a decade of intensive discussion around them, thanks to the inventive display designed by architect Franco Albini to accommodate the show’s paintings and drawings.<sup>1</sup>

Informed by Marinetti’s hatred for museums, Mussolini blatantly ignored such institutions, particularly fine art museums, which were left almost untouched during the dictatorship.<sup>2</sup> Exhibitions, on the other hand, enjoyed an unprecedented success after 1932, developing a series of displays that in different ways questioned the very nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> Although Albini’s exhibition was not a thematic contemporary art exhibition, it was the first time that an architect had applied exhibition design to fine art exhibits, anticipating the post-war tendency discussed in chapter three.

<sup>2</sup> Marinetti expressed his thoughts regarding the museum in his first manifesto, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, reprinted in Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (eds.), *Futurism: An Anthology*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009, p.51. On Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, see also R.W. Flint (ed.), *Marinetti: Selected Writings*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1972 and Luciano De Maria (ed.), *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Teoria e invenzione Futurista*, Milano: Mondadori, 1996. For the few cases in Turin, Pesaro and Bolzano of fine art museums that were refurbished under Fascism, please refer to: Marisa Dalai Emiliani, “‘Faut-bruler le Louvre’”. Temi del dibattito internazionale sui musei nei primi anni '30 del Novecento e le esperienze italiane”, in *Per una critica della museografia del novecento in Italia. Il ‘saper vedere’ di Carlo Scarpa*, Marsilio: Venezia, 2008, pp.13–50. It should be noted that, in the 1930s, a different fate befell historical museums, especially those dedicated to the Risorgimento, the term under which historians inscribed the process of the country’s unification and the birth of Italy as an independent state. A thorough analysis of the debate on the museums of Risorgimento and their relationship with Fascist propaganda is presented in Massimo Baioni, *Risorgimento in camicia nera. Studi, istituzioni, musei nell’Italia Fascista*, Carocci editore: Torino, 2006.

museum, namely its relationship with history and temporality. Exhibitions took on the status of events able to transform the historical imaginary of the Italian populus. In order to achieve this goal, Mussolini could count on the collaboration of artists and architects. Since 1926 he had developed a system of co-option (rather than imposition), through which he offered favourable working conditions to any artists willing to collaborate with the regime. In 1933 Mario Sironi, who since 1921 had been working at *Il Popolo d'Italia*, Mussolini's newspaper, launched his *Manifesto della Pittura Murale*, (co-signed by painters Massimo Campigli, Carlo Carrà and Achille Funi) in which he posited mural painting as the quintessential Italian art form, with the capacity to achieve a unity of the arts and at the same time contribute towards spreading Fascist values in society and establishing an international reputation for Italy's supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Richard Wagner, Sironi aimed through his Manifesto to set the conditions for a synthesis of the arts, a task he and other artists could achieve only with the collaboration of architects. The latter included those struggling to develop in Italy an architectural language influenced by the international style, who recognised in the model of the temporary exhibition the perfect arena for their practice. New technological materials, combined with the exhibition design models offered by the international avant-gardes, inspired these architects to view exhibitions as a distinct architectural category (as, for example, hospitals, train stations, houses etc). In the event, architects such as Giuseppe Pagano or Gio Ponti proposed a further interpretation of the concept of the synthesis of the arts which differed from that championed by Sironi.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.2 Exhibition Cultures under the Fascist Dictatorship

In analysing Italian exhibition culture of the 1930s, one cannot but confront the Fascist regime and its ambiguous cultural politics. The boundless body of literature on Fascism produced over the last seventy years allows one to address a series of precise questions and areas of investigation. It is often the case that authors such as Emilio Gentile, Marla Susan Stone, Emily Braun, Jeffrey T. Schnapp or Claudio Fogu, to name but a few, have differing and even opposing views; however, their publications variously enhance and enrich from different perspectives my own insights into the unstable artistic cultural politics of the regime.

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<sup>3</sup> The manifesto is reprinted in Elena Pontiggia (ed.), *Mario Sironi. Scritti e pensieri*, Milano: Abscondita, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> As discussed below, Pagano and Ponti suggest in two articles published following the 1936 Milan Triennial that only architecture can achieve a real synthesis of the arts, while artists tend to realise self-sufficient creations or pure art. Giuseppe Pagano, *Arte decorativa italiana*, Milano, 1938, pp.20 and 36 and Gio Ponti, 'La Sala della Vittoria', in *Domus*, n.103, July 1936, p.7.



As mentioned above, Mussolini's cultural politics can be described as ambiguous, since a range of different positions were assumed during the *ventennio* (the twenty year period of Mussolini's rule), typical of the constant shifting of the regime in respect to many subjects. The lack of any consistent stance led different commentators (especially in the two decades after the Second World War) even to question the existence of any true Fascist cultural policy.<sup>5</sup> This mirrors the argument that the regime itself inherently lacked a convincing ideology, in contrast with the other main European dictatorships of the time. Reconstructing Mussolini's formative years, Gentile argued that it was exactly this reluctance to embrace any clear ideology that itself constituted the ideology that drove the Fascist regime through the two decades of Mussolini's power.<sup>6</sup> One of the reasons why Mussolini abandoned the socialist party in 1914 was his loss of faith in the capacity of any political doctrine to respond to the ruthless and unpredictable transformations of contemporary reality. Working from this premise, *il Duce* (as he was called, the word meaning 'leader' in Latin) firmly believed in the need to take up a new stance on any given situation, showing no qualms if that stance contradicted any previous position or decisions.

Aware of the political importance of the masses, as evidenced by the Russian Revolution of 1917, Mussolini had by 1920 developed the idea that a state and its populace are entities to be shaped by a skilful politician.<sup>7</sup> For him, politics was the art of moulding the masses and his main goal was to strive continuously for the regeneration of the Italian population. In order to achieve this, having managed by 1925 to dismantle any leftovers of the liberal democratic state, Mussolini developed a system for encroaching on the private – as much as the public – life of any single individual. The aim was to percolate Fascist values throughout society and galvanise the population to support the regime, in order to achieve an anthropological revolution and reiterate its essential difference from both the capitalist democracies of the Western world and the Bolshevik revolution of the Soviet Union. Mass exhibitions organised by the regime became an invaluable weapon with which to mould and shape the views of the Italian population.

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<sup>5</sup> Among the most notable voices were the philosophers Norberto Bobbio and Eugenio Garin, Communist party leader Palmiro Togliatti and the critic Carlo Bo who, despite their differences, agreed that such a thing as a properly recognisable Fascist culture did not exist. Alessandra Tarquini recently described the manifold activities and initiatives through which Fascist culture came into being, summarising at the same time the historical debate around its existence. Alessandra Tarquini, *Storia della cultura fascista*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo. Storia e interpretazione*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2002, pp.77–90.

<sup>7</sup> As pointed out by the historian of Fascism Emilio Gentile, Mussolini laid out his theory on politics in the short paper *L'artefice e la materia*, a response to and assessment of the Bolshevik revolution. Emilio Gentile, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista 1918–1925*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996, pp.202–3.

It is not by chance that the architect and critic Agnoldomenico Pica identified a propagandist exhibition as being the landmark event that changed the meaning and function of the exhibition genre as a whole.<sup>8</sup> In 1925, at the Paris *Exposition Internationale des Artes Décoratifs*, Konstantin Melnikhov presented his Soviet pavilion, where for the first time – Pica claims – exhibitions ‘began to assume new functions and to postulate ends of a purely spiritual nature. These functions and purposes had not only been previously completely ignored, but, with their birth, spiritual, cultural, didactic and idealistically propagandistic ambitions tended to become dominant.’<sup>9</sup> While until that moment, according to Pica, exhibitions were mainly a commercial phenomenon in which modern nation-states competed against each other in technology and progress (exemplified by the display of their most advanced products), the Soviet government demonstrated the enormous potential inscribed within an exhibition as a vehicle to promote an ideology and generate consensus among the people.<sup>10</sup> Coming from the Soviet Union, Melnikhov interpreted the exhibition space as discursive, able to fulfil the propaganda needs of his government through ‘a masterpiece that was immediately intelligible to anyone.’<sup>11</sup>

Fascism could not ignore the potential inherent in this approach to exhibition making.<sup>12</sup> Beside Melnikhov’s pavilion, the other notable examples of exhibitions mentioned by Pica in his texts are: the German Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe built in Barcelona in 1929; the *Deutscher Werkbund* exhibition at the *Exposition de la Société des Artistes Décorateurs* in Paris in 1930; and the *Baugewerkschaft Ausstellung* in Berlin in 1931.<sup>13</sup> However, the key event that influenced the Italian debate more than any other was the exhibition design of the *Pressa*, held in Cologne in 1928. Yet, while these exhibitions had a definite propagandist agenda, what distinguished the plethora of Fascist-organised exhibitions was the added desire to shape the opinions and behaviours of the masses. Hence the more

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<sup>8</sup> Agnoldomenico Pica, in Roberto Aloi (ed.), *Esposizioni, Architettura, Allestimento*, Milano: Hoepli, 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. XLI. Although debatable from a historical point of view, Pica’s claim allow us to understand the perception of this event by an attentive Italian community of artists and architects, aware of international developments happening in contemporary art and architecture.

<sup>10</sup> Although S. Frederick Starr pointed out how the Soviet authorities had commissioned Melnikhov, who was already in Paris, to construct a series of *Torgsektor* kiosks where visitors could buy products from the Soviet Union. For Starr this is evidence that it was not true that the Soviets wanted to offer only ideology. S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov, Solo Architect in a Mass Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, p.99.

<sup>11</sup> Agnoldomenico Pica, in Roberto Aloi (ed.), *Esposizioni, Architettura, Allestimento*, p.XLIV.

<sup>12</sup> Many Italian artists and architects had direct or indirect knowledge of those experiments in exhibition design happening at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s in Northern Europe; for example, Novecento painter Mario Sironi worked at the *Pressa* in 1928, widely reviewed by the Italian press, moreover, the Venice Biennial of 1928 included a body of Constructivist works from Russia. Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), *Anno X. La Mostra della rivoluzione fascista del 1932*, Pisa: Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 2003, p.23.

<sup>13</sup> The *Deutscher Werkbund* was designed by Walter Gropius, László Moholy-Nagy, Herbert Bayer and Marcel Breuer. Of the four, only the latter did not contribute to the design of the *Baugewerkschaft Ausstellung*.

pertinent term ‘mass exhibitions’, since they were conceived and carefully constructed to choreograph, both physically and mentally, a public always considered in mass terms.<sup>14</sup>

Usually these exhibitions celebrated Fascism and Mussolini or Italian industry, pushing visitors towards a new kind of secular worship of *il Duce* or towards a more ‘informed’ way of supporting the Italian economy through consumerism (especially after 1935, with international sanctions in place, and the dictatorship launching its campaign for autarchy). The mass exhibitions could physically affect a substantial part of the Italian people (whether or not they were actually living in the country), coming from different social backgrounds, and including those who did not customarily visit exhibitions.<sup>15</sup> Creating events that demanded to be seen and participated in by the entire population, Fascism exploited the exhibition medium in a new direction, almost competing with cinema, defined by Mussolini as ‘the most powerful weapon’ to create the model of the new Italian.<sup>16</sup>

If we look at the list of the most important exhibitions organised by the regime in the 1930s, their sheer number is striking. They include the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932; *Mostra dell’Aeronautica Italiana*, Milan, 1934; *Mostra dello Sport*, Milan, 1935; *Mostra Nazionale del Cartellone e della Pubblicità*, Milan, 1936; *Mostra della Romanità*, Rome, 1937; *Mostra delle colonie estive e dell’assistenza all’infanzia*, Rome, 1937; *Mostra nazionale del tessile*, Rome, 1938; *Mostra del lavoro e del dopolavoro*, Rome, 1938; *Mostra nazionale del minerale italiano*, Rome, 1939; *Mostra d’oltremare*, Naples, 1940 and, finally, the never-realised *Esposizione Universale di Roma* (E42), scheduled for 1942, with its street layout and pavilions still today forming the EUR quarter of the city of Rome.

It is within this framework that it is possible to understand Mussolini’s attitude towards the arts and the reason why he was able to link his ideas and policies with so many artists and architects of his time who were prepared to collaborate with him. As much of a

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<sup>14</sup> It is Walter Benjamin that in his *Letter from Paris (I)* points out the explicit aim of Fascist exhibitions to mould, and therefore to be moulded by, the masses. Walter Benjamin, ‘Lettera da Parigi (I)’, in *Critiche e recensioni*, Torino: Einaudi, 1979, pp.251–64. Translated from German by Anna Marietti Solmi.

<sup>15</sup> The popularisation of the public exhibition, although it helped to eradicate some bourgeois habits in the Italian middle classes, at the same time did not aim to erase class division as implied by the propagandistic discourse around the ‘Third Way’.

<sup>16</sup> Claudio Fogu, ‘L’immaginario storico fascista e la Mostra della Rivoluzione,’ in Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), *Anno X*, p.149 and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*, Berkeley, (CA): University of California Press, 2000 (second edition). Falasca-Zamponi underlines how, despite his intuition, Mussolini failed to fully understand and employ the real potential of cinema as a weapon for propaganda.

contradiction as he could be, Mussolini believed that the state should not interfere in the creative act of an artist, since the imposition of a specific language or style for propaganda reasons could lead only to second-rate art.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he did not censor avant-garde or modernist styles, instead giving them his official blessing and providing them with public occasions through which to express themselves. It is worth noting that since 1913 Mussolini had been having an affair with the critic Margherita Sarfatti, a supporter of avant-garde art in Italy, while around the same time he also became a close companion of the founder of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.<sup>18</sup> Later in the 1910s, thanks to Sarfatti, Mussolini also became acquainted with Sironi.<sup>19</sup>

To fully understand the relationship between Fascism and the avant-garde and modern movements a little digression is required, so as to appreciate the issues also surrounding the art historical literature on the avant-garde. In particular, the canonical reading of the historic avant-garde developed by Peter Bürger ignores Futurism, arguably because of its relationship with Fascism and incompatibility with the argument constructed by the author.<sup>20</sup> Braun addresses directly the anomaly in a convincing way, in her monographic work on Sironi. According to Braun, Futurism perfectly embodied the theoretical definition given by Bürger of an avant-garde movement, with its constant drive to supersede the division between high and low art, its attack on bourgeois institutions such as museums, and its commitment to merge art and life. In muddying the clear waters of Bürger's theory, Braun's analysis of the relationship between Fascism and the Italian avant-gardists allows one to understand how the strategy of 'creative freedom' pursued by the regime, heavily present in its exhibition culture, found its way into the so-called post-war western European democracies.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Bürger set in opposition the concepts of the avant-garde and modernism, underlining, among other things, how the latter consciously avoided any relationship with mass culture while the former found therein its main ally against an elitist

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<sup>17</sup> Mussolini expressed this view from 1923, when he attended the opening of the first exhibition in Milan by the Novecento group organised by critic Margherita Sarfatti. One year after he seized power, Mussolini declared that 'art belongs to the domain of the individual', denying any attempt to impose a Fascist art on Italian artists. "Alla mostra del 'Novecento'" speech of 26 March 1923, published in *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 27 March 1923, extract republished by Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism. Art and Politics under Fascism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> For a complete account on Mario Sironi see Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*.

