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Exhibiting Communist Italy Abroad: The 1956 Artist Delegation to the People's Republic of China

In the 1950s, Italian Communists looked not only to the USSR but to China's nascent regime, the People's Republic of China, for cultural exchange and collective inspiration. Italy sought alternative avenues toward a revolution and China hoped to gain international legitimacy. Through various channels, artists and other cultural figures participated in periodic visits and dialogues, largely omitted from macro-histories. This essay focuses on the unique experience of six unlikely Italian artists – Agenore Fabbri, Antonietta Raphaël, Aligi Sassu, Ampelio Tettamanti, Giulio Turcato, and Tono Zancanaro – as they visited China in 1956. Sponsored by the PCI, these artists showed their artwork in Beijing in an unprecedented exhibition and made artwork from their travels that was shown upon their return to Italy. Art – accepted in a plurality of visual forms – served as a vehicle for dialogue and was placed at the center of this mid-century Communist project of national connection. The Chinese-Italian exchange thrived at a moment when both countries imagined a radical future, and communist ideals of equality and prosperity seemed within reach.

Standing in casual formation atop the steps of a brick building, a group of people smiles at the camera (fig. 1). In the center are six Europeans, distinguished by their western-style clothes, flanked by Chinese men and women. All the Chinese men wear zhongshan (“Mao”) suits. The contrast between the two groups is obvious, yet, in this particular moment, they are united to show a cultural connection. In 1956, the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) sent six artists – five men and one woman – on a delegation to visit the newly formed People's Republic of China (PRC). In the two countries' brief years of openness, various delegations traveled between the two nations, including this one comprising artists exclusively. Agenore Fabbri, Antonietta Raphaël, Aligi Sassu, Ampelio Tettamanti, Giulio Turcato, and Tono Zancanaro visited China at a time when there were not yet official diplomatic relations in the aftermath of World War II. The PCI capitalized upon this absence and invested in sending artists as an effective way to build unofficial ties. Moreover, artists could observe and evaluate the new China and report to the Italian people through a visual language that the PCI thought could be more compelling than prevalent journalistic accounts or literary narratives¹.

Established only in 1949, the PRC was not yet recognized as a sovereign nation on the world stage, and the leading Italian party, the Christian Democrats, had aligned Italy with the West after WWII. In the 1950s, however, China was important to Italian communists because it offered an ideological path to rebuilding their nation separate from the USSR. China's dramatic transformation as a socialist utopia appealed to Italian artists, writers, and intellectuals, as it also provided

an alternative to the Atlantic world. Indeed, as early as 1953, the PCI, through the Center for the Development of Economic and Cultural Relations with China (Centro Studi Cina), began to build a network of unofficial contacts with China that involved educational, economic, and cultural incentives. The 1956 artist delegation was historic because it was the first visit of artists from Italy and Western Europe to the newly formed PRC.

This article investigates the singular journey these six artists undertook as they traveled halfway across the globe to learn first-hand about the Chinese communist revolution and bring to the Chinese people Italian communism and anti-fascism that had created solidarity in their home nation. The trip culminated with an exhibition, where the PCI displayed its cultural heritage for the host nation. Along with a discussion of the communist cultural exchange network that gave form to the 1956 artist delegation and a detailed account of the groundbreaking 1956 exhibition in Beijing, this article also provides a framework for understanding the Chinese reaction to Italian communist art.

Sino-Italian Delegations in Context

In a brief few years in the middle of the 1950s, Italy and China had an unprecedented exchange. The geopolitical conditions of mutual interest provided a rare platform for the possibility of visits on many levels – economic, political, and cultural – that were unique to these years.

China's outreach to other communist parties around the world came from the External Liaison Department (Duiwai lianlubu or Zhonglianbu), established in 1951 and directed by Wang Jiaxiang, supported by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee. Moreover, China was particularly drawn to Italy, and at the 8th Congress of the PCI held in Rome in December 1956, the head of the Chinese delegation Peng Zhen reminded the audience of the great strength of the PCI and its prominent position within the international communist movement². Moreover, mutual economic interests between the two countries further motivated partners on both sides of the dialogue despite an impasse on the political front. Reporting on a meeting between representatives from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese ambassador Wang Bingnan in Geneva, Wang revealed divergent perspectives: while the Italians focused on the expansion of trade, the Chinese tried to leverage trade relations to establish official status between the two states³.

