

The Artist and the book in twentieth-century Italy : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 14, 1992-February 16, 1993

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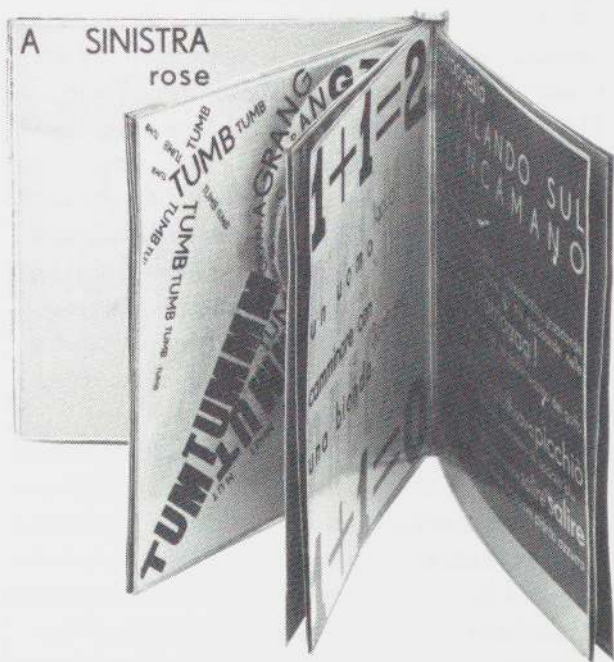
The Museum of Modern Art

Exhibition URL

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**THE ARTIST
AND THE BOOK
IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY
ITALY**



**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
NEW YORK**

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The first book printed from movable type was completed in Mainz, Germany, by Johannes Gutenberg in 1456. Only ten years later another German from Mainz set up the first press to use Gutenberg's methods in Italy, near Rome. However, it was wealthy Venice that became the center for printing, and before the end of the fifteenth century over one hundred and fifty printers had produced more than four thousand editions. It was in Venice that the style of printed page that we find common even today was created by the great printer Aldus Manutius, whose death in 1515 ended the city's and the Italian peninsula's dominance in book production.

When the many provinces and cities of Southern Europe united to form the nation of Italy in 1861, other countries had already endured and profited from the mammoth changes of the industrial revolution. For Italy most of these changes came late and in the midst of a fragile, often disrupted unity. The romantic and symbolist writers and artists of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth dreamt of the glories of the past in the midst of the instabilities of their time. "Everything will be as it was long ago," wrote Gabriele D'Annunzio in 1891. Twenty years later, from the same fountain of nostalgia flowed the metaphysical art of Giorgio de Chirico, who placed

contemporary objects in dramatic and psychologically charged settings from an illustrious, ancient past. In contrast, other writers and artists were enthralled by the speed and freedom that technology gave to life, and as Futurists they put this new spirit into art, and into the arts of the book.

Futurism was born through the verbally and pictorially iconoclastic writings of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and through the energetic paintings, stage designs, music, and dance of other Italians, such as Giacomo Balla and Carlo Carrà. Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* was published in 1909 in France, a year before the flamboyant D'Annunzio, whom he had called an "adventurer," fled there to escape his creditors. Marinetti's extremely vivid language needed no illustration, since the words of his writings were made up of a variety of styles and sizes of letters, arranged in dynamic patterns. These patterns exemplified his idea of *Parole in Libertà* ("Words in Freedom"), which, along with other inventive typographical designs, such as Ardengo Soffici's geometric cover for *BIFSZF + 18* of 1915, presented in printed form the spirit of Futurism. A second wave of Futurism (after its break with Mussolini's cultural politics in 1920) produced three of the most ingenious and important Futurist books, Depero's *Depero Futurista* of 1927, Tullio D'Albisola's *Parole in Libertà Futuriste*, written by Marinetti, and Bruno Munari's *L'Anguria Lirica*, written by D'Albisola, both of 1933–34. During this same period Giorgio de Chirico illustrated with rather conventional theatrical vignettes one of Guillaume Apollinaire's word-picture works, *Calligrammes*, of 1918. The text was printed in spirals and other calligraphic patterns that echoed those of the Futurists.

Mussolini's rule in Italy had a significant effect on art. At first, artists were encouraged to participate in the forward-looking social and political movement, but the end of what had been a benevolent dictatorship soon came, and while Italy's government did not imitate Nazi Germany's extremist attitude toward art, the regime's enthusiasm for art faded. One of the first institutions devoted to book design in the world opened in Urbino in 1924, but for its students Futurism never seems to have existed; they mainly produced classical tales with conservative illustrations. In the twenties in France, as well, Pablo Picasso was illustrating Ovid, and Marc Chagall the fables of

Above and on cover: Tullio D'Albisola. *Parole in Libertà Futuriste*
Tattili Termiche Olfattive by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. 1932.
Lithographs, metal page: 9 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{16}$ "

La Fontaine. The catastrophic, burning tempest of World War II cleared the field, and artists and writers became openly creative again.

A major economic recovery as well as the return of some exiles after the war made Italy once again an ostensible site for exciting creation. In industrial design it immediately took the forefront, building the most streamlined automobiles and finest equipment for office and home. Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini gave a new form and importance to film, while practitioners of other visual arts, such as Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana, Renato Guttuso, and Giacomo Manzù, who had worked in Italy before the war, also came to international attention. With the popularity of Italian art, publishers began to commission such artists to illustrate fine editions. By 1948 Manzù's *Le Georgiche* of Virgil had been published in Milan, and by 1955 books by Burri and Guttuso had also been printed in Italy. Within twenty years after



the war, artists, writers, and printers had reanimated Italy's publishing tradition.

