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Author

Stone, Marla

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The Anatomy of a Propaganda Event: the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista*, 1932

On the morning of October 28, 1932, the tenth anniversary of the Fascist assumption of power, Benito Mussolini inaugurated the most enduring propaganda event of the Fascist dictatorship. As the *Duce* reviewed the assembled honor guards and passed the cheering crowds to open the doors of the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista*, Fascism invited Italians and foreigners alike to experience and participate in the regime's representation of itself. The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* recreated, through a melange of art, documentation, relics and historical simulations, the years 1914 to 1922, as interpreted by Fascism in its tenth year in power. The exhibition's twenty-three rooms focused on each year from the beginning of World War I until October 1922 and crescendoed in a *Sala del Duce* and a *Sacrario dei Martiri*.

While the show centered on the past, the actual focus was the future. The *Mostra's* celebration and evocation of Fascism's history and rise to power occurred in the early 1930's, the period of the regime's "reaching out to the people" and cultural expansion. The years 1929 to 1935 witnessed Fascism's consent-building programs, such as the draining of the Pontine marshes, the construction of the Fascist "new towns", the wars on tuberculosis and infant mortality. In this context, the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* constituted a mass culture referendum on Fascism to date. The exhibition's *Partito Nazionale Fascista* promoters worked to capture the allegiance of an Italian mass audience. With the show, the regime reached out to the whole of Italian society

and hoped that at least one of the *Mostra's* many messages would strike a responsive chord in the various attending publics. The not so hidden message asked for consent for continued Fascist rule.

The *Mostra* offers a case study of the organization of culture during Fascism's period of greatest mass support and clues to an understanding of public responses to that culture. How did the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* produce a propaganda event which both met its own political need for legitimization and responded to the cultural needs of a broad cross-section of the Italian public? The answer must be sought on two levels: (1) the aesthetic and iconographical and (2) the organizational. Fascist Party organizers used incentive and experimented with developing mass culture techniques in order to attract spectators. The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista*, soon after its opening, was seen as a popular mass-media event and a *de rigueur* cultural experience. Examination of the dual mechanism of "aesthetics" and "mass culture event" reveals the way in which Fascism produced a propaganda exhibition which received critical and popular acclaim, while also giving the regime the consent it sought.

Since the fall of Fascism in 1945, historians, art historians and architectural historians have debated the nature of the relationship between Fascism and culture. Initial studies placed the cultural artifacts produced under Fascism in two camps—as either the work of regime propagandist, and therefore devoid of intrinsic artistic value, or as works separate from political and social conditions.¹ More recently, art and culture under Fascism has come to be seen as shaped by the interaction between the regime and artists and the public.² As this discussion of the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* will show, culture under Fascism took the form it did for a number of reasons, ranging from Fascism's search for consent to the internal aesthetic concerns of artists to the cultural tastes of spectators.

After ten months of preparation, the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* opened in Rome at the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* on October 28, 1932. The director, Dino Alfieri, then President of the *Istituto Fascista di Cultura* in Milan and a Parliamentary deputy, had devised a solicitation system in order to attain the artifacts which made up the exhibition.³ The Fascist Party newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, described the artifacts sent from all over Italy as "dei piu importante e significa-

tivi cimeli, fotografie, manifesti, autografi, reliquie, giornali, pubblicazioni...’’⁴ In total, ‘‘ministeri, prefetti, segretari federali, musei, biblioteche, privati...’’ contributed 18,400 items to the *Mostra*.⁵ This organizational technique involved a vast number of people from various constituencies and gave the impression that the exhibition was the product of many and varied hands. If a Senator or a local Fascist leader sent in a clipping or a photo, he had personally contributed to the regime’s reproduction of itself and was, therefore, central to the construction of Fascism.

Teams of historians and artists organized the *Mostra* into twenty-three exhibition rooms. As noted, one of the two critical elements of the *Mostra*’s success lay in the use of an aesthetic which beckoned the viewer into the Fascist experience and manipulated emotions to a desired end. The vibrant, modern and evocative aesthetic of the show incorporated contemporary Italian and international artistic developments. Mussolini had ordered the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* to be ‘‘cosa d’oggi, modernissima dunque, e audace, senza malinconici ricordi degli stili decorativi del passato’’.⁶ The show also had to be ‘‘senza precedenti, nuovissima, modernissima, fascitissima’’⁷ Taking this into consideration, Alfieri and C.E. Oppo, who Alfieri had recruited to oversee the artists, courted the Italian art world’s most prominent figures. As with other artistic institutions under Fascism, explicitly anti-Fascist artists were excluded from state and party patronage. However, beyond this base qualification, little discrimination took place. In the end, the artists singled out were ‘‘architetti, pittori, scultori, tutti provenienti da scuole artistiche diversi...’’.⁸