On the Italian side, the PCI carefully followed the Chinese communist revolution because of the roadmap it could afford Italy as the PCI sought to distance itself from the Soviet bloc. Gian Carlo Pajetta (1911-1990), one of the party's leading

members, recalled: «the particularities of the Chinese revolution, its weight within the proletarian and revolutionary movement, and the problem of the autonomy of the party that guided that revolution, were questions beyond dispute»⁴. Indeed, 1956 was a watershed year, where ideological fractions were sedimented, called by historian Luciano Canfora, «l'anno spartiacque»⁵. The 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February of that year shattered the myth set by Joseph Stalin and inspired radical renewal of communism. In Italy, key intellectual figures such as Antonio Giolitti, Italo Calvino, Carlo Muscetta, and Delio Cantimori left the PCI in protest. The party responded by seeking plural and diverse roads to socialism and autonomy for Communist parties. In his speech to the PCI on March 13, 1956, party leader Palmiro Togliatti stressed the importance of acknowledging that there were different routes to socialism and quoted the Chinese experience as an example of other possible paths to those dictated by the Soviet Union⁶. Togliatti, however, also argued for a peaceful and democratic trajectory, not a revolution. His ideas would later, in December 1962, at the 10th National Congress of the PCI, be condemned by the Chinese Communist Party and labeled as “revisionist”.

In the 1950s, however, Italy, and the PCI in particular, sought such an alternative. Although the PCI was the largest communist party in Western Europe, it did not control the national government. Moreover, Italy's adherence to the North Atlantic Treaty blocked official diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Many PCI members and communist-leaning individuals, however, were committed to reconstructing their nation after World War II and believed a communist revolution in Italy was necessary. They looked to China as a model. For instance, Piero Calamandrei was gravely dissatisfied in the 1950s with the lack of actual implementation of the ideals of the 1948 Italian Constitution, social and territorial inequities, and the persistence of authoritarianism in the Italian Republic of the postwar years⁷. He was one of the main drivers of these Sino-Italian encounters, understanding that the learning opportunities from these delegations and the possibilities of sharing that knowledge with the Italian people were vital if support was to be garnered for an Italian communist revolution.

In addition to trade relations, cultural exchange was another uncontested arena of mutual interest. Before the 1956 artist delegation, there had been several delegations of Italian visitors, including writers, philosophers, and individuals advancing business opportunities. A large 1955 delegation was led by Piero Calamandrei, whose son Franco was stationed in Beijing as a journalist for the communist newspaper «l'Unità». Piero Calamandrei brought figures like

Norberto Bobbio, Emilio Durio, Rodolfo Margarita, Cesare Musatti, pathologist Lucio Benedetti, psychiatrist Rosario Ruggeri, writers and journalists Franco Antonicelli, Umberto Barbaro, Carlo Bernardi, Rocco Cacapardo, Carlo Cassola, Franco Fortini, Corrado Pizzinelli, Antonello Trombadori and Maria Regis, the architect Franco Berlanda, and the painter Ernesto Treccani. After the trip, the journal «Il Ponte», directed by Calamandrei, published a special issue called *La Cina d'Oggi* in 1956, which contained a selection of essays by Italian, Chinese, and international intellectuals, aiming to provide Italian readership with a new set of cultural, literary, juridical, and historical information regarding both pre- and post-revolutionary China.

Independently of this delegation, the Socialist Pietro Nenni – one of Stalin's fiercest critics – also visited China in October 1955, making him the first high-ranking Italian politician to step foot in the newly created PRC. The invitation came from Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. Nenni knew that he would cast a shadow on Togliatti. Mario Filippo Pini speculates that it was Nenni, and not Togliatti, who was invited because the Chinese strategically connected with individuals who would be able to have agency in their sphere of influence and on their national governments, and Nenni, at the time, had important connections to the Christian Democrats⁸.

Despite this, communist-sponsored delegations seemed worthwhile to the Italians, and a third delegation returned to China in 1956, this time led by Ferruccio Parri with other members of the Italian cultural sector⁹. As Laura De Giorgi explains, these delegations were supported by the PCI and, in particular, by the communists living in Beijing during these years. There were a handful of communist journalists, like Franco Calamandrei, students, and experts, who were a vital point of contact, and whose experience was essentially determined by the Chinese redefinition of its national identity¹⁰. The groundwork for the cultural exchanges in the 1950s – and the instances like the 1956 artist delegation – were necessary for establishing relationships that then resulted in the official PCI delegation to China to meet the Chinese Communist Party for the first time in 1959 and the signing of an agreement formalizing the establishment of direct bilateral relations in 1970.

