

## **Exhibiting an Unapologetic Fascist: Mario Sironi**

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*"Non si può governare ignorando l'arte a gli artisti. L'arte è una manifestazione essenziale dello spirito umano. In un paese come l'Italia sarebbe folle il governo che si disinteressasse dell'arte e degli artisti."*<sup>1</sup>

TIMOTHY LUKE WRITES in his testament to social theory, *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*, that all art indicates at the very least a sense of the political and cultural temperature of the environment in which it was created, once we as critics step away from aesthetic discourse and those methodologies reliant on formalist interpretations.<sup>2</sup> A further question for Luke's consideration is whether a museum-going viewer receives a work's political or cultural messages in addition to the aesthetical regardless of the institutional context in which the artwork hangs, or if viewers can only consider those messages when a piece is presented within its proper historical context. The answer to that question holds especially potent meaning in the case of a contemporary display of artwork produced during difficult periods of history such as the Fascist era in Italy. What is the purpose for a museum to display relevance today as his artwork recently went on display in two, very different local and national art museum exhibitions within the Italian capital. *Roma Anni Trenta. La*

Fascist era art today and what connotations do those displays inspire? Is it to prevent the public from forgetting the existence of the Fascist regime from 1922 to 1943? Is it to acknowledge and celebrate the overwhelming Italian artistic invention during that period? Can and should the two be separated?

Mario Sironi is internationally acknowledged as one of the most prolific painters of early twentieth-century Italy and, depending on the critic or historian's position, that is either in spite of or because, a significant number of his works typified the ideals or rhetoric of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. Unlike any other artist of his time, Sironi actively produced work before, during and after the Italian Fascist state exploring multiple stylistic modes throughout that period (Milan Futurism, the Novecento movement, Metaphysical art) to leave behind an incredibly diverse body of work for deeper investigation. As one of the artists most often referenced within the studies of art under Fascism in Italy, does Sironi's work maintain an inherent connection to Fascist ideals/rhetoric no matter its environment or method of display? On the other hand, once removed from any Fascist context, can his work be appreciated solely for its artistic merit? Should it be?

These questions hold particular

*Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte (1931 - 1935 - 1939)* by La Galleria d'Arte Moderna (GAM) in partnership with the *Fondazione La Quadrennale di Roma*

and *Istituto LUCE-Cinecittà*,<sup>3</sup> was an exhibition planned to celebrate the success of the first three editions of the Quadriennali as a prequel to the October 2016 opening of the 16th Roman Art Quadrennial at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni to create "*un ideale passaggio di testimone tra passato e presente*."<sup>4</sup> Overlapping that exhibition, the recently reinaugurated La Galleria Nazionale (GN)'s,<sup>5</sup> with a name streamlined to fit its new arrangement and emboldened by a newly granted sense of autonomy from governmental powers, opened its latest composition titled *Time is Out of Joint*. This exhibition underlined the rejuvenated collection's departure from the "cage of art historical chronology" as the museum's new director, Cristiana Collu, disregards context in her curatorial approach, instead favoring a more "genuine" experience of the museum's permanent collection contingent on passion and individual interactions.

#### THE FASCIST REGIME ON ART

Born from a period of legislative ineffectiveness and post-war turmoil following the unification of Italy in 1861 and World War I, the Fascist Italian state took root when Benito Mussolini, the newly appointed Prime Minister, marched on Rome in 1922 before declaring his dictatorship in 1925. Once Mussolini had established the Fascist state, the following decade and a half coalesced into a period of intense urban renewal and industrial development complemented by a renewed official interest in commandeering the imperial legacies of Roman antiquity

through heightened archeological efforts. These simultaneous campaigns of modernization and preservation necessitated extensive state reliance on the ability of the arts to shape the new Italian culture: a Fascist, Italian culture.

*"I declare that it is far from my idea to encourage anything like an art of the State. Art belongs to the domain of the individual. The State has only one duty: not to undermine art, to provide humane conditions for the artists, and to encourage them from the artistic and national point of view."*<sup>6</sup>

This quote translated from Benito Mussolini's speech inaugurating the exhibition *Six Painters of the Novecento*<sup>7</sup> – of which Sironi was one – in 1923 explicates the mentality that permeated the duration of Fascist totalitarianism: allow artists to flourish and develop independently but "encourage" them through syndicate- or regime-organized commissions, competitions, and exhibitions to communicate Fascist nationalist values. These syndicates were professional organizations, something akin to what might be recognized as a worker's union today, but they operated by providing material and prominently monetary assistance to those artists that participated in official regime culture. Focusing their efforts on administrative rather than stylistic control over artists, the regime left an opening for conversation and criticism regarding these

movements to revolve around style rather than content or use.

