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Edited by
Günter Berghaus

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Günter Berghaus

With the assistance of Mariana Aguirre (†) and
Sze Wah Lee

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Giuseppe Virelli

Aroldo Bonzagni and His (almost) Futurist Epoch

The exhibition *Aroldo Bonzagni e il suo tempo: Ironia, satira e dolore nelle opere di un “primo futurista”* (Aroldo Bonzagni and His Time: Irony, Satire and Pain in the Works of an “Early Futurist”), held at the Fondazione Lercaro in Bologna (14 November 2020 – 4 July 2021) represents an opportune moment to reflect on the early history of Futurism. As Aldo Carpi stated in 1961, it is only by “thinking back to those momentous encounters of Marinetti, Boccioni, Sant’Elia, Carrà, Romolo Romani, Giuseppe Camona, Luigi Russolo, [Vincenzo] Costantini, Balla, Aroldo Bonzagni, Severini and others, [that] one understands the true reason and the substance out of which the [Futurist] activity arose.”¹

One of the pivotal figures which this reflection must include is Aroldo Bonzagni (1887–1918), an artist born in Cento in the province of Ferrara, but trained in Milan at the Accademia di Brera. As is well known, he signed the *Manifesto dei pittori futuristi* (Manifesto of Futurist Painters), around February/March 1910,² *La pittura futurista: Manifesto tecnico* (Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto), dated 11 April 1910, the manifesto *Contro Venezia passatista* (Against Past-loving Venice, 27 April 1910), and the related flyers *Venezia futurista / Venise futuriste*, launched in a spectacular action from the Clock Tower in Venice.³ He also participated in the first Futurist *serate* held on 15 February 1910 at the Teatro Lirico in Milan, on March 8 of the same year at the Teatro Politeama Chiarella in Turin and a few weeks later, on 20 April, at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples.⁴

Bonzagni, therefore, can and must be considered one of the founding members of the Futurist group of painters. However, his sudden defection from the movement and his premature death due to Spanish flu in the immediate postwar period have almost relegated him to the rôle of a ‘supernumerary’. Carlo Carrà, in his autobiography, recalls his friendship with the artist since 1906 and emphasizes the centrality of this figure within the group of young ‘progressive’ artists

1 Carpi in Carrà and Carpi: *Aroldo Bonzagni*, p. 13.

2 See Coronelli: “Spigolature bibliografiche sui manifesti futuristi 1909–1910”, pp. 1–13.

3 For a discussion of these flyers and the date of the action in Venice, see in this volume of the Yearbook the essay by Coronelli: “The Futurist Manifestos of Early 1910: Dates and Editions Reconsidered.”

4 See Gozzi: *Dal futurismo ai moti del ventre*, pp. 12–13. The preparation and execution of these *serate* have been analysed in great detail in Berghaus: “The Beginnings of a Futurist Performance Art: The Early Serate.”

of those years. He also tells us that it was only three artists – he himself, Boccioni and Russolo – who drew up the first version of the above-mentioned *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters*, and that only at a later date was the document passed on to Bonzagni and Romolo Romani to put their signature to it.

Boccioni, Russolo and I met in a café near Porta Vittoria, close to our homes, and, with great enthusiasm, sketched out an outline of our declaration. The final drafting was quite laborious; the three of us worked on it all day long and in the evening, together with Marinetti and with the support of Decio Cinti, the secretary of the group. We completed all the parts and, having had it signed by Bonzagni and Romani, we passed the text to the printer.⁵

Aldo Palazzeschi, an involuntary witness of the meeting between the Futurist painters and Marinetti on that occasion, has a different recollection:

In January 1910 [...] I noticed that Marinetti was even more animated than usual, impatient, restless, like a person who waits for someone who is late. Every now and then, he was staring at me, laughing under his moustache to the point of saying something, when the bell rang. In the darkness of the adjoining entrance corridor [...] appeared, like celestial apparitions, one after the other, silent as shadows, four mysterious looking men dressed in black [...]. As soon as they had entered, Marinetti touched my arm and said: “Wait for me here, I’ll be right back.” [...] Four hours later, at seven o’clock, [...] I asked Nina to tell Marinetti that I would be at the café Savini at midnight, as usual. [...] Marinetti, upon arriving at the Savini that evening, looked like I had never seen him before [...] After staring at me repeatedly with an air of promise, he shook my hand and said, more astonished than I would ever have thought possible: “Futurism has been born in painting as well.” [...] The four shadows seen parading in the darkness of the corridor were Boccioni, Russolo, Carrà... and a fourth who, due to a lack of courage, probably disappeared immediately afterwards.⁶

5 “Boccioni, Russolo e io ci riunimmo in un caffè di Porta Vittoria, vicino alle nostre case e, con molto entusiasmo, abbozzammo uno schema del nostro appello. La stesura definitiva fu piuttosto laboriosa; ci lavorammo tutto il giorno noi tre e la sera, insieme con Marinetti e con l’ausilio di Decio Cinti segretario del gruppo, lo completammo in tutte le sue parti e, fattolo firmare anche a Bonzagni e Romani, passammo il testo alla tipografia.” Carrà: *La mia vita*, p. 73.

