

## **ALL PATHS LEAD TO ROME**

Establishing an Italian American Archive of the Visual Arts of the Late 1950s and Early 1960s

In the early 1950s, Rome was a city largely populated by ghosts. Two, in particular, were haunting Rome's streets: one was Giacomo Balla and the other one was Giorgio De Chirico. We were young, we wanted something new. So, we basically ignored them.

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Lorenza Trucchi (Trucchi, 2014)

Why is it so important to study "a city populated by ghosts"? And, if Rome was such a lifeless place, how, when, and why did the situation reverse so that Rome became such a central place for the international art scene? This paper aims to reassess the importance of this experience, both from the Italian and the American perspectives. In particular, it focuses on Rome as a place of cultural and artistic exchange and explains why it should be considered an "archive" of transatlantic experience, with one tradition influencing the other and vice versa. It will attempt to offer an explanation of the importance of such a moment by analyzing the extraordinary concentration of personalities that lived in Rome during the 1950s and the early 1960s, a condition that fostered the development of a particularly lively artistic and intellectual scene.

The reasons bringing so many people to Rome were diverse. It was not only artists who visited Rome: in fact, this paper aims to demonstrate that the Italian city played such a key role in the 1950s that critics, intellectuals and art dealers also moved there. Art dealers, in particular, were among the protagonists of the renovation of the Roman scene, offering artists a place

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to gather and exchange ideas. This paper closely analyzes the history of the galleries that opened their doors to contemporary American and Italian art, such as *L'obelisco*, *La Tartaruga*, *La Salita*, and *Il Segno*, which would later become the Roman branch of Marlborough Gallery.

This paper begins by looking at the American perspective, and it will do so by following the exceptional story of photographer Milton Gendel, who sums up perfectly in his career all the features of this transatlantic exchange and is still one of the few lucid and active witness of that period. Many other artists may be considered more important or their voices more significant, but Gendel is a primary source of information on the subject.

The paper then considers the Italian point of view, analyzing the careers of the painters Afro, Toti Scialoja and Piero Dorazio as case histories. The galleries' histories will, in the end, provide a sort of *trait-d'union*, explaining when, how, and to what extent those two realities mingled. The goals of this analysis are to present a complete picture of the period, to show the connections among the different personalities animating that scene, and to highlight the importance of this moment, which should be considered a quintessential example of transatlantic influence in both cultures.

But, do all these elements together constitute enough evidence that this period can be considered an "archive" of an Italian American tradition in the visual arts? Why is the Italian American art scene of the 1950s so important? And, moreover, because very few Italian spoke English at that time and even fewer Americans were able to speak Italian, on what ground did they meet? How was it possible to create a network if they couldn't bridge the communication gap? Of course, the development of an international scene is not adequate proof that the period in question constitutes an "archive." This paper addresses all these questions. It aims to demonstrate that, though not free of contradictions and misconceptions, this period was, at the same time, very fertile for a cross-cultural experience. This paper also shows how both sides benefited from it.

A first answer is to be found in the complexity of the interplay between the different protagonists animating Rome in the 1950s. One of the first to benefit from this transatlantic experience was

Milton Gendel, who was born in New York in 1918. Photography was one of his interests from an early age: he started to take pictures in 1930. His relationship with Italy did not start so well. In the summer of 1939 he traveled to Europe, first to Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Holland, and then to Italy. His friends and family disapproved of the last stop of his trip because of the tense political situation, to which he replied: "I highly doubt that the 200 dollars I could spend in Italy should represent a great contribution to Fascism" (Gendel, 2014).

After the summer, he returned to the United States, where he received his Bachelor of Science from Columbia University in 1940. Later, he enrolled in a Master of Arts in Fine Arts and Archeology program, studying under art historian Meyer Schapiro and with artist Robert Motherwell as a fellow student and friend. In 1942 he joined the Army and was sent to the Pacific front, serving as Corps of Engineers liaison with the Chinese army. In 1948 Gendel applied for a Fulbright scholarship, wishing to go to China. Instead, he was sent to Rome; he vividly recalls his disappointment: "We all believed Europe was over. I used to say to my friends that I was going to the province" (Gendel, 2014).

The year that saw Milton Gendel receive his scholarship was very important, in general, for the Italian-American cultural relationships. In 1948, works of abstract expressionism were shown for the first time at the Venice Biennale, where they were exhibited again in 1952. Later, in 1950, Jackson Pollock had his first Italian solo exhibition, which Peggy Guggenheim organized in Venice. A second one would follow in Rome in 1958, only two years after his death. A slow but steady revolution began: progressive, young Italian artists were instantly attracted to American art, which they had previously seen only through photographic reproduction. Ultimately, the 1950s marked a general awakening of the Italian scene to contemporary art, especially in Rome. Piet Mondrian's exhibition held at the *Galleria Nazionale d'arte Moderna* in 1956 was pioneering in this sense (Celant and Costantini, 1993: 34).

