

Outside the Fascist Canon of Ancient Art:

Edoardo Persico, *Arte romana* (1935) and an Alternative Look toward Antiquity

Giorgio Motisi (Scuola Normale Superiore)

giorgiomotisi2@gmail.com

giorgio.motisi@sns.it

Giorgio Motisi is a PhD candidate at the Scuola Normale of Pisa. His research focuses on Italian art of the twentieth century, with a special attention on the reception of ancient and Renaissance art, and the critical dialogue with the international avant-gard. His doctoral project concerns Francesco Arcangeli's work as a critic during the 1950s and the theme of nature in Italian painting during the 1950s, with a special interest in contacts with American abstract expressionism. In 2022 he was a research fellow at the CIMA (Center for Italian Modern Art) in New York. In 2024 he was awarded an Archive Research Residency at the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

Abstract

The paper offers a reflection on some case studies of alternative approaches to ancient Roman art by Italian critics and artists during the fascist regime. Specifically, the starting point of the text is *Arte Romana* – a volume on Roman art consisting of a groundbreaking essay and a long sequence of striking photographs, edited by the art critic Edoardo Persico in 1935. The book represented a unique episode in the Italian cultural context of the 1930s, both from a graphic and thematic perspective. Differently from most critics of the time, Persico avoided any form of magniloquent celebration of antiquity. Conversely, he proposed an interpretation of the artworks according to a purely formal and stylistic approach. Furthermore, he stated a strong ideal connection between ancient sculptures and works of international contemporary art, which was then regarded with suspicion by the fascist official culture. On the basis of these considerations, Roman sculpture was unexpectedly presented as an incentive to rethink contemporary culture and society from a progressive perspective: the distance from the ideals of fascist regime could not be more evident.

Introduction

The reception of ancient art in Italy during the decades between the two World Wars is a widely studied theme. Retrospective studies on this topic, however, have focused almost exclusively on the fascist exploitation of classical art for celebratory and propagandistic purposes.¹ This research trend is rather understandable, since fascist appropriation of ancient art still represents an extremely challenging subject: the fascist regime was able to propose different notions of *romanitas* at different stages of its history, the investigated contexts are articulate and heterogeneous, and still today

¹ The bibliography on Fascism's engagement with antiquity is enormous. For a general overview, see e.g. Canfora 1976: 15-48; Losemann 1977; Visser 1992: 5-22; Stone 1999: 205-220; Giardina 2000: 212-296; Nelis 2007: 391-415; Nelis 2011; Salvatori 2014: 227-239. For an up-to-date summary on the studies and a comprehensive bibliography on the subject, see *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, ed. Helen Roche and Kyriakos Demetriou (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017).

numerous case studies have problematic and complex legacies.² Nevertheless, by studying Italian cultural history between the 1920s and 1930s, it is possible to trace other ways of looking at antiquity which, in some cases, seem to reflect an authentic political commitment against Fascism or at least a clear dissociation from the regime's official positions.³ Starting from this reflection, this essay aims at analyzing a paradigmatic case study: the volume *Arte romana* ("Roman Art"), published in December 1935 as a supplement to the renowned Italian architectural magazine *Domus* and edited by the art critic Edoardo Persico. After examining *Arte romana*'s peculiarities, the second purpose of this paper is to reflect on the decisive resonance the volume had on the work of a number of figures closely related to Persico. The critic's approach to Roman art appears indeed as an important precedent for several architects, photographers, designers and painters who were active in Italy, and especially in Milan, in the second half of the 1930s.

Edoardo Persico and Arte Romana

Persico was born in Naples in 1900 and moved to Turin in the second half of the 1920s, where he soon came into close contact with the city's liberal and progressive intellectual circles. As early as 1930, he settled in Milan and began working for the "Milione" Gallery, as well as for the periodicals *Belvedere* and *Casabella*. Thus, within a short period of time, he established himself as one of the key figures in the Italian contemporary art scene. Strongly opposed to the ideals of rigid classicism so prevalent at the time, Persico supported artists such as Renato Birolli, Carlo Levi or Lucio Fontana, who shared an expressionist and anti-classical style, more oriented toward the expressive possibilities of color than toward the construction of solid volumes.⁴ At the same time, the critic became increasingly intrigued by rationalist and modern architecture. In both cases, the driving force behind his interests was a great curiosity for the international cultural scene, which was then regarded with suspicion by the fascist official culture (Tentori 2006). As the critic and architect Bruno Zevi would recall, "Persico's purpose was always the same: to de-provincialize, to shake things up, to push intellectual problems to the point of paradox."⁵

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that during those years Persico developed a growing political intolerance toward the fascist regime and also befriended numerous dissident intellectuals. Among them, it is worth mentioning Lionello Venturi: one of the most prominent Italian art critics of the time, but also one of the few university professors who refused to take the oath of

² For a reflection on the problematic nature of these themes, see Fleming 2006: 127-137. From this perspective, one of the most complex and multifaceted issues concerns the influence of antiquity on the regime's architectural planning strategies. Still today, several buildings erected during Fascism are central elements in the urban landscape of many Italian cities. See e.g. Kostof 1978: 270-325; Aicher 2000: 117-139; Kallis 2014; Marcello 2011: 325-369.

³ From this perspective, a useful methodological model can be found in several studies on the revival of Etruscan art, which during those decades in Italy depended not only on reasons of mere political propaganda. The subject has been the focus of some insightful studies. See e.g. Mauro Pratesi, "Sculptura italiana verso gli anni Trenta e contemporanea rivalutazione dell'arte etrusca," *Bollettino d'arte* 69, no. 6 (1984): 25-30; Flavio Fergonzi, "Arturo Martini e le ricerche sulla terracotta nei primi anni Trenta," *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 16, no. 3 (1986): 895-930; Mauro Pratesi, "Sulle tracce degli Etruschi: l'arte e la critica negli anni Venti e Trenta del Novecento," *Prospettiva* 46, (1986): 80-85; Vincenzo Farinella, "Vedere il sole attraverso occhi di terracotta: alcune fonti archeologiche della scultura di Marino Marini," in *Marino Marini. Passioni Visive*, ed. Barbara Cinelli and Flavio Fergonzi (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2017), 62-85.

⁴ See Edoardo Persico, ed. Cesare De Seta (Naples: Electa, 1987); Edoardo Persico e gli artisti 1929-1936: *il percorso di un critico dall'impressionismo al primitivismo*, ed. Elena Pontiggia (Milan: Electa, 1998).

⁵ Tentori 2006: 33. All the original quoted texts are in Italian; all translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

loyalty to Fascism and, as a consequence, was forced into exile in Paris in 1931 (Iamurri 1999: 59-68). In addition, to understand the close connection between Persico's political commitment and his work as a critic and editor, it is useful to highlight what the art critic Anna Maria Mazzucchelli, who then worked with him for *Casabella*, remembered:

Sometimes articles and photographs too closely related to the fascist regime arrived. In those cases, we had to do all we could to justify not publishing these materials. As a result, we were boycotted. *Casabella* was banned at the School of Architecture in Rome. We were considered the black sheep of our publishing house (Mazzucchelli 1978).

Taking Persico's cultural and political leanings into account, it is easy to imagine that his approach toward Roman art could not coincide with the most widespread interpretation held at the time in Italy. In fact, leafing through the most influential Italian volumes on ancient art published during those years, a clear shared and underlying idea seems to emerge: ancient sculpture, and thus obviously also the Roman one, was primarily celebrated as a model of classicism, balance and masculine robustness. In 1930, for example, the prominent archaeology professor Alessandro Della Seta published a seminal book, *Il nudo nell'arte. Arte antica* ("The Nude in Art. Ancient Art"), one of the main reference texts to understand the common conception of ancient sculptures in Italy at the time. Within the volume, Della Seta proposed a scientific and almost anatomical study of ancient works: the main objective was to demonstrate that they had to be admired as models of "formal severity," achieved through a "solid construction of bones, joints and muscles," rigorously rendered in a "state of immobility" (Della Seta 1930: 1). Similar positions seemed to be directly reflected in the work of several contemporary artists as well. Significantly, in the early 1930s, the Venice Biennale's general secretary, the sculptor Antonio Mariani, strongly argued for a "return to the supremacy of form" of ancient art against the "chaotic impressionistic disorder" of contemporary international trends (Maraini 1986: 9). Such a statement was obviously influenced by the Italian political situation, as well as by the desire to forcefully assert a national identity tied to a glorious past (Margozzi 2012).

