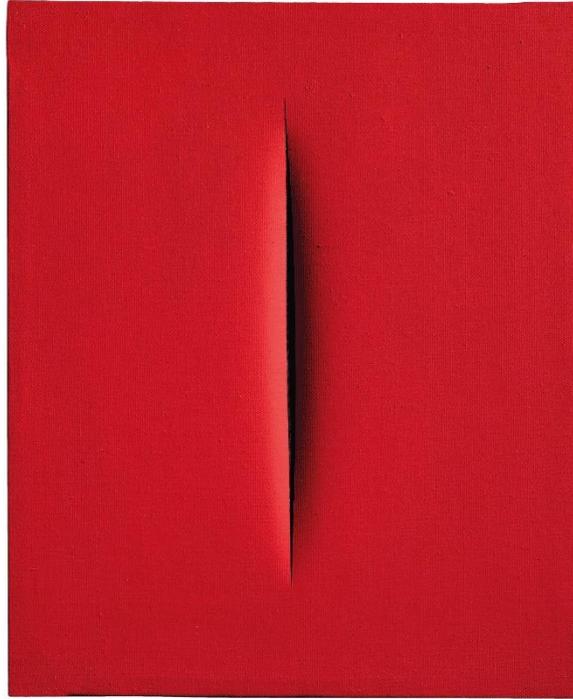


The Renaissance of Italian Art

Why La Belle Époque is coming of age again



Lucio Fontana, *Concetto Spaziale, Attesa* (1967). Courtesy Robilant + Voena

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The Venice Biennale—which opened to VIPs this week and opens to the public on Saturday—is an international, rather than strictly Italian, affair (there are just two Italian artists in Ralph Rugoff’s [central show](#) “May You Live in Interesting Times” until 24 November). From its first edition in 1895, the founding principle of the world’s first art biennial was clear: to place Italy at the heart of the international art world.

By the decades following the Second World War this dream was being realized. Italy’s economy and cultural scene was booming. Film-makers including Federico Fellini, based in Rome’s [Cinecittà](#) studios, fashion houses like Pucci, Valentino and Fendi, as well as designers such as Gio Ponti and Ettore Sottsass put Italy on the contemporary cultural map—as did its artists. “The unexpected Belle Époque”, writer [Italo Calvino called it](#) in 1961.

“The unexpected Belle Époque”

Scores of artists, including [Alberto Burri](#), [Pietro Consagra](#) and [Afro \(Basaldella\)](#), were showing in Europe and the US. Thanks to the biennale, which had a bustling sales office until 1968, they had the added boost of the world’s biggest critical and commercial art platform. Even America, the dominant economic and cultural power (which was helping to fund Italy’s economic revival through the Marshall Plan) was charmed.

This was the Italy of *Roman Holiday* (1953) and *La Dolce Vita* (1960). [Peggy Guggenheim](#) settled in Venice in 1949. Philip Guston, Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg worked in Rome. Painter [Piero Dorazio](#) recalled that “Americans were no longer going to Paris. In the 1950s, Rome was full of artists”.

