

Mario Sironi
and Italian Modernism

Art and Politics under Fascism

EMILY BRAUN



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Sironi in Context

ON 26 MARCH 1923, at the inauguration of the exhibition *Sette Pittori del Novecento* (Seven Painters of the Twentieth Century) in Milan, Benito Mussolini first declared his intentions about state intervention in the arts. Installed as prime minister only five months earlier, on a wave of Fascist violence and parliamentary paralysis, he was more attuned to pressing matters of political consolidation than to the fine points of aesthetic discourse. Nonetheless, Mussolini astutely acknowledged both the privileged position of creative autonomy and the artist's role in shaping a Fascist Italy. In a shrewd, opportunistic statement, the new leader offered an arrangement of benign mutual support in the interest of the "human spirit":

I declare that it is far from my idea to encourage anything like an art of the State. Art belongs to the domain of the individual. The State has only one duty: not to undermine art, to provide humane conditions for artists, and to encourage them from the artistic and national point of view.¹

Over the course of twenty years, as the Fascist movement was transformed into a regime, as revolution gave way first to normalization, then to dictatorship, and finally to totalitarian rule, Mussolini's liberal attitude toward the fine arts changed little. The credo that "art belongs to the domain of the individual" became one of the most potent means of drawing intellectuals to the Fascist state while creating an impression of the regime as an enlightened patron. As dictator, Mussolini never sanctioned an official style, despite concerted efforts by both intellectuals and party bureaucrats

to forge an art of the state. Instead, the regime instigated a cultural policy based on a series of administrative controls, which aimed to discourage opposition with an insidious combination of coercion and tolerance. As a result, the Fascist period was marked by pluralism in the visual arts, which permitted the avant-garde and the retrograde, abstraction and neoclassicism, to be deftly absorbed by the state's eclectic patronage. Questions of style were generally left to the artists and critics, often resulting in bitter polemics that diverted attention to matters of form rather than content. Intentionally or not, Mussolini's hands-off policy had the effect of dividing and conquering the intellectual community. This made organizing a cultural opposition a remote possibility: the strategy of allowing a margin of creative freedom while rewarding capitulation led the majority of artists to coexist with, if not openly support, the regime.

Fascist Italy's tolerance of diversity in the fine arts was very different from the attitude of Nazi Germany, where a monolithic and absolute cultural policy dictated both the overall model of volkish culture and a specific style of illustrative realism. Moreover, unlike the totalitarian regimes of Germany and the Soviet Union, the Italian Fascist government did not persecute or subjugate the avant-garde, despite attempts to do so by hardliners. (The exception, of course, is Jewish artists, who were persecuted as Jews rather than as artists after the Racial Laws of 1938.) Instead, the Italian situation presents a unique set of historical and moral problems that is tainted by a less than heroic story of accommodation, opportunism, and outright support, rather than rebellion, among the cultural elite. The issue remains as to the quality of artistic production in the face of such professional collusion and ideological equivocation. Can we speak of a Fascist art, let alone of Fascist culture or Fascist modernism?

Initial studies on the period, written in the aftermath of World War II, argued that culture, by definition, was immune from the coercion and rhetorical propaganda on which the regime based its popular consensus.² On the one hand, art was seen as extraneous to political concerns, its purity deriving from the absolute autonomy of formal values and independent cognitive capacity. On the other, it was held up as a mirror of its age, an intrinsic product of social, economic, and political exigencies.³ The culture of the Fascist period was suspect on both counts. As a totalitarian system, Fascism theoretically aimed to leave no element of the social fabric untouched, and therefore contaminated any cultural manifestation that was not openly opposed to it. Disdained as an "anti-ideology," it avoided the articulation of a central doctrine or consistent principles, producing a culture that was as insubstantial as it was opportunistic. Its discourse was conducted in negative terms: Fascism mimicked or manipulated the ideas of others but never generated its own authentic expression. Soon after the fall of the regime, the philosopher Benedetto Croce could reflect that liberal culture had survived, albeit under-

ground in the anti-Fascist resistance, while he wrote off the entire period as a parenthesis in the history of modern Italy.⁴

Revisions of the period have concerned themselves with demonstrating that Italian Fascism was never absolute in its controls and that it derived, if not from a single, dominant ideology, then at least from a series of political theories with legitimate historical roots. Beginning in the mid-1960s, Renzo De Felice published the first volume of his controversial biography of Mussolini, which acknowledged the fundamental left-wing components of Mussolini's political revolution, refuting the standard Marxist contention that Fascism was a conservative reaction against the rising working class.⁵ At the same time, studies by George Mosse on Nazi Germany debunked the other classic view that Fascism was born wholly out of the crisis of World War I. Tracing its ideological roots well back into the nineteenth century, Mosse also advanced the theory that totalitarianism was a "secular religion" that drew on traditional rites and popular customs in the collective worship of the nation.⁶ Although it focused on Nazism, Mosse's work was pertinent for Italian studies as well, since it argued that Fascism was not an ideological sham but an innovative, if antiliberal, approach to the new politics of mass society.

