

Byzantium in 1930s Italy: from the Palace of Justice in Milan to Lucio Fontana

In the pioneer period of Byzantine studies – means for an art historian, the years from 1876, the date of Kondakov's *Histoire de l'art byzantine*, to 1931, the year of the first international exhibition of Byzantine art which was held at the Louvre, which was planned by Charles Diehl and Charles Duthuit, Matisse's son-in-law, a passion for Byzantium overflowed Europe; Italy, instead, developed a deep hostility for that world¹. One could start charting this history with the impressionist painters. During his journey to Italy, Renoir was bored by classicist art and monuments in Florence; thus, he decided to move to Venice; here, he was delighted by the magnificent mosaics in San Marco. Monet, too, visited Venice; the city light enchanted him: the outcome was a series of about thirty views of Venetian palaces and channels. The clash between impressionists and academic painters is mirrored by the clash between the colors and immateriality of Byzantine art, on one hand, and the lines and volume of Italian art, on the other. The 20th-century avant-garde had a preference for light and colors. Matisse stated: »la révélation m'est venue de l'Orient«²; he is enthusiastic for the mystic feeling, purity of colors, and spontaneity of Russian icons. Matisse copies the lines and combinations of colors of Byzantine enamels. By contrast, Carlo Carrà, Giorgio De Chirico and Gino Severini wrote essays on »Valori plastici« (plastic values), a combative art magazine, which appeared from 1918 to 1922³: they praised the plastic values of Giotto, the champion who translated the rude, old *maniera greca* into the modern Latin one, to quote Giorgio Vasari.

Byzantium meant corruption and decline; the empress Theodora was its perfect personification. In the 1880s, she became a living figure after Sarah Bernhardt played her role in Victorien Sardou's play *Théodora*. The first night of the play was in 1884. The plot is hardly taken out of Procopius' account: Sardou's Theodora is a merciless woman who is redeemed by her love for Andrew, a young, noble-minded man, who, at the end of the play, dies in the empress' arms⁴. A great deal of *Théodora*'s several years of success must be credited to the rousing performance of Sarah Bernhardt⁵. In 1893, Oscar Wilde wrote *Salome*, which he thought Bernhardt herself would perform. In 1908, Gabriele D'Annunzio

created Basiliola, a mixture of Theodora and Salome, the fatal Byzantine woman who is the leading character of *La nave* («The Boat»). The play attained extraordinary success in Italy. The story is set in 552: a group of citizens from Aquileia took refuge on an island of the lagoon, where Venice would spring up; here, they build a ship to rescue the Evangelist Mark's body in Alexandria. The tribunes of the Veneto faction are the brothers Sergio and Marco Gratico, honest descendants of Roman blood; Basiliola, by contrast, is the leader of the Greek faction; she is reputed to have been a prostitute, who performed in circuses; she is likewise an enticing deceiver, a new Salome; by dancing, she seduces Sergio Gratico and excites the sexual instincts of the crowd of Veneti – so she forges the vision of Byzantium as a corrupted female in an early 20th century audience and readers. At the end of the story, the Roman virtues of Marco Gratico defeat Basiliola; she takes her own life and the boat sails to Alexandria⁶.

For the »Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della Città di Venezia«, which opened on 24 April 1909, Antonio Fradeletto charged Galileo Chini with picturing eight world civilizations in the dome of the Italian pavilion (**fig. 1**)⁷; in the fourth web, that of Byzantium, he assembled into a single painting the sarcophagus of the archbishop Theodore from Sant'Apollinare in Classe, Theodora from San Vitale, two virgins from Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and a newly-created group of impudently nude girls, who are about to launch a boat, just the boat of D'Annunzio's play. Byzantium was depicted as a corrupted female, in opposition to male, honest Romans (*id est* Italians): Oriental effeminacy and refinement versus the rustic male virtues of Roman warriors. The 20th-century heirs of Rome could only despise Byzantium: the physical vigor of the athletes in the Foro Mussolini, Rome, versus Byzantine stereotypes represented by Sant'Apollinare virgins. Indeed, a new chapter in the *Orient oder Rom* affair.

The decadent values of 20th-century artistic avant-garde fires the soul of Italian artists for more than a decade, in particular after World War One, when it was fomented by French hostility to Italy's territorial claims. Italian artists strongly defended the values of their national art against the Byzantine values of artistic avant-gardes whose capital was Paris:

1 A discussion of these events in Bernabò, *Ossessioni*.

2 Cat. Roma 1998.

3 *Valori Plastici* 1,1 (15 novembre 1918) - 3, no. 5 ([maggio] 1921).

