

FUTURISM & THE GERMAN AVANT-GARDES BETWEEN THE TWO WARS

MONICA CIOLI

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[1] Westheim 1919. See also Däubler 1916.

[2] Walden 1916. The article was published again in German and Italian: Walden 1922.

[3] See Fabio Benzi's 'Futurism & Europe: The Aesthetics of a New World' in the present volume.

[4] See Lissitzky and Ehrenburg 1922a, p. 1. The journal was launched at a crucial time: with the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo in April 1922 the isolation of Bolshevik Russia came to an end and communication with Germany was re-established.

[5] See Benzi 2013a, chapter 1.

The First World War and the Russian Revolution reshaped the world, including the world of art. In Europe the conflict made the relationship between Germany and France problematic, while the October Revolution (1917) had had the same effect on relations between Germany and the USSR. Already during the war, art critics and artists invoked peace among peoples and the re-establishment of the 'spirit of art' (*Kunstgeist*).¹ In 1916, in his magazine *Der Sturm*, Herwarth Walden praised Umberto Boccioni, who had died that same year (in a riding accident while stationed with an artillery regiment near Verona), arguing that Boccioni was against militarism but believed in a 'spiritual' war.² After the Futurist exhibitions in his gallery (since 1912), which according to him had a strong echo in Germany, Walden aimed at re-establishing contacts with the Italian artistic world.³ In March 1922, El Lissitzky and the writer Ilya Ehrenburg founded in Berlin the trilingual journal *Vešč – Objet – Gegenstand*, an initiative which aimed at strengthening ties between Russia and the West after the October Revolution.⁴

POST-WAR CONNECTIONS

At the end of the First World War, Rome regained its dynamic cultural life.⁵ In 1918, Enrico Prampolini founded the Casa d'Arte Italiana, which worked as a vehicle and a means for promoting his work and that of international artists who he felt were close to his purposes. Through the Casa d'Arte and the

[6] See Versari 2010, pp. 581–85, and Chytraeus-Auerbach 2019.

[7] Versari 2006, p. 180.

[8] Prampolini's signature appears in Herwarth and Nell Walden's guestbook in autumn 1921 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Sturm-Archiv, 'Unsere Gäste', Handsch. 120).

[9] Letter from Walter Gropius to Enrico Prampolini, Weimar, 21 February 1922, in Siligato 1992, p. 154, and *Mappenwerk. Bauhaus-Drucke Mappenwerk. Bauhaus-Drucke. Europäische Graphik. Vierte Mappe. Italienische und Russische Künstler*, edited by the Staatlichen Bauhaus Weimar, Weimar 1923.

[10] Letter (in French) from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti to Walter Gropius, 24 April 1924 (Bauhaus-Archiv, BHA_GSI9_Mp423_01). In 1932, Saxony-Anhalt elected a new government, which Wassily Kandinsky termed 'fascist'. In a letter to Marinetti, the Russian painter asked the leader of Futurism to support the Bauhaus, which risked closure because it was accused of being Marxist, Jewish and of pursuing an 'oriental style'. This request, however, which had also been sent to various other leading artists and intellectuals, had no effect. In October 1932 the Nazi-led local government closed the school, after which it moved to Berlin. See Wassily Kandinsky, Letter to Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Dessau, 23 July 1932, Paris, Centre Pompidou, Documentation and Research Centre of the National Museum of Modern Art / Centre of Industrial Creation, Kandinsky Library; Monica Cioli, 'The European Avant-Gardes and Italian Fascism: The Kandinsky–Marinetti Correspondence in July 1932', *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*, 2017, www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/tdae-1698.

[11] Enrico Prampolini, 'I miei incontri con Kandinsky al Bauhaus di Weimar' (Roma Capitale – Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali – CRDAV – Centro Ricerca e Documentazione Arti Visive – Archivio Prampolini, PRAs4ss2f52n.20). In 1923, Gropius sent Prampolini three photos for publication in the magazine *Noi*. However, they were never published: 'Wettbewerbsentwurf für ein Zeitungsgebäude der Chicago-Tribune in Chicago', a 'dito (Modell)', and the 'Umbau des Stadttheaters in Jena', in Letter from Walter Gropius to Enrico Prampolini, Weimar, 17 September 1923 (Roma Capitale – Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali – CRDAV – Centro Ricerca e Documentazione Arti Visive – Archivio Prampolini, PRAs2f13n23).