With Mussolini actively refraining from proclaiming any single movement *the* art of the state, competition blossomed between two prominent, ideologically opposed movements both chasing the acclaim of the state: the classical Novecento, founded by Margherita Sarfatti—his mistress of 20 years, and the modern Second Futurists, formed in Milan—the birthplace of the Fascist Party. Fostering this growth and competition between multiple artistic styles allowed Mussolini to harness a combination of neoclassical and modernist principles and direct the momentum of a variety of movements into furthering the regime's cultural reach and consolidating his power. This plurality delineates the Fascist contrast to other totalitarian regimes that limited their ability to produce widespread cultural consensus by excluding certain styles in favor of a specific art of the state.<sup>8</sup> This produced a unique dilemma for the artists of the period and the critics both then and now as the Fascist regime molded their administration to be, as Marla Stone asserts, "a well-funded and stylistically tolerant patron who was also a repressive authoritarian dictatorship."<sup>9</sup> Art would seem to propose Fascist ideology following the artist's complex decision to participate in some form with the monetary, moral, or supportive role played by the state, thus not necessarily stemming from a genuine belief in the notion of Fascism itself.<sup>10</sup>

As World War II approached in the mid-1930s, a greater militaristic and imperial tone came to the fore as Mussolini

developed a close relationship with Hitler and invaded Ethiopia, officially declaring the new Italian empire in 1936. Benito Mussolini approached the concept of public exhibitions as an effective means of promoting the glories of Fascism on both a domestic and an international stage. These "performances" suggest that Mussolini or someone of significance within the Fascist party knew that public exhibitions could be optimal vehicles for propaganda – for presenting selected representations of social and political memory of a given time period.<sup>11</sup> The Fascist regime sought to influence the collective memory of 1930s Rome by using a combination of subtle and overt rhetoric presented as "images and figures, topics and schemes" within the time's broad spectrum of artistic styles and by sponsoring annual competitions to celebrate such works and hosting exhibitions like the 1933 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*<sup>12</sup> for which Sironi designed the promotional material and a series of rooms including the Gallery of the Fasci (Figure 1) to illustrate the eminent stature of the regime and its nationalistic view of Italian pride.<sup>13</sup>



1. "Gallery of the Fasci" designed by Mario Sironi



**2. A promotional illustration  
Both for *La Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*,  
in *Palazzo delle Esposizioni*, Rome 1933.  
Source: Istituto LUCE archives.**

The dictatorship founded by Mussolini was arguably the most outwardly receptive patron to the growth of Italian art movements by the 1930s fashioning itself "as a benevolent patron with an open purse" with the ulterior motive of encouraging artist participation to disseminate and legitimize official culture.<sup>14</sup> This method of strategic, often financial, incentives was especially utilized by Cipriano Efisio Oppo, artist and director of the *Sindacato Artistico*, at exhibitions like the Venice Biennale and Roman Quadriennali<sup>15</sup> to draw in increasingly greater numbers of artists with the incentives of regime-funded awards and purchases.<sup>16</sup> Emphasizing his interest in engendering a cultural consensus that would champion a unified Italy under the Fascist party, Mussolini categorized the Roman Quadriennali in 1931 as the first national exhibition inclusively representing the state of Italian art declaring, "There is everyone: from old timers to the very young, and also unknown [artists]."<sup>17</sup> As Governor of Rome, C. E. Oppo instituted the Roman Quadriennali in 1927 to become Italy's

premier national exhibition of Italian art and opened participation as a means of reigning in the plurality of flourishing arts movements in Italy under their new and benevolent patron – the Fascist government. In essence, he viewed the widely encouraged and accepted Quadriennali as a tool of the Fascist system for arts patronage, a "simultaneous appropriation and reconstruction of cultural authority..."<sup>18</sup>

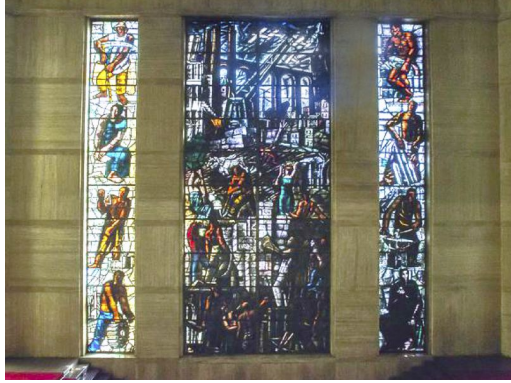
Are the Fascist, Anti-Fascist or apolitical themes that were so present within the stunning artwork of the Novecento, Second Futurist, Metaphysical and other artistic movements during the regime, still intrinsic to those works today? Alternatively, did that visual rhetoric lose its potency when Fascism fell from power? Mussolini strategically garnered cultural support for Fascism by placing the regime in a financial and political position of power over the multitude of artistic movements. By acting in collusion rather than opposition to these movements he effectively linked Fascist funds to the production and/or purchase of these works, but in doing so did he also permanently link their content to the legacy of the Fascist regime? Even if they do not explicitly depict Fascist rhetoric or document a Fascist existence?

**MARIO SIRONI: THE UNAPOLOGETIC FASCIST**

*"...All roads led to the formidable figure of Mario Sironi – formidable because of sheer size of his collective work and because of the pervasive discomfort surrounding the obvious fact that he was a Fascist."<sup>19</sup>*

Thirty-seven years old when Mussolini declared himself dictator of Italy and often referred to by critics as the "dramatic protagonist" of that artistic period, Mario Sironi continues to be one of the artists most prominently haunted by Mussolini's legacy as illustrated by the above quote from Emily Braun's book *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics Under Fascism*.<sup>20</sup> With paintings present in both of the exhibitions that comprise the focus of this investigation, the fact that Sironi produced work during all and within a number of the major artistic movements of the period and that he enthusiastically supported the Fascist regime make him the ideal vehicle through which to investigate the current conversation engendered by artwork born from Fascist ideology and political circumstance. As mentioned, he experimented with the active and modern forms of the first Futurist movement in the earliest years of the 20th century only to become the premier name associated with the Novecento movement's rebirth of classicism and antiquity in the 1920s which saw the development of Sironi's figures into stalwart, statuesque forms – grounded to the earth and crafted with a sense of timelessness. For a shorter period in the 20s he also explored the disorienting forms of Metaphysical painting associating with the likes of Giorgio De Chirico, who strove to find an apolitical viewpoint within his works utilizing mannequins and disjointed objects to produce unsettling compositions.