4 See Carlà, *Prostitute, Saint, Pin-Up, Revolutionary*.

5 Bernabò, *Ossessioni* 11-15.

6 Bernabò, *Ossessioni* 25-34.

7 Spagnol, Galileo Chini.

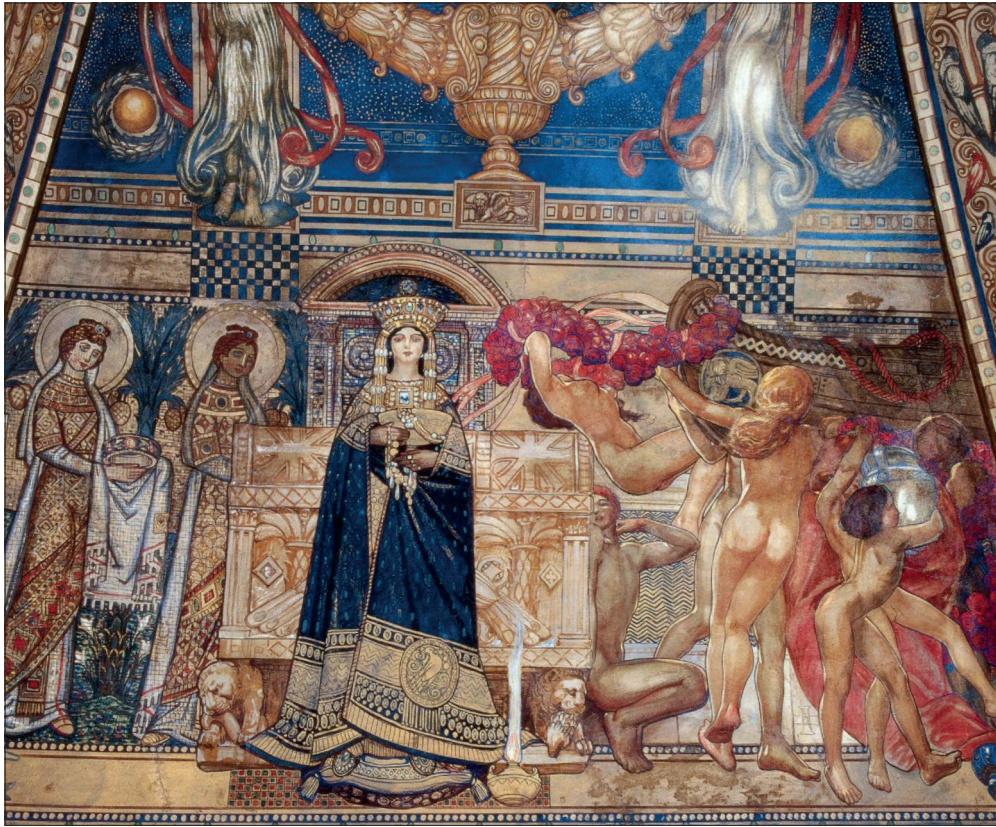


Fig. 1 Galileo Chini, *Byzantium*. Venice, Biennale, Padiglione Italiano, dome, detail. – (After Spagnol, *Italian Art* fig. 47).

the metropolis was called a 20th-century Byzantium. In the 1930s, the international background has changed: France is no more the enemy *par excellence*; the dispute with France and Byzantium has faded away. The new attitude relies on the appreciation Italy and Italian art have now gained abroad. In 1930, a magnificent «Exhibition of Italian Art 1200-1900» was opened at the Royal Academy in London⁸. Fascism has received a worldwide legitimization. In 1932, a grandiose show proclaimed the tenth anniversary of the Fascist Revolution. On 5 May 1936, after the conquest of Ethiopia has been completed, Mussolini proclaims the foundation of the Empire from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia, in front of a huge, ocean-like crowd. In 1937, two exhibitions celebrated the sixcentenary of Giotto's death, in Florence⁹, and the second millenary of Augustus' birth in Rome, the «Mostra augustea della Romanità»: Fascism trumpeted about its Latin roots¹⁰. Tellingly, the show set the chronological limit of Roman civilization to the time Justinian. As a collection of Latin laws, the *Corpus Iuris Iustinianum* belongs to Rome: the emperor was reclaimed for the Latin tradition.

As for art, in 1932, Sironi published «Pittura murale» (Mural Painting)¹¹; the following year, Sironi, Carrà, Campigli and Funi, four painters very active with Fascism, published

the «Manifesto della pittura murale». Mural Painting claimed that the Fascist Revolution must educate the popular soul; a social art must exalt Fascist ideology, like socialist realism does in Bolshevik Russia: «A Fascist style will spring out of Mural Painting», the manifesto reads. Sculptures, paintings and mosaics covered the walls of the regime buildings: post offices, ministries, palaces of Justice, palaces of Podestà, university buildings, Case del Fascio – the seats of Fascist groups –, forums, newspapers buildings, railway station and churches. One example: in 1939-1940 Campigli painted the new hall of the Liviano in Padua (**fig. 2**)¹², that is the entrance of the Faculty of Arts. The scenes tell that *romanitas* feeds present civilization: Titus Livy is shown while teaching young people; archeologists while exploring the underground; a triumphal column is erected between a moved crown who is lined either side; and heroes of the past are buried and sleep. A contemporary art historian wrote that Campigli's paintings transpose archaic images in a Byzantine rhythm¹³.

During the 1930s Sironi declared his love for Byzantine art. In a list of examples to be taken as models, he quoted «Pompei, Ravenna, Assisi, Padova, Firenze: here we see the gigantic masters of our art»¹⁴. It is noteworthy, he praised not Byzantium, but rather Ravenna. In 1942, Sironi wrote the

8 Cat. London 1930.

9 Cat. Firenze 1937.

10 Cat. Roma 1937-1938.

11 Sironi, *Pittura murale*. – On Muralism, see: Cat. Milano 1999-2000.

12 Dal Piaz, Università di Padova 205-208.

13 Pallucchini, *Affreschi padovani*. Muralism was also accepted abroad as a monumental style, e.g., in the project for the Mausoleum of Atatürk in Ankara, which was never completed: Bernabò, *From Nationalism to Iconomania* 141 f.