[12] See Cioli 2013.

[13] See Fineldey 1992.

magazine *Noi*, founded by him in 1917, Prampolini sought ties with the international avant-garde. His programme, like that of the Casa d'Arte Bragaglia opened in 1917 by Anton Giulio Bragaglia, showed similarities to the activities of Walden, who had founded *Der Sturm* in Berlin in 1910 and the gallery of the same name in 1912. In 1920, Casa d'Arte Italiana even hosted two exhibitions of the German Novembergruppe.⁶

In 1921, Prampolini participated in the Italian section of the Exposition internationale d'art moderne (International Exhibition of Modern Art) in Geneva, and in the autumn of that year he organized the *Esposizione italiana d'arte d'avanguardia* (Italian Exhibition of Avant-Garde Art), which opened in Prague and travelled to Berlin in early 1922. In Berlin the Futurist poet Ruggero Vasari, who had just settled in the German city, transformed the exhibition into the Große futuristische Ausstellung (Great Futurist Exhibition). The Berlin iteration also included works by artists presented as 'International Futurists', such as Kseniya Boguslavskaya from Russia, Alexander Mohr from Germany and the Japanese Yoshimitsu Nagano and Tomoyoshi Murayama; the Düsseldorf iteration also included other artists such as Gerrit Rietveld, Oskar Kokoschka, and so on. In addition to this, Vasari partnered with Walden and Novembergruppe associate Rudolf Belling at the Casa Internazionale degli Artisti in Berlin-Charlottenburg,⁷ and edited the magazine *Der Futurismus*. Futurism aimed at being an international and transnational movement. Vasari was bound to become the key figure of Futurism in Berlin.

Besides being acquainted with Walden,⁸ Prampolini was introduced to Walter Gropius by Theo van Doesburg in 1922. He contributed to the *Neue Europäische Graphik: Die Künstlerische Graphik des Bauhaus*.⁹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti also sought contact with Gropius: in a letter he stated that he was grateful for the interest in Futurism from the founder of the Bauhaus School.¹⁰ It was at the Bauhaus in Weimar that Prampolini met Wassily Kandinsky. Together with the Russian painter and Piet Mondrian, Prampolini developed the 'ideology of abstract painting',¹¹ while taking part in the Cercle et Carré/Abstraction-Création group.¹²

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF PROGRESSIVE ARTISTS

In the spring of 1922 the first and only congress of the Union of International Progressive Artists, whose purpose was to clarify what the 'real' avant-garde was, took place in Düsseldorf.¹³ It was a clear sign of the artists' general desire to establish an international network. Nevertheless, the congress failed because of the harsh dialectic between the aim to enhance individual creativity and the idea of a universal quality in art. The latter position was fervently represented by Van Doesburg, who recognized the potential of artistic universality in abstract art. For him, the progressive abstraction of the object led to harmony between the particular and the general. Van Doesburg's 'striving for harmony' was quite controversial among his colleagues. For instance, the members of the Synthès group – Karl Zalit, Ivan Puni, Arnold Dzirkals – resisted the influence of an artistic community based on the aesthetics of the individual artist. In

[14] Lissitzky and Ehrenburg 1922b.

[15] *La relation italienne* 1922.

[16] Prampolini's text first appeared in Italian (Prampolini 1922a); and then in English, in a translation by the poet Edward Storer: Prampolini 1922b.

[17] Prampolini 1922b, p. 236.

[18] Vasari signed the guestbook on 22 January 1922 and a portrait of himself with a dedication to Herwarth Walden in Italian on 26 January 1922: 'At the beginning of a great friendship' (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Sturm-Archiv, 'Unsere Gäste', Handsch. I20 and Handsch. I24). See also his positive appreciation of the *Der Sturm* movement in Vasari 1924.

[19] Berghaus 1998, p. 504.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., p. 495. See pp. 495–98 for the plot.

[22] Verdone 1988, p. 252.

[23] Berghaus 1998, p. 504.