An invitation to work on the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* was an invitation to breathe life into the artifacts of Fascism, to take them and re-incarnate them into relics, spiritual objects and inspirational touchstones. Artists from a range of schools and histories accepted the challenge. All the predominant Italian modern movements were represented: Futurism by Enrico Prampolini, Gerardo Dottori, Antonio Santagata, Aldo Carpinetti; *Novecento* by Mario Sironi, Achille Funi, and Domenico Rambelli; Rationalism by Giuseppe Terragni, Adalberto Libera, and Mario De Renzi; ‘‘Return to order’’ and *Strapaese* by Mino Maccari and Leo Longanesi. The list of contributors read like a roll call of leading inter-war Italian artists.

While the artists came from diverse backgrounds and movements, a common approach to the material linked them to one another. Much of the aesthetic construction of the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* centered on the utilization of repeated, simple architectonic forms, such as triangles and circles, of photomontage, extracted slogans, typography and enlarged photographs.⁹ The artists shared a common faith in the malleability of the artifacts and the possibility of using modernist artistic construction such as collage and photomontage to make them speak a number of messages. One reviewer believed that photomontage “imprime all’intera rassegna il suo più squisito e inconfondibile carattere oculare”.¹⁰ The exhibition felt the imprint of two primary aesthetic philosophies: the Futurist practice of *plastica murale* and the Soviet Constructivist inspired notion of creating self-enclosed environments. The Futurist contribution entailed a dependence upon projected three-dimensional constructions which gave the walls a plasticity and movement. The artists of the *Mostra* borrowed photomontage and the idea of reshaping pre-existing architecture from the avant-gardes of the Soviet Union, such as El Lissitsky. These common threads gave the exhibition its underpinning of aesthetic vibrancy. A shared relationship to the artifacts allowed varied aesthetic languages to blend and produce a coherent whole.

Alfieri allotted the liturgically central aspects of the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* to the most experimental and modern artists. Four elements emerged as the most lasting from the exhibition: the facade, the *Sala del 1922*, *Sala della Marcia su Roma* and the *Sacrario dei martiri*. These four, with their complicated texts, articulated the most emotional aspects of the show. The facade, as the beckoning image, drew spectators in with its imposing specter of power and modernity. The Room of 1922 manipulated frenzied images of the social, political and economic crisis leading to the March on Rome, rousing passions of anger and allegiance. The rooms celebrating the Fascist takeover offered a moment of resolution and epiphany. Finally, the show’s core cycle was completed by the silent and intense of the Chapel of the Fallen.

The rooms of the exhibition played out the cycle of crisis, redemption, resolution: the first fourteen rooms traced Italian intervention in World War I, the postwar crisis, the rise of Fascism and the Fascist victory. With the Fascist takeover, depicted in *Sala Q*, the chronological

approach ended and the show concluded with the *Salone d'onore*, the *Galleria dei Fasci*, and the *Sacrario dei martiri*.¹¹ As the Fascist coup symbolized the end of history and a resolution of all national conflicts, the rooms which followed its depiction dealt with timeless subjects.

Rationalist architects Adalberto Libera and Mario De Renzi completely covered the pre-existing nineteenth-century beaux arts face of the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* and replaced the heavily ornamented facade of 1882 with a Rationalist metal one. Over a thirty-eight meter long "pompeian" red metal archway, stood the words, MOSTRA DELLA RIVOLUZIONE FASCISTA in red letters. Over this arch rose four metal styled *fasci*. These imposing *fasci*, which were visible for a great distance, stood twenty-five meters and were made of "lamiera di rame brunito e ossidato, su armature di acciaio".¹² On either side of the building stood two, six meter tall X's "costruiti in lamiera." The rectangular archway entered upon an atrium surrounded by arches which carried the visitor into the exhibition.