14 Sironi, *Arte ignorata*.

Fig. 2 Massimo Campigli, Affreschi del Liviano. Padua, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia. – (After Dal Piaz, Università di Padova fig. 23).



following sentence, whose evocative language can hardly be rendered into English:

»In the Byzantine, the giants of the expressive-decorative spatiality, and the very powerful masters of heaven, spirit and gold, which brings down to the earth the reflection of their shining sovereignty, the decorative purpose is immanent, impressive. Because of its resonant rhythms, the idea of Christ is surrounded with a transcendental lyricism«¹⁵.

In the March 1935 issue of the *Rivista illustrata del «Popolo d'Italia»* – the magazine of *Il popolo d'Italia*, that is the newspaper of the Fascist party –, Sironi published »Racemi d'oro« (Gold racemes), an enraptured eulogy of Byzantine mosaic¹⁶. Sironi drew many covers of the magazine and published his warlike and anti-communist plates in the pages of the *Rivista*. »We are amazed – Sironi says – when we gaze at the daring, potency, magnificence of the combinations of colors«; »Byzantine art (...) scorns the realism of contemporary art«; »the bright creation of the Byzantine mosaic is rooted in Hellenistic and Roman art; it was not only the expression, however, of an Eastern world opposite to the Western world of Rome, but it was the expression, too, of a new age, full of life and movement«; »the Byzantine – Sironi concluded – are the modernist elements of ancient art«. Two remarks: Sironi was not an art historian, but an artist, of course, so he felt no hesitation in approaching Byzantine art in an ahistorical way; secondly, Sironi looked only at the Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna: the illustrations in Sironi's article are all from Ravenna mosaics, but also one in San Marco and one in Torcello. A doubt: did Sironi know Byzantine monuments

elsewhere, say Sicily, Greece or the Eastern Mediterranean? I think that the monuments that had caught the attention of international scholars and public were ignored such as the new discoveries in Saint Sophia, Constantinople, and the mosaics in St. Demetrios, Thessaloniki. At the time, handbooks of Byzantine art in Italian were indeed poor things. Only Pietro Toesca's *Il Medioevo* – which had appeared in 1927 – examined a good number of Byzantine works. But Toesca was the target of a denigration campaign in Fascist newspapers, as well as Strzygowski, because he supported, decidedly, a Byzantine primacy over the West, from the early Middle Ages to the Duecento, Giotto included¹⁷.

In 1933, the Fifth Triennial Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts, in Milan, marked the apotheosis of Mural Painting¹⁸. Mural Painting aspired to be appointed as the art of regime; indeed, the movement was upheld by the European wing of Fascism, the so-called Right. It promoted the »Premio Bergamo« of painting, sponsored by Giuseppe Bottai, the Minister for National Education since 1936. The rustic and vulgar soul of Fascism, the so-called Left, promoted the rival »Premio Cremona«; it had a preference for realism in painting and was sponsored by the local party leader Roberto Farinacci: the Pietro Gaudenzi triptych *The grain* won the Cremona Prize in 1940 (fig. 3)¹⁹.

The words »decorative arts« in the title of the Milan exhibition are misleading: In fact, they included sculpture, monumental painting and mosaic. Sironi was one of the three members of the exhibition directory. In the special issue of the *Rivista illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, we read that the show

15 Sironi, *Ragioni dell'artista*; the Italian text reads: »Nei bizantini, questi giganti della spazialità espressivo-decorativa, questo potentissimi signori del cielo, dello spirito e dell'oro che porta sulla terra il riflesso della loro fulgida sovranità, la funzione decorativa è immanente, formidabile. Per i suoi ritmi sonori l'idea imperiale del Cristo si circonfonde di un trascendentale lirismo« (quoted from Pontiggia, Mario Sironi 72 f.).

16 Sironi, *Racemi d'oro*.

17 Toesca, *Storia*. See Bernabò, *Episodio*.

18 *Pittura murale* 25-29.

19 *Cat. Bergamo 1993-1994*.



Fig. 3 Pietro Gaudenzi, *Il grano*. Cremona, Pinacoteca Ala Ponzone. – (After Cat. Bergamo 1993-1994, fig. 46).

gathered »artists of any school and age«²⁰. Many settings of the exhibition were designed by Sironi and large paintings filled the walls. Work, Sport, Study, and Family were the subjects. Carrà exhibited a mural entitled *Roman Italy*; Campigli *The Farmer Mothers*; Sironi *Works and Days*; lastly, there was De Chirico's *Italian Culture*, which encloses the mosaic *The Arts* by Severini (fig. 4). Both are still *in situ*. Severini's mosaic was the work closest to Byzantine art at the Triennial. In fact, a great deal of his work is mosaic: the technique is Byzantine, but note that traditional workshops in Ravenna or Venice assembled the tesserae, after an artist's sketch. On the other hand, the Severini panel shows little affinity to Byzantine aesthetics in the choice of color as well as the figures, as they are shaped by colors themselves more than outlines.