<sup>19</sup> That year the Socialist party expelled Mussolini, editor of the Socialist newspaper *L'Avanti!*, for his support of the Italian intervention in the First World War.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984. Translation from the German by Michael Snow.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, p.217.

view of culture. As noted by Braun, the Italian experience of movements such as Novecento required a more nuanced stance in the definition of avant-garde and modernism.<sup>22</sup> History and the avant-garde are also contested ground with respect to Italy in the 1930s: Novecento, Futurism and Rationalism were three modernist movements that emerged in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century, all three engaged in opposing a conservative and traditional production rooted in the aesthetic of the nineteenth century. Yet while Rationalism was mainly architectural, inspired by the International style, Novecento and Futurism adopted an avant-garde position despite their differing attitudes to the past.<sup>23</sup> It is for this deep connection with modern culture that Fascism now needs to be carefully analysed, especially for its similarities with the cultural output of Western democracies.

If Stalin in the Soviet Union and Hitler in Germany, once securely in power, quickly rejected any kind of avant-garde language or tendencies, Mussolini's regime adopted a much more ambiguous and condescending stance towards them.<sup>24</sup> This is largely due to the fact that, after Fascism failed to recognise and declare one style as the champion of the purest Fascist Art, it pursued for several years (roughly from 1925 to 1936) in its public commissions a cultural policy based on what Stone describes as 'aesthetic pluralism'.<sup>25</sup> At least until 1936, an avant-garde movement such as Futurism coexisted with Rationalism and the expressionist painters of the Scuola di Roma, alongside Novecento, which aimed to provide a modern version of *italianità* [Italian tradition], and the more conservative (and populist) movement called Strapaese, fundamentally nationalistic, anti-modernist and interested in promoting rural subject matter in painting.<sup>26</sup> Aesthetic pluralism demonstrated to artists and their public the revolutionary position adopted by the dictatorship against academic culture. Within this framework, mass exhibitions became the best vehicle to promote Fascism as a tolerant force of modernity.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp.6–7.

<sup>23</sup> As noted by Emily Braun, it was in 'Fascist Italy, where the avant-garde, the Futurist flank excepted, made use of historical forms (and their implicit critique of social modernity) in the service of modernist politics.' Ibid., p.8.

<sup>24</sup> On this topic, see Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992, translated by Charles Rougle; and Frederic Spotts, *Hitler e il potere dell'estetica*, Monza: Johan&Levi editore, 2012, translated by Ester Borgese.

<sup>25</sup> This definition is provided by Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State, Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p.5. In 1926, Mussolini called for a Fascist Art, despite being firm in maintaining that artists should be left free to express themselves through their own individual style. In the same year, a journalistic enquiry launched by Giovanni Gentile, the intellectual of the regime, and by a conference in Bologna, tried to understand which style practiced at that time in Italy could be understood as the most Fascist, finally acknowledging the impossibility of the task.

<sup>26</sup> On the Italian art scene of the first three decades of the twentieth century, see Alessandro Del Puppo, *Modernità e nazione. Temi di ideologia visiva nell'arte del primo Novecento*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012.

As reconstructed by Stone, Mussolini built a ‘patron state’ able to accommodate the needs of an artist during his or her entire career, from its early stages to its final validation.<sup>27</sup> The state took care of the artist with a series of awards, commissions and exhibitions on different scales, developing an hierarchical system structured as a pyramid with two perennial events at the top: the Rome Quadrennial (taking place every four years and dedicated only to the most accomplished Italian artists) and the Venice Biennial (offering the best international contemporary showcase). Stone recognises three different stages in the development of the patron state. In the first one, between 1925 and 1930 – the period of the dictatorship’s stabilisation – the regime infiltrated itself into already existing institutions such as the Venice Biennial and the Milan Triennial, initially organised in Monza every two years (and called the Monza Biennial) before becoming a Triennial and being moved to Milan. It also created new institutions where needed (such as the Rome Quadrennial) and re-organised cultural producers within a corporation, creating an artists’ syndicate so as to gain full control over them and make them economically dependent on the regime.<sup>28</sup> In the second stage, from 1931 to 1936, exhibitions reflected in their ‘aesthetic pluralism’ the strategy of the regime to create a mass consensus through the cooperation of cultural practitioners. Finally, in the third stage, the years from 1937 to 1943 witnessed a general authoritarian stance that restricted (although did not extinguish) experimentalism in exhibition design and the partial abandonment of aesthetic pluralism. The Italian incursion into Ethiopia in 1935 and the consequent sanctions from the League of Nations in 1936, the period of autarchy and the closer political relationship with the German National Socialist party with the signature of the *Patto d’acciaio* in 1939, gave more room within the Fascist party and the government to the most conservative wing of the cultural bureaucrats, led by Roberto Farinacci, at the time secretary of the PNF.<sup>29</sup>

Tensions between the conservatives and the supporters of aesthetic pluralism had existed since the regime had become established – a few years after the *coup d’état* of the March on Rome in 1922.<sup>30</sup> This particular field became the arena for an internal political

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<sup>27</sup>Artists had to subscribe to the Sindacato di Belle Arti, a union linked to the Confederazione degli artisti e professionisti, which in turn was related to the Ministry of the Corporations founded in 1926.

<sup>28</sup> Alongside the Venice Biennial there was a second Ente Autonomo specifically dedicated to Italian fine art, the Rome Quadriennial; in this dissertation I focus only on the former due to its historical relevance within the international debate of the time and exhibition studies of the present. Furthermore, the Biennial offers various examples of the relationship between Italian architects and installation design and is most relevant because my case study, discussed later, is located in Venice.

<sup>29</sup> Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State*, p.7

<sup>30</sup> In a speech in Perugia in 1926, Mussolini declared the need to produce an art capable of becoming the glory of Fascist Italy. After the speech, the magazine *Critica Fascista*, edited by Giuseppe Bottai, launched an

battleground, since it was apparent how both fine art and political exhibitions could provide the strategic apparatus to increase the consensus of the masses. Through mass exhibitions, Fascism questioned the usual boundaries of culture and the traditional cultural elitism of the Italian bourgeoisie – whom Mussolini held responsible for the catastrophic conditions the country had fallen into after the First World War – opening up cultural consumption to a new kind of public (such as workers and the rural and urban lower middle-classes), uprooting the petit-bourgeois attitudes usually associated with visitors to fine art exhibitions, and educating and training citizens in Fascist values.<sup>31</sup> As Stone notes, ‘it is not by chance that Italian Fascism commenced its cultural politics with a challenge to the structures of cultural display and distribution.’<sup>32</sup>

Historian Claudio Fogu called into question Stone’s temporal model highlighting how the regime supported modernist styles even after 1936, although not on the same scale and with less official visibility than before. In particular, Fogu admits that the regime backed up the *Stile Littorio*, a conservative style more in tune with the new rhetoric related to the Roman Empire brought back to life by Mussolini. At the same time, if one moves from a strictly aesthetic perspective to a historical one, it is evident how private commercial initiatives adopted modernist and avant-garde movements with the tacit consensus and support of Fascism.<sup>33</sup>

Fogu’s argument goes even further in recognising that it was the influence of avant-garde and modernist movements that allowed Fascism to reshape the historic imaginary of

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enquiry into the possibility of developing an official Fascist style, but due to the actual conditions of different movements and styles existing in Italy and the staunch resistance of Mussolini himself to impose a style on artists, the outcome was the recognition that there was no such a thing as a Fascist aesthetic. For more information on the enquiry, see ‘Resultanze dell’inchiesta sull’arte fascista’, in *Critica Fascista*, year V, n.4, 15 February 1927, pp.61–4.

<sup>31</sup> On the relationship between the masses and power in the modern age, a landmark study is George L. Mosse, *The Nationalisation of the Masses. Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*, New York: Howard Fertig, 1974. The introduction by the historian Renzo De Felice in the Italian edition points out the differences of the PNF in respect to the National Socialist party in its relationship with the masses. Fascism relied on the charismatic figure of Mussolini and tended to focus on the creation of the new Italian, born thanks to the Fascist revolution. While the NS party wanted to rediscover the essence of the German people, negating any positive value to progress, for the PNF progress was an essential element for the achievement of their goals. George L. Mosse, *La nazionalizzazione delle masse. Simbolismo politico e movimenti di massa in Germania (1815–1933)*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1975. Translation from English into Italian by Livia De Felice. On the relationship between Italian Fascism and the masses, Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy*, and Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, in particular chapter four.

<sup>32</sup> Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State*, p.23.

<sup>33</sup> Claudio Fogu, ‘L’immaginario storico fascista e la Mostra della Rivoluzione’, in Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), *Anno X*, p.149. Jeffrey T. Schnapp arguments a similar position in his essay *Mostre*, available at <http://jeffreyschnapp.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Mostre.pdf> (last accessed on 17 September 2013).

the Italian population, shifting it towards a constant awareness of the future in the present. This project was nowhere better realised than in the MRF, while its culmination should have been in the unrealised Universal Exhibition scheduled for 1942. For Fogu, the fact that the E42 plans still perpetuated the hints of the historical imaginary set in motion by the MRF, demonstrates that if not from an aesthetic point of view, certainly from an historical one, the influence of modernism and the avant-garde played a fundamental role in Fascist history right up to the very end.

Compelling as it is, this second part of Fogu's argument requires in my opinion further analysis and research. Nevertheless, it highlights a key element for this dissertation in detecting how Fascist exhibitions challenged the historic imaginary of the masses and played with the temporality traditionally assumed in the historical style of display epitomised by museums. As Fogu has it, it was the MRF, through its innovative display, that set everything in motion, and it is therefore time to examine it in greater detail.

### 2.3 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista, Rome, 1932*<sup>34</sup>

Apart from Staniszewski, who mainly focuses on the exhibition design of those rooms that were influenced by the international avant-garde experience of the early 1930s avoiding any further analysis, there is almost no trace of the MRF in the literature on exhibition history. The anthology *Public Photographic Spaces*, which primarily addresses the presence of photography in propaganda exhibitions from 1928 to 1955, makes only passing reference to the MRF, describing its linchpin as the *Room O*, designed by architect Giuseppe Terragni. This room, by far the most reproduced of the entire exhibition, is usually the only aspect of the MRF to be treated in the general literature. Excessive and chaotic in its display, with striking photomontages set alongside unexpected perspectives, the *Room O* epitomised the Fascist manipulation of the masses through new media such as photography: the aestheticizing of politics as evoked by Walter Benjamin.<sup>35</sup> However, this

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<sup>34</sup> In the last two decades various authors have addressed the MRF in their publications, in particular: Libero Andreotti, *Art and Politics in Fascist Italy. The Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution (1932)*, Thesis (PhD), MIT Massachusset, Dept. of Architecture, 1989; Emilio Gentile, *Fascismo di Pietra*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2007, ch.8; Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993; pp.189-209; Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State*, pp.133–67; Giorgio Ciucci, 'L'autorappresentazione del fascismo. La mostra del decennale della marcia su Roma', in *Rassegna*, n.10, anno IV, 1982, pp.48-55 and Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), *Anno X*.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hanna Arendt (ed.) *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, London: Cape, 1970, p.253.



apparent lack of interest in the MRF<sup>F</sup> evidenced in the literature on both curatorial and exhibition history is not paralleled by that demonstrated by historians and art historians, especially in the last decade, who have analysed the exhibition's display and its political and cultural implications at length.<sup>36</sup>

As previously mentioned, the MRF<sup>F</sup> became the launchpad for the three elements that most affected exhibition culture in Italy, resulting in the emergence of the new profession of the curator in the period following the Second World War. The MRF was an historic exhibition, its primary and official aim being to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, the revolutionary event (although in reality an almost peaceful parade) that marked the coming to power of Mussolini.<sup>37</sup> It resulted in a massive and spectacular event in which several intentions coalesced: the start of the cult of Mussolini to the detriment of the Fascist revolution; the transition from a state of 'permanent revolution', initially conceived by the regime after coming into power, to a more stabilised situation with the 'Fascistization' of the state; the celebration of aesthetic pluralism that characterised the Fascist approach to the arts since the end of the 1920s, promoting artists' collaboration; the creation of a testing ground for Italian art to experiment with forms and languages gleaned from the exhibition design of European avant-garde experiments; the downplaying of elitist museum culture by promoting an exhibition addressed to the masses; and, finally, the reversal of the temporality traditionally inscribed in museum display, resulting in making the future present rather than the past. Instead of just celebrating an historical event, the MRF became a historic event in itself.

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<sup>36</sup> Among the different analyses of the MRF, there are two interpretations that could be useful to consider. The first one is by Libero Andreotti who, via Benjamin's suggestions on Fascist art, considers the influence of Sironi on the MRF. Sironi constructed his installations according to journalistic principles, using shock factor as the driving force for achieving radical interventions in human perception similar to those 'that accompanied the rise of the society of the spectacle.' Libero Andreotti, 'The Techno-aesthetic of Shock: Mario Sironi and Italian Fascism', in *Grey Room*, n.38, Winter 2010, p.41. As tempting as it is to embrace this interpretation, I believe this dissertation would profit very little by doing so since it does not examine the development of the three elements I retrace in this chapter. Although, Andreotti's reading, further invigorates the argument that the use of mass media by Fascism hastened their later employment by the so-called western democracies to develop their societies of spectacle. The second reading, which is much more relevant to the present discussion, is the one by Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Claudio Fogu. Both historians, rather than pigeonhole the MRF within the usual boundaries according to a set of terms provided by Benjamin, tried to understand its original contribution within Fascist cultural politics. In particular, Schnapp detects in the rhetorical figure of the oxymoron the driving principle of the officials who oversaw the exhibition organisation. Fogu, instead, puts the accent on Fascist historic culture and how the MRF contributed to transforming the historic imaginary of the Italians.

<sup>37</sup> On the March on Rome, its ambiguous revolutionary nature, and its impact on the dissolution of the liberal state under Mussolini, see Giulia Albanese, *La Marcia su Roma*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2006.

The MRF perfectly fulfilled the expectations of the regime that since its very beginning aimed to sanctify politics and consecrate Mussolini as a superhuman figure. This achievement can be assessed through looking at the exhibition's installation design – a journey of initiation largely inspired by the liturgy of the catholic mass secularised for the occasion – and through the public response the MRF prompted, with visitors organising real pilgrimages to visit it from all over the world. Opened on 28 October 1932 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Via Nazionale, a street in central Rome characterised by palaces in the Umbertian style (symbols of the liberal Italian period of the end of the nineteenth century, despised by the Fascists), it eventually closed a full two years later on 27 October 1934 due to its success, having attracted in the region of 3,701,818 visitors. Open each day from the morning until 11.00pm, including weekends, Christmas and Easter, the exhibition generated a wide range of reactions from the public, from letters of gratitude sent to Mussolini, to poems and short stories celebrating and re-enacting the overwhelming feelings experienced by visitors.

Already in 1928, Dino Alfieri, as Head of the Istituto Fascista di Cultura Milanese, had formed a plan to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the constitution of the first 'Fasci di Combattimento', founded in 1919, with an historical exhibition in Milan. The exhibition was then postponed by Mussolini and transferred to Rome, changing, as already mentioned, its focus to the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome. Understanding its potential, *il Duce* wanted to take advantage of it to mark the coming into power of the Fascist revolution over Bolshevism (which had threatened Italy in the wake of the First World War) and the liberal state (in his view responsible for the country's collapse).<sup>38</sup> It is not by chance that Alfieri formulated his idea for a political exhibition around 1928, the same year in which the internationally acclaimed *Présence* exhibition, arranged by El Lissitzky in Cologne, demonstrated the inventiveness and power of Soviet propaganda and the potential of propaganda exhibitions in general (fig.1). The Italian press covered the event widely, and, as Schnapp claims, the presence of Constructivist artists at both the 1928 Venice Biennial and the Zurich exhibition of 1929, further confirmed its influence.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> As stressed by Alfieri in a document now housed at the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome, the purpose of the exhibition was not only the celebration of an anniversary, but also a self-assessment of the Regime's achievements before the Italian populace. This perspective helps to understand why the MRF should not be considered (and dismissed) merely as an attempt to brainwash the masses through spectacular installations and the use of photography. From his first plans in 1928, Alfieri wanted to bring the exhibition to life through a massive campaign to collect ephemera, documents, publications, objects, personal memories and photographs belonging to ordinary Italians and donated by them to the project. He applied the same principle to the MRF, organising a team of ad hoc historians, often of a Fascist inclination, each in charge of organising this wealth of material in a room conceived together with an architect and an artist.

