

Jana Reena, "Alighiero e Boetti," *Art + Auction*, July 1, 2012Art
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Alighiero e Boetti

BY REENA JANA

IN 1968 ALIGHIERO BOETTI created a haunting yet playful image titled *Gemelli*. The dreamlike work features two likenesses of the artist, then 28 years old, shaggy of hair and slim of silhouette, as rebelliously sexy as a Rolling Stone. The two pictures were taken minutes apart and, decades before Photoshop, assembled in a photomontage to create the effect of Boetti walking hand in hand with himself. Around the same time, the artist began to experiment with ambidextrous writing; a few years later, he sandwiched the letter *e*—Italian for “and”—between his given name and his surname, essentially splitting his identity in two.

The doubling spills over into the rest of his oeuvre. As Mariolina Bassetti, international director of postwar and contemporary art at Christie’s Rome, says, “There are two kinds of art by Boetti.” On the one hand, there are the Arte Povera-associated artist’s highly conceptual works, which deal with temporality and the absurdity of life; see, for example, *Niente da*

vedere nulla da nascondere, 1969, a plain grid of glass panes that, as the title goes, has “nothing to show, nothing to hide.” On the other hand, he also made unabashedly bright embroidered pieces as well as subdued yet elegant Biro, or ballpoint pen, drawings on paper, such as *Aerei*, 1983, which fetched €63,150 (\$85,000) at Sotheby’s Milan last November. The latter two bodies of work are particularly sought after; with simple imagery rendered in everyday materials, they are pleasing and instantly familiar. “Boetti is a very interesting artist,” says Claudia Dwek, cochair of Sotheby’s Europe and senior specialist in contemporary art. “He is both conceptual and fun.”

Boetti’s market mirrors the dichotomy between his popular pieces and his more poetic ones. The past two years have seen a spike in the artist’s values, with nine out of the top ten auction sales of his work set in this period. However, most of these sales have been embroidered “Mappa” works, which the artist

Riding a wave of interest in postwar Italian art, Alighiero e Boetti’s embroidered tapestry *Tutto*, 1988, fetched nearly \$1.4 million at Sotheby’s London in February 2011.



commissioned from Afghani women artisans and cast as a global dialogue intended to, in his words, “erase the distance between Rome and Kabul.” The watershed moment was June 2010, when a 1989 “Mappa” tapestry with a rare dark-blue background sold for £1,833,250 (\$2.8 million), well above the estimate of £900,000 to £1.2 million (\$1.3–1.8 million), at Christie’s London.

Although the “Mappa” pieces are today Boetti’s signature works, they weren’t always critical or commercial winners. Back in the 1970s, “reactions

chose a Boetti to headline its rebooted contemporary sale in London last October. The house hyped *Anno*, 1984 (est. £1.2–1.8 million; \$1.9–2.8 million), made up of 192 pencil drawings of magazine covers that document the year of its creation, but the work failed to find a taker.

Although *Anno* seems straightforward in subject matter, it forgoes the lush aestheticism of the embroideries in favor of thematic points about the passage of time and the subjectivity of news media. “It takes a lot of knowledge to get into Boetti’s conceptual works. They’re not as immediately appealing to the wider public as, say, Lucio Fontana’s,” says Benedetta Ghione-Webb, head of Bonhams’ contemporary art department in London, referring to the well-documented demand for works by the key precursor to the Arte Povera movement. “But as more information on Boetti becomes available, it will become more easily digestible.”

