

TWENTIETH-CENTURY ITALIAN ART (1909-69)

In their manifestoes the futurists praised modernity, celebrated war and professed scorn for “woman”, how well do their artworks fulfil this theoretical program?

The inception of Futurism was, in all respects, accidental. In 1908, while driving his automobile the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti dodged a collision with two motorcycles, to immediately recognise the grapple between the primordial and prevailing machine. The face off led to an obsession with technology which prompted Marinetti to draft, then publish, the Manifesto of Futurism in the French newspaper *La Figaro* on 20 February 1909. Dismissing Italy's reliance on heritage, he passionately called for innovation. F.T Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism aimed at celebrating modern technological transformation, in addition relished ferocity and brawn. Its foundation was based in the necessity of unjust brutality in order to make art. Targeting both the elite as well as the masses, it was an attempt to instigate public anger towards the establishment. In retrospect, the manifesto was also a product of 'the Age of Enlightenment (1685 – 1815)' where new political and social theories were put forth by philosophers. Violence was used to establish the implementation of the accepted laws. Brute was used as a means to enforce change in nations; an agency to reposition the pre-existing belief systems. In the 17th and 18th centuries, notions of religion and reason were restructured making way for industrialisation. It was a time when science was rapidly expanding its turf and economies were built on the emergence of countless factories around urban developments. Furthermore, it was the era in which the camera was invented. Therefore, negating a need to portray representational portraits or landscapes. Realism seemed dated, and as a consequence modernism was born. Taking from the tenets of Cubism, specifically works of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, Futurism made its course into the spectrum of Art History.

The manifesto is graced by introductory text, which romanticises the machine. The machine is spoken of as an object of desire, adventure, danger as well as a medium to reincarnate - from the mundane and inertia of the bygone. It states, *“We went up to the three snorting machines to caress their breasts. I lay along mine like a corpse on its bier, but I suddenly revived again beneath the steering wheel - a guillotine knife - which threatened my stomach. A great sweep of madness brought us sharply back to ourselves and drove us through the streets”*. The declaration sings in praise of movement, speed, aggression, power, war; keeping at the forefront a seething audacity, machismo and revolt. Inclusive of both, the high society and the common man, the futurists realised the strength of a group, with unified sentiments, coming together. The central figure, targeted with an intent to transform the cultural and political scape of Italy was 'the crowd' or *La Folla*, which was synonymous to the nation. *La Folla* was different from a mere congregation of individuals. It is rather organised masses having singularity in thoughts, to an extent that individuals are devoid of their conscious personalities. Gustave Le Bon, a french psychologist and sociologist called this *The Mental Unity of the Crowds*. The collectivity was resultant of a psychological force. Seen as erratic and malleable with an incapacity to reason, the crowd was described by the futurists as 'feminine'. Marinetti called the crowd a wild horde driving in pure emotion, devoid of logic. Marinetti drafted the manifesto with an aim to mould them into being virile, revolt against the bourgeoisie.

The Manifesto of Futurism also expressed a contempt for traditional trajectories followed by art and literature. Marinetti perceived them as overtly pensive and monotonous. He accused standardised style of poetry to induce slumber due to its enervated temperament. Futurists were set on reinvigorating the character of art, in all its forms, by injecting a certain forceful fervour. They wanted to demolish museums and libraries that hoarded elements of history, with a call to make way for the discipline of nationalism and militarism. Accordingly to them, to study and imitate conventions were not just futile but also reductive of present-day zeal. The dramatics of the manifesto announce struggle and aggression to be an asset which enhances beauty. Rejecting the state of Italy, labelling its as a second-hand market historical institutions were seen as a place for the dead. Marinetti believed intelligence should embrace the future, institutions such as museums and libraries only amplify the underlying dejection in beings, decelerating growth. He glorified combats and their impetus, rhapsodising destruction. In addition, expressing scorn for femininity, Marinetti not only alludes to the gender in question, but also hints at the attributes that stereotypically associate themselves with a woman symbolically, such as sentimentality, delicate elegance, maternity and materiality.

