

“Art comes out to engage with life”

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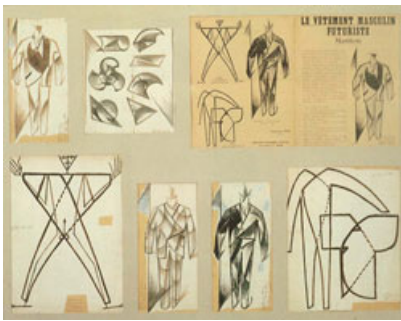


Fig. 1
Giacomo Balla
The Male Futurist Suit, 1914
Six studies in ink on paper and a manifesto
printed on paper and laid down on card
Courtesy Galleria Tega, Milan

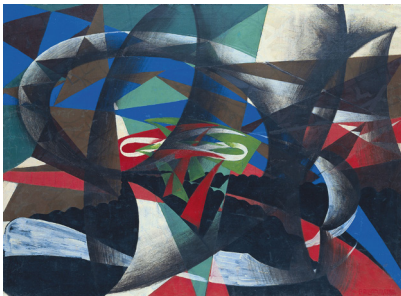


Fig. 2
Giacomo Balla
Patriotic Demonstration, 1915
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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Fig. 3
Giacomo Balla in his studio holding
*Futurist Flowers green, navy blue
and blue*, ca. 1931

In 1909 five painters – Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrá, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini – joined forces to throw down a challenge, once more declaring the decline and death of old art and once more proclaiming the need for change and freedom. However, as Christopher Green noted, few movements had shown such a level of commitment as that professed by Futurism in Italy.¹ The Futurists began by rejecting the art of the past and terminated by denying their own previous identity. Art came out to engage with life. In the *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*, Balla and Depero recounted that Marinetti had looked at their assemblages and said: “art becomes art-action through such optimism, aggressiveness, possession, penetration, joy and brutal reality in art”.² In 1913 Balla auctioned off all his earlier work, and hence his earlier life. In 1915 he declared that he had died and had been reborn as *FuturBalla* or *BallaFuturista*. He painted, sculpted, wrote, made frames, clothes, chairs, and more (fig. 1). Balla designed a new vision of life, wishing to “reconstruct the universe by making it more joyful, completely remaking it.”³

The Futurists looked for a new vision of the modern world. In *Patriotic Demonstration* (fig. 2) Balla depicts a political protest through its “abstract equivalents.” The colours and forms are simplified in order to acquire a symbolic value but nonetheless continue to represent reality. This is an aesthetic language of abstraction and simplification of forms that still remains accessible, aiming to attract the spectator and to appeal to the widest possible audience. The colours of the Italian flag stand out, making it clear from the start that the painting deals with the issue of identity and is a call to popular unity. It is worth remembering that in the first Futurist Manifesto, published in *Le Figaro* on 11 February 1909, Marinetti wrote: “Let us sing to the great masses stirred up by work, pleasure or rebellion: let us sing to the multicoloured and polyphonic tides of the revolutions in modern capital cities.”⁴

Alongside this propagandistic purpose that is characteristic of Futurism, Balla’s work is also notable for its distinctive, individual nature (fig. 3). According to his fellow Futurist, Umberto Boccioni: “everything is transformed by the dynamic idea, interpreted according to his abstract sensibility.”⁵ Balla did not merely offer a descriptive account of the pro-Interventionist demonstration: rather, with the simplicity that characterises good publicity material, he appealed to the viewer’s sensibility in order to win him or her around to this viewpoint. The work conveys pride, reflected in the colours of the flag, and strength, evident in the speed of the lines that move the united crowd in a single direction. Balla’s works reveal a desire to achieve a visual synthesis between form, sentiment and ideal. He represents the energy of the crowd.

The Italian monarch, head of the House of Savoy, was a known Interventionist. Christopher Green believes that the introduction of a royalist motif in the centre of the composition indicates that the protest



Fig. 4
Giacomo Balla
*Demonstration in the Piazza del Quirinale
(Forming the Shape of Viva Italia)*, 1915
Private collection, Rome

in question is the one convened by Gabriele D'Annunzio on 21 March 1915 in the Piazza del Quirinale in Rome, calling for Italy's entry in World War I (fig. 4). The King lent over the balcony of the royal palace and shouted out "Viva Italia", thus supporting the message of the event. The Moebius strip functions here as the emblem of the house of Savoy but also as a metaphor of war awakening Italy, a country that considered itself inferior to the rest of Europe. The Futurists longed for a new and glorious future, no longer looking backwards and with its melancholy recollections of Italy's great and glorious historical and artistic past. War signified the destruction of previous decadence and the possibility of starting anew, prepared for the modern world.