Following upon the work of De Felice and Mosse, scholars have focused on the factors involved in the rise of Italian Fascism: how various political factions (Nationalists, Syndicalists, Interventionists, and Futurists) and social strata were united in their discontent by a common antisocialism and strident nationalism. By probing the intellectual roots of Fascism in the elitist and relativist philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Georges Sorel, historians have also accounted for the authoritarian attitudes that appealed to an entire generation disillusioned by an ill-functioning Liberal parliamentary system.⁷

Although one of the central critiques of Italian Fascism in the post-World War II era (as well as in its own time) was its lack of a coherent ideology, recent historians have shown that its self-presentation as an "antiparty" contributed to its longevity and continued pluralistic base of support. Long after the establishment of the regime, many were convinced that Fascism was a true intellectual revolution by virtue of its refusal to be constrained by a single doctrine, and that the ability to govern according to an ongoing dialectic between the individual and the state was the sign of ultimate political realism.⁸ This condition of adaptability (or internal contradiction) gave rise to the coexistence of different "Fascisms" within the Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party, or the PNF): urban and rural, technocratic and conservative, from the intransigence of party minister Roberto Farinacci to the pragmatism of Giuseppe Bottai.⁹

The reconfigured image of Italian Fascism as a complex rather than a monolithic entity molded subsequent studies of culture during the *ventennio*

(1922–43) and began to explain how Mussolini and the PNF attracted and retained the most creative minds of a generation. Conversely, the study of culture became the very means by which to expose the character of the regime as a flawed or “imperfect totalitarianism.”¹⁰ In the 1970s, historians detailed Fascist cultural policy and its bureaucratic infrastructure while also examining the response of artists and intellectuals to these official controls.¹¹ They showed that the regime evolved two distinct strategies: one aimed at controlling the general populace through the mass media and organized leisure, and the other directed toward garnering the prestige and support of the cultural elite.

The double standard ultimately reinforced long-standing assumptions about the qualitative differences between high and low culture.¹² And although Italian Fascism was particularly original in the invention of mass festivities, leisure activities, and propaganda, the fine arts were left, by and large, to their own traditional devices, standards, and audiences. As a result, both during the Fascist period and in most art historical studies to date, painting and sculpture have been perceived as being relatively immune from the vulgar political content that contaminated popular imagery and the press. This degree of autonomy has become the pivotal issue in judging the relationship between intellectuals and the regime: the history of the avant-garde is written as a story of either opportunism and equivocation or long and inevitable progression toward open resistance.¹³ What has remained unacknowledged is how “creative freedom” was itself a preeminent form of Fascist propaganda, used by the regime to present itself as a “Third Way” between the “inhumanity” of Communism and the “decadence” of liberal individualism.¹⁴

In the 1970s, as Fascist culture was being reappraised in the historical field, numerous exhibitions organized in Italy brought to light the richness and diversity of the arts and artists under the regime, rehabilitating whole careers and movements.¹⁵ Art historians, however, initially isolated painting and sculpture from the political context, as monographs on individual artists ignored the relationship between style and political ideology, artistic intent and audience reception. Histories of the avant-garde – as with the Futurist and Novecento groups, to give the prime examples – admitted to the Fascist allegiance of the artists but inevitably emphasized their differences with, rather than their adherence to, the regime’s policies.¹⁶ Art and propaganda were still perceived as mutually exclusive endeavors.

The term *Fascist art* was, and still is, used only pejoratively, in reference to the type of paintings shown at the Premio Cremona, a state-sponsored exhibition begun at the end of the 1930s that emulated the didactic realism of Nazi art. Yet the perplexing fact remains that many, if not most, of Italy’s most famous literary and artistic figures openly supported the regime or were ardent Fascists: Luigi Pirandello, Massimo Bontempelli, F. T. Marinetti, Giuseppe Pagano, Giuseppe Terragni, Carlo

Carrà, Mario Sironi. Typically, the spirit of their works was seen as fundamentally antagonistic to the exigencies of the regime, and equivocation became the standard explanation for the troubling longevity of their relationship with Fascism.¹⁷ The question of style (and stylistic originality) as a vehicle of Fascist ideology and persuasion was generally ignored, in favor of exploring the artist's individuality of expression in and of itself. Nor was it considered how many of these artists, writers, and philosophers actually viewed totalitarianism as a means to a collective society – as a creative project of shaping the masses.

Only in the following decade did scholars move beyond the isolated aesthetic object to a more integrated analysis of cultural politics, considering the role of commissions, incentives, and exhibitions in the building of consensus.¹⁸ The field of architectural history made particular strides in demonstrating that the Rationalist movement aligned itself with the rhetoric of “discipline” and *Mediterraneità* congenial to the regime and, conversely, that Fascist Italy patronized modernist architecture to a degree unmatched by any other major Western power.¹⁹ By proving the complicity of progressive styles and critical discourse in shaping the official image of totalitarianism, these studies countered, once and for all, the prevailing view of Fascist aesthetics as entirely provincial and retrograde.