<sup>39</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), *Anno X*, p.23.

Following the example of *Pressa*, the MRF highlighted the uniqueness of the Fascist revolution, an alternative model to Communism in Europe, both from a political and an artistic point of view.<sup>40</sup> In order to achieve this ambitious goal, Alfieri was joined by colleagues Antonio Monti and Luigi Freddi who organised the massive quantity of historical material featured, by Cipriano Efisio Oppio (at the time Director of the Rome Quadrennial), by Marinetti as a further advisor and finally by Sironi, the *deus ex machina* of the exhibition's artistic programme.<sup>41</sup>

Mussolini followed the development of the exhibition programme closely, often intervening even in the organisers' aesthetic choices. He adamantly stated his desire for the final aesthetic of the MRF: 'Make it new, ultramodern and audacious therefore, free from melancholic echoes of the decorative styles of the past.'<sup>42</sup> With this in mind, the committee invited the most talented Italian artists and architects, without worrying about whether they were bringing together opposing artistic and stylistic tendencies. For the first time, the most daring modernist styles gained official recognition – something unthinkable at the time even in other countries – and artists and architects were invited to collaborate in order to achieve the highest degree of creativity.

Together with Sironi (the only contributor who designed more than one room), Achille Funi, Ettore Rambelli, Arnaldo Carpanetti and Alberto Santagata represented the Novecento group; from the conservative Strapaese group were Leo Longanesi, Amerigo Bartoli and Mino Maccari; among the Rationalist architects were Giuseppe Terragni, Adalberto Libera, Mario De Renzi and Marcello Nizzoli, who was on the fringes of the group and later became one of the protagonists of Italian exhibition culture; and finally Futurism was represented by Enrico Prampolini and Gerardo Dottori. In these exceptional circumstances, it was not only the idea of the synthesis of the arts that found an historic opportunity to express itself, but it also became clear to architects that exhibitions – because of their temporary nature and their potential as mass media – could constitute a

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<sup>40</sup> Emily Braun analyses the differences between the use of photomontage in the *Pressa* and in the MRF. The first aimed to eradicate 'the aura of the traditional artwork, the Fascist version demonstrated the aura of history inherent in the "real" photographic fragment.' Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, p.154.

<sup>41</sup> As noted by Braun, Sironi had already actively contributed to propaganda exhibitions of the regime, being involved in both the Italian Press pavilion at the *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne in 1928 and a second version of it in Barcelona in 1929. At the time, Sironi had already 'revealed its preoccupation with integrating art and propaganda in a single architectonic "plastic" whole', despite not having yet achieved his goal.' Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, p.145.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Jeffrey T. Schnapp, 'Fascism's Museum in Motion', in *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol.45, n. 2, February 1992, p.89. Translated by Schnapp.

new field for practising those modernist languages traditionally rejected for permanent buildings and structures.

Alfieri, probably inspired by the then recently published *Storia della Rivoluzione Fascista* by Giorgio Alberto Chiurco, applied a chronological organising principle to the MRF, dividing it into three sections. The first, adopting a ‘hot’ modernist language, was itself articulated into three areas, compared by Alfieri to three *tempi* (movements) of a symphony: the first comprised the historical narrative of what happened in Italy between 1914 and 1922, with the first four rooms dedicated to the First War World and the foundation of the Fasci di Combattimento (1919), and the following eleven dedicated to the events of the next two years, until the March on Rome in 1922. The second part of the exhibition, abandoning the diachronic presentation of historical events, proposed in four solemn and monumental halls a celebration of Mussolini and the new order he imposed on Italy, using a ‘cold’ modernist language (abandoning photomontage as the main medium and adopting monumental sculpture instead). Mussolini became the saviour of the nation, the nation finally coinciding with Fascism itself.<sup>43</sup> While the first part of the exhibition ran anticlockwise around the perimeter rooms of the ground floor of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni and the second occupied its central area, the third part – dedicated to what Fascism had achieved in the decade since its inception and consisting of four rooms – was on the first floor (fig.2). This part, less impressive and largely unmentioned by commentators of the time, presented the successes achieved by Fascism in the country’s economy, building, infrastructure and public institutions from 1922 to 1932.

From the very beginning then, the exhibition aimed to subvert the logic traditionally applied to historical presentation. In dispensing with the rigorous selection of the exhibits traditionally associated with museums and intended to present the outcome of a scientific research into an aspect of the past, the MRF proposed to its visitors a new relationship with history (with the purpose of promoting a new kind of temporality, as discussed below). The physical displays designed by the artists and organisers reinforced the dismissal of a standard museological approach. In the museum one typically found exhibits for inspection in the foreground, while comments made about them were positioned in the background. The decision to abandon the museum as an institution to

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<sup>43</sup> As noticed by Braun, Sironi used photomontage again only on those occasions explicitly devoted to mass culture such as the *Esposizione Aeronautica Italiana* (1934), *Mostra dello Sport* (1935) and *Mostra Nazionale del Cartellone e della Pubblicità* (1936), while he preferred to use more traditional media such as mural painting or sculpture when fine art was involved. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, pp.155-156.

validate history and to switch to the temporary exhibition format was then mirrored by the reversed relationship established at the MRF between comments and exhibits. In the exhibition all the material within the display cases acted as a commentary on the inscriptions and images reported on the walls; their content and appearance was taken from *Il Popolo d'Italia*, the newspaper founded and edited by Mussolini since 1914 (fig.3). This came across as an open refusal to use the apparatus traditionally employed to write history itself: no longer a rational analysis of the exhibits but an ecstatic approach aimed at erasing any critical distance between the visitors and what was on display.<sup>44</sup> In the tumult of objects and images, described below, the masses were invited to bridge any gap that may have existed between them and the exhibits: the exhibition's message needed to be immediately grasped by those going through it. At the same time, the exhibits collected from society at large triggered personal memories (often traumatic ones) and an immediate identification with the events narrated. This was also part of a Fascist strategy of declaring war on the Italian cultural elitist stance typical of the liberal state. Indeed, the colonising of free time by the regime aimed to open up to the lower social classes those places and institutions dedicated to so-called 'high culture'. The eradication of cultural status as a class distinction lingered during the entire *ventennio* as the official history of the exhibition promoted by the Fascist regime testified.

As pointed out by Schnapp, the MRF explicitly employed oxymoron as its most effective figure of speech as demonstrated by its modernist façade designed by architects Libera and De Renzi. A large red cube flanked by two smaller ones dominated the original façade from the Umbertian period. In front of the old façade, four metal stylised *fasci* in copper, twenty-five metres high, framed the entrance, celebrating the technological achievements of the regime, by recalling the shapes of chimneys and the traditional columns that welcomed visitors into ancient classical temples or palaces. Two X's on top of the smaller cubes on the façade, instead, made reference to the anniversary of the March on Rome and at the same time imposed a new temporal unit onto which Fascism started projecting its historic imaginary. Among the most celebrated rooms lining the perimeter of the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, the *Room O* designed by Giuseppe Terragni, marked the culmination of the narrative of the first part of the exhibition. Largely employing typography and photomontage, recalling Soviet propaganda experiments such as El

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<sup>44</sup> It was Sarfatti who probably understood better than any other contemporary commentator the significance of the exhibition and of its innovative display, which was history in act rather than a collection of historical material thanks to the artists' intervention, Margherita Sarfatti, 'Architettura, arte e simbolo alla Mostra del Fascismo', in *Architettura*, n.12, 1933, pp.1-17, reproduced in Jeffrey T. Schnapp (ed.), Anno X p.69.

Lissitzky's Soviet Pavilion at the *Pressa Exhibition* in Cologne, 1928, Terragni constructed a chaotic space providing a Fascist reading of the social unrest caused by the workers' unions and socialist activists in Italy in 1922 and their violent suppression by the *squadristi*, Mussolini's paramilitary militia. The *room O* prepared visitors for the encounter with the main historical event celebrated by the exhibition, the March on Rome, whose room was designed by Sironi. It was Sironi that introduced visitors to the four central rooms of the exhibition, where a rather 'cold' display presented a vision of the future in which Mussolini bestowed a silent grandeur on Italy. After having crossed the celebratory rooms of the *Salone d'Onore* and the *Sala dei Fasci* (both designed by Sironi), visitors ended their journey of initiation in the *Stanza dei Martiri* designed by Libera and Antonio Valente. Perfectly serving the MRF's purpose of the sacralisation of politics, the *Stanza dei Martiri* was a circular room recalling a Catholic martyrdom with a giant red cross on a blood-red pedestal at its centre, and around the edges of the room six lines of text lit from behind repeating the word 'Presente', meaning 'Here' as in a roll-call. Evoking the presence of those 'martyrs' who died to ensure the rise to power of Fascism, the room aimed to reveal to visitors how the history of Fascism was in short the history of the Italian nation, having rescued its future from both Socialist unrest and the ineptitude of the Liberal state.

The MRF demonstrated to artists that under Fascism it was possible to experiment with modern visual languages (to which Rationalism, Futurism and Novecento all belonged in different degrees) and that exhibitions could reveal themselves as the perfect medium for these experiments. The MRF is an historic event not only because in two years it mobilised an impressive number of people and reactions, clearly highlighting a need in the population itself (apart from the regime's forced mobilisation, people looked to the exhibition almost as a sacred place, organising self-motivated pilgrimages to visit and pay tribute), but also because it constituted the first official presentation of modernism to the Italian public. Moreover, in using artists who employed a modernist language in both the exhibition's sections (such as Terragni, Prampolini and Funi in the first and Sironi, Libera and Valente in the second), Fascism demonstrated that modernism was not only suited to expressing the chaos, the 'hot' part of the oxymoron that constituted the exhibition's installation design, but also by contrast the 'cold', second part. Therefore, in freeing it from any ideological ties, modernism could finally be appropriated by Fascist exhibition policy. At the same time, architects and artists belonging to different modernist movements (such as Rationalism and Novecento) started a fruitful dialogue in order to resist the more conservative forces at play in the PNF. This renewed dialogue would have had immediate

repercussions for Italian exhibition culture, as demonstrated by the Milan Triennial of 1933 and by the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* in Milan in 1934.

Finally, the MRF, according to Fogu, transformed the historic imaginary of both the Italian people, bringing through its rooms an eternal future into the present, and of the regime, which rather than celebrating its past, started promoting in subsequent exhibitions an idea of the future. Modernist language, in both cases, played a fundamental role, and as demonstrated by both Fogu and Schnapp, the mass exhibitions organised directly by or supported indirectly by Fascism (via the Enti Autonomi under its control), reiterated the desire to colonise the future and the way in which it was imagined. Nevertheless, despite these being the foundations on which the burgeoning Fascist exhibition culture of the 1930s was based, a different destiny awaited the MRF. Already in 1933, Mussolini decided to relocate the exhibition's material to a permanent venue, but once the MRF closed, it took another three years for this to happen. It was the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, which occupied an outlying position in the city, that finally housed the remnants of the exhibition. As a temporary although historical exhibition, the MRF was characterised by its anti-museological stance, but the display of this new version betrayed the intentions of the original presentation, displaying its exhibits in a very traditional and canonical way.<sup>45</sup> As noted by Schnapp, with the disappearance of the revolutionary impulse from the Fascist horizon – which by 1937 was preoccupied with the longing for the Third Rome, a return in the present to the grandeur of the Roman Empire – the same destiny befell the exhibition.



Fig.1: detail of the photo-mural, Soviet Pavilion *Pressa Exhibition*, Cologne, 1928, El Lissitzky and Sergei Senkin.

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<sup>45</sup> The exhibition betrayed the original modernist model by presenting the events linked to the history of Fascism since 1914 in a chronological organisation that encompassed other events, such as the Spanish war, which had obviously been absent from the first edition. Moreover, it presented in a very didactic way a gallery dedicated to famous Italians such as the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio or the scientist Guglielmo Marconi.

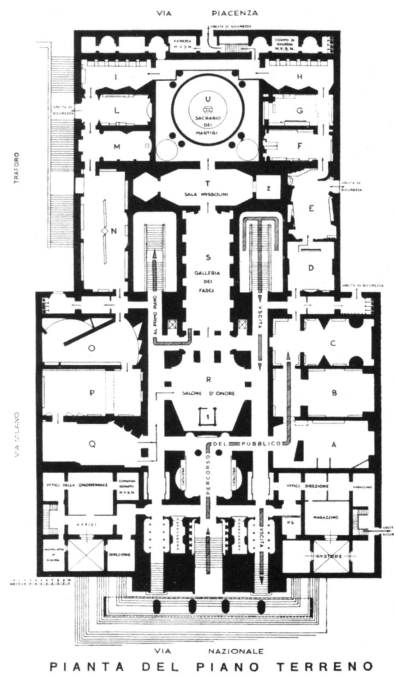


Fig.2: Floorplan of the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932



Fig.3: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932, Room G, designed by Marcello Nizzoli.



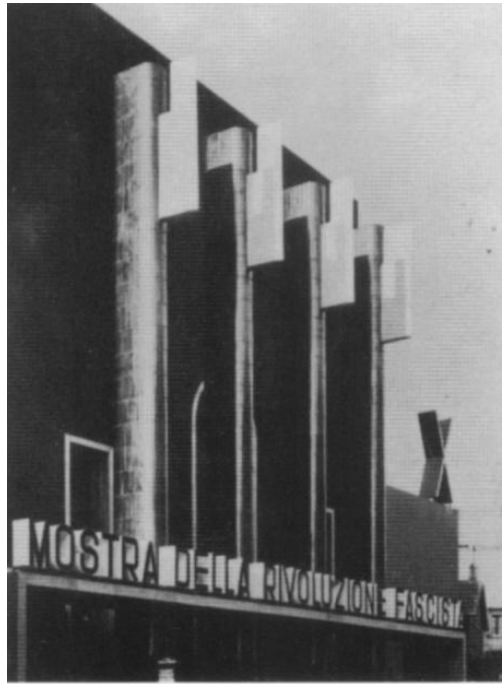


Fig.4: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932, Entrance, designed by Mario De Renzi and Adalberto Libera.

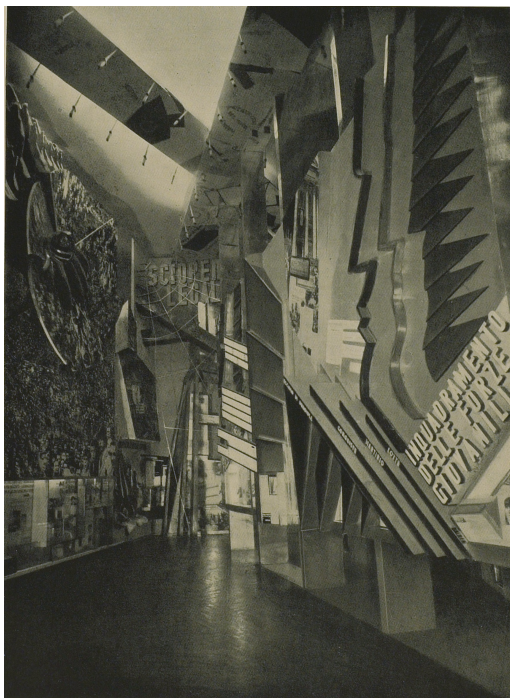


Fig.5: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932, Room O, designed by Giuseppe Terragni.