A Delegation of Artists

The 1956 delegation of Italian artists – although all communist card-holding members – formed an unlikely group: they had different artistic styles and sensibilities and belonged to separate art circles. None of them adhered to

Togliatti's outspoken aesthetic preference – but not mandated – for Soviet-sanctioned socialist realism, which made them an even more improbable group selected by the PCI to show their work abroad. Their artwork ranged in mediums and styles: some, like those of Agenore Fabbri, were expressionist, while others, like those of Tono Zancanaro, were realist, and yet, others, like those of Giulio Turcato, were abstract. In considering the diversity of these artists, it is important to consider that throughout the first half of the 20th century, there had been heated debates about which styles—abstract, realist, modern, classicist, expressive, fauvist, nationalist, or cosmopolitan, to name a few, should be used to convey which political ideology. Many experimented with a wide range of approaches, as purists and as hybrid models, and the discourse cannot be distilled to the polarities of socialist realism and abstraction. The 1956 delegation of artists reflects the many art forms artists employed. Indeed, art historian Juan José Gómez Gutiérrez has shown the complexities and multivariate stances of the anti-Fascist artistic resistance and how, by mid-century, the socialist realism of the Soviet Union was seen as authoritarian by the Italian Left¹¹. While steeped in the cultural debate in the post-war years, the PCI conveyed that the party had not formulated a clear Marxist aesthetic and, by necessity, took a tolerant approach. All six delegation artists had lived through WWII and aligned with PCI's resistance to Fascism. This political bond was strong in the aftermath of the War to give them political coherence.

The cultural commission of the PCI organized the trip, and the party charged the historian and critic Mario Penelope, founder of the union of artists of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (General Confederation of Labor, CGIL), to select the artists for this critical cultural mission. These artists knew each other despite being based in different cities between Milan and Rome. Most of them had prominent and critically acclaimed exhibitions since 1945, giving them the credentials to be selected. Given these facts, we can wonder what they thought of each other and how they bonded on this journey. Much from this expedition was not recorded and has now been lost to history. What we can reconstruct about the trip and its impact comes from these artists' journals, diary entries, and secondary accounts.

The group left Rome on May 10, 1956, and traveled for about nine days, taking multiple flights, to arrive in China. They obtained visas in Zurich as Italy could not issue them the paperwork because of the absence of official diplomatic relations between Italy and China. Finally, they landed in Beijing on May 19. During their stay, they visited various institutions, ranging from museums to an agricultural cooperative and a youth institute. They also traveled to several

Chinese cities, including Shanghai, Hangzhou, Guangzhou, and Shenyang, and took day trips to other towns. What the artists saw and who they interacted with was highly orchestrated by the Chinese government to give them the best possible experience of the new Communist China so that they might share their experience with Italians upon their return.

This journey had a profound impact on all the artists, many of whom made work while they were in China and then exhibited it in Italy¹². For instance, Tono Zancanaro described his enthusiasm in his journal. He came back with many drawings he completed while in China, which he exhibited at communist cultural centers, Case del Popolo, to connect with workers and farmers¹³. He rendered the port of Shanghai, rice fields, factories in Shenyang, streets of Beijing, as well as Buddhist pagodas and sculptures in Hangzhou¹⁴. His images of Chinese people express admiration. For Zancanaro, the trip was an intense experience, so stimulating that he extended his stay through July, as is evident from the markings on his drawings¹⁵.

The official tour ended when, on June 3, the group returned to Beijing to participate in the presentation of their artwork, which had traveled with them to China, collected in an exhibition entitled *Exhibition of Works by Italian Artists Visiting China* (*Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin zhanlan*). After experiencing the new China, it was now the Italian artists' turn to present themselves to the Chinese people in this choreographed cultural exchange.

Selected Works by Italian Artists Visiting China

The 1956 exhibition in Beijing was an important example of how the PCI promoted itself abroad. This was the Party's opportunity to engage in a transnational communist dialogue through the arts, and it showed itself through a diversity of voices and artistic styles, as represented by the disparate nature of the artists.

The exhibition was held in a space used by the Chinese Artists Association (CAA), the professional organizing body for Chinese artists. It was a traditional building in central Beijing (no longer existent), as large-scale exhibition spaces had not yet been built in China. What we know is reconstructed from the exhibition catalogue, *Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin xuanji* (Selected Works by Italian Artists Visiting China), published a year later, in September 1957¹⁶. This publication, written entirely in Chinese, contains a foreword by Aligi Sassu, an introduction by Chinese printmaker and CAA administrator Yan Han, photographs of some of the artworks exhibited, and a partial checklist¹⁷. A brochure, also in Chinese, which was printed

in 1956, contains a complete checklist. As far as we know, there are no installation images of the exhibition. Thus we can only deduce from known sources how the exhibition was organized and laid out spatially. A rare image of a billboard advertisement for the exhibition reveals that it was placed alongside other public service announcements, such as movie posters and an early propaganda poster for the Four Pests Campaign (fig. 2).

The Beijing exhibition was composed of 108 artworks from Italy that the artists had pre-selected, and the crates traveled parallel to the artists across the Russian continent to China. On the eve of the opening, Raphaël noted in her diary her anxiety about this exhibition:

Tomorrow is the inauguration of the exhibition. The organizers came to tell us that the show had been installed and asked if we wanted to go see it. I did not go as I wanted to go to the hairdresser. After an hour, Sassu and Tettevani knocked on my door and gave me the catalogue [1956 brochure] of the show. It is really a wonderful thing. The only thing that I am unhappy about is that I fear my work is not well presented and that tomorrow will be a sad day for me¹⁸.