The most recent approaches to Fascist culture have focused on popular forms and the media, building the case that totalitarianism attempted a seamless unity between ideology and its ritualistic expression. Inspired by Walter Benjamin's theory of the “aestheticization of politics,” they consider the mechanics of propaganda not merely as a vehicle of dogma but as the determining factor in the content and identity of Fascism itself. As a result, the focus is no longer on the flaws in the system, but on the idea of totalitarianism as aesthetic politics: in what ways did Fascism attempt to impose a “total style of life”? Departing from a related concept of the “sacralization of politics,” and with specific application to Fascist Italy, the historian Emilio Gentile has detailed how public festivities, collective rites, and ubiquitous visual symbols determined the regime's self-representation on one hand, and a mass participatory politics on the other. The political religion of Fascism, conceived to integrate the masses with a modern authoritarian state, he argues, also laid the foundations of official Fascist culture.²⁰

At present, it is difficult to distinguish between studies of Fascism and those of Fascist culture, so intertwined have become the concepts of politics and aesthetics. The most extreme view in the reevaluation of European Fascism has been taken by the historian Zeev Sternhell, who views it as a wholly coherent and original political ideology that ultimately transcended polarities of left and right. Privileging the role of France, and specifically the theories of Sorel, Sternhell reduces Fascism to a prewar cultural phenomenon, stemming from a radical revision of Marxism by Marxists. According

to Sternhell, Sorel shifted the agent of revolution from class conflict to national regeneration, while also redefining myth as a “system of images” used by the elite to motivate action and determine history. In Sternhell’s teleological view, the subsequent ascendancy of totalitarianism did not depend on the crisis of the Great War but was an inexorable fulfillment of preestablished ideas, of the transformation of nineteenth-century *realpolitik* into cultural praxis and mass psychology.²¹

Gentile, as well as Walter Adamson, have shown that in Italy, too, it was the prewar avant-garde – Futurists and the *La Voce* circle – whose “modernist nationalism” provided the theoretical basis for the new aesthetic politics.²² By pinpointing the origins of Fascist ideology in the years before World War I and within the cultural (in contrast to the political) realm, this approach allows us to speak of a legitimate Fascist modernism: one that disavowed the modernity of Enlightenment reason for the other modernity of activism, instinct, and irrationalism. It also establishes a prestigious pedigree for both elitist attitudes toward the masses and the cult of violence in the avant-garde, whose countercultural position is usually associated with progressive liberal politics. Indeed, in the historical texts cited earlier, the coercive nationalization of the masses by the intellectual elite is seen as an essentially modernist phenomenon. In Italy, at least, radical politics and political activism, and not necessarily radical aesthetics, define the artistic avant-garde. With the *La Voce* circle, in particular, the project of cultural renewal readily availed itself of tradition; even the Futurists invoked past cultural achievements to claim the superiority of the Italian race and justify colonial conquests.

Writing on the visual arts, however, I am more than aware of another debate beyond the purview of the history of Fascism proper: that surrounding the definitions of *avant-garde* and of *modernism*. The relationship between the two terms has been a point of contention in the field of art history and criticism since the publication of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.²³ Bürger effectively dismantled the formalist-modernist paradigm made orthodox by Clement Greenberg and Theodor Adorno in Anglo-American cultural studies. Here, the avant-garde was equated with transgression on the level of stylistic hermeticism, and hence equated with aesthetic modernism. Pure form became the content, as high art had to withdraw from the leveling effects of mass culture to salvage its own autonomy. Bürger shows that the historical avant-garde did not aim at separating art from life but, to the contrary, wanted to restore its social and political function. For Bürger, the essence of avant-garde ideology is a constant critique of the notion of the autonomy of art. Hence, the stylistic innovation and linguistic defamiliarization associated with aesthetic modernism are not ends in themselves but means of attacking the institution and commodification of art in bourgeois society. Moreover, mass culture, instead of being the enemy of the

avant-garde posited by Greenberg, becomes, in Bürger's line of reasoning, its chief ally.

More than any other historical movement, Futurism fulfills the criteria of direct political activism, the desacralization of the art object, and the boundless reach of aesthetic experience, yet it is noticeably absent from Bürger's discussion. Futurism thus finds itself in the peculiar position of being central to studies on Italian Fascist culture and ignored in histories of the European artistic avant-garde. One can only assume that the taint of authoritarian politics – in contrast to the left-wing affiliations of Dada and Surrealism, which Bürger favors – accounts for this exclusion. Indeed, Bürger states that the avant-garde cannot operate under Fascist politics “that liquidate the autonomous status” of art. He implies what Renato Poggioli explicitly argues in his earlier book on the avant-garde, namely, that it depends on the liberal values of the bourgeois society it chooses to attack. The avant-garde can exist only in a society that tolerates artistic autonomy and a margin of dissent.²⁴

Yet if taken to its logical conclusion, did not the avant-garde ideal of merging art and life reach its sinister conclusion in totalitarianism, in the aestheticization of politics and daily existence? As Boris Groys argues in his book on the Russian avant-garde, “reality itself became the material for artistic construction,” and absolute artistic control was synonymous with total political control.²⁵ In Italy the avant-garde desire to shape the masses through aesthetic means developed in perfect synchrony with the experiment in totalitarian politics. The refutation of art for art's sake in favor of creating a total style of life was theorized by the Futurists before the war and became standard rhetoric under Fascism. Mussolini repeatedly referred to himself as an artist and to politics as an art, usurping the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to envision the form of the Fascist state.