In contrast to this climate, Persico's *Arte romana* would have moved in a completely opposite direction. The critic must have been fully aware of this, for, in the introduction to his volume, he immediately pointed out that the main risk in his work was to give in to a "merely archaeological and rhetorical interpretation" of ancient art. In this regard, he had no qualms about claiming that most of his coeval scholars had undeniably "replaced their judgment with a mere glorification" of Roman sculptures. So, in trying to disassociate himself from this trend, he openly stated that from the very beginning of the project his intention had been to avoid "any reference to the subjects depicted, which would have been an inevitable invitation to rhetoric," focusing instead on "the aesthetic and formal values" of the works (Persico 1935: 28-31).

These ideas were primarily reflected in the visual solutions adopted within the volume. Not by chance, Persico stated that "the most interesting aspect of the work has to be sought in the way its contents are presented" (ibid., 27-28). In fact, the critic had also been directly involved in the choice of layouts, every graphic detail, and had personally chosen the ninety full-page photographic reproductions which, even more so than his brief critical essay, represented the core of *Arte romana*. The pictures used by Persico were originally part of the catalogs of some of the main Italian photographic companies (Alinari, Anderson, Brogi), which over the previous decades had been responsible for comprehensively documenting the Italian heritage of ancient art. But in view of the publication of the volume, all the photographs had been edited and cropped, and in their final version they were presented with extremely refined and modern graphics, almost never reproduced in their

entirety. On the contrary, details and close-ups were dynamically juxtaposed, according to an unprecedented and disorienting perspective. As a result, the readers could not have a didactic, historical or linear understanding of their contents, and were forced to give up their traditional knowledge about ancient art. The only possible approach to these images was to focus on their pure expressive and stylistic qualities.

For instance, the solemn and easily recognizable poses of the full-length statues were completely cut off. The same was true for the renowned decorated armor of the *Augustus of Prima Porta*. Going against audience expectations, the focus was exclusively on the physiognomic characterization of the sculptures' faces (figure 1). Likewise, a clear view of the content of sculptural reliefs was hardly ever offered. In the case of *Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus*, for example, the reproductions showed only a few details chosen for their peculiar expressive intensity (figure 2). Furthermore, some of the photographs included in the volume were printed so as to entirely occupy two adjacent pages: a significant innovation for the graphics of those years. The visual impact, especially for the Italian public of the time, must have been quite unexpected: even considering the large size of the pages (11,42 x 14,92 in.), the reader could almost have the impression of being concretely absorbed within these images and the visual interaction with the works inevitably became much more intimate than people were used to (figure 3). Persico eloquently wrote: "If we could, we would have gone even further, focusing only on isolated fragments" (ibid., 28).

Arte romana also included numerous advertising pages, specifically designed by the critic together with several specialized graphic designers, such as Alfredo Carnelutti. The advertisements did not have a simple promotional and profit-making function, but, following a fairly common practice in those years, played a crucial aesthetic role within the volume. These pages proposed an ironic and playful image of ancient artworks, putting them in open dialogue with modern graphics and contemporary products. For instance, the renowned fresco of the so-called *Flora*, from the Archaeological Museum of Naples, was used to promote modern paints and varnishes, and the detail of a relief depicting an ancient racing chariot was placed side by side with the latest FIAT 1500 car model (figure 4). Even in this case, *Arte romana* renounced a linear, official and historical interpretation of Roman art. On the contrary, these advertisements proposed a playful and irreverent approach toward the ancient world.

Persico's essay published within the volume emerged as equally bold and groundbreaking. The critic even went so far as to openly quote the aforementioned Lionello Venturi, who had left Italy four years earlier and was then implicitly seen as an enemy by the fascist regime. Borrowing his colleague's words, Persico firmly asserted the "need for a universal and transnational art culture" – a statement that in an age of violent nationalism was highly controversial. Consequently, he argued for the possibility of freely comparing and recognizing similar values in Roman art as well as in international contemporary art. This was a revolutionary approach for Italy at the time, and the critical consequences Persico arrived at were absolutely radical, completely unexpected within the Italian debate of that time (ibid., 32).

For instance, the critic proposed an ideal comparison between the influence of ancient Provincial art on the style of *Trajan's Column* on the one hand, and the international energies which had given rise to the *École de Paris* during the 1920s on the other. Similarly, speaking of the so-called *Altar of Ostia*, he referred to a notion of "impressionistic deformation," primarily with the aim of efficiently describing the loose composition and the intricate shadow system of the ancient sculptural reliefs. According to such a critical approach, even the formal simplification and the rigid geometries typical of the Constantinian sculptures were ideally compared with Picasso's Cubism

(ibid., 32-22). Persico was aware that these comparisons had no historical or philological validity. Nevertheless, contemporary paintings could actually help the readers to look at ancient artworks with fresh eyes, removing the filter of a centuries-old tradition. Finally, another crucial aspect to consider is that Roman sculptures, celebrated by the fascist propaganda as models of 'Italianness',⁶ were thus provocatively put into dialogue with works that many people in Italy considered as episodes of European degenerate art.⁷

Summing up, even though *Arte romana* apparently presented itself as a simple art history volume, it also acquired a strong social and topical value. This aspect was immediately recognized by its most attentive readers, and during the following weeks Persico received several private letters which confirmed it. The painter Enrico Paulucci, for instance, described the volume as "vital, human and deeply topical," in open opposition to the "country of idiots which we are forced to live in". Likewise, the anti-fascist poet Alfonso Gatto wrote Persico that he had found numerous "interesting insights" within his text, particularly praising its "cultural and polemical implications."⁸ The deep political meaning of these words could not be clearer.

Alternative Approaches to Roman Art

Persico's friends and colleagues could hardly imagine what would happen only a few weeks after the release of *Arte romana*: on the morning of January 11, 1936, the critic was found dead in the bathroom of his apartment in Milan under very suspicious circumstances. The hypothesis that he had been murdered by the fascist secret police quickly emerged, for the critic had been anti-fascist for years and was probably in contact with clandestine resistance groups. Still today, however, several aspects of Persico's life and death remain shrouded in mystery.⁹ What is certain, though, is that the event deeply shocked the city's art scene. Throughout the previous years, Persico had become an important reference point for several artists, especially those of the younger generation, and his sudden death contributed to making him an almost legendary figure. The painter Aligi Sassu would recall: "Persico has been the prophet of our youth. [...] He was definitely the man who loved us the most, who best understood our anxiety, leaning toward a new civilization, toward a new reality."¹⁰

Taking these assumptions into account, it is easy to understand the reasons why *Arte romana* could have a great impact on the work of several young Italian artists. Persico's death was not directly related to the recent publication of the volume. Yet, the book represented the last relevant demonstration of the critic's cultural (as well as implicitly political) commitment, and soon took on an iconic value, almost like a moral testament of his activity.¹¹ It is not possible today to fully

⁶ See e.g. Falasca-Zamponi 1997; Norton (ed.) 2007; Arthurs 2012.

⁷ Italian critics' approach to modern art was definitely more complex and less narrow-minded than that of Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, the international avant-garde movements were generally conceived as negative examples, in sharp contrast to the national tradition. See e.g. *Abstracta: Austria, Germania, Italia 1919-1939. L'altra "arte degenerata"* (Milan: Electa, 1997); Iamurri 2012: 152-165.

⁸ Letters from Enrico Paulucci and Alfonso Gatto to Edoardo Persico, December 1935 or January 1936. See Persico 1964: 217.

⁹ Persico's political involvement and the causes of his death are not yet fully clarified. For a general overview on the topic, see Belfiore 2012; Marcenaro 2017; Puglisi 2019.