Attended by Chinese government officials, artists, journalists, and even two Mexican journalists, the opening was an important event for the host nation. Raffaella De Pasquale speculates that Chinese artists must have been searching for an autonomous avenue of creativity while navigating their tradition and the Soviet-style, so they must have had a genuine interest in Italian artists¹⁹. After the opening, the Italian artists were fêted by the CAA with a celebratory lunch in their honor.

Featured prominently in the exhibition and subsequent catalogue was delegation leader Aligi Sassu, whose artwork occupied the entirety of the first room. He showed sixteen works documented in the 1956 brochure; eight were reproduced in the 1957 catalogue. All the paintings, lithographs, and watercolors were created in the 1950s. Sassu chose to exhibit his most recent work, including subjects like dynamic horses (fig. 3), lively cafe scenes, and portraits of specific and unknown sitters. His style is expressionistic with loose, bold gestural brushstrokes, and he sometimes took creative license with color. For example, his horse paintings, like his *Uomini Rossi (Red Men)* series from the 1930s, exist between myth and reality; a figurative landscape grounds them, but their colors move away from naturalistic representation and can be green or red. They echo the Futurists' concern for dynamism but depart dramatically from the earlier movement to inhabit an imaginary world, which was part of his visual resistance to the then State-sponsored aesthetic of national classicism of the Fascist Regime. Sassu also painted cafe scenes after undergoing political radicalization during a

1935 trip to Paris²⁰. This could be why the artist chose to include these works, although the images likely appeared to be bourgeois social scenes to Chinese audiences. Interestingly, Sassu did not present his more explicitly political paintings, which he made during these years, including representations of the Italian working class like *Minatori* (*Mineworkers*, 1951) and *I Martiri di Piazzale Loreto* (*The Martyrs of Piazzale Loreto*, 1944) that depicted the massacre of fifteen anti-fascist fighters.

Ampelio Tettamanti had seventeen artworks in the exhibition, with eight reproduced in the 1957 catalogue. He was a painter and draftsman and showed only recent drawings. In the mid-1950s, he produced murals and illustrations for «l'Unità». He was closely linked with the Milanese group "15 Borgonuovo", named after the street of the gallery, which also included Giovanni Fumagalli, Giovanni Bruzzi, Maria Antonietta Rampolini, Giuseppe Scalvini, Franco Rognoni, as part of the Milan Realist painters group. In the Beijing exhibition, Tettamanti presented several communist-related themes, such as working-class figures like the solemn-looking portrait *Renxiang* 人像 (*Portrait*, 1955) of a woman²¹. The work was featured on its cover, rendered in a communist red tone. Additionally, a few landscapes were exhibited, such as *Nongshe* 农舍 (*Farmhouse* 1954), an agricultural scene, and *Qiao* 桥 (*Bridge*, 1955), a working-class urban setting. *Youji dui yuan de muqin* 游击队员的母亲 (*Mothers of the Guerilla Fighters*, 1955) showed a woman mourning the death of her partisan son, consoled by two others at her side (fig. 4). Several artists represented images of anti-fascist fighters, demonstrating the importance of the subject to the Italian communist artists.

Agenore Fabbri also exhibited seventeen works; one of the most prominent was the sculpture. *Youji dui yuan zhi si* 游击队员之死 (*Death of the Guerrilla Fighter*, 1950), made out of what looks like terracotta. An image of the sculpture is reproduced in the 1957 catalogue. It shows a female, possibly a mother, holding her collapsing son as he wails in agony (fig. 5). The modeling of the form is rough and expressionistic in Auguste Rodin's manner. In Antonietta Raphaël's diary account, this work was one of approximately sixty small sculptures presented in a case with photographs and Italian art publications²². The catalogue reproduced only three other watercolors and explicitly political sketches, including *Shouxing de youji dui yuan* 受刑的游击队员 (*Tortured Guerilla Fighters*, 1954).

