

Casa Balla: From the House to the Universe and Back  
MAXXI, Rome, IT  
plus Casa Balla, Via Oslavia 39b  
17 June through 21 November 2021

On 5 February 1909, the Milanese art theorist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published “Manifesto iniziale del Futurismo” in Bologna’s *Gazzetta dell’Emilia*. Two weeks later, it appeared on the front cover of the French daily *Le Figaro*. Although Giacomo Balla didn’t participate in “Italian Futurist Painters” (1912), the first touring exhibition of futurist art that originated in London and passed through galleries in Paris, Berlin, Brussels and elsewhere; he taught two of its four contributors (Gino Severini and Umberto Boccioni), making him the movement’s guiding light. By 1913, he was exhibiting regularly with the Futurists and in 1919, he opened his first home to the public as a testimony to Futurism’s place in everyday life.

The doors to Casa Balla, his second home, are finally open! In January 2005, Italian conceptual artist Patrizia Giambi and I tried to visit Giacomo Balla’s apartment. Even though we were in Rome to locate the remains of Robert Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), I was keen to visit Balla’s apartment since I had just seen Jack Clemente’s docufilm *Balla et la futurism* (1971), whose amazing scenes of this *gesamkunstwerk* totally enticed me. What we found instead was a solid wooden door locked in three different chains; each colour representing a different party in lawsuits claiming the right to elements inside. By chance, the son of an art historian inhabiting the apartment directly above Casa Balla noticed us and invited us to chat with his dad about the Shangri-la hidden behind the door. He told us that the deaths ten years earlier of Balla’s artist daughters Luce at 90 and Elica at 79 (Italian for light and propeller, respectively) had prompted legal battles, thus interrupting Casa Balla’s bright future.

Upon reading in June that Casa Balla was finally accessible, I leaped at the chance to enter. Closed for nearly five decades, its reopening coincides with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Balla’s birth in 1871. Two months before Italy entered World War I, Balla and his then student Fortunato Depero wrote the *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe* (1915), which committed them to: a “complete fusion in order to reconstruct the universe, cheering it up—that is, recreating it entirely,” giving “flesh and blood to the invisible, the impalpable, the imponderable, the imperceptible” and creating art that would be a “dynamic, simultaneous, plastic noise-ist expression of universal vibrations.”

One might ask how MAXXI, a museum dedicated to 21<sup>st</sup> century art, justifies championing artworks dating from a century ago. Rather than showcasing the Balla family’s legacy in terms of extant artworks, MAXXI commissioned eight artists, designers and architects (b. 1961-1982) to make new artworks in response to Casa Balla. Although the results left me feeling nonplussed, this exhibition is definitely more contemporary than would be a survey of his inaugurating Op Art, sound art, performance, installation art, all-over painting, edible art, experimental film, dance and theater. So pervasive is his influence that any exhibition of extant art would automatically feel passé. MAXXI juxtaposes Casa Balla’s Studio Rosso door, green dining room furniture, carpets and tapestries, as well as his designs for a cabaret, interiors, lamps, clothing and typography and Elica’s interior designs with artworks by architecture filmmakers Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, photographer Carlo Benvenuto, performance artist Alex Cecchetti, installation artist Jim Lambie, sculptor Emiliano Maggi, typographer Leonardo Sonnoli, VR-architects Space Popular and designer/architect Patricia Urquiola.

While several new projects are surprising and all are well presented, Space Popular’s *Camera Balla* (2021), a modest video presented on a circular screen in the gallery’s far corner (behind Urquiola’s delightful communal table) impressed me most. In just a few minutes, Space Popular (Lara Lesmes and Fredrik Hellberg) render the simultaneity of our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. Their video captures imagery transitioning from representational painting to photographic/sonic registrations to wifi/networking, while Balla’s colourful patterns evolve into spherical images of Casa Balla, whose kaleidoscopic imagery morphs and multiplies to render hyperspace. *Camera Balla* echoes Balla’s painting *La seggiola dell’uomo strano* (The

Weird Man's Chair)(1929) whose spherical visions appear bathed in prisms of light refracting off a tiny stick figure at its center. The chair in question is one of Casa Balla's handmade chairs, while a light beam piercing the apartment door reaches the universe outside. No doubt, Casa Balla swung open the door for art to pervade every aspect of our lives.