The emphasis on popular culture, public spectacle, and “politics as religion” in recent studies of Fascism has followed the paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism that has permeated all fields of study since the 1980s. It also reinforces the regime's own internal dichotomy of high and low culture. Analyses of individual objects, personalities, and movements have taken second place to a larger sociology of culture. With such a methodology, critical as it is in detailing the innovative aspects of the new politics, Fascism is interpreted as a one-way imposition of the regime upon a rather abstract general populace, with no account taken of individual contributions and responses. We are also left with having to square the seriousness and pervasiveness of Fascism as a lay religion with the rote application of its rituals. Analyses of the marches, salutes, rallies, and propaganda displays tend to reduce the individual experience to one of pure collective indoctrination.

To reverse the usual terms of the equation, how were aesthetics politi-

cized? How were the fine arts involved in the modernist nationalist project, and what of the avant-garde after Fascism came to power, when its role turned from one of attacking bourgeois institutions to constructing mass consensus? Given the official division between high and low culture, what was the particular propaganda value of painting, sculpture, and the fine artist, and what was their perceived relationship to the Fascist collective? Most crucially, did the traditional aesthetic experience (or “aura,” as Benjamin would have it), however dedicated to cultural intervention, ultimately play into, or resist, the goals of totalitarianism?

As the historian Robert Wohl has noted, it is one thing to account for the prewar provenance of Fascist ideas, but it is quite another to explain how and by whom these ideas were transformed into practice, specifically the practice of authoritarian politics.²⁶ The issues are particularly complex in the case of Fascist Italy, where the avant-garde, the Futurist flank excepted, made use of historical forms (and their implicit critique of social modernity) in the service of modernist politics. Moreover, only in Italy was the avant-garde employed in the shaping of a Fascist “new man” and a new “style of life” throughout the duration of the regime. Yet the degree and success of this participation, as well as its effect on the avant-garde’s own identity and ideology, have still to be determined. This book charts the relationship – at times a dialogue, at times one of mutual refutation – between the Italian avant-garde and aesthetic modernism, the practice of art and the practice of aesthetic politics.

Mario Sironi, a painter, sculptor, designer, graphic artist, and propagandist, presents the ideal figure with whom to pursue these questions, from both a historical and a methodological point of view. In purely art historical terms, his career followed the development of Italian art for almost half a century: from Futurism and Metaphysical painting to the Magic Realism of the Novecento group and the archaism of the mural-painting movement and, after World War II, the abstraction of Art Informel. He was also the artist most closely associated with Mussolini and the regime. The chief caricaturist for the Duce’s official newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, for over two decades, he shaped a distinctive graphic style that came to be associated with the Fascist press and its exhibition installations. In both high and popular art forms, Sironi transformed the spirit of modernist nationalism into striking visual images, mythic narratives, and instrumental propaganda that animated the religion of state. Although his was but one artistic interpretation in a varied field of contenders, it was the most consistently and originally engaged with the complexities of Fascist ideologies.

Sironi’s attraction to Fascism was typical of a generation of Italian intellectuals who were born in the 1880s, nurtured on the anarchic individualism of Nietzsche, and matured in the trenches of World War I.²⁷ The late-Romantic attitudes that shaped his personality and those of his Futurist comrades –

a discontent with bourgeois society, a love of extremes, the cult of violence and the self – derived from the same cultural matrix as the authoritarian politics of Mussolini. This generation supported the Fascist movement in the belief that it represented a long-awaited social palingenesis based on national unity and spiritual superiority, rather than on the dynamics of class conflict. As artists and intellectuals they were also convinced that they had the right and ability to achieve this destiny. Like his Futurist contemporaries, Sironi cultivated a radical elitism and strident nationalism after years of disenchantment with both Liberalism and Socialism and out of a complex and contradictory attitude toward the new political reality of the masses.

Sironi was the only visual artist of the original Futurists who went on to become a prominent Fascist working in close collaboration with the regime. As the last to join the core Futurist group before Italian intervention in the war, he was raised on avant-garde premises but was the least tied to the orthodoxies of Marinetti's program. He reached his artistic maturity after the war, unlike Umberto Boccioni, Giacomo Balla, and Carlo Carrà. From Futurism, Sironi carried forth modernist techniques of collage, Expressionist distortion, and abstraction, as well as activist concepts of violence, virility, dynamism, and manipulation of the crowd. But he also recognized the value of tradition – including classical references, allegory, and a figurative style – in developing a Fascist art that would resonate with national and cultural references deeply familiar to the general populace.