The facade, like the show itself, presented a mix of concurrent messages. The long rectangular arch over a bank of doors beckoned to be entered. At the same time, the immense *fasci* towering over the crowded Roman shopping street humbled and minimized the individuality of the attender. The stark metal simplicity of the facade in contrast to everything surrounding it made a bold statement about the regime's power. The bare machine-like *fasci* advertised the regime's decision to represent itself as modern, while the reconstruction of a triumphal arch out of the four column-like *fasci* testified to Fascism's identification with the past.¹³ The primary two iconographical elements of the facade, the *fasci* and the Roman numeral X, harkened back to Imperial Rome. At the same time, the stark, stylized *fasci* evoked images of modern war, of bayonets and swords.¹⁴ There was no confusion as to the symbolic universe offered by the facade: the eye first caught the metal *fasci* proclaiming the power of the State, then the X which announced the State's temporal reign, and finally the title of the event.

While the facade came to be one of the most reproduced images of the show, the *Sala del 1922* by Giuseppe Terragni and the *Sala della Marcia su Roma* by Mario Sironi offer, perhaps, the best clues to the contribution of aesthetics to the success of the exhibition. Cut diagonally by a wall and surrounded by semi-circles of display cases,

the *Sala del 1922* was a frenetic mass of inter-connecting photomontages, collages, cut-outs, all moving at diagonal angles. The room projected a “fantasia terramotata, che scardina ogni angolo, ogni porzione delle superfici aggredite dall’inconsueto allestimento, destrutturando lo spazio espositivo”.¹⁵ The themes of the room ranged from the continued martyrdoms of Fascist squad members, to accelerating parliamentary crises, to the birth of the first Fascist para-state organizations. Below the canvass-draped ceiling, hung an enormous X, for year 10:

Questo plastico è completamente coperto di bandiere socialiste ed anarchiche messe in penombra e le bandiere stesse, volendosi dimostrare che nell’anno 1922 ha termine la vera efficienza dei partiti sovversivi, sono inchiodate sull’armature da pugnali illuminati da riflettori.¹⁶

One side of the diagonal wall narrated Fascist punitive actions of 1922, with clippings and artifacts. Above the display, hung a series of merging profiles in which Mussolini’s black profile fused with the silver outline of Italy, all framed by the words “Inquadramento delle forze giovanili”. This collage symbolized the emergence of the institutions of the nascent Fascist state out of the disarray and created the ichnographical conflation of *Italy–Mussolini–Fascism*. Another segment of the wall bore Mussolini’s slogan, “The Last May 1st!”, supported by a cutout figure pushing away the crutch of socialism. In the adjacent corner stood a ceiling-high figure composed of a prison-suit of metal strips, entitled, “Il lavoratore irretito dalla scioperomania”. The “Room of 1922” reached a climax with a panel called “Adunate”. The lower section bore airplane propellers constructed from photographs of mass rallies. These propellers faced diagonally up towards hundreds of plaster hands, all pointing to the sky in a disembodied Roman salute.

Sironi’s *Sala della Marcia su Roma* used an imposing monumentality to calm the spectator after the frenetic crises depicted in the earlier rooms. The Room of the March on Rome centered immense, overpowering, but minimal images. The austerity of *Sala Q*, after the earlier rooms, offered a respite, an opportunity for the viewer to feel the restive powers of Fascism. Sironi merged the symbols of Fascism with those of the Italian nation-state. The ceiling was tricolor, as was the color scheme of the entire room. The wall facing the entrance displayed three images: (1) white letters with red borders, declaring *LA MARCIA su*

ROMA, below (2) a basrelief of a stylized eagle in flight which (3) supported a relief of the national flag adorned with the cross of the House of Savoy. Together the shapes of the flag and the eagle produced the silhouette of a *fascio*. This three-dimensional trilogy of Fascism–imperial eagle–Italian flag projected the unity of the old and the new and offered a message of stability and consolidation. The head of the eagle projected off the wall and into the exhibition “come presaghe del prossimo impennarsi del destino”.¹⁷ Bare except for two images, the opposing wall was Sironi’s most powerful. A three-dimensional, wall length Roman sword engraved with the intersecting words DUX/ITALIA shattered the red chain of Socialism which hung in pieces from the wall.¹⁸ The Roman sword, the symbol of Italy united to its *Duce* in a resurrection of Roman glory, smashed the strangle-hold of Socialism. *Il Popolo d’Italia* hailed the “bloody chain” which had to be cut as a “prelude to the flight of the eagle”.¹⁹