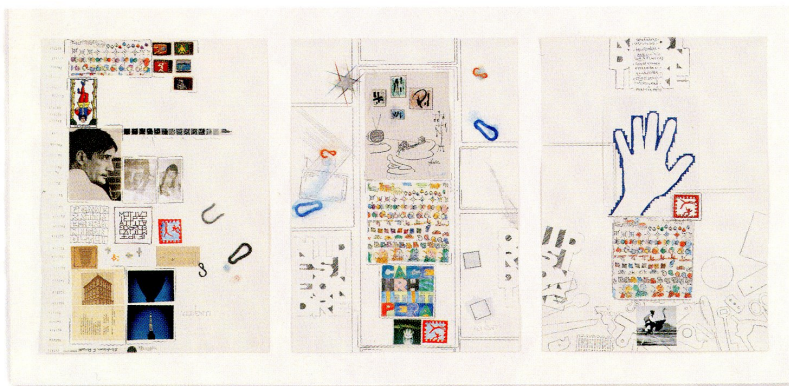
With a high-profile Boetti retrospective, “Game Plan,” on view at New York’s Museum of Modern Art from July 1 through October 1, after showing this past spring at Tate Modern in London and the Reina Sofía in Madrid, it’s likely that underappreciated Boetti works will be more widely grasped. And an upcoming second volume of a planned four-part catalogue raisonné compiled by the Fondazione Alighiero e Boetti in collaboration with the Archivio Alighiero Boetti (two institutions started by family members) should help to clarify his production. Historically, it has been difficult to come up with exact figures on his artistic

output, in part due to the outsourcing element; the “Mappa” works may number anywhere from 150 to 250. Boetti’s legacy has also been shadowed by alleged forgeries.

“As the breadth of his thinking is further understood and as the catalogue raisonné brings confidence to the market, interest is destined to get broader and to embrace lesser-known aspects of his production,” says Pepi Marchetti Franchi, director at Gagosian in Rome. Gagosian is one of several blue-chip international galleries that represent the artist, including Barbara Gladstone and Sperone Westwater, in New York; Simon Lee Gallery, in London; Sprüth Magers, of London and Berlin; and Milan’s Galleria Cardi.

Born in 1940 in the industrial city of Turin to a lawyer father and musician mother, Boetti was never formally trained as an artist. In an autobiographical statement written when he was 27, he cheekily traced the beginning of his art career to his childhood, when he “tore a large sheet of brown paper to get little rectangular pieces that I piled up, and with which I erected »

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From top: *Mappa*, 1989, notched a new artist record for Boetti when it crossed its \$1.8 million high estimate to realize \$2.8 million at Christie’s London in June 2010, but intimately scaled works on paper can be had for far less; *Senza titolo*, 1979, is \$300,000 at Sperone Westwater, New York.

were terrible,” says Mark Godfrey, a curator at Tate Modern and the author of a recent monograph on Boetti from Yale University Press. Over time, however, the maps have come to be seen as prescient. According to New York art adviser Allan Schwartzman, “Boetti’s work set the foundation for an interest in globalism in contemporary art.”

Boetti made many trips to Afghanistan in the 1970s, hiring Afghan refugees to produce the maps, as well as the “Tutto” series—embroidered collages in eye-popping hues—and works that resemble stylized kilims and quilts. These outsourced pieces have fared better in the market than those by the artist’s own hand. Not long after the record Christie’s sale, Bonhams thought it was making a safe bet when it

ARTIST DOSSIER

From top: *Le infinite possibilità di esistere*, 1989, a 10-by-10-inch embroidery, topped its \$35,000 high estimate to earn \$50,000 at Dorotheum, Vienna, last November; the early sculpture *Zig Zag*, 1967, went for \$303,000 at Sotheby's London in October.

a rather unstable column," an act completed with an impish creativity that would characterize the intellectual playfulness of his career.

In 1966 he began experimenting with everyday fabrics in pieces such as *Zig Zag*, in which he stretched colorful striped cloth across aluminum bars in a style suggestive of folding beach chairs. Boetti had his first solo show in January 1967 at the Turin gallery of Christian Stein, just months before the seminal exhibition at Galleria La Bertesca, in Genoa, that critic and curator Germano Celant proclaimed the start of the Arte Povera movement. The participating artists, including Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Merz, and Luciano Fabro, chose "poor" or quotidian materials rather than more rarefied, archival ones as a rebellion against the commercialization of art.

