Being Old and Being Modern: Amedeo Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale

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Abstract In this article we propose an analysis of the reception of the works of Italian artist Amedeo Modigliani at the XVII Biennale di Venezia in 1930 as a way to critique the discourse of Fascism in the field of art. The Biennale's motto, according to its organizer Antonio Maraini, was to begin the task of renewing Italian art in open rivalry with the French avant-garde, following the project of national reconstruction promoted by Benito Mussolini. Modigliani is interpreted by Maraini as a modern Italian artist *par excellence* and as a model for the new generation of artists. Mainly due to the linear aspect of his style and his insistence on the genres of the nude and the portrait, he is taken as representing the "Return to Order" and the affirmation of an "intrinsic Italianness." At the same time, the exhibition's curator, art historian and critic Lionello Venturi, doesn't share this interpretation. On the contrary, Venturi sees Modigliani as a follower of French modernism and Cézanne, offering another way of considering the role of Italian tradition in his works. Our aim is to show how ideas about the relationship between modernity and tradition were contested in Italy, and to examine the terms in which dissent was possible within an institution subjugated by Fascist ideology, based on the argument that Venturi's position confronts the conception of tradition tied to the realistic and descriptive aspect of social life.

The Return to Order at the 17th Venice Biennale

During the Fascist era in Italy, Mussolini's government played a central role in controlling artistic and cultural institutions, restructuring them to align with the regime's ideological prerogatives. In the case of the Venice Biennale, the management of the institution was centralized in 1927, when its administration was transferred from the commune of Venice to the state. That same year, the sculptor Antonio Maraini was appointed secretary-general of the Biennale, marking an important step in the regime's appropriation of the institution. Maraini was responsible for implementing changes to the exhibition structure and intervened directly in foreign pavilions, reducing both the number of artists and the quantity of works each could exhibit. According to Massimo De Sabbata, the intention was to weaken the impact of French art, the only one that could disrupt the project of asserting the supremacy of modern Italian art, by shifting the center of modern art from France to Italy. Furthermore, according to the author, Maraini's priority was to exercise diplomatic control over the Italian and French pavilions (2014, 84). By the 17th Venice Biennale in 1930, this endeavour was already underway and was directly expressed in the texts that made up the catalogue.

The general proposal of the event is stated in the very first paragraph of the *Programma* that opens the exhibition catalogue: "With the 17th Biennale opening in the spring of 1930, year VIII, the reconstructive work of these generations must begin, from which Italy expects the seal, in Art, of its renewed greatness" (1930a, 5). It is, therefore, a matter of presenting a revision of current modern Italian art in order to demonstrate that the new tastes and trends that matured in Europe after the First World War revive the great Italian pictorial tradition, positioning Italy as the new centre of influence in modern art. The statement of this project is directly linked to the claim of overcoming French taste. The antagonism with French art had been unfolding since the early years of the Venice Biennale, initially concerning French Impressionism and later regarding French art in general.

Regarding the reception of Impressionism at the Biennale, the discourse was not so much about undermining the value of this artistic experience but about removing the French hegemony over the style. Giuliana Donzello (2021) comments that, in the early days of the Biennale, the relationship with Impressionism was ambiguous, as it represented an antithesis to the prevailing taste in Italy, which was more linked to romantic and sentimentalist experiences that Ragghianti (1990), in *Profilo*, associates with "purism." Laura Cecchini (2020) also presents interesting insights for evaluating the developments of this reception, arguing that Impressionism came to be understood as an international phenomenon rather than a purely French one. The effect of this discourse on the Biennale was to favour artists of other nationalities who worked in the vein of French Impressionism over the French themselves. This can be seen in the success achieved by, for example, the Irishman John Lavery, the Spaniard Ignacio Zuloaga, or the Swede Anders Zorn. In this sense, the "accepted" form of Impressionism was a more moderate one, less radical than the artistic experiments of the French Impressionists.

This mistrust or resistance toward the French was neither new nor unique to the period when Fascism appropriated Italian cultural institutions. What is new, however, is the explicitly declared character of the rivalry, which was used to bolster the discourse that the future of modern art depended on leaving behind the abstracting experiences initiated by French Impressionism and continued by the avant-garde. In this sense, the rivalry with French art created the basis for a nationalist discourse advocating a return to Italian pictorial traditions, linked not only to realism but to an entire way of life associated with the idea of "intrinsic Italianness."