Sironi's most demanding mosaic was *Corporate Italy*, known also as »Fascist Italy« (fig. 5), which he showed at the Sixth Triennial Exhibition; the year after, the work was sent to the Italian pavilion at the International Exhibition in Paris²¹. Today, the mosaic is hanging on a wall of a large room, two stories high, in a palace which was the former home to the newspaper *Il popolo d'Italia* – after the war the name was changed into Palazzo dell'Informazione. Alas, it is no longer open to the public. The theme is propaganda: on the left, a pre-Christian priestess stands at an entrance; geometric signs are depicted on the doorposts, thus connecting the group to pre-Christian cults; nearby, we find Adam and Eve; on the opposite side, there are one of the Dioscuri (a replica of the marble group near the Quirinale fountain), an imperial eagle, a Roman column; in the lower stripe, on the left, a woman with a child brings a basket of fruit and a farmer plows – they stand for agriculture; a fisherman holds up a tiny sailboat; the entrance of a mine; a mason builds a wall; the personifications of Justice and Law; a victory with the *insignia* of a Roman legion; and an Italian soldier. The fascist motto »credere, obbedire, combattere« (believe, obey, fight) is inscribed by the head of the woman sitting in the middle of the mosaic: she is the personification of Italy, which is surrounded by its religious, civil, and military foundations and



Fig. 4 Gino Severini, *Le arti*. Milan, Palazzo della Triennale. – (After Cat. Milano fig. 102).



Fig. 5 Mario Sironi, *Italia corporativa*. Milan, Palazzo dell'informazione. – (After Braun, *Racemi d'oro* fig. 4).

industrial sectors – agriculture, mining, building and fishing. Would we refer to *Italia corporativa* as a Byzantine revival? We could, but at the same time we realize that we are facing a distorted view of Byzantium: the dominating brown color and deep shadows are recurrent in Sironi's paintings, but they are never met in Byzantine art. The statuary personification of Italy counters the Byzantine aim of immateriality. The pose of

20 Quinta Triennale.

21 Braun, *Racemi d'oro*.

the woman repeats a statue of Augustus, but also it recalls Christ sitting on a throne in an early Christian church in Rome.

Hundreds of works covered the walls of public buildings in 1930s Italy. Before presenting the Palace of Justice in Milan, let call to mind enterprises the minister Bottai promoted. The first one is the so-called Legge del 2 per cento (Two per cent Act), which is nowadays still in force: the act requires that no less than the two per cent of the cost for a public building should be earmarked for its decoration. The second enterprise of Bottai was the founding of the magazine *Le arti*, the »State organ directly responsible for the artistic policy of Fascism« which the minister published a number of articles in. In »Modernity and tradition in today's Italian art«²² – meaningfully, it appeared in the very first issue of *Le arti* –, Bottai stated that Fascism does not make a choice between academic and modern trends in art: »Because of the historical consciousness of the Italian race – Bottai claims – it is absurd to typify our tradition, to limit it to fixed formal categories. It is true only in part to affirm that the artistic heritage of Italy is the classical tradition. Also Giotto, Donatello, Masaccio, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, and hundreds more, belong to our historical experience«. Bottai's sentence legitimates eclecticism: in the words »hundreds more«, we sense implicitly that the works of Ravenna are entitled to be a part of the Italian tradition²³. Fascism tried to gain the approval of the intellectual élite, even of the part of it that was not Fascist; during the 1930s, it absorbed a great part of the artists who had been antifascist in the 1920s. An example is Casorati, who was a friend of the antifascist industrialist Riccardo Gualino, whom Mussolini forcibly sent to exile. Casorati, too, experimented with the technique of mosaic; he exhibited *Family Scene* (*Scena familiare*) at the 1936 Triennial in Milan (fig. 6): In fact, the work relies on Italian 15th-century painting (we could think of Piero della Francesca and Mantegna) rather than Byzantine mosaic.

The Palace of Justice in Milan was completed in 1940 (fig. 7)²⁴. The building stands like a stern and oppressive rectangle which overlooks people drawing near to it. The exterior is almost completely lacking in decorative details. The three epigraphs on the front lintel are from the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*; they declare the principles of Law to citizens²⁵. The building was designed by Marcello Piacentini, Mussolini's main town planner. The magazine *Architettura*²⁶, which was the organ of the »Sindacato Nazionale Fascista Architetti« and was directed by the »Accademico d'Italia«. Piacentini himself, dedicated to the palace a whole issue with a bilingual text, Italian and German, as a homage to the ally in those years. »The most monumental and solemn architecture of the Fascist period«, we read; »An assertion of Latin knowledge and bal-

