

Afro: The legacy of Transatlantic 20th century Italian Artist Basaldella

Roberta Cutillo (May 02, 2015)



On April 23rd a new exhibit opened at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò featuring the paintings and jewelry of the famous 20th century Italian artist, Afro Basaldella. With his natural talent for cultivating relationships within the art world, Afro was a fundamental figure in building relationships between Europe and the United States. He was one of the very first transatlantic artists, navigating American artists, buyers and curators through the Italian art scene.

Varied works by the Italian contemporary artist Afro Basaldella are exhibited in Afro, a show dedicated to him, on view at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò through May 29th. In it are featured varied types of works, from paintings to gorgeous pieces of jewelry, both tracing back Afro's artistic evolution. "You really get to see some different phases of his career", explains Rosemary Ramsey Stewart, editor of the exhibit's catalog.

Born in 1912 from a family of artists, Afro started his career very young. At age 16, with the



help of his older brothers (also artists), he participated in a group exhibit. He then moved to Rome and had his first solo show in 1937.

From the very start he proved to be very good at making friends and cultivating meaningful relationships within the art world. He became friends with prominent Italian artists such as Turcato, Vedova, and Scagli. He came to hold a position amongst the most renowned European artists of the time and was called to paint a mural at the UNESCO in Paris alongside such household names as Picasso, Mirò, and Tamayo.

It was through a collaboration with Catherine Viviano, whom he met in Venice, that he finally made it to New York in 1956 and exhibited some of his works at her gallery. He was greatly appreciated in the United States and continued to make new friends all while maintaining connections in Italy. In fact, he introduced various American artists to the Italian art scene, including De Kooning, Klein, and Gaston.

Throughout his career, he worked hard to promote Italian art in America, by serving as a bridge between the US and Europe. He did so by fostering relationships between artists but also through his own artwork. For example, he remained true to his origins by continuing to produce his own paint in the Venetian tradition, creating connections not only in space but also through time, by using old traditions to produce new art.

His numerous friendships also helped Afro grow as an artist. Being constantly surrounded by many forms of inspiration, he experimented with different styles. Initially, his paintings were more figurative and he relied on a muted palette of colors. Eventually, he moved into geometricized abstraction in the 1940's, which then developed into a more lyrical abstraction during the 1950's, inspired by the work of Gorky, among others.

The same trend can be recognized in the evolution of the style of his jewelry. The designs featured on his beautiful hand-crafted golden jewelry, of types and forms, go from being somewhat figurative, to geometric, and finally abstract, just like his paintings.

A fine example of this later style of his – the one for which he was most known for – is the final sketch of *Boy with Turkey*, currently shown in the exhibit, but usually found hanging on the walls of the famous Museum of Modern Art.

Throughout his career in the United States, Afro's works were in fact purchased by several prestigious art institutions. As Isabelle del Frate Rayburn, the curator, informs us "Some of the works in this exhibition were previously exposed in places like MoMA, JPMorgan, National Gallery in Washington".

"There are several lithographs from the 50s up to the 70s belonging to famous US museums", adds Isabella. Afro's work was very well known in America as was his endeavor to introduce Italian art in American collections. His success proved to be beneficial for both Italian artists looking to gain recognition in the US, as well as for the American artists, buyers, and curators who became fascinated with Italian art.

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