The Room of the March led into Sironi’s “grave and silent” Salon of Honor.²⁰ With the Salon of Honor and the Gallery of *Fasci* which followed it, Sironi produced self-sustaining psychological environments. The Salon of Honor was based around an exedra dominated by a statue of Mussolini bursting out of a wall. Below the statue stood the enormous abstracted letters DUX. The statue/DUX combination overlooked the “den”, the “severe cell of the first seat of *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the real focus of the room.²¹ Inside a simple, square building, Mussolini’s office from 1914 until 1920 was re-created and canonized for the viewer. The only ornamentation of construction were plain pillars clothed in reproductions of *Il Popolo d’Italia* and a simple doorway through which the relics were observed. The re-constituted office offered a slice of Fascism in its radical movement phase: Mussolini’s paper-covered desk strewn with hands-grenades and a carelessly placed revolver; behind the desk hung a black flag with skull and cross-bones. The disordered room, claimed the catalog, was “a living documentation of the den from which came the orders of the insurrection”.²² The bare architecture of Salon of Honor, with its focus on (1) the image and word of Mussolini as authoritarian consolidator and (2) environmental recreation of Mussolini as radical revolutionary leader, gave the cult of Mussolini a symbology.

The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* implied a number of contradic-

tory messages about the future of Fascism; it offered simultaneous images of revolution and consolidation and it celebrated Fascism in its movement phase while also elevating the cult of Mussolini. However, above all, the exhibition worked to convince the viewer that Fascism had been the saviour of the nation. The interpretation of the events of 1914 to 1922 portrayed an Italy besieged on all sides by internal and external enemies bent on national disintegration. The rooms covering the years 1914 to 1922 depicted images of “wolf-like parliamentarians”, backstabbing Allies, insidious Soviets and evil socialists. The exhibition, with its repeated fusion of the symbols of the Liberal, pre-Fascist state with those of Fascism, declared that Fascism and the Italian state were now one. Fascism enthroned a new national symbolic universe and conflated the national cult with the Fascist cult.

With the exhibition, the regime produced the first event of a shared national culture. For the first time in modern Italian history there existed a cultural experience which resonated—albeit in different ways—with a significant cross-section of the Italian population from a range of regions and classes.²³ While Fascism’s primary goal in promoting such an event was support for the Fascist project, in the process it attained the secondary goal of contributing to the creation of an Italian national consciousness.

The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* borrowed from both the secular rituals of the French Revolution and the religious ones of Christianity. The rhythm of the show—crisis, understanding, redemption—paralleled the Christian liturgy, while the secular religion of the state and the canonization of its symbols built on the legacy of the French Revolution. The celebration of the “glorious dead” combined a Christian reverence for martyrdom with the nationalist celebration of allegiance to the *patria*.²⁴ The exhibition was repeatedly described in language such as, “un atto di fede e omaggio agli Caduti...rivendicazione di fiere opere compiute ed una esaltazione solenne anche dei più ignoranti sacrifici...”.²⁵ The religious imagery spilled into such assertions as, “ogni visita diventa un pellegrinaggio”.²⁶

The powerful aesthetics of the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* were supported by an orchestrated reaching out to the masses. In order for the exhibition to be a tool of consent and legitimation, the regime had to expose large audiences to it. The dictatorship courted audiences

through an incentive policy which included travel discounts, organized group excursions, and rotating honor guards. Throughout its two years on the Via Nazionale, the *Mostra* offered 70% train fare discounts to any visitor who had his or her train ticket validated at the exhibition ticket office. Organized group trips included school children, members of Fascist organizations, municipal works, ex-soldiers, teachers' unions, nuns.²⁷ American Naval Cadets, farmers from Treviso, and teachers from France all took advantage of the discount opportunities.²⁸ The exhibition also brought together Fascist officials and members of Fascist organizations through the system of rotating honor guards. Each day that the show was open to the public, a file of daily rotating and paid honor guards flanked the doors. This gave many party members the opportunity to visibly participate in the *Mostra*.

Popular response to the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* exceeded the Fascist National Party's greatest anticipations. Attendance steadily increased and remained so intense through the exhibition's planned six month existence that the closing date was initially extended from April 21, 1933 to July 31, 1933 and, finally, to October 28, 1934.²⁹ Interest in the *Mostra* proved so great and pervasive that within two months of the inauguration one reviewer claimed:

Non v'è oramai cittadino, in tutta la Penisola, il quale non sappia che essa è una pagina di storia, che balza calda e fremente da una documentazione inconfutabile e definitiva, perchè d'ogni fatto possiamo essere testimonianze.³⁰

Attendance figures supported assertions of widespread interest: in the first seven months (October 29, 1932–May 23, 1933) 1,236,151 visitors attended the exhibition and by the closing date of October 28, 1934, three million spectators had passed through the metal *fasci* of the entrance to the *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista*.³¹

The *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* revealed Fascism's ability, in the middle years of its rule, to respond to Italian cultural needs. Through an effective combination of experimental aesthetics and mass cultural organizational techniques, the Fascist regime offered cultural consumers an event which resonated with their own identities as Italians and spectators. The exhibition swept up the visitor in the representation of his or her own history and allowed artists to participate in the con-

struction of that history. In return, artists and spectators gave their continued consent to Fascist rule.

