

Futurism in the City of the Future:
Marinetti's avant-garde in New York 1909-1930



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by
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For my mother and my father

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Introduction

“The first Futurism was a rhapsodic adventure of youth. Its drive towards an artistic ecstasy gave it the force of a new religion for those who were persuaded of its power. But it demanded of its adherents an intensity and blind faith that can only be expected of youth. Its very basis ordained its brief existence.” - Professor Joshua C. Taylor, *Futurism*, New York, 1961.

The Forgotten Futurist

On the 31st of May, 1949, the artist Fortunato Depero received a letter informing him that the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was opening an exhibition of Italian modern art in June, and that none of his works were to be included. He was dismayed, and began urgently writing letters to his connections in New York. Depero lived in the city twice, from 1928 to 1930 and from 1947 to 1949, and had just recently returned to Italy when he heard about the exhibition. He considered his time in America a high point in his artistic career, and believed that his art deserved a place at the MoMA. Depero wrote to Ercole Sozzi, a friend of his who owned some of his work, asking Sozzi to get into contact with James Soby, the organizer of the exhibition. Depero’s message for Soby was simple: “il mio nome non può essere escluso dato il significato della mia vasta opera ed attività avola nel movimento futurista Italiano dal 1914 ad oggi.” [*my name cannot be excluded given the significance of my vast body of work and activity as part of the Italian Futurist movement from 1914 to the present*].¹ Depero also sent similar letters to two other people in New York who owned paintings of his. The three men, Sozzi, John B. Salterini, and Wilhelm Hillman, were to contact Soby or Alfred Barr (the director of the MoMA) and argue for Depero’s inclusion, even offering to loan the museum the paintings in their collections.

Not satisfied with leaving it to these middlemen, Depero wrote a letter to Soby and Barr himself. Depero lauds the two men for putting together the exhibit before saying how hurt he

¹ Letter to Depero from Gianni Mattioli, May 31, 1949, Dep.3.1.42.9, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

was to hear that he was excluded from its extensive list of Italian artists. The letter ends with a list of his works in New York City along with their owners and locations, so that Barr and Soby would have to do as little work as possible bringing them to the museum.²

Unfortunately for Fortunato, nothing could be done. Barr and Soby were unmoved by the artist's pleading, and the exhibition went ahead without a single work by Depero on display. It was partly a matter of timing, Depero wrote his letters to New York on June 1st, they were received days later, and the exhibition opened on June 28th. When Sozzi called the office of James Soby on June 8th, he was told by Soby's secretary that the exhibition catalogs had already been printed — even if Barr and Soby wanted to include Depero, he was too late. The director's response to Salterini explained why the organizers had chosen to sideline Depero: "we are not including any of the second generation of Futurist painters, but only the original five or six who worked in the first period between 1910 and 1915."³ This choice to divide Futurist art into what became known as the first and second Futurism meant that not only Depero, but several other painters who worked during the 1920s and 1930s were excluded. Even worse, these artists were relegated to a second tier for their association with the Fascist regime in power in Italy during the height of their careers as Futurists.⁴

Depero's exclusion from the MoMA exhibition certainly injured his reputation in America, a particularly ironic fact given that he was one of only a few Futurists to have a solo

² Letter to James Thrall Soby from Depero, June 1, 1949, Dep.3.1.42.12, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

³ Letter to John B. Salterini from Alfred H. Barr, June 8, 1949, Dep.3.1.42.6, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

⁴ This association was certainly not unfounded, the Fascist regime supported Futurist art and many Futurist artists of the time used their art to glorify Mussolini. The connection between Fascism and Futurism is explored further in Chapters 2 and 3.

exhibition of his work in New York during his life, and one of even fewer who called the city his home. Futurism was not well known or appreciated in the United States until the 1949 exhibition. Even though Barr was dismissive of Futurist art's aesthetic value as late as 1936,⁵ He and Soby defined the movement for Americans who were previously unaware of its artistic achievements and influence on other avant-gardes.⁶

MoMA's exhibition of Modern Italian Art was a turning point in the story of Italian Futurism in the United States, it was the first time the public was able to clearly understand what the movement was — at least the way Barr and Soby saw it. Looking back to the birth of the movement in the pages of European avant-garde journals, this project seeks to explain some of the reasons why it took four decades for Futurism to be recognized and understood in America.

The Dawn of the Futurist Age

Futurism was the brainchild of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the son of a well-to-do family from Northern Italy. He was born in Alexandria in 1876, and studied at a Jesuit school while his lawyer father worked for the Egyptian government. Fluent in French from a young age, he went on to study at the Sorbonne and later mingled with fin de siècle literary figures in Paris. In the years before 1909, Marinetti wrote plays, novels, and poetry — often in French rather than Italian. Despite these ties to France, Marinetti became a fierce Italian nationalist and believed strongly that for Italy to be great, it would have to wage war against Austria to seize its Italian

⁵ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: "Like a Giant Screen"* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 36.

⁶ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: "Like a Giant Screen"* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 28.

speaking territories. Italian hypernationalism and a belief in the virtue of war became two central tenets of his new Futurist movement.

In Marinetti's view, Italy was failing to live up to its potential in a time of rapid industrialization and technological advancement. Other European countries were building railroads, putting automobiles in the streets, and lighting up their cities with electricity — every year the speed of life was increasing. Italy possessed a more agricultural economy than its Northern European counterparts, and this was a great source of humiliation and resentment for Marinetti. Industrial machines were the “vehicles of modernity,” constantly in motion, reshaping space and time itself in new and unpredictable ways. The Futurists embraced machines — bold, dynamic, powerful, energetic machines — wholeheartedly, and they became “the very syntax and architecture of Futurist aesthetics and ideology.”⁷ Reconstructing the universe became the overarching goal of the Futurist movement, and in the years after the publication of Marinetti's first manifesto in 1909, he and his followers chased that goal in every medium imaginable.

In the artistic sphere, Marinetti and his partisans felt that Italy was weighed down by its history. Dense with ruins and home to the great masterpieces of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Italy was celebrated for its past, not its future. For many young Italian artists, this atmosphere was stifling — they chafed against this heritage, searching for something fresh, a mode of expression unlike any that came before. Futurism offered them a totally new, bold, and exciting framework for understanding the world. Marinetti's manifesto was effectively a declaration of war against the past; in it he demanded that museums, academies, and libraries be razed to make way for a new society. Marinetti's new culture would glorify speed, violence,

⁷ Katia Pizzi, *Italian Futurism and the machine* (Manchester University Press, 2019) 2.

youth, and courage — the virtues of city dwelling engineers, inventors, and industrial workers. He believed it would be the antidote for a corrupt country ruled by men of the 19th century, and a culture dominated by indolent academics and decadent aristocrats.⁸

For the artists who joined Marinetti's movement at its outset — the most famous of whom were Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carra, Gino Severini, Giacomo Balla, and Luigi Russolo — Futurism informed what they painted and how they painted it. They rejected artistic tropes like the nude and opted instead to portray dynamic subjects: animals in motion, airplanes, automobiles, trains, bustling city streets, and crowded interior spaces. In their colorful compositions they sought to capture the appearance of objects in motion by duplicating and shattering their subjects into geometric shapes. These shapes overlapped and penetrated one another, giving the impression that multiple simultaneous states of being were rendered at once in each painting. To achieve their goal of collapsing the space between the viewer and the painting, they depicted sensations and memories, showing things as they were experienced rather than reproducing them with photographic realism.

Umberto Boccioni articulated the principles of Futurist painting in the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* and the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* in 1911, but the movement went beyond the medium of painting. Futurist manifestos were written that revolutionized music, sculpture, literature, clothing, politics, and even cooking. These documents, printed in Futurist journals and spread across Europe, collectively lay out an ambitious utopian vision for the Future based on a complete break with the past and the embrace of a new set of modern virtues.

⁸ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) 14.

Futurism sought to remake the universe, and its adherents were not content to express themselves solely in art. Marinetti and his followers hosted theatrical performances called *serate* where they read poetry, showed off their paintings, and got into heated arguments with audience members that sometimes grew into physical altercations.⁹ They organized stunts like dropping leaflets calling for the destruction of Venice from the top of St. Mark's Cathedral and got into fights with critics at Florentine cafes. When Italy entered World War One, many Futurists volunteered to fight, and Marinetti served in the Italian military in Russia during the Second World War, when he was 65 years old. This was the level of commitment that characterized Futurism's most ardent followers.

Futurism is generally understood as a movement in two parts, a first phase from its foundation 1909 to the death of the painter Boccioni in 1916, and a second phase that lasted until Marinetti's death in 1944. While the first Futurism is celebrated for its artistic achievements and influence on other European avant gardes in Russia, Britain, France and elsewhere, the second phase is characterized by its troubling association with Fascism and the concomitant constriction of the movement's original utopian agenda. This project will examine the reception of Futurism in the United States during both phases.

⁹ Günter Berghaus, "Futurist Serate and Gallery Performances," in *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2014) 90.

The Scope of This Project

This project is divided into three chapters, each of which focuses on a different moment in the history of Italian Futurism in the United States. These events took place primarily in New York, the country's capital of modern art and the most important site of exchange between American and European artists. Each chapter addresses the different factors at each moment that help explain why the avant garde movement failed to have the same impact in America as it did in Europe. In chapter one, I analyze the first mentions of Futurism in the American press. Relying primarily on Margaret Burke's 1986 PhD dissertation, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, John Hand's 1967 MA thesis, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, and archival documents from the Library of Congress and New York Public Library, I attempt to reconstruct the American media's response to the birth of Futurism. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first discusses the exceptional case of Andre Tridon, a French expatriate living in New York who wholeheartedly embraced Futurism in late 1911 and appeared in several newspaper articles to promote it to Americans.

In 1912, the Futurists exhibited their works in Paris and London, drawing the attention of American art critics, who wrote dismissive and derisive articles about the movement in the newspapers. The second part of chapter one looks at these critical reviews and puts them into context. American audiences in general and art critics in particular were extremely suspicious of modern art of all kinds, not just the paintings of Boccioni and the other Futurists. In some cases, Futurism and Cubism were confused for one another or conflated entirely. This confusion also derived from the broad lack of access to images of avant garde art in the United States.

I argue that because Americans had very little access to Futurist art, they could only piece together an understanding of the movement from what Futurist writings they could get their hands on. When they did this, they often drew inaccurate conclusions or confused the movement with a generic appreciation of modernity. Without a group of committed Futurists to perform their ideology in the streets as they did in Italy, and without any images to see Futurism in practice, Americans could not understand the movement and it could not maintain a presence in the country.

Chapter two analyzes the role of Futurism at the 1913 Armory Show held at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York. Organized by a group of American artists and collectors, the Armory Show has come to be recognized as the moment at which modern art entered into the American mainstream. Books like *Picasso's War* by Hugh Eakin, *Modern Art Invasion* by Elizabeth Lunday, and *The Story of the Armory Show* by Milton Brown have looked closely at the way the organizers of the Armory Show worked to bring modern art to the public, and how the public reacted.

Whereas Eakin and Brown write at length about the art at the armory, I look instead at the art that was not. There were no Futurist paintings at the Armory Show, and this absence at such an important moment for avant garde art in America had a significant impact on the movement's success in the country. Analyzing absence is difficult, but Futurism was present at the armory in a different kind of way. The show's organizers announced weeks in advance of its opening that the Futurist art would be there alongside other European avant gardes. But the Futurists withdrew from the show suddenly, and owing to their unfamiliarity with modern art, many visitors to the exhibition thought they were looking at Futurist art when they saw art by French

cubists. Because of this unexpected series of events, the Armory Show became a source of great confusion about Futurism and Futurist art. Newspaper writers, art critics, and artists all responded — mostly with negativity — to the revolutionary new art movements they were seeing for the first time, and Futurism, despite not being on display, was not exempt from the conversations the show spawned.

Chapter two begins with a history of the Armory Show and attempts to explain why the Futurists declined to participate in the exhibition. Then I look at the critical reception of the show and unpack how the audience constructed an understanding of the movement based on false premises. The chapter also discusses the complex political positioning of Marinetti and his collaborators, and the discrepancy between actual Futurist politics and the American conception of Futurist politics. At the end of the chapter, I briefly consider two positive responses to the Armory Show, and examine the rhetorical strategies of these defenders of modern art.

After showing how a lack of access to Futurist art before and during the Armory Show caused confusion about what Futurism was, the next chapter analyzes events that occurred almost two decades later. Chapter three switches focus from the reception of the first Futurism in America, to the reception of the second Futurism's most important artist, Fortunato Depero, in 1928. This twenty year time gap allows us to see in a different way how the incongruities between Futurist modernity and American modernity prevented the movement from gaining currency in the United States. The years after the Armory Show were a low point for interest in Futurism in America. The death of Boccioni in 1916 and the rise of Fascism in Italy meant that Futurism was changing, and because they had only been exposed to it in small ways, few Americans were tracking its development closely.

Between 1916 and 1928, there were three more important moments of contact between Italian Futurism and the United States. In 1915, J. Nilsen Laurvik, an American art collector, convinced Marinetti to allow the Futurists to show a grand collection of their work at the Panama Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Two years later in 1917, Gino Severini had a solo show open at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in New York. Lastly, the Italian government sponsored an exhibition of Italian Modern art in 1926, which included works by Futurist painters Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero. These three events are referenced but not analyzed in depth in the project.

The Panama Pacific Exposition featured art from all over the world, and the Futurist room there was only one of many open to the public. Still, the Futurist artworks garnered significant attention from regular visitors and the press. This exhibition, the first time Futurist works were put on display in America, is not examined here for two reasons. The first is that the audience response was generally the same for the Panama Pacific Expo as it was for the Armory Show. Americans unfamiliar with modern art reacted with laughter, derision, and confusion, believing that these modern artists — whether Futurist, cubist or impressionist — were perpetrating some kind of hoax or practical joke. Secondly, because San Francisco was a smaller city and not the center of modern art that New York was, the exposition had a limited influence on the development of Futurism in America. Compounding this, the ongoing war in Europe overshadowed the exposition in the American media.¹⁰ For a comprehensive look at the role of Futurism at the Armory Show, see Laura Ackley's *San Francisco's Jewel City; The*

¹⁰ Maurizio Scudiero and David Leiber, *Depero Futurista & New York* (Longo Editions, 1986) 53.

Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and Heidi Applegate's 2014 PhD dissertation, *Staging Modernism at the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair*.

Gino Severini's show at Stieglitz's gallery in New York was the first solo exhibition by one of the original Futurists in the United States. Reviewed positively in the press, the exhibition was a badly needed success for Severini, who was struggling to make ends meet in Paris during the war. The exhibition was relatively small, and happened as Severini was moving away from Marinetti's Futurism and began painting in a new style. While the show likely inspired American painters in Stieglitz's circle,¹¹ its lasting impact on Futurism in America was minimal. For these reasons, the exhibition is not discussed at length in this project. Joan Lukach's article in *The Burlington Magazine*, "Severini's 1917 Exhibition at Stieglitz's '291'" gives a good account of the show for those interested in learning more.

The Exhibition of Modern Italian Art, sponsored by the Italian government, opened in 1926. Works by artists affiliated with the Futurist movement made up a small portion of the total number of works shown at the exhibition, and, like Severini's 1917 show, its impact was relatively small. For these reasons, and because of time constraints, these three exhibitions are not examined in this project.

Fortunato Depero is the focus of the third chapter of this project because he was, in my view, the most important and talented artist of the second Futurism, and he considered his time in New York to be an important moment in his career as a Futurist. The chapter begins with an explanation of the relationship between Futurism and Italian Fascism that affected Depero's

¹¹ American artists like Max Weber, John Marin, James Daugherty, Hugo Robus, and others show signs of Futurist inspiration in their work. For a complete look at these figures and their relationship with Futurism see Margaret Burke's PhD dissertation mentioned above.

artistic production during the 1920s. I argue that Futurism lost almost all of its revolutionary energy by its association with the regime, and that a similar phenomenon can be seen in Depero's 1931 manifesto, *Futurism and Advertising Art*, in which the Futurist movement is effectively made subservient to corporate interests. Next I describe Depero's first trip to New York in 1928 and lay out his plans to develop Futurism in the United States. Much of the chapter is based on primary sources including Depero's two autobiographies and correspondence I accessed at the Depero archive in Italy — all translations from Italian are my own unless otherwise noted. The remainder is dedicated to an analysis of Depero's career as a designer of advertising art in New York, and differences between American and Italian advertising culture that negatively affected both his cultural influence and income.

Taken as a whole, this project seeks to explain how Futurism, an ideology that celebrated modernity, failed in a country at the forefront of technological development. Marinetti's Futurism influenced new artistic movements in Russia and Britain, but no such movement ever appeared in the United States. Several factors contributed to this lack of success in America. It was not only the difficulty of distance or the historical happenstance of the Armory Show that prevented Futurism from finding widespread recognition in America. The tenets of Futurism itself were difficult to understand from its art alone, and this set it apart from other movements that became more popular in the United States, such as impressionism and cubism. Futurism had to be felt and experienced, on the streets and salons of Milan and Florence. Some aspects of Futurism, like its Italian nationalist worldview, were difficult for Americans to resonate with. In this way, it can be said that the United States was unprepared for Futurism, and that Futurism was unsuited to reach the masses of America.

Part One
American Responses to Futurism Before 1913

“Let us leave good sense behind like a hideous husk and let us hurl ourselves, like fruit spiced with pride, into the immense mouth and breast of the world! Let us feed the unknown, not from despair, but simply to enrich the unfathomable reservoirs of the Absurd!” - Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*, 1909

Futurism Approaching: Marinetti, Andre Tridon, and the American Newspaper

When Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published the Futurist Manifesto in the pages of *Le Figaro* in February of 1909, he had the good sense to send copies of it far and wide.¹² The April edition of his own avant-garde magazine *Poesia* contained an English translation of the manifesto and over a dozen reviews and responses published in foreign journals. Among these reviews were two written in English, from the London *Daily Telegraph* and *The New York Sun*.

Over the next few years, the American press would give scant attention to Marinetti and his partisans, but when they did appear — as they did more frequently after their exhibitions in Paris and London in 1912, they were met with one of three responses. Early on the primary feeling was one of curiosity, objectivity, even a mild sympathy in some cases. As the Futurists began to produce more art and exhibit their work across Europe, more writers published their own opinions. The majority of these appraisals were negative, and some bordered on being downright hateful of the Futurists. Lastly, there were rare endorsements of the movement, exemplified best by a series of articles written by or about Andre Tridon, a French expatriate who, for a time, became the number one booster of Futurism in the United States. In the end, however, this diverse set of viewpoints did not offer a comprehensive understanding of Futurism

¹² John Hand, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, MA Thesis, (University of Chicago, 1967) Page 3

to the American public. Instead, Americans¹³ who tried to stay abreast of artistic developments in Europe came to understand Futurism as a generic modernism, a hoax perpetrated by insincere artists without talent, or a dangerous force intent on undermining traditional aesthetics.

The earliest assessments of Futurism in the American press focused on the philosophical aspects of the new doctrine, its total rejection of the past, its violent attacks on venerable institutions, and the irrepressible urge of Marinetti and his partisans to engage with the world of their time on its own terms. The *New York Sun* writer compares the perspective expressed in *The Futurist Manifesto* to that of the modern American artist: “Europe is always objecting to our attempts at artistic innovation that we neglect the indispensable factor of continuity or unbroken tradition. Here as in most other places the matter is of degree. If we need more numerous tangible evidences of the past, these French and Italian artists feel that they require more ‘tabula rasa.’”¹⁴ This sympathetic early response to the nascent Futurism may offer a hint as to why the movement never took root in America, as the author is attentive to the differences between the two worlds separated by the Atlantic. If it was the immense weight of Italy’s artistic past that spurred Marinetti and his partisans to develop Futurism, American artists would have no such incentive because their country was relatively young.

¹³ This study looks primarily at newspapers and periodicals to focus on the way the American public came to see Futurism — if they did at all. For a more in depth analysis on the effects of Futurism on American artists and art historians, see Margaret Burke’s 1986 PhD dissertation, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, University of Delaware, 1986.

¹⁴ “Le Futurisme et la Presse Internationale,” *Poesia* April-July 1909, 24

The biggest nit was picked by the writer for *The Daily Telegraph*, who asked “Why do not the futurists write their poems about railway trains and areoplanes [sic] their sermons in steam-engines, and books in racing motor-cars, instead of telling us they mean to write them?”¹⁵

The idea that the Futurists were just loud-mouthed theorists who spent more time talking about what they intended to do than they did actually doing anything became a common attack against them in the pages of the American press¹⁶. After briefly explaining Futurism, a writer for *Current Literature* wrote in August of 1911; “But when it comes to producing works according to the program, it is regretfully admitted that the program itself remains more successful.”¹⁷ In retrospect, the comment seems entirely baseless, as 1911 was a year of explosive Futurist activity. Carlo Carra’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, Luigi Russolo’s *The Revolt*, Giacomo Balla’s *Street Light*, Gino Severini’s *The Pan Pan Dance*, and Umberto Boccioni’s *States of Mind* were all finished in that year, representing some of the best of Futurist painting. The first big Futurist exhibition in Milan, the *Mostra d'Arte Libera*, opened in May, laying the groundwork for the Paris exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune and the London exhibition at the Sackville Gallery. America lacked access to Futurist art, and could only read excerpts of their manifestos and secondhand accounts of their work before drawing inaccurate or incomplete conclusions.

¹⁵ “Le Futurisme et la Presse Internationale,” *Poesia* April-July 1909, 24

¹⁶ The line of thinking was not exclusive to the United States. The *Daily Telegraph* article quoted in Marinetti’s *Poesia* features the line; “Young and strenuous M. Marinetti writes like Walt Whitman gone mad. But Whitman sang, instead of telling us what he was going to sing.”

¹⁷ “The Futurist Movement in Italy,” *Current Literature*, August 1911, 206.