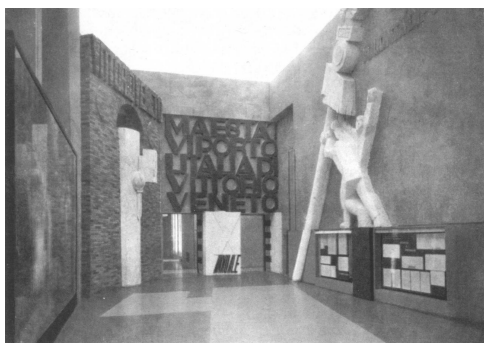


Fig.6: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932  
1932. Room Q, designed by Mario Sironi.



Fig.7: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome,  
Room Q, (detail), designed by Mario Sironi.



Fig.8: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932  
Room R, *Salone d'Onore*,  
designed by Mario Sironi

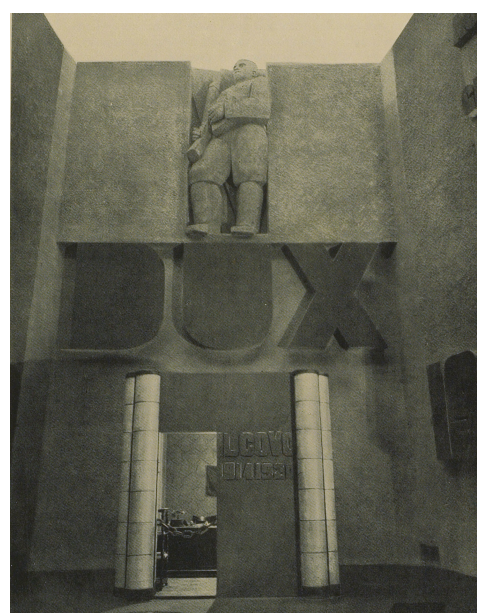


Fig.9 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932  
Room R, *Salone d'Onore*,  
designed by Mario Sironi.

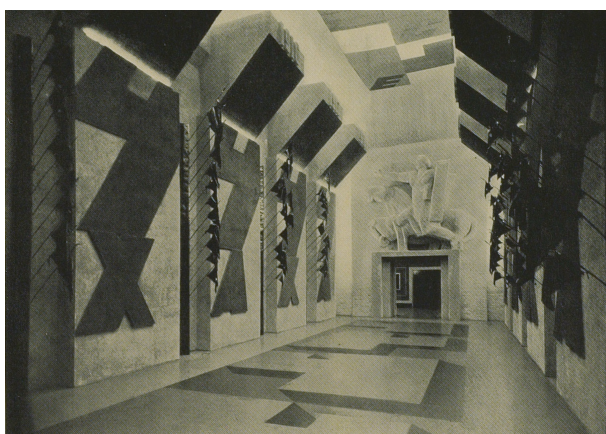


Fig.10: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932, Room S, *Galleria dei Fasci*, designed by Mario Sironi.



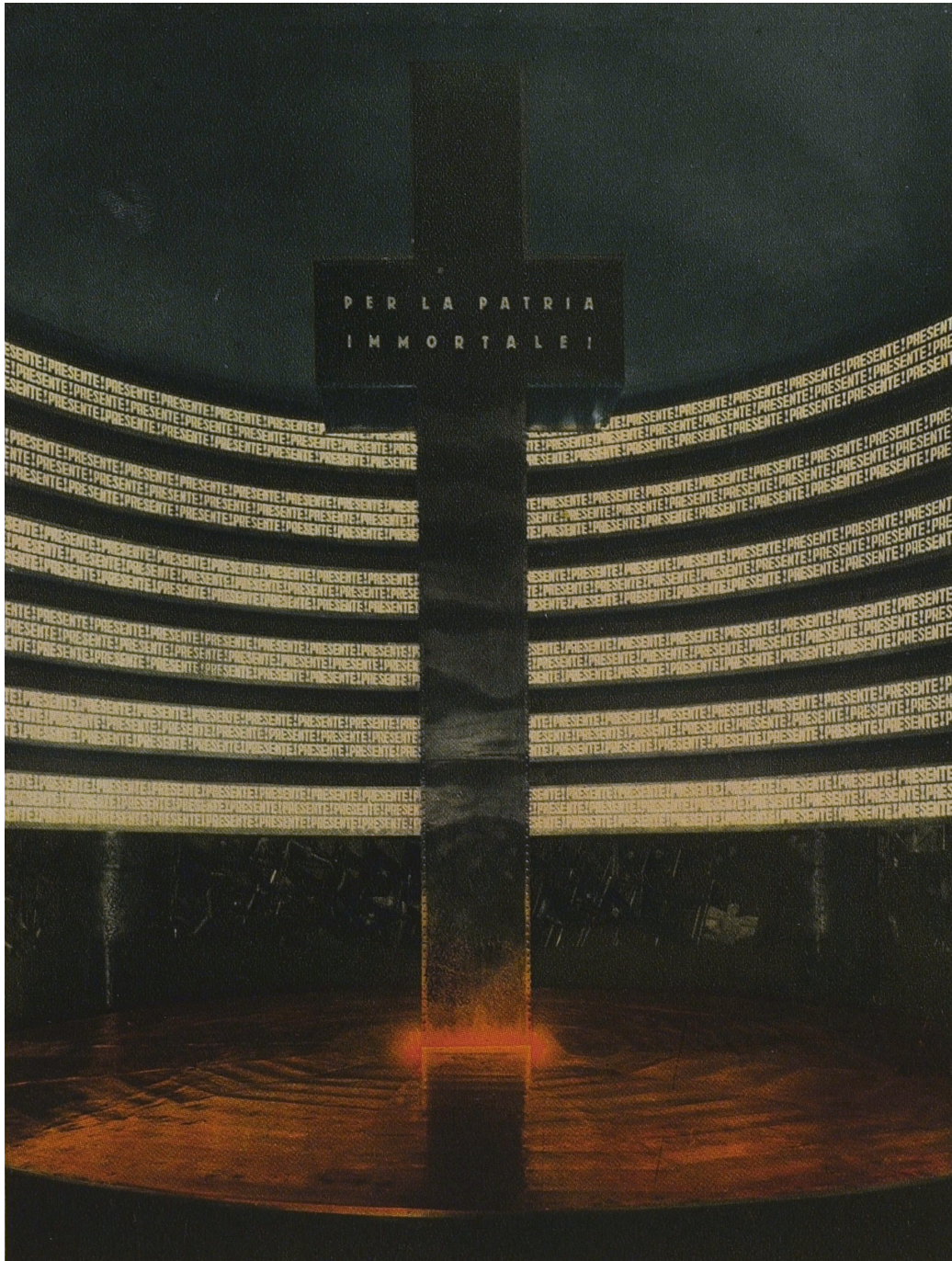


Fig.11: *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, Rome, 1932, Room U, *Sacrario dei martiri*, designed by Adalberto Libera and Antonio Valente.

## 2.4 Fascist Mass Exhibitions from 1934 to 1939

In his essay 'Mostre', Schnapp lays out the argument that the political exhibition became in the 'new mass-based regimes of the twentieth century' what the historical museum was for the nation-state in the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> Schnapp reconstructs a genealogy of Fascist political exhibitions starting with the MRF and continuing through the 1930s until the unrealised Universal Exhibition, scheduled in Rome for 1942. He highlights how these events on the one hand functioned as a 'locus of historical self-reflection, self-representation, and self-promotion,' while on the other hand they produced new myths combining influences from the past as much as from the present and maintaining 'a prospective focus in harmony with the values of the era of industry.'<sup>47</sup>

While I share Schnapp's point of view, which could find further exemplification in the case study elaborated in chapter four, I believe one should further credit the contribution of those architects and artists involved in these exhibitions.<sup>48</sup> To elucidate the perpetually ambivalent relationship between the regime and those involved in the exhibitions, and the myth of modernity that both groups shared despite not always conceiving it in the same way (and sometimes even in opposite ways), it is relevant to understand how a number of issues related to display culture could undergo the experience of a dictatorship and a civil war and then resurface under different circumstances in a democratic parliamentary republic.

A case in point in Schnapp's argument is the influence on political exhibitions of trade fairs and universal exhibitions. As mentioned in the introduction, Italian artists and architects involved in the exhibition culture of the regime were widely interested in the installation design of the international avant-garde as experienced in such events as the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris (1925), *Pressa* (1928) and the *Universal Exhibition of Barcelona* (1929), to name but a few. The MRF showed echoes of this international influence in the typographical character of the exhibition space, exaggerating the discursive approach initiated by the Bauhaus exhibitions and the use of new media such as the photomural, the photomontage and enlargements of both photos and texts.

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<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Mostre*, p.60.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> I believe this is the reason why in selecting an adjective to describe these exhibitions, I prefer to put the accent less on the 'political' and rather on the 'mass'. The 'political' primarily advanced the Fascist agenda (which surely imbued all the exhibitions analysed), while the 'mass' tends to open up the field of analysis to focus on the actual outcome of these events, including the agenda of the architects and artists that designed those exhibitions while not necessarily sharing the same goals as the regime.

In 1934 Mazzucchelli, reviewing in *Casabella-Costruzioni* the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* organised that year in Milan, detected the presence of a more autonomous language in Italian exhibition design, although one still indebted to international influences.<sup>49</sup> Opened in June at the Palazzo dell'Arte, built in 1932 by architect Giovanni Muzio to host the Milan Triennial, the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* had a distinctive modernist design that applied the filter of Italian rationalism to futurist and Novecento sensibilities. Among the artists and architects who participated in it were some who had also worked on the MRF, such as Sironi, Pratelli and Nizzoli, and on this occasion they collaborated with some of the youngest upcoming artists and architects, who were mainly from Milan. They included Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, founders in 1926 of the Gruppo 7, Marcello Mascherini, Erberto Carboni and Bruno Munari, these last two close to the Futurists, the BBPR studio and Franco Albini, later a pivotal protagonist in Italian installation design history, and Gio Ponti, editor of the magazine *Domus* and member of the Novecento group; a number of the best architects of the time featured including Luciano Baldessari, Gian Carlo Palanti, Piero Bottoni, Agnoldomenico Pica and Eugenio Faludi (the latter later involved in the SNIA Viscosa) and finally Persico, co-director of *Casabella-Costruzioni* together with Giuseppe Pagano, one of the organisers of the exhibition and a passionate advocate of the modernist cause in Italy.

Originally the brainchild of Marcello Visconti di Modrone, the Podestà of Milan (the Podestà being the Fascist title for the Mayor of a city, inspired by Roman times), the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* aimed to celebrate the history of manned flight that, needless to say, was seen as being rooted in Italy and the figure of Mussolini. Both a commemoration and a celebration of the *genius Italico*, the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* included historical rooms such as the one dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci (one of the earliest figures to attempt to devise ways to fly), and others praising the most recent Italian achievements in flight (the D'Annunzio 'Impresa di Fiume' and Italo Balbo's flight across the Atlantic Ocean), at the same time paying homage to one of the most characteristic themes of Futurism. Being a historical exhibition, in which architects and artists designed the display of the exhibits, the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* naturally took the MRF as its model, as adamantly declared by Modrone in his introduction to the catalogue.<sup>50</sup> Alongside the historical approach though, it should be noted that the exhibition also

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<sup>49</sup> Anna Maria Mazzucchelli, 'Stile di una mostra,' p.6.

<sup>50</sup> Marcello Visconti di Modrone, *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, exhibition catalogue, Milan: n.p., June–October 1934.

adopted an educational stance, dedicating several rooms of the second floor to very detailed and specific scientific explanations of different technological aspects of flying. As with the MRF, the original façade of the Milanese palace where the exhibition was installed was covered over by a work of art, needless to say, by a Futurist, Carboni.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* even took its visitors on an initial journey, this time struggling against the notion of gravity and ending in a circular room that paid homage to those who lost their lives flying. What the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* certainly did not share with the MRF (as well as the clutch of disparate artistic movements) was its morbid atmosphere, resulting in a much more pleasant experience for those who visited it.

From the outset it was possible to detect in the shrouded façade of the palace the heroic rhetoric and modern style that characterised the exhibition.<sup>52</sup> Carboni's design for the façade comprised symbols such as a shining *fascio littorio*, a patrol of airplanes and a reproduction of a map in which Europe and Africa could clearly be seen as the future targets of Fascist expansion, its style inspired by the Futurist *aeropittura* technique. Inside the exhibition, the accompanying documentation fitted with refined subtlety into the aesthetic designs of the architects and artists. It was again Mazzucchelli who noted how 'In this Aeronautic exhibition, the exhibit loses its realistic value and blends with all that is around it, in an overcoming of the dualism of form and content, of decoration and architecture.'<sup>53</sup> This environmental aspect emerged for the first time in the European avant-garde exhibitions of the 1920s, whose fruitful heritage was taken further by the Italians, as already seen in the MRF, and was further confirmation of the debate around possible ways in which to achieve a synthesis of the arts.<sup>54</sup>

Among the highlights of the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, Mazzucchelli praised the *Sala dei Precursori*, designed by architects Figini and Pollini, and the *Sala dei Primi Voli*

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<sup>51</sup> Erberto Carboni gained international reputation both for his installation design and his graphic output, conceiving some of the most memorable advertising campaigns of post-war Italy. On Erberto Carboni please consult: Erberto Carboni, *Erberto Carboni*, Milan: Electa, 1985; Erberto Carboni, *Erberto Carboni: Exhibitions and Displays / With an introduction by Herbert Bayer*, Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 1959; Gloria Bianchino (ed.), *Erberto Carboni dal Futurismo al Bauhaus*, Milan: Mazzotta, 1998.

<sup>52</sup> While the façade of the MRF still retained an ambiguous position in respect to the past, with the four giant *fasci* recalling roman columns, the EAI instead referred from the very outset to those modern languages such as Futurism and Rationalism, marking its distance from the MRF where modernist languages such as Futurism, Rationalism and Novecento coexisted with conservative tendencies such as Strapaese.

<sup>53</sup> Anna Maria Mazzucchelli, 'Stile di una mostra', Translated by Susan Osmond in Sergio Polano (ed.) *Mostrare. L'allestimento in Italia dagli anni Venti agli anni Ottanta*, Milano: Edizioni Lybra Immagine, 1988, p.533.

<sup>54</sup> As discussed later in the chapter, a fundamental contribution to the Italian debate on the theme of the synthesis of the arts was given by the 1933 edition of the Milan Triennial, which took place in the same palace as the EAI but positioned at its core the relationships between art and architecture rather than between exhibits and installation design realised either by artists or architects.

designed by Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers (the future BBPR Studio) (fig.12). The *Sala dei Precursori*, divided into two parts, presented at the beginning the failed attempts at flight over the centuries, with a lowered ceiling and a grey colour to underline the impossibility of reaching that goal; while in the second part the space opened with photographic representations on the walls of the first successful prototypes that allowed flight. In the *Sala dei Primi Voli*, dedicated to these first flights, the architects installed different devices belonging to the technology of aviation in front of a large photograph depicting changing fashions from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. A liberty railing running along these photographs created a sense of unity and order. The language of both rooms referred to European rationalism, in particular to Le Corbusier and Marcel Breuer.