Ultimately, however, Sironi returned to the figures with an air of antiquity quintessential to the Novecento before abandoning the painted canvas for what he believed to be the true calling of his hand as stated in *"Pittura murale"* (1932) and his *"Manifesto della Pittura murale"* (1933) urging artists to turn away from the individualistic nature of small scale artwork in favor of public murals created with collectivity in mind. This push for a change in scale and medium was not purely about aesthetic but socially motivated as Sironi strove to craft a direct link between the educational and collective character of the regime and that of the public viewing monumental works. Sironi chose to create his mural works using the difficult and highly respected method of fresco painting, examples of which the Italian people would associate with the decorated walls of elaborate spaces from the Romans in antiquity to the masters of the Renaissance. He elevated fresco as the ideal medium to embody and communicate the spirit of Fascism since working with fresco would follow the Fascist party line of taking something ancient and imbuing it with a new sense of purpose.<sup>21</sup> During this effort he created works like the *La Carta del Lavoro* (Figure 3) for the Ministero delle Corporazioni (Now Ministry of Economic Progress) in the Palazzo dell'Industria and *L'Italia Fra le Arti e le Scienze* (Figure 4) in Magna Hall of l'Università degli Studi di Roma, or "La Sapienza", both in Rome and both communicating tenants of Fascist ideology as conceived by Mussolini and interpreted by Sironi.



3. Mario Sironi, *La Carta del Lavoro*, 1931-32



4. Mario Sironi, *L'Italia tra le Arti e le Scienze*, 1935

Here we can begin to understand the complexity of Mario Sironi's position at the time as both his fellow artists and officials of the time agreed upon his mastery of the painted image. Even so, he drew criticism from the anti-fascists within his peers for being too supportive of the government by completing hundreds of illustrations satirizing foreign governments and ridiculing political parties for "*Il Popolo d'Italia*" (Figure 5), the official newspaper of the Fascist regime, and by avidly participating in Regime-organized shows like the aforementioned Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Regime officials, however, also found room to criticize Sironi as not being Fascist enough with paintings whose meaning was too opaque for their liking and needed to display clearer rhetoric for public consumption.



5. Mario Sironi, *Particolare di Abbonamento annuo L 75*, from *Mario Sironi e le illustrazioni per il "Popolo d'Italia" 1921-1940* at Villa Torlonia, October 24, 2015 - January 10, 2016.

These criticisms gave way with the fall of Fascism in 1944 and for years the prolific work of Mario Sironi would go undiscussed – only mentioned in whispers and even then only in a tone of disdain as he experienced a degree of academic *Damnatio Memoriae* for his role in shaping regime ideology and public perception through his artwork.<sup>23</sup> Sironi was far from the only artist during this period to experience a certain unfavorable view by critics and art historians in retrospect; they did not recognize the merit of F. T. Marinetti and his Futurist movement until decades after the regime's fall.<sup>24</sup> Outside of the occasional mention within exhibitions on the Novecento movement during the 1960's-70's, his prowess as a painter was not brought substantially back into the realm of academic discourse again until the late 1980's, which spurred numerous rereadings of his work, centered around a number of retrospective exhibitions attempting to



correct decades of unacknowledged skill. Yet, a number of these early rereadings display a certain discomfort on the part of the critic in their approach to the Fascist content of his works and many of these writers settle that discomfort by focusing on the dark nature of his later landscapes and the seeming existential turbulence they expertly depict, attributing this to his internal crisis as a Fascist persisting past the fall of the regime.<sup>25</sup> It is not until the research of Emily Braun and Elena Pontiggia, published in 2000 and 2015 respectively, that Mario Sironi's whole, artistic and social mind begins to be uncovered and appreciated in biographical studies delving into his personal life and political relationships to contextualize the half-century he was actively producing work.

#### EXHIBITING "FASCIST" ARTWORK TODAY

*"That which was does not interest because it was, but because in a sense it still is."<sup>26</sup>*

Museums exist in part to inform, remind, and broaden the minds of their visitors and through that existence, they have a central role in the formation of society's collective memory: what we remember and how we remember it. Yet, a question that rarely receives a worthy answer is: why do we remember certain pieces of our past and not others? What are the ramifications of exhibiting selective chunks of history? Who holds the power to determine what history is exhibited and what

is forgotten – the curator, the patron or the artist? Keeping these questions in mind, the following sections will examine the paintings by Mario Sironi presented in two Roman exhibitions: one, a retrospective at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna on the three *Quadriennali d'Arte* held in the 1930's, and the other, a new hanging of the modern art collection from all periods in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna and how the different curatorial choices made in these exhibitions influence the public reception of his artwork to perpetuate the ambivalence modern Italian society holds towards the Fascist era in Italy and its products.<sup>27/28</sup>



#### **6. Exhibition postcard for Roma Anni Trenta. La Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte (1931 - 1935 - 1939)**

**Source: Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna**

The Municipal Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art originated in 1883 as a "civic" or "citizen's collection" but by