In 1909 however, there was at least some truth to the idea that for all their exciting rhetoric, no notable “Futurist” works had yet been produced¹⁸ — Boccioni’s *The City Rises* would not be finished until the next year — an awkward fact for a group that declared their opposition to the world of academics who pontificated about the world without getting their hands dirty. But even as the Futurists increased their painting output from 1911 to 1914, images of their works did not cross the Atlantic as easily as their words did.

This is made painfully clear in a full page of the *New York Herald Magazine* from the Christmas Eve issue of 1911 was dedicated to an interview with Andre Tridon, a French journalist turned psychologist who became a cheerleader of Marinetti’s ideas in the United States during 1911 and 1912. Entitled “The New Cult of Futurism is Here,” the article explores Futurism in many aspects, and contains a full-throated endorsement of Futurism by Tridon; “Futurism believes in making the present an attribute of the Future rather than of the past. Futurism is the belief which applies the methods of science to human emotions, to art, to literature, to music... To forget the past, which is wrong, which is dead.”¹⁹ Most of the article is devoted to Tridon’s searing takedown of certain mainstays of contemporary culture rather than explaining the Futurist alternative. An image of Titian’s *Sacred and Profane Love* is “stupid,” a typical man’s tuxedo is deemed an “atrocious,” an bank built in a neoclassical style is a “horror,” and even that great American novel, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is “awful.” After excoriating conventional art, fashion, architecture, and literature, Tridon even hits out at

¹⁸ Boccioni, Carra, Severini, and Balla together had a body of work prior to 1909, but Boccioni’s *The City Rises* (1910) should be considered the first Futurist painting. This fact was recognized by the *New York Times* in 1910; “There are some clever painters among the ‘Futurists’ but so far it cannot be said that any one of them has accomplished a masterpiece; or indeed, anything that would seem to justify their extraordinary pretensions.”

¹⁹ “The New Cult of Futurism is Here,” *New York Herald*, December 24, 1911.

American dining, calling American cooking “vile.” Tridon was getting a little carried away here²⁰, but unbeknownst to him, his comments on cuisine were remarkably prescient — nearly twenty years later, in December of 1930, Marinetti would formalize a similar critique in his *Manifesto of Futurist Cuisine*.²¹

Tridon was more than a positive reviewer, he was an evangelist, and he believed America was the perfect place to put Marinetti’s Futurist program in action. The author of the December article dubs Tridon the “archpriest of Futurism”²² — in another article written by Tridon in *The Sun* in February of 1912, his byline lists him as the “Organizer of the Futurist Society of America,”²³ an organization that never existed.²⁴ In architecture especially, America was far ahead of its European competitors, Tridon declares: “In the matter of successful accomplishments take the skyscraper building. As architecture suited to specific American needs it is perfect. It is hygienic, attractive, an economizer of effort and time — a perfect machine.”²⁵ This love of the skyscraper was common among the Futurists, as can be seen in the works of the architect Antonio Sant’Elia and later, the art of Fortunato Depero.

In spite of his love for Futurism, his understanding is imperfect — probably because of a lack of access to images of their work. In fact, Tridon had never seen a Futurist painting before

²⁰ Tridon, a Frenchman by birth, reveals some anglophobic sentiment in the article, listing the characteristics of British literature as “mawkish sentiment, an unreal and utterly untrue analysis of sex emotion, and a marriage which ends with orange blossoms. This is not life. It is simply piffle.”

²¹ Günter Berghaus ed., *F.T. Marinetti, Critical Writings* (New York:Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 394.

²² “The New Cult of Futurism is Here,” *New York Herald*, December 24, 1911.

²³ “The Futurists, Latest Comers in the World of Art,” *The Sun*, February 25, 1912.

²⁴ John Hand, “Futurism in America: 1909-14,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, no. 4 (Winter, 1981), 337-342.

²⁵ “The New Cult of Futurism is Here,” *New York Herald*, December 24, 1911.

being interviewed by the *Herald*, and his entire understanding of the movement was based on what parts of their manifestos he had read.²⁶

The December article does contain many images to help the reader understand the unfamiliar doctrine of Futurism. The Singer Building, the tallest building in the world from 1908 to 1909, is reproduced next to the aforementioned neoclassical bank to emphasize its superiority (fig 1). Titian's aforementioned *Sacred and Profane Love* and Bouguereau's *Invading Cupid's Realm* are there to exemplify passe painting. Tridon takes issue with the nudity of the women in both works, accusing Bouguereau of using the woman's body to "attract custom [sic] by selling a nude in a shop window." The attack on the nude in painting comes straight from the mouths of the Futurist painters themselves, who declared war on the nude in their *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting*, adding later "We demand, for ten years, the total suppression of the nude in painting."²⁷

Because there is no Futurist painting on the page to compare the Bouguereau or Titian to, a cartoon artist at the *New York Herald* produced a drawing of a man and woman dancing (Fig. 2), surrounded by wavy lines a la Edvard Munch's *The Scream* instead. The image is accompanied by a paragraph pronouncing that it is "a good example of a sketch drawn after the Futuristic axioms."²⁸ The dancer was a subject Severini painted several times in his Futurist period, and comparison between the *Herald's* drawing and Severini's *Sea = Dancer* (Fig. 3) reveals just how far off the newspaper was in accurately aping the movement.

²⁶ John Hand, "Futurism in America: 1909-14," *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, no. 4 (Winter, 1981), 337-342.

²⁷ Umberto Boccioni, "Futurism Painting: Technical Manifesto," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 67

²⁸ "The New Cult of Futurism is Here," *New York Herald*, December 24, 1911.

In Severini's painting, the dancer as such is enveloped by her motion, but not enough for her to dissolve into pure movement — instead she is transformed from dancer to dancer-motion. Her arm lifts up into the top right corner of the canvas and a delicate calf cuts down the bottom middle of the composition landing in a pink shoe. Her flowing blue dress curls around her body — swinging up on her right side and down on her left, evoking ocean waves. Severini deftly uses alternately straight and curved lines to subtly indicate which forms represent the dancer and her movements and which represent the light hitting her from all sides — after all, beams of light do not curve. The use of color is equally important, dark and light sections mark out where light meets body — most noticeably on her underarm and torso where the shadow of her outstretched arm is cast. The effect is that Severini able to depict dancer-motion rather than painting motion abstractly — without substance — as Hilma af Klint did in *Primordial Chaos, No. 16* (fig 4), or painting a dancer *in motion*, where the dancer is easily apparent and the movement is implied — as Georges Seurat did in his *Le Chahut* (fig 5), which may have inspired Severini's choice of subject.²⁹ The sea is not motion, it is material, but it nonetheless cannot exist without its movement. So too the dancer-motion goes beyond the dancer and the movement of her body — the two elements are extracted from each other and then collapsed back into the canvas together.

The *Herald* drawing is completely static by comparison. No part of the woman is obscured by her movement, which is only suggested by the position of the arms and legs and the angle at which she holds her neck. There is fluidity in her dress, which flows as it touches the ground, but the curved lines surrounding her body do nothing to signal motion. There is no meaningful direction in them, they travel around her, never touching or overlapping her body —

²⁹ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), p. 58.

creating a barrier between her and the surrounding space rather than signaling change. It is as if the sketch of the woman frozen in place was made first, and the artist tried to depict her movement afterward — in other words, the woman and her movements are not integrated as they are in Severini's painting. This was not a failure of the *Herald* artist, he could never have produced an adequate example of Futurism for the paper because he never had the opportunity to see one himself.

A lack of access to the actual artistic products of Futurist thought was one of main sources of confusion among American audiences. Margaret R. Burke calls parts of Tridon's characterization of Futurism here misleading — it is unlikely that even he had seen anything beyond the early Futurist manifestos at that point.³⁰ This problem was made worse by the absence of Futurism from the Armory Show of 1913, discussed in part two.

The formalization of Futurist principles in sculpture was still months away, but the *Herald* article features images of *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin and Michelangelo's *Night* from the Basilica di San Lorenzo in Florence. Both of these works are deemed Futurist approved, but bear no resemblance to the real Futurist sculpture developed by Boccioni from 1912 to his death in 1916.³¹

³⁰ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 48

³¹ In his excitement, Tridon was jumping ahead of the Futurists by presenting their views on sculpture in December of 1911 — the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* would not be published until April of the following year. If Tridon had held back until he could read it, he would have discovered that the Futurists did not think particularly highly of Michelangelo or Rodin. Boccioni writes in the manifesto that Michelangelo is a “burdensome weight” on Latin artists, and that continuing to emulate him and other classical sculptors “is like wanting to draw water from a dry well with a bottomless bucket.” In explaining the inclusion of Rodin's *The Thinker*, the article plainly states that it “is a fine example of Futurism — according to the Futurists.” No source is provided for this claim, the only justification for it is that the writer suggests that “*The Thinker* was meant to move, they say — if you look at it the right way.” That

Tridon's confusion about what exactly Futurist art looks like is combined with a tendency to overstate the popularity of Futurism abroad — a result of his evangelist tendency. He incorrectly listed several writers including Jeanne Catulle Mendes, Gustav Kahn, and Gabrielle D'Annunzio as avowed Futurists in the realm of literature.³² These writers were not Futurists, they did not put their names on any of Marinetti's manifestos or sign on to his utopian programme. Nevertheless, their names did not come from nowhere; they all had had their work published in Marinetti's *Poesia*. The avant-garde journal had been in print since 1905, years before Futurism was codified and its adherents began producing manifestos. In another section of the same December article, Tridon baselessly claims that "On the continent of Europe Futurists claim a strong following everywhere among the younger men."³³ Tridon's exaggeration of Futurism's following is related to his understanding of the movement as inclusive of many more people than the Futurists themselves might have thought. The author ends the article with an audacious expression of the inclusive understanding of Futurism presented; "If you agree with [Mr. Tridon]

a Futurist sculptor would try to capture the essence of movement in bronze is true, as Boccioni would prove with his experiments in the following years, but Rodin, as modern as he was, was no Futurist sculptor. Not to say that he was not appreciated by Boccioni, on the contrary, in the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture he is listed as one of the "great contemporary sculptors." Beyond the specific critiques of sculpture based on tired antique models, the manifesto expresses a similar disdain for the nude in sculpture as in painting. Tridon should have guessed that the Futurists would have felt the same way about the nude in sculpture as they did in painting, but in his excitement, and lacking any Futurist images to draw on, he tried to fill in the gaps himself.

³² "Keats the younger" is listed among these alleged avowed Futurists, but it is unclear who this refers to. The poet John Keats died in 1821.

³³ Scholars have since expressed doubt that Futurism was ever very popular among the masses prior to World War One. See Giancarlo Bergomi, "Gramsci, Trotsky e il Futurismo" in *Nuova Antologia: Rivista trimestrale di lettere, scienze ed arti diretta da Giovanni Spadolini*, (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1988) 318-331, and Umberto Carpi, "Gramsci e le Avanguardie Intellettuali," in *Studi Storici*, January-March 1980, Year 21, no 1, 19-29

you must be a Futurist yourself, he says, even if you don't admit it."³⁴ This quote is strange because Futurism was *supposed* to be revolutionary, provocative, avant-garde, not something that Americans did without thinking. By framing Futurism as something already practiced in America, Tridon was trying to make it more palatable to his audience, but statements like these caused more confusion and made Futurism appear less radical than it was. When Tridon returned to the papers with an article he wrote himself, printed in *The Sun* on February 25, 1912, he said something similar: "The majority of modern cartoonists apply unconsciously the futurist technique when they endeavor to visualize motion very realistically."³⁵

The article, published weeks after the Paris Bernheim-Jeune exhibition, featured pictures of Futurist paintings by Russolo, Boccioni, and Severini. Working now with authentic images, Tridon's analysis of Futurist art became more coherent and true to their own ideas, even if he misunderstood some details of the paintings reproduced.³⁶ John Hand says that in his 1912 article, "[Tridon] came closest to transmitting their theories in the most cogent and accurate manner."³⁷ A section of the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* was printed with the article to give the public an idea of how the Futurists themselves talked about their work. Tridon even

³⁴ "The New Cult of Futurism is Here," *New York Herald*, December 24, 1911.

³⁵ "The Futurists, Latest Comers in the World of Art," *The Sun*, February 25, 1912.

³⁶ In one strange misreading, Tridon says that Russolo's *The Revolt* contains images of trees.

³⁷ Hand bases this claim on the fact that Tridon, before any other American critic; "found in their paintings not only the more typical ideas of 'dynamism' and interpenetration of objects, but also stressed the importance of the spectator's involvement in the work of art." Hand goes on to say; "Tridon's statements imply that Futurism is less an attempt to render motion than it is an art that tries to depict or induce 'states of mind,' and that it is this rather than any technical devices that separates Futurism from Cubism." This is true, and certainly Tridon had a better-than-average understanding of many Futurist tenets, but it is equally important to acknowledge the places where his lack of knowledge caused him to diverge from the Futurist dogma. Burke describes Tridon's descriptions of Futurism in *The Sun* in February as "the most articulate" in the American press; positioning him as an exceptional figure in terms of his understanding during these years.

adds a clarification that “[Futurism] has nothing in common with Post-Impressionism or Cubism.”³⁸ This was one of the first attempts in print to clearly differentiate the artistic avant-gardes of Europe, but it did not clear up the confusion completely.³⁹

In an interview in the *Evening World*, published on May 16, 1912 Tridon returned to make a similar declaration of inclusivity while extolling the virtues of American architecture; “You build warm, convenient dwellings, with modern plumbing, electric lights, steam heat, and a hundred other improvements. Your modern architects and contractors are all unconscious Futurists.”⁴⁰ Here again Tridon tries to promote Futurism not as a new radical movement seeking to remake the world on a new aesthetic basis, but as a set of ideas and practices already known in America by a different name.

Tridon’s enthusiastic comments presented Futurism to the American public as an ideology open to anyone who liked Rodin, was bored of nude paintings, or admired the skyscrapers of New York City. According to John Hand, “Tridon makes it quite possible to interpret Futurism as simply a manner of thinking that places an emphasis upon doing away with the past and glorifying movement.”⁴¹ Tridon’s Futurism was forward-looking, but it was also generic, inclusive, popular, and devoid of the virulent Italian nationalism that drove Marinetti and his early collaborators. It did not help that the word ‘futurism’ was so similar to the word ‘futuristic’ — making the distinction between a generic modernism and Marinetti’s movement

³⁸ “The Futurists, Latest Comers in the World of Art,” *The Sun*, February 25, 1912.

³⁹ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 36

⁴⁰ “Hamlet is a Bore and Romeo Silly, Asserts M. Tridon,” *The Evening World*, May 16, 1912.

⁴¹ John Hand, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, MA Thesis, (University of Chicago, 1967) Page 16

less clear.⁴² In the late 1920s the Futurist artist Fortunato Depero even used the term on materials advertising his studio in New York, showing that even twenty years later the two words were used interchangeably (see cover image).

Other writers responding to Futurism around this time also seemed to downplay the movement's radicalism in their own assessments. The *Current Literature* article of 1911 described above stated of Marinetti's rhetoric; "Burning the museums... is only a figure of speech." The author also added that Marinetti's "contempt for women" is "a reaction to preceding excesses of Italian literature and not a genuine hatred of women."⁴³ These disclaimers might make Futurism more appealing to an American audience unprepared for the extreme beliefs of the Futurists (they might even be true), but they also blunt the force that Marinetti clearly intended to pierce the heart of the bourgeois sensibilities he despised.

Tridon, for his part, probably had a sense of Marinetti's penchant for provocation, he describes an incident at the Chiarella Theater on March 8, 1910 where the audience revolted against the Futurists; "The poet Marinetti only succeeded in silencing the howling mob by an amusing display of coolness. He caught on the fly an orange which was speeding past him and, interrupting his address, peeled [sic] it, quartered it and ate it with the greatest unconcern. That saved the day."⁴⁴ After 1912, Tridon disappeared from the newspapers and he took his Futurist zeal with him. He went on to write several books on the nascent science of psychology, and

⁴² Brown, Milton, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963). Page 145

⁴³ John Hand, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, MA Thesis, (University of Chicago, 1967) Page 19

⁴⁴ "The Futurists, Latest Comers in the World of Art," *The Sun*, February 25, 1912.

when he died in 1922 at the age of 45, his obituary in the *New York Times* dubbed him “the foremost psychologist in America.”⁴⁵

The legacy of Tridon and the other American writers who first discussed Marinetti’s Futurism in the press is a mixed one. On the one hand, they brought to life with their words a novel set of ideas that, for the moment, could not cross the Atlantic to make itself seen in images and performances. Lacking its empathic presence, Futurism could not speak for itself as it did throughout Europe in the years after 1909. As a consequence, American writers tended to play down their radicalism, whether by misunderstanding Futurist goals, imagining Futurist rhetoric to be more metaphorical than it was, or by making the claim (as Tridon did) that Futurism was at the same time a radical departure from past modes while also being somehow familiar to the American way of life already.⁴⁶ If anything can be appreciated about these reports is that they reveal a sort of confused curiosity about the goings on among avant-garde circles in Europe. Futurism struck Europe like a bolt of lightning, but by the time it reached across the Atlantic it was lacking the energy it needed to shock a significant number of people.

The Critics: America’s First Line of Defense Against Modernity

While many of the early American responses to Italian Futurism came from authors who had little or no experience with their artistic products, there came to be several who saw Futurist

⁴⁵ John Hand, “Futurism in America: 1909-14,” *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, no. 4 (Winter, 1981), 337-342.

⁴⁶ In fairness to Tridon, there was something about America, particularly New York, that appealed to the Futurists. It was the most modern city in the world, dense with skyscrapers and shining so brightly with electric lights that the moon appeared invisible. For Fortunato Depero, the advertising culture of the United States was profoundly modern and signaled the dawn of a new artistic revolution.

paintings as the Futurists exhibited their art in galleries across Europe. For the most part, the critics were of a conservative temperament. They openly abhorred the Futurists and thought their work was amateurish at best, and a purposeful hoax at worst. A review of the Paris exhibition published in *The Sun* on February 18, 1912 — a week before Tridon’s full page discussed above — and its tone can only be described as baffled and annoyed. Of Severini’s *La Modiste* (fig. 6) he says; “...one of the chef d’oeuvres of the futuriste exposition, [*La Modiste*] shows a woman with three heads, a large collection of arms and numberless legs. If she was a zigzag puzzle she would not be more sorely in need of being put together, if only the cut up parts matched, which they don’t.” With characteristic wit he continues with an eye towards another Futurist: “One must hope that their ‘good-bye’ will never resemble *Les Adieux* (fig. 7) by Boccioni.” No Futurist goes unscathed; *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (fig. 8) by Carra is called “a hopeless medley,” and Russolo’s *The Revolt* (fig. 9) is not given any kinder response.⁴⁷

An even more caustic review came from the pages of the *Daily Tribune* on March 24. The author, the “arch-conservative”⁴⁸ Royal Cortissoz, opens by expressing astonishment that the Futurists “had got themselves exhibited at all, and that people were willing to talk about them with more or less seriousness.” Cortissoz says the Futurists “deserve no explanation,” and makes it clear that his ire is directed at avant-garde artists in general, the so-called “Futurists, the Cubistes, and all the other freakish innovators.”⁴⁹ The negative reaction to the exhibitions of 1912 is perhaps best encapsulated by a snide cartoon that ran in the London *Daily Mirror* on March 15 (fig. 10).

⁴⁷ “The Latest Thing in French Art Is the ‘Futuriste’ Painting,” *The Sun*, February 18, 1912

⁴⁸ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 49

⁴⁹ “Matters of Art,” *New York Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1912

Not all the reviews were bad, even if they expressed some uncertainty about the movement. One published in the *New York Daily Tribune* on March 3 contains a description of the author, “C.I.B”, trying to discern what exactly the Futurists were trying to depict in their paintings; “I see showers of multi-colored confetti and fireworks. Is it a railroad catastrophe or the explosion of a dynamite bomb? No, it is simply a modiste displaying her wares in a shop window.” The article ends with an endorsement, “There is no question but that this exhibition of ‘Italian futurists’ is the most sensational art show that has been held in Paris for many a year. It is certainly well worth seeing.”⁵⁰ More positive in the end, this article gives voice to one of the most enduring responses to Futurism (and Cubism) that appeared in the American press: the audience just could not figure out what they were supposed to be seeing. This phenomenon was the result of an unfamiliarity on the part of the American public toward avant-garde art and the concomitant failure of art critics to prepare the public to see it because they hated it. It was also perhaps a sign that the Futurists had at least partially succeeded in creating a new art.

Such was the response to Marinetti’s explosive manifesto of 1909 and the paintings of the Futurists from 1910 to 1912. There was much curiosity, much derision, and some genuine sympathy in America for Marinetti’s project. However, the defining feature of the coverage was confusion over what exactly Futurism was. This confusion came from the early critics who were interested in the manifesto but could not imagine what its implications would be. It came from the overeager Andre Tridon, who tried to sell Futurism to the masses and so peppered his (generally accurate) analysis of their ideas with inaccuracies and generalizations.⁵¹ And it came

⁵⁰ “Salon of the Futurists,” *New York Daily Tribune*, March 3, 1912.

⁵¹ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 48

from the negative reviewers who often could not quite tell what they were looking at when they saw Futurist painting — but nevertheless hated it.

As John Hand notes, In America, from 1909 to 1912, “There was indeed an acquaintanceship with the theories, manifestoes, and reproductions of the paintings of the Futurists...”⁵² And yet, after all the ink spilled over Marinetti’s and his men (and women)⁵³ in the pages of the newspapers, the American public had “no clear notion”⁵⁴ of Italian Futurism, and would continue to confuse it with Cubism or other avant-garde styles. This was, at least in part, because neither movement had their works at a major exhibition in the United States.⁵⁵ The Armory Show of 1913 had the potential to change that.

⁵² John Hand, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, MA Thesis, (University of Chicago, 1967) Page 93

⁵³ The American press and American critics were very interested in the Futurist’s opinions of women. In 1912 *The Sun* dedicated almost an entire page to Valentine de Saint-Point and her Futurist exploits in Paris with Marinetti. In the press Tridon talked about his belief that Futurism would signal the end of the “Hebraic marriage law” and allow for women to end their marriage at will. Tridon also expressed very positive opinions about the Danish novel *The Dangerous Age* by Karen Michaelis, a progressive work for its time that featured a woman leaving her husband and to be with a female friend.