[24] See Gori 1925.

comparison to these two extremes, there were artists who sought to mediate between collective and individual creativity. In a statement released before the Düsseldorf congress, Lissitzky called for cooperation between artists, scholars, engineers and workers. They would provide, he suggested, their knowledge and experience in discussions, and eventually work out the best solutions to social problems.¹⁴

Prampolini and Vasari, who attended the congress in Düsseldorf, advocated international cooperation (*collaborazionismo internazionale*) through congresses, journals and studies. For them, artistic autonomy was inviolable.¹⁵ Significantly, shortly afterwards in July 1922, Prampolini published 'L'estetica della macchina e l'introspezione meccanica nell'arte' (The Aesthetic of the Machine and Mechanical Introspection in Art), a watershed between the first and second waves of Futurism.¹⁶ This essay was unmistakably a product of the debates that had animated the Düsseldorf congress, and pointed towards confirming the primacy of the Futurist concept of mechanical art. Prampolini outlines the 'spiritual content' of the machine and, perhaps to emphasize his autonomy and that of the Futurist group, he distances himself from the most geometrical-abstract artists such as Theo van Doesburg.¹⁷

RUGGERO VASARI AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN BERLIN

On arriving in Berlin, Vasari immersed himself in the artistic scene. He was not only in touch with Walden,¹⁸ but also with artists associated with *Der Sturm* and with the new names on the Bauhaus scene – Gropius, Oskar Schlemmer, László Moholy-Nagy, Hans Richter and Lissitzky.¹⁹ Walden's *Der Sturm* Gallery also became a promoter of Constructivist art.²⁰ These different influences had an impact on Vasari's dystopic drama *L'angoscia delle macchine* (Anguish of the Machines), written in 1923 and published in 1925 (some excerpts appeared in advance in the magazine *Der Sturm*).

The three-act play is set in a 'Realm of the Machine', established on an unnamed planet. A hierarchical structure divides the lower orders of inhabitants condemned to become machines: robots, androids and workers, and engineers who supervise the machine park. At the top, there is a triad of despots who exercise perfect control over its dominion through a Brain-Machine. This machine reads their thoughts, translates them into orders, and communicates these to their subjects.²¹ This control is a source of anguish for the individual because of the impotence to which he is condemned.²² Thus *L'angoscia delle macchine* shows not a real 'anguish' of machines but the anguish, or impotence, of the mechanized man. Vasari's critical view of technological civilization was not a 'romantic fear, as was common among the early expressionists, but a "reluctant attraction", not unknown among new objectivity artists'.²³ Vasari's drama also reveals a 'riotous modernism that becomes a utopia': a concept that we will find immediately afterwards in Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, which premiered in 1927.

Vasari undoubtedly captured the mood of his time: a deep scepticism towards the mechanical civilization that was overwhelming a more optimistic image of the relationship between the individual and technology.²⁴ In this sense

[25] Kahn 1926.

[26] Danzi 1927.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid. Eventually, Vasari appointed Vera Idelson as designer for his production.

[29] See Ivo Pannaggi, *Futurismo*, 1922. New Haven CT, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, F. T. Marinetti, General Collection I30.

[30] Crispolti 1969, p. 388, and Toni 1976, p. 28.

[31] Benzi 2013a, p. 130. The ball was held in June 1922 at the Casa d'Arte Bragaglia.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Quoted in *ibid.*

Vasari participated with this vision in the international debate on a contemporary mechanized aesthetic, launched many years before by the Futurists. Significantly, in 1926 the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* wrote about 'the individual as the most complex machine',²⁵ and in 1927 *L'Impero* praised the 'physical awakening of the 20th century'.²⁶ The 'spiritual', it reports, harmonizes with the 'utilitarian' and the 'human intellect accepts the practice of experimentation'.²⁷ It is a sort of return to the ancient Greek harmony beyond 'the hazes' of the nineteenth century, the century of Hegel and Kant. A 'Costume for the Anguish of the Machines' was drawn by Ivo Pannaggi.²⁸

IVO PANNAGGI AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN GERMANY

Already in his early works, Pannaggi shows that he was acquainted with the European and Russian avant-garde.²⁹ According to scholars, some works that were made by him between 1919 and 1922 were influenced by Constructivism and French Purism.³⁰ Analysing the costume that he designed for *Il ballo meccanico futurista* (The Futurist Mechanical Ball), Fabio Benzi maintains that 'constructivism is very evident' and contributed to inspire Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*.³¹ His photocollages (1926–29) reveal an acquaintance with Berlin Dadaism too: indeed, between 1925 and 1926 Pannaggi established contact with Vasari.³² During this period he also renovated the interior of Casa Zampini at Esanatoglia, 'a masterpiece between constructivism and neo-plasticism'.³³ The Czech artist Karel Teige wrote in 1929: '[I]t is a work strongly influenced by the *Proun* of El Lissitzky and Doesburg's neo-plasticism. It is important for the future evolution of Italian architecture'.³⁴ Pannaggi's works in the second half of the 1920s show clear analogies with Lissitzky's *Proun*, namely with 'German Constructivism'.³⁵ Through the magazine