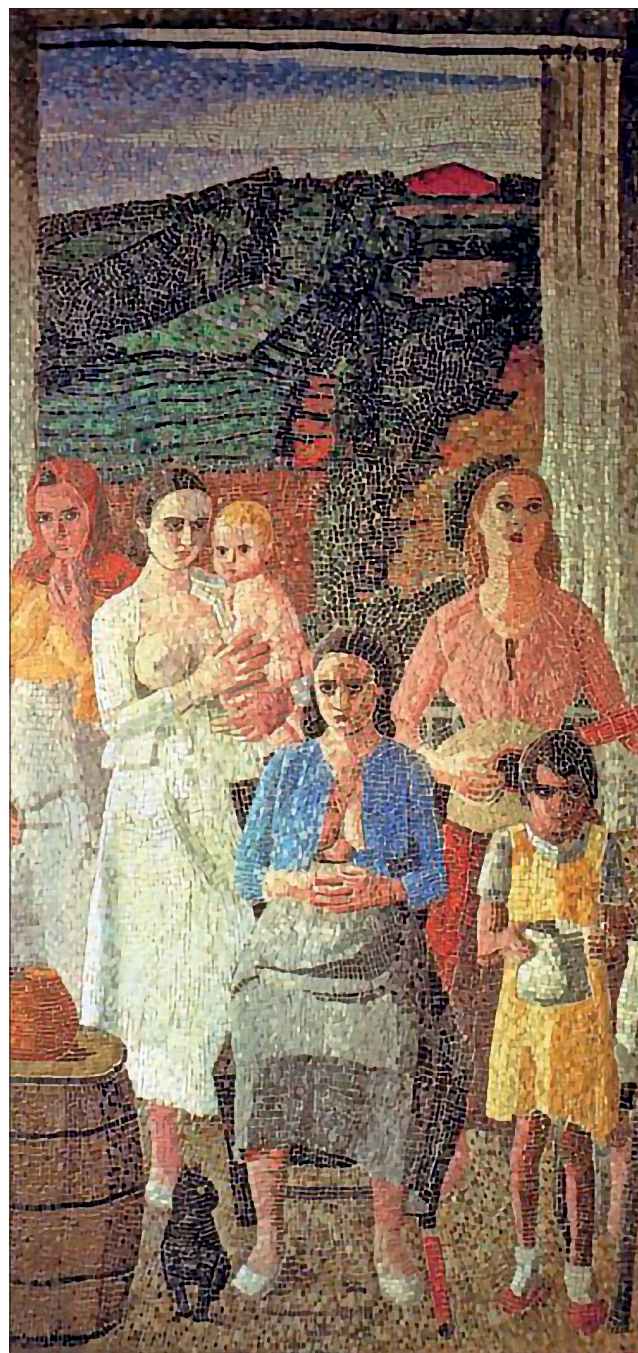


Fig. 6 Felice Casorati, *Scena familiare*. Milan, VI Triennale di Arti Decorative. – (After Quinta Triennale fig. 32).

ance, as well as Italian tradition and conclusions«. Truly, today it looks like a gloomy, stifling and not very fine building. It has a menacing look. Walking inside, the huge volumes of halls, ambulatories and staircases make us feel uneasy, I would say frightened: the almighty Law towers over the citizen. Aside

22 Bottai, *Modernità e tradizione* 230-234.

23 Bottai's statement mirrors Lionello Venturi's words in *Per una critica dell'arte contemporanea*. Lionello Venturi, an antifascist and the son of the art historian Adolfo, fled to France and from there to U.S.A. On his position on Italian tradition in art, see also Barocchi, *Storia* 132-133 note 5.

24 Bologna, Milano.

25 Left: *Iurisprudentia est divinarum atque humanarum rerum notitia iusti atque iniusti scientia*; center: *Iuris praecepta sunt haec: honeste vivere alterum non ledere suum cuique tribuere*; right: *Sumus ad iustitiam nati neque opinione sed natura constitutum est ius*.

26 Palazzo di giustizia.



Fig. 7 Marcello Piacentini, Palazzo di Giustizia, Milan. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 9 Ferruccio Ferrazzi, *Daniel in the lions' den*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile d'Appello, room no. 35. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 8 Attilio Selva, *Justice*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

from that, most of the works of art contained in the buildings lend a feeling of friendly and protective justice²⁷. In the main courtyard, we see a marble and porphyry statue of Justice by Attilio Selva (fig. 8): a crowned woman holding a sword which copies the statue of the goddess Rome – or Minerva – at the Capitol. The interior is »a true museum of the Italian art production«, as *Architettura* proclaims; it housed one hundred and forty works, most of them unpublished²⁸. Only a minority of them are quality works; the room walls are in most cases decorated by modest paintings, with large areas of the same color, as seen, for example, in *The Heavenly and the Earthly Justice* by Primo Conti; here, the figure of Mussolini was covered after the war; today, it has been again uncovered. Or *Daniel in the Lions' Den* by Ferruccio Ferrazzi, on the rear wall of room no. 35 of the Civil Court of Appeal (fig. 9). It must be mentioned that the then president of the Court labeled some of the paintings as »degenerate art«, since they showed nudes and Jewish, that is biblical, subjects; two years previously, the Grand Council of Fascism had issued the racial laws. By the way, Bottai applied the racial rules in a severe and diligent way²⁹.

Three high relief sculptures decorate the ambulatory of the Civil Court of Appeal. The one on the left, *Roman Justice* by Romano Romanelli, depicts the story of the emperor

27 As stressed by Pacini, Severini 32-35.

28 A list of the art works in the building is given by Ginex, *Opere decorative* 209-213.

29 Simioli, *Integrazione* 83-92; Simioli reports also the discussion on racism in art between Bottai and Grandi.



Fig. 10 Romano Romanelli, *Roman Justice* (Trajan and the widow). Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile d'Appello, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

