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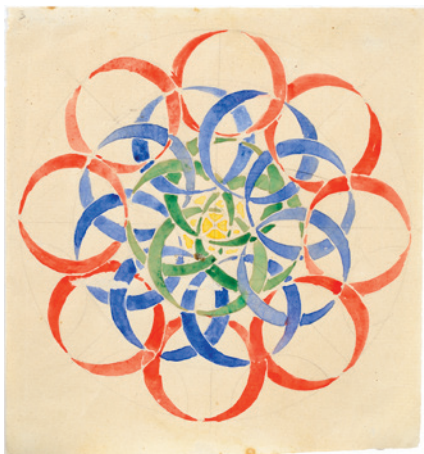
# SILENT REVOLUTIONS



Italian Drawings from the Twentieth Century

The Menil Drawing Institute

November 14, 2020–April 11, 2021



# During the Twentieth Century,

Italian art was remarkably innovative, revolutionary even, and it had significant repercussions in international art. This creative spirit was particularly manifest in the field of drawing, which enabled Italian artists to invent new artistic concepts and styles, often with an economy of means. Drawing gave them free rein to experiment with a wide range of techniques, each endowed with physical properties and expressive potential of their own. Artists used traditional materials such as pencil, ink, pastel, charcoal, and paint, as well as employed unconventional processes like puncturing, burning, embossing, and stitching. They pushed the boundaries of what drawing is, investigating its dual nature (theorized in 16th-century Italy with the concept of *disegno*) as both a physical practice of mark-making and a conceptual process for the generation of ideas. Italian artists produced studies to explore their thoughts on paper to be realized potentially in other mediums, as well as autonomous works.

The first large-scale survey of Italian drawings from the 20th century mounted in the United States, *Silent Revolutions* features 70 drawings by well-known artists as well as by under-recognized figures, who tackled themes as varied as history, myth, language, subjectivity, modernity, movement, space, and abstraction. The works on view are selected from the Milan-based Collezione Ramo, which focuses on 20th-century Italian drawings, as well as several works from the Menil's holdings.

- 1 Umberto Boccioni, *Against the Light (Controluce)*, 1910. Graphite pencil and ink on paper, 14 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 19 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (37.7 × 48.9 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan
- 2 Giacomo Balla, *Untitled, study for Iridescent Interpenetration (Compenetrazione iridescente)*, 1912. Watercolor on paper, 7 $\frac{5}{8}$  × 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (19.4 × 17.7 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

One of the earliest works in the exhibition, *Against the Light (Controluce)* (FIG. 1) is a haunting masterpiece by UMBERTO BOCCIONI (1882–1916) made in 1910. It depicts the head of a young woman in front of a window, with rays of light that rain down obliquely, revealing the window frame through her face. The composition's sense of transparency hints at Boccioni's theoretical interest in the optical interpenetration of bodies and planes, which he would further develop as part of his involvement with the revolutionary aesthetic of Futurism.

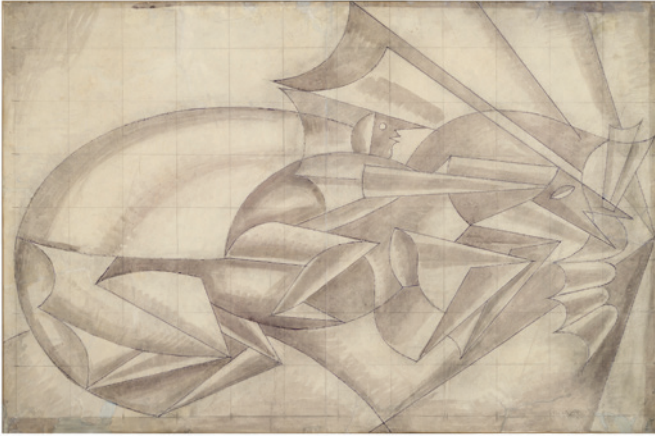
GIACOMO BALLA (1871–1958) also became a key figure of Futurism, a radical, utopian aesthetic catalyzed by the publication of a manifesto in 1909 by the poet F.T. Marinetti. Centered in Italy, this avant-garde movement sought to revitalize society and culture by decisively breaking from the past and by embracing modernity and its dynamism. A sophisticated, independent study in watercolor by Balla from 1912 (FIG. 2) attests the Futurists' experiments with light, color, and space. This work, one of a group called *Iridescent Interpenetrations*, depicts vibrantly colored, interconnected circles arranged symmetrically around a yellow nucleus, conveying a sense of depth and motion.