Amidst this rivalry with French art, the organizers of the Biennale state in the *Programma* that the aim of the exhibition is not to impose a fixed

aesthetic program; on the contrary, they claim to foster artistic freedom (1930a, 5). It is explicitly suggested that the broad influence of French abstract art marked a period of restricted freedom, since "genuine expressions in art" are those where "the artist's individual sensitivity vibrates and speaks the universal sentiment of a people, embodying the aspirations and ideals of a historical moment" (1930a, 5). They advocate a "healthy" return to Italian tradition at the expense of the "entirely theoretical cerebralism" of French trends, which, according to the organizers, incited artists to withdraw into the "ivory tower of uncompromising subjectivism" (1930a, 5). There are two important elements here supporting the revival of Italian tradition: the first concerns the theoretical and "cerebral" nature of modern French art, which is seen as opposed to the spirit and sentiment of the Italian people. The second is the understanding that the subjectivist aspect of French art corrodes the "profoundly human nature" that characterized the Italian tradition. Therefore, they hope that the Biennale will fulfill its purpose by creating favorable conditions for the revival of this tradition, allowing artists to renew themselves through the immutable and timeless values that, in their view, characterize true art: "the instinctive and healthy taste for beauty as in Raphael, symmetry and proportion as Michelangelo described, and the expression and character that Leonardo taught" (1930a, 6).

"Uncompromising subjectivism" and "aesthetic of theoretical cerebralism" are terms used to characterize modern French art and to contrast it with Italian art. Thus, the idea of reconstruction should be understood in two senses: first, as the rebuilding and renewal a glorious Italian pictorial tradition dating back to the Renaissance; and second, as the re-establishment of ties between art and the reality of the Italian people in the present. The organizers state that the new generation of artists, renewing contemporary Italian art, is part of a larger movement as their mission participates in the "great national reconstruction work of Benito Mussolini" (1930a, 6). Responding to the aspirations and ideals of that historical moment in Italy meant a certain ideological subordination to the regime's principles. Moreover, another passage highlights that the exhibition prizes would be awarded to those who, "with the desire to represent the events and feelings characteristic of Italian life, address themes of political, social, family, agricultural, industrial, maritime, sporting life, etc." (1930a, 6). We see that the project is therefore explicitly linked to the desire to overcome abstraction in favor of a realist aesthetic that depicts the social life of the Italian people in its characteristic features.

In this sense, the rivalry with French art is marked by a critique of the cosmopolitan aspect of its aesthetics. Seeking to reconcile the

revival of Italian tradition, habits, and life with the idea of artistic freedom, the Biennale organizers aim to convince their audience that the intensity of cultural exchange among nations, which prevailed in the years before the First World War, was responsible for corrupting artists, leading them down a path of artificially constructed paradigms and programmes. Although these ideals are explicitly present in the *Programma*, there is a certain mediation. It is not about failing to recognize that the Parisian environment produced true talents, but of attributing the artist's estrangement from the trends and traditions of their own people to the cosmopolitan aesthetic climate.

From a strictly pictorial and formal standpoint, the intention is to assert elements of *classicità* as an alternative to French abstraction. It is argued that abstraction led artists to isolate themselves in an overly analytical perspective, distancing them from the concrete and tangible world. The elements of the Italian pictorial tradition referred to in the text, such as affirming a "profoundly human nature" and recovering an "instinctive and healthy taste for beauty," are directly connected to a figurative and "truly" realistic representational model. The valorization of these elements over French trends is advocated as a stance not only in art but also in life: an attitude privileging sensitivity over intellect. Instead of emptying the form of meaning and making it increasingly abstract and subjective regarding historical and social content, the Italians propose to restore the centrality of the human figure and sentiment.

