

Anthony WHITE

Italian Modern Art in the Age of Fascism

New York 2020

ISBN 978-0-367-19627-1, 263 pp.

The book by Australian historian Anthony White was published under the edition Routledge Research in Art and Politics and it focuses on the definition of the relation between modern art and the ruling regime, that is Fascism. In his study, however, the author does not explicitly focus on the culture policy of Fascism or on certain ideological dictation. On the contrary, he goes deeper into his research and tries to define relatedness of the aesthetic ideals and thinking of artists with the Fascist ideology in the given socio-political context of the time.

White's book examines the work of three modern artists, including Fortunato Depero, Scipione, and Mario Radice, who were working in Italy during the time of Benito Mussolini's rise and fall. Within two decades of Mussolini's rule, the regime and its ideology underwent variations thanks to the changes of both external and internal political climate, and artworks which responded to these stimuli were changing and evolving too. The main topics of the study, determined by its author, are: influence of the Return to

Order movement with its emphasis on the national traditions in which we can see the same ambition as in the Fascist ideology; religious policy of the regime reflected in the religious themes of the Italian modern painting; Fascist propaganda celebrating Italian war heroism and the art that was serving it. The author analyses and proves the above-mentioned issues based on a selected sample of artistic works by these three mentioned artists, that means the futurist Fortunato Depero, the expressionist Scipione and the geometric abstractionist Mario Radice. Each of these artists produced works that conformed to the socio-political climate of the years when they were created. At the same time – thanks to the trend established by post-war Return to Order – each of them reflected the heritage of the past in their pieces, far from aiming at a “rebirth” of a prior situation, but mostly held the idea of the differences or interconnection between history and present.

First of them, Fortunato Depero was chosen for a phase of '20s after

the March on Rome. The futurist artist from Rovereto in Trentino which was up to the end of World War I a part of Austria-Hungary. That is why participation on the war and irredentism were very personal for Depero and, in his works, he tried to prove the real “italianness” of Trentino’s inhabitants by studying local traditions. On the other side, his artworks were connecting traditional craft techniques originated from Austria and Bohemia, which he strove to put into a wider cultural framework of Italy. This was reflected in his “cloth paintings” from the early ‘20s. Technically based on the inlaid patchwork, “cloth paintings” united aesthetically futuristic ideals – in Depero’s case it meant “mechanical living beings” based on his costumes for Ballets Russes or occasional war motives – with ideals of the Return to Order. Thus, there were aesthetic parallels between his art and officially declared theories by the regime. In 1926 Mussolini characterized truly Fascist art as figurative, with clear outlines and solid volumes, which should match traditionalism just like the Return of Order. Depero appropriated textile production techniques and made frequent references to folk-art context, but still as part of the futurist practice which celebrated the mechanization characteristic of modernization. This approach resulted in a contrast of the new industrialized world of the 20th century against its primitive predecessors in such devices as the marionette

or mechanical toy. Thus, Depero united modernism and national traditions in his paintings and sculptural objects in the same way as Fascism was building modern Italy on the foundations of great Roman past.

Second of these painters in second part of the book, Gino Bonichi, known as Scipione, started his career after World War I as a neoclassicist figurative painter. His style changed dramatically in late ‘20s when he, together with Mario Mafai and Antoinette Raphael, founded the Roman School, a group of artists influenced by expressionism. During his short life – Scipione died of tuberculosis in 1933 at the age of 29 – he often faced strong criticism of his works. His work was controversial, because he relied on the expressionistic and surrealistic patterns to challenge a contemporary understanding of the way contemporary Italian art should relate to the past, which is known from Depero’s paintings and was even accepted by Fascism. In opposition to this way, Scipione’s troubled scenes of the urban landscape of Rome or religious apocalyptic paintings questioned a generally accepted thinking about the role of art and culture under Fascism. Scipione’s fantastic scenes in their expressive colour scheme of aggressively red and neutral tones combined in themselves surrealistic and mythological visions, spiritualism, and baroque patterns. Interpreting the works of Scipione from 1928–1933, which White chose for his thesis, the

author proves that Scipione's expressionist scenes put in neo-baroque scenery and full of hybrid creatures did not glorify historical tradition of the Italian culture nor even celebrate modern Fascist Italy but identified a recent past-made strange and alien situation made by the destructive changes wrought by Fascism. His works from the late '20s reacted among others on the radical urbanistic rebuilding of Rome initiated by Mussolini and accompanied by massive demolition of historical buildings.

Also, Scipione's religious visions reflected the relationship between past and modern reality and combined expressionism with motives from the Bible. They originated in the early '30s in a political climate developed after signing of Lateran pacts from tension caused by a dispute between Pope Pius XI and Mussolini about the competences of Catholic Action. Nevertheless, choosing of religious themes and spiritualistic decadent atmosphere of Scipione's pieces must also be ascribed to the artist's progressing disease and long curative stays in Alpin sanatoriums, which is not considered by the author. However, unlike Depero and Radice, Scipione counterposed the image of a corrupted Italian capital and society, which symbolize the deeper spiritual decline, that Fascism was not helping to resolve but was exacerbating it.

Under the influence of Return to Order, Mario Radice also studied the

old Masters of Trecento and Quattrocento, showing interest primarily in Piero della Francesca. Thanks to the Il Milione Gallery in Milano, Radice familiarized himself with abstract art in the '30s and begun to devote himself to geometric abstraction which, however, maintained a strong continuity with traditional Italian visual culture. In the chapter devoted to Radice, the author analyses not just the relation to historical tradition, but also to Fascist propaganda, using Radice's mural paintings as an example for his thesis. Radice was working with abstract panels which – supplemented by motifs of Fascist ideology – often made a sculptural decoration on ceremonially exhibitions held by the regime. Radice was thus involved in the official state propaganda and in celebrating Italian imperialistic victory in Ethiopia or heroism of Italian soldiers in the Spanish Civil War.

During the '30s Radice realized lots of his projects in cooperation with a group of Italian rationalist architects, among others, especially with Giuseppe Terragini. With him, Radice was working on interiors of the House of Fascism in Como. Decoration of this interior was made up from abstract panels too, but importance here was the choosing of materials like marble. Marble embodies certain grandeur worthy of Fascist nobility and a relationship with traditional art (not only) of Antiquity so important for Fascist ideals. In the meeting room,

the marble panels were even completed with a great photograph of Mussolini, which made an impression of Duce authoritatively guarding ongoing negotiations. By that, all Radice clearly glorified Fascist regime. Although the position of modernist movements in the second half of the '30s was not easy thanks to the influence of Nazism and the fit between Fascist ideology and abstraction was unstable, Radice proved that even abstract geometric works could be aligned with those ideologies of the Fascist movement which promoted the integration of the individual with society, the artwork with

its broader context, and the present with the past. Yet, at the end of '30s Radice and many others matched the aesthetic of their art with futurist ideas to settle the influence of the Nazis, because Marinetti was still able to defend futurism in this ideological battle.

The reviewed publication is remarkably interesting work and brilliant contribution showing ways how political events and ruling regimes did and do influence a fine art, even without being truly totalitarian in their cultural politics.

Zuzana Donátková