Balla found a new means of communication in language and signs. Manifestoes, which are works of art in themselves, are another example of Futurism's aim of invading all areas of life (fig. 5). In the first Manifesto words create images, which in turn provoke sensations. Words acquire a visual weight that sets in motion a play of metamorphoses, all intended to activate the reader's imagination on the basis of successive images. In *Patriotic Demonstration* we see the visual equivalent of the acceleration that is evident in real events of this type and which brings to mind the run-up before a high-risk rump: that impulse prior to the moment of taking off into space, in this case hurling into war in order to change everything.

The First Manifesto is filled with metaphors in which everything gathers speed, jumps and flies away from the past, "flinging its challenge to the stars".⁶ Marinetti exclaims: "Let us emerge from wisdom as if from a horrible wound and hurl ourselves like fruit ripened by pride at the huge, twisted mouth of the wind!" The Futurists approach the "three snorting machines in order to lovingly caress their torrid breasts", while the "great sweep of madness" drives them along the streets. In addition to this whirlwind action we find an evocation of colour and texture used as a weapon against neutrality and nostalgia for the past. Dawn is "the splendour of the sun's red sword", while rivers are "glittering in the sun with sparks like a knife". Noise is also present in the propellers of aeroplanes that "whine in the wind" and in the "huge rumbling of the enormous double-decker trams leaping by, streaked with multi-coloured lights."⁷

Patriotic Demonstration reveals the artist's desire to represent the scene as an overall effect of noise, colour and movement in order to convey the sensation produced by all these elements. In previous visual investigations Balla had aimed to convey the effect produced by a passing car. The result was to make the viewer's eye traverse the canvas, following the black lines of force that represent movement in space and the sensation that we experience when something passes us by at high speed (fig. 6). Such compositions can be associated with the advances in photography made by Étienne Jules Marey in France



Fig. 5
Giacomo Balla
*Manifesto for the Exhibition at the Galleria
Angelelli*, 1915
Private collection



Fig. 6
Giacomo Balla
Car Speed + Light, 1913
Moderna Museet, Stockholm



Fig. 7
Giacomo Balla
Iridescent Compenetration no. 7, 1912
Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna
e Contemporanea, Turin

and the experiments of the Bragaglia brothers in Italy, which, together with scientific advances and research into light, changed previously held concepts of light and space. Balla came close to the style of Severini who focused on effects of light in his "iridescent compenetrations" (fig. 7). This was a moment of intensive technical research into the potential of painting as an expression of the new reality discovered by science. Nonetheless, the spectator's viewpoint continued to be a distant one.

In December 1915 the exhibition *Fu Balla e futurista* took place at the Galleria Angelelli in Rome. In it and for the first time, Balla exhibited his group of paintings on Interventionist demonstrations. Six years had passed since *Le Figaro* had published the first Futurist Manifesto written by Marinetti, and five years since Umberto Boccioni, Balla's pupil, convinced him to join the group. The political climate in Rome and Milan had become even more agitated. April saw further Interventionist demonstrations and Balla was arrested together with Marinetti and Benito Mussolini, a name that would come to attract increasing attention.

In his series of demonstrations, particularly in *Patriotic Demonstration*, Balla's painting reveals a shift of direction. The prospect of involvement in the war offered him a new range of forms, movements and colours and a new motivation. If this work were any larger it would seem aggressive, given the way that large flags and vibrant colours can suggest moments of pro-war fanaticism, death and destruction. In fact, its actual size (101 x 137.5 cm) means that it perfectly envelops and attracts the viewer in a subtle manner, encompassing the spectator's viewpoint. The centrifugal movement of the lines of force direct our gaze towards the centre while the movement engulfs and absorbs us, breaking down the barriers between the pictorial space and our position outside of it. Balla no longer requires us to experience movement, but rather that we become part of that energy. Movement and speed revitalise and rejuvenate, looking to the future represented in the dazzling blue that crosses the composition diagonally. The sensation of instability and dissent that the work conveys brings to mind Umberto Eco and his definition of art when he said that: "man in his entirety, in conclusion, should get used to never getting used to things" and that "art, in reality, has never done more than conform to the rhythm of science".⁸ Art offers an appropriate vision of the world that helps man to locate himself in it at times of change and transformation. Its function is thus that of not allowing the public to settle down into habits and of continually offering new solutions and drastic changes. That liberating impulse, which was so pronounced in Futurism, meant that the early 20th Century avant-gardes renewed and updated visual language with results that remain in force today.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Green: *The European Avant-Gardes. Art in France and Western Europe 1904-1945: The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*. London, Zwemmer, 1995, p. 15.
- 2 Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero: "Reconstrucción Futurista del Universo" in Ester Coen and María Teresa Ocaña: *Futurismo 1909-1916*. [Exhib.cat., Barcelona, Museu Picasso]. Barcelona Àmbit, 1996, p. 259.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid, p. 213.
- 5 Ibid, p. 153.
- 6 Ibid. p. 214.
- 7 Ibid, p. 212.
- 8 Umberto Eco: *La Definición del Arte*. Barcelona, Ediciones Martínez Roca S.A., 1970, p. 220.