This diagnosis relates to what became known as the *Return to Order*, a term describing the artistic phenomenon of the interwar period as a reaction to the paths taken by abstract avant-gardes. Jean Clair (1981) emphasizes that these were proposals grounded in a return to a type of realism, not in the sense of a scrupulous observation of reality, but one that adapted the perceived reality to the artwork's need for autonomy. It was not about returning to the rules that governed art within the Academies, such as the norms of anatomical drawing, perspective, and colour, but about recovering the integrity of form, which had been disintegrated by the avant-garde outside academic molds, informed by the idea of art's autonomy. The *Return to Order* is characterized by a return to figuration and the reinterpretation of elements from the Western artistic tradition, especially classical art linked to Greco-Roman culture and its reinterpretation through the Italian Renaissance experience. It also involves revaluing traditional artistic techniques (such as mural painting, particularly fresco, and easel painting) and traditional painting genres (especially still life, portrait, and landscape).

From the panorama outlined above, we see that the regime and its

cultural institutions appropriated a climate of patriotism and anti-French sentiment that had been developing even before the First World War. Through this appropriation, they set in motion a project of positioning Italy not only at the center of the modern art narrative but doing so in alignment with Fascist ideology, committed to justifying the idea of a strong and superior nation through art. In the case of the 1930 Biennale, this task was pursued through two main pillars: first, the evocation of traditional values and figurative systems, which took on "mythological" contours in the sense that such values were superficially, and even anachronistically, transported to the contemporary era; and second, by encouraging the penetration of art into Italian social life, promoting poetics that broadly addressed national themes.

Modigliani at the 17th Venice Biennale

Against the backdrop of the proposal of the 17th Biennale, focused on its rivalry with French art and its attempt to promote a nationalist discourse, we turn to the reception of the artist Amedeo Modigliani, who, for the first time and posthumously, had an individual room dedicated to the exhibition of his works at this Biennale.

Amedeo Modigliani was an Italian artist who established his career in Paris during the early decades of the twentieth century. His work included elements shared by artists in the cosmopolitan Parisian environment, sensitive to the Cézanne-influenced trends that shaped the avant-garde movements. Like many of his contemporaries, he spent much time exploring African and so-called "primitive"[1] art. During his lifetime, Modigliani achieved relative fame, although it was mainly restricted to the French scene, with exhibitions at the *Salon des Indépendants* and the *Salon d'Automne*, highlighting his connection to Cubist poetics.[2] In the 1910s and 1920s, a period of significant activity for the artist, his work was often associated with the French avant-garde and, at times, considered less

1. In general, the term "primitive" has been used since at least the mid nineteenth century to distinguish contemporary European societies and their cultures from other societies and cultures that were then considered less civilized and seen as "closer to nature." Until the mid nineteenth century, the term was also used to Italian and Flemish works from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, its scope was broadened to refer to ancient Egyptian, Persian, Indian, and Japanese cultures, as wel as what many historians of the time called the "tribal" art of Africa and Oceania. The label "primitivism" was used generically to describe a Western interest in societies designated as "primitive" and their cultural artifacts, as well as to reorganize them within Western art.

2. The main exhibition of his sculptures took place at the Salon d'Automne in 1912, where seven sculptures titled *Heads - Decorative Group* were included in the Cubist room, alongside works by artists like Picabia, Metzinger, Kupka, and Le Fauconnier.

original by comparison.[3] Modigliani never gained substantial recognition in Italy and was largely ignored, except for a brief moment in 1922 when Vittorio Pica, then secretary-general of the Venice Biennale, organized a room featuring some of his works. Even then, his art received little attention, with occasional negative responses from critics. However, at the 1930 Venice Biennale, the situation changed dramatically: an individual room was dedicated to him, showcasing thirty-nine paintings, two sculptures, and five drawings. This marked a significantly different context, where Modigliani was exalted as a quintessential modern artist and received by critics as an exemplar for the new generation of Italian artists. In this context, art critics ideologically aligned with the Fascist regime rehabilitated Modigliani's image, positioning him as an artist who avoided the "aesthetic of theoretical cerebralism" and was powerful precisely for expressing what they understood as the most genuine Italian spirit.

In a brief comment from the introductory text of the *Catalogue*, Maraini justifies Modigliani's presence at the exhibition by emphasizing three main points: his intrinsically Italian character, the presence of the Italian pictorial tradition, and the combination of past and present in his work.