¹⁰ Sassu 1936. Significantly, a few months after Persico's death, friends and colleagues formed an editorial committee in order to publish a memorial booklet: *Edoardo Persico* (1936). See de Seta (ed.) 1985: 82-98.

¹¹ Immediately after Persico's death, *Arte romana* achieved great prominence within the Italian contemporary art scene. See Modiano and Mazzucchelli 1936: 230-243.

understand the exact resonance of *Arte romana* in the Italian art scene of the time (for, as it is well known, the second half of the 1930s in Italy was characterized by a growing political censorship: since the expressive freedom of several artists was deeply curtailed, it is often difficult to understand their real interests and intentions).¹² In spite of this, it may be useful to focus on a selection of projects and artworks realized during those years by several figures previously related to Persico, in whose activity it is possible to trace some evident echoes of *Arte romana*.

A first interesting case study can be found in the *Salone della Vittoria* (“Hall of Victory”): a huge hall set up in the spring of 1936 at the *Triennale* in Milan, one of the most important Italian art exhibitions of the time (figure 5).¹³ Persico himself had worked on the project of the *Salone* during the last months of his life, along with the designer Marcello Nizzoli, the architect Giancarlo Palanti, and the sculptor Lucio Fontana, and the close link between the architectural setting of the room and *Arte romana* appears quite evident. For example, the huge photographic close-ups of five Roman portraits displayed inside the hall were explicitly inspired by some of the images printed in the volume. More generally, just like *Arte romana*, the *Salone* proposed a modern, elegant and unexpected interpretation of antiquity. One need only think of Lucio Fontana’s sculptures placed in the middle of the room: while they echoed the ideal whiteness of Roman marbles, the elongated and decorative shapes of the figures reflected a free, anti-rhetorical and almost humorous reworking of ancient models, extremely close to Persico’s ideals and completely different from the rigid classicism so widespread at the time.

Meaningfully, in 1935 Persico had written in his private notes that the *Salone*, with its bright and rational architecture, was supposed to express a renewed “confidence in [...] a peaceful Europe,” through the “principles of modern taste.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, within only a few months, the situation dramatically changed: Persico was killed, and the pressure of the fascist censorship on Italian artists was becoming increasingly heavy. In addition, after the recent colonial wars, Italy’s diplomatic relations were extremely strained – it is telling that on the pedestal of Fontana’s sculptures a quote from Mussolini about Italian imperialist ambitions was added (“Italians created the Empire with their blood. They will enrich it with their labor and defend it against anyone with weapons”)¹⁵. Even the name “*Salone della Vittoria*,” a clear reference to the recent conquest of Ethiopia, had been chosen only a few weeks before the hall’s inauguration, so several months after Persico’s death. The original purpose of the project had been diametrically distorted, and Nizzoli, Palanti and Fontana could not avoid it.

As is well known, over the following years the most widespread approach toward antiquity in Italy still remained celebratory, magniloquent and strongly nationalistic. One of the most paradigmatic episodes of this trend can be traced, for instance, in the renowned *Mostra Augustea della Romanità* (“Augustan Exhibition of Roman World,” 1937-38), on the occasion of the bimillenary of Augustus’ birth. The main cultural subtext, in this case, must have been clear to all

¹² For an introduction to the subject, see Tempesti 1976; *Annitrenta. Arte e cultura in Italia* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1982); Malvano 1988; Gentile 1993.

¹³ See Mugnai 2014: 50-57.

¹⁴ Persico 1968: 194.

¹⁵ The inscription is easily readable thanks to a photograph of the *Salone*. See the fact sheet on the website of Lombardia Beni Culturali: <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-3u030-0002310/>. It would be hard to imagine words more distant from the ideal of a “pacified Europe” expressed by Persico in his text a few months earlier.

visitors: the ideal parallel between the Roman emperor's reign and Mussolini's regime.¹⁶ Such political pressures were a hard obstacle to overcome. Nevertheless, alternative approaches toward ancient art still seemed possible, and the ideals expressed by Persico in *Arte romana* kept on circulating, mainly within inner intellectual circles. A perfect example is offered by the work of the aforementioned Marcello Nizzoli. The graphic designer had already collaborated with Persico on some rationalist installations during the early-1930s.¹⁷ The visual echo of this partnership, however, can also be found in some of his later works: many of Nizzoli's collages and photomontages from the mid-1930s are the result of a modern, ironic and sometimes even provocative graphic reworking of images of ancient works, following an approach extremely close to Persico's.

A couple of visual comparisons may help to understand this connection. In *Studio* (1935-36), for instance, Nizzoli used exactly the same clip of a photograph Persico used to illustrate a detail of the *Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles*, from the Capitoline Museums, in *Arte romana* (figures 6 and 7). An equally telling episode can be traced in another famous photomontage made by Nizzoli in the fall of 1935, consisting of pictures of modern soldiers showed as completely anti-heroic and stereotypical figures, trivial elements of an anonymous crowd (figure 8). Indeed, the overlapping photographs openly emulated the horizontal bands of *Trajan's column*, and perhaps precisely the detail Persico chose in the same months for the cover of *Arte romana*. Not by chance, a darker rectangle made with some military medals seemed to exactly replicate the hole visible in the upper right corner of the photograph used by Persico for his volume (figure 9).

Although in a different way, a link with the visual solutions adopted by Persico in *Arte Romana* can also be seen in Giuseppe Pagano's work. Pagano was an architect, and had been director of *Casabella*, the magazine for which Persico also worked, since 1933. Unfortunately, just like Persico, he passed away too soon – he was Jewish and was deported and killed in the concentration camp of Mauthausen in 1945.¹⁸ Before the outbreak of war, however, Pagano represented one of the most interesting and original photographers in Italy. Among other genres, he mainly devoted himself to the photography of ancient artworks and developed a highly original style, taking some of the most groundbreaking photographs of the time.¹⁹

With his pictures Pagano brought some features of *Arte romana* to their extreme consequences; he pursued new and unexpected viewpoints, focusing on apparently insignificant details or even on the worn-out appearance of materials (figure 10). The subjects depicted were thus often completely unrecognizable. On the other hand, formal and stylistic values emerged as the true essence of these images. Pagano's main purpose was to unsettle the viewers, putting a strain on their traditional approach to the ancient world. After all, changing the way we look at the artworks always also means changing the way we come to terms with our past and tradition. Pagano was aware of this, just like Persico, and thus tried to propose an alternative and anti-official perspective toward the subjects of his photographs. The protagonists of this images were no longer soldiers, emperors, or deities, but rather decorative details, imperfections, and traces left by the passing of the centuries.

¹⁶ The Augustan Exhibition is a paradigmatic example which helps us understand the fascist regime's approach to antiquity. See e.g. Scriba 1993; Prisco 2008: 225-259; Marcello 2011: 223-247; Arthurs 2017: 157-177; Perry 2020: 627-638; *Mythe des origines et réalités (geo)politiques: la Mostra Augustea della Romanità (1937-1938)*, special issue of *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 10 (2020); Ghilardi and Mecella 2023.

¹⁷ Cresti 2016: 575-612.

¹⁸ Bassi and Castagno 1994; Marcello (ed). 2020.

¹⁹ De Seta (ed.) 1979.

Visual approaches of this kind, however, did not only concern design and photography. Equally remarkable episodes can also be traced in some of the most fascinating paintings of the Italian art scene of the time. *Arte romana* clearly demonstrated the possibility of looking at ancient models in anti-classical terms, without the solemnity advocated by official regime critics, finding alternative expressive qualities in the works of the past. So, it should come as no surprise that, during those years, Roman art could represent a crucial model for some of the most progressive Italian painters, who were often politically committed against Fascism.