Lorenza Trucchi, a journalist and art critic, recalls the particular climate of postwar Rome: "In comparison with other Italian cities, Rome still maintained its cosmopolitan character; there was

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a cultural and social fervor, and international artists and intellectuals were active here as nowhere else" (Trucchi, 2014). It is in this particularly favorable environment that Milton Gendel settled, even though at first he disliked it. In a few years, he carved out a particular role for himself: he became the interpreter for both Americans and Italians and, as such, introduced many artists. He was well known because of his collaboration, which started in 1947 with *Art News*, the journal then directed by Thomas Hess. When he moved to Italy, Hess was looking for a foreign correspondent to cover the European section of his journal. He found Gendel an excellent candidate for the position because he lived in the heart of Rome and knew so many people, mostly artists.

Furthermore, Rome in those years found itself in a particularly favorable position for artistic exchanges: World War II had halted international mobility, but this mobility resumed at the end of the conflict, and with a new vigor. In addition, Rome profited from the loss of prominence that Paris experienced at that time. Rome gained momentum in the 1950s in this period of blurred edges, of roles not yet defined; it also kept its central position thanks to American investments like those of the movie industry, which attracted directors, actors and producers as well as artists. Even if many agreed with Gendel's statement about Rome, and Europe in general, being no longer alive, many more were still attracted to the culture—especially the visual arts—as Barbara Drudi effectively highlighted:

When one looks at the cultural relationship between Italy and the United States, he/she must be aware of the time frame he/she is dealing with: the Italian artistic scene of the 1950s is totally different from that of the following decade. In fact, despite all its war wounds and its poverty, Rome still played a prominent and acknowledged cultural role. In the 1960 the situation was completely reversed. (Miller and Drudi, 2011: 108)

Rome enjoyed this cosmopolitan status, reassessing its importance as a cultural center, even if over time it had lost its artistic leadership. What is curious is that Americans who visited Rome in the 1950s knew little or nothing about their Italian colleagues, whereas their names were widely circulating among Italians, at least among younger artists. What interested them most

were the works of the old masters, archeology, and Renaissance and Baroque art; one of the artists who visited Rome in search of inspiration and models from the old masters' traditions was, curiously enough, Mark Rothko, among the protagonists of abstract expressionism. In the late 1950s, Rothko had just been commissioned for his first series of mural paintings, the Seagram murals, and for this purpose wanted to broaden his knowledge of painting techniques. Carla Panicali, the director of the Roman branch of the Marlborough Gallery, who had hosted him on many occasions in her house, recalled conversations between the American artist and her husband, the painter Carlo Battaglia: "they talked endlessly about Piero della Francesca and Beato Angelico, Bernini and Borromini" (Sleiter, 2007: 127).

One might argue that this statement supports the objection to the existence of an Italian American "archive." How could an "archive" form under such different conditions? In an interview granted in 1970, a few months before his suicide, Mark Rothko remarked the importance of Italian art to his work, particularly its influence on the Seagram murals composition: "After I had been at work for some time, I realized that I was much influenced subconsciously by Michelangelo's walls in the staircase of the Medicean Library in Florence. He achieved just the kind of feeling I'm after" (Fischer, 1970: 20). This paper aims to demonstrate that the Italian-American exchange was built exactly on such uncertain and trembling foundations; reading some of Gendel's articles written during that period helps understand what brought about this transatlantic dialogue:

The foreground of the Roman art scene was dominated, it seemed, by a foursome of twenty-year- olds, a sort of collective phoenix risen from the mud and ashes of Novecento Kultur. The fall of Fascism and the Liberation, a few years earlier, had put an end to Italy's provincial isolation under Mussolini's policy of material and cultural autarchy, and Italian artists and intellectuals were again thinking of themselves in terms of a European and Atlantic context. (Miller and Drudi, 2011: 118)

The birth of such a community was fostered by political developments: not only the de-provincialization following World War II that Gendel mentioned in his article, but also the new world order emerging from the conflict. In the 1950s, the United States

 was entering the Cold War; this meant that, in order to oppose Russian hegemony in Europe, they expanded their influence over countries such as Italy, where they wanted to keep a strong hold (Guilbaut, 1983: 35).