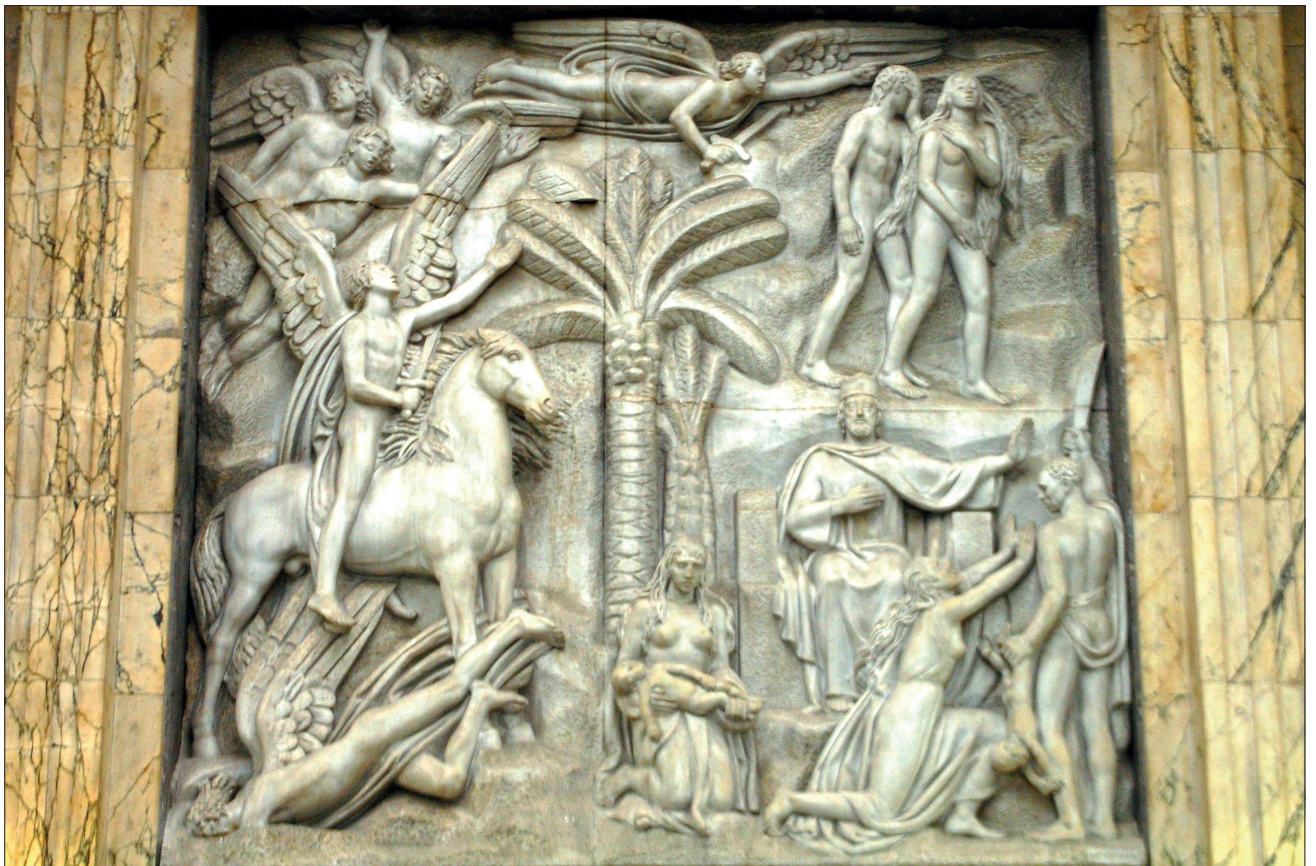


Fig. 11 Arturo Dazzi, *Biblical Justice*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile d'Appello, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 12 Arturo Martini, Fascist Justice. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile d'Appello, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 13 Carlo Carrà, Justinian set free a slave. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile d'Appello, room no. 29. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

Trajan and the widow (fig. 10), which is an episode found in Dante's *Purgatorio* (Canto X): The legend tells that Trajan did justice to a widow whose son had been killed by a soldier. On the right, the *Biblical Justice* by Arturo Dazzi contains the episodes of the Fall of Adam and Eve, the Fall of the rebel angels, Solomon and the two mothers (fig. 11). In the middle, we see the *Fascist Justice* by Arturo Martini, the highest-rated sculptor of the group (fig. 12). Riccardo Bacchelli expounded Martini's relief in a monograph dedicated to Bottai – Bacchelli is the author of the family epic *Il mulino del Po*, which appeared in 1939-1940³⁰. In a rhetorical and bombastic style, the meaning of which is sometimes obscure, Bacchelli explains every single part of the relief. Left above, Bacchelli describes the theme of heroes: Victory carries the corpse of a man killed in a battle; Bellerophon³¹ – he claims, but it a mistake for Perseus – holds Medusa's head; the aged Daedalus is sitting by the standing boy Icarus; a wolf is sinking its teeth into a rabbit³². Top right, the theme of Passions: A genius is covering the nude and immodest body of Beauty with a cloth – she looks like Eve or Venus³³; a poet is about to ride the horse Pegasus, which stands for inspiration; two lovers embrace each other; a skinner is grasping the tail of a fox, an animal which is the symbol of pleasure and ambition of human vanity. Bottom right, the theme of Family: The prodigal son; a boat with a family landing at the harbor of Justice, which stands for the familial house and life: The father looks like a country Neptune. Nearby, a rectangular sail which balances the labara and insignia on the opposite side. Bottom left: A jurist, standing for Roman Law, and a bishop, for canon Law; Charity is covering a beggar by means of his mantle with his dog. Just in the center, under the eye of God, Justice is sitting like an armed idol on a trunk, around which a serpent is coiling. Bacchelli concludes his panegyric with the sentence: »Justice looks at nothing and sees everything, while mankind dreams and works, meditates and is troubled, fights and loves, around the trunk of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which it is sitting upon«. As regards visual sources, Bacchelli claims correctly that Martini is fond of primitives, or more precisely, I would suggest Italian Gothic sculpture of the 13th century, in particular, the sculptures of Arnolfo, or the personifications and characters of Nicola Pisano at the main fountain in Perugia³⁴. Instead, Bellerophon/Perseus is modeled after Hercules in a Byzantine slab on the outer wall San Marco. Finally, the people on the left stem from the Justinian's panel in San Vitale. Fitting in Bot-

tai's recommendations, Martini chose his model from works of different centuries and trends.

