

# The Italians are coming – in record numbers

## London auctions

Colin Gleadell

The London art market is gearing up for the biggest sales of post-Second World War Italian art it has ever seen. In addition to the Italian art auctions that will be held during the Frieze art fairs in two weeks' time, and which are expected to bring in a record £50 million, there are at least half a dozen high-quality selling exhibitions at different galleries in central London or in the Frieze Masters fair.

London's 20th-century Italian art auctions began in October 1999, and have grown from takings of £10.4 million in 2002 to £42 million last year. What with Christie's producing a record £26.8 million Italian art sale last October, and then £38.4 million for a collection of Arte Povera in February, dealers have recognised that London is the place to show and sell the post-war Italian avant garde that has been driving the market. Even artist/collectors such as Marc Quinn, who is selling a £1 million-plus embroidered map of the world by Alighiero Boetti at Christie's, have got the message.

Last week, the Pace Gallery set the ball rolling with a mini retrospective devoted to the Arte Povera artist Mario Merz, who died in 2003. Pace had been an active bidder for Merz at the last Christie's sale, where a spiral sculpture, included in the exhibition, sold for £183,000. More expensive will be the large installations. Merz's most recognisable works are igloos made from industrial materials, and a triple igloo made of glass, stone and clay

being sold by the Merz Foundation will be priced above the £1.1 million auction record for the artist.

Tomorrow, Robilant & Voena in Mayfair opens an exhibition for Paolo Scheggi, who died in 1971 aged just 31, and has recently been rediscovered by the market. Scheggi practised what has been called "spatialism"; his monochrome paintings consisted of three superimposed, stretched canvases with layered openings creating a sense of receding space.

Scheggi's first painting at auction in London sold last year for £218,000 against a £20,000 estimate. In May this year, that record was surpassed when another of his works sold at the Dorotheum auction room in Vienna for a quadruple-estimate 573,000 euros (£484,000). Gallery partner Marco Voena says European artists are still undervalued compared with their American contemporaries.

The spatialism theme continues at New York's Dominique Levy gallery, which opens in London in Old Bond Street on October 13 with an exhibition that places the Italian Enrico Castellani in an international context with Americans Frank Stella and Donald Judd, who saw Castellani as "the father of minimalism". Castellani's monochrome paintings project outwards like rows of tents propped up by nails interspersed behind the canvas. Prices for these works reached a record £1.8 million last year.

Arte Povera is again to the fore with an exhibition of monochrome works by Alighiero Boetti at the Luxembourg and Dayan gallery in Savile Row, which has assembled a complete set of painted panels that Boetti made, parodying commodity fetishism in Sixties Italy with special reference to the motorcycle companies Gilera and



Paolo Scheggi's 'Zone riflesse': Scheggi died in 1971 aged 31 but has recently been rediscovered

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Dealers know that London is the place to show and sell post-war Italian avant garde

Guzzi. One pair of these panels sold for a record £1.7 million in February, and examples in this show will be priced up to £2.2 million.

At Frieze Masters, which opens on October 14, London dealer Ben Brown will present the first exhibition devoted to Boetti's works on paper. Priced between £6,000 and £1.6 million, they range from studies to finished works. Also at Frieze Masters, Marian Goodman is mounting a display of drawings and major sculptures by three leading exponents of Arte Povera, Giovanni Anselmo, Giulio Paolini and Giuseppe Penone.

That the London market is much stronger than in Italy is indicated by the opening in Mayfair of the Mazzoleni Gallery from Turin, which has been dealing in modern Italian art since the Sixties. Its first exhibition will comprise works by market leaders Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Alberto Burri, all of whom can command prices of several million pounds, as well as the new contenders, Castellani and Scheggi. In true patriotic style, the works have been selected on the basis of their overriding colours – red, white or green – the colours of the Italian flag.