So, while Rome in the 1950s was opening to the international scene, trying to regain the status and importance it had lost during the war, American culture was engaged in international issues, which were not new to its artistic and intellectual debate. It had been framed for a long time by two key words—"national" and "international"—which, over time, had defined the shifting of the artists' aesthetics and their approach to both European art and the formation of an independent tradition. The notion of an international art scene emerged in the late nineteenth century, when American artists' presence in Europe grew significantly and, afterward, in the age of the avant-gardes, when many crossed the Atlantic. The "international" term is commonly used to refer to these periods of intense cultural exchange.

This exchange between the two cultures was deeply engrained in American visual arts tradition: painters, sculptors and architects had often traveled to Europe to improve and complete their education. In the 1920s and, even more, in the 1930s and 1940s, the opposition between "national" and "international" had stronger cultural connotations (Cooney, 1986: 71). Among the most vehement advocates of these international encounters was the art critic Clement Greenberg. He believed that, through direct confrontation with the European masterpieces, American artists could grow and enrich their own works. In his writings of the 1940s, he points out the conceptual complexity of European art already reached in the nineteenth century, which American artists needed to understand and master if they aimed to achieve significant results: "Art is under no categorical imperative to correspond point by point to the underlying tendency of his age [...]. Yet it seems to me [...] that the most ambitious and effective pictorial art of these times is abstract, or goes in that direction" (Greenberg 1986, 1: 97).

Greenberg's interpretation challenged the works of earlier critics who had strongly opposed any comparison between Europe and the United States, claiming a sort of "exceptionalism" for the art and culture produced by the latter. In the 1910s

and to an even greater extent in the 1920s, the critics—especially those associated with photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) and *Seven Arts* journal, such as Van Wyck Brooks (1886–1963), Randolph Bourne (1886–1918), Waldo Frank (1889–1967), and Paul Rosenfeld (1890–1946)—had stressed the importance of finding a voice expressing the uniqueness of American experience. Wanda Corn traces the origins of this attitude: "Their true calling, rather, was to save the country from its modern evils: emotional repression (Puritanism) and relentless materialism (Pioneerism)" (Corn, 1999: 18).

In the 1930s those voices lost their preeminence, as they were, to some extent, marginalized; other intellectuals, such as Greenberg, believed that the earlier critics had ended up trapping themselves in a modernist version of nineteenth-century aristocratic traditions (Corn, 1999: 21). The cultural nationalism they boasted prevented them from a complete understanding of culture, which necessarily had to be framed within an international context. The articles Clement Greenberg wrote for *Partisan Review* and other journals in the late 1940s and, to an even greater extent, those written during the 1950s, remarked on the importance of a broader perspective; the arena where American artists had to fight was no longer national, but wider (Rubenfeld, 1997: 108).

Greenberg's essays were really popular and widely read. His opinions deeply influenced the young generation of American artists who understood the importance of transatlantic communications. Greenberg was closely connected, in particular, with the protagonists of abstract expressionism and with the intellectuals circulating in New York's Greenwich Village. His articles were often polemic, as his personal style: his fights with some fellow critics and journalists, such as Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess, were legendary. This contributed, of course, to his popularity, and even those, like Hess, who often disagreed with him could not ignore his strongly expressed opinions (Marquis, 2006: 72).

Greenberg suggested that American artists needed to open up to a wider, international perspective, thus mirroring a larger debate. The critic was not preaching in a desert: the Museum of Modern Art had opened in New York in 1929, and its collections focused especially on European contemporary art. Many

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other similar venues were inaugurated shortly afterward, like the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (later the Solomon Guggenheim Museum) or Peggy Guggenheim's New York gallery, only to cite a few. Moreover, many European artists who had fled both world wars chose to move to the United States, thus fostering the development of an international scene. Movements such as cubism, futurism, metaphysics, Dadaism, and surrealism were well known in the United States in the 1930s. Of course, most of the artists were attracted to French art: Paris had been the undisputed protagonist of the international art scene before World War II broke out. However, the Italian artists' fascination with American art had just begun (Celant and Costantini, 1993: 69).

The younger generation of Italian painters was increasingly rejecting the canons of figurative art, still widely popular during fascism, and began to look at French informal art and, of course, at American art. In this sense, Rome in the 1950s played a fundamental role as an international cluster where Italians could meet and discuss within a broader arena. We should bear in mind that traveling was very expensive and, at that time, the Italian artists who could afford to go to the United States were few. Only three painters of the Roman scene were able to visit New York in the 1950s: Afro Libio Basaldella, Piero Dorazio, and Toti Scialoja. The houses of these painters, like Gendel's, became outposts of the community of Italian and American artists and intellectuals.