⁵⁴ John Hand, *The Development of the Concept of Futurism in America: 1909-1914*, MA Thesis, (University of Chicago, 1967) Page 66

⁵⁵ Alfred Stieglitz did feature modern artists at his gallery “291” including Picasso, Cezanne, and Matisse before 1913, but the audience was relatively small compared to the Armory Show of 1913. The Futurists would not have their art on American soil until 1915, and the first Futurist to have a solo exhibition in America was Gino Severini, in 1917.

Part Two
The Armory Show and its Consequences for Futurism

*“I venture to say you will be more bedazzled in five minutes of concentrated attention on the moving electric signs than in an hour with the most extreme Futurist.” - J. Nilsen Laurvik, *Is it Art?*, 1913*

The Armory Show, Or: How the American Public came face to face with Modern Art

Futurist art was the most well developed part of the Futurist programme. With art, Futurists turned their ideas into living objects, capable of acutely evoking the sense of dynamism endemic to modern life. These works, more than any other form of communication, made Futurist ideology immanent, aestheticizing all aspects of life in a bold and exciting way. In 1912 the Futurists exhibited in Paris, London, Brussels, and Berlin, and the previous chapter demonstrated how some information about their art trickled into the United States through newspaper reviews. Americans had no Futurist show in 1912, and had no first hand access to the images that powerfully expressed the Futurist message. As it would turn out, the most important European show to influence the history of Futurism in America was not a Futurist show at all, but the Cologne Sonderbund exhibition of 1912.

The Cologne Sonderbund exhibition of 1912 brought together “more than six hundred works, including Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Fauvists, and Austrian and German Expressionists.”⁵⁶ On the other side of the Atlantic, Arthur B. Davies, president of the American Association of Painters and Sculptors (AAPS) saw a catalog for the Cologne Sonderbund exhibition and immediately sent one of his colleagues, Walt Kuhn, to Germany to see it for himself.

⁵⁶ Starr Figura, “Cologne Sonderbund,” MoMA.org, 2011, https://www.moma.org/s/ge/collection_ge/artist/artist_id-20531_role-3_thumbs.html.

The AAPS had been trying to organize an exhibition of modern European art in the United States since its founding in December of 1911 — coincidentally when Andre Tridon made his debut in the American press — and after one year of organizing and administrative work, they were ready to put on a show. They wanted to give the public “...an opportunity to see and judge for themselves the work of the Europeans who are creating a new art.”⁵⁷ Davies and the AAPS had no idea what their show was going to look like until Kuhn arrived in Cologne on the last day of the Sonderbund exhibition and was amazed by its breadth. The show was unlike anything the American artists had ever seen — it featured works by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Signac, Picasso, Mondrian, and Munch among others. After Kuhn experienced that eclectic collection of works from the best artists in Europe, “the conception of the Armory Show was set.”⁵⁸ He got to work quickly, traveling across Germany, Netherlands, and then France to meet artists and secure their works for a show in America.

After arriving in Paris, the art capital of Europe, Kuhn began working with Walter Pach, an American painter who counted among his friends many avant-garde painters including the Futurist Severini. Davies joined Kuhn and Pach in Paris and they began wrangling as many paintings and drawings from Europe’s most exciting artists.⁵⁹

As the three Americans scoured Europe for its best modern art for the Armory Show, it was inevitable that the AAPS would encounter the Futurists, who had spent the past few years

⁵⁷ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 26

⁵⁸ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 46-49

⁵⁹ They mostly focused on the French, Gauguin, Cezanne, Matisse, Renoir — avoiding the German expressionists that made up the bulk of the Cologne Sonderbund exhibition that had inspired them.

loudly drawing attention to themselves. A provisional agreement was made with them to exhibit their work at the Armory when the show opened in February. Kuhn wrote to his wife in November telling her; “We will have a room each for the entire cubists and futurists.”⁶⁰ This was confirmed in a press release by the AAPS on December 12, which said the Futurists would be there, exhibiting their work as a group, separate from the other participants.⁶¹ As December wore on, the AAPS still was confident the Futurists would be present. Suddenly towards the end of the month, however, with the exhibition two months away, the Futurists dropped out.

Why the Italian Futurists were not at the Armory

It is unclear exactly what caused the Futurists to quit the show so soon after agreeing to take part. It must be considered that the Armory Show came together very quickly for an event of its scale. Davies only arrived in Paris on November 6th, and the show opened on February 17th of the following year, making the scheduling extremely tight. An agreement between the Futurists must have been made quickly, almost certainly through Walter Pach, and if there were quibbles about the details, there would have been little time to renegotiate the terms of their participation.⁶² The popular story after the show concluded was that the Futurists refused to take part in the show because they demanded to be exhibited as a group, apart from the other artists. Milton W. Brown points out in *The Story of the Armory Show* that this explanation is

⁶⁰ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 52

⁶¹ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 57-58

⁶² Marianne W. Martin offered the explanation that the Futurists did not participate because of “conditions [that] could not be met.” Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory, 1909-1915*, (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1978) page 121.

unsatisfactory because, "...the AAPS had [already] announced that they would be presented that way."⁶³

Brown also suggests that the Futurists could have had other obligations to exhibit in Europe during the same time period. It is conceivable that the Futurists would have been wary of sending their art overseas for so long if they had plans already made for later in the year. The whole Futurist group showed their art in Berlin at the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon that September, but it is unlikely that would have prevented them from exhibiting in America in February. Margaret Burke follows Brown, agreeing that an "overburdened exhibition schedule" was the reason for their absence.⁶⁴ There is no evidence that this was the case however, and the scale and novelty of the Armory Show should have drawn the Futurists to New York even if they had plans to exhibit in Europe.

Joshua C. Taylor, author of the catalog for MoMA's 1961 exhibition of Futurism simply says: "The Futurists decided, as a group, not to participate in the Armory Show of 1913."⁶⁵ This does not square with Gino Severini's own account of what happened from his autobiography:

⁶³Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 57-58

⁶⁴ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 52

⁶⁵Joshua C Taylor, *Futurism*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1961) 7

“The American painter, Walter Pach, a pupil of Matisse and a friend of mine, had decided to organize a large modern exhibition in New York that would include the Impressionists, Renoir, Degas, Cezanne, and end with the Cubists. Naturally, he had invited me to participate and I had accepted on the condition that the other Futurists be invited. This was easily accomplished, but Marinetti, for his own purposes, would not hear of having us in the show. So, against their will, my friends were forced to decline their participation and, out of solidarity, so was I.”⁶⁶

This story seems like the closest one to the truth. It makes sense that the agreement with the Futurists would be negotiated entirely by Pach and Severini,⁶⁷ as the American representatives of the AAPS were in Paris in late 1912, and never went to Italy where Marinetti and the other Futurists were based. Unfortunately, Severini’s account still does not explain what Marinetti’s problem with the Armory Show was.⁶⁸

Another explanation was offered by J. Nilson Laurvik, writing in 1915 regarding the then ongoing Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. While explaining how he convinced Marinetti to allow the Futurists to send their work to California, Laurvik wrote that the leader of the Futurists canceled their appearance at the Armory because he was appalled at

⁶⁶Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter: The Autobiography of Gino Severini*, trans. Jennifer Franchina (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). 111

⁶⁷ Anne Coffin Hanson, in the introduction to Severini’s autobiography, says there was “much discussion” among the Futurists before they turned down the invitation, with Severini following their lead. The idea is compelling, but there is no source given for this claim.

⁶⁸ Did Marinetti harbor some kind of Anti-American bias? His rejection of the opportunity represented by the Armory Show in 1913 is echoed by his attempt to deter Fortunato Depero from going to America in the 1920s.

the “discourtesy” paid to him by the exhibition organizers.⁶⁹ The absence of Futurist art at the Armory, the event that would go down in history as the debut of modernism in the United States, had a great impact on the understanding of and attitude towards Futurism in America. It only compounded the problem discussed in chapter one, leaving Americans to base their view of Futurism only on the few writings of the Futurists they had access to. In fact, the problem might have actually gotten worse, because now they had other modern art in front of them, and could easily confuse it for Futurist art and make inaccurate assumptions about the European avant-gardes.

In any case, Severini expressed a deep regret that he did not participate in the show; “So much that happened later as an outcome of that first show. Today it is clear how grave an error I made in not taking part in that magnificent international exhibition.” It seemed to be a breaking point in Severini’s relationship with Marinetti and the Futurists, in retrospect he wrote; “I had never displayed an intense interest in Futurism.” He also suggests that he was beginning to tire of Marinetti’s megalomania and was worried about the effect it was having on the Futurists who stayed in Italy with him. Severini then says that he was offered a solo show at the Marlborough Gallery in London, to open in April, and he took it without hesitation — without considering how Marinetti would respond.⁷⁰

That Severini took this offer with enthusiasm suggests that he, and the Futurists as a group, did not have an “overburdened schedule” and could have taken part in the Armory Show in February had Marinetti given his consent or if the painters had ignored him when he pressured

⁶⁹J. Nilsen Laurvik, “Laurvik on Exposition Art,” *American Art News*, 13, no. 27, April 10, 1915

⁷⁰Gino Severini, *The Life of a Painter: The Autobiography of Gino Severini*, trans. Jennifer Franchina (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). 111-113

them to reject the offer. Severini did eventually see his paintings hang in New York. In 1917 he would be the first Futurist to have a solo exhibition in America, after Pach put him in contact with Alfred Stieglitz through Stieglitz's associate Marius de Zayas. By that time, Severini's closest friend among the Futurists, Umberto Boccioni, was dead, and he was beginning to think beyond the ideological framework of the Futurist painters.

Just because there were no Futurist paintings hanging in the armory on opening day did not mean Futurism was not on the lips of the visitors and critics. Futurism had a small presence in the New York newspapers, and many educated observers of modern art had at least a vague notion of what it entailed in painting; dynamic modern compositions and a focus on color, light and speed. The more educated connoisseurs might know that Futurist painters wanted to depict states of mind, and denature the barriers between artwork and viewer.

Joseph Stella and Athos Casarini: Futurists on the Margin

In fact, at the Armory were exhibited works by two painters who could be considered Futurists (or Futurist adjacent), who will not be discussed at length in this paper. The first was Joseph Stella, an Italian-American painter and close friend of the artists Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Stella is considered one of Futurism's greatest exponents in America, having learned of the style during a sojourn to Europe between 1909 and 1912. He was in Paris with his friend Walter Pach in 1912 and saw the Futurist exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, even meeting Carlo Carra there.⁷¹ Stella was fascinated by both Cubism and Futurism, but when he returned to America he decided that the latter style was more appropriate for the task of capturing the fast

⁷¹ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 107

developing modernity of his country on canvas. He wrote, “Cubism is static. Futurism is dynamic... Futurism strives to be absolutely free of any tradition: its effort chiefly lies in creating a new sort of language apt to express the feelings and emotions of the modern artist... The essence of life is movement.”⁷² Stella took what he learned in Paris and created *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* [Fig 11], his most famous Futurist inspired work, in 1913.

Depicting a modern American subject, and likely inspired by Severini’s *The Pan Pan Dance* [fig 12] made two years earlier, the painting is as full of light, movement, and energy as one would expect from a devoted Futurist. Margaret Burke devotes several pages of her Phd dissertation to an analysis of the work in comparison with Severini’s, and she concludes that it represented the “the most fully developed example of Futurism by an American painter.”⁷³ However, there are good reasons to not consider Stella a true Futurist, and it is for these reasons that he is excluded from this chapter.

The first reason, evident from Burke’s quote, is that Stella, even with his Italian roots, was considered an American painter, and was not a part of Marinetti’s Futurist group in 1909 or the years after. Stella was in contact with some of the members of Marinetti’s group, Carra and Severini, but these relationships were not close ones.⁷⁴ Stella crucially did not consider himself a Futurist, instead, he “resisted classification” and did not share the same philosophical and social outlook as the Italian Futurists whose art inspired him.⁷⁵ Throughout his career he painted only a

⁷² Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 109

⁷³ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 115

⁷⁴ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 107

⁷⁵ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) Page 115

few Futurist-inspired paintings before moving away from their style — notably the Stella painting that hung on the wall of Room E at the Armory was a still life, not one of his avant-garde works.⁷⁶

Joseph Stella was certainly an important figure in the story of modern art in New York, and his influence and relationship with Futurism should not be ignored. However, his role in the story of the Italian Futurism of Marinetti in New York will not be considered here because he was not considered one of the core group by the Futurists and did not consider himself a Futurist as such.

The second artist who could easily be considered a Futurist in America is Athos Casarini, an Italian painter who lived in New York from 1909 to 1915, after which he returned to Italy to fight in World War One — two years later he was killed in action. Unlike Stella, Casarini passionately identified as a Futurist. An article he wrote for *The World Magazine* days before leaving New York is titled: “The Futurist Hears the Call of War.” In it, Casarini declares that it is “Thanks to the Futurists and nationalists that Italy has found herself” and that “Us American Futurists are running into battle side by side with our European Futurist brothers.”⁷⁷ Thinking of the city he was leaving, and would never see again he wrote:

⁷⁶ Claudio Poppi, “Gli Anni Americani,” in *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 33

⁷⁷ Claudio Poppi, “Gli Anni Americani,” in *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 32

*“New York, I bring with me the indelible memories of your wide streets, the vibrant fervor of your factories and construction, the memory of your crisp lines, your rivers bustling with human activity, your ocean that defends you, your youth, your faith, your aspirations; oh America, the youngest of the immortals!”*⁷⁸

The quote above sounds like it could have been written by any of the Futurists who were in Italy during the time Casarini was in New York — it shows clearly how committed he was to the movement developing in his home country. However, his role in that development was obviously limited because he was abroad during the formative years of Marinetti’s Futurism.

It is unclear when exactly Casarini crossed the Atlantic to settle in New York, where his brother Alberto had already been living for several years. According to the scholar Lucia Colombari, records from Ellis Island say that he entered the United States on the 11th of November, 1907.⁷⁹ This means that Casarini would not have been in Italy when Marinetti’s Manifesto of Futurism was published in 1909, and that he learned about Futurism secondhand, from copies of Futurist writings available in America.

This version of events is challenged by an interview given by Casarini’s brother Alberto in 1963. Alberto claimed that his brother Athos came to America in 1909, not 1907.⁸⁰ Claudio Poppi, scholar and editor of a catalog of Casarini’s work, believes Alberto’s version of events, citing correspondence between Casarini and other artists in Venice and Milan that suggest he was

⁷⁸ Athos Casarini, “The Futurist Hears the Call of War,” *The World Magazine*, August 15, 1915

⁷⁹ Charles C. Eldredge, ed., *Unforgettables: Expanding the History of American Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023). 311

⁸⁰ *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 172

in Italy in 1908.⁸¹ In his 1915 farewell article in *The World Magazine* Casarini talks about the “six years” he spent in New York, which would align with his brother’s account of him departing Bologna in 1909.⁸² Based on these sources, Poppi places Casarini’s arrival in New York somewhere in the late spring or early summer of 1909. If this was the case, then it is very likely that Casarini was exposed to Marinetti’s manifesto as it was published, because it appeared in a Bolognese newspaper on February 5th.⁸³

Whether or not Casarini was still in Italy or already in New York in early 1909, two things are clear: Casarini had access to Futurist writings and potentially some reproductions of Futurist artworks during his six year stay New York, and that he called himself a Futurist in 1915, despite having no part in the development of Futurism; he wrote and signed no manifestos (although he had a small presence in the American press — in this way he can be seen as similar to Andre Tridon), he took part in none of the Futurist performances, nor did his art appear alongside the works of the other Futurists in their European exhibitions.

After his death in 1917, Casarini was more or less forgotten in Italy, and it was not until 1937 when a retrospective exhibition of his work, organized by his brothers, was held in Bologna. Writing about Casarini in that year, the Futurist leader Marinetti celebrated his achievements in New York and called him a “young and genius painter.”⁸⁴ According to Poppi,

⁸¹ *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 172

⁸² Claudio Poppi, “Gli Anni Americani,” in *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 32

⁸³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) 17

⁸⁴ Claudio Poppi, “Introduzione,” in *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 11

was part of a “retracing” of Futurist history — Marinetti was naming Casarini among one of first Futurists, giving him a level of recognition that he had not received during his life.

Casarini did have an important role as the first Futurist in New York; he was friends with Joseph Stella, and he taught his neighbor, the American artist James Daugherty, about Futurism, inspiring him to create a few paintings in that style.⁸⁵ But like Stella, his production of Futurist paintings was limited, and his one painting at the Armory Show was not a Futurist composition (it was one of his ‘grotesques’ called *Crime*).⁸⁶ Because his career in New York was relatively short, his impact on the city limited, his corpus of Futurist paintings narrow, his contribution to the development of Futurism in Italy was small, and because he was not in close contact with Marinetti and the original Futurist group, his work will not be examined in detail here.

Paintings Confused for Examples of Futurism

While there were no Futurist paintings at the show, there were several works that were close enough to what people expected Futurism to look like, causing some confusion. Francis Picabia’s *The Procession, Seville* (Fig. 13), and Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2* (Fig. 14) were thought to be Futurist works,⁸⁷ because they were “closer to Futurism than to analytical Cubism.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Rebecca E. Lawton, *Heroic America: James Daugherty's Mural Drawings from the 1930s*, (Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, 1998)

⁸⁶ Claudio Poppi, “Gli Anni Americani,” in *Athos Casarini Futurista*, ed. Claudio Poppi, (Bologna: Abacus, 2003), 34

⁸⁷ George B. Zug, a professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, was so uninformed that he thought Picabia was Severini. He also thought, based on the old press release, that the Futurists were indeed a part of the show, and wrote about them in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*.

⁸⁸ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 145

Picabia's painting depicts a religious procession by a group of nuns on a hill, wearing their habits and carrying objects likely to be candles. The hillside is completely obscured by the group, but the way the nuns are arranged suggests the hill's presence as they cascade over one another. The nuns' bodies are abstracted into pure geometry, triangles, rectangles and squares. While the painting is clearly Cubist, *The Procession, Seville* does feature some similarities to Futurist works in the way that the human body is divided into flat shapes. Picabia's painting is not Futurist, however, because the lines he chooses are almost entirely straight ones. Severini's *Sea = Dancer* is dense with curves and rounded shapes, and it is those lines more than any others that evoke movement on the canvas. By contrast, *The Procession, Seville* is defined by its straight lines, which feel solid and static, even while the title suggests there is motion. The solid solemnity brought by the straight lines and sharp angles of the work feel appropriate for its more serious subject matter, one that the Futurists would not have painted.⁸⁹

Picabia's colors also have much more in common with those used by other Cubist painters of the time, who often made use of more subdued tones. Picasso's *Girl with a Mandolin* (Fig. 15) and Jean Metzinger's *Woman with Horse* (Fig. 16) exemplify this trend with the dominance of light grays and browns in their angular compositions. A comparison between *Woman with a horse* and Boccioni's *Elasticity* (Fig. 17), both of which depict the physical interaction between horse and rider, demonstrates clearly how the use of brighter colors and curved lines sets Futurism apart from Cubism. In *The Procession, Seville*, Picabia does expand

⁸⁹ Picabia's painting was a part of a series of "scenes of peasant and religious life that he had witnessed on his honeymoon in Spain in 1909" according to Jeffrey Weiss, writing for the National Gallery of Art's *Art for the Nation* Catalog, 2000.

the modest Cubist color palette to include an orange and bright blue, but he still does not come close to the diversity of bright colors that defined the best of Futurist painting.

The reports in the press that confirmed the Futurists would showcase their work in New York primed an audience — one without a clear idea of what Futurism was — to think they were seeing it and react accordingly. In the words of Brown, “The American public in its innocence lumped Cubism and Futurism together, and for a long time afterward the term Futurism or Futuristic remained the generic term for modern art, possibly because it was more evocative than Cubism.”⁹⁰ Boccioni and his colleagues would have been dismayed at the suggestion that Futurism and Cubism were equivalent. In the *Preface to the Catalog of the First Exhibition of Futurist Painting* written for the Paris exhibition of 1912, Boccioni wrote “Even though we admire the heroism of our Cubist friends, painters of the highest value, who have demonstrated an admirable contempt for artistic mercantilism and a powerful hatred for academicism, we feel and declare ourselves to be absolutely opposed to their art.”⁹¹ The Futurists were not present at the Armory in early 1913, but it is easy to imagine what the response to their work would have been had they appeared.

⁹⁰ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 145

⁹¹ Umberto Boccioni, “The Italian Futurist Painters and Sculptors,” in *Catalogue De Luxe of the Department of Fines Arts Panama-Pacific International Exposition*, ed. John E. D. Trask and J. Nilsen Laurvik (San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1915) 123. This was the same “letter to exhibitors” that Boccioni wrote for the Futurist exhibition in London, three years earlier.

The Critics See Modern Art Up Close, and They Do Not Like What They See

If the American critics were harsh with modern art when examining exhibitions from across an ocean, they were — for the most part — much more vicious seeing it in their own backyard. Strangely enough, the Cubists did not receive the worst of the critical broadside. That was reserved for the Post-Impressionists and Henri Matisse in particular. Brown explains that this was because “Fauvism in its emotional violence was completely foreign to American taste. Whereas Cubism started from entirely new premises and produced an unrecognizable art which could be simply ignored or rationally discussed and found wanting, and one could even see in it evidence of intellectual speculation, technical proficiency and neatness.” By contrast, “Matisse was blatantly undermining all the accepted and recognizable forms of art.”⁹² That is not to say that the Cubists were appreciated by the mass of critics, but it was as if their art was so different from the traditional academy style expected of good painters that it became slippery, difficult to grapple with, and so harder to tear down. In other words, Cubism was “a little too revolutionary for either comfort or understanding.”⁹³ There is little doubt that Futurism would have been viewed similarly.