The example of Corrado Cagli is paradigmatic. Cagli was an influential painter active in Rome, highly appreciated by Persico; gay and Jewish, he was forced to leave Italy in 1938 to take refuge in the United States.²⁰ During the 1930s, he used to paint scenes set in a naive, pre-classical and almost primitive world, far removed from any official and celebratory dimension. For this reason, it is quite surprising to find in some of his works, such as *Passaggio del Mar Rosso* ("Passage of Red Sea," 1935) or *La caccia* ("The Hunt," 1936), a number of explicit references to *Trajan's Column* (figures 11 and 12).²¹ The artist's choice, however, was certainly not accidental. During the same years, the monument was the focus of attention of several archaeologists and scholars.²² Even within *Arte romana*, the column represented the real centerpiece: it seemed to perfectly embody a model of expressiveness and compositional complexity and excitement, capable of implicitly reflecting even the tensions of the contemporary world. Thus, it is significant that Cagli's attention was drawn specifically to some of the most expressionistic and dramatic details of the ancient work, usually depicting Dacian soldiers fleeing from the Roman army.

In reflecting on possible alternative approaches to ancient art, it is also worth considering at least one episode related to Carlo Levi, one of the most fascinating figures in the Italian cultural scene of the time. Levi was a Jewish doctor, painter and all-round intellectual. Born in Turin, he had met Persico during the 1920s and also painted his portrait in 1930. In the early 1930s he moved to Paris where he joined the group *Giustizia e Libertà* ("Justice and Freedom"), the most relevant anti-fascist organization during those years. From that moment, political engagement and pictorial research would represent for Levi two essentially inseparable challenges.²³

In June 1937, Carlo and Nello Rosselli, Levi's close friends and founders of *Giustizia e Libertà*, were murdered by the fascist secret police.²⁴ Upset by the event, Levi decided to paint a self-portrait with a bloody shirt. As already mentioned, during the same months, preparations were underway for the great *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*, a crucial propaganda event for the regime.²⁵ With this in mind, it is meaningful that Levi decided to take explicit inspiration for his portrait from a completely antithetical ancient model: the renowned *Portrait of Caracalla* (figures 13 and 14). The painter's choice of emperor was motivated by the fact that, in those years, Caracalla was commonly pictured as an enemy of the fatherland, diametrically opposed to the political balance of Augustus, and guilty of extending the right of citizenship to the entire population of the Empire in 212 CE, thus

²⁰ On Cagli's American exile, see Bedarida 2018.

²¹ On the extraordinary visual fortune of the *Trajan's Column*, with a reference also to Cagli's *La caccia*, see Agosti and Farinella 1985: 1102-1150.

²² See Bandinelli 1939: 325-334; Agosti 1986: 307-329.

²³ On Carlo Levi's political commitment, see Foa 1984: 40-46.

²⁴ "Mussolini ha fatto assassinare in Francia Carlo e Nello Rosselli," *Giustizia e Libertà* 4, no. 25 (1937): 1.

²⁵ See note 27.

‘corrupting’ the supposed purity of Roman people.²⁶ The stylistic aspect of the sculpture also can not be ignored: Caracalla’s portrait was by far one of the most intense works of all Late Imperial Roman art. In short, it could provide the painter with a perfect reference point, both from an ideological and formal perspective. Following the example of Persico, Levi basically aimed to find even in ancient art models of strong expressiveness, even better if at odds with the fascist established power.

A third interesting case is that of the aforementioned Aligi Sassu. A native of Sardinia, during the 1930s Sassu was one of most talented young painters active in Milan, in the same circles as Persico. In addition, he soon joined the clandestine opposition against the regime and was arrested for a few months in 1937 for anti-fascist activity. Apparently, the artist was then interested in models far removed from ancient art – among his reference points, for instance, was 19th-century French Romantic painting, with a particular emphasis on Delacroix.²⁷ Nevertheless, the stylistic influence of several ancient reliefs, including once again those of *Trajan’s Columns*, also appears decisive for some of the battle scenes he painted during those years. Sassu used to choose for these works mythological titles such as *La morte di Patroclo* (“The Death of Patroclus,” 1935) or *L’ira di Achille* (“The Wrath of Achilles,” 1938). Even in these cases, however, the paintings had nothing ‘classical’ in the traditional sense. On the contrary, mythological themes and ancient models primarily represented a push to paint bodies tangled and clashes characterized by rough brushstrokes and violent rhythms (figure 15). The painter’s aim was clear: to express the deep moral and political tensions of the time through an allegorical and codified subject, without risking censorship by the regime.

In order to understand these painters’ peculiar way of looking at ancient art, it is worth considering one last crucial aspect: remarkable evidences of the pervasiveness and energy of these new approaches can also be traced directly in the archaeological studies of the time. As a matter of fact, the work of several Italian scholars during those years reveals a close affinity with the interests of contemporary artists and critics. From this perspective, an article published in 1938 by Massimo Pallottino in the influential ministerial journal *Le Arti* emerges as paradigmatic.²⁸ Pallottino was then a promising young scholar, and on that specific occasion he was working on Late Imperial Roman Art. At the beginning of his essay, however, he proposed an insightful general reflection on the change of perspective that had occurred in archaeological studies over the previous few years:

The only aesthetic principle of the old art historians was the canonical ideal of classicism as naturalistic perfection, achieved by Greeks and inherited by Romans. [...] But modern criticism has rejected these schematic patterns. It objected to the prejudices of so-called golden or decadent periods. It recognized in ancient art an unpredictable variety of conflicting aspirations. [...] An anti-classical substratum often emerges in Roman art. An atmosphere of warm passion permeates the scenes. Harmonious and classical patterns disappear. We can find vast, tumultuous, crowded compositions, the bodies appear ductile, almost elastic (1938: 32-36).

²⁶ On the negative opinion about Caracalla during the fascist period, see Cagnetta 1979: 71-72.

²⁷ See Pizziolo (ed.) 1999.

²⁸ In this regard, it is worth considering also Pallottino’s championing of Etruscan art, as well as his interests in Ancient Africa. See: Avalli 2022: 393-410.

Pallottino's sentences could easily have been used to describe the coeval paintings of artists such as Cagli, Levi or Sassu (figure 16). After all, the emphasis on the inner tensions of Roman works was the result of the gradual rethinking of ancient art that was then occurring in Italy, in part influenced by most recent trends in contemporary art.

As the regime insisted on a magniloquent, official, and at most vaguely modernist image of *romanitas*, the research of some specialists was beginning to move in very different directions. In the early 1930s, for example, the archaeologist Pirro Marconi was focusing his theoretical reflections around the notion of *anti-classicismo* ("anti-classicism"). In particular, he detected in some phases of ancient Italian and Roman art a decisive reaction against classical balances, a sort of avant-garde movement of the ancient world, still capable of surprising even 20th-century viewers.²⁹ Likewise, it is no coincidence that during those years a complete reassessment of the art of the Republican age took place. For decades these works, characterized by a peculiar rough realism, had been considered inferior to the perfect formal balance of the art of the Augustan age. Now, on the contrary, they were described as the best examples of "a strong and intense sculpture, which aims at the essential, at the expression of the soul" (Guerrisi 1931: 78). Similarly, reading the scientific and educational publications of that period, an unprecedented attention to Late Antique art can also be noticed. In the climate of poised classicism of the 1920s, the irregular forms and some apparently caricatured solutions of these sculptures were unavoidably regarded as imperfections. In contrast, during the 1930s, their intense expressiveness seemed to meet the interests of the public and scholars as never before (Ferri 1935: 166-171).