Fig. 38 — Ivo Pannaggi, *Architectonic Function 3U*, c. 1925–26. Oil on canvas, 150 × 90 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, gift of the Société Anonyme Collection

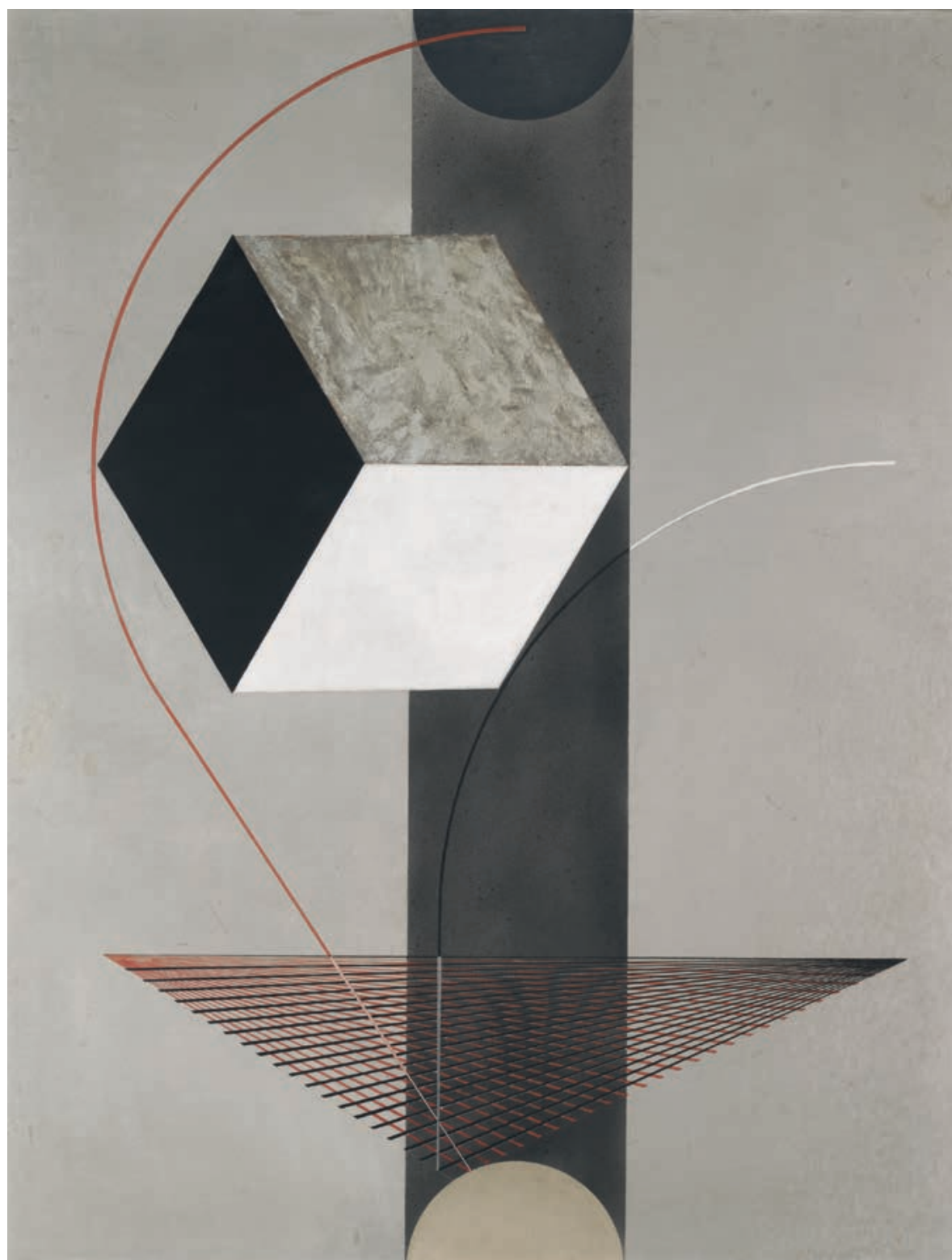


Fig. 39 — El Lissitzky, *Proun 99*, c. 1923–25. Water soluble and metallic paint on wood, 129 x 99.1 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, gift of the Société Anonyme Collection

[35] Gan 1922, p. 18. For a re-evaluation of Gan's anti-art attitude from within the development of Soviet Constructivism in the early 1920s and his formulation of an 'embedded' perspective, understanding how objects are formally linked to their context, see Romberg 2019.