6 “Nel gennaio del 1910 [...] mi accorgevo essere Marinetti anche più movimentato del solito, impaziente, inquieto come chi aspetta qualcheduno che ritarda; e ogni tanto fissandomi rideva sotto i baffi sul punto di dire qualcosa fino a quando venne suonato il campanello e nell’oscurità dell’attiguo corridoio d’ingresso [...] apparizione celeste, uno dopo l’altro silenziosi come ombre quattro uomini vestiti di nero dall’aspetto misterioso [...]. Non appena entrati Marinetti disse toccandomi il braccio: ‘aspettami qui, torno subito’. [...] Alle sette, dopo quattro ore [...] pregai la Nina di dire a Marinetti che mi sarei trovato al Savini alla mezzanotte come al solito. [...] Marinetti giungendo al Savini quella sera, aveva un aspetto come mai gli avevo visto [...] dopo avermi fissato ripetutamente con quell’aria di promessa, disse stringendomi una mano: “e nato il futurismo anche in pittura”, meravigliato più di quanto avrei supposto. [...] Le quattro ombre vedute sfilare nell’oscurità del corridoio erano Boccioni, Russolo, Carrà... e un quarto che

It is impossible to ascertain whether the fourth man in Palazzeschi's account was Bonzagni (it could also have been Romolo Romani), but some passages of the manifesto can be reasonably related to the artist from Cento, especially the references to the nightlife in the modern city, with its pleasure seekers, prostitutes and ruffians.⁷ Aldo Carpi observed that "Bonzagni loved the nightlife [...] and drew ideas for his modern-type drawings from the eccentric world of nocturnal entertainment."⁸ Similarly, his friend Carrà remembers that "the tarts provided Bonzagni with highly attractive subjects, soon giving him a good name in fashionable circles and in the artistic milieu of Milan."⁹ In this regard, the works he exhibited in those years at the Famiglia Artistica in Milan, together with those of his Futurist companions Carrà, Boccioni and Russolo, reveal him to be, perhaps even more so than his colleagues, a convinced supporter of the "frenzied activity of the great capitals".¹⁰

From a formal point of view, the style Bonzagni adopted for his works on the eve of Futurism reveal how much he was still tied to the figurative culture of late nineteenth-century Divisionism (with Gaetano Previati and Giovanni Segantini serving as his models) and the Secessionist aesthetics from north of the Alps (in 1910, Gustav Klimt had a first solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale). At the same time, Bonzagni embraced an unconventional, expressionist or 'wild' spirit that showed itself in compositions and forms of an entirely new style, quickly executed, sketchy, but able to capture the turmoil of modern life. In other words, Bonzagni and his companions felt a need to give up traditional Naturalism or anecdotal Realism, as well as the more recent Symbolist past. Instead of turning towards meta-psychic realities, they chose to immerse themselves in a Heideggerian *Dasein* ("being there"), living consciously and with great personal engagement in the contemporary world.¹¹

per difetto di coraggio molto probabilmente si dileguò subito dopo." Palazzeschi: "Marinetti e il futurismo", pp. X-XI.

7 "And how can we remain unresponsive to the frenzied activity of the great capitals, the ultra-recent psychology of noctambulism, the feverish figure of the viveur, the cocotte, the apache, and the alcoholic?" Boccioni, et al.: "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 62.

8 Carpi in Carrà and Carpi: *Aroldo Bonzagni*, p.15.

9 "Le *cocottes* fornivano a Bonzagni gli argomenti più attraenti procurandogli presto buon nome fra la gente mondana e nell'ambiente degli artisti milanesi." Carrà: *La mia vita*, p. 48.

10 Boccioni, et al.: "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 62. A number of works by these painters can be found in the catalogues of the *Esposizione annuale d'arte della Famiglia Artistica*, 13 December 1908 – 8 January 1909, and *Esposizione annuale d'arte della Famiglia Artistica*, December 1910 – January 1911.