And whereas postwar Futurism maintained an uneasy relationship with the regime, defending its artistic independence while demanding recognition as the founding spirit of Fascism itself, Sironi devoted his art completely to politics. In any medium, from illustration to architecture, Sironi was equally at home with crude propaganda and poetic evocation, adept at fashioning an image and a message according to the audience and the medium. Whether agitating for popular insurrection or expounding dogma, he consciously directed his energies to the goal of "cultural intervention" that preoccupied his generation. In his own words, Sironi corresponded to the Fascist ideal of "a militant artist, that is to say, an artist who serves a moral idea and subordinates his own individuality to the collective cause."²⁸

The neglect of Sironi in the post-World War II era shows the degree to which his name was identified with the fallen dictatorship and a disowned epoch in Italian history. Although Sironi is often grouped with Pagano, Bontempelli, Marinetti, and Terragni in the ranks of formidable cultural figures who also supported the regime, his name has consistently evoked a more sensitive, even guarded response.²⁹ Unlike Bontempelli, who broke with Fascism in the late 1930s, or Marinetti, who openly criticized the regime's antimodernist, anti-Semitic campaign, or Pagano, who perished (in the concentration camp of Mauthausen) for his anti-Fascist activities, Sironi maintained a constant allegiance to Fascism. Marinetti also subsequently supported the

Republic of Salò, but he died in 1944 without having to live with, retract, or answer for his position. Moreover, Marinetti's ability to combine the anarchic, antiestablishment hyperbole of Futurism with an eager embrace of Fascist patronage has confounded rather than clarified the opinions of those who would judge him: the contradictions of Marinetti's career, whether intentional or not, have served only to give him the benefit of the doubt.³⁰ Perhaps only Terragni can be compared to Sironi in his unflinching loyalty to Mussolini, but here, too, the architect's death in 1943 spared him from having to choose sides during the Resistance.³¹ Sironi, in contrast, survived Mussolini's downfall by some two decades and lived by his decision without apology or explanation.³² In a prescient remark made in the 1930s, Mussolini commented to the journalist Yvon De Begnac that Sironi was one "who would never betray" him.³³

Perhaps Sironi's position caused particular embarrassment because in that era of compromise and opportunism, his record was a singular one of absolute commitment. Furthermore, his work as a caricaturist and propagandist gave him more opportunity than most visual artists to associate his name with the regime. If Sironi were aware of the failure of Fascism by World War II, he never voiced his disillusionment in public. He was not specifically associated with the revisionist strain of Fascism represented by Giuseppe Bottai's cultural journal *Primato* (1940–43), nor did he enter the fray, as did Marinetti and Bontempelli, in criticizing some of the regime's more controversial actions in the realm of the visual arts, such as the anti-modernist campaign set off by the Racial Laws of 1938.

So resolute was Sironi in his choice that, unlike some of his more illustrious contemporaries, he never needed to be courted or persuaded. Although bribery in the form of official favors and stipends was an instrument of Fascist cultural policy, there is no evidence of his asking for or receiving any form of economic assistance, aside from his salary as a journalist and the commissions for his public projects.³⁴ It is the underlying irony of his career that Sironi, considered to be the Fascist artist par excellence, was never admitted to the Reale Accademia d'Italia (Royal Academy of Italy), an honor bestowed upon personalities of more ambiguous stance, such as Marinetti, Bontempelli, and Pirandello.³⁵ Mussolini himself admitted:

If I weren't afraid of creating an uproar within the entire artistic community I would bestow upon Sironi the vestment of royal academician. But then they would say that this artist enjoys my protection, rather than my consideration, since I am the director of *Il Popolo d'Italia*, for which – and here you have it – Sironi is the editorial illustrator.³⁶

The most politically committed of artists, Sironi himself was not a political animal.³⁷ Sironi did not exploit his personal relationship with Mussolini for professional ends, although he had plenty of opportunity to do

so.³⁸ During the course of his career, he shunned the limelight, retreating to the background in ceremonial functions and refusing to court the camera or the press. Shy and antisocial, he completely lacked the makings of a public persona or the means of self-aggrandizement. In this sense he never used Fascism or adhered to it merely to advance his career. In an epoch of clawing sycophants, Sironi stands apart, whether out of timidity, disdain, or pride.

Sironi presents the singular figure of an artist weaned on the premises of the European avant-garde who dedicated himself ardently to the Fascist cause, only to find himself the target of both the regime's reactionary and revisionist factions. His position as the most polemical artist of the period is not a postwar phenomenon but dates from the 1930s, when he became the center of the debate on what was or was not Fascist art. For the cultural conservatives, led by Roberto Farinacci and influenced by the volkish imperatives of Nazi ideology, the archaic stylizations of Sironi's figures epitomized the decadence and xenophilia, even the "Jewishness," of modern art. For the younger generation coming of age in the second decade of the regime, Sironi's monumental creations with their allegorical figures represented all that was stale and obtuse in classical revivals.

Relentless in the pursuit of his artistic ideals, strident in his nonconformism, Sironi inevitably roused feelings of inadequacy and resentment in his peers, but never indifference.³⁹ Indeed, the critics' discomfort with Sironi has been compounded by the artist personally. Anything but easygoing, he seemed "curt, irascible, and sullen, a man who seemed at war with himself and with others," in the words of Lamberto Vitali.⁴⁰ Sironi's taciturn manner, interpreted by many as contemptuous, protected a complex inner character, whose driving force was self-doubt rather than arrogance. Aristocratic in bearing and attitude, he could command the salon conversation if he so chose, but by the fear and respect his intelligence inspired rather than by his enticing wit or fluid small talk.⁴¹ As the years progressed, Sironi remained a "misanthrope and loner by nature," according to his Novecento colleague, the painter Leonardo Dudreville, and he conspicuously avoided the café circles and salons that animated artistic life in Milan.⁴² During the preparations for the Fifth Triennale in 1933, Sironi painted at night to avoid onlookers.⁴³ Though they disparaged his work and questioned his politics, the younger generation could not deny they admired Sironi's severity and isolation and his having "the merit of not lecturing to anyone."⁴⁴