Another highlight of the exhibition, a landmark in Italian exhibition design history, was the *Sala delle Medaglie d'Oro* by Nizzoli and Persico, which provoked a wide range of feedback, for some being too 'cold', for others the perfect exemplification of the balance achievable between the presentation of documentation and an aesthetically sophisticated display thus enhancing the visitor's experience (fig.13).<sup>55</sup> Inspired by the structure created by Walter Gropius and Joost Schmidt on the occasion of the *Ausstellung Deutsches Volk-Deutscher Arbeit* in Berlin in 1934, but also by the seminal *Foto und Film* exhibition, Stuttgart, 1929, the room used a grid-based organisational structure to celebrate twenty-six Italian aviators who gained gold medals during the First World War. Instead of creating a rhetorical space, the architects incorporated photographs, descriptions of the events and actual objects belonging to the heroes into a sober and rarefied display, achieved by the use of white bars that bestowed on the room an austere but compelling order. Earlier that year, Nizzoli and Persico had already had the opportunity to address the theme of the grid in an architectural structure devised to host Fascist propaganda posters and notices in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in the very centre of Milan.

The exhibition ended with the *Sala d'Icaro*, a lyrical memorial to those who lost their lives in the attempt to conquer the skies (fig.14). A thirteen-metre spiral occupied the centre of the circular room, rising to the ceiling from a pool positioned on the floor, covered with a pane of glass. On the wall were paintings by Munari retelling the story of

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<sup>55</sup> This is the only room reproduced by Staniszewski from the installation designs conceived in Italy apart from those related to the MRF. In her account, Staniszewski reports the astonished reaction of Gropius when he visited it. Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cambridge, MASS: The MIT Press, 1998, pp.56–7.

those who longed to fly (from Leonardo da Vinci on) and a sculpture of Icarus by Mascherini. Like the circular *Sacrario dei Martiri* in the MRF, the *Sala d'Icaro* ended the exhibition with an evocative experience for the public, elevating the spirits of visitors in the face of the greatness of their Italian ancestors.

As noticed by Mazzucchelli in another passage of her review, ‘the architectural flavour of the exhibition is not a result of the fact that architects were asked to organise it ... it is the result of the special way in which the exhibition items are displayed, a “construction” rather than an “illustration”, as in all exhibitions where aesthetics is not the main criterion.’<sup>56</sup> By praising the role ‘abstraction’ played in the organisation of the exhibition, the critic highlights the degree of maturity reached by the Italian Rationalists, underlining how it was the influence of Futurism that characterised the MRF, whereas here the references were international but the outcome still Italian.

A year later, the Palazzo dell’Arte hosted another mass exhibition this time dedicated to sport, in which once again artists and architects collaborated. Pica includes the exhibition in his historical excursus, stressing the influence of Bayer in the graphic solutions that generally characterised the exhibition.<sup>57</sup> The 1941 monographic issue of *Casabella-Costruzioni*, devoted to showcasing the best exhibition design produced in Italy, Europe and North America since the nineteenth century, featured reproductions of rooms by Figini and Pollini, the BBPR studio and by the architects Lingeri and Terragni. The issue presents an installation view from the *Mostra dell’Agricoltura*, organised in Bologna, and the *Mostra dedicata al mare e alle navi*, held in Trieste, both from that year. Both Pica and the editors of *Casabella*, though, shunned in their historical outlines the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, organised in 1937 at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, the same venue as the MRF, to celebrate two thousand years since the birth of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor.

In Stone’s account of the decline of aesthetic pluralism after 1936, due to the proclamation of the Italian Empire and the intention to propose the Fascist dictatorship as the Third Empire, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* is at the crux of her argument.<sup>58</sup> The façade of the palace, designed by architect Alfredo Scalpelli and recalling the Roman Arch of Constantine (as noted by Romy Golan), marked the dawn of the *Stile Littorio*, a

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<sup>56</sup> Anna Maria Mazzucchelli, ‘Stile di una mostra’, in Sergio Polano, *Mostrare*, p.533.

<sup>57</sup> Agnoldomenico Pica, in Roberto Aloï (ed.), *Esposizioni, Architettura, Allestimento*, p.XXXII.

<sup>58</sup> Marla S. Stone, *The Patron State*, pp.222–6.



combination of modern materials and ancient architectural typologies handled in a heavy monumental way, and fiercely opposed by architects such as Pagano or Persico (fig.15).<sup>59</sup> If the theme was indeed not in tune with the most radical modernist movements such as Rationalism (although this is not at all the case with the Novecento, as the work of Sironi demonstrates), it should be noted that in its installation design the exhibition profited from mass communication techniques such as photography and typography and flirted with modern materials and reproduction techniques.

Organised by the Roman city councillor Giulio Quirino Giglioli, a professor of ancient art at the University of Rome, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* gathered together mainly local architects such as Ludovico Quaroni, Giulio Pediconi and Mario Paniconi, who after 1945 were involved in different ways in the city's reconstruction. As with the previous mass exhibitions, the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* also promoted itself as an event conflating the historical and the symbolic: covering thirteenth centuries of Roman history, touching upon politics, economics, culture, everyday life and religion, the exhibition aimed to saturate and overwhelm visitors with its information and exhibits. In this case, though, the exhibition design, rather than being inspired by the 'hot' avant-gardist approach of the perimeter areas of the MRF, seemed to refer more to the monumentality of Sironi's rooms, such as his *Salone dei Fasci*. A sense of greatness and monumentality were of course the feelings that the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* wanted to convey, without at the same time renouncing those aspects that characterised the Fascist mass exhibitions: on the one hand challenging traditional museological display and, on the other hand, the use of modern materials and technologies in order better to exploit mass-communication techniques. It should be noted that the organisers made extensive use of cast reproductions, so as to avoid difficulties with shipment, installation and conservation and in order to grant a degree of homogeneity to the different exhibits.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, photographs, cropped images, texts, wall partitions and a theatrical and modern lighting system, as pointed out by Schnapp, 'lent a degree of dynamism to the installation that would have been unthinkable in any 1930s archeological museum.'<sup>61</sup>

This argument, as clarified by Schnapp, finds its validation in Giglioli's catalogue text: 'The monuments have not been exhibited following the rigid norms of museums, but

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<sup>59</sup> Romy Golan, *Muralnomad. The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009, pp.108–9.

<sup>60</sup> *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, exhibition catalogue, Rome: 23 September 1937–23 September 1938, p.164.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Mostre*, p.66.

instead surrounded by inscriptions, photomontages, maps, and diagrams, so as to give rise to sections that wed scientific rigor [sic.] with the liveliness of a modern exhibition.<sup>62</sup> The task of course was again to be able to speak to a new kind of audience, not just the cultured elite of aristocrats, professors, students and the bourgeoisie, but the whole spectrum of society. In this way, and thanks to the collaboration of artists and architects, the mass exhibition became the medium by which Fascist values could be injected into and spread throughout the different strata of society.

As stressed by Golan, the risk of this kind of approach was a ‘Disneyfication’ effect, yet I believe it is important for my argument to retrace the not so subtle attempt on the part of the Fascists to rethink the conditions of museum display via the medium of the exhibition.<sup>63</sup> The temporary quality of the exhibition seemed to provide a framework through which to play with the temporality traditionally inscribed in museums. Through the collaborations of artists and architects in exhibition installation design and the use of modern materials, Fascism directly questioned the authority of the museum as established in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, adapting for the purposes of propaganda the display techniques traditionally employed by trade fairs and universal exhibitions. The latter was clearly demonstrated by the exhibitions organised at the Circo Massimo between 1937 and 1939.

The Circo Massimo exhibitions, named after the area in Rome where the new citadel purposely created to house them was built, came as a response to the new political and economic conditions in which the regime found itself after the Ethiopian invasion and the declaration of the new-born Empire. After the imposition of sanctions by the League of Nations in 1935, Italy implemented its policy of autarchy, under which the country should no longer rely on any imported products. Already towards the end of the 1920s, the regime had been taking measures in this direction (such as the Battle for Grain, intended to boost production); it is also worth noting that countries such as Spain did not fully respect the sanctions, which Mussolini was able to exploit for the purposes of propaganda, as discussed in chapter four.

The *Mostra Nazionale delle Colonie Estive e dell’Assistenza all’Infanzia* (June–September 1937), dedicated to children and their care by the regime, the *Mostra del Tessile Nazionale*

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<sup>62</sup> Giulio Quirino Giglioli, ‘Presentazione’, in *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, op. cit., p.XVI. Quoted and translated by Schnapp in Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Mostre*, p.66.

<sup>63</sup> Romy Golan, *Muralnomad*, p.272, n.65.

(November 1937–March 1938), devoted to national textiles and discussed in detail in chapter four, the *Mostra del Dopolavoro* (May–August 1938), addressing the regime’s interest in workers’ conditions and their free time, and the *Mostra autarchica del Minerale italiano* (November 1938–May 1939), highlighting Italian scientific research based on national mineral extraction, offer a full spectrum of the regime’s activities at the end of the 1930s. The exhibitions aimed to exert an impact on their visitors but this time no one moment of enlightenment was intended other than the reinforcement of the ideology of the new era that started with the foundation of the Fascist Empire. Information and documentation presented in a clear way served the purpose of promoting Italian autarchy and transmitting the rhetorical messages surrounding the new Empire and its power, despite Italy’s political and economic isolation. With one of its pavilions designed by Libera, the citadel of the Circo Massimo, occupying more than 50,000 square metres, could once again count on the collaboration of important modernist architects – from Luigi Moretti to Marcello Nizzoli, from Cesare Pea to Vinicio Palladini – for the installation design of its exhibitions. The use of modern materials and techniques already encountered in other mass exhibitions, such as photomurals, texts, cropped images, and typographical and lighting effects, situate these experiences within the lineage outlined so far. Furthermore, to guarantee a constant dialogue with the *romanità* pursued by the regime, the Circo Massimo was designed so as to allow a view of the Coliseum on the horizon.<sup>64</sup>

The first of these four exhibitions opened in 1937, the same year in which the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* was inaugurated and the second (more museological) installation of the MRF was completed. Fogu noted how, while the latter in part undermined the idea of Fascism as a movement that was still present in the first version of the MRF, the first two, instead, shared a vision of the future that clearly adopted the modernist experiments with installation design of the decade, although translated for the new needs of the Fascist state. Schnapp goes even further, claiming, contrary to Stone, that the Circo Massimo exhibitions in no way represent a return to the pre-existing order.<sup>65</sup> The analysis of the *Mostra del Tessile Nazionale* in chapter four points more towards this latter interpretation than to Stone’s.

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<sup>64</sup> Moretti, a great supporter of the regime, deliberately designed his modernist installation for the *Mostra delle colonie estive e dell’assistenza all’infanzia* with the layout of ancient roman houses in mind, thereby celebrating Mussolini’s aspirations to form a Third Rome. Orietta Lanzarini, “Mi attrae e usa sconvolgermi insegnandomi”. Gli allestimenti di Luigi Moretti’, in Bruno Reichlin, Letizia Tedeschi (eds.), *Luigi Moretti : razionalismo e trasgressività tra barocco e informale*, Milan: Electa, 2010, pp.2–13.

<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *Mostre*, p.66.

Fascist mass exhibitions mainly adopted a historical approach in order to address in different ways the historical event of the dictatorship. In readdressing the museological conventions of the time, however, they projected themselves as historic events in themselves: firstly through their memorable installations, achieved thanks to the participation of the best artists and architects of the time; secondly because each of them aimed to have a tangible effect either on the economy (highlighting the research and the achievements of Italian industry) or in the cultural sphere (as in the case of the MRF and the ensuing debate surrounding historical institutions); and thirdly because one of their aims was to transform the historic imaginary of the masses, demonstrating how through Fascism a sense of a positive future could be a permanent presence in people's lives. Although interested in involving the artists and the architects of the time, these exhibitions never openly addressed art as a topic in itself. How the art world reacted and what kind of effects this exhibition culture had in the realm of art exhibitions is the subject of the last two sections of this chapter, which further explore the theme of the synthesis of the arts and the coming-of-age of exhibition design for Italian architects.

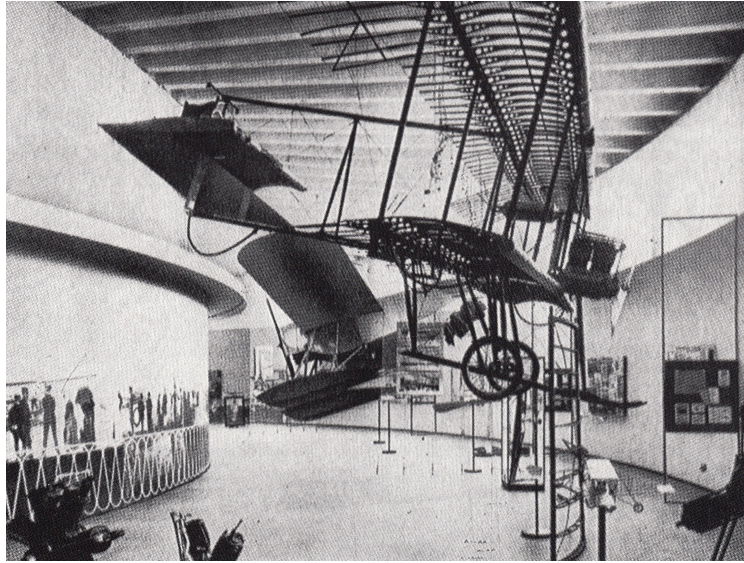


Fig.12: *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, Milano, 1934, *Sala dei primi voli*, installation designed by the BBPR studio.

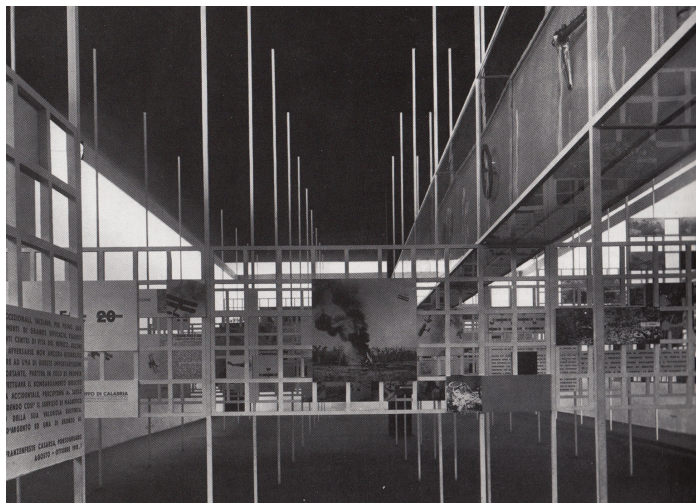


Fig.13: *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, Milan, 1934, *Sala delle Medaglie d'Oro*, installation designed by Marcello Nizzoli and Edoardo Persico.



Fig.14: *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana*, Milan, 1934, *Sala d'Icaro*, designed by Giuseppe Pagano in collaboration with Bruno Munari and Marcello Mascherini.



Fig.15: *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, Rome, 1937, façade designed by Alfredo Scalpelli.

## 2.5 Modernisms at the Milan Triennial (1923–1940)

Trade fairs and the great International exhibitions inspired not only the invention of the Fascist mass exhibition, but were also partly responsible for the creation of a new institution: the Milan Triennial.<sup>66</sup> It is important to stress the fact that while Fascist mass exhibitions started in 1932 with the MRF, the Milan Triennial – in its first version – was originally an attempt by the Italian liberal state in the 1920s to revamp craft production at a national and international level. The institution was first known as the Monza Biennial, established in 1923 in the Villa Reale of Monza, a historical palace commissioned from architect Giuseppe Piermarini by Maria Teresa d'Austria in 1777.