[36] About Malevich's biography and the links of his works to Ukraine, see Shkandrij 2002.

[37] See Lodder 2003.

[38] Malevich 1920. For a discussion of the complexity of Malevich's thinking, see for example Drutt 2003 and Shatskikh 2012.

[39] Lodder 2003, p. 28.

[40] H. (Hermann) K. (Karl) Frenzel, 'Ivo Pannaggi, an Italian Artist', 1928. Part of a special section on Ivo Pannaggi: New Haven CT, Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, F. T. Marinetti, General Collection I30.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Pannaggi reminisced about this period in an interview for Oslo's *Dagbladet* in 1970. See Crispolti 1995a, p. 451.

Vešč – Objekt – Gegenstand Lissitzky opposed the Moscow Constructivists' stance which, in its most extreme form, declared 'Death to Art'³⁵ and continued to adhere to the position taken in the USSR by Kazimir Malevich³⁶ and UNOVIS (Utverditeli Novogo Iskusstva; The Champions of the New Art).³⁷

Around 1915, Malevich had developed the concept of Suprematism to describe his abstract art based on the supremacy of pure artistic feeling. Suprematism is all about the supremacy of colour and shape in painting. After the October Revolution, Malevich began to reinterpret Suprematism, maintaining that theory and teaching were now more important than painting.³⁸ After moving to Vitebsk in 1919 to teach at the Vitebsk Art School, he founded the UNOVIS group. Between 1920 and 1921, Lissitzky was also closely associated with UNOVIS. According to UNOVIS, pre-revolutionary Suprematism, 'stripped down to coloured planes floating and interacting spatially against pure white grounds', should and could serve as the correct aesthetic correlative of the new social order. 'The ultimate version of human society, which [...] appeared to be in the offing, deserved to be matched by the final and supreme manifestation of art'.³⁹ This was what Suprematism meant to Malevich and his followers. In Berlin, Lissitzky fostered a Constructivism intermingled with Suprematism, which gave birth to his *Proun*.^{→FIG. 39}

Influenced by several avant-garde movements, Pannaggi developed his own autonomous approach working in experimental fields such as theatre, architecture and design. He achieved great international success:

The new art, which set in at the beginning of the new century, took hold of everything visible in quite another manner than had hitherto been usual: it was not the beautiful for its own sake that was produced, but the beautiful for the sake of the spirit in which it was born [...] Modern art [...] is no longer contemplative, but strives to convey the spirits of things to the spirit of man, and so has led to abstract painting. Ivo Pannaggi, the Italian architect and painter, is one of the strongest representatives of the new art in Italy. It is a peculiarity of this art, which is not fettered to any particular nation but is absolutely international.⁴⁰

Pannaggi's work 'was seen in Prague, Berlin, Brünn [Brno], Düsseldorf, Antwerp, Riga and Vienna and thus laid the foundations of his international reputation'.⁴¹ By the end of 1927 Pannaggi was living in Germany and in 1932 he formally joined the Bauhaus.⁴²

CARL KRAYL AND ITALIAN FUTURISM

The German architect Carl Christian Krayl began his career working for architects in Nuremberg and Freiburg. After the First World War, he joined Das Junge Franken group in Nuremberg. Analogous to other artists' associations such as Das Junge Rheinland, the Novembergruppe or the Arbeitsrat für Kunst, this Expressionist group was a union of artists, architects, writers, poets and designers who searched for a new beginning in art outside the establishment. In the period between 1919 and 1922, Krayl's drawings were influenced by

[43] Maasberg 1997, p. 23.

[44] Maasberg 2016, p. 17.

[45] Benson 1993, p. 38.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Maasberg 2016, p. 19.

[48] Maasberg 1997, p. 27. Carl Krayl (Anfang), *Gedanke*, drawing, 1920, in *Frühlicht* 8 (1920).

[49] Barnstone 2021, p. 154.