Conclusions

On the basis of the themes and case studies analyzed in this paper, a clear conclusion seems to emerge: throughout the fascist period, the approach to ancient art in Italy was far from homogeneous, both in theory and in practice. Especially during the second half of the 1930s, several alternative and unconventional trends appear, sometimes in open conflict with the official positions of the regime. In graphics, architecture and photography, as well as in modern sculpture and painting, Roman art could also represent a progressive and expressionist model. Edoardo Persico, just like many other critics and artists, seemed to have fully understood this opportunity. At the same time, however, it would be impossible to gather all the episodes considered so far within a single uniform system, sharply opposed to the celebratory and nationalistic approach claimed by Mussolini. The reception of antiquity in Italy during those decades still remains a multifaceted and nuanced subject which lends itself to a broader reflection on the cross-pollination between contemporary art, archaeology and other areas of interest.³⁰

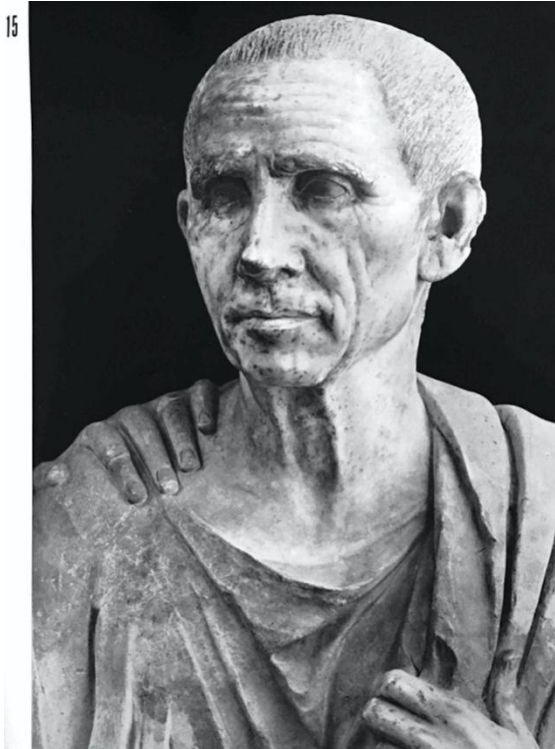
As early as 1934, the president of the Italian *Regio Istituto di Archeologia* ("Royal Institute of Archaeology"), Roberto Paribeni, described Roman art as the most intimately consonant with "our unquiet and troubled age" (1934: 39). Over the following years, also in light of contemporary tragic historical events, the interests of many Italian archaeologists and art critics would increasingly move in this very direction. The political and social situation in Italy was rapidly deteriorating. The tragedy

²⁹ Marconi 1930: 395-412 and 1935: 574-585.

³⁰ Among other fields, the dialogue with antiquity also involved cinema, religion, museology and historiography. See e.g. Wyke 1997; Nelis 2013: 259-274; Silverio 2014: 149-162; Piovan 2017: 82-105.

of World War II was approaching. The climate of tension and fear was influencing contemporary art as much as the interpretation of the ancient one. Taking all these factors into account, it should come as no surprise that for artists, critics and archaeologists, even Roman art seemed to express the drama and deep tensions of modern times.

Figures

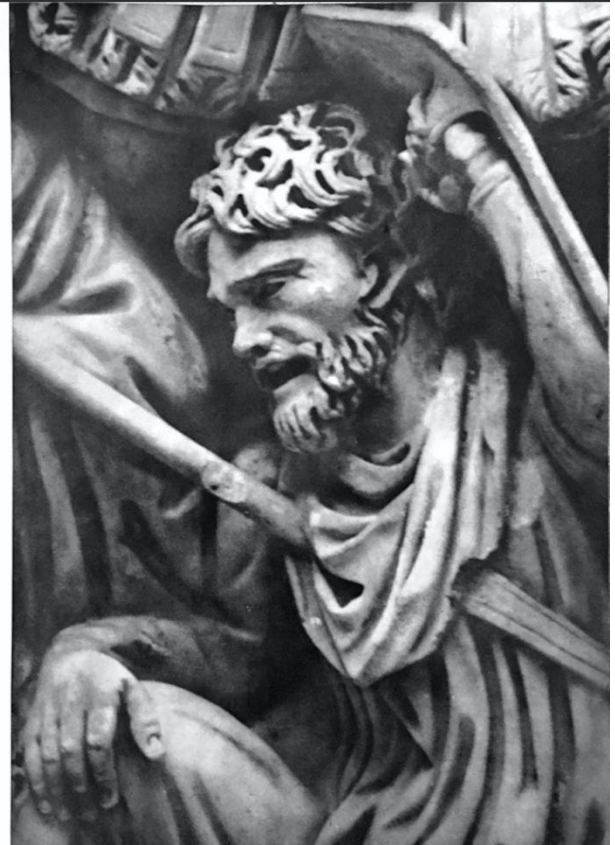


1. *Funerary Relief with the Portraits of Gratidius Libanus and Gratidia Charite* (so-called “Cato and Portia”), detail, first quarter of the 1st century CE. Photo published in Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935), no. 15.