Marla Stone
Princeton University

Notes:

1. Umberto Silva's *Ideologia e arte del fascismo* is an example of the first approach. Umberto Silva, *Ideologia e arte del fascismo* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1973).

2. In recent years, a number of works have attempted to determine the social and cultural bases of Fascist policies. Victoria de Grazia's *The Culture of Consent* which deals with Fascist leisure-time organizations is the model for this approach. Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979). See also, Laura Malvano, *Fascismo e politica dell'immagine* (Bollati Boringhieri: Turin, 1988).

3. *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, Mostra delle rivoluzioni fascista, Buste 1-275. The Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome has a document collection entitled, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista*, of the tagged and collated items from the show. Each clipping, artifact or photograph has a tag which details from whom it was sent and whether or not it was used in the *Mostra*.

4. "Per l'organizzazione della Mostra del fascismo", *Il Popolo d'Italia*, January 5, 1932.

5. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica* (Rome: Partito Nazionale Fascista, 1933), p. 53. The exhibition published two guidebooks, both by Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi. The one cited here was longer and included numerous reproductions. The earlier one was more strictly a guidebook: Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Guida della Mostra della rivoluzione fascista* (Firenze: Stabilimenti Grafici A. Vallecchi, 1932).

6. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 8.

7. Mussolini's directive as reported in Gigi Maino, "La mostra delle rivoluzioni fascista". *La Rassegna Italiana*, vol. 16, n. 178, p. 206.

8. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 9.

9. Giorgio Ciucci, "L'autorappresentazione del fascismo", *Rassegna*, n. 10, June 1982, p. 49.

10. Alberto Neppi, "L'Opera degli artisti alla Mostra della rivoluzione fascista," *Rassegna istruzione artistica*, November-December 1932, p. 338.

11. The *fascio* was the symbol appropriated from ancient Rome by Fascism. The

fasci were double edged swords bound with rods and carried by the magistrates of ancient Rome. They were the symbol of justice and unity of the state. Fascism also used the term to refer to its fighting squads, the *fasci di combattimento*.

12. Margarita Sarfatti, "Architettura, arte e simbolo alla Mostra del Fascismo", *Architettura*, January 1933, p. 3.

13. Giorgio Ciucci described the facade as a triumphal arch, with its four fasci acting as columns. Giorgio Ciucci, in a presentation to "Istituto Gramsci di Bologna", April 9, 1987.

14. Giorgio Ciucci, "L'autorappresentazione del fascismo", *Rassegna*, p. 49.

15. Ada Francesca Marciano, *Giuseppe Terragni: Opera completa, 1925-43* (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 1987) p. 74.

16. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 191.

17. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 195.

18. *Dux* is Latin for *Duce*, or leader.

19. "La Mostra della Rivoluzione", *La Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, Year XI, November 1932, p. 51.

20. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 211.

21. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 215.

22. Dino Alfieri and Luigi Freddi, *Mostra della rivoluzione fascista: Guida Storica*, p. 215.

23. For more on the late development of national cultures and the attempt to bring the masses into the project see: George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York, 1975) and E. J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1983).

24. George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses* (New York, 1975) p. 90.

25. Cornelio di Marzio, "La Mostra del Fascismo", *Bibliografia Fascista*, n. 4, May 1932, pp. 259 and 264.

26. Mino Maccari, "Il carattere popolare della Mostra della rivoluzione fascista", *Illustrazione Italiana*, April 2, 1933.

27. ACS, PNF Direttorio—Ufficio Stralcio, Busta 271, fascicolo 2.

28. ACS, PNF Direttorio—Ufficio Stralcio, Busta 271, fascicolo 2.

29. "La mostra della rivoluzione (da Via Nazionale a Via dell'Impero)", *Illustrazione Italiana*, 28 ottobre 1934, p. 668 and ACS ?).

30. F. P. Mule, "La Mostra della rivoluzione fascista", *Capitolium*, January 1933, p. 1.

31. ACS, PNF Direttorio—Ufficio Stralcio, Busta 271, fascicolo 3, "Verbale, 7 novembre 1934.