11 "Non cercate nelle sue tele [di Bonzagni] l'espressione speculativa di fatti cerebrali e nemmeno aspetti di un naturalismo oggettivo." Carrà in Carrà and Carpi: *Aroldo Bonzagni*, p. 9.

FAMIGLIA ARTISTICA ✪ MILANO

Via S. Raffaele 81, 6

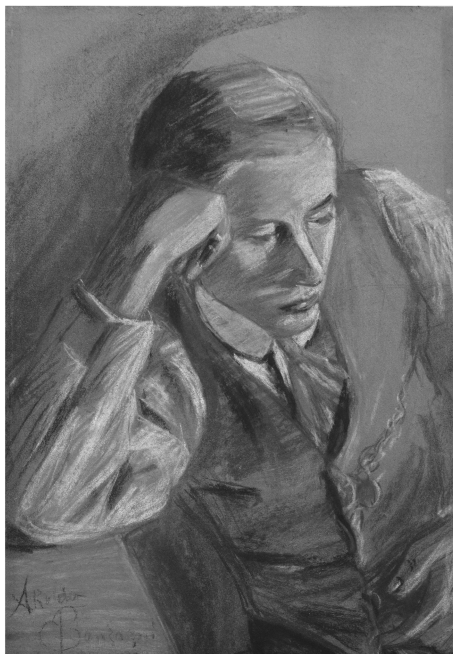


Fig. 1a. Catalogue of the annual art exhibition at the Famiglia Artistica in Milan, December 1910 – January 1911, with a cover by Aroldo Bonzagni. **Fig. 1b.** Aroldo Bonzagni: *Schizzo a Boccioni* (Portrait of Boccioni, c.1910).

In the original quintet of Futurist painters there existed a sort of lingua franca, a shared understanding that, despite the diversity of personal accents, they were bound together in their search for new and modern forms of painterly expression: “If we consider their positions in art, Bonzagni, Boccioni, Carrà, Camona, Romani, Dudreville, Funi, Russolo, Severini, Balla, etc. belonged to the same current. [...] they all worked together in perfect harmony and friendship, let’s call it blessed youth, sure of having discovered the true and only universal path.”¹² This path involved the practice of brightening up the palette with strong, aggressive colours, of abolishing the fin-de-siècle decorativeness, of breaking the “tourniquet” (as Marinetti contemptuously wrote¹³) in favour of a free-floating,

¹² Carpi in Carrà and Carpi: *Aroldo Bonzagni*, p. 14.

¹³ “Dégout de la ligne courbe, de la spirale et du tourniquet.” / “Nausea della linea curva, della spirale e del tourniquet.” / “Nausea at the curved line, the spiral, and the tourniquet.” Marinetti: “Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom”, p. 122. A tourniquet is

vibrant, nervous style that charges the figures with an expressive accent and inner dynamism. This style was in some ways a sign of purity and originality, but also a brutal manner of depicting the New Man of the twentieth century. To quote their own words: “You think that we are mad. Instead, we are the Primitives of a new sensibility that has been utterly transformed.”¹⁴ In short, the Futurist painters adopted Fauvist or Expressionist concepts, which in the early years of the twentieth century represented two of the most advanced artistic currents.¹⁵ French Fauvism and German Expressionism sought to visualize inner tensions and to give expression to those ‘states of mind’ that possess the power of a subjective, participatory engagement with the world.¹⁶

From this new desire to confront the full spectrum of contemporary realities emerged the deformed and cartoon-like figures in Bonzagni’s *Cavalieri antichi* (Ancient Knights, c.1910), exhibited in the Lercaro Collection in 2020/21. In this show, they enter into a dialogue with Anselmo Bucci’s *Bimbo* (Child, 1907), Umberto Boccioni’s *Autoritratto* (Self-Portrait, 1909–10) and Achille Funi’s *Paesaggio* (Landscape, 1910). This tendency to adopt new formal devices can also be observed in the graphic works displayed in Bologna, where Bonzagni’s pen strokes share the violent attitude of his friend Boccioni in *Testa di bambino che sorride* (Head of a Smiling Child, 1910), but also in Romolo Romani’s *Volto femminile* (Female Face, 1907–8), Luigi Russolo’s *Città addormentata* (Sleeping City, 1909–10) and Leonardo Dudreville’s *Uscita dalla fabbrica* (Leaving the Factory, 1910). We can therefore conclude that, ultimately, the original Futurist quintet of painters conducted a perfectly parallel formal research. Valsecchi writes in this regard that Bonzagni’s “disposition for an expressive form of painting, with the bright colour dictated by emotional rather actual perspectives corresponding to the experience of European Fauves and Expressionists, brought him already in 1909 close to Marinetti’s early group of Futurist, i.e. Boccioni, Carrà, Balla, Severini.”¹⁷