62

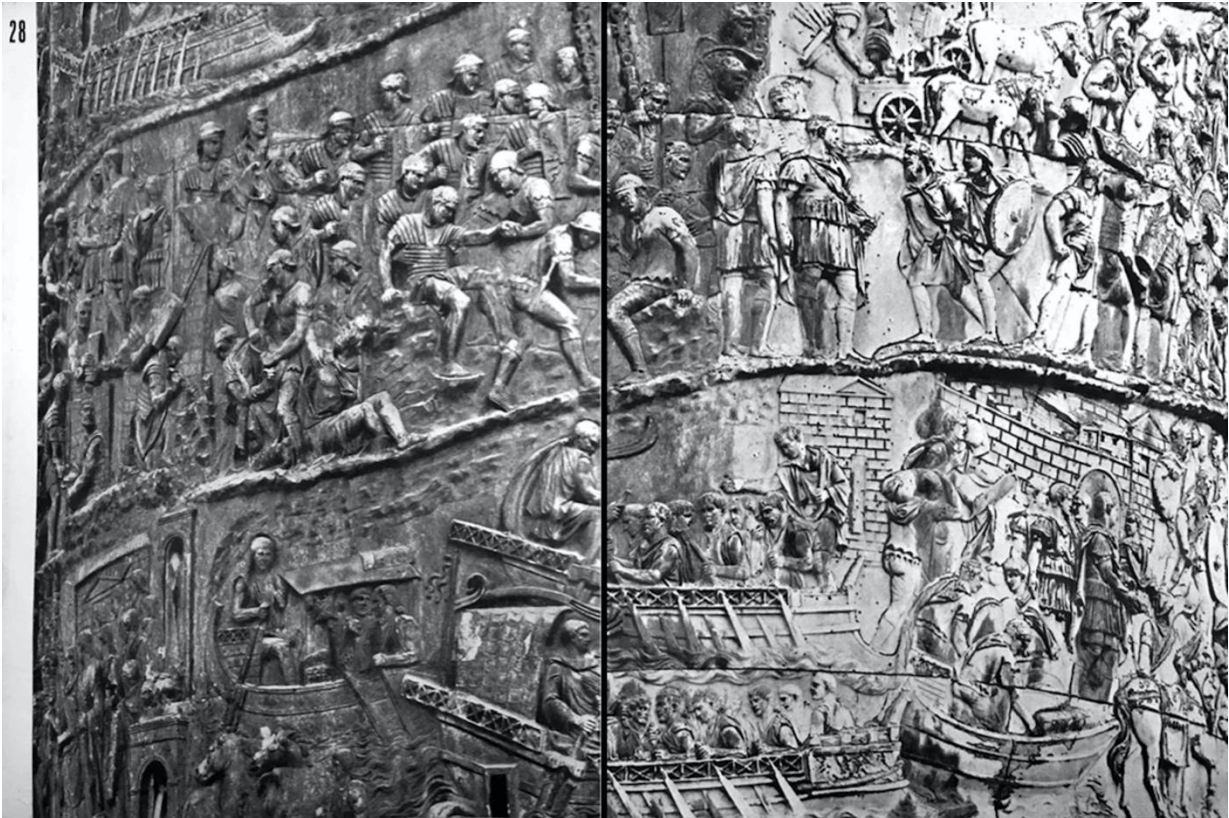


63

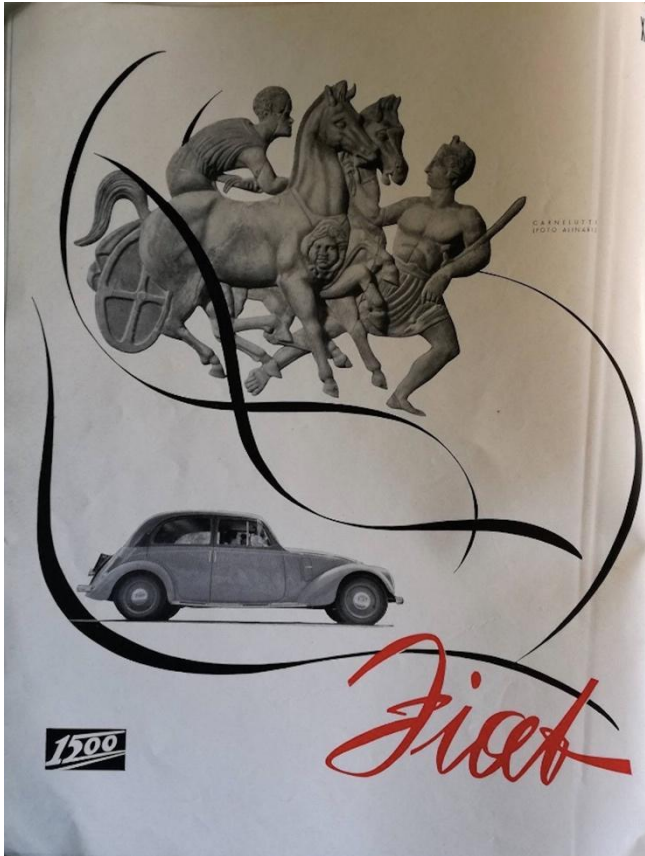


2. *Ludovisi Battle Sarcophagus*, details, around 260 CE. Photos published in Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935), no. 62-63.

28



3. *Trajan's Column*, detail, c. 113 CE. Photo published in Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935), no. 28.



4. Alfredo Carnelutti, *FIAT 1500*. Published in Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935).



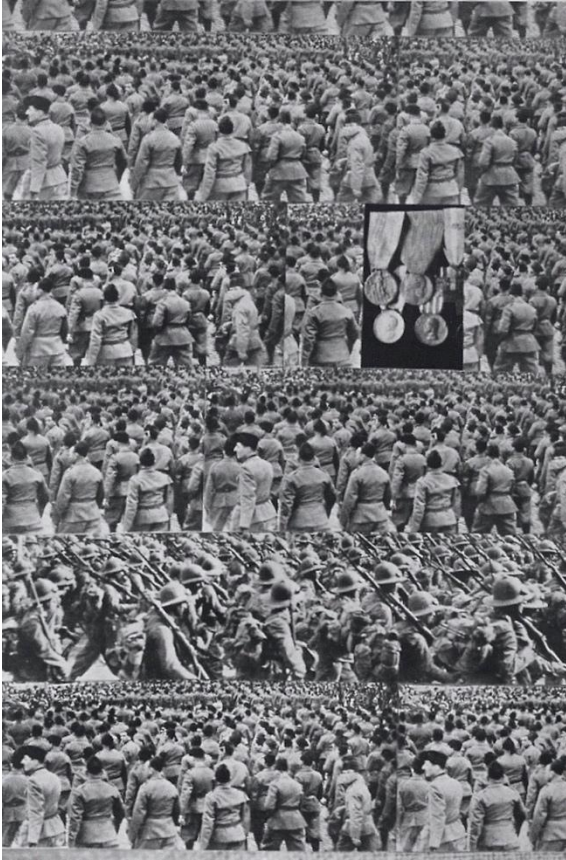
5. Edoardo Persico, Marcello Nizzoli, Giancarlo Palanti, and Lucio Fontana, *Salone della Vittoria* (Hall of Victory), VI Triennale, Milan, 1936. © Photographic Archive La Triennale di Milano.



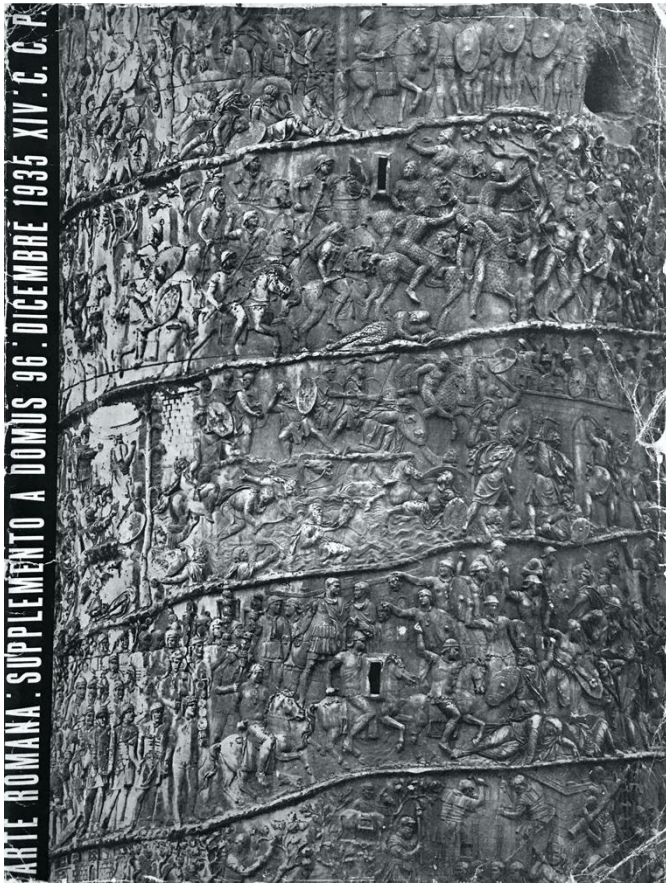
6. Marcello Nizzoli, *Studio* (from the *Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles*), photomontage, 1935-36. Multiple versions.



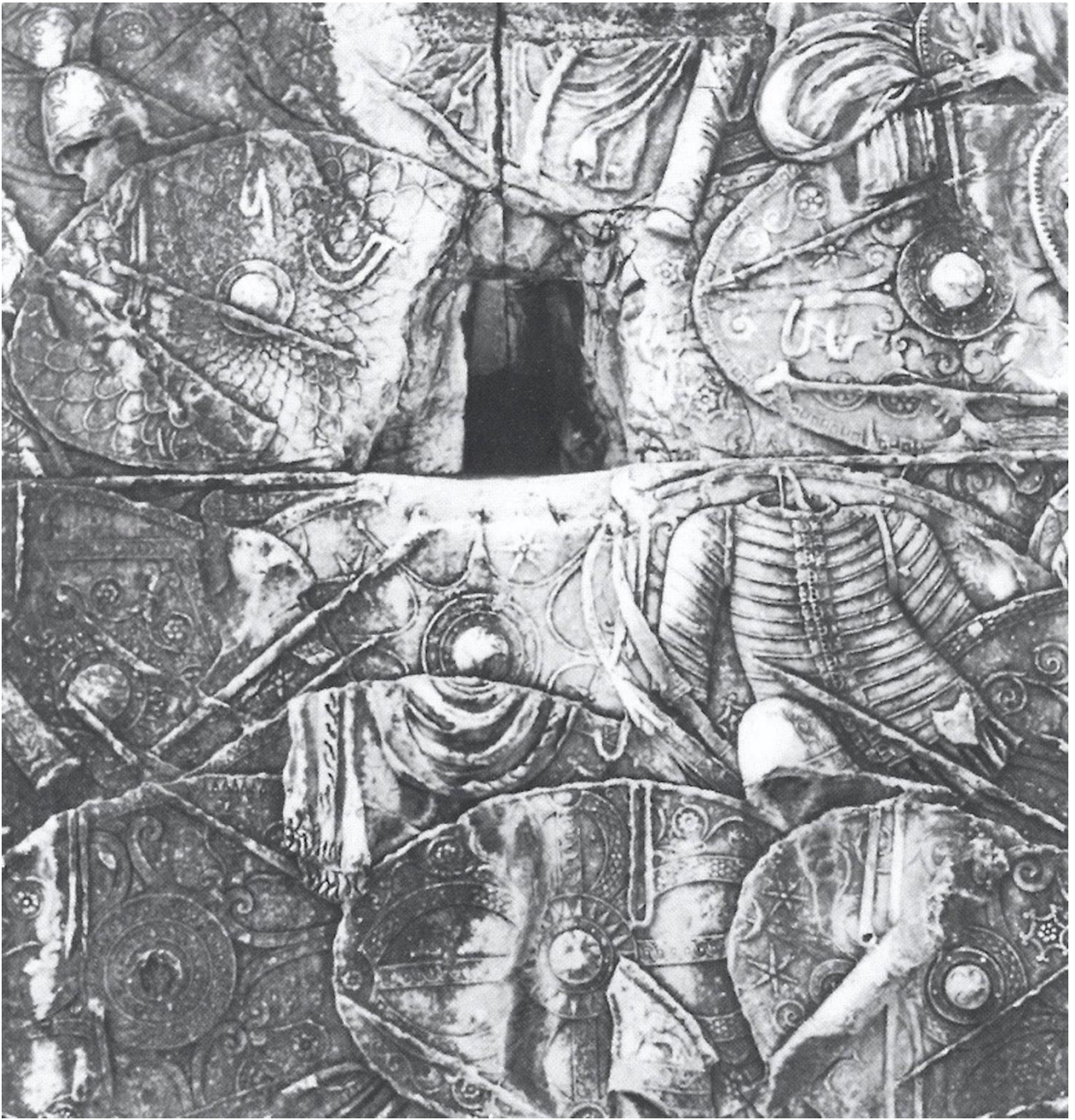
7. *Kline Sarcophagus with Scenes from the Life of Achilles*, detail, Mid. 3rd century CE. Photo published in Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935), no. 59.



