

‘Italian Futurism’  
at the Guggenheim, NY

## A ONCE-IN-A-LIFE- TIME EXHIBITION

‘Italian Futurism’ is the perfect exhibition for those keen to explore the connection between creative imagination and technological determinism, as well as the role played by museum collections when constructing and revising art history.

Sue SPAID

This exhibition poses a challenge to art historical texts that privilege Cubism over Italian Futurism, which involved nearly 1000 artists in artistic practices ranging from music, theater, costume design, fashion, dance, performance, poetry, graphic design, advertising and architecture to fine art. Exemplary of Italian Futurism’s status, about 30 recent scholarly books concern Futurism – a four-year movement whose participants numbered only sixteen – while only 20 new books address Italian Futurism. To approximate Italian Futurism’s breadth, one would have to combine the cultural contributions of Dada performance, cubist painting and Bauhaus construction. One explanation for Futurism’s art historical slight is that so few museums outside of Italy own works by Italian Futurists, constraining most museums’ abilities to accurately educate their publics. Telling this story required the Guggenheim to borrow more than 90% of the artworks and ephemera from Italian institutions, including 15% borrowed from anonymous private collections, making this a sort of once-in-a-lifetime exhibition for those who are even remotely interested to discover this underestimated movement’s wide-ranging impact.

Exemplary of their breadth, F.T. Marinetti’s original 1909 Italian Futurist manifesto shares company with 22 related texts from ‘Manifesto of the Futurist Musicians’, ‘The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells: Futurist Manifesto’, ‘Manifesto of The Futurist Woman’ to ‘The Futurist Manifesto of Lust’. Sixteen different Futurist manifestos were distributed by 1914 and Marinetti published more than 16 manifestos, four



Installation view of the entrance to Giacomo Balla's stage design of Igor Stravinsky's *Fireworks* (1916-17) in 'Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe' at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC, photo Kristopher McKay

novels and six poetry books over two decades. Although art historians have tended to blame Futurism's poor reputation on its participants' Fascist sentiments, this exhibition suggests that despite their fascination with speed, technology, nationalism and war, they quickly parted ways with Benito Mussolini's political party. Futurist aggressions reflected their desire to reunite Italian lands then under Austro-Hungarian Empire domination. While Hitler branded Germany's avant-garde 'degenerate', Mussolini valued Italy's vanguard enough to sponsor several of their exhibitions. Unlike the Russian Constructivists, the Italian Fascists implemented Futurist values and ideas without co-opting either its 'look' or artists as ideological tools.

### MOVEMENT

Although 'Italian Futurism' begins with Gino Severini's divisionist paintings and Umberto Boccioni's proto-cubist drawings, this show demonstrates that the tendency to depict dynamic and simultaneous events was already in play by 1911, one year before their Paris debut. Artworks presented here that highlight Futurism's greater fecundity over Cubism include Giacomo Balla's dynamic light show, which originally accompanied

Igor Stravinsky's 'Fireworks' (1916-1917); paintings of that era's inventions – cars, airplanes, motorboats, seaplanes and skyscrapers – in motion; experimental films from the teens; 'aero-aesthetics' (paintings, films and photographs from the 1930s depicting Earth from the pilot's perspective) and photographs detailing their imaginatively installed painting exhibitions. Futurist architects like Mario Chiattone and Antonio Sant'Elia envisioned monumental factories and apartment complexes, while photographers Mario Bellusi, Ottavio Berard, Piero Boccardi, Anton and Arturo Bragaglia, Mauro Camuzzi and Gligielmo Sansoni found ways to incorporate movement into their photos of the 1930s.

One of the rare Fascist commissions of Italian Futurist art, five fresco-like paintings by Marinetti's wife Benedetta are exhibited here for the first time since their 1935 installation inside the Palermo Post Office. Given the Futurists' fascination with movement and speed, scores of paintings by Balla, Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Marinetti, Luigi Russolo and Severini demonstrate how these master geometers insinuated speed, depth and waves using only spirals, curves and triangles. Five drawings and a painting from Balla's 'iridescent interpenetration' series (1912-1914) introduce tools that Op artists exploited decades later.

What has bizarrely gone unmentioned is Italian Futurism's influence on experiential artworks. Not only did their performances engage spectators as actors, but their 'Aeropittura' paintings situated viewers in the pilot's seat, giving spectators the impression of being part of the scene. Although one imagines Michael Fried rejecting Futurist pictures for their 'theatricality', they are far more than pictures to be looked at. Anticipating video games, they simulate action and stimulate imaginations. Moreover, Futurist paintings inspired Lucio Fontana's 'Ambiente Spaziale' (1949-1967), light installations engrossing spectators in darkened spaces, such as the 1949 installation on view in Paris. No doubt, Fontana's experiential ploys led to John Dewey's seminal text 'Art as Experience' (1934) being translated into Italian, some fifty years before its French edition.

'Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe' on view until 1 September at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, USA. [www.guggenheim.org](http://www.guggenheim.org)  
Lucio Fontana: Retrospective on view until 24 August at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, FR. [www.mam.paris.fr](http://www.mam.paris.fr)