

ART &amp; DESIGN | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# A New Italy, Imagined by Artists and Demagogues

By JASON FARAGO MARCH 21, 2018

MILAN — In the prelude to the Italian elections this month, the far-right League party did not distinguish itself for rhetorical subtlety. Its leader, Matteo Salvini, called Islam “incompatible with our values, rights and freedoms.” He characterized the single European currency as a “crime against humanity.” And the senior League politician Attilio Fontana, after deploring that the “white race” could be “wiped out” in Italy, went on to win the presidency of Lombardy, the wealthy northern region that includes this fashionable city, in a landslide.

But pull up the League’s campaign manifesto, dig past the strident anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric, and suddenly the tone turns more poetic.

“Italy and its thousand cultures should be the Silicon Valley of cultural heritage,” it sings, one of many flourishes among the party’s proposals for art institutions, churches and heritage sites. Unlike the League’s American cousins — Mr. Salvini is an avowed fan of President Trump — these Italian populists like to present themselves as defenders of public cultural institutions, and their “Make Italy Great Again” vision highlights museums as much as migration policy. For Mr. Salvini’s party, the nationalist project goes right through the history of art.

They are not the first right-wingers to make promises about Italian high culture. A few days after the March 4 elections, as the papers here weighed the likelihood of a populist governing coalition or a new poll, I visited two major exhibitions examining how art and politics informed each other at previous turning points in Italy's history: in the 1920s and '30s, on view at Fondazione Prada in Milan; and in the '50s and '60s, at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence. Both reaffirmed that questions of culture — who defines what it is, and who administers it — have never been far from the surface of Italian political life.

The better of the two shows — a landmark, really — is at Fondazione Prada, where the immense, scholarly “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943” opened last month. Get past the car crash of a title (it's a riff on an early poem by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the godfather of Futurism) and you will discover more than 600 paintings, sculptures and design objects from Italy's Fascist era, by the likes of Giorgio di Chirico, Giorgio Morandi, Gino Severini and dozens of unknowns, displayed amid countless historical documents that map the rise and fall of the interwar art world. It is a resounding achievement in exhibition making, blending rigorous scholarship, political engagement and immaculate design.

Unlike in Germany, where the Nazi regime policed strict aesthetic boundaries, Benito Mussolini did not impose a style on Italy's artists after he came to power in 1922. Culture was to be in the service of a rejuvenated state, but it could take any number of forms — from the abstraction of the second-generation Futurists to the classical figuration of painters espousing a “return to order.” How were these artists shaped by the politics of their time? And how, in turn, did these artists, many of whom eagerly supported the Fascist regime, participate in the construction of a new Italian iconography?

“Post Zang Tumb Tuuum” answers by presenting the art in strict chronological order, and in something like the original circumstances. Black-and-white photographs of the works displayed in situ — at the Venice Biennale and the now defunct Rome Quadriennale, as well as in private homes and artists' studios — are blown up to actual size and printed on wallpaper; the paintings and sculptures are

then hung or placed in the very spots they appeared initially, against ghostly backdrops of the past. The show lets you walk right into the art galleries of interwar Rome, Milan and Turin, unmediated by later judgments of quality or historical significance. (The show's mastermind is the veteran curator Germano Celant, though its true heroes are the designers of the New York agency 2x4, who work on Prada's stores as well as the foundation's exhibitions.)

A color-starved still life of bottles on a table by Morandi, who made a quiet peace with Fascism, appears just as it did in a 1921 exhibition. It gives onto the hideous mock-classicist marble busts of Adolfo Wildt, who stole the show at the 1922 Venice Biennale and who would go on to sculpt Mussolini with the intensity of a Roman emperor. We then see Di Chirico's pictures of stringy, bare-bottom gladiators as they were displayed in a Paris apartment, and a Roman museum populated by gross, classicized athletes and nymphs.