1925, once the collection numbered near 200 works, it took the official name of Galleria d'Arte Moderna and its existence became progressively complex. Mussolini appropriated the gallery's "goal to document Rome's artistic environment in all its aspects" to further his nationalist cultural vision and it was consequently renamed Galleria Mussolini in 1931 as its collection grew exponentially with acquisitions from the newly created Roman Quadriennali.<sup>29</sup> Even though the significance of the institution and its collection did not diminish, the museum was suppressed in 1938 until partial repatriation of its collection after World War II in 1949. The collection would spend the next half century shifting between temporary homes and storage before 2011 when it settled in a former *Carmelitane Scalze* convent on Via Crispi and became what is now known colloquially as the GAM, a part of the network of museums under the direction of the Rome City Council: the *Musei in Comune*.<sup>30</sup> The well-known *La Famiglia del Pastore* (Figure 7) painted by Sironi in 1927-28 was the only painting by his hand on display in the GAM's recent exhibition, *Roma Anni Trenta. La Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte (1931 - 1935 - 1939)*, and curators selected the work purchased from the 1931 *Quadriennali* to be the widely-circulated publicity image (Figure 6) for the show.



**7. Mario Sironi, *La Famiglia del Pastore*, 1926-27**

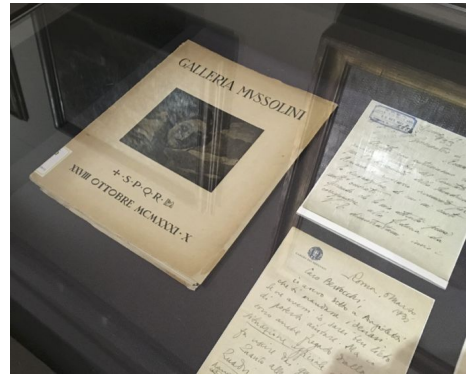
At the time of *La Famiglia del Pastore*'s creation, Mussolini was in the early years of his renewed cultural and urban initiative appealing to both the ancient rural traditions of Italy and the burgeoning seeds of industrialism to give root to a public consensus on Fascism. The public reception of this work in its own time would have associated the painting with Margherita Sarfatti's growing Novecento movement and, within the context of the Fascist state, would have recognized the subtly depicted Fascist environment. It encapsulates the regime's focus on a rebirth of antiquity as evidenced by what appears to be a segment of Roman aqueducts in the background between the figures and the simple nature of their dwellings in an undeveloped landscape. The regime's rhetorical emphasis on family and labor is also present as the father seems to have paused while going to or coming in from his occupation to gaze upon his wife, the mother of his child, as she fulfills her role of birthing and raising a child to become a participating Fascist clothed in a deep blue as a potential allusion to earlier



portrayals of the ultimate mother: The Virgin Mary.<sup>31</sup>



8 - 9. Images of the room in *Roma Anni Trenta* labeled with the themes: "Novecento and the Scuole Regionali" and "Great Masters and the Young Generations" featuring *La Famiglia del Pastore* on the rear wall. Source: Author.



10 - 11. Examples of the historical contents contained in black display cases throughout *Roma Anni Trenta* as seen in Figure 8 above. Source: Author.

The press release for *Roma Anni Trenta* expressed the gallery's intention to use the 120 works of art and numerous historical documents included in the exhibition to "present a picture that is as faithful as possible to the character of the first *Quadriennali* and, with them, the trends present in Italian art of the 1930s." As highlighted in reviews and noticed in my own experience of the space, the exhibition achieves the curatorial goal of immersing the visitor in the inescapable historical context of the period by arranging the rooms thematically (Figures 8-9) as designated by the movements of the period or their assignments within the *Quadriennali* with an emphasis on context added through the presence of LUCE documentary footage

running on loop and the original *Quadriennali* documents (Figures 10-11) in prominent cases throughout all three floors thus shaping the contemporary visitor's reception of the works to be as close to that of a viewer in the 1930s.

*"...The exhibition intends to adopt, beyond the systematic value of the art on show, a strong educational approach aimed at promoting greater understanding of what was happening at that time in Rome on an urban, architectural and cultural level...[the artwork is] as faithful a framework as possible to portray the nature of the first Quadriennali and, along with these, the trends then present in Italian art."<sup>32</sup>*

From the wording of this introductory exhibition text – the text that in Gadamer's terms generally provides the visitor with the viewpoint from which they will survey the horizon of meaning within the works and information displayed throughout an exhibition – one would surmise that this exhibition will take an objective and scholarly viewpoint in its "strong educational approach" to communicate the circumstances in which these exhibitions came into being and how those circumstances influenced the artistic movements of the time.<sup>33</sup> In plainer words, an *informed visitor* would expect the content of this exhibition to explore the Fascist origins of these *Quadriennali* and how the Fascist regime's administration and rhetoric did or did not play a role in the artwork

produced for these competitions.<sup>34</sup> *Roma Anni Trenta*, however, walks the line between a self-critical view of the role Fascist totalitarianism played in the *Quadriennali* and an attempt to aesthetically evaluate and appreciate these artworks and artists separately from their Fascist context as a fortunate period for supporting the arts.