Nevertheless, the critics came swinging. Kenyon Cox, a painter and academy-man through and through, said Cubism was “nothing else but the total destruction of the art of painting.”⁹⁴ He followed this up in an interview with the *New York Sun*, in which he proclaimed that the “public will sooner or later find out that anyone can do Cubism...” adding that “it will be

⁹² Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 141

⁹³ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 146

⁹⁴ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 147

the end of the movement.”⁹⁵ Royal Cortissoz, who had eviscerated the Futurists reviewing their 1912 exhibition in Paris offered the most common response to Cubism among the critics, he called their work boring, and said they ought to be ignored. His final appraisal of the Armory Show at large was not entirely negative however, for him it showed off “some of the most stupidly ugly pictures in the world and a few pieces of sculpture to match” but was “a fine and stirring exhibition.”⁹⁶

Christian Brinton and J. Nilsen Laurvik, two educated who may have been the Americans with the best knowledge of the state of art, believed that modern art was fundamentally returning to primitive and oriental styles.⁹⁷ This rhetoric, which was racially charged, was commonplace among critics dating back decades, but was not always deployed to attack modern artists. In 1914, Walter Pach, one of the key figures behind the Armory Show wrote in *Century Magazine*: “The Orient helped us not only to find the lost sense of design on surfaces which we first thought of as the message of its art, but to find the design of life which we of Europe had in pre-Christian days.”⁹⁸

For Brinton, the Cubists were leaving imitation behind and painting “a realm where subjectivity reigns supreme.”⁹⁹ This dichotomy between the subjective world of modernity and

⁹⁵ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 148

⁹⁶ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 87

⁹⁷ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 157

⁹⁸ Walter Pach, “The Point of View of the ‘Moderns,’” *The Century Magazine* 87, April 1914. 853

⁹⁹ Christian Brinton, *Impressions of the Art at the Panama-Pacific Exposition*, (New York: John Lane Company, 1916) 158

the objective, rational perspective of traditional art, with the implication that the latter was superior fit into a broader narrative placing the west against the east.

Despite his view that the Cubists were retrogressive, Brinton appreciated their use of form and color, believing that it amounted to a different language unknown by American painters. Unlike most observers, he knew that the Armory Show was an incomplete selection of European modernity, missing the Futurists and a wide range of German artists. In spite of these omissions, the Armory Show was a representation of how artistic change arrived in America. At the Armory Americans saw the results of modern artistic development, without seeing the long road to that led to their creation. In Brinton's own words; "We take no part in the preliminary struggles which lead up to these achievements. They come to our shores as finished products."¹⁰⁰ If Futurism had been featured in New York in 1913, it would have been viewed the same way.

Boccioni's *The City Rises* would have been sneered at by most visitors, and some connoisseurs might recognize its value, but it would be a finished product of Futurism, lacking the ongoing struggle — intellectual, social, psychological — that defined Futurism. Marinetti's ideology glorified the struggle, in many ways it *was* the struggle, and so it follows that even if *Futurist art* had made the trip across the Atlantic alongside the works of Picasso and Duchamp, Futurism, in all its violent and effervescent glory would still be in Europe. It is conceivable that this fact is part of the reason Marinetti was so opposed to the idea of sending Futurist art abroad, because doing so would hollow it of its ideological content, annulling what was effectively the basis of his entire movement. Futurism required total engagement in all mediums, the paintings alone could provoke and propagandize, as they had in London and Paris, but the full effect would

¹⁰⁰ Christian Brinton, *Impressions of the Art at the Panama-Pacific Exposition*, (New York: John Lane Company, 1916) 159

be dampened with distance, and dampened by the surrounding Cubist works confusing the ignorant audience — hence why Marinetti would insist upon having a separate Futurist gallery.

Laurvik was very familiar with the manifestos and writings of the Italian Futurist group, and quoted them at length in his 1913 book, *Is it Art?* After allowing the Futurists to speak for themselves, on the interpenetration of objects and planes, on the rejection of the museum and the academy, on the monotony of the nude in painting, etc. Laurvik characterizes Marcel Duchamp as “one of the most discussed exponents of Futurism” followed by the clarification that Duchamp is “not officially affiliated with the main group.”¹⁰¹ *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2*, Duchamp’s most important work at the armory, is a failure in Laurvik’s eyes, because the artist tried to capture motion using overlapping flat shapes fixed in space. For Laurvik, depicting motion in such a mechanical fashion is the domain of film, not painting — as such *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2* (and other Futurist attempts to depict simulanties states of motion in painting) are deemed “parlor games” with “very little value as art.”¹⁰² He goes on to assert that the goal of the Futurists, to produce a sense motion in the minds of the painting’s spectators, is a “puerile use of art.” In the end of his section on the Futurists, Laurvik dismisses them as motivated only by a desire for notoriety and “quick financial returns.”¹⁰³ Surprisingly, two years after publishing his definitely negative appraisal of Futurist art, Laurvik would meet with Marinetti in Venice and arrange for the exhibition of a large number of Futurist paintings and sculptures at the Panama-Pacific Exposition held in San Francisco.

¹⁰¹ J. Nilsen Laurvik, *Is it Art?*, 1913, 18

¹⁰² J. Nilsen Laurvik, *Is it Art?*, 1913, 18

¹⁰³ J. Nilsen Laurvik, *Is it Art?*, 1913, 19

In Laurvik we can see the consequences of the way the Armory Show presented modern art to the American public. As Brinton pointed out, New Yorkers were given the chance to see the products of ongoing developments in Europe and were woefully underprepared by a class of art critics who largely disliked the avant-garde. After seeing Duchamp and Picasso, at the Armory, how else were people to react other than by assuming that these Europeans were charlatans?

The “Retrogressive” Attack and the Struggle Over the Word Primitive in Modern Art

It was no accident that the word “primitive” was used to attack modern art at the Armory. Progress was an American value, and even the harshest critics of the modern art at the Armory would not have characterized themselves as conservatives standing in the way of progress. Rather, they saw themselves as defenders of progress against artists who were undoing centuries of development and banishing art back to the primitive world. For them, progress was a slow and careful process, respectful of tradition and established techniques of painting.¹⁰⁴

This understanding of progress is best exemplified in “A Layman’s View of an Art Exhibition” written by America’s first progressive president, Theodore Roosevelt. Coming off his second place finish in the election of 1912, Roosevelt responded to the Armory Show with a combination of tepid approval and dismissiveness. He began by lauding Arthur Davies and Walt Kuhn for their hard work, and arguing for the necessity of a show like the one they put on: “The exhibitors were quite right as to the need of showing to our people in this manner the art forces

¹⁰⁴ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 151

which of late have been at work in Europe, forces with can not be ignored.”¹⁰⁵ Roosevelt is firm in his endorsement of progressive values, admitting that there can be no life without change, but quickly turns on modern art, saying it represents “retrogression instead of development.”

Roosevelt makes it clear that he believes in the necessity of moving forward and “shaking off the dead hand” but he distances himself from the work on display by asserting that every progressive movement has its “lunatic fringe.” These lunatics, according to Roosevelt, are on full view “in the rooms devoted to the Cubists and the Futurists.” In another passage, the distinction between the two groups disappears, and he uses the word ‘Futurist’ as a blanket term for the entire avant-garde. Roosevelt says “...the pictures of the Futurists... show that the school would be better entitled to the name of the ‘Past-ists.’” The Futurists, of course, were not at the Armory, and Roosevelt unwittingly reproduced the confusion about Futurism and its relationship with Cubism.

The Futurists were familiar with this kind of attack on their work, and embraced it wholeheartedly. As early as the first manifesto Marinetti wrote “Our hearts feel no weariness, for they feed on fire, on hatred and on speed!”¹⁰⁶ In an interview in the months following the publication of the first manifesto, Marinetti responded to a question about the “hostile reception” it had received by saying: “This animosity doesn’t surprise me at all. It justifies the eruption of Futurism...”¹⁰⁷ The Futurists were provocateurs and thrived on being hated by critics and journalists. As a group their skill in art making was only surpassed by their ability to draw

¹⁰⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, “A Layman's View of an Art Exhibition,” *The Outlook*, March 22, 1913

¹⁰⁶ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) 16

¹⁰⁷ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “An Interview With Mr. Marinetti in Comœdia,” in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006)

attention to themselves. In New York they would have found a public only too happy to tear them apart.

The particular valence of the word ‘primitive’ would have been complicated had the Futurists been at the armory, because it was a word the Futurists proudly used to describe themselves. In the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* Boccioni declares that the Futurists are “the Primitives of a new, completely transformed sensibility.”¹⁰⁸ He embraces the word primitive, not because he wishes to return to an earlier art — Boccioni is clear that “What was truth for the painters of yesterday is but a falsehood today.”¹⁰⁹ — but because they were overthrowing all existing modes of expression and beginning anew, rendering them the first in a new tradition. The partial knowledge of the contents of Futurist manifestos in America was no guarantee that the nuanced understanding of the term ‘primitive’ proposed by Boccioni would have made a difference to the American critics who seemed intent on mocking modern artists.¹¹⁰

The one painting Roosevelt describes in detail is *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2*, which he seems to take particular issue with, calling it “repellent from every standpoint.” The ex-president was not alone in taking offense to Duchamp’s painting, which was the “most notorious work in the Armory.”¹¹¹ The painting went further than other cubists did by trying to capture the many body positions of a woman in a continuous motion. The painting shares some similarities with Balla’s *Dynamism of a Dog on Leash* [Fig. 18]. Balla’s brushstrokes are lighter

¹⁰⁸ Umberto Boccioni, “Futurism Painting: Technical Manifesto,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 67

¹⁰⁹ Umberto Boccioni, “Futurism Painting: Technical Manifesto,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 65

¹¹⁰ Boccioni’s insistence on Futurist primitivism reappears in the introduction he wrote for the Futurist exhibition at the Panama-Pacific Exposition of 1915.

¹¹¹ Michael R. Taylor, “Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2* and The 1913 Armory Show Scandal Revisited,” *American Art Journal*, Vol. 51 no. 3/4, Fall 2012. 51

than Duchamp's, the dog and woman are portrayed more naturalistically, whereas the nude woman is blocky and inscrutable — typical of the Cubist style. In some ways, the painting is quite Futurist, in keeping with Boccioni's precept that "To paint a human figure you must not paint it; you must render the whole of its surrounding atmosphere."¹¹² Duchamp paints the swinging arms and legs criss-crossing each other as different moments coalesce into one frame, incorporating some curvilinear forms into the forms defined mostly by Cubist straight lines. The role of the light in *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2* also sets it apart from Futurist paintings, which tend to paint the light as a separate body onto the canvas. Duchamp's use of light and dark tones does not express the dynamism of the light, his lighting is more in line with his other Cubist compositions.

Roosevelt was unable to actually see the woman in Duchamp's painting — a problem common enough to warrant a newspaper to publish a reproduction in which they circled her, not understanding that it is the sensation of a memory or state of mind that is depicted [Fig. 19].¹¹³ Roosevelt mistakenly refers to it as "Naked Man Going Down Stairs" and is quite certain that the Cubists should not be taken seriously as artists. The inability to even find the subject within the frame plagued the American critics when they saw Futurist art in Paris and London the year before, and was the greatest challenge of modern art to new eyes.

Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2 had a difficult time being exhibited in France — blocked by Duchamp's fellow Cubists — apparently because "The salon Cubists wished to avoid

¹¹² Umberto Boccioni, "Futurism Painting: Technical Manifesto," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 65

¹¹³ Michael R. Taylor, "Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2* and The 1913 Armory Show Scandal Revisited," *American Art Journal*, Vol. 51 no. 3/4, Fall 2012. 53

the charge... that they deliberately courted scandal.”¹¹⁴ Duchamp was so upset by this that he broke with the Cubists, but they might have been right — the painting certainly did scandalize at the Armory.

Francis Picabia Explains Art

Francis Picabia, the only European artist present in New York while the Armory Show was ongoing, tried to explain the work in an interview with a journalist from the *New York Tribune*. The full page article, published on March 8th, lauds Picabia and his wife for their creativity and knowledge of the latest developments in modern art. Regarding *Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2*, he clarifies that neither the staircase nor the woman are depicted, and that those searching the canvas for any objectivity are searching in vain.¹¹⁵ Instead it is the impression of these entities and the way they interact that is captured by Duchamp, the painting is trying to evoke something in the mind of the audience rather than show them a snapshot of a moment. Using painting to capture the sensations of moments experienced, or the memories of those sensations, was one of the goals of the Futurists, but Picabia was not very impressed with their work, as it turned out.

In one section where he describes various art movements, he is quoted as saying the following about the Futurists: “They have selected the wrong medium... they seek to reproduce movement in painting, whereas painting is essentially static.”¹¹⁶ Passing over the strange fact that Picabia seems to be sympathetic to *Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2* but dismisses Futurist

¹¹⁴ Michael R. Taylor, “Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending Staircase no. 2* and The 1913 Armory Show Scandal Revisited,” *American Art Journal*, Vol. 51 no. 3/4, Fall 2012. 58

¹¹⁵ “A Post-Cubist’s Impressions of New York,” *New York Tribune*, March 8, 1913

¹¹⁶ “A Post-Cubist’s Impressions of New York,” *New York Tribune*, March 8, 1913

painting as a sort of category error, his assertion that painting is a static medium is at least in keeping with the style of his own *The Procession, Seville* discussed above.

As a Parisian artist, Picabia had a great deal more knowledge of Italian Futurism than most Americans, and rather than explaining the artistic implications of their ideology or clarifying that they had failed to appear at the Armory, Picabia chooses instead to cast them as apart from the other European avant-gardes — perhaps out of an unconscious French bias against Italians. After all, Paris, not Milan or Rome, was the center of European modern art.

At another point in the article, Picabia discusses the “sincerity of the interest in the modern movement evinced by the men and women [of New York].” Americans might have a “great ignorance” of modern art, but exhibit a greater deal of “honesty” and “seriousness” than their “superficial” Parisian counterparts.¹¹⁷ Whether Picabia is being honest here or simply trying to flatter the *Tribune* journalist, it is interesting that he would be so positive about the reception of the Armory Show while the newspapers were dense with reports of crowds who reacted with laughter and derision at the modern masterpieces.

Reconciling Picabia’s view that Americans were curious about modern art with the standard account (reproduced by Milton Brown in *The Story of the Armory Show*), in which the American response can best be described as emphatically incurious, can only be done by doubting one version of events. It is unlikely that the common narrative of general incuriosity, punctuated by notable examples of positivity and excitement, is overstated, because a similar reaction was reported two years later at the Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.

¹¹⁷ “A Post-Cubist’s Impressions of New York,” *New York Tribune*, March 8, 1913

As Heidi Applegate has demonstrated in her 2014 doctoral dissertation *Staging Modernism at the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair*, an event at which Futurist art did appear, the response to avant-garde art was similar to that in New York.¹¹⁸ An article in the San Francisco Bulletin read “People came in, looked at the pictures and usually laughed. They thought that laughter was the proper reaction.”¹¹⁹ Because this was the case, something else must account for Picabia’s impression that the situation was different.

The most plausible explanation for Picabia’s rosy description of open minded New Yorkers is that he was indeed honestly reporting his experiences, but that he only associated himself with people sympathetic to the cause of modern art. In the very same *Tribune* article, Picabia declares that the most informed American on the subject of art is Alfred Stieglitz, a man who remained friends with Picabia in the years after the Armory Show. Spending time with Stieglitz and his intellectual circle likely gave Picabia a different view of how Americans interacted with modern art, shielded as he would have been from the most ignorant and dismissive voices like that of former president Roosevelt.

Futurist Politics: The Looming Anarchist Threat

The press also inflamed a moral panic over the influence of the Armory Show on Americans. As Brown explains, many American critics “found the radical art movement an expression of... the degeneracy of European culture in an intellectual, moral, and political sense,

¹¹⁸ Heidi Applegate, *Staging Modernism at the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair*, PhD Dissertation (Columbia University, 2014) 87-90

¹¹⁹ “Scrambled Art and Scones. Two Features of the Fair and their Effect Upon a Neutral Observer,” *San Francisco Bulletin*, September 6, 1915. 6

and therefore dangerous.”¹²⁰ He suggests that this impulse came from America’s “Puritan tradition” that judged art based on its capability for spiritual uplift. The *New York Review* published an article on March 22 in which the author claimed that “the propaganda of the Cubist, Futurist, and Post-Impressionist painters is not only a menace to art, but a grave danger to public morals.”¹²¹ Cox reached a tone of near hysteria when he wrote “There is only one word for this denial of all law, this insurrection against all custom and tradition, this assertion of individual license without discipline and without restraint; and that word is ‘anarchy.’”¹²² The link between modern art and anarchism made by the moralizers in the press in response to the works at the Armory Show would certainly have been less tenuous had the Futurists actually been there.

Italians had long been associated with anarchism in the United States. Italians had been immigrating to America in droves since the 1870s, but the rate increased rapidly after the turn of the century. From 1901 to 1915, nearly 600,000 Italians left their country each year to seek opportunities abroad.¹²³ New York City was among the most popular destinations for Italian emigrants — by 1914 there were 370,000 Italians living in New York, representing one-quarter of all the Italian population in America.¹²⁴ Italian workers did participate in the American labor movement, and there was a “small but significant”¹²⁵ number of Italians involved in radical

¹²⁰ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 137

¹²¹ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 138

¹²² Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 139

¹²³ Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 24

¹²⁴ Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 9, 10

¹²⁵ Samuel L. Baily, *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise: Italians in Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870 to 1914*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 188

political activity — anarchists and socialists — but the idea that Italians in general were dangerous extremists was not true. A general hostility to immigrants combined with the high profile assassinations of the Empress of Austria and King of Italy, in 1898 and 1900 respectively, by Italian anarchists, to create the impression that Italians were particularly prone to anarchist activity. This anti-Italian, anti-Anarchist panic reached a crescendo in the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1921.

Returning to the Futurists, it is understandable that the American press dubbed them anarchists around 1913. There was certainly an anarchic tenor to their writing; “We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution.”¹²⁶ Marinetti, for his part, was close with anarchist circles in Paris even before the founding of Futurism.¹²⁷ His sympathies were shared, to greater or lesser degrees, by Russolo and Carra. Marinetti consistently reiterated his belief in the necessity of forceful revolutionary action, declaring that “violence and bloodshed” was the only path towards “a possible and desirable anarchy.”¹²⁸ The Futurists were opposed to all that was old and held Italy back, political and cultural institutions alike. Based on these similarities between anarchist and Futurist ideas, Gunter Berghaus describes the relationship between Futurism (in its early years) and anarchism as more a “partial overlap” of ideologies rather than an alliance.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006) 14.

¹²⁷ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 34

¹²⁸ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 57

¹²⁹ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 53

Umberto Boccioni held socialist beliefs and believed his art was speaking a “universal language of forms and colors” that was understood by proletarians “struck by their imagination.”

¹³⁰ He was active in labor circles, but eventually broke with the socialists, frustrated by the lack of interest in avant-garde art within the labor movement. He wrote; “One should be able to expect something from the extreme left in life and politics. Instead: they are the most ferocious imbeciles, the most vulgar defenders of traditional banalities.”¹³¹

Andre Tridon, the French-American Futurist fanatic, was quite open about his own socialist inclinations.¹³² In an interview published in the *Evening Sun* in 1912 he declared that Futurism would bring an end to the “Hebraic marriage law” and allow women and men to dissolve their union at will. Continuing from this, he suggested that the state should pay for the upbringing of children, “as it now pays for their education.”¹³³ Marinetti for his part denounced socialism in a letter to the poet Giovanni Pascoli in 1905, and declared Futurism to be “anti-socialist” in the *Futurist Political Programme* of 1913.¹³⁴

These associations with the left were complicated by the Futurists’ ultranationalism and pro-war activism. Marinetti was an advocate for Italian colonial expansion, most notably during the Italo-Turkish War during which Italy acquired Libya as a colony. He also pushed for Italy to wage war against the Austrians and annex territories he considered rightfully Italian. When war

¹³⁰ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 66

¹³¹ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 67

¹³² John Hand 1981

¹³³ Marguerite Mooers Marshall, “Hamlet is Bore and Romeo Silly Asserts M. Tridon,” *The Evening World*, May 16, 1912

¹³⁴ Christine Poggi, “Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, Spring 2002. 713-714

broke out in Europe in 1914, Marinetti was one of the loudest voices in favor of intervention — he got his wish in 1915, and served in the Italian army alongside other enthusiastic Futurist volunteers.

While some anarchists shared his patriotism, others were more critical, especially as he expressed views like the ones in the *Second Futurist Political Manifesto*, published in late 1911. In it Marinetti plainly states that “Every individual and our entire people must be given total freedom, other than the freedom to be cowards” adding “Let it be declared that the word ITALY must take absolute precedence over the word LIBERTY.”¹³⁵ These words were antithetical to anarchism, and the differences in ideology were noted with frustration by some left-wing critics, who complained that Marinetti’s politics were essentially incoherent and purely aesthetic.¹³⁶

Before 1909 Marinetti had more aristocratic sensibilities, he was very skeptical of the value of the masses as a political force.¹³⁷ He never subscribed to egalitarian ideologies and believed in fundamental hierarchies — for Marinetti, talented supermen were the only ones capable of creating a new society. By the time Futurism was developing, Marinetti came to the conclusion that the masses, as uncontrollable and atavistic as they were, would be necessary to remake the world. Thus, Marinetti and his cadre of genius artists had to become the energetic leaders the crowds were predisposed to follow.¹³⁸ This turn in Marinetti’s thought explains the flirtation with anarchism and the ideologies of the left, but it did not signal a capitulation to

¹³⁵ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 69

¹³⁶ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996) 58

¹³⁷ Christine Poggi, “Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, Spring 2002. 715

¹³⁸ Christine Poggi, “Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, Spring 2002. 710-713

them. All of these ideas were based at least in part on the work of the Frenchman Gustave Le Bon, who developed the field of crowd psychology in 1895 with his influential volume *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Le Bon ascribed to the crowd feminine characteristics, and believed that it could be dominated and controlled — this “insight” was central to the development of Futurism, Fascism, and the French and Italian advertising culture of the 20s and 30s.¹³⁹

The relationship between anarchism and Futurism left its mark on the art of the first Futurism. Carlo Carra’s *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* [Fig. 8] is the most striking example. It depicts a clash between police and anarchists bearing the red draped coffin of Angelo Galli, a young man killed by factory security guards while organizing a strike in 1906. The painting likely would have caused a stir based on its name alone if it was exhibited in New York in 1913.

