

- (ed.), *Festivals & Daily Life in the Arts of Colonial Latin America, 1492–1850*, Denver, 2014, p. 119.
- 4 Zoë Ryan, 'There is Design in Everything', in Zoë Ryan (ed.), *In A Cloud in a Wall in a Chair*, exh. cat., Chicago, 2019, p. 25.

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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.2396-9008.059](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.059)

'Morandi, Balla, de Chirico and Italian Painting 1920–1950', Tornabuoni Art Gallery, London, 12 February – 18 April 2020. Catalogue: Tornabuoni Art Gallery, London, 2020, 176 pages, hardback, £20,00.

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'The drama of modern painting consists in not giving up on the modern, but trying to infuse it with the eternal [...]; in disentangling the essential, which is simple and immutable, from the tangle of complex and fleeting impressions'.¹ With these words, art critic Margherita Sarfatti introduced Novecento: a large group of painters, including Mario Sironi, Ubaldo Oppi and many others, exhibiting their works at the *First Exhibition of the Italian Novecento* in Milan in 1926. The group aimed to reinvigorate the Italian artistic scene by rejecting the 'ephemeral' qualities of previous avant-gardes, instead creating a new 'modern classical' art. Through this apparent paradox they conceptualised an art that would be simultaneously modern while looking at the Italian art historical tradition, embracing figuration and solidity.

The exhibition at Tornabuoni Art Gallery presents some works by painters who had been part of Novecento, arranged around the three themes that appeared at the 1926 exhibition: still life, landscape and the representation of the female figure. One has the perception of an a-temporal 'classicism' emerging from the arrangement of the exhibition at Tornabuoni and yet, the stylistic diversity of the works on display reveal the eclectic approaches of the Novecento artists to the concept of 'modern classicism'. What distinguishes this show from the 1926 exhibition, however, is that the works on display encompass a 30 year range and the majority of them date from the 1940s and 1950s, not from the 1920s and early 1930s – roughly the years of Novecento. If, on the one hand, this curatorial choice seems detrimental to the temporal specificity of the works on display, subsumed as they are under the framework of the Novecento 1926 exhibition and ideas, on the other hand, it actually complicates narratives through unexpected juxtapositions while altering temporalities, encouraging visitors to reflect on the artistic legacy of Novecento.

The first room, for instance, is dedicated to still lifes and landscapes and offers interesting comparisons. De Chirico's *Natura Morta* [Still Life] (1930) creates a jarring juxtaposition to Filippo de Pisis's *Vaso di Fiori in un Interno* [Vase of Flowers in an Interior] (1945), which sits next to it. The precise draughtsmanship and shading in the former is highlighted by the vaporous yet restrained brushwork in the latter. De Chirico's apples and grapes on a crumpled white tablecloth, with touches of white paint marking the reflection of light, rival the still lifes of the seventeenth century, and appear at odds with de Pisis's patchy strokes, which seem still indebted to a more 'Impressionistic' language. Three still lifes by Giorgio Morandi are hung

at the back of the room. While brushstrokes are visible in the other canvases, here they disappear. Hues are reduced to a uniformed colour palette – a few earthy cream colours set against a plain monochrome background – and basic geometric forms harmonise in a fusion of lines. In *Natura Morta* [Still Life] (1959), only a shadow indicates the temporal presence of light striking these objects, making them present in time.

This web of diverse ‘classicisms’ is even more palpable in the room dedicated to the representation of women. Here, the casting of the ‘woman’ in a timeless space seems to be the unifying character. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent how each casting references a different tradition, a historically specific ‘classicism’. Giacomo Balla’s *Luce nella Luce* [Light in the Light] (1928) combines a large-scale figurative subject with remnant futurist interests in the breakdown of forms and light, which may appear at odds with Sarfatti’s words. Instead, Massimo Campigli’s *Campi Arati* [Ploughed Fields] (1957), executed several decades later and sitting on the adjacent wall, references the matted colours of Etruscan frescos with simplified female figures set against a striated abstract field.

While these narratives unfold, with their diverse temporal references, other stories emerge as one ponders on the dates of the works. How should one read de Chirico’s still life *Vita Silente* [Silent Life] of 1958, which greets visitors at the entrance of the exhibit, next to its counterpart of 1930? In both cases the genre of still life allows the painter to focus on forms. However, the juxtaposition also points to differences in technique and meaning. Not only has the palette changed, but the brushwork too. If in *Natura Morta* [Still Life] (1930) brushstrokes are stirred and controlled by the virtuosity of its maker, in

Vita Silente [Silent Life] (1958) they seem to take on a life of their own, vibrant and agitated, restless on the canvas, with surrealist overtones that resurface in the painting, as is disclosed by the different choice of title. Indeed, in the title of the 1958 work, de Chirico replaces the Italian term ‘natura morta’, which has connotations of death, with the literal Italian translation of the English ‘still life’ or ‘silent life’, implying something beyond the stillness of those fruits as objects. The title now hints at their poignant ‘living silence’ as the real subject of the painting.

The exhibition at Tornabuoni Art Gallery seems to plunge visitors in an anachronistically loose temporal specificity, accentuated by the emphasis on the seemingly a-temporal ‘classicism’ of the Italian Novecento. Through comparisons, it actually highlights the diverse ‘classicisms’ referenced by the painters and also the transformations of the very paintings across time. Thus, issues of time, which were central to Novecento for whom past and present were not perceived as antithetical, are complicated and interwoven here at Tornabuoni.

¹ Margherita Sarfatti, ‘Letter from Margherita Sarfatti for *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d’Italia*, March 1926’. Quoted in *Morandi, Balla, de Chirico and Italian Painting 1920–1950*, exh.cat., London, 2020, p. 135. The original quote reads: ‘Il dramma della pittura moderna consiste nel non rinunciare al moderno tentando di infonderlo nell’eterno[...]; districare l’essenziale, che da solo è semplice e immutabile, dal groviglio di impressioni fugaci e complicate’.

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