> The painful and glorious experience of Amedeo Modigliani [...] finally finds its first worthy recognition in his homeland, ten years after his death, in the room dedicated to him by the Biennale, curated by Lionello Venturi. For, although it was in Paris that the painter from Livorno reached the decisive formula of his genius, in the exaggerated tension of that cosmopolitan climate, he was always shaped by a purely Italian scene, characterized by clarity and frankness of style. So much so that his biographers and admirers do not hesitate to trace in these qualities, and in the mysterious charm that seems to fix his images, a distant heritage of the Sienese primitives and the linearity of Botticelli. This is Modigliani's lesson: to be both ancient and modern—timeless. And always Italian. (1930a, 30)

The comment about the artist made by Margherita Sarfatti in the newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* helps explain the reception of Modigliani and his connection to the *Return to Order* movement. Her article opens with the assertion that the watchwords are "severity, austerity, precision, determination, and classicism," and that Impressionism, like Romanticism, belongs to the past.

> Amedeo Modigliani fulfilled one of the typical roles of Italian genius in all fields: to point to new paths for the future. The influence of the avant-garde

3. Modigliani is criticized for not promoting any formal innovation, especially in comparison with Cubism. "Among the Italians: (...) only Amedeo Modigliani draws attention; he performs skillful and rather unexpected distortions, but his work, as interesting as it is, is too hasty and sometimes lacks true originality." (Olivier, 1920, p.10).

French cosmopolitan environment acted on him in the purest and best way, because, through the assimilation of others' experiences, he was able, with clairvoyant confidence, to gain courage and an intimate awareness of himself.

This man from Livorno, who died very young in poverty, is one of the guiding spirits of modern painting, and his influence greatly contributes to bringing out the element of Tuscan, Sienese, and Botticellian Italianism.

From the primitives of Siena and Botticelli, he, a close relative, in fact a direct descendant, brings to modern painting the soul and even the forms, without any archaism, actually with total originality. A little heavy matter is enough for him, so that the humanity of his creatures emerges from the slender lamp. Unlike the Gothic style, this happens without torment or disturbance of the distorted forms; it is achieved in the manner of Italy, with high harmony. Modigliani, like the Sienese, devoutly adores that consecrated flesh, tabernacle and revelation of the spirit, from which each feature is carved and imprinted by inner light. From the shoulders, the neck becomes long and slender, supporting the slender flower of the face, and his nudes, although close to Gauguin in the plastic and chromatic scheme, transform the decorative elements into more delicate meanings, shivers of voluptuousness and poetry of virtual motherhood.

Of all his works, perhaps the Self-Portrait is Modigliani's strongest piece, sober and resplendent, with restrained coloristic skill. (1930b)

In both Maraini's and Sarfatti's commentaries, there is the idea that the French cosmopolitan environment, instead of corrupting the artist, allowed him, through antithesis, to express what is truly Italian in his taste. Both highlight that the artist does not succumb to a programmatic avant-garde style, insisting on a unique style, even when it runs counter to the taste of French critics of the period. We see that the analysis of the pictorial elements of Modigliani's work is intertwined with a discourse that appeals to the sentimental and spiritual aspect of his approach to art. That is, by linking his style to the Tuscan and Sienese masters, it highlights not only the linearity that connects him to Botticelli but also an almost devotional aspect, where "flesh is a revelation of the spirit." Sarfatti does not exclude his connection to the artists of his time, emphasizing the plastic and chromatic scheme that links him to contemporary artists. The author mentions Gauguin, while other critics reference Toulouse-Lautrec and Brancusi, for example. However, it is emphasized that the decorative element in Modigliani assumes a more affectionate aspect. Modigliani's modernity, therefore, lies in his ability to reconcile tradition and modernity, embodying the principle that true art cannot be reduced to an individual whim but must reflect the universal of a people in its particular expression.

Regarding this interpretation of Modigliani as a continuator of the

best Italian tradition, expressing the cherished "Italianity," we cannot deny that there is something in his poetics that supports this viewpoint. It is undeniable that the artist develops his style without fully embracing the abstracting tendencies of the avant-garde, not adhering to the "manifesto trends" of Cubism, Fauvism, or Futurism. Indeed, from a formal standpoint, Modigliani's style changes significantly after he moved to Paris and came into contact with French modernist trends. If we compare one of the few known paintings from his Italian period, *The Tuscan Road* (1889), with a work from his early years in Paris, *The Cellist* (1909), we can perceive this influence. While the former falls within a naturalistic perspective typical of a learning phase, the latter reveals how his work shifts towards an emphasis on color masses that structure the composition, characteristic of Cézanne's works. In 1911, Modigliani began to focus more on drawing and sculpture, with caryatids as his almost exclusive theme, reflecting the modernist interest in so-called "primitive art." In this context, Modigliani's sculptures were displayed alongside Cubist paintings, indicating shared interests and possibly an attempt to align with this group, especially considering elements of simultaneity and decomposition that Cubists introduced in their imagery. Some of his watercolor caryatid sketches, as well as his portraits, especially those created between 1914 and 1917, also