Boccioni too produced images of crowds, mobs, and riots. (the raid, the mob at the galleria) In these paintings the masses are depicted as dynamic, violent, energetic, and glorious. These works bridge the gap between the artist and the uneducated public — not everyone can be a talented artist-genius, but when the individual is subsumed into the mob, the mob itself becomes an avatar for Futurist virtue.

In this way, Futurist politics was mass politics, but it was not democratic.¹⁴⁰ Unlike other ideologies of the left, Futurism did not consider the liberation of the masses an end in itself. Instead, the masses would be dominated by the Futurists, who alone could marshal the primal

¹³⁹ Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 165

¹⁴⁰ By this I refer to liberal democracy that affirms the autonomy and rights of the individual. Insofar as the untamed mob can be considered the ‘demos,’ Futurism could be considered democratic in some sense, as it exalts their power above others.

energies of the mob to lay waste to the old world and give rise to the world of tomorrow.¹⁴¹ This desire to dominate was expressed in Boccioni's *Genius and Culture*, a Futurist play in which the main character, an artist frantically declares;

“I'm strong! I'm young! I can face anything!... Oh divine electric light! ...Sun ...
Electrify the crowds! Set them on fire! Dominate!”¹⁴²

No less an authority on left-wing radicalism than Antonio Gramsci, sympathetic to Futurism insofar as it was an “injection of cultural vitality,” believed the movement was “not quite so scary or novel” as it might first appear.¹⁴³ Futurist art was not any more politically subversive than any of the other modernist works on display at the Armory in 1913. The extremism of Marinetti required the presence of the Futurists themselves to make itself felt. It was *total Futurism* — their antics in the streets of Italian cities, their fiery performances, their speeches, and their endless manifestos printed in their journals — that gave Futurism its radical political essence. In New York, outside of the context of Italy where the Futurists were active, a painting by Boccioni was just more modern art.

The nuanced political positioning of the Futurists did not translate across the Atlantic, however. Futurism was tied to anarchism by American critics writing about the Futurist exhibitions in Paris and London. Writing for the *New York American*, one critic said of Severini's

¹⁴¹ For more information on the Futurist conception of the mob, see Christine Poggi, “Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, Spring 2002.

¹⁴² Umberto Boccioni, “Genius and Culture,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 487-489

¹⁴³ Nicole Gounalis, “Antonio Gramsci on Italian Futurism: Politics and the Path to Modernism,” *Italian Studies*, Volume 73, issue 4, 2018.

The Pan Pan Dance (Fig. 9); “...anarchy is too tame for the painters of the school to which this painting belongs... they are everything any anarchist is — and then some more.”¹⁴⁴ Arthur Jerome Eddy, an otherwise “thorough” and “perceptive” thinker considered the Futurists the “anarchists of the art and literary world.”¹⁴⁵ The political associations of the Futurists were irrelevant in America precisely because they were so entrenched in their Italian nationalism — despite their international renown, their politics was essentially national. The attacks on Futurism (and Cubism for that matter) by American critics were mainly made on artistic, literary, or philosophical grounds, not political ones.

The American Defenders of Modern Art

It was not all negative for Cubism and Futurism (What Americans thought was Futurism at least) in the reviews of the Armory Show. Brown notes that there was a “fundamental American artistic bias” for “the intellectual as opposed to the emotional.”¹⁴⁶ This bias actually worked in favor of the Cubists, because even though their paintings were incomprehensible in the eyes of the critics, their skill was apparent. The art writer Charles Henry Caffin wrote that for all the strangeness of their composition, they could draw “accurately” and paint “smoothly and with admirable color.”¹⁴⁷ Caffin went on, comparing the Cubists and Futurists favorably to the Fauvists and Post-Impressionists; “...it is a pleasure to see in their work good, sound painting and

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) 68

¹⁴⁵ Margaret Burke, *Futurism in America, 1910-1917*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Delaware, 1986) 68

¹⁴⁶ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 146

¹⁴⁷ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 146

drawing, elements that seem quite unknown by Matisse.”¹⁴⁸ He singled out Picabia’s *Procession, Seville* as having “lovely” color despite the fact that it was otherwise “nothing but a queer jumble of the forms known to the science of angles...”¹⁴⁹ His words were not a ringing endorsement of Cubism by any means, but they signal that the work of the Futurists might have had some admirers in New York if it were on display.

Unequivocal endorsements of the cutting-edge art seen at the Armory Show did exist, and one came from Joel Elias Spingarn, then a professor at Columbia University. Spingarn defended the modern artists for their “essential madness” and admired them for their courage. The recklessness and boldness of the Futurists would certainly have inspired Spingarn had their art been displayed there.¹⁵⁰

Interestingly, Spingarn was connected to the Futurists in a roundabout way. From 1899 he had been in contact with the influential Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce, who would become minister of education in 1920. Croce happened to be a frequent target of the Futurists, who labeled him a “pompous Germanophile.” They hated him for his criticism of Italy’s entrance into World War One, which the Futurists furiously supported.¹⁵¹ In 1913 the Futurist writer Giovanni Papini gave a speech entitled “Against Rome and Against Benedetto Croce” in which he denounced Croce’s philosophy as made for those who preferred to “sweep the old streets”

¹⁴⁸ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 146

¹⁴⁹ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 146

¹⁵⁰ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 157

¹⁵¹ Lawrence Rainey, “Introduction,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 32

instead of cutting new paths through deserts and forests.¹⁵² Later, Croce would be a prominent liberal opponent of Fascism, who believed that Futurism contained within it the roots of Fascism.¹⁵³ Spingarn and Croce's friendship continued until the American's death in 1939. When Spingarn heard that Croce's house was raided by Fascist agents in 1926, Spingarn was quick to contact him, asking "How can I help?"¹⁵⁴

A more prominent defender of the Armory Show was Alfred Steiglitz, who wrote in the Sunday Times, who praised the artists whose work was on display as "revitalizers" breathing life into dead art.¹⁵⁵ That Steiglitz would endorse the show is no surprise, he was at the center of a burgeoning modern art scene based in New York, and would later become friends with European artists like Picabia and Severini, and the Americans John Marin and Max Weber, who were influenced by Futurism.¹⁵⁶

What is most striking about the few positive reactions to the Armory Show in New York is that they are almost entirely philosophical in nature, rather than based upon aesthetic analyses of particular works. Stieglitz, Spingarn, and the other supporters of modern art praised the artists for their courage, for their boundary pushing, and for their rejection of old forms. These were certainly Futurist virtues, albeit ones that Futurism shared with other avant-gardes. What was

¹⁵² Giovanni Papini. *Against Rome and Against Benedetto Croce. A Speech Given by Giovanni Papini at the Futurist Meeting at the Costanzi Theater*. Milan, Italy: Governing Group of the Futurist Movement, 1913. Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667111/>.

¹⁵³ Lawrence Rainey, "Introduction," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 33-34

¹⁵⁴ Emanuele Cutinelli Rendina, *Carteggio Croce-Spingarn*, (Bologna-Napoli: il Mulino-Istituto Italiano per gli studi storici, 2001) 115

¹⁵⁵ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 152

¹⁵⁶ For more on the American artists influenced by Futurism, see Margaret Burke's PhD dissertation.

missing were specific aesthetic appraisals of the work from believers in modern art. Brown points out that “Hardly anywhere in the mass of newspaper and magazine criticism is there an indication that the aesthetic arguments for fauvism, Cubism, or Futurism were known.”¹⁵⁷

This absence is more confusing because the negative reviews combined philosophical attacks on modern art with aesthetic ones. For the opponents of modern art, the images themselves, not just their conceptual basis, could be attacked. Modern paintings were ugly, repellent, and most offensively; confusing. Americans just could not find on the canvas what they were supposed to be seeing, and this led them to react with laughter and derision. They represented a turn away from progress and towards a primitive sensibility that should have been long left behind.

It is possible that defenders of modern art thought that because such confusion was the result of ignorance, it was not worth addressing, and that their words were better served defending modern art from conservative critics who attacked it on more philosophical grounds. These attacks might have been understood as the most urgent ones to deal with if modern art — Cubist, Futurist, or otherwise — was to take root and grow in the United States as it had in Europe. Alternatively, it could be that the defenders of modern art themselves were not well acquainted enough with the theories that led to avant garde expression in painting, and were not equipped with the language to defend them well.

¹⁵⁷ Milton Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963) 156

Part Three
Fortunato Depero and Futurist Advertising in America

“I have taken up the art of advertising on a deliberately restricted schedule, I can affirm, without hesitation, that I have managed to create many followers; but I should add that, in this field, I shall have a great deal yet to say.” - Fortunato Depero, *Futurism and Advertising Art*, 1931

Fortunato Depero: Futurist Missionary in New York, 1928-1930

Futurism, as outlined by Marinetti in his manifestos and speeches, was a movement dedicated to remaking all aspects of life on new aesthetic grounds. Consequently, many of his closest followers were multimedia artists, eager to innovate in as many fields as possible. Umberto Boccioni was the most talented Futurist painter — he was the driving force behind the two Futurist manifestos on the subject — but he also developed Futurist sculpture almost single handedly. Luigi Russolo was a painter too, but also innovated in the area of music. Even Marinetti, who mainly stayed within the realm of literature, experimented with language in novels, poems, plays, manifestos, and speeches.

However, there was no Futurist who danced between mediums as fluently as Fortunato Depero, who created paintings, tapestries, furniture, poems, posters, plays, and even architectural designs. All of his art was in service of the goal he outlined alongside Giacomo Balla in the 1915 manifesto *The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*. The document outlines several principles of Futurism and elaborates how these principles will manifest themselves in practice. Depero and Balla promote the use of new materials in art; “metal wires, strings of cotton, woll, silk... colored glass... mirrors, metallic foils, colored tin-foil, and everything gaudy or garish.”¹⁵⁸ With

¹⁵⁸ Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla, “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 210

these materials and others, the Futurists will create objects to fill the new “artificial landscape,” and these objects are described as dynamic, abstract, transformable, volatile, fragrant, noise-making, and exploding — everything new will be rooted in these aesthetic and sensory principles.¹⁵⁹

In 1928 Depero took the opportunity to leave Italy and take residence in New York City, a place as dynamic and stimulating as any world the Futurists could dream up. Living there until 1930, Depero experienced the city of the future, the one that had inspired the utopian city drawings of the Futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia a decade earlier. While he was not the first Italian Futurist to experience modernity as it was articulated in New York — Athos Casarini lived in the city in the years before World War One — Depero’s unique experience in the America (and the unique art he produced there) can help us understand the discrepancies between the imagined Futurist culture and the actual culture of modern New York.

Depero left Italy with a mission: he was going to propagandize on behalf of Italy and Futurism. These two goals were really one, because Futurism was an art movement founded on a firm base of Italian nationalism. By 1927, Futurism was effectively one of several artistic propaganda languages spoken by the Fascist regime; its avant-garde aesthetics represented Italy’s newfound modernity and technological advancement.

This had not always been the case. During the early post-war years, Marinetti tried to build his Futurist movement into a genuine political party with a more or less revolutionary platform. When this project proved untenable, he began to collaborate with the Fascist party in

¹⁵⁹ Fortunato Depero and Giacomo Balla, “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 210

the hopes that it would bring about at least some of the cultural changes the Futurists demanded. In 1924 Marinetti renounced Futurism's utopian agenda in exchange for official approval from the Fascist regime of Futurist art. I argue that this trade effectively sapped what was left of Futurism's revolutionary energy on all but the rhetorical level, and reduced it from a holistic political and cultural movement to merely a literary-artistic one.¹⁶⁰ Futurism had laid the groundwork for Fascism, a fact that even Mussolini acknowledged, but now the former movement all but served the latter.¹⁶¹

Depero was a committed Futurist during the years of Fascist rule in Italy, and, like other Futurists active during that time, produced work glorifying the regime [Fig. 20]. He later wrote of the difficulty he consistently faced in acquiring commissions from the government,¹⁶² but as he planned his mission to America in 1928 he expected that the authorities would support him.

In his 1940 autobiography, *Fortunato Depero nelle opere e nella vita*, the artist tells of how when he began planning his trip, he went first to Rome “per ottenere una possibile riduzione di viaggio come artista” [*to obtain a possible discount on my trip as an artist*].¹⁶³ After spending what he described as a difficult and discouraging month meeting with several high ranking officials,¹⁶⁴ Depero secured a subsidy from the Ministry of Education.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Gianluca Camillini, *Fortunato Depero and Depero futurista 1913-1927*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Reading, 2020) 145

¹⁶¹ Gianluca Camillini, *Fortunato Depero and Depero futurista 1913-1927*, PhD Dissertation, (University of Reading, 2020) 142

¹⁶² Gianluca Camillini, “Believe, Obey, Work: Artistic relations between Fortunato Depero and Fascism”, in *International Graphic Design Magazine*, Autumn 2018. 42

¹⁶³ Fortunato Depero, *Fortunato Depero Nelle Opere e Nella Vita*, (Trento: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940) 275

¹⁶⁴ Fortunato Depero, *Fortunato Depero Nelle Opere e Nella Vita*, (Trento: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940) 275

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Depero from The Italian Ministry of Education, August 7, 1928, Dep.3.1.16.12, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

One letter written on Depero's behalf to the Italian shipping giant Navigazione Generale Italiana (NGI) requests a discount on his travel for the purposes of experiencing "le nuove correnti artistiche di quel paese" [*the new artistic currents of that country*].¹⁶⁶ This letter is interesting because it reverses the roles that Depero assigned for himself, his "viaggio artistico" [*artistic trip*] is reframed as an opportunity for an Italian artist to learn from his American counterparts rather than a chance for Futurism or Fascism to gain currency abroad. Depero's own conception of his American sojourn probably would not have inspired the ambivalent authorities to generosity — as the scholar Rafaele Bedarida has discussed, the Italian government was not very interested in propagandizing in the United States until the 1930s.¹⁶⁷

"Delusione completa" [*complete disappointment*] is how Depero, in his 1940 autobiography, described his reaction when he arrived in Genoa in September of 1928 and discovered that his promised subsidy from Rome was not forthcoming.¹⁶⁸ Depero is clear to mention his poverty, surrounded as he was at the port by hundreds of other Italians grasping what little money they had, waiting expectantly for the great ship that would whisk them to new opportunity in New York.¹⁶⁹

Depero's eagle-eyed awareness of money and the outsized role it played in New York, the world capital of commercialism, is evident throughout his writings. For example, he describes the nervousness of his fellow passengers waiting to board the ship in Genoa while clutching what

¹⁶⁶ Letter to Navigazione Generale Italiana from Gastone Gorrieri, June 26, 1928, Dep.3.1.16.11, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

¹⁶⁷ Maurizio Scudiero and David Leiber, *Depero Futurista & New York* (Longo Editions, 1986) 15

¹⁶⁸ Fortunato Depero, *Fortunato Depero Nelle Opere e Nella Vita*, (Trento: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940) 277

¹⁶⁹ Fortunato Depero, *Un Futurista a New York*, (Perugia: Francesco Tozzuolo, 2017) 9-10

little money they have, and he makes note of the sound of coins in the pockets of a hotel manager he encounters in the city.¹⁷⁰ While Depero was certainly a uniquely talented artist, he was not alone as an Italian with a limited understanding of the English language struggling to make ends meet in the metropolis.

Depero's first exhibition in New York was at the Guarino Gallery on Madison avenue (fig 6). Organized in part by Christian Brinton, the attendees included the head of the Italian Consulate of New York and Ignazio Thaon di Revel, head of the Fascist League of North America. The exhibition did not result in many sales of his works. Regardless, Depero would be in contact with various Italian officials, including representatives of the Fascist League of North America, during his stay in the United States, but he quickly learned that they were not forthcoming with the assistance he was after.

The Fascist League of North America was created in 1924 when Mussolini ordered Thaon di Revel to New York to organize the spontaneous Italian Fascist organizations that arose in America after the March on Rome in 1922. The Italian government itself was divided on the issue of these patriotic organizations; some eager Fascist officials in Rome wanted to control them and use them to advance Italy's interests abroad, while others, especially the Italian diplomats already working in the United States thought supporting Fascist organizations in America would do more harm than good.¹⁷¹ At first Mussolini's government refused to recognize them, but the former faction eventually won out, and the FLNA was born. Even after granting official sanction to these Italo-American Fascists, the Italian government remained divided on

¹⁷⁰ Fortunato Depero, *Un Futurista a New York*, (Perugia: Francesco Tozzuolo, 2017) 9, 29-31

¹⁷¹ Alan Cassels, "Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties," in *The American Historical Review*, Vol 69 April 1964. 711

them. Similarly, the American government was ambivalent, and, thinking that the FLNA could act as an anti-Communist force in the Italian community, allowed them to operate.¹⁷²

Depero was in contact with Thaon de Revel in the months after the Guarino exhibition. On March 12th the artist received a response to a letter he had written seven days earlier, in which the president of the FLNA invites him to visit the organization's headquarters and expresses a desire to visit Depero's studio.¹⁷³ Unfortunately, these contacts never generated any pecuniary upside for Depero, which appears to be what he was asking for.

In May, the secretary of the FLNA, Camillo Canali, wrote to Depero apparently in response to a request for support. The letter explains that the organization cannot offer the artist anything due to a lack of funds, and that it is using whatever money it has to send Italian-American children on vacations in Italy.¹⁷⁴ The lack of funds was another symptom of the ambivalence of the Italian government to the organization, which was shut down just five months later in November of 1929 after an article published *Harper's* accused it of anti-American activities.¹⁷⁵

The Italian Embassy in Washington was equally unwilling to lend a hand to Depero. After sending the ambassador a cushion as a gift, it was returned with a letter reminding him that

¹⁷² Alan Cassels, "Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties," in *The American Historical Review*, Vol 69 April 1964. 710

¹⁷³ Letter to Depero from Ignazio Thaon di Revel, March 12, 1929, Dep.3.1.17.25, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

¹⁷⁴ Letter to Depero from Camillo Canali, May 21, 1929, Dep.3.1.17.9, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

¹⁷⁵ Alan Cassels, "Fascism for Export: Italy and the United States in the Twenties," in *The American Historical Review*, Vol 69 April 1964. 711

Italian officials were not allowed to purchase decorations for the embassy even in a private capacity.¹⁷⁶

Depero's desire to "conquer the sympathy and backing of Italian diplomats in America"¹⁷⁷ can also be read in a short telegram sent to the general Italo Balbo, then traveling to New York himself, which reads "Un *alala* Fascista Futurista dal pittore Depero" [*a Fascist Futurist alala from the painter Depero*].¹⁷⁸ Depero uses the word *alala*, an ancient Greek war-cry — here as part of a phrase Gabriele D'Annunzio invented in 1917, "Eja Eja alala." D'Annunzio combined the Greek cry with a Sardinian expression, creating a phrase that became popular among the *arditi*, the Italian shock troops of World War One. Its popularity carried over into the Fascist period when the *arditi* were celebrated for their daring and dedicated service to their country.

Deploying the phrase and placing his identity as a Fascist ahead of his identity as Futurist in the telegram can be read as Depero subtly trying to ingratiate himself with a very powerful Fascist politician; one who might understand more than most the potential value of supporting a sympathetic Italian artist in the United States.

Italo Balbo would become very popular in America during the 1930s, celebrated for his impressive aeronautic feats. Flying across the Atlantic with a fleet of over thirty airplanes in 1933, Balbo was welcomed by millions of Italian Americans in Chicago and New York as a hero and awarded with a Distinguished Flying Cross by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1935.

¹⁷⁶ Depero Archive, MART Rovereto, Dep.3.1.18.11

¹⁷⁷ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: "Like a Giant Screen"* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 15.

¹⁷⁸ Telegram to Italo Balbo from Depero, 1928, Dep.3.1.17.11, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

¹⁷⁹ By then the Italian government was more interested in propagandizing abroad, but extravagant displays of industrial and military might seemed to do the job better than subsidies for little known Italian artists from the foothills of the Dolomites.¹⁸⁰ Even when the Italian government supported Italian art in America, it preferred a “moderate Mediterranean-looking type of modernism” to Futurism, which was relegated to be “side note” in the story of Italian art.¹⁸¹ In short, there were too many hurdles for Depero to clear if his evangelism in America was to be a government sponsored initiative. In any case, it was clear to Depero that he would have to find another way to both support himself and fulfill the mission he set out to accomplish an ocean away from his home.

Futurism for Sale: Depero in the service of American Consumption

Depero turned to the advertising industry as a way to earn a living in New York, but it was nothing new to him — he had been producing advertising art since at least 1920. His early advertising career was built on material promoting his own *Balli Plastici*, Futurist puppet theater shows. Depero was commissioned by various companies during the 1920s, including the porcelain manufacturer Richard Ginori and Giuseppe Verzocchi’s V&D, a major player in the brickmaking industry [Figs. 21, 22, 23].¹⁸² Verzocchi was a great patron and a believer in the connection between industry and the arts. His support for the arts reached a peak in 1950, when

¹⁷⁹ “SIGNS BALBO D.F.C. BILL; Roosevelt Acts to Honor Leader of Italian Flight,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1935

¹⁸⁰ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 14-15

¹⁸¹ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 15.

¹⁸² Giovanna Ginex, “Not Just Campari! Depero and Advertising,” in *Italian Modern Art*, Issue 1, 2019

he commissioned 72 Italian artists to paint whatever they wished — as long as they included one of his company's bricks in the composition. Depero created a painting for the exhibition, *Lathe on Frame*, which includes the prerequisite brick in the bottom right corner [Fig. 24].