8. Marcello Nizzoli, *Military Photomontage*, photomontage, 1935. Published in *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia* 13, no. 11, November 1935.



9. Edoardo Persico, *Arte Romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8, no. 96 (1935). Cover.



10. Giuseppe Pagano, *Trajan's Column Detail*, 1940. © Photographic Archive Pagano, Naples.



11. Corrado Cagli, *Passaggio del Mar Rosso* (Passage of Red Sea), 1935. Encaustic tempera on panel, 19,7 x 29,9 in. Private collection.



12. *Trajan's Column*, detail, c. 113 CE. Marble. Rome.

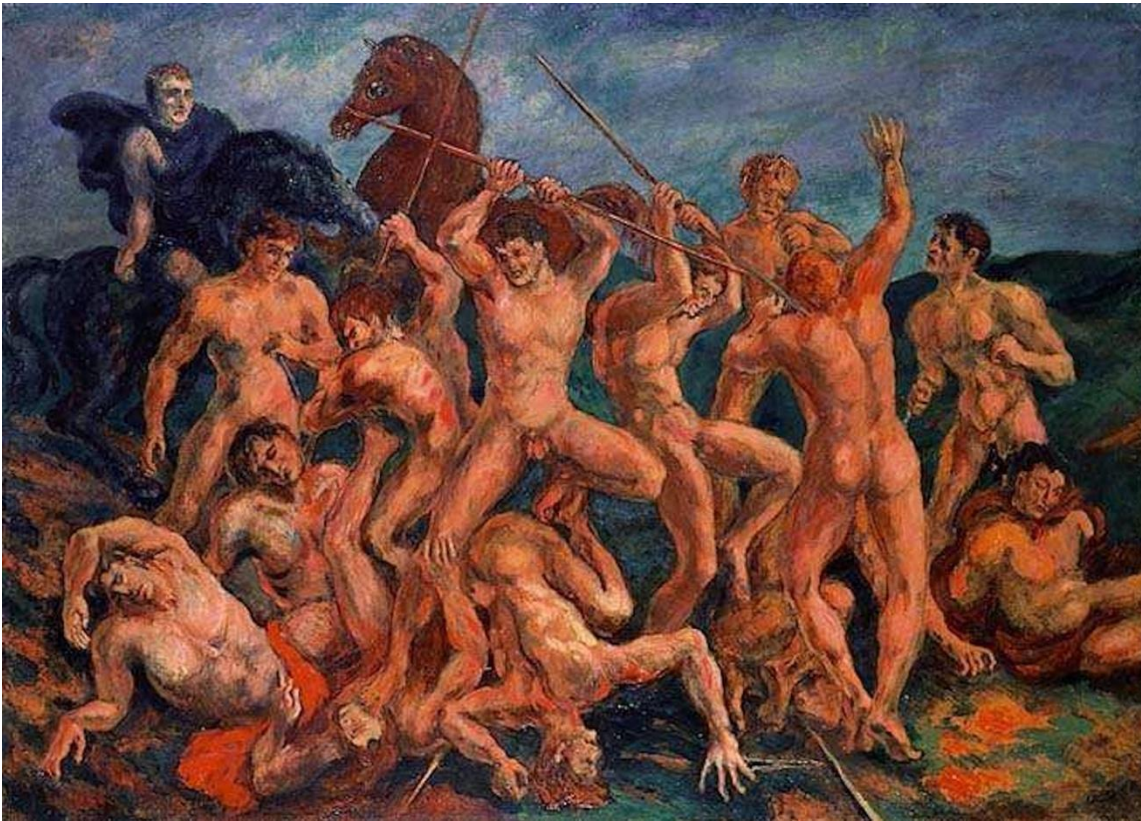


13. Carlo Levi, *Self-portrait with a Bloody Shirt*, 1937. Unknown location



14. *Portrait of Caracalla*, detail, after 212 CE. Marble, height: 25,59 in.

Naples, National Archaeological Museum.



15. Aligi Sassu, *L'ira di Achille* (The Wrath of Achilles), 1938. Oil on canvas, 39,37 x 55,11 in. Private collection.



Fig. 8. Roma: Museo Nazionale Romano. Sarcophago con rappresentazione di battaglia.

16. *Portonaccio Sarcophagus*, 180-190 CE. Photo published in Massimo Pallottino, "Studi sull'arte romana. L'orientamento stilistico della scultura Aureliana," *Le Arti* 1, no. 1 (1938), tav. XIX.

Bibliography

- Abstracta: Austria, Germania, Italia 1919-1939. L'altra "arte degenerata."* 1997. Milan: Electa.
- Agosti, G. 1986. "Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli. Dall'invenzione del Maestro delle imprese di Traiano alla scoperta dell'arte plebea." *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 16.1: 307-329.
- Agosti, G. and Farinella, V. 1985. "Il fregio della Colonna Traiana. Avvio ad un registro della fortuna visiva." *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 15. 4: 1102-1150.
- Aicher, P. 2000. "Mussolini's Forum and the Myth of Augustan Rome." *Classical Bulletin* 76.2: 117-139.
- Arthurs, J. 2017. "Behind the Spirit of Eternal Rome: The *Mostra Augustea della Romanità*." In H. Roche and K. Demetriou (eds.) *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 157-177.
- , 2012. *Excavating Modernity: The Roman Past in Fascist Italy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Bassi, A. and Castagno, L. 1994. *Giuseppe Pagano*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Bedarida, R. 2018. *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l'esilio, l'America (1938-1947)*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Belfiore, P. 2012. "Edoardo Persico e il labirinto di Camilleri." *Op.Cit. Selezione della critica d'arte contemporanea*, no. 145 (<https://opcit.it/cms/?p=199>).
- Bianchi Bandinelli, R. 1939. "Un problema di arte romana. Il maestro delle imprese di Traiano." *Le Arti* 1.4: 325-334.
- Cagnetta, M. 1979. *Antichisti e impero fascista*. Bari: Dedalo.
- Canfora, L. 1976. "Classicismo e fascismo." *Quaderni di storia* 3: 15-48.
- Cresti, R. 2016. "L'imminenza del doppio. Opere e allestimenti di Edoardo Persico." *Il capitale culturale. Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage* 14: 575-612.
- de Seta, C. (ed.) 1979. *Giuseppe Pagano fotografo*. Milan: Electa.
- , (ed.) 1985. *Il destino dell'architettura: Persico, Giolli, Pagano*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- , (ed.). 1987. *Edoardo Persico*. Naples: Electa.
- Della Seta, A. 1930. *Il nudo nell'arte*. Milan-Rome: Bestetti & Tumminelli.
- Edoardo Persico*. 1936. Milan: A. Lucini & C.
- Falasca-Zamponi, S. 1997. *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Farinella, V. "Vedere il sole attraverso occhi di terracotta: alcune fonti archeologiche della scultura di Marino Marini." In Cinelli, B. and Fergonzi, F. (eds.). *Marino Marini. Passioni Visive*. Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 62-85.
- Fergonzi, F. 1986. "Arturo Martini e le ricerche sulla terracotta nei primi anni Trenta." *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 16. 3: 895-930.
- Ferri, S. 1935. "Plotino e l'arte del III secolo." *La Critica d'Arte* 1.1: 166-171.