Amadeo Modigliani, The Tuscan Road, 1898, Museo Civico Fattori, Livorno

Amedeo Modigliani, The Cellist, 1909, Archive Abelló Collection, Madrid.(left) and Amedeo Modigliani, Bride and Groom, 1915, MoMa, NY (right).

recall Picasso's use of color and space construction, as exemplified in *The Bride and Groom* (1915). Modigliani's return to painting in 1916 focused exclusively on nudes and portraits. During this period, the Cézanne-like elements of color masses and the synthetic, austere scheme of "primitive" sculpture persisted. Yet Modigliani never adopted the Cubist syntax of fragmenting figures and space. On the contrary, he maintained a strong linearity and psychological characterization of figures, elements contrary to avant-garde experimentation. In *Reclining Nude* (1919), the female figure is outlined by a long, sinuous line, contrasted with an abstracted space constructed by overlapping layers of color and a delicate decorative element that merely suggests the pillows of a bed.

The question regarding Modigliani is aptly expressed by Giulio Carlo Argan:

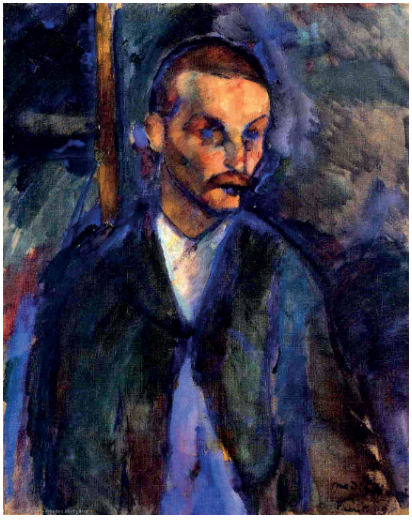
> At the origin of this simultaneity of movements, this intricate play of curves and counter-curves, of light and dark masses, lies not the chromatic version of the Fauves, but the Cubist decomposition. However, the mechanism that activates all the elements of the painting is the sharp drawing of the pointed nose, the crooked mouth, in other words, the features that describe the character's physiognomy and psychology. Why does Modigliani, after assimilating the Cubist syntax, not take it to its ultimate consequences? Why does he return to the traditional type of portrait and nude? Because, instead of bringing things and space together in a single

Amedeo Modigliani, Reclined Nude, 1919, MoMa, NY

> architecture, he isolates a fragment of space, now significant, sensitized by the presence of a person characterized in physiognomic and psychological terms? (2006, p. 468)

In this sense, it is this retreat from the extreme abstraction of the avant-garde that allows the faction most closely aligned with the Fascist regime, namely Maraini and Sarfatti, to consider him an expression of the *Return to Order* movement. Modigliani became the perfect figure to support the argument the claim that a return to tradition was the most appropriate path for modern art. However, Iamurri (2012) raises a pertinent point in this context, suggesting that the attempt to appropriate the Livorno artist in terms of a national celebration, turning him into a defender of "Italianity", can only have a dubious and partial outcome. "The laborious verbal constructions of contemporary critics demonstrate the difficulty of reconciling the quality of the paintings with the schemes imposed by a generalized ideological structure" (2012, p.154). Iamurri rightly highlights the artificial, and in our view even anachronistic, manner in which this appropriation is made. When we consider not only Modigliani's figure what but also his own writings on his artistic and creative process, as well as what his closest friends said about his aspirations, we see an artist who was not content with the artistic canon emerging in the late 1920s and early 1930s. That is, while distant from the more radical forms of abstraction, the artist was equally uninterested in the ideas of a return to realism, the primacy of plastic form, or the expression of the life and feelings of a people.