Lathe on Frame depicts two mannequin-like workers laboring in a divided space. A woman, bathed in “an emerald light” inspects a thread at her loom while on the right, a man works at a lathe in a ruby colored room. The work is painted in a style reminiscent of Depero's ‘steel style,’ developed under the time of Fascism. In contrast with other Futurist styles that expressed dynamism by dematerializing their subjects, making them as lightweight as light itself, and showing them penetrating and passing through one another, the steel style rendered its subjects as solid, frozen, and with a “sculptural clarity.”¹⁸³ This style enabled Depero to depict figures with a sense of mechanical monumentality that made them appear strong. Beyond the figural, Depero's steel style environments are “crystallized” or “glacial,” built from straight and angular forms like the latest products of modern architecture. Even the light, passing through the skylight on the left and the window on the right, is given weight, transformed into a rectangular mass that travels onto the floor. The steel style gave Depero's art a heavier impact and a more solid feeling, suitable for images of labor under Fascism, both urban and rural. In the 20s and 30s Depero, influenced by the *strapaese* trend in Italian art, painted scenes of farmers and lumberjacks alongside the traditional Futurist mechanical themes.¹⁸⁴ While this 1949 was painted long after Depero's first stay in New York, it is relevant because it shows that he was able to

¹⁸³Giovanni Lista, “Futuro-Fascismo,” in *Futurist Depero 1913-1950*, ed. Manuel Fontan del Junco (Madrid: Fundacion Juan March, 2014) 338-340

¹⁸⁴ For more on Depero's *strapaese* influenced art, see Juan March Depero, “Futuro-Fascismo” by Giovanni Lista. For more on the Italian *strapaese* movement in general and the opposing theme of *stracitta*, see Braun, Emily. “Speaking Volumes: Giorgio Morandi's Still Lifes and the Cultural Politics of Strapaese.” *Modernism/modernity* 2, no. 3 (1995): 89-116.

cultivate long lasting relationships with business owners in Italy who appreciated his work — something he failed to do in New York.

Depero's advertisements for the V&D company emphasize the labor required to produce and to utilize the company's fire resistant bricks. In one, fire surrounds the brick, clearly marked with the V&D trademark. Three devils, constructed to look like Depero's theater puppets, stand underneath the brick, hoisting it up above their heads. This simple design represents the fire resistant quality of the V&D brick and its heft — three devils are required to lift it.

Another of Depero's V&D artworks shows two workers, again figures based on puppet designs, bringing their hammers down onto a stack of bricks. The arc of their swing is marked out with a bright pink and contains within it the company's logo. Another arrow emerges from the bricks being struck, gesturing towards their future use in skyward construction. Both of these artworks and *Lathe on Frame* represent labor alongside its product, in this case the V&D brick. The centrality of labor surrounding the product was something particularly appreciated by the patron Verzocchi. In an interview published in *Life* magazine on October 30, 1950, the brickmaker said of his upcoming show; "All I have I owe to work. I intend to build a monument to it through art."¹⁸⁵

Depero certainly understood advertising art as a sort of monument. In 1931 he wrote *Futurism and Advertising Art*, a manifesto that championed the advertisement as the medium of modernity and argued for its development. For Depero, advertising was a *gesamtkunstwerk* that permeated all manner of settings; "boldly placed on walls and the façades of big buildings, in shop-windows and trains, alongside pavements and streets, everywhere; someone even tried to

¹⁸⁵ "Speaking of Pictures," *Life*, October 30, 1950, 14.

project advertisements onto the clouds— living, multiplied art, not isolated and buried in museums.”¹⁸⁶ Advertising was dynamic, attention grabbing always responsive to the changing demands of the manufacturer and consumer.

Motion, that elusive force that the Futurists had been chasing in their artworks since 1910, was unavoidable in New York. The city was in a constant state of reconstitution, as he observed: “Se voi fotografate ciò che vedete dalla vostra finestra nel mese di maggio e poi rifate la fotografia dalla stessa finestra nel mese di ottobre, avrete due panorami diversi.” [*If you photographed what you saw from your window in May and then retook the photo from the same window in October, you would have two different panoramas*].¹⁸⁷ This phenomenon, the unbelievable rapidity at which the cityscape of New York was remade, was noticed by non-Futurist writers who responded with less enthusiasm than Depero.

The Italian critic and journalist Emilio Cecchi traveled throughout the United States and Mexico in the 1930s, and returned to Europe to publish his *America Amara* (Bitter America) in 1939. He had a much dimmer view of the modern architecture of New York than the Futurist Depero, but still could not deny their beauty. Like Depero, Cecchi was surprised by the speed at which the skyscrapers of New York had risen, as though there were a race to get as tall as possible; the Chanin building, finished in 1929 had 54 floors, the Chrysler finished year later with 77, passed by the Empire State building only a year later with 102.¹⁸⁸ Cecchi considered them symbols of American arrogance, poetically describing the skyscraper as “È il campanile senza campane d’una religione religione materialista, senza Dio” [*They are the belltowers*

¹⁸⁶ Fortunato Depero, “Futurism and Advertising Art,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 290

¹⁸⁷ Fortunato Depero, *Un Futurista a New York*, (Perugia: Francesco Tozzuolo, 2017) 37-38

¹⁸⁸ Emilio Cecchi, *America Amara*, (Padua: Franco Muzzio, 1995) 11

without bells of a materialist religion, without God].¹⁸⁹ For Cecchi, the skyscrapers and towers of New York were not revolutionary structures but another step in a dance ongoing since the dawn of civilization; “Caddero la torre di Babele, le moli di Ninive e di Babilonia; e cadranno i grattacieli” [*The tower of Babel fell, the great buildings of Nineveh and Babylon; and the skyscrapers will fall*].¹⁹⁰ Comparing Depero’s recollection and Cecchi’s, both of whom dedicate several pages to skyscrapers, it is striking how Cecchi sees in these buildings echoes of the past, while Depero describes them as revolutionary concepts reminiscent of the forces of nature; the way they resemble the Dolomites and pierce the clouds.¹⁹¹ While Cecchi remarks on the city’s lack of a single coherent architectural style, Depero can only breathlessly list the aspects of the skyscrapers that catch his eyes — their multitude of colors, abundance of shapes, and sheer size. For Depero, as for Andre Tridon writing almost two decades earlier, skyscrapers were Futurism in practice. On a New York postcard depicting the Times Building, built in 1904, Depero wrote “Futurismo!” in red colored pencil, and drew forceful lines and curves around it [Fig. 25]. On another of Depero’s postcards, this one depicting the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Depero wrote “distruggeremo i musei” [*we will destroy the museums*], demonstrating how dedicated he was to his Futurist mission [Fig. 26].

Cecchi has an interest in the social effects of this new architecture that is absent in Depero’s account. As before, Cecchi reached into the past, comparing the modern skyscraper to

¹⁸⁹ Emilio Cecchi, *America Amara*, (Padua: Franco Muzzio, 1995) 11

¹⁹⁰ Emilio Cecchi, *America Amara*, (Padua: Franco Muzzio, 1995) 13

¹⁹¹ Fortunato Depero, *Un Futurista a New York*, (Perugia: Francesco Tozzuolo, 2017) 38. It is true that Depero does invoke the image of Babel to describe New York, his writings on the city are far more forward looking than Cecchi, who invokes images of the past frequently. Depero’s invocation of the image of Babel may also have to do with the variety of languages spoken in the cosmopolitan city, a theme he depicted in art.

the castles of medieval Europe, owned by plutocrats who, in his view, simultaneously waged war against one another and against the people.¹⁹² Such a socially conscious approach appears not to have crossed Depero's mind.

Rather than question the construction of these skyscrapers and the beneficiaries of the economic success they symbolized, Depero seemed enamored by the cult of the industrial magnate. In *Futurism and Advertising Art*, he lauds "the captains of business who run powerful campaigns in order to publicize their battles, their labors on behalf of their own projects and products."¹⁹³ These great entrepreneurs are, according to Depero, on the front lines of the war for a new world, their genius inventions "increase the world's speed." The automaker and airplane manufacturer are especially celebrated, for they are the ones who "create and hurl forth mechanical furies mechanical sirens mechanical eagles. Furnished with precise and perfect dials, with wings and heaving lungs, capable of every sort of flight."¹⁹⁴ It is clear that Depero identifies with these corporate leaders, imagining them to be just like Marinetti and his Futurists, intent on changing the world and spreading technological modernity across the globe to remake humanity.

On this basis Depero proudly declares; "the art of the future will be largely advertising."¹⁹⁵ Citing the early Futurist painters like Boccioni who painted automobiles and electric lights, Depero argues that that Futurism is the perfect movement (perhaps the only one capable) to take on the mantle of the advertising art of tomorrow — he goes on to make it clear that it is the duty

¹⁹² Emilio Cecchi, *America Amara*, (Padua: Franco Muzzio, 1995) 11

¹⁹³ Fortunato Depero, "Futurism and Advertising Art," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 289

¹⁹⁴ Fortunato Depero, "Futurism and Advertising Art," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 289

¹⁹⁵ Fortunato Depero, "Futurism and Advertising Art," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 288

of every Futurist to “exalt the products and companies of our time, i.e. the prime factors in our life.” The problem with this new Futurist theory is obvious, and it was a problem Marinetti understood in the 1920s when he surrendered his utopian vision to the Fascist party.

In 1923 he wrote; “Fascism constitutes the realization of the minimum [Futurist] programme.”¹⁹⁶ As mentioned above, Marinetti and Mussolini might have had a lot in common ideologically in 1919, but Marinetti was, as it turned out, much more ambitious than Mussolini. As such, the alliance between the two was severely limiting for the Futurists, who were effectively restricted to working in service of the regime rather than pursuing the reconstruction of the universe they theorized. Fascism could deliver the minimum, but Marinetti admitted that the “maximum programme” was “not yet achieved” — and if he thought about it soberly, he might have realized that it never would be.

Turning back to Depero, it is clear that for Futurism to become the language of a modern universal advertising, it would have to have to leave behind all of its tenets that were unappealing to business leaders — a group not known for their revolutionary social aspirations. Like the Futurists, the great corporations of the 1920s (Depero names Ansaldo, FIAT, Marchetti Alfa Romeo, among others)¹⁹⁷ might share an affinity for mechanical marvels like airplanes and automobiles but would, through their patronage, necessarily control Futurism and limit it to activities that could produce profit. Just as the alliance with Facism rendered Futurism an art of status quo (at least in Italy), Depero’s oath of fealty to industrial corporations turned an

¹⁹⁶ Anne Bowler, “Italian Futurism and Fascism,” in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 20, no. 6, December 1991. 788

¹⁹⁷ Fortunato Depero, “Futurism and Advertising Art,” in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 289

avant-garde movement from one that unapologetically worked to further its own interests to one that served the material interests of shareholders and business leaders.

It is clear why Depero would make such an audacious, and perhaps rash, declaration about the Future of Futurist art. There was truth in the idea that business leaders and inventors were bringing exciting new technologies to the masses, increasing the speed at which modern life was lived. Emilio Cecchi wrote about Henry Ford and ‘Fordism’ during his travels in America, and while he does not hesitate to criticize some aspects of Ford’s business, there is a palpable awe in the way he describes Ford's achievements.¹⁹⁸ Reading Cecchi’s account, it would not be difficult to understand Henry Ford as a kind of Futurist genius, single handedly growing his automotive empire on the basis of rational production principles on a grand scale, a radically new kind of businessman taking over from the outdated Rockefellers and Carnegies of the 19th century. This kind of viewpoint was not uncommon in Italy, where America was envied for its mechanical inventions and industrial capabilities. Americanism was, in many ways, synonymous with modernity for Italian thinkers of the time, whether they were Fascist or not.¹⁹⁹

It might also have been the Italian government’s ambivalence towards his artistic project that motivated Depero to celebrate and seek support from business leaders. When Depero discovered that the government would not subsidize his trip across the Atlantic in 1929, he was saved by the generosity of Benvenuto Ottolenghi, an old friend and entrepreneur who lived near the city. It was Ottolenghi that opened “la porta alla mia speranze” [*the door to my dreams*],

¹⁹⁸ Emilio Cecchi, *America Amara*, (Padua: Franco Muzzio, 1995) 19-22

¹⁹⁹ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 19

according to Depero's 1940 autobiography.²⁰⁰ In the same passage, Depero dedicates his departure for America to Ottolenghi, and in 1932 Depero dedicated his *Saggio Futurista* (a short collection of his work) to him [Fig. 27]. As discussed above, Depero was always attentive to money, and seemed to always be struggling to acquire enough of it to survive. Working in advertising and maintaining relationships with business leaders was one of the ways Depero tried to support himself; even in *Futurism and Advertising Art* Depero made sure to mention that advertising art was: "unavoidably modern, unavoidably bold, *unavoidably paid for...*" (emphasis added).²⁰¹ If the Italian government could not be counted upon to support the Futurist project, maybe private benefactors would.

Futurism as an artistic language for Mussolini's regime began to coexist with Futurism as a language used to sell soda, among other consumer goods. Much has been written already about Depero's famous relationship with Davide Campari, which began around 1926 and continued for a decade, but reading the pages of the Campari Gallery's own art journal, we can gain an insight into how the company understood the Futurist art it was paying Depero to produce for them.

Describing the art in Depero's famous Bolted Book of 1927, the Campari journal says "through its sublime expressive power it projects the traveler through the underground tunnel of the Future along with Campari."²⁰² This quote establishes the tension between the broader goals of Futurism and the narrow goal of the modern corporation — the genius of Futurist art is

²⁰⁰ Fortunato Depero, *Fortunato Depero Nelle Opere e Nella Vita*, (Trento: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940) 277

²⁰¹ Fortunato Depero, "Futurism and Advertising Art," in *Futurism: an Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 290

²⁰² Serena Spinelli, "Campari; The Game of Letters," in *Campari Gallery Art Journal #14*, 2020, 8

celebrated for its ability to project its audience into the future, *as long as the audience can take their soda with them.*

It is with pride that the journal recounts the story of Depero and Davide Campari's working relationship, emphasizing the revolutionary aesthetics of Depero and Bruno Munari — another Futurist-associated artist who worked for the company. In another section, the Campari journal explains why Depero and other Futurists would be drawn to the medium of advertising, saying; “the Futurists were not merely aiming to stimulate the creativity of an elite. On the contrary they fully intended to reach a mass audience by merging art with day-to-day life.”²⁰³ Everything said is true, but it is interesting what is left unsaid — that Campari too intended to reach a mass audience, to sell as much of his product as possible. Sentences like the one above frame the relationship between Futurism and advertising as only one in which the medium of advertising was explored by avant-garde artists seeking to push boundaries, rather than one where companies like Campari traded on the aesthetic value of Futurist art to appear modern and sell soda.

There is no doubt that Depero was a believer in the artistic potential of advertising, and his time in New York had a great influence on his work. It was his experience in the city that led him to believe that painting would not work in urban environments, and that decorative and advertising arts were the way forward.²⁰⁴ While working in the United States, Depero drew dozens of sketches for advertisements and magazine covers, some of which were used and many of which were rejected for a number of reasons. His notable successes included covers for *Movie*

²⁰³Serena Spinelli, “Campari; The Game of Letters,” in *Campari Gallery Art Journal #14*, 2020, 8

²⁰⁴ Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 22-24

Makers and *Vanity Fair* [Figs. 28, 29], which have been analyzed elsewhere in detail, but it is more interesting to look at the many designs that failed to appeal to American businesses, and consider what made them unappealing to the advertisers of the late 1920s.²⁰⁵

For example, in early 1929 Depero began correspondence with the American Lead Pencil Company, based in Hoboken, New Jersey. Depero asked the company, which sold pencils under the brand name “Venus Pencils,” to send examples of their advertisements [Fig. 30] to him so he could begin work on sketches for prospective pencil advertisements.²⁰⁶ This would have seemed to Depero a perfect opportunity, as he had made several designs that centered pencils in 1926, for use on postcards [Figs. 31, 32, 33].

The advertising proposals he drew for Venus were varied, but they share some common design elements that are worth remarking on. Most strikingly, these designs monumentalize the pencil and graft it onto the image of the city. In one sketch, the pencil appears to penetrate a grid-like building that appears to be leaning away from the ground. Two other identical pencils, riven with bark-like cracks (a pattern taken from the first of the samples sent to Depero from Venus) loom over the scene [Fig. 34]. From the tops of the pencil-towers, ribbon-like curves connect the figures to one another and swirl to the ground. Underneath, text reading “Venus Pencils” decorated to look like the cracked pencil towers reveal the purpose of the design. Two things that stand out from this sketch are, first, the way Depero marries the product and the city, inscribing one onto the other until they are difficult to distinguish. Depero deployed the same style in the 1930s for Campari advertisements made after his return to Italy [Fig. 35]. In these

²⁰⁵ For a complete view of Depero’s advertisement production in New York, see Maurizio Scudiero and David Leiber, *Depero Futurista & New York* (Longo Editions, 1986).

²⁰⁶ Letter to Depero from American Lead Pencil Company, March 26, 1929, Dep.3.1.18.7, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

designs, the advertising space (the space invented by Depero) is totally integrated into the city space in which the consumers live.

Second, there is the dramatic spiraling curl on the right side of the composition, which suggests motion. The use of curves in an otherwise rectilinear design was one way Depero evoked motion in his 'steel style' paintings, and it was a technique used in other advertising materials in the same year. A Campari ad from the same year by the artist Marcello Nizzoli used a similar visual language to convey the movement of a speeding car on a sweltering day [Fig. 36]. In this Futurist-inspired advertisement, the product is positioned as the best way to finish a long car ride on a hot day. Naturally for a Futurist composition, it is the automobile and its swirling movements that take center stage, the beverage is only indicated visually by a pair of glasses in the bottom right corner.

In another design, the monumental pencil is placed in the center of the frame, between the words "Venus" and "Pencils" [Fig. 37]. The pencil, again decorated with the same pattern, is pointed downwards, hitting the center of a bullseye. The scene evokes the sight of a bomb crashing onto the city, hitting its target, a flared triangle shoots out of the bottom of the bullseye, suggesting the force of the impact. Two buildings are shunted to either side of the pencil, as though its power rocked their foundations and caused them to lean over. On the sides of the buildings are arrows pointed upwards, again indicating the force emanating from the tip of the pencil and shooting outwards. This advertisement represents a near perfect synthesis of Futurist advertisement and Futurist theory; the pencil, instrument of creative production is transformed into a weapon, striking its target with perfect precision, displacing buildings and destroying

cities. Armed with the pencil, the ad seems to say, the artist becomes the avatar of creative destruction, capable of remaking the world with a flick of their wrist.

Depero's other advertisements feature similar motifs, the pencils arranged in architectural compositions resembling the city. In one, the tower-like pencils peer out from behind a pyramid and appear to have lights shining from their spires, like the actual skyscrapers whose lights captured Depero's fascination in New York [Fig. 38]. In these advertisements, the product as such is almost absent, Depero opts not to show any person holding the pencil, and he also does not include any information about the pencil beyond its image.

There are very few similarities between the Venus pencil advertisement samples Depero received on March 26, and the sketches he made for Venus in the following year. The Venus ads Depero was sent are conventional, featuring images of the products alongside text describing them. In these ads, it is the word rather than the image that carries the most narrative force. Rather than draw the pencil as a skyscraper sized monument to the creative potential of its use, the Venus copywriters write things like "Perfect for every drawing and writing purpose — providing pencil luxury and economy" and "for Stenographers." These plain, prosaic phrases were designed to appeal to the "modern, rational consumer."²⁰⁷ This was the traditional structure of American advertisements, sold by big advertising agencies, which "stressed the ways in which products could help their uses achieve a successful presentation of self in everyday life." From this focus on the practical came the most common type of images found in these advertisements, which were realistic and depicted "everyday life situations."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁷Adam Arvidsson, "Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy," *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 152

²⁰⁸Adam Arvidsson, "Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy," *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 152

This type of advertising language would have been more or less foreign to Depero when he arrived in New York at the end of 1928. It would not be until the 1930s that large advertising agencies opened in Italy, all of which were started by men who had worked in the United States before, and brought the American style ad with them.²⁰⁹ For Futurist artists like Depero, who believed advertising could help bring about a new, modern, mentality, the image was far more important than the text. According to them, “the Futurist advertising aesthetic would exalt the virtues of objects rather than try to educate consumers.”²¹⁰ The psychological basis for the effectiveness of this kind of advertising came from Gustave Le Bon’s crowd psychology (the same source for Marinetti’s political understanding of the crowd, as discussed in Part Two of this paper). Rooted in an understanding of the masses in which “public space turned individuals into a crowd” and effectively suspended their individuality and reason, it became the work of the ad man to “create an illustration that can penetrate the perceptive field of the passer-by, stimulate his passive attention and, by virtue of its very shape, give rise to a thought in his mind that is directly connected to the object to which the ad refers.”²¹¹ In this 1925 quote from the Italian poster artist Guido Cassi can be understood the difference between the advertising culture Depero was trained in, and the one he stepped into when he arrived in New York in 1928. In the United States the word was king, and advertisers used rhetoric to appeal to the reason and emotions of the individual consumer. On the other side of the Atlantic, it was the advertising artist's job to create compelling and interesting images that would linger in the subconscious

²⁰⁹Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 170

²¹⁰Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 162

²¹¹ Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 168

mind of individuals whose individuality was temporarily suppressed in favor of their identity as a member of crowd — suggestible and prone to imitate what they saw in those around them. With this context, it is easy to see why Depero, who had mastered the art of advertising in Italy, had so much trouble selling his work in America. In some ways, it appears Depero was doomed to fail — after all, how could a man who did not speak English succeed in an advertising culture so dominated by the written word?

Words were used in Depero’s ads and the advertising designs of other Futurists, but they were used in a decidedly different way than the Americans did. Their use of text was based on Marinetti’s words in freedom poetry, a renunciation of the rules of syntax developed in the years following the birth of Futurism in 1909 and made famous in his book *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1912). Looking at the examples published by the Campari Gallery again, we can see how this deployment of letters works in conjunction with the artwork to create a memorable aesthetic sensation rather than make a persuasive argument in favor of the product.