Piero Dorazio (1927–2005) was an abstract painter and was among the authors of the manifesto of Gruppo Forma 1, together with Pietro Consagra, Achille Perilli, Giulio Turcato, and Carla Accardi. In 1950, with Perilli, he opened the bookshop/art gallery *L'Age d'or* which, the following year, merged with the activities of the group of Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Ettore Colla, thus becoming *Fondazione Origine*. In 1952 he met Virginia Dortch, an American artist who had just graduated from Columbia University, was visiting Rome, and was a close friend of Clement Greenberg. Dorazio also knew Milton Gendel, who recalled Dorazio as one of his first Roman acquaintances. In 1953 he was invited Harvard University as summer lecturer. In September, after marrying Virginia, he moved to New York, where she introduced him to the painters Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock,

Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, and, of course, Greenberg, who frequently visited their house in Rome in the 1950s. His presence there was remarkably important for the transatlantic community, even if he was sometimes only recalled for his many eccentricities, as Marisa Volpi noted: "I remember him. We were having dinner at some artist's house near Santa Maria Maggiore. The first thing I noticed was that he was wearing two unmatched shoes. He looked so original to me" (Volpi, 2013).

Afro Libio Basaldella (1912–1976) was among the first to visit the United States. In fact, thanks to a reference letter written by the painter Corrado Cagli, in 1950 he was able to move to New York, where he started his collaboration with the gallery of Catherine Viviano. In 1955 he became one of the most renowned Italian artists, because his works were selected by James Thrall Soby for the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*. Afro's paintings, along with those by others, were chosen because they were considered representative of the contemporary trends of abstract art in Europe. In 1957 he taught at Mills College in Oakland and, until 1968, he traveled extensively to and from the United States, where his works were highly praised.

Afro was a good friend of another Italian painter, Toti Scialoja (1914–1998), and sent him many letters detailing his experiences and his encounters in the United States. In 1957, thanks to the joint help of Afro and Milton Gendel, Scialoja had his first exhibition at Catherine Viviano's gallery. He was also able to visit New York, where he met the group of abstract expressionists. As for other artists of his generation, the end of the war had marked a change for Scialoja, which his stylistic choices mirrored: from the former, prevalent style borrowing from cubism and expressionism, he moved on to informal abstraction. His American travels reinforced the idea that his art was developing to such an extent that he could engage on an international level.

But do all these elements support the claim that Rome in the 1950s constituted a transatlantic "archive"? Not by themselves only, as Milton Gendel poignantly points out:

It is not possible to say that an Italian American scene existed there in the 1950s. First of all, there was a problem of communication, because

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no one spoke the language of the other: in Italy, French had always been more studied and there were very few people speaking English. (Gendel, 2014)

Those very few were like magnets, centers attracting both Italian and American artists. For instance, both Dorazio's and Scialoja's wives spoke excellent English, so their houses were very popular gathering places. Of course there was Milton Gendel, whose work grew in this international atmosphere. However, what this paper argues is that the most important places were the art galleries. They not only provided the artists with a venue where they could meet, but also, in a broader sense, offered a canonization of the artists involved and those of the period, thus creating an "archive" of transatlantic experience.

One of the first galleries active on the international scene was *L'obelisco*. Established in 1946 by Gasparo del Corso and his wife Irene Brin, a writer, journalist, and correspondent for *Harper Bazaar*, it started to show works by American artists as early as 1950, when they organized an exhibition of Sebastian Matta. The exhibitions of Robert Rauschenberg (1953), Alexander Calder (1956), and Arshile Gorky (1957) were also pioneering. The galleries in those times were not only driven by commercial reasons, but they also played an important cultural role: in choosing the artists to exhibit and promote, they clearly revealed the tastes and preference of their owners who enjoyed much more freedom than, for instance, the museum directors (Camerlingo, 2010).

L'obelisco gradually lost its preeminence when, by the mid-1950s, a large number of galleries specializing in contemporary American and Italian art opened in Rome. In 1954 Plinio de Martiis inaugurated La Tartaruga, which originally should have been his own photographic studio but over time became one of the main centers of cross-cultural encounters. Thanks to the relationship de Martiis had with many art galleries, dealers, and museums around the world, especially in New York, he was able to exhibit the works of Conrad Marca-Relli in 1957, followed in 1958 by a collective of Afro, Capogrossi, Consagra, de Kooning, Kline, and Matta and the two first European solo exhibitions of Franz Kline and Cy Twombly, who later moved to Rome (Grossi and Santarelli, 2008).