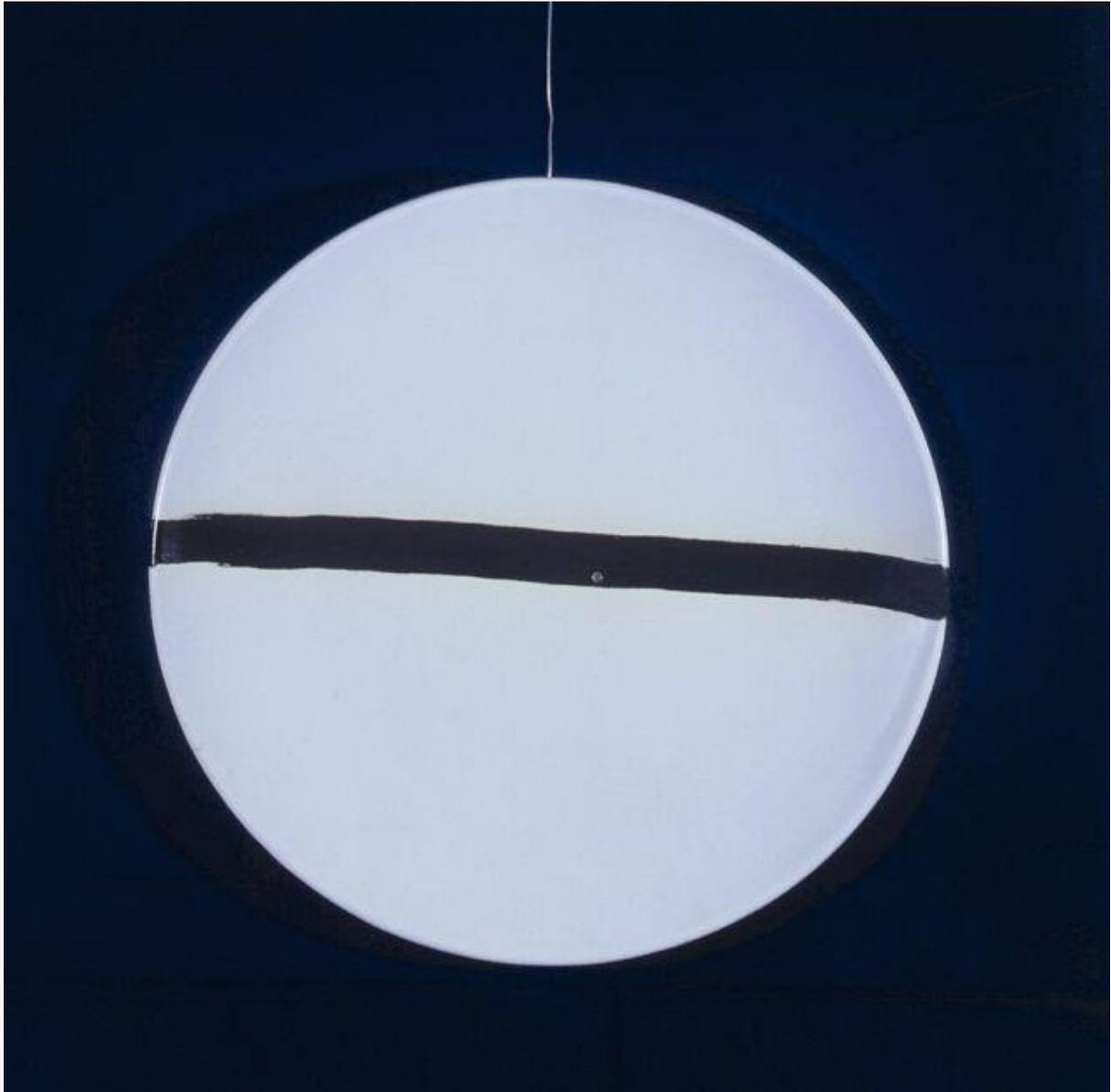
Today, though, many of these artists are relatively obscure. In this article we tell you which you need to know about and explain why they were overshadowed by their mostly American contemporaries.

A complex picture

The immediate post-war Italian art scene was complicated. “It’s a story of a lot of individuals,” says Daniella Luxembourg, co-founder of [Luxembourg & Dayan](#) gallery, and a specialist in this period. “Even when they called themselves movements, they didn’t think like that and many had nothing to do with any of the others.”

The strong regional identities of most Italians at that time were another factor, says Luca Massimo Barbero, the Director of Venice’s [Cini Foundation](#) and Associate Curator of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. “In 1961, the Italian state was just 100 years old,” he says. “It’s not just north and south, it’s [Emilio Vedova](#) in Venice, Burri in Rome, [Fontana](#) in Milan—cities have their own personalities,” he says. To confuse matters further, artists often associated with one group shifted to another as their work changed—sometimes radically.

There are also individual reasons the artists’ international reputations dwindled. Burri founded his own museum in 1978 in his home town of Città di Castello to house his own work—thus removing many of the best pieces from international circulation. Paolo Scheggi and Piero Manzoni both died young, which [often impacts long-term reputation](#). [Mimmo Rotella](#)’s lifestyle was louche (Playboy magazine called him “erotically advanced” and he spent five months in prison on drugs charges). [Mario Schifano](#) had another career as a filmmaker and some-time rock star.



Pietro Manzoni, *Linea (Line)* (1961). © Fondazione Piero Manzoni, Milano. Courtesy of the Foundation and Hauser & Wirth

But there are some common factors. As today, Italy had a strong domestic market—private collectors included the powerful Agnelli family and industrialist Gianni Mattioli (part of whose collection was famously barred from export by the Italian government in 1973). In addition to the interest of other European collectors—and the raft of new post-war museums of contemporary art being built across the continent—“You didn’t have to go to the US to have success and a market,” Barbero says.