Marinetti argued for his words in freedom by saying that “the relationship between the public and the poet must be the same as the rapport between two old friends. They are capable of explaining themselves with a few words, a gesture, a wink.”²¹² The Campari Gallery journal shamelessly takes this formulation and adds: “one need only substitute ‘poet’ with ‘industrialist’ and the relation between Campari and the efficient Futurist communication would be clearly established.”²¹³ Suddenly Marinetti’s raging against the boundaries of language is reframed as an “efficient” way for marketers to move as much product as possible. Depero, ever enthusiastic to

²¹² This phrase comes from Marinetti’s *Destruction—Untrammelled Imagination—Words-in-Freedom*. Published in the Futurist journal *Lacerba* on June 15, 1913.

²¹³ Serena Spinelli, “Campari; The Game of Letters,” in *Campari Gallery Art Journal #14*, 2020, 25

bring to bear all his creativity for the medium of advertising, proved that he was capable of using typography to great effect in his compositions.

In one composition by Depero, entitled *Palestra Tipografica* [Typographic Gym] [Fig. 39], the letters that spell “Campari” are brought to life as “jugglers pumping their muscles with alphabet weights.”²¹⁴ Here again the product as such is absent, the name of the company appears but is incorporated into the composition — in fact the name is used as the basis for the entire design. No text appears underneath explaining how refreshing or delicious the beverage being sold is, but the ad does convey the joy and energy of the Campari drinker, the unseriousness of the art itself is a sign that drinking Campari is a fun, low stakes endeavor. These advertisements lacking descriptive words paradoxically do more with less, revealing Depero’s high level understanding of the power of signs and symbols to communicate ideas.

In another advertisement for Campari called *Paesaggio quasi tipografico* [Almost typographic landscape] [Fig. 40], Depero features the name of the brand five times while turning the words into a tropical environment decorated with bottles and palm trees. As before, there are no written explanations of what Campari is or why a consumer would want it, but the theory of crowd psychology developed by Le Bon and embraced by Marinetti and his followers required no such things. Attention grabbing visuals and the repeated representation of the Campari name was enough, in the Italian advertisers view, to “condition” consumers from the outside, putting new “needs, desires, and habits” into their heads, prompting them to buy the drink at the next available opportunity. The objective was to “make the name of a large manufacturer penetrate the

²¹⁴ Serena Spinelli, “Campari; The Game of Letters,” in *Campari Gallery Art Journal #14*, 2020, 12

brains of a million men.”²¹⁵ Unfortunately for Depero, he would find the walls of the American advertising industry more or less impenetrable.

In December, the American Lead Pencil Company sent Depero a letter informing him that they would not pay for any more advertisement sketches beyond the first two the artist made for them.²¹⁶ Other letters in Depero’s archive from earlier that year reveal how ambivalent American companies were about his artwork. Letters from the publishing houses Little, Brown and & Co. and William Edwin Rudge Inc. informed him that they would not be buying his work.²¹⁷ The department store Macy’s was kinder in their wording, but told Depero that it was very unlikely he would be hired to design for the Thanksgiving Day Parade.²¹⁸ Depero also failed to have his cover designs for the *New Yorker* published (although he did succeed in making two covers for *Vanity Fair*). In a letter suggestive of the fact that the American advertising industry at large was not enthusiastic about his work, a representative of William Edwin Rudge Inc. explains that he tried to have Depero’s work published in a Boston advertising journal, but was unable to. Ending with kindness, the representative says that Depero’s work is “brilliant and extraordinary” and that if it had been published, it “surely would have brought you [Depero] orders.”²¹⁹ The Boston advertisers were aligned with their counterparts at the Advertising Club of New York,

²¹⁵ Adam Arvidsson, “Between Fascism and the American Dream: Advertising in Interwar Italy,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 2001. 166-167

²¹⁶ Letter to Depero from American Lead Pencil Company, December 9, 1929, Dep.3.1.22.18, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

²¹⁷ Letter to Depero from Little, Brown & Co., August 27, 1929, Dep.3.1.19.4, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto and Letter to Depero from Printing House of William Edwin Rudge, August 22, 1929, Dep.3.1.19.2, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

²¹⁸ Letter to Depero from R.H. Macy & Co., October 28, 1929, Dep.3.1.20.31, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

²¹⁹ Letter to Depero from Printing House of William Edwin Rudge., October 3, 1929, Dep.3.1.20.6, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

who turned down a meeting with Depero about three weeks later.²²⁰ This long list of rejections caused Depero to struggle financially, and has led modern scholars like Raffaele Bedarida to characterize Depero's first stay in New York (1928-1930) as “unsuccessful.”²²¹

In the decades after his death in 1960, Depero began to be recognized as the genius that he was, and people began trying to explain his failure. Raffaele Bedarida points out that his was simply a case of poor timing, that if he had come to New York a few years later, he might have found the Italian government more willing to support his cause.²²² Another way Depero's timing did not serve him well was that the Great Depression began soon after he arrived in America, and the economic downturn probably prevented him from selling more of his art.²²³

As real as these influences on Depero's success were, this chapter has shown that there were fundamental incongruities between the Italian advertising tradition that Depero knew, and the American advertising model that his potential customers expected from him. It seems likely that even if he had come to New York in the 1930s rather than in 1928, this factor alone would have limited his reach in the American advertising market.

Through an analysis of Depero's experience, we can see from another angle why Futurism at large was unable to gain ground in the United States. During the 1920s and 30s, Futurism was made to serve the interests of the Italian state and Italian companies, but it was unable to find any such patronage in America. Without this financial and social support from

²²⁰ Letter to Depero from Advertising Club of New York, October 21, 1929, Dep.3.1.20.29, Fortunato Depero Archive, MART Rovereto.

²²¹Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 12, 17

²²²Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (New York: Routledge, 2022) 14

²²³ Rita Reif, “Posters and Toys: Back to a Futurist,” *New York Times*, June 13, 1999

outside, the movement could not grow in America, because there had been no groundwork laid there by the first generation of Futurists, who themselves failed to make themselves known there. At the same time, the Italian government that saw the utility of offering some support to Futurism in its own country had no reason to support its growth abroad, leaving Depero effectively alone in his quest to evangelize Futurist ideology across the Atlantic.

Conclusion

“...the artist must create, this being his most important task; a work of art always speaks for itself, but it has also its own special language which one must know in order to understand. To create, in art, means to produce something personal, some interpretation as yet unknown, something exempt from plagiarism and assimilation. These interpretations, therefore, need illustration and perfecting.” - Fortunato Depero, *So I Think, So I Paint*, 1947

The history of Italian Futurism in the United States is a living one. Exhibitions like The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s retrospective of Boccioni (1988), the Guggenheim’s grand exhibition *Italian Futurism, 1909-1944* (2014), and *From Depero to Rotella: Italian Commercial Posters Between Advertising and Art* at the Center for Italian Modern Art — still ongoing at the time of writing — collectively demonstrate the continued interest in Futurism in the United States. While academic interest in the movement, even in its second phase, has remained high in recent years, comprehensive studies of Futurism in America are still rare. This discrepancy is, in my view, in part due to the difficulty of studying absences in art history — in other words, it is easier to study Futurism where it succeeded than where it failed to develop.

In this project I have relied on archival sources and other records of events in New York to help reconstruct the factors that may have prevented Futurism from entering America the way other avant-gardes did during the same time. These factors were both structural and contingent. The technology of the day made it difficult for good reproductions of Futurist artworks to appear in newspapers in New York, and this was unavoidable. This made it difficult for Americans to understand a movement that had a holistic utopian mission, but one that was primarily aesthetic, and relied on the art and performances of its adherents to succeed.

What was avoidable was the absence of Futurist art at the Armory Show of 1913. The murky circumstances leading to the Futurists dropping out after having agreed to participate may

not be fully understood, but the consequences are clear. Modern art finally had the eyes of the American public and caused an explosion of discourse in which Futurism was misunderstood or excluded entirely. Here we can see how the choices of individual actors affected the impact of the movement in America.

A more complicated constellation of factors can be read in the story of Fortunato Depero, who tried his best to extoll the virtues of Futurism in New York City, but was constrained by forces beyond his control. He was unsupported by the Italian government, and was forced to find an income that would allow him and his wife to survive. Whether Depero's lack of success was primarily caused by individual failings on his part, or larger factors he could not account for, is unclear. He was perhaps overconfident to come to America without knowing how to speak English and he overestimated the support he would receive from the government, but on the other hand he was likely unaware of the profound differences between the advertising culture in New York and that in Italy.

The example of advertising culture is just one part of a larger discrepancy between American modernity and Italian modernity that made it difficult for Futurism to translate across the Atlantic. Even the earliest American commentators on Futurism recognized this, observing that Europeans had a much longer history weighing down upon them than Americans did, so a movement to overturn the past would have no impetus in the Western Hemisphere.²²⁴ American modern artists of the time, especially Stieglitz and his New York based circle, were not struggling to build a new art opposed to the past, but working to develop an American modern independent from Europe. Their mission was to make New York an artistic center in its own

²²⁴ "Le Futurisme et la Presse Internationale," *Poesia* April-July 1909, 24

right, rather than just a follower of Parisian trends — as Stieglitz himself said: “America without that damned French flavor.”²²⁵ The desire for an American modernity in art, a “Great American Thing” as Georgia O’Keeffe called it, built through exchange with Europe but apart from it, posed a challenge to a European movement like Futurism, which had its own goals already articulated in Italy. America had no great history to raze, its forward-looking artists were already building modernity without the need for Marinetti’s violent rhetoric and promotion of a cleansing war. As discussed in the previous chapters, Marinetti’s Futurism may have been too specific to an Italian context to interest Americans in large numbers.

A further study in this field should more fully consider the development of an American modernity that was happening during the time of the First Futurism. Such an examination would reveal even more differences between the dynamic, mechanical, and Italophilic vision of the future proposed by Marinetti and the artistic movements developing in New York. Even more crucially however, an in depth analysis of the kind described above would likely reveal some unexpected similarities between Futurism and the nascent American modernism of the machine age, and increase our understanding of the active international exchange of that time.

These connections existed, but are often overlooked because they were made by figures on the margin. For example, the British poet Mina Loy wrote a poem called “Aphorisms on Futurism” in Stieglitz’s magazine *Camera Work* in 1914,²²⁶ and Loy had a close relationship with the American artist Frances Simpson Stevens, herself a close associate of Marinetti.²²⁷ These relationships are not well known, and future studies using archival research have the potential to

²²⁵ Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 3

²²⁶ Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism,” in *Camera Work*, January 1914, 45.

²²⁷ Francis M. Nauman, “A Lost American Futurist,” in *Art in America*, April 1994, 104-141

shed light on unappreciated artists like Stevens and the connections between American modernism and Futurism in general.

This study has been, in large part, a study of characters. Fortunato Depero, Walter Pach, Gino Severini, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Andrew Tridon — all of them affected the way Futurism was felt and understood an ocean away from its birthplace. After reading this project, I hope it is clear why searching the archives and telling their stories is an effective way to enter into the past and reconstruct events and their consequences. Personal narratives are compelling, and the story of Futurism is full of colorful and interesting characters, all of whom could have been the singular focus of this project. It must be acknowledged, however, that relying on personal narratives has the potential to exclude and obscure as much as it reveals. People on the margins, the aforementioned Frances Stevens, Athos Casarini, James Daugherty, and others, are important pieces in the puzzle that is Futurism in America. It is my hope that this project can be one more node in a series of studies of these connections that began with John Hand's 1967 MA thesis and will continue in the future.

Images



Fig. 2) Fig. 1 Detail



Fig. 3) *Sea = Dancer*, Gino Severini, 1914



Fig. 4) *Primordial Chaos No. 16*, Hilma af Klint 1907

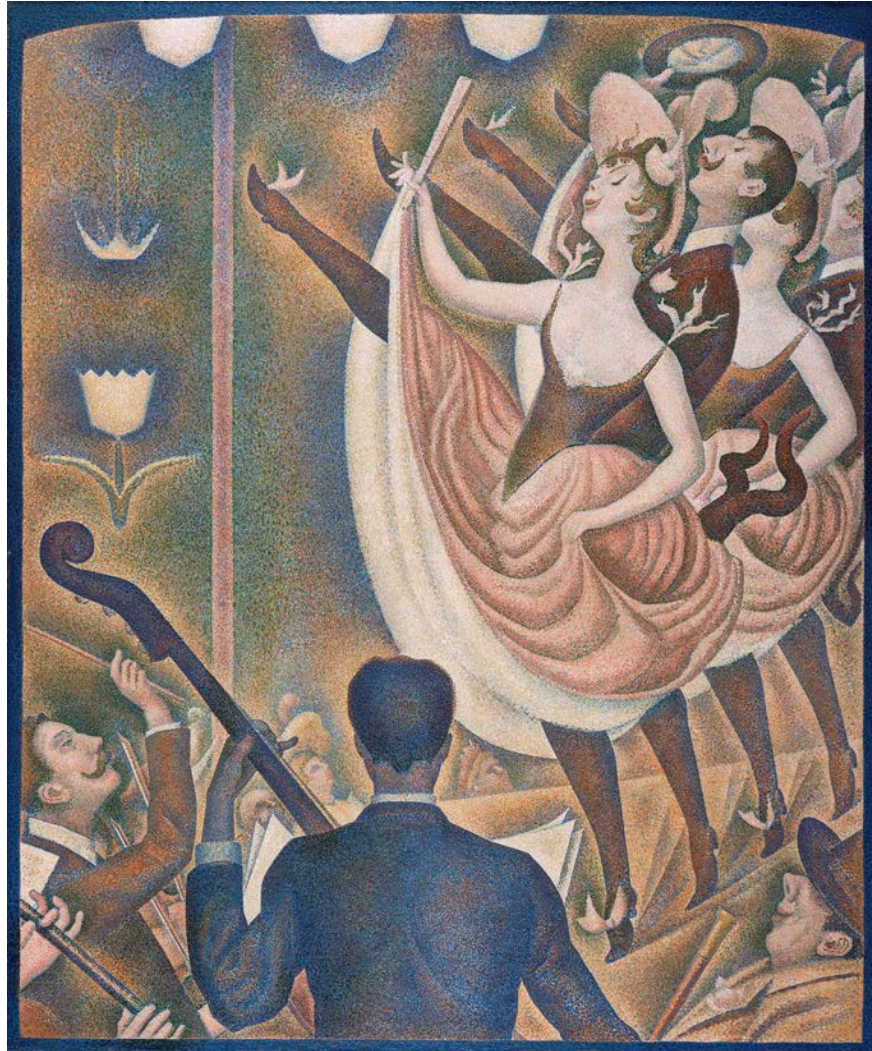


Fig 5) *Le Chahut*, Georges Seurat, 1890

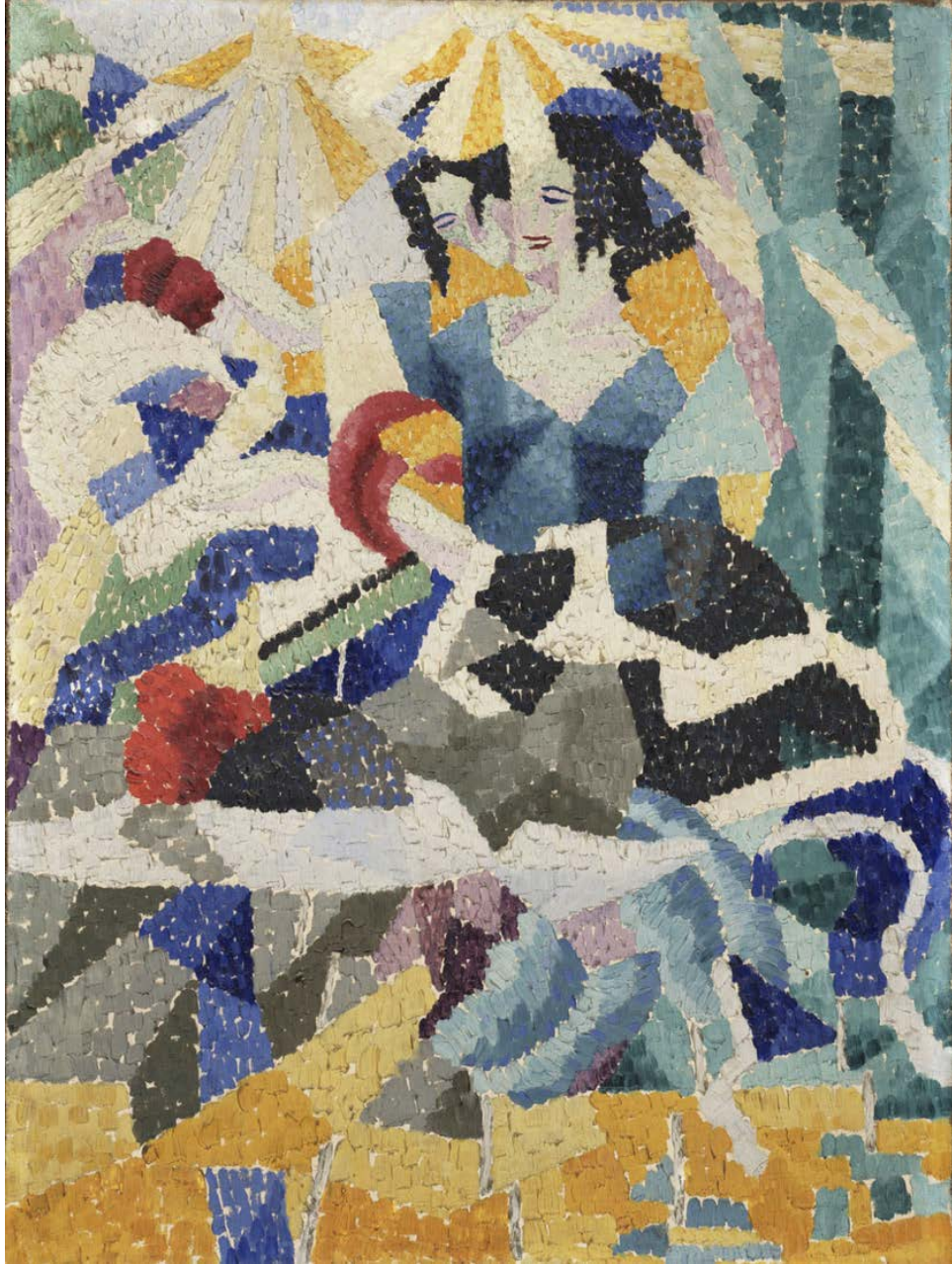


Fig. 6) *La Modiste*, Gino Severini, 1910-1911



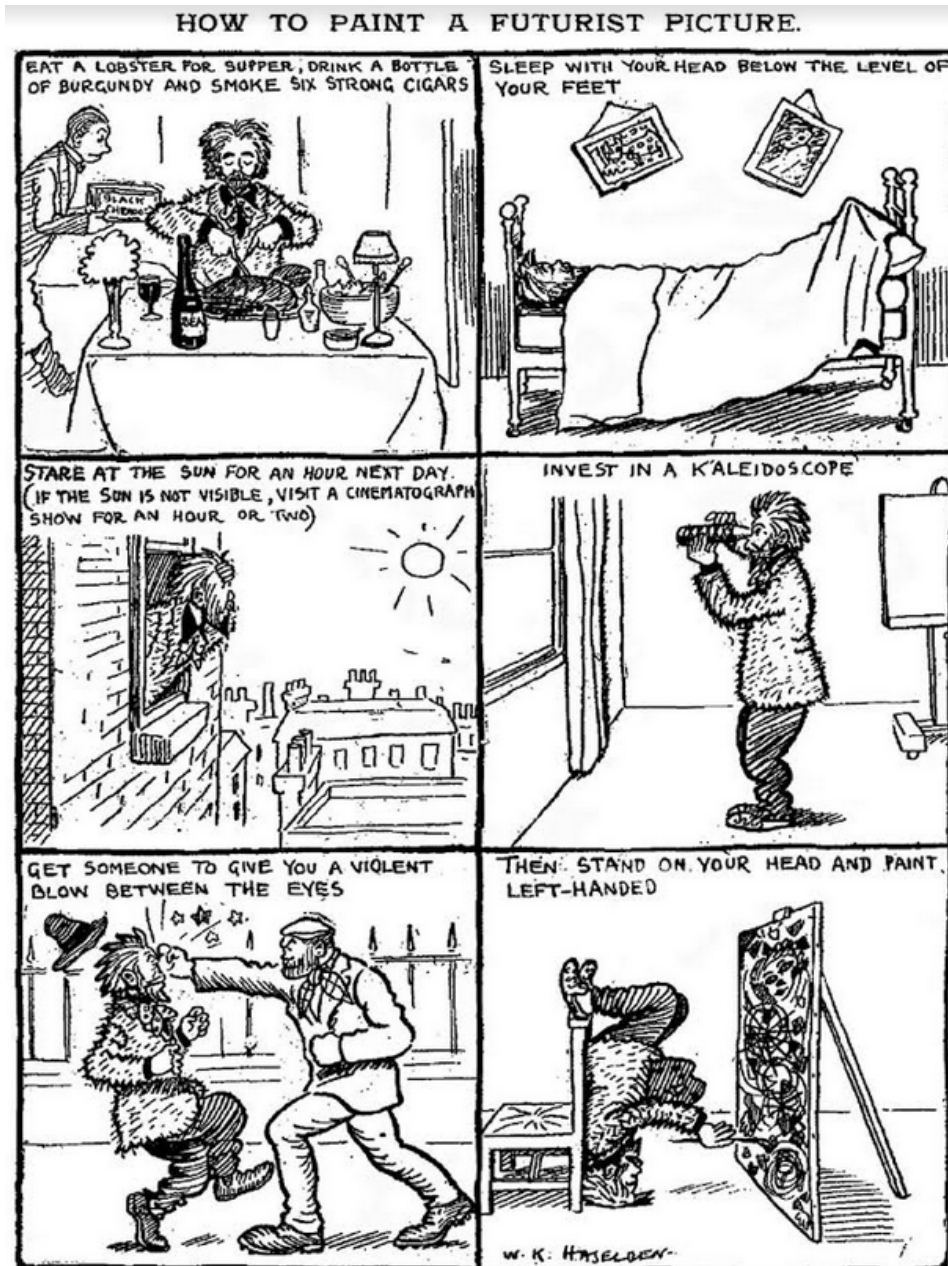
Fig. 7) *Les Adieux*, Umberto Boccioni, 1911



Fig. 8) *The Funeral of the Anarchist Galli*, Carlo Carrà, 1910-1911



Fig. 9) *The Revolt*, Luigi Russolo, 1911



Futurist pictures are a disordered mass of straggling flats and cubes. Presumably they are painted from some such inspiration as follows from partial blindness, indigestion, and sick headache.