Monza was the perfect location for an international exhibition dedicated to promoting and boosting crafts, decorative arts and, on a minor level, folkloric production. Located in the middle of Brianza – one of the first industrial districts to the north of Milan – the small city of Monza became the centre for the rebirth of Italian artisanship and craft. In fact, together with the Monza Biennial, the organisers promoted the *Università per le arti decorative*, a university for applied and decorative arts that opened in 1921 in order to provide skilled labour to local industries, to sensitize people working in industry to the importance of art as applied to artisan production, and to in general to promote arts and crafts, often ignored by the public sector. The Monza Biennial was intended to provide a platform for international foreign production in order to then inspire local Italian production, to sustain and promote Italian industries abroad and to boost the entire sector from an intellectual as much as an economic point of view.<sup>67</sup> It was as a result of this interdisciplinary character that the Milan Triennial could quickly become, in the following decade, the testing ground for modern Italian exhibition design.

In 1930, from being held every two years, the exhibition became triennial and the organisation, as happened with the Venice Biennial, came under Rome's control, the title changing to *Esposizione Internazionale d'arte decorativa e industriale moderna*, the emphasis being on both decorative art and industrial art that was modern. In 1933, the institution moved to Milan, changing its name to *Triennale di Milano*. While the socialist deputy Guido Marangoni directed the first three editions of the Monza Biennial (1923, 1925, 1927), the architects Ponti and Alpagò-Novello, together with Sironi, organised the fourth (1930),

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<sup>66</sup> Although dated, the most comprehensive source on the history of the Milan Triennial is Anty Pansera, *Storia e Cronaca della Triennale*, Longanesi: Milano, 1978.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.23.

opening up the institution to the categories of architecture and industrial art (at that point still meaning works of art produced by industrial means). The change of directorship demonstrated the grip of Fascism on cultural institutions after the initial years when general freedom was still partially granted (and the consolidation of the Novecento group, thanks to Mussolini's endorsement).

In the first three editions, the organisers paid little attention to the installation design, apart from a general awareness of 'setting out' the objects presented so as to avoid boredom for the visitors. In 1923 and 1925, the organisation of the Italian section followed provincial regional divisions, presenting objects largely inspired by different local traditions. At the same time, even any foreign participation – desired yet feared due to the potential economic competition that could have followed – was characterised by a general interest in folkloric art rather than modern experimentation. In the first edition, the Futurist artist Fortunato Depero offered the public the only avant-gardist experience, presenting a kaleidoscopically coloured room with sculptures, drawings, paintings, textiles and objects, crossing the boundaries between fine and decorative art. Interestingly, on the occasion of the second edition (1925), the Monza Biennial, in highlighting an interest in folkloric production, consciously positioned itself in contrast to the *Paris International Exhibitions of Decorative and Industrial Modern Arts* that, instead, banned any reference to that kind of production.

In 1927, as evidence of the dictatorship's progressive control over the institution, several members of the Novecento group joined the artistic committee, which comprised Margherita Sarfatti, Sironi, Carlo Carrà, Carlo Alberto Felice and Gio Ponti. As an immediate result, the institution adopted a much more modern approach, dismissing folkloric production. Furthermore, the committee employed a more rigorous selection process for the objects presented. Several artists produced a series of rooms creating interior designs for shops, such as a butcher's by Felice Casorati, for example, or a pharmacy by Gigi Chessa, indicating a growing interest in architecture as a category in itself, still relatively overlooked at this stage.<sup>68</sup> The Gruppo 7, comprising seven architects, presented a series of models of rationalist buildings. Established in 1926 by some of the

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<sup>68</sup> The so-called 'via dei negozi' [shopping arcade] was proposed by a group of artists based in Turin and related to the 'circle of Gualino'. Riccardo Gualino, a modern and refined entrepreneur and collector, brought together in his house a group of intellectuals from all over Italy, among the critic Lionello Venturi and Pagano, as well as those responsible for the 'via dei negozi'. According to Ciucci, Turin in the 1920s was the laboratory of the 'modern' Italian architecture thanks also to the presence of intellectuals such as Gobetti, Gramsci and Persico, to name but a few. On the architecture in Turin during the 1920s, Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il fascismo. Architettura e città 1922-1944*, Torino: Einaudi, 2002, pp. 37-56.



most promising Italian architects (i.e. Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini and Giuseppe Terragni), Gruppo 7 aimed to promote rationalist architecture inspired by the international movement.<sup>69</sup>

In 1930, the first Triennial after the series of Biennials concentrated on modernity, as expressed by its new title that included industrial modern art. It was, of course, a modernity understood in the Italian way, at a moment in which the dictatorship deeply imposed itself onto the cultural and economic life of the country.<sup>70</sup> If Bauhaus exhibitions had turned to modernity to improve the living conditions of the working classes, then in Italy the objective was more to produce desirable industrial art objects for wealthy patrons or middle-class clients. It is worth mentioning that the Triennial maintained this sort of ambiguity well into the 1950s and 1960s, due to the particular ties in existence between architects and designers and industrial capitalism, as explained in chapter four.

The 1930 Monza Triennial dispensed with the regional organisation of the Italian section and the links with tradition and folklore. Marangoni having retired, Ponti, Sironi and Alvaro Novati jointly took on the directorship of the fourth edition of the Triennial. Exponents of Novecento, they naturally supported their own artistic movement, although architecture was also widely represented for the first time, with special attention given to the rationalist style. For the first time, the park of the Villa was used as a site for different temporary houses designed by architects. One of the most successful was the one designed by Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, the Casa Elettrica [Electrical House], a 1:1 model of a domestic house inspired by rationalist criteria. Although the stated intention was to address the housing issue in Italy, in reality these prototypes reproduced houses for the middle classes, bypassing any serious attempt to understand the issue from a broader social point of view.<sup>71</sup> To address the middle or high bourgeoisie as the main audience for the exhibition was probably Ponti's idea, who was then editor of the magazine *Domus*, in some way embracing the dictatorship's needs to court Italian magnates of industry.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 'L'evoluzione del metodo espositivo nelle passate Triennali', in *Casabella*, 1954, n.203 p.74.

<sup>70</sup> On the Italian route to modernism, Persico wrote several articles, some of which are collected in Edoardo Persico, *Profezia dell'architettura*, Milano: Skira, 2012. A completed documentation of Persico's writings is in Giulia Veronesi (ed.), *Edoardo Persico*.

<sup>71</sup> For example, the BBPR's proposal was for a holiday home.

<sup>72</sup> During Ponti's directorship, *Domus* provided a unique platform for an inter-disciplinary approach to the arts, blurring the usual distinctions between minor and major, although clearly addressing a very specific type of wealthy reader.

Among the Enti Autonomi, the Triennial managed to achieve greater freedom to experiment with different styles, becoming a unique space in which to understand the different cultural and intellectual battles being played out at the time. It is because of its natural link with everyday life and the problems intellectuals have to face in it that the Triennial managed to sustain a different position with respect to the Venice Biennial and the Rome Quadrennial, both of which were mainly dedicated to fine art.<sup>73</sup>

In 1933, after the Triennial moved to Milan, in Muzio's Palazzo dell'Arte, the new committee of directors, formed by Ponti, Sironi and the painter Carlo Alberto Felice, foregrounded the 'unity of the arts' as the main theme of the various exhibitions presented. This theme particularly interested both Ponti and Sironi. The former coined for the occasion the motto 'style and civilization', highlighting his goal of educating people through style, transforming them into good consumers. Ponti recognised style as being capable of improving society (and of course the kind of society Ponti had in mind was a wealthy one), with the 'unity of the arts' as the perfect umbrella under which to secure an even quality across the entire spectrum of artistic production. Sironi, thwarted by the experience of the MRF in which he had been prevented from realising mural paintings, poured his vision of a new mural art into the realisation of a distinct section of the Triennial dedicated to this genre. Inspired by Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* and deeply convinced by the fact that artists should commit themselves to producing an art that both embodied Fascist values and was suitable for all, Sironi in 1933 co-signed the *Manifesto della pittura murale* with painters Carlo Carrà, Achille Funi and Massimo Campigli.<sup>74</sup> In order to achieve his goal, he invited thirty artists (among them Giorgio De Chirico, Alberto Savinio, Campigli, Carrà, Funi, Depero, Severini, Cagli) to create works to be installed on the walls of the main hall and corridors of the Palazzo dell'Arte (fig.16). Rather than impose his choice of subject on each artist, or articulate a prescribed programme, Sironi preferred to leave to the individual the decision as to what theme they would represent.<sup>75</sup> Sironi himself executed a fresco depicting the subject of work and created a minimalistic typographic decoration in bas-relief with the three letters VTM standing for 'Fifth (in roman numerals) Triennial Milan', that covered the entire ceiling, looming over the staircase (fig.17).

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<sup>73</sup> Anty Pansera, *Storia e Cronaca della Triennale*, p.36.

<sup>74</sup> On the manifesto, see Elena Pontiggia (ed.), *Mario Sironi. Scritti e pensieri*.

<sup>75</sup> In the main spaces the most famous artists addressed those themes favoured by Fascism – such as family, labour, sport, workspace – while in the less prestigious areas of the palace, younger artists could develop their own ideas. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, p.171.

The final result did not satisfy the critics who considered that the synthesis of the arts attempted by the artists in the Palazzo dell'Arte had failed. Apart from Ponti's *Domus*, commentators from both sides, conservative and modern, lambasted the entire operation. Supporters of academic art, such as Ojetti or Farinacci (the latter a journalist and future secretary of the PNF), found the language predominantly employed by the artists very much not to their taste, starting a campaign against Sironi and the Novecento movement that lasted for months.<sup>76</sup> Roberto Papini, from *Emporium*, disagreed with the decision to let each artist come up with his own theme; Figini and Pollini claimed that there was no relationship between the architecture and the paintings; while Ghiringhelli from *Quadrante* stressed that the final outcome was, in fact, more similar to a series of easel paintings translated onto a bigger scale.<sup>77</sup> In his review of the Triennial, Pagano stressed how, in general, the most accomplished rooms of the exhibition were those in which one person was responsible for the entire space, successfully reaching the kind of synthesis looked for by the organisers.<sup>78</sup> Despite the ambiguity (and failure) of its reception from the very outset, the theme of the unity of the arts became a refrain in the Triennial's history, as demonstrated by the editions of the 1950s discussed in chapter three.

Mural painting was, in fact, one of the four themes around which this 1933 edition was organised, together with the exhibitions of decorative arts, architecture, and modern houses. For the first time, architecture became an official theme of the Triennial, with a large-scale exhibition dedicated to International architecture, the *Mostra Internazionale di Architettura*, co-ordinated by Pica. This exhibition underlines how, during the Fascist period and at least until the mid-1930s, there were still channels open to the experience of what was happening abroad. Architects and artists involved in representing Italy at international fairs would have had direct access to people and productions occurring outside Italy's borders.

Therefore, the Milano Triennial, during the 1930s, not only provided a platform for practising avant-garde languages, it also opened up a channel of communication with international stimuli, otherwise known only via a few magazines such as *Casabella* and *Quadrante*. The International Architecture exhibition of 1933 presented for the first time in Italy the achievements of a series of prestigious architects such as Le Corbusier, Mies van

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<sup>76</sup> The entire affair is recounted in Rossana Bossaglia, *Il Novecento Italiano. Storia, documenti, iconografia*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979, pp.48–55.

<sup>77</sup> Virginio Ghiringhelli, 'Pitture murali nel Palazzo della Triennale,' in *Quadrante*, giugno 1933, p.8.

<sup>78</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, 'V Triennale di Milano', in *Casabella*, year 6, May 1933, p.31.

der Rohe, Gropius, Mendelshon, Wright, Perret and Melnikhov.<sup>79</sup> This had a major impact on the education of the so-called second generation of Italian architects (such as Franco Albini, Carlo Scarpa, the BBPR studio), whose activities came into focus after 1945. Even during the war, a magazine such as *Casabella-Costruzioni* managed to keep an eye on projects by these distinguished architects of the modernist movement.

In 1934, a year after the fifth Triennial, Pagano organised the aforementioned EAI in the Palazzo dell'Arte, proving the capacity of even such a traditional architectural venue to take on the most modern exhibition design. The success of the EAI won Pagano his place on the artistic committee of the sixth Triennial (due to open in 1936), together with Sironi and Felice, although due to a series of disputes he had to resign five months before the opening. On this occasion, the board conceived twelve exhibitions – divided into different sections, each with its own theme – in order ‘to better persuade the public, because “the duty of an exhibition is also to instruct.”’<sup>80</sup> It was in this edition that for the first time a thematic exhibition, the *Stanza della Coerenza*, was organised within the Triennial, as recognised by Lodovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso in an article written in 1954 dedicated to the history of the first ten editions of the institution.<sup>81</sup> According to him, this demonstrated the influence of the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* on the Italian architects who were involved in it.<sup>82</sup>

As well as the usual sections dedicated to the presentation (and promotion) of crafts or of objects produced industrially (but not on a large scale), the international participation – among which the Swiss section with works by Max Bill particularly stood out for his use of abstract forms in his exhibition design – and the exhibitions dedicated to architecture, the Palazzo delle Arti also hosted three key exhibitions that clearly underlined how the initial influence of avant-garde modes of exhibition display, after the mass

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<sup>79</sup> Edoardo Persico was certainly the most lucid Italian critic of modernist architecture in the 1930s and, together with Pagano, managed to publish in *Casabella* updates on international developments. In 1933, he published a review of the exhibition that while on the one hand praised its achievement in bringing to Italy a body of international protagonists, on the other hand criticised the absence of landmark architects who were exponents of the modernist language, such as Henry van de Velde and Tony Garnier. Edoardo Persico, ‘L'architettura mondiale’, in *L'Italia Letteraria*, 2 July 1933, reprinted in Edoardo Persico, *Profeszia dell'architettura*, Milano: Skira, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Anty Pansera, *Storia e Cronaca della Triennale*, p.48.

<sup>81</sup> Belgiojoso argues a decisive point for the present research, stressing how ‘the programme of this Triennale added a new element to the usual presentation and review of products in the previous editions: those sections designed to develop a thesis to persuade the public and disseminate ideas.’ Ludovico B. di Belgiojoso, ‘L'evoluzione del metodo espositivo nelle passate Triennali’, p.74. My translation.

<sup>82</sup> Belgiojoso noticed, in fact, that the sixth edition directed by Pagano ‘marked a decisive contribution to the experience of exhibition methods from that [1934, Mostra dell'Aeronautica Italiana] exhibition.’ *Ibid.*, p.74. My translation.

exhibition experiments of 1932 and 1934, was being refined into a more autonomous language. The first was the *Stanza dell' Antica Oreficeria Italiana*, presenting work by the historic goldsmiths Franco Albini and Giovanni Romano (fig.18); the second was the *Sala della Vittoria* by Persico, Nizzoli and Palanti with a contribution by the artist Lucio Fontana (fig.19); and the third was the *Stanza della Coerenza*, designed by the BBPR studio (fig.20).