This hesitant or oscillating approach leaves the informed visitor with a sense of mild confusion as to the exact purpose of putting together this temporary exhibition and presenting it to the public. Furthermore, which public was the Galleria d'Arte Moderna seeking to reach with this celebratory display? The local Roman community? Italian visitors from outside of the Lazio region? International visitors? The younger generations lacking any memory of these exceptional events or the older generations to capitalize on their memories and evoke a sense of nostalgia for a culturally appreciative former government? While a young, international visitor with little to no knowledge of Italian Fascism or its residual effects may be unaware of the lack of a clear message behind *Roma Anni Trenta*, that vagueness would not be lost on older, Italian visitors and additionally might move them to consider what feelings they may still harbor towards that period of Italy's history. Remembering Mussolini's afore-mentioned strategic cultural campaign, the mixture of aesthetically appreciative exhibiting methods with incorporated historical artifacts and film footage from LUCE, the institution initiated by Mussolini to document his cultural efforts, provides visitors with an expansive yet muddled view

of the artwork and *Quadriennali* in the Fascist era.



## 12. Promotional image for *Time is Out of Joint*

Source: *Galleria Nazionale*.

As Rome's modern and contemporary art equivalent of the American Metropolitan or Philadelphia Museums of Art, La Galleria Nazionale (GN), is a renowned national institution that has existed for over a century catering to a devoted local and large international audience. Founded in 1883 to "represent the national art of the newly unified state", the GN would temporarily live in the Palazzo delle Esposizioni prior to finding a permanent home in 1911 at the Padiglioni delle Belle Arti built by Cesare Bazzani for the International Exhibition. After an expansion of that original structure, the gallery temporarily held the *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* in 1934 following the exhibition's initial debut before closing during World War II. The gallery's reopening in the 1950s gave rise to a complex evolution of renovations and restorations motivated by a desire for change after "twenty years of Fascist autocracy". Throughout the 1960s and 70s both

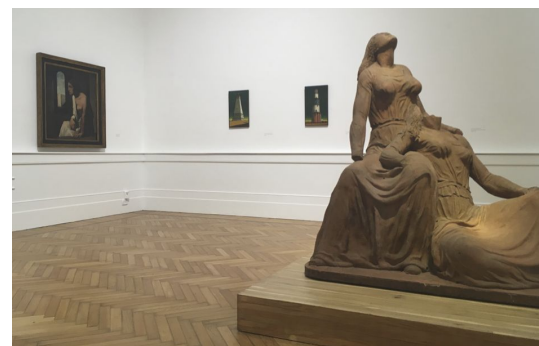
Superintendent Palma Bucarelli and architect Luigi Cosenza planned renovations with the intention of emphasizing the "educational purposes" of the institution creating "a place that could be a propulsive centre for cultural initiatives." The 1980s saw the gallery reach various stages of completed renovations and, in the next decade, the collection would be organized with each wing housing the era of art correlating with the time of its construction – the older the wing, the earlier the art.<sup>35</sup> The collection stayed in this arrangement until the arrival of Cristiana Collu, an Italian curator and new Director of GN who archaeologically uncovered the museum's interior to restore the face of the 1911 building. She then stripped all textual, educational, or organizational material from the permanent collection in order to rehang about 500 of the previously 700 works on display, with the addition of a few external works, based on her perceived connections fundamentally deviating from the educational aspirations of previous administrators. The reimagined GN's inaugural show, *Time is Out of Joint*, featured permanent collection works from a range of Italian artistic periods including *La Solitudine* and *Il Costruttore* by Sironi and numerous works by his artistic contemporaries.



13. Mario Sironi, *La Solitudine*, 1925-26

*La Solitudine* (Figure 13) painted by Sironi in 1925-26 is one of the few pieces by him and one of the many works from early twentieth-century Italy on display in *Time is Out of Joint*. Although the viewer can see the leftovers of Sironi's experimentation with the Metaphysical movement in the mysterious, building-like cube framed by the arched opening in the background of this painting, the heart of this work lies in the Novecento-style representation of a seated female figure. Viewers in the 1920s would read the Novecento goal of achieving a classical timelessness within their works, here, through the environment deprived of any contextual decoration or architectural elements save the archway – the element most closely associated with ancient or imperial Rome. The figure herself reads visually as heavy, weighted in the frame with a complexion lacking imperfections and a gaze classically devoid of any expression. Her positioning gazing outward by a window in a severe profile pose is reminiscent of Renaissance portraiture but her partially nude appearance builds a stronger connection with the female statues

of antiquity. Similar to *La Famiglia del Pastore*, these visual reminders of antiquity aided the regime's aim to foster the public's perception of the new Italian nation being as strong as that of the ancient Roman Empire. Further alluding to Fascist ideology, her exposed breast may have been meant to emphasize female fertility and the accented role of women under the regime as mothers, the nurturers of the next generation of Italian Fascists.<sup>36</sup>



14 - 15. Exhibition images from *Time is Out of Joint* featuring *La Solitudine* on the left wall of Figure 14 and its neighboring works by Giorgio de Chirico in Figure 15. Source: Author.