Fig. 10) "How to paint a Futurist Picture," *Daily Mirror*, March 15, 1912



Fig. 11) *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras*, Joseph Stella, 1913-1914



Fig. 12) *The Dance of the Pan Pan at the Monico*, Gino Severini, 1959 (1911 original destroyed)



Fig. 13) *The Procession, Seville*, Francis Picabia, 13

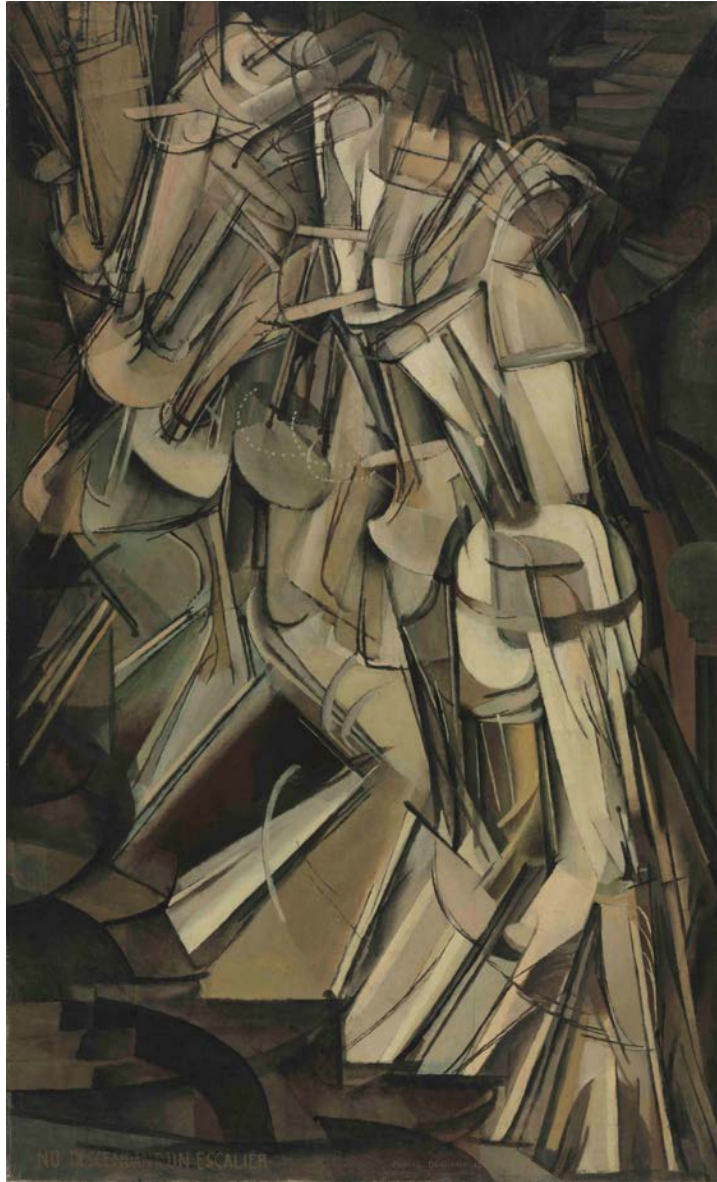


Fig. 14) *Nude Descending a Staircase no. 2*, Marcel Duchamp, 1912



Fig. 15) *Girl with a Mandolin*, Pablo Picasso, 1910



Fig. 16) *La Femme au Cheval*, Jean Metzinger, 1911-1912



Fig. 17) *Elasticity*, Umberto Boccioni, 1912



Fig. 18) *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, Giacomo Balla, 1912



Fig. 19) "Here She Is: White Outline Shows 'Nude Descending Staircase,' *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1913

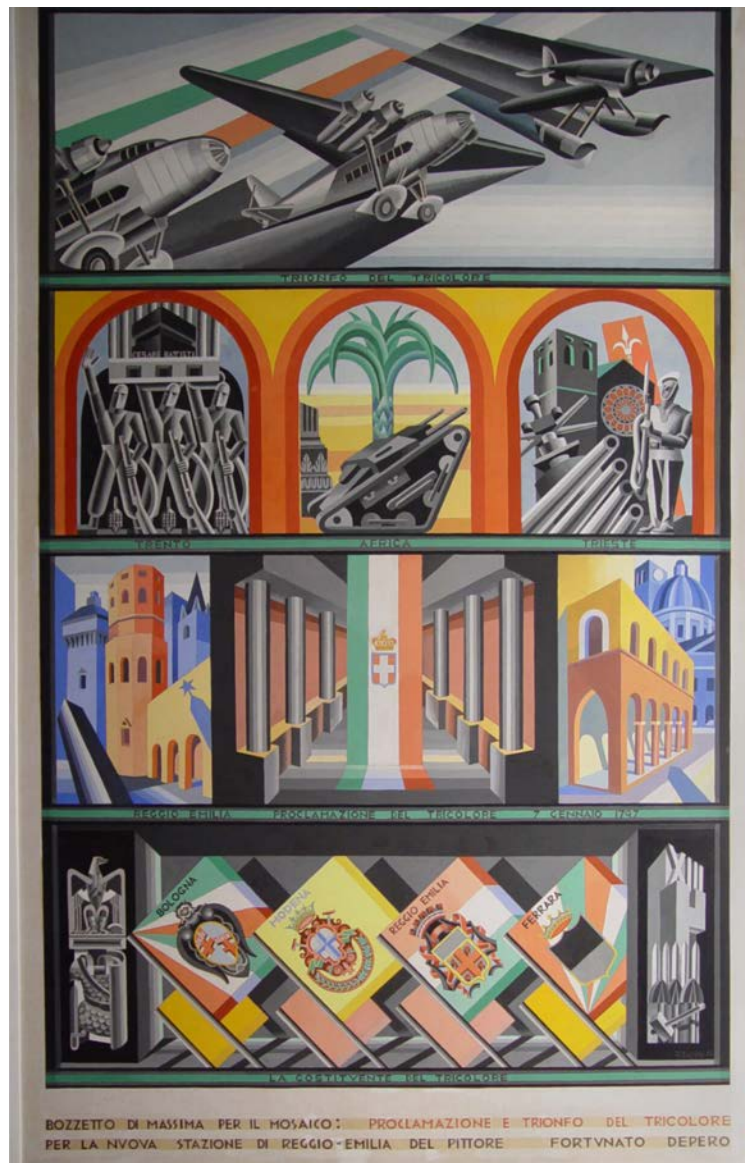
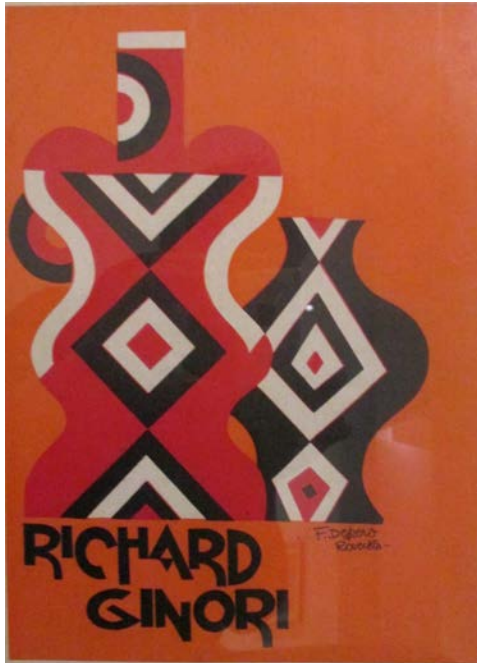


Fig. 20) *Proclamazione e Trionfo del Tricolore*, Fortunato Depero, 1935



Above: Fig. 21) Commission for Richard Ginori, Fortunato Depero, 1924

Below: Figs. 22, 23) Illustrations for *Veni. VD. Vici.*, Fortunato Depero, 1924





Fig. 24) *Lathe on Frame*, Fortunato Depero, 1949



Fig. 25) Postcard with Depero's writing, 1929



Fig. 26) Postcard with Depero's writing, 1929

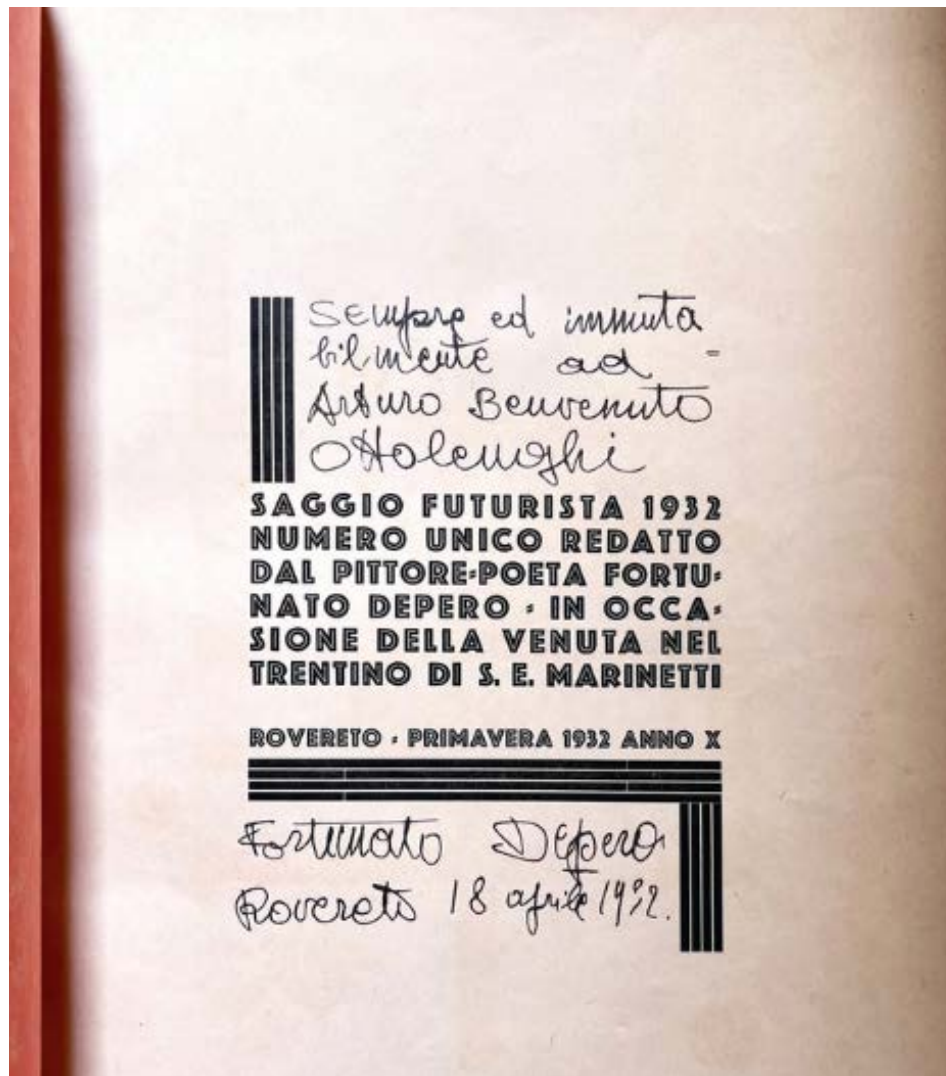


Fig. 27) *Saggio Futurista 1932* title page, Fortunato Depero, 1932.

“Always and immutably to Arturo Benvenuto Ottolenghi”



Left: Fig. 28) Cover for *Movie Makers*, Fortunato Depero, 1929

Right: Fig. 29) Cover for *Vanity Fair*, Fortunato Depero, 1930

Leading Products of American Lead Pencil Co.

VENUS PENCILS

The largest selling quality pencil in the world.

Perfect for every drawing and writing purpose—providing pencil luxury and economy.



17
Black Degrees

No. 3800—Plain Ends
No. 3820—Tip and Rubber

for Stenographers

VENUS PENCIL

No. 3822

Two Ready Points and a Metal Point Protector

Soft, smooth, long lasting lead. Ideal for shorthand.



VENUS COPYING PENCILS

Unequaled for silky smoothness and durability of the lead. Write black and copy an indelible purple.

No. 165—Medium
No. 168—Hard
No. 214—Super Copying
and 20 other styles.



VENUS ERASERS

The first eraser of its kind made in America and still the best.

12 sizes for Pencil erasure,
1 size for ink.



UNIQUE THIN COLORED PENCIL

Makes fine lines for Figuring, Checking, Underscoring, Blueprints, etc.

Useful to everyone



Blue	Purple	Pink
Red	Brown	Lt. Blue
Green	Orange	Lt. Green
White	Yellow	Maroon

Blue Band VELVET PENCILS

The Best medium-priced Pencil in the world

Soft, smooth, durable lead.

No. 556-1—Very Soft No. 558-1—Hard
No. 557-2—Soft No. 561-4—Very Hard
No. 557-2 3/5—Medium



VENUS THIN LEADS

For all metal pencils

The same marvelous quality of lead that has made VENUS the world's most famous pencil.

7 Degrees—BB - B - HB - F - H - 2H - 4H
No. 38—For Pencils taking 1 1/16" lead
No. 39—" " " " 5/16" lead





No. 3830—VENUS Pencil with Oversize Rubber. The final touch to the finest pencil.
Enough rubber to outlast the life of the long-lasting VENUS Pencil.

Trade marks registered in U. S. A. and foreign countries. Copyrighted, American Lead Pencil Co. K.

Fig. 30) Sample Advertising Material, American Lead Pencil Company, 1929

From Top to Bottom: Fig. 31) *Uomo-matita* [Pencil-man], Fortunato Depero, 1926/1929

Fig. 32) *Cavallo-matita* [Pencil-horse], Fortunato Depero, 1926

Fig. 33) *Fabbrica e matite* [Factory and pencils], Fortunato Depero, 1926



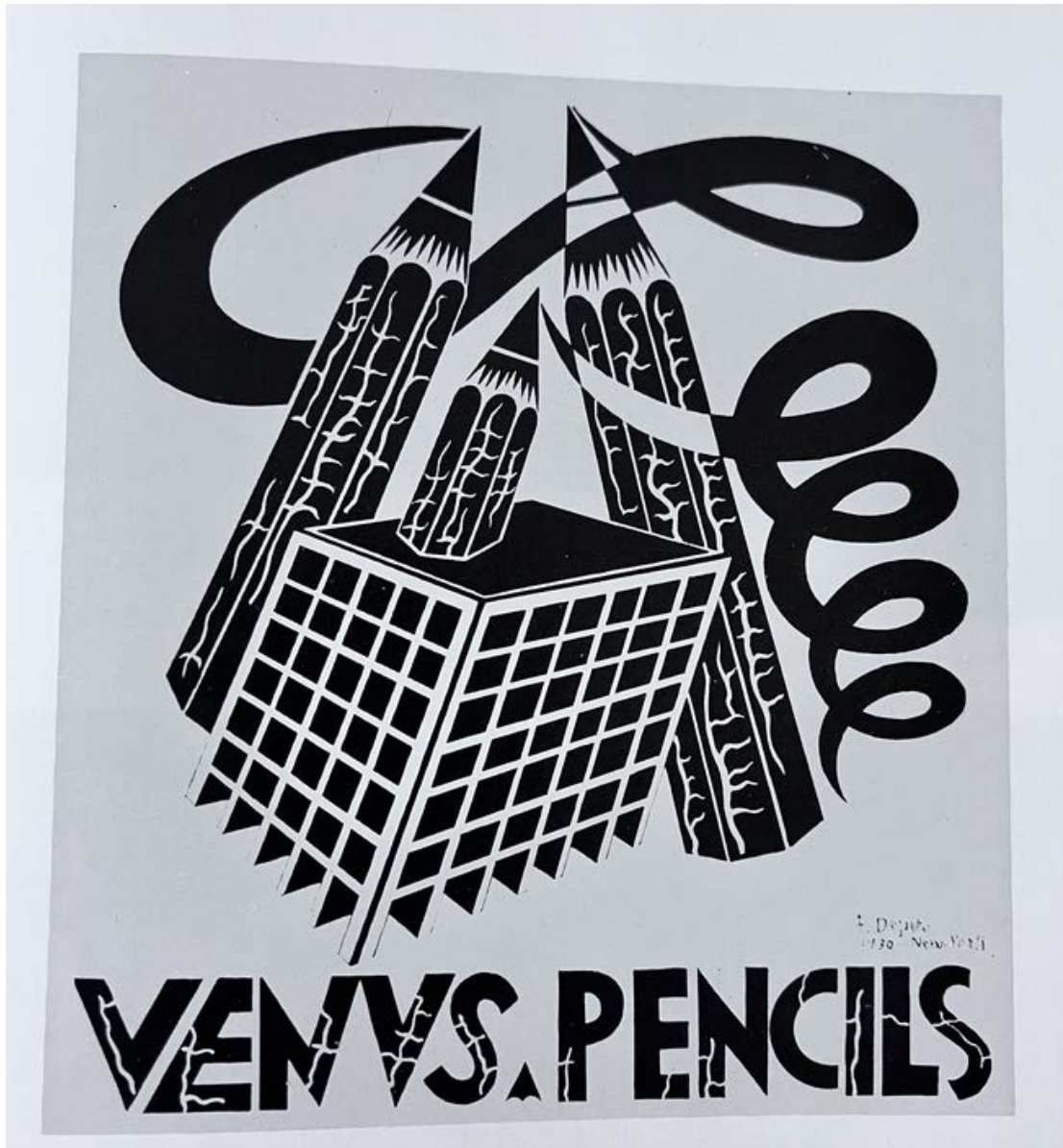


Fig. 34) Venus Pencils advertising proposal, Fortunato Depero, 1930

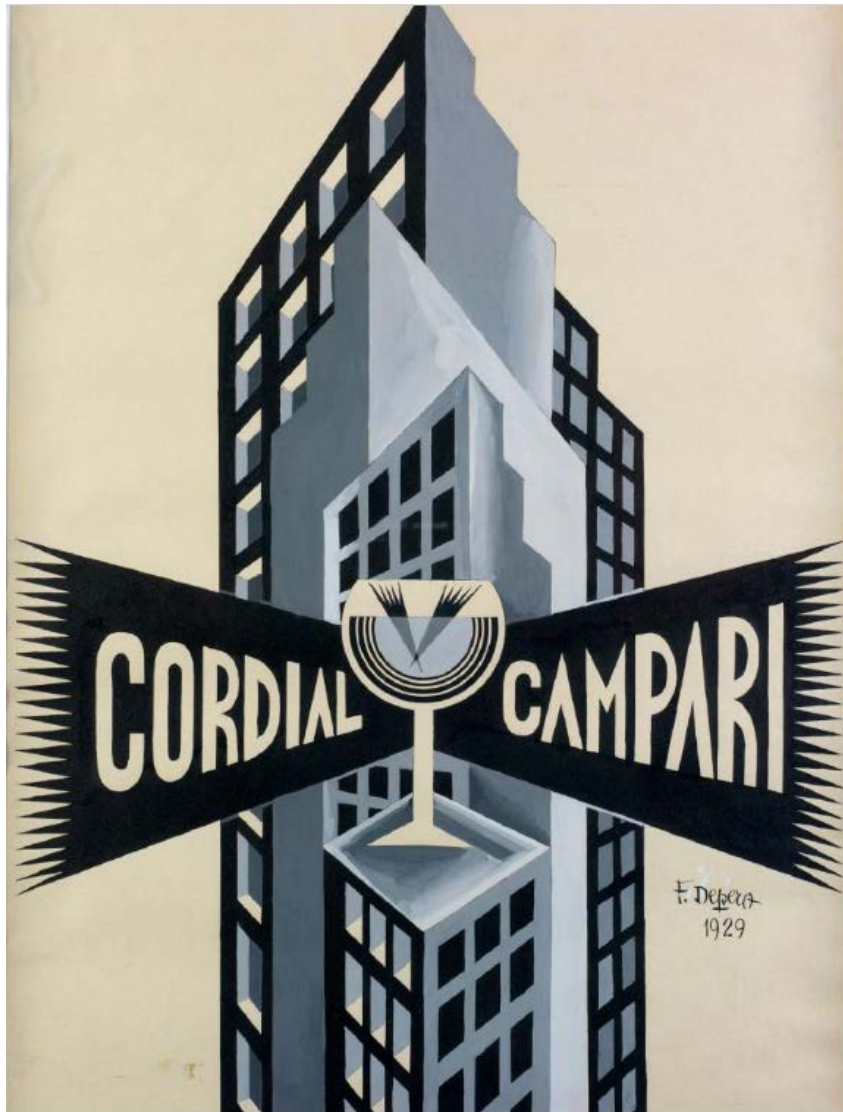


Fig. 35) *Cordial Campari*, Fortunato Depero, 1929



Fig. 36) *Sintesi parolibere*, Marcello Nizzoli, 1930



Fig. 37) Venus Pencils advertising proposal, Fortunato Depero, 1930



Fig. 38) Venus Pencils advertising proposal, Fortunato Depero, 1930



Fig. 39) *Palestra tipografica* [Typographic gym], Fortunato Depero, 1931



Fig. 40) *Paesaggio quasi tipografico* [Almost typographic landscape], Fortunato Depero,

1930-31

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