While Giulio Turcato's work was the most abstract of the group, it was also highly political. Like Fabbri, he presented seventeen works on paper: watercolors, drawings, and lithographs. Turcato lived in Rome and moved in the same circles as Antonietta Raphaël and her husband, Mario Mafai. In the 1950s, he embraced non-geometric abstraction as a member of the *Fronte nuovo delle arti* (New Art

Front) without relinquishing his political dedication. The Italian art world was fraught with disagreements on what artistic language best suited the communist cause. Turcato joined the Gruppo degli Otto (Group of Eight), born from a split in the Fronte, which promoted abstraction as a socialist aesthetic. In 1947 he was one of the founding members of Gruppo Forma 1 (Group Form 1), which merged communist commitment with abstraction. He painted a series of large abstract-looking canvases with striking red triangles, such as the 1948 *Comizio (Rally)*, which the artist described as representing the red flags of the rallying masses. Indeed, the first two works reproduced in the catalogue are titled *Wuyi jie 五一节 (May Day, 1956)*. Like the 1948 *Comizio*, the first *May Day* features elongated red triangles (flags) scattered across the composition, animated by black dots that evoke the crowds (fig. 6). The subsequent artworks, like the *Zhanzheng de feixu 战争的废墟 (Ruins of War, 1956)* and *Meikuang kengdao 煤矿坑道 (Coal Mine Tunnel, 1956)* relate to politicized events. All the works Turcato presented were created in 1956 and show the themes the artist was grappling with in his larger canvases back home. When a group of Chinese visitors stopped in front of Turcato's work, one person said he did not understand. Turcato reportedly replied that one just needs to read works' titles to comprehend their meaning²³.

Antonietta Raphaël exhibited twenty-two artworks in all, thirteen drawings and watercolors and seven photographs of her sculptures, as the actual sculptures did not arrive in time for the exhibition²⁴. She was self-conscious about her participation in the exhibition, as she wrote to her daughter: «everyone had about thirty to forty works, and I was one of the poorest, but I think these drawings and watercolors were very much liked»²⁵. The catalogue indicates that she showed sketches of her daughters – titled simply *Shaonü 少女 (Girls)* – and flowers. Self-identifying as a sculptor since the 1930s, Raphaël had planned to show her three-dimensional work, including the *Tongnian de meng 童年的梦 (Child's Dream, 1937)* (fig. 7). However, she had to make do with photographs, which she presumably kept in her luggage, as they are reproduced in the 1957 catalogue. The publication does not mention that the actual sculptures were not shown in the exhibition. In addition to her daughters, her sculptural subjects include other female sitters, such as a pregnant torso *Shengming de kaishi 生命的开始 (Genesis, date unknown as she made several sculptures with this name throughout her career)*, which she planned to exhibit, along with two bronzes. These particular works were not reproduced in the catalogue, but were listed as numbers 84 and 85 in the brochure. Raphaël recalls that Chu Tunan, the founding director of the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, whom she referred to as “Minister of Culture,” generously stopped in front of every artwork to express his appreciation²⁶.

When he approached her work, he reportedly «expressed admiration for the photographs of my sculptures and said that the young sculptors of China could learn from me»²⁷. This comment must have greatly impacted Raphaël as she created a sculptural portrait of Chu upon her return to Rome.

Raphaël shared an exhibition room with Tono Zancanaro, who had nineteen artworks and was known for his 1940s anti-fascist series *Gibbo* featuring a grotesque and overweight creature, sometimes part human and part animal, reminiscent of Mussolini. In his satirical illustration, Zancanaro often incorporated Fascist slogans and scenarios that replicated actual events. None of these artworks were included in the Chinese exhibition, but Zancanaro did show political work, such as the intaglio print *Bei faxisi jiao si de san ge youji dui yuan* 被法西斯绞死的三个游击队员 (*Guerrilla Fighters Hanged by Fascists*, 1955) and a portrait of a young partisan woman standing in front of Communist flags during a parade called *Wuyi jie* 五一节 (*May Day*, 1952). Other artworks in the show include scenes of Venice and Sicily and representations of Italian workers, such as the intaglio print *Zai daotian li gongzuo de nüren* 在稻田里工作的女人 (*Women Working in the Rice Fields*, 1954-1955) (fig. 8).

Chinese Responses to the Exhibition

Aligi Sassu begins his essay in the 1957 catalogue by reminding audiences of the Italian legacy of the Renaissance before introducing the current exhibition as a chapter in China-Italy history. He presents the artworks as a “gift” to China from “progressive” Italian artists whose anti-fascist political mission was just as important as their art²⁸. Yan Han provided an introductory essay for the catalogue that represented the Chinese perspective²⁹. His text offers a generous assessment of the art that matches the tone of Sassu’s forward in its focus on the political foundations of the works. Yan introduces all six artists with a focus on their political message. Highlighting Turcato’s work, Yan describes the paintings as enigmatic and less accessible to a Chinese audience while addressing their revolutionary themes. He concludes by praising the Italian artists for building on the tradition of the Renaissance, echoing Sassu’s essay.