Instead of the false clarity of the white cube, "Post Zang Tumb Tuuum" gives us a plural, kaleidoscopic view of the decades of Il Duce. You watch helplessly as the avant-garde hardens into agitprop, and see how even the most stolid of styles could be complicit in horror.

It also erases the distinction between elite exhibitions and popular manifestations — above all when you reach Fondazione Prada's huge Deposito, or warehouse, where Mr. Celant projects dozens of installation shots from the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, which opened in Rome in 1932, for the 10th anniversary of the regime. This epic show, drawing nearly four million visitors, rewrote Italy's political history as a hybrid of sacred ceremony and love affair with the leader. Cantilevered walls plastered with Fascist slogans and clippings from Il Popolo d'Italia, Mussolini's newspaper, gave way to stylized statues of the regime's brawny "new men." It concluded with a "Shrine to the Fallen," dominated by a massive crucifix and blinding light.

Picking up where Fondazione Prada's show ends is "Dawn of a Nation," at Palazzo Strozzi in Florence, a less ambitious exhibition that nevertheless offers an effective window onto Italian art amid postwar reconstruction. Unlike "Post Zang

Tumb Tuuum,” it limits documentary material to an initial gallery, where a newsreel montage takes us from the foundation of the republic in 1946 to the “dolce vita” of the 1960s.

The past was not forgotten in this postwar age: Mimmo Rotella, whose canvases comprised multiple posters sliced in the technique known as *décollage*, found an old Mussolini placard beneath an advertisement for a swords-and-sandals epic film. But the economic boom of the 1950s occasioned a new freedom in Italian art. A beautiful gallery here unites two dozen paintings and sculptures of all white: a slashed monochrome by Lucio Fontana, a foam rubber canvas by Giulio Turcato, and multiple achromatic works by Piero Manzoni, whose white bread rolls, rabbit-fur balls and canned excrement mocked both artistic genius and rampant consumerism.

By the late 1960s, the Italian avant-garde had again become explicitly political, though this time it spoke the languages of the left. In Rome, the Pop artist Mario Schifano painted boys toting hammers and sickles, when he wasn't recording prog-rock or in jail on drugs charges. And up in Turin, a loose collection of young artists started to embrace humble, everyday materials to challenge artistic hierarchies, and eventually became known as *Arte Povera*. (The man who coined that term? A young Germano Celant, the curator of “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum.”)

“Dawn of a Nation” closes with one of the most emblematic works of *Arte Povera*: Giuseppe Penone's “Rovesciare i Propri Occhi” (“Reversing One's Eyes”), from 1970, in which the artist photographed himself wearing mirrored contact lenses, blinding himself and reflecting the world he usually saw back onto the viewer. The curators of “Dawn of a Nation” make the eyebrow-raising proposition that Mr. Penone's photograph symbolizes “a nation gazing introspectively at itself and its history as it enters the period of critical tension” — that is to say, the violent years of the 1970s. That is a pretty desperate projection onto Mr. Penone's intricate, sense-triggering art, and, when contrasted with the extreme precision of “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum,” it feels especially baseless.

In any event, another work in “Dawn of a Nation” more explicitly encapsulates

the tangled web of art and politics here. In Luciano Fabro's "Italy" (1968), a steel cutout of the boot of Europe's south hangs from the ceiling, but the wrong way up: a supporting wire stretches around Calabria, and Piedmont dangles down to the floor. It sways and swings like an air-dried prosciutto — or, indeed, like the body of Mussolini, hanging upside-down in a Milan square in 1945.

Especially after March 4, as its citizens await to discover what sort of new government they will get, Fabro's "Italy" feels familiar again, a portrait of a country both exquisite and hamstrung.

Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943  
Through June 25 at Fondazione Prada, Milan; [fondazioneprada.org](http://fondazioneprada.org).

Dawn of a Nation  
Through July 22 at Palazzo Strozzi, Florence; [palazzostrozzi.org](http://palazzostrozzi.org).

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