A hallmark of modernity, speed was a dominant theme in Futurist art, as exemplified by *Untitled, study for Neighing in Speed (Nitrìto in velocità)* (FIG. 3) by FORTUNATO DEPERO (1892–1960), whose taut, geometrical style here is characteristic of the aesthetic movement. Depero's dynamic composition depicts a man riding a horse as if they were reconstructed synthetically to resemble a machine, one made with curvilinear pieces of metal. The drawing, created following the artist's return from New York (where he

3 Fortunato Depero, *Untitled, study for Neighing in Speed (Nitrìto in velocità)*, ca. 1931–32. India ink, pen, and graphite pencil on paper mounted on canvas, 23  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 35  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (59.3 × 89.7 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

4 Adolfo Wildt, *Animantium Rex Homo*, 1925. Graphite pencil and charcoal on paper applied on canvas, 35  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 51  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (89.8 × 130.7 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan





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had worked as a designer for magazines such as *The New Yorker* and *Vogue*) was preparatory for a painting that the artist exhibited at the 1932 Venice Biennale.

While the Futurists found the Classical tradition inherited from antiquity and the Renaissance stifling, artists including GIORGIO DE CHIRICO (1888–1978) and ADOLFO WILDT (1868–1931), by contrast, chose to engage with it and to interpret this cultural legacy in a modern way. Wildt, best known as a sculptor, embraced drawing as an essential independent activity and made, for example, *Animantium Rex Homo* (FIG. 4). As part of a cycle of twelve large scenes executed in 1925, these drawings were meant for photographic reproduction in black and white. Here, as described in the Bible, God is bringing man and animals to life. Wildt's style is reminiscent of Classical statuary as he used pencil and charcoal to a high degree of finish to give his figures a volumetric quality; his style, at the same time, anticipated the rigor and the concerns of modern graphic design.

The Argentine-born artist LUCIO FONTANA (1899–1968), who trained in Milan under Wildt, founded Spatialism in 1947. This influential movement repudiated the illusionistic space of traditional picture-making and called for new art forms suitable for the age. In his series of “spatial concepts,” Fontana lacerated the support—whether canvas or paper—thus opening it into three-dimensional space. Here (FIG. 5), he scratched on the back of absorbent paper to create a tactile, protruding outline on the front. Patches of ink appear to emerge from behind, adding to the impression of depth.

- 5 Lucio Fontana, *Untitled (Spatial Concept)*, 1951. Watercolor and graffiti on paper, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 23 in. (46.5 × 58.5 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome
- 6 Alberto Burri, *Untitled (Combustion)*, 1957. Acrylic, vinyl glue, and combustion on paper, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (35 × 26 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome

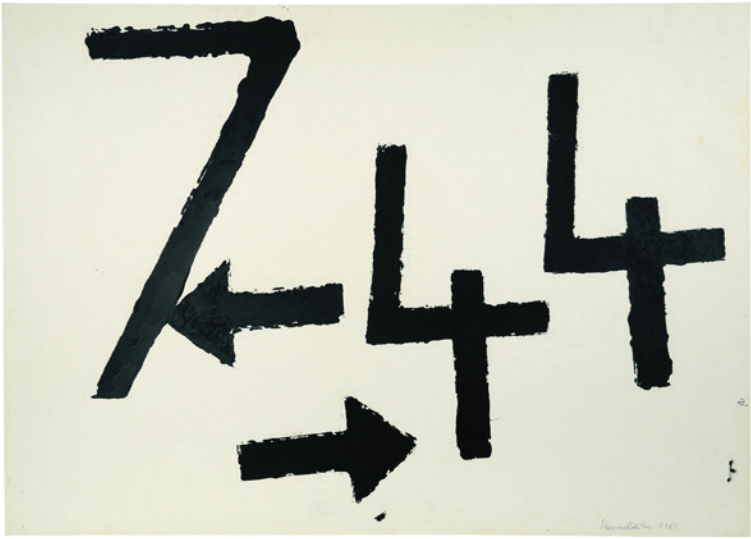
Materiality was a primary concern of ALBERTO BURRI (1915–1995), a central figure in the era following the devastation of World War II. *Untitled (Combustion)* (FIG. 6), a drawing with a powerful physical presence, from 1957, exemplifies how Burri employed unconventional materials and processes—burning, in this instance—to make pioneering work that questioned and reconceptualized the Western pictorial tradition. His radical approach to manipulating modest materials (tar, sack, wood, fiberboard), which transcended the painted surfaces and gestural qualities of contemporaneous Abstract Expressionism in North America and European Art Informel, had a profound impact in Italy and beyond.

Fontana's energetic gestures and Burri's material explorations provided important foundations for a younger generation of artists and urged them to make groundbreaking work of their own. Dated from 1961, *Untitled (7-44)* (FIG. 7) is an early piece by JANNIS KOUNELLIS (1936–2017) that is part of a series known as *Letters or Alphabets* featuring numbers, letters, arrows, and other signs. Here he turned them into the monumental components of an opaque, primordial linguistic system. Kounellis applied his signs on the sheet of paper using stencils, instead of drawing them directly by hand, thus questioning the crucial connection that is traditionally assumed to exist between drawing and the mark of the artist's hand.