The Chinese press commented on the show as proof of international openness for the new China³⁰. As reported by Xinhua, China’s official news agency, the opening event was attended by 200 guests, including Vice Ministers of Culture Ding Xilin and Zheng Zhenduo, and notable Beijing artists. After viewing the exhibition, the guests reportedly engaged in warm conversation with the Italian artists³¹. Wu Zuoren and Wang Qi, President and Vice Chairmen of the CAA,

respectively, published articles about this exhibition, singing high praise for the work of the Italian artists. Laura de Giorgi assesses that the artwork by Italians was understood following Chinese ideological criteria, focusing on its propagandistic qualities and subject matter rather than aesthetic language, which according to her, sparked little intercultural dialogue³². Although little movement took place on the official front between the two countries, the visit was impactful for the Italian artists in terms of its influence on their work and their continued engagement with China, such as in the case of Raphaël and Sassu. Raphaël made at least five sculptures following her trip, two gesso portraits titled *Ritratto di Chu-Tu-Nan, Ministro della Cultura* (*Portrait of Chu-Tu-Nan, Minister of Culture*), and *Ritratto della Piccola Scia-U* (*Portrait of the Little Scia-U*), both dated 1956, and currently in the collection of Eredi Raphaël-Mafai, Rome. Sassu maintained contact with China throughout the second half of the 20th century, and, as we shall see, he continued to exhibit his work in China.

As suggested through the catalogue essays, the understanding of Italian art by Chinese artists of this era is framed generally by a high regard for the historical legacy of classical antiquity and its revival in the Renaissance. An essay penned by the Chinese artist Shi Lu in 1952, just a few years before his delegation trips, reveals a perspective of an official Chinese artist on Italian art. In this essay, we detect Shi Lu's natural affinity for innovative artists like Leonardo da Vinci; he praises the Renaissance master for capturing the spirit of his day by making his art relevant to contemporary life³³. This was standard Maoist rhetoric in some ways, but it also communicated the artist's sincere admiration of the Italian master.

Commentary on the 1956 exhibition emerged from the same cultural context as Shi Lu's essay, and also referred to recent cultural contact between China and Italy. A review of the exhibition by the ink painter Wu Zuoren offered an enthusiastic and measured reflection on the exhibition in *People's Daily*, the leading party newspaper of communist China³⁴. Wu cited the cultural connections between China and Italy as the basis for understanding the Italian delegation's visit and exhibition, including the historical impact of Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and Giuseppe Castiglione, a Jesuit artist who lived in the Qing court and whose western style advanced the potential of realism in Chinese ink painting³⁵. Wu also praised specific aspects of the contemporary Italian artists' work, drawing particular attention to the struggle of the working class in Turcato's and Fabbri's abstract work.

Another review appeared in *Guangming Daily*, the official newspaper of the China Democratic League³⁶. Written by Wang Qi, a printmaker, the review commended the Italian artists for their expressiveness and individuality,

particularly Sassu for his use of color and composition – a drawing influence from Impressionism – and the expressive quality of his style in conveying the mood of a café. He also praised Sassu’s portraits of girls for capturing their bodily gestures and emotion³⁷. In his generous assessment of Tettamanti, Wang compared his sketches to Chinese painting for their gestural emphasis on simple lines and shapes while acknowledging the skill and intentionality in the artist’s “scribbled” lines. Like Yan Han and Wu Zuoren, Wang noted the abstraction of Turcato’s and Fabbri’s work as being “very difficult” for Chinese viewers to comprehend. Still, he praised the Italian artists for developing their novel style and for following their theories and aesthetics. Interestingly, Wang offered a gender-specific interpretation of Raphaël’s work, noting her delicate and light colors as features of a female artist’s “soft” and “euphemistic” style. Zancanaro seemed to garner the greatest praise from Wang as the prints and drawings of the Italian artist aligned most closely with the Chinese commentator’s politically informed and aesthetic standards. Wang praised Zancanaro for the conviction and smoothness of his lines in rendering the subjects of working peasant women and the iconic vistas of Venice.

Conclusion

Of the six artists, Aligi Sassu maintained the strongest connection to China. In 2013, he again made Chinese headlines when the largest retrospective of his work outside of Italy opened at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum in Beijing, thirteen years after the artist passed away. The exhibition comprised 140 works from different periods of Sassu’s life, including his diaries and sketches made during his 1956 trip to China and artworks influenced by his trip produced afterward. The show was celebrated as the final chapter of the Italian artist’s prolonged engagement with China, initially made possible by the communist networks of the mid-1950s. Reflective of the relatively relaxed cultural policies enacted during Hu Jintao’s presidency (2002-2012), another review of Sassu’s work appeared in *Guangming Daily*, published almost sixty years after Wang Qi’s. It focused less on the political dimension of Sassu’s 1956 visit and more on his contributions to modern Italian art³⁸. The commentary and selected images of abstract art suggest that readers would not only understand but appreciate abstract elements of the Italian artist’s work that would have been considered too inscrutable in an earlier era. This would have been a completely unforeseen outcome for PCI in the 1950s. Little did the Italian communists know that sending a diverse group of artists to China would plant the seeds for a slow and steady appreciation for diverse artistic expressions.