In contrast to the artificial alignment of Modigliani with the *Return to Order* movement, the




Amadeo Modigliani, The Beggar of Livorno, 1909, Private Collection (left), and Amedeo Modigliani, Self-Portrait , 1919, MAC , São Paulo

interpretation of the historian and art critic Lionello Venturi, curator of the room dedicated to Modigliani, emerges as a counterpoint. Venturi's position is particularly compelling because, while rejecting this forced, ideological, and nationalistic alignment, he manages to articulate this dissent in a way that remains acceptable by critics aligned with Fascism. Through carefully calibrated mediations, he is able to assert his position and intervene in a cultural scene increasingly dominated by the regime's ideology.

In the text on Modigliani in the exhibition catalogue, Venturi's rejection of the artist's association with the *Return to Order* is conveyed more implicitly than explicitly. From a formal perspective, Venturi compares two of Modigliani's works to show that his starting point is Cézanne: *The Beggar of Livorno* (1909) and *Self-Portrait* (1919). In the first, "masses and volumes are arranged according to color and tone. The principle of line has not yet appeared» (1930a, p. 114). In the second, "[t]he tonal masses and volumes remain, but line is integrated into them to fulfill its synthesizing function" (1930a, p. 114). We have here the first element through which Venturi distances Modigliani from the Return to Order. For Venturi, line in Modigliani's work has a synthesizing function. But what does this mean? Firstly, it indicates that this line is not reclaimed from tradition; rather, it emerges from the positive influx of various influences that only the cosmopolitan Parisian environment could provide: African sculpture, French Gothic sculpture, Italian primitives, Japanese art, and

El Greco. Venturi understands that these influences were mobilized by artists in Paris not as fixed dogmas or artistic trends to be perpetuated, but as a means of liberation from the weight of a single tradition. Secondly, the line pursued by the artist does not serve to firmly delineate contours; instead, it holds a value of simplification, liberation from the contingent, and a quest for the essential.

Venturi thus argues that the line in Modigliani's work should be seen as resolving the antithesis between structure, derived from Cézanne's lessons, and decoration, rooted in the Impressionist taste. To maintain the third dimension while preserving the decorative element, Modigliani employs a line that, far from simply outlining, works simultaneously with overlapping planes, bringing the image to the surface and contorting not just the pose but the very form of the image. In this sense, the interplay of curves and counter-curves in Modigliani's composition serves to surface elements created for depth, achieving a three-dimensional vision through a deliberately superficial appearance. This effort to reconcile structure and decoration demands deformation as a formal system.

> For the line to emerge with the pictorial mass rather than being added, it had to be more than a contour; it needed to move the masses toward a new order and proportion. Thus, the elongation of Modigliani's images, excessive compared to natural measures, was the essential necessity of a style that encapsulated the antithesis of depth and surface, the constructive and decorative, the cognitive ideal of reality and the mere phantom of grace. (1930a, pp. 114-115)

This formal analysis of the function of line in Modigliani's work in the catalogue, while hinting at Venturi's criticism regarding the artist's association with the *Return to Order*, does not extend to the full interpretation of his poetics. Although the critic acknowledges that Modigliani remained distant from the cold abstractions of Cubism and Futurism, he does not attribute this distance to any intention of returning to tradition. This argument becomes clearer when we examine other texts by the critic that address more directly the issue of Modigliani's relationship with tradition.

In the article "Sulla linea di Modigliani," published in the magazine *Poligono* in 1930, Venturi clarifies his view that the linear element in Modigliani responds to an antithesis between structure and decoration that only makes sense within the context of modern art. For this reason, he disagrees with comparisons made between Modigliani's line and those of Simone Martini, Botticelli, or Cosmè Tura. In the catalogue, the critic had already hinted at this opposition between constructive and decorative elements, attributing to the line the ability to synthesize the two by deforming not

just the figure but the whole image. In the article, Venturi reinforces that the problem Modigliani sought to solve—the antithesis between depth and surface, constructive and decorative—was posed by Cézanne in relation to the language of Impressionism.