Carrà painted two murals in the Palace of Justice, but to call them masterpieces would be very generous: One is *Justinian Sets Free a Slave* (room no. 29, Civil Court of Appeal, fig. 13), a Byzantine subject but not Byzantine in style; the other, *Justinian Does Justice* (room no. 42, Civil Court of Appeal)³⁵. Instead, the nine glass mosaics Giulio Santagata and Severini made for the ambulatory of the Civil Court are more dependent on Ravenna examples – the latter's mosaic date from ca. 1938³⁶. Santagata depicted Justice who holds a sword and has the code of Law at her feet (fig. 14); an unexpectedly tall Napoleon in the livery of a jurist with the Code and the Iron Crown of the *Imperator Romanorum* (fig. 15); Justinian with the Digest rooted in Roman law (fig. 16), the Camaldolese monk Gratian, the father of Canon Law, holding his Decretum, and a griffin, the symbol of Christ in Dante's *Paradiso* (Canto XXIX) (fig. 17). Ravenna had found its place in the rhetoric of regime. Finally, Sironi executed a few mosaics within the building: The rear wall of a room of the Court of Assizes and Appeal houses Sironi's mosaic *Justice Armed with Law* (fig. 18): Law holds an engraved slab; a nude man, Strength, holds the fasces of a Roman lictor, now almost totally erased; a legion emblem bears the inscription *Dux*; lastly, on the right, is Truth.

The Byzantine revival in 1930s' Italy was a *sui generis* reading of that art. The Italian artists did not revive a canonical Byzantine style, but rather the early Christian or the 5th- and 6th-century Justinianic style: In sum, it was a partisan revival. In contrast to Europe, the autarkic culture of Italy did not love what we would call the Byzantine spirit; it rediscovered only a domestic phase of Byzantine art in Ravenna. Indeed, we are presented with the face of nationalism. For his part, Sironi had no doubt that the revival was genuinely Italian. He wrote: »It is obvious that the Mediterranean, solar ideal of a revival of fresco and mosaic, the great decorative art, can be reached only in Italy«; »The return to the mural painting means a return to the Italian examples and our tradition«. With the fall of Fascism, this propaganda art of the regime was abandoned. Fascist to the last, Carrà and Sironi sided with the Italian Social Republic, or Republic of Salò; they essentially disappeared from public life after the war.

In the 1930s, we meet an unexpected love for Byzantium in Lucio Fontana, a then marginal artist: His abstract works did not meet a wide consensus during Fascism. In his works,

30 Bacchelli, Giustizia. Bacchelli's dedication reads: »A Giuseppe Bottai/che all'ordinamento corporativo/all'idea e alla norma/regnando Vittorio Emanuele III/duce Mussolini/diede azione, pensiero, opera e fede/Arturo Martini/che da quell'idea/ebbe l'ispirazione a questa sua opera di scultore/dedica/MCMXXXVII-XV«.

31 Bacchelli, Giustizia 11: »Si comincia dunque dalle favole: gli »Eroi, a destra della Giustizia; e dalle passioni: le »Ambizioni« a sinistra. Bellerofonte estolle una testa medusea«.... »Accanto al Bellerofonte, Dedalo...«.

32 Bacchelli, Giustizia 13: »La prepotenza d'un lupo adusto azzanna un coniglio vile, tra gli eroi; uno scuoiatore afferra per la coda una volpe, premessa, con tutta la sua furberia, al piacere e all'ambizione della vanità umana bene abbigliata«.

33 Bacchelli, Giustizia 12: »la donna nuda è la Prostituta, Venere terrestre e pandemia, »Eva gotica«, Semiramide, Cleopatra, Elena«.

34 Nonveiller, *Altorelievo* 216-233. – In a list of figurative sources, Nonveiller includes late-antique sculpture (the Largitio scene on the arch of Constantine), Nicola Pisano's pulpit in Siena, the mosaic of Justinian in San Vitale, and the Herakles on San Marco's outside wall. See also Gian Ferrari/Pontiggia/Velani, Arturo Martini 210-213.

35 Carrà's paintings are reproduced in Cat. Bergamo 1996, 306f. Carrà's *Justinian Sets Free a Slave* had been published in *Primato* 3, 13, 1942-XX, 253.

36 Pacini, Severini 32-35; Pacini reports a letter of Severini which hints at a date of about July 1938 for the mosaic.



Fig. 14 Giulio Santagata, *Justice*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 15 Giulio Santagata, *Napoleon*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

Fontana experimented with different techniques and styles, ceramics to sculpture and painting, abstract to figurative. He worked for E.U.R. 42, the 1942 International Exhibition which never opened because of the war and which Piacentini was the planner of; in sum, the regime entrusted him with an official task. At the 1940 Seventh Triennial in Milan he exhibited a Victory in the «Sala della Vittoria», the main hall of the Triennale. In that same year, Fontana portrayed his wife Tere-sita in a mosaic in full relief. Just before Italy entered the war, Fontana moved to Argentina, from where he came back in 1946. After the war, he was crowned as the most influential

artist in Italy. Like Renoir and Monet, Fontana was captured by the light of Venice. In 1961, at the show *Arte e contemplazione* in Palazzo Grassi³⁷, he exhibited the series of panels entitled *Concetto spaziale, Venezia*: the paintings are oil on canvas, with holes, cuts, and colored glass. Ten of the panels were presented at an one-man show at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York; they were a huge success³⁸. The panels evoke the gold of Venetian mosaics: «Gold is as beautiful as the sun», Fontana said. The titles of the series *Concetto spaziale* were extremely suggestive: *Piazza san Marco al sole* (Piazza San Marco in the sun), *Mezzogiorno a piazza San*

37 Cat. Venezia 1961, pls 16-18. – See also Schapiro, Church Art 185-191. I wish to thank Glenn Peers for suggesting the above essays.