The 1956 Italian artist delegation to China came at just the right time for the PCI, when exploring an alternative to Soviet Communism had become a critical necessity to move the communist project forward both nationally and globally. Likewise, China experienced years of national openness to achieve legitimacy on the international scene. Although the two nations were primed for a productive political encounter, the cultural meeting unfolded through diverse artistic languages; some resonated then, and others took longer to grasp. In many ways, the PCI's artistically varied presentation in China reflected its internal heated political debates about the different avenues to a communist revolution. Though neither the PCI nor the artists found a singular answer in China's journey thus far, they all returned home altered from the trip, with renewed energy to share with their compatriots what they had experienced in a country that was living a communist revolution.

- 1 L. Basilone, *Italian Travel Narratives on Twentieth Century China: Alterity, Distance, and Self-Identification*, in *Representing the Exotic and the Familiar: Politics and Perceptions in Literature*, ed. by M. Bharat, M. Gover, Amsterdam, 2019, pp. 59-94.
- 2 G. Samarani, *Italy's Communist Party and People's China, '50s-early '60s*, in *Roads to Reconciliation: People's Republic of China Western Europe and Italy during the Cold War Period (1949-1971)*, Venezia, 2020, pp. 159-176, ref. p. 167.
- 3 *Representatives of Italy and our country were in Geneva regarding the promotion of the normalization of relations and the expansion of trade*, in «People's Daily», 24 October 1955.
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- 12 M. Tanga, Y. Wang, *Representations of Socialist Mobility in Post-WWII China-Italy Cultural Exchange*, in *Cultural Mobilities Between China and Italy*, ed. by G. Zhang, V. Pedone, London, 2023, forthcoming.
- 13 N. Micieli, *Tono Zancanaro: i disegni della Cina 1986*, in *Archivio Storico Tono Zancanaro* (web site), http://www.tonozancanaro.it/famiglia/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=278&Itemid=441, accessed August 24, 2022.

- 14 *Ibidem.*
- 15 *Ibidem.*
- 16 *Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1957), unpaginated.
- 17 *Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin zhanlan*, unpaginated, *ibidem.*
- 18 G. Appella, B. Fontana, *Antonietta Raphaël: catalogo generale della scultura*, Torino, 2016, p. 134. Original Italian: «Domani è l'inaugurazione della nostra mostra. Le dirigenti del gruppo artistico sono venute ad avvisarci che le sale sono allestite, e se volessimo andare prima di vedere ci sono qualche cosa da correggere. Io non sono andata; volevo andare dal parrucchiere. Dopo un'ora è ritornato Sassu e Tettamanti e bussarono alla mia porta e mi hanno riportato un catalogo della mostra collettiva. È veramente una cosa bella. L'unica cosa che mi dispiace è che io non sono presentata bene e tempo che domani sarà una giornata triste per me».
- 19 De Pasquale, *Antonietta Raphaël in Cina*, cit.
- 20 A. Negri, *Aligi Sassu*, Lugano, 1995, p. 75.
- 21 All artwork titles have been translated by Yang Wang.
- 22 Appella, Fontana, *Antonietta Raphaël*, cit. p. 134.
- 23 *Ibidem.*
- 24 *Ibidem.*
- 25 Letter from A. Raphaël to G. Mafai, Beijing, June 4, 1956, in the Gabinetto Scientifico Letterario G. P. Vieusseux, Florence.
- 26 Appella, Fontana, *Antonietta Raphaël*, cit. p. 134.
- 27 Letter from A. Raphaël to G. Mafai, Beijing, June 4, 1956, cit.
- 28 A. Sassu, *Xu [Preface]*, in *Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin xuanji*, Beijing, 1957, unpaginated.
- 29 Yan Han, *Qianjin de sixiang, duli de fengge*, *ivi*, unpaginated.
- 30 L. de Giorgi, *Alle radici della diplomazia culturale cinese: l'interesse per l'Europa occidentale negli anni Cinquanta*, in *La Cina di Mao, l'Italia e l'Europa negli anni della Guerra Fredda*, ed. by C. Meneguzzi Rostagni, G. Samarani, Bologna, 2014, pp. 119-146, ref. p. 138.
- 31 *First Beijing Exhibition of Works by Italian Artists Visiting China*, in «People's Daily», 5 June 1956.
- 32 Giorgi, *Alle radici della diplomazia culturale cinese*, cit.
- 33 Shi Lu, *Weida de zhihui buxui de jingshen jinian da fen qi sheng 500 zhounian [Mighty wisdom, immortal spirit—commemorating the quincentenary of da Vinci's birth]*, in «Qunzhong ribao», 8 May 1952, republished in S. Dan, Y. Jian, *Shi Lu yi shu wen ji [Collected writings on Shi Lu's art]*, Xi'an, 2003, pp. 23-26.
- 34 Wu Zuoren, *Discussing Visiting Italian Art*, in «People's Daily», 10 June 1956, p. 3. For further discussion of the interaction between the Italian and Chinese artists during this visit, see Y. Wang, «So Are They Good Artists?» *Context and Asymmetry in Postwar Sino-Italian Artistic Exchanges*, in *Art and Modernism in Socialist China: Unexplored International Encounters, 1949-1979*, Leiden, forthcoming.
- 35 See a discussion of these and other Italian visitors to China in M. Musillo, *The Shining Inheritance: Italian Painters at the Qing Court, 1699-1812*, Los Angeles, 2016.