The *Stanza dell'Antica Oreficeria Italiana* consisted of a neat and ordered space, recalling the *Stanza delle Medaglie d'oro* realised by Persico and Nizzoli in 1934. The use of thin vertical aluminium poles joined with the glass of the vitrines organised the space into a grid, within which the exhibits seemed to be floating weightlessly. Whilst in the previous manifestations the grid almost competed with the objects or pictures on show, in this case it contributed to highlighting the precious and unique qualities of the goldsmith's art. It is interesting to note how a form conceived for propaganda reasons could be revitalized in such a different context, a historical exhibition within a contemporary event. The architects also achieved this goal through a typical device already encountered in the mass exhibitions and immediately seized upon by an institution so closely related to trade as the Milan Triennial: namely the use of modern materials – representing state-of-the-art Italian production – to present the work of ancient goldsmiths to the public. Finally, the room introduced the lyrical use of space that, together with the floor-to-ceiling poles, quickly became the trademark of Albini's installation design, as demonstrated at the end of this chapter by his design for his 1941 Scipione exhibition. For Albini, the construction and constituent elements of a display had to retreat discreetly into the background, leaving the viewers to enjoy the exhibits that would be allowed to shine in the foreground.

Albini and Romano's room was not the only one to evoke the *Stanza delle Medaglie d'oro*. The *Sala della Vittoria*, the second high point of this Triennial, saw Persico and Nizzoli teaming up once more, in a reprise of their 1934 exhibition design transformed into pure architecture and on a monumental scale.<sup>83</sup> Conceived in response to an open competition launched by the regime for the Salone d'Onore of the Triennial, where a series of official events and ceremonies would take place throughout the exhibition period, the *Sala della Vittoria* celebrated the ideal of Victory (and it is worthwhile noting that on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, only a few weeks before the opening of the Triennial, Italy conquered Addis Ababa, winning the Ethiopian war). In this room, the purity of form of rationalist architecture

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<sup>83</sup> A description of the project by Persico himself is published in Edoardo Persico, 'Relazione per il concorso per il Salone d'onore', reproduced in Giulia Veronese (ed.), *Edoardo Persico. Scritti di architettura*, pp. 194–6.

pervaded the entire space, creating a mystic and almost ahistorical dimension into which visitors entered after passing through a narrow passage painted in black. The windows were plastered over and obscured (except for some holes to allow air to circulate), the entire room thus separated from the rest of the world, with a series of wooden panels from floor to ceiling alternating along the perimeter walls, behind which artificial lighting illuminated the space. A group sculpture realised by Fontana – a woman representing Athena Nike and two horses – was positioned at the other side of the entrance, intended to suspend the visitor in a new reality: one in which the Fascist victory was presented as ahistorical, detached from the present. This eternal quality was reinforced by the series of five portraits of Roman emperors occupying a single panel slightly detached from the others, just at a time when Fascism, in the immediate wake of the Ethiopian conquest, proclaimed the rebirth of the Italian Empire as the continuation of the Roman Empire (celebrated one year later at the *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*). The *Sala della Vittoria* could hardly be a better exemplar of the new historical ideology pursued by the Fascist regime. As claimed by Persico, who died mysteriously before the opening of the Triennial, this was not simply a redecoration of a pre-existing room, but a new, ‘independent and original’ architecture.<sup>84</sup> Critic Raffaello Giolli, who praised the project, expressed the same sentiment at the end of his review, noting that ‘when architecture reaches such heights as this, just one day of life is enough.’<sup>85</sup> From another perspective, however, Papini called into question the architectural nature of the project, comparing the artificial atmosphere of the room to the scandal of the mural exhibition of three years earlier, when the works of art failed to relate to each other and to the surroundings of the Palazzo delle Arti.<sup>86</sup>

The frequent declarations for and against the ephemeral quality of the architectural structures created for exhibitions confirmed how, throughout the period of growth that was the 1930s, modernist architects granted exhibition design the same status as more concrete forms of architecture. Furthermore, as declared in Pagano’s landmark text of 1941, much discussed later, architects realised that it was the very ephemeral nature of the exhibition that allowed architects to experiment with modernist architecture in Italy. It is Pagano himself who permits us to make a small detour before focussing on the third highlight of this Triennial. In a review published in 1938, two years after the exhibition, Pagano drew an interesting comparison between the *Sala della Vittoria* and the unfinished

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<sup>84</sup> Edoardo Persico, ‘Relazione per il concorso per il Salone d’onore’.

<sup>85</sup> Raffaello Giolli, ‘La sala della Vittoria’, in *Casabella*, June–July, n.102–3, 1936. Reproduced in Sergio Polano, *Mostrare*, p.538. My translation.

<sup>86</sup> Roberto Papini, ‘Le arti a Milano nel 1936 - XIV’, in *Emporium*, August 1936, vol.LXXXIV, n.500, p.72.

mosaic by Sironi, *Il lavoro Fascista*, which was positioned at the top of the imposing staircase of the Palazzo dell'Arte. He states: 'Sironi's mosaic, the paintings of Carrà and Cagli, the sculpture of Martini are self-sufficient and create that force of attraction around themselves, that force of artistic creation. In the *Sala della Vittoria*, instead, the "figurative decoration" and the "architectonic decoration" participate willingly and decisively towards one unified result.'<sup>87</sup> The sentence is quoted also by Braun to illustrate what the rationalists thought was the artistic approach that could best realise a Fascist art. In this context, though, I would like to stress how Pagano's remarks highlight a different concept of the unity of the arts, by necessity achieved via architecture rather than through the creation of works of art in an ad-hoc dialogue with the other major arts. This underlying tension between artists and architects, stressed in Pagano's 1941 text, emerges again after the Second World War, with architects being accused of realising 'exhibitions of exhibitions' and acting like artists in conceiving their exhibition designs.<sup>88</sup>

Largely ignored by the critics, but crucial for this research, the third highlight of this edition of the Triennial was the *Stanza della Coerenza*, by the BBPR studio.<sup>89</sup> Belgiojoso considered this room an example of the introduction into this particular Triennial of the thematic exhibition. The BBPR studio divided the space into two parts. In the first a selection of architectural structures, photographically reproduced on panels, introduced the visitor to the theme of 'coherence': how different architectures around the world and built in different ages bore witness, despite their disparities, to the coherent endeavours of man through the centuries. The BBPR studio developed this argument in the second part of the room, where, again using a grid-based structure, this time recalling the exhibition by former Bauhaus members in Berlin in 1931, they applied onto glass panels short texts about the relationship between architecture and man across the ages. Behind each of the structures, the architects positioned a series of sculptures (twelve in total, four for each section), and the artwork *Costante Uomo*, a human silhouette in chalk realised by artist Fausto Melotti. Behind the sculptures, on the floor, flower beds gave a sense of harmony to the space.

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<sup>87</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, *Arte decorativa italiana*, Milano: 1938, Translated by Emily Braun in: Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, p.279, n.98.

<sup>88</sup> Eugenio Gentili Tedeschi, 'Organicità e decorativismo nell'allestimento delle mostre', in *Metron*, n.10, 1946, republished in Sergio Polano, *Mostrare*, pp. 545-551. A similar accusation was levelled at curators in the early 1970s, in particular by Daniel Buren in his polemic against Harald Szeemann on the occasion of *Documenta 5*, Kassel 1972; Daniel Buren, 'Ausstellung einer Ausstellung', in *Documenta 5*, exhibition catalogue, Kassel: Bertelsmann, 1972, recently republished in English in Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962-2002*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013, pp.171–2.

<sup>89</sup> On the *Stanza della Coerenza*, see Ezio Bonfante, Marco Porta (eds.), *Città, Museo e Architettura. Il Gruppo BBPR nella cultura architettonica italiana, 1932–1970*, Milano: Hoepli, 1973, p.A26.

Together the three elements – flower beds, sculptures and built structures – were designed to convey a clear message to the visitors, who were intended to read with careful attention the texts in a pleasant environment consistent with the message being conveyed. This environment was intended to reiterate that message through its immediate form – the uniformity of the silhouettes recalling the uniformity of man as declared by the texts – and finally, to make a strong impression on visitors and create a lasting memory. What is striking in this case is the fact that it shows a contemporary artist being invited to present a work of art that was not intended to be viewed within an art historical context, nor out of a desire to introduce his work to the viewing public, but because the meaning of the exhibition was believed to be best transmitted through its installation design. This is a key point, since it proves how architects started to bring together the results of years of intense debate and experience in the specific form of the thematic exhibition. The BBPR Studio's exhibition challenged the traditional display of an artwork, took advantage of the positive outcomes resulting from the collaboration of artists and architects, guided by the principle of the unity of arts, and recognised the autonomous value of exhibition design, as Belgiojoso recalled eighteen years later by which time the thematic exhibition had become commonplace.

Despite the success of this edition of the Triennial, in which Pagano was instrumental in promoting the language of modernism, two events before its opening hinted at the changing tide in Fascist cultural policy. With Edoardo Persico's mysterious death and Pagano removed from his position on the Triennial managing committee, due to a quarrel with the conservative critic Sommi Picenardi, a public voice for the modernist position became weakened. The next Milan Triennial in 1940 was less daring and interesting in its choice of exhibition language, also because of the outbreak of war, although some aspects of the show, such as the BBPR room of the *Verde nella città*, demonstrated the persistence of modernism.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ezio Bonfante, Marco Porta (eds.), *Città, museo, architettura*, p.A44.





Fig.16: Fifth Milan Triennial, Milan, 1933, *Aula Massima*, among the artists whose work is recognisable are Mario Sironi and Carlo Carrà.



Fig.17: Fifth Milan Triennial, Milan, 1933, ceiling by Mario Sironi above the grand staircase of the Palazzo dell'Arte.

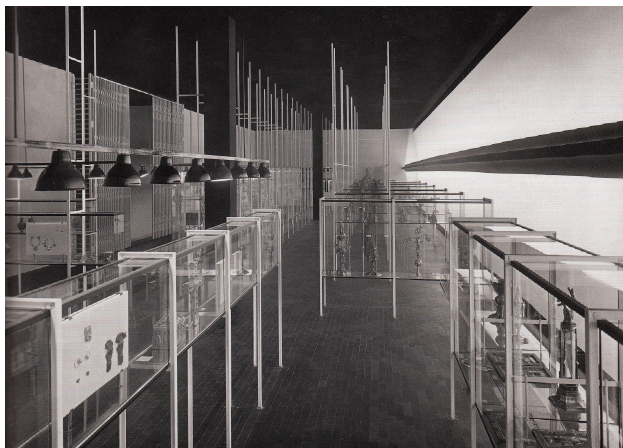


Fig.18: Sixth Milan Triennial, Milan, 1936, *Sala dell'Antica Oreficeria Italiana*, exhibition designed by Franco Albini and Giovanni Romano.



Fig.19: Sixth Milan Triennial, Milan, 1936, *Sala della Vittoria*, designed by Marcello Nizzoli, Gian Carlo Palanti, Edoardo Persico with the contribution of Lucio Fontana.

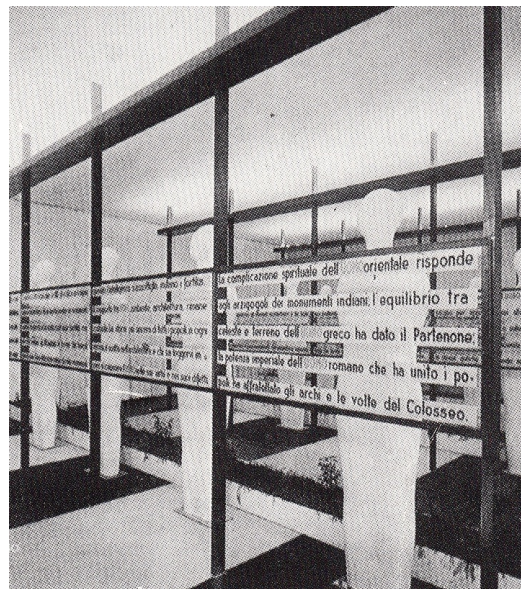


Fig.20: Sixth Milan Triennial, Milan, 1936, *Sala della Coerenza*, exhibition designed by the BBPR Studio with sculptures by Fausto Melotti.

## 2.6 The Venice Biennial under Antonio Maraini (1928–1942)

While the Milan Triennial was developing a new exhibition culture inspired by the design of both the Italian mass exhibitions and the international avant-garde, the Fine Art sector of the Venice Biennial decisively followed a different trajectory. The Venetian institution came under the attention of the regime towards the end of the 1920s, soon after the consolidation of the dictatorship. Together with the Milan Triennial (at the time still the Monza Biennial), the Biennial was brought under the direct control of the central government of Rome at the expense of the city of Venice, which since its inception in 1895 had coordinated its organisation.<sup>91</sup>

It was Antonio Maraini, nominated general secretary of the institution in 1927 and Extraordinary Commissioner of the Fascist Syndicate for the Fine Arts in 1932, who suggested the need for greater control over the Biennial by central government.<sup>92</sup> This would have turned the Venice Biennial into the most important institution at the top of the hierarchical pyramid organised by the dictatorship in order to promote its policy of patronage of the arts. Together with Maraini, the other key player of the newly organised institution was Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata, nominated President of the Venice Biennial in 1930. Committed to boosting the economic potential of the institution for tourism, Volpi opened the Biennial up to other sectors such as theatre, music and cinema.

Mussolini's interest in culture reached its peak between 1928 and 1935, and this is exemplified by his relationship with the Venice Biennial.<sup>93</sup> In 1935, with the change in Italy's position on the international scene as a result of the crisis provoked by the Ethiopian war, the regime diverted its interest away from culture to focus more on fostering a consensus towards the policy of autarchy and the rhetoric of the new-born Italian Empire.<sup>94</sup> However, at that stage, Maraini held complete sway over the Fine Art

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<sup>91</sup> The Venice Biennial became formally *Ente Autonomo* in 1930, fully operating as such by the 1932 edition. Finally, in 1938 central government passed a law for the regulation of the *Ente*, effective until 1972, more than twenty-five years after the defeat of the dictatorship.

<sup>92</sup> Marla S. Stone and Massimo De Sabbata have researched in detail Maraini's Biennials. While Stone inserts the Biennial experience within the wider picture of Fascist patronage, De Sabbata specifically focuses only on Maraini at the Biennial. Marla S. Stone, op. cit., and Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte: le Biennali di Antonio Maraini (1928–1942)*, Forum: Udine, 2006. A closer focus on the Biennial editions from 1939 to 1944 is in Giuliana Tomasella, *Biennali di guerra. Arte e propaganda negli anni del conflitto (1939–1944)*, Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2001.

<sup>93</sup> According to De Sabbata, Maraini and Mussolini met at least twice a year to discuss the Venice Biennale.

<sup>94</sup> As suggested by De Sabbata, in reference to a letter sent in 1940 to Mussolini by the Minister of Education Giuseppe Bottai lamenting the 'hostile silence of culture' since 1936; De Sabbata refers also to the diminished investment of the regime towards cultural production. Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte*, p.38.

element of the Venice Biennial, which he continually redefined from 1927, when he first took it on, until 1942.

Maraini completely reshaped the Venice Biennial, moulding it to the propaganda needs of the regime through shrewd artistic patronage and a selection policy aimed at evening out the artistic production it presented. Through the exhibitions at the Biennial, Maraini aimed to provide evidence for a coherent Italian style based on naturalism and rooted in Italian artistic tradition. As previously mentioned, during the Fascist period there was no one predominant style but a multiplicity of different movements, and therefore Maraini wanted to privilege only those artists whose practice was in line with tradition. Moreover, Maraini's exhibitions tended to brush over and erase any kind of artistic experimentation, in order to provide visitors with a consistent art experience. Following this logic, the general secretary also moved from a regional to a more national discourse, highlighting similarities among artists living in different areas rather than promoting individuality.<sup>95</sup>

It is for this reason that Maraini felt the need to remove the critics (such as Margherita Sarfatti, Ugo Ojetti and Nino Barbantini, who each championed their own, separate artistic movements) from the selection committee of the Venice Biennial, something he achieved in 1932. While the critics' interests lay in presenting the variety of artistic practice existing in Italy at that time, Maraini preferred to promote an art that mirrored Fascist values, easily understood and appreciated by the public, eventually exempt from impenetrable works of art and the intellectual diatribes around them.