Inspired by the manifesto, several creatives joined the art movement including visual artists *Luigi Russolo*, *Gino Severini*, *Carlo Carrà*, *Gerardo Dottori* and *Umberto Boccioni*. In all of their work, there is an inherent reflection of the principle notions stated in the manifesto. There is a certain dynamism and sense of restlessness, when formal quality is analysed. The hues and tints used on canvas are bold, bright with no seeming need to subdue their rigour. Crimsons and violets are daringly paired alongside the cooler tones of greens and blues. Even while selecting colour palette of the compositions, futurists comet feud between pigments used on the canvas. The subject matter of Futuristic Art were modern machines, motion and warfare. One can find strong obliques, confident curves, theatrical light and shadow play as well as density in forms. There is little space for delicate details or ornate forms.



(left) *Music*, Luigi Russolo. Image Courtesy: Luigi Russolo/Estorick Collection
 (right) *Madonna and Child with Angels*, Pietro di Domenico da Montepulciano 1420 Image Courtesy: THE MET

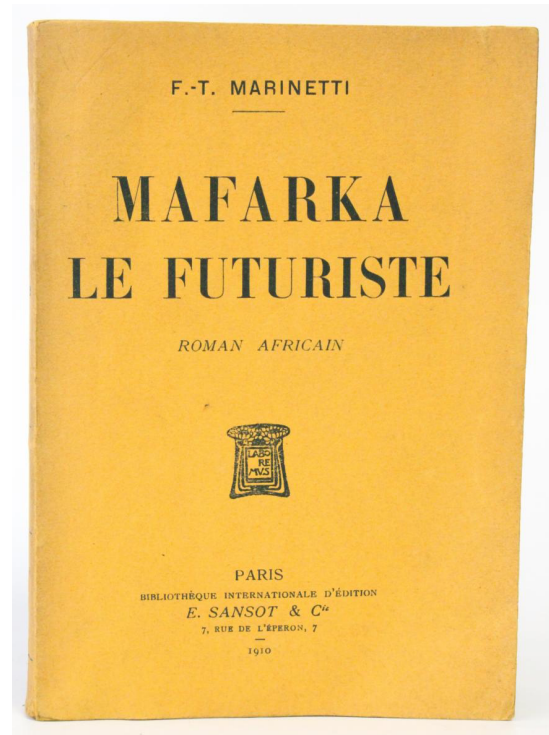
There are apparent contrasts that enliven the gaze of the viewer. Futurist paintings have a visual quality that sits on the opposing end as that of classical paintings. For instance in *Luigi Russolo's Music (1911)*, the eye of a viewer moves in accordance with geometries that form part of the painting. Bright, floating faces painted in greens, reds and yellows along with the concentric circles in the backdrop and blue band that swirls, all direct the viewer's gaze. They all represent motion and agility. There is a sense of impatience and multiplicity, a stirring emotion of agitation. The composition guides the eye to the focal point. The dark face of the subject is the focal point of *Russolo's* painting. The human subject plays the keyboard — an instrument that was found in the 16th century but was rarely kept in focus. Here, the machine and its interaction with man is dominant. On the other hand the traditional Italian Renaissance tempera on wood, by *Pietro di Domenico da Montepulciano*, *Madonna and Child with Angels (1420)* is entirely different. Although, there is a similar plurality of human facets and it is their gaze that set the focal point; the classical piece carries a stillness and a serenity. It exudes emotions of maternity, divinity, royalty and fragility — all of which are derided by the modern Futurists. At the heart of the *Montepulciano* painting is the child in Madonna's lap i.e baby Jesus. Instead of the machine which stands for modernity, the traditional painting glorifies the heavenly. Therefore, the painting is rooted in the fundamentals of religion. Formally, a dominant gold ground covers the work. This is a material that speaks of excess — of wealth and faith. Gold was used traditionally to represent the light of God, or for ostentatious, flashy embellishments in frames. In modernist paintings, it seldom makes its way into the artwork (apart from Gustav Klimt). Moreover, one is also aware of the dainty pinks, airy blues and demure tones of yellow and white. The *Montepulciano* work is highly ornate, with adorned motifs on fabrics of the subjects and the frame.