Today presented in a room curated by Cristiana Collu supposedly based on her personal aesthetic and intuitive connections, *La Solitudine* hangs at eye level on a stark, white wall with no identifying categorical or contextual information save three, small

lines of text beside the piece providing the viewer with the title, artist, and date of production. At the outset, the only interpretation viewers could bring to this piece is whatever lies in the paint itself and in their own minds. From there, the viewers' interpretations could progress in stages dependent on their background and previous knowledge. A viewer may recognize the artist's name, Mario Sironi, as being one of the foremost painters of Italian art in the twentieth century and realize the significance of this painting to Italian artistic tradition. Furthermore, if they have any knowledge of Italian art history they may connect the date, 1925-26, and classical nuances of this work as those quintessential to the Novecento movement thus acknowledging its existence as part of larger artistic culture and, with a general background of Italian history, they would then be able to make a connection with the plurality of artistic movements flourishing under the Fascist political fabric of the time. Having reached this point, only then could the viewer realize an intriguing contradiction within this exhibition that Collu arranged by theoretically focusing on connections between unusual aspects of the works. It would become glaringly apparent that *La Solitudine* is still on display in the immediate environment of a sculpture by Novecento artist Arturo Martini, the so-called "sculptor of the regime to Sironi's painter," with paintings by Giorgio de Chirico of the Metaphysical movement flanking the portrait.<sup>37</sup> What is the cause for this? Is it a fault in Collu's efforts to overcome her academic instincts or does it

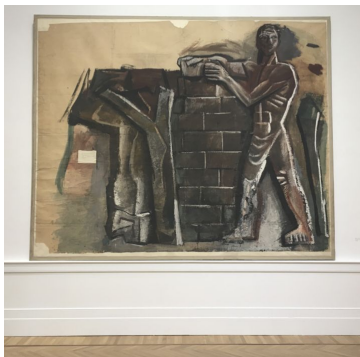
prove a deeper inherent connection between artworks created under the same historical conditions? Does it matter if only a specific portion of the visitor population would reach this realization?

*"And in a true work of assembly, with the partiality that every choice or selection entails, it topples chronological historical time; anachronizes past, present and future; and reconstructs and decants a different time, while emphasizing intervals and durations, advances and setbacks. A time rife with faults, fractures, voids, fits and starts, suggesting numerous combinations like those that Time, without hesitation, exposes to the light of day."<sup>38</sup>*

Antithetical to the entry text from *Roma Anni Trenta* and written in a selectively accessible manner, the only text within *Time is Out of Joint* at the GN informs the visitor that walking through this modern art museum will be unlike walking through any other museum.<sup>39</sup> Any form of contextual information or interpretation is not offered to visitors in the display as they are accustomed to but rather drawn out of his or her own mind based on a supposedly unbiased interaction with the artwork. As it clearly states, the purpose of this exhibition is to "anachronize past, present and future," or in layman's terms to intermix the past into the present into the future by removing all chronological suggestions or distinctions normally provided in didactic content. When



employed in a national encyclopedic-style art museum, an institution-type that traditionally strives to be accessible to and educational for visitors at any level of knowledge, this curatorial approach has historically been a very controversial one to choose.<sup>40</sup> Yet, Collu breaks from tradition in an attempt to make, in her opinion, a more universal and hands-off statement about the artwork within the Galleria and its relation to our human existence "than an art history text can do".<sup>41</sup> She believes that by removing the curator's interpretation of context from the exhibition that the art will speak more clearly on its own – an attempt at a non-statement on her part. Having said that, numerous scholars on art history and museum theory disagree with this approach viewing it as a rather bold statement on the part of the curator to remove the artists' works from the context that influenced their creations and thus deeming historical circumstance to be a disposable factor in the understanding of art.<sup>42</sup>



**16. Mario Sironi, *Il Costruttore*, 1936 in *Time is Out of Joint* at the *Galleria Nazionale***



**17. Mario Sironi, *Il Lavoratore*, 1936 sketch for a in the Private Collection of the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri* at the *Palazzo della Farnesina***



**18. Mario Sironi, *L'Italia Corporativa*, 1936 in *Palazzo dell'Informazione*, Milan.**

Is historical circumstance some exterior aspect of artwork that can be tossed aside? Take the two works of art titled *Il Costruttore* (Figure 16) and *Il Lavoratore* (Figure 17) for instance. Both of these works are large-scale sketches by Mario Sironi as compositional studies for his future monumental mosaic, *L'Italia Corporativa* (Figure 18) in the *Palazzo dell'Informazione* in Milan – an excellent example of the public works that he so directly associated with the Fascist regime's nationalist cultural



campaign in his 1933 manifesto. The two, rhetorical sketches are both currently on display with minimal identifying information, but in two distinctly different atmospheres. Comparing these two, similar works, consider: is the legacy of a work of art reliant on the potency of its immediate context – whether that context is inherent to the environment, imposed upon the viewer through text, or produced from the works in its immediate surroundings? *Il Costruttore* is currently hanging in the Galleria Nazionale as part of *Time is Out of Joint* thus it for all appearances has no imposed context, yet, does that environment fundamentally remove the Fascist rhetoric inherent to the work's original message? Without didactic support, can viewers only receive such messages today if the work is hanging in an inherently Fascist environment like that of *Il Lavoratore*? This work hangs in a space that provides an unspoken context to those with the knowledge for understanding, a building now called the *Palazzo della Farnesina*, which houses the *Ministero degli Affari Esteri*, or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This structure was originally designed to become the headquarters of the Fascist Party in the 1930s with an imposing, rationalist façade and an anterior piazza conceptualized to become the Italian equivalent of the Nuremberg Rally Grounds in Germany, a vision that was never made a reality but essentially influenced discussion on the building's later alterations.<sup>43</sup> Today, the hundreds of hallways are filled with an astounding, private art collection, which the Ministry champions in an effort to reinforce Italy's presence in the international

landscape of modern art, noticeably mirroring the cultural goal as envisioned by Mussolini in the 1930s but in some statements, decontextualized without that association of the regime.<sup>44</sup>