38 Cat. New York 1961 (leaflet). The exhibition was reassembled in 2006 in Venice and, in 2007, in New York: Cat. Venezia-New York 2006-2007.



Fig. 16 Giulio Santagata, *Justinian*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).



Fig. 17 Giulio Santagata, *Gratian*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile, ambulatorio. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

Marco (Noon in Piazza San Marco), *Notte d'amore a Venezia* (Night of Love in Venice), and *Venezia era tutta d'oro* (Venice Was All Gold). Fontana reveals his love for the Byzantine golden city, its light and colors. Byzantium seems to open to him the doors of abstraction and Spatialism.

Pure colors and gold convey spirituality. Clement Greenberg drew a parallel between abstract art and Byzantine art³⁹. In the iconoclastic trends of Byzantium, he saw the forerunners of the 20th-century refusal of a figurative art. Byzantine aimed at denying the physical appearance of figures; abstractionists

excluded figures as well. Pure colors and homogeneous light, which shines with no shadows, urge people towards spiritual meditation. To conclude, a recent exhibition in Houston, Texas, entitled *Byzantine Things in the World*⁴⁰, focused on the role Byzantine art played for abstract art since the 1950s, from the golden monochrome compositions of Rauschenberg to the abstract paintings of Reinhardt and Rothko (who participated in the Venice show *Arte e contemplazione*⁴¹), up to the murals Rothko painted, in 1954, for his chapel on the grounds of the Menil Collection in Houston⁴².

39 Greenberg, *Byzantine Parallels* 167-170.

40 Cat. Houston 2013.

41 Cat. Venezia 1961, pls 32-35.

42 Cat. Houston 2013, pls. 27. 56. 61. 68.



Fig. 18 Mario Sironi, *Justice armed with Law*. Milan, Palazzo di Giustizia, Corte Civile, Corte di Assise. – (Photo Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali ed Ambientali).

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Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

Byzanz im Italien der 1930er Jahre: Vom Justizpalast in Mailand bis Lucio Fontana

In Ablehnung der neoklassischen akademischen Malerei blickte die europäische Avantgarde des 20. Jahrhunderts in ihrer Suche nach Inspiration auf die byzantinische Kunst. Die italienischen Künstler entwickelten jedoch eine tief empfundene Abneigung gegen Byzanz, das in ihren Augen anders als Rom eine dekadente Zivilisation war. Auch für das faschistische Regime war das klassische Rom das Vorbild. Diese Haltung änderte sich radikal, nachdem der Faschismus in den 1930er Jahren weltweit Anerkennung gefunden hatte. Die italienischen Künstler akzeptierten jetzt die byzantinische Kunst als einen Teil ihrer eigenen Tradition, Ravenna wurde nun zum Stellvertreter von Byzanz in Italien. Diese neue Wertschätzung byzantinischer Kunst spiegelt sich in dem sog. Muralismo wider, eine Bewegung, die Sironi, Carrà und andere begründeten. Die Mosaiken Sironis und die mehr als 100 Werke im Inneren des Justizpalastes von Mailand liefern die besten Beispiele für die Annahme des Mittelalters in allen seinen Schattierungen.

Byzantium in 1930s Italy: from the Palace of Justice in Milan to Lucio Fontana

The twentieth-century European avant-garde looked upon Byzantine art for inspiration, as they refuted the neoclassical Academic Art. Instead, Italian artists developed a deep aversion towards Byzantium, as it appeared as the decadent civilization in comparison with classical Rome. All the same, the Fascist regime considered Rome as its model. After Fascism had received a worldwide legitimation in the 1930s such an attitude changed radically. The Italian artists accepted Byzantine art as a part of their own tradition; Ravenna was taken as the substitute of Byzantium in Italy. The novel love for Byzantine art is mirrored in the so-called Muralismo, a movement which Sironi, Carrà and others founded. Sironi's mosaics and the more than one hundred works inside the Palace of Justice in Milan are the best examples of that acceptance of the Middle Ages in all its trends.

Byzance dans les années 30 en Italie: du Palais de la Justice de Milan à Lucio Fontana

L'avant-garde européenne du vingtième siècle chercha son inspiration vers l'art byzantin car elle refusait la peinture académique néo-classique. Par contre, les artistes italiens développèrent une profonde aversion envers Byzance qui, à leurs yeux, était une civilisation décadente contrairement à Rome. De même, le régime fasciste fit de Rome son modèle. Cette attitude changea radicalement une fois que le fascisme fut reconnu au niveau international dans les années 30. Les artistes italiens acceptèrent l'art byzantin comme une composante de leur tradition et Ravenne devint alors le substitut de Byzance en Italie. Ce nouvel engouement pour l'art byzantin se reflète à travers le »Muralismo«, mouvement fondé par Sironi, Carrà et d'autres. Les mosaïques de Sironi et plus de cents œuvres à l'intérieur du Palais de Justice de Milan fournissent les meilleurs exemples de l'accueil du Moyen Age dans toutes ses tendances.

Traduction: Y. Gautier