- 36 As one of the few surviving visitors of the 1956 exhibition, Wang Qi wrote an acknowledgment for the catalogue of Sassu's 2013 exhibition. *W. Qi, Wang Qi ti ci*, in *Chi zi zhi xin – ji nian a li jie sha suo dan chen 100 zhou nian hui gu zhan* [*The Heart of Innocence: A Centennial Retrospective of Aligi Sassu*], catalogue of the exhibition (Beijing, CAFA Art Museum, 2013), Beijing, 2013, pp. 4-5.
- 37 Wang Qi, *Discussing the work of visiting Italian artists* [*tan yidali fanghua meishujia de zuopin*], in «Guangming Daily», 10 June 1956.
- 38 *The Heart of Innocence*, in «Guangming Daily», 2 June 2013. Sassu visited China a second time in 1995 as a part of a Spanish delegation for the opening of a Joan Miró exhibition.



Fig. 1 Group photograph of the 1956 Italian artist delegation to Beijing. Courtesy of Archivio Giulio Turcato.



Fig. 2 Photograph of a billboard advertisement for “Selected works by Italian artists visiting China (*Yidali fanghua meishujia zuopin zhanlan*).” Courtesy of Fondazione Helenita e Aligi Sassu.



1. 白 馬 (油画・1954年) 阿里吉・沙梭

Fig. 3 Aligi Sassu, *White Horse*, 1954, oil painting
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.

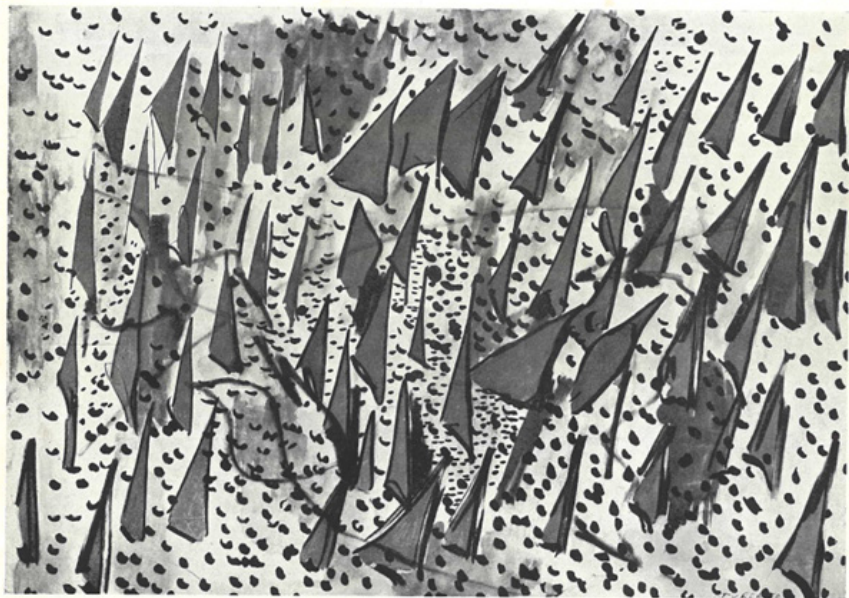


Fig. 4 Ampelio Tettamanti, Mothers of Guerilla Fighters, 1955, sketch
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.



17. 游击队员之死 (彩色陶塑·1950年) 阿金波利·法普利

Fig. 5 Agenore Fabbri, Death of the guerilla fighter, 1950, color sculpture
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.



21. “五一”节 (水粉画·1956年) 吉尤利坎·碧金多

Fig. 6 Giulio Turcato, May Day, 1956, watercolor
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.



29. 童年的梦 (即则·1937年) 拉斐尔·玛拉

Fig. 7 Antonietta Raphaël, *Child's Dream*, 1937, sculpture (carving)
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.



37. 在稻田里工作的女人 (铜版·1954-55年) 托诺·桑加罗

Fig. 8 Tono Zancanaro, Women working in the rice fields, 1954-1955, intaglio
From *Selected works by Italian artists visiting China*, exhibition catalogue, published 1957
in Beijing, People's Art Press, un-paginated.