As Susan Crane surmises, "'Lost' implies what is desired but missing, 'lack' connotes what is absent and unwanted despite its existence...an edited past, not a memory lost but a memory evaded."<sup>45</sup> Italian museums certainly do not have to fear a *loss* of material memory from the era of Fascism and Mussolini for, even outside of an institution, the evidence is preserved in the very streets and structures that construct Rome's contemporary image. Thus, the concept of *lacking*, or disregarding, memory comes to the fore. Is the Fascist era a period of shameful history to be locked away from the eyes of future generations as the resounding defeat in World War II is to Japan? Does accepting the regime's influence on art accept its influence on all aspects of that period? These questions also lead to a specific Italian query that only the native population can truly answer: is Fascist culture purely in the past?

#### THE NEXT CONVERSATION

As my discourse comes to a close, I would like to pause briefly to acknowledge the caveat that my personal perspective comes nowhere near understanding the cultural experiences and environment of being a native Italian citizen. My viewpoint could stem from the fact that I am an English-speaking, art historian-in-training and that a significant portion of the sources I reference were written in my native

language or translated, but a majority of the research I was able to locate specifically on the topics of politics in exhibiting history or art have stemmed either from American or German studies. Could this penchant for analyzing, not just the works in an exhibit, but the public act of exhibiting and viewing as a whole be a product of cultural or societal differences between other countries living with the burden of troubling cultural legacies and Italy? As I am not a native Italian, only a student who spent a short four months in country; I do not have an answer to that question. Yet, the noticeably minute amount of critical work outside the realm of formalism or psychoanalysis by Italian art historians on art in the period of Fascism does speak volumes in itself. To conclude this dialogue and initiate the next, I offer this quote from Italian-Jewish writer and Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man / The Truce*:

*"We cannot understand [Fascism], but we can and must understand from where it springs, and we must be on our guard...because what happened can happen again...For this reason, it is everyone's duty to reflect on what happened."*

Investigations into and dialogues about the various intentions behind contemporary displays of work by Mario Sironi and similarly complex artists are more relevant today than ever before with the resurgence of Fascist and Neo-Fascist rhetoric across Europe and even here in the United States. For the present, the significance and nuance

of the Fascist era in Italian history is in certain instances memory *lacking* – it is our responsibility as the conservators and interpreters of the past to ensure that it – and periods like it – do not become memory *lost*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marzio Tremaglia, Untitled Preface for *Da Boccioni a Sironi: il mondo di Margherita Sarfatti*, Curated by Elena Pontiggia, (Milano: Skira, 1997). Quoting Benito Mussolini's speech at the inauguration of the exhibition: *Sette Pittori del Novecento* in 1923. Author's translation: "One cannot govern ignoring art and artists. Art is an essential manifestation of the human spirit. In a country like Italy it would be deranged for the government to be disinterested in art and artists."

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Luke, *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 5. (80's-90's US exhibitions)

<sup>3</sup> "Rome in the Thirties: The Gallery of Modern Art and the Quadrennial of Art (1931 – 1935 – 1939)", Gallery of Modern Art (GAM), Foundation of the Roman Quadrennial, LUCE-Cinecittà Institute. Author Translations.

<sup>4</sup> "An ideal passage of witness between past and present," Author translation. "Roma Anni Trenta. La Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte 1931-1935-1939," *Musei in Comune: La Galleria d'Arte Moderna*, (Rome, 2016) [http://en.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/mostre\\_ed\\_eventi/mostre/roma\\_anni\\_trenta\\_la\\_galleria\\_d\\_arte\\_moderna\\_e\\_le\\_quadriennali\\_d\\_arte\\_1931\\_1935\\_1939](http://en.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/mostre_ed_eventi/mostre/roma_anni_trenta_la_galleria_d_arte_moderna_e_le_quadriennali_d_arte_1931_1935_1939).

<sup>5</sup> The National Gallery (GN), formerly the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art (GNAM). Author's translation.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics Under Fascism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1. Translated quote from Benito Mussolini's speech at the inauguration of the exhibition: *Sette Pittori del Novecento* on 26 March 1923.

<sup>7</sup> Translation: *Sette Pittori del Novecento*.

<sup>8</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State: Culture & Politics in Fascist Italy*, (New Jersey: Princeton University, 1998), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 257.

<sup>10</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, "General Introduction: What Are Museums For?" In *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution. Author's translation.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Carruthers, "Collective Memory and *Memoria Rerum*: An Architecture for Thinking." In *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, edited by Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 124.

<sup>14</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> La Biennale di Venezia, or Venice Biennial, originating in 1895 as an invite-only, international juried art exhibition held every other year and administered by the city of Venice until control passed to the Italian Fascist state in 1931, after which the exhibition expanded to include events for music, cinema and theatre. For further reference: <http://www.labiennale.org/en/history>. La Quadriennale di Roma, or Roman Quadrennial, established in 1927 as a means of gathering "the most representative trends in Italian art in a single, major exhibition" held every

four years and spearheaded by Cipriano Efisio Oppo who offered incentives for participation through artist prizes and an extensive, government-funded purchasing campaign. For further reference:  
<http://www.quadriennale-di-roma.org/en/history/>.

<sup>16</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Marla Susan Stone, *The Patron State*, 66-68.

<sup>19</sup> Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, xi.