A lack of interest by the government, academics and museum staff (“who didn’t believe enough in Italian contemporary art”, according to Barbero) also hindered the spread of the art beyond Italy. “We didn’t translate important texts in English, we didn’t promote encyclopedic shows abroad.”

Meanwhile, by the 1960s, American artists were in the ascendant: [Jackson Pollock](#), [Mark Rothko](#), [Andy Warhol](#), [Donald Judd](#) and [Rauschenberg](#) were some of the artists whose work was filling museums from Düsseldorf to Denver. “Italy suffered the same problem as other European post-war movements,” Luxembourg says. “It’s to do with the social and political effects of the Second World War, perceptions of what is important and the fact that the art market moved to America.”

Then, in 1968—at the height of anti-capitalist strikes and riots across Europe, and under pressure from radical students and artists in Italy—the Venice Biennale closed its sales office. “After Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion [for painting in 1964], the perspective changed,” Barbero says. “Little by little, overseas collectors [and museums] decided that contemporaneity was American.”

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Another important factor, says Michele Casamonti, co-director of the London, Paris, Italian and Swiss-based [Tornabuoni Art](#) (and son of the influential collector-dealer Roberto Casamonti), is that the government’s strict heritage export laws misunderstood contemporary art. “Italy is the only country in the world where the state can block the export of a work, if it is of exceptional quality, without any obligation to buy the work [for a museum, as in France and the UK],” he says. “It’s right to protect the heritage, but it’s not the same for Baroque painting, which needs to be seen in its original context—for example, a church. Post-war Italian art needs to be shown in international collections, in the context of the other great artists of the 20th-century.”

Recently though, in August 2017, the Italian government made the decision to relax its stringent art export regulations, only applying the rules now to works by dead artists created 70 or more years ago (rather than the previous 50—though not the 100 that auctioneers and dealers had lobbied for). This could liberalize the supply of work by post-war artists: according to a report published by market research group [ArtTactic](#) last month, international sales of Italian art at Sotheby’s, Christie’s and Phillips increased 5.6% to \$183.9m in 2018, up from \$174m in 2017—despite fewer lots being offered.

Renewed interest

The curatorial lack of attention spanned decades and only began to change recently: the Guggenheim’s 2015-16 “[Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting](#)” was the first institutional show of his work in New York in more than 35 years, while the Met Breuer’s “[Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold](#)”, which finished in April, was the first for 40. The first major show in Los

Angeles for 20 years of Piero Manzoni was organized by [Hauser & Wirth](#), a commercial gallery while a comprehensive exhibition of his work was organized at [Gagosian](#) by the curator Germano Celant [in January this year](#).



Alberto Burri, *Cretto Nero e Oro* (1994). Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini. Collezione Burri

In March, Bernard Blistène, the director of the [Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris](#), said that he is working on a Burri show, the first monograph of a post-war Italian artist in the French institution's history. Nonetheless, Tim Marlow, the Artistic Director of [London's Royal Academy](#), says: "Not so long ago, I mentioned Burri to two British curators, who have gone on to be directors of distinguished institutions, and they had no idea what I was talking about."

Luxembourg says: "Great exhibitions, especially in museums, really make a difference. But they are only as good as the willingness of the crowd to accept them. To capture the zeitgeist, you need a great curator and public with the thirst to see the show." Now, finally, it appears as though both museums and the market are primed for a reassessment of the early Italian post-war period.

The Major Movements

Spazialismo

Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) is now the most famous of the post-war artists. A major survey of his work, which recently closed at the Met Breuer in New York (and is traveling to the Guggenheim Bilbao (17 May-29 September)), was the first major survey in four decades but found mixed reviews. Critics felt its rather academic curatorial approach made the

groundbreaking nature of the work—and its passion—appear somewhat rigid, stifling its impact.



Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept, Expectation (Concetto Spaziale, Attesa)*(1959). Collezione Prada, Milan. Courtesy Robilant + Voena
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019

A radical pioneer, Fontana experimented with ceramics, architectural environments, and with punching and slashing holes in paintings and sculptures. Revered now, he was initially considered “too revolutionary and conceptual; too complex” in both Italy and America, Barbero says.