- Fleming, K. 2006. "The Use and Abuse of Antiquity. The Politics and Morality of Appropriation." In Martindale, C. and Thomas, R. (eds.). *Classics and the Uses of Reception*. Oxford: Blackwell, 127-137.
- Foa, V. 1984. "Carlo Levi uomo politico." In Mongiano, E. and Massabo Ricci, I. (eds.). *Carlo Levi. Un'esperienza culturale e politica nella Torino degli anni Trenta*. Turin: Archivio di Stato di Torino, 40-46.
- Gentile, E. 1993. *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista*. Rome: Laterza.
- Giardina, A. "Ritorno al futuro: la romanità fascista." In Giardina, A. and Vauchez, A. *Il mito di Roma da Carlo Magno a Mussolini*. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 212-296.
- Ghilardi, M. and Mecella, L. (eds.). 2023. *Augusto e il fascismo. Studi intorno al Bimillenario del 1937-1938*. Città di Castello: LuoghInteriori, 2023.
- Guerrisi, M. 1931. *Discorsi su la scultura*. Turin: Libreria Editrice di Cultura.
- Iamurri, L. 2012. "Espressionismo e identità ebraica: il caso Modigliani e la scuola romana di via Cavour." In Jarassé, D. and Messina, M. G. (eds.). *L'expressionisme: une construction de l'autre*. Bordeaux: Editions Esthétiques du divers, 152-165.
- , 1999. "Lionello Venturi in esilio." *Ricerche di Storia dell'Arte* 67: 59-68.
- Kallis, A. 2014. *The Third Rome, 1922-1943. The Making of the Fascist Capital*. Palgrave: Macmillan.
- Kostof, S. 1978. "The Emperor and the Duce: The Planning of the Piazzale Augusto Imperatore in Rome." In Millon, H. and Nochlin, L. (eds.). *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 270-325.
- Losemann, V. 1977. *Nationalismus und Antike: Studien zur Entwicklung des Faches Alte Geschichte 1933-1945*. Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe.
- Malvano, L. 1988. *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Maraini, A. and Bardazzi, F. (ed.). 1986. *Scultori d'oggi. 1930*. Florence: S.P.E.S.
- Marcello, F. "Building the Image of Power: Images of Romanità in the Civic Architecture of Fascist Italy." In Roche, H. and Demetriou, K. (eds.). *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 325-369.
- , 2011. "Mussolini and the Idealization of Empire: The Augustan Exhibition of Romanità." *Modern Italy* 16.3: 223-247.
- , (ed.) 2020. *Giuseppe Pagano: Design for Social Change in Fascist Italy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Marcenaro, G. 2017. "Il guru eclettico." *Il Foglio* (<https://www.ilfoglio.it/magazine/2017/05/02/news/edoardo-persico-guru-eclettico-132475/>).
- Marconi, P. 1930. "L'anticlassico nell'arte di Selinunte." *Dedalo* 11.2: 395-412.
- Margozzi, M. 2012. *L'antico nel moderno. Scultura italiana degli anni Trenta*. Milan: Electa.
- Mazzucchelli, A. M. 1978. "Gli anni di Casabella." In Mariani, R. (ed.). *Edoardo Persico, 1900-1936: autografi, scritti e disegni dal 1926 al 1936*. Milan: Assessorato regionale ai beni e alle attività culturali.
- Modiano, G. 1935. and Mazzucchelli A.M. "Tipografie di Edoardo Persico." *Campo Grafico* 3.11-12: 230-243.
- Mugnai, F. 2014. "Il Classico in una stanza. Il Salone della Vittoria alla VI Triennale di Milano." *Firenze Architettura* 20.2: 50-57.
- "Mussolini ha fatto assassinare in Francia Carlo e Nello Rosselli." 1937. *Giustizia e Libertà* 4.25: 1.

- Mythe des origines et réalités (geo)politiques: la Mostra Augustea della Romanità (1937-1938)*, special issue of *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 10 (2020).
- Norton, C. (ed.). 2007. *Nationalism, Historiography and the (Re)Construction of the Past*. Washington DC: New Academia Press.
- Nelis, J. 2007. "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of Romanità." *Classical World* 100. 4: 391-415.
- , 2011. *From Ancient to Modern: The Myth of romanità during the ventennio fascista. The written imprint of Mussolini's cult of the "Third Rome."* Turnhout: Brepols.
- , 2013. "The Myth of Romanità, Antichistica and Aesthetics in Light of Fascist Sacralization of Politics, and Modernism." *Mediterraneo antico* 16. 1: 259-274.
- Pallottino, M. 1938. "Studi sull'arte romana. L'orientamento stilistico della scultura Aureliana." *Le Arti* 1.1: 32-36.
- Paribeni, R. 1934. *Il ritratto nell'arte antica*. Milan: Fratelli Treves.
- Perry, J. 2020. "'Augusto non è morto': Celebrating the Saeculum Augustum in 1937". In Pimentel, M.C., Lóio, A.M., Simões Rodrigues, N. and Furtado, R. (eds.). in *Augustan Papers: New Approaches to the Age of Augustus on the Bimillenary of his Death*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 627-638.
- Persico, E. 1935. *Arte romana*, supplement to *Domus* 8.96.
- Persico, E. and Veronesi, G. (ed.). 1968. *Scritti d'architettura (1927-1935)*. Firenze: Vallecchi.
- Persico, E. and Veronesi, G. (ed.). 1964. *Tutte le opere (1923-1935)*. Milan: Edizioni di Comunità.
- Piovan, D. 2017. "Ancient Historians and Fascism: How to React Intellectually to Totalitarianism (or Not)." In Roche, H. and Demetriou, K. (eds.). *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 82-105.
- Pizziolo, M. (ed.) 1999. *Aligi Sassu. Antologica 1927-1999*. Milano: Skira.
- Pontiggia, E. (ed.) 1998. *Edoardo Persico e gli artisti 1929-1936: il percorso di un critico dall'impressionismo al primitivismo*. Milan: Electa.
- Pratesi, M. 1984. "Scultura italiana verso gli anni Trenta e contemporanea rivalutazione dell'arte etrusca." *Bollettino d'arte* 69.6: 25-30.
- , 1986. "Sulle tracce degli Etruschi: l'arte e la critica negli anni Venti e Trenta del Novecento." *Prospettiva* 46: 80-85.
- Prestinzenza Puglisi, L. 2019. "Architetti d'Italia. Edoardo Persico, il critico." *Artribune* (<https://www.artribune.com/progettazione/architettura/2019/02/edoardo-persico-storia-italia/>).
- Prisco, G. 2008. "Fascismo di gesso. Dietro le quinte della Mostra Augustea della Romanità." In Catalando, M.I. (ed.). *Snodi di critica*. Rome: Cangemi Editore, 225-259.
- Roche, H. and Demetriou, K. (eds.). 2017. *Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017.
- Salvatori, P. S. 2014. "Fascismo e romanità." *Studi Storici* 55.1: 227-239.
- Scriba, F. 1993. *Augustus im Schwarzhemd? Die Mostra Augustea della Romanità in Rom 1937/38*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Silverio, E. 2014. "Il ruolo del Museo dell'Impero Romano nelle celebrazioni del Bimillenario Augusteo del 1937-1938." *Bollettino dei Musei comunali di Roma* 27: 149-162.

- Stone, M. "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of *romanità*." In Edwards, C. (ed.). *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 205-220.
- Tempesti, F. 1976. *Arte dell'Italia fascista*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Tentori, F. 2006. *Edoardo Persico: grafico e architetto*. Naples: Clean.
- Visser, R. 1992. "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of *Romanità*." *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.1: 5-22.
- Wyke, M. 1997. *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*. New York-London: Routledge.