In his mail art, however, one sees evidence of Boetti's interest and participation in the art world. For the series "Viaggi Postali," 1969–70, he sent letters and postcards to influential gallerists, critics, collectors, and artists, dispatching them on imaginary itineraries: dealer Leo Castelli on a package tour of Morocco and artist Lawrence Weiner to Zumaglia, Italy. Around this time he also began to explore materials and themes that diverged from those of his Arte Povera peers. A curious soul, he traveled to South Asia, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. In Afghanistan he bought and began operating a hotel in 1971; the act was intended as an art piece. (It closed in the late 1970s.)

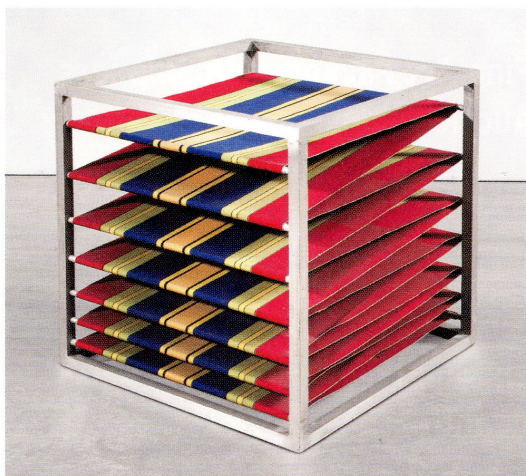
By 1972, five years after his gallery debut, Boetti had become a respected figure, his work featured at high-profile events such as Documenta and the Spoleto Festival. He moved to Rome and devoted the next two decades to the complex maps and simple, grid-based drawings that echo American Minimalism. In the early 1990s he worked with a number of different media, from watercolors to sculptures. Boetti died of a brain tumor in 1994, not



long after creating a haunting self-portrait in 1993 titled *Mi fuma il cervello* ("My Mind Is Burning"), a bronze sculpture of a man holding a hose. When the water from the hose hits the statue's pate, it evaporates thanks to a heating element built into the head. A far cry from the flat, crafty-looking maps or streamlined works on paper, it's a thought-provoking piece that illustrates the artist's range and enduring wit.

The astonishing breadth and depth of Boetti's oeuvre offer numerous collecting opportunities. Sculptures, most unique and some editioned, range in price from \$50,000 to \$500,000; works on paper can be had for well under \$100,000. Gian Enzo Sperone, a founding partner of Sperone Westwater and an early supporter of Arte Povera at his galleries in Turin and Rome in the 1960s, thinks that late, abstract watercolors from 1991 and 1992—which go for relatively affordable, high four- and five-figure prices—are likely to receive more attention after the retrospective. Gagosian's Franchi believes the postal works and the more esoteric sculptures "may benefit from the broader perspective on the work provided by the exhibition." Indeed, the touring show makes visual and thematic connections between very disparate works, and this may reinforce values across the board.

Perhaps one of the biggest selling points for Boetti today, Godfrey suggests, is that his themes are echoed in the work of the current art stars Maurizio Cattelan and Francis Alÿs, who are known for marrying striking aesthetics with rigorous intellectualism. Offering more than meets the eye, Boetti's astonishing output seems to find richer contexts posthumously, gaining momentum as new generations of collectors discover and decode them in both canonical and contemporary light. ▣



From the Files

Alighiero e Boetti's mother owned an embroidery business, which undoubtedly influenced the young artist.

Boetti considered his "Mappa" pieces "the ultimate in beauty" because "for that work I did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that: the world is made as it is, not as I designed it."

"Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women," on view at the Fowler

Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles, through July 29, describes the artist's textile collaborations.

In 2002 the Archivio Alighiero Boetti examined and declared a work shown at Sperone Westwater, in New York, inauthentic. The gallery removed it from the exhibition, but the two parties later traded lawsuits in Milan and Manhattan over the matter.