Sironi's unresolved passions eroded his personal as well as professional relationships. In 1919, at the end of his active service in the war, Sironi married Matilde Fabbrini, who bore him two daughters, Aglae and Rossana. Their union was troubled from the beginning by financial hardships and personal incompatibility.⁴⁵ Sironi's increasing work commitments and travel encouraged his absence from home, and the marriage disintegrated by the late twenties. They separated in 1930, the same year that Arnaldo Mussolini

introduced Sironi to Maria Alessandra (Mimì) Costa, who was some thirty years his junior.⁴⁶ Sironi was mistrusting by nature, and this disposition was aggravated by the companionship of the younger and, by all accounts, flirtatious woman. Costa recalls accompanying Sironi to the Palazzo dell' Arte while he supervised the murals being executed for the Milan Triennale: Sironi locked her in his car for several hours rather than have her mingle with his colleagues. They rarely went out together, and Costa eventually sought the social life that Sironi shunned. Despite her involvement with other men, and long after their sexual relationship had ended, the two maintained close, if separate, lives. The artist's familial relationships tragically dissolved with the suicide of his daughter Rossana in 1948 and his subsequent estrangement from his other child, Aglae. Sironi never divorced Matilde. His guilt and her persecuting temperament ensured that their mutually abrasive relationship would continue until his death.⁴⁷ His will stipulated Mimì Costa as his universal heir and barred Matilde from attending his funeral.⁴⁸

Sironi is a study in contrasts and extremes, a man marked by outbursts of uncontrollable vindictiveness followed by crippling remorse. His letters reveal an almost embarrassing self-effacement; he is often profusely apologetic for any delay in response. Ill at ease in human relationships, he adored animals, was a vegetarian, and wrote acrimonious diatribes against hunting, the slaughter of animals in war or for pleasure, and the degradation of the environment – vices he ascribed to the “bestiality of man.”⁴⁹ His poetry dwells on human fallibility and suffering and is marked by impatience and despair.⁵⁰ Marginalized after the war and devastated by the death of his daughter, Sironi was increasingly filled with bitterness and grief. These powerful emotions, as well as his vulnerability and ferocity, colored his writings and correspondence.

I do not intend to deny that the glaring contradictions of Sironi's character provoke unease rather than sympathy, but to dispel any notion that beneath Sironi's moodiness lay a repressed violence or sexuality, as in the B-movie stereotype of the sadomasochistic Fascist fanatic, a stereotype codified in Susan Sontag's essay of 1974, “Fascinating Fascism.”⁵¹ Sironi indulged in the Futurist rhetoric of violence and supported Fascism during its often bloody rise to power. Many of his cartoons for *Il Popolo d'Italia* depict the *squadristi* in a heroic light and applaud Mussolini's use of force. Sironi himself agitated with the pen rather than the bludgeon, although one might argue that his propaganda was more insidious and effective. For the record, Sironi's political cartoons loyally follow the policy of the regime throughout the *ventennio*, with the significant exception of the anti-Semitic campaign. There is no evidence, however, that he participated in any punitive expeditions during the street violence of the early years. (Marinetti, however, helped sack the press of the Socialist paper *Avanti!* in April 1919. Four died and dozens were injured in the incident.)

Sironi's saturnine temperament was legendary and influenced the critics' judgments, both positive and negative, of his art and his Fascism. The bibliography on Sironi is enormous, and interpretations of his art are beset by partisanship, fueled by the same devotion or discomfort that characterized attitudes toward the man himself.⁵² Virtually all of the literature is Italian; the neglect of Sironi by European and American authors reflects both the Francophile-modernist orientation of twentieth-century art history and what was, until recently, the Italian reluctance to promote Sironi's work abroad – surely the product of national ambivalence toward Fascist culture.

Since the beginning of his career, interpretations of Sironi have revolved around sets of dualities: the contradictions of his personality paralleled by his seemingly contradictory responses to Fascism. One body of opinion views Sironi's pessimism (innate to his character as well as his art) as inherently humanitarian, a genuine despair over man's alienation in the modern world and, therefore, fundamentally antagonistic to the optimistic rhetoric of the regime. His detractors view this same disquiet as the *ne plus ultra* of Fascist morbidity, a disdain for mankind that expressed itself in demagoguery and celebratory mythmaking. In either argument Sironi emerges as both the atypical and central figure in the visual arts of the period: his powerful style distinguishes itself from the mediocrity of his peers and is seen to embody the drama – perhaps the confusion – of his generation.