(left) *In corsa*, Gerardo Dottori, 1926. Image Courtesy: the Espoo Museum of Modern Art in Finland. Archives Futurism / EMMA
(right) *Armoured Train in Action*, Gino Severini, 1915. Image Courtesy: Museum of Modern Art

In their manifestos, the futurists praised modernity and celebrated the grandeur of war. 20th century Italy experienced an expansion of military capabilities. War was declared in 1914, and the atmosphere was thickly nationalist. With swift advancement in technologies, the Italian battalion saw lighter fighter planes which looked sleeker and sharper. This was an exemplification of their achievements, an epitome of their strength and destructive potential. Gerardo Dottori's *In corsa* (1926) reveres the technological innovation which serves as a symbol of brute. Over a sweeping landscape, the wondrous plane in white flies with might conquering the expanse of the canvas. The concentricity of arches around it, indicate its speed in addition to its scope of disruption. The painting shows a sense of linear direction, a competence of lightening momentum. The mobile has also been granted a heart. A geometric representation in crimson seems to represent a roaring engine which raves from the orange pit in its stomach, to the chest. During then, there was also chemical weaponry and the Maxim gun. In shades oscillating between Hunter and Castleton Green, the first automatic firearm called the Maxim gun, allowed the recoil of the barrel, to eject and then reload without a need for manual intervention. The ammunition ran on smokeless powder technologically supercharging the war front. In *Gino Severini's Armoured Train in Action* (1915) the soldiers are sandwiched between the modern material of steel, with bolts holding the sheets together. The comrade-in-arms are focussed, with targets locked in sight. There is a military discipline that the featureless men exude. Their blue uniforms have no creases. Alert and in position, they are ready for the kill. Over their heads, is a scaled up version of the Maxim gun. Placed at a higher height, it seems to shadow them in order to protect. Just like *Montepulciano's*, Madonna with Jesus in the *Madonna and Child with Angels* (1420) there is a sense of parental care but starkly aggressive. There is conflict and turmoil, passion for raging competition.

One of the most important painters of the futurist movement was *Umberto Boccioni*. Born in 1882, *Boccioni* was a painter, sculptor and a writer. From the studio of *Giacomo Balla*, *Boccioni* learnt the techniques of Pointillism to then delve into the theories of Futurism. He made immense contributions to the art movement, to revolutionise the theories spun by the Futurists. An important piece of work by *Umberto Boccioni* was *Riot in the Galleria* (*Rissa in Galleria*) of 1910.



(left) *Riot in the Galleria (Rissa in Galleria)*, Umberto Boccioni. 1910. Oil on canvas, 76 x 64 cm.

Image Courtesy: Soprintendenza per i Beni Storici Artistici ed Etnoantropologici di Milano

(right) *Mafarka le Futuriste*, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Published by Sansot & Cie, 1909. Image Courtesy: Abebooks

The painting, *Riot in the Galleria* (1910) has in focus the elite. The upper class crowd, swarms around a shopping centre where two men break into a fight. It is a space of consumer culture, a place of vanity. In the middle of the brawl, there is a third who decides to intervene and attempt to separate the two. *Christine Poggi*, professor of Fine Arts at the New York University and the theorist behind the publication of *Folla/Follia: Futurism and the Crowd*, claims the central figure, and thereby the reason for quarrel, are two female sex workers. Through this work, the futurist is scorning at the desire for women, making a clear distinction between the one sucked into destruction versus the ones left unaffected. According to *Boccioni's* depiction, there is a physical and psychological effect females have and as a result, men must keep away from sentimentalities aroused by women. *Boccioni's Riot in the Galleria* (1910), is therefore similar to classical paintings in a way that it is moralistic. Carrying an attitude of holier-than-thou, the futurists preach to a crowd, acting as its leader as they 'other' the women. They suggest avoidance is the cure. *Riot in the Galleria* (1910) depicts the saved man as one who has raised his arm, unwilling to indulge in the scene. However, this scorn takes a divergent route of violence to expand on the futurists actively professing scorn for woman. Marinetti is affiliated with the text of *Mafarka le Futuriste* which is a 'heroic' narrative of a battle set in North Africa which includes scenes of rape and pillage by the protagonist.

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