> In Cézanne, if depth is seen as a symbol of constructive vision and Monet as a symbol of decorative vision on the surface, it seems that Modigliani is far from both—he speaks a different language. [...] Between color and form, between surface and depth, there seems to be a contrast in the details that perfectly softens the overall vision, precisely through the line. [...] Decorative extension on the plane and constructive superposition in depth: two originally antithetical visions, reconciled in the painter's genius. (1930c, pp. 194, 196)

The importance Venturi assigns to the linear element, against the undeniable dominance of the Impressionists' coloured areas or Cézanne's plastic planes, is to be understood as an attempt to resolve an antithesis unique to modern art. For Venturi, the line itself, even if slender and undulating, a receptacle of "decorative grace," is not enough to make his art contemporary. It must also be realized as a solution to a modern dilemma, meeting two conditions: representing the invisible, that is, depth, and becoming a symbol of the unknowable.

Venturi establishes a continuity between the production of the Impressionists, Cézanne, and the twentieth-century avant-garde concerning what he understands as "French taste." He identifies a simplification in French taste, initiated by the Impressionists and continued by Cézanne. The French succeeded in freeing themselves from the prescriptive programmes of the Academy, avoiding any preference for naturalistic or historically limited elements of vision, thereby achieving a simple "scheme" free from imitative or "rational" prejudices. The critic praises Manet, Monet, Cézanne, and other Post-Impressionist artists for the sincerity and originality of their initial impulses and their refusal to adhere to academic prescriptions. Regarding the Impressionists, Venturi notes that "the Impressionist painter sees the image, not caring how it is, but how it appears, and perceives it as a created subjective phantom, not as a reproduced objective reality" (1930d, 93). He argues that Modigliani's poetics should be seen as an expression of the "extreme simplification of French taste," precisely because it does not commit to reproducing objective reality. In this sense, Venturi believes that a return to a neoclassical taste is detrimental, even when not strictly based on the rules of academic art, because the prejudices stemming from a preference for a rational and objective scheme of reality, rooted in classical taste, would prevent the recognition of modern artistic experiences in their true potential.

In this sense, Modigliani is viewed as an artist whose works should be interpreted as a reaction

against the *Return to Order* trends, where "classicism" and "realism" are taken in a strictly historical sense—verisimilitude and objectification of external reality—while Venturi argues they should have a philosophical meaning, not serving as absolute value criteria. The resolute and demanding simplification of taste, initiated by the Impressionists, continued by Cézanne, and present in Modigliani, signifies for Venturi an abandonment of extra-artistic concerns—a necessary condition for freeing art from tradition as a burden and from the privileging of any historically determined element. Here lies the power of Venturi's interpretation: the extreme simplification of taste, inherited from the French experiences of the Impressionists and Cézanne, allows Modigliani to detach from a conception of art as the expression of objective reality, the sentiment of a people, or the character of an era. It means claiming the autonomy of art in its deepest sense, where the originality and authenticity of the creative spirit are not hindered by any attempt to conform to a particular program, style, or trend.

Thus, it is not about denying that there are formal elements in Modigliani's work that distance him from the proposals of the French avant-garde, nor of suggesting a discontinuity between Modigliani and the Italian tradition. Rather, it is about affirming that none of these aspects indicates even partial adherence to programmes and precepts based on a neoclassical taste. The assimilation of French taste as a form of creative freedom, culminating in a simplification of form, is seen by Venturi as essential for Modigliani to fully realize his art. This does not mean that his recognition stems from a stronger abstract tendency than that admitted by the *Return to Order* critics; rather, it lies in a poetics that, while appreciating various traditions, manages to avoid the opposition between classicism and romanticism.

We see that, on the one hand, Venturi's interpretation denotes a common project among intellectuals aimed at securing Italy's place in the history of modernism. This approach aligns with a broader context linked to the growth of art collections, the establishment of museums and institutions, and the creation of specialized magazines focused on modern art. On the other hand, Venturi does so without resorting to artificial and anachronistic approaches. Instead, he seeks, albeit subtly, to promote a different conception of modernism: one less bound to programmes and canons, and more closely tied to the idea of creative freedom. The Modigliani case allows us to understand how narrative disputes occurred within institutions already ideologically informed by Fascism, and how dissenting opinions regarding both the direction of modern art and ideological alignment with the Fascist regime could be echoed. Our intention was, therefore, to highlight that the development of a discourse

valorising Italian modern art was not free from disputes and contradictions.