The times were ripe, as Barbara Drudi suggests:

Italy was recovering economically from the postwar crisis, modern art was beginning to be accepted, and artists loved to travel. Many Americans chose to visit Rome and some even settled there. Just as Roman artists were going to the United States, many galleries were being opened in Rome dedicated to new artistic languages. (Miller and Drudi, 2011: 130)

1957 was a very important year for the transatlantic relationships; at least four new galleries opened. One of these was *La Salita*, owned by Tomaso Liverani, who collaborated with art historians Lionello Venturi and Enrico Crispolti. Venturi was renowned in the United States, where he had taught in the 1940s. Together with Bruno Zevi, who studied and then taught at Harvard University, he was among the few Italian art scholars whose works circulated in America.

1957 also saw the opening of the Rome-New York Art Foundation, in which Milton Gendel was directly involved as consultant. The gallery was directed by Frances McCann, a friend of Peggy Guggenheim, whom the photographer had met at the collector's house in Venice. Following Gendel's suggestion, she opened a gallery in Rome, where she had decided to move. The first exhibition, inaugurated in July 1957, featured the works of the most advanced Italian and American artists, such as Burri, Capogrossi, Colla, Fontana, de Kooning, Sam Francis, Franz Kline, Conrad Marca-Relli, Pollock, and Mark Tobey. The works were curated by some of the most important critics of that period: Lionello Venturi, Herbert Read, and Michel Tapié (Miller and Drudi, 2011: 131).

Other venues opened in that same year, such as Bruno Sargentini's *L'attico* and Carla Panicali's and Bruno Herliztka's *Il Segno*. This paper closes with the activity of this last gallery, which in 1962 became the Roman branch of the London Marlborough Gallery and, as such, proved to be extremely influential during the following decade. *Il Segno* was a gallery essentially devoted to graphic art. Herliztka was the husband of Carla's good friend, the painter Georgina Lattes. Carla had gotten to known them in Turin, where she had lived before moving to Rome. Together they ran the gallery, which was located in Via Capo le Case and represented many international artists. Lorenza Trucchi recalled Carla Panicali early days as an art dealer:

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She was the true engine behind it all [...]. In the end, she would give Rome a truly international gallery and I believe that, without her, certain Italian names would have never made it through [...]. In addition, she had excellent relationships with art historians, critics and artists, such as Giulio Carlo Argan, Palma Bucarelli, Cesare Brandi and Toti Scialoja. (Trucchi, 2014)

All these galleries worked on multiple levels: first of all, they offered Italian artists an occasion to experience first-hand the research of their American colleagues. Earlier, as Milton Gendel underscores, the art produced in the United States had only circulated through international exhibition catalogues and a few articles (Gendel, 2014). Second, as previously mentioned in this paper, they provided a platform, a place where artists could meet. It could be said that they gave the artists, especially Italians, the sense of being part of a larger community, of really engaging in a global and meaningful debate about culture. It has also been argued that galleries enjoyed more freedom than museums in their artistic choices, a situation that granted them a position at the forefront of the cultural scene of the time; especially in Italy, postwar art did not receive immediate acknowledgment from the national institutions. According to Lorenza Trucchi, Rome was never able to profit from this incredibly lively scene that developed in the 1950s; she defined this particular atmosphere as a "cultural encumbrance" (Trucchi, 2014). Barbara Drudi is more clear in her analysis of the cultural situation in Italy in the postwar years:

Abstractionists and realists fought each other—through their paintings—on two clear and opposing fronts. And yet, although the PCI had considerable political power, enjoyed clear dominance in the management of public spaces (as well as in the orientation of taste), and, [...] condemned abstraction in favour of social realism, young artists were in search of other directions. They were looking to Europe and to America [...] Many young people, in fact, although sympathetic to Communism, did not want to renounce the search for "new" art, an art that could express the changed relation between modern man [...] and reality. (Miller and Drudi, 2011: 117)

Thus, what Italian artists in the 1950s were looking for were new models, which they found in the American works, especially those of abstract expressionism, which they considered liberating from the constraints of previous artistic experiences. It is ironic,

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in this sense, that the country where futurism originated ended up marginalizing futurist artists like Balla and others of the historical avant-gardes with its call to destroy museums in the 1950s. Italians were attracted to the artistic freedom that Americans seemed to enjoy, whereas the latter were fascinated exactly with the deeply layered traditions from which the Italians wanted to be freed. Slowly, art dealers and figures such as Milton Gendel who allowed these encounters contributed to the construction of a transatlantic canon. Analyzing this complex network of relationships is particularly interesting now, from the perspective of an age of globalization and cross-cultural approach, as well as in the field of art history, which allows us to follow the path that generated the "archive" of this specific moment. This moment can be considered a repository of shared experiences, not only with all its contradiction, but also with its development and transformation.

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