<sup>20</sup> "Mario Sironi," *Archivio Biblioteca Quadriennale*, 2016,  
[http://www.quadriennale-di-roma.org/arbiq\\_web/index.php?sezione=artisti&id=10584&ricerca=](http://www.quadriennale-di-roma.org/arbiq_web/index.php?sezione=artisti&id=10584&ricerca=).

<sup>21</sup> Elena Pontiggia, "Biografia Breve di Mario Sironi," *Associazione per il Patrocinio e la Promozione della Figura e dell'Opera Mario Sironi*, April 20, 2017, <http://www.mariosironi.org/biografia.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Fabio Benzi, "Mario Sironi e le illustrazioni del Popolo d'Italia (1921-1940)," *Musei in Comune: Musei di Villa Torlonia*, last modified 2006,  
[http://en.museivillatorlonia.it/mostre\\_ed\\_eventi/mostre/mario\\_sironi\\_e\\_le\\_illustrazioni\\_per\\_il\\_popolo\\_d\\_italia\\_1921\\_1940](http://en.museivillatorlonia.it/mostre_ed_eventi/mostre/mario_sironi_e_le_illustrazioni_per_il_popolo_d_italia_1921_1940).

<sup>23</sup> Ettore Camesasca via Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, xi.

<sup>24</sup> Mario Calvesi, "A Hundred Years of Italian Art," *Contemporary Art Collection at the Farnesina*, Cura. Maurizio Calvesi, (Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri-Directorate General for Cultural Promotion and Cooperation, 2006), Catalogue.

<sup>25</sup> Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism*, xiii.

<sup>26</sup> J. G. Droysen (19th Century) via Hans Robert Jauss paraphrased by Michael Ann Holly, "Reciprocity and Reception Theory," *A Companion to Art Theory*, Ed. by Paul Smith, Carolyn Wilde (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 449.

<sup>27</sup> Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Temporary exhibition, *Roma Anni Trenta. La Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte 1931-1935-1939*, (Rome, Italy: 24 March 2016 - 30 October 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Cristiana Collu, Temporary hanging of permanent collection, *Time is Out of Joint*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, (Rome, Italy: 11 October 2016 - 15 April 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Maria Catalano, "Galleria d'Arte Moderna: Editorial," *Musei in Comune*, last modified March 3, 2013,  
[http://en.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/il\\_museo/editoriale](http://en.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/il_museo/editoriale).

<sup>30</sup> "Galleria d'Arte Moderna: Storia del Museo," *Musei in Comune*, last modified 2006.  
[http://www.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/il\\_museo/storia\\_del\\_museo](http://www.galleriaartemodernaroma.it/il_museo/storia_del_museo). Author's translation.

<sup>31</sup> Laurie Kalb-Cosmo, "Topics in 20th Century Art: Italian Fascism," class lectures and readings.

<sup>32</sup> Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, la Fondazione La Quadriennale and l'Istituto LUCE-Cinecittà, temporary exhibition, *Roma Anni Trenta. La Galleria d'Arte Moderna e le Quadriennali d'Arte 1931-1935-1939*, (Rome, Italy: 24 March 2016 - 30 October 2016), Wall text.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Ann Holly, "Reciprocity and Reception Theory," *A Companion to Art Theory*, Ed. by Paul Smith, Carolyn Wilde (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 452.

<sup>34</sup> Informed visitor: a visitor with the pre-existing knowledge that the Fascist totalitarian regime was in power during the period of these three Quadriennali.

<sup>35</sup> "History," *La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna*, Accessed 25 November 2016, <http://lagallerianazionale.com/en/history/>.

<sup>36</sup> Laurie Kalb-Cosmo, "Topics in 20th Century Art: Italian Fascism," class lectures.

<sup>37</sup> "Mario Sironi," *Archivo Biblioteca Quadriennale*, 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Cristiana Collu, permanent collection, *Time is Out of Joint*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, (Rome, Italy: 11 October 2016 - 15 April 2018), Wall text.

<sup>39</sup> "Selectively accessible" in that the title is not the title is only in English and only those with a significant level of education and cultural understanding will be able to fully comprehend the nuanced and theoretical intention behind the exhibition as proposed in the entry text by curator Cristiana Collu.

<sup>40</sup> Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, "General Introduction," 16. Referencing 'Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Du Sommerard' in Stephen Bann's *The Clothing of Clio*, 1984.

<sup>41</sup> Wall text, Cristiana Collu, *Time is Out of Joint*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, Italy.

<sup>42</sup> Susan Crane in "Introduction", 9; Timothy Luke in *Shows of Force*, 229-230; Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago in "General Introduction", 17.

<sup>43</sup> Laurie Kalb-Cosmo, "Topics in 20th Century Art: Italian Fascism," class lectures.

<sup>44</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, *Contemporary Art Collection at the Farnesina*, (Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri-Diretorate General for Cultural Promotion and Cooperation, 2006), Catalogue.

<sup>45</sup> Susan A. Crane, "Introduction." In *Museums and Memory*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000), 9-10. Referencing the essay "History and Anti-History: Photography Exhibitions and Japanese National Identity" by Julia Adeney Thomas on the intriguing stance of photography museums in Tokyo, Japan towards exhibiting photographic documentation of World War II, or Japan's defeat on an international stage. The essay focuses on exhibitions in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the war and a period of international commemoration everywhere except seemingly in Japan where, as Crane summarizes: "The war is not forgotten, it is everywhere lacking."