In Maraini's mind, the aim of the Biennial exhibitions was to attune the taste of the public to an art of Fascist values. He was thus constantly aware of the public reception for the shows. His battle against the critics was intended to reposition the work of art and its relationship to the public, without the filter of critics who developed complicated aesthetic theories surrounding the works. This position also provided Maraini with a weapon against further criticism from the press. In fact, by taking a populist stance in presenting art that

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<sup>95</sup> This was possible also thanks to the foundation of the Rome Quadrennial, that allowed the Venice Biennial to dispense with presenting the whole range of Italian production, reflected in the regional organisation of the installation. Since the Quadrennial was every four years, the problem arose with those Biennial editions happening in the gap years. In fact, it was via the Quadrennial that the Venice Biennial could select the best Italian artists working at that moment in the country. Therefore, a series of travelling exhibitions around Italy started to be organised in order to overcome the problem, such as the exhibition *1 Mostra del Sindacato Nazionale* organised in Florence in 1933 (with the involvement of Maraini as President of the artists' corporation).

the masses could easily understand, Maraini discredited the art critics as ivory tower intellectuals only interested in complicated discussions around art which were far removed from the interests of the general public.

While the first four editions (1928–1934) of the Biennial coordinated by Maraini experimented with its organisation and the artistic languages then existing in Italy, the last four (1936–1942) witnessed an entirely more fixed structure and the promotion of a homogeneous artistic language devoted to naturalism and far from any avant-garde or modernist experimentation. In 1928, Maraini marked the shift from the Biennials of the liberal period, while avoiding a complete break with the Italian tradition. For this reason, he presented nineteenth century Italian art alongside some of the most avant-garde experiments in Italy, such as the Novecento. That year, he abandoned the regional organisation of the rooms, a model to which he returned only once in the 1930 edition to introduce the different artistic experimentations happening around Italy (fig.21). Despite his interest in providing an overview of the Italian art scene, Maraini claimed that the Biennial should be a means to allow ‘popularisation for the public and not the outlining of aesthetic problems for the critics.’<sup>96</sup> It was in fact in the following edition in 1932 that he took control of the selection process, directly inviting those artists to participate who confronted the subject of the ‘real’ and everyday. He confirmed his principle of avoiding any great variety of artistic style in 1934, when he explicitly requested artists to address their subjects through sculptures and paintings characterised by a simple, understandable language. The aim was to delight the public with art inspired by the principles of rectitude and clarity of vision of Fascism itself.

The second group of Biennials, according to De Sabbata, finally abandoned all experimentation to concentrate on art that was truly representative of a Fascist style.<sup>97</sup> As of 1936, naturalism became the main theme and the guiding principle by which artists were selected. In order to facilitate the visitor’s experience, Maraini organised the installation of the Italian section into displays around individual artists rather than groups of works of art. This resulted in a reduction in the numbers of those invited to participate in 1938. The wartime editions, 1940 and 1942, were affected by increasingly strained international relationships (already complicated since 1936, after the sanctions imposed by the League of

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<sup>96</sup> Antonio Maraini, ‘Biennale di Venezia’, in Luca Pinti (ed.), *L’azione di governo del regime fascista*, Roma: Casa Editrice dei Panorami di Realizzazioni del Fascismo, Vol.7, pp.371–2, quoted in Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte*, p.73.

<sup>97</sup> Massimo De Sabbata, *Tra diplomazia e arte*, p.84.

Nations), and appeared much more tired in their rhetorical propositions. Maraini preferred to organise solo shows of artists, grouping them two per room according to aesthetic and technical similarities, or by their geographic origins, and in 1942 he decided to separate sculpture from painting. Despite his attempt to present a more readable exhibition experience, Maraini's policy did not go unremarked. In an article Carlo Carrà pointed out the fact that the installation should always promote the best works of art, rather than preferring a homogeneous design that reduced everything to the same level.<sup>98</sup>

Another point worth mentioning is the role of architecture in Maraini's strategy. From the very beginning, Maraini understood the key role that architecture could play in shaping the visitor's experience. He invited Gio Ponti and Marcello Piacentini in 1928 to redesign the key spaces of the Italian pavilion and in 1930 he changed its façade, giving the commission to Duilio, a Venetian architect who would later collaborate on the transformation of its internal spaces according to Maraini's needs (fig.22). Moreover, for each of his editions, Maraini created within the Italian pavilion a route for the visitors to follow and over the years he kept shaping its internal spaces in order to provide the public with a smooth path through the installations.

In general, it can be argued that the Venice Biennial under the Fascist dictatorship aligned itself with the corporate policy adopted by the state. At the same time, rather than encouraging avant-garde or modernist movements, the institution preferred to present a more homogeneous level in the aesthetic quality of the works of art displayed in order to please the visitor's eye. Abandoning a position of enquiry (although it should be noted that avant-garde work was not especially welcome even before Maraini's arrival), the Biennial decided to present a particular, traditional way of making art.

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.90.





Fig.21: Seventeenth Venice Biennial, Venice, 1930, *Salone d'Onore*.



Fig.22: Nineteenth Venice Biennial, Venice, 1934, Room 40, exhibition design by Duilio Torres.

## 2.7 Franco Albini's *Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei*, Milan, 1941

Departing from the approach to exhibiting fine art that characterised the Venice Biennial, in 1941 Franco Albini organised a small retrospective of the work of Scipione, a recently deceased painter from Rome, together with a series of drawings by different artists. For the first time an Italian architect adopted a modernist-style display for works of art, inspired by the design of mass and commercial exhibitions. To conclude this chapter, I will argue that Albini's exhibition prefigured the post-war development of exhibition design as described in chapter three.

As reported by Pietro Maria Bardi in an article of 1931, fine art exhibitions were barely touched by the innovations in display that took place during the first part of the twentieth century, especially at an international level. Bardi pointed out how architects should always take care over the installation and the concept of an art exhibition, even if it contained only paintings. The occasion for his article was a review of the first Rome Quadrennial of 1931 that, according to Bardi, was still organized in a manner disturbingly close to Salon-style principles of installation design.<sup>99</sup>

Ten years later, the exhibition *Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei*, organised in 1941 at the Brera Academy in Milan, attracted a series of positive comments, as reported by reviews in *Domus* (titled by Ponti "A Perfect Exhibition") and *Casabella-Costruzioni*.<sup>100</sup> Scipione was the charismatic leader of a group of artists, based in Rome and active between the 1920s and early 1930s, interested in reviving an expressionist language within an Italian context. The exhibition, alongside a comprehensive body of work by Scipione, presented a series of contemporary drawings by other artists, displaying the material in four consecutive rooms that epitomised Albini's installation practice. The exhibition demonstrated the level of awareness reached by Albini in managing exhibition design. Furthermore, he proposed an innovative approach to fine art display, where visitors shared the space with the works of art on display, which no longer simply hung on the walls.

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<sup>99</sup> Pietro Maria Bardi, 'Nuove esigenze delle esposizioni', in *Ambrosiano*, 20 March 1931 reproduced in Sergio Polano, *Mostrare*, pp.530–2.

<sup>100</sup> Anna Lena Pacchioni, 'La mostra postuma di Scipione e una prima mostra di disegni contemporanei allestite nelle sale della Gallerie di Brera', in *Domus*, n.159, March 1941, pp.55–7; Gio Ponti, 'Una mostra perfetta', in *Stile*, n.3 March 1941, p.4 and Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua, 'L'allestimento della Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei nella Pinacoteca di Brera', in *Le Arti*, fasc.IV, April–May 1941, pp.2801.



In the 1941 exhibition, Albini organised the space according to a grid system – defined by the suspended wires running from floor to ceiling in each room – in which a series of elegant wooden poles punctuated the space, functioning as primary structures on which to present the items on display.<sup>101</sup> Depending on the material exhibited, these standardized poles could variously accommodate a pair of glass panels to hold drawings, a number of backdrops in canvas to frame paintings, or cases in which to present other drawings laid out on a trellis (fig.23). Albini set the three masterpieces painted by Scipione (such as *Il Cardinal Decano*) within three brick niches, which echoed in their roughness the paintings’ material aspect (fig.24). Thus Albini departed from the traditional display of drawings and paintings hung along the walls, preferring to let them inhabit the exhibition space, almost floating in the void, free from any physical constriction dictated by the architecture of the building. A series of long paper strips – positioned at regular intervals alongside the perimeter walls – and paired together with one suspended above the heads of the visitors to diffuse the light and to provide a thread of continuity throughout the four rooms of the exhibition – created a more dynamic atmosphere. The rational organisation of the space, the relationship between the items on display and the set of suspended poles, and the use of devices conceived to introduce a dynamic element into the space all three characterise Albini’s exhibition design up until the 1950s.<sup>102</sup> By this incursion into the realm of fine art that had so far been untouched by those three themes that I have drawn together in this chapter (the calling into question of museum display culture; the call by artists for the synthesis of the arts; and the recognition of exhibition design as an autonomous area of architectural practice), exhibition design was finally ready, once the war came to an end, to expand its field of action into museums and art exhibitions.

This chapter comes to a conclusion with the words of Pagano, who was unable to visit Albini’s exhibition since he was on the frontline in Greece fighting for the regime, having joined the partisans in 1943 in their struggle against the dictatorship. While still in Greece, he helped the editorial team of *Casabella-Costruzioni* to put together a monographic issue on the most important exhibitions organised around the world since the nineteenth century. Obviously privileging the defence of those modernist values for which he fought

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<sup>101</sup> Albini often structured the exhibition space according to the grid principle, as at the Milan Triennial of 1936 in the *Stanza dell’Antica Oreficeria*.

<sup>102</sup> In 1941, in revising the grid structure adopted since the INA Pavilions of the early 1930s for the Milan Fair and again for the *Stanza dell’Antica Oreficeria* at the 1936 Milan Triennial, Albini paved the way for further improvement in the way it was used in the “Sala delle mostre didattiche” [the Educational Room] at the Palazzo Bianco of Genoa and reaching its pinnacle in a project such as the Olivetti shop in Paris (1960).

throughout his life, Pagano managed to deliver at the very last minute an article entitled 'Parliamo un pò di esposizioni,' dedicated to Italian exhibition design of the 1930s.<sup>103</sup>

In this landmark article, Pagano argues that exhibitions in the 1930s became for Italian architects the primary arena in which to practice and test out a rationalist language more usually blocked by members of the Fascist party. In particular, he refers to the pivotal role of the commercial exhibitions and fairs, which he defines as 'clever sheds,' highlighting their essentially temporary nature but at the same time their essential contribution towards experimentation in modernist architecture. In fact, the international rationalist style was seen as unacceptable for publicly commissioned state buildings, and was employed for minor sites and structures such as post-offices, colonial buildings, holiday camp homes and, of course, exhibitions. These last, due to their ephemeral nature, their reduced costs and especially their potential impact on the masses, became by the end of the 1920s useful tools for Fascist propaganda. Moreover, their ephemerality pushed architects to a new level of experimentation '*in corpore vil?*' (working with poor materials and in low-budget conditions).

Pagano also made two further points that are relevant for my argument about the prominent role achieved by modernist architects in the organisation of exhibitions. The first relates to the position of the architect in respect to those who fund and those who organise (i.e. the specialist historian or curator) an exhibition. Pagano stressed that there must be cooperation among the three, but that in any case architects fulfil the most important role. The second reflects on the relationship between exhibition design and the commercial sector:

After having become established exclusively for commercial or tourist reasons, the technique of exhibition had the considerable merit of facilitating the kind of experimentation that would otherwise have been impossible...This favourable climate is completed by the particularly important contribution made by the publicity departments of large industries. Many of the best Italian exhibition

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<sup>103</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, 'Parliamo un pò di esposizioni'. Pagano abhorred the *Stile Littorio*, extremely popular at the time of the article, nevertheless it is important to note that during the 1930s the regime accorded to the rationalist movement the construction of at least three important public buildings: the Casa del Fascio (Como, 1932–6, by Giuseppe Terragni); the Stazione di Santa Maria Novella di Firenze (Firenze, 1932–6, by Giovanni Michelucci) and the Dispensario Antitubercolare (Alessandria, 1938 designed by Ignazio Gardella). On the relationship between the three modern Italian artistic movements – futurism, rationalism and novecento - and the regime in architecture, see Dennis P. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy: Italian Architecture, 1914–1936*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988; Cesare De Seta, *La cultura architettonica in Italia tra le due guerre*, Bari: Laterza, 1972 and Giorgio Ciucci, *Gli architetti e il Fascismo*.

specialists, in fact, have polarised around these ingenious technicians. Such names as Montecatini, Fiat, Olivetti and Snia have become linked with several of the most successful affirmations of exhibitory art.<sup>104</sup>

And finally, he admitted that ‘what can be more exciting for a lively poet if not that task of exalting with all the craftiness of the arts, the objects, the ideas, the products of contemporary civilisation?’<sup>105</sup> I believe this sentence sums up the sense of how great a transformation occurred in the 1930s in Italian display, through the active engagement of both Fascism and modernist architects and artists. By celebrating his civilisation through its products, Pagano highlights how the main focus of display culture was towards the present and the future, glimpsed through contemporary industrial production. According to Fogu, the MRF played a significant role in the redirection towards the future of the historic imaginary pursued by Fascism, and it was in the commercial sector – represented by both the Milan Triennial and the Milan Fair (discussed in chapter four) – that architects could perpetuate the MRF’s shift in the temporality of display. Although I agree with Fogu, one should not underestimate the influence on Italian culture of both the international avant-garde experiments (such as those of the Bauhaus and El Lissitzky) and functionalist architects, such as Le Corbusier. What is peculiar to the Italian situation is the fact that, after the war, those architects such as Albini, the BBPR studio and Carlo Scarpa, all involved in experimenting with exhibition design in the 1930s, worked on the refurbishment of fine art museums. On these occasions, the experience gained in commercial and political contexts helped them, on the one hand, to redirect the temporality of museum display (as inspired by Croce’s vision of history) and, on the other hand, to present works of art outside of the art historical narrative traditionally bound to the museum, by foregrounding the visitor’s encounter with the works of art through their personal and physical experience of the space.

Both of Pagano’s suggestions – the role of the architect in the exhibition making process and the relationship between exhibition design and the commercial sector – constitute two of the guiding principles for this dissertation in the following chapters,

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<sup>104</sup> Giuseppe Pagano, ‘Parliamo un pò di esposizioni’, English translation in Sergio Polano, *Mostrare*, p.543. The quote continues ‘[the exhibitory art] has certainly been of great help in such official events as the Monza Exhibitions and Milan Triennale, The Fascist Revolution Exhibition in Rome, the last Circo Massimo Exhibition, the Aeronautics Exhibition, the Leonardo da Vinci Exhibition, the Turin Fashion Show and the exceptionally successful exhibition held at the Milan Trade Fair.’

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p.543. At the end of his book, Fogu builds the argument against Stone mentioned at the beginning of this chapter by referring to this same passage from Pagano’s text. Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary*, p.186.

which address the establishment of the architect as an alternative figure to that of the art historian in the realm of fine art institutions, and the role of the commercial sector in the emergence in Italy of the thematic contemporary art exhibition, which ultimately led to the appearance of the curator *avant-la-lettre*.



Fig.23: *Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei*, Milan, 1941, exhibition designed by Franco Albini



Fig.24: *Mostra di Scipione e di disegni contemporanei*, Milan, 1941, exhibition designed by Franco Albini.