From the brightly colored bands that Piero Dorazio threads through the texts of Giuseppe Ungaretti, to the thick asphalt-black marks of Umberto Mastroianni that echo the pathos of works by Soviet poets, and the humor of Enrico Baj's outrageous figures, Italian books (even in foreign languages) began to take on their own character. Fontana, whose post-war canvases were slashed and punctured, and Burri, whose paintings were collages of tattered burlap, created books that were equally audacious, and led the way to other unconventional expressions. The name *Arte Povera* was given in 1967 to a group of artists who broke pictorial conventions; the movement encompassed the esoterica of Piero Manzoni, the mirror pieces of Michelangelo Pistoletto, and the installations of Mario Merz and Jannis Kounellis. Simultaneously, the artist's book (tangentially related to early Futurist publications), a staple of conceptual art, appeared in America and elsewhere in Europe.

Until the nineteenth century, books were decorated exclusively by specialists, either reproducing artists' compositions or designing their own. Those specialists, whom we call "illustrators" today, are required to show in their pictures details of the author's imagery. What differentiates the illustrator's work from that of the artist who makes *livres de peintre*, *livres d'artiste*, or *livres illustrés* — which began to appear around the 1890s — is that in the latter the artist creates images that extend or complement those in the author's writing. The more recent artist's book, which is of a somewhat different genre, is the primary vehicle of an artist in which his or her ideas, whether words or depictions, are the entire contents. Merz's *Fibonacci 1202* of 1970 is a typical example: a series of numbers and plans for one of his constructions.

Indirectly related to both the *livre de peintre* and the artist's book is artwork that mimics the form of a book. Since the central position of the artist's book in contemporary creative activity led directly to this kind of object, it was perhaps inevitable that an artist of this period — in this case Lamberto Pignotti — would make a book of blank metal sheets as a commentary on D'Albisola's ingenious metal design for Marinetti's *Parole in Libertà Futuriste*. Books that do not open, others that do but are mutilated, and sculptures in booklike forms are an oddly deviant

band among artists' books; those with text, graphic adornments, and a variety of materials upon which they are printed and within which they are confined and/or safeguarded offer an entirely different and considerably wider spectrum of impressions, visual and tactile.

Several artists who followed those associated with Arte Povera returned to painting on canvas, drawing upon folkloric and other non-mainstream sources for their imagery. The Transavanguardia, as they were called, quickly found their reputations growing to gigantic proportions as interest in art burgeoned during the late 1970s and 1980s. Three of them, Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, and Enzo Cucchi, were conveniently grouped together by the media and became the subjects of considerable speculation, both monetary and critical. In the past decade they all created books at the behest of Italian and foreign publishers, such as Petersburg Press and Peter Blum Edition in New York. Among the most recent books



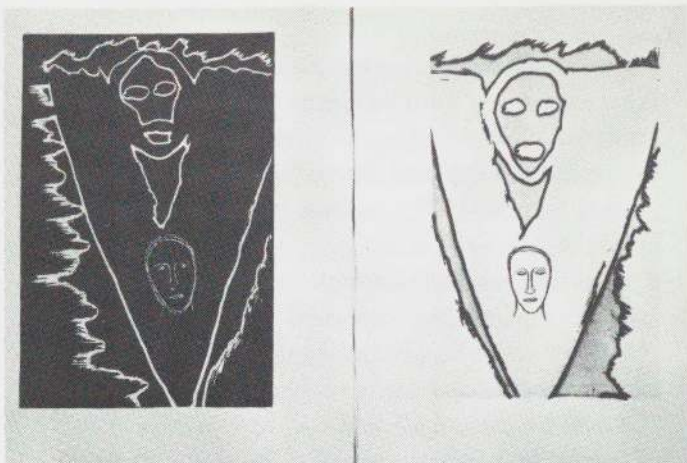
Francesco Clemente. *The Departure of the Argonaut* by Alberto

in this exhibition are two with etchings printed by Giorgio Upiglio of Milan, perhaps the most esteemed publisher of contemporary prints and books in Italy. One is a tale from Aesop's Fables with a print by Cucchi and the other, by a contemporary author, is illustrated with several fold-out etchings by another artist associated with the Transavanguardia, Mimmo Paladino.

Illustrated books, portfolios of prints prefaced by the words of prominent critics, artist's books, and objects that imitate books have proliferated throughout the Western world during the past thirty years. For the same reasons as prevailed in the 1920s and 1930s, European artists have again tended to look more to the past for texts for their illustrated books than to collaborate with living writers. This is often the choice of publishers, who suggest a text from which the artist extrapolates images, since it is the artist's work that will attract buyers for these normally quite expensive books. For Italians, these classical



aut by Alberto Savinio. 1986. Lithographs, page: 25 1/16 x 19 1/16"



authors are Petrarch and Boccaccio, as well as Virgil and Ovid. Among the twentieth-century Italian authors whose works have been paired with that of artists, most have been art critics or, even, artists (e.g. Umberto Eco, Tristan Sauvage [Arturo Schwarz], Alberto Savinio, and Giuseppe Ungaretti).

A romantic inclination combined with boundless enthusiasm for the imminent is, in the perception of many, the quintessential Italian character. To experience the contents of the book, which inherently is sequential and one-directional, is to make progress through it. Surely this idea of progress is what books must have symbolized to Italians ever since they began printing them five hundred years ago.

Riva Castleman

Director

Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

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