That being said, it remains to be clarified why Bonzagni decided to withdraw from the movement of which he had been a co-founder. The most widespread thesis is that Bonzagni was ‘frightened’ by the violent reactions unleashed by Futurism. His sister Elvira, in one of her recollections, asserts that he “retreated

a compression bandage that stops the flow of blood from an artery. It also denotes a rotating mechanical device that controls passage in public spaces. Marinetti uses the term here also with the meaning of a twirling or spinning arabesque.

¹⁴ Boccioni, et al.: “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto, 11 April 1910”, p. 67.

¹⁵ See Barilli: *L’espressionismo italiano*.

¹⁶ Lista: “Futurismo ed espressionismo: Affinità e divergenze”, p. 126.

¹⁷ Valsecchi: *Aroldo Bonzagni*, pp. 12–13.

from Futurism immediately afterwards so as not to distress our mother too much. The avant-garde *serate* were very dangerous for our health, we were violently mocked and even beaten up, and our mother Angela had palpitations every time Aroldo took part in them”.¹⁸ These justifications, however, do not seem well-founded, because Bonzagni’s rebellious spirit had already brought him trouble in the Academy and even clashes with the law on several occasions, both before and after his Futurist period. It therefore seems unlikely that his withdrawal from the movement was dictated by such considerations.

The reasons for this defection probably ran deeper. First of all, he disagreed with the view that “Divisionism, for the modern painter, must be [...] essential and necessary”.¹⁹ Bonzagni had experimented with this technique in ways that were similar to Boccioni’s, for example in *Cavalieri antichi* (Ancient Knights, 1910), *Moti del ventre: Danzatrice* (Belly Movements: Female Dancer, 1911), *Veglione alla Scala* (A Masked Ball at La Scala, 1912) or *Londra sotto la pioggia* (London under the Rain, 1912). However, he never wanted to accept it as an absolute dogma, as the *only one* rather than *one of many* expressive possibilities. In August 1910, when Marinetti planned a new printing of the painters’ manifesto, Boccioni wrote a desperate letter to Severini: “You see that already one (Bonzagni) no longer signs the manifesto, because he is not convinced of Divisionism..... This is very annoying because it makes the imbeciles believe that smart people abandon us!!!”²⁰

Bonzagni, unlike his Futurist friends, did not have unlimited faith in the “tangible miracles of contemporary life”.²¹ On the contrary, he was always ready to see the dark side behind the relentless advance of an industrial civilization. For him, the metropolis was not just a symbol of a dynamic and radiant Futurist ‘city that rises’ but a dangerous as well as seductive place. He was not blinded by the glitter of the modern boulevards, the fast racing cars, colourful tramways or puffing locomotives, but was fully aware of the dull city outskirts inhabited by destitute workers living in squalor and depravation. To these ‘dregs of society’ he dedicated in 1918 one of his most famous paintings, *Rifiuti della società*.²²

18 Testimony reported in Scardino: “L’eccentrico firmatario Aroldo Bonzagni”, p. 87.

19 Boccioni, et al.: “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto, 11 April 1910”, p. 67.

20 Letter from Umberto Boccioni to Gino Severini, undated (but after 1 August 1910) in Birolli: *Umberto Boccioni: Scritti sull’arte*, p. 342. The context of the letter and the dating of Bonzagni’s withdrawal have been discussed in Coronelli: “The Futurist Manifestos of Early 1910: Dates and Editions Reconsidered.”

21 Boccioni, et al.: “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters, 11 February 1911”, p. 62.

22 See Virelli: “Le maschere della città”, pp. 151–158.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Bonzagni found himself, like so many of his contemporaries, in the vortex of a world undergoing great material, social and psychic transformations. As an artist eager to keep up with current developments, he was profoundly shaken by the novelties and contradictions of the world he saw unfolding around him. He showed great sensitivity towards the turmoil and disorder of society and confronted it with an avant-garde spirit. In a fiercely independent way he looked at contemporary life with free and unblinker eyes: “Bonzagni sees ‘beyond’ the world of appearances and prefers to engage with modern life full of tumultuous energy but also beset with contradictions.”²³

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²³ Sassoli de' Bianchi Strozzi: “Secessionista, futurista, espressionista: Aroldo Bonzagni”, p. 11.

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