The first monograph on Sironi, published in 1930 by Giovanni Scheiwiller, did much to establish the artist as an indelibly “tragic” figure who had to endure an uncultivated public and provincial critics. In countering the accusations that Sironi's painting was brutal and deformed, Scheiwiller celebrated the artist's aggressive style as the expression of heroic individuality that scorned bourgeois pleasantries. Most important, Scheiwiller saw Sironi as the champion of the lower classes, the painter of the worker's fate in modern, industrialized society.⁵³ Other critics went a small step further with their own notion that Sironi was the painter of the “tragedy” of daily life, frequently comparing him to Daumier and Rouault.⁵⁴ That Sironi was a modernist artist whose art contained an explicit critique of social modernity only enhanced his propagandistic value for Fascism, which similarly thrived on the apparent overcoming of internal contradictions.

Sironi's Expressionist edge was the salient feature of his art by the 1930s, but it was always combined with a respect for tactile modeling and monumentality of form. Critics interpreted this stylistic dichotomy as an audacious reconciliation of the modern and the classical, or as a psychological battle of the will that resolved itself in the compact energy of his figures.⁵⁵ Struggle and conflict became the interpretative catchwords for the artist on a personal, pictorial, and historical level.⁵⁶ Indeed, favorable critics directly linked Sironi's aggressive style and disdain for conventional good taste to the Fascist spirit of *combattentismo* and “pugnaciousness,” establish-

ing his reputation as the *artista mussoliniano*. The tempestuous brushwork, “violent” chiaroscuro, and aggressive compositions embodied nothing less than the revolutionary fervor of “Fascism of the first hour.”⁵⁷ The argument, however, could easily be reversed: the Expressionist elements that led many to claim Sironi’s art as inherently Fascist prompted others to see it simply as bad painting or, in the case of the intransigent faction led by Farinacci, to reject it as foreign and subversive.⁵⁸

With the outbreak of World War II, perceptions of Sironi’s art and person were loaded with political implications. By this time his career as a muralist of celebratory allegories had superseded that of the painter of tenebrous urban landscapes with their seemingly humanitarian and left-wing content. All subsequent interpretations of Sironi have hinged on this apparent split in his oeuvre.⁵⁹ The irreconcilable division between progressive and reactionary politics, between sincerity and rhetoric, led to consternation among certain supporters and vindicated those who saw Sironi’s art as embodying the schism that underlies the Fascist manipulation of reality.

Since the fall of Fascism more admirers than detractors have written on Sironi, and therefore the literature is predisposed in his favor, if colored by an overwhelming tone of apology and defense. Significant in this regard are the number of left-wing poets and artists who were associated with the *Corrente* movement and the Resistance who later chose to write on a figure who stood for everything they rebelled against.⁶⁰ They viewed the mural paintings as Sironi’s well-intentioned if misguided attempt to overcome his tragic view of the human condition through the remoteness of allegory. A flawed idealism, rather than actual political conviction, has continued to be the dominant explanation for the involution (as opposed to evolution) of Sironi’s aesthetics. By contrast, his detractors considered his pessimistic art and person as evidence of the ideological void that existed at the negative core of Fascism.⁶¹

The artist’s death in 1961 was the occasion for a retrospective at the Venice Biennale the following year (his first exhibition there in thirty years) that gave rise to the myth of Sironi as a neglected and misunderstood genius.⁶² Yet the curators carefully edited the selection, excluding Sironi’s propaganda work, political cartoons, and the photographic documentation of his public commissions. The sidestepping of the more embarrassing aspects of Sironi’s oeuvre continued until revisionist approaches reconsidered the ideological origins and history of Fascism itself.

The first objective analysis of Sironi’s politics came from the Marxist critic Mario De Micheli, who wrote an essay on the artist’s political cartoons for an exhibition in Turin in 1964.⁶³ Following in the footsteps of historians who had recently altered the traditional image of Fascism as fraudulent and insubstantial, De Micheli traced Sironi’s formative intellectual influences to Wagner, Nietzsche, and a mystic nationalism, and also

placed him in a generational context. He argued that the caricatures drawn for *Il Popolo d'Italia* during the early twenties presented the antiliberal, antibureaucratic content of Mussolini's early program, much of which derived from the Futurists. De Micheli went far in proving what was previously only intuited in the Sironi literature: the populism and sincerity of the artist's politics – in short, his “left-wing” orientation. Yet De Micheli's study hedged at its conclusion, explaining the artist's later recourse to mythic themes as a kind of heroic circumvention of reality, a personal and artistic escape prompted by personal disillusionment rather than a conscious capitulation to the demands of Fascism.

De Micheli's contextual analysis was in many ways too far ahead of its time. Moreover, the first public exhibition of Sironi's political illustrations – including images of a virile Mussolini and his triumphant Blackshirts – created a public uproar in an Italy still unprepared to differentiate between early and late, “left-wing” and “right-wing” Fascism.⁶⁴ A more thoroughgoing reappraisal of Sironi had to wait another decade, until 1973, when the Palazzo Reale in Milan mounted the first comprehensive survey of his work, exactly thirty years after the fall of the regime. The attempt was made to redeem Sironi's mural painting as a logical culmination of his desire to forge a collective art for the people, and he was now lauded for the strength of his ideological commitment, however misguided.⁶⁵