Fontana launched the Spazialismo movement in 1947, which wanted artists to embrace science and technology, and exhibited at the Italian Art Informel exhibitions in the 1950s. Since the 1990s his market—particularly for the “Concetto Spaziale, La Fine Di Dio” (oval, punched) and “Attese” (slashed) canvases—has risen sharply. In 2015 a 1964 *Fino Di Dio* made \$29.2m at Christie’s in New York, while a 1965 *Attese* made \$16.4m the same year (est \$15m-\$20m) at Sotheby’s.

The “Fontana effect” is also evident in the influence he exerted on many younger (and lesser) artists, and the appreciation of their work. For instance, prices for the architectural, shaped canvases of Scheggi and Agostino Bonalumi—both regular visitors to Fontana’s Milan studio—have risen notably in recent years. Bonalumi’s *Bianco* (1966) made £626,000 (\$1m) at Sotheby’s London in 2014 (est £300,000-£400,000), while a €1.6m (\$1.8m) record was set for Scheggi’s *Intersuperficie Curva Bianca*(1969) at Sotheby’s Milan in 2015 (est. €400,000-€600,000). Fontana was also a major influence on the Minimalist and kinetic groups Gruppo T and Gruppo N, including artists such as Gianni Colombo and Alberto Biasi.

Art Informel

Visitors to Venice this summer should take in the major museum survey of Burri at the Cini Foundation (“Burri la pittura, irriducibile presenza”, until 28 July), curated by Bruno Corà of the Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri—the museum founded by the artist—and sponsored by Tornabuoni Art.

The Cini Foundation’s Luca Massimo Barbero says the artist “was much more famous in the US than Fontana in the 1950s”. Nonetheless, Burri slipped from view and has been little understood, especially in the US, until the excellent Guggenheim exhibition in 2015-16. Now, Europeans will get the chance to see his work back in his native Italy.

Burri was a prolific artist who experimented with non-traditional materials: sacks, tar, burnt plastic and wood, and the industrial insulating board Celotex. Early on he was associated with Art Informel, a term created by the French critic Michel Tapié, linking artists including Willem de Kooning, Jean Dubuffet and Pierre Soulages.

“They were all searching for a new image of ‘informel!’”

In Italy, Informel took its own divergent forms. Burri’s friend, Ettore Colla made works of iron referencing locks and traps. In Venice, Afro and Emilio Vedova made expressive paintings. Both of these artists are beginning to find renewed interest: Afro had a show at London’s Tornabuoni gallery last October, while the German painter Georg Baselitz is curating an exhibition of Vedova’s work at the late artist’s foundation during this year’s Venice Biennale, “Emilio Vedova di/by Georg Baselitz” until 11 November. Nonetheless, says Allan Schwartzman, co-founder of Art Agency Partners, “these artists will likely always be appreciated more with the regional context of postwar Italian art than of the broader sweep of important postwar art.”

“Burri, Consagra, Afro, Vedova, Fontana—they were all searching for a new image of ‘informel’,” Barbero says. “But put them in a room together and it’s hard to see a (common) project.”

Burri’s market has grown since 2009, and, [says it is destined to rise](#) still further, Schwartzman says—depending on supply. Burri remains a crucial figure for the late 1960s-1970s Arte Povera artists, including Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz.

Forma 1



Pietro Consagra, *Ferro Transparente Bianco V* (1966). Courtesy of Robilant+Voena

Pietro Consagra (1920-2005) was known for his “two-dimensional sculptures”—flat pieces of metal arranged into rhythmic, standing forms. He was a founding member of the Forma 1 group in 1946-47—an aesthetically disparate group of Marxist-leaning, non-figurative artists including Piero Dorazio and Carla Accardi, united by their formal admiration for Futurism and Paris-based artists Brancusi, Picasso and Giacometti.