Some Considerations

When discussing Modigliani's reception in 1930, particularly in the context of the XVII Venice Biennale, we do not cover some significant developments of this reception. By restricting the argument to the debate conducted at this specific historical moment, one might be led to conclude that Venturi belonged to an undeniably anti-Fascist current of criticism, even though his discourse at the Biennale was measured and mediated, precisely because it was a confrontation within an institution already controlled by the regime. However, there remains an unavoidable issue regarding his critique of Modigliani that cannot go unnoticed.

In the 1950s, after the end of the Second World War II and his return from exile in the United States, Venturi writes again about Modigliani:

> It is true that Modigliani is completely Italian, not only by the accident of birth but also by his temperament: that instinctive devotion to an ideal of beauty, his natural tendency to sympathize with the world around him, and the streak of sentimentality that runs through his work - all are typically Italian (1952, p.153).

> Modigliani's art originated from the fusion of an innate, essentially Italian desire for beauty with the stimulating ferment of early 20th-century Paris. His originality is due to the fact that this foundation in the past is solid enough to withstand the violent tensions of his brief but brilliant career, and to allow tradition to take shape in accordance with our time. (1952, p.153)

In 1930, Venturi's assertion that Modigliani was "completely Italian" or "essentially Italian" could be interpreted as an attempt to place Italy at the gravitational center of modernism—a gesture that was indeed important at the time, for if Italy wanted to regain the artistic relevance it had been losing, it fell to critics to argue and defend the value of its artistic production. In the 1950s, however, especially after the implementation of racial laws in 1938 and the concrete consequences of the radicalization of national identity, such statements sounded controversial and provocative, given Modigliani was Jewish and Venturi himself a famous anti-Fascist.

We must admit that we do not have a definitive answer as to why Venturi, in this new historical context, chose to rehabilitate Modigliani in terms suspicious to liberal and socialist anti-Fascists. Perhaps it was an attempt to save him at a time when art identified as "Judeo-Masonic" was condemned without reservation. Perhaps he truly believed that Modigliani's Jewish descent was a minor aspect compared to the impact of his Italian *fin-de-siècle* experience on his poetics. In this sense, the comment made by Argan, Venturi's

student and an intellectual strongly influenced by Venturian criticism, resonates:

> What Modigliani has of 'Italian' is only the internal restlessness (the same as the futurists) that arises from the void of the romantic experience, which was not fully embraced by Italian culture, or if it was, it was done incompletely. Therefore, he does not accept the idea of analytical painting; poetry must be poetry (Argan, 2006, p.468).

As we mentioned, we do not have a definitive answer to this question, but it certainly complicates how we should interpret Venturi's stance regarding Modigliani. In any case, it indicates that the political landscape, deeply intertwined with art criticism, had changed radically. By this time, statements that in 1930 carried one meaning required much greater caution. It also shows how Venturi's own development, often viewed as homogeneous and linear, reflects the contradictions of a period marked by violence and censure.

Final considerations

Given the Biennale organizers' overall proposal to foster the reconstructive task of a new generation of artists, guided by national tradition and by a realistic pictorial language, in open rivalry with French artistic experiences, the creation of an individual room dedicated to Amedeo Modigliani appears as a way of authenticating this discourse on modern art. However, what we see in the catalogue is a dispute over the very meaning of modernity expressed by the artist's poetics and, consequently, over the terms in which Modigliani can be considered a guide for contemporary painting in Italy. Our intention with this investigation into Modigliani's presence at the Biennale, and into the role of tradition in his poetics, has been to highlight that Venturi, from within the institution, was able to develop an interpretative approach that sought to block a nationalist and ideological appropriation of the artist's works. By conceiving him as a continuer of the simplifying trend of French taste, Venturi allows for a recognition of his resistance to extreme abstraction without affiliating him with the Fascist movement aimed at reviving a historical sense of the notion of the "classical." In this sense, Venturi engaged in the effort to valorize modern Italian art, yet he stood apart from the ideological and programmatic narratives of supposed superiority of feeling over intellect or of verisimilitude over reality. Precisely because his criticism remained attentive to the singularity of Modigliani's poetics, Venturi realized that the artist's work could not be explained through major models, neither those of tradition nor of the avant-garde. By focusing on the object itself, that is, the final product of the artistic process—the finished artwork—Venturi able to determine the modernist ideals and aspirations of Modigliani's poetics.

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