In the mid-1960s, ALIGHIERO BOETTI (1940–1994), whose work is characterized by its material diversity and conceptual ingenuity, explored his fascination with the modern, technological object in a series of finely executed, arresting ink drawings, including this one (FIG. 8) from 1965. Starkly composed

- 7 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled (7-44)*, 1961. Tempera on cardboard, 27<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 39<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (70.8 × 101 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Jannis Kounellis
- 8 Alighiero Boetti, *Untitled*, 1965. India ink and watercolor on paper, 31<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 39<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (79.9 × 99.9 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome
- 9 Carol Rama, *Untitled*, 1977. Inner tube, artificial leather, and colored pencil on black board, 19<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 27<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (50.3 × 69.2 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Archivio Carol Rama





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against the white of the paper, the drawing presents to the viewer a microphone in profile and a keyboard seen, unexpectedly, from above. These objects seem to evoke the spirit of innovation associated with the Italian economic boom of the postwar period.

Boetti and Kounellis later became closely associated with Arte Povera, a term introduced in 1967 by the Italian critic and curator Germano Celant to refer to a heterogeneous group of artists loosely united by a desire to make poetic statements with the simplest of means, without the restraints of traditional materials and practices. Other key figures in this influential movement, MARIO MERZ (1925–2003), GIULIO PAOLINI (b. 1940), and MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO (b. 1933), are also featured in this exhibition.

Consumer products frequently appear in the work of CAROL RAMA (1918–2015), a self-taught artist from Turin whose iconoclastic practice often tackled issues of female identity and intimacy. In the 1970s, she made spare geometric collages on paper (FIG. 9) incorporating sections of bicycle inner tubes. These rubber elements—cut and opened flat—are meant to evoke human skin, as well as her memories of her industrialist father, who went bankrupt producing bicycles.

Her contemporary MARIA LAI (1919–2013), who was born on the island of Sardinia, developed an artistic language informed by the culture of her native region, particularly the traditional female practice of needlework. *Diary (Diario)* (FIG. 10) is typical of Lai's imagery as it uses sewing as a form of drawing. Dating from 1979, this piece is part of a group of stitched books she made using fabric, paper, and thread. Her illegible narratives allude to the difficulties and complexities of human communication. Like Rama, Lai

10 Maria Lai, *Diary (Diario)*, 1979. Fabric, paper, and thread, 9 × 6 $\frac{7}{8}$  ×  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (23 × 17.5 × 0.8 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Archivio Maria Lai

forged a deeply personal, imaginative path for herself—as did the artist IRMA BLANK (b. 1934). A native of Germany based in Italy since the 1950s, Blank has spent decades exploring the space between drawing and writing in works like her *Radical Writings* (BACK) where her repetitive, almost ritualistic marks served to record her lived experience of time.

While many artists continued to pursue their deep engagement with drawing well into the 1980s and 1990s, the medium became less central to the practice of a new generation. Drawing was taught less and less in fine art academies while other media, such as photography and video, rose in significance. For much of the 20th century, however, drawing played a key and multifaceted role for Italian artists, as it allowed them to break new aesthetic ground. It proved to be a powerful creative tool and a versatile means of expression and the site of spirited dialogues between form and matter, tradition and innovation, figuration and abstraction, the local and the universal.





Curated by Edouard Kopp, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute, and Irina Zucca Alessandrelli, Curator, Collezione Ramo, Milan

COLLEZIONE RAMO is the only collection dedicated to 20th-century Italian drawing. Its holdings trace the phases of Italian art history with respect to the practice of drawing, which can be seen not only as preparation for paintings or sculptures, but, above all, as a revolutionary form of artistic expression. The collection focuses on the importance of Italian art of the last century while also promoting a culture of drawing as having an independent value, on a par with painting and sculpture. Visit [collezioneramo.it](http://collezioneramo.it)

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Please visit [menil.org](http://menil.org) for up-to-date information about public programs and events organized in conjunction with this exhibition.

- Front Emilio Scanavino, *Untitled*, 1969. Grease pencil and acetate on cardstock, 20½ × 13¾ in. (53 × 35 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Estate of Emilio Scanavino
- Back Irma Blank, *Radical Writings, From the Book of Silence X (Dal libro del silenzio X)*, 1983. Watercolor on paper, 29¾ × 22¼ in. (75.8 × 56.4 cm). Collezione Ramo, Milan. © Irma Blank

All photography: Studio Vandrash Fotografia, Milan

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