Consagra initially worked in muscular materials like bronze, iron and charred-edge wood, reminiscent of Burri. But—inspired by Rauschenberg’s 1964 Venice Biennale exhibition—he later embraced Pop-inspired, candy-colored cut-out iron sheets that appear to “dance” in the air. Consagra showed regularly in New York throughout the 1950s and 1960s: works were bought by the Museum of Modern Art and Guggenheim museums. In subsequent years, however, his solo exhibitions were almost all in Italy. “Consagra played a key role in post-war Italian sculpture,” says Benedict Tomlinson, a Director of European gallery Robilant + Voena, which staged a show in London last year (“Pietro Consagra: Frontal Sculpture 1947-1967”). “And, like Fontana’s ceramic sculptures, his work is still comparatively affordable.” Last year, *Ferro trasparente bianco V* (1966), made £152,500 (\$201,960), almost three times its upper estimate, at Phillips London.

Monochrome and Minimalism

Piero Manzoni (1933-1963) has high name recognition, but only had his first New York show in 2009, organized by the famous Italian curator Germano Celant at Gagosian Gallery. The New York Times critic Holland Cotter wrote that “in the US... Manzoni’s work has been a mystery, fuzzily grasped and seldom seen”.

Despite his early death, Manzoni’s market continues to rise: in 2018 he was the third top-selling Italian artist by value at auction (behind Fontana and Rudolf Stingel). While students at art schools like his conceptual jokes (such as the *Socle du Monde* (1961) and “Merda d’Artista” (1961), 90 separate cans supposedly of “artist’s shit”, Manzoni was a major force in monochrome and Minimalism. In 1959 he set up the gallery and journal *Azimut/h*, with his close collaborator Enrico Castellani.



Piero Manzoni executing *Linea lunga 7.200 metri (Line 7200 Meters Long)*, (1960). Photo: Helene Bagger

Manzoni was part of the Düsseldorf-based Zero group, as were fellow Italians Fontana, Colombo, Dadamaino (Edwarda Emilia Maino), Dorazio and Francesco Lo Savio. All these artists, and Manzoni, were included in the Guggenheim New York's "ZERO: Countdown to Tomorrow, 1950s-60s" (2014-2015).

Prior to that, market attention had been focused on the group following the 2010 "Zero" sale of works from the prestigious Lenz Schönberg Collection at Sotheby's London—the auction was a great success, despite this being a slightly wobbly moment for the general art market (of the 47 lots, 46 sold, many for prices four or five times their estimates, for a total of £23m (\$36.4million) against an estimate in excess of £11.5m).

Since then, there have been more notable records, including the \$6m spent on one of Castellani's white shaped canvases, *Superficie Bianca* (1967) at Sotheby's in London in 2014—almost three times its high estimate. "The widening of interest for Zero builds upon the solidity and history of the market for Fontana and Manzoni," Schwartzman says.

Italian Pop

Domenico "Mimmo" Rotella (1918-2006) "remains the most significant un-rediscovered, and undervalued Italian artist of this period", says Schwartzman. After a creative crisis in the early 1950s, Rotella began to experiment in Rome, tearing down posters from its pock-marked walls to make layered "décollages". While Italian critics initially related him to Art Informel, he found much closer allegiance with the Nouveau Réalisme of Yves Klein and fellow poster-collagist, the French artist Raymond Hains. One of the challenges of the Rotella market is the proliferation of fakes and pre-dated works, but the market and scholarship should be able to sort through.

"Rotella remains the most undervalued Italian artist of this period"

In 1961 and 1962 Rotella was shown in "[The Art of Assemblage](#)" at MoMa in New York, and "[New Realists](#)" at the Sidney Janis Gallery. He later became associated with what Barbero calls "Italian Imagists" (a Roman counter to Pop). Founded by Mario Schifano (1934-1998), [La Scuola di Piazza del Popolo](#) included artists Tano Festa, Franco Angeli and Mario Ceroli, as well as Pino Pascali of the later Arte Povera group (this article has not focused on the latter group, but it is worth noting that despite their broader name recognition, the scholarship and markets for giants such as Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Kounellis, and Anselmo are ripe for reevaluation. Even with the great Boetti [retrospective at the Tate](#) in

2012 and the [Met's 2017 Marisa Merz retrospective](#), most Arte Povera remains fairly invisible.)

“Schifano comes out of the language of Pop and Minimalism, and is very significant and under-appreciated outside of Italy—and has been for many decades,” Schwartzman says. “His work relates to the problem of painting. When he paints a Coca-Cola label in the early 1960s it has a different meaning to Warhol doing it; it’s closer to the Capitalist Realist work of artists such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter.”

Read the article here: <https://www.artagencypartners.com/jane-italian-art/>