Futurism, Expressionism and Cubism.⁴³ For example, in the woodcut *Landschaft* (Landscape, 1919), published in the magazine *Die Sichel*, Krayl shows enthusiasm for Futurism and Cubism: ‘building, landscape and sky with clouds in quick, short lines embody a magical unity’ that is full of ‘inward tension’.⁴⁴

In November 1919, Bruno Taut initiated Die Gläserne Kette (The Crystal Chain). This group, consisting primarily of architects and which stayed active until December 1920, came into existence under the influence of the 1918 November Revolution. The members – among others, Krayl, Gropius and Hans Scharoun – exchanged chain letters in which they discussed future revolutionary visions of art, especially of architecture. ‘Because the Gläserne Kette participants resided throughout Germany, they circulated essays, drawings, designs, and letters, often as photostats or carbon copies.’⁴⁵ All the participants used pseudonyms – Taut was *Glas* (Glass), Krayl was *Anfang* (Beginning) and Gropius was *Mass* (Measure) – which ‘lent an occult aura to the proceedings especially when the aliases appeared in the periodical *Frühlicht* (Daybreak)’.⁴⁶ In *Die Gläserne Kette*, Krayl’s work displayed Dadaist and Futurist inspiration.⁴⁷ Italian Futurism is clearly present in his drawing *Gedanke* (Thought).⁴⁸

Between 1921 and 1924, Taut became Magdeburg’s municipal building surveyor. ‘Convinced that transforming cities into colourful streetscapes could improve the public’s sense of well-being’, Taut embarked on an ambitious campaign to paint Magdeburg’s buildings.⁴⁹ The project was led by Taut and realized by a team of architects and painters who made the city a complete work of art. Taut appointed Krayl as head of the the city design office and managed the colour campaign.



Fig. 40 — Otto-Richter-Straße in Magdeburg, executed by Carl Krayl, following the design of Bruno Taut, c. 1921–22. Magdeburg Marketing, Magdeburg

[50] Ibid., p. 160.

[51] Balla and Depero 1915b.

[52] Maasberg 1997, p. 191.

[53] Maasberg 2016, p. 30.

[54] About the significance of the city of Berlin, see also Clair 1991.

Krayl’s own works as well as projects by other artists stand out because of their use of colour and pattern.⁵⁰ Colour was largely independent from the architectural elements: ‘painting on the front façade consists of coloured shapes and lines arranged in a way that makes the façade an abstract work of art’.⁵⁰ As art historian Ute Maasberg points out, the idea of the reconstruction of the universe would have certainly appealed to Krayl. With the manifesto *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe* (1915), the Futurists had aimed to find ‘abstract equivalents for every form and element in the universe’, ‘creating plastic complexes’ to set in motion.⁵¹ Added to this, Krayl’s ideas for the use of colour refer to Balla’s *Manifesto of Colour* (1918), which states that colour should dominate, although Krayl did not have a fixed concept for his colours. ‘The painter Krayl was not a rationalist’ and ‘did not follow any tenet’.⁵² He continuously searched for new forms, impulses and creative associations. Indeed, in the architectural reform of Magdeburg, Krayl was influenced by several avant-garde movements, not only by Italian Futurism: he aimed to overturn the concept of the ‘ideal city’ of the end of the nineteenth century, with its historicizing and romanticizing features. With Magdeburg’s decorations he adopted, ‘consciously and radically’, elements from Abstract Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism and Constructivism, creating ‘a complete new definition of colour and architecture’.⁵³

CONCLUSION

This essay has shown some of the main contacts established between Italian Futurism and the avant-garde in Germany. These networking activities show that the Italian Futurists aimed at being an international and transnational movement. They were aware that the ‘roaring’ city of Berlin was a place where artistic networks and collaborations formed following the First World War and the Russian Revolution.⁵⁴ On the one hand, Futurism interacted with other national movements, fostering its identity by staying in Germany. On the other, figures such as Vasari and Pannaggi played a very conscious part in the avant-garde’s modernist action: against the background of Europe’s cultural and political crises, they worked at finding new solutions, connecting the Futurist ideology of the ‘reconstruction of the universe’ and mechanical aesthetic to the Bauhaus and the other avant-gardes, and establishing a society that reflected new times. This reaction stems from the great cultural orientation that existed in the Western world even before the First World War: the complex phenomenon of modernism came into play in opposition to modernity, which was the characteristic historical feature of the liberal individual. With the emergence of the masses on the political scene and the organization of the old bourgeois society into elites, the liberal individual, with his or her rights, experienced crisis. It then became necessary to create the new individual and the new society.

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