The 1973 retrospective was the first to present the politically loaded aspects of Sironi's career in the context of revisionist studies of Fascism, and reaction to it was mixed.⁶⁶ The art historian Paolo Fossati, for one, accused Sironi's champions of obscuring the actual content of Sironi's so-called tragic disposition and its correspondence to Fascist ideology.⁶⁷ He reversed the generational analysis forwarded by De Micheli, questioning the value of a civic commitment that favored domination and servitude. For Fossati, Sironi's predilection for the dark and funerary, as well as his didactic and menacing propaganda installations, exemplified the principle of Fascist violence as a means of consensus and control. His analysis was the first to connect the spatial exaggerations, agitated tenor, and overt physicality of Sironi's style with the politics of manipulation. It bears comparison to Sontag's essay (written a year after the Sironi retrospective), which also recognized a specifically “Fascist aesthetic” characterized by a “preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain.”⁶⁸

Despite the harsher judgments, Sironi's reputation continued to rise, in no small part due to the emergence of new studies on art between the wars. Sironi first received prominent attention outside of Italy during the watershed exhibition *Les Réalismes* in 1980, organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris.⁶⁹ Examining the resurgence of figurative art after World War I in an international context, the exhibition did much to relieve the insularity and tentative,

self-critical tone of Italian studies. Postmodern approaches, which have challenged the modernist teleology of abstract art by reasserting the importance of classicism in twentieth-century art, as well as an increasingly voracious international art market, have also made Sironi one of the principal beneficiaries of a new critical largesse. Furthermore, the rise of neo-Expressionism among young Italian artists in the 1980s – the so-called *transavanguardia* – has given Sironi's figurative style a new relevance.⁷⁰ At present, art historians concur on Sironi's key position during the Fascist period. He embodies the best, and the worst, of compromised culture under Fascism, but he was undeniably the emblematic figure of the period and the only artist to devise an original style consistent with modernist principles.⁷¹

Although Sironi's rehabilitation would seem by now complete, the balance of opinion still sides with those who see a division between his early work and the rhetorical murals, who cannot reconcile the quality of his art with his Fascist politics, and who ultimately view him as a figure betrayed by his own blind idealism.⁷² Yet considered as a whole, and taking into account his theoretical writings, stated intentions, and participation in the regime, Sironi's activities as an artist confound any attempt to show his equivocation or disillusionment. One is left with the fact that his art succeeded, not in spite of but because of Fascism.

There is no contradiction between Sironi's urban landscapes and his murals: both respond to Fascism as it evolved from a movement to an established order. His early images of the industrial milieu have their roots in the radical left (Futurism and Syndicalism) and Nationalist ideologies that formed the basis of Mussolini's first political program. Sironi was a Fascist of unquestionable faith, a devout follower of the religion of state whose symbols and liturgy he invented with such calculated effect. He was the first to visualize the principal system of images used by the regime to legitimize its power, from the cult of origins in the Great War and the Fascist Revolution, to the theology of *Romanitas*, the omnipotent Duce, and the "Third Way" of the Corporate State.

By the end of the 1920s, Sironi had perceived the inadequacy of easel painting as a vehicle of political persuasion and devoted himself to public commissions and propaganda installations. With his murals and wall decorations of the 1930s, he aimed to eradicate the distinction between high and low culture through the creation of a national popular style. Yet for Sironi, a Fascist art was not predicated on the elaboration of mass media forms; rather, he, like official Fascist cultural policy, maintained a hierarchy within the creative enterprise that privileged the "spiritual" quality of the fine arts. The ability to transform consciousness, he believed, lay not in the bombardment of the senses or in challenging habitual perception but in the aura of the aesthetic experience itself. Above all, Sironi envisioned a Fascist art that combined mythic function (the ability to mobilize the masses) with the

narrative of a mythical past. Myth served the purpose of both ennobling and indoctrinating the masses, and depended on the evocative qualities of style, rather than crude didacticism.

The mural-painting movement led by Sironi in the 1930s was the avant-garde answer to a politically engaged art, and not just in Fascist Italy. Like his contemporaries – Diego Rivera, a Communist, and Fernand Léger, a champion of the Popular Front – Sironi believed murals to be the most effective form because of their direct appeal to the popular and collective imagination. Numerous correspondences in the theories of these, and other, artists point to a common ideology of the avant-garde that transcends differences of the political left and right: a patriarchal attitude toward the “people” and privileged positioning of the artist’s role; an ambivalence toward mass culture as evidenced by the retention of traditional fine art media and the elevation of popular sources into the realm of high art; and the rhetoric of denouncing art for art’s sake while insisting on the autonomous expressive powers of the painterly medium. Instead, what distinguishes Sironi’s position, and that of Fascist Italy, is how modernist aesthetics were used to the ends of antidemocratic politics, and how the regime, in turn, exploited the propaganda value of “creative freedom.”

With the Great Depression and the rise of the dictators, European and American governments relied on the economic and promotional benefits of arts patronage to an unprecedented degree. The 1930s represents the culmination and denouement of the historical avant-garde as it found itself immersed in the task of consensus rather than critique. The end of the avant-garde has as much to do with its persecution under Hitler and Stalin as it does with the inversion of its principles through self-contradiction, compromise, and factionalism within its own ranks – a process that is vividly foregrounded in Fascist Italy.