The notion of doors opening up onto more doors evokes simultaneity, so it's hardly surprising that doors pervade Casa Balla. The front door, signed "FuturBalla," welcomes visitors to this astonishing wonderland. The kitchen door with its small pastel glass squares insinuates calm and comfort. "La stanza dei rumori continui" (the room of unrelenting noise) is written above the door leading to kitchen storage, yet conveys this buzzing hive's mantra. Painted in red, yellow, blue and green "blobs," the door that separated Balla's Studio Rosso and bedroom from his apartment's lively activities is on view at MAXXI. Meanwhile, the same pattern transforms Studio Rosso's light box lamp, cupboards, bookshelves and coat rack into a unified surface. Glass doors to the bedrooms of painter and seamstress Luce (1904-1994) and painter and amateur astronomer Elica (1914-1993) are hand painted with floral motifs, vines and leaves, as are the shutters, terrace door and observatory (plus gyroscope) inside Elica's room. Since Elica was nicknamed the "cloud catcher," her room features several cloud paintings, including one that she exhibited in 1945 alongside her father and elder sister, and a desk set covered in leopard spots.

Clearly, this family lived, breathed and slept creativity. Standing atop gorgeous hand-painted purple tiles in the living room, one notices the vast array of handmade easels and their maquettes. More display tools than painting tools, these easels enabled Balla's dynamic paintings to fly off walls to become free-standing things. The Ballas regularly recovered chairs and sofas with fabrics assembled from triangular scraps to evoke prismatic colours. A plurality of practices arose under one roof, as each artist inventively reworked their home over time. Casa Balla even inspired two Italian design movements- Studio Alchimia and Memphis, whose colourful patterns and geometric forms directly reference Casa Balla's intensity.

Prior to moving to Via Oslavia 39b in 1929, the Balla family lived near the Villa Borghese. During this period (1904-1926), Balla designed the Löwenstein's Düsseldorf home (1912), built Studio Rosso inside his model Futurist home, designed Rome's Bal Tik Tak cabaret (1921) and built furniture for Guglielmo Jannelli's Villino Mamertino in Messina, IT (1924). In 1919, Balla opened his home to the public on Sunday afternoons, inspiring *Case d'Arte* (art houses) to pop up across Italy. By 1925, Futurists such as Tato in Bologna, Cesare Andreoni in Milan, Pippo Rizzo in Palermo, Enrico Prampolini, Anton Giulio Bragaglia and Virgilio Vecchi in Rome and Depero in Rovereto had either established a workshop, opened a shop or set up their home to showcase customisable artisanal objects, paving the way for today's Etsy posse.

Unlike the designers of the American Prairie School, Great Britain's Arts and Crafts Movement or Belgium's Art Nouveau, the Futurists constructed their home's furnishings. Two photos from Theo Van Doesburg's archives are of interest: one from 1932 features Elica, Balla and Luce dressed in Futurist outfits surrounded by "Futurist flowers," furniture and free-floating paintings, while another captures Balla's cabaret, a likely inspiration for Café l'Aubette (1927) in Strasbourg, FR. In 1927, Piet Mondrian wrote "Various movements have tried to abolish form and create a freer rhythm. Futurism gave the major impulse." Casa Balla predates Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* (1933) and the many *in situ* installations interspersed throughout the "Exposition internationale du surréalisme" (1938).

Without access to more photographs, it's difficult to assess changes made by the daughters following Balla's death. Despite their having exhibited alongside their father in Futurist exhibitions, "FuturBalla" never became ideology. Unlike families who attempt to institutionalize a style or brand a name, all three remained free to explore either avant-garde or retro approaches. The eclectic styles (nonobjective and floral motifs), formats and subjects (including landscapes and classical portraiture) present in the home and visible in photographs suggest the daughters' greater affinity for Ferdinand Hodler than Balla. Entirely focused on energy, movement, light and vibrations, they felt no compulsion to jump aboard

that era's AbEx train. Moreover, they painted recto verso, so I imagine that the paintings that survived were meant to be, otherwise they would have been reworked into something new.

Casa Balla, as currently experienced is a curated exhibition, organised to prompt particular stories about each of the characters who lived there and gave it life. What's sorely missing from Casa Balla are images that show visitors exactly how it looked the moment the chains came off, as well as the story of how its contents (hundreds of landscapes, portraits and decorative paintings in all manner of style) were eventually distributed. Moreover, there's no explanation for why Balla's actual bedroom remained undecorated. Perhaps the daughters used it more for storage or as a studio than display. In reflecting upon Balla's patterns, one point that distinguishes his approach from his peers is that his system was cumulative, as each mark or shape responded to prior ones. Unlike artists who transformed scenes into segments familiar to Divisionism, Cubism and De Stijl, Balla's paintings arose from motifs that multiplied, spreading across paintings and walls more like living organisms.